

Gentrify This!!! Transcultural Communication and the Public Sphere'

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Preface.

('Anger is energy', John Lydon: 1977?)

This working paper is a further elaboration of a presentation I recently did at the 198 Gallery in Brixton, with a slideshow containing pictures taken during the last two years along the river Thames (Greenwich and Deptford reaches). Many of the pieces and the walls are not there any more, some of them have already been replaced by developers' scaffolding and white fences. Another important part of the pictures has been taken more recently at the Cans Festival under Waterloo Station, and concerns with a very different aspect of the graffiti fashion. Finally, and by no means as conclusion, there are a very few pictures of Peckham Jobcentre's bombing, which happened a couple of years ago: could we possibly give sense to that as to a form of *visual expression of affection*, in this case probably anger, frustration and resentment?

By juxtaposing and meddling the sets, I hope to cover and discuss this peculiar technology in the framework of an urban theory of public (visual) sphere, which draws mostly from the recent book by Michael Keith (2005).

The original idea, to which I still want to stick, was to prepare an independent photoblog open to feedback and discussion¹. A few technical problems, however, have made this project slower than I first thought (namely: computer crash, decision to swap into Linux environment, acquisition of some basic 'solid knowledge', start-up with a wireless broadband co-op active in the local area). I therefore present the paper in the usual format and the pictures onto a cd-rom. *Pace Chimielewska (2007)*, I am not able to give the names of (nor pay copyright to) the authors, apart from a couple of famous ones or from few self-evident tag signatures. In exchange, I will make available to anyone both pictures and text for free download.

INTRO.

“Teenagers occupy a different space than most of their adult counterparts: the meaning-laden space of use and belonging; the political space of appropriation; the temporally fluid space of arrival, claiming and departure. They also make great use of their communities leftovers – the negative spaces in the positively planned and owned world – and pioneer the use of new virtual spaces that adults often do not see” (H. Childress, 2004)

What all these pictures have got in common is that they have been taken along the 188 bus route, from the Dome to Senate House. They are also usually named *graffiti*, under one big umbrella - they therefore share to some extent some claims to illegality – but, as I will try to argue, they respond to very different demands, done on different surfaces, in different moments and locations; they above all appeal to diverse audiences and use a very different language, but always use a technology, which entails an interplay between text and images.

For instance, whilst the extraordinary numbers of authors and stencils, present at the Cans Festival², are asking us to reformulate this event into more open and diverse urban landscapes, on the other hand and at the same time, I want to ask you not to

1 The idea came mostly by reading the opening note to One-Way Street, 'Filling Station', by Walter Benjamin: 'Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alteration between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous form that better fit its influence in active communities' (1979: 45).

loose sight of the profound voyeurism of the media and the crowd, which have seen this issue less in terms of sub-culture or antagonist struggle of a counterpublic, than as a sub-human and glamorous phenomenon. *In this fashion, I believe the large stencil exhibition reclaims a sense of context-specific event and peculiar graffiti representation, since the audience forces us to re-frame the event itself². As I am interested in the relationships between viewers and subjects, a large number of pictures are bound to reflect this antinomy.*

This element of the discussion is even more pertinent as it opens to ongoing polemics among commentators of the significance of tagging and stencil graffiti onto the urban landscapes.

The paper will also show how youth culture, from graffiti tagging to Internet based visual art, make claims of appropriation of the Public Space and Public (Visual) Sphere.

Material and Imagined Public(s).

The so called universal public sphere has more and more been identified with a normal white male middle class self⁴, that voluntarily decides to participate to the public, often mediated by the mainstream imaginary of the mass media. If we think of the public sphere as the horizon for the organization of social experience, there must be then different and competing counterpublics each marked by specific terms of exclusion (sex, race, class, age) in relation to dominant publicity (Miriam Hansen, 1991: xxxvi). If we accept this, then we have to refashion the public sphere as an emergent arena of conflict, that is in Kluge's words: 'The public sphere is the site where struggles are decided by other means than war' (1972/1993).

2 The Cans Festival run from 3rd to the 5th of May under Waterloo Station, in a former taxi run from the former Eurostar terminus, which 'currently forms an open plan split level studio apartment for at least six rough sleepers.' (from the (un)-official brochure of the event (The Cans Festival: Stencil Art, Street Battle).

3 risking to overemphasise the element of the reception, I cite Hansen's foreword: 'in Kluge's concept of cinema, every spectator is already the producer of the film on screen, supplying labour of emotion, fantasy and experience to the media, which both assimilate and negate that productivity, usurping the role of the producer' (cited: XXIII).

4 'We can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule' (N. Fraser commenting on the 'revisionist historiographers', such as Geoff Eley, 1990: 62).

I maintain that the public is not just an imagined and planned sphere or a plaything for academics and theorists alike, but it is material and lived daily in various social geographies of urban space, and it has got a physicality attached to it. So it has the various technologies of publicity within the diverse publics, including and especially the writings on the walls. More in particular, I am addressing the visual public of the everyday, the consumerist transformation of the public as space for advertising and sale: we have become cynical about the visual landscapes of the cities (S. Burnham 2007: 184). On the other hand, and not less importantly, the increasing urbanization of the contemporary life has made its mark in the relationship between the self and the physical city: it has transformed 'the identity of home as *part* of the landscape to the realization that home *is* the landscape' (ibidem: 182).

The distinction here is crucial: being there, showing off, becoming part of the landscape, seeing and being seen, all become a struggle for inclusion, for recognition and authority. 'Small hidden islands of freedom' (Arendt cited in Mitchell, 1995) appear and disappear in the ephemeral landscape of the city: but importantly, the claim to be visible becomes a claim to the land or to the territory. In the capitalist society, anchored to the laws of the private property, claiming territory equal to extending rights of possession from the private to the public, as well as notion of the privacy to the right of seeing or of being seen in public (ibidem, also in Childress: 2004). Therefore, the common assumption is that certain kinds of behaviours, consistent with these notions, are to be displayed in public too. Whoever cannot comply is at risk of deviance. What is worse, it is that the exclusion often takes place routinely, without people even noticing it.

So the concepts of exclusion and deviancy I am using for the purpose of this paper are at least problematic: I maintain that social inclusion and normality are caused by and reflect the distribution of power and capital (cultural, symbolic and economic) and thus the exclusivity of the public (visual) sphere will not change unless there is some kind of re-distribution of representative, symbolic and economic resources (also Dörmunt, 2007).

Three questions should simplify the framework I am moving into:

1. who are places made for?
2. whom do they exclude?

3. how are these prohibitions maintained in practice, everyday?

The graffiti scene in the urban context.

'Graffiti tag frames the contemporary city', says Mike Keith, meaning that through the vernacular production of the sign on the wall, there can be seen both elements of *appropriation* of space and *struggle* for the reclaim of the control over the very same space by authority. It concerns *simultaneously*, then, with the transitional space of the urban and the challenges of the discourses within the public sphere.

In fact, there are two aspects of graffiti art that need to be highlighted and from which important questions arise:

1. the paramount irony of graffiti is that use paint and other permanent pigments the make artwork that is anything but permanent. So why do the artists ultimately bother, I mean there is a lot of risk involved (police, court, rival crews, personal safety, cost of paint, etc.)?
2. for its nature graffiti is almost always an intrusion on an 'illegitimate' canvas: its interpretation then cannot be disjoint from an understanding of the semantic of the urban surface on which they appear. The story of the wall, then, does matter for the meaning of the graffiti attached to it⁵. Which immediately should make us think in terms of propriety rights and property of the evaluation (in other words, who is deciding what is legitimate).

Lets stay for the time being to the relevant debate on the public sphere, **because it is around the received order of the city space, that youth vernacular culture create its own space** (as 'subaltern counterpublic', Fraser, cited: 67). I do not want to over emphasise here the celebrated role of the transgression, as the caricature of the street inner city rebel, often racialized, sound a bit of a naïve stereotype, also remarked by the very same people who claim to be against the phenomenon as well as by the media tycoons whose fortunes might thrive on those very aspects of global youth culture (e.g. hip hop, clothing, music). What I want to highlight, I guess, it is

5 From my own visual research I have noticed that whilst a graffiti becomes soon part of the landscape, the arrogant cover-up from private landlords and public authority make in fact more evident the presence of graffiti (not to talk about the aesthetic element – and here I am obviously biased – of for instance trains coming out from the tunnel in pale grey, rather than the explosion of colour and cartoons).

both a need of confronting themselves with the notion of generic mainstream as well as, at the same time, working within a privileged framework of exclusion and alienation. This is the dual character and the dialectic force of the above stencils: 'On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training ground for agitational activities directed towards the wider publics' (ibidem). It is this problematic antinomy that the pictures I hope make manifest.

But we cannot not recognise that liberal mainstream (implicitly white) politics struggle to come to terms with such untameable phenomenon. For the simple reason, as has been suggested, that liberal commentators have confused the technology, and the tagger to a single language (Keith, talking of Sennet's famous remarks on signature graffiti): hence, the tag expresses, for them, an individuality, a simple me, over and again (*I am here, I did it*). But if we look a bit closer we might in fact see a WE (community of writers or such): the writer, in fact, always has an audience (both Keith, 2005 and Chimielewska, 2007).

According to Mike Keith, in fact, in the process of tagging itself there is a 'redemptive force of this transgressive moment' (cited: 140), a mechanism of self-expression and resistance to exclusion, which creates semiotic codes and alternative public spheres, often beyond the understanding of this commentators. The trains going around town or all over the country, for instance, were carriers of coded messages, a node of connections and disconnections, which at the same time hid and revealed positions of the writers (also Upsi, 1994).

The graffiti change and remodel the landscape as well as the visual public sphere, the material as well as the subjunctive space of the cities, the moral geography and the value of the propriety often depending on it: in this sense the graffiti cannot be disjoint from the surface on which it is deployed as each defines and limits the other. More generally, it is the 'spaces of the public sphere [that] are malleable surfaces rather than passive containers of forms of sociability' (Keith, cit:140). They are a process with multiple identities and no fixed place of reference, rather than a product or a point of arrival: a few things in this representation of the twenty-first century city are as they look like.

“I am part of the landscape” once Basquiat famously said⁶, who was both, and often at the same time, an insider and an outsider of the art world, operating in and out of the galleries (symbolically embodying the social landscape as well as a symptom of the failure of the public visual sphere). **“We are the writing on your walls”**, by the converse, “The London Street Commune” (Piccadilly 144) put on the door of their infamous squat, marking clearly boundaries and making unmistakable claims to rights and wrongs of the territory: the invasion of ‘their’ public space, occupation of ‘other’s’ geometries of power, expression of an unruly lumpen proletariat: “The only possible meta-statement which could be made about the way their presence had been framed in the means of its broadcast” (P. Cohen, 1997), the conscious ‘feel of the game’ of the media and image-makers mystification. Facebook now uses it as the virtual ‘writing on your own wall’ as the space of advertising by or with your glocal community of ‘friends’⁷.

What this discourse wants to highlight is the incomplete and always emergent form of the graffiti writing, as a combination of particular urban arenas (conflict), working surfaces, and spaces of identity (Keith, cited).

Rights to the city

Struggles are often structured over a right to and for a public space, what such space means and for whom it has been made public public: we might even reduce this discourse to a simplistic vision of two distinct and oppositional ideological visions of the nature and purpose of the public space. The first is a space of the experience, lived and appropriated, *space of representation*; the second is the imagined and orderly *representation of space*, planned, comfortable and safe (the Leffebvre's paradigm as reported by D. Mitchell, 1995). The simplicity of this dualism is even more evident in the essay by Boris Ewellstein (2005), according to whom the opposite and distinct worlds exist side by side until the piece has been drawn: ‘Below the paint lies the cosmos of a rational and disciplined society, while from above the paint, extending outward from its two-dimensionality, rises the diegesis of the graffiti writer.

6 Downtown 81 / directed by Edo Bertoglio; written by Glenn O'Brien; produced by Maripol. New York Beat Films, 1981

7 But, bear in mind, the small print for Facebook reads: ‘You can always remove comments you don't like from your own Wall. You can restrict who your Wall is visible to, or turn it off entirely, by going to the [Profile](#)’ section of the Privacy page’.

The piece becomes a permeable membrane that allows both worlds to flow into each other'.

From the tensions arising from this mismatch, however, there can be the creation, throughout the mediated production of **moral panics**, of folk devils.

'Family', 'suburb', and 'society' all have the particular connotation of stability and order for the relatively affluent, and attachment to the system which depends for its continued success on the belief in core values is reinforced by the manufacture of folk devils, which are negative stereotypes of various 'others'. Behind, there is always traditional values and moral concerns (Sibley, 1995: vii). The mass media strategy is to create styled or stereotypical fashion which embrace the social deviants: 'folk devils' will be created, our society as presently structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members – like working class adolescents – and then condemn whatever solution the group find (ibidem).

A whole taxonomy of deviance is usually deployed around moral panics: moral categories, by contrast, exist in purely imaginary space of public discourse, in an empty homogeneous time of modernity outside history: 'it's the assault of the present on the rest of the time' (Negt and Kluge, cited).

Double Hermeneutics of the Youthism.

Between adults and children, parents and the state, children and educational system, there is a fuzzy and grey area, which can be constrained or expanded through negotiation and conflict. Adolescence, in particular, is an ambiguous concept, usually distanced from childhood, but to whom adults deny access to most of the public sphere. It is often represented in public discourse as threatening because adolescents transgress the adult/child boundary and appear discrepant in adult spaces (Sybley, 1995).

Put it bluntly, young people are the most popular users of public space, they gather together in voluntary association more than any other age or social group. For a lot of reasons, legal, cultural, economic, they occupy most frequently than any other the streets. On the other hand, the adults grip on the territory, both physical and

imagined, is becoming increasingly tight: ASBOs and gentrification, control and commodification, school achievement and productive entertainment. Here, it is important to stress that there is a toxic mixture of symbolic (fear of, for) and economic (ownership and capitalist tenure) elements that contribute to each other and to a general sense of panic.

According to Phil Cohen, these elements of the youth question are 'bio-political' as they constitute youth 'as a specific type of population and as a site of particular political interventions' (1997: 182). In particular, he identifies four premises, which lay the framework of what he calls 'youthism':

- A. Youth is a unitary category, with particular psychological and social needs.
- B. Attitudes and values of youth become anchored to fixed ideologies.
- C. Part of the generational passage involves rebellion as cultural tradition of youth.
- D. This transition is difficult and requires help of professionals.

There is then 'a vested interest [in generating and maintaining moral panics] because they help to generate public support for *our* projects' (cited: 193), instead of producing an effort aimed at separating the two levels of the same issue, the youth question and the young people themselves: by deconstructing this artificial link, there is a chance to open up 'spaces of representation in which they can formulate their own desires and demands beyond the constraining images of deviance imposed on them by the promoters of pop music and moral panic alike' (ibidem).

Following again Keith (this time in conjunction with Pile: 1993), there is a dynamic and dialectic interplay between these two moments, as well as between the two dimensions of the material and the imagined; 'place, politics and identity are to be understood through an already spatialized array of concepts, such as mapping and spatiality' (p. 5). In other terms, the position of the subject in place, as well as of the one who does the evaluation, do count in conjunction with, and sometimes in opposition to, the surface of the inscription and the technology used.

In this sense, resistance can never be unproblematically divorced from the creation of the subjectivities through which it is defined (Keith: 2005).

This reiteration between place and identity is well expressed by Nancy Fraser, according to whom: '*Pace* the bourgeois conception, public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities. This means that participation is not simply a matter of being able to state propositional contents that are neutral with respect to form of expression. Rather, participation means being able to speak "in one's own voice", thereby simultaneously constructing and expressing one's cultural identity through idiom and style' (cited: 68-69).

Important corollary, over which we have insisted a few times, it is the hybrid formation of these counterpublics, both grounded on fragmented experience and rooted on transitory alliances. On this point, again, the multitude of pictures, location, styles, people involved seem to bring a lot of argumentative pace: the middle-aged white artist, alongside the young Asian art student, the teenager tagger with the elderly member of the audience. 'One thing seems clear: a cultural politics of counterpublicity can be founded neither on abstract ideals of universality nor on essentialist, identitarian notions of community. Rather, it has to begin with understanding the complex dynamics of existing public spheres, their imbrication of global and local parameters, their syncretistic, unstable make-up, their particular modes of dis/organizing social and collective experience (Hansen: cited: XLI). Also Keith stressed out this important element, according to whom: 'Graffiti draws attention to how communities are manifested and articulated in a necessary incomplete, uneven, and contingent fashion' (2005: 151).

The transitory character of these alliances between people - participating at the same time and sometime incongruently to different and overlapping publics - whose identities otherwise might diverge, opens up spaces of liminalities, conflicts, and unexpected proximities. The common worry for both artists and audience at the Cans Festival, for instance, seemed to be not so much the whitening spray from the Council (as the Bansky's piece would suggest), but more likely the unruly and untameable tags from the youngsters, coming to cover the 'art pieces'.

Zero tolerance, maximum profit.

And yet, the tidy urban furniture, the surveillance society and the zero tolerance have made more difficult to continue this activity. But more than this, I claim, what is really making a change in the graffiti practice is the attention/extension of the market (mostly media and musical industry) to the spaces of the unruliness, emptying the initial transgression, making soft what it used to be hard: the makers of spray paint are also the most famous producers of the spray which cancel graffiti. The technology has been appropriated, sometimes with tacky and/or realistic tones, by institutions, developers, media, publicity tycoons, etc: sometimes this trend has made the fortunes of graffiti artists that have successfully moved into mainstream design industry. With the appropriation of music and fashion industries the graffiti have now less to do with the visual sphere and has become a holistic sensorial experience (Chimielewska, cited).

The slogan at the entrance of the tunnel at Leak Street, "Gentrify This", sounds then a little bit suspicious...the fact that a countervailing reality, or rather its human bearers, have broken through their encirclement, define them as 'news'. A subcultural conjuncture is always news from nowhere, a volcanic eruption, a non-sense, as well as a non-sequitur, from the vantage point of the bourgeois public realm⁸ (P. Cohen, 32).

It is not the matter of graffiti constituting the *effects* of the conflict. It is rather that the iterative cycles of erasure and exposition shape an emergent and contested landscape in which the geographies of identity and the identity of a particular place are manifest; they should be thought as continually in flux (Keith: 2005). Think just about the graffiti memorials, how intense and touching is that form of communication, how much it can change a sense of a place. . As de Certeau notes, "Space is a practiced place" (de Certeau, 1984: 117). What mediates the relationship between place and space is the story told about the particular location in question. "Stories (...) carry out a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places" (ibid., 118).

In other words, we can think of the city as a 'living text, an imaginative construct... conjuring up images, desires and experiences...but the city is also a place where

8 The difference here from The Street, to which Cohen was referring, is that the Mayoral election, happening that same week end, obscured the event in the media.

most of us live, with streets we travel through and buildings in which we eat, play, work, rest and reproduce. Is the city a character in our narratives or are we characters in the story of the city? (Marcus, A. and Neumann, D. 2007).

CONCLUSION.

Graffiti is a technology, a form of expression that involves both text and visual in dynamic and complex combinations. It is a discursive and complex use of images and text, which tackle into the ubiquitous visual sphere, and claim a place into it. Due to the extreme importance of the surface and the context, we cannot reasonably talk of graffiti as singular phenomenon, but different forms of writing 'interact with the urban contexts in way that are shaped by their linguistic, iconic, and territorial significations and, in turn, inflect their specific context with different meanings' (Chmielewska: 2007).

The surface is never arbitrary or randomly chosen, it is often carefully researched, and at more professional levels, entails travels of crews around the world. For the simple reason that graffiti is always pointing to itself, its visibility is crucial, the fame and the reputation are intimately linked to the specific location valued for its danger and amount of risk involved. Ultimately, in the era of digital image, every famous graffiti artist appear to have some kind of shared space on the mainstream and corporate photo sharing websites (e.g. Flickr, Facebook, etc). Banksy, for instance has got nearly 6000 fans on Facebook.

There is also an other element that hopefully came out from this presentation: all forms of graffiti, to certain extent, entail some form of narrative; they talk of alternative stories about a locale, construct diverse meaning and identities of a place, and finally speak more broadly of the failure of the universal public sphere to incorporate them: 'Through the spatial practices of the writer, a neutral place becomes a personalised space' (Ewenstein, Boris 2005). To a more optimistic extent, we might think of the growing trend of playing with street furniture, urban signs and road markings, as an attempt to re-mix the familiar imaginary of the everyday experience of the city living. It is an authentic creation from existing materials at hand: 'Innovative remixes of urban visuals make the city seem malleable, mortal...the

philosophy of street artists and interventionists, that the city is the shared property of its inhabitants, rather than a collection of discrete zones, appears to be making its way into the public sphere' (S. Burnham 2007). Will Bansky & co. stay or the council will pay 300 grant to clear it? An internet poll?

Can an alternative public visual sphere come from the graffiti movement?

Probably not if we think a little bit in what terms the identity of the most famous artist in this country has been kept secret and made notorious for that at the same time, an ironic theme to which many pictures and pieces have been dedicated to.

Therefore, graffiti are also confined by the surfaces of inscription on which they happen to be, the coded communication, internal to their very community. As a spatial story of place-transformation and individual and communal becoming graffiti changes quite a few things. But as an arena for discursive and organised political activity, it somehow collapses under the weight of its own aesthetic baggage. The continuous emphasis on style has the effect of turning "the message into the medium" (Ewenstein, Boris 2005).

The notion of '*people going public*' via explosion on the wall is a bit optimistic, as well as the rebellious counterpublic appears a bit simplistic. This impossibility to incorporate all the counterpublic into one common discourse or public sphere, is perhaps the very reason why the graffiti form has endured for so long, as form of representation (Keith, 2005).

world count: 5000 circa

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