

---

Youth, Graffiti, and the Aestheticization of Transgression

Author(s): Ricardo Campos

Source: *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, AUTUMN 2015, Vol. 59, No. 3 (AUTUMN 2015), pp. 17-40

Published by: Berghahn Books

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24718322>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*

JSTOR

# YOUTH, GRAFFITI, AND THE AESTHETICIZATION OF TRANSGRESSION

---

---

*Ricardo Campos*

**Abstract:** This article is the result of research that focused on street art and graffiti in the city of Lisbon from 2004 to 2007. The empirical arguments presented draw from ethnographic work and from an analysis of inscriptions on urban walls. In my understanding, these visual manifestations can be understood as political and aesthetic devices, fundamental expressive resources in the negotiation of power and agency in the urban environment. They are vernacular creations that may be interpreted as discursive instruments forged in the context of symbolic struggles, characteristic of the 'field of visibility'. Furthermore, I put forward an analytical framework of graffiti and street art as an urban transgressive grammar, while considering the articulation of produced text and the context of production.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, city, graffiti, Lisbon, street art, transgression, visibility, youth cultures

Graffiti and street art could be considered a practice through which individuals appropriate the city, using it as a repository of semiotic operations. In most academic analysis, the nature of graffiti is consistently described as subversive. It is commonly seen as belonging to a family of vernacular discourse that takes over everyday resources in order to communicate outside of the legitimate scope of the powers that be. The majority of studies address it as a relatively uniform category, often characterizing it as being an illicit act. Nevertheless, this is currently a domain where multiple trends, practices, and even ideological stances co-exist. One possible explanation for this multiplicity is twofold. On the one hand, the globalization of North American-based graffiti has enabled a gradual multiplication of aesthetic and cultural expressions as a result of contrasting forms of appropriation in various geographic contexts. On the other hand, the universe of graffiti has become more open to other cultural



influences and pictorial manifestations, which has led to a slow ramification of practices and aesthetic statements.

This article is the result of several years of research focused on graffiti and street art in the city of Lisbon. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2004 and 2007 that involved in-depth individual and group interviews<sup>1</sup> and the use of visual methodologies (photography and video). This research explored graffiti, not only in the practices and words of those who create it, but also on the city walls. The systematic photographing<sup>2</sup> of neighborhoods and of selected streets with a strong symbolic charge<sup>3</sup> was crucial as a means to explore how the built environment is appropriated and transformed into a particular visual medium by graffiti writers. Since the conclusion of the fieldwork in 2007, I have been following the development of graffiti and street art in the Portuguese capital, focusing especially on the more recent initiatives that public and private entities have carried out that are aimed at sanctioning or repressing certain practices related to this universe.<sup>4</sup> Most of the arguments presented here originate from an informed reading of the inscriptions on urban walls. My immersion in the graffiti culture and the time spent with the graffiti writers affected how I envisage the material city in a way that may be described as a slow socialization of a particular gaze. I have gradually acquired decoding and evaluation skills that help explain the symbolic significance of the distinct types of graffiti pieces. This has taught me that the reading of graffiti goes well beyond the visibly etched material text.

My starting point, thus, looks on graffiti as an unsanctioned communication format that is typically practiced by young people, an approach that has been taken by other authors (Ferrell 1996; Macdonald 2001). However, I propose to read this phenomenon in a somewhat different manner. In my understanding, graffiti is a discursive device forged in the context of symbolic struggles characteristic of the 'field of visibility' (Brighenti 2007).<sup>5</sup> Visibility is, as various studies have demonstrated (Hebdige 1976, 1988; Hethorn and Kaiser 1999; Willis 1990), a particularly relevant social arena for young people. To *see* and to *be seen* are imperative in a world of images and outward appearance. Using style, performance, and consumption, young people build symbolic boundaries that become marks of social distinction. Many juvenile demonstrations of defiance and transgression occur in the realm of the symbolic, taking advantage of the power of aesthetic discourses. Graffiti may, therefore, be seen as a language in accord with the aesthetic imperative that is prevalent in youth communication. In spite of that, I tend to attribute the success and overall influence of this form of expression to two broader phenomena that are considered typical of contemporary society: first, the growing aestheticization of everyday life (Chaney 2001; Ewen 1988; Featherstone 1991; Maffesoli 1990, 1996) and, second, the increasing centrality of visual communication to everyday life (Jencks 1995; Mirzoeff 1999; Robins 1996). I maintain that these factors may encourage the expression of dissidence and the development of 'guerrilla operations' in the field of the visible. The urban public space, an everlasting source of symbolic conflict, may be construed as a privileged location for the visual (and spectacular) performance of transgression.

My intention is not to examine the actual semantic meanings of graffiti, but rather to grasp its social and symbolic meanings within the urban visual landscape. In order to achieve this, I propose an analytical framework of graffiti as an urban transgressive grammar, taking into consideration the articulation of produced text and the context of production. Such a reading aims to peruse the interconnectedness between the city's material aspects, the message semantics, and the social contexts of illegal graffiti painting. To illustrate my interpretations, I will resort to several graffiti and street art photographs taken during the early part of the fieldwork that are directly connected with the social and economic situation Portugal is currently facing, as well as others taken during a later stage. My purpose is not to examine these particular images semiotically, but instead to provide the reader with visual data that aim to serve as empirical examples of the theoretical arguments to be presented.

### **Occupying the City: Turning Transgression into Aesthetics**

My research in the Lisbon area confirmed what had previously been noted: that painting illegal graffiti is basically a juvenile social practice (Campos 2013; Ferrell 1996; Macdonald 2001; Sanchez and Tauste 2002). This does not prevent us from acknowledging that many of those who continue making graffiti illegally fit into the category of young adults or, indeed, adults. The fact remains, however, that they almost certainly got initiated in this activity as youngsters. As several studies have shown (e.g., Campos 2010; Macdonald 2001), this illegal activity typically becomes increasingly sporadic in adulthood. This means that a career in this world usually begins in adolescence, while the gradual move toward adulthood implies letting go or reconfiguring such practices. For this reason, it makes sense to analyze a few particularities of urban youth cultures that may contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon. Paul Willis (1990: 1) argues: "Young people are all the time expressing or attempting to express something about their actual or potential *cultural significance*." Through 'symbolic work'<sup>6</sup> and creativity, young individuals produce and reproduce place-specific identities; affirm vital capacities and develop a sense of agency; and, lastly, configure their familiar world by giving it meaning. Like many other youthful manifestations, graffiti is a creative mechanism used by individuals to communicate in the realm of the visual. It is a way to express cultural identities and to enforce symbolic distinctions within youth cultures. In this context, urban infrastructures can be taken as communication devices, resembling the body and clothing styles.

The idea that visibility is always related to a strong performative dimension in youth cultural practices seems pervasive (Feixa 2006; Hebdige 1988; Willis 1990). The significance of visibility had already been pointed out in the 1970s by the theorists of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Turning their attention to the so-called spectacular subcultures, they focused on the issue of style as an essential feature in the construction of collective identities (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1976). Other authors have

also underlined the role played by the body and performance (Feixa 2006; Feixa et al. 2008; Ferreira 2007; Hebdige 1976; Muñoz Carrión 2007; Reguillo 2004; Willis 1990), as well as the role of visual (Hethorn and Kaiser 1999) and digital technologies (Bennett 2004; Lenhart et al. 2007; Loader 2007). This dimension obviously assumes greater relevance in certain youth cultures.<sup>7</sup>

Younger generations, more familiar with an aestheticized and stylized environment, and heavily influenced by audiovisual technologies and languages, act more and more in a symbolic and politic manner within the realm of visual communication. By extensively tattooing and piercing their bodies or by painting subway cars, young people claim a territory of emancipation and uniqueness. Sovereign spaces are created when they collectively forge significant practices, codes, and languages. Within this framework, the city has been highlighted as a privileged setting for collective performance and identity construction. Studies focusing on youth and urban space suggest that “the space of the street is often the only autonomous space that young people are able to carve out for themselves and that hanging around, and larking about, on the streets, in parks and shopping malls, is one form of youth resistance (conscious and unconscious) to adult power” (Valentine et al. 1998: 7).

Public space has always been appropriated by citizens as a vehicle for communication and symbolic exchange. Street corners or city avenues become stages where exchanges, dialogues, and solidarity arise and polyphony is cultivated. As a democratic arena, public space frequently becomes the only means of expression available to the powerless. Carving out one’s place in the city, or leaving a mark, is part of this process. When discussing the urban public space, it is important to refer to the notion of ‘field of visibility’ (Brighenti 2007, 2010) as a realm where different social actors and communication logics meet. The field of visibility is always a territory inhabited by actors with asymmetrical positions and the ability to look at, scrutinize, and label the perceptible world; it is invariably an instrument of power. However, subcultural or transgressive movements also tend to use the field of communication and visibility as an arena where order may be defied. This seems to be the case with graffiti. I contend that it may be included among the tactics that young people use within the realm of visibility disputes. In my opinion, graffiti propagation over these last few decades has to do with the privileged position that image and visual communication have come to occupy in young people’s expression in the public sphere. Image and visual languages are regarded as capillary channels for the production and dissemination of meaning in an increasingly mediatized and globalized society. Consequently, we find more and more evidence that the symbolic conflict in metropolitan areas is conveyed through visual communication that takes advantage of the potential offered by the city’s public space.

The plastic and artificial nature of the urban landscape, the proliferation of images, the presence of distinct lifestyles, the increasing relevance of cultural industries and mass consumption, the creation of dream-worlds linked to the consumption of goods and imaginaries—all of these contribute to a highly aestheticized experience. Image and visuality have become crucial to the exchange of meaning in a context where the established distinctions between art and

ordinary life, as well as high and popular culture, are destabilized. The stylization of commodities and art commoditization make previous symbolic partitions problematic. The spectacularization and aestheticization of the urban world tend to be viewed by postmodern approaches (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1984) as a consequence of global capitalism and a consumerist culture that reigns in the city's landscape. In this context, the aesthetic domain is usually taken to be a depoliticized force. However, as Jacobs (1998: 274) argues, "it is also true that aestheticization operates as the logic of many more modest urban transformations such as streetscaping, place making, and community arts projects ... Aestheticization may also be the way in which national and political agendas (be they agendas of inclusion or exclusion) are manifested." In this sense, using aesthetic devices in order to render visible in the public sphere minority-related or counter-hegemonic opinions, representations, or stances may be considered an act of citizenship.<sup>8</sup>

Spatial order comes with an ensemble of interdictions but also with possibilities. In this realm, it is possible to make tactical use of space and operations within the field of visibility. I use the term 'tactical' in the same sense as Michel de Certeau (1984) in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where the concept refers to the creative ability of the common citizen to resist hegemonic logics and the domain of more powerful social actors. According to Certeau: "Many everyday practices ... are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many 'ways of operating': victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong' (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, 'hunter's cunning,' maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike (ibid.: xix).

Graffiti and street art can easily be regarded as instances of these 'tactical operations'. They can be considered interstitial practices that circumvent the prescriptive nature of urban order. Graffiti writers take advantage of the communicational opportunities offered by the 'space of exposure', which the city's 'vertical urbanism' (Tripodi 2009) provides, in order to perform a crime of aesthetic nature—or, as Ferrell (1996) puts it, a 'crime of style'. We are left with the question of how graffiti is socially manufactured as a transgressive grammar during the struggle to occupy a space of visibility in the urban landscape.

## The Transgressive Grammar within Graffiti and Street Art

Graffiti is, by definition, composed of subversive texts (and acts). The term 'graffiti' derives from the Greek *graphein*, which means a scribbling or drawing on a surface. The term was originally applied to illicit marks executed on walls and other surfaces found in ancient Rome and Pompeii. In studying the graffiti phenomenon, Gari (1995: 16) points out its intrinsic transgressive nature, highlighting the human ability to "convert signs into speech violence aimed at those in power (the father, the teacher, the law)."

That graffiti is by nature a transgressive activity seems therefore to be relatively consensual. In other words, regardless of the kind of content conveyed, the act itself is, first and foremost, a manifestation of subversion—not of a



political or ideological nature in the strictest and more conventional sense, but of the moral and legal judgments that dictate how public urban space should be used. We are thus faced with a symbolic ordering of reality that is expressed in the landscape. On this point, Austin (2010: 43–44) tells us: “Urban social order is, for a great many city leaders, a matter of ‘common-sense’ visual order ... The moral order has a visual vocabulary at its assistance, an aesthetics of moral order ... Graffiti art disrupts the coherence of common-sense aesthetics. It violates the urban habitus. Graffiti art defaces the commonsensical, recognized, expected authority lodged in the property ownerships of classical (and neo-)liberalism, public or private, effecting a detraction of pleasure and security in some viewers. It performs a re-writing of foundational cultural symbols and materials.”

The research I conducted is clear in terms of the writers’ awareness that they must violate established limits. If graffiti were not an obvious assault on dominant values and institutional power, how would we explain the continual repression, criminalization, and removal of these forms of expression carried out by public entities and police authorities throughout the globe?

Even though graffiti and street art are frequently considered synonymous, in fact they correspond to closely related, yet distinct, categories. The reason for this conceptual confusion is understandable, given that they possess overlapping features. Both share the same communication medium—urban public space—and both entail an unpredictable, anonymous, and unsanctioned/illegal action through that medium. To this, we should add the informal nature of said action and the comparatively ephemeral character of its productions. Furthermore, the works are sometimes made by individuals who move between these two social spheres.<sup>9</sup>

By graffiti, I consider all of the non-commissioned and usually illegal works of spray-can art and lettering executed on various urban surfaces and objects (walls, trains, billboards, etc.), deriving from North American urban graffiti writing and kept within that taxonomy: ‘tags’, ‘throw-ups’, ‘walls of fame’, and so forth. This type of graffiti has been documented in various cultural contexts (Campos 2010; Castleman 1982; Cooper and Chalfant 1984; Ferrell 1996; Macdonald 2001). To some authors, this corresponds to a youth subculture based on illegal and risky experiences (Campos 2010; Ferrell 1996; Macdonald 2001). It is a subculture supported by a community of young people who share common practices, hierarchies, values, and vocabulary. Although it may be regarded as illegal, this kind of expression is not necessarily understood as a form of subversion (by graffiti writers) or vandalism (by public authorities, media, etc.). Generally speaking, the so-called artistic graffiti<sup>10</sup> is becoming socially more tolerated and increasingly acknowledged as a legitimate aesthetic urban expression.

It is therefore not easy to draw a clear line between traditional graffiti writing and street art. While, on the one hand, identifying the characteristics of graffiti culture of the North American tradition is a relatively straightforward matter, insofar as it shares a common vocabulary, set of values, practices, and clearly defined aesthetic choices, on the other hand, street art includes a range of forms of expression that are not only broad but also eclectic and constantly

mutating. While graffiti is based on a number of fixed forms of expression and is almost exclusively executed with spray paint, street art incorporates multiple techniques, materials, and formats (stencil, sticker, tape, etc.), along with the more traditional graffiti techniques (spray paint). Street art can be described simply as a post-graffiti movement “characterized by wide-ranging stylistic, technical, and material innovations, which place less emphasis on lettering with spray-paint and more weight on fashioning varied interventions into the cultural landscape of a city” (Waclawek 2011: 30).

Regardless of the obvious differences, it seems clear that, in large part, street art derives from principles and techniques handed down by graffiti culture. The concept of street art itself results from the gradual perfecting and maturing of graffiti’s plastic language, mainly owing to the recognition of many writers who became specialized in the execution of large-scale murals (walls of fame). This explains Austin’s (2010) use of the term ‘graffiti art’ in reference to manifestations of this type that emerged within the graffiti scene.<sup>11</sup> The fact that some of the works produced by graffiti writers acquired the status of a legitimate art form only opened the way to further experimentation with techniques and languages.

The major dividing line between these two universes seems to be the growing tendency of public legitimation to fall mainly upon one of them—street art, which is increasingly assuming the role of a sanctioned art form. According to Dickens (2010: 64), “[m]ore recent understandings of post-graffiti point to a qualitatively distinct model of urban inscription, known popularly as ‘street art’, a subculture that appears to be more comfortably and consciously positioned between art and commerce.” This is reflected, for instance, in the attention and praise that it is bestowed on street art by the media, artistic spheres, and public and private institutions, which explains why many of its practitioners have gained some prominence within the art world.

There is yet one other relevant issue attached to this last aspect—that is, the target audience of these forms of communication. This is not an easy matter to resolve, as there are several ambivalences that come into play when identifying a potential audience for a graffiti/street art piece. A ‘spatial sociology of spots’, as proposed by Ferrell and Weide (2010), may be helpful here. According to these authors, the choice of spots, or locations, determines the audience to whom graffiti is addressed.<sup>12</sup> First, there is an internal circuit of communication that takes into account a more limited audience (graffiti painted in subway stations, abandoned factories, etc.). Second, the high visibility of some places makes graffiti available to a wider audience (e.g., painting on the side of buildings), broadening the scope of its reception. Ferrell and Weide (2010: 51) argue that “graffiti writers play to two intended publics: other graffiti writers first and the general public second.” The first is a knowledgeable audience that evaluates the quality and validity of production according to shared conventions. The second is composed of lay people who may come across graffiti pieces without necessarily understanding their purpose and/or content.

Thus, while I argue that the works of illegal graffiti writers (tags, throw-ups, etc.) are mostly aimed at internal appraisal and recognition (among peers), we find that graffiti art (basically, walls of fame) and street art (stencils, posters,



etc.) also target a considerably more diverse audience. In the case of the latter (graffiti art and street art), however, we are facing more open, and less hermetic, structures of communication that resort largely to image and figurative compositions (characters, visual narratives, etc.), thus facilitating its decoding by a non-expert audience. We might also add that the visual rhetoric of these expressions promotes a parallelism with conventional visual arts, thereby suggesting aesthetic appreciation. This equally serves to explain the greater acceptance of more ‘aestheticized’ formats, particularly among public authorities, the media, and the artistic field, as noted by researchers, who also highlight the professional opportunities that may arise from being involved in these fields of aesthetic creation (Dickens 2010; Snyder 2009).

In this article, while conceding that we face two distinct manifestations, I propose that we consider the relevance of their point of intersection—namely, the fact that they are both produced without permission and thus share a vernacular and unsanctioned character. At least in this respect, they are opposed to the commissioned and commercial mural expressions so often found decorating cities around the world. This, in my opinion, is the crucial point at stake: both graffiti and graffiti/street art involve forms of visual communication that take shape in the arena of illegality and transgression.

As Marshall McLuhan once stated, “the medium is the message.” In other words, part of the meaning of what is conveyed through communication is contained in the medium itself (see McLuhan [1964] 1994). Some media are socially held to be subversive. The choice of a given medium is thus enough to render the message marginal, subversive, or subordinate. Therefore, an image always refers to more than its content. It also invokes a genealogy of media and visual grammars that, in themselves, carry some meaning. For this reason, an iconographic work painted ‘in the streets’ has a completely different meaning than the one it would have if it had been painted on canvas and displayed in an art gallery. I believe that by sharing the same field of action and the same communication medium, many street artists wish to invoke the transgressive nature of traditional graffiti.<sup>13</sup> As Schacter (2008: 39) puts it: “[W]e can argue that as the embodied artist undertaking the act of graffiti is also intrinsically an artist engaged in a criminal act, one cannot view the image without perceiving this inherent illegality; when we examine and experience the images we consequently *internalise* this conscious act of transgression created through its performance.”

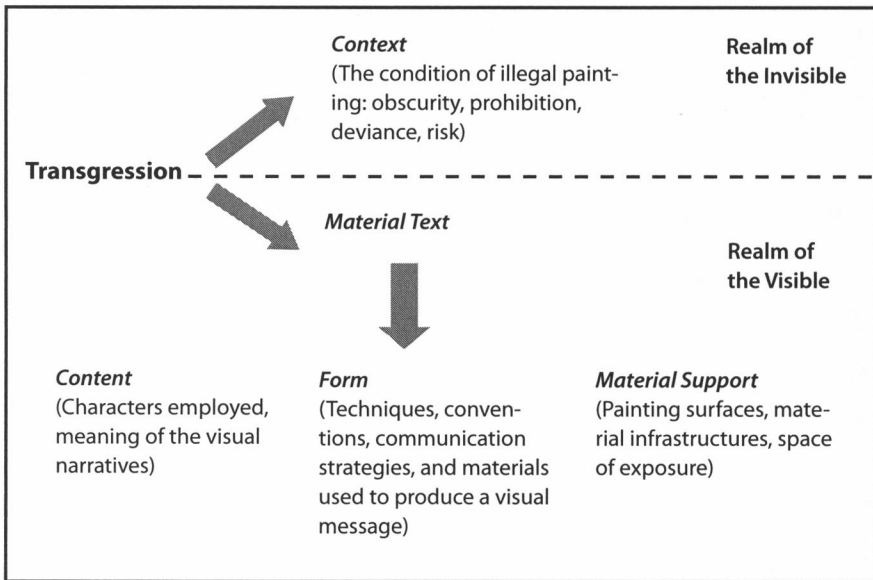
In aiming to analyze them as non-sanctioned expressions of a transgressive nature, I am aware of the different levels on which the transgressive potential of these languages may function. A tag or a throw-up does not have the same effect or contain the same depth of meaning as a well-elaborated figurative stencil. In other words, not all illegal mural expressions are as clearly transgressive or contain the same degree of transgression as others. We might speak of the existence of different levels or intensities of impact, depending not only on the content of the message, but also on all the circumstances surrounding it. Some messages are disruptive due to the force of their context, others in terms of their text as well as their context. It is not even possible to state that the majority

are immediately subversive with regard to their content, given that many have merely ‘decorative’ ambitions, functioning as demonstrations of their authors’ skills. Notwithstanding all previous objections, my intention in the following lines is to attempt an identification of some of the concurring factors in the construction of a social representation of these languages as transgressive.

As we have seen, a graffiti work is much more than its content when it appears on a wall. Schacter (2008) insists on the performative dimension inherent in graffiti. Inevitably, each work displayed in the city has its own story, one that is closely related to the particular conditions of its production (contravention, risk, violence, heroism, and so on). That is why I argue that a graffiti piece always carries a double message: the one that is contained in its *material text* (verbal content, iconography, etc.) and the one that exists within its *context* (prohibition, deviance, and risk). If the former has to do with the domain of the *visible* (that which an audience perceives), the latter refers to the sphere of the *invisible* (that which is not observed but merely imagined). Subsequently, whereas the former concerns the semantic nature of what is inscribed on city walls, the latter involves social practices of illegal graffiti, conveying meaning not only in what is unveiled but, specifically, in what is concealed. Figure 1 sums up how I envisage the idea of transgression being presented in the scope of graffiti and street art.

Let us first talk about the ‘context’. Graffiti is usually the result of an illegal activity. That is why the very act of appropriating the city for the inscription of unauthorized messages may be conceived as a communicational maneuver. Perpetrators are clearly aware of the symbolic violence exercised by their gesture. Graffiti painting incorporates a ceremonial and ritualistic dimension

FIGURE 1 Transgression in Graffiti and Street Art



(Schacter 2008) that is associated with deviance, transgression, and liminality. There is thus a strong evocative power in a graffiti inscription that calls upon the unknown and the mysteries of what is concealed. The observer is forced to acknowledge the power of disorder and of those who circumvent the rules and escape authority.<sup>14</sup>

If we consider the material text that is produced, we may envisage the transgression that exists in the ‘material support’, in the form and in the substance of the messages identified as belonging to graffiti and street art. When assessing the substance and impact of graffiti, material support is a dimension that cannot be overlooked. A support is not only the surface where the inscription is placed, but also its location and the surrounding space. For several different reasons, the reading of a graffiti piece depends heavily on its setting. First, space bears a specific symbology, and the meaning of what is inscribed cannot be dissociated from the social significance of its specific surroundings. Consequently, painting the front of a police station, a historical monument, or a road bridge imparts different substance and impact to the message. Second, the space where an inscription is placed determines the level of exposure that the work will have and its potential audience. Therefore, as Ferrell and Weide (2010) have shown through what they term ‘spot theory’, those who paint graffiti do it taking into account the public they are addressing.

When I refer to ‘form’, I mean the techniques, conventions, and communication strategies, as well as the materials used, in order to produce a visual message. Transgression is first displayed in the maneuver to subvert the meaning of city objects and in the reversal of their utilitarian and symbolic role. Thus, different kinds of urban artifacts and surfaces are transformed into unusual canvases, exhibiting verbal or iconic statements. The way space is understood is altered from the moment objects acquire unpredicted symbols and thus new functions. The nature of this mechanism of visual communication is similar to the one Hebdige (1976) found in the ‘style’ of many youth subcultures. He saw subcultural style as a “mechanism of semantic disorder” (ibid.: 90) that enables “violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced” (ibid.: 91). This is precisely what we are talking about when ‘bombing’ (illegal graffiti) unexpectedly turns train carriages, traffic signs, billboards, or immaculately white buildings into colorful canvases (figs. 2 and 3). Shock, public outrage, political reactions, and police repression are all the results of these actions of urban guerrillas.

Let us now focus on the ‘substance’ or ‘content’. The relevance of the content is basically reflected in mural expressions in which the visual message and narrative are more dense, complex, and prolific from a purely pictorial point of view. One of the components regularly present in graffiti works, unveiling its transgressive nature, is the satirical or offensive content, the obvious desire to shake beliefs, to mock the order and the symbols of power. This is an ancient characteristic.<sup>15</sup> The following images clearly represent the critical stance aimed at dominant institutions, namely, those of a political, economic, or religious order. This attitude matches the traditional stance of the graffiti writer as a social actor on the margins, questioning power and authority.



**FIGURE 2** Street Bombing on Abandoned Buildings (Lisbon, 2009)



**FIGURE 3** Train Bombing (Lisbon, 2009)



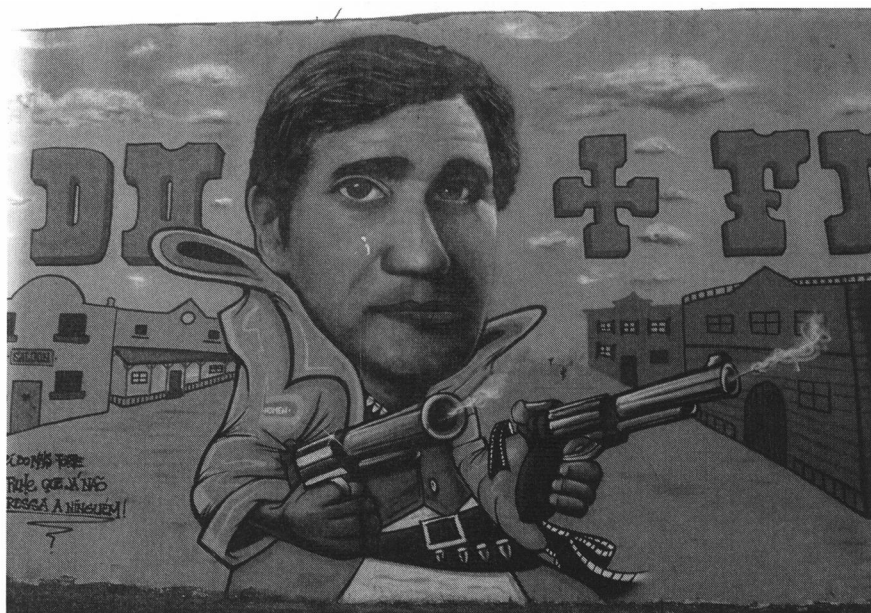
It is obvious that these images represent merely part of the pictorial representations executed with spray paint scattered around Lisbon. As I have already mentioned, the majority have a more evident purpose of territorial markings (tags, throw-ups) and demonstrations of technical skills (walls of fame). Nevertheless, we cannot deny the clear, and perhaps growing, presence of visual narratives tending toward criticism and subversion. The cases presented herein fit into what we might describe as statements of political and social satire and criticism. In political satire, a few clearly identified political agents are ridiculed and belittled through the use of various narratives. Such is the case with figure 4, which portrays José Sócrates, the former Portuguese prime minister, as a court jester. The next two murals (figs. 5 and 6) are more recent and came into existence in the context of economic crisis in Portugal, a direct consequence of the 2011 Portuguese bailout and the austerity measures that followed.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the so-called Troika (a group of international lenders composed of the International Monetary Fund, European Commission, and European Central Bank) and the national political class (particularly those parties in power over the last four decades) became obvious targets for the common citizen's criticism and satire. This is well-documented in the following images as well.<sup>17</sup> In figure 5, a mural entitled "The Law of the Strongest," the Portuguese prime minister is portrayed as an Old West bank robber, alluding to the deficit control measures that resulted in large cuts in wages and pensions, commonly described by Portuguese left-wing parties as a 'theft'.

**FIGURE 4** Former Portuguese Prime Minister, José Sócrates (Lisbon, 2009)





**FIGURE 5** Current Portuguese Prime Minister, Pedro Passos Coelho (Lisbon, 2012)



**FIGURE 6** German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Portuguese Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs (Lisbon, 2012)





Figure 6 depicts the common person's representation of the political state of affairs in Europe, satirizing both the Portuguese prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs.<sup>18</sup> The image represents the alleged subservient attitude assumed by the Portuguese government toward Germany's Merkel, who wears the European Union's logo as a necklace. In figure 7, the ruling political class, recurrently portrayed by the common citizen as being responsible for the current state of affairs, is labeled as being "corrupt" and visually represented as pigs. The names of well-known politicians—some of which were involved in a number of financial scandals—are spread all over the wall. In figure 8, irony is used to caricature the economic crisis in Portugal, calling for the international community to have compassion and urging it to "Pray for Portugal." All of the examples shown in figures 5–8 are from murals produced on what is referred to as the Amoreiras Wall. This important wall features some of Lisbon's pioneering graffiti writers and 'graffiti kings'. Its symbolic significance for the local graffiti community means that only the more consensual writers are 'authorized' to paint on this wall.<sup>19</sup> The choice of this location represents the writer's full awareness of the clear statement being made and of the impact that his or her visual creations will produce.<sup>20</sup>

The next three figures maintain the spirit of social satire through their critique of dominant values. In figure 9, we find religious power being satirized by means of sexual innuendoes involving a clergyman. Figure 10 provides us with a clear criticism of what we might call the existence of a 'surveillance society', reflected in the dissemination of surveillance cameras throughout the city. Lastly, figure 11 is an example of an attack on the consumerist and capitalist

**FIGURE 7** Portuguese Politicians Represented as Pigs (Lisbon, 2012)



**FIGURE 8** “Pray for Portugal” (Lisbon, 2012)



**FIGURE 9** “I Got Erection” (Lisbon, 2009)





FIGURE 10 “Big Brother Is Watching You” (Lisbon, 2009)



FIGURE 11 “McMurderer” (Lisbon, 2009)



spirit, made through the use of one of the most emblematic logos of cultural and economic globalization, which, to some extent, represents ‘Western dominance’: McDonald’s.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes the imagistic content expresses a clear goal to represent or reinvent the everyday life experienced by youngsters. The next two photographs (figs. 12 and 13) depict a wall of fame in Lisbon—made by a crew known as GVS—that might be defined by what I would call ‘allegories of everyday life’.<sup>22</sup> While I have to admit that a direct attack or criticism of power is not to be found in this case, in my view the political dimension of the mural’s narrative

**FIGURE 12** GVS Wall of Fame (1) (Lisbon, 2006)



**FIGURE 13** GVS Wall of Fame (2) (Lisbon, 2006)





is nevertheless evident. It is perhaps not a political expression in the more conventional sense, but rather a form of symbolic resistance, resulting in the revision of the status quo and the normal order of things. As various studies have shown, one of the most constant dimensions of the graffiti world is the permanent (and sometimes violent) antagonism between graffiti writers and establishment forces.<sup>23</sup>

In this particular case, it is easy to see how tensions with authority are invoked and represented through cartoon characters. The mural is converted into a canvas of self-representation, visually articulating the experience lived out in everyday life via the imagined world. In this sense, it has an almost magical function, serving to exorcize ghosts and grant wishes. The weak and the villains are turned into heroes in this combat of unequal forces that pits the law against the graffiti writer. Figure 12 shows a police officer, weapon in hand, who is visibly upset due to the fresh paint marks on the wall that identify the authors (GVS). In figure 13, Bart Simpson, the key character, appears satisfied with a victory that is symbolically strengthened by the mark painted on the police van. In this way, the powers that be are simultaneously violated and conquered by the criminals.

All the images in this article are clear examples of messages that would hardly have had a chance to be delivered by any means other than this alternative and non-sanctioned display. Their controversial content, in some cases violent and unsavory, turns them into clear examples of visual ‘guerrilla warfare’. In some cases, the aim is to shock, in others to produce violent criticism, using a number of semiotic resources that are framed by a communicational context that enhances the message’s subversive character. In the majority of cases, the main point at stake is an attack either on rather abstract notions (capitalism, consumerism, neo-liberalism, the state), which emerge as structural elements of a given social order, or on concrete figures, who are turned into symbols of a certain status quo. Both cases, however, maintain the spirit of popular cultures and vernacular expressions that have provided us with multiple examples of these kinds of dynamics throughout history.

## **Conclusion**

In its early days, graffiti was confined to a fairly basic act of communication. As a language code, the tag was the vehicle of communication. Any writer would be seeking fame through the propagation of this set of letters, which represented his nickname (and alter ego). An escalating competition between writers and crews brought the struggle for distinction to the field of pictorial inventiveness and to the improvement of writers’ technical and plastic skills. In the early years of New York graffiti, there was an ever-increasing level of graphic and technical creativity (Castleman 1982; Cooper and Chalfant 1984). Subway cars were converted into visual narratives where several mass media characters (e.g., Mickey Mouse, Super Mario, Pluto, Felix the Cat) lived together, reflecting the technical and stylistic skills of both writers and crews.

We find in the illegal expressions of graffiti and street art an incorporation of the successful communicational patterns used by advertising and propaganda media, which tend to colonize the field of visibility in the city. However, these illegal languages are tactical operations of a disruptive nature, used by (typically) young people to conquer a space of visibility in the city. Illegal graffiti is a kind of ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’, to use Umberto Eco’s term (Hebdige 1976). According to Ferrell (1996: 176), it is “a form of aesthetic sabotage.” Graffiti writers and street artists combine a number of elements that take into account the perception and impact of their message in the landscape, an exercise that is far from simple. They strategically explore the city’s topography and morphology, as well as, invariably, its visibility. Therefore, communicating through the wall becomes a way of bringing out a sense of citizenship that rejects the conventional patterns of political action. The young, who occupy subordinate positions in the social order, often create new ways to communicate, thus acquiring the visibility that they need in order to express themselves. The criticism and mockery aimed at the authorities or the dominant culture, along with the strengthening and promotion of certain youth practices and imaginaries, are discourse elements that stress a specific subcultural identity.

In this article, I have endeavored to identify graffiti as an illicit format of visual communication that is used by its producers as a potent sign of non-conformity. In spite of the symbolic reversal under way, graffiti is still clearly represented—both by its authors and by the rest of society—as a discourse of a transgressive nature. This distinctive trait is appropriated by graffiti writers, who usually represent themselves as individuals belonging to an outcast community, critical and defiant of the status quo (Campos 2013; Ferrell 1996; Macdonald 2001). A graffiti piece is thus a composite symbol, suggesting transgression in two different ways: first, in the production contexts and, second, in the disseminated pictorial and verbal texts. The former addresses the circumstances in which graffiti is produced: they are usually illegal in nature and involve risky activities, situations where liminality and disputes over the use of urban space occur. The latter is simultaneously related to a communication format (with all its techniques, languages, and peculiar supports) that has been historically represented as peripheral and subversive and to contents (such as characters, narratives, sceneries) that exhibit criticism or dissidence. Nevertheless, I believe we are experiencing a transition in which society is gradually valuing the text (form and content) in the production of these urban languages. In fact, graffiti has grown complex over time, undergoing a semantic and technical evolution whereby the rudimentary tag has been slowly giving way to more sophisticated communication formats. It is for this reason that, in the past few years, there has been a growing interest in the aesthetics of this language, which has been gaining visibility due to the mediatization of contemporary street artists, such as Banksy, Blu, Shepard Fairey, and Os Gémeos, among many others.

In my opinion, it makes sense to interpret graffiti and street art as evidence of a visualist culture and a growing aestheticization of everyday life, both of which seem to be viewed as obvious trends of our times. Aestheticization in the contemporary city is not only displayed through plots of land governed by



global capitalism and mass consumption that spawn shopping centers, theme parks, and fun centers, thus multiplying the channels for visual and audiovisual communication and allowing for the constant discovery of new artifacts and commoditized signs. On a small scale, aestheticization also occurs and has—or can have—a significant political dimension in a city of differences. This dimension is often ignored by analysts of the postmodern city who tend to stress the apolitical nature of the aestheticization of everyday life in a city attuned to the logic of global capitalism, paying little attention to small-scale phenomena. Still, I do believe that aesthetic resources can become important symbolic and political tools through which young people will be able to create new channels of communication. Contemporary graffiti and street art are examples of discursive instruments that can help them negotiate agency and power in the urban environment.

## Acknowledgments

The translation of this article was financed by FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, under the project PEst-OE/SADG/UI0289/2014.

---

**Ricardo Campos** holds a PhD in Visual Anthropology and is a Research Fellow at the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences (CICS-Nova), Portugal. He is an editor for the Brazilian academic journal *Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia* (Journal of Art and Anthropology) and co-coordinator of the Luso-Brazilian Network for the Study of Urban Arts and Interventions. For the past 15 years, he has been researching urban youth cultures, particularly the connections between youth and image. More recently, he has studied the graffiti community in the city of Lisbon.

## Notes

1. In-depth interviews with 13 graffiti writers from Lisbon have been complemented by another 17 in-depth interviews conducted within the scope of a previous project on the hip-hop movement.
2. During this period, I took dozens of photographs, while others were offered by some of the interviewees. Many other photographs were accessed online at graffiti writers' websites or weblogs. These visual data were subjected to close scrutiny and were categorized according to the graffiti writers' own techniques and aesthetic and stylistic ordering. This vast visual patrimony has since grown, owing to a systematic photographic registration of Lisbon's urban landscape that I have undertaken, which aims to detect the mutations that this kind of phenomenon has gone through in recent years. By means of this process, I have been able to identify the

particular traits and the most common qualities of the multiple communicational categories one may find in the graffiti and street art world.

3. Streets where I found a strong presence of graffiti and street art pieces revealed their relevance as key sites for this kind of urban visual communication in the city of Lisbon.
4. In this capacity, I have been cooperating with the Lisbon City Council on a project to inventory local manifestations of street art.
5. According to Brighenti (2007: 324), “[v]isibility lies at the intersection of the two domains of aesthetics (relations of *perception*) and politics (relations of *power*).” Visibility is often asymmetric (i.e., not equally distributed), generating different responses from social actors and transforming it into a site of strategic action.
6. In his book *Common Culture*, Willis (1990: 12) defines ‘symbolic work’ as “the application of human capacities to and through, on and with symbolic resources and raw materials (collections of signs and symbols—for instance, the language as we inherit it as well as texts, songs, films, images, and artifacts of all kinds) to produce meanings.”
7. Once again, this applies mainly to so-called youth subcultures, for which style remains a factor of group identity and distinction.
8. It is in this sense that Holston and Appadurai (1999) argue that the city is a true arena for citizenship. This is the very place where rights are renegotiated and new ways of exercising citizenship, based on difference, become visible.
9. We often find street artists who had formerly been graffiti writers. Many persist in their illegal street activities as a complement to their more legitimate practices.
10. The term ‘artistic graffiti’ is usually used by graffiti writers to describe large and complex mural paintings. In some cases, these paintings are executed with permission (Campos 2010). This expression was appropriated by several social agents (media, public authorities, etc.) who use it to symbolically differentiate this type of aesthetic production from traditional graffiti writing (tags and throw-ups).
11. According to Austin (2010: 35): “Graffiti art is a face-to-face, social practice with clear aesthetic intentions and unlike traditional graffiti, the semantic content of graffiti art is secondary to its visual aspirations.”
12. We should not disregard the importance that the Internet assumes nowadays, altering the ways in which graffiti works are disseminated (Campos 2012; Snyder 2009).
13. I recognize, however, that this subversive nature has been gradually softened as a result of a set of social and political processes.
14. For this reason, several authors refer to Mary Douglas’s celebrated essay *Purity and Danger* in order to examine the social practice of graffiti (Campos 2009; Schacter 2008). In her essay, Douglas (1969) tells us that the idea of impurity is something that destabilizes order. This explains why, in a disciplined and hygienized city, all forms of pollution (either material or symbolic) are reproached, discriminated, camouflaged, or cast away. Toxic elements, such as graffiti, represent disorder and challenge social conventions.
15. Graffiti found in the city of Pompeii, for example, hints at how walls were carved by residents with sayings of erotic or political content, using satire, mockery, and humor.
16. Due to the growing economic crisis, citizens took the streets throughout the country, holding huge demonstrations on 15 October and 13 November 2012.
17. What is interesting in this context is the resurgence of an almost extinct phenomenon: the political mural. In recent years, the number of political murals produced by anonymous citizens has multiplied (Campos, forthcoming), and street artists and graffiti writers in particular are playing a relevant role. If the graffiti culture that

has grown since the 1990s in Lisbon has been for the most part non-ideological and non-political, the current economic turbulence has triggered its political vein.

18. These are the leaders of the parties of the right-wing coalition that has been in power since the 2011 elections.
19. Graffiti writing considered to be 'unauthorized' might be 'crossed' (vandalized).
20. Some of these murals have had wide repercussions in the national media (television and newspapers) and on the Internet (social networks), having garnered never before witnessed media attention.
21. In some of the examples shown in the photographs, the language used on the wall is English. Various reasons may explain this situation. For one thing, contemporary graffiti is inevitably associated with North American imaginary and vocabulary. This explains why most of the graffiti writers' tags, as well as the names of the 'crews', are in English. In addition, the Portuguese youth is a large consumer of Anglo-Saxon mass culture (film, music, television, etc.), and thus English is a familiar language to many. In an increasingly globalized context, the use of English is, in fact, fast becoming a relatively normal means of communication among youngsters.
22. This mural no longer exists. The pictures were taken in 2006 during an interview with some of the graffiti writers belonging to this crew.
23. Those who have studied the subject of graffiti have remarked on the significance of this clash between opposing forces. See Castleman (1982), Cooper and Chalfant (1984), Ferrell (1996), and Macdonald (2001).

## References

- Austin, Joe. 2010. "More to See Than a Canvas in a White Cube: For an Art in the Streets." *City* 14, no. 1–2: 33–47.
- Bennett, Andy. 2004. "Virtual Subculture? Youth, Identity and the Internet." Pp. 162–172 in *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brighenti, Andrea M. 2007. "Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences." *Current Sociology* 55, no. 3: 323–342.
- Brighenti, Andrea M., ed. 2009. *The Wall and the City*. Trento: Professional Dreamers.
- Brighenti, Andrea M. 2010. "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain." *Space and Culture* 13, no. 3: 315–332.
- Campos, Ricardo. 2009. "On Urban Graffiti: Bairro Alto as a Liminal Place." Pp. 135–151 in Brighenti 2009.
- Campos, Ricardo. 2010. *Porque pintamos a cidade? Uma abordagem etnográfica do graffiti urbano*. Lisbon: Fim de Século.
- Campos, Ricardo. 2012. "A pixelização dos muros: Graffiti urbano, tecnologias digitais e cultura visual contemporânea." *Revista FAMECOS: Midia, cultura e tecnologia* 19, no. 2: 543–566.
- Campos, Ricardo. 2013. "Graffiti Writer as Superhero." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2: 155–170.
- Campos, Ricardo. Forthcoming. "From Marx to Merkel: Political Muralism and Graffiti in Lisbon." In *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, ed. Jeffrey I. Ross. London: Routledge.
- Castleman, Craig. 1982. *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chaney, David. 2001. "From Ways of Life to Lifestyle: Rethinking Culture as Ideology and Sensibility." Pp. 75–88 in *Culture in the Communication Age*, ed. James Lull. London: Routledge.
- Cooper, Martha, and Henry Chalfant. 1984. *Subway Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Dickens, Luke. 2010. "Pictures on Walls? Producing, Pricing and Collecting the Street Art Screen Print." *City 14*, no. 1–2: 63–81.
- Douglas, Mary. 1969. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Ewen, Stuart. 1988. *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Featherstone, Mike. 1991. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage.
- Feixa, Carles. 2006. *De jóvenes, bandas y tribus*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- Feixa, Carles, Laura Porzio, and Mireia Bordonada. 2008. "Um percurso visual pelas tribos urbanas de Barcelona." Pp. 87–113 in *O Visual e o Quotidiano*, ed. José M. Pais, Clara Carvalho, and Neusa Mendes de Gusmão. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Ferreira, Vítor. 2007. "Política do corpo e política da vida: A tatuagem e o body piercing como expressão corporal de uma ética da dissidência." *Etnográfica* 11, no. 2: 291–326.
- Ferrell, Jeff. 1996. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Ferrell, Jeff, and Robert Weide. 2010. "Spot Theory." *City 14*, no. 1–2: 48–62.
- Gari, Joan. 1995. *La conversación mural: Ensayo para una lectura del graffiti*. Madrid: Fundesco.
- Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson, eds. 1976. *Resistance through Rituals*. London: Hutchinson.
- Harvey, David. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1976. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1988. *Hiding in the Light*. London: Routledge.
- Hethorn, Janet, and Susan Kaiser. 1999. "Youth Style: Articulating Cultural Anxiety." *Visual Sociology* 14, no. 1: 109–125.
- Holston, James, and Arjun Appadurai. 1999. "Introduction: Cities and Citizenship." Pp. 1–18 in *Cities and Citizenship*, ed. James Holston. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jacobs, Jane. 1998. "Aestheticization and the Politics of Difference in Contemporary Cities." Pp. 252–278 in *Cities of Difference*, ed. Ruth Fincher and Jane Jacobs. New York: Guilford Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146: 53–92.
- Jencks, Chris. 1995. "The Centrality of the Eye in Western Culture: An Introduction." Pp. 1–25 in *Visual Culture*, ed. Chris Jencks. London: Routledge.
- Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, Alexandra R. Macgill, and Aaron Smith. 2007. *Teens and Social Media*. A report for the Pew Internet & American Life Project. [http://www.pewinternet.org/~ /media/Files/Reports/2007/PIP\\_Teens\\_Social\\_Media\\_Final.pdf.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~ /media/Files/Reports/2007/PIP_Teens_Social_Media_Final.pdf.pdf) (accessed 10 May 2010).
- Loader, Brian D., ed. 2007. *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Macdonald, Nancy. 2001. *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Maffesoli, Michel. 1990. *Au creux des apparences: Pour une éthique de l'esthétique*. Paris: Plon.
- Maffesoli, Michael. 1996. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage.
- McLuhan, Marshall. [1964] 1994. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 1999. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Munõz Carrión, António. 2007. "Tácticas de comunicación juvenil: Intervenciones estéticas." *Revista de Estudios de Juventud* 78: 11–23.
- Reguillo, Rosana. 2004. "La performatividad de las culturas juveniles." *Revista de Estudios de Juventud* 64: 49–56.
- Robins, Kevin. 1996. *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision*. London: Routledge.
- Sanchez, Paco, and Ana Tauste. 2002. "Graffiti, pintadas y hip-hop em España." Pp. 169–217 in *Comunicación y cultura juvenil*, ed. Félix Rodríguez. Barcelona: Editorial Ariel.
- Schacter, Rafael. 2008. "An Ethnography of Iconoclasm: An Investigation into the Production, Consumption and Destruction of Street-Art in London." *Journal of Material Culture* 13, no. 1: 35–61.
- Valentine, Gill, Tracey Skelton, and Deborah Chambers. 1998. "Cool Places: An Introduction to Youth and Youth Culture." Pp. 1–33 in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, ed. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine. London: Routledge.
- Snyder, Gregory J. 2009. *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*. New York: New York University Press.
- Tripodi, Lorenzo. 2009. "Towards a Vertical Urbanism: Space of Exposure as a New Paradigm for Public Space." Pp. 47–62 in Brighenti 2009.
- Waclawek, Anna. 2011. *Graffiti and Street Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Willis, Paul. 1990. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.