

TAGGING, “AESTHETIC TERRORISM” AND RELATED ISSUES IN ATHENS, GREECE

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Abstract:

Trends of globalization contribute to this viewpoint of a specific type of graffiti, called tagging, and related themes in cities of constant flux and change like Athens, Greece which has been in the spotlight for more than a decade on issues relating to the economic crisis and larger socio-economic and political phenomena. Tagging graffiti is the main focus of this article as the authors turn the spotlight to the so-called “dirty graffiti” which can extend from scribbles related to a group or individual name, sports teams, symbols, and logos, and extending to a specific graffiti artist’s “branding”. Drawing on social sciences, applied linguistics, and related fields such as aesthetics, and public health, the authors touch upon interrelated issues weaving the fabric of the local and global cultures, co-relating vandalism, aesthetics, possible terrorism features, and the need for temperance in communities towards positive change. The focus will be the critical examination of a form of graffiti (“dirty tagging”), and its potential association with aspects of terrorism and “aesthetic terrorism.”

Keywords: *Tagging graffiti, “aesthetic terrorism”, vandalism, community affects, Athens.*



Two sides of “tagging” graffiti, Panepistimio, Athens, Greece, September 2018 (Photo: B. Kondilis)

I. Overview

Graffiti and its related implications are here to stay in our globalized world. Some scholars trace the “birth” of graffiti to the pre-historical writings in caves, while others suggest that graffiti was born in the Roman era.ⁱ Graffiti includes language texts or paintings or the combination of both and may appear on walls, buildings, vehicles, etc. in urban (even rural) public spaces. Graffiti can be considered part of the linguistic landscape of a city, and graffiti writing includes meaningful symbols and images communicating messages at different levels. Words are imprinted using a multitude of visual features, symbols, and colors, intentional or unintentional communicating of information.

One of the key factors/features of graffiti is that they present visual messages, stimulating the attention of passersby, a form of “visual language”ⁱⁱ which has a growing influence in modern day society. This may include a commentary of social or political content, or a protest to dominant perceptions and practices, which attempt to attract the reader. And, in many parts of the world, graffiti “tagging” could be seen as part of group identities (e.g., gangs, collectives of graffiti artists). Maryam Farniaⁱⁱⁱ explored what drives people to put down such inscriptions on the walls they pass by, claiming that graffiti are people’s channels by which thoughts, annoyance, affection, political declaration, even their outcry are publicly expressed. This expressed community language (multiple languages in one area locale for example), is a phenomenon which showcases diversity or what sociolinguists refer to as “superdiversity”^{iv} reflecting how globalization has changed the face of social, cultural, and linguistic diversity.^{iv} Dr. Claire Kramsch of the University of California at Berkley, indicates that language is the morphing “culture” at different points in time and thus is constantly changing in the face of the globalized world.^v Modern version of graffiti which includes “tagging” was introduced to Greece in the 1980s via the hip hop culture including breakdance videos according to Tsamandakis.^{vi} The author shares how hip hop and wall graffiti became part of the modern Greek scene as both are part of a global phenomenon (Ibid, 15). Contemporary graffiti however is disassociated from the latter, where this ‘underground culture’ of street art and its duplication adds to an artist’s fame.

The link between hip hop and graffiti initially evolved as a competition, similar to the hip hop dance moves, as described by Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise* (1994), about U.S. urban black rap and hip hop culture.^{vii} The modern phenomenon of globalization is manifested in the rise of “Graffito-tourism” in Athens, while the graffiti phenomenon of Athens has been under scrutiny by foreign and Greek journalists, scholars, and of graffiti “artists”.^{viii} The concept of “tagging” is the repeated use of a single symbol or series of symbols to mark territory in order to attract the most attention possible; this type of graffiti usually appears in strategically or centrally located neighborhoods.^{ix} Here, we attempt to examine a particular component of “tagging” graffiti, emphasizing on the so-called “dirty” (*βρόμικο* in Greek) tagging.

The newly introduced term in the quotidian vocabulary, “dirty tagging”, entails a wide spectrum of connotations, from aesthetic pollution, soiling and offence to recklessness, disrespect and even destruction against an established set of socially and aesthetically acceptable “rules”. We deem it can be viewed, not without a certain degree of ambiguity and several reservations, as distinct from more “artistic” forms which attribute some “aesthetic value” to forms of tagging, like bubbles, or graffiti artists’ signatures. We maintain, however, that “dirty tagging” cannot and should not be disassociated from the expanded realm of the aesthetic. Setting such boundaries is a precarious task. We realize that this

specific form of tagging has not been adequately investigated in its particularity so far from any “aesthetic” point of view. Indignation and overall rejection does not contribute to a more profound understanding and the formation of an open-minded stance on a diverse phenomenon that is here to stay. We do not ignore what may seem to many as exasperating proliferation, (Freudian) narcissism, limited imagination, law violation, and criminal light-mindedness towards monuments.

To address the above, we shall focus on “crisis-ridden” Athens, providing some additional examples from the larger Attica area to further substantiate the extent and proliferation of tagging. We refer to aspects of “political tagging” though not exhaustively because, in our view, it requires analytical investigation better implemented in a separate article. In this spirit, we only make some selected references to overtly political/radicalized slogans, signs and mottos that blatantly praise political extremes, or advocate resistance and potential for violence. We adhere to the notion that all acts (such as artistic or expressive ideas and emotions) in public space are political, in that they create degrees of affect in people’s lives. Particular studies about “gang graffiti/tagging” in Athens are still lacking. In addition, after reviewing interviews with, and statements by graffiti “writers” (most reject the label “artists”), it seems most are openly politically oriented or have particular political affiliations (e.g., extreme right or left, anarchy, etc.), though the issue of dirty tagging far extends this type of politicized graffiti language.

The repetitive random fashion of symbols or scribbles might be “akin to a dog’s marking of their territory” though citywide graffiti (particular tags and stencils) have been found in anarchistic communities in the 80’s and 90’s, in Berlin, particularly in apartment and school complexes, or associated with urban decay.^x We acknowledge that every act in the public sphere is political, at least in the sense that all visual forms generate or “reverberate” ideology, intervene, and in the short or long term, shape perception, stir public discourse, and advocate action or counter-action. We are principally preoccupied, however, with the why, how, and to what avail all the above create an “ethos”, projecting a controversial thus fascinating identity for contemporary Athens and, at the end of the day, generating a “culture”. There is a strong connection between culture and politics, especially when people from different cultural environments and ideological background come into conflict with each other. “Culture” becomes political when meanings become the source of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power.^{xi} Tagging can signify a break with the established order and the defiance of society and the institutions that represent it (OECD).^{xii} In this light, we aspire to contribute to the on-going graffiti debate between the writers/artists, the officials, and the community at large.

The ambiguity of this visual form of expression emanates mainly from its multifaceted ontology that intertwines the fields of politics, aesthetics, sociology, linguistics, among others. Our paper does not perform a critical discourse analysis of the actual graffiti tags or statements as typical in the field of mapping out linguistic territory, though the authors gathered some visual samples and refer to research where certain graffiti messages and tags use overtly political/radicalized slogans and mottos that give the impression or are interpreted as a praise terrorism or as an advocate of violent acts. For example, a poster image outside the Law School near Panepistimio metro station in Athens, “Up Against the Wall M*FUCKERS” declares an intentional “graffiti jam” opposing any law.



Up Against the Wall – Poster on the walls of the Law School, University of Athens, March 2017 [authors rebel against the notion that they are seen as “criminals” (in Greek «να μας αποκαλέσουν «εγκληματικά στοιχεία»») claiming that graffiti “writers” have a right to express themselves freely against any prohibition.] (Photo: B. Kondilis)

Many believe tagging graffiti (or graffiti in general) to be defacement and vandalism of private and public property when done without permission. Besides a significant element of public opinion that apprehends graffiti as an unwanted annoyance, an indication of rebellion against political authorities, a destructive practice that must be mended.^{xiii} This issue takes on a social, legal, and economical twist in any city undergoing a severe economic crisis that is unable to dispense funds to clean up the “vandalism” caused intentionally by others.

II. Why Athens?

“If you want to learn about a city, look at its walls,” INO (Greek graffiti artist). No longer just the “city of Pericles” or the home of Philosophy, Athens has been for some time touted as the “graffiti capital of Europe,” perhaps replacing Berlin^{xiv}, the “Graffiti city”^{xv} and the “contemporary Mecca for street art in Europe.”^{xvi} We favor the perceptive definition of a city by Henri Lefebvre: ‘a city is the projection of a society on the ground’.^{xvii}

The multilayered crisis continuing for more than a decade at the time of writing this article is still holding a strong grip across Greece having a profound, identity-altering effect in terms of radicalization, flourishing of solidarity movements, but also extreme-right mostly violent activism, as many large cities also have experienced. Athens, the capital city of Greece, and an expanding metropolis, acted as the breeding ground and a test tube for attitudes, practices, ideas and phenomena such as graffiti and tagging. The Greek crisis has wiped out thousands of jobs, decimating the middle and lower classes. Thus, social unrest provides a breeding ground for outbursts of “expression.” Moreover, Athens is plagued by abandoned buildings that are testimony to the city’s illustrious neoclassical past, as only a small percentage of neoclassical or “of neoclassical style” edifices survive today, many being architectural corpses.^{xviii} Many side streets and alleys are poorly lit, thus tagging activities are facilitated. The Athens urban underground also has a longstanding connection with fringe cultures such as anarchists, the migrant communities, and other graffiti writers making dirty tagging instrumental in making protest, voicing frustrations or agonies. Though the law addresses issues of vandalism, the police are seemingly reluctant to arrest taggers unless they are associated with anarchist groups. Conclusively, “the ever-increasing quantity of street art (some commissioned) seems to parallel the unfolding state of emergency which grapples and cripples the socio-urban heart of Athens.”^{xix}

In many countries graffiti is considered illegal, since it is a form of “pollution” or “destruction” of public or private property, a form of vandalism. Greek law indicates that vandalism or damage to buildings without explicit permission by the owner (public or private) is illegal and punishable with fines and possible prison time (Articles 381,382 and 383 -- penal law since year 1982).^{xx} Local and international writers and photographers have captured multitudes of dirty tagging and political types of symbol and statements on classical buildings such as the Polytechnic University of Athens.^{xxi} Several graffiti writers/artists or taggers showcase their intention by posting on YouTube or represent their work in public magazines including the street artist, “Dreyk the Pirate,” who indicates that he never paints on clean walls and believes he contributes optimism and emphasizes “Greek traditional elements”.^{xxii}

Dreyk and Bizare, both well-known graffiti artists, participated in 2007 in an exhibit near Technopolis in Gazi called “Destroy Athens,” supposedly a series of art narratives, by an eerie coincidence, an unanticipated series of events followed from December 2008 through 2012 included fires and the gutting of several historic buildings.^{xxiii} Though graffiti art proliferated during and after the Olympic Games of Athens in 2004 where walls were seen as “architectural canvases” with several commissioned artworks it seems that dirty tagging even covering over some of these original works has become the new graffiti “scourge” of Athens.^{xxiv} Has Athens become the “new Berlin” of graffiti? Berlin parallels Athens in the plethora of vandalistic style of tagging among other graffiti types.^{xxv}



“Berlin is The New Athens” Graffiti, Athens, Greece, May 2017 (Photo: B. Kondilis)

Greece's ongoing crisis includes over-taxation with competing personal and social financial cost issues such as healthcare^{xxvi} thus, the municipal costs of the added cleanup is yet another burden to taxpayers. Furthermore, there is the issue of graffiti-tagging filled "ghettos" and related issue of increased crime in many communities. Acts of vandalism amount to breaking the law, and in places like New York, graffiti seems to be categorized into two camps -- the "vermin" similar to urinary canine practices, and the "innovators" of graffiti art.^{xxvii} Sterbenz (2018) indicates that following the Broken Window study (theory) by Kelling and Wilson, originally proposed in 1982, and subsequent city cleanup efforts, New Yorkers reflected on whether their city became safer as a consequence of better management and policing, or whether getting youth off the streets, and lowering unemployment, are the reasons for decreased crime.^{xxviii} Positive change has been demonstrated in other communities who focus on community wealth building by cleaning up downtrodden, vandalized urban areas among other actions,^{xxix} providing funding for businesses to clean graffiti-ridden buildings, and creating better graffiti cleaning products as many of these have proven to be toxic.^{xxx}

III. Local views on Vandalistic Style Graffiti: a case study in Athens

One multi-method research study presented in the Europe in Discourse Conference (Kondilis et al., 2018), focused on the different viewpoints on graffiti and potential vandalism.^{xxxi} Specifically, this includes: (1) face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire with fifteen local businesses in downtown Athens; (2) excerpts from viewpoints on tagging images in an open Facebook (FB) page; (3) general feedback on graffiti and vandalism to a pilot sample of ten people from the general public; (4) an interview with a local legal expert on the issues at hand.

The sixty-eight public Facebook responses on the issue (posted on May 2018) were categorized qualitatively as relating to: historical context -- referring to earlier years where the city was without any visible tagging, contrasting current graffiti-tagging issues in Athens with other Greek cities; freedom of expression comments or related comments about rebelling against the establishment; general comments about graffiti including two posts about specific writers' street art artwork including the "Athena Owl"; and lastly solutions to the overall "vandalism" issue at the local or global levels. Fifteen local Athens businesses commented both on the positive and negative sides of graffiti and related vandalism.

One participant stated, "*The appearance of the city affects every business*" (optical shop owner, age 70). Another commented on the issues related to art, vandalism, context, and freedom of expression:

"Graffiti could be something artistic. Besides this it is a sociocultural phenomenon that transports life and messages that many times are needed. Despite all of this when it takes place on public and private areas without approval or mutual consent it creates problems and is indeed property violation. However, I cannot deny that it is something that beautifies the dullness of the city. I believe that a middle ground solution can be found so artists can express themselves through street art while properties remain protected (clothing store owner, age 40)."

IV. The "ART" or "LIKE ART" Question

Dirty tagging is mostly gestural and expressive in a more generic fashion than its more "artistic" siblings (see, for example, some writers' elaborate signatures). Most taggers would vehemently repudiate any "artistic" connotations or added value to their imprints as outdated, conservative, appropriating and canonical, thus muffling their statements of individuality in making protest. In any case, the bulk of dirty tagging appears to resist an art form analysis: according to the institutional theory of art, although tagging is definitely an artefact, which is the first condition in order to be considered as work of art, this status usually is not given by members of the art world (Dickie, 1974).^{xxxii} From a quotidian empirical exposure to dirty tagging throughout Athens, any artistic merit attributed to most of its manifestations is either limited or even non-existent. However, the "art" or perhaps "like art" question is not completely unfounded. Underlying artistic patterns associated even with rudimentary art principles such as space manipulation, styles, gestural utterances, a sense of movement, an attempt at calligraphy, shapes corresponding to emotions, recurring patterns and motifs etc. lay some claim to a "raw" artistic value both by the tagger and by the random viewer on the receiving end (perception). To take it one step further from general and ambivalent artistic attributes, the graffiti end-result may neighbor the "aesthetic", may have an "aesthetic affect". It certainly causes sensory stimulation and response.

To this effect, we may evoke an argument based on Da Vinci's position about the value of "formlessness" and "randomness". He postulates that, if put under careful and insightful consideration, even ostensibly random and incoherent formations might foster important ideas and inspiration.^{xxxiii} The random or not-so-random layout of tags on the "city canvas" of city walls may encompass the energy and the potential to suggest uncharted visualizations of artistic and/or aesthetic stances. To further support any art potential even for dirty tagging we may develop an argument by University of Melbourne graffiti scholar Dr. Lachlan MacDowall who stated that tagging was the cornerstone of graffiti culture that emerged from the impoverished neighborhoods of New York in the late 1960s -- "Tagging is a prototype for a mural. There is a direct link between a tag that became more and more ornamentalized and eventually became this full color burner."^{xxxiv}

Any aesthetic connotation of the tagging phenomenon in Athens is not intended to sanitize or make tolerable the hard-to-deny problematic concerning the anti-social ramifications of dirty tagging. We should strive at striking a balance between “over-moralizing aesthetics” and allowing all acts in the realm of “freedom of expression” to rise and meet the aesthetic claims.

V. Inducing the Element of ‘Extreme Fear’ (orchestrated and ‘random’)

The “cultural war”, the “undeclared war,” “social war”, “war for Athens cityscape”: these recurring phrases in media articles and in writings of the Academy of Athens^{xxxv} which emphasize these polemical terms to characterize the on-going and forthcoming fierce confrontation. But whose “war”, against whom, why and at what cost? The crucial, underlying question, here, may be phrased as follows. Tagging: an unconventional and spontaneous activity or vandalism? Opinions range from general praise to down-right condemnation as “aesthetic pollution” and anti-social acts. However, such polarities, even in the form of critical questions, may appear to many as pseudo-dilemmas, judging by the end results from the point of view of those afflicted by “dirty tagging” as this is seemingly the “battle of the walls” of public space.

Creating a war-like atmosphere (the threat or promise of a dramatic intervention or potential conflict, damaged properties) is a feature of “terrorism” as a climate of fear is thus created and preserved. Related strategies are employed to solidify this constant, quotidian fear. To begin with, a powerful technique one said to resemble an “asymmetric threat.” Arnold Berleant’s idea of a “vicious lottery”-- a lottery with equal opportunity to lose -- may be cautiously expanded in the case of dirty tagging.^{xxxvi} The speedy, almost instantaneous application of dirty tagging is intrinsically associated with its ubiquitous nature (on any public or private space) and the manipulation of the available time (“anytime”) capitalized by taggers. All kinds of “safety” are mashed between the clashing rocks of randomness and omnipresence, the two strategies of taggers. These “improbable odds” impose heavily, especially on local businessmen/women who see the facades of their properties tarnished. In general, strong indignation is being voiced, apparently by many Athenians and visitors at how tagging overall impacts or affects their everyday quality of life (if it’s treated as a severe form of aesthetic pollution, etc.).

We continue our examination of the potential application of “strategies” and “techniques” employed by some taggers that may be considered as bordering on a particular kind of “aesthetic terrorism.” Turning our focus to the “occupation of the senses,” especially of vision, referring to the article by Shalhoub-Kevorkian, who mentions the context of state terrorism by the Israeli government occupying the Palestinian part of East Jerusalem.^{xxxvii} The key idea here is that violence is the occupation of the senses, referring to the sensory technologies that manage bodies, language, sight, time, and space in the colony. Could some general analogy be drawn in “tag-ridden” Athens as to how vision is being literarily and figuratively “occupied” by the immense bulk of tagging? If we allow for some latitude, we may rather effortlessly observe that the afore-mentioned ‘qualities’ of tagging (randomness, expansion, ubiquitousness, perpetuality, extreme intensiveness) constitute a type of “socio-aesthetic” violence, an expansionist drive that colonizes vision in the quotidian practices and experiences of Athenians. Such violence may escalate into aesthetic “terror”, especially in the cases of “bombing” and “tag wars”, evident on thousands of square meters of city surfaces.

As stated previously, we suggest that, in the case of tagging in Athens, due to the immense diversity of forms and scope, and of different, groups, crews, and backgrounds, the debate is not so much about the practices of tagging or about the particularly structured sets of notions and ideas represented. It is more about its effects on the cityscape and aspects of the everyday life of Athenians. The chaotic “result” of tagging over time as implied via Broken Window Theory asserts that this is an effective method of inducing fear through seeming or real violence. By “chaotic”, we imply that, from the point of view of the average uninitiated viewer, one may find it very difficult or even unattainable to fathom or decipher the “code” of tagging. If one exists it can be comprehended by other taggers, the principal target group of the very act of tagging – tagging as gesture and expression in public spaces, of course, addresses society as a whole. The deliberate or not, but still intrinsic cryptic nature of perplexed layouts of lettering (rarely in Greek, mostly in Roman alphabet) street-handles, acronyms, etc. contributes to the further mystification of what may prove actually very mundane in its uniformity through repetition. It has been for some time now a trend. Words as symbols, devoid of some recognizable “meaning” hinder the communication between the visual form and the viewer (symbols could be interpreted univocally). At this point, we emphasize that terms related to types of tags, elude to some overt or covert forms of violence including: *going over*, *slash*, *massacre* (see list of terms via reference).^{xxxviii} Additional fear may also be introduced by anonymity as it seems an oxymoron that tagging is often ascribed to an accentuated state of alertness, social awareness, struggle for radical change while on the other hand most tags seem communication-impaired to the general public.

The latter faces difficulties in understanding the inherent and hermeneutic ambiguity of tagging. As a result, this confusion may cause certain degrees/levels of fear in a seemingly unstable environment. As a lateral construct and a visual manifestation (an event and its manifestation occurring simultaneously) dirty tagging, on many occasions, draws its aesthetic appeal from the oscillation between opposites such as criticism and profanity, frankness and rudeness, purpose and purposelessness. Thus, it induces the passerby in a state of intentional discomfort. This enhancement of potential aesthetic reverberations may also result in morally and socially ambiguous forms of expression. This condition of discomfort/malaise may nurture species of the aesthetic. The battleground known as “city walls” is a perpetual fight for hegemony and domination of public space between rival or sibling social forces. Is “future Athens” being incubated in its

graffiti matrix and who determines this? How well-equipped for such a tremendous undertaking are people with often total disregard for any opposition, people who repeatedly display a counter-productive narcissism, may disregard laws, or undermine public discourse concerning public spaces? Violence, fear or even terror can be identified in all inevitabilities historically known for harboring types of social turbulence.

Lastly, one reservation is put forward that tagging is incriminated by many for “aesthetic pollution”. The Athenian cityscape lends itself to this through commercial forms of information such as posters, banners, and commercial graffiti (as adverts). However, a larger question arises: should the invasive agenda of tagging be perceived as fearful, or should the people of Athens be equally or more “intimidated” by the daily flux of consumerism and its multiple visual forms? Such questions, though poignant and rather perceptive, seem to favor a peculiar equation between different realms of culture. Being bombarded for decades by a broad spectrum of commercial and consumer imagery does not automatically grant absolution to “tag bombing” which again may be a covert or explicit form of terrorist-style. As seen below in the various selected images from Athens city center, there is evidence of repeated “tag bombs” on not only on neo-classical buildings and private properties and businesses (such as the kiosk) but also on moving vehicles. Therefore, the “threat” is constant and inescapable.



Images of dirty tagging on property near Omonoia square, Monastiraki, and Panepistimio areas, Athens, Greece, June 2018 (Photos: B. Kondilis)

VI. Could “Dirty Tagging” be Associated with a Type of “Aesthetic Terrorism”?

From an empirical perspective, the unaligned “tagger” in Athens appears to be more preoccupied with “him/herself”, his or her imperatives, such as “expression”, “fame”, the struggle with anonymity, the venting of frustration due to the grim reality of the crisis etc. In the grand scheme of things, the idea of an intermediate stage of inducing “terror” or extremes of fear, seem far-fetched for most taggers. A disregard for public space, private property, and monuments, stemming from the euphoria of “leaving a mark” and the bliss emanating from some makeshift claim on the “aesthetics of destruction”

seems to constitute a precarious shift in morals -- individual or group expression takes the game one step further and shows an ostensible “lack of limits.” We wonder if some methods (wearing masks, repetitive use of verbal violence, actual violence, as in the cases of opposing crews fighting over territory or making threats to local businesses, if they erase their tags) may in some cases create terror-like associations to the lay public; these patterns draw from historical, social, and political issues that border on terror.^{xxxix}

In our view, dirty tagging may qualify to be categorized as a particular type of “aesthetic terrorism,” though it may be less flamboyant, imposing, horrifying, and generative of less “terror” for the people of Athens than its “distant cousins” – that is, overtly terrorist acts that participate in the realm of contemporary aesthetics by employing “aesthetic” strategies with resonating “aesthetic” messages and effects. Taggers may be of either gender, walks of life, any age, though they tend to be younger and work in teams, “spraying” while masked or unmasked, some are affiliated or not with radicalized groups. People who cover their faces to avoid identification may or may not be radicals in the strictest sense but either way their “aesthetic” acts or gestures are deliberate, orchestrated and driven by instant pleasure or for some obscure long-term strategy. Tagging in general is most often addressed to specific recipients, such as opposite crews or gangs (e.g., “YoGang” as a tag featured on a kiosk, photos above) or to people who are deemed “the enemy” (all authorities, people covering a large spectrum of ideological opposites) including the supposed “detached” and numbed “average” Athenian.

Nevertheless, a vibrant part of Athenian society that is either the maker or the main target of dirty tagging seems to be younger people from teens to early adults. From an empirical standpoint associated with our field as educators, the young appear to be accustomed to the ubiquitous tag or, equally, disassociated from it as a hostile “anti-aesthetic” act of potential “aesthetic terrorism”. To account for this stance, one may invoke cultural conditioning, contemporary mass culture for the young that is ostracizing any vestiges of past aesthetics, and the age factor (restlessness, protest, subculture-friendly position). The massive and unpredictable application of dirty tagging aims at exerting different kinds and scales of fear (extreme fear being the focus of our attention) for its recipients, ranging from the fear emerging from imminent threat of violence such as in the form of retaliation (directed at opposing crews or groups of citizens protesting against this practice) to the ubiquitous and thus extreme fear (or terror) from the unprecedented and still escalating indiscriminate expansion of “dirty” graffiti all over Athens.

VII. “Aesthetic Terrorism”: A Welcomed Plague, similar to Cavafy’s “Barbarians”?

Associating “aesthetics” (a term still echoing some moral qualities) with any type of “terrorism” does not entail any lack of justification. Contemporary aesthetics, in particular, is broad-minded enough to encompass almost all human activity. The aesthetic dimension probes “reality” with its pervasiveness and gives prominence to obscure, indiscernible qualities. It resizes, minimizes, or maximizes. Consequently, it aspires at re-shaping “reality”. The vast majority of graffiti writers, taggers especially -- some refuse to make “pieces” or “murals” at all -- are appalled by the prospect of being called or viewed as “artists”. It is quite evident that any affiliation with the lofty realm of aesthetics might not be well-received or welcomed by the taggers. Nevertheless, there is an underlying “aesthetic stance” adopted by some crews in that their tagging is an emphatic response to the ugliness, uniformity, and monotony of Athens’ urban landscape.

Bulk and omnipresence of “dirty tagging” may act as forceful amplifiers of whatever message is supposed to come through the tags. Tags may act as narrative threads of violence, which are historically established to play a role as a tacit mechanism for liberation (dirty tagging viewed as a quotidian aesthetics act of “liberation”). However, in contemporary Athens, the aforementioned “liberation” is less conceptualized and more associated with taggers’ venting from personal or societal suffocating conditions. There is a difference between free and allegedly liberating use of tags and self-absorbed exploitation, just as there is a difference between individuality and individualism, identity utterances and selfish “yelling”. Are the tag-covered walls of Athens still a “space” or a “canvas” as it is often romantically described, an open-ended narrative, a field of reciprocity, inter-play and even struggle and opposition? What is the “war on walls” for? Tagging attacks have escalated to the point of explosion. Any overt or subliminal “message” packed in the fast and furious writing on the wall is but temporarily intensified (the “terror” effect is both overt and covert as it promises more presumed mayhem). On a more practical level, mass tagging involves crews orchestrating a quasi- ritualistic “happening” and is almost always implemented at night. This deliberate obscurity severely weakens analogies to other overt acts of terror that may have aesthetic results as well but are done in broad daylight so that “directing the act” is equaled with the act itself.

In general, providing any comprehensive, sober, and all-encompassing definition of “terrorism” is an almost impossible task, especially after 9/11 in the U.S., and outside the scope of this article. This difficulty and controversy emerges from the potential use of violence and the question as to whom, by whom, and for what ends it is directed, since the use of violence achieves political goals common to state and non-state groups^{xl}. The majority of definitions in use have been written by agencies directly associated with the government and are systematically biased to exclude governments from the definition. The contemporary label of “terrorist” is highly pejorative as it denotes a lack of legitimacy and morality; taggers may be viewed by some to be the “essential outsiders”, with a likeness to Cavafy’s “Barbarians”, whose “images” might unleash the combined anger at all the “reactionary” forces, the state, the municipality, the police, and the petit bourgeois of Athens. “Dirty taggers” may be seen as genuine “aesthetic terrorists,” when they emphatically discard the corrupting realm of any commissioned “art” and scorn legal restrictions as societal moral hand-outs. This is manifested

by tampering/tagging over of the “Athena Owl” as referenced in the following sections. Taggers value their methods and means enough to elevate them to a separate individualistic reality placed higher than the reality of the rest of all other Athenians. Does such a mindset evolve into a life stance, thus qualifying “dirty taggers” to the status of a Romantic, Byronic “hero” that equates “poetry” and action? A delusion, a fallacy, or an age-old model re-instated with a contemporary vestige? Anyway, isn’t life in civilization mostly experienced in symbols? Why don’t we gradually process the symbols of “dirty tagging”, and since aesthetics should not be solely associated with beauty show it as converging with Jean Arp’s most “perfect image” being a “dry porridge”?

Regarding the use of “aesthetics and terror” in the same phrase, Manon Slome (2018) explains: “As for the use of ‘aesthetics,’ I use this term in a neutral sense, as in a study of the forms and principles by which the images under investigation are used, not with a reference to the word’s popular connotations of beauty or value. I am in search of what can be termed an ‘aesthetics of terror’ much in the way that the nomenclature ‘fascist architecture’ immediately connotes a style of building.”^{xli} At this stage, we may not have the clarity of distance as in the aforementioned example, but such an aesthetic of terror is likely to be permeating our popular culture.^{xlii} Aretoulakis further states that “Terrorism cannot and should not be seen as a work of art” though at times we consider a non-art object as if it were artistic in order to discuss its aesthetic value or dimensions.^{xliii}

We can encounter something visually stunning and aesthetically powerful without considering it as a work of art for it is important to reveal or, even better, to sense its moral consequences and its ethical and social impact on human psychology and political practices.^{xliiv} Oscillating between the familiar and the unfamiliar and being in constant flux, dirty tagging alternates between intimidation and fascination, perpetuating a state of discomfort and unease, thus mimicking a distant echo of the Sublime.^{xliv} For a profound association between terrorism and the sublime, refer to Arnold Berleant’s article, “Art, Terrorism and the Negative Sublime.”^{xlvi} By also pushing the “unexpected” in extremes (massive tagging everywhere, even on other tags), the aesthetic impetus of dirty tagging again borders on terrorism as “Terrorism is aesthetic because terrorist acts are staged for maximum effect and maximum sensory force.”^{xlvii}

VIII. The “Future” Argument

The aesthetic accentuates probability. However, in the case of dirty tagging the future is not as much in flux and “imagined” as initially promised. The “threat” is not just immanent; it is here and must be negotiated in more “temperate” terms in a synergy of lawmakers, educators, academics, writers, and graffiti taggers (and graffiti artists). In this light, dirty tagging may allude to “aesthetics” that can be associated -- not without caution -- with what might be called “a specific type of aesthetic terrorism.” This type of “aesthetic terrorism” is, in our view, not so much about intent (deriving from a well-thought out set of ideas and strategies) but mostly about results. The omnipresence and the element of the unexpected – the so-called “vicious lottery” of tagging that is massive/all-over, and unconstrained, affects both property and aspects of quality of life that is hard or even impossible to decipher which may enhance fear. Tagging is characterized by inaccessible semantics to the common viewer, lack of two-way communication, inevitability, and, perhaps the most ominous one, one-sided designing of future public space. The largest part of dirty tagging is not overtly political, but it is a social act that may significantly impact the local communities. Extra caution should be applied for potential abuse of this particular type of “aesthetic terrorism” from both conflicting sides (exaltation/condemnation), and we should always be mindful of the omnipresent state and commercial terrorism as well (commercial imagery that occupies public spaces, e.g., banners, posters etc.).

If all graffiti claim to go against the current dystopia and somehow promises a cultural heterotopia, the means, for dirty tagging in particular, is a “war” for the visual landscape of Athens, creating counter-hegemonic spaces flushed with tagging. Can tagging still be deemed “countercultural” by propagating a “future” after it has become ubiquitous? Is it still preserving the fundamental impetus of graffiti? Tagging is the heart of graffiti and its beginnings. However, nowadays, everyone who takes a fat cap spray, and scribbles his tag cannot be deemed a “writer”. If tagging becomes a cultural norm, will it maintain its infamous “radicalism”? Or does it incubate a promise of “catharsis” through extreme pollution? Analogically can it be compared to a PC game principal, the “take it to the next level” argument features, though in real life there are no preset parameters. However, the forthcoming inevitable congestion of space is a key parameter in our case. What comes next? More listed monuments, religious edifices, and antiquities? Is this “future” to be anticipated or feared?

People may convince local government to focus on municipal efforts such as “Fix My City”^{xlviii} or find better ways to report vandalistic tagging or other similar aesthetically “displeasing” images. A Peace Jam Greece event held in Athens February 2018 for younger students (ages 12 to 17) included a session about issues related to graffiti, particularly tagging.^{xlix} A collective of individual actions can affect the community’s welfare for future generations to come; thus, we must be able to read the ‘writing on the wall’. For the ancient Greeks, *Sophrosyne* was a virtue inspiring moderation and *temperance*^l, a principle dare we say should apply to how people express themselves with a spray can. We must look at both sides of the coin. On the one hand, graffiti can be a type of “education” of the people of Athens, joined in by the mass media, scholars, experts, graffiti “artists” themselves, towards an appreciation of tagging as a “lived lexical vocabulary.”^{li} On the other hand, graffiti can be a vehicle for artist-tagger respect. Consider the case of the Athena Owl graffiti that was tagged over, though repairs were made immediately by a pro-graffiti, non-profit art group.^{lii}

Athena's Wise Owl Graffiti Art...



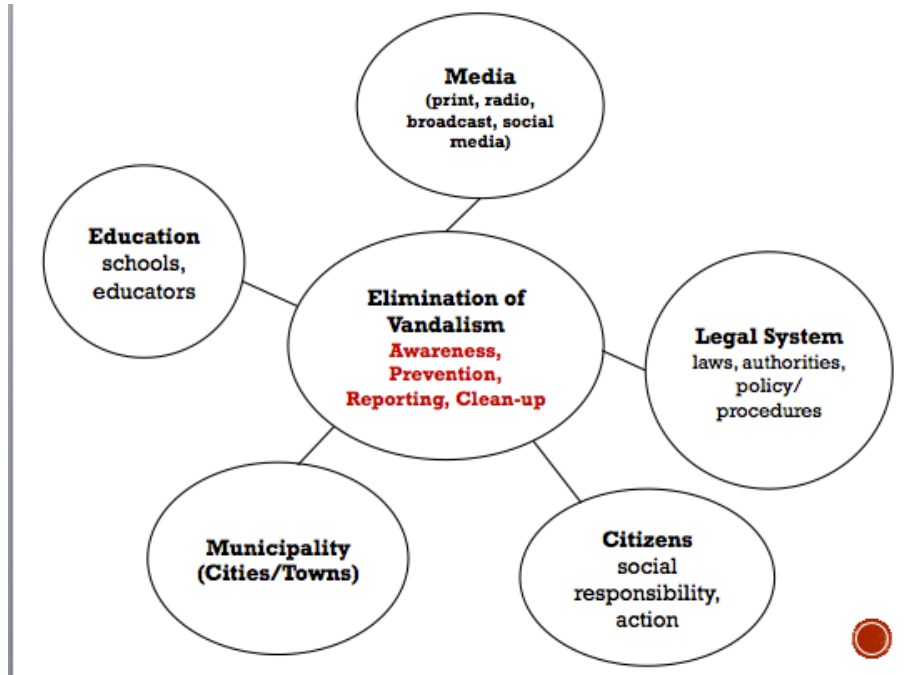
[Left] *Amazing Graffiti 'Owl of Athens' Goes Viral*. Keep Talking Greece. Accessed September 28, 2018. <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/10/25/amazing-graffiti-owl-of-athens-goes-viral/>

[Right] Xinhua/LefterisPartsalis. *Feature: Preserving contemporary graffiti art on walls of Athens*. New China. Accessed September 28, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/19/c_136140746.htm

We attempted to establish the difficulty in decoding tagging, particularly “dirty tagging” which may appear to invoke “terrorism-like” effects on the community. Perhaps a mutual meeting of the minds should be pursued for a shared appreciation of tagging and graffiti art as a whole, as well as critically thinking about place and community benefit. Slome (2018) calls for Athenians to critically think about controversial contemporary imagery that is either embellishes or soils the city, and how graffiti gives a sense of “critical citizenship” that encourages a rethinking of the crucial role of images in our media-saturated world. When simultaneity of event and image are coupled with the omnipresent fear of war and terror, the image can be used not only for entertainment and information but also as both a weapon and a shield.

A pre-emptive practice that is rather rapidly spreading as a non-overtly aggressive counter-act to “dirty” tagging is to commission established writers like street handles INO^{liii}, AIVA and SAME 84, to produce large pieces (murals) on exposed facades in order to capitalize on one of the unwritten laws of graffiti, “respect” (to generally not “write” or “tag” on top of another writer’s piece without her or his permission). Could this practice effectively reduce “dirty” tagging in at least some very exposed surfaces or edifices under the taggers’ spotlight (large businesses, listed monuments, and public buildings) or could this counter-act prompt retaliation (as with the Athena Owl graffiti)? The legal handling of “dirty” tagging in Athens poses some very intriguing questions. For instance, is the full implementation of the law a feasible response? Will repression generate more reaction, even radicalization? As our smaller research and interview with our legal counsel indicates, any kind of graffiti is considered “vandalism” when it is committed without the permission of the owner of the property.^{liv}

At the end of the day, to reduce the “dirty tagging aesthetic terrorism” and, even better, gradually channel excess energy towards productive cultural and community partners, we should primarily focus on facing the psycho-social issues that prompted the phenomenon (unemployment, marginalization, oppressing expression). This is more than a platitude or wishful thinking. These issues have lead authors to question if cleanup efforts will reduce the Broken Window Syndrome phenomena.^{lv} As an effort of organizing the group’s thoughts about community effects and the need to eliminate vandalistic style graffiti, the authors refer to a concept map “Eliminate Vandalism” created and presented by Kondilis et al. (2018) showing how civic engagement at individual and community level interplays with the larger vandalism prevention issues.^{lvi} The authors call for further community discussions and collaborations in integrating street images asking for “positive” messages that can create community change at the local and global levels.



“Eliminate Vandalism” Concept Map

IX. CONCLUSIONS

Dirty tagging affects everyday life in many ways. It is, for reasons recorded above, a key factor in the transformation of public space in Athens and Attica. Dirty tagging remains arbitrary from all points of view (aesthetic, social, economical, cultural). It may be examined as associated with the scope and methods that border on “terrorism”, and it can be appreciated in the broad realm of contemporary aesthetics as embracing traits of “aesthetic terrorism”. This type of dirty tagging in Athens is not associated with particular political parties, however, it remains a social and political act since it significantly impacts people living in Athens. Caution should be applied for potential abuse of this particular type of “aesthetic terrorism” from both conflicting sides that usually oscillate between exaltation to condemnation.

We attempted to establish that one of the “terrorism-like” effects of “dirty tagging” is generated by the difficulty in decoding it. Perhaps another kind of “education” of the people of Athens (by mass media, independent scholars, experts, graffiti “artists” themselves) should be pursued for a more substantial understanding that will allow access and perhaps (social media-oriented) appreciation of tagging, in general, as a “lived lexical vocabulary...”

Reconsideration and “bringing up to date” current existing policies/laws and related procedures is important in the overall handling of this issue in municipalities, so is sharing of best practices among EU countries and beyond. This further implies critical thinking skills for future generations and implications for education and active citizens with positive community involvement. It is critical for the onlooker to see the difference and resist the demagogic strategies to which a media-driven society can be subject (Slome), and this can only be helped by the media if “vandals” are demoralized into understanding that what they are doing is counter-intuitive to “healthier” choices for societies. If unemployment is lowered, education and volunteerism (civic engagement) are encouraged, the high-risk youth likely involved in vandalism will be off the streets to productive community involvement including community service.

We can say with certainty that there is a lot of room for different interpretations and a need for further research. There needs to be a central, well-structured, scientifically diverse, technologically sufficient “institution” that will amass information, monitor, and evaluate graffiti in general, and coordinate studies and activities. Graffiti, in general, is interwoven into the fabric of Athens. It is high time we treat it as a key cultural player, not trap it in convenient binaries.

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