STREET ART AS NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis examines the importance of studying street art as a form of subjugated narrative. Street art and writing connect to a larger body of narratives, from art brut to native art, that tell outsider stories which are largely ignored by the dominant ideology. It is a type of narrative that directly opposes the capitalist system of production and elicits new ways of thinking from readers and viewers. Since we live in a world mediated by images, street art incorporates visuals with its text to become a medium of communication that coincides with modern day advertisements. As a form of subjugated narrative, street art and writing explores the means of production of a text, the importance of the author to the text, and the actual definition of text itself.

I begin this thesis by discussing the need to challenge the academic canon to include subjugated narratives. Using Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, I examine how street art and writing actively work to combat image-dominated society and challenge the dominant ideology that is created and maintained by tradition and capitalism. I then move into viewing street art and writing as an attempt to create a dialogue with the cultural monologue by forcibly and illegally inserting a voice onto street walls. Finally, I conclude my essay by looking at how culture jamming, a form of street art that specifically uses advertisements to create a new subversive message, is challenging the way humans view the cultural messages being sold. Street art is slowly becoming more popular as an art form, as museums are starting to recognize it as valid art forms; however, it is the un-commissioned and illegal narratives that need to be studied and reviewed, as they tell a valuable story that is often overlooked.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are multiple belief patterns in our society and many different types of narratives; however, the majority of these are repressed. The dominant classes have created a norm, a standard that is passed off as “natural” instead of as a social construction. This standard is reinforced by institutions, such as the church, schools, and government. However, this dominant ideology excludes many peoples, their culture, and their ideas. Outsider art and subjugated narratives have been continually produced as a response to the dominant ideology. What are some of these subjugated narratives and what forms do they take?

Art brut, homeless texts, tattoos (particularly prison tattoos), folk art, and street art and writing are a diverse group of subjugated arts that consistently resist the hegemonic culture. Homeless texts and publications are largely ignored due to the prejudice against the writers and artists who produce them. Society often ignores the homeless, sees them as a problem, and yet the homeless have a voice and a story to tell. Their texts are rich with experience, thoughts, ideas and beliefs about their world and the global society. These narratives are ignored, just as the homeless population itself is ignored. Native art is a term applied to the arts and crafts of indigenous cultures. This type of art is only marginally recognized by the mainstream culture and is not incorporated in the traditional schools of learning. Why is this ignored? Why, in America, are Native American art and literature pigeonholed into a subcategory instead of included in the overall American narrative? The standards that the dominant ideology imposes on art and literature exclude narratives such as folk art and homeless texts.

Art brut is another form of subjugated art that is part of the continuing response to the hegemonic culture. This art is considered “outsider art” and is generally not attached to institutional learning. Many of these artists have no training in the art department, and some have mental conditions that marginalize them from mainstream society. The fantasy and dream worlds often created by these artists explore dimensions of the mind in new and exciting ways. One “outsider artist” who gained some popularity, although by no means
recognition from the mainstream culture, was Henry Darger. His large body of work, including thousands of images and texts, was not really discovered until his death in 1973. He was labeled a paranoid schizophrenic; however, others believe he fell on the autism spectrum. Darger often used collage, a technique that incorporates a variety of different images and words to create a new work. Darger created a religious collage in which he incorporates the image of the Madonna and child with the text, “Where, then, shall we find Jesus on earth if not in Mary’s arms? Was it not she who gave us the Eucharist!” (Figure 1). Darger introduces a new idea of the Eucharist in that the body of Christ was given to us by Mary and not some omnipotent male leader in heaven. Many Christian religions teach that it was God who gave mankind Jesus; however, Darger’s collage acknowledges the female role in the creation of Jesus.


Tattoos also are a form of the subjugated narrative. Although some tattoos are becoming more accepted by mainstream society, prison tattoos still remain an outsider art,
just as the men and women prisoners who wear them remain outsiders. These tattoos are stories of lives written on bodies that elaborate experiences that are ignored or marginalized because inmates and ex-convicts are seen as less than human. The photograph in Figure 2 shows a picture of a prisoner’s chest, covered with various images and texts. The faces could be of children, friends, or lovers, while the letters are most likely gang affiliated. Prison tattoos have their own symbols, meanings, and codes creating a subjugated narrative that is ignored.


Street writing and art are a part of this body of subjugated narrative and art that is marginalized and ignored by mainstream society. It is a disparate discourse that communicates messages and ideas in the form of text and visuals illegally placed on the street. The writers of these texts are attempting to create a new narrative for their communities as well as collectively tell a story for a global community, but their ideas are often quickly painted over.

Street art is a type of narrative and expression that is currently not accepted as a valid form, either in an academic content or by the state. Why is writing on the walls not seen as a valid form of narrative? And why do governments work so hard to eradicate any forms of it instead of just ignoring it? In the following essay, I am going to examine street writing as a
subjugated form of narrative that goes beyond the traditional definitions of narrative voices. It is also a text that directly opposes the capitalist system of production and elicits new ways of thinking from readers and viewers. The majority of street writing criticizes the dominant ideology and therefore is a subjugated voice that should be recognized as a valid form of expression. Some of the street text incorporates visuals, which are important to understanding it as a medium of communication. We are consumed by images in our society, and by incorporating images with the text, the medium calls for a different way to read and understand it. I will also explore the originality of street writing and how it defies the laws of capitalist production. Each text is unique to the space and time in which it is placed, and requires no mediation between text and reader. It has the ability to reach a variety of audiences, as it requires no purchase to read its message. In a capitalist society that encourages consumption, the goal of many street writers and culture jammers is to elicit free thought from the readers or viewers and recognition of the forces that control society.

In examining street art as a narrative, one of the most important questions that needs to be raised is what is a text? In current society, texts come in more ways than the traditional book or newspaper format. With the use of the Internet and cell phones, the way text is used as communication is changing. Words are truncated for tweets and text messages, and symbols are used to create expression and tone. Some other questions that are raised when discussing street art as narrative relate to the author’s voice and the illegality of the text. Since the majority of street writing is anonymous, of what importance is identifying the author? In addition, street art is deemed as vandalism and is criminalized by all Western communities. Is this just the dominant culture and government censoring an alternative voice, or is street art really vandalism? Street art also raises the question of public space and who is in control of it. Street text challenges viewers to reappraise their surroundings and to question who controls the street. The use of public space is determined by the city; however, private spaces can be bought for a particular amount of money. When people walk down the street, they are often assaulted by images of advertising. Why shouldn’t street writing and art be allowed as well? If they paid to post up their idea, would it still be considered illegal?

I begin by examining the literary canon and how it is used to indoctrinate citizens into an official culture and way of thinking. I then suggest the need for English Departments to move more towards cultural studies in order to incorporate the myriad voices that remain
outside the official narrative. With society constantly changing with new forms of media, English Departments need to focus more on critically analyzing culture instead of stressing a dominant ideology. Introducing subjugated narratives into the canon will allow for all groups to feel included in the official cultural narrative as well as promote modernization of departments that teach literature.

I will also introduce Guy Debord’s idea of the spectacle and how street writing actively works to break through the confines of the spectacle. Debord belonged to a group of revolutionaries called the Situationists, who advocated living and experiencing life apart from an illusory capitalist society. According to Debord, society creates representations of life and all citizens are living within the confines of this spectacle. It is very difficult to break out of the spectacle, as it has absorbed all aspects of private and public life. However, Debord and the Situationists believed that by constructing situations, people might start to be aware of their environment and begin to live outside the spectacle. Street writing directly relates to Debord’s theories of the spectacle, as the nature of street narrative is to help jar others out of their slumber. Seeing a piece of street text could startle readers out of their routine and potentially help them to start critically evaluating society. Street writing often employs the use of humor and parody, which helps the texts to remain inoffensive to many who encounter them. Street writers are tricksters, employing jest to make strong social commentaries.

I also explore street art as a dialogue and an interaction with society. Society is in a monologue with itself, not allowing in outside voices or new thoughts. Street artists playfully interact with the government that works to buff out their narratives. The expression “buff” is used to describe the grey paint that is painted over street texts by order of local governments. One of the reasons that the dominant narrative stays the same is because it discourages dialogue; hence, street artists work to encourage dialogue. Some of the areas that street artists particularly focus on are education, work, and growth and development. Many of the myths of society are perpetuated because we encourage the telling of the same story. Although many of the street writers work independently, their voices create a unique collective narrative that challenges the monologue of the culture.

In addition, I will explore the role of the author in creating text and how anonymity is a way for these writers to bypass the capitalist modes of production. For street writers, the
message, and not popularity, takes precedence. Their aim is not to make money, since they put up their texts for free and only hope they do not get taken down quickly. These subjugated narratives revolutionize the typical format a narrative takes, as books are a commodity to be marketed and then consumed. Generally, the text must go through editing prior to publishing, and then through the hands of the marketing department before reaching the reader. Street writing ignores the traditional means of creating cultural narratives and forms new types of relationships between texts and readers.

Although the majority of these writers remain anonymous, some work under monikers and because they are so effective in spreading their message, they have made a “name” for themselves. Although this paper explores the texts of some of the more “well-known” street writers, society at large does not know who these writers are and would not recognize the style of a particular writer. However, there is a small global community that follows and attempts to capture these texts before they disappear.

Finally, I will conclude my paper by discussing Jean Baudrillard’s “hyperreal” and how street writing, particularly culture jamming, attempts to fight against the hyperreality in which we live. Baudrillard recognized that the world is mediated by images and that we live in a simulation of reality. Culture jammers are a particular type of street writer who actively subvert the images that the consumer culture uses in order to write a new cultural narrative. These writers cleverly incorporate advertisements into their own texts to present a visual that sparks thought. Although capitalists and their products and advertisements are creating a dominant cultural narrative, culture jammers are attempting to combat that narrative, and their alternative is to create a new story, one that should be recognized as valid and real. They use the same techniques that advertisers and governments use to sell us the ideas of desire and power. In this way, the culture jammers are attempting to break through the hyperreal.

Some of the limits of this paper are due to the availability of the street text. Most of the texts are rapidly painted over and therefore lost unless they are photographed by the author or someone else. These narratives are ethereal by nature, and while there is a community of people who actively seek to preserve these texts through photographs, my study is limited to the photographs that have been taken. This form of narrative is constantly evolving, changing, being written, and being erased, and I could only focus on the pieces that
have been somewhat preserved. Another area that this study does not explore is the history of writing on walls and its effects on society. Writing on walls through pictographs was the first documented form of narratives, and many of the original civilizations wrote on walls to tell their stories. Beyond these early groups, many different protest movements have used writing on walls as a means to spread their political beliefs and to unite people to their cause. What comes to mind is the May 1968 uprisings in Paris and its revolutionary graffiti that was crucial to the changes that they were advocating. However, in this study, I focus on modern street writing and how it works in contemporary society. If street writing is to be taken seriously as an alternative form of narrative, another study focusing on its evolution would be warranted.

An important term that is used through this paper is *detournement*, a concept developed by Guy Debord and the Situationists to help people break from the spectacle. To *detourn* an image is to take a familiar media or cultural image and create a variation of it that has a meaning contrary to the original. The idea is to use the familiar image itself to subvert the status quo by turning it into an oppositional message. The new image is often a satire that can be provocative and amusing. A *detourned* poster from the May 1968 uprising in Paris reads “Be young and be quiet” (Figure 3). The text is combined with a caricature of Charles de Gaulle, suggesting that the government wants to silence the youth who actively speak out and want to change the capitalist system in France.

A variety of different types of texts are put on walls, and it is necessary to define the type of street art and writing that will be reviewed in this paper. Tagging is a particular form of writing that is usually gang related. The purpose of tagging is to mark a territory, send messages to other gangs or those in one’s own gang, or signify initiation. Tagging is often messy, inscribed rapidly, and is usually just the letters or initials of a person or the gang. This essay will not review tagging, as the purpose behind it is not to create a narrative for a voiceless minority.

A variety of different types of texts are put on walls, and it is necessary to define the type of street art and writing that will be reviewed in this paper. Tagging is a particular form of writing that is usually gang related. The purpose of tagging is to mark a territory, send messages to other gangs or those in one’s own gang, or signify initiation. Tagging is often messy, inscribed rapidly, and is usually just the letters or initials of a person or the gang. This
Other types of street writing are stenciling and wheatpasting. Both of these require the writer or artist to prepare the text and image they are going to use to put up on the wall. Stencilists will often tape their stencils to the walls and then spray paint their message, while wheatpastes require a writer to paste the image and text on the wall. These forms of narratives are important because they mimic forms that society uses. Most lettering used by the government on the street are stencils, and advertisements use wheatpaste for their billboards and posters. These two forms of narratives are often used by people who have something to express and communicate that critically evaluates society at large.

Including street writing and other subjugated narratives into the canon will be valuable for literature departments to enable them to evolve and adapt. As English Departments shrink around the country, a shift towards cultural studies and awareness will help to revive these departments and allow for subjugated narratives to have a place in academics. Although street artists and writers remain mostly anonymous in our society, this medium is growing in popularity. Museum exhibits around the world are starting to invite some of these artists to display their work, and a group of filmmakers is starting to document...
this alternative movement. It is necessary for us to explore from a theoretical perspective how these writers are working in order to understand better how they are contributing needed changes to the capitalist system.
CHAPTER 2

OUTSIDE OFFICIAL NARRATIVES:
CHALLENGES TO THE CANON

Writing on walls and street art are forms of expression, narration, and communication that are overlooked, but they are not the only ones. Many writers from a variety of races, genders, and cultures are often overlooked when discussing culture. These subjugated voices and ideas can contribute to positive changes in the world, and they should not be ignored. However, the dominant ideology and canon of writings are not inclusive, preferring to honor writers that support the major ideology and do not teach rebellion and the revolution of ideas. The task of challenging the canon and prevailing theories in any department within the humanities is extremely difficult, but that does not mean that writers, theorists, and artists have ceased to try. Along with many other forms of subjugated narratives and arts, street art and writing are forms of expression that directly challenge the dominant ideology by making political and cultural comments. By its very nature, as written on walls, street art becomes accessible to everyone and solicits the attention of anyone who might be seeking a different way of looking at the world.

Louis Althusser, in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” recognized that the state uses institutions such as the educational institution to indoctrinate its citizens into its ideology, which has been created and maintained by the ruling, or dominant, class. According to Althusser, the Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISA, are institutions such as the media, religion, and education, whose function is to take individuals and indoctrinate them into the dominant ideology. He believes that the Ideological State Apparatuses are responsible for instilling culture in its citizens, while the Repressive State Apparatuses, institutions such as police, courts, heads of state, and the military, enforce the dominant ideology. How does the teaching of literature and the official narrative fit into Althusser’s ideas? The role of the school and its established canon is meant to enforce the ideology and in turn, keep the system in place and running. In his book *Crusoe’s Footprints*, Patrick Brantlinger comments on Althusser’s ideas:
Althusser leaves no doubt of the importance of schools in maintaining the “ideological subjection” . . . Children at school . . . learn the ‘rules’ of good behavior, i.e. according to the job he is ‘destined’ for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. (93)

The purpose of a literature class is not to teach children to challenge the official narratives set in the canon but to accept them, internalize them, and then allow the state to control all aspects of social life.

Literature courses are problematic. First and foremost, it is slow to include a variety of texts written by authors of a different race, gender or class than what the dominant ideology commonly permits. David Richter writes in “What We Read” that

Strong conservative forces—including the very idea of a canon—operate to keep the canon constant. Institutional education may be the strongest of these. The literary texts most widely read today are those read in schools, and teachers are likely to teach texts that were valued when they were students. (125)

The cycle of exclusion continues. Why is there resistance to allowing a new perspective and new ideas into the canon? It is easier to manipulate and control people if they do not feel like they have a voice or if they lack an outlet in which to express themselves. Keep people oppressed and without a voice and they are likely to obey orders rather than challenge the establishment. In his essay, “The Function of English at the Present Time,” Richard Ohmann discusses the role of education:

The humanities, like the schools and universities within which they are practiced, have contributed through the hundred years of our profession’s existence to this hegemonic process. English teachers have helped train the kind of work force capitalists need in a productive system that relies less and less on purely manual labor. More, we have helped to inculcate the discipline—punctuality, good verbal manners, submission to authority, attention to problem-solving assignments set by somebody else, long hours spent in one place—that is necessary to perform the alienated labor that will be the lot of most. And more important still, by helping to sort out those who will succeed in school from those who will not, we have generally confirmed the class origins of our students, while making it possible for a few to rise. The effect—unintended of course—is to sustain the illusion of equal opportunity and convince the majority that their failure to play a significant and rewarding role in society is a personal failure rather than a systemic one. (91)

Ohmann reasons that not only has the system indoctrinated individuals into its own ideology but has managed to convince an individual that the failure is on his or her part. If the
individual doesn’t realize the flaws in the system, and that the system is failing its citizens, there will be no change, no challenge, no resistance.

One could argue that the canon does include texts that resist and challenge authority and that encourage the student to think. For example, a popular novel that is taught in high schools and colleges is Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*. This anti-war novel goes against the United States’ military history and explores the pain and angst of war. Teaching it challenges students to examine war critically and its effects. Although Vonnegut is a strong writer known for his cultural critiques, students are examining a war in that novel that has no effect on them. World War II is far removed from the majority of students who no longer have any sort of connection to it. By teaching and reading novels that deal with World War II, a great war where the United States and other Western countries challenged the dictatorships and evils of other countries, the canon continues to teach students the dominant ideology. After World War II, the United States and others emerged as superpowers, nations great enough to rule the world. It is safe to teach Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* because even though that war was dreadful, at least it’s over. What students aren’t exposed to by the literary canon are the texts about war being produced today, such as one written by an Iraqi who is feeling the loss and devastation inflicted upon him and his family during the recent Iraqi War.

Besides the need to challenge the official canon to include texts from a variety of genders, races, and cultures, there is a need to recognize the current changes in the way individuals see “text”. In the 21st century, literature not only reaches people through the usual book and newspaper format but through the Internet, which diffuses vast amounts of information. People no longer communicate through ideas spread in traditional text format, and society has far surpassed the use of radio and television: individuals are bombarded with information everyday in the forms of texts, emails, blogs, journals, online newspapers, websites, advertising, billboards, phone calls, web videos, etc. Culture is no longer disseminated only through reading books and visiting museums and walking through historical sites. Individuals live within culture, a culture that is often created and then circulated by a capitalist system. The traditional canon not only needs to change its exclusionary policy, but it needs to develop and recognize that other types of media need to
be studied in order to understand the humanities. In his essay, “Teaching Culture,” Simon During argues that

The heyday of English literature as an academic discipline is over. As worldwide enrollments indicate, interest in English is losing ground to a wider spread of contemporary culture forms from advertising and the Internet to cartoons and art movies—what we call cultural studies. (96)

Incorporating more cultural studies into the literary canon will not only help others have a voice in the official narrative but provide the opportunity to teach students to be critical consumers of the society in which they live.

In a provocative essay entitled “A Fortunate Fall?” Robert Scholes challenges the traditional discipline of English to become a “productive discipline” that will replace “a canon of texts with a canon of methods” (112). One must explore what it is that our narratives are teaching us. When we read and study in our literature courses, are we learning “texts” or how to understand texts? Are we exploring ideas that have been put in place, or are we being challenged to produce our own ideas? After a literature course, is the student more versed in the official culture, or is the student taught to critique the modern and current culture? Scholes argues that introductory courses in literature should not “be literary surveys that start at the ‘beginning’ but rather courses in the culture of the modern period that accommodate the rise of the new media and situate traditional literary works among the texts of these upstart media” (115). This will not only allow students to explore the culture around them but will expose them to other ideas outside of the traditional canon.

Imagine the world if students were taught to read not just the words on an advertisement but decipher the underlying meaning behind those words. Humans might not just become passive containers willing to accept what is presented but might critically challenge what the capitalist system is selling. As stated previously, some theorists have proposed that school is not a place teaching students to challenge but rather a place to accept. Paulo Freire calls this “the Banking Concept of Education.” The idea is that students are passive receptacles to be filled by the teacher, who is the authority figure. Students are not to challenge the ideas presented, nor are they to refuse them. Freire argues in his essay “The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education” that this is “projecting absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression . . . [which] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (69). To have students memorize facts prepares them for the world that
society wants them to exist within, but to teach them to think for themselves would upset the
system that has been set in place by a dominant group. Why teach an individual to question
and challenge authority? Oppression is forcing a group of people to accept other’s beliefs,
ideas, and ideology. Allowing an individual to think might transform the world and
demythologize the myths that have been set in place.

One of the primary challenges that street art and writing have embraced is criticizing
the dominant ideology. For example, a major emphasis in today’s economy is to have an
education for better job advancement. This is a capitalist value, and as Althusser recognized,
education is merely a way for the state to control. One street writer in Northern India
expressed a similar view, but the actual text takes into consideration the location as well.
“Education is key to development” in bold black letters inscribed on a building that looks as if
it was an abandoned construction project captures the irony that many in today’s society are
encountering. (Figure 4) Education is not a way to develop as a thinker but rather is a way to
grow into a productive individual that will have no problems accepting the status quo. In fact,
the writer deliberately misspells “education” to reinforce that education is not complete and
is failing the students it is meant to teach. This unknown writer confronts the lie that
education is a means of growth, challenging the official narrative.

ofwalls.com/Index.asp?Album=4&Offset=81>. 
Street art and writing also use humor to confront the dominant ideology. The state attempts to impress upon its people that they have a voice, that education will create change, that in America we have freedom of speech. This is an official narrative, a dominant myth that is taught and enforced throughout an individual’s life. One of the most glaring discrepancies between what the state teaches Americans about democracy and the actuality about democracy is that people have a voice in the government. An artist in New York City humorously confronts this myth by inscribing “Vote Here” on a trash can (Figure 5). The simple narrative invites the viewer to make his or her own connections and to think for him or herself about the nature of democracy in America.


One group that has been marginalized and excluded by the dominant ideology is homosexuals. Not only are they excluded from the dominant culture, unless of course it is a media regulated image, but there is a significant lack of homosexual narratives in the canon. A wheatpaste seen on the streets in Portland, Maine, in 2008 recognizes these silent voices and attempts to add a new narrative to the community at large (Figure 6).
In this anonymous wheatpaste thrown up on the wall, the image of the happy-looking American boy catches the viewers’ attention. If the observer takes a moment to read the words surrounding the image, the reader will be confronted by the reality that many young boys fear the coming out process. Most of our society still does not accept gay men and women, and their narratives remain mostly subjugated.

Another popular cultural narrative that is instilled and taught in many different venues is that money will buy happiness. People all around the world are not just working to make ends meet and to pay for the basics of life, but they also work to get ahead, to have more in life. This concept is true in all areas of life, including in the arts. Many writers and artists start by producing their art because they love it and because they enjoy the act of creation. In large black text painted on the side of a building in Miami, the street writer, Escif, reminds people of something else (Figure 7). In December of 2010, a gallery was putting on a show of street artists and their work. Escif painted on the outside of the building a reminder to the street artists to “remember that u’re not doing it for money.” The words “for money” are larger solid black letters that speak loudly and suggest that money is not the reason to
produce pieces of art but that the creative process and something bigger than money is what causes people to create.

For those who pass Escif’s mural and do not know it is associated with the art show, the text can also have quite a powerful impact. How many of us do something simply because it makes us happy? How many of us are tied to jobs that are done only for money? How many of us unselfishly give of ourselves and our talents to others without regards to money? Escif’s text is one that insists we look at why we do things and how it relates to our own value system rather than to the idea that money buys happiness.

Another text, which was written in Crete, attacks the dominant ideology that creates the rules. Emblazoned on the side of a wall are the words, “In our city we make the rules” (Figure 8). Who is this “we” that creates the rules, and how exactly is it different than any other city? The text on the wall suggests that there are other forces at work within this city, as a reminder that there are subjugated narratives and marginalized voices that do play a part in how the city is created. In fact, the writer is directly defying the vandalism rules by writing on a fence. Without a doubt, the text was probably quickly removed; however, it was up long enough for someone to capture the narrative, which suggests that people want to assert some control over their own lives.
CHAPTER 3

SURPASSING THE SPECTACLE

Any writer who attempts to question the prevailing myths will encounter obstacles. In the media and information age, society at large has abundant opportunity to indoctrinate individuals into its ideology and silence any voices of dissent or criticism. Guy Debord called modern society a “spectacle,” in other words a capitalistic controlled world in which all humans exist. The spectacle is confining and restricting, and yet extremely seductive as it draws citizens into the dominant ideology; its focus is the complete acculturation of all people.

In his influential book, Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord outlined the Situationists’ ideas on what the spectacle was and how it was perpetuated within society: “Life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (1). Debord believed that humans no longer lived an actual existence, but one that was created and controlled for them. Since the spectacle is in charge of creating life, the spectacle determines human life and the quality of it. For example, the spectacle insists that younger is better. Humans know this because they are bombarded with advertisements for products to make them look younger. In our modern society, cosmetic plastic surgery has evolved into a massive money making business in order to provide unlimited services to keep people looking young, with procedures such as face lifts to remove fine lines and wrinkles and lifting sagging breasts. Aged humans do not fit into the spectacle’s representation of what humans should look like or into the myth that happiness comes to those who stay young. Debord argues that since the spectacle’s job is to use “various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch” (18). Although any conscious human is aware that it is natural for everybody to go through an aging process, the spectacle has presented to us a different image, one that insists on the agelessness of humans. Within this spectacle, we all strive to stay young.

If the spectacle presents us with images and representations, then it logically follows that it will present us with the ways to become like its images and representations of life.
Debord recognized that the consumer culture was crucial to the spectacle’s power. He writes, “The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having—human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed” (Society of the Spectacle 17). Human life is dominated by consumerism. The more we own, the more we believe we are happy. The largest producer of this representation is advertising, propaganda for corporations. Advertisements first provide an image for humans to strive for and then provide the solution: their product. Their product is not stagnant but dynamic and is constantly touted as “new and improved,” “better quality,” or as having “newly added features.” Humans buy into the façade. We throw out our old cell phone and upgrade to the new iphone. We get rid of our 2005 Honda for the latest model with new standard safety features. We trash things that still work for things that we are told will work better. The spectacle insists that if we own Nike’s, we will be happy. Debord argues that “the real consumer has become a consumer of illusions” (Society of the Spectacle 47).

Why does it seem that only Debord and the Situationists are awake? Why do humans buy into the spectacle? The spectacle is all-consuming, and as Debord recognizes, “the spectacle is the ruling order’s nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the state of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life” (Society of the Spectacle 24). We live in a world that presents freedom as an inherent right, but the freedom is an illusion. What we buy, where we go, whom we interact with, everything is controlled by the spectacle. According to Debord, its goal is to keep “people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in their conditions of existence” (Society of the Spectacle 33). If the spectacle allowed humans to think, then the world might just be changed. If we were aware of the tricks, the gimmicks, the illusions, we just might not like feeling so duped and try to change.

This awareness of the spectacle is the first step towards living a conscious existence. The Situationists advocated on behalf of human life and insisted that by constructing their own situations, they might be able to break from the fetters of the spectacle. In his essay, “Report on the Construction of Situations,” Debord insists that “the most general goal must be to expand the non-mediocre part of life, to reduce the empty moments in life as much as possible”. The empty moments that he is referring to are when we passively accept our lives.
We wake up, walk to school, then to the library, then home in order to make dinner and sit in front of the TV where the spectacle will provide us with more images on how to live a happy life. The Situationists insisted that humans open their eyes, look at their surroundings, and consciously pay attention to the world they live in. By doing this, we might start to see the tears along the seams of the spectacle. We might start to live according to our own terms rather than according to the illusions created by the spectacle. Debord believed that “we must try to construct situations, that is to say, collective ambiences, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of a moment” (“Report on the Construction of Situations”). By constructing our own situations, our own narratives and ways of living, we are truly free to determine our own existence and quality of life.

A text written on a wall in Manhattan captured by Lindsey Beyerstein is part of the subjugated discourse that attempts to shatter some illusions of the spectacle (Figure 9). A street writer plays with the sounds of the word “realize” to write “Real Eyes Realize Real Lies.” The subtle shift in words based on similar sounds has a profound effect on the reader once the meaning of the words is absorbed fully. Although not directed at any one thing, the suggestion is that we are surrounded by lies that are difficult to decipher. The words also call into question what are real eyes? Are these eyes which can decipher that we are living in the spectacle? Are they eyes belonging to a person who is fully living and aware? Not only does this writing challenge the reader to think beyond the limits of the spectacle, it actively works towards shattering the illusions that surround us.

The Situationists proposed a variety of ways to construct these situations, one of which is the idea of detournement, a concept that has heavily influenced the modern stencilists. Detournement is the construction of a situation by taking any element and combining it with another in a brand new way, creating a new combination of images, words, sounds, and pictures. For example, to detourn an advertisement, one might take the advertisement and combine a different piece of text with the picture. In the essay, “Methods of Detournement,” the Situationists stated that “it is the most distant detourned element which contributes most sharply to the overall impression, and not the elements that directly determine the nature of this impression … the distortions introduced in the detourned elements must be as simplified as possible”(Debord “Methods of Detournement”). The simple changes can cause a great impact on people. Overall, the use of detournement is
meant to challenge people to think, to clash head-on with the modern ways of life, and to “be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle.” Detournement is meant to help break the illusions of the spectacle. It is meant to help wake humans out of their bovine slumber, to help people live.

Although Debord and the Situationists elucidated a theory that attempts to change and defy the dominant cultural ideology, they did not practice their subversive techniques. If their ideas were put into practice, they could have an influence on challenging the spectacle. Street writers and artists who have embraced the Situationists’ ideas are attempting to construct situations that challenge the viewer to think. Their goal is to challenge people to question the spectacle, and as written in the Situationist essay, “Methods of Detournement,” “be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle.” By using visual and public means, street writers and artists are communicating new ideas that can reach a larger audience. In her book, Surpassing the Spectacle, Carol Becker questions the best way to
confront the spectacle in the new millennium and concludes that it is “anything that punctures the veil—challenges the status quo, asks difficult questions about the actualization of democracy and quality of human relationships under advanced capitalism, helps to create theory that ultimately brings people together under a coherent critique of social totality” (5). By throwing a piece up on the wall, stencilists and street writers are working to challenge the illusions of the spectacle.

Becker recognizes that there is a false equilibrium that has been created by the spectacle, and art can help to shatter it. She says that art should have “an impact on society, to challenge existing forms, to raise significant questions, to bring ideas into society that might not yet be visible, and to do so in a way that can be accessed and, with some scrutiny, understood” (19). Graffiti writers and then stencilists and street artists were among the groups of people who recognized that art can have an effect on their community. Although graffiti writing is a criminal act, it must be noted that anything that works to subvert and challenge the spectacle will be deemed a criminal act. Are those who write on the walls in the streets where they live as dangerous as men who steal money from others? Are they as criminal as those white collar workers who embezzle millions from investors? Graffiti writers are very similar to the idea of tricksters. Tricksters are those who mock, ridicule, and present new information for those within their culture in a mischievous and sometimes amusing way. Virtually every culture has written about them and Becker quotes Lewis Hyde when she writes “the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures requires that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very thing that cultures are based upon” (49). Becker adds to Hyde’s point and says that tricksters are “playful in this condition, smearing dirt on all things to bring them back to the world to remind us that their uniqueness is of the world” (50). It can be argued that our modern day tricksters are the stencilists and street writers who playfully confront the spectacle and provide images that cause people to think. In a photo posted on woostercollective.com, a writer playfully interacts with the justice system by adding the word “fun” to a billboard (Figure 10).

Each city is a manmade creation, and each street should be seen as a democratic space; however, the spectacle controls the dominant images in all the streets. Stencilists are artists that evolved from graffiti writers. Humans have always written on walls, and the Situationists encouraged graffiti in the May uprisings in Paris in 1968. Unlike other graffiti
artists, those in New York worked to find their own representation amidst the myriads of representations that the spectacle bombarded them with. In fact, the graffiti artists of the 1980s called themselves “Bombers” because they believed that they were battling the dominant culture. The New York subway trains became the canvas for these bombers (Figure 11).
In bright, brilliant colors, these artists threw their tags up and then watched them travel around the city, a real museum on wheels. The once gray metallic trains now had colorful names blazoned up and down the sides. These weren’t just names written sloppily with a spray can; these were tags that defined the artist and represented who that artist was. Graffiti artists detourned typical texts to make them their own. By adding their own style, text was detourned to fit the individual that it was meant to represent, and then these free museums rolled around the city. In the documentary Bomb It, the artists questioned why it was absolutely necessary to have pristine trains, and for that matter, buildings. Claw, a female graffiti artist, commented that she didn’t “see why a clean building is a better quality of life than something with art on it.”

Although the subway trains were eventually cleaned and the bombers’ tags were taken down, their challenge to the spectacle remained in motion. Other artists began to challenge the dominant culture and produce works of art that were intended to be put up in public places. One such group was the stencilists. Stencils are similar to graffiti in that they require spray paint and are placed in public places, but they require work beforehand. The artist must design his or her image, cut it out, and then bring the stencil to be placed on the wall. Although some stencil graffiti are purely pictures, most of it challenges the dominant society or presents detourned elements in a way that challenges a viewers’ perception of life.

Which is more aggressive, advertising or stencil graffiti? Stencil graffiti and writing subtly challenge the viewer to think, while advertising screams at the viewers to buy, consume, and give up their freedom of thought. The spectacle is in control of all public visual space, and the stencilst has no option but to take it. The documentary Bomb It points out that even if a stencilist wanted to get his or her own billboard, if it doesn’t fit with the political agenda of the spectacle, no amount of money will get those ideas on a billboard. The spectacle leaves no room in its world for ideas that challenge it, unless dissent can be converted by the spectacle and then sold. Stencilsts are forced to claim what was rightfully theirs. “Cash rules everything around me” is a simple message that communicates the frustration that many people in society feel. The writer of this message, Rene Gagnon, would have to pay to put this truth on a billboard, a truth attempting to create a tear along the seams of the spectacle (Figure 12).
In his book *Stencil Nation*, Russell Howze believes that “In cities, on the streets, the ironies and contradictions of our times are summed up in simple images, often with a bit of text, stirring emotions and begging questions” (8). With their stencils, these artists are living out the Situationists’ ideas of challenging the spectacle, and they are doing so publicly. Although a stencil is impermanent, and many do not stay up for extended periods of time, via their public placement they can reach a wider audience and quite possibly cause a few people to start thinking differently. Besides the questions they ask, stencil location is also very important. Tistant Manco, in his book *Stencil Graffiti*, notes that “a stencilist will have a location in mind for both aesthetic reasons and for an audience” (11). Many stencils that question the dominant society also are questioning the spectacle. Why shouldn’t we, as people who inhabit a particular city, decide how our public spaces should be used? Why
should large corporations determine the pictures and images that are placed before us?

Stencils construct situations that ask a viewer to question how public space is used. In a stencil placed strategically next to a cash point, the customer of Barclays is reminded by a sinister looking man in a hat to “beware pickpockets” (Figure 13). The power of the message is backed by the placement, and the artist/writer of the narrative communicates a message by engaging with the space in which it is placed.


Some stencils also playfully interact with a viewer. For example, (Figure 14) “Dance Here” was stenciled on the sidewalk. This stencil, with its dotted line creating a dance space, invites a person who comes across it to stop and dance for a moment. This type of stencil encourages people to break from their normal routine that is encouraged by the spectacle and
asks them to construct a new moment in their life. In the humdrum routine of daily life, people do not often stop and take a moment to be playful, to do something unexpected. Why not stop and dance for moment while walking down the street? Why not do the unexpected to surpass the limits and confines of the spectacle?

A stencil such as the one in Figure 14 would help a person to determine his or her own quality of life, and, for a moment, to be aware of what he or she is doing and how he or she is living. Manco finds that

Stencil art poses many questions. Who was the creator? When did the image appear? What is the concept behind it? It makes us reappraise our surroundings. It turns the street into a gallery but, unlike in a gallery, there is an engagement with the environment, which is a canvas as well as artwork. The strength of stencil graffiti is its ability to captivate people—off guard—as part of their day-to-day experience. (35)

The stencil on the stairs communicates a variety of ideas (Figure 15). To start, it catches the person climbing down the stairs off guard, as one is not expecting to see on public stairs “slipping up on words can be a dangerous mistake.” The written message is equally important, as it forces the stair climber to reflect upon something outside his or her own life. Most likely, the person on the stairs was not thinking of mistakes, or words that have harmed
another, and yet the unexpected message creates thought and separates the climber from the spectacle.

Why do stencilists do what they do? Although it is unlikely that many of the stencilists have been exposed to the Situationist ideas, it is interesting that most of their reasons for stenciling on walls are remarkably similar to Situationist ideas. In the film Bomb It, an unidentified artist commented, “I’m so numb by all the images I’m assaulted with that it takes something absurd to make you question the rest of what you are confronted with.” These images are what Debord recognized as the spectacle presenting representations of life to us, and the stencil artists are working on attacking the spectacle. Some of the stencils that are put up are art based on the artists’ ideas and their desire to make their world more beautiful. Similar to reasons for the May 1968 graffiti in Paris, certain current stencilists often put up political graffiti because as Manco states, “they are an immediate commentary on current issues with the message literally and symbolically on the streets” (60). Where else can the common man share his political views? The airwaves and television shows are controlled by the spectacle, and dissenting views are not often acknowledged.
Blek, one of the first stencil artists in Paris, discusses some of his reasons for creating stencils, “Art must serve a cause, not a militant or political cause, but a social one” (*Bomb It*). Blek’s most prolific stencil was of a rat that he put up all over Paris. He chose this image because he believed “the rat is the only free animal in the city.”

The stencilist who put up the image of the homeless man with the sign “Keep your coins, I WANT CHANGE” acknowledges that there is a spectacle (Figure 16). The viewers might ask themselves, what change is this artist advocating? An issue in almost every city that is ignored or covered up is homelessness. Many people are without homes because the system does not provide for them. As Debord writes, “to effectively destroy the society of the spectacle, what is needed is men putting a practical force in action” (Debord *Society of the Spectacle* 203), which is in effect, change. It is not money that will surpass the spectacle, but voices begging for change and then working to change society.

Another group who remains voiceless in the narrative of the spectacle and dominant ideology is the impoverished. With a failing education system and a capitalist economy that encourages debt, most people in America do not have the means to survive and support themselves. Although some traditional literature does address issues of poverty, the academic setting encourages a study of the issue, rather than teaches students how to protest or change it. A stencilist attempted to give this group a voice when he or she put up the stencil of a boy with the traditional “I (heart) NY” who is sitting on the heart (Figure 17). In the typical area
where the heart would be, the words “I need it more” are written. This stencil/wheatpaste image tells a story of a group of people who often lack a voice. By choosing to use an African American boy, the stencilist is commenting on the poverty in the black community. In fact, the heart as a seat suggests the tiredness that the young boy feels. Why should a child feel so tired of the ways of the world? Why should a little boy need a seat more than he needs the love of the city that he lives in? By detourning the original familiar tourist logo “I (heart) NY,” the creator of this stencil is recognizing that tourists would rather buy their tee-shirt or mug with the famous logo than recognize the poverty in which many New York residents live. The boy in the photo needs attention and needs a voice, but the spectacle continues to silence him. Tourists come to New York, buy their souvenirs but do nothing to change the system. To cite Debord, in the spectacle “waves of enthusiasm for a given product, supported and spread by all the medial of communication, are thus propagated with lightning speed” (Debord *Society of the Spectacle* 67). Americans and tourists would rather purchase the popular “I love NY” decal than make a purchase for change.

One of the ways that the spectacle works to indoctrinate its citizens into is ideology is by using children’s games. Teaching children about capitalism is a great way to ensure that they will not only realize they are a part of the spectacle but that they will also not challenge it. Monopoly and Life are two popular games, both of which are commonly played by children. But what does Monopoly really teach a child about life? Isn’t it that the point is to buy up properties in order to create a monopoly so that one’s opponents must pay a lot of
money in order to stay on them? In a detourned stencil drawn on a sidewalk square, similar to the Monopoly board, an artist suggests that the “Luxury Tax” piece will end up costing one far more than what the game suggests (Figure 18). The illusion the spectacle wants a child to believe is that it’s as easy as rolling the dice and landing on the right square and one can have it all! Monopoly doesn’t have an “unemployment square” or a “foreclosed home square” or a “credit card debt square.” The story the game tells is one of luxury, ease, and a little chance, which is not the story of most people. In fact, the artist who created the “Luxury Tax” piece was attempting to narrate a cultural truth: to get rich, you have to pay.

![Luxury Tax](http://www.flickr.com/photos/chartreusepics/2494380018/)


Although a great majority of street art that confronts the spectacle has been created by unknown artists, other artists have been confronting the spectacle for years, and their work has gained recognition. One of the most well-known and prolific stencilists is Banksy. Banksy has been reclaiming public space in London as well as other major cities in England since 2000. His own style is readily recognized, and he has become very popular around the world. Banksy’s main canvas has been walls where he blazons some political and social artwork that add beauty to the space. In his book *Wall and Piece*, Banksy proclaims the real purpose of graffiti:

> A wall has always been the best place to publish your work. The people who run cities don’t understand graffiti because they think nothing has the right to exist unless it makes a profit … graffiti is only dangerous in the mind of three types of people: politicians, advertising executives, and graffiti writers. The people who
truly deface our neighborhoods are the companies that scrawl their giant slogans across buildings … they expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you’re never allowed to answer back. (Banksy 25 )

His response to the spectacle: detourn their messages and give it back to them with a subtle sense of humor. One stencil shows a cheetah walking calmly towards the viewer after walking out of a barcode cage, suggesting that we humans are controlled by products and need to find the power to walk out of them (Figure 19).


Besides the images that he stencils on walls, Banksy is famous for his detournement of popular images used in advertising. In Wall and Piece, Banksy notes that

Any advert in public space that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours. It’s yours to take, re-arrange and re-use. You can do whatever you like with it. You owe the companies nothing. You especially don’t owe them any courtesy. They have re-arranged the world to put themselves in front of you. They never asked for your permission, don’t even start asking for theirs. (30)

In a recent stunt done in February 2011, Banksy detourned a billboard on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles (Figure 20). Using the billboard’s image of a sexy woman in a bra with the advertisement’s words “Right People,” “Environment” and “Lifestyle,” Banksy added a drunk Mickey Mouse and a drugged Minnie Mouse with the words “Livin’ the Dream.” The billboard will be viewed by many, and the detournement forces the viewer to question what the advertisements are selling compared with the reality of people’s lives. By choosing to use Mickey and Minnie, two Disney characters who are well known for being a happy couple in love for over fifty years, Banksy is drawing attention to the infidelity, drug use, and unhappiness that comes with the dream advertisers are selling.
In Figure 21, Banksy uses a specific font to mimic what the English government uses when posting signs. Here, Banksy mocks the anti-graffiti posts with his own post: “BY ORDER NATIONAL HIGHWAYS AGENCY THIS WALL IS A DESIGNATED GRAFFITI AREA. PLEASE TAKE YOUR LITTER HOME. Ec Ref Urba 23/366.” By creating a stencil that so closely resembles the official texts, Banksy could cause the anti-graffiti agencies to mistake it for one of their own. This stencil also poses questions about graffiti areas: should there be a place for a community to write its own narratives and have a voice? Or would this area just be another place for the city and dominant governing group to control another form of expression? Either way, Banksy’s stencil mocks the official government by subverting its intended message with his own.

There are numerous detourned images that Banksy has created and illegally displayed along the walls of his native England and the world. Whereas the Situationists provided ideas about the spectacle, Banksy and many other stencilists are successful at challenging the spectacle. As Greil Marcus says in his book *Lipstick Traces*, “the detournement of the right sign, in the right place at the right time, could spark a mass reversal of perspective” (179). The stencil work that is seen on the streets is attempting to do just that.
CHAPTER 4
A DIALOGUE WITH THE CULTURAL MONOLOGUE

Society is in an unending and undisputed monologue with itself. The ideas it creates are produced and then distributed among its people, with no regard as to what the people might actually want. But can the people really want anything anyway? Society has produced the wants and desires that the people have through its unending monologue with itself. Often, children learn in school what is “important,” where culture is packaged and taught according to what society wants them to know. These children grow up, filled with the ideas that were given to them so that they can become producers within the monologue, buying and consuming, buying and consuming, until they die. Do individuals feel trapped within this spectacle? Is there any desire to voice one’s own opinion, to speak out against the never ending monologue?

Debord writes in *Society of the Spectacle*, that “the spectacle is the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue” (Debord 24). Within our society, there is no room for dialogue. Why should there be? Those who have created and are controlling how society runs do not feel the need for any changes, for according to those in power, the system is running just fine. No need to recognize the marginalized voices and faces, no need to be concerned with the environment and nature. The capitalistic system does not want to change.

How does this monologue affect literature and the arts? It controls them and forces all creative art and literature into supporting the monologue. Writers and artists all live within the confines of society, and as Terry Eagleton writes *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, “Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors’ psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the ‘social mentality’ or ideology of an age” (5). Everything that is created will only be disseminated by the forces of publication if it fits with the dominant ideology. In the United States we are not living under a repressive regime as such, but in fact we are restricted by the dominant ideology.
Most Americans willingly accepted the Patriot Act under the guise of national security. We have access to Debord’s book that discusses the spectacle and the conditions we live under, but we have no way to change it. Even *Society of the Spectacle* becomes a part of the monologue solely because society allowed for it to be published. The book is still under a form of control. It is okay for citizens to have different ideas, but to act on them requires something far different.

This is one of the failures of current literature and the way society views literature. A monologue gives the speaker all the power. It does not allow for the insertion of other voices, and although there are many dissenting voices, they do not really seem to be breaking up the monologue. In *Crusoe’s Footprints*, Patrick Brantlinger writes that “discourse is power … those who can represent themselves and others through discourse are powerful; those who cannot are powerless. The power to represent oneself becomes of major importance” (110). Representation of the self is something that the monologue controls, but street writers and artists actively work to represent the reality of the self rather than allow the spectacle to create who they are. Magazines, TV shows, movies, popular novels, and reality TV all seem to tell the same story: most people in Western society are relatively happy, enjoy their way of life, and if they don’t, a few changes and everything will still have a fairy tale ending. Within this monologue of the culture, people are expected to feel euphoric, and if they don’t, seeing a shrink and taking a few pills is the answer. Stripped of a voice, most people continue to travel along, listless with a smile on their face. Street writers, who remain outside of the monologue due to the illegality of their narrative, suggest something different. In Australia, an anonymous writer used everyday discards to write “I feel empty” (Figure 22). The voiceless masses, deemed to have happy lives full of meaning manufactured and produced just for them by the spectacle, often feel the opposite and have no voice in which to begin a dialogue about it.

Street art and writing are unique forms of subjugated narratives that attempt to have a dialogue with and insert a voice into the unending monologue of society. Upon reflecting on narrative and the forms it takes, Eagleton notes that “significant developments in literary form, then, result from significant changes in ideology. They embody new ways of perceiving social reality and new relations between artist and audience” (25). He continues by using the novel as an example, explaining that there was a shift from the romantic and
supernatural to more realistic and linear plotlines that develop around a character. It can be further said that beyond the novel form, in modern media-saturated society, the movie has become the form that narratives take. But this ideological shift is part of the spectacle, controlled by the monologue. All developments of literary form have taken place within this spectacle, and if the dominant ideology does not accept a new form of narrative, then that form of narrative has no chance to voice itself. The new narrator, social commentator, artist, or writer must forcibly insert him or herself into the monologue and break it up by forcing a dialogue.

One of the most popular narratives that the spectacle conveys, particularly through movies, books, and TV shows, is that hard work will eventually pay off. A good education will allow one to get a good job, but if one chooses to do something else, any other pursuits should be considered a failure. But whose “story” is this? Is this part of the monologue, or are there different voices? A photograph of wall writing taken in Raleigh, North Carolina, posted by Hannah Pearce suggests a different idea (Figure 23). Whoever wrote “it’s ok to fail college” was suggesting a different narrative, from a different voice. The majority of people would find that failing college is not an option, but what if colleges are failing their pupils? What if one was to choose to fail college because he or she disagreed with the curriculum, or realized that what was being taught were not new ideas but old, stale ones? The budget reforms in America, the cutting of essential college programs, the inability of universities to
hire qualified staff and provide new and cutting edge classes are issues that should be considered. In America, we have been bombarded with the idea that college is important, but what we don’t explore is if these institutions are encouraging free thought and advocating for radical change.

Street artists also confront the myth that working hard will give you the life that you always “dreamed” you wanted. The word “dreamed” is in quotations because those are also manufactured and created by the spectacle. Although many people “dream” of being rich, these dreams do not include a one hour commute each way to and from the cubicle that confines you for another eight hours, five days a week. People “dream” of better lives that include luxury and leisure, all the while existing and moving within the daily grind. The prevailing narrative states that there are rewards after long hard lives. In a stencil piece called “A tribute to commuters” posted on a Flicker account, an anonymous street artist, whose moniker is Mobstr, used an overpass to create a tear in the monologue (Figure 24). He writes, “Day in, Day out,” an expression that not only draws attention to the short amount of time one actually has to live, but highlights the drudgery that commuters choose for their “dreams.” The master monologue neglects narratives like “day in, day out” because it doesn’t fit with its myth that rewards come after some toil.
In his introduction to *S/Z*, Roland Barthes outlines his ideas about the two types of texts that exist: the readerly text and the writerly text. The readerly texts are products meant to be read and absorbed, and the reader is meant to remain idle while doing this. Essentially, these would be the texts that help to create a monologue, as they do not encourage a response, change, or any sort of dialogue. Writerly texts have a goal to “make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). Barthes is suggesting that the reader have a dialogue and interact with the text in order to give it meaning rather than just bestow accolades on the text solely because it is part of the canon. Many of the books that are read are meant to be consumed, as are movies, TV shows, and a variety of other narratives that society wants consumed. Street art and writing are alternative narratives that by its nature encourage the viewer and reader to think. To start, this type of narrative could not even fall under the readerly text category as there is nothing between the creator and the viewer, whereas for all other traditional forms of literature, there are editors, marketers, distributors and the like between the creator and the reader. More importantly, these outside official narratives, like street art and writing, begin a dialogue with society. They do not submit and
conform to the prevailing ideology but confront them head on. For those who are aware and are seeking more in their lives, these narratives can provoke thought and possibly encourage change.

In “The question behind graffiti,” Mobstr presents a writerly text that confronts the viewer with the question, “who did this and why?” (Figure 25). There are no answers, but it the reader is required to question the nature of graffiti, as well as the type of person who creates it. Society has painted graffiti artists, street writers, and stencilists as vandals, criminals, and riff-raff from the street who are seeking to disrupt society and make it ugly. Although there might be some truth to this sentiment, people just often accept it as absolute truth, neglecting to recognize that this is an absolute truth created by the dominant ideology. There is an entire group of men and women around the world expressing their culture, their truths, their stories on the walls of their communities because there is no other place for them to express this. Not everyone wants to commute “day in, day out” or buy into the master narrative that has been written. Do these writers create these alternative narratives and write them on walls because they want to make their city look uglier, or are they just trying to make the concrete city their own?


Another fiction of the monologue is that growth and development are important and necessary, no matter the costs. In truth, gentrification has pushed many of the poor out of the city to make room for the wealthy elite, all in the name of progress. Why can’t we make the city beautiful for the rich and poor alike? Why can’t we improve all neighborhoods and the standard of living for everyone, not just paying customers? An anonymous author in London
writes on a construction wall “opening soon: another place to eat or an estate agents” (Figure 26). According to the official narratives, development and gentrification are good things for cities, but for those voiceless inhabitants, this creates problems. Just last year, there was a massive housing crash in the Western countries because of overdevelopment and wild speculation. Do we really need so many agents selling properties? London is a city that is already saturated with restaurants, and this author is questioning the need to open yet another place for people to consume. This text is writerly, as it brings to mind many questions about how money is spent in a city and where money should be spent in a city to make improvements. It encourages the reader to question if improvements that are being funded are beneficial for the people or if they only benefit the capitalist economy.

![Image of a construction wall with graffiti](http://www.picturesofwalls.com/Index.asp?Album=4&Offset=117)


A street writer who actively attempts to give voice to the voiceless goes by the name Fauxreel. In a series of writerly texts, he uses full length pictures of homeless people holding signs, not with the message we expect such as “any change will help,” but instead Fauxreel writes a series of phrases that attempt to draw attention to the homeless and the conditions in which they live. In Figure 27, the image of a young woman holds a sign that reads “Homeless does not mean dirty.” How many people believe that homelessness is a problem because it means dirtiness, crime, and ugliness? How many people want to rid themselves of the homeless problem, not because the homeless are people who need help, but because they find the homeless to be disgusting? In Figure 28, Fauxreel combines the image of a man with

a cardboard sign that reads “Everybody deserves respect.” Too many people in society walk by the homeless and completely ignore their existence. Does our society really respect the homeless?

In Figure 29, Fauxreel creates a dialogue with the fictions and myths perpetuated by society, directly challenging the notion that homelessness is a viable option and solution for people. A young man holds a sign that reads “For ME, This was not a choice!” Many people believe that homelessness can be prevented if only a person worked harder, or if he didn’t use drugs, or if he managed his money better. Another fiction about the homeless is that they choose that way of life and they willingly accept it. Although these ideas might contain some truth, they are certainly not the absolute truths about homelessness. Many are forced to live on the streets, and contrary to what the media and the government claim, there is not enough help for the homeless. With the prejudices and stereotypes that abound about the homeless, it is difficult for them to move forward and to find ways to get off the streets.

Sometimes these street writers are voicing dissent over ideas fundamental to the monologue. In an attempt to voice a protest, a writer in Tacoma, Washington, scrawled “plant trees not buildings” (Figure 30). In a capitalist society, the idea that trees are more needed than buildings is ridiculous. Unlike trees, buildings promote economic growth. If it is an apartment building, more people can move to the city to spend money and consume. If it is an office building, it allows for more businesses to flourish and new retail outlets to open. In fact, any type of building relates to money, which is part of the official narrative of the spectacle. However, the growth and expansion is often at the cost of natural habitats and contributes to the destruction of nature. This anonymous writer is not voicing a new idea, as Emerson and Thoreau and many other environmentalists advocated on behalf of the beauty of nature, however, he or she is voicing it in public, uncontrolled and unmediated. The text, in plain view, suggests an idea that may cause the reader to question the status quo. It generates thought and insists that the reader become a thinker, not just a passive consumer.


In attempting to establish a dialogue with the master narrative and culture, street artists and writers must pose new ideas that challenge readers to examine the beliefs that they hold true. The best type of text will actually lead to changes, as the more readers it affects, the better. One reason that street text can be so effective in advocating and affecting change is because it reaches a wide variety of people. Many cultural critiques and texts are available, but it is generally a specific group of people who are exposed to them. Certain schools and
universities teach writerly texts, while other radical-minded and intelligent people might produce and seek out texts that inspire them to think. On the other hand, street writing is in the public arena and reaches not only a select few, but the masses. People who might not be actively thinking about their surroundings are suddenly confronted by a text that causes them to think. For example, a cultural critic in England, known as Jaar, posted up large black letters “why” under a large billboard for a McDonald’s burger (Figure 31). Although many people choose McDonald’s for the convenience, low cost, and manufactured taste it offers, the fast food chain is helping to perpetuate the obesity epidemic in the world. Quite a few people choose to avoid all fast foods and recognize the danger of indulging in McDonald’s, but the majority continues to find comfort in the juicy, fattening burgers. Jaar’s text raises a serious question as to people’s food choices, and his choice of location enables his lettering to catch the attention of a wider audience. Although it may not stop people from choosing McDonald’s, it might cause them to think about their food choices.


An Australian writer also comments on the issue of McDonald’s as a food choice and the ubiquity of the fast food chain. Although the cultural commentary is slightly different, what is important to note is the global nature of these alternative narratives. Debord’s spectacle is not contained within a city, a country, or even Western nations, but is now a global phenomenon. Globalization, mass media, mass marketing, and the Internet have led to a global cultural narrative, fueled by cartoon images of Ronald McDonald and Mickey Mouse and the idea that happiness can be bought and sold. As the Australian writer pens, “Too much Ronald McDonald Not Enuff Dalai Lama,” our global culture no longer relies on
spiritual leaders but on the leaders of capitalism (Figure 32). There is a continuity of voices among these writers, advocating consciousness, thought, and awareness. Debord recognized that change cannot be “accomplished by a single individual,” but is possible when “dialogue arms itself to make its own conditions victorious” (Debord *Society of the Spectacle* 221). Street writing has the ability to reach many people by helping to spark a dialogue with their cultural narratives.

In an introduction to *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that parody is a perfect postmodern form because it both challenges and incorporates that which it parodies. Parody is a form of discourse that can create a visual dialogue, engaging the viewers without isolating them. It can challenge and mock perceptions while mocking itself. Many street writers rely on humor and parody to mock the master narratives. The street writer Mobstr, as previously illustrated, practices parody. His narratives span a few weeks and rely on a “dialogue” with the city officials who work to cover up his words. As writing on public walls is illegal, which will be discussed in a later chapter, city officials in almost every city mandate that any type of art, graffiti, or writing on exposed walls that has not been commissioned be painted over or in some way obliterated. This is not only a way for the state to control the spread of thought-provoking ideas, but it allows the state to keep everything the same color: grey. In Figures 33-39, taken from Mobstr’s Flicker Account, he jokingly


establishes a dialogue with the state about its insistence that his work be “buffed out.” His series is titled “Playing with the Buff Man.”

In the seven part series, the street writer playfully attempts to create a dialogue with the system that is working to censor him. The wall is gray, and the writer recognizes that the only gray that can stay up on the wall is the one that is placed there by the city itself. The city official must come back four times to buff out the gray text the writer put on the gray wall. Even as a writer attempts to combat the spectacle’s monologue, there is only one response: gray.

A writer in Washington, DC, as captured by Spiggycat, also attempts to dialogue with the system in control (Figure 40). Surveillance is an important part of a capitalist society so that it can ensure that the citizens are not stepping out of line. The Orwellian Big Brother is always watching under the guise of protection and keeping the public safe from criminals. However, constant surveillance of the public is also done to find out if there are any free thinkers and to discourage people from spreading their own ideas. Try it: walk into any store and find the “eye in the sky.” Cameras are everywhere, monitoring, watching, capturing images of would be criminals, and yet, the system is flawed. So many cameras are not capturing the street writers that jokingly tease “up here, silly.”
The street writers not only create dialogues with the master narratives, but by focusing on a particularly oppressive issue in society, they are attempting to form a collective voice. The surveillance camera and the idea of being constantly watched are being exposed globally by many writers. In a highly publicized stunt, Banksy wrote on the wall of the broadcasting system “One nation under CCTV,” without being detected by their surveillance cameras (Figure 41). His cultural commentary is not only about being under the constant watchful eye of the state but that our culture is now worshiping and pledging allegiance to the television. Not only did he have time to letter his phrase, he was successfully able to stencil up an image of a child doing the lettering with a policeman watching him.

In the same vein as the writer in Washington, DC, and Banksy in London, a San Francisco writer wants to remind people that they are being monitored and watched (Figure 42). Too many people walk around unconscious of their surroundings. What people are neglecting to ask is whether they feel safer because the government is watching? The irony is that the camera will provide a heightened sense of security, when in reality it only works to stop free thought and the spread of ideas. Did Orwell realize when he wrote *1984* that Big Brother really would be watching us? And how many of us have forgotten that we are being watched? The alternative narrative, the one that reminds us that we are being passive consumers, is being written on walls.
Although street writers continue to advocate for a new narrative, censorship is a means used by the spectacle to control any alternative narratives. The official narratives are still created and controlled by the dominant culture and ideology. In her essay “Contingencies of Value,” Barbara Herrnstein Smith recognizes that “since those with cultural power tend to be members of socially, economically, and politically established classes, the texts that survive will tend to be those that appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies” (151). Street writers’ alternative narratives will be “buffed out,” erased because they challenge the dominant ideology. They question the fast food culture, the constant surveillance, the inequalities and unfairness that dominate cities. They humorously joke with the dominant myths, and they ask readers and viewers to question their
surroundings. One unknown street writer in an American city dared to respond to one of the myths that are being sold in such a way that the viewer may question his or her own sexual life. Kaiser Permanente advertised that “Having sex burns around 4 calories per minute, roughly the same as mowing the lawn,” and the street writer responded, “clearly you’re doin’ it wrong” (Figure 43). The spectacle was trying to imply that all sexual activity should burn about 4 calories, according to a scientific-based monologue, but the writer suggested an alternative in his or her text.

For any change to occur, it requires rupture and a break, not passive growth. As our society continues to grow, it will constantly stay within the monologue. Rupture happens when there is a disagreement, an argument, recognition that the master narratives and myths are not the only possibility. Hutcheon writes that “no narrative can be a natural ‘master’ narrative; there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct” (3). It is time to start deconstructing the myths, questioning the official narratives. Street art is attempting to chip away at that wall.
CHAPTER 5

AUTHORSHIP/ANONYMITY: BYPASSING LAWS OF CAPITALIST PRODUCTION

Although street art has a distinctly authorial voice, it can be difficult to find. The voices of most street writers are silenced because they are painted over, but many of the writers choose to remain anonymous. There is a fear of reprisal, as writing on a public wall is illegal, unless of course, it has been commissioned by the government or some private enterprise. Here in San Diego, there is a multicultural voice in Barrio Logan at Chicano Park under the bridge where the city of San Diego allowed for the community to paint and write on the Coronado Bridge pylons. The murals under the bridge tout the triumphs and the culture of Latino and indigenous peoples, and the artwork is often visited and photographed for its beauty and craft. Since the city of San Diego allowed for these cultural murals and texts, there is little possibility that these narratives will be painted over.

But what if one of the artists who painted on the Coronado Bridge pylon decided that he wanted to disseminate his culture, spread the word that there was injustice done to the Native American peoples? What if he chose to leave Barrio Logan and paint a mural with text on the side of the downtown San Diego Public Library? Consider the following example: a poem that was written on one of the pylons entitled “I am Somebody.” It expresses that although the writer is part of an “inferior group” and is looked down upon by society, he or she still is a person with thoughts and feelings (Figure 44). The poem explores the racism in our society and does not shy away from the fact that people of color do not have the same privileges as white Americans. If this poem were written on a different wall, it would be painted grey within days. The dominant class will only allow the sharing of ideas and the dialogue from outsider voices if it is in a controlled environment. Street writing and art that are uncommissioned constitute an alternative narrative that is stepping beyond the bounds that society has set, and it must do so in order to have a voice, in order to challenge the dominant official narratives.
We must first examine these questions: What is an author? How does our society view the author? In our current culture, the author is someone who produces the text and possesses the authority of that text. As Michel Foucault writes in his essay “What Is an Author?” the author is a “solid and fundamental” part of a work (101). If a person wanted to find the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the person would not find the book by searching for the title but rather by the author’s name, J. M. Coetzee. In fact, any bookstore alphabetizes books by the author’s last name, which highlights what society finds important about a text. Roland Barthes writes in “Death of an Author” that

The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as ... it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person.’ It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author. (254)

If in modern society, the author reigns supreme, why are street writers choosing to remain anonymous?

One must first recognize that most of the writings put up on walls are not done in a “meaningful” way. There is a lot of gang tagging that is put up to mark territory and to send rival gangs a message. Some authors of texts scribbled on walls are people who really don’t
have a critical comment or message to convey but just feel like writing text on the wall. However, this essay focuses on those writers who are trying to convey a message, attempting to combat the spectacle and question the nature of our culture. These street writers are attempting to encourage thought, to convince people to think differently; therefore, who the author of these texts is becomes unimportant. The author in Figure 45 writes, “Destroying everything seems like the best option” on the side of a dilapidated building. Is the destruction of the system the best option for rebuilding? Although many may disagree with that sentiment, this narrative might spark conversation and thought amongst those who read it.


Many of these street authors do not just put up one text but many for a variety of reasons. The first is that much of the street writer’s text will be erased, so he or she must continually put up texts to spread a message. Another reason is that many of these writers enjoy doing what they do. It is not something that makes them money, but they want to combat the dominant ideology, which requires multiple attempts. Many of these street authors have a distinct style, and their work becomes recognizable, particularly if they work in the same community. There is also a growing global network of people who recognize street texts as a legitimate form of communication and narration, so authors often photograph their own street writings and disseminate them via sharing accounts, such as Flicker or other websites that allow for the spread of information. It is important to note, however, that these authors are still anonymous, for they write under a moniker and reveal no information about who they really are.
One very popular author mentioned in other chapters is Mobstr, who writes mostly around Newcastle, England but has put up texts in other English cities. He or she is known for creating multiple dialogues with the city of Newcastle, often challenging it and its anti-graffiti campaign. In one piece, Mobstr posts on a white wall “Come on paint me white again” with quite a bit of color splashed on (Figure 46). Essentially, the question being asked here is why can’t this plain white wall have some color on it? Why does a city insist on having grey and white walls? Do unpainted walls suggest a clean city, one that is free from crime and vandalism?


Of course the city painted over Mobstr’s challenge, after which Mobstr responded with “Boooring” (Figure 47). Although an individual who has researched and is aware of the street writing community might be aware that these are Mobstr’s texts, essentially these types of writers are still anonymous to the public at large. Many people who encountered either one of those texts on the wall might not have known who the author was, but it certainly would have challenged them to question, why exactly does a city insist that its walls remain white?

Street writers work for free and are outside society’s idea of authorship. Their usual purpose is cultural, political, and societal commentary that is not going to be edited, produced, marketed, and distributed as a commodity. Their disparate form of narrative calls into question the nature of how texts are produced in a capitalist economy. Terry Eagleton writes in Marxism and Literary Criticism that “literature may be an artifact, a product of social consciousness, a world vision; but it is also an industry. Books are not just structures
of meaning, they are also commodities published by publishers and sold on the market at a profit” (59). The spectacle maintains an element of control over ideas that might challenge the nature of the capitalist economy. In a parody of this very idea, the writer and artist Banksy created a text that read “destroy capitalism” with a line of people waiting to buy a tee-shirt with that message on it (Figure 48). This text highlights the irony that even though the author might be presenting a new idea that critiques the dominant ideology, the capitalist market finds a way to control the idea and make money from it.

Street writing as art is, however, not a commodity to be bought and sold. The ethereal nature of it prevents this from taking place, as many ideas are taken down before they are
seen by the masses. This alternate form of narrative directly defies the capitalistic system and creates its own unique and challenging narrative. It can be argued that street writing has the ability to spread ideas in a more impactful way. Let’s take, for example, books that are attempting to raise awareness about neglect of children and child abuse. This is an issue which many sociologists and psychologists attempt to draw attention to and raise awareness about in order to prevent it from happening. However, how many people can these authors reach? Their books must be bought by a reader or a library in order to disseminate a topic that advocates social consciousness. In fact, if one asks the majority of Americans how many texts they have read that actually draw attention to child neglect, most Americans might say just a few or even none. However, the short discourse about neglected children posted in an American city is very effective at raising social consciousness. Amidst a wall plastered with advertising, a writer pasted “Neglected children are made to feel invisible” with the form of a child’s body standing hidden underneath (Figure 49). This type of narrative cannot be easily bought and sold, and it is effective precisely because it is free. The text combined with the form of a child forces the viewer to confront the issue of child neglect in our country. No one had to buy a book to read about it, nor can capitalists make any money from those who are attempting to change child abuse. This anonymous writer draws attention to a voiceless group and raises awareness in a way that cannot be accomplished through official texts.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith explores why texts become official and how they fit into the capitalist system and concludes that a text needs to be “culturally re-produced” and thus will be able to function in other times for other people (148). She posits that texts that have value, those which can be re-produced, will be the texts that become official and will survive as a form of narrative. It is street writings’ inherent nature that they cannot be reproduced by the capitalist system. If a street author decides to put up similar texts around the city, or stencil the same stencil in a few places, then one can argue that the text is reproduced. However, because they are all done by hand and individually, even the same messages that are written on walls are each original and unique.

Street texts are irreproducible, and each piece that is put up is unique to that space. Although some stencilists put up the same stencil, each time there is always something different to each stencil as they are all done by hand. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin discusses that in the age of mechanical reproduction, every piece of art can be reproduced; however, this changes the nature of that art. “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). Time and space are important to the original piece of art and text, and Benjamin argues that it is this that makes art elitist and inaccessible. Street art, precisely because it is impermanent, is accessible to all. It cannot take on an elitist quality and all people can enjoy street art, or the images of art pieces that have been buffed out.

Street art and text rely heavily on placement as well. Many times the words and the art utilize the space in which they are written. To remove a piece of the text and inscribe it elsewhere would take away from the power and meaning of the message. For example, in Mobstr’s piece “Consume until you are consumed” placed up in Newcastle, England, the location of the text is extremely important to the message (Figure 50). The artist put a white sheet over a billboard with the stenciled message already cut out. The message is an attack on advertising, suggesting that humans continue to consume until we are consumed by the spectacle. It was important that Mobstr’s text be placed on the billboard, rather than a wall, because that particular space adds to the message of the text.
Benjamin continues discussing the concept of space with the example of the theater as one of the only places in which one can see the action and the original aura of a piece, since there is nothing mediating the action from reality. This sentiment can be applied to street narrative, especially if the reader encounters the text within her own life. Benjamin writes that “the equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology” (233). In a world mediated by cameras and computers, a piece of art or writing that has not fallen prey to the capitalist system should be celebrated. The writing is unlikely to have the taint of the official ideology, nor does it have capitalist interests in mind. The writing is more about the message and expressing a voice that often goes unheard. If Benjamin had encountered a piece posted by Kguy on woostercollective.com in 2008, he might remark that this was an unmediated response to the recession (Figure 51). The narrative presents flowers, similar to those that are often placed on the side of the road where someone has died. With the flowers is a sign that says “in loving memory of a boom economy.” Books were written, TV reports abounded, and there was a steady stream of commentary about the world-wide recession, but this narrative, in a humorous way, addresses the realities of the recession head on. There is no technology that separates the viewer from the reality of the text.
Even with its mostly anonymous authors and its inability to be mass produced, street art should be considered a type of subjugated narrative and communication because its goal is to spread ideas, commentary, and critiques about the official society and dominant ideology. In an influential essay entitled “What Is a Minor Literature?” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari discuss their ideas about the nature of minor literature and how it functions in society. They state that minor literature has three elements: it takes place in a major language, is political, and is collective in nature. This type of literature is not included in the traditional canon, nor do these authors have a voice that is effective in expressing the needs of their community. However, Deleuze and Guattari believe that this literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (168)

Street writing can express a collective voice and forge means for a new community consciousness.

In a piece of text that could be considered minor literature, a street writer, who works under the moniker Priest, responded to the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (Figure
Although some media discussed the horrors of the oil spill and other media downplayed the seriousness, the majority of people who were affected by the spill remained voiceless. Without fail, the media interviewed a few people whose ways of life were harmed by the spill, but it did not advocate change. It merely acknowledged that there was an issue, but not much was done to change why the spill happened. BP dumped money into a clean-up, but only enough to keep its good name. This street writer has a very political message that calls for collective action. Next to an image of two children is an official looking sign saying “beach closed, do not enter.” The call to action is written on the left: “when life gives you oil spills, make molotovs!” By playing on the cliché “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade,” the writer encourages revolutionary thought and for a group of people to collectively fight back. Oil, being highly flammable, is what one associates with the explosive effect of a Molotov cocktail. The sentiment here is to respond aggressively when the system fails and ruins lives.

![Image of graffiti](image)


Deleuze and Guattari write that “there is nothing major or revolutionary except the minor” (172). As street writing is revolutionary in nature, the writers remain anonymous; therefore, the system has a harder time stopping it. Foucault theorized in his essay “What Is an Author?” that one of the author’s functions is to take ownership of his or her text so that it becomes easier for society to punish transgressions. Society enacted authorship, rights, and publishing in order to help control transgressive ideas and keep outside narratives silenced.
Street writing bypasses ownership, therefore making it revolutionary by nature. According to Eagleton, the revolutionary artist should not uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production, but should develop and revolutionize those forces. In doing so he creates new social relations between artist and audience; he overcomes the contradiction which limits artistic forces potentially available to everyone to the private property of a few...the revolutionary artist’s task is to develop these new media, as well as to transform older modes of artistic production. (61)

Street writers and artists are doing just this: they are moving beyond the forces of capitalistic production in order to forge a new relationship with their audiences. They are also transforming the artistic limits that are imposed on people by taking back their city streets, without permission.

This revolutionary way of disseminating narratives and ideas is one reason why street art is illegal. Society calls it graffiti, dubs it vandalism, and criminalizes writers who are caught putting up words and images on city walls. The city puts money towards buffing out the texts, keeping the walls white, and projecting a uniformly “clean” city. Why is society so resistant to these voices and this way of bringing information to the unthinking masses? One reason is that the state will not have people questioning the current way of thinking. Everything must remain status quo in the spectacle, for free conscious thought might cause change. It is easy for the city to criminalize this type of narrative because there is quite a bit of gang tagging that is put up on walls, so the state recognizes it all as vandalism. However, even gang tagging is a way for a group of people to state that they exist, an attempt to draw attention to a marginalized group.

Putting up the narratives can also be quite difficult, and the fear of reprisal is certainly present amongst those writers who risk being caught by the police. The street artists, or as society calls them, vandals, run into quite a few obstacles if they want to put up a piece of work in a location where the public will see it. On his Flicker account, Mobstr discusses the experience of engaging in this illegal activity. The piece that he put up, “This is not supposed to be here,” is a reflexive piece that looks at the illegal nature of street writing (Figure 53). It draws attention to an attempt to voice ideas that cannot be bought and sold by the laws of production and is therefore dubbed illegal. It challenges the reader to question why that narrative can’t be there. What harm is writing on the walls doing to people? It is no different than having an advertisement on the wall, as they are both text. Why is writing on the walls
so offensive, so illegal, so criminal? Why is freedom of expression not appropriate in our society? It is because freedom of expression cannot be controlled by the spectacle; it steps beyond the borders that society has created; and it challenges people to think for themselves. In relation to this piece, Mobstr commented on the process that the author must go through in order to create some street text:

This position of this piece is located right in the heart of Newcastle city centre. It is down an alley way which opens up either end onto busy streets. … Police patrolled the entrances to make sure no illegal activity was going down. I realised at that point that it would be impossible for me to do the piece without getting attention from the cops since the patrols were too frequent … There were some large wheelie bins a bit down the alley way. I decided to leave my gear in the courtyard while I dragged two of these bins and placed them either side of the area that I wanted to do the piece. I judged that these, if I crouched down, would probably provide enough cover from the police while I executed the work. (Mobstr, This is Not Supposed to Be Here)

He was able to put the text up and snap a photo, and by the next day it was wiped out.

The art of writing on walls is illegal because it currently cannot be controlled by capitalism. There is no way to take an image on the wall, mass produce it, and then sell it back to the people. However, the spectacle is trying. As the street art and writing phenomenon grows, society is starting to find ways to sell it back to the people. Popular artists such as Banksy have become a worldwide name, and tourist shops, which have gleaned some of his images off the internet, have put them on tee-shirts and sold them back to the public. Shops have printed some of his works on posters to be sold for ten dollars to
customers who think, “Wow, this is cool.” Unfortunately, the spectacle is a powerful force, and even though some people work to revolutionize it, the dominant society has a way of absorbing new thoughts and co-opting them. In response to the appropriation of street narratives and the attempt by society to absorb them as its own, Banksy responded on a San Francisco wall in 2009, “This will look nice when it’s framed” (Figure 54). Although society has dubbed Banksy and other street writers as vandals, it is now starting to frame their works and call them art. The irony of this situation is astounding, and the brashness of society can be nauseating.


The majority of street writers will remain outside the spectacle. Although a few of these writers might rise to some popularity within the dominant culture, the street writers remain mostly anonymous. However, this type of narrative is revolutionary, and will always remain outside the dominant culture. The purpose of this type of minor literature is to inspire and create a consciousness in the reader and viewer that has been previously neglected. As Barthes writes, “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (“Death of an Author”, 257). Anonymity, illegality, and contempt for capitalist production is all for the sake of raising awareness and surpassing the spectacle.
CHAPTER 6

CONFRONTING THE HYPERREAL: CULTURE JAMMING

Debord and the Situationists argued that the spectacle could be surmounted, that situations could be created that allowed individuals to live consciously again. Fifty years later, is this really still the case, or has the spectacle become all consuming and insurmountable? Our world is mediated by images, and [dis] information travels at unimaginable speed. The capitalist modes of production affect every aspect of our lives and dictate them. Information is presented through means that are owned like the TV, newspapers, and certain webpages, and the media creates an illusion of a world that we take as truth. In the literary field, the pieces that are chosen to be published and then mass distributed do not even begin to cover the entire spectrum of writers. It is as if the capitalist world is narrowing us down, whittling at us until we fit into the mold that it has created. Dissenting voices are controlled, what is deemed “good” must cost money, and that which society deems culturally valuable can be found in museums.

According to Debord, reality is what is created by the spectacle. However, Debord posits that it is possible to break out of the spectacle, to cut through the illusion to find a way to begin living again. Jean Baudrillard also critically evaluates the spectacle in which we live; however, his conclusions are far bleaker than Debord’s. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard puts forth his idea of simulacra and simulation:

> Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire but ours. *The desert of the real itself.* (1)

There is no “real” anymore; we live in the hyperreal, that which has been created for us. Although Debord believed that there was a way to step out of and around the spectacle,
Baudrillard believes that we are within the spectacle and there is no way out. Humans no longer exist in the realm of the real but in that which has been created, the simulacra.

It is not hard to apply Baudrillard’s theory to modern society. Take, for example, how we receive and process information. In our society, we place all faith in images, in eye witness accounts because in our society, seeing is believing. TV, new sources, and photos on the Internet are regarded as utmost truth, but is this real information? What we neglect to question are the channels of communication themselves. A news channel that captures footage of a protest in Egypt airs the footage for Americans to see. This footage becomes truth, the reality of the situation. However, what the hyperreal ignores is everything else outside the camera. Who shot the film and did they only shoot in one isolated area? Who edited the film and decided what images to present to the Americans watching at home? A news channel and its production team create the “reality” that we accept as truth, as what is real. This is what Baudrillard was referring to when he suggested that “the territory no longer precedes the map” (1). There doesn’t have to be anything actually in existence, but in the hyperreal, we believe that there is something in existence.

Baudrillard’s idea is most clearly seen in advertising. Capitalist society must create needs and desires that are not actually there in order to convince people that those needs are real. Humans actually only need a certain amount of food and some protection for the body against the elements in order to survive, but in the hyperreality where humans exist, those needs have become minimal in comparison to the amount of things we believe we need. Advertising creates desires and needs that do not actually exist in humans; it is the “map before the territory,” and because of this, culture and language have been absorbed fully by advertisers. Baudrillard argues that “all original cultural forms, all determined languages are absorbed in advertising because it has no depth, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten. Triumph of superficial form, of the smallest common denominator of all signification, degree zero of meaning” (87). With no reality in which to live, where are humans to turn? If we are living in the hyperreal, is there any way out?

In the world of simulacra and simulation, literature falls prey and is absorbed into the hyperreal. How can literature help to break through the façade, to confront the hyperreal, to help give meaning to people’s lives, to break through and to aid in awareness of the illusions in which we live? Some published literature attempts to do this, but ultimately, published
literature must still go through the process of editing, marketing, and distribution—the laws of production that capitalist society dictates. Street writing, in particular culture jamming, is able to confront directly the hyperreal in order to bring awareness to those who encounter it. Like street writing, culture jamming takes advertising and popular cultural images that are used to create illusory desires and wants in people and attempts to break through the simulation. It challenges the viewer to be aware of the message that is presented and elicits the reader to think for him or herself. Culture jamming is a form of communication, a conveying of information that is repressed by the capitalist society and should be recognized as a narrative for a community that lacks a voice. It is a narrative for people who are thinking for themselves, who refuse to buy into advertising and the illusions of desires and wants that it creates.

Culture jamming is a movement that is very similar to stencil graffiti and street writing. In his book, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*, Kalle Lasn states that the aim of the movement is to “topple existing power structures and forge major adjustments to the way we will live in the next twenty-five years” (xi). The spectacle and the hyperreal is in control of every aspect of our lives, and only through actively bringing awareness to a multitude of people can the system change.

The unique aspect of culture jamming is that it is a collective movement. Although there are a great many writers who put up work anonymously, culture jamming collectives have formed in many cities. These groups often collaborate on ideas and then put up larger pieces together. Whether one is an anonymous individual or working within a collective, the goal of culture jamming is the same: to confront the hyperreal and bring awareness and change to others. In the film *POPaganda*, Carlo McCormick observes that “our entire visual landscape is bought and sold. You can have a passive response to it and enjoy the spectacle, or you can try to confront it in some way.” Culture jammers work to confront the spectacle, and one of the forerunners of the visual cultural jamming movement was Ron English. English, now a popular artist, began his work by hijacking billboards. Billboards are visual spaces that are owned, and if there is money to rent it and a message that remains consistent with what the spectacle dictates, a message can be displayed to anyone that goes by. These private billboards are owned by only a few companies, and the billboards are leased to large
companies who want to sell the spectacle. English’s idea was to subvert the original message intended by the corporations by playfully detourning their message with his own ideas.

One of the issues that Baudrillard tackles in *Simulacra and Simulation* is that it is “impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real” because the simulations of the real are already “inscribed in the decoding and the orchestration rituals of the media” (21). Billboards are prime examples of this hyperreality that is created by simulations. By specifically hijacking billboards and presenting a new idea in the fashion of the simulated one, English successfully combats the hyperreal by subverting its illusion-making process. In one of his more successful campaigns, English went after the “supersizing” at McDonald’s (Figure 55). The reality is that humans only need so much food in order to survive, but McDonald’s has convinced the American public that super-sizing is better and cheaper. Culturally, Americans believe that bigger is better, but English actively worked to bring a different awareness by creating an obese Ronald McDonald. In order to confront the hyperreal successfully, the text must include an image, making street culture jamming a very unique form of narrative.


Of course, like stencil artists, English didn’t have the right to change the billboards, and he was criminally acting out against society, but as he says in *POPaganda*, “Legally, I don’t have a right to do this, but as a proponent of free speech, I have an obligation to do this.” In daring, and sometimes difficult situations, English proceeded to take back his visual landscape by subverting the spectacle. The “false” advertisements in Figure 56 force the
viewer to confront the reality behind some of the “real” advertisements (Figure 56). Products like Diet Coke are still harmful, even though they use the word “Diet” to signify something positive. The 24 hour access that is provided by our convenience stores is only promoting our desire to have everything at our fingertips when we desire it.

One of English’s most daring and successful campaigns was against Camel cigarettes. Camel cigarettes used to have an older man on all their advertisements, and the company realized that people weren’t connecting with that image, so Joe Camel, the cartoon, was created. Joe Camel could be seen on billboards across the US, and English decided that it was enough. English created his own billboards that looked shockingly similar to the original advertisements, but the message was clearly different. In some billboards, English attacked the fact that the cartoon camel was targeted towards kids, an ethically questionable marketing campaign by the company. In these billboards, he used a child-like cartoon camel that was being offered cigarettes beneath the company’s words “Smooth character” (Figure 57).

In other ads, he attacked the fact that the company was selling dangerous products to people by creating billboards that said “Joe Chemo,” with a decrepit looking Joe Camel attached to life support machines in a hospital bed. English believes that “Liberating a billboard is like taking a stab at corporate America.” In this particular case, English was extremely successful. Because he continued to cause a row about the advertisements and was relentless in his battle against the spectacle, Joe Camel is no longer used to sell cigarettes. Albeit, it was only a slight change, but by his activism and devotion to awareness, English was able to alter the spectacle.
English is also well-known for his *detournement* of the ever popular Apple advertisements. In a major ad campaign, Apple used the images of famous people alongside the words “Think Different.” For example, Albert Einstein’s face was displayed in this particular campaign. English subverted the message by detourning the words “Think Different” and placing them next to a variety of other major thinkers who were extremely creative in their own way, but Apple would have never used them in its campaign (Figure 58). English chose to use people such as Hitler, Charles Manson, and Bill Gates in order to subvert the original advertisement.
English has made a name for himself, as he has been creating new cultural narratives since the 1980s. His work has inspired a variety of other artists, film makers, and writers to question the narratives and myths that are being given to us daily. There are countless other culture jammers around the world who are also working hard to create a new cultural narrative. Baudrillard describes their quest:

> It is up to us to again become the nomads of this desert, but disengaged from the mechanical illusion of value. We will live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting strangeness of the desert and of the simulacrum, with all the veracity of living phantoms, of wandering and simulating animals that capital, that the death of capital has made of us—because the desert of cities is equal to the desert of sand—the jungle of signs is equal to that of forests. (153)

Our society is a desert of meaning because for too long the dominant class and the cultural forces of production have been given reign to create our narratives. The street writers, stencilists, and culture jammers, using a combination of visuals and text, actively work to create a narrative that has meaning and that defies current cultural norms. In Figure 59, a street writer has a response to a popular advertisement. The illusion created is that by purchasing the Itouch, the consumer will have more games to play, and therefore more fun. Does the consumer really need more games, games that require a single person player and no interaction with others? Once the headphones are plugged in, this Itouch in fact isolates the individual from the community around him and absorbs him into a virtual world. This advertisement, this capitalistic narrative, touts that more fun comes from playing in an illusory world. The street writer finishes what the advertisement is really selling by penning the words “more distractions from the fact that this capitalist system is falling the fuck apart” (Figure 59). The writer is expressing anger, a feeling that is currently being felt by many who are suffering during a recession that was caused by the over-speculation and greed of those in charge. In the hyperreal world, the narrative reads that the more people avoid reality, the better their lives will be. They are selling a distraction, a way for a consumer to buy his or her way out of pain and to allow the failing system to continue. The anonymous writer who responds to the advertisement is attempting to promote awareness of the illusions that the hyperreal uses to keep a hold on consumers.
The media plays a crucial role in defining current cultural narratives. From TV to movies, from newspapers to magazines, from books to the Internet, our lives are dominated and dictated by the media. There is no area of life in which media doesn’t create the narrative. According to Baudrillard, the hyperreal needs “all the messages in the media [to] function in a similar fashion; neither information nor communication, but referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code” (75). All society is acculturated into the media and capitalistic societal code and narrative. One such narrative pertains to women, and more specifically, how women should look. In the hyperreal, everything is perfect, as perfection itself is just an illusion, and if it is not that way, the story reads that it can be made perfect. The media reinforces this idea by ensuring that all images of women that it projects are “flawless.” Beautiful, tall models with perfect hair, lips, skin, and bodies are plastered all over magazines, billboards, and TV. The model has a flaw? No problem: just airbrush the pimple out, Photoshop the cellulite, and enhance the size of her breasts with a click of the mouse. This hyperreal image of women is wreaking havoc on the female population. From weight issues, to extreme dieting, to complete body modification surgeries, women are doing everything they can to fit the image that is constantly projected to them.

A writer who goes under the pseudonym Ninja IX and writes mostly around Vancouver, Canada, actively works to redefine the cultural image of Western women and beauty. Directly incorporating the advertisement and image, Ninja IX uses short phrases and
words to tell a new story, a story that breaks through the illusion. In Figure 60, entitled *Starving for Attention*, Ninja IX placed those words directly over the model’s face. In the advertisement, the model’s body is extremely skinny, so much so that the white space around her entire body takes up more than two thirds of the space (Figure 60). Although the clothing company is attempting to sell the jeans on the model’s body, it is really selling the story: extremely thin is better. Women, take up as little room as possible, and just be thin. The words over her face speak a truth that the advertisers do not want you to read: these women are literally starving themselves to fit the illusion of what a woman should be. Real women are starving for attention, and that is a story that is not told.

Ninja IX also attempts to expose the truth behind the advertisements and how they use a variety of methods to make their images “perfect.” Again, by directly writing on the advertisement, the author is able to create a new narrative. Ninja IX writes, “Anatomically corrected” directly over the image, exposing the truth behind the image (Figure 61). Although the female in the picture could not be as perfect and flawless in real life, the advertisement attempts to tell a different story. Ninja IX’s text forces the viewer to acknowledge that advertisements are falsehoods disguised as truth, selling an unattainable illusion.

![Image of advertisement with text overlay](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ninja9ine/2533999071/in/set-72157604939255393/).
Living in the hyperreal is difficult, and for those who do not accept it as truth and attempt to break through the illusion the consequence can be depressing. How does one continue to live a lie? What does one do if there is nothing that can be done? Street writers, artists, thinkers, and culture jammers are all attempting to critique the world and create a new vision, write a new story. For those that are aware we are living in “a desert of meaning” there is hope; they can struggle against the forces, and even though not successful, at least they can live consciously. As one anonymous writer posted when he or she came across an empty billboard, there is “the joy of not being sold anything” (Figure 62).

For all the others who do not recognize the illusions that are being sold or that the narratives that are being told are false, life can be difficult and depressing, and one might feel lost. Fortunately, society has a solution: medications. Instead of fixing the problems, recognizing that the system is failing its people, society, backed by large pharmaceutical companies seeking profits, pushes happiness in pill forms. Feeling depressed? Have a Prozac. Feeling anxious? Here’s a Xanax. Can’t sleep? Easy, Ambien. Loss of focus? Don’t worry, Ritalin. What most people don’t realize is that their mental issues are coming from living in a hyperreality. They are unhappy because they are not living a real life; they are just following the story that is being written for them by capitalistic interests. Ninja IX writes, “prescription kills. Don’t consult your physician” (Figure 63). Our society places such an emphasis on
science, medicine, and technology as being solutions to everything, so much so that these fields are writing and dictating our narratives. Foucault believes that the author function affects literature texts more than scientific ones. Society needs an author in order to punish transgressions, but this function of the author doesn’t necessarily affect scientists as much as it does philosophy and literature. This is because we put faith in science and technology, and those who think outside society’s limitations are more likely to be punished. Ninja IX’s sentiment, expressed on the side of a dumpster, is that we put far too much faith in medicine and science. Quite often, we do not need the pills that we are prescribed, nor do we need the numbness that they offer. What we really need is to awaken from our slumber.
Culture jammers and street writers also playfully interact with the cultural narrative. One of the techniques employed by culture jammers is remaking official looking signs. Many people ignore signs that are posted, especially if they see them on a frequent basis. These signs are meant to control, to direct, to guide, or to restrict. Worldwide, writers are choosing to put new messages up that tell a different story. Baudrillard writes that “power itself has for a long time produced nothing but the signs of its resemblance. And at the same time, another figure of power comes into play: that of a collective demand for signs of power—a holy union that is reconstructed around its disappearance” (23). Although we don’t see authority figures daily, we certainly see that there is some sort of power structure in play by the signs that control us. For example, in Figure 64, an anonymous artist has recreated a sticker that the London Transport uses on the Tube to signify busy times. The writer has transcribed on the detourned sign “Congestion Zone: Take a deep breath and smile” (Figure 64). Since the size is small and it is very similar to the original sticker, many people might miss the new sticker advocating for a positive response to such congestion. Most people on a crowded Tube are frustrated, anxious, and full of negative energy. This sticker suggests that if people approach the crowd with a different mentality, it could make things better.

Another creative sign that mimics an official sign is seen in Figure 65. Jason Eppink uses the walk sign, and what it signifies, to make a new statement about a crisis situation. If one sees the person walking, one should “start running,” a flashing hand means “don’t think,” and a solid red hand means “obey orders.” Without even thinking about it, people follow the orders of the walk signal daily. Many would argue that it is to keep people safe
from cars and this prevents accidents, but it is based on a system that seeks to control, even our daily movements. In this detourned sign, Eppink writes a narrative that suggests we follow orders that society commands, and most likely, we do so without thinking.

Baudrillard uses Disneyland as a metaphor for how we see America, as an example of how we view our cultural narrative, but “this masks something else and this ‘ideological’ blanket functions as a cover for a simulation of the third order: Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, all of the ‘real’ America that is Disneyland” (12). The most magical place on earth is touted as being America, so we don’t have to see the poverty, the racism, the hatred, and the injustice that exist in our real America. In Figure 66, an unknown author warns people as they walk into the real America outside Disneyland, “WARNING!!! You are currently located in an urban environment. You may be subject to viewing artistic expressions beyond your control in the form of seemingly meaningless tags, throw-ups, stickers, & pasted images. If a bad reaction occurs from being forced to view said expressions, remain calm, slowly look away and repeat ‘I didn’t just see that’ 10 times.” This official looking sign recognizes that there are alternative narratives being written on walls and calls attention to this different story that is being told in the city streets. It epitomizes what Baudrillard is suggesting, that people don’t want to see the real world and want to live
in the Disney world. The sign also provides the magical solution, repeat something ten times and pretend it doesn’t exist. Isn’t that what most Americans do anyway?

Culture jamming and street writing could never fit into the hyperreal, as they are not reproducible, and, more importantly, they work to shatter illusions. The purpose of these writers is to narrate a different story, a truthful story. In order to find a way out, these artists and writers use the same means that society uses to control. In a world that lacks meaning, whose stories run empty, it is up to us to create the story and tear holes in the illusions.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In the recent years, street art and writing have started to gain notoriety in popular culture. Besides the independent documentaries made about street art, larger museums are putting street art and writing on display. In April of 2011, the Museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles is hosting its first street art exhibit. As some of these artists move from the street to the gallery, what are the implications for the growing popularity of street art and writing? By embracing this form of subjugated narrative, is society finding a way to put a price tag on this type of work?

The majority of street writers and artists still remain anonymous, and their work continues to be buffed out by city officials on a regular basis. Culture jammers continue to write new scripts to combat consumerism. This form of subjugated narrative will not be easily bought and sold. Some could argue that a move into the galleries is a good thing, that it shows society is starting to accept a different form of narrative. However, others quickly point out that putting an exhibit in MOMA is just a way to begin to control the art and the narrative that is gaining popularity. In fact, many of these pieces by well-known artists, such as Banksy, can be bought and sold for thousands of dollars.

Although some of these artists are doing work in galleries and creating pieces that are made for display, the real essence of their work is in street writing. Some of Banksy’s pieces might be sold in galleries, but his real work is still done in the street, anonymously and illegally. The venue is what distinguishes the socially acceptable narratives from the illegal and criminal narratives. Street art is analogous to tattoos in that tattoos are popular on everyday citizens, but prison tattoos are still an indication of crime and remain unacceptable.

Street art and writing are forms of narrative that deserve the attention of the community. These narratives tell stories that run counter to modern ideological narratives. Street writers and culture jammers are part of a large body of people who actively attempt to revolutionize the ways of contemporary thought about societal values. In this essay, the street art presented has explored topics ranging from politics to culture, from thoughts about
advertising to reflections on constantly being under surveillance. Some of the street art is self-reflexive and examines its own ethereal nature.

Street art and writing specifically relates to many theories, particularly those of Debord and Baudrillard. These theorists recognize that capitalist society is all consuming and that for individuals to truly live, they must find ways to break out of the confines created by the dominant ideology. Street artists playfully interact with the hegemonic culture by interacting with the public spaces in which they write their narratives. The goal is not only dissemination of new ideas but to inspire any readers and viewers who chance across the narrative to think.

Like many other authors and artists of subjugated narratives, the majority of street writers and artists do not create for monetary reward. In fact, by placing their original pieces on public walls, the likelihood of their works’ being buffed out is extremely high. They are not writing narratives that are meant to be re-produced by machines; each piece that is put up is done by hand. Many of the pieces depicted in this essay are already gone; all that remains of them are the photographs. Street art challenges the way society capitalizes on art and narrative by refusing to work along the production modes. In fact, the very act of painting up one of these pieces of street art can get the artist arrested.

Further investigations could be made into the connections between other subjugated narratives and street writing. For example, how many prison tattoo artists have also put up their own street writing? Another idea would be to look at how the main themes of street art and writing correlate to those in other subjugated narratives. Does some native art explore the idea of feeling repressed by a dominant group similar to how some street art responds to the oppression of consumer society?

There is a vast amount of research that can still be done into the nature of street art and writing, but it can be difficult. Many of these writers and artists are completely anonymous and are unlikely to be found. In addition, the majority of the writing on walls is erased quickly, so the amount of material that is gone can be enormous. However, looking into and studying the global connections among street artists could be an important research topic. Street writing is common to every nation, and an exploration into the themes and ideas of these art pieces could provide insights into the universality of resistance literature.
What is the future of street art? Throughout history, individuals have been writing protests on the walls of their cities; however, this latest form of stenciling, culture jamming, and street art has only come to be a movement since the mid 1980s. Street writing, particularly graffiti, has been associated with a variety of other subjugated cultural movements, like the rise of hip-hop, break dancing, and DJs creatively mixing music from already created records. And like everything that cannot be easily bought, packaged, marketed and sold, street art is likely to remain a subjugated form of discourse. City officials like to control the format of their streets, and ideas that are for public display are privatized and controlled by large corporations. Billboards can assault citizens all day with their message to buy a new car for happiness, but a street artist has no right in our society to spread the idea that we don’t need a new car to be happy. As long as capitalism remains king, street art and writing will remain outside the official narratives.
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