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Toxicscape: An epistemological approach to graffiti through American narrative cinema

ABSTRACT

Why are people and institutions more inclined to tolerate a street art piece rather than a graffiti tag? Even if legally authorized, graffiti still largely epitomizes a symptom of urban decay, while municipalities hire street artists to rehabilitate poor neighbourhoods with their stunning artworks. Starting from this assumption, the aim of this article is to understand the political roots of such negative attitude towards graffiti in the western imaginary. In doing so the article addresses graffiti as an epistemological object. First, by following Jean Baudrillard, who looks at graffiti as a counter-colonial phenomenon rather than a form of self-expression, the article explores and debunks the most common epistemological attitudes towards graffiti. Second, through an accurate historical and political analysis of New York's welfare and city planning policy, it is shown how graffiti became a pivotal topic in the politics of demonization and exclusion of the ethnical minorities during the Reagan presidency. Drawing from Craig Watkins' notion of 'ghetto-centric imagination' – a racial discourse produced by emphasizing images of inner-city villainy within American film production – the ideological use of graffiti aesthetics in visual communication is termed 'toxicscape'. By displaying 'toxicscapes', American narrative cinema uses graffiti as fetishist visual objects that drive

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the audience in perceiving graffiti (and events or characters related to them) as 'toxic objects'. Therefore, in the second part of the article, a reconstruction of the American conservative discourse involving graffiti is proposed. The text analyses toxicscapes by focusing on action-crime films of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Death Wish (Winner, 1974), Fort Apache, The Bronx (Petrie, 1981), Escape from New York (Carpenter, 1981), Colors (Hopper, 1988) and Batman (Burton, 1989). Finally, hip-hop visual narratives like Wild Style (Ahearn, 1983), Bomb the System (Lough, 2002), The Graffiti Artist (Bolton, 2004) and The Get Down (2016) are addressed as an alternative to the toxicscape for their employment of graffiti in a more progressive and dramaturgical sense. In conclusion, graffiti appear to be challenging ideological and epistemological objects. Therefore, a more accurate analysis of the graffiti discourse that stemmed in the 1970s and 1980s would provide a more critical and sophisticated perspective to the understanding of contemporary 'street art's' political and cultural investment.

1. STREET ART VS WRITING: THE PHILOSOPHY OF LETTERING

Street art is everywhere. By means of stencil, wheat-pasted posters, mosaic, airbrush and other techniques, urban public space is witnessing the world-wide invasion of this 'new' and controversial visual art phenomenon. In the last years, financed and planned street art districts spawned all around the world, from Mexico city to London, Prague, Rome, Lodz, Berlin, Bogota and, of course, New York City, as a way to meet outskirts or 'though' neighbourhoods with the beauty of Fine Arts. 'All City Canvas', a dedicated festival inspired by Mexican new muralism, has become an international artistic project and a media platform for artists networking throughout the 2010s. Led out by a new generation of artists like Shepard 'Obey' Fairey and Banksy, street art seems to reach a perfect balance between private and public, institutional and grassroots, legality and subversion. As a gigantic mural covering the facade of a reinforced concrete building, or in the shape of a *trompe l'oeil* figure that plays with architectural boundaries and perspectives, urban art stuns the gaze of the city dwellers, adding colours, curiosity and personality to what was an anonymous, flavourless and monotone cityscape.

However, street art is nothing new, nor just a fad. The phenomenon has its roots in the underground art movement that boomed in New York in the early 1980s, when young hip-hoppers and baby-boomers met in downtown Manhattan and started to expose and sell their artworks under the label of 'graffiti art'. With the endorsement of Andy Warhol, emerging artists such as Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Fab Five Freddy got their momentum in the Olympus of Fine Arts, whereas anonymous underground graffiti writers continued to hit the city, facing legal and health consequences. Graffiti writing (namely the phenomenon of writing letters on public spaces by means of spray cans or markers), which undoubtedly originated the street art's aesthetics, still has a bad reputation. While ex-writers have abandoned the way of illegality to embrace a more profitable and recognized careers as street artists, the concept of *graffiti* (with its cultural and aesthetics heritage) is stacking into a merciless downsizing process. As a recent article states, the graffiti 'hunt' is still internationally opened: 'Milan, hunting without limits: police blitz in Europe against the graffiti's international' (Bianchin 2016). Significantly, while anti-graffiti policy and campaigns struggle to clean city walls, institutions fight to 'preserve' street artworks, raising the question about the ownership and

the public mission of these works. In fact, a recent story hit the headlines of international art news when the acclaimed street artist Blu self-erased his own artworks from the walls of Bologna to protest against the unauthorized relocation of other street art pieces into a museum (Wu Ming 2016).

In general, the public opinion is more inclined to tolerate the artwork of an internationally recognized artist than a cluster of senseless tags on the walls of its neighbourhoods. People often stick up with street artists when municipalities erase their non-authorized artworks, but rarely put the same effort in defending the removal of 'historical' graffiti areas. A plausible answer is that graffiti is largely associated with a non-artistic, vandalic or even violent phenomenon.

The aim of this article is to understand the roots of such attitudes towards graffiti in the western imaginary. I argue it would relate to a hegemonic discourse that stemmed since the 1970s, which reached its peak during the Reagan presidency, and still lives today. As I will discuss, discourses around graffiti produced a whole epistemology towards the visual that leveraged on western cultural productions, in particular on cinematographic and audio-visual narratives.

2. GRAFFITI: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUE?

After a stay in New York in 1976, Jean Baudrillard claimed the graffiti movement had lost its revolutionary potential (1993). The French philosopher saw in graffiti a form of radical revolt against the imposed space-time of contemporary city, a city of signs and codes that young writers were subverting by covering it up with the anonymity and indeterminacy of tags and masterpieces. Baudrillard saw in graffiti not just an artistic or a political phenomenon, rather a philosophical one. Comparing the city as a 'body without organ' (a notion already put forth by Deleuze and Guattari) Baudrillard described graffiti writing in terms of 'conflictual territorialisation of signifiers':

[Graffitiists] territorialize decoded urban spaces – a particular street, wall or district comes to life through them, becoming a collective territory again. They do not confine themselves to the ghetto, they export the ghetto through all the arteries of the city, they invade the white city and reveal that it is the real ghetto of the Western world. [...] a kind of riot of signs.

(1976: 31)

Baudrillard was of course critical about the Public Walls Projects, a programme of legal walls where graffitiists could express themselves in accordance with the public decor. As for Baudrillard, this was just a means to regulate graffiti into the architectural frame, so that 'art does not explode in contact with the city, the city does not explode with graffiti' (1976: 34). On the contrary, illegal graffiti and underground writers debunked such architectural framework: 'By tattooing walls "SUPERSEX and SUPERKOOL" free them from architecture and turn them once again into living, social matter, into the moving body of the city before it has been branded with functions and institutions' (Baudrillard 1976: 36, original emphasis). The issue of public space plays a crucial role in New York City since the deployment of a violent post-war city planning that invested poor residential neighbourhoods, especially the Bronx. In such a context, as I argue, epistemological and discursive frames were articulated around graffiti.

The first one, which concerns the very term 'graffiti', was introduced by media in the early 1970s. From a hegemonic point of view, this operation would accomplish a twofold task: reframing the phenomenon within the field of art history and, therefore, suggesting a link between the primitive graffiti makers and the young graffiti writers of the Bronx. The suffix 'art' buttresses the discourse from a different political side: rather than a form of vandalism, graffiti art is reframed as an artistic expression of youth minorities without identity.

What is usually overlooked is that early writers have a political background. Growing up in a decade, that is, 1960s, of civic and ethnical awareness and uprising, the emergence of writing culture stemmed from a very political collective consciousness. Instead of a 'dramatization of lost ghetto youth having no identity', many writers came from working-class families and felt a strong bond with their community (Anon. 1996). Sociologist Dick Hebdige saw in graffiti a sub-cultural phenomenon rather than an artistic one: a cultural form of symbolic resistance based on the subversion of the hegemonic discourse by imposing hegemony of style (1995: 120–24). Against such counter-hegemonic practice, an anti-graffiti discourse has been produced by the deployment of a real 'aesthetics of fear' towards graffiti (Austin 2002). As I argue, American narrative cinema, in particular through the genre of action-crime films, helped in spreading such a discourse. By connecting graffiti-making and tagged surfaces with narratives of crime and villainy, audio-visual storytelling anesthetizes the subversive value of graffiti and leverages on its aesthetics to produce a reactionary epistemological discourse. As according to the classical cinematic grammar a fading represents a time jump, it is not risky to suggest that showing graffiti in a movie would 'signify' the beginning of a crime scene or the entrance in a dangerous space. This epistemological attitude is so evident that it is recognizable in almost every mainstream audio-visual product (from TV series to commercials, from video games to cartoons) and I will provide examples from American narrative cinema of 1970s and 1980s. For now, I would highlight the employment of graffiti as a vehicle of dramatization.

From this perspective, another epistemological frame that has reinforced the graffiti discourse is the depiction of graffiti as a 'ghetto thing'. By June of 1971, the *New York Times* published the first article about graffiti, depicting the identikit of the street artist that would endure to the public opinion for decades: male, unemployed and member of a minority group (Anon. 1971). But, as the article states, the writer in question ('Taki 183') was a 17-year-old American Greek who consciously hit the Upper East Side to get noticed by the media (Austin 2002: 50). Moreover, other early writers such as Fab Five Freddy, Lee Quinones or Ramellezee started to meet each other in Manhattan since the end of the 1970s, shifting from the volatile surface of the subways to the long-lasting support of doors, panels or canvas, which were exposed for the first time in an international exhibition in 1979 in Rome (Galleria la Medusa 1979). While it is true that numerous leading figures of writing stemmed from gang culture, it is misleading to conceive this phenomenon as a prosecution of gangs' criminal activities. According to hip-hop scholar Jeff Chang, the hip-hop generation whereof writing is part of represents a rupture with the gang culture, bringing gang symbolism to a new creative and non-violent level (Chang 2005: 41–65). While gangs would use colours to define their territory, writers use colours and letters for breaking barriers, crossing neighbourhood's boundaries and gathering multiethnic crews. It was, to replace Baudrillard's words, a new territorialization of the city by means of colours, letters and style. Moreover, according to Matt Mason, 'the

[graffiti] crews differed from gangs in that they had a radical new Human Resourcing strategy' based on diversity, as an harbinger of trends in business today (Mason 2008: 134–36). While for Mason graffiti and advertising are intertwined in a love–hate relationship, for Baudrillard they are 'anti-media' and incompatible with fame-seeking strategies. Not by a chance, the ideological frame 'anonymity vs celebrity' has been the main topic of a lot of hip-hop movies, since *Wild Style* (Ahearn, 1983) became the most successful film narrative for the worldwide spreading of graffiti culture.

As I outlined, once we deciphered the stereotypical approach to graffiti-making as a 'ghetto thing', graffiti appears to be a challenging ideological and epistemological object. Moreover, a more accurate analysis of the 'graffiti art' discourse of the 1970s and 1980s could provide a more critical and sophisticated perspective to the understanding of contemporary 'street art' global investment.

3. THE POLITICS OF SHRINKAGE AND THE GRAFFITI WAR

Leveraging on a vanguard study led by RAND Corporation and commissioned by the city's Housing Authority (with the endorsement of real-estate industries), since the late 1960s, New York's municipality devised a public policy of decreasing city services – libraries, fire services, public transportation, etc. – from high-density poor neighbourhoods. This project, later known as 'planned shrinkage', sought to fuel industrialization and urban relocation by denying the value of welfare investment in improving people's life conditions (Wallace and Wallace 2001; Chang 2005: 13–14). Eventually the result was quite the opposite. Arsons in the Bronx were a direct consequence of this policy, as the story of what happened in those years echoed today as a mantra of public dominion: landlords paid junkies and gang members to burn abandoned buildings so they could collect insurance money. 'One motivation for destroying the housing of large poor communities was to get land for industry' (Wallace and Wallace 2001: 21–37), a situation that eventually reached its peak with the disorders of 13–14 July 1977, where a gigantic electric blackout triggered an unpredictable wave of looting, arsons and violence through the darkened and unpatrolled streets of over 30 neighbourhoods, Bronx included. The New York City blackout of 1977 has become a powerful image in the imagination of the time. Recent hip-hop TV series *The Get Down* (2016) begins its story in 1977 by dedicating an episode on the blackout as a salient event for the history of Bronx urban culture.

The years of shrinkage are also the years of graffiti war. From 1972 to 1989, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) in collaboration with the municipality's anti-graffiti task force and the endorsement of newspapers such as the *New York Times* marshalled an expensive and violent campaign to 'rescue' the city from decay by whitewashing or replacing the entire subway fleet (almost 7000 trains) at a cost of ten million dollars (Castleman 2004). As Joe Austin argues, from the end of the 1970s, political and economic elites have fuelled the discourse of an 'impending civic collapse', fastening urban and social renewal manoeuvres as means of coping with fiscal crisis (2002). The Reagan era is considered a 'die hard' age for graffiti. Significantly, these years gave birth to the infamous 'broken windows theory'. Based on a study on urban social 'fear', the theory claimed that preventing environmental disorder (broken window, trash and graffiti) would prevent criminal behaviour (Herbert and Brown 2006).

In a stunning interview that appeared in the hip-hop documentary *Style Wars* (Silver and Chalfant, 1983), the New York City mayor Edward Koch reclaimed, with self-satisfaction, the idea of equipping train yards with fences and patrolling 'wolves'. From 1978 to 1989, Koch (officially a democrat, basically a bipartisan) conquered the electorate by deploying a resolute political campaign against graffiti.

In 1989, by endorsing the MTA civic campaign with the slogan 'make your mark in society, not on society', the mayor declared that the last train covered by graffiti was removed from service (Chang 2005: 203). Why spend millions of dollars to remove graffiti during a period of financial crisis and service withdrawal? As I mentioned, even today, graffiti writing gets a significant attention by the authorities. One reason could be the effective contrast to illegal defacement of properties, but other one might recognize 'graffiti thing' as a powerful political weapon.

As analysed by Castleman, since 1972, subway graffiti became a political issue in New York City, leveraging a peculiar political discourse that links youth minorities with media narratives. This contradictory discourse is also analysed by Craig Watkins, with particular attention to hip-hop and black culture (1998). With a Foucauldian and Gramscian perspective, Watkins outlines the controversial hegemonic wars that took place between new-right policies and youth minorities during Reagan presidency. For Watkins, the passage to late capitalism – a de-industrialized, fragmented and anxiety-driven system – is responsible for the rise of a policy of demonization of the ethnical minorities, which were addressed as the 'Other' – a way to cope with the nostalgia of a non-alienated life by defending and restoring the traditional American values. In particular, that of culture and media was the field where apparent 'liberal' narratives – as Koch's legacy epitomizes – were stuffed with intolerant and reactionary ideological frames. One of the most representative of this political stance is what Watkins dubs the 'Law-and-Order spectacle', which 'emphasized image of inner city-villainy [...] as a major urban pathology that required militarized, get-tough posture' (1998: 37). For Chang, in these years media took a contradictory attitude towards graffiti writing. On the one hand, they took a paternalistic effort to integrate the new graffiti art into the Fine Art system. This kind of attitude emerged through several media contents that flourished during the early 1980s: Martha Cooper's photographic reportages from 1979 to 1981 (successively published by the author in *Hip-Hop Files* in 2004); stories by Sally Banes and Steven Hager for *The Village Voice* in 1981–82; Henry Chalfant's artbook *Subway Art* (Chalfant and Cooper 1984) and public events; Michael Holman's TV show *Graffiti Rock* (1984); hip-hop documentary *Style Wars* (Silver and Chalfant, 1983); and films such as *Wild Style*, *Beat Street* (Lathan, 1984) and *Breakin'* (Silberg, 1984). As the groundbreaking work of these authors has been fundamental for the reconstruction of the early years of hip-hop and graffiti culture, it is always important, for a hip hop scholar, to take into account the political *milieu* and the discursive frame whence it stemmed. On the other hand, media also supported a conservative discourse, notably devised by American narrative cinema.

Undoubtedly, graffiti and hip-hop culture got their worldwide diffusion through narrative films. *Wild Style* is not just a cult movie of the genre but also a pioneering hip hop narrative that has spread all around the world and has contributed to the global diffusion of the 'four disciplines' of hip-hop, graffiti included. Even if the political debate around graffiti has fluctuated from a

liberal stance, presenting the act of writing stylish letters on urban surface as a creative intervention towards unpleasant environment, to a more conservative depiction of graffiti as a symptom of social decay and gang behaviour, I contend that the conservative view has hegemonized popular imagination, feeding an ideological and epistemological discourse related to politics of exclusion and demonization of the Other.

Watkins dubs the 'ghettocentric imagination' a racial discourse involving action films located in the ghetto as a dynamic site of ideological production and narrative pleasure (1998: 199). With a narratological approach, the author analyses the Afro-American films of the so-called 'post-industrial ghetto action cycle', like *Boyz 'n The Hood* (Singleton, 1991) or *Menace II Society* (Hughes and Hughes, 1993), as counter-discursive narratives to the hegemonic view of ghetto life. Similar to Watkins, but through a philosophical and ideological approach to film theory, I would like to step back to the late 1970s and 1980s and analyse the evolution of the conservative discourse involving graffiti. In this sense, I will term 'toxicscape' the strategy of exploitation of graffiti aesthetics through narrative cinema.

Film philosopher Slavoj Žižek introduced the concept of 'toxic subject' as an epistemological notion from a political as well as a philosophical perspective. According to Žižek, a toxic subject is not only a person who harasses our everyday social life. Rather it 'covers a series of proprieties which may belong to totally different levels (natural, cultural, psychological, political)' (Žižek 2009: 45), and I would add 'visual'. By adopting a Lacanian perspective, the subject *as such* is toxic, and thus 'the ultimate aim of all rules governing interpersonal relations, is to quarantine or neutralize this toxic dimension or to reduce the Neighbour to a fellow man' (Žižek 2009: 47). The policy of toxic subject fluctuates between two kinds of fetishisms: the liberal/cynical one and the populist/fundamentalist one. Both fetishes identify with their universal claims (the freedom of the market for the liberal one; the rage against immigrants or infidels for the populist one). Since the fetishists rationally accept their fetishes and do not want to get rid of them, for Žižek it makes very hard to produce a rational argumentative criticism of them. The progressive escalation of moderate or 'reasonable racist' policies reveal this ideological hegemony and involve a lot of cultural products with an ostensible progressive political aim.

As for Baudrillard, graffiti are 'signifiers without signify', in Žižek's film theory such 'things' resemble the Lacanian 'symptom' (*sinthome*), that which in the shape of blots, stains and other visual elements break into the classical shot and scatters its visual as well as its symbolic structure (Žižek 1989). I argue that in contemporary cinema, vandalized walls and tagged trains stand for an epistemological visual symptom for detecting toxic subjects or events. By displaying 'toxicscapes', American narrative cinema uses graffiti as fetishist visual objects that drive the audience in perceiving graffiti and subject or events related to it as 'toxic objects'. Such toxic objects are generally embedded in two political narratives: a conservative one, which focuses on Law-and-Order discourse and leverages on the ghettocentric imagination; or a progressive one, where the 'insignificance' of graffiti is converted into the 'signifier' of art and their 'anti-mediality' is narrated by and within the very media system.

In conclusion, a 'toxicscape' is a visual bearer of toxic subjectivity that employs the aesthetics of graffiti writing. Many toxicscapes had a crucial role in the formation of a ghettocentric imagination that relates criminal behaviour with environmental dissonance and architectural imbalance, the

hand of the Other with the incommunicable tag of the writer. In this sense, a toxicscape literally gives an idea of the toxic world where graffiti embodies a fetishist 'unsolved tension' and triggers specific political and philosophical consequences. What follows is a general overview of the films that have produced toxicscapes from the late 1970s to the 1980s, sure that new research on this topic would come forth in the broader field of media and visual studies.

4. TOXICSCAPES AND FILMS

Before the worldwide spreading of graffiti, the Bronx became the favourite location for staging the new ghettocentric visual discourse. Here, the narrative of action-crime films of the 1970s and early 1980s focused on the figure of urban cops unit or vigilante: *Badge 373* (Koch, 1973), *The Seven Ups* (D'Antoni, 1973), *Night of the Juggler* (Butler, 1980), *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (Petrie, 1981) and in particular the *Death Wish* saga (Winner, 1974). The latter is the story of civil engineer Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) who becomes an urban vigilante after a gang brutally kills his wife and rapes his daughter. As the film's trailer says, the vigilante's mission is to 'clean up the most violent town in the world'. During the entire series, graffiti emerge as a background for shootouts and brutality scenes, enforcing the linkage between gang behaviour and environmental dissonance, whereas tagged subway trains function as a cue or anticipation of an imminent threat. Significantly, the very act of 'spraying' is depicted as a violent one. In a pivotal scene, three gang members break into Paul's house and threaten his family by handling a spray can. While one of them paints the house, the others beat the mother to death and rape her daughter. At the end of the cruel scene, they mark the daughter's naked posterior with a red spray paint under the eyes of the mother, who eventually dies (Figure 1). The use of spray can as an environment and body offender is thus paradigmatic. Shocked by the event, Paul would become an urban vigilante by handling a small revolver, as an ideal reply to gang's spray cans.

Death Wish and *Fort Apache, The Bronx* employ sprayed trains to introduce the spectator into the Bronx, as an embodiment of the criminal world of the Other. As in *Death Wish* the displaying of a sprayed train during the main titles is a cue for the forthcoming disintegration of Paul's symbolic order, in *Fort Apache* the train enters the frame after a seductive Latino prostitute, interpreted by Pam Grier, murders two cops in cold blood. In this case the graffitied train embodies a traumatic 'blot' that disrupts the symbolic order



Figure 1: *The spray-can assault in Death Wish, M. Winner, United States, 1974.*
© Dino De Laurentiis Corporation.



Figure 2: A graffitied train enters the frame after the murder. Fort Apache, D. Petrie, United States, 1981. © Time-Life Films.



Figure 3: A graffitied train used as a transition to introduce the cop hero. Fort Apache, D. Petrie, United States, 1981. © Time-Life Films.

(Figures 2 and 3). Moreover, by means of a match cut, the trains serve as objects of transition from the crime scene to the police department where the main character, the officer Murphy (Paul Neumann), is introduced. In another scene, a graffiti wall is a background for dramatizing the death by overdose of the Latino nurse whom Murphy has tried to save from addiction. As the final image, the film ends with a slow camera adjustment, shifting from the long shot of a moving train to that of the Latino prostitute's corpse wrapped in a carpet within an open sky dump. It is significant that during the shooting of the film, Bronx's Latino community established a series of protests under the name of Committee Against Fort Apache (CAFA), in opposition to the dangerous representation of the Bronx proposed by the screenplay of the film. As reported by Richard Perez (one of the leaders of the protest), the demonstrators were fighting media conglomerates 'at a time when many American liberals were embracing the "solutions" of the reactionary Right' (1985).

A representational war would focus on the Bronx for all of the 1980s, reaching its momentum with the so-called 'urban survival films' series. In such narrative, the main characters have to survive in a hostile environment, being chased or assaulted by savage gangs. Points of reference for such film series are *Escape from New York* (Carpenter, 1981) and *The Warriors* (Hill, 1979). In both, there is a strong visual bound between gang and graffiti.

In the dystopian universe of Carpenter's film, former soldier and criminal Bob 'Snake' Plissken (Kurt Russell) has to rescue the US President from the maximum-security prison of Manhattan isle. Without 'law and order' Manhattan has become a no-man's land where zombie-like hordes live under the law of the jungle. In addition to abandoned buildings, trash and old crates, the film's setting makes a large use of graffiti, especially to highlight the entrance in the 'other' world of Manhattan. Otherwise, in *The Warriors*, the story focuses on a gang's survival and return journey to its own territory, threatened and chased by other rivals. Since the first 'cult' scene sees all the gangs of the New York City gathering together in a carnival and colourful mob, the film is riddled with tagged trains, walls and vehicles. In both films, background graffiti surfaces are the main visual strategy for highlighting a toxic subject or event.

Interestingly, Italian B-movies director Enzo G. Castellari rode the wave of this genre. Films like *1990: I guerrieri del Bronx* (1990: *The Bronx Warriors*) (Castellari, 1982) and *Fuga dal Bronx* (*Escape from the Bronx*) (Castellari, 1983)



Figure 4: Using long length lens to empower toxicscape in 1990: *Escape from the Bronx*, E. Castellari, United States, 1983. © Deaf International Film.



Figure 5: Spray can animation in *Colors'* main titles. D. Hopper, 1988. © Orion Pictures.

crystallize in a more effective way the influence of the American toxicscapes on European imaginary. Castellari's films not only mock titles from Carpenter's and Hill's stories but also boost the toxicscape effect by augmenting the hue of tags and exasperating villain's behaviour and clothing. For instance, by employing long-length lens, graffiti letters scatter on the bottom of the frame, enhancing a dramatic effect of distortion (Figure 4). As the mood of the film oscillates between action and musical, adventure and horror, with a declared postmodern attitude to playfulness, nonetheless its visual strategy would reinforce the link between gang behaviour, urban decay and graffiti.

Another survival narrative regarding stories of 'tough cops in tough world' is *Colors* (Hopper, 1988). The film is interesting since the ideological setting shifts from New York to the suburban ghetto of Los Angeles, where two officers (a young Sean Penn and Dennis Hopper himself) try to stop the escalation of violence between the gangs of the blue-Crips and red-Bloods. In the main titles, the symbolic use of colours alludes to the relationship between graffiti and violent behaviour (Figure 5). The very title of the film – 'Colors' – is displayed as an animated tag at the beginning of the story. As 'red' and 'blue' are the representative colours of the two main rival gangs, the members always wear coloured clothes and, like in the aforementioned survival films, the interiors of their headquarters are completely filled with graffiti. In a memorable scene, Sean Penn catches a Latino kid while spraying a wall and punishes him by painting his body with his own spray (Figure 6). In an opposite meaning in respect to *Death Wish*, the scene emphasizes the symbolic role of the spray can as a punitive weapon, producing a linkage between graffiti and illegal behaviour. While Afro-American cinema of the 1990s articulated a counter-discursive answer to the ghettocentric imagination (Watkins 1998), as I suggest, toxicscapes continued to circulate through the popular imagination, also affecting non-ghettocentric films and narratives.

As the following few examples show, toxicscapes have produced a real epistemological 'code' that, as the reader could recognize, is embedded within the totality of mainstream contemporary audio-visual productions.

An emblematic example of this attitude is a scene from *Batman* (Burton, 1989) when Joker (Jack Nicholson) and his gang breaks into an art gallery. With a gigantic boom-box playing pop music, the villain and his henchmen enter the gallery after having anesthetized the audience. They start to ruin all the artworks by adding splashes of colour over canvas and sculptures, in a



Figure 6: Sean Penn punishes young Latino with a spray can in *Colors*, D. Hopper, United States, 1988. © Orion Pictures.

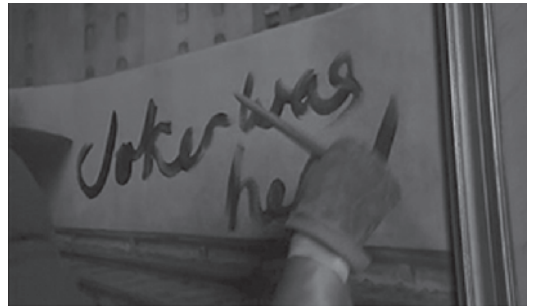


Figure 7: Joker tagging a picture in *Batman*, T. Burton, 1989. United States © PolyGram Pictures.

scene that echoes the assault of Paul's family in *Death Wish*. Then, in front of a frame depicting an empty wall, instead of dropping a colour bucket, Joker pulls out a brush and writes on it: 'Joker was here!'. The picture suddenly becomes a meta-toxicscape as Joker tags both the real surface and the represented one, the signified and the signifier (Figure 7). The assault ends by painting the last canvas with a spray can, with the exception of a Francis Bacon picture of which Joker says, 'I kind of like this one.' As a schizophrenic villain, with his very act of tagging and painting artworks, Joker embodies the Lacanian 'blot' who destroys the symbolic frame by disrupting the very frames of the art gallery. The use of spray can as a weapon and that of colours to signal a territorial invasion (even with a critical intent to the Fine Art system) buttresses the link between graffiti and gang behaviour, thus reinforcing the toxicscape discourse.

5. CONCLUSION

The only film genre that tries to articulate a historically situated discourse on toxicscapes involves narrative on graffiti aesthetics and writers' life. After the aforementioned *Wild Style*, the most relevant would be *Bomb the System* (Lough, 2002) and *The Graffiti Artist* (Bolton, 2004). While in *Wild Style*, graffitied walls and tags function as symbolic field for the representation of a new collective and socially acceptable subjectivity, in Bolton's film this subjectivation is doubly denied: first, because the young writer does not belong to any ethnical group, and nor to any kind of artistic movement; and second, because his attempt to engage in a love relationship with another male writer vanishes as an homophobic reaction after their first sexual intercourse. As *Wild Style* is without any doubt the hip hop generation cult movie, *The Graffiti Artist* shows the solipsistic and paranoid world of a western teenager in which, recalling Žižek, all graffiti are toxics *as such*, as embodiment of toxic subjectivity that does not belong any more to the external Other, but rather to ourselves. More than 25 years after *Wild Style*, Netflix has recently released a new TV series called *The Get Down* (2016). The series focuses on the birth of the hip hop and graffiti culture in the New York of the 1970s, with a good balancing between socio-political enquiry, narrative style and a low-fetishistic approach to 'ghetto life'. However, as the main characters are young writers and hip hoppers, their graffiti always left a 'message'. By using the 'graffiti art' aesthetics of the

early 1980s, the graffiti displayed in the 1977 of the *The Get Down* are pretty well realized and serve as an extension of main characters' thoughts, not as a vehicle for an 'aesthetics of fear'.

In conclusion, in such productions the toxicscape effect is certainly decreased or even debunked in respect to other reactionary narratives. As their topic focuses on graffiti-making through its ethical, political, artistic and sexual issues (as in the case of Bolton's film), the spectators would be induced to address graffiti with more attention. Precisely, thanks to the narrative and set design, the audience would direct its attention to the graffiti background as a salient object within the body of film narrative. Hence, what is often perceived as 'the blot' now assumes a symbolic and dramaturgic sense. While graffiti-aware narratives like *The Get Down* employ graffiti aesthetics as an original sense-making tool, toxicscape still represents the normative language for film, TV series and audio-visual contents. It is an epistemology that leverages on our visual perception and ideological background, thus producing a toxic narrative – an epistemological strategy that we have just begun to map out.

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