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Graff' and the City: Towards a Socially Conscious Aesthetic Theory of Graffiti

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GRAFF' AND THE CITY: TOWARDS A SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS
AESTHETIC THEORY OF GRAFFITI

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Master's Program in Philosophy

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by

Eric Chavez

2017

DEDICATION

This goes out to the BTK: Smog, Limox, Provet, Macr, Defk, El Huarichi, and the almighty Cleto (RIP). This also goes out to all the graff' artists out in the streets, getting up while we sleep, keeping our cities alive and colorful: thank you. I would like to dedicate this to my family who keeps me (in)sane: Jefito y jefita, *los aprecio y los quiero un chingo! Pa' los que no pueden cruzar la frontera, no se me aguiten raza, nuestros corazones no se detienen en las fronteras.*

Naia Sabina Rayel Chavez: you are life. *Ometeotl.*

GRAFF' AND THE CITY: TOWARDS A SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS
AESTHETIC THEORY OF GRAFFITI

by

ERIC CHAVEZ, B.A.

A THESIS

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PROLOGUE

The invention of art and language occurred about 30,000 to 70,000 years ago¹. This “cognitive revolution”, going from *homo sapiens* to *homo sapien sapiens*, gave us the imaginative powers of language and art. No society as far as we know of thus far has been able to live without some form of art². Nonetheless, art’s constant movement, transformations, its disappearances, reappearances, and even its proclaimed “death” throughout history have always challenged the theorists’ and aesthetes’ attempts to capture art’s essence. At the most basic level, art is just a human expression upon a surface, any surface- a *Lebenswelt*³ captured in a *Leinwand*⁴. Any definition of art therefore must capture what it does, and not what it is. For instance, graffiti art materializes abstract human expressions into non-superficial and substantive socio-political narratives. However, just because graffiti does not, at first glance, seem to have any political value does it mean it is completely devoid of any political impact. Since the practice of graffiti necessarily rests upon the dominant socio-political narratives of contemporary property relations and a capitalist mode of production, both the message and the surface that graffiti is painted upon happen to be non-superficial and socio-politically consequential. Graffiti at first glance might seem as mere criminal malevolence, as a petty act of vandalism, and it is. But graffiti, by its mere existence, disrupts contemporary property relations and forces the viewer to shift our perspectives in a way that, as philosopher Gabriel Soldatenko argues, “we can recognize a political value in graffiti, and perhaps understand politics in a new light,

¹ Yuval Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Signal Books, 2014), 20-21.

² Geitlein, Mark. *Gilbert’s Living with Art* 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005), 4.

³ A Husserlian “Lifeworld”.

⁴ A “canvas” or “film”.

according to different terms, and with new ends.”⁵ In any case, graffiti is very significant for human expression in all its forms imaginable. Furthermore, all of these various expressions that graffiti offers cannot always be merely superficial and apolitical. Graffiti contains substantive and significant units of knowledge within and outside formal channels. Graffiti constantly mediates a dynamic between our imaginary and our concrete conditions. That is, graffiti art is physical as well as metaphysical.

As such, graffiti is a peculiar superficiality that hinges on the non-superficial. In other words, a graffiti artist can evoke reactions of pure pleasure, rage, anxiety, or social change within the very same “piece”. Graffiti, depending on its form, content, and interpretation by the audience can be a source of contemplation and appreciation, or inattentiveness and indifference. The significance and the superficiality of graffiti coalesce when registered by differing spectators and by the passage of time. As Walter Benjamin notes, what was once serious art can now be mechanically reproduced as a diminutive facsimile⁶. Graffiti art evokes, translates, and transmits human dexterity in its own unique manner to its own unique receptor when created by unique a set of set of hands. As Hegel once noted in his “Lectures on Aesthetics”:

...Every work of art belongs to its own time, its own people, its own environment, and depends on particular historical and other ideas and purposes; consequently, scholarship in the field of art demands a vast wealth of historical, and indeed very *detailed, facts*, since the individual nature of the work of art is related to something individual and necessarily requires *detailed knowledge* for its understanding and explanations.⁷

⁵ Gabriel Soldatenko, “The Politics of Writing on Walls” *Rhizomes* 25 (2013) accessed from <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue25/soldatenko.html>

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006)

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, “Lectures in Aesthetics” in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism*, Eds. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 99.

Graffiti does not totalize human aptitudes, but transmits them within the historicity of the dialectic between nature, its domination, and urban life. In other words, graffiti mediates between the human, its reasoning capabilities, its natural environ, and its technological expressions- all these dimensions marching towards history. Graffiti then opens up infinite horizons of possibilities out of finite pieces of material, what I call, a *Lebenswelt* captured in *Leinwand*. This is where the complex beauty and political potential of graffiti rests. To practice graffiti art is to create- *creARTE*⁸- while at the same time it is an act of destruction. Graffiti is a symbiotic relation of construction and deconstruction.

Hegel once stated that, “For the beauty of art is the beauty that is born- born again, that is- of the mind”⁹. Similarly, graffiti art is a human-made enterprise that takes away from the resources surrounding us, while at the same time it attempts to reach a primordial sense of freedom. Graffiti art incorporates both the beauty *of nature* and the beauty *of the mind* into an aestheticizing of our political life; graffiti can be spontaneous and malevolent. Yet because of the city as its canvas, graffiti is always political. However, the mass-reproducibility of art within our contemporary life, which is governed by technological apparatuses of all kinds of sizes and colors, has rendered the authenticity of the graffiti artist as just another commodity for our immediate pleasure. This commodification of graffiti is made possible by perfectly and ingeniously hiding all the mediations of technology and politics behind graffiti as mere vandalism.¹⁰ Art, specifically graffiti art, has incredible influence over the evolution and

⁸ This is the logo of a well-known spray paint company in Mexico. The semantics and the typology of the logo, *creARTE* alludes to both the act of creativity in art and the affirmation of our own subjectivity.

⁹ Qtd. in Tiziana Andina and Natalia Iacobelli, *Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

¹⁰ This is more clearly the case when dealing with reproduced artworks (that is, not the original, but copies of the original). As Walter Benjamin outlines in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”: the role of technological reproduction is to devalue and jeopardize the authority and historicity of the original (its *aura*; its “here/now”). Whereas the role of politics is to make concrete the mass existence of

execution of our socio-political life that is often overlooked in discourses on political identity and emancipation.

However, graffiti art can also be extremely superficial and non-consequential. Increasingly, graffiti art can be bought, sold, and disposed of just like any other commodity in the market. This is the case with advertising and fashion of so-called “street” art, but most art whether its so-called “high” or “low” art, can fall prey to its mass reproducibility and loss of authenticity. According to Benjamin, the loss of art’s aura is expedited by its mass reification¹¹. Set against any other commodity in this same marketplace, graffiti art is valued not just by its production-cost and profit margins (i.e.: especially when sold as “street” art), but also by a whole universe of extraneous factors that are ever-more qualitative than quantitative. This is graffiti’s potential as a liberating praxis from contemporary property relations and a capitalist mode of production. However, the qualia of artifacts remains in play and is always unique. That is, “what it’s like” for me to view a Banksy stencil will be quite different to “what it’s like” for another person to view this same piece of graffiti art.

What this means is that the dialectic of graffiti has to be understood in light of the machinations and modifying effects of technology and technology’s grasp on art’s mass-reproducibility. Graffiti’s collusion with unfettered capitalism, as in “street” art, brings graffiti’s authenticity and aura into question. Every art form, including graffiti, created by any given society was anticipated and molded by the technological and economical prowess available to such society, which in turn also molds aesthetic judgments on beauty and ugliness. As Theodor W. Adorno states: “What appears ugly is in the first place what is historically older, what art

replications as a unique existence; that is, the aestheticizing of politics ultimately culminates in fascism. See Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, pp. 252-254.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

rejected on its path towards autonomy...The concept of the ugly may have originated in the separation of art from its archaic phase.”¹² Graffiti art is thus not defined by strictly outlined psychological or logical schools of thought, but more by the chaotic ebb and flow of economic and political tendencies. Graffiti is able to give rise to the urban expressions of our unique subjective experiences tied to a context of historical and political forces.

The purpose of this study is so that we can better understand the dialectics between construction and deconstruction in the lived-city by specifically examining the phenomenon of graffiti and its socio-political implications. But before undertaking this examination, a brief outline of some kind of aesthetic framework is in call. A definition of art, as elusive as this is, must somehow be put forth prior to any aesthetic discourse on graffiti as art, as political, and as social; or to use the graffiti artist’s own words, as tagging, plastering, slapping, wheat-pasting, stenciling, or bombing art into the political and the social milieu of our contemporary urban society.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008), 47.

INTRODUCTION

I. Brief Definition of “Art”

Generally speaking, for such artwork to be pleasing or to have a purely¹³ aesthetic value, it must primarily contain some kind of human-use. If merely a primordial human use, as in expressing feelings or emotions, is sufficient for art to be pleasing, then a more concretely instrumentalizing use, as in for a specific *telos* or aim¹⁴, will not only be sufficient, but be subordinate to the social level. Art is useful not only as a skill, and as a mere skill, but art must also obey the machinations of reflection, industry, and practice.¹⁵ Art must obey the social if it is to be considered “genius” or “talent”. After all, it is also the audience who is in control of the interpretation of art works, and not necessarily the artist themselves.

Otherwise, the artist’s authentic self, their subjective individuality which captures their wonders, fears, compassions, and enjoyments must somehow be contained within the artwork while also reflecting the audience’s psyche in an ever-flowing multiplicity of centripetal and opposing forces that we call history and politics. The source of authenticity, what Benjamin would call the “auratic experience” of an artwork, is its unique instantiations throughout history devoid of timeless and spiritless technologically reproduced replicas¹⁶. The artist’s authentic self must be safeguarded against the loss of its aura via mechanical reproduction and the commodification of art in the culture industry. In other words, the primordial auratic experience of an artwork must also coincide with the instrumental usage of artworks for it to have both extrinsic and intrinsic values. Perhaps even more importantly, the aura of an artwork must be

¹³ If purity is even possibly today...

¹⁴ Think here of architecture and the city: bridges, roads, buildings, churches, banks, etc.... built to lead us from our shelters to the market place. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Micheal W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), particularly Convolute [E2,1] and [E5a1].

¹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, “Lecture on Aesthetics”, 105.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”

preserved in order for it to be able to mediate between objective and subjective values. If not, art will readily lend itself as a medium towards a specific historical and political *telos*; or else, it will be completely contingent. Again, what we need is mediation between these two extremes.

Authenticity and autonomy stem from the artist's unique position within their own historical and philosophical "here and now"¹⁷- and are often set against the flow of our present social ways of being. However, the artist's own culture, and that of others, must also influence the artist's production; that is, their artwork must have some kind of traceable historicity and historical locus of inter-communicability between subjects. That is, art works contain the trace, not just of the artist's "individually" authentic self, but more compellingly, the trace of the entire milieu surrounding the artistic production. Uncovering this robust trace provides an inroad beyond classical aesthetics and into a critical aesthetics necessary for a socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti. Lastly, art is usually a representation, in some form or another, of reality (or realities). The ambiguity and irony masked within these representations is how art enables itself to become more than just a superficial aesthetic experience, transcending rationality by resisting its strict categorizations, thus enabling raw human expressions to become materialized and experienced by a willing receptors.

In other words, art is a means for human connectivity and flourishing. Throughout history, art has been used to create for human purposes, make the ordinary into the extraordinary, record and commemorate, make tangible what is unknown and abstract, and refresh our vision by helping us to see reality in new ways.¹⁸ In short, art has always been seen as a mere *medium* for some greater human end. Art has also always been utilized as an instrument in the hands of the subjective individuality simply as a tool for the mastery of the individual self. In other words, art

¹⁷ That is in retrospect a fixed-point in our history, whereas our actual "here/now" is always fleeting.

¹⁸ Hegel, "Lecture on Aesthetics", 7-10.

can be seen as a vehicle to display various forms of human prowess and dexterity. On the one hand, art is the only human event that has the potential to equal nature's beauty. But on the other hand, art also "dominates" nature by mimesis, by attempting to equal its infinite beauty. It is this mimetic character of art that can be perverted into the mechanization of domination.

Art is usually always exhibited prior to its consumption; or better put; there is no clear demarcation when art is being produced or being consumed. In the realm of art, one must simultaneously consume in order to produce, and as vice versa. In this way, art highlights the materialized dialectic between destruction and construction. Yet, art must validate a cultic existence prior to exerting an aesthetic or instrumental value, even if this cultic existence is facilitated by its simulated and artificial aura via mass-reproducibility (i.e.: mass-produced plastic, glow-in-the-dark Jesus Christ made in China as facilitating a Christian faith in America). However, art is also able to elevate its own status as a mere medium by being perfectly posited for the transmission of imperfect human affairs- both abstract and concrete human affairs. Art crosses the boundaries between the material and the imaginary then consolidates both into an ever-shifting process of production, reception, and reproduction. The dialectics of art, politics, and religion point towards this muddling between the abstract and the concrete. In other words, we cannot separate art from the socio-political context it was inspired from, produced, or will inspire in the future.

In the relational mode of existence that we call urban society, art as a medium is already an end in itself; it is a bridge that connects varied individuals from different space and time scapes, while also transmitting differing primordial human expressions into useful political and normative forces. Therefore, art is not just a mere medium or a tool for some greater end; it is a dynamic rendezvous point in the inter-subjective play of our human existence. Art is not merely

a step towards self-realization, but an integral part of this self-realization. Art occupies both an object and a subject-position; it is both infinite and finite; it is both inspired and inspiring; it is both creative and destructive; it has both material-content and cognitive-content. Again, art is not just superficial; its significance lays in its power to maintain a complex symbiotic relationship between the primordial, the instrumental, the semiotic, and the historico-political. In other words, art constantly mediates between feelings, intentionality, image, and action¹⁹. Art is able to move us beyond just reason and practice; art is truly a philosophical paradox- a transcendental event that happens to be empirically necessary for the design and interplay of our ever-flowing social existence into history.

In other words, it is not just art, technology, politics, or history that molds our quotidian and future existence, but rather the simultaneity of all these elements working for and against each other that ironically produces a harmony between our subjective individuality and the objective social whole; the harmonious interaction between the particular and the whole mediated through the production and subsequent expression of art. Art is able to illuminate, in a shocking display of mimesis, the differing and infinite elements in art that construct the constellations of our finite life-world. The mimetic character of art is able to induce a shock- a brief moment of insight (*Augenblick*)- inspiring us to see alternative horizons of possibilities beyond our current ways of being. This mimetic character- and this shock- can be expressed in an infinite amount of modes; artistic expression is infinite, but the materials remain finite.

The aesthetic framework I take here is best explained by the historicity of the tension between the philosophies of art for art's sake (*l'art pour l'art*) and art for life's sake. What

¹⁹ Also applicable here is Erwin Panofsky's formulation of the three strata of visual meaning: natural subject-matter, conventional subject-matter, and intrinsic meaning (or iconology). See Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Westview Press, 1972), 5-8; and this quote on page 16 in *Studies in Iconology*: "It is in the search for *intrinsic meanings* or *contents* that the various humanistic disciplines meet on a common plane instead of serving as handmaidens to each other".

follows next then is an odd mix between aesthetic theory, critical theory, and historiography. In Benjaminian terms, what follows is a “paratactical representation” of the history of art and aesthetic theories relevant to my philosophical inquiry of graffiti and the city within our high-capitalist epoch. For my formulation of a socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti, I will mainly turn to the converging and diverging philosophical ideas of aesthetics and history by critical theory pioneers, Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Whereas, Adorno was writing from a different perspective from that of Walter Benjamin; a post-Holocaust perspective situated in the United States, not facing immediate danger, although still in exile, but still within the walls of academia (first in England, then settling in New York City as one of the founding members of the New School for Social Thought).

This illustrates how for Adorno theory must be spelled out explicitly. The need to interpret our theoretical framework is crucial in order to clearly show where we stand; mediation is necessary to avoid any confusion and ineffectiveness in social critique that can again lead to mass genocide and fascism again. On the other hand, Benjamin was writing not from a pre- or post-Holocaust perspective, but actually within the maelstrom of the Holocaust. Benjamin was writing from a more limited theoretical horizon, although at a more immediate sense. Benjamin is more sensitive to what is happening in the streets rather than what is happening higher up in the realm of theory and academia. Literally, Benjamin can see the writings on the walls, and is thus, writing from such “fragmentary” perspective. Whereas Adorno can clearly see the theoretical and metaphysical implications of such writings on the wall that Benjamin is reporting from the ground. Considering these historical forces of our social milieu, both Adorno and Benjamin acknowledge the necessity for an immanent critique that is able to shock and shatter the uniformity of the status quo.

It is this formulation of an immanent critique that can lead us towards a socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti. However, to move beyond Adorno and Benjamin into the present-day, this aesthetic formulation will also be complemented with the critique of modern urbanism that was developed by the Situationists such as Guy Debord and post-structuralists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These theoretical frameworks will then be “paratactically represented” against the backdrop of current socio-political affairs in the Paso del Norte border region.

CHAPTER 1: ADORNO AND THE CITY: PRELIMINARIES TOWARDS A SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS AESTHETIC THEORY OF GRAFFITI

A theory of graffiti as socially conscious, at first glance might seem to be an enterprise with both too redundant and too obvious conclusions. Another epistemological dead-end of the tragic-drama (a *Trauerspiel*) that occupies most of Western philosophy's fixation with the object/subject split. Or rather, and the aim of this present text, is to propose for an aesthetic theory of graffiti as a socially conscious moment in the genuine creation of subjectivity against the backdrop of an increasingly capitalistic and banal urban lived-world. A socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti that does not polarize into nor artificially synthesize the object/subject split, but rather attempts to mediate between them by charting an alternative route. Graffiti whether commissioned or illegal is a genuine moment of a visibly spelling-out of a socio-political stance within the available venues of our historical and philosophical trajectories as urbanites- as sensually engaged individuals in the ever increasingly homogenized and reified life-world that we call the city. In Benjaminian terms, graffiti creates a moment, albeit brief, of resistance and self-realization that "goes against the grain". That is, it goes against the dominant grain of the high capitalist epoch where cultural and mechanical reproduction is increasingly normalized into a single phenomenon that we call mass consumerism. This world of mass consumerism, and what I claim is our unfortunate paradoxical phenomenon of modern progress; namely, that we are compelled to buy into a so called reality where the subject becomes the ultimate arbiter of reason- foregoes any ethical inter-subjectivity and already presupposes a moral higher ground. This mass consumerist lifestyle is where the purchase of commodities is the most assured method of social communication and interaction. Consequently, this increase in the demand for commodities as comfort simultaneously destroys our natural surroundings, leading to a guaranteed self-destruction of ourselves.

The legacy of the Enlightenment is exactly this: that the domination of nature is the ultimate manifestation of human reason. From the domination of nature follows the domination of each other. For the modern human being, killing makes us live. This is the dialectic between creation and destruction. This legacy of the Enlightenment, and its global expansion under colonialism, creates a dangerously universal social imaginary where the individual, as the logical subject of domination and reason, serves a commitment of moving society towards an arbitrarily posited moral perfection. This is a moral perfection based upon Western notions of reason, beauty, and purity; thus necessarily subordinating non-Western philosophies and way of life. Given these social conditions of reification and domination in our present time, the creation of the “individual” subject reaffirms this imaginary drive towards so-called progress and moral perfection as an objective reality. The more one is able to own, the more affluent one is able to become. Exploitation then is ultimately praised as success. Therefore the Western notion of progress, as a function of success in a capitalist world, necessitates exploitation. The creation of comfort, in the guise of commodities, means the destruction of resources and the exploitation of human labor. This is actually a perverse objective reality that renders destruction as creation, and domination as reason. An objective reality hinging on a subjective arbitration of what is to be justified as reason; this is the colonizing power of modern Western epistemology.

There is no other Western philosopher that embodies the Enlightenment epoch, *par excellence* than does Immanuel Kant. Terry Eagleton’s, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, gives us a critique of the Kantian aesthetic-subject, which corresponds to the critical orientation that both Adorno and Benjamin advocate:

In the ‘imaginary’ of ideology, or of aesthetic taste, reality comes to seem totalized and purposive, reassuringly pliable to the centered subject, even though theoretical understanding may more

bleakly inform us that this is finality only with respect to the subject's faculty of cognition.²⁰

In other words, the presupposed finality posited by the idealist conception of the aesthetic- the notions of modern progress and moral perfection- must be confronted with the immediacy of the "here and now". This is the "aura" for Benjamin, which constitutes a confrontation that does not lead to the dead-end-domineering methodology of Enlightenment-thinking and later Positivist logic. Just like the technological reproduction of art begets art's loss of aura via the mass reproduced replica, it concludes with art's subservient role as a tool for the mass-acceptance of fascism and totality. The replication of original artworks enables for the ever-same to become normalized. This homogenization of the production of art via mechanization will be reproduced in the mechanization of our socio-political milieu. This is the Benjaminian argument against the role of art solely for life's sake. The role of art as an instrument for the individual subject, as subject to political institution, will lead to the mass and uncritical acceptance of such institution's wishes.

For Adorno, this instrumentalization of art is part and parcel of the instrumentalization of reason. Whereas art is able to mimic nature, and reason to dominate nature; reason then- as the ultimate arbiter of Western epistemology- already dominates art by its mere existence. For reason, as the dominator of nature, also necessitates human labor- this is the role of the artist, the artistic production, and the interpretation of the audience. The domination of art necessitates interpretation, which is the role of the audience. Now, when the role of the artist and the audience are thwarted specifically for political purposes (i.e., propaganda), then there cannot be any artistic nor interpretative freedom for interpretation. Everything that is laid out in a piece of propaganda has a specific purpose and a specific ideological *telos*. Therefore, an idealist

²⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 87.

conception of the aesthetic cannot shatter the illusory understanding of reality via strict logical or rational categories. In fact, these logical categories are necessary for totality and fascism to occur. The naiveté of Enlightenment-thinking and Positivism can be found in the attempt by the “state” to capture and understand infinity in objective and finite terms in the very same way Western epistemology attempts to capture nature into strict logical terms- leaving everything in our life-world exposed and instrumentalized. The shattering of this illusion, or this imaginary order propagated by such Western epistemology, is a necessary prerequisite for my formulation of an aesthetic theory of graffiti as a socially conscious moment in our ethical inter-subjective relations.

Prioritizing the immanency of our present subjective individuality- an individuality that is both politically determined and yet historically unbound- facilitates the illumination (albeit for a brief moment: an *Augenblinck*²¹) of the crude, raw, and fragmentary essential details that constitute our life-world. This subjective life-world often gets overshadowed and over-powered by the desire for a self-determined, anthropocentric, and egoistic pursuit for an ill-construed narrative of progress. This will deny our actually fragile subjectivity that ties us closer to nature, which violates our subjective integrity because the dominant narrative of progress is based upon domination. We are integral to nature, and not outside of it or superior to it. This is the primal impetus for shelter. It is literally sheltering our fragility against the storm.

The formative forces of believing in the teachings of the Kantian sublime and beautiful, the Kantian aesthetic theory, has mainly justified this overpowering idealist conception of how “I” should be sensually engaged in the world in nature. This Kantian teaching has been both humbling and aggrandizing for the way that subjectivity is mediated through the experience of

²¹ Literally meaning, “in a blink of an eye”. For Benjamin, the “*Augenblinck*” is how knowledge exists prior to its codification into a text; as a lightning flash of insights: “In the fields with which we are concerned knowledge exists only in lightning flashes. The text is the thunder rolling long afterwards.” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N1, 1)

aesthetic engagements. The Kantian aesthetic engagement positions the individual subject in a moment of overwhelming surrender in a purposeless purpose, yet maintains the individual subject as the prime agent of this aesthetic engagement. This is so because Kant's construction of the concept of the transcendental subject actually serves the purpose of arbitrarily abstracting me- "the subject"- from reality, thereby retarding our subjective individuality into some metaphysical realm even before an individual truly hits the physical ground. It can be asked: who exactly is this "transcendental subject", and is he/she even possible? This is the classical Kantian dilemma of how to establish a harmonious connection between the transcendental ego and the empirical subject. Kant's third critique can come into play here as having aesthetic objects (art and artifacts) appear as functionless, but still maintaining a function. The abstraction of the Kantian disinterested interest arrests the individual subject judgment simply to its reception of an artistic essence, and neglects any attention to the historical process driving the dynamism between the artistic essence and the audience.

This misunderstanding of the relationship of purposelessness to purposiveness, or function to non-function, or art for art's sake to art for life's sake, was critically incorporated by Adorno to dialectically analyze the politically determined, yet historically unbound nature of our subjective individuality via art and aesthetics. Adorno makes clear the necessary relationship between art's autonomy and art's dependence on human utility, yet maintains art at a distance in order to give art its critical potential. According to Adorno, "aesthetic feeling is not the feeling that is aroused: It is astonishment vis-à-vis what is beheld rather than vis-à-vis what it is about; it is a being overwhelmed by what is aconceptual and yet determinate, not the subjective affect

released.”²² To make this point clear, Adorno warns us about the failed utopian attempts of revolutionary art in the early 20th century to liberate such subjectivity by fixating on itself:

In many regards, expansion appears as contraction. The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure. Instead, the process that was unleashed consumed the categories in the name of that for which it was undertaken...the autonomy it [art] achieved, after having freed itself from the cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered.²³

Yet, art’s autonomy, even in “...the face of increasing social deformation that we call reality”, as Adorno concedes, “...remains irrevocable”²⁴. The revolutionary art movement of 1910 failed because it ended up reifying the same conditions they were attempting to subvert. This art movement reflected the radical social context it emerged from, but as this social context became increasingly normalized and commercialized, this art movement lost its revolutionary rigor. Giving art a social function will not necessarily free us from the double-bind that constitutes the whole of art and aesthetics, that is, the double bind of art serving a function, and art as functionless, again alluding to Kant’s third critique. But the related problem with which I am especially interested here is the inherent contradiction of every particular autonomous artifact against “...the perennial unfreedom of the whole.”²⁵ This is the problem of social injustice and domination that I referred to above in the guise of Enlightenment, Western epistemology, and reason.

In a dialectic that conforms very well to Adorno’s thought, art’s autonomy is always up against art’s necessary dependence upon human labor. This is what Adorno calls art’s naiveté of

²² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 164.

²³ Ibid, 1.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

a second-order. Thus, in a classic naïve move, the more art attempts to reject reality and the status quo (think of the revolutionary art in 1910 just mentioned by Adorno above), the more art affirms such a reality by actually concretizing such status quo, and ultimately annulling its very origins of resistance and radicalism. Art introduces alternatives, but it also reifies our current reality- whether that reality is just or not. Nonetheless, and because “art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements”- always refusing definition and opening up myriads of art forms that constantly emerge and die out- art is still able to produce great emancipatory potential to liberate us away from what Adorno calls “the face of abnormality into which reality is developing.”²⁶

Moreover, all art forms- especially graffiti art which is always at risk of being “buffed” by anti-graffiti state pogroms²⁷- are infinitely fleeting and in a state of becoming rather than in a state of being. Therefore, art, or at least graffiti art, must be seen as a becoming and not as a being, as ever-opening and never totalized. This infinitely fleeting constitution of graffiti art will enable us to understand the movement, separation, and distance necessary for a socially conscious critique of the idealized subject-centered framework of Positivist aesthetics. In order to have a viable critique, distance from the object in question is a necessary movement in order to have a more authentic analysis free of biases or presuppositions. This critical (dis)stance will further enable a path to initiate my theory of graffiti as a socially conscious moment.

According to Adorno, “only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work’s own need,

²⁶ Ibid, 2

²⁷ This is not a typo. Although most city government’s label such anti-graffiti initiative “programs”, I am using “pogrom” to allude to systematic wiping out of subjects by a state, for example the Nazi German pogroms to liquidate millions of Jewish subjects. This is to make more concrete Adorno’s argument that a work of art has both a subjective dimension and objective dimension in its constitution. However, it is important to note that this is an allegorical use of the word “pogrom”. I do not intend to directly equate the wiping out of graffiti to the wiping out of actual human lives. The point here is about the erasure of subjectivity.

does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence”²⁸. Following Adorno, artworks are then a living-dynamic between ontological content (*Inhalt*²⁹) and ontic form (*Gehalt*³⁰). In Adorno’s aesthetics, artworks occupy both a subject- and object-position; artworks have both *Inhalt* and *Gehalt*. The objectivation of artworks is only possible by its complete mediation by the subject. The subject’s ability to reason, as a “universally conceptual formalization”, unifies it with objectivity. The hand necessarily shapes the material object: “...expression, objectivated in the work and objective itself, enters as a subjective impulse...form must be produced subjectively according to the demands of the object.”³¹ In Adorno’s own words, artworks are better thought of by “...the recognition of aesthetic forms as sedimented content.”³² In other words, and as an explanation of Adorno’s attempt to shatter the illusoriness and naiveté of Idealism that brings us closer to the immanent critique he espouses, aesthetic forces are constant sedimentations of social forces- art reflects social forces and vice versa. Artifacts act as a sort of track record of specific social structures that have been instantiated and demolished throughout time. Artifacts reflect not just the individual artist’s desires, but more importantly, they express specific social structures of coercion and harmony throughout history.

This relation of the aesthetic to the social is reproduced in the dimension of art’s autonomy- the role of art forms and content as sedimentations of social forces direct us again to the opposite of art’s autonomy. The real social effects of art illuminate the non-autonomous character of art. Again, the double bind of art returns even when we attempt to employ the immanent critique. Or better said, the immanent critique illuminates and puts into play the

²⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 4

²⁹ Adorno also refers to *Inhalt* as “sedimented content” in *Aesthetic Theory*, 138.

³⁰ This will be taken to mean the material form of the sedimented content.

³¹ *Ibid*, 167.

³² *Ibid*, 5

contradictions inherent in an idealized aesthetics. The proper integration and the proper resistance of art to reality is the only hermeneutic available in understanding the complexity and anti-foundationalist conception of Adorno's aesthetic theory. This is an aesthetic theory that is sensitive to the historical and the social realms of our existence. Contradictoriness is essential to art's "fixed" philosophical concept. Again, art mediates between the human, its natural environ, and its technological expressions because it is not just an act of consolation or cathartic mechanism, but rather it is both the act of domination and the act of being dominated. However, Adorno does not critique Kant in order to relapse into a Hegelian totality of dialectical systems.

Although synthesis does introduce differences and otherness, Hegel's aesthetics still maintains a rationale of totalizing the universe. Ultimately for Hegel art's purpose is for social organization. Hegel's aesthetics is a sub-part of the metaphysical organization of his concept of the Spirit, which naively culminates in the rational modern State. Hegel is highly optimistic about the role of the modern state as a rational institution that ensures the ethical life of the collective to mediate between individual rights and freedom in harmony with the whole of society. Whereas Kant reduces aesthetics to a function of practical reasoning for the sake of moral duty, Hegel, on the other hand, reduces aesthetics to a function of dialectical reasoning for the sake of civil duty. The obvious difference between Kant and Hegel that Adorno espouses is that both Kant and Hegel presuppose a harmonious outcome, where Adorno was writing from a justified pessimistic, post-Holocaust worldview. Additionally, Adorno also critiques the psychoanalytic framework of aesthetic espoused by Sigmund Freud's as being also too naïve, idealistic, and abstract. Where Adorno blames Kant and Hegel as being too altruistic, he also blames Freud as arbitrary psychologism.

For Adorno, the theories of Kant, Hegel, and Freud all fail to acquaint themselves to the concept of art by trying to understand it and posit such fluid and dynamic concept as a fixed concept. The failure of Freud is that artifact loses all autonomy and instead is minimized into mere mechanisms for the individual subject to sublimate its primal urges into civilized end-products. A Freudian aesthetics transforms artifacts into mere psychological defense mechanisms. Art therefore becomes a mere instrument for the rationalization of life and the self-preservation of the individual rational subject. In this Freudian framework, the dynamism and fluidity of art is minimally maintained by conceding the power of negation in artworks themselves, but solipsistically returns to the ego as the ultimate arbiter, whether conscious or unconscious, of such negation. The fixation on the subjective repression of desires as the main impetus for artworks- the psychoanalysis of Freud- misses the entire historical genealogy of art, artists, and artistic movements. Freud reduces the complex dialectic of particular and whole to a simple function of catharsis and/or sublimation. In critical contrast, Adorno makes clear the myopic view that is characteristic of psychoanalysis: "...According to the tone of psychoanalytic monographs, art should deal affirmatively with the negativity of experience."³³ Psychoanalysis reduces art to a function of repressing our desires by way of producing sublime works of arts, and thus returning the artist (and audience) to some kind of pre-established psychological normalcy. The lack of historical sensibility and the reduction of artworks to mere functions of a supposed rational defense mechanism render psychoanalysis as inadequate for a socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti.

³³ Ibid, 8

Unlike Hegel's, the Kantian and Freudian accounts of aesthetics share a common misunderstanding, that is, they both are "subjectively oriented by the power of desire."³⁴ This power of desire, although rooting such aesthetic accounts into some empirical background, nonetheless, demands for artworks to be subjected to a cognizing and hegemonic enlightened subject. On the other hand, the Hegelian conception of aesthetic fails to be socially conscious because of its preoccupation for serving the end-goals of the modern State, and not of the individual subject. One can argue that serving the state is, at the same time, serving the individual citizen-subject. However, the history of racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia still haunts the "spirit" of the United States, the modern U.S. state has not been able to provide freedom and rights to certain citizen-subjects.

I. Deaestheticization of Art And The Culture Industry

According to Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the deaestheticization of art, via the culture industry and mass consumerism, works to narrow the distance from the artifact- which needs to stand on its own for it to be a vehicle of social critique- then fetishizes this artifact by wanting to possess it and touch it- or in other words, to understand it. The objectification of art follows the logic of commodities: exchange, value, homogenization, alienation, and fetish. Impulses are projected onto an artifact, and transformed into something graspable and in the service of the subject, just like the commodity exists. The service in commodity exchange translated into the realm of art is that of the philistine demanding that the artwork give them something.³⁵ Whereas one should follow Hegel in his insight of the aesthetic sublimation of the subject as being "...free unto the object"; that is, "...the subject that becomes subject in spiritual experience through self-

³⁴ Ibid, 17

³⁵ Ibid, 17

relinquishment...”³⁶, this self-relinquishment should then reveal a different objectivity than that espoused by either Idealism, Romanticism, or Psychoanalysis. This subject should realize, within their self-relinquishment, the elements of freedom and unfreedom inherent in our social institutions and epistemological concepts. This self-relinquishment, self-reflexion, and self-sacrifice give the subject enough distance to be able to gauge our available social, political, historical, and philosophical horizons beyond our pre-given “objective reality.”

Engaged art, or as Adorno puts it “avant-garde art”, then is not just representational, but it is an actual embodiment of social, political, historical, and philosophical sedimentations that always in a flux of change. Thus the ultimate paradox here for both the artifact and the subject enjoying such an artifact is the paradox of control in a setting of uncertainty. In an immanent critique of aesthetics, which is necessary for a socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti, reification is both necessary yet degrading. Understanding this dialectical aporia in my formulation of aesthetics as socially conscious is a necessary prerequisite for the unleashing of art forms as explosive mimetic potentialities in the liberation of our consumer-driven, technologically reified and homogenized urban life.

Nevertheless, aesthetic autonomy is still to this day sufficiently, and almost necessarily, shaped by the universalization of domination and reason. With a hint of fatalism, Adorno and Horkheimer note that the Enlightenment attempt to formalize a modern logic of reason against nature was the ground for the Positivist practice of the universal exploitation of society through formalizing language, semiotics, and images, eventually leading to fascism.³⁷ This is the dialectic of enlightenment: the perfection of knowledge to such a transparent and exposed extreme that it ends up culminating into fascism. Thus, if we want to avoid exploitation, art cannot be a clear

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2-12.

dividing-line where the domination of society suddenly stops, and then aesthetic pleasures and desires are freely expressed via access to multiple and historically-fluid art forms and styles. This multiplicity of art forms and art styles ends up justifying art itself as a mere appendage of the cognizing, Enlightened subject. Additionally, the dialectic of pleasure, desire, and domination all express the same thing in our contemporary world: the increased aestheticization of politics- a battle for power over other, which culminates into fascism and is concretely manifested in the ultimate loss of auratic experience through the mass-reproducibility of artworks for the purpose of the reification of society. That is, the aestheticization of replicating power dynamics, the economic aestheticization of politics into the culture industry, is best articulated by the logical solipsism of the commodity exchange.

This is why art's actual social effects, whether formulated as a call to unify communities into the rational modern State (Hegel), or following a mechanical dictum towards a universal morality (Kant), or merely functioning as the sublimation or catharsis of repressed desires into normalcy (Freud), demonstrates a lack of autonomy imparted by the artwork itself against the objectifying gaze of the cognizing subject(s) and dominant social structures. In other words, given the dependency of artworks on a subjective individuality, namely, the artistic individuality and the audience receptivity then the logical extension of that dependency is that artworks act instrumentally to promote the self towards the goal of self-preservation. This logical framework sacrifices the artwork's autonomy under the hegemony of the cognizing subject. Art does not give its own life to add to the living landscape of city-life, but rather, art is given a life of its own in accordance with historical phases. Art is a living and dynamic historical phenomena.

Art, in these formulations of being inferior to the cognizing subject, can then never be *l'art pour l'art*, but always ends up being understood as art for life's sake. The instrumentalizing

logic of art for life's sake runs corollary to the domination of nature and society: as an instrumentalizing means of "the logic of reason" for understanding the other. The universality of art in its immediate sensual engagement commands the subject, especially when the relation of subject-to-artwork is posited within the framework of art for life's sake, to readily appropriate itself to the totalizing logic of reason. The hegemonic usurpation of art as the subject's ad-hoc instrument for one's own self-preservation provides a blueprint for the perpetuation of domination amongst nature and each other. Outstripping art's autonomy helps outstrip another's autonomy. Although semantics has been the first issue at hand; that is, what is the definition of art? The more urgent issue now is pragmatics, and that has to do with praxis of liberation.

II. Art and Praxis

To begin with, artworks should be seen as the offspring of their creator and never as her material manifestation nor her mirror image. Instead, art is connected by a unique and shared event called "birth", but then immediately placed in autonomy against the compulsive and blind flight towards history. As much as I may look and act like my progenitors, but I will never be able to be neither. Similarly with art and artworks. Losing sight of this autonomy and this genealogy within art and artifacts involves arbitrarily postulating an Ego, be it mine or someone else's, as plenipotentiary and final- as authoritative and all knowing against the backdrop of the mystery and uncertainty that we call life. Unfortunately, the criterion for the quality of art is defined by what most benefits our capacity to understand and dominate our surroundings. Domination as being based upon the price tag of an artifact, which in turn begs the question of: What exactly is beneficial to us all?

Overcoming this philosophical dilemma usually leads to either an arbitrary foundationalism or the conformity and acceptance of such an arbitrarily posited criterion in order

to “just move on” and be a productive citizen for the whole of society. What is truly unfortunate is that both of these choices are unsatisfactory and inauthentic. This dead-end also lends itself to the justification of fascism as rationally and technologically necessary, masquerading as the ultimate rational solution to the myriad of competing political egos-the great liberal dream of equality. However, this can also be seen as the manifestation of the ultimate institution of objectivity and technological prowess that is actually fascism.

Art for art’s sake then denounces this totalizing logic espoused by Positivism by creating a continuous and sacrificial self-destruction of its own definitive constitution. In other words, art is always attempting to escape its own definition in a self-sacrificial manner. This is why we, as ultimate cognizing subjects (i.e. the collective will to conform to the play of reason), need to ever-newly qualify what art means, what art attracts our attention to, or to what purposes it must serve. This will also lead to ever-newly reflect on ourselves, hopefully inspiring modifications of our “rational” existence for a more harmonious one with the Earth.

To be sure, there is no such thing as autonomous art; in this day in age, *l’art pour l’art* rarely exists- instead this is considered excess. To delimit art, it must always be prequalified by some kind of adjective. For example: *ancient art*, *classical art*, *modern art*, *post-modern art*, and so on and so forth.³⁸ However, it would be odd and useless to refer to an aesthetically-pleasing artifact as *art-art*. This is what *l’art pour l’art* aspires towards, and what Adorno notes Dadaism failed as a truly revolutionary art form, that is: *art-art*, or in other words, art for art’s sake. Now, the aesthetic characteristic of the *nouveté* (i.e.: the new) both reifies the untamed nature of art and artifacts, as well as reifying the nagging insistence of human reason in attempting to understand and manipulate everything that crosses our path. The former embraces humility,

³⁸ Or more specific adjectives, but still as arbitrary: *romantic art*, *Dadaist art*, *cubist art*, *surrealist art*, *pop art*...etc.

whereas the latter-as we have seen with Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer- culminates into fascism. In more aesthetic terms, the former is *l'art pour l'art*, while the latter is art for life's sake. Yet, both these dimensions of art share the same essence of the *nouveté*. How is this shared essence of the *nouveté* even possible?

III. The *Nouveté* and the Image

This essence of the *nouveté* can be both a source of commodity fetish (viz. always wanting the new iPhone) and an ever-expanding horizon of liberation (viz. always searching for new possibilities within our creativity and engagement with others). “The new”, this *nouveté*, can be manipulated both ways: as an illusory panorama of progress-the modern paradoxical phenomenon of progress as actually regressive- or as a revolutionary and paradigmatic change. In any case, this *nouveté* becomes infinitely self-preserving and self-promulgating as the solipsism of Positivist logic and commodity exchange embodied in aesthetic production of “the new”.

The *nouveté* is the perfect model for the high capitalist subject in critique here, but it is also the mechanism for broadening our horizons into a liberatory praxis. This opposing dialectic of the new is given by its close and deep relationship with the Western notion of “the modern”. According to Benjamin, the concept of “the new” is always necessarily accompanied by what “always was”. The new does not alter the face of the earth, but instead simply reorders, while simultaneously reifying, the structures of power-dynamics feeding the illusion of the new.

Benjamin notes that:

According to fashions, the eternally up-to-date <das Ewig-Heutige>, escapes ‘historical’ consideration; it is truly overcome only through a consideration that is political (theological). Politics recognizes in every actual constellation the genuinely unique-what will never recur....Definition of the ‘modern’ as the new in the

context of what has always already been there. The always new, always identical ‘heathscape’ in Kafka (*De Prozeß*) is not a bad expression of this state of affairs.³⁹

In other words, if both instruments are made exclusively to dominate life, then: is the atom bomb truly better than the slingshot? Are the images of atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki much easier to muse over because of their totalizing, lightning-fast destruction rather than the after-images of empty Zyklon-B canisters in concentration camps (Zyklon-B which was first utilized in the United States-Mexico border, and then perfected in Nazi Germany⁴⁰)? Or are the photographs of the piled up bodies of Jewish victims less easy to muse over because of its slow, agonizing, and fragmentary slaughter of human beings? Or is it our nationalistic vestiges and romanticizing of that epoch that is still able to justify contemporary U.S. foreign policies, while at the same time historically condemning Nazi German internal affairs? Or is it purely a matter of economic efficiency, whether in Nazi Germany or here at home? Is demolishing historical barrios for the purposes of increasing private investors’ coffers truly progressive? Is efficiency best suited for epistemology or for practical life? Above all, is it really all that better now?

For better or for worse, the manipulation of art, of the image, and the imaginary almost undoubtedly equates to the manipulation of the subject, its labor, and its ideological framework. Each one of these single elements feeds on each other to create an aesthetic experience. For instance, art feeds the image, which in turn feeds the imaginary, just as the subject creates a labor that maintains a certain ideological framework (i.e., an artist getting paid for their work). This then creates a vicious cycle: the ideological framework feeds the subject (the audience/artist relation), which reifies the need for artistic labor (demand), that then feeds the ideological

³⁹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [S1, 3], [S1, 4], 544.

⁴⁰ Zyklon-B was the trademark chemical, derivative from cyanide, commercially used to kill pests, such as lice, but politically used to cleanse undesired subjects by the state. The United States was the first state to utilize Zyklon-B to cleanse Mexican migrants entering the US-Mexico border in the early 1900s through the Paso del Norte port of entry. This practice influenced Nazi officials to utilize Zyklon-B as a much more “humane” approach to the Final Solution.

framework again, that then validates the subjects' (both the artist and the audience) own existence as worthy and as a productive force for the whole of society. Capturing this whole by rationalizing out every mystery within it into strict categories is what a fascist interpretation of aesthetics is about. The complete signification, classification, and transparency of what makes "us" unique is what gives power and control to fascism. This is the complete liquidation of the aura, and due to its simplified and convenient semiotics, it renders life under a fascist existence seem reassuring and worth pursuing.

Like any other artwork, this ultimate Ego I will call fascism, necessitates the workings between the image and its captivated audience. The concept of the image is pivotal. The concept of the image is the kingpin for either a liberatory praxis or a totalizing logic. The image can lend itself to the workings of constellatory mimetic interpretation of the world or, on the other hand, a replication of the ever-same sold as the ever-new. The image is not a fixed concept or a set syntactic representation. This is why a philosopher will take a thousand words where an artist can depict it in a small piece of canvas. Language will always betray us (cf. the Levinasian "saying and the said"); contrariwise, the viewer's greedy gaze will always cause the image's duplicity. The grasping of an image by the gaze of the viewer already presupposes an objective existence for the artwork, nullifying any subjectivity into a function of usurpation and self-preservation. The appropriation by the viewer over the image will make it seem as if the image is a fixed concept, but the image can, and often does, remain long after the producer and viewer perishes. Thus, the question now is: who is really doing the objectification of the gaze? Is it I, at the Louvre waiting in line amidst thousands of other anonymous spectators, paying a fee to take a glimpse at the Mona Lisa? Or the Mona Lisa itself, ever-ironically, smiling over us for centuries at a joke we will never understand? Or do we redeem language, as the later

Wittgenstein did, on the sole basis of pragmatic achievements as opposed to strict logical categories, taking a gaze not at the object itself, but at the consequences of our language-acts?

In any case, an imageless world necessitates and will demand for more art. Our contemporary world was exposed to art as part and parcel of instrumental reason, but never as art-in-itself; again, this is considered excess. The culture industry then took up the role to qualitatively (and quantitatively) modify the “lower arts and mass entertainment” into a new form of commodified art, never as art proper. As Adorno makes clear, “Those who have been duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities were never familiar with art...this is the subjective basis for classifying art among the consumer goods under the control of *vested interests*.”⁴¹ This is where the *nouveté* fuels the technological reproducibility of art forms as commodities, dissolving art’s autonomy and aura.

In other words, the reductionist rational attitude towards the classification of art under ever-new adjectives enables the conditions for ever-new modifications within the same signification and practice of commodity-exchange. The game of commodity-exchange is the heart and soul of high capitalist logic. Hence a commodity is not the same as an image, even if such commodity stems from an image; its operation as an exchange-value congeals what was once an artwork into a fixed-value. For if we want a socially conscious aesthetic framework, artworks cannot be fixed concepts ready for our usurpation.

The aura of anything, including artworks and subjectivity, is lost once exchange-value and reproducibility are introduced as its operating features. This is how, in Marxist and Benjaminian terms, the subject is alienated from its labor: via the loss of the aura, the commodification of life, and its technological reproducibility. Because of its irrational and

⁴¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 17

threatening nature to the status quo, a fragmented multiplicity of images will constitute a more sincere picture of reality than the illusion of logically and rationally grasping reality into a totality of fixed categories. Such finite beast that a human is will never be able to accomplish such infinite task that art demands unless it takes on the violent expression and aesthetization of fascism. Only in fascism is the entire universe disclosed for all to see.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS REAL? WHAT IS TRUTH? A BENJAMINIAN CRITICO-EPISTEMOLOGY

Running in conjunction with Adorno's thought, my take on philosophy and aesthetics is that it cannot be reduced to some-thing true or untrue, an ultimatum culminating to an either/or, nor a didactic system with ulterior moralizing or patronizing motives. Much less can philosophy be reduced to a strict mathematical methodology based upon the feeble foundation of infinitesimals and logical proofs. Continuing the critique by Adorno from the previous chapter, our blind-faith in the accumulation of scientific knowledge and our endless quest for being the dominator over the dominated, both over nature and thus, over society- then yes- to a larger extent, David Hume was right: we have absolute certainty over uncertainty. For we are integral to nature, and any attempts at overpowering nature will then default, because of not recognizing our debt to nature, in the overpowering of each other. The manner in how we have been conditioned to gather facts, evidence, and accounts- in short, how we gather knowledge and truth- is akin to the manner in which we attempt to colonize the Earth and overpower nature. This is the goal we have set for ourselves: to be human means the unbridled accumulation of nature and by extension, wealth. That is, to own something and thereby understanding it signifies that we can dominate it. Everything that we come to understand via the cold rationality of science and philosophy comes to take a literal stand beneath us; objects are posited below the supposed superiority of the rational subject as we *under*-stand such objects. Objects then become either for or not for the rational individual subject to usurp- whether it is in epistemology or scientific discoveries, this usurpation of the object has been the litmus test of Western knowledge and truth.

Since the Scientific Revolution, Western science has donned a disguise of “objectivity”, which serves to abstractly distance itself from any subjective biases or from any social preoccupations. That is, science is science. The social is something else entirely. At the basic level, objectivity refers to: 1) a denial of individual preferences, and 2) a regimentation of *supposed* non-arbitrary methodologies. However, many recent scholars in the philosophy of science have begun to emphasize the role of socio-political issues within the field of scientific rationality, and have also begun to question the infallibility of objectivity⁴². The imposition of Western standards across academic disciplines has had the negative effect of diminishing native subjectivity, creativity, and nature overall. Taking heed from Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin, this quest for knowledge and truth by Western science is akin to fascism. This type of fascism is the totalizing and instrumentalizing of nature, reason, and ultimately, the disappearance of the “aura”.

This domination is best represented by the manner in which objects tend to serve us or not. This is how we are able to justify a true belief in objectivity. However, Edmund Gettier⁴³ made clear circa 2,000 years after Plato’s *Thaetetus* that a “justified true belief” can be made fallible by introducing an element of surprise, luck, or uncertainty into the premises or conclusions of any piece of propositional knowledge. It just happens to be that life itself is more than usually constituted with such surprise, luck, and uncertainty. Thus, a rational account of philosophy will be a “Gettier problem” all in itself. In other words, and in accordance with Adorno’s critique of objectivity, the reductionist methodology of Positivism gives itself the power to be self-justified in its own set of beliefs. However, we can never be certain if such Positivist system of knowledge can ever reach a knowledge corresponding to a reality outside of

⁴² For instance: Imre Lakatos et al. 1978; Paul Feyerabend, 1978; Helen Longino, 1990; Miriam Solomon 2001; Paul Kitcher, 2011

⁴³ Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” (1963)

such system. That is, universalization of a specific epistemology is not possible because context-specific socio-historical forces influence the formation and selection of knowledge. The ability to universalize a proposition, embodied in what is called “scientific consensus”, is the exemplar of objectivity. Also, the supposed distance from the socio-historical gives objectivity its epistemic superiority. Yet, since history unfolds and differently interpreted by various peoples in the world, the universalization of a specific epistemology will benefit some while at the same time hurting others. In essence, universalization can readily be transformed into the curtailing of interpretation, giving voice to some while at the same time silencing others.

This is why science, in its current Positivist form, can never be like art. On the one hand, art is able to incorporate the internal and external, mediating between knowledge and reflection, producing dynamism in every artifact created. On the other hand, objectivity only takes notice of the internal (i.e.: the knowledge aspects) of an object, giving us only a partial understanding of truth. For if we want philosophy to reflect reality (i.e.: philosophy as *describing* the world), and dialectically following, make reality reflect philosophy (i.e.: philosophy as *prescribing* to the world), then philosophy cannot only be about a strict demarcation of quantifiable judgments or categories of an either/or, but rather- and much more productive for my formulation of a socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti- philosophy should be about the constellation-esque, fragmentary, and often uncertain, multiple, and simultaneous narratives comprising the unbound march towards history.

I. Why Does History Matter? Historical-Materialism vs. Dialectical-Materialism

Why does history matter? History matters because there are many histories, and not just a History, indeed, because there are many histories in a single history. That is, there is no single narrative that is capable of giving fidelity to the story of all human beings. An ultimate history is

ultimately impossible. Because there are many histories to be told, it is one's responsibility and obligation to realize that one will always have a partial understanding of any history. The history we chose to tell at any given time, no matter how many primary or secondary sources one begets, will obscure the other narrative in the sedimentation of societies' dust. To be sure, some narrative(s) must be left out in order for others to be successfully (re)told, while yet others become incorporated and appropriated by more dominant and mainstream narratives. The only true history of humankind that is surely warranted thus far is that of a cycle of creating and destroying, accepting and discarding, opening and closing, consumption and (re)production. To be sure- and against historian Leopold von Ranke's belief that the divine would take care of the meaning if he could only take care of the facts.⁴⁴ However, there can be no limit in the exhaustiveness to reach when representing history and its "facts".

In other words, one will never be able to completely separate the object and the subject. Any claims to facts are claims to our own position in time and space. The being of *Dasein* is within our faculty to create as spatio-temporal beings. The production of specific spaces and times is what pivots the being into *Dasein*. Thus, we must be keenly aware that the manner we chose our facts and tell our narratives largely affects the conclusion of any history we try to represent. As an *a priori*, the facts we gather to illuminate our histories are already directing a narrative towards us, and away from us. As individual rational subjects, history mediate through us, but also, history permeates away from us. Thus, it is not in the "good old things" that one will find the best "natural" representative of history, but rather in accordance with Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, history is best represented by the "bad new things".

⁴⁴ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* accessed from <http://www.trfa.org.uk/sixthform/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/HISTORY-What-is-history-E.H-Carr.pdf>.

Following this understanding of history, the (sub)histories of graffiti will follow traces of art, embodied by the historical timeline between art for art's sake and art for life's sake.

However, given the material nature of graffiti, an exploration of a history of art and the city's architecture will enable an analysis of the "auxiliary histories"; such as artifacts, *debitage*⁴⁵, sub-cultural expressions, as well as the socio-political movements that create a society's milieu.

What I am trying to accomplish here is an admixture between history, archeology, anthropology, and political science in the hopes of culminating into a sound philosophical exposition.

Borrowing from historian E. H Carr:

History has been called an enormous jig-saw with lots of missing parts. But the main trouble does not consist in lacunae...Our picture has been preselected and predetermined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving.⁴⁶

Just like this view of history depends on the "conscious or unconscious" imbued interests by a few to preserve certain facts as universal historical memory, the discussion of art for art's sake vs. art for life's sake has extremely similar undertones and ethical consequences. This is made more clear when taking into account the type of canvass that graffiti uses as its medium: architecture and the city.

Without architecture and the city as purveyors for commodity-exchange and corrupt forms of polity arrangements, graffiti reverts back to its innermost fabric as scratches on the wall, that is, as a primal scream for identity and community-building. However, with architecture and the city (and both its historicity) in our ever-expanding horizons as urban beings⁴⁷, graffiti

⁴⁵ Literally, "trash" in French; however, it is a technical term in the field of archeology that denotes the artifacts left over by pre-historic peoples.

⁴⁶ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* Accessed from <http://www.trfa.org.uk/sixthform/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/HISTORY-What-is-history-E.H-Carr.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Having as backdrop the current trend of urban-life over rural-life. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities. See Agyeman (2014).

then becomes an ambiguous and fruitful vehicle for cultural, political, and economic (ex)change. Graffiti then goes from mere scratches on the wall (i.e.: art for art's sake) to a more serious exchange of ideas, *pathos*, identities, and lifestyles (i.e.: art for life's sake). Thus consciously or unconsciously, graffiti creates its own narratives, with its own facts, preserving its own histories for the interest of the primal liberty of all. In other words, even though the city has been traditionally created for the covert oppression and forced integration into a mainstream society (i.e.: the Haussmannization of the city as megalomania and suffocating in nature⁴⁸), therefore exiling every citizen away from their own home and into a specific program (i.e.: paycheck, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.), graffiti uses the very same materials of such oppression and turns them upside-down and inside-out. Graffiti necessitates the city, architecture, and its semiotics in order to reflect the emptiness of our late-capitalist mode of production. Graffiti is transgressive in nature by primarily attacking “the sign systems and values of power institutions”⁴⁹. As post-modernist theorist, Jean Baudrillard, once affirmed that graffiti is an “incision into the flesh of empty signs”⁵⁰. In a fatalistic turn, the use of pre-existing materials of oppression for the purpose of liberation was what spurred Baron von Haussmann to completely re-engineer the Parisian streets of the Second Empire. So in a cycle we call life, specifically with graffiti, we revert back to square one: where ingenuity trumps authority. Graffiti utilizes the system of signs and the system of commodity exchange in order to undermine these very same systems of oppression. To be sure, von Haussmann left a legacy of city planning and empire-building that continues to our very own “post”-colonial, urban epoch. Graffiti completely breaks with this Haussmannization of the city until it becomes economically appropriated as “street art”. However, we are already

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, “Haussmannization, Barricade Fighting” (Convolute E), trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, 129 and 132-133.

⁴⁹ Liz Kinnamon, “London Riots, Living Walls: Questions of Resistance in Late Capitalism” *Rhizomes* 25 (2013), accessed from www.rhizomes.com/issue25/kinnamon/index.html

⁵⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), 82.

getting ahead of ourselves here. We first need to layout the metaphysics behind the aesthetics and history that we are utilizing prior to venturing into a philosophical adventure into the realm of graffiti itself.

Moreover, such philosophical doctrine will be confined to historical codification, if not by accident, then by conscious application (*Darstellung*⁵¹) within the present-time (i.e.: the imbued interest in a narrative). As such, and in either case (whether in *Forschung*⁵² or *Darstellung*), any proposition posited as truth will be contingent upon the historical narrations of that specific given time, contingent upon the person who is responsible for the collecting and representing of such historical data given to a specific audience: the historian. Accordingly, the historical image of any given epoch will always be fragmented, if not always biased. The consequence of this enveloping cacophony of fragmented historical data is the opening of “a world of secret affinities”, where a “primal history” is glimpsed from an attentive acknowledgment of the philosophical immanent critique. This immanent critique ranges from the literary to the politic, to the economic, and the technological phenomena of modern life (i.e.: the admixture between history, archeology, anthropology, and political science in the hopes of culminating into a sound philosophical exposition).

The responsibility of attending to the many histories that our world affords is not an easy task, and is much more dependent upon chance than on a linear and/or logical account of “events” and “objects”. Instead of trying to fix a historical image of the past to illuminate the present, one should strive to maintain the spectral and fleeting nature of the present when investigating the past. Friedrich Nietzsche once noted that the misuse of monumental history is to effect obedience and mediocrity amongst the masses, while promoting certain interests over

51 “Application”

52 “Research”

others⁵³. In other words, instead of creating a *historical image*, one should portray a *dialectical image* of history. The traces and phantasmagoria of the past should not be totalized under the fixed categories of facts, objects, and events, but instead, should be allow to flow in the dynamism between past, present, and future. In fact, in his essay, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense”, Nietzsche describes “truth” as “... a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms; in short, a sum of human relations which have been practically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding”⁵⁴. In other words, truth is never found in fixed categories or by itself, but rather, “truth” is a reflection of certain social arrangements and histories.

Therefore, a responsible glimpse into any historical narrative is not best told by a professional historian or trained-researcher confined to university libraries and citation guides, but by a methodology and spirit of the “refuse” and “detritus” of history. The Benjaminian narrative of the *flâneur*, the collector, the gambler, the prostitute, and/or the ragpicker gives us a much closer approximation to the daily realities of historical subjects rather than the official records of the imperial court or magistrate. Thus, in the following pages, such Benjaminian historical methodology will be utilized for an inquiry into contemporary graffiti artists and their narratives on the wall. These character-types that dwell and flourish on the threshold of the marketplace- both within and without the marketplace- illuminate the rational and the irrational at play. According to Benjamin, this dialectical image of history “...was one way in which the

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* in Friedrich Nietzsche *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, Cambridge UP, 1997, 58-123.

⁵⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. and edited by Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 147.

documentary and the artistic, the sociological and the theological, were to meet head-on”⁵⁵. In the following pages, such Benjaminian historical methodology will be utilized for an inquiry into contemporary graffiti artists and their narratives on our city’s walls. Yet, to maintain brevity and some kind of logical sense, a (very brief) sketch of graffiti’s timeline from antiquity to the modern age will be given as a historical panorama and philosophical starting-point.

II. Etymology and History of “Graffiti”

“Graffiti is words or drawings, scratched or scribbled on a wall. It originates from the Greek term ‘graphein’ (to write), and is the plural of the Italian word ‘graffito’”⁵⁶

“The word graffiti (singular: graffito) comes from the Italian verb graffiare, meaning ‘to scratch’”⁵⁷

Graffiti (*graffito*, singular) is a very unique human phenomenon. It is almost timeless, definitely universal, and omnipresent- from the most remote villages in the world to the densest and most populated cities- graffiti is ever-present. However, what makes this human phenomenon so unique is its power to simultaneously compel and repel the social fabric of our existence. To be sure though, graffiti has always had, as part of its historical essence, the expression of an individual (i.e.: Vikings writing their names along the Crusades or Russian soldiers writing their initials inside the Reichstag after defeating the Nazis). Likewise, however, graffiti has morphed beyond the individual and has evolved into a political aesthetic of collective expression (i.e.: anonymous stencil art depicting certain political ideologies). Graffiti makes its home in the interplay between the individual and the collective, the mundane and the political, the past and the present, the ugly and the beautiful, in short, the representation of the object-

⁵⁵ Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, “Translators’ Foreword”, Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, xii.

⁵⁶ Jesse L. Whitehead, “Graffiti: The Use of the Familiar”, *Art Education* 57, no. 6 (Nov. 2004): 25.

⁵⁷ Vicki Gach, “Graffiti”, *College English* 35, no. 3 (Dec. 1973): 285.

subject split. Graffiti is not limited just to petroglyphs and cave paintings in the ancient world, personal initials on trees as declarations of love, political ideas on a city-wall, aerosol spray can art, or even rude discussions about bodily functions in truck stop restrooms. Graffiti is truly limitless and always evolving. In many instances graffiti is illegal, yet in other instances it is a coveted piece of artwork that could be auctioned at multi-million dollars price tag (no pun intended). In all cases, graffiti is ostensibly without a strict definition. But if we must make an attempt to define graffiti, we have no other option but to resort to the word itself. The word graffiti is taken from a Latin term that means “a scratch on any surface”. If we take this very basic etymological definition as a point of departure, then this will lead us to so-called “rock art”, otherwise known to archeologists as “petroglyphs”.

This type of ancient graffiti can date back 40,000 years ago, but “the bulk of these petroglyphs begin around 27,000 years ago.⁵⁸ Many theories abound as to what exactly the purpose and definition of these glyphs mean. Some archeologists contend that some of the glyphs were used for shamanistic purposes under altered states of consciousness. The shamans would imbibe hallucinogens and the images that the shamans would hallucinate would be represented onto rocks.⁵⁹ According to archeologist, Polly Schaafsma, “petroglyphs are the record of the visionary experience of individual shamans.”⁶⁰ Other archeologists argue that these glyphs serve a more utilitarian purpose. They argue that petroglyphs are essentially for the purpose of making a tribe’s territory known⁶¹ and/or for giving directions to fellow travelers.

⁵⁸ Fiona McDonald, *Graffiti: From the Ancient World to the Present*, (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), 2-3.

⁵⁹ Solveig A. Turpin, “Beneath the Sands of Time” *Archaeology* 47, no. 2 (1994): 53.

⁶⁰ Polly Schaafsma, “Form, Content, and Function: Theory and Method in North American Rock Art Studies” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 8 (1985): 257.

⁶¹ Linea Sundstrom and James D. Keyser, “Tribal Affiliation of Shield Petroglyphs from the Black Hills and Cave Hills” *Plains Anthropologist* 43, no. 165 (August 1998): 234.

Consensus in the archeological field on this issue of the purpose of petroglyphs has yet to be reached.

To take a more local look into the commonalities between petroglyphs and graffiti we will briefly turn to the Three Rivers Petroglyph site in the Southwestern United States. The Three Rivers petroglyph site near Tularosa, New Mexico contains over 21,000 glyphs of birds, humans, animals, fish, insects and plants, as well as numerous geometric and abstract designs. These glyphs at Three Rivers date back to between 900 and 1400 A.D.⁶² This site is an important side-note to mention because it is still an active archeological site under the Bureau of Land Management. Although the glyphs have been well documented, their purpose is far from being conclusive. However, and more interesting, is that very near the glyphs, many ancient pithouses have been recently discovered. The ongoing archeological excavations at this site concerns the discovery of a small village occupied for over a couple of generations. The debitage (i.e.: trash) left behind by our ancestors gives us a big clue of a strong community presence there⁶³. Therefore, the petroglyphs near these pithouses in Three Rivers seem to be much less about directions for the passer-by, but more as mementos about ceremonial rituals performed by the community. Still, the evidence is inconclusive. Ongoing archeological excavations hopefully will shed more light about life with the Jornada Mogollon people. This leads me to the question: are petroglyphs a part of this intrinsic Dionysian human expression of rituals and the esoteric; or, are petroglyphs a more Apollonian preoccupation with order and direction? Again, the exact definition and purpose of petroglyphs is still inconclusive. This is where ancient petroglyphs and modern-day graffiti converge: both do not have a strict definition.

⁶² U.S. Department of the Interior. Bureau of Land Management. "Three Rivers Petroglyph Site", <https://www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/recreation/las_cruces/three_rivers.html>

⁶³ Jack Ross, "Petroglyphs of the Three Rivers Area" *Central States Archaeological Journal* 10, no. 1 (January 1963): 33.

Thus, petroglyphs, by its etymological roots and archeological investigations, can be seen as the origins of graffiti. Indeed, the development of a language has as its visual representation in the development of graffiti- from petroglyphs to the development of hieroglyphics in Egypt up to the Greek and Roman alphabets⁶⁴. The problem is that we automatically think of images about urban-plight and hip-hop beats coming out of the inner-cities when we mention the word graffiti. To be sure, this is graffiti indeed, but graffiti has a much more intimate relationship to the early development of human social life, and the historical development of our contemporary societies that can be traced through these artifacts.

Similarly, Pompeian wall-writings are some of the most famous examples of the use of graffiti during the Roman Empire. One of the most famous examples that demonstrate the use of graffiti for public usage, a form of what we now call “guerrilla advertising”, was the illustration of a phallus to direct customers towards brothels. The main uses for graffiti in Pompeii were for commercial purposes (i.e. advertising goods) and sexual innuendos or respites. As a matter of fact, Pompeii contains more than 11,000 inscriptions on the walls (which is close to the number of residents to have lived there).⁶⁵ In Herculaneum, there are at least 200 (well-documented) cases of graffiti.⁶⁶ Thus, the main debate surrounding the practice of graffiti in ancient times surrounds the moral and ethical issue of graffiti’s acceptance or non-acceptance in a given society at a given time. Another case in point is the Athenian marketplace graffiti in the 2nd century AD. Graffiti found in the Athenian Agora was primarily used for relaying information about vendors and their business (i.e.: commercial interests). Graffiti was also used for magic

⁶⁴ Fiona McDonald, *Graffiti: From the Ancient World to the Present*, 2-3

⁶⁵ Rebecca R. Benefiel, “Dialogues of Ancient Graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii”, *American Journal of Archeology* 114, no. 1 (Jan. 2010): 59.

⁶⁶ The Ancient Graffiti Project. Accessed from <http://agp.wlu.edu/>.

charms (particularly in lovers) and, as one historian calls it, “salacious pornography”.⁶⁷ The ancient writer, Plutarch, once commented about the nature of graffiti, anticipating my formulation of a socially conscious aesthetic theory on graffiti, by stating that, “...however, the energy and ambition of Tiberius were most of all kindled by the people themselves, who posted writings on porticoes, house-walls, and monuments, calling upon him to recover for the poor the public land”⁶⁸. Thus, ancient graffiti is more than just a two-dimensional text waiting to be transcribed for its typology and/or iconography (iconoclasm); but rather, analysis of ancient graffiti should also take into account the fact that these ostensibly two-dimensional texts were motivated and inscribed by three-dimensional beings living in a three-dimensional social milieu. For archeologists, ancient graffiti allows for a deeper glimpse into the quotidian ruminations of cultural life in ancient times.

By 6th century AD, the beginnings of the fall of the Roman Empire, “topoi inscriptions” were made in same Athenian Agora. This marketplace was later abandoned and converted into a Christian temple. Considering that our current jurisprudence is structured and influenced directly from the Republican form of government utilized by the Roman Empire, it is no surprise that legal and social attitudes towards graffiti on public spaces, then and now, are strikingly similar:

The deliberate act of carving on an architectural block must have been considered vandalism, particularly in a location that would be extremely visible to the public, such as a market where hundreds of people would pass through each day. If graffiti carving were tolerated, there would have been many more instances of deliberate engravings. The paucity of graffiti within the Roman Market indicates that defacing public structures must have been therefore taboo, an attitude not dissimilar to that of modern society.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Michael Hoff, “Inscribed Graffiti in the Roman Market in Athens”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 155 (2006): 181. See also, Peter Kruschwitz, “Attitudes Towards Wall Inscriptions in the Roman Empire”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 174 (2010): 218.

⁶⁸ Plutarch, “The Life of Tiberius Gracchus”, *The Parallel Lives*, 8:7. Accessed from http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Tiberius_Gracchus*.html

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 182.

However, the definitions of public and private spaces (even if codified in legal statutes) are still a contested spatial context. Private property (the singular) has completely different dimensions than public spaces (the collective). Or as we shall see with Jurgen Habermas, the concept of social space has gone through some radical transformations throughout history.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, during the 800-900s AD, specifically during the Carolingian Renaissance, graffiti was a widely accepted form of writing; it was not yet the modern category of crime or vandalism that we know of today:

Early modern English contains no term to denote graffiti writing—a fact suggesting not so much that the vice was unknown, but that the activity was not distinguished from other writing practices, and not yet considered a vice. Like pornography, with which it often shares a site, graffiti in its modern sense is an effect of categorization. In its political dimension it appears against the grid of what we understand to be the difference between public and private, professional and amateur, authorized and unauthorized.⁷⁰

This change in the acceptance of graffiti as a popular form of expression can be seen as a manifestation of the transformations of the Roman Empire’s despotic social milieu, especially during its downfall, into a more tolerant social milieu under the Carolingians.

This brief historical outline of graffiti demonstrates not only that the phenomenon of graffiti has been around for ages, but also that this phenomenon is constantly changing in its form and content. Again alluding to the fact that graffiti art cannot be totalized into a static category. Graffiti has always been an intricate part of civilization and city-life.

III. The Image and the Esoteric

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the essence of myth is identical to that of modern Enlightenment: “But the myths which fell victim to the Enlightenment were themselves its

⁷⁰ Juliet Fleming, “Wounded Walls: Graffiti, Grammatology, and the Age of Shakespeare”, *Criticism* 39, no. 1 (1997): 2.

products...Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins- but therefore also to narrate, record, explain".⁷¹ Rationality dismisses the esoteric and cryptic qualities of our original impetus to knowledge, our Dionysian impetus towards knowledge, which is represented via the historicity of myths, magic, and rituals. Rationality thereby suffocates and renders such primitive impetus into reductionist attitudes that function to exacerbate modern philosophy's self-destruction. The ritual-images of the shaman were utilized to know the unknowable, to reach the *nouemon* via the phenomenon. Such praxis has been totally cast out of modern philosophy as mere superstition. But in fact, it is such praxis not necessarily shamanistic, but definitely representative, rather than a purely reductionist logic that needs to be re-incorporated into philosophy if such mode of inquiry, namely, philosophy itself, is to go beyond instrumentalization and self-debasement. Taking heed from Benjamin's conception of the philosophy of history, and as a first premise that Adorno also accepts is that: "Philosophical doctrine is based on historical codification".⁷² This is the historical-materialist dimension of critical theory, namely that the material of the world gives us access to the history of the world. Thus, philosophy is not all about the nude acquisition of knowledge and/or the gathering of facts, but it is all about the image and representation of truths as a locus of history. That is, as representations that absorbs the uncertainty of history rather than dismiss it. In other words, it is about allowing the cryptic and the esoteric to take their primary role once more as human-made and pragmatic venues for the acquisition of knowledge as praxis. Similar to the Heideggerian "handiwork" that mediates and illuminates the relation between the *Da-sain*, the work of art, and otherness- the mimetic character of representing truth within its historical context also illuminates the necessity of both, otherness and nothing.

⁷¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 5.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 27.

A representative image of truth is not the same as an objective account of truth. A representation of truth allows for multiple avenues to open; narratives and sub-narratives to interject, meet, fuse, but hardly pass another unnoticed. Similarly, a genuine ethical relation does not allow for the dismissal and/or instrumentalization of the other. In other words, the important issue here is not about the *what* (the nominal, categorical, and immediate), but more about the *how* (pragmatic, immersed, and mediated) aspects of knowledge, truth, and reality. Not about *what* kinds of avenues are *created*, but rather about *how* these avenues are *related* to their creation and future projections in an ever-changing setting we call our life-world. These interrelations need to be sufficiently malleable and openly exchanged by all. Also, these interrelations need to be open to revision rather than totalized and infallible in order for knowledge and truth to maintain a social conscious.

Therefore, philosophy should never be doctrinaire, but instead, should maintain its critical form and distance as an open-treatise between differing subjects. Even though such treatise still maintains vestiges of a didactic function, however it instead takes increased effect by losing any rigid conclusiveness of instruction and finality. A treatise is open to negotiation; its codification is malleable to the ebb and flow of history. On the other hand, the codification of a doctrine is not malleable to historical changes, instead it is codified as a categorical truth. Both a treaty and a doctrine share the elements of the written word and the representation of an ideology via the interaction of the written word with its audience. Both, writing and representation is a tool for any philosophical adventure, so when does it become doctrinaire or a treaty? Is a treatise really any different from a doctrine? Again, a doctrine is a sealed deal and is infallible to revision; in other words, it is self-contained. On the other hand, a treatise is akin to a spoken agreement that is still open to negotiation and being breached comes natural as the conversation

continues. Moreover, a doctrine has the implications of a teleological end goal, whereas the treatise has no definite end in sight. In an over-simplistic analogy: a doctrine is to a university lecture, as a treatise is to a university seminar. In the former there is no room for exploration, where in the latter, independent exploration is necessary for it to be a fruitful endeavor.

This open-endedness of a treatise, and the allegorical representation of philosophy as a treatise rather than a doctrine, points towards the preliminary recognition- first given to us by the primitive-impetus-to-knowledge⁷³ of “the uncircumscribable essentiality of truth”.⁷⁴ This recognition of the infinitude and boundlessness of truth by early mystical humans has been completely eradicated from modern Positivist-rationalist thinking; supposedly, the esoteric is something that the rational modern human should not handle. If the esoteric and mystical are so mundane and lowly, underserving of or below Enlightenment thinking, then why should we not attempt to grasp (*Begriff*) it as well? It should be a piece of cake for such rational human to accomplish such feat! But it is evident that this has not been the case thus far.

The traditional *Subak* irrigation system in Bali is a perfect example of how allowing for the shamanistic praxis to co-exist with Western technology can greatly benefit the local community. The *Subak* system is a cooperative water management tradition that dates back to the 9th century. Cooperation is based upon deities and temples, embodied as efficient water management strategies. The *Subak* system is an example of how non-Western traditions can actually be quite “scientific” and “efficient” in the Western sense of those words. The *Subak* system is a perfect mediator between the “shamanistic” and “scientific” praxis. According to UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre:

⁷³ That is, the mystical, magical, intuitive and purely contemplative side of human history.

⁷⁴ Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 28.

The *Subak* reflects the philosophical concept of *Tri Hita Karana*, which brings together the realms of the spirit, the human world, and nature. This philosophy was born of the cultural exchange between Bali and India over the past 2,000 years and has shaped the landscape of Bali. The *Subak* system of democratic and egalitarian farming practices has enabled the Balinese to become the most prolific rice growers in the archipelago despite the challenge of supporting a dense population... Water temple rituals promote a harmonious relationship between people and their environment through the active engagement of people with ritual concepts that emphasise dependence on the life-sustaining forces of the natural world.⁷⁵

In fact, prior to being recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, the *Subak* system was in danger of being destroyed by Western powers' insistence on Western methods of irrigation and canals. It was until 2005, when the community of Balinese farmers urged the United Nations to finally respect their traditions and cultural landscape. This allowed for the local community to revive their rice terraces destroyed by Western practices of ignoring traditional "superstitions".

But before going any further, a distinction between *episteme* and *techne* must be made, as it has been made since the beginning of Western thought.⁷⁶ That is, the *exercise* of philosophy must always undermine its *anticipation*; or at the very least, the exercise and anticipation of thought must always co-exist. This "groundlessness" of Western thought, or this erroneous emphasis on the anticipation rather than the exercise of philosophy was no mere accident. According to Jules Simon's interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy of the work of art, this loss of "the Greek ground-experience of the being of beings in the sense of presence" was due to "...the translation of these words from Greek to Latin that resulted in a different kind of thinking that initiated the groundlessness of Western thinking".⁷⁷ In more Benjaminian terms, and for the purposes of my own formulation of a socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti, philosophy

⁷⁵ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Cultural Landscape of Bali Province: the Subak System as a Manifestation of the Tri Hita Karana Philosophy", accessed from <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1194>>, accessed on March 22, 2017.

⁷⁶ Hence the allusion to such ancient Greek terms.

⁷⁷ Jules Simon, *Art and Responsibility*, 191.

must then be immersed with(in) the world, and not be abstracted from the world. This immersion is made feasible by giving sensitive attention to the characteristic rules or laws that govern a certain epoch.⁷⁸

By being sensitive to the historical-material structures, which contours the available venues for our projection of possibilities, philosophy will then be better poised to tackle issues of social injustice and oppression. The mediation between the *episteme* and the *techne* is the material stuff that culminates into the inevitable march of time as unbound history. This mediation is constantly dynamic. An attempt to allow the external and internal to instantiate themselves must be genuinely made by philosophy to divorce itself from the rational and objective impetus towards self-destruction. Thus, philosophy should strive to imitate art in its complex relation to the whole; imitate how art plays between the internal and the external; the role of the mediation between *episteme* and *techne*. In Benjaminian terms, mimesis and a representative mode of comprehension, and not a “rational” conclusiveness, should be philosophy’s last word.

Hence, in order for philosophy to maintain its revelatory *and* epistemological power, it must primarily take account of the “here and now”; it must maintain the “aura”. A cheesy analogy would do some cheesy justice: truth is akin to an art mosaic⁷⁹, which at first glance seems fragmentary and nonsensical, but at a fundamental level *represents* an intelligible narrative as a whole. Thus the exercise of the mosaic meets us half-way into truth; in the realm of art, the mosaic has a rendezvous point of communicability between the *creation* of the artist and the *perceived* representation by the audience. A genuine ethical relation is not far from this

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ A mosaic, given its fragmentary constitution, is still open to interpretation; liking it to a treatise; whereas, a doctrine (which curiously has no mimetic counterpart as the mosaic) is not open to interpretation...

Benjaminian structure of knowledge as an esoteric mosaic, since interpretations can go beyond the intent of the artist and/or the audience. The interpretation of artworks is an open endeavor.

IV. The Image and the Quote

What is the essence of a communicative ethics if not the power of dialogue, monologue, or multi-logue, or even the transcendence of the “fourth wall”⁸⁰? Nonetheless, at the foundation of this rhetoric is the (quasi)plagiarizing *quote*. The quote opens multiple avenues for differences in intentions; differences in otherness; differences in perspectives; differences in our own difference. In short, quotations are essential representations; they act as dialectical images themselves. The quote inserts another’s voice and perspective into our own narrative. They can allow us to experience another’s joy, pain, determination, humor, and/or position. A quote interrupts our own narrative, and immerses us into another. The quote allows our mode of contemplation to take a break and arrive at a better view of its horizons of possibilities. Benjamin insists that: “This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation”.⁸¹ This is because any kind of representation presents us with a break, a distance, and a digression from the norm—a critical distance from the object— a distance necessary for any object’s redemption.

This digression from the norm is best captured in the function of the “quote”⁸² embedded within any given narrative. The quote arms us (both the reader and the writer) with a clear and image-like representation of the distinct and the disparate. A quote posits an interruption, and distances myself from the mainstream narrative only to get me even closer to the subjective

⁸⁰ Here I am thinking about Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theater”.

⁸¹ Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 28.

⁸² This break/distance/digression is best captured by the image of a punctuation mark; namely, the “bunny ears”. Quotations mark a distance from the narrative into the character themselves.

expressions of a particular being, or a Da-sein. The quote has a trace that is not spun from abstraction, but has a trace of the “here and now”; it is historical in nature. Thus, quotations, just like primary sources in modern historiography, enable access to the immediacy of the “here and now”, and to the aura of such historical events⁸³. Quotations allow us to grasp the *immediacy* of propositional truths and ground them in the here and now of history.

For in a Benjaminian conception of knowledge, any truth-content can only be derived from the complete immersion within the crude and raw details we ostensibly call reality. The epistemological gap between the particular and the whole- the distinct and the disparate- can be filled with sensitivity to such crude and raw details of our varied histories and our shared future. The distinct and the disparate represent themselves as fragments of thoughts-as subjective particularities- and their indirectness is an important element for the representative mode of contemplation. The concept of the “quote” is able to capture both these aspects of contemplation a la Benjamin.⁸⁴ the fragments of thoughts and the indirectness and breaking-away of such underlying idea.

The nature of prose, which includes the quote as part of its repertoire, embodies this mode of contemplation as well. The main thrust here is that the structured relationship of prose-to-quote necessitates that the writer continuously pause and reflect before and after each sentence (even before and after each word) making the writer critically aware of where she has been and where she is going. Dialectically, the reader’s response to quotes and prose follows this structure of pause and reflection. The greater the shock of the object (i.e.: the quote or prose), the more detached the reflection must be, and the more it is the case that horizons and possibilities expand. Thus, contemplation becomes much more robust than a strict didactic projection of identificatory

⁸³ ...still need to unpack this Benjaminian concept of authenticity/art a lot more!

⁸⁴ That is, “the contemplative mode of representation’, Benjamin, *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 29.

classifications and abstracted propositions. Instead, with this mode of contemplation, by allowing the fragmentary, the disparate, and the indirect to take important roles in cognition, a brilliance and a radiance of knowledge is created around any underlying idea, which would otherwise go unnoticed if directly and objectively confronted. In other words, a Benjaminian mode of contemplation seeks to represent ideas as they are, and not understand ideas as instrumentalizing apparatuses strictly for the ego's self-preservation.

V. The Quote and Graffiti

In the realm of socio-historical narratives, graffiti acts just like the concept of the quote outlined above. Just like a quote in a piece of prose, graffiti becomes a digression from the norm that opens up alternative horizons of possibilities. It allows for the distinct and disparate to meet; where the different is placed alongside sameness. Graffiti interrupts the dominating narrative in order to allow different voices to be heard as they are. The quote and graffiti intensely demands the reader and viewer its focus, forces the reader and viewer to zoom into the particular (albeit for a brief moment), disposing any presupposition of a whole. This shedding of presupposing the whole prevents us from falsely starting any line of investigation in “a self-absorbed fantasizing”⁸⁵ of a pre-established harmonious system; namely, the fantasy of Enlightenment and Positivist thinking. This is what Adorno and Horkheimer label as “instrumental” or “identificatory” thinking. However, examining Benjamin's penultimate line in his “Epistemo-Critical Prologue”, which is the introduction to his *Origins of German Tragic Drama* and very well qualified to be the prologue not just of this great piece of work, but also of his entire mode of thought, he states that:

⁸⁵ Ibid, 53.

Only by approaching the subject from some distance and, initially, foregoing any view of the whole, can the mind be led, through a more or less ascetic apprenticeship, to the position of strength from which it is possible to take in the whole panorama and yet remain in control of oneself.⁸⁶

To be sure, presupposing or fantasizing about a whole from the outset will never lead to the representation of truth. Knowledge gives us coherence, and truth gives us essence, but the representation of both is an ever-fleeting and non-totalizing sedimentation of historical processes. This is where the robustness of the “contemplative mode of representation” is apparent; it does not sacrifice coherence or essence, but attempts to acknowledge both in their own right as dynamic historical forces. Representation accepts, instead of *understanding*, the organic dialectic and living dynamism between coherence, essence, and truth. But what is “truth” in this case?

VI. Aesthetics and Theory of Truth

To be sure, the concept of truth has eluded philosophers ever since humans began to self-reflect on their actions. The traditional Western view of truth- although always fleeting the philosopher’s grasp- has been conceptualized as something we can have secure possession of. Theories of truth, such as coherence or correspondence theories of truth, follow the *telos* of transparency and hierarchy inherent in instrumental thinking. That is, truth is to be grasped in an abstract manner, characterized as a fixed logical end-point. For Adorno and Benjamin however, truth is to be understood- if at all- as aporetic and context-dependent. Both Adorno and Benjamin agree that the concept of “truth” must be a complex theory of truth “in which apophantic,

⁸⁶ Ibid, 56. It is worthy to note that Benjamin *Habilitation* was denied due to his opposing views with his director. This dispute between Benjamin and his mentor is important because it highlights the division between Benjamin’s critical position and modern Western philosophy’s preoccupation with Truth.

endeetic, and moral-practical⁸⁷ moments would form, not a hierarchy, but a constellation”⁸⁸. This constellation of truth continuously runs away from us as history unfolds. Truth, in this formulation as a constellation, is based not upon a differentiation of separate truths, but more on acknowledging the conditional entanglement of historical sedimentations within our present. That is, truth as constellation refers to the potential of our historical experience to mediate between object and subject. This is truth as “truth-potential”, and not as a totalized “truth”: truth at the dialectic between mimetic impulse and rationality.

This mimetic impulse is the expressive comportment of subjective creativity. The dimension of rationality is the domination of technique and form- the artistic production that necessarily succumbs to the domination of nature. Again, this is what Adorno called art’s “double-bind”; namely, is art truly autotelic (*l’art pour l’art*)? Or does it have a specific purpose other-than-itself (art for life’s sake)? The praxis of graffiti is able to capture, although loosely yet very dynamically, this “double-bind” of art. Graffiti is a unique artistic production and expression that does not easily fall into either the category of *l’art pour l’art* or art for life’s sake. Graffiti artists do not expect to get paid for their works out in the streets; in fact, they expect to get harassed by police and property owners alike. The act of graffiti writing is an act of sacrifice; thus in this sense, it does fall under the rubric of *l’art pour l’art*. Graffiti stands on its own and gives itself a life of its own, the anonymity of the graffiti artist allows for this subjective independence of the artwork itself. Graffiti maintains this independent existence until it is buffed by anti-graffiti programs, or by the property owners themselves. Nonetheless, the graffiti being buffed by authorities forces such authorities into an ethical relation of inter-subjectivity.

⁸⁷ Apophantic truths refer to assertions and propositions; this is the traditional notion of truth under Western epistemology. Endeetic truths refer to authenticity. Whereas, moral-practical truths refers to pragmatics.

⁸⁸ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, 114.

Of course the piece of graffiti is easily dominated until another (or the same) graffiti artist returns to the same spot and paints the wall again. In this process of “paint-and-buff”, as I will call it, the piece of graffiti has as its “cognitive content” the “truth-potential” for a critique of our quotidian urban life under high capitalism. Graffiti is meant to break through capitalist ideologies of private property and public property, uncovering the illusion of this private/public split as truly nonexistent. For instance, tagging on a public property (i.e.: a park, mailbox, street sign, etc.) carries a heavier fine than tagging on private property. So, is public property then really public if it is a felony to tag on “public property”, but only a second-degree misdemeanor for tagging a private property? At this crucial event of critique and uncovering the truth- the break in our life-world just as in the break in a “quote” in prose- within our urban life does graffiti then become art for life’s sake. Graffiti is always in a constant state of becoming, always mediating between the autotelic and the teleological.

In a world where property relations directly pre-determine an identity, graffiti helps reclaim an autonomous identity projected upon the subject. It is not only an individual experience of evading law enforcement but it also entails a collective experience of identification-building with the random passer-by: a synthesis of *memoire volontaire* and *memoire involuntaire*. Graffiti anthropologists, Ernest Abel and Barbara Buckley state that “The everyday thoughts of the people...are the domain of the graffiti writer”.⁸⁹ The graffiti artists as the *flâneur*: the objective “man of the crowd” is wholly enmeshed in the social but who is also “not to be subjected to the modern forces of commodification.”⁹⁰ This threshold point of graffiti, between *memoire volontaire* and *memoire involuntaire*-subjective expression and commodity

⁸⁹ Abel, Ernest L. and Buckley, Barbara E. *The Handwriting on the Wall: Toward a Sociology and Psychology of Graffiti*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 14.

⁹⁰ Jules Simon. “Benjamin in Paris: Weak Messianism and Memories of the Oppressed” *Topographies du Souvenir “Le Livre des passages” de Walter Benjamin*. Ed. Bernd White (Paris: Sorbonne, 2007), 83.

exchange- can open up the possibilities for the reclaiming of one's own content and identity; the "weak messianism", which according to Benjamin, is necessary for class-consciousness. Additionally, those who produce graffiti-the graffiti artists and collectives- take on the role of the *flâneur* as described by Benjamin in his *Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project)*.

CHAPTER 3: GRAFFI' AND THE CITY AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

I. The *Flâneur*; or the Graffiti Artist

The artist, in the sense of being the “elementary form” of the individual commodity⁹¹ for the bourgeoisie, becomes the *flâneur* type, the purveyor of novelty in the dominant culture. According to Benjamin, “The *flâneur* is the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. *He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers* (emphasis added).”⁹² The strict classification of the experience of art mollifies the manipulation of such experience to serve capitalist needs. All the while, the artist, the creative engine of the power of aesthetics, is at a parallax threshold between *l’art pour l’art* and art for social consumption (art for life’s sake). The graffiti artist is in a unique position to delve into “the crowd”, but still retain an autonomous self-awareness-class consciousness: this is the role of the *flâneur*. This self-awareness, by being painted onto a wall via graffiti, can transcend into the psyche of the crowd, invoking and inspiring a means for their own autonomous self-consciousness. As Jules Simon states: “His (Benjamin’s) belief in the possibility of the individual member of the proletariat to become conscious of exploitation was essential for how Benjamin proposed to counter what Baudelaire claimed was the dominating sign of modernity: suicide.”⁹³ The graffiti artist, with their dialectical role as both part of the crowd and distanced from the crowd, their simultaneous objective and subjective existence on the walls of buildings, is in the pivotal position for the immanence of class-consciousness as praxis. The act of graffiti is not just a performance of resistance, but it also embodies and

⁹¹ Marx, Karl. *Capital Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. trans. by Ben Fowkes. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 125.

⁹² Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. “Convolute M: The Flaneur” trans. by Howard Eiland and Micheal W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 427.

⁹³ Jules Simon. “Benjamin in Paris: Weak Messianism and Memories of the Oppressed”, 78.

communicates a shift in perspective away from our current socio-political existence and into alternative socio-political arrangements.

II. Haussmannization and Barricade Fighting = Anti-graffiti Programs and Non-Commissioned Graffiti

To immerse ourselves in the realm of graffiti, we must first acknowledge the spatial-temporal context where graffiti takes place. The landscape of the city as the canvas for graffiti has in itself important ethical implications for city-life, culture, and property relations. Graffiti cuts across multiple dimensions within our epoch of late capitalism. Thus graffiti is perfectly posited within and without the flow of commodities, private property, and capital. It necessitates the city and capital while at the same time it resists them. Moreover, graffiti mediates, or functions as an “in between”, given the division of the base from the superstructure. That is, graffiti is both: pure form- the accumulation and manipulation of base materials- and also, pure content, a propagation of subjective and ideological attitudes. Graffiti occupies, as ideological performance and material substance, both *Inhalt* and *Gehalt*.

That is, graffiti, just like any other work of art, necessitates the domination of materials and technique; this is no other than saying that in order for graffiti to exist, its content must be derived from material forms- stemming from the over-powering of nature as “resources”. At this point, any human creation becomes destruction of nature. This is what I call the base (...more like debase). Unfortunately, this negative act is an integral part of our modern human condition for progress. The content of graffiti, on the other hand, ranges in many styles and has a deeper after-effect in the embodiment of ideology. The content of graffiti, although always fleeting, cuts across the ideology of private property and of capitalism in order to *deterritorializ* and *reterritorialize* (physically and ideologically) our life-world in an urban setting. Following

cultural and border theorist, Manuel M. Martin-Rodriguez, using the words of Deleuze and Guattari, graffiti can then be conceptualized as a “minor language” that erodes a “major language from within”⁹⁴. More specifically, Martin-Rodriguez states that, “minor languages erode a major language from within, deterritorializing it, breaking up its system’s supposed homogeneity without uncritically *reterritorializing* it”⁹⁵. Returning to Deleuze and Guattari, graffiti, as praxis of resistance to capitalism- however, still necessarily operating in such system- can also be conceptualized as the schizoanalysis process of “desiring-production”⁹⁶, of a body that continuously breaks itself down in order to survive. This is the self-sacrifice of the graffiti artist as they risk their liberty and life in order to get their name up. Both the form and the content of graffiti, critically, codifies and decodes-*deterritorializes* and *reterritorializes*- the axiomatics (i.e. laws/rules) governing our contemporary ideas of capitalism and private property. As Deleuze and Guattari argue:

...Capitalism indeed has as its limit the decoded flows of desiring-production, but never stops repelling them by binding them in an axiomatic that takes the place of the codes. Capitalism is inseparable from the movement of deterritorialization, but this movement is exorcised through factitious and artificial reterritorializations. Capitalism is constructed on the ruins of the territorial and the despotic, the mythic and the tragic representations, but re-establishes them in its own service and in another form, as images of capital...the subjective abstract essence is discovered by capitalism only to be put in chains all over again, to be subjugated and alienated- no longer, it is true, in an exterior and independent element as objectivity, but in the element, itself subjective, of private property.⁹⁷

The double-bind of graffiti- or art in general as we have seen- mediating between *l’art pour l’art* and art for life’s sake attests to the problem outlined above by Deleuze and Guattari- of art being

⁹⁴ Quoted in Manuel M. Martin-Rodriguez, “The Global Border: Transnationalism and Cultural Hybridism in Alejandro Morales’s ‘The Rag Doll Plagues’”, 86.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 5-8.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 303.

reterritorializing and usurped by capitalism once again. This is the exact moment when graffiti becomes “street” art, and thus acquires a price and exchange-value. In other words, graffiti’s *content* is reterritorialized and recoded into a *form* of capital-exchange and accumulation. Art’s unique subjectivity is killed in such a closed system; it is a totality. Under this totalitarian framework, graffiti’s content- its message for autonomy, creativity, emancipation, in short, what Benjamin would call its “aura”- is frozen into a form of either expensive avant-garde art or mere vandalism.

In our contemporary existential conditions as urban dwellers, graffiti is the dialectical image for emancipation from our homogeneous lives. Graffiti is situated at both the object- and subject-position. It mediates between the artistic production of graffiti and the audience, but it also reflects a specific historical epoch. Depending on the individual subject’s perspective, graffiti can either be gratifying or repulsive. Objectively, the “non-salaried, but impassioned work” is how Charles Fourier describes the building of barricades before the French Revolution, during the Blanquists insurrections leading up to the Revolution of 1789, where the tactics of barricade fighting were perfected. Resistance to the *Ancien Regime* was embodied in the form *and* content of barricade fighting. Similarly, graffiti, as “non-salaried, but impassioned work”, functions like the revolutionary Parisian barricades; it shocks and shatters the status quo. Both graffiti and barricades utilize basic materials available around them to create their revolutionary acts. In the case of the barricades, planks from the wooden streets were used to erect the barricades. In the case of graffiti, the city and its architecture serve as the canvas. Both are *ad-hoc* and grassroots endeavors, more importantly, both utilize the city’s streets as their site of contestation.

The city of Paris, after the quelling of the revolution and its re-designing of its urbanicity under Baron von Haussmann is the blueprint and forbearer of our contemporary urban planning and cityscapes. The blueprint that Haussmann laid down was one of making civil unrest impossible by manipulating the width, direction, and functions of city streets. To return to Fourier, the very same description of “non-salaried, but impassioned work” can be readily applied to graffiti in our contemporary, Bourgeoisie city-life. Graffiti, just like the barricades, acts as a sort of disruption and interruption of the flow of capital, military technology, and social control. Graffiti is an embodiment of resistance within the Bourgeoisie way of city life. This way of city life is still being forcefully implemented today, however, scholars and social activists alike call this (post)modern phenomena of Haussmanization, “gentrification”. Specifically, the city is an increasingly homogenizing site for the purposes of conformism and appeasement into capitalist modes of (re)production. Again, the very same structures that graffiti tries to undermine are quintessential for graffiti to exist. In order for graffiti to exist, infrastructure and capital is necessary, components for an ideology of private property.

Now, the phenomenon we call the city- as the canvas for graffiti for socio-political critique and praxis- has been built in corrupt architectural forms since at least Haussmann’s efforts; namely, equating infrastructure to a function for a political agenda. The *Hausmanization* of the city, via shopping centers (then known as “arcades”) as the kingpin of city-life, has prioritized the commodification of experience as the main instrument for social identification and control. Infrastructure is not exclusively built for social transit, but instead serves as a hidden backbone for socio-political homogenization. In Benjaminian terms, the layouts of city streets and its architecture “...were not based on strict deductions of the science of town planning. The measures he (Baron Van Haussmann) took were of a financial and military

character.”⁹⁸ Just as Parisian boulevards connected the “government with the barracks” and the “barracks with the suburbs” for purposes of social control, contemporary existential conditions of consumerism and resistance are manipulated upon each other for the same process of social control. Public spaces are determined by commercial potential. The ordering of city streets to be aligned with shopping centers and military barracks reflects the historical embodiment of social control during Haussmann’s period. This ordering of the city is still being implemented in our contemporary age. The case of El Paso

The city is molded for purposes of purchasing commodities as a means of an identity, as a pseudo-escape from the homogenization of the life-work roundabout of urban life. The purchases commodities create an objective and subjective reaction of gratification, identity, and existence. But this existence goes only as far as its producer is willing to sell to you. With Parisian arcades in the 1820s, artificial building materials appear: iron and glass.⁹⁹ The architecture of the city begins to cater to the needs of commerce; traffic is redirected from the center of the city to multiple locations where commodities are purchased. The streets cede their function as the location of community-building, and thus must link neighborhoods with a specific commercial site. An individual is attracted to these commercial sites (i.e.: arcades, department stores, shopping malls- all are part of the Haussmanization of the city) in order to purchase a mass-produced object that will somehow authenticate their individual identity in the face of the other- who is also caught up in the identificatory dialectical scheme of commodification and capitalist expansion.

⁹⁸ Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. “Convolute E: Hausmannization, Barricade Fighting”. trans. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 125.

⁹⁹ Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century <Expose of 1935>” trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

Without the objectification of the individual via material objects, the individual is exiled to non-existence in a realm where experience and identity is gauged through ever-new commodities. As Benjamin notes: “The commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension.”¹⁰⁰ By objectifying experience, via fashion, photography and souvenirs an individual can make a claim on their self-identity that another person will be readily able to comprehend, and thus a dialogue can commence. This necessity for commodities as sources of human identification and inter-communication enables a shift in the way a city is experienced, and conversely, the way a city is built. A building never stands on its own. It is a complex relationship between what ancient architect, Vitruvius, categorized as *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas* (firmness, function, and beauty). But architecture is much more than just these three elements combined; architecture also deals with patron/client relationships, resource management, socio-economic status, power dynamic, history, and geography. In the United States, as in many other Western countries, architecture and city-planning closely reflects real-life socio-political conditions. This is why there is a need for a historical materialist approach towards a socially conscious theory of graffiti.

III. The City and a Revolutionary Critique of Modern Urbanism

The public sphere, especially after the Industrial Revolution, has been characterized around the concepts of the social, the economic, and the political. The merging and diverging between these different categories illuminates how humans interact individually and collectively; this is what makes up our cultural history. Viewing the public sphere, as a dynamic interaction between social, economic, and political forces has been more so the case as flight from rural

¹⁰⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. “Central Park” (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 188.

areas to urban centers has become the norm in our contemporary age. In the city, those who were once private individuals tending only to the lord of the manor now had the opportunity to meet publicly with other private individuals, creating a new socio-political narrative embodied in public houses and coffeehouses. The public use of reason for purposes of debating the affairs of their own polity and state was unprecedented prior to the Industrial Revolution. This is what differentiates a feudal state from a democratic republic.

According to Jürgen Habermas, the transformations from a manorial system to a more democratic system was ushered in by the advancements of long-distance traffic in commodities as well as the long-distance traffic in news¹⁰¹. However, this “democracy” was based upon an individual’s private economic holdings, such as private property and mercantile investments¹⁰². Thus, even as the democratization of cities transformed the public sphere from a feudal-system to a politically democratic system, not everyone living in cities participated in such a democracy. This limited democracy is technically what we are still living under in our contemporary age. In any case, Jürgen Habermas claims that not only do we live in a limited democracy but also more insidious than this is that such democracy is actually retrograding into a feudal system of representation of power and domination. The “refeudalization” of the public sphere can be seen in the role that elected politicians and advertising and marketing campaigns have in the high capitalist epoch. The public use of reason for critical-debate has reverted back to a kind of perverse popularity contest, where the public is persuaded by either politicians or the mass media to accept what is fed to us as the most beneficial for the public itself. Policies and elections, to name a few examples, are executed without the open and critical debate constitutive of a democracy. That is, instead of the public sphere debating with the political sphere and reaching

¹⁰¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 16.

¹⁰² Ibid

some compromise or consensus on what is beneficial for the polity as a whole, both of these spheres have now collapsed into themselves and have become one monolithic entity. What we have now, according to Habermas, is the illusion of a public sphere that is manipulated via mass media and political theaters. Advancements in technology enabled the masses to be politically active, yet at the same time suppressing them with labor. The public sphere is essentially under the auspices of the mass media and corrupt politicians.

As the shift from rural living to urban life increases, the city's streets become one of the most basic elements of modern civil society. The streets are spaces where the public and the marketplace converged. However, soon after the mass reproduction of the automobile, the streets began to lose their public character and became just another tool for the ordering the public to follow the whims of the marketplace.

Given the (brief) Habermasian analysis of the structural transformations of the public sphere outlined above, we can now see how the city is in the perfect position to be the future site for a revolution of the public sphere as autonomous and critical once again. At the very least, cities can create alternative possibilities outside the hegemonic status quo. Yet, this revolution cannot revert back to the literary-public sphere or the political-public sphere described by Habermas's archeology of the public sphere. That is, we cannot try to revert back in time where coffeehouses were the impetus for critical-debate, since coffeehouses now serve as an extension of the marketing consortium of high capitalist economies. Yet, the main center for the exercise of the public sphere has always been the city and its streets. Moreover, without any site for such critical-debate to take place, as cities are becoming increasingly corporatized and gentrified, the political-public sphere will then become obsolete. Herein comes graffiti: graffiti as the last bastion of critical-debate amidst the politically and social monotonous character (or neo-feudal

character) of the public sphere. The banalization of the public sphere via refeudalization can be combated with the unique expressive and communicative power of graffiti. Due to its transgressive nature, graffiti opens up new venues for communication in such a closed-narrative we call our modern urban life.

Apart from armed revolution and barricade fighting, graffiti places resistance in the physical realm, in the quotidian life, but does not expect the masses to forcibly submit to its message; it is an act of sacrifice. Graffiti artists do not get paid for their tags, bombs, or pieces. Graffiti artists need to get their own supplies, whether store-bought or stolen. The graffiti artists are always risking their own liberty and life. Given the sacrificial character of the graffiti artist, graffiti keeps intact the weak messianism Benjamin argues is necessary for a self-consciousness leading to the eventual liberation from current capitalist mode of production. A weak messianic power, according to Benjamin, is the spirit necessary for the rupture of the present homogeneous empty time. Weak messianic power enables revolutions and social struggles to redeem the past, to establish fragmented continuities with other subterranean histories of class struggle and revolution. With weak messianism, past struggles are always alive within present struggles. As Benjamin reaffirms: “Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones? ... There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one... nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history”¹⁰³.

Similarly, graffiti might “reveal more of the truth than all the bombastic historians who will so soon be clothing our grotesque society with dignified phrases and political stercorations representing its present antics as studied movement to be explained in terms of high principles

¹⁰³ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 390.

and rational conduct”¹⁰⁴. Just as graffiti can work as a Benjaminian weak-messianic synthesis of *memoire volontaire*¹⁰⁵ and *memoire involuntaire*¹⁰⁶, the praxis of Nietzsche’s “monumental history” can act in the same manner by invoking the voluntary and involuntary, yet retaining an illusory “natural order” of progress. As Benjamin warns: “One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm”¹⁰⁷. However, the implementation of monumental history in the subjective and the objective manner in which we experience a historic monument needs a *strong* messianic power for its authority over tradition, the indigenous, and the past. A strong messianic power will result in a closed narrative based upon an authoritative figurehead. A weak messianic power allows for the collective to flourish.

The so-called “experienced and superior man” prescribes to the masses a type of monumental history that Nietzsche critiques in his book, *On the Advantage and Disadvantages of History for Life*¹⁰⁸, and is similar to the aesthetic notion of strong messianism as utilized by Walter Benjamin. The “experience and superior man” can be equated to the owners of the capitalist of (re-) production; and in the art world, this would include the owners of art institutions, art galleries, art collectors, and art forgeries. Benjamin states that the impetus for the aestheticization for a politics of domination is that, “the idea of eternal recurrence transforms the historical event itself into a mass-produced article”¹⁰⁹. What really is at play here is the monopolization of our subjective experience in accordance with the historical justifications of the ruling class. Art, as monumental history, is able to do just that: mold our aesthetic

¹⁰⁴ Reginald Reynolds, *Cleanliness and Godliness* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1943), 33. Also quoted in Abel, Ernest L. and Buckley, Barbara E. *The Handwriting on the Wall: Toward a Sociology and Psychology of Graffiti*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 15.

¹⁰⁵ Voluntary memories

¹⁰⁶ Involuntary memories

¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, 392.

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. trans. by Peter Preuss. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 38.

¹⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Central Park”, 166.

sensibilities to promote a certain ideology over another. As Nietzsche comments: “Monumental history is the disguise in which their hatred of the mighty and the great of their time parades as satisfied admiration of the mighty and the great of past ages.”¹¹⁰ This monopoly on the subjective aesthetic experience (i.e.: on what is “mighty and great”) maintains the capitalist tradition and the eternal recurrence of seeing each other “...as debtors and creditors, salesmen and customers, employers and employees, and above all as competitors.”¹¹¹ The encapsulation of novel movements, particularly in art (i.e.: graffiti as so-called “street” art) by the bourgeoisie has been utilized for the sustainability of an “eternal recurrence” of class struggle. When the bourgeoisie appropriates art, as in the appropriation of “street” art, the weak messianic power of art is manipulated for the promulgation of current socio-political existential conditions of domination; it becomes a strong-messianic aesthetic. Benjamin states that, “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe.”¹¹² Benjamin questions the concept of progress as liberation and freedom in this rhetorical question: “What good is talk of progress to a world sinking into rigor mortis?”¹¹³

For instance, following the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution during the 1920s, a state-led program for social rebuilding was commissioned to the Mexican muralist art movement. The purpose of the Mexican muralist movement was to be a rhizome of revolutionary art for the promotion of class-consciousness among the Mexican masses. However, the cooptation of such movement into the social-building programs by the state rendered this art

¹¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 20.

¹¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, 20. *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*. ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006)

¹¹² Walter Benjamin, “Central Park”, 184.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 184

movement into a legitimating socio-political tool for an authoritarian regime¹¹⁴. Following the Mexican revolution, first under the auspices of the Secretary of Education, Jose Vasconcelos¹¹⁵, the main patrons for the muralist movement was the state; which used mural art as a prop for political maneuverability into a nationalist monotonous identity. Some art critics identified the heavy cooptation of mural art for the use of official political discourse, as the death of the Mexican muralist movement.

Even though the Mexican Muralist Movement began with an earnest dedication for the struggle of the proletariat and the role of art as a political vehicle for this struggle via the negation of “academic” or “fine art” own by private hands, the Mexican muralist movement quickly was coopted by the state. For the early Mexican muralists (the “big three”: Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros), art should be a public affair of historical narratives of class- and cultural-struggle, and not a symbol of status and individualism. Nonetheless, as popular Mexican intellectual, Octavio Paz, once remarked: “...on the one hand, it was a revolutionary art, or one that called itself revolutionary; on the other, it was an official art.”¹¹⁶ Art needs to remain a tool for social justice, as non-official or non-commissioned, rather than a tool for capital accumulation and state formation, if socio-political change is to actually occur.

¹¹⁴ Coffey, Mary K. *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 1.

¹¹⁵ Vasconcelos, was a philosopher by training, and had advocated for the recognition of indigenous culture albeit by promoting cultural assimilation rather than a multi-perspectival respect for indigenous autonomy. However, continuity of Vasconcelos’s principles was short-lived. He served for as Secretary of Education for four years. After Vasconcelos, this cabinet seat was in disarray, with Secretariats serving only for one or two years at most until modern industrialization and neoliberal policies were implemented by Presidents Miguel Aleman, whose Secretariat of Education, Jaime Torres Bodet, served for an unprecedented 8 years, and later served again under the hyper-modernization of President Adolfo Lopez Mateo from 1958-1964; indicating the need for the institutionalization of a certain ideology (namely, neo-liberal principles) via the nation’s curricula and pedagogy for education.

¹¹⁶ Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, 1.

Did the Mexican muralist movement as first proposed by the “big three really lose its transgressive edge and sell itself as a mere political prop for official state-building? Not so. The spirit of subversion initiated by the Mexican muralist movement remained in the barrios. The barrio, although under constant attack via the consequences of gentrification as modernization and neo-liberal policies were implemented during and following World War II, was the target audience with the power of interpretation. The people from the barrios decide what and how their identity should be represented, even if the city’s government and business sector desire otherwise. At the very least, the interpretation and meaning of public art forms (i.e.: murals and graffiti) has always been under contention. Furthermore, the field of meaning for these public art forms does not necessarily stem from the art form’s “content” itself, but must necessarily pass through an infinite and fragmentary cacophony of various efforts of determining such field of meaning¹¹⁷. The production of mural art highlights the possibility and development of alternative public spheres based upon the growing dissatisfaction of corrupt and inadequate official channels over the future of public discourse. A mural, given their fluidity in meaning, enables the barrio to create their own realities according to their own needs and their own abilities.

In other words, a revolutionary critique of modern urbanism must be made outside of the confines of what is authorized within the banalization of the public sphere as a monotonous entity (i.e.: the city), contoured by the mass media, politics, and mass-consumerism. This is no other than what Guy Debord calls “the society of the spectacle”; and from a different, more theoretical angle, Adorno calls it “the culture industry”. In any case, a viable critique of modern urbanism must not be part of, or originate within, the hegemonic system of control and order. This critique must be immanent by nature; that is, this critique must not attempt to reform or

¹¹⁷ Bruce Campbell, *Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis*, 12.

reconcile available official conduits, but rather must transgress such official channels, and while doing so, illuminate the boundaries between legality and illegality in order to create new alternatives to city life. This immanent critique, in accordance with Adorno, should be an ongoing conversation intimately entwined with a specific socio-historical epoch; explicitly keeping in mind that our history is ever dynamic and fluid.

According to the Situationists, such as Debord and Henri Lefebvre, one must look at the concept of the festival, as politically embodied in the Paris Commune of 1871, to reach a viable understanding of how transgression is intimately related to the creation of a social revolution. However, the festival, by definition cannot be truly transgressive because it is an institutionalized event; a festival is meant to end at some point (even if violently suppressed, as in the Paris Commune). Although the festival allows for masses to celebrate life in their own terms, to violate hierarchies, and/or to open alternative social relations, this is all done albeit for a specified and officiated time. After the festival is over, everyone is expected to return to his or her quotidian work lives. The importance of the festival is nonetheless retained by the way such events invites and encourages play, embodiment (i.e.: attention to the body), and excess¹¹⁸. According to rhetoric scholar, Christina R. Foust, festivals are “...actively, symbolically asserting the unofficial, emotional, feminine, playful, and multifarious; against the bureaucratic, rational, masculine, serious, and coherent logics which suppress or oppress them; hierarchical dominance is foiled”¹¹⁹. The ludic character of the festival, and its short time span, is what makes the festival appeasable to higher authorities, yet the festival still has the potential of being truly transgressive if the festival is an ever-ongoing and ever-changing ludic event. The same interplay between play and transgression graffiti is able to capture so well. Graffiti artists, by their

¹¹⁸ Christina R. Foust, *Transgression as a Mode of Resistance: Rethinking Social Movement in an Era of Corporate Globalization*, 10.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

transgressive nature of their art forms, are always at play with the city while still expressing a unique existence amidst the growing monotony of city-life.

Another revolutionary strategy for the transformation of the monotonous and banal quotidian lifestyle of civil society, that also incorporates some of the same ludic elements of the festival, but takes a bit more transgressive stance, is the praxis of the *dérive*. The *dérive*, according to Debord, is “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances...a playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects...”¹²⁰. The purpose of this strategy is to initiate an alternative perspective and to give in to the new and unusual within our quotidian lives. The *dérive* opens up multiple perspectives by obtaining the sensibility of objectively studying a terrain- but with the invitation of the random and the fragmentary (i.e.: the ludic)- also becoming subjectively emotionally disoriented. The *dérive* captures not just the objective landscape, but can also capture our mindscapes as we stroll down the objective terrain. The objective and subjective analysis of a terrain is clearly dynamic under the strategy of the *dérive*, and cannot be separated into entities of their own. This living dynamism between the object and the subject graffiti shares with the revolutionary strategy of the *dérive*.

IV. The *Dérive*, the *Flâneur*, and the Graffiti Artist

The artist, in the sense of being the “elementary form” of the individual commodity¹²¹ for the bourgeoisie, becomes the *flâneur* type: the purveyor of novelty in the dominant culture: “The *flâneur* is the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. *He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers*

¹²⁰ Guy Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*”, accessed from <<http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/deriveddebord.pdf>>

¹²¹ Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. trans. by Ben Fowkes. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 125.

(emphasis added).”¹²² The classification of the experience of art quells the manipulation of such experience to serve capitalist needs. All the while, the artist, the creative engine of the aesthetics of power, is at a parallax threshold between *l’art pour l’art* and art for life’s sake.

The graffiti artist is in a unique position to delve into “the crowd” but still retain an autonomous self-awareness and class-consciousness: this is the role of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* is a living-dynamism just as much as graffiti is a living-dynamism out in the city. In any case, this self-awareness and class-consciousness, by being painted onto a city’s street via graffiti, can transcend into the psyche of the crowd, invoking and inspiring a means for their own autonomous self-consciousness; graffiti can inspire the innocent passer-by to delve into their own *dérive*. According to philosopher, Jules Simon, “his (Benjamin’s) belief in the possibility of the individual member of the proletariat to become conscious of exploitation was essential for how Benjamin proposed to counter what Baudelaire claimed was the dominating sign of modernity: suicide.”¹²³ The modern city, with its banal and quotidian existence, is a form of modern suicide; it destroys the creative subjectivity for the purpose to reign in objectivity and order. The graffiti artist, with his dialectical and dynamic role as both part of the crowd and distanced from the crowd- his objective/subjective existence on the walls of buildings and in the city’s streets- is in the pivotal position for the immanent critique of class-consciousness as political praxis. This is what contemporary graffiti artists need to take into account when practicing their art forms: the thin line between the commodification of art and art as a liberatory praxis.

¹²² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. “Convolute M: The Flâneur” trans. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 427.

¹²³ Jules Simon, “Benjamin in Paris: Weak Messianism and Memories of the Oppressed”, 78.

V. The Case of El Paso del Norte Tri-State Area

Urban landscapes are enablers of commodity exchanges, which then reflect the ideologies and practices of a people as consumers. The same justification that Haussmann used to defend his project of revamping Parisian streets, that is, “strategic embellishments” of the city, is still being used today by corrupt city council members and their collusions with development and construction firms.

For instance, the City of El Paso is currently in 2017 going through a mass transformation of its downtown area. Alliances between private investors, hoteliers, and city council members have orchestrated a take-over of historic neighborhoods that surround the business district in Downtown El Paso. The neighborhoods that are currently in danger of eminent domain and/or demolition are Segundo Barrio, Duranguito, and Chihuahuita neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are geographically situated at the limits of what is now considered El Paso Downtown Office District¹²⁴. In other words, if downtown El Paso is going to expand, it can only expand into these areas outside the office district. What is more interesting is the fact that these lower-economic neighborhoods have continuously been omitted from historical districts or historical registries, which will in fact protect these neighborhoods from demolition and further gentrification. It was only until recently that preservation efforts in downtown El Paso were taken seriously. However, as Nietzsche concept of “monumental history” can attest, not everyone was included in the dominant narrative of historical preservation of El Paso’s downtown neighborhoods. As art historian and expert in El Paso architecture, Max Grossman, states:

¹²⁴ Which even has its own “Snapchat” filter, only adding to the purposeful neglect of Segundo Barrio, Duranguito, and Chihuahuita neighborhoods.

A series of six additional historic districts, both local and National Register, were created around the periphery of the city's urban core between 1983 and 2016.¹²⁰ With the exception of Chihuahuita, these districts honor and commemorate the primarily Anglo-American residential neighborhoods north of San Antonio Avenue. Unfortunately, nearly all the important historic buildings in the overwhelmingly Hispanic urban enclaves to the south of this corridor—Segundo Barrio, Chihuahuita, and Duranguito—were omitted from the National Register applications, including the El Paso Laundry Building (1897), Mansion (1901), Colón Theatre (1919), Sacred Heart Church (1929), and Firehouse No. 11 (1930). This is alarming because such neighborhoods have been some of the first settlements in El Paso (i.e.: Chihuahuita was settled in 1818; Duranguito in 1821).¹²⁵

To be sure, the U.S.-Mexico border along the Rio Grande has always been a contentious geo-political space. During the pre-historic time, 1050 to 1375, the El Paso del Norte region was characterized by minor seasonal settlements now labeled by archeologists as *rancherías*¹²⁶. Prominent native tribes that had roamed the region for centuries, such as the *Sumas*, *Mansos*, *Jumanos* and *Raramuri*, had been engaged in dispersed hunting-gathering activities¹²⁷. The expedition in 1532 led by conquistador Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca was when the Spanish Crown first settled along the Paso del Norte Region¹²⁸. The Spanish colonization of Northern Mexico marked a dramatic shift in the social paradigm of this region, evolving from a hunter-gathering paradigm into permanent peripheral settlements that developed towards a core (i.e.: the mission and/or presidio, which in turn was obedient to the Spanish metropole). Further, the only historical accounts that mention the activities of pre-historic indigenous tribes in this region were the documents left by Spanish conquistadors and priests, and as such, the only insights available

¹²⁵ Max E. Grossman, "Saving Downtown: An Architectural Survey and National Register Nomination For El Paso, Texas", *The Alliance Review* (January 2017), 4.

¹²⁶ John A. Peterson, Roy B. Johnson, and Mark Willis. *Archeological Survey of the Clint Landfill in East El Paso County, Texas*. Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso, 2000, 7.

¹²⁷ Raul Flores Simental, Efrén Gutierrez Roa, and Oscar Vasquez Reyes. *Paso del Norte en el Siglo XXI: Breve Historia de Ciudad Juárez*. Colección Bi-Centenario, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez: 2010, 13.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 14.

about these indigenous peoples are based upon a skewed and imperialistic origin. Consequently, those European powers created the definition given to these native border people. Such social disparities have, unfortunately, continued from 1532 to 1848 and to the very present-day¹²⁹.

Even before the North American Invasion of Mexico in 1848, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have always been crucial sites of contestation: both culturally and commercially. Before 1848, however, border skirmishes were mostly due to its abundant river-water supply and nearby fertile land, which in recent years has increasingly become depleted and overused for commercial farming. Now however, this border region is coveted by trans-national corporations for its abundant cheap labor pool and, taking heed from its historical namesake (Paso del Norte), as a major international hub for commerce and migration. So from its pre-history to the very present, the borderlands has been a highly fluid space where history and culture syncretize into its own being, without and within formality. One such example of the syncretism of history, culture, and politics into its own unique being along the US-Mexico border is graffiti, its practices, and messages upon the bi-national urban cores.

The Spanish conquest of Mexico lasted until September 1821. This was when Mexico gained her independence. At the northern frontier of Mexico, the construction of the urban-core of El Paso-Ciudad Juarez began in 1818, when Ricardo Brusuelas established a small ranch in what is now the Chihuahuita neighborhood. The Chihuahita neighborhood was originally located on the Mexican side of the Rio Bravo, but as the river meandered throughout history, this

¹²⁹ Note the names given to these indigenous tribes, particularly the *Mansos*, which can be translated into “the tame” or “the submissive”. This obviously reflects the views of the Spanish conquistadors upon the indigenous people as primitive, weak and servile. Also, the peripheral mode of living that has continued ever since the Spanish Conquest of Mexico can be seen not just at the micro-level, the production of *colonias* along the border, but also at the macro-level as border cities such as El Paso-Juarez are articulated to powerful financial centers and “global cities” such as Mexico City, New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and London. For further discussion on the relationship between global cities and border cities see: Kathleen Staudt, César M. Fuentes, and Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso (Eds.) *Cities and Citizenship at the U.S.-Mexico Border: The Paso Del Norte Metropolitan Region*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

neighborhood stands today on the North American side of the Rio Grande. In 1827, Juan Maria Ponce de Leon received a 500-acre land grant north of the Rio Grande from the Mexican government¹³⁰, comprising what is now prime real estate in Downtown El Paso and the Duranguito neighborhood. At the end of the American invasion of Mexico in 1848, Ponce de Leon sold this plot to American businessman, Benjamin Franklin Coons, whose middle name became the name of the town and the mountains overlooking the town¹³¹. However, the main impetus that drove the El Paso-Juarez region into an urban center was the emergence of the railroads in 1881. According to historian Miguel Juarez: “First, the Southern Pacific arrived and doubled El Paso’s population; then came the Santa Fe line and the next year, the Texas and Pacific. Finally the Mexican Central Railroad, a 1,224-mile project backed by a group of Boston investors, was constructed from Mexico City to El Paso, making the community a key border crossing for Mexican-U.S. commerce and travel.”¹³² The introduction of railroads greatly expanded commerce in this border region, transforming El Paso del Norte from a small outpost to a bustling urban center. According to, Max Grossman:

The trains brought high-quality timber, brick, and other construction materials in large quantities, and multi-story Victorian-style hotels and retail structures began to line El Paso Street and the other major thoroughfares. In 1903, the brothers Henry and Gustavus Trost founded their celebrated architectural firm in downtown and began to erect large commercial buildings in and around the business district. After the arrival of a third brother, Adolphus Trost, in 1908, the firm designed the city’s first reinforced concrete high-rises, beginning with the Richard Caples Building.¹³³

¹³⁰ Max E. Grossman, “Saving Downtown: An Architectural Survey and National Register Nomination For El Paso, Texas”, *The Alliance Review* (January 2017),

¹³¹ Miguel Juarez, *Colors on Desert Walls: The Murals of El Paso*, 2.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Max E. Grossman, “Saving Downtown”, 2

Most major buildings in El Paso were built after 1910, a crucial time in the region, as El Paso became one of the main exile headquarters of the opposition to the Porfirio Diaz regime. The Caples Building, for example, located right in the heart of Downtown El Paso became the headquarters of the anarchist-syndicalist, Flores Magon brothers. The Flores Magon brother were the intellectual impetus, via their *Partido Liberal Mexicano* and their propaganda efforts, for the Mexican Revolution. The Caples Building also housed the headquarters of Francisco I. Madero main oppositional party, whom was later chosen president after the Mexican Revolution ended. This site, crumbling as it currently stands, was one of the first edifices in downtown El Paso. According to Dr. Grossman, this building “marked the beginning of a serious of architectural experiments that put El Paso on the path to becoming the so-called ‘reinforced concrete city’”¹³⁴. The late 19th century and the early 20th century ushered an incredible explosion of rapid developments for the El Paso del Norte region. The ongoing Industrial Revolution and the impending Mexican Revolution served as the catalyst for such rapid change in this region during that time. The American republic was beginning to become quite a powerful nation; destiny had manifested itself in the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, extending U.S. sovereignty from “sea to shining sea”. Sixty-three years later, the Mexican Revolution would agitate American hegemony over the North American continent once again. As border historian Oscar J. Martinez recounts:

Fears of an organized invasion and recapture of territory lost by Mexico during the War of 1846-1848 circulated widely in the United States by 1915. The climax came in the early part of 1916, when Villa’s troops killed fifteen American engineers in Santa Ysabel, Chihuahua, and raided the town of Columbus, New Mexico...The foregoing events combined to create an extremely tense situation in the El Paso area...In June 1916, the two nations

¹³⁴ Ibid

teetered on the brink of war, with Juarez anticipating an invasion at any time.¹³⁵

There was an obvious need to reinforce (and concretize) American political power on the southern frontier with Mexico, and stabilize the region in accordance with American interests.

Yet, El Paso del Norte has always been a fluid and dynamic space, exacerbated by the artificial border humans erected in lieu of nationalistic and fascist ideologies, “El Chuco”, as it is colloquially known, still maintains its unique aura as a unique city. This region has always maintained its identity as the crux for the movement of goods and people, as a welcoming place. As El Paso grew in size and economic power, the people adapted to such growth according to their own needs and abilities. As historian, Miguel Juarez points out: “The thousand of families who came to El Paso created an informal network which helped even more people come to the Southwest.”¹³⁶ The city of El Paso as we know it today is a syncretism of official economic and political forces exploiting the abundant cheap labor pool available, but El Paso-Juarez is also the counteraction of this cheap labor pool via unofficial public discourse, informal networks, and informal economies. At the parallax gap between the formal and the informal graffiti is able to highlight this city’s historical detritus, while at the same time opening alternative horizons for a better future.

But what is troubling in the city of El Paso at the moment is that Nietzsche’s analysis of “monumental history” is being played out in the struggle for the neighborhoods of Duranguito and Segundo Barrio. These historical neighborhoods are being demolished in order for new monuments, such as the baseball stadium and the proposed “performing arts and entertainment complex”, impose a certain ideology amongst the citizens. The gentrification of El Paso is a concrete example of Nietzsche’s insight on historical monuments and their socio-political

¹³⁵ Oscar J. Martinez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juarez Since 1848*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 39-40.

¹³⁶ Miguel Juarez, *Colors on Desert Walls*, 3.

consequences. In the case of El Paso, the political maneuvering of officiated historical districts purposefully includes certain affluent areas of the city, while excluding *barrios* with lower-economic social status. This intentional exclusion of the *barrios* is an attempt to redefine the city's ideological and cultural terrain into a high capitalist arcade, a shopping center. The silencing of the *barrios*, and of professionals helping the *barrios* in their struggle, is a tactic used by the government to maintain hegemony of cultural and economical production. Breaking this hegemony and allowing the silenced to speak out is what graffiti is all about.

The architectural repression of individuality experienced in the city of El Paso is what graffiti attempts to resist. Graffiti can enact a diagonal attack across the relationship between urban life, commodity exchange, and property relations. Graffiti in El Paso can open up an alternate narrative than the dominant narratives of progress and gentrification. Urban anthropologists, Terry Moreau and Derek H. Alderman, state that, "the control of landscapes through the creation of strict, and sometimes punitive, policies that work to marginalize certain citizens and landscapes activities is widespread."¹³⁷ Also widespread however, is graffiti, specifically in highly urbanized settings. Thus, graffiti, if genuinely appropriated by a socially conscious praxis of liberation, can then become a counter-act for the homogenizing aspects of city landscapes. Graffiti's unique character as *flâneur*, maintaining a critical distance from the marketplace, but still within it, can be an opportunity for exploring alternative socio-political arrangements. Moreover, its ubiquitous instances in urban settings can be a potential source of collective solidarity and community building.

Most graffiti and murals found in the Paso del Norte area are of cultural or political nature. It is easy to find a mural depicting heroes from the Mexican revolution, Chicano/a

¹³⁷ Moreau, Terry and Alderman H., Derek. "Graffiti Hurts and the Eradication of Alternative Landscape Expression" *Geographical Review*. 101.1 (2011), 107.

activists, and/or religious personalities all throughout El Paso, Juarez, and Las Cruces. Murals help neighborhoods create a sense of identity, which directly reflects the community's ideals. In fact, many early murals in El Paso were created with the collaboration of neighborhood gangs¹³⁸. The creation of the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s was a major source for funding some of El Paso's earliest murals. Even though most of El Paso's early murals were mostly official commissions by business and government, these early works "provide examples of monumental public art for residents of all classes to see, thus establishing murals as an appropriate medium for later community-based expressions beginning in the 1970s"¹³⁹. This highlights graffiti's double-bind, always mediating between *l'art pour l'art* and art for life's sake. That is, graffiti resists the status quo while simultaneously necessitating such status quo.

During the 1980s and 1990s, experienced artists¹⁴⁰ from larger cities, such as Los Angeles and San Diego relocated to El Paso and highly influenced the mural art production. According to Miguel Juarez, "the expertise of the experienced artists introduced another dimension to sponsorship of works. Instead of being financed by the artists, they gained agency support"¹⁴¹. Nonetheless, Miguel Juarez notes that gang involvement in the production of murals was not only necessary, but also beneficial for the expression of community solidarity¹⁴². Many of the murals painted at that time actively involved the community and included untrained artists. However, graffiti, being a more transgressive praxis than commissioned mural art, can be a more authentic expression of a community's identity as well as their socio-political aspirations and/or complaints.

¹³⁸ Miguel Juarez, *Colors on Desert Walls*, 13.

¹³⁹ Ibid

¹⁴⁰ Such as Felipe Adame and Carlos Callejo. For a great anthology of El Paso murals, see Miguel Juarez, *Colors on Desert Walls: The Murals of El Paso*.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁴² Ibid, 13.

VI. Graffiti, its Forms, Content, and Praxis: A Phenomenological Perspective

Graffiti is practiced in many different forms, from a random scribble on a restroom to an intricate master-“piece” or mural. But there is a gradual intrinsic “street” value going from a “tag”, to “stencil”, to “bomb” and throw-ups”, and finally “pieces” and “murders”. According to local graffiti artist, Provet, “. . . graffiti always starts off with a tag, this is your signature, you know, your ‘John Hancock’, and from that you make more intricate signatures. . . can evolve to fat letters, skinny letters, or calligraphy.”¹⁴³ Graffiti, in the eyes of most graffiti artists, evolves from mere “tags” to the bolder and bigger so-called “bombings” and ultimately “pieces”; this is colloquially known in the graff’ community as “getting up”¹⁴⁴. According to graffiti artists and journalists, Gastman et al.:

Graffiti is a continuum from the unabashedly ugly to the unavoidably beautiful. The grimy, dirty, dripping tag signature comes from the same hands as the enormous, multicolored mural. The throwup, landing between the two, combines speed, style, and size. . . Bombing-the act of getting your name up illegally and irrespective of the pretense of making ‘art’-remains the core of graffiti.¹⁴⁵

Some will argue that “stencils” are superior to “bombings”, due to how detailed and prolific some stencil aerosol art can be (i.e.: Banksy, Blek le Rat, Os Gemeos. . .). One element that stencils and wheat-pasting uniquely possess is the character of the commodity; namely, the mechanical reproduction of a same message and its mass reproducibility. The stencil is perhaps the most politically visible image of graffiti. Stencils can be seen from the jungles of Chiapas to the urban jungle of New York City representing resistance to the status quo.

¹⁴³ Provet (graffiti artist), in discussion with the author, April 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Roger Gastman, Caleb Neelon, and Anthony Smyrski, *Street World: Urban Art and Culture from Five Continents*, 124.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 127.

Another type of graffiti art that is easily mass-produced and contains a political edge is wheat-pasting. Wheat-pasting is a homemade glue made by graffiti writers to put up posters that will be near impossible to tear down if pasted properly. The glue in the practice of wheat-pasting is mainly comprised of a mixture of water and flour. Wheat-pasting is an easy way to “get up”; that is, it is less time consuming and can be reproduced almost anywhere. This ubiquity to be everywhere gives graffiti its political power. Graffiti contains the politics of visibility in a city landscape that forces people into the ever-same commodities. Graffiti artists create an alternative path as we meander through our own city’s streets bombarded by commodities. Graffiti is a constant reminder that we are unique and creative subjective beings, and not just consumers.

In any case, all graffiti writers will agree that it begins with the “tag” and the development of one’s own lettering and style- this is the foundation for all graffiti- which becomes perfected by practicing, not just out on the streets, but also in the graffiti artist’s “blackbook”. This “blackbook” is the artist’s sketchbook, portfolio, and diary: “It’s a place to practice and refine sketches...collect notes and collage found bits and pieces, and it’s passed around to one’s friends and heroes”.¹⁴⁶ This is why a piece of graffiti is an act of sacrifice and “unsalaried, but impassioned work”; behind a “tag”, whether intricate or not, beautiful or ugly, has had some hand and mind expressing its unique subjective existence.

As local graffiti and tattoo artist, Enks, states: “One of my fortes is calligraphy, letters, and lettering...I used to struggle a lot with cursive-writing back in school, now with a lot of practice I had in graffiti and with different type of letters; that’s what I specialize in with my tattoos; calligraphy. I would like to become a calligraphy master.”¹⁴⁷ The graffiti artist begins by creating their own style, mastering such unique style- inspired by their surrounding context (i.e.:

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 137.

¹⁴⁷ Enks (graffiti and tattoo artist), in discussion with the author, April 2017.

“friends and heroes” whom we share our blackbooks with, as well as encounters with authorities)- and expressing the this style out in the city. It allows artists to explore themselves as well as exploring their surroundings. Graffiti is a political praxis of community interaction and community building that gives priority to creative outlets over conformism. Graffiti is not just about gang activity, but even if it is, graffiti is nonetheless very political. Because graffiti can mediate between serious political performances and benevolent vandalism, graffiti also cuts across ideologies such as the Benjaminian quote cuts across a narrative, and posits us deeper into an inter-subjective level of inter-communication. Following a pathos of good philosophy, the graff’ artist’s “blackbook” forces the artist to self-reflect and openly communicate with other artists in an open critique of each other.

After mastering the letter, graff’ artists go on to the next step, which are “throw-ups” and “bombings”. As Provet states: “bombings are quicker, but bolder”.¹⁴⁸ The throw-up and the bomb are meant to put you name up as quickly as possible, but yet maintain a presence. This presence forces people to see the graff’ artist’s artwork, and because of the anonymous nature of graffiti, the piece of graffiti itself takes on a unique subjective existence of its own; it creates an intimate relation between the artwork, the artist, and the unbeknownst or well-acquainted audience. Local feminist graffiti artist and makeup consultant, Grey, states as an example of this ubiquitous presence of graffiti:

I love seeing big amounts of freight trains with pieces over pieces over pieces, and you know they’re different because they’ll have it dated sometimes, and you know this is people...and you have no choice but to look at it because it might be five or more pieces by different people, and they are all up in your face like, boom! Or even going to you mailbox and seeing a little sticker that someone

¹⁴⁸ Provet (graffiti artist), in discussion with author, April 2017.

put. And you might not know, but that's a very intimate moment between the artist and the art itself¹⁴⁹.

There is an inherent contradiction between the artist's will to "get up"-that is, to make their presence known- and the pragmatic need to maintain anonymity. This is the first rule you learn in graffiti. Anonymity is essential for a graffiti artist because the performance of graffiti is still an illegal act. Anonymity is a source of protection, but it is also a source of power. Being invisible to the authorities while still being able to make your own unique statement to the world is an important political act of resistance.

Every artist I interviewed agreed that they knew before going out and tag that graffiti was illegal, and the consequences that such act renders. The most common way for law enforcement to build a case against a graffiti artist is to either catch them in the act, or link their "blackbook" sketches to tags and throw-ups out in the streets. As Enks states: "...the 'buff' system that the city has, they (police) take pictures of every piece or tag out in the city. This is how they are able put a case against you."¹⁵⁰ The graffiti artist knows the dangers of putting up your name out in the city, but this is exactly what makes it "so fun" and "so liberating." As Enks succinctly puts it, "graffiti should be illegal, that's what's fun about it. Once it's legal, there is no point."¹⁵¹ Female graffiti artist, Grey, states that attracted her to graffiti is the rebelliousness inherent in graffiti: "graffiti gives you outlets on how to express your anger of being controlled. It tears down rules, and gives you no option but to realize and look that you are actually in charge of the situation. All art is authentic, and all art should be shared; this is the point of graffiti...it is a noble criminal."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Grey (graffiti and make-up artist), in discussion with the author, April 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Enks (graffiti and tattoo artist), in discussion with the author, April 2017..

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Grey (graffiti and make-up artist), in discussion with the author, April 2017.

This demarcation between legality and illegality is obvious to the graff artist; this is what makes graff artist the perfect *flanuer* a la Benjamin: “Graffiti writers understand real estate as well as those who sell it: it’s all about location, location, location.”¹⁵³ As for graffiti itself, the best bomb, throw-up, or piece is based upon the location; namely, somewhere that is difficult to access, but with high public visibility. These spots are called “heavens” or “murders”, usually because these spots are rooftops or billboards- highly dangerous, for the artist, but highly visible, for both the public and authorities. Ubiquitous presence was the basis for the phenomenon of “Obey”, Shepard Fairey’s “experiment in phenomenology”, which started with mere “slaps”¹⁵⁴ to a complete urban fashion scene in itself. This is the politics of visibility that graffiti comprises. It is a politics of resistance to the homogenizing effects of consumerism in our city-life. Social-political homogenizing effects that often go unnoticed until graffiti interrupts us. According to Shepard Fairey’s “Manifesto”:

Heidegger describes Phenomenology as ‘the process of letting things manifest themselves.’ Phenomenology attempts to enable people to see clearly something that is right before their eyes but obscured; things that are so taken for granted that they are muted by abstract observation. . . . The first aim of phenomenology is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one’s environment. The obey sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings.¹⁵⁵

Many “taggings” abound the El Paso’s downtown area, which to an innocent passerby might seem like undecipherable scribbles, yet these taggings- by their mere existence on private property- are politically laden messages. They represent a subject making a claim of taking back the streets, from a private corporate framework to a more public and open-communication

¹⁵³ Gastman et al., *Street World*, 142.

¹⁵⁴ This means the act of placing stickers instead of aerosol paint. I.e., “slapping” a sticker on a mailbox.

¹⁵⁵ Shepard Fairey, “Propaganda/Manifesto”, accessed from <<https://obeygiant.com/propaganda/manifesto/>>

framework. Although these taggings create a sense of disorder to the banal existences of civil life, it is this disorder that is crucial to the opening of new possibilities and alternatives to a more creative life. According to urban sustainability scholar, Julian Agyeman: “It is both the disorder and the community that create vibrant, distinct, and liveable cities”¹⁵⁶. In other words, we should not accept our public spaces (cities and streets) as they are, but rather, we should seek to redefine our public spaces every time we interact in such spaces. This is the role of the Situationist *dérive* embodied as the graffiti artist in the Benjaminian typology of the *flaneur*. This relation is also embodied in the forms and content of graffiti art. As such, graffiti art is not just merely representational, but actually embodies and crystallizes social, political, and economic forces in history.

¹⁵⁶ Julian Agyeman, *Just Sustainabilities: Policy, Planning, and Practice*, 104.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, art is one of the most universal and oldest human activities. It is a human impulse rather than a skill or hobby. Art cannot be defined by reductionist, psychological or logical schools of thought, but as a more complex phenomenon, art is constituted by our chaotic ebb and flow of economic and political tendencies and histories. Art ultimately gives rise to the plastic expressions of our unique subjective experiences that are tied to a specific context of historical and political forces. But art, at its most fundamental form, is still just a human, subjective expression upon a surface- a *Lebenswelt* captured in a *Leinwand*- that concretizes such subjective human expressions into non-superficial, substantive narratives codified into our shared histories. Graffiti's own narrative rests upon the socio-political narrative of contemporary property relations and capitalist mode of production. It creates a critical dialogue between the artists, the audience, and the canvas- that is, the city's streets and buildings- with the aim of challenging notions of capital, space, ownership, expression, and subjectivity.

To be sure, graffiti art is always at risk of being "buffed", erased, by anti-graffiti state pogroms; therefore, graffiti is infinitely fleeting and in a state of *becoming* rather than in a state of *being*. Art is an open endeavor that can never be totalized. This infinitely fleeting constitution of art will enable us to understand the movement, separation, and distance necessary for a socially conscious critique of the subject-centered framework of Idealist and Positivist aesthetics and epistemology. This critical (dis)stance is necessary to pledge my aesthetic theory of graffiti as a socially conscious event.

As we have seen, graffiti fits Adorno's conceptualization of art as being a subjective entity in itself, while also containing a cognitive content; namely, resistance and challenge to the high capitalist status quo. The mask of anonymity endowed by graffiti artists enables graffiti to

beget its own position as a unique subjectivity amongst the homogenous character of city-life. Graffiti is not just merely representational, but it is an actual living-embodiment of social, political, historical, and philosophical sedimentations, which are always in flux. Also, Adorno laid down the main tension between *l'art pour l'art* and art for life's sake; a tension that graffiti- due to its inter-subjective character- is able to mediate and illuminate, only to be able to push the boundaries further. That is, graffiti under Adorno's aesthetic framework actually becomes transgressive and a praxis for emancipation from the "culture industry" and the increasing homogenization of city-life.

Under a Benjaminian aesthetic framework, the historical-materialist sensibility is reincorporated into a socially conscious understanding of graffiti. That is, Benjamin grounds Adorno's aesthetics into everyday city life; into the material that constitutes our everyday existence out in the city. Benjamin is able to bridge the theoretical with the quotidian by his concepts of the aura, his critique of mechanical reproduction in art, the function of the quote, and the different typologies (i.e.: *flâneur*) he utilizes as living allegories of life in the city under high capitalism. Further, Benjamin also helps clarify how graffiti art does not fall into strict categorizations of truth, such as Positivists attempts to hold, but instead demonstrates how art works does not follow a strict definition of truth. Artworks, including graffiti, direct us towards a "truth-potential", and not a totalized "truth". This is truth at the dialectic between mimetic impulse and rationality.

Finally, by incorporating both Adorno's and Benjamin's aesthetics, a phenomenological perspective on graffiti in the Paso del Norte region gives us more socially conscious alternatives to understand the phenomenon of graffiti beyond strict binary poles of legality or illegality. Following the Situationists concept of *dérive*, and personal interviews with local graffiti artists in

order to phenomenologically explore the experiences of graffiti artists, and particularly how this type of art form affects their social-political lives as inter-subjective beings.

Graffiti's own unique subjectivity and autonomous character can help us realize an alternative future beyond the mechanisms of high capitalist consumerism. Graffiti helps us illuminate the problems of historical sedimentations of the public and private dichotomy. This is a dichotomy that maintains the base and the superstructure of capitalism intact, and thus ever renewing itself under the same dynamics of domination and exploitation. Art can maintain its unique subjectivity as a vehicle for social change via graffiti. A socially conscious aesthetic theory of graffiti can help us restore art's unique position and autonomy.

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