

The Role of Democracy in Graffiti Development in the United States and the Czech Republic

Leah Heiser

Modern Media and Democracy in Prague

Kent State University

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to compare and contrast the Czech Republic and the USA's development of graffiti in a general context. This research is not concerned with any specific graffiti genre. It will intend on uncovering the role democracy plays in graffiti's formation. Democracy arrived at different times and in different ways in the Czech Republic and the United States. Graffiti has similarly developed in various ways.

Definition of Graffiti in a General Context

The mention of graffiti conjures up a variety of images and produces a large and controversial scope of attitudes (Banet-Weiser, 2011). Definitions of graffiti are also wide in range. Some definitions state that graffiti is an art form while others define graffiti as vandalism. Graffiti essentially refers to writing or scratching on walls or surfaces (McDonald, 2013). Graffiti's history can be dated back to the time of cave painting during prehistoric times (McDonald, 2013). Throughout history, graffiti has been used as a form of communication and can represent a human need to voice opinion (Ralph, 2009). In urban settings during the late 20th century, graffiti became a prominent source for societal expression (McDonald, 2013).

People write graffiti for various reasons (McDonald, 2013). To some, graffiti is simply about getting one's name out on the streets (Ralph, 2009). These graffiti writers are more concerned with fame than with artistic expression (Ralph, 2009). Others approach graffiti writing in more artistic terms. Graffiti serves multiple purposes.

Graffiti also marks territory (McDonald, 2013). Gang members use graffiti to mark territory; however, compared to writers with artistic intentions, not as much time or effort is spent in the creation of gang-related graffiti. Regardless of individual reasons for writing, tags are a

necessary element of all graffiti. If graffiti writers wish to evolve their tags artistically, they must create hundreds of tags in order to perfect their lines and form (Ralph, 2009).

Tags are a unique, visual representation of a graffiti writer's identity (Ganz, 2009). Tags are the most common form of graffiti found in any given city (Ganz, 2009). Tags can be written over any available space and they tell onlookers who wrote the tag (McDonald, 2013). Once a graffiti writer has an established tag, that tag is rarely changed (Ralph, 2009). This is because tagging is largely associated with "getting ones name out there." The more writers change their tags, the more they have to get their new tag out on the streets in order to be noticed (Ralph, 2009).

One can choose to evolve and stylize one's tag. Pieces are what graffiti writers call wall writing that takes on a mural form (Ganz, 2009). Pieces tend to have more depth, color, purpose, and also include a variety of images besides the normal tag (Ganz, 2009). Pieces are what graffiti writers refer to as master pieces (Ganz, 2009). These pieces are usually larger and take up an entire space on any given available wall or surface (Ganz, 2009). Pieces include more than just elaborated tags; they have images and frequently portray social messages (McDonald, 2013). When graffiti writers create a piece, they are in a sense creating a piece of art work (Ganz, 2009). Graffiti writing that has evolved into piece work is what has turned street writing into gallery worthy works of art (Ralph, 2009).

History of Graffiti Development in the United States

In the city of New York, graffiti gained fame and spread worldwide (Kramer, 2010). The graffiti writers of New York started their work on the subway trains below the city (Kramer, 2010). Writers then moved their work above ground, usually on the sides of trains and busses, vacant walls of parking lots, and on buildings (Kramer, 2010).

Graffiti writing existed before the late sixties. However, the idealism found in the sixties movement of free expression propelled the relevance of graffiti's ability to be an art form (Gastman, Rose & Deitch, 2011). Graffiti was an ideal mode of expression for those opposed to government influence and solution. It encapsulated the refusal of predetermined limitations (Gastman, Rose & Deitch, 2011).

Urban graffiti in the United States has evolved over time (Kramer, 2010). Graffiti was not considered to be a candidate of gallery worthy art until the sixties. "Many artistic innovations occur during periods of prosperity and economic expansion". (Gastman, Rose & Deitch, 2011) Graffiti gained attention during a time of social change and un-rest.

History of Graffiti Development in the Czech Republic

Under communist regime, graffiti was scarce in the Czech Republic (Ganz, 2009). The Velvet Revolution played a major role in the eventual demise of communism in this region. The Velvet Revolution was a peaceful protest against the communist party that lasted from November 16th to December 29th (Leff, 1997). It was mainly dominated by student demonstrations and eventually led to a peaceful overthrow of the communist government (Leff, 1997). After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and a break from communist rule, the former Czechoslovakia separated into two countries now and the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Leff, 1997). After the fall of communism, the Czech Republic became a democratic country.

Under the communist rule, bands like the Beatles and other rock bands were banned from the general public (Leff, 1997). The communist regime did not let the Czech society listen to any western music because they were afraid that the Czech people would become inspired by the music and revolt against the government (Leff, 1997). Even though the Czech people were not

allowed to listen to The Beatles, they still did. They listened to this music undercover because if caught the communist government would persecute the listeners and put them in jail.

After John Lennon's death in 1980, people in Prague decided to paint a mural in his memory (Steves, 2013). This mural was a collage of graffiti writing of John Lennon lyrics about peace, love, and freedom (Steves, 2013). After the mural was painted, the communist party white washed the wall the next day (Steves, 2013). The next night, the mural was painted again by Lennon fans and later white washed by government guards (Steves, 2013). This exchange continued until the communist party finally posted guards and security cameras to prevent the Lennon fans from writing graffiti on the wall (Steves, 2013).

The wall started out as a graffiti memorial for the death of John Lennon. However, it turned into something more when the communist party white washed the wall (Steves, 2013). In a way, graffiti's history in the Czech Republic started at the John Lennon Wall. This is because the memorial became more than just a memorial. It became a symbol of the movement to eradicate the communist regime. In a sense, graffiti in the Czech Republic has its roots in the anti-communist movement; the Czech people used graffiti to retaliate against the regime.

Comparison of Graffiti Development in the Czech Republic and the United States

What is of particular interest is that graffiti did not gain in popularity in the Czech Republic until the fall of communism (Ganz, 2009). In the United States, however, graffiti started in the late sixties (Kramer, 2010). Even though graffiti arrived at different times in the Czech Republic and the United States, it is important to acknowledge the social unrest that these two countries were undergoing at the time of graffiti's gain in popularity.

During the sixties in the United States, the younger generation of this time participated in numerous protests against the government (Stewart, 2009). Even though the younger generation in the USA at this time was part of a democratic society and was essentially free, it still revolted against the government because they were unhappy with how the government handled current social situations (Stewart, 2009). Graffiti arrived in the Czech Republic during a similar time of social unrest, just as graffiti did in the United States. For the people of the Czech Republic, graffiti appeared when communism was on the edge of collapsing.

The Relationship between Graffiti and Democracy

An article found in the New York Times written by Chan Sewell in 2009 titled A Sociologist's Look at Graffiti discusses the unique relationship between graffiti and democracy. According to Sewell, graffiti can come from a variety of cultural sources. He states that "whatever their class, race, ethnicity, religion, or age, writers define themselves not by what they look like, or what language they speak, or what clothes they wear, but by what they do. Their identities are as writers first, and as members of ethnic, religious, and other subgroups second" (Sewell, 2009). Chan Sewell makes one noticeable statement in his article. He states that "In its purest form, graffiti is a democratic art form that revels in the American Dream" (Sewell, 2009). Sewell makes an interesting argument when he states that graffiti, when it is considered art, is democratic. He supports this argument by stating that graffiti is democratic in that writers do not need money, social status, or laws to create it (Sewell, 2009).

Conclusion

The development of graffiti in the United States and the Czech Republic is strikingly similar. The popularity of graffiti developed during times of social change and un- rest. In the Czech Republic and the United States, government and social strain silenced the voices of younger

generations. Due to graffiti's limitless boundaries and embracement of all styles, cultures, and messages, it arises as a solution for societies searching for change. Graffiti, in and of itself, is an idealized form of democracy (Sewell, 2009). This is because it is essentially a free form of art. Graffiti attracts those in search for a voice and arises as main stream art form when societies either express the need for a democratic country or are exercising existing rights as one already.

Reference Sheet

- Banet-Weiser, S. (2011). Convergence on the street rethinking the authentic/commercial binary. *American Psychological Association* , 45(4-5), 641-658. doi: DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2011.600553
- Ganz, N. (2009). *Graffiti world street art from five continents*. New York, NY: Abrams.
- Gastman, R., Rose, A., & Deitch, J. (2011). *Art in the streets*. New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc.
- Halsey, M., & Young, A. (2002). The meanings of graffiti and municipal administration. *American Psychological Association* , 35(2), 168-186. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=7&sid=58a86632-b51b-4631-9459-2c9db5be3580@sessionmgr10&hid=20>
- Kramer, R. (2010). Moral panics and urban growth machines: Official reactions to graffiti in new york city, 1990–2005. *American Psychological Association* , doi: DOI 10.1007/s11133-
- Leff, C., & , (1997). *The czech and slovak republics nation versus state*. (pp. 76-83). Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- McDonald, F. (2013). *The popular history of graffiti from the ancient world to the present*. (pp. 1-2). New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing.010-9154-0
- Ralph, M. (2009). Hip hop. *American Psychological Association* , 27(3), doi: DOI 10.1215/01642472-2009-025

Sewell, C. (2009, February 17). *A sociologist's look at graffiti*. Retrieved from
http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/17/a-new-look-at-graffiti-writers-lives/?_r=0

Steves, R. (2013, August 08). [Web log message]. Retrieved from
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rick-steves/prague-jumbled-with-histo_b_3728075.html

Stewart, J. (2009). *Graffiti kings new york city mass transit art of the 1970's*. New York, NY:
Abrams.