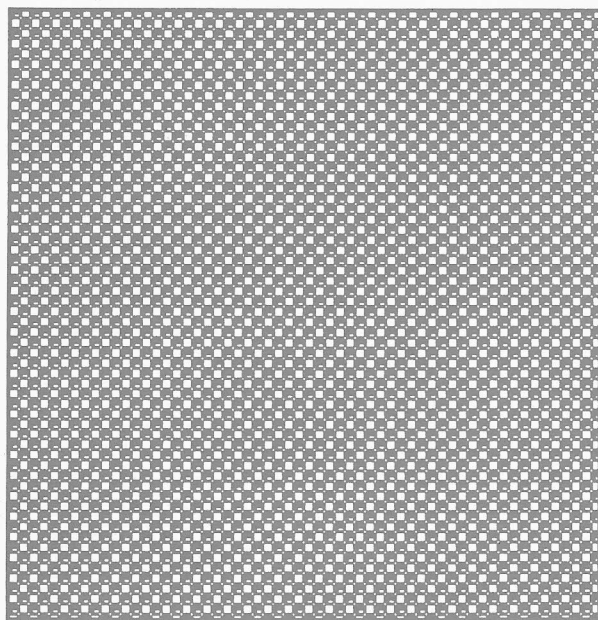


# *Talking Walls*

A Semiotic Approach to Graffiti



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## TALKING WALLS

### A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO GRAFFITI

The wall is here, inevitably. The maculated wall, of course: forced, sullied by more or less intelligible, bearable signs. Rude and coarse as it is, it assaults our look in the most unexpected places, in the most private corners in the urban whirl, but also in the middle of the bucolic peace of the rural atmosphere. The discursive excrescence on this wall —the *graffiti*— is an old, persistent practice, but -now as before- radically renewed. And what follows is an introduction of an integral reading of graffiti, an essay to think about such an obvious phenomenon, this discursive sign in front of which we, as evident as it is, hardly stop to think over (apart from the already known opportunist and conjunctural visions).

Why a theory on graffiti here and now? Perhaps have we not heard enough of it? In fact, we have, but seriously, little. Is it really worth being paid attention to? If people have struggled to hide it, to erase its prints, to prosecute its authors, it is because it is certainly worthwhile. Shall we talk truly, therefore, about these execrable parietal spots, about these vile scribble? Let us talk, in fact, about the expressive willpower of the human being.

Antropologists know, in their extreme understanding, that children and apes share, up to a certain age (let us say three) a common artistic potencial. In the present year (1994), more than thirty drawings made by apes could be seen in the zoo of Amsterdam. It was really surprising the similarity between these *creative* works and those the youngest children made: the same naïve style, with a preference for the most glowing colors, after a Mironian style, joined the human creatures and the apes in an absolutely exceptional behavior, new among the way the other species behave.

Obviously, it is not but significative that apes need a human stimulus in order to show us half a cent of one of their most hidden mimicries: significative and suspicious. Thierry Lenain, a Belgian philosopher, thinks he has found out the cause: apes cannot express themselves plastically in a spontaneous way because they do not have either the required tools or a clearly delimited area where to show themselves creative. In fact, they only paint something when they are provided with the right tools and a blank sheet of paper. *They would never paint on tables*

or on their cage walls. This is the difference with human beings in the first years of their lives.

Human beings, in fact, learn quickly: they know where the colors box is, where the blank sheets of papers are, how they have to start the pictorial mess. They know, besides, that *these* pencils are used for drawing on *these* sheets, and they know they will be punished if they are used out of these preestablished *framework*. But they know, indefectibly, —it is a matter of time— the fruition extracted from disobeying the rules, the pleasure of transgression. This is, therefore, (and not the higher pictorial technique, or the increasing ability for developing the binomial mimicry/innovative capacity), the most specifically human feature which already shows at this age. It —the capacity for leaving the writing framework, for turning signs into discursive violence towards power (the father, the teacher: the Law)— is what makes the difference with an ape, that is, graffiti.

Certainly, mural signs (I say it again: so closely human) are far too important to be left under the city council, the school, or the metropolitan rail corporation cleaning services protection. The language of the walls is everywhere (on the parietal surface or on its metonymical extensions: vehicles, doors, urban furniture, trash containers...), it has *always* been there, but it has only been considered worth being studied since not long ago. In fact, it was not till the 19th century, with the finding of significant *corpora* of ancient graffiti (singularly, the one in Pompei) that some scholars took an interest in a reality as evident as hidden. The surprise those last-century prehistorians (with the Italian Raffaele Garruci (1856) at the head) before the subversive and erotic load the material revealed must have been tremendous. But the research and publicity of these inscriptions (which, from immemorial times, had been alternating with the institutional notices with which the power demarcated its area of influence) did not surpass certain specialized circles. It was certainly the despise towards the popular culture, which would not be rectified till the mid-19th century, what contextualised and clarified the «oblivion» graffiti were practically casted into since their appearance (Riout, 1990).

A researcher with prejudices -our daily bread- is like a doctor who refuses to attend some patients because of their smoking habits, in short: an atrocity. Garrucci and the other researchers who, a century and a half ago, let themselves be blinded by the mural reality without putting on their mirror sunglasses at once, left us a starting point to understand the phenomenon (and also the most universal of their designations, the term «graffiti», from the Italian «graffiare»: scribbling) thanks to which I can now write these lines. But everything was not, then, fun and pleasure:



there was, preceding the Italian, the sadly famous Abbé Grégoire, a Jacobian linguicide who had coined the term *vandalism* to refer, among others, to the habit of writing on monuments or on the public property. Therefore, both basic visions, which still focus the writing on walls, were this way configured.

At present, we seem to witness a reawakening of our interest in graffiti. On the one hand, the phenomenon of the New York subway has spread out a pattern of mural work admired everywhere (and now, by the way, difficult to find out of the «marginal» lines), in such a way that it has even been tried to be incorporated in museums: the first great retrospective of the movement is dated in 1983, and it was organized by the Dutch Wim Beeren, director of the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum. In the very 1991, the former Socialist Minister of Culture in France, Jack Lang, set up, together with the jewels of the Gallic architecture, an exhibition in the Palais Chaillot (headquarters of the National Museum of the French Monuments) which, under the name of *Graffiti Art. Artistes Américaines et Français 1981-1991*, placed in parallel the reproduction of a Romanic fresco from the 12th century with a graffiti from the Paris subway. This latter experience, however, had an unexpected result: the *taggers* of the Parisian *banlieu* did not like the government initiative and exteriorized their protest the way they thought it was more natural: covering with graffiti the flamant suburban rail stations of the city on the Seine. Graffiti, no doubt, does not want to go into the museum.

And the thing is that, on the other hand, the Parisian episode shows how the vandals' language is now coveted by ministers of culture. We are witnesses, in fact, of a cultural movement favourable for the features of the mural discourse: the renowned postmodernity.

If postmodernity is a change in the status of traditional knowledge and a breaking of the reports of legitimation from the Enlightenment (Lyotard, 1979), it also implies a well-known aesthetic redesign, in such a way that an author such as Omar Calabrese (1987) has been able to define our time as the *età neobarocca*. The loss or the renunciation of a universal metalanguage capable of integrating and making sense to the diverse formal systems has encouraged a cultural net where the lighting foundations of modernity have changed into a dark and never ending burlesque eclecticism. Basically, all the features Calabrese mentions in his essay as definers of our time can be perfectly applied to the language of the walls.

Thus, if the postmodern is an «aesthetic of the repetition», the iterative purpose is obvious in the quotidian agglomeration of signs on walls; if the present works of art (also the ones for consumption) are

characterized by the «excess» of what is performed and also of the performance, the decorative and superfluous figures of the New York graffiti are a tangible example; if this is the culture of the detail and the fragment, the wall is the stage of the primary fragment, where the mosaic effect scrubs the entropy with the multiplication of signs and codes upon a common place; if the «neobaroque» style is eager for the metamorphosis and the unsteadiness, nothing else is more ephemeral than a graffiti; if we are in the era of «fractal objects» and of the «intermittent communication» (let us remember the *zapping*), the wall is a privileged place where an imaginary of the stormy chaos in the production, the reception and the continuity of the message becomes apparent; if the maze is the most symptomatic metaphor of the postmodern condition, nothing else is the metropolitan subway or the big cities urban connections, permanently saturated with graffiti; if parody is, as long as «disipating structure», one of the defining features of the aesthetic model I refer to, we will not need to waste time to find it in the graffiti world; if the darkness and the inaccuracy are today's artists' rules, graffitiists' «live painting» is a true paradigm; finally, if the quotation is a resort consubstantial to the postmodern culture (as long as it is a resource which allows the distortion and the mockery of the borrowed discourse), it is present, in the same measure, among graffiti *writers* (Gari, 1993a).

It all explains the reason of graffiti current boom: its intemporal and transfrontier spirit adheres perfectly well to the *Kuntswollen* of this period of crisis, the way postmodernity agents act. It explains their refusal to be filed: to become a «piece in a museum».

The interest mentioned before, unfortunately, has not been concentrated on works capable of explaining to us the essential features of graffiti from a solvent semiotic point of view. The occasional publications on the subject have been limited, generally, to collections of cuttings from odd and decontextualised texts, offering a poor (when not void) theoretic apparatus. We still do not have a substantial volume of reflexions capable of searching for the graffiti place in the contemporary iconosphere, together with its relationship with the hegemonic discourses in our society (literature, comics, publicity, proverbs, television...), with which it shares a porous frontier. We consider this work as a modest contribution in this sense.

In order to carry out the above-mentioned theoretic program, the first thing to do is to explain what we understand as graffiti, such a vacuous and unsteady label as the very same signifier binding it. Personally, I understand as graffiti a discourse in which a sender and a receiver perform a multidirectional dialogue -from their mutual anonymity- on a place

where it is not allowed to (or previously established), yet constructing with different tools an escriptorial place made up of pictorial and verbal elements in appealing osmosis and amalgam. A definition like this one lets us quickly visualize the essential point that a semiotics of graffiti should emphasize, which is no other than the definition of the subject of this discourse and its pragmatic (actuatinal) configuration. Subjects and actions must define the strict communicative dimension of mural signs, while overlooking other considerations of the archeological, iconological o socio-logical kind (even though all visions are, of course, useful and respectable).

Theoretically, thus, there is a subject who performs a modally well-delimited action (writing on a place -any place- where it is not allowed to) and who shapes, this way, a performace even tipified by the laws in force: graffiti assumes a legal violation, its practice receives a more or less hard punishment by the more or less competent authorities. Consequently, we must not be surprised at the anonymity of this nocturnal and clandestine discourse manifestations: the author risks his life. The subject of the enunciation, therefore, remains in the darkness: he lets nobody know him nor he knows the receiver. This mutual anonymity is what has made Regina Blume (1985) define the consequent circuit as a «defective communication».

In fact, not to know the empiric identity of the productive subject of the discourse not necessarily means it is defective from the communicative point of view: it would be so in case what was implied was a strictly informative question (in the mechanical sense of the expression). It is not a manifest problem at all since, more than in the empiric producer of the text, what we are most interested is in its enunciator, and we can only know him from the marks left in the text itself -being as he is a *construction*. of his text. The defiguration of the author of graffiti ( the *writer*, as they call themselves), besides, evidences the adogmatic interchangeable character of the relationship enuntiator-enunciatee, and the twice productive consideration of both: writing and reading are, in graffiti, -beyond any theory- two fully active processes, because neither function is assigned exclusively to one of the two poles of communication (as it happens, in fact, in the other discourses except in the daily conversation).

To sum up, what is brought into play is the construction of an enunciative free from any empiric element: producers and receivers become, more than in any other discursive modality, enunciators and enunciatees (that is, pure textual emanations). The anonymity favors, thus, the configuration of a subject of the enunciation in which writing and reading become undifferentiated practices. What is formed is a great

*collective enunciator*, fully treated ironically in a revealing French graffiti:

Ce mur, c'est moi qui l'avons écrit, co-personnellement tout seuls  
(Signé: Paul-Loup Sulitzer).

The mural subject, therefore, renounces his identity so as to construct a language which, belonging to nobody, is everyone's. But then, the first paradox appears: the very writer of the message, this mask remaining in the darkness squanders everywhere the invisible signature-shaped face. That and no other is the recent phenomenon of *tags*. The anonymity shows now in a proliferation of flourishes certifying an authorship, marking out a territory. These signatures, however (which, in fact, are pseudonyms), do not achieve the function they develop in other discursive modalities: they neither identify clearly and universally the speaker, nor assure the identity between the speaker and an empiric individual (the real producer of the text), a function which in other contexts is carried out thanks to the genuineness required of the whole signature (Ducrot, 1984).

Therefore, it is difficult to establish a pattern of the type of receiver of the mural discourse, as we can with other discourses. The absolute dispersion seems to characterize this figure. Nevertheless, the disorganisation, the receiver displacement, cannot but strengthen the possible transference with the sender category. If the role of the empiric producer of the mural discourse is not institutionally determined (neither can it: its activity is illicit because it encroaches upon a place to which it does not belong and does not suit the supradiscursive normative in force), then the receiver can also become a sender: it is the same anonymity, the same mask. I, the reader, am the writer. Behind the mask there is, inevitably, another mask.

This is the origin of the daily palimpsest on the walls of our towns, of the hipertextual orgy (as Genette would say) put on stage on any buzzing wall every night. It, the mural talk, the dialogue which, as an exception in the contemporary discursive universe, makes graffiti resemble more the ordinary interactions of the oral language (Garí 1993b) than any other rigorously institutionalised discursive phenomenon. We will come back to it later on.

We were dealing above with the tags phenomenon. From the originary deed of the first New York *writers* (Castleman, 1982), this habit of spreading a signature through a particular territory, either with a spray or a felt-tipped pen, has been widely extended throughout the world. In fact, this modality of graffiti (which finds its precedent in the symbols and the names systematically written on the monuments of the past) is a

symptom of the extension and the influence of what I call the *American pattern* on the *French or European pattern* (with great importance to the verbal factor). Gradually, since the late 60s, and in a process parallel to the triumph and the consolidation of the global communicative village, the graffiti pattern directly bred on the surfaces of the New York subway cars has invaded Europe, with its unmistakable features: the prevalence of pictorial signs over verbal ones (or the conversion, better said, of the whole into a figure of iconical interpretation), the consequent importance of factors such as the color or the figurative boldness, the influence of the patterns from television or comics, and, specially, the symbolic function of the activity (the graffittist is a *Hip-Hop* agent, who listens to *rap* music and moves his skeleton after the *break-dance* rhythm). From it all, a significant particular: the verbal signs conversion (the same ones involved in a tag) into a purely plastical value. As Blade, one of the seniors of the movement says, «The name is the main image» (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987).

A unique writing, thus, takes possession of the wall, but it is difficult to know what there is of alphabetical and of iconical in the subsequent amalgam. In fact, if writing has been considered, in the phonocentered occidental tradition, a mere appendix (a «sign of signs»: an unguenuineness), the mural frontier reminds us of its material, visual status and, consequently, of the links with the iconical practice. In the end, if a text is, as the poet Joan Brossa says, «a disordered alphabet», an image is also a group of deconstructed lines and forms. In short, a unique structure (or *archiwriting*, using a Derrida's term) is built on the wall, where images and words form a new and indistinct alphabet.

After all, the simply alphabetical practice and the purely pictorial activity have a similar origin: in the classical Greek, the verb *graphein* (from the Indo-European root \*grph/grph) meant, indistinctly, "draw", "carve", or "write", among other meanings (Ruiz, 1992). Fundamentally, the Hellenic speaker understood drawing and writing were included in a higher category which could be defined as «to carry out visible traces» and this *archiwriting*, still frontier today like yesterday, is the one which has shown neverending along the kilometers of walls in the planet. Of course, as Roland Barthes (1979) says in a clear pragmatic intuition, what is significative in these traces is not the signs (which could be reproduced on a sheet of paper or on a canvas), but the surface they are written on, the channel:

«It is well known that what makes a graffiti is, certainly, neither the inscription nor its message, it is the wall, the base, the table; because the

base exists fully, as an object which has already lived, the writing is added as an enigmatic appendix: that superfluous, in a supernumerary way, out of place, is what disturbs the order; or rather, just as the base is not clean, it is inappropriate for the thought (the opposite to the blank sheet of paper of the philosopher), and therefore, it becomes appropriate for all the other things (art, idleness, sensuality, irony, taste: everything the intellect can regret as many other aesthetic catastrophes).

Let us turn to what matters. We have an anonymous face that puts on stage the immemorial amalgam of letters and drawings every night, and another face, not less anonymous, that *seizes* the message in such an accurate sense of the expression it means: the text belongs to the receiver, to the decodefier, in such a way that, as a singularity, the latter can modify it at will (correct it, cover it, complete it, adorn it,...). The philosophy of the language, however, shows us that every fragment of the discourse achieves a fixed function in behavioral terms. To say something, thus, (and also to draw it, film it or create it in a computer, although in a more problematic way), supposes to carry out a concret illocutionary objective. In some instances, specifically, the discourse is not useful to describe a state of things but this state of things is created by the discursive act itself. These types of enunciations, as known, is what John L. Austin (1962) called «performatives».

The description of the performative potenciality of the discourse is closely linked, according to Austin himself, with the presence of an enunciative I, with which this point of view connects with the general postulate of the theory of the enunciation (Benveniste, 1966). The convergence of both views can be checked in the comparison between the expressions /I smoke/ and /I swear/. In the first one I am described as a character or a subject of the enunciation, who is assumed the action of smoking. The second one, however, introduces an /I/ subject of the enunciation (or, if preferred, an /I/ that syncretises the figures of the speaker and the enunciator). /I smoke/, therefore, is a constative expression and its values refer to the enunciation. /I swear/, on the contrary (which I *do* because of the fact of *saying* it and, unlike the previous case, it is not the same as /he swears/), as long as performative, it concerns the act of the enunciation itself.

As it is clear in the natural languages field, I would like to enlarge (we would need it to question the wall) on the reality of the image. /I swear/, indeed, or /I declare/ or /I bet/, form a specific juridical order of relationship between the discursive character and the world, in such a way that /I smoke/ or /I eat/ do not. What happens, however, if the



piece of the discourse we bring forward is, instead of these linguistic expressions, a notice that says «Do not turn left»? Is it not performative too? Austin himself made a distinction between «explicit performative» and «primary performative», while including in the latter «more primitive» discourses in order to carry out performative acts: the imperative verbal mode, certain voice turns, adverbs and adverbial phrases, connectors, extralinguistic elements (gestures, ceremonies) or certain circumstances of the expression. One of these «primary performatives» is made up, without doubt, of fixed images that, far from any ambiguity, accede to a juridical status compared to the classical performative which Austin referred to: it is, for instance, the traffic signals and other typified symbols to direct the movement of vehicles and people.

These pictograms of low iconicity ( with a strong symbolical component, and, consequently, a poor mimic power) establish, in a certain space, the obligation to carry out a concrete behavior: to stop, not to turn left, not to enter with animals, to give way, etc. If the physical presence of an I enunciator is absent of these pictorial performances (but not that of a collective enunciator far typified: the Law), it is not less certain that these ones have the illocutive force they pretend. Whether it can produce the wished effect is another story: a warning or a verbal swear expressed by a subject invested with the necessary features of authority, credibility and sincerity may also not achieve their objective if the interlocutor is not aware of the illocutive power -or decides to stay away from it- and he does not uptake it.



Picture 1 (Source: the author's file)



The enlargement of this hypothesis to the rest of the images has higher problems by lacking a complete theory on the image as discourse acts. Basically, however, the possibility of interpretation of the discourse of the image is undeniable, even if it is partial. Now we know better the existence of some fixed signal codes and, at the same time, the mural persistence to show a type of very concrete symbols together with verbal texts which remain invariably a known plot. Let us observe a concrete example (Picture 1).

The text we propose for analysis is semiotically heterogeneous: it is made up of two enunciations written in different codes. One of the enunciations has a linguistic character («DROGA NO»: «No drugs»); the other, with an imaginary expression, or if preferred, an iconical one (but made up of a graphysm -the representation of a syringe with a denying cross over it- with a low rate of iconicity, what we more conventionally would name a symbol). The writing is recorded on a worn-out bare wall surprisingly similar to a picture by Tàpies from the matter paintings period (the original and the copy, in fact, get mixed). We know neither the co-text of the message the photographer has constructed (even though we know by intuition that the wall prolongs, probably full of texts like the ones before), nor its immediate context, but we know its generic context: El Carme area in València, a urban Lebanon in debris, of past glories, the paradise of furtive graffitists.

The message is simple and redundant: the negation -its substance- appears twice, in form of a linguistic item, and by means of the sign that helps the image refuse it (a red cross, in the original, outstanding thus the power of the negation). The word «DROGA» gets multiplied thanks to the symbol the syringe meant to represent, that is, the metonymy of a sadly universal activity the text refuses with the simplicity of a NO. The fact that the image has to resort to a rhetorical operation to have access to the required abstraction level reveals authentically the tropes role in the imaginary discourse.

Different codes sharing, in the end, the matter of the expression: there is something in this syringe that reminds us of the alphabetical symbols written with the same spray. It could, in fact, be any letter in a hypothetical alphabet; the same thing happens with each linguistic graphysm, which shows an irregular tendency -it is the same *continuum*, the same *writing*-towards the imaginary figuration. Undoubtedly caused by haste (which makes the two first letters almost illegible) only identified by the receiver's competence and a subsequent graphic reconstruction. It is also caused, however, by a hand aware of the redundancy, of the excess of meaning: the double refusal to drugs, with two ways -so that the vehemence of the

message can be understood- but with an only reading (with different microroutes: sequential in the case of the alphabetical symbols and sincretic in the iconical ones). In fact, the first thing the hypothetical receivers observe, should they come from the right, left or in front, is a form with an iconico-verbal relationship, a really plastical form (this is the original value of the alphabetical symbols on a wall). Then, they stop to complete the identification of the objects and their relationship (the sense of what is represented) and finally they come back to the globalizing terms to catch the sense of the representation.

In any case, it stands to reason that we are in front of a discourse act which pretends a fixed communicative result, which may not be so obvious as it seems at first sight. After all, the creator of our text, why (and what for) has he traced these signs on the wall? An instinctive answer would remind us of the presumable refusal the author feels towards the phenomenon of drug traffic and consumption, but it does not explain the final functional sense of the scribbled signs on a wall. Does it help anyhow the fight against drugs? Is it simply a cry of rage and impotence? The syntax of the text makes us think of other terms: the linguistic enunciation reminds us of other similar ones («No Smoking», «No trespassing», «No dogs allowed»..., accompanied by their images) indicative of a prohibition supported by the power. The pictorial enunciation equally refers to a very concrete type of symbols this banning, warning function has: the above-mentioned traffic signals. Is there not, in fact, in this text a legislative purpose (in the sense Ducrot states, 1984) similar to that of these urban symbols? This is thus its function, which does not fulfil equally -mind you- the linguistic enunciation and the imaginary one: it is the symbol made up of a circle with a horizontal red line on a white base from where a performative value is derived and not from a simple enunciation postulating «No trespassing».

It is not, after all, what Oswald Ducrot refers to when he speaks about «the power of the speech act to breed an ideal world and to legislate for this world»? This is just the illusion this graffiti, and in general the mural discourse, looks for: creating an ideal world -with indeclinably physical limits- and legislating from the other side of the Law, out of the allowed channels. Naturally, the graffiti illegal character determines the absence of an established authority who lets the sender the performative faculty, but this authority is substituted by a performative fiction with a groupal character which delimits a space of allowance/prohibition. The real power of this mural work, however, is shown not only by the perlocutionary sort of every concrete text, but even by its own physical perdurability.

We will now be able to understand different and characteristic graffiti: from the tags fashion and its territorial function, to the well-established habit of the symbol of a heart on any surface (a tree, a wall, a monument), or that other which takes travellers to associate their name with the place visited and which they would never like to be apart from. Also collectives as European football supporters leave their testimonial of a symbolic spatial graffiti-shaped appropriation: to mark the territory of the opposite team is the same, in this sense, as to appropriate it in symbolic terms, by means of a so typified behavior.

In the horizon of the establishment of a typology of the discourse based on functional and non-formalist postulations, the consideration of this performative fiction, which is scenified meaningfully on the neverending walls in the planet must give its game. To differentiate discourses which share certain features, in fact, we need pragmatcal tools or else, we are at the risk of beating about the bush (and, concretely, confusing the stick with the branches).

In the contemporary discursive universe is evident that graffiti comes in direct competence with very close texts because of different circumstances, but this question has not been undertaken yet in a systematic and generalized way. We do not know thus the exact space the mural discourse occupies among the discourses which inhabits its frontier, say literature, publicity, institutional paintings, television or the new holographic and equally infographic experiences, just to quote the most remarkable ones. We consider the following paragraphs a modest contribution in this direction.

Beginning with literature, we must say that a powerful program has investigated up to now (at least since Roman Jakobson) the relationship between the canonical whole of literary works and a series of discourses with which this shares a more or less prevailing «aesthetic function» (or «conditional literariness» as Gérard Genette (1991) has recently updated). If «the frontier which separates the poetic work from what is not is more unsteady than the frontier of the administrative territories in China» -as Jakobson wrote by 1933-34-, then it means there are a series of discursive realities (publicity, proverbs, riddles...) which share with literature the same use of language. Among these realities graffiti itself finds its way in its verbal modality. The problem, once everybody has agreed on this point, is how to define the kind of relationship that links all these discourses and which ones are the devices to differentiate them.

Many answers to the above question have been given, but this is not the appropriate place to carry out a systematic exposition on the subject. It is interesting to note, anyway, that from a pragmatic poin of view,

concretely T.A. van Dijk (1981), from the consideration that a text is proclaimed literary according to the special kind of relationship established between the participants in their communicative performance (with a relevant part played by the contractual conventions between the speaker and the addressee), considers that literature -as long as an «impressive» or «ritual» macroact- belongs to the same kind of discourse acts as jokes or riddles (and we also could include the mural discourse if we followed this logic). A reasoning like this one, however, ignores that the institutional position these discourses occupy is rather different from the one occupied by the literary fact. The *contract* between the enunciator and the enunciatee -which really exists- does not have at all the same clauses. In the case of graffiti, a fact is evident: the mural texts can share with other discourse acts certain features (among which, the use of poetic resorts -rhythm, parallelism, rhetorical figures- is quite evident), but it is its *(counter)institutional legitimacy* nature as a specific game of language (in Wittgenstein's sense, 1953) what singles it out radically. All other discourses, either the one evaluated (Genette, 1991) under the prism of *fiction* (literature itself) or the ones taking shelter under the category of *diction* (the discourses of «conditional literariness»), play after some socially sanctioned rules. Graffiti, on the contrary, operates trampling these very same rules in such a way that, as we have seen, they even construct a performative fiction to form a part of a world from where it should be excluded. This is the hard nucleus that pragmatics of the discourse production cannot ignore.

Definitively, graffiti resemble proverbs, advertising slogans or poems by a field of common practices and homogeneous resorts, but the distance separating them, in terms of semiotic function, is fairly evident. It is not only that the production conditions (the involved technologies) or those of transmission of the different adduced texts are clearly different: it is specially in the reception dynamics where the difference is clearer. If the publicitary discourse has been said to establish a «one-way communication» (Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985), a type of communication in which the receiver is not authorized to change the order of the relationship established to become the sender, the same reflexion can be applied to literature and other discourses, which also can be labeled as «one-way communication»: the enunciator has no right to reply, they are closed discourses and the dialogue is literally impossible. In fact, all the discourses which will be brought forward here (the verbal ones as much as the iconical or verbo-iconical ones) share this textual closure and that is what separates them radically from graffiti.

Before a mural text, we obviously find ourselves with a discursive

game quite different from the previous ones, without any possibility at all of confusion. We face in this one, in fact, the problem of the limits of the game and also its legitimacy. In this sense, the following reflections by Jean-François Lyotard (1979) are relevant:

«In the discourse ordinary use, for instance in a discussion between two friends, the interlocutors fall back on anything, change the game from one enunciation to another: questions, prayers, assertions, narrations rush in confusion during the battle. This is not lacking of rules, but its rules authorize and promote the enunciation main flexibility. Thus, from this point of view, an institution always differs from a discussion in that it requires supplementary limitations so that the enunciation can be declared admissible to its bosom. These limitations work as filters upon the authority of the discourse, break possible connections in the communication nets: there are things that can be said (...) and ways to say them».

What happens when, besides, the player's own legitimacy to carry out his game is doubted (and sanctioned)? The game then becomes clandestine and consequently a challenge to institutions. The right answer towards this discursive insubordination cannot be but terror, that is, the elimination of the already uttered discourse or the menace on the player so that he stops playing.

But let us turn back to the thread of the exposition. The confrontation of graffiti with the other discourses in a poetic function by reasons of juridical (in the sense referred to on these pages) and institutional order. One of them, in special, is shaped, however, as a direct semiotic competitor in the contemporary urban iconosphere: publicity and, concretely, posters.

From the European popular tradition of circus and fairs exhibitions, posters used for publicity are the hegemonic iconic items in the modern city (and, thus, the most powerful semiotic competitors of graffitis because of their attraction over the walking look). Despite their present use as commercial tools (created by a designer, planned by a specialist in marketing and reproduced *ad infinitum* by industrial means), a poster handicraft -and I do not know whether we can speak about it- has also had a publicity function with a political finality: from the Russian revolution (which, with their habit of sticking posters on trains supposes a funny precedent of New York graffitis) to the revolutionary «ateliers» in the French May 1968, going through the productive poster handicraft of the contenders in the Spanish Civil War.

Between posters and graffiti, as we have already said, there is an

evident semiotic competence. Publicity embodies the mural syntax into its texts and graffiti makes a parody of the publicity discourse with an uncunningly corrosive interest. In this mutual pollution, it might be thought that it is the mural discourse the one in danger of losing its identity in front of the almighty publicity look. The facts, however, do not show it this way, and that is why I agree with Regina Blume (1985), for whom «it seems unlikely that it [the publicity voracity] will be in a position to displace the textual category of graffiti».

But if the semiotic competence in the contemporary urban chaos is established by graffiti together with publicity, from an ontological point of view it is evident that the scribble keeps up a special relationship with painting, or as I prefer to call, the *Institutional Pictorial Discourse*. The latter, the natural protagonist of museum corporations, has its more evident origin in the symbolic representations of the prehistoric man. In these primitive figurations there is not still «art» (aesthetic function) or, in purity, «iconicity», but the so human impulse to represent world elements for the group's worship and contemplation is essentially identical to the present one. We must insist, anyway, on the difference between this groupal primitive painting and graffiti: the renown cave paintings were produced by and for the group, and it is what differentiates them from graffiti, which is a *private mark* and above all, it is not sanctioned by the power. It is certainly imaginable, in any case, the appearance of individuals who in this incipient discursive model must have shown their need to escape from the group authority, to establish a channel of communication in the margin of the consecrated use of writing.

The institutional pictorial representations (made particular by their unicist character and by their ritual function, producer of certain «aura» -to use a well-known expression by Walter Benjamin) have been characterized, since the late Middle Age, by appearing in front of their spectators usually marked in a framework delimiting them cognitively and spatially. All the occidental pictorial tradition is based, in fact, on the association between the space of the signifier (picture) and the referential space (field) of the representation (Gauthier, 1982). The habit of isolating the image by means of a continuous rectangular frame (which supposes a perfectly defined condition for reading) is ignored in civilizations such as the Asiatic or the Amerindian, as in the painting of the different periods of the prehistory.

The reasons for this modern convention (incorporated into our encyclopedia since our childhood) have been found in the use of the central perspective system, the geometrical rationality which goes together, and the possible influence of the architecture (the occidental

picture resembles, in fact, the plan of a city wall or the bounds set by a window). From the strict point of view of the History of Art, the origin of the frame must be sought in the Medieval altarpiece, which substituted the till then ruling mural painting. In the context of the scientific and technological revolution of the Italian Revival, thus, a convention of both technical and metaphorical roots expands powerfully, a physical and cognoscitive prothesis of the way of looking that, besides painting, has configured decisively the modern arts of image: the photographic and film camera viewfinders have also adapted, against any natural logic, to the rectangular picture consolidated by painting.

It has not been left, anyway, attempts to escape from this subjection: in some cases the technical possibility -as in the architectural painting- and in others, the pure liberating will of the «sacred rectangle» (as Gauthier calls it) -comics, for instance- has jumped over a not always accepted barrier. But it is precisely graffiti the discourse more clearly has ignored this great occidental convention.

The mural discourse, in fact, has no right to a sanctioned space where it can be practised in the same conditions as the other discourses, and that is why it does not keep up any representational convention. Its *space is a depredated space. It is not configured in its own framework, but, simply, invades the others. It is the perpetual escape from the occidental civilization framework.* It is not hazardly that one of the main attractives of graffiti for many of its practisers has been this spatial and mental transgression. It is because of it that the more it has been tried (from official instances) to dispose a predetermined space so that graffitiists develop their art «within an order» (that is, within a framework) the more the experiment has failed tremendously: graffiti have proliferated everywhere but within the proposed picture. It is the same reason that difficulties considerably the recent attempts to close the mural discourse in museums: the real place, pragmatically correct, of a graffiti inside a museum should not be closed within the narrow limits of one or more pictures, but on the museum walls or, more suitably, *on* the pictures. The cemetery of images, which is a museum (ritual temple of Modernity) is, precisely, the negation of what the mural discourse really means.

It should not be strange, consequently, that the European Avantguard of the beginning of the century were the main protagonist of a rediscovery of the wall (with precedents of this interest in Gauguin's naïve neofigurativism and in the Mexican mural producers' indigene painting). Surrealists, for instance, make the most of the mural teaching for some of their more characteristic practices (the authomatic writing, the game of the «cadavre exquis»). Dadaists do not stay back either, yet getting at



once the transgressing and *épatant* force of graffiti: in 1921, in the Salon d'Automne in Paris, Francis Picabia introduced his «blackboard-graffiti» *L'Oeil cacodylate*, formed by an open collection of autographs.

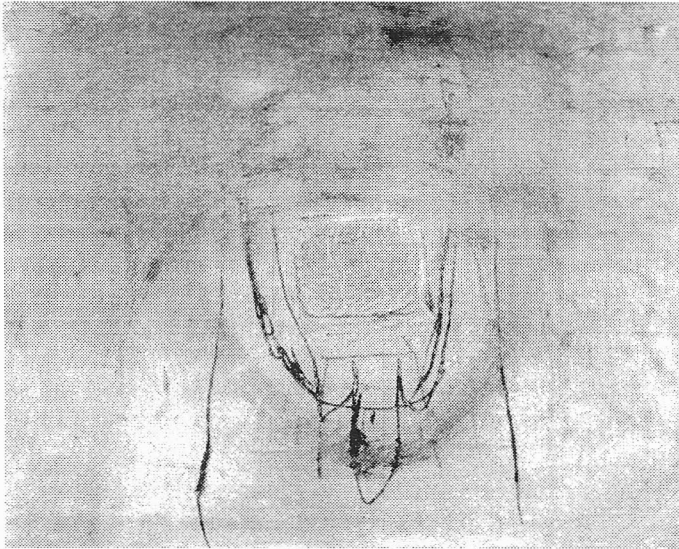
The same concern about the mural reality can be detected in artists so significant for the contemporary art such as Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso or Joan Miró. In spite of it, Antoni Tàpies is usually considered the contemporary author more firmly influenced by the mural discourse. As a matter of fact, the historical importance of Tàpies' art has always been identified with his series of «matter paintings», a set of works produced by the 50s showing a mural appearance and characterized by the density of their texture and their range of colors confined to gray, brown and ochre (see Borja-Villel, 1992). The pictures grafted with mural matter by the Catalan artist evidence the profound concern of the artists of our century about the discourse which is being traced anonymously (in bleeding contrast with the fetishism of the signature in the official art) on the ubiquitous surfaces of the urban connection. Tàpies' interest, specifically, was able to see the reivindication of the low matter on the wall («l'informe»), against the neo-idealist conceptions, made by Georges Bataille.

With Tàpies' matter pictures (but also with the systematic incorporation of the alphabetical signs into painting, like in Cy Twombly's work) the wall is not a physical background any more and has become the main protagonist in art. It shows now its anonymous traces promptly framed on a strange, imitative, radically closed surface. What was once characterized by the absence of a frame, it is now framed everywhere so that it can be shown. Then, which can be the difference between an anonymous graffiti and one of Tàpies' pictures, for instance? (Picture 2).

It may be excessive to think, as many good-faithed people do, that the only disparity obeys to the presence, in the institutional instance, of the signature of the very author. Naturally, the aesthetic value of Tàpies' work is out of doubt, but it is not less evident that his work production and its reception conditions are also radically different from those of the mural discourse. Apart from the problem of the picture, the ritual that determines the reception of a pictorial text in a museum (silent private reading and at a distance) keeps it away invariably from the mural reality.

But as the institutional art gets near the wall, this, in an inverse process, has recently remarked its reproductive character as a part of an enunciative strategy designed for ensuring the diffusion of its messages and guaranteeing its survival. The «serigrafitti» phenomenon responds to it: they are stencil-made texts, with a subject usually borrowed from

mass-media and repeated till society thanks to its easy reproduction (Cano & Rabuñal, 1991). From Paris, during the 80s, these graffiti in serie keep away from the traditional pictorial pattern (founded in the existence of *originals* without *doubles*) to approach the reproductive pattern typical of the discursive phenomena of the contemporary communication (comics, photography, television...).



Picture 2: Gray Painting, No. LV, by Antoni Tàpies [1957]  
(Source: Borja-Villel, 1992)

In this perpetual —centrifugal and centripetal— intersection between the Institutional Pictorial Discourse and the mural discourse, the latter keeps on being configured as the refuge of anonymous artists more interested in increasing what Leroi-Gourham called the «personal art ration» in a society where the split between producers and receivers of symbols raises an insuperable barrier. This art *democratization*, naturally, is in the antipodes of the mess caused by the official painting, a religion officiated at the auctions and consagrated to museums, and more related to economy than to aesthetics.

Going on this walk along the contemporary discursive universe, it is time we referred to television. Of all attempts of a technological uptake of reality, the electronic image is, without doubt, the ruling discourse. Despite its nature even more illusory than that of cinema and less

material than photography, the television massively indiscernible and periodic penetration into the family life has turned it into an orthopaedic eye which substitutes our look at the world by means of electronical impulses of deceptive appearance. And the fact is that this perpetually fragmented, aggressive (it seizes the spectator to a bombing of dust, ions, bacteria and fungus), permanently constructed and deconstructed image of low definition, still resembles, inopinately, the imaginary mural. Of course this theoretical similarity does not invalidate the great differences between both discourses, but we cannot help observing how, for instance, the above-mentioned features defining our period, and which so well characterize graffiti, also delimit exactly the discursive perimeter of television: its intense and constitutive fragmentarism, its tendency to entropy (by means of informative saturation), the substitution of the narration (broadcasting 24 hours a day and refusing, therefore, any form of enclosure) in search of a permanent connexion with its ideal addressee, the configuration of an imaginary space -far away from the topography of the real world- where the difference far/close or periphery/center disappears, the absence of the subject enunciator or, last but not least, the perpetual fulfillment of the scopic pulsion of the spectator with a vision of reality in terms of a strictly *spectacular* logic.

According to it, it is not exaggerated to affirm that probably the two most characteristic discourses of postmodernity are television and graffiti. From among the many features which can separate both phenomena, I am interested now in highlighting only one: their enunciative structure and, thus, the role of the subject enunciator/enunciatee that both discourses postulate respectively. Precisely, the television enunciative pattern is the antithesis of what the discourse mural represents. Despite the viewers' manipulative power (thanks to the handling at their discretion of the image and sound regulators, and to the possibility to change the channel), it has been roughly observed in television that the disassociation between the experience and the participation due to the electronic representation of reality (Lang & Lang, 1968) induces a false participation in the events watched. The viewer is, thus, informed about everything, but he does not take part in anything: he is given the discourse as a literally intangible reality. The only manifestation expected of the receiver is made on a typical pattern of quizzes or at the end of certain interviews: the public takes part personally or by telephone, how, when, according to the exclusive interests and under the conditions of the program responsables.

In front of this reality, gradually opposed by some sectors of the audience, those responsables for television have rehearsed several ex-

periments to -as they say- break the unidirectionality of the television signal. These experiences -called generically «interactive television»- do not respond, in fact, but to the concern of the television channels themselves about the fragmentation of the offer and the consequent loss of audience and publicity investors, all flourished with the zapping cruel reality.

Although, in theory, the «interactive television» opens interesting possibilities for the users' participation in the construction of the television discourse, the up-to-now use made reveals that this participation is, in reality, but a device which ensures the correct reception of the messages of the system (which sends complementary information of certain programs, such as the transcription of cookery recipes), stimulates the home participation in quizzes for specially shy spectators, and above all, it is used for the many measurements of audience and opinion and for the whole catalogue of «interactive publicity». The famous television interactivity is, by now, thus, a pure feed-back device that improves the efficiency of the system, without introducing any substantial change in the receiver' enunciative status.

These television increasing attempts to incorporate the public as partial responsible for its discourse (which, with the opening in the USA, last 4th July, of the *America's Talking* cable broadcasting, have gone in for broadcasting without pause interactive debates and talks) reveal the urgency with which the ruling imaginary pattern tries to make the users believe that their participation is wanted and necessary. Passivity, the great weapon television has used for prolonging its influence and acceptance, becomes now an enemy to fight in a moment in which both the fragmentation of the offer and the difficulty to give really new programs condition radically the addressee's loyalty to the programation of the small screen.

As a matter of fact, we must repeat that the television enunciative pattern (even with its desperate attempts to stimulate the receivers' active participation) is the antithesis of the mural talk. That is why these both great discursive manifestations of our period eventually show themselves as antithetical, two lucid metaphors for whom dares to be lucid in a time of neon, on the confrontation of different ways of the discourse configuration at the end of the second milenium.

But if we have been able to define the electronic image as deceptive because of its phantasmagoric signifier, recent experiments in the field of imaginary discourses, on the way to achieve procedures more and more «realistic» to store the visual information, emphasize even more this matter bareness of the signifier. It is the case of holography and of the set

of procedures which can be grouped under the name of infography (images by computer).

Holograms, as long as «light sculptures» capable of reproducing all the physical dimensions of objects, improve two essential conceptions originated from the Revival: that of the framework and that of the lineal and monofocal perspective (Gubern, 1987), but this renewed impression of «reality» can be obtained by constructing a phantasmagoric image whose light, floating wandering in the space, seems to have been taken from an object that is not present any more, that has been irrecuperably deprived of its more private essence.

Something similar happens with the infographic practices. The generation of images by synthesis by means of computerized procedures has significative points of contact with the production devices of the videographic image, from the common audiovisual terminal with cathodic ray tubes and phosphorescent screen to the use of the digital technique (origin of the new experiences on the called «high definition television»), which codifies the iconical message in basic and discreet points (pixels), to which numerical values are attributed in a system of spatial coordinates. This numerical matrix is *translated* either in the form of an iconical image on a television screen or by a printer.

Emphasizing an image already observable in the video image, infography requires the establishment of a distance between the imaginary matrix and its register support, both at the level of physical extension and the relationship between the «latent forms» and its iconical transcription. This way the isomorphism of the photoquimical image (the one projected on the screen corresponds exactly with the one registered in the storage support) is substituted by a dissociative discourse that requires a process of technical mediation (similar to that of the photographic development) to turn the energetic potencial system into an iconical image.

The infography high creative potencial is fairly evident. The interaction between the human being (this «computerized ape» Gubern talks about) and the computer machine generates experiences such as the renown «virtual reality», in which users create their own world of «intelligent» images from a computer programme, using a special set of glasses and gloves already commercialized in the USA in the summer of 1993 at the reasonable prize of \$100. These experiences are also the base of the so called *Information Highways*, substructures of telecommunications that will be able to transmit at great speed the transit of sounds and images, and that will permit, for instance, new stages of the present projects of «newspapers à la carte» -a direct transmission of information from the publishing house to the readers by means of computers (as in the case of

the pioneer *Time Online*, product of the collaboration of the weekly *Time* with the computation company *America Online*).

All in all, in this multi-colored dominion of the contemporary iconosphere, in this postindustrial and postmodern social model, in which we will be served information on a polifunctional screen (the heiress of the traditional pictorial picture recycled to the present uses) in the form of electric or electromagnetic flows, we witness, on the one hand a spiral of interactive patterns which seek to interest a sleeping receiver by the long promoted passivity, while on the other, the dissociation between the discourse storage support and its exhibition support is consolidated. In front of this reality, of inevitably vicarious flavour, only graffiti -from outside the institutional patterns of representation- is stated as genuinely dialogical and shows itself -from its unavoidable material nature- as the last shelter for the public production of signs in a non-vicarious and non-controlled experience.

The future may go along these *highways* where the society of information will interchange all kinds of data. In front of this futurism, however, the question still is (as Javier Echeverría (1994) has recently stated) who will control the ways in and out of this highway, and also if there will be some kind of traffic police in charge of checking the information vehicles. It is about knowing if foot citizens will be the users of these new ways, or again, they will be cause for the unidirectional empire of the great tele-masters and their commercial interests.

We must think, in any case, that the main discursive battle of the future will be fought between the polifunctional and remote-controlled screen of phantasmagoric signifiers and the mural dialogue, unavoidably matter. It is obvious, however, the latter is not competence -it cannot- for the other, but anyway, it will keep on offering an alternative normative pattern and we hope it will keep doing it: I do not know what we could expect of a world where all remainings of individual and ephemeral matter communion, of ludic and transgressive artistic intimacy -festive, tout court- were eliminated in favor of a remote-controlled vicarious monologue.

It will have been observed, definitively, that the different discourses confronted along these pages with the mural reality share their immutable character, the rate of the same enclosure. It is known that semiotics, with the postulation of a more and more active role for the receiver (who is moving up: he is still considered a *decodifier* and he is already said to be an *interlocutor* or even a *co-enunciator*) has constructed an illusion of purely theoretical foundations: the spectator/reader takes part, if preferred, in the textual reality as long as co-participant (and guarantor of



the textual activation, which, without its performance, could be lost in the virtuality ocean) but always from the other side of the barrier (from the visual window, which it is, eventually, the characteristic support of the literary discourse: the book). He will be able to collaborate, even in cognitive terms, to *confer* the text *spirit*, to attribute the senses arranged for him, but he knows that the *letter* will remain invariably beyond his reach. It is not less certain, however, that this lack of base evidences to be mitigated from inside the productive apparatus, either because of ideological conviction or -more usually- because of feed-back necessities: it is thus that experiments like the literary text which can be constructed physically by the reader (not only in children's genders) and, above all, all the range of *interactive* practices we have already referred to, have been born.

The discourses sanctioned by our society, however, are articulated too clearly as *institutions*. The dialogue, in this sense, cannot be but a mere project answering, above all, to inside necessities of these discourses, which are constructed in such a way that the reader joins the expected world by the text communicative project, that is, that -as Gianfranco Bettetini states (1984)- he *talks* with the text. But this conversation, its «to-and-fro movement», cannot be but a metaphor: it seems to correspond, in fact, to the interpersonal dialogue pattern, but with the remarkable difference that the text signifying manifestations cannot be altered: the receiver cannot become his turn producer. The signs production is kept for a privileged minority.

In front of this reality, the mural discourse behaves symptomatically more as a *discussion* than as an institution. Before the desperate effort of the hegemonic discourses to offer an illusion of real participation in productive terms (although without being able to leave the exclusively symbolic field), graffiti reminds us, with its *dialogical democracy*, of the effectiveness of a discourse permanently exposed to the counter-opinion (like the daily conversation). This is another basic element in order to understand its transgression or, more precisely, its closely *subversive* nature, in all the exact orders of the term: an escape from every systematic discourse, a provocation for the action, a poetics of the violence.

Finally, in a moment in which history recovers the data and the individuals capable of enlarging our knowledge, without taking into account their intrinsic importance in the family tree (*microhistory*), where certain philosophical trends (let us think of Habermas) remind us of the importance of the dialogue as a foundation of a society organized around freedom and consensum, the lesson of graffiti -from the other side of the mirror of the Law- is that the communicative necessity, intrinsic in the



human being, cannot be understood in a narrow preestablished framework or with rules promulgated from above.

Up to a point, I am convinced that we could teach an ape send a message by computer, but I think we would never make it understand that it should paint anything out of the preestablished framework of writing. Even an ape knows what to do and what not to do, which are the games to play to please its master. If we all had the logic of apes, the planet walls would be so clean as the old-fashioned -so old...- eastern side of the Berlin Wall. It is evident, however, that here and now a spotless wall would be unexpected (or rather: uneasy): the very white, unpolluted surface of the Stalinist wall was not but a worrying metaphor. The total cleanliness, because of the absence of writing or because of the reduction of the signifier to a phantasmagoric construction, causes me many enigmas. The *dirt*, anyway, is a closer kind of discourse, because under that infected we can easily discover the language of human beings...

And, in the end, the extreme neatness, on a wall, will always be an invitation for the extreme loquacity.

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