

Hiding in the light: graffiti and the visual

Jeff Ferrell highlights the challenges that graffiti art poses to criminological theory.

Some 20 years ago, Dick Hebdige (1988) proposed that in contemporary society, a youth subculture typically 'forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is hiding in the light'. Hebdige focused this double-edged analysis especially on punks, mods, and other youth subcultures who engage in public activities that mix pleasure, style, and transgression, and in so doing both invite and seek to avoid the attention of adult authorities. By this time, though, another subculture had also created its own distinct public presence, spreading from the United States to Great Britain, Europe, and beyond – and in its global proliferation, pushing Hebdige's notion of 'hiding in the light' to still further levels of visual and perceptual complexity.

Contemporary graffiti

This is the subculture of contemporary urban graffiti, a subculture that over the following 20 years has only continued to increase its public presence in cities around the world. Emerging in and around street-level hip hop culture during the 1970s, contemporary graffiti has been defined from the first by public visibility and visual style. Whether 'tagging' their subcultural identities on walls and bridges, executing quick two-colour 'throw-ups' in urban alleys, or spending hours painting large, elaborate 'pieces' on abandoned buildings or bridge abutments, graffiti writers seek to achieve a sort of stylised visual presence. Specifically, they gain status and respect among other graffiti writers to the extent that they can saturate the spatial environment with graffiti that is distinctive and

stylistically innovative – ideally to the point of being seen, known, and respected 'city-wide' or even 'nation-wide'. In this sense, while graffiti writers are certainly aware, and sometimes even pleased, that their graffiti will be seen by the public, legal authorities, and the media, they are also well aware that other members of the graffiti underground remain their principal audience – and that these other writers will judge each instance of graffiti by elaborate stylistic codes of colour, composition, letter design, and situational visibility.

For criminologists, graffiti in this way constitutes an unusual sort of criminality in that its practitioners seek not to mask evidence of their crimes, but rather to ensure that this evidence is seen. Yet this very visibility is deceiving; in Hebdige's terms, graffiti constitutes a classic case – perhaps for criminologists *the* classic case – of hiding in the light. Day after day, in world cities large and small, contemporary graffiti offers itself up for public viewing and visual analysis – but does so by way of complex visual and interactional codes that in fact undermine easy understanding or analysis. Such are these subtle subcultural codes that each aspect of graffiti's ready visibility – its prominent display on a wall or bridge, its eye-catching mix of colours and lettering styles, its engaging interplay with other forms of

visual marking and symbolic communication – serves mostly to hide its underlying meaning in the light of visual accessibility. Unavailable to the general public, largely unknown even to legal authorities and the media, these subcultural codes confound what can seem so visually self-evident. Failing to visually distinguish one form of graffiti from another, police chiefs and politicians argue that their city's graffiti obviously constitutes evidence of increased gang activity. Unfamiliar with the subcultural focus of graffiti writing, local newspapers opine that graffiti is obviously intended to demonstrate young people's disrespect for authority. Unaware of graffiti's growing commercial appeal, homeowners spot graffiti on the back fence and know that, obviously, such graffiti reduces property values and neighbourhood safety. But of course there is nothing obvious about it; there for all to see, graffiti remains in many ways invisible, its meaning masked by the subculture that produces it.

Subcultural processes

In everyday practice graffiti writing incorporates an ongoing visual and symbolic conversation among its practitioners, and each new instance of graffiti – a freshly executed piece, for example – invites other writers into the conversation. Some may stop by to evaluate the piece and to leave coded commentary nearby; others



Figure 1



Figure 2

may tag next to it in appreciation, or may decide to accept the aesthetic challenge it offers and paint their own piece adjacent to it; still others may dislike the piece, or be caught up in an antagonistic 'beef' with its creator, and so decide to deface it in some fashion. In this way what may appear a simple instance of graffiti is most often only a moment in an ever-emerging process – and in this way popular graffiti writing spots inevitably become over time complex subcultural palimpsests.

Adding to the visual confusion is the fact that not all graffiti-writing spots are equal – or for that matter even stationary. Because graffiti writers gain great subcultural status

from successfully writing graffiti in locations that embody a mix of physical danger, risk of legal apprehension, and public visibility, many writers attempt to place their graffiti in 'the heavens' – that is, on rooftops or atop billboards and motorway overpasses. When successfully accomplished, such heavenly graffiti does indeed become especially visible to the general public, even though such general visibility may or may not have been the primary motivation for its writing. Conversely, writers also value secluded graffiti writing spots hidden from the general public and legal authorities, and known only to other graffiti writers; such spots allow



Figure 3

elaborate pieces to endure beyond the reach of police officers or clean-up crews, and ensure that these pieces will be seen by the underground community of graffiti writers. Moreover, the last decade has seen the growing popularity of writing graffiti on active freight trains, such that in many cities whole swaths of publically visible graffiti are parked for viewing one day and carted away the next (Ferrell and Weide, 2009).

Meaning and motives

As these forms of graffiti intermingle with the larger visual and cultural environment, they come to hide even more deeply in the light. Contemporary freight train graffiti is often juxtaposed or overwritten with the informal train markings of traveling hobos and local rail yard workers. Contemporary subcultural graffiti at times can be seen on the same wall with street gang markings, though the two generally share no causal relationship; in fact, graffiti writers often take care to avoid painting over or otherwise engaging with gang markings, lest they accidentally invoke neighbourhood conflict. At other times or in other situations, though, graffiti writers may cross out skinhead symbols or other racist pronouncements, jokingly experiment with gang styles, or even come to be employed by a local gang in painting a street memorial – a 'rest in piece' – for a fallen gang member. Most confusingly, local and international businesses now deploy graffiti-style advertisements, employ graffiti writers, and even embrace illegal graffiti for the cultural cache' and increased sales it brings (Alvelos, 2004; Snyder, 2008).

For all these reasons, contemporary graffiti – a form of distinctly visual criminality that would seem ready-made for documentation and analysis by way of visual criminology – in fact forces the visual criminologist to confront any number of issues. First is the question of the visual criminologist's role in approaching a phenomenon that is both *already visually ordered* according to elaborate subcultural codes, and also *already visually disordered* by its existence within a



Figure 4

complex urban environment. Any attempt to compile 'comprehensive' visual evidence of the graffiti in a given neighbourhood, for example, will likely have the effect of confounding what are in fact distinct forms of graffiti writing, and will almost certainly fail to find graffiti that is less readily visible. Likewise, assembling a photographic record of a single graffiti writer's work may provide a sort of visual life history of that writer as artist or criminal, but may well mask the differing subcultural significance assigned to various forms of the writer's work. Yet meticulous visual sorting does not necessarily solve the problem either. If for example a visual criminologist is examining contemporary subcultural graffiti, but regularly finds this graffiti to be visually entangled in public environments with gang markings and corporate advertisements, is it the criminologist's job to extract the graffiti from its convoluted visual environment for the sake of analysis, or to understand that environment as integral to graffiti's everyday meaning?

Documentary photography

Answers to such questions can perhaps best be sought not in

criminology but in the field of photography, and particularly in the tradition of documentary photography (Ferrell and Van de Voorde, 2009). As developed from the American Civil War onward, documentary photography has embodied the notion that it is only through long-term submersion in human situations that a photographer can meaningfully document and analysis those situations; without such submersion, the photographer knows neither *what* to shoot, nor *how* to shoot it so as to capture its situated complexity. As regards contemporary graffiti, this insight suggests that the work of the visual criminologist must be grounded in ethnographic research – that is, that any adequate analysis of graffiti as a visual phenomenon must be informed by a careful investigation of graffiti writing as an urban, subcultural practice. By integrating these visual and ethnographic approaches, criminologists can begin to map not only the visual contours of graffiti tags and pieces, but the subcultural and urban dynamics by which these visual patterns are produced and reproduced over time. More broadly, they can perhaps begin to enliven criminological theories of crime with photographic

theories of the visual, and so undertake a more sophisticated visual criminology (Hayward and Presdee, 2009).

Otherwise, it seems, a phenomenon like contemporary graffiti – as visually available as it is – will only continue to hide in the light. ■

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