

The elusive nature of critical codes: Graffiti writing culture in film

Ronald Kramer

University of Auckland, Sociology and Criminology,
Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, New Zealand.
r.kramer@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

This paper engages two ideas put forth by sociologists who are interested in the arts and who have returned to questions of meaning. Amongst such scholars, cultural producers are construed as able to connect with “codes” to create critical works of art. These are then understood to play a pivotal role in redirecting the cultural value systems that constitute our existential frame of reference. Through an interpretive reading of films based on graffiti writing in New York City, I suggest that the relationship between cultural producers and critical codes is fraught with difficulty. Further, when this relationship breaks down we will encounter cultural objects that are more ideological than critical. I conclude by suggesting that culture may not offer a viable space for the pursuit of progressive politics.

Keywords: Graffiti – Street Art – Culture – Culture Industry – Film – Representation

1. Introduction

Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as what the whole has made them. And all its agents [...] are on the alert to ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind.

The moment in the work of art by which it transcends reality cannot, indeed, be severed from style; that moment, however, does not consist in achieved harmony, in the questionable unity of form and content, inner and outer, individual and society, but in those traits in which the discrepancy emerges, in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 100, 103).

These two passages, both of which can be found in Adorno and Horkheimer’s “The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception,” seem to point in two very different directions. The first passage communicates the now familiar

argument that mass-produced cultural products operate as an instrument of domination. The second passage suggests the presence of cultural objects in which the contradictions that constitute contemporary social relations are displayed. By virtue of this ability, culture promotes awareness that social reality falls short of the promises it contains. This is culture as “negative dialectic” (Adorno 1992). Within Adorno and Horkheimer’s framework, which carves the field of culture into sections depending on how it is produced, such claims do not present any logical contradiction. It is “mass culture,” produced by small, yet very wealthy segments of the population and distributed for mass consumption, that promotes the inability to think critically. “Art,” on the other hand, is understood as a mode of production defined by freedom from profit motives and, in this capacity, able to pursue the creation of new, non-formulaic forms. Insofar as this is the case, it could be said that cultural objects made beyond the circuits of mass culture have greater chances of fulfilling critical functions.

Sociological work on the arts and popular culture retains a strong interest in the political-social significance of cultural production. On the one hand, we now have a “production of culture” perspective that explores the relationship between social contexts and cultural objects. On the other hand, seeking to problematize this approach, a cultural sociology that returns to questions of “meaning” has emerged. The latter focuses on cultural texts, such as works of art, popular music and so on, and tends to discover, through hermeneutic methods, truth bearing functions within such works. This critical capacity is dependent on two extrinsic factors. First, the antecedent presence of critical “codes,” discourses and traditions established during the course of earlier social struggles or socio-cultural events. And, second, the ability of cultural artifacts, via their producers, to connect with such codes and deploy them towards “value-rational” ends.

My primary goal in this paper is to question the notion that producers of cultural objects can readily connect with critical codes. I do this by analyzing three films – *Wild Style* (1982), *Beat Street* (1984), and *Bomb the System* (2002) – that take graffiti writing culture (and “hip-hop”) as their ostensible subject matter. These films can serve as illustrative examples that reveal a great deal about the ability of cultural producers to connect with critical codes and therefore operate as sublimated forms that bear witness to social truths. Whereas *Wild Style* reveals that it is possible to produce cultural forms that escape the grip of dominant narrative structures, *Beat Street* and *Bomb the System* suggest that the relationship between cultural producers and critical codes is likely to break down, thereby introducing a large chasm between cultural forms and social projects. Where this occurs one is likely to encounter cultural forms that are more ideological than critical – and this despite a social context that would lead one to suspect the creation of a critical cultural object.

2. The “production of culture” and the return to “meaning”

Following Eyerman (2006), the analysis of cultural objects can be divided into two broad approaches. In production of culture perspectives,¹ the focus is on the social interactions and contexts within which cultural objects are created and disseminated. The major strength of this view is the way in which it challenges the notion that cultural objects and their creators possess some kind of inherent value or singular meaning. However, this is not to say that the social

production of culture is unmotivated. Within such accounts, a wide variety of factors have been identified to explain why cultural objects (or some of them) manage to acquire social significance.

Rejecting Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2002) argument that the division between high and low art reveals objective social tendencies and therefore serves the interests of the working class, Bourdieu (1984; 1993) has argued that such a distinction operates as a mechanism to naturalize class inequality. Others working from within the production of culture perspective have focused on specific social groups and their ability to institutionalize conceptual cartographies, such as the distinction between “high” and “low” art (DiMaggio 1982) or the notion of “genius” (DeNora 1995), to consolidate their class power. Also in this vein, some have argued that what comes to be considered art is a matter of successful labeling processes and the outcome of micro interactions between artists, dealers, curators and/or organizational agents, rather than a reflection of qualities inherent to the art object (Becker 1982; Gitlin 1991; Hirsch 1972; Peterson 1997; Peterson and Anand 2004).

Drawing inspiration from hermeneutic traditions, the field has also seen a return to the cultural object as something that is *meaningful* and therefore demands exegesis. The decision to enter the cultural object has resulted in at least two broad strands of thought. First, the realm of culture and its specific manifestations has been understood as a “recording device” well equipped to track the changing nature of social structures. Jameson, for example, interprets stylistic changes within western art of the twentieth century as an aesthetic analogue of the shift from modern capitalism to “late capitalism” (Jameson 1991). Eyerman and Lofgren (1995), on the basis of an analysis of the road movie genre, suggest that a conceptual apparatus that incorporates cultural values – and an awareness of the shifting social contexts within which such values are realized or fail to be realized – is vital for making sense of aesthetic forms.

Second, one can discern within the return to meaning the readiness to treat cultural forms as *active moments within critical praxis*. In this view, contemporary cultural production cannot be reduced to a project geared towards the perfecting of social domination. Based on an analysis of the use of popular music within social movements of the twentieth century, Eyerman and Jamison suggest that popular cultural forms (such as folk music of the 1960s, punk and rap from the late 1970s onwards) draw from extant critical traditions

– or what one might call “cultural resources” – not only for the sake of pursuing temporally specific political objectives, but to re-articulate (progressive) cultural values and, on this basis, create anew specific social relations. As they ultimately conclude:

[M]usic, as an aspect of the cognitive praxis of social movements, has been a resource in the transformation of culture at this fundamental, existential level, helping reconstitute the structures of feeling, the cognitive codes, and the collective dispositions to act, that are culture (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 173).

Drawing from an analysis of less popular cultural forms, Witkin (1997) has pursued a similar line of argument by interpreting Modernism, particularly through a close reading of Manet's *Olympia*, as an aestheticized critique of the class and gender relations that have been naturalized within modern capitalist society. In a manner comparable to Eyerman and Jamison, Manet's “critical aesthetic” allows Witkin to speak of the presence of “cultural resources”:

Olympia takes its place as one among a number of cultural resources that serve to unmask the pretense and illusion involved [...] in the spiritual claims of a sphere of purely personal relations in modern society (124).

Despite exploring what may appear to be radically different ends of the creative spectrum, the accounts of Eyerman and Jamison (1998) and Witkin (1995; 1997) display a striking similarity. Both analyses rest on the assumption that critical codes exist within our cultural ether and can be utilized by cultural producers to recreate existential conditions. Moreover, there is a tendency to read the relationship between critical codes and social projects as relatively unproblematic: In Witkin's account, Manet's modernism is held to represent an aesthetic sublimation of sociological theories, yet the artist need not have any awareness of sociological ideas to develop a grammar that mirrors the work of Marx, Weber, Simmel, Toennies and so on. Rather, Manet just happens to produce a critical set of aesthetic codes, the structure of which reproduces the kind of critique likely to be found in sociological discourses.

3. Wild Style, Beat Street, and Bomb the System.

Although produced in distinct time periods, *Wild Style* (1982), *Beat Street* (1984), and *Bomb the System* (2002) share much in common. All three films take their inspiration from New York City's graffiti writing and hip-hop cultures. Moreover, they all feature and were developed in consultation with active graffiti writers, rappers, break-dancers and individuals, such as Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver,² who were very close to the graffiti and hip-hop “scenes” of New York City. Further, despite the differences concerning the production centers from which these three films emerge – *Wild Style* and *Bomb the System* are independent films whereas *Beat Street* was made by a major Hollywood movie studio – they all claim to offer a sympathetic portrayal of graffiti writing culture. If *Wild Style* promises to “capture” the “South Bronx scene,” *Beat Street* invites us to “feel the rhythm” and “catch the beat.” *Bomb the System* assures us that we are about to encounter an “unforgettable portrait of the often misunderstood art form and culture of graffiti.”³

To express this in the terms that a sociology intent on returning to meaning might use, these films promise to fulfill critical functions that will revise common-sense perceptions concerning graffiti writing. Despite the shared intention to offer cultural critique, and a context of production that suggests this will indeed transpire, we will see that only *Wild Style* manages to accomplish this task. Conversely, *Beat Street* and *Bomb the System* do little more than reproduce dominant ideologies concerning graffiti writing culture.⁴ In this sense, analyzing these films can be regarded as a case study of sorts, one that illustrates how difficult it can be to produce subversive cultural products even when “critical codes” are available.

4. Wild Style, where “critical codes” get their 15 minutes of fame

Wild Style was written, directed and produced by independent film-maker Charlie Ahearn and co-produced by Fred Brathwaite (“Fab Five Freddy”). Brathwaite was an active writer on the New York City subway until 1975 and it was he who suggested to Ahearn the viability of making a film that included graffiti, rapping and break-dancing.⁵ Of the cast, very few made a living as professional actors. The majority of the cast – that is, the rappers and break-dancers

– appeared as their real life selves. While “authentic” graffiti artists appeared in the film, they were given scripted roles. As the producers acknowledge, the point of *Wild Style* was not to make a great movie per se, but to develop a story that could serve as a window into hip-hop culture and the urban world in which it was embedded. Thus, in some respects, *Wild Style* almost resembles a documentary that provides a platform to expose many of the people responsible for the creation of then “emergent” (Williams 1958; 1977) forms of cultural expression.

Yet *Wild Style* does not dispense with a storyline altogether and it is this narrative component that contains much of the film’s normative core. The film’s central character is Zoro,⁶ a young energetic graffiti artist negotiating struggles that revolve around love, the (il)legality of his actions, and the possibility of incorporation into the art world. Despite this list of struggles Zoro never questions the value of graffiti writing, rendering his struggle of a different order than any other comparable figure, such as Ramo from *Beat Street*. Ahearn’s Zoro is unique insofar as his graffiti writing is not pitted against alternative life choices that demand his withdrawal from graffiti writing culture.

As his encounters with his older brother make clear, Zoro takes it for granted that he is an artist and that the objects he produces can be called art. He does, however, struggle to discover what it means to occupy this social position. Zoro learns, mainly through Rose,⁷ that being an artist is not so much about how the world affects you as an individual, but how your creativity affects the world of which it is a part. It is in graffiti writing that Zoro finds his altruistic self. Having learned that as an artist he is part of a greater whole, and the importance of thinking of others, Zoro is rewarded with the joy that such self-awareness can bring. This joy is particularly evident in the closing scenes where Zoro, having created the artistic backdrop to a music event, literally sees how his art constitutes an important element in re-affirming the “collective conscience” of a social group.

By subsuming graffiti writing under the categories of “art,” “altruism,” and “social renewal,” *Wild Style* manages to offer a critical discourse. Alongside the framing of graffiti as a practice that fulfills a public good, the film’s critical standpoint is embedded in the way in which it deliberately blurs the boundaries between graffiti writing and popular notions of “art.” In this instance, art is employed as an appreciative label, one that seeks to construe graffiti writing as a cultural practice that demands some degree of social

recognition. Subsequent films have veered away from this kind of conceptual framing, preferring to condemn their central characters to death instead.

Zoro’s journey, moreover, is not only one of personal importance, but also of socio-cultural significance. His writing career takes him into many parts of the city, including the Bronx, where rap music and break-dancing are in the process of becoming unique cultural practices. Ahearn uses the spatial aspect of Zoro’s journey to expose many of the key figures involved in the development of what we now know as rap music and break-dancing, going so far as to include entire songs and performances of many pioneering rap artists and break-dancers. Through the use of many establishing shots, Ahearn documents the spatial environment, the Bronx, in which these cultural forms developed. It is one thing to hear of what the Bronx looked like throughout the 1970s and 1980s; another thing to actually see it. It is no over-exaggeration to say that many years of government neglect, and even hostility (see Berman 1982), produced an urban environment that, at least to some extent, resembled a war-torn city. The juxtaposing of these two aesthetics – war-torn urban environment versus three vibrant cultural practices – reveal a great deal about the assumptions Ahearn and Brathwaite import into this film. Arguably, the guiding normative claim of *Wild Style* is that graffiti writing, rapping and break-dancing constitute something akin to a “phoenix in the ashes.”

5. *Beat Street*, where death becomes a normative “litmus test”

Shortly after the release of *Wild Style*, MGM studios released *Beat Street* (1984). Like *Wild Style*, the producers of *Beat Street* consulted several people who were familiar with what was happening in New York City. For example, Steven Hager, author of *Hip hop: The illustrated history of break dancing, rap music and graffiti* (1984), provided the story and Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, the producers of *Style Wars*, provided much of the information upon which the film depended. *Beat Street* also featured some prominent figures from within New York City’s rapping and break-dancing circles. While this influence lends the film a semblance of credibility, *Beat Street* is ultimately dominated by the kind of aesthetic standards that producers are likely to consult when seeking to engage a mass audience.

With its emphasis on interpersonal relationships and success, *Beat Street* is, thematically speaking, like many other mass produced films. The only significant difference being the hip-hop context in which these themes are played out. The film follows the lives of Kenny and Ramo, each entangled in a series of personal struggles. While Kenny negotiates the pitfalls of love and striving for success as a DJ/rapper, Ramo is plagued by two sources of conflict. The first occurs between him and another graffiti writer named Spit, who is responsible for destroying Ramo's pieces; the second conflict involves his father who insists that he stop painting graffiti and start living by "traditional" notions of masculinity (Connell, 1995). It is the way in which these life trajectories play out that reveals the film's ideological standpoint concerning writing culture.

Kenny's most significant encounter as a DJ/rapper pursuing commercial avenues of success occurs when he decides to audition at the Roxy for the headlining act at the club's New Years Eve celebrations. The man in charge of casting talent is Monte, who we first encounter at an audition space in which he sits in judgment of young hopefuls. Kenny's manager, Chollie, enters and convinces Monte to see Kenny at his regular Saturday night gig, which involves "spinning" at Kool Herc's highly respected, but presumably less profitable, club. This leads to an encounter between Monte and Kool Herc in which the former convinces the latter that he would never try to steal his "main man." Rather, Monte is only interested in giving Kenny some extra exposure. What may appear to some as an exploitative relation actually turns out to be an arrangement that serves the interests of all involved: Kenny achieves greater success through increased exposure, which boosts the reputation of Kool Herc's night spot; Monte stages a memorable New Years Eve party; and the masses are entertained.

It is important to note here the ideological commitments and assumptions that undergird Kenny's trajectory through this cinematic space. The most obvious of all the ideological commitments embedded within this aspect of the story is that with persistence and dedication anyone can succeed in America. This is supposedly facilitated not only by the accessibility of the culture industry, but also by its mobility. As the interactions that occur between Kenny, Chollie and Monte make clear, the door to the latter's audition space is "open." Moreover, if one would prefer, the culture industry will even come to you. Of course, Kenny's story also reinforces the view that success is best understood as

the extent to which one is recognized by the mass culture/entertainment industry - an industry that Monte assures us is devoid of exploitative social relations. Ultimately, then, Kenny's trajectory should be read as one that assumes and verifies the legitimacy of DJ-ing/rapping while disavowing graffiti writing. In short, Kenny makes the "right" choice in his personal life struggle.

This leaves us with Ramo, who now embodies what it means to choose graffiti over other life possibilities. About a third of the way into the film we learn that Ramo is not only a graffiti writer, but also a "dead-beat-dad." The mother of his child is Carmen. Neither her mother nor Ramo's father are much too thrilled about his dead-beat-dad status and both want him to start acting more responsibly by finding stable employment, getting married, and taking care of "his" family. As even friends like Kenny start asking him to consider his future, Ramo makes some effort towards "improving" his masculine status. He gets a day job and moves his family into an abandoned apartment building uptown. He even gathers a few friends to help fix the place. They replace broken - i.e., absent - windows by rolling plastic sheet over the spaces and Ramo takes care of several interior design problems by spray painting pieces in the apartment.

Yet despite his best efforts, Ramo just can't seem to kick his graffiti habit. His addiction is not helped by the fact that the Metropolitan Transport Authority is attempting to re-paint the subway fleet white. In time he notices a "white one" on the A subway line, which means it will be stored in a lay-up area in which it can be painted over night. Ramo takes Kenny along to the lay-up area to assist him in fulfilling his newly acquired dream of painting the "white elephant."⁸ They paint a "hip-hop-don't-stop" piece on one side of a train car before proceeding to paint the car's other side. As they are at work, Ramo hears the faint sound of spray paint coming from somewhere nearby. He walks back around to the "hip-hop-don't-stop" piece to find Spit destroying his work. He yells out to Spit, who turns to Ramo. In the process we catch a glimpse of Spit's dirt-covered face. The dirt, in combination with his startled look and generally disheveled appearance, assure us that we are in the presence of a being whose existence registers well below the threshold of civility. Nevertheless, Ramo chases Spit through the subway system and eventually catches up to him on tracks that run parallel to a station platform. The people on the platform become witnesses to the struggle that ensues between Spit and Ramo, which ends when both figures, now entangled, fall

onto the third rail and die.

With Ramo's death, *Beat Street's* ideological standpoint concerning graffiti emerges. Whereas DJ-ing is positioned as an appropriate choice that will lead to success, graffiti is constructed as a dead-end pursuit. Ramo's desire to paint graffiti, moreover, is held to represent the diametrical opposite of Kenny's decision to pursue commercial success. To the extent that writing culture is posited as a dead end pursuit not on the basis of its illegality nor its cost to taxpayers, but for the harm it may bring to its participants,⁹ it may be possible to see some signs of a progressive politics at work. Ultimately, however, the text treats graffiti writing as a monolithic entity: while Spit and Ramo may represent the end points of a continuum within graffiti writing culture – where Spit is the “graffiti vandal” and Ramo the “artist” – they die together. Immersion within graffiti writing culture, no matter what form it may take, assures a kind of death that, as earlier scenes in the film make clear,¹⁰ is heavily invested with normative significance.

6. *Bomb the System*, where anomie triumphs within the sphere of critical discourse

Admittedly, and to side with cultural critics such as Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) and Macdonald (1957), we should not be too surprised to find Hollywood produce such standard fare. One might suspect, however, that an independent film would do a much better job of connecting with critical codes. There is little doubt that *Bomb the System* (2002), like *Wild Style*, was made in close consultation with many prominent New York City graffiti writers. While some were cast in important roles, many more made cameo appearances. Renowned graffiti writers also contributed to *Bomb the System* by producing the art work featured in the film and, if the contents are any indication, by sharing many stories from the folklore of writing culture in New York City.¹¹ Nevertheless, *Bomb the System* does not echo the critical perspective found in *Wild Style*, as one might be inclined to expect, but recapitulates the ideological standpoint espoused by *Beat Street*.

Once again, it is the life struggles and choices of young men – Lune, Buk50 and Blest – who display various levels of commitment to graffiti writing culture that provides the film's normative core. *Bomb the System* begins with the motif of death, which emerged as a central signifying device in *Beat*

Street. In the opening scene we encounter Blest's definitive memory of his older brother Lazaro, who died one night by falling from the Brooklyn Bridge whilst painting graffiti. The memory is recalled immediately prior to Blest meeting Buk50 to embark upon a late night graffiti spree where they will be observed by two police officers from the anti-graffiti vandal squad.

While the two officers sit in their vehicle during a stakeout, the relationship between death and graffiti becomes the focus of their conversation. Bobby Cox, who sees no merit in graffiti and who harbors an obsession with its eradication that will ultimately lead to his suicide, is astonished to learn that his partner, Shorts, was a graffiti writer during the 1980s. Shorts defends his earlier indiscretions by claiming that as a socially marginalized youth his life chances were effectively restricted to a choice between gangs or graffiti. Shorts insists that he made the right choice: whereas the gang members he knew ended up paralyzed or dead as a result of being shot, the graffiti writers he associated with managed to attain “decent jobs,” if not careers.

Although Shorts appears to offer a critical discourse that dissociates graffiti from death, thereby undermining the ideology espoused by *Beat Street*, it soon becomes evident that this is hardly the case. Rather, Shorts's discourse serves to re-inscribe death, especially violent death, as the ultimate standard against which graffiti can be evaluated. An interpretation along these lines becomes difficult to refute as Buk50 and Blest meet their demise.

Not being the film's central character, Buk50 is the first to die. After illegally painting elaborate “pieces” on a building rooftop late at night, Buk50, Lune and Blest casually stand around at the “scene of the crime” and discuss the pleasures afforded by painting graffiti. Suddenly, Bobby Cox and Shorts “raid” what has become an almost cozy gathering amongst the three graffiti writers and attempt to arrest them. The police officers corner the three and an altercation between Bobby Cox and Buk50 ensues. The latter, deeply immersed in graffiti writing culture and thus well armed with “rationalizations” (Sykes and Matza 1957) for the practice, insists that he and his friends “ain't terrorists.” This only seems to enrage Bobby Cox who then forces Lune to deface Buk50 by spray painting his sweater. Lune protests and is grabbed by Cox who threatens to break the kid's neck. Shorts, seeing that the situation is escalating, attempts to restore order by pulling out his gun. Bobby Cox, following Shorts's lead, throws Lune aside and also pulls out a gun,

which is pointed at Buk50. The latter, not scared by this, encourages Cox to put the gun away and fight him. Bobby Cox acquiesces to this demand and is then knocked to the ground by Buk50. As he gets back up Cox pulls out his gun, puts it to Buk50's face, and pushes him to the edge of the rooftop. Shorts, in what is perhaps best described as a counter-intuitive move, attempts to restore order by firing his gun into the air. The loud gunshot, however, simply startles everyone, especially Bobby Cox, who loses his grip of Buk50 who then falls over the rooftop edge to his death.

Whereas Buk50 dies a martyr's death, the demise of Blest is closer to "tragic." Unlike Buk50, Blest is torn between graffiti writing and alternative life courses, either of which would symbolize the attainment of maturity and the directing of his creative talents towards socially meaningful ends. On the one hand, Blest's mother encourages him to apply to art school and, sure enough, he eventually gets accepted to a well-regarded college in San Francisco. Upon his acceptance to college, Blest's mother uses the opportunity to re-articulate what death connotes and what it will mean to reject this life chance. As Blest questions whether he will actually attend college, his mother dispenses some sage-like advice that echoes Kenny's mother in *Beat Street*: "What's your alternative? To keep doing what your brother [Lazaro] did? You're going down the same road. I've been through this before [...] I refuse to go through that again." Rejecting college implies death and is therefore, obviously, the "wrong" choice for Blest to make.

On the other hand, Blest's love interest, Alex, belongs to a loosely organized coalition of "young turks" who question the corporate control of public space through stickers and stencils. Alex not only asks Blest to travel across the US to assist in the pursuit of her political project but, more importantly, invites him into an intimate relationship that effectively demands his withdrawal from graffiti writing culture.

It is in the midst of his struggle between graffiti, art school and love that Buk50 dies. Buk50's death sends Blest and Lune into separate, privatized worlds of mourning. As Lune descends into a depressive state that eventually translates into the desire to avenge Buk50's death, Blest finally acknowledges that it is time to "head west." He even decides to find Lune and take him along. Blest discovers Lune, who is now carrying a gun, on a drug dealers boat. He convinces Lune to hand over the gun and leave New York with him. As they are leaving, they find Bobby Cox, now suspended

from the police force and under investigation, in an alleyway scrawling graffiti that reads "fuck Buk." Outraged, Lune encourages Blest to shoot Bobby Cox. While Blest pulls out the gun he took from Lune and points it at Cox, he realizes that he cannot pull the trigger. However, it is soon too late: Cox takes out his own gun and, before turning it upon himself and committing suicide, kills Blest.

Bomb the System concludes with a statement on the relationship between "choice" and "justice." We hear the voice of Blest, who theorizes his brief existence in the following way:

In the end it all comes down to Karma. Life is just one big circle constantly repeating itself [...] We're all given choices. You make the wrong choice and you pay for it. You can't escape fate and you can't escape justice. In a way, I'm glad all this happened; it's my way out. I truly am blessed.

While multiple interpretations of this statement are possible, it seems that two readings readily suggest themselves. The first interpretation might claim that Blest's closing statement represents a pessimistic worldview in which death becomes a not entirely unwelcome means of escape from the supposed monotony of life. However, not even Blest appears to lend his full support to such a reading. After all, he is only content with his death "in a way." It seems, in other words, that there is an awareness here that a different outcome is possible and desirable.

The second interpretation would claim that *Bomb the System* effectively wraps the ideology that we saw articulated by *Beat Street* in metaphysical absurdities. If *Beat Street* saw graffiti writing as a dead end pursuit, *Bomb the System* insists that the death involved is assured by a quasi-divine cosmos that evidently transcends social, cultural and political realities. To choose graffiti writing is to invite a "fate," a "justice" that one simply cannot escape. While it is difficult to imagine even its staunchest opponents claiming that graffiti is a practice that warrants an inescapable death, it is reasonable to suspect that this is the kind of sentiment that gets conveyed when dominant ideologies infiltrate and suffuse aesthetic products. Given its independent production and the involvement of graffiti writers, it is all the more surprising that *Bomb the System* churns out an ideology that almost makes *Beat Street* come to resemble a repository of critical discourse.

7. Conclusion

An exploration of the narrative content of films inspired by New York City's graffiti writing subculture, the preceding analysis problematizes some of the arguments put forth by sociologists interested in returning to meaning and, albeit to a lesser extent, some of the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer. The former have tended to see cultural producers as capable of connecting with codes and traditions to create critical works of art. These are then understood to play a pivotal role in redirecting the cultural value systems that constitute our existential frame of reference towards progressive ends. There is, however, a question here: how much weight can we really lend to the notion that the sphere of cultural production (and its particular manifestations) fosters progressive social and political change?

In analyzing *Wild Style*, *Beat Street* and *Bomb the System*, it was found that each was produced within close proximity of critical codes that, theoretically at least, were capable of investing the films with critical functions. All films were made in consultation with graffiti writers or individuals who were not only very familiar with graffiti writing subculture, but known to be quite sympathetic towards it. Yet, only *Wild Style* offered a cinematic portrayal that challenged the dominant discourse on graffiti by coding the practice as an art form, if not one of the few cultural assets to have emerged from an urban space predominantly known for being abandoned by public officials. *Beat Street* and *Bomb the System*, on the other hand, associated graffiti not with art, but with death. Moreover, through the incorporation of scenes that signal the meaning of death, both films made the normative import of the association in question remarkably transparent.

In the case of *Beat Street*, a Hollywood film seeking to engage a mass audience, this is somewhat understandable. However, in the case of *Bomb the System*, an independent film made in the shadow of *Wild Style*, which certainly offered the nearest thing to a tradition that could have been appropriated towards critical ends, to uncover little more than a cinematic rendition of the dominant political discourse on graffiti is revealing. If these films struggle to connect with critical codes and traditions, how can we expect them to transform shared "structures of feeling" or the "collective dispositions" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 173) that delimit our actions? Further, that a film can be created outside the logic of mass-culture, and yet remain ideological, certainly calls into question Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that

critical potential is a function of independent production.

Two decades after Hall et al (1976) crafted the notion of "symbolic resistance," Watkins (1998: 231) also wondered, albeit in a slightly different context, whether "increased symbolic capital, largely on the terrain of popular media culture" could translate into "political and economic capital that can begin to reverse some of the disturbing trends that define black American life"? If these films are any measure, it seems unwise to place one's "political faith" in the sphere of cultural production.

Notes

¹ I use the term "production of culture" quite broadly. Here it serves to situate perspectives that focus on how cultural objects are conditioned by, but also play a role in conditioning, social contexts. To be sure, some scholars would prefer to use the term with much less elasticity.

² Henry Chalfant is a major documenter of graffiti in New York City. He co-authored *Subway Art* with Martha Cooper in 1984 and *Spray can Art* with James Prigoff in 1987. In the early 1980s Chalfant and Tony Silver produced *Style Wars*, a documentary on New York City graffiti that is now highly regarded amongst graffiti writers not only in New York City but throughout the world (author).

³ These descriptions have been taken from DVD covers and jackets, which, to paraphrase Barthes (1983), could be said to constitute "written film." In this context, "written film" strives to convey that we are about to encounter something "critical."

⁴ I have explored what constitutes the dominant discourse on graffiti in New York City (and other major US urban areas) in much greater detail elsewhere. To put it briefly, the dominant ideology claims that graffiti is nothing more than a criminal or "outlaw" act; one that constitutes a serious threat to social and economic stability, citizens, and the individuals who produce it (author, XXXX; XXXXa; XXXXb).

⁵ See the extras on the 25th anniversary edition of *Wild Style*, which includes an interview with Brathwaite and Ahearn.

⁶ Played by Lee Quinones, a very well known New York

City graffiti writer whose work has appeared in numerous publications, such as *Subway Art*, *Spraycan Art*, and *Getting Up* (Castleman, 1982). He is now a successful gallery artist.

⁷ Played by Sandra Fabara or “Lady Pink,” another very well known New York City graffiti writer. Like Lee, she has appeared in many publications and documentaries.

⁸ “White Elephant” was a term used by New York City writers to describe the subway fleet after the MTA attempted to repaint it white. See *Style Wars*.

⁹ Cf. statements made by officers Rotun and Bianco in Castleman (1982: 166).

¹⁰ The most important scene along these lines involves Kenny’s mother comparing break-dancing to gang-related violence and death. A mother losing her son due to his involvement in subcultural activities is portrayed as the worst possible fate, thereby setting up death as the ultimate litmus test for judging the practices of youth.

¹¹ For example, Blest paints the Brooklyn Bridge, an accomplishment that can be credited to Smith and Sane (see Powers, 1999). Blest also writes his life story on his bedroom wall, which references the well known “diary entries” that Revs painted in the subway tunnels of New York City. Other examples could easily be added.

References

Adorno, T. 1992. *Negative dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York: Continuum.

Adorno, T., M. Horkheimer. 2002. *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*. Translated by E. Jephcott. California: Stanford University Press.

Ahearn, C., and F. Brathwaite. 1982. *Wild style*. Los Angeles, CA: Rhino/Time Warner.

Barthes, R. 1983. *The fashion system*. Translated by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.

Becker, H. 1982. *Art worlds*. Berkeley: University of California

Press.

Berman, M. 1982. *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. 1993. *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Cambridge: Polity.

Castleman, C. 1982. *Getting up: Subway graffiti in New York*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Chalfant, H., and J. Prigoff. 1987. *Spraycan art*. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Connell, R. W. 1995. *Masculinities*. St Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin

Cooper, M., and H. Chalfant. 1984. *Subway art*. London: Thames and Hudson.

DeNora, T. 1995. *Beethoven and the construction of genius: Musical politics in Vienna, 1792-1803*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

DiMaggio, P. 1982. “Cultural entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Boston: The creation of an organizational base for high culture in America.” *Media, Culture and Society* 4: 33-50.

Eyerman, R. 2006. “Toward a meaningful sociology of the arts.” P.p. 13-34 in *Myth, meaning and performance: Toward a new cultural sociology of the arts*, edited by R. Eyerman and L. McCormick. Boulder: Paradigm publishers.

Eyerman, R., and A. Jamison. 1998. *Music and social movements: Mobilizing traditions in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eyerman, R., and O. Lofgren. 1995. “Romancing the road: Road movies and images of mobility.” *Theory, Culture and Society* 12: 53-79.

Gitlin, T. 1991. “Movies of the week.” P.p. 335-356 in

Rethinking popular culture: Contemporary perspectives in cultural studies, edited by C. Mukerji and M. Schudson. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hager, S. 1984. *Hip hop: The illustrated history of break dancing, rap music and graffiti*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Hall, S., and T. Jefferson. 1976. *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. London: Hutchinson.

Hirsch, P. 1972. "Processing fads and fashions: An organization-set analysis of cultural industry systems." *American Journal of Sociology* 77: 639-659.

Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lathan, S. 1984. *Beat street*. Santa Monica, CA: MGM.

Lough, A. 2002. *Bomb the System*. New York: Palm Pictures.

Macdonald, D. 1957. "A theory of mass culture." P.p. 59-73 in *Mass culture: The popular arts in America*, edited by B. Rosenberg and D. W. White. New York: Macmillan.

Peterson, Richard A. 1997. *Creating country music: Fabricating authenticity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peterson, R. A., and N. Anand. 2004. "The production of culture perspective." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30: 311-334.

Powers, S. 1999. *The art of getting over: Graffiti at the millennium*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Silver, Tony, and Henry Chalfant. 1983 (re-released 2004). *Style wars*. Los Angeles, CA: Public Art Films.

Sykes, G., and D. Matza. 1957. "Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency." *American Sociological Review* 22(6): 664-670

Watkins, S. C., 1998. *Representing: Hip hop culture and the production of Black cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Williams, R. 1958. *Culture and society: 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Williams, R. 1977. *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Witkin, R. W. 1995. *Art and social structure*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Witkin, R. W. 1997. "Constructing a sociology for an icon of aesthetic modernity: Olympia revisited." *Sociological Theory* 15(2): 101-125.