

Ukrainian War Graffiti

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Abstract. The proposed article examines graffiti related to the war in Ukraine. Based on a socio-philosophical perspective, the author explores graffiti as a socio-cultural phenomenon and sets out to explore the following research questions: How has graffiti gained visibility and interest among the general public in Ukraine (beyond subcultural communities)? and How has graffiti's symbolic communication evolved in response to wartime circumstances? The study includes a general overview of murals and graffiti in Ukrainian public spaces over the past decades. The research is based on practical cases that illustrate the transformation of symbolic interactions such as expressions of solidarity, protest, revenge, and identity. Particular attention is paid to the evolution of graffiti through illegal activity and the preservation of cultural heritage, spontaneous self-expression and regulation, and the role of government in the development and legalization of graffiti.

Key Words: graffiti, murals, wall paintings, urban world, social semantics, message, sign, symbol, social meanings, communication, Ukrainian resistance

Ukrajinski vojni grafiti

Povzetek. Članek preučuje grafite, povezane z vojno v Ukrajini. Avtor na podlagi sociofilozofskega vidika raziskuje grafite kot sociokulturni pojav in si prizadeva preučiti naslednji raziskovalni vprašanja: Kako so grafiti pridobili na prepoznavnosti in zanimanju med širšo javnostjo v Ukrajini (zunaj subkulturnih skupnosti)? Kako se je simbolna komunikacija grafitov razvijala kot odziv na vojne okoliščine? Raziskava vključuje splošen pregled fresk in grafitov v ukrajinskih javnih prostorih v zadnjih desetletjih. Raziskovanje temelji na praktičnih primerih, ki ponazarjajo preobrazbo simbolnih interakcij, kot so izrazi solidarnosti, protesta, maščevanja in identitete. Posebna pozornost je namenjena razvoju grafitov iz nezakonite dejavnosti in ohranjanju kulturne dediščine, spontanemu samoizražanju in regulaciji ter vlogi vlade pri razvoju in legalizaciji grafitov.

Ključne besede: grafiti, murali, stenske poslikave, urbani svet, družbena semantika, sporočilo, znak, simbol, družbeni pomeni, komunikacija, ukrajinski odpor

Introduction

In recent decades, graffiti has evolved from being perceived merely as an act of vandalism to becoming a powerful medium of political expression, social critique, and cultural identity. Despite the fact that this is a challenging time for the whole world – ‘Crisis, today, is everywhere ... a permanent state of emergency, precariousness and uncertainty has seemingly become the white noise of our existence...’ (Campos et al. 2021, 1) – nowhere is this transformation more visible and urgent than in Ukraine – a country that has undergone a series of profound political upheavals, from the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan protests to the ongoing Russian invasion. Studying graffiti in Ukraine’s changing political and socio-cultural context offers a unique window into the ways in which citizens negotiate power, reclaim public space, and visually articulate dissent. These visual statements often appear where traditional political discourse is censored, distrusted, or inaccessible, making graffiti a vital grassroots communication tool. Moreover, Ukrainian graffiti reflects global currents – from anti-authoritarian symbolism to solidarity with international movements – while remaining deeply rooted in local experiences of war, corruption, revolution, and identity formation. As such, analysing graffiti in Ukraine is not only essential for understanding urban visual culture, but also for interpreting how societies symbolically navigate moments of crisis and transformation. This article explores graffiti as a socio-cultural phenomenon in contemporary Ukraine, focusing on its role as an informal archive of civic agency and contested memory in times of dramatic change. In the context of war, graffiti becomes an even more powerful tool for communicating protest, revenge, solidarity and identity. Graffiti serves as valuable evidence for explaining the intentions of radical movements, the general moods of society, and the priority narratives. The study of graffiti helps uncover the unobvious factors behind significant historical events, such as conflicts, war, genocide, and unmotivated cruelty and aggression.

It is important to note that in the Ukrainian context, graffiti had long been assigned a marginal status and remained largely overlooked in academic discourse. It was only with the emergence of the first patriotic murals that public and scholarly interest in street art practices began to grow.

In this article, we seek to demonstrate how the expansion of wall-based artistic practices has also contributed to the increasing visibility of grass-roots social and protest expressions that had previously been ignored or rendered invisible.

Despite their visual coexistence in urban space, *graffiti* and *murals* represent fundamentally different forms of public art. We define graffiti as *drawings or inscriptions created using any tool, applied deliberately, purposefully, and illegally in public space*. In contemporary academic literature, murals (wall paintings) are defined in various ways that reflect different approaches: art historical, socio-cultural, and urbanist. Murals are often seen as a continuation of the tradition of monumental art intended to be accessible to the public: 'a painting, usually large, painted on a wall [...] as a permanent part of the decoration of a building' (Chilvers 2009, 488).

Within the socio-cultural approach, the emphasis is placed not on the technique but on the function: the mural is viewed as a way of speaking to the city and its community in a specific context: 'Murals are large-scale, site-specific artworks that are often designed to communicate social, political, or cultural messages to a public audience' (Doss 2010, 150). The political dimension of murals is particularly relevant for the analysis of Ukrainian wartime murals, which often serve as acts of protest, remembrance, or healing: 'Murals are often tools of resistance, reclaiming public space and visually asserting alternative narratives that counter dominant powers' (Rolston 1992, 8).

In this sense, graffiti emerges as a practice rooted in protest culture, individual expression, or territorial marking, usually carried out without official permission and outside institutional frameworks. In contrast, a mural is typically a legal, institutionally sanctioned, or even institutionally initiated project. Murals are created within artistic initiatives, public space programmes, or frameworks of memory politics. These are works characterized by deliberate aesthetics, serving a public function (memorial, representative, or educational), and they are integrated into the architectural environment.

While murals articulate a message through artistic imagery, graffiti speaks in the language of the current historical and cultural code, conveying meaning through semiotic signs. This is why we propose applying a semiotic methodology to the study of contemporary graffiti in Ukraine and interpreting it along three dimensions: subcultural graffiti and extraneous graffiti (including political (protest) and everyday expressions).

Methodological and Theoretical Framework

Public practices such as graffiti and street art lie at the intersection of artistic expression, political discourse, and protest activism. Graffiti serves as an active and effective channel of communication, offering a simple yet powerful means of visual engagement within the public sphere; it therefore reflects the most pressing societal issues. In the information age, communication methods and mass media significantly influence public opinion, the understanding of reality, and potential transformational processes. The visual turn in culture has altered the perception paradigm, placing verbal information in the background relative to visual information. Practically, this emphasizes the primacy of visual perception and figurative thinking, enhancing the efficacy of any message when visually supported (Stanislavska 2016, 7–8). Amidst the kaleidoscope of messages in an endless information flow, human attention gravitates towards bright visual images, which can shape and direct thought, establishing key points of social interaction, dialogue, and consensus.

Over the last decade, several European studies have been published, revealing new directions for research into graffiti and street art. Notably, the recent Ukrainian translation of Mitja Velikonja's book (Velikonja 2013) along with his accompanying book tour across various Ukrainian cities, which included public discussions, has indicated significant interest in this topic. The discourse surrounding graffiti is vibrant globally, continuously enriched by new research directions and original perspectives.

The author of this article has been researching graffiti and street art for over 15 years, culminating in a thesis presented in 2015 for the candidate degree in philosophical sciences at the H. Skovoroda Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. However, graffiti and street art remain underexplored in Ukrainian academic literature, despite consistent media interest and scholarly discussions. Ukrainian research contributions include works by sociologist Inna Holovaha (2004, 64–77), ethnologist Olha Hrytsiuk (2020), and art critic Kateryna Stanislavska (2016).

This article was written under the usual conditions for scientific work – during an ongoing war – in a difficult situation, with power outages, limited access to sources, destroyed infrastructure, and an unstable psycho-emotional state. The researcher's direct involvement in socio-cultural processes occurring under special and abnormal conditions for the entire society provides deeper insider understanding of the context, which,

in particular, enables a more profound interpretation of communication through graffiti.

Graffiti can be examined from various angles, including anthropological, cultural, aesthetic, linguistic, and psychological perspectives. The author approaches the phenomenon from a social-philosophical reflection, viewing it as a relevant symbolic form within the communicative framework of urban social semantics. As Mitja Velikonja notes, the semiotic method allows us to understand the ideological messages conveyed by graffiti, the power structures they represent, and the practical and political consequences they carry (Velikonja 2013, 117). Drawing on the works of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, we argue that the semiotic approach enables us to decode the sign-nature and symbolic form of graffiti. We consider each graffiti inscription or drawing a sign in the sense of Ferdinand de Saussure, viewed as a dyadic structure: ‘not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. [...] The two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other’ (Saussure 2011, 65). Graffiti artefacts, such as single inscriptions and drawings, are objectified expressions with visual and sensory images, marking graffiti as a materialized expression of meaning. Graffiti messages are constructed from artistic and figurative means and/or written signs, communicated through visual channels. This channel facilitates the movement of sign forms, while meanings traverse social spaces through perception, understanding, interpretation, and re-interpretation of these signs. Given its sign form, graffiti possesses a communicative nature, allowing for its investigation as a communication phenomenon. The social semantics of the urban world serve as a social component that objectifies, translates, and interprets the symbolic meanings embedded in messages, revealing shared social significances within the city’s communicative framework, in particular: ‘Conflict graffiti transforms the essential structures of a city, reconstituting the architecture to create for viewers a subjective perceptual relationship with the environment. The walls speak and enter into a collective conversation expressing plural identities and revolutionary desires of the people inhabiting the streets’ (Lennon 2021, 64–65). The semantic landscape and elemental ontology of the city manifest in the fundamental components of social reality, connecting material and symbolic objects. Urban daily life is filled with objectified polylinguistic, polysemantic social meanings reflected in the urban text. This daily life consists of signifiers (material objects) that facilitate the invasion of meanings into urban realities, including graffiti symbols.

We propose understanding graffiti as a synthesis of three components: personal-reflective, communicative, and socio-ontological. They realize through three corresponding types of graffiti practices: everyday (spontaneous expressions of thoughts and emotions), artistic (subcultural graffiti, murals, and aesthetic street art), and social protest (political and conceptual) (Kais 2015). The symbolism of graffiti resides in the function it serves for the communicator. Placing a graffiti message within urban space symbolizes a substitute for a completed communicative act; through communicating with the city's physical space (walls, surfaces), the communicator symbolically replaces a genuine act of communication. Therefore, the method of studying context is heuristic, and 'a prior understanding of the spatial, temporal, cultural, and historical landscape in which political graffiti and street art emerge is essential. The message is shaped through their inseparable unity' (Velikonja 2020).

We consider graffiti as a means for symbolically exploring, understanding, and transforming the urban world through three communication scenarios: imitation, dialogue, and control (Kais 2015). Each scenario involves specific communication practices. Everyday graffiti reflects traditions of magic, play, and carnival; artistic graffiti integrates into official artistic practices through adaptation and dialogue; and conceptual/political graffiti embodies deep protest and social transformation potential, enacted through communicative control and sign expansion. The communicative channel of graffiti offers an alternative to other communication methods, not due to a lack of information transmission means, but because of the overwhelming influx of information amidst an excessive concentration of artificial, technical communication strategies.

This article aims to address the following questions: (1) How has graffiti gained visibility and interest among the general public in Ukraine (beyond subcultural communities)? (2) How has graffiti's symbolic communication evolved in response to wartime circumstances? Understanding these critical points allows us to observe the changing interaction scenarios through graffiti messages, particularly how authorities engage with and regulate (or control) graffiti, alongside the factors prompting such transformations and legitimization of this otherwise illegitimate phenomenon.

To address these inquiries, we begin by providing a general overview of the place of the graffiti phenomenon in recent decades in Ukrainian public space. This is followed by presentations of cases demonstrating symbolic interactions with wall paintings, including symbolic solidarity,

protest, and revenge, as well as identity. Lastly, we explore three controversial points related to transformations within the graffiti social phenomenon: illegal activity vs protection of cultural heritage, spontaneous expression vs regulation, and the involvement of authorities in developing and legitimizing graffiti. Case studies illustrating these transformational processes include graffiti and street art reinterpretation over the past 20 years, during which Ukrainian society has undergone significant socio-political changes.

Visibility of Ukrainian Graffiti

What constitutes Ukrainian graffiti, and where is it found? The term 'graffiti' possesses a long history, encompassing everything from ancient cave markings and sacred folklore to political protests and subcultural expressions. This phenomenon has accompanied society throughout history, permeating diverse cultures and ideologies.

Until recently, graffiti was often perceived as a marginal phenomenon, associated with incomprehensible inscriptions and drawings that cluttered city walls, contributing to visual pollution and distorting the city's image. Nonetheless, it was undeniable that such a social phenomenon existed, albeit primarily within the communicative codes of various subcultures, including graffiti subcultures.

The graffiti subculture in Ukraine boasts nearly 40 years of history, initially developing in the western regions due to their proximity to Poland, which facilitated quicker access to paint and information. Crews include, for example, WSK (WestSideKings), FAZ, CB, CBKGB, SWB, Iskra Crew, Psja Krew (PSCR), NOK, and Ingenious Kids (IK, later Interesni Kazky). This geographical advantage fostered inspiration and the adoption of European styles and experiences (<https://www.instagram.com/motornyi.vahon/>). By 2010, the Ukrainian graffiti community expanded with the emergence of new crews and a variety of youth culture festivals encompassing music, sports, and public events, notably featuring graffiti artists from across Ukraine and neighbouring countries. The prevailing pessimistic view of the graffiti subculture today can be attributed to a transformation in its semantics; graffiti messages that once existed in physical space continue to thrive in photographs on social networks, accumulating likes and wielding communicative power.

Following the events of two Ukrainian revolutions and the onset of military conflict in 2014, public spaces became increasingly potent channels of communication. The visual turn in culture and global informatization

shifted the paradigm of perception towards prioritizing visual imagery. As a result, graffiti and murals emerged as significant forms of expression, encapsulating the nation's struggles, unity, and aspirations for peace. The Euromaidan protests of 2014 marked a pivotal moment in Ukraine's history, giving rise to a surge in politically charged street art, with Kyiv becoming a focal point for these expressions.

Patriotic murals began to proliferate in Ukraine during and after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. Between 2014 and 2015, numerous districts in Kyiv were adorned with wall panels created by renowned international artists, such as Guido Van Helten, Fintan Meji, Zosen, Pantonio, Kenor Martinez, Aryz, Lycen, Okuda, Remed, Seth, and Roa. Noteworthy artistic initiatives, including 'Muralissimo,' City Art,' and 'Art United Us,' were orchestrated by proactive leaders in district councils, such as Ilya Sagaidak, municipal council members like Geo Leros, and Ukrainian artists and muralists, including Olexandr Korban, Artem Proot, and Volodymyr Manzhos. Most of these murals explore themes related to the war in Eastern Ukraine, expressing patriotism, resilience, and hope for the revival of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.

These projects familiarized a broad segment of the population with mural art and spurred growing interest in mural painting, fostering acceptance of wall art across various styles and intentions. The graffiti background of many mural artists, such as Interesni Kazky and Oleksandr Korban, contributed to a fusion of two fundamentally distinct phenomena and visual practices, leading to terminological confusion. A significant event illustrating this confusion was the 'First Ukrainian Graffiti and Urban Culture Forum,' held in November 2016, aimed at broadening perceptions of the city's modern visual landscape and understanding both controlled and uncontrolled factors driving its transformation. This forum successfully brought together varied stakeholders, including graffiti community members, street artists, urban artists, 'street graphomaniacs,' and experts from fields like history and cultural studies (Kais 2016, 27–28).

However, a notable misperception in urban visual practices arose; many experts discussing graffiti actually meant murals – considered a legal artistic practice that should be regulated by the city and its authorities. Conversely, graffiti artists and street creators viewed graffiti as illegal, spontaneous visual interventions in public urban spaces. Murals have certainly elevated graffiti's visibility within the general public, sparking interest and awareness. Nevertheless, the two phenomena remain intertwined and are often encompassed under the umbrella term 'graffiti.'

The introduction of various art projects has brought mural art to the forefront and increased public appreciation for graffiti as well. This blending of graffiti and murals continues to foster a dialogue about the nature of these practices. For the first time, graffiti is now a subject of scientific inquiry and public debate. Still, the confusion persists, as experts discussing murals frequently refer to them as graffiti, while conversely referring to graffiti when addressing murals. Consequently, these phenomena – murals, graffiti, and street art – are often regarded as inseparable and are predominantly termed within the broader definition of ‘graffiti.’

Overall, the visibility of actual graffiti for the broader Ukrainian public was significantly enhanced by the aforementioned artistic projects. This accelerated the emergence of the graffiti scene from the shadows and drew attention to it as an important political tool.

Graffiti in a War Context: Symbolic Solidarity

If in the early 2000s there were a dozen graffiti teams in Kyiv, from 2009 to the present, the Kyiv community (mostly ‘old school’) has united around the ETC project (‘Erase The City’ or ‘Enjoy the City’). Today, many members of the ETC community are mobilized to the Armed Forces. Their painting skills made it possible to do camouflage paintings of military vehicles and equipment (https://www.instagram.com/erase_the_city/). But even in these circumstances, former graffiti artists joke that they draw graffiti in their time free from the war, because graffiti is a lifestyle. Many Ukrainian graffiti artists have now moved abroad but continue to draw and dedicate their pieces to Ukraine. Today, the initiative of creating war-themed murals continues in all cities of Ukraine. Sorrow over the destroyed Ukrainian cities of Mariupol, Bakhmut and Avdiivka also extends to the destroyed murals (Hordiichuk 2023). In our opinion, destruction of murals symbolically depicts destruction of the war victims’ memory, of the values of family comfort, love and joy.

Within the first year of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, monumental murals in the colours of the Ukrainian flag began to appear on the facades of buildings in cities around the world. The plots of the murals refer to the events of the war, and the mood and message show solidarity, support, and admiration for Ukrainian indomitability. Wall visual practices are becoming universal language that is understandable to everyone, regardless of age, gender, geographical location, social status, level of education and intellectual culture, and also regardless of personal preferences of the sources of information consumption. The city walls all over the

world became a universal communicative channel for the transfer of symbolic messages and common meanings. Artists around the world show their support for Ukraine through their wall paintings. There are even symbolic dialogues and conversations through space and time.

Since the Revolution of Dignity, the image given to the world by Eugene Delacroix – ‘La Victoire guidant le peuple sur les barricades’ – has been remembered. The female figure, symbolizing freedom, was replicated in memes and depicted with the Ukrainian flag in her hands, instead of the French tricolour. This symbol is still quoted today as a belief in the strength and effectiveness of Ukraine’s struggle for freedom. A Ukrainian artist living in Paris (Mykyta Kravtsov) created a mural full of symbolism near the Pompidou Center, ‘Vive la résistance ukrainienne!’ – Freedom, which once defeated France, now tramples the two-headed serpent and breaks the crown of the empire (Popovych 2023). Ukrainian Freedom, based on Delacroix, was also depicted on the wall of the French embassy in Kyiv by artist Christian Gemi (graffiti name c215). In addition to a large number of talented murals in Ukrainian cities, he created a symbolic extra-spatial connection between Ukraine and France – a mural dedicated to Ukrainian refugees. The first mural with a portrait of a girl was painted in March 2022 on a building in the corner of the streets Patay et Domrémy and 13th arrondissement in Paris. A month later a twin mural was painted on Horodotska Street in Lviv. Both are accompanied by a famous quote of President Zelensky: ‘I really want there to be no pictures of me, no portraits of me in your offices, because the president is not an icon, not an idol, the president is not a portrait. Hang pictures of your children there and look them in the eye before every decision’ (The President Office of Ukraine 2019). Lviv citizens and Parisians, each walking through the streets of their city, look into the eyes of a Ukrainian girl.

Kyiv citizens who live on the territory, or pass by the campus of Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, can see the same painting as in Paris. Artist Seth (Julien Malland) also created a symbolic ‘bridge of solidarity’ between Paris and Kyiv. In 2022, he painted ‘L’Ukraine en marche’ (‘Ukraine in Action’) on Rue Buot – a little girl with a Ukrainian flag in her hands tramples enemy tanks. A ‘twin’ of this mural, also signed by Seth, appeared on Metalistiv Street in Kyiv in 2023.

Well-known street artists also showed their support and solidarity by visiting de-occupied Ukrainian cities. For instance, Thomas Baumgartel, aka Bananensprayer, expressed his support for Ukraine with a series of stencils he made in the cities of the Kyiv region (Irpın, Bucha, Gorenka),



Figure 1 Rue Buot, Paris, France, 2022, *L'Ukraine en marche* (Artist: Seth [Julien Malland]; Photo: Natalie Novikava)



Figure 2 Metalistiv Str, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2023 (Artist: Seth; Photo: Zosia Kais)

which he personally visited in May 2023, a year after the de-occupation.

In November 2022, the world-famous secret artist Banksy came to Ukraine incognito and left art works on the walls of destroyed houses in the de-occupied region: in Hostomel, Horenka, Irpin and Borodyanka. Ukrposhta created a souvenir postage stamp based on one of the drawings, which symbolically plays with the apparent weakness of Ukraine, which throws a much bigger and stronger enemy to the ground (Potter 2023, 235). There are also traces of his stay in Kyiv. Banksy rethought the 'hedgehog,' an iron obstacle for tanks located in the centre of the city, and painted two children playing on a swing next to it (Superlative Creative n.d.). The composition on Velyka Zhytomyrska Street, where Banksy added a painting of a Russian missile launcher to the already existing drawing of a penis, was hidden under a glass frame.

The precedent set by the attempted theft of Banksy's graffiti raises the question of whether municipal authorities should control spontaneous creativity. As a head of the Kyiv Regional Military Administration emphasized: 'These images are a symbol of our struggle against the enemy. These are stories about the support and solidarity of the entire civilized world with Ukraine. We will do everything to preserve the works of street art as a symbol of our future Victory' (Kuleba 2022). In addition to the Hostomel community, representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy were also involved in discussions regarding the preservation and future fate of Banksy's graffiti. In November 2023, the Ministry

of Culture presented a project to digitize the works which Banksy created in the Kyiv region, and place them in a virtual gallery with the assistance of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, a state institution whose purpose is to promote the development of national culture and art in the state. We will move on to covering the issue of graffiti regulation by the authorities later (Ukrainian National News 2023).

In the context of war, graffiti changes in form and symbolic meaning. In particular, war brought rich material for deepening the study of outside-subcultural graffiti. The voice of graffiti sounds even louder, and images become even more expressive during periods of crisis for society. Because graffiti is a powerful communication channel, whoever wants to be heard chooses it as the most effective for their messages. Graffiti messages in public spaces can only compete with messages in social networks.

These examples of public art demonstrate a scenario of graffiti communication through a specially planned display of works in urban space, which aims to initiate a symbolic dialogue mediated by space. The urban space here acts as a medium and the first recipient of the message and the translator of meaning, inviting and involving the entire urban community of observers, all casual spectators, to co-authorship in the invention of shared meanings. Communication through graffiti in a dialogue scenario is creative and appeals to shared social meanings. Such communication is realized in particular in murals, in which aesthetic, moral, and communicative value operates beyond the boundaries of subcultural graffiti. Here, messages operate at the level of the entire urban community, and the meanings transmitted by the authors are woven into shared meanings.

Graffiti Protest and Symbolic Revenge

Traditionally, protests in society are accompanied by slogans and inscriptions on city walls. The creation in 2015 of the informal youth movement 'Honor' ('arrogance' in Ukrainian) by the former head of 'Civil Corps of Azov' in Kyiv, and all the activities of this radical group, were accompanied by graffiti. The inscriptions 'Honor' on the streets of Kyiv were obtrusive. They literally invaded the public space due to the number of small inscriptions and large inscriptions/pictures in the style of graffiti, which covered and repainted existing subcultural graffiti pieces. Opponents of the radical movement, as well as members of the graffiti community, changed the inscriptions 'Honor' to 'Hemor' by redrawing the letters. Such a harsh intervention through graffiti and opposition was es-



Figure 3 Mykhailivska Square, Kyiv (Photo: Zosia Kais)

essentially a symbolic graffiti battle stretched across space and time ('Ofis Prezydenta: Tretii Den' Pislja Napadu' 2021). This is just one example of protest graffiti. The tactic of such communication is to intervene in urban space as a demand for social change. An unofficial appeal to the authorities and power structures is implemented here; symbolic communication consists in replacing real action and real changes by offering a sign. This graffiti operates under a management (control) scenario; it embodies the desire to transform social reality.

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, the leader and founder of 'Honor' formed a unit, the basis of which are members and supporters of the movement. The unit participated in the defence of Kyiv and Kyiv Oblast. Later, the unit joined the 'Da Vinci Wolves' battalion and the founder of the movement (Serhii Filimonov) became the commander of the 'Honor' company of the same name.

Symbolic revenge through graffiti illustrates the magical function of inscriptions. An open-air museum on Mykhailivska Square in Kyiv, where destroyed enemy equipment is on display, became a depiction of symbolic revenge. This is part of the exposition of the Military Historical Museum of Ukraine. On each burned combat vehicle, you can see graffiti messages expressing hatred for the enemy. Here, the creation of an inscription symbolically replaces the creation of an event, an accomplished fact. The inscriptions contain magical intentions to fulfil the desire that was written.

Ukrainian volunteers started a new trend – inscriptions/messages on combat shells for donations, which are used to buy everything necessary for the military. Projectiles signed with these messages are sent to Russian

positions. Examples of graffiti that reflect intentions of revenge refer to the ancient tradition of the magical function of inscriptions. People who carved their prayers on the walls of Saint Sophia Cathedral in ancient Kyiv in the ninth century believed that their requests would be heard. The sacralization of the writing process itself and the assignment of a magical function to the inscription is a reaction to the limitations of other ways of achieving the desired result (more practical and realistic).

A separate research area of war graffiti is the inscriptions left by the Russian military, which were found after the de-occupation. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the team of the cultural institution 'Mizhvukhamy' has been collecting inscriptions. This archive is a documentation of war crimes, reveals the cultural roots of the genocide and provides evidence of the violence committed. These texts are a unique opportunity to understand the brutal and unmotivated nature of Russian aggression (Mizhvukhamy 2022).

Graffiti as Symbolic Identity

During the occupation, graffiti became almost the only channel of communication for expressing one's civil position and symbolic identity declaration. Partisan graffiti and anti-occupation graffiti appeared in the occupied cities, conveying messages between Ukrainians or simply reminding them of Ukraine. In Ukrainian cities, graffiti functions as a form of moral support and as an expression of collective resilience, both in liberated areas and in cities still under occupation. In these graffiti, communication is implemented according to the imitation scenario, similar to the way fashionable innovations and popularization of ideas occur in public life. In the act of creating these inscriptions, the intentions of restoring deep personal connections with one's culture and identity, affirming one's own ontological status, and proclaiming one's own existence are realized.

An illustration of graffiti as symbolic expression of identity is a stele at the entrance to the Donetsk region. In the spring of 2024, Volodymyr Zelensky left his signature on it. Before that, volunteers updated the stele and painted over the previous inscriptions, which caused a flurry of disputes on the network. The authors of many inscriptions were no longer alive at that time, and the stele carried the memory of the soldiers, imprinting their messages, thoughts and meanings. Soon the stele was again filled with inscriptions, including the president's signature, which became a symbolic sacralization of the memory place and experience of writing a message in it, similar to the ancient inscriptions in Saint Sophia of Kyiv.

In response to war legacies, graffiti communication changes its scenarios and the graffiti sign takes on other, broader meanings. The playful and carnival intentions of writing everyday graffiti like 'I was here' and 'I love Ivan' are replaced by inscriptions that have a magical function: 'Kherson is Ukraine,' 'I will win Z.' There is also a magical function in the inscriptions on enemy equipment and the signatures of shells. These inscriptions express symbolic revenge and symbolically replace the creation of a real act. They contain magical intentions to fulfil the written wish. Graffiti in occupied Ukrainian cities reflects the civic position of people, their desire to symbolically affirm their identity and belonging to Ukraine. In this sense, the creation of the inscription also contains a magical intention. The sacralization of places where inscriptions are concentrated (such as on the columns of the Main Post Office building and on the stele of the Donetsk region) reflects the intention to record and document the thoughts, desires, and aspirations of participants (authors of the inscriptions) in certain events. Here, the attitude towards the act of graffiti and the understanding of the value of the inscription change from non-recognition to granting it the status of historical and cultural heritage.

In addition, we see in this example a value shift from the authorities' rejection of graffiti to the involvement and legitimization of a marginal phenomenon. Next, we will consider examples of such a transformation in Ukrainian society.

Regulation and Legitimization

In the fall of 2004, participants of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine left graffiti on the walls and other surfaces in the city centre and on the columns and walls of the Main Post Office building as well. Protesters wrote the name and painted the image of their candidate Viktor Yushchenko, the names of their cities, the slogans of the Orange Revolution ('Tak!') and other political slogans. After the events, the graffiti fragments on the columns were covered with plexiglass to keep the memory.

The tragic events of 2014 – the shooting of the *Nebesna Sotnja* (Heavenly Hundred), the Russian invasion of Crimea and the start of the war – caused a wave of new graffiti in the centre of Kyiv, the main scene of the Revolution of Dignity.

The most famous street art of those times is 'Icons of the Revolution' – portraits of cult figures of Ukrainian history, symbols of the struggle for democracy, national identity and freedom. Taras Shevchenko, Ivan

Franko and Lesya Ukrainka are depicted as Maidan activists, equipped in masks and helmets, attributes of the revolution. Graffiti appeared in February 2014 on the building at Hrushevsky Street, 4, where the National Academy of Sciences and the 'Emporium' interior studio were located.¹

In 2017, this graffiti was painted over by communal services, which caused a wave of indignation, and the owner of the store was accused of destroying the drawings. The next day, shop windows were broken and eggs were thrown. And on the nearby walls there were inscriptions: 'Can't wipe us out' and 'Maidan was here, and it will be here forever.'

The representatives of the government did not remain silent either. The then ministers responded with posts on their Facebook pages. Volodymyr Groysman, Prime minister, said that destroying graffiti on Hrushevskyi Street is not just a crime. 'This is a crime against memory and values, against what cannot be forgotten' (Groysman 2017). Minister of Culture and well-known theatre actor Yevhen Nyshchuk wrote: 'In the third year of the war, such things should have been impossible and unacceptable ... Every helmet, every tool, every picture created in that historical time not only for us, but also for the whole world, is already HISTORY and needs to be preserved. After all, the smallest artefact is already a page from the life of OUR PEOPLE ... Shevchenko, Lesya, Franko – our prophets – were with us side by side on the Maidan. We 'took shackles' and they were our talismans ... I can't imagine who could have raised their hand to just wash them off. I know one thing – it was unacceptable and short-sighted. However, if the pictures were drawn for a reason – I have to upset the initiators – these Icons are not only on the walls for a long time, but they are also in the hearts of Ukrainians' (Nyshchuk 2017).

The destruction of the original 'Icons of the Revolution' graffiti, applied during the events of the Revolution of Dignity, was recognized as an act of vandalism, for which the director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, Volodymyr Vyatrovych, appealed to the police and the Prosecutor General's Office. After that, in September 2017, the Kyiv prosecutor's office opened criminal proceedings for vandalizing graffiti. A preliminary restoration examination established that the original drawings could be restored if the upper layers of paint were removed. The director of the Museum of the Revolution of Dignity insisted precisely on the restoration, since the monument is the original drawings, and any

¹ Documentary video about the creation of this trilogy by a social artist #Sociopath is available at <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=oCyNVWvsfdg>.

new similar image would lose the authenticity and symbolism acquired during the live events on the Maidan.

The very next month, in October 2017, the public movement 'Novyi Vohon' ('New Fire') replaced the destroyed original graffiti with their copies, which caused a new wave of indignation and controversy. Today, in the same place, there are the inscriptions 'Fake' applied with a red aerosol over copies of 'Icons of the Revolution.'

The author of the original graffiti commented that despite the technical possibility of restoring the originals, no one contacted him, while the authors of the copies reported that restoration was impossible and Sociopath (2018) refused to repeat his graffiti: 'Someone decided in this way to remind Minister Nyschuk that he must answer for his words. Mr. Minister, I will also remind you of our second meeting, when you said that reputation is important to you. But now it looks like a wall on Grusha – fake, like all the policies of your government.'

On July 4, 2024, the Kyiv City Council approved the procedure for applying murals on buildings in the capital with the aim of creating a transparent mechanism for the artistic design of the urban environment. The head of the Commission for Culture, Viktoria Muha, remarked about it: 'Kyiv is the first city that has developed a clear and open procedure that defines a road map for the initiators of the murals creation, will contribute to the harmonization of new murals with the urban environment, and will protect the city and public space from the chaotic saturation of monumental arts, in particular at cultural heritage sites' (Bozhok 2024).

The case of graffiti of the 'Icon of the Revolution' demonstrates how, during revolutionary events, at a transitional moment for the entire nation, new heroes have not been born yet, but support is needed for motivation in the struggle. Then consciousness looks for myths and turns to archetypal images (like the well-known cult figures of the struggle for national idea, identity and freedom). The name 'icons' indicates the search for that common canonical image, to which it is possible to turn for support. Through their symbolic representation in the attributes of protestors, these graffiti transport viewers across space and time to the actual battlefield, invoking the collective unconscious and cultural myth, which enhances their significance. The reaction of the authorities to the clashes around this graffiti, their involvement in the graffiti discourse and their attempts to control the situation, demonstrate an understanding of the importance of the graffiti communication channel as an effective one in times of crisis and social instability.

In August 2024, a Commission for the approval of sketches and the location of murals was created, that included experts in culture, preservation of monuments, art historians and representatives of the city government. The commission is called to reject initiatives of mural creation that contain prohibited advertising, as well as placing murals on the facades of cultural heritage sites. The impetus for creating the Commission was a temporary ban on the application of any wall paintings in November 2023, which was initiated by Kyiv City Council member Yevgenia Kuleba after the incident with an aesthetically questionable mural painted by artist Yevgenia Fullen on buildings with protected status. The plot and artistic skill of the mural's author met with the indignation of local residents and criticism from the City Council. Since the artist showed persistence and continued to apply her drawing, but again on another historic building in the city centre, the Kyiv City Council supported the draft decision on the creation of an expert commission and introduced a temporary ban on the drawings (Kyiv City State Administration 2024).

So, when social institutions join the graffiti discourse, communication, according to the management (control) scenario, is realized through the control of signs, the expansion of meanings and suggestions, like advertising and propaganda.

Conclusion

We are confident that the identified dimensions of wartime graffiti in Ukraine – namely symbolic solidarity, symbolic revenge, and symbolic identity – warrant further research and deeper exploration within socio-cultural, psychological, political, and socio-philosophical frameworks. In this article, we have broadly outlined the semantic field of possible scholarly inquiries. To date, graffiti as an object of academic research in Ukraine is a relevant and timely subject, though it has gained such attention only relatively recently. We have shown how graffiti has become visible to the broader public, including the academic community, largely due to the popularization of artistic projects and patriotic murals in Ukraine since 2014. In the context of socio-political crises and challenges – particularly the ongoing war – graffiti as a social phenomenon is undergoing transformation, along with a noticeable shift in its social roles and functions. The examples discussed illustrate how, under wartime conditions, graffiti acquires new meanings as a symbolic expression of solidarity and as a medium for intercultural and international communication through murals as a language of art.

In periods of difficult crisis transitions for the whole nation, it is necessary to choose the most effective channels of communication to preserve national identity, strengthen national unity, affirm the ideas of peace, solidarity, and inspiration to fight the enemy, and resist aggression. City walls around the world are becoming a universal communication channel for transmitting symbolic messages and shared meanings. The graffiti communicative channel is able to unite Ukrainians around the world and residents of different cities and countries with common aspirations and common meanings, creating symbolic bridges through space.

It has also been demonstrated how the attitude of governmental authorities toward graffiti is undergoing transformation – how graffiti is increasingly being controlled, regulated, and utilized as a tool by local and state institutions. When authorities engage in graffiti control on the basis of partnership and dialogue, on the one hand, the creative and humanistic potential of such incorporation lies in the ability to create and enrich shared social meanings. On the other hand, this means a reduction in the semantic power of graffiti and a significant narrowing of the communicative channel of graffiti itself. Because under control, it becomes impossible to express true thoughts, feelings, reactions, and demands.

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