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Thesis Proposal

Visual Argument:

Conflicting Collective Voices

Between the Israeli Separation Barrier and its Protest Graffiti

As a prank, on the side of several buildings in the United Kingdom, the British graffiti artist Banksy stenciled the terms, “By order, National Highways Agency, this wall is designated graffiti area” (Banksy 59). Within weeks, the walls were covered with graffiti writing by numerous writers from around the neighborhood. Graffiti writers often have silent conversations with each other when they write on the same walls, adding to a phrase or drawing in agreement, or crossing out or completely drawing over a text in disagreement. As Russell Howze writes, graffiti “create[s] a new form of publicly expressed language and dialogue” and “if left unchecked, the wall can become a mural” (109).

In this thesis, I would like to examine one instance of this type of conversation, a particularly aggressive conversation between the protest graffiti on the Israeli West Bank Separation Barrier and the barrier itself. What I wish to discuss is a collective argument among an international community of writers against the authoritative collective voice of the wall. In particular, I wish to analyze the communicative interaction between the protest graffiti written on and against the separation barrier in order to show that graffiti is more than mere vandalism and serves as a powerful way to communicate messages of resistance to injustice when employed as a tool of protest. I hope this thesis will not only present graffiti as a valid form of writing to analyze, but also demonstrate that graffiti is one way people can speak against an oppressive force that alters their physical environment, which can be a site of continuous argument.

To discover the arguments made both from the wall and from the graffiti, I will use Barthes' *structural description* – which seeks to understand the interrelationship of the various levels of messages (i.e. linguistic message, iconic message, literal message, symbolic message, etc.) found in a visual argument - to perform my rhetorical analysis. Further, I will discuss how graffiti is a visual argument by relating various graffiti works to David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke's five modes of visual meaning: as flags (i.e. attention grabbers), demonstrations (i.e. "conveys information...best presented visually"), metaphors (i.e. "conveys some claim figuratively"), symbols (i.e. "have strong associations that allow them to stand for something they represent"), and archetypes (i.e. "a kind of visual symbol whose meaning derives from popular narratives") (104).

Following what many have asserted – that text must be understood within its context – I aim to discuss the arguments made by the graffiti itself in relation to its place in the globe and the structure it is attached to, that is, its placement on the Israeli Separation Barrier. Built by Israel, the structure (construction of which began in 2002), is designed to encircle several parts of Palestinian land, resulting in the separation of Palestinians from their own farmland and relatives. The graffiti on the barrier that I intend to analyze is composed by international artists who oppose the barrier's existence. These artists include Banksy (who employs heavily symbolic imagery), JR (who juxtaposes enlarged and distorted photographs of Palestinians and Israelis), Arofish (who uses positive imagery), and Justus Van Oel (who is painting an entire letter written by Farid Esack along a section of the separation barrier) – all of whose work is documented either online or in book format.

In chapter 1, I will discuss the theoretical background for using images as arguments, paying primary attention to Barthes, and secondary attention to Birdsell and Groarke. Also here,

I will outline the various perspectives – including those of Barthes, Ron Burnett, and Luke Dickens - on analyzing images within their context or changing context. Burnett discusses *vantage points*, which are points of “entry” where viewers initiate their understanding and interpretation of an image. He writes, “The intersections of creativity, viewing, and critical reflection are fundamental to the very act of engaging with images in all their forms,” and that to understand an image better, a viewer must “move the image continuously around so that its context can be examined from a variety of perspectives and vantage points“(13). Dickens describes another way to analyze context that he names “the journey,” in which *the journey* “enables us to understand the highly interrelated spatio-temporal practices of urban inscription” (Dickens 487).

In chapter 2, I will begin a rhetorical analysis of the graffiti by Banksy, JR, Arofish, and Justus Van Oel using Barthes’ *structural description* and Birdsell and Groarke’s *modes of visual meaning* to discuss the graffiti on the separation barrier, including those entirely made up of imagery, entirely made up of words, and those that combine imagery and words. Further, I will perform a rhetorical analysis of the “material text” of the separation barrier itself, i.e. its concrete structure, towers and checkpoints, and its planned encapsulating construction. My analysis will also consider such historic and pragmatic aspects of walls and barriers, such as their use to delineate territory, to block attack, and to control passage.

This analysis will help me discuss the argument occurring between the authoritative barrier and its rebellious graffiti. Included as part of the discussion of context, I will consider how the general and specific history and usage of graffiti affects the meaning, or argument(s) made on the separation barrier. In other words, such factors as marking territory, giving voice to the “have-nots”, and the rebellious nature of graffiti will play a part in my analysis.

Finally in chapter 3, I will discuss what happens when the graffiti on the separation barrier reaches the viewer, both those who see the visual arguments in Palestine and those who see them through news media, in terms of the argument being hyper-visual and ever-present. I will also track the changing meaning of the argument(s) as context changes and the image of the wall's graffiti makes its way through media. To do this, I will use Dicken's "journey" analysis to discuss how the images of the separation barrier are not necessarily *fixed*, but "move" within an international sphere via medias, thus affecting how viewers understand the visual text.

(word count: 9)

## Annotated Bibliography

Alvarez, Marubel. "La Pared Que Habla: A Photo Essay about Art and Graffiti at the Border Fence in Nogales, Sonora." *Journal of the Southwest* 50.3 (2008): 279-286. Print. In her essay, Alvarez discusses three artists' art on the border fence between Ambos Nogales. She explains that the words and images are used to give the fence a "power of enunciation," which is both assertive and subtle (280). In her analysis, she says that through their art the artists intend to demand the wall confess its true purpose and to collapse, and that it is also their intention to defy and minimize the wall's authority by defacing it with images and words that highlight social and political problematics of the border. Through her discussion of the 13 pieces of border fence art she catalogues and describes at the end of her essay, Alvarez wishes to demonstrate that they are "evidence of a persistent desire to speak the border's story in a hypervisible way"; that they are ways of talking back against the authorities who built the wall (303).

Banksy. *Banksy: Wall and Piece*. London: Century, 2006. Print. Banksy catalogues his various humorous, ironic, and thought-provoking stencil work and "sculptures" throughout the UK and in other locations in the world, including Israel. His work is made on walls, trash bins, monuments, bridges, cars, streets, sidewalks, beach sand, cows, and toilets, where he particularly defies capitalism, elitism, and police, military, and executive authority. He argues that his work is a retaliation against the numerous advertisements posted "across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff" (8).

Barthes, Roland. "Rhetoric of the Image." *Image Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 32-51. In this essay, Barthes performs what he calls a *structural analysis* to find the meanings, hidden and not, in a commercial advertisement, an image

whose meaning is intentional and which includes familiar visual items. He identifies and examines several *messages* in the ad: the linguistic messages (denotative and connotative) and the iconic messages (coded and non-coded). The coded iconic message is the totality of all of the messages that are connoted by the image itself. The noncoded iconic message is simply the literal "what it is" of the photograph. After articulating the three levels of signification, Barthes pursues another question: "What are the functions of the linguistic message with regard to the (twofold) iconic message?" (38); and he comes up with two such functions: anchorage and relay. With anchorage, "the text *directs* the reader through the signifieds of the image...remote-control[ing] him towards a meaning chosen in advance" (39-40, italics in text). In a system of relay, "text...and image stand in a complementary relationship...and the unity of the message is realized at [the] level of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis" (41). Most systems are actually a combination of anchorage and relay and "the dominance of the one or the other is of consequence for the general economy of a work" (41). In addition to these modes of analysis, Barthes argues that attention must be paid to the composition of an image as a signifying complex and to the naturalizing role played in photography, where the exact replication of reality "naturalizes the symbolic message...innocent[ing] the semantic artifice of connotation" (45).

Barthes, Roland. "Political Modes of Writing." *Writing Degree Zero/Elements of Semiology*.

Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. Boston: Beacon, 1967. 19-28. Print. Barthes outlines two modes of writing (i.e. political mode and intellectual mode) and discusses their defining characteristics, as well as those they share in common. He begins by defining writing as "closed," in contrast to speech, which is "open" to dialogue and is

evanescent. Writing, he explains, is symbolic, introverted, occult, “express[es] the threat of retribution” because it can be seen, and can “unite at a single stroke the reality of the acts and the ideality of the ends” (20). Barthes moves on to examine three types of writing in the political mode: revolutionary writing, Marxist writing, and police state writing. He ends with a discussion of the intellectual mode of writing, which he calls a language of commitment, is nuanced, yet unstable and powerless (28).

Birdsell, David S. and Leo Groarke. “Outlines of a Theory of Visual Argument.” *Argument and Advocacy* 43 (Winter & Spring 2007): 103-113. Print. Building upon their previous argument “that it was time to reject assumptions that excluded the visual from the various strands of argument theory,” Birdsell and Groarke argue in this article that visual arguments are indeed arguments, which are conveyed through images and can, in some cases, be more accurate, precise, and persuasive (103, 104). In this introductory article, the authors outline and define five *modes of visual meaning*, that is, functions of images when used in arguments: flags, demonstrations, metaphors, symbols, and archetypes. The authors concede some drawbacks of employing images as arguments (e.g. capturing irrelevant information or presenting distorted perspectives), yet Birdsell and Groarke stand by their assertion that visuals are “powerful tools of persuasion“ that communicate their “point in an immediate and compact way” (109, 111).

Burnett, Ron. “Vantage Point and Image-Worlds.” *How Images Think*. Cambridge: MIT, 2004. 2-38. Print. In this chapter, Burnette examines the interaction between images and human perception as a negotiation of meaning. He explains that the interpretations of an image are multiple not only because of the various possible perspectives, but also because the social context in which an image is viewed changes constantly. Therefore, he argues, the

meaning of an image is constantly recontextualized. He also argues that viewing an image is an experience of creative and critical engagement with a viewer's intellect, emotions, and personal experience. Burnette further argues that images themselves are preserving and speaking the stories of human experience for the photographer or artist. However, while images can only depict some elements of experience, they are also a way to make the world and experiences tangible. With this tangibility, he finds that the meaning of an image can be narrowed down with accompanying sounds and texts; and when this happens, a "magical" hybrid space of media is created, which alters how an image is viewed and interpreted.

Dickens, Luke. "Placing post-graffiti: the journey of the *Peckham Rock*." *Cultural Geographies* 15.4 (2008): 471-496. Print. Dickens discusses the British graffiti artist Banksy's "sculpture" the *Peckham Rock* in terms of its "journey," its "life," where movement between different social spaces and times change its meaning. Through his discussion, he argues that there is a need to analyze an evolved form of graffiti, post-graffiti art in spatio-temporal context rather than spacial fixity and binary logic in order to view graffiti in its rightful complexity rather than in simplicity. The author hopes to create a new way of looking at the relationships between urban inscription, art, and the city.

El Fassed, Arjan. "The writing on the wall spells 'freedom'." *The Electronic Intifada*. Opinion/Editorial. 20 April 2009. Web. 26 Aug 2009.

<<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/printer10475.shtml>>. El Fassad discusses the founding of Sendamessage.nl, a Dutch-Palestinian collaboration project that spray-paints messages, for international internet users for a donation to the organization, on the Israel Separation Barrier. He also reports that the writing of the open letter written by Farid



Esack was requested by the Sendamessage founder, Justus Van Oel, who wanted to paint the entire letter along a portion of the wall.

Esack, Farid. "Farid Esack's Open Letter is inscribed on Apartheid Wall." *Jewish Peace News*. 22 April 2009. Web. 26 Aug. 2009.

<<http://jewishpeacenews.blogspot.com/2009/04/farid-esacks-open-letter-is-inscribed.html>>. In his open letter, Esack speaks to the world about giving their support to liberating the Palestinian people and fighting against the oppression of Israel so that both may reclaim their humanity. Esack asserts that everyone, as a part of the human family, is responsible for helping others by coming together in international solidarity. Speaking for the world, he pledges to the Palestinians "our determination to...overcome separation, to conquer injustice and to put [an] end to greed...and exploitation."

Hattenstone, Simon. "Something to Spray." *The Guardian*. 17 July 2003. Web. 28 April 2009.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2003/jul/17/art.artsfeatures>>. Hattenstone interviews Banksy about his motivations for creating graffiti, his current work, and how he perceives graffiti itself.

Howze, Russell. "Stencil Nation: Graffiti, Community, and Art." San Francisco: Manic D, 2008.

Howze compiles photographs of numerous stencil graffiti works, and several interviews of graffiti artists and documenters of graffiti art. The author defines stencil graffiti as a type of graffiti made with stencils, a unique art form of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For stencil artists, stencils are preferred tools because they are cheap, mobile, easy to use, and hold up to repetitive use. Howze notes that graffiti, overall, communicates across time, space, and culture because of its highly visual form, and also because of the technology used to share these images. Regular everyday people become documenters of this work using

mobile, digital technology and the internet, which “has allowed global awareness of local stencil art” (80). With his book, Howze intends to share this work and various artist perspectives with those less familiar with the art in hopes of building an appreciation for it in his readers/viewers.

“Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”

*International Court of Justice*. 9 July General List No. 131 (2004). Web. 10 June 2009.

<<http://slomanson.tjssl.edu/PalestWall.pdf>>. The advisory opinion begins with a description of the events that led to resolution ES-10/14, then “determines the rules and principles of international law which are relevant in assessing the legality of the measures taken by Israel” (7). In the end, the international court explains how the construction of the wall breaks each of these charters, resolutions, treaties, and conventions. The court concludes that the wall and the Israeli settlements in Palestine breach international humanitarian law and international civil and political rights.

Lewisohn, Cedar. *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2008. Print.

Lewisohn offers a history of the development of graffiti as a rebel’s art. His book is an analysis comparing graffiti writing, which is primarily associated with hip hop culture and gangs; and street art, which is associated more with political statements. He describes graffiti as esoteric writing that is territorial and aggressive written by those who are “at war with everyone” (87). On the other hand, street art offers accessible messages to engage in a conversation with the city. It is anti-capitalist and thought-provoking, made by artists who want to “save the world” (87). Lewisohn points out that, regardless of these differences, graffiti can be a highly hybrid work. Overall, Lewisohn demonstrates that writers’ and artists’ belief in public ownership and democracy provokes them to

produce creative work.

Nevaer, Louis E.V. and Elaine Sendyk. *Protest Graffiti: Mexico Oaxaca*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2009. Print. The authors of the book document the 2006 city-wide supported Oaxaca's teacher's strike for higher pay, better working conditions, and the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. In doing so, Nevaer and Sendyk recount the origins of the Artist's Assembly, Revolutionaries of Oaxaca (ASARO) and the street art they created as a political weapon that protested their governor's unjust and cruel leadership. The book catalogues ASARO's collective street art, which demonstrates their "dialogue of rage" and the strong voice and unity of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) who called for civil disobedience among city citizens until Gov. Ruiz left office.

Parsberg, Cecilia. "Networking on the wall." *Eurozine*. 30 May 2006. Web. 14 May 2009.

<<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-05-30-parsberg-en.html>>. The author theorizes that the art on the Israeli Separation Barrier are collective and "creative attempts to transcend the political limitations of the wall." Parsberg conducts several interviews with Palestinian artists, writers, and cultural workers. She questions them about such things as why international artists are drawn to compose on the Israeli Separation Barrier, if there are paintings on both sides of the wall, and the role, political impact, and ethics of art and aesthetics. Parsberg relates ideas from Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception* to the struggle that the wall represents and the art made on it. Agamben claims that, in a state of exception, there is an "empty space" where no rules apply. She concludes that "art is a political action, an action that serves the nexus between violence and law and...opens a space for negotiation between life and right."