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Emergent normativities in a crew of graffiti writers

Abstract. The paper is based on an ethnographic research carried on inside a graffiti writers crew in the North-East of Italy. It aims at investigating the interplay of external and internal normativities that inform the practice of graffiti writing. Graffiti writing is part of hip hop culture, born in the North-American metropolis at the end of the Sixties, and subsequently disseminated in a world-wide diaspora that nowadays cuts across race, class and gender lines. As part of hip hop culture, writing inherits a specific symbolic and normative language. In this paper, writers are observed as a community of practice which develops its own self-regulatory normativity. Endogenous norms interact with different normative sources and codes deriving from other social fields, such as criminal law, political commitment, and art. Writing thus is seen as an ‘interstitial practice’ that illustrates, not simply how a conflict among different normative systems comes along, but also and especially how social fields are shaped through conflicts over the power of nominating (even before judging) practices, or, in other words, through symbolic violence and the capillarity of power. Visibility and territoriality are two crucial aspects that interact with normativity in writing and concur to substantiate it.

Broadly speaking, signature graffiti writing can be characterized as a practice consisting in producing legal or illegal drawings and writings in public places using acrylic spray cans. During 2006, I have co-conducted an ethnography of Overspin, a crew of signature graffiti writers based in Northern Italy, the other co-researcher being Mr Michele Reghellin, a graffiti practitioner himself. We also have interviewed some writers who act alone and are not member of any crew. The main research aim was to understand how the community of writers define itself, and how it traces its own boundaries vis à vis other communities and other practices.

In the following, I attempt to provide a very rough summary of some of my findings that are related to the normative side of the practice of writing.

1. The representations and the practices of writing constitute a field (Bourdieu 1972). A field is a semi-autonomous social domain (Moore 1978) capable of generating at the very least: *first*, a number of relationally defined field positions; *second*, a number of specific dispositions to act and action orientations, both at the level of concrete practice, and at the level of lifestyles adopted by the community of practice (Wenger 1998); *third*, a series of position-takings or opinions that manifest themselves in discursive accounts produced by the members themselves in order to maintain or reshape definitions, norms and values inherent to the practice. Interestingly, the concept of field is reminiscent of – although not entirely correspondent to – an emic term employed by writers, as well as more generally by underground artists, the concept of *scene*¹. Both in graffiti writing and in other underground practices, a scene is a territorial ensemble of social actors dislocated in positions of centrality versus periphericity, of avantgarde versus retrogarde, of relatively differentiated degrees of seniority, militancy and success. The most important index that signals the establishment of a field can be said to be the extent to which value judgements about the artifacts produced by the practice are subtracted from exogenous reference frames and led back to endogenous frames. In other words, within an established social field, the capability to evaluate – and, even before evaluating, to even give a name to – the artifacts of a practice is claimed to belong to the field itself and exerted only by members of the community of practice. The argument advanced by Bourdieu about the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993) can be extended to the field of graffiti writing, insofar as language plays a crucial role in the definition of any social field. In fact, it is inside language that the power to nominate relevant phenomena takes shape and is revealed. Consequently, linguistic fluctuations are symptomatic signs of weakness in the constitution of the field.

2. Graffiti writing is a field whose definition is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is difficult to trace its boundaries. Writing interfaces, often overlaps and interweaves, with the fields of other practices, which it cannot always clearly separate itself from: art and design (as aesthetic work), criminal law (as vandalism crime), politics (as a message of liberation), market (as merchandisable product). Since no official and universally agreed-upon definitions of all these boundaries exist, writing appears as an *interstitial practice*. An interstitial practice is precisely a practice about whose definition and whose boundaries different social actors hold different conceptions. Consequently, the only common denominator of such a practice is the materiality of the practice itself – in our case, a spray can and a surface to be painted. If linguistic oscillations mirror oscillations in the constitution of the field, writing presents itself as an uncertain field indeed. The stark contrast between autochthonous terms (**bombing, painting**) and allochthonous ones (**staining,**

¹ An earlier attempt to use the concept of scene sociologically has been made by Irwin (1973).

vandalizing) provides a clear case of this problem. As known since Everett Hughes' works on professional cultures (Hughes 1958), the possibility to define one's own activity according to one's own autochthonous categories is among the key elements for the creation of a professional field. In graffiti writing, autochthonous definitions are explicitly claimed, but at times writers find themselves in the unpleasant position of observing and perceiving their own activity through categorical and terminological lenses that belong to external actors, either because these external actors are institutionally strong actors (such as the state's legal system and agencies of control), or because they are socially influent actors (such as those who operate in the media, the fashion system and so on). One of the first website ever dedicated to graffiti writing stressed the gap between the two points of view on the same practice by keenly choosing the provocative name Art Crimes.



Pict. 1a. Paolins's tag



Pict. 1b. Twor's and Bass' tags



Pict. 2a. Piece by Kato



Pict. 2a. Piece by Sparki

3. Graffiti writing is a territorial endeavour, in two senses. First, seen from inside the field itself, a tag is essentially a territorial marker (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974) (Pict. 1a, 1b). You are not supposed to overcross someone else's tag, this being one of the most serious offences to other writers – much worse if you overcross a masterpiece (Pict. 2a, 2b). From this point of view, territoriality is

basically linked to respect, and lack of respect, as well as defiant acts of disrespect, lead to retaliation (Bourgois 1995; Butler 2004; Kubrin 2005). Second, seen from the outside, the writer in fact ‘touches’ something that belongs to all, something that is public, like a wall in a street or a train’s front, and, by soing so, he makes visible a number of questions about the norms and rights that define the nature of social interaction in public spaces. The writer is a psycho-social character that belongs constitutively to the public space. Following Joseph and his reflection on Tarde (Joseph 1984), we can call him a *traître*. Consequently, the two conventional opposing views that interpret writing alternatively as art or as deviance are not able to identify the real stake that the practice of writing brings along. This stake is the definition of the nature and the limits of public space *qua* public². The street is the birthplace as well as the target of writing. The street is not merely a physical infrastructure; rather, it is a territorial construction fundamentally connected to the public destination of graffiti. As such, the street is also a discursive and ideological formation within the field of writing. In short, the two basic questions raised by writing are: ‘what is a writer?’, and: ‘what is a public space?’

4. Writers who belong to a crew³ represent their own crew even when acting alone⁴. The act of representing is linked to essentially to stylistic identity. Style is crucial to define the various positions writers occupy within the field of writing. Style is as important as difficult to define (Fricke and Ahearn 2002). Making a tag or a piece ‘with some style’ implies a form of ‘regulated improvisation’ (Bourdieu 1994) based on training, inspiration, virtuosity and quickness. Style is identity caught in the tension between tradition (school) and innovation (name). Together with the territorial nature of writing, style is the second item of the inner normativity of writing. Territoriality and style shape the inner normativity of writing, which is often implicit, but can ultimately be observed in action or elicited during interviews. This implicit inner normativity can be distinguished from outer normativities, such as social, legal and economic ones. However, the distinction is only ideal-typical, given that the various normative forms are in fact but various dialects in the attempt to symbolize human conduct as related to aspirations, i.e. – as radical legal-pluralists suggest – in the activity of producing legal forms (Macdonald 2006). Distinguishing inner and outer normativity is in fact but a way to inquiry on the constitution of the field and its boundaries. What is inner and outer becomes a matter of perspectives. Consider for instance the role of passers-by. Besides graffiti writers, passers-by, too, form the public of graffiti. In regard of the relationship between a minoritarian community and the mainstream,

² One of my interviewee, Res, put it like this: “Communitarian spaces, everyone interprets them at will”. For an insightful reflection on the public realm, see Lofland (1998).

³ When gathered together, the crew can be described and understood as a *pack* in Canetti’s sense (Canetti 1960).

⁴ ‘Representing’ is fundamental in hip hop culture at large. See Forman (2000).

Howard Becker once observed that *outsider* is a symmetric label: on the one hand, marijuana smokers are outsiders, but, on the other hand, for the marijuana smokers' community, the outsiders are the non-smokers (Becker 1963). Similarly, inside the writing field, passers-by are conceptualized as outsiders. This fact bears some consequences when it comes to tell who can judge, evaluate and appreciate aesthetically graffiti. In the former sentence, the 'can' refers to both competence and entitlement, two aspects that are clearly not the same thing and can be at odds with one other.



Pict. 3. Police controls at the Meeting of Styles convention, Padova, April 2006



Pict. 4. Secse on Trenitalia

5. In the relationships between writing and criminal law, illegality is the 'degree zero' of the practice of writing. Not only most writers have been having troubles with the police sooner or later (Pict. 3), but they also regard making a train (i.e. sneaking by night into the yards to make a piece on a train's front) as the true writer's pedigree (Pict. 4). Illegality is also regarded by writers as one of the crucial characteristics that differentiate writing from other practices or products. This does not mean that writers always do illegals. On the contrary, most of the actions I've been following were legal, either at the crew's wall of fame (Pict. 5), or during graffiti conventions (Pict. 6). Yet writers believe that the more you content yourself with legality and legal arrangements of some sort (e.g. public institutions granting you a wall out of town where you can practice, or shopholders hiring you to paint their place) the more you become something else, something different from a writer. You may end up doing 'art' or 'merchandise', which are different practices from writing. Even politics is something writing must distinguish itself from if it wants to constitute its own field. Writers consider themselves different from political activists. Despite the fact that in Italy graffiti writers have been often hosted inside the *centri sociali autogestiti* (most of which in the North-East of Italy are associated or controlled by the *disobbedienti* movement), writers do not identify themselves with the *centri sociali* at all, and, with some notable exceptions, they are especially reluctant when it comes to paint commissioned subjects.

6. Emergent inner normativity among writers is best revealed in the opinions about the legitimacy to hit certain types of spaces or surfaces. In regard of this, two main tendencies emerge, the first one more restrictive, the second one more permissive. For some writers, it is important to impose self-limitations to prevent acting on surfaces like monuments, churches and private houses. For others, on the contrary, no place is sacred. Writers with more restrictive positions sometimes also advance a utilitarian argument in favour of their normative choice: “It’s useless to hit where you’re sure you’ll be erased almost instantly. Then you’ve got four bastards who will hit everywhere anyway...” (Morki). Moreover, Res argues, hitting indiscriminately is self-defeating in the long run because you don’t know anymore which places are safe and which one unsafe and patrolled (this is also a side-effect of writers disrespecting other writers’ territory). Usually, though, bombers are not very sensitive to this type of arguments. Paolins for instance said: “I paint the wall but the house is still workin’, I haven’t... the use of the house is still you can live in it, maybe it’s just slightly different aesthetically. I understand you get angry, but after all I don’t give a damn. Fuck off, I too want my slice of fun in all this shit. I found it like this, too bad for you”. Interestingly, these two tendencies mirror the very process of constitution of the field of writing itself. In fact, more restrictive writers tend to mix endogenous and exogenous categories when describing the effects of indiscriminate hitting. On the contrary, bombers tend to conceive writing as a wholly constituted and even universal practice. For a bomber, norms about writing should be generated entirely from considerations within the field of writing itself, whereas a hard-core stylist will be more interested in securing a place where to write at ease. In any case, the essential point remains the degree to which value judgements about the artifacts produced by the practice are subtracted from exogenous reference frames and led back to endogenous frames.



Pict. 5. Rode at the Overspin's Wall of Fame in Schio, beginning to sketch

7. One could conceive writing as a seduction of crime (Katz 1990). But one can also regard it as a form of resistance, as an act of protest; or, alternatively, as a form of aesthetic research, which is intrinsically productive and against none (Kato)⁵, or even as primarily an *infottamento* (in slang, an uncontrollable burn), as Paolins put it. These conceptions do not automatically rule out each other. Up to a degree, they coexist. But the degree is floating and beyond a certain threshold conflict appears. The different motivations that cut across the community of practice influence the normative field of writing. More crucially, the interplay of these motivations affects the boundaries of the practice itself and determines its interstitial nature vis à vis art, crime, political action, subculture, research, bodily skillfulness (Pict. 7), personal satisfaction and

⁵ “Q. Thus, writing makes sense only if it remains illegal. But according to you, does it have an oppositional meaning, I mean against institutions, do you see it as an act...

A. Of protest?

Q. Yeah, does it have any such meaning or... I mean, a protest against the State, the institutions, against...

A. No, no, no! I don't think it's against anyone. At the root it's a thing you do 'cause you may just want to set a signature...”

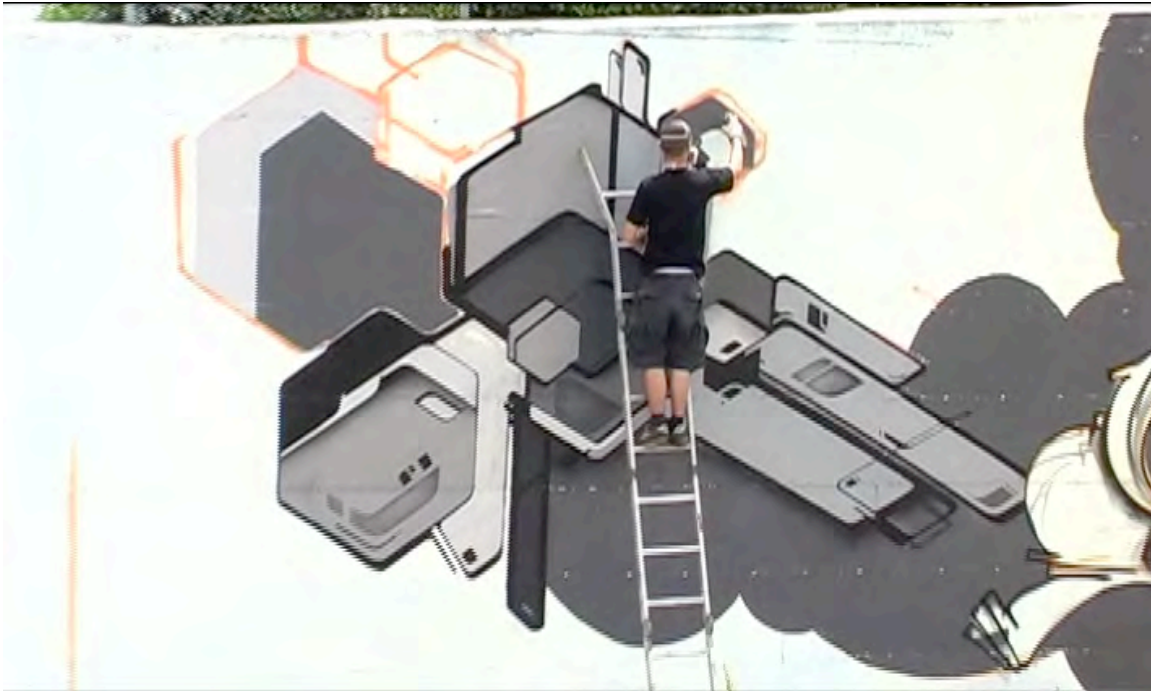
illness. Taken all together, these dimensions are clearly contradictory. Which one is activated or claimed at which time and by whom is a matter of people, situations and interactions, and that is the reason why these people, situations and interactions make the difference in the constitution of writing as a semi-autonomous social field created by practice. For instance, most writers do not reject the idea that their practice is a form of art. On the contrary, they often claim that it is. But when it comes to confront institutional art, or art that sells, they become much more cautious in endorsing any equivalence. Interestingly, Paolins refers to writing as a form of 'ungovernable art': "If you want it's a form of art that is ungovernable. It's done by people who act fooling all rules. If it gets into a museum it loses 'cause it's no longer an instinctive stuff. It's just a drawing like any other, who cares if it's done by a writer. To me, it must remain in the street. It'll always be a trouble, probably. 'Tis stuff's around since thirty years and it's always there. But as time goes, stuff increases and damages too. If the boy makes it there's motivation behind, it ain't just fashion".



Pict. 6. Overspin's allotted wall at the Street Fever convention, Romano di Lombardia, May 2006

8. Similarly ambiguous are the position-takings about other dimensions of the practice. Most notably, even the affiliation of writing to hip hop culture is not something that *va de soi*. The writers I have observed do not identify themselves with hip hop at 100%. They indeed recognize that graffiti writing is usually understood as one of the four main threads in hip hop culture. Most of them have also been inspired by rap music and hip hop fashion, but they also need to reach

some form of independence from the horizon of the subculture. This independence is expressed in musical taste as well as in dressing code. At the Overspin's hall of fame you can hear rock music and the writers dress 'street' but not specifically hip hop. The fact is that if you conceive writing as research, you don't want to be constrained by the *stylemes* and the clichés of a subculture. And, for the members of a crew such as Overspin, you should not stop your style there. As Kato put it: "Many of those who are hard infottati with rap are also inclined to a more conventional view of writing".



Pict. 7. Nolac tracing at Street Fever

9. To conclude, my point is that the endeavour to explain how norms emerge or are produced in a community of practice is fundamentally interweaved with – and, ultimately, amounts to – understanding the processes of the constitution of the semi-autonomous field where the community dwells, or the field that enables to define the practice endogenously rather than exogenously. The question as to when is a norm autonomous and when is it heteronomous is contingent upon boundary-making activities. Boundary-making is inherent to normativity at large. The specific nature and the features of boundaries and boundary-making is what need to be accounted for, if one wants to understand the implicit and explicit tensions, conflicts, resistances and negotiations of norms. From this point of view, the analytical advantage of the concept of field is that it allows to account for phenomena of porosity of the boundaries. In this paper, I have tried to illustrate some phenomena of porosity – or, with Foucault, some phenomena of *capillarité du pouvoir*.

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