

# *Visual representation of graffiti in the media environment: between art and vandalism*

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**Abstract** — Grasping of the environment, whether it be urban or virtual, by modern youth often happens thanks to not non-institutionalized practices. Creation of graffiti, in particular, is one of such practices. This practice has come out far beyond physical space and achieved the status of a comprehensive representation of youth cultural subjectivity in the media environment. The stability of this practice, despite its provocative and sometimes vandal nature, demonstrates that it deals with fundamental patterns of axiological and normative behavior model of youth. An essential factor which allows graffiti to serve as the "voice" of youth is technical availability and simplicity of images transfer in the virtual space, absence of any qualification requirement on their creation and a rather low level of social sanctions.

Videocracy which is a sociocultural characteristic of the present transforms subject - object and subject - subject relations among young people and, if does not cancel, but expresses an urgent need to review classical ideas, for example, of art.

**Keywords** — *media environment, graffiti, modern art, vandalism, social networks, visual representation*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The appeal to the essence of visual culture and to the peculiarities of its manifestation at the turn of the XX-XXI centuries is natural and understandable. The "power of images" (videocracy) has become of great importance in the daily life of man and has found new forms of representation in the media environment. After N.B. Kirillova, we regard the media environment as "the sphere that through the mediation of mass communications (print media, radio, TV, video, movies, computer channels, the Internet, etc.) connects a person with the world around, informs, entertains, promotes certain moral and aesthetic values, has ideological or organizational influence on the world view and social behavior of people" [1]. It should be noted that today's socialization of the young generation is initially included in the media environment, which occupies a stable position in the organization and virtualization of everyday practices. In particular, social networks have provided modern people with the opportunity to form their social circles, to differentiate "friends and foes", to create visual representations of their own "self-image" in relation to the urban environment, to organize thematic communities and/or join them depending on their own interests, preferences and values.

The sociocultural nature of media is traditionally considered in the process of interaction between the network society and the boundaries of the private sphere. The Internet, as a decentralized system of communication, operates on the basis of a "network of networks", undermines the existing perceptions of the nature of politics and the role of technology in general [2]. According to M. Poster's theory, the role of the Internet is not limited to an effective tool of communication, as the Network generates new forms of interaction between people and expands the boundaries of given identities. In virtual communities, identity is constructed through communication practices, i.e., "by exchanging electronic messages, individuals kind of invent themselves" [2].

Young people, as the most active group, respond to emerging patterns of behaviour in the information space and respond quite flexibly to transformations in the socio-cultural sphere. But this group also presents certain risks in terms of self-expression and identity search. In real reality norms are regulated, and any act becomes a marker of the manifestation of personally significant values and meanings. The virtual environment, where young people seek to "continue" reality, functions as a projection of reality, while removing a number of behavioral constraints and moral conditionalities.

The space of the Network is attractive for the younger generation for several reasons: they are technically equipped, the Internet forms of interaction are familiar to them, they seek support from the outside in finding answers to their questions, in self-identification, in building behavioral, and, deeper, life strategies. Also, for young people, the virtual reality is increasingly becoming an environment where stable behavior patterns are fixed, the rules of the game are defined, which are quickly adopted to create an ideal/successful self-image. Identification and self-affirmation happen under the influence of "friends", "friends of friends". Through getting approval for their actions, statements and thoughts, self-presentation in the virtual space creates a positive social effect. According to R. H. Jones, A. Chik, C. A. Hafner, "young people form their way of communication, close to themselves in sense perception and life attitudes" [3].

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

Media environment and communicative sphere overlap, forming an information environment, where its technological and content components require the student to immerse in the material and to perceive it. Also the skills of its representation through available means are needed. In this regard, visualization is advantageous and optimal as it is used by natural sciences and humanities to replicate, popularize and represent information.

In this respect, it is important for us to focus on the following positions that formed the basis of the methodology [4]:

- the technological effectiveness of communication prevails over its content: imprinting of the world image together with the values and meanings inherent to it is important for the modern person if it is associated with relevant forms of expression and the principles of creation of hybrid texts designed for different canals of perception convenient for reading and understanding in a situation "here and now",
- for the person of the 21st century, visual "capturing of the reality image" acquires the nature of technology and is actively duplicated in the media environment, provoking the creators to organize new communication practices and forms,
- the "visualized" as a means and result of personal self-actualization,
- development of critical thinking during implementation of basic communication skills (system, structural, logical and creative thinking) and work with diverse information in the conditions of the media environment.
- The method of visualization in the humanities correlates with the method of cultural interpretation of reality phenomena [5].

They include the ways to organize the presentation of a text through verbal and visible images and its full and/or partial inclusion in the digital environment.

Interpretation as a method is one of the universal ones when dealing with phenomena and multimodal texts: it is the way through which words, artifacts and events are explained and analyzed in their historical and cultural entity.

## III. FINDINGS

What is influencing the self-determination of a young person today? Let us consider the phenomenon of graffiti and the peculiarities of its representation in the social network "VKontakte" on the example of the following two communities "GRAFFITI SOYUZ" (hereinafter - GS) [6] and "Conceptual vandalism" (hereinafter - CV) [7]. These communities are chosen by us as a bright example. The names of both are speaking. The word "union" means a close connection, unity due to common interests, for example, in the

field of graffiti. The word "conceptual" is something that in its basis has a serious independent concept.

The first community is presented with a photo representing a man whose eyes are seemingly looking for a wall. The man's face is half-covered with a respirator, but he is perceived in the context of the urban environment, he is engaged in it, he is one of us. On the semiotic level it's interpreted as: "You can become one of street artists", "You are a creator against the city background..." And the man is young.

The photo of the second community - a wall paved with "blocks." In "CV" the image of the wall is interpreted in differently: as a way of internal and external closure, as a place for creativity, fantasy and hooliganism, as a symbol of dullness, which must be overcome, as a psychological problem (a wall of misunderstanding, which teenagers often face).

Alexey Sukhachev, as the chief administrator, outlined the community's position: "GRAFFITI SOYUZ can be justly called the best news portal of graffiti and partly street art cultures. The portal incorporates countless street artists. Here one can find works of both the most influential and leading graffiti artists who have been setting the level for many years, and authors who have just found their personal style"[6]. The page sets values associated with positive self-identification of the individual in the world which includes a lot of different cultures, with recognition of its importance in the society and creative community not only today, but also in the historical and cultural context. Engagement of the community members is supported and guided by information resources, visual representations, discussions, etc. The attitude of voluntary participation, creative impulse, creative pathos and involvement of a person who joins the community, the discussions and communication in general are characteristic of the community activity. The community asserts its basic values in the given quote, which is substantively and stylistically different from the other, in which the author is designated as the "handler and owner" with reference to - [instagram.com/true\\_conceptual\\_vandalism/](https://www.instagram.com/true_conceptual_vandalism/).

"A free exhibition of creativity. Update every hour. Street art, graffiti... And everything else. <...> Have you chosen the street to be your canvas? We transfer the street online. The goal: to create an industry where the funds we raise give you an opportunity to express yourself accurately and creatively. Conceptions seem to be asking to be vandalized. What will make others think tomorrow is up to you today." The words "and everything else" mean any manifestation of creativity, including "acts of vandalism," which, according to Article 214 Vandalism of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation [8] is considered, firstly, as "desecration of buildings or other constructions, destruction of property on public transport or in other public places," secondly, as "the same acts committed by a group of persons, as well as on the grounds of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity or on the grounds of hatred or enmity against a social group." There is a clear opposition to "you – everyone else" where the position of "you" sounds clear and persistent in the final formulation - "it's you who decides," as if the responsibility

for the "opportunity to express yourself accurately and creatively" rests only with you. On the one hand, one cannot argue with this, as if a person makes a decision, he or she takes responsibility for the resulting consequences. On the other hand, after the words "conceptions seem to be asking to be vandalized" raising protest intentions within a person and inspiring the subconscious with "go and do" appeal, the community abstracts itself, as the actions and consequences are the "decision" of the participant himself.

Development of the media environment has a number of characteristics. *Firstly*, interacting with each target group, the user "domesticates" a virtual social network that leads to formation of external and internal space within this network [9]. VKontakte – one of the most popular networks in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet. It became not just a place for communication, but also a "territory" where the most different representations are possible: from positive and creative ones to protest forms and destructive acts. It should be noted that creative search, projects and self-affirmation through deliberate violation of norms, rules, prohibitions and other processes are not meaningless in themselves, but the subject and saturation of content has the axiological and semantic potential which is perceived in a certain context and gains positive and/or negative connotation. Joining the community, the user sort of acquires the right for manifestation of the activity demonstrated in the discussion, in uploading of photos and videos. For the user, communication becomes a way of exploitation of the virtual environment, endowing it with his or her own meanings. Locally, in groups it is solved differently.

Secondly, the logic of the external space existence is defined with the extent to which the structure of a virtual social network can meet the needs of its user. For example, in the community "GS" there is quite lively communication among 162,476 people (at the end of September 2019) in different directions with a feedback form provided: donations, graffiti (applications), advertising, a shop, mailing. The practice-oriented attitude of the group is positioned in posts discussions, videos, photos, in distribution of thematic content among and for the members of the community. The nature of the communication itself among the participants cannot be called decent, but rather familiar and disorderly (obscene and derogatory language is used, etc.).

The community has information resources: three articles related to graffiti content ("RASKO"), legal use of public space ("Trun about legal walls") and punishment and administrative liability for graffiti. Functionally, they "work" and set the main theme of the сообщество's content: you can achieve success in two ways, legal and vandal ones. The first on the page is positioned much more actively.

The community's page features 59 photo albums with a total of 43,451 photos. The topics, movements, stories, and attempts become the object of active community participants' discussion, their assessments and comments, often limited to expression of emotional attitude.

The target audience of the community is easy to identify by the nature of communication, by the methods of verbal and visual representation, by the attributes and entourage

characteristic of the participants - young people seeking self-expression against the urban landscape background, but in most cases guided by the criteria of the allowed and permitted.

The "CV" community significantly exceeds in the number of participants - 583,414 people. This is much more than in the previous community, and this is related to the style and specifics of communication within the community. The language itself reflects the style of communication adopted in the adolescent environment: daring, emotional, attracting the interlocutor's attention. The thematic compilation reflects the "code" of the community newcomers - "HALA VANDALA novice," which reflects the degree of the community openness, the content ("WHAT SHOULD NOT BE OFFERED"), the style of communication is marked by such phrases ("sometimes of humorous character," All the information is fictitious. Coincidences are unrealistic "etc.") [7] and promising words, which are addressed, first of all, to young people seeking support, popularity and recognition: "Write - we will post your works and you will become more famous" [7]. Other topics about the logo, tags, principles of using the mask image on the created images and updates of albums of Russian street art are represented with links and without any additional information.

49 albums, which contain 1,528 photos, reflect street art of particular people from different cities of Russia: Alexander Blot (Penza), Ilia Mozgi (Yekaterinburg), Nikita Nomerz (N. Novgorod), Muluk (Saratov), etc. The "novice"'s task is to orient among the names and content. Pasha Kashel (community administrator), Igor Krutoy - Krutoy Igor, etc., do podcasts related to the theme of the group: "Vandalism in," land art, "procedural art," etc. Small audio recordings are attractive to young audience in terms of the variety of topics and the organization of stylistic "translation" from one language into another - accessible and understandable for teenagers and young people. There are recordings not only about graffiti, but also about futurism, postmodernism, impressionism, etc., reflecting the essential features of movements and styles of art. And also about philosophy and thinkers...

The collection of articles is much more numerous and broader in the scope content than in the "GS" community. These are articles on vandals and vandalism in art, advertising graffiti, museumification of street art, on stencils and much more, which is directly or indirectly related to the issue of modern art representation.

The links are organized for a specific audience, which, firstly, will accept the words "there is something to read," "eavesdrop the podcasts" without rebellion and "language disgust", and secondly, has access to other social networks (www.instagram.com, tele.click, podcasts.apple.com).

By analyzing the content presented on the pages of the both communities, it becomes apparent that the concept of conceptual vandalism can be defined through

- permanent desire for an experiment and "search of the new" through the expression of the world outlook characteristic of teenage and youth audience and, as a

*rule, happening in the conditions of the urban environment,*

- *elements of deliberate provocation and epatage,*
- *representations of the ways of development and exploitation of the life space through creation of its projection in the media environment and keeping balance between intentional creating and intentional destroying behavior.*

Thirdly, the domestication of the internal space of a virtual social network is a complex of sensual-emotional, symbolic and pragmatic dimensions that the user forms "around himself" and "for himself."

These communities present creative works by street artists to look up to, whose names have become a classic: Timofei Radya, Banksy, Rasko, etc. In the GS community, the video selection not only expands the horizons of the graffiti concept, but also contains videos that reflect the process of applying the image to the surfaces. In the "CV" community there is information not only about graffiti, but also about art, its essential features. And this becomes important in terms of grasping of the virtual space, creating it "for yourself," a sort of a step-by-step instruction.

A distinctive feature of the both groups is the style demonstrated in the design of the page. "GS" is characterized with discreet, guiding tone of the headlines and columns, characteristic of keeping the format, which does not allow to go beyond the limits allowed. "CV" design, on the contrary, is deliberately provoking, daring, which, apparently, is more attractive for those wishing to become subscribers, seeking freedom (in a broad sense) of self-expression.

In the both communities, the path of virtual space exploitation by the user in general or by the participant himself is quite transparent and clear. The three dimensions of the virtual environment (sense-emotional, symbolic and pragmatic) in each community are aimed at achieving the result: finding like-minded people, attracting audience, distributing content and representing creative self-identification correlated with the subject matter and content of the communities. The position "around oneself" and "for oneself" in the context of the graffiti representation as a relevant form of street art or a practice of vandalism plays a decisive role in terms of expression of subjectivity.

Acquisition of meaning, which is understood by us as the highest manifestation of value, is confined to the need to mark one's own "ego" for others and for himself. For such an act of self-identification, epatage is important as a manifestation of extremes, as a way of a deliberate provocative challenge erasing limitations in aesthetic and moral representation of the visual image. Such treatment of meaning could well be called vandalism. But destructive behavior and ways of its record are also filled with meaning. The context within which the image is created is required, its semantic content and pragmatic focus. In defining the essence of the phenomenon - graffiti/vandalism - the legitimacy of action as an act plays an essential role. Within art, and especially in demonstration of relevant art practices, the question of manifested vandalism as

an individual's destructive deviant behavior is rather controversial and ambiguous. And experts are involved in the dispute.

Within the cultural approach, each VKontakte page is a quite independent text of multi-modal character addressed to the potential "reader". This allows to reformat, mix their content through creating information systems by everyone who has access to the Internet, and ensures their circulation. Adding and updating content, attracting new members who may be in different communities at the same time, ensures that the page is viable and representative in the social network.

For adolescents and young people, social media communication and self-presentation practices have a temporary character. In our opinion, there are two reasons for it. The first is the ability of the media environment to produce new methods and forms of transferring the texts of different nature. As a result, the former versions lose their relevance for the broad mass filling the public space and for the subject himself. The second reason is mobility and related internal tensions of the subject himself both in the ways of grasping the reality and in the speed of acquisition of identity. Communicative media practices identifying the subject outlive themselves on the Internet largely because they cease to be interesting. The subject sort of "outgrows" them within himself.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Under the conditions of videocracy, personality representation in different environments takes new forms. The media environment is increasingly gaining the status of an "inhabited" space that affects the identity formation and personality self-identification in the real world. Street art and the ways of its representation in the media environment (on the examples we provide) create the optics of double vision: the exploitation of urban space by a person, and then - the representation of this exploitation (in a full, partial, supplemented version) to others.

Capturing the image of the world with its inherent values and meanings is important for modern man. This takes place in the process of his appeal to topical forms of expression and principles of creation of texts designed for different channels of perception, convenient to read and understand in the situation "here and now," in search of answers to various personally significant questions. For young people and, in particular, for the adolescent environment, the search for guidance is an important and necessary stage in acquisition of life's meanings and building behavioral strategies.

Technicality, which determines the specific capturing and subsequent representation of the image of reality, distinguishes the ways of building communicative relations with the world and the individual's self-actualization. The effectiveness of communication on the Internet, in general, depends largely on the quality of the language, which should be understood by each user of a certain resource and arouse interest for further communication, i.e. be commercially profitable for one and attractive for the other.



For this age group, graffiti is becoming a relevant practice, allowing to understand the boundaries of culture through form, content, peculiarities of creative and destructive decisions and opportunities to take responsibility for them. The very practice of street art demonstrates the technicality of "capturing the image of reality," the activity of replication of this process in the media, being subjected to the influence of mass media. "Represented" in the real environment of urban space acts as a means and result of the individual's self-actualization both in real reality and on the pages of social networks.

Certainly, the special niche in grasping the reality is occupied today by the media environment producing a definite format of the text – multimodal, oriented to inclusion of the experienced user having skills of reflection and critical information analysis. Such a text is convenient in the context of building a trajectory of its exploitation and perception, it is practical and allows to build subject - object and subject - subject relations in the conditions of actual culture. But in determination of the essence of modern practices (graffiti and vandalism) the key position is taken by ability of the person to carry out critical activity through understanding of sense, phenomena and artifacts ... transfer ...

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