# The Critique of Technocracy in Riga Stencil Graffiti

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**Abstract**. The utilization of the street as an alternative and independent medium for transmission of radical political ideas is a form of civil disobedience manifested thus to a certain extent in a work of propaganda and is an example of creative idealism. In this case graffiti can be regarded as a non-violent protest that was theoretically described by Henry David Thoreau in the treatise on "The Duty of Civil disobedience", a work that has become an essential part of anthologies of political and social philosophy. To a certain degree, in its visual format, graffiti is a continuation of the "samizdat" tradition dating back to the Soviet era, both in the sense of a socially critical message and in the use of an alternative medium. Proposing a new, tactical usage of technology critically directed against technocracy of contemporary society youth of the city is trying to occupy it's public space by specific type of aesthetization and, in the same time, is delivering clear message. The goal of this paper is the reading and interpretation of messages of the images and texts in stencil – graffiti in Riga in the context of interplay between counter cultures, different minor social groups and their ideologies. The method used is social semiotic analysis. The results show that the criticism of technocratic capitalism, consumerism and the oppression of life and the nature are most important issues taken up by the authors of stencils.

**Key words:** stencil graffiti, counter-culture, technocracy, ideology

## Introduction

According to Theodor Roszak's classic definition, youth counterculture is "opposition to a technocratic society", i.e. the critique of an overwhelming technocracy. Another important theoretician of counterculture Timothy Leary, in speaking about the "symbol of the electric guitar" of the youthful opposition, points on its ambivalent attitude towards technological innovation. This equivocal link to the world of technology fostered the phenomena such as, for example, cyberpunk literature and aesthetics, as well as the ethics of hacktivism that belongs to new media as a form of counter-culture in the era of the information society.

In the case of the subculture of graffiti, a battle is taking place for the aestheticization of the public space. This is the answer provided by the rebellious sons to the "fathers of the city" who possess money and power with which to design urban public space using architectural means. The generation of sons, who are excluded from this real estate discourse due to a lack of means, put into play the only thing they own, i.e. their body, which they subject to the danger of imprisonment, because graffiti is an illegal activity, which in legal terms is interpreted as vandalism, a view that also prevails within the mass media.

The thematic diversity of countercultural ideology appears most prominently in the alternative media space. For example, in the case of graffiti-stencils as semiotic partisan infowar activity and as carriers of a particular socio-critical ideology, where the main themes of countercultural ideology manifest themselves through the visual and concise form, we come to an interdisciplinary study field of the energy of creative self-expression and the critical expansion of the street art vector (that we can conditionally call semiotic rebellion (ie, rebellion by sign-symbols). The study will look at each of these aspects in the light of their contemporarity and duration.

## Aims and objectives

Most of street art (including stencil graffiti) messages have a socio-critical potential. They represent the diversity of social streams and subcultures not represented at the mainstream strain of public communication within traditional mass media. They are poorly studied theoretically, although there lies perhaps the most direct, sensitive and open platform for forming and expressing grassroot ideas and new systems of signification as well as new media approbation. However, it goes unnoticed because in the marginal manifestations of art, the symbolic rebellion / protest of the youth, i.e. in the messages based on counterculture ideology, neither researchers nor the traditional mass media, nor the broader audience of the media and the public that occupies the public space, delve deeply into social criticism of the state of affairs within contemporary society. The visual-material signs of these criticisms are accustomed to the process of countercultural semiosis and often go from the street to the commercialised arts' industries and popular culture, losing their critical importance- in other words semiotically speaking: the signified social-critical element changes to decorative and profitable. Still, those signs have a potential of telling their own story of the city and society. To identify the messages delivered by street art, in particular, stencil graffiti in Riga and to decode the meaning of the messages (both visual and verbal signs) as well as to interpret those meanings in the contexts of counterideological interplay are the main three objectives of this article. This is done to reach the main aim of the research, that is to understand the countercultural semiosis in the street culture of Riga city. Countercultural semiosis is important in the context of its intergenerational change during the analysis of social processes and policy-making in Latvia, as the dialectical collision and unity of culture / counterculture has already structured prosperous Western democracies through the 1960s and 1970s towards systemic openness and social engagement.

## Literature review

Latvian street art is not widely explored topic in communication science. Besides the research on street art of Latvia conducted within Police Academy that perceives graffiti as "vandalism" (Boluža, 2013.), there was practically no Latvian street art scientific covering (the media publications in essay or pictorial forms do not count). The only exception is very recent last year's publication of Culture Academia of Latvia "Cultural crossroads" (Latvian Academy of Culture, 2019.) that has a place for a research on street art and graffiti. The essays dedicated on street art is conducted by students where Latvian graffiti is studied basically through the prism of street art preservation through various documentation formats mainly by photography artists or in the weird context of authorship and legal copyright law concern. (Academy of Culture, 2019) The stencil graffiti with their counter-cultural messages are not within the scope of interest of those studies. Our research resides between the Scilla and Haribda of 1. The administrative legal status of vandalism or 2. Artistic practices: namely – it is about ideological messages that can be studied within cultural studies paradigm with semiotic approach to the subcultures and can be conducted within specific media fields like: fan-zines, stickers, T-shirt design, etc. We choose specific stencil graffiti *empiric material* that boomed in the years of economic crisis in Latvia 2007-2009 and still has luckily survived remains documented in the rather comprehensive online database format of art-pieces photographs on stencils of either Riga or all other places of Latvia by Jeremy Smedes. Items were gathered anonymously and collectively including the authors with volunteer effort and without registration of date or more specific location. This unique collection was accessible via webpage: jeremy. lv/stencils.

In fact, there is no acknowledged or classical theoretical framework for studies on the countercultural ideological messages within graffiti or particularly stencils. But there are some relevant studies focusing on the subcultural dimension of graffiti. We can recommend from them a young and perspective researcher with her insightful symbolic code's analysis that hopefully has potential in the future comprehensive theory treaty (Lannert, 2015) There exist (except the ancient Hellenic graffiti studies) the only theoretical book in the field with ideology context in a very specific topic from Eastern Europe studies series covering Post-socialist political messages and published just in 2019: (Velikonja, 2019).

## Method

The general methodology of current study foresees the application of the approaches known in social semiotics and cultural studies. As the object of this study can by defined as the cultural logic and meaningful cultural semiotical activities of certain groups of society that establish the differentiation of collective identities and cultural diversity paralell to the globally unifying mass culture, the visual and verbal signs were decoded and interpreted in the key of various countercultural ideologies. The focus of the reserch determines certain sites of display and materialities of signs as well as class, cultural and ideological differences influencing audiences of its readers and decoding process (Hall,

1980). But multimodal complexity and the laconic multilayered expresivity of stencils remain in centre of our interest, this is why we used elements of social semiotical analysis addapted for visual and multimodal messages developed by G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen in their work (Kress, 2009, Kress, van Leeuwen, 1996, van Leeuwen, 2005) – color, image, composition, story, visual un verbal rhetorics and interaction, verbal expression, graphical form.

The pictures analysed were selected from the private collection created by Jeremy Smedes (consisting from 1031 images) using two criteria – relevancy of the main theme of the stencil to the topic of this article and the level of informativity of the picture; 11 pictures were selected for the further analysis.

## Results

The messages of the street art (including stencils) have a socio-critical potential. They represent the variety of social movements and subcultures that are not given the voice in the mainstream media of public communication. If the potential of stencils and graffiti as a radical medium has been discussed, there is little analysis to the ideological background of groups communication via stencils on street walls and almost no research done on streets of Riga. However, this is maybe most immediate and most open platform for forming and expression of the grass-root ideas as well as for testing of new sign systems and alternative media. However, this is not always noticed because neither researchers, nor traditional media, nor media audience that inhabit the public space – no one seriously sees in the rebellious, countercultural ideology based messages sense full criticism on the existing status quo in the contemporary society. The visual and material signs of the countercultural semiosis cycle are tamed in the process of cooptation, and lose their critical sense, respectively, in the sense of semiotics, the social critical element of the signified is changed to aesthetic signified, i.e. decorative, income bringing.

The semiosis of counterculture is a significant element in the context of generational change in the process of social processes and development of politics in Latvia because the dialectical fight and unity of culture and counterculture already have structured a Western democratic type of welfare into the direction of openness and social integration and civic involvement.

As the main principle of the research, the approach of social semiotics is used together with a research philosophy of cultural studies. As main objects of the research then emerge the phenomena of cultural logics and activities of sense – making cultural semiosis of certain social groups that is based on the differentiation of collective identities and cultural diversity on the background of global mass culture or popular culture.

The thematic diversity of the countercultural ideology is at its best represented in the space of alternative media. For example, speaking about semiotic guerilla – activity that is creating and making of stencils in the public space as representing of certain socio-critical ideology, they manifest in the visual and laconic form the main topics according the ideology of counterculture we should take in account 1) subcultural identity, 2) creative

self-expressional energy and 3) the criticism of the street art form that can be seen as semiotic rebel (the rebel with help of signs and symbols).

Urbanism philosopher Richard Sennett describes transformation of the public space in the philosophical approach: he speaks about the "fall of public man" (Sennett, 2017).

In the case of graffiti subcultures there is a fight for the aestheticization of the public space. That is the answer of the rebellious sons to the "fathers of the city", who have a money and power that allow them to design urban public space by means of architecture. The generation of sons that because of the lack of means is deprived from the discourse by immobilization. They are acting by all they have – their bodies that come under risk to be arrested by the police. Because stencils, like all graffiti, is illegal activity that is treated by law as vandalism. Mass media often take on this view.

Another way is to see the visuality of stencils as a non-violent protest theoretically based on the work of Henry David Thoreau on "civil disobedience" (Thoreau, 2014). Another part of similarity connects stencils to the forms of alternative media – "samizdat" tradition, for example, both as social criticism and as alternative media usage.

There is another contemporary protest tradition or "post-modern politics" that is oriented on the "aestheticization" of politics – the visual creativity of stencils is possible to understand in this context.



Picture 1. **Poetics of the tool 1.** ([Picture accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/stencils.)



Picture 2. **Poetics of the tool.** ([Picture accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/stencils.)

Therefore, stencil messages in this article are understood and interpreted in the three-fold way: first, as a message sent in the public space for wide audience by social group representing countercultural ideology, second, as an act of civil disobedience, third, as the aestheticization of politics.



Picture 3. **Poetics of the tool 3.** ([Picture accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/stencils.)

The image of the butterfly (picture 1) confronts natural, fragile, sensitive and sensible in combination with man-made, industrial, mechanical, metallic. Besides, it doesn't produce a humorous or comic effect as a confrontation of a high and low, like it might appear in one's joke.

This image makes us think of a poetical dimension of the technical (or vice versa – necessity in industrialization of work done by the poet– as Bourdieu puts it – the small-scale production of private mythologies (Bourdieu, 2004: 126). An example for it is "literary machines" introduced by Russian writer Andrey Platonov (Platonov, 2004). In the official arts and culture of Soviet time industrial work was celebrated as the higher social status could be achieved through one's experience obtained through the process of the work within a factory.

However, the mechanical work and conveyer – Fordism introduced assembly line represents the universe of a loss of creativity, unanimated work and a global simulation in which we live only as a source of energy for self-developing world of machines and as machinery reproductive organs that are remanufactured in a conveyer. The image of a conveyer (that is here metonymically replaced by just one key) in a piece of art arouses thoughts about the poetical dimension of the technical sphere or the need for industrialisation for the poetic work via some kind of machinery. Andrey Platonov also believed that a person could be occupied with poetry – literary creativity – only during one's leisure time apart from full time occupation in the Planetary Communism construction site (Platonov, 2004).

Those aspects show that the image in the context of the street of Riga can be interpreted both as a critique of a industrial work deprived of the life, the natural and creativity and a celebration of the industrial work as a liberating creativity. Manufacturing work of the industrial proletariat of the USSR was recognised as the highest social status that a person could gain through working experience in a factory and that was supported by various bonuses: health rehabilitation centres, salaries, flats. Access to engineering and technical education for children of workers, as well as intelligentsia, allowed them to perform work that is less alienated, non-routinized and creative (also less deteriorating for health) and thus less paid work provided immanent satisfaction. The machine is here a result of the work of creation and in the same time serves for the liberation of the worker. Such a poeticization of manufacturing machinery is also typical for the steam-punk sub-culture (Kozlovs, 2004).

The work of literary machines is suggested in the poetic use by Platonov of the new revolutionary language (*novoyaz*) from a Soviet bureaucratised office. Here words and things (that are always the medium) are combined: language and apparatuses. Culture, in its turn, is something that is cultivated/lived by a nation, i.e., in a language. In linguistic activity, according to notorious contemporary linguist Abraham Noam Chomsky, pure creativity is manifested by generating a non-routinized and innovative adequate response to any communicative situation overcoming the gap between a limited numbers of linguistic elements (phonemes, vocabulary, grammar rules) by moving to an unlimited field of verbal combinations. The same mechanism appears in *bricolage* – an innovative action not only by words but also by things.

So, in the dynamic city space simple mechanisms and complicated machines become an environment for imagination, creativity and expression. In picture 1, a wrench for mechanical works is becoming a body of a butterfly – a symbol of a passion, creativity and easiness of life. In picture 2, a part of pliers is developing into an insect-like Dinosaur – nature represents danger in this interpretation. Picture 3 represents a critical version of the dehumanization and manipulation by mechanical work and mechanisms of economy.

A historically developing parallel to the industrialization of production – cities obtain a strictly organized system and speed of life, producing social divide and public common, and a place where opinions are expressed and exchanged. Along with signs included into official order – in form of graffiti this space allows for expression hidden voices of the criticism of the city order – that of capitalist production, efficiency, profit and consuming.

In the picture 4, it is the recursive ornamentation of the facade of city building with the picture of the city itself – blockhouses, a tree in the square, biker and a flow of cars. The picture symbolizes the immobilization of the everyday scene in the common city space. It is the symbol of immobilization that is painted on the walls of a city, a painting in the very painting. One of the first things we notice is the color red.

Picture 4. **Bleeding city** ([accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/stencils.)

The first impression is that this is used in order to make the image more impressive on the wall, but after the analysis, one can obtain a fully new interpretation. If the color symbolizes blood, it is bleeding. The city can bleed for several reasons. I is important that the order is questioned and it is painful. Here we see some movements, but the building in the middle divides the picture in two parts. On the right side there is a lot of cars, busses, trucks, on the left, there is a space for people and bicycles. The division could mean that people can refuse to use air condition damaging mechanical vehicles, trying to use the more ecologic and more human walk, going by bicycles or other means that cause no damage to the environment. In the same time, if the both kinds of movement are in opposition (right and left), the design of buildings is dehumanizing and similar everywhere. We can see tree in the middle of landscape. It can symbolize the importance of the nature in the middle of city. This example can provide several messages – first, it is a pluralistic message on the alternatives of ways of life, second, it is an appeal to take care of our city and nature – for life to become better, more natural and more responsive. Third, by making a moving scene still in red in pictographic sign, this stencil as well means that immobility is the death of the city. Cities must move to develop and stay alive. Which of the readings is applied- it depends from the ideological position of the reader.

Immanuel Wallerstein described three political ideologies that were formed in 19th century – conservatism, liberalism and socialism – that are present in political philosophy as well as public opinion" (Wallerstein, 2003: 128-130). The turning point is the Great French Revolution that brought "consequences to the system of worldview" in the form of *normalisation* of changes, innovations, transformations and even revolutions in the modern political arena. But political ideology is only one of the ways how to cope with this socio-psychological normalisation: the emergence of social sciences according to the following narration of "an archaeology of the human sciences" started by Foucault's book "The Order of Things" (Foucault, 1994) is yet another way how to cope with challenges of modernity. The third is a negative answer – "anti-systemic movements" or counter-culture; that appear as ideology of the graffiti- our field of interest and study.

Gilles Deleuze describes the transition postulated by Michel Foucault as a shift from the modern society of industrial discipline to a society of cybernetic control (Deleuze, 1990). The transition from modernism to postmodernism is described by Jean Baudrillard as an evolution from metallurgy to semiurgy – the production of digitally transmitted signs.



Picture 5. **Working/Leisure**. ([accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/ stencils.)

The control society that comes to replace the society of discipline (Picture 5) is based on prevention. Control is introduced already by the "diapers revolution" that produces a creative class. The industrial society (both capitalist and socialist) corresponds to "toilet-training". It is a discipline that is suitable for a factory, when one needs to be in the right place at the right time, thus controlling the function of a sphincter in order to accumulate (sic! a capitalistic discourse) and present one's performance (by postponing instant pleasure for gaining a later and sublimed pleasure of recognition by authorities-parents). Diapers restrict one to control the lower-side processes and to establish an adequate understanding of causes and consequences behind it. Alongside with diapers, parents have become more liberal in their attitude towards earlier instilling of discipline; as a result, the new generation grows up less critically thinking.



Picture 6. **Power of drugs 1.** ( [accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/ stenc ils.)

Picture 7. **Power of drugs 2.** ( [accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/
stencils.)



Picture 8. **Power of drugs** ( [accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.lv/
stencils.)

The Freudian – Marxist cultural criticism of the technocratic society inspired by the
Frankfurt school described how the exploitation of the nature is transformed into the ex-
ploitation and manipulation of man. The drugs appear (picture 6, 7, 8) on the walls of the
city as a criticism of technocracy – for the worker of industrially alienated work in service
of machines the head has been "normalized" by the monotone handwork of the machine.



Picture 9. **Smoke green.** ( Picture accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy.
lv/stencils.)



Picture 10. **Negation to heavy drugs.** ( [Picture accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through
Internet: jeremy.lv/stencils.)

"Five fingers" – cannabis leave (picture 6, 7) with ethnical ornaments on the surface of a pipe and stylized waves of smoke. This is the attribute of the subculture of Rastafarianism: cannabis is the symbol of mystical wisdom. This is drug is popular in the stencil graffiti of Riga along with magic mushrooms (picture 8). In opposite to that Riga street public space contains negation of heavy drugs (picture 10) that receives form of warning by using visual form of sign that symbolically connotes warning…



Picture 11. **Drugs work.** ( [Picture accessed 30 October 2019]. Access through Internet: jeremy. lv/stencils.)

It must be also noted that sometimes stencils are not based on visual images, in opposite it uses language for double meaning. In "Smoke green" (picture 9) invitation to smoke cannabis is in the same time criticism of the capitalist market driven business model that is a responsible for damages for nature and climate change. In "Drugs Work!" (Picture 11) simplistically written message plays with ironic criticism of the capitalist work ethics – work as performed like something under drugs, work as performed by drugs. Where it is not an option to reject conditions of the pressure for productivity and efficiency, after an alienated work, worker can feel as a human being only in his basic animal-like activities in his leisure time – with food, sleep, or sex.

The nation's creativity is culture. Hannah Arendt raised a question, what remains from Germans after Auschwitz and the answer is – the language. (Compare Adorno's famous slogan: No more poetry after Auschwitz!) Alongside with language the productive activity itself by mastering the natural forces (praxis) is the origin of humankind, while self-developing production means are the technology/machinery itself.

In Martin Heidegger's opinion, the technological development is the destiny of humankind (Krokker, 2014). It should be listened to carefully as the voice of existence is revealed there. Humble listening creates a third way between thoughtless assumptions that technology is something technically handy providing comfort and convenience, and rejection of technical progress. Also, existence speaks to us through language, for instance, proto-machinery The teeth- proto-machine's glossy surface power within the realm of hairy reality of primitive man postulated in "Crowds and Power" by Elias Canetti (Canetti, 1999) appeared in the etymology of the Latvian language "*zobs-zobens*": a manifestation of the sequence/arrangement of glossy teeth – the row, the sequence of teeth that destructs flesh and incarnates power (the first amulets were made from teeth and tusks of animals). There is evolution from *a tooth* through metallurgy to *a sword* and

further- a chromed car. Apotheosis for it is clearly seen in "life-style" glossy magazines with toothy smiling beauties on the front cover that promise eternal youth in which there is no place for death, entropy and illness just like in the fascinating virtuality of glossy computer screens. The digital objects do not erode: the photos in granny's albums become yellowish while digital pictures do not age at all.

Aristotle's ancient distinction of a gatherer/collector/processor *versus* a creator/inventor is equally disgusting in the eyes of most prominent contemporary literature critique from Russia Olga Sedakova, "When I hear any new humanitarian "idea", theory, conception… I want to say, "Enough, stop! Have mercy on life, save nature! Let us simply think and try to understand it without discoveries and achievements. The world is already open. Both extremes are unpleasant to me in Hlebnikov's distinction between collectors and inventors, I dare say that both of them are internally out-of-date, both of them are predatory in their own way. For God's sake, save me from my desire to acquire selfless and aimless knowledge that is not power, as opposed to Bacon, and to admit it as another idea or a global-scale project!" (Sedakova, 2000).

## Conclusions

In this article, we tried to describe the tactics of counter-culture in the urban environment when expressing and communicating their position as opposed to the dominating messages in media and public events. In the street art form – the stencils – the messages are sent to the wide publics expressing both opposition and negation, and the active criticism of the situation where human being is becoming a "cog in the machine". Messages of stencils analysed in their texts and visual images are pointing on the life through the images of nature as opposed to industry and colonization of the life-world by mechanical work. The technique is treated not only negatively, but gains certain ambivalence in the interpretations of technique as creation, poetical machinery and work of non-production.

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