
The Graffiti Within: the Reactivation and Politicization of Sydney's Subterranean

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Abstract

Socio-spatial politics characterize the city and the subcultures that reside within her. This paper is centred on the visual tensions and dialogues embedded in the graffiti which shape and transform the public waterways, drains, tunnels and decommissioned coastal fortifications that cut through Sydney's built environment. It aims to construct a revealing portraiture of graffiti's multimodal engagement to further insights into the politicization of place in these liminal realms.

The research case rests on the premise that the discursive and material processes which underpin the production of graffiti are situated, embedded and relational. The graffiti under examination are illicit constructions. However, in spite of this judicial status and perils associated with its production, the graffiti prevails. As official sites of protection, conduit and flow, these substructures have been purposefully concealed from public view for safety reasons, sanitation purposes, aesthetics or defence.

Nuancing Lefebvre's (1974) counter spaces of otherness, and Swyngedouw's (2006) networked phantasmagoria of waterways and sewers, I argue here that graffiti's transgression intervenes and diverts the socio-political directive of these utilitarian substructures, as well as the symbolic power of the state. Moreover, the remoteness and darkness of these varied concealments serves to compound the liminal connotations of the graffiti, and encourages a more expressive, confronting and ineffable response.

Drawing on specific instances, this paper provides evidence of defiant and differentiated forms of visual expression that involve a separation from mainstream norms to reveal alternative narratives which redefine Sydney's subterranean cavities as a place for pilgrimage, passage, performance and play.

Keywords: Graffiti, Liminality, Subterranean, visual politics, Place

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