

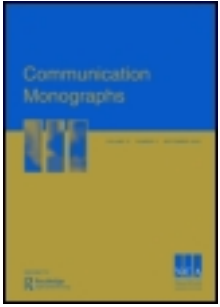
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Graffiti and “film school” culture: Displaying alienation

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GRAFFITI AND "FILM SCHOOL" CULTURE: DISPLAYING ALIENATION

DEAN SCHEIBEL

Graffiti created by students in "film school" are examined as an organizational document from a cultural and critical-cultural perspective. The graffiti serve as a critical discourse that reflects and creates meanings related to the sectional interests of film students. In so doing, graffiti create and reflect an ideology that is positioned against the ideology of other sectional interests, both organizational and industrial. The study reviews a variety of themes related to film students' alienation and the discourse that counters the sources of that alienation. Themes include editing as a disliked and avoided activity, isolation, lack of artistic control, and career filters. The humorous communicative style of graffiti creates tension among cultural meanings that mediates between alienation and liberation.

"Films are never finished,
they are slowly abandoned."—Frank Capra
[graffito found on wall
of an editing room at
Loyola Marymount University]

Nicole Elia, a senior film student at Loyola Marymount University, sits in a ten-by-ten foot editing room. She is hunched over a Steenbeck "flatbed" editing machine as images from her film light up the Steenbeck's screen. The film she is editing is for a senior level class, Advanced Film Production (also known as "460"). She has watched and listened to the scene about 100 times, backwards and forwards. And after listening to dialogue played backwards for 25 hours, *without sleep*, the chance of hearing strange word-like sounds is a very real possibility. She has made dozens of splices. This entails cutting and connecting little pieces of film together with special tape and a little splicing machine that looks like it would make a dandy guillotine for Lilliputians. In addition to the Steenbeck, which takes up considerable space, the room also holds four "trim bins," one for each of the four film students that take turns using the editing room. The "trim bin" looks like some sort of rolling laundry hamper. There are about two dozen thin metal hooks mounted over the opening of the bin, and from each little hook lengths of film coil down, snake-like, into the bin.

So Nicole is a bit tired and a little stressed; she sits, isolated in a little room, dealing with a film that is at times frustrating. The traditional end-of-semester screenings are only two weeks away and she still has to finish editing her film and then build a soundtrack. She needs a break. Nicole turns away from her film and reads a piece of graffiti that someone, whom Nicole presumes is male, has written on one of the editing room's graffiti-covered walls:

I had a dream
that Cindy Crawford¹
was editing my film for me.

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Nicole picks up her red “Sharpie” marker that she uses for making editing marks on film. She grins and writes beneath the graffiti:

I saw your film.
That was no dream.

Written Communication and Graffiti

Relatively little research has been conducted on written communication (Cheney & Vibbert, 1987, p. 180). Most organizational research dealing with written communication is steeped in a Weberian legacy; written communication is “favored as a means of establishing organizational continuity, if not permanence” (Tompkins, 1987, p. 72). Not surprisingly, such research focuses on written communication that is formal and managerially originated (Stohl & Redding, 1987, p. 457). Thus, written communication facilitates “getting the job done” *as defined by those in formal positions of power*. In such forms of written communication, “dissent, debate, [and] criticism are rarely found” (Levinson, 1972, p. 223).

As a form of written communication, graffiti has a long history (Abel & Buckley, 1977). The first anthology of graffiti was published in 1731 by Hurlo Thrumbo and was entitled *The Merry-Thought or the Glass-Window Bog-House Miscellany*. Most research on graffiti focuses on those writings that appear on restroom walls. In fact, Dundes (1966) suggests the term “latrinalia” to refer to writings that are found in restrooms. Such graffiti includes a variety of themes, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, racism, philosophy, and politics. Gathering graffiti as data has been characterized as an “unobtrusive” (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966, p. 42) or “nonreactive” measure (Rhyne & Ullmann, 1972).

In sum, while written organizational communication is typically viewed as part of an organization’s formal communication, graffiti—which is also a form of written communication—is illustrative of informal communication. Moreover, the informality, coupled with a frequently scatological focus, may have contributed to organizational scholars marginalizing graffiti *as a category*, without examining graffiti as an organizational document for what it can contribute to understanding organization. Examining three common themes of graffiti research suggests how graffiti might make a contribution.

A common theme of contemporary graffiti scholars is the idea that graffiti reveal things about “cultural attitudes and conflicts” (Gadpaille, 1971, p. 45). Similarly, Lomas (1973) contends that graffiti reflect cultural themes. Graffiti also has been used, however, as a critical discourse in the sense that graffiti may express “thwarted human interests” (Opler, 1971). Recently, for example, graffiti such as “Black Power” and “R King” appeared on walls in Los Angeles several days after “not guilty” verdicts ignited a city-wide inferno after police officers were acquitted of beating Rodney King.

A second common theme relates to humor (cf. Gadpaille, 1971; Kilroy, 1979). Various theorists have commented on the emancipatory aspects of humor (cf. Mindess, 1971; Monro, 1963). For example, in *Laughter and Liberation*, Mindess (1971) includes discussions on humor as providing “freedom” from conformity,

inferiority, redundancy, seriousness, and morality. Further, humor serves as a means of dealing with alienation (Boland & Hoffman, 1983). Humor also serves as a "technique" (Berger, 1976) that allows for "multiple possibilities of interpretation" (Boland & Hoffman, 1983, p. 197). In so doing, the communicative style of graffiti expresses a "tension" (cf. Carbaugh, 1988) between alienation and liberation. In another sense, the tension, resolved through humor, may be thought of as an

expanded perspective, of what D. H. Monro has called "the god's-eye view." It is evidence of the mental act of rising above one's deficiencies by frankly admitting and enjoying them. . . . When all else fails, man has the capacity to picture his plight as part of the absurdity, the gross injustice of human affairs and in so doing to become a free, detached observer of his fate. (Mindess, 1971, p. 49)

In this sense, graffiti may be viewed as providing a "transcendent" (Berger, 1976) interpretive frame, which allows organizational members to make affirmative interpretations about aspects of organizations that are problematic. Additionally, the humorous quality of graffiti may also be understood as a stylistic expectation (Bantz, 1993) about how members communicate with graffiti.

Finally, graffiti are also understood as territorial markers (Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974). In the current study, the graffiti in editing rooms may be viewed as sites of ideological struggle. Further, such graffiti are not merely individual expressions; rather, graffiti communicatively constitute and reconstitute a collectively created social reality. The tensions expressed on graffitied walls reproduce the sectional interests of student filmmakers. Such interests are revealed in a variety of themes (Bantz, 1993) and constructs (Bantz, 1993; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982).

In this study, I adopt a critical-cultural perspective (cf. Deetz, 1985; Mumby, 1988) and examine graffiti as an "organizational document" (Bantz, 1993) that serves as a form of critical discourse. As a form of organizational document, graffiti may be seen to "embody and represent certain human interests" (Deetz, 1985, p. 122). As such, graffiti may be thought to create and reflect not only the ideology of the sectional interest who create graffiti, but also to portray the ideology of those oppositional sectional interests. In this sense, graffiti may be viewed as a critical discourse that exposes the tensions between domination and alienation. As such, graffiti may facilitate a perspective on organizational reality that has been neglected by traditional approaches to organizational theory.

Cultural and Critical-Cultural Organization

Organizational culture is a diverse perspective for studying communication phenomena (cf. Frost, Moore, Louis, Lundberg, & Martin, 1985; Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983; Smircich & Calás, 1987). The interpretive strands of cultural approaches examine organizing as communicatively constituted patterns of meanings and expectations; that is, the interpretation of culture is concerned with "coming to understand how organizational life is accomplished communicatively" (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982, p. 121). In this sense, organizational culture reflects the assumptions that the creation, maintenance, and transformation of organizational life is

socially constructed, and that the study of symbols and meanings is key to understanding cultural organizing.

The critical-cultural perspective views organizations as constructions that are interrelated with encompassing historical, social, and economic contexts (Deetz, 1985; Jelinek, Smircich, & Hirsch, 1983). This perspective also believes that organizations “embody and represent certain human interests” over other human interests and that the representation of privileged interests may become distorted (Deetz, 1985, p. 122). Organizational documents instantiated in language, including graffiti, constitute ideology that articulates meaning formations. In deconstructing such documents, power relations and sectional interests are revealed (cf. Mumby, 1988). Research from the critical-cultural perspective is extremely diverse, although perspectives reveal shared interests with concepts including consciousness, alienation, ideology, power, emancipation, and domination (e.g. Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Clegg, 1975; Conrad & Ryan, 1985; Deetz, 1985, 1992; Frost, 1987; Habermas, 1971; Mumby, 1988; Rosen, 1985).

Alienation is a common aspect of everyday life activities (Goffman, 1957). Long a prevalent concept in classical sociology, particularly as a central concern of Marx, Hegel, Lukács, and Durkheim (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Seeman, 1959), the concept of alienation has of late suffered from theoretical diffusion and confusion (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 201; Johnson, 1973, p. 3). Despite Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) contention that *alienation* is a “central concept” to both critical theory and anti-organization theory, very little cultural (e.g., Carbaugh, 1988, p. 229) and critical-cultural research explicitly use the concept of alienation (e.g., Boland & Hoffman, 1983). Similarly, theoretical discussions textually marginalize the concept of alienation, often confining it to footnote status (e.g., Conrad & Ryan, 1985). With the advent of cultural and critical-cultural perspectives of organizing, however, the current study suggests that the concept of alienation may prove to be a fruitful conceptual tool for organizational analysis. The concept of alienation is viewed as being similar to *powerlessness* (Finifter, 1972; Kanungo, 1982; Seeman, 1959). In this sense, alienation is concerned with people’s lack of freedom and their inability to control things. Additionally, Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest that alienation creates an estrangement of one’s “true self”:

The state in which, in certain totalities, a cognitive wedge is driven between man’s consciousness and the objectified social world, so that man sees what are essentially the creations of his own consciousness in the form of a hard, dominating, external reality. This wedge is the wedge of alienation, which divorces man from his true self and hinders the fulfilment of his potentialities as a human being. (p. 298)

Graffiti, therefore, express individuals’ sense of estrangement and powerlessness while simultaneously producing and reproducing individuals’ connectedness with the linguistic community of which they are members. In the current study, film students are thought to seek liberation from alienation through the creation of a critical discourse; in graffiti, a counter-ideology is created and is positioned against the dominant ideology of other sectional interests. As such, graffiti simultaneously reproduce the conditions of alienation and create a counter-ideology that constitutes the organizing of cultural meanings and expectations.

"Film School" as Alienating Context

At film schools, "film students" specializing in film production take a series of courses dealing with sound production, directing, editing, and cinematography (Tyo, 1962). These courses teach fundamentals and skills that are then ostensibly applied during the making of "student films." For film students, the making of student films is the defining and indispensable thing, the *sine qua non*, of film school. The process of filmmaking is composed of a myriad of tasks that are temporally ordered and are bunched together and referred to as "preproduction," "production," and "postproduction."

However, a variety of factors may impinge on students' filmmaking, and which serve as sources of alienation. First, students face temporal demands of semester deadlines. For example, students are required to screen their respective "student films" at the end of the semester, regardless of whether the film is "finished." Second, film production technology is in relatively short supply. This being the case, students are limited in terms of the amount of time they can use cameras. This, in turn, effects film students in terms of the filmmaking process. Further, some of the equipment that film students is relatively old, and in less-than-ideal condition.² Third, students' films are subject to various forms of criticism from film production faculty. Typical junctures for criticism during the filmmaking process include preproduction story conferences, viewing "dailies" during production, during postproduction editing, and during public grading sessions, at which time students and their films may be critiqued not only by faculty members, but by other film students as well. Finally, students' professional aspirations are such that students believe that their respective student films may provide access to people in positions within the "movie industry" who may be able to help them in the future. Film schools and faculty may differ considerably in terms of how they view their school's relationships to the industry. Some believe that film school should be a place of experimentation; conversely, other schools seek to train filmmakers who build strong connections with the movie industry (cf. Goldman, 1984; Hinerfeld, 1991; James, 1988; Johnson, 1991). Knowing that the films that they will make may be important to their post-academic career influences students' decisions about the types of film that they will make and the content of the film.

In essence, film school, from the perspective of anti-organization theory, is an "alienating intermediary" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 311). Organizations are alienating intermediaries in that they are reified constructs that come between individual consciousness and individuals' "appreciation of the nature of the totality in which they live" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 311). In this sense, film school serves as a context for the production and reproduction of cultural meanings and expectations that are problematic for film students.

Additionally, film school is contextualized by an encompassing intermediary (i.e., the film industry) and by society. Perception of the interpenetration of these alienating contexts is reflected in the words of an award-winning film student:

Film school is a big joke. You go here and you make these student films that don't mean anything and don't get you anywhere and everyone has these big dreams about "making it big." But let's face it, not that many of us, if any of us, are ever going to make it anywhere. That's what that's about [i.e., the graffito]. That's the reality. Most of us make shitty films

anyways. And there's only a few people that make good films and even the good films aren't good enough. You've got to make something that's *great* to get noticed. And then it has to be in the right place at the right time and the right person has to like it. That's what it's about [i.e., the graffiti]. Everyone *thinks* this, *hopes* this. But, y'know. Get *serious*. But see, we all have the same dream, and that's what keeps us coming here. We're all here because we have the same dream . . . to make films; not just to make it big, but to be able to make films. That's not just film school. That's Hollywood. That's the whole industry. That's the beast. It lives and breathes and sucks souls out of people.

Student filmmakers are faced with problematic relationships in terms of their relationships with film school faculty, relations with their own film, relations to technology, and relations with the film industry. Graffiti, in this context, serves not merely as expression of frustration, but rather, as a part of film students' communicative life. As a communicative activity specific to "postproduction" film editing, graffiti is a practice that provides one view on cultural organizing in film school. Most importantly, however, is the idea that the inscription of graffiti on the walls of editing rooms produces a critical discourse and ideology that represents the sectional interests of film students, while countering the ideologies of not only the film school, but also the film industry. The current study addresses the following interrelated questions:

1. What themes of alienation are revealed through graffiti?
2. What aspects of the organizational culture of the film school are reflected and created through the graffiti?
3. How do graffiti reproduce the reasons of and conditions for alienation?
4. How does writing graffiti liberate one from these conditions of alienation?

METHODS

Using the term "ethnography" to label a method is problematic since differences among approaches such as ethnography of communication, cultural, cultural-critical, and radical-empirical post-ethnographic (cf. Bantz, 1993; Boland & Hoffman, 1983; Deetz, 1985, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Hymes, 1974; Goodall, 1991) are such that each promotes a different reading of an empirical scene. The current study is guided by cultural (e.g., Bantz, 1993; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Trujillo, 1985) and cultural-critical approaches (e.g., Boland & Hoffman, 1983; Deetz, 1985; Rosen, 1985).

I spent nine months in contact with film students at Loyola Marymount University. During that time I regularly attended senior level film production classes. I sat in on "preproduction" activities including instructor-student film script conferences as well as casting sessions during which individual film students auditioned prospective actors for their student films. I observed "production" activities including film "shooting" and watching "dailies." I observed 11 students during editing sessions, some repeatedly during several editing sessions. I informally interviewed eight of the students.³

I collected graffiti from 9 small editing rooms (approximately 10' × 10') and from one larger editing room named the "Bullpen." The amount of graffiti in the small editing rooms varied considerably, ranging between 40 and 250 pieces of graffiti per room; four of these rooms had at least 100 pieces of graffiti. The total number of pieces of graffiti was estimated to be between 825 and 900.⁴ Representations of graffiti were collected by shooting photographs and by

copying the content of graffiti.⁵ In addition, I collected graffiti, photographs of graffiti,⁶ and interviews at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC).

The graffiti collected was initially analyzed by looking for general patterns (Fetterman, 1989) specifying “constructs”⁷ (Bantz, 1993; Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982) and “themes”⁸ (cf. Bantz, 1993; Carbaugh, 1988). Some triangulation (Fetterman, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to check my interpretations of the graffiti collected against interviews with students and faculty members, and students written responses to a dozen different pieces of graffiti.⁹

The analysis of graffiti evolved during the journal’s review process. At the suggestion of two reviewers, I made the analysis more explicitly “critical” (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Deetz, 1985). An initial draft of this study was submitted to “member checks” by students and faculty in order to establish the “trustworthiness” of the report (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

ANALYSIS

Graffiti are a prominent part of the cultural organization of the film school. As such, graffiti are social-historical constructions (cf. Deetz, 1985) that are intrinsically interrelated with other local film schools. The existence and production of graffiti at LMU are, in part, a reproduction of the graffiti practices of the film schools at USC and UCLA.¹⁰

The graffiti that appear on the small editing rooms at LMU reveal a variety of interrelated constructs (cf. Bantz, 1993; Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982), including editing, technology, film school faculty, the film industry, film students, student films, and film school. Cutting across these various constructs are a variety of explicit or implicit underlying themes (cf. Bantz, 1993; Carbaugh, 1988; Spradley, 1979), including avoidance, isolation, lack of artistic control, destruction, frustration, and “career filters” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985).

Disliked activity/avoidance. Film students find the “beginning” of the editing process particularly unsettling; that is, editing entails “shifting gears,” going from highly social production activities (e.g., “directing” and “shooting”) to a relatively solitary activity. At any rate, graffiti affirm film students’ expectation that editing is an extremely tedious activity, one that can be put off, but ultimately, one that can not be evaded. Although film students understand how important editing is to the quality of their films, the process of editing is revealed through graffiti as an often disliked activity (e.g., “Editing is hell” and “Editing sucks”). It is sometimes portrayed as a lesser task in the student film world (e.g., “those who can, direct; those who can’t, edit”). Such disdain is affirmed as a cultural taken-for-granted that finds resounding choral and collective agreement across generations of film students:

“I hate editing!!!
I’m not kidding. I really hate it!!!”
[added later] WE KNOW!!!!
WE KNOW!!!!

Between the two graffitos, a shared meaning is approximated, with the latter graffito providing an ideological affirmation of the former. The dislike of the activity of editing is also revealed in the creation of new jargon that is specific to a particular *part* of the editing process. In particular, the process of “syncing up” one’s “sound” and “action” is often judged to be particularly boring and laborious. Thus, new jargon may be created by marrying the process of “syncing” with familiar epithets (e.g., “Bull sync” and “Sync off”).

A variation on the theme of editing as a disliked activity is that editing is something to be avoided. One piece of graffito humorously lists various activities that can be done to temporarily put off the process of editing:

Things to do before you begin editing:

1. Wander lobby & find someone to talk to.
2. If by some amazing chance nobody is in your room, go in and sit and read the writing on the walls.
3. Satisfy a sudden urge of hunger or thirst.
4. Sit and think of reasons to put off editing until tomorrow.
5. Close the door, turn off the lights, and have a quick wank.
6. Think about your old boyfriend/girlfriend and if they would still have dumped you if you were in law school instead of film school.
7. Look at other people in your room’s footage and accidentally put in back out of order.
8. Go and gawk at Gunsmokers.¹¹
9. Balance your checkbook if you can.
10. Kill someone (preferably faculty).

The *list*, as a rhetorical form, is inherently formal and rational, legitimated through the act of *numbering*. In this sense, the numerated items masquerade as a peculiar form of “rule-citing” (cf. Frost, 1987) for creating a context of consciousness (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 298; Frost, 1987) for accomplishing the overall theme of *procrastination*. The architectural structure of the message (Bantz, 1993) is paradoxical, consisting of contradictory and inconsistent qualities (i.e., rational form and irrational content). From the perspective of anti-organization theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 323), the creation of the list may be viewed not as procrastination from “productivity,” but rather, as “human creativity.”

Isolation/Stress/Fatigue. The stress of working long hours, combined with the pressure to produce quality work often takes a physical toll. As the date for the screening of student films draws closer, students often spend long hours alone; shifts of 12 to 15 straight are not uncommon; some students edit around the clock, working working 24 to 48 hours straight. Visual hallucinations are possible and the ability to correctly gauge distances may become temporarily impaired. Some people report not being able to physically take hold of strips of film that are directly in front of them. The following examples of graffiti reflect members understanding that things may be getting out of hand, and suggest fatigued and unbalanced states:

I have lost all semblance of sanity

It’s 4 o’clock in the morning. . .
do you know where your mind is?

Such statements speak to the use of alienation in the sense that the graffiti

authors create a hyperbolic vision of people who are not in control of their faculties. In particular, the latter makes a humorous allusion to a television commercial that gravely asks, “Do you know where your *child* is?” In this sense, a relationship exists between the terms “mind” and “child.” The author of the graffiti may be suggesting that long hours of editing has the potential to reduce the functioning of one’s mind to that of a child’s.

The relationship between film student and machine is sometimes viewed in adversarial terms (e.g., “Hell hath no fury like a pissed flatbed”). More frequently, however, is the sense of frustration—and sometimes pain—that results from students working long hours in isolation, and becoming too “dingy” to use the equipment safely. Consistent with a critical perspective, editing technology is portrayed as a “negative force” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 323). Consider the following example:

3:12 a.m.
 I spliced
 my finger. . .
 I’m bleeding in
 a basement. . .
 No one knows,
 No one cares. . .
 I wonder if
 Penelope Spheeris¹²
 started out like this?

Although the theme of “suffering for one’s art” is a time-honored one, another interpretation may be made. The image of a pathetic and isolated figure is juxtaposed with that of a successful figure (i.e., filmmaker and former film student Penelope Spheeris); the juxtaposition creates a sense of distancing, as if the writer is moving away from him or herself as he or she idly wonders while bleeding in a basement editing room. This suggests alienation in terms of the variants of isolation and self-estrangement. However, the very idea of alienation is mediated through the humorous form of the graffiti. The initially vague, indeterminant angst, accentuated through the repetitive use of ellipses, ultimately gives way to an *ironic* rhetorical question, which creates a vision of the film student inhabiting a state of somewhat diminished capacity.

Lack of artistic control. This is the most prevalent theme, and relates to several of the variants of alienation. The theme takes a variety of forms, including the subtheme of *frustration*. In one sense, lack of artistic control may be understood as alienation in terms of “self-estrangement.” That is, there is a “loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work, a loss which Marx and others have held to be an essential feature of modern alienation” (Seeman, 1959, p. 790). Lack of artistic control may be expressed in terms of various topics, including student films, editing room technology, and faculty.

It is common for film students to take on a somewhat cynical perspective about their own, and others’ films. During the process of film editing, a student’s film often serves as a reminder of things that “went wrong” during filming, such as bad performances by actors, or other errors that occurred during production but that must now be dealt with during the process of editing, such as poor

lighting, image framing, or the need for more “coverage.” Thus, there are often things about the film that the student is displeased with, yet knows can not be changed. At the least, a student’s film virtually never embodies what the student envisioned when he or she first began making the film. In this sense, graffiti rationalize the aesthetic limitations of their own film projects. Thus a student’s mood may alternately swing from being pleased with their film to being disgusted. For example:

It was an unbelievable sight.
As I sat here and watched,
my entire project magically
transformed into a big pile
of warm, steamy horse shit.

The graffiti promotes a passive and powerless view of the filmmaker, one who, by virtue of having “sat here and watched” rather than taking actions, is reduced to a spectator. The film student experiences the created product as being alien from him- or herself (Boland & Hoffman, 1983, p. 195). This is reaffirmed in that human agency is denied; rather, the film has been “magically transformed.” The humor stems from various sources, including the unstated “want of knowledge or skill” (Monro, 1963, p. 50), and the use of numerous adjectives that postpone closure on the eventual metaphor of excretion (cf. Mindess, 1971).

In a somewhat different vein, graffiti also suggest the personification of film students’ films into a personal nemesis that must be grappled with:

My film has turned against me.
I’m starting to like hating my film.

Such graffiti reflect filmmakers’ perception that an adversarial relationship between film and filmmaker may exist; again, there is a sense of the product being alien to the film student (Boland & Hoffman, 1983). Moreover, such graffiti reveal students’ humorous attempts to battle physical working conditions that make the process more problematic.

Another aspect of lack of artistic control is manifested in terms of students dealing with technology. In particular, such graffiti express alienation in terms of powerlessness in the sense that there is a discrepancy between control expected and the control desired (cf. Seeman, 1959). As stated earlier, the process of editing entails the use of technology. Graffiti in the small editing rooms reveal a variety of technological meanings. These include themes about the dangers of technology, the quality of the technology, and the people who are responsible for the technology.

The idea that film students are saddled with poor quality technology is a common theme. The nature of film school is such that departmental budgets spend significant amounts of money on technology. But as technology gets worn and in need of repair, it may become a source of frustration for students. Graffiti revealing frustrations about technology may be expressed in a somewhat rational manner. Consider the graffiti, “Moviola = total shit,” which is written in mathematical terms. Similarly, the following graffiti is also stated in a

matter-of-fact, question-and-answer format:

Did you know
the equipment
here sucks the
big dick with
ears? Yeah, you
probably knew that.

In contrast, consider the following, in which an angry writer castigates the technology as being “mickey mouse,” while blaming those believed to be responsible:

M — I — C . . .
see how the fucking shit
equipment doesn't *ever* work!
K — E — Y . . .
Why? Because the Jesuits
are lining their pockets instead
of buying new equipment!!!
M — O — U — S — Eeeee

Graffiti reveal the meanings of problematic technology; there is not any graffiti in praise of “good” technology. Technology is *supposed* to be instrumentally effective. The graffiti function to draw attention to perceived inadequacies of technology (cf. Van Maanen & Barley, 1985, p. 46). In particular, lack of artistic control is equated with an external locus of control (i.e., “the Jesuits”) that manipulates technological resources. The humor is a play on words: the juxtaposition of an allusion to the theme music from an old television show, “The Mickey Mouse Club,” with another meaning of “mickey mouse” (i.e., the technology is inadequate).

Yet another topic of graffiti that is related to artistic control focuses on the film production faculty. Graffiti about film school faculty members reflect several topics. On one hand, graffiti portray faculty members as objects to be feared and loathed. The past chairman is singled out for particularly harsh treatment, although he defends and values the graffiti.¹³ He is depicted humorously in a modified saying as a devil figure (e.g., “— is the root of all *evil*”) and as a bureaucrat in a limerick:

There once was a man named _____ [faculty member]
Who didn't know shit from shineola
Ask why he was chairman
He said with a rare grin
“I know how to shovel *crapola*!”

Other film instructors, particularly those who teach film production classes, are also the subject of much graffiti. Graffiti about these two faculty members is ambiguous. On one hand, they are depicted as “monsters”:

Life's a bitch
and then you die.
And then you start making movies
about how life is a bitch.
The antagonist is a two-headed monster.
One of its heads is _____ [faculty member],
the other is _____ [faculty member].¹⁴

Casting faculty members as monsters suggests an imagery of “power” run amok. Professors’ interaction with students is evidenced during all phases of student filmmaking. During preproduction “story conferences,” professors may want scripts to be radically revised. During editing sessions, professors may make comments for improving the pacing of the film’s “action.” Such comments are interpreted as a mixed blessing. They improve the quality of the film, but play havoc with the students’ timetables for completing various tasks.

The ambivalent attitudes that film students express about faculty members are revealed in graffiti about one instructor, whose bizarre sense of humor is such that he is often quoted directly as graffiti, or is incorporated into other graffiti. For example:

“. . . The farmer knew it. The tractor knew it. I just wanted you to cut to black, so we all could meditate on it.”

— _____ [faculty member]
May 1987

“Forget content, mood, sound quality, and image framing. . .
I WANNA SEE *GOOD SLATE!*!”

— _____ [same faculty member]

In contrast to the above, which portray the faculty member as some sort of twisted-yet-appreciated cultural icon, another form of graffiti has the graffiti writers offering advice to other student filmmakers. In such, the writers push other student film-makers to follow their own aesthetic choices, while downplaying the aesthetic judgments of the same faculty member. For example:

You know you’ve got a good film when _____ hates it!

So what if _____ doesn’t like it.

Remember to do what *you* want—not what
_____ wants you to do. . .

Such graffiti is of an explicitly political nature and may be understood as “organizational games” (Frost, 1987). Strategies and tactics such as “defaming” faculty members seek to manage ideological territory and preserve the sectional interests of film students (Frost, 1987, p. 529). Such graffiti may also be viewed as “maxims” or “organizational enthymemes” (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) that are built on the sectional interests of film students, and more specifically, on beliefs and values related to aesthetics, the locus of artistic control of the film, the economic responsibilities assumed by student filmmakers, and the fact that student filmmaking is a time- and labor-intensive reality.¹⁵

Thus, the myths of “artistic control” and “ownership” serve to legitimate the sectional interests of film students. Therefore, graffiti about faculty contribute to contradictory meanings (Gray, Bougon, & Donnellon, 1985) about faculty. Graffiti contribute to a film student ideology that seeks to protect students’ control of their films while simultaneously questioning the authority of faculty members’ legitimate power; conversely, graffiti also portray film production faculty in a positive light, in which they are portrayed as a source of knowledge that film students may use as a resource.

Subtheme of Frustration. Graffiti about film students reveal how film students view themselves and their fellow students. Such graffiti centralize the film

student, although such graffiti overlap with other major themes. Because student filmmakers assume the leadership role of “director” in their own films, some graffiti reflect how students feel about how such roles are enacted:

CONSCIOUS SPEAKING:

- Being the frustrated artist that I am
- I am entitled to certain characteristics
- I am entitled to yell at actors who cannot follow simple instructions
- I am allowed to yell at crew people who couldn't get hired at Del Taco and who easily fall prey to the vicious jaws of the extinct North American C-Stand.¹⁶
- I am allowed to constantly doubt my filmmaking ability and my existence and purpose on Earth.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the graffiti is the author's self-proclaimed identity as “being the frustrated artist that I am.” This statement serves as a *motive*, the “organizational expectations about *why* people behave as they do” (Bantz, 1993, p. 17). The graffiti progresses with an odd mixture of angst-venting fantasy; the author creates a view of the film student as occupying a position of unlimited entitlement. The graffiti reveals what student filmmakers would *like* to do on occasion. However, “actors” and “crew people” are almost always non-paid volunteers so student-directors *rarely* express anger to them directly. Nonetheless, student-directors will often discreetly “bitch” (cf. Trujillo, 1985) about “incompetent” actors and crew members.

Students may also become frustrated through the inevitable comparisons that they make between their intermediate (“360”) and advanced (“460”) films. For example:

DEPRESSION is:
 Not being able to
 match your 360 and
 having 10× the budget,
 2× as much experience,
 3× as much time,
 better acting, better D.P. [Director of Photography]
 and better script.

Film students typically want their advanced film project to be of equal—and hopefully higher—quality than their intermediate film project. The major difference between the two films projects is that the advanced project has “sync sound,” typically, “sound that is heard in direct alignment with its source in the picture” (Konigsberg, 1987, p. 367). However, the addition of “sync sound” typically presents a variety of new technological problems that must be dealt with.

The theme of “depression” at not being able to create a film that exceeds the accomplishments of the “360” film is heightened by several factors. First, the “460” film is the final film in the student's film school career (unless the student goes to graduate school). Second, the chances of unforeseen and unusual problems (aside from those dealing with “sync sound”) cropping up is not unusual. Problems with actors, crew members, the script, scheduling, equipment failures, locations, or the lab that processes the film, are real possibilities.¹⁷

Career filters. Film students hope, upon graduation, to succeed in the film industry. Graffiti reflect cultural meanings and expectations about the transition from film school into the film industry. And there are enough “success stories”

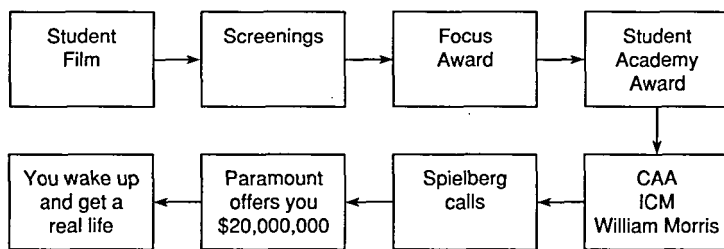
about students making million-dollar deals to keep the fantasy alive. Thus, the *possibility* of “selling a script” and getting to direct a movie becomes part of the fantasy-life of film students. The following graffiti deal with the fantasy of “making it” in the film industry.

I bet I'm going to be a director. A really famous one. I bet . . . I bet . . . I bet I am. You're all gonna know my name in ten years. Just wait and see. You're gonna eat your words, you bastards—everyone of you. In ten years the whole world will know my name. I bet you. I bet my life: If I'm not famous in ten years—I'm gonna blow my brains out.

Percy Moskowitz
Class of '72
(1950–1982)

The above graffiti lampoons a fictitious film student who has delusions of grandeur and who ultimately commits suicide after failing to become a “really famous” director. Such graffiti suggest a “fantasy type” (cf. Bormann, 1983) of students who take themselves too seriously and whose actions are viewed negatively by other film students. Such graffiti make subtle references to film students who, according to one film student, “think they are so superior when really they are full of shit.” In another sense, the graffiti deals with alienation in the sense that it paints a psychological portrayal of an obsessed and antagonistic film student; the student violates norms of behavior, alienates himself from other film students, and ultimately kills himself. In a less obvious sense, the graffiti refers to occupational as well as organizational conditions of alienation. That is, “Percy” has killed himself after failing to “make it big” in the film industry.

In a different vein, the graffiti below traces an idealized “career path” of students, and lampoons the idea that “film school is the gateway to the new American Dream” (Latham, 1992, p. 107):



The major component of the graffiti is the depiction of a linear career path in which the film student moves from film school to the film industry. The graffiti is a critique of a fantasy that is propagated by the “success” of a few graduates of a few film schools (cf. Farber, 1984; Hinerfeld, 1991; Johnson, 1991). The author creates a fantasy progression in which the student accomplishes a sequence of activities that move the student toward the ideal of making mega-bucks as a director of a big-budget motion picture. The top row of activities are all real possibilities. The possibility of winning such awards is plausible, although winning the Student Academy Award is extremely competitive. In contrast, the next three frames, all relating to the film industry, are all problematic. It is very

unlikely film students will get representation with high-power agencies such as CAA (Creative Artists Agency), ICM (International Creative Management), and William Morris; however, film students know that “miracles” *do* happen.¹⁸ Similarly, the next activity, “Spielberg calls” is *almost* complete fantasy, although Spielberg has been very influential in terms of some film students’ subsequent film industry careers (Farber, 1984). The tradition of graduates helping other graduates enter the film industry has developed considerably since the late 1960s (Farber, 1984). The next frame is pure hyperbole, “Paramount offers you \$20,000,000.” In the final frame of the graffito, the probability of “waking up” (that is, “wising up”) and getting a “real life” reveals the sequence as a symbolic fantasy from which one awakes. The graffito is ideological, serving to promote a consciousness for dealing with a “problematic social reality” (Geertz, 1973, p. 220). That is, the graffito implicitly identifies the contradiction between the idealized path for “making it” in the film industry and the unlikeliness of that goal being realized. In this sense the graffito serves to identify the source of alienation as the acceptance of a distorted view of the career path of the film student.

CONCLUSION

As a form of written communication, graffiti are an overlooked type of organizational document. As a type of discourse, graffiti may be viewed as a discourse of liberation. Graffiti express students’ alienation relating to conditions concerning their films and the filmmaking process; simultaneously, graffiti produce and reproduce students’ attempts to liberate themselves through the creation of communal discourse. Graffiti reflect and create film students’ meanings and expectations that constitute aspects of film school culture. Graffiti also identify sectional interests and sources of alienation of film students. In so doing, graffiti portray power relations, juxtaposing various sectional interests (e.g. students, faculty, administration, and industry). Graffiti also communicate an ideology in which the sectional interests of film students are favorably portrayed.

ENDNOTES

¹Cindy Crawford is a covergirl-model-actress who appears regularly on magazines covers such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* and on commercials for various products.

²The expense of film school technology is an ongoing problem for both students and for faculty.

³These interviews were not related specifically to the topic of graffiti, but were to increase my understanding of the process of editing.

⁴Not all graffiti are self-evidently “critical” in nature or can be related to the concept of alienation or sources of domination. Non-critical themes include graffiti topics related to (1) sexual behavior (*very few*, although graffiti *responses* to graffiti about sexual behavior were often critical of the initial author); (2) lists of days and times spend editing; (3) some “conversations” between graffiti writers, (4) witty comments about particular film students; and (5) references to music groups. There were no examples of racist graffiti. Graffiti may be ambiguous in terms of analysis. For example, the graffito “No one here gets out alive” may be an allusion to the music group, the Doors; it may, however, also be a critical comment on the activity of editing. Similarly, some extensive graffiti lists of days and times spent editing suggest a tone of ongoing drudgery.

⁵Most of the data collection at LMU was accomplished during hours when students were not using the editing rooms.

⁶On visits to the film schools at the USC and UCLA staff members and students provided valuable information. At UCLA, a student gave me photographs of graffiti taken several years before. When I explained why I was visiting, I was taken on tours of various facilities and was shown locations where graffiti existed or where it had previously existed.

⁷Constructs are organizationally defined indicators of organizational understanding that are recognizable to the collective. In general terms, constructs may be objects, individuals, processes, entities, actions, or events (cf. Bantz, 1993; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982).

⁸Themes are reoccurring topics that express simple or complex ideas (cf. Bantz, 1993; Johnson, 1977).

⁹Several students, were asked to make written interpretations to twelve pieces of graffiti. In some cases, students made similar interpretations as I have. Differences among comments were considerable. Some were brief and ordinary; in contrast, others, including the comment used earlier in this paper, were extended and metaphorically rich. In no cases did students use the words "alienation," "domination," "ideology," or "powerless."

¹⁰Most of the film production faculty were film students at either USC or UCLA. Both of those schools, particularly USC, had legendary graffiti. Virtually all of USC's graffiti was destroyed when new buildings replaced the wooden "barracks" that originally housed their film school.

¹¹The term "Gunsmoke" refers to the introduction to editing course in which students are all given a series of shots of a "fight scene" from an episode of a television show named *Gunsmoke*. Students "cut" the shots together to create their own interpretation of how the scene should look. There is a long history that connects film school editing and *Gunsmoke*. The *Gunsmoke* sequence has been used for many years at many different film schools. The *Gunsmoke* sequence was developed in 1957 out of a short film presentation and colloquium called *Interpretation and Values*.

¹²Penelope Spheeris is a film director who graduated from UCLA's film school. Her films include *The Decline of Western Civilization II*, *Suburbia: The Wild Side*, and *Wayne's World*.

¹³A previous chairman of the department, the individual was a film student at USC and is a strong defender of LMU's graffiti.

¹⁴The above graffiti also reveals a blurring of boundaries between "real" life and "reel" life. The antagonist in the movie is a two-headed faculty member. Nowhere is the boundary more prominently displayed than in a genre of student films about the film school experience; one element of this genre of student films is making fun of faculty members.

¹⁵For example, there are different economic "models" that guide film school filmmaking. At LMU, for example, students assume the entire economic responsibility and each student makes a film. In contrast, at USC's School of Cinema and Television, advanced film students submit their own scripts and compete to see which scripts will be selected by the faculty to be made into films and receive university funding (Cieply, 1988a).

¹⁶Defined by Konigsberg (1987, p. 45) as "a three-legged mobile stand that holds flags or other apparatus to control light or reduce its intensity. The stand also holds branches or other objects for shadow effects." More formally referred to as a "century stand."

¹⁷For example, if a key crew member, such as the Director of Photography, or a lead actor pulls out of the project at the last minute, the entire film may have to be postponed a semester.

¹⁸Networks between top film schools (aka the "Big Four," include film schools at Columbia, NYU, UCLA, and USC) at the film industry are extensive. Student directors are often interviewed by film companies (cf. Cieply, 1988b; Farber, 1984; Hinerfeld, 1991) and film students have sold film scripts to film industry companies.

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