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BEYOND VANDALISM: ANALYSING GRAFFITI AS VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL COMMENTARY AT KNUST

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Abstract

This study examines graffiti as a form of visual communication and cultural commentary on the campus of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), focusing on its aesthetic, philosophical, and symbolic dimensions. Often dismissed as vandalism, graffiti is here repositioned as a legitimate art form that bridges traditional African visual languages with contemporary global narratives. Using a qualitative research approach that combines semiotic and content analysis, the study analyses four selected graffiti artworks created by KNUST students, uncovering their embedded meanings related to identity, social critique and philosophical inquiry. The Semiotic Theory of Communication, in conjunction with Empirical Aesthetics, serves as the study's theoretical foundation. The sampled works transform public spaces into arenas for dialogue, creative resistance and self-expression. The findings highlight graffiti's role in shaping cultural discourse and amplifying marginalised voices. The study concludes by advocating for the recognition of graffiti within academic frameworks, its preservation through archival practices, and the establishment of designated spaces for artistic engagement and cultural exchange.

Keywords: *Graffiti, bombing, cultural expression, semiotics, throw-up.*

1. Introduction

Graffiti, often viewed as a controversial art form, occupies a unique position in visual culture. It bridges the realms of public expression and private creativity, with its practitioners using walls, urban spaces, and other surfaces as canvases to communicate ideas, provoke thought, and assert identity. While graffiti has historically been associated with vandalism, recent academic discourse positions it as a legitimate art form imbued with aesthetic and communicative significance (Riggle, 2010; Bowen, 1999). In the Ghanaian context, graffiti has emerged as a medium for cultural expression, yet it remains underappreciated as an artistic practice. On the KNUST campus, graffiti created by students serves not only as an outlet for creativity but also as a visual commentary on identity, society, and philosophy. This study, therefore, explores the aesthetic, philosophical, and symbolic facets of graffiti as a means of visual communication and cultural criticism on the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) campus.

2. Background to the Study

Graffiti, derived from the Italian term “graffiare,” meaning "to scratch," has ancient roots in human communication and artistic expression. From the walls of Pompeii to modern urban centers, graffiti has been a means of recording personal and collective histories (Baird & Taylor, 2010; Gomes et al., 2017). Historically, graffiti has been linked to notions of identity and territory marking, often reflecting the socio-political climates of its creators (Gross & Gross, 1993).

Modern graffiti, influenced by hip-hop culture, has evolved into an intricate art form characterised by stylised typography, vibrant colors, and complex symbolism (Hager, 1985). Writers like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Banksy have elevated graffiti to the level of high art, challenging conventional perceptions and highlighting its aesthetic and communicative power (Berio & Leymarie, 2015).

In the African setting, graffiti has been explored by few scholars, for instance the study *“Writing the City from Below: Graffiti in Johannesburg”* by Penfold (2017) examines how street art and graffiti in Johannesburg, especially the Westdene Graffiti Project, may be used to map and comprehend the city and highlight the conflicts and complexities of modern-day South Africa. Similarly, a paper written by Halliday (2024) on *“Graffiti as a Catalyst for Urban Creativity: Exploring Agency, Participation, and the Rightto the City in Nairobi”* highlights graffiti's potential for civic involvement, placemaking, and cross-cultural interchange while examining its role in Nairobi's urban inventiveness and youth agency. It makes the case that graffiti is an inexpensive, effective medium in spite of issues like gender inequality and the enduring nature of street art. Furthermore, with an emphasis on mural painting and drawings with African themes, the study of Patrick et al. (2023) on *“One man's trash is another man's treasure": Graffiti and civic education among youths in Nigeria”* investigate the connection between graffiti art and civic education among young people in Nigeria. Graffiti can encourage social interaction, critical thinking, and cultural literacy despite its stigma. The study makes recommendations on curriculum changes, how society views graffiti art, and how to interact with it through interactive technology.

In Ghana, graffiti has begun to find its voice within urban and academic spaces. For instance, a paper written by Obeng (2000) on the *“Doing Politics on Walls and Doors: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Graffiti in Legon (Ghana)”* explores how Students in Legon, Ghana, can freely express their thoughts about political figures and decision-making procedures through graffiti without fear of repercussions. These anonymous graffitis are made up of triggers and responses, frequently using simple language structures and turn-taking. Additionally, they display features of interaction, such as opening and shutting. On the KNUST campus for instance, graffiti works by students demonstrate a synthesis of traditional African artistry and contemporary global influences. These works are not merely decorative

but are embedded with deep philosophical and cultural meanings. However, the academic exploration of graffiti in Ghana has largely overlooked its aesthetic and communicative dimensions, creating a gap that this study aims to address.

Statement of the Problem

Graffiti, as a form of artistic expression, occupies a contentious space between being considered art and being dismissed as vandalism (Eldridge, 2013). While extensively explored as a socio-political medium (Bowen, 1999; Riggle, 2010), its aesthetic and communicative essence remains underexamined, particularly within the African context. Graffiti is not merely a display of creativity; it is a powerful tool for communication, embodying hidden philosophies and unique aesthetic beauty (Baca, 1995; Othen-Price, 2006).

In Ghana, graffiti is gaining attraction as a visual medium of expression, yet it continues to face stigmatisation and limited recognition for its artistic and cultural significance (Chamberlin et al., 2020). This gap in understanding diminishes its potential to contribute to cultural narratives (Merrill, 2015) and public discourse. On the KNUST campus, graffiti created by students stands as a testament to their creativity and cultural identity. However, the underlying philosophies, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic values of these works are largely overlooked.

This study, therefore, seeks to illuminate the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of selected graffiti pieces on KNUST campus, highlighting their role as tools for communication and cultural identity (Merrill, 2015). In this regard, this research aims to shift the narrative from graffiti as mere vandalism to a legitimate art form worthy of academic and cultural exploration. The study, therefore, examines the aesthetic, philosophical, and symbolic aspects of graffiti as a visual communication and cultural commentary medium on the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) campus.

3. Review of Related Literature

Philosophy of Graffiti

Most writers view graffiti as a code that is difficult to comprehend unless one is immersed in the writer's environment. This implies that the entire objective of graffiti is to encode one's name in a unique form that few people can decode. One either understands it or does not. Graffiti's distinct character sets it apart from street art and other wall paintings, which do not include secret messages. A professional graffiti writer basically only depicts one thing: their *"nom de guerre,"* which means *"alias"* or "*pseudonym"* which should be as easily recognisable as feasible; while encounter to people outside of the graffiti community is unavoidable, the works are not created to be understood by strangers (Bowen, 1999). It will become redundant to state that most of the reason behind graffiti and street art stems from an artist's views on a contentious social, political, or economic topic. From identity marking to socio-political critique, graffiti spans a spectrum of philosophical engagement, some are filled with angst, some serve as memorials, and others are scathing and cheeky. Street art is a drastically different appearance from graffiti because of variations in application techniques, artistic media, and aim; nonetheless, the two styles are inextricably linked, both in origin and in a general sense of intent. "What graffiti writing and street art have in common is a fundamental sense of utilisation: claiming territory in the city to make it one's own (Hughes, 2009).

Postmodern philosopher Baudrillard (1994) contended that simulacra, or copies without originals, and hyperreality, in which signs refer only to other signs rather than to truth or reality, had supplanted reality in a world saturated with media. According to him, resistance is challenging in such a society since

even revolt may be appropriated and turned into a commodity by the prevailing culture. According to the theories, graffiti may stand out as genuine resistance but runs the risk of turning into a phoney uprising commercialised, aesthetically pleasing spectacle that is employed in gentrification, tourism, or advertising. However, unapproved or unpolished street art might still provide brief systemic breaks-a brief return to reality in a hyperreal setting.

Through his ideas of commonplace practices, spatial strategies, and defiance of prevailing order, French philosopher and cultural theorist Michel de Certeau offers a compelling framework for comprehending graffiti, particularly as presented in his groundbreaking book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). According to de Certeau's theory, graffiti is a form of tactical intervention that reclaims meaning and space from the governing elites who try to sanitise and organise the city. Graffiti provides temporary, daily resistance by operating within the system's flaws. Through movement, rebellion, and creativity, the disempowered can write themselves into the urban narrative through this silent dialogue between the margins and the centre.

The study by Alnaji (2020) demonstrates that graffiti is a philosophical act of resistance, remembrance, and reclamation in the Sudanese-and generally African-context, rather than just being vandalism. It is a vital instrument for influencing sociopolitical change from below because it embodies collective resiliency, visual storytelling, and revolutionary hope.

Communicative Essence of Graffiti

"How can I talk so you can hear me?

Graffiti

Screwed on the wall

So all can see it.

Spray-can expression

Ten inches tall.

Language of the cities,

Street corner art,

Gang poetry.

Drawn on a canvas stone.

How can I talk

So you can hear me?

How can I live

So you won't ignore me?

How else can I stand up

And tell you-

I am here!"

Peter Maize (2025)

Prehistoric etchings and cave paintings depict mankind's attempts to communicate, with symbols denoting landmarks or tribal boundaries. Petroglyphs can also be found all throughout the world, dating back up to BC 40,000. While this sort of communication was socially acceptable, it was also used for political, territorial, and aesthetic purposes, as well as self-expression. According to Backer (1999), murals and graffiti are effective means of communication for underrepresented groups, particularly young people from varied cultural backgrounds who are frequently left out of the mainstream of public art. Further, he adds, these artistic mediums provide young people with a way to express themselves in the face of a lack of youth programs and opportunities, especially in urban areas like Los Angeles. First of all, murals and graffiti enthrall, stimulate the mind, and inspire fresh viewpoints. He stressed that graffiti is the first visual art form that was completely influenced by youth culture because many young people used community mural programs to address issues and make their voices heard. By incorporating their graffiti styles into mural traditions, they created a space where they could express their individuality and aesthetic. Although many graffiti artists gain experience by exploring with vandalism, some do not perceive their art to be wrecking public or private property, but rather providing a voice to the oppressed and disadvantaged, incorporating beauty and elegance to a noticeable location, or developing one's identity through a pseudonym (Othen-Price, 2006).

Local graffiti at KNUST frequently arouses feelings associated with social criticism, cultural pride, and student action. Particularly during periods of social upheaval or political turmoil, their striking visual presence on college walls can evoke sentiments of resistance, identification, and unity. The messages range from affirmations of Pan-Africanism and creative freedom to criticisms of structural problems like injustice and corruption. In addition to adorning the area, these pieces challenge spectators, elicit contemplation, and represent the collective voice and emotional pulse of the student population.

The general population’s access to graffiti and street art, paired with its grassroots technique of conveying public opinion, heightens its significance as a cultural legacy. Its media, like any other intellectual form, is varied, but its inspirations come from the "ordinary" rather than the haughty elite, making it more human-relevant. This is evident from its growing appeal and widespread availability. Its benefit in beautifying public spaces or serving as a forum for civic interaction increases its relevance. Aside from writers, graffiti artists like Banksy sell their work at art galleries and museums. According to Gach (1973), Graffiti is a language.

Aesthetics of Graffiti

Street and graffiti artists regard their work as a contribution to society, providing much-needed aesthetic appeal and visual interest to the urban landscape (Lind, 1992; Bowen, 1999; Bowen, 2015). Riika Kuittinen, a street art enthusiast, contends that, hoardings, disused edifices and billboards are much more often used as a canvas or writing surface than buildings that hold more value (Chamberlin et al., 2020). Tagging awakens our cities as democratic realms, keeps them alive with creativity and appealing ideas, and attracts new audiences. The employment of a wide range of warm and cool colours brightens ancient and forgotten walls, infusing the room with newness and freshness. These graffiti tags and pieces revitalise derelict neighbourhoods, walls and trains.

Again, the employment of specialised fonts with distinct styles belonging to various writers results in a beautiful message that can only be decoded by a few people. The delicate combination of graphics, whether in silhouette or stencilled with tags, is made using artistic concepts. Street artists offer aesthetic interest and bring out the natural beauty and communicative nature of unused public space (Chamberlin et al., 2020). The inherent beauty and strong messages hidden in graffiti art cannot be overstated.

The debate over beauty's determination involves artists, institutions, and the public. Artists challenge norms, institutions legitimise, and the public shapes beauty through emotional responses. Beauty is negotiated among these forces, varying across time, culture, and context.

Graffiti has a subtle but significant influence on the campus's visual aesthetics at KNUST. Murals and graffiti that showcase student activism, academic vigour, and cultural pride adorn a number of walls, especially those close to the College of Art and Built Environment. The campus is given a distinct character that sets it apart from more impersonal educational environments thanks to these pieces, which frequently feature vivid Ghanaian symbols, Afrocentric patterns, or images of national luminaries. In keeping with KNUST's purpose as a centre of innovation and design, its artistic presence cultivates a creative environment.

Furthermore, the emotion of students is frequently reflected in the graffiti that may be seen on educational facilities, hallways, and hostel areas. While some pieces of art honour historical occurrences, others emphasise social justice issues, and many employ visual narrative to encourage introspection and participation. The end effect is a dynamic visual landscape that communicates, stimulates the senses, and encourages involvement in addition to decorating. Graffiti at KNUST enhances the aesthetic experience while reaffirming the university's dedication to creativity and intellectual freedom by converting plain walls into expressive canvases.

Semiotics and Graffiti Art

Graffiti art, a visual language rich in symbolism and cultural narratives, finds its roots in the broader discipline of semiotics, which explores how signs and symbols communicate meaning. Internationally, graffiti has been studied as both an art form and a medium of social expression, often operating within the frameworks of subculture and resistance. Semiotics, as articulated by Barthes (1972) and later expanded by de Saussure (2011), provides a lens for interpreting graffiti as a system of signs where the interplay of signifiers *(images, symbols, and texts)* creates multilayered meanings (Chamberlin et al., 2020). Graffiti communicates through its visual elements-typography, color, and form-conveying messages that are often political, personal, or cultural (Baca, 1995).

The Encoding/Decoding theory by Hall (1980) describes how viewers decipher signals embedded by political, social, or personal meanings in graffiti. Depending on their experiences, beliefs, and background, decoders may interpret it in different ways. Graffiti is a contested and dynamic form of visual communication, and this variance underscores Hall's contention that meaning is not set and that audiences might embrace dominant, negotiated, or opposing readings of the same piece.

Globally, graffiti is often associated with urban subcultures, particularly within the hip-hop movement. Artists such as Banksy, JR and Shepard Fairey have used graffiti to challenge societal norms and highlight socio-political issues. Their works are not merely decorative but carry profound messages encoded in visual metaphors and cultural references. For instance, Banksy's pieces often juxtapose stark imagery with satirical commentary, creating a dialogue between the artwork and its environment (Riggle, 2010). The communicative power of graffiti lies in its ability to claim public spaces, transforming them into platforms for discourse and identity formation.

In the Ghanaian context, graffiti has emerged as a creative medium that blends traditional African artistry with contemporary global influences. The works observed on the KNUST campus reflect a unique synthesis of cultural heritage and modern visual language. These graffiti pieces serve as both aesthetic expressions and communicative artifacts, addressing themes such as identity, memory, and social critique. While Western graffiti often emphasises overt political critique, Ghanaian examples often blend local symbolism and philosophical undertones, engaging audiences through culturally resonant imagery (Bowen, 1999). KNUST's graffiti art incorporates Ghanaian symbols, like Adinkra motifs, to convey values of unity, resilience, and identity. The colours used, such as bold reds and blacks, symbolise resistance, activism, and national events, while gold and green evoke hope and pride.

Texts are in both English, Twi, and Pidgin, as well as other local languages, enhancing accessibility and emotional resonance, reflecting the university's identity as a space for academic and cultural expression. Multilingualism in Ghana, particularly English, Twi, and Pidgin, significantly influences graffiti's semiotics by expanding its communicative power and cultural relevance. English is used to convey formal messages, while Twi adds emotional depth and cultural intimacy. Graffiti murals capture unique Ghanaian worldviews, enhancing their legitimacy and cultural relevance. Students and urban youth prefer the raw, rebellious graffiti style known as "pidgin English." It permits unofficial criticism and expression, frequently with sarcasm and humour. This multilingual graffiti engages a variety of audiences in urban or academic settings, reflecting Ghana's linguistic diversity. While much literature explores graffiti in Western cities, there is limited scholarly work analysing its symbolic and aesthetic relevance in Ghanaian academic spaces.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the Semiotic Theory of Communication complemented by Empirical Aesthetics (Brielmann, 2025). Semiotic theory, as articulated by Barthes (1972) and later expanded by de Saussure (2011), provides the foundation for analysing the signs and symbols within graffiti, focusing on how meaning is constructed and interpreted within cultural contexts (Chamberlin et al., 2020).

In conjunction with semiotics, Empirical Aesthetics offers insights into the visual and emotional impact of graffiti as an art form. Rooted in the works of Berlyne **(**1971**)** and later expanded by Arnheim **(**1974**)**, this framework examines how aesthetic principles such as composition, colour harmony, and visual balance contribute to the overall appeal and interpretive depth of graffiti (Berio & Leymarie, 2015).

Together, these theories enable a comprehensive exploration of graffiti's dual role as an artistic and communicative medium, bridging its aesthetic and philosophical dimensions. Semiotic theory is applicable to decode the iconography, textual elements, and symbolic references embedded in the selected graffiti works, while empirical aesthetics will guide the evaluation of their visual impact, assessing how compositional choices like symmetry, line, and hue contribute to emotional engagement.

The integration of these frameworks is crucial for understanding graffiti not only as a symbolic system of resistance and identity but as an art form designed to provoke visual and emotional responses in viewers.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research methodology, integrating content analysis and semiotic analysis to explore the aesthetic, philosophical, and communicative dimensions of selected graffiti works on the KNUST campus (Bowen, 1999). These approaches are particularly suited for examining visual and symbolic artifacts, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the underlying meanings and cultural narratives embedded in the graffiti (Baca, 1995).

Content analysis was used to evaluate each selected graffiti piece as a unit of analysis, examining visual form, composition, use of colour, typographic style, and symbolic motifs. Drawing on principles from empirical aesthetics, this analysis considers elements such as visual balance, harmony and contrast to understand how these contribute to the aesthetic and emotional impact of the works. Complementing content analysis, semiotic analysis is employed to decode both denotative and connotative meanings embedded in the graffiti. Using de Saussure’s concept of signifier and signified and Barthes’ notion of myth, this approach reveals how visual symbols, icons, and metaphors within the graffiti function as cultural texts. Graffiti, as a visual medium, is rich with semiotic potential, often using metaphors, icons, and coded messages to engage its audience (Chamberlin et al., 2020). Semiotic analysis allows the study

to uncover these layers of meaning, situating the graffiti pieces within broader cultural, philosophical, and artistic discourses.

Data were collected through direct observation and photographic documentation of four purposively selected graffiti pieces located across different parts of the KNUST campus. Selection was based on visibility, artistic complexity, and thematic richness. These visual records formed the primary data for both content and semiotic analyses. Additionally, informal interviews were conducted with the student artists, providing contextual insight into their intentions and philosophical perspectives. Informed consent was duly sought and obtained from participating artists.

5. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Da Yie I: Episode 1 (2018)

(Detailed from "**Da yie"** graffiti piece. Episode 1 painted in 2018.)

The piece titled *Da Yie*, meaning "sleep well" in Akan, operates as a spiritual tribute to the deceased Ghanaian music icon Ebony Reigns and her companions. Central to the piece is a frontal portrait of Ebony, flanked by more faded, less detailed figures that represent the others who died alongside her. This intentional hierarchy of visual clarity reflects a philosophy of memory-honouring the immediacy of loss while allowing others to recede into visual history. The work achieves formal balance through symmetry and spatial arrangement, consistent with principles of empirical aesthetics. The Odenkyem crew is made up of a group of graffiti writers who uses the pseudonym tags; Scrapa (Daniel Akwasi Mensah), KOFI, G/P and Mentse (Samuel Baah). This graffiti piece is supposed to have been started in 2017 and completed somewhere in mid-2018.

The less cluttered and visually appealing imagery in the work “Da yie” (Plate 1) features a painted hip-hop female artiste by name Priscilla Opoku-Kwarteng, popularly known as Ebony Reigns and two others she died with, her best female friend and a police man who died at tender age in mysterious car accidents in Ghana in 2018. The two other figures by her side were the other people she had the accident with and they have been rendered in less detail than the centered female figure.

The **“Da Yie”** pieces deliver brief, incisive, and frequently anti-materialist messages to passers-by. Graffiti, once viewed as a sign of infringement and vandalism, is now being used as a vehicle for artistic "branding" by taggers and remains a vital means of communication for all road users. Their collaborative style could be traced to the works of graffiti artists like Banksy, JR and Shephard Fairey who use their pieces to advertise and brand companies in Bristol, London and the United States. It is obvious to say that territorial tagging is almost the basic philosophy that binds this painstaking piece by the crew as almost all the contributing writers have tagged on the throw-up piece(Rosalind *et al.*, 2013). This is a means of announcing their existence, documenting themselves and establishing an identity within the space, again, the artist uses this masterpiece as tribute to the deceased for their passion for her music.

Using simple visual outlines and dots to achieve a unified defined compositional structure,

The writers convincingly portray a symmetrically balanced graffiti work with binary interpretation of a superimposed female head on two juxtaposed male heads directly reflected on the vertical axis to create a very beautiful formal balance and unity by proximity. The centre female figure in-between the male figures faces the viewer, its cartoonish proportions, contortions, physiognomy and expression suggest the gestural graffiti that remained a core stylistic influence from Basquiat’s painting. The simplicity of the greyish background and the subject matter are also reminiscent of prehistoric cave art, as well as later African tribal art. The head of the female figure is indistinct, its broad smile that exposes almost all her upper teeth and other facial expressions suggest excitement. Both ends of mass on her head reveal undulating, wavy lines that create an illusion of a hairstyle usually referred to as dreadlocks, which adds to the structural unity of the purely realistic female figure.

The central figures, although simply framed, are loaded with symbolism. The less detailed figures are intended to create “oldness” and “fading” off as time passes, as opposed to the freshly painted Ebony, whose death incident *(happened in 2018)* was new and fresh. Again, the sensational cool colours of black, grey and shades of brown also give a clear illusion of death and decay. Their existentialism graffiti piece is directly opposing to Basquiat's final nihilism paintings, “Riding with Death” which had no rational meaning to existence and life after death but rather, the basic philosophy underlying their work can be likened to the preparatory stages of the Egyptian mummies which are laid to rest by rapping white linen around their dead kings for a safe transitional journey to begin a new life in the underworld.

With rays of tinted-blue dots, the artists show motion using dots of varying sizes, ranging from the smallest above to the biggest, to depict transitioning and to accentuate the main figure in the middle of the throw-up piece.

Da Yie I: Episode 1 (2018)

*(Detailed from "**Da yie"** graffiti piece Episode 2, foreign hip-hop artist composed in 2018)*

Organised in a splendid catchline, behold! a dramatic stylistic stencilled rendition of a tone pictorial graffiti piece (plate 2) portraying deceased hip-hop international artists. Flanked on the right upper quadrant by two outstanding hip-hop messiahs by names Tupac-Shakur and Aliah, and beneath them in the fourth quadrant are Notorious BIG and an unknown artist.

The second quadrant is less dense with a female bust with a demeanour of a hip-hop dancer, and finally, the third quadrant is meandering, wavy movement of a line, which is a complete imitation of a vaporised effect and a display of the writers of intense dramatic spatial dynamics of positive and negative imagery free from academic realism. The symbol of the human skull, reggae stars, and many hip-hop figures dominate the work.

The Owl, Butterfly, and Dove Piece (2020)

(Graffiti by Scrapa, 2020)

The owl, as both a signifier of wisdom and a symbol of the mystical, reflects the Ghanaian duality of knowledge and caution. Juxtaposed with the butterfly, a symbol of metamorphosis, the dove, a spiritual constant, the visual composition forms a triadic semiotic arrangement that guides the viewer's gaze from spiritual insight to transformation and ultimately to transcendence. The piece's blue background deepens the emotional tone, eliciting a meditative calm while anchoring the viewer in a cosmological dialogue. The choice of these motifs and their juxtaposition evoke both cultural and philosophical reflections, especially when analysed in the context of Ghanaian traditions and urban art practices.

The owl, central to the upper section of the artwork, holds a dual significance. In many cultural traditions, including those of Ghana, the owl is an ambivalent figure. While it is often celebrated as a symbol of wisdom and vigilance, it also carries connotations of mystery and the supernatural. In Akan folklore, for example, the owl sometimes embodies connections to the spiritual world, often being associated with foresight or ominous warnings. Here, the intense, almost confrontational eyes of the owl invite the viewer to reflect on these layered meanings, as though urging a deeper exploration of the hidden knowledge embedded within the work.

Beneath the owl lies the butterfly, whose vibrant yellow, orange, and green wings bring warmth and vitality to the composition. The butterfly, a universal symbol of transformation and *(from larva to caterpillar to pupa to a full butterfly)* renewal, is particularly resonant within the Ghanaian cultural landscape, where concepts of growth and cyclical change are deeply rooted. Its placement at the center of the artwork suggests a narrative of personal or collective metamorphosis, a journey toward freedom, or the celebration of life's fragile beauty. In the urban context, where graffiti often acts as a medium of resistance and self-expression, the butterfly's symbolism could also speak to the resilience and adaptability of marginalised voices in the face of social and economic challenges.

Above it all, the white dove offers a counterpoint to the intensity of the owl and the dynamism of the butterfly. As a universal emblem of peace and spiritual transcendence, the dove's presence introduces a sense of hope and unity. Within the Ghanaian context, the dove might also invoke Christian iconography, reflecting the nation's deeply spiritual ethos. Its luminescence against the blue background reinforces an aspirational tone, suggesting a striving for harmony and higher ideals amidst the complexities of modern life.

The blue backdrop itself is a deliberate choice, evoking the vastness of the sky and the depth of water, essential elements in African cosmology. Blue symbolises calmness and introspection, grounding the work in a sense of serenity despite its bold and vibrant forms. This interplay between stillness and energy mirrors the duality often found in graffiti art: a genre that thrives on its ability to disrupt and provoke while also offering moments of profound beauty and reflection.

In discussing the communicative essence of this graffiti, it is crucial to consider the nature of the medium itself. Graffiti, often dismissed as mere vandalism, has increasingly been recognised as a legitimate form of artistic and cultural expression. Ferrell (1996) argues that graffiti serves as a voice for the voiceless, reclaiming public spaces and challenging dominant narratives. Within the Ghanaian context, urban graffiti has evolved as a powerful medium for youth expression, addressing themes ranging from political activism to cultural heritage. This artwork, with its rich tapestry of symbols and colors, aligns with such traditions, offering a commentary that is at once local and universal.

Through this lens, the graffiti becomes more than just an aesthetic creation; it is a dialogue. It speaks to the spiritual dimensions of Ghanaian culture, the transformative power of art, and the resilience of communities seeking to assert their identities in a rapidly changing world. By integrating elements of folklore, nature, and contemporary urban life, the artist crafts a narrative that is deeply rooted yet aspirational, reflecting the complex interplay of tradition and modernity in Ghanaian society.

LYRIC

*(Detailed from the bombarded painting studio walls at KNUST: "**Lyric"** graffiti tag thrown up in 2014).*

Using striking spray can art and profound text, Lyrics has captured the interest of art lovers, activists, and graffiti artists around the KNUST campus as he throws up an above window bubble style graffiti tag that reads “lyric” written in simple, rounded, bubble-shaped letters which overlap from left to right-hand side of the building. The main purpose of tagging the painting studio is territorial tagging, where he tries to showcase his presence and dominance over the area. These tags are made up of reduced forms of rapid, stylised signatures formed of letters and/or numbers (Gómez, 1993).

This graffiti artwork presents a compelling statement through its raw, urban aesthetic and minimalist yet bold visual language. The word “LYRIC” which is the brush-name for the artist is central to the composition, written in exaggerated, bubble-like letters outlined in black and partially filled with earthy, rust-like textures. Above the text, a simple crown floats prominently, signaling authority, creativity, and mastery. Surrounding the central text are abstract linework and drips, adding an unrefined energy and a sense of motion to the piece.

The incorporation of the word “LYRIC” connects directly to themes of expression, rhythm, and storytelling. In a broader cultural context, particularly within urban Ghanaian spaces, the term "lyric" might evoke the vibrancy of spoken word, hip-hop culture, and local music traditions such as hiplife and afrobeats. Graffiti, as a medium, often reflects the dynamics of music culture, blending visual art with lyrical narratives to communicate identity and resistance. Here, the artist seems to emphasise the power of words and their ability to convey complex emotions and social commentary.

The crown above the word “LYRIC” has a long-standing history in graffiti art. Popularised by iconic graffiti artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, the crown is a recurring symbol of excellence and defiance. In this context, it elevates the concept of lyrics to a revered status, suggesting that words and creativity hold a kingly or queenly power. Within Ghanaian culture, the crown can also reflect leadership and respect, qualities often associated with oratory skills and the ability to inspire communities.

The drips of paint and rough, unpolished strokes reinforce the rawness of street art. This unfiltered aesthetic mirrors the authenticity often found in both graffiti and lyricism, where the emphasis is on unrestrained self-expression rather than perfection. The urban backdrop of the piece, perhaps a wall or a neglected surface, adds to its cultural relevance, representing the resilience and ingenuity of individuals creating beauty and meaning in overlooked or marginalised spaces.

From a semiotic perspective, the layered textural elements and abstract linework can also be interpreted as symbols of interconnectedness, chaos, and the rhythm of city life. The uneven application of paint, combined with its drips and streaks, mirrors the impermanence and unpredictability of urban spaces. This impermanence aligns with graffiti’s transient nature, where works are often ephemeral, subject to erasure or overpainting.

Theoretically, the piece evokes Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of symbolic capital. The tag “LYRIC,” crowned and expanded in exaggerated stylised forms, becomes a statement of authorship and urban legitimacy. From a semiotic perspective, the crown functions metonymically, symbolising status within the graffiti hierarchy. Visually, the balance between unpolished strokes and stylised symmetry reflects the tension between control and spontaneity, core to empirical aesthetic experiences.

Drawing on literature about graffiti art, scholars like Macdonald (2002) have emphasised how graffiti functions as a subcultural dialogue, challenging authority while asserting individuality. This piece aligns with that framework, reclaiming a mundane urban surface and transforming it into a canvas for creative assertion. It also recalls the idea of “naming” in graffiti culture, where tags and words act as signatures or declarations of presence. By choosing the word “LYRIC,” the artist might be aligning themselves with the power of storytelling as an act of resistance or celebration.

In the Ghanaian cultural landscape, this work resonates deeply with the storytelling traditions that underpin local art forms, from the oral histories of griots to the rhythmic narratives of contemporary music. It bridges the global language of graffiti with the localised essence of Ghanaian identity, offering a testament to the enduring power of words, symbols, and creative expression. The work, therefore, stands not just as a visual piece but as a call to recognise the transformative potential of art in connecting cultures, challenging norms, and inspiring dialogue.

6. Conclusion

Often dismissed as mere vandalism, graffiti is far more significant than society typically acknowledges. This study, situated within the KNUST campus, has revealed the profound cultural, philosophical and communicative dimensions of graffiti art. Rather than random wall markings, the analysed works emerge as powerful visual texts, rich with symbolic meaning, social commentary and aesthetic sophistication (Hochtritt, 2008; Hughes, 2009; Merrill, 2015). First, the study affirms graffiti as a legitimate and multifaceted art form. While frequently stigmatised, the graffiti at KNUST reflects a sophisticated interplay between global artistic movements and traditional African aesthetics. These works do not only demonstrate remarkable visual appeal but also convey layered narratives about identity, memory, resistance and social critique.

Again, graffiti's communicative power cannot be overstated. It reclaims public spaces, subverts dominant narratives, and becomes a platform for marginalised voices. Through its vivid symbols, experimental typography, and metaphoric compositions, graffiti generates public dialogue and challenges passive spectatorship. Finally, the study highlights graffiti's educational and inspirational potential. On the KNUST campus, these works stimulate critical thinking, creativity and cultural reflection. They bridge the past and present, fostering discourses that extend beyond aesthetic appreciation and into cultural discourse. In doing so, graffiti does not only become a mode of expression but also a pedagogical tool.

7. Recommendations

In view of the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to promote, preserve and academically integrate graffiti as a legitimate art form and cultural practice. The artistic and expressive aspects of graffiti ought to be integrated into the educational framework. Graffiti can be used as a case study in courses that emphasise contemporary art, cultural studies, and visual communication, allowing students to thoroughly examine its significance. Graffiti art should have its own space at universities and other public institutions. These spaces would foster artistic innovation in a controlled setting while enabling artists to produce without worrying about stigmatisation. Public awareness campaigns can be started to inform communities on the importance of graffiti in order to change societal perception. Such projects can change the perception of graffiti from vandalism to a useful form of cultural expression by highlighting its creative and communicative possibilities. In this regard, institutions and communities can elevate graffiti from the margins of social acceptance into the centre of cultural and academic engagement. In this regard, institutions and communities can elevate graffiti from the margins of social acceptance into the centre of cultural and academic engagement.

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