

## **Rethinking Athens as Text: The Linguistic Context of Athenian Graffiti during the Crisis**

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### **Abstract**

*Athenian graffiti functions as a testament of creativity and artistry occurring during the hard times of socioeconomic and political crisis in Greece the last seven years. The impact of Greece's crisis is presented through urban art in downtown Athens. This extensive street art practice on Athenian walls as a linguistic and imagery line is approached in the present article via the semiotic and multimodal perspective, as the main symbolic and representative expression generated by the crisis, contributing to the production of visual urban culture. Fieldwork research was conducted in Athens from January to July 2015. The findings from the qualitative analysis highlight that politicized wall writings constitute a modern wall language, expressing social and political messages produced mainly via text and image, reconstructing the wall slogans and murals as the fundamental means of sociopolitical reaction.*

### **Athens: The Cradle of Wall Writing Protests**

The present contribution, as a slightly modified version of my Master's Thesis (Stampoulidis 2016), submitted in 2016 with the title "HOPE WANTED. Wall Writing Protests in times of Economic Crisis in Athens," intends to study the messages transmitted via text and image, and also the thematic and intertextual references of Athenian graffiti during the period from January to July 2015 through a small-scale corpus analysis. According to Kalogiannaki & Karras (2013), the Athenian wall language is considered a specific literary genre; "not only dynamic, ironic and socially politicized, but also colorful and multiform" (Kalogiannaki & Karras: 12). Street artists, according to Yiakou, express their thoughts based on current sociopolitical circumstances on any available surface conveying underlined messages, which serve as avenues for their expression.

[...] this form of outcry communication is such a dynamic agent that can awake emotions and hidden thoughts. (Interview with Yiakou, February 2015).

Their inspiration is usually the anxiety about the future and sadness about the Greek sociopolitical and economic spectrum. The deterrent expression of their ideas, according to the Athenian street artist EXIT, transforms the so-called historic centre of Athens into an "international cradle" of street

art. As I have shown elsewhere, street art functions as a broader concept of social and abstract ideas of protest and constitutes a form of new generations' expression, which wants to be heard (Stampoulidis 2016).

Street art is any form of public art. You use the public space as an international cradle. (Interview with EXIT, February 2015)

In this article, the linguistic investigation of sociopolitical graffiti will further take into account the textual and visual characteristics and also the intertextual references as direct connections with the Greek past. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the research of a current hot topic in semiotics and multimodality in the specific genre of the data investigated: the metamorphosis of the Athenian urban linguistic landscape.

This paper addresses the following questions, to be further explained below:

- What does the chosen graffiti during the crisis on Athenian walls mean, and how are the messages conveyed in them via text and image?
- What is the main thematic content of Athenian graffiti?
- Are there any intertextual references?

### *Athenian Graffiti as an Urban Window*

Etymologically, graffiti derives from the Italian word “graffito,” which refers to artworks originating from the artist’s attempt to draw shapes on a surface (OED 2005). In this light, as can be drawn from the data of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, the Athenian graffitiists believe that presenting their works in the public space is the best way to gain audience for their ideas. They get the opportunity to transmit sociopolitical messages and talk about their concerns and disagreements.

Concerning the role and the importance of graffiti, the opinions vary. As can be extracted from my personal experience (as an active participant in two graffiti crews) during the fieldwork research in Athens in 2015, there is a number of people who view graffiti positively, as a form of direct expression of sentiments and political ideals. For them, it is considered a culture of the street, opposed to color monotony and to the grey background of “ideological construction of space,” (Hodge & Kress 1993: 212) that is present in Athens. Those who see graffiti with suspiciousness consider it to be an expression of marginalized social groups, and often they characterize it as art through vandalism, according to Stewart (2008). Nowadays, graffiti is made by various social groups of people and serve several social needs expressing different social interests. For most people, graffiti constitutes the global youth language (Stewart 2008: 14-16), which reflects changes in the society.

Much research about the Athenian graffiti as an urban window has provoked special interest in the issues of urban public space, focusing on the political unrest and the use of the wall mural as a tool for sociopolitical propaganda. According to Chaffee (1993: 4), the wall language has been studied as a type of “democratic form in which there is universal access and a barometer that registers the

spectrum of thinking, playing an intricate role in ordering space,” establishing and communicating codes of behavior, values and beliefs, participating in the cultural (re)production of the Athenian urban landscape.

## **Semiotic-Multimodal Framework of the Dynamic Reconstruction of the Athenian Landscape**

Semiotics and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) have been selected as the main theoretical and methodological framework to analyze the linguistic context of Athenian graffiti during the crisis. The corpus analysis in this short article depends on the sociopolitical occasions and also on the given historical and sociocultural lifeworld (Gee 2014: 185-186; Sonesson 2013a), contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding the Athenian graffiti language of the crisis.

The semiotics framework has been chosen in order to test the main expectation in terms of decoding the language of the Athenian urban landscape including symbols and signs. The fundamental aim of the semiotic analysis is to explore how meanings are conveyed and generated by wall writings in relation to the Athenian urban sphere. This strengthens the opinion that everything written or painted on the Athenian walls does not exist in isolation from the specific environment implying the sociopolitical processes, but they are interconnected through the cultural bonds of Greek society. Sonesson (2010) argues that “pictorial semiotics is the study of pictures as particular vehicles of signification,” concluding that it is concerned with the imagery meanings, signs and symbols. Therefore, the meaning of a sign is defined by its synergy with an object and other sign systems within a particular society in order to be interpreted by the passers-by.

In other words, when someone gives a meaning to an object, their experiences and ideas are organized into that sign system, revealing what they know about it. Therefore, in order to understand and gain insight into the Athenian urban landscape, any symbols and signs as well as the current sociopolitical changeover must be examined.

Subsequently, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), based on O'Halloran (2008), explores the meaning-making of different communication modes – “Color, Words, Shape, Framing, and Lighting” – and their special usage and interaction with the sociocultural context in which they occur (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 2). Thus, as stated by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006: 35) multimodality is the most important part of the semiotic environment (Athenian semiotic space) in which humans live and act, and constitutes a semiotic activity, which produces and reproduces possible symbolic meanings.

Furthermore, Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) pursue their theory underlining the juxtaposition between the “context of production and the context of reception,” acknowledging the semiotic resources which contribute to the understanding and decoding of any sociocultural and political synergies. In particular, the model of the scholars Hodge & Kress (1988) has emerged from the Hallidayan framework of “social semiotics” (ibid: 261) about the systemic functional grammar (cf. Halliday 1978; O'Halloran 2011). Halliday (1978) introduced three accurate functions and defined them as “metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.” Kress & van Leeuwen (2006),

inspired by Halliday's framework, applied their theoretical construction, handling the following three criteria (Kress & van Leeuwen: 42-44), which constitute the proposed formula of my analysis of the reconstruction of the Athenian public sphere:

1. **Visual representation:** This first level of ideational metafunctions of analysis concerns the artistic practices that are apparent in Athenian graffiti.
2. **Representation and interaction:** The analysis of interpersonal metafunctions focuses on various "non-verbal (multimodal, visual) perspectives of interaction-semiotic" (Wodak & Meyer 2008: 2) characteristics of sociopolitical references (as Greece's official signs and symbols), lighting, style, and color. Salience could be realized as the size of the image/figure or the specific color application. Framing could be realized as the frame lines to emphasize distinct imagery and iconographic features.
3. **Representation and textual design:** The analysis of textual metafunctions focuses on the meaning organization in a piece of Athenian graffiti and on intertextuality. It investigates any grammatical, lexical, semantic, or typographical features between the picture and its verbal intertext.

To sum up, Kress & van Leeuwen (2006: 18) state that the meaning of visual representations comes from the incorporation of different visual and textual characteristics and the "message is independently organized and structured" by both image and verbal text.

## Data Gathering Tools

The core data gathering tools were photo documentation, participant observation and semi-structured interviews, as my main focus was to qualitatively describe and analyze what kind of linguistic trends occur in Athenian urban writings. The following image displays the distribution of urban roaming in Athens in a perimeter of about twelve kilometers.

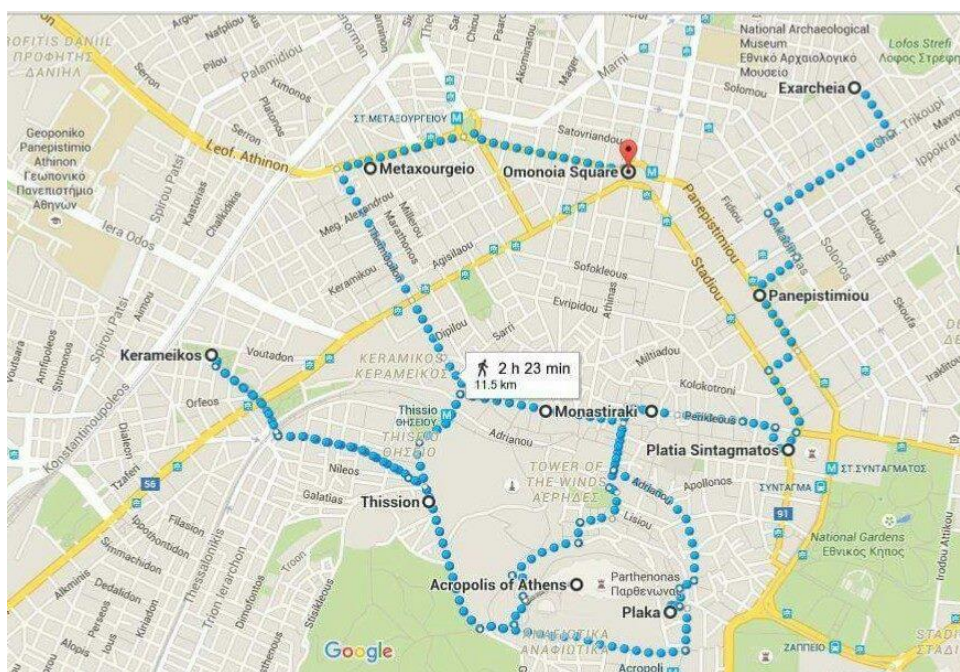


Figure 1: Fieldwork research in central Athens, 2015.

Keeping in mind that this article is based on fieldwork research I did as part of my master studies in 2015, I recorded my personal experiences in a data collection, which grew larger during the fieldwork in Athens, with a satisfactory number of photographs of graffiti with the aid of my mobile camera phone during several days of roaming. The photographic corpus contains a total of 1500 pictures from places in central Athens during the crisis. Some of them existed before January 2015, when I started my fieldwork in Athens. However, the majority of these wall writings have been either repainted by other works or destroyed due to weather conditions and the passing of time. Nevertheless, the pre-existing wall writings have also been included in the data corpus, because they all come up with similar issues of contemporary interest, constituting a social milieu of ideas. This was deemed as necessary for the reliability of the research. Besides, I have decided to share a sample with everyone using Flickr by clicking on the following link: [https://www.flickr.com/photos/athenian\\_wall\\_writing\\_2015/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/athenian_wall_writing_2015/).

In order to illustrate the language of Athenian graffiti, five indicative graffiti have been selected for this paper. The instances presented here have been drawn by well-known Athenian street artists, *Bleeps.gr*, *Cacao Rocks*, and *SX*. The criteria I used for choosing these graffiti included multimodal imaging techniques, a variety of historical and sociocultural motifs, intertextual influences, and timeliness. The present study also shows that the localization functions as a cognitive link between the Athenian semiotic place with the contemporary ideological contexts and sociopolitical events.

Participant observation took place sporadically from mid-January until mid-March 2015, in different environments, mostly in downtown Athens during the night. Being an active participant-member of two graffiti groups, as has already been said, gave me the opportunity to decipher and explain the reasons why they transform the walls into a sociopolitical magazine. Two street artists,



*WD* and *EXIT*, explain their motivation to reconstruct the Athenian walls, admitting that the crisis has influenced their art in a direct way.

Athens is characterized by a sweet chaos that makes it so vivid! I love this kind of chaos because it gives me unexpectable inspiration. (Interview with *WD*, February 2015).

Wall-fever has become apocalyptic, reflecting the heartbeat of a boiling city. (Interview with *EXIT*, February 2015)

The interviews took place from mid-February 2015 until the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2015. They were carried out either in Greek or in English when the interviewees did not speak Greek. Three of them took place in different settings, according to the needs of the participants, via voice recorder, two of them via online service call operated by Skype and three of them via e-mail. Broadly speaking, an average interview lasted circa 40 to 45 minutes. The audiotape recordings via voice recorder and Skype online service call have been all verbatim transcribed and translated into English. The sample consists of eight male street artists, and the age of the participants ranged between 20 and 37. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the recruitment of participants was not an easy task due to their illegal activity.

### **Athenian Street Art and Crisis Aesthetics**

Athenian street art can be seen as a didactic reading of the urban discursive speech; as a mirror of a new social life, which should be heard and read, providing researchers with a large amount of information regarding sociopolitical processes within Greek society. Thus, a sample of some typical pictures has been chosen for this paper, which highlights the voice of the Athenian society; how Athenian street artists face the effects of the crisis through the prism of aesthetics. As I have noted elsewhere, the transmission of sociopolitical messages via wall writings as well as their conceptual visualization, contributes to the development of sociopolitical propaganda (Stampoulidis 2016). More particularly, Wodak & Cillia (2006) argue that

[...] discourses express societal power relations, which in turn are affected by discourses. This “overall discourse” of society [...], could be visualized as a “diskursives Gewimmel” (literally: discursive swarming) [...] (Wodak & Cilia 2006: 714).

In spite of all this, it seems to me that the content and the meanings of these wall writings are connected with visual vocabulary and semantic symbols. In this light, the linguistic context of Athenian graffiti could provide evidence that it is not only the symptom of the crisis in contemporary Greece, but also a collective expression of an emerging urban subculture, which endeavors to metamorphose the image of the city, describing according to Matsaganis (2013) the rise of Greek social resistance and disobedience against the bailout and the harsh austerity programs (Matsaganis 2013: 4-6). Before I proceed, however, it is necessary to remind the reader of the objective of this article: My interpretation will be based on the linguistic and visual forms of

semiosis from a semiotic and multimodal perspective. Thus, I am going to examine the following five wall writings as an alternative political voice and sociopolitical critique through text and image.



Figure 2: NO EURO NO VISION, Omonoia Square, 2013.

A story telling piece “NO EURO NO VISION” illustrates the incorporation between writing and image, as a central technique of *Bleeps.gr*'s activity. A first reading of this image would focus on the way how written graphics are applied by the Athenian street artist in a complex way. It constitutes a wordplay slogan “NO EURO NO VISION” directly connected with the Eurovision Song Contest, as an ironic social commentary (Tulke 2014: 7-8), which based on O'Halloran (2008: 448) conceptualizes the linguistic content image and the image of language through the perspective of the lack of artistry, inspiration, and motivation in dealing with the crisis issues. According to the color application, red is commonly recognized to symbolize various meanings and feelings such as anger, danger, malice, wrath, stress and action. Red is a very strong color, which is often associated with strength or self-confidence. Besides, the blue color is the traditional Greek color with a long tradition behind, symbolizing the blue of the Hellenic sea and flag.

Figure 2 testifies mostly dark humor by referring to GREXIT as the worst scenario of the negotiation process between Greece and EU officials. The possibility of Greece withdrawing from the European family became real in late 2011, but still, GREXIT remains only a smart neologism for an event that never happened. Since then, GREXIT not only has become a common keyword in the European discourse, but also remains a linguistic neologism rather than an actual event. *Bleeps.gr* has commented in his works about the current issues, e.g.

[...] I care for what happens in this world [...] I care about the social problems [...] In Athens, when we look at those inscriptions on the walls, firstly the sociopolitical writings come to our minds. (Interview with *Bleeps.gr*, February 2015).

In addition, in terms of intertextuality, *Bleeps.gr* applies well-known redefined symbols from classical antiquity, as for example the ancient Greek foot and leg of the female figure, possibly with a hidden semiotic symbolism by referring to the Ancient Greek past. *Bleeps.gr* seeks to challenge the linguistic objective of meaningful configurations and power relations within Athenian urban landscape. At the same time, according to Crimp (2005), through the intertextual references, he provides open narrative structures in his works (Crimp 2005: 20), confirming the given definition of this piece as a story telling piece. The same street artist comments on the contemporary situation even more openly by referring to the classical antiquity, as seen in the next figure 3, which commands the Greek people to think – maybe about their uncertain future!

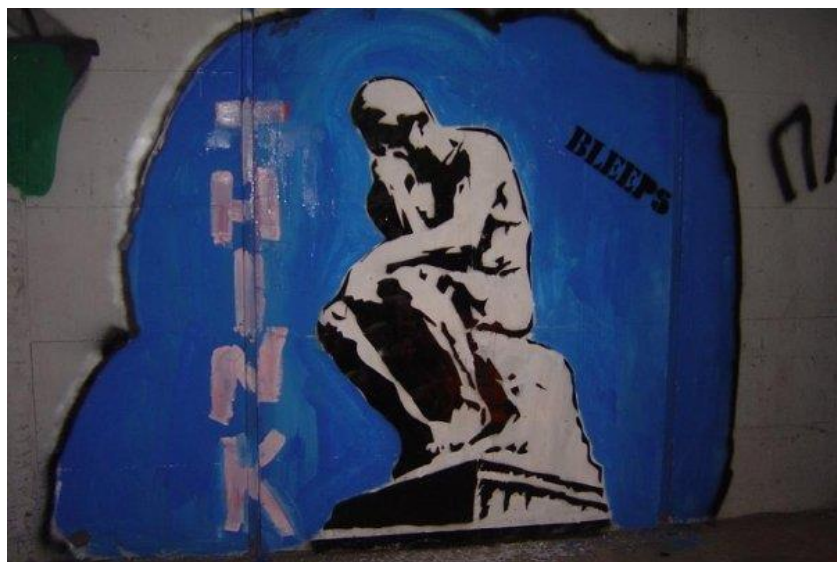


Figure 3: THINK, Acropolis of Athens, May 2015.

In both the localization and the message of his work, *Bleeps.gr*, in figure 3, empathically attempts to “dress” not only any abandoned buildings in central Athens but also public surfaces in specific areas — Acropolis of Athens. As defined by Hart (2010: 57), Chilton & Schaffner (2002: 30) and Goutsos & Polymeneas (2014: 690), the medium of locality within the Athenian centre functions as cognition between contemporary Athenian wall writers and their ancestors — Ancient Greek philosophers. From a linguistic perspective, it becomes evident that the second person singular or plural usage in imperative mood “THINK” indicates that the street artist induces the Athenian passers-by to perform an action, which is presented here as something imperative. At the same time, *Bleeps.gr*, redefining the Ancient Greek culture, history, and philosophy through his specialized techniques, brings together the reminders of the country's glorious past and the



inherent uncertainty of the future. The mode of blue color is used repeatedly as the main background in the artifacts of *Bleeps.gr*, playing an important role in the project, as is also referred to by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) who state that “the color modality is characterized as an important aspect for decoding the compositionality of image” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 228). According to the street artist, *Bleeps.gr*, figure 3 transmits a clear political idea and color, because as the artist stated, “both of them have social dynamics in Greek society.”



Figure 4: ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!, Exarchia, February 2015.

“ΦΤΑΝΕΙ ΠΙΑ ΑΡΚΕΤΑ!!”  
“FTANI PIA ARKETA!!”  
“ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!!”

Figure 4 is a sociopolitical graffiti found in the Exarchia district, with unique political messages against tough austerity measures for the majority of Greek people. It attempts to motivate its readers to overcome their fears and fight for their future, implying a call for action. From a linguistic point of view according to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006: 144), it is worth noting that the unification of both linguistic and pictorial forms of representation testifies the clearer understanding of the social commentary. According to the imagery aspect, the male human face (gestural techniques) shown in this figure constitutes a unity of form and content (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 117-118). The wall writing refers both to the real human faces of indignant Greek citizens, who suffer from the crisis, and to the mobilization of major street protests. With regard to the words used to connect the protest idea, it should be noted that the lettering is capitalized. What is more, this graffiti indicates the hopelessness and the desperation of Greeks to get rid of the constant deep austerity. The Athenian graffitist, SX, endeavors with certainty to imprint on the public Athenian walls the emotional stress and the anxiety of the Greek nation applying both tools of communication; word and image.



Figure 5: YES, YES, YES, YES, NO... YES, YES, YES, AS EVER?, Exarchia, July 2015.

“ΝΑΙ, ΝΑΙ, ΝΑΙ, ΝΑΙ, ΟΧΙ... ΝΑΙ, ΝΑΙ, ΝΑΙ, ως πότε?”

“ΝΕ, ΝΕ, ΝΕ, ΝΕ, ΟΧΙ... ΝΕ, ΝΕ, ΝΕ, os pote?”

“YES, YES, YES, YES, NO... YES, YES, YES, as ever?”

Figure 5 depicts the protest of the Athenian street artist *Cacao Rocks* against the last Greek bailout program. This graffiti indicates the power and the willfulness of the Greek graffiti artists in general, answering “OXI-NO” to the Greek referendum on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2015, applying dynamically the modality of the red color. The focal question of the Greek referendum 2015 was whether Greece should continue fiscal austerity programs imposed by its creditors’ willingness or not.

Here, it is important to note what tagging means; when graffiti overlap other graffiti, as can be seen on the top of the figure 5. In particular, tagging can be seen on walls with tags and graffiti, which either have been destroyed by the passing of time or have been changed and improvised by the same street artist following the sociopolitical changeover. To make matters more concrete the initial form of this graffiti can be featured in figure 6.



Figure 6: THEN THEY USED TANKS...NOW THEY USE BANKS, Exarchia, Athens, March 2015.

“TOTE ME TANKΣ...ΤΩΠΑ ME BANKS”

“TOTE ME TANKS...TORA ME BANKS”

“THEN THEY USED TANKS...NOW THEY USE BANKS”

Figure 6 is a sociopolitical graffiti found in the Exarchia district that undoubtedly has unique political messages against tough financial measures for a majority of the Greek society. It attempts to motivate its readers to overcome their fears and fight for their freedom.

From a linguistic perspective, it is worth noting that the idiosyncratic language of graffiti via the collaboration between linguistic and pictorial forms of representation testifies to an understanding of social commentary (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 144). In this graffiti, the street artist *Cacao Rocks* uses the two words “tanks” and “banks”, and two adverbs of time “then” and “now”, to compare two periods of Greek history: The first period could be either the period of the World War II (1939-1945) or the seven year period (1967-1974) of the Greek military junta [THEN] (Tsarouhas 2005: 1), and the second period, according to the writer, is the Greek present [NOW].

From a semiotic multimodal approach, the structure of the image affirms that the message is transmitted by the incorporation of an iconic image (tank) accompanied by text (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 26). With regard to the words used to connect the idea of protest, it should be noted that the lettering is capitalized and possibly expressing the heartfelt message of agony and suffering of the Greeks.

### **Athenian Walls’ Voice – A Sociopolitical Magazine**

[...] people who do graffiti are the Greek artists of today. This is the design that fits in Athens today. The outer walls of the houses are the infrastructure of the public image of the city. I think that presenting our ideas on the streets is the best and easiest way to

acquire audience for our ideas [...] graffiti is a weapon of influence and the urban landscape is a huge gallery giving everybody freedom. (Interview with Charitonas Tsamantakis, February 2015).

The Athenian walls, as an urban sociopolitical magazine, suggest that sociopolitical changeover, economic and banking crisis, austerity measures, the IMF and European symbols are considered common to the street artifacts displayed in the Exarchia district and generally in the centre of Athens. Exarchia is an intellectual and restless neighborhood in downtown Athens where mainly left-thinking people, anarchists, artists, but also ordinary people live. Since my corpus includes only street slogans and wall paintings from this area, my data is not able to say anything about wall writing protests expressing other political views.

Anything written or painted on any public wall or any other city surface without official permission is surely a political act with a poetic, or philosophical, nature transmitting various intriguing messages. As the street artist, *WD*, strongly suggests

[...] the graffiti process has a political character by its nature. The fact that you are going out in the city claiming a space to express yourself without asking for permission from any institution, mayor or owner [...] it's a political choice [...] all these things are part of graffiti and furthermore a political process. So, graffiti comes to make a small rebellion via the act. It includes the painting, the way each one decides to do it. (Interview with *WD*, February 2015)

In the light of the above transcript, it should be highlighted that the artistic interventions in urban public sphere articulate an alternative political art of discourse functioning as a neutral means to convey beliefs, ideas and concepts through wall writing. This dialectic processing between political protest and the invasion of wall writings in the public arena is more than evident nowadays with various individual groups or pseudonymous artists using “the walls as public forums” (Avramides 2012: 14) of sociopolitical protest art expression.

The samples presented above include at least one dominant sentence conveying the political scream to the masses. The letters are usually black, blue or red and they are written with aerosol spray paint and in certain cases only with paint. They are usually statements, which portray the sense of suffering of the Athenian society. In particular, the Athenian graffiti according to the stencil street artist *Tona* does not serve only an artistic function; in fact it helps to spread the messages of the youth.

I work a lot for the people that spend a lot of time on the streets. Unlike elsewhere in the street art world (which probably works more with criticism and irony), my motivation is to deconstruct the viewers' “ordinary” perceptions, give them inner peace, joy or a smile as a new communication medium. (Interview with *Tona*, February 2015).

Furthermore, it should be noted that the thematic content in these selected samples of graffiti essentially reflects attitudes, messages/signs about the sociopolitical system, financial crisis and



social problems, and attitudes opposite to the current sociopolitical topicality. In this frame, the messages of signs recorded above concern the prompt for change and activation via political and social fights. Lastly but not least, the references to the sociofinancial problems reveal the poverty, the crisis austerity, and they always have an ideological base.

### **Conclusion: Transforming the Athenian Landscape through Graffiti?**

Athenian wall writing protests have attracted much scholarly attention in the last years. A particular semiotic and multimodal approach has been shown to play an important role in this specific genre. The relation between visual images, language usage and interpersonal social power has been examined, showing that the politicized wall art acts as a form of struggle where language and society are intersecting each other. In this paper I have attempted to shed some light on the presence of verbo-pictorial messages, particular thematic topics, and intertextual applications in the genre of Athenian graffiti through a small-scale corpus analysis of five selected pictures. The study highlights the image-text interaction in the meaning construction process and suggests that Athenian street artists use a multifaceted colorful language based on different semiotic modes as a visual testimony in order to engage the world and Greek society. More generally put, the corpus-based analysis points out that these graffiti images explicate fury and frustration caused by the current socioeconomic crisis and the imposed austerity measures as a lived reality, but also a hope for a better future!

The scope of this contribution being limited, it seems this study could demonstrate various paths forward due to the fact that the street art inquiry in the Athenian case, especially from a semiotic and multimodal perspective, is still in its infancy. A prospect for further research could be the investigation of visual rhetoric in graffiti, in which the rhetorical figures as a cognitive tool still remain an unexplored terrain.

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