

# Taki 183 spawns pen pals cultural studies essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

After the article was published, a visual and cultural explosion occurred. Teens and younger adults quickly took to the streets to write their name on anything they could, but the main target of these writings became the New York City subway system. With new "writers" joining the ranks daily, writing on the subway cars became extremely competitive in a short amount of time. During this period of the mid-1970's, the sole form of graffiti was tagging, or simply scrawling letters or words on a surface. At this point, taggers realized that they could hit many more subway cars in less time by going to "lay-ups", or stations where subway cars sit overnight to run the next day, instead of writing on the trains when they were in service. With the large number of names appearing on the subways, writers had to devise a way to gain more attention for themselves. This led to the birth of modern graffiti, as writers started painting their names much larger, using various colors and fonts to catch the eye of the public and other artists. As the famous artist Futura 2000 puts it, "It just makes perfect sense that the subway system would become the "vehicle". Suddenly graffiti wasn't limited to tenement halls, school yard walls and bathrooms. Graffiti could be found at the Speed it needed to be seen... To keep in step with fast paced communication and information sharing." (Futura 2000, 1) Overtime, these letters developed into what graffiti writers call "pieces", which is short for masterpieces. With the discovery of new paints and nozzles, these works of word-art became larger and higher quality as writers began to push the limits. Before long, entire subway cars would roll out of their stations, covered top-to-bottom in paint. Artists like BLADE and LEE paved the way for future painters, eventually making appearances in films such as Style Wars, a movie about graffiti culture in the 70's and early 80's. "[Style Wars] came

<https://assignbuster.com/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals-cultural-studies-essay/>

out the next year and that got me wanting to write like I seen it in the movies. People getting busy... like I was already ' bombing', but that movie got me bombing even more." (Interview with BG 183, March 2001). From the 80's to the present, graffiti art and tagging has evolved into it's own culture, shaping the identities of youth, as well as cities and common popular culture. Its high visibility and recognition from the public, be it positive or negative, has transformed it into one of the most American art forms and cultural trademarks in history. Its safe to say that since it's first beginnings in the 1970's, graffiti has drastically changed American culture as a whole. One of the most obvious aspects of America that graffiti has altered are it's cities. Before graffiti, cities were relatively clean urban environments, dense with people but filled with blank, grey walls. Since writers have started painting the walls with their names, the drab urban landscapes have transformed into a canvas, sometimes engulfing whatever was below the paint. Annually, the US spends about \$8, 000, 000, 000(Schrader, 3a) on graffiti removal and cleanup in cities across the country. With all of this paint being brushed and sprayed in these cities, the line between public and private property gets blurred, changing the way Americans view these boundaries. " Graffiti unquestionably changed the urban landscape, whether they are public surfaces or private ones...[It serves] as a tactic for challenging and offering alternative meanings for public space and for who belongs or whose ideas count within these spaces."(Moreau & Terrialderman, 1). In this sense, graffiti becomes a successful strategy for a marginalized culture to establish a voice. Individuals who have struggled to make an impact in society have the ability to do so with a spraycan, by writing what they want on their environment. This has changed the way city-goers view the spaces around

<https://assignbuster.com/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals-cultural-studies-essay/>

them. Graffiti broke up the monotony of the grey concrete, and turned public spaces such as the subway stations into moving art galleries. When most people think of graffiti, they are easily reminded by gang writing. Gangs commonly use graffiti tags to define territories and mark their "property". This form of graffiti is separate from common graffiti art, and is often confused by the general public. "A lot of people confuse gangsters with graffiti artists. They call it gang-art and that's not what it is... gangsters don't do colorful artwork (laughing). Gangsters just catch a quick tag on a wall and throw a 13 at the end of it to let you know they're gang bangers." (Interview with D-CON, January 2001). However, even though these gangsters have a separate culture from typical graffiti writers, they also have impacted the urban landscape. They have used graffiti as a means to define boundaries between large groups of people, and even the general population understands that seeing gang markings is a dangerous sign to them, as stepping into a gang-populated area can mean death in some circumstances. These tags drawn by gangs also tend to symbolize ethnic boundaries in the cities, signifying inner-city cultural and social conditions. Certain gang graffiti implies certain ethnic backgrounds, and the neighborhoods in which the same ethnic groups live. Although the public despises gangs, they seem to be more clever than typically believed. "In their apolitical relationship to the dominant society, gangs have found their politicalization. Without confronting them directly, gangs have dominated the social and legal systems in the United States." (Phillips, 92). With their territorial graffiti markings, gangs have literally changed the way cities are structured, if even unofficially. One of the biggest influences graffiti has had lies in artwork. With the massive growth of graffiti appearing on walls all over the world, it

<https://assignbuster.com/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals-cultural-studies-essay/>

has made an easier access to art for many whom it would go unnoticed. The typical american living in an urban area would have to walk through the streets with their eyes closed to avoid seeing any form of graffiti, be it street-art or letter-forms. Because of this every day exposure to graffiti-art and culture, it has slowly made it's way into art galleries and become a legitimate art form. " Graffiti in the form of spray-can art is art. It has form, color, and other properties... that qualify it aesthetically as being art...[it] is not to be disqualified as art simply because it might appear unsolicited. In short, graffiti in the form of spray-can art is like any other work that might be found in a gallery or museum." (Stowers, 6). This quote serves to legitimize graffiti as an art form rather than the blatant vandalism of some teens.

Whether or not the public approves or disapproves of it's presence, it still works to change the environments of cities, which then further goes on to impact the direction of art in modern society. In the 1980's, graffiti quickly became a hot commodity to have in popular art galleries, so artists like SEEN, CRASH, DAZE, and LEE were found in exhibits all over the country. For a relevant example, in 1984 CRASH was featured in the Musee D'Art Moderne de la Villa de Paris France (Frances museum of modern art) and DAZE was featured in the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) in New York City (John " Crash" Matos' Resume). Even compared to other art-forms, graffiti has outlasted many styles of painting, including Fauvism and Expressionism, both of which have lasted only ten to twenty years (Rewald, 1).

Contemporary graffiti art on the other hand, has been ongoing since the 1960's to present day. " We weren't sure if the [graffiti] art movement had longevity. With sales of 200 copies [of Spraycan Art] and still selling, this remarkable interest confirms that the existence of graffiti.... is a worldwide

<https://assignbuster.com/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals-cultural-studies-essay/>

phenomenon. Corporations hire street artists to create ad-campaigns, they fund their shows and events and profit in the millions" (Prigoff, 3). With a public interest like this, it's only natural to say that graffiti art has had an impact on the art world as a whole. With massive profits and influence onto other styles of art, it can only continue to progress how it affects artwork in the future. Another way graffiti has greatly influenced American culture and society is through public advertising. Graffiti started as a way of personal advertising for people who participated; it was a means to get noticed and acquire a certain level of notoriety based on the pseudonym that they would paint as many places as possible, with goals of both quality and quantity. Is it a coincidence that graffiti started in New York City, arguably the world's most saturated and simultaneously media-savvy city? One can argue that graffiti is a bi-product of a society inundated with advertising, after all, advertisers and graffiti writers seek to do the same thing. As time passes, the graffiti image endures mutations that have altered it's popularity in a larger societal context. Large companies have found uses for it in marketing campaigns. For instance, in 2005 the hit television show *The Apprentice* provided a distinct depiction of graffiti's use in national marketing campaigns by major corporations. In an episode that pitted two teams of contestants vying for an apprenticeship with business mogul Donald Trump, each team was given the task of creating a twenty-foot high wall ad in Harlem, New York. As a promotion for the then new video game *Gran Turismo 4*, the show provided viewers with a ' behind-the-scenes' look at the development and implementation of a trend that Donald Trump himself proudly introduced as the " new form of urban advertising. It's called graffiti." (Burnett). Advertisers and companies all over the world are cashing in on the aesthetic of graffiti,

<https://assignbuster.com/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals-cultural-studies-essay/>

including brands like Burton, Victoria's Secret, and even Louis Vuitton, who is currently selling graffiti-inspired gloves whose retail price is upwards of \$300. ([www.louisvuitton.com](http://www.louisvuitton.com)). What seems to be occurring in all of this, however, is a cycle. Graffiti has arguably influenced modern design, which then influences advertisers, which then ultimately influences graffiti artists and their artwork. " Graffiti often borrows from the aesthetics and signage and the jargon of advertising campaigns. The drop shadowed letter designs, the wild vernacular lettering styles of naive hand-painted signs and neon lights are just some of the city signs that have inspired graffiti lettering, composition, and tactics." (Manco, 11). A society that was once staunchly opposed to graffiti, with a minority community willing to accept a clear, cultural division, has moved toward an anomic state of social morality where " old norms no longer apply, but which new [norms] have yet to develop."(Ritzer and Goodman, 178). For graffiti artists, their artistic endeavors, which were once considered a dysfunctional element to society, have shifted to a functional, more profitable element. But social norms continue to lag, prohibiting their freedom of expression. Society continues to vilify graffiti, demanding the removal of non-profit and/or illegal graffiti, while simultaneously accepting and glorifying profitable pieces that utilize similar styles in the marketers' effort to maintain rewarding social cues. Despite all of the propaganda, prohibitions and punishments associated with contemporary graffiti, representatives of the dominant culture exploit the character and style of graffiti when it is profitable for them to do so. In this sense, graffiti has undoubtedly changed the face of advertising all over the world. The result of this power struggle is an anomic collective that accepts graffiti as an art form, but continues to refer to members of the graffiti

culture in degrading terms, with connotations of delinquency and vandalism. However, despite these negative connotations, many youth since graffiti's beginnings have adapted to the culture, and have become a very large part of the movement. " Graffiti writing in NYC is a vocation. It's traditions are handed down from one youthful generation to the next. To some, it's art but to most people however, it's a plague that never ends. A symbol that we've lost control." (Style Wars, interview with SEEN). Graffiti has been a transitional point for most teenagers, as they take in, and are taken by the images they are fed by corporate America. In this sense, graffiti has become a symbol of youth, and with youth being the future of society, as time goes on it would only be natural for graffiti to become more and more accepted by the public. Besides common advertisements, graffiti has found its way into mainstream media as well. This popular media is viewed at a network through which the image becomes identity. Graffiti writers manufactured a cultural importance of graffiti through repeated public exposure of the image, displayed through two socially constructed methods. These ' networks' or systems, through which the image becomes available to the masses, may be concrete or virtual, and in regard to graffiti was the subway system and is now currently the internet. However, apart from graffiti culture in itself, graffiti as a whole has influenced popular media as well. Many clothing, movie, magazine and product designs use graffiti as an inspiration. A detective from the LAPD put it this way, " It's because of the pop culture. With your violent crime going down, it seems your mischievous crime is going up, the art world has accepted it. People make money from graffiti tee-shirts. I was in Walmart on Easter, and I saw graffiti Easter eggs." (Reske, 1). Because of this absorbance of graffiti art into everyday products and



designs, the public tends to become desensitized to it, or even begins to understand it more. A contemporary graffiti writer from New York, EARSNOT, recently finished a full scale mural on a gallery in Los Angeles entirely consisting of tags in repeating colors. " You wanna make it look pretty and a way for the public to digest it. The last thing that they want to have to learn, is like, you know, ' graffiti language'. We made the whole building covered in a repeating color pattern, that way they notice the same tag over and over again, you know, and they notice the repetition of letters."(Interview with EARSNOT, 2011) With graffiti becoming more and more " pop culture", there is a large body of evidence that points to graffiti art having an impact on American culture as a whole, and in the future. Graffiti artists themselves have been making an impact on their communities as well. Because large corporations have capitalized on the public appeal of graffiti art in recent years, many artists have since caught on. Thus, many writers have " gone public" with their works and are using graffiti as a money-making strategy. Artists like these have chosen to capitalize on this opportunity and have created companies which cater to the social demand of graffiti as a form of advertising. One artist, BG 183, has formed a company with fellow writers called TATS CRU that specializes in creating murals. He describes his company in the following passage:" What I do now... it's more the company... we have more to offer. Our company is a company... we do backdrops, we do balconies, we are artists for hire. Promotional campaigns, we do backdrops for commercials, for movies, for music videos and by doing this... in the beginning there was no company like ours that we could follow. We had to do everything by trial and error and the next thing you know they want us to paint Motor Homes... so now we paint motor homes with spray

<https://assignbuster.com/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals-cultural-studies-essay/>

paint. We try, with enough skills to make it happen... the next thing you know we are doin' banners, canvases... now we have our own computer system and we do vinyl letters, logos, and other promotional stuff. We hire out other graffiti artists in different cities. We hire out in something like sixteen cities... campaigns in Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Florida to paint walls out there for us. Like we sub-contract for them." (BG 183 interview, 2001).