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A Tropic Understanding of Street Art as a Persuader For Social and Political
Advocacy

What began in the streets of New York in the 1970's has migrated across the world. Street

art is often characterized by rhetoric of "resistance to corporate values and an implicit desire to

subvert existing power structures" (Saunders, 2011). Graffiti and street art has been prevalent in the

past few decades taking stances toward social and political adversity. Famously, Banksy has taken

the streets creating clear "narratives of global ethics, of an unfair world that needs reform, by

juxtaposing familiar icons of western capitalism with icons of western imperialism (Brasset, 2009,

p.232). Similarly to cartoons (Moss, 2007), there lacks discussion about how persuasive arguments

within street art work. An essential tenet of street art is the reclamation of public space "for the

people," a goal with clear roots in social and political activism (Saunders, 2011). With the ability to

be an activist medium, street art is a visual display that presents a message that is often

simultaneously revealing and concealing information, in this way it can work rhetorically.

Additionally, it is evident that street art that is politically or socially charged often isn't neutral often

taking sides or making a stance against the "other". When assigning meaning, Moss (2007)

explains, "Persuaders often rely on binary choices" like judgments of good and evil and she

continues to say, "persuasion therefor becomes the ability to persuade an individual in a positive or

negative direction" (241). Is it possible, then, for a message to be rhetorically neutral? Street art that

uses neutrality can be powerful in creating a dialogue that offers a new perspective on perspectives.

This analysis will focus on how one street artist took the challenge of creating a display on

the West Bank Wall that divides Palestine and Israel. This display is rhetorically interesting in the

purposeful choices of location, content, context, and the medium used that evidently elicits a

retrospective response from viewers. The placement and location provide a canvas, and the people

that inhabit these places provide the context. The use of the wall is meaningful in the context of the situation and location that allows the photographs to elicit thought and reflection. Placing images in politically tense locations makes a provocative statement. The placement and arrangement of the portraits shows the creators' ambition to create public art that would not be ignored.

Studying street art as a rhetorical display allows introspection on the components of persuasion. There is no question that there is a connection between street art and persuasive rhetoric, but how do the persuasive arguments work within this medium? In this light, this paper will focus on the rhetorical function of how street artist utilize images as means for political and social change. This analysis will specifically place importance on the question of, how do street artists use images as an instrument for social or political advocacy?

 "What's the difference between an Israeli and Palestinian?" This is the question posed by anonymous French street artist, JR. To tackle this question, he ventured with his friend Marco to start a campaign called "Face2Face", a deviation from a bigger project, "28 Millimeter". While the simple answers to the question include, "Israelis are Jewish. Palestinians are Arab", JR counters these answers by suggesting that these two groups of people are more alike than either group thought.

In 2005, the concept was born. Listening to the noise of the Middle East conflict, JR and Marco ventured there, and asked themselves "are they [the Palestinians and Israelis] so different"? They began talking to people, and found that they were quite different than how they were framed in media. Did they, the Israeli's and Palestinians see that too? Even though they are neighbors, Palestinians and Israelis typically only see each other through the lens of the media.

The Face2Face campaign consists of taking portraits of Palestinians and Israelis doing the same job, posting them face to face, in huge formats, in unavoidable places, on both Israeli and Palestinian sides (JR-art). When the project finally came together in 2007, images of taxi drivers,

lawyers, cooks, actors, etc. erected in 8 cities on both sides of the politically charged wall, thus becoming one of "the biggest illegal exhibitions ever" (Ted, 2011). At some point, someone had asked what was going on. Why were photos of Palestinians being pasted in Israel? JR explained that it was just part of the project, and proceeded to ask her, "So can you tell who is who?" She had no clue. The use of up-close portraiture calls for trust between the creator and participants. JR explains that using a 28mm lens means getting within 10 inches of the subjects face to the point you can feel them breathing (TED, 2011). The closeness allows for "up close and personal" perspective. The participants' humanity become the focus, while the wall and distinctiveness between the two groups of people becomes blurred. With no use of text, the display relies heavily on the audience's introspection. This proves to be a challenge for the creator, in that in order for the display to be impactful in the way it is intended the creator must use location, context, and content carefully and decisively.

The goal of their exhibition was to show that all those inhabitants of the two places are not so different; when you look at the portraits it becomes difficult to differentiate between a Palestinian and an Israeli. "It's obvious, but they don't see that. We must put them face-to-face. They will realize", says JR (Jr website). Putting these people face to face performs as a metaphorical confrontation with the reality that they are more alike than they think. His work highlights "simple juxtapositions that everyday people produce, while at the same time counteracting the reductive messages propagated by mainstream advertising and media" (Lewisohn 123). JR's objective was to not only post up images in places and spaces where they are likely not accepted nor expected, but also to encourage people to observe and wonder what is going on. He wanted these communities to contemplate and question the artwork's message. In this endeavor, location and context played a crucial role. The use of the politically charged space, the statement became a protest against the very wall that the artists appropriated as a canvas. My hypothesis is that the use and placement of

portraits in street art can have power in political activism, but that it won't elucidate a change in the world. It is not going to cease the conflict that arguably made the wall necessary, but rather art can be a catalyst for changing perspectives and ignite dialogue.

An integral principle of street art is that it is temporary. Consequently, it is inevitable to be taken down either naturally or by force. It has been about a decade since this display was created, and during this time some of the images have since been ripped down. The use of social media, blogs, and websites of the artist keep the display alive for people around the world to see. For this analysis, the visual display with by examined through the photographs supplied by the artist on his official website. The conservation of street art through media is important for art activism when intended for the world. The only way that any one else is able to see this work is because the photographs and the context in which they are a part were captured and displayed on the web. It is likely that most people will see this display for the first time through the frame of their computer screen. This is drastically different from the framing of the Separation Wall, the canvas used for the display for the inhabitants in the surrounding areas to experience. At the time of the display, the intended audiences were those that lived in the surrounding areas, Palestinians and Israelis, and presumably tourists. The very nature of street art invites the public to see and experience the display. This art is not meant to inside closed walls, it's meant to be shared with everyone.

Kenneth Burke (1941) provides a framework that elucidates how this visual display operates rhetorically. The four master tropes provide answers to how the display elicits reflection from viewers and will contribute to the understanding of how street art acts rhetorically to impose a change of perspective. The context of the location and the people that inhabit the location is vital to the purpose of the message that is being conveyed. The tropes allow for individuals to examine possibilities for audience response (Moss, 241). Tropes are essentially instruments of thought implying that they are inescapable, operating consciously or unconsciously. Tropes are embedded in

our daily language and serve as means to make judgments as "to how things are and how they may be". There's a particular way that the creator wants the audience to view the art. It is implied, then, that the tropes are inherent to persuasion. Moss (2007), explains that "the without master tropes, the potential to persuade audiences decreases. In this way, tropes help to guide an audience perception an action (Moss, 241).

Additionally, Burke (1941) suggests that the four tropes overlap each other in that when identifying a trope in a display, it becomes harder to ignore or dismiss the others (423). It poses a decision to either focus on one trope and discuss how is doesn't account for certain feature or elements of a display, or to integrate the tropes in a way to understand how they can work together to form a message (Moss, 2007). As a rhetorical study, this is a paper that will focus on a tropic understanding of how street artists elicit thought through their created images.

The four master tropes consist of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (Burke, 411). These serve as organizing principles that aid in grasping the concept of specific persuasive arguments within a street art display, like that of cartoons (Moss, 2007). Burke (1941) describes metaphor as a rhetorical device that takes the form of perspective, and is "a device for seeing something in terms of some thing else" (421). It is a way of seeing one thing in the perspective of another separate thing. Often metaphors are seen as analogies in that they are "saying or suggesting that something is like or similar to something else" (Berger, 2008). Berger further states that metaphors are inescapable, they our pervasive in everyday life (62). Metonymy fulfills the function of reduction, in that a word or image that symbolizes an idea becomes a stand in for that idea (Burke, 424). Berger (2008) explains simply that metonymy is the technical term for associations (62). Synecdoche, as described by Burke (1941), is "part for the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified…cause for effect, effect for cause, genus for species, species for genus, etc. All such conversions imply an integral relationship, a relationship of

convertibility, between the two terms" (426-427). Synecdoche formulates an argument as a relationship between the part and a whole (Moss, 242). It is a part that represents the essence.

The use of synecdoche is observed in Farrell's essay "The Horrible Spectacle" (*Rhetorics of Display*, 2006). He explains that synecdoche is "a visual trope that represents a wider landscape of social reality" (86). Synecdoche relationships are necessary to represent experiences that are indescribable. Here, he explains that the starving mother and child are representative of the famine, but that written text and imagery alone cannot reveal the full portion of suffering (70-71). Farrell argues that written description paired with visual images work together efficiently as the description adds interpretation that cannot be visually depicted (76). The use of synecdoche in street art may pose an opposition to this view. While the use of no text poses a challenge for the creator to convey their message, it allows room for purposeful reflection.

With the tool of synecdoche, a large concept or idea can be effectively communicated through a single image (Moss, 243). Metonymy and synecdoche are similar in the respect that they both assert a message through a single frame. Burke states that the primary difference between the metonymy and synecdoche is that "representation (synecdoche) stresses a *relationship* or *connectedness* between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road, extends in either direction … but reduction follows along this road in only one direction" (429). Synecdoche then suggests that the part and the whole are interchangeable, but then metonymy only manifests a one-way substitution. Metonymy is the idea that the two things being talked about are not a part of a whole or a whole of a part, but rather they share an association with each other. Metonymy is a representation, like synecdoche, but it always involves a reduction. Synecdoche on the other hand allows for a part to represent the whole and the whole to represent the part.

Lastly, irony functions in terms of a double meaning, a perspective on perspectives. Burke indicates that irony could be substituted for the term, *dialectic* (421). The dialectic calls for two opposing perspectives conjoined to provide a bigger picture. Burke explains,

Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development, which uses all the terms. Hence, from the standpoint of this total form (this "perspective of perspectives"), none of the participating "sub-perspectives" can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong (432).

One must be able to experience the drama of the two contributing elements to experience the whole. White (1973), furthers this discussion by stating that "irony deploys a *language of negativity* that discloses a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language" (35). This idea of negativity can be observed in the critical nature of street art.

Further, it becomes apparent that when identifying the tropes in a visual display, the identifier can "either remain satisfied with what appears to be a final analytical act or proceed to 'integrate' these elements…"(White, 1973). Present in JR's display, is the shift from synecdoche to irony. If irony were to be disregarded, the persuasive element of the whole would be lost. Conversely, if synecdoche is avoided in analysis, the street art loses much of its rhetorical utility. While the tropes are intertwined and flow into each other, it is help to distinguish which tropes makes this display impactful. What is it that makes it work as a social or political message? I argue that whether JR is aware of it or not, his use of synecdoche and irony are helpful in understanding how images provokes thought and reflection as means for social and political advocacy.

Synecdoche can be observed in the visual images themselves. With the intent of the artists not to be mocking the people in the photos for their occupation or responsibility of any conflict, he poses them in a silly, sometimes grotesque, ways to have them represent the essence of humanity. It is clear that the artist wanted to depict "sameness" between Israel's and Palestinians. JR reports in his TEDtalk (2011) that he specifically asked those that volunteered to be a part of the project to "make a face of commitment, not a smile" because a smile "doesn't really tell about who you are and what you feel". What shocked him was that they all accepted to be pasted next to the one other on both sides of the wall. In putting the photos next to each other, he creates a dialogue between two opposing sides. This suggests, that while he wants the strangers to see themselves in each other, his intention is not to take away their self-identity.

When making them look silly, rather than it being a mockery of these people, it suggests that all humans have the ability to exude emotions. Simultaneously, this suggests that it is the humanness that allows for the universality of displaying and understanding faces as playful. No matter where you are from or what you believe in, underneath it all everyone possess a "humanness" quality. The medium of photography doesn't allow for purely imaginative caricatures, but rather shows them to exist. These people actively chose to make these faces. In opposition to Farrell, Hill (*Defining Visual Rhetoric)* suggests that a photograph carries "more epistemic force than a verbal depiction" because the photograph is evidence that the people in the photographs exist (29). Placing the photos besides each other, of two people typically of the same profession seems to eliminate the tension. Synecdoche is used in a way where when the photos are seen even just within the frame of a computer screen, the point comes across that these silly portraits placed besides each other display the essence of humanity, the part being the silly photos and the whole being humanness.

It is important to acknowledge that the portraits alone are just one aspect of this project. The portrait by itself is not complete. "It is the contact with everyday public space, a contact with a specific site that provides the context for the work to exist and gives it meaning" (Fredman, p.19). The contextual information that puts it all together is the location of this display, that being at the very site of conflict. The Separation Wall between the two territories is symbolically a conflict zone and politically charged. It is when seeing the portraits next to each other on this wall that irony imbues thought, it displays a perspective of perspectives. In this case, the irony is situational, highly dependent on the context. The irony is not so much depicted in the photographs themselves, but rather in the situation in which the images are placed.

There are three perspectives to consider when talking about the West Bank barrier. For its Israeli proponents, it is the "security" or "anti-terrorist" fence. For its Israeli opponents and for Palestinians, it is the "apartheid," "segregation," "separation," "colonization," "demographic" or "annexation" wall (Leuenberger, 2011). Many Palestinian graffiti artists tend to draw attention to the daily struggles of Palestinians living in the shadow of the Wall. "For them the ugliness and enormity of the wall speaks for itself" (Leuenberger, 2011). On the other hand, international graffiti artists, use the wall to "show solidarity, to raise awareness about human suffering and to bridge cultures" (Leuenberger, 2011). Because they are more removed from the struggles that the West Bank Wall imposes, Western artists express a more cerebral interest in the Wall as a metaphor and symbol of disconnection and oppressive politics. JR is amongst these international artists, in that his project is a means to show the similar "humanness" between Israelis and Palestinians while also depicting them in a light that debunks portrayals in media. JR is putting the control with the subjects for themselves to determine how they want to be shown to the world. Given the context of how the wall is symbolized for both groups of people and the placement of silly faces on the wall, it can be argued that these two elements in juxtaposition create situational irony. The silliness of the portraits

summarizes the essence humanity, where the nature to express humor is part of what it means to be human. It's important to note, then, that while the images alone provoke thought, the necessity for this display is evoked in the ironic placement.

Aiming to convey the sameness of the "Other" has been one of the main objectives of Face2Face in order to create a connection among the subjects photographed. As such, the portraits convey an essence of humanness that cross any country of origin and is established by emotions. In their discussion of street art in public space, Christenson and Thor (2017) discuss that street art and graffiti, as communication and aesthetics, occupy a key role in the geography of urban social relations. "A 'theory of context' such as geopolitics further helps to frame urban communication and questions of cosmopolitan openness during given periods which might be marked by political cooperation and economic boom, or, conversely, by national or transborder tensions" (590). This theory of context applies to JR's display on the tension-ridden border of Palestine and Israel.

One set of portraits on the wall is that of "The Holy Triptych", which evoke biblical representations in art, and adds a message of religiosity. Without the caption, it's clear through their dress that they are signifying their religious identity as "a Jew," "a Muslim" and "a Christian". JR explains on his website that this is an area that is important to all three religions. They bring forth a message of silliness across religion underplaying the expectation that orthodox people are serious. The juxtaposition of silliness and seriousness is ironic in itself, but the bigger message doesn't lie within the image alone. The importance of the photo is not that it makes fun of these religious leaders, but that the image alone displays synecdoche in that distorted silly faces exuberate the essence of humanity. This idea comes across through the framing of simple image search on the Internet. Placing the portraits in politically charged places, perhaps works most effectively in bringing out the content of a conflict between two groups.

"The Holy Triptych" (Figure 1) is perhaps the most iconic of JR's Face2Face project, but it's just one example amongst a multitude of paired photos the exude themes of humanness and sameness that are pasted on the wall. JR specifically asked them to not just smile, because it doesn't show who they are, how they feel. Using different facial expressions to portray the self allows the performers to not lose their identity while at the same time being able to relate to the "Other". The faces that are made all differ from each other, but the common absurdity in the facial expressions allow for unity. Within conflict there can be humor, and as all belonging to the bigger essence of humanity, these two things can be experienced.

Figure 1: 28 Millimeters, Face2Face displayed on Jr-art.net
Holy Triptych, 2006

Figure 2: 28 Millimeters, Face2Face
Separation Wall, Palestinian Side In Bethlehem, March 2007

When the portraits are seen with the context of the Separation Wall (Figure 2), the images become more impactful. Appropriating the Wall as a canvas resonates with a simple message that there should be no wall separating the people portrayed. Using the Wall as a canvas to convey this message raises a paradox. The Separation Wall is used as an object for the benefit of the display, while the photographs that appropriate it as an object of art protest against the very existence and political purposes of that Wall. To some inhabitants, the physical wall might be necessary, but the metaphorical wall that fuels the interpersonal conflict is one that hopefully can be broken down. Blown-up to massive formats, the portraits nearly cover the entire Wall in height. Against the grey concrete wall, the portraits stand out, framed by the barbed wire above their heads. In this particular place, the portraits gained meaning as activist art.

Not having a stance towards either side of the conflict allows the situational irony to come across as a neutral perspective that proves to be beneficial for the campaign. Linda Hutcheon (1992) explains the notion of irony functions as a distancing mechanism, and continues to suggest that "indifference on the part of the ironist and with irritation at being so treated on the part of the target. But distancing reserve can also be interpreted as a sign of a new perspective from which things can be shown and seen differently" (223). A positive way of reading the distancing function of irony would be to see it as "a refusal of the tyranny of explicit judgments at a time when such judgments might not be appropriate or desirable"(223). If we consider these ideas about irony, it makes sense as to why it was perhaps necessary for JR to stay neutral in such a tension filled location. By utilizing situational irony, JR is able to obtain a neutral stance to broaden the view of perspective while simultaneously refusing to elicit judgments in a place that would have been inappropriate with what his intentions were. In other words, he introduces change "by alienating art from the political and the social, necessarily clinging to its very autonomy in order to produce highly involved community-oriented installations" (Ferdman, 13).

This ironic perspective on perspectives concludes "no one perspective is precisely right or precisely wrong. Rather, through a process of dialectical mortification, all the competing perspectives are absorbed into the body of a larger development" (Kenneth Burk in The Classroom, 444). By all of the perspectives being absorbed into the body of a larger development, the result is a neutral perspective. This neutrality in a place that is a center for conflict provokes thought, in that the very idea of conflict implies that there are competing perspectives occurring. Sometimes where there is conflict there's no need to make a stance. While this display arguably down plays the conflict, it asserts a hopeful perspective. Being pasted on a site of tension and conflict leaves the neutrality of the display is unexpected. In a neutralized context, the public is able to stop in front of

the portraits, contemplate, and talk together about what it is all about. When a strong stance is taken, there is not much room left to reflect.

It is important to note that while JR is neutral in his taking sides, the situational irony creates a dialogue. In other words, it is the performance of these mediated images that defines the work. Brasset (2009) offers the idea that, "The indeterminacy of moral situations is more than an intellectual curiosity, it can open our discourse to the human suffering, that we are all connected to, and, in a sense, partake in. It is on this basis that irony can retain the (difficult) dual role of being both a critical yet deeply hopeful and imaginative contribution to the politics of global ethics" (23-24). JR's use of irony and synecdoche also allows for a re-framing on a local level (becomes global once spread across the web), seeing each other as possessing qualities of humanity. Thor and Christenson expand on this idea stating, "As networked art forms and expressivity, graffiti and street art, generate certain senses of locality, and their ephemerality and changing nature temporalize the city as a transient space of global mediations" (592)

Face2Face was a global art project with local ramifications, responding to local problems, mounted by local people. In this way, the work belongs to those who created it and to those who saw it (Ferdman, 22). While not explicit, the irony in this display forces the audience to be self-reflective in how they view and think of others in times of conflict and tension. By recognizing the tropes in JR's work, viewers can reflect on their perspectives of others in way that can hopefully be transformative for society in the future.

This analysis was purposeful in answering the question of how do street artist use images as instruments for political and social advocacy. Through the breakdown of the tropes and identifying them in the display created by JR, it is reasonable to suggest that tropes, in this case synecdoche and irony, are used unconsciously or consciously as a means to evoke reflection. With the use of tropes, street artists use images to elicit a change of perspectives. The indication of tropes in street art

indicates that they are utilized to help street art displays function rhetorically. The observation of irony in this display highlights an importance of incorporating context of social and political issues into these kinds of displays. The nature of street art often suggests a perspective on social or political issues that calls for perspective. With this in mind, it is probable then that other street artwork alike also uses a combination of synecdoche and irony as their important means of persuasion.

Evocative and alluring as these portraits may be, they do not relate to any narratives of victimhood nor do they refer to any tension. It is only once they are seen amongst the canvas of the wall do they evoke a dialogue of the conflict occurring between Palestinians and Israelis. While this could be a critical view of the artwork, this perhaps is a central point to how this piece works rhetorically. The display shifts the focus from trauma, dislocation and victimhood to that of comedic relief in our "humanness". It is JR's work in places of conflict that has led to a direct experience of locations and situations, and has enabled the viewer to "cut through the mediated preconceptions generated by the media" (Lewisohn, 123). His street art exemplifies the ways in which the art form can be used to "expose media stereotypes while at the same time using the media attention the work provides to spread [an] alternative message" (123). The identification of tropes within a street art display indicates that they are in use, sometimes without thought, within the creation and exhibition of visual imagery and not just in verbal and written text. The initial lack of description of these photos allowed passer-bys to contemplate the meaning as a means to initiate reflection of one's self.

Can art change the world? Not likely. JR eloquently states that "Art is not suppose to change the world, but it can change perception. It can change the way we see the world…the fact that art cannot change things means that it's neutral for exchanges and discussions" (TED, 2011). There is no doubt that it can be powerful in provoking reflection as a means to suggest a new way to look at

each other. This reflection is important when trying to elucidate a change in perspective. As JR

himself notes: "To change the way you see things is already to change things themselves (Ferdman,

25).

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