

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

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There was a strange silence in Havana. Fabulous old Pontiacs growled, Spanish voices chattered, and of course Buena Vista Social Club music was everywhere. But the semiotic silence was slightly disconcerting. No Mini Adventures climbing up tower blocks; no H&M women smiling seductively out of bus shelters. Nor was the iconic sign of Fidel in fatigues much to be seen. Che Guevara's face was the closest you got to a marketing operation for the revolution. When the occasional revolutionary slogan shouted across rooftops, I found myself longing for more. I realised that I need the cacophony of signs in the city.



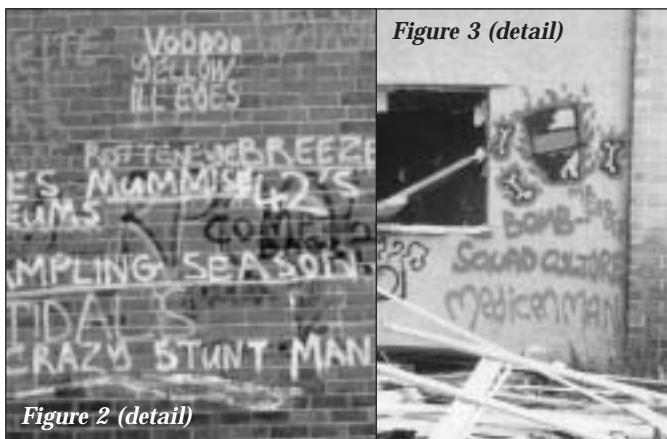
Figure 4



Figure 1

The walls are exceedingly noisy in Chapeltown, the multi-ethnic, inner area of Leeds. Thanks to Saussure, Pierce, Barthes and company, we think we know what to do with signs. We search out their referents, work out their meaning, and investigate the myths they circulate. Despite Baudrillard's insistence that signifiers now float without meaning, most of us force some sense into the signs we encounter. Otherwise, we feel a little mad.

Thus some of the writing on the wall in Chapeltown makes me feel extremely uncomfortable. What do I make of **PSYCHIC LAWLESSNESS TAMPERING**? As good semiologists we treat signs in relation to each other. Near to **PSYCHIC** we see **PLANET** (in blue paint) with **NONE SENSICALLY SICK** Figure 1 (in black) underneath. This makes sense to me - so much of what I see all over the world is sick, and without sense. It's possible that the author is part of the anti-capitalist movement. Already, to write about these words on the walls, I seem to need to configure its author. Since these three words could be a line from a 1950s Beat poet, and since I don't want to leap to an interpretation of the meaning of this sign based on assumptions about his or her mental health, I'm going to refer to the writer as The Poet. An almost arbitrary choice, but not quite.



These short, punchy slogans face on to Chapeltown Road, the main road through the area, so that people in buses and cars will read them. A few hundred yards away, a whole gable end was carefully painted with phrases which seem related in form to **PSYCHIC** and **PLANET**. There are possibly 22 slogans here, some slightly overlapping. Figure 2 (September 1997) shows a section of this wall. It includes **VOODOO YELLOW ILL EYES**, **ROTTEN EYE** and **CRAZY STUNT MAN**. Nearby it says **BRAIN ENSLAVEMENT**, **TRAMPLING SEASON** and **ZOMBIE MAKERS IN PROGRESS** and **DON'T BELEIVE IN HEADACHES**. These are interspersed with lots of other words in yellow and white and green paint on this wall. I photographed this wall some years ago, but new ones appear on other walls up to the present day.

I initially read these slogans as being the work of a single writer, but Philippa Boyce, the graphic designer who scanned the photos for me, pointed out that the shape of the Y in Figure 1 is quite different from the shape of the Y in Figure 2. She is certain that there are two different people at work here. Can we make sense of these works by imputing madness to their authors? **ILL EYES** and **CRAZY STUNT MAN** might imply that this is the author's definition of himself. But 'crazy' was a term of approbation in 50's jazz circles and it has positive connotations today when young people say they've just had a 'mad night', meaning a wonderfully enjoyable night. Graffiti can be seen in which "Crazy" and the Bomb Squad seem to be referred to with approval (Figure 3, May 1998). If 'crazy' does not imply a negative self-definition as mad, perhaps the references to Voodoo will allow readers to impute either paganism or insanity? Western ethnocentricity certainly facilitates such a move. But Julio, our humourous, Catholic, anti-communist host in Cuba was highly sympathetic to Santeria (a term used by adherents to what the West calls Voodoo). When we strip away Hollywood Zombie mythology it's easy to see Santeria as meaningful and valuable.

A careful, rational reading of these words as the work of poets who stretch the usual boundaries of normality doesn't provide the full story, at least for me. Unease runs through my body when a new slogan appears. My discomfort is visceral. I have a dread-full sense that this



person - initially I wrote 'man', but why do I make up the author's gender? - is in mental turmoil. This sensation, this fluttering in my stomach and chest, reminds me that I am projecting my own disturbances into these signs. I am imagining a black man suffering in the 'psyche wing' of St James' Hospital, the place that my friend Elton had categorically refused to enter the night he killed himself by setting fire to his flat, a few hundred yards from these signs. I just hope these graffiti artists can keep on working.

Let me see if I can calm myself by thinking about other writings on other walls. Figure 4 (August 2001) puts me on the more comfortable ground of radical political art. The Bankside Mural Project is the work of Peter Turner, aka Peanut the Clown, who scrapes bits of funding together to paint the wall at the back of his house. An early work was a huge mural celebrating the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. Figure 4 is in narrative form: the story line is composed in conjunction with people who talk to him while he's working. He insists that the message is positive and uplifting; he places an embargo on personal comments and "isms".

T Shirts are mobile signs which sometimes inspire resistance. 'This machine kills apathy' said a young woman's chest at the demonstration against George Bush's visit to London in November 2003. Chapeltown's Palace Youth Project produced a T Shirt for the 1989 Carnival in support of the Anti Hard Drugs

Campaign. White and black people had these African Pledges running down their backs: “We will remember the humanity, glory and sufferings of our ancestors . . . We will strive to bring new values and new life to our people . . . We will be loving, sharing and creative . . . We will be free and self-determining”. Our struggle against hard drugs had been lost by 1995, but there was another T shirt at the Carnival reminding people, without any Foucauldian irony, to regulate their selves (Figure 5, August 1995).

You don't need to be a Situationist to know that the spectacle of signs is, very often, just a symptom of the relentless, all-embracing march of commodification. Remember how bling-bling Naf-Naf was only ten years ago? Its street wear was, it proudly announced, “On the point of revolutionizing the world” (Figure 6, August 1992). Did you know that, when you drink a bottle of Red Stripe beer you are improving the world's ecology? (Figure 7, September 1995). But whereas the purveyors of this admittedly excellent beverage also argue that there is “No redemption in cosmology”, the huge gable end you see as you enter Chapeltown from the city centre nearly always invites you to celebrate the world of the Spirit, as blessings for Eid and Divali greet us at the appropriate times of the year.

Religious signs are no longer static. Flash cars (Figure 8, November 1997) and naff cars proclaim their devotion to Allah, while a Land Rover champions the love of Jah (Figure 9, August 1996). A quote from a speech by Haile Selassie, immortalised by Bob Marley, is carefully inscribed on the side of this vehicle. Here are some of the verses from War (Rastaman Vibration):

*Until the philosophy which hold one race
Superior and another inferior
Is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned
Everywhere is war, me say war*

*That until there are no longer first class
And second class citizens of any nation
Until the colour of a man's skin
Is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes
Me say war*

*That until the basic human rights are equally
Guaranteed to all, without regard to race
Dis a war*



Figure 9



Figure 5



Figure 7

This vehicle's package of words and images in praise of Rastafari ('Lord of Lords Conquering Lion of Judah') reminds us that all religions entwine progressive and reactionary politics, and all devote themselves to a remarkably similar God. But religious architecture in Chapeltown and its signs on our walls function, as all sign systems do, in stark relation to one another. We know Rastafari because it isn't Protestantism which isn't Sikhism which isn't Islam. The symbolic machineries of these religions grind louder and louder as each one strives to make sure that its difference from the others is thoroughly embedded in our consciousness and rooted in our practice.

I think the owner of the mobile advertisement for Jah Rastafari is a white man with dreadlocks. Maybe that's why he's carefully painted in Rasta colours on the war-like camouflage background the sentence beginning 'Until the colour of a man's skin'. I'm pretty sure that he, like people of peace all over the world, will subscribe to the whole package: there will be a war until all the people of the globe have equal rights and justice.

That radical message can be found, if you look hard, among the riot of signs in Chapeltown, but so too can sectarianism, craziness and commercialism. Sometimes the signs seem too slippery for sense, but usually they tell us the simple stories that humanity constructs for itself as it goes about the daily business of buying and selling, loving and loathing, and dreaming of paradise.

Max Farrar's book about Chapeltown, The Struggle for "Community" in a British Multi-Ethnic Inner City Area – Paradise in the Making (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), is in stock in good libraries.

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Figure 9



Figure 8