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"THE MESSAGE OF PROTEST": ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF PUNK / HARDCORE SUBCULTURE IDEAS

I will discuss the main ideological trends within punk / hardcore subculture and discuss how these ideas are reflected in the art of *stencils*. In this paper I define stencils as pictures on city buildings or the walls of abandoned houses, etc. made using a certain technique which distinguishes them from graffiti.

The **main question** of the paper is: how does the art of stencils express the ideas of Lithuanian punk / hardcore subculture?

Research objectives:
- To present the **attitude** towards stencils by members of the punk / hardcore subculture,
- To identify the **main themes** of stencils within the punk / hardcore scene,
- To analyse the **values** expressed by the visual stencils of the punk / hardcore subculture.

Data

The research is based on ethnological fieldwork carried out in Lithuania from July 2005 until 2007[1]: participant observation, interviews, photographs, audio and video data collected relating to punk / hardcore subculture. People chosen for interview were deeply involved in subculture activities: publishing fan-zines, organising concerts, festivals, etc. Later on, a 'snowball method' to find other interviewees was used. The interviewees comprised of five people from Kaunas and fifteen from Vilnius city (twenty interviews in total), by gender – fifteen males and five females, age – from 17 to 30. Additionally, more than one hundred and fifty different stencils in Panevėžys, Kaunas and Vilnius were photographed.

Methodological and theoretical framework

The research methodology for this study is based on contemporary ethnography and qualitative research. The research has been based on the works of Norman K. Denzin's *Interpretative Ethnography. Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (1997)[2] and Pertti Alasuutari's *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies* (1995)[3]. On subculture issues I was guided by theoretical contemplation of Johan Fornäs (1995)[4].

Norman Denzin stresses natural changes in ethnographic research and speaks about various forms of interpretative writing: a **reflexive ethnographer**. Denzin speaks about the transformation of ethnography in the twenty-first century: *"the ethnographic project has changed because the world that ethnography confronts has changed…The new global cultural economy is shaped by new technologies…, and media changes that flow across old national borders"*[5]. These changes have influenced the role of the ethnographer, who isn't the one able to produce an *"objective, non contested account to the other's experiences"*[6] any longer.

While speaking about the analysis of cultural difference, Alasuutari[7] suggeststhat *"the objective is to study what distinctions the texts themselves contain, how, for example, interviewees conceive of and construct a phenomenon in their speech"*[8]: by collecting ethnographic data, the ethnographic researcher collects and tells these *"multiple versions of the truth"*[9]. In this article I stress the interviewees' point of view in relation to punk / hardcore subculture ideas, as they understand them, thus trying to enrich the analysis of visual representations of culture.

A subculture exists until it begins to encompass a particular ideology. Thus we can rely on Fornäs definition of subculture as a lifestyle[10]. Fornäs describes subcultures as *"more or less reflexive formations, which the individuals to a varying degree know that they are involved in…. Some minimal degree of consciousness is necessary, since culture is as symbolic communication and meaning-creation presupposes a certain degree of interpretative effort and purposeful action"*[11]. According to this paradigm, punk / hardcore is a subculture because its members are conscious about their involvement, they articulate a punk / hardcore ideology, and define themselves as being "in" the subculture. According to the scientific suggestions above, I have tried to represent the punk / hardcore subculture from the viewpoint of its members, representatives of the punk / hardcore scene as much as possible.

Visual expression: the history of stencils
and their role in punk / hardcore subculture

The visual expression of punk / hardcore subculture consists of the production of comics, fan-zines, web pages, original garments[12], and different styles of street art, including stencils.

Stencils are not a modern invention. Originally they were used in fascist Italy for fascist propaganda, during World War II, and in the 1970s, as a medium to express protest during conflicts in Mexico, the Basque region, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, and South Africa[13]. In the 1980s artists started to use stencils as an extension of art into public places.

Table 1. The contents of this table are based on texts by Manco (2004).

Time	Place	Purpose
World War II (1941–1945)	Fascist Italy	Propaganda
Post-War period	Germany	Inform and reunite refugees
1970s	Mexico, Basque region (Spain), Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, South Africa	Protest
Early 1980s	France	Artistic expression
1980s – present	Europe, USA, Scandinavia – widespread phenomenon	Artistic expression (street art) and spreading the message of protest (by punk / hardcore activists)

"All this fashion [of making stencils, auth.] *stems from approximately 1968, when there was a popular phrase: "Blank Walls – Blank Minds". That means, blank walls – empty minds."* [Male, 20. VDU MKR C 50].

Visual expression within punk subculture was researched by Robert Garnett[15] (2003) who noticed that "we can no longer, however, see art as being detached from the low, the popular and the everyday"[16], i.e. aesthetics penetrates subculture activities as well.

The Lithuanian context of the punk / hardcore scene and stencils

Lithuanian youth culture is notable for its historical, political and cultural situation. During the Soviet period any democratic thought was forbidden:, it was not permitted to dress or behave in an extraordinary way, and every-

one had to be "equal" in a rather direct way. The first punks in the mid 1980s were the ones to oppose the communist system, and were focused mainly on challenging the politics of the USSR[17].

The ideas of anti-commercialism were absent among Lithuanian punks in Soviet times because there was no relevant cultural context. This context emerged only after the restoration of independence, economical reforms, and the flood of information from abroad. Because of close contacts with western youth, ideas of anti-globalism, human rights, vegetarianism, 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) culture, etc, appeared .in the punk / hardcore scene.

There is no history of the art of stencils in Lithuania. Some interviewees have mentioned that stencils were developed from the art of graffiti, but stencils could also be an independent branch of art. The practice of stencilling in Lithuania began around 2000 and has lasted to the present.

Both in punk / hardcore subculture and in the art of stencils, one of the most important things is "the message" which reflects "the idea". Visually, stencils can be likened to street signs, which serve to inform people, and spread ideas.

"This is a way to tell your thoughts to people that you don't know. Sometimes it is just a nice picture, but in general it has a strong idea." [Male, 30. VDU MKR C 50].

"Art is the kind of thing that you can speak a lot about, show something, create..., but the element that associates stencils with DIY culture is that something political or philosophical can often be found [in the picture] in order to make people stop and think about some problem." [Male, 19. VDU MKR C 50].

"You make stencils or stickers because you want to say something [i.h.[18]]. ... The stencils are like a message, a message for everyone." [Female, 23. VDU MKR C 50].

Stencils visually speak to the by passer through their image and/or slogan. Stencils reflect various social problems, political orientations, or the taste of the artist. Various problems are represented by the personification of a particular problem, and/or it can be enriched with slogans. Slogans usually inject a political meaning to the picture, and serve to reflect political or current events.

Punk / hardcore activities and protest

Stencils as a medium to express protest started in the 1970s (see above) where stencils served as alternative, paper-saving posters for spreading ideas[19]. In the punk / hardcore subculture stencils began in early 1980s as form of protest with the first initiatives by the British punk rock group *Crass*. Their stencils have developed into a form of artistic activity that served to express the social and political dissatisfaction of the so-called "second wave" of non-commercial punks[20].

There are many stencil themes, or messages about different aspects of life and politics. These stencils reflect various social, educational, political, national and international problems, express personal and aesthetic values. For this article I have chosen the stencils that express **protest**. I have divided my analysis of the protest messages of stencils into three parts: protest against the System, political protest and protest against a conformist lifestyle; but I must note that all of these themes are closely ideologically interrelated and that there are also other issues presented through protest messages.

Protest against "the System"

"[Anarchy] is the principle of not ruling and not being ruled." [Male, 29. VDU MKR C 50].

The political messages within the punk / hardcore scene reflect attitudes towards political actions in both local and global contexts. Stencils, referring to *"the System"* in general, from a global point of view, are usually accompanied by slogans like *"Fuck the police"*; *"An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind"*; *"The best thing is to go away"*; *"The names have been changed to protect the guilty"*; *"Švietimas supuvo"*(*"Education has rotted"*); and *"Peace!"*. These stencils criticise "the System" and its negative consequences: the weaker aspects of the systems of education and security (police), the hypocrisy of politics and other influential people. "The System" is generally criticised because of its pressure: any model of hierarchical power produces a compulsion for the consumers of "the System" – citizens (for example, everyone has to pay taxes despite their wishes).

Two types of stencil expressing protest exist: 1) stencils which reflect international, current global issues of "the System", and 2) stencils that reflect
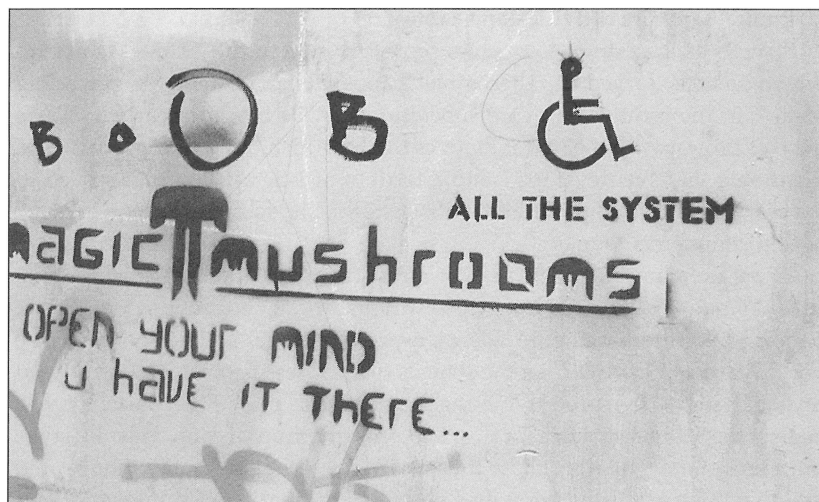
Fig. 1. Stencil *All the System*. Vilnius, 2006.
1. att. Trafaretu māksla *Visa sistēma*. Viļņa, 2006. R. Šatūnienes foto.

Lithuanian politics. The slogans of stencils are either in English or in Lithuanian accordingly.

A picture of a disabled man in a wheelchair together with the caption *"All the System"* (pic.1) seems to be a metaphor for a system, which suggests that the system functions like a disabled one. The stencil *"All you know is lies"*, and *"The names have been changed in order to protect the guilty"* declare that the things we know about the system are usually not true, some facts are consciously hidden from common citizens. The stencil *"Government"* (pic.2) with an image of a marionette-like, hanged man expresses the relationship of citizens and the government from a general perspective.

Political protest

Stencils express an attitude towards international or national politics. For example, stencils with the slogan *"Rusui ne!"* (*"No to Russian!"*) reflects national current political events. This stencil refers to a well-known politician of Russian origin in Lithuania, who has lost confidence in the eyes of some politicians and society at large because of his political actions.
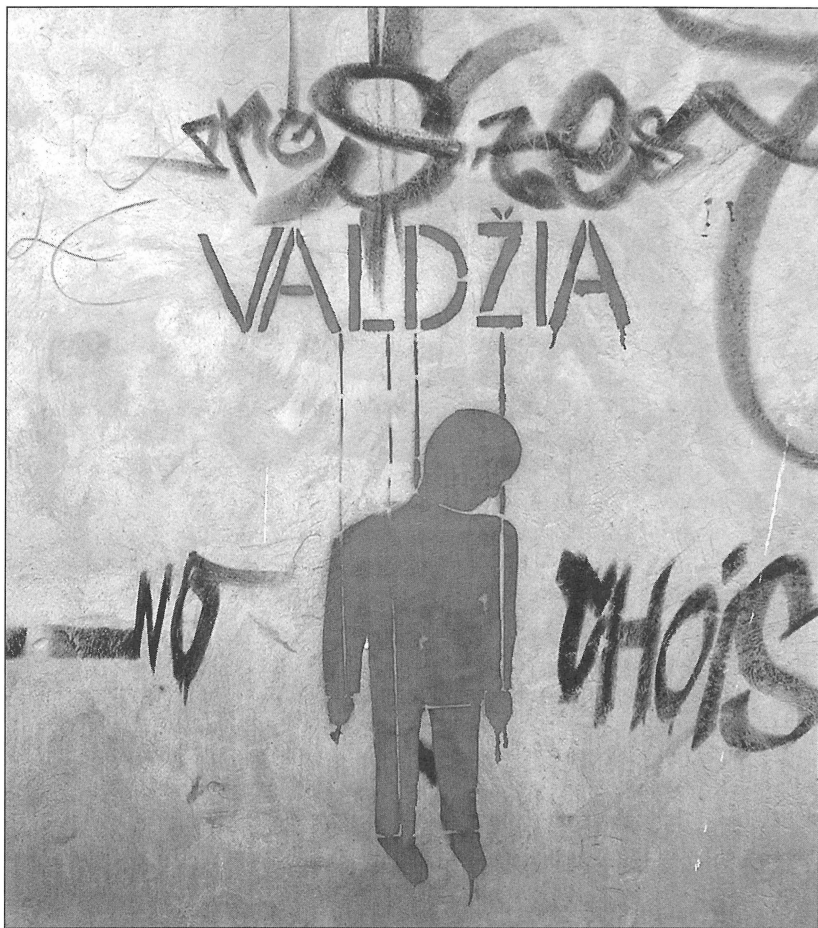
Fig. 2. Stencil *Valdžia* [*Government*]. Kaunas, 2005.
2. att. Trafaretu māksla *Valdība*. Kauņa, 2005. R. Šatūnienes foto.

Internationally, punk / hardcore activists focus on the issues of globalisa-
tion, and raise questions about the unequal arrangement of economic power
in the world. This issue is closely related to the unequal economic conditions
for various countries engaged in the global trade market. Punk / hardcore

Fig. 3. The stencil *"War is Peace"* with an image of George Bush. Panevėžys, 2006.
3. att. Trafaretu māksla *Karš ir miers*, ar Dž.Buša attēlu. Paņeveža, 2006. R. Šatūnienes foto.

activists seek equal human rights on the economic level, a struggle against the exploitation of poorer countries, and are against the social and political hierarchy. Politics in the USA are especially in focus: *"Drop Bush not Bombs"*, *"War is peace"* (pic.3).

> *"*[We] *are not against* (i.h.) *globalization. Let's say, we are against cultural and economic domination* (i.h.). *...For fair trade. ... All this* [anti-globalist, auth.] *movement isn't against* (i.h.), *but is for* (i.h.) *the equal rights of all countries."* [Male, 20. VDU MKR C 50].

Punk / hardcore activists believe that we can always choose, and fight for our rights instead of being passive observers. Ninety percent of interviewees emphasised that the difference between a regular citizen and a punk / hardcore activist in this case is that they go, speak, and fight – do something – not just pontificate.

Fig. 4. Stencil *"Mes čia būryje savų draugų"* [*"Here we are amongst our own "friends""*], with NATO icon. Kaunas, 2005.
4. att. Trafaretu māksla *Mēs starp "draugiem"*, ar NATO logo. Kauņa, 2005. R. Šatūnienes foto.

Protest against international alliances amongst punk / hardcore activists is related to the process of globalisation. They protest against powerful countries that want to dominate politically and economically. This refers to the military NATO alliance, commercial alliances[21], various supermarket chains, and other corporations. In the stencil above (pic.4), a protest against international alliances is expressed through irony, where NATO is named to be a "friend". The stencil is saying that the NATO alliance doesn't provide any real support for member countries, isn't really a true "friend". According to interviewees, joining the international alliance is regarded as danger for smaller countries because of their weaker political and economical power, and larger countries usually find these alliances more useful than smaller ones.

Protest against conformist thought

A conformist, consumerist lifestyle is a consequence of post-industrial society. Baumann (2002)[22] emphasizes that people today are shaped to be "consumers"[23]. In order to shape a consumer, it is necessary to reach her / his mind through commercials, for example. Punk / hardcore subculture supports the idea of **liberation** from the methods of influence. They declare conscious critical thinking as a way to preclude manipulation or turning into a puppet.

Stencils, expressing protest against conformist thinking, speak through an image and / or a slogan. The captions of these stencils include the following: *"TV terror"*; *"Maxima – you can"*; *"Happiness – only 99⁹⁹"* (pic.5), *"Get it for free"*, etc. The idea is that people have the right **to choose** their way of life and not act just as passive consumers. The notion of anti–consumerism contradicts *"the joy of buying"* [Male, 19. VDU MKR C 60]; this feeling is understood as morally low and dull.

> *"Consumerism is alien to us. ... I mean, buying things that you do not need at all, buying things for only one season which you can use for several years. It is wide-spread in our times. This encompasses many things."* [Male, 19. VDU MKR C 50].

Conformist thinking and a "consumerist mind" is seen as a negative quality in the punk / hardcore scene. Its opposite, critical thinking, is often a stimulus to quote the "normal", the "usual", the standard. In punk / hardcore subculture standard phrases usually appear as criticism towards society at large – its values and status.

> *"The common thing ... is their (of punk / hardcore activists, auth.) decision to be **non-conformists** (i.h.). ... When you enter the public, consumer society, you can not find much joy there, but amongst people who share the experience of practising 'do it yourself', you can."* [Male, 19. VDU MKR C 50].

Almost every informant emphasised the importance of being independent of commercial structures as much as possible. Punk / hardcore activists speak about creativity and fantasy, thus the idea of anti-consumerism here might be understood as an effort to maintain the power of humanity, person-

Fig. 5. Stencil *"Laimė tik 99,99"* [*"Happiness – only 99,99"*]. Vilnius, 2006.
5. att. Trafaretu māksla *Laime tikai 99,99*. Viļņa, 2006. R. Šatūnienes foto.

al values, originality and self-consciousness. Stencils critical of society could be treated as a response or as a mirror to society, reflecting subculture youth activities.

Conclusions

The messages of stencils are quite well organised, united, and have well-articulated ideas: political, social and moral values. The following attitudes can be derived from the above discussion of the messages of stencils that were discussed by those members of the punk / hardcore subculture interviewed:

- "the System" is wrong because it is created artificially,
- the negative side of globalisation, and power are seeking economic and political domination,
- international alliances are more useful to economically and politically powerful countries; dependence on any alliance creates more commitments for small countries – "joiners" rather than real security,
- it is better to be a flawed creator rather than a passive consumer.

It might be concluded that images of stencils reflect the main principles of punk / hardcore subculture, i.e. principles of liberty, equality and critical thinking. These principles can be reduced to smaller trends like equal economic rights and anti-globalism, values of non-conformism, self-consciousness, social justice and anti-commercialism.

The Subculture art of stencils reflects protest against political, economical, and personal decisions (conformist thinking) on international and national levels, so stencils are both a global and local phenomenon. Interviewees confirmed these assertions as well.

Stencils are a unique way of expressing punk / hardcore ideas, but they are also a form of creative self-expression. The messages of stencils let us think about the alternative forms of communication of subculture youth, which reflects relevant social, economic and political problems.

References

[1] Interviews guided, transcribed and translated by R. Šatūnienė. University archive number: VDU MKR C 50.
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[4] Fornäs Johan. *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 1995, 312 p.

[5] Denzin, Norman K. *Interpretative Ethnography. Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997, pp. xxii.

[6] Ibid., pp. xxiii.

[7] Alasuutari, Pertti. *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies*. London, New Delhi: Thousand Oaks, 1995, 67–68 p.

[8] Ibid., pp. 67.

[9] Denzin, Norman K. *Interpretative Ethnography. Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997, xv p.

[10] Fornäs Johan. *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 1995, 104 p.

[11] Ibid., pp. 115–116.

[12] Usually without any logos, brands, but with ideological slogans instead.

[13] Manco, Tristan. *Stencil graffiti*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004, 9, 60 p.

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[18] Informants highlight [i.h.].

[19] Manco, Tristan. *Stencil graffiti*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004, 9, 60 p.

[20] Fanzine-book 'Punk rock enciklopedija' = Encyclopedia of punkrock'. Lithuania: P.N. PROPAGANDA, no year specification, 0–4 p.

[21] Such as MTV, etc.

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Reda Šatūniene
"Protesta vēsts": panku / hārdkora
subkultūras ideju mākslinieciskā izpausme

Kopsavilkums

Nekomerciālā panku / hārdkora subkultūra izveidojās no britu pankiem un amerikāņu hārkora 20. gadsimta septiņdesmito un astoņdesmito gadu mijā. Galvenās panku / hārdkora subkultūras iezīmes iemieso pankroka brīvības, kritiskās domas un vienlīdzības principus. Lietuvā daudzas jauniešu subkultūru paražas ienāca pēc valsts neatkarības atjaunošanas 1990. gadā.

Raksts pievērš uzmanību nekomerciālās panku / hārdkora subkultūras idejām un vērtībām, kādas ietvertas lietuviešu trafaretu mākslā. Raksta empīriskais materiāls ir savākts, pateicoties atbilstošai metodoloģijai un kvalitatīvam (etnogrāfiskam) lauka pētījumam, kas veikts 2005.–2007. gadā. Raksta autore secina, ka panku / hārdkora subkultūras idejas – protestēšana pret "Sistēmu", ekonomisko un politisko uzkundzēšanos, patērētājfilozofiju, konformismu un starptautiskajām aliansēm – izpaužas trafaretu mākslā. Tā atklāj globālās un vietējās sociālās, politiskās un ekonomiskās aktualitātes.