

*Essay Question: Students are to write a cultural critique essay on an aspect of culture that is particularly impacting young adults. The paper will follow the method laid out in Vanhoozer's *Everyday Theology*.¹ The critique will exegete the culture and give a biblical perspective on the subject.*

Approx 1750 words; 40%.



Image created by Banksy on the 02/10/2008. Spray painted on the side of a building at the corner of Broadway & Howard Streets Soho, New York, USA.²

Graffiti is an unrestricted and uncensored form of expression that seems to strike a cord with teenagers and young adults, and the graffiti artist Banksy - in particular this image - makes an ideal text for a cultural critique that is particularly impacting young adults³. Firstly, Banksy is probably the most famous graffiti artist in the world to date, and he enjoys most of his popularity from the teenage/young adult age range⁴. His artwork is also being used as tattoo artwork for many young adults.⁵ Secondly, this particular Banksy image is one of his most recent documented pieces and it's message and location makes a good sample of his work.

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (annotated ed.; Baker Academic, 2007).

² Banksy, 'Banksy.co.uk', *Banksy*, Cited 28 Sep 2009, Online: <http://www.banksy.co.uk/>.

³ My intention is to one day do a full theological critique of graffiti and young adults in general, but Banksy will suffice for this paper.

⁴ A quick scan of the many Banksy fan sites on the web indicates that most of the fans are of this early teens to late twenties age cf. 'The Banksy Fan Club', Cited 28 Sep 2009, Online:

<http://www.bebo.com/Banksy-Fan-Club>

⁵ Delana, 'Web Urbanist', *Web Urbanist*, Cited 28 Sep 2009, Online:

<http://weburbanist.com/2008/07/29/banksy-photos-prints-and-tattoos-part-three-in-an-eight-part-banksy-art-series/>.

There is much speculation to the identity of Banksy but despite all conjecture his identity is still unknown.⁶ Banksy's anonymity is vital because graffiti is illegal. However, the true identity is irrelevant because the values of the Banksy persona and what he stands for are publicly displayed through his images and slogans.⁷ According to Banksy 'It takes a lot of guts to stand up anonymously in a western democracy and call for things no-one else believes in – like peace and justice and freedom'.⁸

It's clear that Banksy values graffiti as a form of art which comes with 'no elitism or hype' and believes that 'the wall has always been the best place to publish your work'.⁹ And not only so, Banksy values 'the wall [as] the weapon of choice to hit back' at companies '...that scrawl giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff'.¹⁰ It is this anti-establishment, anti-consumerism, sentiment which is the most prominent feature of Banksy's values and his graffiti is most commonly directed against what he calls 'brandalism'.¹¹ Graffiti is therefore the perfect medium for voicing uncensored criticism of public advertising because it too is in the public visual space, but the most popular feature of Banksy's work is the satire and self-effacing nature in which he makes his criticisms. Banksy is a product of and a reaction against modern western capitalism. The Global Financial Crisis and U.S. Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 which was enacted the

⁶ Claudia Joseph, 'Graffiti artist Banksy unmasked ... as a former public schoolboy from middle-class suburbia', *Mail Online*, Cited 28 Sep 2009, Online: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1034538/Graffiti-artist-Banksy-unmasked---public-schoolboy-middle-class-suburbia.html>; Brian Sewell, 'Banksy Biography', *Art Directory*, Cited 28 Sep 2009, Online: <http://www.briansewell.com/artist/b-artist/banksy/banksy-biography.html>.

⁷ Given the ephemeral nature of graffiti, Banksy has taken to documenting his own works and has provided extra insight to his view of the world in his book Banksy, *Banksy: wall and piece* (Century, 2005). Also, given his massive popularity, there is plenty of his work documented by his fans and preserved on the internet.

⁸ Banksy, *Banksy*, 29.

⁹ Banksy, *Banksy*, 8.

¹⁰ Banksy, *Banksy*, 8.

¹¹ A term coined by Banksy meaning that 'Any advert in a public space that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours'. Banksy, *Banksy*, 196.

day after Banksy painted this image in New York, provides the perfect opportunity for Banksy to voice his criticism.¹² This is the context and world behind the text.

The text itself portrays a world where the rich display apathy towards the plight of the poor, and there is disregard, even indifference toward their needs. The rat is a common image used by Banksy as his own mascot, but this rat is not identified with Banksy himself, but rather as a businessman complete with tie, white collar, and a brief case full of money.¹³ The red paint/blood on the rat's hand connects it with the slogan 'Let them eat crack', as if the rat has scrawled the slogan itself. The slogan is obviously an allusion to the alleged words of Marie Antoinette 'let them eat cake' where 'them' is referring to the bourgeois. This is an illustration of the callous indifference of the rich elite towards the poor and needy, and the substitution of 'cake' for 'crack' is a clever satire of the phrase that recalls the American crack epidemic of the 1980's that made a cheaper form of cocaine available to the poor.¹⁴ The location of the image also adds meaning to the text, as it is painted in downtown Soho, New York, just a few blocks from the financial district which contains the Wall Street stock exchange and where the major US banks base their offices. This is the world of the text.

The image proposes a confronting reality check in much the same vain as a political cartoon. It uses satire to expose injustice and inequality to the viewer and caricatures the US Bailout of the wealthy institutions as callous and indifferent towards the underclass. It certainly is making an appeal that the moral conscience should be abhorred at such a

¹² Commonly referred to as the "bailout" of the U.S. financial system, which authorised the United States Secretary of the Treasury to spend up to US\$700 billion to purchase distressed assets, especially mortgage-backed securities, and make capital injections into banks. Wikipedia contributors, 'Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008', *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., September 28, 2009), Cited 28 Sep 2009, Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Emergency_Economic_Stabilization_Act_of_2008&oldid=507550599.

¹³ 'They exist without permission. They are hated, hunted and persecuted. They live in quiet desperation amongst the filth. And yet they are capable of bringing entire civilisations to their knees. If you are dirty, insignificant and unloved then rats are your ultimate role model'; Banksy, *Banksy*, 95.

¹⁴ 'United States Drug Enforcement Agency', *U.S. DEA*, Cited 28 Sep 2009, Online: <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/history/1985-1990.html>.

laissez faire attitude and ambivalence that would give such a nonsense response to the poor and vulnerable. The text articulates a way of being human which directly commends an anti-capitalist and anti-greed sentiment, and at the very least, it commends people to speak out and make a statement. This is what Banksy himself is doing through the medium of unsanctioned and illegal graffiti.¹⁵ However, indirectly it commends either hopelessness or revolution, or even hopelessness that leads to revolution, especially given that the satirical slogan ties with the French revolution and rise of the bourgeois against the aristocracy. When such a frank and candid text is brazenly displayed, the viewer is either moved to hopelessness and resigns themselves to the immutable unjust nature of the world or is motivated to bring about change. This is the world in front of the text.

Injustice for the oppressed and marginalised is a strong biblical theme. God's concern for justice is clearly a major feature of his law for Israel (cf. Ex. 23:6,11; 30:15; Lev. 19:10,15; 22:23; 25:35-36; Deut. 15:7,11; 24:12,14-15) and is prominent in the charges that the prophets bring against Israel (Cf. Isa. 1:21-23; 5:7,22-23; 9:7; 10:1-2; 11:3-4; 29:20-21; 42:3-4; 59:4,8; 61:8. Jer. 5:26-29; 21:12; Ezek. 22:29; Amos 2:7; 5:11-12; Micah 3:9-12; Malachi 3:5 etc). Perhaps Banksy can find some symmetry with the prophets of Israel who satire and parody the life of Israel in order to expose their sin.¹⁶ In the same way, Banksy correctly articulates that the world is a place of injustice where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (cf. Ps. 73:12; Ecc. 8:14), and that the greed of humanity is evil, callous and destructive. But unlike the prophets of Israel, he does not provide a solution or move the world towards a sustainable response. The prophets never leave Israel with a sense of hopelessness but always point forward to 'the Day' when God puts the injustice right, and there is always hope of salvation throughout the

¹⁵ This is moving people towards Banksy's utopian dream: 'Imagine a city where graffiti wasn't illegal, a city where everybody could draw wherever they liked. ...A city that felt like a party where everyone was invited, not just the estate agents and barons of big business'; Banksy, *Banksy*, 97.

¹⁶ Isa. 5 and Ezek. 4 & 16 make some good examples.

prophetic literature.¹⁷ Neither do the prophets commend a revolution instigated by the people. Repentance, yes, but salvation and redemption is always an action of God towards the people.¹⁸ The root theological error in this image is not so much in what it says or portrays, but what it leaves out. It leaves out a viable solution to humanity's greed.

The equal distribution of money would not solve the problem of injustice and greed, as the failure of communist ideals has shown in history.¹⁹ As Paul points out in 1 Timothy 6:10 'For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil' and this misplaced love is a problem of the heart. As Jesus identifies, 'For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile you' (Mark 7:21-23). Here is where the prophets and the law have been pointing throughout salvation history, the renewal of the human heart through the Messiah. The Christ is the king of justice (cf. Isa. 11:4) who accomplishes what God promises through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-37).

Christians can be agents of cultural change of this particular text by making a stand for the oppressed, calling governments to account, and having a voice. This text can be readily used and maintained by Christians to expose the sinfulness of our society's greed, and the love of money that leads to evil. Not just this image, but with as much thought provoking wit and insight as Banksy displays in all his work. What a powerful form of communication it would be for Christians to use the same creativity and cleverness of exposing the world's failures that Banksy does so well! Even more so because Christians can add the solution that is lacking from this text, and point people to

¹⁷ Cf. Isa. 2:12,17; 11:10; 12:1,4 as a sample. This theme is pointedly obvious in Isa. Chapters 1-12 where God will raise a new Messiah from the stump of Jesse and save a faithful remnant.

¹⁸ Cf. Jer. 31:31-37; and Isa. 9:7ff

¹⁹ Not to suggest that Banksy is a communist, but the ideals implied by this text may move some towards this response.

Jesus and the redemption leading to the new creation. Identifying not only the problem but the root of the problem - the callous heart.

The root theological error may cause some to despair and others to put more faith in social action than is warranted, or even to propagate the image (or similar) illegally (ie. more graffiti) as a way of active response. But this would be to make the same mistake as the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 which illustrates the desire of people to build a city that seeks self sufficiency and removes God from the centre of community life.

However, as the Babel story satirically points out (with all the irony found so much in the works of Banksy), *Babel* - the gate of god - is really *Babal* – confusion - of the created order and insults God by seeking to lay claim to the heavens it can't actually reach (Cf. Gen. 11:4).²⁰ Likewise, social action that fails to include God's redemptive plan will also fall short. Christians must attempt to avoid being part of this aspect of the text that seeks change and social action outside the redemptive plan of God. The democratic voice is not an end in itself, instead it is good to make petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This pleases God our Saviour - who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (Cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-4).

This is how Christians who are called to be salt and light in the world can respond in regard to this cultural phenomenon: by firstly acknowledging and effectively communicating the problematic truth that the text is identifying – greed, injustice, oppression of the poor. Then secondly, bringing God's salvation story to the bear upon the sinfulness that has been exposed – God is concerned for the oppressed and the poor, and is abhorred by injustice. And thirdly, offering God's redemptive solution – that 'God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—

²⁰ John E. Hartley, *Genesis* (NIBC; Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 124, 126.

to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus' (Romans 3:25-26).

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