

Reading Banksy's Street Art through the Verses of *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: Though it has been a century since T.S. Eliot's creation of *The Waste Land*, it is still immensely alive because its meaning is getting new momentum in almost every part of the current global world. The society Eliot meticulously portrayed in this masterpiece is perhaps relevant now, more than ever. Pop culture of the present day like street art often demonstrates the traits which were repeatedly mentioned in the poem. This paper aims to read one of the most controversial street artists, Banksy's artworks through the depiction of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Banksy's career started in the early 1990s as a graffiti artist, soon his artworks on the walls of London begin to reveal the conditions of contemporary disillusioned society, hopelessness, alienation, and a poignant emptiness. Over the decades, Banksy's work is becoming more biting and bitter. Even though Eliot's *The Waste Land* precisely talks about modernity, and Banksy's work pulsates with postmodernity, a wide range of Banksy's work can be interpreted through Eliot's verses. This paper reflects on those common threads along with the nuanced meanings of the verses of *The Waste Land* and Banksy's street art.

Keywords: *The Waste Land*, Banksy, Street art, City space, Images

2022 is the year when T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* completes its century. As a centenarian, *The Waste Land* has been through the horrors of the two world wars, nuclear weapons, the cold war, refugee crises, the rise of nationalism, postcolonialism, decolonialism, and many more. Unusual as it may seem but Eliot's *The Waste Land* has managed to maintain a consistent relevance throughout these events and keeps continuing its journey as a celebrated classic in academia and the English literary arena. This literary masterpiece enjoyed its

stardom in the rise of modernism and keeps a steady hold on the postmodern era as well. *The Waste Land* is predominantly a commentary on urban space with a masquerade of characters from classics around the world. This paper takes street art, a prominent urban subculture of the postmodern era, and reads a number of street art through the verses of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Since the genre of street art has a wider variety in art history, in order to narrow down the focus of the paper, I have chosen Banksy, one of the most controversial as well as celebrated street artists of the present times. Another reason for choosing Banksy is, his street arts predominantly appear on the walls of urban London with the commentary on contemporary social inequalities and *The Waste Land*'s backdrop is also primarily urban London. The aim of this paper is thus to go through several of Banksy's street art and show the striking relevance of Eliot's centenarian verse through those pieces of art.

Eliot and His Conservatism

In 1928, in one of his essays, Eliot identifies himself as "classical in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" (Scruton). Throughout the century critics have pointed out Eliot's conservatism and elitism and the surprising combination of these two traits with his modernism (Asher 20) (Kaveney 20) (Kimball). While juxtaposing Eliot's *The Waste Land* with Banksy's deviating street art, I am well aware of the opposites of their ideologies but there lies the beauty of intertextuality where art exists in the realm of previous works of art despite having no common threads between the artists. Therefore, it is rather ironic that a lot of the stories stenciled by Banksy are found in the verses of *The Waste Land* which is written by a renowned conservative like Eliot, whereas Banksy's ideology is completely anti-establishment, and radical.

Street Art and Banksy

Art historians suggest that street art is an evolved form of graffiti. The difference between graffiti and street art is that street art focuses on messages through artistic expression while

graffiti is only text-driven. The term street art was coined in 1985 by Allen Schwartzman (Rudolph 4) and it became popularised in the late 1980s. According to Jeffrey Ian Ross, "street art refers to stencils, stickers, and noncommercial images/posters that are affixed to surfaces and objects (e.g., mailboxes, garbage cans, street signs) where the owner of the property has not permitted the perpetrator" (Ross 1). As the definition suggests, street art is a piece of art done without the permission of the property owner, therefore goes through the question of legitimacy in the legal sense and there is a tendency to label this form of art as an act of vandalism by the dominant culture. Ross' definition also points to the fact that street art is a piece of art to which anyone has the access to the art which exercises a sense of democracy of creativity.

In her lecture series, Professor Rudolf emphasises how the location of street art is more important for a street artist than a graffiti artist because in often cases street art is a commentary on the contemporary world/politics/national crises. It is usually an urban expression of art, meaning the artists use the urban walls/urban mailboxes/street signs as their canvases in order to reach as many audiences as possible. Most celebrated street artists often choose the walls /public places of cosmopolitan cities like New York, Paris, Berlin, and London. Alison Young, in her book quoted Eine and emphasises, "(London) is the hub ... the mecca for street art" (Young 80), and one of the factors that make London "the hub" is its proximity to Bristol because "Bristol is a more accurate point of origin for street art in Britain given that it is the home of Banksy..." (ibid).

Banksy is perhaps the most celebrated street artist whose work is applauded in the mainstream art network as well. He is extremely controversial for his ostentatious display of sardonic attitude towards high culture, upper class, commodity culture, capitalism, and war mongering psyche of the developed nations. Interestingly, the name Banksy is a pseudonym

and even though he has written several books, screenplays, and directed a few documentaries, he has successfully masked his identity, and no one, to date, has managed to reveal his identity.

Juxtaposing Banksy and *The Waste Land*

This paper brings in a number of Banksy's artworks that reverberates the images of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. One of the salient features of *The Waste Land* is its disjointed masquerade of images which is in Eliot's own terms "(a) heap of broken images" (T.S. Eliot), the images of this poetry are thus fragmented, and shattered in pieces, peeping through the sections of this lucid poetry. Likewise, the street arts of Banksy echo a disjointed aura, ruptured by the geographic borders, cityscapes, and alleys of the urban areas of metropolises because his artworks are founded in the cities of Britain, the USA, Palestine, Ukraine and many more.

My reading of Banksy is not complete without T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* because it is more relevant than ever with its montage of images and politics of urban spaces. We are now ever more connected through the advent of social media but perhaps we are now more disconnected than ever. Each of these artworks tells a story of oppression/satire and or critique of the contemporary socio-political atmosphere. *The Waste Land* and Banksy's street art exudes an apocalyptic aura where there is a disquieting sense. The constant feeling of hopelessness, fragmented life, and lack of cohesion resonates and recurs several times in the lines where Eliot writes:

... Son of man.

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water. ("The Burial of the Dead" 20-24)

There are a number of Banksy's artworks that reflects on the same bleakness, dreams being shattered, and arid land where hopes slip out of the hands (fig.2), flowers wilted in the hand of the beloved (fig.1):



Fig 1: On the shutter of the Larry Flynt's Hustler Club, New York



Fig 2: Girl with a Red Balloon at South Bank, London

The dreams have withered and there is no hope in Eliot's *wasteland*, everything reeks of nothingness, whereas Banksy has also portrayed the same in his artwork where all the dreams are being brushed away with the reality:



Fig 3: Chintatown, Boston

Through the verses and the artworks above, it is evident that the social commentary of dejected life, and infertile landscape is still relevant after 100 years. I will emphasise this theme of the alienated, lonely life of the cityscape in the following section of the article.

Lack of communication and inability to communicate is another frequent of *The Waste Land* where Eliot writes:

I can connect

Nothing with nothing. (“The fire Sermon” 301-302)

The inability to connect and communicate with each other hits hard at the core of modernity especially after WWI when the entire human civilization experienced the mass destruction of trust, faith, and humaneness for the first time through the horror of the war. This incapacity to connect and create a human connection becomes more poignant with the advancement of time, and the alienation becomes more obvious. One of Banksy’s sculptures at Soho Square in London is a twisted phone booth, which is struck hard at its heart with a pick axe and is

bleeding from its wound. This iconic sculpture can be read as a vivid spectacle of the current inability to communicate where nothing makes sense anymore and communication mediums are ultimately destined to be a wounded failure.

In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the image of the river Thames is an exhausting portrayal of the aftermath of war, and intense industrialization, where:

The river sweats

Oil and tar

The barges drift

With the turning tide ("The Fire Sermon" 266-278)



Fig 4: Soho Square, London

In 2005, in one of his exhibitions of Banksy, the audience get to see Banksy's appropriation of Claude Monet's masterpiece "Water Lilies and Japanese Bridge". Banksy remakes the entire art piece with two abandoned shopping trolleys and one traffic cone submerged in the lily pond.



Fig 5: "Show Me the Monet"

This appropriation is a dig at the ever-growing consumer culture of wanting more, never satiated consumer psyche which can be metaphorically juxtaposed with the river that "sweats oil and tar". Both Eliot and Banksy thus show the degeneration of the water bodies with the deterioration of human civilization. The despair and the disjointed relationships are inflicted on the rivers and lakes, thus nature fails to ameliorate the human condition. Nature is, therefore, no longer a place to offer respite or tranquillity of mind.

With the dystopian urban imagery weaved by Eliot, one obvious imagery that creeps up in poetry is that of rats. In the third part of *The Waste Land* Eliot has mentioned the movement of rats in the sewer-strewn alleys of London, where the cityscape seems "unreal" and under the spell of a "brown fog of a winter dawn". Interestingly, rats have been copiously used by Banksy in his street art partly because he started his career with the admiration of Blek Le Rat ("Banksy Street Art - Most Famous Work") who is a notable French graffiti artist

and has been using rats as one his main motifs of artworks. Rats are an essential motif of any dystopian urbanscapes and Banksy has masterfully used this motif to rupture the make-believe world of the city dwellers. While mentioning his fascination with rats as a recurring motif in his artworks, Banksy says, “I have been painting rats for three years before someone said ‘that’s clever. It’s an anagram of art’ and I had to pretend I’d known that all along” (Banksy 89).

Followings are some of the curious takes on rats being used as pieces of street art:



Fig 6 : Paris, France

This street art depicts two rats holding hands together and roaming the streets of Paris. Apparently, one of them is female and the other one is male where the female rat is holding a fancy pointed umbrella and the male rat is wearing a bowler hat and holding a stick in one hand. This is a satire on the fancy upper-class tourists who roam around the streets of Paris.

The second one presented here in this article is showing an office-going rat with an umbrella and briefcase, which is once again a typical sight of any city where most dwellers have a mundane 9 am-5 pm job in order to maintain sustenance.



Fig 7: Pitfield Street, Hoxton

There are numerous instances of Banksy's artworks with rats in the cityscapes that portray the usual human affairs like wearing a tuxedo and holding the door for a red-carpet event or dumping toxic liquid all over the place, all these portrayals suggest as if the city is infested with rats while the rats doing the exact same things as humans are doing.



Fig 8: At the corner of the Curtain Road and Christina Street, London



Fig 9: Oliver's Yard, London

The last artwork of a rat I am using is where Banksy has stenciled a rat inside an upcycled clock near the Empire State Building, in New York. This artwork powerfully represents the fact humankind is stuck in this endless race against time which will ultimately bring nothing but futility.



Fig 10: Croydon, New York.

To reinforce this idea of race, in one of his books, *Wall and Piece*, Banksy mentions “You can win the race but you’re still a rat” (Banksy 91). By saying so, this street artist indicates the fact of modern humans’ tendency of running a rat race throughout the entire life which makes the cities “unreal”, and brings nothing but a sheer of void and failure. This combination of human exhaustion and sense of meaninglessness constantly flow through the verses of *The Waste Land* as well.

In the last part of my paper, I will bring a parallelism between how Eliot's last section of *The Waste Land* resonates with one of Banksy’s Street arts where both of them have spoken ambiguously regarding the concept of *shantih* (peace) and solace. While Eliot is wrapping up his masterpiece with the chanting of *Shantih shantih shantih*, Banksy seems to layer the theme of *shantih* and has gone to another level with his sardonic attitude to depict the contemporary context of *shantih* or peace.

The following artwork is done by Banksy on a wall in Bethlehem, Palestine. The symbol of dove is universally acknowledged as a symbol of peace and hope. Banksy tweaks the concept of this symbol and makes an armoured dove, with apparently an olive leaf on its beak. But, this full-winged dove is also targeted for shooting that suggests its impending murder by the Israeli soldiers. This shows the brilliance of Banksy who not only problematizes the concept of peace in the current political context but also layers this work with symbols. Through this artwork, Banksy not only questions the concept of *shantih*/ peace, but he also engages with the space of that particular wall of Bethlehem with his anti-war conscience.



Fig 11: Bethlehem, Palestine (Banksy and Ryszawa)

The reason for choosing this particular piece of artwork at the end of my paper is that Eliot's concept of a peaceful future is as enigmatic as this portrayal of Banksy's peace where none of them doesn't give away a concrete formula of attaining *shantih*, though Eliot makes a subtle suggestion of attaining it, Banksy forfeits the idea of peace by adding layers of symbols to the universal symbol of peace. The stories of incapacity, disconnection, and losing hope, therefore, are still at the backdrop of their works.

Conclusion

In one of his most celebrated essays, "Tradition and Individual Talent" Eliot says:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead ... The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. (37)

Reading Banksy's work through the verses of *The Waste Land*, therefore, in a way thus becomes a task that Eliot himself has endorsed in his essay. The specific pieces that I have

chosen for this paper can very well be read as a companion to Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Though the connection between poetry and paintings is quite common, the connection between poetry and street art is not usually seen in academia.

This might sound radical to compare one of the controversial artist's arts with one of the canons of the literary world, but in this era of enmeshed identities where interpersonal communications and human connections are blurred with the dominance of technology, each person is alienated from her/his own identity, the idea of self is suspended from the reality, and the world is at constant anxiety of an impending war, masterpieces like *The Waste Land* requires to be re-read side by side with the contemporary sub-cultures that are subverting the mainstream narratives and critiquing on the socio-political narratives of the ruling forces by creating spaces in the concrete jungle of the urbanscapes. Such readings will open up discussions on the intertextuality and thus bring in a Bakhtinian carnivalesque narrative on a classic like *The Waste Land*.

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