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Style Wars: study of a documentary film's voice.



"Style War Train" by Noc167, photographed by Henry Chalfant, 1981.

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Introduction

The movie *Style Wars*, directed by Tony Silver and produced by Henry Chalfant, is one of the first movies documenting the beginnings of the hip-hop culture in the early nineteen-eighties in New York City¹. Focusing on the 'visual art' part of this culture, that is to say graffiti, it also contains some early examples of hip-hop dances and songs. The movie was aired for the first time on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, a public American television program distributor) in 1983, and won the Grand Jury Prize for Documentary at the 1984 Sundance Film Festival. It takes place in different locations in New York City: streets, flats, studios, clubs, art galleries, trains deposits, etc. It seems important to note that *Style Wars* was also partially funded by PBS, and that some movies aired by PBS and financed by public funds were controversial (for example Ken Burns' *The War* in 2007, which was accused of not representing the Hispano-Americans in its depiction of the American participation in World War II²).

Many different voices are presented in the movie, from the main protagonists, the graffiti artists themselves (and for some of them their family and friends) to political authorities -such as Edward Koch the Mayor of the city, a New York City Police Department detective, the MTA's chairman (Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the organization in charge of the public transportation in New York City), MTA's workers, or anonymous New Yorkers and users of the public transports. Concerning the graffiti artists, they represent a large panel of teenagers and young men (no girl is mentioned as a graffiti artist) and they are not directly named apart from their pseudonyms, which are only said (by the artists themselves or by the voice-over) and never written on the screen. It seems also interesting here to underline that all the social actors presented in the movie are considered in the context of the graffiti culture. *Style Wars* focuses on the emerging movement, its protagonists and opponents, each one of them is invited to

¹ Between 1980 and 1985, several movies of random quality were centered on the emerging Hip-Hop and graffiti movements, but *Style Wars* is the first documentary film that directly addresses these subjects. Here is a list of several movies from the 1980s:

Wild Style. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. 3DD Entertainment, 1983. Film.

Beat Street. Dir. Stan Lathan. Orion Pictures, 1984. Film.

Break Street 84. Dir. Joel Silberg. The Cannon Group, 1984. Film.

Krush Groove. Dir. Michael Schultz. Warner Bros., 1985. Film.

It is interesting to note the recurrence of the terms 'style' and 'street', which emphasize the urban aspect of the movements, and the importance of the concept of style.

² Cauchon, Paul. "États-Unis – Polémique autour du documentariste Ken Burns." *ledevoir.com*. Le Devoir, 4 May 2007. Web. 21 June 2016.

develop his position toward graffiti, but their social backgrounds and personal lives, apart from the movement, are not clearly mentioned, or only evoked.

An important figure in the making of the movie is Henry Chalfant, a photographer who has produced a significant corpus of photographs from this period (late seventies and early eighties) that documents graffiti culture, especially fully painted trains (“whole cars”) and murals, and who consequently was a close friend of the teenagers that populate the film³. This fact enlightens the relationship between the film crew and the graffiti artists. Moreover, at this time Henry Chalfant was one of the few to have a good knowledge of this recent culture as he has worked on it for many years.

The function of the photographic medium is remarkable in many aspects in the development of the Hip Hop culture. Its archival function is essential; it was a means to record masterpieces, ephemeral paintings and dances, playful atmospheres or original styles. It was also a tool for the competitive aspects of the culture, constituting evidence of artistic or stylistic prowess –a line, a move, a pair of glasses- leading b-boys and b-girls (the name of the hip-hop artists in general) to collect images of their skills as trophies. Photography also played a crucial role in the worldwide expansion of the culture notably due to the importance of its visual aspects: thanks to Chalfant’s images, kids from all over the world were attracted by Hip Hop, and were able to develop it locally and to strengthen its cultural development. It seems interesting to mention the book *Subway Art*⁴, authored by Chalfant and Martha Cooper, another photographer, as it composes nowadays a fascinating and vivid testimony of this era, a “landmark photographic history”⁵, which is emblematic of the status taken by the photographers’ work through time. It is possible to depict the movie *Style Wars* as an extension of *Subway Art* in a different medium, both works aiming at creating a representation of the graffiti movement.

With a view to study *Style Wars* it appears necessary to review few different terms, inherent to the graffiti culture, used throughout the film. First, the term *writer* is important as it is frequently used; its definition is obvious and clearly mentioned by a disembodied voice-over in the very beginning of the movie: “They call themselves “writers” because that’s what they do. They write their names, among other things,

³ Henry Chalfant website. n.p. n.d. Web. 14 June 2016.

⁴ Cooper, Martha and Henry Chalfant. *Subway Art*. London : Thames & Hudson. 1984.

⁵ Kennedy, Randy. “Graffiti of New York’s Past, Revived and Remade.” *New York Times*. 26 October 2010. Web. 12 April 2016.

everywhere [...]” (2’12 to 2’18”). This term is very general, contrary to the term *bomber* that implies a prolific practice and a sort of supremacy. A graffiti bomber is very active, and his goal is not to produce the most beautiful piece, but to produce as many pieces as possible, in order to have the most visible name. This notion is connected to the term *graffiti king*, a graffiti artist acknowledged as being superior to others. Most of the time this term is linked to a geographic area (a street, a block or an entire district), or more frequently to a train line or a train yard, which also tackles the notion of territory. Covering a pre-existing piece made by another artist is called *toying*, and the writer who covers other pieces is called a *toy*, a very pejorative term. Finally the main types of graffiti pieces are the simple *tag* (a plain signature), the *throw-up*, a rounded lettering composed by an outline and a filling (the use of two different colors for each one creating an effect of contrast), and the *wildstyle*, an elaborated, complicated and almost unreadable lettering that frequently contains various different colors, and that is usually larger than the other types⁶.

Style Wars has a particular status in the history of graffiti linked to its originality. For the first time graffiti was not only represented through artistic pieces, but also through the voice of its practitioners (and opponents). Moreover the movie focuses on the artists’ side, and lets them free to give their own definition of their practice. As a result *Style Wars* captured the atmosphere of the period, creating a sort of idealized vision of the emergence of the movement. The idealistic aspect is also connected to the period: as it is depicted at the end of the movie, *Style Wars* records the end of what can be called an (ideal) age of innocence for graffiti, preceding a period of severe repression.

It is interesting to note that there is no work on the movie in the field of documentary film studies, and the texts and reflections about *Style Wars* are most of the time concentrated on its cultural and sociological aspects⁷. This study aims at analyzing the movie with the tools of the documentary film studies, with the objective of understanding the different strategies implemented by the filmmakers. *Style Wars* will be considered more as a documentary film than as an historic document about a given epoch. Documentary and historic aspects are connected in the movie, consequently its

⁶ These definitions are based on the vocabulary page from “Subway Art” (Cooper and Chalfant 27).

⁷ Lachmann, Richard. “Graffiti as Career and Ideology.” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94. n°2 (Sept. 1988): p.229-250. Web. 21 Feb. 2016.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Kool Killer ou l’insurrection par les signes*. Paris: Les partisans du moindre effort, 2005. Print.

historic value will also be included; but we will try to focus on the documentary processes in order to comprehend the particular status of this documentary.

Technically speaking the movie alternates between interviews and free speech, and mixes videos and still photographs. It includes some contemporaneous songs, and uses few occurrences of a disembodied voice which can be linked to the classical expository documentary as defined by Bill Nichols⁸, and which will be examined in further details. But the point of view of the movie, or its “voice” as Nichols describes it, cannot be conveyed through this disembodied voice, which is almost only used in a perspective of contextualization, and which only has a low frequency of occurrence during the film (more or less four uses in the entire movie). Nichols’ works on documentary films will compose the general base of this study. Indeed, such notions as the “voice” of the documentary, its “mode”, the notions of truth and representation, the “modes of address”, etc. developed by Nichols are essential elements of his theses, and offer relevant tools for the analysis of documentary films.

In order to analyze the documentary processes at work in the film, it appears judicious in a first part to observe its political and cultural contexts, before analyzing the historical, technical and theoretical evolutions of documentary films. The second part of this study will focus on the voice of the movie, throughout the means used by the filmmakers to develop their central ideas, points of view or theses; then it will consist on an analysis of the potential mode(s) of the film according to Nichols’ definition; before trying to understand the narrative schemes developed by the filmmakers. Finally, in the last part these different elements will be involved in the analysis of a sequence representative of the documentary devices at work in the movie. A particular attention will be given to the relation of the film to its social subjects. This sequence analysis will be completed by reflection on the originality of the cinematographic tools used by the filmmakers, with the intention of understanding the particular status of the movie in its relationship to the graffiti movement.

⁸ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2001. p.105

I - *Style Wars*: historical and cultural backgrounds, documentary landmarks.

In order to understand the multiple issues at stake in *Style Wars* it seems important beforehand to situate the political background of New York City in the early 1980s, and the cultural situation of the city in this period, as the graffiti movement was anchored in its political and social contexts, and linked to contemporaneous cultural currents. Indeed, considered as a social practice (occurring in a public space) that can be compared to visual mass advertising (the product being the writer's name), graffiti movement has public and social dimensions that are influenced by local policies. Considered as an artistic practice the movement is likewise connected to the artistic and cultural movements of the time.

Moreover an observation of the history of documentary films and techniques, and of the evolution of documentary theoretical frameworks, appears necessary to proceed to a relevant analysis of this documentary movie.

1) New York City in the early 1980s: historical and cultural contexts.

a. Political aspects.

The study of the political aspects will be mainly based on Georges Lankevitch's "American Metropolis"⁹ -more precisely on the tenth chapter entitled *Disaster and Rebirth*, an analysis of New York history through the political angle, focused on the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. This part will be complemented with some elements taken from Ira Rosenwaike's "Population History of New York City"¹⁰ (chapter 6, *The Metropolitan Giant*), a demographic analysis of statistical sources.

The city of New York has known a major crisis in the 1970s, which was a consequence of various factors¹¹. In the post-war era the city was energized by an

⁹ Lankevich, George. *American Metropolis, a History of New York City*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Rosenwaike, Ira. *Population History of New York City*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1972.

¹¹ Lankevich evokes some of these factors (on a national scale applicable to New York City) in the introduction to the tenth chapter: "violence" and "scores of deaths", "ethnic immigration to urban center", "increasing gap between city's revenues and services". (Lankevich 205)

unprecedented prosperity, becoming one of the most important artistic and economic places in the world. But from the mid-20th century and on, the “white flight” phenomenon started to drain middle and upper class populations from the center of the city to its suburbs. These populations were replaced by the arrival of lower classes immigrant populations favored by the federal Immigration Act of 1965 that abolished national-origin quotas¹². As early as the 1960s, even if “New York still benefited from a powerful economy [...]” (Lankevitch 206), a gradual economic and social disrepair took place, symbolized, for example, by the departure of major baseball national league teams (Dodgers and Giants, in 1958 –Lankevitch 210) and by the US Navy withdrawal from the Brooklyn Navy Yards in 1966. The analysis of the mayoralties of John Lindsay (from 1965 to 1973, first a Liberal Republican, then a Liberal Democrat), Abraham Beame (from 1973 to 1977, Democratic Party) and Ed Koch (from 1977 to 1989, Democratic Party) gives a representative vision of the evolution of the city, as municipal political decisions have had strong social impacts¹³.

Lindsay’s mayoralty is characterized by its inability to anticipate fiscal difficulties in a prosperous national economic environment during the late 1960s. As this positive economic environment progressively collapsed, Lindsay maintained the deficit of the city to compensate economic and social issues. Whereas he was depicted as the “builder of modern New York City”¹⁴, his final economic record was disastrous.

Beame, the following mayor, consequently inherited important economic issues from the preceding mayoralty; he was partially linked to the tax dilapidation of the city, being Lindsay’s comptroller. The most important point of Beame’s mayoralty is the repeated request from the municipality for a gradual intervention of the federal

¹² “In summary, the relatively insignificant growth between 1940 and 1970 in New York’s total population -from 7.5 to 7.9 million- masked very dramatic shifts in population composition within the city. The white population (exclusive from Puerto Ricans) experienced unparalleled massive losses through outmigration in this period, falling from approximately seven million to five million. By contrast, the number of Negro residents grew extremely rapidly, from 458,000 to 1,668,000. The Puerto Rican population also increased with startling speed, climbing from an insignificant group of under 100,000 to a major segment approaching one million. In the same time period (1940 to 1970) the population living in four suburban counties in New York State [...] rose from 1.3 million to 3.7 million.” (Rosenwaike 174)

¹³ Lankevitch’s *Disaster and Rebirth* chapter is centered on this idea. The following analysis mostly consists in a synthesis of his arguments.

¹⁴ “[...] certainly he [Lindsay] ranks as one of the master builders of modern New York”. (Lankevitch 211)

economic authorities during his term. This fact underlines the failure of the municipal authorities to regulate incomings and expenditures, which engaged the municipality in a vicious economic circle leading to a fiscal crisis.

When Koch became mayor in 1978 the city was in a social and economic impasse. Urban decay, the economic federal guardianship, the “white flight” phenomenon, and the recent immigration of mainly “non-white” populations (primarily from Puerto Rico and the West Indies –Rosenwaik 174) changed the city. Koch consequently took radical measures, on both economic and social levels, including an important five-year austerity plan, and he is considered as being at the origin of the rebirth of the city (Lankevich, p.228-229). Koch has an important role in the movie under study as he represents the political body struggling against the development of graffiti.

Martha Cooper illustrated the social impact of these municipal policies in her book entitled *Street Play*¹⁵, a photographic vision of the city’s decay during the 1970s. The subway transit system was also a symbolic reflection of the city’s situation, considered as unsafe, ramshackle and devastated by graffiti. Bruce Davidson’s *Subway*¹⁶ book illustrates this situation, and his work can be linked to the movie *Style Wars* as it depicts a contemporaneous subway’s ambience, in the field of documentary photography.

b. Cultural aspects.

Culturally speaking New York was a predominant place in the world, at least since the after-war period, notably in the domain of pictorial arts, but also in the music, theater, poetry, literature and other artistic spheres. This major status in the Arts can be partially associated with the demographic evolution of the population. Traditionally welcoming an important immigrant population, New York is marked by a constant cultural blend. A vivid example of this aspect can be found in the salsa music, which embodies and illustrates this notion of intermixture. The musical genre was originally created by Caribbean and Latino-American New York immigrants and incorporates jazz solos and traditional European instruments to Latin influences, rhythms and standards. The example of salsa music is remarkable, as it emerged in a place culturally very

¹⁵ Cooper, Martha. *Street Play*. Berlin: From Here to Fame. 2006.

¹⁶ Davidson, Bruce. *Subway*. New York: Aperture. 1986.

different from its essence and roots, emphasizing New York's capacity to favor the development of original artistic and cultural practices. The intermixture dimension of Salsa can also be linked to the multiple visual influences that were at the origin of the graffiti movement (including comic books, cartoons, advertisements, etc.), and that were inspired by popular culture and by the urban visual environment of the city.

New York thus retrospectively appears as a cultural and artistic crucible making possible the emergence of new forms. Concerning pictorial arts the city is notably recognized as a foremost place for late modernist and post-modernist currents. The Pop-Art movement, more particularly, knew its greatest developments in New York with artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) and Andy Warhol (1928-1987), thanks to the significant role played by art galleries like Leo Castelli art gallery and others. Art galleries had an essential function in New York's artistic spheres. The gallery sequence from *Style Wars* (49'25" to 52'10") illustrates this function, emphasizing positive reactions from the public contrasting with the general negative comments of anonymous voices in the streets, suggesting that as soon as a cultural movement enters galleries (from street walls and trains to canvas for graffiti) it is considered as Art and no more as a trivial production of a minor subculture¹⁷—the term “subculture” is used twice in the movie (7'28" and 20'07"). In relation to the subject of this study the key-figures of Jean Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) and Keith Haring (1958-1990) are very important. Indeed, both of them spent time with the prominent graffiti artists of the time; and they were themselves part of the graffiti movement: Basquiat started by painting mottos on the walls of the city (fig. 1) with spray cans, and Haring painted murals and used subway station's blank ads as artistic supports (fig. 2) - these elements (tagging on walls, using spray cans and painting in subway's environment) were typically used by graffiti artists who were among the first to use such artistic media. Moreover Haring's artistic approach aiming at taking Art out of elitism to put it in the streets¹⁸ can directly be linked to graffiti's artistic independence regarding traditional

¹⁷ “A group that has beliefs and behaviors that are different from the main groups within a culture or society.”

“Subculture.” Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2016. [Learnersdictionary.com](http://learnersdictionary.com). Web. 21 June 2016.

¹⁸ “About Haring/Bio/Success”. *Keith Haring website*. The Keith Haring Foundation. n.d. Web. 26 March 2016.

<http://www.haring.com/!/about-haring/success#.VyxmmnBihL8>

artistic careers; and Fred Braithwaite (also known as Fab Five Freddy, a major Hip Hop figure) introduced Basquiat to the Hip Hop microcosm of the late 1970s ¹⁹. Even if Basquiat and Haring cannot be considered as pure graffiti artists (technically speaking their artistic practice was not centered on the lettering which is an essential dimension of graffiti) their relationship to the movement and its culture is highly indicative. They were not constrained by the graffiti codes (“being everywhere”, the concept of “graffiti King”, the style competition with the highest complexity in the structure of the letterings: elements perpetually evoked by the writers in *Style Wars*) but their art nevertheless reveals the influence of the recent graffiti and Hip Hop movements on the New York artistic scene during the 1980s. Contrary to graffiti artists, both painters were rapidly integrated to the fine Art sphere, certainly due to their freedom towards the rigid rules of “bombing”, and they were able to develop an entirely original and personal practice.

c. Beginnings and developments of the graffiti movement.

Originally, *graffiti* was a generic term used to name the engravings, marks, writings, and other drawings, on walls or other surfaces. The practice can be traced back to ancient times, but the modern use of the term is more restrictive as it generally designates the fact to write a name or an inscription with spray paint or marker pens. In this sense the first graffiti appeared in Philadelphia’s streets during the early to mid-1960s, but were only marginal efforts. The movement quickly spread to New York and, as early as 1971, the practice of tagging on walls and urban furniture was relatively widespread, notably with writers such as Taki183, Joe136 and Barbara62, as indicated by a *New York Times* article focused on Taki183²⁰. This article is very important as it is one of the first examples of the consideration of graffiti by a media (which underlines

“As an art student and being sort of in the underground and having very precise and cynical ideas about the art world, the traditional art-dealer gallery represented a lot that I hated about the art world.”

¹⁹ “Artist Timeline”. *Jean-Michel Basquiat website*. The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. 2011. Web. 26 March 2016, <http://www.basquiat.com/artist-timeline.htm>

“Braithwaite provides Basquiat with a link to the graffitists and rap artists from uptown, including Rammellzee, the graffiti artist and dj.”

²⁰ Unknown author. “ ‘Taki 183’ Spawns Pen Pals ”. *New York Times*. 21 July 1971. Consulted on Taki’s website: http://taki183.net/_pdf/taki_183_nytimes.pdf

the significance of the practice), and it describes in the details Taki's approach and motivations. Gradually, an increasing number of New York's kids started to write their names on the city walls, but also inside and outside subway trains. During this decade (1970s) the different types of graffiti practices appeared, from the simple *tag* to the complex *wildstyle*; these types of graffiti reflected the skills of the painter in a sort of stylistic hierarchy from the littlest and simplest signature to the biggest and most convoluted paintings. This highly innovative period culminated in the mid-1970s, the city being almost completely covered by tags, and the transit system contaminated with "whole cars" (a fully painted wagon), the period coinciding with the crisis, previously mentioned, in New York²¹. The graffiti artists shown in *Style Wars* belong to the following generation of writers, and they were highly influenced by this era, paying tribute to the originators (20'09" to 20'56"), but also surpassing them in artistic recognition, and elevating the general artistic level of graffiti. The initial graffiti artists only interested few art galleries in the early 1970s; the main interest came ten years later during the early 1980s with places like the ESSES studio, the Fashion Moda and the Fun Gallery. David Diallo, a French scholar, details the role played by galleries in his article entitled "From the Street to Art Galleries: How Graffiti Became a Legitimate Art Form":

« The media coverage started with the *New York Times* article had attracted the attention of other journalists on graffiti, of academics and of the contemporary art milieu. As early as 1972, Hugo Martinez, a sociologist at the University of New York who particularly appreciated the aesthetic character of the first bombings organized, with the United Graffiti Artists, a crew of graffiti writers, the very first canvas exhibition at the Razor Gallery. This exhibition, chronicled by Richard Goldstein in the *New York Magazine*, paved the way for the legitimating of graffiti as an art form. Young graffiti writers were suddenly in the limelight and were invited by downtown gallery owners to show their pieces on canvas. The Fashion Moda gallery and the Fun Gallery, located, respectively, on 3rd avenue in the Bronx and in East Village, and specialized in graffiti only, greatly contributed to the artistic blossoming of graffiti in the early 80s. They also played a determining role in its exportation to Europe where contemporary art sellers were equally receptive to this mode of expression in the process of becoming a legitimate art form."²²

²¹ Mark S. Feinman. "New York Transit Authority in the 1970s". *nycsubway.org website*. Version 1.0. 19 November 2002. Web. 26 March 2016.

http://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/The_New_York_Transit_Authority_in_the_1970s
"The rapid transit infrastructure of NYC in the 1970s was suffering from the effects of "deferred maintenance" initiatives started in the 1960s. The fiscal crisis of 1975 didn't help matters. Conditions were so deplorable that it was amazing that trains even ran. If they did run, they were dark, or completely covered by graffiti."

(This non-commercial website provides relevant information about the history of the New York City Subway System.)

²² Diallo, David. "From the Street to Art Galleries : How Graffiti Became a Legitimate Art

Diallo underlines the role played by the medias and by art galleries in the evolution of graffiti during the 1970s and 1980s, notably concerning the “blossoming of graffiti” that is to say its cultural expansion in the United States, but also concerning its international expansion. This period marked the cultural and artistic acknowledgement of the graffiti movement, and more largely of the Hip Hop culture. The movie *Style Wars* can also be considered as another mark of the general media recognition of graffiti, being a PBS documentary intended for a large and non-specialized audience.

2) Documentary film context.

This part will focus on the history of documentary films, and on the technical developments of the medium, before proceeding to an observation of the different theories at stake in the field of documentary movies. These elements appear necessary to a correct analysis of the film under study as they provide a general background for documentary films. Indeed, it seems important to situate the movie in its historical, technical and theoretical frameworks to fully understand its issues.

a. History of documentary films (currents and techniques).

In place of a complete and general analysis of all the successive evolutions of documentary cinema through time, it appears more interesting here to underline its major orientations and changes with a view to situate *Style Wars* in the history of documentary films. This part will be mainly based on a short film by Catherine Goupil²³, which summarizes the main events and technical evolutions of the history of documentary films.

When cinema (images in motion) appeared in the late nineteenth century it was the result of an amalgamation of several independent techniques, as underlined by Goupil's short film: the chronophotography (developed by Muybridge in the United

Form.” *Revue de Recherche en Civilisation Américaine* HS 2 (2014) : n. pag. Web. 6 February 2016.

²³ Goupil, Catherine. “Le documentariste et ses outils à travers les âges (penser le cinema documentaire : leçon 1, 1/2).” Online video clip. Canal-u.tv, 4 April 2003. Web. 12 April 2016.

States and Marey in France), the perforated film (created by Edison, along with other technical devices), and the light projection process (elaborated by Reynaud)²⁴. The Lumière brothers realized this technical association and invented the first complete system that allowed to record, to develop and to project images in motion: the *cinématographe*. These techniques were directly obtained from the development of photography during the nineteenth century, which aimed at creating “representations of reality”²⁵; and these representations were generally oriented towards two major directions: artistic creations and scientific observations. In a study of the scientific dimension of documentary films²⁶, Brian Winston clearly links the invention of cinema to the scientific aspects of photography –considered as a scientific recording device such as the thermometer, an “instrument of inscription” that “produce[s] data” (Winston 37). But his analysis does not oppose artistic and scientific purposes, on the contrary for him artistic practices benefited from technical developments of scientific photography.

The following important evolution in the field of documentary films has been the introduction of narrative elements. Structuring a plot in order to create a progression in the development of a movie is a means to create interest for the viewer, but beyond that it allows the cinematographer to elaborate his own manner, his own style. Nichols bases his concept of the “documentary voice” on this notion, that is to say the combination of style and plot in the larger frame of “narrative story telling” (Nichols 91). As Goupil specifies it, Flaherty was among the first documentary filmmakers to introduce elements aiming at creating a narration: an organization in sequences, close shots creating empathy with the characters, camera movements dramatizing the action, etc (Goupil, 5’35” to 5’55”). Moreover Flaherty took advantage of recent technical evolutions notably concerning the loading of reels, the change of lenses and the handling of tripods (Goupil, 4’10” to 5’15”). It seems interesting to note that the term ‘documentary cinema’ was

²⁴ Goupil, 1’07” to 1’25”.

²⁵ Winston, Brian. “The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription.” *Theorizing Documentary*. Ed. Michael Renov. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

“That the camera can be manipulated more easily than, say, the thermometer is less significant than the fact that both instruments produce a representation of reality.” (Winston 40)

²⁶ « [...] the long history of pictorial representation as mode of scientific evidence [...] conditions, in part, the research agenda that produces the modern camera [...]” (Winston 37)

coined for the first time in 1926 in the *New York Sun* by Grierson to qualify Flaherty's work (Goupil, 6'28")²⁷.

More or less during the same period (early twentieth century) another esthetic aspect emerged with the "romantic" and "poetic" productions that attempted to depict the world through original forms frequently disconnected from the referent (the photographed object) of the photographic image, with the view to exploit the different qualities of the new medium. This poetic style is particularly at work in the "city symphony" genre for example, and can be linked to the pictorial artistic *avant-garde* of the time like Dadaist and Surrealist movements: the artistic techniques used by both movements (for example the collage technique that can be compared to the multiple exposure technique) are similar and their respective aesthetics are part of the same artistic movement. The Second World War period marked a radical change for documentary films, the large majority of cinematographic productions being oriented toward war efforts, acquiring clear political dimensions with propagandistic aims. Political and social perspectives were already at the core of the documentary practice, notably in Soviet films, but the Second World War amplified this aspect. A shift occurred from "educational cinema to committed cinema"²⁸.

From the 1950s the appearance of the magnetic tape for sound recording allowed to record images and sounds at the same time by reducing the necessary audio equipment. Goupil (16'16" to 16'45") notes that the sound was at first not synchronized with the images, which imposed an important work of re-synchronization during post-production. A major break occurred during the early 1960s with the synchronization of images and sound directly during filming, along with a significant decrease in the size and weight of cameras.

Filmmakers were able to treat and depict their subjects more directly with less technical constraints, which allowed them to work with reduced teams that could limit their impact on the subjects and to offer a greater level of control over recorded images and sounds. These elements also emphasized the role and place of the filmmaker, questioning his distance and relationship to the filmed subject, this notion of distance appearing more and more central in the documentary field. Several documentary

²⁷ Other sources note that the term was used before 1926, notably Séverine Graff (see note 38), p.53.

²⁸ "Les cinéastes de documentaire quittent peu à peu le cinéma éducatif pour un cinéma engagé." (Goupil, 10'30" to 10'38", author's translation).

currents were created during the 1950s, 60s and 70s with the view to create a filmic representation of contemporary issues, the documentary “voice” aspect becoming another major element of documentary films. Among those documentary currents it seems important to mention ‘Direct Cinema’ and the ‘Cinéma Vérité’ that marked an important evolution in the conception of documentary films; these currents will be discussed in the following section. *Style Wars* also benefited from these technical evolutions, and the movie is consequently marked by ethical questionings concerning the role of the filmmakers and their relation to the social actors. These elements will be developed in the second part.

The late twentieth century (1980s and 1990s) saw the emergence of other original forms of documentaries, and the increasing importance taken by video cameras and television (37’15” to 38’25”), but in relation to the subject of this study it seems relevant to only observe evolutions up to the 1980s.

b. Theories of documentary films.

Concerning documentary film’s theory it seems relevant first to quote the former practitioners of documentary, the filmmakers, who were the initial thinkers of the discipline. Then the study will focus on John Corner’s article “Dimensions of transition and continuity”²⁹, an analysis of the main theoretical academic approaches of documentary, before concentrating on the recent developments of this field of research

Prior to the academic consideration of the end of the twentieth century (that will be developed later), documentary filmmakers themselves led the reflections on documentary films. Historically, the first prominent figure in this sense is probably Grierson, the creator of the term ‘documentary’³⁰. He began by studying psychology and propaganda in Great Britain, before dedicating his career to the educational dimension of documentary, and he was highly involved in several national film agencies (notably the Empire Marketing Board in Great Britain and the National Film Board of Canada³¹).

²⁹ Corner, John. “Documentary Studies: Dimensions of transition and continuity.” *Rethinking Documentary. New Perspectives, New Practices*. Ed. Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong. London: Open University Press, 2008. Print.

³⁰ See previous section.

³¹ Zéau, Caroline. “ Cinéaste ou propagandiste? John Grierson et ‘l’idée documentaire’ ”.

For Grierson documentary films were “a means to serve propaganda for the purpose of education”³². Minimizing the aesthetic value of documentary, he considered that official authorities should control documentary productions in order to educate the citizens, or more precisely in order to create “a ‘Manufacturing Consent’ capable of shaping public opinion”³³. This ambiguous position partially led to the emergence of new documentary approaches (notably the Free Cinema movement in Great Britain) that rejected the notion of national authority³⁴. Grierson’s attempts to give a theoretical framework to documentary movies provided the bases for future and wider reflections.

The following important step in these theoretical researches occurred in the 1960s, with the Direct Cinema and Cinema Vérité movements. The 1963 MIPE-TV in Lyon³⁵ constitutes an interesting synthesis of the theoretical issues raised by both movements, as this meeting gathered the most prominent documentary filmmakers (notably Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin -French, Richard Leacock -British, Robert Drew and Albert Maysles -Americans³⁶), technicians and cameras (and sound) engineers and firms. During this meeting appeared a strong dichotomy between partisans of a purely observational practice of documentary films –Direct Cinema with Leacock, opposed to those in favor of a manifest intervention of the filmmakers in the movie –Cinema Vérité with Rouch. Theoretical issues were strongly linked to technical evolutions of the time, more precisely to the reduction of filming equipment that allowed a significant downsizing of film crews³⁷, and implied a closer relationship to the filmed subject. The

1895 Mille huit cent quatre-vingt-quinze. N°55 (June 2008): 53-74. Web. 28 April 2016.

³² “[...] le cinéma pour John Grierson était avant tout un moyen à mettre au service de la propagande à des fins d’éducation.” (Zéau 72, author’s translation)

³³ “[...] une “fabrique du consentement” [...] capable de modeler l’opinion publique.” (Zéau 54, author’s translation)

Zéau underlines the fact that Grierson was influenced by Lippman’s ideas, particularly by his works on public relations and on the use of propaganda (*Public Opinion* in 1922 and *The Phantom Public* in 1925).

³⁴ “John Grierson contribua donc maigrement à l’édifice d’une quelconque tradition artistique et les cinéastes qui rejoignirent l’ONF après-guerre s’empressèrent de rejeter cet héritage cinématographique, en même temps que le carcan institutionnel dont il était indissociable.” (Zéau 73)

³⁵ Marché International des Programmes et Équipements de Télévision (International Television Programmes and Equipment Market).

³⁶ Graff, Séverine. «Meeting and divergence in relation to « cinéma-vérité »: the MIPE-TV 1963 in Lyons”. 1895 Mille huit cent quatre-vingt-quinze. N°64 (Autumn 2011): 65-89. Web. 28 April 2016.

This article by Séverine Graff offers an interesting review of the MIPE-TV meeting.

³⁷ see previous section.

notion of truth was at the core of documentary practices, and remains a dominant issue in contemporary documentary studies. As Séverine Graff notes, the MIPE-TV was “marked by conflicts between [...filmmakers in favor of] a transparency of the tool [...and those who considered that] the camera has to perform a provocative function.”³⁸, she also underlines that “the issues raised by the MIPE-TV lasted several years”³⁹.

The 1970s marked the beginning of academic studies on documentary films that offered original approaches on the discipline. In his text entitled “Documentary Studies: Dimensions of Transition and Continuity”⁴⁰, Corner, after an evocation of previous works, underlines the role played by two texts published in 1976 (Dai Vaughan’s “Television Documentary Usage” and Bill Nichols’ article “Documentary Theory and Practice”) which for him “quite radically departed from previous work in the way they posed documentary as an object of study” (Corner 14). The most important aspect, evoked by Corner, of these texts is the issue of “documentary’s textuality, including its grammar of representation” (Corner 14), that is to say the tools used by documentary films to build and to convey a message through a specific filmic language. Both authors considered this discursive dimension very differently, but it remained at the core of their studies, and offered an efficient point of view on documentary’s studies, which was focused on the notion of representation. Nichols concentrated on the political aspects of documentary, emphasizing “expository” elements, whereas Vaughan’s study was limited to British television documentary and developed “observational” elements:

³⁸ “Ce colloque a aussi été marqué par les premières divergences entre les équipes américaines, prosélytes d’une transparence de l’outil et d’un effacement de l’équipe, et certains intellectuels français qui défendent, dans le sillage de Rouch, des expériences filmiques où la caméra assume une fonction provocatrice. Le MIPE, moment nodal de ce nouveau cinéma, amorce aussi une vaste polémique qui questionne la cohérence de ce «mouvement » et débat âprement de la terminologie à employer pour définir ces nouvelles pratiques : « cinéma-vérité » ou « cinéma direct ». Si cette manifestation ne dure que quelques jours, les dissensions générées lors cette rencontre courent sur plusieurs années.” (Graff 65, author’s translation)

³⁹ See previous quote.

⁴⁰ See note 27.

“Nichols’ reflections are guided by his attention to the deficits in a particular body of ‘left’ independent cinema, whereas Vaughan is primarily concerned with an increasingly popular strand of television. Yet their suspicion of modes of discursive management, particularly that of image by direct-address speech, are interesting to compare and suggest that for Nichols, with his commitment to the ‘expository’ idea, the distortive potential of speech has to be challenged within the context of its recognized indispensability, whereas Vaughan’s ‘observational’ emphasis places speech other than ‘overheard’ speech as secondary at best. Of course, Nichols’ framework is explicitly political, whereas Vaughan’s is only implicitly and partially politicized.”
(Corner 17)

The partition between a political expository practice of documentary and a less political observatory approach is revealing of the ethical choices of the documentary filmmakers. The notion of “discursive management” appears predominant here, and stresses the different potential modes of address available for the filmmakers, these modes of address being one of the political channel through which the film can express its voice. Concerning *Style Wars* this notion will be analyzed in the last part (the movie containing both expository and observational elements) as the particular status of the film is certainly linked to the ethical choices of the filmmakers.

These two somehow founding texts established the theoretical foundations for future academic studies on documentary films. Nichols’ approach became central in the following years⁴¹, and it will be analyzed in the next part of this study. It is interesting here to note the “increasing” importance taken by television from the 1970s concerning documentary films. *Style Wars* is directly linked to this idea, being a PBS production partially funded by television, and more importantly intended for television broadcast.

Parallel to these successive theoretical approaches emerged a field of research centered on the history of documentary, along with (for example) studies on the relationship between fiction and documentary films, on the conditions of production and reception of these films, or on philosophical or anthropological approaches, etc. This expansion of the sphere of documentary studies reflects a growing interest for the discipline from scholars. The most recent developments of documentary studies (mainly situated in the extensive analysis of the history of the practice, but also in the

⁴¹ “Nichols’ article [“Documentary Theory and Practice”] came near the beginning of his writings on documentary, which were to become, internationally, the most significant body of scholarship on documentary we have, with a major impact both on teaching and research.”
(Corner 18)

intermingling of different approaches: documentary cinema and philosophy, and ethics, etc.) illustrate the rich and constant evolution of the discipline⁴².

The movie under study is situated in this important period for documentary films during which several theoretical approaches emerged. Even if *Style Wars* cannot be directly linked to these different theories (it was released in 1983, which corresponds to the very beginnings of these new theoretical approaches), it was certainly influenced by the questionings of the time. In order to understand the operation of the film it appears relevant to analyze its documentary strategies, using Nichols' tools for the study of documentaries. Thus, the voice of the film and its mode (according to the definitions of Nichols) will be implemented in this perspective.

⁴² It seems important to mention the historical study of Ellis and McLane, the historical, theoretical and technical approach of Gauthier, and the philosophical approach of Niney, which constitute important works on documentary films, and illustrate a clear broadening of the documentary field of research. The conversation between Godmillow and Shapiro also offers an interesting synthesis of the issues at work in the contemporaneous documentary practice, tackling questions of representation, truth and reality, "visual language", "genre" and analyzing the "possibilities and constraints of non-fiction films" (Godmillow and Shapiro 80). The references for these works will be provided in the bibliography.

II – Study of the documentary processes.

1) The three “C” of documentary: Credible, Compelling and Convincing.

a. Preliminary notions.

“Many documentarists would appear to believe what fiction filmmakers only feign to believe, or openly question: that film-making creates an objective representation of the way things really are. Such documentaries use the magical template of verisimilitude without the storyteller's open resort to artifice. Very few seem prepared to admit through the very tissue and texture of their work that all film-making is a form of discourse fabricating its effects, impressions, and point of view.”⁴³

“[...] Nichols works his way through a tight typological scheme for studying documentary as a textual system. Within this scheme, influenced by various concurrent writings on ‘film as system’ (including work in the journal *Screen*), documentary is seen to be grounded in the logics of exposition. These logics involve various forms of address, direct and indirect, sync and non-sync, a complex (indeed, dual) idea of diegesis relating both to narrative and to expositional development, and strategies of sequence construction and linking.”
(Corner p.17)

In these quotations, apart from the relations between documentaries and reality, Nichols and Corner underline the language dimension of filmmaking. Indeed, considered as a “textual system” that produces a discourse and implies “effects, impressions, and point of view” -that is to say a filmic language- documentary form is consequently a type of discourse aiming at persuading. This audiovisual discourse can be linked to the western tradition of rhetoric, both domains (films and rhetoric) aiming at creating a particular perspective of persuasion that is presented to an audience in order to focus on particular points, ideas or thesis. In these conditions, it seems relevant to follow Nichols’ approach (Nichols 2001, 50) and to employ the Aristotelian distinction between the different modes of persuasion that compose the historical western roots of the study of discourse, and that consists of three different fields: the *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*.

The *ethos* is based on the capacity of the orator to persuade the audience of his authority on a precise subject. It is the recognition by this audience of the qualities of the orator on this subject. For example, the point of view of a specialized professor on his own field of research will be considered as an authoritative voice.

The *pathos* is mainly at work when the arguments used are built on emotional aspects rooted on values shared by both the orator and the audience. Emotions and

⁴³ Nichols, Bill. “The Voice of Documentary.” *Film Quarterly*. Vol. 36 n°3 (Spring 1983): 17-30. Web. p.18

values such as good and evil, fears and hopes are frequently brought into play in the field of *pathos*.

Finally the *logos* is the domain of logic, when the persuasion is logically organized in order to underline a chain of consecutive concrete and definite elements which cannot be denied due to their qualities. Here scientific examples can be evoked, such as smoking injures lungs, failing lungs lead to death, and consequently smoking kills. This example is very basic, but illustrates the chain of facts at work in a perspective of *logos*.

According to Nichols these three modes of persuasion can be linked to three tactics employed in a filmic discourse: the *ethos* leading to the credibility of the orator (filmmaker, voice of the movie), the *pathos* being compelling for the audience, and the *logos* aiming at convincing this audience in a logical way. Nichols specifies that these three different fields are based on the “idea of artistic or artificial evidence or proof”, a proof that is necessary to support any given persuasive argument⁴⁴. We will now observe these three elements in the perspective of the movie under study.

b. Credible.

Defined by B. Nichols (Nichols, 2001, p.50) as “ethical: generating an impression of good moral character or credibility”, this tool of persuasion is at work in *Style Wars* through different aspects. We have seen that Henry Chalfant, co-producer of the film, had a ten-year experience of the graffiti movement in New York when he started the movie⁴⁵. His photographic books (*Subway Art*, 1984, and *Spray Can Art*, 1987) were, and still are⁴⁶, considered as important documents about the artistic scene of the time. As an emerging cultural movement, graffiti painting did not have real specialists in the early eighties (except the writers themselves), but the figure of Henry Chalfant might be considered as an expert due to his previous works and experiences, and to the quality of

⁴⁴ “More pertinent to our discussion of how documentaries speak or acquire a voice of their own is the idea of artistic or artificial evidence or proof. These are the techniques used to generate the *impression* of conclusiveness or proof. They are a product of the orator or filmmaker’s inventiveness rather than something found elsewhere and introduced intact. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle divided artistic proofs into three types. Each strives to convince us of an argument’s or perspective’s validity.” (Nichols, 2001. p.50)

⁴⁵ See the Introduction.

⁴⁶ Kennedy, Randy. “Graffiti of New York’s Past, Revived and Remade.” *New York Times*. 26 October 2010. Web. 12 April 2016.

his photographic skills. But this aspect is not directly at work in the movie, as Chalfant is never mentioned neither shown.

The use of clear authoritative voices is also a device of credibility. The figures of the mayor of New York City of the time, of the chairman of the MTA, and of a detective of the NYCPD clearly bear a reliable value. Even if their opinions are presented in opposition to the bombers -the main figures of the film, their presence alone is a guarantee of the serious and careful application and organization of the movie itself; and the way in which they are shown reinforces this idea. The mayor is filmed in his office, with the symbols of his power: surrounded by rich and sumptuous furnishings, with the American flag (the Star-Spangled banner) in the background. The chairman of the MTA is also shown in his office, with many files on his desk (suggesting that he is busy and has lot of work) and with an MTA subway map in the background underlining his function –an American banner is also visible in the background. The NYCPD detective is staged in an outside location (a train yard), emphasizing his qualities as a man of action.

Finally the bombers themselves support an authoritative value, as they are depicted as the best painters, the most original and important artists of their generation⁴⁷, and they are represented as the most authoritative elements: they are staged and presented as the real specialists of graffiti and the only legitimate judges of the practice, as the film turns them into guides that will directs the viewer in his journey into graffiti. This aspect creates a strong effect of contrast with the representation and status of the official authoritative voices. In a sort of inversion, the mayor, MTA chairman and NYCPD detective become illegitimate voices (because of their lack of knowledge concerning graffiti), whereas practitioners of illegal activities (the writers) become real specialists, authoritative voices and credible elements.

⁴⁷ During the very beginning of the gallery sequence (49'27") a disembodied voice declares: "For the past 20 years, there really hasn't been anything hot. There have been no movements since Pop Art." This remark tacitly implies that graffiti movement is the "hot" movement of the early 1980s.

c. Compelling.

The *pathos* effect, for Nichols, “appeal(s) to the audience’s emotions to produce the desired disposition; putting the audience in the right mood or establishing a frame of mind favorable to a particular view” (Nichols, 2001, p.50). It is possible to link at least three sequences to this device: the interview of the mother with her son, the different street interviews, and more particularly the interview of the woman in front of the mural speaking with the group of teenage bombers, and the scenes in the club, in which teenagers are staged as kids playing together.

First of all the moments when a young bomber is presented in his house, close to his mother –there are six instances along the film, clearly bear an emotional value. For the young painter, as he tries to develop and explain his motives for illegal painting in an honest and sincere way, by answering his mother’s questions with his own values, from his point of view. But also for his mother, as she appears helpless and distraught by the behavior of her son, and insists on the dangerousness, illegality, and immorality of wasting nights in train painting. The scale of the shots also reinforces these emotional aspects. Mother and son are filmed in close shots (for example from 19’12” to 19’22”), which creates a sensation of proximity with the viewers and underlines the physical expression of their emotions –the screen is full of their emotionally charged faces.

The different street interviews also carry emotional aspects. The process itself appears as truthful: opinions are directly recorded and express people’s sensibility to a given issue –here graffiti painting. The appreciation of the “people of the street’s” voice is consequently based on an emotional range. The woman interviewed in front of the mural (37th minute) is an example of this process. She evokes the notion of a “deep meaning” concerning graffiti and admits that she was not aware of this deep meaning before meeting the painters. She somehow discovers the artistic values carried by the graffiti movement, beyond its illegal and vandalistic aspects. But she is represented as alien to the group of writers (an adult woman surrounded by a group of boys, wearing different types of clothes, and above all she does not master the codes of the discipline, contrary to the specialist who converses with her), almost mocked for her ignorance of the graffiti sphere, which reinforces what she says as it comes from an external point of view (coming outside from the graffiti sphere this point of view is consequently more neutral, and closer to the viewer’s position).

The sequence about the “conflicts” with the bomber named Cap (from 44’15” to 46’30”) also conveys a strong emotional and value-based aspect. Such expressions as “it hurts me” or “that’s ‘never forgive’ action” clearly denote the affecting consequences suffered by the bombers. The viewer is placed in their private circle to directly perceive their own emotional reactions generated by the practice of graffiti. It creates a link between a given artistic movement and its emotional potential. This notion is strengthened in this sequence by the point of view of the filmmakers, the film’s voice being clearly oriented toward compassion for the writers. They are staged as victims, ‘good characters’, confronted to the ‘bad character’, Cap, who does not respect the rules of graffiti. This sequence will be analyzed in details in the last part.

d. Convincing.

The convincing aspects, expounded by Nichols as “demonstrative: using real or apparent reasoning or demonstration; proving, or giving the impression of proving the case” (Nichols, 2001, p.50), are not directly used in *Style Wars*. But some aspects of the movie can be linked to convincing elements. And amongst others the most direct example could be the effect of contrast created by the gap between the violence of the repression evoked by authoritative figures and the gaiety and cheerfulness shown by the bombers. Even if their discourse is sometimes radical they are just shown as a group of teenagers trying to have fun and to “make their marks in society” by writing their names “on society”. This effect of contrast supports the fact that the official reaction is disproportionate and inadequate to the social recognition attempts and artistic motives of the teenagers.

Concerning the film’s voice, it seems possible to depict editing as a convincing element. The didactic dimension of the movie, linked to the gradual description of the graffiti movement (its protagonists, adversaries, techniques, codes, etc.), constitutes one aspect of this convincing dimension. Moreover the plurality of editing techniques (among which continuity editing and parallel editing, that will be analyzed later) used in the film tends to give an insight of the filmmakers’ convincing aims and enriches the didactic dimension. Beyond a factual representation of an artistic movement, the filmmakers try to convey the complexity of the practice through cinematographic devices, notably editing.

e. Relationship between the recorded voices and the voice of the film.

Beyond this observation of how the different voices are used in order to organize a filmic argumentation, it appears necessary to differentiate two voice levels: the recorded voices and the voice of the film itself (that is to say the voice employed by the filmmakers). The recorded voices directly express the opinions and ideas of the movie's social actors, whereas the filmmakers indirectly construct the voice of the film (using, among other elements, the organization of these direct voices to create their own one). The underground scene (9'07" to 11'20") in the movie under study illustrates this distinction. The graffiti artists' voices are recorded in a didactic perspective, to explain their motives, but the position of the filmmakers expresses a different aspect: the camera was there, in the underground, a dangerous environment, with the artists, and consequently reflects the implication of the filmmakers. In this scene the voice of the film conveys a notion of involvement and reinforces the credibility of the filmmakers, whereas the recorded voices give further explanations about the practice of graffiti. Both voices can sometimes and somehow correspond -here the credibility of the artists is also at stake, but there is a fundamental distinction in their natures, functions and levels: the individual dimension of the recorded voices is opposed to the filmic level of the film's voice. This contrast leads to the notion of film modes, through which the voice of the film is expressed.

2) The "mode" of the documentary.

a. Preliminary notions.

In his "Introduction to Documentary" (2001) Bill Nichols describes six modes of documentary representation, from the beginnings of cinema to the performative aspects developed in the 1980s (Nichols 2001, chapter 6, p.99). Before trying to apply these modes to *Style Wars* it seems relevant to briefly describe each one of them.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Nichols proposes a relevant synthesis of these documentary modes at the end of the sixth chapter of "Introduction to Documentary" (see fig.3).

The “poetic documentary”, significantly developed in the 1920s by the different *avant-garde* movements, is characterized by its abstraction, its artistic representation of the world, mixing conceptual and poetic representations of the world.

The “expository documentary” appeared simultaneously during the 1920s. But it is a more direct and didactic mode of representation, which frequently carries a political value. It is characterized by its direct address to the viewer, most of the time through an authoritative didactic disembodied male voice, also named “voice-of-god”.

The “observational documentary” directly presents what happens in front of the camera, and the voice of the film is frequently articulated around the editing. Observational documentary “eschew commentary and reenactment” (Nichols 2001, 138).

The “participatory documentary” can be considered as the opposite side of the observational documentary. There is a manifest and obvious intervention of the filmmaker in the film itself, in order to develop in details certain aspects of the argumentation. The use of archival footage and direct addresses to the subjects of the film are frequent in this mode of documentary representation. Both observational and participatory aspects were mainly developed in the 1960s.

The “reflexive documentary” aims at “questioning the documentary form” in itself, considering the lacks of previous modes. It is based on an abstract and indirect address to the issues at stake in the movie.

The “performative documentary” emphasizes the “subjective aspects” of the documentary discourse, and is characterized by its particular form, articulation, and “excessive use of style”. Both reflexive and performative forms appeared during the 1980s.

It seems important to underline the fact that those categories are not hermetic and one documentary film can use several modes to develop its own singular voice. The next part of this analysis will observe the potential modes at work in *Style Wars*.

b. Potential modes.

The most obvious element of the movie is its observational dimension. Large parts of *Style Wars* are composed of non-directed and non-commented takes, giving free rein to the bombers to express their feelings and ideas. There are also numerous takes of

action painting without any commentary, or traditional group scenes of the life of the teenagers: parties in the clubs, meetings at the “writer’s bench”. These sequences are most of the time devoid of direct didactic purposes, and mainly present to the audience what was in front of the camera. It is almost possible to describe this process as a scientific observation of a given group that can be linked to Direct Cinema and to the work of Fred Wiseman. Winston evokes this point in a direct quotation from Wiseman: “[...Wiseman] began by being not overly troubled with the observational claims of the [Direct Cinema] style: “It’s the idea of using film and film technology to have a look at what’s going on in the world.” (Winston 48). But the use of other modes of documentary implies the necessity to qualify this observational aspect.

A disembodied voice is used several times all along the movie. Its function is to contextualize the emerging artistic hip-hop movement and its recent history. This disembodied voice is mainly used in the first part of the movie (from the beginning to the tenth minute), then around the 22nd, 25th and 32nd minutes, each time to give further details on the history of the movement, and finally around the 50th minute to explain the transition from street and train activities to exhibitions in art galleries. It is a male voice, which can be described as a “voice-of-god” due to its authoritative and omniscient aspects. The use of such a voice links the film to the expository documentary mode, as it is one of its main characteristics. But like the observational aspects it seems relevant to qualify this use of expository aspects.

Another documentary mode is at work in the movie. The abstract night shots of the train deposits of the beginning and the end of the movie, and the use of dramatizing music in these shots (a highly expressive Wagnerian composition), situate the movie in a poetic perspective. These shots are somehow empty of factual information and create an effect of aestheticization in the artistic depiction of railway infrastructure (trains, rails, light signals, etc.). But the low frequency of occurrence of this device prevents the classification of the movie as a poetic documentary, and another documentary mode seems more accurate to describe the entire film: the participatory mode.

c. Participatory aspects.

The participatory mode appears as the most efficient means to describe the movie. Indeed, the characteristics of this mode are generally used in the entire film. The

importance of the interviews, the fact that the voice of the interviewer can be heard at many times, and most of all the commitment of the figure of Henri Chalfant to the bombers' side for a period of ten years when the movie was shot (which also reflects the general commitment of the filmmakers to the graffiti artists), are patent elements which allow the characterization of *Style Wars* as predominantly using the participatory mode.

Moreover there is an obvious contrast (as previously observed) between the bombers' voice and the voice of the different official authorities (the mayor, the MTA's chairman and the NYCPD detective). This contrast is conveyed through the relation between both groups and the filmmaker -or more generally the "makers" of the movie. The proximity between the bombers and the filmmakers can be described as evident, due to their freedom of speech and their unrestrained behavior compared to the official forms of speech used by the authoritative voices. The filmmakers certainly chose to preserve the official tone of authoritative voices to reinforce the contrast with the voices of the graffiti artists. Instead of investigative interviews, the filmmakers only record the official arguments of the authorities, without trying to deepen their points of view. This supposedly superficial approach constitutes another manifest element that strengthens the participatory approach.

An interesting detail also betrays the commitment of the filmmakers to the writer's side. During a studio sequence (from 44'15" to 46'30") there is a shot around 46'05" in which a colored sketch can be observed in the background⁴⁹. This sketch is the graffiti form of the word -or name "HENRY". It is possible to think that this sketch situates the scene in Henry Chalfant's studio, as the bombers are continually observing photo albums, perhaps Chalfant's archives of their works. The location of this scene in the photographer's studio indicates and emphasizes the relationship of trust between the artists and the photographer. Moreover this studio sequence (and other sequences staged in the same environment) places Chalfant's work at the core of artistic exchanges between writers; photographic representations of their works being the support of their discussions. The photographer therefore becomes an active member participating in the movement: a recorder and archivist of ephemeral masterpieces.

⁴⁹ See fig. 4.

3) Narration.

It is possible to distinguish three main aspects in the construction of the narration in *Style Wars*: the didactic presentation of an artistic movement, the articulation of three spheres (the individuals, the group(s) and society in general), and the importance of editing in the representation of graffiti wars.

a. Didactic dimension.

First, the didactic dimension of the movie implies narrative aspects. The progressive initiation to the Hip-Hop and graffiti cultures and codes operated by the film logically raises the curiosity of the viewer, notably due to the novelty of the culture, as it reveals some elements of an underground and secret practice. The filmmakers gradually introduce the spectator to the subtleties of graffiti, to its rules, activists, places and tools. Beyond this initial presentation, the content of the film expands to larger notions (competitive aspects, social issues, etc.) aiming at contextualizing the practice. The use of a “voice-of-God commentary”⁵⁰ illustrates the didactic dimension and complements the plain observation and listening of the writers by its authoritative dimension, which leads the viewer in his journey into graffiti.

b. ‘Levels of representation’.

The articulation and alternation of three embedded levels, from the individual to the society as a whole, enables the creation of multiple relationships between the different protagonists, and consecutively to introduce narrative aspects. Some characters are developed individually through the field of intimacy then set in the context of a group, and finally they are confronted to the society in general. The example of the writer (named Skeme) and his mother, and the example of Case’s character illustrates this idea. They are individualized through the use of domestic scenes that induce a sense of intimacy and that appeal to compelling and emotional aspects⁵¹, then

⁵⁰ “The voice-of-God tradition fostered the cultivation of the professionally trained, richly toned male voice of commentary that proved a hallmark of the expository mode [...]” (Nichols 2001, 105)

⁵¹ See previous chapter.

they are presented within a larger group of graffiti artists which anchors them into the community of writers, before being faced with graffiti social issues (mainly the degradation of public properties), which emphasizes their social position. Narrative aspects emerge from this articulation, as social actors (the graffiti artists) are turned into characters (narrative actors) with the aim to arouse the viewer's interest (and to raise his expectations), to prompt him to follow their evolution and to create a close relationship between the viewer and the artists. For the development of this study the three potential modes of representation of the social actors will be called 'levels of representation', in order to emphasize the relationships that are constructed between these different levels, but also to underline the fact that each character can be successively represented through the intimate, group and public spheres.

The multiplication of the levels of representation is thus a means to develop a complex network of relationships, inside the intimate sphere (family relationships), inside the group (friendly relationships), inside society (social relationships) and between all these spheres; which likewise multiplies the potential plots that the movie can establish.

c. Editing: representation of the style wars.

The two aspects previously discussed compose the narrative background of the movie, but the narration in itself is mainly based on the use of editing, notably in its application to the graffiti wars presented in the film. These graffiti wars are double: on the one hand the style wars between writers, on the other hand the indirect conflicts between writers and the social authorities (political authorities, transit administration and users of the train system). It is interesting to remark that the editing choices are similar for both oppositions. The main editing technique used by the filmmakers to represent these oppositions is named crosscutting or parallel editing, and consists in a repeated alternation of shots taken from two different scenes. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define and analyze the process in their book "Film Art: an Introduction"⁵²:

⁵² Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art, an Introduction*. 8th edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. Print.

“Crosscutting gives us an unrestricted knowledge of causal, temporal, or spatial information by alternating shots from one line of action in one place with shots of other events in other places. Crosscutting thus creates some spatial discontinuity, but it binds the action together by creating a sense of cause and effect and temporal simultaneity.”⁵³
(Bordwell and Thompson 244)

The notion of linkage between two scenes is here a central point. Even if the “spatial discontinuity” implied by crosscutting spatially disconnects both actions, the process also strongly connects both scenes, and creates a sort of indirect dialogue. The construction of the sequence with the MTA chairman and a group of writers (from 55’28 and 57’42”) clearly illustrates this idea. In an alternation between shots of the MTA chairman in his office and shots of the group of writers (with also shots of the painted trains and still-images), the parallel editing produces a question-and-answer system that allows a confrontation of antagonistic arguments. The effect of the process is to provide the viewer with a full range of information about the conflict, which would certainly be impossible in a direct confrontation of both groups, and which would be much less effective, and less vivid, with a different choice of editing. The sequence exactly corresponds to this observation as it somehow consists in a debriefing of the encounter, and discussion, that previously occurred between the chairman and some of the writers. This meeting is not shown in the movie, but there is brief summary at the beginning of the sequence, and more importantly the rest of the sequence addresses issues that were not developed during the meeting. The viewer has therefore a complete knowledge of both parts’ arguments. Moreover the crosscutting process emphasizes here the role of the filmmakers, who become mediators between both entities, another aspect of the participatory mode already observed. The dialogue dimension of this sequence is obvious: there is a thematic link between the two first statements (the “insides”), the third and fourth statements can be considered as two versions of the same idea (“the public would be impressed” and “let people vote on it”), statement 5 is a direct answer from the MTA chairman to the artists’ “proposal”, and finally the last two statements illustrate the gap between both points of view, a gap centered on the notion of “misplacement” (of MTA priorities for the writers, of the writer’s “value system” for

⁵³ Bordwell and Thompson are mainly focused on narrative fiction films and processes, however the editing process used by the filmmakers in *Style Wars* corresponds to the definition given by the authors. Moreover this connection to narrative fiction films clearly anchors *Style Wars*’ editing in a narrative perspective.

the MTA chairman). Here is a transcript of the sequence under study (from 55'28 to 57'42"):

MTA chairman: (statement 1)

- " The people see the outside of the cars when the trains are going, pull into the station, or when they're passing on the express track. And then it's generally a blur. But I don't think the public finds that nearly as intrusive and ugly as they do the inside graffiti. "

Graffiti artists: (statement 2)

- " He hates the insides.

- Yeah, he hates the insides. He said if there's any possible way of we giving him some kind of suggestion of how to get rid of the inside, he said there might be a chance of "negotiating" with the outside.

- "Negotiating?"

- Something like that. "

MTA chairman: (statement 3)

- " I met with a group of them one day. More out of intellectual curiosity as to who they were and what made them tick. I found them surprisingly articulate. They expressed a strong sense that if their outside paintings were left untouched, that the public would be impressed. "

Graffiti artists: (statement 4)

- " We came up to him with a proposal to paint 10 cars inside and out and let it run in the major stations. And let people vote on it, let's say a two-week period, and after the two-week period, they'll have the results in the paper, and I think the MTA will be embarrassed. "

MTA chairman: (statement 5)

- " I thought there was no basis whatsoever in which it was proper for anyone to touch our property in an unauthorized fashion. "

Graffiti artists: (statement 6)

- " They got guys out there that are mugging people in the subways, stabbing people, throwing people onto the tracks and all that, and they're wasting their bullshit money trying to get us. "

MTA chairman: (statement 7)

-“ With all respect, I think you are close to falling into the trap of the 1960s culture, which says this society has left these kids with not enough to do. If the kids have energy and want to do something, we'll give them all brooms, we'll give them all sponges, and they can do something that is publicly productive, useful and that would earn for them the respect and approbation of their fellow citizens. It isn't the energy that is misplaced, it's the value system that is misplaced. “

Style Wars mainly bases its argumentation on credible and compelling arguments, and uses elements taken from several documentary modes as defined by Nichols. However the participatory aspects seem predominant in the structure of the film. Moreover narrative elements are employed in order to create a dynamic depiction and to arouse the interest of the viewer. It seems now important to analyze the status of the film and its influence on the graffiti culture. These elements will be linked to the filmic devices used in *Style Wars*.

III – Originality of the voice of the film, analysis of its status.

This final part will observe the originality of the documentary voice developed by *Style Wars*' filmmakers, and will analyze the impact and legacy of the movie, especially on the following generations of graffiti artists. A sequence analysis will be performed in order to underline the filmic devices at work in terms of editing, sound and cinematographic elements. Then the movie will be replaced in the History of graffiti to underline its status and influence on the evolution of the movement.

1) Sequence analysis

The sequence (43'05" to 49'24") chosen for this sequence analysis is interesting as it gathers elements of parallel editing, a multiplicity of recorded voices, an important work on sound editing, and exemplifies the notion of 'levels of representation' previously mentioned, along with other elements.

Shot 1: 43'05" to 43'16"



-long shot, pan to the left

Shot 2: 43'17" to 43'37"



-long shot to full shot, match-on-action (with following shot)

Shot 3: 43'38" to 43'41"



-match-on-action (with previous shot), full shot

Shot 4: 43'42" to 43'59"



-full shot to long shot, zoom out

Shot 5: 44'00" to 44'16"



-medium close up

Shot 6: 44'17 to 44'33"



-medium full shot to medium shot for the characters in the background (close-up on the foreground, photo album), zoom-out before slight zoom-in

Shots 7 and 8: 44'34" to 44'36"



-photographs, still images

Shot 9: 44'37" to 44'44"



-medium close up to close up on the character's face, zoom-in

Shots 10 and 11: 44'45" to 44'47"



-photographs, still images

Shot 12: 44'48" to 44'50"



-return to shot 9, close up on the face

Shot 13: 44'51" to 44'55"



-medium close up

Shot 14: 44'56" to 45'05"



-medium full shot, steadycam following the character's moves

Shot 15: 45'06" to 45'10"



-close up on the character's profile, steadycam

Shot 16: 45'11" to 45'27"



-return to shot 14, medium full shot, steadycam following the character's moves

Shot 17: 45'28" to 45'32"



-medium shot, pan to the right

Shot 18: 45'33" to 45'36"



-medium shot

Shots 19 and 20: 45'37 to 45'39"



-photographs, still images

Shot 21: 45'40" to 45'42"



-return to shot 18, medium shot

Shot 22: 45'43" to 45'47"



-medium shot

Shot 23: 45'48" to 45'54"



-close up on the character's faces, zoom out

Shot 24: 45'55" to 45'59"



-medium close up, steadycam moving to the left

Shot 25: 46'00" to 46'18"



-medium close up, steadycam moving to the right, closeup on the character's faces, then steadycam moves to the left

Shot 26: 46'19" to 46'32"



-medium close up, zoom out then zoom in and slight movement to the left

Shot 27: 46'33" to 46'35"



-full shot

Shot 28: 46'36" to 46'50"



-close up on the character's face, slight zoom in

Shot 29: 46'51" to 46'53"



-close up on the character's face

Shot 30: 46'54" to 46'57"



-return to shot 28, close up to medium close up, steadycam moving to the right

Shot 31: 46'58" to 47'00



-medium close up

Shot 32: 47'01" to 47'03"



-photograph, zoom in the still image

Shot 33: 47'04" to 47'22"



-return to shot 31, medium close up, then slight zoom out and steadycam moving to the right

Shot 34: 47'23" to 47'41"



-medium close up, pan to the right then still shot

Shot 35: 47'42" to 47'47"



-full shot to medium shot, zoom in on the "CAP" painting

Shot 36: 47'48" to 47'50"



-photograph, zoom in the still image

Shot 37: 47'51" to 47'53"



-full shot, pan to the right

Shot 38: 47'54" to 47'56"



-full shot, pan to the right

Shot 39: 47'57" to 48'14"



-close up on the character's face

Shot 40: 48'15" to 48'20"



-full shot, pan to the left

Shot 41: 48'21" to 48'23"



-return to shot 39, close up on the character's face

Shot 42: 48'24" to 48'27"



-full shot, high-angle shot

Shot 43: 48'28" to 48'34"



-return to shot 39, close up on the character's face, slight zoom in

Shot 44: 48'35" to 48'45"



-long shot, high-angle shot

Shot 45: 48'46" to 48'51"



-high-angle shot, medium full shot to medium close up, zoom in

Shot 46: 48'52" to 48'58"



-long shot, accelerated shot, fade out

Shot 47: 48'59" to 49'04"



-fade in, long shot, photograph, zoom in the still image

Shot 48: 49'05" to 49'11"



-full shot, photograph, still image

Shot 49: 49'12" to 49'16"



-close up, photograph, still image

Shot 50: 49'17" to 49'20"



-close up, photograph, still image

Shot 51: 49'21 to 49'24"



-close up, photograph, still image, fade out

The first striking point in this sequence is the reduced length of the shots, and consequently the important number of shots that compose the sequence (51). Several shots, notably the still images of photographs, last less than a few seconds, and the longest shots do not exceed twenty seconds. The consequence of this process is an impression of nervousness implied by rapid changes between different environments, characters, actions, scales of shots, etc. But the sequence can also be divided in three important scenes: the studio scene with several graffiti artists, the writer's bench scene, and the scenes with Cap and more particularly the final interview (along with other short takes: still images, shots of the mural, etc.). These three major scenes are fragmented into numerous shorter shots through editing, which as a result also dynamizes the sequence. This notion of dynamism can be connected to the subject of the sequence, the conflict between writers that implies tensions.

The tension is also reinforced by the use of music. An instrumental song is used three times in this sequence, and it accompanies during a few seconds the action of the bomber named Cap when he covers the paintings of other graffiti artists. This action is divided in three parts, at 45'29", 47'23" and 48'15", marked by continuity in the editing, through a match-on-action. During the first occurrence he walks to the train he will

paint, during the second one he paints the train, and during the last one he leaves the place. Here the music is used to dramatize his action by emphasizing the illegality of his act towards the rules of graffiti. This effect results from the music itself, which mainly consists in a repeated pattern of hi-hats (a plain rhythm that can be interpreted as sustaining the tension) and from the action that is represented: Cap is violating the implicit laws concomitantly expressed by the other writers on the soundtrack.

The character of Cap embodies the tensions in this sequence, which is also illustrated by the sound effect and editing process used at 44'45". A writer explains that Cap does not respect the pieces of other artists and systematically covers it. The voice of the writer is a voice-over and a photograph of a painted train is visible. Then the writer makes a sound ("POW!") to express the violence of Cap's action, simultaneously the photograph changes to another photograph of a graffiti covered by a Cap painting. The editing here uses both sound and image to symbolize the violence of the action.

The use of voice-over is another interesting point in this sequence. Very frequently the vocal soundtrack of a given shot starts during the end of the previous shot (for example between shots 4 and 5), or continues on the following one (between shots 41 and 42). Systematically the subject of these discussions is the opposition to Cap, or for Cap the opposition to all the other writers. This process allows the creation of a dichotomy, an indirect opposition between Cap and the other writers (gathered in an anti-Cap group). The voice-over symbolizes this opposition by confronting shots of Cap to the voices (and criticisms) of the other writers, and *vice versa*. Moreover the process also increases the tension by adding rhythm to each shot by the use of sounds from the previous or following shots.

Concerning editing, the sequence is predominantly structured by crosscutting (or alternate editing). As it has been noted previously for another sequence (with the group of bombers in the studio and MTA chairman Richard Ravitch in his office) the process spatially separates the characters, but at the same time it links the arguments evoked in each scene to other arguments from contiguous scenes. Moreover the alternate editing creates another indirect question-and-answer system, each shot complementing the previous one. The beginning of the sequence under study is a vivid example of this process. Cap gives his own interpretation of the practice of graffiti and underlines the difference between a "graffiti writer" and a "graffiti bomber" (43'42"), that is to say his personal vision of graffiti opposed to the others one, which results to a "blood war"

(43'55"). Then the writer Min accuses him to don't respect the rules, to "ruin" graffiti and to "destroy" the train yards (44'00" to 44'16"). Here the editing indirectly confronts both voices and develops a general view of antagonistic elements, as it presents and confronts opposed ideas. Each shot is spatially disconnected from the others, but at the same time linked to the others by its subject. Crosscutting is also complemented by other types of editing, such as continuity editing⁵⁴ (previously evoked concerning the partition and organization of a scene: Cap painting a train), or what can be called illustrative editing (when images are an illustration of the commentaries), as, for example, when photographs are used to exemplify character's arguments.

The multiplicity and complexity of the editing processes used in this sequence also reinforce the work on the different levels of representation previously mentioned. Indeed the character of Cap is represented in isolation (compared to the representations of the other artists), or accompanied by one or two other (supposedly) writers, but they are totally silent. This element is particularly at work during the partitioned sequence (at 45'29", 47'23" and 48'15"): at the beginning of the first part (45'29") it is possible to furtively see a body on the right edge of the frame, but rapidly Cap is alone, until the end of the third part when the other character re-enters the frame. Moreover this phenomenon of isolation is gradual, as Cap is first represented with the two other writers under the bridge (shots 1 to 4), then painting a train (with another character almost unnoticeable, shots 17, 34, 35 and 40) and finally he is isolated in the final interview (shots 39, 41 and 42). The different scales of shots follow this gradual process, from long shots (43'05", shots 1 to 4) to close ups (shots 39, 41 and 42). It is interesting to note that this phenomenon of gradual isolation is symmetrically opposed to the representation of the other writers. First, one of them is represented alone (44'00" to 44'16"), then there is a small group of artists in the studio, and finally a larger community during the writer's bench scene (and also the general scene of the mural, using a high-angle shot, perhaps to suggest a general vision that encompasses the entire group of writers in the same frame).

Alternating several different levels of representation allows the filmmakers to create a complex depiction of the relationships between the individuals and the group in

⁵⁴ "Around 1900- 1910, as filmmakers started to use editing, they sought to arrange their shots so as to tell a story coherently and clearly. Thus editing, supported by specific strategies of cinematography and mise-en-scene, was used to ensure *narrative continuity*." (Bordwell and Thompson 231)

the context of the graffiti culture. Here the alternate use of the individual sphere, group sphere and public sphere reinforces the notion of dichotomy previously mentioned by confronting both groups (pro-Cap and anti-Cap) through each sphere. But these editing choices are also the manifestation of the filmmakers. The dichotomy suggests that one of the two opponents is a good character whereas the other should be the bad one. In fact, the sequence is also morally oriented, and Cap's arguments seem invalid when compared to the arguments of the 'anti-Cap' group expressed since the beginning of the movie. There is a clear imbalance between the characters shown all along the film, and Cap's marginal representation.

Moreover the sequence is very interesting for its expression of graffiti ethics, and its representation of a correct practice of graffiti, linked to a set of rules (it is, for example, forbidden to cover the paintings of other writers, there is a distinction between "graffiti artists" and "graffiti bombers", etc.). After a depiction of the practice itself, of the perception of this practice by public authorities and by other elements external to graffiti (for example the users of the MTA transit system), this part of the movie focuses on the graffiti community and develops its observation of social relationships inside this community. The position of the sequence in the film follows this idea: the sequence is preceded by a very intimate scene (a graffiti artist at home) and followed by a scene in the public sphere (the gallery sequence). Consequently the sequence under study can be considered as a sort of transition between these two spheres, a transition that operates through the community of writers. Symbolically the function of the sequence is to describe how graffiti artists can reach public recognition (that is to say enter galleries), and the sequence suggests that public recognition is conditioned by the recognition of peers.

This sequence is representative of the filmic devices used in the movie, and it is also representative of the detailed description of the graffiti movement in the early 1980s that is built by the movie. In relation to all the aspects previously observed, the last part of this study will consist in an analysis of the status and of the influence of *Style Wars* on the graffiti movement

2) Status of the film and influence on the graffiti movement.

It seems first important to underline the status of the movie in the general history of graffiti. The website of the film constitutes a relevant source of information concerning the movie's status. Indeed, the website contains numerous interviews of the filmmakers, and more particularly of Chalfant. These interviews, most of the time, insist on the legacy of the movie, and on its consequences on the Hip-Hop and graffiti movements. *Style Wars* has marked both the climax and the end of the "golden age of youthful creativity"⁵⁵, that is to say the last generation before the international expansion of the movement, and also before the beginnings of the commercial dimension of graffiti. Diallo's article previously mentioned underlines the influence of the galleries on the artistic movement, and suggests that the commercialization of graffiti radically changed the practice.

The movie also constitutes a very important archive for the history of the movement, which is represented in the website by the "Big Subway Archive" project⁵⁶. This project consists in several interactive and multimedia works, a sort of slideshow of previously unseen photographs from the late 1970s and early 1980s, with also videos, interviews, texts, etc. This project can be seen as an extension of the movie, in the sense that it is a means to record and archive ephemeral artistic works. The ephemeral aspect is also linked to the galleries' influence: being ephemeral in its essence, graffiti disappears when it is practiced on a durable medium like canvas.

The depiction of the writers in *Style Wars* is very important. Through the voice of the film the sincerity of these characters, along with their artistic skills and originality, create a very particular, sensitive and rewarding, description. The term 'style' is here predominant; the title of the movie contains this idea and emphasizes its importance. Style is a central notion when it is considered in the domain of graffiti, and it can be described as the fundamental value of graffiti, its ultimate goal. All the graffiti codes expressed by the writers in the movie are oriented toward style. Cooper and Chalfant gave a definition of the style in the context of graffiti:

⁵⁵ "Opening Page" *Style Wars website*. 2014. N.p. Web. 26 March 2016.

⁵⁶ "Archives." *Style Wars website*. 2014. N.p. Web. 26 March 2016.

"Style is a very concrete idea among writers. It is form, the shapes of the letters, and how they connect. There are various categories of style, ranging from the old, simple bubble letters or peppermint-stick letters to the highly evolved and complex wildstyle, an energetic interlocking construction of letters with arrows and other forms that signify movement and direction. Styles vary from writer to writer, from crew to crew, and from line to line. The 6 line, for example, had a style which could be attributed to the influence of one outstanding writer, Seen. Seen had a profound impact upon a score of younger writers, not only members of his crew (United Artists) but also many others for whom he was simply the king."
(Cooper and Chalfant 66-67)

In this definition, style appears as the modality through which graffiti artists can express their technical and artistic skills: "form, shapes of the letters and how they connect", that is to say their creativity. It is also interesting to note that style is not a rigid concept, but on the contrary it is the expression of the intrinsic mastery of the artist; consequently each artist owns his own style. Thus, style is also an element of identity, connected to the notion of originality. Being stylistically different from the other graffiti artists is something very rewarding, and the originality is most of the time conveyed through a high level of complexity and of stylistic mastery, which also explains the importance of the wildstyle:

"A writer will therefore often make a piece deliberately hard to read. There is a pressure on him to make his style more complex, partly to enhance his reputation as a virtuoso, and partly to discourage other writers from "biting" or stealing it. "I throw' em off with the camouflage. That way they can't bite my style", says Kase 2, widely acknowledged "king of style."
(Cooper and Chalfant 71)

This quotation clearly explains the duality of the notion of style, its two aspects: style is a demonstration of the "virtuosity" of the artist, but it is also the expression of its originality, of what makes him artistically unique and different from the other artists. The idea of "pressure" also defines style as a common notion, a value shared by the entire community of graffiti artists. In the style wars that artistically oppose the graffiti artists, style becomes the standard of judgment on which peers can base their evaluation of the piece.

This 'stylistic' dimension is made possible by the voice of the film, notably through the work on the modes of address. The modes of address are the means through which the film communicates with the viewers. Nichols proposes a diagram to describe these different modes of address, divided into direct and indirect address, and describing the synchronicity or non-synchronicity of the voice of the narrator and of the

voice of the characters (or social actors) to the images that are shown⁵⁷. Generally speaking, this diagram goes from the more direct and synchronized address of the 'voice of authority' to the most indirect and non-synchronized address of the voices of social actors used over images of illustration.

The application to *Style Wars* of a categorization that follows the different modes of address is highly revealing: the filmmakers use all the different types of address to compose a vivid, dynamic, sincere and complete description of the graffiti movement, from the authoritative function of the 'voice of god' to the intimate and personal aspects of social actors' indirect voices (for example during domestic scenes, or group scenes: gatherings of writers speaking together). From didactic elements assumed by the disembodied voice to social actors' testimonies of personal experiences, the entire film illustrates the graffiti definition of style. The coherence between the core of the movement (style) and its cinematographic depiction probably explains the legacy of *Style Wars*. This coherence can be expanded to the previously mentioned levels of representation that reflect the intricate issues of the graffiti practice, and also to the different modes of representation (according to Nichols' definition of the term: documentary sub-genres⁵⁸) used by the filmmakers to create an original voice for the film.

Nichols underlines the importance of the different voices at work in a documentary movie, the importance of their relationships, and their consequences on the reception:

"The film operates as an autonomous whole, as we do. It is greater than its parts and orchestrates them: (1) the recruited voices, the recruited sounds and images; (2) the textual "voice" spoken by the style of the film as a whole (how its multiplicity of codes, including those pertaining to recruited voices are orchestrated into a singular, controlling pattern); and (3) the surrounding historical context, including the viewing event itself, which the textual voice cannot successfully rise above or fully control. The film is thus a simulacrum or external trace of the production of meaning we undertake ourselves every day, every moment. We see not an image of imaginary unchanging coherence, magically represented on a screen, but the evidence of an historically rooted act of making things meaningful comparable to our own historically situated acts of comprehension."
(Nichols 1983, 27)

⁵⁷ See fig. 5.

⁵⁸ « In documentary film and video, we can identify six modes of representation that function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative" (Nichols 1976, 99)

Here, Nichols cites three major aspects of documentaries: the recorded voices, the voice of the film, and the historical context of the film including its conditions of reception. As he explains it, these three elements are the essential “parts” of the movie, but the argument developed by the movie itself exceeds these parts. A documentary film is consequently the representation of a “production of meaning” that can be “compared” to the phenomenon of “comprehension”. It is not the direct representation of a point of view, but rather an indirect research of meaning in a given historical context. This quotation is thus highly applicable to *Style Wars*, and explains the particular reception of the movie and its importance for the Hip-Hop and graffiti cultures. The legitimacy of the recorded voices, the variety of the documentary devices that are used, the anchoring of the film in its historical context and the importance taken by *Style Wars* in the history of graffiti (which influences its conditions of reception), all these elements contribute to the specific status of the film. *Style Wars* offers an historic depiction of a decisive period: the end of a golden era and the beginnings of a culture that will soon become a global artistic movement.

Conclusion

The movie *Style Wars* is remarkable for its historic and original depiction of an emerging culture: the graffiti movement. Beyond a pure observation of the practice, the movie also records the voice of the graffiti protagonists, and uses cinematographic tools such as editing to create a complex vision of a new artistic form. Moreover we have seen that the different devices offered by the documentary field were efficiently brought into play with a view to compose a vivid panorama of the graffiti culture's codes. The legacy of the movie is predominantly based on this description of the codes, and *Style Wars* can be considered as a masterpiece that has contributed to the construction and to the evolution of the culture.

The era recorded by the filmmakers is also very important as it marked the junction between two key periods: the marginal developments of a subculture and the worldwide expansion of an original culture. Consequently *Style Wars* has defined the roots of this urban practice, but has also described the founding elements on which the culture could develop. The movie has turned delinquent teenagers into original artists, elevating them to the rank of graffiti legends. The following generations of writers frequently rely on the movie to acquire a cultural background necessary to their initiation to graffiti.

This status of graffiti legends is connected to the transformation from social actors to characters operated by the movie. The graffiti artists are "playing themselves" in *Style Wars*. Nichols, analyzing the movie *Soldier Girls* (1980), a "purely indirect or observational" film (Nichols 1983, 19), addresses this notion (this example is only partially relevant to *Style Wars* -as *Style Wars* is not entirely observational, but it illustrates the concept of social actors "playing themselves" and its consequences):

"[...] the structure [of *Soldier Girls*] relies heavily on classical narratives procedures, among them: [...] excellent performances from characters who "play themselves" without any inhibiting self-consciousness. [...] These procedures allow purely observational documentaries to asymptotically narrow the gap between a fabricated realism and the apparent capture of reality itself which so fascinated André Bazin."
(Nichols 1983, 20)

The relationship between reality and its representation evoked by Nichols is here an important point. The function of characters, played by social actors, finally connects "fabricated realism" and the "capture of reality", but also respects each element without

completely bridging the gap between them. As a result the movie is balanced between the dynamism of the characters and the realism of the social actors, the writers. Furthermore the proximity between the filmmakers and the graffiti artists appears as a means to eliminate the “inhibiting self-consciousness” evoked by Nichols, which reinforces and facilitates the transfer from social actor to character.

More generally the movie tackles the intrinsic notions of reality, realism and authenticity. The historic dimension of *Style Wars* is situated in its depiction of a precise period, of practices, and of the social and political impacts of these practices. The historicity is thus anchored in the realm of realism, in the attempt to record the reality of the writers. But this reality is conveyed through the cinematographic medium, and consequently the objectivity of the initial reality is modified by the subjectivity of the social actors, first, but also by the subjectivity of the filmmakers, expressed by the voice of the film. This analysis emphasizes the function of the voice of the film, and clearly links the legacy of the movie to the work and choices of the filmmakers. *Style Wars* became a major film for the graffiti culture because of its factual content, but also and above all for its skillful use of the documentary codes and tools.

It is interesting to remark that the influence of the movie on the development of the culture has been essential, helping to impose a sort of traditional vision of graffiti. But the expansion of the movement has been so important that the initial definition of graffiti, shared by *Style Wars*, is nowadays outdated. Henry Chalfant, challenging the notions of spontaneity, experimentation and the inherent risks of graffiti, claimed in 2012 his attachment to this bygone era:

“[The work of current graffiti artists] gets close to airbrush painting,” [Chalfant] said. “But it loses the experimentation that always went on. It’s so refined, it reminds me of mannerism in Renaissance painting. It’s beautiful, but it loses spontaneity. All the experimentation in the ’70s was exciting. People had to work against all these odds: will you get caught? Will you get beaten up? Will you run out of paint? There was always that tension.”⁵⁹

This quotation reinforces the gap between graffiti in the 1980s and its practice in the 2010s; moreover it specifies the interest of the filmmakers: in a way the graffiti movement fascinated them not only for its experimental and artistic aspects, but also for the commitment it required from its practitioners.

⁵⁹ Gonzalez, David. “Art, Elevated: Henry Chalfant’s Archives.” *LENS. Photography, Video and Visual Journalism*. The New York Times, 14 Dec. 2012. Web. 20 June 2016.

Style Wars possesses the characteristics of different documentary modes: poetic, expository, observational and participatory. It also contains a large variety of recorded voices, and uses the plurality of tools offered by the cinematographic and documentary practices. In addition its subject is an original cultural movement, previously rarely addressed by the media. All these elements contribute to the creation of a landmark in the history of the graffiti movement, whose legacy has lasted for more than three decades, and they also compose an original voice for the film.

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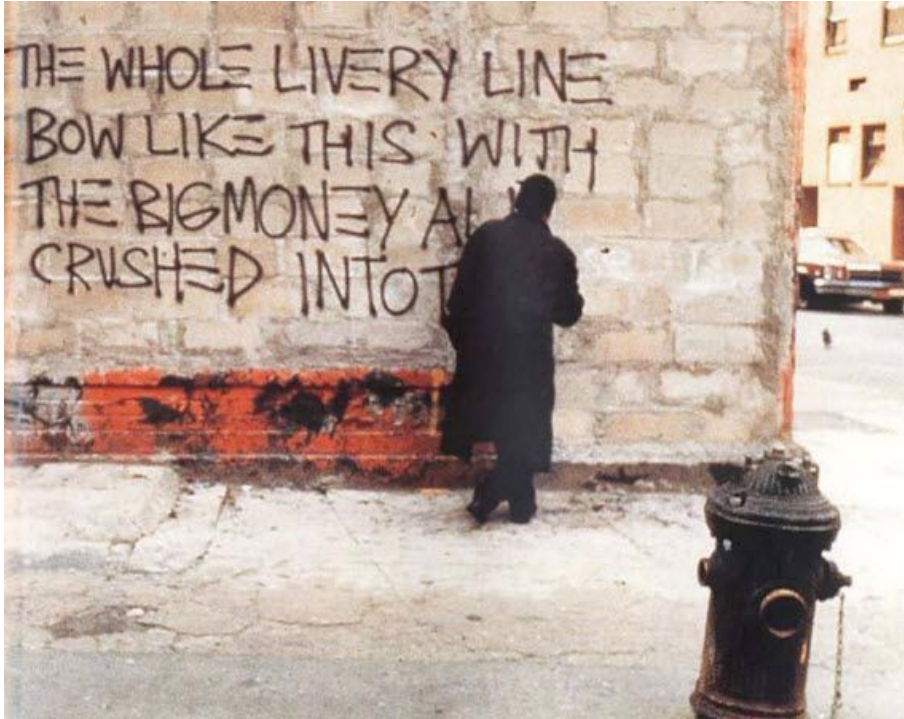
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Appendix:

Fig. 1



Basquiat using a spray-paint can in the streets of New York, still image from the movie *Downtown 81* (1981).

Fig. 2



Keith Haring drawing on a subway blank ad (circa 1983).

Fig. 3

Table 6.1
Documentary Modes
Chief Characteristics
—Deficiencies
Hollywood fiction [1910s]: fictional narratives of imaginary worlds
—absence of “reality”
Poetic documentary [1920s]: reassemble fragments of the world poetically
—lack of specificity, too abstract
Expository documentary [1920s]: directly address issues in the historical world
—overly didactic
Observational documentary [1960s]: eschew commentary and reenactment; observe things as they happen
—lack of history, context
Participatory documentary [1960s]: interview or interact with subjects; use archival film to retrieve history
—excessive faith in witnesses, naive history, too intrusive
Reflexive documentary [1980s]: question documentary form, defamiliarize the other modes
—too abstract, lose sight of actual issues
Performative documentary [1980s]: stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse
—loss of emphasis on objectivity may relegate such films to the avant-garde; “excessive” use of style.

Nichols’ documentary modes and their characteristics (Nichols 2001, 138).

Fig. 4



"Henry" drawing in the background (*Style Wars* 46'05").

Fig. 5

Direct Address		
	<i>sync</i>	<i>non-sync</i>
<i>narrators</i>	Voice of Authority	Voice of God Images of Illustration
<i>characters</i>	Interview	Voice of Witness Images of Illustration
Indirect Address		
	<i>sync</i>	<i>non-sync</i>
<i>narrators</i>	—	—
<i>characters</i>	Cinéma-Vérité (Voice and Image of Social Actors)	Voice of Social Actors Images of Illustration

Nichols' diagram representing the different types of modes of address (Nichols 1976, 37).