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UKRAINIAN STUDENT SUBCULTURE AS MIRRORED IN EPIGRAPHY

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УКРАЇНСЬКА СТУДЕНТСЬКА СУБКУЛЬТУРА У ДЗЕРКАЛІ ЕПІГРАФІКИ

У роботі досліджуються настільні та настінні написи і малюнки харківських та київських студентів, зібрані автором протягом 1990 – 2005 рр. Ці графіті (більшість з яких є фіксацією фольклорних творів) дають змогу скласти уявлення не тільки про музичні, спортивні, політичні та інші уподобання студентів, а й взагалі з'ясувати сутнісні характеристики студентської субкультури. Як свідчить епіграфіка, ними в першу чергу є відкритість, безупинне прагнення до всебічної комунікації, висока цінність вільного самовиявлення особистості, домінування сміхового та ігрового (карнавального) елементів.

The fact that the studentship is a special unique subculture, that is “a sovereign integrated formation within the reigning culture which is distinctive by its own scale of values, its customs and norms”¹, as well as by its slang and folklore, has long been obvious not only to researchers (cultural studies and political studies researchers, ethnographers, folklorists, psychologists, philosophers, linguists, sociologists) but also for those who were once lucky to belong to this corporate community.

For the past 15 years in the republics of the former Soviet Union (especially in Russia) there has been a growing interest in the modern student subculture on the part of folklorists and ethnographers which is stipulated by the democratization of public life and the attention to non-formal cultural formations, youth formations in particular in all their diversity². It is quite logical that we find a *Student traditions* chapter in the *Modern City Folklore* collected works – the first and, alas, the last up to now fundamental work on the subject³. The majority of the works on the modern studentship describes omens and superstitions, specific rituals (before examinations, transitory etc.), jokes, tales (fables) and other narratives, sometimes there are also humoristic decodings of abbreviated words, “key words” and dictionaries of slang.

We are going to try and consider student subculture through the alembic of epigraphy (graffiti) – writings and drawings on desks, walls, various interior objects, billboards etc.

Our work is based on a considerable collection, completed in 1990 – 2005 by the author in the National Technical University “Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute” (NTU “KhPI”), Kharkiv National Karazin University (KhNU), Kharkiv State Academy of Culture (KhSAC) and Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University (KNU). The results of 1999, 2001 and 2005 students polling will also be considered.

Why is epigraphy so eternally attractive for students?

Unlike other folklore genres, sometimes put into written form for the sake of memorization (mnemonic purpose), (in songs collections, demobbed albums etc.), for teenagers fixation of some texts on everything that comes to hand is only occasionally aimed to facilitate memorization, but basically

it is the elemental manifestation of free self-expression and its purpose is communicative. We should take into account that “the doers of graffiti are not always their authors but much more often their “translators” and “are representatives of a certain behavioural stereotype” (namely, group stereotype). However, there is much of the personality in the act, as the choice of a “lyric hero” always takes place. In fact, it stands for choosing the self-image, “which the writer creates, which he identifies himself with – consciously or subconsciously – firstly, by the very fact of writing and, secondly, by the content and the form of the inscription”⁴.

Out of the first-year students of three departments of KhPI (168 people, 59 female and 109 male), questioned by us in 2001, only 13,5 % (22 people, 12 boys and 10 girls) never write or draw on desks. 7,1 % (12 people, 11 boys and 1 girl) mark desks with graffiti *regularly*. As it has been expected, the majority – 78,2 % (134 people) do it sometimes or occasionally (86 boys and 48 girls, 78,8 % and 81,3 % respectively). In March, 2005, we questioned first-year students of three departments and fifth-year students of one department of KhPI and got similar results.

In 2005 the respondents were asked the question: “Why do you think people write on desks and walls?” The most typical answers were: “Because they convey their ideas that come up suddenly and [a person – M.K.] is overwhelmed by certain emotions”, “to be humorous”, “because you wouldn’t write a thing like that in a newspaper”, “out of idleness”, “self-expression + boredom”, “fools have nothing else to do”, “to express feelings, thoughts, stupidity”, “they understand nothing [of the lecture – M.K.], that’s why they are bored”, “they want to stand out (writing on the desk is poetry for them”, “to leave their mark for the future generations!”), “some people would like to put down their poems, thoughts for others to know”, “to write tests with the help of desks writings (formulas)”, “not too bright”, “sometimes you just want to play a little dirty trick”, “they are inspired by their Muse”, “they want all people around them to know their ideas”, “a) out of boredom; b) out of excessive sense of humour; c) in defiance of rules that prohibit doing it”, “they don’t know why they are doing it themselves”, “out of lack of communication” etc.

It is characteristic that many respondents, without long consideration, give one and the same motivation for everybody – most often it is “out of boredom” or “for the sake of self-expression!!!”, not less often it is the need of communication (lack of communication) or “a historical mark”, “a means to be remembered”. Less people (about 40 %) differentiate the motivations of different writers, for example, as follows:

“People write to:

- a) put down their telephone number, their name or group-number etc.;
- b) give vent to their good or bad mood (appropriate pictures);
- c) express their attitude to some people in the group or course, their attitude to teachers;
- d) express their attitude to sports, music or politics”.

We could hardly agree to the following statement of one of the respondents: “If lectures were more interesting, there would be less writing”. Boredom is not the only and most likely not the main “impetus” for the graffiti. The key motivation for “desk-writers” are the unquenchable existential significant need to raise their voice about their values and priorities in a most straightforward way, being unafraid to be mocked (a characteristic reply is “to express emotions without saying them aloud”) or misunderstood (this is where lies the great psychotherapeutic force of the thing – such a session of “creative work” is, in fact, “art-therapy” and in many cases can help as much as a visit to a psychologist). The author of graffiti knows perfectly well (and deep down counts on the fact) that his every saying, sign, picture left on the desk or the wall is almost doomed to dialogical (polylogical) “communication”, whose significant charm lies in partial or complete anonymity. In fact, walls and desks had been a forerunner of Internet, that allows now to exist comfortably under “nicks” and to gush one’s “Phew!” and “Wows!” towards everything in the world, frisking about thousands of sites. (By the way, S.Y. Nekludov is absolutely right in stating the importance and great prospects of studying “Internet as a quasi-folklore environment”⁵). Nevertheless, we would take the risk to suggest that even if the World Web creeps into every household, the number of those who choose to scrape or draw in an old-fashioned way on suitable surfaces in public places will not diminish, for “the real reality” has a certain advantage as compared to the virtual reality. This advantage was very well described by one of our respondents: “... It is nice to see your writings appear in other university buildings and classrooms. You feel like an unknown celebrity”.

Naturally, autographs on walls and desks are a means of marking a new (neutral or alien) space and of familiarizing oneself with it (“appropriating it”). This is the meaning of the omnipresent “Vasja was here”-type signs. With students (and this is symptomatic) these are not so much individual autographs (“memories”) as collective (group, department) “nicks”, which is related to collective self-identification and collective self-assertion:



In any classroom in any institute we can find desks covered by columns of academic groups' names (sometimes in various artistic and calligraphic manners). Often the name is accompanied by the English “*the best*”. Researchers rightly liken this kind of graffiti to animals marking their territory⁶. However, following the idea of A. Plutzer-Sarno, we tend to view even such simple writings not only as “territorial signs to mark the area” or the communicative space, but as the means (quite subconscious on the level of reason) of magical influence on the world, as metatexts with the regulating function⁷.

In general, student life is the key subject of writings and pictures, which is the evidence of sub-cultural interests prevailing over “common” ones. However, such common topics as music, sports, erotica, alcohol and (rather less common) politics are also quite popular with students and graffiti prove it in an eloquent way.

It is worth mentioning that most of writings and drawings are not of a serious nature, but humorous (most often) or ironic. If a serious text crops up (a saying or a lyrical outburst), it can hardly pass without a jeering commentary. Humour is the element of freedom, its pet child, and there is nothing strange about the fact that the dominant feature of Ukrainian students (at least, of those who raise their voice epigraphically from time to time) is not simply the sense of humour but the constant inclination towards “humorous”(free) perception of any event, be it of the most serious nature – ranging from inter-university to state or international levels. Most pictures (especially erotic) are caricatures, erotic writings play with the subject of oral sex (still viewed as perverted by the conservative “adult” society) and homosexual relations, using almost exclusively “non-parliamentary” expressions primarily for the sake of joshing. On the other hand, it is also a manifestation of freedom, the verbal and artistic affirmation of the personality’s right to the non-interference in the private life of a young person on the part of the society (with its archaic and often bigoted moral restriction on out-of-wedlock sex). The pronounced cynicism of certain writings, the rudeness and vulgarity of remarks regarding the opposite sex (often coming from girls) do not always reflect the real attitude but are often a play mask. In fact, graffiti are a phenomenon of playing consciousness. In view of this, even obvious verbal aggression, “atrocious” invectives of xenophobic, misanthropic or personal nature should not be treated very seriously. This is nothing more but a substitute to actional aggression.

We will try to analyze in detail those graffiti that reflect student life, its uncomplicated events, attitudes to the learning process, to teachers and friends.

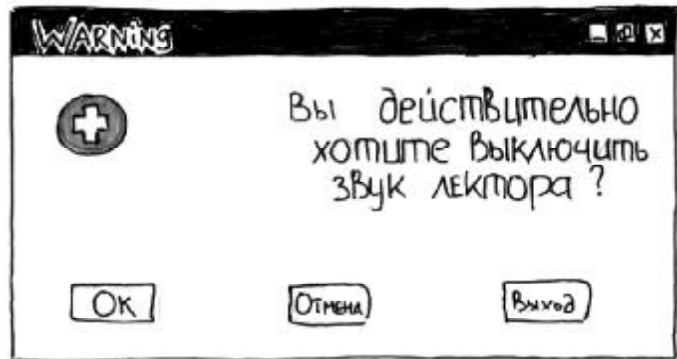
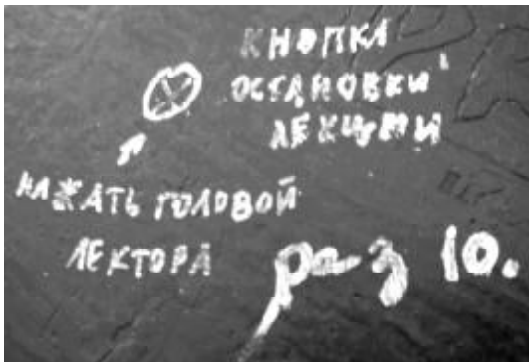
The decodings of the self-identifying word “student” (*Rus.* – *студент*) give us quite a traditional image of a student (familiar for us from thousands of jokes), which can be translated as “a sleepy theoretically intelligent kid naturally disinclined to study”.

Or there is another version, quite popular in Kharkiv: “A haul of money is urgently needed. Nothing to eat. Full stop”. Also quite a folklore image.

The process of studying is of course the most burning issue in the student folklore. On desks and walls we can find parody slogans: “Sleep, student! The country needs healthy specialists!” (KhSAC, KhPI), “epitaphs”: “This is where an atrocious assassination of Time took place!” and wise sayings (reconsidered and added-to proverbs and sayings): “Learning brings light, and you have to pay for the light” (KNU), maxims, parodying religious commandments: “You shall not snore at the lecture

for snoring you will awaken your neighbour” (KNU, variations can be found in many Kharkiv universities), “You shall love you teacher for the dog is a pal for the human” (KNU) and more or less tumultuous reactions to what is going on in the classroom (silenced *cri de coeur*): “We are people though we are students”, “All I hanker after right now is beer!”, “Don’t shout! I want to sleep!”, “We have been fucked”, “Shit!!! What’s gonna happen to me?!! FACK!!! I am in an asshole!!!”, “Not ready for the seminar! Sod OFF!”, “I’ll re-pass” (KNU), “that’s it!!! I am shocked!!!!”, “Home, home, it’s time to go home” (KhPI) etc. Despair is in many cases exaggerated and grotesque, as it can be clearly observed.

There is probably not an institute, not a single classroom in the whole of the former Soviet Union where you could not find a drawing of a simple device accompanied with the corresponding instruction.



There are also inscriptions under the picture: “Button for switching off the lecturer. Press with the forehead and wait”. “Button for catapulting the lecturer into space. If it does not work, try by hand”, “Button for switching off the lecturer. Press with the lecturer’s forehead ten times”.

Of course, almost every classroom can “boast” of a caricature pictures of “favorite” teachers, often accompanied with offensive inscriptions, for example, “S. is a bitch”.

Sometimes the following picture is drawn on the vertical surface turned to the class:

On the walls and desks there are enough writings addressed to the pedagogical staff and few of them are positive.

Most often they read as follows: “Look here, Maz, we gonna meet in a dark alley. Well-wisher and Co.”

There are many unaddressed writings of a generalizing nature:

“Fuck you prepod – son of a bitch”; “A good teacher is a dead teacher” etc.

It even makes one think about the rightness of the maxim inscribed on one of the desks in the graffiti-famous classroom 214EC in KhPI: “If students’ prayers were answered, there would not be a single teacher left alive”.

Naturally, there are a lot of poetic works dedicated to the hardships of students’ life.

There is a remarkable example of playing with the Soviet symbols in a picture expressing the author’s attitude to learning:

Sometimes the drawing of the crossed hammer and sickle goes without verbal commentaries, but only some first-year students on seeing the picture on the desk can treat it as a sign of students’ commitment to communistic ideals and of their nostalgia after USSR and not as a call to skip lectures.

In any big city’s student community there are teasing verses directed at students of different professions, humoristic explanations of the universities’ abbreviated names and jokes and anecdotes on the subject.



As we do not have the opportunity (on account of the volume limitations) to dwell upon either the purely erotic, musical, sport, political topics of student graffiti or the latrine (toilet) "classics" and additions to written message, we would like to say that in this sphere we can observe the same situation as was described by K.E. Shumov on the basis of his Perm materials. In many points our research backs up the observations and conclusions made by the authors of the *City Graffiti* article. However, not all of them.

Namely, we believe it is too early (at least, for Kharkiv) to conclude, as it has been done by our Russian colleagues, that "lately the society has ceased to be actively discuss and disapproved of writing on walls in public places and to treat it as reprehensive and marking its doer's behaviour as anti- or asocial"⁸. In 2001 18,8 % of the students questioned stated their negative attitude to writing on desks or walls, while in 2005 it was 16,4 %. There is a certain reduction but it is not significant enough.

When asked if they had heard remarks from their teachers about those who wrote or drew on the desks, 63,2% answered positively in 2001, and 46,4 % answered positively in 2005. Although we can observe a clear downward tendency, 46,4 % does not seem a small figure.

So, it is too early to speak about tolerance to graffiti on the part of the older generation (pedagogues, in particular, and they are a community apart).

We cannot agree either with the final conclusion of the authors of *City Graffiti*: "Modern graffiti are losing their significance as a sign of protest or alternative to the official culture and actualizing their dialogical material they are extending to the maximum their "sphere of influence" in the communicative system of the modern city... At the same time... the difference between intragraffiti and extragraffiti level of communication is practically disappearing..."⁹

Without dwelling upon all the types of modern graffiti and speaking only about student graffiti we cannot say that they are losing their oppositionist function. On the contrary, epigraphy is often the only accessible for the student form of expressing their disagreement (moreover, quite a safe one) with the suggested "conditions of existence", complicated or boring lectures, highly demanding teachers, disciplinary reprisals of the dean's office etc. By the way, according to the sociological research carried out in KhPI in 2000 – 2004 (the same 225 students of all departments were questioned once a year) every third student says that learning materials are put into a learner-unfriendly form, while 44,7% of first-year students, 46,5 % of second-year students and 41,6 % of third-year students complain about the saturated schedule of mandatory tasks. How can oppositionist texts fail to appear on desks, if 51,8 % of students in their second year are already disappointed with their choice of profession or university, among third-year students the figure is 61,2 %, among forth-year students it is 61,1 %! With the time passing, the interest in the learning process is, as we can see, falling.

"Being alternative to the official culture" remains essential for the modern Ukrainian authors of graffiti. The powerful parody current in the students' creative work is directly connected to the purposeful "debasement" of official literature, pronouncedly drastic vulgarization and profaning of "those lyrical things".

This is clearly the obstinate rejection of "ready-made" texts, truths and life schemes which are to be taken for granted. This is a form of cultural and generational alienation from the adult world with its tedious institutional means of upholding the "morality".

The predominantly negative evaluation by teenagers of the "process of the compulsory obtaining of information" is, of course, connected with the well-known age-related negativism, the attitude to antonymic perception of the "parent" discourse, but at the same time it is also an evidence of the real faults in the existing educational system.

As to the extension of the "sphere of influence" of graffiti, we must say that a great number of them still remains functional only within their "mother" subcultures. Out of a certain locus (a classroom in this case) many of them lose their meaning. Many of the above-mentioned graffiti are not known at all beyond the social group of students, even among teachers who linked to students. That is why the openness and readiness to participate in a dialogue (a polylogue) of student graffiti authors do not mean that the replies received will be got from "outside" (it is difficult to imagine a teacher writing an answer to his student offender. So, we are speaking here about intragraffiti communication locked within its community, though not so hermetically as some other youth subcultures.

To sum up, it should be said that it is graffiti – a parafolklore means of keeping and transmitting folklore information – that give us the most adequate, unadorned vision of the studentship. Of course, the image we get is that of a brutally charming trickster, of a unpleasant (lazy, sly, cynic, unlearned) and not intelligent person (even not in the future). Is it the true picture of an average modern student and why is it what we see in the mirror of folklore? May the mirror be distorting?

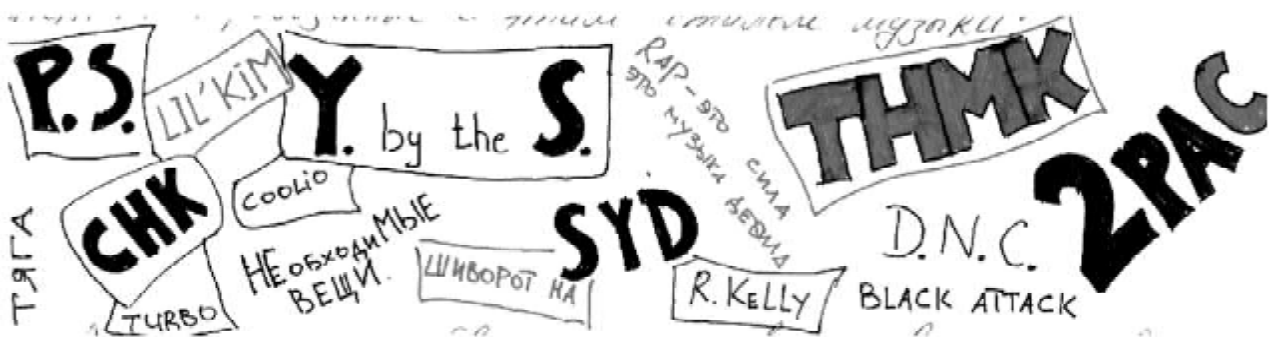
One of the answers is tradition. In the base mass culture the main features of the student have been carelessness, merrymaking and alcohol-drinking since the times of the vagants.

Nonetheless, we should say that alcohol-drinking is of a declarative and conditional nature (as well as drug-taking and erotomania are mainly virtual) and the verbalization of desires, fulfilling the compensatory function can often successfully substitute their realization in the real. Even real-life student binges are often akin to rituals. Demonstrative deviancy (not so considerable in its percentage – according to K.E. Shumov only 22 % of all writings in the Perm university touch upon untraditional sexual relationship¹⁰ and we observe practically the same situation) is a sure sign of the necessity of self-affirmation: you cannot stand out if you are the same as the others?

Foreign words in inscriptions are also a mark of distinction and initiation, but this “esoteric quality” contains an oppositional element not only towards the profane, but towards the official Ukrainian culture.

Swear words which are not a common language of communication for many students, as our research shows, are still used in some on-desk writings – and this is also a mark of belonging to a subculture, where this stratum of vocabulary is as used (to a certain degree) as jargonisms of different origin and specific student slang. The function of swear words in this case is differentiating and integrating: they are to demonstrate the distancing of the person from the official sphere and to show the integration of a person into the “people’s sphere” (“the large world”) and into his own subculture (not only student, but youth subculture in general). Oppositionist approach is naturally present here, though it is not consciously realized by the culture’s representatives. Unfortunately, for many young people swear words are a mark of freedom and absence of inhibitions in a person, of democratic communication, that is why they remain prestigious among the young.

The informational value of the students’ epigraphy is exceptionally high. It is graffiti that show us the whole range of musical and sports likings of the young (view the photo), that tell us about their political views, aesthetic tastes and – what is most important – about the most “sore issues” which are not as a rule discussed with adults (first of all, sexual life). It is graffiti that being an “alternative to the official discourse”¹¹ convince us that the student is in a major degree Homo ludens and it is not possible not to take this fact into account in pedagogical activity.



The image of “the funny and the resourceful” was born long before the appearance of the KVN game itself (the Russian abbreviation for A Club for the Funny and the Resourceful) and it is remarkable that the game, stemming from the legendary students “joking parties” and remaining a phenomenon of students’ subculture, has overstepped the boundaries of the subculture and has become an integral part of the common Soviet and post-Soviet culture thanks to the television. Resourcefulness (ingenuity, wit) is the opposite of “time-consuming” and “workaholic” which are, alas, indispensable for fundamental sciences and, in fact, the basically folklore (relayed through jokes and graffiti) image of the truant student is simply a modification of Ivan the fool who is, for some reason, inevitably lucky unlike his “positive” and hard-working brothers. The notorious “laziness” of students, a demonstrative unwillingness to study (to perform their basic duty) is not, in a

number of cases, the reflection of real inclinations but just a convenient mask that allows to hide for a certain period of time the student's creativity and considerable mobilizing reserves.

The "humorous world" of students is really all-encompassing: desanctification of both the Science and the "Temple of Science" and its priests has taken place long ago and there is nothing to be done about it. One of the key reasons for it may be the fact that "academic liberties give an independent and critical view of life"¹². Total ridicule of everything and everyone, burlesque overturning of high values and ideals are salvation from boredom and dreariness of everyday life, from over-seriousness of its Majesty "the learning process". That is why one of the answers to the question: "Why do people write on desks and walls?" was "kidding". The word explains many things. It is clear that the phenomenon is very ancient; what was Diogenes doing if not kidding? Nevertheless, if we take "kidding as a factor of modern culture" and realize that "to be kidding means to express oneself in a creative way and to demonstrate the freedom of thought and of action in an individual and original manner"¹³, then we have to admit that the young have an existential need in such kind of "creative behaviour". (M.M. Bakhtin) Despite the proclivity to topple over everything, the student subculture keeps their "faith in the possibility of communication" that was called "philosophic faith" and viewed as the only possible salvation for the humanity by K. Jaspers. Through the roughness and "holy simplicity" of student epigraphy it is easy to see a breathing human feeling, a natural self-expression of the personality warmed by the limitless self-irony (which is a sign of moral health), it is easy to hear an eternal cry of every intelligent human being: I want to be understood!

¹ Гуревич П.С. Субкультура // Культурология. XX век. Энциклопедия, – СПб., 1998. – Т.2 – С. 236.

² See, for example: Киселёва Ю.М. Магия и поверья в московском медучилище // Живая старина. – 1995. – № 1. – С. 23; Анекдоты наших читателей. Вып. 1–45. – М., 1996. – (Биб-ка "Студенческого меридиана"); Мадлевская Е.Л. *Op. cit.* – С. 33–34; Лис Т.В., Разумова И.А. Студенческий экзаменационный фольклор // Живая старина. – 2000. – № 4. – С. 31–33; Харчишин О. Новочасний фольклор Львова: творення, функціонування, специфіка репертуару // Матеріали до української етнології. Зб. наук. праць. – К., 2002. – Вип. 2 (5). – С. 435–437; Борисенко В. Вірування у повсякденному житті українців на початку ХХІ століття // Етнічна історія народів Європи: Зб. наук. праць. Вип. 15. – К., 2003. – С. 4–10; Коваль-Фучило И. Чудесное в картине мира современного студента в Украине // Чудесное и обыденное: // Сб. материалов науч. конф. – Курск, 2003. – С. 9–15.

³ See: Шумов К.Э. Студенческие традиции // Современный городской фольклор. – М., 2003. – С. 165–179; Маталин М.Г. Фольклор военных училищ // *Ibid.* – С. 180–185.

⁴ See: Бажкова Е.В., Лурье М.Л., Шумов К.Э. Городские граффити // Современный городской фольклор. – М., 2003. – С. 440.

⁵ Неклюдов С.Ю. Фольклор современного города // Современный городской фольклор. – М., 2003. – С. 21.

⁶ Бажкова Е.В. та ін. *Op. cit.* – С. 444.

⁷ Плущер-Сарно А. Магия современного города // http://www.russ.ru/journal/ist_sovr/98-12-14/pluts.htm

⁸ Бажкова Е.В. и др. *Op. cit.* – С. 445.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Шумов К.Э. "Эротические" студенческие граффити. На материалах студенческих аудиторий Пермского университета // Секс и эротика в русской традиционной культуре / Сост. А.Л. Топорков. – М., 1996. – С. 454.

¹¹ Бажкова Е.В. и др. *Op. cit.* – С. 438.

¹² Кравченко А.И. Культурология: Учебное пособие для вузов. – М., 2000. – С. 335.

¹³ Вчерашняя А. Прикол как фактор современной культуры // Дикое поле. Донецкий проект. Интеллектуально-художественный журнал. – Донецк, 2002. – Вып. 2. – С. 172–179.