

Graffiti: an expression of identity

It seems fat-tipped pens, aerosol cans and “scratchy” things may soon become illegal handbag accessories. Well, only if the handbag owner has the “intention of using” said pen, can or scratchy thing to graffiti – which does lead me to wonder if intending to key your ex-partner’s car counts.

Carrying a handbag jam-packed with graffiti-making implements will be illegal only if Manukau City Council succeeds in forcing its Control of Graffiti Bill through Parliament.

This, rather disturbingly, seems likely, especially since Justice Minister Phil Goff has expressed his intention to crack down on graffiti, and city councils nationwide have registered support for the bill.

It is disturbing because the Control of Graffiti Bill is one dog of a bill, complete with teeth and ready to give more than a precautionary bite.

If given royal assent, the bill would see spray paint made an R18 product kept under lock and key and make graffiti an offence with a fine of up to \$2500.

Carrying a graffiti implement without lawful excuse would carry a fine of up to \$1500.

The council would be allowed to remove graffiti on private

property if it was publicly visible.

Police would be given the power to question and arrest anyone they have “good cause to suspect” has marked graffiti or the intention of marking graffiti.

Looking at that list someone is bound to say: “Good, it’s about time we bit back at graffiti and stopped those kids from damaging public property.” After all, as Manukau mayor Sir Barry Curtis recently said in a press release, graffiti is “nasty”.

True, Manukau and Auckland City spend a combined \$7 million a year cleaning up graffiti and yes, tagging strewn across the city often damages private property and looks pretty ugly. But do we really want to prosecute graffiti offenders, most of whom are young kids, so heavily?

Turning shop owners into criminals for forgetting to lock up the spray paint also makes me a tad uncomfortable and giving police the power to arrest someone based on their intention to do graffiti is tantamount to creating a *Minority Report* style future crime unit.

Mostly though, the question at the centre of all this is: Do we really want cities that are completely free of graffiti?

Graffiti is more than vandal-



PHOTO: STEPHEN COOK

URBAN ART: New graffiti laws would punish those who carry graffiti implements with a \$1500 fine.

ism. It is an expression of identity that often becomes works of art which brighten up the grey concrete jungle with youthful defiance and creativity. Graffiti has the power to grab your eye and take you on a journey through the city led by signs of an underground culture.

It is also an art form that exists outside of the mainstream and as such allows it some freedom not often given to young people.

Originating in ancient Greece, graffiti was reborn on the streets of impoverished New York during the 1970s. Today it continues to be an expression of street culture.

A quick look at Auckland City Council’s statistics will tell you that, as in New York 30 years ago, incidents of graffiti are highest in lower socio-economic areas.

This, maybe, hints at the heart of the issue. Maybe the

powers-that-be should try to think more broadly about graffiti.

Getting at the issues of why young people do graffiti and finding ways of channelling their creativity seems much more positive than slamming them with a whopping fine and hundreds of hours of community service.

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Mother of all Soaps fizzles out in ratings

It’s been nearly four years since September 11 and the memorable debut of *War on Terror*. But despite its dramatic beginning, the world’s biggest TV show is suffering from falling ratings; losing the all-important battle for the youth market.

War has been punctuated with excitement like Bali, Iraq and London but the plot has since become ponderous and repetitive. The show’s bland dialogue and the one-dimensional lead characters simply aren’t connecting with youth.

To reconnect, *War* should follow the king of long-running soaps, *Coronation Street*. Like *War*, *Coro* had a real problem attracting a younger audience, rating only with cantankerous old viewers on death’s door.

But, in a bold move, *Coro* went racy with murders, homosexuality and secret affairs. The corresponding surge in youth ratings means a new generation of viewers will be curmudgeonly beholden to the programme.

War will have a harder time reconnecting with youth because of its morbid death obsession. The current generation tends to steer clear of anything remotely dangerous, highlighted by the rise and rise of antiseptic products.

War’s producers have made some shocking errors. Axing Comical Ali, the hugely popular Iraqi foreign minister was the worst mistake in TV history. Replacing the youth-friendly Colin Powell with Condoleezza Rice was amateurish. Sure both actors were also Afro-American but the gender difference is obvious.

Outside of the “Bible Belt” the ama-

teur and seemingly ad hoc directing could mean *War*’s ratings slide is terminal.

But where did it all go wrong? When was the “jump the shark” episode – that climactic moment, immortalised by the Fonz jumping a shark in *Happy Days*, which signals when a good show goes bad?

The ratings point to when the controversial, yet horribly wooden, lead character George Bush decided to invade Iraq. It was a grandiose twist on the “you wronged my father, prepare to die” soap theme but it may have simply been too fantastical.

While the invasion initially sent ratings through the roof, the plot has been dragging on too long. Latest figures show only 44 per cent of Americans support the current plotline.

The Iraq plot will be hard to scratch as this ambitious soap cannot simply throw a character down a lift shaft. However one option, inspired by *Days of Our Lives*, would reveal that Al-Zarqawi is the love child of Dick Cheney and a stunning Iraqi intelligence operative later murdered by Saddam. The reconciliation episode would be a ratings bonanza and the Iraq plot could be culled for a fresh start.

Easy enough but *War*’s producers lack imagination. The latest news from director Donald Rumsfeld is that *War* is to be renamed *A Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism*. Such a boring name might confuse viewers into thinking the show is real life – surely the final nail in the coffin.

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