

## Depicting Physical And Social Fears: Shark Graffiti On Reunion Island

### Danny Flynn

Artist and independent scholar, UK  
dannyamosflynn@hotmail.com

### Marina Carter

Historian, Edinburgh University, UK

#### Abstract:

This short paper focuses on graffiti depicting desperate warnings over the increase in shark attacks, the threat of which has been encouraged by the idyllic feeding climate on the Indian Ocean island, and suggests a metaphorical simile of the threatening invisible and ever present malevolent force felt in the social climate of expanding inner cities through greed within capital investment.

**Keywords:** graffiti, Reunion Island, shark attack, profit, corporate greed.

### 1. Jace depicts sharks on Reunion Island

Jace, a 44 year old street artist from Le Havre, France places his little yellow figures, known as 'gouzous' all around the world. In Réunion, Jace depicted Gouzou surrounded by circling sharks (see Figure 1).

Why sharks? Because this small Indian Ocean island, which is an overseas territory [Département] of France, has suffered a worrying number of shark-related fatalities over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> The shark-fest is rapidly becoming the main reason people in the anglophone world have even heard of Réunion.

Kelly Slater, an American surfer, responding to reports of the death of Alexandre on 21 February 2017, a 26 year old considered one of the best body boarders of the island, wrote on her Instagram page: 'there needs to be a serious cull on Réunion and it should happen every day. There is a clear imbalance happening in the ocean there. If the whole world had these rates of attack nobody would use the ocean and literally millions of people would be dying like this. The French government needs to figure this out asap. 20 attacks since 2011.'<sup>2</sup>

A couple of months later, in April 2017, the death of Adrien Duboscq, a 30 year old surfer, was reported at Saint Leu, following another shark attack - the 21st since 2011. He

succumbed to a severe bite on his right thigh. A newspaper report into this latest attack provided a photograph of the unfortunate victim alongside an inverted image of his surfboard which ironically depicts a graffiti image of a shark (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> A YouTube homage to Adrien provides this image in more detail.

Several of the graffiti artists in Réunion have taken up the cause of graphically depicting this menace. Figure 3 is a version by Kmis3:

### 2. History of shark attacks on Reunion

The problem of shark attacks is not a new one in Réunion. There have been documented attacks over many years: 38 recorded over a 30-year period.<sup>4</sup> However it is the recent intensification of the attacks – in double figures since 2011, which has brought the problem to the attention of the general public and to the global surfing and bodyboarding community. Three shark species blamed for what is now being dubbed the 'shark crisis' are the grey reef shark, the tiger shark, and the bull shark. Scientists have attributed the new velocity and timing of attacks to the seasonal presence of the bull sharks close to the coastline during their reproductive cycle [May to October] and the degradation of their environment, notably the lack of food due to over-fishing which has led to increased aggression as food searches become more pressured.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1 Gouzou surrounded by circling sharks



Figure 2 Shark depicted on surfboard of boarder who was attacked by shark



Figure 3 Street artists Kmis3 depiction of shark menace



Figure 4



Figure 5 Marine of the Shark

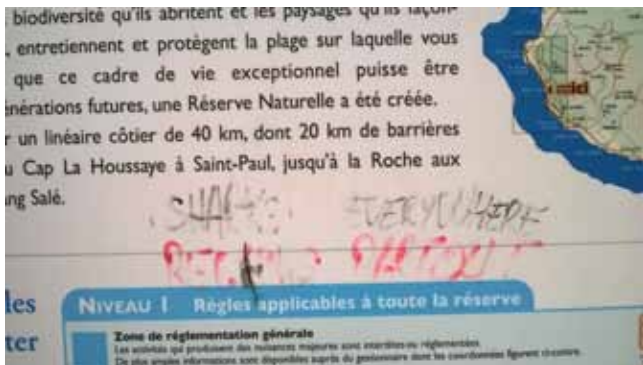


Figure 6 Rules for the Reserve – sharks everywhere warning



Figure 7 Red shark stencil graffiti



Figure 8 Rat stencils

Interestingly the majority of victims have been surfers from metropolitan France [known colloquially as *zoreils*] since local creoles or island born Réunionnese are less likely to be aficionados of such nautical activities. The depiction of government inaction in the face of this threat may, nevertheless, be invoked as representative of underlying tensions between the French metropolis and the Réunion hinterland where the shark graffiti becomes a metaphor for anti-establishment and anti-metropole popular expression.

Perhaps the most familiar and humorously disrespectful shark warning graffiti can be seen on a welcome billboard advertisement within the fictional seaside town of Amity Island from the 1975 movie *Jaws*. The alarming graffiti images on Réunion Island are without humour, essentially functioning as clear pictograms. The shape of a black silhouette of a shark (see Figure 4) is seen daubed with a brush and drawn with a nib all along the coast, added to official signage that does not identify the particular warning. The graffiti triggers immediate stimuli. There is a threat. It is stark.

The attractive 'Creole Village' becomes 'Shark Village' as if the shark is now what truly defines the village and the 'Natural Reserve Marine of the Réunion is renamed: 'Marine of the Shark.' (see Figures 5). Public information including a list detailing the 'rules applicable to the entire reserve' is succinctly added to with the English words: 'Sharks Everywhere' (see Figure 6). This has also been added to as a translation into French by what looks like another hand using a red pen: 'Requins Partout' (see Figure 7).

On a 'no swimming' sign on which the danger and risk is stated but not the reason - the body of a shark vertically attacking is stencil graffiti sprayed in red. Here the graffiti is operating as a warning of the ever-present yet unseen threat of the shark, the predator, the malignant force that flourishes causing damage void of surveillance. The metaphor of the mechanics of capitalist systems in place that affect our lives are ever present and as inseparable as the salt in the ocean.

The black silhouetted stencils of a rat (see Figure 8) running through the streets of Paris by Blek le Rat (and later adopted by Banksy to let loose in the streets of London) multiply like an underbelly class, a resident that just won't leave the city in which they belong. The recurring visibility of this unwelcome

occupant appears in streets by the street artists and is possibly intended as an off putting warning to the new generation of property investors who wish for a cleansed environment and selectively ordered lifestyle. The environment is no doubt conducive due to the encouragement of the city's expansion of capital investment and profit within the changing areas of regeneration.

The terms 'social cleansing' and 'ethnic cleansing' of people previously living/renting in and moved (priced out) from poor areas as a result of new development and subsequent gentrification has been used and is close to that of 'extermination' an employment used in order to solve the problem of the city's rat population. The fins of the city are moving forward freely and unhindered, and like the fast-moving greed itself and the damage it causes, if it were able to be slowed to a stop, it would die.

### Endnotes

1. Jace left with his mother to live in Reunion island at the age of 8 and it was here that he developed his unique graffiti style. [http://www.lemonde.fr/arts/visuel/2017/09/22/street-art-jace-un-gouzou-dans-la-ville\\_5189860\\_1655012.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/arts/visuel/2017/09/22/street-art-jace-un-gouzou-dans-la-ville_5189860_1655012.html).
2. <https://www.lequipe.fr/Adrenaline/Surf/Actualites/Kelly-slater-prend-parti-sur-la-crise-requin-a-la-reunion/780268>.
3. <http://www.ipreunion.com/requins/reportage/2017/04/30/21e-attaque-de-requin-mortelle-depuis-2011-pointe-au-sel-adrien-dubosc,61383.html>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G1hcsIGPPY>.
4. <http://www.linfo.re/la-reunion/faits-divers/38-attaques-de-requin-en-30-ans-a-la-reunion>
5. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attaques\\_de\\_requin\\_%C3%A0\\_La\\_R%C3%A9union](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attaques_de_requin_%C3%A0_La_R%C3%A9union).