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*Online Journal in Public Archaeology*

# INDEX

## **Editorial**

1

Jaime Almansa Sánchez and Elena Papagiannopoulou

### **Mutual Education. Towards a model of educational co-creation around the archaeological heritage of Mexico**

Jaime Delgado Rubio

### **Communicating Cultural Heritage Resources to the Public: Experiences from the Makonde of Mtwara Region, Tanzania**

Festo Wachawaseme Gabriel

### **Reflecting on evaluation in public archaeology**

Kate Ellenberger and Lorna-Jane Richardson

### **Points of You: Historical graffiti and pop culture: A public archaeology perspective**

Alberto Polo Romero and Diana Morales Manzanares

## **Review**

Antipatrimonio

Nekbet Corpas Cívicos

## **Review**

Archaeogaming

Daniel García Raso

## **Review**

Yacimiento pixel

Jaime Almansa-Sánchez

## **POINTS OF YOU**

### **Historical graffiti and pop culture: A public archaeology perspective**

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#### **Introduction**

The analysis of historical graffiti—commonly taking the form of engravings on pottery and drawings on the walls of ruins—has become more popular in archaeology and history of late. Although studies on historical graffiti (see Barrera Maturana, 2002; Ozcáriz, 2013; Viñuales y Reyes, 2016, and more) are increasingly gaining academic acceptance, the results are rarely transferred onto other related knowledge fields, such as heritage outreach and teaching.

Interestingly, however, these historical engravings and drawings were represented in cinema and television before they were the subject of academic research. The point was raised in the field of public archaeology, with Jaime Almansa Sanchez (2013; 2017) noting that aspects of everyday material culture can remain unknown to society despite being studied academically. For this reason, it is necessary to evaluate and create dialogue spaces between historians, archaeologists and filmmakers in order to create more faithful representations in cinema other historically-themed productions.

The present study analyses these representations of the past in popular culture, by noting different typologies and appearance contexts of graffiti in cinema and comparing them with archaeological elements. The films and television production we have focused do not necessarily have strict historical backgrounds, and exclude

documentaries and specialised films. The paper is not aimed at merely listing the films in which historical graffiti is represented, but to create new spaces of academic study in terms of the relationship between society, history and archaeology.

## Films and series analysis

Cinema and television often use material remains from the past. Of course, films that hark back to historical times, like Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), or those set in medieval and pre-Hispanic times, do not always do this appropriately (Tejerizo, 2011). The present study will focus on one aspect of this usage of material remains—historical and prehistoric graffiti used in cinema.

Terry Jones' *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) is perhaps one of the most singular cases of graffiti deliberately employed in films. At 26 minutes into the film, the iconic sentence "*Romani ite domum* (Romans go home)," appears written on a wall.



Fig. 1. *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

Ostensibly a joke about bad Latin, the scene it captures the reality of the rejection of Roman dominion by many territories. It gives us an opportunity to reflect deeper on the intent behind historical graffiti, because many of these jokes, complaints and insults were written on surfaces not built for that purpose.

In Jean Sacha's television series *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1964), the protagonist draws a calendar on the bark of a tree, a motif which recurs in many contexts and chronologies. One such instance is in the 1994 Disney animated feature *The Lion King*, where a character draws a lion on a tree bark. Painted lions, such as those found in the Chauvet Cave (Clottes, 1996), are a regular feature of past communities relaying their relationships with nature.

Released in the same year was Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption*, which features a scene where one of the characters engraves on a wooden beam the phrase "Brooks was here" before committing suicide. Anthony Minghella's Oscar-winning *The English Patient* (1996), meanwhile, contains a scene with engravings and paintings from the Cave of Swimmers in Egypt, which was discovered in 1933 by Hungarian explorer László Almásy.

Gus Van Sant's *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) include scenes with two different 'geniuses' writing down mathematical formulas on uncommon bases, a bath mirror and a glass window. These graffiti typologies are very common on the walls of different buildings, such as in industry areas, churches, or even wine cellars. Another atypical surface reflected in cinema is plaster. This material is used by the Frida Kahlo character in the 2002 biopic directed by Julie Taymor. She draws a butterfly on this plaster, first with a pencil, then with pens of different colours, blue and red.

Kevin Reynolds' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, released in the same year, depicts the phrase "God will give justice" as central element of the story. The same prison engravings are seen in Daniel Monzón's *Celda 211* (2009). These prison engravings are very varied, from crosses to graves and anthropomorphic figures, such as a man with an umbrella. These are also complemented by phrases, like "*Aquí murió Calzones* (Here died Calzones)" or "*Enfermo, enfermo, enfermo* (Sick, sick, sick)." These show the misery of captivity inside of prison. We also should underline that this is a multi-temporal phenomenon, as it is still evident in prison graffiti today. (Herrasti et al, 2014; Barrera Maturana, 2016).

In Antoine Fuqua's 2004 film *King Arthur*, we can observe inscriptions on orthostates. These are similar to that which is found on

the south of the Iberian Peninsula, the decorated South-west steles. Other cases of this are the stone circles or the cromlechs around the British Isles, like Stonehenge (Salisbury), Castlerigg (Cumbria) or the Scottish Brodgar. According to the cromlech inscriptions, there are different opinions on their function, but all of them can be summarised in this sentence: "The English sites indeed confirm that the megalithic decorations had references in other spaces of their builders' lives" (Bueno Ramírez et al, 2016: 188).

The opening of HBO's *Rome* series shows several types of graffiti depicting different aspects of daily life, in the form of both pictures and Latin words. One important characteristic of the Latin in the opening is the use of uncial writing, cursive writing and capital letters. As Pablo Ozcáriz states: "*Aquellos dibujos o inscripciones realizados sobre un soporte que no es el adecuado para ellos* (Those drawings or inscriptions are made on surfaces not intended for this purpose)" (2012: 9). We can compare some of these with archaeological real cases around the world, such as those in Pompeii described by Rebeca Benefiel (2017).

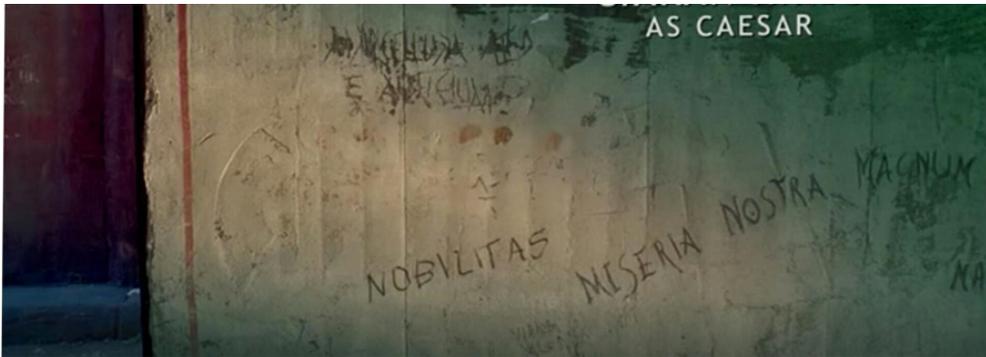


Fig. 2. The graffiti visible in the opening of HBO's *Rome*.

The action-comedy film *Sahara* (2005), directed by Breck Eisner, also shows some anachronistic anthropomorphic representations for comedic effect, such as buildings, scenes of hunting and even a submarine on the walls of a cave.

Hieroglyphs in Yucatec Mayan appear in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* (2006). A linguistic analysis shows that these are numbers, with one represented by a point, and five represented with a line. The sum of these characters would show us the numbers "11, 16 and 6" written on the left column (see Fig. 3 below).



*Fig. 3: A scene from Apocalypto, where graffiti appears next to hieroglyphs on columns.*

These also need to be differentiated from the hieroglyphs proper. The hieroglyphs seem to more deliberate, while the numbers appear to be written more spontaneously, in freehand. We can see on the right column the same hieroglyph as on the left, but written in the freehand is the number 12.

Nevertheless, we can observe an intentional link between both signs to complete an 'idea'. On this occasion, it could be interpreted as a date, formed by the sign *k'in*, a Mayan day word, and the number, made up of two points and a line (Grub, 2006: 131). The column also contains four signs consisting of three regular crosses and a vertical line—clearly written spontaneously, and much closer to our modern understanding of graffiti. The interpretation of this is quite difficult, and we have yet to discover any archaeological parallels.

In the DreamWorks animated movie *The Croods* (2013), we see intentional hand prints on the cave where the titular family lives. These are normally not taken and understood as normal graffiti, but we thought it worthy of being included in the present article, considering their association to rock art. Some well-known cases of this include the Cueva de las Manos in Santa Cruz (9,300 years ago) or the Cueva de El Castillo in Cantabria (40,800 years ago), where we can actually see handprints next to zoomorphic engravings of animals or schematic art.

Also worthy of note is the 2013 movie *The Physician*, directed by Philipp Stölzl. In one scene, writing on the wall is used to indicate the number of deaths caused by the plague. But by far one of the most impressive representations of graffiti in cinema in terms of both quantity and quality has been David S Goyer's *Da Vinci's Demons* series. In different episodes, we have the opportunity to observe several drawings and ideas expressed on walls and other surfaces. In the fifth episode of Season 1, we can see some inscriptions, which could be ideograms, letters or even shapes in the form of stairs. In episode six of Season 2, graffiti appears during a dramatic scene. Here, a wall of graffiti can be observed with the word "Medici." The word is surrounded by anthropomorphic drawings, as well as engravings of animals, like birds. Such depictions are common in medieval and modern archaeological contexts. In addition to these, we also have scenes with multiple wall inscriptions, such as that visible in Fig. 4.

In Sarah Gavron's 2015 film *Suffragette*, a famous phrase appears on the wall of the cell in which the protagonist is being incarcerated: "Deeds Not Words D.S." making reference to the movement in early 20th century Britain. In prisons like Holloway Castle in London, we find testimonies of the thoughts of women imprisoned there. Some of them were condemned to death or simply jailed, as the famous Marion Wallace Dunlop, who was on hunger strike in 1909 during her imprisonment.

The CW series, *Arrow*, also depicts graffiti in episode 12 of Season 2. In the scene, a map drawn in chalk is visible, which also contains sentences and coordinates. Graffiti on jail cell walls are also visible in recent series like *El Marginal* and *Narcos*, but these scenes are isolated.



*Fig. 4:* A scene from *Da Vinci's Demons*, where historical graffiti is shown on the wall.

Lastly, Patricia Riggen's *The 33* (2015), about the miners trapped 700m underground for over two months after the collapse of the San José mine. In one of the final scenes of the film, graffiti is prominent on the wall of cave in which they were trapped. It states: "Here lived 33 miners, August 5 – October 13. God was with us."

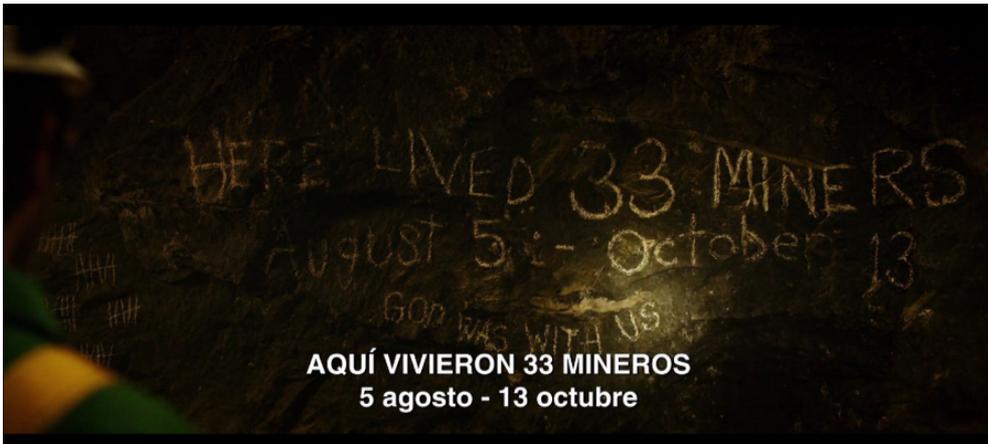


Fig. 5. Graffiti on the cave wall in the film *The 33*.

### Contexts and typologies

The complete a comparative analysis of the examples listed above, we used Josemi Lorenzo's 2016 study, "*Grafitos medievales. Un intento de sistematización,*" which contains typological standardisation and a system for the characteristics of medieval graffiti.

Different techniques are employed in the scenes above to produce graffiti, from incisions with knives, stones and other sharp objects, to the use of natural pigments, or even chalk. In cases where the graffiti is not planned beforehand, graffiti is drawn freehand (Lorenzo, 2016: 55).

The locations in which this graffiti is found is also varied, from houses and palaces to prison walls, or even on the inside of the caves. The surfaces on which graffiti is found is also heterogenic—wood, walls, stone, cement mortar, etc.

We can also use three of the four categories Lorenzo establishes to classify the graffiti in the examples above – textual, figurative and accounting graffiti. Names and sentences are a feature of the first category, such as in the word "*Medici*" in *Da Vinci's Demons*, or the sentences in *Celda 211*, *Life of Brian* or *33*. In all of these examples, we can find names and sentences which demonstrate a multitemporal approach.

Representations of humans and animals are significant in figurative graffiti also found in *Celda 211* and *Da Vinci's Demons*, or the anachronistic submarine in *Sahara*. Accounting graffiti, meanwhile, appears on multiple occasions, such as in the films *The Physician*, *Good Will Hunting* or the *Arrow* series. The last case is the most noteworthy, since the map shown also contains geographical coordinates of an island.

Therefore, we can observe that this analysis help us to continue exploring relevant issues as highlighted by Beatriz Comendador, who said:

*"El análisis y estudio de la configuración de la imagen especular del pasado en nuestra sociedad constituye un punto de análisis crucial del que los arqueólogos y/o historiadores no deben quedar al margen como parte de la sociedad (The analysis and study of the configuration of the mirror image of the past in our society constitutes a crucial point of analysis from which archaeologists and/or historians should not remain on the sidelines as part of society)." (2013: 132).*

## **Conclusions**

We are concerned about the distance between academic studies and the general public. Cinema and television are helping members of the public understand the multi-temporality of archaeological and historical elements such as graffiti.

The graphic representations studied above appear in both historical and non-historical films, and we can observe how these speak to many aspects of contemporary life, which is fundamental to their understanding.

The present article breaks down the temporary borders that usually exist between different chronologies to study graffiti as an element transcendent of space and time. In our understanding, we need to start thinking about graffiti as a representations of the philosophy and the gradual changes of mentality of the period in which it is produced.

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ISSN: 2171-6315

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