

What's Up Doc: A Review and Analysis of English Language Documentaries On Contemporary Graffiti And Street Art

Jeffrey Ian Ross - Ph.D. University of Baltimore
email: jross@ubalt.edu

Ronald Kramer - University of Auckland
email: r.kramer@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

Over the past four decades, most large urban settings around the world have experienced an increase in graffiti and street art. One of the consequences of this activity is an attempt to interpret this phenomenon. Not only have popular and scholarly articles and books catalogued, examined, and analyzed graffiti and street art, and the people who engage in and respond to this activity, but so too have documentary movies. In order to better understand this latter method of capturing and explaining graffiti and street art, this paper reviews and analyzes seventeen English language documentary films (produced between 1980-2014) drawing generalizations about the dominant themes that have been expressed in this body of work. This analysis includes a review of the settings, individuals interviewed, and provides a critical commentary on this body of work.

Keywords: Graffiti, Street Art, Documentaries, Films, Movies

1. Introduction

Social phenomena are explained and interpreted in many different ways. One of the communication vehicles for this has been through mass media. One of the most powerful media has been films, movies, and cinematic productions. Documentaries, in particular, can educate, entertain, and shape viewers' opinions. The information presented can also motivate the behavior of viewers. Despite their pretense of objectivity, documentaries selectively choose information to present to an audience (e.g., Nichols, 2010).¹ One relatively contemporary subject that has been the focus of documentary coverage has been graffiti and street art, the people who engage in this activity including community and political response.

Although graffiti has existed for centuries, modern graffiti typically traces its origins to New York City (NYC) subway writers² of the 1970s (Austin, 2001; Waclawek 2011, p. 12).³ For a number of reasons, these writers started placing their work on various surfaces in the city and beyond. Shortly after contemporary graffiti appeared, a complementary activity called street art developed (Castleman 1984; Young 2014).⁴ Before continuing, it is useful to understand that most graffiti and street art is considered by law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies as a form of vandalism

and it exists in most of the major cities in the world. It can be found on all kinds of surfaces, from walls, to signs, to means of transportation. Graffiti and street art differ from public art, which Waclawek (2011: 65) defines as "a vast assortment of art forms and practices, including murals, community projects, memorials, civic statuary, architecture, sculpture, ephemeral art (dance, performance theatre), subversive interventions, and, for some graffiti and street art."

The people who engage in this activity and the causal dynamics surrounding their work are frequently discussed. For example, many articles and books have been published, and websites and blogs have been produced about this subject (e.g., Gastman and Neelan 2010; Seno 2010).⁵ Likewise, an emerging scholarly body of work has been published on graffiti and street art (e.g., Austin 2001; Ferrell 1996; Philips 1999; Macdonald 2003; Snyder 2011, etc.). One of the numerous effects of graffiti and street art has also been a steady flow of films, both documentary and fictional (also referred to as commercial, feature-length, Hollywood, and popular). Although analysis of fictional types of films is emerging (Author), work regarding documentaries remains relatively dormant.

This paper attempts to contextualize and understand this body of work. In short, the paper argues that while

documentaries on graffiti and street art, particularly the earlier ones, were important conduits to both preserve and disseminate information about graffiti and street art to various audiences across the country and around the world, as new ones were developed there was little in the way of conscious reflection on the content that was previously produced and thus little value was gained with each new documentary. In several important respects, as documentaries continued to be produced, they tended to become formulaic and less reflexive. One of the consequences of this was that the possibility of offering an alternative discourse on graffiti and street art, one that would depart from those typically found in mass media, was lost.

2. The importance of graffiti and its representation

Numerous reasons attest to the importance of graffiti and street art. These forms of creativity are now fairly pervasive and can be found in most, if not all, major cities around the world. Alongside its proliferation, graffiti and street art has spawned ongoing “cultural wars” over its meaning. This battle over the meaning of graffiti and street art is fought by various sectors of society.

Governments and private concerns (e.g., corporations), alongside some individuals and community organizations, often spend a phenomenal amount of resources in responding to graffiti and street art, especially its eradication and abatement. In addition to material practices, opposition to graffiti and street art also takes discursive forms, which has led to what one might reasonably call a dominant discourse on graffiti and street art. In this discourse, graffiti is often understood through the rhetorical conventions of the “broken windows” thesis, and thus comes to be seen as a practice, associated with gangs or uncontrollable urban youth, that will devastate local economies if left unchecked. In constructing graffiti as a threat, dominant discourses routinely deny that it has any political meaning. Moreover, the dominant discourse on graffiti often circumscribes public debate by drawing a binary distinction between “art” and “vandalism,” and insisting that graffiti can only be the latter (Author).

Against this, however, art galleries, museums, curators, and collectors increasingly recognize graffiti and street art as a major development in the history of art. To be sure, this may well be the product of attempting to exploit the economic potential of graffiti and street art, but it nevertheless offers an alternative framing of graffiti. Somewhat comparable,

some academics and experts understand the phenomena as important and meriting serious scholarly study. Such accounts are typically sympathetic towards graffiti writers/street artists and their work, often striving to develop theoretical accounts of this subcultural practice.

A third major source of discourses that vie over the meaning of graffiti and street art can be found in films. Although fictional movies with actors playing graffiti artists, or graffiti serving as a backdrop to tell the story have been analyzed elsewhere (Author), a relatively comprehensive review of documentary films on this subject has yet to be done. Despite the improved access to documentaries via streaming technology, we do not have a good understanding of the information and themes that these movies have presented and portrayed, and to what extent they are a reflection of reality or have perpetuated myths.

Documentary movies are often understood as having a “realistic” nature. Insofar as this is the case, they provide an additional medium to understand this phenomenon. Like other forms of popular culture, documentaries can create and establish expectations for their audience and frame issues. In this framing, they may reinforce and/or challenge dominant stereotypes, which can influence policy decisions and responses (Aufderheide 2007; Rafter 2006; 2007; Rafter and Brown 2011; Welsh Fleming and Dowler 2011; Yar 2010). On a related point, numerous graffiti artists indicate that seeing one or more documentaries about this subject matter served as a basis of inspiration for their work.⁶ In short, there is a widespread belief that documentary films are more honest or authentic in their portrayal of subject matter (Nichols 2010, p. xiii).

The following is a review and analysis of popular, readily-accessible, English-language documentaries that have been produced on graffiti and street art. This research lies at the crossroads of a number of interrelated fields including cultural criminology, visual criminology, and urban studies. The first body of work sees the primacy of culture as a context in which to understand crime, criminals, and responses to it. In addition to a focus on ethnographic methods, cultural criminology examines how numerous cultural industries portray deviant subcultures (Ferrell, Hayward, and Young 2008). The second collection of scholarship deals more with how images are constructed, used, and framed (Hayward 2009; Hayward and Presdee 2010). In both cases, there is an interest in the role of movies, particularly in their power to shape and reinforce dominant stereotypes of marginalized

sectors of society, but at the same time, various media may also be carefully used to have liberating and educational effects on sectors of society that are oppressed, repressed, and marginalized. The final body of relevant literature examines the complex relationships among urban processes and trends such as culture, public and private space, planning, housing, work, change, gentrification, crime, city services, planning, transportation, and economics. In some small way our analysis should contribute to literature in these three complimentary areas.

3. The world of graffiti and street art documentaries and their analysis

There are numerous methods by which films can be analyzed (e.g., Aumont and Marie 1988/2015; Sobchack and Sobchack, 1997) including, but not limited to, content, historical, iconic, narrative, psychoanalytical, semiotic, and shot by shot analyses. We adopt a socio-historical approach that conforms most closely to a topic-based analysis.⁷ In using this approach, the focus is on identifying recurrent themes within and across the documentaries. Moreover, to the extent possible, this study delves into the choice of individuals who are featured and/or interviewed, their decisions regarding the graffiti and/or street art they engage in, the places that are featured, as well as those factors that have an influence on the films, such as the social, historical, and political contexts in which the films were created.

In order to identify the universe of movies depicting graffiti and street art, we searched the Internet for examples of English-language documentaries that disproportionately focus on graffiti and street art. When the research was conducted, the website www.graffitimovies.weebly.com listed 206 films on the subject matter of graffiti, most of which are uploaded to that site. On closer examination many of these movies are self-produced “home movies” of minimal quality. Moreover, many of these films do not appear to have a distinguishable narrative. Once the films were selected, the researcher asked selected scholars who specialize in this subject matter if they could add to his working list of movies. While not all films listed by the experts were documentaries focused disproportionately on graffiti and street art, or were easily accessible (i.e., they could be streamed), the investigator was able to narrow down a manageable list of documentaries, and then systematically watched these movies, paying careful attention to identify prevalent themes.⁸

An attempt was made to watch these movies in a chronological fashion. By seeing these films in this manner, the researcher hoped to witness the evolution of depictions of graffiti and street art and the relative changes, if any, in content and the approach to the subject matter.⁹ In some cases, it was necessary to view these movies several times to better understand, categorize, and contextualize them.¹⁰ Finally, by limiting the universe to popular (easily accessible) documentaries, the analysis was made more manageable. From 1979 to 2014, approximately 24 full-length English-language films depicting graffiti and/or street art and artists/writers were made (Author). Of this total, seven are fictional accounts and seventeen are documentaries. The majority of the documentaries focus disproportionately on graffiti and graffiti writers rather than street art and its practitioners. The balance of this section deals with inclusion and exclusion criteria of the analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, the documentary genre consists of films with nonfictional content, the intent of which is instruction or the capturing of a part of the historical record. Full-length documentaries usually run between 45 and 95 minutes in length. In addition, numerous short films (i.e., “shorts”) (e.g., *Atlas: Los Angeles Graffiti Documentary* (2005), and *MUTO*, a wall-painted animation by BLU) documenting graffiti and street art have been made. Many of these are accessible via YouTube, Amazon Prime, or third-party websites (Light, Griffiths, and Lincoln 2012). The focus of this analysis, however, is on the longer and, in most cases, better known, and easily accessible full-length movies. Thus, the study excluded what appear to be mostly unnarrated, self-produced/vanity home-style movies.¹¹

Another point is worth mentioning. Some readers may question the inclusion of the Academy Award-nominated movie *Exit Through The Gift Shop* (2010) in this study. Why might this be the case? This movie, directed by street artist Banksy, ushered in considerable debate over whether the events portrayed in it are true, and some critics have suggested that this film should be more appropriately considered a mockumentary (Dubois 2010-2011). After a close reading of the discussion surrounding this film, however, the investigators decided to classify it as a documentary, even though it falls outside of the norms of the other documentaries on graffiti and street art.¹²

In sum, the documentaries on graffiti and street art included in this review were made between 1980 and 2012. The majority 12 (70 %) were produced during the first decade

of the 2000s. With the exception of Reiss (director of *Bomb It* and *Bomb It 2*), no director made more than one documentary. All the directors were men and directed their films on their own. The documentaries ranged in length between 45 minutes and 95 minutes with an average of 73 minutes. Since some of these movies have been reviewed in other venues, this paper is not meant to be a collection of reviews. It seeks, however, to interpret their content and approach to their subject matter.

In general, the movies can be placed into three categories: movies focusing primarily on one graffiti or street artist and/or a particular graffiti crew; movies that feature this subject matter in one particular location; and movies covering graffiti and street art in different locations throughout the United States or around the world.

Documentaries that concentrate on one particular artist or a crew, include *Tatscru: The Mural Kings*; *Beautiful Losers*; *Exit Through the Gift Shop*; *Graffiti Wars: Banksy vs. Robbo*, and *The Legend of Cool "Disco" Dan*. More prominently represented are documentaries that focus on graffiti and street art done in one city. This group of films includes *Stations of the Elevated*; *Style Wars*; *Graffiti Verite 1: Writing on the Wall*; *Piece by Piece*, and *RASH*. However, the largest category of documentaries is constituted by those that cover graffiti and street art in a variety of locations. A few of these films have an overarching point, while others are narrowly focused. This group of films includes *Infamy*; *Just to Get a Rep*; *Next: A Primer on Urban Painting*; *Bomb It*; *Alter Ego: A Worldwide Documentary about Graffiti Writing*; *Bomb It 2*, and *Vigilante Vigilante: The Battle for Expression*.

After viewing the 17 movies numerous times, several key themes can be identified. In general, the viewer gets the impression that graffiti is done by disaffected youth, mostly engaged in by men, primarily done in New York City, and that graffiti writers frequently have disagreements with other graffiti artists. Alongside these general themes, there is a readily discernible aesthetic quality that characterizes graffiti films, and they tend to incorporate similar narrative structures. In the remainder of this piece, the focus is on these aesthetic qualities and narrative elements, and the ways in which they tend to inhibit the development of new insights into graffiti writing culture. The paper closes with a discussion of how the content of graffiti documentaries could be expanded.

4. The aesthetics of the graffiti documentary

A considerable amount of resources have been invested in the shooting, editing, and distribution of these movies. It was no easy feat to track down many of these individuals who spend a considerable portion of their lives engaging in graffiti and evading detection. Also, in many cases, these documentaries required the directors and their crew to travel to both domestic and foreign places to capture the footage they wanted. This introduced additional logistical challenges. The conditions under which some of the films were shot, evidenced by grainy video and night shots under street, poor, and/or minimal lighting conditions is testimony to the conditions under which the directors were forced to make their movies. It was also very resource intensive to track down the archival footage and photographs that were included in some of the films.

In general, the documentaries on graffiti and street art are informative and professional looking. This is noticeable in the range of subject matter that most of these films cover, the quality of the editing, the shots chosen to be included, and the sound used to accompany some of the visuals. Viewers get to see inside the world of graffiti and street art and the people who do this sort of thing. The audience learns about how and why graffiti writers are attracted to this activity, as well as the process of graffiti and street art, the difficulties among various artists, and the work of anti-graffiti activists and vigilantes. These interviews and images are accompanied by music that is disproportionately drawn from the hip hop and/or rap genres.

The audience is presented with a considerable number of time-lapse photographs and grainy images. Time-lapse photography shows graffiti artists and crews installing new pieces on walls or other surfaces and how the walls have changed over time as different writers have placed their graffiti and street art there. The faces of interviewees are frequently pixelated to disguise the identity of the artists. Interview material is often interspersed with black-and-white and color archival film footage, photographs, and color animation used to illustrate some of the artists' activities. These kinds of aesthetic qualities have a functional quality: the painting process can be slow and rather boring to watch but becomes much more engaging when sped-up through time-lapse photography. Grainy imagery is also likely to be an outcome of the conditions in which footage is produced and the reliance on older source material. Concealing the artists' identities is certainly intended as a pre-cautionary measure to prevent any legal consequences of appearing in

such movies.

However, such aesthetics are also symbolic, conveying meanings that go beyond their functional necessity. In many respects, the use of time-lapse, grainy imagery, and pixelated faces works to reproduce the idea that graffiti writers are inherently outlaws: sped-up footage connotes the ways in which graffiti is likely to be an adrenaline filled experience, and the grainy image suggests some kind of clandestine activity. It is not hard to imagine how the pixelated face might evoke in viewers the feeling that they are hearing the perspectives of those who engage in criminal activity. All of which is somewhat odd given that a common narrative thread throughout the films is that graffiti is a legitimate activity.

Over the thirty-five-year period these movies span, the films reflect an increasing technical sophistication. The sound quality gets better, there are a diverse number of shots taken at different angles, and there is more use of color. In some ways, this replicates the history of graffiti itself, which is oftentimes more a display of technical competence in painting than a matter of communicating some kind of deeper message.

5. The narrative formula of graffiti and street art documentaries

In an indirect manner, most of these movies attempt to confront popular myths and misrepresentations of graffiti writers and street artists as lacking respect for private property and as mindless anarchists. Some of these documentaries are very good at pointing out the hypocrisy of various situations. For example, in *Vigilante Vigilante*, buffers walk or drive around the cities in which they live or work, often painting over graffiti without authorization. Insofar as this is the case, the buffers are committing acts that could be framed as vandalism. Viewers also learn about how public space has been increasingly taken over by corporations advertising their goods and services, and how this has a negative effect on the urban landscape.

With notable exceptions (e.g., *Exit Through the Gift Shop*; *Vigilante Vigilante*; *The Legend of Cool Disco Dan*), most of the documentaries resemble each other mainly because they repeat the same information, interview the same graffiti writers and street artists, dwell on the same kinds of issues, and rarely go beyond these tropes. The narrative formula of graffiti documentaries dictates that we learn about the history of graffiti and its major players, rehearse debates regarding whether it is art or simply vandalism, and pursue

the problem of whether graffiti is still “legitimate” once it is moved from the streets to the gallery.

This is all kind of standard fair and, in many important respects, it replicates the kinds of debates/discussions one is likely to encounter in the mainstream media. Arguably, it would not be too much of a stretch to say that the content of graffiti documentaries serves as a good illustration of hegemony. That is to say, documentaries on graffiti have a tendency to stay within the confines of a “permissible discourse,” one that is established by those who oppose graffiti and wield greater social power (Gramsci 1971/2012; Hall and Jefferson 1993).

This is evident in debates over the “authenticity” of graffiti-inspired art and, especially so, in the recurrent theme of whether graffiti is art or vandalism. Respondents who paint graffiti, or who are sympathetic to the subculture, often claim that “graffiti is art.” Presumably, a statement such as this seeks to use the label of “art” in order to win legitimacy for graffiti. As Austin (2001) suggests, framing graffiti as art transforms it into a valued cultural practice.

Such interpretations may seem to oppose a dominant discourse that reduces graffiti to vandalism. However, claims that graffiti-is-art take for granted the parameters of debate as established by powerful opponents of graffiti and, insofar as this is the case, are problematic. While the graffiti-is-art position tries to push graffiti away from the stigmatizing effects of the vandalism label, it reproduces the idea that it has some kind of inherent definition, as if the meaning of graffiti could be determined by its intrinsic qualities. In this debate, graffiti is either this or that, either art or vandalism; as if it were a ball that might be tossed back and forth between two ends of a tennis court.

The problem with this discourse is not so much that graffiti might be art and vandalism, but that it glosses over the constructed nature of graffiti and its relationship to public space. In this view, what graffiti comes to mean is a social process, one shaped by material and ideological interests. Those who oppose graffiti, for example, might simply be benefitting by portraying it as vandalism. This allows graffiti opponents to articulate their vision of a desirable urban environment, what the city should look like, and what kinds of subjectivities and activities should be permitted within it. This point can be illustrated by drawing attention towards the phenomenological experience of city environments. All kinds of written text can be found in public space, from signs dictating appropriate behavior (e.g., “Tow away zone,

No parking”), corporate logos, informal fliers, and other forms of advertising, to name a few. Phenomenologically, these forms of writing (or at least some of them) have as much potential as graffiti to be constructed as vandalism. Who gets to decide what kinds of public writing will be tolerated and what forms despised? Who gets to carve up the field of public writing into those forms that are necessary and those that are problematic? How are such distinctions imposed upon the world of urban text? When documentaries obsess over whether graffiti is art or vandalism, these kinds of questions will be unlikely to enter the picture. In short, the “art versus vandalism” trope is ideological – irrespective of where one stands – because it forecloses the possibility of discussing how graffiti, and the struggles to establish what it *is*, are connected to an intricate web of cultural politics and material interests.

A second way in which the narrative formula of graffiti documentaries reproduces dominant discourses can be seen in the well-rehearsed theme of what counts as “authentic graffiti.” The problem of authenticity emerges when graffiti is transferred onto canvas in order to become a part of the art world. In these respects, we are often encouraged to accept the idea that graffiti on canvas is not “real,” or that only illegal graffiti is “authentic graffiti.” Apparently, something “gets lost” when graffiti is taken out of public space and transformed into a cultural commodity.

Such a discourse would seem to oppose the notion that graffiti-is-art, but this seeming paradox is resolved in light of the hegemonic ways in which graffiti is framed. Whereas the graffiti-is-art claim seeks to reject the “vandalism” label within a binary discourse, the notion that authentic-graffiti-is-illegal insists that graffiti is a crime, but never art. If the first claim amounts to a form of critique that is permitted within (if not useful to) the dominant discourse on graffiti, the second represents an internalization of that dominant discourse. In both instances, we are left with narrative elements that do not escape the confines of permissible discourse.

The viewer of these films may ask what new information each new movie offers. Overall, these movies sort of run together and get a little boring because their core narratives are so similar. With each new documentary, it becomes a case of diminishing returns. Over time, the films rarely present any new information or novel interpretations. In short, it does not seem like the directors did their homework and reviewed the other movies that were produced before embarking on their films. In defense of the directors, it may very well be that at the

time that many of these movies were produced (mid 2000s), the other films may not have been as widely accessible as they are today. Perhaps these movies were primarily playing in the independent film festival circuit and thus accessibility to these movies was not as prominent as they are today in our interconnected web based world. It could also be the case that the directors placed more emphasis on the act of creation rather than contributing a product that was unique.

6. Towards new narratives

What would it take for these documentaries to produce a discourse that pushes debates over graffiti in new directions? Rarely are the differences among the various types of graffiti and street art explained to the viewer in an easily digestible manner. Indeed tags, throw-ups, pieces, and paste-ups are identified, but rarely are definitions provided, nor are the advantages and disadvantages of these various techniques explained to the audience. The films also tend to be silent on how different communities are likely to conceptually organize these various forms of graffiti. For example, while much of the public is likely to conflate tags and throw-ups with “ugly” graffiti but may construe “pieces” as “more artistic,” graffiti writers are likely to frame these forms in a different manner. Amongst graffiti writers, all forms of graffiti are likely to be judged in relation to aesthetic standards set within graffiti writing subcultures. In this sense, graffiti writers may debate whether any particular tag, throw-up, or piece is “ugly” or “good.” It may be fruitful for documentaries to pursue why different communities operate with specific conceptual maps.

While the majority of movies review graffiti artists and the graffiti and street art scene in big cities, both in the United States and elsewhere, other large cities with thriving graffiti and street art scenes, including Cairo, Shanghai, and Toronto are absent from these films. With the exception of some footage in South Africa, none of the movies touch upon graffiti and street art in Africa and the Middle East. Also underrepresented are places in Asia.

Most of the narratives lack an argument and/or easily identifiable chronology. Some of the films seem to simply be collections of vignettes with no central argument or point (e.g., *Bomb It 2*). They bounce around from one location to another, and from one graffiti and street artist to another. In some cases, the movies defy logic in terms of the choice of why certain cities and themes are included. For example, in early scenes of *Next: A Primer on Urban Painting*, we see

shots of a spray paint manufacturer, but there is no logical reason why these are included. Other than the fact that graffiti had its historical origins in New York City, and the movie starts and ends with shots of graffiti in that city, the viewer is not certain what the director's intent was in this case.

Although a handful of the graffiti and street art documentaries also interview citizens, law enforcement, and politicians about their reactions to graffiti and street art in their cities, almost all of the movies disproportionately rely on interviews with the artists/writers. Nonetheless, these individuals appear to be one-dimensional and caricatures. Interviews with politicians, anti-graffiti activists, and law enforcement officers seem tacked on like an afterthought. The almost singular approach to interviewing graffiti writers and street artists unnecessarily privileges the perpetrator's (or if you prefer artist/writers) voice, (making the primary source of information), placing them on pedestals and portraying them in some cases as super heroes (Campos 2013).

One of the problems that follows from here is that, because graffiti writers are likely to be "on the defensive," they typically produce a discourse that responds to a dominant discourse. But this minimizes the odds that "disinterested" and novel interpretations of graffiti will enter the picture. For example, although *Vigilante*, *Vigilante* is an exception in these regards, the films do not interview scholars of graffiti and street art to get a sense of how they interpret this activity. Likewise, *Style Wars* is the only film in which the families and loved ones of the graffiti and street artists are consulted to understand how they feel about this activity. The films fail to integrate the contemporary scholarly research on graffiti and street art that is more nuanced with respect to who the perpetrators are, their motivations, and the kinds of challenges that graffiti writers face in their lives.

Because of these drawbacks, many of these movies provide superficial analyses of their subject matter and keep within the orbit of well-rehearsed cultural debates surrounding graffiti.

7. Conclusion

As previously mentioned, this body of work is important on different levels. There is a wealth of information that has been captured and translated to the viewer. Most of the influential individuals who do graffiti and street art appear in these films. Undoubtedly the documentary medium has enabled those who care to watch with another avenue (or

means) to understand this phenomena, which has framed the issues, and as a byproduct has created and established expectations for their audience. Given that the intended audience is, in all likelihood, the graffiti writing and street artist community, it is not necessarily clear if these movies challenge or simply reinforce dominant stereotypes and misperceptions. Their ability to influence policy decisions and responses is difficult to determine within the kind of analysis presented here.

Nevertheless, in some respects, it would be more interesting for viewers to learn about how graffiti artist/writers and street artists go about making choices with respect to the types of images, paint, colors, and methods of application and location.¹³ Other questions could include: What was the writers' intent and meaning for the piece, if there was one at all? How much, if any, planning went into the pieces that they created? How did the writers feel about the ephemeral effects of their work? These sorts of questions and nuances are not answered well in the documentaries produced in this field.

Additional insights might have been drawn about these films if the investigators had interviewed the directors, producers, film crew, and/or graffiti and street artists featured in these movies. At the very least, the researcher could have asked the directors of the movies about their rationales behind their productions. However, the investigator did not have the appropriate resources, nor did they think that the additional information would contribute much value to the findings presented here. This study only included English-language movies. Additional insights about documentaries on graffiti may have been drawn and different results may have been achieved if documentaries produced in foreign languages were also included in the review. Again, this would have required more resources than the researcher had. Finally, had the investigator opted to engage in a close textual analysis of the films, different conclusions would have been achieved. Instead the objective was a fuller understanding of the content of these documentaries within specific social and historical fields.

Over time, and in conclusion, these movies tend to repeat basic information and themes (i.e., the terms, the illegality of graffiti and street art, and well-known individuals who engage in this work). The constant repetition of content in these movies serves as the biggest encumbrance to this body of work in order to understand deeper meanings

regarding the motivations of individuals who engage in this activity, public and government reactions, and the future of graffiti and street art.

References

Aufderheide, P. 2007. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Aumont J., Marie, M. 1988/2015. *L'Analyse des films/ Analysis of Film*, third ed. Armand Colin, Paris.

Austin, J., 2001. *Taking the train: How graffiti art became an urban crisis in New York City*. Columbia University Press, New York..

Campos, R., 2013. Graffiti writer as superhero. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(2), 155-170.

Castleman, C., 1984. *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Dubois, E., 2010-2011. Banksy's Exit Through The Gift Shop: Street Art and Our Quest for Authenticity, *WR: Journal of the Arts and Sciences Writing Program*, (3), 66-74. <http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-3/dubois/>, downloaded February 17, 2014.

Ferrell, J., 1996. *Crimes of Style: Urban graffiti and the politics of criminality*. Northeastern University Press, Boston, MA.

Ferrell, J., Hayward, K., Young, J., 2008. *Cultural Criminology*. Sage, London.

Ferrell, J., Weide, R. D., 2010. "Spot Theory," *City Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 14(1-2), 48-62.

Gastman, R., Neelon, C., 2010. *The History of American Graffiti*. Harper Design, New York.

Gramsci, A., 1971/2012. *Selections from the prison notebooks*. in: Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (Eds.), *International Publishers*, New York.

Hall, S., Jefferson, T., 1993 (Eds.). *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. Routledge, New York.

Hayward, K., 2009. *Visual criminology: Cultural criminology-style*, *Criminal Justice Matters* 78(1), 12-14.

Hayward, K., Presdee, M. 2010. *Framing Crime: Cultural Criminology and the Image*. Routledge, London.

Light, B., Griffiths, M., Lincoln, S. 2012. 'Connect and create': Young People, YouTube and Graffiti, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 26 (3), 343-355.

Macdonald, N., 2003. *The graffiti subculture: youth, masculinity, and identity in London and New York*. Palgrave, New York.

Nichols, B., 2010. *Introduction to Documentary*, second ed. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

Philips, S. A., 1999. *Wallbanging: graffiti and gangs in L.A.* University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL.

Rafter, N., 2006. *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*, second ed. Oxford University Press, New York.

Rafter, N., 2007. Crime, film and criminology recent sex-crime movies. *Theoretical Criminology* 11(3), 403-420.

Rafter, N. H., Brown, M., 2011. *Criminology goes to the movies: crime theory and popular culture*. New York University Press, New York.

Ross, J. I., 2013. *Street Art*, in: Ross, J.I. (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Street Crime in America*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 392-393.

Ross, J. I., 2016. *Introduction: Sorting it all out*, in: Ross, J. I. (Ed.) *Routledge Handbook on Graffiti and Street Art*, Routledge Publishers, New York, pp. 1-10.

Seno, E., 2010. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. Tashen, Koln, Germany.

Snyder, G. J., 2011. *Graffiti lives: beyond the tag in New York's urban underground*. New York University Press, New York.

Sobchack, T., Sobchack, V. 1997. *An Introduction to Film*, second ed. Longman, Boston, MA.

Waclawek, A., 2011. *Graffiti and Street Art*. Thames and Hudson, London.

Welsh, A., Fleming, T., Dowler, K., 2011. *Constructing crime and justice on film: meaning and message in cinema*. *Contemporary Justice Review* 14(4), 457-476.

Yar, M. 2010. *Screening crime: Cultural criminology goes to the movies*. in: Hayward K. J. and Presdee, M. (Eds.) *Framing crime: Cultural criminology and the image*, London: Routledge, London, pp. 68-82.

Young, A. 2014. *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination*. Routledge, New York.

Endnotes

1 - Documentaries, much like commercial movies can misrepresent and perpetuate myths primarily for the sake of the narrative and to engage the viewer. Although important to understand, this argument is not explored in this paper.

2 - This paper uses the word “artist” and “writer” interchangeably.

3 - Although it is neither the paper's intent to discuss, nor debate the development of graffiti, some observers are quick to point out that modern graffiti originated in Philadelphia. However, because of the sheer quantity of work the major emphasis for the contemporary movement can be better traced to activities in the South Bronx.

4 - Multiple definitions of graffiti and street art exist (Ross 2016), at a bare minimum graffiti typically refers to words, figures, and images that have been written and/or drawn on surfaces where the owner of the property has NOT given permission for the individual to place them on it. Street Art, on the other hand, refers to stencils, stickers, and noncommercial images that are affixed to surfaces where the owner of the property has NOT given permission for the individual to place them on it (Ross, 2013). Needless to say, the world of graffiti and street art is more complicated than these basic distinctions (e.g., Waclawek, 2013), and includes numerous subtypes and participants, but for

current purposes, this basic definition will suffice. At a bare minimum because of its illegal nature, graffiti and street art are acts of vandalism.

5 - Some may quibble with respect to my characterization of these books as popular, this label is used to distinguish them from traditional scholarly approaches to the subject matter.

6 - This sentiment has been expressed to the researchers through face-to-face conversations with numerous graffiti artists over the past five years of conducting research on this subject.

7 - This paper does not attempt to test hypotheses but takes a more grounded empirical approach. Its contribution lies in the conclusions that are articulated after the analysis of the data.

8 - Some observers may have difficulty with delimiting the analysis to documentaries that were accessible in this manner. We see nothing wrong with this approach, because the movies that are readily accessible should have a greater impact on the graffiti community rather than the more obscure and harder to access ones.

9 - In reality, as the review progressed, because of the need to revisit movies that had already been watched, conformity to a chronological approach could not be maintained.

10 - Although a coding sheet was initially used, it was progressively determined to be unwieldy, and that the additional benefits to be accrued (in terms of results) by using this technique outweighed the resource expenditure.

11 - These films include but are not limited to *Cope2 - Kings Destroy*; *5 AM Part 1*; *5 AM Part 2*, *State your name*, and *Fuckgraff #1*.

12 - This was a judgment call, the elements of the movie seemed to conform more towards a documentary than a typical commercial movie and thus *Exit Through The Gift Shop* was classified as a documentary.

13 - See, for example, Ferrell and Weide (2010) analysis of spot theory alludes to this discussion.