Graffiti goes to the movies: American fictional films featuring graffiti artists/writers and themes

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Since the early 1980s, in addition to the increase in graffiti and street art in many urban contexts, a number of movies have been made that have either examined this phenomenon and the people who engage in this activity, or used graffiti and street art as a backdrop to tell a story. This article briefly reviews the scholarly literature that examines movies that portray criminals and criminal actions, and then analyzes seven American-produced fictional (drama) films using graffiti writers/artists as major characters and then draws generalizations about them. Although this is not a semiotic analysis of the films, to the extent possible, it delves into the settings, plots, characters, dialog, and how realistic the movies appear to be. In general, most of the films include unrealistic aspects and/or are of poor quality, and this contributes to misrepresentations of and stereotypes about graffiti writers/writing.

Keywords: graffiti; film; art; streets; crime

1. Introduction

Contemporary graffiti emerged in Philadelphia during the 1960s and slowly migrated to New York City during the 1970s (Waclawek, 2011, p. 12). Originally placed on subway trains and station walls, graffiti soon appeared in back alleys and on the facades of buildings in various parts of the city. It was eventually reproduced in other locales, materializing on numerous surfaces both in the USA and elsewhere (Gastman & Neelon, 2010; Schacter, 2013). Shortly after graffiti started appearing, a complementary activity called ‘street art’ developed.1 It is useful to understand that graffiti is a form of vandalism that exists in most of the major cities in the world. Graffiti and street art also differ from public art (i.e. ‘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’ (Waclawek, 2011, p. 65).

Consequently, numerous popular articles and books have been published, and websites and blogs now proliferate on this subject. This includes a variety of books primarily containing photographs featuring the work of well-known graffiti and street artists/writers (e.g. Banksy, 2006; Fairey, 2009)² and/or graffiti and street art in specific cities (e.g., Gastman, 2001; Grévy, 2007). Likewise, a handful of book-length scholarly studies of the subject, based on empirical research, have been

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produced (e.g., Austin, 2001; Castleman, 1984; Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2003; Miller, 2002; Phillips, 1999; Snyder, 2009). Needless to say, graffiti and street art are frequently misunderstood contemporary phenomena (Seno, 2010).

One of the numerous cultural responses to graffiti and street art have been films, both fictional (drama) and documentary. These contain images and stories related to graffiti and street art, the individuals who engage in this activity, and those who respond to it. With the emergence of the Internet and World Wide Web, most of these movies are now readily available and, thus, are widely distributed. It stands to reason that an increasing number of people are seeing these films, learning from them, and imitating what they see. Less understood are the movies’ themes and the extent to which they have been reflections of reality or the creators or perpetrators of myths.

Why is this important? The movies that have been produced provide an additional medium through which to understand and deconstruct graffiti. Films establish expectations for the audience and often reinforce dominant stereotypes (Monaco, 1977). They also promote and reinforce myths and misconceptions about activities, and may affect policy responses (Rafter, 2006, 2007; Rafter & Brown, 2011). Movies are conduits for framing issues that can transcend into the political arena (Welsh, Fleming, & Dowler, 2011; Yar, 2010). Another item to consider is the notion of looping (Manning, 1998). Manning argues that because of the constant barrage of news, films, and television series, the distinction between what is real and what is fictional has become blurred. Indeed, some people believe fictional accounts more than actual true ones (Sanders & Lyon, 1995). Misperceptions about graffiti and those who engage in this activity (typically perceived to be youth), can lead to unnecessary negative consequences including moral panics (e.g., Ferrell, 1996), and unfair targeting by the criminal justice system.

The following article is an analysis of the well-known fictional movies that have been produced on graffiti. Although a greater number of documentaries than fictional films have been made, by focusing on one type of film, the researcher can hold the field of analysis consistent rather than alternating between the two different genres. In general, most of the films include unrealistic aspects and/or are of poor quality and this contributes to misrepresentations of and stereotypes about graffiti writers/writing.

2. Literature review

The study of films in criminological and criminal justice contexts has a long and rich history. Scholarship in this area mainly consists of analyzes of particular types of movies and the utility of films for criminological and criminal justice pedagogy.

Many studies look at how well particular films cover certain crimes, criminals, and/or criminal justice agencies and practices. Rothe and Ross (2007), for example, identify 56 films that focus on state crime. They point out that the majority of films are documentaries that draw connections for students and policy audiences. Rafter (2007), on the other hand, assesses how films portray crimes that have a sexual motivation. Meanwhile, Snyder (1995) looks at how well movies examine the issue of juvenile delinquency.

Besides analyzes of particular crimes and criminals in films, there have been studies of particular branches of the criminal justice system and of criminal justice practices and practitioners. For example, Hale (1998) addresses how policewomen
are portrayed in commercially accessible videos. Alternatively, Bailey, Pollock, and Schroeder (1998) examine how female attorneys are portrayed in Hollywood films, while Cheatwood (1998) reviews the portrayal of males behind bars in American-based films. In terms of practices, one scholarly study examines the portrayal of the death penalty (O’Sullivan, 2003). Most of this research uses some variation of content analysis methodology. Although this approach has been called into question with respect to its claims to objectivity, it does enable important insights to be made about the nature, breadth, and depth of cinematic treatments of these subjects.4

The utility of films for pedagogy has a long and rich history in scholarly studies (e.g. Bluestone, 2000). In the fields of criminology and criminal justice, numerous scholars have tried to assess their students’ receptivity toward different types of films that depict crimes, criminals, victims, and criminal justice agencies (e.g. Cook & Bacot, 1993; Rockell, 2009; Rothe & Collins, 2013). As mentioned above, the films depicting graffiti and street art, and the official (e.g., law enforcement) and community reactions to these activities have yet to be analyzed in a comprehensive manner.  

3. Method

In order to map the universe of movies depicting graffiti and street art, the writer searched the Internet for examples of films that use these actions as a dominant theme. After creating an initial list, he then asked selected scholars and other experts, who specialize in this subject, if they could add to a master list of movies. From 1979 to 2014, 22 English language, American-made films depicting graffiti and/or street art and graffiti artists/writers were identified. Seven are fictional accounts, and fifteen are documentaries. The majority of the movies focus disproportionately on graffiti and graffiti artists, rather than street artists. In order to make the study more manageable, the writer concentrated only on fictional movies. Finally, by limiting the universe to America-based movies, the analysis was more manageable and findings better able to be generalized.5

The investigator then systematically watched these movies, paying careful attention to identify prevalent themes. After a possible theme was identified, the investigator established it as a category, and looked for its prevalence in all of the other movies. An attempt was made to watch these films in a chronological fashion. By analyzing these movies in this manner, the researcher hoped to see the evolution of depictions of graffiti and street art. In a few cases, it was necessary to watch these movies several times to better understand, categorize, and contextualize the subtleties contained within each. Additionally, if a movie was available via DVD, the researcher also viewed the ‘bonus’ content, as it provided supplementary information to better understand the films.6

4. Fictional films about graffiti/graffiti artists/writers

4.1. Introduction

Seven fictional movies featuring graffiti/street artists and themes were reviewed for this study: Dreams Don’t Die (1982); Wild Style (1983); Bomb the System (2002); Against the Wall/Quality of Life (2004);7 The Graffiti Artist (2004); Transit (2004); and Gimme the Loot (2012).8 It should be noted that it may be difficult to classify these films as commercial, popular, or Hollywood films, as each of these labels
implies a different meaning. Since most of these movies were not done by the traditional large Hollywood studios or big name directors, but were written, directed, and/or produced by lesser-known individuals, it is more appropriate to suggest that they fall under the independent movie category. Below are brief summaries of each movie.

4.2. **Dreams Don’t Die (1982)**

This movie tells the story of Danny Baker, a white 17-year-old graffiti artist (tag name KING 65) from the Bronx. The film begins with him walking into a clothing factory to pick up his mother. She tells Danny that she needs to work overtime to make extra money. Danny goes home and passes in front of his father without speaking to him. Then he goes to the roof of the apartment and meets Teresa, his love interest. Next, Kirk, a juvenile street thug/drug dealer gets into a limousine. He checks on his street sellers and shoots at the crew boss. Teresa is not happy with Danny. Kirk approaches Teresa at school and asks her to work for him. Danny tries to discourage Teresa from working for Kirk.

Danny goes to a subway, does graffiti on a train, but is caught by Charlie Banks, an African-American police officer. Banks gives Danny a lecture and a warning. Banks tells Danny that he has real talent and it’s a shame that he is wasting it. He encourages Danny to go to art school. Teresa does a delivery for Kirk. This continues into the night until they visit Mr Gavin, the head of the illegal drug operation. Danny paints graffiti on Kirk’s limousine. Teresa begs Danny to stop provoking Kirk. Banks arrests Kirk and Teresa. Both are eventually released. Banks recommends that Danny and Teresa accompany him to the Guggenheim Museum, and he pays their admission.

Danny comes home, and after noticing his mother holding ice to her face, fights with his father. Danny visits a subway train yard and paints an entire train. He runs into Banks and asks him about what it takes to become a paid artist. Banks says that he knows someone who owes him a favor. He proposes to arrange an interview for Danny if he stops doing graffiti. Danny agrees. Soon thereafter, Banks is shot dead by Obadiah, a young African-American male who acts as Kirk’s gunman. Danny assumes that Kirk is responsible, tells Teresa, and creates a large graffiti piece illustrating Kirk shooting Banks.

Danny secures an apprenticeship with the man that Banks knew. Meanwhile Kirk tries to find out who painted the accusatory graffiti. Obadiah attempts to shoot Danny, but Teresa pulls him out of harm’s way. Danny and Teresa plan to get Kirk arrested after he turns 17 (and is no longer a juvenile in the eyes of the law) in a few days. Teresa visits Kirk and slips him a pill that makes him sleep for two days. Kirk, unaware of the drugging, is no longer officially 16 years old. He then sells drugs to an undercover police officer and gets arrested. Obadiah tries to shoot Danny, but the cop shoots him instead.

4.3. **Wild Style (1983)**

Also set in New York City, *Wild Style* follows the exploits of Raymond (tag name is Zorro), a Hispanic graffiti writer, who specializes in painting images of Zorro. Raymond meets his friend Chico in front of a bodega. Chico tells him that Rose (Danny’s girlfriend) is hanging out with his crew, and he would like to be intimate
with her. Raymond goes to the subway train yard and spies Rose doing graffiti with another artist. Later he spots her directing a bunch of young people painting a legal mural. Raymond visits a nightclub. He talks with a friend, and plays Three-Card Monte with him. Raymond and his friends leave the club and step into a limousine, where a number of passengers are rapping. The film then cuts to a sex scene and then two groups in a rap competition.

Raymond and his friends debate whether to be interviewed by Virginia, a female reporter. She speaks to the artists and asks about Zorro. The MC takes her to meet Zorro for an exclusive interview. Raymond is uncomfortable with this experience. Then, Grand Master Flash spends a considerable amount of time rapping, while individuals break dance on the dance floor.

Raymond and his friends go to a party where influential people in the art world are attending. The host, commissions him to do a painting. He goes home and starts the painting. Rose questions what he is doing, and he confesses his love for her. She tries to convince Raymond to go to the yards that night to paint graffiti.

Grand Master Flash hands out flyers to a rap competition to be held at an amphitheater. Raymond coordinates helpers to whitewash the venue so he can create a large-scale mural on it. Raymond goes to the amphitheater and then starts outlining what he wants to paint. He gets frustrated with his work. Rose tells him that he is too self-referential in his painting. Raymond then discovers the inspiration he needs. The movie concludes with Rose going to the performance and seeing Raymond’s work in the background. She is suitably impressed.


Anthony ‘Blest’ Campo, a young white graffiti writer, whose elder brother Lazero was shot doing graffiti, has a recurrent dream of also being shot. Blest and his crew, Justin ‘Buk 50’ Broady and his younger brother Kevin ‘Lune’ Broady, two African-American members, do graffiti on the side of building. Two undercover police, Nole Shorts, and Bobby Cox, notice this activity and chase the culprits. Justin and Kevin are arrested. Justin gets probation and instead of arresting Kevin, Cox took a box cutter to his face. Angered, Justin, and Kevin want to continue bombing (i.e. placing graffiti up around) the city. Blest, however, is reluctant to participate.

Blest goes to a party held at Hazer’s (a former friend of Lazero). The partygoers watch a video/DVD that includes Blest being interviewed about graffiti. His mother informs him that he received acceptance letters from colleges; however, the best ones have not responded. Blest goes to a big boat docked in the harbor. He descends the steps to a nightclub. While waiting to speak to an elderly Indian man, he strikes up a conversation with Alex who says that she has seen his work all over the city. Blest, however, is reluctant to participate.

Alex shows Blest her politically charged street art. He goes out with Alex and her friends putting up the street art. He brings Alex back to Hazer’s place where he is living. They have a philosophical discussion about the role of graffiti vs. street art. She expresses her affection for him, and asks him to accompany her across the country doing street art. He is uncertain.

Justin and Kevin see the two police officers shaking down a drug dealer and a graffiti artist. The officers notice and give chase. Justin wants Blest to join him to paint the Brooklyn Bridge. Justin is unrelenting. Blest suspects that Justin is
jealous. Blest confesses his dissatisfaction with graffiti. He goes to his mother’s house. His mother tells him that she received a letter of acceptance for him from an art school in San Francisco along with a scholarship. Blest is ambivalent about going. His mother worries that he is going to suffer the same fate as his brother.

The police find Kevin and threaten him with a gun. A struggle ensues and Cox ends up shooting Justin. Blest goes to the Brooklyn Street Bridge, climbs it, and does graffiti on the bridge. Hazer encourages Blest to accept the scholarship. Blest discovers Kevin with a gun in his hand. He runs into an out of control Cox who is doing graffiti. Kevin points a gun at Cox, and Blest grabs the gun out of Kevin’s hands. Cox threatens Blest, and then Cox shoots Blest and dies.

4.5. **Against the Wall/Quality of Life (2004)**

This movie, which takes place in San Francisco, begins with a young adult spray painting a wall with graffiti, while another acts as a look out. Next Mikey (short for Michael) accompanies his father, who runs a house painting business. They pick up Curtis, Mikey’s friend, who also works for Mikey’s father. Mikey and Curtis take a break and visit Lisa, Curtis’ girlfriend who works in an advertising/graphic design agency. Then they watch films at a theatre with Devon, Curtis’s girlfriend’s son. Mikey and Curtis paint graffiti at or near the rail yards. They get into an argument with other graffiti artists. Mikey and Curtis are chased out by the police, arrested, booked, convicted, spend a week in jail, receive community service, and one-year probation. Mikey’s father criticizes him for his graffiti activity and fires Curtis.

While Mikey does community service, Curtis, out of work, supports himself by shoplifting. On the way to a show, Mikey and Curtis run across friends rapping and drinking in the street. They go into the back door of a club where Dino, their friend, is having an exhibition of his work. They get into a fight with three young men, who accuse them of destroying or playing a practical joke on their cousin.

Curtis has an argument with Lisa when she finds out that he has been shoplifting. Mikey visits a Buddhist temple where he meets Dino, who is working on a sand mandala. Dino tries to explain the impermanence of all that is created and how one must enjoy the act of creating. Mikey summons the courage to meet Lisa’s boss, to ask for a job. The police raid Lisa’s apartment in an effort to collect evidence to build a case against Curtis. Shortly after they leave, Curtis goes back to the house and discovers Lisa’s goodbye letter. Then he does a line of coke, goes to the street, and gets in a fight. He successfully wrestles a gun from the assailant. Curtis steals a cab and shows up at Lisa’s work. Curtis confronts Lisa and puts a gun to his head. The movie ends with a shot of Curtis’ friends standing on a mountain with Curtis’ ashes in a vase. Mikey goes out at night, revisits the places where Curtis used to do graffiti. Mikey creates a graffiti memorial for his friend. Then, in Buddhist fashion, he paints over it.


Nick, a young, single, skateboarding, graffiti writer (with the tag RUPTURE) lives alone in a small apartment in Portland, Oregon. He steals spray paint from a store and uses a disposable camera to take pictures of his graffiti once it is completed.
Nick gets arrested while spray painting a wall. After he is released from a correctional facility, he returns home and rolls a spiff (i.e. marijuana cigarette).

Then Nick does graffiti on a freight train. He visits a skateboard park and spies on Jesse (tag name FLIP), another graffiti artist. Nick sleeps in a door well, takes a train to Seattle, does a big piece of graffiti, walks around downtown, and then sleeps on a park bench. The next day, Nick recognizes Jesse. They do two separate graffiti pieces together, take pictures, and then step into a skateboard shop, where Jesse buys Nick a skateboard. They go skateboarding and do graffiti together. While Jesse buys apples, Nick steals his. He claims to be a vegetarian.

Then they go to Jesse’s place where he cooks a meal. They go to the rail yard, and start doing pieces under the tag name ELUSIVE. Later that night they have sex. The next morning they steal spray paint, but Jesse is a reluctant shoplifter. They do separate pieces and sleep apart that night.

Jesse tells Nick that he is going to go back to Portland to visit his mom. Nick asks if he can crash at his place. Jesse reluctantly agrees. Nick takes Jesse’s books and goes back to Portland. After a couple of days of staying on the streets, Nick finds Jesse at the skateboard rink. Jesse rejects Nick, but then follows him out to the street. Jesse tells Nick to get a job, while Nick accuses Jesse of being a poser. As he walks around the city, Nick notices how his tags have been crossed out. He creates an image of a spray can with angel wings attached to it. Nick gets arrested, and four months later, he is released from a juvenile detention center. He goes back on the streets and starts painting freight trains. This time Nick does a more complicated piece with the words ‘Free Art’ in the angel wings of the aerosol can. As a possible act of spiritual renewal, he signs it with his old tag RUPTURE.

4.7. Transit (2005)

Ritchie Jimenez (tag name MOZART), a young Hispanic male graffiti writer, has just been released from juvenile detention and appears to be on parole. He has a recurrent dream or memory of his brother being shot by an anti-graffiti vigilante. Ritchie goes to his brother’s side, but he was dead when he arrived.

A college recruiter visits Ritchie’s home and tells him that he would flourish in college where he could get formal training in art. Sensing his reluctance, the recruiter tells Ritchie that they have a scholarship for him, but he must give his response by Friday. Ritchie meets Chico, his crew member, who tells Ritchie how doing graffiti is now more dangerous. Chico warns him that Shifty, their African-American West Coast Kings (WCK) crew member has become a gangster. Ritchie goes to a park, and his friends try to convince him to return to doing graffiti.

He runs into Shifty, who pulls out a gun. Shifty also wants Ritchie to get back into the game and asks Ritchie to watch his back as he does a graffiti piece that covers another one. To Ritchie’s surprise, his friend has painted his graffiti moniker over a rival graffiti crew’s work. They are discovered by Gonzo, a rival graffiti crew member, who threatens and warns Ritchie.

Ritchie instructs Shifty to stop doing graffiti in Gonzo’s neighborhood. Ritchie fills out the college application. Then he and Shifty see Ritchie’s graffiti crossed out. They go to Alex’s place. He is young, white, a former member of the WCK crew, and is now the head of the ABC crew, which they suspect of crossing out the graffiti. They fight and then Ritchie challenges Alex to a graffiti battle. Ritchie
meets with his WCK crew, and they plan to cross out the ABC crew’s graffiti. They go out that night and ‘bomb’ the neighborhood (with graffiti).

Ritchie visits the rival crew’s hangout and sees Shifty lying on the ground, while Alex, kicks him. Ritchie fights with Alex, but Alex threatens him with a gun. Alex tells Ritchie that Shifty was responsible for crossing out his tags. Shifty comes back, shoots, and kills Alex.

Ritchie returns home, his mother notices his blood soaked t-shirt, and yells at him. He explains he has to leave town otherwise he will be killed. Ritchie’s mother hands him his scholarship letter. He leaves the house, while Jenn (his girlfriend) discovers his acceptance letter. Ritchie paints a memorial to his brother. No sooner does Ritchie finish, when one of the rival gang members shoots him. In the next scene, Jenn and his mother gaze at the memorial piece, wearing black, and clutching each other. The movie closes as two department of public works painters paint over the graffiti.

4.8. Gimme the Loot (2012)

Malcolm and Sofia, two African-American teenagers, want to be the most well-known graffiti artists in NYC. In order to achieve their goal, they decide to place graffiti on the large apple replica at Shea Stadium where the Mets play. Malcolm and Sofia still want to paint the apple, but they need to raise $500 to pay their friend Pedro to sneak them into the stadium.

Malcolm takes the subway to the East Village, to meet Donny, a low-level marijuana dealer whom he works for. Malcolm asks for a loan of $500, but Donny is not willing. He scams Lenny, another delivery person, out of five packs of marijuana. Next, Sofia goes to Renaldo’s house to get paid for a custom graffiti job she did. When she leaves without the money but with his expensive athletic shoes, her bike is stolen by two neighborhood toughs. Sofia chases one of them, but once caught, only gets his cell phone as compensation. Malcolm goes to Jenny’s (the first customer) apartment to do a delivery. They smoke weed, talk, and then get intimate. This is interrupted when Donny shows up. Malcolm evades Donny, but he forgets his shoes.

Meanwhile Sofia visits Champion to retrieve the stolen spray paint to sell. She then goes to a bodega to sell the cell phone, but the owner ends up ripping her off. Sofia walks over to a basketball court and meets a young man she knows, likes, and asks him to sell the spray cans for her. Sofia goes back to her acquaintance’s hangout/flop house. He gives her money for Renaldo’s shoes, but after she leaves, several youths assault her and take her money. They write the Westside Crew moniker (WSK) on her white shirt and order her to stop doing graffiti on their turf.

Malcolm and Sofia run into each other. Malcolm expresses his attraction to Jenny and then suggests they find a way to steal from her.

Jenny calls Malcolm and asks him to come to her place with more marijuana. When he arrives at her place, he encounters her well dressed, middle-class, college educated female friends. Malcolm thinks there is more between Jenny and him, but all she wants is the pot. Malcolm finishes the deal, and takes a key to her jewelry box. Along with Sofia and Champion, haplessly they try to break into Jenny’s place, but fail.

Since they were unable to raise the money to pay Pedro, Sofia decides that they will scam Pedro, and assembles a stack of the paper and bills to resemble $500.
The next day, Malcolm and Sofia go to Shea stadium, but Pedro does not show up. Malcolm suddenly remembers that it is his mother’s birthday, and he has forgotten to get her a present. With Sofia’s assistance, he steals flowers.

5. Generalizations from the movies

5.1. Introduction

After summarizing these films, it is useful to examine the similarities among them. The following discussion is divided into three categories: characters, settings, and themes. The balance of the analysis looks at the quality of the movies.

5.2. Characters

5.2.1. Graffiti writers shoplift, especially spray paint

Some of the graffiti writers engage in petty crimes, like shoplifting (e.g. food) and jumping turnstiles into the subway. To support their graffiti habit and sometimes to make extra money, most of the graffiti artists steal spray paint. In *The Graffiti Artist*, along with skateboarding and graffiti writing, Nick and Jesse shoplift spray paint and steal fruit from street vendors and shopkeepers. In *Quality of Life/Against the Wall*, Curtis and a friend invent a complicated ruse in order to distract the shopkeeper in order to steal spray paint. In *Gimme the Loot*, the movie begins with a major spray paint heist and closes with Sofia assisting Malcolm steal flowers. This kind of activity is consistent with scholarly research on the criminal activity of some graffiti artists (Taylor, Marais, & Cottman, 2012), which suggests that stealing spray paint is both part of the initiation and maintenance process of graffiti crews.

5.2.2. The primary characters come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

The majority of the main characters come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. In *Dreams Don’t Die*, Danny comes from a working-class family, where his mother is trying to make ends meet. In *The Graffiti Artist*, Nick lives by himself and leads a hermit-like existence where he has little food in his fridge, shoplifts food, and does not have much money on hand. In *Transit*, Ritchie lives in a small modest house with his mother. In *Against the Wall*, although Mikey’s father runs his own small business, he is not rich by any means. In *Gimme the Loot*, based on their street talk and the final scene, we know that Malcolm and Sofia come from a lower socioeconomic status. In the end, Malcolm goes home to his mother’s apartment building, which appears to be in the projects. None of the protagonists are middle class, come from the suburbs, or from families of means. The class differences between graffiti writers and outsiders are highlighted in various scenes. For example, in *Wild Style*, Raymond meets gallery owners at a party who talk to him condescendingly. The partygoers are comparatively well dressed, disproportionately white, and show minimal interest in graffiti. A similar situation occurs in *Gimme the Loot*, when Malcolm encounters Jenny and her college educated friends, and they talk to him in a demeaning fashion.
5.2.3. **Graffiti artists/writers are primarily young males from selected races/ethnicities**

The movies typically feature males as graffiti artists/writers, and women (mothers and girlfriends) relegated to secondary roles. This is true even if the female is a graffiti writer. For example, in *Wild Style*, Rose, Raymond’s graffiti writing girlfriend, plays a very minor role. To call attention to these gender dynamics, Rose is interviewed by a female reporter who asks her, ‘Aren’t you scared to be a girl doing graffiti?’ This gendered rendering of the graffiti world is consistent with early findings (Macdonald, 2003). On the other hand, in *Gimme the Loot*, Sofia is paired with Malcolm and is an equal, if not more dominant, graffiti partner. Finally, Alexandra, who is Anthony ‘Blest’ Campo’s love interest in *Bomb the System*, is a street artist who unsuccessfully tries to convince him to join her in a cross-country street art adventure.

To these movies’ credit, the protagonists span a number of races. Some are white, like Danny (*Dreams Don’t Die*), Curtis and Mikey (*Against the Wall*), and Anthony ‘Blest’ Campo (*Bomb the System*). Alternatively, other primary graffiti writers are Hispanic, like Raymond (*Wild Style*) and Ritchie (*Transit*). Finally, Malcolm and Sofia in *Gimme the Loot*, and Justin ‘Buk 50’ and his brother Kevin ‘Lune,’ Anthony’s two crew members in *Bomb The System*, are African-American. There are no Asian or American–Indian graffiti writers included in these movies.

Finally, all of the protagonists are young (i.e. teenagers), with few of them older than their mid-twenties. None of the perpetrators are middle-aged. This runs counter to Kramer’s work (2010) on post graffiti, which reveals how graffiti, especially that which currently exists in New York City, is created by individuals from all age groups.

5.2.4. **Graffiti writers engage in graffiti primarily for fun and to build their reputations**

In almost all of the films reviewed, the writers engage in graffiti primarily for fun, the thrill of the experience, and/or to build or maintain their reputations as skilled players. This is reflected in the dialog and actions of the protagonists, and this is why the majority of the writers become upset when their graffiti is buffed over or crossed out by rivals. In *Transit*, Ritchie is worried about his graffiti being crossed out by rival graffiti crews, and this leads to a battle (i.e. competition) with a rival graffiti crew. In *Gimme the Loot*, Sofia’s graffiti is crossed out by a rival crew and this bothers her considerably. In *Wild Style*, although Raymond wants fame, he is also anxious to impress Rose, his girlfriend. He does this by painting a major piece at the amphitheater. Similarly, Sophia was commissioned to do a piece for her friend Renaldo, because he believes this will impress his girlfriend, who we learn has just left him.

5.2.5. **Most graffiti artists have one or more absentee parents**

In the majority of the films, parents do not appear, are not mentioned, or provide minimal supervision of their teenagers/young adults. In *Dreams Don’t Die*, Danny’s mother works long hours in a sweat shop. Although she knows of his graffiti activity and even warns him that he will be arrested, she needs to work extra hours to...
pay the bills, thus she is not home when he returns from school. In *Transit*, we briefly see Ritchie’s mother twice: when she warns him that he is going to get killed, and in the final scene as she grieves his death. In *Against the Wall*, although Mikey’s father is present, we learn that his mother has left. The father is displeased with his son’s graffiti activity, and warns him to stop. Likewise, we never hear about or see Mikey’s friend Curtis’s parents. In *The Graffiti Artist*, we find out that Jesse has a mother because apparently she has sent him money to visit her. In *Gimme the Loot*, although Malcolm’s mother periodically calls him on his cell phone and he steals flowers to celebrate her birthday, we neither see Malcolm’s nor Sofia’s mother. Blest’s mother (*Bomb the System*), like Ritchie’s mother has lost a graffiti writing son to gun violence and warns Blest against making the same mistake as his brother.

5.2.6. *Most of the fathers of graffiti artists are either absent or ‘missing in action’*

In the majority of the movies, the fathers are either absent or they are not emotionally engaged. In *Dreams Don’t Die*, Danny goes home and observes his ‘good for nothing’ father, who is lying on a bed smoking a cigarette and watching television with beer in hand. Later, it is implied that he beats Danny’s mother. In *Against the Wall*, although Mikey’s father runs a painting company and is quite authoritarian in his treatment of his son, no mention is made of Curtis having a father. In *Transit*, we do not see Ritchie’s father, but he does have a mother and a girlfriend who warn him that he will be shot. The lack of a father is evident in *Bomb the System*. Although Blest’s mother is concerned for her son, his father is never mentioned.

5.2.7. *Authority figures occasionally provide or suggest a path out of the graffiti subculture*

In *Dreams Don’t Die*, Danny is caught by Banks, an African-American police officer, while he is painting on the subway platform. Banks offers to introduce him to a man who might help him get a paid job as an artist. In *Transit*, an unnamed African-American college recruiter encourages Ritchie to fill out an application for art school in order for him to improve his artistic abilities and make a living by doing this. These individuals also assume a father figure role in the narrative. In *Against the Wall*, even though Mikey has a father, he comes under the more direct influence of Dino, an older friend, who works in a Buddhist temple. This relationship provides him with spiritual guidance in escaping the graffiti subculture and dealing with Curtis’s death.

5.3. *Settings*

5.3.1. *Settings are limited to a handful of well-known big cities on either the West or East Coast*

All of the movies are set in big cities. Whereas *Against the Wall*, *The Graffiti Artist*, and *Transit* take place in West Coast locations, respectively San Francisco, Portland/Seattle, and Los Angeles, *Dreams Don’t Die*, *Wild Style*, *Bomb the System*, and *Gimme the Loot* are shot in New York City. Other large cities with thriving graffiti scenes, including Washington, DC, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Orleans, are absent from these movies.
5.3.2. **Targets of graffiti**

In the movies reviewed, graffiti is usually placed/written on subway trains, subway platforms, freight trains, police cars, rooftops, sides of buildings, walls, and metal roll-down doors for retail businesses. Other locations include phone booths, bus shelters, and metal trash dumpsters. With the exception of Sofia in *Gimme the Loot*, who occasionally places a United States Postal Service mailing label sticker with her tag on a couple of places, and Alex in *Bomb the System*, there is little street art done by the characters in the movies.

5.4. **Themes**

The primary themes in these movies concern: the soundtracks; characters’ fears of selling out; and rivalries among graffiti artists/crews.

5.4.1. **Soundtracks**

Soundtracks help to locate the films during a certain period in contemporary American history. Most of the movies rely on early rap and/or hip-hop music played in the background. The only exception to this is *Gimme the Loot* where the majority of the music is rhythm and blues, with the occasional gospel piece mixed in. *Wild Style* uses overly dramatic music, and it often seems like the film is more a celebration of rap artists than graffiti. In *The Graffiti Artist*, the soundtrack is dominated by electronica and Indian tabla music. In *Bombing the System*, the soundtrack is punctuated with Indian music, including Bollywood, during a scene in a nightclub.

5.4.2. **Displaying graffiti in galleries means that the artist/writer has sold out and/or been co-opted**

In some of the movies, the protagonists confront the possibility that they could stop doing graffiti and could assume more legitimate/legal jobs or careers, especially through ceasing street-based graffiti activities and displaying of their work in galleries. In *Dreams Don’t Die*, Danny does not want to ‘sell out,’ but he eventually gets a job as an apprentice graphic artist. In *Wild Style*, the notion of joining a union of graffiti artists is proposed to Raymond, but he is not interested. Danny is also introduced to a bunch of ‘squares’ at a party, including the director of acquisitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, who does not take kindly to him. In *The Graffiti Artist*, Jesse suggests to Nick that he send photographs of his graffiti to a magazine called *Underground Productions* and try to have his work shown in a gallery. Nick says that he wants no part of this. In *Bombing the System*, Hazer, who was friends with Blest’s dead brother and at whose place Blest is staying, reveals that he is ready to display his work at a gallery. Blest, however, refuses the offer. In short, for these protagonists, going legitimate is one of the most dreaded consequences to befall a graffiti artist and speaks of co-optation and/or selling out.

5.4.3. **Rivalries among graffiti writers and crews frequently occur**

In order to keep the viewers engaged, the majority of the movies depict rivalries (also known as "beefs") among individual writers or graffiti crews. *Wild Style*, for
example, shows the conflict between two graffiti crews. In *Gimme the Loot*, Malcolm and Sofia are up against the Westside Crew. In *Transit*, Ritchie’s WCK is challenged by the ABC Crew. This leads to the deaths of the ABC leader and Ritchie.\(^\text{10}\)

The characters, places, and themes embodied in these movies reinforce stereotypes about graffiti writers and the conditions under which they operate. The films neglect the conclusions of contemporary research that is more nuanced with respect to who the perpetrators are, their motivations, and the kinds of challenges they face in their lives.

5.5. **Quality of the movies**

5.5.1. *Most of the characters, scenes, and stories (or selected aspects of each) are unrealistic*

One of the most important issues that these movies can be criticized on is the degree to which they are a reflection of reality. Although they are understood to be works of fiction, in order to be believable, they must include substantial elements of reality. Unfortunately, many of these films undermine their legitimacy by including numerous unrealistic aspects as enumerated below. These movies fall short in their depictions of characters, scenes, and stories.

Many of the characters appear caricature-like. In the movie *Wild Style*, from his clothing to his speech, Kirk, the juvenile drug dealer, bears little relation to actual drug dealers. He is seen being driven around town in a chauffeur-driven limousine, while he does small-time drug deals, and shoots at people from the comfort of this car. Similarly, in *Bomb the System*, from the food they eat, to their dialog, NYPD officers Cox and Shots appear to be caricatures of corrupt New York City police officers.

5.5.2. *Stories*

Some of the movies have gaps in the storyline, introduce questionable scenes, or pose logical contradictions. In *Wild Style*, the movie moves from one scene to another without much logical sense. In *Dreams Don’t Die*, a senior NYPD detective allows Danny to look through a police file on a suspected criminal. Although this may have been permissible during the 1970s, today it would certainly compromise the integrity of a police investigation. In *Against the Wall*, it is unclear why Lisa would hang out with someone with as few career prospects as Curtis. In *The Graffiti Artist*, although Nick does not have any money, he is able to survive on shoplifting. Not once does he go to a homeless shelter or a public food line, or use food stamps for food. In this movie’s first arrest, the police officers wear uniforms, but in the second arrest, they are plainclothes officers and drive unmarked cars, which leads one to believe that the producer had a limited budget. There are also inconsistencies in *The Graffiti Artist*. For some strange reason, even though Nick is initially locked up and although he does not have any savings, when he gets out of prison, he still has an apartment. Although Nick takes pictures with a disposable camera, and the police take Polaroid photographs, it is unclear why in 2004, the year the movie was shot, and ostensibly set in, no cell phones or digital cameras seem to be in use. In *Transit*, just in case the viewer cannot figure out that the men
interrogating Ritchie are police officers, one of them eats a doughnut. Although Ritchie lives with his mother in a modest house and qualifies for a financial aid scholarship, he somehow has money to rent a studio. Also, every time that the graffiti artists have a confrontation with the police, the latter are plainclothes officers and are riding around in unmarked cars, suggesting that the filmmakers could not afford police costumes or gain official cooperation of the police for use of their cars. At the end of Transit, when Ritchie is shot, the sequence looks very unrealistic. In Gimme the Loot, Malcolm goes to a basement ‘headquarters’ underneath a bodega in the Lower East Side run by two seemingly middle-class, university-educated, small-time pot dealers. It hard to imagine, that individuals like this would be putting small amounts of pot into bags and selling them.

5.5.3. Scenes
In Transit, toward the end of the movie there is fistfight between Ritchie and Alex while the ABC crew watches. The fight is poorly choreographed. This flaw is exacerbated by the sound that does not sync with the punches. In the majority of the movies, many of the most unrealistic scenes surround criminal activity.

5.5.4. Most of the films appear amateurish
A little more than half of the films (i.e. The Graffiti Artist, Bomb the System; Against the Wall/Quality of Life, and Gimme the Loot), received awards at various film festivals. Despite these accomplishments, many of the films looked very amateurish in terms of acting and production values. This is embodied in the poor and/or forced acting, the transitions from one scene to another, the lack of authentic costumes, the poor sound and lighting quality, and the choice of the angles and shots. Most of these difficulties can perhaps be explained because these movies probably depended on students, friends, and/or acquaintances to play the parts, rather than professionals. Sometimes it appears like the actors forgot their lines because they hesitate in the delivery.

In Wild Style, there are numerous voice-overs of people talking with their backs turned to the camera. This was probably done to disguise the problem of syncing the sound.

A few of the movies are confusing with the storylines and thus not making much sense. In Wild Style, for instance, at certain points in time, it looks as if the director just told the cast to talk among themselves. As the movie progresses, the plot has less to do with graffiti and more to do with music. In Gimme the Loot, if you were not paying close attention, viewers would not know why the protagonists needed $500.

In terms of production values, many of the fictional films have a documentary feel. This is reflected in the quality of the pictures and sound. Even though the grainy video, which occurs when film is shot at night under street, poor, and/or minimal lighting conditions, may add to the authenticity and artistry of the films, it is also a reflection of the low budget that these films had. Both the amateurishness and the uneven story lines are probably connected to the relatively meager budgets that were allocated for these movies.
6. Conclusion

Since the majority of these movies have been reviewed in other venues, this article is not meant to be a collection of reviews. It seeks, however, to interpret the content of the fictional films on graffiti. Some of these movies appear to be very outdated. This is evident not only in the type of graffiti that the protagonists and their crews do, but in the clothing styles the actors wear and dialogue that they use. The fashions, hairstyles, music, and dialog in the movies would perhaps make many people who lived through this era cringe with embarrassment. For example, in Bomb the System Justin ‘Buk 50’ Broady was filmed the entire movies with an Afro hair pick. Alternatively, Kevin, his brother was routinely filmed with a 70s style bandana. Otherwise, characters are wearing track suits and/or hoodies.

We may even question if people actually wore these sorts of clothes or talked in this manner during this time period. It may be too early to suggest that there is a genre of graffiti films. However, the graffiti movie may be a subgenre of the modern day gangster films, like Boys in the Hood, Warriors, etc. (Berman, 1992; Przemieniecki, 2005). Despite the obvious acts of vandalism that the graffiti writers engage in, there is little discussion about the criminal component of their actions. In many respects, the graffiti writers are portrayed as antiheros or Robin Hoods (Campos, 2013).

Additional insights might have been drawn about these films if the researcher had interviewed the writers, directors, producers, and/or actors. However, the investigator did not have the appropriate resources, nor did he think that the additional information would contribute much value to the findings presented here. This study only includes American movies. Other English language fictional films, or those with subtitles, depicting graffiti and graffiti writers might exist, but for one reason or another, the writer was not able to locate any. Additionally this study can serve as a baseline to compare with documentary films on graffiti and street art.

Over time, these movies tend to resemble each other in terms of themes and characters, but there is consistency in term of generalities as it concerns graffiti including:

Graffiti is primarily:

- concentrated in well-known big cities on both the West or East Coast,
- is largely perpetrated in rail yards, subways, subway stations, and roof tops,
- an outgrowth of a hip-hop lifestyle.

Graffiti writers/artists frequently:

- shoplift, especially spray paint,
- come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds,
- are primarily young males, who are either white, Hispanic, or African-American,
- engage in graffiti for fun and/or to build their reputations,
- have one or more absentee parents,
- fathers are either absent or ‘missing in action,’
- believe that displaying their work in galleries is selling out, or being co-opted,
- have rivalries with other graffiti artists/writers and crews,
- authority figures occasionally suggest or provide a path out of the graffiti lifestyle.
Although some of the movies examined in this study are accurate reflections of reality, there are numerous exceptions in the actual practice of graffiti (i.e. how the writers/artists engage in their craft) many of which have been identified in the scholarly literature.

For example, despite thriving graffiti (not to mention street art) scenes in New York City, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Portland, almost every big city in the USA has a graffiti subculture. Each has different norms and key players. Thus to infer that it only exists in the settings used in the fiction movies reviewed here is a bit of a narrow interpretation. Graffiti artists engage in graffiti for a number of reasons beyond fun and/or building a reputation (Taylor, 2012). Moreover, the notion that graffiti writers have one or more absentee parents – primarily, fathers does not bear out in the academic literature. Finally, while many graffiti artists accede to the belief that displaying their work in galleries is a form of selling out or being co-opted, no empirical research indicates that this is a widespread perception. Similarly, there are usually no authority figures who come around to suggest or provide a path out of the graffiti lifestyle. These last points are perhaps better understood to be part of the myth-creation process surrounding the practice of graffiti and graffiti artists that has been formed by the wider dominant society. Indeed the field of graffiti studies is at a rudimentary level. As more scholarly research and knowledge accrues, we can better critique these films and suggest ways that they differ from reality. This information should be communicated to parents, social workers, the news media, municipal politicians, departments of public works personnel, and criminal justice practitioners so that they can better understand and respond to graffiti and those who engage in this practice.

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Notes

1. Although many definitions of graffiti/street art exist, ‘graffiti’ generally refers to words, figures, pictures, caricatures, and images that have been written, drawn, scratched, engraved, or painted on surfaces where the owner of the property has NOT given permission for this activity. Street Art, on the other hand, refers to stencils, stickers, and wheat-pasted posters (i.e. of a noncommercial/advertising variety) that are affixed to surfaces, where the owner of the property has NOT given permission for this kind of activity (Ross, 2013). The world of graffiti and street art is more complicated than these basic distinctions (e.g. Waclawek, 2011), and includes numerous subtypes and participants, but for current purposes, these definitions will suffice. At a bare minimum, because of their illegal nature, graffiti and street art are acts of vandalism.

2. The writer uses the terms graffiti artist and graffiti writer interchangeably throughout this study.

3. It would be useful to include fictional movies on street art; however, the researcher could not locate any.
4. The investigator recognizes that there has been broad scholarly discourse on how commercial movies have treated prisons, prisoners, and correctional offers, and thus the research mentioned here are done for illustrative purposes.
5. Given that the origins of contemporary graffiti and street art are American, an argument might be made for the importance of movies that originate from the USA.
6. Although the researcher considered developing a coding sheet and having other researchers/research assistants engage in this process too, it was determined that little value added would be achieved by this process.
7. For reasons unknown to the writer, this movie has been released with two different titles.
8. In all likelihood, there are numerous movies made by film students that are of a fictional nature; however, the ones reviewed here are well known and have, in some respects achieved a cult status. Noticeably absent is Banksy’s Exit Through the Gift Shop. Although some critics have suggested that the film has fictional elements, it was designed to be a documentary, and thus for purposes of classification the researcher will keep it in this category. Also missing is Beat Street, which focuses disproportionately on dance and DJing, and Marc Ecko’s Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure, which is an animated movie based on a video game.
9. Closely related to this trend is the graffiti writer, who despite his attempts to go straight has friends who pull him back into the game. For example, in Transit, Shifty encourages Ritchie to continue writing, despite being on parole, and his inclination to stop.
10. My comment is not to dismiss the importance of “beefs” in a graffiti writers’ career (e.g., Snyder, 2009), but the dominance of these kinds of events and why they are included in almost all of these films.

References