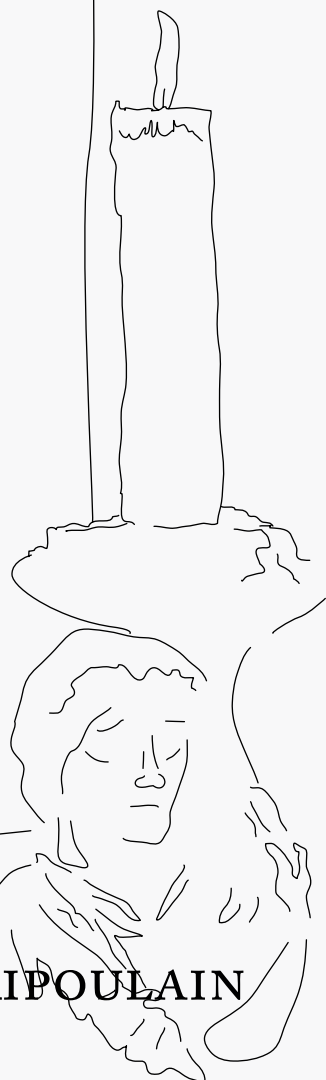
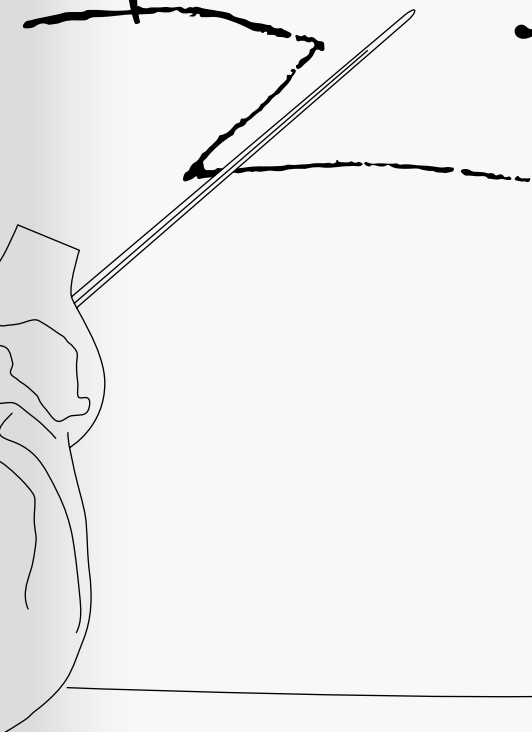


Graffiti Fiction (Survey)



LES FRÈRES RIPOULAIN

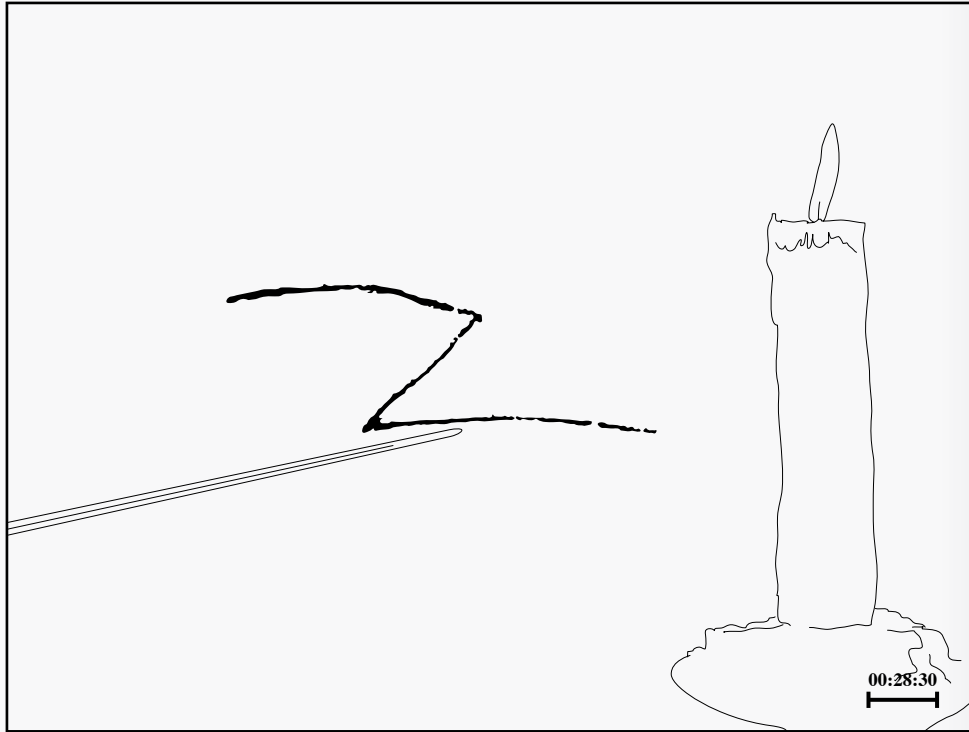
Graffiti Fiction (Survey) presents in the form of sheets a selection of photograms from twenty films and series from the 20th century. Each photogram is redrawn according to the principle of archaeological survey to highlight the inscription of graffiti in space. This graphic interpretation is associated with an analysis developed from the context of the appearance of graffiti and opening onto a reading of graffiti as microhistory within the fictional narrative.



Fritz Lang (dir.), *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder (M)*, 1931
Germany: Nero-Film, 117 min

Like a rumor spreading through the city, the letter M (for *Mörder*, or murderer) makes its first appearance in the form of a rhyme about a murderer sung by children. Over and over the rhyme's prophecy becomes a reality. The residents begin to obsess over solving the "M" mystery. We see the letter M on the back of the character about to commit his crime once more. Recognizing the killer by the tune he whistles, a street vendor and his colleague decide to mark him by accidentally bumping into him,

thus transferring a chalk mark from the palm of their hand to the murderer's shoulder. Contradicting the belief that a graffiti artist should remain invisible behind their graphic gesture, the murder's anonymity is here dispelled through the marking. Although it is technically not graffiti, the relationship to the circulation and perception of markings in the city makes this apparition an important reference in the use of graffiti in cinematic fiction.

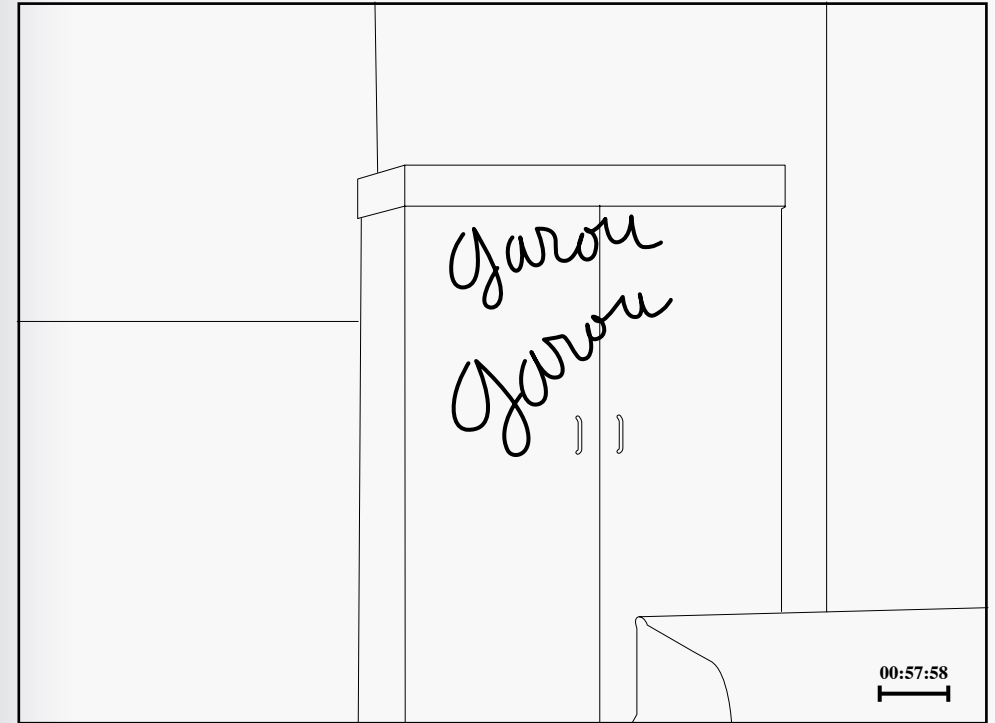


Rouben Mamoulian (dir.), *The Mark of Zorro*, 1940

United States: Darryl F. Zanuck, 94 min

In Los Angeles, the letter Z, mark of El Zorro, is inscribed at swordpoint on the office wall of the new alcalde, Luis Quintero, as a warning. The masked vigilante fights against the oppression and injustice that Quintero represents. After a series of adventures in which El Zorro defies the corrupt governor's soldiers, the plot culminates in this very office. It is now the governor's sidekick, Captain Esteban Pasquale, who challenges Don Diego Vega—the shy gentleman concealing the vigilante's true identity—just as Quintero is about to sign a letter of resignation demanded under threat from El Zorro. Vega wins the duel

and kills the captain, who, in his fall, knocks over a painting used to cover El Zorro's mark. In Fred Niblo's 1920 adaptation, the film opens with the scarred face of a brigand. In this version, El Zorro slashes his "Z" directly onto the bodies of the villains. Changing the focus of the action from the body to the wall shifts the physical violence to a symbolic register, allowing the director to use the sign to play with urban communication codes and to enhance the story's dramaturgy.

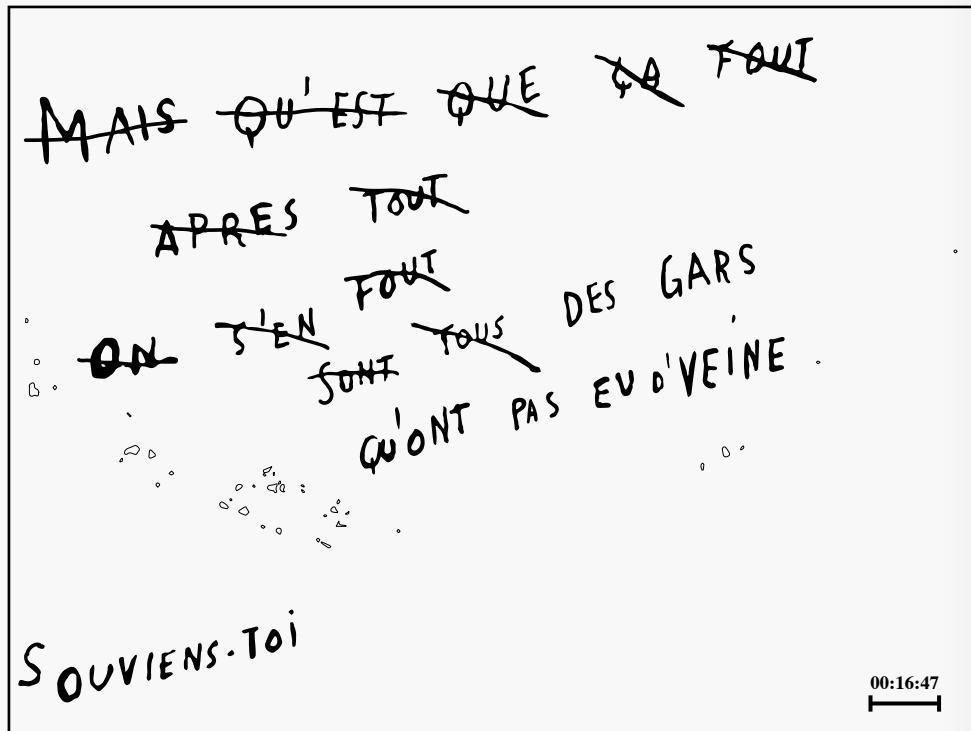


Jean Boyer (réal.), *Garou-Garou, le passe-muraille* (Mr. Peek-a-Boo), 1951

France: Cité Films; Silver Films; Fidès, 90 min

The graffiti "GAROU GAROU" (from *loup-garou*, or werewolf) marks the transformation of a shy civil servant by day into a mysterious, traceless burglar by night. The graffiti, chalked on the safe of the municipal credit office, serves both as a mischievous signature for his crimes (the recovery and return of confiscated goods) and as a response to a sign asking patrons to check that they haven't forgotten anything before leaving. The burglar's motive turns out to be his love for Suzanne, an English thief he surprised earlier, when he discovered her talent as

a *passe-muraille*—one who can "walk through walls"—and who challenged him to an adventurous life. Garou Garou (Mr. Peek-a-Boo) decides to teach her a lesson so she doesn't turn out badly, which he explains in court after revealing his identity: he was trying to "bring a little poetry into an age that no longer has any". *Mr. Peek-a-Boo* anticipates the idea that the practice of graffiti involves the ability to break into any space. A graffiti writer is an authentic *passe-muraille* who holds all the keys to the city.

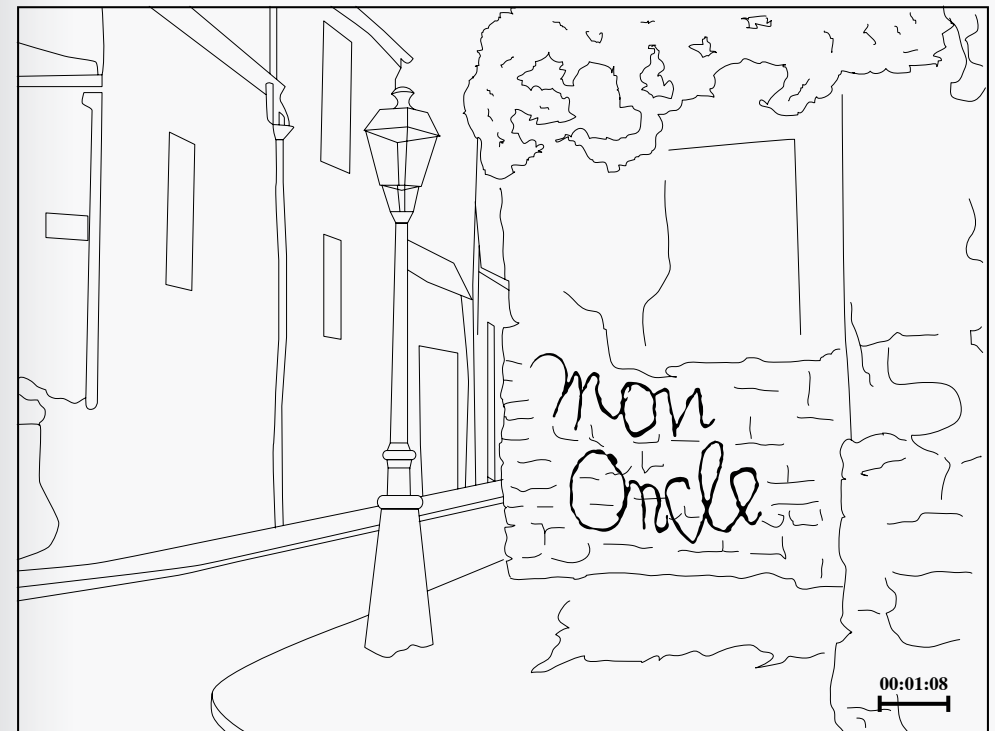


Robert Bresson (dir.), *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* or *Le vent souffle où il veut* (*A Man Escaped*), 1956

France: Gaumont; Nouvelles Éditions de films, 95 min

Incarcerated by the Nazis in 1943, a resistance fighter named Fontaine uses various tools to record information about the prison on the walls of his cell in order to plan his escape. He communicates with inmates in adjoining cells using Morse code. They knock on their cell walls, and he records the letters one by one until they form words on his wall. Language, transferred from one space to another, literally becomes a key to escape from imprisonment. At one point, his neighboring cellmate, who was scheduled to be shot the next

day, asks him to transmit the chorus line of “Le Bataillonnaire”, a colonial song sung by the Bataillon d’Infanterie Légère d’Afrique. Fontaine obliges. The words are crossed out as they are relayed: “*MAIS QU’EST QUE ÇA FOUT ; APRÈS TOUT ON S’EN FOUT ; SONT TOUS DES GARS QU’ONT PAS EU D’VEINE ; SOUVIENS-TOI*” (But What Does It Matter; After All No One Cares; They’re All Guys Who Didn’t Get Lucky; Don’t Forget).

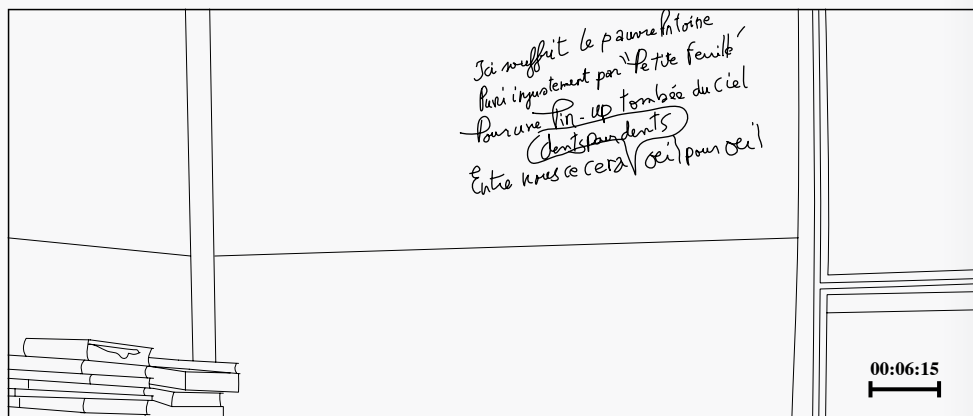


Jacques Tati (dir.), *Mon Oncle* (*My Uncle*), 1958

France: Jacques Tati; Fred Orain, 110 min

The graffiti “*MON ONCLE*” (my uncle) appears inscribed in chalk on a stone wall at a sleepy city street corner roamed by a group of small dogs, which set the urban scene for the story. The graffiti acts as the title screen for the film following the introduction of the production team via a vertical tracking shot along a signpost full of road signs. The staging of the credits announces the plot by highlighting an opposition between two lifestyles: that of Mr. Arpel, a factory owner surrounded by impersonal, technological modernity, and that of Mr. Hulot, his brother-in-law,

who is chaotic and dreamy, mocking with a certain affability a society based on consumerism, efficiency, and social status. The childlike style of the cursive script «*MON ONCLE*» refers both to the candid, burlesque character of Mr. Hulot—played by Jacques Tati—and to his complicity with his nephew, Mr. Arpel’s son.

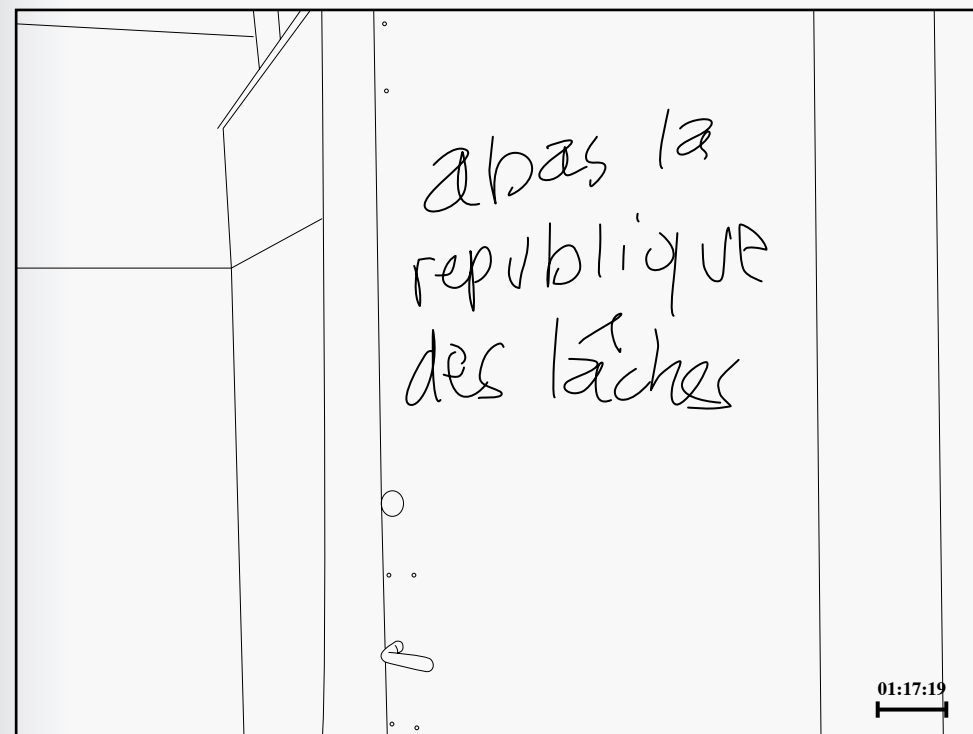


**François Truffaut (dir.), *Les quatre cent coups*
(*The 400 Blows*), 1959**

France: Les Films du Carrosse; Société d'exploitation et de distribution de films (SEDIF Productions), 99 min

After being punished and sent to the corner behind a removable blackboard, Antoine Doinel, a turbulent and tormented pupil, writes a message on the wall: "ICI SOUFFRIT LE PAUVRE ANTOINE DOINEL PUNIT PAR 'PETITE FEUILLE' POUR UNE PIN-UP TOMBÉE DU CIEL ENTRE NOUS CE SERA DENT POUR DENT ŒIL POUR ŒIL" (here suffered the poor antoine doinel punished by 'Little Leaf' for a pin-up fallen from the sky between you and i this will be an eye for an eye). His teacher, nicknamed "Little Leaf," had caught him adding glasses with a pencil to an image of a pin-up girl he'd been given. Doinel immortalizes on the wall the injustice he feels he has suffered, only to be discovered by "Little Leaf," who ironically compares him to the satirical poet Juvenal.

More than a gesture of vandalism, Doinel's inscription can be likened to that of an epigraphic historian bearing witness to the events and tragedies of his school, much like Juvenal probably did in ancient Rome. For the author of the graffiti, now a martyr, this unacknowledged script marks the beginning of a descent into hell, where defiance and delinquency intertwine.



**Jean-Luc Godard (dir.), *Masculin Féminin*
(*Masculine Feminine*), 1966**

France, Sweden: Anouchka Films; Argos Films; Sandrews; Svensk Filmindustri, 110 min

After catching two homosexuals kissing through the crack of a bathroom stall in the cinema where he's attending a film, Paul scrawls the phrase "À BAS LA RÉPUBLIQUE DES LÂCHES" (down with the republic of cowards) on the door in chalk. Paul's graffiti punctuates *Masculin Féminin* like an intertitle. Actor Jean-Pierre Léaud, who plays the main character, has come of age since his role as Antoine Doinel. Recently discharged, he continues his rebellion: disillusioned by a sexual orientation struggling to be accepted

within a conservative environment, he is also angry with war and authoritarianism. His accomplice paints "PAIX AU VIETNAM" (peace in Vietnam) in white on the side of a diplomatic car while Paul distracts the driver. After expressing his indignation that the film he came to see was not shown in the correct format, he spray-paints "DE GAULLE EST UN CON" (De Gaulle is an asshole) on the back wall of the cinema, below the projectionist's booth. His graffiti act as faint indicators of events to come.



Michel Audiard (dir.), trailer for *Elle Boit Pas, Elle Fume Pas, Elle Drague Pas, Mais Elle Cause*, 1970

France: Gaumont, 3 min 52 s

On a street-corner wall, director Michel Audiard, playing himself in the trailer for his film, spray-paints “ELLE BOIT PAS ELLE FUME PAS ELLE DRAGUE PAS MAIS ELLE CAUSE” (she does not drink, smoke, or flirt but... she talks) in reference to Germaine, a cleaning lady around whom the plot revolves. The graffiti reflects the informal and poetic qualities typical of Audiard’s writing style.

On several occasions, with the help of the writing wall, Audiard amusingly breaks the imaginary “wall” that separates fiction from its audience. He even goes so far as to improvise as a bistro owner, serving coffee to his actor-clients, or to have Germaine question his authority as a director by adding “AUDIARD EST UN CON” (Audiard is an idiot) with the can of spray paint she has confiscated from him.



Terry Jones (dir.), *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, 1979

United Kingdom: John Goldstone, 92 min

A Roman patrol catches Brian Cohen graffitiing “*Romanes eunt domus*” on a wall at night. After correcting his Latin, the centurion begins to police his spelling, ordering him to write “ROMANI ITE DOMUM” (Romans, go home) a hundred times under the watch of two soldiers. This graffiti introduces Brian Cohen, the film’s protagonist, who despises the Romans and becomes embroiled in a test of courage after meeting members of the People’s Front of Judea (PFJ). The film employs parody, drawing on the trivial graffiti of ancient Pompeii.

The repetition of the text “ROMANI ITE DOMUM” and its scaling to the entire city, rather than just a wall, is an anachronistic device that highlights the contemporaneity of American graffiti writing. The use of gigantic lettering in the cityscape and the “punishments” that involve repeating the same signature inscribe Brian into the “pantheon of characters with superhuman powers”, as sociologist Alain Vulbeau describes contemporary graffiti writers.

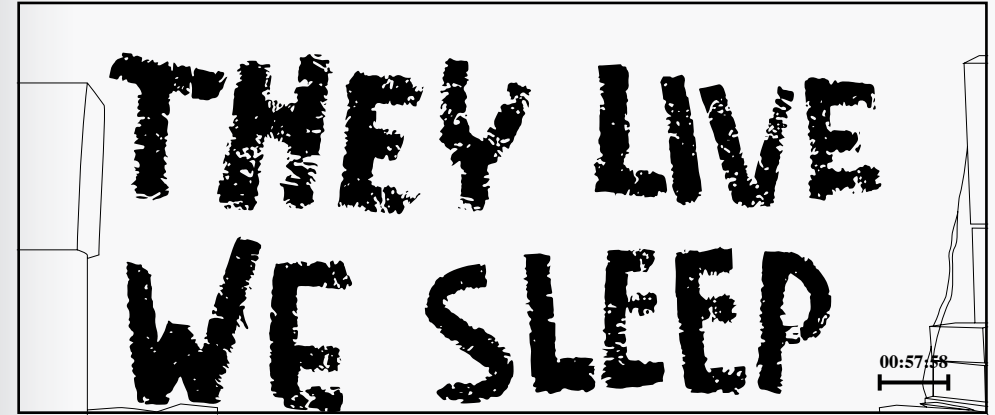


Stanley Kubrick (dir.), *The Shining*, 1980

United States: Hawk Films; Peregrine, 146 min

After obsessively whispering the word in a strangled voice, “REDRUM” is the graffiti that Danny, knife in hand, inscribes in lipstick on his mother Wendy’s bedroom door while under the spell of his imaginary friend, Tony. As his mother wakes up and embraces Danny, she realizes, upon looking in the mirror, that “REDRUM” is the reversed spelling of the word “murder”. It appears as a warning of an esoteric nature that evokes the Hebrew inscription “*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*” (Counted, Counted, Weighed, and Divided) from the Book of Daniel. This mysterious, prophetic phrase, written by the hand of God, appears on a wall during a banquet after which King Belshazzar is murdered.

An exiled Jew named Daniel, leader of the magi, magicians, astrologers, and soothsayers, deciphers the message in Aramaic, whose writing is a mirror image of the conventional reading direction. Like this sentence, “REDRUM” is a harbinger of bad omens. The expression “I see the writing on the wall” originates from the appearance of the Aramaic inscription. From Daniel to Danny, the divine word is transposed into “shining”, the child’s gift of telepathy. The inscription is premonitory, appearing as an almost mystical resurgence, a warning that reveals the sinister intentions of his father, Jack, possessed by the spirit of the place and gripped by murderous madness.



John Carpenter (dir.), *They Live*, 1988

United States: Larry Franco, 94 min

The graffiti “THEY LIVE WE SLEEP” is first seen when the main character, John Nada, a homeless construction worker, sneaks into an abandoned church where strange activities seem to be taking place. Graffiti on the wall indicates that there’s a conspiracy keeping people asleep and that we need to wake up. Later, following the arrest of the people gathering in the church, Nada makes a crucial discovery next to the painted-over, now illegible graffiti: a hidden box full of sunglasses that are able to reveal the presence of the invaders.

In *They Live*, graffiti serves as both an indication of a hidden truth and a symbol of human-scale resistance to capitalism’s subliminal propaganda machine. It takes on a prophetic character for whoever discovers it—character or viewer—as it also serves as the film’s title.

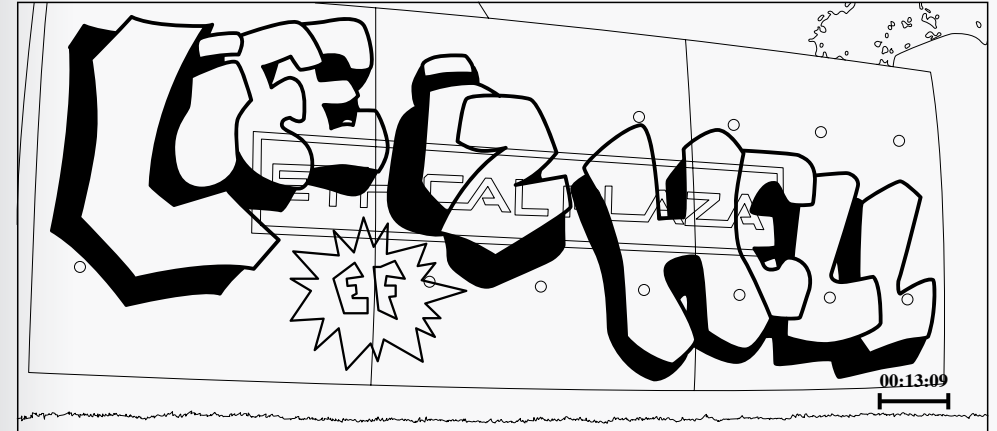


Tim Burton (dir.), *Batman*, 1989

United States: The Guber-Peters Company; Polygram Filmed; Entertainment Warner Bros., 126 min

The graffiti “JOKER WAS HERE” is painted in purple cursive script with a brush on the wall next to a painting hanging in a museum. It’s one among many acts of vandalism and yet another provocation by the Joker against the citizens of Gotham City. But the sacrilege doesn’t stop there. Strutting along to their boombox playing “Partyman” by Prince—who composed the music for the film—the Prince of Crime and his gang destroy everything in their path with unbridled enthusiasm. Anthropological artifacts, paintings, and master sculptures are overturned, smashed, and repainted one by one, using multicolored paint smears, projections, or caveman-like hand stencils traced in aerosol.

The “was here” refers to “Kilroy was here”: a graffiti attributed to U.S. Army ship inspector James J. Kilroy, popularized by American soldiers during the Second World War as they advanced across the European continent. The graffiti “JOKER WAS HERE” serves as a territorial marker—a sign of defiance and a trademark, or rather, a mark of destruction—worthy of the Vandal tribe, known for the senseless damage they inflicted from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages.



Marco Brambilla (dir.), *Demolition Man*, 1993

United State: Warner Bros., Silver Pictures, 115 min

In the year 2032, an intricate, multicolored graffiti reading “LIFE IZ HELL” is painted on the sign of the Ethical Plaza company using an automated robotic device that emerges from the ground. Metal nodes immediately deploy from the surface of the sign, electrifying the billboard until the pigments disintegrate. Like the graffiti perpetrator, the graffiti removal system seems highly technologically advanced. Integrated into the sign to deal with any form of vandalism within minutes, this device is emblematic of a zero-tolerance policy taken to the extreme, culminating in the destruction of the device that created the graffiti, much to the amazement of passers-by. In this futuristic Los Angeles, technology imposes its totalitarian reign, creating a hypersophisticated, totally sanitized society of control.

Although crime has disappeared, life seems to have become an unbearable living hell in this excess of security. The opening scene of *Demolition Man* recalls the sterilization of New York’s urban landscape in the 1980s. In the space of a few seconds, the historical dichotomy between the emergence of graffiti writing and Mayor Ed Koch’s policy of massive de-graffitiing is re-enacted. In certain respects, this dystopia could represent the fulfillment of the repressive, segregationist urban policy based on the broken windows theory, whose deleterious consequences are still evident today.



Dario Argento (dir.), *Profondo Rosso (Deep Red)*, 1975

Italy: Rizzoli Film; Seda Spettacoli, 126 min

The graffiti “KILL YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER” furtively appears in blood-red above a toilet at a local school when Marcus Daly, an English pianist, and Gianna Brezzi, a journalist, begin investigating a series of murders in the city of Turin. Unlike “ESTAT”, a clue inscribed in Italian on a foggy bathroom mirror by one of the serial killer’s victims, this English graffiti has no direct narrative function in the story—especially considering that it seems to be directed at a child, inciting them to kill their parents. It suggests the idea of a morbid family bond and references the film’s opening act: a murder scene in a family home twenty years earlier. The murderer, it turns out, is a woman—the mother, Martha—who is protected by her son Carlo, who, as a child, witnessed his father’s murder at the hands of his mother.

The trauma from the murder materializes in Carlo’s childhood drawings, archived at the local school, as well as in graffiti on the walls of the family’s home, where the mother walled up her husband’s corpse before abandoning him. Marcus follows the trail of Carlo and his mother as the bodies pile up—each time a person is about to reveal the family secret, they are killed. Marcus’s witnessing of the first murder motivates his investigation: Medium Helga Ulmann, captivated by a vision of the husband’s murder, describes the scene to the audience at a parapsychology conference where she is speaking. In *Deep Red*, graffiti manifests an unspoken danger within the family unit, contrasting with its usual function as a symbol of external danger in “toxic landscapes”.



Kenneth Johnson (dir.), *V*, 1984

United States: NBC, 100 min

As an elderly couple walks along a picket fence, a group of teenagers smears the faces of the characters depicted on the alien propaganda posters covering it. One of the teenagers graffiti the letter “V” with red spray paint, guided by the hand of the old man, who belongs to a secret resistance organization. The gesture symbolizes the informal spread of resistance ideas in the face of the Visitors, who, despite arriving on Earth with a message of peace and ecological mutual aid, actually conceal dark designs: to use humans as food. The red spray-painted “V” appears multiple times in the background to signify the presence of resistance cells. Later, the same fence with the graffitied posters becomes the scene of a collective arrest of resistance members.

While the title of the series, *V*, initially evokes the Visitors—the humanoid reptilian extraterrestrials—the graffiti reveals itself as an explicit reference to the “V for Victory” sign, graffitied during World War II by the Resistance against the Nazi occupiers. This connects to the anti-fascist heritage of the Resistance, as witnessed by the old man, a Jewish scientist, and represents the generational transmission of militant tools. The old man calls out to the teenager before guiding the act: “No, if you are going to do it, do it right. I’ll show you. You understand? For Victory! Go tell your friends.”



Paul Verhoeven (dir.), *Total Recall*, 1990

United States: Carolco Pictures, 113 min

The graffiti “KUATO LIVES” is discovered by the militia of Coahaagen, the corrupt governor of a mining colony on the planet Mars in 2048. Painted in orange letters in the lobby of the air terminal, it serves as a reminder to the Martians that resistance leader Kuato, along with his cause, is still alive and well. It’s the first mention of this pivotal character for Douglas Quaid, whose journey oscillates between dreams, fake memories, and reality. To break up the monotony of his daily life, Quaid asks the Rekall company to implant him with memories of Mars, but he begins to lose his sense of reality: Is he a worker dreaming of adventure, or an undercover secret agent who’s forgotten his primary mission?

Thanks to the psychic powers of Kuato, a half-human, half-mutant hybrid creature, Quaid, who is on the run, is able to recover crucial information for the resistance that has been implanted in his subconscious. The Martian mines harbor a gigantic reactor of extraterrestrial origin—Quaid’s destiny is to activate it and terraform Mars, thereby saving it. In *Total Recall*, the graffiti “KUATO LIVES” is as much a sign of hope that inspires the rebels as it is an appeal to the people to awaken from their lethargy and embrace a cause that transcends them. The spirit of revolt lurks in everyone, just like Kuato, a creature secretly conjoined to the belly of George, the Venusville resident who comes to Quaid’s aid.

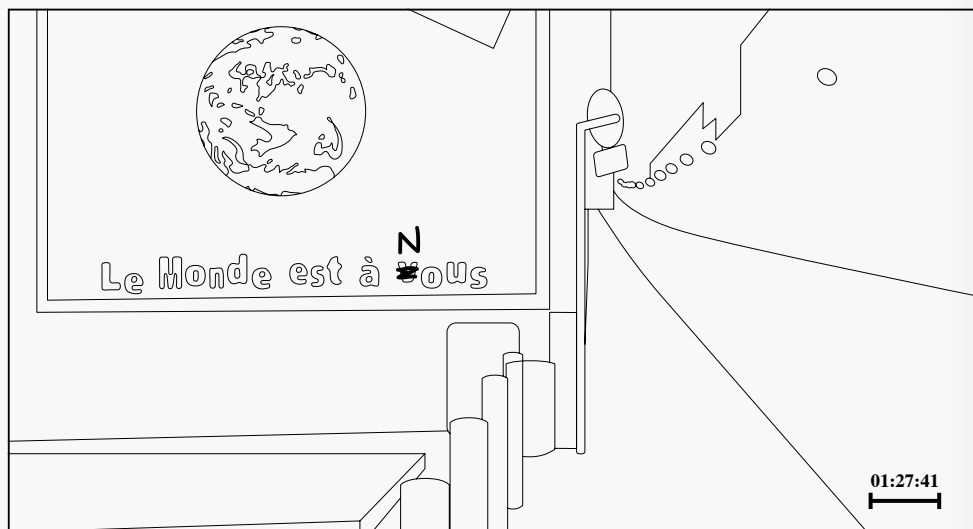


Frank Darabon (dir.), *The Shawshank Redemption*, 1994

United States: Castle Rock Entertainment, 142 min

“BROOKS WAS HERE” is etched into the wooden beam of a dilapidated hotel room. It’s the last trace left behind by a former prisoner recently released after spending most of his life in jail, just before he hangs himself, feeling unable to adapt to a society he no longer knows. Later, Red, freed in his turn, retraces Brooks’ footsteps and discovers the inscription left by his former prison mate. He decides to add “SO WAS RED” to it, casting doubt on his own suicidal intentions.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, the graffiti acts as a tragic, solemn epigraph whose role is both memorial and spiritual. After finishing the inscription, Red gives up the idea of committing suicide. He decides to go on living and take the arduous road to redemption and reintegration into society.

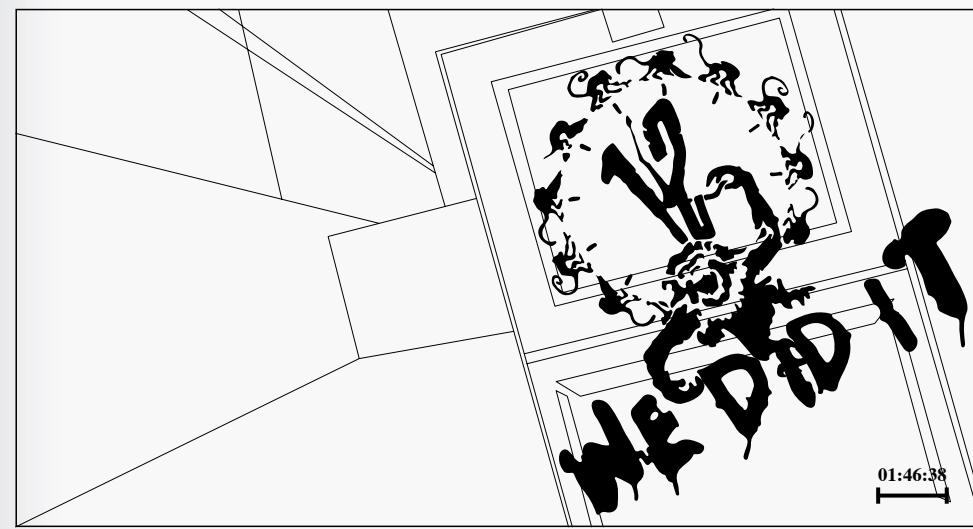


Mathieu Kassovitz (dir.), *La Haine (Hate)*, 1995

France: Les Productions Lazennec; Le Studio Canal+ ;
La Sept Cinéma; Kasso Inc. Productions; Studio Cofinergie 6;
Polygram Filmed Entertainment; Egg Pictures, 98 min

Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert are three adolescents from the Cité des Muguets who wander through Paris in a spiral of injustice and violence after their friend Abdel Ichaha is the target of an assassination attempt by the police while in custody. “*LE MONDE EST À NVOUS*” (The World is Yours) is an advertisement modified by Saïd using spray paint. The original poster, mounted on a 4×3 meter panel, depicts a globe on a black background, captioned with the phrase “The World is Yours” in sans-serif typography.

The alteration of the pronoun “vous” (equivalent to the English possessive pronoun “yours”) to “nous” (“ours”) by adding a spray-painted N highlights the perspective shift at play in *Hate*, inviting the viewer to see the world through the eyes of a group of youths from the projects. By extension, this reappropriation illustrates the asymmetrical balance of power between two conceptions of urban space: the first, private, belongs to the wealthy class and the consumer society, propelled by advertising and other forces; the second, public, belongs to the impoverished class and citizens who engage with the city through rudimentary means, striving to create common ground.



Terry Gilliam (dir.), *12 Monkeys*, 1995

United States: Atlas Entertainment; Classico Entertainment, 129 min

An enigmatic stencil depicting a monkey with the number 12 appears several times in the streets, accompanied by the spray-painted phrase “WE DID IT”. The graffiti is subject to multiple interpretations by James Cole, a voluntary prisoner who travels back in time to discover the origin of a virus that decimated humanity and to which this symbol seems to be linked. The series of stencils, serving as a common thread in Cole’s investigation during his numerous journeys through time, raises questions about predetermination and the possibility of altering the future, given that memory plays an essential role in the formation of identity and the understanding of reality.

12 Monkeys is a loose adaptation of the avant-garde short film *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker in 1962. The temporal vertigo evoked by Brassaï’s photographs of graffitied skulls in Paris, as they appear in the featurette, serves as a MacGuffin in the film’s storyline—a pretext and unsolved mystery used to construct the narrative. Memento mori and anachronistic palimpsest, the engraved skull refers to both humanity’s past and its dire future. In this dystopian context, the message “WE DID IT” appears as a reminder of the catastrophe—both commemorative and premonitory.



David Finscher (dir.), *The Game*, 1997

United States: Polygram Filmed Entertainment Propaganda Films,
129 min

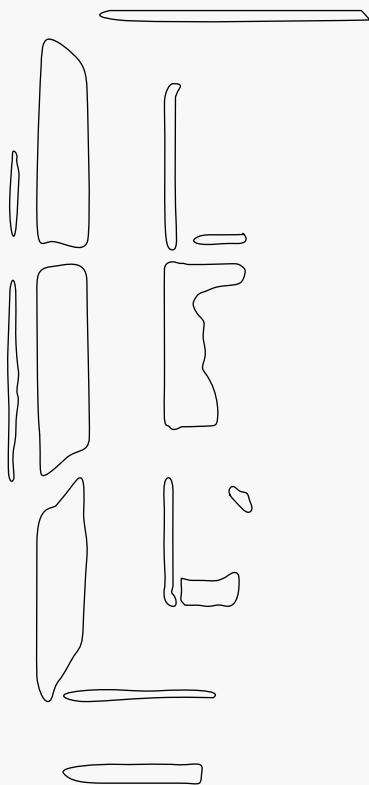
The phrases “WELCOME HOME” and “DON’T CRY PRETTY BOY” are seen among various tags and graffiti painted in a fluorescent, hip-hop style covering the walls of the apartment belonging to Nicholas Van Orton, a rich, cold, and sad businessman, now immersed in a mixture of blue and black light. The markings signify a tipping point in the narrative. Nicholas has been offered a chance by his younger brother Conrad, a former drug addict, to participate in a game organized by Consumer Recreation Services (CRS) for his birthday. The game begins without Nicholas even realizing it, from the moment he contacts CRS out of curiosity.

Gradually, the game invades all aspects of his professional and personal life. He loses his grip on reality as the game starts with minor disturbances in his daily life and escalates in frequency, intensity, and perversity. In *The Game*, the graffiti suggests a total takeover of his intimate space, his life, and his future, signifying his inability to escape the game. Graffiti writing is often perceived as cryptic by the uninitiated. The film exploits this notion in the plot, transforming it into a cabalistic symbol that seems to hold special meaning, pushing the observer toward paranoia and conspiracy.

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Graffiti Fiction is a research-creation around graffiti in fiction films and series. David RENAULT and Mathieu TREMBLIN AKA LES FRÈRES RIPOULAIN have been archiving photographs from films and series in which graffiti appear since 2006. Their collection includes an inventory of several hundred references. Their collection focuses on graffiti created especially for the film and which have a narrative function in the story, as a key or indexical element of the plot, rather than on graffiti as a “toxic landscape”.



Rouben Mamoulian (dir.) *The Mark of Zorro*, 1940. United States. David F. ZANUCK. 94 min.



FONDS DOCUMENTAIRE
DE L'AMICALE DU
HIBOU-SPECTATEUR