



Intercultural Visual Communication

Guest post by Trudy Milburn

In February 2015 I had the opportunity to travel to Italy with my family and friends. The first day in Milan, my friend Bethany remarked that she was surprised there was so much graffiti in the city. As in many cities, Milan, Bologna and Rome have their share of writing-on-walls. What my friend didn't see initially was any potentially positive purpose behind the act. She merely thought of it as defacing beautiful old buildings. Rather than simply viewing the writing as criminal, we could think of wall writing as existing in "rhizomatic space" (Nandrea, 1999, referencing Deleuze and Guattari), where "inscriptions can begin and end anywhere, can proceed unpredictably in any direction, can form surprising juxtapositions, layerings, and diagonal relations" (p. 111).

As we traveled south, we saw more mural-like wall paintings that seemed to convey political messages.



Clearly the public display of opinion was alive and well in this college-town (Bologna).

When we arrived in Rome, at our apartment in Trastevere, the front door was covered in writing. It was really the only such display on the nearby buildings. One first impression might be that this was a sign of an undesirable location; perhaps a seedy section of town. It was the first apartment I

had rented in another country, so I was uncertain of what kind of place we had contracted. Once inside we encountered very large and spacious rooms. Later, we learned that this was a popular area for nightlife by local and study-abroad students.



Since this was our home base for five days, it became a welcome site at the end long days of sightseeing. In fact, Johnson (2002), suggests we think of sites “not merely [as] the material backdrop from which a story is told,” but rather consider physical spaces themselves as meaningful because they are “a sight-line of interpretation” (p. 293).

One of our final days was spent at the Coliseum. It was here that we learned that the ancient Romans had some of the earliest forms of graffiti as demonstrated on a placard to illustrate the carvings into the stone (below). While much writing in public places offers a more transient layer of potential meanings that can get worn away over time, that placard preserved ancient writing that was much more difficult to inscribe than modern tools of spray paint or marker.

That night, we were having dinner with our friend Patrick who explained that his architecture class in Rome had just viewed, *Exit Through the Giftshop* (Cushing, D’Cruz & Gay-Rees, 2010), a film that depicts street art and artists from Los Angeles to the U.K. He described the importance of shifting how we come to understand the built landscape and the connotations it offers, moving from a simplistic view of graffiti as an act of vandalism to considering both the buildings and any layers of images and writing on them as meaningful additions.



While these images may be “curiously foreign script we cannot read” (Nandrea, 1999, p. 113), we shared an experience similar to what Nandrea (1999) observed, that that was that, “graffiti forces us to witness something” (p.114). Initially, we approached Italy as a site of historic monuments, but came to learn that layers of newer symbols were added over time (and some have even been preserved). This trip helped us to acknowledge different form of communication and recognize that added writing, images or carvings shouldn’t be simply brushed aside as unimportant. When traveling, we seek to learn more about how visual communication is interpreted interculturally or internationally and how the multimodal layers will engage us in a different kind of dialogue.

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