

Pudu Jail's Graffiti: Aesthetics Beyond the Walls of the Prison Cells

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Pudu Jail's Graffiti was a physical art lost during the course of reconstruction of the Prison into a remand facility in 2003, as these photographs were the last remembrance of the graffiti found prior to the construction, these images are the last remnant of the markings that now no longer exist as a result of the reconstructions.

By connecting the idea of graffiti (*writings*) being a source of information, composed within a simple agreement, there was deliverance. This was not a matter on figuring out how we know and what we know, but also how the fundamental information that was embedded into these *writings* leads to a release from the bars of physical imprisonment. In other words, Pudu Jail's graffiti does not simply refer to memory, but also show proof of acts to find sanctuary, or even salvation, which even steel bars and concrete walls could not deter.



Based on the information in most of the data collected from the *writings*, it was possible to find similarities in the collective conscience of the prisoners based on the structural basis of the individuals' origins, as the prisoners were predominantly kept in high volumes and density, yet segmented by ethnicity within restricted confinements. The prison was ruled with repressive sanctions of the Penal law system. These would bring about, hypothetically, the attachment of "higher" and "supreme" values (Foucault 2003: 366-371), as the prisoners were highly secular.

Arguably, almost all of these *writings* documented were reasonably independent to stand as unique character(s) on their own, taxonomically. The very concept of an individual being deprived by powerful institutions and laws from society rooted more from ancient and modern

psychology than from traditional doctrines. In many ways, the characters of the prisoners are much closer to the likeness of the men confined in Plato's cave,¹ rather than just a simple confinement. Hence, so do their voices in those *writings*. It was observed that the writings were neither premeditated nor simulated. The *writings* perhaps were actually composed of subject matters that had references to the subjects and objects around this region, and this prompts the question: what drives the prisoners to project these *writings*? One of the basic themes of the Prisoner's *writings* was psychological skepticism that questions the nature of reality and whether this documentation could actually be on familiar terms with, or even acknowledged. This theme is played out in the conflict of "*bricolage*"² world where prisoners are struggling to survive in a conflict against their composure in such environment and compose them into a "simulated" literature within the *writings*.



The quest for adjacent representation of the space makes one feel, smell, taste and see electrical signals interpreted by the experiences of the brain. Yet, these *writings* remain intact in its form and appearance as feasible documentation went through. The particular reason of the writings within the confinements of the Pudu prison facility portrayed real substitution for the existing environment.

R. Barthes, (1915-1980)³ suggested *semiology*⁴ as a great exponent from the concentration on text, rather than the author, as an object of his study. He had written vast amount of *writings* that are found in commonplace, events, images, and activities (usually found in most mechanized

texts; i.e. billboards, posters... etc.). However, a more consistent explanation would be that the *writings* were considered as simulation and this study hopes to add a branch towards the existing graffiti's taxonomy. "Pudu Jail's Graffiti: Aesthetics Beyond the Prison Cell" has enough evidence to document the *writings*' unique purposes. The *writings* depict the committed space, as other than their cellmates, they were dependent upon the walls as their only audience. The notion is that the walls will preserve their words and past memories. Channeling onto inanimate objects resulted in further salvation — and the *writings* could allow those leaving their markings behind on the prison walls to gradually improve their levels of hope over despair.

In other words, if we chose to read the texts (mainly printed texts) merely for reasons of leisure only, then we really don't have any firm basis upon which we can conclude that any proprietor of the texts must be telling the viewers an absolute perspective. The entire population, as Barthes mentioned:

The removal of the Author... is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text. The temporality is different. The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after.

– Robert, B., 1977⁵

However, the attraction of radical skepticism would be powerful, being drawn to the scene in the Pudu Prison facility where the walls around the cell room frame are

closely tied to the walls themselves. Beneath the thick layers of plasters on each wall, each *writings* contained more subtle hints of more *writings* that might have existed prior to the current ones. This merely holds up the notion of “A world within worlds within words”.

The “Pudu Jail’s Graffiti” has the sole aim of future extraction of linguistics in analytical concepts, and this documentation hopes to start semiological research in this direction. In assembling them, the taxonomy was not presupposed to remain integral to future research; nor does this semiology suggest a permanent linguistic model. The researcher merely hopes that it may enable an initial (albeit provisional) order to introduce the heterogeneous mass as significant graffiti, and it will go through various stages of evolution. In fact, what the researcher purports to do was to furnish a principle of classification with the hope that such documentation will manage to contain enough information to prevent the *writings* from being eradicated (*Damnatio Memoriae*).⁶

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- 1 Plato’s “Allegorical Cave”, from Plato’s *REPUBLIC*, Book VII, 514a-c to 521a-e.
 - 2 Bricolage n. – the process of transforming the meaning of objects and symbols, through novel uses or unconventional arrangements of unrelated things. *Collins Dictionary*. 1997.
 - 3 “*Mythologies*” Barthes: 1975 p.107.
 - 4 Semiology derives from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure’s linguistic theory as elaborated in *Cours de linguistique générale*, derived from the collection of lectures written between 1906 and 1911.
 - 5 Robert, B.’s lecture (1977), “Death of an Author”; Written by Wyrick, D.- <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/whatis.htm>, accessed December 2004’.
 - 6 In ancient Rome, the senate wiped its disposed emperors from the historical records by a decree “*Damnatio memoriae*” (Condemnation of memory), by removing their names from public inscriptions and destroying their statues. From the late 1st century BC until the 4th century AD, the recycling and destruction of images of emperors, empresses and other members of the imperial family occurred on a vast scale and often marked periods of violent political transition. This volume catalogues and interprets the sculptural, glyptic, numismatic and epigraphic evidence for *damnatio memoriae*, revealing it to be at the core of Roman cultural identity. 552p, (*Monumenta Graeca et Romana* 10, Brill June 2004)

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