Poor Pompeii. If Roman Britain has a PR problem, being known only for rain, Boudicca and the non-disappearance of the Ninth Legion, Pompeii has it much worse. Pompeii is known for one thing and one thing only: being destroyed by a volcano. This is inevitable, really, as Pompeii’s destruction was so dramatic and spectacular, it would seem a waste to take one’s fictional Roman characters there and not cover it in some way (besides, if anyone goes to the Bay of Naples in earlier-set Roman fiction, they go to Baiae, the party town, as do actual Romans in historical sources). And so, in this article we list five especially successful representations of Pompeii in modern popular media; but the list might as well be called ‘Five Great Representations of the Eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.’

It’s worth noting here that among the best known images from Pompeii are the famous ‘bodies’, which are actually plaster casts (Mary Beard recently reflected on these for BBC Radio 4’s A Point of View). There were no human remains in the city when it was excavated. Instead there were holes in the solidified deposits that were human-shaped, and so Victorian archaeologists poured plaster into the holes to produce statue-like images of the attitudes in which these people died, where the ash and stones originally encased their bodies after they’d been killed by the pyroclastic flow. More human-looking than skeletons, they’re very moving to look at and dominate representations of the eruption.

5. The Simpsons, ‘The Italian Bob’

Why are we in Pompeii? The Simpsons does Italy, taking the title characters on a tour in Mr Burns’ new car. They don’t even have to come up with a reason to hit a list of random Famous Things About Italy (in an order that makes no geographical sense). The Roman Forum and the Colosseum are kept for the climax, but Pompeii makes it into Italy’s Greatest Hits alongside the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a picturesque Tuscan village and a McDonald’s that serves wine.

Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? No. We’re here for a single, volcano-based sight gag.

Do we see the famous plaster casts? Sort of.

Worth a watch: Lisa inaccurately claims that the victims of Pompeii (which is given the spelling of the modern town, Pompei, not the ancient Roman spelling) were frozen in whatever position they died, implying that the ‘bodies’ are actually petrified corpses. Which, of course, they’re not. It’s probably worth it, however, as it allows the show to revisit one of its favourite jokes. Throughout the twenty-plus years The Simpsons has been on air, Homer has frequently been seen choking Bart when angry (a ‘horrible act of child abuse,’ as documentary-spoof episode ‘Behind the Laughter’ pointed out, that ‘became one of our most beloved running gags’). So, of course, when the family discover a Roman family who look just like them, Roman-Homer has been killed in the act of choking Roman-Bart.

4. Pompeii: The Last Day

Why are we in Pompeii? For a BBC docu-drama whose title was presumably inspired by Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s famous nineteenth century novel, The Last Days of Pompeii, and its various adaptations.

Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? No. Bulwer-Lytton’s novel was full of preachy stuff about terrible Roman morals and how somehow this led to death by volcano; but that sort of thing’s gone out of fashion (partly for being untrue) and this docu-drama is all about getting to everybody’s horrible deaths.

in the context of a bigger debate about the curriculum, and also in a way that isn’t just lecturing people - that isn’t just navel gazing. And there are issues that are worth debating. How do you justify Latin in an already packed curriculum? I think you’ve got to do it in better ways than it helps you to learn French better, because why not just learn French better? I gave a lecture in New York: ‘Do the Classics have a future?’ It wasn’t my title, but it worked and the audience was packed. There was a long discussion. We need to think about how to make sure it would be more edgy.

‘Does Latin have a future? We’re thinking of debating big questions about learning; what we value in society. What is the role of Latin in the classroom? Or in broader society? Is it irrelevant? I think we’ll get people for that. I’d like to get some kids too. Does Pompeii have a future? Who knows? But there are different forms of classical learning and culture. It’s not just a six month exhibition and then it’s all over.

1. Although the exhibition has now closed, for further details, see www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/pompeii/. The catalogue is still available.


4. Allan McCollum’s The Dog from Pompeii (1991). Originally the artist wanted to replicate the carbonised loaf of bread in the Naples archaeological museum – a kind of replication of something banal, simple and in its own way replicated constantly in the ancient world – not just in Pompeii. However, the Italian authorities decided that the loaf was too delicate to be submitted to the casting process.

5. The Cast Gallery, properly called the Museum of Classical Archaeology, is housed above the Faculty of Classics in Cambridge. It contains Victorian (mostly) plaster casts of sculptures and friezes from the ancient world.
Do we see the famous plaster casts?
Oh yes.

Worth a watch: Docu-dramas are odd beasts – often, you can’t help feeling that things ought to be either documentaries or dramas. Either talk about the evidence and the debates surrounding a topic, or write a proper fictionalisation of it. Docu-dramas can be particularly problematic when they imply, or their audience believe, that their largely fictionalised version of events is somehow the ‘correct’ or ‘true’ one. At least when people watch a fictionalised drama, they know it’s fictionalised and don’t expect anything else.

However, it’s worth making an exception for this very well made programme because there are advantages to using the docu-drama format to tell the story of Pompeii. We in the twenty-first century understand details concerning the nature of the pyroclastic flow that destroyed the city that the Romans didn’t; and so a modern narrator can explain what’s happening much more clearly than Roman characters within a story would be able to. The geology of how the volcano erupted and the different (though equally gory) ways people died in Pompeii and nearby Herculaneum are fascinating; but you need documentary-style narration to tell that story properly, perhaps more than you need it in dramatisations of political or military events. Meanwhile, the fictionalised elements offer a moving representation of the human side of the tragedy. The moments towards the end where the characters we’ve been following move into place to become the famous plaster casts of the inhabitants of Pompeii crouching where they died are quite chilling.

3. Up Pompeii!

Why are we in Pompeii? For Plautine-style hijinks with people who thought it was a good idea to name their daughter ‘Erotica.’

Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? Yes, which is partly why this is an interesting example. The TV sitcom Up Pompeii ran for a couple of years, using Pompeii as a setting for general Roman-set hijinks, presumably because it’s the best known Roman town outside of the City of Rome itself. The film spun off from the series is more focused on working up to the eruption, but even in the film this only occurs at the end, to provide a suitably dramatic climax.

Do we see the famous plaster casts?
Much like the Simpsons example above - sort of.

Worth a watch: There’ve been better comedies set in ancient Rome; A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum for one, which inspired Up Pompeii in the first place, and certainly Carry on Cleo. But Up Pompeii is entertaining enough. And then, at the end of the film, the volcano erupts. The film has been so completely silly that it’s impossible to take the eruption entirely seriously, and yet the knowledge that what is being presented is the real-life death of hundreds of people means a certain level of gravity is required. It’s hard to say whether the film achieves the required balance - the characters from the series being frozen in awkward moments (rather inaccurately implying they’re somehow turned to stone) are half funny, half a bit strange. On the other hand, there’s something about Frankie Howerd facing his inevitable doom with comic dignity that is rather wonderful.

2. Doctor Who, ‘The Fires of Pompeii’

Why are we in Pompeii? Because Doctor Who hadn’t done a full-on Roman-set story since ‘The Romans’ in the 1960s. Perhaps more importantly, because the production team were able to use the sets recently vacated by the BBC/HBO series Rome.

Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? No - but we do learn lots about the Elder and Younger Plinys.

Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? No - the Doctor and Donna have to blow up Vesuvius to save the Earth from a Pyrovile. Obviously.)

Worth a watch: ‘The Fires of Pompeii’ was the episode that showed us the sort of Doctor Who companion relatively new cast member Donna could be. Her debut as a regular character, ‘Partners in Crime,’ was funny, but ‘Pompeii’ is dramatic and moving, show-casing not just Catherine Tate’s acting but how the team would be writing for Donna. The show has repeated many times over the last few years its mantra that the Doctor needs a companion to keep him grounded and provide an emotional connection with the people he meets, but this is one of the episodes that shows this most effectively. And, of course, the icing on the cake is that the people Donna persuades the Doctor to save are Caecilius and his family, characters from the Cambridge Latin Course books that very many children who learn Latin in school in the UK and US use. And, for everyone who didn’t learn Latin in school, Caecilius was also a real person and you can visit his house in Pompeii. So that’s pretty cool.

1. The Roman Mysteries, ‘The Secrets of Vesuvius’

Why are we in Pompeii? Well, we’re not exactly - we’re in and around the Bay of Naples, within sight of Pompeii. And we’re there because that’s where Uncle Gaius lives.

Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? No - but we do learn lots about the Elder and Younger Plinys along the way.

Do we see the famous plaster casts?
No – the Doctor saves Caecilius and family just before the full force of the pyroclastic flow hits the town. (Which was caused by the Doctor and Donna, who had to blow up Vesuvius to save the Earth from a Pyrovile. Obviously.)
Worth a watch: *The Secrets of Vesuvius* is the second novel in children's mystery series *The Roman Mysteries*, and both the book and the BBC TV adaptation are excellent. The book is a little more historically accurate in the details, but on the other hand the televised version has the advantage of being able to show the volcano erupt and it benefits enormously from the casting of Simon Callow as Pliny the Elder, who is wonderful as ever. Callow has all the *gravitas* combined with fun required to play a general with an interest in unusual flora and fauna and general curiosity and enthusiasm about the world. We're spared the gruesome fate of those in Pompeii and Herculaneum here, as our heroes a) are in a children's story but more importantly b) have to survive, but there's plenty of drama and horror in the distant eruption and the falling ash, not to mention poor Pliny's (historically accurate) death. Brilliant stuff.

### Bibliography and Discography

*The Roman Mysteries*, *The Secrets of Vesuvius*, by Caroline Lawrence, is available from Orion, published in 2001. The DVD from the series is available from the BBC, and it has its own website [http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/romanmysteries/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/romanmysteries/)

*Dr. Who*, *The Fires of Pompeii* and *Up Pompeii* are available on DVD from the BBC and on YouTube.

*Pompeii: The Last Day* is not currently available on DVD from the BBC. There are numerous clips on YouTube.

*The Simpsons*, *The Italian Bob* is the eighth episode of *Season 17*. 

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