

Research Article



Street Poetry: The Lyrical and Societal Voice of the City

May 31, 2024

Issue: [Intermedial interventions in the city](#)

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The Subversive Voice

Matt Siber tested the power dynamics of language and communication in public space through his photographic experience “The Untitled Project” (2002–2010). This project implied the transfer of messages, such as publicity or instructions, from the public space to a blank piece of paper: the results were unsettling, modified photos of public spaces emptied of any linguistic signs, and an alienating, corresponding blank map full of all the messages that normally belong to the public. Thanks to this artistic experience, the artist was able to identify five main *voices* that inhabit the public space: the *commercial/corporate* voice, the *municipal* voice, the *propaganda* voice, the *news and mass-media* voice, and lastly the *subversive* voice.

It may be seen as controversial to use the term *voice* to express something that is mainly visual, however in this context the term voice has to be considered in a broader sense:

My initial motivation for removing text from public spaces was to free the modern citizen from the onslaught of language that is ubiquitous in our environment. I felt this to be a noble cause until I finished editing my first piece in Photoshop and immediately became aware of the errors in my initial concept. Despite the lack of text, I was still able to interpret most messages through visual rather than literate forms of communication, resulting in little to no loss of power of this voice I was attempting to silence (Siber 5).

We may see that, in this case, *voice* is perceived as an *ensemble* of codes such as language, text, context, materials and placements. By its definition, the subversive voice is the less represented one, as it “appears in the form of graffiti and can often cross over into the propaganda category if it is political in nature” (Siber 9). The subversive voice collects everything other than institutional, including also artistic expressions. Especially when it comes to graffiti, the subversive voice often shares anti-capitalistic purposes by claiming a space that distances itself from the capitalistic and property paradigm. It triggers the desire to create a space where people can express themselves as citizens and individuals at the same time. The subversive voice often represents the blurred boundary between written and visual modes of communication; one of the most common manifestations of this voice is the *tag*, a text-based, highly visual signature that writers repeat, or better *bomb*, in an urban area to mark a territory and to affirm their existence in the rather depersonalized space of the contemporary city (Siber 9).

Street Poetry

Street poetry is an artistic practice that consists of integrating brief poetic compositions into the urban environment. It may be identified as the modern legacy of epigrammatic poetic verse and inscriptions. However, more than inscriptions, today’s mural poetry is no longer carved in stone, but is spread through manifestations of street art and graffiti such as posters, writing, stickers, installations, and many others, ranging from the most classic techniques to more complex ones. Despite its massive presence across the globe, street poetry has only recently started to attract the attention of the academic community. Indeed, street poetry is a more complex phenomenon than expected: known through many definitions such as *street poetry*, *guerrilla poetry* or *poetic assault*, this phenomenon

still remains confined in an amphibious situation between poetry and graffiti-street art's experience.

a) An Intermedial Explanation

Street poetry can be defined as a literary-artistic space where poetry and graffiti-street art meet. According to Rajewski, when two or more media collide, we encounter a specific intermedial relationship defined as *media combination*.

The intermedial quality of this category is determined by the medial constellation constituting a given media product, which is to say the result or the very process of combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation. These two media or medial forms of articulation are each present in their own materiality and contribute to the constitution and signification of the entire product in their own specific way. Thus, for this category, intermediality is a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation.

(Rajewski 52)

This relationship can be a harmonious contiguity between the different media or, as in the case of street poetry, a total integration, an equilibrium where no medium prevails over the other (Rajewski 52). Another clear example of media combination is opera: even if we may consider all the elements which compose the experience as separate artistic entities (e.g., one may only read the *libretto* or listen to the music), it is only through the union of music, theater setting (*décor*, costumes, staging), and text that the genre reaches its full potential. And although valid studies can be conducted on the separate artistic elements, the outcomes of such studies always have to be held against this light. This is the case in the genre of street poetry as well: one may consider the poem as an individual composition, as one may also observe the graffiti-street art piece as one single work of art, however it is the union of the characteristic features of both arts that brings street poetry alive. Considering street poetry as media combination means taking into account different aspects, such the linguistic (e.g., standard language, dialect, slang) and the literary ones (e.g., figure of speech and sound) as much as the material (e.g., street art techniques, colors, dimensions) and the spatial features (e.g., where in the city the piece has been performed). We may frame these aspects in what Elleström defines as *modalities*, or the different ways through which a media product is transferred in the communicative and perceptive process between the producer's mind and the perceiver's mind, taking into consideration that one media product normally entails different modalities (Elleström 16). The main modalities are four: material (e.g., solid-liquid, organic-inorganic), spatiotemporal (which traits of space and time the product entails over the perception process), sensorial (which senses are stimulated during the perception process) and semiotic (which signs, icons, contexts are revealed in the communicative act) (Elleström 20). In example 5, found in London's subway, it becomes clear that, according to Elleström's theory, the media product (the street poem) has solid and inorganic material modality, and that it has a strong spatiotemporal modality since it has evident spatio-temporal traits (the poem is settled in a transit place as the metro, therefore the poem is visible for a few minutes by many different people in many different places). We can also say that the main sensorial modality implied in the reception of the media product in this

case is the view, but that the sound and the smell can also be taken into consideration (e.g., the sound and the smell of the metro). Concerning the semiotic modality, it is clear that a text base mode is implied with metaphorical shades.

To conclude, street poetry can thus be seen as a synthesis of the specific codes which define graffiti-street art and poetry.

On the one hand, street poetry can be considered a form of poetry. In fact, we can find different points of contact with poetry, such as the aphoristic formula, the epigraphy's *brevitas*, rhymes, metaphors, irony, dialectic forms typical of inscriptions, and pictorial elements evoking visual poetry. But on the other hand, street poetry is also a graffiti-street art phenomenon. Firstly, because it is shared through forms and techniques which are typical for street art; secondly, because the city is the distribution area as well as the main source of inspiration. As a matter of fact, street poetry follows some of the codes of street art and graffiti, such as the anonymity, the practice of *bombing* and the *guerrilla* effect.

It is especially in the application of these last two elements, *bombing* and *guerrilla*, that street poetry reveals its subversive and poetic voice.

b) The Subversive Voice of Street Poetry

Even if street poetry may sometimes overcome the limits of the law, it is not in this illegal and occasional aspect that the strength of its subversive voice is held. We can find the subversive voice in the communicative *deviation* that occurs in the reception process thanks to the *guerrilla-effect*. The concept of *guerrilla* in relation to the public space is often assimilated in its marketing interpretation, known as *marketing guerrilla*. This marketing approach is an advertising strategy that uses unconventional and original tactics to attract customers by disrupting the normal marketing communication in public space. There are four main kinds of *marketing guerrilla*: 1) placing something unusual in an outdoor environment (e.g., IKEA's campaign in Australia that used to put sofas at bus stations), 2) generating excitement exploiting an indoor space features such as a mall or the subway (e.g., a flash mob in a museum), 3) ambushing someone else's event like a concert or a show (e.g., in the 2019 Golden Globes, a model was employed to photobomb Fuji water between celebrities), 4) proposing, in a more experimental way, engaging mixed experiences such as handing out free samples or suggesting activities ([Coursera-Marketing Guerrilla](#)).

It is also interesting to notice that the same strategies have been used multiple times with activist purposes, such as the action organized by [workersforpalestine.nl](#) who, during the Christmas period, released a rain of flyers in a mall in Amsterdam inviting others to boycott Israeli products (assimilable to type two of marketing guerrilla), and the anti-publicity movement in Brussels that opens the commercial billboards all over town for delivering anti-capitalistic messages (assimilable to type one of marketing guerrilla).

In more general terms, it can be said that *guerrilla* generates a strong surprise effect that arises when there is a clear friction between object and context: in the case of street

poetry, poetry and urban landscape. Benthien points out that “urban sociology defines ‘public space’ according to three basic features: accessibility, anonymity and openness to different kinds of actions” (Benthien 346). When poetry is displayed in public, it becomes accessible, anonymous, and open, provoking an unforeseen aesthetic function in opposition to the expected and less intimate voices in the city (corporation, municipality, propaganda, news). The clash between the poetic function and the urban communicative tradition creates a *sense of disruption* that is surprising and unsettling at the same time (Benthien 347). Therefore, we can state that the presence of poetry in the urban context is surprising and creates an intimate, poetic feeling emphasized by a deviation that *subverts* the standard communicative rules of the city landscape. The guerrilla element present in street poetry is clearly correlated with its graffiti-street art legacy: the free and eventually illegal exposition of art in public space goes against the utilitarian communicative landscape typical of the city. This is important to consider, since even if the guerrilla element plays its role in the audience’s perception, the deviation provoked by the guerrilla is a fundamental aesthetic choice for street artists and poets who exploit the unforeseen effect to better strike their message or signature.

Bombing is a practice that was introduced at the same time as the phenomenon of *tagging*. It stands for the massive repetition of the same message, in the case of street poetry, the same composition or the poet’s signature. Just like the guerrilla effect, bombing has this same surprising effect but with a *conquering* touch: indeed, the more the composition is repeated the more it is recognizable, and it gains value. Bombing is associated with the sociological need of expressing one’s own identity, also typical of graffiti (e.g., ‘Killroy was here’), and the will to claim the urban space for a moment other than utilitarian purposes.

Guerrilla and *bombing* are key elements for understanding the rebellious attitude behind the phenomenon of street poetry. The three main elements for framing street poetry in relation to the elements of guerrilla and bombing are *traceability* (how the composition can be recognized in a public space), *visibility* (which materials and techniques make the poem more or less seen in a public space) and lastly, *repetition* (how many times and under which circumstances the poetic message is performed).

Street poetry is a controversial artistic expression that places itself in the center between one of the genres perceived most as elitist (poetry) and one of the most popular practices (graffiti-street art). The result is a peculiar underground and lyrical expression that challenge the communicative codes of the city through its form and its content.

Analysis

In the following paragraphs, we will analyze a sample of poems collected in three western European capital cities between 2019 and 2023 (101 poems in Rome, 228 poems in Brussels, and 95 poems in London). Because of the different number of compositions per city, the graphs shown will not follow any percentage but a numerical quantitative value instead. Our methodological approach is mixed and it entails both a quantitative and a qualitative method. The compositions have been collected through fieldwork and crowdsourcing and have then been selected according to three previously mentioned parameters: traceability,

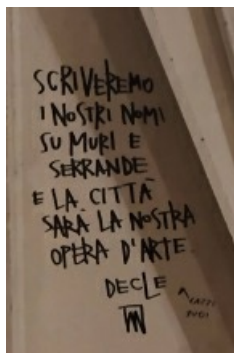
visibility and repetition. These graphs show preliminary results since the research is still ongoing, however they already allow for some interesting reflections.

a) *The City as an Intimate and Public Journal*

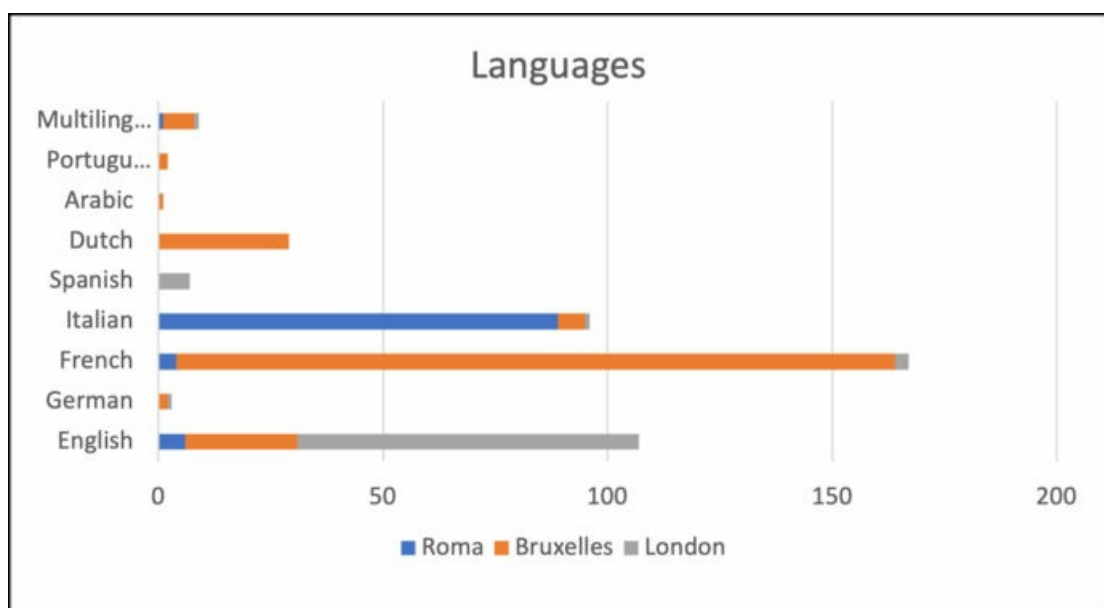
The city can be read because it is written, because it was written. However, it is not enough to examine this text without referring to the context. To write about this writing or this language, to elaborate the *meta-language* of the city, is not to know the city and the urban. The context, what lies beneath the text to be deciphered (everyday life, [...]) and what lies above this urban text (institutions, ideologies), cannot be neglected in deciphering.

Lefebvre 62; our translation.

Henri Lefebvre describes the role of the city as *mediation* between text and context, between private and public. The city places itself in this position of mediation between the *ordre proche*, the individual life, and the *ordre lointain*, the public sphere of government and institutions (Lefebvre 54). The mediation itself occurs through writing, and street poetry is one of the experiences that makes this movement possible. The city as intimate and public space is embodied in one of the aspects that street poetry underlines: the idea of the city as both an intimate and shared journal.

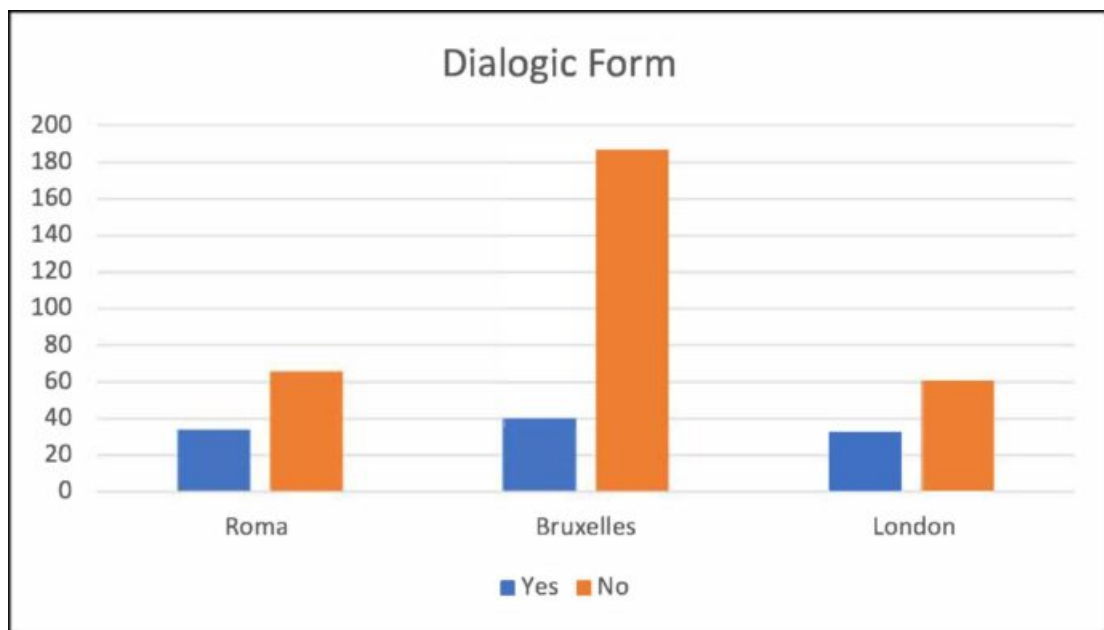


2. Decle, Ponte della Musica, Roma, 2021: "We'll write/our names/on the walls and/shutters/and the city/will be our/work of art"; our translation.

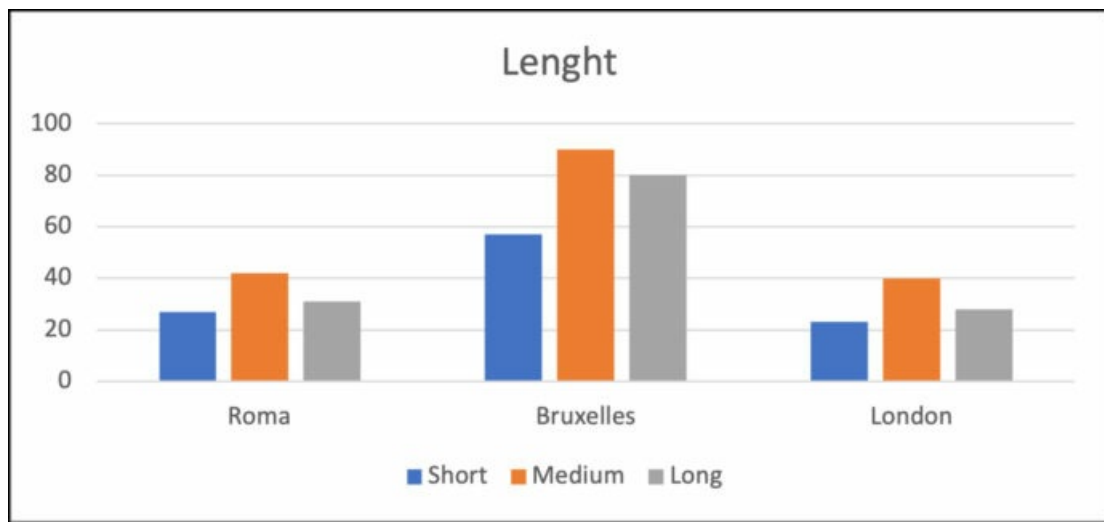


Graph 1. Languages.

We see that all three cities host multilingual poems. This is a significant aspect, because it underlines the rich diversity of the contemporary urban fabrics. This multilingualism also includes dialects or idiolects that make the compositions highly spontaneous and direct. The national languages of Italian in Rome, English in London, and Dutch/French/German in Brussels are the most used in their territories for obvious communicative reasons, however we notice that English, Italian, and French are also respectively used in the other cities. This element might be expected for English, today's *lingua franca*, but it is interesting in the case of French and even more of Italian. Brussels is a slightly more complex case: probably due to the high density of expats in the territory and the multilingual character inherent to the linguistic diversity of the city, it has the most diversified urban panorama in terms of language. However, even though Brussels is officially a bilingual city (French/Dutch), the majority of compositions are written in French: Brussels's population perceives French as the common language and therefore chooses this language for expressing poetic thoughts in public. The graph shows an interesting tendency: compositions are *spontaneous* and highly *comprehensible* despite the possible frictions between the creative writing language and the institutional linguistic habits.



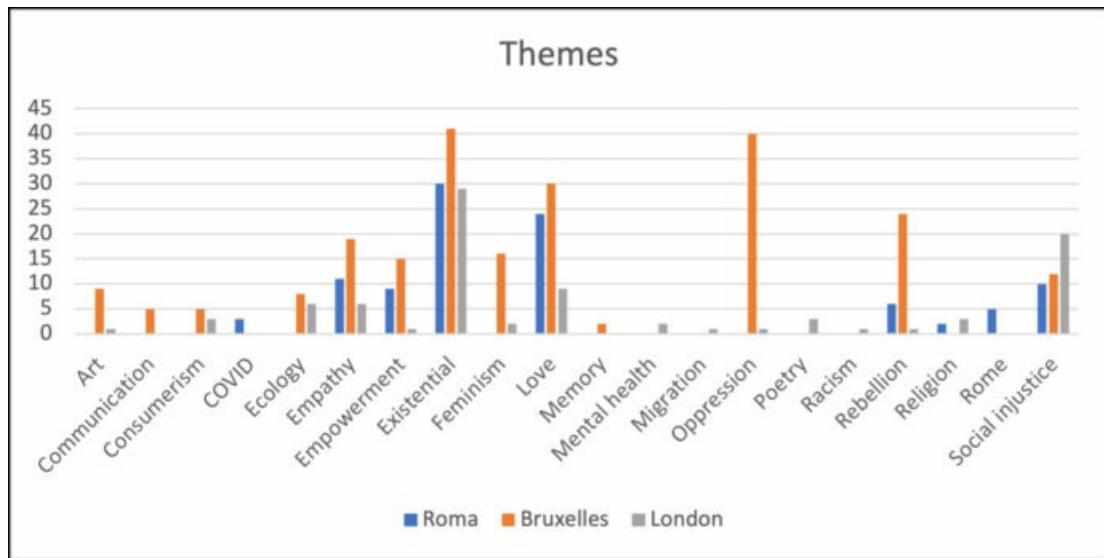
Graph 2. Dialogic Form



Graph 3. Length.

Other important formal aspects can be seen in graphs 2 and 3 regarding dialogic structure and length. Even if the first-person poetic voice is still the most used, we notice an interesting presence of the dialogic form as well: exactly like in a diary, the poet tries to start a dialogue with a reader (or even other elements such as monuments) who can be a lyric “you”. It is interesting to notice that even if the dialogic form is one of the main contact points with the genre, it is far from the only one. Both speak to the intimacy of the author and that the message is conceived to stay in an ambiguous state between private and public (normally one writes a personal diary but many diaries have been published by publishing houses or blogs for instance) (Van Dijk 122). Lastly, there is the importance of the signature, or the handwriting/hand-made gesture that makes the confessions in the diary and on the wall authentic (Van Dijk 118–120).

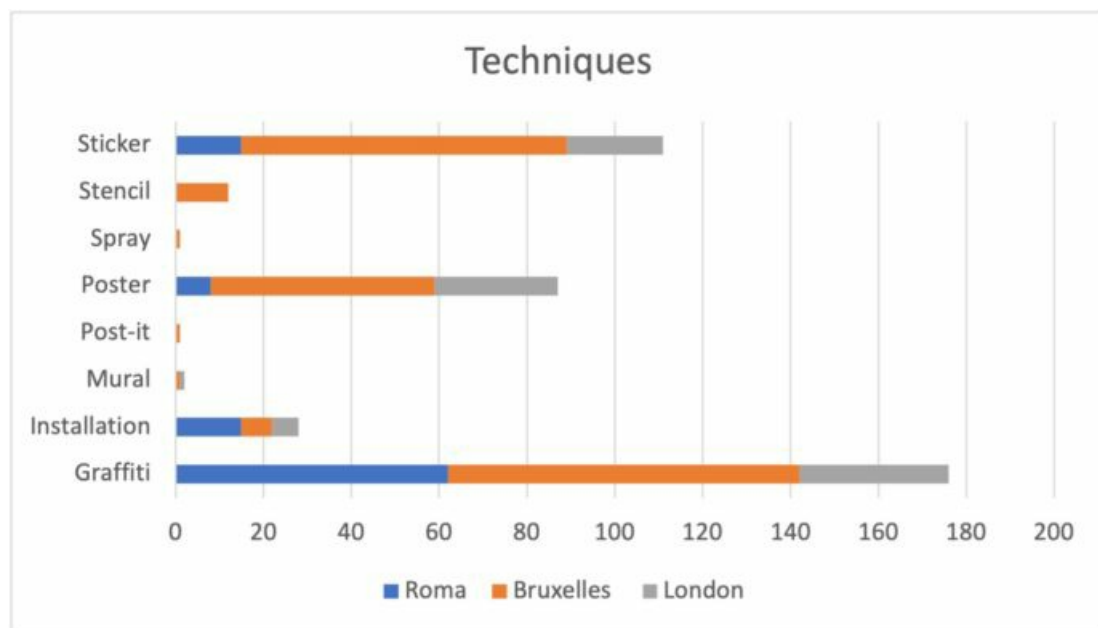
The length of the compositions shows the preference for a condensed form of no more than four verses (medium value) typical of the aphoristic genre. Indeed, this preference for short and intimate anonymous truths is also mirrored in the tendency of sharing existential themes, as we can see in the graph 4 below (themes), where *existence* is the most shared theme between the study cases. With the term *existence* we group different themes connected by common *motifs* linked to the complexity of human life, such as doubt, despair, death, time, life, etc. This tendency towards existential matters makes the shift from the private to the public sphere even more evident. Just like in a diary, poets/citizens share their own private truths about life, placing their thoughts in a special zone between anonymity and accessibility typical of the urban context.



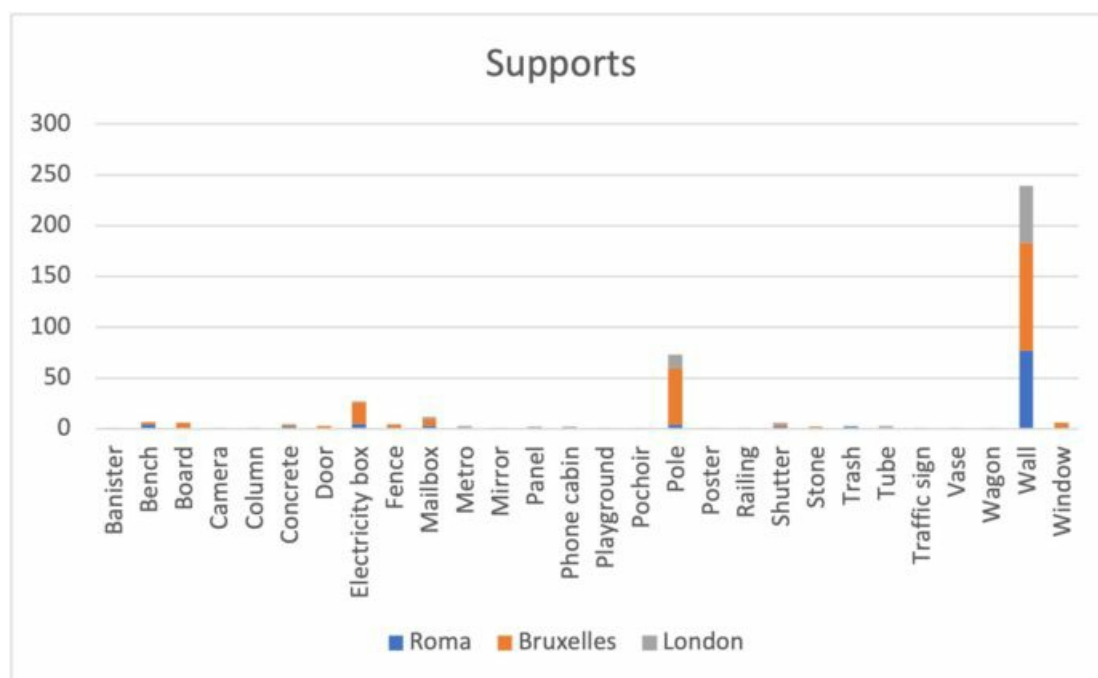
Graph 4. Themes

b) The Lyrical Claim of Public Space

Before getting into the details of this aspect of the research, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by *lyrical*. As previously stated, street poetry is an intermedial phenomenon that combines graffiti-street art and poetry. When the practical influence of graffiti-street art is evident, the influence related to poetry needs to be framed: by lyrical, we mean not only the direct or indirect influence of literary genres (e.g., epigraphy, visual poetry, intertextual elements, etc.), but also the use of *poetic language*. The poetic language is empirically detectable by the presence of figures of style, figures of sound, rhyme, irony, and division in verses. As Kila Van der Starre clarifies in her doctoral thesis (“Poëzie buiten het boek. De circulatie en het gebruik van poëzie.”) about the circulation of poetry out-off the page, by reinterpreting Bornstein and Hirsch’s theories, the significance of a poem can change according to different aspects, mainly according to the material code (the form in which the text exists) and the linguistic code (the verbal element of text) (Starre 2021, 539). In the case of street poetry, the placement as much as the material of the poem may interfere with the strength of the poetic message (e.g., if one writes “your eyes burn like stars” on a bench, in front of a belvedere, or at the planetarium, the poetic impact might be perceived differently according to the location). When we say *lyrical claim*, we underline the graffiti-street art and poetic legacy of street poetry at the same time. In fact, street poetry, exactly like graffiti-street art, has an expansive quality mirrored in its subversive and rebellious components, described in the paragraphs dedicated to *guerilla* and *bombing*. This choice for repetition (*bombing*) is formally shown in the choice of graffiti and stickers as the most used techniques as well. Graffiti and stickers are, indeed, the most spontaneous and reproducible of all street art forms (see graph 5. Techniques). If we have a look at the most chosen supports in our study cases, we notice that the tendency is clearly pending towards the easiest and most common urban supports like walls and poles (see graph 6. Supports).

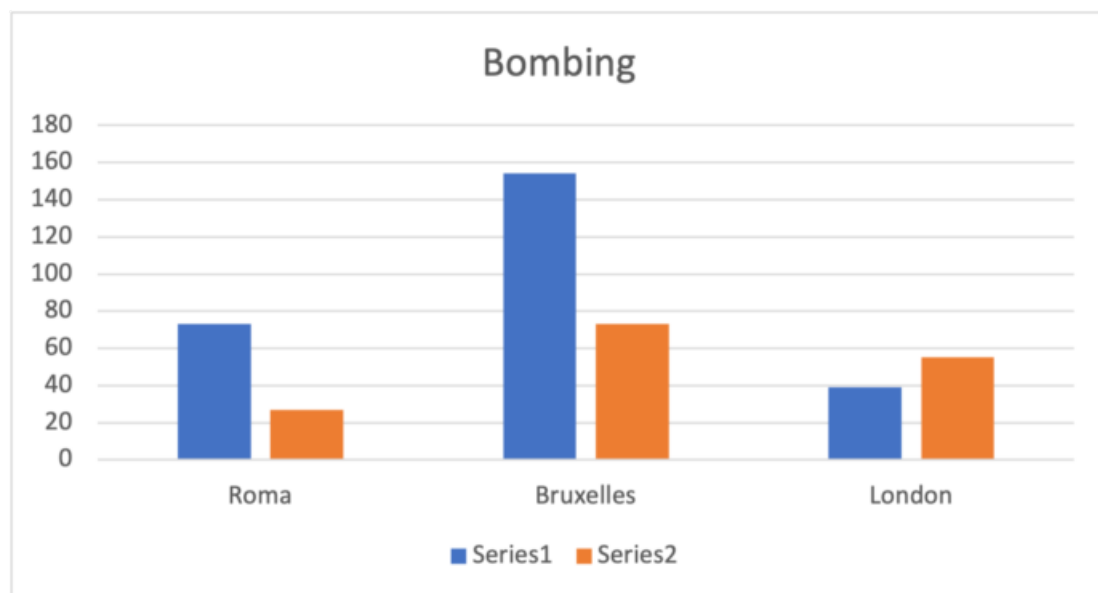


Graph 5. Techniques.



Graph 6. Supports.

We were also able to partially track the practice of *bombing* in the three cities. As we can see from the graph below (graph 7. Bombing), this desire to claim the public space through bombing is present in all study cases. In Rome and in Brussels, the majority of poets use this practice extensively, whereas in London, the values (series 1 = yes; series 2= no) are almost equal (the value differs of only 11 compositions). This desire for repetition can be interpreted as a need for the affirmation of an identity within a depersonalized space like the city context (Terzago; Carrington), while it may also be a way to spread a poetic and societal message, claiming not only a place but also a reason.



Graph 7. Bombing.

c) Poetic and Societal Messages

In the already discussed graph 4 (Themes), we notice that poetic and societal themes are spread on the walls of Rome, Brussels, and London. In this section, the previously cited mixed method is directly applied: the categorization of the poems has been made following a literary thematic analysis based on the definition that a theme is described by a net of *motifs* (emotionally and culturally charged images) (Giglioli 2023). The application of this method is necessary in order to maintain a feasible balance between themes and poems, avoiding assigning one theme for each poem or too many poems to one theme. By mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches, we were able to see that the themes with the highest common rate are *existence*, *love* and *social injustice*. In this contribution we will focus on *social injustice*. The theme *social injustice* groups different subcategories all connected through similar *motifs* that inspire feelings such as inequality, poverty, decay, abandon, abuse, discrimination, etc. In line with the previous analysis, the majority of these societal messages are spread in a condensed and aphoristic way. This tendency is also coherent with some elements of the literary canon rooted in popular art, especially in the exposed writing: epigraphs in memory of a dead tyrant, the scandalous verses of *latrinalia* (inscriptions made in the semi-private space of public toilets), or the satirical interventions of the *statue parlanti* (statues placed in Italian cities where, in a tradition dating back to the 16th century, it is common to hang anonymous poems satirizing the government or the Pope). The three poems shown below represent the main tendencies relating to theme of social injustice. In image 2 “We look for/a caress/in all this/trash” (our translation) the Roman street poet Er Buio ironically denounces the decay of the urban landscape in their dialect through a classic four-lined rhymed poem in a graffiti fashion. In this case, we clearly notice how the placement of the composition (a garbage can) underlines the social focus of the composition: the citizens are presented with something tender within the cruel decay of the city.



3. Er Buio, Via Attilio Friggeri 101, Roma, 2021.

The following composition is a black sticker signed “Human” displaying in white font a four-lined quotation by the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti: “It is not a sign/of good mental health/to be well adapted/to a sick society” (our translation). The quotation is translated in standard French and it invites the reader to maintain critical thinking about society and to not accept what is ethically wrong in name of a depersonalized law. This sticker is part of a series with the same fashion that spreads quotations of different philosophers all over the streets of Brussels, supposedly to increase socio-political awareness not only through the content but also through the practice of bombing.



4. Human, Rue A. de Witte 48, Bruxelles, 2022

The last example was photographed in the metro of London in 2019. It is a graffiti sprayed on a wagon in the most classic graffiti-street art tradition: “Borders in our/minds.../borders on the/land.../to control the freedom/of woman and man.../but nothing lasts forever!!”. The anonymous writer(s) express in four verses, using both anaphora and rhyme, the need to have an open mind and not fixate on the concept of the state that controls everyone’s freedom. The end is a free verse, an exclamative line that makes us believe that things will soon change. The reception of this message is included

in its materiality and placement: as the tags on the wagons, the poem will travel all over the city, entering many Londoners' daily lives.



5. Anonymous, Metro, London, 2019.

Through these examples, we again notice the mediatic movement between intimate and common, this semiology of the city that goes from private to public and vice versa (Lefebvre 68), its meanings mirrored in this complex relationship, even more evident when the content is strictly social:

Alongside the written word, there is the word of the urban dweller, which is even more important; these words speak of life and death, joy or misfortune. The city has this capacity that makes it a meaningful whole. [...] In the form of meanings, in the form of simultaneity and encounters, in the form of 'urban' language and writing, the city transmits orders. The distant order is projected into the near order.

(Lefebvre 69)

When the institutions of the city falter, the citizens experience a disequilibrium and one of the creative responses is street poetry. Street poetry brings the unexpected poetic message at a societal level: denouncing, expressing and educating the urban fabric.

Conclusion

In the present contribution, we have seen how five voices populate the contemporary urban landscape. All these voices (corporate, municipal, propaganda, news, and subversive) contribute to the construction of the semiology of the city. Street poetry is an example of the subversive voice: thanks to its intermedial features and, especially, its combined nature between graffiti-street art and poetry, it is able to have a strong societal

and poetic impact. This impact is mainly due to the deviation that occurs in the unexpected presence of poetry in public space (*guerrilla*) and the repetition of the same signature or composition (*bombing*). The societal impact is at the same time poetic, and it happens in three distinct ways. The first one is the idea of the city as a common and private journal where poets/citizens/readers share short, mostly existential truths in an anonymous and yet public way. This modality opens the concept of city as *mediation* between intimate and common, individuals and institutions, private and public. Street poetry concurs to enable this process. The second is the lyrical claim of public areas, choosing a short, highly comprehensible and reproducible composition as trend. The lyrical claim identifies the need of a free place within the broad and rather utilitarian urban space. The third way is characterized by the coexistence of poetic and societal messages that reveals the tendency of the mediation within the urban fabric: the fluctuations of the institutional order are experienced and reinvented by the individuals. In the case of street poetry, it happens through creative writing. Yi-Fu Tuan differentiates between *place* and *space*: place is associated with a known, safe, intimate feeling and space with an unknown, frightening and alienated sensation (Tuan in Tally 18). In light of this definition and this short analysis, we can state that street poetry creates specific moments, almost snapshots, in the mediatic movement of the city: *places* of self-political awareness within the otherwise alienating urban *space*.

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