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Abstract

In this paper, the claims made to London through the writings in its public spaces will be explored. As will be argued, urban interventions are communicative practices that can become visual "scenes of dissensus", *i.e.* political interventions and disruptions made by emerging voices. In this article, the focus is on visual interventions relating to two of the biggest contemporary issues for London and other global cities, namely gentrification and migration. In the four cases I present and analyse in this paper, city dwellers use a variety of tactics and techniques to make their claims be seen and heard; and these actions can generate diverse meanings and have different impacts. I argue that corporate discourses can appropriate urban interventions, showing that important contemporary urban expressions such as graffiti and street art, which are usually and primarily conceived of as counter-hegemonic actions, might in fact also contribute to the reinforcement of consensus and domination, as part of the increasing phenomenon of the commodification of authenticity and of urban space. I will conclude by stressing the importance of approaching urban interventions as creative communication practices that carry and show the complexity, the ambiguity and contradictions that are inherent to everyday life in global cities.

The whole is not immediately present is this written text, the city. There are other levels of reality which do not become transparent by definition. The city writes and assigns, that is, it signifies, orders, stipulates. What? That is to be discovered by reflection. This text has passed through ideologies, as it also 'reflects' them.

(Lefebvre, 1996: 102)

1 INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this study was to identify and analyse the emergence and meanings of visual interventions in various urban spaces in London. During a period of ten months, different kinds of urban interferences such as tagging, stickers, stencil, graffiti, etc. were observed, collected and analysed, in order to understand this communication phenomenon within a broader socio-cultural context and to detect their potential for consensus and dissensus. In the cases I discuss in this paper, city dwellers used different tactics and techniques – creative, aggressive, ironic – to make their claims be seen and heard; and these actions can bring new meanings, multiple effects and consequences.

The paper is structured in five sections. First, I argue that city surfaces are communication media and that urban interventions must be understood as communication practices and, therefore, as spaces for subjectivation. Second, I unpack the concepts of consensus and dissensus as discussed by Rancière (1995, 2009, 2015) to analyse the phenomenon of urban writings. In the subsequent section, I outlined the methodological issues relating to my research, including selection of case-studies. After presenting and analysing the cases, I develop a broader analysis of the phenomena considering the ideas of consensus, dissensus, appropriation and authenticity. In the last section, I present partial research findings and articulate the concepts in order to discuss the phenomenon as political actions and scenes of dissensus.

2 WRITING AND READING THE CITY AS COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Mediation, a concept proposed by Martín-Barbero (1987) is a crucial constituent of everyday life (Silverstone, 2002) and can be understood as a place between culture, communication and politics which puts logics of production and consumption, industrial formats and cultural matrixes in a dialectical relationship to each other (Lopes, 2014). The contemporary city can be approached then as a place of mediation, as a complex system where meanings constantly circulate, through multiple technologies in diverse institutional and social contexts, constituting and being constituted by culture(s) in everyday life. For Silverstone (2002), mediation is both social and technological as it depends increasingly on the media presence in everyday life and the crucial role media and communication technologies play in our everyday lives. Media facilitates and structures spaces for communication, interaction and action. We can understand media as a materiality (a support, a basis), an ambiance (an environment, a situation) and a frame (each media has its scope and limitations, which allows and constrains certain forms and kinds of discourses). Media is a technical apparatus, but not only this: media and mediation are central to the discourses, the contents and the meanings that circulate through society.

Urban surfaces can be considered as some of the most pervasive media in everyday life. Cities are spaces for subjectivation and identification processes as images, texts and interactions on urban landscape offer standards and values of social institutions. These processes are not, however, predetermined or fixed, they are riddled with tensions and negotiations over cultures, values, norms and rights. People are enmeshed in discursive power relations 'in a constant tension between connected operations: subjection and subjectivity, domination and passivity; subjugation and autonomy, action and resistance' (Marques, 2014). Besides this, the everyday practices of interaction are complex – and not easily captured by binaries. Hence, there are many ways through which city dwellers consume, act and react towards urban discourses in everyday life. We construct our identities and subjectivities in relation to others; and this is a reflexive communication phenomenon (França, 2006). Urban surfaces interfere in the way we see ourselves, in the way we live and experience the city, which carries marks, traces and signs of other people's lived and shared urban experience.

I understand urban surfaces as the exterior part of a city, in a broad sense. The surface is what is visible, sensible, in an aesthetic way: what can be caught by the visual and tactile senses in our everyday experience in the city. It has to do with appearance and emergence, as it is the external layer of the city: walls, signs, facades, urban furniture, roads, bridges, and buildings that can be covered by paint, steel, glass, tiles, wood, brick, paper, etc. Urban surfaces are designed and built according to purpose and function: they cover, hide, and protect the inside,

but they also show it (like, f.e., a shop window). The materiality of the surfaces (such as texture, colour, size, shape, position, decay, etc.) can carry meanings, provoke feelings and reveal relations that are not always obvious. Any surface is a potential canvas and, in global cities, they are constantly used by urban dwellers as a place for communication, expression, and visibility. Therefore, surfaces separate and also connect. As exposed and vulnerable as a skin[2], urban surfaces are not static, they change as the cities and societies are transformed.

Being in a global city means being immersed in an intense variety of urban discourses. At the iconic Piccadilly Circus in central London, a bunch of well-lit logos and screens compose and configure a touristic place which has its branded image sold in a variety of products. This is only one of the multiple London representations offered to dwellers and visitors. In the central and suburban areas, small businesses' signs, with diverse appeals to the potential citizen-customer, also occupy the urban environment with words, images, colours, and textures. Facades, shop windows and construction hoardings are media for corporate communication, as well as a site for graphic, typographic and iconographic interventions by commissioned or uninvited artists and activists. Despite the prohibition and regulation of unofficial discourses, the global city is the place for heterogeneity, where individuals and groups from social different strata are, at the same time, linked and separated. There is a constant dialogue about the physical and symbolic occupation of houses, avenues, squares, marquees, and corners. Cities are polyphonic places (Canevacci, 1993) where multiple voices can be heard in the chaotic concert of large and small players.

Urban communication, as all other forms of mediated communication, tends to be asymmetrical. The most evident discursive constructions allowed on the streets are the speeches of the market and the state. These are the actors who can afford (or are responsible for) the visual occupation of public spaces. Urban furniture and signage are inscribed in this network of official discourses, in the sense that they have, as their main function, to order the movements of people, groups and vehicles in cities. Nevertheless, people do subvert the uses and functions of the objects in everyday life, as discussed by de Certeau. Those practices are marks of the weak, whose clever activities respond and attack the places of power in the very fixed enemy territory. De Certeau uses the term *strategies* to name the activities of the strong and *tactics* to those of the weak in order to stress the difference of power –and of type of action– between them. A strategy is linked to the dominant institutions, it is the given structure; tactics are the practices (of individuals or groups) in everyday life that depend on opportunities as the weak has to act with creativity and astuteness in the domain of the strong, in a

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[2] This illustrative metaphor does not mean I agree with the hygienist approach that sees the city as an organism that needs to be cured.

tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would you place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it. (De Certeau, 1984: 31)

An important characteristic of urban visual phenomena, both legal and illegal, is that they speak about a certain time and a certain place. These interferences are usually ephemeral, but some of them might be quite meaningful. Such urban interventions highlight contemporary tensions and struggles, they can tell us about events that provoke people to take part in a dialogue in and about their city. As interactional practices, they are part of the public debate that reverberate current issues at stake in society. Therefore, symbolic practices of writing over the city surfaces can work as visual and synthetic chronicles of a place. The walls speak about problems and conflicts, make claims, and express desires in the urban centres. The reception of the official discourses on the streets is not passive. When answering to the discourse, the subject makes herself present, denying the idea of perfect order and organisation in the city. Urban dialogues are, as in most interactions, marked by relations of power, but at the same time they always carry the possibility of agency and resistance. Many urban writings try to overturn, reverse or even ridicule the speech of the powerful, in a kind of revisited culture jamming.

Some interventions may show a desire of transformation in the direction of a more egalitarian, more tolerant and less exploitative society. Others may point to a prejudiced and aggressive view towards marginalised groups, for example. Although many of the urban interferences such as graffiti, street art, jamming etc. may offer an antagonist response to hegemonic discourses, not all of them should be considered progressive just because of its illegality, sense of humour or creativity. Some practices of jamming advertising and propaganda also reinforce prejudices and conservative points of view (Cammaerts, 2007; Corrêa and Salgado, 2016). Besides this, advertising has historically incorporated the aesthetics of cultural jamming, thereby unjamming the jam.

3   RANCIÈRE's DISSENSUS AND CONSENSUS

Rancière (1995, 2009, 2015) foregrounded the concept of dissensus in order to understand situations whereby the order is disrupted by someone who was not supposed to be part of a discussion in the commons. The author does not consider a difference of opinion as dissensus, nor a dispute that occurs inside the established political system. Dissensus happens when

people who did not have a voice before find a way of being heard as political subjects. A scene of dissensus collapses the sensible order, *i.e.* it disrupts the way things are usually perceived.

Dissensus occurs in conjunction with a process of disidentification, which means that being attached to a single identity is something that would prevent someone from being somewhere else and someone else. In *Nights of Labour*, Rancière (1988) shows that poor people could disrupt the order by devoting themselves to activities not related to their primary identity. So, workers would also be poets, would appreciate art and would not be confined and restricted to what they were supposed to do: work, rest, work again, having no time for fruition, creation or politics.

The discussion Rancière (2015: 76) proposes is related to the distribution, and thus also to the limits of the separation of political and private life:

> *the issue is to know precisely where to draw the line separating one life from the other. Politics concerns that border, an activity which continually places it in question.*

As such, whoever draws the line between the political and the private, has the power to define what can be publicly discussed or not, what has less or more importance in the life of a community, a city, a country:

> *If there is a positive content to this term (dissensus), it consists in the rejection of every difference that distinguishes between people who 'live' in different spheres of existence, the dismissal of categories of those who are or are not qualified for political life. (Rancière, 2015: 77).*

The author proposes a particular definition of *police* and *politics* as opposing concepts. He understands the police as the hierarchical distribution of the sensible in which subjects have specific and determined places. In this sense, formal politics (constituted of parties, state, government as well as formal opposition, unions, etc.) are part of what he would name the police order, where everything and every person have their determined place. There is no lack or surplus in the police order, everything fits, as the police order happens through divisions and partitions of *who* can speak and *what* can be said.

Rancière's definition of politics, on the contrary, considers its disruptive character, its capacity to bring to the public scene those who do not count and have no voice. He argues that any subject can be discussed by any person, that everyone can take part in the poetic, creative and intellectual work. So, art and politics can be emancipating for they can create – or at least point to – a new world, a new way of existence and sharing the common:

Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the "natural" order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific "bodies", that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying. [...] politics begins when those who were destined to remain in the domestic and invisible territory of work and reproduction, and prevented from doing "anything else", take the time they 'have not' in order to affirm that they belong to a common world. It begins when they make the invisible visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the "common" of the community. (Rancière, 2015: 147)

In opposition to dissensus, considered by Rancière as the essence of politics, consensus is a process that shrinks the political space, reducing politics to the police. Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees in every issue, but that there is an agreement about the way the sensible is distributed, *i.e.,* about who has and who does no have the right to speak and to be recognised as a voice that counts.

It is argued here that *consensus* and *dissensus* can constitute key concepts to read, interpret and analyse urban contentious interactions. Written and performative interferences are communicative practices that may show scenes of dissensus, marking a new distribution of the sensible. In this case, the autonomous subject, who creates and is created in the gaps, invents a scene that has contingent, situational, aesthetic and political aspects. Furthermore, illegal and even aggressive practices of urban interference are subject to appropriation, normalisation and invisibility, approaching what Rancière defines as consensus. Looking at the multiple and ongoing dialogues which take place in the city, one can observe that dissensus and consensus are continuously performed, sometimes in a situation where both types of relation are present, and the boundaries between them can become blurred and are continuously changing. These reflections lead to the rmain research question: considering that, in contemporary global cities, dissensus tends to become consensus through commodification and appropriation, what are the impacts and results of the urban interventions in a larger – and political – sense?

4 METHODOLOGY

Whereas, the plan was initially to do comparative research across different cities in the UK and Brazil, the experience of reading about London and walking around the city made it clear to me that London as an urban context would be rich and diverse enough for capturing and analysing urban writings. The spatial limits for the research were then drawn alongside transport zones, privileging zones 1 and 2 of Central, North, South, East and West London.

London's identity is associated with its historical, economic, political and military power; strongly connected to a particular symbolic power (Georgiou, 2013: 54), which makes it an iconic global city. It is a culturally rich and diverse place, very suitable to ground a research project about visual communication. In her book *World City*, Massey (2007) stresses that London holds a hegemonic position at the heart of the establishment of neoliberalism. Quite often, decisions and actions taken in London have material consequences in other parts of the world. The author also describes London as a radical and progressive place. The city has been a focus of migration, which makes the metropolis a 'home to an astonishing multiplicity of ethnicities and culture' (Massey, 2007: 9). The capital of the UK is one of the richest cities in the world but at the same time it has acute and growing inequalities. As in many other global cities, London points to the paradoxes of living (in) the global city, which for some privileged can be 'enormously pleasurable' but, for others, 'a site of serious deprivation and despair' (Massey, 2007: 11).

The research empirical material was not predetermined, but defined inductively and during the research conduct. The chosen methodology was an ethnographic exploration of the streets of London, during which attention and openness to the visual dialogues taking place at street level was central. My research work often deals with the ordinary, the banal, the subtle, the *object trouvé*, and is focused on gathering discarded and apparently unimportant things. It comes from an effort of paying attention to the usually invisible in the everyday routine in big cities. As Georgiou (2016: 8) puts it, '[c]ity dwellers immersed in the routines of city life are often inattentive and indifferent to the range of urban sounds, languages, and media surrounding them'.

In the urban spaces I set to explore, my search for discursive interventions was inspired by the idea of *flânerie* in Benjamin (1997, 2004) who was, in his turn, inspired by Baudelaire's (2007) *flâneur*, a dandy wanderer aesthetically affected by the cosmopolitan experience. Georgiou (2013: 18) stresses that *flânerie* was not a practice of aesthetic explorations for Benjamin: he sought to understand the city 'as a site of struggle, as an unequal place', and also as a 'point of meetings of difference'. My method consisted firstly in experiencing the city through long walks, without previous planning[3], but with attentiveness to the environment and, especially, to the visual traces of struggles and antagonist interactions.

Through this practice I learned to chose, beforehand, regions and streets where interventions could potentially be found: the more deprived and less surveilled ones, less central and therefore more likely to receive interventions. In the first explorations, I could also notice, for

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[3] The drifts were spontaneous but not completely at random, as I usually carried a printed map of London and a mobile with internet access.

example, that commercial areas, usually busier than residential ones, were more affected by inscriptions, so I privileged those streets. Some of the choices were previously made, other were made freely during the walks. In this sense, my method was also inspired by the Situationist practice of the *dérive* (drifting), as proposed by Guy Debord (1956): '[t]he spatial field of a *dérive* may be precisely delimited or vague, depending on whether the goal is to study a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself'. Thus, the drifts methodology instilled an awareness of the urban landscape and of its possible – although unpredictable – findings. The research methodology was therefore intertwined with the conceptual and theoretical framework, as the attention to the tactics of the weak over the strategies of the powerful (De Certeau, 1984), as well as to scenes of dissensus and consensus (Rancière, 2009; 2015) became concrete within the practice of wandering while looking after the struggles in London.

Some methodological challenges had to be faced during the making of the research. I had to adapt the initial schedule because, being used to researching in a warm country, I did not consider that the weather conditions would strongly affect data collection in the streets of London during the winter. In order to obtain an appropriate number and quality of photographic data, I extended the period of collection to four months: from September 2015 to June 2016. Some other environmental conditions, such as access, security, infrastructure, surveillance etc., also influenced the data collection.

During the period of analysis, approximately 2,300 images of urban interventions in London were produced. From the collected imagery universe, I made a first selection according to technical criteria of quality, intelligibility and appropriateness to the research question. The materiality of the recorded interventions (such as texture, size, material, contrast, colour, etc.) was also considered, as they could reveal the tools used to write, paint, daub, spray, stick, draw. These visual aspects of the writings were important for the impact, the visibility, the legibility and the discursive argumentation. This observation was significant to the analysis as these elements are also indexes of the intervention practices; suggesting who (and how) did them. The selected images, about 400, were printed and cut. In order to obtain an overview of the empirical evidence, I spread this material on a large desk and, for three weeks, the construction of possible groups for analysis was tested in this stage of redesigning and reinvention of the *corpus*. Through these procedures, it was possible to detect regularities, peculiarities and differences between the recorded interventions.

A similar and inspiring methodological approach is **"**iconology of intervals", a method of image analysis which art historian Warburg created (Warburg, 2009). His methodology consisted in organising large panels according to common elements, similarities and various connections between many images. These groupings were mobile and changeable. For Warburg, the analysis was in the space between one image and another. The iconology of

intervals is not an end in itself, it helps identifying content and setting a historical problem by connecting images and collective memory[4]. Thus, the image analysis should consider both the text and the context.

According to Discourse Analysis (DA) approach, which was developed mostly in France, the verbal or visual discourse should not be observed independently, or detached from the historical moment, the power structures and the lines of force in society (Charaudeau, 1996). This conception indicates a glance at the textual object, both in its internal (linguistic and image-based) and external (situational and social) aspects. Every discourse brings the underlying ideological, historical and political construction that is current in its time. This context, in its turn, is constructed and understood in the clash of the speeches and discourses. Fairclough (1992), one of the most important authors of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the Anglo-Saxon strand, understands that social actors, through discursive practices, can reproduce and also transform structures of domination, challenging and restructuring the domination and ideological frames, resisting and reconfiguring them. Considering that discursive practices shape society and are shaped by it, CDA claims that theorising language is also a way of intervening in it and in the social structure.

Even acknowledging the differences between DA and CDA approaches, I understand that they also have important points of convergence: the object of study of any discourse analysis is never only the text/image, because the discourse exists within the relations of power, social institutions, identities, ideologies, etc. Therefore, as a premise, I consider that urban discourses are intrinsically related to conflicts in a certain time and place, showing which issues are worrying, affecting and engaging urban dwellers in public discussions. Reading the claims in the streets, it is possible to discover which are the main contentious topics. The investigation sought to explore the tangling of texts and contexts, going beyond the inscription itself. In order to read them, it was necessary to draw attention to the social, political, economic and cultural contexts.

My first approach to the material was to organise the images by region, looking at the issues that emerged from the evidences. The following way of reading the material was grouping them by themes, and this was the most productive procedure for building the clusters for analysis. The questions for the analysis related to the content of the inscription were: 1) what is this person or group claiming?, 2) does the intervention point to a struggle, and 3) what can writing practices reveal about the tensions and struggles in London? Among the most

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[4] See more about Warburg's BilderAtlas Mnemosyne at https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/collections/warburg-institute-archive/online-bilderatlas-mnemosyne [Accessed 30 May 2017] and at The Warburg Institut (School of Advanced Study, University of London), Woburn Square, Bloomsbury, London.

important struggles in urban interventions in London (f.e. Brexit, politics, austerity, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.), I could notice that housing, gentrification and migration were very emotive topics in the urban discursive interventions. This was especially the case in East and South London. So, I decided to privilege these issues and I chose four case studies relating to them to discuss in this paper.

5   FOUR LONDON-BASED CASES

Four distinct, but also somewhat inter-related, London-based case studies were analysed. In each of these cases, dissenting discourses challenged previously existing consensual discourses and spaces in London, provoking different reactions and results. Official and counter-hegemonic discourses interacted in a contentious or more harmonic context. Three of the interventions were found in areas in East London where processes of gentrification are very noticeable (Shoreditch and Hackney Wick). The fourth intervention was situated in Knightsbridge, in the affluent Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. They have in common the disruption – or the attempt to disrupt – in a given urban landscape. Each one of the four cases have a specificity, but also present features in common, which was a criterion for choosing them for analysis.

5.1   Dissensus and Insistence in Hackney Wick

The first case is situated in the northeastern region of London, an area close to Hackney Wick overground station and the River Lee Navigation Canal. Since 2012, this area has been rebuilt and the main constructions were a huge shopping centre called Westfield Stratford City and the Olympic Park, built to host the 2012 London Olympics. The region of the new buildings has a strange and arid atmosphere. Nevertheless, the area is becoming attractive to newcomers because of the new infrastructure and also the lower house prices, as it used to be (and still is) a poor region of London. Along the canal, in a more alternative spot, it is possible to come across cafés, galleries, art centres, breweries, bars and a bohemian scene that points to a process of cultural effervescence and gentrification of the region. Zukin (2010: 8) explains that these changes are called gentrification

> *because of the movement of rich, well-educated folks, the gentry, into lower-class neighborhoods, and the higher property values that follow them, transforming a declining district into an expensive neighborhood with historic or hipster charm.*

During the period of data collection, a building was being constructed in the area and dark green hoardings were protecting the construction site. These temporary protective structures were used to promote a corporate visual identity and visibility, displaying the logo,

information about the project, the company name etc. (cf. Figure 1). However, these canvases were not left as they were before; they also became a canvas for dissensus: red, white, yellow paint was sprayed over the logo and information, and sentences were written over the hoardings. I have been to the place in different times to record these written interactions, which revealed a repetitive and alternate conversation between the official branded discourse and the social actors who practice dissensus.

Figure 1: Interventions over constructions hoardings in Hackney Wick. **Source**: Photographs made by the author

The first interventions in Hackney Wick were registered in October 2015. In February 2016, there were no visible unofficial writings anymore, only signs of new paint which looked like patches in a darker tone covering some parts of the hoardings. In July 2016, the surfaces were all overwritten again, showing that the symbolic struggles are ongoing processes, based on insistence, resistance and repetition: the hoardings are painted, then interfered with graffiti,

the company covers it with ink, and it happens again and again. The cycle of branding, interference, erasure, rebranding shows that none of the sides gave up the fight for this physical and symbolic space. They know the panel will be painted and erased again, and this is part of the dynamics of the place[5].

I understand *insistence* as the repeated denial to accept something, especially when it comes from a more powerful actor, such as a corporation or an institution. The strong has the material resources to produce a message once and then to reproduce and repeat it over and over – this is a common strategy in marketing, advertising, and propaganda. In a different way, the insistent individual is the one who does not seem to care how many times she practices an act – not by reproduction, but by coming back and acting again, in spite of the intervention's ephemerality. In this case, the repetition is a tactic of the weak. It might not be a clear political action, but insistence can be read as one of the features of resistance. The repetition, in this case, is the aspect that constitutes a scene of dissensus as the struggle for physical and symbolic space is a constant process, without a solution or a winner. The problem of disruption is not solved with the effacement as the written interferences always come back[6], like an ironic and endless game.

5.2   The fusion in Shoreditch

Another example of using construction hoardings as a canvas for dissensus could be found in Shoreditch, a borough in a much more advanced state of gentrification and commodification than Hackney Wick. Shoreditch is also located in East London, in between the boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets. In about one decade, the borough transformed from a place with a strong Asian migrant presence, mostly Bangladeshi, into a trendy bohemian area with bars, cafés, restaurants, vintage and designer shops, most of them usually managed and owned by young white middle-class newcomers, called by some, in a sometimes derogative, sometimes positive way, "hipsters".

In recent years, the area has seen the construction of numerous new high-rise buildings marketed at wealthy newcomers. *The Fusion* is one of them. On the construction hoardings, the visual communication of *The Fusion* enacts an appropriation of the graffiti aesthetics using them as a way of illustrating and approaching the building to its surroundings. The colourful graffiti composes a pattern that fades into black in a gradient effect that work as a background

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[5] In Brazil, a sentence is frequently graffitied on the walls and shows this curious and dissensual conversation: "I graffiti, you paint, let's see who has more ink". The original in Portuguese: "*Eu pixo, você pinta, vamos ver quem tem mais tinta*".

[6] See Mobstr, an East London street artist who exchanges provoking messages with the "eraser" in a creative and insistent dialogue: http://www.mobstr.org/

to display the logo and the sales phone number. The typography emulates hand-painted numbers, so that the corporate communication would not appear too different from the "urban" character of the neigbourhood.

In this case, tagging and graffiti are not *against* the new building, but are used as a visual communication and marketing strategy which attempts to fuse the "shabby-chic" character of the area and the "luxurious" features of the new flats. It is noticeable that, on the building's website, the aesthetics of tagging is not present. Its iconographic and typographic design brings a clean and sophisticated atmosphere. The promotional material published online[7] describes it as a project that

> *comprises of 26 luxurious apartments and offers an exclusive and highly refined luxury lifestyle, located amid some of London's most fashionable streets alive with nightlife, gastro eateries, bars, markets, festivals and galleries.*

The document, furthermore, points to the advantages of living in the area, selling it by using words and expressions that suggest the ideas of diversity (cf. 'eclectic', 'suited to every individual's taste', 'mind-boggling variety', or 'an open book to tourists'); of contemporariness and modernity (cf. 'fresh', 'trendiest', 'culture that inspires trends', or 'fashion'); of liveliness (cf. 'exciting, 'urban'). There are also two dissonant but revealing adjectives to describe the area: 'ingenuity' and 'unique', which can also recall an idea or feeling of authenticity.

The advert also praises Brick Lane, a street famous for its diversity, street art and graffiti. The advantages are linked to the consumption of customised clothing, designer pieces at low price, rare and collectable vinyl, affordable vintage, etc. Food is also an attraction of the street, which has 'market food stalls' as well as 'chain restaurants and smaller run cafés bringing together larger and local communities with a variety of tastes'. We could read this phenomenon as an example of consensus in the city, as Rancière (2015: 79) points out:

> *Consensus consists in the attempt of dismiss politics by expelling surplus subjects and replacing them with real partners, social and identity groups and so on. The result is that conflicts are turned into problems to be resolved by learned expertise and the negotiated adjustment of interests*

The marketing discourse repeatedly tries to move away from the massification idea and incorporates languages of marginalised groups, which provides the illusion of carrying some form of spontaneous originality. Companies know that their audiences are becoming

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[7] Available at: http://www.galliardhomes.com/The-Fusion. [Accessed 20 Mar. 2017]

increasingly media savvy and therefore resistant to the consumption and marketing discourses which dominate advertising in mainstream *media*. Thus, there is a constant search for whatever may be seen as authentic and original (*coolhunting[8]*). One way of achieving this is by intersecting corporate communication with urban expressions. The aesthetics of the diverse street has been widely used to add authenticity, youth, informality to products and services. Many corporations hire and sponsor street artists to add value to their brands. As a result of this, the boundaries that separate the illegal and transgressive practices from the illustrative, decorative and paid street art are becoming blurred, especially in a place like Shoreditch where ethnic diversity and even the related tensions this creates make the place more attractive to tourists and white middle-class consumers in general.

This phenomenon influences the experience people have when visiting cities. Today, tourists are offered street art tours not only in London, but in many other global cities (such as Lisbon, Berlin, Melbourne, São Paulo, New York). Instead of the traditional sightseeing of historical monuments, the attractions during the street art tours are the marginal, the transgressive and creative expressions of graffiti and the tagging on the canvas of urban tapestry, usually located in neighbourhoods where immigrants, poor and non-white people live – or used to live. As Hall (1992: 23) reminds us:

> *there is nothing that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic, as we say in England, 'a bit of the other' (which in the United Kingdom has a sexual as well as an ethnic connotation).*

Likewise, Banet-Weiser (2012: 104) points to the racial aspect of the phenomenon when she states that:

> *[s]treet art, mobilized by the early legitimation of hip-hop as popular music, attractive to middle-class, white, suburban audiences as well as the working class and people of color, emerges in the 21st century as a 'white hot commodity'*

The aesthetics of graffiti, tagging and street art bring to the place a valuable atmosphere of *authenticity*. This aligns with Zukin (2010: 4) who argues that '[i]n the gentrified and hipster neighborhoods [...], authenticity is a consciously chosen lifestyle and a performance, and a means of displacement as well'.

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[8] Coolhunting, also called trendspotting, refers to the professional activities of searching, observing and making predictions about new fads and trends, usually among young people living in global cities. The aim of coolhunting is to feed the market with useful information for the launching and branding of products, services, etc.

Figure 2: The Fusion construction site in Shoreditch **Source:** Photographs made by the author

5.3   Protests and Cereal in Brick Lane

In global cities worldwide, as well as in smaller historical towns, issues and struggles about housing and gentrification are present today. This contemporary phenomenon leads to tensions and conflicts regarding the commons and the complex use of public and private spaces.

According to Rancière (2015), dissensus is precisely a disagreement about ~~where~~ the boundaries between what is public and what is private ~~need to be drawn~~. The issues about gentrification, as in many other urban problems, relate to the relationship and disjunctures between public and private life: the rise of rents affects where and how people live in the city. This can be seen as a private and individual problem, which would need to be solved by, for example, trying to raise the household income or moving to a less expensive area in the city or to another city altogether. However, when individuals and groups get organised to discuss and protest about the issue of gentrification and rising costs, it becomes a public problem and concern. The struggles against gentrification and real estate speculation are inscribed in this effort to make visible this contemporary phenomenon of change and displacement in some neighbourhoods in London.

In September 2015, protesters attacked a hipster café in Brick Lane, East London. As already pointed out above, both the area (Shoreditch) and the street (Brick Lane) are quite famous for their cultural diversity and consequent "authenticity". The population of Shoreditch is still very diverse, but the rents are increasingly at a rapid pace, making it more and more difficult for the former and remaining locals to stay and live there. Owned by two white, good-looking, tattooed, and bearded twin brothers from Belfast, The Cereal Killer Café has provoked controversy since its opening in December 2014, as the high prices (around £4 for a bowl of cereal) were considered outrageous, especially because it is located in Tower Hamlets, one of the poorest boroughs in London. Activists (local or not) and even the press have pointed to the discrepancy between the two facts, arguing that local residents could not afford to eat at the cafe[9]. In this context it was not entirely surprising that the trendy Cereal Killer Cafe was chosen as the target for a public protest, which was organised via a Facebook-page called "Fuck Parade".

Besides the Facebook page, the group used also stickers on lampposts to mobilise people into action. On the evening of the protest, the anti-gentrification activists were wearing pigs head masks and torches that scared some customers who were inside the cafe. The protesters threw red paint and daubed the word "scum" over the windows, as they considered the shop a symbol for the neighourbood's gentrification. A few minutes after it started, the event was on Twitter and other social media, and it was also reported on the websites of all major newspapers some hours later.

The day after, a journalist asked a customer what he thought about the attack to the cafe. He had not heard about it neither noticed anything different in the facade, as he thought the red paint on the windows were part of the cafe's decoration. The reason for this indifference or invisibility might have been the graphic style of the logo and illustrations, which were not very "clean". In an area known for the graffiti, street art and interventions, that could be just one of them, part of the cafe's visual identity, which already had references of informality, such as loose baselines, retro typography, bright primary colours, etc.

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[9]   http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2869969/Excruciating-encounter-hipster-twin-Cereal-Killer-cafe-challenged-selling-bowl-cornflakes-3-20-one-London-s-poorest-areas.html#ixzz4oap98C7s [Last accessed 01 Aug. 2017]

Figure 3: Protests against the Cereal Killer Café in Brick Lane, September 2015 Source: Sticker for the protest (author's photograph), red paint in windows (The Telegraph website), tourism (The Guardian website) and windows with promotional splash-shaped stickers (author's photograph). Chronological order.

The protests did not seem to have disturbed the business too much, on the contrary. A photo published in *The Guardian* even suggests that the Cereal Killer Cafe facade became a tourist spot as a result of the protests[10]. The place seems to have become more interesting and attractive as it was the stage – and a reason – for performative struggles. Ironically, the episode gave the café a touch of authenticity and belonging to a new configuration of the neighbourhood. Although violence, noise and protests are not desired characteristics for a business, the event seems to have added more layers of value to the commodified region. Months later, splash-shaped stickers could be seen at the café windows, advertising its products and facilities. Again, the aesthetics of protest was appropriated and commodified.

5.4   Layers of meanings and media in Knightsbridge

In the night of 23-24 January 2016, Banksy made one of his artworks in the rich area of Knightsbridge, London. He used a wooden construction hoarding located opposite the French Embassy to critique France's treatment of refugees in Calais by referring to Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, one of France's most popular historical novels which can also be read as a humanitarian manifesto. In the famous preface to the book, Hugo (1909: 3) writes: 'so long as

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[10] Available at https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/28/cereal-killer-protest-police-investigate-threats-cafe-london [Last accessed 1 August 2017]

ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless'. Banksy reproduced the worldwide famous drawing of a poor and young Cosette used to market the musical of Les Misérables. This production has been very successful in France, UK and USA for more than three decades and, since its première in 1985, it has been the longest-running musical in the West End in London.

The location of the intervention was highly symbolic, as it criticised the use of tear gas by the French police against refugees and migrants in the "Jungle", a large encampment in Calais. The iconic figure in the mural had tears coming from her eyes and, as in the poster, a torn French flag as a background. Although the upper part of the artwork was similar to the musical visual identity, its lower part showed the sprayed image of a gas cloud coming from a can with the initials CS, another name for tear gas. The mural portrays the fragile Cosette – representing the poor, the weak, the refugees, the migrants – as a victim of the violence perpetrated by the French police forces.

This street art piece adds layers of meaning as it manages to simultaneously evoke a classic French novel, a world famous musical and a repression practice. Like many other urban interventions he did about controversial political issues, Banksy's work is ironic and bitter. The juxtaposition of the contrasting elements (the girl and the gas) portrayed the incoherence between the widespread acclaimed ideals of humanism and the actual practices of inhumane treatment towards those who are excluded.

This mural is mainly an urban work, and can be considered very daring regarding the highly surveilled space it was placed. Nevertheless, the intervention did not end with the mural: in the left corner of this urban canvas, a QR code was placed which led to a video on YouTube showing scenes of the police attack at the camp in Calais. In this sense, the whole image can also be seen as a lure to draw the viewer's attention to the video. Banksy's work is an example of the complexity of urban interactions and of convergence (Jenkins, 2006). In this transmedia urban communication, the artist used alternative and complementary media resources to communicate, reinforce and prove what he had to say. These were his tactical tools operating in the domains of the powerful (De Certeau, 1984).

Banksy's work, although covered and removed on the same day that it appeared, was the most reverberated and probably the most successful in its political aim to call attention to the treatment that refugees were receiving in Calais. This intervention was also the most "professional" one: done by an anonymously notorious artist, it was reverberated in the massive media in the UK and abroad. At the same time, it is also the most branded and commodifiable intervention, because just as his other works, the hoarding he painted is worth a fortune on the art market.

Figure 4: Banksy´s intervention in Knightsbridge **Source:** http://banksy.co.uk and http://news.trust.org

6   CONCLUDING DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

My observations across London between September 2015 and June 2016 and the collected images revealed some important themes of contention: gentrification, migration, Brexit, racism, gender issues, use of public resources, preservation of local cultures, surveillance and privacy were issues in evidence in the streets. Regarding the communication between the social actors, there are many forms of interaction taking place at street level. One of them is the communication between the "writers": the official institution, the company and the jammers, for example. But, as interventions happen in open spaces, the dialogue also includes the general public: both the institution and the jammer are talking to publics. They are using the street as a canvas and as a screen for their discussion. Even when the intervention is addressed to a corporation or to an individual, it seems to be aimed at the general public too. Most of the times, artists and activists work *in situ* but seek to receive social and mainstream media publicity, reverberation and a wider visibility to the artwork and also to the cause – when there is one.

Observing the urban surfaces' materiality, I noticed that many interventions were done over hoardings, structures, originally made for protecting construction sites from view and unauthorised access. They are also a separation device, as they prevent the contact between the general public and the workers; and between the public and the private space. Besides its primary function as a shield, they are also used to display warning and information signs as well as marketing and promotional messages. As seen in three of the four cases I presented, dwellers extend and subvert the purposes of construction hoardings, using them as canvases for urban interaction. I believe that the large number of writings found over this kind of surface is not a coincidence, but a sign that hoardings work well for this kind of interactions for particular reasons. If compared to walls, windows, doors and facades, hoardings are cheap and temporary structures that can receive paint and other interferences without much damage to their function. They are not seen as valuable private property; hence, using them as canvasses for contentious communication is a kind of compromising, respectful and obedient

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transgression. Even when writing provocative or counter-hegemonic discourses, the individuals, artists and activists seem to avoid permanently damaging the actual properties. Besides this, the transitory character of the construction hoarding makes it an almost perfect base for also transitory claims to the city.

Interventions against corporate and state communication are not a new phenomenon. Rhetorical strategies such as parody and criticism of advertising, as well as the appropriation of these counter-hegemonic speeches, have been part of the capitalist dynamics and neoliberalism rationale. There is also an especially ambivalent and intertwining relation between transgressive street culture and the phenomenon of commodification of the city's space; and this is linked to class and race. As Banet-Weiser (2012: 106) observes,

> *in creative cities that develop alongside processes of gentrification, 'urban' street art signals*
> *a desirable racial presence to wealthy investors and tourists rather than actual raced,*
> *undesirable bodies.*

In the same vein, Harvey (2012) notes that singularity and transgression are valued as they break the homogeneity of the production of goods. This would be a way of being original, creative and unique. As well as consensus, the dynamics for the functioning of capitalism in contemporary life need dissensus, as it tends to be appropriated, normalised and even sold as a mark of authenticity.

Looking back at the cases observed, I tend to consider the protest against the Killer Cereal Café in Brick Lane, as a scene of dissensus, precisely because a subaltern group forced a visibility through disruptive tactics. Their claims against gentrification were somehow heard, as the action highlighted the issue in the media and made it an object of public debate. In spite of this visibility, however, the actual result of that direct action was uncertain and presumably not very successful: as we could see, the process of the city's commodification can rather easily appropriate and neutralise protests.

In Hackney Wick, the people who sprayed paint over the hoardings also forced a visibility in the urban landscape, in ideally sanitised spaces; controlled by other pictorial and verbal speeches. These inscriptions also referred to the process of gentrification, but in a kind of nonsense way. Although this might be read as simple noise, I consider that their presence and especially their insistence is a way of producing scenes of dissensus and politics through nonsense and humour. The ephemeral speech of unauthorised urban writings are temporary and volatile, but can also embed resistance, marked by audacity and creativity. Maybe because of its enigmatic or nonsense character, opposite to the neoliberal criteria, the consumer culture cannot absorb some of the urban expressions that remain marginal.

The Fusion, in Shoreditch, on the contrary, was a case of hegemonic voice that not only illustrates the aesthetic and political consensus and appropriation of East London; but also dilutes the creative character of graffiti, transforming it into a kind of decorative accessory for a luxurious building.

In Knightsbridge, Banksy's work is an example of vicarious counter-hegemonic voice. The artist is not speaking about his own experience when he addresses issues like wars, refugee camps, etc. His oeuvre highlights the point of view of the weak, of gay people, of children, of migrants, of the poor. Even considering that Banksy's work challenges hegemonic institutions, Banet-Weiser (2012: 94-95) sees the street artist as 'a brand in and on himself' and a neoliberal '*free* enterprising individual'. His audacious act of making his protest art in such a rich and surveilled area adds value to his intervention, in a sort of authenticity that comes with transgression and illegality.

In this paper, I chose to analyse four specific cases of interventions in London, in three different areas. All these cases raised awareness regarding important issues that have been central in discussions about the urban context in the UK and beyond, namely the phenomenon of gentrification and tensions regarding migrants/refugees. Both topics reflect struggles about spaces and are directly connected to ideas of displacement, of migration, of people moving and being moved from one place to another, searching for something, escaping from something, looking for a better life. These two processes – gentrification and migration - have points of crisis, but are not isolated nor inscribed only in a determined time and space, as they are part of the history of cities and of people who live (in) them.

Returning to the research question I proposed, seeking to understand the impacts and results of the urban interventions in a larger – and political – sense, I believe there is no definite or "right" answer, as the concrete impact is not measurable. By studying these and other cases of urban writings, I could see that dissenting voices are undoubtedly weak, not only because of their limited scope of action in urban spaces but also because of the dynamics of appropriation and commodification that constantly try to neutralise them (like in other counter-hegemonic practices such as culture jamming). Looking at London and other global cities, we can observe that, unfortunately, in spite of interventions and protests, gentrification is a fast and strong phenomenon and migrants and refugees are continuously refused entry and/or kept on the fringes of society.

The evidence shows that, at the end, almost nothing escapes the neoliberal rationale as the appropriation undermines and assimilates many kinds of protest and critique in urban interventions. Nevertheless, I do not believe it can completely neutralise them, as these

interventions remember us that the 'distribution of the sensible is never secure' (Tanke, 2011: 72) and that discourse can carry maintenance or transformation (Fairclough, 1992). In this sense, when causing small symbolic disruptions – and persisting in doing so –, individuals and groups make politics. There are important contradictions in all the cases analysed in this paper, at different levels: the multiple combination of words and images in the streets often constitutes ambivalent discourses, showing critique and appropriation. I tend to adopt an extended concept of dissensus, understanding that the practice and the presence of the interventions can configure (in themselves) scenes of dissensus.

I conclude by stressing the importance of approaching urban interventions as creative communication practices that reveal the tensions, the power relations, dissensus as well as consensus taking place in global cities. They comment on current issues, sometimes contributing to the public debate about crucial questions. They interfere not only materially, but in the way we understand and make sense of ourselves and of the physical and symbolic world. The city is a site of lived, interpreted, mediated, shared experiences. These – usually banal – inscriptions are important to the city, to the society and as objects of research. Urban dwellers can become political through urban writings, showing the uneasiness, the discomfort, the lack and the excess of contemporary life. They can reflect and produce the movement, the instability, the insecurity; as society is not static nor it is done. It is always in the making, in the writing.

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