The Power of the Powerless in a Linguistic Landscape of European Cities

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Abstract
Oppressed people, regular citizens who lack the power to rapidly change the mindset of society and politics, are not entirely powerless. Titular powerless, those who disagree with the current social order, with the usage of omnifarious accessible ways to change the fate of citizens, pay attention to ongoing problems and injustices, and bring some colour to grey human life. Street art, sometimes verging on the illegal, has become an excellent example of informal education led by people for people and a form of revolt. The authors undertook an analysis of visual materials in the largest European cities, appreciating the pedagogy of place, the educational tenor of street art, and the forms of action of different resistance groups fighting for the rights of themselves and others.
Results of the research presented in the following paper present different dimensions in which people use street art for their purposes – what those aims are, what they refer to, and what social problems they concern. Streets create the opportunity to pay attention to our own art and business, and develop marketing. On the other hand, it presents confrontation between different social groups, pretence towards political actions, and ongoing events. Others aim to boost one's morale through hermetic images and inside jokes (or sharing the message with a specific social group) or cheer us up by means of motivational quotations. In total, eight different categories of street art stickers were distinguished in labels and posters that appeared in the cities where the research was conducted. The presented topic is very comprehensive, thus creating an opportunity to conduct further research.
Key words: informal education, pedagogy of place, democracy, resistance groups, street art, *flâneur*

Introduction

Strolling through the streets of European cities, modern *flâneur* foremost experiences the pedagogy of space – an infosphere in the form of official messages: advertisements, road signs, traffic lights, and shop windows. Statements are located there since the 'organs of power' want, have to or need to inform citizens, in a proper form, of preferred ways of behaviour in a public space.
The other entities – both institutions and private persons - must fit into the legal frameworks which are controlled by the representatives of power. The space used by the citizens is never fully private and has to correspond with social interest, which is expressed in the form of local legal regulations, such as, for example, a local land development plan, which consists of limitations regarding the appearance and purpose of the property.
Yet, the keen eye of a *flâneur*, vagrant or tourist can notice the richness and diversity of informal messages in the form of graffiti, labels, leaflets, stickers and ordinary handwritten inscriptions on the walls of buildings. Such types of communication overlap with official messages. It is their complement and sometimes a way of showing an entirely new reality in contrast to propaganda and manipulation. Occasionally, such created texts become annotations to official messages and sometimes take the form of palimpsests which obliterate messages of other public space users.

Theoretical frameworks

This paper takes the view that language is a cultural tool and is the key to understanding the sphere of values and behaviour of social groups. Analysis of informal statements in the public space can lead to defining social groups in the role of senders, specifying their properties, intentions and expectations. It can be assumed that informal messages in city areas will be mostly used by those social groups which cannot fully utilise the public space due to different forms of exclusion (economic, ideological; discrimination because of religion, nationality, or age) or those which consciously contest an existing social order and do not want to fit into the dominant political or ideological narrative. Adopting such a perspective provides the theoretical inspiration for research over the informal messages infosphere that can be found in many sociological and anthropological theories.

The expression "the power of the powerless" contained in the title refers to the concept by Václav Havel (1987), which indeed has a specific political context but can be used for any protest group, including those expressing their disagreement with the existing social order through guerrilla activities in the urban infosphere. Havel's concept corresponds to the term of resistance identity by Manuel Castells (2011), who in turn relates this term to modern technology possibilities (Internet and network society). Stirring and manifestation of communities built on resistance to power as collective identities of rebellion should not be limited to the network society (Gil, 2011).

From more recent theoretical concepts, it is worth referring to the burnout society by Byung-Chul Han (2015) and the perspective of the crisis of democracy in the eyes of wary voters by Iwan Krastew (2013). However, in pedagogy, more adequate seems the concept of informal education (Pstross *et al*., 2017), pedagogy of space, emancipatory pedagogy (pedagogy of the oppressed) by Paulo Freire and the critical approach. It seems especially interesting to discover the essence of the message from such groups in the form of informal visual communication, which, in many cases (considering the increasing significance of visual culture), can reach potential consumers more quickly than written text (Rose, 2007).

Method

The biographical method and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis seem most promising for reconstructing world image elements and values of resistance communities in a language landscape of European metropolises. The latter assumes that language can be treated as a symptom of mindset (Worf, 2011; Banks, 2007) and substantively as a symptom of social awareness.

The ethnographic approach requires the researcher to engage in a long-term research process and to have a personal experience of the investigated reality (Bryda, 2024). Phenomena are studied within their context; we do not assume hypotheses on the topic of the studied reality, and for researchers, data serves as a starting point for creating descriptions, categories, and the basis of grounded theory (Angrosino, 2007).

In case of the research on the language landscape of European cities, research materials were collected in a short period (two-three days) in the years 2010-2023 in numerous European cities, such as Paris, London, Madrid, Sevilla, Rome, Magdeburg, Vienna Bratislava, Prague, Vilnius, Riga, Stockholm, Helsinki, Amsterdam, Bari, Barcelona, Hannover, Dresden, Brussels, Ljubljana, Athens, Thessaloniki, Bologna, Lisbon, Nicosia, Bolzano, Verona. The collected research material in the form of photos, those specific communication forms such as labels, stickers, murals, and handwritten inscriptions on the walls of buildings consisted of 1 347 photos.

Material analysis and conclusions

The first regularities could be observed in relation to places of sticker and label display materials. In general, these were paper stickers from a few to several centimetres, diameter: circular, oval, rectangular or square, put on road signs, poles, front walls of public buildings, doors, passageways, gates, boom barriers, barriers, bridges, troughs, street lamps, park benches etc. The common denominator of these objects is that they are located on footpaths and places with the largest numbers of passers-by, predominantly in big cities – metropolises with over 500,000 citizens and/or capitals. The stickers themselves were placed so that they could be in the eyeline of a random passer-by – most often at eye level but also on paving slabs, nearby doorbells, on stair treads. Places with the highest pedestrian traffic in the city are foremost main streets with immediate proximity to historical – shopping arcades and boardwalks, surroundings of the most important relics, pedestrian crossings on the biggest crossroads, museums and arty districts.

The last ones deserve special distinction in this analysis. The space of arty districts such as Užupis in Vilnus or Metelkova in Ljubljana are separate microcosms where art and artistic expression become the basis of ontology as an aim on its own.

It is to be expected that in the area of a regular city, living its own rhythm and everyday problems, stickers and labels can have an entirely different nature. Through its diversified form and a proper artistic expression integrated with the message of a label and a sticker become some kind of invitation to modern art museums and arty districts, yet they have a specific aim, expressed in concrete messages that can be just a type of interstice of everyday life. Such an interstice through which one can perceive the ambitions and potential of the local artistic bohemia.

The infosphere of stickers and labels focuses the attention of bystanders, foremost through its sophisticated form, images and symbols in which the inscribed text, mostly in the form of short statements, sometimes one word and website addresses. Just a few of the messages are addressed to a local viewer (in a national language) – the vast majority are formulated in the English language. Rare are the cases when one can notice stickers in national languages; for example, in Ljubljana, were found stickers in Polish or German language, most often of the supporters of specific soccer teams. Most likely, it is evidence of the presence of supporters during some soccer games in the past and indicates the will to appropriate the space through club symbolics and national language.

As a result of the analysis of the material in the form of photos of the stickers, it was possible to distinguish the following thematic areas:

1. **Free artistic expression** – This motive is worth mentioning as the first and most important one as (skipping over the predominance of the English language in formulated messages) a universal language of art is an especially important message, which has a value in itself. On the one hand, an assemblage of stickers in a small area, in a few cases on old walls (sic!), in contrast to giant posters and clean streets, for a bystander can be some kind of shock or at least cause consternation and impression of a certain disorder, symbolic domination, blatancy and brutal propaganda. On the other hand, such places, arranged differently from anything similar around, show the other sphere of life – unofficial, free, out of the system.

The language of street art performs many functions (Wacławek, 2011) – in this case, it looks like a kind of play connected with building the identity of place, city and artist. Freedom of artistic creation is naturally limited through the necessity of a proper expression consistent with the text.

2. **Fights of neo-tribes** – An example of the clash of different social groups, ideologies, or interests can be seen in the stickers of soccer teams, fascist

organisations, and left-wing anti-fascist organisations. War in the infosphere is not limited only to issuing inconsistent ideas, but it transfers to the available level of the physical world: right-wing stickers are destroyed, stripped, converted and stuck down by the left wing and vice versa. The struggle of the left wing with fascism is most often seen in the informal infosphere of big European cities. In this case, stickers serve as a means to familiarise space in the name of specific social groups.
They are not an expression of individualisation as in the case of artistic expression, but rather the building of a new symbolic community in a public sphere (Maffesoli, 2000). A foreign space of law, policy and great business becomes less foreign. Iconography and the infosphere of neo-tribes change the emotional climate of this space. Thanks to this, the street becomes more domesticated… or captured (depending on the point of view – of the sender or lawmaker/owner of the tagged objects and spaces). Creating such an infosphere can also be viewed as an invitation to participate in a specific commonwealth rather than just as a means of giving a new identity to foreign places (especially when the internet addresses of organisations are displayed on stickers).

3. **Social marketing of urban activists** – The Public city area is a good ground for promoting social values, such as health, environment protection, social activisation. Large organisations have a proper budget for marketing campaigns in the form of banners, posters, recordings and leaflets. Grassroot organisations and small non-governmental organisations, which mainly are grounded on the work of volunteers, have to find another way of promoting undertaken ideas and changing social awareness. Besides being responsible for social marketing, local and national authorities, by promoting specific values, also pursue the policy of local or national power. Grassroots movements are not bound by the necessity to implement a concrete policy and can even (and very often take advantage of the opportunity) work against its priorities, showing disagreement and revolt. Examples of such such statements can be: „*Stop represión ao estudantado*" (Rome 19.03.2014), „Cannabis can replace fossil fuels" (London, 15.02.2017), "*Em comú podem lluitar contra la corrupció*" (Barcelona, 22.08.2016), „No means no" (Bologna, 22.05.2014), „*Vewrantwortung Erde. Global denken- local handeln*" (Ljubjlana 23.09.2021), „We are the 99%" (Bologna, 22.05.2014).
The street becomes the sphere of ideological confrontations, a place for presenting specific ideas of social change or remaking society. Messages of such types often relate to demands of a political nature.

4. **Political manifestations** – The Street infosphere becomes the area of political views manifestation in the form of posters inviting people to rallies and protests. However, there are also exceptions – for example in this year on walls and subway cars in London could be seen a series of posters which were depicting extreme right-wing politicians (Trump, Vance, Netanjahu, Musk, Putin) in frames of a protest against the far right-wing ("*Turd Reich*").
Stickers and labels of a political nature mostly respond to the most traumatic political events. Examples of such messages can be:

- „Andalusia is not Spain" (Sevilla 10.09.2005).
- „Refugees welcome" (Magdeburg, 21.03.2017) – as a reaction to the emigration crisis in Europe.
- „*Gospodi! Pomogi mnie wyžit sriedi smiertioj ljubvi*" (trans. Lord! Help me to find love in the midst of death) – the sticker presents kissing Putin and Salvani, which suggests protests towards right-wing parties for supporting Russian policy (Lisbona, 23.07.2006)

- „*Putin chuilo*" (trans. Putin [is a] dickhead) (Vilnius, 17.06.2022)- as a reaction to Russian invasion on Ukraine.
- „*Trump is a pig*" (Ljubljana 24.05.2017)

Often, a street becomes a space for expressing extremist views but also disagreement for official political actions. One can risk saying that some social groups are dissatisfied with state policy, and in this way they express their protest. An interesting example of such disagreement being the result of historical trauma was a Polish sticker in the centre of Slovakia's capital "*13 grudnia- Śmierć konfidentom*" (trans. 13th December – Death to confidants) (Bratislava 26.11.2016).

5. **Small business** – The most striking to the eye were stickers advertising tattoo studios due to their sophisticated form. After all, they have to be eyecatchers, which immediately affects the aesthetical sense of the viewers – potential clients. Other commonly occurring advertisements in this form usually invite to: bars, restaurants, nightclubs, and specific shops (for example, vegan or with local products). Offers of small businesses are usually aimed at people, customers, and clients looking for sensations. There can be seen less common, simple in form, stickers of tutors and foreign language teachers or local artists – "Terry Pilchards" music band from Trento (Bolzano 8.09.2017).

6. **Current news** – A relatively small number of stickers were inviting to concerts, themed evenings in bars, protests, political actions, strikes, petition signing or lobbying for specific changes in law, flower markets and even dates for dog owners and lovers (Vienna 25.02.2015). The diversity of this type of stickers is so large that it makes it impossible to further categorise them.

7. **Motivational slogans, phrases, quotations, intellectual provocations** – Examples of such statements:
- „We buy things, we don't need, with money, we don't have, to impress people we don't like" (Vienna 25.02.2015),
- "Stay on the barricades for a better education" (Bologna, 22.05.2014),
- "Believe in yourself and others will" (London, 14.02.2017),
- "*Sei wild, frech und frei*" (trans. Be wild, cheeky and free) (Magdeburg, 21.03.2017)

In this dimension, street art should be treated as a contribution to informal education, stirring into critical thinking and, as a result, to opportunities for emancipatory learning.

8. **Narrow codes** – The vast majority of stickers and labels are unreadable for the uninitiated viewer, since the sender uses narrow codes, accessible only for narrow groups of receivers (Fiske, 1987). An example can be, already mentioned, the sticker with kissing Salvini and Putin and with Russian subtitles (originally written in Cyrillic). The message is even more hermetic as it is located on the territory of a foreign country with a different language tradition and entirely different alphabet. Indeed, the image itself says a lot, but to understand the message behind which is *sui generis* fear, a kind of prayer, some paradox (deadly love/love leading to death), it is necessary to speak the Russian language.

Thus, we can assume that in many cases, even if the image seems to be just a free language game, a play with associations and popular culture motives or a kind of individual artistic expression, we have a brush with addressing a message to a very concrete and appropriately prepared viewer. Such projected viewer should operate the

same code or at least function in a similar universe and share a similar value system. Otherwise, the message will be lost and protest will come down to the mosaic of motives.

Summary

Street art in the form of different types of labels and stickers is an important part of the language landscape of big European cities. It seems that their presence/assemblage can be treated as a kind of freedom, democracy, and independent thought indicator (Lesková & Yochanna, 2024). The presented analysis can serve as an introduction to further, more extensive, and systematic research. Revolt and discord are just one of many dimensions, but they are significant since they pierce every other dimension. This is evidenced by, for example, the public space's way of usage – the attempt to point out the presence and self-expression on the margins of other sender messages, sometimes even creating cacophony and sometimes a palimpsest.

Weakness is not the only attribute of senders using public stickers as a form of communication. Street artists show considerable reserve so as not to say – sow distrust towards democracy and social order. On the other hand, so such, taking the view could be even possible, the state of democracy has to be on an appropriate level.

It seems that equally important is the level of artistic development, presence of artistic bohemia and independent creators' tendency to experiment.

It is worth reflecting on further research on this issue towards imagery analysis and the usage of popular culture motives. Language landscape analysis without consulting imagery will always be incomplete and provoke essential explorations (Gańko, 2018).

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