

'Epi-graffiti': Arenas of Conflict in Rome's Public Realm during the Bullet Years (1968-1982)

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Introduction

Public space is the locus where citizens can receive, perceive, compare and reciprocally influence each other's political views. Words on buildings are a form of mass media where the past is conceived, presented, rethought and repackaged to communicate a range of messages: they can be commercial, commemorative, conflictual. Whether scratched in the stucco, attached to buildings or sprayed onto walls they draw us out of our everyday state of distraction in urban space and transport us to another space and time, to another emotional state.¹ For the society of big business, governments and institutions, lettering on buildings is used to shape and govern behaviours and can play an important role in writing history, manipulating memory and forming identity. The construction of a unified memory, history an identity was fundamental to consent building for the Italian Fascist regime and the post-WWII democratic republic alike. Although the specific narratives of the majority Christian Democrat Party and the Italian Communist Party differed, they shared common goals to stand on middle ground, fight extremism and promote peace and stability through democratic means. Paolo Pezzino has pointed out that this policy effectively negated the lived experience of individuals who had previously fought either against Fascism or for it and did not believe their struggle to be over.² The building facades that frame and define public space are reserved for the dominant discourse of advertising signs, plaques and inscriptions but at the same time offer a surface for dominated voices to be heard via the practice of graffiti that includes tags, stencils, slogans or stick-ups and is lately being appreciated as an art form in its own right.³

Rome's arenas of conflict

Political graffiti has been around for thousands of years and Rome's modern streets and *piazze* have long been arenas of conflict between a dominant majority and a dominated minority: the Roman Republicans against the Papal army in the mid 1850s, the fascist *squadristi* against the Liberal State in the early 1920s, the anti-fascist partisans against the Italian Fascist and Nazi Germans from the early 1940s to the end of WWII, the extremist groups of neo-Fascists and Communists against each other and the democratic state from

¹ Benjamin, Walter (1992) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Fontana Press, 211-44.

² Pezzino, Paolo (2005) 'The Italian resistance between history and memory', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 10:4, 396-412.

³ Nicoarea, Georgiana (2014), 'Interrogating the dynamics of Egyptian graffiti: from neglected marginality to image politics', *Revista Română de Studii Eurasiatice*, 10:1, 173 & Petrucci, Armando (1993) *Public Lettering. Script, Power, and Culture* trans. Linda Lappin, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 118. See, amongst a vast bibliography on this subject, Jeff Ferrell (1996). *Crimes of style urban graffiti and the politics of criminality*. Boston Northeastern University Press.

the late 1960s to the early 1980s to the sport-fuelled rivalries of the Roma v. Lazio soccer teams today (Figures 1 & 2).



Figure 1 – Political graffiti in Pompeii (Source: Wikimedia Commons), Resistance memorial plaques, fascist inscriptions and graffiti showing sport-fuelled political rivalry (Source: author).

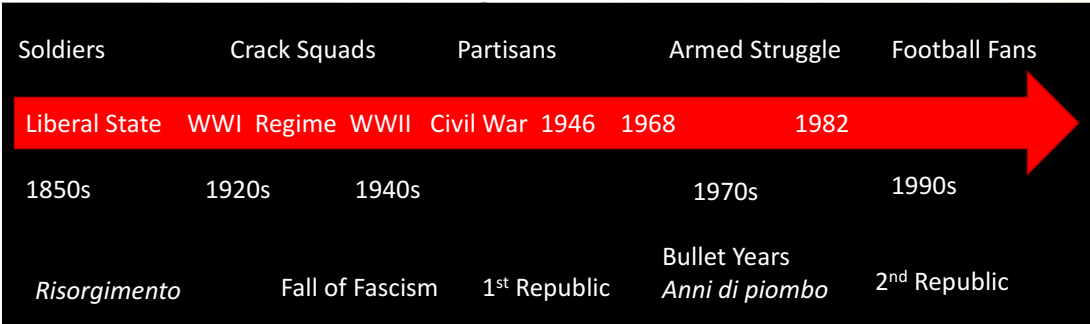


Figure 2 – Timeline (Source: author).

This paper examines how the continuing conflict between fascism and anti-fascism plays out in the public arena of the street through the practice of graffiti by focussing on the ‘Bullet Years’ (or *Anni di Piombo*), a period that saw political extremism come out in the form of armed struggle and terrorism. This period is marked by narratives of historical continuity (or mnemonic pasting) that developed out of the post-war practice of historical discontinuity (or mnemonic decapitation) (Figure 3).⁴ Rome’s political graffiti is considered in relation to what Bakhtin termed ‘addressivity’. As we walk through public space we are an *event* constantly responding to the different worlds we pass through. We read the words sprayed onto the walls and respond to their meaning that comes about both in our individual

⁴ Zerubavel, Eviatar (2003) *Time maps: collective memory and the social shape of the past*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 40-1 & 82-3 (Chapter 4).

psyches and in the shared social experience of walking down the street (Figure 4).⁵ Although not all of us who read words on buildings knows fully (or at all) what they mean, these writings set up a 'horizontal' line of communication between us and those who walked that very street, sometimes only the night before armed with a spray can.⁶

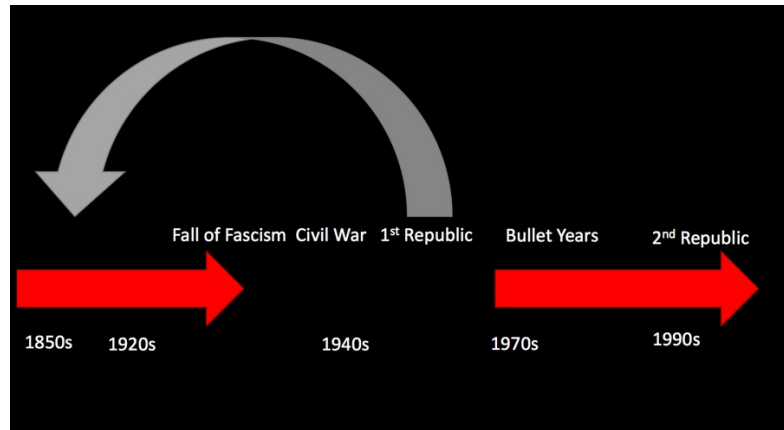


Figure 3 – Historical discontinuities in the post-war era (Source: author)



Figure 4 – Graffiti in the Streets of Rome (Source: author)

Fascist and post-Fascist Hegemonic narratives

Under Fascism, a hegemonic narrative based on militarism, faith, the myth of ancient Rome and the cult of Mussolini was projected into the street through large lettering on building

⁵ Holquist, Michael (2002). *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his World*. London, Routledge, 48-9.

⁶ The concept of 'horizontal communication' is discussed by Petrucci in relation to the student revolutions in Paris of 1968.

facades. Fascist nationhood was bound up with images of the ancient Roman past and a selection of individuals and events of the *Risorgimento* (Figure 5). This narrative disallowed personal views and experiences. Post WWII, this ‘glitch’ in history was effectively erased and the Resistance was put forth as a foundation for the First Republic. Like the Fascist regime who re-set the calendar to zero in 1922 to mark Mussolini ‘seizing’ power so did the de Gaspari government ‘clip away’ the Fascist past in an effort to start the era of the First Republic mnemonically afresh (Figure 3).⁷ Anti-Fascist First Republic nationhood negates the Fascist past and uses the Resistance and its heroes along with its own selections of the *Risorgimento*. In the post-war democratic era of Italy’s first Republic (1946/8-1992/4), the public use of history was used to manipulate memory and identity in a way as contributed to the social and political conflict of the Bullet Years by excluding dissenting voices and effectively disallowing expressions of lived experience.⁸

Plaques on buildings commemorating sites, events and people of the Resistance were one of the many forms of media, along with cinema, newspapers, literature, art and political discourse, used to communicate an all-encompassing public narrative. A poignant example is the plaque commemorating the death of university student Paolo Rossi who was pushed (accidentally or not we will never know) from the steps of the Arts Faculty during a riot that signalled the beginning of the ‘Bullet Years’. It sits close to an image of the Twin Warrior God Castor (or Pollux) whose youthful strength was presented as a model for the university students of the Fascist era (Figure 6).⁹ The dominant left-wing/centralist hegemony of the First Republic systematically denied cultural and political space to extremist groups who did not share their non-violent and democratic values (Figure 7).¹⁰



Figure 5 – Quotes by Mussolini still visible on Fascist buildings in Rome’s EUR.

⁷ Zerubavel, 94.

⁸ Pezzino, 405.

⁹ Marcello, Flavia and Gwynne, Paul (2015) “Speaking from the walls: Militarism, Education and *Romanità* in Rome’s Città Universitaria (1932-35)”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 74:3, 321-40.

¹⁰ Ward, David (1999). ‘Fifty years on: Resistance then, Resistance now’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 4:1, 63.



Figure 6 – Plaque commemorating the death of Paolo Rossi on the steps of the Arts Faculty of Rome University next to an example of Fascist use of the Roman past for political ends (Source: author).



Figure 7 – Memorial plaques and 'tripping' stones. (Source: author).

This pushed Neo-fascist and dissident anti-fascist groups to reconnect to a nostalgic view of struggle and a past they have never actually experienced to shape modern action. They wanted build a bridge back to a past that had been cut away, re-written, denied. ‘Reds’ v. ‘Blacks’ co-opt official and unofficial, collective and personal histories in their argumentative frameworks as expressed in epigraphy, inscriptions and graffiti and pitch them both against each other and against the establishment (Figure 8).

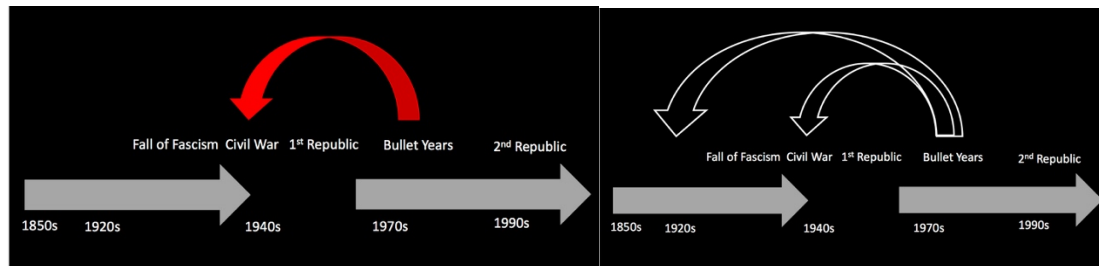


Figure 8 – Diagram showing reconnection between Bullet Years and the Civil War (left) and reconnect of each extremist group reconnecting to their preferred past (right) (Source: author)

Fascist and Post-fascist action

The complex relationship between fascist and anti-fascist groups originates before the Fascist period *per se* and it continued throughout the two decades of Mussolini's regime despite attempts to oppress or erase it. It persisted throughout the era of the First Republic (1948-1992/4)¹¹ during its darkest period – the Bullet Years. Together, anarchists, left-wing groups like *Prima Linea*, *Autonomia operaia* and the Red Brigades and right wing groups like *Ordine Nuovo*, *Terza Posizione* and *Fronte della Gioventù* together orchestrated 7,866 attacks and participated in 4,290 episodes of violence that left more than 1,000 wounded and 69 dead.¹² Valerio Verbano and Paolo di Nella are just two young men who like the Christian saints, soldiers, Fascist *camerati* and Resistance comrades before them, became martyrs whose violent death is glorified as a noble act in honour of a greater cause. There were times when the blood of a comrade can only be cleansed with the blood of a *camerata* and vice-versa in contemporary re-enactment of the blood that had to be shed in the ancient Roman ritual of gladiator games at funerals.¹³

¹¹ The First Republic ended in the 'reborn' political era of the Second Republic (1992/4-2013) when the triadic political hegemony of Christian Democrat, Socialist and Communist Parties broke down and/or reinvented itself. In the early 90s these 'traditional' parties formed and re-formed into new, arguably more extreme *Rifondazione Comunista* and *Alleanza Nazionale* and at the same time supposedly centralised poles as represented by new political formations that represented the rich industrial north: namely Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* party and Umberto Bossi's *Lega Lombarda*. The *Partito Democratico di Sinistra* was a softer more contemporary version of the Communist Party and the *Democrazia Cristiana* lost its more polarised members to other parties becoming ever more central.

¹² <http://www.lastoriasiamonoi.rai.it/puntate/morire-di-politica/587/default.aspx>

¹³ Carlo Bonini, 'Delitto Verbano, si riapre il caso dopo 31 anni due nomi e la pista nera', *La Repubblica*, 22 February 2011

http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2011/02/22/news/omicidio_verbano_si_riapre_il_caso_dopo_31_anni_due_nomi_e_la_pista_nera-12751390/ [Accessed 11 May 2017].

This need to express extreme (and often violent) political ideas in the public arena of the city's public spaces and on its walls through graffiti is as a result of what could be considered one of the pathologies of language: 'official discourse'. Bakhtin terms it an 'autism of the masses' and describes it as totalitarian in that it abhors difference, does not recognise otherness and aims for a single, collective self.¹⁴ The official and overtly anti-fascist discourse at the foundation of Italy's post-war First Republic was, in effect, totalitarian and monologic.¹⁵ Surrounded by a centralising official discourse of post-war Italian identity that effectively resisted communication, members of extreme right and left groups were, arguably left with no other option than to 'go rogue' and reopen dialogues both between each other and with the State to establish the relationship between the social self as defined by their political views and the social self as determined by the official discourses of the dominant Christian Democrat and Communist Parties.

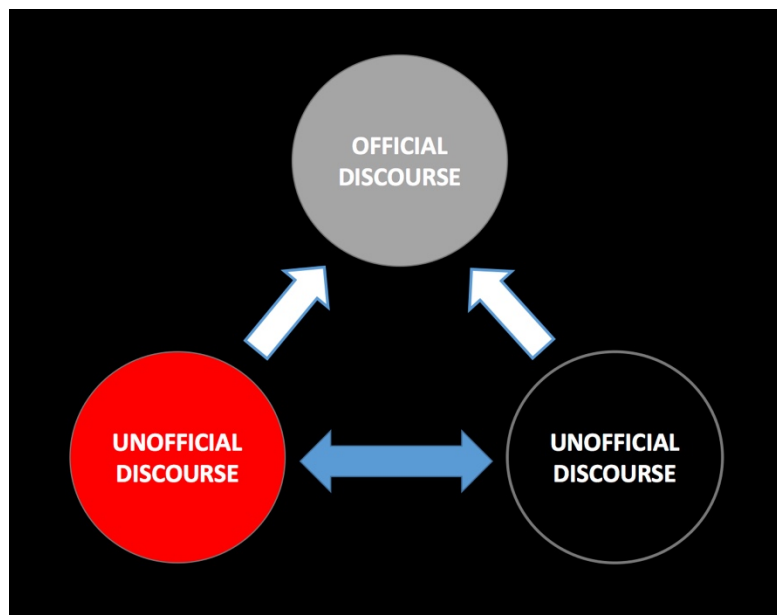


Figure 9 – Channels of discourse (Source: author)

Context of case studies

Sites of partisan actions during the civil war against Germans like Via Rasella and the reprisal killings that followed at the *Fosse Ardeatine* find their latter counterparts in the streets in the north-eastern suburbs of Rome, in particular *Monte Sacro* and its poorer area the *Tufello* and the area known as *Quartiere Africano*. Only a few kilometres away from each other and symbolically divided by the Aniene River these two areas of Rome essentially waged war on each other during 'Bullet Years' killing a total of nine men in seven years.¹⁶ *Monte Sacro* located on the Via Nomentana was built as a garden city in the early 20s by the social housing institute and inhabited for the most part by the left-wing working class.

¹⁴ Holquist, 52.

¹⁵ Holquist, 53.

¹⁶ Bonini.

Quartiere Africano, built in the late 1930s, is a bit closer to the centre and the Via Salaria and gets its name from the many streets named after the cities of Italy's former colonies (Figure 10).



Figure 10 – Map of Rome showing the location of Montesacro and the Quartiere Africano (Source: Google Maps & author).

In the late 70s and early 80s, highly politicised groups of youth in this (and other areas of Rome) went from doodling the Swastika or the Hammer and Sickle in their school books to mixing Molotovs and hiding guns from their parents to take direct, armed action in paramilitary groups in imitation of their civil war counterparts: the violent crack squads loyal to Mussolini's Republic of Salò and those who had sworn allegiance to the patriotic action squads aligned with the newly-reconstituted Communist Party. Young 'blacks' and young 'reds' who fought against each other were re-living and re-creating a history that had been denied them.

Each group expressed (and still expresses) itself with a fairly standard set of fonts and colours, signs and phrases. Right-wing inscriptions often use a thick geometric font and predominantly use blue and black. Left-wing inscriptions use rounder, looser lettering and, unsurprisingly, red paint with hints of black for clarity.¹⁷ The Fascists very often spray the Celtic Cross, as used by French SS used and adopted as a 'logo' by the *Fronte della Gioventù* (the youth front of MSI) or a variation of the *wolfsangel* (or wolf's tooth) rune that was adopted by the SS Panzer Division. More recent extreme right student groups like *Blocco studentesco* use a circle pierced by a lightning bolt to symbolise unity.¹⁸

¹⁷ Petrucci, 121.

¹⁸ <http://www.bloccostudentesco.org/blocco-studentesco/simbolo.html> [Accessed 11 May 2017]

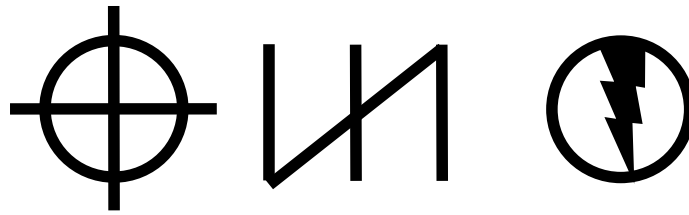


Figure 11 - Neo-fascist symbols: Celtic Cross, Wolf's tooth, Circle and lightning bolt (Source: author).

Extreme left groups will spray a very simplified form of the Communist Party's classic hammer and sickle, a clenched fist such as the one that symbolised *Lotta Continua* and, more rarely, due to the elevation to national hero of the murdered DC politician Aldo Moro, the *Brigate Rosse*'s symbol of the star within the circle the arrow and circle used by *Autonomia operaia*. Because a number of them are based on a circle they are often overwritten with a different colour and in thicker paint to symbolise an overlay of power and importance of one symbol over another.



Figure 12 - Anti-fascist symbols: Hammer and sickle, Circle and Star, Circle and lightning bolt (Source: author).

The phrases are for the most part antagonistic and refer equally to 'Fascisti' and 'Anti-fascisti' and 'Comunisti' as 'merda' (shit), 'verme' (worm) or 'boia' (lowlifes). These ones are most often targeted for transforming, adding, erasing, blotting or overlaying so that, for example the phrase 'FASCISTI MERDA' is easily transformed to 'ANTI- FASCISTI MERDA' or conversely ROMA FASCISTA is easily transformed to ROMA ANTI FASCISTA (and back again: ROMA ~~ANTI~~ FASCISTA). Or the Hammer and Sickle is turned into the Celtic Cross (and back again).

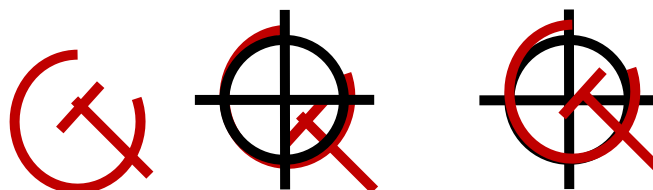


Figure 13 – overlays of Fascist and Communist symbols (Source: author).

Another type of less antagonistic inscription is memorial and most often honours the 'martyrs' of the Bullet years by using the first name and the third person singular for of the verb to live: 'Vive!' to mean that he lives on in the hears and memories of the present. As in 'Valerio Vive!' ('Valerio lives on') or 'Paolo Vive!' (Paolo lives on): two inscriptions that have been a mystery to me for over 20 years on my regular visits to Roman family who live in Monte Sacro and *Quartiere delle Valli*.

Valerio Vive!

'Valerio' is Valerio Verbano, shot in his own bedroom on 22 February 1980. Graffiti in his memory is concentrated around Via Monte Bianco where he lived, in particular Via delle Isole Curzolane which has the perennial inscriptions 'VALERIO IS WITH US' and 'VALERIO AND CARLA LIVE ON' (to honour his mother who died in 2012) and 'ROME IS ANTI-FASCIST VALERIO LIVES ON' accompanied by the symbol of *Autonomia operaia*, the organisation to which he belonged. (Figure 14).



Figure 14 – Map of Rome showing location of streets connected to Valerio Verbano and Paolo di Nella (Source: Google Maps & author).

Newspapers and online news sites keep Valerio's memory alive with rhetoric such as the 'symbol of a generation who fought to change the City and the Nation, a commitment that he paid for with his life in the name of that justice and truth that is still denied [us] today' or 'the emblem of an unending ideological tension'.¹⁹ His memory is also enshrined through more official channels with a plaque near his home, moves to make his family's apartment a

¹⁹ Mecchelli, Sara (2013) 'Valerio Verbano, il corteo raccoglie il testimone di Carla', *Roma Today*, 22 February. <http://montesacro.romatoday.it/valerio-verbano-corteo-33-anni.html> [Accessed 9 May 2017].

memorial site, a sports centre in Via delle Isole Curzolane and a street in his name in the Parco delle Valli. The marble sign reads 'Viale Valerio Verbano. Victim of Political Violence' – some believe it should read 'Victim of Fascist Violence' but again the official voice wins over the unofficial one. In 2013, the sign was torn to the ground and smashed – the battle continues (Figure 15).²⁰



Figure 15 – Graffiti and memorials dedicated to Valerio Verbano in Parco delle Valli around the Tufello part of Montesacro where he lived and died (Source: author).

Paolo vive!

'Paolo' is Paolo di Nella and he was the last man to die during the violent Bullet Years. Shot down in the night while sticking up posters in Piazza Gondar, the heart of the *Quartiere Africano*. The huge black and red inscription 'PAOLO LIVES ON' stretches out along Viale Libia accompanied by the sign of the Celtic Cross surrounded by a shield (Figure 14). Other less structured graffiti nearby echoes the fascist utterance 'Honour to Paolo' while between the two the words of Friedrich Nietzsche proclaim 'I love him who reserves no drop of spirit for himself, but wants to be entirely the spirit of his virtue: thus he walks as spirit over the

²⁰ Renzi, Valerio (2013) 'Roma, distrutta la targa della via dedicata a Valerio Verbano', *Il Manifesto. Quotidiano comunista*. 9 August. <https://ilmanifesto.it/roma-distrutta-la-targa-della-via-dedicata-a-valerio-verbano/> [Accessed 11 May 2017] & Coccia, Pasquale (2014). 'Una palestra al Tufello popolare e di massa, la Valerio Verbano', *Il Manifesto. Quotidiano comunista*. 27 September. <https://ilmanifesto.it/una-palestra-al-tufello-popolare-e-di-massa-la-valerio-verbano/> [Accessed 11 May 2017].

bridge.²¹ The choice of Nietzsche's is interesting, indicating a continued fascination with the German philosopher's work on the part of the extreme Right. Di Nella also has his share of official commemorations. A street has been named after him in Villa Chigi thanks to the efforts of former right-wing Alleanza Nazionale Mayor, Gianni Alemanno. Its sign also reads 'Viale Paolo di Nella. Victim of Political Violence', it, too, was attacked less than a year before (Figure 16). Like Valerio, Paolo is held up by members of the centre-right part Popolo della Libertà as an 'example ... killed at the age of 20 by blind political violence. He is strong and he lives in the hearts of those who, every day, try to keep his ideas and his battles alive'.²²



Figure 16 – Graffiti and memorials dedicated to Paolo di Nella in Villa Chigi and around the *Quartiere Africano* where he died (Source: author).

Conclusion

The walls and public spaces of Rome are sites of conflict over the construction of social, physical and political reality. This conflict is played out in a three-way struggle between groups of neo-Fascists and anti-Fascists and between each group and the hegemonic narrative of the democratic state. Their graffiti and commemorative inscriptions are yet

²¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich (2010). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Based on the Thomas Common Translation. Extensively modified by Bill Chapko. Feedbooks, Prologue (4) 4.

²² La Repubblica (2012). 'Distrutta targa che ricorda Di Nella. Alemanno: "Roma non merita questo"', *La Repubblica*, 18 September, http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/09/18/news/di_nella-42810115/ [Accessed 9 May 2017].

another layer to Rome's rich palimpsest of historically contextualised shifts from one-way official political discourse to multi-directional voicings of identity and dissent. Their continued presence in the public arena is supported through the use of building facades as surfaces of canvasses of political ideas that keep a changing record of Italy's fractured political past. 'Epigraffiti' does not resolve dichotomised readings of history but preserves conflictual sites of physical armed struggle between Fascism and anti-Fascism. The 'Bullet Years' may well be over but the graffiti continues to demarcate political space in the contemporary city: today's left-leaning youth know better than to walk through the Quartiere Africano wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt while the continued rivalry between the Roma and Lazio soccer teams keep the ideological struggle alive.

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