

THE FEAST WITH THE STATUE: CREATIVE, PLAYFUL AND INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO CONTROVERSIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT: The destruction of confederate statues during the Black Lives Matter protests as well as the assault to the US Capitol by MAGA supporters have highlighted the centrality of cultural heritage in the current social and political struggles. This paper engages with the strategies that can be used to defuse or solve the controversies emerging around cultural heritage sites and monuments around the World. First, we define monuments as urban artifact embodying discourses about cultural heritage, therefore at the centre of a conflict for the construction and conservation of memory. We then problematise the concept of “cultural heritage” and its ideological components and offer as an alternative the idea of “cultural commons”. Subsequently, we use some tools from urban semiotics and human geography to contextualise and propose a short typology of intervention and relation with monuments. Finally, we use the typology to explore both the top-down strategies employed by institutions and the creative, playful and innovative solutions that have been and could be used by citizens in a bottom-up way.

KEYWORDS: Cultural heritage, Cultural commons, Controversial monuments, Gamification, Play, Semiotics

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1. Introduction⁽¹⁾

On 7 June 2020, the statue of Bristol-born philanthropist and slave trader Edward Colston was toppled by protestors and thrown in the city's harbour. This act, like many similar ones, was part of a widespread protest against racism and police violence that followed the murder of George Floyd by the hand of police forces in Minneapolis. As it happened with other defaced or destroyed monuments, also the toppling of Colston's statue opened a discussion on cultural heritage and its role in relation to memory and identity in the urban spaces. In the midst of the discussion about the future location of the statue, a peculiar project was advanced by Bristol-based artist Banksy: to reposition the statue where it was, but to also include statues of the protestors that toppled it, so that the monument would celebrate the protests instead of the deeds to Colston himself.

While we were writing these pages, another monument – attacked and damaged – has gained the attention of international news: the US Capitol. Protesters from the other end of the political spectrum have invaded the seat of the legislative branch of the US government by force to protest against a political system – but also a system of values, that they do not recognise. The invasion filled the historical building with signs, flags, and costumes – a combination that gave an eerie carnivalesque feel to what is considered by many an act of sedition.

These examples are emblematic of the many cultural and semiotic nodes that surround monuments and cultural heritage in urban spaces, including issues of authorship, interpretation, narrative and memory. In this paper, we use the term “monument” to include every urban artifact that embodies a discourse about cultural heritage. Monuments articulate specific views on the past designed to convey specific historical narratives, conceptions of the present and of possible futures (Violi 2017; Bellentani 2021: 15). Hence, they present a “partial vision” focusing attention on some events and identities while concealing others (Eco 1976: 289–290).

In this paper we highlight the central semiotic nodes raising around

(1) This paper has been written in equal parts by the two authors. For formal attribution, the parts 1, 2, 4.2, 4.3, 5 and 7 can be attributed to Federico Bellentani and the parts 3, 4.1, and 6 to Mattia Thibault.

controversial cultural heritage and analyse some of the ways that citizens and communities have been using to dispose of them or integrate them in new urban and ideological contexts. We problematize the notion of cultural heritage – opposing to it the idea of cultural commons – and present a list of possible semiotic strategies that can be – and have been – put in place to “renew memory”, with a particular attention to solutions that, instead of being simply destructive, are creative, playful, and innovative. To do so, we will first illustrate some fundamental concepts regarding the semiotic mechanisms involved in monumentalisation as well as some principles of urban semiotics and cultural geography. This will then inform our analysis of a series of strategies to rethink our relationships with monuments and cultural heritage. These strategies are organised into a first typology of top-down practices to culturally reinvent controversial monuments and a second typology of gamification solutions to manage their meaning changeover.

2. Monuments and the Conflict for Memory

Cultural heritage is actively constructed and maintained to define what is to be remembered of the past (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995: 129). National elites are aware of this potential and use cultural heritage as a tool to promote dominant historical narratives and worldviews. However, the meanings of cultural heritage sites are dynamic and reflect changes in culture, social relations, and views on the past (Bellentani 2021: 165). Cultural heritage, hence, can be rejected by the citizens and generate an opposite response to the intentions of its creators.

Monuments are particularly prone to become controversial due to their paradoxical nature: meant to be stable over times in their physical forms, their meanings are actually “mutable and fluid” (Hay *et al.* 2004: 204). This is evident in moments of semiocrisis: a deep change of epistemes in a culture creating a gap between a mutation in the immanent structures of social life and its old visible and observable signs (Tarasti 2015: 142). In a semiocrisis, the ideologies and narratives sedimented in monuments are no longer hegemonic and – at least for a part of society – they acquire meanings that are not worth being celebrated.

Tarasti claims that semiocrises have two consequences: some individuals become more self-aware, while others try to reject the shift of meaning resorting to old or mythological values. In the case of controversial monuments both are true: they reinforce the identity and politicisation of groups that oppose the values they represent, and, on the other hand, they meet an iconophiliac reaction in those that still adhere to such views and decide to defend them.

Edward Colston was once seen as a philanthropist and the Anchor Society decided to erect a statue to commemorate him. In time, his involvement in the Atlantic slave trade outweighed his philanthropic works, so much that during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, his statue was toppled and pushed into the Bristol Harbour – a controversial fact, cheered by some and strongly condemned by others. Similarly, the fall of the Soviet Union entailed the destruction of many Communist statues as people demonstrated against the same regime that installed them. The surviving monuments – especially those whose destruction would have involved disrespecting the dead and religious beliefs – continue today to be loci of struggle for conflicting interest groups.

3. From Cultural Heritage to Cultural Commons

The word “heritage” is semantically and ideologically linked with the idea of inheriting something from the past and therefore has a strong positive connotation (Weiss 2007). Most public discourses about cultural heritage focus on its restoration, preservation, and valorisation: all seen as key issues for national identity, but also presented as depositary of universal values transcending locality (Matthes 2015). Discourses on the past convey and institutionalise collective meanings thus supporting a uniform national memory and identity (Johnson 1995; Withers 1996). Nevertheless, individuals variously interpret the same discourses on the past.

The use of such an ideologically charged term for sociocultural relations with the past has received harsh criticism (Lowenthal 1998). It has been noted that sites of injustice and atrocity – often considered worth preserving for the preservation of a shared memory – create cultural dissonance in their interpretations and practices. Dissonant cultural heritage

generates friction between the users of such spaces (generated, for example, by inappropriate hedonistic practices like selfies at Auschwitz, see Surace 2019) as well as between cultural and legal discourses. Similarly, the positive connotation of “cultural heritage” raises difficulties in reconciling the celebration through monuments of individuals and events linked to traumatic memories or experiences (Meskell 2002; Macdonald 2009; Tunbridge, Ashworth 1996).

The asymmetry of the discourses around cultural heritage – strongly influenced by governmental policies and large international institutions – has brought about the distinction between “official” and “unofficial” heritage (Harrison 2013). Smith (2006) describes an “authorized heritage discourse” promoted by museums, governments, and organisations such as UNESCO, that identifies cultural heritage with positive characteristics (monumentality, grandiosity, aesthetics, achievement) and engages it with celebratory tones. This top-down view of cultural heritage contrasts with the fact that our relationship with the past is built on an ongoing process of interpretation (Smith 2006), that can contradict the traditional meaning conveyed by official cultural heritage.

“Unofficial heritage” encompasses practices and memories that are not recognised in an official way by nations or organisations but proceed in a bottom-up way from the working class or immigrant communities (Harrison 2013) and often make use of guerrilla memory tactics (Opromolla, Thibault 2020).

Cultural heritage, especially in its official forms, is therefore a strongly ideological operation. It naturalises specific narratives about the past by enshrining them in a “heritage” – that is something whose value is intrinsically related to a temporal dimension, and therefore that has to be preserved in a static way⁽²⁾. This top-down nature of cultural heritage connects the conflicts and controversies around it to a larger struggle: that for the right to the city (Lefebvre 1968).

For these reasons, we believe that a more constructive way to look at public monuments and sites is to consider them cultural commons. The idea of “commons” indicates shared resources benefitting all members of

(2) This is true even when the monuments are quite recent, e.g. the contested monument to Indro Montanelli (Fig. 4) is only from 2005.

a community, realised and taken care of by collective active participation. Cultural commons are a way to understand culture as a “shared resource” (Bertacchini *et al.* 2012) and have recently been re-thought in an organic way as living parts of the urban space (Tiramachi *et al.* 2020). Such approaches unfortunately do not make a clear-cut difference between cultural heritage and cultural commons: in this paper, instead, we use the latter to indicate an approach to urban cultural capital that is strongly committed towards pluralism or, in other words, that extends the right to the city to the spaces dedicated to the preservation of memory.

From this perspective, the need to ensure the citizens’ right to the city is not a merely socioeconomic issue but has an intimate relationship with urban semiotics. The conflict around monuments is a struggle for the right to interpret them beyond their ideological layers (Eco 1967’s “semiological guerrilla”) and for the right to re-write them or erase them. The struggle to transform cultural heritage in cultural commons.

4. Urban Semiotics and the Meaning of Monuments

4.1. *The Urban Context*

Since its beginnings semiotics has dealt with cities and urban spaces, focusing on the generation and circulation of meaning within them. Works such as those by Barthes (1967), de Certeau (1980) and Benveniste (1970) focused on the textual, discursive and enunciative dimensions of cities. Together with later studies on urban semiotics (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986; Cervelli & Sedda 2006; Marrone and Pezzini 2006; Volli 2009; Pellegrino 2007; Pilshchikov 2015), they offer us a wide range of tools and concepts to deal with the meaning-making dynamics that take place in the urban spaces. Here we will briefly focus on some of them that are particularly useful for our study of cultural heritage.

First, monuments are part of a complex polyphonic urban text, and have to be understood in the conflictual dynamics and historical stratifications that characterise it (Volli 2008). Therefore, they never simply preserve memory of the past: while they often refer to the past and celebrate or commemorate events, figures, or values, they are also part of

the current identity of the city. Texts, however, can only be understood within a semiosphere, of which they work as mirrors (Pezzini and Sedda 2004). Lotman (1990) already advanced that urban morphology is isomorphic with the semiosphere: the city is a spatial representation of a symbolic universe, founding its organisation in an ideological hierarchy. Monuments are integral parts of the urban fabric and, by giving meaning to the city, they participate in the production of its semiosphere, they contribute to making the culture of the city.

Second, whatever their scale, monuments can be strongly meaningful objects, capable of resemantising the space around them. The polyphonic urban text contains an incredible number of other texts within itself, giving birth to many different intertextual relations. A particularly interesting one, for our analysis is that regarding context. Lotman (1987) claims that in the urban spaces the difference between text and context can be quite blurred. If a square is indeed the context in which a statue is located, for example, particularly meaningful urban objects can cast an “aura of context” on the spaces hosting them. The statue, hence, can become the context of the square, modifying its meaning, wrapping it around itself.

Third, monuments are often the product of an asymmetry in the power to write the city. Monuments in most cases are produced by powerful agents and they contain their narratives, values, and ideologies. Common citizens have rarely a say – unless through vandalism or when the ideological divide with the embodied narrative reaches a breaking point and triggers iconoclastic reactions in the population. However, if common citizens have rarely the right to write their cities (and when they do, they often incur in fines or imprisonment, as in the case of graffiti), they can still influence the meaning of their environment with their re-enunciations. Their behaviours, actions and even clothing in the public spaces of the city affect their meaning in the eyes of other citizens. Protest marches, pride parades, sandwich people, begging in the streets: all these activities influence the meaning of the space they take place in.

4.2. *The Meaning of Monuments*

Human and cultural geographers have largely analysed cultural space as the product of a struggle among interest groups. This interest has taken momentum from the mid-1980s, when the so-called New Cultural Geography has emerged aiming to uncover dominant meanings and power relations represented in landscape and urban space, envisioned as constructions to perpetuate social order and power relations (Cosgrove 1984; Jackson 1989). As important elements of the urban space, monuments can be seen as tools helping to do this. Drawing on landscape-as-text (Duncan 1990), geographers have started to consider monuments as “focal points of meaning in the landscape” (Auster 1997: 219) and “highly symbolic signifiers” conveying dominant meanings in space (Whelan 2002: 508). Hence, a great deal of geographical research has concentrated on how power relations have manifested in cultural heritage and particularly in monuments (e.g. Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Osborne 1998).

Geographical research on monuments has mainly focused on the intentions of those who have the power to erect them, while paying less attention to how monuments are interpreted at the societal level. By inviting questions on readership, semiotics has sought to overcome this limitation by addressing the impact memory representations in the urban space have on individuals and social groups. This research has focused on different cultural heritage sites such as museums (Pezzini 2011; Violi 2017), monuments and memorials (Peet 1996; Auster 1997; Elsner 2003; Pezzini 2006; Sozzi 2012; Abousnougga and Machin 2013; Krzyżanowska 2016; Bellentani and Panico 2016; Huebner and Phoocharoensil 2017; Torop 2017; Panico 2018; Sönesson 2019; Violi 2019; Bellentani 2021). This line of research has described memory as external to the human mind, being manifested in texts, documents, everyday objects and built forms (Violi 2017). Connecting semiotics and cultural geography can advance the understanding of the cultural geographical world in which monuments are located and interpreted, of what strategies designers use to design them and of how these are variously interpreted by individuals and social groups (Bellentani 2021: 170).

4.3. *Reinventing Memory*

The built environment can undergo several forms of manipulations aiming at cultural reinvention (Bellentani 2021: 5). Architects and designers can bring about reinvention through redesign, renewal, reconstruction, relocation and removal of buildings and monuments (Mazzucchelli 2010). Citizens, who interact with them in their everyday life, rarely have the power to directly modify them, but can resemantise them through their uses. To guide our analysis of the different strategies to deal with controversial monuments, we propose the following typology. The categories we outline are analytical: not every strategy falls exactly into one of them, while some monuments may have been approached with strategies belonging to different categories at different times.

1. *Re-enunciation*: the meanings of monuments are manipulated through their use. The affordances of the monuments are used, while their official meaning is ignored. While semioticians have broadly used the term *enunciation* to define the operations that produce discourses sufficiently set to be available for individuals (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 133), re-enunciation is here used to highlight the bottom-up dimension of this category.
2. *Context*: the spatial settings in which monuments are located largely affect their interpretations. The location of monuments can have “site specific connection to events and people commemorated” (Benton-Short 2006: 300). Relocating monuments, hence, can lessen their ideological charge. Manipulations of their spatial surroundings can also be used as a strategy to reduce their visibility.
3. *Maquillage*: adding or removing elements of monuments can alter their meaning. As adding/removing a paragraph changes the meaning of a text, adding/removing plastic elements to monuments may alter their meaning and function.
4. *Re-writing*: events and identities represented in monuments are turned into something completely different so to annihilate their original meanings.
5. *Erasing*: monuments can be removed from the public space, placed in storage, or destroyed altogether.

5. Top-down Strategies and Controversial Monuments

National elites use monuments and their cultural reinvention to fill the urban space with the meanings they define as central. Through monuments, they can shape and spread hegemonic worldviews, legitimate the primacy of their political power and reinforce social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. When cultural change brings about a semicrisis, e.g. in a regime change or when controversies around monuments emerge, elites are forced to take remedial actions. The list below includes established, top-down strategies used to deal with controversial cultural heritage and monuments.

1. *Re-enunciation*: By definition, top-down strategies are put in place by social actors with the power and ability to deeply rewrite the urban fabric. Re-enunciation, instead, is often a bottom-up strategy employed by those who cannot decide how to shape the environment of the city. For this reason, we did not find any meaningful example of a top-down use of re-enunciation to deal with controversial monuments.
2. *Context*: Manipulation of the surrounding environment can be used to lessen the visibility and the “ideological weight” of unwanted monuments (Ehala 2009: 140). When a monument becomes controversial it can be relocated from populated venues as an attempt to define its meanings as alien to the current hegemonic culture. A highly discussed solution to deal with controversial monuments is their relocation from public space to museums. In the USA there is an ongoing debate if to relocate in museums some Confederate monuments currently standing in the public spaces. The Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Tallinn used an ironic solution placing monuments to Soviet leaders at the entrance of the museum’s toilets (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. A Soviet statue guarding the toilet of the Museum of Occupation in Tallinn until 2019. Picture by F. Bellentani.

3. *Maquillage*: It can also change the original meanings of monuments. For example, Roman statues' genitalia were sometimes removed or hidden in the Middle Ages, since they were considered offending the public decency (Fig. 2). Similarly, during the French Revolution statues that were deemed to represent the Ancien were decapitated.



Figure 2. Statue of Mercury in the Vatican with the fig leaf placed over his privates under. Creative Commons license.

4. *Re-writing*: It is when what is represented in monuments is turned into something different. In 2015 in Forlì, the building previously used as the headquarters for the Fascist youth organization was turned into an exhibition centre devoted to the study of totalitarian architecture in South-Eastern Europe (Fig. 3). This restoration reframed the meaning of the Fascist building in today's Italy (Nanni and Bellentani 2018: 405-406).



Figure 3. The headquarters of Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) under restoration in August 2014. Picture by G. Casa.

5. *Erasing*: It is the most basic way of dealing with unwanted cultural heritage. In 2020, during the Black Lives Matter protests, there has been an acceleration of this iconoclastic tendency: several monuments were removed or plans for removal were announced. Removals focused, in a first time, on monuments related to leaders of the Confederate States of America, but they soon expanded to other monuments considered to celebrate slavery and racism. Statues of Columbus were removed across the US, monuments to King Leopold II were removed in Belgium and Colston's statue in Bristol, after being retrieved from the bay, was moved to a museum. In Italy, a controversy emerged about whether to remove or not the statue of Indro Montanelli, an Italian journalist that came under scrutiny for his fascist and colonialist youth (Fig. 4). Removal of monuments can also highlight a regime change: for example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, crowds toppled and knocked down monuments representing Soviet leaders.

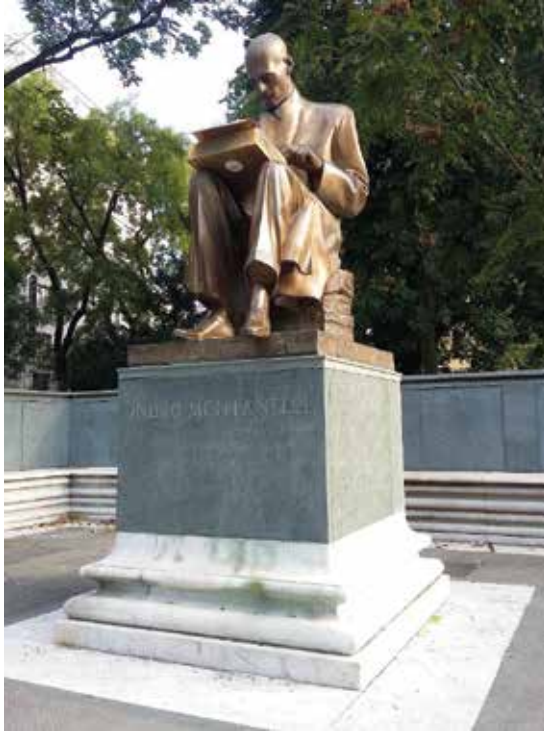


Figure 4. The monument to Indro Montanelli in Milan, that was vandalised with pink paint in June 2020. Creative Commons license.

6. Renewing Memory: Creative, Playful and Innovative Solutions

We have seen that the traditional strategies for dealing with controversial monuments and with the heritage they embody act on many different aspects of the urban text. The examples we have reported are far from exhaustive but outline a picture that is oriented toward the erasure of the entire monuments or, in the case of maquillage and re-writing, of parts of it.

However, new approaches towards controversial monuments are emerging both from the technological developments related to digital technologies and extended realities (Biggio et al. 2020) and from the so called “ludification of culture” (Thibault 2020) a trend that is redefining the position of play and games in the semiosphere. In the last decade,

playfulness and games have been acquiring a new importance in city-making strategies and ideologies. Several bottom-up approaches, such as DIY urbanism, make use of playful techniques to democratize urbanisation processes in the attempt to put the needs of the citizens at the centre of the decision-making processes (Finn 2014). The informal and social aspects of play are also at the base of proposals to use it to confront the technocentric view of urbanism propounded by the Smart Cities paradigm. The concept of Playable Cities, for example, aims to go beyond this paradigm, by “hacking” smart city technologies and using them to create moments of sociality and creativity (Nijholt 2017). Play is also indicated as a fundamental tool to ensure the right to the city of postmodern citizens and to move toward a “ludic city” (Stevens 2007). Urban gamification, finally, proposes the use of play as a way to help citizens reappropriate the urban spaces (Thibault 2019).

Seeing the convergence of playful approaches to bottom-up and democratic city-making, it is unsurprising that new approaches to the preservation of memory and cultural heritage make use of playful “guerrilla memory” approaches (Opromolla, Thibault 2019). In some cases, also controversial cultural heritage is being approached in a playful way to subvert its meaning. The ability of playfulness to offer a new set of meaning and contexts to our surroundings (Lotman 2011 [1967]) allows to challenge and reimagine the role of controversial monuments in the urban space, without the need of destroying or removing them.

In this section, we will overview the semiotic potential of playfulness, sometimes with the mediation of digital technologies, as a tool for dealing with controversial monuments and memories. To do so, we will examine its existing and possible applications throughout our typology.

1. *Re-enunciation*: To playfully re-enunciate monuments, means to ignore their meaning and propose alternative uses. The affordances of the monuments – i.e. their constituent plastic features that allow certain forms of interaction – become the basis to re-invent them. Reappropriations of monuments as those operated by skaters (Fig. 5), but also unintended but common practices such as climbing on the components of Berlin’s memorial of the Shoah are examples of a playful re-enunciation of monuments. Similarly, attempts to toyify (Thibault

& Heljakka 2019) statues by, for example, providing them with toilet paper during the first wave of Covid-19 in 2020, is a way to devoid the monument of meaning and, instead, to use it as support for a joke. While there have not been many recorded examples of this behaviour towards controversial monuments, making fun of them and involving them in playful practices as the ones described could be an effective way of challenging and maybe defusing their original meaning.



Figure 5. Skaters on the Monument to Emanuele Filiberto Duca d’Aosta in Turin.

2. *Context:* The context of urban spaces can be playfully thwarted and hijacked by creating peritextual indications (plaquettes, insignia) or even by creating alternative monuments altogether. The commemorative plaques from the future realised by Italian collective DustyEye are a good example of the first strategy. The plaquettes commemorate events yet to happen – like the suicide of the first android capable of emotions – and in this way they offer a new key of interpretation of the spaces around them. Joe Reginella’s “NYC urban legend monuments” on the other hand, commemorate past, but fictional, events, like the attack of a ferry boat by a giant octopus. The monuments hijack the persuasive language typical of discourses around cultural heritage but use it instead to

play with the citizens' perception of the spaces. A similar approach has been taken by positioning Kristen Visbal's statue of the "Fearless Girl" right in front of the Charging Bull of New York's financial district. The move was interpreted by many as giving a negative connotation to the bull and, therefore, to the Wall Street ideology altogether. Adding new monuments, or different plaques to modify the context around controversial monuments, therefore, can be an effective way to propose a counter-narrative to that embodied by the monuments themselves. Finally, the many digital maps that exist online can also work as the context of a monument – and have been in some cases used in a playful way. It is the case of Google Maps, which, for some time, has changed the location of Colston's statue in the bay in which it was thrown by the protestors (Fig. 6). Playful approaches to controversial monuments, then, can also engage the vast hypertextual net that surrounds them online and use it to contrast the ideologies that they carry.



Figure 6. The location of Colston's statue in the bay on Google Maps.

3. *Maquillage*: Probably the most used playful strategy against controversial monuments, *maquillage* involves some minor additions capable of resemantising the monument. Splashing of blood-red paint the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan (Fig. 4), for example, is a simple form of *maquillage* possibly involving some pretend play. The Buzludzha monument in Bulgaria, a futurist architecture built during the communist regime to commemorate the Bulgarian Communist Party, has often attracted graffiti artists and amateurs: quite popular is a graffiti representing the word “Communism” drawn as the Coca Cola logo (Fig. 7). The monuments, in these cases, are used as support for new writings that can alter slightly but significantly the original meaning and unwillingly offer a space for dissent. Light projections have also often been used in a creative way to reshape the meaning of monuments. While light shows have mostly a merely aesthetic purpose, others have a clear political dimension, such as the writings projected on Palazzo Chigi (the official residence of the Prime Minister of Italy) in January 2021 by youth associations asking to be heard by the government. In some cases, this approach has already targeted also controversial monuments: during the Black Lives Matter protests in



Figure 7. The Buzludzha monument in Bulgaria built in the place where in 1891 a group of socialists assembled secretly to form a forerunner organisation of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Creative Commons license.

2020, the pedestal of some Confederate statues became a place where to project photographs of civil rights leaders and martyrs.

4. *Re-writing*: More thorough alteration of monuments can entail a true rewriting, capable of overcoming – and in some cases making disappear – the original meaning of the object. A Bulgarian monument commemorating the Red Army, for example, has been subject to such re-writing, when an unknown graffiti artist has painted its statues to represent US pop “heroes” ranging from Superman to Ronald McDonald (Fig. 8). Similarly, in the Russian town of Voronezh, a Soviet Star at the top of a building was painted to look like Patrick: the starfish from the show *SpongeBob SquarePants*. A more complex rewriting was necessary to transform a statue of Vladimir Lenin in Odessa, Ukraine, in one of Star Wars’ *Darth Vader*. The makeover – which conserved inside the original statue – was part of the city’s effort to remove Communist propaganda from the urban spaces. The Lenin statue was strikingly suited to the new subject: Lenin’s long coat became the cloak of *Darth Vader* and his closed fist now holds a lightsabre. The “*Darth Vader*” was unveiled during an opening ceremony that included vehicles and characters from the Star Wars films: a person dressed as *Darth Vader* unveiled the statue and held a speech with *Darth Vader*’s vocal effects. The Imperial March music theme played through. While the most notable examples of rewriting appear to come from Easter Europe and to focus on Soviet Era monuments, such a strategy can be easily applied to all sorts of controversial monuments, both in authorised and unauthorised actions.

A digital alternative to the physical rewriting of monuments is the use of Augmented Reality. AR allows us to visualise new layers of information while looking at a certain object through a smartphone. It is finding an increasing importance in street art, where artists add layers of drawings or animate their graffiti with this technology. While we do not know of any cases of AR used on controversial monuments, we believe that it offers the potential for completely legal, but hardly accessible, urban rewritings.

5. *Erasing*: In the same way strategies based on re-enunciation are rarely employed in top-down actions, erasing monuments is often out of

reach for bottom-up approaches. Moreover, while we can imagine a playful context in the destruction of a monument, that would not leave traces behind it, and the playful potential of the action would be exhausted immediately.



Figure 8. In February 2014, the 1950s Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia was daubed painted and the represented soldiers transformed into pop culture icons. Creative Commons license.

Our brief overview outlines how the potential of playful and creative approaches to monuments and cultural heritage resides in its ability to deal directly with the ideological connotation of monuments, by turning it upside down or to ignore it altogether so as to propose new meanings. Play can be strongly desacralising, as it questions the traditional meanings and the ideological truthfulness and naturalness of memory.

Additionally, the use of digital technologies to deal with controversial monuments, while at the moment limited in the applications, presents a strong potential, especially when combined with playful and bottom-up approaches. Together, play and technological augmentations

become an effective alternative for transforming cultural heritage in cultural commons.

7. Conclusions

The meaning of cultural heritage and monuments is much more flexible than one would imagine, always at the centre of a negotiation. Both physical and interpretative actions can be taken to deal with controversial monuments, to reshape them and, by doing so, reshape the meaning that they cast on the urban spaces. Based on our simple typology, our paper illustrates the great variety of the possible strategies to do so, both in a top-down, official way and in a bottom-up, creative and playful way. While the examples that we have outlined are not exhaustive, they should at least indicate the potential of the alternative methods for dealing with controversial memories and with the buildings, spaces and statues that embody them.

The struggle for the right of interpreting, reading and writing the city is likely to exacerbate in the next decades, as society is becoming increasingly polarised, causing (or being caused by?) the ongoing semicrisis. Digital technologies will probably play an important part in these conflicts because, if they make it easier to affect the urban spaces, there is also a high risk of the creation of monopolies and an unbalance of authorial power even in the digital realm (as it is already happening with the digital versions of cities owned by Alphabet).

Future research, therefore, should explore new creative, playful and innovative ways of dealing with them. Urban semiological guerrilla and playful hacking of smart city technologies might become the key tools for fighting for inclusive, democratic and liveable cities in the future. In the long term, on the other hand, playful and bottom-up approaches should not be limited to an a posteriori attempt to contrast the divisions created by monuments and spaces of memory but should be involved in the very ideation and creation of such texts. Future research, therefore, should explore the possible connections between a playful, creative and bottom-up approach to existing monuments and the use of the same strategies to design more inclusive and representative urban spaces (e.g. Tan 2014).

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