The Weird and the Urban. The aesthetic experience of ruins in Italian street art

L’Étrange et l’urbain. L’expérience esthétique des ruines dans le street art italien.

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Introduction

1 The title of the present article is deliberately inspired by that of the 2017 essay by Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, in which the British philosopher and critic focuses on these two adjectives by turning them into proper philosophical concepts and aesthetic categories. As such, and in Fisher’s words, “The weird and the eerie […] allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside” (10), meaning by that the potential to observe and criticize our reality (*the inside*) through specific kinds of fiction (*the outside*). Close to what had been previously and commonly categorized as “speculative fiction” (Gill), the weird and the eerie can also act, in their many artistic manifestations, as a sort of new macro-genres, with features belonging to more conventional modern and contemporary genres such as science-fiction, fantasy, and horror. In order to illustrate examples of weird and eerie artistic products, Fisher considers the work of writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, Margaret Atwood, H.G. Wells, and Philip K. Dick, as well as film directors such as David Lynch, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Jonathan Glazer, or musicians such as Brian Eno, among others. While the philosopher focuses exclusively on literature, cinema and music, the present article proposes to enlarge the field to the visual arts and architecture, and more specifically to street art, its main objective being that of phenomenologically investigating the aesthetic relationship between unsanctioned forms of street art and ruins in Italy.

2 In order to do so, a certain number of terminological and methodological premises appear necessary. In the first place, and unlike Fisher, this article shall not make any
crucial distinction between the weird and the eerie, and will rely on the commonly accepted synonymy of the two: the first one will henceforth be used over the second, especially since the metaphysical implications of the latter are less relevant to the present analysis.

A second premise concerns the use I shall make of “street art”, which is an ambiguous term that needs to be clarified before being employed. Commonly, it is used as an umbrella term and can define both legal and illegal urban artistic practices, existing in a wide variety of media and supports (murals, posters, stickers, installations...), techniques (spray-painting or paintbrush, stencils, photography, collage...) and styles (figurative, abstract...). In what follows, the term “street art” shall be used to exclusively identify unsanctioned forms of muralism, derived from the experience of graffiti writing, i.e. the urban art practice based on the spray-painted inscription of the artist’s own pseudonym (called tag) through their own personal graphic style. The reason for such a choice is that all the Italian street artists henceforth mentioned have experimented tagging and graffiti before turning their practice into figurative or abstract forms of illegal urban painting.

As for “Italian street artists”, I shall mean by these terms artists who have grown up and developed their practice in Italy, and are currently operating in Italy, and/or abroad. As the main purpose of this article is to highlight the existing aesthetic interaction between street artworks and ruins in Italy, examples shall be limited to street artworks created on the Italian territory, although such interaction could certainly be investigated in other contexts. As we shall see, the decision of delimiting the field of observation to the Italian territory is due to the particular interest that Italian ruins have in relation to the Fisherian concept of the weird.

The article shall be structured into three main parts: the first one, following the present introduction, shall focus on the concept of the weird, its general meaning, its genealogy and relation to the broader, psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny, and ultimately its application to the domain of architecture, and specifically to ruins. A second part shall focus on a phenomenological definition of ruins as weird architecture, and particularly certain aspects of the Italian in-ruins architectural environment. The third and last part, preceding the conclusions, shall highlight the idea of street art as an intrinsically weird art: first, by highlighting the aesthetic relationship between street art and ruins in Italy; secondly, by making an inventory of the science-fictional, fantastic and horrific character of its representations. In order to fulfil these two goals, the work of Italian street art pioneers 108 and Blu will respectively serve as examples.

A genealogy of the weird as a genre, from psychoanalysis to fiction

What do we mean when we say that something is weird? The Cambridge dictionary defines the weird as what is “very strange and unusual, unexpected, or not natural”¹. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary highlights the “strange or extraordinary character”² of objects determined as weird, and the New Oxford American Dictionary gives us the following etymological meaning: “Old English wyrd 'destiny', of Germanic origin. The adjective (late Middle English) originally meant 'having the power to control destiny', and was used especially in the Weird Sisters, originally referring to the Fates, later the
While reading these and other common dictionary definitions, we cannot but notice that a weird object is one that has qualities that go beyond the ordinary, are easily related to the supernatural, and imply a sensation of fright. When reworking the adjective into the field of aesthetic experience, Mark Fisher underlines the inadequacy of definitions found in dictionaries, especially if limited to the domain of the supernatural: what about a black hole, then? “[...] the bizarre ways in which it bends space and time are completely outside our common experience, and yet a black hole belongs to the natural-material cosmos – a cosmos which must therefore be much stranger than our ordinary experience can comprehend.” (Fisher 15)

By choosing the example of the black hole, Fisher underlines the main characteristic of the weird as an aesthetic experience: rather than a frightening sensation produced by something fictional or non-existing, the weird implies a sensation produced by something which exists, but makes us feel like it should not. In this sense, even fictional scenarios such as those elaborated by H.P. Lovecraft – who, as is well known, published his horror stories in the magazine *Weird Tales* from 1923 to 1954 – are weird in as much as they make use of what the American writer called a “real externality”, i.e. the condition under which something unimaginable (other entities) from an imaginable outside (the cosmos) makes an irruption into our own, real world, turning our ordinary naturalism into a hypernaturalism.

In Fisher’s words, the weird is “a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid.” (15)

The speculative character of the weird as an experience lies, according to Fisher, in the fact that it pushes the experiencing subject to find new categories in order to decipher the world. It is a feature that the weird and the eerie seem to share, although while the former is “constituted by a presence – the presence of which does not belong” (61), the latter is, by contrast, “constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence” (61). In other words, while the feeling of the weird compels the experiencing subject to deal with an uncanny presence, the uncanniness of the eerie consists in making the experiencing subject ask themselves “more fundamental metaphysical questions [...] questions to do with existence and non-existence”. (12) It is worth mentioning that Fisher considers that “the feeling of the eerie [...] pertains to ruins or other abandoned structures” (62), which the philosopher observes in many post-apocalyptic science-fiction examples. Although this is particularly interesting given the object of our research, the particular case of street art and ruins concerns, as we shall see, the Fisherian conception of the weird rather than that of the eerie.

Concerning uncanniness, both the weird and the eerie owe their existence as aesthetic categories to the Freudian, psychoanalytical concept of the *unheimlich*, translated in English as “uncanny”. In Sigmund Freud’s words, “the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar. [...]” (Freud 123). The *unheimlich* is that particular condition in which familiar things become other than themselves. In this sense, it shares with the Fisherian weird the peculiar quality of perturbation. But even though both the weird and the eerie exist as legacy of
the Freudian uncanny, Fisher conceives those as an overcoming of the uncanny itself: as a psychoanalytical category, the latter always processes “the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside” (10), while the former “make[s] the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside”. (Ibidem)

At the time Mark Fisher wrote his essay, weird fiction was already an acknowledged literary genre: in 2002, in his introduction to China Miéville’s novella The Tain, the English author M. John Harrison introduced for the first time the term “New Weird” to discuss new directions in science-fiction, fantasy and horror literature (Weinstock 196); in 2008, Ann and Jeff Van der Meer curated the anthology The New Weird, and defined new weird as follows in their introduction: “a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping-off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy.” (Van der Meer xvi)

Since the appearance of Fisher’s essay in 2016 and its 2018 Italian translation by Vincenzo Perna, the debate around the weird as a literary genre has reached the Italian literary community, who started enquiring about the constitution of an “Italian weird canon”, as opposed to the long-standing realist tradition that had characterized the Italian bourgeois novel in the 19th and 20th centuries, and that had disqualified fantasy or horrific fiction as simple entertainment literature. The author Vanni Santoni, for instance, observes in the Italian literature of the 20th century, a “forceful emergence of narratives that […] break through […] the barriers between genres, ending up drawing elements and narrative devices from fantasy, science fiction and horror, thus giving rise to new forms of the uncanny.” (Santoni. My translation'). As the literary critic Carlo Mazza Galanti puts it, “the simple fact of knowing how to imagine an outside or to suggest other possible realities that do not conform to the unique model – whether alienating epistemologies, alien entities or mystical involutes – becomes an intrinsically political gesture.” (Mazza Galanti. My translation'). In this debate, far from being simple entertainment or escapist literature, the emergence of the weird has provided new tools to interpret the historical context we live in, marked by the idea of the end of the world, as the environmental crisis and the everlasting risk of nuclear war become day by day more present and tangible in our lives.

The debate initiated in Italy gives us the opportunity to consider other forms of the weird, beyond the sphere of Italian literature and cinema. In the domain of the visual arts, for instance, street art plays an important role in the creation of “new forms of the uncanny”, through the “conjoining of two or more things which do not belong together” (Fisher 11), as Fisher describes what he considered the most important feature of the weird. These two incompatible and juxtaposed things being, in the case of street art, unsanctioned muralism and architecture.

Ruins as weird architecture. The abandoned and the unfinished in Italy

When speaking about weird architecture, it is necessary to consider the contribution of Anthony Vidler and his most renowned essay, The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely (1992). Here, the architectural historian stresses the existing link between architecture, and the concept of the Freudian unheimlich: “At one level, the
house has provided a site for endless representations of haunting, doubling, dismembering, and other terrors in literature and art. At another level, the labyrinthine spaces of the modern city have been construed as the sources of modern anxiety, from revolution and epidemic to phobia and alienation” (Vidler ix). Since the very appearance of such feeling of unease in the late 19th century, both the house and the city, our familiar places par excellence, have been revealed as the places of human de-familiarization and de-personalization. In this sense, Vidler underlines how the uncanny is, far from being an intrinsic quality of architecture, rather “a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming” (11).

In this projection from our minds to architecture we find again the move from the inside to the outside as described by Fisher when stating the main difference between the uncanny on the one side, and the weird and the eerie on the other, the latter implying an opposite move from the outside to the inside. If one follows Vidler’s argument, it is clear that the places of the uncanny, in which humans project their inner uneasiness, are the very places they inhabit: but what about those houses, and buildings, and parts of the city which, for whatever reason, have been left abandoned or unfinished, and therefore uninhabited? Such places seem to match at the same time the Fisherian categories of the weird – as places which no longer belong to the active city, while still being physically within it – and the eerie – as places implying the failure of both an absence and a presence, as human activity seems to remain in-between these two states of existence.

Existing within the city or in its immediate surroundings, uninhabited buildings or areas like wastelands and vacant lots constitute one of the most typical traits of the modern urban. They represent, for instance, a part of those places that Marc Augé has called non-places, at least for their apparent lack of identity, history, and relational dimension (Augé 77-78). Another possible model to classify those leftover places is that of the “Third landscape” (Tiers paysage) conceptualized by Gilles Clément as “the result of the abandonment of previously exploited territory” (Clément 3. My translation). Generally speaking, they are urban interstices: as the urban sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti puts it, an urban interstice is “a space in-between others [...] regarded as somehow minoritarian vis a vis other spaces that surround or encircle it [...] generated as by-products of urban planning [...] imagined essentially as vacant lots, terrains vagues or decaying ruins” (Brighenti xvi).

In the Western world, the word “ruin” employed by Brighenti usually comes with a very precise connotation. Historically, it is associated with the remains of Greek and Roman architectures, which since the Renaissance have been worshipped as the signs of a glorious and cherished past for humankind and for the arts, and have survived through the centuries. From the Renaissance to the Romantic era, ruins have represented an ideal of everlasting beauty resisting the effects of time and the events of history. Nonetheless, the “decaying ruins” mentioned by Brighenti as examples of urban interstices are of another kind, and need to be distinguished from the ruins of a distant past.

In the first place, we need to define what a ruin is. Our epistemological context being that of aesthetics and phenomenology, an appropriate definition of ruins comes from French philosopher Bruce Bégout and his most recent essay, Obsolescence des ruines:
To be recognized as such, a ruin must meet two essential conditions. First of all, there must be an abandoned human construction, and especially one that remains in such state for a certain amount of time. Then, it is necessary that humans perceive in it something other than simple debris without any interest (Bégout 35. My translation).

The first condition enumerated by Bégout is a factual, objective one, and we can say that since the birth of architecture humans have always produced a certain quantity of ruins. The second condition, as put by Bégout, is one of a more subjective and contingent nature: ruins are interesting, while debris are not. These considerations lead the philosopher to distinguish between three ages of ruins. The first is a classical age concerned essentially with the Greek and Roman remains, idealized during the Renaissance and the Romantic era as examples of sublime, everlasting beauty. A second age concerns ruins that can be determined as historical-industrial: late 18th to early 20th century architectures, linked to industrial revolutions and early production of capital, preserved today as industrial archaeology and architectural heritage. Modern ruins belonging to this category are still subjected, Bégout notices, to the classical cult of collapsed monuments (50). The third and last category conceived by Bégout regards contemporary, post-industrial ruins – the ones that Brighenti inscribes among the urban interstices as abandoned or unfinished architectures, the result of hyper-accelerated urbanization under late capitalism.

Those ruins are the ones we are most interested in, for two reasons. The first one is that the history of Italian street art is significantly linked to such architectural environment. The second one, is that there is a substantial difference between the first two categories of ruins and the third one.

While classical ruins and historical-industrial ruins are experienced ex post as monuments by generations of individuals and communities who could witness the secular or millennial fall and decay of those constructions, contemporary ruins are in some manner accelerated or “instant ruins”: i.e. ruins that are experienced by generations of individuals and communities that are the actual producers of those very ruins, or in other words, individuals and communities who live and experience the ruins they have themselves created. As Bégout puts it, the acceleration of humans’ building activities under late capitalism goes along with an acceleration in the production of ruins, for buildings are no longer built to last for centuries, as symbols of “eternal values” (temples, churches, royal palaces or palaces of power). They are mostly brought into existence with precise functions, and their use and exchange value stop existing once they are no longer functional according to their original purposes. From an aesthetic point of view, the question we shall ask ourselves is: do we look at contemporary “ruins” with the same interest as we look at classical or historical-industrial ruins?

One of the main theses in Bruce Bégout’s essay is that the ruins we produce are not actually ruins, but rather debris, and that we are actually erasing the idea of “ruins” itself from our relationship to our contemporary built environment. Indeed, our own ruins are not there to last for centuries: on the contrary, their disappearance occurs very quickly, for their destiny is that of being replaced by newer constructions, which in turn are intended to produce more ruins, and so on.
Nevertheless, even though those ruins are actually debris, such debris are not without interest to us. The phenomenon of urbex (urban exploration) in its many declinations is a proof of such interest:

[...] urban exploration is about discovering, walking through and appreciating these abandoned places, which in fact possess, because of their practical and symbolic proximity, a ghostly character much stronger than that of allogenic ruins. In modern wastelands, the individual perceives the uncanniness of the familiar, the becoming-other of the same (Bégout 40. My translation).

The reason we are so attracted to our own debris lies precisely in the fact that they “offer oases of weirdness” (50) and, as Fisher points out, the weird always implies a certain amount of fascination, in a way that is similar to Lacanian jouissance: “there is an enjoyment in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded – an enjoyment which, in its mixture of pleasure and pain, has something in common with what Lacan called jouissance” (Fisher 13).

The main difference between ancient and contemporary ruins is that “the ancient ruin is marvelous, in that it projects the individual who walks through it into a foreign and definitively absent universe whose rules are lost and no longer valid; the modern ruin is fantastic insofar as it plunges this same individual into an insidious perturbation of their living environment and makes the alteration appear in the present” (Bégout 41. My translation).

The fascination for contemporary ruins finds in the Italian territory a fertile soil, as evidenced by two publications released during the last decade, aiming at constituting a proper architectural canon based on abandoned and unfinished Italian architectures. The first publication, the *Atlante dei classici padani* (2015), is the result of a research project, led between 2010 and 2015 by the artist Filippo Minelli and the writer Emanuele Galesi, whose purpose is to identify the aesthetic and architectural specificities of the Po Valley, an urban canon based on the overabundance of reinforced concrete and the abandonment of former industrial establishments. A second, more radical approach has been led by the artist collective Alterazioni video in 2018, resulting in the publication of *Incompiuto: la nascita di uno stile* (2018), in which the authors have made an inventory of unfinished public buildings over the entire Italian territory, the result of building abuses perpetrated by the local mafias and subsequently seized and interrupted by the State. The amount of data collected region by region – Abruzzo 42; Basilicata 21; Calabria 58; Campania 54; Emilia-Romagna 15; Friuli Venezia Giulia 5; Lazio 45; Liguria 9; Lombardy 38; Marche 10; Molise 13; Piedmont 15; Apulia 69; Sardinia 71; Sicily 163; Tuscany 34; Trentino Alto Adige 5; Umbria 11; Aosta Valley 3; Veneto 15. (Alterazioni Video 246) – led the authors to consider the “unfinished” as a proper Italian architectural style.

In such an architectural environment, marked by an overabundance of abandoned and unfinished constructions, the aesthetic experience of ruins has taken on special forms, which go beyond the pure enjoyment underlined by Fisher, or the urge to explore observed by Bégout.

We can easily argue that such aesthetic experience begins with the exploration of ruins, regardless of their age or category. To this effect, the aesthetic experience of ruins always begins as immersive, for ruins are, above all, sites: they are environments. From this perspective, artists like Piranesi, or high society individuals of the 18th and 19th century taking the Grand Tour, could be seen as urbexers avant la lettre, enjoying the
activity of exploring manmade abandoned structures, with a particular interest in
documenting or depicting them through drawing and painting. Indeed, when it comes
to the representation of ruins, there is no substantial difference between an etching by
Piranesi, and an urbex photograph today: they both respond to the particular urge of
creating landscapes out of ruins, of turning the practical, three-dimensional
experience, into an idealized, two-dimensional one. In this regard, today’s urbex
photography is not just a way to explore and document contemporary ruins: it is to all
effects a way to idealize and romanticize our own ruins, to turn them into visual
heritage.

Yet there is also a crucial difference between the aesthetic experience of historical
ruins and that of contemporary ruins: the latter involves other forms of interaction
than the simple exploration, and other aesthetic outcomes than documentation, two-
dimensional representation and subsequent contemplation. One of those forms of
interaction is, of course, unsanctioned graffiti writing and street art.

Street art, weird art? Towards an Italian weird muralism

Bruce Bégout includes graffiti writing in the field of urban exploration, among other
activities such as skateboarding, photography or squatting (Bégout 41). While all those
practices start with the exploration of ruins, the exploration seems not to be their sole
endeavor, nor their ultimate purpose. This is particularly noticeable for graffiti writing
and street art, which imply a deeper interaction between the urbexer and the
environment in which they operate, ultimately resulting in an active transformation of
that same environment, which other activities such as photography do not entail.

In an interview that the Italian artist Guido Bisagni, alias 108, gave to me in 2017 during
my doctoral research, he describes the particular relationship that he has always had
with ruins in the Po Valley, since the very beginning of his artistic path, and the
importance that those places have had in the development of his peculiar, abstract
black shapes (Figure 1):

Figure 1. 108. No title. 2015. Abandoned power plant, Turin
The Po Valley is a sort of uninterrupted suburb [...]. What unites the artists of northern Italy [...] is that [...] we all carry within us the experience and memory of those places, for good or for bad. We hung out there even before we went there to paint, when we were children and when we used to ride around the abandoned factories, warehouses and wastelands on our bikes... What struck me most was that they were never really inhabited: they are populated only by outcasts [...] I think mainly of voyeurs, sex buyers, nomads... outsiders of all kinds. [...] around 2004, when I realized that for years I had been walking around by myself making black spots in these uninhabited, ghostly places, I also realized that to me those places had become a kind of obsession, that I needed to go there to create my shapes. I understood that I was an outsider myself, and that what I was doing was incomprehensible to most people: not really the fact of creating the black spots, but rather the fact of creating them in those specific places. (Parisi 2018 380-381. My translation).

Creating something in ruins is presented by 108 as an actual urge: the urge to establish a poietic and dialectic relationship with the ruin, which is thus perceived and experienced not just as material for mere documentation or representation, but as a surrounding environment which the street artist enters into dialogue with. Such a dialogue results in a weird metamorphosis of the environment, in which pre-existing architecture is subordinated to the aesthetic regime of the artistic intervention. The unexpected appearance of the artwork where only a ruin existed before provides the latter with a new identity, and thus a new existence beyond the original function of the building and its current state of abandonment. Thus, the work of art and the ruin become one: a place which is also an artwork, and an artwork which is also a place. Suddenly, one could no longer exist without the other: the boundaries of the unsanctioned artwork do not coincide uniquely with those delimited by the shapes and the pigments that the artist has impressed on the chosen surfaces, but with the dynamic, contextual relationship in which those shapes and pigments engage with the surrounding environment. Such a relationship cannot exist – unless it is artificially recreated – in the conventional spaces of the white cube. Most importantly, such a relationship between artwork and place is not the same as the one occurring in the cases of ornamentation or site-specificity. Although certainly sharing with ornaments an adjunctive nature – as already pointed out by Rafael Schacter (2014) – unsanctioned graffiti and street art engage in a different kind of relationship with the places in which they are created: while ornamentation is harmonic and servile to architectural order, unsanctioned graffiti and street art make use of pre-existing architecture in a parasitic manner, by subordinating it to their own aesthetic (dis)order. For this same reason, unsanctioned graffiti and street art function in a way that is opposite to site-specific art: for they are parasitically, and only randomly or forcibly conceived for the places in which they are created. As one can infer from 108’s words, unsanctioned graffiti and street art are always out of place – “what I was doing was incomprehensible to most people: not really the fact of creating the black spots, but rather the fact of creating them in those specific places” – and precisely in this out-of-placeness lies their aesthetic specificity, which is also their weirdness.

While 108 speaks about the Po Valley as an “uninterrupted suburb”, filled with late capitalism ruins, i.e. ruins belonging to the third category identified by Bégout, it is not uncommon, in the Italian territory, to see unsanctioned street artworks in more ancient ruins, belonging to the first and to the second categories. Two worthwhile examples are represented by the ancient military garage Staveco (Stabilimento Veicoli da...
Combattimento – War Vehicle Factory) in Bologna, built in 1880 and abandoned in 2003, and by the ancient convent of the Capuchin friars in Grottaglie, built in 1536 and left vacant since 1986. Both have been the scene of an intense unsanctioned artistic activity, as evidenced by several articles in local newspapers or magazines, drawing attention to the state of deterioration of the two historic sites. Particularly in the case of the latter, an article from the local newspaper Il Corriere del Giorno interprets a mural painting representing a hooded death figure as the sign of the presence of “satanic rites” inside the convent: “The walls are daubed with writings of all kinds. The small cloister has been defaced by a large and expressive drawing that leaves little doubt about the celebrations of rites that have little to do with Catholicism or other religious denominations.” (Savoia 19. My translation). (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Corriere del giorno. “Il convento è rimasto orfano”. 2007. Grottaglie

Both this last example and the words of 108 seem to confirm the features that Fisher ascribes to the weird and the eerie and that we consider to be a feature of contemporary ruins: their in-between condition of being “never really inhabited”, but above all the incomprehensibility and the uneasiness experienced by other citizens when confronted to the practice of art in such places. This last feature is something that is common to all unsanctioned forms of urban art. To a certain extent, graffiti writing and street art have always been intrinsically weird, for they usually cause the sudden and somewhat haunting appearance of works of art where they should not be, i.e. in uninhabited places, and outside of those places that Western society has conventionally devoted to the artistic experience, such as galleries, workshops, museums and collections, or their projections in the public space (monuments, public installations, etc.).
On the one hand, such appearance entails the failure of an absence, for it turns out that something is actually present and acting within uninhabited places: works of art have, thus, the same agency as specters. On the other hand, anything that falls outside the conventional exhibition system, represented by the white cube – the “unshadowed, white, clean, artificial [space] devoted to the technology of esthetics” (O’Doherty) – and its rituals, is substantially out of place: generally speaking, art does not belong to the streets, and when this happens, it defies the rules of property – which include both ownership and cleanliness – thus easily generating that particular perturbation, that sensation of wrongness that we call “weird”.

Therefore, street art has its own ways to allow us “to see the inside from the perspective of the outside”. I shall enumerate three:

1. As 108 acknowledges, “I was an outsider myself”: as agents from the outside, artists operating illegally in abandoned or unfinished places favor the reappearance of those very places, and their transformation from non-places – deprived of an identity, a history, and a relational dimension – to neo-places, places with a new identity, a new history, and most certainly a new relational dimension, represented by the artistic interactions among groups of artists and other urbexers. In this consists precisely the aforementioned, weird metamorphosis to which unsanctioned graffiti and street art subordinate the urban environment.

2. From a symbolic perspective, and in relation to the singular, amphibious state of street art within the world of art, the inside/outside dichotomy can also refer to the division between the institutional artworld and all that falls or happens outside of it: to this effect, street art acts as a haunting presence in between the inner and outer facets of the white cube.

3. A third aspect of street art’s intrinsic weirdness concerns directly the representational imagery carried by the artworks themselves: it is worth noticing that, among Italian street artists, such an imagery is particularly imbued by sci-fi, horrific, dystopian and Anthropocenic representations, mostly driven by a marked no-global, ecocritical and anti-specieist sensibility.

Concerning this third aspect, we have already seen the example of the hooded death figure painted in the cloisters of the Capuchin friars’ convent: during the years of the FAME Festival – an illegal public art festival organized in the city of Grottaglie from 2008 to 2012 – the same place was covered in other mural paintings, for instance disquieting animal figures by the artist Ericailcane (Figure 3), or biomorph creatures painted by Microbo (Figure 4). The same abstract black shapes created by 108 could also be seen as alien biomorphs, coming from other universes, and invading abandoned human-built environments.
These examples contribute to the constitution of a mysterious, haunting atmosphere that seems to populate the imagery of an entire generation of Italian artists. Perhaps the most interesting example of such imagery is represented by the art of Blu, who is, together with the aforementioned artists, one of the pioneers of street art in Italy.
Originating in the artist's anarchist background, close to the no-global movement, two of the main themes explored by Blu are police brutality and the environmental crisis. Within the Italian political and social context, the artist's anti-police sensibility has its origins in infamous, sensational events such as the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa, when the Italian police shot dead the no-global demonstrator Carlo Giuliani (McDonnell) and led a ferocious night ambush against ninety-three other demonstrators sleeping in an occupied school (Davies). It is not known whether Blu took personally part in the anti-G8 manifestations in Genoa at that time – although the artist has already dedicated murals to the memory of those events, and especially to the memory of Carlo Giuliani (Blu 2021) – nonetheless the representation of police brutality of those years is almost omnipresent in his Italian works, where we can see policemen wearing riot gear, shields, and beating demonstrators with truncheons. For instance, in the mural dedicated to the memory of the 18-year-old left-wing militant Fabrizio Caruso, killed by police in 1974 in the San Basilio neighborhood in Rome (Parisi 2017, 219), policemen are depicted in an Orwellian manner as pigs and sheep (Figure 5). In other representations, policemen appear as zombies (Figure 6), spring-loaded automata (Figure 7), or pairing with Star Wars' Stormtroopers (Figure 8).

Figure 5. Blu. San Basilio (detail). 2014. Rome

© Blu.
Figure 6. Blu. *ERREKALEOR BIZIRIK* (detail). 2017. Vitoria-Gasteiz

Figure 7. Blu. *Cinodromo* (detail). 2012. Rome
Blu’s taste for horrific, science-fictional or fantastic depictions informs his representations of the environmental crisis, which the artist links, as in the case of police brutality, to specific events occurring in Italy’s most recent political and social context: in 2009 in Grottaglie, for instance, Blu dedicated a mural to the case of the ILVA steel plant in Taranto, at the center of a longstanding struggle for its closure due to being the cause of one of the highest cancer rates in Italy (Di Todaro). In this mural, a bunch of Pinocchio-like white-collar figures – most probably symbolizing local and national politicians – are depicted with long, flue-gas stacks in place of their noses (Figure 9).
In another case, in 2013, in Niscemi, Sicily, Blu completed a mural against the construction of a MUOS (Mobile User Objective System), a military satellite antenna that the Italian government allowed the United States Army to install (Mazzeo): the MUOS is represented here as a huge, robot-like monster threateningly standing in front of local demonstrators (Figure 10).

Figure 9. Blu. *No title*. 2009. Grottaglie

Figure 10. Blu. *No Muos*. 2013. Niscemi
A third example comes from the 2016 mural against the construction of the high-speed train line through the Susa Valley in the Alps, where the artist draws inspiration from the horror movie *The Human Centipede* (Six), and represents a human centipede produced by a European bureaucrat defecating money, eaten by an Italian mayor, who defecates more money, eaten by a constructor, who defecates yet more money eaten by a judge, and so on. (Figure 11)

Figure 11. Blu. *Alta voracità*. 2016. Val di Susa

© Blu.

All the aforementioned examples show the extent to which Italian street art has developed in what we may call a weird tradition: on the one hand, this is due to its inextricable connection to abandoned or unfinished built sites of different periods, from 16th century ruins to historical-industrial and contemporary ruins, that the sole presence of unsanctioned artworks contributes to reshape and re-inhabit, according to their out-of-place aesthetic specificity. On the other hand, it may also be connected to the peculiar thematic choices made by the artists creating those very unsanctioned artworks in those very abandoned and unfinished sites: weird abstract or biomorphic shapes, science-fictional, fantastic and horrific scenes and characters end up strengthening the disquieting feeling of being in a haunted, never truly inhabited place. Such a *mise-en-abyme* of weirdness becomes a speculative tool for social and political criticism in artists like Blu, whose creations allow us – to put it in Fisherian terms – to see and criticize the inside, specific reality of late capitalism, from the perspective of a science-fictional, fantastic and horrific outside.

**Conclusion**

The two main purposes of this article were to question, through the lens of Mark Fisher’s concept of the weird, the aesthetic relationship between ruins and street art in Italy, and the recurrence of science-fictional, fantastic and horrific elements in the representational imagery of Italian street artists.

As we have seen, the Italian territory is particularly remarkable when it comes to the exploration of ruins, for it provides a dense tissue of abandoned and unfinished architectures, from ancient to modern and contemporary ones which have, during the late 1990s and the early 2000s, exerted a particular influence on a new generation of artists, coming from graffiti and inventing a new, unsanctioned form of muralism. Such muralism is to all effects a weird muralism, for it responds to many of the qualities enunciated by Fisher: it entails a sensation of wrongness, for art does not conventionally belong to ruins; it implies the failure of a presence and of an absence, for street artworks act like specters in sites that should be empty and uninhabited; it also makes use of weird imageries in order to criticize reality. Most importantly, street
art’s weirdness seems to enhance the intrinsic weirdness of ruins: when in dialogue with the artwork, ruins are no longer objects of mere contemplation, they become instead the subjects of new creations.

Of course, the present article does not have the ambition of giving an exhaustive or a conclusive reading on the history of street art in Italy. It is also important to acknowledge that the weird may not be exclusive to Italian street art, and that the same research could perhaps be carried out in other contexts. Nonetheless, the Italian street art scene seems to be dominated, at least for the first generation of street artists, by a widespread aesthetic of the weird. Such an aesthetic is evident in the artists’ approach to ruins, as well as in their representational imageries, combining sci-fi, fantasy and horrific cultural references, pervaded by the experiences of political and social disasters that occurred in Italy during the 1990s-2000s. This basis can serve as the starting point for a subsequent, more exhaustive and perhaps comparative work, in which the interactions between artworks and the sites in which they are produced, together with the imageries, are analyzed and categorized in greater depth, and compared to those coming from other national contexts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works cited


NOTES

4. “L’emergere con forza di narrazioni che [...] sfondano [...] barriere tra i generi, finendo per attingere elementi e dispositivi narrativi dal fantastico, dalla fantastascienza e dall’horror, dando così vita a forme nuove del perturbante.”
5. “[...] il semplice fatto di sapere immaginare un fuori o di suggerire altre realtà possibili e non conformi al modello unico – che si tratti di epistemologie straniante, entità aliene o involate misticheggianti – diventa un gesto intrinsecamente politico.”
6. “[...] procède de l’abandon d’un terrain anciennement exploité.”
7. “La ruine, pour être reconnue comme ruine, doit répondre à deux conditions essentielles. Il doit tout d’abord y avoir des constructions humaines abandonnées, et surtout qui subsistent un certain temps dans cet état. Il faut ensuite que le regard que les hommes portent sur elles y perçoive autre chose que de simples débris sans intérêt.”
8. “[...] l’exploration urbaine s’attache à découvrir, parcourir et apprécier ces lieux abandonnés qui, de fait, possèdent, en raison de leur proximité pratique et symbolique, un caractère fantomatique beaucoup plus fort que celui des ruines allogènes. Dans les friches modernes, l’individu perçoit l’inquiétante étrangeté du familier, le devenir-autre du même.”
9. “La ruine antique est merveilleuse, en ce qu’elle projette l’individu dans une perturbation insidieuse de son cadre de vie et fait surgir l’altération dans le présent.”
10. Atlas of Padania Classics
11. Unfinished: the birth of a style
12. “[...] la zona padana, è una specie di metropoli continua, di periferia diffusa [...] La parte che accomuna artisti del settentrione d’Italia [...] è che [...] tutti ci portiamo dietro l’esperienza e la memoria di quei luoghi, nel bene come nel male. In più c’è che questi posti li frequentavamo già prima di dipingere, quando eravamo ragazzini e andavamo in bici ad esplorare fabbriche abbandonate, depositi, capannoni... La cosa che più mi colpiva di quei posti è che non sono neanche mai abitati: sono, semmai, popolati solo da persone ai margini [...] mi riferisco soprattutto a guardoni, clienti di prostitute, nomadi, outsider di ogni tipo. [...] verso il 2004, quando mi sono reso davvero conto che da anni andavo in giro da solo a fare delle macchie nere in questi posti disabitati e spettrali, ho capito che per me erano diventati una specie di ossessione, che avevo bisogno di andare lì per creare le mie forme. Mi sono reso conto che ero anch’io un outsider e quello che facevo era incomprensibile ai più: non tanto il fatto di fare delle macchie nere, quanto quello di farle in questi luoghi.”
13. Le pareti sono imbrattate con scritte di ogni genere. Il piccolo chiostro è stato deturpato da un grande ed espressivo disegno che lascia ben pochi dubbi sulla
possibilità che siano celebrati riti che hanno poco a che fare col cattolicesimo o con le altre confessioni religiose.”

14. For a detailed account of street artworks’ spectrality, and their possible connections to the theory of hauntology, see my two articles from 2019.

ABSTRACTS

The history of Italian street art appears to be ingrained in interstitial architectures such as empty lots or abandoned and unfinished buildings, ruins in which since the late 1990s a new generation of outsider artists coming from graffiti writing have been developing new unsanctioned forms of muralism, based on science-fictional, fantasy, and horrific representations and imageries. This article aims therefore to revisit the history and aesthetics of Italian graffiti writing and street art through the prism of British philosopher Mark Fisher’s concept of the weird, by questioning the aesthetic, socio-anthropological, and critical interaction between street artworks and ruins: what role have ruins played in the development of graffiti writing and street art in Italy? And how, in return, have graffiti writing and street art transformed the aesthetic experience of ruins?

L’histoire du street art italien semble être ancrée dans les architectures interstitielles telles que les terrains vagues ou les bâtiments abandonnés et inachevés, des ruines où depuis la fin des années 1990, une nouvelle génération d'artistes marginaux issus du graffiti writing a développé de nouvelles formes de muralisme non autorisé, basées sur des représentations et des imaginaires science-fictionnels, fantastiques et horrifiques. Cet article vise donc à revisiter l’histoire et l’esthétique du graffiti et du street art italiens à travers le prisme du concept de weird formulé par le philosophe britannique Mark Fisher, en interrogeant l’interaction esthétique, socio-anthropologique et critique entre les œuvres de street art et les ruines : quel rôle les ruines ont-elles joué dans le développement du graffiti et du street art en Italie ? Et comment, en retour, le graffiti et le street art ont-ils transformé l’expérience esthétique des ruines ?

INDEX

Mots-clés: graffiti, street art, ruins, weird, urban interstices, Fisher (Mark), Italy, aesthetics, 108, Blu

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