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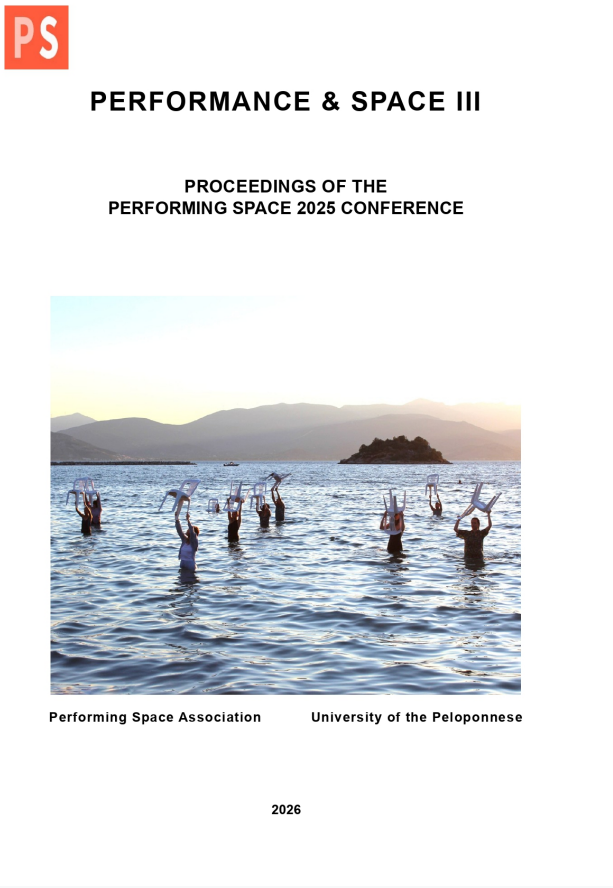

Reading the City: The Performative Function of Text and the Dramaturgy of Public Space

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Reading the City: The Performative Function of Text and the Dramaturgy of Public Space

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Abstract

This study examines the performative function of written text in public urban spaces and positions the city as an entity to be navigated both visually and textually. The city is a text: layered, unstable, and annotated by its inhabitants. Textual interventions in the urban landscape operate as performative gestures that transform the perception, experience, and memory of space, drawing on performance studies, spatial theory, and semiotics. A stencil on a wall, a handwritten note on a lamppost or a name inscribed in a corner may alter the rhythm and significance of a location, inviting the passerby into a fragmented yet intimate act of reading. The city becomes a palimpsest, marked by layers of presence, intention, and interruption. The paper draws on examples ranging from graffiti and activist slogans to anonymous tagging and poetic street interventions. Using the city of Athens as a case study, it examines how these textual presences raise questions about authorship, legality, ephemerality, and visibility, while also proposing an expanded dramaturgical field in which language performs materially within the urban environment. In dialogue with the work of Barthes, de Certeau, and Lefebvre, the study reconceptualises text as an embodied spatial practice, one that not only marks the surfaces of the city but also participates in its ongoing performance. Text in the city performs with and through space, infusing the everyday with resonance. These textual presences contribute to a dramaturgy of public space, where language becomes part of the spatial and affective atmosphere that shapes how the city is seen, felt, and understood. In this sense, text in public space functions both as an expressive presence and as a perceptual intervention into the city's evolving narrative.

Keywords: Urban Dramaturgy, Performative Text, Public Space

Walking the City

High up on Ymittos Hill in Athens, Greece, an abandoned building stands, its walls a canvas for countless tags and graffiti. The passage culminates as you walk down a narrow corridor to an unprotected balcony overlooking the city. There, inscribed on the floor, is the phrase: "Jusqu'ici tout va bien" or, "So far, so good" (Figure 1).

The impact of these words on a reader can vary significantly, ranging from being unnoticed to appearing light or ironic. However, for anyone familiar with Kassovitz's 1995 film *La Haine* (Hate), the words carry a profoundly different weight. The film famously opens with the lines: “Have you heard about the guy who fell off a skyscraper? On his way down, past each floor, he kept saying to reassure himself: So far, so good. So far, so good. It doesn't matter how you fall. It's how you land”. When this phrase appears on the edge of a balcony overlooking the city, the spatial context intensifies its emotional impact, evoking themes of falling, vulnerability, and the tangible threat of a literal or metaphorical fall. This encounter demonstrates that to move through the city is to engage in a continual act of performative spatial engagement.

Figure 1
The floor of an abandoned building's balcony. Ymittos Hill, Athens. Photograph by the author.

The city's built environment compels a continuous and subconscious decoding. Beyond simple physical navigation, pedestrians actively process a torrent of urban text: every street sign, advertisement, and crucial informal inscription. This constant intellectual and visual activity is how the city's surfaces assemble into a layered and evolving narrative (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Urban inscriptions from cities across Europe. Photographs by the author.

As Andron (2023, p. 2) observes, urban walls and surfaces possess the "capacity to capture and generate cultures of publicness in cities," asserting that "there is no urban culture that is not defined by the way it uses its public surfaces." These surfaces operate as sites of cultural negotiation, inscription, and expression. Similarly, Barthes (2005, p. 35) reminds us that text can act as a "parasitic message", one that breathes secondary layers of meaning into the image, enriching and complicating its interpretation.

Writing the City

Who writes these texts, and to what end? This question immediately reveals a core performative dimension of graffiti. The act of inscribing words onto a wall — whether as a political slogan, a personal tag, or a declaration of love — constitutes a deliberate, performative gesture directed towards a public: the fellow inhabitants and passersby who will, consciously or unconsciously, serve as its audience. (Figure 3)

Figure 3
Urban inscriptions in Greek. Photographs by the author.

Graffiti tags, for example, which seemingly consist of no particular artistry, are frequently at the center of public debate, positioned between artistic expression and urban degradation. For some, a tag represents creative intervention and political voice; for others, it signifies vandalism, disorder, and a threat to the aesthetic coherence of the city. It is often within this very tension, this battle over meaning and control, that the act of writing becomes an act of resistance**.** Fundamentally, these disputes arise from differing views on access, authorship and authority over shared spaces, with the act of writing itself representing a direct challenge to established norms. Nonetheless, a graffiti tag can function as a declaration of presence, a marking of territory, and a performance of identity. "Cities as a whole can be understood as sites upon which an urban(e) citizenry, in the 'practice of everyday life,' performs its collective memory, imagination and aspiration, performing its sense of self both to itself and beyond" (Makeham, 2005, pp. 151–152). In this light, the graffiti tag is a performative act embedded in the dramaturgy of urban space, an act that says "I was here, my name is part of the city" or "I claim my right to this city's surface and narrative".

The centre of Athens, in particular, offers a striking example of this phenomenon, as a city perpetually inscribed, a layered palimpsest of text. As Lefebvre (2003, p. 18) notes “The city (...) is a book that never ends and contains many blank or torn pages” (Figure 4, Figure 5).

Figure 4
Phrases from the Athens' centre. Photographs by the author.

Figure 5
Phrase from the Athens' centre. Photograph by Romanos Lioutas.

Much of Athens' street writing is political, often expressing frustration, anger, and defiance directed toward the state. Walls become platforms for dissent, challenging authority and voicing socio-political grievances. Urban space is shaped by “behaviours whose theatricality can dominate public space, undermining the mimetic conformity” (Stavridis, 2002, p. 23). Such graffiti, in this view, is not only expressive but disruptive, capable of challenging normative uses of space. In this sense, street writing participates in a wider political context, one that negotiates visibility and regulation, where one party writes and the other erases.

Reading the City

Beyond the act of writing itself, there exists a second, equally vital performative function: the act of reading. Reading is an unplanned but active engagement with the history of the city, shaped also by spatial, political, and cultural context. For example, the phrase sprayed outside the Greek Parliament that reads: *“Down with the nation, long live the proletariat”* (Figure 6). While the words carry meaning on their own, their spatial placement, aesthetic appearance, the social event that they are referencing, transforms them into a performative intervention, a pointed critique inscribed at the symbolic heart of state power.

Figure 6
Phrases outside the Greek Parliament. Photographs by Romanos Lioutas.

"Down with the nation, long live the proletariat."

"Shit on the Nazis"

Similarly, one might recall the writing of the names of the fifty-seven victims from the recent Tempi train crash, scrawled in red paint on the ground right before the Greek parliament, only to be erased and then rewritten, countless times (Figure 7). The repetition of this act — and the persistence of the rewriting — becomes a form of collective ritual. It is a defiant gesture against erasure, transforming space into a site of mourning, protest, and political demand. Until today, students, citizens and the families of the victims' guard and protect the written names of the dead, so the city cleaning services don't erase them again, maybe until justice is made. Also, the very placement of this text, by simple rules of space and semiotics directly points the blame or at least the responsibility (Figure 8).

Figure 7

The names of the fifty-seven victims of the Tempi train crash. Photographs by grtimes.gr.

In these examples, the spatial and temporal dimensions of reading are foregrounded. Text not only marks space but also animates it by generating tension, inflecting public narratives, provoking certain emotions and staging encounters between personal and collective memory and institutional authority. The ongoing dialogue between those who write and those who erase reveals a fundamental truth: writing on public surfaces is a powerful form of communal participation in the city's evolving history. It reflects an enduring human impulse, to leave a mark, to be heard, to contribute to the shared narrative of urban life.

The Dramaturgy of Public Space

This constant interplay of written words, their intended and unintended meanings, their placements, and their interaction with the built environment constitutes what I refer to as the dramaturgy of public space. The city is “a theater of social action” (Makeham, 2005, p. 150), positioning the urban environment as an inherently performative setting. And if we define dramaturgy not only as “the composition of a work, whether read as a script or viewed in

performance," but also as "the discussion of that composition" (Turner & K. Behrndt, 2008, p. 4), dramaturgy is eventually a mode of observation and analysis, encompassing the structure, event, and context of a performance.

Figure 8

Black balloons carrying a banner that reads "Murderers." Photographs by Romanos Lioutas.

"Murderers"

Public text, in this context, operates as both script and performance, contributing to an ever-evolving *mise-en-scène* of the city. And much like text in theatre, it creates meaning. The very act of reading in context draws us into the performance of the urban as active participants. This dynamic interplay between text and context ensures that the city is never static. Meaning is always in flux, continuously produced and reproduced through the acts of writing and reading. "Any surface inscription only makes sense when it takes place. It signifies from the moment of surface encounter as a result of a negotiation with its location" (Andron, 2023, p. 13).

It's crucial to acknowledge, however, that the texts we encounter in the city are not always expressions of collective memory, resistance, or social cohesion. Urban surfaces are truly democratic in their accessibility, and this means they also become canvases for messages that can be divisive, offensive, or even hateful. We see this in the form of fascist slogans, aggressive football team rivalries, or xenophobic statements. While my analysis draws examples primarily from text as an act of resistance, as a means for marginalised voices to claim space and articulate dissent, it's vital to recognise that these are not the only examples that exist in the city and they vary as its inhabitants.

Figure 9

The mock wall of the Academy of Athens. Photographs by the author.

Engagement with urban text often involves an experience of the *threshold*, a "spatiotemporal experience of transition" that marks a shift between states, spaces, or identities. The threshold is an "intermediate place" where one encounters elements that signal the approach of difference (Stavridis, 2002, p. 221). Crossing such a threshold generates a temporary distance from one's destination, creating a condition of becoming, of being prepared to be somewhere else, which, in turn, alters the subject, "radically or subtly" (p. 221). Crucially, thresholds arise through movement and transformation. As such, they can be understood as *scenes* in themselves (p. 232), "crafted from matter and meaning simultaneously" (p. 255). In this context, reading a text in a public space becomes a threshold experience: a passage through meaning, spatiality and subjectivity that temporarily disrupts and reshapes our relationship with the city. For example, there is a mock wall seemingly protecting the Academy of Athens building on Panepistimiou Street (Figure 9). This wall is the ultimate canvas of text, which is usually written every time a protest ends, since all the demonstrations end up in this street. The wall is repainted every morning. However, traces of previous writings can always be seen, or remembered (Figure 10).

Figure 10

The mock wall of the Academy of Athens, graffitied with the phrase "I remember everything." Photograph by Romanos Lioutas.

"I remember everything"

Conclusion

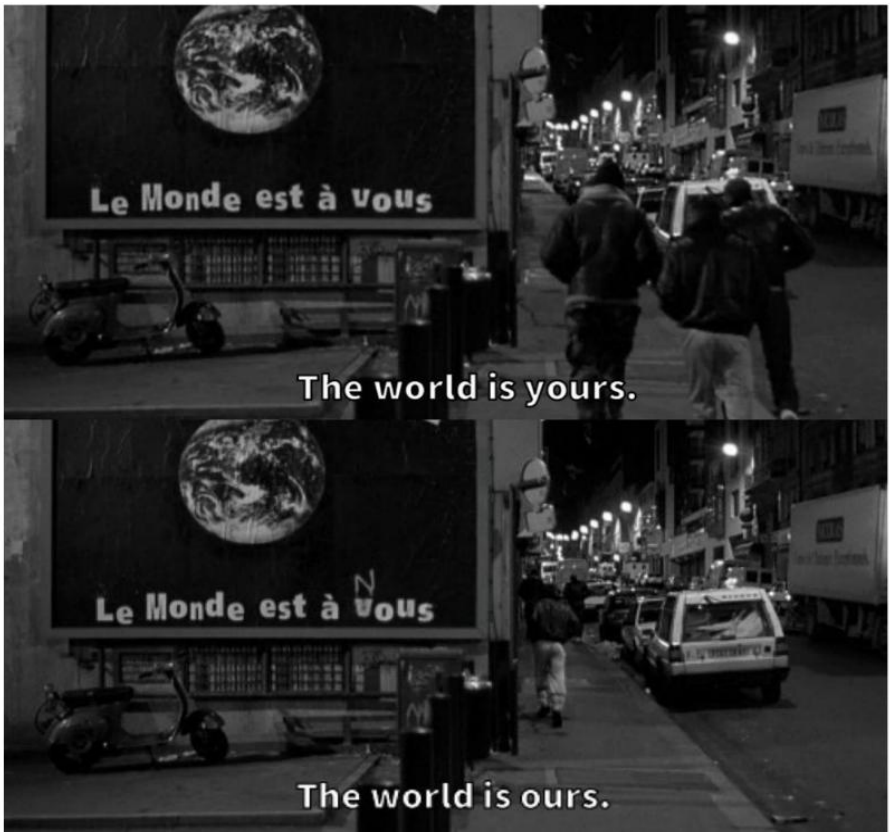
The written word in Athens forms a critical layer of the urban fabric. While cities possess a materiality that performance does not, they remain "as imaginary and ephemeral as performance, because [the city] is a performance of individual and collective values" (Makeham, 2005, p. 157). In Athens, this performance is localised in specific scenes of high symbolic tension, where text intervenes directly in the city's political and affective life. By examining who writes these texts and to what end, this study demonstrates that authorship ranges from grieving citizens at the Greek Parliament to anonymous writers on the Academy's mock wall, all of whom use writing as a means of claiming a "right to the surface," and thus a right to the city itself (Andron, 2023, p. 5).

These locations function as political and intellectual thresholds within the urban fabric, spaces where institutional authority, collective memory, and everyday movement converge. Writing resists erasure and turns the city into a living archive, one that demands to be continually read, protected, and rewritten. In this sense, any urban wanderer becomes a reader of a distinct Athenian history, encountering text as part of an unfolding dramaturgy of public space. Walking through the city thus becomes a performative practice. Drawing on de Certeau's assertion that

“the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language” (1988, p. 97), this study understands movement as a rhetoric that challenges dominant spatial regimes. Through walking, the pedestrian “writes” the city by assembling fragments of text, place, and memory into lived meaning.

Finally, the figure of the flâneur emerges as a productive lens through which to understand this process. As Stavridis (2002, p. 261) describes, the wandering observer discovers meaning within the fragments of the metropolis. In Athens, the flâneur becomes a reader of a city marked by crisis and resistance, where each walk unfolds as a distinct performative text, both a mental and emotional document of the city’s history, written in the very moment of movement (Figure 11). These specific locations operate as scenes in which language performs materially to challenge institutional power. In this sense, the performative encounter between text and surface in the Athenian urban fabric becomes an act of creative resistance, enacting a vital dramaturgy of the everyday and reclaiming the right to the city, a right increasingly threatened by neoliberal politics, gentrification, and the dehumanising forces of postmodern life.

Figure 11
Snapshots of Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 film La Haine.



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