



Symbolic and Material Transformations of a Roman Street: Aestheticization and Alternative Imaginaries of a Synecdochic Space

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ABSTRACT Via Fanfulla da Lodi is a little street located in the neighbourhood of Pigneto (Rome), considered an emblem of roman gentrification. Sometimes “looking at changes of a street [...], if in possession of the right glasses, allows you to have a window on the world” (Semi 2015: 47): the analysis of some recent transformations and daily dynamics related precisely to via Fanfulla da Lodi can reveal synecdochally the general mechanisms at play in the changing of the neighbourhood. The paper focuses on the layering of imaginaries related to via Fanfulla da Lodi, linked to a complex ensemble of images and values, and to often-conflictive representations. Starting from this specific case, the contribution brings into light the actors, the processes, and the effects of the resignification of the neighbourhood; on the other hand, it focuses on the counter-imaginaries that question the ordering logics of the dominant normativity.

KEYWORDS Pigneto, symbolic transformations, aestheticization processes, resistances

A Walk in Via Fanfulla Da Lodi: Local Transformations that Refer to Global Processes

Via Fanfulla da Lodi is a little street in the middle of the Pigneto¹ neighbourhood, a triangle-shaped area in the eastern periphery of Rome contained within the ancient consular roads of via Casilina and via Prenestina. With its succession of low houses, delightful cottages, workshops, and old barracks, via Fanfulla da Lodi inspires a sense of lost authenticity. The immediate feeling when walking in this street is not to be in a big and chaotic city, but in a sort of village where you can still stop and talk to the old ladies sitting in front of the houses. Flanking the houses reminiscent of the popular past of the area, it is impossible not to be invaded by the image of the writer and director Pier Paolo Pasolini, who in this street shot in 1961 his famous movie *Accattone*. Pasolini himself described via Fanfulla da Lodi in these terms:

Via Fanfulla da Lodi, in the middle of Pigneto, with its low huts and cracked walls, was of a grainy grandeur, in its extreme smallness; a poor, humble, unknown street, lost under the sun, in a Rome that was not Rome. (Pasolini 1960)

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¹ Pigneto does not exist on an urbanistic level, being part of the larger urban area of Tor Pignattara, but is commonly considered a neighbourhood in its own right, for its very recognizable characteristics, and for being today a trendy place.

These words speak of an archaic microcosm out of modernity, made up of shacks, hamlets, and uncultivated meadows, and inhabited by an underclass humanity, poor and marginalized, which remained alive despite social and urban shifts. In a way, the impression of being “in a Rome that is not Rome” remains vivid in the appearance of the street, making it clear how representations affect our way of thinking and relating to reality and consequently our ability to produce new representations (Attili 2012).

But, beyond appearance, things are more complex: some details represent the unmistakable trace of profound changes that make apparent the extent to which Pigneto is a far cry from the uncompromising, rough-and-ready place that inspired Pasolini’s neorealist works. Today, the district can be considered an “open-air laboratory of the roman gentrification” (Bukowski 2019: 156), an emblem of the rebirth of those ex-working-class neighbourhoods capable of embodying the experiential vocation of the city (Bovone 2005): Pigneto has turned into a cool area, an entertainment and creative hot spot with trendy spaces and bars that attract night-time consumers and, more generally, temporary city users (Martinotti 1995). The arrival of wealthy social categories – mostly linked to the creative class (Florida 2002) –, the opening of commercial activities in line with the needs of this new population, and the emergence of attractive imaginaries, have determined a change of the local scene (Silver and Clark 2016); Pigneto is therefore a strategic place within the symbolic geography of the city.

Back to our walk in via Fanfulla da Lodi, it is not uncommon to come across groups of curious urban explorers who, following a tourist guide, “recall the characters born from the pen of Pasolini that right here drew inspiration”². A must during the tours are the three street art works dedicated to the writer, which stand out in plain sight in via Fanfulla da Lodi, making us think of his transformation into a powerful brand.

It is quite significant that these street art interventions were commissioned a few years ago by the owners of a famous bar, *Necci*, during an event in his honour. The bar – which on the figure of Pasolini has built a winning marketing strategy – is the reference point for the new urban population which is now rooted in the area and seems to appreciate its lively and alternative atmosphere.

In a sense via Fanfulla da Lodi is a synecdochic space: it summarizes some interesting dynamics at work in the neighbourhood, in turn emblematic of global trends; it can be said that the city reflects the change of the capitalist organization through its neighbourhoods and also through its streets. Macroeconomic changes have affected cities, which are increasingly competitive in terms of symbolic meanings and imaginaries; new urban populations, with new tastes and lifestyles, orient consumption and are fundamental to understand the trend of the market and the social, economic, and cultural transformations of cities.

The social diversity, the search for authenticity (Zukin 2009a), the desirability of working-class neighbourhoods (Annunziata 2008), the aestheticization and the commodification of certain symbolic assets are indications of the importance of a new symbolic and experiential

² These words are found on the website of a company that organizes tours through the streets of Pigneto. For more information see: <https://www.felix.tours/poi/il-pigneto/>

economy (Zukin 2009a; Pine and Gilmore 2013): but we must not forget that changes on the immaterial level have very concrete effects on reality.

The case of via Fanfulla da Lodi shows how certain symbols, memories and imaginaries can be reactivated as sources of value, affecting processes that take shape in the present.

The immaterial factory (Rullani 2004) uses as raw material the affective and social value of the neighbourhood and its symbolic meaning; but we cannot forget the risk of erosion of its relational dimension and use value (Lefebvre 1974), as well as the affirmation of new social inequalities; the concerns related to the loss of social diversity and to the formation of social exclusion are not peregrine considering that the depositories of the exploited values do not seem to coincide with the final beneficiaries of the commodified neighbourhood and its experiential value.

The forced eviction in 2019 of a Senegalese community that had lived in via Fanfulla da Lodi for about thirty years is a clear signal of the negative consequences of the hyper-thematization of urban spaces: to increase the exchange value of the neighbourhood it is necessary to “sanitize” the space, make it safe and decorous (De Giorgi 2019) and not crossed by social groups considered undesirable.

The spaces of contemporary cities are designed to be pleasant and desirable, a sort of playground for the middle classes from which deviant behaviours are removed (Semi 2020): public spaces appear as normalized stages, devoted to consumption and leisure, built to make citizen-consumers – who adhere to a type of disciplined and apolitical sociality – feel at ease. Such operations also favour the real estate speculation that affects the neighbourhood.

But we must not forget that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault 1976: 84); the presence – just in front of the apartments freed from the presence of the Senegalese – of a cultural association, the *Fanfulla 5/a*, which conveys unconventional artistic practices, keeps alive a form of resistance. This cultural reality – reference point for a musical-artistic underground community – represents an alternative to exclusionary patterns of using the city and its existence (along with other spaces in the neighbourhood) open to other ways of producing, imagining and practicing space, beyond the logic of consumption and against an urban model driven by the market and by the obsession with control and decorum. To talk about resistance does not mean assuming the existence of an “island of alternative possibilities” (Giubilaro 2019: 44): resistance practices are configured as imperfect entanglements, relational and open spaces, often characterized by contradictory processes, interdependencies, and uncertainties, in which powers and resistances are not two autonomous and isolated spheres. Besides, as Foucault himself tells us, power and resistance should not be considered as necessarily opposed: they exist in a mutually constitutive relationship, and they have to be understood as interconnected and entangled. In this sense, it would be more accurate to talk of “imperfect resistances” (Ivi), to highlight the contradictions within the processes of resistance and contrast the idea of their separateness and autonomy. But, this does not mean making these experiences less important: “it is precisely in these imperfections, in its openings and curvatures, that the critical topography [...] can find its political chance (Giubilaro 2019: 55).

Walking in via Fanfulla da Lodi on any given day, with its low houses and authentic atmosphere, you realize how it maintains the apparent “grainy grandeur” that led Pier Paolo

Pasolini to select it for his cult movie *Accattone*. It's been over sixty years. Almost thirty since the arrival of the Senegalese in this street, when nobody wanted to live here, as a lot of residents claim. Over the years much has changed: the Senegalese community was kicked out and the Pasolinian mythology has grown in step with the gentrification suffered by the area since the late 1990s.

Actually, in this case we can speak of an embryonic process of gentrification, which manifests itself in the urban space in a fragmented way, on a small scale and limited to some areas. This phase of gentrification, observable in other southern European cities, must be distinguished from the paradigm of gentrification as a global urban strategy (Mendes 2013), which has Anglo-Saxon or North American cities as its model. In this regard, I report the field notes written during some walks – at different times of the day – around the pedestrian area of Pigneto, in which I express feelings that revolve around the concept of “contrast”:

Contrast. The word that comes to my mind when walking around the pedestrian area. Contrast between day and night. Morning with market and elderly inhabitants chatting on the benches. Young hipsters dressed in much the same way passing by on bicycles. The night full of bars, young people crowding the pedestrian area. Via Macerata³: African boys who trade with drugs, there are syringes on the ground. The dumpsters are overflowing with trash. Contrast between shimmer and darkness. Contrast of populations. Contrast between the ordinary and the spectacular.

The contrasts of which I speak reflect the contradictions that characterize the transformations of Pigneto, in which “pockets of decay”⁴ are particularly visible and, instead of diluting with the slow process of neighbourhood change⁵, are amplified, enhanced by their substantial irreducibility to an urban reality of which they constitute a kind of negative.

This demonstrates that the motives, mechanisms, actors and stages of gentrification identified in global cities cannot mechanically apply to other contexts: there is an urgent need for more sensitive geographic analysis demonstrating that “gentrification is not the same everywhere” and that in some cases the differences may be sufficient to question accepted theoretical models (Lees 2000).

The terms “gentrification” and “gentrifiers”, as commonly used in the literature, are “chaotic conceptions” which obscure the fact that a multiplicity of processes, rather than a single causal process, produce changes in the occupation of inner-city neighborhoods from lower to higher income residents. Moreover, the existing concepts are also chaotic in extant marxist usage because they internally combine “necessary tendencies” with “contingent conditions”. (Rose 1984: 62)

³ Via Macerata is a side street of the pedestrian street.

⁴ I use the word “decay” aware of the critical issues related to its use, as a powerful instrument of urban / social / moral control.

⁵ In a paper that focuses on the transformations of Pigneto, Sandra Annunziata (2011: 606) talks about “a slow process of neighbourhood change”, noting the impossibility of applying the classic gentrification label for this context.

Nevertheless, the case of via Fanfulla da Lodi demonstrates how much the marketing operation carried out especially on Pasolini's memory is transforming the neighbourhood into an artistic area with trendy bars and cafes.

Behind many of the doors of the low houses are hidden b&bs for tourists. In high season a room can cost up to 60 euros per day; via Fanfulla da Lodi is becoming the corridor of a hotel, embellished by street art works that satisfy the tastes of cosmopolitan urban consumers. Along the streets that branch off from the intersection with the historic *Necci* bar, there are many bars, restaurants, ice cream parlours, wine bars and breweries recently opened or renovated. Their lights illuminate the narrow streets of Pigneto at nightfall, just like those of the studio/coworking that show behind the windows interior design treated in detail. The old ladies dragging groceries home meet daily with well-educated professionals or with festive groups of young people attracted by the lively nightlife of the area. Many worlds stuck in a single road: starting from these worlds, this contribution will bring to light the stratification of imaginaries and the dynamics related to them, which concern the complex geography of meanings and symbolic values associated with space. The analysis will highlight the dynamics of aestheticization and commodification of the collective symbolic capital (Harvey 2002). On the other hand, the paper will focus – especially through the presentation of the practices and counter-imaginaries brought forward by the underground musical community rooted in the area – the alternative senses of place that come from the dimension of lived space (Lefebvre 1974), which do not conform to an economic logic.

The aim of the analysis is to denaturalize the process of resignification of via Fanfulla da Lodi (and, indirectly, of the whole neighbourhood): this means identifying the agents, the social processes, the consequences, and the symbolic contents involved.

Aestheticization Processes: The Actors

Via Fanfulla da Lodi – with its atmosphere – satisfies the tastes of the new inhabitants of the neighbourhood, who mostly belong to a cosmopolitan middle class, with greater economic and cultural capital than the original inhabitants. This has to do with broader social changes, new consumption patterns, lifestyles, and expectations with respect to urban environments. However, it is obvious that there are interests at stake, and actors who express those interests. Starting from the case of via Fanfulla da Lodi, in the following pages the main actors in the change of the neighbourhood will be identified.

Commercial Entrepreneurs

I mentioned before how the bar *Necci* has built a marketing strategy focused on the figure of Pasolini: in dealing with the specific case of *Necci* I want to refer to the general commercial gentrification suffered by the neighbourhood in the last twenty years. The opening of countless trendy venues (mostly bars and restaurants) has radically changed the commercial profile of the area, historically characterized by small neighbourhood shops and artisanal workshops.

Necci – whose owners run other similar spots in the adjacent streets – confirms the fact that commercial entrepreneurs are key players in the process of neighbourhood

change: they are also social and cultural entrepreneurs (Zukin 2009a) who push to ensure that the neighbourhood fit to a specific socio-economic target.

The bar – also restaurant, pastry shop, bakery, cocktail bar – in recent years (it opened in 2007) has become one of the trendiest in Rome, replacing the old café, characterized by an uncool and ramshackle aesthetic, and frequented by the old inhabitants of Pigneto. Today *Necci* is the favourite destination of young artists, creative professionals, and radical chic of the city. The decor is carefully studied, from the garden with country lights and vintage tables that create an informal and relaxing atmosphere, to the tasteful interiors, always with a reference to authenticity, through posters of old playbills and black and white photos of Italian actors of the past.

Underlining these aspects is important to understand which are the winning symbols that attract urban consumers: “restaurants that offer the latest news in high class dining suggest an aura of sensual excitement akin to the latest financial information, publishing coup, or fashion scoop. Indeed, restaurants have become the public drawing rooms of the symbolic economy’s business and creative elites” (Zukin 2009a: 155).

The new retail landscape works in favour of residential gentrification and against the interests of long-term, low-income residents:

The commercial gentrification of urban areas involves complex issues of social class, cultural capital, and race that go beyond individual cities and neighborhoods. “Boutiquing” is, then, part of a broad dynamic of postindustrial change and urban revitalization that may benefit certain residents while deepening economic and social polarization and place low- and middle-income neighborhoods at risk. (Zukin 2009b: 48)

Culture, symbols, and aesthetics become signs of a power – material and immaterial – in the neighbourhood space: we can fully understand the “symbolic strategy” of *Necci*, played on the feeling of authenticity – an authenticity updated to please customers – and focused on the figure of Pasolini; although the rhetoric endows these operations with cultural intent, they are commercial strategies.

In 2014 the members of *Necci* promoted an event in honour of Pasolini. On this occasion they organized a walk to visit via Fanfulla da Lodi and to discover the origins of the bar (and the neighbourhood) and its link with Pasolini. Screenings, visual and sound installations and the exhibition of a series of vintage pictures of the neighbourhood were hosted in the bar; a live performance dedicated to the author was organized inside one of the barracks. Gadgets, t-shirts and themed publications were distributed during the event; among the cultural souvenirs. It was possible to buy some corsair pills – excerpts from the book *Scritti Corsari* of Pier Paolo Pasolini – from a special distributor: this confirms the emergence of economic models focused on the consumption of cultural and symbolic content. In the evening, the three street art works mentioned above were realized: urban art becomes in effect a device in the hands of private actors to increase the value of the neighbourhood and attract urban consumers. The whole event was realized thanks to the support of the municipality of Rome. This data allows us to introduce a second important actor in the process of symbolic redefinition of Pigneto.

Public Policies

The public authorities represent another actor, perhaps the most important, within the changes of the area. Since the 1990s, the district has undergone a process of multi-stage regeneration. The requalification – with public-private funding directed more towards the physical restructuring of various places, and poor results in promoting social inclusion, providing public infrastructure for the local community, and integration of migrants (Fioretti 2018) – seems to have accelerated the trendification (ibid.) of the area. Although the rhetoric of regeneration has been based on discourses of social inclusion and participation, the interventions have been marked by contradictions. The urban interventions – strongly criticized by the local committees that were initially involved – seem to adhere to a vision conditioned by supra-local expectations: the neighbourhood was modified to attract potential tourists, consumers, investors and not to respond to the needs of its inhabitants. The analysis of the institutional actions and discourses has revealed a certain strategy of centralization and spectacularization of Pigneto, whose property prices have increased⁶ (Scandurra 2007) with the consequent risk of expulsion of its most vulnerable inhabitants.

What I want to emphasize is the role of policies in promoting aesthetic strategies for the restyling of public spaces, which become attractive and reassuring. The aim is to create spaces devoted to consumption, produced in such a way as to avoid any kind of conflict and with the aim of generating a disciplined, apolitical and safe sociability (Semi 2020). As with the street art in via Fanfulla da Lodi, the case of the pedestrian area (a portion of via del Pigneto home to the local market) is an example of this “beautification” of the neighbourhood. Since 2015 the street has been the subject of a series of restyling interventions within the process of regeneration: today it is the epicentre of the neighbourhood’s nightlife, with countless bars and clubs – opened thanks to the “sale” of licenses by the municipality – and the place where most security policies (based on the decorum-decay dyad) have been put into practice (Bertoni and Tulumello 2019). These operations cannot be condemned outright: the point is always to consider what are the interests at stake and the unequal effects.

It is interesting to note that here the presence of various venues with ethnic flavour refers to an image of multiculturalism: “we can speak of consumption of difference, a way to taste the Other more than to enter into a relationship with it” (Semi 2004: 92). As the anthropologist Giuseppe Scandurra says:

The pedestrian area, which is the heart of Pigneto, in this battlefield of representations, is narrated as *the ethnic square*, the *new Paris*, the example of *multicultural Rome*. The presence of immigrants [...] from a social problem can be transformed into a matter of urban design. For this reason, in addition to the operation of pure facade, also the conflicts of intercultural nature that arise in this stretch of via del Pigneto are reimagined. [...] This does not in any way mean that the conflicts that have the pedestrian area as a stage have ended in recent years. Surely, however, they are narrated by the media in a different way, hidden and heavily romanticized. (Scandurra 2007: 82; my translation)

⁶ Since Pigneto does not exist as an area in its own right, it is impossible to find precise data on the increase in the value of properties. In any case, the increase in the cost of housing is confirmed in all the interviews carried out.

Media representations

As the last citation suggests, another key player in the symbolic resignification of the neighbourhood is represented by the universe of media representations. They have built, since the 2000s, the success of Pigneto as a fashionable area: it can be said that a certain “critical infrastructure” (Zukin 1995; Semi 2004) has created, through a communication strategy based on the idea of the *Pigneto Village*, an attractive image for a middle-upper class; since the early 2000s many articles have been published in magazines, newspapers, blogs of various kinds that talk about Pigneto and enhance its characteristics as a new “place to be” in Rome. There are lots of articles (also for an international audience) that highlight the liveliness of Pigneto: as examples I could quote *The New York Times*, which in 2014 calls it an “enclave of cool”, *Vanity Fair*, which in 2015 speaks of it as “Rome’s Brooklyn”, or the website “TravelSupermarket”, which in 2017 considers Pigneto as one of the coolest neighbourhoods in Europe.⁷

Why is it important to consider these representations? We can say that consumer preferences are influenced by and are reflected in the language and images of the media. This apparatus, which in the era of the Internet acquires exponential strength, can forge a certain imaginary: giving importance to magazines, websites and blogs means recognizing that media discourse shapes contemporary urban experience, together with economic power, state power, and consumer culture (Zukin 2009a). The media images of cities and neighbourhoods function as important elements of a contemporary technology of power (ibid.), which establishes a close connection between capital, State and a new urban class. These representations romanticize the new urban lifestyle that characterizes the neighbourhood – such as the authentic atmosphere in via Fanfulla da Lodi – but leave very little room for reflection on who gains and who loses in this process of upgrading.

The Processes: Reinvention and Exploitation of the Collective Symbolic Capital

So far, I have presented some of the actors who played a role in the transformation – symbolic as well as material – of the neighbourhood. In this section I would like to focus on the processes at stake, taking up some of the aspects mentioned above.

As emerged in the description of the branding of Pasolini by commercial entrepreneurs (supported by policies and media), the construction of an imaginary is a politically constituted process based on existing discourses and symbols: the complexity of urban social life must necessarily be simplified in view of a symbolic consumption (Johansson 2012). The construction of imaginaries can be seen as a technique of a fictional narrative (ibid.), in which symbols, memories, and values are manipulated in view of a desired future. So, the links established between past, present and future are fundamental:

⁷ To view the complete articles see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/travel/in-rome-an-enclave-of-cool.html> ; <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/09/brooklyn-of-rome-pigneto>; <https://www.shortlist.com/news/the-coolest-places-to-visit-in-europe-travel-berlin-riga-ancoats>.

Identity is always, and always has been, in process of formation: it is in a sense forever unachieved. [...] What is important to note for now, however, is that much will depend on the nature of the links made, in the construction of notions of the identity of place, between past, present and future. The identity of places is very much bound up with the histories which are told of them, how those histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant. (Massey 1995: 186–187)

In Pigneto the image of authenticity – like that of multiculturalism – has been used in a consumer key. This involves a form of selection and reinvention (observable for example in the way in which the image of the proletarian past has been cleaned of its tough aspects and idealized). Reality is emptied of its deeper contents to become a consumable symbol.

We can speak of the desirability of working-class neighbourhoods (Annunziata 2008), a renewed desire for places that embody the image of the “small village of the past”. The paradox is obvious: a particular target of urban consumer (also inhabitants) wants ways and practices of life that no longer exist, except in terms of symbolic and aesthetic re-enactments. The thing is that authenticity becomes a real form of cultural power in space, an instrument of controlling not only the appearance, but also the fruition of urban places: the case of via Fanfulla da Lodi, which has become the favourite place of wealthy urban classes, proves it. The paradox of authenticity lies in the fact that the consumption of authenticity leads to the definitive transformation of neighbourhoods; it is therefore a force in action within urban spaces.

One cannot ignore the fact that behind the new forms of gentrification there is a crucial link between real estate speculation and cultural production. David Harvey (2002) introduces in this sense the notion of *collective symbolic capital* to explain how the real-estate business exploits the old and new cultural capital settled in a given place (in the forms of sociality, quality of life, artistic scene, gastronomic traditions, and peculiar characteristics, like authenticity and multiculturalism). It is therefore important to look at the political asymmetries that start from the cultural commons, and to analyse the material accumulation of value that is triggered by cultural production.

For what I hope to have shown, by invoking the concept of monopoly rent within the logic of capital accumulation, is that capital has ways to appropriate and extract surpluses from local differences, local cultural variations, and aesthetic meanings of no matter what origin. The shameless commodification and commercialization of everything is, after all, one of the hallmarks of our times. (Harvey 2002: 107)

So, the struggle to accumulate and exploit collective symbolic capital in a highly competitive world is on; but, as Harvey himself states, “this entrains in its wake all of the localized questions about whose collective memory, whose aesthetics, and who benefits” (2002: 105).

The Unequal Consequences

I return to the example of via Fanfulla da Lodi to examine the unequal consequences of the above-described processes, which involve losers and winners. As mentioned, in the street there are some apartments under seal: these three properties, now in a state of disrepair, for thirty

years housed a community of Senegalese, who were part of the fabric of the neighbourhood. As told to me by the Senegalese themselves, and by members of the neighbourhood committee that defends them, the seizure of the apartments in 2019 took place in ambiguous circumstances. The Senegalese were accused of selling counterfeit goods, when in fact the culprits did not reside in the buildings. On this occasion the fifteen people left homeless were discovered to be squatters despite having always paid the rent: the property had been sold in 2014 and they knew nothing about it.

This episode can be seen as part of the gentrification process, and it is significant that it happened in one of the most emblematic streets of the neighbourhood. According to this interpretation, the Senegalese represent the most marginal social strata of Pigneto, who are therefore driven out in the dynamics of increasing property values and attracting a population with higher purchasing power.

The case of the Senegalese also makes clear the operation of the securitarian ideology that tolerates consumption and represses in the name of decorum any behaviour or figure that deviates from the ordering logic of the dominant normativity. At work is what geographer Neil Smith (1996) called *the revanchist city*, namely a city that requires and activates spatial cleansing policies to ward off the social figures who are bearers of potential disorder, emblematically represented by the homeless or immigrants. We are in the order, aesthetic as well as social and political, of the *punitive city*, which creates enclosures, supports resentment, and excludes everything that does not fall within the canon of conformity, in which conformity means consumption.

In other words, we are facing the *city of decorum*, whose legitimate inhabitant is the good consumer, who does not want turbulence neither political nor aesthetic, but only wants to spend time in peace (Ascari 2019). This means that citizens must respond and correspond to a system of signs and styles, otherwise they are transformed into the object of perceptive repression and, if necessary, administrative and police repression. Decorum becomes an aesthetic-moral criterion, which, moreover, acts outside the logic of emergency and immediate intervention, but within a preventive logic (Tulumello and Bertoni 2019). So, the Senegalese have been punished not because they performed an outlaw action, but because of the simple fact that they exist and do not conform to certain aesthetic codes fixed by the hegemonic culture, making them indecorous and disposable elements.

The policies of perception act not only on the perceived that stigmatize, they also act on the percipient: these policies are radically changing the way we feel, not just what we feel, producing a natural way of seeing the city (Ascari 2019). The almost fixed presence in the pedestrian area of police cars, wanted by the citizens who fight against decay, makes us think about how the inhabitants themselves have become “operators of a morphological discipline”, introjecting a way of ordering the world and perceiving reality without figures considered inappropriate.

But, as will be shown in the next section, alternatives are possible.

Alternative Imaginaries

In this section I will focus on the East Rome scene, an underground musical-artistic community⁸ rooted in the area since the early 2000s, showing how – through unconventional practices and imaginaries – it generates spaces of possibilities, and questions the ordering logics of the dominant normativity. An important reference point for this community is the association *Fanfulla 5/a*, located in via Fanfulla da Lodi, that confirms its importance as an interpretative prism to observe and analyse processes that affect the entire neighbourhood.

By unconventionality I refer to the “resistant positioning” of this community, which unfolds on various levels. There is the resistance to the distortion of the neighbourhood, besieged by attempts for commercial exploitation and extracting value; the resistance to the productive mentality that invades the world of culture and society *tout court*, since profit is not the primary objective of artistic production; the resistance to rigid identity definitions, through an exaltation of the indefinite that is related to the concept of queerness; the resistance to the very fixity of the result, given the importance accorded to the artistic experimentation.

To better understand this resistance, it is useful to resort to some narratives collected in the interviews with various artists of the scene.

Stefano: Pigneto seems to me a kind of simulacrum ... that is, imaginaries have been created, but this imaginaries are for those who have to sell pizzas – and not even well done... we are talking about *Necci*, just to make an example, it is more the idea of a place that has who knows what, than the reality ... more advertising than the place itself, which in reality does not exist... what was to be put on the pedestal was the people like us, who made such a great effort, and we were here ... but no, not at all, here has become a place that focuses on the bistro who sells beers, but I'm interested in another aspect, which is being on the street, meeting people, understanding what they have to say...it's something I've always had and I don't think it's linked to aestheticizing... [...] Here is cool precisely because there are these clashes...for me it is interesting to see that there is this vitality that is based on the meeting clashes, meeting clashes that are very reminiscent of Spike Lee's movie *Do the Right Thing*.

This excerpt makes it clear how authenticity, which we have seen functioning as a sort of symbol that can be sold on the outside, is also used in the internal identity dimension. It is a question of positioning with respect to a context that is obviously romanticized, reinvented in a present that appears to be in transformation. The neighbourhood becomes the setting for a sort of conflict over authenticity, in which the fundamental marker is the use made of certain imaginaries: the artists represent themselves as internal to the context because they claim to appreciate the atmosphere, but not “distorting it”, as those outsiders who exploit its commercial potential.

⁸ The East Rome scene is composed of a series of heterogeneous groups in terms of origins, vocations, styles and musical influences; ranging from noise, punk, to sounds and performances of various types.

There is, therefore, a conflict between the sense of place (Feld and Basso 1996) locally built and a vision that treats Pigneto as a source of income. It is not important to verify the truth or not of these statements, but to note how the narratives bring out a stance. Those who do not participate in the local specificity are perceived as outsiders, who consume but do not really have a meaningful experience of the neighbourhood.

East Rome (a label created by the scene itself⁹ to indicate a fairly indefinite urban area that goes beyond the boundaries of Pigneto, trespassing in the adjacent area of Tor Pignattara) thus becomes not only a new geographical reference, but also a kind of identity marker, linked to the place, to the music – in this case not to a specific genre, but to a spontaneous way of doing the music – and more generally to an attitude that contrasts the competitive and ordering will of the “society of the performance” (Chicchi and Simone 2017).

Toni: This is the contrast, on the one hand people who want to make success, with glossy things to make money, on the other hand East Rome who started doing stuff simply because it was fun... it's cool do this things, we don't want to pigeonhole them, and therefore you have someone who plays electronics, others rock-and-roll, or more pop things, and this is the result of energies that moved in the area from the end of the Nineties/beginning of the new millennium. [...] In Pigneto there was a beautiful mix, for example, there were South American trans women, and they had clubs, we organized things inside. It was a really nice mix, so at the morning market of what is now the pedestrian area, you met the trans with the old Roman lady who told her the recipe for pasta ... it was very fascinating! Where I come from there is no such stuff, and it is the same mix that we propose, to which we aim ... a stuff that you cannot pigeonhole.

The musical practices of this community are contextualized within a way of doing things, full of contaminations – in this regard the neighbourhood seems to be a source of inspiration – and without commercial ambitions, in contrast with attitudes characterized by a performative action oriented to success, and above all, in contrasts with any attempt at pigeonholing, on a musical and identity level.

For this reason, I consider some aspects of this scene as queer: in particular I refer to those practices that bring forward an idea of fluidity, nonconformity, of breaking of rigid definitions. The queerness has to be understood as a discourse that wants to be liberating with respect to the use of rigid, polarized categories, for example, with regard to gender identity or male-female oppositions. The queerness refers to an “anti-essentializing ambiguity” (Taylor 2012: 144) that rejects any regime of normalization; queer becomes a resistant identity in a broad sense, as it resists to normalize and privilege certain criteria of identity: “Ultimately queer theory's target [has been] identity itself” (Ivi: 147).

Although the East Rome scene does not represent itself as queer – one of its characteristics is the willingness not to adhere to any label – it is undeniable that it has created the conditions for the opening of spaces of possibility, in which not homologated bodies express themselves: as I could observe on many occasions, the desire for emancipation and experimentation is perceived as soon as you come into contact with the scene, entering a concert

⁹ See the article “Borgata Boredom” in the music magazine *Blow Up* (2011) and the vinyl-manifesto “Borgata boredom – Music and Noises From Roma Est” of 2011.

or participating in any event: music, look, attitude, gender identity, all become expressions of the same search for freedom. The scene adopts a trans-gender perspective that recognizes, includes and acts all subjectivities/identities; the real connotation of the scene lies in rejecting any essential and fixed notion of subjectivity, it is not necessary to define oneself.

It is evident that as a community the East Rome scene is characterized by a code of rules, ways of doing and behaving that serve to create borders, but it is also true that it carries on an experimentation, which is reflected in music and in sociality. The East Rome scene is an inclusive community, not in the sense of wanting to include all possible subjectivities, but in the sense of carrying out an experimentation, outside of strategic calculations, which is reflected in music and – much more interesting for a socio-anthropological discourse – in sociality.

Giuseppe: I like the concept of community very much, because it brings together, the community for me is something inclusive. The East Rome scene for me is an experimental community. It is not only about experimenting in music or art, but *new rules of sociability are also experimented*. For the first time I am part of a community that represent me. We are all people attentive to an artistic-musical discourse, then you can be an artist or not, however you are permeable to a cultural-artistic discourse, all the people here are tolerant, they are open to diversity, and this is not easy. There are few rules, but they do a lot.

This new sociality is mostly conveyed through artistic-musical contents; this is the strength of this scene, which does not need political slogans but uses music to experiment, as a form of sincere and radical expression, which remains extraneous to market calculations. The body becomes a political laboratory, a space for carrying out processes of (counter) subjectivation in which knowledge passes through the somatic experimentation. Listening to distorted music, freeing the body through dancing, experiencing pleasant sensations while being together lost in music or joking with friends: a process of carnal knowledge is produced (Petrilli 2020) that is not easy to translate with words.

Vito: The musical genre and the alternative projects, even if in a non-verbal way, are a distortion, and that distortion translates into people, even those who don't know that musical genre, because it is experimental, but that experimentation gives you the feeling to be able to experiment even in human relationships. *Fanfulla is a laboratory of sociality*, a laboratory that arises from a distortion that in my opinion derives from a content contained in the artistic project...this means that Fanfulla achieves a social goal even without verbalization, but through sounds, and here the social value of art and music, which in Italy is going through a difficult phase, must be recognized... that distortion of sounds produces a distortion of human relationships, breaks the traditional logic of social relationships. The communication bridge is the musical distortion ... I am talking about music that creates distortion, and the distortion that affects human and social relationships by breaking the patterns of the standard society.

The meeting spaces of this community, not based on a commercial logic, are fundamental in this sense. Nino, owner of an LGBTQ+ comics publisher, who in past was part of the internal organization of *Fanfulla 5/a*, says to me in an interview in 2021:

Fanfulla 5/a gives space to everyone, it is neither a company nor a club, it is a place made by people. I lived Fanfulla 5/a as a kind of landlord that must be respected... Respecting Fanfulla 5/a means respecting the diversity of the people who are inside, and they are Fanfulla 5/a... precisely the people who are inside and are enjoying the evening, because it is a safe place, a home. Fanfulla 5/a is a kind of comfort zone for people who feel out of this world... I am a freak, a nerd out of the world, at Fanfulla 5/a I have never felt out of place, it is a safe space and here I feel at ease.

It is interesting to note the contrast between certain securitarian policies that tend to order the world, assigning positions and making certain figures feel out of place, and the perceived atmosphere of *Fanfulla 5/a*, in which, as Nino states, “you never feel out of place”. It’s curious that he speaks of a “safe space”, giving to security a meaning of acceptance, whereas on the contrary security has become the workhorse for repressive policies that create exclusions.

The spaces collectively created by the artistic community function as safe spaces in which to express oneself without inhibitions and without the need for labels, at a musical and, above all, identitarian level. I deliberately use the concept of safe space because it has been reported to me in various interviews; nevertheless, there are some critical issues regarding the idea of safe space. The harshest criticism refers to the defensive meaning of the term, as a protective reaction against an unjust world, from which one seeks refuge in retired environments with peers. Such criticisms push for another declination, that of “brave spaces” (Brian and Kristi 2013): places of courage in which to rebuild new imaginaries and fight against the heteronormative structures of society. Surely, safe space does not exist as a universal formula, but concerns the way communities and spaces are built (Davis 1999): *Fanfulla 5/a* represents in this sense a safe space.

The opening of a series of associative circles that host events and musical performances (such as *Fanfulla 5/a* or *Trenta Formiche*), summer festivals in public spaces (such as the one held at the *Torriane Park* in 2012 and 2013), performative-workshop spaces (such as *Pescheria*), rehearsal rooms and artist studios (such as *Studio 54*) that meet the needs of this growing community, has allowed over the years the formation of a network that has conveyed unconventional artistic languages and has expressed a form of resistance to those regulatory norms that govern life.

The artistic events and the numerous opportunities for community encounter can become spaces of resistance against the *ego-centrism* (Chicchi and Simone 2017) that dominates all aspects of society and against the socio-spatial consequences of an anthropological model dominated by a neoliberal rationality that radicalizes the domination of the market within the social order. The rationality of neoliberal government pursues an idea of “self as enterprise”, dispossessing individuals of fundamental rights and leading them to value – with a tendentially individualistic approach to social action – ever greater aspects of life, thanks also to the productive use of new technologies: “the entrepreneurialization of society and of life as such becomes the signature mark of the contemporary urban condition” (Rossi 2017: 247). Although the positions of these resistant subjectivities are not totally separable from the “dominant sphere” (in a sense the artists can be considered as gentrifiers with certain cultural and economic capital, who often look at the space of the neighbourhood with aestheticizing eyes), they open up spaces in which alternative processes of self-making are made possible. In doing so, they make possible the constitution of novel sorts of subjectivity

and resist the processes of internalizing power through alternative modes of self-making based upon experimentation, pleasure and solidarity.

Processes of regulation and social control are by now widespread in urban spaces, to the point of contaminating the space itself of the bodies; within the artistic spaces of the scene there are glimpses of possibilities for constructing alternatives.

This is particularly important in view of the recent changes of the area. As previously stressed, the neighbourhood has become a reference point for leisure and nightlife: this resignification has had repercussions on public spaces, which appear more and more consumer-oriented and do not admit eccentric, non-consumerist, disinterested behaviours. As emerged during my observations, often it is the same “community” (a selected portion of it) that represses in the name of decorum behaviours considered deviant.

The role of these underground cultural spaces within the neighbourhood is therefore fundamental to dismantle a narrative that addresses the theme of sociality only in terms of decay and public order.

Conclusions

Starting from the example of a single street, this contribution has shown the transformations of the Pigneto neighbourhood in Rome, focusing on the symbolic aspects and imaginaries that enter these transformations. The dynamics observed in via Fanfulla da Lodi are linked to widespread worldwide macro-processes. The transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist system, the delineation of spatial configurations in the function of capital accumulation (Harvey 2001), the transformation of cities into “entertainment machines” within an experiential economy (Pine and Gilmore 2013), are tendencies that have changed the appearance of contemporary cities. Local policies, through an entrepreneurial turn (Harvey 1989), create areas attractive and functional to the localization of activities and people related to innovation, creativity, and especially with greater economic capital (Florida 2002), encouraging new forms of consumption and lifestyles. With my analysis I tried to underline the way in which certain imaginaries are used as sources of value. The contribution has identified the leading actors in the upscaling of the neighbourhood, stressing the ideological character of some urban interventions, media representations, and commercial activities. The rhetoric of regeneration based on creativity and culture, such as that of security and decorum, are indispensable narratives for the functioning of the consumer city.

An important issue is to assess the extent to which the recent change in the neighbourhood has produced a “happy modernization”, or conversely has accelerated the formation of an unequal scenario, saturated by the differential effects of the accumulation of power and wealth. The case of the forced eviction of the Senegalese makes us think of the excluding effects of this urban model.

Securitarian policies create margins, but on the other hand the analysis of the East Rome scene brings to light the way in which from spaces considered marginal new forms of sociality are carried out. Without falling into easy polarizations, but trying to understand the narratives, the positioning and the relationship with the neighbourhood of this artistic community, the contribution has shown how these cultural spaces – such as Fanfulla 5/a – give room for

creative abilities and forms of resistance against the normalization of bodies in urban space: they function as incubators of unconventional forms of expression; they include subjectivities that do not find spaces for expression within the ordinary tales of the city; they develop practices that reject the neoliberal logic of profit that has contaminated the world of culture and society *tout court*. These practices, often contradictory and complex entanglements, take on a political sense – a new “political” – because they reconstruct senses of place and, against the normalization of subjects and through a creative work of imagination and self-formation, give life to new urban paradigms.

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