

Stop Pasolini

Excavating the social underbelly of a gentrifying neighbourhood in Rome

Nick Dines

Via Braccio da Montone cuts through the bottom end of a former *borghetto* (shantytown) in Pigneto, a district located to the immediate east of the historic centre of Rome.¹ Today this pavement-less thoroughfare is flanked by an assortment of reconditioned brick shacks set in private gardens and low-rise pre-war condominiums that open directly onto the street. At the intersection with Via Fanfulla da Lodi, protected by a canopy of shady trees, is the long-established neighbourhood bar now officially entitled “Necci dal [since] 1924”. The preeminent venue in Pigneto’s nightlife scene since a change in ownership and major refurbishment in 2007, Bar Necci’s success over the last decade has prompted the opening of similar establishments in the immediate surrounding area.

A few metres along from Bar Necci it is possible to make out the words “Stop Pasolini” scrawled in dark grey letters near the foot of a three-storey block.² At first sight, this nondescript if cryptic piece of graffiti appears somewhat out of sync with the flamboyant murals, stencils and stickers that clamour for the public’s attention on more prominent walls nearby and which have enabled Pigneto to take its place in the Italian capital’s pantheon of street art. But the enigmatic plea starts to make sense if one considers that this part of the neighbourhood has manufactured its sophisticated ambience around none other than Pier Paolo Pasolini. In the late 1950s – as is now common knowledge – the Friulan poet and filmmaker started to frequent Necci during his peregrinations around Rome’s rapidly expanding periphery, and the bar would later become a logistical base for the production of his first feature film *Accattone*, parts of which were shot on adjacent streets. Necci’s current owners milk the bar’s historic associations with various homages to Pasolini on the premises, including a vending machine that offers you a one-in-three chance of acquiring a pin badge with the bust of the great man himself. There are also numerous Pasolini-themed murals in the vicinity, such as Pier Paolo’s giant black and white eye that gazes towards the original spot where the opening scene in *Accattone* was filmed.

Once a relentless critic of consumer capitalism and bourgeois conformism and hagiographer of the urban lumpenproletariat, Pasolini now finds himself implicated in neighbourhood ‘renewal’ and an accessory to the commodification of *Roma popolare*. “Stop Pasolini” would hence appear to be a comment on the direction that this particular corner of Pigneto has recently taken. The provenance and significance of the two words are open to interpretation. Perhaps it was an outburst of anger from someone connected to the anarchist centre across the street, which after years of lone resistance has found itself gradually hemmed in by swanky night spots. Or maybe it is an example of hipster

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¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of Sandra Annunziata, one of the most astute writers on gentrification in Italy and someone who knew Pigneto well.

² A picture taken by the Author can be seen [here](#).

irony, daubed in just like other epigrams dotted about the district such as “I ♥ Degrado” (I love urban blight) and “Rispettiamo solo il degrado” (We only respect blight).

Street art, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bar Necci, refurbished informality and popular heritage together tell us much – but also very little – about Pigneto today. On the one hand, these elements provide mainly outsiders with the opportunity to embellish their enthusiastic portraits of a “trendy leftwing neighbourhood” (*The Guardian* 13/07/11) and “Rome’s answer to Bushwick, Brooklyn” (*New York Times* 19/03/14), but they also represent the stigmata for caustic critiques about demographic change, the disappearance of local shops, and rent gaps. Either way, Pasolini and the other props get deployed to define what is at stake in Pigneto.

On the other hand, the same common denominators operate to ring-fence the physical, social and moral boundaries of the neighbourhood. Pigneto is here, but it is not there: it gets felt in quirky, tumbledown lanes like Via Braccio da Montone, but not among the eight-storey post-war residential blocks a few streets away. The selected tropes filter out the mundane, not readily perceptible and sometimes inconvenient pasts and presents: the numerous middle-class enclaves that have existed since Pigneto’s inception that counter the image of a proletarian stronghold; the histories of rent hikes, dispossessions and campaigns for social housing that predate the area’s recent changes; the voluntary relocation of many low-income residents to modern apartments in outlying suburbs during the 1970s and 1980s and the subsequent return of later generations to Pigneto as middle-class newcomers; the unscrupulous locals who rent out uninhabitable cellars to migrant families who are always first in line for eviction and who have little part to play in imaginaries of popular Rome; or the collective struggles to combat building speculation and to create new spaces of intercommunity sociability, such as the ex-Snia lake and park, which have seen the active participation of long-established and new residents alike.

Even graffiti has a far longer, ambiguous and contested tradition than either its lionizers or detractors would have us believe. For instance, a few hundred metres to the east of Bar Necci, emblazoned in thick black capital letters on the marble base of a 1960s lower-middle-class apartment block, is a mural that never features on street art lists. The words “MARIO VIVE” (Mario Lives) accompanied by a Celtic Cross commemorate the murder of a sixteen-year-old neofascist in 1975 outside what was once the local branch of the Italian Social Movement. After years of being intermittently defaced by political opponents, the mural was finally eliminated during a municipal decorum campaign in late 2017. Before it was restored two months later, a Fratelli d’Italia MP, Fabio Rampelli, wrote a public post to Virginia Raggi, accusing Rome’s mayor of dishonouring the memory of “a whole popular district” and being accomplice to the continual desecration of the city’s walls that were covered in “words in Arabic, the scrawls of mythomaniacs, coded messages from Satanic Sects, instructions left by nomads for breaking into apartments, and the usual threats aimed at the police”. Both Rampelli’s rant – in perfect tune with the hate-mongering hysteria that characterizes Italy’s political Right – and the mural itself confound the lingering assertions that Pigneto, like neighbouring San Lorenzo, is united in anti-fascist values.

Such contradictions and irritating details are easily overlooked or denied. “Mario Vive? That’s not Pigneto, that’s Malatesta”. As Pigneto becomes increasingly associated with gentrification in local, national and international imaginaries, both from celebratory and critical standpoints, ideas about the neighbourhood tend to get collapsed into a predetermined set of signifiers. This is not to deny that gentrification is very real in Pigneto or that it is not embroiled in instances of structural and symbolic violence. Rather, it is simply to point out that any attempt to understand a gentrifying neighbourhood will be wholly inadequate if the narrative approach clings to class and political identities that no longer exist or perhaps never existed in the first place.

“Ha ha! You live in the bo-ho neighbourhood!”

Since 2013 I have lived with my family on the southern edge of Pigneto. Although I had previously frequented Pigneto for its leisure and cultural facilities, it is primarily through the multiple social networks associated with my children's school that I have come to learn and appreciate certain neighbourhood dynamics. On the basis of this personal experience, here I want to start to outline some of the more prosaic dimensions that I believe have been largely missing from discussions about Pigneto and gentrification.

First of all, a brief (and very incomplete) summary of the social composition of the school is in order. The families can be divided into three broad 'residential' groups. About a third of parents are second- or third-generation *pignetari*. This low figure

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is perhaps not surprising if we consider that until recently Pigneto had one of the highest over-65 populations in Rome (Scandurra 2007), but it is also a vivid illustration of the extent of residential turnover during the last decade. Some of these 'natives' have actually returned to the neighbourhood after periods spent elsewhere, occasionally thanks to an apartment becoming available following the death of a relative. Around 20% of parents are of foreign origin, which is considerably lower than the proportion for other schools nearby. The total number, however, continually fluctuates, especially among the sizeable Bangladeshi community (see Pompeo 2011), as a result of changes in residence or onward migration as households strive for improved employment and living conditions.

The largest group of parents is made up of new Italian residents, some of whom have relocated from other districts in Rome but mainly originate from other parts of Italy. In the latter case, most people have either remained in the city following higher education or have moved to the capital for work, and have gravitated towards Pigneto due to the relatively cheap cost of housing, the proximity to city-centre workplaces and the attraction of the area's social and architectural diversity. Some of the non-Roman Italians work, like the 'natives', for municipal and government bodies, others are employed in cultural and entertainment industries or education and research institutions, while only a handful are in managerial or professional positions. A substantial proportion of the non-Roman Italian group, especially among women, are in insecure or temporary work and a few of those who own their apartments have rented rooms on Airbnb to make ends meet. While parents from all three groups form their own cliques, the interaction between and within them greatly depends on the friendships formed between children, but also on the intensity with which family members use local public spaces and amenities.

For the majority of the residents in question, the neighbourhood is a malleable space that stretches and contracts concertina-style as far as people's different networks and routines carry them. There is little interest among parents to partake in quibbles about the boundaries of 'Pigneto' and to indulge in its links with famous people. Bar Necci is rarely a destination of choice (it is too far from school, too busy and too full of non-locals), but its notoriety and location nevertheless make it a key coordinate in mental maps of the area, at least until some other place assumes greater collective significance, such as the nearby *campetto* (little football pitch). Over the last six years, street art has almost never been a topic of conversation, apart from the time a giant mural advertising an Italian Netflix series was painted on the side of a building opposite the school which initially aroused people's curiosity and triggered debates about its artistic merits, but after a few days it faded into the background.

Clichés about “cool Pigneto” commonly deployed by the media to promote or chastise the area hold

little meaning and are substituted by commonplaces about the richness of social relations and support networks afforded by the school. Those who possess friends in the neighbouring white-collar district of San Giovanni typically repeat the refrain that the situation on the other side of the railway tracks is instead one of isolation and boredom. The school functions as a marker of social and cultural distinction that differentiates native, migrant and new resident families from Pigneto's night-time users who clog the streets with traffic and patronize bars and restaurants that, for the most part, are rarely frequented by locals.

At the same time, most new residents are well aware of the transformation of both the school and the neighbourhood and how they are variously implicated, for instance, in the increased desirability of both. There is general respect for the knowledge and memories of people with roots in the neighbourhood, but there is no infatuation with the idea of the 'popular' both because some local figures are known to be reactionaries or bullies or both, but also because some 'native' parents are and have always been 'middle class'. The activities that revolve around the school – from the acts of solidarity among parents to self-organized campaigns in support of extending *ius soli* to migrant children; from football-related camaraderie to various forms of (inclusive and exclusive) cultural consumption – function as levers with which parents negotiate, counter, dissociate themselves but also compound the effects of gentrification in the local area, even if the term itself is almost never used.

Forget Pasolini?

Conflating the representation of a gentrifying neighbourhood with a figure of facile derision such as the hipster or insisting on ritual arguments that pit vulnerable natives against predatory incomers is not only reductive: it neglects the continually shifting dynamics of class composition and is oblivious to the everyday tensions and alliances that emerge between different residents and their divergent cultural, social and economic relationships with the neighbourhood. As Michaela Benson and Emma Jackson have recently argued, there is a need "to shift the conversation from the blunt and binary lens within which gentrification research seems to become repeatedly entrenched – the structural and economic determinism of Marxist approaches versus the cultural lens oriented towards human agency; the gentrifier versus the non-gentrifier; the new middle class versus the working class. These binaries serve little more than to reify identities and stagnate debate, while gentrification continues as a classed and classifying process full of contradiction and ambiguity" (2018, p.77). With a similar concern, "excavating the social underbelly" in the title of this article was not a call to search out some inner truth behind the veneer of street art or the rhetoric of popular Rome, but a more modest invitation to take gentrification's humdrum details and unintended consequences more seriously.

Pier Paolo Pasolini never lived in Pigneto but he ventured out to the neighbourhood from the city centre to meet with non-professional actors who, in turn, travelled in from peripheries further afield. It was in Pigneto where Pasolini first set out to select and aestheticize the constituents of popular Rome for the big screen. As such, Pasolini might be considered a precursor to gentrification rather than its antithesis. This is not to belittle the man's artistic production nor is to discount the commemoration of his persona on the streets of Pigneto, be this commercialized or otherwise. Instead, it is a reminder that the local nostalgia for Pasolini must be understood, first and foremost, as a particular (contested) discourse about place. Otherwise the filmmaker risks to become little more than a distraction that impedes our ability to craft a truly trenchant portrait of a neighbourhood undergoing major change.

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