The Zone

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There is a sort of constitutional taboo for a writer coming from Italy to talk about a topic such as "the city". Since Italo Calvino wrote his book *Invisible cities*, we have spent years speculating about cities. "The city" as a topic has been exploited more or less as a metaphor for everything. However, almost every important city has been exploited and read as a possible text. Both "emotional topography" of the city and the attempt to "semiologize" it had become quite fashionable practices.

When you write fiction in Italy there exist a sort of a moral/civil commitment to be connected to the place where you live, which quite often is a city. As if there is a demand to bring "reality" into your work by transforming the space where events are set by turning the city into one of the characters.

A few months before I traveled here, some other writers and I came up with an idea to start a new online magazine about Rome; it would be our attempt to understand what was going on in our city, analyzing social events which could have not been explained with the usual categories we were familiar with. Rome has changed a great deal in the last few years. We had a left wing administration which used the alibi of "multiculturalism" to make people forget that immigrants need social rights much more than ethnic cinema festivals (which by the way they never took part in). For example, there is this district in Rome, called Pigneto, located communal houses very often built without any permission. For years it was just an historical lower and middle class district, and people who lived there were quite fond of their place. Then immigrants started to rent flats there, and more recently it became quite a fashionable place to live because young bohemian newcomers started moving there. They opened ateliers, cafés, bookstores, since it was still quite a cheap place to exploit and good way reinforce utopia on earth and sell the concept of a "multicultural district" as if they were trying to sell a car. The inner transcendence in such a concept can have bad consequences.

Some months ago the main Italian newspapers printed the story that some Neo-Nazi men wearing swastikas on their t-shirts broke into a Bengali shop in Pigneto and destroyed it. The next day people were demonstrating on the street against racism. Pigneto, all of a sudden, became a symbol of the fight against racism (again in a transcendental way, it was not a fight to find a cause-effect relationship of what had happened, but a fight against an ideology – racism – in the name of a more suitable one, multiculturalism). A week or so later, a fifty-year-old man

with a big Che Guevara tattoo on his arm, who was born in Pigneto and who is considered a sort of pioneer there, and dislikes both immigrants and the new bohemians, finally revealed the truth. It was he who had organized the expedition to the Bengali shop with some local men who were happy to help him. It had nothing to do with Neo-Nazis, and the swastika that they were supposedly wearing was a fictional element similar to the ones you invent for creating urban legends. What actually happened was that a North African man, who was accidentally in that shop, had stolen a native Pigneto woman's wallet, and he didn't want to give it back. The wrong act was not stealing a wallet, but stealing the wallet of someone who belongs to the autochthonous Pigneto community. There are some fundamental rules even criminals must respect. Someone who tries to be too smart and who breaks this sort of ancestral code of honor needs to be punished because he can be dangerous. The community uses him as an external element of possible entropy by investing him of some specific bad qualities. Let's take as an example what the Slovenian philosopher Zizek says about Jews and Nazis. "It is not a question that Nazis attributed false properties to the Jews; the point is why did the Nazis need the figure of the Jew as part of their ideological project? It is clear why: their project was to have capitalism […] which would magically maintain what they thought previous eras shared, a sense of organic community and so on, so in order to have this, you must locate the source of evil not in capitalism as such, but in some foreign intruder, that through its profiteering just introduces imbalance and disturbs the natural cooperation between productive capital and labor". [1]

Some months ago I was translating the comic book *Droopsie Avenue* by William Eisner, in which he explains how the Bronx in New York was born and how it developed. This process reminded me a lot of what is going on in Rome; the idea that your experience of a city is founded on a sense of possession and genuine belonging. Which brings me back to the magazine we wanted to start. That event with the so called Nazis in Pigneto opened up new categories for us since we didn't know how to react to it. Justice was in fact rooted in a devotion to the community. So it was as if Rome-the city itself-was rebelling against the categorization that bohemians and artists had tried to create for it. Or maybe it was rebelling against the idea that writers and artists are supposed to have a better insight into the world - or the small geographic world where they belong - than other people.

While I lived in Berlin for two years with many other writers, artists, actors, film-makers, musicians and the like, I had an apartment in Prenzlauer Berg. Prenzlauer Berg is a paradise of the social democratic idea of political correctness. Organic food and homosexual relationships

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[1] Slavoj Zizek, *The Believer,* July 2004

are available to everybody in order that they not feel guilty for environmental problems or endemic male chauvinism. Yuppies of the cultural sector make sure that people enjoy their residency there in the same way that some other people enjoy sexual tourism in Thailand, all projecting a certain image of their social identity. So it seems that everybody is producing some cultural values there, except for people who are actually working in Prenzlauer Berg, such as immigrants who work in their own shops but who don't live there and don't hang out in cafés or concerts at night. This leads of course to a sense of guilt that social democracy, with all its efforts, can't hide completely. And it also leads to a paradoxical situation in which everybody stands at some distance from the community to which one actually belongs, assuming he belongs to a virtual community that doesn't exist anymore, and thus defining his individual identity in opposition to the very same collective identity he supposed to be a member of. Let's take one of the possible categories: artists in Prenzlauer Berg. Every single artist constantly complains about all the other artists surrounding him, about their struggle for coolness and fancy clothes, accusing them of some lack of authenticity. He keeps talking about how things were better just a few years before, how the city used to be different, and more modest and more genuine, and how proud he is of having been there when things were like that. This short-term nostalgia I think is one of the most common feelings of people living in the cities of the west. Afraid of changes, and the transformations that they themselves take part in (sometimes in a very active way), they prefer to conjure - and miss - a lost world that is actually just the projection of their inability to accept the new world. In the same way that death is hidden and removed from daily life in western societies, poverty and social unease migrates more and more to our cities' suburbs. But again, the perverse paradox is that these suburbs operate in the middle class imagination as a last refuge for authenticity and real life, even if it then is necessary to distance oneself from the utopia in order for the utopia itself to work properly.