

# THE CONTAGION: THE EVOLUTION OF *BORGATARI* FROM PIER PAOLO PASOLINI TO WALTER SITI

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La riflessione attorno alla borgata occupa uno spazio importante nel lavoro letterario e cinematografico di Pier Paolo Pasolini. La sua principale preoccupazione, lungamente argomentata nei suoi ultimi anni di attività, era la trasformazione dei borgatari in piccolo borghesi. Pasolini credeva che questa mutazione antropologica fosse causata dal periodo di espansione economica attraversato dall'Italia durante gli anni '60. A questa analisi si contrappone quella elaborata dallo scrittore e critico Walter Siti, il quale nel romanzo *Il contagio* che ha pubblicato per Mondadori nel 2008 sostiene invece che nell'Italia contemporanea si stia verificando invece il fenomeno opposto, cioè che sia la "borghesia che si sta (per così dire) 'imborgatando'". Questo cambio di paradigma porta alla luce una serie di considerazioni: in quali modi e con quali tempi i borghesi hanno cominciato a ssumere comportamenti e modi di pensare generalmente associati con i cosiddetti borgatari? È possibile supporre una nuova mutazione antropologica successiva a quella teorizzata da Pasolini? Tenterò di rispondere a queste domande attraverso il romanzo di Pasolini *Ragazzi di vita* e gli scritti elaborati dal poeta friulano nei suoi ultimi anni di vita. Per quanto riguarda, il cambio di paradigma teorizzato da Walter Siti, farò riferimento al suo romanzo del 2008, *Il contagio*.

The question of *borgata* has always been central in all Pier Paolo Pasolini's works. During the last years of his life, he expressed in many artistic forms his preoccupation for the evolution of *borgatari* in *piccolo borghesi*, intercepting an anthropological mutation that, in his view, was the result of the economic boom experienced in Italy during the sixties. However, Walter Siti, one of the most important living Italian writers, and most eminent Pasolini's scholar, in his 2008 novel *Il contagio* proposed to overturn Pasolini's analysis positing that nowadays "non sono le borgate che si stanno imborghesendo, ma è la borghesia che si sta (per così dire) 'imborgatando'". Siti's one is certainly an ambitious change of paradigm and it immediately raises a number of questions: to what extent, in recent times bourgeoisie embraced kind of values and behaviours usually associated to *borgatari*? Is it possible to posit a new anthropological mutation in Italy successive to the one theorized by Pasolini? In this paper, I will try to analyze the environmental, political and anthropological causes that led to this change of paradigm. I will try also to investigate how the perception of *borgata* has evolved and has been constructed by mass media in the collective imaginary. To reach these aims, I will closely analyze the concepts of *borgata* and *borgatari* in Pasolini's *Ragazzi di vita* and Siti's *Il contagio*.

*Io voglio inocularmi il presente, capire in me la malattia del mondo*  
Walter Siti

*Per la minoranza / per l'opposizione*  
Simona Menicocci

## 1. Introduction

In the introduction written for the 1998 edition of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Meridiano* – co-edited with Silvia de Laude – the Italian critic and writer Walter Siti reports a quotation where Pasolini defines bourgeoisie as a “vera e propria malattia. Una malattia molto contagiosa”.<sup>1</sup> The *contagion* Pasolini refers to can

<sup>1</sup> WALTER SITI, “Introduzione”, in PIER PAOLO PASOLINI, *Opere Complete*, (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), LVII.



be defined as the adoption by people living in Rome's suburbs – *borgatari*, in Romanesco dialect – of attitudes and behaviour patterns typical of bourgeois mentality. As he stated in many articles and essays, people living in the suburbs – mostly poor, unemployed, marginalized people – abandoned the system of values based on solidarity, indolence, hospitality that, according to Pasolini, traditionally characterized them, in order to embrace a bourgeoisie's system of values based on capitalistic competition and obsession for consumerism. This contagion is also the focus of Walter Siti's 2008 novel, unequivocally titled *Il contagio*. However, after reading the novel, it is immediately clear that Siti's intent is to subvert Pasolini's assumption, claiming that in recent times “non sono le borgate che si stanno imborghesendo, ma è la borghesia che si sta (per così dire) ‘imborgatando’”<sup>2</sup>. In his novel Siti, like Pasolini, uses Rome's suburbs as the privileged field in which to observe and point out this change of paradigm which, as the one previously described by Pasolini, is related to specific cultural and economic conditions. Before analysing Siti's *overturn*, it might be worth recalling Pasolini's conception of contagion, and why Rome's suburbs are, now as it was then, such an indispensable point of observation.

## 2. *Borgata and borgatari*

Pier Paolo Pasolini arrives in Rome the first days of January 1950 accompanied by his mother. Immediately he gets interested in Rome's suburbs, which will be the setting – along with its inhabitants – of his first novel published in 1955: *Ragazzi di vita*. In particular, Pasolini's attention was caught by the vitality of the suburbs' inhabitants and by the various *codes* that ruled the borgata's life. As claimed by Brevini, Pasolini was fascinated by “l'irriducibile vitalità di questi ragazzi che nella loro saison en enfer trovano ancora la forza di affermare un disperato, tenero, desiderio di felicità, colmi quasi di gratitudine per la vita”<sup>3</sup>.

Pasolini was also interested by the urban configuration of the *borgate* and by the reasons – both ideological and economic – that led to their construction. Pasolini raised the suspect that those areas, constituted by dilapidated structures and without connections to the city centre, had to be considered as a sort of *concentration camp*; basically a restricted and abandoned territory far from the urban core of the city, where to group and isolate people who have been

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<sup>2</sup> WALTER SITI, *Il contagio* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008), 323.

<sup>3</sup> FRANCO BREVINI, *Per conoscere Pasolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 1981), 153.

excluded by the rising economic boom that developed in Italy during the Sixties:

Non sono abitazioni umane, queste che si allineano sul fango: ma stabbi per animali, canili [...]. Ma qual è il criterio stilistico, sociologico e umano di queste nuove abitazioni? Lo stesso. Siamo sempre alla nozione di campo di concentrazione.<sup>4</sup>

However, these suburbs were also a space of solidarity, welcoming, mutual help; a space for exactly those values that were disappearing in Italian society replaced by the new dogmas of competition, obsession for consumerism, yearning for social recognition that, according to Pasolini, characterized the new rampant bourgeoisie. Therefore, from this point of view, *borgate*, especially for their inhabitants, did not represent only a *ghetto* but also a sort of *shelter*; a place with recognizable codes where, by adhering and respecting those codes, it was possible to find reception and protection.

The representation of this social and biopolitical space and the values it preserved, became a crucial goal for Pasolini's work. Not only because, as stated by Panzieri, *borgate* represented a place where to recreate a sort of myth "entro il quale, pur sotto altre forme, possa riprendere corpo la perduta felicità friulana",<sup>5</sup> but also because they represented a model of values that were alternative to the dominant one – which Pasolini found profoundly aberrant – embodied by the Italian bourgeoisie. The problem is that *borgate* were not indifferent to the changes happening in Italy, but, according to Gianni Biondillo, they became from Pasolini the privileged place where to observe and describe these transformations:

La borgata è il punto di osservazione della trasformazione essendo al contempo luogo causato dalle trasformazioni della società da parte del capitalismo ma, anche, luogo dove ancora i valori borghesi non hanno senso.<sup>6</sup>

In particular, Pasolini was interested in how these bourgeois values penetrated and influenced the *borgate's* inhabitants, especially the youngest generations. The Italian poet thought that at a certain point the young generations of *borgatari* started to feel a sort of *shame* for their economic and cultural situation, developing a desire to change their status:

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<sup>4</sup> PIER PAOLO PASOLINI, *Storie della città di Dio. Racconti e cronache romane (1950-1966)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 120.

<sup>5</sup> FULVIO PANZIERI, *Guida alla lettura di Pasolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), 31.

<sup>6</sup> GIANNI BIONDILLO, *Pasolini: Il corpo della città* (Milan: Unicopli, 2003), 63.

Per esempio, i sottoproletari, fino a pochi anni fa, rispettavano la cultura e non si vergognavano della propria ignoranza. Anzi, erano fieri del proprio modello popolare di analfabeti in possesso però del mistero della realtà. Guardavano con un certo disprezzo i “figli di papà”, i piccoli borghesi, da cui si dissociavano, anche quando erano costretti a servirli. Adesso, al contrario, essi cominciano a vergognarsi della propria ignoranza: hanno abiurato dal proprio modello culturale (i giovanissimi non lo ricordano neanche più, l’hanno completamente perduto), e il nuovo modello che cercano di imitare non prevede l’analfabetismo e la rozzezza.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the price to be paid for fulfilling this desire was extremely high: it meant to abandon the values traditionally characterizing *borgate*’s inhabitants and hence to lose their *purity*. The reflection quoted above, and contained in Pasolini’s 1975 collection of essays *Scritti corsari*, was written twenty years after *Ragazzi di vita*, and it comes from a historical context where, so to say, the anthropological mutation has already taken place. However, in Pasolini’s first novel there are already clues of such a *mutation* and of the consequent loss it carries with. Let us focus, for instance, on the narrative development of Riccetto – the main character of *Ragazzi di vita* – and precisely on the two particular moments that open and close the novel, when Riccetto is forced by the circumstances to take a decision that is full of implications.

In the first moment, placed at the end of the first chapter, Riccetto is canoeing in the river with a few friends while he sees a little swallow that is drowning in the water. Ignoring the protests of his friends, he risks to tip over the boat and jumps into the river – endangering his own life – in order to save the swallow:

Il Riccetto li aspettava seduto sull’erba sporca della riva, con la rondine tra le mani. “E che l’hai sarvata a ffà,” gli disse Marcello, “era così bello vedella che se moriva!” Il Riccetto non gli rispose subito. “È tutta fracica,” disse dopo un po’, “aspettiamo che s’asciughi!” Ci volle poco perché s’asciugasse: dopo cinque minuti era là che rivolava tra le compagne sopra il Tevere, e il Riccetto ormai non la distingueva più dalle altre.<sup>8</sup>

Riccetto puts his own life in danger in order to save another creature, so demonstrating audacity and altruism, but here he is still very young and barely touched by the selfishness and individualism that are typical of the adult age or, according to Pasolini, typical of the Italian raising capitalistic bourgeoisie.

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<sup>7</sup> PIER PAOLO PASOLINI, *Scritti corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 2015), 24.

<sup>8</sup> PIER PAOLO PASOLINI, *Ragazzi di vita* (Milan: Garzanti, 2007), 108.

At the end of the novel, we find an older Riccetto who has just been released from jail after having served for three years because of a crime that he did not commit; paradoxically – or maybe not – he was arrested while he was trying to eventually embark a respectable path, getting engaged with a young woman and finding a job. He is meeting the old friends on the banks of Aniene, a river that crosses the periphery of Rome and where the inhabitants used to swim during the summer. Riccetto is provoking the young boy Genesisio by challenging him to cross the river. Genesisio accepts the challenge – a sort of initiation necessary to be accepted by the *adults* – but the current is too strong and he starts to drown and to beg for help. The scene is very similar to the one described at the beginning of the novel, but this time Riccetto will not dive into the river as he did with the swallow. He will just observe, without doing anything, Genesisio drowning and dying into the river, under the gaze of Genesisio’s little brothers who cannot do anything but helplessly cry:

Genesisio ormai non resisteva più, povero ragazzino, e sbatteva in disordine le braccia, ma sempre senza chiedere aiuto [...]. Il Riccetto, con le mani che gli tremavano, s’infilò in fretta i calzoni, che teneva sotto il braccio, senza più guardare verso la finestrella della fabbrica, e stette un po’ lì fermo, senza sapere che fare. Si sentivano da sotto il ponte Borgo antico e Mariuccio che urlavano e piangevano [...]. “Tajamo, è mejo”, disse tra sé il Riccetto che quasi piangeva anche lui, incamminandosi in fretta lungo il sentiero, verso la Tiburtina; andava quasi di corsa, per arrivare sul ponte prima dei due ragazzini. “Io je vojo bbene ar Riccetto, sa!” pensava.<sup>9</sup>

The difference between the beginning and the end of *Ragazzi di vita* symbolizes Riccetto’s passage from the values typical of the *borgata* (associated here with the infancy of the protagonist, and with *pietas* and solidarity instead of individualism and selfishness) to those typical of adulthood. The last ones are values that Pasolini links to capitalistic bourgeoisie and that are the price to pay in order to be accepted by contemporary society. As it is argued by Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, Riccetto’s indifference to Genesisio’s death, and his consequent betrayal of *borgate*’s values, represents “il sacrificio che la società chiede ai ragazzi di vita”.<sup>10</sup> This *betrayal* brings with itself the seeds – or the *germs* – of an anthropological mutation that will be Pasolini’s obsession during his last years, a mutation that Pasolini places between the Sixties and the Seventies. In this period, Italy experienced a period of stunning economic and industrial development, called *economic boom*. As we will see below, according to Pasolini

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<sup>9</sup> PASOLINI, *Ragazzi di vita*, 229.

<sup>10</sup> MARCO ANTONIO BAZZOCCHI, *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1998), 168.

this exceptional economic acceleration led to a sort of cultural *genocide* of the *borgatari*'s culture, and of the related system of values. Such a cultural genocide paved the way to the total adhesion to the kind of culture that was becoming hegemonic – and of which the new bourgeoisie was the product and the instrument – in those years: capitalistic consumerism. However, what does Pasolini exactly mean with *cultural genocide*? And why, according to the Italian poet, this new cultural hegemony and this new *Power* considered so important to absorb – and thus to destroy – *borgate*'s culture?

### 3. New powers and new strategies

During the last years of his life Pasolini regularly wrote articles for the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera”, a choice that entailed many harsh criticisms against him from basically every Italian political side, given that this newspaper was considered a direct expression of Italy's conservative powers. However, from those columns Pasolini placed some of his most controversial invectives. In one article in particular (titled “Il mio *Accattone* in TV dopo il genocidio”) – written in 1975 and then published one year later in a posthumous collection titled *Lettere luterane* – Pasolini seizes the chance to clarify what he means with the word *genocide*, using as example the first TV passage of his first movie *Accattone*.<sup>11</sup> Pasolini says that nowadays it would be impossible for him to realize the same movie with the same kind of actors, who were amateur actors chosen among the people he was used to meet in Rome's *borgate*, the typical inhabitants of those *borgate*. The reason why Pasolini could not reshot *Accattone* with the same actors – and the *spirit* they embodied – is that between the year when the movie was produced, 1961, and the year when it first appeared in television, 1975, those people simply *disappeared*. They were transformed into something that Pasolini considered horrifying: petit-bourgeois; or, in other words, proletariat that obsessively tried to act as petit-bourgeois. There are many examples in Pasolini's writing of how this change, this *metamorphosis*, took place and they are disseminated in all his last articles and essays. This metamorphosis is precisely the kind of *genocide* that Pasolini denounced with all his forces: the destruction of a whole culture and life model in favour of a total homologation blessed by the imperative of consumerism; a goal that, according to the Italian poet, not even Fascism had been capable to achieve.<sup>12</sup> Pasolini explained that this genocide was in favour of a new, neo-capitalistic Power, something that he

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<sup>11</sup> PIER PAOLO PASOLINI, *Lettere luterane* (Milan: Garzanti, 2015), 152.

<sup>12</sup> PASOLINI, *Scritti corsari*, 31.

had not been able to decode yet, but only to guess, and that Fascism only alluded to. Indeed, the new Power's aim, in the last analysis, was ultimately to homologate *borgatari* and to transform them into petit-bourgeois, that is to say into consumers: "Riconosco alcune caratteristiche di questo nuovo Potere: la sua determinazione (coronata da successo) di trasformare contadini e sottoproletari in borghesi".<sup>13</sup> The reason of this determination was to eradicate a cultural model that was potentially alternative to the one supported by the new Power, and to adapt the people who represented this alternative model to the model imposed by the new Power.

According to Pasolini, such an eradication could be made possible only through the mass media, television in particular, which imposed the new model of life that Italian people *had* to achieve (or to *perform*). In fact, the Italian poet pointed his finger against Italian television, especially a television programme titled "Carosello". This program at those times was followed by millions of people, and Pasolini claimed that it needed to be censured by Italian institutions: "Doveva censurare per esempio Carosello, perché è in Carosello, onnipotente, che esplode, in tutto il suo nitore, la sua assolutezza, la sua perentorietà, il nuovo tipo di vita che gli italiani 'devono' vivere".<sup>14</sup> A new life model that is characterized by the imperative of consuming, an imperative that leads to a homologation that implies the disappearance of any kind of alternative:

L'ansia del consumo è un'ansia di obbedienza a un ordine non pronunciato. Ognuno in Italia sente l'ansia, degradante di essere uguale agli altri nel consumare, nell'essere felice, nell'essere libero: perché questo è l'ordine che egli ha inconsciamente ricevuto, e a cui "deve" obbedire.<sup>15</sup>

The targeted victims of this homologation, according to Pasolini, are exactly the *borgatari* and their cultural models and values. Such models and values could be potentially antagonist with the new Power, and thus they are destined to be eliminated, along with the people who carry those values with them. However, the new Power is even more subtle: it has not simply *destroyed* the alternative model represented by the *borgataro*, it has rather preferred to *absorb* it, therefore proposing an adapted version of it, *emptied* of its subversive potential. In order to better explain this point, let us take as example the figure of *fornarino* – a kind of job typically practiced by *borgatari*. In an article contained in the *Scritti corsari*, Pasolini describes the *fornarino* as the typical expression of the *borgata*'s

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<sup>13</sup> PASOLINI, *Scritti corsari*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> PASOLINI, *Scritti corsari*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> PASOLINI, *Scritti corsari*, 60.

cultural model: always happy even if poor and proud of belonging to a system of values that was radically opposite to the bourgeoisie:

Una volta il fornarino [...] era sempre eternamente allegro: un'allegria vera, che gli sprizzava dagli occhi [...]. Era vestito molto più poveramente di adesso: i calzoni erano rattoppati, addirittura spesse volte le camicie uno straccio. Però tutto ciò faceva parte di un modello che nella sua borgata aveva un valore, un senso. Ed egli ne era fiero. Al mondo della ricchezza egli aveva da opporre un proprio mondo altrettanto valido.<sup>16</sup>

The same *fornarino* will be the protagonist of an advertisement released during the above mentioned TV programme “Carosello”, where he appears with all his vitality suggesting the public to buy an industrial baked product. In sum, the figure of the *fornarino* – who represented for Pasolini the quintessence of *borgata*'s culture – has been used to promote that same consumeristic homologation responsible for, according to Pasolini, the disappearance of the culture that the *fornarino* supposedly stood for. This figure, that was emblematic of a system of values potentially opposed to the dominant one, has been absorbed by the latter, and then adapted to its context. This is why the new Power is radically different from previous powers like, for instance, Fascism: such a new Power does not need to *eliminate* its opponents; it rather prefers to *absorb* them, so adapting them into a model that is functional to promote and to perpetuate its domain, and therefore neutralizing those opponents' subversive potential. This is what happened to the *fornarino*, who passed from being the representative of a cultural model alternative to consumerism – with its rituals and its values – to being the protagonist of an advertisement. It is interesting to notice that the actor who played the *fornarino* in the advertisement was Ninetto Davoli, Pasolini's favourite actor, muse and lover. That is to say, the person who represented for Pasolini the perfect personification of the *borgataro*'s culture and values. Power is subtle.

#### 4. Walter Siti's *Il contagio*

Walter Siti's novel *Il contagio* was published in 2008, therefore fifty-one years after Pasolini's *Ragazzi di vita* and thirty-three years after the poet's desperate invectives against the anthropological mutation triggered by the new, uncanny, Power. The novel is divided into two parts. The first part describes the life into

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<sup>16</sup> PASOLINI, *Scritti corsari*, 61.



and around a council building situated in Rome's periphery. It analyzes the mechanisms and the social and cultural structures that rule the life of the building and its inhabitants. The second part mainly concerns one of the residents of the building, Mauro, and his attempts to flee from the *borgata* and to improve his economic and social position. Mauro will become the rich right-hand man of a powerful criminal boss, and he will be able to buy a luxury apartment in the centre of Rome. However, he will also become addicted to cocaine and, subsequently, more and more aggressive and violent. In the end, he will lose everything and he will be jailed, so demonstrating that, as Siti writes in the novel, the first rule of a *borgata* is that "la somma di ogni azione deve essere zero".<sup>17</sup>

For those who study Pasolini's work, Walter Siti is certainly not an unknown name. He is, in fact, one of the most respected and esteemed scholars of the Italian poet's work: he devoted many interesting studies to Pasolini, and he has also been the editor of his complete works, which have been published in 1998 and are accompanied by an impressive critical apparatus written by Siti himself. Pasolini's shadow has always been evident in Walter Siti's work as a novelist, and it takes various forms. For instance, in the autofictional novel *Troppi paradisi* – probably Siti's masterpiece – we find as a character the actress Laura Betti, who was one of Pasolini's closest friend and confidant, and who, after the death of the Italian poet, has also been the caretaker of Pasolini's literary legacy. In the novel, Laura Betti is described as a terrible *harpy* who continuously torments and humiliates the character Walter Siti, to the point of being even able to reduce him at the level of a harmless child.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, in *Il contagio* the character Walter Siti decides to sell his collection of Pasolini's complete works (the same edition Siti edited in *real life*) in order to pay Marcello, who is the prostitute he fell in love with.<sup>19</sup> Pasolini is a shadow that Siti constantly tries to overcome. For instance, as a critic, Siti has been criticised for his approach to the editing of Pasolini's complete work; an approach that Carla Benedetti has defined as *ambivalent*, a precarious balance between the homage and the destruction of the *myth*:

L'ambivalenza che nutri per l'opera di Pasolini è evidente a chi abbia letto la postfazione. Né tu la nascondi, anzi direi che la esibisci, quasi fosse un titolo di merito, quasi tu avessi bisogno di mostrare che sai anche prendere le distanze dal tuo oggetto, che non sei, no, tra coloro che se ne lasciano abbagliare (strano bisogno, poiché il curatore è già supposto imparziale per statuto). Quasi tu

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<sup>17</sup> SITI, *Il contagio*, 163.

<sup>18</sup> WALTER SITI, *Troppi paradisi* (Torin: Einaudi, 2006), 37.

<sup>19</sup> SITI, *Il contagio*, 237.

volessi dimostrare che sai anche distruggere il monumento che hai appena eretto.<sup>20</sup>

In *Il contagio* this ongoing and conflictual confrontation between Siti and Pasolini shifts toward two of the themes that concern the most to Pasolini: *borgate* and their inhabitants, which become – again – the *laboratory* to understand contemporary society. In *Il contagio*, Siti describes how *borgate* changed during the years, and formulates a radically new theory on the relationship between *borgatari* and bourgeoisie. A relationship that obviously differs from the one denounced by Pasolini, even if the changes are, as we will see, once again related to the contemporary economic and cultural system of power.

## 5. “Le borgate sono il nostro domani, ma il domani non si deciderà in borgata”

In the first part of the novel, Siti compiles a sort of genealogy of *borgate*, explaining the reasons that led to their conception and construction, and remarking that the term *borgata* first appeared in 1924, when it was coined by a city planner to describe a part of Rome’s periphery called Acilia, “un pezzo di città in mezzo alla campagna”.<sup>21</sup> Then Siti explains how *borgate* were explicitly and consciously designed to be a space *other* than the prosperous city, a sort of storage closet where to cram those kind of dresses that we do not want to wear anymore – and that, to be honest, shame us a little bit – but that we do not dare to throw away:

Le borgate nascono come brandelli di città isolati in piena campagna: chiusi in sé stessi, con comunicazioni difficili e non autosufficienti. Le borgate non sono mai contigue, in mezzo c’è sempre un vuoto non organizzato; vengono costruite nelle bassure per ragioni speculative [...]. La collocazione “in basso” (nelle zone che sono poi anche le più malsane) è funzionale al decoro della città: chi vi arriva in auto dalle consolari, o in treno, le borgate non le vede.<sup>22</sup>

The proper *mission* of *borgata*, the reason why they have been planned and built, is to gather those kinds of people who are considered undesirable, dangerous, useless, one may say not *functional* to that rampant consumerism

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<sup>20</sup> CARLA BENEDETTI, “Le Ceneri di Pasolini”, *L’Unità*, 30 April 2003, 2.

<sup>21</sup> SITI, *Il contagio*, 169.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

represented by the city. And it is obvious – there is no need to be an anthropologist to understand this – that communities forced to be isolated develop their own codes and behaviours. It is worth reminding that Pasolini considered those codes and behaviours as the last representation of a kind of culture – the peasant one – that he believed lost, and which, according to the Italian poet, was the alternative to the capitalistic consumerism embodied by the bourgeoisie. However, the *borgate* changed during the years – like everything else – and today they are not as isolated as they were before. In the novel *Siti*, developing his *history of borgate*, points out all the efforts made by all the politicians who have administrated Rome in the years to integrate those neglected spaces with the city, especially in recent times; he describes as well how proudly those politicians enumerate, like the grains of a rosary, all the facilities they planned and developed:

I poli di sviluppo, i parchi pubblici ricavati dai sequestri alla criminalità organizzata; gli abbattimenti degli ecomostri, i centri anziani, i teatri decentrati, le antiche fabbriche di birra o i vecchi pastifici trasformati in laboratori multifunzionali; case della musica, serre creative, archivi dell'immagine.<sup>23</sup>

*Siti* notices how even the term *borgata* is now considered as only a mere relic of the past. The areas usually considered as *borgate* have now been incorporated by the city. However, this *encounter* between city centre and periphery – obtained through a massive real estate speculation – has not exactly succeeded, resulting rather in failed amalgamation, like mixing together water with oil:

Riempire gli interstizi non è stato un modo per compattare, ma solo per agitare confusamente particelle eterogenee: pensionati statali in caduta libera, giovani coppie precarie, pakistani in ascesa. Borgate che ormai sono praticamente Centro, con vinerie chic, knit café e affitti adeguati alla borghesia; quartieri oltre il raccordo per manager di medio livello, con balconi rotondi e vasche Jacuzzi; *villes nouvelles* verso il mare o i castelli, ma grotte a due passi popolate di nomadi.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, according to *Siti*, despite all the efforts and all the slogans made by politicians, the *borgate* are still there. Maybe those spaces can be *dressed up* as a city centre, with all its facilities and shops, but they remain excluded from the activities and the sociality of the city. However, there is also a significant difference in the population of *borgate* from Pasolini's to *Siti's* years: the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

presence of the kind of people who are usually associated with the bourgeoisie. People who have been forced to leave the city centre because of the unaffordable rising of the rent, and because of the progressive disappearance of the traditional craft workshops in favour of activities oriented to mass tourism – a phenomenon usually defined as gentrification. These petit-bourgeois who *migrated* from the city centre or from residential areas found themselves, according to Siti, into a sort of *hostile territory* of which they totally ignored the codes and the social procedures:

I piccolo-borghesi che vengono qui in cerca di affitti bassi, e che hanno le regole e la correttezza nel loro DNA, sono guardati come se fossero più stranieri dei bengalesi e delle nigeriane, quelle almeno fanno le troie e l'ammettono; il borgatario non rispetta niente perché è rassegnato a tutto, il che significa vivere alla grande fin che si può e crollare quando capita. Agitazione e immobilismo stretti in un solo respiro [...]. Il tempo e lo spazio sono mediazioni culturali: i borgatari non hanno né lo spazio né il tempo per costruirsi'.<sup>25</sup>

In the *borgate* the petit-bourgeois are looked suspiciously and immediately recognized, in the same way the *borgatari* are easily identified when they dare to venture into the city centre:

Il centro della città, se per qualche motivo ci si avventurano, è terra incognita [...]. I loro gruppetti li riconoscono immediatamente in via del Corso, diretti verso una musica o un saltimbanco vestito da mummia egiziana: i ragazzi coi giubbotti sulla pelle nuda, le ragazze vestite di nero e con gioielli vistosi, matita pesante alla bocca e agli occhi. Certe parioline, per moda, ne imitano il coattume, le maniche a rete e i capelli sparati: ma le tradisce la camminata più molle, una sciarpa vetero-femminista recuperata nell'armadio della madre – il loro corpo, il loro abbigliamento hanno una storia, rimandano a decisioni prese prima di loro. Le bande di borgatari danno l'impressione di doversi sempre giocare il tutto per tutto nei prossimi dieci minuti, e proprio per questo fingono che non gliene frega niente di niente.<sup>26</sup>

When reading this passage, we find a detail that immediately draws our attention. Siti describes how the *parioline* – people living in Rome's neighbourhood *Parioli*, who are usually associated with the upper class – often try to copy the style typically associated with *borgatari*, Siti also remarks that this style is now considered as *fashionable*. Therefore, Siti is saying that people usually associated with the bourgeoisie are now trying to imitate the style of

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

*borgatari*. This is exactly the reason why the author titled this novel *Il contagio*, where for *contagio* Siti intends an *exchange* – at a cultural and behavioural level – between *borgatari* and petit bourgeois; an exchange that is caused by an unexpected co-habitation that has never happened before and can be defined as a *forced coexistence*. At this point, it would be legitimate to argue that this statement contradicts Pasolini's theory of the anthropological mutation, which caused the disappearance of the culture represented by *borgatari* in order to embrace the dictates of capitalistic consumerism embodied by the new bourgeoisie. My point is that this is exactly Walter Siti's intention: to overturn Pasolini's analysis; or better, to update it, claiming that now it is not that the *borgatari* are trying to imitate the bourgeoisie but the opposite: it is the "borghesia che si sta imborgatando":

L'appassionata analisi di Pasolini, vecchia di oltre trent'anni, andrebbe rovesciata: non sono le borgate che si stanno imborghesendo, ma è la borghesia che si sta (se così si può dire) "imborgatando". Al di là dell'esperienza biografica di pochi individui sbrancati, o dell'arroganza esibizionista di qualche ricco che gioca al sottoproletario ("se hai soldi, una bella macchina e un po' di cocaina, puoi scopare chiunque" è un motto del carcere ammirato e condiviso da Fabrizio Corona) – al di là dei casi singoli, vige un'effettiva solidarietà strutturale: nel continuum indifferenziato di chi il mondo non sa più vederlo intero, è l'ideologia di quelli che una volta si chiamavano gli esclusi (i lumpen, i sub-culturali) a risultare egemone [...]. Ora gli strati si sono contagiati a vicenda: c'è un po' di borgata nei nuovi valori borghesi, un po' di prudenza borghese nei nuovi slanci dei borgatari.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, now the bourgeoisie does not tend to destroy and to absorb the proletarian's culture, because according to Siti, the new hegemonic culture is that of the *borgatari*. Here it is possible to find another contradiction, a contradiction that takes the form of a question that can be summarised in the following way. If Pasolini stated that the new Power – which he associated to capitalistic consumerism – imposed its hegemony through the destruction of proletarian culture because it was potentially alternative, why is this very culture – which was supposed to be destroyed because of its subversive potential – now considered attractive, fashionable, and why is it even promoted? In order to answer this question we have to bear in mind that the figure of *borgataro* that now is considered *fashionable* is not the kind of *borgataro* narrated by Pasolini. It is rather its *simulacrum*, a version filtered by the mass media that is reified, spectacularized, now perfectly fixed into the collective

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-324.

imaginary and thus into the dominant discourse. In sum, the figure of *borgataro* is emptied of its subversive potential. The fashionable *borgataro* is not Pasolini's *fornaretto*, but the one represented in the advertisement I have referred to before. This *domesticated* version of *borgataro* is now the only one that is recognized, and given the presence of people associated with this version into hundreds of Italian TV programs it became – as everything that appears on television – something attractive, to be imitated, *fashionable*, as Siti said. It is correct to say that nowadays the figure of *borgataro* is not despised as it was in Pasolini's days, but it is rather pushed, even promoted; and, as remarked by Francesco Guglieri, “è proprio su questa sistematica e ipertrofica epidemia mimetica che lavora il potere”.<sup>28</sup> Having clarified this, we will investigate why the Power described by Pasolini should *promote* the *borgatari* after going to all that trouble to destroy the culture and values they represented. My point is that power changes, along with its strategies, also the typologies of *culture* and *values* it needs to spread in order to perpetuate its realm also change. Therefore, if in the past certain aspects of *borgata's* system of values – solidarity, mutuality, disrespect for the imposed rules – were seen as a potential menace, now other aspects of *borgatari* are, on the contrary, considered to be functional, even necessary to the new hegemonic system of power. A system that, for convenience, we might identify with neoliberalism; a system, in other words, that is different from the one that Pasolini identified as capitalistic consumerism.

What are the aspects of *borgatari* that now are considered *fashionable* and thus useful, what are their features now worth being promoted and fostered? According to Siti, all those aspects can be summarised by the term *coattume* (177), a word that in Rome's dialect collects a large and sometimes unexpected variety of meanings. For instance, people who are bold, arrogant, usually with a poor education – or who pretend not to be educated – are usually defined as *coatti*. Nonetheless, the term is used also to refer to people who flaunt their richness. It is safe to state that there is also a sort of *coatti's* philosophy, whose ideology resides into the unique precepts of the *all at once*. *Coatti* do not plan or build anything, they just take everything they want when they want, and their desires change every day, because those desires are pushed and oriented by mass media and fashion:

Nessuno in borgata riesce a disegnare un profilo di sé che si appoggi a modelli resistenti, di lungo periodo, con una strada chiara per arrivarci – i cosiddetti modelli sono piuttosto dei lampi delle istantanee di sorrisi o di ovazioni. O beni

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<sup>28</sup> FRANCESCO GUGLIERI, “Walter Siti - *Il Contagio*”, *Allegoria*, 76, 2017, 8.

da possedere, più enumerati che effettivamente goduti; appena ottengono qualcosa, se ne stancano subito e non lo vogliono più.<sup>29</sup>

Coatti do not have a project or a dream that goes beyond the very next day, they just take all they want, when they want, even through violence if necessary:

Di fronte all'impossibilità di padroneggiare il contesto, il borgatario semplifica, si costruisce degli idoli personali e spera "alla grande", cioè a vuoto; vittima o spaccamontagne, si mette in scena come personaggio (o almeno come comparsa) per ottenere un'elemosina. L'illegalità è per lui una forma di magia, una manipolazione per piegare la rigidità del mondo ai propri desideri.<sup>30</sup>

This is the attitude that is becoming hegemonic nowadays: simplification, obsession for consumerism, no faith in the future, and absolute conviction that every effort to change life is useless, worthless; again, it is "a somma zero", as argued by Siti. This attitude is the specular opposite of the vitality typical of the *borgatari* that were narrated and celebrated by Pasolini, a sort of degeneration of the obsession for hedonism lamented by the Italian poet and that became hegemonic during the Sixties, so eradicating *borgata's* culture. This is exactly the cultural attitude that power considers more functional nowadays; it is functional because, as already stated, power changes, along with the conditions that determine and sustain power itself. In order to clarify this point, let us think – with a necessary, given the context, simplification – that during the Sixties the economic system needed a *laborious bourgeoisie*, people who planned a future based – let's say – on buying a home, domestic appliances, a future adequate to the life models that television, according to Pasolini, contributed to impose. In this sense, it is clear that *borgatari's* way of life was considered as *dangerous*, an anomaly that was necessary to absorb. Today, in Italy that kind of system has collapsed: the welfare has been drastically cut, unemployment is a major problem, and systemic precariousness substituted the rhetoric of steady jobs. In sum, that kind of life model is not applicable anymore. Therefore, when no future, no life enhancement is assured the only alternative is the rhetoric of the *living for the moment*, of all at once, the granitic conviction that no change is possible, that every action is useless. Ultimately, today the only alternative is this aspect – condensed in a famous Italian advertisement whose jingle claimed that *life is now* – of *borgatari's* philosophy; a philosophy that, as claimed by Siti, is now hegemonic. Such a philosophy is now hegemonic because it is more

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<sup>29</sup> SITI, *Il contagio*, 227.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

functional to the perpetuation of the political, economical, and cultural system that Pasolini condensed in the term *Power*.

## 6. Conclusions: “Tenetevi pronti”

In the previous lines I have claimed that power is subtle. It is subtle, because it absorbed a mode of life – the life of the *borgatari* – whose values were alternative to capitalistic consumerism and thus potentially subversive, and it is subtle also because it extracted and adapted certain characteristics of that model, using them as a sharp and effective instrument. When Pasolini elaborated his critique, he celebrated the vitality, *living-for-today* attitude typical of *borgatari* that assumed a political connotation, because it represented an alternative to oppose the imperative of productivity typical of capitalistic consumerism. However, now that times have changed, that same attitude has been absorbed, devoid of its subversive potentials, and made functional to the exercise of power. Be that as it may, I am still convinced that the marginality represented by *borgata* has not exhausted its revolutionary potential. Indeed, when an economic, political, and cultural system is radically unequal – as the one we experience nowadays certainly is – it necessarily produces *marginality*, and that marginality develops antibodies, codes, system of values: it develops alternatives, it *resists*. *Borgate*, those *borgate* that meant separation, fracture between places and people, they still exist; but they are not where we are used to see them. In order to understand who the new *borgatari* are, and to understand their subversive potential, we have to open our gaze and look among those people who now are considered useless, unproductive, non-functional as the ones narrated by Pasolini were. We have to look at those people who are now the lowest of the low: the migrants, the prisoners, the outcasts; in sum all those people who are excluded from society. To make an effort to narrate the new minorities and to understand the conditions that produced these minorities is now more than ever necessary. Literature is, as it has always been, the apt instrument to narrate and to understand. Nicola Lagioia, a young Italian writer, recently wrote a small but dense collection of short stories titled *Esquilino: tre ricognizioni* where we find one of the most impressive and powerful description of these new minorities – in this case a homeless, probably an illegal migrant. In this description, we undeniably find the spirit of the *borgatari* narrated by Pasolini, but in the text there is also a sense of obscurity, of subtle menace, which is incompatible with the easygoing happiness that characterize those *borgatari*. A sense of subtle menace that can be also be understood, depending on the eye of the beholder, as a sense of hope:



c'è lui, questo ragazzo sui trent'anni. È sporco, nonché completamente nudo. Probabilmente è un vagabondo. In buona forma fisica. Accavalla le gambe, guarda fisso davanti a sé. Gli vedo le piante dei piedi completamente nere, le cosce muscolose, gli addominali bene in vista, i peli folti tra le ascelle e il ciuffo del pube. Il Cristo tra i rifiuti di alcuni giorni fa sembrava definitivamente sconfitto. Questo giovane Cristo nudo non solo è vivo, ma anche un po' arrabbiato [...]. A un certo punto sembra quasi che accenni a una smorfia, uno strano sorriso minaccioso il cui senso suona nella mia testa più o meno così: "tenetevi pronti".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> NICOLA LAGIOIA, *Esquilino: tre ricognizioni* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Asino, 2017), 39.

### **About the author**

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