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**Italy: A Post-Biopolitical Laboratory.  
From Pasolini's "Il romanzo delle stragi" to De Cataldo's *Romanzo  
criminale***

**Lorenzo Fabbri**

*Chiunque oggi vesta la triste redingote della sovranità sa di poter essere un giorno trattato come criminale dai suoi colleghi. E certamente non saremo noi a compiangerlo. Perché il sovrano, che ha acconsentito di buon grado a presentarsi in veste di sbirro e carnefice, mostra ora alla fine la sua originaria prossimità con il criminale.*

--Giorgio Agamben, "Polizia sovrana," *Mezzi senza fine*

*Today, those who should happen to wear the sad redingote of sovereignty know that they may be treated as criminals one day by their colleagues. And certainly we will not be the ones to pity them. The sovereigns who willingly agreed to present themselves as cops or executioners, in fact, now show in the end their original proximity to the criminal.*

--Giorgio Agamben, "Sovereign Police," *Means Without End*

*Teratologies: "The Land of Pirandello and Machiavelli"*

*In realtà l'Italia è un luogo orribile.*

*(Italy is actually a horrible place.)<sup>1</sup>*

--Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La droga: Una vera tragedia italiana"

It is March 29, 1969 and, from the pages of *Tempo*, Pier Paolo Pasolini asks: Do novelistic lives still exist? ([1969] 1981, 129). In the summer of 1968 the poet had begun a collaboration with the magazine which, aside from some very brief interruptions, would continue until the spring of 1970. The goal Pasolini wanted to achieve with his weekly column "Il Caos" was clear from the outset: to take advantage of the glossy pages of a mass publication to warn workers and students, shanty dwellers and intellectuals, of the monsters walking among them. Just a few, short months before the release of *Night of the Living Dead*—George Romero's own indictment of market capitalism's devastating stride—in his *Tempo* debut Pasolini warned:

Il borghese...è un vampiro, che non sta in pace finchè non morde sul collo la sua vittima per il puro, semplice e naturale gusto di vederla diventar pallida, triste, brutta, devitalizzata, controrta, corrotta, inquieta, piena

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<sup>1</sup> All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by Scott Stuart.

disenso di colpa, calcolatrice, aggressiva, terroristica, *come lui*" ([1968] 1981, 21).

(The bourgeois...is a vampire; he is not at peace until he has bitten his victim's neck for the pure, simple, and natural pleasure of seeing her become pale, sad, ugly, lifeless, twisted, corrupt, restless, guilty, calculating, aggressive, and terroristic, *as he is.*)

It is hard to believe that Pasolini's graphic description of the bourgeois as a vampire was not inspired by the metaphors adopted by Karl Marx's one hundred and one years earlier to sketch the relation between Capital and labor power.

For Marx, capital has an almost organic, natural necessity to grow, and the only way it can fulfill this necessity is to live off of the workers. Without the proletariat's energy, the machines and knowledge capitalists have accumulated (i.e., dead labor) would lie tragically inactive, inoperative, unproductive. In order for surplus to be created, dead labor must then be aroused from its comatose state; it needs to live. A productive life is precisely the "gift" Capital gains from the exploitation of the working class. It is in this discursive context that Marx puts forth the analogy between capitalism and vampirism: the capitalist craves workers' labor power as much as a vampire craves human blood, since these two destructive creatures (vampires and capitalists) can survive solely by extracting life from those who actually have it. In the tenth book of *Capital*, Marx writes: "Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labor-power he has bought from him" ([1867] 1992, 342).

Pasolini takes up the provocative framework elaborated by Marx, yet his treatment of capitalism moves in a slightly different direction. Marx, at least in the passage just quoted, was mainly concerned with explicating the logics governing capitalistic exploitation. Pasolini, on the other hand, in his *Tempo* column as elsewhere, seems more interested in mapping out the consequences that capitalism has on human lives; in highlighting how the value system of the triumphant bourgeoisie has transformed the very structure of life itself. As Pasolini's first *Tempo* piece explained, capitalism is not merely an economic model, just as the bourgeoisie is not merely a class: "Quanti operai, quanti intellettuali, quanti studenti sono stati morsi, nottetempo, dal vampiro, e, senza saperlo, stanno diventando vampiri anche loro!" ([1969] 1981, 21; How many workers, how many intellectuals, how many students have been bitten by the vampire at night and, unwittingly, themselves are becoming vampires!).<sup>2</sup> Capital is an actual, true social epidemic affecting lives everywhere. Pasolini organizes his "Ci sono ancora le vite romanzesche" exactly around such a diagnosis.

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<sup>2</sup> Pasolini will use the monster metaphor throughout *Lettere luterane* to describe the changes in contemporary Italy: the process of democratization taking place in Italy is having monstrous results; Italians, and the youth in particular, are becoming monstrous; the Italian language itself is therefore a monster—a "teratology," he calls it in *Gennariello* ([1975] 1976, 27-30, 57-63).

This 1969 article came about by way of an inquiry in the newspaper *Giorno* regarding the fate and destiny of the novel: Is the novel a relevant, contemporary literary form or is it something that definitively belongs to the past? This was the question both writers and intellectuals were asked to engage in. Unfortunately, in Pasolini's opinion, his colleagues did not go out of their way to contribute meaningfully to *Giorno's* research: the inquiry ended up being nothing more than a useless ensemble of commonsensical commentary and apocalyptic lamenting. However, the real problem lay not so much with the responses as with the inquiry itself. The questions asked should have been: Are novelistic lives [*vite romanzesche*] over? And, if novelistic lives still exist, why do writers no longer draw on them for their novels [*romanzi*] ([1969] 1981, 129). In the attempt to answer such questions, Pasolini begins by affirming that modern-day life is still a story worth telling: it still makes for a good novel. Adventures are everywhere; the unexpected and the fortuitous lie in wait around every corner. Any love story, the first day of school, the last day at work: these are only a few examples of real existential events with an intrinsic novelistic substance. The ultimate sense of the novelistic, Pasolini notes, resides in fact "nello stupore del succedere": in the amazement provoked by the happening of occurrences. Novels are nothing but a by-product of the astonishment novelistic events generate in those who experience them. The novel happens primarily in reality; only in a second moment is it translated into books: the novel is therefore—concludes Pasolini, evoking Roland Barthes—beyond the sentence.

The problem is that consumerism tends to eliminate the novelistic from reality, forcing pre-molded destinies upon the people. True, the repressive codification of existence was also experienced in pre-industrial societies, and actually originated precisely when human beings dared to make their first attempts at a shared life. The implicit suggestion here is that the beginning of politics coincides with the end—or the beginning of the end—of the novel. However, even if the process of de-novelization has been going on forever, only today, with the rise of technological civilization and industrial capitalism, has this immemorial process reached its maximum intensity. It is only today that *nothing* is left to chance. Only today has *all* which is real fallen victim to the same destiny. In the history of humankind, we alone are absolutely normal beings; we alone live a life free from any novelistic texture whatsoever, a life that is completely predictable. The violence of techno-capitalism—against which no useful defenses seem to have been contrived—has finally succeeded in disciplining the real by mass-producing, among other commodities, millions of identical destinies. Besides defusing the possibility that unexpected events could occur in certain national contexts, the triumph of capitalism on a global scale has also destroyed the hope for possible places where the novelistic structure of life would still be safeguarded. Another world no longer exists. There is no possibility of living and experiencing one's own time in a different way; no place in which other forms of life are possible. In a world dominated by capitalism, i.e., the only possible world, everything has been mapped out. No unforeseen events, no surprises, no alternatives. No fireflies. The industrial order of things encompasses nearly all of humanity. We are all here; it is all here. And this being the sad state of things, the urge to travel and venture outside the hierarchy of values that disciplines our space-time goes dormant: once India and its scent have been annihilated, one only travels in search of oil.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On relation between globalization, capitalism, and mapping, see also Pasolini's *Petrolio* ([1992] 2006, 144-66).

It is this devitalized standardization induced by capital's vampires that, according to Pasolini, puts novels at risk. All lines of flight having been exhausted, it is only natural that the novel would disappear with them. The novel has in fact always had "The Journey" as a dominant theme and structural inspiration: toward and beyond the Horizon or—potentially synonymous—toward and beyond Power. Therefore after the real is deprived of its original novelistic configuration, after the extinction of those novelistic events and places capable of inspiring people in their journeys, the conditions needed to write novels also fade away. If lives are no longer novelesque, if they do not wonder or wander, then obviously the novel can no longer be the literary device best-suited to tell their stories.

Still, for those who write after Piazza Fontana—both a singular case and an index for numerous other events: for other bombs in other squares, for trains that explode and clocks forever stopped at 10:25—is Pasolini's historico-narratological thesis concerning the obsolescence of the novel still plausible? After the discovery of State terrorism, can we really believe that the bourgeoisie enforces its dominion by inducing an ordered standardization and repressing the novelistic structure of the real?

It is December 12, 1969. 4:37 p.m. Milan. Explosion at the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura di Piazza Fontana. 4:55 p.m. Rome. Explosion at the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro di Via Veneto. 5:22 p.m. Explosion near Altare della Patria. 5:30 p.m. Explosion in Piazza Venezia. *Later that day*, back in Milan. Another bomb discovered and defused in the courtyard of the Banca Commerciale in Piazza della Scala.

This spectacular series of detonations which stained a winter market day with blood and tears forces one to admit that the bourgeois apotheosis—the "Italian boom"—did not lead to the triumph of order, but rather to the explosion of a chaos which was all too novelistic. It makes us realize that December 12, 1969 is nothing other than the *incipit* of a real-life novel of massacres. The Italy born out of the Christmas of '69, the Italy of the 1970s, must in other words be understood as a fictive yet real universe populated by characters worthy of the best crime novel: corrupt agents, high-class call girls, criminals with their hearts in South America, aspiring *bons vivants*, spies, shanty dwellers, unscrupulous financial experts, neo-nazis fond of Julius Evola, men of honor, men that don't exist, rats, commissioners, singers, law clerks, drug mules, clockers, carabinieri, police officers, bodyguards, traffickers, mafiosi, journalists, brigatisti, film producers, hustlers, priests, wives (De Cataldo 2002, front flap). But if Italy truly is all of this, then we would be dealing with a governmental monster different from the one Pasolini denounced before Piazza Fontana. A monster, in this case, which is threatening not because it represses the novelistic and produces a disciplined standardization, but because it uses lives and events strategically novelized to annihilate any possibility of resistance. This is a monster equipped with a "côté letterario;" a monster that no genre could therefore bring into focus better than a novel (De Cataldo 2002, 125).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The literary côté which Commissioner Scialoja refers to on this page from *Romanzo criminale* is the one indicted by Leonardo Sciascia with regard to Aldo Moro's fifty-five day long captivity: "L'impressione che tutto nell'affaire Moro accada, per così dire, in letteratura, viene principalmente da quella specie di fuga dei fatti, da quell'astrarsi dei fatti—nel momento stesso in cui accadono e ancora di più contemplandoli poi nel loro insieme—in una dimensione di consequenzialità immaginativa o fantastica... Tanta perfezione può essere dell'immaginazione, della fantasia: non della realtà" (1978, 28 [1987, 26: The impression that everything which occurred in the Moro affair did so, as it were, in literature, derives mainly from the elusiveness of the facts, a sort of withdrawal of the facts—when they occurred and even more so in

The sensation that contemporary Italy is actually understandable only as a work of fiction is confirmed by Giancarlo De Cataldo's *Romanzo criminale*. Millicent Marcus has for instance highlighted in a brilliant essay how the characters from De Cataldo's novel need to resort to literary genres to represent the society in which they live: they can come to terms with and understand their Italy (i.e., Italy between 1977 and 1992) only in "generic terms." But this is not the case only for De Cataldo's characters: De Cataldo as well relies on the "the fluidity, the hybridity, and the radical freedom of the novel for the representation of life lived *italianamente*" (Marcus 2008, 397). The way Italians live their lives, in other words, calls for a novel since Italian life itself is novelistic. It would be too reductive, then, to affirm that the principal purpose of *Romanzo criminale* is to shed light on the life and exploits of the Magliana Gang, the most powerful crime syndicate Rome has ever seen. De Cataldo is not merely interested in uncovering the hidden truth of singular historical events; he is not primarily concerned with naming names or in pointing out specific individual responsibilities. (And perhaps this is why the names of the characters from *Romanzo criminale* are not the actual given names, or nicknames, of the members of the real Magliana Gang; and why De Cataldo omits names from excerpts of the court records involving the Magliana Gang he includes in the narrative.<sup>5</sup>) Though he is a judge on the Corte d'Assise in Rome, with *Romanzo criminale* De Cataldo is exposing the novelistic, criminal logic organizing the time-space in which the Gang operated, rather than re-trying, in the literary space, its members to determine a series of factual truths. After all, as Wu Ming 2 recently suggested, the most precious thing one can learn from a novel is not the truth of the facts, but the meaning of their plot (2009, 190).

*Romanzo criminale* should be treated, then, as one of the most ambitious attempts to come to grips with the plotting of the Italian ruling caste during and after "gli anni di piombo" ("the years of lead"). It is at once a road map of the past and a genealogy of the present. A genealogy, because it provides us with a possible understanding of how Italy came to be what it is today; a map, because it allows us to orient ourselves in our recent past and to find routes of escape from it. Looking back as an endeavour to move forward. Novelizing the affairs of the Magliana Gang—from its rise to power in the second half of the 1970s to its withering at the end of the 1980s—is, for De Cataldo, an opportunity to chart the strategies that more or less occult powers had adopted in those twenty terrible years to ward off any radical change, keeping Italy and its citizens stuck at the gates of history. There are no vampires in *Romanzo criminale*, just as there are no traces of the attempt to discipline the present by creating millions of identical lives. De Cataldo turns to other monstrous creatures to allegorize the governmental logic imposed on Italy after Piazza Fontana. The new monster is called The Old Man. Recounting his schemes, maneuvers, sidetracking and lies, *Romanzo criminale*'s aim is not to try a group of individuals or a party (as is sometimes the case for Pasolini), but rather to expose a

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retrospect—into a dimension of unflinching imaginative or fanciful consequentiality.... Only in fantasy, in dreams such a perfection is achieved)).

<sup>5</sup> Marcus proposes an alternative explanation for "De Cataldo's authorial reticence, his *omertà*, regarding the official, and hence legally actionable identities of his characters." According to her, "the narrative voice works in collusion with the gang's most consequential mission—that of stripping away the social identities of its members, re-creating them according to its own alternative code of behavioral and ethical norms" (2008, 400-01).

governmental system—the system that, criminally plotting in the darkness, transformed public life into a novel written by few and lived by all.

Obviously such “re-novelization” of life did not coincide with the triumph of life and the unpredictability of becoming that Pasolini had identified as the defining features of the novelistic. Anything but. What was produced is a “depotentialized reality,” which, while it may be structured as a fiction, is deprived of fiction’s fundamental characteristic: the possibility for the extreme to happen (Siti 2006, 96). The novelistic is, in this case, exploited as an instrument of control over the population; as a means to reach the same goal that, up until a few years before, motivated the very extinction of the novelistic. It is the sighting of this new governmental monster that, possibly, urged Pasolini to write one more novel, after having suggested in his “Ci sono ancora le vite romanzesche” that the novel was an outdated literary *genre*. It is just an hypothesis, but perhaps Pasolini’s return to the novel was determined by the return of the novelistic into our lives, thanks to the so-called “strategy of tension” and its fictive emergencies. Isn’t *Petrolio* inspired by the awareness that an era in world history is finished, and a new one is about to begin? Can’t *Petrolio* be considered one of the first attempts to grasp the workings of the new enemy at the gates? It cannot be only a coincidence that the narrative hinge of Pasolini’s unfinished, experimental novel is precisely “the trauma of 1969” ([1992] 2006, 6).<sup>6</sup>

While working on *Petrolio*, Pasolini published “Che cos’è questo golpe? Io so” in *Corriere della sera*. In this well-known piece from November 1974, Pasolini declares that he knows the names of those responsible for the blood that flooded Italian piazzas and stations over the previous five years. Piazza Fontana; the massacres in Brescia and on the Italicus: tension as a system to protect Power.

Io so i nomi di coloro che, tra una Messa e l’altra, hanno dato le disposizioni e assicurato la protezione politica a vecchi generali (per tenere in piedi, di riserva, l’organizzazione di un potenziale colpo di Stato), a giovani neo-fascisti, anzi neo-nazisti (per creare in concreto la tensione anticomunista) e infine criminali comuni, fino a questo momento, e forse per sempre, senza nome (per creare la successiva tensione antifascista).

.....  
Io so i nomi delle persone serie e importanti che stanno dietro ai tragici ragazzi che hanno scelto le suicide atrocità fasciste e ai malfattori comuni, siciliani o no, che si sono messi a disposizione, come killer e sicari. ([1974] 1975, 112)

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<sup>6</sup> From *Petrolio*, see also “Appunto 50: Come dovevano essere i giovani uomini nel ’69,” where Pasolini describes the traumatic and prophetic apparition of the workers’ new bodies, bodies by now totally absorbed into the obscure will of the nation ([1992] 2006, 202-06). The discovery of the co-optation of bodies and pleasures within the logic of late capitalism will lead Pasolini to a radical reformulation of his own poetics, see for example “Abiura dalla ‘Trilogia della vita’” where he emphatically announces his hate for the bodies and sex organs of the new Italian youth: “ormai odio i corpi e gli organi sessuali. Naturalmente parlo di *questi* corpi, di *questi* organi sessuali. Cioè dei corpi dei nuovi giovani e ragazzi italiani, degli organi sessuali dei nuovi giovani e ragazzi italiani” ([1975] 1976, 73: “By now, I hate bodies and sexual organs. Naturally, I am speaking of *these* bodies, of *these* sexual organs. That is, of the bodies of the new Italian youth, of the sexual organs of the new Italian youth.”)

(I know the names of those who, between Masses, have arranged and ensured the protection of old generals (to keep, as a “plan B,” the organization of a potential *coup d'état* on its feet); young fascists, neo-nazis indeed (to create in concert an anti-communist tension); and even common criminals who to this day and perhaps forever remain nameless [to create a successive anti-fascist tension.]

.....  
I know the names of the serious and important people who are behind those tragic kids who have chosen atrocious, fascist suicides, and behind the common evildoers, Sicilian and otherwise, who have made themselves available as killers and assassins.)

Pasolini knows. He knows the names, knows the facts. But he knows without having clues or evidence. He cannot have clues or evidence because he is an intellectual. A writer. In contrast to journalists and politicians, he keeps himself far away from the viscous world of power, and for this reason has no way of getting direct access to the facts. True, he could decide to compromise with the universe of Order and acquire the evidence he needs. But Pasolini cannot enter that world because of his intellectual courage: the same sentiment and civic virtue pushing Pasolini to tell the truth also keeps him from getting tangled up in the world of politics that disgusts him so much. Paradoxically, it is this marginal position that makes knowledge possible. It is only thanks to the incompatibility between civic courage and practical politics that Pasolini can speak the truth. Only when one cannot have clues or evidence, only as an intellectual and novelist can one really know:

Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore, che cerca di seguire tutto ciò che succede, di conoscere tutto ciò che se ne scrive, di immaginare tutto ciò che non si sa o che si tace; che coordina fatti anche lontani, che mette insieme i pezzi disorganizzati e frammentari di un intero coerente quadro politico, che ristabilisce la logica là dove sembrano regnare l'arbitrarietà, la follia e il mistero. ([1974] 1975, 112)

(I know because I am an intellectual, a writer who tries to follow everything that comes to pass, to know everything that is written on it, to imagine everything that is unknown or kept quiet; who coordinates often distant facts, who puts together disorganized pieces and fragments of a whole, coherent political frame, who re-establishes logic where the arbitrary, folly, and mystery seem to reign.)

Even if the names will not be named, it does not mean that the writer is forced into silence. An inventor of stories, the novelist can write. He can devise a novel that still

remains relevant to reality and allows Italians to see through the chaos surrounding them. The novelist knows. And Italian citizens are moved by an indisputable will to knowledge, Pasolini explains in “Perché il processo.” Among other things, they want to know what exactly is the political and social human condition in which they are forced to live as if by a cataclysm. Italians want to know how they became what they are. They can no longer settle for the revelation of any one particular mystery; they want the general picture. They want to understand the logic governing their time. They want to know. We want to know. And Pasolini knows. Therefore: embrace the Italians’ will to knowledge. Produce a new awareness with the hope that this will inaugurate a new historical consciousness ([1975] 1976, 145-51). Unveil the plots of Power. Plot against it. Write a true and proper novel of the massacres: it is no accident that Pasolini chose the title “Il romanzo delle stragi” for the republication of “Che cos’è questo golpe?” in *Scritti corsari*.

Pasolini tries to achieve the “novel project” put forth in his *Corriere* article with *Petrolio*. In a letter to Alberto Moravia, he explains that *Petrolio*’s language was different from that typically employed for narrative: its language was the language used in essays and nonfiction, reviews and private letters, poetry and certain newspaper articles ([1992] 2006, 623). It is worth highlighting that Pasolini interpreted such linguistic experimentalism as a truly political gesture. As Carla Benedetti has argued in her introductory essay to the collective volume *A partire da Petrolio*, Pasolini’s unfinished novel was in fact motivated by the refusal to play by the rules of a literature which had turned into a self-referential game. With *Petrolio*, Pasolini—who, in the parallel universe of *Romanzo criminale* taught Ricotta to read and write, and even let him act as an extra in some of his films—takes the risk of opening the novel to the outside, to the extra-literary, to the impurity of the real: its linguistic anxiety puts reality back into the game of literature so that the novel can break down the wall of the aesthetical and of ineffectuality (Benedetti 1995, 12-13). By addressing the reader directly and unconventionally, *Petrolio* (like *Romanzo criminale*) recounts the story of an Italy caught in the grip of late capitalism and the strategy of tension: it is this historico-political reality that, in all its impurity, becomes an object of representation. But such an object can no longer be represented realistically for it is itself excessive, experimental, and unreal. What gets narrativized is precisely the disorder produced by order: the anomic thrust of power; its anarchy. The form(lessness) of *Petrolio* and the fluidity of *Romanzo criminale* are, to summarize, ways of opening the novel to politics by answering the question of where power is going (see Genovese 1995, 85-91; Patrizi 1995, 15-25; Marcus 2008).

Even without naming names, without the means to bring suspects to trial, it is indeed still possible to reveal the meaning of a series of events, the logic of their plot; to use the subterfuge of fiction to produce a travel guide, “the sketch of a journey” in contemporary Italy (Pasolini [1992] 2006, 21). And the beginning of this journey can be no other than Piazza Fontana, because—as Pasolini notes in “Che cos’è questo golpe?”/“Il romanzo delle stragi”—the truth of what happened in Italy after 1968 is not that hard to reconstruct. Do you remember counterrevolution?

La “controrivoluzione” è, letteralmente, una *rivoluzione al contrario*. Vale a dire: un’innovazione impetuosa dei modi di produrre, delle forme di vita, delle relazioni sociali che, però, rassa e rilancia il comando capitalista.

La “controrivoluzione,” proprio come il suo inverso simmetrico, non lascia niente immutato. Determina un lungo *stato di eccezione*, in cui sembra accelerarsi la scansione degli eventi. Costituisce attivamente un suo peculiare “*ordine nuovo*.” Forgia mentalità, attitudini culturali, gusti, usi e costumi, insomma un inedito *common sense*. Va alla radice delle cose, e lavora con metodo. (Virno [1994] 1997, 639)

(Counterrevolution is literally *revolution in reverse*. In other words, it is an impetuous innovation of modes of production, forms of life, and social relations that, however, consolidate[s] and again set[s] in motion capitalist command. The counterrevolution, just like its symmetrical opposite, leaves nothing unchanged. It creates a long state of emergency in which the temporal succession of events seems to accelerate. It actively makes its own “new order,” forging new mentalities, cultural habits, tastes, and customs—in short, a new common sense. It goes to the root of things, and works methodically.) (1996, 241)

The detonation of State terrorism in Milan and Rome on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December was an unequivocal sign that the battlefield was being transformed and that “the most ignorant bourgeoisie in Europe” (as Pasolini, using Orson Wells as a proxy, calls the Italian ruling class in *La ricotta*) had modified its strategy. A few days after the bloodshed at Piazza Fontana, a flyer began to circulate around Milan. In this flyer—which bore the emblematic title “Il Reichstag brucia?”—a number of extra-parliamentary activists on the Left had already unmasked the fiction of the Pinelli-Valpreda lead.<sup>7</sup> According to the flyer, drafted by some anonymous supporters of Debord’s “Situationist International,” it was not anarchists who planted the bombs, and therefore the terror did not come from the radical Left: It came from Capital; these explosions were bourgeois, all too bourgeois. In a climate of general insubordination, after a hot autumn which melted away any illusion of restoring the normality of law and order, the only hope the bourgeoisie had of maintaining its dominance over the real consisted in staging fictions of extremism which would reverse the actual extremism of the revolutionary movement. Incapable of actively enforcing its terror *on* the proletariat, the State could do nothing more than instill its terror *of* the proletarians in the general population. A fictive emergency was the best way to exorcise the possibility of something novel and novelistic from actually happening (Gli amici dell’Internazionale, 1969).

Giorgio Cesarano, Piero Coppo, and Joe Fallisi would confirm the complicity of “bombs, blood, and capital” after the bombing of Piazza della Loggia killed eight people in Brescia on May 28, 1974 and just a few days prior to another bomb (twelve dead on

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<sup>7</sup> The reference is here to the 1933 Fire of the German Reichstag, which represented an invaluable opportunity for Germany’s newly appointed Chancellor Adolph Hitler. Pursuing what he deemed a “sign from heaven,” Chancellor Hitler immediately denounced the arson of the Parliament building as the inaugurating act in the Communists’ plot to seize power. In order to effectively deal with the presumed emergency Germany was confronting, the very day after the arson, Reich President von Hindenburg—invoking Article 48 of the Weimar constitution—approved a decree which suspended fundamental individual rights and allowed the Chancellor to assume full emergency powers (Mommsen 1972, 129-222).

the Italicus train on August 4). In “Cronaca di un ballo mascherato,” these three denounce the strategy of tension for what it evidently is: a desperate attempt to “esorcizzare la guerra civile in vivo, manovrando *in vitro* qualche sensale di cadaveri ([1974] 2005, 100: exorcise the real civil war, manipulating in a controlled setting a few corpse-dealers).

Against the furor mounting everywhere, the promise of the great blowout could no longer be kept at bay. The register had to be changed. The furor must be deviated and made productive. As The Old Man from *Romanzo criminale* instructed his two most trusted secret agents: you find a deviant; you makes him deviate; and then you put him in front of a brutal alternative: either you deviate for me, or you are done (De Cataldo 2002, 215). Or, as Ceserano, Coppo, and Fallisi put it:

A un capitale che gioca d'anticipo...su una crisi irreversibile, le sue ultime chances di sopravvivenza, non resta alcun margine, nemmeno ideologico, per proporsi di amministrare un ordine apparente. Solo un disordine controllato gli prospetta qualche respiro. Una *guerra civile pilotata* è il tipo di realtà quotidiana che meglio gli consentirebbe di estremizzare il *proprio* terrorismo. ([1974] 2005, 100)

(For Capital betting in advance...on an irreversible crisis as its last chance for survival, no margin remains, not even ideological, for claiming the appearance of order. Only a controlled disorder offers the possibility of some respite. A *guided civil war* is the type of reality that would allow Capital to push its *own* terrorism to extremes.) (Editors' translation)

Since it cannot produce order out of chaos, Capital's only chance is now to produce chaos out of order: disarranging the world to keep hold of the reins of History (De Cataldo 2002, 216). If this is truly the political game that emerges with Piazza Fontana—a game at which The Old Man had no equal—then the name of the coming enemy is “control.” And it is not the time to cry or to tremble, but rather to comprehend its plot and create new weapons. Giancarlo De Cataldo's *Romanzo criminale* is one of these weapons.

Writing from the fascist prison where he was sent to rot, Antonio Gramsci contrasted the negative and apolitical adventurousness of daily life with the potentially political and pedagogical adventures of some popular literature. Gramsci concluded the section “Romanzi polizieschi” from his notebook 21 by claiming that the appeal of escapist literature must be connected with the increasing precariousness of existence: life is becoming all too unpredictable and chaotic; there is too much adventurousness around. As a defense against such coercive precariousness imposed on the living by capitalism, people start looking for a different kind of adventure, one that might educate and introduce them to alternative modes of living and being human. The appeal of literature, popular or not, is first and foremost practical, moral, and political, and only secondarily aesthetic “Si aspira all'avventura ‘bella’ e interessante, perché dovuta alla propria iniziativa libera, contro l'avventura ‘brutta’ e rivoltante, perché dovuta alle condizioni imposte da altri” ([1934-35] 1975, 2133 [1985, 374: people aspire to an adventure which

is ‘beautiful’ and interesting because it is the result of their own free initiative, in the face of the adventure which is ‘ugly’ and revolting, because due to conditions imposed by others]). My treatment of *Romanzo criminale* moves in a similar direction: from the “ugly and revolting” fiction that is contemporary Italy to the “beautiful and interesting” adventures that can be used to redeem it (and us). One fiction responds to the other: popular literature is not only an opiate for the masses, but may also reignite the spirit of resistance, for example, by bearing witness to the German insurgents in the Peasants’ War and rebellious Anabaptists who established a communal government at Münster in 1534 (De Michele 2006).

The pages that follow—sometimes paraphrasing, sometimes quoting directly—cross-cut scenes from *Romanzo criminale* (which takes place between 1977 and 1992) and theoretical representations of the changes that occurred in the governmental strategies of post-1968 Europe in order to show the political potential harbored in De Cataldo’s novel. After introducing the Gang’s origins and its rise to power, I will show how the Gang was courted by the Italian secret services and discuss the resistance of one its members to get involved with politics: the Cool feared that the visibility the Gang earned was detrimental and counterproductive. This anxiety suggests a transition from *Romanzo criminale* to Gilles Deleuze’s notes on societies of control—societies organized around the visibility of their subjects rather than on their discipline or punishment. I will argue that the emergence of this new form of society must be connected with the restructuring of the productive process of the 1960s and 1970s. The automatization of production required citizens to freely experiment with their creativity and individuality, but such freedom created a milieu in which criminality was endemic: the role of the State was not to prevent social frictions anymore, but only to watch over them in order to keep them in check and exploit them for the conservation of the *status quo*. I will jump-cut back to *Romanzo criminale*, to show how the deviances of the Gang’s members were exploited by The Old Man for the benefit of its political agenda. In the last section, by taking up Wu Ming 1’s discussion of “New Italian Epic,” I will draw a political lesson out of De Cataldo’s novel and connect it with Giorgio Agamben and Paolo Virno’s descriptions of the political valence of the refusal to participate in State politics. After all, exiting and deserting is what The Cool wanted the Gang to do from the outset, rather than follow The Lebanese’s will to power and his desire to be involved in the workings of the governmental machine.

### *The Stench of State and the Lives of Infamous Men: “Politics is a Rip-Off”*

The fabula of *Romanzo criminale* starts under the EUR Fungo, the tall water-tower rising over southern Rome.

It is the summer of 1977, and we follow The Lebanese walking from Trastevere to Ostiense to meet up with Dandy, an old pal of his from Tor di Nona who had been obsessed with style and elegance ever since he came across a book on Lord Brummell. The Lebanese needed to see him. Someone had just stolen his Mini Cooper. The real problem wasn’t however the car itself, but what was inside it: 4 Berettas, 2 Tranfoglios, magazines, bullets. A small armory. They had to get it back. The guy who had jacked the

car had already sold it to The Cool. Dandy had heard good things about him: a quiet guy with a certain feel for stickups and post offices. The Lebanese and Dandy burst into his hiding spot behind the Fungo fully loaded. The Cool was a decent guy, true, but you never know how situations like this might go down. And, naturally, The Lebanese and Dandy found themselves staring down the barrels of three SRLs and one revolver. The Cool and his men gave the two guests a pretty friendly welcome, all things considered. “No need for a standoff,” The Cool calmly explained. The car was gone, but the weapons were still there. The Lebanese and Dandy could get them back and call it a day. In order to defuse the built-up tension, they all went out drinking. After a few rounds, The Cool and The Lebanese found themselves in The Cool’s black Golf. Something had to be said.

“What do you have in mind?” asked The Cool.

“A kidnapping: the Baron Rosellini. Anything’s possible, it’s just a matter of finding the right people,” The Lebanese answered (De Cataldo 2002, 17-19).

It was the Summer of 1977 and the Magliana Gang had been born. The kidnapping of Baron Rosellini yielded a three-billion-lire return, and the ransom money was immediately reinvested—what a great intuition The Lebanese had: “Cars get old, coke runs out, pussy runs dry for lack of flow”—in one-point-three kilos of pure Chilean heroin. Things were going well indeed, and the organization was holding up just fine: no friction between The Lebanese and The Cool’s factions. There had been hesitations at first, understandably, but eventually everyone agreed that if they were going to make it big, they needed to put their differences behind, reinvest the Rosellini ransom, and work together. They had to join forces in order to become more powerful. The most powerful. And by now they were one gang. Ready to take Rome for themselves. The Magliana Gang. Recognized and respected as an actual authority. This was why Don Rafele Cutolo, from the criminal nuthouse where he was doing time, asked to get them involved in the Moro affair. The cops had no idea where to look for him, so they came to Cutolo for help. And who did Cutolo go to? He went to The Sardinian, because The Sardinian was the man to go to in Rome. And The Sardinian went to The Lebanese and explained that the State was putting a deal on the table.

“We’ll do you a favor today, and you’ll turn a blind eye on us tomorrow.... Why not?” The Lebanese concluded.

When The Lebanese repeated the proposal to the Gang, The Cool seemed jittery. He wasn’t at all convinced by his “why not.” The Lebanese was trying to break into a scene that just didn’t sit right with him. Work for the State? Why join up with something that had screwed you over all your life, reduced you to the brink of starvation, and then, when you pushed back just a little, threw you in the can? To him, getting bogged down in politics was never a good thing. The Cool smelled a rat. But he’d go to meet Cutolo—who, in the meantime, had made it out of the nuthouse thanks to three kilos of TNT—with The Lebanese anyway: a favor to a real friend, in this case. However, once he’d arrived at the farm-house where the meeting was about to take place, The Cool decided not to go in. He lit a cigarette and stood outside contemplating the lambs which, all of a sudden, set off all together, helter-skelter, in a pack. And as suddenly as they’d started, they stopped and ran to find shelter at the teats of the mother sheep. The Cool was distracted from this bucolic scene by a soft patter of footsteps. He turned around. Two stockmen looked at him intently. The stench of State was getting very strong, unbearable. The stockmen asked for a smoke, The Cool offered his pack. The taller of the two jumped

the fence into the corral. One of the slower lambs bumped into the man's legs. With one swift move he grabbed it, broke its neck without effort, and threw it over his shoulders. The Cool felt a chill. For an instant, he had seen his younger brother in the face of that lamb. But maybe, in that blink of an eye, he had also realized that the Gang's hard-earned visibility was ultimately a trap. The fetid presence of the State in their infamous lives made them all lambs to the slaughter (De Cataldo 2002, 62-66, 85).

*The Out-of-dateness of Biopolitics: "Individuals and Society"*

Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, *which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.*

--Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

One of the most acute interpreters of the transformations in contemporary governmental models is Gilles Deleuze. His 1990 "Postscript on the Societies of Control" is at once an homage to Michel Foucault's ground-breaking analysis on disciplinary societies and an attempt to further pursue vectors that his friend, in his lessons on biopolitics and neoliberalism from the late 1970s, barely had time to register. In other words, Deleuze's postscript is a projection towards the present future: a foretelling of what awaits us at the end of discipline.

Disciplinary societies, according to Deleuze, began to replace societies of sovereignty at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Compared to the emerging form of society, societies of sovereignty had quite different goals and functions: to collect the fruits of production rather than organize it; to make decisions about death rather than administer life. In societies of sovereignty, interest in the subjects' lives was marginal. The State became concerned with the lives of its subjects only when they violated the sovereign's prohibitions or represented, in his outraged eyes, a threat. With the transition to the disciplinary paradigm, the crucial interaction between the subject and the sovereign does not take place anymore after the infraction of a law but, rather, before such a violation. Discipline is in fact essentially inspired by a carcenary logic: to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time. The household, school, factory, hospital, barrack—while these are all different environments, they each function by holding the prison as their ultimate analogical model (Deleuze [1990] 1992, 3).

However, notwithstanding the fact that the prison is its guiding light, the dream of discipline is in effect a world without jails: through a minute, capillary training of the individual bodies and of the citizenry as a body politic, this mode of governance seeks to produce docile bodies ready to obey sovereign power and to satisfy the presumed collective needs. Laws will not and could not be broken: this is the disciplinary fantasy. Once the disciplinary task is accomplished and State authority is total, the beam of the prison will no longer be needed. It will be extinguished by the government of the flesh and by endo-surveillance. This does not mean—Foucault warns in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*—that laws and institutions of justice disappear. Rather, it means that "the law operates more and more as a norm, and that the judicial institution is

increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory” ([1976] 1990, 144).

Under disciplinary regimes, it is less a matter of exercising the power of death over the guilty, as it is a matter of disciplining the life of the innocent. According to Deleuze’s reading of Foucault, this very transition from a punitive logic to a normalizing one marks the passage from political to biopolitical governance. Power becomes bio-power when it assumes life as its object and objective. And, for Foucault, this assumption requires continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms. Vampires (Marx, Pasolini) and zombies (Romero) are metaphors for precisely such disciplinary apparatuses. The disciplinary logic is, however, about to be overtaken by a different governmental system. According to Deleuze, a disciplinary society is what we no longer are, what we have already ceased to be. Deleuze is firmly convinced of this fact, though his essay only alludes to the reasons for this ulterior paradigm shift. But if we read Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2001; 2004) alongside Deleuze and Foucault, we can unpack the urgencies motivating such a governmental overhaul.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggested that societies of discipline overcame societies of sovereignty for two distinct sets of reasons: (a) the capital violence of the sovereign encountered ever-growing resistance from the population as the brutality of executions erased the difference between sovereign and criminal, outlaw and police, justice and vengeance; (b) the undisciplined flesh of the subjects was not in sync with the needs of a nascent industrial capitalism and hence it was necessary to re-tune citizens’ bodies and allow them to interact more efficiently with the machines that they needed to take care of ([1975] 1995, 50-69, 135-69). Analogously, we can venture that the overcoming of disciplinary logic is due, at least in part, to a widespread intolerance toward governmental techniques. Because of the resistance encountered, these techniques become more aggressive and invasive and, therefore, bring about even more determined acts of sabotage. Excessive disciplining and acts of insubordination resound in a dramatic crescendo. Yet, just as the replacement of societies of sovereignty was co-determined by the needs of a nascent industrial Capital, so too does the obsolescence of disciplinary societies coincide with a transformation in the productive processes. With the industrial restructuring of the 1960s and 1970s, Capital’s demands on the workers changes: the automation of production liberates workers from the machines and relegates them, as Marx noted in *Grundrisse*, in activities that have their place “alongside” the productive processes. Whereas work once consisted in producing and created the man-machine symbiosis (see Charlie Chaplin’s 1936 *Modern Times*), the autonomy won from the machines both distanced man from them and made labor coincide with the surveillance and coordination of production (see John Hughes’s 1985 *Weird Science*). According to Virno, the fundamental point in the transformation of productive processes consists in this: once the production of commodities gets automatized, the services rendered by living labor resemble more and more linguistic-virtuosic performances (2001, 34; 2004, 58). The automated machines bring about a new model of society, a society that—as we are about to see—The Old Man governed. It is no surprise, then, that The Old Man loved mechanical toys so much and spent all his spare time playing with them: automata are responsible for the world he ruled with such success. In that world, the docile body-machine of the workers is an obsolete legacy; in that world, the workers are required to be creative in order to strengthen, streamline, optimize, and diversify production. A

genocide needed to be enforced to sustain the changing modes of production; the old humanity and its outdated culture had to be replaced by a new man able to provide Capital with what it was reclaiming (Pasolini [1975] 1976, 152-55). Capital no longer needed the blood of the workers to live. It needed their minds to live in a better way. This is why in a capitalism of automated over-production and services it is essential to preserve undisciplined spaces where the “creative improvisation” of the individual can take place. It is the very creativity of immaterial labor that creates surplus value, and therefore creativity is encouraged through a system of challenges, awards, contests and company competitions. Those bodies that were once trained for obedience are now for Virno asked to experiment with their individuality—of course not to selflessly promote human creativity, but to achieve satisfactory levels of productivity (2001, 34; 2004, 59).

Creativity and individuality are crucial in the new automated capitalism, first and foremost because their exploitation as sources of “problem solving” ensures the optimization of the productive processes. They are crucial because, thanks to them, there is the guarantee of a constant turnover of merchandise and services available on the market. But individuality and creativity are also fundamental for another reason: they ensure the diversification in the social fabric without which the multitudes of merchandise and services flooding the market would surely have an author, but would still be in search of a consumer. While the factory constituted the individual into a single, collective body, the new model of enterprise—Deleuze notes in his postscript—presents even the most violent rivalry as a healthy form of emulation; as an excellent motivational force that in reality sets individuals against one another and runs through each, to the point of dividing each within and turning them into divided beings (“dividuals”) ([1990] 1992, 5).

Here, Deleuze is making explicit some tendencies already exposed ten years earlier by Foucault in his 1978-1979 seminars on neo-liberal society (which Deleuze would dub society of control). In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault observes that once the mechanics of entrepreneurial competition becomes the organizing principle of public policy, when the market, competition, and entrepreneurship are made into the formative powers of society, then the mass society which Marx denounced in the first book of *Capital* fades away: a prison society, normalized, standardized and disciplined was surely our horizon from the 1920s to the 1960s, but we are no longer there. It is 1978 (*Romanzo criminale* starts in 1977, Moro was kidnapped in March 1978—let’s keep these historical markers in mind) and we have move beyond that stage. Now we are looking at a dog-eat-dog world of small entrepreneurs; a world dominated by generalized insecurity because one’s survival, both literal and metaphorical, depends on one’s capacity to overpower competitors.

[T]he more the law in this enterprise society allows individuals the possibility of behaving as they wish in the form of free enterprise, and the greater the development of multiple and dynamic forms typical of this “enterprise” unit, then at the same time so the number and size of the surfaces of friction between these different units will increase and occasion of conflict and litigation multiply. (Foucault [2004] 2008, 175)

During a February 14, 1979 seminar at the *Collège de France*, Foucault adds a fundamental remark to these considerations concerning the decline of mass society and the rise of neo-liberal governance. He adds this note almost as an afterthought—it is the end of the session, and he promises he will get back to it at the following meeting—as if surprised by a sudden illumination: a society dominated by the entrepreneurial logic is a society in which the most important public apparatus is the judicial institution. Why? Why the courts and not the police, for instance? Because (and I am moving away from Foucault at this point) with the ever-multiplying centers in competition with each other and the consequent increase in points of friction among individuals (or, to be more precise, among the different ‘dividual’-enterprises), the role of the State also changes. It is no longer a matter of correcting destructive behaviors and preventing social conflicts: under the heading of “healthy entrepreneurial competition,” social discord is what the new logic of government promotes. Rather, it is necessary to watch over the different actors of the disputes; ensure that tensions remain under control and do not threaten the boundaries organizing the political space. The social form must be kept unchanged, but anything that does not undo this formation is allowed to happen. Pasolini would call this a system of false permissiveness: Power tolerates only those infractions that serve its purpose, creating a milieu where criminality is endemic. “Non solo i criminali veri e propri sono una ‘massa’: ma, ciò che più conta, la massa giovanile *tout court*...è costituita ormai da criminaloidi” ([1975] 1976, 81: Not only are the true criminals a ‘mass’ but, what is more important, the mass of Italian youth *tout court*...is now entirely made up of criminaloids). And, putting it even more dramatically: “Non c’è gruppo di ragazzi, incontrato per strada, che non potrebbe essere un gruppo di criminali” (ibid., 8: Not only are the true criminals a ‘mass’ but, what is more important, the mass of Italian youth *tout court*...is now entirely made up of criminaloids; there is no group of boys one meets in the street which might not be a group of criminals).<sup>8</sup>

Mass criminality.

Controlled disorder.

Fictive civil war that averts real, live civil war.

Opposing extremisms.

Counterrevolution.

Even Comrade Mao got something right in *The Old Man’s eyes*: if there is great disorder under heaven, the situation is excellent (De Cataldo 2002, 216). The promise of perpetual peace gives in to a generalized conflict in which the State legitimizes its own existence as the only director capable of mediating, maneuvering, deflecting conflicts, and guaranteeing a future for the nation. The task of the State consists in defending society from itself. However, if this is the only duty that the State carries out, how can we not think that a governmental apparatus which finds its exclusive justification in social emergencies is not also secretly interested in producing them?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the DVD commentary to his own filmic rendition of *Romanzo criminale*, Michele Placido commented: “The boys of *Romanzo criminale* are really the grandchildren of the shantytown dwellers so magnificently described by Pasolini” (quoted in Marcus 2008, 401).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of insecurity as a political strategy, see Agamben (1996, 15; 2000, 6-7), Mbembe (2003) and Wacquant (2009, 1-40).

Favor violence and conflicts within the State so they are not directed against the State?

Increase the number of enemies in order to hide the real one?

The truth of this new governmental strategy is encapsulated in Giulio Andreotti's confession to his wife and to Paolo Sorrentino's camera in *Il divo*: perpetuating evil is the only way to guarantee the good. In societies of neo-liberal control, each person is in fact free to be herself and to do whatever she wishes. Even (and above all) evil. One individual against another. One company against the other. One gang against the other. Everybody against everybody and the State guaranteeing that the unchained violence among different sacrificial lambs does not compromise the dominant social form. One is free to set off all of a sudden, to stop, to run, to bump into someone else, to stay behind. Kill or be killed. Be a wolf to other men. Exactly as it happens in *Romanzo criminale*: it is the 1970s and 1980s and the Gang brutally removed all the other pushers from the streets of Rome without any intervention from authorities. The bullet in the head that evened the score with their main competitor went unpunished. And with the intervention of The Skinny—truly the best financial advisor around—the Gang's capital skyrocketed. All it took was a spot-on business strategy to transform two mobs of losers into an enterprise that, depending on the situation, either competed or signed commercial agreements with the mafia and camorra. Nothing here for the State to worry about. A cabinet reshuffle, The Old Man defined it. Everything changes in order for everything to remain the same. The Italian miracle.

However, this miraculous freedom enjoyed in the post-disciplinary world is carefully watched. The same technological innovations that liberate man from his biopolitical chains also expose him to the continuous scrutiny of indiscreet eyes. "Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt," says Deleuze in his postscript. After the demise of disciplinary governance and the rise of the control society at the end of the 1960s, one no longer deals with docile bodies but with monitored individuals: the trace surplus that these new men leave behind in their daily transgressions make them all potentially indictable or open for blackmail. If evil is everywhere, you can be sure that everybody will screw up sooner or later. Indeed, when you do screw up, The Old Man will be there, ready to use your vulnerability to his advantage. Power does not rest on the muzzle of a gun, as Mao held. Power rests on information—The Old Man knew this all too well (De Cataldo 2002, 215). And what happens if someone, either through authentically subversive actions or through words inspired by a parrhesiastic madness, risks compromising the plots of power, along with the precarious equilibrium of a society that is always strategically held on the brink of disaster? You put him in the clink or six feet under. Fleas to eliminate. Just like Mino Pecorelli. In a state of permanent exception nobody cares about another headstone. Or about another dead journalist. For everybody else, for everyone who conforms to the rules of the game, things go relatively smoothly. At least until the State, or somebody working in concert with it, decides to cash out the debts you have contracted with society. But the Gang members didn't have to go through Marx, Deleuze, and Guattari to figure out that they were dealing with nothing more than a glorified loan-shark (De Cataldo 2002, 101).

*“Cops, If Not Worse”*

The first time that the Magliana Gang in *Romanzo criminale* crossed paths with obscure State apparatuses was in the winter of '78. At the Maremma meeting called to discuss the Moro affair and seal the deal between the State and the Gang, Cutolo introduced The Lebanese to two men whose actual identities were better left unknown. Zeta and Pigreco: distinguished, suit and tie, mute. It was clear that there wasn't much to say. No one was interested in freeing Moro anymore. He was writing too much; dead, he was worth more than alive.

At the second meeting, Zeta and Pigreco were far more loquacious. Accompanied by The Frog—one screw-up had also landed him on The Old Man's pay roll—they showed up at the classy Trastevere brothel that Patrizia, Dandy's girlfriend, had been running for a while. It really was a nice place. It would be a shame if something unpleasant were to happen to it. Zeta and Pigreco's boss—The Old Man—wanted a room in order to avoid any unfortunate incidents. Very special clients hung out at her brothel, and they wanted to blackmail them—isn't it so? What an absurd idea! Blackmail for sexual vices? In Italy? In Italy, the more powerful you are, the more tail you chase, and the more tail you chase the more people like you. Pigreco and Zeta did not want to blackmail anyone. They wanted a room from which to observe without being observed, listen without being heard. What they were after was precious information (De Cataldo 2002, 143-145).

After Patrizia came to him with Zeta and Pigreco's "offer," Dandy tried to throw his weight around. How dare those two suits threaten his woman? Didn't they know who they were messing with? The Lebanese explained there was something off about the whole thing, so it was better for the Gang to walk lightly around those people. They would realize Zeta and Pigreco's true power only a few years later, when some of the Gang members wound up in prison and, one brisk March evening, found the two agents waiting for them in a deserted section of the jail, offering lines of coke in welcome. The message was loud and clear. The Old Man wanted to work out a deal with The Lebanese after the Moro thing went South. There was some dirty work to be done, and the State needed some smart guys like them to do it. So: either they agreed to play by The Old Man's rules, and all the charges would go up in a puff of smoke, or they would have to consider themselves out of business. Pigreco and Zeta had already done them the favor of taking Commissioner Scialoja—the only person with the guts to give the Gang a hard time—out of the picture. They hadn't intervened when they discovered that Scialoja's beloved Sandra was about to be arrested on charges of violent conspiracy and insurrection against the State; they hadn't stopped Scialoja from helping her escape to France; and, finally, they had helpfully suggested that he leave the Gang alone, if he didn't want to find himself in the military prison of Forte Boccea with an arrest warrant twenty miles long. The State had done the Gang members more than one favor, and it would keep looking after them if the Gang showed equal affection for The Old Man. The Old Man had the palaces, but the Gang had the street. And without the street—The Old Man knew it—the palaces are worth nothing (De Cataldo 2002, 209).

But who the hell is this fucking Old Man?

*The Old and The Youth: Lines of Flight and the Coming Epics*

*Siamo stanchi di diventare giovani seri,  
o contenti per forza, o criminali, o nevrotici:  
vogliamo ridere, essere innocenti, aspettare  
qualcosa dalla vita, chiedere, ignorare.*

*(We're weary of becoming respectable youth,  
inevitably happy, or criminals, or neurotics:  
we want to laugh, to be innocent, to expect  
something from life, to ask, to remain in blissful ignorance)*  
--Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Postilla in versi"<sup>10</sup>

*[L]a nostra colpa di padri consisterebbe in questo: nel credere che la storia non sia e  
non possa essere altro che la storia borghese.*

*([O]ur guilt as fathers could be said to consist in this: that we believe that history is not  
and cannot be anything other than bourgeois history.)*  
--Pier Paolo Pasolini, "I giovani infelici"

Il Vecchio è il Vecchio, il Vecchio ordina e Dio dispone. Il Vecchio comandava un'unità informativa dal nome neutro il cui potere era noto solo a pochissimi eletti. Circondato dai suoi giocattoli meccanici, pezzi autentici del Settecento austriaco, prototipi dei moderni automi, il Vecchio combatteva l'insonnia giocando a disordinare il mondo. (De Cataldo 2002, 215)

(The Old Man is The Old Man. The Old Man gives the order and God gets it done. He commanded an anonymous intelligence unit whose power was known only to a very select elite. Surrounded by his mechanical toys, authentic pieces from eighteenth century Austria, prototypes of the modern automata, The Old Man fought insomnia by playing at disordering the world.)

I comunisti erano stati risospinti all'opposizione, e anche se facevano la voce grossa, la loro influenza era in netto calo.... Il terrorismo, rosso e nero, era entrato in un vortice autodistruttivo dal quale non c'era ritorno. Tra pentimenti, delazioni, dissociazioni e arresti, la generazione del 1970

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<sup>10</sup> These verses are part of the untitled poem included, as an appendix, in the Italian edition of *Lettere luterane*. The editorial note explains that Pasolini thought of this poem as an integral part of his unfinished pedagogical treatise *Gennariello* ([1975] 1976, 206).

era stata di fatto cancellata. Quanto alla mafia, non aveva mai rappresentato un vero problema. La mafia era più che un'istituzione: una necessità storica. Un accordo, alla fine, si riusciva sempre a trovarlo. L'Italia veleggiava tranquilla verso il traguardo degli anni Novanta, mollemente cullata dal ritmo di commedia dell'antica quadriglia dei poteri in eterno conflitto. Sì, la nave va: e se la nave va, chi ha più bisogno dei pirati?... Tenere in ballo gli alleati, anche i più scomodi. Perché non si sa mai che cosa potrà accadere domani, e un po' di pirati di scorta possono sempre tornare utili. (De Cataldo 2002, 447-48)

(The communists had been pushed back to the opposition, and even if they made a lot of noise, their influence was in serious decline.... Terrorism, black and red, entered a self-destructive spiral with no way out. Between repentance, spying, disassociations and arrests, the generation of the 1970s had been wiped out. As for the mafia, it had never represented a real problem. The mafia, more than an institution, was a historical necessity. In the end, an agreement was always found. Italy sailed calmly towards the 1990s, gently rocked by the rhythm of the ancient comic quadrille of powers in eternal conflict. Yes, the ship sails on: but if the ship sails on, who needs pirates?... Calling the shots in the game. Keeping your allies in the game, even the most uncomfortable ones. Because you never know what can happen tomorrow, and a few pirates left on the bench can always come in handy.)

The Old Man never slept. He could not close his eyes because he had to take care of History. Which history? The murder of democracy in Italy, naturally. The attempt by elements of the State to deprive the *demos* of its ability to write and rewrite its future autonomously. Interestingly, the absence of autonomy is the very characteristic that, according to Walter Benjamin (and to Pasolini, in a certain sense) distinguishes mythical time from a properly human temporality (see Benjamin [1921] 2004, 248-52; Pasolini [1969] 1981, 130-31).

The mythical universe is that which is dominated by the alternation in power of opposed factions fighting for control over the State. In this universe, nothing can truly happen because the goal of the State—independent of the political force that occupies power—is to immunize itself against the possibility of unexpected events which, by happening, might suspend the hegemony of the present. Pursuing such a line of thought, in his 1921 “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin concludes that mythical violence and State violence are structurally indistinguishable: the time of the State is nothing more than a demonic repetition of mythical times. In both cases it is a matter of establishing boundaries and arresting humanity in fixed places and fixed roles; in both cases it is a matter of banning the possibility of human agency, the capacity of acting differently from one's own presumed natural destiny. Guilty—i.e., criminal (let's not forget The Cool's charges “against the State” mentioned above)—is precisely the person who tries to live a different life from the one he, or she, is assigned to. The life of the citizens that the State wants to protect is not life in general, not their “whatever” life, but their present life: what

needs to be secured and assured is the way in which life is lived today. The eventuality that this present mode of living might be disturbed is the risk that must be avoided at all costs. This is why one cannot concede to the *demos* the power to choose its own destiny and why democracy is actually the true enemy of the State. Once it is freed from the control of State apparatuses, there cannot be any guarantee that the population will do the right thing. This is why you've got to keep an eye on things. The Old Man did nothing else. He never closed his eyes and never slept. He made sure that Italy didn't venture in the wrong direction—in the direction of communism, that is (Ward 2008, 97). And when it did, he immediately interfered to put everything back on track. You can be sure that whenever The Old Man goes, someone else will take up his vigil over Italy. And after him, someone else again. This is the dynamic that has characterized contemporary Italy—a mythical dynamic, because it involves the reenactment of plots and storylines that have already been seen and lived. It is no coincidence that, in a recent interview, De Cataldo insisted on the mythical thrust of a novelized Italy and concluded that while names and scenarios change, social, human and political dynamics remain unaltered (Antonello and O'Leary 2009, 357).

One must then ask the following questions: Is this mythical life we are doomed to really human life? Fully exposed to the controlling apparatuses of State power, can we still claim to be alive? According to Benjamin, we cannot. The term that Benjamin uses to refer to the larval mode of being alive which is deprived of any counter-power is “bare life” (*das bloße Leben*): life becomes naked when it is abandoned to face, unprotected, the apparatuses of a sovereign power. For this reason Benjamin's “Critique of Violence” notes that *das bloße Leben* is the unhappy, marked bearer of guilt: bare life is inevitably criminal and unhappy, for it has been stripped of the power to assert its innocence when confronted by a ruling authority. It is this situation that leads Giorgio Agamben to ask, at the end of the first installment of his *Homo Sacer* franchise, how the historical standstill into which we have been cast can be overcome, and how the living can be liberated from the blackmail of sovereign power (1995, 185-211; 1998, 166-188). Who or what can save us from the criminal spell of bare life and from the reduction of our existence to a “romanzo criminale”? Given that the State is the origin of the mythical evil that threatens us, it would be naïve to hope for redemption in those at the State's service. Sandra from *Romanzo criminale* was right when she said that rewriting History is not the task of judges and policemen. When the chips are down, one cannot expect much from the men of the State. Take Commissioner Scialoja for example. Democratic, *garantista*,<sup>11</sup> idealist, heroic: a man who read Guevara and Sciascia and, after holing up in Emilia Romagna for a while, returned South to fight crime just as Captain Bellodi had done; a man who hated the Italy of Pirandello and Machiavelli with a passion. Scialoja too was sucked back into the very system he had tried so stubbornly to change. The Old Man chose him to become the new custodian of Italy's secret history, and Scialoja used that history to help himself to power. Ultimately, he had the power. He was the power. And even if The Old Man died nothing was going to change. After 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the demise of The Old Man, Italy was no closer to getting rescued from the eternal return of the same. Not even victory over communism had been enough to set Italy free. It was not hard to find valid replacements: a new enemy and a new controller. The Old Man is dead, long live The Old Man. “On the breaking of this circle maintained by

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<sup>11</sup> [Editors' note: i.e., in favor of Constitutional and other guarantees of civil liberties and citizens' rights.]

mythical forms of law...a new historical epoch is founded” (Benjamin [1921] 2004, 300).<sup>12</sup>

In “Al di là dei diritti dell’uomo”—which, with its dismissal of the apparatus of citizenship, can be read as a cutting critique of *Empire* ten years before Negri and Hardt had written it—Agamben suggests that stateless people are the form of life responsible for the foundation of that new historical epoch Benjamin had cryptically evoked in “Critique of Violence.” Grafting the Arendtian terminology of this 1993 *Libération* article onto the vocabulary employed by Benjamin, we might say that refugees are the historical vanguard that brings about a world liberated from the apolitical immobility of mythical time. In order to understand the reason why, it is necessary to individuate the characteristics that distinguish the stateless person from other forms of life.

According to Agamben, the refugees’ specificity consists in showing a political relationality that is not mediated or controlled by any state authority or sovereign power. The stateless live beyond the State: escaping from a particular regime, they physically inhabit another nation without wanting or being able to assimilate. They constitute an obscure anomaly in the State fabric because they exist in it without belonging to it. And this type of spectral presence will only become more and more prominent in the contemporary world. The dramatic intensification of migratory flows that bring millions of men and women from the global South into the stronghold of the empire has in fact created a critical mass of non-citizen residents who substantially find themselves in the condition of statelessness. The crucial point here is that these noncitizens, while escaping from their own State, are not looking for another State; their occupation of a physical territory does not necessarily demonstrate the desire to partake in the system of rights and duties around which that symbolic space of a nation is organized. Far from it. For the most part one is dealing with attempts to live together while avoiding participation in State politics. Yet, this disinterest for a certain type of politics is not limited only to foreign noncitizens. The same refusal of citizenship is spreading among the citizens themselves:

i cittadini degli Stati industriali avanzati...manifestano, attraverso una crescente diserzione rispetto alle istanze codificate della partecipazione politica, una propensione evidente a trasformarsi in *denizens*, in residenti stabili noncittadini, in modo che cittadini e *denizens* stanno entrando, almeno in certe fasce sociali, in una zona di indistinzione potenziale. (Agamben 1993, 27)

the citizens of advanced industrial states...demonstrate, through an increasing desertion of the codified instances of political participation, an evident propensity to turn into *denizens*, into noncitizen permanent residents, so that citizens and *denizens*—at least in certain social strata—are entering an area of potential indistinction. (2000, 23)

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<sup>12</sup> For the neutralization of Scialoja and/in post-1989 Italy, see De Cataldo (2007).

If the political cartography developed in *Romanzo criminale* has convinced us that the governmental apparatuses of our nation are not actually concerned with our well-being, since the very State-form is responsible for the condition of minority into which we are thrown, then—perhaps—in order to blast open the mythical time that characterizes societies of control, we should follow the example of the stateless and venture out on a journey and a politics that brings us far away from any and every national belonging. There is nothing passive or remissive about this flight: it is a challenge, an experiment, an attempt to be our own parents by dodging the traps of control and imagining different communitarian assemblages. It is an attempt to politics. You realize that your own State's protection is, at best, an infantilizing device. You pack your bags, form alliances with the other refugee camps—to use an image from Wu Ming 1—and start watching out for yourselves.<sup>13</sup> Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* confirms the impression that such desertion is not a surrender.

Nulla è meno passivo di una fuga, di un esodo. La defezione modifica le condizioni entro cui la contesa ha luogo, anziché presupporle come un orizzonte inamovibile; cambia il contesto in cui è insorto un problema, invece di affrontare quest'ultimo scegliendo l'una o l'altra delle alternative previste. In breve, l'*exit* consiste in una invenzione spregiudicata, che altera le regole del gioco e fa impazzire la bussola dell'avversario. (2001, 46)

Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting. Defection modifies the conditions within which the struggle takes place, rather than presupposing those conditions to be an unalterable horizon; it modifies the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives. In short, *exit* consists of unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance. (2004, 70)

While societies of control map human creativity and subordinate it to the necessities of production and consumption, the disjunction from the State opens up an entirely

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<sup>13</sup> “Posso dire che mi sono sempre sentito italiano soprattutto in questo senso, ossia consapevole—e orgoglioso—di stare dentro una tradizione di ‘pensiero italiano’ (cfr. Roberto Esposito) radicale, lungo una via prettamente italiana alla modernità e al pensare la rivoluzione. Cosa che ha ben poco a che fare con lo stato-nazione e col patriottismo dei confini.... Profugo, sfollato, pur continuando a vivere all'interno del Paese che è anagraficamente il mio.... Si tratterà, per me e per quelli come me, di federare i campi profughi (dove abbiamo avuto figli e nipoti) fino a costruire un nuovo Paese nel Paese” (Wu Ming 1 2011; I can say that I have always felt Italian in this sense, that is to say aware, and proud, to belong to a tradition of radical ‘Italian thought’ [see Roberto Esposito], to a peculiarly Italian route to modernity and to the conceptualization of revolution. All this has very little to do with the nation-state and with the patriotism of borders.... Refugee, displaced, even if I am still living in the Country which officially and by birth is my own.... For me and for those like me, it will be a matter of federating our refugee camps (where we had children and grandchildren) in order to build a new Country within the Country).

different plot. It is a scenario having to do with the invention of lives that, while they are physically collocated inside a determined national context, are radically elsewhere. Deactivate control apparatuses and activate communities that are at once secluded and accessible. Only in this way can we emerge from the condition of minority into which the State forces us and eventually become adults: decide our own future, write our own story. We are weary of existing only in the crime news columns. We want to live in history (Pasolini [1975] 1976, 92). But to do this one needs to prevent the re-absorption of the newly formed communities by State power and their exploitation as productive resources by capitalism. If then it is licit—again following Agamben—to risk advancing a prophecy on the coming politics, it will no longer be a battle for control of the State, but rather the struggle of the non-State to conquer and manage autonomous political spaces and temporalities. From such perspective, freedom from the plots and maps of control amounts to ripping territories away from the hostile environment of mythical time and living them, day by day, in a different way. And then, once their political livability has been compromised, give ground and find new territories. The wisest thing—as Benjamin believed the fairy tale taught humankind in olden days, and some novels teach youth today—is to meet myth’s depoliticizing thrust with craftiness and in high spirits.<sup>14</sup>

A similar trust in the political redemptive power of narrative organizes also Wu Ming 1’s 2008 essay on the epic turn in Italian contemporary literature. In his memorandum on “New Italian Epic,” Wu Ming 1 scouts the emergence of a new narrative nebula in Italy after 1992-1993, the years of “Mani pulite” and the crumbling of the First Republic (Wu Ming 2009, 18-22; see also Wu Ming 1 2008). While many interpretations credit the Milan investigative squad as the cause for the disappearance of the parties that had dominated Italian political life since 1948, Wu Ming 1 reverses the causal chain—so to speak. Operation “Clean Hands” did not lead the First Republic to collapse; rather, the opposite occurred: the end of the First Republic was the condition of possibility for “Mani pulite.” As soon as the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, Italy’s political arrangement became immediately outdated. Actually, it was already defunct in 1989, and yet three years had to pass before its death could be declared. Wu Ming 1 is here suggesting that Eastern Block communism and the First Republic died the same death. The Cold War did not just end; it was won by the West, and its victory put an end both to communist states and the political systems that found their only legitimacy in the prevention of a red flood. Without the specter of communism to exorcise, the Italian political arrangement—entirely designed to keep the larger Western Communist Party in opposition—no longer had any historical justification. It is hence in the epistemic space

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<sup>14</sup> The anti-mythical thrust Benjamin localizes at the core of both fairy tale and revolution would impose a cross-reading of his 1921 “Critique of Violence” and his 1936 “The Storyteller.” While it is not within the scope of this paper to explore such a relationship, allow me to quote a long passage from “The Storyteller” crucial to my understanding of “New Italian Epic”: “The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest. In the figure of the fool it shows us how mankind ‘acts dumb’ toward myth; in the figure of the youngest brother, it shows us how one’s chances increase as the mythical primordial time is left behind; in the figure of the youth who sets out to learn what fear is, it shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through; in the figure of the wiseacre, it shows us that the questions posed by myth are simple-minded, like the riddle of the Sphinx; in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale, it shows that nature not only is subservient to myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man. *The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits*” ([1936] 2006, 157, emphasis added).

created by the death of actually existing socialism that the “Mani pulite” event could take place. But it is also only in this very unstable space in collapse that the first glimmerings of “New Italian Epic” (NIE) could make their appearance. While the rest of the world discussed Fukuyama and postmodernism became mannerism, in our country, new energies were released. This long process of crystallization, which began with an explosive return to genre fiction (sci-fi and noir especially: Carlotto, Lucarelli, Evangelisti), would culminate a decade later under the pressure of 2001: Genoa and the Twin Towers. What is Italy? What is the world? What will they become? Could they—and we—be something else? The urgency of these questions leads NIE to the maturity of 2002: interest in the past and in a genealogy of the present, concern for the future that awaits humanity around the corner, and trust in fiction’s power to interrupt the feared course of events and impose on it an unexpected twist.

2002: Wu Ming’s *54*; Valerio Evangelisti’s *Black Flag*; Giancarlo De Cataldo’s *Romanzo criminale*. And then, just to name a few: *La presa di Macallè* (Andrea Camilleri); *L’ottava vibrazione* (Carlo Lucarelli); *Cristiani di Allah* and *L’oscura immensità della morte* (Massimo Carlotto); *Scirocco* (Girolamo De Michele); *Il fasciocomunista* (Antonio Pennacchi); Giuseppe Genna’s *Dies Irae* and *Hitler. Gomorrah*, of course. Kai Zen’s *La strategia dell’ariete* and Siti’s *Il contagio*. Very different works indeed, but resonating together. All the works positioned by Wu Ming 1 within the NIE nebula in fact assume writing to be a serious task; they all share a profound faith in the liberating potential of language and narrativity.

Then, hopefully, the escapist, ex-ducative novels of this coming epic will be used as Pasolini and Gramsci thought novels should be used: as guides in the gateway beyond the Horizon and beyond Power. Beyond the domain of mythical time. Beyond the Italy transformed into a criminal novel by powerful old men. Another life awaits us elsewhere; one needs only the courage to invent it. Maybe this is what The Panther was trying to tell the Gang: don’t get blinded by power; don’t try to seize it and become kings of Rome. Board that plane for Nicaragua now; take off on that line of flight before you are forced to kill each other. The Cool knew he wasn’t just a deluded fool. In South America, Ireland, or in the valley of the Mohawk river, different histories and different Italys wait to be read and written. As The Lebanese proposed at the Gang’s genesis: “Stecca para e si decide tutti insieme... Se ci teniamo uniti...avete idea di quello che possiamo diventare?” (De Cataldo 2002, 27).

Divide everything equally, decide everything commonly.

If we stay united, do you have any idea what we can become?

(Translated by Scott Stuart)

### *Closing Credits*

Some ideas put forth in this article were previously proposed in my “*Romanzo criminale. La produzione di storia e l’esistenza dell’Italia*,” published in the volume *Pop filosofia. Esercizi filosofici attraverso la cultura di massa* (edited by Simone Regazzoni for il Melangolo) and republished online on [carmillaonline.com](http://carmillaonline.com). I am grateful to Simone for

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