

Tracce di lucciole. Sex work and the removal of perturbing bodies from the public space

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This text owes much to the common research conducted with the ATIsuffix collective and it owes as much to Paulette, who generously decided to share her space, time and story with me. The pictures represent some moments of her daily life in Rome.

As an architect and a planner, I have always been fascinated by the exceptional power that space (and its governance) has on shaping our behaviours, for instance through the indication of which bodies are legitimised to use public space or not. In this sense, the case of the management of street sex work is particularly interesting, as it is deeply intertwined with issues of gender but also with the concept of public space itself.

Yet local administrations and policy makers seem not to choose this framework to understand - and to deal with - this "annoying" phenomenon. Most of the public debate in Italy (and in many other EU countries) around the topic of sex work is limited, in a nutshell, to two aspects of the issue. Firstly, a large part of the academic literature about sex workers has contributed to their unique representation as passive victims of trafficking. This representation has a tricky consequence, which is to delegitimize sex workers as subjects with awareness, agency, desires and claims and to consider them as objects to move around and remove from the city. Moreover, trafficking is very often used to justify some policies of spatial exclusion, with the result of pushing sex workers in darker or more peripheral areas, where it is still more difficult to emerge from a situation of coercion. The second aspect considered in the public debate is the thorny problem of *decency*. In this framework, Nancy Duncan (1996) has perfectly identified the sight of prostitutes as a reason for profound upheaval of the urban moral geographies: the presence of their bodies in the streets blurs the public/private dichotomy and threatens the concept of "respectable behavior" for a woman, even only subverting the idea for which a female person, at night, should not wander alone in any public space.

The issues of trafficking and decency, often recognized as problematic in equal measure, are not sufficient to frame the questions raised by the management of sex work in public space, in part addressed by some academic research (among others, Hubbard & Sanders 2003, Hubbard 2004, 2009, Danna 2006, Maltherre Barthes & Genini 2011, Serughetti 2015). For instance, the policies put in place do not address deeply enough the consequences they can have on sex workers' lives, starting with not considering them as stakeholders in any of the decision-making processes that concern them.

I argue that such policies are exclusive and harmful, for the life of sex workers and for the very concept of public space, and that despite trying to remove some bodies considered too "disturbing", these same bodies manage to resist, often leaving important traces of their presence in the urban environment. To deepen this topic, it is necessary to introduce the example of the spatial management of sex work in Italy.



Italy does not consider prostitution itself to be a crime, while criminalizing anyone taking advantage of it: in 1958, the *Merlin law* revoked the regulation system, banned brothels, and established the criminal offence called "exploitation of prostitution" to punish procuring of sexual services. Organized prostitution, whether indoors in brothels or controlled by third parties, is thus prohibited, although the exchange of sexual acts for money is legal, in itself. This legislative framework makes indoor sex work very difficult to be legally practiced: for example, in private apartments it is likely to be prosecuted for exploitation or other kind of abuses; furthermore, a significant amount of sex workers cannot afford a rent. As a result of these conditions we witness a remarkable presence of sex workers working in the street, imposing the presence of their bodies and practices and thus triggering a series of local conflicts related to the use of public space.



Although it is not a crime, sex work in Italy remains socially unacceptable, which is why it is restrained via urban governance, defining legislative gimmicks to contain and control its visible features. Decrees, orders, and patrols are designed and implemented to forbid, or prevent, the presence of sex workers on certain streets or areas.

These attempts can be ascribed to the set of measures that aim to achieve the chimeric concept of "decorum". Decorum is a very delicate concept, not only because it is hard to define – it recalls behaviour, decency, discretion – but above all because it is ambiguous. Decorous is, in fact, who is within certain limits, which are not absolute but redesigned in relation to the gender, age, and social position of the accountable person (Pitch 2013, Pisanello 2017). Since the early 2000, decorum has inflamed the minds of citizens and administrators, legitimizing a long series of ordinances aiming at the regulation of the use of public space pursuing an idea of the city where both diversity and marginality are not seen. In the name of decorum, local administrations remove both objects *and* individuals, such as people pursuing informal work, people without official documentation, the homeless, beggars, migrants etc. and obviously sex workers. This kind of measures are double standard: they focus on the *good citizen*, without considering the interests of the population working in the practice of prostitution. In general, Italian policies for the management of public space can be recognized as exclusionary. In this sense, exclusion is the result of the implementation of policies aiming to define areas where the presence of certain bodies is not tolerated (Sibley 1995, Cresswell 1996).



Within sex work that takes place in the realm of the streets the transgression of sexualized bodies in the public space becomes explicit, and their insolent and “excessive” visibility is confined to the outside of the purified spaces of residency and consumption. If we could hypothesize a bold analogy between public space and the space of human psyche, then through the lens of psychoanalysis, the measures inspired by the concept of decorum could be read as a collective removal of perturbing bodies. Freud has extensively theorised the mechanisms of removal: the psychic contents that are sources of conflict, such as desires, impulses or representations that are unbearable for some reason, are removed from the conscious sphere and eclipsed in that of the unconscious. Despite this, they keep a trace, a weak and latent signal that brings back to light what has been removed, triggering a complex conflict. It is thus defined as *unheimlich*, the uncanny, the anguish and disorientation generated by what could remain hidden, and which instead has emerged.

Street sex workers are accused of offending public decorum, decency and order, and the more explicit and visible they are, the deeper the conflict they generate. The resulting policies of removal can be framed in a more general approach to the public space which is being imposed throughout the country, and it is based on what we may call “right to security without security of rights”: the physical removal of sex workers is often legitimated by security reasons, but it is not supported by the guaranty of fundamental rights to those who are removed, such as the right to the public space and the right to housing, to a proper place to live. This factor has a strong impact on sex workers, fostering dynamics of impoverishment and precariousness: the government of space is fundamental in keeping sex workers in poverty, in conditions of need. Furthermore, these policies do not induce significant changes in the sex work phenomenon, but rather a shift towards more peripheral areas, and the corresponding adaptation of clients. The urban geography of sex workers is always *becoming*, constantly pushing against the limits of its confinement and adopting tactics of mobility and resistance; and in doing so, as we will see, they leave some important traces of their presence, in a manner that prevent their complete removal from the urban space.



While I was pursuing research on the forms of governance that play a role in the marginalization of sex workers in the urban public sphere, I had the chance to meet Paulette[1], a transsexual sex worker that arrived in Rome from Colombia in the late '90s and worked in the streets until a few years ago. Together, we tried to reconstruct her story since her arrival, through all the spaces she had lived in the city, for working, housing or leisure reasons using the form of maps. The mapping was initially concerning her displacements in the public space of different neighbourhoods, confronting them with policies and ordinances that were active in that period: the idea was to understand whether institutional choices had consequences on the way sex

workers were living in the city, and which were the strategies of resistance triggered by them to counter the removal policies. But eventually her story turned out to be fundamental to underline the role of the space in making sex workers' lives harder: for example, she frequently told me about police patrols persecuting her while working and chasing her from certain spaces; also, about the many different accommodations she had to change, from the illicit (and extremely expensive) arrangements for illegal migrants to the first apartments rented without any official contract: a toilsome journey, due to her impossibility to access to public housing provided by the local welfare system to get an affordable rent.



Paulette's story is necessary in order to enrich the narratives of some areas of the Italian capital, otherwise represented exclusively through the words and actions of those who are entitled to talk about them: her story highlights visible and invisible geographies in the Roman public sphere, between the abuses of law enforcement and the weaving of relations with her neighbors. Furthermore, the mapping of all her movements between the squares and streets she has been working in confirms that the policies enacted to manage the presence of sex workers in public space have no permanent effects on their removal, but only on their temporary displacement. Instead, they contribute to break the balance achieved between groups of sex workers, as well as any relationships established with the neighborhood. In fact, no matter how much the city tries to distance and remove the presences of what it perceives as perturbing, trying to confine these bodies generates new forms of alliances and relationships. These can be within the confinement itself and towards its outside, constructive and affective as well as conflicting and opportunistic. Paulette's tales are scattered with relationships with clients, friends or partners to obtain support in bureaucratic-legal matters such as political asylum, and many other ties: those with her sex workers friends, those with other inhabitants of the Roman nights (often gravitating around the LGBTQ+ world), those with neighbours of the places she lived or worked in. These relationships were, and still are, her opportunities for social and economic wellbeing, letting her feel as an active part of these urban areas. Beyond the physical trails, these relationships are maybe the most powerful traces that she's leaving in the space around her: they are a light, intangible witness not only of her presence, but also of her resistance to the institutional attempts to remove her from the realm of visibility.



As said above, it seems important to highlight the connection of this dynamic with the sphere of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny: the “disturbing” visibility of street sex workers is what justifies their exclusion from the “purified” spaces of the city. Queer and gender studies turn therefore out to be interesting interpretation tools of a phenomenon that draws a moral geography reflecting and confronting features of heteronormativity and patriarchy and their denial of the right to the city to certain inhabitants.

In the article known as “L’articolo delle lucciole”[2], Pier Paolo Pasolini speaks up against the silent cultural “genocide” that reduced differences and otherness, by assimilating them to bourgeois values and ways of life. Pasolini points this out as the latest crime of a new fascism, maybe worse than the previous one: the neo-capitalism, with its blinding, artificial splendour. Since the article appeared, talking about *lucciole*, fireflies, has been alluding, metaphorically, to the traits of the human world that risk to be eclipsed by the inexorable imposition of social and cultural stereotypes.

Many years later, in *Come le lucciole*(2010) Didi-Huberman accuses Pasolini of not seeing the spaces and the dynamics of resistance: these are often interstitial, intermittent, nomadic, but still they withstand the attempts of extinction of the fireflies. In fact, the excess of regulations, controls and limits to the use of urban space is contrasted with very different actions depending on the (in)visibility and on the social and cultural capital of those who practice them, repeatedly and stubbornly, consciously or unconsciously, chasing the right to an idea, an aesthetic and an ethic, and remaining active and resistant presences in the public space (Saitta 2017).

In this sense, also the presence of hypersexualized and extra-normative bodies in the city assume a clear political meaning: bodies that are normally stigmatized, banned and removed can become performative tools for the contamination of some spaces and the overcoming of certain limits (Borghi 2012), in a staunch attempt to affirm their well-deserved right to the city. It is the duty of anyone in charge of the governance of public space to recognize and defend it, against the inexorable burden of this darkness of the rights.

[1] Paulette is the name she chose to use when she appears in my writings.

[2] Translated as “Disappearance of the Fireflies”. The article was originally published as “Il vuoto del potere in Italia” (The Power Void in Italy) in the newspaper *Corriere della sera*, 1 February 1975; it was then re-published in Pasolini, P. P., (1975). *Scritti Corsari*, Garzanti, Milano. The article is translated and published at: <https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=2107>.

*“Traces of fireflies”. *Lucciola* (literally, “firefly”) is a very popular term in Italy to refer to female sex workers. *Lucciole* are women who practice prostitution on the streets who, with their fires that light up at night in the places where they work, evoke the flashing light emitted by the homonymous nocturnal insect.

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