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Neighbourhood Portraits

53 Lo sQuaderno

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Neighbourhood Portraits

a cura di / dossier coordonné par / edited by
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Editorial

Quarticciolo, the perfect dimension
Decay, coexistence and resistance in a roman ecosystem

Serena Olcuire

Quarticciolo[1] is often described as one of the most significant examples of the *borgate ufficiali*, the public housing settlements built by the Istituto Fascista Autonomo Case Popolari in the late 1930s in the Roman countryside[2] (Cianfarani and Porqueddu 2012). The Government Programme envisaged the *borgata* as the fulfillment of the new principles of urban health and the implementation of an urban model that responded to various socio-political needs: the solution of the housing crisis, the removal of shanty towns, the provision of public housing for internal migrants, and shelter for those populations displaced from the historic city centre[3].

The hard physical boundaries of Quarticciolo, delimited by major roads and, historically, the Fosso di Quarticciolo [a small canal], testify its deliberate mission to confine the hosted population. The masterplan aimed to create an autarkic microcosm (Cianfarani and Porqueddu 2012): the Casa del Fascio, the church, the square and the market are arranged so as to suggest the orderly spatial rhythm of a self-contained district. The architectural composition simulates building types from different historical periods, creating a fictitious historical coexistence (Cianfarani 2012), with an almost metaphysical effect. The political aim of this choice, however, was to encourage forcefully displaced populations to find new roots.

Today, Quarticciolo is an architecturally seductive neighbourhood that offers living space at a human scale. Its associated discomforts are those typical of the Italian low income periphery: the concentration of poverty, unemployment, a lack of transport connections to the rest of the city[4]. Policies and activities promoted by the public institutions are almost absent, with a few significant exceptions

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1 This contribution collects ideas gathered during an ethnographic observation carried out between 2017 and 2018, as a case study of my doctoral dissertation at Sapienza University of Rome.

2 "Autonomous Fascist Institute of Popular Houses", during the fascist period, the Italian entity promoting, building and managing public buildings to allocate housing to the lower income population. *Borgata* literally means "village", but in the city of Rome it indicates a suburban area, with a pejorative sense. Fascist regime reused the term in the expression *borgate ufficiali*, to indicate its 11 interventions of public housing. A *borgata ufficiale* has a very rigid structure and it is divided in smaller administrative parcels, the *lotti*.

3 Such as the *sventramenti*, the gutting style politics of urban planning implemented to remove some of the popular neighbourhoods from the city centre to make room for monumental interventions. The connection between the *sventramenti* and the corresponding displacement in the *borgate ufficiali* (see Cederna (1979) and Insolera (2011, orig. ed. 1962)) has been criticized by Villani (2012). However, it is important to take into account recent analyses of displacement, highlighting the difficulties of evaluating its dynamics. On this debate, and on the particular case of Rome, see Herzfeld (2009).

4 The average income of the Municipality V corresponds to 18,900 euros per year against, for example, 40,296 of the Municipality II (Source: Reddito individuale imponibile medio per municipio e cittadinanza nel 2014 a Roma. Dati del Rapporto Il reddito dei romani, Ragioneria Generale, I Direzione Sistemi informativi di pianificazione e controllo finanziario, U.O. Statistica). Employed population is at 10,416 out of an active population of 17,078 (Source: Census ISTAT 2011).

such as the Quarticciolo Theater-Library, which opened in 2007 but which fails to attract residents[5]. Progressive commercial desertification is another significant issue: following the closure of the local market (imposed by the public administration), the arrival of large-scale retailers just outside the neighbourhood gave the *coup de grâce* to local family-run trade. Meeting places have also been severely curtailed: for instance, the main square was the subject of a redevelopment project that kept it inaccessible for over twenty years until 2015. Overall, as the public institutions watch the neighbourhood from the outside, informal forms of livelihood fill the gaps from the inside.

Although Quarticciolo gives the impression of a complete and autonomous place (as originally intended by the Fascist regime), the neighbourhood obviously lives on a multitude of exchanges with the outside. The illegal economy, and particularly the drug market, is one such exchange: indeed, Quarticciolo is considered one of the major locations in Rome for heroin and cocaine dealing. This also creates some local redistribution effects. Fortunately, the void left by public governance is not only filled by illicit activities but also by self-organised bodies who seek to support the neighbourhood. For instance, the Casa del Fascio now hosts the occupied *centro sociale* Red Lab Quarticciolo and, on the upper floors, a housing squat.

Since 2014, Red Lab has managed to establish a degree of solidarity with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. This dimension, almost pre-political in a sense, is grounded in daily mutualism in order to bridge the huge void of social policies left by the institutions: a dense set of actions, built on a dynamic, relational process that allows for the discovery of different situations and provides an overall image of the vulnerabilities and the resources of the neighbourhood itself.

Inspired by similar informal institutions in popular neighbourhoods worldwide, the Palestra Popolare del Quarticciolo, a grassroots gym promoted by Red Lab's member Manu', seeks to use boxing to strengthen social bonds among the youth. Boxing and *muay thai* martial arts make the gym a very *cool* place for the hundreds of local kids who gravitate around it. Neither the Red Lab nor the gym enjoy any formal recognition from the institutions. Despite their social importance and the array of social activites they organize, like many other informal bodies on which a large part of Roman welfare depends, these organisations receive no public support whatsoever (Vereni 2015, Cacciotti and Brignone 2018). Here in particular, it is ironic that Red Lab is situated directly in front of the official Theater-Library: the non-institutional and the institutional face each other on the same street, promoting distinct parallel models of education, culture and sociality that, however, hardly intersect.

The *favela* is a set of two squatted buildings, having been dubbed with this name in reference to both the dilapidated conditions and to the presence of many Brazilian transgender sex workers. In the framework of my doctoral research, I had the opportunity to frequent the *favela* for a few months and interview its inhabitants. My main objective was to investigate the particular form of collective living, and, in doing so, to reconstruct the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and highlight their nature of survival tactics. The situation in the *favela* is not just the result of the extreme needs of those who live there, but also the type of relationships that the dimension of the *borgata* allows to build. After all, every area of coexistence works as an ecosystem, as a delicate apparatus of relationships held in tension by an unstable, dynamic balance between the organisms that compose it and between them and their environment. The scale of the neighbourhood proposes a possible dimension to observe these relationships, their changes and what is produced by them. Quarticciolo, conceived as an autarkic microcosm, and the *favela*, in its character of a small enclave of illegality, are areas whose dimension makes the ecosystem even more readable.

Seen from the outside, the two buildings look quite run-down, but are certainly not abandoned: the

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5 One of the employees of the library, during an interview, indicated that the service reaches only the 10% of the population of the neighbourhood.

entrance is studded with mailboxes, and the staircases are stacked with everything that does not fit in the flats. The interior of the flats interestingly contrasts with the external lack of maintenance: many of them are decorated with rich ornaments and refined details.

Most inhabitants are here due to a lack of alternatives, and are employed in precarious, low-skilled and underpaid jobs. The interviews with residents provided a glimpse of the local activities and expedients deployed to make ends meet. A particularly interesting example is that of P., a person with a physical disability, who uses her charity as an expedient to accumulate a minimum of income through the packaging and sale of food parcels: these are composed of expired foods she and her husband collect for free among bakeries and supermarkets of the area, purportedly for free distribution among the needy. In fact, parcels are sold for an albeit small price. The parcel

The ecosystem of the local neighbourhood allows for social outcasts to feel somehow at home

mechanism is certainly a fraud; at the same time, however, it represents a double form of welfare: it supports those who provide the service, and distributes food at a bargain price to a group of people who do not have access to the services of charitable assistance, but for whom supermarket prices are inaccessible.

The ecosystem of the local neighbourhood also allows for social outcasts to feel somehow at home: transgender sex workers, for instance, badly tolerated elsewhere in Rome, here somehow find themselves settled among the other inhabitants. That does not mean that small, daily battles for coexistence do not occur: the equilibrium of the ecosystem is dynamic and the uses of space must be reasserted over time. Some describe the conflicts and quarrels that break out for a range of reasons, be it drunkenness, screaming at night, or improper attire. Rather than resorting to the police, however, such issues are solved through discussions, yelling, threats, and eventually agreements: this is probably because of the condition of shared illegality, which makes the top-down intervention of public authority an operation undesirable for everyone.

Certainly, while there is no open hostility, the *favela* remains a stigmatised building even in Quarticciolo. Most residents seem concerned with preserving the neighbourhood as a homely place, even if it is surrounded by illicit activities. So, the sex workers who work on viale Togliatti become a problem only if they cross the boundaries of the neighbourhood with their customers, stepping into the *lotti* to have intercourse. So long as boundaries are respected, prostitution on viale Togliatti is perceived practically as a job, to be tolerated as such. This tolerance, always bound to the respect of certain limits, is also expressed in the relationship with the "local" sex workers, those of the *favela*. Their presence is perfectly metabolised by the neighbourhood, and to have breakfast side-by-side a forty-five-year-old Brazilian transgender person in a low-necked top and with a hint of beard, does not disturb anyone. Despite this, the *favela* and its inhabitants are easily singled out as the origins of the decay experienced by the whole neighbourhood — by the same people who perhaps have breakfast next to them at the bar. The forced proximity reveals how sharing space with stigmatised social categories can entail a process of negotiation in a shared condition of marginality and, often, illegality: as all are occupants of public buildings, no one can claim in front of an institution a greater legitimacy over others. This extra-ordinary situation, where the rules imposed by "legality" do not hold, generates an oasis in which norms must be elaborated collectively: the *favela*, a place often represented from the outside as shameful and dangerous, turns out to be a singular laboratory of urban coexistence.

Popular neighbourhoods such as Quarticciolo raise questions about the role played by public institu-

tions. After all, the latter is mainly responsible for local 'decay': the lack of investment in education and training programmes, in employment and youth policies, and the lack of provision of basic social services take their toll. Criminal organisations substitute public institutions in providing residents with an income – even if obviously an illicit one. The inhabitants respond to precariousness by employing survival tactics such as squatting and engagement in the informal economy. Furthermore, the local ecosystem proves to be resilient and capable of fostering not only survival tactics, but also unprecedented and ever-changing relationships.

Ultimately, however, one must recognise that the lack of public governance leads to an increase in isolation and the risk of regression. Which policies and approaches could prove to be more fruitful? The work of Red Lab squat offers an example: a neighbourhood-wide action brought about through the fundamental daily work of weaving social relations – an approach that adopts mutualism and sharing as a means to foster the collective dimension. The Red Lab engages in a dialogue with illegality, being itself an illegal squat, but one which emphasises the difference between the criminal and harmful illegality of the drug market, on the one hand, and the fruitful and constituent illegality of self-organised spaces, on the other. Such action, rooted in the neighbourhood, provides a key that can perhaps be extended to other spaces characterised by "otherness", whether embodied in migrants or sex workers: spaces in which coexistence cannot be imposed or denied by force, but only built through relationships and around the fight against precariousness.

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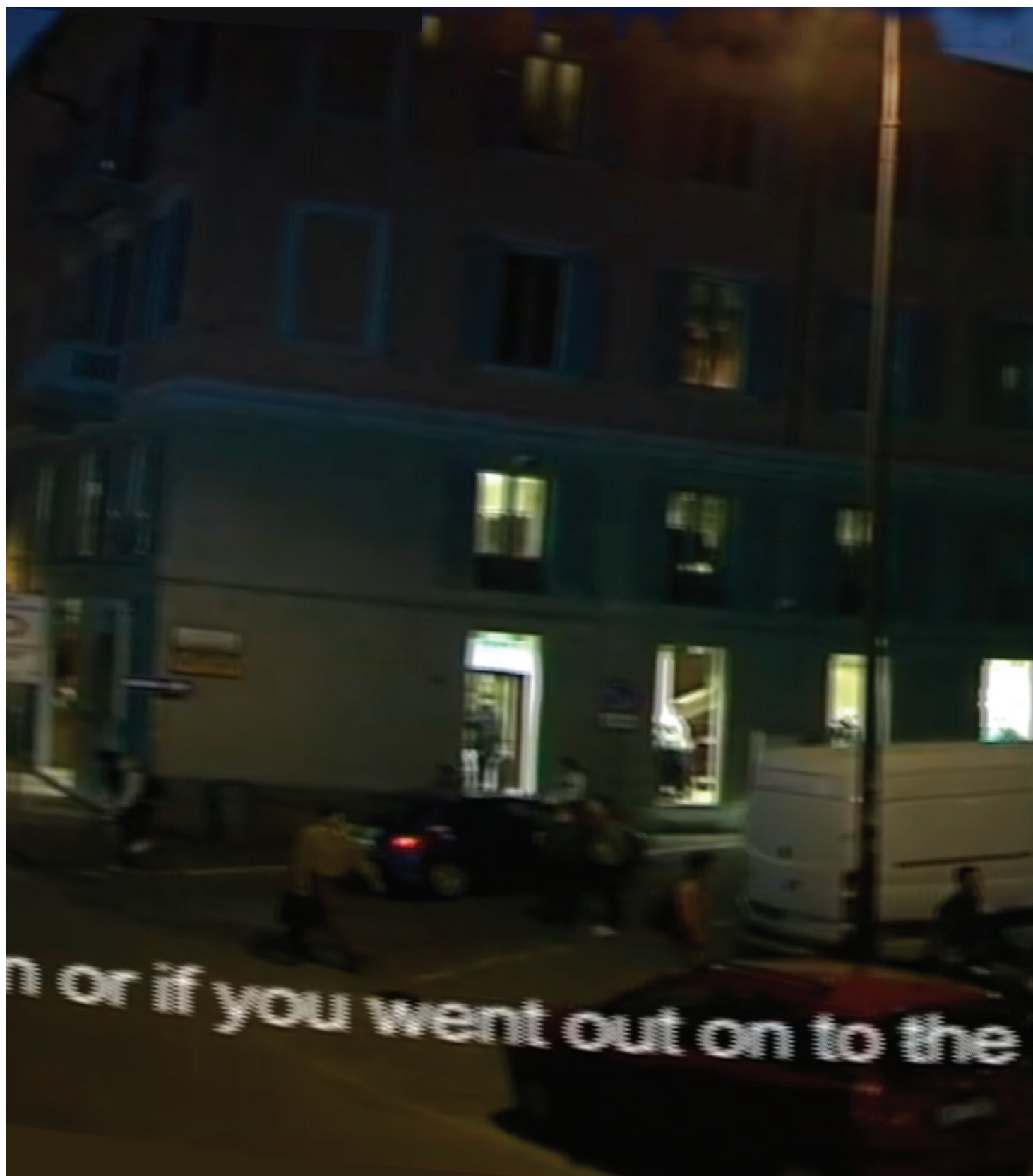
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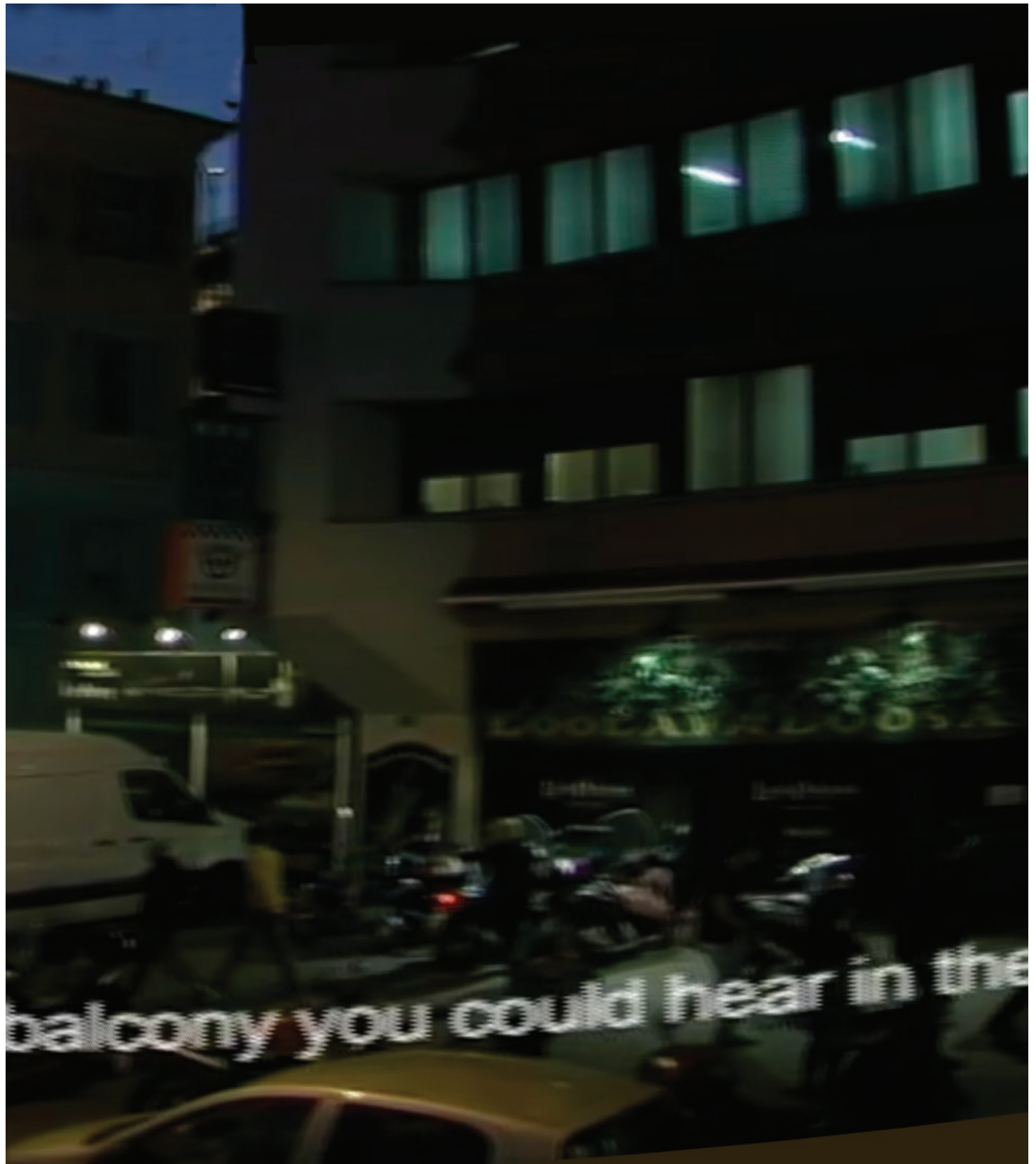
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...because with the lighting,...

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