

Genoa: the story of a port city and its hinterland

Cora Piantoni

The work of Cora Piantoni explores the period before the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the political upheaval at the end of the Cold War. Her practice involves interviews with participants originally involved in historical processes, as well as re-enactments from the past through moving images engaging with socio-political situations. In the following discussion, Piantoni takes seafaring as a starting point to reflect on interconnected maritime stories. Seafaring brings together a variety of viewpoints, experiences and connections among different worlds. Seafarers brought back to port cities stories, objects, and ideas from their passages across the seas. Navigation with its imaginative and speculative potential has long generated myths and legends. In reflecting on storytelling at the heart of the port city, the artist draws from its use of imagination, construction and reinvention in the recollection of historical events. In 2015, Piantoni spent half a year in Genoa. Here, she recalls the people and the stories that she encountered in the Northern Italian port city.

Many historical layers interact in Genoa, a city of treasures and stories. The port as a connection to far-away worlds supports the development of resistance and alternative thinking, in building communities and solidarity with groups at the edge of society, with environments and places in need. I arrived in Genoa early in 2015, to live there for six months, supported by a grant from the city of Zurich. The studio I lived in is in the middle of the old town, close to the port. My family comes from a small village between Bergamo and the Swiss border and I had wanted to live in Italy for ages, to see Europe from an Italian perspective. The port city of Genoa became my temporary home, a city with a history, different communities, archives and stories of resistance to relate to.

Genoa stretches along the coast, a narrow strip between sea and mountains, and sea and hinterland. Genoa's relation to other port cities along the Mediterranean is stronger than to the countryside behind it. From the late Middle Ages, Genoa's fleet was the main contender in the transporting and trading of goods across the Mediterranean sea. The exchange of goods, people, and languages was more intense across the sea than on land, towards Liguria and Italy.

In the early spring, I met Jeff Quigliotti who lives in the countryside, in the Genovese hinterland close to Arquata Scriva. Quigliotti is a historian and farmer who belongs to Valli Unite (united valleys), a cooperative for regional agriculture. He writes texts and participates in discussions, focusing in particular on the protests that took place in June 1960 in Genoa. I was interested in radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) and the struggle against fascist structures in Italy, which were similar to those that occurred in postwar Germany. We discussed my first ideas and Quigliotti suggested I look into an antifascist group from Genoa named Radio GAP. Radio GAP was a small group of former partisans, made up of workers at the port, as well as an animal conservationist, Mario Rossi. He describes the activities of the group: 'We were called "Tupamaros of Bisagno Valley". During the famous night excursions, we went across the mountains from one valley to the next. We could move through the mountains with our eyes closed. We wanted to adopt a few things from the partisans, such as how to find our way through the mountains. However, our mission was to be an urban guerrilla movement.'

During World War II, the hinterland with its steep hills and thick forests was a perfect hideout for the partisans. They fought against Italian fascism and the occupation by the German regime. The antifascist resistance continued into the 1960s and 1970s. Quigliotti and many others I met in the following months, explained to me how important the 'demonstration of the striped shirts' on 30 June 1960 was as an act of resistance and solidarity amongst different parts of society. The unions, the Italian communist party PCI, the students, the dockworkers and a big part of Genoa's population demonstrated against the congress of the neofascist party MSI that was to be held in Genoa.

I had made several films on resistance movements before 1989 in Eastern Europe and the city's united resistance against fascism impressed me. In April 1970, almost ten years after June 1960, Radio GAP started their opera-

tions. Mario Rossi, the initiator of Radio GAP, explains: 'We were broadcasting for the first time because of the planned rally of the fascist Almirante. We asked the Genovese to take to the streets to block this insult. The protest went on for several hours and Almirante's rally had to be cancelled. There were riots and even a dead person. Antifascism was militant.'

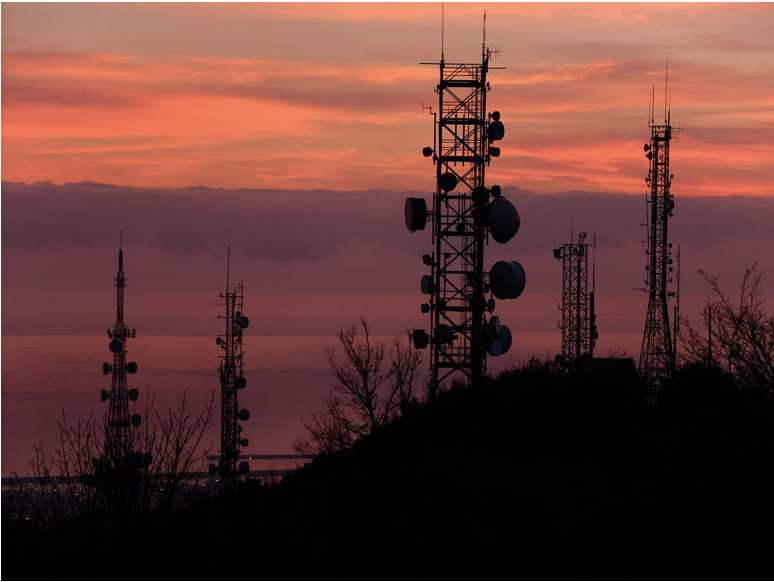
The name of the group Radio GAP Gruppi d'Azione Partigiana (groups of partisans' action) referred to the history of the partisans and at the same time used a contemporary medium of communication: television. Radio GAP brought the information directly to the public, into their living rooms. After the news, during the advertisements, their messages interrupted the programme. They chose a strategy of propaganda similar to an artistic action, a communication guerrilla, as in the Situationist movement happening at the same time in Paris.

Giuseppe Battaglia, another member of Radio GAP, recalls: 'It was absolutely new to us. We could enter people's houses very fast and without reading a long text first. And we entered all the houses, even the houses of those who didn't want us. This is similar to what RAI [Italian State Television] does with advertising. We broadcast through the radio and cut into the television program of RAI. We interrupted television programming and inserted our message. It had quite a lot of power and a wide distribution because we were reaching the whole city.'

'The importance of Radio GAP', Rossi continued, 'was that we did something and explained our actions ourselves. We pointed out that there was a resistance movement and there existed another reality with other information. If you simultaneously enter the houses of thousands of people, it isn't easy to manipulate that information. What we did had a violent aspect. People wanted to watch the news or a show with singing. But instead, we were broadcasting our message. People had to turn us off. It was a kind of violence, but this violence was necessary.'

At the end of my stay in Genoa, I made a film about the interferences of Radio GAP.

Fig. 1: Cora Piantoni, Radio GAP, The Interferences, film still, 2016



But before that, I had encountered other groups and their stories, many of which explore the harbour and its history, and together have helped to shape Genoa's identity as a port city. Following my interest in workers' communities and workers' solidarity, I met with members of the dockworkers' union, Compagnia Unica (the only company). In 1340, the dock workers or *camalli* (carriers) founded Compagnia dei Caravana (cargo company), which existed for more than 500 years. Until 1946, the different organisations of the port fought individually for workers' rights with strikes, until they merged to form Compagnia Unica. Before it was partly privatized in 1992, Compagnia Unica ran the whole port, employing workers to load and unload the ships, but also taking responsibility for social issues and acting like a family to its members. The sought-after job of carrier and its symbol, the hook, *il gancio*, was passed down from father to son. Massimo Nicora, member of Compagnia Unica and president of Circolo Luigi Rum, told me not only about the mythical solidarity and responsibility within the community of workers but also about the joy their job at the port gave them: 'The objective is to create something and to know how to maintain it. Every day, we have to invent and change. In 37 years, I have never done the same job twice. We are making the rules on how to work.' In the vicinity of Compagnia Unica's buildings, a wooden walkway leads to the city's symbol, the lighthouse, *La Lanterna*. A group of young architects and urbanists takes care of the museum and the park next to it, making them accessible to visitors. One of the architects is the son of the lighthouse guard; his family lives in the lighthouse. Dedicating their time and energy to keeping it open to the public is one of the many examples of the community's ethos of responsibility for, and relationship with, a singular place in Genoa.

On my walks from the port to the upper parts of the city, I sometimes found hidden green spaces and parks. I met different groups looking after formerly run-down parks. They cleaned them up, built structures, organised events and attracted people with markets, concerts and dinners at Giardini di Plastica (gardens of plastic).

Fig. 2: Cora Piantoni, group portrait at Giardini di Plastica



There is a mixed crowd of theatre enthusiasts and families at Giardini Luzzati and there are students of the faculty of architecture who created a community garden on the university's premises: Liberi Giardini di Babilonia (free gardens of Babylon), in their own words 'a mental and material space to be filled, shared, transformed, and moulded' by the neighbourhood's inhabitants, the students and whoever wanted to join spontaneously with their own story and contribution.

Gardens embody a material heritage of urban planning in Genoa. The city is also filled with memories and an intangible heritage, such as the Trallalero. This is another community, which doesn't work with the environment, but with an immaterial treasure: the voice. Trallalero is an oral tradition stemming from the Trattoria, the bar where the dockworkers used to go for a drink after work. Gathered around a table, they sang in Genovese, the dialect-language, about the worlds brought via the trade routes, from Portugal to faraway shores, mixing in tongues. At Piazza Lucoli, in the heart of Genoa's old town, I would stand in front of Bar Lucoli to listen to the syllables and harmonies coming out of the open windows on the first floor. One day, I climbed the narrow stairs to a room with many chairs along the wall. A group was standing around a table in the middle, looking at each other attentively: elderly men, a few younger musicians and one woman with a deep voice were

singing together a cappella. They were a polyphonic choir, but their voices imitated instruments. A charming old lady welcomed me and explained the different voices: tenor, baritone and contralto, accompanied by several basses and a singer whose voice imitates the guitar. The singers of the three main voices rotated after every song. Sometimes the younger woman joined in. They later moved on to the street, but in this room with the low ceiling, the sound of the Trallalero voice orchestra was much stronger and closer to the original tradition of the dockworkers. Outside on the street, the sounds and syllables of Genovese mingled with the sounds of people doing their Saturday afternoon shopping.

Fig. 3: Cora Piantoni, view from Castello d'Albertis with the statue of Christopher Columbus as a boy



Before leaving Genoa, I climbed up the stairs to the park of Casa d'Albertis, the house of former captain Alberto Albertis, who travelled to distant worlds and cultures and brought all kinds of treasures back home: from branches to stones, from ceramics to masks, from furniture to images. He re-arranged objects and memories into a *Wunderkammer* of sorts, inventing new countries and atmospheres. And between the Alhambra-like dining room with

colourful tiles on the walls and the cave with fabric and oriental smoke in the air, there is the captain's cabin, brought from the ship to land, with portholes overlooking the city. An ethnology museum adds a more scientific approach to the very personal and subjective collection of the captain.

And together with a statue of young Columbus who was born in Genoa, I looked down from the captain's terrace to the sea, with the industrial port and the lighthouse on the right, and the city with its zig-zag of houses stretching towards the left. Container ships and ferries to the islands were coming in before leaving for the open sea.