



A city remembers: urban drifting and images of a footballer

Giulio Todescan, 15 June 2021

In the winter of 2020, the northern Italian city of Vicenza said goodbye to its most loved football champion, Paolo Rossi. In this urban wandering, Giulio Todescan surveys the visual markers that supporters have left around town to perpetuate Rossi's memory, revealing how the mundane can become a fresco of local history and identity.

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As I open the door of *Café Quattro Novembre*, I am barely awake, my thoughts still shrouded in the light mist of sleep. Perhaps that's why the situation inside takes me by surprise: all the customers are glued to the television screen that is broadcasting an important funeral. The ceremony is taking place less than a kilometre from here, in the cathedral of this very city set in the heart of north-eastern Italy. All eyes in the country are on Vicenza, and that doesn't happen very often.

In the late 1970s, this place where I was born and raised, was also home to a world champion football player: Paolo Rossi. Three days ago, the heart of the city seemed to stop beating: the man who Italians regard as the hero of the

1982 World Cup, was gone. But here in Vicenza, he is, before everything else, the young man who brought his Lanerossi-Vicenza team close to winning the Serie A championship – here known as “*Scudetto*” – with second place during the 1977-78 season. In fact, Rossi’s reputation earned his team its nickname: “Real Vicenza”. As I pay for my breakfast, the barmaid tells me that someone has drawn an image of “Pablito” (Paolo’s nickname) on a wall outside the bar.¹ Stepping out into the cold air of a December Saturday morning, I take a photo of the image and post it on Instagram.

An almost simultaneous mourning period is occurring in the city of Naples. The death of Argentinean player, Diego Armando Maradona, occurred just 14 days prior to the death of Paolo Rossi, on 25th of November 2020. Perhaps these two events of collective grief and remembrance affirm the words of Pasolini when he defined football as ‘the last sacred representation of our time’. Indeed, they look like two opposite ways of expressing faith.



The wall bordering the park of Villa Beltrame in Via Cairoli, Vicenza. Top image: The old abandoned ticket offices of the Menti Stadium, Via Schio, Vicenza.

Born in a *favela* on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Maradona arrived in the city of Vesuvius as an absolute champion, worshipped as a god who was to redeem the capital of southern Italy, Naples – a poor metropolis long-demeaned by the rich north of the country. His goals and spectacular scores are strokes of brilliance. He divided, provoked and, most of all won two championships – a first for Napoli and yet to be repeated. Maradona was a larger-than-life character: his own film crew would follow him everywhere and donated 500 hours of unedited footage to film director, Asif Kapadia, who used it to make a documentary entitled, quite simply, *Diego Maradona*. The murals that were drawn to glorify Maradona during his lifetime multiplied after his death, covering entire suburban buildings, many of them signed by street artist Jorit.

Paolo Rossi, born in Prato, Tuscany, arrived in Vicenza in his twenties. Raised in a middle-class family, he interrupted his studies in accountancy to pursue a career in football. His petite physique and calm, approachable character

allowed people to identify with him immediately. His goals are the result of speed, intuition, an innate sense of position and precise shooting. Few are the spectacular 'highlight' scores such as those of Maradona. Rather, as fan and accomplished illustrator, Osvaldo Casanova, recounts in a conversation I had with him, "after his death, most of the memories I heard were not of his actions on the football field but of the man off it: people do not speak about memorable goals but of that time they met him in a restaurant or on the street. As if he were a friend or relative". I wonder if, although perhaps in a different way to Maradona, Rossi too embodied a form of redemption for the city of Vicenza. By elevating this provincial town out of its anonymity, he disrupted its inferiority complex, compared to the northern capitals of football and industry, Turin and Milan.²

Yet, against the backdrop of this provincial town, there is also a seduction of images. In the Italian collective imaginary, Rossi is amongst those who embodied a sort of shadow line between the 'grey' 1970s and the 'colourful' 1980s.³ It was a time of transition: when RAI introduced colour television, in 1977, Pablito wore the Vicenza shirt. At the same time, Rossi was among the first footballers to lend his graceful face to advertisements and to end up on the covers of entertainment magazines. "I immediately sensed that there was something elegant in Rossi's way of being on the pitch," as Pino Dato, founder of the local sports and politics magazine *Il Sospiro del tifoso* recalls. "Images had power, and we were among the first to exploit it: in 1977 we started to include a colour poster of a player in every issue, and they sold like hot cakes".



The cover of the *Almanacco Bianco Rosso* 1978 edition of *Sospiro del Tifoso*, on display at the newsstand in Levà degli Angeli in Vicenza. A reprint was published after Paolo Rossi's

However, Rossi's image did not remain simply on paper. It soon became part of the city's iconography. Over the years, endless reproductions of his photos wearing the red and white jersey have been hung on the walls of bars. And in the days following his death, his spray-painted face appeared on the facades of buildings, along streets that had become deserted by night due to the curfew imposed by the pandemic. The homage that an anonymous street artist from Vicenza pays to Rossi seems to confirm the simultaneously popular and discreet aspect of this figure:

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the small-scale image, depicted in a tone that is less spectacular, compared to the Neapolitan ones, is low-key, anti-monumental. As I leave *Caffè Quattro Novembre*, I make a mental note of the outlines: the monochrome spray paint simply traces the facial features and the wide red and white striped v-neck shirt. And then there's the looped blue 'R' – the Lanerossi trademark, at the same height as Rossi's heart. The stencil is a reproduction of a photograph taken in the summer of 1978 during the training camp in Ponte nelle Alpi and is only slightly different from the collectable football *Panini* sticker of that year.⁴

The interesting thing is that these appearances do not seem to be random. Rossi's images are landmarks: they are able to corroborate the identity of specific places of the city. Even more, they are small testimonies of a town that has assimilated local football history into its own urban fabric. A few months after that December morning, I decided to retrace the places where these images may be found, in an attempt to understand the ways in which they are in dialogue with the city. Marking the places where the stencils have appeared on a map is enough to note that many of them are located near bars – the critical points of Vicenza's social life. Deez, a fellow fan, urban drifter and regular barfly, is the right person to act as a guide.



Paolo Trapani at the counter of *Trapani* bar, Viale Mercato Nuovo, Vicenza.

One morning in mid-April, we begin our treasure trail at *Trapani*, a bar near the fruit and vegetable market in the western suburbs.⁵ Taking advantage of the partial reopening of the bars, after weeks of the anti-Covid 'red zone', some no-longer-young patrons order a coffee or a glass of white wine. Serving them is Paolo Trapani, part of the third generation of a family of bar landlords and football enthusiasts: his grandfather founded the family bar after the war and his father founded the *Biancorosso* Club (literally 'white-red' – the colours of the Lanerossi football team). Looking at the walls, it's like visiting a small museum: a poster dated 1960 depicts four men on the lawn of the stadium proudly displaying the club's flag; next to it are a watch marked with an 'R', two scarves, a photo of Rossi on

the pitch and one of the team members from the mid-1980s, with a very young Roberto Baggio, another now-famous football player of the team.

From there we continue on foot, taking Via Legione Antonini. “This used to be the old industrial area of Vicenza,” Deez comments, as we observe the alternation of old council houses and art deco villas with gardens, reflecting the social composition of the neighbourhood, which in the early 1900s was home to workers and employees of the factories that could be seen in the distance. We pass in front of the lowered shutters of *Osteria del Cane Barbino*, successor to *Caffè Menti*, which, for over 50 years was run by a family of the same name and who lived in the building. The café represented a piece of local football history. In fact, it only takes a few steps to come across a stencil on the wall of a former industrial building. This is no coincidence: on the other side of the street, behind a row of houses, there was the San Felice pitch, where the town team played from 1919 to 1935. As the First World War had destroyed the old playing field in the Borgo Casale district, Giacomo Sarteà, an entrepreneur in the alcohol sector and president of the football club, made a plot of land available at the back of his brewery, between the industrial and working-class districts of San Felice and Ferrovieri. The ground was lower than street level since it was previously used as a quarry for the extraction of clay for some nearby furnaces. To level the playing field, waste from the nearby *Montecatini* chemical plant, formerly *Magni*, was used. To cover the holes that would form during matches, dark slag from the Beltrame steelworks was used, hence the stadium’s nickname: “*campo de carbonea*” (coalfield).⁶



Deez toasts the encounter with Paolo Rossi’s stencil in Via Legione Antonini, Vicenza.

It is perhaps from this moment onwards that the connection between the football club, founded in 1902 by white-collar professionals and the working class, was strengthened.⁷ The five Menti brothers, who grew up between the family tavern and the pitch, all became football players: Pietro, Mario, Umberto, Guido and Romeo. Today, buildings have been constructed on the old San Felice pitch, but the Art Nouveau building of the Sarteà brewery is still the

same as it was then, although it has recently been converted into a gourmet pizzeria, losing much of its atmosphere in the process.

Deez drives north to the *Saltatempo Café* in Via Pecori Giraldi. A more recently opened bar where people drink spritz at the outdoor tables. On a shelf inside, a secular altar has been created: the stencil of Paolo Rossi printed on a square between a red and white scarf, a demijohn filled with corks and a garden dwarf. In Via Cairoli, near the Madero bar, Pablito is immortalised on an electricity box located between the municipal theatre built on the site of the former Valbruna steelworks and the wall of a villa belonging to the Beltrame family, who established a historic foundry of Vicenza. On a nearby brick wall, red paint still reads: “Rossi gol!” (“Rossi goal!”) followed by an expression that is not kind to the city of Verona.⁸ We get back into the car and park in the old town. Here, we meet Pablito’s gaze on a wall in Contrà Busa San Michele – a small street just a few steps from the famous Basilica by Palladio. We are near the historic osteria *Il Corsore* where you can eat the typical dish of salted cod with polenta while losing oneself among the football-themed photos that fill the walls. In addition to the pictures of Paolo Rossi, there are also photos of much more distant eras, such as one with the caption: ‘Red and white team winner of the 1914-15 Veneto-Emilia championship.’⁹



A “santino” of Paolo Rossi at *Saltatempo Café*, Via Pecori Giraldi, Vicenza.

As if triggered by the sight of the stencil on the wall, a memory resurfaces, confirming the many threads that link the figure of the champion with the city. Not far away, between the porticos of Via Liroy, one November evening – just a few weeks before Rossi’s death – I came across three film transport trucks for the shooting of the film *Mancino naturale* (*Naturally left-footed*) by Salvatore Allocca with Claudia Gerini. It is ‘dedicated to the world of youth football and the myth of the most famous Italian left-back, Paolo Rossi’, so says the official press release, which seems to ignore the fact that Rossi’s strong foot was actually his right.

We cross Piazza dei Signori, the heart of the historic centre, to reach another bar that is a regular destination for fans: *La pausa dei dogi*, once known as *La loggetta*. We find it closed, but a fortunate interplay of reflections makes the stencil appear on the window between the iron shutters. Passing by the bar on Via Apolloni, through a window we see a “santino” (holy figure) resting on a shelf, similar to the one seen at the *Saltatempo Café*. We walk towards the stadium area and, in Contrà della Piarda, we spot a Pablito painted on a white wall, near a bus stop and the primary school I attended. He seems to be waiting for the stadiums to reopen to the public – currently impossible due to Covid – as if he were waiting for nothing more than to watch the pilgrimage of fans on their way to the game.



Reflections on the window of the *La pausa dei dogi* bar, Contrà Motton Pusterla, Vicenza.

This is the same route we take, crossing the two bridges that connect the banks of the Retrone and Bacchiglione rivers that run parallel here, separated only by an embankment. A few hundred metres and we reach the Romeo Menti stadium. All that remains of the original construction, inaugurated in 1935, is the entrance arch that resembles a *serliana* (Serlian window) – an architectural motif repeated 44 times in Palladio’s Basilica, Vicenza’s symbolic monument. The rest is the result of modernisation and renovation over the decades. The worn concrete of the bleachers, softened only by the steel trusses supporting the roof of the central stand, gives the stadium a geometric industrial charm. On the outside walls, between the symbols of the ultras and a new large mural dedicated to Rossi, there are at least six stencils. The most memorable is located between two small windows of the old ticket offices, abandoned for years, under a wall heavy with humidity.

After walking around the stadium, we take the car back and move north: in Viale Trieste, a stencil shows us the way to the cemetery. Although its location seems incongruous to me, my guide sees a connection to football history here too. He leads the way as we enter the modern part of the cemetery where another member of the Menti family is buried: Luigi, Romeo’s grandson, who played for Vicenza for a long time and was affectionately nicknamed “*bagolina*”, which in Vicentine dialect means “walking stick”, indicating his tall, lean physique. “There is no cross on this tombstone”,

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Deez points out, “but in its place, to the right of the name of the deceased, is the red ‘R’ of Lanerossi”. In the photo, Luigi Menti is portrayed, in the same way as they are in collectable stickers: a young footballer wearing the team’s jersey.

Continuing by car towards the outskirts, we park in Via Quadri, a busy ring road, where we come across Pablito’s face on an electricity box, looking east towards the nearby city of Padua. The location is not chosen at random. This is the route through which the police escort the cars of Padua fans when there’s a game between the two teams at the Menti Stadium. It is here where the *biancorossi* ultras noisily welcome, so to speak, the opposing fans.



A student waits for the traffic light to turn green to cross the street, Via Quadri, Vicenza.

We return to the old town for the last stop: *Osteria Pitanta* in Contrà Santa Lucia, one of the most popular pre-match haunts, with walls covered with football memorabilia. Outside the restaurant, the spray-painted icon of Pablito protects patrons like a tutelary deity from under a shelf where the clients leave their drinks.

Two unexpected discoveries were waiting for us. The first, on the overpass of Viale della Pace: on the right, a banner with the words “Rossi gol” (“Rossi goal”) and the silhouette of the footballer is hung on the warehouse of a small business. The tribute was repeated in similar ways in various neighbourhoods by supporters, Deez explains to me, and this one has remained even months later.

The second unscheduled visit is to the New Bunker bar in the suburb of Anconetta, home of the Biancorosso Club named after the “Real Vicenza” coach Gibi Fabbri. On the wall, I am struck by a beautiful photograph of him looking concentrated during training. In a corner of the frame there is a photo of his goalkeeper Ernesto Galli, another protagonist of that season who has just left. The bartender at the New Bunker takes a bottle of LaneGol (“the aperitif liqueur drunk by Vicenza fans”) and insists we try it. In return, I promise to send him the photos I took of the bar and the bottle.

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Osteria Pitanta, Contrà Santa Lucia, Vicenza.



A Paolo Rossi banner on the warehouse of a small bathroom fittings business, Vicenza.

This brief urban exploration on a spring day revealed to me just some of the ways in which popular memory has paid tribute to the champion, Paolo Rossi. Exactly five months after the day of his death, the local institutions have also indicated how they intend to dedicate a significant amount of urban space to him: as the mayor, the family and the top management of the football club announced, a small pedestrianised square in front of the stadium entrance will be named Largo Paolo Rossi. Furthermore, in the centre of the square, a bronze statue depicting the footballer wearing the Italian national team jersey will be erected, reproducing a model already in use in some historical European stadiums. According to the plans, the old ticket offices will be restored and returned to operation. A coat of red paint will cover the stencil that is currently on those crumbling walls, erasing all traces of it. Yet, one can bet, new reproductions of that face will surely surface elsewhere, reviving the city's love for its football legend.



About the author

Giulio Todescan was born in Vicenza in 1981. He graduated in Communication Sciences from the University of Bologna, is a professional journalist, works at the *Blum* communication agency and collaborates with *Corriere del Veneto*. He is co-director of the documentaries *Good luck, Vicenza* (2007) and *L'acqua calda e l'acqua fredda* (2015) and one of the organisers of *Working Title Film Festival*. He is president of the association *Laboratorio dell'inchiesta economica e sociale – Lies*.

Footnotes & References

[1] The nickname was coined by journalist Giorgio Lago during the 1978 World Cup in Argentina.

[2] After Lanerossi-Vicenza achieved second place in the championship, the team's president Giusy Farina daringly challenged the established hierarchies of football. At the time, Paolo Rossi was co-owned by Vicenza and Juventus. Yet, instead of selling Rossi, as everyone expected, Farina offered more than twice as much for the player as Turin in a closed auction. The striker, therefore, remained with Vicenza.

[3] For the symbolic importance of the '82 World Cup victory in the construction of a new sense of national pride and optimism, see Marco Gervasoni, "Storia d'Italia degli anni Ottanta", Venice, Marsilio, 2010, pp. 30-33.

[4] The photo is published on Wikipedia at this URL: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Paolo_Rossi_Vicenza.jpg

"Paolo Rossi, the career told through Panini stickers", Sky Sport, 10 December 2020, URL: <https://sport.sky.it/calcio/2020/12/10/paolo-rossi-carriera-figurine-panini#05>

As Casanova, the illustrator I spoke with, pointed out, 'it is an unusual image because it's one of the few portraits in which Paolo Rossi is not smiling'. I tried to find out which of the local photographers (who immortalised the exploits of the champion at the time) is the author of this image. I even made contact with collectors, but the author of that photograph remains a mystery.

[5] Note that in Italy a bar is open all day for coffee and pastries, as well as in the evening for drinks.

[6] "A San Felice il primo stadio e una birreria come casa", Il Giornale di Vicenza, 20 April 2021, URL: <https://www.ilgiornaledivicenza.it/iniziative/lane-120-anni/in-viaggio-con-il-vicenza/a-san-felice-il-primo-stadio-e-una-birreria-come-casa-1.8577127>

[7] For an analysis of the differences between Italian football fan culture, which is interclass and connected with local rivalries, and English football, which is traditionally working-class, see: Giacomo Giubilini, "91° minuto", Rome, minimum fax, 2016, p. 163.

[8] On the bitter football rivalry (and more) between Vicenza and Verona: "Verona v Vicenza: how one of Italian football's great rivalries could be reborn" by Luca Hodges-Ramon, The Guardian, 2 June 2015, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/the-gentleman-ultra/2015/jun/02/verona-vicenza-italy-serie-a-football>

[9] Among the players' surnames, captain Vallesella stands out, who in 1919 emigrated to Argentina in search of fortune.

Pino Dato, "Storia del Vicenza", Vicenza, Dedalus, 2002.

All images by Giulio Todescan