

# The Italian Detective Novel: The Literary and Cinematic *Giallo*

Joseph Eynaud  
(University of Malta)

## Introduction

The crime fiction genre was relatively slow to catch hold in Italy although it gradually became very popular and eventually

on and similar papers at [core.ac.uk](http://core.ac.uk)

bro

translations of American and especially British stories. There were, however, some very early local mystery writers including Francesco Mastriani who published *The Blind Woman from Sorrento* (Bietti, Milan, 1973) in serial form in 1852. Emilio De Marchi published an inverted mystery (one in which the guilty person is known at the outset) entitled *The Priest's Hat* in 1858 (republished in 1927 by Fratelli Treves, Milan, 1927).

The genre was really begat, however, in 1929 when the publishing house Mondadori began to turn out mysteries and especially translations of U.S. and British mysteries in the “pulp” style with yellow covers. These were christened “I libri gialli” or the “yellow books”. Thus “giallo” caught on as shorthand for the crime fiction genre, a term that eventually expanded to mean also thrillers and suspense and was also extended to films. *Giallo* (*gialli*, plural) became, as in most countries and especially Italy, a mass-market, popular type of literature. Gradually, indigenous writers were attracted in larger numbers to the genre. For example, Alessandro Varallo adopted an ironic tone in a number of his works (e.g. *Dramma e Romanzo Poliziesco*, Comoedia, 1932). Arturo Lanocita published *Forty Million* (Mondadori, Milan) in 1931 with comedy as the main theme. Luciano Folgore employed a surreal approach in his *Colored Trap* published in 1934. And, Augusto

De Angelis in a series of novels (e.g. *De Vincenzi e la Bruchetta di Cristallo*, Sonzogno, 1974) created a serious and talented Italian police procedural set in Milan. His detective/commissioner, De Vincenzi, was a literate and clever hero who attempted to get inside the criminal's mind.

The relatively feeble beginnings of indigenous mystery writing was sharply threatened and curtailed by the Fascist government in 1941 and the genre was banned outright in 1943 as an unpatriotic in its portrayal of the state.

After WW II the importation of American hard-boiled mysteries inundated the country. By the late 1950s and early 1960s Italian writers took to the genre with gusto. One of the most important and prolific writers, Carlo Emilio Gadda, had a significant impact on later authors. His novel, *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana* was published in 1957 (available in English from a number of publishers – e.g. G. Braziller, N.Y., 1984). It was set in fascist Italy of the 1920s and provided a somewhat negative view of the police. It can be characterized as an anti-detective novel and led to a type of crime fiction without certainty of solution. This model was adopted and enlarged upon by a number of later writers. (See also Gadda's, *Acquaintance with Grief*, G. Braziller, N.Y., 1966).

By the 1960s the mystery genre attracted two types of writers – the traditional, mass-market crime fiction writers and the “literary” detective writers. The latter employed the detective structure – crime, plot, puzzle – but developed a so-called anti-detective novel which rejects the expected outcome of restored order found in most mysteries.

The traditional detective storywriters grew in number and popularity through the decades after 1960. One of the best was Giorgio Scerbanenco who created a Milanese physician as his hero (see *Duca and the Milan Murders*, Harper and Row, N.Y. 1978). Attilo Veraldi began a hard-boiled series set in Naples in the 1970s (see *The Payoff*, Hamilton, London, 1978) and Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini published an extremely popular novel – *La Donna Della Domenica – The Sunday*

*Woman* (Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, N.Y., 1973). These two also wrote *The D. Case: the Truth About the Mystery of Edwin Drood* (Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, N.Y., 1992), a pastiche based on Dickens's unfinished mystery in which they resurrect Poirot, Father Brown and Holmes!

Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini's *La verità sul caso D.* is the fruit of a joint writing project between two well-known Italian writers of detective fiction who most of the time operate as a couple – hence the use of the ampersand. But even more so, this is the fruit of a joint writing project between them and Charles Dickens. *La verità sul caso D.* consists actually in Dickens's own unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* interpolated by chapters written by Fruttero & Lucentini which represent about one third of the whole. The two parts form a single text, a dialogue between the two authors and Dickens, or, as some reviewers defined it, “a three-way collaboration” or, even better, “un romanzo a sei mani” (a novel for six hands). To continue the numerical escalation (and borrow Wolfgang Iser's definition of reading), the new novel is a dramatic example of “the interaction between its structure and its recipients” (1987: 106), in this case not only the common reader but also the over two hundred writers who attempted to complete and complement the novel. Fruttero & Lucentini use the narrative framework of a debate among the most famous fictional detectives as they are trying to make sense of Dickens's intentions. Sherlock Holmes, Maigret, Dupin, Poirot (and even a Hercule Popeau, a character created by Hilaire Belloc's sister well before Agatha Christie gave birth to her immortal sleuth), join some equally famous *roman noir* colleagues such as Philip Marlowe and Lew Archer. To them we should add Porfirij Petrovic from *Crime and Punishment*, De Quincey's *Toad in the Hole*, Dickens's own Inspector Bucket and Collins' Sergeant Cuff. Last but not least comes a token academic, Dr. Wilmot, the fictional editor of *The Dickensian*.

The genre grew greatly in popularity and in 1980 the journal *Panorama* commissioned a series of stories written by a number of Italian celebrities – judges, politicians, professors, etc. – related to their fields of endeavour. These booklets were called “I gialli verità” or “True detective stories” and became extremely popular and successful. In 1983 a television series – “Giallo sera” (The Evening Detective) was produced by the Italian TV network RAI. The series was also very popular and involved the viewing audience in attempting to solve the crimes.

The mass-market mystery writers in Italy tend to have a very regional voice. Laura Grimaldi, one of the finest current writers, is also the director of the publishing house *Interno Giallo*. Her stories are all set in Milan. Bruno Ventavolis is Turin-oriented, Andrea Pincketts sets his hard-boiled series in Milan, Silvana La Spina employs Sicily as a crime site, Lorian Macchiavelli prefers Bologna and Corrado Augias is comfortable in Rome. Among the most popular authors today is Andrea Camilleri whose Commissario Montalbano has even been produced for television. Unfortunately, most of the work of these authors is not always available in English.

### **Italy as a backdrop**

There are also a few non- Italian writers who set mysteries in that country and are worthy of mention. One is the very popular Donna Leon who has created a most fascinating Venetian detective/commissioner Brunetti. Her novels are redolent of every section of Venice and capture the personality of the city and region. Michael Dibdin has created a worthy Italian policeman in Aurelio Zen who fights corruption and bureaucracy all over the country. For a glimpse of ancient Rome and its empire one might enjoy Lindsey Davis’ historical mysteries as well as those of Steven Saylor. All four of these writers’ many novels are readily available. Readers of Italian might well enjoy Loris Rambelli’s *Storia del Giallo Italiano* (*The Story of Italian Detective Fiction*).

“Italian hearts”, Stendhal wrote in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, “are much more tormented than ours by the suspicions and the wild ideas which a burning imagination presents to them...” Living in Italy, one quickly realises that suspicion and paranoia are the standard emotional twinges of “imaginative Italians”: suspicion about amorous betrayal, paranoia that the goodies in government might actually be the baddies, suspicion about whether organised crime is quite as organised in reality as it appears in books and films. Rampant suspicion is the reason Italians love the dinner-party game of *dietrologia* (X-Files-style conspiracy-theorising), in which participants try to out-trump each other with paranoid ideas about the country’s terrorism, its fascism and the links between the two.

The reason for that Italianate suspicion is that there is so much food for thought. The country seems to have an unlimited supply of real-life thrillers, called *gialli* or “yellows” because thrillers are published with yellow bindings. “It’s an incredible yellow” is a common phrase used by excited newscasters as they introduce breaking news about a dramatic murder or an intricate financial scam. Each time a new “illustrious corpse” is unearthed, suspicions soar once more, the conspiracy-theorists go to work, and it’s impossible for an observer to understand quite what is reality and what fantasy.

All of which makes Italy the perfect backdrop for noir detective fiction. The private eye isn’t just chasing the criminals; in all probability, the criminals – who may be his superiors or his politicians – are themselves on his tail. It’s arguable that many of the best Italian writers of the 20th century (Silone, Sciascia, even Gadda) used that sophisticated, bewildering “yellow” genre: events happen without explanation, so that the reader is never sure of the moral identities of characters or of the reach of their power. Evidence disappears, witnesses are murdered; in the end the beleaguered detective’s only resource is suspicion, that “antechamber of truth”. The crime might never be solved, the criminal certainly won’t be punished, but it’s a thrilling journey through the moral maze of Italian life.

Michael Dibdin's Aurelio Zen books are steeped in Italy's suspicion. The paranoia drips from every page, as his arch detective, a Venetian *carabiniere*, cleans up bizarre crimes across the country. By now the detective's name is synonymous with, or – the ultimate compliment – more famous than his creator's. But Aurelio Zen's allure is due to the fact that the novels effortlessly paint a sharper portrait of Italy than any guidebook, cookbook or academic history.

### **Dibdin and Camilleri**

Italy has produced, in the last few years, a parallel publishing phenomenon very similar to Dibdin: a writer of detective fiction whose critically acclaimed books regularly reach the sacred sales bracket of six figures. Given that book sales in Italy are generally minute compared to Britain, the success of Andrea Camilleri, a Sicilian novelist in his 80s, has been extraordinary (making it even harder to understand why no shrewd translator has rendered him into English). His detective, Commissario Montalbano, is not unlike Zen: a man who pieces together clues out of coincidences, and who has an acute moral conscience while being worldly enough to understand how to exploit immoral means for noble ends.

It is probable that anyone living outside Italy who reads about Zen or Montalbano might think it all too much: murders in the Vatican, the mafia and fascism installed in the upper echelons of parliament, sinister policemen who use batons and bullets to dispel protesters. Yet Camilleri and Dibdin are admired because they put into fiction many of the unsavoury facts that British visitors, eager only for a Tuscan beach or bottle, are reluctant or unable to see. And that ugly side of the *Bel Paese* has led to a new Italian detective story: one being played out in real time, in front of the television cameras, in which the ageing Sicilian novelist has himself become a protagonist. It isn't a traditional *whodunit*, but something subtler: we think we know *whodunit*, but wonder if he'll be caught before the evidence disappears and the legal system is

stitched up. In the most recent chapter of this real-life thriller, the suspect has become the country's prime minister; each time he seems on the brink of arrest, his government passes legislation, which lets him off the hook.

Some might say that this, too, is paranoia. Not according to Camilleri, who has proved himself as tenacious as his detective. He claims that Silvio Berlusconi is the incarnation of evil – “male with a capital M” – and has frequently inveighed against his collusion with the “powers that be” in Sicily (in the last general election, Berlusconi won 61 out of the available 61 constituencies on the island). As ever in Italy, the only real clues to the suspect's guilt are the coincidences: that electoral result in Sicily, his recent refusal to sign a European Union accord against financial fraud, the fact that his first legislative act was to decriminalise false accounting and his second to put a bureaucratic spanner in the works of detectives investigating international financial fraud. There are endless other coincidences. It's a story, which is as unbelievable, brilliant and strangely thrilling as anything written by Dibdin or Camilleri. And as one watches the plot thicken by the day, it becomes obvious why suspicion is the staple diet of Italian hearts: there's simply so much about which one can be suspicious.

Italy, says Michael Dibdin, is a country in which the concept of closure is alien. Court cases rumble on for decades; crimes remain unsolved indefinitely; convictions are overturned on appeal; known criminals chill out in the piazzas without fear of arrest. Examples are legion. Take the case of the bombing of the Bologna railway station in 1980, killing 85 people and mortifying the nation. To this day, says Dibdin, nobody knows exactly who did it or why.

Dibdin's vision of Italy is distilled through his detective, Aurelio Zen, who makes his ninth appearance in *Medusa*, a typically elegant, sophisticated and intricate novel. Zen, says Dibdin, would prefer to work in the rationalist or scientific tradition, intent on demonstrating the validity of truth. But in Italy that's never going to happen. Though Zen desperately

wants to get at the truth, he also has a very strong fatalistic sense that it is beyond his grasp. “Basically all he can do is damage limitation”, says Dibdin.

In *Medusa*, Zen starts out investigating a body, which has turned up in a cave and happens upon a plot, which could have destabilised the government 30 years previously. As ever in Italy, politics are at the heart of the matter. But by the time Zen becomes involved everyone wants the kind of resolution, which has no legal repercussions, or uncomfortable questions being asked. In short, they want to forget. Only in Italy, for instance, could a detective be complimented by his superior for not having brought a killer to book. Who needs closure when no one cares?

*Medusa*, says Dibdin, is a novel about an Italy that is history, what Italians refer to as “the First Republic”, from the end of the second world war to 1998, a period of unprecedented corruption at the highest level:

That gang of thugs, crooks, murderers and villains have been replaced [...] and they’re all now either in prison or dead or in disgrace or waiting to go to prison. Or, in the case of former Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, for example, imprisonable because under Italian law you can’t send someone of that age to prison. You don’t want to be sending 80-year-old blokes to prison. [...] We’ve now got to the so-called Second Republic of Berlusconi and his bunch of thugs and all the terms I used before. [...] Whatever you think of Berlusconi and his pals from the Northern League, they’re repulsive in a very different way, as Berlusconi proved the other week when he made that totally inappropriate remark about the German Social Democrat at the European Parliament.



### **The postmodern novel**

The second group of writers mentioned earlier who use the detective format to create what is essentially an anti-detective or postmodern novel are a very noteworthy group. Probably the best known to English readers is Umberto Eco whose *Name of the Rose* (Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, N.Y. 1994) was set in the 1300s with a Franciscan monk detective with the name of William of Baskerville (note the Holmsian ring to the hero's name). The best-known writer of this group in literary circles, however, was Leonardo Sciascia who wrote many novels in the detective mode and also wrote a number of essays about the mystery genre. His stories were all set in crime-ridden Sicily and explored issues of political morality and corruption – especially the impact of the Mafia culture. His stories were filled with imperfect heroes, clues left for the reader to solve the crime on his or her own, and often no justice meted out to the offender. His best works include *By All Means – Todo Modo* – (Harper and Row, N.Y., 1977) and *A Ciascuno il suo – To each His Own* (or sometimes translated as *A Man's Blessing*, – Harper and Row, N.Y. 1968). The latter is a fascinating window on Sicilian life and one in which the bad guys win! More than a dozen of his novels are available in English. Incidentally, one can sample short crime fiction stories by Sciascia, Calvino and Grimaldi in *The New Mystery* edited by Jerome Charyn (Dutton, N.Y., 1993).

Since Edgar Allan Poe invented it, the detective story never went out of fashion. Alive and well both on page and on the screen, it has evolved into a surprisingly wide variety of sub-genres and styles. It probably sells more than any other kind of fiction. For a long time, the very existence of an Italian detective story was considered an “absurd hypothesis”, as Alberto Savinio once said. In fact, to most writers, sunny Italy was an unlikely scene for the intrigues and machinations of diabolical criminal minds. Italian detective storywriters have to deal with this preconception, and do so re-interpreting the genre, shifting their interest from the “solution to a mystery” to the “mystery to a

solution”. The solution to a mystery often turns into a much more complex quest, where the crime committed, which primed the plot of the novel, is only one of the issues that the detective/reader has to face in order to establish his own identity, and justify his own investigation. Today, *gialli* continue to be written by Italians, Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*) in 1984 being the most famous and prestigious outside of Italy. There are also numerous translations into Italian of novelists such as Thomas Harris and Patricia Cornwell.

### **The film giallo**

However, it is the cinematic *giallo* that emerges during the “Golden Age” of Italian cinema in the early 1960s. One interesting point about the *giallo* in its cinematic form is that it appears to be less fixed as a genre than its written counterpart. The term itself doesn’t indicate, as genres often do, an essence, a description or a feeling. It functions in a more peculiar and flexible manner as a conceptual category with highly moveable and permeable boundaries that shift around from year to year to include outright gothic horror (*La lama nel corpo* [*The Murder Clinic*, Emilio Scardimaglia, 1966]), police investigations (*Milano, morte sospetta di una minorenne* [Sergio Martino, 1975]), crime melodrama (*Così dolce, così perversa* [*So Sweet, So Perverse*, Umberto Lenzi, 1969]) and conspiracy films (*Terza ipotesi su un caso di perfetta strategia criminale* [*Who Killed the Prosecutor and Why?*, Giuseppe Vari, 1972]).

It should be understood then that the *giallo* is something different to that which is conventionally analysed as a genre. The Italians have the word *filone*, which is often used to refer to both genres and cycles as well as to currents and trends. This points to the limitations of genre theory built primarily on American film genres but also to the need for redefinition concerning how other popular film-producing nations understand and relate to their products. This introduction to the *giallo*, therefore, begins from the assumption that the *giallo* is

not so much a genre, as its literary history might indicate, but a body of films that resists generic definition. In this respect it is unlike the Italian horror and *poliziotto* (police) genres yet, at the same time, the *giallo* can be understood as an object to be promoted, criticised and studied.

By its very nature the *giallo* challenges our assumptions about how non-Hollywood films should be classified, going beyond the sort of Anglo-American taxonomic imaginary that “fixes” genre both in film criticism and the film industry in order to designate something specific. As alluded to above, however, despite the *giallo*’s resistance to clear definition there are nevertheless identifiable thematic and stylistic tropes. There is a stereotypical *giallo* and the *giallo*-fan has his or her idea of what constitutes the *giallo* canon. The following points therefore, are an attempt to clarify and define familiar aspects of this “canon.”

In 1963, Mario Bava directed the first true Italian *giallo*: *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* (*The Girl Who Knew Too Much*). It can be argued that the Italian *giallo* pre-dates Bava’s film, as the term has frequently been used to associate Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione* (1943) with the tradition. However, the reason why Bava’s film is the “true” starting point of the *giallo* is its explicit and successful attempt to say to the spectator, in effect, “The Italian *giallo* has arrived”.

The familiar black raincoat associated with the *giallo* killer stems from continental fashion trends in the 1960s and has since shifted its meaning over the decades to become the *couture* choice of the assassin by default in addition to serving as one of the *giallo*’s most identifiable visual tropes. Bava’s *Sei donne per l’assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*, 1964), set in a fashion house, confirms this observation as the use of a black Macintosh for disguise purposes potentially means it could be any number of the models and, at the same time, situate itself on the pulse of fashion (Humphries).

The hybrid medico-detective discourse is a popular one in the *giallo*. Hallucinations and subjective “visions” are central

both to the protagonists and the narrative enigma in *Una lucertola con la pelle di donna* (*Lizard in a Woman's Skin*, Lucio Fulci, 1971) and *Lo strano vizio della signora Wardh* (*Next!*, Sergio Martino, 1971) and are part of the *giallo*'s inherent pathologising of femininity and fascination with "sick" women. Hysterics are in abundance here: films such as *Il coltello di ghiaccio* (*Knife of Ice*, Umberto Lenzi, 1972) and *Tutti i colori del buio* (*They're coming to get you*, Sergio Martino, 1972) anchor their narratives around the collapse of the "sickness" and mystery, albeit through the conduit of femininity.

The 1960s made a slow but sure inroad for the *giallo* in Italian cinema. The period following 1963's *The Evil Eye* was clearly a mapping out of new territory for Italian directors, not only for the *giallo* but also for the Italian horror film. The early-to mid-60s *giallo* didn't exhibit the strength of other genres of the period such as the western, the horror and the *peplum* ("sword-and-sandal" movie). However, one remarkable thing about the *giallo* is its longevity; even if its presence has been slight at times, it has still spanned over four decades of Italian cinema with the latest Dario Argento film, *Non ho sonno* (*Sleepless*, 2001). Not only does *Sleepless* constitute a return to form for the director, but it signals a revisiting of his own debut, *L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 1969). Perhaps again the *giallo*'s staying power can be reduced to a resistance of the homogenising constraints that traditional genre membership often imposes on bodies of films by making them fit particular historical and critical categories.

Instead of defining the *giallo* in generic and historical terms, I would like to suggest that we understand it in a more "discursive" fashion, as something constructed out of the various associations, networks, tensions and articulations of Italian cinema's textual and industrial specificity in the post-war period. It happens that the *giallo* revolves around murder, mystery, detection, psychoanalysis, tourism, alienation and investigation.

The *giallo* literally begs for psychoanalytic inquiry and at the same time stages both the “analytical scene” and the “classic symptoms.” As usual, this staging occurs through the conduit of femininity but in some cases – as in (almost) every Dario Argento film – masculinity becomes the focal point. The typical Argento protagonist is the victim/witness of trauma who must keep returning to the scene of the crime (the Freudian retranscription of memory; popularly represented via flashback sequences), often committed by a killer who just can’t resist serial murder (the psychoanalytic “compulsion to repeat”).

All sorts of vision/knowledge dynamics are explored in the *giallo*, but never to such great effect as in *L’Uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, whose foreigner abroad, *flâneur* Sam Dalmas (Tony Musante), is eyewitness to a knife assault in a chic Roman art gallery. The gallery is explicitly concerned with maximising clarity and vision: the space is minimal so there are no distractions for the gaze other than that of the crime; the doors/façade are enormous glass panels; nothing is obscured; the entire area is brightly lit. However, despite all of these supports aiding Dalmas’s vision, he fails to see (or in psychoanalytic terms, he *misrecognises*) the truth of his gaze. Other *gialli* which foreground the eye-witness narrative strand are *Passi di danza su una lama di rasoio* (*Death Carries a Cane*, Maurizio Pradeaux, 1972) and, of course, Bava’s *La ragazza che sapeva troppo*.

Quite related to the theme of eye-witnesses and unreliable sight – and in the spirit of Carol Clover (1994) – are the numerous incidents of violence done to the eyes (including those in *Gatti rossi in un labirinto di vetro* [*Eyeball*, Umberto Lenzi 1974] and *Opera* [Dario Argento, 1988]) and the generous amount of titles with “*gli occhi*” in them, whether this refers to the eyes of detectives, victims, killers or cats (e.g., *Il gatto dagli occhi di giada* [*The Cat’s Victim*, Antonio Bido, 1977] and *Gli occhi freddi della paura* [*Cold Eyes of Fear*, Enzo Girolami Castellari 1971]). The *giallo* eye is both penetrating and penetrated.

As a work of detection, the *giallo* is less a set of conventions than a playful resource about them. Detection is often the point of entry for an exploration of how to sort out the normal from the pathological through identity and representation. Along with psychoanalysis, detection was one of the great ends of nineteenth-century epistemology and it is by now a cliché to make the analogy between detective and analyst.

Many *gialli* clearly define the pathological, including *Sette scialli di seta gialla* (Sergio Pastore, 1972) and *La bestia uccide a sangue freddo* (*Slaughter Hotel*, Fernando di Leo, 1971), and it is the sole purpose of these particular films to exploit this characterisation. The detective's job thus becomes one of uncovering, naming and containing otherness as something socially and morally threatening. However, several progressive *gialli* (again mostly those of Argento, but also *Giornata nera per l'ariete* [*The Fifth Chord*, Luigi Bazzoni, 1973]) play with the conventions of detection and investigation procedures in order to explore issues of masculinity and identity. Key themes in such *gialli* include alienation, failed detection, otherness and the well-worn European concept of the "subject in process/on trial".

Referring back to the *giallo*'s origins in the 1930s with the translations of British and early American murder mysteries, it appears that the cinematic *giallo* has never quite forgotten its debt to the literary. The most explicit examples include the staging of the *giallo* book as an object in *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* and the author/reader of the *giallo* as central to the narrative in *Unsane*. In the latter film, Peter Neal (Antonio Franciosca) is an American *gialli* author, and Giuliano Gemma's detective is an avid reader of Sherlock Holmes stories who even quotes what is perhaps the mantra of the *giallo*'s dénouement: "Whatever remains, however improbable, must be truth" (from Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*).

Although unaccredited, Agatha Christie is the main source of inspiration and imitation for *Concerto per un pistola* (*The Weekend Murders*, Michele Lupo, 1970) and *Cinque*

*bambole per la luna d'agosto* (*Five Dolls for an August Moon*, Mario Bava, 1970). Edgar Allen Poe is also represented in *gialli* such as *Sette note in nero* (*The Psychic*, Lucio Fulci, 1977), not to mention Argento's ineffectual cut-and-paste of Poe's world in the "black cat" episode of *Due occhi diabolici* (*Two Evil Eyes*, Dario Argento and George Romero, 1990).

### **Main features of Italian films**

Travel, tourism, exoticism, hybridism and foreignness are all familiar features of the *giallo*. The textuality of Italian cinema after the 1950s has many features that seem to open up queries problematising the concept of a national film movement and a national identity. The main protagonist of the *giallo* is often the foreigner in Italy or the Italian on holiday. "Exotic locations" include Scotland (*L'iguana dalla lingua di fuoco* [*The Iguana with a Tongue of Fire*, Riccardo Freda, 1971]), Haiti (*Al tropico del cancro* [*Death in Haiti*, Edoardo Mulargia, 1972]) and Africa (*L'uomo più velonoso del cobra* [*Human Cobras*, Bitto Albertini, 1971]). Characters don't seem fixed to a home or location; they are always (in) between different places. This justifies the advertisements for various transatlantic airlines that bookend the *giallo*, not to mention the promos for every traveller's favourite drink – a J&B whisky. This must be the most plugged product in the history of European Cinema.

When the *giallo* is set in Italy it typically takes one of three different routes. Sometimes it promotes "Italian-ness" through a foregrounding of identifiable tourist spots that often halt the narrative and serve as sheer spectacle. Other times it strives to erase Italian-ness by establishing the setting as an (other) anonymous European city, avoiding distinctive signifiers of Italy altogether. And still other times it constructs a "rural-historical" locale as a place of the uncanny, as in *La casa dalle finestre che ridono* (*The House with the Windows that Laugh*, Pupi Avati, 1976).

Italian popular cinema tends to promote the non-national, and this variably results in a tendency to exaggerate

and exploit the “foreign” through the tropes of travel and the tourist’s gaze. Ugo Liberatore’s *Incontro d’amore a Bali* (1969) and the *Black Emanuelle* series (1975-83) instigated a whole *filone* of soft-porn desert island and globe-trotting adventure films, fuelling what Anne McClintock calls the “porno-tropics”, and which in turn influenced the direction of the *giallo* towards a more pan-exotic exploration of mystery, detection and murder to sustain the public’s interest and changing tastes.<sup>1</sup>

The *giallo* is quite difficult to pin down as a body of films. Criticism tends to gather around author directors or singular examples. However, if we can understand the *giallo* discursively, we may begin to make interesting connections between its textual, industrial and cultural features. Such a strategy would allow us to open the *giallo* up rather than close it down. One final note specifies the *giallo*’s discursive potential in everyday criticism. A recent Japanese animated feature, *Perfect Blue* (Satoshi Kon, 1997) was referred to as an animated Japanese *giallo*. There is also a frequent and longstanding tradition of appropriating Spanish (*Una libelua para cada muerto* [*A Dragonfly for Each Corpse*, Leon Klimovsky, 1974]), Belgian (*De Potloodmoorden* [*The Pencil Murders*, Guy Lee Thys, 1982]), Japanese, French and Dutch films for inclusion in the *gialli* tradition.

The last decade has seen the rise of a literary phenomenon quite unknown to Italian culture: the widespread production and consumption of genre fiction – mysteries, science-fiction, fantasy, or horror fiction – not imported from abroad, but rather written in Italy and more often than not set there. Of course, genre authors like Andrea Camilleri, who has consistently been at the top of the best-seller charts for the past several months, or Valerio Evangelisti are not the first practitioners to come out of Italy: the history of Italian para-

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on colonisation and (post-) colonial issues in the *giallo*, see Frank Burke (1970).



literature – for the most part yet unwritten – should certainly record pioneering experiments such as the review *Il cerchio verde*, which sought to implement a limited autarchy in detective fiction or the work of honest and often original writers such as Giorgio Scerbanenco, best known as a *giallista*, but who was also the author of a number of works of science-fiction, or Vittorio Curtoni who, among other things, is the author of what remains to this day the most complete – if somewhat outdated – history of Italian science-fiction. But this tradition of genre fiction has always existed in a doubly liminal space, that is, on the margins of both the official literary establishment on the one hand and of the market of popular literature, whose access was open mainly to authors in translation (American, English, French and, in the case of science-fiction, even Russian).

It is thus legitimate to question the reasons why Italian genre fiction has emerged so forcefully in the last decade. It is significant that this phenomenon seems to have taken by surprise the popular fiction industry itself. The back cover blurb of Evangelisti's second novel, *Le catene di Eymerich* (1995), published in the Mondadori science-fiction series "Urania", made the book sound like a minor miracle: "Autore del romanzo che ha vinto l'ultima edizione del Premio URANIA, oggi Valerio Evangelisti ha l'onore di essere il primo scrittore italiano a venire pubblicato su queste pagine al di fuori di ogni tenzone o competizione letteraria." And in an editorial by the editor in chief of the series, Marzio Tosello, much is made of the fact that Evangelisti has managed to break the traditional hostility of the Italian public towards Italian genre fiction, which resulted in lower sales "ogni qual volta si dava spazio a un autore che magari italiano non era ma il cui nome suonava tale", such as the mystery writer Bill Pronzini. It seems to me, however, that this renewed interest in genre fiction is an aspect of a broader coming together of and outright contamination between high and popular literature. I do not want to imply that we are in the presence of a "closing of the gap" between high and low culture, to use Giuseppe Petronio's famous expression,

given the fact that much of our younger narrative – from Paola Capriolo to Paolo Maurensig to Alessandro Baricco, and so on – is impervious to the allure of genre. Rather, we are in the presence of a process of appropriation which on the one hand has made certain of the stylistic and structural elements of genre fiction available to writers who do not necessarily locate themselves within that horizon, and on the other has “sanitized” – “sdoganato,” to use the political jargon – home-made genre fiction enough to make it a viable alternative to the imported variety.

### **Serious or trivial literature?**

Of course, there is a long-standing tradition of exchange between genre and “serious” fiction, in spite of the lack of a national tradition for the former, going back at least as far as Leonardo Sciascia’s *Il giorno della civetta*.

In Italy an extraordinarily well-written detective novel by one of the few professional writers of the genre will always remain “only a detective novel,” while even a mediocre novel with a detective structure, if written by a traditional “serious” writer (i.e., Michele Prisco), has every chance of coming to be considered by critics a valuable innovative novel.

“Serious” is the operative word here, the one that distinguishes this early appropriations of the conventions of “letteratura di consumo:” genre is used to establish a horizon of expectation which the novel violates – and it is precisely this violation that locates it outside of the contaminated space of the popular – but the violation is functional to the plot itself and to the message it vehicles, and leaves the structures of the genre untouched. In other words, Captain Bellodi’s defeat in *Il giorno della civetta* is functional to the novel’s thesis about the pervasive nature of the Mafia and of its entanglements with the political realm, but the novel still delivers the truth (for all of Don Mariano Arena’s Pirandellian talk about its shiftiness). Marchica’s guilt is proved by the detective, if not by the legal system. In the end, then, what is explicitly negated by the novel,

namely the possibility of justice, is what is in any case always denied by the very conventions of the detective genre itself, which stops short of showing the messy details of trials and sentences, usually bringing the text to a closure with the act of naming the guilty party.

On the contrary, the contemporary contamination between consumer and high literature has been the result of a more conscious re-working of the structures and codes of genre fiction. Carla Benedetti has summed up the terms of this complex relationship clearly in an essay on the genres of modernity (“I generi della modernità”) (and we will notice, *en passant* for the moment, the introduction into the discussion of the notion of postmodernity). Benedetti writes:

I generi di recupero sono sostanzialmente il frutto dei mutamenti di criteri estetici portati dal postmoderno, anche se il fenomeno va ben al di là del postmodernismo inteso come poetica. Come è noto, uno dei tratti specifici del postmodernismo è la commistione (o meglio l'indifferenza della distinzione) tra cultura di massa e cultura di élite. [...] Se la modernità svalutava l'essere di genere, nella postmodernità quella svalutazione viene attivamente contrastata. La nuova produzione attinge a piene mani dalla letteratura 'di genere', non più svalutata come tale ma anzi recuperata proprio in quanto di genere. La via del genere insomma si riapre al traffico creativo [...] [L]a nuova produzione [...] fa un uso 'serio' [del genere], o per lo meno un uso che, per quanto ironico e ammiccante, non è mai stravolto o improprio. (51)

Benedetti's picture appears somewhat overtly optimistic here, but she then goes to qualify it in a way that, it seems to me, hits the problem squarely in its centre. Because the apparent recovery and even celebration of genre by serious literature has not pushed genre literature itself within its horizon, but has

rather resulted in a parasitic relationship whereby the non-literariness of genre fiction becomes a resource for the literary text itself.

The often cited example of Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* is a case in point. In Eco's novel, as is well known, the rules of the genre are both re-asserted and subverted, as the denouement of the novel reveals that the truth uncovered by William of Baskerville is both a formally legitimate interpretation of the clues and a colossal misreading of the same. Thus, the appropriation of the rules of the mystery genre is not simply carried out in an "ironic and knowing" way, as Benedetti has it – and that, in any case, would already be incompatible with a "serious" appropriation of those very same rules – but it is rather aimed at a destructuring of the mechanisms which govern the rules themselves. *Il nome della rosa* always calls for a double reading, as a mystery and as a meta-mystery about the (re)-construction of the crime carried out by William, which works according to what his inter-textual referent Sherlock Holmes called the "science of detection." The double-play of the novel between narrative and meta-narrative level of course is re-articulated at the point of decoding – if, in any case, we can accept Eco's own testimony as having theoretical validity and being more than a mere instance of much-maligned authorial intention – as it calls for a reader who can both "read for the plot" and thus enjoy the fictional world on its own terms (Eco: "I wanted to create a type of reader who, once the initiation was past, would become my prey – or, rather, the prey of the text – and would think he wanted nothing but what the text was offering him") and be the narrator's "accomplice" in distinguishing between the historical reconstruction or the detective plot and the structural, rhetorical, and narrative conventions which govern them – in other words, a reader who does not mistake the play of linguistic and cultural codes with something outside them, i.e., "reality." The fate reserved to the "ingenuous reader" who is unable to carry out these operations is, of course, to be deceived by the text itself. The novel, finally,

calls for “post-modern readers”. With the modern, anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it, but with the post-modern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously. Which is, after all, the quality (the risk) of irony. There is always someone who takes the ironic discourse seriously.

Through irony, the distinction between popular and elite culture, supposedly called into question by post-modernism, is re-asserted at the level of the reader: the post-modern reader is the discerning consumer whose giving in to the pleasure of the text, to the hypnotic and seductive allure that makes him/her its prey, is redeemed by the knowledge that the whole thing is a shadow play of semiotic codes.

### Works Cited

- Benedetti, Carla. “I generi nella modernità.” Eds. Luca Lugnani, Marco Santagata e Antonio Stussi. *Studi offerti a Luigi Blasucci*. Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 1996. 51-75.
- Burke, Frank. “Intimations (and more) of colonialism: *L’Uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird With the Crystal Plumage*, 1970).” *Kinoeye* 2,11 (10 June 2002).
- Clover, Carol J. “The Eye of Horror.” *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*. Ed. Linda Williams. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose* including Postscript to the *Name of the Rose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1984.
- Humphries, Reynold. “Just another fashion victim in Mario Bava’s *Sei donne per l’assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*, 1964).” *Kinoeye* 1, 7 (26 November 2001).
- Iser, Wolfgang. *L’atto della lettura: una teoria della risposta estetica*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987.

- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Petronio, Giuseppe. *Sulle tracce del giallo*. Roma: Gamberetti Editrice, 2000.
- Rambelli, Loris. *Storia del Giallo Italiano*. Milano: Garzanti, 1979.