

## Italians Do It Differently: Giorgio Scerbanenco's Appropriation of the American Hard-Boiled Novel

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In the 1960s, Giorgio Scerbanenco (1911-1969) published four crime novels featuring Duca Lamberti, a former doctor struck off the register and imprisoned for practicing euthanasia, who first turned private detective and then policeman. This crime series<sup>1</sup> marks the beginning of a wave of successful Italian *gialli* by many writers that has shown close ties with the urban setting and a sustained engagement with Italy's political and social conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Scerbanenco was the first Italian writer to successfully exploit the conventions of the American hard-boiled sub-genre<sup>3</sup> in order to develop a harsh critique of Italian society and politics.<sup>4</sup> In particular, he tackles urbanization and pollution, consumerism, and the rise of brutal organized crime in Milan and Europe. His novels also portray a changing Italian society where the traditional family is gradually being replaced by new family structures and women are trying to break free from a sexist society in which they are largely treated as objects. Far from merely imitating a foreign formula, Scerbanenco provided an all-Italian approach to crime fiction that continues to influence and inspire local contemporary crime writers. In so doing, he also filled a perceived void, covering "an area of fiction in the realist tradition that had grown progressively narrower in the '60s and '70s."<sup>5</sup> In other words, he responded to the demand of those readers interested in

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I follow Martin Priestman and Stephen Knight in using "crime fiction" as the label for the genre as a whole. See Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) and Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to Present* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> *Giallo* (*gialli* in the plural) is the term commonly used to define crime fiction in Italy. It means "yellow," from the color assigned to the covers of one of the first Italian series of crime fiction called "I libri gialli," launched in 1929 by the publisher Mondadori. The question of the origin of the term is complex and not entirely resolved, however. See Maurizio Pistelli, *Un secolo in giallo: storia del poliziesco italiano* (Rome: Donzelli, 2006). In this article, I use the term *giallo* in its broadest meaning, that is to say, a story where there is a crime and an investigation takes place, as commonly accepted by authoritative scholars, such as Giuseppe Petronio, *Sulle tracce del giallo* (Rome: Gamberetti, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For the problematic definition of the hard-boiled formula as opposed to the classic detective fiction, see Lee Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). According to Horsley, both of them are "loose groupings of texts" (1). Classic detective fiction, also called "whodunit" or golden age-style detective fiction, usually indicates a pattern of death-detection-explanation in which "the reader's attention is focused on the process by which a brilliant or at least uncommonly perceptive detective solves a case so intricate and puzzling that ordinary minds are baffled" (12). The hard-boiled formula is what Raymond Chandler defined as an American variety of detective fiction whose writers "wrote or aimed to write realistic mystery fiction" (1988: 13). See Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage, 1988). Several scholars have adopted a dialogic approach and have tried to give an account of the fluidity of the genre, identifying more specific terms for the great variety of novels present within these two groupings. The terminological debate about the various nuances of detective fiction is a fascinating topic, but it is not the focus of this article. See Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and *Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Only very recently has Italian criticism acknowledged the social and political nature of Scerbanenco's novels. In 2001, crime scholar Loris Rambelli stated that *Venere privata* was the first example of social and political engagement in the *giallo*: "the *giallo* can [now] be considered a social novel in Italy." Cited in Giuliana Pieri, "La letteratura gialla e noir degli anni Novanta e impegno," in *Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 290.

<sup>5</sup> Massimo Carloni, *L'Italia in giallo: geografia e storia del giallo italiano contemporaneo* (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Diabasis, 1994), 162.

Italian social descriptions and critique that the high literature in Italy at the time seemed to have abdicated.

Born in 1911 to a Ukrainian father and an Italian mother, Scerbanenco migrated from Rome to Milan with his widowed mother when he was 16. A journalist, he was in charge of the readers' letters section of a women's weekly, "Annabella," and soon became editor of other women's magazines such as "Novella" and "Bella." A successful writer of love stories, in 1966 Scerbanenco published the crime novels *Venere Privata* and *Traditori di tutti*; these were followed by *I ragazzi del massacro* (1968) and *I milanesi ammazzano al sabato* (1969) before Duca Lamberti's adventures ended suddenly that year, owing to Scerbanenco's untimely death.<sup>6</sup> The series was an immediate success and also inspired a number of films and TV adaptations.<sup>7</sup> Internationally acclaimed, Scerbanenco was the first Italian crime writer to have his books translated into several languages (including into French, English, and Spanish). The writer also won the prestigious "Grand Prix de la littérature policière" in France in 1968 for *Traditori di tutti*.

In spite of this international acclaim, Scerbanenco failed to receive recognition at home because of the bias against crime fiction in Italian critical circles.<sup>8</sup> However, he left an influential mark on the crime genre in Italy and was admired as one of the fathers of Italian crime fiction by subsequent generations of crime fiction lovers and writers.<sup>9</sup> For the first time in the genre's

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<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Scerbanenco, *Venere privata* (1966; repr. Milan: Garzanti, 1990), trans. Howard Curtis, *A Private Venus* (Oxfordshire: Hersilia Press, 2012); *Traditori di tutti* (1966; Milan: Garzanti, 1990), trans. Eileen Ellenbogen, *Duca and the Milan Murders* (New York: Walker, 1970); *I ragazzi del massacro* (1968; repr. Milan: Garzanti, 1999); *I milanesi ammazzano al sabato* (1969; Milan: Garzanti, 2005). The first crime series Scerbanenco wrote was a 1940s whodunit series set in Boston featuring Inspector Jelling as the protagonist. Among the most relevant studies on Scerbanenco are Loris Rambell, *Storia del giallo italiano* (Milan: Garzanti, 1979); Elvio Guagnini, "L'importazione di un genere. Il giallo italiano tra gli anni Trenta e gli inizi degli anni Quaranta. Appunti e problemi," in *Note novecentesche* (Pordenone: Tesi, 1979), 221-57; Giuliana Pieri, "Crime and the City in the Detective Fiction of Giorgio Scerbanenco," in *Italian Cityscapes: Culture and Urban Changes in Contemporary Italy*, eds. Robert Lumley and John Foot (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 144-55; and idem, "Introduction," in Giorgio Scerbanenco, *A Private Venus*, trans. Howard Curtis (Oxfordshire: Hersilia Press, 2012), 5-11; Alessandro Mazzola, "Giorgio Scerbanenco e Duca Lamberti: note su un incontro fatale," *Delitti di carta* 6 (2006): 37-47; Marco Paoli, "Duca Lamberti nel contesto della criminalità e del miracolo economico nei gialli di Giorgio Scerbanenco," in *Narrativa italiana degli anni Sessanta e Settanta*, eds. Gillian Ania and John Butcher (Naples: Libreria Dante & Descartes, 2007), 117-24; Jennifer Burns "Founding Fathers: Giorgio Scerbanenco," in *Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. Giuliana Pieri (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 27-47; and Barbara Pezzotti, *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction. An Historical Overview* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2014), 58-74.

<sup>7</sup> Three of Scerbanenco's short stories inspired the film *Milano calibro 9* by Fernando Di Leo (Cineproduzioni Daunia 70, 1971), while one of them, entitled "Milano calibro 9" was turned into the movie *La mala ordina* (*The Italian Connection*, Cineproduzioni Daunia 70, Dear Film Produzione, Hermes Synchron, 1972), also with Di Leo as director. Di Leo also directed the film version of *I ragazzi del massacro* (Cineproduzioni Daunia 70, 1969); *I milanesi ammazzano il sabato* inspired Duccio Tessari's *La morte risale a ieri sera* (Production Co: Central Cinema Company Film, Filmes Cinematografica, La Lombard Filmes Cinematografica, 1970); *Venere privata* was the basis for Yves Boisset's *Il caso Venere privata* (Francos Film, San Marco, 1970). According to Andrea Ricci, the Italian movies inspired by Scerbanenco's novels are precursors of Quentin Tarantino's postmodern *noirs*. See Andrea Ricci, "Il pulp dei film tratti da Scerbanenco arriva anche a Tarantino," *Spunti e Ricerche* 16, no. 1 (2001): 17-32.

<sup>8</sup> As Antonello and Mussgnug explain, Italian intellectuals have traditionally "been characterized by an Adornian mistrust of the culture industry and by a more or less explicitly elitist stance, which expressed itself—even in leftist quarters—in an open refusal of mass culture" (*Postmodern Impegno. Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 15).

<sup>9</sup> All the most successful recent crime writers, from Carlo Lucarelli to Piero Colaprico and Massimo Carlotto, have declared they are indebted to Scerbanenco. See Barbara Pezzotti *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction: A Bloody Journey* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 185.

history in Italy, Scerbanenco's commercial success marked a shift in preference from crime fiction in translation, mainly British and American, to local stories.<sup>10</sup> This supported the flourishing of a subsequent domestic output. Equally important, for the first time, the Duca Lamberti series set a new focus for the *giallo* on the urban setting and social and political issues in post-war Italy.<sup>11</sup>

While there are several contrasting opinions about what a hard-boiled crime novel is, especially in comparison with the Golden Age conventions, it is generally acknowledged that it is a predominantly American form often seen as a response to the social, economic, and political conditions in the United States from the 1920s onwards.<sup>12</sup> Among other features, this form is normally characterized by a close tie between the crime story and its urban setting; the representation of a pervasive evil; the violence and, often, the triviality of the crimes investigated; and the description of the detective as a marginalized character.<sup>13</sup> Born as a distinctive American form, hard-boiled crime fiction has subsequently provided "a vocabulary for the expression of a wide range of concerns in many Western societies."<sup>14</sup>

This is exactly the case with Scerbanenco's series: he was not the first Italian crime writer who tried to import the hard-boiled formula, but he undoubtedly performed the first meaningful "translation" of this sub-genre to Italian soil. By using a formula that mirrors social changes in the metropolis, he was able to represent a society scarred by the Economic Boom and characterized by a dramatic change in interpersonal relations among ages and genders. In the 1950s, two authors had used hard-boiled themes, such as the representation of the urban setting as evil and the use of a flawed private detective, with little commercial success. While Franco Enna (1921-1990) set most of his stories in the United States, Sergio Donati (b. 1933), also famous for his work as a screenwriter with film director Sergio Leone, was notable for writing crime stories that implicated violent criminal organizations in a brutal Rome.<sup>15</sup> By contrasting a

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<sup>10</sup> Carloni, *L'Italia in giallo*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> The passage from an enclosed room and a closed society (that is, the typical setting of the classic crime story) to the mean streets of the city (characteristic of the hard-boiled sub-genre) has been powerfully underlined by two masters of detective fiction and theorists of the genre. Firstly, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936) explains that detective fiction is the epic poem of the city, seen as a wild and natural place, and, at the same time, as space crossed by the detective with the loneliness and freedom of a prince in a fairy tale (Gilbert K. Chesterton, "A Defense of Detective Stories," in *The Defendant* [London, Verso, 1922], 158-59). Subsequently, Raymond Chandler (1888–1959) points out/articulates/remarks on the passage from the classic detective fiction to the hard-boiled formula in the works of Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961), who took "murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" (*The Simple Art of Murder* [New York: Vintage, 1988], 14).

<sup>12</sup> See Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> See, among others, John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance. Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1976), 139-91; Stephen Knight, "'A Hard Cheerfulness': An Introduction to Raymond Chandler," in *American Crime Fiction: Studies in the Genre*, ed. Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 71-87; Andrew Pepper, "The 'Hard-Boiled' Genre," in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 140-51; and John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 55-84.

<sup>14</sup> Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to Present*, 169.

<sup>15</sup> Franco Cannarozzo, aka Franco Enna, wrote a series of books featuring private detective Leslie Colina. In the series, only *Tempo di massacro* (Milan: I Libri gialli Mondadori, 1955) was set in Italy. Donati was the author of *L'altra faccia della luna* (Milan: I Libri gialli Mondadori, 1955); *Il sepolcro di carta* (Milan: I Libri gialli Mondadori, 1956), trans. Isabel Quigly as *The Paper Tomb*, (London: Collins, 1958); and *Mister Sharkey torna a casa* (Milan: I Libri Gialli Mondadori, 1956). For an analysis of Enna's crime stories see Gisella Padovani, *L'officina del mistero: nuove frontiere della narrativa poliziesca italiana* (Enna: Papiro Editrice, 1989), 75-104 and Pistelli, *Un secolo in giallo* (371-77); for an analysis of Donati's crime stories, see *ibid.*, 378-87.

touristic image of Rome as a beautiful and sleepy city with a portrait that viewed the capital of Italy as a dangerous metropolis, Donati injected a typical hard-boiled theme into the *giallo*:

I giornalisti americani chiamano Roma ‘la città della vecchia zia’ [...] Invece questa tranquilla e quasi provinciale città pullula di spie, di contrabbandieri di stupefacenti, di invertiti, di ragazze squillo, di gangster espulsi dagli Stati Uniti e mercanzia del genere. Più ne mettono in galera e più ne rispuntano. Gangster, dite. Chiamateli come volete. Ce n’è a New York, a Parigi, a Londra, probabilmente pure a Mosca e Pechino. Saltano fuori dovunque ci siano dei quattrini da prendere, con qualunque commercio. Donne, stupefacenti, cannoni segreti militari. Qualunque cosa, e soprattutto con qualunque mezzo.<sup>16</sup>

American journalists call Rome ‘the old auntie city’ [...] This seemingly calm and almost provincial city swarms instead with spies, drug traffickers, queers, hookers, gangsters who have been deported from the USA or whatever. The more criminals are arrested, the more new ones show up. Gangsters, you may say. Call them what you like. There are gangsters in New York, Paris, London and probably even in Moscow and Beijing. They turn up anywhere there is money to be made with any type of business. It may be women, drugs, secret army weapons. It can be anything and, above all, procured by any means.<sup>17</sup>

Undoubtedly this representation of a merciless capital inspired Scerbanenco, who, ten years later, gave a disturbing portrait of Milan:

C’è qualcuno che non ha ancora capito che Milano è una grande città—disse a Mascaranti—, non hanno ancora capito il cambio di dimensioni, qualcuno continua a parlare di Milano, come se finisse a Porta Venezia o come se la gente non facesse altro che mangiare panettoni o pan meino. Se uno dice Marsiglia, Chicago, Parigi, quelle sì che sono metropoli, con tanti delinquenti dentro, ma Milano no, a qualche stupido non dà la sensazione della grande città, cercano ancora quello che chiamano colore locale, la *brasera*, la *pesa*, e magari il *gamba de legn*. Si dimenticano che una città vicina ai due milioni di abitanti ha un tono internazionale, non locale, in una città grande come Milano, arrivano sporcaccioni da tutte le parti del mondo, e pazzi, e alcolizzati, drogati, o semplicemente disperati in cerca di soldi.<sup>18</sup>

There are still people who don’t realize that Milan is a great cosmopolitan city. They have failed to notice that the scale of things has altered. They talk about Milan as though it ended at the Porta Venezia, and as though the people ate nothing but *panettoni* and *pan meino*. Mention Marseilles, Chicago or Paris, and everyone knows you’re talking of a wicked metropolis, but with Milan, it’s different. Surrounded as they are by the unmistakable atmosphere of a great city, there are still idiots who think of it in terms of

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<sup>16</sup> Donati, *L’altra faccia della luna*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> All translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>18</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 118-19. *Panettone* is a typical Milanese Christmas cake; *pan meino* is a cornflour bread; *brasera* is a typical Milanese restaurant; and *la pesa* was a weighing station for all trucks and carts entering Milan. Finally, *gamba del legno* was the name given to a steam train which ran between Milan and the provincial town of Monza.

local colour, looking for *la brasera*, *la pesa* and *mangari* [sic] *il gamba de legn*. They forget that a city of two million inhabitants is bound to acquire an international flavour. There's precious little left nowadays of the old local colour. From all over the world, spies and layabouts are converging on Milan in search of money. They all come, madmen, drunks, drug-addicts, even those who are simply without hope.<sup>19</sup>

As is evident from this passage, Scerbanenco was inspired by Donati's description, but he also departed significantly from it. While Donati's portrait of an evil urban setting could have been applied to any European city, Scerbanenco localizes the representation of the hard-boiled metropolis. In this passage from *Traditori di tutti*, Scerbanenco adds to the traditional image of a city rotten at its core, characteristics specific to Milanese culture, such as the *brasera*, the *pesa*, and the *gamba de legn*. He also refers to the traditional boundaries of the city ("Porta Venezia"). More importantly, Donati's static description is devoid of any contextualization, whereas Scerbanenco relates the changes occurring in the city to historical factors ("il cambio di dimensioni"). His obsession with topography and, as we will see, his sustained engagement with an evolving social fabric won over Italian readers unhappy with cheap imitations of a foreign formula and eager to read crime stories close to their own experience: from that time on, Milan—rather than Rome—became the Italian capital of crime.<sup>20</sup>

Scerbanenco's series is undoubtedly tied to the historical times in which it was written, appearing in the aftermath of the Economic Boom. Between 1950 and 1963, the country experienced rapid industrialization and unprecedented economic growth, which brought increased wealth and the birth of a consumer society. For the first time, Italians were able to buy household appliances such as washing machines and fridges and to live comfortably. However, as Paul Ginsborg comments, if Italy's rapid industrialization emphasized and reinforced the road to prosperity for both individuals and families, it also ignored the collective public dimension of the consequent economic and social changes.<sup>21</sup> In what can be defined as a delayed industrial revolution, three million people moved from the South to the more industrialized North looking for work. Simultaneously, Northerners moved from villages to towns, and others began to commute daily to work in the largest cities. In the years of the Economic Miracle, rapid and shoddily built state housing developments scarred the symmetry of cities and created bleak and poor suburbs. Rapid industrialization deeply affected the environment in the countryside. As Martin Clark puts it, "dreary housing estates arose all round city outskirts, most of them put up

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<sup>19</sup> Scerbanenco, *Duca and the Milan Murders*, 108-109.

<sup>20</sup> Following Scerbanenco's popular success, a number of crime writers set their stories in Milan. This is the case with Antonio Perria (1924–2004) whose fictional *squadra mobile* (a group of policemen, mostly migrants from other parts of Italy) investigate crimes in this difficult city in a series of books published in the 1970s. In addition, Secondo Signoroni (b. 1947) wrote a series featuring *Commissariato Venezia* (a police procedural involving thirty policemen coordinated by Chief Inspector Bompiani); Pinuccia Ferrari (b. 1943) and Stefano Jacini (b. 1939) also put Milan at the centre of *Tragico loden* (1988), and set all their other novels in Milan. More recently, Renato Olivieri (1925-2013), Gianni Biondillo (b. 1966), Andrea G. Pinketts (b. 1961), Sandrone Dazieri (b. 1964), Piero Colaprico (b. 1957), and Pietro Valpreda (1933-2002), among others, have set their crime series in Milan. For an analysis of Italian crime fiction of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s set in Milan, see Massimo Carloni, *L'Italia in giallo: geografia e storia del giallo italiano contemporaneo* (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Diabasis, 1994), 23-38; Luca Crovi, *Tutti i colori del giallo. Il giallo italiano da De Marchi a Scerbanenco a Camilleri* (Venice: Marsilio, 2002), 108-110, 116-117; and Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place* (7-38).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (London: Penguin, 1990), 223.

without benefit of planning permission and often without roads, schools, lighting or even sewage. Parks and open spaces were destroyed.”<sup>22</sup>

This new Economic Boom urban setting is a distinctive feature of Scerbanenco’s series: first and foremost, it is a narrative about the Milan of the Economic Miracle. As Mazzola notes, in *Venere privata*, the Lombardy capital is explicitly cited 30 times, and 81 streets and squares are named, some of them several times.<sup>23</sup> The other books also show an obsession with topographical details. For example, in *Traditori di tutti*, the readers follow *vicebrigadiere* Morini as he shadows a suspect:

E la cavalcata nella notte continuò, dopo piazza Cinque Giornate la Giulietta uscì dai bastioni, chi sa perché, e prese viale Montenero, viale Sabotino, resi teatrali dall’ora notturna, dalla vuotaggine, dai lampeggianti gialli agli incroci, dall’ultimo trani aperto con l’insegna luminosa *Crota Piemunteisa* che tremolava, priva delle spente lettere *r u a*, e poi viale Bligny e viale Col di Lana, e insomma tutta la cerchia della semiantica Milano coi pezzi ancora residui e architettonicamente conservati o spesso ricostruiti, per i turisti, dei bastioni dai cui spalti, un tempo, pare, vigilavano prodi armigeri.<sup>24</sup>

The little cavalcade rolled on through the night. After Piazza Cinque Giornate, Giulietta, for some reason, left the ramparts and drove by way of Viale Montenero, Viale Sabotino, dramatically silent and deserted at this hour, due to the emptiness, to the intersection streetlights set to yield at night, from the solitary night-club still open with a flickering neon *Crota Piemunteisa*, the letters *r u a* having failed to light up. They then went along Viale Bligny and Viale Col di Lana, in other words they circled the whole of the old quarter of Milan, where heavy ancient buildings still stood, some architecturally preserved or often restored, for the benefit of the tourists. On either side there were bastions and ramparts once, no doubt, manned by valiant soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

According to Philip Howell, crime fiction can deliver a form of knowledge of the city that is linked to everyday spatial practices such as walking or driving through the city’s streets. This often results in a genuine urban epistemology and is precisely what happens with Scerbanenco’s novels.<sup>26</sup> While stirring a sense of belonging among his Milanese readers by citing real streets, restaurants, and tourist sites, through the detective’s walking and driving along the streets of Milan, Scerbanenco also manages to create familiarity and a “sense of a place” for non-local readers.<sup>27</sup> Alongside these realistic descriptions is a common feature of the hard-boiled tradition:

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Clark, *Modern Italy: 1871 to the Present*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 434.

<sup>23</sup> Mazzola, “Giorgio Scerbanenco e Duca Lamberti,” 37-47.

<sup>24</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 53-54.

<sup>25</sup> Scerbanenco, *Duca*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Howell, “Crime and the City Solution: Crime Fiction, Urban Knowledge, and Radical Geography,” *Antipode* 30, no. 4 (1998): 368.

<sup>27</sup> Moreover, as Marty Roth points out, it is the detective’s job to trace criminal activities in a modern urban environment, bringing them to the surface and showing the way the city works *Foul and Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 158. Gary Hausladen also observes that crime stories are “a powerful communicator of sense of place,” in *Places for Dead Bodies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 3. The “sense of a place” is the result of the amalgamation between reality and culture and between visual and symbolic reality. For the different nuances of this term, see Éric Dardel, *L’Homme et la terre: nature de la réalité géographique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952) and Edward Relph, *Places and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

the representation of the urban environment as fake. In the above passage, the narrator mentions the reconstruction of Milan's ancient walls for touristic purposes, highlighting a new culture of mass tourism and consumerism in Milan. This contrasts with a nobler past when gallant soldiers protected the city from a possible invasion. The opposition between real and phony complements another dichotomy: just as Chandler's Los Angeles is "a city of façades, of stucco and fake marble," Scerbanenco's Milan is characterized by a tension between respectable appearances and sordid truth.<sup>28</sup> This dichotomy is embodied by several buildings in the city center. For example, in *I milanesi ammazzano al sabato*, hundreds of women sell themselves in respectable buildings and shops:

Ma ti rendi conto di quanti siano i postriboli a Milano? Si tratta di case private e anche negozi, tu vai in una merceria, una modesta, onesta merceria, dove vendono dalle calze ricamate ai guanti per bambini, e nel retrobottega della merceria c'è un bel divano e vicino c'è un bel bagno, così un maturo signore entra, compra un bel pulloverino per il suo nipotino, poi passa nel retrobottega dove sul divano c'è una sedicente ventenne che prova una calda e improvvisa simpatia per lui.<sup>29</sup>

Do you realize how many brothels there are in Milan? They're private houses or even shops. You go to a corner market, a modest and honest store where embroidered socks and children's gloves are sold. At the back there's a nice sofa and nearby there's a nice bathroom. A mature gentleman walks in and buys a nice jumper for his grandson. Then he goes to the back. On the sofa there's an alleged twenty-year old woman who feels a sudden and warm attraction for him.

The contrast between the "modesta" and "onesta" appearance of the shop and the merciless business of women's bodies it hosts is symbolic of a city evil to the core. In this sense, Scerbanenco's crime fiction does not depart from urban stereotypes of the hard-boiled novel. However, most of the descriptions of Milan in his stories are an integral part of his specific discourse on the changes happening in Milan in the 1960s. First, as we have partially seen in the previous excerpt, these changes relate to the Milanese social fabric, turned into a consumer-oriented society:

Era lo squallido bar del benessere di massa. C'era tutto, il flipper, il juke-box, il televisore, la radio che suonava in sordina quando non c'erano programmi alla televisione, la saletta semiappartata coi tavolini coperti di panno verde per giocare a carte, un settore del bar con frigorifero a vetro da cui si vedevano prosciutti, salami, quarti di groviera e una distesa sterminata di bacinelle di vetroplastica, con le acciughe, i carciofini, i capperi. C'era un piccolo forno per le pizze, c'era un altro settore del banco con le paste e le focacce in busta di plastica, più una specie di palazzo di vetro delle nazioni unite, composto di caramelline, con gomma o senza, di un'infinita varietà di gusti, e perfino con la vitamina C contro l'influenza.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Scerbanenco, *I milanesi ammazzano al sabato*, 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

It was the typical and squalid café of the Economic Boom. There was everything: a pinball machine, a juke-box, a TV set, and a radio on in the background when there weren't any shows on TV. There was a semi-isolated little room with tables covered in green cloth where you could play cards. There was a sector of the café that boasted a fridge with a glass window where you could see hams, salamis, pieces of Swiss cheese and a huge variety of plastic bowls with anchovies, artichokes and capers. There was an electric oven for warming pizzas. There was another sector of the counter with pastries and focaccia bread wrapped in plastic. And to top it off, there was a kind of UN skyscraper made of candies – with gum or without – in an unending variety of flavors, even with vitamin C against the flu.

Michel de Certeau identifies two types of spatial practices as analogous to the linguistic figures of the asyndeton and synecdoche.<sup>31</sup> The first, the figure of the disconnection, undoes continuity and fragments places into separate islands; the second is the figure of the displacement where a part is taken to stand for the whole that includes it. In this case, Scerbanenco uses asyndeton to represent a society through descriptions of objects. His depiction of a series of objects in a typical suburban bar vividly illustrates the changes that occurred in Italian society in the 1950s and 1960s. The reference to juke-boxes and flippers is symbolic of the Americanization of Italian society, while the description of food wrapped up in plastic (“focacce in busta di plastica”) refers to the mass production that started in those years. Finally, the “caramelline,” with their huge range of taste and colors, speak of a rising culture of the superfluous.

The changes also relate to the scars inflicted on the architecture of the city by the uncontrolled urban growth following the Economic Boom. Duca's investigations take place with the noise of demolition and construction in the background: “udì il frenetico rombare di una scavatrice: proprio davanti stavano scavando le fondamenta di un nuovo palazzo” (he heard the frenzied noise of an excavator: just in front of his building the foundations of a new apartment block were being digged).<sup>32</sup> From his semi-central apartment in Piazza Leonardo Da Vinci, Duca Lamberti breathes “l'aria di cemento e spazzatura” (“the smell of cement and refuse”).<sup>33</sup> In *Venere privata*, Lamberti's investigations also take him to the outskirts of Milan where “tutta da sola, per chi sa quale sottile speculazione edilizia, c'era una vecchia cascina, lontana dallo stradone oltre cento metri, appena appena emergente da una specie di boschetto” (“all by itself, because of some clever bit of property speculation, there was an old farmhouse, more than a hundred metres from the main road, peeping out from a small wood”).<sup>34</sup> This idyllic image is abruptly interrupted when, a few lines down, the narrator explains that the farmhouse faces “il condominio Ulisse, per tutti i suoi dodici piani e per un po' di campagna intorno, così verde e solare, eppure così inquietante” (“the whole Ulisse building, with all its twelve floors and a little of the countryside around, so green and sunny, and yet so disturbing”).<sup>35</sup> The disparity between the old farmhouse and the twelve-story building highlights the relentless and menacing urbanization of the rural areas surrounding Milan. Written in the years of the Economic Boom when the urban landscape suffocated the rural scenery, this passage describes how the small

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<sup>31</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Scerbanenco, *I milanesi*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori*, 63; *Duca*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Scerbanenco, *Venere privata*, 183; *A Private Venus*, 206.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*



piece of countryside remaining around a gigantic building ends up seeming disturbing and out of place. The dilapidated farmstead's battle for survival against a concrete giant, ironically called Ulysses, is destined to fail. Indeed, Scerbanenco's fiction also points to the disappearance of the traditional dichotomy between city and countryside:

[C]'erano sempre intorno dei campi, mal trattati, coltivati un po' solo in attesa di venderli come terreno di costruzione, c'erano delle stradette fangose, quelle che portavano alle cascine, ma c'era anche la strada asfaltata per Romano Bianco, e agli angoli del quadrato di cascine c'erano dei negozi, quello di vino, una volta detto osteria, oggi col juke-box, il droghiere e salumiere e panettiere che fungeva come da piccolo supermarket, e la macelleria di Ulrico Brambilla.<sup>36</sup>

They were still surrounded by fields, now much neglected, in which a few straggling crops were being cultivated until such time as the owners of the land could sell them for development. One or two muddy cart-tracks remained, leading to the farm, but there was also the asphalt road to Romano Bianco, and each corner of the square shops, that wine shop, at one time an osteria, today a bar with a juke-box, the pharmacy-deli-bakery that served as a miniature supermarket, and Ulrico Brambilla's butcher's shop.<sup>37</sup>

Williams analyzes a persistent dichotomy between the city and the countryside in Western literature, in which rural life is traditionally described as simple, natural, and unadulterated, in contrast with the city, which is seen as a symbol of capitalistic production, labor, and exploitation.<sup>38</sup> This dichotomy disappears in Scerbanenco's work, where country villages are no different from the city and, as Pieri puts it, Milan "is presented as the sprawling American metropolis."<sup>39</sup> In the above passage, this uniformity is symbolized by the presence of consumer icons, such as juke-boxes and supermarkets. Consumerism, Scerbanenco seems to imply in this extract, wipes out any difference between urban and rural life. Uniformity has instead turned villages into cheap versions of a city. The reference to the owner of neglected fields, looking forward to selling them as construction sites, also points to the uncontrolled urbanization of the countryside and the boom of unauthorized buildings. Being a photocopy of the city, the countryside has also become the realm of the fake: "c'era il capriccio della stalla, senza nessuno degli inconvenienti, dal soffitto pendevano rustiche lampade, un carrettino era in piedi in un angolo con dentro stipate delle scope di saggina, ma era tutto molto pulito, terso con l'aspirapolvere" ("The room had all the atmosphere of a stable, without any of the inconveniences. Rustic lanterns hung from the ceiling, and, in one corner, there was even a wheelbarrow full of bundles of millet. But everything was very clean, by dint of careful polishing and vacuuming").<sup>40</sup> "Binaschina," a kitsch rural *trattoria*, whose mock rustic furniture imitates a cattle shed, is another instance of appearance versus substance: in being a clean version of a real stable, it also serves bad food. In addition, the restaurant is a front for a hotel for clandestine couples and arms-trafficking, just as the elegant building in central Milan hosted a brothel. The dichotomy between respectability and reality does not spare the countryside. Indeed,

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<sup>36</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 148.

<sup>37</sup> Scerbanenco, *Duca*, 136.

<sup>38</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973).

<sup>39</sup> Pieri, "Crime and the City in the Detective Fiction of Giorgio Scerbanenco," 146.

<sup>40</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 99; *Duca*, 90-91.

Milan and its hinterland are now merged into a single place of dishonesty and phoniness. Both are also a place of horrors where arms and drug trafficking, prostitution, and murder are committed.

Scerbanenco's melancholic detective is an outsider who finds it very hard to re-acclimatize after three years in prison for practicing euthanasia.<sup>41</sup> Embodying Scerbanenco's own alienation as a half-Ukrainian migrant from Rome, the fictional detective comments: "Ci sono tanti vantaggi dall'ingrandimento di una città, ma ci sono cambiamenti che fanno pensare" ("the growth of a city brings benefits, of course, but it brings changes too, some of which make you think").<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Duca manages to detect what the majority of Milanese cannot see: a growing urban environment that increasingly hosts unauthorized buildings, pollution, marginalization, and violence. The contrast between Duca's concern—that often borders with rage—and the indifference of the average Milanese is therefore striking:

andava tutto sudiciosamente male come i paciosi, efficienti ambrosiani che sudando passavano per via Fatebenefratelli o per piazza Cavour, non potevano supporre, anche se tutti i giorni leggevano sul *Corriere* grosse storie del genere, esse appartenevano però, per loro, a una quarta dimensione di un Einstein del crimine, ancora più incomprensibile di un Einstein della fisica. Ciò che era reale, per quei passanti, era il tabaccaio da raggiungere per comprare le sigarette con filtro, per fumare con meno rimorso, e ogni tanto un pensiero al mattino dopo, all'ufficio, quel lavoro da chiudere prima che la direzione sollecitasse, o guardare un po' quelle due ragazze sole che attendevano il tram, col seno così scoperto, queste erano le dimensioni naturali della vita, il resto lo leggevano soltanto e aveva l'evanescenza delle cose soltanto lette, "colpisce la moglie con ventisette coltellate," oppure "vasto traffico di droga, implicata anche una madre di famiglia con cinque figli," oppure "sparatoria in viale Monza tra gang rivali," tutto questo era solo lettura, stimolante, poi uno tornava a casa e trovava la bolletta del gas da pagare.<sup>43</sup>

it all went along far more grittily unwell than the pacific, efficient ambrosians who would pass sweating through via Fatebenefratelli or through piazza Cavour would ever know, even if, everyday, they read in the *Corriere* major stories of that type, for these belonged to, in their view, a fourth dimension of Einstein criminality, even more incomprehensible than Einstein's physics. What was real, for those people in the street, was going to the tobacconist to buy filter cigarettes, so that they didn't feel so bad about smoking, and every now and again thinking about the next morning, the office, the work that had to be finished before the boss summoned them, or looking for a moment at those two girls standing alone waiting for the tram, with their low-cut tops. These were the natural dimensions of life, the rest they only read about, "he stabbed his wife 27 times," or else, "housewife with five children involved in vast drug ring," or else, "gunfight between

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<sup>41</sup> Lamberti experiences a trajectory that turns him from a "home insider" into an "away outsider," according to J. Douglas Porteous's famous definitions in "Literature and Humanist Geography," *Area* 17, no. 2 (1985): 118-119. In other words, from being a professional who fits in Italian society, his experience as an inmate makes him a "home outsider," that is a local person with feelings of fear, refusal and entrapment, or even an "away outsider," a marginalization typical of migrants and misfits.

<sup>42</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 119; *Duca*, 109.

<sup>43</sup> Scerbanenco, *Venere privata*, 143.

rival gangs in Viale Monza,” all this was only reading, quite stimulating, but then they went back home and found the gas bill waiting to be paid.<sup>44</sup>

The average Milanese thinks that crimes are performed by an “Einstein del crimine,” that is, the typical evil genius of the classic detective novel. They also read the sensationalist news as if it were fiction or stories that have nothing to do with their own life. By contrast, Duca investigates a Milan and its hinterland where crime is not an aberration. On the contrary, violence is now inherent in a sprawling area where betrayal and greed are widespread and where criminals often go unpunished.

In its “multiple embodiments,”<sup>45</sup> the hard-boiled sub-genre “has operated among different and competing political ideologies,” either criticizing American corporate capitalism and racial subjugation, or attacking Communism and defending the patriarchal system.<sup>46</sup> In Scerbanenco’s case, Duca Lamberti’s hatred of corrupt power and the arrogance of criminals originates from the social changes in the 1950s and 1960s. Evil is not endemic to the social order *per se*, and does not have “political or metaphysical origins,” as happens in many hard-boiled novels, but is strictly economic.<sup>47</sup> In *Venere privata*, Scerbanenco highlights the evil of an accelerated industrialization of the country:

SI SVENA A METANOPOLI che dava alla notizia un sapore di drammatica topologia, come se il fatto che uno si svenasse a Metanopoli includesse un avveniristico significato di costume, un segno dei tempi: oggi non ci si svena più, piattamente, in casa propria, in paesi o città antiquati o dai nomi antiquati, Pavia, Livorno, Udine, oggi ci si svena nei nuovi centri del petrolio, dell’industria pesante, schiavi in fondo, anche in questo ultimo atto di volontà o disperazione, della spietata marcia verso il futuro.<sup>48</sup>

GIRL SLASHES WRISTS IN METANOPOLI, which gave the news a touch of geographical drama, as if the fact that someone could slash their wrists in Metanopoli was a pointer to future trends, a sign of the times: these days you don’t slash your wrists, boringly, in your own home, or in old places and cities with old names, Pavia, Livorno, Udine, today you slash your wrists in the new centres of oil and heavy industry, a slave, even in this last act of will or desperation, to the ruthless onward march of progress.<sup>49</sup>

In this passage, capitalism, embodied by the rising corporations in Italy, marches towards the future by exploiting workers, who are compared to slaves, and leaves behind whoever is not useful or able to follow its pace. This is the case, for example, with marginalized characters such as Alberta Radelli, a young prostitute who is left to die on the premises of a gas company in the outskirts of Milan because she refuses to be part of a criminal organization. The new, merciless capitalistic model is highly efficient and productive. The Milan underworld seems to realize that and starts imitating it: indeed, in Milan these were the years when the old *mala*, a myriad of

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<sup>44</sup> Scerbanenco, *A Private Venus*, 162 (italics in the text).

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Pepper, “The ‘Hard-Boiled’ Genre,” 142.

<sup>47</sup> Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 150.

<sup>48</sup> Scerbanenco, *Venere privata*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Scerbanenco, *A Private Venus*, 88.

small groups of petty criminals, grew in size and upgraded to drug dealing and firearm trafficking.<sup>50</sup> As Guagnini argues, Scerbanenco focuses on the relationship between new ways of urban life and new forms of criminality.<sup>51</sup> In particular, he sees the increase in criminality as an unavoidable side-effect of Milan's development into a consumeristic metropolis: "Con la civiltà di massa viene fuori anche la criminalità di massa" (with mass civilization comes mass criminality).<sup>52</sup> His novels also consciously compare this increase in criminality to the rising tide of rampant capitalism generated by the Economic Boom and consumerism in the Italian economy and society. Indeed, in the Lombard capital, drug dealing or firearm trafficking are as efficient as the legal economy: "un traffico organizzato esattamente come un ufficio di importazione-esportazione" ("highly organised, exactly like an import-export company").<sup>53</sup> Criminal organizations may also move out into the suburbs "come le grandi fabbriche" ("like big factories").<sup>54</sup>

In contrast to classic British detective novels, murderers in Scerbanenco's novels are not clever characters who engage in a contest of wits with the detective, but greedy, stupid people who become irrational for trivial reasons and kill, as in a Dashiell Hammett story, with whatever weapon "comes to hand".<sup>55</sup>

Quello lì faceva il morto, e lui gli avrebbe dimostrato che nessuno lo aveva mai imbrogliato. "Adesso vediamo, se sei morto," gli disse. Lo sollevò ancora per le ascelle e lo portò in fondo al bancone di lavoro, tenendolo pressoché in piedi, trascinandolo, fin davanti alla macchina snella, armonica come linea geometrica, che serviva per segare le ossa.

Il principio della macchina segaosso è semplicissimo: si tratta di un nastro di acciaio seghettato, avvolto attorno a due bobine, pressappoco è lo stesso principio delle macchine di proiezione, una parte del nastro rimane scoperto per un'altezza di trenta, quaranta centimetri, premendo un osso contro la parte seghettata del nastro rotante a buona velocità, l'osso viene perfettamente segato, si usa anche per incidere l'osso delle grandi costate fiorentine che si finirà poi di dividere con un accettino, e in ogni caso in cui il macellaio abbia bisogno di dividere un osso in due o più parti.<sup>56</sup>

[H]e was certain that his victim was shamming, and determined not to let him get the better of him. "We'll soon find out whether you're dead or not," he said. Once more grasping him under the armpits, he dragged him behind the workbench, carrying him almost upright towards the sleek, elegantly proportioned mechanical saw.

A butcher's saw is an extremely simple piece of machinery, consisting of little more than a serrated ribbon of steel revolving round two bobbins. It is not unlike a film projector. About fifteen inches of steel ribbon are exposed at any one time. A meat bone held firmly against the saw, which rotates at a fair speed, can be quickly and neatly severed. It is used

<sup>50</sup> Carlo Lucarelli, *Storie di bande criminali, di mafie e di persone oneste* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 66-118.

<sup>51</sup> Guagnini, "'L'importazione' di un genere," 66.

<sup>52</sup> Scerbanenco, *I milanesi ammazzano al sabato*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Scerbanenco, *Venere privata*, 169; *A Private Venus*, 191.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 178; 200. For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between crime and capitalism in Scerbanenco, see Barbara Pezzotti "Crime and Capitalism: Giorgio Scerbanenco's and Massimo Carlotto's Domestication of the American Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction," *Clues. A Journal of Detection* 32, no. 2 (2014): 51-61.

<sup>55</sup> Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," 14.

<sup>56</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 153-54.

to cut the large highly prized Florentine veal chops, or to sever any meat bone that the butcher wishes to divide into two or more pieces.<sup>57</sup>

The use of extreme violence and torture in Duca's adventures also becomes an integral part of the author's critique of consumerism. As Canova points out, in Scerbanenco's novels the murder weapon is never an object that assumes the status of evidence or clue.<sup>58</sup> They are typical consumer goods whose function is practical and immediate ("il principio della macchina segaosso è semplicissimo") just like the purpose of any other mass consumer object. By being valueless, they mirror the meaningless crimes the villains perform. In the above passage, Claudio Valtraga tortures Ulrico Brambilla, a butcher and arms-trafficker, because he wants Ulrico to reveal the location of some stolen weapons. After being submitted to hours of agony, Ulrico cannot hear anymore and he certainly cannot speak, but his torturer keeps on tormenting his shattered body. Through his use of traits typical of the hard-boiled novel, such as insignificant murder weapons and his descriptions of futile crimes in an Italian context, Scerbanenco seems to suggest that Italian society as a whole was not prepared for the invasive modernization and the consumer culture the Economic Boom brought with it. This is particularly evident, as Burns argues, in the younger generations who, in Scerbanenco's novels, embrace a life of crime and violence in order to obtain the new symbols of success and to show off their wealth.<sup>59</sup>

Lui era bevuto e come tutti i bevuti volle andare ancora in giro, avevamo la macchina in via Montenapoleone, ma lui volle andare al Motta in piazza della Scala, che figura, che figura, voleva scherzare col cameriere, ha tirato fuori un pacco così di biglietti da diecimila, forse era quasi un milione, e gli ha detto, *il resto mancia, ti piacerebbe, eh?*<sup>60</sup>

But my fiancé was drunk, and you know how it is with drunks, they don't know when to stop. We'd left the car in Via Montenapoleone, but nothing would do for him but to go on to Motta's in the Piazza della Scala. What a spectacle! He was determined to have some fun at the waiter's expense. He took out a thick wad of ten-thousand-lira notes, probably a million lire in all, and he said: "How would you like it if I handed you this and said keep the change?"<sup>61</sup>

Giovanna Marelli, Ulrico Brambilla's fiancée, recalls an embarrassing night with her husband-to-be in Milan's city center. Ulrico lives a double life: during the day he is a respectable owner of butcher shops, by night he is an arms-trafficker. Still young and rich, he is about to marry a trophy wife and never misses an opportunity to boast about his wealth (*il resto mancia, ti piacerebbe, eh?*). He values himself for the money he can spend and the envy he can generate, not for who he really is. Likewise his fiancée boasts about his wealth, and does not care if his activities are illegal: "porta dentro la carne senza pagare il dazio, non l'hanno mai preso, ha fatto i milioni così, a centinaia, credo che può comprare la Galleria di Milano, se vuole" ("He doesn't pay any tax on his meat, but he's never been caught. That's why he's made millions, hundreds of millions. It's my belief that he could buy up all the art-galleries in Milan [sic], if he felt like

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<sup>57</sup> Scerbanenco, *Duca*, 140.

<sup>58</sup> Canova, "Giorgio Scerbanenco," 160.

<sup>59</sup> Burns, "Founding Fathers: Giorgio Scerbanenco," 35.

<sup>60</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 43; emphasis in the original.

<sup>61</sup> Scerbanenco, *Duca*, 37.

it”).<sup>62</sup> In *Traditori di tutti*, young criminals think they can buy everything, and their victims, such as Giovanna Marelli, passively succumb to the mirage of an easy life. However, in the Milan of the 1960s corruption has infected all ages and social classes: “Tradivano tutti, la madre sul letto di morte, e la figlia in clinica parto, vendevano il marito e la moglie, l’amico, l’amante, la sorella e il fratello, ammazzavano chiunque per mille lire e tradivano chiunque per un gelato” (“Her sort were ready to betray anyone, a dying mother, a daughter in labour, husband, wife, friend lover, brother or sister. Any one of them would commit murder for a thousand lire, and turn state’s evidence for the price of an ice-cream”).<sup>63</sup>

In a consumerist world, where money rules and loyalty is an empty word, the detective Duca Lamberti is a marginalized person who finds it very hard to play a role in the new Italian social fabric. Guilt-ridden (his father died of a heart attack when Duca was imprisoned for euthanasia), tainted by a criminal record, and in search of a purpose for his life, Duca shows the doubleness of the hard-boiled detective identified by Knight: he is tough, but sensitive; and intelligent, but prefers to resort to violence to achieve his goals.<sup>64</sup> His external voice expresses his criticism of the superficiality and selfishness that characterizes Milan society in the 1960s; his inner thoughts reveal sensitivity and vulnerability. Indeed, Duca’s frequent outbursts of anger are a vehicle for ferocious commentaries on crime and punishment:

La legge proibisce di ammazzare le canaglie, i traditori di tutti, anzi specialmente questi che devono sempre avere un avvocato difensore, un processo regolare, una regolare giuria e un verdetto ispirato alla redenzione del disadattato, mentre invece si può, senza nessun permesso, innaffiare di proiettili due carabinieri di pattuglia, o sparare in bocca a un impiegato di banca che non si sbriga a consegnare le mazzette di biglietti da diecimila, o mitragliare in mezzo alla folla, per scappare, dopo una rapina, questo si può, ma dare un buffetto sulla rosea gota al figlio di baldracca che vive di canagliate, questo no, la legge lo proibisce, è male.<sup>65</sup>

The law was there to protect life, even the lives of the lowest of the low, even the life of arch-traitors, more so, in fact, in their case. Such people had to be given a fair trial, with defence counsel to protect their interests, an impartial jury to arrive at a verdict, and a judge to redress any bias against them. It was possible, with impunity, to riddle a couple of policemen on the beat with bullet-holes, or to blow off the head of a bank-clerk who was slow in handing over bundles of ten-thousand-lira notes, or to shoot wildly into a crowd while escaping from a robbery. All these things were possible, but slap the rosy cheek of the sonofabitch who made a living out of such filthy crimes, oh! No, that was against the law, it was forbidden.<sup>66</sup>

However, in spite of advocating the death penalty for criminals, he feels pity and relief when a villain’s suicide attempt fails in *I ragazzi del massacro*:

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 39; 33. The last sentence is better translated in English as “It’s my belief he could buy up the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele shopping arcade, if he felt like it”.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 147; 135.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Knight, “‘A Hard Cheerfulness’: An Introduction to Raymond Chandler,” in *American Crime Fiction: Studies in the Genre*, ed. Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: McMillan, 1988), 71-87.

<sup>65</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 125.

<sup>66</sup> Scerbanenco, *Duca*, 114-115.

Càrrua gli fece ancora quella domanda spietata. “Tu preferivi che fosse morta, che si fosse ammazzata?”

Fece segno di sì, che lo preferiva. Disse umilmente: “L’ho sempre preferito,” disse, “fino a quando la Stradale non ci ha avvertito dell’incidente.”

“E poi?” insisté Càrrua.

Duca disse fino in fondo alla verità: “Poi sono corso all’ospedale sperando che fosse viva.”

Càrrua ebbe un risolino piccolo ma rumoroso. “E perché volevi invece che fosse viva?”

Lui scherzava, ma Duca no. “Non lo so.”

“E adesso sei contento che sia viva?” disse Càrrua, senza scherzare più, paterno.

“Non lo so. Forse sì.”<sup>67</sup>

Càrrua asked him the same merciless questions: “Would you rather she was dead? Would you rather she had killed herself?”

He nodded. He said humbly: “I always wanted it until the highway police told us about the accident.”

“And then?” insisted Càrrua.

Duca told the entire truth: “Then I rushed to the hospital, hoping she was alive.”

Càrrua had a little but noisy chuckle. “Why did you want her to be alive?”

He was joking, but Duca wasn’t. “I don’t know.”

“And now are you happy she’s alive?” Càrrua asked, in a fatherly tone, no longer joking.

“I don’t know. Maybe, yes.”

This contrast between cynicism and sensitivity and ultimately the doubleness that characterizes Duca’s humanity makes him one of the most appealing detectives in the history of Italian crime fiction.

Duca’s ambivalence towards people and society at large is also present in his relationship with the city. According to Most, classic European and American detective fiction “tended to differ from each other in many regards, at least until the thoroughgoing Americanization of European culture that marked the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>68</sup> In classic detective fiction, the urban environment is “a necessary setting for the mortal incidents but is not complicitous in them or deeply altered by them.”<sup>69</sup> In Scerbanenco’s stories, the city loses its innocence. Likewise, his detective is not optimistically “first and foremost a city-lover” and above all,<sup>70</sup> like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, “he is not at all integrated into it.”<sup>71</sup> In particular, Duca shares with his American counterparts an outrage for the changes that have taken place in an urban environment he now hardly recognizes, but still loves: “Milano in quei giorni era troppo bella” (“Milan, just now, was almost too beautiful”).<sup>72</sup>

Like the typical hard-boiled detective, and operating in a world where crime goes unpunished amidst general indifference, Duca does not disdain violent methods to make people confess their crimes. However, he maintains a code of honor, which prevents him, for example, from hitting

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<sup>67</sup> *I ragazzi del massacro*, 230-31.

<sup>68</sup> Glenn W. Most, “Urban Blues: Detective Fiction and the Metropolitan Sublime,” *The Yale Review* 94, no. 1 (2006): 69.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>72</sup> Scerbanenco, *Traditori di tutti*, 181; *Duca*, 167

women. Indeed, Duca presents interesting differences from the American gumshoe. First of all, he is not in competition with the police. In fact, he unofficially works on a police team<sup>73</sup> that reflects the new geographical composition of Northern Italian cities in the aftermath of the Economic Miracle: Duca is not from Milan (his family comes from Emilia Romagna); his mentor, Chief Inspector Carrua comes from Sardinia, and his friend and police officer Mascaranti is from Sicily.<sup>74</sup> This is a very interesting element, as in a crime series where the clash between Northerners and Southerners in Milan is acknowledged (“era un terrone”), this peaceful cooperation between people coming from different regions of Italy is symbolic of a social assimilation that would come true in the following decades.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, being himself an outsider, Duca does not discriminate against migrants or other people because of race and ethnicity. Apart from lacking the “trademark mannerisms and idiosyncrasies of other famous literary detectives,”<sup>76</sup> such as alcohol dependency and misogyny (even though he shares the homophobia of some of his forefathers), he is also able to commit to other people.<sup>77</sup> In this sense he is different from other Italian fictional detectives of the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike Carlo Emilio Gadda’s and Leonardo Sciascia’s crime novels, the Duca Lamberti series gives wide room to the protagonist’s private life. Gadda’s Ciccio Ingravallo and Sciascia’s characters are police detectives who are completely devoted to their job.<sup>78</sup> Their private life is virtually non-existent. By contrast, and far from being the “fully pathological version of American individualism” as are many of his American fictional colleagues, Duca is in a relationship.<sup>79</sup> However he does not surrender to a typical middle-class family life, as Inspector Maigret and other European fictional detectives normally do. Indeed his “family,” composed of his unmarried sister, with her illegitimate child, and Livia Ussaro, his girlfriend, an eccentric philosophy teacher who experiments with prostitution for her research on the exploitation of women in Italian society, is highly unusual in the still traditional Italian society of the time. In particular, Livia represents the “new” Italian woman. University educated, she has a rational mind and does not fear making her point clear. She also refuses to be patronized by Duca: “a me non interessa affatto quello che a lei dispiace o no” (“I’m not remotely interested in what you like or don’t like”).<sup>80</sup> Duca’s unconventional fictional family probably reflects the experience that Scerbanenco had as a journalist that put him in contact with the changing fabric of Italian society.

In conclusion, Scerbanenco adapted some of the conventions of the American hard-boiled crime novel—such as the urban setting, pervasive evil and violence, and a marginalized detective—to carry out a severe critique of Italian society and the politics of his times. Through the investigations of his fictional gumshoe Duca Lamberti, who shares some characteristics with the typical hard-boiled sleuth but also diverges from the usual representation of this character, he highlighted important issues in 1960s Italy. By criticizing the consequences of the Economic

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<sup>73</sup> This choice can be explained by the difficulty of having a “proper” private detective in a crime story set in Italy. Indeed, at the time, the Italian Penal Code did not provide for the use of a private detective to help the defence in criminal cases. This narrowed the private detective’s range of activities and made it difficult for crime writers to write interesting novels featuring private eyes.

<sup>74</sup> Pieri, *Crime and the City*, 152-53.

<sup>75</sup> Scerbanenco, *I milanesi*, 130.

<sup>76</sup> Jack Van der Linde, “Detective en anti-detective: narratologie, psychanalyse, postmodernisme,” *Rivista di letteratura moderne e comparate* 58 (1996): 304.

<sup>77</sup> On the representation of women in Scerbanenco’s novels, see Pezzotti, *Politics and Society*, 71-72.

<sup>78</sup> An exception is Professor Laurana, who is an amateur detective, in Leonardo Sciascia’s *A ciascuno il suo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966). However, he does not have a private life and still lives with his mother.

<sup>79</sup> Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*, 1-2.

<sup>80</sup> Scerbanenco, *Venere privata*, 158; *A Private Venus*, 179.



Boom on Italy's social and economic fabric, in terms of pollution and unauthorized buildings, violence and discrimination, he introduced important political and social themes into Italian crime fiction. He also vividly represented a changing society with new roles for women and alternative family compositions. In so doing, he responded to many readers' need for novels that mirrored Italian society and its problems, and left a profound mark on subsequent *gialli*.

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