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Poliziottesco 70: Realist representation, private violence, and social commentary In the Italian way to crime cinema

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ABSTRACT

Italian crime cinema (henceforth, *poliziottesco*) is a film genre that developed in the 1970s, particularly from 1972 to 1979. These were the years of political terrorism (both right- and left-wing) and of a structural and cultural differentiation of crime in all the country's major cities. In this context of opposing extremisms and widespread offenses against the law, the emerging cinematic genre combines the stylistic features of the police plot – crimes and police investigations – with chases, action scenes, and the depiction of street and state violence. The objective of this paper is to define this genre sociologically and culturally through so-called cross-border practices. The term refers to research that advance societal knowledge using sources from different fields of knowledge. Without any claim of exhaustivity, this essay muses on the *poliziottesco* genre, showing its aesthetic stylistic features, critiquing the social context from which it originates, and explicating the themes underpinning its political philosophy. I will first offer a critical chronology of some of the films that make up the genre and then analyse them by symbols. In the conclusions, I will offer an epistemological framework on the ideology behind the *poliziottesco* genre, circumscribing it to the years that witnessed its development and popularity.

Keywords: Poliziottesco, criticism, social commentary, violence, judicial creation, realism.

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1. Introduction

Background. Italian crime cinema (henceforth *poliziottesco*) is a film genre developed in the 1970s, particularly from 1972 to 1979. It is not only the revival and the recent interest shown by Italian television, cinema and documentaries in general for the atmospheres of the Seventies and for unsolved crimes that arouse our interest in this topic. It is the theme of private justice, of intolerance towards institutions and of the symbology of violence as a legal creation that is once again topical. And although

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today these dimensions find an empirical manifestation in other forms, I find it useful to take the *poliziottesco* as a unit of analysis to trace its motivations and symbology.

The Idea of this paper. The aim of this contribution is to define this genre sociologically and culturally through so-called cross-border practices. This term marks research orientations and activities that advance the knowledge of society using sources from different fields (in a perspective that the Italian debate might define as “interdisciplinary”). It is, in other words, an attempt to revive the synergy between disciplines – such as film representation, contemporary history, and social commentary – to understand certain phenomena, from the development to the decline of a film genre committed to depicting specific features of social reality.

Methodological brief. The method used for the realization of this essay consists in the chronological analysis of the reasoned filmography that constitutes the genre. Subsequently, the analysis focuses on some social symbols of the stylistic features offered by the filmography itself. Principal results. The result consists in offering a social semantics of violence as a juridical creation and on the reflection on the realist character that emerges from the narration. *The structure of this paper.* In the first part we deal with cross-border practices for the sociological reading of *Poliziottesco*. Later, we present the methodology, consisting in an Annotated chronology of the context and the cultural products that describe and criticize it. After facing the attempt to Understanding an all-Italian genre through appropriate international references, we deal with an analysis of the its themes and symbols. Results. This paper is written in order to define the social meaning of violence offered by this genre and its relationship with social reality today.

2. Cross-border practices for a sociological reading of a film genre

Italian crime cinema (henceforth *poliziottesco*) is a film genre developed in the 1970s, particularly from 1972 to 1979. It is not only the revival and the recent interest shown by Italian television, cinema and documentaries in general for the atmospheres of the Seventies and for unsolved crimes that arouse our interest in this topic. It is the theme of private justice, of intolerance towards institutions and of the symbology of violence as a legal creation that is once again topical. And although today these dimensions find an empirical manifestation in other forms, I find it useful to take the *poliziottesco* as a unit of analysis to trace its motivations and symbology.

The aim of this contribution is to define this genre sociologically and culturally through so-called cross-border practices². This term marks research orientations and activities that advance the knowledge of society using sources from different fields (in a perspective that the Italian debate might define as “interdisciplinary”). It is, in other words, an attempt to revive the synergy between disciplines – such as film representation, contemporary history, and social commentary – to understand certain phenomena, from the development to the decline of a film genre committed to depicting specific features of social reality³. Cross-border practices do not claim for themselves a leading role in the social sciences, but they do suggest that, in some research contexts, cultural objects can become sources for scientific inquiry. Without any claim to exhaustivity, this essay muses on the *poliziottesco* genre, showing its aesthetic stylistic features, critiquing the social context from which it originates, and explicating the themes underpinning its political philosophy. I will first offer a critical chronology of some of the films that make up the genre and then analyse them by symbols. The conclusions offer an epistemological framing on the ideology that sustains the *poliziottesco* genre, circumscribing it to the years that characterized its development and popularity.

I will first frame the genre from a historical perspective. After the student protest of 1968 and the hot autumn of 1969 – a year that culminated with the Piazza Fontana bombing on December 12 – the following decade started under the banner of violence. In Italy, these are the years of political terrorism, both right- and left-wing. On the right, the most significant and striking actions are the bombings⁴. These

² Corcuff (2003).

³ Some authors (O’Leary and O’Rawe 2011) have attempted to scale down the realist scope (in the epistemological sense) of certain currents of the Italian cinema, emphasising how the description of the contexts represented is often associated with moral speculation.

⁴ The mother of all Italian bombings, which inaugurated the strategy of tension, was that of Piazza Fontana in Milan (12 December 1969). It was followed by the Peteano massacre (1972); the bombing at the Milan Police Headquarters (1973); the one in Brescia (1974) and the Italicus Express massacre (1974). The bloodiest massacre to affect Italian territory in peacetime was that at Bologna train station (2 August 1980). Among the most documented and recent studies on the strategy of tension, see Dondi (2015) who makes an explicit reference to socially engaged cinema

attacks, carried out by neo-fascist individuals prompted and supported by deviated parts of the state, aimed at destabilizing society. Their subversive purpose is to establish an authoritarian regime capable of facing a Soviet invasion and it is commonly referred to as strategy of tension. On the left are, instead, several armed formations, especially the Red Brigades, founded in 1970. After inaugural actions with demonstrative aims, such as sabotage and wounding, they inaugurate a season that, from the kidnapping of magistrate Mario Sossi (1974), culminate in the kidnapping and killing of Aldo Moro (1978), the apex of a design called attack on the heart of the State⁵. There is also widespread violence, which – from a sociological point of view – covers urban maps in leopard spots, with red (far-left) and black (far-right) zones. Italy's major cities are also the scene of a structural and cultural differentiation of crime. In Milan, the common underworld (the so-called *ligera*) evolves by sometimes intersecting with class struggle, at other times by radicalizing its activity in the name of wealth and consumption – an aspiration also shared by honest citizens after the economic boom. If Milan represents a sort of criminal avant-garde, in Rome the isolated gangs (*batteries*) still resist by sharing the prostitution, gambling, and drug trafficking rackets. In these years, moreover, some criminal realities enjoy a certain popularity, particularly as subjects in movies, such as the (in) famous Marsigliesi clan. Things change in 1977, when some of these batteries merge into the so-called Magliana gang, which will soon become a criminal holding capable of linking common delinquency and deviant sectors of the institutions.

Having summarily framed the historical context, I should now spend a few words on the characteristics of this film genre. In this climate of opposite extremes and widespread crime, this emerging cinematic genre combines the stylistic features of the police plot (such as crime and police investigation) with chases, action scenes, and the depiction of street and state violence. This genre, which builds on – and then distances itself from – socially engaged cinema and draws on the atmospheres and settings of noir novels and westerns, provides a social commentary while at the same time reassuring the silent majority. It stages violence and its multi-faceted symbolic meaning. Its protagonists are the heinous common thug; the corrupt bourgeois; the political extremist; the rough policeman; the ordinary man living in degenerate urban settings who resorts to private justice because he feels abandoned or mocked by institutions.

Sketching out the main styles is, however, still not enough. From watching just one of the movies in this prolific and circumscribed vein, one can gain plenty of insights – and just as many interpretations about its characters, situations, and scenarios. As an introduction – and following the cross-border framework – it is useful to frame the poliziottesco genre not only historically and cinematically but also under a socio-cultural perspective. I will then describe the discursive codes that the genre proposes to the viewer, distinguishing them from those that connote instead the noir genre. I will also draw similarities and differences with the western genre, which shares with the poliziottesco topics, drives, and even actors. I will use Alexander's (2006) method of argumentation and exposition, borrowing – whenever possible – his ability to compare social discourses within genres. The analysis will inevitably focus on some symbols, which I will introduce here and then analyse by dimensions in a dedicated section following the chronology of the most representative films).

	Poliziottesco	Noir	Western
Contexts			
Setting	Urban, daytime	Urban, nighttime	Rural, daytime
Background noises	Police sirens and gunfire	Silence alternating with gunfire	Silence alternating with gunfire
Main atmospheric elements / climate	Weather indifference/oppressive climate	Driving rain/persistent fog/rarefied climate	Clear and sunny skies/torrid climate
Abstract reference to exoticism	Marsiglia (origin), San Francisco, Chicago	Usually not considered	Frontier

recounting the years of terrorism at p. 231. The most recent text that systematically recounts the years of terrorism in Italy at the time of writing is that by Miguel Gotor (2022).

⁵ The first murder of the Red Brigades took place in 1976. It is at this juncture that the poliziottesco genre intercepts these elements and transforms them into narrative moments useful for contextualising a climate. The recent study by Pino Casamassima (2022) is of particular interest in this topic, as it stresses the topicality of reflection on the stability of democracy after the years of terrorism.

	(identification), Beirut (destination)		
Typical situations	Police chases, kidnapping, setting scores, drug trafficking, murders	Police chases, kidnapping, setting scores, drug trafficking, murders	Duels, executions, chases on horseback

Like the noir genre, *poliziottesco* is purely urban. Only a few chases and kidnappings take place in rural areas – reflecting, anyway, the typical setting of some Italian landscapes (such as the thugs' retreat in the hinterland after the robbery in *Bloody Payroll* (*Milano Violenta*, 1976) or the final confrontation between the police Commissioner and the Marsigliese on a barge on Lake Maggiore in *Emergency Squad* (*Squadra volante*, 1974). Apart from these exceptions, this genre follows the detective novel by sketching the tensions and anxieties of metropolitan settings: cities become its true protagonists. After *Bullitt* (1968), metropolitan detective stories stop reflecting the inner turmoil of the protagonists to focus on an energetic and at times liberating display of the violence that characterizes urban criminal phenomenology. Heavy rain no longer necessarily accompanies the protagonist, and Italian cities are depicted as theatres capable of staging drug trafficking, prostitution rackets, and the clash between old and new underworlds, just like Chicago or San Francisco. Marseille conjures up the origin of criminal expertise – after all, these are the years of the French Connection and Italy becomes an attractive place to refine and transit cocaine first to France then to the US. The exotic myth of the frontier close to the heart of westerns, with their settings and duels under the sun, is reified in metropolises like Beirut, where criminals can spend the winter comfortably living on the spoils of their latest heist.

Like noirs and westerns, the *poliziottesco* places the theme of private justice at the core of its narrative. In the American hard-boiled literature – Hammett, Spillane, Chandler - and the French polar – Manchette in literature and Melville in cinema – the theme has an overtly subversive profile, criticizing the powers that be (hence the inner torments and moral depth of its protagonists/anti-heroes). Conversely, in the *poliziottesco*, the critique gives way to the victim's impatience with and reaction to the rigidities of bureaucracy after a trauma. While the violence in westerns points to a constituent power that has yet to establish a central authority, noir is the flip side of the coin: the constant critique of constituted power. It culminates in the *poliziottesco* with scenes of violence that highlight impatience with real or supposed rigidities of said power. The noir genre depicts the dark side of the organization of power; the *poliziottesco* focuses on the recurrent malfunctioning of institutions and bureaucracy rather than the preservation of the *status quo*.

	Poliziottesco	Noir	Western
Ideas and orientations			
Matrix of justice	Private as reactive	Private as subversive	Private as constituent
Relationship with the establishment	Controversial	Conflictual	Evasive
Exercise of violence	Present	Present	Present
Main image of bureaucracy	Slow and irrational	Corrupt and obscure	To be constructed

Some of the main characters in the *poliziottesco* genre are the rough and violent official and the private citizen who takes the law into his own hands. They are modern-day vigilantes reacting to situations that teach them the multi-faceted essence of evil (to be found in corrupt institutions as in street crime) and the possibility – learned from the noir genre – for good not to triumph, or for a criminal not to receive just punishment. Corrupt officials and slow procedures become the polemical referents of a constituted power deemed insolvent. The reaction is often muscular and violent, anthropologically driven by the manly code of action, motorcycle chase, and fistfight. The female role, which in those years (especially 1974 and 1975) was expressed through the feminist movement in claims that would lead to significant gains in civil rights, is relegated to a secondary position. True, the forefather of the genre, *Execution Squad* (*La Polizia Ringrazia*, 1972), offers an interesting female character: an objective journalist as capable of denouncing the excesses of the police in repressing student and workers' demonstrations as she is of praising their action in countering the rising tide of robberies. However, overall, the *poliziottesco* narrative remains close to a macho representation of the conflict between law and justice.

	Poliziottesco	Noir	Western
Socio-anthropological profiles			
Emerging roles	Vigilante, rough cop	Serial killer, private investigator	Vigilante, bounty hunter
Polemical references	Corrupt officials	Police	Sheriff
Image of the enemy	Unpunished criminals	Unpunished criminals	Unpunished criminals
Female role	Journalists, social workers. Victims of rape and kidnapping	Femme fatale	Object of contention Marginal role Calamity Jane

So-called genre cinema offers an extremely sophisticated and detailed representation of the style of the protagonists, as well as an immediately recognizable definition of situations through visual and sound elements.

	Poliziottesco	Noir	Western
Physical objects and places			
Accessories	Turtleneck	Fedora and trench coat	Cowboy hat
Symbolic offensive tools	Beretta. P38.	44 magnum	Winchester
	Switchblade	Smith & Wesson	Whip
Means of transportation	Motorcycle and green Alfa Romeo Giulietta (Police)	American cars (Buick, Chevrolet, Pontiac)	Horses and carriages
Regolamenti di conti	Car cemetery	Gambling den	Saloon

This stylistic accuracy of the three genres (including the more circumscribed *Poliziottesco*) assured an immediate formal and content recognition by the viewers and allowed their movies to gain the attention of contemporary filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino. I will now offer a diachronic investigation of the *poliziottesco* genre; a method of analysis that will help in understanding how this film genre is constructed historically and culturally.

3. Method

3.1 Annotated chronology of the context and the cultural products that describe and criticize it

Before 1972

The *poliziottesco* genre is codified and distinguished from socially engaged cinema (from which it derives)

In the 1960s and early 1970s, several films anticipate the stylistic features of the *poliziottesco* genre. Mainly, some directors wanted to depict recent crime events, amplifying certain criminal behaviours with the intent of portraying the rampant violence in advanced urban contexts and denouncing the logics of exclusion produced by industrial modernity or the corruption of the ruling classes. The earliest examples that use a police set-up in Italy are marked by (1) a crude realism, often biographical, and (2) a Marxist-style critical framework that focuses on both criminal actions and the context engendering them, to understand and represent them rather than as a justification. It is the case with the works of directors such as Francesco Rosi and Carlo Lizzani, then Elio Petri, Marco Bellocchio and Damiano Damiani⁶.

⁶ By way of example, I will mention the following films. *Wake up and Die* (*Svegliati e uccidi*, 1966) and *Bandits in Milan* (*Banditi a Milano*, also known as *The Violent Four*, 1968) by Carlo Lizzani, the founders of the detective genre in Italy. The first movie recounts the criminal exploits of Luciano Lutring, a Milanese robber known as the soloist of the machine gun. The second film is inspired by the events of the *Banda Cavallero*, a group of robbers led by a leader of the Turin workers' movement and some associates of southern origin and working-class extraction who would later radicalise in prison. *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (*Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*, 1970) by Elio Petri starring Gian Maria Volonté. Its narrative structure is oriented towards denouncing the arbitrary nature of power that exonerates itself, providing a protagonist very similar to Police Commissioner Luigi Calabresi, who in those years was the object of a denigrating campaign because he was suspected of being responsible for the death of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who fell from a window of the Milan Police Headquarters the day after the Piazza Fontana massacre. In *Black Turin* (*Torino nera*, 1972) by Carlo Lizzani, a worker is falsely accused of the murder of a violent colleague because of a plot hatched by a corrupt builder who intends to punish him for his trade union commitment. The film *Confessions of a*

1972

The birth of the poliziottesco genre

I will now address the key movie in the genre: *Execution Squad* (1972) by Steno starring Enrico Maria Salerno. The film is set in Rome and is widely considered the father of the *poliziottesco* genre. Commissioner Bertone investigates a robbery by two young thugs, who – unable to handle the heist – commit a murder. The investigations are far from easy: the social climate is red-hot with journalists' polemics against the police. The reference to judicial, political, and crime news, is clear. The case of the anarchist Pinelli, who fell from a police headquarters window after a detention that had lasted beyond the time allowed by law in the aftermath of the Piazza Fontana massacre, is explicitly mentioned. Consider this dialogue from minute 09.24:

First journalist

Dr. Bertone how come you let them get away? And how come the officers at the checkpoint did not fire?

Captai Bertone

My men don't want to shoot anymore. Every time they have the misfortune of hitting a criminal, a grenade immediately breaks out. And the first ones to blow it up are you journalists!

Second journalist

But those were two murderous robbers. No one would have found fault with them! We get on your case when you smash students' heads, or when you shoot workers....

Journalist

... Or when you throw anarchists out the window!

Commissioner Bertone

On the Pinelli case there is an ongoing investigation, and if someone must pay, he will!

In this context, characterized by the unpopularity and frustration of the police force, one of the young robbers is killed by a secret organization. Investigations bring to light a subversive design: the secret organization is a covert power centre aimed at progressively shifting public opinion's preferences toward issues such as security and order, to favour – by coup d'état – the establishment of an authoritarian regime. The Commissioner is tough and intransigent with criminals and distrustful of laws that prevent him from interrogating them. He is even more disgusted with the illegality of private justice and associations that, outside the institutions, dispense rough justice on criminals because of their symbolic adherence to the corruption of customs. He is authoritarian but remains a guardian of the law. He is not yet a vigilante, as in the *poliziottesco* genre or the suggestions by Fernando Di Leo, and he ends up killed in an ambush.

1973

The twist of the poliziottesco genre and its codification

Starting from 1973, the *poliziottesco* genre is more specialized. Its movies focus on the lonely, manic figure of a policeman who complains of having to stand between a rock and a hard place – between criminals and the magistrates who prevent him from conducting investigations with discretionary power. Films depicting the degraded and delinquent characteristics of major Italian cities mushroom. Genoa is described as San Francisco and Rome as Chicago. Milan, for its part, is the modern metropolis where even crime anticipates the cutting-edge actions and tactics later reproduced in other urban contexts. The critical insights focus – though not in depth – on the importance of territory and the constricting nature of procedures and codes that make it difficult to bring to justice criminals pursued by increasingly lonely anti-heroes.

Enzo G. Castellari's *High Crime* (*La polizia incrimina la legge assolve*, 1973), starring Franco Nero, is considered the film that sanctions the police's renunciation of any pretence of civil denunciation to properly inaugurate the *poliziottesco* genre. The protagonist is a manly, upstanding policeman who interrogates suspects with hasty, often slapdash methods, complaining that his hands are tied by an

Police Commissioner (*Confessione di un commissario di polizia al procuratore della repubblica*, 1971) by Damiano Damiani anticipates some of the stylistic features of the genre, including the transformation of the public official into a vigilante.

overly civil libertarian justice system and that he finds himself in a degraded context in which criminals move better than the police.

The *Violent Professionals* (*Milano trema: la polizia vuole giustizia*, 1973) by Sergio Martino, starring Luc Merenda, confirms the stereotype of the impatient, hasty cop who gets suspended from duty for overreacting due to frustration between the outcome of things and personal moral sense. The rift between justice and legality now seems more than established. While critics are beginning to find the script repetitive, audiences still greatly appreciate these stories. The movie was a remarkable commercial result, grossing over 1.1 billion liras. The gap between critical opinion of the film's artistic quality and popular success at the box office could be explained, if I were to boldly suggest a hypothesis, by the public's need for security and reassurance in the *anni di piombo* (the Italian period of political turmoil spanning from the 1970s to the early 1980s, literally "lead years"). Furthermore, the depiction of violence also triggers fears that need to be exorcized. This need was reflected in the appreciation for behaviours such as brutalizing criminals beyond the rules, the official's disdain for those same rules, the impression that lawful procedures protect thugs more than honest people, and manly empathy for the citizen. The gang in the movie experiences some internal friction. After a botched robbery, one of the thugs kills a pregnant woman by shooting her in the belly. The undercover policeman and another bandit are outraged, but the shooter claims that their job is not only to rob but to induce fear and bring change in the life of the country. This consolidates the habit of depicting the overlap between the underworld and terrorism.

Stelvio Cipriani's *The Great Kidnapping* (*La polizia sta a guardare*, 1973) starring Enrico Maria Salerno offers a glimpse of the young delinquents of Rome's upper class at the bar, devoted to a dissolute life of excesses and private violence against women⁷. The critical and social discourse becomes even more substantial with Romolo Guerrieri's *The Police Serve the Citizens?* (*La polizia è al servizio del cittadino?*, 1973) starring Enrico Maria Salerno, John Steiner, and Giuseppe Tambieri. The movie also offers some social commentary, as the police officer strongly believes to be at the service of the citizen in a democratic state. The Commissioner (the main character) is dealing with a racketeering case in which the underworld organization intimidates even informants (*pentito*), making the investigation remarkably complex. The overall climate of distrust towards the institutions is also represented by the Commissioner's own son, a militant of the extra-parliamentary left who sees in law enforcement an inherently fascist and liberticidal culture, expressed by practices such as police detention. In the confrontation with his father, the son muses on the proletarian origins of the professional figure of the policeman. The father will take justice into his own hands, given the reluctance of his superiors in investigating his main suspect, as well as helplessly witnessing the disappearance of key evidence. The main theme of the movie is a violent and looming underworld against an impotent justice system that relies on the heroic and brutal initiative of the individual officer. Again, the movie refers to news items: the Commissioner provocatively asks journalists if they only pity policemen when they get themselves killed. The reference is to Black Thursday in Milan, April 12, 1973, when officer Antonio Marino was killed by a hand grenade thrown by an extreme right-wing youth as part of the unrest following the lack of authorization by the police for a neo-fascist demonstration.

1974

Bombs, civil conquests, and Il romanzo delle stragi

1974 is the year on the divorce referendum approved by 60 percent of Italians: on May 12, 1974, the divorce law is approved. At the same time there is an increase in the price of gasoline 260 liras per litre. The institutions will respond to the rampant inflation the institutions will respond with walking Sundays and austerity. Politically, some right-wing extremists are thinking of a presidential republic or an authoritarian regime, such as a military junta like that in Portugal or Greece, to be achieved through a coup. Rogue secret services in those years plotted towards an authoritarian turn of the Italian state by using the extreme right as an armed wing capable of subversive actions to terrorize the population, thus strengthening the "law and order parties"⁸.

⁷ Two years later, the Circeo massacre – in which three neo-fascist youths kidnapped and tortured two young working-class women, killing one of them – offered the investigators a socio-anthropological glimpse into the extreme right-wing youth. It also affected the Italian legal system: thanks to the commitment of feminist lawyers as plaintiffs, rape was transformed from a crime against morality to a crime against the person.

⁸ There had already been coup attempts, after all. In the summer of 1964, the Piano Solo, so called because its execution would be entrusted only to the Carabinieri. In December 1970, the Golpe Borghese was foiled, named after Prince Borghese, Commander of the X MAS during

August 1974 will see the white coup, so called because it was prompted by Edgardo Sogno, a former Catholic partisan. In the same year, *Street Law (Il cittadino si rubella, 1974)* by Enzo G. Castellari is filmed in Genoa. In it, an engineer is kidnapped and beaten up by a group of robbers. Dissatisfied with the investigation and the attitude of the police, he decides to take justice into his own hands. The film opens with a series of acts of private and political violence (such as the assassination of a magistrate) taking place on the street, to portray the city as an urban jungle where pursuing law and order is impossible.

Film critics, oftentimes unfriendly towards the *poliziottesco* genre, attribute some sociological ambitions to this movie. Yet, its hardcore realism is confirmed by an anecdote. As one of the screenwriters recalls, it was precisely in Genoa that Judge Mario Sossi had just been kidnapped by the Red Brigades, and the police – confusing cinematic representation with reality – chased the film crew. After the neo-fascist bombing at Piazza della Loggia, Italy witnesses a resurgence of the climate of hatred and political confrontation.

Since 1974, the street climate is characterized by militant anti-fascism.

A good example is the movie *Processo per direttissima* (1974) by Lucio De Caro, Starring Michele Placido, Mario Adorf, Adalberto Maria Merli. In this movie, the future cast of *La Piovra*⁹ rereads, through the lenses of a fictional and civil denunciation, news events such as the Italicus train bombing in August 1974. The over-term police detention culminating in the death of the suspect is, once again, reminiscent of the Pinelli case. The critical framework focuses on the attempt to pin the responsibility on elements of the extra-parliamentary left by showing the police struggling to recognize the corrupt nature of the institutional leadership and to reject the accusations by antagonists and journalists. The theme of deception, topical since the Piazza Fontana bombing, characterizes the subversive activity of the secret services during the so-called strategy of tension: using neo-fascist manpower to carry out terrorist attacks, blaming the extreme left to strengthen the “law and order” parties and encourage an authoritarian turn in national politics. 1974 is also the year in which Pier Paolo Pasolini published the so-called *Romanzo delle stragi* (novel of the bombings), published in *Corriere della Sera* in the column entitled *Scritti corsari*:

«I know. I know the names of those responsible for what is called a coup (and which is actually a series of coups instituted as a system of power protection).

I know the names of those responsible for the Milan massacre of December 12, 1969. I know the names of those responsible for the Brescia and Bologna massacres of early 1974.

[...]

I know. But I don't have proof. I don't even have clues.

I know because I am an intellectual, a writer, who tries to follow everything that happens, to know everything that is written about it, to imagine everything that is not known or that is kept silent; who coordinates even distant facts, who puts together the disorganized and fragmentary pieces of a whole coherent political picture, who re-establishes logic there where arbitrariness, madness and mystery seem to reign [...].».

In the flashbacks of *Processo per Direttissima* (1974), we see the Commissioner and the detained man discussing politics, with the former trying to persuade the latter of their common proletarian origins and pointing him to a kind of commonality of long-term goals, such as greater social justice. However, he challenges him on his subversive methods – specifically, planting bombs. In the movie *City Under Siege (Un uomo una città, 1974)* by Romolo Guerrieri starring Enrico Maria Salerno and Luciano Salce a policeman and a journalist, both critical of the rules and formalities that characterize their professional environment, collaborate in investigating a murder case related to drug trafficking involving some elements of Turin's upper middle class. The investigation and the press point to certain elements in charge of drug trafficking in the city. The Commissioner's activities, however, result in his relocation to the tax department, where he will not be able to investigate matters of public order that challenge the status quo. With the movie *Shoot First, Die Later (Il poliziotto è marcio, 1974)*, Fernando Di Leo insists on a

Fascism. In the spring of 1973, the Rosa dei Venti conspiracy was uncovered. It involved a network of contacts between the subversive right, the military secret services, and the American services. It then turned into a sort of permanent coup with acts of terrorism that lasted until 1974.

⁹ RAI fiction starring a police Commissioner who fights organised crime and its connivance with local economic and political power in Palermo. The first season (1984) was directed by Damiano Damiani.

noir plot to denounce the corruption of the police (represented by Commissioner Malacarne) and reflect on an anthropological constant that characterizes professional criminals, often betrayed by their right-hand man as soon as they forget the reality of street life. In the film *Almost Human* (*Milano odia la polizia non può sparare*, 1974) by Umberto Lenzi starring Tomas Milian and Henry Silva, a policeman becomes a vigilante and resigns from the police force, declaring that he has just killed the bandit he would not have been able to bring to justice due to lack of evidence.

After 1974

Cinema captures the shock of terror (1975)

And the urban context becomes a character (1976)

As historians and some RAI documents recall¹⁰, in 1975 «faced with a public order that appeared increasingly at risk, Parliament passed new special laws for the first time. This is the so-called Reale Law, which expands the powers of the police even in the use of firearms». The climate feared three years earlier in Steno's film *Execution Squad* finds an institutionalized response. And as in Steno's film, the voices of supporters of the benefits of the increased autonomy given to the police force are juxtaposed with those of dissenters. Among the new measures is that of police detention: the possibility of holding a crime suspect in police headquarters for forty-eight hours before a judge validates the arrest. Meanwhile, the phenomenology of violence changes and, in Erri de Luca's words, *specializes*. Genre cinema and the plots of individual films were affected by terrorist events and the unstable climate produced by the milestones reached by political extremism in the previous year. I am referring to the two major attacks attributable to neo-fascist subversion in 1974: the bomb in Piazza della Loggia in Brescia and the one on the *Italicus* train between Florence and Bologna. Meanwhile, paramilitary training camps organized by the neo-fascist movement Ordine Nuovo are discovered throughout central Italy. Sergio Martino's *Silent Action* (*La polizia accusa il servizio segreto uccide*, 1975) starring Luc Merenda, Tomas Milian, and Mel Ferrer, depicts subversive plots that are supposed to culminate in a coup. Their leading activists perfect their training in a paramilitary camp not unlike those described in the press of the time. A lucid take on the disenchanted and annihilated anthropology of the vigilante policeman is summed up by the film *The Left Hand of the Law* (*La polizia interviene: ordine di uccidere!*, 1975) by Giuseppe Rosati starring Enrico Maria Salerno and Leonard Mann. Following investigations conducted correctly and within the rules, the Commissioner's girlfriend is killed. From then on, the young man proceeds with violent methods. He will also realize that one of his colleagues is corrupt and reproach him for following the code in an obtuse and archaic way, combining harshness of repressive methods and faith in democracy and the rule of law. During this period, director Umberto Lenzi refined the figure of the vigilante, as in the film *Manhunt in the City* (*L'uomo della strada fa giustizia*, 1975) with Henry Silva. The film is set in Milan. During a robbery in the elegant Via Montenapoleone, a group of bandits kills a little girl. Seeing the ineffectiveness of the police investigation, the little girl's father decides to investigate privately.

Umberto Lenzi became in those years the most prolific author of the *poliziottesco* genre, perfecting a partnership with several actors, notably Tomas Milian. An important example is *Syndicate Sadists* (*Il giustiziere sfida la città*, 1975). Rambo returns to Milan after a stint in Marseilles. He meets a friend who claims to be part of a security organization, a kind of private police force, that cooperates with law enforcement to fight crime. The friend asks him to join him, but Rambo proves sceptical from the start, unable to place such an organization within the scope of his principles. When Rambo's friend is killed while investigating the kidnapping of an industrialist's son, the protagonist chooses to retaliate and pin the kidnappers down. At the headquarters of the private police organization where he has gone to retrieve his friend's belongings, he approaches the target shooting and pulls out some bullets from his pockets, different from those commonly used in drills. The following is the dialogue at minute 24.15:

Director of the organization:

But these are explosive bullets! They are prohibited by law!

Rambo

For me there is only one law. Mine.

¹⁰ See *Gli anni di piombo in Italia: gli opposti estremismi negli anni Settanta* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_PGIWgCF6c (La storia siamo noi, by Giovanni Minoli) and *Anni Settanta: gli anni della violenza* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEMVfXVzEUI> (Blu Notte, by Carlo Lucarelli).

Later Rambo kills the son of the boss responsible for one stage of the kidnapping but spares the boss himself, acknowledging his dignity as a criminal of yesteryear. He comes to regard the boss as an honourable man, not guilty of heinous crimes such as kidnapping (in this case, a child) for the purpose of extortion. The ethic of the vigilante is thus understandable only within rules enshrined not so much in law as in a code of the criminal community where different forms of mutual consideration exist for different criminal activities.

The theme of the special squad, supposedly free in its methods of investigation and interrogation to combat crime more effectively, will be the subject of many future films, and it will be charged with increasingly colourful and violent tones until it reaches splatter peaks. It is the case with *Live like a Cop, Die like a Man* (*Uomini si nasce poliziotti si muore*, 1976) by Ruggero Deodato. In 1976 the protagonist, in a sense, is the urban context of cities mowed down by political and civil violence. A film like *San Babila ore venti un delitto inutile* (1976) by Carlo Lizzani shows a Milan rigidly divided into left- and right-wing zones. The film is inspired by a true story, namely the stabbing of a couple of young leftists who recklessly wandered around San Babila – a neo-fascist stronghold – so much so that the archetype of the Milanese black slugger found an appropriate definition in the term *sanbabilino*.

Liberi armati pericolosi (1976) by Romolo Guerrieri tells the story of a gang composed of three young men who, despite coming from upper class families and wealthy economic backgrounds, spend their daily lives robbing supermarkets and gas stations. To commit these crimes, the protagonists need weapons, initially provided by a young Milanese libertine who boasts a dissolute lifestyle and neo-Nazi sympathies. After killing him, the young men will proceed their criminal career on their own. Pursued by the police, they will also begin to kill. Their dangerousness is pointed out in the opening scenes of the film by the girlfriend of the least violent of the three, who reports them to the police for a robbery they are about to undertake.

The year 1976 also sees the release of three major films starring Maurizio Merli: *Roma violenta* (1976), *Napoli violenta* (1976) and *Italia a mano armata* (1976). The first two are directed by Umberto Lenzi, the third by Marino Girolami. Together, they form the so-called Commissioner trilogy. The police officer in question is Commissario Betti, a character played by Maurizio Merli and created by Franco Martinelli and Vincenzo Mannino. Betti is a tough, authoritarian officer driven by a sense of moral justice that translates into his ambition to protect the weakest and bring criminals to justice, often resorting to violent methods. The commercial success of the trilogy prompted the authors to resurrect Commissioner Betti, who died in the third instalment of the saga, as Leonardo Tanzi, a similar character who is even more obstinate and authoritarian in his methods. Tanzi will be the protagonist of *The Tough Ones* (*Roma a mano armata*, 1976) and *Il cinico, l'infame e il violento* (1977) also directed by Umberto Lenzi. In *Violent Rome* (*Roma violenta*, 1975) at odds with his superiors for killing a thug who had shot a colleague, he leaves the police force to join a special vigilante squad – with more freedom in their actions than ordinary police.

1977 and beyond

The genre shows signs of wear

Domenico Paolella's *Stunt Squad* (*La polizia è sconfitta*, 1977), starring Marcel Bozzuffi and Vittorio Mezzogiorno, recounts the criminal exploits of a gang that threatens the city of Bologna, prompting the police to create a special squad headed by Commissioner Grifi and exasperating public opinion to such an extent that, once the leader of the criminals is identified, the population kills him. In Carlo Ausino's *Double Game* (*Torino violenta*, 1977), to confront a prostitution racket started in the city by a criminal gang, the Commissioner turns into a full-fledged vigilante, killing them one by one until a colleague discovers him, putting an end to his personal moral crusade.

From 1977 to 1979 some artistic partnerships also bloomed, such as that between Stelvio Massi and Maurizio Merli. These movies are more repetitive than their predecessors, all following the plot of the honest, frustrated, and quick to violence police officer, often forced to investigate heinous crimes in a procedurally and bureaucratically hostile context. Some examples are *Highway Racer* (*Poliziotto sprint*, 1977); *Fearless* (*Poliziotto senza paura*, 1978); *Convoy Busters* (*Un poliziotto scomodo*, 1978); *The Iron Commissioner* (*Il commissario di ferro*, 1978); *Hunted City* (*Sbirro, la tua legge è lenta la mia no*, 1979); *The Rebel* (*Poliziotto solitudine e rabbia*, 1980) just to name a few titles. The audiences will appreciate these movies, whose production will be interrupted only by Merli's untimely death. For his part, Tomas Milian

would continue the genre in a comic-grotesque vein through the character of the sloppy Commissioner Nico Giraldi, directed by Bruno Corbucci. An increasingly lacking production in terms of budget and script content is reflected in the protagonists, prisoners of their own clichés.

The decline of the *poliziottesco* genre is due to several causes, mainly internal to the movie, radio, and television system and the advent of private TV. However, some political events also contributed to depowering the narrative cues underlying the genre's subjects. The political and social scenario changes: 1979 ushers in the season of pentitism (Patrizio Peci for the Red Brigades; Sergio Calore and Angelo Izzo for neo-fascism) while the bomb at Bologna station on August 2, 1980, marks – also historiographically – the end of neo-fascist attacks in Italy. The culture industry follows suit. Before proceeding with the analysis of the socio-cultural dimensions examined by the genre, I would like to complete the chronological section with an interlude that recalls foreign cinematic examples with which the Italian *poliziottesco* genre shares some stylistic features.

4. Intermezzo

4.1 Understanding an all-Italian genre through appropriate international references

Dirty Harry by Don Siegel (USA 1971)

Clint Eastwood chronicles the manly anthropology of the policeman vigilante

Inspector Callaghan investigates rough cases typical of noir atmospheres such as serial murders – with brutal methods that inevitably cause him to clash with the establishment. His profile is precisely that of the vigilante with the face of Clint Eastwood, translated from Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns into the context of a dark and violent San Francisco. The mental mechanism that makes him react with equal violence to the city crime is his personal idea of justice. That idea could coincide with legality only as long as the latter does not, in turn, coincide with procedures that invalidate arrests and limit the scope of investigations, sometimes frustrating the investigator's efforts and instead benefiting criminals. The disconnect between legality and justice gives *Dirty Harry* a curious profile as an armed moralist, who accepts reprimands and suspensions because of his justice-fuelled actions. Bad guys go to jail; good guys can safely walk the streets. This rather perfunctory distinction between good and evil is inherited from the star Commissioners of the *poliziottesco* genre (especially Betti-Tanzi played by Maurizio Merli) and suggests that the commissioner's maladjustment to reality stems from the blurred boundaries between good and evil in real life. The sharp distinction between good and evil in the cop's mind and their transposition into the roles of policemen and thieves (cat and mouse) is an abstract, illusory construction – and, ultimately, the origin of the Commissioner's disappointment.

Bullitt by Peter Yates (USA 1968)

Steve McQueen becomes master of the chase through the streets of San Francisco.

In *Bullitt*, Steve McQueen interprets a muscular and stylish police officer, whose legacy can be fully seen in Maurizio Merli's acting performance and Franco Nero's look. Indeed, the latter stands out in the public's imagination of *poliziottesco* movies for the jackets and turtlenecks also worn by Bullitt. Furthermore, both Steve McQueen and Maurizio Merli were personally involved in the riskiest scenes, doing their own stunts. The famous chase through the streets of San Francisco engages the viewer in sensory excess (Venturelli 2020, 70). From here on, the chase will become a fundamental feature of detective movies and the *poliziottesco* genre will draw on this narrative stylistic device. Screenwriter Dardano Sacchetti recounts that Merli endured gruelling workouts to ensure near-perfect mental and physical fitness on set. *Bullitt* is, therefore, the main reference for the *poliziottesco* genre in terms of chases through the streets of a city to reveal the typical urban landscape. The latter, in turn, will become a character in its own right in some major titles of the Italian genre. The San Francisco shown in *Bullitt* will correspond overseas to Milan, Rome, Naples, Genoa, and Turin. All violent, of course.

Il giustiziere della notte – Death Wish – di Michael Winner (USA 1974)

Charles Bronson and the manhunt in the city

Speaking of violence: the character played by Charles Bronson represents the antihero whose moral depth ends where the bullets he chooses to fire at the address of evildoers begin. At the beginning of the movie, he is a quiet architect whose solid trust in institutions is undermined by the difficulty encountered by the police in bringing to justice those who murdered his wife and raped his daughter.

Films within the *poliziottesco* genre such as *Manhunt in the City* and *Street Law* (*Il cittadino si ribella*) follow this same plot. The theme of private justice is part of a reflection that becomes paramount again when the news report cases in which justice is marred by slow investigations and the relationship between it and bureaucracy produces unsatisfactory outcomes. This is a theme shared in all democratic systems that decline their own version of extreme protection of civil rights (*garantismo*) as a constitutional principle. In a meaningful interview, Franco Nero recalls that *Street Law* – in which he was the main protagonist – was filmed and released in theatres before the more famous *Death Wish*. It addressed a crucial theme for advanced democracies, considering the complex relationship between criminal phenomenology and the judicial environment. Private justice returns as a theme whenever the social morphology of society changes, as shown in later movies by Clint Eastwood, who embraces the noir atmospheres by Dennis Lehane in *Mystic River* and the increasing stratification of the migration phenomenon in the urban space described in *Gran Torino*.

5. Discussion

5.1 Analysis of the themes and symbols

The police serve the citizens

Whoever says that Enzo G. Castellari's *High Crime* marks a kind of watershed between action and social commentary is not wrong. The film opens with an 11-minutes long chase scene. This narrative device shows, right from the opening credits, the tenacity of the protagonist, Commissioner Belli (Franco Nero). A tenacity that is also impetuosity, given by a still partial understanding of the criminal mechanisms that govern the drug dealing economy in the city of Genoa. Attempting, without initial success, to lead the Commissioner to a more lucid definition of the situation is Chief Commissioner Scalia, who insists on the various layers of the criminal structure they investigate. The underworld has changed; there are no longer just the street gangs living day by day through gimmicks and minor crimes. Instead, they have specialized as a kind of mercenary labour force for the underworld's *eminences grises*. Nor there is simply the organized crime under a Mafia godfather whose language and practices are still governed by categories such as honour and respect. The Commissioner will have to deal with entrepreneurs with substantial funds at their disposal, white-collar criminals, and corrupt politicians. His hasty methods are likely to merely scratch the surface of problems, and his lack of understanding of the relationships among the criminal actors involved in the various forms of racketeering contributes further to his frustration. At minute 50.19, the Commissioner vents:

Commissioner Belli

The police serve the citizens! But which citizens?! The important ones! The powerful ones! The rich ones!

The harshness of Belli's words and attitude will cause the chief Commissioner to pull out all the stops and hand over the dossier to the attorney general, who clearly wishes to cover it up. In the film *The Police Serve the Citizens?* at minute 11:20 a deputy submits to the Commissioner (played by Enrico Maria Salerno) a promotional poster, which bears precisely that same phrase. The superintendent recommends hanging it up but the Commissioner objects, emphasizing that he alone is in charge and highlighting his indifference to hierarchy and rhetoric:

Commissioner

A policeman has a duty to be civil to everyone but he is not a servant! And we don't need to pander to anyone!

The lecture on the dignity of the police officer and his class status is reiterated by the Commissioner to his son, an extra-parliamentary leftist, from minute 34.10:

Commissioner/Father

Look, Michele, I have never gone into the merits of your choices... Indeed, if anything, my job is just that, to protect the freedom of every citizen... But you must tell your friends, before they insult a policeman, let them take a good look at his face... and you look at them too! They are children of peasants, of poor people, whose fathers did not have the opportunity to send them to school, nor the opportunity to take to the streets to demonstrate their ideas as you do....

Extra-parliamentarian/son

If this is your alibi for feeling like a good father, it's not enough, Dad! [...]

The motto *The police serve the citizens* is provocatively framed at minute 11:31 of the film *Manhunt in the City*. The viewer reads it through the eyes of the protagonist (played by Henry Silva) posted on the wall of a police station where the man, whose daughter was killed in an ambush by unknown thugs, was left alone by the Commissioner in the middle of a conversation. In his eyes, such a reassuring phrase is progressively emptied of meaning, to the point of being a mere slogan with no corresponding action. Hence his progressive inclination toward private justice.

Police stop and hands tied

(Slaps galore)

In *The Police serve the Citizens?*, the Commissioner uses the forty-eight-hour police custody not only as a precautionary measure to check alibis and obtain information, but also to create a scapegoat. He spares only a suspect who is particularly hostile to him to turn the others against him. 48.20):

After the murder of two thugs by an anonymous association practicing summary justice for subversive purposes, in the film *Execution Squad* we witness this dialogue between the Superintendent, Chief of Police, and Minister of the Interior (min. 48.20):

The government rejects this unbelievable story [...] Personally, I'm worried: here people are stealing, killing, robbing, the urge to take justice into their own hands has been around for a long time!

Chief of Police

Mr. Minister, you know how things are. And you know that in the police force we have our hands tied! Try to untie our hands and you will see! [...] We are facing an emergency situation. Let us take emergency measures!

Minister

For example?

Superintendent

For example, let's start by suspending some of the laws regarding police detention and interrogation. I assure results in twenty-four hours.

Minister

The police once had exceptional powers and made life harder for criminals, that is true. But it made it impossible also for honest citizens!

In *The Tough Ones* (1976), Commissioner Tanzi (from minute 21) is interrogating Vincenzo Moretto, suspected of a series of crimes, with brusque and increasingly violent methods:

Commissioner Tanzi

Listen Moretto, I would spill the beans if I were you! With the new rules on police custody, I can keep you here for forty-eight hours. Just think: forty-eight hours you and me!

Vincenzo Moretto

Yes, but with is my lawyer, too!

Commissioner Tanzi (slaps him).

We'll tell your lawyer you slammed into a door!

In *Execution Squad*, from minute 10.35, the Commissioner reflects on the ever-weaker police officer in the face of rampant forms of crime and so strong a protection of civil rights that it hinders investigations:

Commissioner Bertone

People don't feel protected by the police! But we also don't feel protected by those who should have our backs! We have them all against us with guns blazing - judges, newspapers, parties! Sometimes it seems that we are the thugs!

The theme will return at minute 27.39, with the former superintendent later found to be head of a secret association involved in an attempted coup:

Commissioner Bertone

It is a matter of fatigue... I no longer have confidence. Judicial police work has become a farce. Our hands are tied. Thugs mock us, and journalists rub it in.

The theme of the police having its hands tied points to the conflict between principles (helping justice triumph) and responsibilities (by acting in a specific way). The frustration of the official, who is often reprimanded, sued for abuse of power or injury, suspended from duty because of his violent ways is a way of representing the frame of mind that will produce the conflict between responsibility (complying with procedures) and principles (killing bad guys, thus helping justice triumph). The Commissioner in *The Children of Violent Rome* (*I ragazzi della Roma violenta*, 1976) investigates a gang of young highborn thugs and vents hitting a punchbag from minute 01.01.09:

Commissioner

The quibbles (SOCK) the laws (SOCK) public opinion (SOCK) the politicians! (SOCK) The judiciary trading lightly (SOCK) but they don't realize that our (SOCK) hands (SOCK) are tied (SOCK). I have clues to put away a bunch of murderous bastards (SOCK) and Mr. Judge wants ironclad (SOCK) evidence (SOCK) and those keep screwing us (SOCK)!

The Special Squad and the Justiciary

(Legal creations by the genre)

Becoming a justiciary comes in stages. An intermediate stage is the special squad, a group of elements intended to scour the territory in search of offenders who are not effectively pursued by the police. Sometimes the members of such squads are from subversive sectors of the state or intelligence services. Other times the special squad is conjured up and proposed by police officers themselves frustrated by the rigidity of the procedures they must follow to search for evidence and arrest criminals. In both cases, they are a cinematic device capable of adequately representing the suspension of constitutional guarantees that connotes the rule of law. At other times they are autonomous formations of citizens opposed by the police, who justify its hostility with arguments that reaffirm the state monopoly of legitimate violence.

This dialogue in *The Tough Ones* from minute 12.28 describes the confrontation between police officers after a robbery they failed to foil, carried out by a criminal newly released from prison whom the Commissioner had previously wanted to detain by violating the terms of the police arrest:

Commissioner Tanzi

No! You listen to me! It's not just a matter of feelings, believe me, but a matter of principle... Those are playing with our feelings, with our scruples! [...] Let's create a special team! A team authorized by the Judiciary that can fight crime with greater freedom!

Vice-Superintendent

Tanzi, as a citizen I can agree. But as a deputy superintendent and your direct superior, I can only say no.

The anthropological styles of the *poliziottesco* genre are sometimes overtly and explicitly negative – for example, when the protagonist is a thug, and the narrative uses the criminal point of view to subject society to a cynically realistic critique. At other times, the protagonists are the citizen who rebels against the harassment from criminals who are not adequately prosecuted by the law and the police officer frustrated by having to investigate according to rules that hinder his efforts in apprehending criminals. In the latter two cases, the main character is a true vigilante, an individual who prefers to act by his own rules, in turn clashing into conflict with the established order. As Pierre Bourdieu argues:

«The justiciary is the self-mandated legal prophet who imposes a new form of prophetic justice. [...] This character is a judicial creator of a certain type who opposes a personal and private justice to juridical common sense, and he naturally has problems with justice» (Bourdieu 2014, 57).

Indeed, it is precisely in the self-representation of the judicial creator that some characters or performers in the genre communicate the meaning of their violent actions from a moral and civil viewpoint. If they are policemen who have killed a criminal in cold blood (thus in turn transgressing the law), they nonetheless show an intention to take responsibility for their actions, clarifying the boundary that analytically separates ethics of principles and ethics of responsibility. The cop who becomes a vigilante underscores the ability to transcend the law by legitimizing individual actions under a different logic from that of ordinary law. *Manhunt in the City* represents, on a narrative level, the formation mechanisms of the identity of the vigilante/justiciary. An honest man undergoes a dramatic event, such as the death of a daughter, and the failures of the police adds frustration to his grief. From minute 09.57:

Commissioner

I want to be honest with you: at the moment, we are just groping in the dark... Let's hope that some of them will make a mistake sooner or later! [...]

Mr. Vannucchi

Look Commissioner, one day the man on the street, Mr. Rossi, will be fed up with this crap!

This state of mind is intercepted by representatives of an elusive and mysterious association for which the protagonist feels an initial revulsion:

Attorney Ludovico Mieli

You may be wondering why this visit! Well, I have the pleasure of chairing the city watch movement that you may have heard of [...] You have been wounded in your deepest affections [...]

Lt. Pascucci

You see, that's why we are here. The police's hands are tied, if you add the inefficiency and malpractice typical of this crumbling Italy, the result is what? Free hands for thieves, robbers, and murderers! [...]

Mr. Vannucchi

And what do you want from me?

Lawyer Ludovico Mieli

[...] We invite you to join our association.

Mr. Vannucchi

And what would that be? A private police force? A death squad like in Brazil?

Lawyer Ludovico Mieli

No, none of that! We want respect for the law. We want order!

Mr. Vannucchi

Get out!

The protagonist warns the police Commissioner that he is about to shoot the thug who killed his daughter. Here is an excerpt of their conversation from minute 1.20.26:

Commissioner

Where the hell are you!

Mr. Vannucchi

I am at the eighteenth kilometer of the Tradate road. I managed to find my daughter's killers. Come at once, Commissioner. Before I kill them!

In *Almost Human*, the police Commissioner played by Henry Silva will in turn kill the bandit guilty of kidnapping, rape, and massacre, later asking him to notify the precinct that former Commissioner Grandi killed Giulio Sacchi. Before cold-bloodedly killing who had murdered his partner five years earlier, the police officer will throw his badge to the ground.

Coppers

(How they are viewed by the corrupt bourgeoisie and common thugs, and how they think about crime)

In *The Children of Violent Rome*, a dialogue between one of the young thugs from a wealthy family and his father shows clearly their personal depiction of a class-divided society and their contempt for humbler professions, such as that of the policeman (which, moreover, in their far-right mentality, is preserving an outdated and bankrupt system. From minute 15.41:

Father

So that Commissioner has it in for you, huh? And I also know why! Because you are my son, I have a lot of money, and he is a half-starved beggar!

Son

A copper will always be a half-starved beggar....

Father

Yes, but be careful! Because sometimes the hungrier they get, the more dangerous they are. Do you want to be someone in life? Then try to be careful! Cheers, Stefano!

Following this dialogue, Stefano lectures his associates on the categories by which society is stratified: the worms (who only know how to crawl); the slaves (who must obey because they lack brains and will); and the rulers. Their contempt for the institutions and their officials is evident. The sense of

superiority that father and son share toward democratic institutions is also reflected in the latter's dialogue with the Commissioner during his detention as he is suspected of assault and rape. From minute 32.23:

Commissioner
 Do you have a dirt bike?
 Young man
 I am Mr. Donini, Commissioner.
 Commissioner
 Where were you last night between 5 and 6 pm?
 Young man
 I won't answer you, Commissioner, if you don't call me Mr. Donini first!
 Commissioner
 A couple was slaughtered. And the young woman repeatedly raped. By two thugs like you!
 Young man
 [...] Do you know Nietzsche, Commissioner? He explains that the general condition of the world is chaos! Therefore, creation is tantamount to placing order and is will to power. And he who creates must dominate to impose his law!
 Commissioner
 And you would be a kind of creator? One who makes his own law?
 Young man
 One must impose one's will in order to create a new order!
 Commissioner
 And is that all you were doing last night between five and six o'clock?
 Young man
 Stop being so informal with me! How much do you make a month? Three hundred thousand? That is as much as my maid!

After a robbery where four people ended up dead, the Commissioner of *Young, Violent, Dangerous* (*Liberi armati pericolosi*, 1976) summons the families of the three young men responsible, asking them to cooperate. From min. 23.00, he offers, somewhat prosaically, a pedagogical argument that he believes could prevent the emergence of deviant conduct such as that of the three young criminals. For him, the responsibility for their behaviour clearly lies with their families. In this sense, this movie, unlike others in the same genre, emphasizes a sociological dimension of education:

Father of the blond one
 Then you justify them?
 Commissioner

No! On principle, I cannot justify anyone! Neither the citizen nor the political idea that tries with violence to force others to think as he would like! But even less can I justify those who create these monsters. And if your son is a monster he owes it to you, who failed to give him the love and help he needed! Today I am the one in an unpleasant situation. I am the one who has to get him out of the way to prevent him from continuing to harm others. I regret only one thing, however: that there is no law to punish parents like you harshly!

The main activities the youths in the film engage in are like those depicted in *San Babila-8 P.M.* (*San Babila ore 20 un delitto inutile*, 1976): drug dealing, intimidation, beatings against those who investigate their illicit activities, robberies, and rape. A picture emerges inspired by the youths from the Parioli or San Babila neighbourhoods: common criminals who try to legitimize their dissolute conduct with generic and confusing ideological references, limited to belonging and not aimed at defining any framework for an idea of state, not even an extremist one.

From this point of view, sociological explanations and criminal profiling activities are seen by the police officers as attempts to justify criminal conduct or to minimize its relevance. The Commissioner in the poliziottesco genre is often a man of sound principles (with some exceptions, as in Di Leo's *Shoot First, Die Later*) but he is above all a man of action. He dislikes sociological analyses (explicitly mocked in *The Tough Ones* and in Di Leo's noir *Caliber 9* (*Milano calibro 9*, 1972) as much as he dislikes the expert reports and profiling activities of forensic psychologists, whom he considers ambiguous for their attempt to understand the environmental factors underpinning crime. So, the point is not whether one is born a

criminal or becomes one – indeed, this question is unanswered by the genre. Moralism takes over the *poliziottesco* genre by favouring the narrative construction of the vigilante. The genre does not seriously address the search for the causes of crime but focuses instead on people's frustration with justice. Perhaps one can become a criminal, but for sure one can die a cop.

6. Conclusions

Realist cinema or ideological cinema?

Does it make sense to question the meaning of the genre fifty years later?

The reasons why the *poliziottesco* genre, so prolific in Italy in the 1970s, rapidly declined between the end of that decade and the beginning of the 1980s were recalled by several directors in the specials cited in the footnotes and brilliantly summarized by Roberto Curti's comprehensive essay:

«[...] the intervention of television networks in production acquires a fundamental importance. And if before it was the distributor, with the minimum guaranteed to the producer, who had the last word, now it is Rai and Fininvest who share the cake. The producer becomes a mere performer. The political class washes its hands of it [...] With the 1984 decree and the subsequent Mammì law, which in 1990 regulates the radio and television system, the financial power of the networks implies consequences not only on the modes of production, but also on the content of the products, conceived in function of the future passage on television, and therefore deprived in the bud of any potentially unpleasant, indigestible or transgressive element» (Curti 2006, 338).

According to this approach, the end of the *poliziottesco* genre is mainly due to factors internal to the film and broadcasting system and – ultimately – to economic reasons. Political and institutional factors, such as the rules imposed by the Mammì law, facilitated this dissolution process. Yet, socio-cultural reasons related to the changing society are also important. From the Moro kidnapping onward, social reality changed and the representation of violence began to be affected (in fact, it will be later repurposed in the context of cinematic subjects that intended to sublimate its allegorical charge by disengaging it from the realism of the events, as in the splatter genre). However, the interest in social reality continues. Where there are problems, there is also the will to talk about them.

In the 1980s, the era of terrorism is believed to be over – at least for its secular and nationalist version pitting extreme right against extreme left. However, organized crime is still powerful, and the series *La Piovra* will chronicle its mechanisms of territorial entrenchment, again showing the life of a commissioner under attack and letting the viewer identify with him and pine for his misfortunes. In this case, television series take over from cinema, but the interest in unresolved facts affecting the present will also characterize important examples of the film industry in later years. Some Italian filmmakers have learned Pasolini's lesson of condensing legally unresolved (or dubiously resolved) historical facts into a kind of social novel capable of recognizing in the exercise of doubt and logic the historical and political responsibilities for the most scabrous facts of our democratic life¹¹. Until light is shed on the past, turning secrets into manifest truths, the present cannot be understood - this seems to be the message of the new socially committed Italian cinema. While this new cinema still employs the register of the detective or noir genre, it has little or nothing to do with the *poliziottesco* genre: there are investigations, false leads, enigmas, and conspiracies, but very few chases or violent scenes. The latter is picked up by filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, who openly acknowledged his love for Lenzi and Di Leo's films. In his opinion, however, violence does not reflect the one actually existing in society. In movies such as *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp fiction* we are offered a kind of aesthetic of violence, the permissibility of which is essentially playful and afferent to the cinematic language of neo-noir genre (Venturelli 2006, 328; Greene. R. and Mohammad, K. S., 2013).

I am, conversely, well aware of the cinema's ability to intercept certain aspects of social reality and transform them into representation and thus wonder what elements distinguished the *poliziottesco* genre from a sociological and cultural point of view. The purpose of this questioning is to defuse all clichés that ascribes the genre to a reactionary and authoritarian ideology (indeed, some actors were

¹¹ Michele Placido, who directed *Romanzo criminale* (2005) based on the novel of the same name by Giancarlo De Cataldo and inspired by the Banda della Magliana, and Marco Tullio Giordana (2009) whose film *Piazza Fontana: The Italian Conspiracy* (*Romanzo di una strage*, 2012) tells the trial story of the Piazza Fontana massacre and the emergence of the neo-fascist hypothesis.

openly accused of fascism for the characters they played). Once again, I will proceed following a cross-border framework.

My final thesis, the one I wish to uphold in these conclusions, is that the *poliziottesco* genre intercepted certain aspects of realism on the cinematic and historical level. It can be seen in its earliest example, *Execution Squad*, with its reflections on the phenomenology of crime, its invectives on the paradoxical changes in prostitution since the Merlin law (in Commissioner Bertone's own words, free to prostitute but not free to stop), its denunciation of far-right subversive plots. From 1973, the movies favoured a more constructivist perspective in the epistemic sense. The lucid analysis of the facts was juxtaposed with (and in some cases succeeded by, as we have attempted to show in this contribution) the legal creation of the vigilante and the special squad. The advent of the post-modern – and its hermeneutic suggestions, philosophically less inclined towards realist representations – also coincides with the decline of the genre. Everyone has his own idea of violence; everyone can stage it by playing it like Tarantino or by reflecting on good and evil like Michael Mann. Pure post-modernism.

In its own way, the *poliziottesco* genre celebrated the horror and disquiet of a society that witnessed the Circeo massacre and was unwittingly the scene of a series of subversive practices and coup attempts. It depicted patchy cities in which the juxtaposition of political extremisms was the main criterion for recounting their social geography and understanding the widespread violence. The crisis of repressive institutions and the emergence of individual morality as opposed to the bureaucratic procedures of advanced democracies represented a provocative attempt to show distrust for the establishment and exorcise the savagery of the present, reviving the debate between justice and revenge.

Paraphrasing Bourdieu, the vigilantes narrated by the *poliziottesco* genre have become judicial creators (2012). Of course, in pretence, on the screen. But while there is some evidence to suggest that Commissioner Tanzi roughing up a suspect is indeed a forerunner of the ACAB narrative, the character played by Enrico Maria Salerno in the movie *Execution Squad* seeks a dialogue with his extra-parliamentary leftist son and is the victim of a right-wing subversive conspiracy. If Bertone-Salerno corresponds to what was called at the time a democratic policeman Tanzi-Merli is a disillusioned man, who uses violence as a desperate weapon to make justice triumph, who considers the law an instrument that protects delinquents rather than victims.

He confuses his law with The Law. It ends badly, because while he moves from a lucid realist critique of society (the spread of delinquency, the ineffectiveness of procedures) he proposes a solution not practicable in a rule of law for a mere police officer (no guarantees for suspects, private justice). Between the honest proletarians and the wealthy bourgeois attending the monarchist circle after raping a woman in *The Tough Ones* (Circeo, always Circeo) Tanzi chooses the former. Today he would be a model for that social right that draws part of its electoral consensus from the suburbs recounted by Pasolini, taking it away from the left who has stopped considering the workers or the underclass as their political referents. Manhandling suspects is not enough to make a policeman a fascist, or rather: to make the genre in question a fascist film genre. There is paternalism in Bertone's few slaps and frustration in Merli's many slaps. Certainly, both Commissioners (and many other of their epigones in the genre) express their revulsion for far-right subversive plots as much as for widespread violence. Their despair stems from a moral and civic reflection on justice, the elusiveness of powerful criminals and the pettiness of small-fry violence. After Bertone – precisely after 1973 – the genre took up the stylistic features of a culturally reactionary cinema from the civil point of view: sometimes mocking issues such as feminism (e.g., the machismo of *Live like a Cop, Die like a Man*, but also, for that matter, of the *Dirty Harry* saga in the US), while homosexuality is considered a vice, a perversion to be mocked at a distance and violently driven away. The Commissioner of the *poliziotteschi* is not a theorist – or at least he is not after the 1973 twist, Bertone was one, Belli of *High Crime* much less, Tanzi not at all. He prefers action, knowing that he consecrates his daily existence to failure, transfer, dismissal. In this sense, the cross-border triangulation that leads us to connect (1) the *poliziottesco* genre with (2) social critique (what kind of law helps criminals and penalizes honest officials?) and (3) the political proposal that is actually a desire for overcoming proceduralism (the judicial creator, the special squad, the vigilante) shows an anarchic protagonist (anarcho-fascist, anarcho-communist, who cares?) whose human tragedy is to ascertain the difference between just and legal.

It matters little whether he is motivated by right-wing or left-wing ideals: he is still the true outlaw, the anarchist who contradicts the implicit covenant on which the status quo rests. The realism of the scenes in the poliziottesco genre is accompanied by a moral rigor that is sometimes obtuse and lacking in nuance (Commissioner Tanzi in *The Tough Ones*), sometimes betrayed and mocked and then paradoxically recalled several times (Commissioner Malacarne in *Shoot First, Die Later*) or elevated to an avenger who transcends his social function (Commissioner Grandi in *Almost Human*; the Police Commissioner in *Emergency Squad*, the ordinary citizen in *Manhunt in the City and Street Law*).

The structure of the detective story is composed of fundamental elements such as crimes and investigations. Its noir evolution – due to the U.S. hard-boiled, by Chandler and Hammett – is loaded with realistic suggestions in urban settings, which cinema knows how to pick up, both in the U.S. and Italy: Franco Nero recalls that *Street Law* precedes *Death Wish* with Charles Bronson. The poliziottesco genre privileges action and chases over introspective character analysis; chases over sociological reflections branded as attempts at historical-contextual understanding of criminal conduct. It is a *macho* cinema, violent and sanguine, which does not take advantage of the cues offered by the genre's progenitor: the journalist in the film *Execution Squad*, formerly the Commissioner's partner, needles him in a press conference about police violence in repressing students' and workers' demonstrations and the condition of prostitutes before the Merlin law.

To civil and ideological engagement, the poliziottesco genre preferred to insist on fisticuffs and car races, violence and cathartic indignation. If the cinema of civil commitment appealed to people's brains, the poliziottesco genre appealed to their guts. In this sense it was a realist cinema: the gut exists. It recounted in fictional form real-life news events, described verisimilar cityscapes, political plots, and excellent corpses. He showed with conviction that those who tried to stand alone against such a situation ended badly. And people liked it: its movies appealed less than civil commitment films to critics; but audiences often rewarded them, and box office figures are proof of that¹². We do not know whether all the paying spectators dreamed of a different Italy, were politically engaged, or voted right. We do know that this cinema performed an entertainment function, assigned a liberating role to violence, showed the internal discomfort within the social category of the official. And it managed to survive as long as the society it depicted existed. Some, like Tarantino, drew on the stylistic features of the genre, insisting on violence as a language game, while the revival of civic engagement films and TV series dosed its relevance to describe and expose the hidden mechanisms of power in democratic society. In both cases, although the poliziottesco as a genre is historically dated, the violence and the reasons for representing it are as relevant as ever.

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¹² See Schudson and the resonance of cultural objects (1989).

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