

**Violence, gender and sexuality in Giorgio Scerbanenco's *I ragazzi del massacro* (1968) and Fernando Di Leo's film adaptation (1969)**

**Claudia Bernardi**  
Victoria University of Wellington

**ABSTRACT**

The third book of Giorgio Scerbanenco's Duca Lamberti series, *I ragazzi del massacro* (1968), was adapted into a film of the same title, written and directed by cult film-maker Fernando Di Leo (1969). Scerbanenco's narrative, developed around the investigation of the rape, torture and murder of a young female teacher by eleven of her male students, problematises from the start the extent to which such misogynistic violence should be presented in fiction: through sophisticated narrative strategies, the author frames all descriptions of the massacre as a warning against voyeuristic temptations. By contrast, Di Leo's adaptation wavers between the need to abide by the morals of the source text and the desire to titillate his audience through pornographic suggestions, turning violence into entertainment. Both novel and film betray underlying anxieties generated by the socio-political upheaval of the late 1960s, including the shifting gender dynamics and the growing visibility of diverse sexualities. Through different narrative solutions, both fictions captured, but at the same time resisted, an irreversible moment of crisis of traditional gender roles. In doing so, they also contributed to codifying extreme violence against women, homosexuals and transsexuals as conventions of Italian crime fiction and noir.

*I ragazzi del massacro* (1968), by Giorgio Scerbanenco (1911-1969), is the third novel of his Duca Lamberti tetralogy, which also comprises *Venere privata* (1966), *Traditori di tutti* (1966), and *I milanesi ammazzano al sabato* (1969). It was the first book of the series to be adapted for the screen, with the homonymous film written and directed in 1969 by Fernando Di Leo (1932-2003). Scerbanenco's story and Di Leo's adaptation follow the investigation of the rape, torture and brutal murder of the young *maestra elementare* Matilde Crescenzaghi, perpetrated in her classroom by eleven of her evening class students, young men and boys aged between thirteen and twenty (although in Di Leo's film they are all minors) who come from deprived, criminal backgrounds. Through stories that detail this horrific crime and the process that will lead to the punishment of its perpetrators, both novel

and film engage with the anxieties generated by the rapid social and cultural changes that were taking place in Italy in the late 1960s. In particular, adopting conventions that are specific to the crime fiction genre, they capture the discontent, tensions and fears that marked the transition from the economic miracle period (1950-1963) to the *contestazione* years, when, between 1968 and 1969, the global movement against the Vietnam war found its Italian expression in student-led protests that defied bourgeois ideology and the institutions that represented it. At the heart of both works lies an ideological conflict between the flawed but determined champion of justice embodied by inspector Duca Lamberti and the underprivileged boys/young men who have committed the terrible crime, a conflict that is rendered more complex by the parallel tension between Lamberti's idealistic search for justice and the many layers of hypocrisy, complicity and indifference of the Milanese middle class he encounters in the course of his investigation. Indeed, critics such as Gordiano Lupi and Davide Magnisi have read both novel and film as powerful explorations of the class conflict and generational disaffection that was spreading through Italy at the time:

Di Leo indaga con coraggio nei delitti e nella vita della Milano bene, seguendo la trama di Scerbanenco che è una perfetta sceneggiatura, scritta con stile secco e duro, come buona regola del noir. Scerbanenco e Di Leo affrontano lo stesso tema senza fronzoli e con uno sguardo impietoso, anche se utilizzano linguaggi diversi. Lo scrittore di Kiev<sup>1</sup> realizza un romanzo drammatico, Di Leo gira un film crudo e scomodo, un atto di accusa verso il mondo borghese, una rappresentazione realistica di una vita giovanile a contatto col pericolo del quotidiano. Di Leo descrive i giovani senza finzioni e voli pindarici, ma in maniera realistica, con pregi e difetti, frutto di una società malata che produce figli perversi (Lupi & Magnisi 2017: 46).

While Scerbanenco and Di Leo came from very different ideological backgrounds,<sup>2</sup> both their texts convey the political *zeitgeist* of the late 1960s and reveal a sense of unease with the challenge to traditional gender roles issued in those watershed years: an unease that both in the novel and in the film culminates in an act of extreme violence against a young woman. In Scerbanenco's case, this anxiety should be read as a response to what Marco Paoli describes as "the cultural trauma inflicted by Italy's experience of the economic miracle" (2015: 179), including the new socio-economic opportunities and greater sexual freedom it had offered to women.<sup>3</sup> In this context, Paoli argues, Scerbanenco's Duca Lamberti novels break new ground by portraying a range of independent and confident female characters, who reflect the changing gender dynamics but are ultimately punished by narrative arcs that express "the attempt of Italian patriarchal culture to contain and repress any *threatening* female fictional character by, for example, victimizing her, reducing or even removing her femininity, or coding her as abnormal or strange" (180). Di Leo's film adaptation latched onto this combined fascination for and fear of these new models of womanhood, resulting in an even more aggressive narrative of resistance to women's liberation, as well as a punitive stance on the diverse sexualities that were becoming more visible in the social, political and cultural sphere.<sup>4</sup> Scerbanenco's narrative problematises from the start the question of how the central act of violence should be presented in his novel, painstakingly framing all descriptions of the massacre with warnings against voyeuristic temptations. By contrast, Di

Leo's screen representation of that violence is overlaid with erotic nuances and pornographic suggestions, a recurrent and problematic feature of his entire filmography that has so far received little critical attention.<sup>5</sup> Through different perspectives and resolutions, emphasised by Di Leo's departures from the original text, both these fictional works depicting brutal misogyny capture an irreversible moment of crisis of traditional heterosexual male identity in the Italy of the late 1960s, an identity that appeared to be displaced by women's socio-economic advances and by the emergence of feminist and queer voices in public discourse. In view of the special significance *I ragazzi del massacro* holds in Scerbanenco's and Di Leo's work, and the way the film contributed to codifying language and conventions by which violence against women would be visualised and popularised in Italian noir (as well as in other film genres) throughout the 1970s,<sup>6</sup> I believe that the adaptation of the novel, and more specifically the adaptation of its gendered violence, deserves some detailed discussion. The aim here is not to assess the "fidelity" Di Leo's film paid to Scerbanenco's hypotext, but rather to explore how the film reframed elements of disquiet regarding gender representation that were already voiced in the source text, and what a comparison of the two narratives reveals about the response of popular culture, and of the crime fiction genre in particular, to the historic changes taking place in Italian society at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Considered one of the "founding fathers" of contemporary Italian crime fiction (Burns 2011), notable for the creation of "a distinctive sub-genre of Italian crime fiction, the urban crime story" (Cicioni & Di Ciolla 2008: 3), Scerbanenco followed the models offered by the American hard-boiled tradition, in his crime fiction of the 1960s (Paoli 2016; Pezzotti 2014a; Pezzotti 2014b: 60-64). Barbara Pezzotti (2014a) sees the Duca Lamberti series as a "domestication" of the hard-boiled genre, one that is able to grasp and reflect upon the social costs of the so-called economic miracle. In this Italianisation of the hard-boiled tropes, Milan becomes the setting for dark, gritty and melancholic reflections on the collateral damage caused by the rapid economic growth of post-war Italy – a damage of territorial displacement, loss of moral values and widespread corruption. It is precisely these social ills that are indicated as the root of the horrifying crime that opens *I ragazzi del massacro*. These themes are similarly explored in the screen version of *I ragazzi del massacro*, also known as *Naked Violence* and *Sex in the Classroom*, the infelicitous but telling titles used for its American and British distribution, respectively (Magnisi 2017: 261). The film was completed hot on the heels of the book's publication, shortly before Scerbanenco's death, providing a blueprint for the visual adaptation of his novels,<sup>8</sup> and it contributed to creating the conventions of the *poliziottesco* – the dark and hyper-violent Italian version of the police procedural, which, precisely in those key years of social and political unrest, began its rise to international success.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that Di Leo should have found inspiration in Scerbanenco's writing, given the similarities between their careers. With his innumerable poems, articles, stage and radio plays, essays, and short stories, and more than ninety novels to his name in a wide variety of popular genres (including romance), Scerbanenco embodied the idea of a prolific journalist and writer whose popularity defied the lukewarm response of literary critics.<sup>10</sup> Di Leo, too, was highly productive, directing twenty films that spanned a wide range of genres, from horror to soft-core porn to noir, and creating an even more substantial body of work as a screenwriter, which included, among others, the scripts of numerous classic "spaghetti westerns", such as (uncredited) Sergio Leone's *Per un pugno di dollari* (1964) and *Per qualche dollaro in più* (1965).<sup>11</sup> Although Di Leo is now best remembered for his

“*Trilogia della mala*” (*Milano calibro 9* and *La mala ordina*, 1972; *Il boss*, 1973) and for his influence on Quentin Tarantino, who praised his films and granted him cult status and belated critical attention (Magnisi 2017; Ricci 2001), *I ragazzi del massacro* occupies an important place in his production and therefore in the corpus of popular Italian cinema. In fact, this is the first noir of Di Leo's career, directed after the success of a couple of political-erotic films – “*erotici sessantottini*” (Lupi 2009: 53-61) – released the same year: *Brucia, ragazzo, brucia* and *Amarsi male*. Moreover, this is the only adaptation of a Scerbanenco novel on which the author had the opportunity to express some views and perplexities, which – as will be discussed – he did, precisely on the interaction between gender and violence that plays an important role in both works.

The novel opens at the hospital, where Matilde, the school teacher, has just died an agonising death after her rape and torture. Duca Lamberti, in charge of the case, can hardly look at the bruised, grotesquely broken body, and the reader is only provided with a fragmentary description, through the point of view of the resistant Lamberti:

Guardò e vide il mignolo sinistro spezzato, glielo avevano appena legato con una piastrina di plastica, tanto perché non si sparpagliasse ancora di più, perché era così guasta e rotta da per tutto che avevano dovuto riparare subito i danni più gravi, come si vedeva anche dal grosso rigonfio di ovatta che aveva all'inguine, sotto il giallo dei calzoncini del baby doll che la madre le aveva subito portato all'ospedale appena era stata avvisata dalla polizia, e da altri vari impacchi che aveva qua e là, martoriata come se fosse andata sotto un treno (Scerbanenco 1978: 8).

Lamberti proceeds to reconstruct the scene and the detailed sequence of that massacre with dogged single-mindedness, while trying at the same time to come to terms with the unwelcome memory of that broken body. He does so by seeking refuge in the thick Milanese winter fog, the smoke of endless cigarettes, the dark, claustrophobic space of the interrogation room, and the fumes of alcohol, all to little avail. Not only does Lamberti wish he could erase the memory of the broken body and the horrific crime it evokes, but he is also repulsed by the idea that anyone might indulge in such viewing: “*non c'è spettacolo, per quanto repugnante che possa essere, che non abbia il suo pubblico*” (11), he observes about the photo reporters who insist they must take pictures of the lurid crime scene. Examining the crime scene in person first, then poring over the photographs after it has been documented by his agents, Lamberti builds a map of the crime, but he also attempts to distance himself from its raw, unbearable visuals. Meanwhile, he forces the perpetrators to look at the pictures of Matilde's lifeless body, as a form of punishment and as a way to test their individual culpabilities: those who look at them without flinching and those who appear to take pleasure in the visual evidence of their actions are surely guiltier than the others. The reader is thus conditioned to dread the build-up to the full reconstruction of the crime sequence. When that reconstruction finally eventuates near the end of the novel, through the detailed confession of one student, Carolino Marassi, it is doubly shocking: the massacre was, yes, perpetrated by the boys in all the brutality Lamberti had reconstructed from the evidence, but it was masterminded and directed by Marisella Domenici, the mother of one of them, Ettore Domenici.

In contrast with the book, Di Leo's opening title sequence is a two-minute version of the gang rape that takes place in the classroom, filmed with hand-held camera and ripe with detailed shots of Matilde's naked body and close-ups of the boys' distorted faces. The scene reaches its culmination in forty interminable seconds of fast edited display of the victim's lifeless and naked body, laid out on her teaching desk and filmed from every possible angle. And, while in the novel it is made clear that Matilde's body is grotesquely broken by the end of the assault, Di Leo's visualisation chooses to leave her, and the sexual attractiveness of actress Anna Maria La Rovere, intact. Towards the end of the film this scene returns in an extended five-minute sequence, but this time it comes in the form of Carolino's delirious remembering, rather than the coherent, deliberate narrative filtered through Lamberti's perspective that was presented in the book. This scene is edited so that the two experiences, Carolino's memory of the teacher's rape and murder, and his own agony in remembering it, are alternated and presented as parallel: a very problematic visual choice which likens the suffering of the victim to the remorse of one of the perpetrators. In summary, the opening title sequence, shocking as it is, functions as a teaser of the elaborate scene of violence against the young woman that will become the climax of the film later on. The presence of the hand-held camera in the midst of the assault, the intrusiveness of the extreme close-ups of both the victim and her tormentors, and the insistence on showing Matilde's brutalised body place the viewers in the same position as the boys. Duca Lamberti's often-voiced contempt for voyeurism, reflected in many of the narrative strategies that frame the description of the crime, is fundamentally overturned in Di Leo's film, where the perverse viewing pleasure teased out of the scene is offset only by Silvano Spadaccino's discordant score. Similarly, absent from the film is the foggy, nocturnal atmosphere which served as a visual filter to the violence in the book, replaced here by a bright, at times strikingly colourful, Milan, as photographed by Franco Villa in spring: there is no fear of seeing in Di Leo's adaptation, and certainly no fear of showing the victim's naked, brutalised but still attractive body. In light of this, the titles used to market the film to English-speaking audiences mentioned above, *Naked Violence* and *Sex in the Classroom*, acquire an altogether different meaning: the combination of nakedness and violence is revealed as a deliberate selling point, the marketers banking precisely on the viewers' voyeuristic instincts. At a paratextual level, a comparison between the cover of the original edition of the book and the posters used for the promotion of the film reinforces this contrast:<sup>12</sup> on the one hand, we have the stylised silhouette of a twisted, broken paper doll, laid out within a narrow strip on the right of the austere book cover; on the other hand, the artwork of the poster that is meant to lure us into the theatre shows a dramatic scene where four men tower over the naked body and screaming face of a beautiful young woman, promising the full voyeuristic experience.<sup>13</sup>

I propose that this shift in the visualisation of violence is not simply a necessary result of the transition from written to visual medium, but rather a manifestation of how the gender anxieties already present in Scerbanenco's novel are magnified in a film that is also codifying the conventions of 1970s Italian noir. If, as Robert Stam argues, "[t]he art of filmic adaptation partially consists in choosing **which** generic conventions are transposable into the new medium, and **which** need to be discarded, supplemented, transcoded, or replaced" (2005: 6), we need to pay attention to the fact that the majority of the discarding, supplementing, transcoding and replacing that takes place in the screen version of *I ragazzi del massacro* refers to female characters and to issues of sexuality and gender. Di Leo was adamant about

his free and independent approach to adapting Scerbanenco's work. In his interview with Manlio Gomarsca, available as an extra feature of the film's DVD distributed by Raro Video/Nocturno, he insisted: "Ogni volta che ho fatto un lavoro di Scerbanenco, il novanta per cento è Di Leo, il dieci per cento è Scerbanenco" (Di Leo 2014). Yet, more than any of his later Scerbanenco-inspired films, *I ragazzi del massacro* follows the original plot very closely, rendering its departures from the source text all the more significant. A case in point is the character Livia Ussaro who, in the novel, is already a part of Duca Lamberti's life, as established in the previous volumes of the series, and plays a crucial, active role in his investigation – by, for example, driving him around and at one point even carrying a gun, discussing the case with him and challenging his prejudices, and often risking her own safety in the process. Moreover, in a way that sets her apart from a clichéd love interest, she is markedly non-beautiful, her face having been scarred in the events that unfolded in *Venere privata*. In the film, Livia appears with the features of the flawlessly beautiful Susan Scott (stage name of Nieves Navarro). Her character is a combination of the original Livia and another major female role in the novel, Alberta Romani, the social worker who challenges Lamberti to reassess his disgust for the young criminals by taking into account their deprived social background and the context of exploitation in which they have grown up. But while, in the novel, both Livia Ussaro and Alberta Romani are presented as complex and educated women, each with her own personality, agency and opinions which she verbalises at length, in Di Leo's film, Livia becomes a beautiful, impeccably dressed, vaguely soothing and, for the most part, quiet presence, easily overlooked by the male characters during the course of their investigation. Other dramatically important characters, such as Lamberti's sister Lorenza and his little niece Sara, protagonists of a sub-plot where the sick child dies at home while Lamberti is obsessively working on the case, are simply erased from the film. Even more significant is the erasure of the lesbian relationship between Beatrice Bovato, sister of Paolino, one of the students involved in the massacre, and the doctor who performed an abortion on her, Ernesta Romani (sister of the social worker Alberta). Even if we agree that "[i]n the process of dramatization there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot" (Hutcheon 2006: 40), the erasure of this particular relationship is striking, especially if we consider it in the context of Di Leo's overall production, where soft-core lesbian pornography was to become a signature trademark across all genres. In other words, while Di Leo shows no qualms in exploiting elements of same-sex female eroticism in *poliziotteschi*, horror, noir and other crime films, in his adaptation of *I ragazzi del massacro* there is no place for the complex lesbian characters of the source text.

In marked contrast, most of the main male characters, including all eleven boys, are present in the film, reaffirming the male homosocial dynamics that are a core element of Di Leo's noirs. Di Leo's assistant director Franco Lo Cascio confirms this deliberate approach in his comments included in the DVD of *I ragazzi del massacro*. Attempting to explain why the film never achieved the success of other Di Leo noirs, Lo Cascio suggests that the audience was not interested in seeing a woman, Matilde, playing such a central role in this type of film: the audience of the genre, he claims, "*le donne le vuole quasi solo di contorno, la ragazza del capo come Barbara Bouchet in Milano Calibro 9*" (Di Leo 2014). Since Matilde is literally murdered in the title sequence of *I ragazzi del massacro*, it is puzzling how her presence could be blamed for the limited commercial success of the film, but Lo Cascio's contradictory remarks are revealing of the way female characters came to be

inscribed in Italian noir as both secondary and titillating. His statement is also emblematic of the strategy of gender blame-shifting that, already present in the novel, becomes all the more marked in the screen version of *I ragazzi del massacro*.

While, as Paoli (2015) argues, Scerbanenco followed a strategy of containment of women's liberation in his fiction, yet still created multiple and diverse female characters who challenged traditional gender roles, many of those characters are erased, reduced and silenced in the film. As already mentioned, while the constraints and conventions of the genre contributed to these adaptation choices, they were also the result of contextual factors, including "ideological, social, historical, cultural, personal and aesthetic" ones, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us is characteristic of all adaptation processes (2006: 108). The relationship that develops between Duca Lamberti and *i ragazzi* during the investigation, which is central but by no means exclusive in the novel, becomes the sole focus of the film. In both cases, the narrative of the investigation, which begins after the material culprits of the crime have already been arrested, turns into an investigation into the degrees of responsibility of the perpetrators and a search for someone else to blame. In other words, the movement of the investigation in both the novel and the film is one that, by degrees, shifts the boys' responsibility onto external forces and other characters, starting with the degraded social environment and their exploitative or absent families. This implied social commentary, which presents the students as both despicable perpetrators and victims of their social *milieu*, confirms how Scerbanenco's and Di Leo's fictions managed to capture, darkly and nakedly, the class tensions and the generational unease of their times, but it also shows a shared strategy to scapegoat the gender conflict that runs parallel to those tensions. As noted above, in the novel the instigator of the crime is revealed to be Marisella Domenici, mother of one of Matilde's pupils. Herself an ex-prostitute and a petty criminal, part of the same deprived and depraved world that has generated the boys, Marisella conceives the massacre as an act of revenge for the teacher's interference in her family's dynamics, which has led to her husband's arrest and death in prison. Marisella's orchestration of the rape and murder becomes thus an act of theatrical and hysterical revenge that, Lamberti tells us, can only be staged by a woman:

"Se tu, uomo e non isterico, odi una persona e vuoi ucciderla, non fai altro che andare da quella persona e spararle. Fai una cosa vietata dalla legge, ma fai una cosa razionale [...] Ma una donna isterica no, una donna isterica odia, ma cerca di saziare il suo odio indirettamente, senza pericolo personale, e nel modo più completo possibile. A una donna isterica non basta la semplice morte della persona che odia, lei vuole una morte torturante e teatrale, perché le donne isteriche sono anche istrioniche" (Scerbanenco 1978: 79-80).

As we shall see shortly, Lamberti's perspective mirrors Scerbanenco's own stance on this point. But if Scerbanenco's attribution of responsibility for the gang rape and murder of a young, middle-class woman to an underprivileged, uneducated, ailing and aging female prostitute is emblematic of his unresolved stance on class relationships and of the strategy of containment of female characters identified by Paoli, Di Leo's choice of a different culprit offers a resolution that hangs entirely on issues of gender and sexual anxiety, and specifically on the perceived threat that diverse sexualities pose to traditional heterosexual masculinity.

In both novel and film, the boys' line of defence is for each to state that he did not personally participate in the crime, but only witnessed it. Under Lamberti's relentless questioning, however, they all start to point the finger at Fiorello Grassi as the one who brought to school the *anice lattescente*, the potent alcohol blamed for their loss of self-control. Fiorello, the only student from Matilde's class with a clean criminal record, is gay, as Lamberti quickly finds out; this marks him as the designated scapegoat, a fact he seems to accept with resignation. Lamberti tries to force a confession out of him through a manipulative show of sympathy, but the young man will not reveal what happened, sticking to a misguided code of honour ("*Non faccio la spia, io*", he declares, both in the novel and on screen). The film version of Fiorello shows a further degree of vulnerability by blaming himself for what happened, while still denying his participation in the massacre. In both novel and film, however, this line of investigation comes to an abrupt end when the boy commits suicide. Lamberti then identifies Carolino Marassi as the next weakest link, rightly guessing that he was in love with his teacher. Lamberti separates Carolino from the others, hosting him in his home and providing him with the brief illusion of a safe, bourgeois family life in order to lower his defences and induce him to confess. In the film, Carolino eventually reveals that Matilde had tried to "cure" Fiorello of his homosexuality by seducing him, with such success that Fiorello had fallen in love with her, causing the resentment of his older lover, a new character created by Di Leo. And in the film, it is precisely this new character, Fiorello's wealthy and closeted transsexual lover with his own criminal record, who, driven by jealousy, instigates the rape and murder of Matilde. While Scerbanenco had identified the origin of the massacre in the desire of an underprivileged, petty criminal woman for revenge against the young and idealistic teacher who had cared for her son, Di Leo devises an ending where the ultimate responsibility for the horrible crime falls in equal parts on a young gay man who ends up committing suicide, his jealous lover who is punished with a savage on-screen beating by Lamberti, and the victim herself, who has seduced one or more of her students!

Thanks to Paoli's archival work, we know from a previously unpublished letter to Tiziano Longo, the film's producer, that Scerbanenco was not happy with this drastic departure. He had read the script before it was filmed, making minimal suggestions that showed he was not bothered by most of the changes. However, he had begged Longo not to alter what he saw as a crucial element of his story: the female gender of the main culprit (he identified the transsexual character as male). He appealed to both the film-makers' sense of realism and their desire to entertain the audience:

"ne I ragazzi del massacro c'è già una grossa vicenda molto thrilling; c'è una grossa carica sexy, con l'invertito, le lesbiche, i giovani drogati e quelli che si prostituiscono ai vecchi. Caricare il soggetto con un altro invertito e con altre complicazioni di vicenda, non mi sembra produttivo.

Ma c'è qualcosa, secondo me, di ancora più importante: un simile massacro si può rendere verosimile, credibile, solo se ideato e compiuto dalla follia di una donna scatenata nella vendetta. Io ripeto nel romanzo che il delitto è femminile, isterico. [...] una donna che dirige un massacro è ancora più impressionante di un uomo" (quoted in Paoli 2015: 183).



Scerbanenco's statement is complex and problematic in many ways, starting from the implication that lesbian and gay characters, drug addicts and prostitutes are all equivalent narrative devices useful to provide the sexy and thrilling elements necessary to a noir plot. But it is especially revealing of his attachment to the idea of a vengeful woman as the most credible architect of a gang rape and murder of another woman. Equally interesting is his attempt to sell this culprit to Longo and Di Leo as both realistic and "*impressionante*", and therefore able to produce the same shocking finale the film-makers were aiming for.

The tensions caused by the changing social and sexual dynamics that in Scerbanenco's novel give life to an array of complex female characters with a great deal of agency are revisited by Di Leo in a film that often alludes to male homosexual desire in its visual choices (especially in the allusive framing of the scenes between Lamberti and Fiorello and Lamberti and Carolino), but that ultimately opts for a punitive resolution of those tensions. The rape and murder of a young woman is presented twice in graphic detail on screen, but the moral responsibility for this act is eventually lifted off the shoulders of the heterosexual young men who have committed it and attributed to a character who embodies many of the gender anxieties of the time. Through different narrative solutions, both the written and visual fictions capture an irreversible moment of crisis for traditional notions of masculinity in the late 1960s, threatened by the emergence of liberated women and visible queer sexualities. Such a crisis had been precipitated by both the disillusionment that followed the economic miracle and the challenge to traditional institutions and authority represented by the protest movements of the late 1960s, but also, more specifically, by the rising wave of feminism that would soon lead to a cultural revolution and political reforms that would change the gender dynamics of the country forever.<sup>14</sup> With their fictions of class, gender and sexual anxiety, told in the vivid grammar of crime fiction and film noir, Scerbanenco and Di Leo captured that moment of social unease with a mixture of fear and excitement, but ultimately opted for written and visual narratives that resisted those changes, brutally punishing the characters who embodied them. In doing so they contributed to the aesthetics of a genre that, especially in film, was to end up normalising representations of violence against women and queer characters in Italian popular culture.

## REFERENCES

- Block, M. (ed.) (2008). *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- Burns, J. (2011). Founding fathers: Giorgio Scerbanenco. In G. Pieri (ed.), *Italian Crime Fiction*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 27-47.
- Cahir, L. C. (2006). *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company.
- Cicioni, M. & Di Ciolla, N. (2008). Introduction. In M. Cicioni & N. Di Ciolla (eds), *Differences, Deceits and Desires: Murder and Mayhem in Italian Crime Fiction*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1-10.

- Violence, gender and sexuality in Giorgio Scerbanenco's *I ragazzi del massacro* (1968) and Fernando Di Leo's film adaptation (1969)
- Curti, R. (2006). *Italia odia. Il cinema poliziesco italiano*. Turin: Lindau.
- Curti, R. (2013). *Italian Crime Filmography, 1968-1980*. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company.
- Di Leo, F. (2014). *I ragazzi del massacro/Naked Violence* [1969]. Raro Video/Nocturno. DVD.
- Hipkins, D. (2008). Why Italian film studies needs a second take on gender. *Italian Studies* 63,2: 213-234.
- Howarth, T. (2015). *So Deadly, So Perverse: 50 Years of Italian Giallo Films. Volume 1 1963-1973*. Baltimore, MD & London: Midnight Marquee Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Luperto, F. (2010). *Cinema Calibro 9. Guida al poliziottesco*. Lecce: Pietro Manni.
- Lupi, G. (2009). *Fernando Di Leo e il suo cinema nero e perverso*. Rome: Profondo rosso.
- Lupi, G. & Magnisi, D. (2017). *Di Leo Calibro 9. Erotismo e noir nel cinema di Fernando Di Leo*. Piombino (LI): Edizioni Il Foglio.
- Magnisi, D. (2017). La fortuna critica internazionale dei film di Fernando Di Leo. In G. Lupi & D. Magnisi (eds), *Di Leo Calibro 9. Erotismo e noir nel cinema di Fernando Di Leo*. Piombino (LI): Edizioni Il Foglio, 255-286.
- Maina, G. (2016). Lucertole con pelle di donna. Mostrosità e mancanze del femminile nel thriller italiano degli anni Settanta. In L. Cardone & C. Tognoletti (eds), *Imperfezioni. Studi sulle donne nel cinema e nei media*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 121-130.
- Marcus, M. (1993). *Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- McFarlane, B. (1996). *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Migale, L. (2016). *Piccola storia del femminismo italiano*. Rome: Empirìa.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan, 14-26.
- Mulvey, L. & Buckman Rogers, A. (2015). *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

- Violence, gender and sexuality in Giorgio Scerbanenco's *I ragazzi del massacro* (1968) and Fernando Di Leo's film adaptation (1969)
- Paoli, M. (2015). *Giorgio Scerbanenco: Urban Space, Violence and Gender Identity in Post-war Italian Crime Fiction*. Brussels: Peter Lang.
- Paoli, M. (2016). Spunti per un'analisi del processo di ibridismo tra l'hard-boiled americano e il giallo italiano nella serie Duca Lamberti di Giorgio Scerbanenco. *Quaderni d'italianistica* 3,1: 17-34.
- Pezzotti, B. (2014a). Crime and capitalism: Giorgio Scerbanenco's and Massimo Carlotto's Italian domestication of American hard-boiled crime fiction. *CLUES. A Journal of Detection* 32,2: 51-61.
- Pezzotti, B. (2014b). *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction: An Historical Overview*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
- Ricci, A. (2001). Il pulp dei film tratti da Scerbanenco arriva anche a Tarantino. *Spunti e Ricerche* 16: 17-31.
- Rossi Barilli, G. (1999). *Il movimento gay in Italia*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Sanders, J. (2006). *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Scerbanenco, G. (1978). *I ragazzi del massacro* [1968]. Milan: Garzanti.
- Scerbanenco, G. (2016). *Venere privata* [1966]. Milan: Garzanti.
- Stam, R. (2005). *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic and the Art of Adaptation*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Testa, C. (2002). *Masters of Two Arts: Re-creation of European Literatures in Italian Cinema*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.

**Claudia Bernardi** is a Senior Lecturer in Italian at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her research focuses on contemporary Italian fiction, in particular twentieth-century women writers. She has published extensively on Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo and Isabella Santacroce. She is currently working on the experimental writings of the Swiss-Italian writer Alice Ceresa, with a focus on the intersection between gender, language and the avant-garde.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although he was born in Kiev to a Ukrainian father and an Italian mother, Scerbanenco was raised in Italy, his mother tongue was Italian and he considered himself Italian. His experience of travelling back to Kiev with his mother in 1920, when he was nine years old, only to discover that his father had been killed by the Bolsheviks ("*i rossi*"), is told in the memoir "*Io, Vladimir Scerbanenko*", published in 1966 in appendix to *Venere privata* (Scerbanenco 2016: 219-246).

---

<sup>2</sup> The traumatic killing of his father by the Bolsheviks in revolutionary Russia contributed to Scerbanenco's life-long anti-communist stance and, despite his anti-fascism, to his refusal to "[embrace] any ideological and communal hegemonic projects" (Paoli 2015: 200), least of all the Marxist ideology which was a main point of reference for many post-war Italian intellectuals. In contrast, Di Leo was an open supporter of the Left: "*Lui non era di sinistra, era di stra-sinistra*", his sister Rita Di Leo confirmed in an interview with Davide Magnisi (Lupi & Magnisi 2017: 164). See also Magnisi's interview with Di Leo's friend, politician and communist intellectual Mario Tronti (Lupi & Magnisi 2017: 169-171).

<sup>3</sup> Paoli's monograph *Giorgio Scerbanenco: Urban Space, Violence and Gender Identity in Post-war Italian Crime Fiction* (2015) presents the most exhaustive discussion of gender identity in the Duca Lamberti series to date. In this article, I engage directly with many facets of Paoli's theoretical approach and analysis.

<sup>4</sup> The first Italian gay association, ROMA-1 (*Rivolta Omosessuale Maschi Anarchici*), later known simply as *Rivolta Omosessuale*, had been founded by Massimo Consoli in 1963, while Angelo Pezzana founded FUORI! (*Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Italiano*) in Turin between 1970 and 1971, providing a political voice on gay rights issues that had become part of the public debate since the late 1960s. For a brief history of the LGBTQ+ movement in Italy, see Rossi Barilli (1999).

<sup>5</sup> With the exception of Ricci's (2001) essay on the influence of Di Leo's films on Quentin Tarantino, the main research on his *oeuvre* has been carried out by scholars and admirers who, like Gordiano Lupi in *Fernando Di Leo e il suo cinema nero e perverso* (2009), and Gordiano Lupi and Davide Magnisi in *Di Leo Calibro 9: Erotismo e noir nel cinema di Fernando Di Leo* (2017), highlight the ground-breaking elements of Di Leo's portrayal of explicit sexuality, including women's sexual agency, in the moralistic context of Italian society. This approach falls in line with a tradition of Italian film criticism that, as pointed out by Danielle Hipkins, "conflates screen eroticism with female emancipation" (2008: 215). While Magnisi has queried the brutality towards women in Di Leo's films and the exploitative nature of his use of female nudity, in interviews with Rita Di Leo and with actresses Monica Strebler, Barbara Bouchet, Lisa Gastoni, Gloria Guida and Dalila Di Lazzaro (Lupi & Magnisi 2017), in-depth critical analysis of how these key elements play out in his films remains scarce.

<sup>6</sup> For a brief but cogent discussion of the "*normalizzazione*" of violence against women in the Italian cinema of the 1970s, especially in the "thriller" genre, see Maina (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Film adaptation studies have long moved beyond the notion of "fidelity" as a central concern of the relationship between literature and cinema, now favouring approaches that frame their analyses in terms of re-creation (Marcus 1993; Testa 2002), appropriation (Sanders 2006), intertextuality (McFarlane 1996; Stam 2005), translationality (Cahir 2006), and cultural and transcultural re-coding (Hutcheon 2006). It is not within the scope of this article to delve into that debate, but it clearly informs much of this discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Di Leo's *Milano Calibro 9* (1972) and *La mala ordina* (1972) were much more freely inspired by a number of Scerbanenco's short stories. The other films based on the Duca Lamberti series are Duccio Tessari's *La morte risale a ieri sera* (1970) and Yves Boisset's *Il caso Venere privata* (1970).

<sup>9</sup> Curti (2006) and Luperto (2010) identify the period 1972-1980 as the golden era of the *poliziottesco*, inaugurated by *La polizia ringrazia* (1972), directed by Stefano Vanzina (Steno). While *I ragazzi del massacro* does not present all the characteristics of the sub-genre, which typically included "hard-boiled, gun-crazy cops, ruthless and sadistic criminals, brutal violence, heists, shoot-outs and spectacular car chases in city streets" (Curti 2013: 1), it features enough of those elements to be considered a precursor and "an interesting early example of the *giallo/poliziotteschi* hybrid" (Howarth 2015: 101).

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive bibliography of Scerbanenco's works, see Paoli (2015: 205-212).

<sup>11</sup> For a full filmography of Di Leo's works, see Lupi and Magnisi (2017: 148-152).

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this.

<sup>13</sup> The sadistic positioning of the spectator *vis-à-vis* the representation of the female body on screen has been theorised and discussed extensively by feminist film criticism ever since Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (republished in Mulvey 1989: 14-26). While Mulvey's theoretical approach on gendered gaze and visual pleasure has since been developed, reconsidered, reassessed and expanded many times over, including by Mulvey herself (Block 2008; Mulvey & Buckman Rogers 2015), Di Leo's *I ragazzi del massacro* can be considered a textbook case of the way she saw film, and noir in particular, enact the parable of desire followed by punishment of the female object of that desire, for the pleasure of both the male characters (here the students, who are narratively forced to look at, and look up to, their female teacher) and the spectators, who are invited to participate in the male characters' viewing, desire and punishment of the female character.

<sup>14</sup> The publication, in July 1970, of the feminist manifesto written by the founders of the periodical *Rivolta femminile*, Carla Lonzi, Carla Accardi and Elvira Banotti, is conventionally considered the start of the second wave of Italian feminism, but the public debate that had led to its publication (and to the legalisation of divorce in the same year) had developed throughout the 1960s and during the *contestazione* of 1968-1969. For a concise outline of salient developments in Italian feminism, see Lia Migale's *Piccola storia del femminismo italiano* (2016).