

## WHODONIT? RAI TV FICTION PRODUCTION BETWEEN DETECTION AND *GIALLO*

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### *Abstract*

Italian TV serial production is interesting not only in its peculiar, often paradoxical, production traits, but also because of its adventurously happy results, sometimes due to creative constraints by claustrophobic Italian television market. TV series have a physiognomy and an “Italianness” also evident in their language, since they show distinctive characteristics in terms of modes of representation and communicative pacts, in which to settle a whole television history and visual culture. This essay begins to outline this aspect from a particular vantage point: that of detective and crime series, whose history is deeply rooted in Italian culture and whose dominant traits are so different from most recent European TV series. Far from being a sign of recession, RAI public service broadcasting – in which *Il commissario Montalbano* naturally represents a relevant case – reveals the persistence of specific and well embedded traits, albeit evolved over time (a particular dynamic between opening and closure; an overwhelming and static narrative; a parataxis and accumulation of criminal performances, which closes continuously narrative development around the circle of the crime; a urban and landscape component which provokes and creates diversions, etc.). These traits are rooted and shaped in Italian culture, starting from the privileged relationship never exhausted with its literary matrix, but also from the complex and typically Italian interconnection in cultural and media domains created by *giallo*.

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Italian theory and criticism always tend to look smugly to national TV series, which are often studied just from a strictly technical perspective – as said in 2003 by Eleonora Andreatta (now director of RAI Fiction) and Francesco Nardella – to confirm its “peculiar strategic importance for public television in virtue of its extraordinary power to represent the national imaginary and for the simultaneous opportunity to aggregate a large and various audience.”<sup>1</sup> It still remains a great difficulty in taking into account the Italian TV series as part of a visual history, in considering these products as pieces of a pattern of audiovisual narrations which convey aspects not only of Italian society and its needs and repressions, but also of the images to which society continues to relate and of the representational modes and practices which characterize it from time to time.<sup>2</sup>

In large part this unique theoretical perspective, focused mainly on production quota and details, strategy and goals, can be attributed to the anomalous Italian production system, “a closed

market in which the only two broadcasters dictate rules and the producer has no choice,”<sup>3</sup> apart from transforming from an independent to a contractor and a simple project executor for RAI or Mediaset. This is an element that certainly slows down creativity and experimentations in many occasions. As stated by Carlo degli Esposti, producer of *Il commissario Montalbano*:

*In Italy, since there is no market, it is the network that decides a product's value. It is not the market to determinate the price, but the buyer. Without competition, the buyer is so strong he can force independent producers, who are creators, investors and cultural promoters of the idea, to be mere executors of productions. There is no equal relationship between broadcaster and producer, but a dependent relationship: the producer is a slave, he cannot afford to buy back his own product.*<sup>4</sup>

TV drama production, as well as the adventurous manufacturing of the series, in opposition to the solid organization and the widespread competition of formats that characterize the other TV genres,<sup>5</sup> must deal with the lack of independence of the production companies, often dominated by the owners of the capital invested directly by the network, and by the narrow Italian market with its substantial condition of consolidated duopoly. Even just investing in a pilot for only two potential customers is opposed to any commercial practice. The TV channel La7, for example, never pushed itself to co-produce or invest in Italian TV series; it did so for the first time in May 2012 orientating itself however toward a big movie-style operation. *Vi perdono ma inginocchiatevi* (Claudio Bonivento, 2012) produced by La7 with Boniventofilm and Regione Sicilia, was dedicated to a Mafia theme, dear to Italian TV series,<sup>6</sup> addressed in an everyday perspective, that of the heroic and unknown representatives of the police forces similar to the officers killed in attacks to Falcone and Borsellino and of the stories of their families after their tragic death. However, this movie-style operation choice rejected serialization, even in the form of a double episode, to gamble on the single big media event. It is not a coincidence that this made-for TV movie was inserted into the collection *Film Evento*, hosted by director of La7 News Enrico Mentana, that had already aired relevant movies, such as *Il Divo* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2008). What happens on satellite TV – which lies outside this article, focused on TV series produced by public television, and in particular by RAI – confirms in any case this scarcity in production, counting just few cases, each one, not by chance, with a relevant linkage to cinematic and authorial narration. For instance, we might remember here *Romanzo criminale – La serie* (2008-2010) based on the well-known and award-winning movie directed by Michele Placido and on Giancarlo De Cataldo's novel, and *Quo vadis, baby?* (2008) directed by Academy Award winning director Gabriele Salvatores.<sup>7</sup> Relevant names and big budget are used in order to hide TV behind cinema. Although in every other national context the broadcasting network influences the producer, it is clear that Italian production reveals prudence and timidity which is not shared, as we shall see, in Europe and that, while relying on certain “reactionary” and reassuring characters of the public broadcasting, has its roots in “an asphyxial and substantially locked market”<sup>8</sup> such as Italy is.

By virtue or despite of this – it is hard to say – Italian fiction in the last twenty years has been able to prove to be one of the flagship of competitive programming – an Italian product not only with a high international potentiality, capable of crossing European and other boundaries, but also with a strong transnational vocation, when offering, as we shall see, an image which is authentically Italian but can also simultaneously bring together “Italianness” and the idea of Italy

as developed abroad. There is no doubt about the role of the international co-productions – as experienced in 1984 with *La Piovra* (1984-2003), which counting on the investments of French Telecip, of English Channel Four and German Taurus Film, could appear almost simultaneously on the television screens of those countries. However there is more.

In front of an initial investment of 47 million Euros, *Il commissario Montalbano* has led RAI to collect 72 million and has been sold to many foreign channels, including the Australian SBS, US MHz networks, France 3 and English BBC Four. The case of this serial produced by Palomar is exemplary. When it was aired for the first time on Thursday, 6 May 1999, on RaiDue, the episode *Il ladro di merendine* was to compete with the giants of the small screen, a variety show on RaiUno with well known host Milly Carlucci (*La casa dei sogni*), and a similar detective drama lead by a well recognized actor and loved by television audiences, namely Enrico Montesano playing in *L'ispettore Giusti*. Both, the series debuting on Canale 5 and the consolidated competition of the variety show could scarcely compete against *Il commissario Montalbano*, which immediately snatched a 24.45% share of television viewers with its 6,251,000 spectators – one million more than its competitors. And the success of this product never diminished, supported by an audience of over 6 million spectators for eight seasons. When moved to RaiUno, *Gli arancini di Montalbano* nearly reached 10 million spectators and; on 2 November 2008, the episode *La vampa d'agosto* reached the record of a 37.50% share of the market with 9,219,000 viewers. The lifecycle of *Il commissario Montalbano* has been very long in Italy and the twenty-two episodes of the series aired almost three times, often rerun consecutively. Even the prequel, *Il giovane Montalbano* (2012-), an operation that could not count on the attraction of the star of Montalbano played by Luca Zingaretti, exceeded expectations, and its six episodes made RaiUno prime time leader with an average of 22% share in March 2012.

*Distretto di polizia* (2000-2012) is not far behind, debuting on 26 September 2000 immediately with a strong audience, that gradually grew during the first season from 19% to 7 million spectators and a 28% share in the final evening, surpassing even 9 million viewers with the third season, over 32% share. Also, in this case, the longevity of the program was maintained and season eleven, broadcast in 2011-12, has held a strong audience with about 3 million viewers, a share around 13.50%.

### Italian TV series: mode of production

Italian TV series, however, seem to have their own physiognomy and “Italianness” not only in terms of production. They also have linguistic elements and characters in which to settle a whole history of television and visual culture, which this article begins to outline from a particular vantage point, that of the detective and crime series, whose history is deeply rooted into Italian culture.

The presence of fiction in Italian TV listings has a relatively recent history, despite the impact that the first US series immediately had on Italians – *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin* arrives in Italy on *TV dei ragazzi* already in 1956 and from 28 January 1959 Italian audience could also see *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Nevertheless, these products were still marginal in the programming of the classic TV era, just relegated to shows for children or used as a filler in TV schedule, with

no real strategy for serialization and audience involvement, mainly treated as if they were small films, independent one from the other. Leaving aside for a while the phenomenon of *teleromanzo*, on which I will return shortly, the invasion of TV series exploded in two moments: the first phase, starting from the end of the Seventies, took place when the import of new TV fiction from foreign market became stronger, due to a range of factors: from the dumping policy of US production companies, to the appearance of the first Italian commercial television channels which availed themselves very quickly of these trade agreements and predatory pricing, given the need to fill their programming schedule with packed products. More unique than rare is the case already mentioned of *La Piovra*, not surprisingly often named as “the Italian answer to *Dallas*”, the only big investment in the serialized narrative television since the golden age of TV serial capable to survive in full phase of American invasion.<sup>9</sup>

But it is only in the second phase, the TV series explosion during the Nineties that Italian television finally started to invest on domestic production along with lower investments in foreign TV series. The main incentives were offered by the crisis in movies on television after film binge of the Eighties, both for the lower availability of movies that could be suitable to television needs, as for their dislocation on other media – e.g. the increasing home video market. Second, they were offered by the birth of dedicated theme channels and, at last, by the EU Directive of 1989, the so-called *Television Without Frontiers*. The latter required not only the free circulation of European television programs within the internal market and the presence of “quote of diffusion” equal to almost half of the time scheduling, but also forced networks to reinvest a portion of their earnings, from 10% to 20%, in production and co-production of national TV programmes.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the Nineties Italy is still last in Europe for production of TV series, but the series start to expand (along with the explosion of RAI’s first soap opera *Un posto al sole* from October 1996) and to construct fidelity with their audience, while they also begin to be pushed into prime time. The last episode of *La Piovra 4* aired on 20 March 1989, featured the death of the hero, commissioner Corrado Cattani (Michele Placido), and was followed by 17,200,000 spectators with an astonishing 58.91% share, never reached before by a serial drama. In 1993, the spreading success of *Amico mio* (1993-1998) forced RAI to program for the first time a rerun immediately after the first release. And *Un medico in famiglia* (1998-), is one of the first cases in which the Italian broadcaster tries to create continuity from one season to another, airing its almost 80 episodes with very few interruptions between 1998 and 2000.

The explosion of the Italian series and the economic base of this process, the creative constraints of the particular Italian market which has already been discussed,<sup>11</sup> should not, however, distract from the fact that the Italian TV series production has acquired its own physiognomy that cannot just be closely related to commercial and contractual characteristics of its format. Closely related to their production chain, that tries to get out an industrial product from the handcraft, TV series also show distinctive characteristics in terms of modes of representation and communicative pacts. In this quick review, we will focus on detective and cop dramas, prevailing genres among TV fiction – perhaps not by chance, for RAI public service broadcasting, as well as for other broadcasters – which are rooted in the culture of typical Italian serial dramas.

In this perspective, the first feature that stands out in the mode of production of Italian fiction is definitely the size of the text. From the point of view of production the alternatives offered to Italian investors are evident and related to different budgets: made-for-TV movies, distant from

the featured films just for the fact of being especially designed and produced for TV; miniseries, a short story usually in two episodes, spread over a time of programming of few days; and, finally, continuous serials with a strong US-style industrial chain, that present twelve or twenty-four episodes every year and continues from season to season.

The special formula which, however, all of these formats assume, reveals a typical inclination of the Italian fiction, particularly evident in the detection procedure; often labeled as “all’italiana” to indicate hybridization, promiscuity, and distance from the US serial models, this production yet deserves a deeper analysis than the usual easiness to dismiss the Italian anomaly. I argue that it reveals a deep connection with the Italian culture, both of television – finding in *teleromanzo* almost an archetype of the way of using the serial elements, emblematic of Italian culture – and of cinema culture, catching typically national styles of detection and mystery.

### Closure of serial

First, detective dramas allow to half-see a kind of compressed serialization, a dialectic between opening and closing that is deeply rooted in the Italian television heritage. The completeness of serials is in fact always absolute; at both macro and micro levels, the narrative is mostly completed without presupposing a real suspension into the future, either of the single episode or from one episode to another. Single episodes have a high degree of autonomy and continuity between episodes, which has often more to do with the dynamics of life than with the strategy and the building of suspense.

*Il commissario Montalbano* naturally represents the most evident case. The closure of the serial is certainly linked to his literary matrix; it is well known that it is drawn from the novels by Andrea Camilleri, with stories set in the fictional Sicilian town of Vigàta and around the investigations of Inspector Salvo Montalbano. In the early Nineties, with record sales of *La forma dell’acqua*, this novel series had led to the emergence of a genuine literary event. The literary origin of the project is an additional element in strengthening the closing of the text, according to the best Italian tradition.

The fact that the so called “teleromanzo” used to have strong closing episodes should not be overlooked. One can mention two antithetical and macroscopic cases: in *La cittadella* (1964) Anton Giulio Majano, director who was well aware of the soul of *feuilleton*, closes each part of Archibald David Cronin’s novel in seven chapters, characterized by strong core themes (the activity in the mining village, London life, etc.). The first episode, for example, closes undoubtedly with a real “And they lived happily ever after” (with a kiss between the protagonists, the birth of the couple and their departure to town). The eruption of tragedy (the loss of a child) has postponed the onset of the next installment in a process well in contrast to the typical never-ending serial. The voice over seems to contradict what happens, predicting future disasters; but this is not enough, in fact it pulls future event in a frame which further closes the flow of the serial story in flashback’s finiteness.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, there is the different case of *I promessi sposi* (1967) directed by Sandro Bolchi. Director’s philological and exegetical attention to Manzoni’s text does not preclude the fact that each of the seven episodes organizes itself around solid and concluded thematic units (the first episode dominated by Don Abbondio, the third by narration of Monaca di Monza

played by Lea Massari, or the fifth chapter dedicated to Salvo Randone in the role of Innominato). And, again, the well-known pending closing phrases in Manzoni have no visual translation and at the most they are entrusted once again to the frame narrative and to the words of the novel “read” by Giancarlo Sbragia’s voice over.

This closure is typical and it often characterizes serials, as it will become even more evident analyzing detection as TV genre. The narrative form of Montalbano series is not different from that committed years earlier in *Le inchieste del commissario Maigret* (1964-1972) by Mario Landi, respectful of the boundaries of Simenon’s narratives. The frontier of the novel remains strong and it is used as a reinforcement of completeness. Without detracting from Camilleri’s novels, the boundary of the story is sacred and inviolable, the proof is given that the only hazard is the order chosen for the release of the TV movie, privileging first the third novel, *Il ladro di merendine*, that immediately offered an effective portrait of the protagonist; but no mixture is accepted if not, in some cases, the union of two stories.<sup>13</sup>

Closure is also internal to the texts and, as well as complete closing of criminal cases, also storylines between episodes centered around the private life of the Inspector are convoluted and proceed at least in a spiral way, while the relationship with his girlfriend is not taking off or evolving and, multiplied by continuous skirmishes with other women, is incapable of becoming a true narrative turning point. In the second episode of season four, *Gli arancini di Montalbano* (2002), both mysteries – the murder of a couple passed for an accident and the false accusation of theft for the faithful maid’s son – dissolve completely without any possible after-effects. Also private narrative line is totally healed, not developing the relationship between Montalbano and his girlfriend, who wants him to go on vacation to Paris, but closing with the long-awaited New Year’s Eve dinner with the beloved *arancini*. Moreover, even the big dog Orlando, adopted by Montalbano in the previous episode *Il senso del tatto*, that could give rise to a new story line, is quickly liquidated and ceases to exist as Montalbano gives it to his lieutenant. Even *Le ali della sfinge* (2008), punctuated by quarrels on the phone with Livia, concludes with a phone hung up, but also with the reassuring words of the woman “And bravo! You’re always the same Montalbano,” which, rather than reopen the narrative, rewinds it back. From the fifth season onwards, with Montalbano’s injury, the effect will be even more evidently enveloping and much of the narrative lines about private lives will be pigeonholed into dreamlike dimension, framed and limited to any possible real development, thus moving to a paradoxical plan, completed by the dream of his own death in the last episode of season eight. In *L’età del dubbio* (2011), while dreaming, Montalbano ends up his relationship with Livia observing the possible new storyline with Laura (Isabella Ragonese) ending with her death. Once again, to emphasize the impossible opening to new narrative turning point, it comes the weight of the frame, as the episode ends with a flashback of Laura walking on the beach and apologizing for their dispute.

The dominance of the closure in the Italian serial is therefore not simply a mode of production due to the lack of industrial production processes and to the praxis of a full packed serial, completely shot before airing.<sup>14</sup> As symbolically shown in detection – genre that by definition, with suspense as one of his principal mechanisms, should focus on dilatation and on delay – the dynamics of the Italian serial seems to overwhelm the audience in a static way, more than to drive forward ceaselessly. The difference catches the eye if we glance at non-Italian products, with which the Italian viewer has to deal mainly on theme satellite TV channels. Leaving aside



the most innovative American series – among them the conspiracy to be fixed hour by hour in *24* (2001-2010) – one might immediately think to Scandinavian TV Nordic noir, that has produced very interesting results. In Danish *Den som dræber* (internationally known as *Those Who Kill*) the ten episodes revolve around the Serial Crime Unit of Copenhagen Police, led by brave detective Katrine (Laura Bach) and introverted consultant psychiatrist Thomas (Jakob Cedergrén) addressing five different cases. Creator Elsebeth Egholm, a renowned mystery writer, divided them into ten episodes linked by an unrelenting cliffhanger, in some cases almost unbearable, as well as by several dangerous occasions that affect the protagonist herself. The viewer is asked to wait a week not only for the outcome of the investigation, but to be sure for the safety of the detective herself who, for example, between the first and the second part of the first episode (*Liget i skoven*, *Corps in the woods*) is nothing less than buried alive.<sup>15</sup> In Italy, for rerun broadcast by Sky terrestrial digital channel Cielo, the episodes have been grouped together in pairs – confirming the power of order and reconstruction of broadcast TV. Nevertheless, this does not mean that from the narrative point of view, as well as visually and stylistically, the series turns into a totally exposed and open narrative.

But the most relevant Danish case is *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*), whose first season only has been aired in Italy, on digital terrestrial channel Rai4. Still, this show is well known thanks to the huge success of the American remake by Fox Television in 2011, reworked with a few variations and broadcasted in Italy by FoxCrime.<sup>16</sup> The innovative idea of the creator Søren Sveistrup, often associated with the archetype of *Twin Peaks*, resides in the only crime to be solved, the death of Nanna Birk Larsen, a new Laura Palmer, that unfolds the first twenty days of the investigation by detective Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl) during the 20 one-hour episodes of the first season (and even beyond in the American remake, in which the identity of the murderer is not revealed until half of the second season), between the emergence of mysteries and red herring in a gray pre-election Copenhagen.

The examples could continue with the neo-polar French production by Canal+. In *Braquo* (2009-) created by Olivier Marchal, an endless spiral of violence and corruption emerges episode after episode and drags away the four policemen from any case and episodic logic that is not the discovery of the reasons for the suicide of their leader, revenge and ultimately redemption.<sup>17</sup> *Hunted* (2012) is unconventional in both the narrative and content, exhibiting violence and sensuality of the body, most often exposed to the eyes of the viewer, of the protagonist Sam Hunter (Melissa George). Created by the well-known Frank Spotnitz simultaneously for UK BBC and US cable broadcaster Cinemax, this product unravels the plot around the special agent, leaving the viewer in full suspension at the end of each episode.<sup>18</sup> Another interesting production is *Profilage* (2009-, in Italy *Profiling*), in which the solution of the cases clouds up gradually, transformed into opportunities to reconstruct the past of the criminologist Chloe Saint Laurent (Odile Vuillemin), who finally, in season three, has an affair, gets pregnant and ultimately ends badly wounded and in life threatening conditions in the final episode, while fellow police officer is confronted with the loss of his wife and the responsibility of a child.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps one of the most significant cases, that marks the distance from the Italian TV serials, is the British drama *Luther* (2010-). Not far from Luca Zingaretti, Idris Elba also gives the Chief Inspector John Luher a strong personality, while the British product also offers a compressed form of serialization, limited to 4-6 episodes per season and therefore similar to what happens in

Italy. Creator Neil Cross greatly emphasizes intellectual acumen and investigative capacity of the detective, underlining the ambience that, far from the colors of Sicily, here depicts a dark and violent London.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the involvement of Luther in the case is very strong and profoundly changes in the course of episodes, bringing about a transformation. Equally, private life events that cross the stories are not a pale background, but a foreground element: the relationship with the former wife, who dies at the end of the first season, and especially the involvement with the psychopathic criminal Alice (Ruth Wilson) – guilty, but also seductive for her dark and mysterious side, whom Luther helps to escape from the insane asylum – unravels through all the seasons, opening them to next, unforeseen developments. Not surprisingly, the series offers a reverse pattern of detection, where the offender is known to the viewers since the very beginning. Thus, there is not the actual dissolution of the case to confirm the conclusion of the episode, but the crimes themselves are an additional trip to the mind and personality of Luther that open up to mysterious developments, unforeseen and unexpected choices of the protagonist, more than to the disclosure of the criminal.

On the other hand, as shown before, Italian TV serial tends to close claustrophobically, communicating the sense of an eternal return, rather than of a narrative development, and installing a temporality that has more to do with the myth than with the history. No coincidence that the flashback, the narrative pattern of prequel and sequel, the disruption of temporality in parallel dimensions and the “mythical” mood of the Mafia are often dominant in these series where, as in the US products from the Seventies “actions become routines, punctuated by small partial goals, which recur cyclically.”<sup>21</sup>

The same thing also happens in the continuous and more industrialized serial. In this case, the resistance to opening is also installed by the non-temporal continuity of the different seasons, often shot within a two or three years distance one from the other. It would be too simplistic to affirm this attitude is just due to production reasons, such as the engagement of the actors. For instance, *Il maresciallo Rocca* had a second season only two years after the first was aired: this second season was composed by four episodes only, while there had been six in the first season. Then it turn into a miniseries of only two episodes with season six.<sup>22</sup> However, this product remained credible to the public, showing TV series’ total abstraction from the flow of life and from the continuity of narration. Too often these situations are dealt with strictly in terms of production, following the economic logic of the spin-off or sequel, and forgetting the communicative dimension of the TV series, whose fundamental (mimetic) feature is represented by the rhythm between episodes and between seasons.

*Il maresciallo Rocca* also maintains a strong autonomy within a single episode, where the bickering of the protagonist with the sons or with the woman he is attracted to (adopting a puppy or not, how to get a dinner date, etc.) are always resolved within the single spin, with a traditional narrative structure which, not coincidentally, the authors Laura Toscano and Franco Marotta defined as inspired very closely by Maigret, played by Gino Cervi on Italian TV. Rather, narrative development is more pronounced passing season by season; if the evolution of Salvo Montalbano is measured almost exclusively in terms of interiority with a dark intensification of character’s thoughts on the fate and his ageing, the widower Giovanni Rocca (Gigi Proietti) gets married and adopts a child in season two, loses his wife (Stefania Sandrelli) in season three, remarried in season five and so on. In this case, however, the dialectical tension is resolved within the episode, the



proof is that the tragedy of the death of his wife is consumed in the penultimate episode, *Crudele destino*, which aired on 18 March 2001, so as to avoid any exaggerated cliffhanger and give the character time to recover his identity in the next episode, letting the story close and resolve by the end of the third season, with a lot of renewed balance and a bravery award for the Marshal.

## Disclosures of landscape

This brief review can already lead to two considerations. First, it is clear that, although it can be a driving force from the point of view of production, it is not entirely correct to identify, as it's often done, *La Piovra* as a prototype of the Italian television series. Originally conceived as a miniseries, it nevertheless retained and fixed only one of its character. Moreover, the moderate number of episodes and the almost infinite multiplication of seasons<sup>23</sup> is a very common trait in Italy. However, quite different is the clear infringement of the authentically Italian model of autonomy and episodic completeness. In fact, cliffhanger is the dominant structure, not only macroscopically in the transition from one season to another (the death of Cattani in season four, etc.), but also at the level of single episodes, not coincidentally never titled, refusing to close around a specific theme and almost always ending with a death, a departure or a new trigger. In the first season some episodes end with the death of an official, or the departure of the protagonist's wife, the kidnapping of his daughter, and finally with the new departure for Sicily, that opens up the serial at the end of last episode. *La Piovra* represents the exception to an extremely serialized formula that almost has no followers in Italy, except, partially, for very isolated and experimental cases like *Romanzo criminale*, *La squadra*, *Squadra antimafia – Palermo oggi*.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, it is not a coincidence that this type of serial is mainly broadcast on Italian Public Broadcasting System. Police drama is by far central on Italian Public System, while it has very few achievements in the commercial network,<sup>25</sup> since its closed structure seems to mark it hardly, offering an in-depth real world view, which mainly coincides with the reassuring one of Public TV. *Il giovane Montalbano*, prequel to the popular series and aired in 2012,<sup>26</sup> did not challenge in any way the prototype, always offering a rigid episodic scan, not only for what concerns the criminal matter to be investigated, but also for the private life of the young protagonist, whose twists, including new lovers and quarrels with his father, always resolve within a single episode. The model of State Television, also in such a recent example, imposes an investigation with the geometric features, British rational deduction-style, that solves everything in the celebration of *whodonit* and that avoids opening at any set of problems, putting all the pieces in place.

It is no coincidence that Mafia is the background to most of the series, from Montalbano to *Distretto di polizia*: the doubt, the real duality are inherent in the environment, and in its ambiguous connotation at least criminal events find an answer. In recent television history, there are few examples of series trying to open up to a more serialized formula and to create a greater connection between episodes. And they seem doomed to failure. *Il segreto dell'acqua* has recently ditched the share of RaiUno to only 10%, even in the face of the attraction usually hold on the audience by the Mafia background as much as by the interpreter Riccardo Scamarcio.<sup>27</sup> The failure of the series is perhaps linked to the RAI public resistance to the thrust of suspense and the apparent lack of independence of the episodes, forced to a rapid initial summary of the previous installments. On

the other hand, especially in commercial television, the abnormal serialization, for Italian habits, seems to be the only compensation to renewed difficulties in maintaining open end. This is the case of *Distretto di polizia*, a TV series with different production and narrative characteristics, not feeding on large elements of call as the derivation from literature or the presence of stars beloved by the audience, but on “the idea of genre and of invention of worlds” such as that of a police station, the X Tuscolano, and the reconstruction of the community that revolves around it. Therefore, the serialization plays an important role and the trajectories of the characters are developed in depth so as to retain the audience with the characters, from the original starring Giovanna Scalise (Isabella Ferrari), a commissioner persecuted by Mafia that killed her husband in the South Italy and who then takes refuge in Rome, waiting to testify at the trial. *Distretto di polizia* is definitely the emblem of a mode of production typical of the already industrialized series. This starts with the centrality of the so-called bible – absent from the previous series – that tracks accurately the profile of each character and their interactions with the others and around which revolves a pool of twelve screenwriters, led by Giacomo Scarpelli and Massimo Lugli, and story editors that collect in police stations and newspapers the chronicle of real cases, to ensure verisimilitude and realism to the narrated events. The production itself is never-ending, because scripts are delivered in blocks, and neither the actors nor the director have the full picture of what will be next. However, the centrality of detection and of the crime solving, as well as that of the return to the order given by the investigation that ended the episode, show that the compressed serialization and the tendency towards closure is evident even in the highly industrialized continuous serial, in which the degree of autonomy of the individual episodes still remains very high, and the personal life of the protagonists, as the hardest element of inter-episodic continuity, seems nevertheless to be constantly frozen and stuck in reverse.

These observations lead to a final consideration about the forms of representation and Italian detective drama. In September 2010, welcoming the tenth season of *Distretto di polizia* and the return of the protagonist Claudia Pandolfi, Aldo Grasso regretted that the direction of Alberto Ferrari was not “able to restore a representation of the city as a threatening space, as a clash of urban, social and narrative disorder.”<sup>28</sup> Nothing could be further not only from the mood of the series, as told by the production, but also from the Italian intellectual climate, distant from that dichotomy and alien to its visual translation, in particular in the urban fabric. The great distance of the fiction of the last twenty years from traditional TV is right in not drawing more on the *noir* mood, even though filtered through the French culture of *polar*, which was the conceptual and iconographic core of Sheridan, Maigret or Nero Wolfe. A deep bond is instead defined by the genre re-establishment operated by Italian *giallo*, an inevitable connection given the cinematographic vocation of these series, that starts with an intensive use of the made-for TV movie formula and the unprecedented stability of direction by Alberto Sironi, Giorgio Capitani or Renato De Maria, both within the series and even from season to season. In fact, the claustrophobic closing of the serial requires to recall the centrality of the crime scene and crime rituals in the Italian *giallo* from Mario Bava to Dario Argento, from Lucio Fulci to Riccardo Freda, that create a parataxis, an accumulation of criminal performances which closes continuously narrative development around the circle of the crime. Also due to evident TV requirements, the iconography of the crime does not always find the effectiveness of the catalogs of murders by Bava or of the vivid covers designed by Carlo Jacono for Giallo Mondadori pocketbooks. Nevertheless, there are some cases, especially in female mur-

ders solved by Montalbano, such as the naked body lying on the sofa in the bluish light of the villa in the episode *La voce del violino* (1999), the mummified in the chest in *La vampa d'agosto* (2008) or even the horse collapsed on the beach in *La pista di sabbia* (2008).

The visual and cultural link to *giallo* heritage is strengthened by setting and by the game between background and characters, landscape and human beings, that continues to characterize Italian series. Perhaps the importance of urban and landscape component in these serial formulas is ignored a little too easily, again with a myopic eye focused only on production methods, for which of course the performance and promotion of the Italian territory offers important opportunities for co-production and sales abroad. However, it is a bit simplistic – thanks once again to a unique productive perspective – to liquidate a central aspect of the television series as a pure act of national marketing and pure ostentation of landscape, not more interesting than a postcard. If the issues of national mafia and corruption sometimes make it possible to superficially invoke the tradition of Italian *cinema civile* (that of Francesco Rosi or Elio Petri – bond validated when Damiano Damiani signed the first season of *La Piovra*), why not to consider that Viterbo of *Maresciallo Rocca*, Rome in *Distretto* or Sicilian districts in *Montalbano* participate in some ways in the particularity with which the eternal city is dotted by Mario Bava in *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* (*The Evil Eye*, 1963). Or sights of Milan is kaleidoscopically fragmented by Fernando Di Leo (*Milano calibro 9* or *La mala ordina*, both 1972). Or why not to rethink of several analyzed urban visions shot by Dario Argento?

Quoting Franco Moretti, who compares novel to movie, “the novel accustoms us to ‘see’ the city by throwing a glance, not really distracted but discontinuous.”<sup>29</sup> This discontinuity also characterizes the Italian series, both for the *cento* of unstuck views that built the place of the events (the recognizable Agrigento district in Camilleri’s novels that flakes between Ragusa-Modica, Porto Empedocle and many other locations in the TV movies), or for the fixity of a space that does not seem practicable and is resistant against any path except that of the gaze, as Salvo Montalbano often does. This kind of landscape really evokes an inconvenience and a disconnection between the man and his surroundings distilled in the Italian culture much more authentically than many sociological or psychological drifts. It is not urban context of film noir, twisted and heartbreaking, constantly at odds with the man to mark his temporary nature,<sup>30</sup> it is a distant and indifferent background, a sunny space, flat or disconnected, not less impossible to live than the one culturally tied to the *giallo*.

- 1 Eleonora Andreatta, Francesco Nardella, “Una fiction di lungo periodo,” in *Il Mulino*, no. 2, March-April 2003, p. 343. Translation from Italian to English always by the author.
- 2 Almost unique exception – which, however, dedicates a really small space to Italian production and adopt a dominant semiotic approach – is the edited collection Maria Pia Pozzato, Giorgio Grignaffini (eds.), *Mondi seriali. Percorsi semiotici nella fiction*, RTI, Milano 2008.
- 3 Maurizio Costanzo, Flaminia Morandi, *Facciamo finta che. L'industria televisione: produrre fiction seriale*, Carocci, Roma 2003, p. 36.
- 4 Idem, p. 38; see also Pino Salerno (ed.), *La fiction in Italia. Parlano autori, broadcaster, produttori*, Dino Audino, Roma 1999, and Enrico Menduni, Antonio Catolfi, *Produrre TV. Dallo studio televisivo a Internet*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009.

- 5 Of course, there are also the formats – as *Médico de familia* format by Spanish Globomedia arrived in Italy as *Un medico in famiglia*, or *Un posto al sole* based on the Australian *Neighbours*. However, these are exceptions, as contents – the only part truly free in format adaptation – is obviously dominant in fiction and not easily transferable in a different culture. About continuous serial in Italian TV see Daniela Cardini, *La lunga serialità televisiva. Origini e modelli*, Carocci, Roma 2004.
- 6 Milly Buonanno, “Storie di mafia tra cronaca e immaginario,” in Milly Buonanno, *La fiction italiana. Narrazioni televisive e identità nazionale*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2012. This book had an influence in the approach adopted on some case studies presented in this article. However, Buonanno is mainly oriented to a vision of television as a great “storyteller” and to the “bardic” nature – on the account of Fiske and Hartley – of its narratives. For a quick overview of the main approaches to television narratives in Italy see Francesco Casetti, Federico Di Chio, *L’analisi della televisione. Strumenti, metodi e pratiche di ricerca*, Bompiani, Milano 1998; Milly Buonanno, *L’età della televisione. Esperienze e teorie*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2006; Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, *Le nuove forme della serialità televisiva. Storia, linguaggio e temi*, Archetipo, Bologna 2008.
- 7 Certainly of great relevance, also from the point of view of its innovative production dynamics, is the case of *Romanzo criminale* which, however, is outside detective drama genre, focus of this article. See Aldo Grasso, Massimo Scaglioni (eds.), *La televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, RTI, Milano 2010.
- 8 Emiliana De Blasio, Michele Sorice, *Cantastorie mediali. La fiction come story teller della società italiana*, Dino Audino Editore, Roma 2004.
- 9 The reasons for this explosive first step in the Italian television production are more complex, at least as much as the decade of the Eighties, in which it is located. For example, this is the time when in Italy, for the first time, the film confronts television and its “parasitical disposition,” found in the US already thirty years earlier by Raymond Williams: the crowding in the schedules of film puts in crisis the national film industry and its audience causing a profound change in structures and strategies of production film and television which are then reversed again in the Nineties, with the new regulations on movies broadcasted whose gradual decrements increases TV production. These reflections emerged several times in conferences during Mostra del Nuovo Cinema di Pesaro, then published by Marsilio; see studies and data published in Lino Micciché (ed.), *Schermi opachi. Il cinema italiano degli anni ’80*, Marsilio, Venezia 1998; among most recent contributions see “Dossier. Cinema e TV,” in *Link*, vol. 3, 2004.
- 10 About EEC Directive 89/552/CEE, than 97/36/CE, also known as TVSF (now re-elaborated by European Parliament inside SMAV Directive 2010/12/UE) see Roberto Mastroianni, *La direttiva sui servizi di media audiovisivi e la sua attuazione nell’ordinamento italiano*, Giappichelli Editore, Torino 2011.
- 11 See Federico Battocchio, *La produzione televisiva*, Carocci, Roma 2003.
- 12 *La cittadella* is organized around the story of his life that the protagonist Andrew Manson (Alberto Lupo), now an old man, tells to a young doctor. His reconstruction opens and closes each episode, framing the flashbacks. TV serial was aired on the national TV from 9 February to 22 March 1964.
- 13 TV serial script is always by the author of the novels, Andrea Camilleri, assisted by Francesco Bruni and Salvatore De Mola. Episodes are always directed by Alberto Sironi.
- 14 It is clear that the industrialized manufacturing with its initial offer limited to the pilot and the creation of no more than two episodes, is ontologically dominated by the opening in the narrative development, not surprisingly sometimes these germs of the serial do not survive (even J.J. Abrams failed to achieve in 2005 a bounty hunter serial *The Catch*), sometimes turn into something else (*Mulholland Drive* by David Lynch, as the pilot ordered by ABC to double the success of *Twin Peaks* was converted in 2001 in movie by Studio Canal), sometimes generate potentially infinite serial that only an act of force can close (*Lost* always by Abrams).
- 15 Ten-episodes series, produced by Miso Tv, was aired by Danish TV2 between 13 March and 15 May 2011 (plus a feature film, *Fortidens skygge*, a two-episode final conceived as a theatrical movie) has been sold to broadcasters in more than 25 countries, reaching for example in German ZDT 3,8 millions viewers watching the final episode. In Italy it was aired as *Loro uccidono* on satellite channel FoxCrime

- on Friday prime time, from 7 October till 11 November 2011, with not striking audience results, but in line with the objectives of the network.
- 16 Produced by network Denmark's Radio, *Forbrydelsen* was aired on 7 January till 26 November 2007 (20 episodes scheduled with a break in March and September) and was followed by two more seasons of 10 episodes each (unreleased in Italy), in Autumn 2009 and 2012. In 2011, US Fox Television has produced a remake by Veena Sud (two seasons, 13 episodes each), aired by the American cable network AMC and by Fox Crime in Italy.
  - 17 Season one (8 episodes) was aired on French Canal+ from 12 October till 2 November 2009, followed by a new season in 2011; in Italy it was scheduled by satellite channels FX and FoxCrime from 2011.
  - 18 The eight episodes of season one – still ongoing – almost entirely located in London and created by the father of *The X-Files* for Kudos production, were broadcasted on BBC One from 12 October 2012 and almost two weeks later on US Cinemax. In Italy the series was aired by FoxCrime from 15 January 2013.
  - 19 Created by Fanny Robert and Sophie Lebarbier, this 6-episode serial was broadcasted by French TF1 starting from 23 April 2009, followed by three 12-episode seasons in 2010, 2012 and ongoing 2013. In Italy it was broadcasted by FoxCrime from 2010 and on Cielo.
  - 20 Produced by BBC itself, *Luther*'s first season was aired on BBC One from 4 May to 8 June 2010; second season aired in 2011 and a third is forthcoming in 2013; in Italy FoxCrime aired reputedly British serial starting from 6 January 2011.
  - 21 Federico Di Chio, *L'illusione difficile. Cinema e serie tv nell'età della disillusione*, Bompiani, Milano 2011, p. 205.
  - 22 *Il maresciallo Rocca*, produced by RAI and Solaris cinematografica, was aired first on RaiDue from 16 January 1996 in 8 episodes; then the show moved to RaiUno for the next 4 episodes of second and third season (1998, 2001) and the 6 episodes of fourth and fifth season (2003 and 2005) and the last, for now, two episodes of miniserial *Il maresciallo Rocca e l'amico d'infanzia* (2008).
  - 23 *La Piovra* was aired by RaiUno from 1984, for ten seasons till 2001 (44 episodes), including two *pre-quels* which led story back to Fifties and Sixties to origins of Mafia.
  - 24 One partial exception is the show *Romanzo criminale* (2008-2009), perhaps the only true heir, in this interpretative key, of the modes of production of *La Piovra*; partially, however, considering the exceptional productive situation (a series created by a satellite theme channel of Sky Italia together with Cattleya Film, followed by a second season in 2010) and the particular genesis of the TV series, derived not only from a novel, but also from a successful movie, both considering its unusual narrative construction, wrapped up even more on the group of characters and their actions, rather than on an almost impossible real development. The proof of its exception is that another experiment, conducted a few months before, *Quo vadis, baby?* (Sky Italia and Colorado Film, directed by Guido Chiesa) also based on a novel and a movie (by Gabriele Salvatores), adopted a closing framework and focused on completeness, derived by the closure of the episode around the solved criminal case. The case of *La squadra* (RaiTre, seven seasons from 2000 to 2007) is different. This was the first Italian serial using a *Hill Street Blues* strategy, that is to say to focusing on characters, on their personal cases and relational dynamics, rejecting the episode title, but however giving importance to the solution of crimes within the single episodes. Even more significant is the case of *Squadra antimafia – Palermo oggi* (Canale 5, 2009 and 2010, ten two-hour episodes each season), which is almost unique, both for its hybrid nature which crosses several genres and for its production history; see Aldo Grasso, Massimo Scaglioni, *Televisione convergente*, cit.
  - 25 There are a lot of example in RAI production, only referring to the last decade, from *Don Matteo* to *Ho sposato uno sbirro*, from *Il Maresciallo Rocca* to *L'ispettore Coliandro* and again with Commissioners Montalbano, Manara, Nardone or De Luca. To this long list Mediaset responds with a few examples, including *Distretto di polizia* and *Ris* (this one in fact contaminated with the medical drama that leads to other nature).
  - 26 The television series is always produced by RAI with Palomar; the first season is organized into six episodes and producers have already announced a second one. Again the subject comes from some stories by Camilleri, who has worked on this script as well, with Francesco Bruni; director here is Gianluca Maria Tavarelli.

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- 27 Directed by Renato De Maria, TV series, produced by RAI and Magnolia, was aired on RaiUno from 11 September till 2 October 2011.
- 28 Aldo Grasso, "La Pandolfi salva il Distretto di polizia," in *Corriere della Sera*, 8 September 2010.
- 29 Franco Moretti, *Segni e stili del moderno*, Einaudi, Torino 1987, p. 158.
- 30 Vivian Sobchak, "Lounge Time:" *Post-War Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir*, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998, pp. 129-170.