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Georges Simenon's Realistic Twist and the meaning of Renato Olivieri's Tribute to Maigret (Or of The Change from Detective Story to Social Thriller)

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ABSTRACT

Sociology of literature is underdeveloped in Italy and western countries in general (except for France). Nevertheless, this discipline suggests interesting reflections on political, social, and moral topics (Laugier 2019; Cavell 1981; Corcuff 2013; Boltanski 2009; Martignani 2018). In this article, we ponder the difference between moral and legal dimension through the change from detective story to social thriller (Sciascia 1954; Oliva 2003). In this direction, this essay is composed of two parts. The first identifies two key moments in the development of a very popular genre: detective fiction. Permeated by the relevance of social phenomena, it acknowledges aspects beyond the detective's deductions, to consider society as the true protagonist of the storytelling. The second focuses on a fragment allowing for a comparison of the two key moments. More specifically, we aim to reflect on a gender gap in sociological research: the change from detective story to social thriller represents the ontological relationship between the law and the crime. This key issue orients the private behaviour with reference to the State. This change represents the critical capacity to transcend the ordinary law through a logic of legitimation of individual actions radically different from those considered by the law.

Keywords: detective fiction; thriller; mystery novel; noir; realism; Simenon.

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1. Introduction: Popular culture and sociological questions about ordinary objects

Sociology of arts and literature is not very developed in Italy and western countries in general (except for France). The overall production is 0.5% of the general reflection on sociological problems (Heinich 2004). Nevertheless, this discipline suggests interesting reflections on political, social, and moral topics.

We aim to reflect on the difference between moral and legal dimension through the change from detective story to social thriller. In this direction, this essay is composed of two parts. In the first

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part, we will identify two moments in the development of a highly popular genre²: detective fiction, both related to the investigative method. Permeated by the relevance of social phenomena (order and deviance, law and crime), this genre becomes properly linked to reality when it juxtaposes the formal rigour of the investigative method (first moment – deduction, represented by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes) with the acknowledgement of aspects that transcend the effectiveness of the detective's deductions to include society and its complexity among the protagonists of the events narrated (second moment – hesitation, represented by Georges Simenon's Jules Maigret).

More specifically, we aim to reflect on a gender gap in sociological research: the change from detective story to social thriller represents the ontological relationship between law and crime. This key issue orients the private behaviour with reference to the State. This change represents the critical capacity to transcend the ordinary law through a logic of legitimation of individual actions radically different from those considered by the law.

This has important consequences on the narrative structure and plot of the detective novel, but also on its social philosophy, thus ushering in the reflection on the realistic³ character of the social thriller. In the second part, the analysis focuses on the importance of the realist profile of detective stories in Italy, with particular reference to a fragment of Renato Olivieri's work, allowing for a comparison of the two main moments in the genre related to the investigative method to understand its development following literary realism.

Among the many issues included in the plot are as follows: the territory as a character, a more equal communication between male and female genders, the existence of random factors at the basis of the enigma; a more nuanced distinction between good and evil.

In cultural studies, the researcher's interest in "ordinary"⁴ objects, such as detective fiction, is undoubtedly interesting. According to Laugier (2019), the theoretical junction represented by popular cultures is paramount for philosophical and sociological reflection.

It is not about "escapism" – or, at least, not just about that – but about the recovery of philosophy through the everyday, ordinary dimension (Cavell 1981) and the linguistic games inspired by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Corcuff 2013) and the recognition that a genre resonates in readers' tastes (Schudson 1989) determining its reception as a cultural object (Griswold 1994) able to indicate priority interests and curiosities in readers as individuals within a specific social context. As stated by Tedeschi and Negretti when introducing Ed McBain for Mondadori in 1977:

«Some say that crime stories, also called escapist literature, are not real literature. Perhaps, but it seems to us a drastic, hasty, and simplistic statement. And in any case, there are detective stories and detective stories, and when an author brings together the qualities of a writer and the ability to build a crime novel, the result is undeniably a good detective novel, the work of a narrator for whom a story, however it may be, is essentially an event to be told. McBain is one of these [...] His characters, criminals, policemen or ordinary citizens, are real, credible, authentic. They are cold in winter, sweaty in summer and would like to enjoy the sun and air and greenery in spring. His stories are possible, immediate, enjoyable [...] His attitude towards crime stories is serious, precise, meticulous» (Tedeschi e Negretti 1977, 5. Personal translation).

We do not know they were referring to when they wrote about «someone [who] says that crime stories, also called escapist literature, are not real literature». What is certain is that – through a

² In addition to the many new detective novels, the re-edition of classics of the genre in series sponsored by newspapers and emerging publishing houses and the proliferation of festivals on the topic, some recent articles take stock of the pervasive spread of the detective story, which is currently celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the series *Il Giallo Mondadori* directed by Oreste del Buono (to whom we owe in Italy the very term "giallo" to indicate a novel focused on mystery and enigma). See *Il Venerdì, La Repubblica* on 22/03/2019 and the articles in *Il Manifesto* on 10/08/2019 and 28/08/2019.

³ The epistemological debate on realism in sociology and philosophy is rather complex and was recently reintroduced by several voices claiming the theoretical overcoming of post-modern assumptions. See the following. Sociology: Berger and Luckmann (1966); Bhaskar (1979); Maccarini, Morandi and Prandini (2008); Elder-Vass (2010; 2012) and the whole heterogeneous group revolving around the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. Philosophy: Searle (1995); Vattimo (2012); Ferraris (2012). We consider social reality (on which the detective story emerges as a cultural object) as an intersubjective construction of meanings oriented to the critique of the existing and to a reflection on how reality observes itself. Detective fiction is an emerging effect of this logic of critical observation on established power, the relationship between good and evil, the need to combine rationality and contingency to understand social phenomena (i.e. to take note of a plural social ontology to orient epistemological reflection on society). On this subject, see Martignani (2016).

⁴ The term "ordinary" is attributed to cultural objects considered in their "everyday" and "popular" character as opposed to those intended for an elite public. Ordinary objects, therefore, correspond to the "feeling" of democratic consciences. See Cavell (1981), Corcuff (2013) and Laugier (2019). On the resonance of popular cultural objects in people's tastes and their reception, see Schudson (1989) and Illouz (2014).

skilful literary artifice that we will see later on – an important Italian novelist like Renato Olivieri compared McBain to Simenon for the realistic and plausible (human) characterization of the policemen and investigators in his novels.

It is also certain that popular literature (like cinema) offers a representation within which the reader can identify more easily than that offered by myths and heroes.

The anti-heroes of everyday life (whether they are guards or thieves, or lovers in the case of “chick lit”) offer the reader a therapeutic image of everyday life: the protagonists face ordinary problems, have accessible sources of satisfaction, their dramas are those of the crime news section. Realism starts from this level of construction (Martignani 2015).

From a sociological point of view, questioning the crime novel means wondering about the dark sides of modernization, the relationship between law and society (which transcends it), the class structure and the cultural reception of the categories of enigma and secret (Boltanski 2009; Boltanski 2011; Martignani 2018). It also means wondering why such literature is so interesting, why it resonates and gives the reader a less encouraging, more cynical, and realistic image of society. After defining the method and unit of analysis of this contribution, we will develop the dimensions briefly recalled here regarding the key moments in the development of the genre.

2. Method and unit of analysis: The analytical reading of a (necessary) selection of texts

It would be impractical to consider all of Simenon’s literary production for this contribution, or to outline the development of the detective novel in the space of an article⁵.

We will, instead, think of its articulation, abandoning any attempt to systematically reconstruct an increasingly prolific genre. We aim to highlight the progressive tendency of the detective novel to assume a realistic profile from an existential, sociological, and political point of view.

The unity of analysis is therefore represented by a few paradigmatic works substantiating the evolution of the detective genre. This selection is justified not only by the popularity of the individual works but by specific passages that indicate reflection on the philosophical and social matrix of this literary genre. The texts are as follows:

(1) *A study in red*. The novel uses Dr Watson’s narrating voice to introduce Sherlock Holmes to the reader. It is the first book in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s saga dedicated to the British private detective. The story is interesting in both theoretical and methodological terms, amounting to an explanation of Holmes’ scientific and logical-deductive method to solve cases with the rigour of a laboratory analyst (although a deliberately anti-academic and reckless one).

(2) *Maigret hesitates*. This episode in Simenon’s vast narrative production is a milestone in which the logical method is discussed. It opens a space for contingencies, feelings, emotions and – last but not least – for the investigators’ mistakes due to haste, overconfidence, prejudice or habit. This novel caught Leonardo Sciascia’s attention for the epistemological transformation of the meaning of the investigative method, which becomes progressively more linked to the historical and social characteristics of its context. This method is perfected in conversation with the witnesses and literary characters involved. A central role is played by the chief’s wife, who helps to build, in the private and domestic dimension, the interpretative articulation through which Maigret, by trial and error, gradually abandons all wrong leads in favour of the right one. Unlike Holmes, Maigret is a police officer, a figure whose acumen is often sharply targeted in genre literature compared to the private detective’s. From logical and deductive, Maigret’s method becomes empirical, it deviates from logical deductions to focus on examining the meaning given to the characters’ action. The investigator’s fallibility is introduced and – while not overshadowing his performative abilities – it suggests to the reader that truth (guilt and innocence) is socially constructed, as is the crime (an action accordingly oriented to steal, kill, or otherwise harm).

(3) *The Kodra Case*. Together with an enjoyable crime case set in Milan and the presentation of Commissioner Ambrosio (later the protagonist of a fortunate saga by Renato Olivieri), this novel regales us with a detective who reasons on the complex intertwining of social relations through literary quotes that attribute him an unnecessary infallibility. Maigret (together with McBain) is explicitly

⁵ Without any pretension of exhaustiveness, the following are some useful references to understand the historical and social development of the police genre in Italy, Europe and overseas: Hoveyda (1956); Mandel (1989); Pistelli (2006).

preferred to Sherlock Holmes and his infallible deductive and performative ability. This annotation – far from being a simple coincidence or aesthetic inclination – helps in analysing the detective story. We can understand its evolution in a realistic key and frame the moment in which, in Italy and especially in Milan, noir becomes a further realist twist in the detective genre, thanks to Giorgio Scerbanenco's works (1966; 1968; 1969) and his explicit criticism of bourgeois morality and established power.

This essay will contain references to other works. All three texts mentioned are included in a saga. They are pivotal because between their pages we can read an ideal continuity orienting the reasoning on the change of the investigative method. Literature transforms it into the plot and returns it to critics and readers in terms of a radically modified epistemology.

On the one hand, therefore, we have a realistic twist on the socio-cultural level, while on the other are new dynamics strengthening the diffusion of an increasingly popular genre.

3. Part One: Two key moments in the development of the philosophy of the detective novel

3.1 1st Moment – Detective novel and logic-deductive method in Conan Doyle

The private-rational and the philosophy of classic detective storytelling according to Siegfried Kracauer

A Study in Scarlet (GB 1887)

After introducing Sherlock Holmes, the second chapter of A Study in Red explains his investigative method. The title of this section is paradigmatic: The Science of Deduction. This dialogue is emblematic of the character's working method and approach to knowledge:

You see, [...] a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things [...].

But the solar system! - I protested

What the deuce is it to me? - he interrupted impatiently.

You say we go around the sun. If we went around the moon, it would not make a pennyworth of difference to me or to my work.

[...]

He said that he would acquire no knowledge which did not bear upon his object. Therefore, all the knowledge which he possessed was such as would be useful to him. [...]

(Conan Doyle, 1887, 10-11).

This quote recalls Siegfried Kracauer's study of the philosophy of the detective novel (1925), where the figure of the detective and his rationality emerge in a paradigmatic key. The symbolic value of the detective novel lies in restoring the reader to the centrality of individual reasoning (represented by the detective) and the need to strengthen the logical-deductive method to explain the transformations induced by modernization processes in western urban centres. Following Kracauer's insights, this genre is a consequence of (and mediation between) (1) progress associated with the scientific experimental method, (2) rationalist anthropology (3) growth of cities and the forms of exclusion related to them (prostitution, alcoholism, vagrancy):

«While it is true that art in general, since it represents the mirror of perfection, takes on the meaning of redemption, it does not intend to create a pure and simple fable. Rather, its theme is reality, which is internally linked by it in the field of aesthetics» (Kracauer 1925; Italian translation 2011, p. 133. Personal translation).

The postulate represented by Sherlock Holmes – curious and certainly not devoid of passions – is that of a subject who plays the investigator through a hyperbolic and very personal version of instrumental rationality. Although divergent from the common morality, his reflection is styled as a sort of proud existential utilitarianism to which he tends to associate an unscrupulous scientific method. The consequentialism, according to which the moral character of an action is given by the achievement of its objective (the resolution of the case) finds in Holmes a surprising expression, which never ceases to amaze Watson (e.g. when the investigator narcotizes the dog to demonstrate to his partner the effectiveness of a powerful narcotic capable of simulating rigor mortis).

No room is left for general knowledge, for the unresolvable case, which instead will be paramount for the noir genre (both in the American hardboiled fiction and in the European literature, as Jean-Claude Izzo in France or Giorgio Scerbanenco in Italy)⁶.

The logical deduction is perfected to such an extent that it translates into an abstraction of reasoning, confining by the characters' context in the enclosure of specific logical sequences (as when he guesses that Watson is a veteran of Afghanistan, from how he presents himself) or in specific parts of the text (in which he realizes that the rules of the Mormons' community are those which generate the exclusion and subsequent revenge of the subjects who want to live outside the dictates of customs and moral laws).

There is no room for a principle of reality overriding the investigative logic: the case cannot remain unsolved, or rather, the gap represented by the possibility of a case remaining unsolved and its effective resolution is filled by a method implemented only by the protagonist.

"I should have more faith," he said; "I ought to know by this time that when a fact appears to be opposed to a long train of deductions, it invariably proves to be capable of bearing some other interpretation. Of the two pills in that box one was of the most deadly poison, and the other was entirely harmless. I ought to have known that before ever I saw the box at all."

(Conan Doyle, 1887; 53).

Reading Sherlock Holmes, we are not interested in how the world "turns", what are the rules that govern the unjust distribution of power between servants and masters. At most, we can have fun in noticing how the investigator takes advantage of the situation, following cases that could not be entrusted to the official police (described as rather coarse) but also and above all because they are too thorny, involving the upper social strata. Both the reason why the social world is divided into classes and the logic according to which the social mechanisms of stigma are produced are therefore irrelevant (Goffman 1963). On the one hand, there are villains (Foucault 1994) who act under the influence of passions and, on the other hand, there is an investigator who follows a scientific method that goes beyond the policemen's clumsy empiricism. Sherlock Holmes' deductive and logical method pairs with the need to interest the readers in a world to be accepted as it appears. There is no social critique (as it will be for the noir genre) but a phenomenology of crime presented as an imperfect and justified cause in the eyes of both the reader and the detective. Positivism and phenomenology. The two philosophical matrices guiding the development of twentieth-century philosophy (D'Agostini 1999) are summarized in Conan Doyle's narrative: Sherlock Holmes is an analyst who observes the subjective dynamics that cause crime by objectifying them in a laboratory. The latter discloses without investigating the processes responsible for corrupting morality. Through this character, we refine our perceptual patterns (after all, isn't it with Kant that empiricism and rationalism merge?)⁷ to investigate criminal actions through more reliable technological tools aimed at guaranteeing the desired result (i.e. the resolution of the enigma).

As Kracauer points out, the crime novel suggests that law enforcement agencies are necessary to achieve order, security, and peace of mind at the social level. It is Hobbes' recomposition of the sovereign. Yet police failures are indispensable to affirm the literary necessity of the detective and his infallibility (police action, in comparison, is represented as grossly funny, both in Conan Doyle and Rex Stout, for example). The detective is the *res cogitans* whose passions are necessarily both bizarre and private because the passion openly narrated is the bad one, the one inducing crime. The system is still clearly dualist and modern, typical of Cartesian philosophy. The emotions are still expelled from the analysis and we will have to wait for the realistic twist, and then for the critical character of the noir genre, both of which assign realistic relevance to the narration (in Spinozian fashion, see Damasio 2003).⁸

The case, understood as chance, the social and cultural context, even the characters of interacting individuals are subordinate to the logic that governs the investigator's reasoning and that invariably resolves the case understood as a dossier.

⁶ See Corcuff (2013) and Martignani (2018).

⁷ See Ferraris (2004).

⁸ On the *conatus* as self-determination and discernment between good and bad passions, see the preface of the 1988 edition of *Ethics and theological-political treatise* published by UTET.

We will have to wait for the development of the realistic crime story to introduce these elements in the narrative plot and to witness a change in the detective genre, systemically irritated by that social environment that we define as reality and that, through the crime news, informs the reader of the existence of cases that remain unsolved despite the investigator's skill.

3.2 2nd Moment – Simenon's Realistic Twist as a Conceptual Junction

The reading of Maigret by Leonardo Sciascia and gender democracy

Maigret hésite (1968)

The literary context for the figure of the detective – i.e. the detective novel – thus contrasts with the legal formalism and logical positivism of classic detective stories. The outcome is a critical reading of reality as an object of investigation that allows for chance and acknowledges the difference between what is (subjectively or morally) right and what is (ethically or procedurally) legal.

If Sherlock Holmes' method of logical deduction blurs the boundary between the whole of reality (objectively unfathomable) and the portion that we can grasp with our perceptual patterns (Kant's metaphysics of nature, which thus introduces the necessity of science), Maigret abandons any metaphysical suggestion, acknowledging – thanks to Simenon's literary artifices – the unpredictable status of reality, to which corresponds a gruff humility underpinning the investigator's character.

Let us consider the letter that he receives in Maigret hesitates. Its writer announces a crime, raising doubts not only about its perpetrator but also about the ability of the investigator to solve the case. The house always wins, reality imposes itself on the eyes of the beholder, even though it is constructed by the actions of the observers themselves.

You know better than I do that reality is sometimes farfetched. A murder will be committed soon, probably in a few days. Perhaps by someone I know, perhaps by myself.

I am not writing to prevent the tragedy occurring. In a way, it is inevitable. But when it does take place, I would like you to know

[...]

He had stopped smiling. With a frown, [...] “No, I don't think this is a madman”, he repeated.

(Simenon 1968; English translation 2019, 5).

Maigret recomposes the relationship between reality (the crime, the case to investigate) and construction (e.g., the actions that transform the object-quarrel into object-homicide, but also the observations useful to identify the culprit and transform them from subject-investigated to subject-guilty). These ontological suggestions are due to the necessarily weak, fragile epistemology (Corcuff 2013) characterising Simenon's realistic drift. Stating that the reality is produced with the scientific method of the hard sciences (Kuhn 1962) means ignoring the part of it relative to human nature and not ascribable to the criminal ideal-type (from Lombroso, on the physical characteristics, up to Weber, on the greater or lesser rational justification of the logic of action)⁹. Maigret shows us that the distinction between reality and social construction is not dichotomous but rather a relationship articulating what is (reality: e.g., there has been a murder) and what could be based on intuitions, projections and, indeed, intersubjective constructions of the meaning assumed by an intention (there could be a murder: by whom and based on which contextual parameters should it be investigated?).

Maigret's realism lies in allowing for chance and acknowledging the need to reflect on the fallibility of one's investigative powers, be it ever so rare. From this point of view, we are not only poles apart from Holmes, but we introduce a new, more political element, at least broadly speaking.

Acknowledging one's fallibility means abandoning the demiurgic dimension of investigative action as a scientific mission. Maigret's problem is a moral issue: solving cases is not a performance, rather, it is right to restore the body of the wounded sovereign (the law). Consequently, the possibility that a single man may have difficulties in solving a case opens the investigative space to a need for confrontation with a trusted interlocutor. In other words, it creates a democratic space for dialogue. This, in our opinion, is the meaning of Maigret's relationship with his wife. Let us consider his wife's reaction to the letter:

For once she didn't take him seriously.

You'll see, it's a hoax.

⁹ Weber (1919; 1920).

[...]

He found lilacs in rue Saint-Antoine, so there were some in the apartment that night, after all. (Simenon 1968; English translation 2019, 34).

Maigret's democratic ethos is influenced by the division of labour typical of the times (equality between man and woman, for example, implies a rigid complementarity of tasks, according to what Talcott Parsons would define the balance of power between instrumental-masculine and expressive-feminine functional specializations)¹⁰. Nevertheless, the philosophical project of the interpersonal communication between Maigret and his wife is a milestone: from a complete lack of talking women in the plot of the detective story to their presence in the private sphere. This configures the construction of a dialogic democracy in which domestic life (Kaufmann 2008) guides the profession of the investigator, perfects its humanity, assuages its scientist drifts. It humanizes him, constructing its professional reality and configuring a character who incorporates the reflexivity between himself and his outside world, in pragmatist terms (pragmatism being what more effectively introduces the concept of reflexivity as a mediation between ego and alter, encouraging the development of a philosophy that investigates movies and literature)¹¹. Maigret's wife is described by her role as a mediator between the officer and the man, whose characteristics are precisely what make him less fallible in terms of narrative plot and more original in the eyes of literary critics. And publishers are aware of this.

Various editorial logics confirm our assertions on the relationship between Maigret and his wife as an indicator of the democratization of genders in the genre (which also takes on a socio-cultural consistency in this direction). It is worth mentioning one. In 1980, the Giallo Mondadori series, directed by Oreste Del Buono, published a supplement, edited by Marco Polillo, with four of Maigret's stories¹², titled Maigret and his wife. Polillo, an expert in police literature, explains the reasons for this unusual collection:

«We know him. But her, Henriette Maigret, Commissioner Maigret's wife, what kind of woman is she? [...] Mrs Maigret is not an aristocrat, she's a simple woman, with a modest appearance [...] we mustn't forget that the Maigrets certainly get along well, they're one of the closest couples in crime novels [...] to live in perfect harmony with so unbearable a being as Maigret, one must possess uncommon qualities, such as, for example, exceptional goodness of spirit and a commendable capacity for endurance and patience, to say the least. Let's see, how does Mrs Maigret spend her days? She cleans and tidies the house [...], goes grocery shopping, cooks for herself and her husband, washes, irons, the typical activities of housewives [...] it's a quiet, serene life, a life that many would find monotonous, boring. But to the sweet, affectionate, shy Mrs Maigret, it's enough.» (Polillo 1980, 5-7).

Polillo's argument may seem a bit peremptory, at least for Maigret's affectionate readers. The meaning of his observations, which are indeed precise and rather good-natured, should be found, in our opinion, in the historical and cultural context in which this collection is published by Gialli Mondadori. The eighties saw the rediscovery of genre literature, but also full postmodernism (Lyotard and Rorty influenced philosophy and the relationship between solidarity and reality just the year before, in 1979)¹³. Beyond any causal link between postmodernist literature and the re-edition of the detective classics in Italy (an unlikely link, and in any case difficult to prove), we are witnessing new tendencies in the humanities, (not least literary criticism and linguistics influenced by post-structuralism). The new climate questions rigid thoughts on sexual identity, the fixed and immutable character of roles, gender democracy, flipping – or at the very least questioning – the masculine anthropocentric postulate, while women's comeback implies a gradual re-appropriation of public discourse. The reasoning on dialogic democracy entails a reflection on gender that is charged with weak arguments, in the sense attributed to philosophical thought by Vattimo and Rovatti (1983), who shortly afterwards will publish a famous collection of essays on the questioning of the monolithic character of thought and the institutions based on it. The stronger sex exists, but it is not necessarily the male sex, expressed by the bearer of a certain genetic or hormonal makeup. The wife can derive argumentative strength also from the private

¹⁰ See Parsons and Bales (1955).

¹¹ See Cavell (1981); Laugier (2019); Corcuff (2019).

¹² The four novels are *Le fou de Bergerac* (1932; English translation *The Madman of Bergerac*); *L'amoureux de Madame Maigret* (1944; English translation *Madame Maigret's Admirer*); *L'amie de Madame Maigret* (1950; English translation *Madame Maigret's Friend*); *Un Noël de Maigret* (1951; English translation *A Maigret Christmas*).

¹³ Lyotard (1979) and Rorty (1979).

sphere in which she is retrospectively placed; the inspector can hesitate without undermining his virility.

We are amid post-modernism, and the modernity of the detective story can be read in the light of the faster reversibility between identity codes in the social sciences. We refer particularly to women's growing public role, still budding in Simenon's modern fiction (at times still steeped in chauvinism) in the private sphere through literary solutions that emphasize the patience and virtues of Henriette Maigret.

And indeed, everyone knows her as Mrs Maigret.

It is therefore correct to say that Maigret is gruff and Mrs Maigret is patient, on this Polillo's words can be fully embraced. Nevertheless, before Mrs Maigret, women were almost absent in the detective story, or relegated to epic and sinful symbols, as in the case of the femme fatale in the budding American noir genre (which is precisely a narrative of disorder, the hardboiled opposed to the reassuring Mrs Cunningham!).

This sort of balance of power (Parsons and Bales 1955) between two types of specialisations – female-expressive (shall I fix you a Pernod?) and male-instrumental (I'm not coming home for dinner, I have to solve the case!) – is both literary and social. It should be read in the context of the society in which gender is developing (it is a literature that still consoles, clarifying the necessity of the return to social order through the resolution of the case!). In Sciascia's terms, women join the mechanism of the centrifugation of reality narrated in (and by) the detective novel: the private dimension burst in with literary relevance, unveiling the inspectors' doubts and complicating the cases through the necessary and painful recognition of their humanity, in contrast with the ineffable and abstract perfection of the nineteenth-century detective.

From this point of view Sherlock Holmes, Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe or Agata Christie's characters (both Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot) are (literally) logical constructs inspired by the abstract postulate of the rational man and the male domination of public action (Bourdieu 1998). Mrs Maigret allows her husband to pound the street while she does her chores. Nothing untoward in this: it's the 1930s and 1950s. The private dimension frees the police officer in his work, allowing him to make sense of what he is capable of. It is not yet the time of differentialist feminism (Mancina 2002): Maigret's wife teaches democracy to her husband based on a sexual agreement that leads him to stay outside, to eat at the Brasserie Dauphine, to doubt deductions, to follow an emotional intelligence that is grateful to the feminine inherent in each of us.

Pounding the streets, getting one's hands dirty, transforming the laboratory into an ethnography of the human zoo where the bourgeoisie is not always right and the marginalized and the nobility wrong (although with different debasements). This is Mrs Maigret: the construction of a two-man welfare system without which the commissioner would certainly not live up to his literary stature, but be a simple, good, state official. The State is perfected by generalization with respect to the family and the solidity of its few rules of justice. It is as if Mrs Maigret had read Hegel's philosophy of law. But she leaves the quotations, wisely alluded to, to her husband.

Let us consider Leonardo Sciascia's words on Maigret's method as an archetype of the modernization of the detective novel in its relationship with reality¹⁴:

The centrifugation of reality is the technical specification of the detective novel. The crime novel, like all gratuitous literature ("noir" or "chick lit" [...]), is, therefore, a by-product. It pertains to that literary undergrowth that only now, with intelligence and unscrupulousness, is beginning to be explored [...] The interest of those not in power in the administration of justice, the disrepute that the working classes have always bestowed on the official police, who, with the "pig" cop, has always received the most absolute contempt; and therefore the success of the private policemen who systematically beat and discredit the organized police, an expression of the ruling class – these reasons, only superficially explain the popular diffusion of the crime novel (Sciascia 1954; new edition 2018, 22. Personal translation).

The popularity of the detective genre increases in modern societies characterized by a bitter conflict between classes, cementing the narrative logic of gratuitous vs. sacred. This genre helps in

¹⁴ For a sociological reading, see Boltanski (2009) and Corcuff (2013).

reading the transition to modernity and the distinction between public and private as distrust towards a class-based society.

In other words, what Sciascia calls the “cult of gratuitousness” is both satisfaction and compensation for the lack of the consolatory horizon provided by sacred practices, wiped out by modernity as obsolete. Hence the appeal of gratuitous gestures (the cop who becomes “sheriff”, or the doctor who conscientiously objects to the point of conflicting with the law): their aesthetic consistency indicates a consistency of principle that legal formalisms seem not to satisfy, relaunching the sense of symbolic revenge in the name of the law (e.g. of the recent parade of “sheriff” ministers against the arrival of a former terrorist extradited from South America) or the overflow of just vs. legal (e.g. the fishermen who help irregular migrants at sea¹⁵, risking criminal proceedings).

Maigret can restore the fascination of intrigue on the literary level and the need for reconstructing the order on the social level. This is the centrifugation of reality. He represents the need to elaborate, on the one hand, the private sphere (politically) and, on the other, the doubt (conceptually) to ensure that popular literature remains an escapist genre, yet still capable to show how the whole of society is affected by the need for justice, allowing for certain cultural objects to be produced, distributed, consumed and commented on. Simenon’s greatness lies precisely in his ability to create and transcend a character who tells the story of a society and – through it – a necessarily imperfect method of dealing with a crime that becomes multiform, irritated by the social changes between the two wars (new mechanisms of impoverishment and enrichment to which correspond new logics of manifestation of crime) that will explode after World War II and the radical change in the structure of class relations (Boltanski 2011).

This is Maigret’s realist twist: not only the refined product of the application of an investigative methodology to the logic of individual literary cases but a story that gets dirty inside the plausible contexts narrating an evolving society. Any reference to actual events or persons is purely coincidental: a formula that protects from legal actions but induces legitimate suspicion about the truthfulness of the facts. As Sciascia writes:

Maigret’s first investigations [...]are rather far-fetched and confused [...]Simenon was more concerned in upholding the torch of intrigue and detective mystery, than in delving into the reality of his character and the environments in which he conducted his investigations. He slowly dropped the threads of intrigue [...] He gave more linearity to the action, reduced the number of characters, gave up virtuosity which, at the expense of verisimilitude, is precisely such a literary product (or by-product) (Sciascia 1954; new edition 2018, 94. Personal translation).

Quoting a central passage from Kracauer’s essay, in which he points out that the crime novel suggests that the police are necessary to obtain order, security and tranquillity on a social level, he adds:

We immediately think of Maigret: and not only because, in detective literature, he is one of the few investigators who represent the official police; but also for a more subtle reason [...]To come close to defining it, we could thus mock: the body necessary for public tranquillity, security and order is the writer’s office. And this also applies to Simenon novels without Maigret, in which his role is taken over personally by the writer (Sciascia 1954; new edition 2018, 107. Personal translation).

In this sense, Maigret is not only a famous literary character, but a method of investigation and an investigative philosophy that finds an adequate incarnation in the character, but that also transcends him, being represented in others of Simenon’s characters. It also happens for David Lynch’s characters – like the Twin Peaks killer: a force that must necessarily “wear” a body (Laugier 2019). Simenon’s characters are always representatives of his objective reflection on reality, of which Maigret is the main – but not the only – interpreter. See this passage from *The Blue Room* in which the suspect for the murder of a woman – his lover – tries to acquit himself by arguments that go beyond the interpersonal relationships between the characters involved and are instead ascribed to their different social backgrounds:

“Did you ever, before her marriage...”.

¹⁵ We are not referring only to current events, such as those surrounding the Diciotti and the Sea Watch but also to a long-standing problem in strategic outposts such as, e.g., Lampedusa, already highlighted by Zizek (2009) in his provocative invective against legal positivism.

“No, Your Honour.”

“Not even a flirtation? Didn't you ever kiss her?”

“It would never have crossed my mind.” “Why not?”

He almost replied, “Because she was too tall.”

And it was true. He could not have imagined this tall, impassive girl who reminded him of a statue ever making love.

Besides, she was Mademoiselle Formier, the daughter of Dr Formier, who had died during the wartime deportations. Was this explanation enough? He couldn't think of any other reason. The two of them had not belonged to the same circles.

(Simenon 1964; English translation 2005, 17-18).

This excerpt highlights the recurring themes in Simenon's literature: the constant importance of women, society invading the narrative plot through class relationships, prejudices about immigrants, the morality of unfaithful husbands. The democratic definition of society in Simenon sacrifices rationality to narrate a context that changes following intersectional logics. The investigative method is influenced by it, becoming less rational and more exploratory. In *The Blue Room*, the doubt that the main suspects are innocent and that guilt should be sought in those embodying a threadbare bourgeois morality is quite clear. Sciascia is right: here Simenon overcomes Maigret (who admits his weaknesses but usually solves the case) and affirms the principle of reality according to which even innocent people (although ethically blameworthy on some accounts) can be condemned because morality and prejudice replace the defence of civil rights, the presumption of innocence and reasonable doubt.

These last observations lead us to Renato Olivieri, also influenced by the change of pace that Sciascia identified in Maigret.

4. Part Two: The epistemic function of a tribute to Commissioner Maigret

4.1 Influences on Renato Olivieri's work as a realistic reflection on gender

Il Caso Kodra (Italy 1978)

Let us consider again the comparison between the two moments highlighted in the first part of this essay. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is a private investigator who follows the logic-deductive method – to the point of making the facts depend on the logical deductions of a sort of infallible Superman. Conversely, Simenon's Commissioner Maigret is a modern and intuitive public security officer (different from the cops mocked in Conan Doyle's works) who breaks the mystery and contingency in the study of reality, even if he usually solves cases. In particular, he questions his effectiveness in Maigret Hesitates. He questions his timeliness wondering whether it has not become impulse; he confides in his wife showing the need for reassurance. This literary expedient is not only an attack on the anti-sentimentalistic infallibility of the literary figure in charge of the investigation.

It is a paradigm shift that cracks open classic detective stories by making them realistic and opening them up to the noir. The latter, then, will introduce new realistic variables by perfecting the literary image of social detective stories as cultural objects. The evolution of the genre in Italy supports and adds details to this claim, as is shown by Renato Olivieri's novel *Il Caso Kodra*. Protagonist of the novels is Commissioner Ambrosio, a police officer like Maigret, moved by female charm, so much so that he lingers in the description of his professional profile as in a polite flirt. Let us consider this dialogue between the Commissioner and Emanuela, whom he met in this novel and who will later become his partner:

Did you take me for Sherlock Holmes?

No. I do not like Sherlock Holmes. I prefer Maigret.

Do I remind you of Maigret?

Maigret is older than you and fatter. No, I think you might look more like Mike Shayne, and also Marlowe...

How cultured you are! He said.

I'm not, I just read everything from mineral water labels to Mandrake comics.

Which crime fiction writers do you like best?

Chandler, McBain and Simenon.

Damn: like me – said Ambrosio, seriously surprised [...]

What about Agatha Christie? – he asked, as a kind of acid test.

I can't read it; Miss Marple, who discovers murderers while knitting, doesn't amuse me, nor does Hercule Poirot...

I'd like to hug you – he interrupted – I'd like to... say "good job".

You can say good job. She smiled.

(Olivieri 1978, 32, personal translation).

It is a ploy to orient a reflection on the most credible method for being a detective and to represent the inclusion of women's discourse in the detective novel.

Taking Emanuela's arm to get her across the street, Ambrosio felt the warmth between her armpit and breast and felt a kind of yearning that perhaps was simply the desire of a forty-eight-year-old man, still in full vigour, who hadn't slept with a woman for at least a month.

The restaurant, almost on the banks of the Naviglio, had a rustic air, red-checked tablecloths, candles on the tables, wine from the Oltrepò Pavese.

Simenon has been here once, they photographed him with vicolo delle Lavandaie in the background – said Ambrosio.

And he said that Maigret would have liked the place.

Have you read it too?

Of course, we have the same taste in literature, don't you remember?

I remember everything about you.

(Olivieri 1978, 72, personal translation).

Commissioner Ambrosio's sentimentality is not just a declaration of love or Olivieri's homage to his favourite literary character. It indicates the emergence, in Italian detective stories, of the key themes of a changing society: the conversation between genres; the territory as a literary character describing a reality (Maigret's Paris and Ambrosio's Milan, with their restaurants); randomness and anthropological disorder invading the police case. Women become suspects to be investigated: as subjects who negotiate the public space they can legitimately be portrayed as literary suspects. And this element emerges in Olivieri's work with a very precise stylistic force, although he is not the only author who – in Italy and Milan – pays homage to police realism by stylishly mocking the private investigator's logical deduction. Take, for example, Augusto De Angelis' ironic comparison, almost fifty years before Olivieri, between the self-sacrifice of the public official (Commissioner De Vincenzi) and an unlikely private investigator (Mr Harrington) in *Il Banchiere Assassinato*:

Mr Harrington:

«I hope [...] I can give you some help, cavaliere. I know more than the papers published this morning and I can tell you that I already have a theory».

Commissioner De Vincenzi:

«A theory, eh, Harrington? [...] Good thing to have a theory...! You should know that I don't have a theory!» [...]

Mr Harrington

«Oh! One just has to put one's brain cells to work!» [...]

De Vincenzi returned immediately to the Count.

«Please, excuse me! As you can see, I'm making your detective's job easier... A good man, that Harrington... He was waiting to be able to deal with a crime [...] Putting on an English name, like Sherlock Holmes, and having to deal only with information and tailing people... A martyrdom! But the good Lord helped him at last... »

(De Angelis 1930, 64. Personal translation).

The inclusion of women and, more generally, of reality impacts on the investigative method and allows for an ironic representation of the infallible isolation of the detective à la Sherlock Holmes and his logical deductions. Cinema follows suit: just think of Billy Wilder's film *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (GB 1970) which portrays a romantic adventure for Conan Doyle's hero, forsaking the myth of perfect rationality.

These are the central elements perfecting what we called the realist twist in detective fiction. They are also useful to guide further developments of the genre and reflect on how the principle of reality has been inhibited by previous and subsequent arbitrary constructions on reality.

These issues will be the subject of the final section.

5. Conclusion

Our considerations lead to the following results.

Sherlock Holmes is a private investigator *sui generis* who in *A Study in Red* is presented as the standard-bearer of perfect rationality, consequentialism, and an investigative method based on logical deduction. His formal scientific nature – which characterizes the stylistic feature of the successful saga – is not only the yardstick of his success (literary and mercantile, critical and public) but also his logical abstraction towards the social reality surrounding the crimes investigated.

Jules Maigret, a grumpy police officer with an unflinching flair for solving cases and a wife who patiently looks at the gender discourse from private to public, is an example of a different investigative method. He combines intuition and observation of the social relationships developed over his territory. He is a sort of ethnographer who prefers the empirical dimension to the logical one. In philosophical-theoretical terms, he combines Leibniz's concept with Hume's direct experience (Ferraris 2004).

Maigret reminds us that the detective story is born with an intrinsic moral and social connotation, suggesting to the reader that the territory becomes a real literary character. The background is a reality that – though recounted through the literary expedient of a verisimilar narrative – can express the boundaries between good and evil in a much more nuanced way than the original detective fiction. In this sense, Simenon's literature centrifuges reality – to use Sciascia's expression – and projects the detective story on real social problems, of which it is a sounding board as a popular cultural object.

Let us consider some examples. Contemporary to Simenon, Augusto De Angelis writes in Milan. He is a refined mystery writer, who experiences first censorship and then confinement after the measures dictated by the fascist regime (as a violent principle of reality) on the detective genre. First, in 1937, they imposed the crimes to be set abroad and then, in 1943, ordered the withdrawal of all the literature considered subversive because it was able to effectively portray the moral corruption of so heinous criminals that it could threaten the social order guaranteed by the government. Order reigns and the principle of reality chased by fascism becomes simulation thanks to the removal by censorship.

Another such master, Giorgio Scerbanenco, will have to set his detective stories in Boston¹⁶. However, the reflection on the need to represent evil in a plausible territory will only be postponed, and during the economic boom – of which Milan will be the moral capital – the Ukrainian-born writer will set there a tetralogy. Its protagonist is a doctor who has been disbarred for having euthanised an elderly woman and who will become a private investigator. His investigative activity will allow the reader to explore the dark face of Milan and the processes of modernization, which also concern the transformation of crime as a social phenomenon interested in appropriating a wildly and unfairly distributed wealth. The point of view of the perpetrators, already included by Maigret in his investigations (where, however, good triumphs) becomes the peculiarity of a more complex novel combining the themes of crime and noir.

Maigret's realistic tones still echo. In Italy, we see them in the proclivity of some magistrates for writing detective fiction, often successfully and together with journalists (for example, Gianrico Carofiglio, Michele Giuttari or Giancarlo De Cataldo) to describe through fiction their version of reality. The crisis of investigative journalism regarding some of the most recent mysteries finds in crime or noir writings an effective form of storytelling to affirm a reality that does not pretend to be historical or judicial but based on common sense and the ability to critically analyse the versions offered in some official forums. The collective consciousness (Durkheim 1893) gathers around a trauma (Alexander 2012) that recounts reality through fiction. Any reference to actual people and facts is purely coincidental, that is true. But it is not coincidental to think of a cognitively more mature democracy, of which police literature is a valuable ally.

On the connection between philosophy of politics and sociology of culture (pivotal to reflect on the change of the detective novel into social crime and then into noir) we offer the following observations that can sketch future research paths and inspire political change. Just as terror and democracy are outcomes of modernity – and *mutatis mutandis* are the flip side of each other – one could say that the detective story conceptually represents the ontological relationship between crime

¹⁶ On the writer's life, see the biography written by his daughter Cecilia (2018).

and law. The laws regulate crime, foresee it, and show society's ability to transcend law (or perhaps even the need for the right to self-transcend where it reproduces injustice in the name of the law?) through the criticism that guides the overcoming of the distinction between public and private. If we try to transpose these simple intuitions into the philosophical and political anthropology of the literary genre in question, trying also to place it on a specific level of sociological knowledge, the result is a narrative based on an aesthetic and existential self-representation which requires certain conditions to be objectified. The first concerns the admission of operativeness (on the cinematographic and narrative level it is precisely the turning point of the plot) between public ethics and private morality. The second is the recognition of the fact that this fundamental distinction is part of the researcher's observation scheme, which underlines the ability of society to transcend the law through the distinction between constituent and constituted power. The third (and perhaps the more important) consists in identifying the peculiarity of the genre in distinguishing the logic of conflict with the established power. The conflict does not necessarily concern its guiding principles but is expressed on the methods according to which an imperfect and paradoxical justice reproduces itself by conditioning legitimate conduct and imposing sanctions for deviant ones. The realist detective story, in particular, highlights the formal and abstractly cold character of legal positivism, giving the sociological observer and the reader an original configuration of the existing relationship between what is right and what is legal, between ethics of principles and responsibilities.

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