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**READING THE GENRE CODES IN GIORGIO
SCERBANENCO'S HYBRIDISED *ROMANZI ROSA***

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*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Italian Studies
The University of Auckland
2014*

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the techniques of and the potentialities inherent in the blending of popular genres in selected novels from Giorgio Scerbanenco's middle period (specifically, 1949-1963). Long characterised as popular romances (*romanzi rosa*), a form of literature particularly susceptible to critical disdain, these works have received virtually no study. As a result of Scerbanenco's posthumous designation as the father of Italian *noir*, the small amount of attention directed towards them has privileged their grittier elements and worked to reassess them – as crime novels, as adventure stories, or as *noir*. After exploring the reasons why such genre reassignment is possible, I argue that they are best assessed as hybrid forms. Although the view that Scerbanenco habitually blended genres is now widely held, I take a more even-handed approach than is usual in the critical literature, arguing that the sentimental strand of romance has a weight and validity equal to that of the darker strand of crime or *noir* they certainly contain.

I employ a mix of genre and reader-response theories to underpin my close analysis of these works. First I look at how Scerbanenco skilfully incorporates the codes of the popular romance, crime novel, Western, and spy story into his texts. I then discuss the processes of hybridisation and, in particular, the implications for the reader, who can choose to read these novels either mono-generically or as more ambivalent and nuanced hybrids. Given the traditional gender divide between “feminine” romance and “masculine” crime/adventure/*noir*, I explore the alternative constructions of gender models offered by the hybrid text. Finally, I draw on Scerbanenco's wartime philosophical writings, exploring links between ideas expressed in them and potential readings of these hybridised romances, and concluding that it is in the genre blend that the richest readings are to be found.

Acknowledgements

My supervisors, Dr Franco Manai and Professor Jose Colmeiro of the University of Auckland, are due special thanks for astutely guiding me through the long, immensely satisfying project that has resulted in this thesis – as is Auckland University for awarding me the Doctoral Scholarship that allowed me to study full-time.

I wish to congratulate the Scerbanenco/Scerbanenko family for recently establishing the Archivio Giorgio Scerbanenco; I especially thank Dott.ssa Cecilia Scerbanenco and Dott.ssa Nicoletta Talon (Director, Biblioteca Comunale di Lignano Sabbiadoro, FVG) for their warm welcome and enthusiastic assistance during my archival research.

Family and friends have sustained me throughout this project. I heartily thank my husband and son, David and Leo Pardon, for their unwavering support and good humour during what has been to them a most obscure pursuit. I also wish to thank Bridget Tompkins for generously sharing her own experiences of the tortuous doctoral path and providing encouragement and support when I most needed it. Lastly, I owe a great debt to my father, Alfred Hamlyn, whose sustained efforts to correspond with Italian wartime friends first kindled my interest in languages and in Italy – and who sadly died shortly before the completion of my project.

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INTRODUCTION

Popular fiction is typically genre fiction (Gelder 1), yet a work's genre can be contested and may even be reassigned. In this thesis, I examine Giorgio Scerbanenco's characteristic technique of genre blending within a group of novels once characterised as popular romances, in order to explain why it has been possible for the genre assignment of these works to be questioned and revised; I further argue that the key to understanding these texts lies in appreciating the richness of their hybrid form.

The texts in question, all belonging to the middle period of Scerbanenco's long career writing popular fiction, were initially marketed as *romanzi rosa* (literally, "pink novels"), a form of sentimental literature whose focus is directed narrowly onto a love relationship that meets obstacles but has a happy outcome. In more recent years, as a result of Scerbanenco's posthumous designation as the "father of the Italian *noir*" and the elevated status the crime genre (or *giallo*) has acquired among readers, his publishers and critics alike have reassessed Scerbanenco's sentimental novels and short stories, placing an emphasis on elements of other popular genres that may be detected within them, and seeking to reposition many of these texts as crime fiction, as adventure stories, or as *noir*.

I do not suggest that such repositioning is invalid; rather, I argue that my selected texts are best approached as hybrid forms, in which popular genres are blended in ways that yield ambiguous and nuanced readings. In other words, I claim for them a depth and plurality of meaning that is often denied genre literature, justifying a serious critical attention that has been lacking to date. My decision to supply especially detailed descriptions of the texts

throughout this study is a response to both this dearth of criticism and the fact that many of the novels are out of print and no longer widely known.

The ten works that I submit to in-depth study have been selected from the more than eighty novels written by this most prolific author because they provide particularly illustrative examples of Scerbanenco's genre blending. *Anime senza cielo* (1950)¹ and *Appuntamento a Trieste* (1953) combine elements of romance and spy novel; *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* (1950) and *Rossa/Innamorati* (1951)² may be styled romantic Westerns. *I diecimila angeli* (1956), *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo* (1958), *Il fiume verde* (1952), *Johanna della foresta* (1955), *Noi due e nient'altro* (1959), and *La sabbia non ricorda* (1963) all combine features of the popular romance and the crime novel in its many variant forms – classic detection, hard-boiled, and *noir*.

Genre is a powerful tool at all stages in the production and consumption of popular literature, providing a frame of reference for writer, distributor, and reader alike. Its role in communication and meaning making explains how reassignment is possible, for genre resides not just in the text but in a dynamic interplay between text and reader; it is a “shared convention” (Frow 102), shaped both by paratextual factors such as marketing strategies and critical assessments and by socio-historically situated reading communities.

I therefore employ a mix of genre and reader-response theories to underpin my close reading and to engage with the following issues: the extent to which these novels embody, simultaneously, the codes of romance, crime, and adventure fiction; how the genre hybridisation is manifested, and the dualities and oppositions that are created; the reader

¹ Dates are for first book publication. All were first published serially, in the same or the previous year.

² On first serial (*Novella*, 1950) and book (Rizzoli, 1951) publication, this novel was titled *Innamorati*. Sellerio's 2004 reissue took the heroine's name to supply a new title, *Rossa*, which hereafter I use.

responses potentialised by the multiple codings and ambivalent prompts of the hybrid form; the gender constructs potentialised by the hybridity; and the correlation of the potential responses elicited by the genre blending with philosophies expressed in Scerbanenco's non-fiction exile writing.

In describing the elemental features of popular genres, I use the term *codes* in preference to the more commonly encountered *formulas*, primarily to align my terminology with Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding in media communication, which informs my study of the interplay between text and reader, but also to avoid the negative connotations that surround *formula*, a designation that implies that popular writers merely reassemble stock building blocks.³

Scerbanenco's literary fame rests almost entirely on a series of four hard-boiled detective novels published between 1966 and 1969, just before the author's premature death. These novels, featuring a violent, vengeful private detective, Duca Lamberti, in a squalid and venal contemporary Milan, won Scerbanenco literary acclaim; they also, along with Fruttero and Lucentini's 1972 crime novel *La donna della domenica*,⁴ initiated a breach in the traditionally rigid barrier between "high" and "low" literature in Italy – such that the Italian crime novel has in recent years been recognised as a valid vehicle for the interpretation and critique of Italian society. In Elvio Guagnini's opinion, "if the crime novel is no longer considered as just one kind of throwaway literature, we [...] owe this to Scerbanenco" ("se il

³ I also wish to avoid the terminological confusions deriving from the seminal early works of John G. Cawelti, in which *formula story* is used as a synonym for *popular genre*. Pamela Regis (23-25) points out the limitations and inadequacies of the term *formula*, concluding that formulas are simply possibilities available to writers, subsets of genres that cannot be used to define the parent form. Cawelti himself has conceded that his terminology regarding formulas and genres has caused confusion ("Formulas and Genre Reconsidered" 130).

⁴ On the significance of Fruttero and Lucentini, see Franco Manai.

giallo non è più considerato soltanto come un aspetto del consumo letterario, lo si deve [...] a Scerbanenco”) (67).⁵

The Lamberti novels have overshadowed Scerbanenco’s prolific literary output to the extent that until very recently critics paid scant attention to his pre-1966 novels. As Roberto Pirani has wryly observed, “For many readers Scerbanenco’s writing career is meteoric: from 1966, when his first great *noir*, *Venere privata*, appeared, until his premature death in 1969” (“Per molti lettori la ‘vita letteraria’ di Giorgio Scerbanenco è una meteora: dal 1966, comparsa del primo grande *noir* *Venere privata*, alla morte precoce nel 1969”) (“Nota” 289). Since the late 1930s, however, Scerbanenco had produced perhaps eighty novels and more than one thousand short stories manifesting the features of a variety of popular genres – notably, romances, classic detective novels, science fiction, thrillers, Westerns, and spy stories. Latterly, some critical attention has been turned upon a series of classic detective novels Scerbanenco wrote in the 1940s under the constraints of Fascist censorship – the Arthur Jelling series. Yet the majority of the novels published before 1966 have had no close scrutiny, a fact no doubt attributable to their categorisation as popular romance, a genre which still struggles to be taken seriously by literary critics.

I am by no means the first to suggest that hybridity is a hallmark of Scerbanenco’s texts: Pirani, in particular, has noted the author’s “liberal use of contamination” (“uso spregiudicato della contaminazione”) (“Nota” 290). My approach is new, however, in giving equal weight to the strand of sentiment in the genre hybrid, a strand that has been left largely unexamined in an overwhelming critical privileging of the *noir* aspect of Scerbanenco’s work.

⁵ All translations from the original Italian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

My choice to focus primarily on a selection of the novels written in Scerbanenco's mid-career, between 1949 and 1963, was governed by the fact that they present a series of common elements differentiating them from the previous and succeeding phases of his production. They were all written after the author's wartime exile in Switzerland (1943-1945) – a period that marks a significant watershed in both the style and the tone of his writing – and before the appearance of the Lamberti novels. All contain strong love stories: hence their designation as *romanzi rosa*.

Appearing first in popular women's magazines and subsequently in cheap popular editions, these novels can be seen as essentially commercial products directed to a lowbrow female readership. However, their later publishing history, characterised by a conscious attempt on the part of publishers to make them palatable to a larger and less gender-defined audience through a series of marketing techniques (issuing them in new series, with new covers and blurbs), indicates that the publishers themselves recognised that they contained the potential to be enjoyed by new reading communities.⁶

While these novels make heavy use of genre codes, they combine codes from different genres in ways that have allowed the same work to be marketed at different times as romance, crime, or adventure; they turn an intense focus onto love relationships – erotic and familial – using codes clearly drawn from the *romanzo rosa* tradition, and yet, unusually for the genre, the point of view is primarily male or at least rarely primarily female. They appear to project, simultaneously, a world of fable and fantasy and a world of social realism. The romance is traditionally understood to deal in sentiment and a contained domestic world,

⁶ For publishing history I rely on Pirani's heroic efforts to establish a comprehensive bibliography ("Bibliografia" 159-281).

while the crime and adventure story offer rationality, action, and public life;⁷ in the works under review there is, however, a complex weave of emotion and intellect, introspection and action, the private and the public sphere, that offers the reader the chance to veer away from simple “feminine” or “masculine” reading positions.

Scerbanenco’s propensity for genre blending can be found in some measure throughout the many short stories published contemporaneously with these novels, many of which have been subsequently anthologised, as well as in the early detective fiction (the 1940s Jelling series) and the late crime novels (the 1960s Lamberti series), all of which remain outside my current project. In the case of the Jelling and Lamberti series, the genre balance is weighted decidedly towards crime – classic and hard-boiled detective fiction, respectively – with sentiment as a lesser element.

The pre-war romances do not form part of this study. This is partly a matter of necessity, since almost none of these novels are available in bookshops or libraries; more importantly, however, it is an acknowledgment that Scerbanenco’s work underwent a significant change after his traumatic experience of exile.

Employing a concept of decoding derived from Hall’s seminal essay on the production, circulation, use, and reproduction of messages within popular media, I overlay multiple close readings of selected novels in order to decode them, firstly as romances, secondly as crime novels or adventure thrillers, and finally as hybrid forms, questioning how the embedded codes of the individual genres and, ultimately, the unique offering of the hybrid may create

⁷ See Kay Mussell 63-64; Martin Pumphrey 181.

the potential for divergent readings. In so doing, I make manifest in my own performance the work of any reader, as delineated in Hall's model.⁸

A crucial component of genre is intertextuality: by definition, genres are composed of many exemplars and are recognised and interpreted by a reader through comparison with other, already-known texts that the reader understands to be "prototypical, representative members" of the particular genre (Fishelov 8). They are also defined by what they are *not*, so that differences are as important as similarities in the play of intertextuality. Thus from time to time I position Scerbanenco's works alongside representative works by other noted Italian romance writers who were his contemporaries and, indeed, professed rivals: Liala (Amalia Liana Cambiasi Negretti Odescalchi)'s *Passione lontana* (1956), Teresa Sensi's *Oggi è come ieri* (1953), Milli (or Milly) Dandolo's *La prigioniera* (1942), and Dora Mancuso's *Questo amore è mio* (1950).⁹ Such comparison, while highlighting both Scerbanenco's adherence to and his divergence from the norms of the classic Italian *romanzo rosa*, fulfils a double function: while it is a means of interrogating the assignment of genre, based on intertextual similarities, it also recognises the fallacy of assuming that all products of the same genre are identical and thus can be judged en masse. For, as Giuseppe Petronio, an early champion of the critical study of popular literature, has pointed out, "distinctions regarding value [...] are made not between one genre and another, but within each genre, and so characterise works and not genres" ("la distinzione di valore [...] passa non tra l'uno e l'altro genere, ma

⁸ Hall is of course specifically modelling the transmission and acceptance/rejection of ideological messages, using the particular case of television. I find his semiotically based model an effective tool, however, to map the broad process of media communication.

⁹ Cecilia Scerbanenco records that Liala, in a letter, described Scerbanenco as her rival ("Giorgio Scerbanenco: Biografia"). Nunzia Monanni recalls how Scerbanenco admired the sensitivity, refinement, and humanity of Milli Dandolo's writing (292).

all'interno di ciascun genere, e pertanto caratterizza opere non generi") (*Letteratura di massa* xxxiii).

Any approach to popular literature tends to fall into either a positive or a negative camp. The negative stance – epitomised by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School and their writings on what they styled the “culture industry” – views popular literature as a consumer product that is fed to a passive recipient and is deeply conservative in nature.¹⁰ I instead take the positive stance promulgated by members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), including Hall and John Fiske, which sees the reader as an active, critical participant in the processing of popular culture and allows the possibility that responses may be unexpected and even transgressive.

I apply precepts drawn both from broad genre theory and from seminal studies of the specific genres of romance, crime, *noir*, and adventure fiction to test the extent to which my chosen novels adhere to or confound the codes which underpin these genres. I further apply a reader-response critique as a means to query the possibilities of reception of a text in which every character, situation, and action is open to interpretation via at least two different genre codes.

The thesis falls into three major sections, beginning in Part One with essential background. Chapter One provides a brief summary of Scerbanenco's life and career in order to contextualise his characteristic preoccupation with the victim and the outcast as well as his abiding need to work as a commercial writer – both factors that have a strong bearing on his choice to work within popular genre fiction. My emphasis on the importance of the

¹⁰ See their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's “Culture Industry Reconsidered”.

overlooked middle years in his literary trajectory stands also in partial compensation for the dearth of critical material on this period.

Such lacunae in critical coverage are made apparent in my review of the body of Scerbanenco scholarship, which to date has focused almost entirely on the Lamberti novels and, to a lesser extent, on Scerbanenco's pre-war Jelling series of detective novels.

Nevertheless, the still rather small corpus of critical material provides a context for my own position. Indeed, one result of my current project is a thorough demonstration of how features once believed to be unique to Scerbanenco's late crime novels are presented to a well-developed degree in his mid-period work. While it is true that much extant scholarship acknowledges that hybridity is a lifelong hallmark of the author's work, it fully explores neither the techniques of genre blending nor the implications for multiple interpretive positionings that form my particular interest.

Chapter Two lays out my theoretical basis, informed by Hall's encoding/decoding model and grounded in theories of genre and reader response. Theoretical approaches to genre have run the gamut from those positing genre to be a set of prescriptions located in the text (the classic Aristotelian position) to those considering it to be a pragmatic tool imposed by the reader or critic (a position championed by Adena Rosmarin). My own stance is situated midway between these extremes, locating genre neither wholly in the text, nor wholly in the reader, but in the process of communication – the encoding/decoding interplay – between the two.

Genre fiction, built as it is upon the premise that the reader will understand and react to the specific genre codes embedded in the text, particularly lends itself to reader-response analysis. My project is necessarily not based on empirical reader research (the

“anthropological” approach employed by Janice Radway, for example, in her study of the Smithton group of romance readers, *Reading the Romance*), given the difficulties of uncovering the responses of Scerbanenco’s actual readers over more than half a century; instead, it draws upon the considerable body of theory that explores the interface between text and reader. That is, my interest is in the potentials residing within the hybrid text and how they may be activated by readers.

Part Two of the thesis consists of three chapters in which I scrutinise the narrative structures of the selected novels, working with theories of the specific genres of popular fiction that may be identified in these texts. Here I look at what Wolfgang Iser has termed the artistic (author-created) pole of the text-reader interplay (*Implied Reader* 274) or, in Hall’s terminology, the locus of the encoding process (130). By drawing out the individual strands of the genre blend, I demonstrate how each of the texts may legitimately be read in the key of a single genre.

In Chapter Three I construct a working tool for the critique of the popular romance against which Scerbanenco’s works will be measured. In so doing, my interest is textual rather than socio-cultural: that is, I do not follow the critical path – epitomised by Germaine Greer (*Female Eunuch* 171-89) – of questioning the effects on women of reading romances; nor do I take Radway’s approach of questioning the psychological needs the romance genre fulfils for the reader.¹¹ Both schools of criticism too often imply disparagement of both the romance and its readers, a position I find unhelpful.

¹¹ Many of Radway’s insights into textual matters do, however, prove valuable for my initial analysis of the codes of romance.

Indeed, Antonia Arslan and Maria Pia Pozzato have commented on the discomfort that seems to overcome critics when they approach this genre: “Every critical discourse on romance literature is distinguished by a certain degree of embarrassment which is more or less in evidence. [...] the writer becomes ironic and tends to focus solely on the paradoxical and ridiculous sides of the object [...]” (“Ogni discorso critico sulla letteratura rosa è contraddistinto da un certo margine di imbarazzo più o meno evidente. [...] chi scrive diventa ironico e tende a mettere in luce solo i lati paradossali e ridicoli dell’oggetto [...]”) (“Il rosa” 1027). Pamela Regis notes that “Even the most cursory survey of criticism of this genre yields a ringing condemnation of it [...]” (3). It is not difficult to imagine that this discomfort may explain why criticism of Scerbanenco has tended to gloss over the sentimental or *rosa* strand in order to focus on the *noir*, a lack to which I provide a corrective by demonstrating that the *rosa* has an equal weight and validity within the blended form.

My method is to perform an analysis that no one has performed with any rigour to date: to test Scerbanenco’s works against the commonly understood codes of romance fiction to establish how closely they match the expectations of this genre. To this end, I rely upon theories drawn principally from Regis, Radway, Arslan, Pozzato, Eugenia Roccella, and George Paizis. Regis, Roccella, and Arslan/Pozzato provide schematisations of the essential codes of this genre, while Radway has specifically looked at how readers respond to it. Subtitled his study “The Poetics and Politics of Romance Fiction”, Paizis attempts to reconcile the two positions, while according a respect to readers that was absent in some early studies. This framework allows me to measure to what extent Scerbanenco obeyed the rules of the genre, to what extent he broke or modified them, and what results may ensue.

In Chapter Four I apply a similar approach to the aspect of crime, looking first for the “rules of the game” or archetypal patterns of the detective novel, as enumerated by John G. Cawelti, Tzvetan Todorov, Lee Horsley, Heta Pyrhönen, Carl D. Malmgren, George N. Dove, and others, in order to investigate the ways in which Scerbanenco employs recognised codes from this genre in novels once labelled simply as romance.

Many of the novels under study present a generalised atmosphere of crime and guilt, rather than a specific crime to be solved, and are better categorised as *noir*. In these instances, some kind of crime, real or imagined, underpins the text, but there is no need to track and expose the perpetrator since the facts are known by both reader and protagonists from the outset. Rather than providing a puzzle to be solved, the crime creates a situation of unbearable stress and throws certain of the novel’s characters (including the villain, sometimes) into a state of victimhood from which they must struggle to escape. Though more commonly applied to film, critical theories of *noir* provide the basis for my analysis of this atmosphere of crime, guilt, entrapment, and social menace.

Rounding out my genre-based study of the encoding process, in Chapter Five I again follow the same methodology of identifying structural features to explore how thoroughly Scerbanenco’s romantic Westerns and romantic tales of espionage conform to the codes of these classic adventure genres (as expounded by Jane Tompkins, Lee Clark Mitchell, John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg, Allan Hepburn, and Jerry Palmer, among others). At the same time, drawing on theories of *noir* raised in the previous chapter, I examine how this additional layer affects decoding of genre in these classic popular forms – and so I initiate the discussion of hybridisation that occupies Part Three.

Having demonstrated the validity of reading these novels through a single genre filter as exemplars of, alternatively, romance, crime fiction, or adventure-based Westerns or spy stories, in Part Three I examine the process of genre hybridisation and its implications and, in particular, the multiple readings offered by the ambivalent text. In exploring indeterminacies, ambiguities, and polysemy, I here turn my attention towards Iser's aesthetic (or reader-realised) pole of the text-reader interplay (*Implied Reader* 274) – and Hall's locus of decoding (130). Throughout this final section, comparisons with the classic romances of Scerbanenco's contemporary *rosa* writers make evident the more nuanced, ambiguous, and less programmed offerings of Scerbanenco's texts.

In Chapter Six I deal with the broad issues of genre hybridisation,¹² examining processes of both encoding and decoding hybridity and discussing the difference between truly organic (structural) hybridity and simple application of tonal overlays borrowed from secondary genres. Here, guided by the insights of Gérard Genette (*Paratexts*), I take account of certain paratextual features of the works studied, since my central contention – that the hybridisation of genre leaves Scerbanenco's works open to multiple readings – is reinforced by the way in which particular novels have been marketed. Unpublished story outlines held by the Scerbanenco Archive provide further insight into the processes of forging genre at the textual pole, evidencing the changes of genre coding that occurred between the initial conception and the final drafts of certain of the texts that make up my study. Finally in this chapter, I submit my texts to the “double reading” that hybridity engenders.

¹² Defined by David Duff as “The process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work” (xiv). It is the second definition that is most relevant to my study.

A reader is drawn into the world of the text and offered a variety of decoding positions through such techniques as choice of narrator and focaliser. Chapter Seven applies insights from Genette and Mieke Bal to examine Scerbanenco's characteristic shifting focalisation, with its even-handed attention to the viewpoint of heroine and hero, and the potential this fluctuating perspective creates for a variety of identifications and shifts in decodings. I do not accept the commonly encountered opinion that the (female) reader of romance identifies closely and exclusively with the female protagonist, arguing instead that genre hybridity and shifting focalisation allow for a variety of identifications. In my argument regarding potential identification, I am guided by the insights of Emily Moyer-Gusé; Keith Oatley; and Marisa Bortolussi, Peter Dixon, and Paul Sopčák, among others.

In Chapter Eight I examine the implications of genre hybridity on the textual construction of gender models, both masculine and feminine. Virtually all criticism of the popular romance has had a feminist inflection, much of it based on a "media-effects" model that tends to see this genre as instilling acceptance of a repressive patriarchal ideology. More recent feminist readings have claimed the genre to be subversive and empowering. Critical attention has also been directed to the patriarchal discourses underpinning the predominantly male world of crime and adventure. All these popular genres are traditionally considered to construct stereotypical models of passive, submissive femininity and active, dominant masculinity. Both models, I argue, may be read in divergent ways in Scerbanenco's texts, which reinforce the ambiguities thrown up by the genre hybridity with a polyphony of voices that draws the text away from glib gender stereotypes.

Critics have long noted Scerbanenco's particular concern for the disempowered ordinary citizen, struggling to cope in an era of rapid change. And so in Chapter Nine I take up

Scerbanenco's characteristic preoccupation with how one may survive in a cruel world. Specifically, I examine correlations between the ambiguity arising from the hybrid and the author's personal philosophy as expressed in his Swiss exile writings, in which he concludes that, although life is often cruel and seems senseless, hope lies in compassion and human solidarity. I find in this a crucial key for interpreting the genre blend, in which the harsh and alienating crime world is balanced by the warmth and humanity of the love world.

In my conclusion, as well as summarising my findings, I suggest some new areas for study that may arise from my work, including closer scrutiny of the sentimental component of the Lamberti and Jelling series and the neglected issue of the male writer of popular romance, which is of course everywhere implicit in my current thesis.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING GIORGIO SCERBANENCO

Scerbanenco's hybrid texts are characterised by their focus on the sufferings of the small victims of social, political, and economic forces beyond their control, a preoccupation that is surely informed by the author's difficult early life and enduring sense of being an outsider. To understand not only his characteristic style and subject matter but also the factors that impelled him to spend almost all his writing life in commercial publishing therefore requires knowledge of the main facts of his life. This introductory chapter will also provide a summary of criticism to date, both to situate my own position within the existing body of Scerbanenco scholarship and to demonstrate the lack of attention given to his sentimental novels.

Scerbanenco's life and career¹³

Vladimir Giorgio Valerianovich Scerbanenko¹⁴ was born in Kiev (Russia, now Ukraine) in 1911 to an Italian mother and Russian father. Having taken her infant son back to Rome on a temporary visit, his mother found her return and all contact with her husband blocked by the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent Russian Revolution. Thus Giorgio was about nine before his mother took him back to Kiev, where they learned the father had been

¹³ I here draw on Scerbanenco's long essay "Io, Vladimir Scerbanenko" and the biographical sketches edited and expanded by his partner, Nunzia Monanni, as "Giorgio Scerbanenco: Una cronologia". A biographical note by his daughter, Cecilia Scerbanenco, can be found on the website of the Biblioteca Comunale di Lignano Sabbiadoro. Andrea Paganini's prefaces and articles shed light on the exile years.

¹⁴ Scerbanenco italianised his name in his teens. His striking and rather unusual physical appearance was another point of difference, and throughout his life he remained sensitive to perceptions that he was not fully Italian.

executed during the Revolution. A period of internment in Russia, followed by a difficult and dangerous return to Italy, exposed the boy to the grim realities of war and its aftermath.

Mother and son again lived with extended family in Rome until 1927, when they relocated to Milan, the city with which Scerbanenco was to be associated for the rest of his life. Faced here with extreme poverty and a mother dying of cancer, Scerbanenco was unable to complete his formal education, taking on a series of manual and clerical jobs while reading voraciously and writing short stories by night. When he was eighteen his mother died, and he entered a period of acute poverty, ill health, and, at one point, near starvation.

Scerbanenco's career as a professional writer began when his talent was spotted by Cesare Zavattini of the Milanese publishing house Rizzoli, who offered him employment; thus from the late 1930s until the early 1960s Scerbanenco worked as a writer for and editor of mass-circulation women's magazines. As "Adrian" or "Valentino", he responded to his female readers' problems in advice columns; at the same time, he encouraged readers to send him vignettes of their everyday life, which he reshaped for publication. Concurrently, Scerbanenco published dozens of novels and hundreds of short stories, an output so prolific that his colleague, the critic Oreste Del Buono, dubbed him "an extraordinary human typewriter" ("Un'eccezionale macchina per scrivere storie") ("Lavanda d'Ucraina" vi).

Though known primarily for his popular genre fiction, during a period of exile in Switzerland during the last years of the Second World War – a period marked by loneliness, depression, and further ill health – Scerbanenco wrote some bleak novels and novellas, far removed in tone and style from his earlier work, most of which were not published – or at least not widely distributed – until long after his death, but that attest to his desire to be considered a

serious writer. While in exile he also wrote a series of short essays expounding a personal philosophy of life.¹⁵

After the war, Scerbanenco returned to Milan, where he resumed his career as a professional writer, continuing to edit women's magazines and write genre fiction at a rate of two or three novels each year. By the 1950s he was a major figure in both fields, and his female following such that, according to Natalia Aspesi, "there are whole generations of women who emancipated themselves, and understood the life no one explained to them, reading Scerbanenco's romances" ("ci sono intere generazioni di donne che si sono emancipate, e hanno capito la vita che nessuno gli spiegava, leggendo i romanzi 'rosa' di Scerbanenco") (33).

Perhaps because of the personal and financial insecurities of his early life, it was not until the mid-1960s that Scerbanenco, now aged in his fifties, felt able to renounce his editorial career and devote himself to full-time writing. The resulting Duca Lamberti crime novels met immediate success with the Italian public and were translated into several other European languages.

Scerbanenco died of a heart attack in 1969, having in 1968 won the French *Grand prix de la littérature policière*, and having finally come to the attention of literary critics after a lifetime of working in a field – popular literature – traditionally considered beyond the pale of serious study.

¹⁵ Originally published in a local newspaper, *Il grigione italiano*, the philosophical essays have been recently edited and republished by Paganini under the title *Il mestiere di uomo*. Two of the Swiss novellas remained unpublished until Sellerio issued them in 2007 under the title *Annalisa e il passaggio a livello*. The other titles in question are the novella *Lupa in convento* (first published by Theoria, 1984) and the novels *Luna di miele* (Baldini & Castoldi, 1945), *Non rimanere soli* (Gnocchi, 1945), and *Il cavallo venduto* (Rizzoli, 1963).

Scerbanenco's *romanzi rosa*

After a brief foray into classic detective fiction in the early 1940s, and before he returned to much darker crime with Lamberti in the 1960s, Scerbanenco entered “a period generally designated his ‘pink period’ [...]” (“un periodo che viene di regola designato come *periodo rosa* [...]”) (Macioti 211). Because of its characteristic focus on an intense love relationship which is first thwarted and then resolved in a “happy ending”, this mid-period fiction was long dismissed as trivial escapist romance, solely of interest to a lowbrow female readership. Pirani sums up the critical disdain for this genre in his remark that “Certainly we knew of the existence of the so-called ‘pink’ Scerbanenco, author of numerous novels for the popular press’s ‘female public’, but none of us had ever read them [...]” (“Sapevamo certo dell’esistenza dello Scerbanenco cosiddetto ‘rosa’, autore di un ampio numero di romanzi per il ‘pubblico femminile’ dei rotocalchi, ma nessuno di noi li aveva mai letti [...]”) (“Alla ricerca” 106).

Although – as I demonstrate in Chapter Three – Scerbanenco was adept at following the norms of the genre, far from endlessly reproducing hackneyed stereotypes and well-worn plots, his *romanzi rosa* manifest inventiveness in their stories as well as acutely observed characterisation and the flair for capturing place, in their recognisable Italian locations, that is a hallmark of his late crime fiction. Nor do they shy away from the darker sides of contemporary life that are harder to resolve in a bland happy ending.

Critics such as Del Buono and Pirani would indeed later identify a pervasive strain of *noir* permeating Scerbanenco’s entire production and question the *rosa* label. By spearheading republication of out-of-print novels and stories, Del Buono and Pirani opened up the

possibility for a posthumous reassessment of Scerbanenco's entire literary output as more complex than was long supposed. The result of this renewed interest has tended, however, to shift the critical focus rather too far in the opposite direction, onto the elements of *noir* and away from the equally pervasive strand of romance. It is instructive that the posthumously published collections of stories and novels focus on their *noir* aspect.¹⁶ What is more, although hybridisation is certainly acknowledged in the corpus of criticism, little attention has been given to either the techniques or the effects of genre blending.

Scerbanenco: a critical review

The body of criticism of Scerbanenco's works is not large. Much is confined to brief reviews, to a few pages within broad studies of Italian crime fiction, or to introductions to new editions of novels and short story collections. Such extended critiques as exist have focused almost exclusively on the Lamberti and, to a lesser extent, Jelling, novels and hence on the importance of Scerbanenco to the development of the modern Italian crime novel. Those critics who acknowledge Scerbanenco's entire output, and indeed identify commonalities of technique and theme throughout his long and prolific career, still avoid discussion of the courtship plots as they mine the sentimental novels and stories for signs of *noir*. I have not uncovered any critical study that focuses entirely, or even primarily, on "Scerbanenco 'rosa'".

Scerbanenco's early champion Del Buono would appear to be the first to have raised the issue of genre blending, in his brief introductory essays to the new editions of novels and

¹⁶ *Milano calibro 9* ("9 calibre Milan") (1969), *Il centodelitti* ("One hundred crimes") (1970), *Metropoli del delitto* ("Crime metropolis") (1975), *Il cinquecento delitti* ("Five hundred crimes") (1994), *Uccidere per amore* ("Killing for love") (2002), *Racconti neri* ("Noir stories") (2005), *Nebbia sul Naviglio e altri racconti gialli e neri* ("Fog over the Naviglio and other crime and noir stories") (2011).

stories he edited in the 1960s and 1970s. His 1969 essay “Il rosa, il giallo, e il nero” notes the lack of respect accorded popular literature and, in particular, the romance novel, suggesting that Scerbanenco had to escape from a kind of literary ghetto: “[il] ghetto della letteratura rosa” (9). Del Buono here acknowledges the constant presence of darker elements in Scerbanenco’s writings, where tension is mixed with love from start to finish, and ultimately questions the usefulness of such rigid genre classifications, when the most important factor is the ability to tell a story (10).

Del Buono’s serious attentions have been continued by Pirani in his critical introductions to recent reprints of novels and story collections in the series “La Memoria”, issued by the publishing house Sellerio. Pirani has recounted how, while compiling his *Dizionario bibliografico del giallo*, he felt obliged to look over the forgotten novels and stories from the period 1933-1965, which he describes as a veritable “lost continent” (“continente perduto”), a quest which led him to overturn his former assumption of sharp genre divisions forming a dichotomy of “Scerbanenco nero” and “Scerbanenco rosa” (“Alla ricerca” 106).

Condensing an extremely broad survey into a brief article, Pirani necessarily touches only lightly on specific novels and stories, but makes two crucial general points: firstly, that love is a powerful point of entry into the human drama and, secondly, that the stories are based on dualities and oppositions. In my study, I draw out these dualities and oppositions by demonstrating their genesis in the superimposition of codes from differing genres. Indeed, I argue that dualities and oppositions are not restricted to component parts (such as characters) but form an essential organising principle that generates ambiguities and leaves the texts open to multiple readings.

Pirani, one of the very few critics to turn a serious eye (if briefly) onto the so-called *rosa* period, was also one of the first to note the formal and thematic changes in the author's work resulting from the traumatic effects of the war. I concur with Pirani's conclusion that, post-war, even the romances bear the stamp, either explicitly or implicitly, of this experience ("Alla ricerca" 110).

Gianni Canova restricts his appraisal to the Lamberti novels, critiquing Scerbanenco in terms of the consumer market and judging him to be a consummate popular writer who knew his market and knew exactly how to engage the reader with a balance of sadism and pathos that repelled and attracted in equal measure (157). Although he provides a useful analysis of the thread of sentiment in the Lamberti series, Canova sees it as a somewhat cloying functional device, a necessary counterweight to the pervasive sadism. Canova's emphasis on reader response is very pertinent to my study, but his view of the novels as essentially manipulative consumer products diverges from my own. I am, however, in agreement with his comments on Scerbanenco's use of a Bakhtinian polyphony of voices, a point I explore in Chapter Eight.

A more positive reading of genre hybridity occurs in Marco Sangiorgi's appraisal of the Lamberti novels. Though he too is interested in these novels primarily as Italian *noir*, he praises the author for combining "typical elements from different genres, blending them into an original mix [...] giving rise to a hybrid that is [his] true hallmark [...]" ("elementi tipici di generi diversi, compenetrandoli in una miscela originale [...] dando luogo a un ibrido che è la [sua] vera cifra distintiva [...]" (131).

Guagnini, looking briefly at Scerbanenco's entire output but focusing on the Jelling and Lamberti crime series, acknowledges the presence of sentiment in the former and in the 1960s novel *La sabbia non ricorda*, but seems to consider this strand quasi-accidental or marginal. He says of Jelling: "certainly this Scerbanenco weaves together sentimental stories with criminal deeds, thus revealing his background and his apprenticeship in consumer genres quite different from the crime novel" ("certo questo Scerbanenco intreccia vicende sentimentali con fatti criminosi, rivelando in tal modo la sua provenienza e il suo apprendistato in generi di consumo anche diversi dal giallo") (65); he calls *La sabbia non ricorda* "An important crime novel, (even here crime story and romance, but a very restrained, chaste romance) more crime story than anything else" ("un giallo importante, (anche qui 'giallo' e 'rosa', ma un 'rosa' molto contenuto, castigato) più 'giallo' che altro") (67). Guagnini makes no acknowledgement of the strong thread of romance in *Anime senza cielo*, labelling it "espionage-crime" ("giallo-spionistico[o]") (67). I argue that this novel's love story has equal weight, just as the love story of *La sabbia non ricorda* cannot be repressed as effectively as Guagnini suggests.

Gerhard Van der Linde again confines his criticism to the Lamberti novels, but his insights into the anti-heroic nature of the detective, the writer's sympathy for the victim, and elements of dualism in characterisation could be extended to the works in my study. Likewise, Luca Covi, in his history of the Italian crime novel, *Tutti i colori del giallo*, is explicitly interested in Scerbanenco's two crime series, but he makes some useful points on the theme of victimhood, which he sees as all-pervasive, and which, I argue, is a crux at which the strands of the divergent genres merge.

The most recent monograph on Scerbanenco to date – by Antonio Via – with its subtitle “un archetipo del romanzo poliziesco” again turns the focus onto the writer as the archetypal founding father of the Italian crime novel. Although a study of Scerbanenco’s romances is certainly outside Via’s brief, he nevertheless continues the habitual undervaluation of the non-crime work, remarking that “he expresses his best literary ability in his crime stories” (“esprime la sua migliore attitudine letteraria proprio nelle trame poliziesche”) (7).

In short, although Scerbanenco’s critics have touched on the element of romance, too often it has been in order to dismiss it as unimportant – embarrassing even – or to suggest that it is a cynical commercial ploy. Those critics – such as Pirani, Del Buono, and Sangiorgi – who see the hybridity as integral to Scerbanenco’s individual style, nevertheless continue to put their emphasis on the *noir*, giving the inevitable impression that this is the only aspect worth detailed scrutiny. Others have been more explicitly dismissive: Massimo Carloni insists that where traces of the “heritage of the romance experience” (“il retaggio dell’esperienza ‘rosa’”) appear in the Lamberti novels, they cause a “lowering of tone” (“cadute di tono”) (268). Maurizio Pistelli considers Scerbanenco’s early romance production to be “as frivolous as it is abundant” (“frivola quanto abbondante”) (329); Gian Paolo Giudicetti judges certain of the romances to be “banale, kitsch” (154).

A new angle on Scerbanenco has recently been provided by the Swiss scholar Andrea Paganini, who has investigated the writings of a group of Italian wartime exiles who befriended and corresponded with the Swiss priest and poet Don Felice Menghini. Paganini has thus for the first time directed serious critical attention onto not just the fiction Scerbanenco produced during his 1943-1945 exile but also the philosophical articles he supplied for Don Felice’s weekly paper, *Il grigione italiano*. Paganini has confined his

criticism to date to works written in exile, including some fiction which is outside my scope, but he has significantly advanced the body of criticism that contends that Scerbanenco was a serious writer well before he produced the Lamberti novels.

One of the few critics to date to re-examine the early novels in the light of the newly discovered philosophical writings, Jane Dunnett has explored the possibility of treating the Jelling detective novels as something more than frivolous escapism, observing that the series has an unusual focus on the interior life of the detective rather than on action. Dunnett sees Jelling's (and Scerbanenco's) insistence on looking into the hearts of men as a specific rejection of totalitarian ideology. In her critique, Dunnett draws in particular upon Scerbanenco's dictum that to feel is to understand ("commuoversi è comprendere"),¹⁷ highlighting the author's belief in the importance of feeling as a means to understanding. Picking up on this dictum, I argue that such accordance of equal weight to emotion and intellect is at the heart of Scerbanenco's particular technique of genre hybridisation, as evidenced by the works under study here. In his preface to *Il mestiere di uomo*, Paganini signals the usefulness of employing the exile writings as a lens through which to examine the author's entire body of work (44). This is a suggestion I take up, if only in preliminary form, in Chapter Nine.

An unpublished conference paper ("Conforming to Type?") delivered in 2002 by Jennifer Burns provides extremely useful insights that are very much in tune with my own thesis, although once again the focus is on the Lamberti novels.¹⁸ Almost uniquely among critics,¹⁹

¹⁷ See "Elogio della commozione", essay number three of *Il mestiere di uomo* (51-52).

¹⁸ I thank Dr Burns for generously supplying me with her speaking notes.

¹⁹ Barbara Pezzotti's 2014 study of Italian crime fiction also has a (brief but insightful) discussion of the female characters of the Lamberti series, noting the nuanced and sympathetic way in which they are constructed (71-73).

Burns turns the focus onto the female characters of the detective series, arguing that Scerbanenco, in depicting women engaged in transgressive behaviour, “combines an adherence to the public morality of Italy in the 1960s [...] with a questioning of that morality [...]” (1). Furthermore, in vividly depicting female transgression, the author gives his readers the chance to simultaneously condemn the transgression and vicariously experience it, opening up an opportunity for them to question traditional moral codes. Burns explores possible identities for Scerbanenco’s “model reader” for this series, concluding that, while “middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual men are taken for granted” (12), there is also an appeal to the female reader. I find Burns’s paper highly relevant to my study, since I too am seeking to identify alternative potential readers and readings that may not fit the casual stereotypes of the consumer of popular romance. Burns’s contribution to a recent survey of Italian crime fiction, “Founding Fathers: Giorgio Scerbanenco”, necessarily concentrates on the Lamberti crime novels; nevertheless, her insights into the author’s treatment of his female characters continue to fill a large gap in Scerbanenco criticism.

Indeed, given that for most of his career Scerbanenco wrote for an overwhelmingly female audience, and given that the Lamberti novels all centre on crimes against women and have strong female characters, the dearth of feminist or even female-focused criticism is surprising. It might be supposed that major surveys of the Italian *romanzo rosa* would provide some useful criticism; in fact, they largely gloss over Scerbanenco, acknowledging his existence but saying little else. Arslan relegates him to a footnote, judging that he “gave his best results in the crime genre” (“diede i risultati migliori nel genere giallo”) (*Dame, galline e regine* 41). Roccella’s *La letteratura rosa* has just two passing references in the main text, naming him as a noted writer of crime and romance and as editor of the women’s

magazine *Annabella* (32). Although a brief biography appears in an appendix, the chapter in which he might be expected to be critiqued is tellingly titled “One Thousand Romance *Authoresses*” (“Mille *scrittrici* rosa”) (75). (My emphasis.) It is in an attempt to make up for this lack that, in Chapter Three, I perform an extended analysis of my chosen novels as exemplars of popular romance. Before doing so, however, I must outline the theoretical foundations underpinning my thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the broadest level, this thesis draws on Hall's model of encoding and decoding of media messages, in which he moves away from the simple linearity of earlier "media-effects" models and their assumption of passive audiences who uncritically swallow the ideologically conservative messages they are fed, and proposes a complex multistage process in which the audience is anything but passive, and interpretations and effects can never be taken for granted. Briefly, Hall proposes a four-stage model of communication consisting of production (where encoding takes place); circulation (broadly speaking, the medium and process of distribution); use (the decoding or interpretation of the message by an audience); and reproduction (how the message is assimilated and acted upon).

A key component of Hall's theory – and crucial to my interrogation of Scerbanenco's texts – is the potential for a variety of responses to be activated in the decoding process, responses which may be "dominant/hegemonic" or "negotiated" (that is, either fully or partially accepting of the producer's intended message) or "oppositional" (that is, rejecting the intended message and reworking the meaning in unanticipated ways) (136-38).

Slotting into Hall's continuum, theories of genre and reader response – two interlocking aspects of the complex communicative process through which a text becomes meaningful – provide my specific keys for unlocking Scerbanenco's texts and the potentialities they offer, as well as for explaining their history of genre reassignment. Since both these theories are characterised by many opposing positions, some background to my own stance is essential.

Genre theory

Genre theory has been a contested field, with genre seen, variously, as a necessary decorum, a stifling straitjacket, and a powerful factor in textual communication. It has been argued that imposing genre labels is a futile exercise, that ultimately all literature resists classification. Yet even when questioning the value of slotting Scerbanenco's work into rigid genre categories,²⁰ Del Buono is still, by championing the intrinsic hybridity of all Scerbanenco's fiction, tacitly acknowledging the genre-based norms of commercial literature. Similarly, Pirani speaks of Scerbanenco's indifference for the schematisations of genre, while acknowledging his use of genre contamination ("Nota" 290). Subsequent critics, in privileging Scerbanenco as a writer of hard-boiled crime or *noir*, continue to apply a genre-based frame of reference.

I argue that a critique of Scerbanenco's novels can never ignore the framework of genre. It is Scerbanenco's position as a popular, commercial author that makes my application of genre theory highly appropriate: for, if it may be argued that the modern literary novel resists genre classification, within popular culture genre demarcations have remained strong. As Ken Gelder has observed, "popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction" (1), reinforcing Todorov's comment that "the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre" (*Poetics of Prose* 43).

Genre has remained a powerful tool in the production and interpretation of popular literature (and film) largely because of the commercial imperatives underpinning art forms directed to

²⁰ "Romance literature, crime literature, *noir* literature. What counts is the ability to tell a story." ("Letteratura rosa. Letteratura gialla. Letteratura nera. Quello che conta è la capacità di narrare") ("Il rosa, il giallo, il nero" 10).

a mass audience. Unlike the literary novel or art film, popular works are primarily intended to make money for their producers and distributors. Genre labels are essential to the marketing process, which relies on targeted audiences: having identified a market, the producer and distributor must alert this potential audience to the fact that this new work will appeal to their established tastes and expectations.

In the sphere of popular literature, then, genre labelling is not only taken for granted by marketers, distributors, and consumers, but has become a primary aid to the reader's interpretive process. David Duff has observed that, where once seen to equate to "prescription and exclusion", genre is now regarded positively as a signal of "opportunity and common purpose", an "enabling device", and a "vehicle for the acquisition of competence" (2).

Although popular readers, filmgoers, and bookstore owners seem to broadly, almost instinctively, understand genre categorisation, a precise and universal definition of the concept of genre is elusive. This lack of consensus reflects the multiplicity of critical starting points, some essentialist, some pragmatic, some derived from communication theory, and others falling within the disciplines of ideological and cultural studies. While some definitions highlight historical bodies of work, and others focus on structures and rules, the most useful definitions for my purpose combine both descriptive and prescriptive aspects.

David Fishelov gives his working definition of genre as: "a combination of prototypical, representative members, and a flexible set of constitutive rules that apply to some levels of literary texts, to some individual writers, usually to more than one literary period, and to more than one language and culture" (8). While this statement captures some of the

commonly agreed features of genre, such as textual corpora, intertextual linkages, family resemblances, historicity, and dynamism, it leaves a great deal unsaid.²¹ However, the most basic notion of genre as a body of works with shared features is essential to a fundamental aspect of my project: to compare and contrast Scerbanenco's novels with others which possess similar features and "family resemblances".

The film theorist Rick Altman provides insights that are, for the most part, equally applicable to literature; he takes a pragmatist approach, suggesting that genre has multiple meanings and uses, dependent on situation and need. Within the cycle of film production, distribution, and consumption, Altman isolates four key notions (and functions) of genre: a blueprint (a kind of ready-made formula that precedes production), a structure (or formal framework for individual works), a label (an essentially communicative device, especially useful in marketing), and a contract (or agreement with the audience) (14). Shading as they do from the production to the consumption aspects of genre, in broad alignment with Hall's four-step process of encoding/decoding, these notions are relevant to my project, and so I employ each as the context requires.

Such fluidity in definition as that proposed by Altman is a modern departure from the classical notion of literary genres as essential and changeless, epitomised in Aristotle's basic divisions of epic, lyric, and dramatic and subsequently developed into the encyclopedic, quasi-scientific schema that held sway for almost two millennia. Challenged in the late eighteenth century by critics and artists of the Romantic Movement, with their championship

²¹ It also implies, while sidestepping it, the circularity imputed to much genre definition: that is, in order to establish the "constitutive rules" the critic must already have in mind some body of "prototypical, representative members".

of individual creativity, the anti-genre stance reached its most extreme in the early twentieth century in Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce's insistence on the uniqueness of the individual work. Averring that "we can destroy expressions, that is, our thinking about individuals, by turning our thoughts to universals" (39), Croce further observed that individual works of art constantly defy existing genre classifications, forcing the genre critic to continually expand the taxonomy (41).

Mid-twentieth-century theorists, while conceding that genres had relevance in the past, have questioned whether they still have meaning in the postmodern age, with its insistence on mixing of forms and transgression of boundaries. Jacques Derrida in 1979 highlighted the negative implications of genre with his statement that "As soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind" (218). Nevertheless, Derrida did not discount genre but instead posited a dynamic concept of it, where every work necessarily participates in and influences genre but cannot be given a fixed genre assignment because it always has its own singularities. Nevertheless, the taxonomic approach has been slow to die, being revived in the 1950s by the original and influential scholar, Northrop Frye.²² While rejecting the connotations of a taxonomic straitjacket and accepting Derrida's notion of the fluidity of borders, I accept that shared norms are integral to the work of genre.

Where genre theory does attain new vigour – and where it is especially relevant to my project – is in its exploration of the dynamic that comes into play between genre and reader.

Todorov, in his work on that genre he labels *Fantastic*, raises the important issue of the role

²² Drawing on Jung's theories of archetype and myth, Frye posited new classifications of literature in a schema based on archetypal plots (*mythoi*) and what he termed modes. Although Frye's revolutionary approach has been influential, the fact that he created a new taxonomy led to criticism from those who saw the neo-Aristotelian approach as largely a dead end.

of the reader in assigning genre, concluding that a fantastic text is in large part defined by the reader's reaction to it.²³ Contemporarily with Todorov, the hermeneutic critic E.D. Hirsch, in his *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), explored the role of the reader – and the power of genre as an influence on reader expectation – in unlocking the text.

The role of the interpreter is taken to an extreme by neopragmatists such as Rosmarin, who has argued that genre is not an inherent feature of the text but a critical construct, a methodological tool imposed on a work or body of works by the critic, subject to redefinition at will. Consequently, “once genre is defined as pragmatic rather than natural, [...] there are precisely as many genres as we need, genres whose conceptual shape is precisely determined by that need” (25). My own position draws back from Rosmarin's extreme: I argue that genre is neither an essential residing in the text nor an ad hoc construct of the interpreter; rather, it partakes of both text and context, residing in a reciprocal, dynamic, and complex process of communication between text and reader.

Genre and interpretation/communication

If the understanding of genre as a prescriptive taxonomy is now recognised as problematic, genre is still acknowledged to be an important means by which communication between text and reader occurs. Alastair Fowler sees genre as fundamental to the construction and communication of meaning, observing that, rather than being a “curb on expression”, genre “makes the expressiveness of literary works possible” (20). That is, genre enables texts to be produced, distributed, read, and interpreted effectively. This is most transparent in the case of popular fiction, where the writer can include features that anticipate a certain response,

²³ See his *The Fantastic*, 31-57, for a discussion of how the fantastic resides in the reader's hesitation between assigning the text to the uncanny or the marvellous.

marketing strategies will further prompt this response, and the reader is most likely – though of course not bound, for reading “against the grain” is always an option – to interpret the work according to his or her familiarity with the genre, its stock situations, characters, themes, its stereotypes, even. Heather Dubrow refers to this tacit agreement between author and reader as the “generic contract” (31).

Fowler concludes that communication breaks down without genre, since the reader must be able to place the work within a frame of prior understanding and respond accordingly. In an observation that captures both the strong prompt of genre and the possibility for such multiple prompts as we find in Scerbanenco’s texts, Fowler explains that “genres are functional: they actively form the experience of each work of literature. If we see *The Jew of Malta* as a savage farce, our response will not be the same as if we saw it as tragedy” (38).

While Fishelov finds much that is sound in Fowler’s position, he has criticised him for implying that genre is a simple “signal system”, requiring knowledge of a unique code.

While Fowler would consider some genre frames to be simply wrong, Fishelov insists that the reader may validly read a work within a different genre framework: that is, a framework of which they have knowledge and experience and which permits a satisfactory reading. My own position accords most closely with that of Fishelov and, in particular, with his view that “Interpreting the text involves generic knowledge, as well as other types of knowledge, but it is by no means *determined* by this knowledge” (26). (Original emphasis.)

In other words, there is no single correct way to interpret the text, although this does not mean that the text is open to any conceivable interpretation.²⁴ As we shall see amply

²⁴ I shall discuss Umberto Eco’s arguments for constraints on interpretation – and against what he deems “overinterpretation” – below.

demonstrated by Scerbanenco's texts, the reader is offered all the codes or "signals" of more than one genre and can potentially choose to read by one or other of the signalled genres or to acknowledge the hybrid and read both simultaneously.

Both Fowler and, especially, Fishelov emphasise the participatory role of the reader, which was largely lacking in the earliest, prescriptive formulations of genre, where the text was seen as the site in which genre was determined. John Frow has also, more recently, commented upon this interplay between text and reader and the tension arising within the reading process. He notes the situational and performative aspects of genre, observing that "Genre is neither a property of (and located 'in') texts, nor a projection of (and located 'in') readers; it exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers [...]" (102). That is, the reader faced with a text will search for clues as to how it should be interpreted, clues drawn from both the text itself and the situation in which it presents itself. Genre acts as a "constraint on semiosis" (101), limiting the range of interpretations by providing clues as to which are most likely to be relevant in the context. Referring to media messages in general, of which genre is merely one aspect, Hall makes the same point, that "encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate" (135).

Reader-response and reception theories

Although these terms have been variously defined, "reader-response theory" relates mainly to the psychologically based interpretive processes of individual readers, whereas "reception theory" is more concerned with the placement of texts in historically situated socio-cultural environments. My interest is largely, though not entirely, in the former. Seeking to explain

historical receptions of literary works, the German reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss has described this relationship (or “contract”, in Dubrow’s terminology) in terms of a “horizon of expectations” (23). That is, readers constantly strive to place what they are reading within a context of what is familiar to them, including general knowledge and contemporary social convention. Jauss’s insights are important in that he recognises that interpretation of a text is subject to change due to the changing horizons of audiences over time: a part of my project is to explore the actual and potential repositionings of Scerbanenco’s work over time.

Iser, Jauss’s colleague and co-founder of the German Constance School of literary criticism, focuses on the psychology of the individual, rather than the broader social context, applying the phenomenological theories of Husserl and Ingarden to arrive at a concept of reader response that sees the reader filling indeterminacies or gaps in the text by drawing on his or her store of information, including prior reading experience (*Act of Reading* 167-70). Iser thus accords equal weight to the artistic (author-created) and aesthetic (reader-realised) poles of the literary text, asserting that “The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence” (*Implied Reader* 275). That is, reading is a dynamic process in which the text offers a framework to guide the reader’s interpretation (and here genre is one of the text’s more powerful suggestions), and the reader applies his or her store of knowledge and experience to complete the communication process. Like Jauss, Iser relies not on empirical observation of actual readers but on a construct Iser labels the “implied reader”: the reader for whom the text appears to have been written.

Semiotician Umberto Eco has made explicit the implications of genre in his work on reader response, especially in the field of popular literature, which he sees as especially heavily coded with prompts to the reader:

To organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them. (*Role of the Reader* 7)

Thus, in Eco's view, although the reader is free to form an individual interpretation of any text, the codes embedded in the text and directed towards this Model Reader ensure some alternative readings may be simply wrong.²⁵ Eco further distinguishes between the "closed" text, which restricts the range of possible meanings, and the "open" text, which contains the possibility of multiple interpretations.²⁶

Iser's theory of a reader "filling in the gaps left by the text" (*Implied Reader* 280) meshes well with genre theory, providing an insight into how the reader interacts with a heavily genre-inflected text. Dove has indeed pointed out the theory's usefulness as a tool for the critique of detective fiction, since the specific function of this literary form is to prompt the reader to carry out his or her own detection or interpretation by filling the gaps (or blanks). While adding a caveat that the text can never fully direct the reader, I would suggest that Dove's assertion that in the detective novel "the blanks in the story are *programmed* by the genre; that is, the blanks themselves suggest methods of discovery" (22 – original emphasis) can be extended to the popular romance, where an experienced reader will bring an expectation that certain character types (the love rival) and situations (the barrier to love) will be ultimately defeated to meet the requirement of a happy ending.

²⁵ "Even the most radical deconstructionists accept the idea that there are interpretations which are blatantly unacceptable. This means that the interpreted text imposes some constraints upon its interpreters" (*Limits of Interpretation* 6).

²⁶ Here Eco aligns with Roland Barthes' very similar concept of the *lisible* ("readerly" or "closed") and the *scriptible* ("writerly" or "open") text (*S/Z*).

I draw also on the notion of “interpretive communities” proposed by Stanley Fish, who drew back from his initially extreme view of reader response – in which the text was seen to be a construct of the reader and therefore open to an infinite number of interpretations, no matter how idiosyncratic – to suggest this useful concept to explain how a group of readers will tend to arrive at broadly similar interpretations of the same text. Since Fish’s earlier position takes too little account of the restraining effects of the text, I reject it for my purposes; his later notion of the interpretive community – and its commonality of knowledge and expectation – is, however, a useful construct, meshing as it does with the notion of genre as shared knowledge and broadly – though certainly not universally – predictable responses.

Working at an interdisciplinary juncture between narratology and psychology which they term psychonarratology, Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon have rightly criticised the subjectivity and circularity of most reader-response theory to date; they offer a corrective with empirical testing of actual readers processing actual texts, using methodologies taken from the fields of cognitive psychology and discourse processing. Their project is to clearly distinguish which features of the narrative are objective and fixed in the text, and which are reader constructs. Importantly for my purposes, Bortolussi and Dixon offer some preliminary insights on the role of genre in response, proposing it as a fruitful subject for further psychonarratologically based testing. They suggest that the reader’s genre knowledge is relevant in three types of cognitive processes: “cueing processes” (which permit a reader to associate a work with a particular genre”); “schematic processes” (which generate expectations and assumptions regarding the work’s themes, content, and style); and “contrastive processes” (which allow a reader to judge how well the work matches others held to be prototypical within the particular genre) (*Psychonarratology* 253).

Mindful of the warnings of Bortolussi and Dixon against circular argument, I am guided by their empirically tested insights, which do tend to support some of the more subjective theory of their predecessors, and which are useful in that they reinforce the notion of genre as residing in both text and reader.

To sum up, my own study is underpinned by the precept that, while the genre framework – particularly in the case of popular art – offers strong prompts to the reader, the reader still has the freedom to read in more nuanced ways. And, crucially, this is especially so in the case of hybrid genres, where multiple codes are in play.

PART TWO: READING THE GENRE CODES

CHAPTER THREE: THE ROMANCE

Scerbanenco's so-called *romanzi rosa* are best assessed as hybrid forms: neither romances with a touch of crime, nor crime novels with a touch of romance, but a blended form which gives significant weight to the codes of more than one genre. Nevertheless, when faced with a hybrid, a reader may choose to read just one strand of the blend; thus my project in this chapter is to isolate the genre codings that prompt the reader to interpret the text as a romance.

Many critics have attempted to isolate the essential generic components of this form, whether coming from a socio-political perspective or from a structural-narratological position. My own interest here is in narrative structures, in order to build a schema by which Scerbanenco's texts may be assessed; nevertheless, some account of diverging critical approaches to the popular romance is necessary to contextualise the dismal regard traditionally accorded the genre – a factor which has undoubtedly coloured reception of these texts. First, however, I must look briefly at their history of publication, marketing, and critical reception.

The earliest publishing and marketing history of these novels, bearing out Altman's notion of genre as a commercially useful label, shows that they were initially promoted as romances and directed towards female readers. Most first appeared in serial form in women's magazines such as *Annabella*, *Novella*, and *Gioia*, and all were published in book format in popular series marketed primarily to women, notably Rizzoli's distinctive colour-coded paperbacks. Publicity on the flaps of the first editions aligns the author with leading

contemporary *romanzo rosa* writers, while the jacket art features the typical romance close-up of a young couple in a pose suggesting an intimate sentimental relationship.

It may, then, seem perverse to question whether or not these novels are romances.

Nevertheless, critical reassessment of Scerbanenco since his death has tended to turn the focus away from aspects of sentiment in his body of work, a tendency epitomised by Pirani's assertion that "All Scerbanenco's narrative naturally evolves towards *noir*" ("Tutta la narrativa di Scerbanenco si evolve naturalmente verso quel traguardo 'nero'") ("Scerbanenco ovvero la dimensione 'nera' " 309). At the same time – perhaps because a male author sits uncomfortably with their feminist analysis – critical histories of the Italian *romanzo rosa* have given him scarce acknowledgment. The marketing of posthumous editions of many of these novels has downplayed their elements of romance and played up (even overplayed) the elements of crime: the cover of the 1975 edition of *Il fiume verde* (Appendix, Fig. 11), for example, depicts an unambiguously violent scene and places a gun very prominently in the foreground, even though the episode, which is otherwise fairly faithfully recreated, does not involve a weapon.²⁷

Critical approaches to the popular romance

Efforts by his later publishers to downplay the romance component of Scerbanenco's blended texts are perhaps unsurprising, given the low regard in which the popular romance has been held by so many critics: as Regis notes with exasperation, "critical characterization of the romance novel is overwhelmingly negative" (3).

²⁷ While a gun does appear on the cover of the first edition, it is safely enclosed in a display case; and while the couple depicted are not lovers but adversaries, their portrayal is enigmatic, so that this cover is easily read as conventional romance.

Feminist critics have voiced dismay at what they see as the genre's patriarchally inscribed message: that a woman's highest aspiration should be a subordinate domestic role through marriage to a powerful, protective male. Thus early criticism tended to, at worst, deride or, at best, admonish readers rather than engaging impartially with textual content. Greer's scathing comment that the romance hero has been "invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage" (180) underpins the school of feminist criticism, common in the 1970s and 1980s, that views the genre as a dangerous promoter of false consciousness. Equally unsympathetic to readers, both Ann Snitow (1979) and Ann Douglas (1980) formulated a theory of the popular romance as "pornography for women" and made sweeping, patronising characterisations of its readers.²⁸

Anne Cranny-Francis suggests that an even broader range of social inequalities is upheld by the form. In her opinion, the romance "encodes the most coherent inflection of the discourses of gender, class and race constitutive of the contemporary social order; it encodes the bourgeois fairy-tale" (*Feminist Fiction* 192); and she deplores its "fetishisation of an unequal gender relationship" (*Feminist Fiction* 204). Critics such as Radway, Kay Mussell, Tania Modleski, and Ien Ang, while attempting a less judgemental approach towards readers and admitting that responses may not be uniform and clear-cut, still imply that the main work of the romance is to reconcile the female reader with the traditional roles of wife, mother, and nurturer.

Correctives to this ultimately patronising school of criticism have arisen since the 1990s, creating a dichotomy that is succinctly encapsulated in the title of a recent collection of

²⁸ Snitow presumes to speak for all romance readers with her assertion that "While most serious women *novelists* treat romance with irony and cynicism, most women do not" (321). (Original emphasis). Douglas expresses "serious concern for their women readers", whom she discovers to be not just impressionable schoolgirls but "'normal', active women in their 30s, 40s, and 50s" as well (28).

critical essays: *Empowerment Versus Oppression* (ed. Sally Goade). A 1992 collection of essays by romance writers, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, takes an especially positive stance. Here, Susan Elizabeth Phillips argues that the genre empowers women by presenting strong heroines who always succeed in their mission to reform a man; fellow writer Stella Cameron insists that the romance depicts female power over the hero, in “a joyous celebration of the strengths women value most within themselves” (144).

Nevertheless, one encounters a widespread critical assumption that the romance is a low and debased form of literature. Pozzato calls the genre “a hypersimplification, a reduction to the lowest common denominator of sentimental literature [...]” (“una ipersemplicificazione, una riduzione ai minimi termini della letteratura sentimentale [...]”) (*Il romanzo rosa* 7), even suggesting that “the romance genre [...] despises itself” (“il genere rosa [...] disprezza [...] se stesso”) (8). Those critics who take the negative standpoint towards popular fiction, viewing it as essentially an industrial product directed at passive, uncritical consumers, further assume that all romances are essentially identical, rigidly formulaic in plot and character, and hackneyed in style. Michele Rak extends this assessment to all popular genre fiction, insisting that the reader of popular literature repeatedly buys “a book he already knows or owns. He buys a brand, a type of plot (such as a crime novel), a book without a language (in what language are spy stories written?), a book without an author (what do we know of his life?)” (“un libro che già conosce o possiede. Compra una griffe, un tipo di intreccio (come il ‘giallo’), un libro senza lingua (in che lingua sono scritte le spy-stories?), un libro senza autore (cosa sa della sua vita?)) (ix-x).

Raising the salient point that some of the harshest critics of the popular romance appear to have read few examples, Vittorio Spinazzola roundly refutes Rak’s stance, insisting that

“Only someone who has never handled a popular romance thinks that Liala is identical to Mura and Peverelli to Gasperini” (“Solo chi non ha mai preso in mano romanzi rosa pensa che Liala sia identica a Mura e Peverelli a Gasperini”) (*La modernità letteraria* 349).

Radway has demonstrated, through her empirical research, that actual romance readers perceive each individual title to be unique; she reports that members of her survey group were puzzled when asked to describe a “typical” romance heroine (63). This is unsurprising, since readers seek out what is new, while the already-known framework of genre prompts hovers in the background, guiding their interpretation at a less conscious level. As Spinazzola notes, “Imitation always goes hand in hand with variation” (“L’imitazione coincide sempre con la variazione”) (*La modernità letteraria* 161), for successful genre fiction must offer the reader both the satisfaction of the known and the pleasure of the unexpected.

Thus, behind the unique features of any individual romance, lies a structure of defining elements, some essential and some merely typical or preferable. It is through this broad coding that readers initially come to understand that they are reading a romance, as opposed to some other genre, and can begin to bring prior knowledge and expectations into play to aid interpretation and fill gaps and indeterminacies. And so, before analysing Scerbanenco’s novels as romances, it is first necessary to establish a rigorous working definition for the genre.

Definitions of the romance

Despite Lynne Pearce’s observation that “romance is a ‘story’ that everyone knows”, formulating this intuitive knowledge into precise terms is no easy task. A survey of the critical literature reveals a plethora of definitions, arrived at through the filter of varying

discourses. The bulk of criticism – certainly in the early phase, in the 1970s and 1980s – has taken a political stance, whether feminist or cultural/economic. On a mission to argue against the ill effects of the genre upon its readers, such studies focused less on genre features and more on their supposed effects.

Many critics have seen a primary defining feature in the gender of authors, readers, and protagonists,²⁹ a definition which immediately excludes Scerbanenco on the first count and perhaps on the third as well. Scerbanenco is unusual not only because few male authors have applied themselves to this genre but because even fewer have written under their own name.³⁰ Enrico Tiozzo has noted with exasperation the tendency of theorists of the romance novel to ignore male authorship, “as if one is dealing with a genre reserved solely for women writers, who understand the needs and dreams of the sisterhood and consequently direct themselves to a public made up entirely of women” (“come se si trattasse di un genere riservato solo alle scrittrici, che conoscono le esigenze e i sogni delle loro consorelle e si rivolgono conseguentemente ad un pubblico di sole donne”) (63-64). With Tiozzo, Luigi Del Grosso Destrieri is one of the very few critics who have taken account of the male author and reader, though admitting that their presence is statistically small (23). In any event, a definition founded on gendered authorship is clearly inappropriate to my study.

²⁹ “novels written primarily for women by women” (Goade 2); “written by women, published for women, and read by women” (Mussell 169); “written by women and read by women. They feature women [...]” (Regis 207).

³⁰ Daniela Curti (372) comments on the use of female pseudonyms by the “rare men” (“rari uomini”) who write *romanzi rosa*. Scerbanenco, however, while certainly using many pseudonyms, seems to have chosen to do so for pragmatic commercial and contractual reasons rather than to hide his gender, since the names he assumed were as often male as female (e.g. John Colemoore, Jean Pierre Riviere, Michele Raja, Ugo Fontanaviva, Alberto Farnese, George Sherman, Ornella Dallas, Ester Lideri, Maria Grazia Novara, Cristina Doria). See Pirani, “Alla ricerca” 107-08.

The move towards a textually based approach grows stronger in Radway and Modleski: both were interested in identifying fundamental narrative structures within the romance genre, although both combined structural studies with an attempt to uncover the motivations of readers; and both declared their own feminist standpoint, expressing the hope that romance readers would acquire a feminist consciousness that would allow them to see through the seductions of the genre.³¹

Since the 1990s, a number of critics, including Paizis and Regis, have moved away from the effects-focused political stance, with its implied criticism of the reader, to a more dispassionate analysis of the mechanisms of the romance genre. At this point, I aim to follow their lead and seek a working definition of the romance that focuses on structural features.

The term *romance* in itself has both a broad and a more narrow definition. In its most elemental form, the romance or “secular scripture” described by Frye, with its constant themes of quest, loss, and redemption, characterised by literal and metaphorical movements of ascent and descent, provides the template for much western literature. In this broadest definition, both the detective novel and the popular sentimental romance – and indeed the Western and spy story, as well as the bulk of canonical literature from classical to modern times – are underpinned by the structures, myths, and archetypes of the romance. In Frye’s analysis, “Romance is the structural core of all fiction” (*Secular Scripture* 15).

For the present purposes, I rely on the more narrow definition of romance that designates the subset of popular literature whose main concern is a love story. Even here, meaningful definitions of the popular romance have proved elusive. Theorists of the genre have offered

³¹ They also share the flaw of generalising about the entire romance genre from a restricted sample base: Harlequin novels (Modleski) and the sensual historical romances preferred by her reading group (Radway).

numerous prescriptions, some of which are so reductive that they might equally be applied to much of the literary canon: “the story of a man and a woman who meet, overcome one or more obstacles to their union, become a couple” (“la storia di un uomo e di una donna che si incontrano, superano uno o più ostacoli alla loro unione, si accoppiano”) (Rak 46); “the story of how two lovers meet, become estranged, and are then reunited under the aegis of an ‘unconquerable love’ [...]” (Pearce); “[a focus on] the developing relationship of one man and one woman [...]” (Goade 2); “a thwarted love between a man and a woman, with a happy ending, narrated from the female point of view” (“un amore contrastato tra uomo e donna, con lieto fine, narrato dal punto di vista femminile”) (Del Grosso Destreri 17).

More useful definitions relate to narrative structures and a ritualised interplay between the main actors. Rak pinpoints a simple narrative structure that can surely be universally accepted, consisting of Encounter (or Vision, since the lovers’ gaze is paramount at the point of first contact), Obstacles, and Union. This archetypal narrative concentrates on the obstacles to the love relationship – “rivals, misunderstandings, prohibitions, bad behaviour” (“i rivali, gli equivoci, i divieti, gli errori di comportamento”) – spending little time on the union that closes the story (74).

Arslan and Pozzato rightly identify a confrontation, which, however, they particularise as “the *polemical confrontation* between the man and the woman” (“il *confronto polemico* fra l’uomo e la donna”), in which “the woman adopts a [...] strategy of rebellion in her confrontations with the male partner” (“la donna adotta una strategia di ribellione [...] nei confronti del partner maschile”) (“Il rosa” 1028). (Original emphasis.) As I shall demonstrate, the lovers may just as often be united in confrontation with society, and so I prefer the definition given by Krentz, who accords primacy to a relationship rather than a

confrontation, pointing out that “In a romance novel, the relationship between the hero and the heroine *is* the plot. It is the primary focus of the story, just as solving the crime is the primary focus of a mystery” (108). (Original emphasis.) Nevertheless, Arslan and Pozzato provide a useful list of identifying features: eroticism viewed in a positive light; the heroine’s lack of family (typical but non-essential); a love rival; a happy ending, often in marriage; an indeterminacy of time and place; utopianism (“Il rosa” 1028-30).

Roccella’s analogy of the romance’s narrative structure with that of the fairy tale – specifically *Cinderella* – is certainly pertinent to this study, for elements of fable can clearly be detected in Scerbanenco’s texts. Roccella finds in *Cinderella* the romance staples of “the unhappy orphan, spiteful rivals, the marvellous appearance that takes place, together with the fatal encounter with the prince, on a grand public occasion, the ball. And then the separation (due to the female’s secret), the test, and the solution in marriage” (“l’orfana infelice, le rivali maligne, l’apparizione meravigliosa che ha luogo, insieme all’incontro fatale col principe, nella grande occasione pubblica, il ballo. E poi la separazione (dovuta al segreto femminile), la prova, e la soluzione matrimoniale”) (15).

While exploring the mystery and adventure genres in depth, Cawelti has relatively little to say on the topic of the popular romance, an omission that is perhaps telling.³² He notes that “the moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent” (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 41-42) and, like Rak, observes that the narrative concentrates on the “overcoming of [...] barriers” (42). He also mentions the focus on a female protagonist, the

³² Twenty years later, Cawelti acknowledged that early studies of popular culture (“needless to say written largely by men”) ignored the romance, admitting that “I myself look back somewhat guiltily to the mid-1970s when I called a book *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, but had almost nothing about romance in it” (“Masculine Myths” 81-82).

developing love relationship, and the happy ending, usually in marriage but occasionally with a death, both of which endings signal the eternal endurance of the love.

Mussell stresses the essential domesticity of the romance, contending that the romance sets the heroine a “domestic test” which she must pass to win the hero. Focusing on ideology, Mussell concludes that “Romances are primarily concerned with the process of mate selection and, secondarily, with those domestic activities – nurturing and homemaking – traditionally assigned to women in Western culture” (6). Although I do not agree with Mussell’s ideological slant, her focus on the centrality of domesticity is useful to my scrutiny of Scerbanenco’s texts.

Unlike Mussell, Paizis believes that the narrative accords the heroine a chance to prove her overall quality, not simply her aptitude for domesticity; nevertheless, he agrees that a “private setting” and an emphasis on “feminine occupations, preoccupations, emotions and aspirations” are key ingredients. Others are “emotional intensity”, conflict between the hero and heroine, and an “affective adventure that ends happily”, all enclosed within “a narrative structure which focuses on a heroine’s quest for love” (29). Paizis’s essential narrative structure, which expands on Rak’s, can be summarised thus: “First Meeting, Obstacles, (Flight), Solution with a Happy End” (175).

Working from the theory of narrative functions expounded by Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, Radway provides a highly prescriptive schema, identifying 13 essential actions.³³ The high degree of specificity in this list, however, tends to limit its applicability.

³³ “1. The heroine’s social identity is destroyed. 2. The heroine reacts antagonistically to an aristocratic male. 3. The aristocratic male responds ambiguously to the heroine. 4. The heroine interprets the hero’s behavior as evidence of a purely sexual interest in her. 5. The heroine responds to the hero’s behavior with anger or coldness. 6. The hero retaliates by punishing the heroine. 7. The heroine and hero are physically and/or

Radway's survey was restricted to a narrow range of English-language romances typical of the 1970s and 1980s, in which these features are certainly the norm. They are not necessarily universal, however, when one takes a broader temporal and geographic view of the popular romance. Most theorists have focused their attention almost exclusively on the products of the major publishers, Mills & Boon, Harlequin, and their close imitators, and many have tended to look at the contemporary product rather than the form's historical development. Although the major Italian critics of the genre (Arslan, Pozzato, Roccella, Rak) recognise the historical progression of the genre, they nevertheless tend to base structural analysis on the contemporary imported version, a model which may be appropriate to the style of Italy's best-selling *romanzo rosa* writer, Liala, but is less appropriate to writers working in a more realist mode, such as Scerbanenco.³⁴

Regis has ranged more widely across the genre, proposing a model that precisely delineates the romance without being so broad as to include most of western literature nor so narrow as to exclude all but the products of the transnational formula publishers. Regis suggests a test based on eight essential narrative elements: Society defined; Meeting; Barrier; Attraction; Declaration; Point of Ritual Death; Recognition; Betrothal (30-38).

Although all the critics cited above have isolated indispensable features of the romance that will serve my study, I find Regis's eight-part test to be the most precise and useful tool, and

emotionally separated. 8. The hero treats the heroine tenderly. 9. The heroine responds warmly to the hero's act of tenderness. 10. The heroine reinterprets the hero's ambiguous behavior as the product of previous hurt. 11. The hero proposes/openly declares his love for/demonstrates his unwavering commitment to the heroine with a supreme act of tenderness. 12. The heroine responds sexually and emotionally. 13. The heroine's identity is restored" (134).

³⁴ Spinazzola describes how, in the 1970s, Italian publishers assumed that burgeoning feminism would end demand for the *romanzo rosa*. When this proved not to be the case, they chose to fill the vacuum they had created with imports of the transnational "Harmony" variety, resulting in "the sunset of the unique fiction genre with a solid national tradition, the *romanzo rosa*" ("[il] tramonto dell'unico genere narrativo di salda tradizione nazionale, il romanzo rosa") (*La modernità letteraria* 317).

thus will use it to underpin my initial analysis. The eight elements bear looking at individually to test their applicability in Scerbanenco's case. I shall look in some depth at novels which may be characterised as detective (*giallo*) romances (*La sabbia non ricorda* and *Johanna della foresta*); or *noir* romances (*Il fiume verde*, *I diecimila angeli*, *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*, and *Noi due e nient'altro*); with reference also to novels that may be described as spy romances (*Anime senza cielo*, *Appuntamento a Trieste*); and Western romances (*La mia ragazza di Magdalena* and *Rossa*).

After testing these works against Regis's narrative essentials, or what we may call the superstructure, I shall look at the "building blocks" that fill out the structure – such additional features as the key characters (heroine, hero, rivals, and foils), temporalisation, and localisation – with a view to establishing how closely Scerbanenco's offerings conform to the genre norms that an experienced romance reader might be expected to use as a key to interpretation.

Establishing and identifying the coded structures will provide a schema which, in subsequent chapters, I shall overlay with similar schemas of the crime novel and of the espionage adventure and Western, intending to thereby investigate how the very elements that seem most closely aligned with one genre could equally be interpreted by application of the codes of another.

Codes of the romance

The superstructure: Regis's test

The flawed society

Regis insists that the society in which the courtship drama of the romance will take place, presented to the reader at the outset of the novel, is always "in some way flawed: it may be incomplete, superannuated or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and hero" (31). It is this unsatisfactory society which love will remake and redeem by the end of the novel.

La sabbia non ricorda opens with a society disrupted by crime and betrayal. There has been a murder on the beach of a popular Adriatic resort, a crime which draws in the two male love rivals, Alberto (Al) and Roberto, the former as police investigator and the latter as a suspect. At the same time, the heroine, Michela, has come to the resort with her father, a senior police officer, to recover from a mental breakdown brought on by an ugly betrayal by a former lover. The crime operates both as a catalyst to reawaken in Michela an interest in life and as a significant influence on her romantic future, which will involve a choice between Alberto and Roberto.

Johanna della foresta is set in a post-war Europe characterised by displacement and poverty, where wartime atrocities are raw in memory. The two young Italian men at the centre of the story, Donato and Francino, have been forced to abandon their studies and seek labouring work abroad in the Swiss forests. The heroine, Johanna, who disappears soon after Donato meets and falls in love with her, is a victim of unfinished Nazi-era business. Again, the disruption is both societal and personal and has a direct impact on the ability of the hero and heroine to achieve their desired romantic outcome.

The opening scenes of *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo* quite literally present the social disruptions of modernity, as big-city crime, in the form of a young Milanese gang associate, Tomaso, infiltrates the old-fashioned provincial security of Mantua; at the personal level, Tomaso's gang's sophisticated heists will corrupt the personal world of secretaries such as Elsa by exploiting their naivety and trusting nature.

In *Noi due e nient'altro* the hero, Mauro, has his banal life overturned in an instant by events that seem random and inexplicable but leave him an outcast. A tour-bus driver, Mauro kills a small child in a freak accident for which he in fact bears no responsibility. Panicking, Mauro flees the scene, only to have his social ostracism compounded when one of his passengers falsely accuses him of the additional crime of robbery with violence. Mauro finds shelter with an ex-girlfriend, Luisella, who assists him in creating a new identity, while at the same time exploring methods to investigate the crimes, clear his name, and return him to his former social status.

As for the other novels under study here, there is a similar initial circumstance which poisons the protagonists' world and consigns them to some kind of outsider, even outlaw status. *Il fiume verde* begins when journalist Stefano sees a story in the case of a young rape victim, Alina, who has been consigned to a secure mental institution because her reaction to this trauma is deemed socially unacceptable. When Alina escapes, Stefano shelters her, though he recognises that she is fixated on killing her rapist.

The story events of *I diecimila angeli* begin with an ugly act of betrayal and abandonment by a rich young playboy, Aldo, towards his unsophisticated girlfriend, Marina/Libella,³⁵ an

³⁵ Aldo gives Marina the stage-name Libella, a name she later discards. Since the text alternates uses, I shall refer to her as Marina/Libella.

action that epitomises the shallowness and cynicism of his life. When a similar act directed towards Aldo himself brings self-awareness, he is filled with an almost pathological sense of remorse that colours all his future relationships and that must be redressed before he can lead a normal life.

Appuntamento a Trieste and *Anime senza cielo* have the Cold War of the 1950s as a backdrop and heroes whose ability to maintain sentimental relationships is curtailed by the fact that they are being hunted by shadowy enemy forces. *Rossa* and *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* are located in the American south-west of the 1940s and 1950s, where racism, distrust of the outsider, and the shadow of the Second World War promote isolation, violence, and death.

Thus each novel places its protagonists in a situation where, even before any love relationship is introduced, they must struggle to survive within a flawed or diseased society. This notion has some overlap with Radway's initial function, destruction of the heroine's social identity. Michela (*La sabbia*) is in a state of mental collapse brought on by her failed love affair; Johanna (*Johanna*) is believed dead but is in fact pregnant to and hiding from a blackmailer; Alina (*Fiume verde*) is suffering from post-traumatic stress and forced confinement. The native Indian heroines of the Westerns, *Rossa* and *Zuñita*, are outsiders simply by virtue of their race.

Habitual readers of the Italian *romanzo rosa* would understand this coding, as a quick comparison with some representative romances by Scerbanenco's contemporaries will show. Here the initial social disorder and subsequent loss of identity may occur at the broader societal level or, more intimately, within the family unit. The Cinderella-like working-class heroines of Liala's *Passione lontana* and Mancuso's *Questo amore è mio* are far below their

love interest in status and wealth. Both Dandolo's Carlotta (*La prigioniera*) and Sensi's Federica (*Oggi è come ieri*) are trapped in unhappy marriages that force them to suppress their own needs and desires. In every case the heroine is initially thrown into a situation of disorder or menace which only the final love pact can redeem.

Unusually for the genre, Scerbanenco's hero may be the one who has lost his social identity: Tomaso (*Elsa*) is from a respectable bourgeois family but has progressed from teenaged disaffection to juvenile delinquency to organised crime; Mauro (*Noi due*) is on the run from the law for crimes he has not committed; the playboy Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*) is filled with self-loathing, a mental anguish that manifests itself in a physical disability; living under a false identity, the aristocratic Polish refugee Stiva (*Anime*) is on the run from enemies, as is Martino (alias Buck), an ex-gangster who attempts to make a new life in New Mexico (*La mia ragazza*). Roy (*Rossa*), already suffering mental anguish over an atrocity he witnessed during his war service in Italy, is rendered socially unacceptable at home in New Mexico due to his love for an Indian woman. The spy Kirk (*Appuntamento*) has faked death to throw his enemies off his trail. Thus the love relationship may work to redeem the heroine, but it may equally work to redeem the hero and return him to a full place in society, under his true identity.

Indeed there is a recurrent motif of a hero/heroine forced to assume a false identity. I shall discuss this motif, especially typical of *noir*, in Chapter Four, simply noting here that heroes with aliases are found in *Anime senza cielo*, *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*, *Noi due e nient'altro*, *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*, and *Appuntamento a Trieste*. In *Il fiume verde*, *I diecimila angeli*, *Rossa*, and *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*, the heroine conceals her identity and/or changes her name.

Meeting

Since, as Krentz has emphasised, the love relationship “*is the plot*” (108 – original emphasis), the crucial meeting of the lovers takes place early in the story. This encounter signals the moment when one, or more usually each, is struck by an overwhelming and irresistible attraction, which they may recognise or suppress, but which will affect all their actions from this point and set them unmistakably at odds with their society.

Paizis refers to this *coup de foudre* as “passion-love”, in contrast to socially sanctioned “marriage-love” (109), and so this first meeting “threatens an opposition between nature and society, sexuality and socialisation” (111). Rak makes essentially the same point, labelling this type of love *eros*, which all cultures traditionally consider to be “a deviant drive that is dangerous and unsatisfactory” (“una pulsione deviante, pericolosa e insufficiente”) (7). Rak sees the role of the *romanzo rosa* to be a means to domesticate passion by ultimately channelling it into socially sanctioned marriage. Jay (sic) Dixon, however, identifies alternative ways of falling in love in the Mills & Boon romances that make up her study: three basic variations that are certainly found in Scerbanenco’s romances, which do not always follow a single pattern. These are “the *coup de foudre*, which includes passionate desire; loving friendship, which is built up gradually as protagonists get to know each other; and an immediate bond with the other half of one’s self, which goes beyond the physical” (171).

In Scerbanenco’s novels the meeting is not always a first encounter. Alberto (*La sabbia*) realises that his childhood friend Michela is the love of his life when he meets her again some years after they parted. In a sudden intuition, he understands that “the only reason for

his numb unhappiness in all that time spent without her, was her alone” (“l’unica ragione della sua torpida scontentezza, in tutto quel tempo passato senza di lei, era stata proprio lei”) (106). Martino and Zūnita (*La mia ragazza*) first become soulmates when she is ten and he twelve, and then suffer a fifteen-year separation. Giovanna and Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*) are cousins and friends from childhood; their marriage begins as a match of convenience and companionship, only gradually evolving into mutual passion.³⁶

More typically, however, a sudden and overwhelming intuition of love occurs at first sight. Nothing can be done to resist this force, which is a veritable bolt from the blue. Luisella (*Noi due*), having lost her lover, Mauro, to her rival, Letizia, sums up a fact which the experienced romance reader – drawing on genre (and most probably not real-life) knowledge – will accept as a universal truth: “And it wasn’t [Mauro’s] fault if he and Letizia had fallen in love with each other. When you fall in love there’s nothing you can do” (“E non era colpa [di Mauro] se lui e Letizia si erano innamorati. Quando ci si innamora non si può fare niente”) (207). This same romance reader, versed in the codes of the genre, will also intuit that true love will not eventuate between Fabia and the duplicitous Sidic (*Anime*) when the latter tries to convince her that love cannot endure separation: “If you’re never with someone, you can never love them. Love comes into being gradually, being together, getting to know each other better all the time” (“Finché non starai mai insieme con qualcuno, non potrai mai amarlo. L’amore nasce a poco a poco, stando insieme, conoscendosi sempre meglio”) (56). Sidic’s prosaic stance is the complete opposite of Donato’s seemingly impossible – but ultimately rewarded – passion for the “dead” Johanna (*Johanna*).

³⁶ Similarly, Dandolo’s *La prigioniera* tells of an initially loveless marriage that is redeemed – in this case by mutual sacrifice.

The lovers' gaze is at the heart of the first meeting, for "Contact begins through sight. [...] romance characters first of all gaze and are gazed at" ("Il contatto comincia attraverso la vista. [...] le persone rosa per prima cosa guardano e sono viste") (Rak 5). The lovers take in each other's physical attributes – dress, physique, hair – but most of all they gaze into each other's eyes. Tomaso (*Elsa*), waiting to waylay Elsa to instigate his criminal plan, notices her eyes before any other aspect of her appearance: "Even from a distance he made out her huge, bright eyes" ("Anche da lontano distinse i suoi occhi grandissimi e chiari") (7). When he makes first contact, they mark her uniqueness: "He would have imagined he was seeing his sister Agostina coming towards him if she hadn't had those huge eyes [...]" ("Gli sarebbe sembrato di vedersi venire incontro sua sorella Agostina se lei non avesse avuto quei grandissimi occhi [...]" (13). Donato (*Johanna*), encountering Johanna for the first time in semi-darkness, marvels at "the sky-blue sparkle of her eyes" ("lo splendore celeste dei suoi occhi") (16). Gazing at the photo he took of Alina on first meeting her at the clinic, Stefano (*Fiume verde*) is struck by her eyes, which are "lively, full of intelligence" ("vivi, pieni di intelligenza") (9); when she appears on his doorstep, having run away from the asylum, he cannot help but stare at "those large shining eyes" ("quei grandi occhi luminosi") (16).

In every case, the eyes become fetishised, so that repeated mentions reinforce a trope that is biologically improbable but offers an easily decipherable code to the romance reader.

Tomaso continually refers to Elsa as "Occhi di Gazzella" or "Doe-Eyes". Johanna's unforgettable eyes torment Donato with conflicting feelings: finding her behind the bar in the local tavern on their second encounter, he wonders what to do "to drive away the light of those two sky-blue eyes, a light that had stayed with him from earlier on, and that no longer

wanted to go away” (“per mandar via la luce di quei due occhi celesti, una luce che era rimasta in lui fin da prima e che non voleva andar più via”) (21).

The first encounter typically produces a powerful physical effect. If Donato experiences a profound sense of calm, Stefano has the opposite reaction, a wildly beating heart, on taking Alina into his house.³⁷ After her first encounter with Tomaso, Elsa, like Stefano, acknowledges that she feels impulses more suitable to her former teenaged self, who would wander the streets in a daze after viewing a favourite Hollywood movie star at the cinema. Martino (*La mia ragazza*) can hardly breathe and must loosen his collar when he sees the adult Zuñita for the first time.

Barrier

The barrier to the smooth development of the love relationship can take many forms, but these may be reduced to two essential categories, which Cawelti styles “social or psychological barriers” (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 42): that is, an external barrier (some kind of social force that keeps the lovers apart no matter how strong their desire to be together) or an internal barrier (some reluctance by one of the pair to commit to the love relationship).

Like Arslan/Pozzato, Paizis considers the most typical barrier to be an emotional one. His suggested scenario, that “She realises she is in love with the hero but fears he does not love

³⁷ “Those eyes gave him a sense of relaxation and sweetness.” (“Quegli occhi gli davano un senso di rilassamento e di dolcezza”) (*Johanna* 16). “I’ve smoked too much, he thought, but he knew that it wasn’t the smoking. When he was eighteen years old, his heart used to beat like this too when he fell in love.” (“Ho fumato troppo, pensava, ma sapeva che non era il fumo. Anche a diciotto anni il cuore gli batteva così quando s’innamorava”) (*Fiume verde* 32).

her” (37), occurs in Liala’s *Passione lontana*³⁸ but is virtually unknown in Scerbanenco’s novels, where the most usual barrier is external. Less often, problems are rooted in the psyche of one or both of the couple: Stefano (*Fiume verde*) falls in love with a fragile rape victim who is unable to bear any hint of sexual attention; Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*) is literally crippled by remorse. Elsa (*Elsa*) must face the fact that her beloved, Tomaso, is a conman whose initial interest in her was part of a cynical deception, while Tomaso must choose between a future with Elsa and the perils of betraying a criminal gang. Mauro (*Noi due*) cannot marry Luisella without revealing his true identity to the authorities; later, once he realises that Letizia is his true love, his inferior social position as her father’s chauffeur compounds the problems caused by his outlaw status. Thus the initial premise of a diseased or disrupted social environment tends to draw the lovers into proximity, while at the same time making their love impossible.

Attraction

Regis lists a broad range of signs that indicate to the reader the existence of attraction – motives that, by drawing them together, provide “the reason that this couple must marry” – but notes a tendency for these motives to be “lumped together under the rubric ‘love’” (33). Scenes of attraction are found regularly throughout the romance story, reinforcing the reader’s understanding that, despite all barriers, the relationship will achieve a happy outcome. At times, as in Dandolo’s *La prigioniera*, the reader becomes aware of the emotional undercurrents before the protagonists, but in every case repetition of instances and declarations of attraction is the norm. In this way the genre performs its function of

³⁸ The story of a young ballerina, Giulietta, who falls in love with a football champion whose obsession for his dead fiancée blinds him to the fact that Giulietta is his true life partner.

appealing to the reader's emotions: for, just as in the crime novel the reader's curiosity must be repeatedly stimulated, in the romance the reader must be fed a constant surge of romantic feeling.

We have seen how the gaze – and the physical reactions it stimulates – constantly reinforces the attraction, for both lover and reader. If the lover is absent, another stimulus, such as a photograph or letter, will suffice. Stefano (*Fiume verde*) betrays the physical basis of Alina's appeal as he gazes at the photo that will accompany his article: "An interesting girl, especially her gaze, and her small aristocratic face, with her beautiful black hair [...]" ("Una ragazza interessante, lo sguardo specialmente, e il visino aristocratico, coi bei capelli neri [...]" (10).

Attraction is marked by a loss of control. When Alina (*Fiume verde*) seeks refuge with Stefano after her escape, her repeated blushes reveal that she is attracted to him in spite of her inhibitions. Inability to stop thinking about the beloved is a common motif. Visiting a former lover, Stefano cannot get Alina out of his thoughts, even imagining he sees her in the street outside; he ruefully acknowledges that he is showing all the signs of a man in love. Stiva (*Anime*) continues to murmur Fabia's name when unconscious from injuries or asleep, convincing Luisa, the woman who shelters him and falls in love with him, that he will never be able to truly love her.

The power of the attraction is reinforced by the fact that the lovers inevitably act against their own interests, sometimes self-destructively. Although Stiva suspects that Fabia is his enemy and so decides to marry Luisa and escape to safety in America with her, it is clear that his heart is not in this alternative – and far simpler – relationship. Although he knows that it is

against his interests, when his scheme to defraud Sybille Glows with a sham marriage is working so well, Roy (*Rossa*) thinks obsessively of Rossa and cannot resist visiting her, a visit which has disastrous consequences.

Declaration

In the classic model explored by most critics of the romance – that is the version typical of the transnational publishing houses of Mills & Boon, Silhouette, Harlequin, Harmony, and their ilk – the declaration of love is typically postponed until near the end of the novel because of misunderstandings and suspicions between the couple. Liala's *Passione lontana* plays a variation that still respects this basic structure: the hero, Vik, takes Giulietta as his lover soon after meeting her but remains psychologically unable to reciprocate her love for him until near the end of the novel. In Scerbanenco's novels, however, the declaration almost always comes much earlier, so that the lovers are able to put up a joint battle against the external barriers that work against the success of their relationship.

Stefano (*Fiume verde*) struggles to keep a distance between himself and Alina, but after he learns that an anonymous phone call has alerted the police to her movements, he can no longer conceal his feelings, admitting to her that “You’re no longer just anyone to me, even though I’ve tried to resist [...]” (“non sei più una persona qualunque per me, anche se io ho cercato di resistere [...]”) (74). Alina now admits that she has been attracted to him from their first encounter: “You’ve never been just anyone, ever since I saw you at the hospital” (“Non sei mai stato una persona qualunque, fin da quando ti ho visto all’ospedale”) (75). The two refugees, Stiva and Fabia (*Anime*), declare their love by entrusting each other with their true identities and the dangerous secrets of their past lives. In some cases, the declaration is

postponed for practical reasons. Donato and Johanna (*Johanna*) have no chance for any intimate conversation until, towards the middle of the novel, Donato discovers Johanna alive – but perilously ill – in her hiding place in the forest. Likewise, Diana (*Appuntamento*) believes that her beloved, Kirk, a secret agent, has been assassinated, and Kirk cannot let her know otherwise.

Ritual death

“The point of ritual death marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever” (Regis 35). In *Johanna della foresta* this symbolic death coincides with actual death. Convinced that a murder has taken place, Donato acknowledges the impossibility of his position, “in love with a dead woman, without even having kissed her [...]” (“innamorato di una morta, senza averla mai neppure baciata [...]”) (63). Nevertheless, he is still prepared to break off his engagement with his patient and devoted home-town fiancée, Maria, knowing that he cannot love her as he loves Johanna.

In *Il fiume verde* the point of ritual death comes when Stefano’s attempt to force Alina to confront her attacker fails, and both now believe that she can never be cured of her morbid obsession. Alina recognises that their relationship is now irretrievable: “It was more than a barrier now: something had shattered between the two of them” (“Era più che una barriera, ora: qualche cosa si era spezzato tra loro due”) (105). Roy and Rossa (*Rossa*) reach this

insurmountable barrier when they realise that Crave's blackmail will never stop, and Rossa's choices seem limited to turning herself in to the police or killing herself.³⁹

Scerbanenco often uses imagery of death to describe the point where love seems impossible. When Fabia (*Anime*) realises that she has failed to convince Stiva that she is not a spy but has become the mistress of his enemy, Sidic, solely to protect Stiva, her eyes become "like dull pearls [...]: they seemed like dead eyes" ("come perle opache [...]: sembravano occhi morti") (126). Roy acknowledges that Rossa brought him back to life after wartime trauma left him numbed and that if he loses her he is as good as dead. Rejected by Mauro in favour of Letizia, Luisella (*Noi due*) becomes suicidal and, in a mentally and physically fragile state, goes to a deserted part of the coast to die. Mauro finds her near death: "She didn't need to do anything to die, there was no need of either a gun, or poison; her body had simply come to the end [...]" ("Non doveva far nulla per morire, non c'era stato bisogno né della rivoltella, né di qualche veleno; semplicemente il suo corpo era arrivato alla fine [...]" (283-84). Unlike that of her fragile rival Letizia, Luisella's "death" is symbolic and not actual, and Luisella survives to marry her man.

When Alberto (*La sabbia*) unmask Roberto as the murderer, telling Michela that Roberto has only courted her so he can come under the protection of her powerful policeman father, Michela turns on Alberto in fury, then suffers a mental crisis. Alberto accepts that Michela will hate him forever for his revelations and prepares to leave her. At this point, the heavily sedated Michela enters a deathlike state, "like a poor broken doll that can no longer move, and only her breathing prevented him from fearing she was dead" ("come un povero pupazzo

³⁹ Rossa has murdered Roy's wartime enemy, Marichant, in an attempt to prevent Roy from killing the man in front of witnesses. Rossa's act has, however, been witnessed by Crave, a man with an implacable hatred for Roy.

rotto che non può più muoversi e solo il respiro di lei gli impediva di temere che fosse morta”) (289).

When this moment of utter despair arrives, the world itself may take on a lifeless aspect.

Having overheard Stefano tell Clelia that he no longer believes that Alina can be cured, Alina (*Fiume verde*) has a sensation of a still, dead world: “Then there was silence. A great silence. Even from the street, for a few moments, no sound came. It seemed as if the world was dead” (“Poi vi fu silenzio. Un grande silenzio. Anche dalla strada, per qualche istante, non venne più alcun rumore. Sembrava che il mondo fosse morto”) (126). When Fabia (*Anime*) finds that Stiva, unmasked by his enemies, has gone on the run, she wakes next morning to “A grey, joyless dawn” (“Un’alba grigia, senza gioia”) (54).

Recognition

At the moment Regis labels “Recognition”, the lovers – and the reader too – become aware that the barrier can be surmounted; for characters and reader alike, this moment brings relief from unbearable tension, as hope replaces anxiety. In Scerbanenco’s romances this moment is typically accompanied by explicit reference to some mental or physical transformation in the lovers.

Alina and Stefano (*Fiume verde*) face an external barrier – Alina’s outlaw status – but their main barrier is internal. Alina must defeat her post-traumatic stress and murderous impulses and prove to the despairing Stefano that she can be cured. Finally steeling herself to confront her rapist, the now suicidal Ruggero, and recognising his pathetic, reduced condition, Alina enters a new psychic state which she experiences affectively as “a sudden lightness” (“un’improvvisa leggerezza”) (165); she is able to speak to him “with serenity, filled with an

inner force, a self-confidence she had never before had” (“con serenità, piena dentro di una forza, di una sicurezza di sé che non aveva mai avuto”) (166). Her new serenity convinces the clinic to release her, so removing the external barrier – and kindling in the reader hope of a happy outcome.

When, with a mix of luck and guile, Roy and Rossa (*Rossa*) dupe the sheriff into believing that Marichant’s murderer was Crave and not Rossa, the lovers finally are able to escape to a new life together in Cymarron. Here Roy recognises the critical release into a new mental state, reflecting that “The world was ours now. Now that we were freed from every nightmare” (“Il mondo era nostro, adesso. Adesso che eravamo liberi da ogni incubo”) (298). The morning after Alberto (*La sabbia*) has revealed her fiancé to be a cold-blooded murderer, Michela awakes from her sedated sleep, like a fairy-tale heroine emerging into a new state of being, and implores Alberto to stay with her forever. In *Appuntamento a Trieste* the “recognition” is quasi-mystical: Diana is struck by a sudden, irrational but unshakable conviction that her lover is alive, thus manifesting the same innate faith that love will conquer all that is the mark of the experienced romance reader. Her faith, like that of the reader, is of course ultimately rewarded.

The transformation need not be instantaneous, however; rather, the tension may be released in gradual increments. Though armed with faith, Diana still has many practical impediments to overcome before she can achieve her love union, as do Donato and Johanna (*Johanna*). Donato must cure Johanna and find a means to return her to safety in society, her blackmailer must be rendered harmless, and Johanna must be cleared of all suspicion of complicity in crime. Although, with the help of Gertrude and Police Chief Glicker, Donato and Johanna

finally find the means to neutralise these obstacles, there is a long delay before they can reach the mental and physical serenity in which betrothal is possible.

Betrothal

Regis prefers the term *betrothal* over *marriage*, recognising that the obligatory happy ending results from the lovers' commitment to stay together for life: though this is usually symbolised by marriage, it is not always the case. Scerbanenco's texts indeed present a great variety in the nature of the betrothal. Nevertheless, the betrothal is the moment the romance reader has been waiting for as the inevitable resolution to the tension of the thwarted love story; and so, though codings vary, it is always strongly signalled.

Michela and Alberto's betrothal is perhaps the simplest of all, occurring in the closing paragraphs of *La sabbia non ricorda*, when Alberto replies to Michela's entreaty not to leave her with the words "I'm not leaving you, Chela, I never left you" ("Non ti lascio, Chela, non ti ho lasciata mai") (290). Immediately after Stefano proposes marriage to Alina (*Fiume verde*), their betrothal is sealed with a swim in the Ticino River – the "green river" that was the site of Alina's rape.

The betrothal may, alternatively, be a genuine commitment made by marriage partners in a hitherto unsatisfactory marriage, as is the case in Dandolo's *La prigioniera* and Scerbanenco's *I diecimila angeli*. Both feature protagonists who initially reject a loving spouse; in both cases, pregnancy seals their rekindled relationship. Although there is no ceremony, Scerbanenco's text nevertheless unequivocally pronounces the betrothal through Aldo's wife Giovanna's thoughts: "And now she was sure that he was there with her, and

that he would never leave her again” (“E adesso lei fu sicura che egli era lì, con lei, e che non l’avrebbe lasciata mai più”) (292).

Stiva and Fabia (*Anime*), whose hasty marriage takes place “offstage”, make a perilous escape to freedom, to a cottage in the Polish woods, where they clasp hands and acknowledge a mutual sense of final refuge that signals their true betrothal: “They were no longer souls without a heaven. [... Fabia ...] took his hand and like this she crossed the clearing with him, towards the wooden cabin, and they walked as if they were going towards their nest” (“Non erano più anime senza cielo. [... Fabia ...] gli prese la mano e così attraversò con lui la radura, verso la casetta di legno, e camminavano come se andassero verso il loro nido”) (220). Elsa and Tomaso (*Elsa*) marry just before the latter commences his prison sentence, in spite of every warning from friends and family that this is folly. Tomaso is ecstatic because “For all his life, now, he would be bound to Elsa” (“Per tutta la vita, ora, sarebbe stato legato a Elsa”); Elsa knows that “no one could divide them any longer” (“nessuno li poteva più dividere”) (308). Other betrothals use ceremony in a highly metaphorical manner. In their wedding clothes, Johanna and Donato (*Johanna*) undergo a transformation. Johanna exclaims that Donato seems like a prince; in replacing her childish plaits with an adult hairstyle, Johanna herself is transformed from a child into a woman.⁴⁰

La mia ragazza di Magdalena replaces the conventionally happy romance ending with an alternative that is, nevertheless, another staple of the genre (Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 42): hunted through the desert by their enemies, Zuñita and Martino will seal their

⁴⁰ Of the novels under study, *Johanna della foresta* has the most obvious parallels with the classic fairy tale, in which Roccella sees an antecedent of the romance. Apart from this final transformation into more splendid beings, there is the mysterious forest, the lost girl sheltered by a woodsman and his enormous dog, her “rebirth”, the questing knight who, accompanied by his squire, performs feats of superhuman strength, and the fairy godmother.

betrothal with a final union in death. This novel ends with Martino's final thoughts, which make explicit the fact that this is simply one more form of love union: "And I shall go, in a moment, and take her by the arm and so we shall be together, and not even death will separate us, because we shall die together" ("E io andrò, fra un istante e la prenderò per il braccio e staremo così insieme, e neanche la morte ci separerà, perché moriremo insieme") (222). Once again the reader's tension – and horror – in anticipation of violent death, is dissipated by the glow of love.

The betrothal, with its implicit conversion of a state of disorder and unhappiness into a secure and stable happiness, marks the fulfilment of the romance genre's contract with the reader, for if there is one aspect of the popular romance on which all critics agree it is the essentiality of the happy ending. The lovers' betrothal signals the end of the quest, the achievement of the "grail".

Contrary to the tenets of classic romance, Scerbanenco's "happy endings" do not achieve an unambiguous closure but contain the possibility of readings governed by alternative genre codings – as we shall see in subsequent chapters. Elsa (*Elsa*) recognises the anti-romantic side to her marriage as she marries the convicted criminal Tomaso on a wet and foggy winter day: "In films, at the end, there was lots of sun and the groom didn't have to think about soon being returned to prison" ("Nei film, alla fine, c'era tanto sole e lo sposo non doveva pensare che presto sarebbe tornato in carcere") (310). Rossa and Roy (*Rossa*) marry, yet Rossa remains a murderer, and they are concealing knowledge of other crimes. Fabia and Stiva (*Anime*) marry but, rather than escaping their enemies, they take on a new undercover mission together in much more dangerous territory. Martino and Zuñita (*La mia ragazza*) may achieve the supreme, eternal union of death, but they have failed to overcome the

injustice of their many persecutions. While all these endings give lip service to the romance's requisite happy ending, it can be argued that they do not ultimately redeem the initial disordered society.

Building blocks of the romance

Genre coding provides strong prompts for reading the building blocks – notably the characters and the environments in which they move – that fill out the narrative structure outlined above. Put simply, these character codings signal to the reader who will succeed and who will fail.

The heroine

Critics broadly agree on the key characteristics that define the typical romance heroine – characteristics which are indeed exhibited by Scerbanenco's heroines. As in the fairy tale, these women lack at least one parent, most often the mother, but have some protector, usually a more mature man or woman – a situation that renders them simultaneously, and contradictorily, independent, vulnerable, and infantilised. Elsa (*Elsa*) has a deceased father and an invalid mother who is convalescing in a remote location, while the family lawyer, Antonio, acts as her advisor and avuncular companion. Johanna (*Johanna*) has no mother and a surly father leading a precarious existence as a former Nazi collaborator; a taciturn elderly woodsman gives her refuge in his hut in the forest. Michela (*La sabbia*) and Alina (*Fiume verde*) both lost their mothers in childhood but have solicitous fathers who strive to heal them. The list goes on: the refugee Fabia (*Anime*) has lost all contact with her family; Luisella and Letizia (*Noi due*) lack a father and a mother respectively. Rossa (*Rossa*) is estranged from her family, who disapprove of her “white” ways; the orphaned Giovanna

(*Diecimila angeli*) is the ward of her widowed aunt; Diana's family (*Appuntamento*) consists of a dependent younger brother and a dying uncle.

The typical romance heroine is a chameleon, her appearance an imprecise mix of the beautiful and the mundane that renders her simultaneously aspirational and unthreatening to the female reader. Author Anna Banti, quoted by Pozzato, identifies this as "the secret of this consumer fiction: graft the everyday onto the extraordinary, the special onto the obvious" ("il segreto di questa narrativa di consumo: innestare il quotidiano sullo straordinario, il particolare sull'ovvio") (*Il romanzo rosa* 25). Noting that the "overall image of the heroine seems intentionally indeterminate" (83) in contrast to the sharply delineated rival, Paizis suggests that the contrast between the heroine's natural, "moderate" hair and the showy, contrived hairstyle of her predatory rival signals the heroine's innate wholesomeness, her "modest femininity creating an opening to the reader, a point of possible identification" (82). Mussell observes that the hero always values the heroine's moral qualities above her physical appearance; thus "ordinary women become beautiful in the eyes of men who love them", with the result that "romances reassure women that they need not be beautiful to succeed" (99).

Aldo's appraisal of Giovanna (*Diecimila angeli*) perfectly demonstrates this principle: she is "tall and statuesque" ("alta e statuaria"), with the "look of a little girl, and [...] large mannish hands" ("sguardo da bambina, e [...] grandi mani da uomo"). She wears plain, unflattering clothes and has her hair cut mannishly short (30). Yet, while Aldo teases Giovanna for her size, he does not consider it a defect: "she was large, a large statue, beautiful, perfect, but men felt uncomfortable with her size, as if she were lacking in femininity, and that wasn't true, because she was more sweet and childlike than many doll-like women" ("era grande,

una grande statua, bella, perfetta, ma per quella grandezza gli uomini si sentivano a disagio, come se mancasse di femminilità, e non era vero, perché era dolce e bambina più di tante donne che sembrano bambole”) (38).

Pozzato concurs with Mussell, observing that, typically, the heroine’s beauty is revealed gradually in a “svelamento” or “unveiling”: “the heroine unveils herself, she makes her real beauty known and recognised, as well as her other hidden qualities, such as courage, her capacity for devotion, etc” (“la protagonista si svela, fa conoscere e riconoscere la propria bellezza e altre sue doti nascoste, come il coraggio, la capacità di dedizione eccetera”) (*Il romanzo rosa* 27).

These women often have a quality that initially seems to render them less romantically viable: a mildly masculine aspect (Elsa, Giovanna) or a childish appearance that belies their adult state (Johanna, Alina, Giovanna). A short, somewhat mannish hairstyle, above average height, “unfeminine” clothing, and large hands are features that recur.⁴¹ Tomaso’s first appraisal of Elsa (*Elsa*) registers several masculine aspects that, nevertheless, do not render her any less attractive to men: “an athletic yet gentle stride, with her masculine briefcase under her arm, black hair almost as short as a man’s, very serious, yet all the same men passing by insisted on gazing at her” (“un passo sportivo eppure morbido, con la sua borsa da uomo sotto braccio, i capelli neri corti quasi alla uomo, molto seria, ma gli uomini che passavano insistevano lo stesso a guardarla”) (7). These women are thus coded as practical and reliable, not vain seductresses, yet possessing a discreet sexuality.

⁴¹ There are numerous references to Fabia’s large, mannish, yet beautiful hands (*Anime*). The same feature is shared by Michela, Elsa, Zūnita, Rossa, and Giovanna. Both Alina and Giovanna cut their long hair into a style which is specifically labelled masculine or boyish.

Though not classically beautiful, each woman has a striking feature: Elsa has large shining eyes, Johanna has long dark plaits and intensely blue eyes, Michela is exceptionally tall with a tiny waist and an aristocratic bearing. Alina too is naturally aristocratic. Both Luisella and Fabia have the profile of a classical statue, conveying a superficial coolness that dissolves when they smile. Rossa and Zuñita are exotically fascinating with their dark complexions and clouds of black hair.

The hero

Radway, in her Smithton study, uncovered a cluster of attributes that romance readers considered necessary in the hero for them to rate a romance as successful; as with the heroine, these characteristics blend the exceptional and the unthreatening. The Smithton women preferred the hero to be “strong and masculine, but equally capable of unusual tenderness, gentleness, and concern for [the heroine’s] pleasure” (81). They reviled weak heroes, yet “neither strength nor protectiveness is considered as important as intelligence, gentleness, and an ability to laugh at life” (81). Romance writer Robyn Donald describes the most stereotypical form of the romance hero as “a mean, moody, magnificent creature with a curling lip and mocking eyes and an arrogant air of self-assurance – until he meets the heroine” (81). This extreme is rare in Scerbanenco, although Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*) comes close.

Alberto Brodesco (54) notes that romances typically spend more time describing the hero than the heroine, since the point of view is always that of the heroine. She is somewhat vaguely drawn, whereas his attractions are dwelt upon. In fact the reverse is the case in Scerbanenco’s romances, where the point of view – and the gaze – are primarily male, and so

descriptions of the hero are far less precise. Nevertheless, it is always made clear that these men are young, strong, and physically appealing. Since Scerbanenco's heroines are universally tall, his heroes are even taller. Aged from their twenties to their mid-thirties, they may be the same age as the heroine, or older, but never younger.

Typically, the hero's hair and eyes are highlighted for their special attractiveness. Tomaso (*Elsa*) is confident that he can charm women with his appearance: "It was because of his very thick, very short hair, he knew, as well as for his decisive air; many people took him for a young doctor" ("Era per i suoi capelli fitti fitti, cortissimi, lo sapeva, e anche per l'aria decisa: molti lo prendevano per un giovane medico") (6). Stefano (*Fiume verde*) has "appealing steel-grey eyes" ("occhi grigi di ferro che piacciono") and "short, thick brown hair. Girls said he was attractive" ("corti e folti capelli castani. Le ragazze gli dicevano che piaceva") (13). Mauro (*Noi due*) also has an impressive head of hair: "straight brown hair, with attractive blond highlights" ("capelli castani, lisci, ma con delle sfumature di biondo che piacevano") (7). Like Mauro – who combines a tall and powerful physique that has earned him the nickname "Joe Montagna" with shyness around women – all Scerbanenco's heroes present the Smithton women's preferred amalgam of physical strength and tenderness.

The hero tends to be offset by lesser males who serve to accentuate his desirable qualities. The hypermasculine, supernaturally strong Donato (*Johanna*) acts as protector to his friend, the physically weak, boyish Francino. Francino also has a secret passion for Johanna but quickly stands aside, acknowledging that he is unworthy, a mere boy in comparison to the "real man" ("vero uomo"), Donato. Alberto's decisiveness and sense of command (*La sabbia*) are in stark contrast to the vacillation and timidity of his handsome yet weak rival, Roberto.

Scerbanenco does not portray the stereotypically inscrutable hero who is unaware of or suppresses his love for the heroine. Scerbanenco's heroes fall in love as decisively and irretrievably as his heroines and, given the prominence of the heroes' points of view, the reader is privy to their anguished thoughts and not infrequent tears. As is typical in the romance genre, the Scerbanencan hero has often had a prior unhappy experience of love and would prefer to resist the new attachment, yet at the same time he understands that he is powerless to do so. On his quest to track down Rossa, with whom he has had just two fleeting encounters, Roy (*Rossa*) struggles with this internal conflict, as "something which had been dead for so long came back to life inside me, and I didn't want to revive it" ("mi tornava dentro qualche cosa di vivo, che da tanto tempo era morto, e non volevo rivivesse ancora") (39). He knows that he should turn back, admonishing himself "Drop it, Roy [...] an affair like that is of absolutely no use to you" ("Piantala, Roy, [...] non ti serve proprio a niente una storia simile") (39), but continues anyway, tracks Rossa down, and brings her back to live with him. Like Roy, Stefano (*Fiume verde*) is recovering from an unhappy love and has no wish to repeat the experience, yet cannot resist: "he was afraid of himself and of that girl. He'd only been in love once, and the experience had been too bitter" ("aveva paura di sé e di quella ragazza. Era stato innamorato una volta sola, ed era stata un'esperienza troppo amara") (25).

Love rivals and foils

Although the focus is on the couple, love rivals, foils, and opponents play a supporting role in the classic romance. Many critics consider the love rival's role to be to provide a negative example. Paizis notes that "In so far as the actions of the heroine are a representation of what to do, those of the female rival are the opposite – what *not* to do, what *not* to be, what *not* to

risk becoming” (141) (Original emphasis.) According to Mussell, rivals are “negative role models who reinforce traditional assumptions of proper female behavior” (105). Such a Manichean pairing is taken to the extreme in Mancuso’s *Questo amore è mio*, where the love rival is the physical double – and moral opposite – of the heroine. Mancuso’s use of a doppelgänger trope that has clear affinities with the folk tale allows her to simultaneously offer two models of love, one irrational, self-centred, and operatically tragic, the other restrained, self-effacing, and domestic. Two physically identical women, one a good-hearted working-class girl (Bianca), the other a ruthless, egotistical dancer (Mary Luna), cross paths when the latter is attacked and mutilated by a man who has mistaken her for Bianca. Mary Luna engages Bianca as a surrogate so her lover will never know of her lost beauty; the lover of course recognises Bianca’s pure heart and domestic potential, sees through the ruse, and marries her.

Susan Ostrov Weissner observes that “the good heroine and her wonderful/terrible rival” are set up to clash and never cooperate: “[they] never talk to each other about their situation with anything like interest or curiosity, never work together to accomplish a goal, never imagine for each other the possibility of a female-female relation outside a narrative centered on a man as the coveted prize” (278). Mussell is of the opinion that this female rivalry is consolatory in its suggestion that “the underdog – the heroine – can compete with all other women and can triumph over them” (109).

Nevertheless, the rival or foil need not have a strictly negative function; she may, rather, complement the qualities of the heroine. As Jay Dixon points out, “Connected, but distanced, the same yet different, the other woman depicts aspects of femininity the heroine must incorporate in order to become fully female” (93). Juliet Flesch, while specifically critiquing

the Australian popular romance, has insights which are similar, and equally applicable to Scerbanenco's novels. In Flesch's view, the rival has been unfairly stigmatised in much feminist criticism, and may in fact provide another role model for the reader: "Although the jealous ex-wife/girlfriend/ prospective mother-in-law do appear in some romance writing, instances of supportive female networks are also common" (147). Mussell is in qualified agreement, observing that, while romance heroines typically lack female friends of a similar age, "they may find emotional support from women who are older and thus out of the competition" (107).

Certainly, Scerbanenco tends to take a sympathetic view of love rivals, who frequently become helper figures once they accept that their love for the hero is unrequited. As Mussell has noted, these women are typically older than the heroine and have maternal qualities which become more apparent as they transform from potential lover to "fairy godmother". Stefano's friend and casual sexual partner, Clelia (*Fiume verde*), is marked upon her first appearance as too old for love at thirty-five and unsuitable for the hero because she is married – though separated from her abusive husband – and the mother of a small child. Accepting defeat after several humiliating rejections from Stefano, Clelia becomes a substitute mother for the motherless Alina, and from this point her maternal qualities are underlined. Ultimately, Clelia is rewarded with the attentions of Alina's elderly widowed father.

Johanna della foresta's Gertrude plays a similar role. Like Clelia, she has a sexual relationship with the hero but is rejected – and humiliated – in favour of the younger, more bewitching Johanna. At twenty-nine, five years older than Donato, Gertrude accepts that she is getting too old for romance, and so she too assumes a maternal role, protecting the

motherless Johanna and selflessly facilitating her integration back into society. Donato explicitly acknowledges Gertude's helper role, declaring, "If it hadn't been for Gertrude I would never have had this happiness of embracing Johanna" ("Se non ci fosse stata Gertrude non avrebbe avuto mai questa felicità di stringere così Johanna") (303). Like Clelia, Gertrude is rewarded with a suitable partner, marrying Police Chief Glicken, who has courted her for many years without arousing much enthusiasm on her part.

Perhaps the most self-sacrificing love rival is Sybille Glows (*Rossa*), the wealthy heiress whom Roy courts and exploits so he can continue paying off his blackmailer. Hearing the full story, Sybille cedes Roy to Rossa, giving the pair her blessing and a handsome wedding present. Her reward is Roy's acclaim: "I always thought that this was an ugly world [...]. But today I've seen that it's a world where there are also people like Sybille Glows and now I'm happy to live in this world [...]" ("Ho sempre pensato che era un brutto mondo, questo [...]. Ma oggi ho visto che è un mondo dove c'è anche della gente come Sybille Glows e allora in questo mondo mi piacerebbe vivere [...]" (301).

The hero, too, may have rivals for the heroine's affections, although this is less common in Scerbanenco's novels. In *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo* it is Elsa's unofficial guardian, Antonio, who experiences unrequited love for his charge. Elsa considers marrying Antonio, acknowledging the suitability of the match but also realising that she cannot love him in the way she loves the eminently unsuitable Tomaso. Admitting defeat, Antonio reassumes his avuncular role *in loco parentis* and strives to protect the young lovers and rehabilitate Tomaso. Only after Alberto has revealed Roberto to be a murderer (*La sabbia*) does Michela accept that she has directed her affections towards the wrong man.

Both Luisa (*Anime*) and Luisella (*Noi due*) acknowledge that they must cede their man to a rival, not only because he loves the rival more but also because the rival has qualities they see as superior to their own. The simple working-class Luisa and her pragmatic artisan father understand that Stiva is socially superior and thus requires a wife with Fabia's sophistication and refinement. Luisella likewise admits that Letizia can offer Mauro wealth and protection, while she has little to give. Nevertheless, Luisella's selfless love for Mauro endures and is finally rewarded when Letizia dies and Mauro returns to her.⁴²

Other characters are presented not as rivals but as foils – examples of false love and sterile relationships. Alina's father (*Fiume verde*) is duped by a younger woman who is revealed to be a treacherous gold-digger. Aldo's mother is the foil in *I diecimila angeli*, portrayed in a relentlessly negative light as a vain and predatory older woman who has a succession of younger lovers, to her son's disgust. In the same novel, Marina/Libella enters a loveless marriage to a decent but prosaic farmer, a marriage doomed to failure because she cannot reciprocate her husband's love.

Radway's informants agreed that the love rivals and foils should not have too much prominence in the story, so the reader is aware that the rival is not a serious threat. Radway observes that in the successful romance it is preferable that "the heroine and the hero function as the single, dynamic center of the novels", so facilitating "a particularly intense identification between reader and heroine" (123). In contrast, Scerbanenco's romances frequently present characters such as Gertrude (*Johanna*) and Letizia (*Noi due*) who are ultimately revealed to be secondary love interests yet occupy centre-stage for large sections

⁴² In this novel the confusion over who is the true love and who the rival is uncharacteristically sustained until close to the end. A clue for the experienced reader, however, resides in the fact that the ultimately successful Luisella has proven her fecundity by conceiving the hero's child, while Letizia's chronic heart disease marks her as unfit for motherhood or a life of "happy ever after".

of the narrative. While noting here my contention that Scerbanenco's characteristic presentation of these rivals and foils is a key factor in providing the reader with alternative readings and gender models, I shall postpone a full development of this argument until Chapter Eight.

Location and temporalisation

Scerbanenco eschews the school of romance-writing that insists on vagueness of time and place, providing not just detailed accounts of real physical settings but historical context as well. It is not uncommon for actual dates to be supplied, and there are many references to popular songs, films, and world events. As just one example, Stefano's story on Alina and the psychiatric hospital (*Fiume verde*) is edged off the front page of his journal by the developing story of Mossadeq in Persia. In contrast, the lack of clues to a precise date means that Mancuso's *Questo amore è mio* appears contemporary to the reader, in spite of a publishing history spanning several decades. Likewise Mancuso's novel's location, nominally Tuscan, is imprecise.

In Scerbanenco's case, his physical settings reveal the talent for capturing place that was to become the hallmark of the master of Milanese *noir* in the Lamberti series. Milan at the beginning of the economic boom, with its attendant social upheaval, is described in detail in *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*, contrasting with the sleepy provincialism of Elsa's home town, Mantua. There are glimpses of a shattered post-war Milan in the earlier *Anime senza cielo*, with its tottering boarding houses filled with refugees, and parks populated by the unemployed and listless. A swathe of northern Italy encompassing Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, the Veneto, and the Adriatic coast is revisited again and again; and these regions'

physical contours, weather effects, and characteristic personality types are drawn in detail.

The lagoons and flatlands around Comacchio play a central role in *I diecimila angeli*, as do Lignano Sabbiadoro in *La sabbia non ricorda*, Ravenna in *Noi due e nient'altro*, Ferrara in *I diecimila angeli*, and Trieste and surroundings in *Appuntamento a Trieste* and *Noi due e nient'altro*.

Even the forests and small mountain towns of Switzerland are drawn with an accuracy gleaned, no doubt, from the author's years of exile in that country. In particular, Scerbanenco is a master of atmospheric effect, describing the fogs, drizzle, and grey skies of the low-lying lagoons in the same way he would later, in the Lamberti series, capture the subtle shades of Milan's changing seasons.

The New Mexico of the Westerns is perhaps less nuanced, drawn as it must have been from the cinema and American popular novels. Nevertheless, this is no stock, timeless Wild West but is specifically dated to the years immediately following the Second World War. In all the novels, multiple senses are engaged as Scerbanenco describes the smells and sounds of the forest or the city. This specificity of time and place appears more appropriate to the crime and *noir* genres than the popular romance, a contention I shall explore in more depth in Chapter Four.

Genre fiction offers its predictable elements – its codings – as a contract with the reader. My close reading of Scerbanenco's novels has made it clear how these texts conform to the commonly recognised codes of the popular romance, epitomised by Regis's test, thus providing the experienced romance reader with all the genre cues needed to embark upon the

decoding process. Yet the same novels may be read in a different genre key, as I shall demonstrate in the following chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR: CRIME FICTION

That the works under study manifest the classic codes of popular romance should now be evident; yet a second close reading of the same works will reveal the simultaneous appearance of the characteristic codes of the crime fiction genre in its various permutations. In fact, in these novels there is a blurring of boundaries not just between genres but within the subgenres of crime fiction – thus precise definitions are called for in order to identify the boundaries that are being transgressed within the crime genre as well.

With terminological distinctions clearly delineated, I shall turn a sharp focus on certain of Scerbanenco's texts to pinpoint how they offer the reader the embedded codes of the various subgenres of crime fiction, including the special case of *noir*. Before turning to his hybridised romances, some comparison with those of the author's texts that are universally acknowledged as exemplars of classic crime genres – the Lamberti and Jelling series – will provide insight into the author's deep knowledge of and virtuoso ability with these classic codes.

Definitions

The overall genre has been assigned various labels, such as crime-, murder-, mystery-, or thriller-fiction, the last two of which are too all-encompassing to be useful,⁴³ while Malmgren's "murder fiction" (*Anatomy of Murder* 1) makes no allowance for the fact that murder is not an inevitable feature. Following Horsley (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 3) and Stephen Knight, I shall use "crime fiction" as the broadest term to cover all works that

⁴³ For discussion on this point, see John Scaggs 148 and Stephen Knight 227.

have a crime at their heart, whether narrated from the point of view of the investigator, the criminal, or some third party such as a victim, witness, or suspect.⁴⁴

Traditionally, a secondary division is made between works which present the crime as a mystery, thus concerning themselves with its solution by an amateur or professional investigator, and works which do not conceal the facts of the crime or create mystery but instead present the reader with a vicarious experience of transgression by entering the mind of the criminal (or, less often, the victim, a suspect, or a witness).⁴⁵ The former may be broadly described as detective fiction, the designation preferred by John Scaggs, Horsley, and Pyrhönen, and the term I shall employ. Detective fiction has been further subdivided into two categories known variously as classic, Golden Age, or clue-puzzle; and hard-boiled, private-eye, or tough-guy, fiction. The former is most commonly associated with British writers of the interwar years, epitomised by Agatha Christie, and the latter with an American style flourishing from the late 1920s, epitomised by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. These subcategories, which I shall designate respectively “classic” and “hard-boiled” detective fiction, are particularly pertinent to any study of Scerbanenco’s early and late crime novels. With regard to the transgressor-focused category, I prefer to follow Horsley and Knight in using the designation “crime fiction” for this subgenre as well as for the parent genre, rather than Martin Priestman’s and Todorov’s overly broad “thriller”.

Closely allied to the crime subgenre is the special category of *noir*. While some critics have equated literary *noir* with hard-boiled crime fiction, I agree with Horsley – who observes an

⁴⁴ Some critics (e.g. Malmgren, *Anatomy of Murder* 8) prefer to reserve this term for transgressor-focused works. Horsley, however, contends that “the representation of *crime* without the reassuring presence of a detective is arguably the ‘parent’ tradition” (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 3 - original emphasis) and that the label is therefore appropriate for both the overall genre and the transgressor-focused subgenre.

⁴⁵ These broad divisions coincide, respectively, with Cawelti’s categories of mystery and adventure (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*).

overlap but not an absolute identity (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 115) – that *noir* is a special category, with specific defining features. Indeed I argue that although crimes, real and imagined, occur in all the books under discussion, those that are not detective novels – and even those that are – are best examined in the context of this specific definition of *noir*, which I shall discuss in detail below.

Finally, I must note that negotiating the inconsistencies and contradictions of English-language definitions within this genre is challenging enough without entering the equivalent Italian quagmire, where terminology is no more consistent and arguably less precise: hence my decision to employ English terms.⁴⁶

The detective novel: classic and hard-boiled

Most definitions of detective fiction focus on the narrative sequence and archetypal characters: the minimum requirement is a crime to be solved, an investigator, and a solution to the mystery. Horsley contends that the subgenre's essence lies in a simple narrative sequence, the "characteristic pattern of death-detection-explanation" (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 12). Referring specifically to the classic variety, Pyrhönen expands the

⁴⁶ In Italy the parent genre is most often termed – somewhat confusingly – “police literature” (“letteratura poliziesca” or “il poliziesco”). This is generally subdivided into *giallo* (detective fiction) and *nero* (corresponding roughly to transgressor-focused crime fiction; the French term *noir* is often substituted). While the term *giallo* is also widely used for the broad parent genre, it is sometimes reserved for classic detection. Hard-boiled detection is frequently classed as *nero/noir*, although the English term (and others such as “private-eye”) is also seen. Spinazzola contrasts “the classic puzzle *giallo*” (“il classico giallo a enigma”) with “the action *giallo*” (“il giallo d’azione”), equating the latter with “*noir* or horror” (“noir o horror”), but presumably referring primarily to the hard-boiled category, since he explains that “In the action *giallo* the investigation unfolds simultaneously with the criminal acts, which often are repeated in a series” (“Nel giallo d’azione l’indagine si svolge in simultanea con il compiersi delle imprese criminose, sovente replicate in serie”) (“Perché leggiamo i gialli” 68). In regular use are numerous English terms, such as “detective story”, “mystery story”, “police procedural”, “thriller”, “suspense”, and “whodunit”. The fact that throughout the early twentieth century attempts to create indigenous models of crime fiction appeared alongside the dominant Anglo-Saxon imports and their close Italian imitations no doubt adds to the difficulty of achieving precise classifications. Benedetta Bini provides a good summary of this history. Petronio has an extended discussion on classification (“Il giallo: un problema di classificazione”) in *Il punto su il romanzo poliziesco* 15-18.

sequence by specifying “a mystery to be solved”, “presentation of clues”, “the interrogation of suspects”, “announcement of the criminal’s identity”, “proof of the solution” (21).

Dove identifies four essentials, nominating characters as well as structures and – significantly for my purposes – stressing the presence of the reader: “the main character is a detective”; no matter what secondary themes occur, “the main plot of the story is the account of the investigation and resolution”; the mystery must be “a complex secret that seems impossible of solution”; and in the end, even if the solution is known to almost no one in the story world, “it must be known to the reader” (10).⁴⁷ Dove’s study is primarily concerned with classic detection; nevertheless he insists that the same broad schema applies to the hard-boiled model.

Dove further highlights the reader-engaging element of game, calling the detective story “essentially play transformed into art” (1). This insight, that classic detective fiction involves a game wherein the reader pits his or her wits against the author, striving to solve the mystery before the detective’s final summing-up, is long established, growing up alongside the genre.⁴⁸ Thus the reader expects the author to “play fair”, offering all the information needed to find the answer, including clues, which typically include false trails; a range of suspects and motives; and an identifiable culprit.⁴⁹

Pyrhönen likewise finds the game analogy useful as an analytical tool, identifying two levels of game. One is a “game of make-believe”, where the reader participates in the fictional

⁴⁷ In Chapter Six, where I deal with genre hybridity, I shall challenge Dove’s insistence that parallel stories (“love themes, ghost themes, social themes or others” 10) must be subordinate.

⁴⁸ Howard Haycraft provides a summary of the many sets of rules for fair play decreed by early practitioners of the genre (223-58).

⁴⁹ The detective helpfully recaps all the facts, suspects, and motives in a private conversation towards the end of Scerbanenco’s *La sabbia non ricorda* (235-37). In his posthumously published novel, *Le principesse di Acapulco*, Scerbanenco satirises this device by directly addressing the “reader-investigator” (“lettore-investigatore”) and laying out these facts as a table of numbered points (52-53).

world of criminal and investigator. The other has particular relevance to the current project: an “author-reader game”, where the reader uses genre knowledge to interpret how the author is working the conventions (14-16). Describing the reading/decoding process, Pyrhönen speaks of the reader’s “playful rivalry with the author”, noting – in a statement that goes to the heart of my own thesis – that “Our chances of beating the author mostly lie in our familiarity with generic conventions and literary-cultural knowledge” (21). That is, genre coding and reader response/recognition are two necessary sides of the same coin if the game is to succeed.

The hard-boiled variant of detection takes away the lighter aspects of playfulness, replacing the artifice of the puzzle with action, realism, even squalor. In this game, the detective, being also in the dark, does not withhold knowledge; yet since there is still a mystery, the reader-author game of wits remains.

Todorov locates an essential structure of the crime genre in its presentation of two stories, that of the crime and that of its investigation.⁵⁰ Although both the classic and hard-boiled subgenres manifest this structure, their emphases are very different.⁵¹ The classic detective novel opens with a murder, a self-contained story that has already happened. From here, the task of the detective – and the text – is to reconstruct this story by a process of investigation and revelation and create a final point of convergence between the two stories that satisfies reader curiosity. In the hard-boiled novel, the crime story and the story of the investigation run in parallel, as new crimes – some contingent on the catalytic first crime, some caused by the act of investigation – arise to fuel reader anxiety. The hard-boiled detective is not external

⁵⁰ “the first – the story of the crime – tells ‘what really happened,’ whereas the second – the story of the investigation – explains ‘how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it’” (*Poetics of Prose* 45).

⁵¹ In the interests of consistency, I am using my own terminology for the subgenres here, rather than Todorov’s “whodunit” and “thriller”.

and inviolate but fatally implicated in the crime world. If the classic detective is “immunized: nothing could happen to [him]”, his hard-boiled counterpart “risks his health, if not his life” (Todorov, *Poetics of Prose* 47).

Scerbanenco’s detective series

Scrutiny of his Jelling and Lamberti series demonstrates Scerbanenco’s adherence to the rules of the respective subgenres of detective fiction. The Jelling series (1940-1942), presenting seemingly impossible puzzles to be solved by a virtuoso amateur investigator who reserves his findings so as to dazzle the reader in the last chapter, fits well into the classic detection mould, evidencing Scerbanenco’s familiarity with the Anglo-Saxon authors who provided the mainstay of Mondadori’s *Libri Gialli* series.⁵² The Lamberti series (1966-1969), on the other hand, displays the typical features of the hard-boiled school, depicting a corrupt contemporary urban society, a tough-guy investigator, graphic violence, and far less cut and dried solutions.⁵³

The five novels in the Jelling series showcase ingenious variations of the typically convoluted plotting that owes everything to the rules of the game and very little to realism.⁵⁴

Il cane che parla is a classic closed-room mystery, where the murder takes place in a compartment on a moving train. *L’antro dei filosofi* uses the familiar Christie device of

⁵² Since 1929, the Milanese publisher had been issuing foreign, mostly English-language, crime novels in translation, affording the monolingual Scerbanenco the opportunity to become versed in the techniques of such classic detective writers as Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, S.S. Van Dine, and Erle Stanley Gardner, as well as Georges Simenon’s Maigret series. By 1940, the Fascist regime’s policy of autarchy obliged the publisher to include new works by Italian authors, opening the way for Scerbanenco’s Jelling novels. Misgivings about the influence of crime fiction on the populace caused the regime to impose increasing restrictions on publishers, so that Mondadori was forced to suspend publication of the *Libri gialli* series in 1941, only relaunching it after the end of the war.

⁵³ For extended analysis of the contrasts between the two series, see Hamlyn, “The Role of the Mass Market in Shaping Giorgio Scerbanenco’s Arthur Jelling and Duca Lamberti Detective Series”.

⁵⁴ The manuscript of a sixth Jelling novel, *Lo scandalo dell’osservatorio astronomico*, recently came to light and was first published in 2011.

exchanged identity to present a victim who is not who she is presumed to be. In both the first two novels in the series, *Sei giorni di preavviso* and *La bambola cieca*, Jelling must prevent a pre-announced crime that has not yet happened, so that the battle of wits between criminal and detective appears to take place in real time. Both these novels also have elements of the classic closed-room trope, in that the victim is killed while under close police protection.

Nessuno è colpevole is a daring tour de force that inverts the genre, as Jelling takes an open-and-shut case of self-confessed murder and proves it did not happen.

Jelling is not a professional investigator but a police archivist, a pathologically shy man who uses his acute logic, his understanding of human psychology, his reliable intuitions, and sheer doggedness to solve cases that have baffled the authorities. Jelling proceeds by examining the many suspects one by one, following mystifying lines of inquiry, advancing hypotheses, yet concealing his conclusions until he is able to assemble all the suspects at the end, lay out his brilliant line of reasoning, and unmask the guilty party. This line of plotting adheres closely to Van Dine's rules for the detective novel, the most important of which Dora Dundley and Jelling recite in *La bambola cieca*: "It always happens like this in crime novels. There's a web of suspicion over all the characters, each accuses the other, you can no longer figure out anything, and at the end [...] the culprit is the one you least suspected..." ("Succede sempre così nei romanzi gialli. C'è una rete di sospetti su tutti i personaggi, ciascuno accusa l'altro, non ci si capisce più niente e alla fine [...] il colpevole è quello di cui meno si sospettava...") (43-44).

Pistelli finds the Jelling novels "not fully convincing, revealing themselves only as good consumer products, scrupulous apprentice exercises and little more" ("non del tutto convincenti, rivelandosi soltanto buoni prodotti di consumo, esercizi scrupolosi di

apprendistato e poco più”), finding particular fault in their “simple schematisations” (“semplicistiche schematizzazioni”), which include “a Manichean contrast between good and evil persons” (“[una] contrapposizione manichea tra buoni e cattivi”) and “a rigidity of judgement that does not recognise doubts and concessions” (“un’inflessibilità di giudizio che non conosce dubbi e cedimenti”) (335). Here is not the place to argue the merits of the Jelling novels, in which Dunnett has found greater subtlety, but I agree with Pistelli that these novels do display the mannerism and unreality that are hallmarks of their genre.

The Lamberti series is entirely different. Here the demands of realism are privileged over ingenuity, and the detective investigates the kind of social issues that were occupying the Italian public at the time of writing. Though highly topical, these are crimes that nevertheless can be reduced to the “violence, sex, and betrayal” that Scaggs considers the bedrock of the hard-boiled genre (145).

In his first case, *Venere privata*, Lamberti infiltrates a gang that is blackmailing, torturing, and occasionally murdering young Milanese women as it lures them into organised cross-border prostitution. *Traditori di tutti* has Lamberti on the trail of organised criminals engaged in cross-border arms and drugs trafficking and, in the course of this investigation, uncovering evidence of the continuing repercussions of atrocities committed by and against Italians during the Second World War. Ostensibly about an especially vicious episode of juvenile delinquency, in which a young schoolteacher is raped and tortured to death by her pupils, *I ragazzi del massacro* returns to the problems of drug trafficking and organised crime. The final novel in the series, *I milanesi ammazzano al sabato*, deals with forced prostitution and a savage act of vigilantism carried out by a law-abiding citizen who has lost

faith in official justice after his daughter, an adult with the mental age of a child, is abducted, prostituted, and brutally murdered, and the police investigation stalls.

Rather than dealing with a self-contained group of known suspects, as the classic detective form dictates, Lamberti looks for an unknown criminal, someone who may not even exist.

The reader lacks information because the detective is also in the dark; indeed, there are times when the reader has more information than the detective. Lamberti's final exposure of the culprit does not astonish the reader, since, unlike in classic detection, these culprits are not the least likely suspect and are often predictable.

Like Jelling, Lamberti is not a professional investigator; he is a disgraced doctor, jailed for practising compassionate euthanasia, who, at the beginning of the series, has just been released after serving his sentence. Like Jelling, Lamberti has close contacts in the police force and an appreciation of their work and its frustrations. Lamberti drifts into his role as a semi-official investigator for the force when he comes across a crime in the course of an assignment he is given, on release, as minder of the alcoholic son of a Milanese tycoon.

Lamberti's passion for justice – or vengeance – and his skill as an effective though unorthodox investigator who employs both extreme violence and psychological insight to solve cases, draws him into a close, though always ambiguous, alliance with the police.

The first three Lamberti books all open with a murder, but in the case of the first two the plot then heads off in a seemingly unrelated direction which concerns Lamberti's profession as a (deregistered) doctor: the rehabilitation of the alcoholic Davide Auseri; the restoration of Giovanna Marelli's virginity. Only gradually does it become apparent that there are links between these events and the murders, and Lamberti takes up his role as an unofficial

investigator working alongside his police friends. The fourth novel begins as a missing person investigation and bogs down in dead ends. This kind of plotting relies on both the rhythms of real life and a cinematic technique of rapid cuts and flashbacks.

While Jelling puts one piece of the puzzle after another relentlessly into place, using his extraordinary skills of deduction, Lamberti gets nowhere for long intervals and then suddenly has a lucky break. By the end of each novel in the Lamberti series the initial mystery – who committed the crime and why – has been solved but, unlike in the Jelling novels, there is little sense of satisfactory closure. Van der Linde has remarked that “Lamberti’s integrity lies in the persistence of the quest, not in moral rectitude or clearcut answers” (315), and certainly in no case does the reader feel that justice has been done and the world restored to rights: instead, the innocent Livia is mutilated (*Venere privata*); Susanna Paany faces punishment for a “just” crime (*Traditori di tutti*); it is obvious that Marisella Domenici will never receive a punishment that fits the enormity of her crime (*I ragazzi*); Amanzio Berzaghi has committed a savage crime of revenge needlessly, since the police were closing in on the culprits (*I milanesi*).

If the Jelling and Lamberti series adhere respectively to the codes of the classic and hard-boiled schools of detection, the intervening novels that make up the current study show Scerbanenco using the codes of these genres as just one strand in the hybrid forms that typify this middle period. And yet, while his critics continually refer to Scerbanenco’s perennial use of *noir* – as evidenced by my introductory literature review – few have provided concrete

examples from the romance novels, and none but Pirani has made any extended study of an individual work.⁵⁵

Few of the novels in my current study could be classed as classic novels of detection, but I contend that *La sabbia non ricorda* and *Johanna della foresta* meet the essential criteria. I shall now examine these two novels in depth, reserving the other works for a later section in which I discuss the typology of the *noir* variant of crime fiction.

Classic detective fiction: *La sabbia non ricorda*

La sabbia non ricorda most closely follows the conventions of classic detective fiction regarding narrative structure, opening with the murder scene that concludes Todorov's "first story". Standard characters and motifs are showcased in this crucial first scene, as the text forces the reader's gaze to linger on the victim, a prime suspect, and the presumed murder weapon. A young German tourist, Gertrude Leuter, is crouching on an Italian beach at dawn, next to the lifeless, bloodied body of a young Sicilian man, Giannuzzo, with whom, we quickly ascertain, she has had a violent relationship. Telling herself that she must get away before anyone sees her, Gertrude picks up a knife that is lying beside the body, hurls it out to sea, hastily collects her belongings from the nearby holiday camp, and flees back home across the border.

Replicating Horsley's "death-detection-explanation" model, the narrative works to solve the mystery of this murder and closes with special investigator Alberto Messaglia's summary of evidence and dramatic exposure of the culprit, who is among the small group assembled to hear his summation. With a nod to the classic Christie ending, this unmasking takes place in

⁵⁵ Pirani's penetrating but brief critical essays, appended to the Sellerio reprints of the romantic Westerns *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* and *Rossa*, are the exceptions to this critical lack.

the library of a private home, in front of the assembled residents. Only now can the reader know if he or she has succeeded in the game by correctly reading the clues of the murder mystery – and the code of the detective genre.

The detective, Alberto, is a standard of the classic detective novel, in which the mystery is solved by a special investigator, an outsider with superior skills, rather than by the parallel official police investigation. The official investigation must of course be shown, since its lack of success highlights the special investigator's exceptionality – or what Cawelti has called his “almost magical power to expose and lay bare the deepest secrets” (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 94). In a sudden, cinematic change of focus, two policemen from the local *carabinieri* force disembark from the same bus that Gertrude boards as she flees the crime scene; in the course of their morning beach patrol, they will discover the body and activate an official police investigation, which will not, however, solve the crime.

The special investigator, Alberto, is introduced initially within the novel's counterpoint love story as a former boyfriend of this parallel story's heroine, Michela; nevertheless, the reader is soon informed that he works for the scientific branch of the police, where Michela's father is his superior. Alberto's credentials are emphasised: he excelled in his studies and is now sent abroad often “on extremely delicate operations” (“con missioni molto delicate”) (24). Later, in an interlude that serves both the romance and the crime story, we are given a glimpse of his work gathering secret intelligence across the border in Yugoslavia (100-04).

The love heroine, Michela, now – as we read the story within the detective genre – becomes the catalyst who sets the investigator on his task. Mindful that their host's son, Roberto, is a prime suspect in Giannuzzo's murder, Michela persuades her father to pull strings to involve

Alberto in the case. As his police branch is quite separate from the *carabinieri*, Alberto's investigative role remains semi-official, giving him leeway to use the unorthodox methods of the (typically amateur) classic detective. Although Alberto is a forensics expert who "could discuss for hours fingerprints, the rifling on firearms, and knife wounds" ("poteva discutere per ore di impronte digitali, di rigature delle armi di fuoco, di ferite di armi da taglio") (24), he uses not scientific analysis but brilliant intuition and psychological insight to crack the case. Listening to a taped police interview with Gertrude, he intuits that she is concealing crucial evidence. Not only is this hunch correct, but the psychologically astute Alberto knows precisely how to goad Gertrude into revealing the full truth to him before her official police interrogation.

While the local *carabinieri* conduct their methodical murder inquiry, Alberto's special relationship with the murderer – who is both his rival for Michela's affections and the son of his patron's host – gives him access to crucial facts that the police would have been unlikely to uncover.⁵⁶ Under the spell of Alberto's sympathetic and persuasive personality, Gertrude volunteers further crucial evidence: that next to the body when she found it there was a knife which she recognised as the victim's, and that this knife had no blood on it. The fact that Alberto is not surprised by this evidence, remarking that "It was perfectly logical: the knife *had to be clean*" ("Era perfettamente logico: *doveva essere pulito*, il coltello") (250 – original emphasis), again showcases this special investigator's dazzling abilities.

The same exceptionality that marked Alberto as the hero of the love story underpins his appropriateness as hero of this detective story: his height, good looks, and distinctive dress

⁵⁶ In keeping with the classic detection tradition, these facts are arcane: Roberto's obsession with a popular song and his proficiency in writing an antiquated German script.

create a striking appearance; his magnetic personality attracts women and draws male respect; and he quickly establishes his authority not just over his love interest, Michela, but over the various suspects and the local police. In short, he is charismatic, obeying Malmgren's dictum that the classic detective "stands apart" as a "larger-than-life Character" ("Pursuit of Crime").

Alberto has a healing power that may seem more appropriate to the romance yet has a place too in the crime story, where the role of the investigator is to heal a wounded society and restore order.⁵⁷ Before the reader is aware of Alberto's profession, his healing effect on Michela is highlighted. In spite of her mental fragility and phobias, the sense of protection he gives her floods her with well-being and restores some balance to her mind: sitting in his car "she felt fine [...] she felt completely protected" (" lei si trovò bene [...] si sentiva completamente protetta") (15). The reader may initially assume that Alberto is a doctor or psychologist, since he tells Michela that he knows exactly how to cure her and volunteers to take an extended absence from work to effect this cure personally. Michela's father places a seal on Alberto's exceptionality, noting with pleasure that since his return, "already it seemed to him that Michela was regaining her health" ("a lui già sembrava che Michela stesse guarendo") (29).

A further signal that Alberto is not just the most suitable lover but also a superlative agent of justice comes with his first encounter with the volatile and aggressive Roberto, his future rival in love but also the murderer he will unmask. This stand-off establishes Alberto as the winner in a contest of wills that threatens, but avoids, physical violence; it showcases his

⁵⁷ Spinazzola characterises this as the reader's "anxiety for justice: or impatient desire to see reinstated the human values that the wrongdoer has harmed" ("ansia di giustizia: ossia desiderio impaziente di veder ristabiliti i valori umani che il delinquente ha leso") ("Perché leggiamo i gialli" 66).

ability to defeat the criminal with calm authority and controlled aggression. The reader is also given a foretaste of the man's superior psychological insight: although this is a simple disagreement over a parking space, Alberto senses Roberto's guilt, telling Michela, "He seems like someone with something on his conscience" ("Sembra uno che abbia qualche cosa sulla coscienza") (28).

In presenting Roberto as the most obvious suspect so early in the novel, Scerbanenco plays a double game with the experienced reader of classic detective fiction, who will be well aware that the "rules of the game" stipulate that the initial and/or most likely suspect is almost never the real culprit. Roberto is presented as irrationally nervous and aggressive. The complete collapse of his bravado once he realises that Alberto is a police officer, and his haste to get away, compound Alberto's suspicion that this is a man with something to hide. Shortly after, we learn that Roberto had both motive and opportunity to commit the crime; the facts are so incriminating that they must surely rule him out as culprit for any experienced reader.⁵⁸

Other suspects emerge in the course of the investigation, including the German tourist, Gertrude, whose abusive relationship with the murder victim and hasty flight after his death suggest motive and guilt. The reader – who, as part of the game offered by Todorov's "second story", often knows more than the police – is aware that she was with the victim the morning after the killing and removed crucial evidence. Giannuzzo's sister reveals a Sicilian vendetta and orchestrates the revenge killing of the man she believes killed her brother. A

⁵⁸ Roberto has had a sexual relationship with Giannuzzo's sister, Maruzza, and Giannuzzo has been extorting money from him as recompense for the loss of her honour. Roberto admits that on the night of the murder the two fought and that he abandoned the semi-conscious Sicilian on the beach.

local ex-jailbird, Prasin, and his daughter Irene also have convincing motives to want Giannuzzo dead, and Prasin clearly had the opportunity.

In a move typical of classic detective fiction, while supplying a multitude of possible leads, the narrative conceals certain other facts from the reader until the end, heightening the drama and virtuosity of the investigator's final summation. The case is finally solved by Alberto's almost supernatural ability to retrieve lost evidence – the word written on the sand, the missing knife – and, even more impressively, to read their hidden meanings.

Classic and hard-boiled detective fiction: *Johanna della foresta*

Johanna della foresta certainly meets the criteria of the detective novel, presenting, however, not one but two investigations, for this story blends the hard-boiled style and the classic puzzle style of detection. Once again a crime, the disappearance and presumed death of Johanna, occurs close to the novel's opening, there are numerous clues and suspects, and the narrative concerns itself with unravelling both this mystery and a subsequent crime. There is an official investigation: Glicken's police officers spend months patrolling the forest in search of Johanna's body, they assemble clues and interrogate suspects. They later conduct a site investigation and examine new suspects following the murder of the blackmailer, Dr Warchen.

Once again a non-professional investigator solves the mystery first and acts as the main channel of information to the reader. Francino, the friend of the protagonist of the love story, Donato, discovers Johanna's whereabouts long before the police do, and Donato manages to persuade her to reveal the facts of the crime perpetrated against her, which turns out to involve a blackmail about which the police know nothing and a perpetrator towards whom

they have no suspicions. Thus the reader receives the solution to the crime long before the official investigators and understands why the real facts of the crime must be concealed from the police.

Donato has an instinctive understanding of who is guilty and who innocent, in accord with Malmgren's observation that in hard-boiled detective fiction "The detective's most impressive trait [...] might well be the ability to see through all the facades and impersonations and to read people and situations" ("The Pursuit of Crime"). Unlike the intellectual, analytical Alberto (*La sabbia*), Donato is presented as essentially a physical man, defined by exceptional strength and a willingness to settle accounts with violence. Like the typical hard-boiled protagonist, Donato is an informal investigator, operating at the limits of the law, at times actively thwarting the police, and only assisting them on his own terms. Though physically exceptional, as fits his alternative role as romantic hero, Donato is not immune from the crime world, as the classic detective must be. Victimised and scapegoated as a poor foreign guest worker, he becomes a suspect in the first crime. In the lead up to the second crime he becomes a potential criminal, staking out Warchen's house and devising a minutely detailed plan to murder the doctor so as to free Johanna. Thus, in hard-boiled fashion, one crime leads to another, and the protagonist cannot stand aside and coolly observe but is both emotionally engaged and physically threatened.

Indeed Donato may be seen as a prototype of Duca Lamberti. Both are failed doctors: Lamberti has been struck off, and Donato cannot afford to complete his studies. Both form a close bond with high police officials, who verify their special qualities.⁵⁹ Like Lamberti,

⁵⁹ After interrogating Donato, Glicker praises his integrity, telling him his is "the right response. A man's response" ("una risposta giusta. Una risposta da uomo") (60).

Donato is a victim of circumstances that have driven him outside his natural, ordered society; like the other man, he is not afraid to use violence and contemplate acts of vengeance when he believes justice demands it. It is not just Lamberti who has, in Sangiorgi's words, "a natural empathy for the innocent, the suffering, and the defenceless" ("una naturale empatia per gli innocenti, i sofferenti e gli indifesi") (121). Lamberti takes on the cases of the most powerless members of society. Donato acts as older brother to the fragile and idealistic Francino and exercises his physical strength and natural authority to end the timber workers' constant brawls. Like Lamberti, Donato is driven by a personal moral code that transcends official justice: he is equally deserving of Sangiorgi's description of Lamberti as a man with not just "[an] elevated sense of responsibility" ("[un] superiore senso di responsabilità") but a deep-seated "obedience to the unwritten rules of ethics to the point of disobedience to written laws, out of a sense of compassion in the face of human suffering" ("obbedienza alle leggi non scritte dell'etica fino alla disobbedienza di quelle scritte, per sentimento di pietà nei confronti dell'umana sofferenza") (118-19).

Although there is not the big-city setting typical of the hard-boiled novel, *Johanna della foresta*'s world of displacement and war guilt is equally modernistic, amply supplying Scaggs's essentials of "violence, sex, and betrayal" (145) in its crimes of rape and blackmail and its sexually repellant villain. These are crimes and men that Lamberti would well understand.

The second crime, Warchen's murder, is narrated in a manner more typical of classic detective fiction. In the chapters prior to the discovery of the doctor's body, his throat cut by a sharp instrument, we have been given a wealth of information that establishes motives and opportunities for numerous characters and even suggests possible murder weapons. Johanna

admits to murderous thoughts after Warchen, discovering that she is still alive and has returned to her father's house, renews his blackmail and insists that she come to him on the night when the murder occurs. This chapter ends with Johanna's gaze lighting on a pair of scissors, a potential weapon that is consistent with Warchen's injuries.

Two of the forestry workers, Domingo and Szapocki, announce their intention to visit the doctor on the day of the murder. The former has a police profile as Johanna's suspected murderer; the latter has suffered Warchen's extortion. Johanna's father, terrified on learning that Warchen plans to inform the authorities about his war crimes, makes a hasty visit to the doctor's town, then flees into Germany. Aware of Warchen's renewed blackmail and unconvinced by Johanna's story that her tormentor is going away, Donato guesses that she will be visiting her blackmailer that night.

Clues collected by the police around the murder scene are many and confused, implicating almost everyone and providing all the leads and red herrings required by the genre's game with the reader. However, we gain no idea of how the police investigation may conclude, for the game is suddenly annulled when the murderer, Szapocki, confesses to Donato and turns himself in before the investigation has had much time to progress. And so the real crime, Johanna's blackmail, is not solved by the police at all but by the entirely coincidental murder of her blackmailer, while the second crime story, set up as a classic clue-puzzle, simply collapses.

In fact, the story contains a third crime, that of Johanna's father, which goes unpunished but which, I contend, provides the strongest counterpoint to the tone of romance. Warchen's blackmail is based on his knowledge that Johanna's father was a Nazi collaborator during the

Second World War, committing crimes of murder and looting for which he would receive a death sentence should the facts come to light. Though sickened by her father's acts, Johanna's sense of duty towards her only surviving family member prevails, preventing her from denouncing the doctor, who is using this knowledge to force her to submit to a sexual relationship. Once Warchen is murdered – for reasons completely unrelated to Johanna and her father – the likelihood that the war crimes will come to light evaporates.

Following the hard-boiled code, the world is not put to rights by an all-powerful investigator. The classic detective's hard-boiled counterpart can only stem small outbreaks of the malaise that poisons society, for, as Horsley notes, the "consolatory, potentially redemptive myth [of pre-war classic detective fiction] no longer seems viable within a complex urban, industrialized society and hard-boiled fiction reflects this by structuring its narratives in ways that avoid neatly optimistic closure" (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 69). It is here that we approach the territory of *noir*, with its pessimism and its acknowledgement of deep-rooted societal and individual evil, before which official justice is impotent.

The crime novel and *noir*

In the remainder of the books that make up my study there is no detective, little or no process of investigation, and, in most cases, no mystery. There are, however, crimes, criminals, witnesses, and – significantly – vulnerable, persecuted victims. In other words, this is the territory of the subgenre Horsley and Knight (and I) style the crime novel.

The crime novel: *Il fiume verde*

This change of focus is seen in *Il fiume verde*, where there is suspense but little mystery; instead the reader is able to enter the mind of both the victim – and potential avenger – Alina,

and the criminal, Ruggero. Instead of an investigator, there is an “interpreter”, through whose gathering comprehension the complexities of character and situation are channelled to the reader. Stefano, a journalist with a popular current affairs magazine, is initially tasked with writing a human-interest story about mental healthcare but decides to focus on Alina’s story because of its lurid appeal. He uncovers nothing new about the facts of the crime, which are well known and not disputed, but instead provides access to the motivations that led both victim and aggressor to the crime scene, and their subsequent mental traumas. In doing so, he “writes” for the reader of the novel a much more complex, nuanced, and sensitive picture of the pair than the simplistic, sensational piece his editor requires.

Following the structure of what Todorov labels the thriller (and equates with *noir*), the crime subgenre “suppresses the first [story] and vitalizes the second” (*Poetics of Prose* 47). The first story of *Il fiume verde* – Ruggero’s rape of the naive teenager Alina – though appearing in several flashback sequences, is a mere catalyst. The vital story is a potential murder that Alina obsessively contemplates committing, a future crime that necessarily cannot be investigated, leaving Stefano to channel the present mental states of the protagonists rather than their past actions.

The novel opens soon after Ruggero has been released from his lenient sentence, when Alina is about to escape from the mental institution where she has been detained to thwart her inappropriate thirst for vengeance. The crime story thus presents us with two threads of suspense: whether Alina can evade the authorities who will return her to what is essentially her prison; and whether she will succeed in her mission to harm Ruggero.

Although Alina is the victim, she is also a potential criminal, undergoing a sentence which seems little different from that of her rapist, except that hers has no time limit. The clinic's director assures Stefano that, "If they had let her go free she would have rushed to kill someone who, four years earlier, had treated her violently" ("se l'avessero lasciata libera, sarebbe corsa ad uccidere un tale che quattro anni prima [...] le aveva usato violenza") (10); therefore, "almost the whole time she had at her side a nurse charged with preventing her escaping" ("aveva alle spalle, quasi sempre, un infermiere incaricato di impedirle di fuggire") (9). When, after weeks on the run, Alina turns herself in and returns to the clinic for the assessment that is necessary before her final release, Stefano finds her in a tiny prison-like observation room where "there were bars at the window and the door had a spy-hole" ("alla finestra vi erano delle sbarre e la porta era fornita di uno sportellino-spia") (177).

Alina's post-traumatic stress is manifested in obsessive thoughts and behaviours. She experiences uncontrollable flashbacks to her rape, flashbacks brought on by such simple triggers as the ticking of the wristwatch she was wearing at the time. She suffers repeated crises wherein her behaviour becomes automatic, impelling her to seek Ruggero's death, even though she knows that he has undergone official punishment and that her impulses need to be overcome. Most devastatingly, Alina has developed a horror of any physical contact with men. Although she is attracted to Stefano and comes to trust him, she cannot bear him to be close to her and has to force herself to suppress her instinctive repulsion at his attempts to comfort her.

If *Il fiume verde* attempts to portray the traumatic effects of crime upon the victim, it also gives an insight into the mind of the criminal. When, tasked with adding a new angle to his feature on Alina's case, Stefano visits Ruggero's family home, he finds a very different man

from the callous criminal he was anticipating. With its heading “Interview with a brute” (“Intervista con un bruto”), this chapter begins as an approximation of the sort of article Stefano’s editor requires. On entering the luxurious villa, however, Stefano experiences a disjunction between tabloid sensationalism and reality: “He thought [...] about his editor who wanted to greatly dramatise the story: the girl who ranges about to kill the brute, and the brute who, shut up in his villa, is dying of terror. Here there was no air of terror [...]” (“Pensò [...] al direttore che voleva ‘romanzare’ molto la storia: la ragazza che gira per uccidere il bruto, e il bruto che, chiuso nella sua villa, muore di terrore. Qui non c’è aria di terrore [...]) (61).

Ruggero turns out to be an elegant young man with a calm air that provokes unexpected responses in Stefano, who finds he cannot “feel either repugnance or dislike towards him” (“provare verso di lui né ripugnanza, né antipatia”) (63). He finds Ruggero full of remorse for his crime and ready to accept punishment. If Stefano is easily swayed by the young man’s aristocratic manners and spontaneous sincerity, Ruggero himself has no illusions about his divided nature, describing himself as a civilised man who nevertheless has a beast inside him. By the conclusion of the interview, Stefano has a new understanding of the complexity of a man whom he is no longer confident to label with the journalistic clichés of either “a good lad” (“un bravo ragazzo”) or “a scoundrel” (“un mascalzone”) (66).

More of Ruggero’s character comes to light when, unable to cope with his self-loathing, he decides to kill himself. His suicide is thwarted when Alina arrives at his home, and we now see a role reversal. Alina, with a gun in her handbag, is the potential criminal, and Ruggero a helpless victim, suffering a psychological collapse similar to Alina’s. Instead of the anticipated monster, she sees a man in a state of pathetic dependency, “a repugnant but easy

target” (“un bersaglio ripugnante ma facile”) (164). His face, once terrifying, now wears “a heavy mask of exhaustion and suffering” (“una greve maschera di stanchezza e sofferenza”) (163); his nausea means that he can stand only with Alina’s support. In a dramatic demonstration of this reversal, Alina demands that Ruggero drive her home in the very car in which the rape took place.

Having fully explored these pathological mental states, the novel now reverts to the needs of the romance. Ruggero is not mentioned again, as the focus turns to the love relationship between Alina and Stefano and a minor pairing of Alina’s father and Stefano’s ex-girlfriend, Clelia.

***Noir*: some definitions**

Although the designation crime novel could be applied to the remainder of the novels under study, since all are transgressor- or victim-focused and lack mystery, it is more fruitful to view them as exemplars of *noir*, a problematic category which can be overlaid on more than one subdivision of the (parent) crime genre and indeed filters into other genre fiction, such as the Western and the thriller. Certainly, critics such as Del Buono, Pirani, Guagnini, and Covi have identified the presence of elements of *noir* throughout Scerbanenco’s earlier work, refuting prior assumptions that the dark style of the Lamberti series marked a new development for the author.

Once again an exploration of definitions is required, since the critical literature on both *film noir* and the *noir* novel reveals little agreement. Some critics take a primarily historical approach, emphasising *noir*’s origins in a particular time and place characterised by disillusionment and social and psychological malaise; others, while acknowledging these

origins, concentrate on the techniques and structures of the *noir* film and novel; still others place primary emphasis on the mood of *noir*. Nevertheless, a critical survey reveals many commonalities that can provide a key to another reading of Scerbanenco's dark romances.

The critical use of *noir* as a genre label is primarily associated with certain Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, where it is bound as much to the use of a characteristic visual style and particular cinematographic techniques as it is to recurring themes, settings, and characters with close affinities with hard-boiled crime fiction. French critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier first identified the characteristics of the new style, each in 1946 publishing a seminal essay on this new (to post-war French audiences, at least) category of American film. Both employed a label, *film noir*, which, according to James Naremore (15), had already been used by French critics in the 1930s to describe a local style of "dark" film. Yet the term itself has close links with a literary source, the French *Série noire* of cheap, sensational crime novels launched by Gallimard in 1945; and the classics of *film noir* are drawn from the novels of crime writers such as James M. Cain, Hammett, and Chandler.⁶⁰ This combined genesis in a highly stylised cinematographic style – typified by sharp contrasts of dark and light, equally sharp contrasts between squalid urban streets and sleek modernist interiors, subjective voice-over narration, and use of flashbacks – and the pulp, private-eye novel, has undoubtedly contributed to the lack of consensus over a definition for the genre or, indeed, over whether it can even be rightly called a genre.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The first major study of the *film noir*, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton's 1955 *Panorama du film noir américain*, acknowledged the hard-boiled crime novel as a primary source of the film genre.

⁶¹ Along with Altman (70), Horsley raises this fundamental problem of classification: "Is it a visual style, a tone, a genre, a generic field, a movement, a cycle, a series – or just a helpful category?" (*Noir Thriller* 6). Naremore (11) argues for treating *noir* pragmatically, as a discourse. Park (31-54) addresses and refutes the main objections to classifying *noir* as a genre. I agree with Park's position, mid-way between the rigidity of the taxonomic approach and the fully pragmatic, and accept his arguments for according *noir* the status of a genre.

Although there is no absolute agreement, critics have nevertheless broadly concurred over certain recurring characters, settings, themes, and motifs of *noir*. Much of their writing is directed specifically at the *film noir*, but, setting aside the commentary on film techniques, it is transferable to the *noir* novel.

A survey of key criticism reveals agreement on a cluster of features that indeed characterise Scerbanenco's fiction. In an important early article which examined *film noir*'s links with French existentialism, Robert G. Porfirio identified: a "non-heroic hero"; "alienation and loneliness"; the need to make an "existential choice" between the "authentic" and "inauthentic" life; the threat of imminent death; "meaninglessness, purposelessness, the absurd"; "chaos, violence, paranoia"; and the longing for "sanctuary, ritual, and order" (214-17).

Noir combines the sociological and the psychological. Raymond Durgnat notes pervasive claustrophobia and paranoia (47), while Paul Schrader identifies themes of "loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity", manifested in a fear of the future (58). Andrew Pepper summarises the commonly accepted features of the "'noir' sensibility" thus: "an unknowable, morally compromised protagonist who is implicated in the sordid world he inhabits, an overwhelming sense of fatalism and bleakness, and a socio-political critique that yields nothing and goes nowhere" (58). Claire Gorrara acknowledges the importance of time and place – that is, the world of modernism – noting that "The city itself becomes one of the main protagonists in tales of violence and transgression that probe readers' anxieties about the world in which they live" (1).

The dividing line between the hard-boiled detective novel and *noir* – and indeed the question of whether there is any division – has been the subject of critical contestation. Although Gorrara sees a close identity between the hard-boiled detective novel and the French *roman noir*, she acknowledges the diminishing role of the private eye, who is often replaced by “more ambivalent characters who transgress the boundaries of good and evil, criminality and justice” (37). William Park makes the point that the positive attributes of the professional investigator may be incompatible with the spirit of *noir*, using the novels of Raymond Chandler as example. Although Chandler’s hard-boiled fiction is indisputably a primary source of many essential elements of the genre, such as “the seedy, corrupt dark city and a wise cracking hero”, for Park the essential difference is that Chandler’s hero “never falls” (23). Horsley stresses the same point: “The protagonists of literary noir can be victims, transgressors, or investigators. They cannot, however, be the confident, all-solving investigators we have encountered in classic detective fiction” (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 116). Horsley thus proposes a definition of *noir* that privileges the anti-hero. Referencing Chandler’s famous description of the hard-boiled hero,⁶² she, in agreement with Park, insists that the protagonists must be in some way “fallen”: “These are characters who are tarnished and afraid [...]” (*Noir Thriller* 3). (Original emphasis.)

A key feature, and one that is highly pertinent to this study, is the characterisation of the protagonist as a victim who is nevertheless responsible in some way for the trap in which he finds himself. Philip Simpson finds that, typically, “Flawed human beings [...] must somehow make moral decisions with no transcendent foundation of morality on which to

⁶² “But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.”

base them. The consequences of those decisions are frequently fatal and always tragic to someone”. Park agrees; indeed, he finds the primary common defining feature of *noir* to be a protagonist who has “in some way fallen into crime. Either he or she commits the crime or in some way, through chance, a mistake, a moral lapse, or bad decision, becomes implicated in it, most often as the chief suspect” (23).

These definitions of mood and character clearly resonate with Scerbanenco’s dark romances. However, given Scerbanenco’s widely acknowledged position as “father” of Italian *noir*, we must also survey Italian definitions of the genre. Like their English-speaking counterparts, Luigi Bernardi and Giampiero Rigosi identify “an atmosphere that is murky, suffocating, often nihilistic” (“[una] atmosfera torbida, soffocante, spesso nichilista”); and “characters in flight, obsessional, adrift in a society that seems dark and labyrinthine” (“personaggi in fuga, ossessionati, alla deriva in una società che appare cupa e labirintica”) (88). They pinpoint another aspect that meshes with the post-war settings of Scerbanenco’s texts: a desire to expose “the dark side of the years that mark the exit from world war, the enthusiasm of the new beginning and the collective intoxication of the economic boom” (“il lato oscuro degli anni che segnano l’uscita dal conflitto mondiale, l’entusiasmo della ripresa e l’ubriacatura collettiva del *boom* economico”); and “the theme of crisis, whether social, existential, or political” (“[il] tema della crisi, sia essa sociale, esistenziale o politica”) (88).

Bernardi and Rigosi also make an intriguing but undeveloped reference to a “natural evolution” in Scerbanenco’s work in the 1960s, as herald of the genre’s arrival in Italy. I shall claim that all their essential elements of *noir*, enumerated above, are not merely incipient but well developed in his novels dating back to the 1940s and 1950s. Furthermore,

by close critical reading of them, I shall redress the lack of analysis of these works by not just Bernardi and Rigosi but virtually every critic of Scerbanenco.

Crime writer Laura Grimaldi, in her practical manual for aspiring crime writers, lists the psychological states of classic *noir* that we certainly find in Scerbanenco's romances:

"Madness, hatred, vengeance, despair, solitude, betrayal" ("Follia, odio, vendetta, disperazione, solitudine, tradimento") (*Scrivere il giallo e il nero* 20). Fabio Giovannini acknowledges that Italian critics have applied the term *noir* rather loosely,⁶³ and acknowledges, too, the fluidity of the genre (or style) but nevertheless believes that, along with an historical derivation from French cinema, American hard-boiled fiction, Italian neo-realism, and Freudian psychoanalysis, certain basic defining features can be agreed upon. He isolates "harsh, provocative stories, [...] in which the privileged themes are homicide and violence" ("storie dure e provocatorie, [...] i cui temi privilegiati sono l'omicidio e la violenza"), and characters who are "simultaneously victims and executioners, spectators and perpetrators of violent acts" ("contemporaneamente vittime e carnefici, spettatori e attori di violenze"). In absolute opposition to the classic detective novel, "members of the forces of order (unless they are corrupt or 'illegal') [...] cannot be the protagonists" ("[gli] esponenti delle forze dell'ordine (a meno che non siano corrotti e 'illegali') [...] non possono essere i protagonisti") (6).

In an important essay appended to a posthumous collection of Scerbanenco's short stories, Pirani supplies a crucial clarification, noting that one characteristic definition of literary *noir* relates to a mood or tone that is suffused with unease, cynicism, pessimism, and nostalgia,

⁶³ "[*Noir*] can be transformed into a synonym for 'detective novel' by Italian critics [...]" ("[Noir] può tramutarsi in sinonimo di 'giallo', per la critica italiana [...]" (9).

while a second definition relates more specifically to a development of the crime novel characterised by a narrative content that plays out this mood (“Scerbanenco ovvero la dimensione ‘nera’” 309). It is this first definition, preferred also by Horsley and Simpson, that will give us an insight into Scerbanenco’s novels, where, I contend, the mood of *noir* is ever present, in varying degrees of intensity. Finally, this definition furnishes a means to open up new readings of even the most seemingly straightforward romances as well as a useful critical approach to the Westerns and spy stories.

Scerbanenco’s *noir* texts

The mood described by Pirani pervades Scerbanenco’s work; likewise, many other *noir* motifs identified by the critics cited above recur so often in his fiction that they may legitimately be described as hallmarks. His protagonists are inevitably outsiders with a condition or defect that puts them unwillingly at odds with mainstream society and creates a life of struggle. Most often this status arises from conditions beyond the protagonists’ control, although others bring misfortune upon themselves. Nevertheless, all carry a sense of doom, a sense that they are victimised by fate far more than by their own personal choices. They see no hope in the future and long for the lost comfort and security of the past. This outsider status places Scerbanenco’s protagonists in an uneasy position of wanting to be accepted by mainstream society and, at the same time, seeing clearly the defects of this society – a society which, as Bernardi and Rigosi observed, manifests all the turmoil of the

years of post-war recovery and the economic boom in which traditional values and certainties were swept away.⁶⁴

Another recurring motif is loss of identity: characters may be forced to assume false names and personas, elaborately cover their traces, or hide their past.⁶⁵ Often accompanying this subterfuge is a sense of persecution, which may be either a form of paranoia, a pathological obsession, or a very real pursuit by enemies. Thus we find characters who must take flight, endlessly moving on to evade their real or imagined pursuers. Closely linked to this is the recurrent motif of characters caught in a trap, with no means of escape.

Il fiume verde clearly displays many of the characteristic markers of *noir* that may prompt a reader to read the work with reference to this genre: an innocent victim who is persecuted and forced on the run; loss of identity; a victim who means to take the law into her own hands; psychological trauma, despair, and self-loathing; a society that values gossip and sensation over compassion; a legal system that is harsher on the victim than on the criminal. Certainly, the absolute bleakness of true *noir* is tempered by the counter-currents of the romance, since – as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Nine – an appreciation of their genre hybridity is the key to a deeper reading of these works. Nevertheless, the choice of reading in the key of *noir* is offered throughout Scerbanenco's romances – as I shall make apparent by delineating the elements of *noir* identifiable within them.

⁶⁴ “In less than two decades Italy ceased to be a peasant country and became one of the major industrial nations of the West. The very landscape of the country as well as its inhabitants’ places of abode and ways of life changed profoundly” (Ginsborg 212).

⁶⁵ Frye finds the loss and recovery of personal identity to be a mainstay of the broad genre of romance, which encompasses the adventure quest as well as the love story (*Secular Scripture* 136).

The alienated protagonist, outsider, or anti-hero

Scerbanenco's fiction typically features a central character who is excluded from mainstream society through poverty, misfortune, or a bad decision. Indeed it is hard to find a novel or story that does *not* foreground some kind of outsider figure whose plight is examined with honesty and compassion. Among works not examined in the current study, one might cite *Mio adorato nessuno* (a young man stigmatised by illegitimacy and poverty); *Il tramonto è domani* (a woman ostracised after an ill-chosen marriage to a violent man who is her social inferior); *La sposa del Falco* (protagonists damaged by extreme poverty, mental illness, and racial discrimination); *Al mare con la ragazza* (juvenile criminals); *Via dei poveri amanti* (racial discrimination). This is even the case in the Jelling series: financial ruin has forced Jelling, a brilliant medical student from a bourgeois family, to abandon his studies and take a lowly clerical position to support his wife and son.

Scerbanenco's protagonists may be weak, flawed, or victimised people, who cannot or will not live in their prior world, but they are not evil. Circumstances beyond their control have left them in limbo, so that, in Schrader's words, "The *noir* hero dreads to look ahead, but instead tries to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, he retreats to the past" (58).

Ill at ease with his family's comfortable middle-class life, Tomaso (*Elsa*) has drifted into a life of crime from which he finds it impossible to extricate himself. Elsa herself is repeatedly warned of the ruinous consequences of allying herself with a criminal. Mauro (*Noi due*) has fatally chosen to run away from a false accusation of manslaughter and robbery. The men of the Swiss logging camp (*Johanna*) are foreigners, grudgingly tolerated by the locals, who see them as alien and threatening, immediately assuming that they must be responsible for

Johanna's disappearance. Lacking a common language, these political and economic refugees do not even trust one another and constantly bicker and brawl.

Though physical displacement is a constant motif, the alienation of the protagonist in classic *noir* may alternatively be attributable to a disturbed mental state, reflecting the genre's interest in psychological pathology and analysis.⁶⁶ Alina (*Fiume verde*), Mauro (*Noi due*), and Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*), all victims of sudden traumatic events, seem trapped in a closed circle, victims of obsessive thoughts that affect their behaviour. Alina is victimised first by a random act of violence but secondly by the mental trauma it provokes, which leaves her obsessively replaying the rape incident in her mind. The fugitive Mauro is also a prisoner of obsessive thoughts. Though he knows he is innocent of both killing and theft and does not suffer the mental collapse experienced by Alina and Aldo, nevertheless he endlessly replays in his mind a hyperrealistic image of the little girl's lifeless body.

Aldo presents an example of purely psychological malaise, according well with Simpson's designation of "paranoid *noir*", a subcategory in which the protagonist is inescapably trapped "either because of [his own] bad decisions or because of the actions of others". A rich, spoiled playboy who acts as a semi-official talent scout for Cinecittà, exploiting this role to seduce attractive, gullible young women, Aldo himself becomes a victim when he is accidentally shot in police crossfire on a desolate beach where he is secretly meeting his married lover, Cristina. More concerned about avoiding scandal than assisting Aldo, Cristina flees in his car, leaving him severely wounded, far from help. This near-death experience brings home to Aldo the seriousness of an episode, some years earlier, when he abandoned

⁶⁶ Giovannini signals the importance of Freudianism in the genesis of the genre (6). Park comments on "pseudo Freudianism" in *film noir* and the prevalence therein of disturbed mental states, psychiatrists and mental institutions (42).

the naive and trusting Marina/Libella virtually naked on the same isolated beach, after she violently resisted his attempts at seduction.

Though his doctors assure him that his wound – which, significantly, is in the groin – has healed without leaving any lasting effect, Aldo continues to limp. Indeed, the severity of this limp correlates directly with the extent of guilt Aldo feels as he comes to understand the impact his own thoughtlessly callous action may have had on the woman. Aldo's nightmare is entirely within his head: his fumbling assault and abandonment of Marina/Libella was cruel but not criminal, and – at least until he tracks her down, more than halfway through the novel – he has no evidence that she suffered lasting harm. Yet his increasingly irrational sense of guilt convinces him that she may have died on the beach.

In fact, the harm Marina/Libella has suffered is, like Aldo's, mental rather than physical. She has also undergone a breakdown, although, unlike his delayed reaction, hers occurs immediately after the beach assault. In seeming self-punishment, she makes a disastrous, loveless marriage to a peasant farmer, living with him and his dying mother in an isolated farmhouse among the desolate salt flats and lagoons near Ostellato, a house aptly named La Casa Morta – The Dead House. At first characterised by lethargy, passivity, and a will to die, Marina/Libella's unhappiness and self-loathing are later manifested in alcoholism and awkward attempts to seek sexual satisfaction with strangers. Thus both Aldo and Marina/Libella find themselves cast into a nightmare through a trivial act of thoughtless cruelty.

Isolation and loneliness

These protagonists suffer an unbearable loneliness caused by isolation from family and society. Tomaso (*Elsa*) has no family: both parents are dead and his only sister – and substitute mother – has migrated to the United States. Though he longs to make contact with her, shame prevents him. Symbolically, he has desecrated the family home he inherited, allowing the gang of criminals he associates with to take it over and despoil it. His criminality compounds his homelessness and isolation: he has to give Elsa a false name and address and must necessarily avoid her home town if his crime succeeds, dooming this desired relationship before it has begun. Perhaps because they lack families, these anti-heroes cling to romantic attachments which contain, together with passion, a longing to reconstruct a family and a home.

Mauro (*Noi due*) is an orphan whose unhappy childhood was marked by a distant father, an absent mother, a hostile stepfather, and ever-changing caregivers. After both parents died while he was still an adolescent, he was forced to take work as a cross-country tour-bus driver. He has no fixed home; when on the run from the police, he crosses the country from Pisa to Ravenna to be with the one stable figure in his life, his ex-girlfriend Luisella.

Although Luisella would willingly share her family home with him, her mother's hostility ensures that Mauro remains in the awkward position of an unwelcome temporary guest.

Later, when Mauro finds live-in employment with the Ravennan industrialist Malli, and enters into a relationship with Malli's daughter Letizia, his status as employee and social inferior renders their relationship necessarily clandestine. Mauro's access to the Malli house is restricted to a few areas, and when he enters the more intimate spaces, he must do so furtively and fearfully. This relationship is lived out in temporary and ever less domestic

spaces: the disordered and unhappy house of Letizia's Trieste-based friend, the garage in Trieste where Mauro finds work, and, finally, the car in which Mauro and Letizia must live and sleep as they make a final bid to escape the police who are closing in on Mauro.

Alina (*Fiume verde*) is literally isolated from society, yet longs to be back in the family home where she still senses the presence of her beloved dead mother. Though he has served his prison sentence, Ruggero also finds that reintegration into society is impossible, telling Stefano, "I don't like going out, people stare at me too much [...]" ("uscire non mi conviene, la gente mi guarda troppo [...]" (108). He forms meaningless relationships with prostitutes, since he is convinced that the women from his own circle who now court him are solely motivated by a desire to experience his aura of danger. Even when surrounded by his bridge-playing companions in his mother's villa, Ruggero is aware of being desperately alone.

Flight and anxiety

Horsley has noted how "noir accentuates fear and anxiety, ambivalence and vulnerability [...]" (*Noir Thriller* 8). The actions of Scerbanenco's protagonists are frequently irrational, driven by a fatalistic sense of helplessness. Mauro (*Noi due*) flees in panic after his bus, which is parked and in which he is having a furtive encounter with a female passenger, suddenly moves, crushing a small child. Although he initially thinks of turning himself in, he decides instead to change his appearance and identity and seek refuge with a former girlfriend, Luisella, on the opposite side of the country. His resolve to continue in this fugitive existence is confirmed when he finds that the tourist with whom he was having the fateful assignation has now accused him of robbery with violence. Once established in Luisella's house, Mauro receives some legal assistance from a private detective who is a

friend of her family, but the thrust of the novel continues to revolve around Mauro's precarious, hunted existence, rather than any serious attempt to clear up the case. A second flight, this time with Letizia, becomes necessary when a spiteful chance acquaintance, Valeria, denounces Mauro to the police. In their car, the pair criss-cross northern Italy, keeping to minor roads in the hope of avoiding police roadblocks.

Tomaso (*Elsa*) makes several attempts to flee from his gang, initially turning to Elsa because he has nowhere else to go. Elsa provides him with refuge on her cousins' farm in the countryside near Mantua, but Tomaso knows that this respite is temporary, and he is soon on the run again.

Persecution

The counterpart to flight is the mood of persecution that saturates the Westerns and spy thrillers that will be examined in the next chapter but is present to a degree in all the novels in this study. The German tourist's accusations against Mauro (*Noi due*) – aggravated robbery, stalking, violence against a woman, and running over a person while attempting to escape – are false in every detail. The only explanation Malli's lawyer can offer Mauro for the woman's action is spite: "That German woman wanted to take revenge on you" ("Quella tedesca ha voluto vendicarsi di lei") (169). The impact on Mauro is out of all proportion to his lukewarm response to her advances.

Tomaso (*Elsa*) is pursued by not just the forces of the law but the gang's hitmen too, the ironically named "Cudgel Brothers" ("fratellini manganello"). Again, most of the official accusations against him are false, denunciations made by the gang to put him out of action. Officially he faces a long term in prison, but unofficially he is subject to beatings and a real

threat of death for betraying the gang. As with Mauro, Tomaso's initial action was minor in comparison to the nightmare of his persecution. Although he had shown early signs of delinquency and facility as a conman, selling his father's paintings while convincing him he was having them restored, Tomaso's real mistake was to allow the thug Marcello to rent his father's house, only afterwards realising that Marcello was deep in organised crime. From here on, Tomaso appears to have sunk into serious crime more passively than actively.

Alina's torment (*Fiume verde*) is magnified by a media and a reading public obsessed with scandal and sensation.⁶⁷ It is a journalist, Stefano, who discovers her in the clinic and "writes her story" in the terms his readers will understand, mentally deciding whether he will approach it as a *giallo* or a *romanzo rosa*. Stefano interviews and photographs Ruggero, approaching this assignment with his headline already written: "Interview with a brute". In a cynical marketing ploy, Stefano's editor places Alina's photo on the cover of his magazine, conscious that this will boost sales but oblivious or uncaring of the torment this will cause the woman.

Loss of identity

Characters on the run change identities, taking false names, disguising their appearance, and severing former ties. Concomitant with this subterfuge is constant anxiety over the risk of discovery. Anxiety in turn breeds recklessness. Although Mauro (*Noi due*) procrastinates over turning himself in, he continually tells himself he will do so at some point. It is only when Valeria recognises him that he realises with horror that he may be capable of real violence, if that is what it takes to preserve his secret identity:

⁶⁷ Scerbanenco would make an explicit, scathing indictment of the intrusive, sensationalising popular press in *Mio adorato nessuno* (1955).

Now there was someone – that girl – who knew who he was and could have him arrested anytime she wanted. In a flash he pictured the girl strangled, there in the car, and himself racing to find the place to hide her. This he was certainly afraid of, this sudden murderous impulse.

C'era una persona, adesso – quella ragazza – che sapeva chi era e che poteva farlo arrestare quando voleva. In un attimo vide la ragazza strangolata, lì nella macchina, e lui che correva per cercare il posto dove nasconderla. Di questo, sì, ebbe paura, di questa sua improvvisa volontà di uccidere. (74-75)

Tomaso (*Elsa*) is much more polished at deception, fully adept at trading on his affable, educated, middle-class appearance. Noting that a young waitress is smitten with him, he reflects on the power of this superficial self: “I have appeal, he thought” (“Io piaccio, pensò”) (6). Once he falls in love with Elsa, Tomaso’s false identity becomes a liability, a barrier to further contact, and he is tempted to drop the deception. Later, on the run, the formerly suave conman suffers the same anxieties as Mauro and Alina, anxieties which reach an extreme pitch when he is forced to spend an evening in company with the local *carabinieri* marshall at Elsa’s cousins’ farm.

Alina (*Fiume verde*) cuts her long hair and changes her style of dress, transforming herself to the extent that when she returns to Stefano he momentarily fails to recognise her. To his suspicious landlords, Stefano passes her off as his girlfriend, a deception they immediately see through, heightening her danger of discovery.

Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*) provides Marina Visich with the stage name Libella; later, when her film career begins, she will take on the name Angela. Marina takes the last name willingly, as a sign of her re-emergence into life after a long period of mental trauma, but the name Libella sums up a persona unwillingly thrust upon her, an image that exists only in Aldo’s mind.

Although dimly aware that Marina/Libella is in love with him, Aldo treats her as just another

disposable aspiring starlet. His objectification of the girl means that when he has a desperate need to recall her real name it eludes him, and when he looks for her photo among his hundreds of shots of potential starlets (his “diecimila angeli” – “10,000 angels”) even her face escapes him, and all he can recall is her most obvious sexual attributes, her long blonde hair and green swimsuit.

The corrupt or uncaring society

All these novels question certainties of morality and justice and eschew the consolations traditionally considered typical of popular fiction. Even when justice appears to be done – as, for example, when Mauro (*Noi due*) is cleared of all charges – there is murkiness to the process: although forensic police work establishes a fault with his bus’s brakes, the German tourist only withdraws her accusations when Mauro’s lawyer subjects her to blackmail. Scerbanenco’s protagonists must cope within an environment that is cold and corrupt at its core.

Aldo’s self-centred heartlessness is the norm in the wealthy, bored, dilettante society that is his and his mother’s milieu (*Diecimila angeli*). Only when his married mistress, Cristina, repeats his own callous act of abandonment is Aldo’s conscience awakened. Aldo’s action is in fact much less shocking than Cristina’s: where, out of pique, Aldo abandoned Marina/Libella on the remote beach with only her bathing suit, Cristina is prepared to abandon a wounded, bleeding Aldo to a real threat of death simply to save her reputation. The sequel that the newly sensitive Aldo imagines, however – that Marina/Libella died after he abandoned her on the beach – would surely have resonated with readers and enhanced this novel’s codings of *noir*, given that it was written shortly after the sensational case of the

murder of Wilma Montesi, a young Roman woman left to die on a remote beach in 1953. Though unsolved, her death was linked by the prosecution and the press to the decadent lifestyle of the social and political elite of the time, a cohort clearly delineated in Aldo's louche Roman associates.⁶⁸

Aldo's mother is emblematic of this self-indulgent, superficial life of empty pleasure. She scorns Aldo's wife Giovanna's simple, elegant tastes in dress and furnishings, throws childish tantrums when she cannot have her own way, pretends to be much younger than she is, and eventually turns to crime, forging cheques to cover her reckless spending. Her disreputable partner, Dr Bolga, is accused of running a prostitution ring. The reformed Aldo rejects his mother's lifestyle and values, but on his honeymoon trip to Rome he must mingle again with friends from his former life who reveal all the superficiality and immorality behind the glamorous façade of the film world. None of the characters fully escapes this world: in the end Marina/Libella takes on a film career, and Aldo and Giovanna must accept his unreformed mother's carping and discordant presence in their home.

Ruggero (*Fiume verde*) has no illusions about the senseless self-indulgence of the lives of his wealthy, bored companions, telling Stefano: "You know what idiots we are in this little world, we entertain ourselves with pointless and cruel acts of bravado" ("Lei sa come siamo cretini noi di questo piccolo mondo, ci divertiamo a fare delle bravate inutile e crudeli") (64). He admits that the motivation behind the rape was a cruel wager: he wanted to prove that he could seduce Alina in under five minutes to better a friend's boast of seducing a famous industrialist's wife in just a quarter of an hour.

⁶⁸ The case's notoriety was such that Scerbanenco refers to it explicitly in *Venere privata*, more than ten years later. (For a full account of the case, see Stephen Gundle's *Death and the Dolce Vita*.)

Elsa e l'ultimo uomo gives us the most explicit picture of the infiltration of corruption into bourgeois society. Marcello's "formal, elegant" ("corretti, eleganti") hitmen have a perfectly urbane and harmless appearance that masks cold viciousness: "They beat up people well, scrupulously, without the brutal appearance those people always have in gangster films" ("Picchiavano bene, scrupolosamente, senza avere l'aria da bruti che hanno sempre quella gente nel film di gangsters") (77). Yet Tomaso knows that they have crippled a man who disobeyed Marcello. This is the new face of organised crime, where the underworld mixes with the aristocracy. The gang's accountant, Lisetta, is in reality the drug-raddled Contessa Luisa Orassi. Marcello runs legitimate businesses as well as a criminal empire and is keen to retire into wealthy respectability. As part of their plan for social advancement, he and his girlfriend Milena assiduously study English and buy up bourgeois trappings – although Tomaso is contemptuous of their poor taste, and unfavourably contrasts Milena's showy clothes and pungent perfume with Elsa's restrained good taste and subtle scent. The chillingly robotic Lisetta can revert at will to her aristocratic persona to mix with her titled friends and impress Tomaso.

The spaces of modernity

Unlike the classic romance, which tends to vagueness over time and place, these novels are very precisely located spatially and temporally. They show an uneasy relationship with modernity, manifested by the modern city, rapid and devastating social change, and even the role of the media.

Elsa e l'ultimo uomo showcases the modern, corrupt city, contrasting the crowded, impersonal, and alienating Milan of the economic boom years unfavourably with the

traditional old-fashioned values of Mantua and the rural idyll of Elsa's cousins' farm. This novel anticipates the urban *noir* of the Lamberti series, in which Scerbanenco famously has Lamberti characterise the new Milan as a metropolis of crime:

[People] forget that a city with a population of nearly two million has an international, not a local feel, a city as big as Milan attracts criminals from all over the world, madmen, alcoholics, drug addicts, or simply desperate people in search of money who get hold of a revolver, steal a car and leap on the counter of a bank shouting, "Everybody down on the ground!" just as they've heard you're supposed to do. (*Betrayal* 116)

Si dimenticano che una città vicina ai due milioni di abitanti ha un tono internazionale, non locale, in una città grande come Milano, arrivano sporcaccioni da tutte le parti del mondo, e pazzi, e alcolizzati, drogati, o semplicemente disperati in cerca di soldi che si fanno affittare una rivoltella, rubano una macchina e saltano sul bancone di una banca gridando: *Stendetevi tutti per terra*, come hanno sentito che si deve fare. (*Traditori di tutti* 119)

Yet the contemporary world, a world of instability and rapid, disorienting change, is at least implied in all the novels that make up this study. All are precisely situated in contemporary history, citing current events and even specific dates.⁶⁹ This history is no mere backdrop but a key factor in the development of each novel.

Giuliana Pieri, in her study of Lamberti's 1960s Milan, has this to say: "Milan [...] presents a taxonomy of the traditional spaces of the *noir* city: sordid hotels, bars and night-clubs, brothels, squalid buildings in the periphery, and the new headquarters of crime, often housed in the respectable areas that used to be the privilege of the bourgeoisie" (151). Yet almost a decade earlier, in *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*, Scerbanenco had described criminals infiltrating the

⁶⁹ For example: "the news broadcast began. *Eisenhower on his written response to the Russians ... Foster Dulles has declared that America is always ready to open negotiations...*" ("cominciò il giornale radio. *Eisenhower nella sua nota di risposta ai Russi ... Foster Dulles ha dichiarato che l'America è sempre pronta a intavolare trattative...*") (*Elsa* 212); "The spring of 1954 was wet" ("La primavera del 1954 fu piovosa") (*Diecimila angeli* 198); "the English have been kicked out of Persia" ("in Persia gli inglesi vengono mandati via a calci") (*Fiume verde* 176).

respectable homes of the bourgeoisie. These criminals manifest the kind of social breakdown acknowledged by Pieri: Tomaso's gang is a mix of newly arrived working-class southerners and local aristocracy whose drug habits have pushed them into crime and depravity.

In a key scene, Elsa searches Milan's long main street, visiting every seedy bar in an attempt to track down Tomaso. Determined and resilient, she is no innocent, but the Milan we see through her eyes is shocking: "sordid hotels, bars and night-clubs, brothels, squalid buildings", to repeat Pieri. In stark contrast to Elsa's old-fashioned home town, Mantua, this modern city is threatening, impersonal, depraved, and consumer-driven. Elsa's gaze first lights on a dubious hotel named "I promessi sposi" ("The Betrothed"), a name that is both highly ironic, given the likely status of its clientele, and a cynical devaluation of the title of one of Italy's literary classics. In the worst bars, Elsa sees underage prostitutes whose gaudy clothes and make-up emphasise their childishness. Both Elsa and Tomaso experience sensory overload in Milan: the city is overcrowded, deafening, and smells of industrial pollution. Unable to understand the local dialect, Elsa is truly in an alien world.

Speaking of the city as it was in the 1960s, Alessandro Mazzola observes that while "Milan was exploding, everything was becoming bigger, faster, brighter and at the same time more difficult, more devious, complex [...]" ("Milano sta esplodendo, tutto sta diventando più grande, più veloce, più luminescente e insieme più difficile, più tortuoso, complesso [...]"), it was at huge personal cost: "the foundations of human bonds and interpersonal relationships that, up until the previous decade, had been the same as before the war, were being torn, shattered [...]" ("si vanno lacerando, frantumando, la base dei rapporti umani, le relazioni interpersonali che, fino al decennio precedente, erano state le stesse di prima della guerra

[...]”) (42). Mazzola is referring specifically to the Lamberti series, but these comments could equally be applied to the 1950s Milan of *Elsa e l’ultimo uomo*.

If in other novels the modern world’s negative effects are less overt, nevertheless, in every case the characters are faced with disturbing elements of modernity and a loss of tradition and stability. The pine forests, beaches, and antique seaside cottages of *Noi due e nient’altro*’s Ravenna, and the passing references to the city’s glorious Byzantine heritage, contrast starkly with the eternally glaring lights of the oil refineries that signal the city’s future. *Johanna della foresta* shows the devastating effects of the Second World War in the post-war period and the hardship caused by mass displacement, poverty, and unsettled scores. The Swiss village of Lunderrach, which resembles an illustration from a fairy tale, hides guilty secrets, and its citizens are for the most part uncannily reticent and fearful.

Exile and transience

With change and loss of tradition come a sense of transience and a lack of home. Vivian Sobchack has written of the *noir* geography of transient spaces, an existence she calls “lounge time”, where protagonists exist in the impersonal world of

the cocktail lounges, hotel bars, diners, roadhouses, and motels that spatialize film noir – those rented rooms or tables or counter stools that resist individual particularity and are made for transients and transience, those quasi places that substitute perversely for the hospitable and felicitous places and domesticity of a “proper” home in which such necessary quotidian functions as sleeping and eating and drinking are secured and transfigured into intimate social communion. (138)

This is the world of the Swiss logging camp (*Johanna*), where unemployed Italians work alongside the war-displaced and other reluctant guest workers. Here the sleeping quarters afford no privacy and the dining room is the site of constant brawling. Alina’s world (*Fiume*

verde) is a mental institution which is a high-security prison in all but name: a clandestine visit to her family home underlines her exile from this place of childhood tranquillity and security.

Tomaso's family home (*Elsa*) has become a squalid gang headquarters, a place which should be his sanctuary but instead concentrates all his feelings of guilt and remorse. With a dead father and an absent invalid mother, even Elsa leads an unsettled existence, lived between rented rooms and the office where she works. Her momentary thought of marrying her guardian Antonio as she surveys his house seems to be grounded in a longing for a real home, epitomised by a dusty image of continuity and permanence:

Vast sleepy rooms with high ceilings and old furniture that had served for many generations and been preserved with love. Vast carpets on the floor, large dark paintings of no artistic value but which gave a sense of intimacy, of endurance through time. This indeed gave her a little peace [...].

Vaste stanze sonnolente, dal soffitto alto, dai vecchi mobili che erano serviti a più generazioni e conservati con amore. Vasti tappeti in terra, grandi quadri bui, di nessun valore artistico, ma che davano un senso di intimo, di duraturo attraverso il tempo. Questo sì, le dette un po' di pace [...]. (49)

When the houses of the very rich are described, it is most often in negative or ambivalent terms. On arrival at Ruggero's family villa, Alina (*Fiume verde*) is directed to an icy, dark reception room decorated with displays of weapons. When he visits the same house, Stefano is first shown into a reception room where modern frescoes show not family or classical portraits but the faces of Hollywood movie stars. Although he is impressed by the antique furnishings, Stefano's dominant impression of the villa is that this is a showcase of vast wealth. As Sobchack has observed, "The irrevocable loss of the home in noir is also figured

in the ‘radical externality’ and cold glitter of the houses of the rich, where money buys interior decoration and fine art but no warmth, no nurturance” (144).⁷⁰

Aldo’s shallow playboy self (*Diecimila angeli*) is epitomised by his mother’s house in the fashionable resort of Santa Margherita. After his eyes are opened to his own superficiality, Aldo can find a sense of belonging here only in his dead father’s austere study. Aldo deliberately builds the antithesis of his mother’s house for himself and his new wife, Giovanna, in a desolate spot on the Adriatic coast. Yet even here Aldo is obliged to cram his mother’s room full of the expensive, gaudy items she prefers to Giovanna’s elegant simplicity. On the other hand, simplicity and tradition cannot supply a home if there is no human warmth. The farmhouse where Marina/Libella lives after making a loveless marriage to the peasant farmer Pino for her fully lives up to its name, La Casa Morta, and becomes like a prison to her.

Nihilism, fatalism, and pessimism

Simpson finds that the *noir* world is marked by a “prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, the individual’s disconnection from society, and cynicism”. Such characteristic features of *noir* are tempered by Scerbanenco’s distinctive hybrid, where nihilism and despair are softened by the demands of the other half of the blend, the romance. Rather than nihilism, these protagonists exhibit a passivity that is in accord with their acceptance of ineluctable fate. Tomaso (*Elsa*) articulates the common *noir* motif of being trapped with no means of escape: “He was shut in a big cage, a cage as big as the whole of Milan, but which he couldn’t get out of” (“Era chiuso in una grande gabbia, una

⁷⁰ See also David Schmid’s comments on Chandler’s *noir* world, where the “artificiality and [...] false sense of perfection” of the houses of the rich represent their futile efforts to isolate themselves from the corrupt outside world (252-53).

gabbia grande tutta Milano, ma dalla quale non poteva uscire”) (74). Mauro (*Noi due*) is resigned to the fact that, even with his false documents, sooner or later he will be caught, since “One of these days someone would recognise him, the miracle that had lasted so long couldn’t last forever [...]” (“Uno di quei giorni qualcuno lo avrebbe riconosciuto, il miracolo che durava anche da troppo non poteva durare sempre [...]”) (63). Stefano (*Fiume verde*) sees in Alina’s face the same look he has seen in a photo of a man condemned to the electric chair; he reaches the fatalistic conclusion that Alina will never be cured of her trauma and compulsions, telling himself that “everyone has their destiny, even Alina” (“ciascuno ha il suo destino, anche Alina”) (134).

Dangerous women

Simpson identifies “the seduction/betrayal” story as one of the main threads of *noir*, and the femme fatale is surely *noir*’s most iconic female image. The femme fatale, like the stereotypically dangerous love rival in the romance, is, however, rarely encountered in the novels under study here. An exception is Verde Luna (*Elsa*), who has a brief appearance as a drug-addicted prostitute and gang associate with whom Tomaso has been living before he meets Elsa. Verde Luna convinces Tomaso that she will help him break away from the gang but instead betrays him, delivering him up for torture by the gang’s psychopathic hitmen.

The vision the reader is given of Verde Luna through Tomaso’s gaze plays up all the hallmarks of the stereotype and yet is subtly undercut with knowing irony. As Tomaso watches Verde Luna struggle into “the red dress that began to outline her pliant, abundant body” (“[il] vestito rosso che cominciò a disegnarle l’elastico, abbondante corpo”), he thinks that her bust was “much more decent before in her petticoat” (“molto più decente prima in

sottoveste”). Her lips are “fatally red” (“fatalmente rossi”) (73). In case there remains any doubt about what she signifies, Verde Luna’s failed attempt to charm a waiter is followed by the narrational aside: “for an elderly waiter, femmes fatales with full red lips don’t exist” (“per un vecchio cameriere non esistono donne fatali dai labbroni rossi”) (75). Indeed the fact that Verde Luna’s self-constructed image as a femme fatale may be less than successful has already been signalled to the reader in a similarly ironic aside, that “she would certainly have been an irresistible woman for a sturdy peasant from Brianza” (“per un robusto contadinotto della Brianza sarebbe stata certo una donna irresistibile”) (74). Thus the portrait of Verde Luna includes a comic as well as a sinister vein.

This knowing play with genre codes is a hallmark of Scerbanenco’s hybridity, as he offers alternative reading modes while foregrounding the stereotypical qualities of the genre codes that underpin them. Verde Luna’s failure as a femme fatale does not negate the menace of Marcello and his hitmen, but it inserts a chink in the darkness of the *noir* story, alleviating the reader’s intense anxiety at this moment when Tomaso’s case seems hopeless.

Verde Luna is, in any case, a rarity in the novels under study, which have very few truly negative female characters. Although it has been argued that the femme fatale is not a prerequisite for *noir*, nevertheless the contrast between the dangerous, highly sexualised, predatory female and the domesticated wife or fiancée is an enduring trope in both cinematic and literary *noir*. Scerbanenco’s fiction, on the other hand, provides a much more subtle and positive range of female characters who rise above the stereotypes of both the crime and the romance genres. This more nuanced exploration of the lives of women is one of the particular features of Scerbanenco’s hybridisation and will be discussed at length in Chapter Eight.

Having constructed models to delineate the classic codes of the various forms of crime fiction and *noir* and demonstrated that many of Scerbanenco's so-called *romanzi rosa* may indeed be decoded through these alternative genre keys, I turn now to the characteristic encodings of the Western and spy fiction genres that may be isolated in certain other of the novels that make up this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: SPY STORIES AND WESTERNS

If genres can be aligned with genders, with the romance as the most feminine, then the classic adventure genres of the Western and the spy story have traditionally been considered among the most masculine, in terms of both readers and writers. Michael Denning refers to the various types of adventure thrillers as “what we might call masculine romance” (13), while Cawelti points out that “the fact that most adventure formulas have male protagonists while most romances have female central characters does suggest a basic affinity between the different sexes and these two story types” (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 41). Although, as I shall argue in Chapter Seven, reader identifications may not be as simple as Denning and Cawelti’s statements suggest, there is no question that marketing emphatically plays to such a gender divide.

Both the spy story and the Western may, and frequently do, offer subplots concerning male-female relationships (whether romantic or merely sexual), and they may contain mystery as well; nevertheless, adventure and action predominate, creating thrills that are visceral rather than sentimental or intellectual. Both genres eschew domesticity and the interior life, privileging a public world of political or societal conflict.

Scerbanenco’s Westerns and spy stories, in contrast, accord equivalent weight to the interiority and intimacy of the love story. They were originally directed towards the female readership of the magazine *Novella*, in which they were serialised; they were subsequently issued in Rizzoli’s pink-covered paperback series with cover illustrations characteristic of popular romance.⁷¹ The titles of those to be studied here – *Innamorati* (“In love”, or,

⁷¹ For examples of covers, see Appendix.

“Lovers”), *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* (“My girl from Magdalena”), *Anime senza cielo* (“Souls without a heaven”), *Appuntamento a Trieste* (“Appointment in Trieste”) – are suggestive of sentiment rather than action. The implications of this blend of codes and sensibilities will be examined in subsequent chapters: for the present, I shall identify the characteristics that locate these novels securely in the realm of spy and Western fiction, those characteristic codes that prompt the reader to interpret the text within these frames of reference.

The spy thriller

Unlike the detective novel, the spy thriller looks to the future rather than to the past. The detective novel in both its classic and hard-boiled forms offers an initial problem and sets the detective the task of solving it: it begins with a crime that has already happened or is at least in train. The plot of the spy novel, conversely, is more concerned with the act of anticipating and fending off a potential future threat: obtaining intelligence about an enemy’s intentions and capabilities, protecting a national secret from falling into the wrong hands, smoking out traitors and double agents.

Codes of the spy thriller

Once again, a genre-based analysis will reveal how textual coding and reader interpretation may work in consort. This is another genre that draws the reader into a game, this time based on duplicity and treachery, riddles, reversals, and the constant menace of physical danger, all of which use tension and suspense to create anxiety in the reader. The reader may feel like an insider, privy to some secrets, but nevertheless understands that he or she will always be subject to the deceptions of the text.

Playing out the game are clearly coded stock characters: “The spymaster, the Control figure, the agent, double agent, mole, sleeper, cut-out, informant – all have entered the fantasy expectations of the average reader as twentieth-century adventurers” (Merry 1). These characters will make set moves, as they hunt and are hunted.

Secrets and conspiracies

Central to the spy story is an international political, military, or economic secret that must be protected (our side’s secret) or uncovered (their side’s secret) by pitting one side’s intelligence agents against the other’s. Unlike in the detective novel, where the detective strives to make public the unknown facts of a crime, the protagonists of the spy story seek to keep their secret out of the public domain. Thus the agents’ actions and the secrets they acquire from the enemy will only ever be known to a privileged group – which of course includes the reader.

In the detective novel, although the process of official justice inevitably occurs after the story concludes and is not seen, the principle that the wrongdoer must face public justice is, nevertheless, strongly embedded. In the spy story, however, public trials or inquiries cannot happen. The reader is aware that by the end of the spy story a poetic justice has restored the world to rights – but also aware that this justice will remain (yet another) secret; for, as Cawelti and Rosenberg argue in their study of the history and development of the spy story, secrecy, (which they label *clandestinity*) is fundamental to the genre.⁷² As a privileged insider, then, the reader is one of a small group to have the satisfaction of knowing the outcome of this secret game.

⁷² For their extended discussion of the archetypal nature of the tale of clandestine activity and its enduring psychological appeal, see *The Spy Story* 11-33.

A close counterpart of clandestinity is conspiracy: one might say that, if clandestinity provides the mood, it is the conspiracy that sets the story in motion. Palmer posits the two fundamental elements of the thriller to be a solitary, competitive hero and a conspiracy that threatens social order.⁷³ In Palmer's account, "The conspiracy [...] is an absolute structural necessity, for it is the conspiracy that drives the plot into action. Without it, there would be no reason for the hero to act [...]" (23).

Hepburn, who takes a broad historical and cultural overview of the spy story, has continued to develop the implications of secrecy and conspiracy in the genre, defining this type of fiction with the label *intrigue*. Like Palmer and Denning, Hepburn primarily characterises the spy novel as an arena for the production and transmission of ideology, observing that "Narratives of intrigue are plotted to satisfy the desire to know as that desire relates to ethics and politics" (19) and that, in untangling the knot of intrigue to discover the secret, "The reader [...] deciphers the ideological importance of spies' actions" (20).⁷⁴ For my own purposes, I shall set aside the ideological element and focus on the conspiracy as a means of reader engagement – a crucial element in advancing the story and activating the reader's fundamental "desire to know".

Paranoia and peril

Closely linked to conspiracy and intrigue – indeed the reverse side of the coin – is paranoia, and here the spy story shows much in common with *noir*. Secrecy breeds unease, which can

⁷³ Palmer's 1979 study of the thriller, which combines a structuralist methodology with cultural/historical analysis, ranges broadly across many types of "thrilling" popular literature – focusing on spy stories but including classic and hard-boiled detective novels.

⁷⁴ Denning's historical/cultural study examines how the narrative structures of the spy story act as a "cover story" whose underlying function is the transmission of prevailing ideologies, ideologies which change over the history of the genre.

range from a loss of personal certainty and security to an overwhelming sense of persecution. In tracing the history of the genre, Cawelti and Rosenberg have argued that each era produces the type of spy story that best exploits public paranoia by tapping into the fears of the age, whether these be foreign invasion in the early 1900s or nuclear warfare in the 1960s (34-54).

Paranoia is made manifest in the situation of the protagonist, the secret agent, who is never an impartial and immune investigator as is the case in the classic detective novel. The agent knows or is convinced that he or she is being targeted but cannot be sure by whom and so can never trust anyone, not even those on his or her own side, whether fellow agents or controllers. After all, double agents and traitors are staples of the genre, as are the neighbours and friends who turn out to be enemy informants. The agent – willingly, as a professional, or unwillingly, as an amateur drawn into international political intrigue – risks his or her own life and can never relax. Once again, I am less interested in paranoia as a manifestation of the *zeitgeist* and more interested in the use of this device as a genre code, a trope that tells the reader that they are dealing with a spy story and activates their genre knowledge – Jauss’s “horizon of expectations” (23).

If the general atmosphere of distrust sets the scene for many dangers that do not materialise, the reader can be sure that other dangers will certainly arise, since the agent’s personal peril is at the heart of the spy story. As Ralph Harper observes, “A thriller can hardly lay claim to being a thriller if it does not bear this initial distinguishing mark of the spy story: the vulnerability of the hero” (21). Whether he or she has professional backup or is truly alone, the agent must always put his or her life on the line, facing capture, interrogation, torture, or execution. All these key characteristics of the spy story – conspiracy, secrecy, suspense, personal danger, action, and adventure – give validity to the common appellation “thriller”, a

term that emphasises the disturbing physical and psychological sensations produced within the reader.⁷⁵ Martin Rubin notes that the thriller provokes an excess of certain basic reactions: “The thriller stresses *sensations* more than sensitivity. It is a sensational form” (6). (Original emphasis.)

“Us” versus “Them”

It is generally agreed that the genre’s genesis may be found in earlier tales of adventure, usually situated abroad, as in the British tradition of colonial adventure stories.⁷⁶ Thus, in its earlier phase at least, the spy story places a strong emphasis on “us” versus “them”, the legitimate citizen against the foreigner, and it makes a clear division between good (us) and evil (the foreigner). The confused politics and mass displacement of the post-Second World War period may muddy this Manichean absolutism in the two Scerbanenco espionage novels I shall examine in depth here, *Anime senza cielo*⁷⁷ and *Appuntamento a Trieste*,⁷⁸ but nevertheless they retain strong traces of it.

Anime senza cielo’s protagonist, Stiva, is a twenty-three-year-old Pole concealing an important political secret. An unofficial refugee in Italy, he is hunted by enemy agents and ultimately aided by American security forces based in Rome. Though a foreigner, Stiva has since childhood had a connection with Italy through his Rome-domiciled aunt; moreover, he

⁷⁵ Clive Bloom’s overview of the genre is indeed titled *The Spy Thriller*, while Harper’s study of the thriller genre, like Palmer’s, treats the spy story as a major thread of thrilling fiction. In his overview of crime fiction, Priestman assigns the spy novel to a chapter labelled “The Anti-Conspiracy Thriller” (43-50).

⁷⁶ Bloom suggests that “The formal origins of the spy genre lay hazily within an amalgamation of the imperial adventure tale and the detective novel”, and judges its solidification in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to be directly related to “*international* political and social tensions” (1). (Original emphasis.)

⁷⁷ First published serially in *Novella* in 1950 and in book form in the same year.

⁷⁸ First published serially in *Novella* in 1952 and in book form in 1953.

is fulsome in his praise of the honest industry and generosity of the working-class Italians who assist him to escape his enemies. Stiva is pursued by a Yugoslavian agent, Sidic, and it becomes clear that his broader enemy is associated with pan-European Communism. The reader can therefore be in no doubt that the Italophile Stiva's allegiances are on the "good side" (our side) of the Cold War.

Appuntamento a Trieste's Kirk Mesana is an American intelligence officer attached to Allied forces patrolling the disputed territory of Trieste on Italy's north-eastern border in the post-war period. Though born in Kansas, Kirk is the son of an Italian immigrant, and his Italian-ness is highlighted by contrast with his fellow intelligence officer, Rogg. A Californian, Rogg has red hair and freckles (Kirk has dark curly hair), never learns to speak Italian (Kirk is fluent), and makes no attempt to mix with the locals (Kirk is engaged to a local woman).

Because his photographic memory and uncanny ability to read character give him extraordinary capability as a counterspy, Kirk becomes the target of an enemy spy ring that ranges from Italy to Vienna and beyond and is led by an Albanian. Thus, though nominally outsiders, the protagonists of both novels are politically and personally aligned with Italian interests, while their enemies are part of some alien force, broadly associated with Eastern Europe and Communism. In short, these novels play upon the oppositions and fears of the early Cold War period.

The spy

Rubin has noted a broad change in protagonists of tales of espionage written before and after the Second World War – or more precisely, before and after the advent of the Cold War – a change from the typical "amateur or dilettante" spy, who is "often an aristocrat or

gentleman” (228), to the use of “professional spies, employed by large government agencies” (230). Rubin’s observation is borne out by the very different characters of Stiva and Kirk, respective protagonists of *Anime senza cielo* and *Appuntamento a Trieste*. Although both fall within the Cold War period, the former retains a model that was common earlier, while the latter is in tune with contemporary political realities.

Stiva is not a spy himself, but he is in possession of secret papers of enormous interest to his political enemies, papers which came into his possession at the age of thirteen as the only surviving member of an aristocratic and politically important Polish family. Stiva Oski is an assumed name: he is in reality Baron Boguslaw Nalkowski. We learn that Stiva made a narrow escape from wartime Warsaw when German SS agents seized and summarily executed his father, a senior government minister. The rest of his immediate family was executed or perished in concentration camps, except for an elderly Rome-based aunt whom Stiva cannot contact for fear of exposing her. We are given little indication of what the secrets contained in these papers may be; nevertheless, the trope of the isolated individual who possesses information of shattering international import is common enough in the spy genre and, as Rubin has observed, inserts a human element into grand political machinations.⁷⁹

Stiva is intelligent, alert, and cautious enough to keep a step ahead of his pursuers, but at crucial moments he behaves naively. In love with his fellow lodger, Fabia, Stiva rashly reveals to her his identity, his history, and his fears of persecution, although he cannot be sure whose side she is on; in fact, soon after this naive confession, Sidic almost convinces

⁷⁹ “Even though not a general or a political leader, this lone, often obscure individual has the power to make a crucial difference in large scale events. [...] These cases provide a possibility for significant individual action that might be otherwise lacking in the context of mass warfare [...] (Rubin 227).

him that Fabia is an enemy agent who has already commissioned assassinations. Another fellow lodger, the German ex-Nazi Isotta, destroys Stiva's illusion that he is living incognito by calling him "Baron" and telling him that everyone has guessed who he is.

Stiva reveals his amateurishness again when, believing that he has been traced to Milan, he hesitates before fleeing, waiting to see Fabia one last time and so giving his enemies time to organise an ambush at the railway station. Although he escapes, from here on Stiva survives as much by luck as by skill.

A crucial corollary of Stiva's amateur status is his lack of backup. Although he momentarily considers asking the Italian police for protection, past experience warns him off:

Telling the truth would mean filling the newspapers with his story and being in greater danger than before. This had already happened to him in Austria, when he was naive enough to put himself under the protection of the Allied police. He didn't want to relive those distressing times ever again.

Dire la verità significava riempire i giornali della sua storia ed essere più in pericolo che mai. Gli era già successo in Austria, quando aveva avuto l'ingenuità di mettersi sotto la protezione della polizia alleata. Non voleva rivivere più quei momenti angosciosi. (45)

Stiva's situation here closely resembles that of the archetypal amateur spy, John Buchan's Richard Hannay (*The Thirty-Nine Steps*, 1915), who is chased across country by shadowy enemies but cannot call on official protection, since he is suspected of murder. Rubin notes the prevalence of this narrative device, observing that "Such situations relate to the thriller's characteristic strategies of enhancing vulnerability, doubling, and overloading – the hero is getting it from all sides" (228).

Our reading of Stiva as the classic amateur secret agent, ensnared without choice in international intrigue, is enhanced by the contrast supplied by his antagonist: the enemy agent Sidic manifests the coldness and single-mindedness of the professional spy. Although also in love with Fabia, he determines to keep his feelings in check and use her as a cover to deceive his new American employers, reasoning that “they might be suspicious of a Slav on his own, but not a Slav living with a woman from Trieste [...]” (“di uno slavo solo potrebbero sospettare, ma di uno slavo che vive con una triestina no [...]”) (57). Later, Sidic imprisons and tortures Fabia; although he cannot bring himself to carry out his orders to kill her, he leaves her drugged and unconscious so she can be easily finished off by one of his colleagues.

Sidic is part of a team, with a controller, a network of fellow agents, and access to resources such as weapons, cars, and secret bases. Whereas Stiva is essentially a victim, still little more than a child on the run until the end of the novel, when he makes the commitment to become a professional intelligence agent, Sidic is driven by ideology. Stiva merely reacts, but Sidic acts boldly, setting traps for Stiva and infiltrating the American intelligence service to spy from the inside.

In contrast to Stiva, Kirk (*Appuntamento*) embodies the type of protagonist that was to become more usual in post-war spy fiction. He is a professional intelligence officer, reporting to his controller, Major Holbes, and part of a team that includes fellow agents Rogg, Bet, Mike, and Sally. Inserting a note of realism that would become a keynote in the spy fiction of writers such as Len Deighton and John le Carré, much of Kirk’s daily work is routine and dull, and it takes place in a well-protected, bureaucratic setting: a military base in Trieste, secret headquarters disguised behind an innocuous front in Vienna.

It is crucial that Kirk be kept securely away from his enemies, since he is officially dead after an assassination attempt. This pretence has a double aim: to allow Kirk to work unimpeded and to smoke out his “killers”, who require absolute proof of his death. Where Stiva can only react and has little or no time to plan his movements, Kirk’s level-headed professionalism is constantly stressed: a professionalism that means he must convince even his Italian fiancée, Diana, that he is dead, denying himself any possibility of a continuing relationship with her.

Counterspies and villains

The spy or secret agent is at the heart of the spy novel, but he must be matched by a villain who is not a lone agent but acts for an enemy state or movement on the other side. A key characteristic of the enemy agent is inscrutability; he must necessarily be shadowy “because the conspiracy that disrupts the world of normality in the thriller has to be mysterious, as well as threatening” (Palmer 22).⁸⁰ Thus in both novels the main driver of the plot is the need to uncover who is truly an enemy or double agent and who is simply an innocent suspect.

Unlike in the detective novel, this knowledge is not always kept from the reader, for suspense is heightened when the reader knows that the good agent is at risk while the agent himself remains oblivious. Drawn into the game, the spy story reader suffers not so much along with as for the hero. Thus as Stiva (*Anime*) agonises over whom to trust, doubting almost until the end the integrity of his lover Fabia, the reader knows early on that Sidic is Stiva’s enemy and Fabia his ally.

The immediate antagonist of Kirk (*Appuntamento*) is Vsic, a man who seems benevolent but who reveals himself to be a cold sadist, capable of torturing and crippling his own sister.

⁸⁰ In his structuralist analysis, Palmer reduces the villain to a structural necessity, a mere catalyst of the requisite conspiracy, and someone whose personal qualities, unlike the hero’s, are of little importance. Scerbanenco’s villains, on the other hand, play complex roles in the hybrid text and require more life than Palmer suggests.

Vsic's associate, Bart Funsen, is the classic turncoat, an Austrian who has served with the American Army in Vienna but is now deemed unreliable because of alcoholism. Although Funsen is suspected of treachery, Kirk and Bet's mission to Vienna to check him out leaves them with the opinion that he is harmless. Later, the genial and voluble Funsen charms Kirk's ex-fiancée, Diana, and her friend Riccardo, assisting the latter to establish a medical clinic, seemingly out of generosity but in fact as a means to access information on Kirk. These actions cause Kirk's team to once again suspect both Funsen and the innocent Riccardo of being enemy agents. When he is captured and interrogated by the Americans, the treacherous Funsen turns again, giving up the names of all the senior members of his organisation, enabling Holbes to destroy the entire network. This willingness to change sides further enhances the integrity of the hero, for the double agent or turncoat's "lack of a morality reflects credit, by comparison, on the straight agent who is only spying for one side" (Merry 122).

Like Vsic and Funsen, Sidic (*Anime*) is difficult to read. He is handsome, cultured, and charming, with a surface appearance that disarms everyone: "no one could be angry with him: he had the face of a young boy, made even sweeter by his unkempt mass of blond hair" ("nessuno riusciva ad arrabbiarsi con lui: aveva un volto di fanciullo che la massa spettinata di capelli biondi rendeva ancora più dolce") (16). Yet this is a false front, concealing ruthlessness and icy arrogance. Sidic convinces the American Intelligence Service that he is on their side, is employed by them as head of a team of translators, and so infiltrates their Rome headquarters. Here he oversteps himself, since his employers are shrewder than he imagines and keep a strict watch on him. Their suspicions are confirmed when Fabia approaches the head of the service, Herbert Lynn, and details Sidic's treachery.

The agent who plays both sides is of course a staple of the genre; however, if the reader is privy to the duplicity of some of the actors, the game of suspense dictates that other reversals will be less predictable. Thus the reader will discover that Sidic is by no means the only person playing a double game. The Milan-based “Estonian” refugee Istrhal, dismissed by his fellow lodgers as a harmless cripple and beggar, is first revealed to be an (able-bodied) Yugoslavian agent working with Sidic and, later, to be an adherent of a splinter faction that has opposed itself to Sidic’s group. It is not the Americans but Istrhal, his supposed fellow sympathiser, who assassinates Sidic near the close of the novel. Likewise Isotta, a former Nazi spy whose wartime mission was to build a file on Sidic, has now changed her allegiances, delivering crucial information to the Americans and obliquely issuing warnings to Stiva, who, however, initially mistakes her interest as malign.

Controllers and fellow agents

The spy, if he is a professional, has a controller and, although he tends to operate alone, is part of a team of agents. Kirk, as a military intelligence officer, slots into such a hierarchy. Nevertheless, their competence is not enough to keep Kirk safe, and we discover that enemy agents not only know where Kirk is hiding – having ascertained that he is still alive – but that they have informers on the inside of this American military facility. Only Kirk can draw his enemies into the open, by risking his life in a meeting in a public space. In spite of full backup by his team during this risky venture, Kirk is aware that his life is on the line. He is indeed shot at, and the reader assumes, briefly, that this time he really has been killed. In short, the spy hero remains isolated and ultimately dependent on his own skills, for, as Palmer notes, “the main function of the back-up team is to be less competent than the hero, thus demonstrating his worth” (27).

Though not a spy himself, but the unwilling object of interest of enemy agents, Stiva (*Anime*) eventually finds protection and backup from American intelligence forces, as does Fabia. The latter has agreed to become Sidic's lover in order to forestall his actions against Stiva, risking her life to deliver inside knowledge to the Americans. Nevertheless, the official agencies cannot prevent both Stiva and Fabia from facing death alone, surviving only through the narrowest of escapes.

At the end of *Anime senza cielo*, the amateur counterspies Stiva and Fabia become official agents, sent to Poland to work against Communism. In *Appuntamento a Trieste* the reverse happens: the professional counterspy Kirk leaves the service to return to the United States, presumably to lead a civilian life with his Italian bride, Diana.

Narrative structures

If these novels supply all the stock characters of the spy thriller, they also adhere closely to the genre's typical structures. Together, all these well-known genre features will act to condition reader recognition and response. Along with Bruce Merry in his early, formalist study of the spy novel, Cawelti and Rosenberg (55-78) have identified a set of narrative elements that underpin spy fiction and that may be repeated again and again within the same story. Of these, the most common are: Chase, Evasion/Escape, Capture, Interrogation, and Torture, as well as Close Call/Narrow Escape.⁸¹

Anime senza cielo is a classic chase novel. The hunted protagonist, Stiva, epitomises Hepburn's dictum that "To occupy the position of the pursued is to exist within a circuit of paranoia and vulnerability" (42). Stiva's vulnerability is absolute; he sees enemies in every

⁸¹ Merry isolates, among other narrative devices, "setting of traps; elimination of helpers; compounding of treachery by not rewarding traitors; recognition scene [...]; unmasking of the double agent [...]" (112).

face he encounters. Stiva has been on the run from shadowy enemies since childhood, and his sanctuary in a Milanese boarding house, where we find him at the opening of the novel, is brief. Convinced that his enemies have discovered his identity, Stiva attempts to flee Milan. While waiting at the railway station, he is intercepted and drugged with a poisoned cigarette, but before this kidnap can succeed, a mistaken accusation of robbery means that he spends a night in police custody, so evading his real enemies and making manifest Cawelti and Rosenberg's Narrow Escape.

After his accuser, a young Roman woman named Luisa Randani, realises her mistake and retracts her accusation, Stiva resumes his flight, this time in Luisa's company. Since they are unsure exactly who is trailing them, Stiva and Luisa take a tortuous route to her parents' home in Rome, using every subterfuge to shake off their pursuers. The final stage of their journey is in the back of a freight lorry, where Luisa confesses that she has fallen in love with Stiva – a plot development that simultaneously explains why she is willing to risk her own and her family's lives to protect him and feeds the parallel plot, the romance story that maps Stiva's love relationships.

Later, when his Rome safe house is discovered by his enemies, Stiva, Luisa, and her parents escape to the Randanis' isolated country farmhouse. Sidic's men eventually track them here too, leading to a midnight siege and shoot-out, during which Stiva makes an unsuccessful bid to escape and is wounded.

It is Fabia rather than Stiva who suffers the classic spy novel fate of capture, interrogation, and torture. Fabia plays the stock role of infiltrator or mole by allying herself with Sidic in a bid to help her real love, Stiva. Although she feigns love for Sidic, she cannot completely

hide her repulsion at sharing his bed. Sidic, who is genuinely in love with Fabia, deludes himself for a time about her true feelings but, as a professional spy, he must face up to the fact that she is insincere and that he must unmask and destroy her. Fabia is held captive in Sidic's group's Rome headquarters, drugged, interrogated, and threatened with death. She survives, in the end, because of Sidic's unprofessional feelings for her. By delegating her murder to a colleague, Sidic unwittingly buys Fabia enough time to be rescued by American agents, thus creating another narrow escape.

The first assassination attempt and narrow escape have already occurred before *Appuntamento a Trieste* opens. First, Diana's friend Riccardo informs her of her fiancé Kirk's murder, and then, almost immediately, the reader is shown Kirk and Holbes discussing how they must maintain the pretence of Kirk's death in order to smoke out the enemy. Unlike Stiva, Kirk, in his enforced seclusion, is assigned a fairly passive role from this point on. It is true that he is hunted, but his pursuers can only shadow his former associates, Diana and Riccardo, in the hope that they will lead them to their real prey.

While the pace of this novel is leisurely compared to the incessant thrills of *Anime senza cielo*, events speed up in the closing chapters. Although the protagonists, Kirk and Diana, seem immune from danger, the perils one might expect them to endure are reassigned to other characters. Kirk's fellow officer Rogg is seduced by the stock femme fatale, who delivers him to Funsen's team of enemy agents. Rogg, however, overpowers his kidnappers and captures Funsen, who, once he is put under pressure, reveals the information the Americans need to destroy the enemy network. It is Vsic's sister Bella who suffers imprisonment and particularly sadistic torture – by her own brother – when she threatens to give his game away.

By the end of each novel, the underlying conspiracy has been neutralised: Stiva has outrun and outwitted his opponents to find a safe haven for himself and for the documents he has hidden for so long; Kirk's opponents have been drawn out into the open, and their spy ring destroyed. While the general public has remained oblivious to these secret machinations, political equilibrium has once more been restored for "our side".

The Western

Like the spy story, the Western privileges action, pursuit, physical violence, and the threat of death; to an even greater extent, the latter deals with a world of men fulfilling archetypal masculine roles as adventurers and aggressors. The classic tropes of the Western would have been well known to Italian audiences familiar with Hollywood films and translations of popular American writers: the paired, contrasting stereotypes of gunslingers and lawmen, natives and white settlers, bar-room girls and respectable women; stock actions such as the gunfight, the raid, and the chase; overarching themes of Nature versus Civilisation; all set in a wild frontier landscape.

The contract with the reader

Scerbanenco wrote four Westerns in the late 1940s and early 1950s⁸² and seems to have been keen to give them a stamp of authenticity. When *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* was first published under the American-sounding pseudonym John Colemoore, Scerbanenco took unusual pains to establish an authentic identity for this alter ego, as Pirani recounts in his notes to the 2004 Sellerio edition:

⁸² *Il grande incanto* (Rizzoli, 1948); *Luna messicana* (Rizzoli, 1949); *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* (Rizzoli, 1950); *Innamorati* (Rizzoli, 1951).

When announcing the release of his next novel, *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*, in the 17 July 1949 issue of *Novella*, Scerbanenco published a photo of the author, a dark, well-built man with an open face and a Clark Gable moustache, and below the photo he wrote the following profile: “John Colemoore, born 36 years ago in Taos, New Mexico [...]. John Colemoore, the son of a modest petrol-seller, was unable to devote himself to writing when he was young, as he wanted. He was obliged to move north, to New York in fact, where he held various jobs, even working in a laundry. At the same time he continued to write, but for almost ten years no journal published any of his work. Then suddenly, as often happens, an important magazine published this short novel of his, *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* and success smiled on him all at once. John Colemoore is not married, he loves solitude and he is very shy.”

Nel numero di “Novella” del 17 luglio 1949, annunciando l’uscita del prossimo romanzo, *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*, Scerbanenco pubblica la foto dell’autore, un uomo bruno, aitante, dal volto aperto e con due baffetti alla Clark Gable, e sotto la foto scrive il seguente profilo: “John Colemoore, nato 36 anni fa a Taos nel Nuovo Messico [...]. John Colemoore, figlio di un modesto distributore di benzina, non poté da giovane dedicarsi a scrivere come voleva. Dovette emigrare nel nord, e precisamente a Nuova York, dove fece più svariati mestieri, perfino il lavandaio. Intanto continuava a scrivere, ma nessun giornale, per quasi dieci anni, pubblicò nulla di suo. Poi d’improvviso, come spesso accade, un’importante rivista pubblicò questo suo breve romanzo *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* e il successo gli arrise di colpo. John Colemoore non è sposato, ama la solitudine ed è timidissimo”. (“Giorgio Scerbanenco e il Ciclo del Nuovo Messico” 227-28)

This invented biography broadly sketches Scerbanenco’s own life and personality; more importantly, however, it tallies with the life story of the novel’s protagonist, planting a strong hint that this first-person novel is Colemoore’s own thinly veiled autobiography.

Scerbanenco retained the pseudonym for the *Novella* serialisation of *Innamorati/Rossa* and for the first book edition of *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*.

Keeping up the offer of authenticity, Scerbanenco is equally careful in setting a credible scene for each novel. *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* opens with the protagonist, gangster Martino Correal (also known as Buck Ellis, or Lander), in a cinema in an unnamed north-eastern American metropolis, watching the classic Western film *Duel in the Sun* (dir. King Vidor, 1946), a film whose landscape reminds him of his childhood on a ranch in New

Mexico. As both this film and the book on which it was based had been released in Italy (as *Duello al sole*) prior to the issue of this story,⁸³ readers are immediately given a visual reference as well as an indication of the tone of Scerbanenco's novel, which will depict a similarly doomed love relationship between a white settler and a part-Indian woman.

Although he has entered the cinema simply to shake off pursuers from the gang he formerly belonged to and has betrayed, Martino is prompted by the film to reminisce about his youth, his horsemanship, and his disciplinarian rancher father. His reminiscences further prompt a decision to return to his small home town, Magdalena, and hide out there. To underline Martino's cowboy credentials, we are told that he has a striking resemblance to the famous cowboy actor Joel McCrea, a resemblance remarked upon by almost everyone he meets.⁸⁴

Rossa opens with the protagonist, Roy Vegas, newly arrived in New Mexico. Like Martino, he was born here but has been away for many years. Roy, too, has the physical credentials of the man of the West: he is exceptionally tall, his features reveal (at least to *Rossa*) that he has some Apache blood, he is taciturn, but is fluent in Spanish, which he learned in childhood from Mexican servants. In short, the reader is persuaded that Roy is authentic. Should any doubt remain, there is a specific contrast with the inauthentic outsider: newly arrived in Taos, Roy "certainly didn't have the appearance of a tourist. Rather, some tourists gazed at me, taking me for a romantic cowboy" ("non avevo davvero l'aria di turista. Qualche turista invece mi guardava, prendendomi per un romantico *cow-boy*") (116).

⁸³ The novel in 1947, the film in 1949.

⁸⁴ Reinforcing the explicit Hollywood references, other characters in these novels are compared to Joan Fontaine and Katherine Hepburn. As we have seen, even the "author", Colemoore, has features in common with a Hollywood star.

This novel also helpfully guides the Italian reader on how to evaluate their prior knowledge and genre expectations, the clues they have gained from watching imported Hollywood Westerns. In a move that flatters the reader's discernment, *Rossa* opens with Roy's scathing comments on the fake bars that purport to offer a genuine New Mexico experience to northern tourists raised on film imagery, bars that pamper them with bland food and European classical music. Roy rejects all this, choosing a bar that has the hallmarks of authentic south-western culture. In a fog of tobacco smoke, he sits at a large communal table eating spicy Mexican food and drinking beer, served by an Indian waitress who doubles as a dance girl. He can vouch for the fact that the cowboys here are genuine, a type he realises he hasn't seen for years. Real cowboys don't carry guns and lassoes, Roy explains to the reader, just a small concealed knife. Here there is no ersatz music but an old Mexican tune, to which the cowboys dance the traditional steps.

The text works in further ways to congratulate the reader's sophistication, simultaneously acknowledging the Hollywood fantasy that must surely form the reader's horizon of expectations, and presenting a more "authentic" substitute. Although traditions endure, Scerbanenco's West in both *La mia ragazza* and *Rossa* is no romanticised anachronism but is drawn instead from contemporary mid-twentieth-century social reality. His protagonists drive cars and long-haul trucks more often than they ride horses, they run small trucking and logging businesses rather than cattle ranches, and the Indians they encounter are derelicts, prostitutes, alcoholics, and the dirt-poor residents of reservations rather than "noble savages" or ferocious opponents. The contrast with Hollywood's clichéd Wild West is obvious, and it is remarked upon both by the narrator in his asides and by the tourists who come to the region expecting to find what the cinema has shown them. Entering a Zuñi village, Martino

(*La mia ragazza*) himself acknowledges this disjunct: “I believed it would be a case of tents, as I’d seen in movies, but instead they were a strange construction of earth and stones, square in shape” (“Credevo che si trattasse di tende, come avevo visto al cinema, ma erano invece una strana costruzione di terra e pietre, quadrata”) (216).⁸⁵ Nevertheless, this is still a relatively lawless frontier in the classic Western territory of New Mexico, and all the classic elements of the Western are present.

Codes of the Western

Cawelti, in his seminal study of what he terms the formulas of the Western and their cultural implications, sums up the essentials thus: “A Western that does not take place in the West, near the frontier, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension, and that does not involve some form of pursuit, is simply not a Western” (*Six-Gun Mystique* 31).

Feminist critic Jane Tompkins sees the rise of the Western in America in the middle to late nineteenth century as a direct response to the feminised, domesticated, sentimental, and heavily moralistic world that underlay the dominant literary form in America at that time, the domestic novel. Tompkins finds in the Western a reassertion of a world of men demonstrating solitary strength and endurance, outside mainstream civilisation, and – most significantly – in opposition to the domesticating world of women and the church. Pointing up the absolute contrasts between the two literary genres, Tompkins provides the following enumeration of the Western’s essential elements:

First of all, in Westerns (which are generally written by men), the main character is always a full-grown adult male, and almost all of the other characters are men. The

⁸⁵ Since Martino has grown up in New Mexico, his surprise stretches credibility. Scerbanenco is surely using him here as a surrogate for the Italian reader, who would be relying on knowledge gleaned from Hollywood movies.

action takes place either outdoors – on the prairie, on the main street – or in public places – the saloon, the sheriff’s office, the barber shop, the livery stable. The action concerns physical struggles between the hero and a rival or rivals, and culminates in a fight to the death with guns. [...] Finally, nature [...] dominates the Western, dwarfing the human figure with its majesty [...]. (38-39)

Jeffrey Wallmann, whose cultural approach treats the Western as a myth underpinning the American Dream, offers up the following definition, which refutes the common critical stance that the element of explicit violence is a central defining feature, and emphasises instead the centrality of action and adventure: “for the purposes of this study, westerns are considered to be adventure stories, set on a frontier, about personal character striving to overcome perilous circumstances” (9).⁸⁶

Western spaces: frontier, wilderness, Utopia

In both the novels under study here, there is an explicit contrast between the modern, urbanised, sophisticated north-east of the United States and the wild, undeveloped, poorly regulated, and racially disputed territories of the south-west. Although these locales are precisely determined in both geographical and historical terms, the contrast nevertheless imbues the settings with an allegorical function. Recognising that the Western has traditionally employed a multitude of settings which may or may not be geographically or historically accurate, Mitchell pinpoints the West’s significance as a utopian space:

The one aspect of the landscape celebrated consistently in the Western is the opportunity for renewal, for self-transformation, for release from constraints associated with an urbanized East. Whatever else the West may be, in whatever form it is represented, it always signals freedom to achieve some truer state of humanity. (5)

⁸⁶ Tompkins’ and Mitchell’s views on the centrality of violence will be discussed below.

Both Martino and Roy make the classic journey west in search of wilderness, solitude, honest labour, and – most important of all – a symbolic rebirth that amounts to a cleansing from the taint of modern civilisation. Yet both encounter a world of tension where scores are still settled privately – and violently. If this modern frontier territory still provides opportunities for reinvention, it is also still a place of conflict, struggle, and disappointment.

After spending his first night in Las Lunas with his Laguna Indian dance partner, Rossa, Roy (*Rossa*) travels on to the sawmill he has bought, deep in the forested wilderness. Here he employs former cowboys as timber-workers and guards and lives a life little different from that of the pioneer settlers of this archetypal frontier land. Embracing the peace and solitude of the forest, Roy becomes more and more reclusive, only reluctantly visiting even the nearest small town.

When Martino (*La mia ragazza*) finally arrives in Magdalena after an interrupted train journey south – and further adventures en route that will have fatal repercussions – he finds a world that is very different from the one he remembers: the ranches have decayed; the town has grown from a village into a small city, but is poor and dirty; and his father's house is now a petrol station. The local Indians have adopted European dress and are no longer half-naked and barefoot. Yet the values, tensions, and characters of the old West remain. Martino soon discovers that scores are still settled with fistfights and gunfights; his Mexican surrogate aunt, Zia Rosa, reintroduces him to the formal manners of the past. The local thugs are a law unto themselves, leaving the sheriff powerless. And there is still the untamed desert, where Martino and Zuñita seek their final refuge, trekking on horseback through the wilderness with an Indian guide and hiding out in an Indian village that is barely touched by the modern world.

The standard Western trope of Nature versus Civilisation is at the heart of both novels, although, again reflecting the 1950s setting, the opposition is more ambiguous than the clear dialectic of the earliest Westerns. Cawelti sees the tension between savagery (epitomised by the harsh wilderness and its inhabitants) and civilisation (the town and its townsfolk) as a basic governing tension in every Western, although he concedes that there can be ambiguity over which side is to be preferred, describing one type of Western hero whose “inner conflict between the new values of civilization and the personal heroism and honor of the old wilderness tends to overshadow the clash between savages and townspeople” and who “senses that his own feelings and his special quality as a hero are bound up with the wilderness life” (*Six-Gun Mystique* 55).

Tompkins also notes the tension between wilderness and town: “nature gives the hero a sense of himself. For he is competent in this setting” (81); yet the town draws him in as the location of the supplies, companionship, and comforts of civilisation: “Town fills basic needs, but basic though they are, they are precisely the needs that have to be denied because of what their satisfaction inevitably entails. Town seduces” (86).

Both Roy and Martino fall into this category of ambiguous hero: a modern, entrepreneurial man who seeks the solid, hard-working ethos of the frontier town yet finds that the greatest integrity can be found in the freedom of the wilderness, with his trusting, faithful animals, and among the despised Native American inhabitants. Martino has wrongly supposed that the small town of Magdalena will be different from the corrupt cities of the north-east; his and Zuñita’s final escape to freedom is on horseback, with an Indian guide, penetrating deep into desert wilderness to find refuge in an ancient Zuñi village. Roy, too, travels deep into the New Mexican forest, which has a mythical, mystical quality for him, but finds he must

constantly deal with the local townspeople, who may help him, but rarely without self-interest. Even in their chosen refuges, nature is tainted by civilisation: the Zuñi people are corralled into a reservation whose isolation and harshness is a mixed blessing; Roy's forest is governed by modern laws of ownership, as he finds to his cost when he begins cutting trees outside his concession.

In fact, the frontier town in both novels becomes an extension of the modern urban society that both men are attempting to escape. This is no pristine frontier: busloads of tourists arrive daily, hoping to glimpse the clichés of Hollywood's Wild West. *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* is situated not far from Los Alamos, "the city of the atomic bomb" ("[la] città della bomba atomica") (184). Martino no longer breeds and trains horses as his father and forebears did on the family property, which was lost long ago in a mortgagee sale, but transports other ranchers' stock by lorry. Nevertheless, both Roy and Martino yearn for the simplicity of an earlier time and find their happiness with an Indian lover and with the Western staples, horses and dogs. Both end in exile. Although no longer under suspicion for murder, Roy and Rossa must leave their own town to find a less racially prejudiced community that will tolerate their marriage. Martino and Zuñita's exile is less happy: pursued by the law, they wait for inevitable discovery and death.

Western roles: heroes and villains

Cawelti finds that "there are three central roles in the Western: the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes who are above all 'men in the middle,' that is, they possess many qualities and skills of the savages, but are fundamentally committed to the townspeople" (*Six-Gun Mystique* 46).

Scerbanenco's model is rather more complex, as his heroes do not defend the town but simply themselves and their women. Both Roy and Martino "ride into town" as outsiders and loners, in the classic Western opening, although both are original sons of this land who are returning after traumas and disappointments endured in the more civilised world. Roy is returning from war service in Italy, where personal trauma – the rape, torture, and suicide of his fiancée – occasioned a mental breakdown; Martino left New Mexico as a youth and drifted into crime in the big cities of the north, returning only because he is on the run from his criminal associates. Although both strive to assimilate with their new neighbours, setting up small businesses and endeavouring to stay within the law, both end up betrayed by (white) outlaws, and throwing their lot in with the local Indians.

Cawelti acknowledges that the hero, along with other elements of the Western, has evolved over time in step with new social and cultural realities. Although they have the qualities of the original cowboy hero, both Roy and Martino are more in tune with the new Western hero of the 1940s and 1950s, as described by Cawelti:

The hero becomes not so much the founder of a new order as a somewhat archaic survival, driven by motives and values that are never quite in harmony with the new social order. His climactic violence, though legitimized by its service to the community, does not integrate him into society. Instead, it separates him still further [...]. (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 247)

It is true that both men rid their community of its worst outlaws and so – following the classic Western model – make the townsfolk safer, but this result is incidental to settling personal scores. In fact, neither has a high regard for the local white community, whom they

see as racist and puritanical.⁸⁷ Nor does either man kill the outlaw in an unequivocal shoot-out. After Rossa kills Roy's wartime persecutor, Marichant, on Roy's behalf but without his consent, Roy is blackmailed by two local outlaws, Crave and Washington, who trap him and force a shoot-out in which they inadvertently kill each other. Martino and Zuñita's nemesis Burner is only wounded in his shoot-out with Martino but is later shot dead by Zuñita, who is acting in self-defence.

According to Wallmann, "one defining element of westerns is that they are about character, about the makeup of people, the testing of their mettle, the realization of who fundamentally they are and what ultimately they stand for" (9). Roy and Martino seek redemption through honest labour and a sense of natural justice; they defend these principles in the face of injustice and persecution from their fellow men and a cruel, inexorable fate that means the shadow of past traumas can never be excised from their lives.

Both Roy and Martino live out the traditional Western narrative: they are solitary, persecuted men who do not provoke violence but who defend themselves single-handedly when violence is unfairly visited upon them. Since the law cannot help them, they act according to their own code of honour and sense of natural justice. The men's opponents are likewise stock characters from the popular Western: outlaws and gunslingers, men determined to run them off their land and destroy their livelihoods.

⁸⁷ All the prejudice and puritanism that underpins *Rossa* is encapsulated in a sanctimonious pastor who acts as mouthpiece for the community – who believe that this important industrialist should set an example of racial purity – and urges Roy to break off his relationship with Rossa (74-79).

Violence and pain

Tompkins argues that the Western is all about sanctioned male violence, and questions why so much male pain and death pervades these novels. As virtually every critic notes, the chase, the fistfight, the gunfight, and violent death, are the backbone of the genre.⁸⁸ Significantly, violence and vengeance are always wrong when perpetrated by the “baddies”, yet just and appropriate when resorted to by the hero. The crucial point is that the Western hero acts in self-defence and only after extreme provocation: “What justifies his violence is that he is in the right, which is to say that he has been unduly victimized and can now be permitted to do things which a short time ago only the villains did. [...] The hero is *so right* (that is, so wronged) that he can kill with impunity” (Tompkins 229). (Original emphasis.)

Yet, though he is licensed to kill, the hero still kills reluctantly and with regret. After a shoot-out with Burner’s men that is intended to merely incapacitate them but in fact results in their deaths, Martino (*La mia ragazza*) reflects that, even though these men had committed so many crimes that the electric chair would not be punishment enough for them, “they were three men” (“erano tre uomini”) (198). *Rossa*’s final shoot-out similarly gives the moral high ground to the hero, Roy. Roy and *Rossa* are surrounded in their mountain cabin by Crave and Washington; in the confused shoot-out that ensues, their attackers kill each other.

Underscoring the point that this is poetic justice, Roy’s foreman admits that “I would have bet a cent against ten dollars that those two would have finished up like that. [...] They were the nastiest people in the county” (“Avrei scommesso un centesimo contro dieci dollari che questi due sarebbero finiti così. [...] Era la più brutta gente della contea”) (286). Roy then

⁸⁸ “When we are told that a certain film is a Western, we confidently expect [...] that whatever its plot line, the violence of nature and of men will be an essential part of its landscape; and that it will probably reach its moral and emotional climax in a singular act of violence” (Slotkin 232); “violence in the western is not so much a means to an end as the end itself” (Stevens 25).

arranges things so it appears that the two men have also committed an earlier murder, Rossa's revenge killing of Roy's wartime persecutor, the sadistic and depraved Marichant. Since this earlier murder also provides poetic justice, in removing an evil and untouchable man from the world, this final perversion of official justice also seems right and appropriate in the context of Western values. Indeed, there is no question that the death of the villains is just in both novels, for both Roy and Martino have rid their town of criminals who have long preyed with impunity on others as well as on them.

Along with death, graphic violence is a hallmark of the Western genre, which, in Tompkins' words, "is riddled with pain" (104). Having refused to pay protection money, Martino (*Lamia ragazza*) is savagely beaten by Burner's thugs, who leave him for dead in the desert. As Martino tells the reader, he has never passed out during an assault. Thus his excruciating first-person account of his injuries and his pain is prolonged to allow the reader to experience every blow – for, just as the romance works to stimulate feelings of pleasure, the Western's beatings (and the spy story's tortures) stimulate the revulsion (and thrill) of vicariously experienced pain. All three genres appeal to primal affects which make it difficult for the reader to remain detached.

Even after this graphically described beating, the reader is given no respite. In spite of serious injuries and crippling pain, Martino drags himself back to his truck and drives himself blindly back to his depot, medicating himself with whisky rather than seeking medical attention. In fact, he almost immediately goes to confront Burner, the instigator of this near-fatal attack. In Tompkins' view, endurance of pain is the test that displays the hero's masculinity, showcasing his courage and self-control: "Prolonged and deliberate laceration of the flesh, endured without complaint, is a sine qua non of masculine

achievement” (105). Mitchell, who devotes an entire chapter to “A Man Being Beaten”, likewise sees the genre’s violence as “less a matter of violating another than of constituting one’s physical self as a male” (169).

Violence and physical suffering are not limited, in these novels, to the contests between the hero and his enemies: the relationships between hero and heroine are likewise marked by a level of physical violence and pain that makes further powerful yet conflicted calls on the reader’s emotional investment. When Rossa insists on leaving Roy, they fight in the dark. She bites him, and he hits her hard to knock her out. The final scenes of *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* see Martino and Zuñita suffering from serious injuries: Martino has not recovered from Burner’s men’s beating, and Zuñita is almost blind and in severe pain from a head wound inflicted by the dying Burner. Again, a contemporary reader might well have noted the intertextual echoes of *Duel in the Sun*, with its pair of lovers who endure mutually inflicted pain, fighting each other literally to the death in a sequence that encourages a gamut of emotions from its audience as they watch both the culmination of a grand passion and extreme, fatal violence.

Race and gender

At various times in its history, the Western has taken different stances towards the indigenous people that populate its terrain, sometimes portraying them as noble savages, at other times simply as savages in conflict with the white settlers, but rarely as equal citizens. Scerbanenco takes a stance that mixes both sympathy towards his Indian protagonists and an exoticising of them.

In each of the novels, the hero and heroine are both of mixed race, but only the female suffers discrimination and is clearly identified as Indian, while the male passes as white. When the local pastor tries to warn Roy off his mixed-race relationship, and Roy protests that he, too, is part-Indian, the pastor replies: “you may be the grandson of an Indian woman [...] but no one knows that, and in everyone’s eyes you are a white man” (“lei può essere nipote di un’india [...] ma nessuno se ne accorge, e per tutti lei è un bianco”) (*Rossa* 76). Only another Indian, *Rossa*, immediately identifies Roy as Apache. Yet when Roy and *Rossa* fight, Roy acknowledges the split between his wild and his civilised selves: “generations of Mexicans and Indians seethed within me, with their fearful fury that drove them to the worst savagery. But luckily wartime military discipline had taught me how to control myself” (“mi ribollivano dentro generazioni di messicani e di indios, con le loro paurose collere che li spingevano alle più grandi ferocie. Ma per fortuna la disciplina militare in tempo di guerra mi aveva insegnato a controllarmi”) (204).

Both *Rossa* and *Zuñita* have exotic, almost mystical qualities. *Rossa* can communicate with animals: the savage guard dogs Roy keeps become docile in her hands. Both women have been educated and have aspired to respectable “white” careers as teachers but have been thwarted by poverty and blatant racial discrimination. Even the law is against them: *Rossa* tells Roy that, when she was raped as a twelve-year-old child, her attacker was given a sentence of just three months rather than the mandatory five years, because “he was white, and I was Indian” (“era un bianco, e io un’india”) (51).

Rossa’s purity is highlighted by this incident in her past. Roy is horrified to discover that the woman he assumed was a prostitute has, in fact, after this childhood violation, saved herself for a man she truly loves, and so he is her first genuine lover. *Zuñita* is certainly a prostitute,

but she has had little choice, trapped first by poverty and later by falling under the protection of a gangster. In her encounters with Martino, she reveals an essential reticence. Of course, the women's histories allow Scerbanenco to have it both ways: the women are at one and the same time sexualised and innocent.

Both Rossa and Zuñita are complex types, containing many contradictions. They can be fearless, resourceful, and capable of meting out violence, yet they can be docile and submissive. Though superficially modern women, they have a mystical, ancient quality that links them to their ancestors and to nature. Both are educated and understand white society, yet they cannot integrate. As evidence of the chameleon existence they lead, both women have multiple names and nicknames, and they alternate between traditional local dress and elegantly fashionable tailoring. In short, they manifest a polysemy that invites a multiplicity of interpretations. Yet these women ultimately have little voice since, unlike the other romances discussed in this study, Scerbanenco's Westerns have an exclusively male point of view and are narrated in the first person, by Martino and Roy respectively. This accords with the Western's traditional focus on masculinity,⁸⁹ but it also has an impact on the possible readings offered to a largely female initial readership, as we shall see in Chapter Seven.

Tropes of *noir*

Having examined their genre-bound features, we must surely conclude that Scerbanenco's Westerns and spy stories manifest the expected genre codes, as isolated by critics coming

⁸⁹ "from the beginning the Western has fretted over the construction of masculinity, whether in terms of gender (women), maturation (sons), honor (restraint), or self-transformation (the West itself)" (Mitchell 4); "On the surface Westerns seem to give, in the unassailable masculinity of their heroes, a wholly unambiguous statement of what men should and should not do. Repeatedly that masculinity is identified as the only source of stability in a frontier world where the clash of savagery and civilization threatens cultural and social order" (Pumphrey 181).

from a variety of theoretical standpoints. It should be equally obvious, however, that in these adventure-based stories Scerbanenco deploys – indeed emphasises – elements common to *noir*. I reserve a full discussion of Scerbanenco’s characteristic genre blending until the following chapter: here, I shall simply pinpoint the features that allow the Western romances and spy romances to be interpreted in yet another genre key.

Isolation and alienation

These protagonists are all the solitary, alienated, homeless individuals identified as staples of the *noir* universe by Porfirio, Simpson, and Horsley, among many others: “souls without a heaven” (“anime senza cielo”), as the refugees of the novel of that name style themselves. Stiva (*Anime*) is an orphan as well as a refugee, a man who has been alone and on the run since the age of thirteen. Meeting Fabia in the boarding house ten years later, he acknowledges that this is the first time “he had known a little peace after terror” (“aveva conosciuto un po’ di pace dopo il terrore”) (9). He is unable to return to his native Poland and has a tenuous existence in Italy, where his false identity and his right to remain could be challenged at any moment.

Kirk’s isolation (*Appuntamento*) is less extreme but equally involuntary. As a professional soldier and intelligence officer, Kirk has membership of a certain social group but must remain cut off from wider society. Officially dead, he no longer can hope to resume former relationships and, most devastatingly, he must renounce Diana. Kirk has no other family ties, and the life he imagines for himself on return to Kansas is bleak.

Examining the *noir* Western film, James Ursini has observed that:

Although the classic western hero is often a loner, he is usually a loner out of choice, the rugged individual who has consciously decided the (sic) live his life in the sparsely populated landscape of the West. For the noir protagonist, there is often no choice. He is haunted, pursued, guilty, usually for a variety of reasons but with the same effect – alienation and anxiety. (253)

Roy (*Rossa*) and Martino (*La mia ragazza*) are men alone, drifters with no family ties, and guilty secrets to run from. Both try to forge a life within a community but both fail, since they can never escape their past. Both are victims of the violence spawned by modernity. They seek sanctuary in a return to a purer childhood world, but find that it no longer exists; they cannot attune themselves to the realities of the societies to which they return, societies which, while superficially traditional, have all the modern vices of racism, hypocrisy, corruption, injustice. They are, in short, the men Cawelti has described as typical of the mid-twentieth-century classic Western, in which, unlike in the pre-1940s version where “the hero typically made the transition from outlawry to domestication”, he instead “increasingly moves toward isolation, separation, and alienation” (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 247).

The destruction and political upheavals that came as the aftermath to the Second World War are primary drivers of the plots of the two spy novels; yet the Westerns also both have echoes of the destructiveness of this cataclysmic event. *Rossa* hinges on the classic *film noir* character, the damaged or disillusioned war veteran who can no longer fit into post-war society. Though incidental, there is also a reminder of the war in *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*, in the German hand grenades Hatua gives Martino, weapons acquired from a friend who had served in the war in Europe.

Persecution, flight, exile, anxiety

The tropes of persecution, flight, and exile, and the anxiety they provoke, permeate these spy novels and Westerns, in keeping with Julian Symons' observation that "Almost all of the best thrillers are concerned, in one form or another, with the theme of the hunted man" (229).⁹⁰

Both Stiva (*Anime*) and Kirk (*Appuntamento*) are hunted men, but whereas Kirk largely remains safely hidden and protected from his enemies, Stiva is literally a man on the run for most of the novel. His precariousness and fearfulness are stressed from the opening paragraphs, as he sizes up the other occupants of his boarding house, where

he didn't feel sure about anyone, except Fabia and that poor wretch Istrhal. For example, he didn't like Mrs Depierre, that elderly Frenchwoman with the face of a fanatic. [...] Nor did he like the Italian, Milosi: it was clear that he was either a police spy keeping tabs on what was going on in the boarding house, or a spy for something more dangerous than the police.

di nessuno era sicuro, escluso di Fabia e di quel poveretto di Istrhal. Non gli andava per esempio la Depierre, quella vecchia francese dalla faccia di fanatica. [...] E non gli piaceva neppure quell'italiano, Milosi: era chiaro che o era una spia della polizia che sorvegliava cosa si faceva nella pensione, o era spia di qualche cosa di più pericoloso della polizia. (7)

This catalogue of paranoia continues for a page and a half. In fact, we shall later discover that Stiva has misread some of his fellow lodgers, but he is right when he senses that Pietro Sidic has the potential to harm him: "He may have been a good sort, but Stiva didn't trust him and when he met him on the stairs, Stiva scarcely replied to Pietro's noisy, joking greeting [...], hurrying away as if out of shyness, but really out of fear" ("Doveva essere un buon diavolo,

⁹⁰ Other critics concur: "The sphere of the fictional spy situates him alone in a potentially hostile environment in which most of the dangers are unknown to him and sometimes to the reader. His characteristic stance is ON THE RUN, the ideally expressive signifier of the man without roots, with no security, with no solace to be derived from his society because in reality he shares little with it [...]" (Cawelti and Rosenberg 74); "Indeed, the only real freedom allowed a 'hero' of a spy novel is the freedom of *fear* and of being hunted [...], for there is no knowing who is the enemy (therefore presume *all* are the enemy)" (Bloom 4). (Original emphasis.)

ma Stiva non si fidava e quando lo incontrava per le scale, al saluto rumuroso e giocondo di Pietro [...], Stiva rispondeva appena, appena, sfuggendo, come se fosse timidezza, e invece era paura”) (7). The reason for his distrust is soon explained: “Since the time in Warsaw when he had seen the leather-helmeted soldier pointing his rifle at his father [...] he no longer felt sure about anything” (“Da quando aveva visto a Varsavia quel soldato col casco di pelliccia che puntava il moschetto contro il padre, [...] non era più sicuro di nulla”) (7).

Kirk has attempted to evade his pursuers with feigned death and retreat behind the secure walls of the local American Military Intelligence base, but the pursuit does not end. His enemies remain convinced that he is alive and finally penetrate his supposedly inviolable sanctuary.

La mia ragazza di Magdalena maintains a tense atmosphere of pursuit and persecution from its opening paragraph, manifesting what Ursini calls the *noir* Western’s “sense of inexorable doom that tempers the concept of individual choice and freedom” (255). As Martino exclaims, “They’re all against us, Zuñita, police and bandits” (“Sono tutti contro di noi, Zuñita, i poliziotti e i banditi”) (188). Martino narrowly outruns his former gang associates to escape the city, only to discover on his train a woman, Lidia, whom he has tricked, wooed, and coldly abandoned to facilitate a heist. Obligated to spend some days in St Louis with Lidia’s family, which includes a policeman recovering from wounds sustained in a shoot-out with Martino’s former gang, and a highly perceptive child who senses that Martino has a secret to hide, Martino risks discovery at every moment. Although he lays a false trail, Lidia and her policeman uncle eventually track Martino to Magdalena – where his past has already been uncovered by the local thugs – sending Martino on a final flight into the desert, where he knows it is just a case of time before the law and death catch up with him. These are

indeed men who “[dread] to look ahead, but instead [try] to survive by the day” (Schrader 58).

As noted in Chapter Four, the *noir* protagonist’s torment may also be psychological. It is true that Roy (*Rossa*) is unreasonably persecuted by local thugs, but his main torment is inside his head: unable to sleep, he has endless nightmares of seeing Marichant’s victim Lina’s grotesquely mutilated body fished out of the River Dora. Recounting the story to *Rossa*, Roy emphasises the intensely visual quality of this ineradicable memory: “They fished her out a few days later, and I was there and saw it. I saw her. There was a woman who fainted, and others turned their heads so as not to watch, but I didn’t faint and I kept looking” (“La ripescarono parecchi giorni dopo, e io ero lì e vidi. La vidi. Ci fu una donna che svenne, altri voltarono la faccia perché non potevano guardare, ma io non svenni e continuai a guardare”) (84). By sacking two of his workers who have insulted *Rossa*, Roy brings further persecution upon himself: these men first try to have his timber business shut down and then, having discovered that *Rossa* has killed Marichant, blackmail him.

Loss of identity

In all four novels there is a claustrophobic sense of entrapment. These are men with a sense of doom, trapped in a nightmare from which there seems no exit. In this nightmare of entrapment, all these men are forced to play out the *noir* trope of identity loss. *Stiva* (*Anime*) must hide his real name, which would reveal that “he belonged to the most important family in Warsaw, to one of the most important in Poland” (“apparteneva alla più importante famiglia di Varsavia, a una delle più importanti della Polonia”) (113). Yet even as a penniless refugee, his wretched clothing and squalid boarding-house room cannot erase his innate

nobility. Luisa immediately sees that he is a gentleman, someone far above her social station, and much too grand to marry a common working-class girl like herself.

Kirk (*Appuntamento*) suffers the most extreme erasure of identity: supposedly dead, his “body” is shipped back from Italy to Kansas for burial, and his Italian fiancée is left to grieve for him.

Martino Correal (*La mia ragazza*) has been living in the north-east under the aliases Buck Ellis and Lander. He is welcomed home to Magdalena under his real identity as the son of a respected rancher but has to conceal his years as a criminal and his current status as a fugitive from both the law and his former associates. Once Lidia tracks him down, Martino understands the futility of trying to remake identity:

in a second, it was all finished: I was no longer honest Mr Martino Correal, respected owner of a garage that was doing so well in Magdalena. I had been discovered and so I had reverted to what I had always been: the bandit Buck Ellis, among many other names, from Carter’s gang, the most ruthless gang in the north.

in un attimo era finito tutto: non ero più l’onesto signor Martino Correal, rispettato proprietario di un’autorimessa così bene avviata a Magdalena. Ero stato scoperto e quindi ero tornato quello che ero stato sempre: il bandito Buck Ellis e tanti altri nomi, della ganga di Carter, la più spietata delle ganghe del nord. (166)

Roy (*Rossa*) also buries his history, revealing only to Rossa how his Italian girlfriend was raped, tortured, and driven to suicide by Marichant, a man for whom Roy has ever since nurtured murderous intentions. After years of psychological trauma, he has come south to rebuild himself as a new man, willing himself to shed his old identity.

Longing for home

As noted in Chapter Four, the *noir* hero longs for the sanctuary his alienated, isolated existence denies him. At moments of stress, Stiva (*Anime*) cries out for the father who was unable to protect him. Stiva finds a temporary family with the generous and selfless Randanis and determines to marry their daughter Luisa, who loves him but whom he does not love. His true love is Fabia and, significantly, her maternal qualities are stressed. Their relationship begins when Fabia takes pity on Stiva's bedraggled appearance and offers to iron his trousers; she shelters him again when his miserable boarding-house room becomes uninhabitable. Beautiful and seductive, Fabia dances semi-naked in a revue for her living, but she looks on Stiva with "maternal sympathy" ("materna comprensione") (9); finding him drunk in the street, she reacts with maternal smiles ("sorridendo, materna") (13).

Diana's city of Trieste has the potential to provide a home for Kirk (*Appuntamento*), who describes an instant sense of belonging when he walked the city's streets for the first time: "There are places on earth where you feel more at home than in your own home, in your own country. For me, my home was here [...]" ("Ci sono dei posti nel mondo dove uno si sente più a casa che a casa sua, nella sua patria. Per me qui era la mia casa [...]" (137). This first walk leads him instinctively to the shop where Diana works, for it is Diana rather than the treacherous city that will provide his sanctuary.

Both Roy (*Rossa*) and Martino (*La mia ragazza*) attempt to return to their childhood home – literally in Martino's case – but they find that the world has changed, and they cannot retrieve an earlier innocence. Unlike Tompkins' model of the Western hero, these men long for the solace of domesticity and are at their easiest when temporarily granted it. Martino's

Mexican aunt and her daughters turn Martino's spartan living quarters in a corner of his garage into a feminine boudoir, and Rossa creates a cosy domestic space in Roy's forest cabin. Both Martino's and Roy's homes prove, however, to be precarious temporary sanctuaries when both become the sites of showdowns: Lidia confronts Martino in his bedroom with the news that his pursuers are on his trail; the final shoot-out in *Rossa* takes place in Roy and Rossa's cabin. Both men must again flee, underlining their transient status and the seeming impossibility of sustaining a home.

Ambiguous endings

While all four novels rehearse the tropes of *noir* as well as the tropes of the spy novel and the Western, respectively, these tropes never overwhelm the needs of the romance story, so that ultimately there is a happy ending of sorts. Stiva and Fabia (*Anime*) take up a new life as professional spies, finding a haven in a forest cabin in Poland where "They were no longer souls without a heaven. All souls find their heaven in the end" ("Non erano più anime senza cielo. Tutte le anime alla fine trovano il loro cielo") (220).

Kirk and Diana (*Appuntamento*) survive a final assassination attempt while uncovering the remnants of the opposing spy ring, and Kirk is able to take his bride home to the United States. Having diverted suspicion of murder from themselves, Roy and Rossa (*Rossa*) escape to Cymarron, where a less racially prejudiced priest agrees to marry them, and perhaps Roy can finally attain the Western ideal of "translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real" (Tompkins 4). Martino and Zuñita (*La mia ragazza*) have a more tragic end, waiting to die in the desert but still, in the grand romantic tradition, knowing that they will remain inseparable in death.

These endings are ambiguous in both narrative and moral terms and, I contend, capable of more than one reading. Here I disagree with Pirani, who has argued strenuously that Scerbanenco's texts should be read as *noir*, that they cannot be classed as *romanzi rosa*, since they hold "no background of hypocritical optimism, no display of eternal values and no customary happy ending" ("nessun ipocrita ottimismo di base, nessuno sbandieramento di eterni valori e nessun lieto fine di prammatica") ("Scerbanenco ovvero la dimensione 'nera'" 306-07). I would say, rather, that the *noir* tempers the romance but does not cancel it out, so that the reader still has interpretive choices, including the choice of optimism. I now turn, in Part Three, to examination of the mechanisms of this ambiguity and – most importantly – its implications for the reader.

PART THREE: READING GENRE HYBRIDITY

CHAPTER SIX: ENCODING AND DECODING HYBRIDITY

My close analysis of the genre codings of our texts has established that all these works can yield a satisfactory reading when read by the conventions of a single strong genre framework, but that there is more than one choice of what that framework might be. It is time now to (re)read them as hybrids – truly blended forms – and consider the implications of such hybridity. Guided by the insight of Cranny-Francis et al. that “the mixing of generic conventions can be a useful way of making new meanings” (*Gender Studies* 111), in the course of this chapter my focus will travel from sites of encoding to sites of decoding, building a picture of both the creation and the interpretation of genre hybridity, while acknowledging that this process is not linear but entails constant feedback and adjustment.

Ambiguous messages regarding genre may be promulgated outside the text as well as within it, often as a deliberate marketing ploy to maximise potential readership, and so I look first at the crucial role of extratextual factors (that is, the paratext) in the assignment – and reassignment – of genre. Returning to intratextual evidence, I next turn an eye on certain story outlines held in the Scerbanenco Archive, which provide a unique opportunity to see how the author’s genre choices evolved from initial conception to final published version. After some discussion of what constitutes true hybridity as opposed to the relatively common practice of inserting some features of a second genre – and here the ubiquitous love story is a prime example – into another, I submit our texts to extended “double readings” to isolate and interrogate the ambiguities of the hybrid.

The genre frame /paratext

A significant amount of the encoding and decoding of genre hinges on factors that surround or accompany the text in what Genette calls the “threshold” area, the “‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside” (*Paratexts* 2), factors for which he has coined the label *paratext*.⁹¹ Genette’s paratext is made up of two components that are differentiated by their location relative to the text (*Paratexts* 4-5): peritext – that is, material that makes up part of the text’s physical presence, such as title, author’s name, prefaces, jacket copy, and illustrations; and the more distanced epitext – that is, publicity and commentary, such as reviews, author interviews, and point-of-sale advertising, as well as more informal gossip and recommendation. Fishelov identifies some of the “literary-institutional factors” (that is, epitextual factors) that assist in establishing broad expectations of genre to be “the work’s publisher, how it is referred to by critics, presented by salespersons, and, when it becomes part of a curriculum, how it is grouped with other works” (67).

Dubrow provides an apt demonstration of the forceful pull of one of the most prominent peritextual elements, the title, arguing that a reader may interpret the opening paragraph of a hypothetical novel very differently depending on whether it is titled *Murder at Marplethorpe* (a clue that this is a crime novel) or *The Personal History of David Marplethorpe* (suggesting that it will instead be a *Bildungsroman*) (1-3). Although the facts are identical, the reader will make conscious or unconscious decisions as to which elements are likely to be of importance

⁹¹ The crucial concept of the paratext as a threshold zone – a point of entry rather than a sealed boundary – is encapsulated in the original French title, *Seuils* (Thresholds).

to the ensuing story, and in what ways, using broad genre knowledge as well as previous reading experience to make these decisions.⁹²

Scrutiny of both the publishing history of Scerbanenco's novels and their paratexts clearly demonstrates targeted marketing that changes its targets over time in recognition of new audiences, tastes, and expectations. To see this process at its most extreme, one only need place the first Rizzoli edition of *Innamorati* (1951) against Sellerio's 2004 reissue (as *Rossa*): the first is characterised by cheap paper, flimsy binding, a lurid one-colour cover, an author who is explicitly placed in company with leading contemporary romance writers, and a cheap price. Sellerio's edition manifests sophisticated, elegant design on quality paper: the cover reproduces a work of modern art, the explicitly romantic title is gone, the volume includes a scholarly essay by Pirani that repositions the text as *noir*, and Scerbanenco is placed amongst authors with solid critical valuations. In short, the former is geared for quick one-off consumption, while the latter is a book to value and keep.

The original serialised versions of the works under study appeared in *Novella* and *Annabella*,⁹³ magazines indisputably directed towards an adult female readership. These magazines' covers most often feature a fashionable young woman or, occasionally, a celebrity; alongside serials and short stories, there is celebrity gossip, fashion spreads, tips on household issues, personal advice columns, and advertisements clearly pitched towards the housewife, mother, and fashion-conscious woman.

⁹² In Dubrow's imagined opening, a woman lies dead in bed, with a baby nearby: but is she a murder victim or the mother of the hero? Is the ticking clock a clue or an evocation of passing time?

⁹³ Published in *Novella*: *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* (31 July - 30 Oct. 1949), *Anime senza cielo* (9 Apr. - 10 Sept. 1950), *Innamorati* (5 Nov. 1950 - 25 Mar. 1951), *Appuntamento a Trieste* (8 June - 21 Sept. 1952); in *Annabella*: *Il fiume verde* (16 Dec. 1951 - 2 Mar. 1952), *Johanna della foresta* (7 Nov. 1954 - 20 Feb. 1955), *I diecimila angeli* (16 Oct. 1955 - 8 Jan. 1956), *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo* (15 Dec. 1957 - 16 Mar. 1958), *Noi due e nient'altro* (12 Oct. 1958 - 8 Feb. 1959), *La sabbia non ricorda* (7 May - 3 Sept. 1961) (Pirani, "Bibliografia" 162-64).

Soon after conclusion of the serialised version, each work was reissued in book form. All appeared in a popular paperback series published by Rizzoli that was aimed primarily at female readers. The earliest volumes have covers that are colour-coded with crimson bands at top and bottom and feature monochrome illustrations depicting a close-up of a couple. (See Appendix, Figs.1-4.)

Observing the crucial role of the book cover in initiating the “contract” between publisher and reader, Paizis provides an extended study of romance cover art (51-58); although he is referring to English-language romances of the Mills & Boon or Harlequin variety, his observations hold true for Rizzoli’s romances. Paizis’s catalogue of typical features can be summarised thus: the front cover has a portrait of the couple, usually in close-up, with the male slightly behind the female. Their pose indicates a relationship and often, but not always, shows physical contact. The male’s stance frequently suggests protectiveness. The female’s facial expressions are enigmatic, rarely showing a full smile but more often expressions coded as “Invitational” or “Romantic/Sexual”.⁹⁴ While a first-person protagonist (usually the female) typically looks directly at the reader, and the one who is narrated (usually the male) will generally show no such engagement; and while third-person protagonists most often appear in profile or even back on, and so more distanced from the reader; there is an alternative positioning in partial profile – the stance found most often in the Scerbanenco first editions in my study. Paizis sees this pose as more nuanced: “The three-quarter profile suggests a link between heroine and observer but tentatively – an ambiguous pose” (53).

⁹⁴ Paizis is here reliant on the categories devised by Marjorie Ferguson in her 1980 study of the covers of women’s magazines.

Scerbanenco's first editions bear out this typology (see Appendix Figs. 1-8), while other paratextual features bolster the reader's conviction that the novel in their hands is a romance. On the endpapers and the cover's back flap, listings of other authors and titles in the series make clear that Scerbanenco's work is situated in company with the most popular female writers of *romanzi rosa*, thus assisting in the coalescence of an interpretive community. The back flap of the first book version of *Il fiume verde* (Rizzoli, 1952) lists several novels by Liala, Maria Casabella, Dora Mancuso, and Luciana Peverelli as well as other recent novels by Scerbanenco. The titles of these works make it abundantly clear that their subject is romance: *Un matrimonio d'amore* ("A love marriage"), *Paradiso difficile* ("Difficult paradise") (Casabella); *Quel divino autunno* ("That divine autumn"), *Una carezza e le strade del mondo* ("A caress and the streets of the world") (Liala); *Questo amore è mio* ("This love is mine"), *Ti odio amore mio!* ("I hate you, my love!") (Mancuso); *Dove sei, amor mio?* ("Where are you, my love?"), *Non devo amarti* ("I shouldn't love you"), *Verrà il mio principe* ("My prince will come") (Peverelli). Similarly, the back flap of Peverelli's *Vietato ai minori* (Rizzoli, 1951) lists five titles by Scerbanenco (including *Anime senza cielo* and *Innamorati*) as well as titles by Liala, Casabella, and Mancuso.

From the latter part of the 1950s, Rizzoli issued Scerbanenco's novels in a more robust paperback format that was glued rather than stitched and had plain back covers, although the front cover of the dust jacket continued to be illustrated with a standard close-up of a male-female couple in a pose suggesting a close personal relationship. (See Appendix Figs. 5-8.) Each cover faithfully depicts a scene from the novel, a scene chosen for its romantic intensity: this becomes especially obvious when one considers the cover art of later editions, which downplay the romance and focus on scenes that relate to the other strand of the hybrid.

The front-flap copy in all these Rizzoli first editions also tends to prompt an expectation of a certain genre. Most stress the sentimental element and, even when the copy is more neutral, highlight the female protagonist: “This is the story of a man who is wicked, more or less, and the woman who has fallen in love with him” (“Questa è la storia di un uomo cattivo, o quasi, e di una donna innamorata di lui”) (*Elsa* 1958); “The heroine of this new novel by Giorgio Scerbanenco is Johanna, a young girl with sky-blue eyes” (“Protagonista di questo nuovo romanzo di Giorgio Scerbanenco è Johanna, una giovane ragazza dagli occhi celesti”) (*Johanna* 1955); “The Green River is [...] the story of Alina, victim of a man who has disturbed her mind and extinguished all her faith in love” (“‘Il fiume verde’ è [...] la storia di Alina, vittima di un uomo che ha sconvolto la sua mente e spento in lei ogni fiducia nell’amore”) (*Fiume verde* 1952).

Many of Scerbanenco’s titles from the late 1940s until the early 1960s strongly suggest a sentimental content, bolstering the impression that these works should be read in the key of romance: *Innamorati* (“In love”, or, “Lovers”), *Noi due e nient’altro* (“The two of us and nothing else”), *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* (“My girl from Magdalena”), *Appuntamento a Trieste* (“Appointment in Trieste”), *Desiderio soltanto* (“Desire alone”), *Viaggio di nozze in grigio* (“Honeymoon in grey”), *Mio adorato nessuno* (“My beloved nobody”), *Amata fino all’alba* (“Loved until dawn”); or else they highlight the heroine: *Elsa e l’ultimo uomo* (“Elsa and the last man”), *Johanna della foresta* (“Johanna of the forest”), *Cristina che non visse* (“Cristina who didn’t live”). A few are more enigmatic, though not inconsistent with romance: *La sabbia non ricorda* (“The sand does not remember”), *Anime senza cielo* (“Souls without a heaven”), *I diecimila angeli* (“The ten thousand angels”), *Il fiume verde* (“The green river”). Scerbanenco’s four Western romances certainly have more sentimental titles

than might be expected from what is traditionally a masculine genre: *Luna messicana* (“Mexican moon”), *Il grande incanto* (“The great enchantment”), *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*, *Innamorati*. To what extent Scerbanenco had final choice of title is unclear: outlines and proposals in the Scerbanenco Archive show that he sometimes suggested alternative titles. His working title for *Innamorati* was *Ricatto* (“Blackmail”), which might well have given an entirely different suggestion to the purchaser. On the other hand, some preliminary alternatives for *Appuntamento a Trieste* were more explicitly romantic: *L’amarissimo addio* (“The bitterest farewell”) and *L’amica triestina* (“The [female] friend from Trieste”).

Scerbanenco’s modern editors have tacitly acknowledged the power of the title, shunting the posthumous anthologies of his short stories in the direction of crime and *noir* with the titles they have assigned (see above, footnote 16). In the case of the novels, even though almost all Scerbanenco’s original titles have been retained,⁹⁵ subtle changes in other paratextual features work to reposition reader expectation, as a look at later editions of the same novels will show. Rizzoli reprinted *Anime senza cielo*, *Appuntamento a Trieste*, *Il fiume verde*, *Johanna della foresta*, and *Elsa e l’ultimo uomo* for the first time in the 1970s. In all cases the back-cover copy repeats that found on the front flap of the first edition, but the cover illustrations eschew the romance’s typical double-portrait format, instead showing scenes of action or enigma that hint at a story that is far from romantic. All signal crime with either a weapon or a police officer, and sometimes both. (See Appendix Figs. 9-12, 14.)

⁹⁵ The only exception I have found, other than *Innamorati/Rossa*, is the 1985 reprint of a (pseudonymous) serial, *All’alba si dimentica* (Gioia, 1954-1955), under the knowingly ironic title *Romanzo rosa*, and whose blurb promises a mix of romance and *noir*.

The cover of *Il fiume verde* (1975) depicts a terrified Alina trying to struggle free from a shadowy, violent assailant, while a gun looms out of all proportion in the foreground. The seemingly incongruous front cover blurb, “Love returns for Alina” (“Per Alina torna l’amore”), serves to highlight the hybridity, the contrast between violent crime and romance. *Johanna della foresta* (1974) presents an enigmatic cover illustration in which Johanna appears childlike – as indeed she is described in the text – and completely unlike the provocatively dressed adult woman seen on the cover of the first edition, who delivers a strong hint of titillations within. Rather than being alone with the hero, the 1970s Johanna is surrounded by three men whose relationship to her is unclear. One is a police officer, one carries an axe, and one appears protective of her. Again, hybridity is stressed in the front-cover blurb, which announces “A detective story about love” (“Un giallo d’amore”).

The front cover of *Elsa e l’ultimo uomo* (1975) depicts Tomaso’s savage beating by thugs, and the enigmatic, anxiety-provoking blurb “Seven days to become honest” (“Sette giorni per diventare onesto”). The woman who looks on, modelling the slinky low-cut red dress and artificially styled blonde hair of a traditional femme fatale, is not Elsa but Tomaso’s “bad” lover and treacherous gang associate, Verde Luna, thus emphasising the *noir* crime world rather than any domestic romantic sensibility.

Anime senza cielo (1978) certainly displays a young couple, but he holds a gun, they are surrounded by plans marked “segreto” (“secret”), and, unknown to them, they are being observed by a somewhat caricaturised spy. Here the cover copy again suggests hybridity, announcing a “Story of love and espionage amid post-war refugees” (“Storia d’amore e di spionaggio tra profughi del dopoguerra”). The cover of Rizzoli’s 1975 edition of

Appuntamento a Trieste verges even more on caricature.⁹⁶ From left and right, two disembodied arms point guns at each other, while a dishevelled man clutching a paper labelled “segreto” is being marched away by a military policeman. Yet, if the illustration has nothing of romance, once more the cover copy signals the blending of genres with the words “The spy in love” (“La spia innamorata”).⁹⁷

The publishing history of *La sabbia non ricorda*, a text which blends a love story and a crime investigation, makes even more explicit the variant readings offered to the reader by paratextual features.⁹⁸ The first edition (Rizzoli, 1963), though not confined to any series, has cover art that is easily read as conventionally romantic through its use of such strong codes as the half-portraits of an attractive young couple, his intense gaze at her, and a preponderance of the colour pink. The couple’s relationship, however, is ambiguous, and hints at anxiety – an emotion that of course fits well with either genre reading. The back-cover copy announces “Love and suspense [...]. A love story told through the dramatic search for a culprit” (“Amore e suspense [...]. Una vicenda d’amore attraverso la drammatica ricerca di un colpevole”), but still has a slight weighting towards the sentimental side of the plot, a fact that is reinforced by the accompanying pink-bordered list of Scerbanenco’s romance titles.

By 1974 the genre attribution has moved much farther into the camp of crime: the cover of the new Rizzoli edition depicts a crime scene, carries the legend “When love chooses a killer” (“Quando l’amore sceglie un assassino”), and promotes the book as “one of the best examples of the ‘Italian detective novel’” (“uno dei migliori esempi di ‘giallo italiano’”),

⁹⁶ These 1970s editions all have cover illustrations that border on caricature; many exhibit a style that seems knowingly parodic and might be interpreted as indicating some equivocation over genre attribution.

⁹⁷ This wording displays an unusual even-handedness in signalling genre. As Hepburn has pointed out, romance is a mere diversion in the true spy narrative, where “love and sex figures as a pause in the momentum [...]” (14), and where “the male spy steels himself against romance or any emotional entanglement [...]” (15).

⁹⁸ For samples of cover art, see Appendix, Figs. 13-14.

without, however, completely ignoring aspects of romance: “a gripping tale of suspense, but also a love story” (“un’appassionante *suspense*, ma anche una vicenda d’amore”). The 2000 Garzanti edition of *La sabbia* refers explicitly to a crime in both its artwork and its blurb, and makes no mention of a love story.

What are we as readers to make of this ambiguity in genre positioning in the all-important paratext? Here, Altman’s insights on the mixing and reattribution of film genres (123-43) are instructive. Altman asserts that film genre is for the most part established post-production – that is, by critics, and within the marketing process – whereas the producers (directors and studios) prefer to hint at genre in the hope of opening up the film to a wider audience. Thus a single film may be marketed differently to different audiences (both in the initial release and over time), just as audience perceptions may vary according to their sociological and/or historical status.

Paul Cobley develops this proposition further in his discussion of the role of audience expectation in the life cycle of genres, drawing on Todorov’s definition of verisimilitude. (That is, the point at which an artificial reality – the rules of the genre – meshes with audience expectation – “public opinion” or *doxa*).⁹⁹ Cobley observes that genres may wane or die when the genre’s rules no longer resonate with *doxa*, citing the melodrama and the Western as examples (50). The reverse may also happen, since “new structures regularly grow out of spectator positions once characterized as downright eccentric” (Altman 211). All this helps explain the publisher Sellerio’s highlighting of the more academic, and currently popular, *noir* strand of Scerbanenco’s romantic Westerns while downplaying the less respected (romantic) and outmoded (Western) genres. In Cobley’s words, “Generic signs –

⁹⁹ See Todorov, *Poetics of Prose* 80-88.

like all other signs – require sign-users and, undoubtedly, genres depend upon the attitudes, values and experiences of readers [...]” (52).

Finally, there is the immensely strong epitextual pull of Scerbanenco’s posthumous reputation: the fact that his name is scarcely mentioned without the qualifier “father of Italian *noir*”.¹⁰⁰ It would be difficult indeed for any modern reader to turn to his earlier works without actively seeking within them signs of the genres – hard-boiled crime and *noir* – that have sealed his reputation, while finding excuses to downplay the despised romance genre.¹⁰¹

Scerbanenco’s story outlines

Nevertheless, such repositioning is only possible if the seeds of more than one genre are already present in the text. Moving a step further back in the encoding process, scrutiny of those story outlines of Scerbanenco’s that remain extant gives an insight into how texts that were initially conceived as mono-generic were worked into more complex genre blends before publication. The Scerbanenco Archive (Archivio Giorgio Scerbanenco) established in 2011 within the Biblioteca Comunale di Lignano Sabbiadoro (FVG) contains the author’s original outlines for several of his works, in advance of their initial serial publication. The outlines, typically consisting of three or four (unnumbered) typescript pages, take the form of

¹⁰⁰ “Giorgio Scerbanenco’s name has risen to the heavens of Italian *noir* literature, acknowledged father [...] of a genre” (“il nome di Giorgio Scerbanenco è assunto all’empireo della letteratura noir italiana, padre riconosciuto [...] di un genere”) (Pirani, *Scerbanenco: Riflessioni* 3); “father of the Italian crime novel” (“padre del romanzo giallo italiano”) (Paganini, *Lettere* 263).

¹⁰¹ In my experience, many Italian bookshops file all Scerbanenco’s in-print works in the crime section, including the Swiss philosophical writings and novellas, and his 1939 science fiction novel, *Il paese senza cielo* (Aliberti, 2003). Though scarcely scientific, this anecdotal impression evidences the pull of the author’s name and (current) reputation.

a detailed synopsis, sometimes including indications of instalment divisions, with explanatory notes either embedded within the outline or appended as notes at the end.¹⁰²

These authorial notes give an insight into how Scerbanenco initially intended each story to be read as well as his intentions regarding the balance between the love story and alternative genre elements. When they are placed against the published versions, it becomes obvious that important changes were made, changes in relatively insignificant matters such as the characters' names, but changes, too, in the fundamentals of the story and, significantly, the genre orientation.

In the case of *Anime senza cielo*, Scerbanenco states (and I am preserving his emphases and punctuation):

The novel is principally: the love story of Dora¹⁰³ and Stiva; the story of Pietro's love for Dora; the story of Lisa's¹⁰⁴ love for Stiva;

In second place and only as background, the novel is: the story of a man (Stiva), who lives in terror; the human (not political) story of so many refugees, and their lives in Italy, in Milan and Rome;

finally, and only with generic, obscure and imprecise hints, the political mechanism functions to give a dramatic impetus to the plot, but never with any direct reference, exactly as in Jean Pierre Riviere's story "Neither with you nor without you".¹⁰⁵

Il romanzo è principalmente: la storia dell'amore di Dora e di Stiva; la storia dell'amore di Pietro per Dora; la storia dell'amore di Lisa per Stiva;

In secondo luogo e solo come sfondo, il romanzo è: la storia di un uomo (Stiva) che vive sotto il terrore; la storia umana (non politica), di tanti e tanti profughi, e la loro vita in Italia, a Milano e a Roma;

del tutto per ultimo, e solo con accenni generici, oscuri e approssimativi, funziona il meccanismo politico, tanto per dare molla drammatica alla vicenda, ma senza mai

¹⁰² In some cases brief handwritten notes are attached, containing what are most probably later additions, since characters' names are changed to their final, published versions.

¹⁰³ That is, Fabia.

¹⁰⁴ That is, Luisa.

¹⁰⁵ Jean Pierre Riviere is one of Scerbanenco's pseudonyms.

alcun riferimento diretto, proprio con (sic) nel racconto “Né con te né senza te” di Jean Pierre Riviere.

In fact, the story as published deviates somewhat from Scerbanenco’s original proposal. It is true that the political element remains vague, but the business of the official American counterspy agency occupies a good deal of space, and the generic traits of the spy novel are more than mere background. *Anime senza cielo* devotes a good deal of time to the fundamentals of the spy story: betrayal, capture, escape, double-cross, torture, and the like. Although actual political factions are not named, the unease and paranoia of the Cold War divide experienced by Europe in the 1950s is convincingly conveyed, as is the misery of the post-war displaced.

Of course it is plausible that, in his pitch, Scerbanenco emphasised that this novel was to be a pure romance, with a relatively innocuous colouring of espionage, in order to circumvent any hint of political controversy that might have unnerved his publisher. It is equally possible that the potential of the spy genre became more attractive to him as he wrote. Whatever the reasons, this novel in its final form is both a conventional love story, with the expected barriers, love rivals, separations, and final reconciliation, and a suspenseful spy novel which does not leave the lovers at the point of blissful reconciliation and betrothal, as one might expect, but ends by sending them into Eastern Europe on a dangerous long-term assignment. This coda has the pair assuming false identities and making a risky train trip into Poland, during which they are hauled off the train at gunpoint, interrogated, and then driven to a secret location where they expect death but instead find their contact and a safe house. More usually, the female lover would be eliminated by death, disappearance, or exposure as a traitor: Hepburn has commented on the extraneity of the love subplot to the classic tale of

espionage, noting too that “Usually closure in spy novels occurs with the death of the spy, the death of the woman who accompanies him, or their irreparable separation” (15). By reassigning the pair of lovers to a life as professional spies, Scerbanenco demonstrates a masterful weaving of the needs of the romance and the spy story.

Although the draft of *Anime senza cielo* has the same broad story outlines as the final version, the proposed ending is very different from that described above. In the draft, Pietro (Sindic), having discovered that Dora/Fabia despises him and has feigned love simply to thwart his plans of killing Stiva, locks Dora/Fabia in their hotel room and goes to kill Stiva. He is intercepted by Istrhal, a spy from a rival Yugoslavian faction who has been sent to kill him. Realising that he is about to die, Pietro makes the melodramatic gesture of asking Istrhal to release Dora/Fabia and give her Stiva’s address so she can finally be with her true love. This happens to be the day that Stiva, believing Dora/Fabia has betrayed him, is to marry the simple Roman girl Lisa/Luisa, but Dora/Fabia is just in time to prevent the marriage and claim Stiva for herself. Lisa/Luisa nobly recognises that the pair’s love is much deeper than that between her and Stiva and gives him up with good grace.

In short, this is a classic happy-ever-after romance ending. Where this version signals a definitive end to the story, the published version is much more ambiguous. If one is reading the published text as a romance, it is true that the lovers are united in marriage and – at least temporarily – they have an idyllic haven in the Polish forest; nevertheless, a reader who reads this as essentially a spy story may conclude that they are simply at the beginning of a new life of adventure and danger. While a romance must necessarily be a stand-alone work, since betrothal is the end of the lovers’ story, spy fiction tends to be serial; the conclusion to the

published version of this novel admits both possibilities. Thus the reader has a choice of either final consolation or a short respite that promises renewed anxiety.

In the case of *Johanna della foresta*, it seems equally clear that Scerbanenco's vision of the plot changed substantially between the initial outline and the story as written. His synopsis puts little emphasis on Warchen (here Vandagen), who is indeed Johanna's blackmailer and father of her unborn child, but who is conveniently killed in a car crash midway through the story, so that the secondary thread of the story as published – Warchen's murder – is necessarily absent. In his notes, Scerbanenco envisages the story as a pastoral, an idyllic fable of pure love:

The plot consists of two principal strands: the absolutely chaste, fairy-tale love of two young people, Fantino¹⁰⁶ and Joanna. There is the poetry of love in the secret valley, in the small earthly paradise beneath the Swiss mountains. And at the same time, there is Donà's hidden love for Joanna; when Fantino dies, his love is revealed, and Joanna too is immediately warmed by it. Again there is, secondary but important, the Swiss schoolteacher's love for Donà. The setting, without ever falling into a storybook style, is very different from what is usual in our novels. The action plays out imperceptibly, without abrupt and conventional twists.

La vicenda consiste di due filoni principali: l'amore assolutamente casto, fiabesco dei due ragazzi, Fantino e Joanna. È la poesia dell'amore nella vallata segreta, nel piccolo paradiso terrestre sulle montagne svizzere. E nello stesso tempo c'è l'amore nascosto di Donà per Joanna; quando Fantino muore, l'amore si rivela, e anche Joanna ne viene subito riscaldata. Vi è poi, secondario ma importante, l'amore della maestrina svizzera per Donà. L'ambiente, senza cadere mai nel romanzesco, è molto diverso dai soliti dei nostri romanzi. L'azione si svolge insensibilmente, senza bruschi e convenzionali colpi di scena.

In its final form, the plot is greatly changed. Francino/Fantino's love for Johanna recedes into the background; since it is not reciprocated by Johanna, there is no need to kill him off to permit Johanna and Donato/Donà's mutual love to flourish. And, significantly, the real world

¹⁰⁶ That is, Francino.

of crime, politics, and war (with all the “colpi di scena” Scerbanenco originally intended to avoid) is set in contrast with the fairy tale of the persecuted girl in the wilderness, rescued by a questing knight who undergoes ordeals to win her freedom and her hand in marriage.

Although he is a strong presence in the published version, with the glimpses he brings of horrific wartime suffering, Szapocki does not appear in the initial outline. Likewise, in the outline, Johanna’s father’s war crimes are downplayed: although they provide a motive for Vandagen/Warchen to blackmail and rape Johanna, when Johanna finally tells the full story to the police chief, it turns out that he has known about her father all along and has clearly done nothing to bring him to justice. Her father does not flee in terror and shame, even when the full story is revealed in his village, but, when Donà/Donato offers to marry Johanna and take responsibility for her son (who survives his premature birth, in this version), he offers his new son-in-law work on his farm where, one assumes, all will live in peace and contentment. Certainly, the final version preserves the layer of fairy tale, but this is only one possible reading, since the secondary plot of Warchen’s murder, and the realism with which issues of displacement, poverty, and war crimes are treated, give the potential for a much darker reading.¹⁰⁷

In the case of *Innamorati/Rossa*, the reverse appears to be true: Scerbanenco appears to have wished from the outset to play up the darker story of blackmail, as a classic Western trope. In his proposal, the novel is given the provisional title *Ricatto* (“Blackmail”), and Scerbanenco attaches the following explanatory note:

¹⁰⁷ The flap copy of the first published version spells out the dichotomy: “they live out an adventure that would seem a fairy tale if it did not have the convincing human tone of true stories that happen in everyday life” (“vivono un’avventura che sembrerebbe una fiaba, se non avesse l’accento umano e convincente delle storie vere che succedono nella vita di tutti i giorni”).

The novel is the story of the Indian, Rossa's love for Rod.¹⁰⁸ A boundless, wild love. It is the story of a continuous, obsessive blackmail, and all the tension of the blackmail pervades the narrative. In the background, Rod's love for the young Italian girl, and that of Sybille for Rod.

Il romanzo è la storia dell'amore di Rossa, l'india, per Rod. Un amore senza limiti, selvaggio. È la storia di un ricatto, continuato, ossessionante, e tutta la tensione del ricatto pervade la narrazione. Sullo sfondo, l'amore di Rod per la piccola italiana, e quello di Sybille per Rod.

As we see, the story of blackmail is foregrounded to the extent that it gives the novel its proposed title, and there is ambiguity about whether the love story is of equal weight, or is background. Nevertheless, the story outline is in this case very similar to the published version. It begins by describing the secret love of the wealthy and handsome sawmill owner, Rod Vegas, for Rossa, and her discovery that he is troubled by memories of how his Italian wartime fiancée was driven to suicide by extreme abuse from another soldier, a French musician. As in the published version, Rod/Roy discovers that his enemy is touring the United States and goes to kill him, finding, however, that he has been killed already by someone else. The outline continues:

Rod returns to his mountains, where he has his sawmill, his hated enemy is dead, and it seems to be all finished. But that isn't so – and here lies the nucleus of the novel. A white man and a redskin have seen Rossa, the woman with whom Rod is in love, kill the musician. [...] If Rod does not give a thousand dollars to the white man, Smart, and the Indian, Washington, they will denounce Rossa.

Rod torna ai suoi monti, dove ha la segheria, il suo odiato nemico è morto, e tutto sembra finito. Ma non è così – e il nucleo del romanzo è qui. Un bianco e un pellerossa hanno veduto Rossa, la donna di cui Rod è innamorato, uccidere il musicista. [...] Se Rod non dà mille dollari al bianco, Smart, e all'indio, Washington, essi denuncieranno Rossa.

¹⁰⁸ That is, Roy.

The outline continues to sketch a story that is essentially the same as the final version: the extortion continues, Rod/Roy is financially ruined, and he decides to marry the wealthy heiress, Sybille, in order to pay. Unable to go through with his deception, however, he confesses all to Sybille and declares that he will kill the blackmailers. Rossa is opposed to this plan and runs away into the desert, where Rod/Roy eventually finds her near the dead bodies of the two blackmailers. It seems that they have fallen out and killed each other; thus, “The nightmare is over, they can now marry and live happily [...]” (“L’incubo è finito, essi ora possono sposarsi e vivere felici [...]).

In this case, we clearly see Scerbanenco oscillating between the needs of two genres: stressing the primacy of the Western adventure story, yet rounding out his outline with an insistence that the requirements of the romance are fulfilled. To what extent he was expressing his own preferences, and to what extent he was placating his publisher, we cannot of course know.

Genre hybridity

By now we have a clear picture of genre as a field of negotiation between producer and audience. Producers – whether actual creators/authors, or publishers, or marketers – will use genre as a shorthand to alert potential consumers to what they can expect from the work, basing their pitch on their perceptions of the tastes of the contemporary market. Publishers can only render ambivalent or reassign genre, of course, if the text already contains such potential, but they are aided by the fact that genre categories are inherently unstable: not only do they readily split into subgenres to accommodate niche markets, they also combine to create hybrid forms.

The postmodern novel has made a feature of genre hybridity, blending forms (narrative, diaries, reports, letters, legal documents, and more), even weaving together fact and fiction to challenge prior notions of the appropriate structure of the realist novel.¹⁰⁹ The hybridity encountered in Scerbanenco's novels is not of this formally experimental nature but, rather, a blending of what Fowler refers to as subgenres of the novel. What is more, this is achieved in a formal sense, by respecting the classical structures or codes of the popular romance, Western, and crime and spy novel and not by simply overlaying a contrasting tone or, in Fowler's precise usage, a *mode*. Fowler, using the term *kind* to denote historical genre, defines mode as the insertion of certain of one kind's features, in a subordinate role, into another kind, often as a tonal influence, creating such examples as the comic novel, or epic novel. Subgenres, on the other hand, are normally based on subdivisions of kinds according to subject matter and motifs (106-29).

Popular fiction has always contaminated one genre with features of another: the ubiquitous love story, found everywhere from science fiction to the horror film, is the prime example. Cawelti takes pains to explain that such insertions do not affect the base attribution of genre:

Adventure stories, more often than not, contain a love interest, but one distinctly subsidiary to the hero's triumph over dangers and obstacles. [...] Romances often contain elements of adventure, but the dangers function as a means of challenging and then cementing the love relationship. (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 41)

Dove is also of the opinion that a love story may be admitted into the crime novel only if it is clearly secondary: "the hermeneutic must be the main plot, but an interesting love story can serve the dual purpose of distraction and delay" (30). While pointing out that "In all genres, [...] love plots of various kinds are the norm rather than the exception" (47), Regis is

¹⁰⁹ See Linda Hutcheon, Remo Ceserani.

adamant that, without her eight essential elements, these stories cannot constitute a romance novel but necessarily remain in the subordinate position of subplot.

Certainly romance fiction has long been divided into subgenres which manifest influences from other categories of popular fiction, a fact reflected in the niche series prevalent in the current marketplace. Pozzato isolates the *rosa-western*, *rosa-avventuroso*, and *rosa-gothic* (*Il romanzo rosa* 80-84), while a glance at the contents pages of the latest edition of Kristin Ramsdell's guide to romance fiction makes abundantly clear the current tendency for publishers to direct romantic fiction to ever more specialist markets.¹¹⁰ Pozzato's understanding, however, is that the second genre is distinctly secondary, a matter of providing background colour as much as anything, so that "the physical, geographical location allows us to define [...] the 'Western-romance'" ("il luogo fisico, geografico ci permette di definire [...] il 'rosa-western'") (*Il romanzo rosa* 71). Defining romance as "a book where the love relationship is the absolute heart and soul and center", romance author Mary Jo Putney offers a distinction that is equally in tune with Cawelti and Dove and mirrors Fowler's notion of modal overlay: "Contrast 'romantic suspense' with 'suspenseful romance' – i.e., which is the noun (the heart) and which is the modifier [?]".

While Mussell insists that "all romances focus on love, courtship, and marriage", she admits that "thematic concerns and structural imperatives vary from formula to formula" (29), leading to borrowings from the conventions of other popular genres. After some discussion of the romantic suspense novel, "the romance formula that most closely resembles male

¹¹⁰ Ramsdell (vi-ix) supplies the broad categories of "contemporary romance", "romantic mysteries", "historical romances", "Regency romance", "alternative reality romance", "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered romance", "inspirational romance", "ethnic/multicultural romance", and "erotic romance", all of which are further subdivided into more specialised fields ("medical romance", "time travel romance", "paranormal romance", etc.). Of course not all these categories involve engagement with the codes of non-romance genres, but many do.

adventure fiction”, she makes it clear that the insertion of “formulas” from other genres does not override the primacy of the love story. In fact, Mussell sees the adventures of the heroine of both Gothic romance and romantic suspense as just another “‘domestic test’ through which she proves her worthiness for the anticipated reward: the acquisition of a husband, home, and children of her own” (48).

Regis, however, does acknowledge the possibility of full hybridity, devoting a chapter of her study of the romance to a close reading of the romantic suspense novels of Mary Stewart, in which she finds a seamless blend of genres, admitting complex readings. Her comments on Stewart’s novels are worth citing at length, since they make a critical distinction between the romance tinged with features of another genre and the full hybrid, and so are equally applicable to the Scerbanenco novels that make up my study:

Many mystery novels contain a love interest or love subplot, but Stewart’s novels of romantic suspense are full-blown courtship narratives that take us from the definition of the disordered society, through the meeting, attraction, the barrier, declaration, point of ritual death, and recognition to the betrothal. To these elements of the romance novel she adds a mystery plot – not [...] simply a subplot or incidental puzzle, but a complete mystery. Stewart’s combination of romance novel and mystery elements is not mechanical, but organic. The two are seamlessly integrated. (144)

It is this very “seamless integration” that I claim for Scerbanenco’s texts. As I have demonstrated in my opening chapters, these works can equally usefully be evaluated as either adventure novels (whether crime, *noir*, spy, or Western adventure) or as romances, with neither strand decisively relegated to the role of subplot, delaying tactic, or colour. What I must now examine is the particular effect of the hybrid. After all, hybridity runs counter to the certainties a reader expects from genre literature, in which strong codes channel expectations, often at the expense of realism or common sense.

Reading the hybrid

The “generic contract” permits readers to interpret a text according to their store of knowledge regarding conventions, rather than according to the demands of realism. Dubrow suggests that this contract functions as a means of containing reader anxiety, since “generic expectations may still the turbulent emotions a reader might otherwise experience” (32).

That is, a reader familiar with the genre codes knows that the classic detective is immune from harm; equally, he or she will accept – indeed expect – the supernatural in a Gothic tale but not in a crime novel. Certain endings are anticipated, based on the reader’s prior knowledge of the genre: the crime will be solved in a classic detective novel but may not be in a hard-boiled or *noir* crime novel. Most strongly marked of all, surely, is the popular romance, where the lovers must unite in true love, whether through marriage or in death.

Fowler makes a similar observation, noting that through the “special redundancies” of literature – codings such as repetitions, formulas, stereotyping – a sense of familiarity is created for the reader (22). I would take this further and argue that an inexperienced reader, lacking this sense of familiarity, may reject or at the least be confused by genre conventions. For example, the fetishisation of Elsa’s eyes in *Elsa e l’ultimo uomo* makes sense only in the context of the romance, in which love is sparked and maintained by visual contact. In fact, Elsa’s eyes defy biological reality: they are visible from a great distance, they glow in the dark. For a reader with a literal, prosaic mind, they risk appearing simply ludicrous.¹¹¹

As I have indicated, the genre decoding process is not linear but involves continuous negotiation and reassessment. In this regard, Dubrow has some pertinent observations on the

¹¹¹ Again and again in Scerbanenco’s novels, we find this fetishisation of the lover’s eyes and/or her hair, which also may have non-realistic qualities of incandescence.

phenomenon of rereading, a phenomenon which, she explains, need not involve rereading a text from cover to cover, but also includes the way the reader may refer back and forth to passages within a single reading. Dubrow notes that while we often make simple and satisfactory decisions on genre when reading a new work, if, on return, “we then encounter ways in which it violates the norms of that genre, or contains significant motifs from other genres as well, these discoveries will be all the more startling because they conflict with our comfortable presuppositions” (107-08).

Iser makes a similar point, noting that “a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first. The reasons for this may lie in the reader’s own change of circumstances, but all the same, the text must be such as to permit this variation” (*Prospecting* 10). Fish discusses how whole interpretive communities can change perspective in accordance with new interests and goals, producing new readings. All these observations mesh with the facts of Scerbanenco’s publishing history and his novels’ genre repositionings.

Durgnat pinpoints another important factor explaining the coexistence of diverse interpretive communities with his comment that: “Some films seem black to cognoscenti, while the public of their time take the happy end in a complacent sense [...]” (38). Certainly, Pirani’s readings of Scerbanenco’s romantic Westerns, and his emphatic assessment of them as *noir*, reflect an intellectual positioning which was not the original marketing target.

Raphaëlle Moine provides a specific example of how the potential for multiple readings that is embedded within the original text (or film) is dependent upon actualisation by the audience:

rather than saying that *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945) is in certain respects a melodrama, in certain respects a *film noir*, in certain respects a woman's film, and in certain respects a mixture of all three, it is more appropriate to say that it is *viewed as being* a melodrama, a *film noir*, or a woman's film. In other words, even though the mixing of genres can be detected in filmic texts, it is also an effect of interpretation, and of the variability of interpretation. (119) (Original emphasis.)

While it would be rash to suggest that popular novels such as Scerbanenco's are likely to be reread again and again as classics certainly are – the epithets “consumer literature” and “throwaway literature” are not applied to the popular press without some foundation in truth – nevertheless, the critical insights of Dubrow, Iser, and Fish could at the very least be reassigned to the editorial/publication process. Certainly, the paratexts of some reissues of the novels have guided readers to approach them with new genre frames in mind, thus encouraging the birth of new interpretive communities.

Of course hybridity is a more complex matter than substituting a reading in one genre key with a reading in another. Hybridity provides an opportunity for a reading that is richer because it is more complex and ambiguous. The hybrid gives the reader a choice of readings, which means that assumptions are immediately challenged. To take this at the simplest level, what does one make of a romantic hero who may also be a criminal and/or a helpless victim, or a heroine who is equally a passive love object and an active investigator or facilitator? And what of the ending? Both the adventure and the romance genres require a happy ending in that a problem has been set and must be resolved, but can the demands of the romance be brought in line with the pessimism of the hard-boiled or *noir* novel? If genre, in essence, offers predictability, security, and – as Dubrow has suggested – the psychological comfort these promote, then the reader's uncertainty over the preferred genre interpretation must potentially reduce security and stimulate questioning.

Scerbanenco's hybrid texts

Although the story outlines discussed above suggest that Scerbanenco's choice of genre framework evolved during the writing process, speculation about his intentions is ultimately fruitless; thus we must return to the published texts themselves and their indisputable genre hybridity.

Scerbanenco's hybrids question genre assignment in multiple ways. While paratextual features of later editions of many of his novels have offered the reader a choice of adventure or romance, this choice is securely embedded within the texts themselves; indeed, it is highlighted by the narrator in metapoetic remarks. One particularly well-developed example of this tendency is the *mise-en-abyme* of *Il fiume verde*, when the journalist Stefano muses over how he will present the unexpected scoop handed him by Alina's appearance at his house after her escape from the clinic. His editor has threatened to reject his feature on the clinic unless he can add "something to make it more lively" ("qualche cosa che lo renda più vivace") (34). Stefano realises that he has found the very thing: "a mental asylum patient had fled and hidden herself in his house for one night" ("una degente del manicomio era fuggita e si era nascosta per una notte in casa sua") (34). He has already acknowledged that he could write an article about "that flight straight out of a crime novel" ("quella fuga da romanzo giallo") (22). But then he reflects that his editor has stressed that his article should be angled towards the magazine's predominantly female readership, and concludes that "Her story would also interest women: a journalist who spends a night together with a mad woman is a story that also has its sentimental side" ("La sua storia avrebbe interessato anche le donne: un giornalista che trascorre una notte insieme con una pazza, è una storia che ha anche i suoi lati sentimentali") (34). Indeed, if it is to be a sentimental story, perhaps he can invent some

melodramatic, even erotic, touches: “He could perhaps make a big point of the fact that she wasn’t wearing anything under her coat, he could make the story of her biting his wrist a bit more dramatic, he could invent a rather wild struggle with Alina [...]” (“Avrebbe potuto calcare un po’ la mano sul fatto che lei sotto il paltoncino non aveva nulla, avrebbe potuto rendere un poco più drammatica la storia del morso al polso, avrebbe inventato una lotta quasi selvaggia con Alina [...]”) (34). Thus Stefano demonstrates exactly how Alina’s story may be read by the codes of the crime novel or the romance – and recognises that there may well be a gender division in its reception.

While Stefano muses about writing within different genres, characters in other novels read genre-inflected texts that allow them, if only momentarily, to adopt new ways of interpreting the events unfolding around them: Signora Teggi (*Noi due*) has an interest in sensational crime stories that colours her impressions of the fugitive Mauro; Elsa (*Elsa*) self-deprecatingly links her feelings for Tomaso with her teenaged weakness for Hollywood’s romantic leading men; Michela (*La sabbia*) watches a soap opera “which made millions of women weep” (“che faceva piangere milioni di donne”) (165), revealing an interest that may be the key to the melodramatic way in which she has interpreted her own failed love affair; while tourists (*Rossa*) look at the real American West through the filter of Hollywood cliché. Such textual self-consciousness alerts the actual reader to the construction of reading positions.

In yet another self-conscious gesture, *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* creates an explicit and extended intertextual association by having the story begin with the protagonist, Martino, watching *Duel in the Sun*. This classic Hollywood Western is undeniably a hybrid, notable for its strong love story, and presents a text that has many parallels with the story that is

about to unfold in the text before us, in terms of characters, events, and themes of doomed love, prejudice, hypocrisy, and injustice. To underscore the parallel, Martino tells us he is continually mistaken for the famous Western actor Joel McCrea¹¹² and several times quips that there are so many Hollywood stars these days, perhaps everyone resembles one. I agree with Pirani's opinion that this device has the "effect of drawing one in" ("effetto coinvolgente") ("Giorgio Scerbanenco e il Ciclo del Nuovo Messico" 230): such signalling is surely too strong for a reader to ignore.

An alternative form of narratorial self-consciousness resides in the recurrent device of the protagonist who attempts to create a new persona for himself, rewriting his own story in a way that allows him the potential to shift genres. By becoming Mario, Mauro (*Noi due*) hopes to exit the crime story he is living and enter a new life as romantic hero of a love story with first Luisella, and then Letizia. The gangster Buck (*La mia ragazza*) reverts to his real name, Martino, and hopes to expunge the seedy episode he has lived between leaving home as a teenager and returning now, years later, in the resumed role of a hard-working, respectable citizen in love with a local girl. In short, these men are seen attempting to shape their own stories to permit alternative readings.

The oscillation between romance and *noir* can be seen, again, in the way the protagonists of *Rossa* offer alternative readings to their story: Rossa's explanation falls within the bounds of romance, while Roy's relates to the exigencies of the Western genre. Rossa believes that love such as hers and Roy's is always doomed, not just by racism but because it is a simple, eternal truth that the rest of the world is jealous of such love: "Everybody who doesn't know how to love hates those who do, just as an ugly woman hates a beautiful one, as a poor man

¹¹² Though a cowboy icon, McCrea does not appear in *Duel in the Sun*.

hates the rich, and a coward hates the strong man” (“Tutta la gente che non sa amare odia quelli che sanno amare, come la donna brutta odia la bella, come il povero odia il ricco e il vigliacco odia il forte”) (53). Roy, however, reads their situation in terms of the stock Western device of boss and worker in conflict, realising that in assaulting and dismissing his workman Crave, he set himself up for the blackmail that drives the lovers’ tragedy. Coupled with this is Roy’s broader sense of doom, which acknowledges a diseased, *noir* world emblematised by the horrors of the Second World War.

Alerted by Stefano’s hint (*Fiume verde*) that Alina’s story can be read in more than one way, the actual reader has a choice regarding interpretations of key passages. If read as romance, the climactic encounter between Alina and her rapist is pure melodrama, with even the stock cliché of a raging storm to heighten the confrontation between the victim-turned-avenger and the criminal-turned-victim.¹¹³ Ministering to the clearly ill Ruggero with maternal gestures, Alina domesticates the beast and neutralises his power to menace her. So Alina orchestrates the return to order and harmony required by the romance’s happy ending. The coda to the novel rounds out the expectations of the romance reader by evoking a pastoral idyll that approaches the fabular. Stefano rejoins Alina at her family home in the countryside, on “the first marvellous day of spring” (“la prima giornata meravigliosa di primavera”) (191). As he drives through green meadows in a huge, princely Cadillac, the river sparkles, and rustic chickens scatter before him. In a symbolic cleansing that seals their union, Stefano and Alina swim and frolic playfully in the River Ticino. Drawing explicitly on biblical imagery, Alina explains that when she was a child, before the riverbank was the site of her rape, the Ticino was for her an earthly paradise; afterwards, “she hated it and had a horror of it; it seemed to

¹¹³ Both Mancuso and Sensi use this meteorological device at climactic moments in, respectively, *Questo amore è mio* and *Oggi è come ieri*.

her like a liquid snake that would strangle her, like Ruggero Misuria's hand" ("l'aveva odiato e ne aveva avuto orrore, le era sembrato un serpente liquido che la strangolasse, come la mano di Ruggero Misuria") (194). She confesses that from the moment she heard Stefano calling her name from the bank, the river became her paradise again.

The lovers' pledging of troth, as Regis styles it, employs all the devices of classic romance. Both Stefano and Alina are aware that she has undergone a transformation, through love, from damaged child to ideal, erotic woman. Gazing at Alina, Stefano realises that "her shining eyes, full of feminine languor, and her beautiful lips were those of a woman, a real woman now" ("gli occhi lucidi di femmineo languore e le belle labbra erano di una donna, una vera donna, ora") (195). As they exchange their first real kiss, Alina feels she could weep with happiness.

Read as a crime novel or *noir*, the ending is less rosy, and the events leading up to it less easily swept away. It could be argued that Alina's suffering is overcome, but not negated, since she recovers her mental health in a willed act of pragmatism and in spite of the workings of social institutions of justice and health; likewise, the reader is left to consider Ruggero's divided nature and the potentiality for evil to lurk within the most refined and urbane exterior. We can in no way say that justice has been done: Ruggero's short sentence of just four years is surely cancelled out on the scales of justice by the cruel official treatment of Alina; moreover, Ruggero frankly admits that police justice has done nothing to cancel his remorse, his self-disgust, and his fear of the "beast" that lurks inside him. Grimaldi locates an essential point of difference between true *noir* and the hard-boiled crime novel ("romanzo d'azione") in the former's lack of faith in social morality. In a corrupt, indifferent world, the *noir* protagonist must forge his own justice: "Desperation, in other words, is *noir* [...]" ("La

disperazione, in altri termini, è il ‘nero’ [...]”) (“L’urlo e il furore” 70). Far from glossing over Alina’s suffering with a rosy glow, in returning to the scene of her rape the novel’s ending contains both a potent reminder of the crime committed against Alina and acknowledgment that she alone can cancel out her resultant trauma.

As noted in Chapter Three, Roccella has made a compelling case for interpreting the popular romance in terms of the fairy tale, and we certainly may see hints of the fabular in many of our novels. Aldo’s thigh wound which refuses to heal, the barrenness of the salt flats with their Casa Morta, and Aldo’s quest for redemption (*Diecimila angeli*) echo the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King. Celeste and Umberto’s farm (*Elsa*) is explicitly compared to Snow White’s forest refuge. Nevertheless, these elements of fable never constitute the only possible reading, for the real world continually intrudes, as scrutiny of *Johanna della foresta*, a text that is especially closely allied to fairy tale, bears out.

A summary of this novel’s narrative reveals many of the structural and functional elements identified in Propp’s classic study of the folktale form (25-65). The childlike Johanna is forced to escape her evil persecutor, seeking shelter with a kindly woodsman in his log cabin deep in the Swiss forest, where she is guarded by a huge, savage dog. Bewitched by Johanna’s eyes, Donato pines for her, even though he believes she is dead.

Donato has many aspects of the questing hero of the folk tale: though poor, he has an innate nobility that is recognised by the wise authority figure, Glicker, who tells him he is a “vero uomo”, a man of integrity. Like a questing knight, Donato has a “squire”, the hapless adolescent dreamer, Francino, who finds Johanna for Donato, falls under her love spell, but accepts that he must relinquish her to the better man. Faced with trials, Donato performs feats

of superhuman strength: to overcome the dog which only Johanna can tame, he must kill it with his bare hands; later, he carries Johanna for miles through the pitch-dark forest.

Both Johanna and Donato suffer ordeals, but in the end their troubles melt away, seemingly in an instant, leaving the couple free to marry. Their marriage not only signifies the union of the knight and his lady but heralds a mass marriage that offers happiness to all the main characters – an ending reminiscent of Shakespearean comedy. In a sudden reversal, Gertrude accepts Glicker's marriage offer, while Domingo returns to Spain to marry his patient fiancée. Even the murderer Szapocki's punishment is softened in the general rosy glow of the ending: in prison he will receive much-needed medical treatment, and there is a hint of a potential relationship with Donato's ex-fiancée, a stratagem that conveniently ties off another loose end in the tangle of love relationships this novel has presented.

Running counter to the romance and the fairy tale is a much bleaker story. The evil that sets the story in motion is not some cosmic force or archetype, something simply to be accepted as a given of the fairy tale, but stems from historical events that would have been very fresh in the minds of the novel's original readers. Johanna's father's sin, for which his daughter is scapegoated, is a serious war crime. Donato is not a roving knight but a man who has lost all his prospects of education, employment, and social betterment in the mass poverty and unemployment that followed the Second World War. His plan to murder Warchen, though unrealised, may be noble in terms of high romance but in terms of realist crime or *noir* indicates a man being dragged into the evil of the society that surrounds him.

If Warchen most closely approximates a storybook villain, the second criminal, Szapocki, is a nuanced character whose volatile personality becomes explicable in the light of real

historical events, as we discover when Szapocki tells Donato of his wife's brutal death during the wartime massacres in Poznan. This is a man who has lost family, homeland, possessions, and his very identity as a nobleman, a man who has become cynical and violent in the face of unimaginable loss and suffering. Furthermore, his act in murdering Warchen is morally ambiguous, given the evil of his victim. Szpocki, after all, accomplishes what the hero has not simply contemplated but meticulously scoped out.

The Swiss logging village, its citizens, and the forest itself also admit diverse readings. The village looks like a picture postcard, but the citizens are wary and keep to themselves. Though capable of acts of kindness, they harbour deep prejudices against strangers. The forest can appear a sanctuary, a temple even, but at night it is a bleak and menacing desert that becomes another of Donato's adversaries in his struggle to save Johanna.

The juxtaposition of parallel worlds is perhaps at its most obvious in *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*, where gritty urban realism (Milan) is placed in stark opposition to timeless rural idyll (Celeste and Umberto's farm), with the small bourgeois city of Mantua as a middle ground. Mazzola has argued that it was in his use of Milan as background – and indeed protagonist – in his Lamberti novels that Scerbanenco brought a new point of genius to the Italian crime novel. Mazzola locates Scerbanenco's innovation specifically in his recognition that Milan was at a crucial point of change, transforming itself into an international metropolis in which the worship of money and power was sweeping away the old values and bonds of community, church, and family (42). As I have demonstrated in Chapter Four, this unsettling change is everywhere to be seen in the alienating Milan that assaults Elsa's senses during her futile search for Tomaso.

In contrast, the life of Umberto and Celeste is described in terms that recognisably derive from the fairy tale. Forbidden by her parents to marry beneath her, Celeste waited four years without any contact with her beloved, the outwardly rough peasant Umberto, to reach an age to marry without parental permission. Seen through the eyes of Elsa and Tomaso, their farmstead home is a fairy-tale cottage in the wilderness, where time has stood still: “It seemed to [Tomaso] like a Walt Disney animation, the colours were vivid, radiant, the rows of vines behind the white cottage were tangled and affecting, like in a fairy tale, and Elsa had Snow White’s big eyes [...]” (“Gli sembrava di essere un disegno animato di Walt Disney, i colori erano netti, splendenti, i filari di viti dietro la casetta bianca erano contorti e commoventi come nelle fiabe, ed Elsa aveva i grandi occhi di Biancaneve [...]”) (105).

When Tomaso meets Elsa’s cousins, “Once again it was like being inside a Walt Disney animation, the man dressed in black was the rough woodsman and the tiny woman his fragile wife” (“Era ancora come essere dentro un disegno animato di Walt Disney, l’uomo vestito di nero era il rude boscaiolo e la piccola donna la sua fragile sposa”) (106).

A more acute reading will pick up signs of trouble in paradise. Tomaso interprets the couple’s pragmatic attitude to their farm animals as cruelty, and insists on washing their dirt-encrusted dog. The sound of distant trains, a visit from the local police chief, and disturbing glimpses of the headlights of rare traffic are reminders that the modern world is not so far away. The farm provides a respite for Elsa and Tomaso in their flight from Marcello’s gang, but it is no permanent solution. In short, the pair need to find a life for themselves situated somewhere between the fairy-tale world of rural idyll and pure romance, and the *noir* nightmare of modern Milan.

Double reading

Having demonstrated how the reader may oscillate between reading the romance and reading the crime/adventure story, I now examine the complex process of reading the hybridity: that is, reading with an appreciation that it is not a case of either one genre or the other, but a true blend that is facilitated by the genres' shared features.

Crime writer P.D. James has remarked on the points of similarity between the romance and the crime novel, in her 1998 address to the Jane Austen Society, "Emma Considered as a Detective Story". Explaining that the fundamental defining feature of the detective story is "a mystery, facts which are hidden from the reader but which he or she should be able to discover"; and that, furthermore, it involves "evaluating evidence, whether of events or of character", James then demonstrates how Austen's classic romance presents just such features, as well as manifesting the detective story's concern with "bringing order out of disorder and restoring peace and tranquility to a world temporarily disrupted by the intrusion of alien influences" (250).

Spinazzola also sees fundamental similarities between the detective novel and the romance, since "both make much of the dialectic tension between the mounting anxiety, in the course of the story, and the renewed calm at the conclusion, with the return to moral and civil order" ("entrambi valorizzano la tensione dialettica fra svolgimenti d'inquietudine, nel corso della narrazione, e rasserenamento conclusivo, con il ritorno all'ordine morale e civile") (*La modernità letteraria* 217).

Noi due e nient'altro presents a well-defined case of how a text may be double-coded. The novel initially presents as a classic *noir*: a man falsely accused of crimes he did not commit,

unable to find a means to prove his innocence, on the run, and constantly facing exposure. By running to his ex-girlfriend Luisella and then betraying her with a love rival, Letizia, the hero Mauro also provides the story with all the elements of a classic romance. Mauro's "crime" thus furnishes both the barrier to love and the central mystery. The reader must seek answers to multiple problems posed by the plot, all of which feed into both the love story and the crime story: How did the fatal accident happen? Can the German tourist's spiteful accusations be proven false and criminal charges withdrawn? Can Luisella and Mauro (or Letizia and Mauro) achieve a happy ending to their relationship by clearing Mauro's name and restoring his true identity? Such problem solving is inherent in the coding of both romance and detective novel: only after the mystery is resolved and the problems cleared away can the resolutions required by both genres be achieved.

Indeed the romance echoes, almost parodies, the structures of the crime novel. Like the detective, the lovers must interpret contradictory signs, and although each may be led astray temporarily by false signs or false readings, in the end neither must be mistaken in identifying the correct target. The lover weighs evidence to identify the correct partner in a process that mirrors the work of the detective, a parallel made explicit in a scene from *La sabbia non ricorda*. As she anxiously awaits police interrogation in relation to the beach murder, Gertrude subjects herself to a parallel self-interrogation, weighing up evidence about her relationship with Ludwig, a man with no relationship to the crime story. She struggles to interpret certain signs. Does the fact that he always yawns after they have made love signify anything? In an unconscious parody of police procedure, Gertrude realises that she will need to call on expert opinion from psychologist friends who will be able to read this sign, since it

is crucial to make no mistake “before uniting for life” (“prima di unirsi per tutta la vita”) (213).

Later, as Gertrude responds to Interpol’s interrogation, her imagination cannot repress thoughts of her erotic relationship with the murdered man – who was emphatically the wrong choice for a life-partner. If her responses are briskly factual, her memories, stimulated by a photo of his corpse, are all sensual: she recognises Giannuzzo by his hands, which immediately conjure up memories of his caresses, and by his shirt, “whose roughness she could almost feel, like when she laid her head on his chest” (“di cui le sembrò di sentire la ruvidezza come quando appoggiava il capo sul suo petto”) (218). Thus the love plot constantly reinserts itself into the most central and stereotyped motif of the detective novel, the police interview.

James’s observations on similarities between crime and romance also hold true for the adventure story. Hepburn makes the point that “the spy novel demands deciphering because it always means something other than itself” (49). Just as the spy must be adept at cracking codes and penetrating closely guarded secrets,

Characters, actions, numbers, and words in spy narratives have to be translated into other representational systems and contexts before they yield meaning. The clever interpreter – whether an agent within the text or a reader outside the text – moves adeptly among metaphorical, literal, and numerical systems to read aright. (49)

Although he is speaking primarily of ideological messages, Hepburn’s insights hold true for the process of “deciphering” Scerbanenco’s spy romances. The introductory pages of *Anime senza cielo* provide a lesson in double reading, as the reader negotiates the genre codes of thriller and romance in an action that is mirrored by the protagonist, Stiva. The novel begins

with a piece of scene setting infused with the anxieties of both a wanted man and an uncertain lover:

There was a staircase winding upwards, from floor to floor, and on each floor there were three doors, and each door sheltered someone, a person on their own, or a couple, or even a small family of three or four people. By now Stiva knew them all, but he wasn't sure of anyone, except Fabia and that poor chap Istrhal.

C'era una scala che s'attorcigliava su, di piano in piano, e a ogni piano v'erano tre porte, e ogni porta ospitava qualcuno, uno solo, o una coppia, o anche una piccola famiglia di tre, quattro persone. Ormai Stiva li conosceva tutti, ma di nessuno era sicuro, escluso di Fabia e di quel poveretto di Istrhal. (7)

The description of the lodgers continues for a page and a half, providing evidence of why Stiva might fear these people: they are refugees, possible police informers, ex-Nazis. At the same time, Stiva's personal circumstances become clearer: we learn that he is Polish and has lived in fear ever since enemy soldiers burst into his father's ministerial office in Warsaw.

In short, there seems little doubt that we are reading a political thriller or spy novel. And yet, like Stiva himself, we soon find we are reading, simultaneously, according to the codes of the romance. The charming, boyishly handsome Sidic inexplicably inspires antipathy and fear in Stiva. At first we read these signs according to the thriller: this man may be an enemy agent. By the time we arrive at the description of Fabia, however, the tone changes. The lengthy description tells us a little of her past, which suggests a spy role – she has fled her home in Capodistria, unwilling to remain among the occupying Yugoslavs – but also lingers on her physical attributes. And so this passage, which appears to be explaining Stiva's suspicions, in fact reveals an erotic fascination with the staple romance fetishes of eyes, lips, and hair:

At first that face, which was like a cold statue with grey eyes, and lips that were narrow yet strongly arched and well defined, and that ash blonde hair, had roused his suspicions. [...] But then one day she came into his room [...]. And from her smile, Stiva realised that there was no need for distrust. When she smiled, her cold statue-

like face lit up like a mirror struck by a ray of sun and her beautiful parted lips seemed to be asking for a kiss.

I primi giorni quel volto di statua fredda dagli occhi grigi, dalle labbra sottili ma ben arcuate e segnate, e quei capelli di un biondo cenere, gli avevano dato sospetto. [...] Ma poi lei era entrata un giorno nella sua stanza [...]. E dal sorriso di lei, Stiva avevo capito che poteva non diffidare. Al sorriso il volto di statua fredda si era illuminato come uno specchio colpito dal sole e le belle labbra aperte sembravano chiedere un bacio. (8)

Soon Stiva is telling us how romance has blossomed between Fabia and himself, a relationship that mixes the erotic and the domestic – as Fabia irons Stiva’s trousers, chivvies him about his appearance, and worries that his room is cold – and provides him with his first sense of peace in his ten years on the run. Yet here, too, the needs of the romance and the spy story are interwoven, as Fabia’s love causes Stiva to drop his guard. We soon discover that Sidic has also fallen in love with Fabia, thus setting up the first of the classic love triangles that this book contains, while simultaneously cementing the men’s antagonist roles as hunter and hunted.

The introductory chapters of *La sabbia non ricorda* set up an equally ambivalent reading position that demands constant renegotiation on the reader’s part. The first pages, which outline the discovery of the body, the flight of a suspect, and the initial police involvement, unambiguously set up a crime novel; and yet the text quickly introduces the love story, asking the reader to apply a new set of genre codes. When the protagonists, Michela and Alberto, meet unexpectedly after several years apart, the encounter is reported through her eyes, and so his role as detective is slow to emerge. We are first introduced to these key figures as potential lovers, and learn in detail of her sentimental history. This parallel love story appears to have little connection with the murder story that has been briefly sketched in the first two chapters, so that the reader must seek for clues to make sense of the

juxtaposition. Michela is introduced as a woman suffering a mental breakdown brought on by a failed love affair: meeting her childhood sweetheart again, she recognises the beginnings of a healing process. By reading Alberto as a healer, we identify a significant pivot on which both genres turn: Alberto is the gifted detective who can “heal” a society damaged by crime, not just the true lover who can heal Michela’s damaged psyche.

Soon after, we meet Roberto, whose arrival provides another pivot on which both stories will turn. Roberto’s good looks immediately flag him as a potential love interest; the instant antagonism between him and Alberto sends a strong signal of a potential love triangle to the experienced romance reader, while Roberto’s anxiety, which Alberto interprets as guilt, alerts the crime reader to both a potential suspect and a highly perspicacious detective.

Here I diverge from Guagnini’s assessment that this novel is “more crime story than anything else” (“più ‘giallo’ che altro”) (67). Far from being a subplot, the love story is of prime importance. All the main characters play dual roles, inserting themselves into the crime story but also presenting their own love story, rehearsing the many forms of true and false love that are staples of the romance genre. The novel skilfully weaves connections between the characters, connections that relate equally to the crime story and to the love story. In terms of the love story, the three main characters form the classic triangle: Alberto loves Michela but finds himself thwarted by Michela’s love for Roberto. In terms of the crime story, we find another classic triangle, with Alberto as investigator, Roberto as prime suspect, and Michela attempting to help Roberto prove his innocence. Even minor characters fit seamlessly into both crime world and love world: Irene Prasin doubles as a classically self-interested love rival and as a prime suspect; Maruzza displays her melodramatic propensities by falling instantly in love with her bus driver and by arranging a vendetta killing.

Alberto's dual status is highlighted by comments on his resemblance to film star Eddie Constantine, a contemporary actor famous for his role as investigator Lemmy Caution in a series of French films based on Peter Cheyney's crime novels. That is, Alberto looks like a tough investigator – but he also looks like a “much younger” (“molto più giovane”) and “nicer” (“più simpatico”) version of a movie star (111).

A subplot – Alberto's relationship with the Yugoslavian woman Tatiana – likewise feeds both strands of the genre blend. This brief insert may be read as a necessary stage in Alberto's love for Michela. In rejecting Tatiana, Alberto unambiguously acknowledges Michela as his true love, first verbally to Tatiana, then in his thoughts as he returns across the border: “seeing her again [...] had shown him [...] that if there was one woman to spend his whole life with, for him that woman was Michela” (“l’averla rivista [...] gli aveva rivelato [...] che se c’era una donna con la quale vivere tutta la vita, per lui quella donna era Michela”) (105). Read in terms of the crime story, however, Alberto's dangerous secret dealings with his cross-border contact highlight his elevated status as a special agent with an international mandate, which will be of crucial importance in solving the murder case.

If the novel presents first the crime, followed by the love story, these strands weave closer and closer together, until the novel closes with a seamless resolution to both which begs a double reading: Alberto, in the space of a few pages, reveals the identity of both the criminal (Roberto) and Michela's ideal partner (himself). In revealing Roberto to be a murderer whose professed love for Michela is motivated by cynical self-interest, Alberto effectively annuls Michela's engagement to this criminal, so overturning the final barrier to his own relationship with her. Thus the initial disorder is returned to harmony, and both society and Michela are “healed”.

Reading this text as a genre hybrid also gives additional layers to the characters. Alberto is appropriately brilliant and successful as the classic detective, but as a lover he lacks confidence and seems likely to lose Michela. In terms of the love story, Michela is a stereotypically passive heroine, a damaged woman who can only be healed by the genuine love of the right man; within the crime story, her trajectory is less hackneyed. In fact, it becomes clear that Michela's health and her interest in life are revitalised as much by her interest in resolving the crime and clearing Roberto's name as they are by her meeting with Alberto. A hint that Michela is tougher than she seems – and as well suited to operating in the crime story world as in the romance world – comes from her father, who notes that throughout her childhood, “instead of fairy tales about Red Riding Hood, we always talked about crimes in the news” (“invece delle favole di Cappuccetto Rosso, si è parlato sempre di cronaca nera”) (31).¹¹⁴ In short, by being forced to read the characters in more than one register, we see them as more faceted than the stereotypes promoted by a mono-generic reading – a point that will be explored in full in Chapter Eight.

We have seen, then, that as well as having many points of difference, the romance, mystery, and adventure genres have some elemental structural and thematic similarities that allow the same plot to serve the needs of each. We have seen, too, that by presenting two genres in parallel, the text adds extra facets to the traditionally mono-dimensional worlds of each: the reader finds, simultaneously, a world of fable and a world of gritty realism; the domestic, private sphere and the public world of action; worlds governed, respectively, by sentiment, intellect, and action. The reader who performs a double reading, bringing all the strands

¹¹⁴ Michela's qualification to make astute judgements about the current murder is emphasised a few pages later: “She had heard so many cases, of crimes and plots, from her father” (“Aveva udito tante vicende, di delitti e di intrighi, da suo padre”) (36).

together, will find a worldview that is much richer than the offerings of a single genre. This worldview, which is made explicit in Scerbanenco's Swiss exile writings, and which provides a strong key to decoding his characteristic genre hybridity, will be the subject of extended analysis in Chapter Nine. In the meantime, in the following chapter I look at some narrative techniques that underpin the hybridity, enhancing the potential for complex readings and identifications.

CHAPTER SEVEN: NARRATION, FOCALISATION, IDENTIFICATION

Genre hybridity opens the text to alternative readings and responses, offering the possibility of a more nuanced reading. This potential is reinforced by the choice of narrative voice and by the use of a continually shifting focalisation within the narrative, techniques that may cause readers to hesitate over a confident, uncritical choice of genre interpretation and that also influence the ways in which they form identifications.

As a literary concept, focalisation has been subject to slightly differing critical definitions. I rely on Mieke Bal's adaptation of the narratological terminology first proposed by Genette (*Narrative Discourse; Narrative Discourse Revisited*) to clarify the imprecise concept of perspective or point of view by breaking it down into two separate components, narration and focalisation, which respectively answer the questions: "who speaks?" and "who sees?" (Genette later acknowledged that "who perceives?" is a more accurate formulation for focalisation, and William Nelles has subsequently proposed a schema that explicitly takes account of all five senses.) Bal's revision has added the concepts of focaliser (the subject who perceives) and focalised (the object, human or otherwise, that is perceived), introducing a notion of agency absent from Genette's theory. Bal also allows for – indeed insists upon – the possibility of a narrator-focaliser, which Genette does not.

Throughout this chapter, my terminology relating to types of narrator is based on the distinctions offered by Genette, who has demonstrated the inadequacies of such designations as first person, third person and the like. For the most part, the texts under study employ a single, extradiegetic narrator, but the narrative focus typically shifts back and forth between the main protagonists, giving the reader sustained access to the thoughts, feelings, and

motivations of these characters. Moreover, the focalisations do not create simple divisions between a female romance-consciousness and a male adventure-consciousness but reveal both male and female alternating between a romantic and an adventurous mode. This lack of a single central viewpoint deprives the reader of a traditionally strong mono-generic prompt. It also works against any forceful textually programmed identification for the reader.

The narrator and narrational framing

Most of these novels employ a seemingly omniscient extradiegetic narrator, the exceptions being the two Westerns, which both have an autodiegetic narrator. The extradiegetic narrator is largely unobtrusive but at times can be perceived – for example, when it makes explicit an act of translation, as happens more than once in *La sabbia non ricorda*.

Although these texts lack the sustained narratorial irony of the Lamberti novels, there are times when ironic commentary can appear to be attributable as much to the external narrator as to the immediately focalising character. A case in point is when the narrator draws attention to its own function in an act of *mise-en-abyme*, such as when Stefano (*Fiume verde*) wonders whether he will tell Alina's story as a romance or a thriller, mirroring the narrator's – and indeed the implied author's – choices; when Martino (*La mia ragazza*) watches a film that essentially predicts his own future; and when Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*) obsessively constructs possible "endings" for Marina/Libella's "story". Traces of Scerbanenco's characteristic narratorial irony can indeed be found as early as the Jelling crime series of the 1940s, as evidenced by the recently discovered sixth Jelling mystery, *Lo scandalo dell'osservatorio astronomico*, in which the most hackneyed form of the romance is lampooned in thoughts the narrator attributes to a minor character, Emma Frond: "Indeed,

with her active imagination, she was thinking about the possibility of writing a love story, but an original one, for instance about two people who are convinced they hate each other, who are nasty to each other and argue all the time, but in the end discover they love each other....” (“Stava appunto, con la sua veloce fantasia, pensando alla possibilità di scrivere un romanzo d’amore, ma originale, per esempio di due che sono convinti di odiarsi, che si fanno dispetti e bisticciano ogni momento, e poi all’ultimo invece scoprono d’amarsi...”)(38).

Such devices, which insert self-conscious reflections on the role of the narrator in shaping genre, may be used lightly and sporadically in the examples above. Scerbanenco reveals his sophisticated understanding of their full power, however, with a complex and sustained use of narrational frames in *Appuntamento a Trieste*: framing here is fundamental to the structure of the narrative discourse and thus a potent influence on the reader’s interpretation of what is told. This is a text populated by storytellers and audiences, who themselves demonstrate how stories may be encoded and decoded in various keys.

Narrational levels in *Appuntamento a Trieste*

Appuntamento a Trieste employs an unusual – for Scerbanenco, at least – framing device that complicates the way in which the story may be interpreted. The main narrative is ostensibly told to an unnamed narrator by Rolazza, an Italian-American former soldier who played a small part in the tale of Kirk and Diana, which he recounts. In fact Rolazza could not possibly know all the details but has just been given more information by a young woman who is at the end revealed to be Diana herself.

The nest of narrators may be summarised thus, moving from the outermost to the innermost level:

1. An anonymous narrator (whom I shall name X) who tells his own story of doomed love as well as reporting the story of Kirk and Diana, which intrigues him because it has some parallels with his own experience. This narrator occupies an ambiguous position relative to the story of Kirk and Diana: although as their story's narrator he is heterodiegetic, he is not entirely extradiegetic, since he briefly encounters Diana just before her story is told to him and is drawn to her by her uncanny resemblance to his dead fiancée. He is autodiegetic in relation to his own love story, which, although he tells it very briefly, occupies a position of importance, since it opens and closes the text and is highlighted by italicisation.
2. Rolazza, an Italian-American who knew Diana and Kirk and played some part in their story, which he recounts to X. His increasing drunkenness affects the telling in ways which the reader may or may not take as a clue that he is less than strictly factual: "He spoke more warmly, only he interrupted himself a lot [...]" ("Aveva più calore nel parlare, solo s'interrompeva spesso [...]" (206).
3. A Triestine woman, revealed to be Diana, who has filled in the final facts of her story for Rolazza, allowing him to expand on what he knows from his limited personal involvement. X is present during their conversation but apparently not listening to it.

We may assume, then, that the narrative as presented to the reader is filtered through the consciousness of X, who has admitted to a particular interest in a mystical side to love, and who thus possibly colours the story in the form the reader is given.

By being italicised, the introductory and terminal chapters are unequivocally marked as being at a different narrational level: they form a frame that allows the text to comment upon itself. As well as giving X the chance to tell his own story, both these chapters foreground Rolazza

as narrator of Diana's story, speaking directly to X. In the final chapter we discover that this tale has taken several hours to recount, during which time Rolazza has consumed a good deal of alcohol. X now prompts Rolazza to add a coda to his tale, which has ended with Kirk's enemies firing at him as he crosses the piazza to meet Diana. Rolazza assures X that he knows from what Diana has told him earlier in the day that Kirk survived and that he and Diana are sailing for America in a few days. He further assures X that the torture victim, Bella, has recovered and will marry Riccardo, but that Bet still suffers from her unrequited love for Kirk.

This final frame, then, takes what has ended in classic spy story fashion – with a double bluff, a trap, a shoot-out, and presumed assassination – and repositions it as a love story with the classic happy ending in marriage, harmony, and security for the deserving, while the hero's value is underscored by the suffering of the heroine's love rival. And X, who stands at the outermost ring of this nest of narrators, now adds another layer that reinforces the mood of romance and highlights the tone of mysticism that entered the story of Kirk and Diana when Diana suddenly had an overwhelming intuition, so powerful it is termed a vision, that Kirk was alive, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.¹¹⁵

X has himself endured a tragic love story, which is perhaps why he "reads" the story told to him by Rolazza through a romantic filter. Rolazza, as a soldier and professional colleague who witnessed at first hand Kirk's life as a spy, may be presumed to have a primary interest in the story as a tale of espionage, adventure, and a narrow escape from death at the hands of enemies. Certainly at the outset he intimates (wrongly) that it will have an unhappy

¹¹⁵ Diana's intuition is triggered by a song, "Blues di Sal", and its refrain, "I wish I was a rock at the bottom of the sea" ("vorrei essere una roccia nel fondo del mare"). The crucial significance of this episode is surely signalled by the fact that one of the titles Scerbanenco suggested pre-publication, as evidenced by a typescript in the Scerbanenco Archive, was "La roccia in fondo al mare".

outcome, by telling X it is “a dreadful story” (“una terribile storia”) (8); he then makes clear that it is a spy story by stressing that it contains classified information not suitable for all ears: “You don’t seem like a spy and you don’t live in Trieste, maybe I can tell you that girl’s story” (“Tu non hai l’aria di una spia e non vivi a Trieste, forse posso raccontarti la storia di quella ragazza”) (8). It is possible that he has drunkenly embellished the intrigue and adventure and, while he drags out the final shoot-out, in the end he has to admit to something of an anticlimax in terms of the thriller.

X, on the other hand, seems especially susceptible to a tale of doomed love, since he tells us that he once returned to Trieste, after a brief trip away, to be greeted with news of his Triestine lover’s death – just as Diana, at the start of Rolazza’s tale, returns from a brief visit to her uncle to be told that Kirk is dead. As he begins to recount what Rolazza has told him, in the final words of his introductory framing narrative X harks back to his identification of Diana’s story with his own: “In fact it’s the story of Diana that I must recount, the girl in the stationery shop, the living image of the woman I came looking for so many years ago and found dead” (“È infatti la storia di Diana che devo raccontare, la ragazza della cartoleria, l’immagine viva della donna che tanti anni prima ero venuto a cercare a Trieste, e avevo trovata morta”) (8).

The very title of the novel is ambiguous. It may relate to the climax of the narrative, Diana’s appointment to meet Kirk in the piazza in Trieste, an appointment that has been staged to smoke out spies and counterspies; it may, on the other hand, echo the first sentences of X’s opening frame story: “The first time I arrived in Trieste there was a blackout and war. I had an appointment with a woman at the Corso Hotel” (“La prima volta che arrivai a Trieste vi era l’oscuramento e la guerra. Avevo appuntamento con una donna all’albergo Corso”) (5).

In the terminal frame, X returns to his obsession with once more seeing his dead fiancée and once again stresses that he, too, has an appointment in this city: “I have an appointment in Trieste. I do not know when she will arrive, nor where I shall meet her, but I am waiting for her” (“Ho un appuntamento a Trieste. Non so quando lei arriverà, e dove la incontrerò ancora, ma l’aspetto”) (213).

Since we have no knowledge of exactly what Diana told Rolazza, apart from the fact that the exchange is brief, nor any direct reportage from Rolazza apart from a few sentences of dialogue within the framing stories, we cannot know how X has coloured the final text. What we do have is a tension, as the story is pulled back and forth from spy adventure to semi-mystical love story.

The autodiegetic narrator: *Rossa* and *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*

These two romantic Westerns, unusually among Scerbanenco’s novels, both employ a first-person – that is, autodiegetic – narrator who tells his story with the advantage of hindsight and acquired wisdom. This position of hindsight, constantly highlighted by variations on the refrain “If only I had known”, not only foreshadows a tragic outcome but intensifies the sense of genre hybridity. That is, the narrator is well aware, in hindsight, of the intertwining of his classic Western story of a struggle to build a life on the frontier and his personal love story.

The narrator of a Western might be expected to tell a tale of adventure in which he battles adversaries to win a place for himself in the frontier landscape. Both Roy and Martino start out writing this story but are quickly diverted, as suppressed romantic longings are reawakened. Roy (*Rossa*), who repeatedly tells himself that he will never risk loving again

and forces himself to view his brief initial meeting with Rossa as a commercial sexual encounter, relates how he sets up his sawmilling business, only to be threatened by the brutality and ill will of his employees. Martino (*La mia ragazza*) relates his story as a criminal on the run, intent on forging a new life of honest hard labour. Both are diverted from their role of hero in their own classic Western by falling inescapably in love. Thus their narration becomes a mix of the matter-of-fact, tough, laconic style expected of the Western genre and the effusion of emotion and sentiment appropriate to the romance.

Although the autodiegetic narrator projects his own sensibility and, by definition, cannot be omniscient, he is still able to convey an unfolding sense of the inner life of his lover, as the woman who is at first an enigma and a projection of his own needs and fantasies becomes more transparent to him. On one level, these women may be read as stereotypes: exotic, sensual, bewitching Others, with a quasi-mystical closeness to nature in spite of their veneer of “civilisation”. This is the schema within which the narrator at least initially places his lover. Having first mistaken her for a prostitute, Roy later learns, explicitly from Rossa’s own account of her life and implicitly from her behaviour, new facets of her persona as a woman stranded between two cultures. Although Rossa is taciturn, and Roy’s understanding comes gradually, key incidents channel these new layers of understanding to the reader.

One such intimation of Rossa’s mix of strength and vulnerability is conveyed by an episode when Roy rediscovers Rossa in the town of Laguna (40-42). A crowd has gathered to witness two enormous dogs worrying a cat trapped in a large glass bottle. Roy first becomes aware that Rossa is in the crowd when she steps forward to restrain the dogs. This incident gives a powerful sense of Rossa’s complex situation, both as a victim herself, trapped in her society

like the cat in the bottle, and as a fearless defender of the victimised.¹¹⁶ Although the reader sees through Roy's eyes and experiences his emotions, and Rossa remains virtually mute, this powerful scene encapsulates the aura of entrapment, injustice, and cruelty that pervades the novel and marks Rossa's life even more than Roy's.

When he tracks down his childhood love, Zuñita, Martino (*La mia ragazza*) discovers a gangster's moll who refuses to renew their relationship. All the ambiguity of Zuñita, both as a character and as a key to genre interpretation, is conveyed in a scene where she and Martino meet in the midst of a sandstorm that whips her hair into wild snake-like shapes, conjuring up in Martino's mind the image of the Medusa (93-94). Since this image, vividly channelled through Martino's consciousness, is a key to deciphering Zuñita, Martino spells out its significance twice in his narration: first he muses to himself, and later he tells Zuñita, how he once wrote an article recounting the legend of Medusa, a figure from classical Greek mythology who is commonly thought of as a monstrous prototype of the femme fatale. Seeking to explain the reasons why her hair was turned to snakes, Martino's account emphasised Medusa's role as a victim of rape, punished by a jealous goddess. By telling the lesser-known backstory of Medusa he implicitly signals the analogous complexity of Zuñita's story, a woman who can be "read" simply, in terms of crime, as a femme fatale or in a more nuanced way, as a woman transformed into this persona by tragic circumstances outside her control.

Telling this anecdote, Martino adds a further significant detail: the editors rejected his article because "at that time they needed interviews with Al Capone, not mythology and goddesses" ("avevano bisogno di interviste con Al Capone, a quel tempo, non di mitologia e di dee")

¹¹⁶ In hindsight, the reader may also associate Roy with the trapped creature saved by Rossa.

(94). Here, Martino's ironic comment on the public thirst for true crime comments, too, on the public taste for simple sensation, signalling that there is a possible simplistic reading of both his and Zuñita's story that his narration is consciously acting to avoid.

Although the text at such times does not go so far as to create what Genette terms *paralepsis* – that is, an excess of information beyond the natural knowledge of the autodiegetic narrator – nevertheless, by foregrounding incidents such as these which have little consequence for the progress of the story, the narrator opens up opportunities for the reader to achieve some insight into the sensibility of the female. This crucial access to a consciousness beyond that of the narrator is achieved more completely in other novels by means of a shifting narrative focalisation.

Focalisation

In Scerbanenco's extradiegetically narrated novels, narrative focalisation typically shifts back and forth between the main protagonists, rendering the thoughts and feelings of the two central characters accessible to the reader, while only occasionally taking up a secondary character for sustained focalisation. This process of focalisation not only governs the reader's access to information, it also influences the mood of the story and, crucially, provides a means by which a reader may identify with one or many of the protagonists. Ultimately, it can influence the reception of the discourses embedded in the text: as Bal has noted, where the focaliser is a character, that character has an advantage over the others, since "The reader watches with the character's eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character" (149-50). Bortolussi and Dixon suggest that the reader is likely to form an association between the most strongly focalised character and the narrator,

assuming that they share the same attitudes and qualities, so that even where the narration is extradiegetic, the narrator can achieve “a presence of sorts” in the narrative world (*Psychonarratology* 82). A case in point is *Johanna della foresta*, where certain observations may be assigned to either the focalising protagonist, Donato, or the narrator, but create a strong sense of identity in attitude between the two narrative positions.¹¹⁷

In the case of Scerbanenco’s hybrid romances, the narration and, more importantly, the focalisation bolster the uncertainty over assignment of genre. Although typically the centre-stage is shared by the hero and heroine, there is a definite tendency to foreground the male viewpoint, and in a few cases, such as the Westerns, the male carries the novel. Others such as *Johanna della foresta* also rely heavily on the male viewpoint: here the crime plot requires the heroine to be absent for much of the novel, and the female sensibility is mostly conveyed through Gertrude, the love rival, a secondary character whose presence in fact overwhelms that of the heroine, Johanna. And yet in every novel, no matter how dominant the male may be, there is periodic access to the sensibility of the female protagonist. Moreover, this sharing of the focal point operates in unexpected ways: the male expresses his romantic longings as openly and fluently as does the female, while the female is just as often seen exhibiting courage and resourcefulness in the face of extreme danger.

Commentators on the romance concur that the classic model is “narrated from the third person point of view of the heroine” (Mussell 37); Pozzato argues that a lack of intensive focalisation through the heroine, and the presence of multiple viewpoints, are sure signs that the novel in question is not an authentic romance but “an intermediate or borderline genre”

¹¹⁷ For example, remarks about Swiss terminology and pronunciation appear shared by the focaliser (Donato) and the extradiegetic narrator (73, 153), so that later discussions on Swiss language usages – which can only come from the narrator, since Donato is not present in these scenes (234, 247) – seem naturally consistent with Donato’s thoughts, as if he were an unseen observer.

(“un genere intermedio, o *borderline*”) (*Il romanzo rosa* 26). That is, these are signs of hybridity. *Appuntamento a Trieste*’s alternating focalisations pull the story between romance and spy adventure in just this fashion: for the most part the novel consists of alternating scenes focused through Kirk and Diana, respectively, since the two must be kept apart until near the end of the story. By maintaining a strong character-bound focus on the main protagonists, presenting not just perceptible objects, such as their actions, but the imperceptibles of their most private thoughts and feelings, the narrative ensures that the reader is given sustained access to the appropriate emotions of both the romance – love, longing, loss, despair, and hope – and the spy adventure – fear, uncertainty, courage, and dutiful commitment – as experienced by both.

Shifting focus: *Elsa e l’ultimo uomo*

Elsa e l’ultimo uomo provides a clear example of Scerbanenco’s use of genre ambiguity bolstered by shifting focalisation. The paratext suggests a romance: the title of this novel foregrounds the female, Elsa, and in mentioning an unnamed man whom the reader may assume to be either her ultimate life-partner, or – as is in fact the case – her most unsuitable partner, reinforces the impression created by the jacket artwork of the first edition, that this is an account of her romantic history. Yet, while the narration is extradiegetic, the opening chapters are strongly focalised through Tomaso, the criminal. Bal has pointed out that, although it is common for character-bound focalisation to move from one character to another throughout the narrative, nevertheless, “there usually is not a doubt in our minds which character should receive most attention and sympathy. On the grounds of distribution, for instance the fact that a character focalizes the first and/or the last chapter, we label it the hero(ine) of the book” (152).

Elsa e l'ultimo uomo manifests a shifting focus that alternates between the two major characters, Tomaso and Elsa. The novel opens with two short chapters that recount, firstly, Tomaso's approach to Elsa and, secondly, Elsa's response to this first encounter. Both chapters contain many sensory impressions as well as the characters' thoughts, giving the reader the impression of access to the inner life of both.

Chapter One begins in the midst of Tomaso's train journey to Mantua, where he has been sent by his gang to trick Elsa into giving him vital information that will facilitate a robbery. The reader experiences Tomaso's sensations: drowsiness on the train, oppression by heat and jostling crowds in Mantua. When Tomaso takes refuge in a bar, the reader's first assessment of both the hero's appearance and his character is mediated by Tomaso himself, as he self-consciously assesses the impression he has made on the barmaid.

Elsa, too, is at this point filtered to the reader through Tomaso's view, which conveys a multilayered impression built up as new pieces of information come to his attention: first, as he gazes at her photograph, in which he judges her appearance to be "aristocratic"; next, when he observes her from a distance and realises that her appearance is much softer than the photograph suggests and in fact puts him in mind of his sister; and finally, when he stages an encounter with her and is struck by the full force of her eyes, which are registered through Tomaso's consciousness both objectively and factually (they are light brown) and with a strongly subjective impression (they are alive with intelligence and sweetness).

Chapter Two, wherein Elsa provides a strong character-bound focalisation, likewise presents a wealth of emotions and sense impressions. Like Tomaso, Elsa is able to regard her own behaviour through ironic eyes: where he acknowledged his duplicity in projecting a false

front, Elsa acknowledges the ridiculousness of her susceptibility to a handsome stranger by relating her feelings to those conjured up in the past by romantic Hollywood movies: “It was like when as a sixteen-year-old she came out of the cinema after watching a Gary Cooper film and [...] for half an hour she walked through the streets without even looking where she was going, replaying in her head all the scenes he was in [...]” (“Era come quando a sedici anni usciva dal cinema dopo aver visto Gary Cooper e [...] per una mezz’ora camminava per le strade senza neppure vedere dove andava, ripensando a tutte le scene del film dove c’era lui [...]”) (18).

To sum up, we have first been plunged into what appears to be a crime novel: Tomaso, ill at ease, duplicitous, yet well aware that he can charm his way to success, appears to be up to no good. Elsa’s sensibility, on the other hand, draws the reader back into the territory of the romance.

Shifting focus: *La sabbia non ricorda*

A close reading of *La sabbia non ricorda* reveals the same complex and shifting focalisation. Once again the effect is twofold: the reader moves from character to character but also – crucially – moves back and forth from the romantic to the crime genre.

In classic crime story tradition, this novel opens with the scene of the crime, offering a view of the murder victim and a possible suspect or key witness. Although the narration is extradiegetic, the reader at this point sees everything as if through the eyes of a single character, Gertrude, a figure who will not appear again until near the end of the novel. While this character-bound focalisation allows the reader to access many of Gertrude’s thoughts, physical sensations, and emotions, there is a sense that she is withholding information;

indeed, an experienced reader of detective novels will understand that the genre requires her to conceal facts that the investigator (and reader) can piece together as the detective work proceeds.

Nevertheless, in this first chapter Gertrude appears to function as a camera, visually recording the scene, a function that is emphasised by the novel's opening words: "The girl crouched near the man spread out on the sand, with her face almost right down, so as to see him better" ("La ragazza si accucciò vicino all'uomo steso sulla sabbia, a viso quasi in giù, per vederlo meglio") (5). Her other senses appear hyperalert as she registers the change in the sound of the waves that have beaten on the shore all night but are now almost silent. If we take this latter impression to emanate from Gertrude rather than from the narrator, it is an important clue that she has spent the night on the beach.

As Gertrude registers the victim's appearance, his position, and his wounds, it rapidly becomes obvious that her description is not detached. Noting his curly hair, "She remembered the oily sensation she felt the first time she caressed it" ("Ricordava la sensazione di unto provata la prima volta che glieli aveva carezzati") (5) – a thought that immediately reveals to the reader some intimate relationship between this woman and the victim. Gertrude thus transmits to the reader a tantalising mix of clues while withholding crucial information. She knows that the knife lying beside the dead man belongs to him, as he has used it to threaten and wound her. She gives us his name and clear proof that he is violent, at least towards women. What is revealed of Gertrude herself is less clear-cut, coming partly from her thoughts, partly from the extradiegetic narrator. The latter makes it clear that she is German, by repeatedly attaching to Gertrude's thoughts the comment "she thought, in German" ("pensò in tedesco"), and that she is tall, strong, and athletic – and thus

capable of overpowering a male victim? Gertrude's own thoughts and actions reveal her ambivalence towards the victim and her panicked awareness that she will be a prime suspect. Why she is on the beach before dawn is not revealed. While she seems to be asserting her innocence, her flight indicates otherwise.

The cinematic quality of the opening paragraphs persists as Gertrude hurls the presumed murder weapon into the sea, hastily collects her belongings from the nearby campground, and boards the bus into town. At the point when she boards the bus, the focus does a 180 degree turn, as it were, moving from Gertrude stepping aboard to two local policemen dismounting to make their routine morning beach patrol. From here, we are given their impressions as they move through the campground, survey the long beach, and spot the murder victim.

So far there should be no doubt in readers' minds that they are reading a crime novel. And yet, after two short chapters establishing the essentials of a crime and an investigation, the reader's attention is redirected to the story of a seemingly unrelated character, Michela, and the disastrous love affair that has caused her to suffer a breakdown. Once again there is a character-bound focalisation, revealing a disturbed consciousness in a hyperalert state. As Michela exits the house in an attempt to conquer her agoraphobia, her mind floods with anguish and a sense of futility, and her heart beats wildly; she is forced to take more of the pills that dull her senses until she feels like "a chicken" ("una gallina") (13). Michela's glance across the road is thus filtered through extreme anxiety: seeing a young man in a black jumper, she immediately feels the need to run home but, as she is turning her back on him, the man – Alberto – calls out to her, and the sentimental history between the two is quickly revealed.

As Michela's medication takes effect, she falls into a torpor in which she recalls the disastrous love affair that has reduced her to this state of mental collapse. In an analepsis lasting several pages, we are presented with a self-contained inserted story – telling of Michela's affair with the married Aligi, his betrayals, and his wife's fury – that would not be out of place in the most clichéd *romanzo rosa* or, indeed, *fotoromanzo*.¹¹⁸ The fact that Michela is here focalising her own story through a consciousness that is distorted by both mental fragility and powerful medication surely explains the histrionic presentation that allows this episode to be read as a stock-in-trade of the most commercial type of romance fiction. Thus in the four opening chapters the narrative makes a decisive change of focus and, through analepsis, introduces glimpses of stories within stories – Gertrude's relationship with Giannuzzo, Michela's with Aligi, and Michela's with Alberto – putting in question the genre in which it is situated and should be read.

Although Scerbanenco habitually alternates scenes that draw their focus from different characters, at other times the focalisation moves back and forth within the same scene; and as the focaliser conveys particular interpretations, so the genre implications shift rapidly back and forth. For a demonstration of this effect, we can turn to an extended sequence in *La sabbia non ricorda* where close analysis reveals a virtuoso display of Scerbanenco's sophisticated use of focalisation.

Chapter Eleven introduces a new character, Maruzza, sister of the murder victim; her entry brings a complex new focalisation to the narrative, supplying extended proof of Bal's observation that "the image we receive of the object is determined by the focalizer" (153). As

¹¹⁸ A form of popular literature akin to comics, but illustrated with photographs rather than drawings, *fotoromanzi* typically contain a melodramatic love story. *Fotoromanzi* have been enormously popular in Italy since the 1940s, but have traditionally been regarded as one of the lowest forms of literature. (See Alberto Abruzzese; Maria Teresa Anelli et al.)

alternately the focaliser and the focalised of a lengthy sequence that has the tight concentration of a cinematic single-shot take, Maruzza both sees and is seen, thus appearing simultaneously as disempowered sex object and strong avenger.

Initially the gaze is that of the stationmaster, as Maruzza descends from the Latisana train in the sweltering heat. His minute – and disapproving – appraisal of her clothing, his incomprehension of her Sicilian dialect, and his bureaucratic refusal to help her before he signals the departure of this unimportant train, underline Maruzza's subordinate status as a sexually objectified woman and a southerner. As his gaze continues to sweep over her body and her shabby possessions, he hovers between contempt and appreciation, but in the end mentally reiterates his judgement that “she was extremely beautiful” (“era bellissima”) (57). The fact that this appraisal gives Maruzza some value is conveyed by his decision to address her more politely.

As the discussion continues, the stationmaster registers, and so conveys to the reader, Maruzza's mix of aggressiveness and seductiveness – “Her gestures were violent, but sinuous, seductive” (“Aveva gesti violenti, ma sinuosi, procaci”) (57) – and her otherness as a Sicilian who “must have been used to the heat” (“doveva essere abituata al caldo”) (57). Having zeroed his gaze upon her face, the stationmaster now considers her “smiling, mischievous eyes” (“occhi ridenti e maliziosi”) (57), which send him into a brief reverie of a youthful sexual encounter with a girl like her.

This focalisation, internal to the stationmaster, clearly marks Maruzza as both a sex object and a person of low status, yet hints at a power that is so far seen only in the violence of her gestures and the loudness of her voice – markers which, for the stationmaster, denote her

social inferiority and match the inappropriateness of her dress, but which the reader is free to interpret otherwise.

Indeed it is the stationmaster's insistence on reading Maruzza in the register of romance that provokes a show of her force. Replicating the most stereotypical romantic behaviour, the stationmaster finds himself bewitched by Maruzza's eyes, which "seemed to look only at him, and him alone" ("sembravano guardare solo per lui e lui solo") (58); the power of these "large, moist, womanly eyes" ("occhi così grandi e umidi di donna") (58) is such that he abandons all officiousness and addresses her in a new manner which she finds offensively condescending. A new side of Maruzza is now revealed as the stationmaster sees Maruzza harden her expression and rapidly walk away.

At this point, the focalisation seems to hover between Maruzza and the stationmaster, as she reveals that she is not above using her powers of seduction to achieve her ends, while at the same time retaining her pride. Although she is angry with the stationmaster for assuming that she cannot understand standard Italian, and storms off, she is careful to walk in an alluring way so he will see what he has lost in making an enemy of her. Her power is confirmed as the stationmaster hastens to guide her to the bus stop.

Once Maruzza mentions that she is looking for her brother, and he makes the connection with the murder, the stationmaster's consciousness again provides the narrative focus – and signals an important switch from romance to crime mode. Maruzza is no longer a potential love interest but a clue: "But now he no longer noticed that the girl was beautiful. A name was turning over in his mind [...] causing a curiosity that was greater than any other instinct to explode in him [...]" ("Ma adesso non vedeva più che la ragazza era bella. Un nome gli

girava nella mente [...] e aveva fatto esplodere una curiosità più forte di ogni altro istinto [...]) (58).

At this point, Maruzza's consciousness reappears: dismissing the stationmaster, she muses on her methods for achieving help, revealing herself as a pragmatist who knows how to exploit her sexual appeal, but who has no intention of becoming subject to men's power.

Focalisation remains with Maruzza as she boards the bus and appraises the young driver; however, the role of focaliser quickly passes to the driver, Giovanni, in a transition accomplished by a double consciousness in which the narrative offers Maruzza's interpretation of the driver's gaze: "smoking, he had been following her with his eyes since she came on board, and through the wisps of blue smoke you could tell what he was thinking" ("la stava seguendo con gli occhi da quando era salita, fumando, e attraverso le volute di fumo azzurro si capiva che cosa stesse pensando") (59).

Like the stationmaster, Giovanni conceptualises Maruzza through sexist stereotypes, as he too falls into a reverie about casual sex during his military service. He interprets her mannerisms as indicating sexual availability – "she certainly couldn't have been born yesterday, if she moved her eyes like that" ("proprio nata ieri non doveva essere, se muoveva gli occhi in quel modo") (60) – with the result that again the reader is offered not Maruzza's actions but their effects upon an individual. Yet as soon as he realises that Maruzza is unaware that her brother is dead, Giovanni's reaction, almost identical to the stationmaster's, signals a shift in the mode: "He no longer thought about her as a beautiful girl, or about the days when he did his military service" ("Non pensava più che era una bella ragazza e ai giorni di quando faceva il militare") (63). From this point, his feelings towards Maruzza are tender and solicitous; having introduced a brief jarring note from the crime story, the

narrative returns once again to the romance key, as the male realises the value of the female as an individual and makes a transition from predator to protector.

After an interlude in which yet another male, this time the campground proprietor, gazes upon Maruzza, noting her splendid legs and making coarse jokes when a twig drops inside the low-cut neckline of her dress, the function of primary focaliser returns to Giovanni. The young bus driver watches, not comprehending their dialect but clearly reading their body language, as Giuliano, her brother's Sicilian friend, tells Maruzza of her brother's murder. Giovanni is astonished that Maruzza does not react in the way he has predicted by collapsing with grief and requiring his male protection. Instead, Maruzza manifests fury and strong resolve as her thoughts turn to vengeance. Once again, Giovanni reads Maruzza's face for the reader: "There were no tears on her face, and in her eyes there was only fury [...]" ("Il volto non aveva lacrime, e negli occhi vi era solo furore [...]" (71).

While the extradiegetic narrator presents the dialectal interchange between the two Sicilians in standard Italian, there are constant reminders of Giovanni's impressions of what for him is a strange and disturbing scene. He experiences both fear and pity as Maruzza's furious shouting turns to icy calm and she asserts her will over Giuliano, insisting that she will go to the police even as he repeatedly and decisively forbids her to do so. At this point, Giovanni, as the focaliser and "reader" of this scene, has delivered the reader from the romance genre into the crime genre: just as Giovanni discovers that his first assumptions about Maruzza were partial and biased, so the reader realises that Maruzza has equally important roles in the love story and the crime story. Giovanni overtly and decisively marks this shift by rewriting his own role in the story from lover/protector to crime solver, and Maruzza's role from love interest to sister of the victim, by constructing a new fantasy that "Maybe the papers would

have talked about him. He had taken the victim's sister to the police, and soon afterwards the police had arrested the killer" ("i giornali avrebbero parlato di lui, forse. Aveva accompagnato la sorella dell'ucciso in polizia, e poco dopo la polizia aveva arrestato l'assassino") (74).

Shifting focus: *Noi due e nient'altro*

Such scenes, in which a strongly character-based, internal focalisation has the effect of prompting specific genre interpretations, are equally present in other novels. In an early episode in *Noi due e nient'altro*, Signora Teggi, the widowed mother of Mauro's ex-girlfriend Luisella, provides just such a turn in the genre orientation. On the evening when the fugitive Mauro first arrives at her isolated house, Signora Teggi has a prior visitor, her daughter's current boyfriend, Andreino. In a brief sequence when Andreino arrives and is advised that Luisella will be home late, focalisation through Signora Teggi unambiguously marks the scene as romance. She self-consciously checks her appearance, since she knows that men appraise their future mothers-in-law for clues as to how their wives will age. In this self-focus she momentarily places herself as the heroine of her own romance, still able to attract suitors such as her neighbour, a tiresome accountant.

This briefly sketched romantic vignette dissolves as Andreino steps out of his car and Signora Teggi's subjective gaze "reads" him in a conventionally romantic mode, emphatically bestowing her approval in a manner that will surely influence the actual reader to see him as a strong contender for Luisella's love: "She liked slender and distinguished young men like Andreino. He was also tall, and dressed well. [...] Andreino had the most beautiful blue eyes, the eyes of a good man" ("Le piacevano i giovanotti magri e distinti

come Andreino. Era anche alto, e vestiva bene. [...] Andreino aveva dei bellissimi occhi celesti, da buono”) (23).

The pivot in the genre focus comes shortly after, as Signora Teggi is passing a rather dull evening. She considers what the evening television has to offer, turns on the radio, and finally leafs idly through an old magazine, where her attention is arrested by an advertisement for an American novel in which “the story was: *daring, without false modesty, a society laid bare in all its corruption*. She reflected that stories of corruption were always interesting” (“la storia era: *ardita e senza falsi pudori, un ambiente sociale messo a nudo in tutta la sua corruzione*. Le storie di corruzione erano sempre interessanti, pensò”) (25).

(Original emphasis.) Thus it is with a mind tuned to *noir*-shaded crime that Signora Teggi greets Mauro – and her subtle mental transition from romance to crime is marked in her perceptions of her new visitor. Recognising his voice calling Luisella’s name in the dark, Signora Teggi apprehensively investigates, and her initial impressions channel to the reader a first vision that is at once frightening and stereotyped: advancing towards the porch, Mauro appears to her to be taller and more massive than ever. As he comes into better view, however, she is surprised that he does not meet her new genre-inflected expectations: “She had the idea that men who were hiding out would have tattered clothes and a long beard, and she was rather surprised to see that he was tidy enough [...]” (“Aveva l’idea che quelli che si nascondono dovevano essere stracciati, con la barba lunga, e fu un poco sorpresa di vedere che era abbastanza a posto [...]”) (26). Perhaps to compensate for this ill-according impression, Signora Teggi now channels another *noir* image, noticing that he is foaming at the mouth.

Signora Teggi indeed persists in assigning Mauro to the genre of sensational crime promised by the American novel. Now the reader becomes privy to her emotional reaction as well as to the thoughts she expresses in a breathless rush. These are reactions that underline her acquaintance with the most banal crime-fiction stereotypes: “She had a moment of fear, because she thought he could strangle her, someone who escapes after doing what he had done no longer has anything to lose” (“Ebbe un momento di paura, perché pensò che egli poteva strangolarla, uno che scappa dopo aver fatto quello che aveva fatto lui, non ha più niente da perdere”) (27). Running from the house, Signora Teggi manifests the physical signs of terror: “her heart was pounding, and it wasn’t just from running, but out of fear” (“il cuore le batteva forte, e non era soltanto per la corsa, ma anche per la paura”) (27). Yet here Signora Teggi channels a new turn in the genre, as she admits that she is not so much afraid of Mauro as afraid of the powerful emotions of love and despair her daughter has manifested since reading Mauro’s story in the newspapers. This new turn is signalled by both a physical and a mental change of pace: Signora Teggi slows down and her agitated thoughts become calmer and more rational. Thus, in short order, she has channelled for the reader all the affects of romance and *noir*.

Shifting focus: *I diecimila angeli*

I diecimila angeli threads together two main stories, the story of Aldo and that of Marina/Libella, but, unlike many of the other novels under study, has no steady alternation of perspective: this is essentially Aldo’s story, focalised through him, interrupted by a long embedded analepsis focalised through Marina/Libella. This digression into Marina/Libella’s world has a strong bearing on the crime story and, crucially, on the *noir* atmosphere of entrapment, hopelessness, and despair. While Aldo can finally reassure himself that

Marina/Libella suffered little physical damage from her abandonment on the beach, he is also forced to face the psychological destruction his cruelty has effected on her.

The change in perspective is encapsulated in an exchange of glances. Aldo has tracked Marina Visich, the woman he knows as Libella, to the bleak farmhouse in the Po Delta where she is living with her husband. As they walk towards each other, focalisation jumps from one to the other. First, the impatient Aldo registers the stillness of the day and invests it with his own heightened state of anticipation: “all around was numbed by the silence of the sea of land and water in which that place was enclosed, as if in a tight grip, until something seemed to vibrate in the air, or maybe it only seemed so to him, because nothing moved [...]” (“tutto l’intorno era intorpidito nel silenzio del mare di terra e di acqua in cui era chiuso, come stretto, quel luogo, finché qualche cosa sembrò vibrare nell’aria, o forse sembrò così a lui, perché nulla si mosse [...]”) (164). As Marina/Libella enters this scene, Aldo’s eyes take in her appearance – her white dress, her shining hair, her jacket and boots, and finally her grey eyes. As their eyes meet, the focalisation switches briefly to Marina/Libella, as she sums up Aldo’s face – “from the short chin of a spoiled child, to his thick black hair, which was cut short, and glossy” (“dal mento breve da bambino viziato, ai neri capelli fitti, tagliati corti e lucidi”) (165) – in a judgement that combines pure fact with a shrewd appraisal of his character. Immediately after, we hear her voice (low, faintly Triestine-accented) through Aldo’s ears, but then the focalisation for the first time in this narrative settles on Marina/Libella, who will carry the narrative through the next forty or so pages.

Marina/Libella’s account opens and closes with the same phrase, spoken by her: “Oh, it’s you. From the window I couldn’t make out who you were” (“Ah, sei tu. Dalla finestra non riuscivo a capire chi eri”) (165, 208), emphasising that she has filled in all the time missing

from Aldo's knowledge, and thus from the narrative up to this point, since previously it has been almost exclusively focalised on and through him.

Up to this point, Aldo has narrated Marina/Libella's story, patching together his memories of what happened on the beach and a range of alternative sequels constructed in his imagination. Her essence eludes him: he forgets her name and cannot find her photograph amongst the hundreds he has of similarly pretty blondes. Once she speaks for herself, Marina/Libella has a voice and identity of her own to set against his constructions. Her story is both banal and more tragic than anything he imagined. He feared she had suffered harm or even died on the beach but learns now that he destroyed her trust and consigned her to a life of despair and depression. If he has focalised a sensational crime, Marina/Libella draws the focus back upon the romance; both their stories evidence *noir*'s "sordid world" and "overwhelming sense of fatalism and bleakness" (Pepper 58).

Narration and focalisation in the popular romance: comparisons

We have seen that the particular structures of narration and focalisation employed in Scerbanenco's hybrid romances have the effect of perpetuating genre ambiguity. As comparison, I shall look briefly at narration and focalisation in novels by the Italian popular romance writers Teresa Sensi, Liala, Milli Dandolo, and Dora Mancuso, who were Scerbanenco's contemporaries and literary rivals, and whose works appeared within the same Rizzoli series as his. All four use extradiegetic narrators and exceptionally strong focalisation through their heroines, so that the love world is the only world narrated.

Sensi's *Oggi è come ieri* relates the story of a former actress, Federica, who has renounced her career upon marriage. She is defined by her sentimental life, as a betrayed (and later

widowed) wife; mother of an illegitimate adult daughter, Ada, who herself becomes pregnant outside marriage; former lover of Ada's father; and potential lover of a family friend, Ettore, who offers to marry her daughter to save the family's honour. When all seems hopeless, Ada renounces Ettore, and he and Federica are freed to make their long-delayed betrothal.

As is customary in the popular romance, the narrator is extradiegetic, and the female protagonist, Federica, provides virtually the sole point of focalisation. The novel opens with her gaze, her thoughts, and emotions. She is present in almost every scene, and in the one extended scene where she is absent, when Ada confesses that she is pregnant but cannot marry Alfred because he is already married, there is constant reference to Federica and how she will interpret Ada's story. That is, the alternate focalising characters provide the kind of embedded focalisation described by Bal (160-63), where a secondary focalising character filters, accurately or otherwise, the consciousness of the primary focalising character.

Dandolo's *La prigioniera* – which tells the story of a young woman, Carlotta, escaping from a loveless marriage and finding true love, only to renounce it to find her true vocation as a mother – has an especially narrow focalisation. The narrator is extradiegetic, but the focalisation is situated almost exclusively around the heroine, the “prisoner” Carlotta. The novel opens with a vivid impression of her mental state through the thoughts and sensations she experiences as she boards a train, culminating in her highly subjective, camera-like appraisal of her travelling companions, thus setting a pattern that will continue throughout a text that continuously views the world through her eyes.

The two rivals for Carlotta's love – her husband Gustavo and Mario, a doctor whom she meets during a temporary separation from her husband – are presented almost entirely

through Carlotta's consciousness. Mario is engaged to the daughter of Carlotta's friend and protector but, presumably since these details are of little interest to Carlotta (or perhaps because they are potentially painful and guilt-inducing), the reader is given little insight into his true feelings for his fiancée or his feelings when he breaks this relationship. Similarly, Mario's devastation when Carlotta discovers that she has become pregnant to Gustavo shortly before leaving him and decides that she must return and live with her child's father, is given little space in the narrative. The reader is offered, instead, Carlotta's views of Mario, as she plays and replays in her mind their most significant scenes; these scenes focus very much upon visual impressions, but they focus too on Carlotta's interpretations of what Mario may be thinking and feeling, with only fleeting access to Mario's actual consciousness.

Mancuso's *Questo amore è mio*, with its dual heroines, provides a particularly intense example of this filtering practice: in this text, the hero, his motivations, and emotions are presented almost exclusively through the alternating character-bound focalisations of the rivals for his love, the pure Bianca and the evil Mary Luna.

Liala's *Passione lontana*, which tells of a young ballerina's struggle to win the love of a champion athlete who is unable to recover emotionally from the death of his fiancée, does, on the other hand, present a dual focalisation. By far the largest share of the focalisation is accorded the heroine, Giulietta, whose consciousness seems present even when she is not; nevertheless, extended sequences are narrated from the standpoint of the hero, footballer Vik Gildas. However, unlike Scerbanenco's heroes, who give access to a world made up as much of everyday concerns as of sentiment, this champion sportsman lives entirely in the love world of the romance. He shuns contact with his fellow footballers on the grounds of

melancholy induced by a failed romance; the many discussions he holds with his manager and confidant, Miro Monica, all relate obsessively to his sentimental history.

Like a Lialian heroine, Gildas spends much time gazing at and appreciating himself in mirrors. Where there is no mirror, there is still a strong sense of a female gaze, as in the one brief training episode. Here the narrative tells us that “[Gildas] was wearing a tracksuit of grey-blue wool whose colour somewhat matched that of his eyes. Worn by him, that tracksuit became more refined, transforming itself into an elegant garment” (“Indossava una tuta di lana grigio-azzurro che un poco somigliava nel colore a quello dei suoi occhi. Indossata da lui quella tuta si ingentiliva e diventava un indumento elegante”) (56). Gildas’s focalisation here and elsewhere merely reinforces that of the heroine, acting as a surrogate for her in the scenes in which she cannot logically be present.

And so, as these examples show, the narrative continually reinforces the romantic mood. Unlike Scerbanenco’s worlds, these love worlds are intensely self-contained: the story is strongly, almost exclusively, focused through or upon the heroine, and all other characters and events are simply players in, and facilitators of, her quest for love. It is surely this intense focus on the heroine that has given rise to the common assumption that the female reader identifies closely with the heroine of the popular romance.

Identification

Noting the lack of agreement on terminology – and even on basic concepts – among literary and film theorists, Moyer-Gusé has provided a precise set of definitions and distinctions regarding reader/viewer identification that build on the earlier work of Jonathan Cohen and which will be adopted here. In Moyer-Gusé’s definition, the concept of identification “refers

to an emotional and cognitive process whereby a viewer takes on the role of a character in a narrative” (410). In so doing, the reader/viewer temporarily loses his or her own identity, sharing the character’s feelings (Cohen’s empathetic dimension), the character’s perspective (the cognitive dimension), and the character’s goals (the motivational dimension), and experiencing a loss of self-awareness (or absorption). (Moyer-Gusé 410; Cohen 256).

Related concepts which are frequently treated as synonymous with identification but which, as Moyer-Gusé makes evident, are not the same and may more usefully be regarded as precursors of identification, are wishful identification (the desire to be like a character); parasocial interactions/PSI (imagining some relationship, such as friendship, with a fictional character); a sense of similarity with a character; and liking for a character. The crucial distinction, as Moyer-Gusé makes clear, is that only in identification does the reader/viewer lose his or her sense of self to temporarily merge with the character.

Discussing the link between point of view and reader-protagonist relationships in the context of the Italian Harmony series of popular romances, Brodesco provides a list of possibilities which are almost identical to Moyer-Gusé’s stages of intensity: “The point of view of the hero may be shown, but the heroine is the vehicle that carries the story. The female reader lives vicariously through her eyes: she may identify deeply with the heroine, wish to be in her place or to be her friend. The reader has to *like* the heroine” (“Il punto di vista dell’eroe può essere mostrato, ma è l’eroina il veicolo per condurre la storia. La lettrice vive vicariamente attraverso il suo sguardo: deve identificarsi profondamente con l’eroina, desiderare di essere al suo posto o di essere sua amica. L’eroina deve *piacere* alla lettrice”) (53). (Original emphasis.)

Cognitive scientist Keith Oatley has posited a spectrum of reader/viewer engagement in the story world of the novel or film, running from spectatorship (or “meeting by observing”) to identification (“meeting as merging”) (445). Oatley suggests that, while film may tend to favour a spectator role, both spectatorship and identification are fostered by literary fiction. Here, Oatley considers the narration (which, in using the phrase “point of view”, he does not appear to be clearly separating from focalisation) to be crucial: in his view, “the use of third-person narrative favours spectating; first-person narrative favours identification” (445).

Rossa, as one of the few autodiegetic novels in our study, bears out Oatley’s assertion of the powerful identifications potentialised by first-person narration. In particular, this novel fosters a high degree of what psycholinguist Richard J. Gerrig terms “a sense of intimacy” and “collaboration” between narrator and reader (123). By constantly ironising the delusions of outsiders who have been fed a false, Hollywood-manufactured image of the American West, the narrator draws the reader into a shared sense of insider knowledge and a complicit superiority over the tourists who are the butt of his irony. Similar irony is employed by the autodiegetic narrator of *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*, and in both novels the sense of complicity is hugely enhanced by the persona of the implied author, John Colemoore, a genuine cowboy who, in *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* at least, seems to be relating thinly disguised autobiography. The real irony, of course, is that Scerbanenco’s knowledge of the West was all second-hand, drawn from books and films, a fact that he playfully acknowledges in having his characters resemble Hollywood stars and act out the script of *Duel in the Sun*.

Bortolussi and Dixon (*Psychonarratology*) have argued that many of the confusions and disagreements within the field of narratology arise from the fact that no clear distinction has

been made between textual features and reader constructs. By empirically testing their main hypothesis, that the reader treats the narrator as a conversational participant, these researchers are able to shed light on how the reader “constructs” the narrator by way of natural assumptions about the rules of conversation. As we have seen above, part of this construction may consist in forging a strong association between the narrator and protagonist, creating a potentially powerful point of identification in the extradiegetically narrated novel.

De Graaf et al. have demonstrated, through empirical studies, the importance of focalisation and the focaliser (concepts they term “perspective” and “perspectivising character” 805) in increasing the reader’s narrative engagement and thus persuading the reader to adopt, or at least become more sympathetic towards, the focalising character’s attitudes and beliefs. It is surely this close identification that encourages the reader to excuse unethical and even criminal behaviour by the protagonists of the Westerns. *La mia ragazza di Magdalena*’s autodiegetic narrator, Martino, fosters sympathy even though he is a criminal who has cruelly deceived, exploited, and even assaulted women. Roy and Rossa (*Rossa*) exploit Sybille’s love and generosity; they conspire to pervert justice, and Rossa commits murder. Yet in terms of both the adventure and the romance, these dubious activities are ultimately seen to be logical and inevitable, whether the reader identifies with the male narrator or with the heroine. I argue that the reader may indeed identify with both. In all Scerbanenco’s romantic hybrids there is a potential for choice in the point of identification, or for a double identification.

In the case of the popular romance, it has been widely assumed that the (female) reader identifies most strongly with the female protagonist. Flesch has noted that “Much of the discussion about how a romance reader is affected by what she reads rests on the assumption

that the reader takes the heroine as a role model [...]” (127). She notes, too, that while Kinsale and others have refuted the simple (female) reader/heroine identification, this approach is still far from the norm. As evidence for the identification hypothesis, numerous critics¹¹⁹ have pointed out the tendency for romance heroines to be constructed of somewhat sketchy, commonplace attributes, according the reader enough scope to seize on perceived similarities as a precursor to identification; similarly, many have noted the fact that both the narrational voice (typically extradiegetic) and the focalisation of the classic romance centre on the heroine, thus privileging her thoughts and feelings. This is not to say that there is no access to the hero’s viewpoint, but it is most usually given a much lesser degree of focus than that of the heroine; in the classic romance he remains opaque and inscrutable – and thus a torment to the female (and reader) – until she finally understands his feelings and motivations.

Scerbanenco, however, creates heroes who are anything but inscrutable, and he consistently externalises the dangers the heroine must face. She is not hampered by any “inability to read a man properly” (Radway 215); she struggles not with threats emanating from the hero’s dark and mysterious personality but with external, social threats that endanger both lovers. They do not clash with each other but form a front against a hostile society.

The crime novel, spy story, and Western traditionally locate the greatest focus – and thus potential identification – on and through the male protagonist, the hero who will successfully defeat his opponents or enemies and protect the (frequently female) victim. Hepburn asserts that “The aesthetic of espionage narrative requires that we acknowledge our identification with the fugitive or the agent who hovers on the borders of legality and who, therefore, best

¹¹⁹ See Pozzato, *Il romanzo rosa* 25; Paizis 82-83; Bogo 1600.

expresses the reader's uncertainty about living inside and outside the law at the same time" (29).

Bortolussi, Dixon, and Sopčák have subjected the prevalent theory that female readers are most likely to identify with female protagonists, and males with male protagonists, to empirical testing and found it to be unsupported by scientific proof. Their preliminary studies reveal that both males and females have a tendency to identify more strongly with a male protagonist. They find that male and female readers alike employ the same psychological processes and may judge the male character's actions to be more situationally justified than the female's: "From this perspective, identification is a function not so much of similarities between a character and a reader as the ability to construct an analogy between the experiences of the reader and those of the narrative character" (314). Their findings reinforce an insight expressed by Tompkins, who, in seeking to understand why women are drawn to read the strongly masculinised genre of the Western, posits that "since stories about men [...] function as stories about all people", women "regularly identify across gender lines in reading and in watching movies and television" (17). This notion, that the novel and film force the female reader/viewer to adopt a male position, has been much discussed, in particular by feminist film critics; there has, equally, been much critical discussion, since Judith Fetterley's seminal work, over how women may resist this "immasculation".

The findings of Bortolussi, Dixon, and Sopčák may provide solid empirical evidence for a standpoint that has been increasingly argued by romance writers and readers alike. Romance author Laura Kinsale presents evidence – based both on readers' letters to her and on surveys by Lucia Macro and by Carol Thurston – of romance readers' strong interest in the hero's point of view. Such evidence, Kinsale argues, challenges the "commonly accepted truism

that when a woman reads a romance she is ‘identifying’ with the heroine” (31); it also puts in question the validity of the many condemnations of the popular romance that are based on the assumption that the strength of the reader-heroine identification is likely to persuade gullible female readers to assimilate patriarchal ideologies of female submissiveness and passivity. Kinsale’s view is that, rather than identifying with the heroine, the reader takes a more detached attitude, using her as a “placeholder”, and identifying much more closely with the hero who “carries the book” (32). Kinsale defines placeholding as “an objective involvement; the reader rides along with the character, having the same experiences but accepting or rejecting the character’s actions, words, and emotions on the basis of her personal yardstick” whereas, “Reader identification is subjective: the reader *becomes* the character, feeling what she or he feels, experiencing the sensation of being *under control* of the character’s awareness” (32). (Original emphasis.) In this way, the female reader is able to experience both male and female aspects of her own personality. Fellow romance writer Linda Barlow argues that the hero is not a feminine ideal, but a “split-off portion of the heroine’s own psyche which will be reintegrated at the end of the book” (49).

Since the Westerns are narrated autodiegetically, the reader here has direct access to the male mind. In neither case do we find the inarticulate, tough, and emotionally obtuse male one might expect from both the classic Western and the classic romance. These are damaged men; and while they seek to demonstrate the agency and integrity demanded by the Western genre, from the outset they also reveal to the reader their romance qualities of sensitivity, vulnerability, and a longing to love and be loved. In short, as Kinsale and Barlow have argued, they integrate qualities that are stereotypically assumed to be respectively masculine and feminine. Certainly an enduring aim of the stock romance has been to “tame” the

dangerous male and bring out his feminine side; what is unusual in Scerbanenco's Westerns is that this "feminine" side is obvious, indeed dominant, from the outset.

By assuming the roles most commonly occupied by the heroines of romances, these men create further complexities of identification. The female romance reader sees the male suffering in a way that is more usually reserved for the female. In fact, the hero and heroine of both Westerns have roughly parallel experiences and emotions: all are outsiders, of mixed race, and either tainted by criminal associations or traumatised by an experience that is the polar opposite of romantic love. Both Zuñita and Martino (*La mia ragazza*) are trapped by their criminal associates; Rossa has been raped, while Roy has experienced the brutal torture and death of his fiancée (*Rossa*) – experiences leaving all four overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness, injustice, and hopelessness. All long for love but believe it is unattainable for them. These feelings are primarily – and untypically – articulated by the male, who communicates directly with the reader; he acts as a filter for the female's initially inscrutable emotions and motivations, drawing them out and channelling them to the reader. The result is both to subvert genre expectations and to underline the centrality of the romantic sensibility in the text, according it an equal importance with the "masculine" adventures projected through this same focalising narrator.

It has been pointed out – by Brodesco (54), among others – that the male has a more precisely delineated physical presence in the classic romance because he is seen and described through the gaze of the primary focalising character, the heroine. She, traditionally, is described via her own gaze, usually in somewhat general terms that do not provide an unattainable ideal for the female reader. Certainly the female protagonists created by Liala, Italy's most famous and prolific author of *romanzi rosa*, spend a great deal of time looking in

mirrors (Curti 382; Pozzato, “Liala” 107). Pozzato notes that, in this self-scrutiny, the heroine’s eroticised vision of herself replicates the male gaze, which, in Liala’s ideology, is the real measure of her worth (107-08). Scerbanenco’s heroines, who typically lack vanity, do not engage in such self-admiration but, if they do check their appearance, tend to reflect their reassuring averageness. In any case, in Scerbanenco’s Westerns the heroine is seen primarily through the male gaze of the hero, while in his other romances, as we have seen, the alternating focalisation has one gazing at the other on a fairly equal basis.¹²⁰

Another reversal of a genre norm is found in Scerbanenco’s male narrators’ ability to recognise and express their feelings. This is the opposite of the silence Tompkins associates with the Western hero, “this determined shutting down of emotions, this cutting of the self off from contact with the interior well of feeling” which in her view “symbolizes a massive suppression of the inner life” (66). Mitchell, too, notes that the Western hero is expected to be taciturn, for “Talking too much or laughing too easily or expressing fear too readily are more than mere signs of bad form; they reveal a general inability to maintain composure under the pressure of vivid sensation” (166).

If the autodiegetic narration of the Westerns gives unalloyed access to the thoughts and feelings of the male protagonist, the extradiegetically narrated novels provide the same access, as I have argued, through an intense focalisation on and through the male protagonist.

Appuntamento a Trieste enacts within its own discourse a powerful cross-gender identification between the anonymous male narrator and the female protagonist of the story he is told. After hearing Diana’s story, X is profoundly disturbed and spends a sleepless

¹²⁰ The implications of Scerbanenco’s particular use of the male and female gaze will be taken up in Chapter Eight.

night. Although he is normally a pragmatist, X acknowledges that “after hearing Diana’s story, I suddenly felt I was in a mysterious world, peopled with shadows I couldn’t see with my own eyes, nor touch with my hands, but which must be true” (“dopo aver ascoltato la storia di Diana, mi ero improvvisamente sentito in un mondo misterioso, popolato di ombre che non vedevo coi miei occhi, che non potevo toccare con le mie mani, ma che doveva essere vero”) (209). In short, he is flooded with the same intense intuition that his lover is still alive that Diana experienced regarding Kirk. Although his rational mind tries to suppress the thought, the novel ends with X admitting that he believes he will meet his lover in Trieste, and that no one will ever persuade him otherwise.

Whether readers make same-sex identifications by default or not – and Bortolussi, Dixon, and Sopčák have gone some way to proving they do not – the fact remains that both focalisation and narrator-character identification present the reader with potent opportunities for identification with some character or characters in the text. Scott McCracken has remarked upon this potentiality within the genre hybrid, noting that “the artful weaving of several popular genres into one narrative can allow a more complex exploration of self-identity, while still giving the reader familiar boundaries within which to project his or her fantasies” (13). Thus Scerbanenco’s readers may choose to read in the mode of romance, identifying most closely with the sentimental side of both protagonists, or they may choose to read in adventure mode, focusing on the courage, ingenuity, and obstinacy that bring both through the trials imposed by this strand of the hybrid. They may, however, choose to read the story as a genre hybrid and identify simultaneously with male and female, adventurer and sentimentalist.

Further opportunities for identification present themselves in the many vignettes found within these novels. Indeed, throughout Scerbanenco's entire body of work one finds such embedded vignettes: undeveloped stories which sometimes amount to no more than a few sentences, sometimes merely a brief character sketch, but which contain a powerful suggestion of a story that *might* be told. This gallery of lives, together with the more fully sketched lives of the secondary characters, provides more opportunities for reader identification, or – given their generally fleeting nature that scarcely admits the necessary absorption or engagement – for perception of similarity. Since so many of these vignettes and secondary characters provide exemplars for alternative gender roles, full discussion of their import will be taken up in the next chapter, as part of my analysis of the implications of the hybrid form on constructions of models of the masculine and feminine.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONSTRUCTING FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY

Strategies such as choice of narrating voice and focalisation draw the reader into the text and offer the potential for identifications. This, in turn, creates a powerful opportunity for the transmission of ideological messages, including models of “appropriate” masculinity and femininity.¹²¹ In this chapter I explore the ways in which the production and consumption of popular fiction are both engendered and engendering.¹²²

Cultural assumptions about the mental habits and appropriate domains of the male and the female have endured for centuries in the western world, founded on essentialist concepts of gender as biologically determined, and institutionalising the ideology of patriarchy in which the male is assumed to hold a natural position of dominance and normality.¹²³ Analysing cultural constructs of masculinity, R.W. Connell notes that “A familiar theme in patriarchal ideology is that men are rational while women are emotional” (164). Popular fiction enmeshes itself deeply within these discourses: while the traditional “female” romance privileges emotion, introspection, and the private domestic sphere, the traditional “male” adventure story privileges reason, action, tough-mindedness, and the public domain.

¹²¹ Following accepted modern practice, I use the terms *male* and *female* for the biological sex, and *masculine* and *feminine* to refer to culturally constructed gender.

¹²² For extended discussion on popular fiction as a site for gender construction, see Cranny-Francis, *Engendered Fiction*; Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer; and Christine Gledhill. I am drawing here on Cranny-Francis’s terminology, which she explains thus: “A text is *engendered* in that it semiotically constructs discourse(s) of or about gender (such as patriarchy and feminism) and in that it is produced and consumed [...] within a set of discourses about gender. A text also *engenders* its producers and readers as they come to grips with it and negotiate its particular configuration of discourses as part of the construction of their own subjectivity” (*Engendered Fiction* 28). (Original emphasis.)

¹²³ While admitting that the term *patriarchy* is more problematic than was recognised when first adopted by feminists of the 1960s, since masculinities are now acknowledged to be multiple not monolithic, Cranny-Francis et al. concede that it is still useful “as a shorthand to indicate a social system in which maleness and masculinity confer a privileged position of power and authority; where man is the Self to which woman is Other” (*Gender Studies* 14).

Indeed, gender inflects the cycle of production and consumption of popular fiction at all stages; there is well-nigh universal recognition that the romance is written by women, about women, for women. Regis calls the romance “the most female of popular genres”, since “Nearly all of the writers and readers are women” (xii), mirroring Eco’s observation that “it is not only women who write [the romance], but they write about female characters and for a female public” (“non solo sono donne che scrivono, ma scrivono su personaggi femminili e per un pubblico femminile”) (*Carolina Invernizio* 5). Conversely, the several categories of adventure fiction making up the other half of Scerbanenco’s genre blend have traditionally been labelled masculine. Cawelti bases his assertion that “The feminine equivalent of the adventure story is the romance” on the common assumption of same-gender identification, pointing out that the central characters of the romance and adventure story tend to be, respectively, female and male (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 41).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, readers need not forge identifications in quite such straightforward ways; in this chapter I advance this argument further, demonstrating how the hybrid text may encode multifaceted models of the masculine and feminine, offering readers a range of decoding positions. Before presenting evidence derived from a close reading of Scerbanenco’s texts, including his characteristic use of contrapuntal vignettes and voices, I situate my position within its necessary context by examining the role of the stereotype in popular fiction and exploring some intertextual links, including those provided by Italian cinema; I look also at the specific socio-historical context of mid-twentieth-century Italy, a period when gender roles were subject to strong – and evolving – definitions.

Reading gender models

All forms of popular literature offer models of femininity and masculinity, most often based on enduring, sharply defined, and widely understood stereotypes. If, applying the insights of Frye's *Secular Scripture*, we acknowledge that both the popular romance and the adventure story, in their different ways, make use of the same archetypes, we shall see that the same character stereotypes are common to all these stories: the active male, the passive "good" woman, the deceiver/antagonist (whether this is a "bad" woman or a male villain), the helper.

The classic critical reading of the popular romance is that it works to domesticate the male, while assuring him of the female's suitability as a lifelong wife and mother. By passing Mussell's "domestic test", retreating into the private, emotional world of the home and enticing her man to recognise the value of this world, the romance female achieves success.

The classic reading of the adventure story is that it validates the power of the male hero, who endures trials to prove his worth and restore a disordered society to a state of equilibrium, whether this is on a local level (such as when the sheriff saves his town) or a global scale (as when James Bond saves the world from destruction). He is likely to win the love of a good woman – and be tempted by "bad" women – during his quest, but domestication is rarely his ultimate aim.¹²⁴

By contrast, the classic romance sets the heroine on the path of what Diane Negra terms "retreatism" (5), a concept for which Liala's *Passione lontana* provides an exemplary text.¹²⁵

Here the heroine, a talented ballerina, announces at the outset her ambition to move up the

¹²⁴ As we have seen in Chapter Four, the genre of *noir* is a different case, in which the male protagonist is more passive and vulnerable, and appears to long for the home from which he is exiled.

¹²⁵ Although Negra employs the term to discuss the phenomenon in the context of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century postfeminism, retreatism clearly has a long history.

social ladder by securing a wealthy husband. Although she acquires fame and considerable fortune as a dancer and Hollywood film star, her career is presented as poor recompense for the love reversals that have propelled her into it, and the text relentlessly works to reinstate her in the domestic sphere, providing scarcely credible, and morally dubious, solutions to overcome the barriers that have kept her and her true love apart.

By mixing genres, Scerbanenco, on the other hand, provides the potential for alternative readings of gendered ideologies, an interpretative position that would require a much more determined reading against the grain in the case of Liala's text. Although it is certainly possible to argue that Scerbanenco's heroines "retreat" and that his heroes become domesticated, the more ambiguous endings and more nuanced characterisations facilitate this potential for alternative readings. Similarly, although patriarchal attitudes are rife, these may be traced to the attitudes of particular characters – notably, the strongly focalising male – and need not be taken as the final word, as we shall see.

A glimpse at some critical analyses of similar instances of genre blending provides an insight into potential responses. Moine offers the classic Hollywood film *Mildred Pierce* (dir. Curtiz, 1945) as an example of the potential for multiple interpretations offered by genre hybridity:

The discourse of feminine melodrama is muddled here by its subordination to *film noir*, and *Mildred Pierce*, in the manner of many other heroines of films in which two genres are mixed, can be considered as either a strong woman or an alienated one, as a victim figure or a guilty one. (158)

Linda Williams, in her essay on female spectatorship of this same film, also emphasises the interpretive choices potentialised by this ambiguity in the heroine's situation, observing that "we should not underestimate the complexity of the female spectator's recognition of the contradictory particularities of her situation" (29).

The hybrid text heightens a potential present in any text. Sociological studies such as Ang's work on viewers of the popular soap opera *Dallas* and Fiske's on viewers of popular television crime shows such as *Hart to Hart* and *Charlie's Angels*, as well as Radway's study of romance readers, all attest to the fact that audiences routinely respond in unexpected ways to popular texts, ways that resonate with their own beliefs, personalities, and needs.

Cranny-Francis, drawing on the insights of Michel de Certeau, demonstrates how readers faced with engendered texts may choose to read compliantly (accepting the dominant ideologies of the text regarding gender constructions, roles, and relationships) or resistantly (recognising the ideologies but rejecting them); they may also read tactically (reinterpreting the text in ways that accord with their own worldview) (*Engendered Fiction* 184-96). These positions are broadly similar to the three decoding positions proposed by Hall:

dominant/hegemonic (in which the encoded message is accepted uncritically), negotiated (in which the encoded message is recognised and partially accepted, though recognised to be at odds with the viewer/reader's worldview), and oppositional (in which the viewer/reader rejects the dominant position in order to read the message in a contrary fashion that accords with his or her personal worldview) (136-38).

In arguing that the ambiguity present in the gender models found in Scerbanenco's hybrid romances gives exactly this potential for a range of reading positions, I am running counter to much Scerbanenco criticism, which has considered his stance to be politically and socially conservative and, above all, patriarchal.¹²⁶ These critical readings are unsurprising, given that

¹²⁶ Perhaps mistaking Lamberti's stance for Scerbanenco's own, some critics have accused him of extreme right-wing attitudes: Canova notes that "Duca Lamberti is often the bearer of an ideologically suspect and strongly Manichean moralism" ("Duca Lamberti è spesso portatore di un moralismo ideologicamente sospetto e fortemente manicheo") (162). Although she acknowledges that Scerbanenco in the Lamberti series examines the changing socio-economic status of women, Pieri considers that this occurs "[in spite of] the patriarchal ideology

patriarchal and politically conservative attitudes are traditionally ingrained in both the popular romance and the crime novel.

Part of the ambiguity in Scerbanenco's texts can be linked to a marketing history which, over time, has offered the stories to different potential readers: that is, new interpretive communities. Given that most of these novels have been published at least three times in different formats – as serials in women's magazines, as popular novels in series directed primarily at women, and as hybrid adventure novels aimed at a non-gender-specific audience – it is surely inevitable that readings will vary according to such factors as the historical and socio-cultural situation, as well as the marketing-induced expectations, of the reader. For, even when readers observe the same gender discourses within a text, their interpretations can be very different depending on the stance they bring: as Dave Morley has argued, "At the moment of textual encounter other discourses are always in play besides those of the particular text in focus" (163). That is, readers are already immersed in a variety of discourses formed by their unique cultural, social, and educational background. Thus, while responding to the same text, it is entirely likely that "the patriarchal readers will have their positioning as patriarchal subjects reinforced and the feminist readers will have their anti-patriarchal positioning reinforced" (Cranny-Francis, *Engendered Fiction* 28).

On the other hand, a large part of the ambiguity resides in Scerbanenco's texts, which constantly offer alternative ways of reading the characters and the plot, and alternative points of identification. As we have seen, constantly shifting focalisations within the text allow for multiple types of identifications between readers and characters. If the text offers the reader

displayed throughout [his] production" (151). Burns refers to the "troublesome ambiguity (and sometimes deep prejudice) with which Scerbanenco represents matters of gender and sexuality" ("Founding Fathers" 36-37).

the option of choosing to read these characters as stereotypes that reinforce patriarchal structures, and the reader is sympathetic or socialised to the patriarchal discourse, then he or she may well find this reinforcement in the text. However, constantly pulling against the classic interpretations, alternative possibilities – and, especially, alternative femininities and masculinities – are found throughout these novels, often in embedded vignettes which provide glimpses of lives and opinions beyond those of the main protagonists.¹²⁷

Thus these novels can be seen to both promote conventional morality and the rewards of marriage and domesticity, with their attendant stereotyped models of femininity and masculinity, and simultaneously undercut – or at least question – the stereotypes on which these values are founded.

The stereotype

One of the charges by which popular fiction is most often labelled inferior to “high” literature is its reliance on stereotyped characters whose ultimate origins may be sought in the fairy story or folk tale. The popular romance may be seen as the story of the pure and humble Cinderella melting the heart of the all-powerful, haughty prince.¹²⁸ By the same token, the detective, spy, and cowboy equate to the questing knight, enduring trials but prevailing to heal the land by defeating the evil adversary.¹²⁹ Subsidiary characters fall into stock categories: the jealous love rival, the protector or helper figure, in the romance; elsewhere,

¹²⁷ Fiske has found a similar embedded ambivalence in the television soap opera, where the necessarily unresolved nature of an endlessly continuing story works against any state of equilibrium. Fiske argues that this constant disruption “can be read dominantly (patriarchally)” but “can also serve to interrogate the status quo” (*Television Culture* 181).

¹²⁸ See Roccella 13-16; Mussell 83-85; and Heather Dubino.

¹²⁹ Frye traces the genealogy of “the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins” (*Secular Scripture* 67) from its origins in classical and biblical mythology to twentieth-century popular fiction. Cawelti observes that “Almost every commentator on the western has noted at one point or another the analogy between the heroic cowboy and the chivalrous knight” (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* 37).

the criminal, the counterspy, the powerless lawman. Just as genre becomes recognisable by repetition, so these characters are easily recognised on the page and screen by an audience that has become accustomed to their stock features and actions. In particular, it is argued that genre fiction reinforces stereotypes of traditional femininity and masculinity (e.g. Milestone and Meyer 164-65).

The term *stereotype* is itself employed in a variety of discourses with differing meanings, some relatively neutral, and some highly charged with negative connotations.¹³⁰ While in the social sciences the stereotype most frequently bears connotations of prejudice and distrust or fear of the Other, within literature and the other arts it most frequently refers to a standardised, repetitive formula for characterisation that provides a shortcut for audience recognition, functioning in much the same way as genre.¹³¹ This is not to say that the judgemental associations of the sociological stereotype are absent, since such formulas are necessarily reductive and tend to operate in binary oppositions, as evidenced by the enduring Madonna/Whore dichotomy in the portrayal of the female.¹³² Such a dichotomy may, however, be looked at from either a sociological perspective or a purely literary, narratological perspective: my aim here is to do both. After all, genre itself is a form of stereotyping, reliant as it is upon easily recognised formulas and codes in plot, characterisation, setting, and so forth.

¹³⁰ For an overview of historical and current definitions and uses, see Michael Pickering, and Jörg Schweinitz 3-120.

¹³¹ Regis characterises such stereotypical formulas as subsets of genres (23-25).

¹³² This trope has a long history, tracing back to the biblical opposites, Eve and the Virgin Mary. Sociologist Michael Pickering, discussing divisions of the female into the “angel of the hearth” and the “fallen woman” in nineteenth-century English popular thought, isolates the flawed essentialist thinking underpinning a characterisation of women which “spoke only to masculine values and patriarchal knowledge”; he notes that “Both stereotypes were based on the assumption of comprehensive, naturalised and fixed gender patterns operating as a compelling guide for norms of behaviour, identity and value appropriate to male and female spheres” (7).

Before considering the effects genre hybridity may have upon gender stereotypes, it will be useful to consider the constructions of character within popular genre fiction. Here the influence of a contemporary, and complementary, popular form, the cinema, cannot be underestimated. Luisa Cigognetti and Lorenza Servetti have noted the symbiotic relationship between the popular press and cinema in Italy in the post-Second World War period, when “there were still many romantic picture-stories sold in kiosks and railway stations so that the interaction between weeklies and cinema was particularly close” (556). They note, too, the enduring preference for melodrama among film audiences and readers alike at this time, who were less enthusiastic over neo-realism than were international audiences.

In her study of the construction of the feminine in Italian cinema, Marga Cottino-Jones demonstrates how this popular form created and endlessly reinforced stereotypes of woman as, variously, passive and victimised but “good” family member (located within the patriarchal structure as daughter, wife, or mother) or independent, active, and “bad” sexual force. While acknowledging the genesis of these stereotypes in earlier Italian forms of entertainment such as opera and theatrical melodrama, Cottino-Jones argues for the particularly seductive power of cinematic spectacle to implant such images of gender in the consciousness of viewers, both male and female, thus normalising them. I have already noted Scerbanenco’s use of references to Hollywood movie stars to provide a shorthand account of the physical appearance of his characters, designations which surely carry with them reader recognition of the typical roles of these stars.

Gender models in popular fiction

Constructing femininity in the romance

I have discussed at length in Chapter Three the standard attributes of the characters of the romance. A quick look at a novel by Scerbanenco's contemporary Liala will serve to illustrate the stereotypes of good and bad femininity in their most clearly delineated forms. The heroine of Liala's *Passione lontana*, aspiring ballerina Giulietta Colombo, is everywhere marked as infantile, ingenuous, unthreatening, and in need of male protection. She is introduced through the gaze of the man who will ultimately marry her, Vik Gildas, who perceives her thus: "Through the light fog he saw that face that was not beautiful, but smiling, that little body that was tiny but perfectly proportioned. Like a child, Giulietta pressed her palms against the window and looked inside" ("Nella nebbia leggera egli vide quel viso non bello ma ridente, quella figurina minuta ma proporzionatissima. Come i bambini, Giulietta teneva le palme appiccate al cristallo e guardava dentro") (25). (The heroine of Dandolo's *La prigioniera*, Carlotta, is similarly infantilised, referred to everywhere as "the young woman" – "la giovane donna" – although she is thirty-two.) Giulietta is at one and the same time ordinary and exceptional: her beauty is apparent to Vik, but it is not showy.

Set against the ingenuous, childlike Giulietta is the worldly, scheming widow Ulla, who exerts an irresistibly seductive power over Vik. That the Cinderella trope is at work here is made manifest when the humble Giulietta has her first glimpse of Ulla:

Splendid in body and face: regal in her cloak and dress. Unequalled in the charm of her jewellery. [...] Giulietta Colombo had never seen anything more beautiful or rich. She compared herself with that woman and saw herself as small, wretched, badly dressed, modest, with modest habits.

Splendida nel corpo e nel viso: regale nel manto e nell'abito. Insuperabile nell'incanto dei gioielli. [...] Giulietta Colombo non aveva mai veduto nulla di più bello e di più ricco. Si confrontava con quella donna e si vedeva piccola, misera, mal vestita, modesta, con abitudini modeste. (180)

Ulla is a sophisticated, independent modern woman who is ruthless in the satisfaction of her desires, all qualities which the text unequivocally disparages. Giulietta's second rival, Vik's dead fiancée, Nànina, is rated as worse still, since she is two-faced: angelic on the surface but – by patriarchal standards at least – rotten to the core.¹³³ To complete this full hand of female stereotypes, we have two established model wives. Giulietta's working-class housewife mother has no existence beyond serving her husband and daughter, forever cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Her counterpart at the other end of the social scale is Cìà Monica, the impeccably devoted wife of a wealthy industrialist, who, unable to have children of her own, fulfils her maternal vocation by acting as a second mother to Giulietta.

Constructing masculinity in the romance

The construction of models of masculinity is as much a feature of popular fiction as is the construction of stereotypes of femininity. In all popular romance, the figure of the desirable male is central, as the eventual prize for the female protagonist; as her prize, he must be worth winning. In Chapter Three I outlined the typical qualities of the stereotypical romance hero, all of which signal his vigour, potency, and ability to protect: he should be physically attractive, neither too old nor too young, healthy, at least moderately wealthy, active, and decisive.

¹³³ With a cavalier flourish that satisfactorily ties up loose plot ends but skims over legal and ethical problems, the text assures us that Vik was justified in killing his fiancée because of her shameless love affairs with other men.

Scrutiny of the male protagonists of selected *romanzi rosa* written by Scerbanenco's contemporaries makes plain the stereotypical nature of their construction. As demonstrated in Chapter Seven, these novels, though recounted by an extradiegetic narrator, have an intense focalisation by and through the female protagonist, so that the male object of her desire is constructed almost entirely through her eyes. Mancuso's *Questo amore è mio*, with its twinned female protagonists, creates a double focus on the hero, Giuliano Galliani, who emerges as a cliché of the genre. This stage impresario is wealthy, successful, young, handsome, and born to command. He moulds the lives of his two female admirers, schooling his mistress, the seductive but heartless Mary, for a career on the stage, while forbidding the woman he recognises as his true love, the good-hearted, self-sacrificing – and equally talented – Bianca, to expose herself in this way to the eyes of other men.

When Bianca first meets Galliani she literally swoons over his physical appearance: “‘My God...’, she thought, looking at him in amazement. He was tall, slender, with thick black hair and very gentle, blazing turquoise eyes; a dazzling smile revealed superb teeth between two fleshy lips that seemed to have been made for kissing” (“‘Dio mio ...’, pensò sbigottita guardandolo. Era alto, sottile, con capelli neri, folti ed occhi turchese, dolcissimi e brucianti; un sorriso smagliante scopriva dei denti superbi fra due labbra carnose che pareva fossero fatte per baciare”) (106-07). The notion that the romance's typical female-centred focalisation effectively constructs the male as an object of desire is made explicit in a comment by the male helper figure, Fausto, that Galliani has been “the leading character” (“il principale personaggio”), even though “he had not taken part in the drama” (“al dramma non aveva preso parte”) played out with high melodrama between Mary and Bianca (208).

Vik Gildas, the football champion hero of Liala's *Passione lontana*, is first seen through the gaze of an older man, his new team manager, who acts more like a lovesick girl as he paces the train station platform in anticipation of his new acquisition's arrival, and is clearly a focalising placeholder for the necessarily absent heroine. Vik is recognisable not just from his handsome aspect – "Tall, strong, grey eyes, tanned face" ("Alto, robusto, occhi grigi, volto bruno") – but from his powerful, animalistic athleticism, as he descends from the train with "A leopard's bound" ("Un balzo da gattopardo") (5).

Dandolo's *La prigioniera* features a similar cut-out as male protagonist, a man whose qualities are also seen only as reflected through the strongly focalising heroine and who seems tailored to serve her needs. Although not conventionally handsome, Mario has the romance's typically aspirational – and reassuringly protective – profession of doctor: he emanates self-assurance. Mario takes a distinctly paternal role towards the heroine Carlotta, tending to her health, warning her off a predatory suitor, calming all her fears, and taking her in when she becomes homeless. Yet when Carlotta's pregnancy requires her to renounce Mario and return to her husband, the husband is hastily recuperated to become the most suitable love mate.

In short, these several texts present stereotypically patriarchal males who are constructed through the heroine's eyes, and whose entire existence is enmeshed with her desires and needs.

Masculinities in crime, Western, and spy fiction

In the other genres that make up Scerbanenco's hybrids, the male and his masculinity are traditionally central to the discourse. The crime genre, especially at the time when

Scerbanenco was writing, was dominated by the male crime solver, whose masculinity was highlighted in the classic detection subgenre by his “heroism and rationality” (Scaggs 20), and in the hard-boiled version by “his social independence and his ability to withstand and sometimes use physical violence” (Priestman 57).

Mitchell has remarked that “More than anything else, [a] persistent obsession with masculinity marks the Western [...]” (3). With the supports of civilisation reduced to a minimum, the Western hero must prove by the strength of his will and, more especially, the toughness of his body that he can survive alone against the trials set him by nature and evil men. In Tompkins’ words, the Wild West is the place “where the harsh conditions of life force [the hero’s] manhood into being” (47).

In particular, the classic Western measures the male’s qualities against his Other, the female, and the domesticity and softness she evokes. Martin Pumphrey has written of the Western’s “absolute and value-laden division between the masculine and feminine spheres”, noting that while masculinity here is linked with “activity, mobility, adventure, emotional restraint and public power”, femininity is linked with “passivity, softness, romance and domestic containment” (181).

The model of masculinity typically found in the spy novel, in Hepburn’s view, leads to limited roles for women since “The plot of espionage novels characteristically excludes women unless needed as *femmes fatales* or *dupes*” (198). Marked by the negatives of either duplicity or fragility, the female exists largely as a measure of the male spy’s masculine power, integrity, and resolve. In this formation, her story can only ever be a subplot.

Cranny-Francis has dissected the model of masculinity typical of genre fiction and finds within it an essential conflict, in which the male is torn between the two sides to his psyche, the rational brain and the uncontrollable body, “a choice between patriarchal benevolence and wolfish rapacity” (*Engendered Fiction* 87).

We might conclude that popular fiction is by its nature conservative and given to traditionally patriarchal stereotypes; I argue, however, that the characters found in Scerbanenco’s post-war romances have the potential to be read both in dominant/hegemonic mode as stereotype and, oppositionally, as challenges to the contemporary popular culture’s norms of femininity and masculinity. Before I do so, some scrutiny of the specific socio-historical background to these popular cultural attitudes is necessary.

Italian society from the late 1940s to the early 1960s: gender constructions

Post-war Italy underwent a period of rapid social and economic change, generally known as the Economic Miracle or Economic Boom, that propelled this poor agricultural and artisanal society into the ranks of the world’s leading industrialised nations by the 1960s. Although David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, in their study of Italian mass culture between 1936 and 1954, have argued convincingly that the associated social changes were more gradual and uneven than is often claimed, it is true that most parts of Italy were very different in the 1960s from how they had been in the 1920s. As what had been a predominantly rural and traditional society, underpinned by Catholicism and the strong family unit, industrialised and urbanised, population movements and new economic opportunities loosened traditionally strong family, church, and local controls, offering new roles and opportunities for young men and women alike. The extreme nature of this change may be appreciated if one considers that for the preceding twenty years, from 1922 until 1945, Italian society had been under the yoke

of Fascism, an ideology that took social control – and patriarchy – to the extreme, modelling men as warriors and women as mothers.

The immediate post-war period was one of economic and social collapse; this painful time leaves its mark on many of the novels under study, as does the burgeoning prosperity that came slightly later. Although full emancipation of women was slow to come to Italy, the war had both given women the chance to work, even fight, alongside men and left many widows as the heads of families. Furthermore, widespread unemployment in the aftermath of war meant that the male head of the family could no longer necessarily provide for the household on his own.

Thus the period in which our novels were written could be said to promote, simultaneously, the traditional models of womanhood and the opportunity for new models and roles.

Cigognetti and Servetti, in their analysis of Italian post-war film and popular weeklies, have argued persuasively for the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in portrayals of these changes: typically, as they promoted images of modern, independent career women, they at the same time stressed that these women were also (or planned to be) exemplary wives and mothers (560). Certainly, the emancipating effects of the international feminist movement that would bring major social change to the western world in the late 1960s and 1970s were still many years away.

If the influence of Catholicism, the power of the traditional family, and the legacy of Fascism had created, and still maintained, a pervasive Madonna/Whore dichotomy in popular Italian models of the female, the Italian male had also been long straitjacketed into clearly delineated virile and patriarchal roles. This particular model was promoted most insistently

during the *Ventennio*, the twenty-year reign of Mussolini's Fascism, in which the masculine duties of warrior, *pater familias*, and procreator were idealised, and alternative forms of masculinity that were deemed passive or feminised, such as homosexuality or anti-militarism, were ridiculed and persecuted. Elena Dell'Agnese and Elisabetta Ruspini enumerate the characteristics of Fascism's "caricaturised construction of masculinity" ("costruzione caricaturale della mascolinità"), citing worship of the warrior-male and "exaltation of aggressive heroism" ("esaltazione dell'eroismo aggressivo"); a strong association between virility and fatherhood; a strongly demarcated gender divide; and, in short, "celebration of a masculinity that was exasperatingly virile, aggressive, misogynist and homophobic" ("celebrazione di una mascolinità esasperatamente virile, aggressiva, misogina e omofobica") (xix-xx).¹³⁴

As well as a being a father and husband, the ideal Italian male was also, paradoxically, portrayed as a virile seducer, irresistible to women. Certainly, this construction had some of its origins overseas, notably in the Hollywood film and in popular northern European fiction, but it was reinforced within Italy itself by Fascist models of masculinity. While before the Second World War the image could be traced both to the impossibly handsome but also slightly androgynous movie star Rudolph Valentino and to Mussolini's promotion of himself as both a symbol of virility and as an object of desire for Italy's women, Barbara Bracco has argued that in the period immediately after the Second World War it underwent subtle changes:

After 1945, the image of the Italian seducer seems, in fact, to become less ambiguous than the Italian-American movie star [i.e. Valentino] and at the same time less virile

¹³⁴ For a more detailed exploration of the masculinities of this era, see Sandro Bellassai's chapter on "La Grande guerra e il fascismo" (76-98).

than the fascist male; that is, he takes on the characteristics of a more working-class man, and, indeed, the more he models himself on the lower middle class or directly on the “masses”, the more credible he becomes.

A partire dal 1945 l'immagine dell'italiano seduttore sembra infatti diventare meno ambiguo del divo italo-americano e al tempo stesso meno virile del maschio fascista; insomma assume i tratti dell'uomo più popolare, anzi quanto più si mimetizza nella piccola borghesia o addirittura nel “popolino” tanto più diventa credibile (65-66).

The new male, epitomised by screen stars like Alberto Sordi and Marcello Mastroianni, veered now towards a type characterised by Jacqueline Reich, among others, as the *inetto*, the inept man who fails in the role of hypermale and/or seducer and is outwitted by women.¹³⁵ “The *inetto* is passive rather than active, cowardly rather than brave, and physically or emotionally impotent rather than powerful, always in direct opposition to the deeply rooted masculine norms of Italian culture” (Reich 52). This man is far removed from the Fascist superman; he struggles to cope in a world that has been irrevocably changed by war, defeat, economic collapse, and an emerging feminism. Dell’Agnese and Ruspini speak of “a profound crisis in masculine identity” (“una profonda crisi dell’identità maschile”), brought on by disillusionment with the Fascist warrior ideal and a recognition of irreversible social change that was giving women a new place in public life; they conclude that “Growing challenges made necessary redefinition of a masculinity that was by now obsolete, artificial and inadmissible” (“Le sfide crescenti hanno reso necessaria una ridefinizione di una mascolinità ormai obsoleta, artificiale e improponibile”) (xx).

While the norms of the popular genres employed by Scerbanenco demand the stereotypes of the competent, dominating male and the submissive female, I argue that the traits of the *inetto*, this flawed, inept man, can be found clearly stamped on Scerbanenco’s romantic

¹³⁵ Though ostensibly the consummate “Latin lover”, Mastroianni played an impotent man in one of his most successful roles (*Il bell’Antonio*, 1960).

heroes, and that this reduction of the hero to a more human scale offers his heroines a way out of traditional patriarchal passivity.

At the same time that the decisive defeat of Italy – and Mussolini’s Fascism – fatally undermined the model of the all-powerful warrior male, women’s lives were also changing, creating a slow but steady shift in the balance of gender relations. Bracco points out the centrality in post-war Italian cinema of strong, independent women who are “No longer conceived as ‘other’, that is as the countertype that gives value to the male – as in the Fascist years [...]” (“Non più concepita come ‘altro’ cioè controtipo che avvalora il maschio – come negli anni di fascismo [...]”) (69). These women, played by actresses such as Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, and Silvana Mangano, are characterised by a spectacular physicality, in which Bracco sees manifested the need for national regeneration based on models of the human body that move far away from the warrior male. These spectacular, strong women are also found throughout Scerbanenco’s fiction, though more often in secondary, helper roles than as heroines, as we shall see below.

Scerbanenco’s “vero uomo” and “vera donna”

The phrases “vero uomo” (“real man”) and “vera donna” (“real woman”) echo throughout Scerbanenco’s hybrid romances, to the extent that one must agree that part of the novels’ project is to identify what constitutes appropriate masculinity and femininity. Superficially, these qualities may seem to conform to the stereotypes of both the classic romance and classic adventure story and to certain national Italian visions such as the Latin lover and the Fascist warrior, in the case of men, and the Angel of the Hearth and the good-hearted natural beauty, in the case of women. Indeed, Cranny-Francis’s “compliant reader”, accepting Hall’s

“dominant-hegemonic” positioning, will find much evidence for these gender models. Close reading of the novels and their gender constructions will show, however, that these constructions contain the seeds of their own negation. I shall begin with what appears to be a highly patriarchal text and look at how it fashions models of femininity and masculinity.

I diecimila angeli: femininities and masculinities

This novel, as with most of the novels under study here, presents a range of possible feminine roles, either “bad” women, or “good”, even “ideal”, women. Their defining factor is their relationship to the male protagonist, Aldo, and his notions of correct femininity within the naturalised patriarchal order which he embodies and enacts.

As the male centre of this novel, Aldo defines the women characters by his familial and sentimental relationships with them: his mother, aunt (Silvia), his cousin/ward (Giovanna), and his lovers, the coolly aristocratic Cristina Visier and the childlike, fragile Marina/Libella. One possible, perhaps dominant, reading is that this novel upholds a traditional view of ideal femininity as domestic, mothering, subordinate, and in need of male protection.

Transgression, especially if it involves “masculine” behaviours such as indulging in sex without love, spending family money recklessly and self-indulgently, or even holding down an independent career, brings either punishment or paternalistic guidance into more appropriate behaviour, depending on the severity of the transgression.

Perhaps the most stereotyped and patriarchal treatment is reserved for Aldo’s mother, who, since she is a widow and, moreover, has no sense of financial responsibility, is under the tutelage of both her brother Franco and her son. This woman manifests the antithesis of classic “good” femininity: her vanity, manifested in absurd efforts to appear much younger

than she is, attracts ridicule. Her sexuality is condemned as inappropriate for a middle-aged mother: not only does she have a lover, but her lover is little more than a pimp and a charlatan who is exploiting her money and social position. In short, the text makes clear that this woman has no judgement when it comes to either money or relationships, she is inappropriately sexual, and – even worse – she is non-compliant with male counsel, retreating into a childish state of petulance and impotent defiance when Aldo threatens her freedom. Nor does this mother have any maternal qualities: when Aldo is ill, almost dying from a lung infection, she is on holiday with a young lover and only finds out about his illness months later. Indeed, in a telling scene when Giovanna, Aldo, and his mother holiday in Venice, Giovanna reveals that she has passed Mussell’s “domestic test” by showing how much the mother has failed the test: Giovanna spends her evening darning socks, while the mother smokes cigarettes and flicks through glossy magazines.

Aldo’s Aunt Silvia is held up to similar ridicule by her nephew: she is portrayed as a young gold-digger who has little love or even respect for her wealthy, elderly husband; she takes lovers and flirts openly, and incestuously, with Aldo. Both the mother and aunt are punished for their transgressions. Silvia is beaten, since Uncle Franco believes (and Aldo seems to concur) that physical discipline is the most effective means to subdue an “unfeminine” wife. The mother has her independence taken from her: she is banished to Aldo’s new home in the wilderness and relieved of her cheque book; when she remains rebellious, she is threatened with relegation to a closed institution for the mentally ill, a prospect that fills her with terror since a friend of hers has already been consigned to this clinic as punishment for her own unwifely transgressions.

Aldo's cousin and eventual wife Giovanna, on the other hand, is the perfect model of patriarchal femininity. She is patient and self-effacing, winning her man with her domestic skills rather than her sexuality, since she dresses plainly, indeed frumpishly in Aldo's eyes, and has a rather masculine appearance, being exceptionally tall, short-haired, and devoid of make-up. Tellingly, Aldo has long been able to resist Giovanna sexually, spending chaste nights alone with her when they have been obliged to share a room, and rejecting her explicit advances with the excuse that they will wait for marriage.

Although Aldo marries her, Giovanna is fully aware of his continuing obsession with Marina/Libella, the woman whose sexuality proved so irresistible to him. When even her patience is wearing thin, Giovanna plays her trump card by coyly revealing her pregnancy, an act that finally converts Aldo to his "romantic" role of good husband and father, and ensures the requisite happy ending. With a new maternal power that allows her to treat her husband as a child rather than a master, Giovanna is finally able to defy Aldo's authority, refusing to allow him to send his mother to a clinic. The final words of the novel underline this role reversal as she gently calms her husband after his furious outburst, deflecting his attention as if he were a small child:

She comforted him like a child, but she embraced him as a man. 'You'll see that your mother will change [...], don't think about it, let's go to the beach, come and get some sun, look how beautiful it is here ... And our child will be beautiful, healthy, more handsome even than his father, come on, my love, it's so sunny there on the beach... .

Lo confortò come un bambino, ma si strinse a lui come ad un uomo. "Vedrai che la mamma cambierà [...], non ci pensare, andiamo sulla spiaggia, vieni a prendere un po' di sole, guarda come è bello qui... E anche il nostro bambino sarà bello, sano, più bello ancora di suo padre, vieni, amore, c'è tanto sole là sulla spiaggia...". (296)

Giovanna is a career woman with a successful textile business in which she has created a model system of employer-employee relations. Manifesting the classic symptoms of Negra's "retreatism", Giovanna realises, however, that in order to find true fulfilment she must retreat from the public (and, by implication, male) world of work, back to the home and family. Here, it is implied, her business flair can be employed in more appropriate ways as a support to her husband, Aldo's, business projects.

While this novel presents many versions of the female, there is just one central male, the protagonist Aldo who, in classic *noir* style, sets the story in motion with a minor transgression that has far-reaching consequences, and who subsequently undergoes a process of self-discovery and redemption. Aldo is superficially the classic Italian Latin lover: he is young, wealthy, and handsome, a man who has no need to work but occupies his days chasing beautiful women from his home in the fashionable resort of Santa Margherita, ostensibly as a talent scout for Cinecittà, but with the understanding that seduction is the price these women will pay. In case there is any doubt that Aldo is highly desirable to women, his servant Lisa, a young, unsophisticated country girl, nurtures an unrequited passion for him. The appropriate channel for Aldo's virility is signalled by his wife's pregnancy at the end of the novel, when both have – symbolically but also literally – retreated from the public world into their isolated, self-contained domestic space.

Read as pure romance, then, this novel may appear to be one of Scerbanenco's most conservative and patriarchal. Applying the key of *noir*, however, it is possible to construct alternative understandings of the novel's gender constructs. As a romantic hero, Aldo must be tamed and domesticated, persuaded by the patience and forbearance (as well as the home-making skills and fecundity) of Giovanna to abandon his shallow, self-indulgent, amoral

playboy life to become a good husband and father. Starting out as the kind of man who treats all women as essentially interchangeable (his “10,000 angels”) and literally disposable, he learns to appreciate commitment and love. As a *noir* anti-hero, however, Aldo’s persona and trajectory are less simplistic. Aldo is tormented by a psychological malaise. Although the wound to his groin that marks the onset of this mental turmoil heals physically, it continues to manifest itself in a limp that has psychosomatic origins, reappearing when he is feeling most guilty.¹³⁶ Aldo is the classic *noir* hero who commits a small, banal transgression and is punished by being trapped in a nightmare that seems incommensurate with the minor scale of the transgression.

The wound Aldo sustains on the beach is metaphorically associated with impotence. In any case, Aldo abandons his life as a Don Giovanni, feeling an unaccustomed remorse for the damage he has wrought on impressionable young women and on many marriages. The disappearance of his former potency is further highlighted in an incident in which his fiancée Giovanna tries to tempt him into bed, and he refuses with the excuse that they will wait for marriage – an excuse that he realises offends and humiliates her. It is not until the last pages of the novel, once Aldo has made good his promises to Marina/Libella and has married Giovanna, that the return of his potency is made explicit by Giovanna’s announcement that she is pregnant. This is of course the contained potency of the family man, which has replaced the profligate hypermasculinity of the heartless seducer.

Aldo’s wound reduces all his physical powers: he limps and is occasionally unable to walk without support. When Marina/Libella meets him again, years after their beach encounter,

¹³⁶ Although it is initially described as a thigh wound, it is referred to as a wound to the groin by the doctor whom Aldo consults for a second opinion.

she seems to recognise that he is no longer the ideal lover she initially saw him as: now what strikes her first is his “weak chin, like that of a spoilt child” (“mento breve da bambino viziato”) (165). Aldo is a man who is damaged in both body and psyche, a man whom we might consider to be no great prize for either Marina/Libella or Giovanna.

Indeed, in the light of *noir*, it is not certain that any of the characters succeed to a happy ending. Giovanna has won over her man, but only after a great deal of forbearance and self-sacrifice. Aldo’s mother avoids the clinic, but is still firmly under her son’s thumb, and just as much a prisoner in a desolate location that must surely to her seem equivalent to Marina/Libella’s “Dead House”. Even Marina/Libella, to whom Aldo finally makes good his initial empty promise of a career in film, has to part from the man who sincerely loves her and relocate to the shallow, cynical world of Cinecittà.

If, alternatively, one reads Marina/Libella’s trajectory as a rags-to-riches fairy tale, this then throws an unflattering light on Giovanna’s path, which in its trajectory from career woman to a woman defined by marriage and motherhood, is the polar opposite to Marina/Libella’s. The former escapes from the intolerable wilderness of the Casa Morta, the latter embraces it in Aldo’s coastal home. In the fairy-tale world of romance, both women achieve wish fulfilment; in the more realist mode of *noir*, however, their triumphs are at the very least ambivalent.

While it is true that the enduring cliché of the popular romance is the taming of the proud, hypermasculine hero, this is not ultimately the trajectory of any of Scerbanenco’s male protagonists, whose hypermasculinity is always a mere façade. As we have seen above, comparison with heroes in some of his contemporaries’ *romanzi rosa* highlights this

aberration. The focalisation in exemplary works by Dandolo, Mancuso, and Sensi allows little access into the male mind. The female protagonist regards the male as a prize, and so he must be worthy. These men are hypermasculine stereotypes, and these stories play out through the male recognising the superior feminine qualities of the heroine rather than acknowledging any weaknesses in his masculinity. By contrast, even the strongest of Scerbanenco's males demonstrate a basic ineptitude, as we shall see.

Double readings

Cranny-Francis et al. have pointed out that “generic mixing may not necessarily signify that gendering practices are under scrutiny, but it often does” (*Gender Studies* 112). It is clear that Scerbanenco's texts question popular fiction's classic gender stereotypes of a “dark, brooding and masterful” hero and a heroine who is “tremulous, subordinate and focused with doe-eyed adulation on the male” (Eagleton 253); clear, too, that genre hybridity has a significant role in opening up the possibility of divergent readings of both male and female protagonists and of secondary characters. A close look at *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*'s ambiguous constructions of masculinity and femininity bears out the part played by genre blending.

Both Elsa and Tomaso, her “last man” (“ultimo uomo”), feature in the title. She has top billing, but he opens the story; together they share the focalisation of the text, occupying roughly equal space, alone and together. In short, one cannot say with certainty that this is a story of Elsa finding love or, alternatively, a story of Tomaso battling his criminal past. It is both – just as it is a story of Tomaso finding love and Elsa harbouring and aiding a criminal – and this colours the possibilities offered by the text for interpreting the gendered significance of the pair.

Of the pair, Tomaso occupies what should traditionally be the active role, as both criminal and lover, with Elsa as the passive victim of his crime and object of his courtship. In fact, a more passive Tomaso is soon posited: it seems that he is a victim of fate, his trajectory sealed by both his youthful bad decisions and his inconvenient but inescapable desire for Elsa. In the opening chapter, Tomaso presents as a conman, on a mission to charm Elsa into revealing her employer's security systems. As a criminal, his role is to act as a false lover, cynically manipulating young women with his good looks and beguiling personality; in this role he is simply an alternative tool to be employed by his gang's masterminds when the brute force of the "Cudgel Brothers" is not appropriate. It is highly significant that the text places him as not the tool but the recipient of violence; his savagely beaten body forms a central motif. Unlike a cowboy hero, Tomaso does not prove his manhood through such suffering but is almost destroyed by it, recovering only after being tended to and restored by two strong women, Elsa and Margo Spanni.

In fact, Tomaso can be seen as an ironic opposite of the masterful hero of romance and adventure, the man who will provide wealth and a rise in social status for the modest heroine. Tomaso has had a comfortable life, a house, career prospects, and a respectable name, and has wilfully destroyed all of them. He passes himself off as the aspirational staple of the popular romance, a doctor, when he is simply a grifter. In short, Tomaso begins early to demonstrate the traits of the *inetto*. These traits are thrown into relief when set against the model of masculinity offered by Elsa's alternative suitor, the mature, paternal, wealthy, and irreproachable lawyer and family friend, Antonio.

Like Tomaso, Elsa presents several faces. First of all, she is seen as a passive woman, longing for love and a "Principe Azzurro", a Prince Charming to redeem her life. Although

she has a relatively independent existence, living alone in rented rooms, working as personal secretary to an industrialist, and apparently enjoying the financial security to lead a comfortable middle-class life, her focus is on marriage. Superficially polite to Antonio's plain maid, Silvia, Elsa conceals tears of frustration and brutally jealous thoughts when she weighs their respective value in the marriage market: "With that little corpse-like face of hers, and her cut-price dentures, Silvia was in love, was loved in return, and was getting married in a couple of months. For her, the siren of Mantua, nothing" ("Con quel faccino da cadavere che aveva, e quella dentatura in economia, la Silvia amava, era riamata e si sposava di lì a un paio di mesi. Lei, la sirena di Mantova, niente") (20). At this point, Elsa's need for the institution of marriage and the security she believes it will bring threatens to override the romantic feelings kindled by her brief meeting with her "Principe Azzurro", Tomaso. She now toys with the notion of a pragmatic marriage to her avuncular guardian – a proposition she is soon forced to take seriously, when a chance look reveals the hitherto unsuspected truth that he is in love with her.

As Tomaso becomes more hunted and desperate, Elsa takes action, hiding him and later venturing into the gang's home territory when she goes in search of him. She finds Tomaso legal counsel and supports him in his plan to turn himself in and denounce the gang, even though this brings potential ruin upon herself. In short, Elsa reverses the norms of the classic popular romance, rejecting the man who offers social betterment and domestic stability and choosing a man who can certainly offer her love but has a criminal record, a despoiled home, and an uncertain future.

We may of course read this as classic romance: Elsa reforms, tames, and domesticates her man through love, patience and sacrifice; Tomaso is essentially a good man, led astray by

bad company, who can be moulded into a good husband. On the other hand, if our interest is more in the working out of the crime story, then our interest is more likely to focus on Elsa's courage, her contempt for the patriarchal norms that see Tomaso as her ruin, and her success in finding a solution to his dilemma. Similarly, we may see Tomaso for what he is, an inept small-time crook, who lacks the toughness for the job he has taken on and needs the help of Elsa, his family, and her friends to escape the gang and to neutralise it.

We may see a similar ambiguity of gender construction in *Johanna della foresta*. This novel, structured as it is upon the principles of the fairy tale, superficially would seem to manifest the most stereotypical gender constructions. Donato is identified by no less an authoritative figure than Police Chief Glicker as a "vero uomo" for his integrity and honesty. He is also physically powerful, handsome, well educated, and paternal, acting as protector of his younger "squire", Francino.

The object of Donato's seemingly impossible passion, Johanna, is for much of the novel portrayed as an infantilised victim. Her clothes and hair are childish, she looks much younger than her real age, and she sacrifices herself to protect her father, in spite of knowing him to be a criminal. Johanna's life seems entirely defined by relationships with men who force her to act against both her conscience and her own best interests. Her victimhood and passivity are accentuated not just by her sacrificial sense of duty towards her father and her submission to Warchen's blackmail but also by her repeated rescues – first by Francino, then by the woodsman, and finally by her knight in shining armour, Donato. With no chance to get to know the real Johanna beyond her bewitching physical appearance, Donato for much of the novel treats her as a blank slate on which to project his desires.

Within the romance, Johanna progresses from the passive state of child victim to married woman not by her own efforts but by virtue of the redemption her lover accords her. As we have seen, her transformation is literally physical: donning her wedding dress and a more adult hairstyle, she enters a new stage of maturity that is defined in entirely patriarchal terms. Read as the heroine of her own romance, Johanna may be seen as the most stereotypical of all the heroines I have studied here, a mere cypher for male desire and manipulation.

Read in terms of the second thread of the story, Johanna begins to achieve an agency that signals she is less of a child than she may superficially seem. Having returned “from the dead” to her home, only to be once again menaced by her blackmailer, Johanna appears to renounce her role as passive victim and to plot Warchen’s murder. Moreover, with her tortured past of rape and unwanted pregnancy, Johanna is far from the figure that Pozzato has identified as a constant in Liala’s romances: “the child bride, the girl who passes directly from infancy to the guardianship of her husband without the possibility of creating a ‘past’ for herself, that is, relevant experience, usually of a sexual nature” (“[la] sposa bambina, [la] ragazza cioè che passa direttamente dall’infanzia alla tutela del marito senza avere la possibilità di farsi ‘un passato’, un’esperienza cioè rilevante, di solito di carattere sessuale”) (“Liala” 102).

Donato is superficially portrayed as hypermasculine, combining physical strength, intelligence, and a strong ethical sense. His foil, the poet Francino, is sickly, an ineffectual dreamer whose effeminacy earns him the nickname “la signorina” in the absolutely masculinised world of the logging camp. Although his infatuation with Johanna saves him from the implied slur of homosexuality, Francino’s feminine qualities clearly suggest that he is not fully a man. This is of course a classic ploy in the discourse of masculinism, where, as

Connell notes, vilification of homosexuality works “to draw social boundaries, defining ‘real’ masculinity by its distance from the rejected” (40).

In fact, Donato is not as effectual as he seems. It is Francino, after all, who initially saves Johanna from suicide, finds her a hiding place, and supports her until her illness forces him to reveal her whereabouts to Donato. Nor does Donato solve the problem of Warchen. His plan to spirit Johanna across the border – a plan he cannot carry out without Gertrude’s assistance – is foiled when the police locate Johanna’s hiding place; his later plan to kill Warchen is foiled when another murderer gets in ahead of him; and the attempts he may make to uncover the real murderer and remove suspicion from himself and his friends are rendered irrelevant when the murderer, Szapocki, confesses. In terms of the romance, this bolt from the blue frees Donato to continue in his role of “vero uomo” and model husband; in terms of the crime story, it undercuts his masculine agency since, ultimately, he succeeds as neither avenger nor crime solver.

In fact, the one highly effectual character is the schoolteacher and voluntary aid worker, Gertrude. Donato exploits Gertrude’s love for him, using her both sexually and as a facilitator who smoothes over his many practical problems; while he feels remorse for the way he treats her, he never considers her as a suitable life-partner in the way he idealises the childlike Johanna, whom he barely knows.

Gertrude’s long blonde hair and shapely body mark her as physically spectacular, in the mould of those contemporary screen stars (Loren, Mangano, Lollobrigida) whom Bracco considers to provide a powerful post-war model of the feminine. Yet Gertrude manifests her strength through behaviours that are conventionally deemed masculine: she drives a jeep over

rough forest trails and exerts considerable authority within the local administrative hierarchy. Although Gertrude is aware of the patriarchal agenda, accepting that, at twenty-nine, she is too old for romantic love, she cannot be contained by social norms of feminine behaviour. Her dress serves to concentrate the contradictory gender signals epitomised by this woman: she wears practical, unglamorous trousers and overalls which, while masculine, highlight her spectacular body. This mix of the conventional outward signs of masculinity and femininity is a feature of the complexity of Scerbanenco's gender models, in which even his romantic heroines have a decided touch of masculinity, while his adventurous heroes are sentimentalists.

Gertrude's last minute marriage to Glicken seems contrived, a mere tidying up of loose ends to supply a conventional happy ending to this most fabular of Scerbanenco's romances. While it is true that Johanna and Gertrude are ultimately seen to have been securely reinstated within the patriarchal order, their earlier agency has at least suggested more subversive roles and behaviours. We have also seen that Glicken and Donato are not necessarily the effectual men of stereotype; reading in the key of *noir*, one may argue that their status as ideal husbands is undercut by the fact that neither has successfully dealt with the major crime that underpins the story – that of Johanna's father.

What of the spy adventures and Westerns? These might be expected to provide models of tough masculinity, but oppositional readings are certainly possible. Both Stiva (*Anime*) and Kirk (*Appuntamento*) are passive heroes: Stiva's life is simply reactive, while Kirk is powerless in his confinement. Stiva, in particular, has the characteristics of the *inetto*: he is an outsider, homeless, poor, and at the mercy of people and events he cannot conquer. Though no coward, he makes poor decisions, and the course of his life is shaped by others. If

Stiva eventually wins Fabia, his true love, he is not the one who saves her. Only once he is paired with Fabia does Stiva acquire the power to act with supreme courage and resolve; and only then can he receive assurance – from his new spymaster and surrogate father, Herbert Lynn – that he has become a “vero uomo”, a real man. While there is no suggestion that Kirk lacks courage or physical power, without his true love Diana he is impotent in every sense. Not only has he no ability to shield her from his own enemies, he is prevented from taking any meaningful action. More significantly, this former womaniser has become celibate, humiliating Bet by resisting her attempts to seduce him.

Tompkins’ observations on the Western hero’s “massive suppression of [his] inner life” (66) do not hold true in Scerbanenco’s autodiegetically narrated Westerns, which construct male protagonists with acute self-awareness. In these novels, too, the heroes seem unable to act effectively. Both Roy (*Rossa*) and Martino (*La mia ragazza*) are men on the run, powerless to escape the weight of their pasts. It is his lover, Rossa, who kills Roy’s enemy; her rival in love, Sybille, provides the means to keep the couple’s blackmailers at bay, if unwittingly. Roy is not even responsible for eliminating the blackmailers, who kill each other in the crossfire of the final shoot-out. Likewise, Martino does not kill his persecutors: his lover, Zuñita, supplies the *coup de grace* to the men he has only wounded. Martino cannot save Zuñita but only lead her to a temporary refuge where both wait for inevitable discovery and execution. These men are as sentimental, emotional, and vulnerable as any classic romance heroine, sharing her longing for love and domesticity, as the autodiegetic narration makes apparent. The traditional masculine/feminine divide of the classic Western that is posited by Pumphrey (181) emphatically does not apply here.

Vignettes and voices

Confining her comments to the Lamberti novels, Burns has noted how Scerbanenco constructs ambivalent characters and situations that, while condemning transgressive behaviour – and especially transgressive female behaviour – provide titillating glances of less traditional feminine roles: “Reading of the stereotypes at further levels [...] allows them to challenge conventional morality by contradicting the stereotype, and by offering alternative models of behaviour, in which the transgressive is seen as potentially positive” (“Conforming to type?” 2). Burns, in a rare feminist reading of Scerbanenco’s work, situates her argument specifically in the context of changing norms of Italian women’s behaviour in the early 1960s.

Pieri has suggested that a Bakhtinian analysis may be fruitfully employed in reading the author’s weave of contradictory voices in the Lamberti novels. It is true that the irony that is overt in these late crime novels is less pervasive in the novels that make up the current study, but it is certainly present, so that Pieri’s insight is worth quoting in full:

Nostalgia in Scerbanenco’s narrative is always tainted by irony, which is achieved by the use of a Bakhtinian polyphony of voices in the novels. This polyphony can articulate different discourses and is a most powerful ironic device. The narrating voice is characterised by an ironic scepticism and alternates continually between the moral code of the hard-boiled detective, the language of economic reports, the sentimental prose and clichés of the *romanzo rosa*, and the mocking denial of the ideologies that these points of view imply. (148-49)

Canova, who devotes much time to examining Scerbanenco’s use of language in the Lamberti novels, notes his tendency to consider each word “in Bakhtinian manner” (“bachtinianamente”) as an “inhabited word” (“parola abitata”) (169), by drawing out its rich context; he comments, too, on the author’s “frequent and insistent use of *free indirect*

discourse [which] allows the narrator to incorporate, on the level of diegetic communication, his characters' vivid expressions and to alternate voices and various points of view [...]" ("ricorso frequente e insistito al *discorso indiretto libero* [che] consente al narratore di incorporare, sul piano della comunicazione diegetica, le espressioni vive dei suoi personaggi e di alternare voci e punti di vista diversi [...]" (166).

While I agree with Burns, Pieri, and Canova that this polyphony is at its most self-conscious and highly developed in the Lamberti novels, I contend that a similar variety of voices is found in the earlier, less overtly ironic novels that make up my study. We have seen how these texts comment upon their own genres – when characters read crime novels or love stories, or decide in which key to tell their personal history.

Scerbanenco characteristically makes use of a weave of competing voices that open up alternative interpretive positions. To some extent, this seems to have arisen from a mind that brimmed with more stories than he could ever tell: Pirani tells how, from 1963 to 1964, Scerbanenco composed "four mini-stories of a set length and based on a single theme, each week for 94 consecutive weeks: 376 texts [...]" ("quattro miniracconti di lunghezza prefissata e attorno ad un unico tema, ogni settimana per 94 settimane consecutive: 376 testi [...]" ("Nota" 292). Cecilia Scerbanenco has recounted how her father "drew his inspiration from life, things, people, situations that he encountered while he was strolling in the street or eating in a restaurant, minor news items he read in the daily papers; everything ended up in his stories" ("prendeva spunto dalla vita, cose, persone, situazioni che incontrava passeggiando per strada o mangiando in un ristorante, note di cronaca minore che leggeva sui quotidiani; tutto finiva nelle sue storie") ("Ma che colpa" 10). And Scerbanenco drew, too, on the real life dramas provided by the letters his readers sent to him over the many years he

occupied the role of “Agony Aunt” for the women’s magazines he edited. Perhaps as a result of this inexhaustible store of ideas drawn from observation of the life around him, Scerbanenco constantly embeds glimpses of lives which hint at rich stories that remain undeveloped. Many of these stories provide a counterpoint to the main story; in particular, they offer alternative femininities and masculinities.

Fiske has described the necessary and continuous tension between competing readings within the popular text, whose surface promotes conservatism and prevailing ideologies, but which nevertheless must contain, “while attempting to repress them, voices that contradict the ones it prefers” (*Understanding Popular Culture* 84). In this way, the popular text fulfils its key requirement of relevance to the individual and changing social situations of a broad spectrum of readers. This accommodation to multiple reading positions is borne out by Cigognetti and Servetti’s comments on the ambivalent presentation of career women, as both daring and domestic, in Italian magazines of the post-war period (560).

At this point, one may draw upon Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism and polyphony in the novel. Working initially in the field of linguistics, Bakhtin argued that all language utterances contain within them relationships to other utterances, so that there is never a final authoritative word.¹³⁷ From here, Bakhtin developed the notions of the double-voiced discourse, heteroglossia, and polyphony, which explain how competing ideas and tones (that is, competing “voices”) are in constant interplay within the novel, denying the author the last word.

¹³⁷ As expressed by a member of Bakhtin’s circle, V.N. Voloshinov, “Any utterance, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication” (95).

While the ironic narratorial tone and the shifts in register that Pieri identifies as instances of Bakhtinian polyphony in the Lamberti novels are scarcely in evidence in my sample, Scerbanenco's romances do always provide a broad social mix, ranging from working class to minor aristocracy; they also have subtle shifts in register as they move between the fairy-tale love world and the gritty crime world, a shift that is especially marked in *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*.

Scerbanenco's characteristic sprinkling of vignettes throughout his texts provides another essential means of giving voice to alternative points of view and provides an example of what Bakhtin termed "social heteroglossia" (316). The subjects of these brief embedded stories are often older women, who act as helper figures, and whose function is crucial to the playing out of the crime story. Although their stories may occupy a small space, they give the reader cause to question not just the genre of the text but socio-cultural attitudes as well, as some examples from our texts will show.

Signora Cárola (*Appuntamento*), an elderly abortionist with an aristocratic surname, shelters and nurses Bella after she is tortured by her brother, Kirk's antagonist Vsic, and supplies a brief glimpse into an intriguing but unexplored story that resonates with the main story.

Although she lives in squalor and is constantly targeted by the police, the overriding impression is that Signora Cárola is a good-hearted woman who has been reduced by some misfortune: just as Bella, and Diana too, are victims of cruel circumstance. Thus, in what may be seen as an example of double-voicing, the reader must choose between condemning this woman for her life of squalor and her illegal activities, and applauding her for saving the life of a character who is in the process of transformation from femme fatale to victimised

“good” woman. Although Signora Cárola is clearly outside both the law and bourgeois society, violating all conservative and patriarchal norms, she may be read as heroic.

A similar glimpse of the complex and unconventional life of an indomitable woman can be seen in the brief appearances of the Mantuan obstetrician, Margo Spanni, who provides vital medical assistance to Tomaso in the aftermath of his torture (*Elsa*). This pragmatic, humane woman has devoted her life to the memory of a son who died at the hands of Communists in the Second World War: she maintains his library of political literature and his strong anti-Communist views, refusing to forgive her left-wing compatriots, yet continuing to deliver their “red babies” (“rossini”). Spanni’s story has a distinctly neo-realist flavour; it forms a sharp contrast to the fairy-tale history of Umberto and Celeste that is told alongside hers. A physically fragile member of the Mantuan bourgeoisie, Celeste has endured trials to win her huge, rough, but devoted peasant husband and an idyllic country life, whereas Margo lives in the real world of mid-century political and social fracture. One has retreated and one is engaged: yet both women’s situations are offered as exemplary ways of life.

Alberto’s Yugoslavian contact and lover Tatiana (*La sabbia*) provides yet another glimpse into the life of a heroic woman, a woman who is trapped in poverty and squalor in a shattered country where, since childhood, she has witnessed massacres and destruction. Unable to escape, Tatiana risks her life passing information to her Italian contact. Tatiana appears only once, and her story is briefly told. In terms of the romance, she provides the means by which Alberto recognises Michela as his true love, by rejecting this rival claimant. In terms of the central crime story, Tatiana plays no role, but she does make it clear that the heroic detective, Alberto, has a female counterpart, a woman with her own, surely stronger, claim on heroism.

As a strong, independent woman, Tatiana is a counterpart to Gertrude (*Johanna*) and a host of other irrepressible women who figure in secondary roles in Scerbanenco's fiction.

Other stories are scarcely stories at all, simply fleeting episodes that give a glimpse of other lives that are left unexplored. One such is that of the unnamed barista who provides some respite for Mauro (*Noi due*) when, newly on the run and still in his incriminating bus driver's uniform, he encounters two police officers in her bar. This good-hearted Romagnan woman sings snatches of popular songs and flirts with Mauro, but also shows a motherly concern. Though ephemeral, she has the power to be read – in the key of romance – first as a flirt and then as a paradigm of domestic, nurturing femininity; alternatively – in the key of adventure – she is a strong, resourceful woman whose intervention aids Mauro in his escape. These dual possibilities are made explicit by the text, as it tells the reader that “Her previous flirtatious tone had changed, had become the encouraging tone of a practical woman” (“Il tono da civetta di prima era cambiato, era divenuto rincuorante, da donna pratica”) (18). Likewise, her innate reliability as a helper is made explicit in the aside, “women from Romagna [...] aren't scared of anything” (“le romagnole [...] non si spaventano di niente”) (16). Although she never figures again in the story, the refrains of her songs remain as a presence in the text as Mauro's story plays out.

Contessa Mercedes Benari, who provides a refuge for Mauro and Letizia in the same novel, supplies an exemplar of femininity from the opposite end of the social scale. The contessa is wealthy in her own right, an older woman who is still attractive and continues to take lovers, but also a shrewd business woman who has succeeded in living independently. The contessa is anything but domesticated, and yet she is one of the novel's most positive characters – in Propp's schema, she is unequivocally a “helper” in both the love and the crime story. She

advances Mauro and Letizia's love affair, and she provides cover for the fugitive Mauro as the noose starts to close on him.

Returning to the other end of the social scale, we find the story of Clothilde, Diana's teenaged maid, which occurs early in *Appuntamento a Trieste* and which could be read as a counterpoint to Diana's own story. Clothilde has concealed an unwanted pregnancy, until her botched suicide attempt reveals her situation. The episode would appear to have little relevance within the thrust of the main narrative. It is referred to again only once, by Diana, as a justification for her belief that Ricardo, who saved Clothilde's life, is a good person. Yet this vignette of a woman abandoned has some resonance when set against Diana's story: if the former has been abandoned in one of the oldest, most banal, and most sordid of "love stories", Diana, too, has abruptly lost her beloved and has experienced grief and a sense of abandonment. Like Clothilde, Diana has concealed her true state. Clothilde, however, is weighted down with a very real child, while Diana is weighted spiritually by grief experienced as "a great cold stone in her chest that weighed on her and dragged her down" ("una grande pietra fredda nel petto che pesava e tirava giù") (15). While Diana suffers nobly in her mind, the maid plays out an all too real and commonplace suffering.

This fascination with all social levels is characteristic of Scerbanenco. Sometimes the novels provide tantalising glimpses of raw street life: at one of the most suspense-filled moments in *Anime senza cielo*, just such a fleeting vignette appears. After taking the great risk of visiting his elderly aunt in Rome, Stiva realises that he has been exposed by one of her servants. He makes a furtive exit, fearing capture at any moment. On his way back to his hideout, he re-encounters a poorly dressed, slightly drunk young woman speaking a strong Roman dialect, who had accosted him earlier in the evening. This time she is more insistent, and Stiva seizes

the chance to use her as cover when police approach to check his papers. The highly charged incident is rapidly over, and we learn no more of the anonymous Roman woman, except that she is most likely a prostitute and certainly a police informer. Nevertheless, she is sketched in a positive light: she speaks in her own voice, a rich Roman dialect that is left untranslated, and her colourful, almost poetic speech makes Stiva smile in spite of his panic. She offers to shield him from the police, and she refuses the payment he offers. Although her lifestyle as both a prostitute and an informer should situate her as a classic example of “bad” femininity, a reader may find it hard to condemn her good-hearted actions.

A more highly developed example of the streetwise woman who rejects victimhood is found in *La sabbia non ricorda*’s Maruzza. While the men who surround her seek to relegate her to the most primitive forms of patriarchy, Maruzza has an irrepressible energy and a self-determination that refuse such containment; she leaves the reader impressed by the ways in which she moulds to her own advantage the patriarchal norms that indubitably govern her life. Such strong, self-possessed women as Maruzza abound in Scerbanenco’s novels: Sybille (*Rossa*), Isotta and Fabia (*Anime*), Gertrude Leuter and Tatiana (*La sabbia*), Clelia (*Fiume verde*), to name just a few. Whether in the foreground or appearing only fleetingly, all create a strong alternative model of the feminine.

Inevitably, Scerbanenco’s many vignettes bolster the realism of the texts, which take place not in some idealised romance time and place but in precisely pinpointed and minutely described modern European societies. Current events are mentioned; precise dates are supplied. This is no realm of fantasy but the gritty world of uncertainty and change that the novels’ first readers were experiencing themselves. These vignettes have the ring of truth.

Secondary characters

We have seen that many of Scerbanenco's characteristic vignettes rehearse alternative gender roles and attributes. This in itself is not uncommon in the popular romance, where the heroine is traditionally defined by being set against a "bad" woman, usually her rival in love. Weisser has spoken of the "triangular relation of the Bitch, the Heroine, and the female reader, who is made to contemplate the consequences of bad and good female behavior in its extremes through these two fictional character types" (270). Weisser is of course referring to highly formulaic Harlequin romances, but the bad rival/good heroine dichotomy, whether blatantly or more subtly drawn, is a staple of the genre. Rak cites the transgressions of the female love rival – the negative behavioural example – to support his thesis that the popular romance is "a manual for amorous instruction in story form" ("un manuale di educazione amorosa in forma di intreccio") (89).

Certainly, as we have seen in the case of *I diecimila angeli*, Scerbanenco's novels may provide glimpses of non-ideal models of female behaviour. However, it is less certain that the female rival is, in Weisser's words, "meant to be read against the heroine as a nightmare version of assertive, aggressively sexual, and non-nurturant womanhood" (270). In fact, I argue, the rivals are some of the most complex and interesting characters in many of these novels. As we have seen in Chapter Three, Scerbanenco's love rivals, whether male or female, do not model bad behaviour; in fact, the contrary is true, as the rival so often accepts defeat with grace and becomes a helper, fulfilling an active role in both the romance and the adventure plots.

Frequently, the love rival is rejected by the hero because he considers her too old or too experienced: this is the case with *Il fiume verde*'s Clelia, rejected by Stefano because she is thirty-five and has a child and ex-husband, although Stefano somewhat brutally acknowledges that things might have been different had they met earlier. Stiva considers Isotta (*Anime*) too old and unattractive for him, although he pities her before he begins, erroneously, to suspect and fear her as an enemy. Gertrude, who is arguably the most interesting and complex character in *Johanna della foresta* and certainly occupies far more space in the text than Johanna, has internalised conventional wisdom to the extent that she considers herself old at twenty-nine. Sybille Glows (*Rossa*) is simply not feminine enough to attract Roy: she wears glasses and has brisk business manners; she knows she must consciously change her style of dress to woo Roy, and even then she cannot succeed.

Indeed, these secondary women appear at their most stereotyped when they are focalised by males who appraise them initially in terms of physicality and marriageability. We have seen how Maruzza's construction as either a spectacular sex object or a strong and determined woman continually shifts, depending on the point of focalisation (*La sabbia*). Similarly, Johanna ceases to be a childish victim, in need of male protection, and starts to demonstrate some agency when she briefly becomes the focaliser (*Johanna* 260-62) and, significantly, steps out of the love story and into the crime story to face down her blackmailer and contemplate his murder.

In terms of the most patriarchal reading of the romance, the generous treatment accorded both Clelia and Gertrude by these texts may derive from the fact that both have a domesticated side, manifested in caring activities. Although Clelia works as a journalist, she is also a mother, and she nurses Alina when she is seriously disturbed. Gertrude teaches

small children; she is a trained nurse as well as a volunteer social worker. Nevertheless, these are modern career women, living independently without male support. When the demands of the crime story call for them to act, they rise to the occasion more effectively than the males who surround them. Both women are decisive and courageous; they also show great generosity to their rival in love. Like Gertrude, Clelia seems to be offered the consolation prize of courtship by a suitably elderly man, but her attitude to his advances remains ambiguous.

Gertrude's consolation prize for losing Donato is an eleventh-hour marriage to the older, less attractive police chief. That this is a marriage of companionship and convenience is underscored by Gertrude's sorrow as Donato and Johanna depart towards their marriage: the closing image of the novel is that of Gertrude weeping in the rain at the train station before being solicitously led away by her new husband. This final scene may be read in numerous ways. Readers who have been reading melodrama will experience the pathos of a strong and good woman receiving a lesser due than she deserves, while taking consolation from the fact that she still has gained a husband and a new future of domesticity. Readers who find Gertrude the one truly interesting character will have this position reinforced by the fact that she not only appears in the first pages, well before Johanna's entry, but closes the text and so asserts the centrality of her own story. If Johanna is, for the most part, a creature of timeless fairy tale, Gertrude's image remains as a pragmatic, resourceful, independent, and thoroughly modern woman in a harsh realist world where wishes are not fulfilled so easily.

Marina/Libella (*Diecimila angeli*) plays out another variation on the trajectory of the female. Her story is pure melodrama compared to the prosaic and prudent life of Giovanna. If everything Giovanna does is patient and measured, Marina/Libella is governed by extremes.

She has unrealistically romantic notions of love; when these are shattered by Aldo's brutality, she sinks into an extreme depression, marked by a disastrous marriage, social isolation, alcoholism, and prostitution. Domesticity for Marina/Libella, even with an uxorious husband and a sympathetic mother-in-law, is a nightmare of isolation and frustration. Rescued by Aldo from this dismal life, Marina/Libella is guided by him into a new career as a film star.

Marina/Libella's life story presents all the elements of the most melodramatic of popular literature for women, the *fotoromanzo*, where such rags-to-riches stories were standard. As a striking example of genre blending, this time at a micro-level, Marina/Libella's history has many similarities with the brief embedded melodrama that *La sabbia non ricorda*'s Michela recounts, concerning her disastrous relationship with Aligi. Both cases offer the reader another "voice" to consider, an alternative register in which to read.

Marina/Libella's story acts, too, as counterpoint to Giovanna's story. In the end, Aldo chooses the sensible, domestic, maternal Giovanna, and the novel ends on a note of hope for the new life their child will bring. Nevertheless, the allure of Marina/Libella's outcome suggests the possibility of an independent life of success and glamour, just as the frustration of Aldo's mother, who yearns for glamour and excitement and is trapped in her son's domestic world in the same way Marina/Libella was trapped in the Casa Morta, suggests the limitations of the enclosed domestic world. The ending may appear to be a conventional celebration of domesticity, but it surely contains within it a critique of this conventional happy ending.

The alternative female roles also hint of careers for women beyond the domestic sphere. No matter how bad her behaviour, Aldo's mother provides a tantalising glimpse of a world of

hedonism that attracts as much as it repels. Although Aldo and Giovanna extol the virtues of their simple life on the desolate, wind-swept northern Adriatic coast, the reader may side with Aldo's mother in her longing for her chic home and full social life in the fashionable resort of Santa Margherita. After all, the dreary subsistence life of the locals makes it clear that what for this wealthy and self-sufficient pair is an idyll is nothing like so rosy for those without choices. Tellingly, the mother compares the house to a monastery, for this isolation is, indeed, the only means Aldo knows to contain his mother's disturbing sexuality.

The louche lives of the Roman friends with whom Aldo and Giovanna briefly mingle on their honeymoon provide another glimpse of the world former playboy Aldo renounces: a world that is reinforced by the briefly sketched stories of immoral, cynical, and self-absorbed socialites in Aldo's mother's circle. In the case of Marina/Libella, the dangers of the cosmopolitan world are presented much more ambivalently. Marina/Libella is finally rewarded with a career in film that sees her transformed by chic new clothes, jewellery, and make-up. Although the shallowness, venality, and corruption of the Roman film world are made clear in the text, there is still a definite sense that Marina/Libella has entered a desirable world and that her aspirations for fame and fortune are laudable. The difference, of course, is that Marina/Libella retains her pure, kind heart and remains willing to be under the tutelage of male protectors, unlike Aldo's ungovernable mother.

Aldo's mother is by no means the only woman who chafes against the norms of patriarchal femininity and who, while superficially vilified, contains some potential for being read against the grain of patriarchy. Irene Prasin (*La sabbia*), the daughter of a criminal and Michela's rival for Roberto's love, is portrayed in broadly unsympathetic terms: Irene is a devious gold-digger who sees Roberto as a path out of poverty. Her physical beauty is

excessive, described in overblown terms. Physically and morally, she is the polar opposite of the aristocratic, restrained Michela, and yet she generates a natural, animalistic energy that may make her more attractive than her numbed and sedated rival. Roberto and Alberto continually use animal terms to describe both Irene and her father, but while in the father's case these epithets are unequivocally negative (he is an ape, a pig), in the case of Irene – “that animal masterpiece” (“quel capolavoro animale”) (94) – they have an admiring note. In short, Irene may well be read as the stereotype of the “bad” female, but, alternatively, her unashamed transgressions may be interpreted as giving her a defiant power. Both genres allow Irene off the hook: although she appears implicated in the murder at the heart of the crime story, she is cleared of guilt, and Alberto concedes that she, too, is one of Roberto's victims. Technically, she loses Roberto, but one assumes that she will not suffer greatly since her relationship with him was always based on self-interest rather than true love.

There is a similar ambiguity in this novel's presentation of sexually sophisticated modern young women. Alberto's condemnation of the forwardness of a teenaged woman he meets in a seaside bar is manifest in the label he gives her: without asking her name, he simply refers to her as “Lolita” or “the nymphet” (“la ninfetta”), and his judgement is scathing. “Lolita”, the reader may conclude, is a poor model of femininity, on a sure path to ruin. We must bear in mind, however, that the young woman is seen only through Alberto's eyes.

On the other hand, Gertrude Leuter, a woman who is equally independent and equally uninhibited in her sexuality, appears in a much more positive light and, crucially, is given her own voice. In one of several segments that are focalised through Gertrude, we are given a glimpse into her life in Hamburg, where she lives with her lover and works as an engineer. Gertrude is the epitome of the modern emancipated woman who rejects patriarchal restraints

on her sexuality; she coolly faces down the disapproval of the men who interview her about her lifestyle and who are forced to admit their admiration of her coolness and resolve. Unlike Michela, Gertrude takes a pragmatic approach to the fact that some of her lovers are married, and we can assume that she would not allow a man to ruin her life. This confident modern woman has a great deal of agency in the crime story: by concealing the murder weapon and the writing on the sand, she prolongs the murder investigation; later, her evidence allows Alberto to identify the real culprit and conclude the case.

If Gertrude Leuter is the figure of modernity, Maruzza is bound by the stifling patriarchal codes of traditional Italian society, a society that has cast her out because of her refusal to conform to sexual norms. Although much in the construction of Maruzza appears stereotyped, nevertheless she is on the cusp of the conflict between traditional and modern femininity, and she shows that she is very much her own woman. Thus Gertrude may allow the reader to shed new perspectives on both the rather feeble and old-fashioned behaviour of the traditional romance heroine, Michela, and the new behaviours of the incipient modern female, the “Lolita”; her example shows, too, how antiquated are the codes by which Maruzza’s life has been governed.

By the same token, Scerbanenco’s secondary male characters supply alternative masculinities. The older man, like the older woman, is a typical figure in the popular romance: a love rival who offers a paternalistic stability and security but lacks the vigour of the young male and so is most often rejected. Scerbanenco’s unsuccessful lovers include Elsa’s guardian/suitor Antonio (*Elsa*), Luisella’s employer/suitor Malli (*Noi due*), and Marina/Libella’s rescuer/husband Pino (*Diecimila angeli*). On the surface, these men provide all the scope for domesticity required by the patriarchal social norm. As with the female love

rival, these men are never ridiculed or vilified but instead become benign helper figures: in spite of his misgivings about the young criminal's suitability as a partner for Elsa, Antonio engages legal assistance for Tomaso; Malli provides a home and employment for the fugitive Mauro as his live-in chauffeur; Pino relinquishes Marina/Libella not to another man but to the chance of a fulfilling career.

Other male characters are not rivals to the hero but instead present parallel stories of inappropriate or failed love relationships: they include Alina's easily deluded father (*Fiume verde*), Aldo's mother's criminal lover, and Aldo's authoritarian Uncle Franco (*Diecimila angeli*). Scerbanenco is careful to provide brief histories for these men, opening up potential but unexplored narratives in his characteristic fashion. In this way, we are given an opportunity to move beyond stereotype, as these men expose both masculine strength and masculine fragility. Final judgement on even such a sharply polarising character as Aldo's wife-beating uncle is thus left to the reader.

Other minor players are more nuanced still. Two of the most engaging characters in *Johanna della foresta* combine a feminised surface with the determination and courage of the "vero uomo": the frail dreamer, Francino, and the small, inarticulate, but irrepressible Spaniard, Domingo. These men are far from the model that Milestone and Meyer label the "old man", who presents a form of masculinity that is "strong, active, powerful, authoritative, hard, aggressive, violent, competitive and rational, and lacking sensitivity and emotions [...]" (114).¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Engaging with an Anglo-Saxon, largely British, context, the authors contrast the traditional "old" model of masculinity found in the 1940s and 1950s with the modern "sensitive New Age man". Nevertheless, their characterisations are transferable to my mid-twentieth-century Italian context.

Cranny-Francis argues that in the stock pattern of the genre novel the patriarchal man “delegates his emotional life” to his heroine so that “she will take care of it while he gets on with the real stuff of life in the public sphere of competition, exploitation, toughness, hardness and rapacity” (*Engendered Fiction* 133). By revealing themselves to be as sensitive and emotional as the traditional romance heroine, however, Scerbanenco’s heroes are able to set aside the impossible demands of warrior virility. By the same token, in taking on an active and fearless role in the adventure story, the heroine and the females who surround her are able to move beyond the narrow sphere of domesticity. In short, both males and females acquire characteristics that are stereotypically assigned to the other gender and, ultimately, demonstrate the possibility of reading less conservative and patriarchal gender constructions into both the popular romance and the adventure genre.

That Scerbanenco’s hybrid romances provide a much less cut and dried definition of appropriate gender roles is perhaps unsurprising, given that Italian society was undergoing such upheaval in the period in which these novels were written. Although new models of masculinity and femininity were slow to emerge and would not be vociferously contested until the later decades of the twentieth century, Scerbanenco’s rich and diverse cast of characters, and the agency given them by the hybrid stories they enact, at least allow him to rehearse some new possibilities, which the reader is ultimately free to accept or reject.

CHAPTER NINE: SCERBANENCO'S TWO WORLDS

Hybridity admits complexity and ambivalence: although it is possible to read any of the texts under study within the framework of a single genre, their richness becomes apparent only when the genre blend is recognised. Thus I propose to undertake a final reading of these texts based on the proposition that the key to understanding their deliberate blending of genres lies not in cynical marketing strategies but in a worldview that runs throughout Scerbanenco's fiction after the harrowing experience of the Second World War – a worldview that seeks to find how one may exist in an essentially hostile, alienating world.¹³⁹ *Noir* exposes the reader to the alienation of the modern “real world”. The adventure novel and even the more mannered detective story express a public world of disorder, disquiet, and peril. The classic romance, on the other hand, valorises the domestic sphere of intimate relationships, where love provides the antidote to fear and isolation. It is the hybrid that reconciles the tensions between the two spheres.

Exploring the “lost continent” of Scerbanenco's sentimental novels, Pirani recognised the value of the love story as a means of expressing essential truths: “Scerbanenco [...] always wrote about men, about the forces that move them, and thus about the greatest force, love” (“Scerbanenco [...] ha sempre scritto intorno agli uomini, intorno alle forze che li muovono e quindi intorno alla forza più grande, l'amore”) (“Alla ricerca” 110). We must remember that the love story also begins with a problem, a seemingly insoluble disorder: the world of the lovers in any romance “always oppresses the heroine and hero” (Regis 31), and the lovers must struggle to nurture and protect their sentimental bond in the face of hostility and

¹³⁹ Dunnett finds a distinct humanitarian philosophy present “in latent form” (“in forma latente”) (160) as early as the pre-war Jelling series, in which she sees a comprehensive anti-totalitarianism – an intriguing idea that is outside my current brief.

barriers. While the classic romance's barriers may be frivolous – simple misunderstandings that are more comic than tragic – by introducing elements from darker genres, Scerbanenco treats this stock feature with full seriousness, foregrounding diseased and corrupted societies that are not so easily discounted at the work's conclusion. Torture, extreme violence, sudden death, injustice, and a sense of powerlessness pervade these novels, creating an undertow of anxiety that goes far beyond the anxiety over the protagonists' sentimental lives that is typically produced by the romance.¹⁴⁰

Many of his critics have commented on Scerbanenco's sympathy for the tribulations of the ordinary citizen in a time of rapid social change. Burns concedes that, while Scerbanenco is “absolutely not a canonical literary figure in Italy”, he nevertheless deserves the accolade of “founding father” for “[his] intimate and immediate understanding of ‘ordinary’ Italian society” (“Founding Fathers” 27). Others have noted his specific sympathy for the outsider or powerless victim. Van der Linde points out that “Throughout [the Lamberti novels], Scerbanenco is less concerned with the mechanics of and motives for criminal violence than with its effects on the victims” (312). Covi finds that Scerbanenco's characters “are all victims of the society that surrounds them” (“sono tutti vittime della società che li circonda”) (98).

A clue that Scerbanenco's novels are more than a pastiche of popular genres, composed with a simple aim to maximise sales, may be found in the essays he wrote during his wartime exile in Switzerland, essays which were published contemporaneously, under the rubric *Il mestiere di uomo*, in a local Swiss journal, and which have recently been edited and republished by

¹⁴⁰ Noting that “Italian intellectuals [of the 1960s] did not accept him as a politically committed author” (58), Pezzotti makes a convincing case for Scerbanenco's “engagement with political and social issues” (73) in his Lamberti series. I argue that this was no new development: the novels in my study present a continual exposure and critique of social ills.

Paganini under the same title. Clues may also be drawn from other works completed during the exile, works written at a time when the author must have been doubtful that they would ever be published, and which evidence his desire to be taken seriously as a writer of something more than popular entertainment.¹⁴¹

Il mestiere di uomo comprises forty-seven brief essays, originally published individually to form a weekly column in *Il grigione italiano* from June 1944 to May 1945. On first offering these essays to his friend, the Swiss priest and publisher Felice Menghini, in the hope that he would include them in his journal, Scerbanenco explained in a covering letter that “The subject is [...] a true morality, a type of Chamfortian (or ... Scerbanencian) maxim, expanded and commented upon, and above all modern in inspiration, in the sense that it will touch on matters that are very much present in everyone’s heart” (“Si tratta [...] di una vera moralità, di una specie di massima chamfortiana (o ... scerbanenchiana) allungata e commentata, e soprattutto d’ispirazione moderna, nel senso che toccherà cose che sono vive nel cuore d’ognuno”) (*Lettere sul confine* 282).¹⁴²

The topics of these pieces, often little more than a few hundred words in length, cover the gamut of human experience – Hope, Memories, Dignity, Joy, Simplicity, to name just a few of his rubrics – but return often to the theme of life as a constant struggle against an indifferent, even hostile universe, in which the worst trial is enforced solitude: “Ours is a constant struggle against hostile forces that undo everything we do” (“La nostra è una lotta continua contro forze ostili che disfano ciò che noi facciamo”) (“I nostri castelli” 88). In the face of such bleakness, human solidarity, understanding, and mutual love provide the only

¹⁴¹ See Paganini, Dunnett, and Paolo Lagazzi for extended appraisals of the Swiss writings.

¹⁴² The French writer Nicolas de Chamfort (1741-1794) was author of numerous collections of thoughts and aphorisms.

remedy. Although each essay stands alone, key themes of stoicism, humility, strength in the face of suffering, integrity, and – especially – compassion and companionship, recur throughout: “We can only bind ourselves one to another, advise one another, point out the paths where, presumably, we won’t fall into error, warn one another in time of danger, if any of us already knows of it, help one another up if we fall, like a party of mountaineers roped together [...]” (“Possiamo soltanto stringerci gli uni vicini agli altri, consigliarci, indicarci le vie dove, presumibilmente, non si cade nell’errore, avvertirci in tempo del pericolo, se qualcuno di noi già lo conosce, sorreggerci se cadiamo, come in una cordata in montagna [...]”) (“Quasi un intermezzo” 116); “we are nothing without other people” (“noi non siamo nulla senza gli altri”) (“Gli altri sono prima di noi” 149). Perhaps as a response to the horrors of the totalitarian Fascist regime from which he had recently fled, Scerbanenco’s essays advocate love and fellow feeling, rather than the exercise of power, as a means to achieve one’s ends: “Whatever we obtain in life we must seek to obtain it with love. What we obtain by force is worthless” (“Ciò che si ottiene nella vita bisogna cercare di ottenerlo con amore. Quello che si ottiene per forza non vale”) (“Monete false” 119).

In March 1944, while still in exile, Scerbanenco wrote to Paolo Arcari to request his help in publishing his newly written novel, *Non rimanere soli*; in this letter he poignantly described his personal experiences of loss of family, friends, and home as a result of two wars, saying,

This is perhaps the worst damage caused by wars: not the churches and monuments that are destroyed, nor the dead, but the separation of souls that were united, the families dispersed, bonds of affection undone, the individual reduced to a self-centred solitude, which impoverishes him in every sense.

È questo forse il più grave danno causato dalle guerre: non le chiese, non i monumenti distrutti, non i morti, ma le anime che erano unite, separate, le famiglie disperse, gli affetti sconvolti, l’individuo ridotto ad un’egoistica solitudine, che lo rende povero in ogni senso. (*Lettere sul confine* 274)

A note to the reader prefacing this most autobiographical novel sums up his philosophy of human solidarity in the face of a bleak world:

A novel can also be useful. It served to remind the author during his wretched exile, during the most dispiriting grief a man can suffer, to be alone in a strange land, that when all values come crashing down in a war that destroys everything, a single good remains to men: affection. Affection for his relations, for those like him, for his home, for his land.

Un romanzo può anche essere utile. All'autore è servito durante il suo gramo esilio, durante il più avvilito dolore che possa soffrire un uomo, la solitudine in terra straniera, a ricordare che quando tutti i valori precipitano in una guerra che tutto distrugge, un solo bene può restare agli uomini: l'affetto. Affetto per i suoi vicini di sangue, per i suoi simili, per la sua casa, per il suo Paese. (*Non rimanere soli* 23)

Something very similar is found in *Anime senza cielo* when Stiva, at the nadir of persecution and despair, realises the value of Luisa's love and the simple goodwill of her family:

he thought that our family, our affections, are where we find them along the course of our life. The parents fate gave us can die, the woman we love can deceive and betray us [...], but we will always be able to find someone in the world who is like our father and mother, and someone who is our woman.

aveva pensato che la nostra famiglia, i nostri affetti, sono là dove noi li troviamo lungo il cammino della nostra vita. I genitori che il destino ci ha dato possono morire, la donna che amavamo può deluderci e tradirci [...] ma sempre, ancora, nel mondo potremo trovare qualcuno che sia come nostro padre e nostra madre, e qualcuna che sia la nostra donna. (154)

In Scerbanenco's cruel, unjust *noir* world, love, compassion, and human solidarity provide the keys to endurance and redemption. *Non rimanere soli* – “Do not be alone” – is not just the title of his novel but the catchcry that echoes throughout his work. Scerbanenco's novels always feature protagonists, both male and female, who are outsiders, persecuted, alone, and seemingly helpless. Horsley observes that the *noir* hero's world is typically “marginal, unstable and threatening” (*Noir Thriller* 153). Most usually this is an “urban jungle”, as in

Elsa and the Lamberti novels, yet more traditionally benign environments suffer from the alienating effects of modernism as well. The Swiss forest (*Johanna*) where the casualties of war find themselves is variously described as benign and menacing; and the locals of the picture-postcard Swiss village are self-contained in a way that may indicate well-mannered discretion or (as we discover) concealment of disturbing secrets. The marshland (*Diecimila angeli*) represents wild beauty to wealthy visitors like Aldo, yet it is the scene of his “crime” and, later, his near death as a victim of police crossfire; it represents only isolation, poverty, and distress to the locals. To redeem this diseased land, Aldo must build a genuine home and family there.

Like Aldo, Scerbanenco’s lonely, alienated heroes all long to rebuild some form of domestic life, as a haven from a world that threatens to overwhelm them. These men lack (effective) families; most are on the run or have been somehow displaced from the security of any enduring refuge. The two Western heroes try, and fail, to return home. The orphaned refugee Stiva (*Anime*) emblematises the crushing loneliness of the war-displaced who occupy transient boarding houses in the ruins of post-war Milan. Aldo (*Diecimila angeli*) has a family, but one he views with distaste: his upright father is dead; his mother leads a life of frivolous self-indulgence; his miserly uncle is a vicious man who beats his wife. Aldo must literally construct a new house and constitute a new family.

The fugitive Tomaso’s relations with Elsa (*Elsa*) are overwhelmingly couched in familial rather than erotic terms: his immediate impression, and one he later confirms, is her striking resemblance to the older sister who acted as a surrogate mother to him, and whose forgiveness he craves. Tomaso specifically contrasts Elsa’s subdued, tasteful appearance with the femmes fatales of his Milanese crime ring, who are characterised by pungent, unpleasant

perfumes and gaudy taste (Milena), obscenely tight-fitting and low-cut dresses (Verde Luna and Pinina), or robotic androgyny (Lisetta). The criminal band that has invaded his parental home is a grotesque parody of the family unit, but Elsa is authentic.

We see, then, that the work of the romance is not simply to create a love union but to reconstitute society in miniature through new ties of family and friendship. Tomaso draws back together his fractured family by reconciling with his sister and her husband, who return from America to help him redeem himself and reinstate their family home. Stiva (*Anime*) likewise finds not just a wife but a father, in the figure of the American spy boss Herbert Lynn, and a family, in his team of agents. Martino and Zuñita (*La mia ragazza*) return to her extended family on their remote reservation, where they are accepted uncritically. Stefano and Alina (*Fiume verde*) have their last scene, where they pledge their troth, at Alina's childhood home. Various weddings provide the occasion to acknowledge broader social bonds of friendship and trust.

Within Scerbanenco's particular form of romance, the power of human affection is underscored by the author's unusual treatment of the stock oppositional figure, the love rival. As we have seen, this character adjusts to the loss of what she or he most desires – the hero(ine)'s enduring love – by creating a new relationship of affection: (s)he frequently becomes a helper to both heroine and hero alike, displaying a generosity of spirit that frequently leads to some consolation prize. In *Johanna della foresta*, the greatest love is shown by Gertrude, the woman who accepts that she has lost Donato to her rival, yet selflessly and at considerable personal risk assists the pair to exit their nightmare and achieve their ultimate blissful union. This idealised helper figure, almost always female, emerges time and again in the novels under study. Clelia's role in *Il fiume verde* has many parallels

with that of Gertrude, as does that of Luisa Randelli in *Anime senza cielo*. Occasionally the benign helper is male – as in *Elsa e l'ultimo uomo*, where Elsa's friend Antonio fulfils the dual role of potential (but unrequited) lover and avuncular protector, and in *Noi due e nient'altro*, where Malli provides the same dual function.

Sobchack has argued that this longing for the spaces of domesticity is a key component of *noir*; here it overlaps with the romance for, as Frye, writing of romance in its broadest sense, observed, “The perennially childlike quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 186). Having lost their homes and families to the vicissitudes of a brutal modern world, Scerbanenco's protagonists long to recreate them with a loving partner.¹⁴³

Later, in the Lamberti novels, Scerbanenco would create especially vivid contrasts between the brutal world and the haven of the home. Via is referring to these novels – in which the world-weary, cynical detective finds his only respite in his dead father's former home, where he lives with a surrogate family composed of his unmarried sister and her baby daughter – but his comments apply equally to the novels in my study when he calls the family “the space where everything is in order, a welcoming refuge where one can find warmth and cleanliness, while in the outside world one is exposed to cold and filth” (“lo spazio in cui ogni cosa è disposta ordinatamente, un rifugio accogliente dove si possono trovare calore e pulizia, mentre nel mondo esterno si è esposti al freddo e alla sporcizia”) (41).

¹⁴³ For analysis of the pervasive presence of “nostalgia for a pre-modern security” in crime fiction, see Glenn W. Most (71).

This is very different from the longing for a home found in the typical popular romance, where the emphasis is on the normative nature of marriage and domesticity within society: protagonists such as Liala's Giulietta and Vik (*Passione lontana*) are not escaping danger when, in marriage, they retreat into the private world; they are merely ceding their independence to achieve a more "natural" state. Dandolo's *La prigioniera* reverses the trajectory of *noir*: Carlotta's marital home is initially an alienating place that needs to be redeemed, whereas the external world is filled with kind and generous strangers who sustain her in her temporary exile. In spite of the attractions of the outside world, Carlotta returns home to a husband who is reformed by the prospect of fatherhood and – we must believe – to a new life of domestic happiness.

The blend of violence and sentimentality in Scerbanenco's late novels has been much noted, although there can be no question that in these novels the sentimental strand is minor.

Benedetta Bini finds in the Lamberti series "a narrative device which is 'tough', realistic and magnetic, also because it is touched by the stylistic features of the love story" ("un dispositivo di narrazione 'forte', realistico e magnetico, anche perché intensamente segnato degli stilemi del racconto d'amore") (1019). Certainly, by intertwining elements from both the crime/*noir* and romance genres, Scerbanenco achieved a hybrid that tempers alienation with compassion, intellect with feeling, modernist pessimism with a qualified optimism.

Although he is referring specifically to the Lamberti novels, Covi's comment that Scerbanenco's characters are like "animals violently hounded by destiny and lost in a kind of gigantic labyrinth with no way out" ("animali braccati violentemente dal destino e sperduti in una specie di enorme labirinto senza via d'uscita") (98) apply across all his work. Indeed, Covi acknowledges the presence of this bleak *noir* sensibility in the earlier novels,

commenting that “criminal elements are foregrounded even in his most romantic works with happy endings” (“elementi criminali sono messi in primo piano anche nelle sue opere più romantiche e con lieto fine”) (85).

The ending of *Rossa* is unequivocally happy if read in terms of the romance code. Rossa and Roy have located to the more racially tolerant city of Cymarron, where they find a liberal priest who is prepared to conduct a mixed-race marriage. The obstacle to their love – Crave’s blackmail – has been neutralised with the killing of the blackmailers and the police’s attribution of Marichant’s murder to them. Rossa’s love rival, Sybille, gives them her blessing, along with a handsome wedding gift. Yet the reader who has a greater sense of the *noir* possibilities inherent in the story cannot fail to be left with a sense of irresolution and unease. Roy tells Rossa that his bleak view of the world has been modified by the altruism and kindness of a woman such as Sybille, and yet his speech once more foregrounds the very real hostility extant in their world:

I always thought that this is an ugly world [...] A world where in order to survive you have to cheat, lie, and swindle, carry out a heap of dirty tricks, a world where there are people like Marichant, and where I’ve never truly liked living, not even when I’m happy... But today I’ve seen that there’s a world where there are also people like Sybille Glows and I would like to live in this world, even if I were unhappy.

Ho sempre pensato che era un brutto mondo, questo. [...] Un mondo dove per vivere bisognava imbrogliare, mentire, ingannare, fare un sacco di porcherie, un mondo dove c’è della gente come Marichant, e dove non mi è mai veramente piaciuto vivere, neppure se sono felice... Ma oggi ho visto che è un mondo dove c’è anche della gente come Sybille Glows e allora in questo mondo mi piacerebbe vivere, anche se fossi infelice. (301)

Roy here provides an explicit comment on the two worlds of the novel. We cannot forget that the pair’s current happiness is dependent upon the fact that they have successfully concealed Rossa’s crime: in short, they have themselves cheated, lied, swindled, and carried out more

than a few dishonest tricks. Rossa is still, after all, a murderer, and Roy is still guilty of subverting justice.

It is only by reading the novel in terms of the hybrid that we can understand all the nuances of Roy's speech: the world is indeed a bleak, hostile, immoral place, but love for one's fellow human beings makes it bearable. It is, after all, Sybille's selfless affection and goodwill rather than his passion for Rossa that Roy is referencing here. His observation that he would rather be unhappy in a world of genuine companionship than happy in a corrupt world is also a good deal more equivocal than one might expect from a romance, where traditionally the ending promises, or at last strongly implies, escape from tribulation into unalloyed bliss.

In the end, we may recognise that, in all his writing, Scerbanenco was simply reiterating in different guises the famous lines he would put in the mouth of the tough but wise Duca Lamberti, who has no illusions about the brutality and corruption of the modern world yet acknowledges the power of a loving relationship: "Life is a well of marvels, there's everything in it, rags, diamonds, cut throats, and Livia Ussaro" (*Private Venus* 128) ("La vita è un pozzo delle meraviglie, c'è dentro di tutto, stracci, brillanti, coltellate in gola, e Livia Ussaro") (*Venere privata* 113). Such a philosophy, which surely underpins Scerbanenco's genre blend of light and dark, is found in its most explicit form in the exile writings.

We see, then, the central significance of the world of emotion throughout Scerbanenco's work, the love world that has been most discounted by his critics to date. Noting that critical disparagement of the "feminine" forms of popular culture – the soap opera, Hollywood's "woman's film" (tellingly also known as the "weepie"), and, above all, the popular romance

– is so often related to their privileging of emotion over intellect or action, Christine Gledhill concludes that “Clearly the realms of the domestic and of feeling are felt to be beyond serious consideration” (345). Scerbanenco’s texts, however, insist on the primacy of emotion not, as Guagnini (65) and Carloni (268) seem to be suggesting, because of the author’s inability to escape the trap of his apprenticeship in the *romanzo rosa* style but as an indispensable means to express human experience.

Of the numerous essays anthologised and republished by Paganini as *Il mestiere di uomo*, it is the third, “Elogio della commozione” (51-52), that is especially pertinent to the current study. Here, Scerbanenco stresses the importance of emotion to a full human existence; in particular, he expresses his belief that understanding comes through emotion. The final passage of this essay is worth quoting in full since, in playing up the contrast between the toughness expected of the male and “feminine” compassion, it captures well the contrast between the tough, analytical, cynical world we find in adventure stories, and especially in *noir*, and the “female”, emotional world of romance.

To feel emotion is to understand. The rock is what stays unmoved and unfeeling before the human joys and adversities of life that surround it, because it doesn’t understand them. But man understands. And if he doesn’t weep in the daytime on account of these joys and adversities, he will weep at night when his spirit, almost in spite of him, free from any vanity of resembling a rock that is dauntless in the middle of a storm, free from any false fear of seeming a sissy, can feel human emotion, and both understand, and participate in life.

Commuoversi è comprendere. È la roccia che sta inerte e insensibile davanti alle gioie e alle sciagure umane che la circondano, perché non le comprende. Ma l’uomo comprende. E se, per queste gioie o sciagure, non piange di giorno, né piangerà di notte, quando la sua anima, quasi di nascosto da lui, libera di ogni vanità di rassomigliare a una roccia impavida in mezzo alla tempesta, libera da ogni falso timore di sembrare una femminuccia, potrà umanamente commuoversi, ossia comprendere, ossia partecipare alla vita. (52)

This then, is a key to unlock Scerbanenco's characteristic genre blend. The world of fellow feeling and compassion that is epitomised by the domesticity and security of the romantic happy ending acts as a counterweight to the pessimism and despair of the *noir* world, but neither obliterates the other. The reader is free to accept optimism or pessimism, domesticity or alienation, or, in the most nuanced and complete reading, all of this simultaneously. If the endings hold potential consolation, it is a clear-eyed consolation that is far from the escapism and denial of which the popular romance has been long accused. And, if this is by no means the only possible reading, it is, in my opinion, the most complete and satisfying.

CONCLUSION

An entrenched tradition of disdain for popular fiction has kept Scerbanenco out of the Italian literary canon. Popular texts have been widely assumed to be “closed” (Eco) or “readerly” (Barthes), admitting no nuances or ambiguities of interpretation, but merely supplying uncritical readers with variations on escapist and conciliatory stock formulas. While the crime novel has been elevated, in recent years, to a position where it is now accorded serious attention, the old prejudices regarding the popular romance remain firmly in place. I have demonstrated, however, that there is much of interest in Scerbanenco’s entire body of work for a reader who seeks out the ambivalence and complexity that reside within texts that exploit the capacities of genre hybridity.

Paradoxically, Scerbanenco’s strength derives from the very fact that he was a commercial writer: his deep understanding of his readers was forged throughout a long career that gave him first-hand knowledge of their lives, their hopes, and their fears. I cannot agree with Canova’s opinion, however, that he employed this knowledge primarily for commercial ends. He gives only part of the story in his observation that “Scerbanenco knows his public well: [...] he has a clear perspective of what his readers expect and of the type of ‘contractual offerings’ that it is necessary to deliver to the market to guarantee an increase in consumption” (“Scerbanenco conosce bene il suo pubblico: [...] egli ha un chiaro quadro prospettico delle attese dei lettori e del tipo di ‘offerte contrattuali’ che è necessario immettere sul mercato per garantire l’incremento del consumo”) (149). Certainly, Scerbanenco wrote to make money, but, while perfectly understanding and respecting the commercial constraints of popular genres, he still offered his readers multiple reading

positions, ranging from simple escapism – whether in the pleasure of sentiment or the thrill of adventure – to a nuanced world picture.

My thesis opened with the uncontroversial observation that popular commercial fiction is typically genre fiction, transparently coded by a framework of commonly understood tropes that offer powerful interpretive prompts to vast communities of readers. I have demonstrated that, nevertheless, genre need not impose a straitjacket on either author or reader, as genre's fiercest critics have assumed. In the process of this thesis, I have acted out my proposition by reading – decoding – representative examples of Scerbanenco's so-called *romanzi rosa* according to several codes, demonstrating how they may be perceived as either romances, crime novels, or the adventure genres of Western and spy story – or as a more complex form that weaves together the codes of more than one genre. At the end of my readings, a clearer understanding of this neglected body of work and its unexpected complexity has emerged. Inevitably, new questions have also been raised.

Importantly, novels which have been passed over as having little critical interest to the student of Scerbanenco the crime writer have been brought to wider attention and their contents made plain, many for the first time. Most of these texts have been out of print for years and are not widely held in libraries: facts that have governed my decision to include a large amount of textual detail to underpin my argument. My hope is that more critics will choose to engage with these novels, seeing beyond their label of *romanzi rosa*. I have no wish to downplay the efforts of recent Scerbanencan critics – notably Pirani, Paganini, and Dunnett – to cast a serious eye on works once dismissed as banal and formulaic; I simply note that romance is the popular genre that critics still set aside until last, struggling to take it seriously. It is to be hoped that the stigma surrounding the popular romance has been

mitigated by my demonstration of how all the strands of Scerbanenco's particular hybrid have an equal validity.

While Scerbanenco utterly eschews the fantasy love world of a Liala, he nevertheless privileges the love relationship quite as much as she does. Sentiment is not a mere sop, a means to give the reader a breather from too much brutality, nor a manipulative device, as Canova suggests in his analysis of the play of attraction and repulsion in the Lamberti novels (153-54). Sentiment is the other side of the coin: human affections provide the necessary solution to the problem of existence in a harsh and menacing world. And so, while many of the endings of the novels I have studied are ambiguous, in that eternal happiness cannot be taken for granted as it is in (again) Liala's work, it is always there as a possible reading.

Romance – certainly as treated by Scerbanenco – is not escapism or denial but a means to balance and make bearable the cruelties of existence. Noting that Radway's readers stressed the enjoyment they derived from the optimism of their preferred romances, Catherine Belsey, in her study of the western love story, points out that "Amid the harsh and uncaring world of politics and the market, true love promises the personal and private happiness of complete reciprocity" (23). Scerbanenco does not offer a "harsh and uncaring world" as a stock barrier merely to fulfil the needs of romance: as we have seen, real world facts are presented with honesty and accuracy and are not easily swept away by a stock happy ending. Scerbanenco's worlds – whether that of post-war displacement and economic collapse or the shallow world of those profiting from Italy's subsequent economic boom – deal honestly and unflinchingly with the issues that were troubling his original readers. Even the exoticised world of the Westerns presents issues of immediate concern: notably, in *Rossa*, war crimes

and retribution, but also the discrimination, powerlessness, and injustice that rack a society struggling with modernity and rapid change.

Nevertheless, although Scerbanenco, in his romances, gives us a taste of the *noir* world on which he would focus more and more in his last works, he always allows his reader the possibility to pull back from the brink of despair. For, contrary to what the deterministic Frankfurt school of criticism would have us believe, the reader of popular fiction does have an interpretive choice. Where there is ambiguity and duality, no single programme can dominate, so that the reader may find consolation, despair, or something far more nuanced midway between these extremes. And this conclusion is possible only if one admits that the romance world has a value equal to that of the crime world.

It might be argued that it is time to admit that Scerbanenco was not essentially a writer of genre fiction, but that in his hybrids he transcended genre. This position was certainly posited as far back as 1969 by Del Buono (“Il rosa, il giallo e il nero” 10-11). I argue that the genre codes are too strongly inflected to be ignored within the works examined in this thesis (and perhaps also in his later works, but that is a separate argument which is not within the ambit of my current project). The reader is surely guided to read these works within the framework of certain genre codes, stereotypes even, well known to the readership to which the strong prompts of the paratext pitch the work. When reduced to the elemental form of preliminary plot and character sketches seen in the archival drafts, Scerbanenco’s texts everywhere reveal the codings of popular genre.

My project has been to delineate the vital work of the genre frame, not to deny it. I subscribe to Fishelov’s depiction of genre as “a kind of ‘mediator’ between author and reader” (14). By

overlaying a reader-oriented approach over this genre approach – that is, by looking at both the offering and its reception – I have devised a means to demonstrate how a class of novels that has been dismissed as a commercial product designed for quick and easy reading is able to offer richness and depth.

Following the encoding/decoding model offered by Hall, I have examined multiple positions at both ends of the communicative spectrum. At the encoding stage, or “artistic” pole (Iser), I have made plain the strong paratextual prompts offered by the producers and distributors and, most particularly, the strong prompts of embedded generic forms. At the decoding or “aesthetic” pole (Iser), I have demonstrated how genre prompts are capable of more than one interpretation and how, when strong traces of more than one genre are present, the reader may achieve a freedom of interpretation not commonly associated with the strongly coded forms of popular genre fiction.

Definitions both of genre as a theoretical concept and of individual literary genres have been much contested; thus it was necessary, in Part Two of my thesis, to discuss alternative critical positions and schematisations before arriving at my own precise working definitions. Using this framework, I have been able to demonstrate commonalities and intertextual links within the entire corpus of, respectively, romance, crime, and adventure fiction; and, specifically, to place Scerbanenco’s work indisputably in these respective contexts.

In Part Three I demonstrated how, out of seemingly restrictive stock formulas, subtleties and shades of interpretation may arise. We have seen how hybridisation and shifting focalisation have permitted multiple identifications and variant readings of gender models. Here, I have looked at the sequence in Hall’s communication model that he calls “reproduction” – that is,

the recipient's assimilation or "making sense" of the messages offered by the text. This process may be activated by a sense of identification, but, as I have argued in Chapter Seven, drawing on recent empirically based work in psychonarratology, the means by which identifications are formed out of the interplay between text and reader are by no means linear and cannot be glibly predicted.

In Chapter Eight I have looked at possible conclusions a reader may draw from the ambiguities thrown up by the process of genre blending, scrutinising the models of masculinity and femininity constructed by these texts, and the ways in which these models relate to changing gender norms and relations in mid-twentieth-century Italy. Here, Scerbanenco's characteristic offering of character sketches and undeveloped storylines presents the reader with a plenitude of vignettes and voices that rehearse alternative positions and new potential identifications. Building on insights into Scerbanenco's personal philosophy made possible by the recent publication of his exile writings, I have also looked, in Chapter Nine, at a possible reading that inserts a more serious worldview into literature that is widely considered banal and trivial, fit only for quick consumption.¹⁴⁴ At this pole of the encoding/decoding model, I have deliberately chosen not to advance far down the road of ideological interpretation, although in Chapter Eight I have briefly sketched the prevailing ideologies and social formations of the periods of Italian history in which Scerbanenco's texts and their readers are situated. Instead, my project has been to open up the narrative structures of the texts – essential spadework that may serve as a foundation for subsequent analyses that choose a more socio-political orientation.

¹⁴⁴ In Italian, generally designated *letteratura di consumo*; in German, *Trivialliteratur*.

New directions

My research has inevitably thrown up new questions and fields of inquiry that cannot be answered in the space of this thesis. I have briefly explored some of the manuscript material held by the Scerbanenco Archive and urge other researchers to mine this newly available and rich resource.

Beyond the scope of the current study, but a fertile field for full investigation, is the role of sentiment in Scerbanenco's early and late crime novels. To be sure, sentimentality is commented upon by many critics of the Lamberti novels, but it is most often seen as a defect – an unfortunate lapse into the habits of his former genre – or a mere sop to an indiscriminating public which relishes strong emotional effects but may be alienated by unrelieved horror. Yet both the Jelling and the Lamberti novels emphasise the protagonists' personal domestic space – “the warmth of his house, the security, the tranquillity of his family” (“il caldo della sua casa, la sicurezza, la tranquillità della sua famiglia”) (*La bambola cieca* 172) – as his only respite from the corrupt, impersonal world of the modern city.

A further avenue of useful inquiry derives from the fact that criticism of the romance novel takes virtually no account of the male author, in this “most female of popular genres” (Regis xii), traditionally “Written by women for women” (Bogo 1600). Tiozzo has touched on the issue in his study of male writers of sentimental novels from the earliest part of the twentieth century – Pitigrilli, Guido Da Verona, Luciano Zuccoli, and Lucio D'Ambra – but stops well short of Scerbanenco's period. Certainly, Scerbanenco was not the only male *romanzo rosa* writer of the 1940s and 1950s, but his contemporaries appear all but forgotten. The implications of Scerbanenco's maleness in such a highly feminised genre are everywhere

implicit in my study. If a more explicit and detailed study of this topic – which would expand my project too far from its brief – must wait for a later scholar, I trust, nevertheless, that my own project signals the need for more conversation on this fruitful field for inquiry.

Finally, my approach to reader response has of necessity been theoretical, but a larger project awaits a researcher able to trace the history of Scerbanenco's actual readers and their responses. We know that Scerbanenco received, respected, and was influenced by a vast mailbag of feedback from the readers of the women's magazines he edited over the period in which our studied novels were written; it would be most instructive to track this interplay in such letters or editorial columns as may still exist. Even more interesting would be a study of the reception of the later reprints to gauge how they were read by the mixed-gender audiences the publishers were clearly pitching towards. For the time being, I simply offer possible responses, having demonstrated how the texts and their paratexts, in their hybridity, facilitate these multiple readings.

Availability of primary sources remains a problem. As with most twenty-first-century readers of Scerbanenco, I first encountered the author as a crime writer, as I progressed from the Lamberti novels to the recently republished Jelling series. My quest to read Scerbanenco's work more widely met the significant barrier of unavailability. This current project has been possible only after a dogged quest to purchase second-hand, invariably fragile, and sometimes literally crumbling copies of out-of-print novels from Italian dealers – so that I can surely now boast the most complete Scerbanencan library in New Zealand. Many of these novels fall beyond the limits I have imposed on my current study but have informed my understanding of the trajectories of Scerbanenco's complete career. Given his prodigious output, his many pseudonyms, and the fragility and ephemerality of the original formats, I

fear that my ambition to read the complete works of Scerbanenco may be an impossible task – although Pirani has surely come close. Nevertheless, by reading broadly and deeply, I have become convinced of Scerbanenco’s estimable worth – as a master craftsman in the field of popular genre fiction but also as a serious writer who, throughout his career, strove to add his personal view of life to what is unjustly regarded as trivial literature.

Epigraph

I have already, in Chapter Nine, quoted the words that provide the most fitting epigraph to this work, Duca Lamberti’s exclamation that “Life is a well of marvels, there’s everything in it, rags, diamonds, cut throats, and Livia Ussaro” (*Private Venus* 128) (“La vita è un pozzo delle meraviglie, c’è dentro di tutto, stracci, brillanti, coltellate in gola, e Livia Ussaro”) (*Venere privata* 113). Forming a bracket to the novels in my study, I shall couple Lamberti’s words with lines from a direct address Scerbanenco makes to his readers in the preface to a novel written twenty years earlier than the Lamberti novels, during the author’s lonely and bitter wartime exile: “no form of solitude is beautiful, let alone good. [...] Misanthropy is immoral, it spawns wars” (“nessuna forma di solitudine è bella, e tanto meno buona. [...] La misantropia è immorale, su di essa germogliano le guerre”) (*Non rimanere soli* 23). Indeed, the title of this, his most autobiographical novel, is surely the ultimate, perfectly economical epigraph for his lifetime project – “Do not be alone”.

Appendix: Front covers

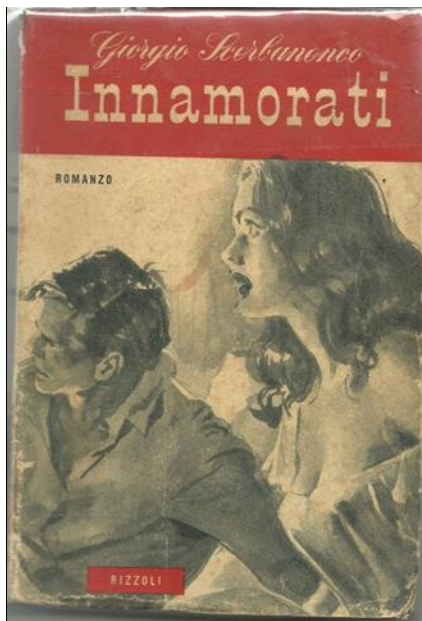


Fig.1: Rizzoli, 1951



Fig.2: Rizzoli, 1950



Fig. 3: Rizzoli, 1950

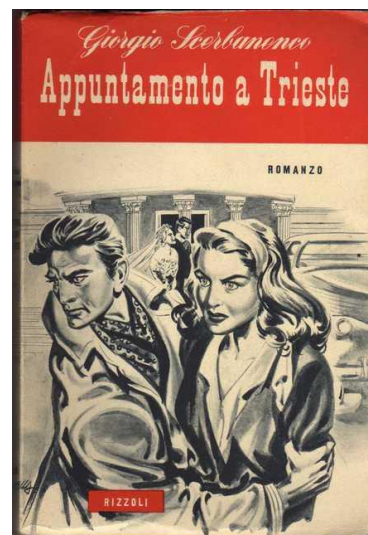


Fig. 4: Rizzoli, 1953



Fig. 5: Rizzoli, 1959



Fig. 6: Rizzoli, 1955



Fig. 7: Rizzoli, 1958



Fig. 8: Rizzoli, 1956



Fig. 9: Rizzoli, 1975



Fig. 10: Rizzoli, 1974

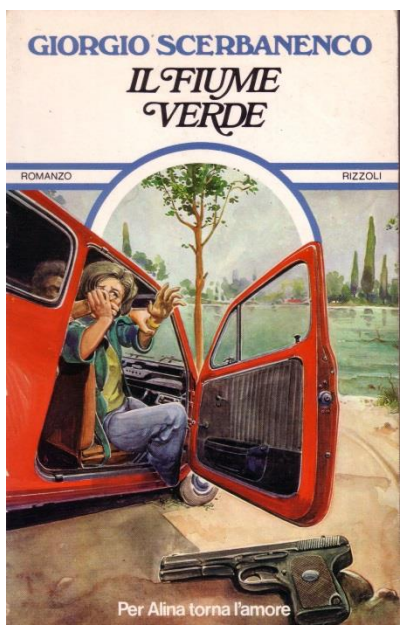


Fig. 11: Rizzoli, 1975

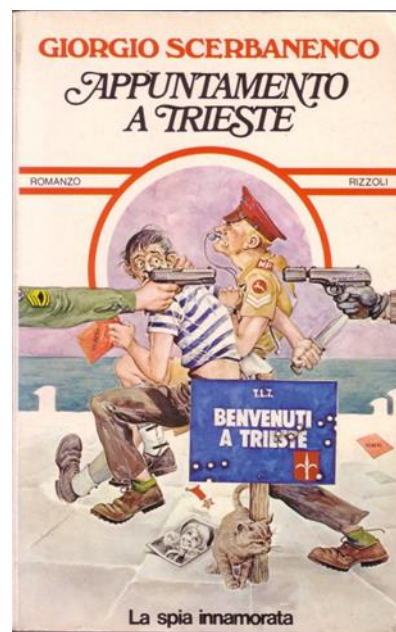


Fig. 12: Rizzoli, 1975

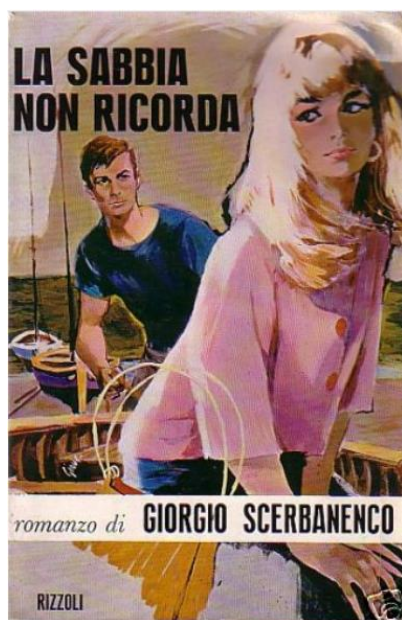


Fig. 13: Rizzoli, 1963

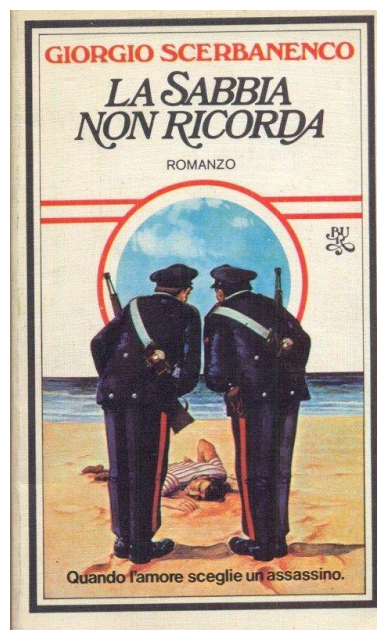


Fig. 14: Rizzoli, 1974

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