

Social Critique and Viewer's Response in the Italian Gangster Film: the Case of *Bandits in Milan* (1968) and *Romanzo Criminale* (2005)

Abstract

This article investigates the development of the Italian gangster film genre and its interconnections with film noir. Specifically, this article will focus on the Italian gangster film genre's attempt to explore post-war Italian culture, society and political context through the portrayal of some of the most important Italian criminal figures of this period. It argues that, while sharing some characteristics with its American counterpart, such as the femme fatale, flashback structures and a narrative of betrayal, the Italian gangster film genre also presents "a flexibility that expresses the transformative qualities of the genre" (Mason 2002: xv). In order to illustrate this point, this article analyses two gangster films: Carlo Lizzani's *Bandits in Milan* (1968) and Michele Placido's *Romanzo criminale* (2005) both through the lens of the viewer's process of identification (Smith 1995) and Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (1964). By showing how the protagonists and their victims are represented in these films, and how this intersects with the social critique featured in these films, this article reevaluates the Italian gangster film as a creative and artistic output that should be analyzed beyond its generic conventions.

Keywords: Gangster film; Lizzani; Placido; film noir; Banda Cavallero; Banda della Magliana

Crime and criminal organizations have long exercised a fascination in the film industry. Mafia organizations, in particular, have featured in Italian cinema since its inception. This representation has been the object of intense scholarship.¹ Italian cinema has also featured non-mafia gang associations, but this kind of output has received less critical attention. In the Italian context, scholars have analysed these two trends — mafia and non-mafia films — separately,

following the different characteristics and development of mafia and non-mafia organizations in Italian history.² Many of these films revolve around the rise and inevitable fall of the gangster protagonists, which are particularly relevant to the discourse of the development of the Italian gangster film and, for the purpose of this analysis, its interconnections with noir film.

Fran Mason argues that American gangster manifestations possess “the same flexibility and variety as Cowie identifies with film noir, a flexibility that expresses the transformative qualities of the genre as it responds to shifts in historical, cultural, and production paradigms over the course of its history” (xv). Gangster films feature several elements that Mason identifies as characteristic of film noir, such as “femme fatale, flashback structure, and narrative of double-cross and betrayal” (58). However, Mason explains that one of the key common features between gangster and noir films is “a critique of an affluent post-war capitalist economy” (75).

In the Italian context, both gangster film and film noir cannot be cinematically defined in the same way it has been in the American and French context, but as Mary Wood claims, film noir in particular should be seen as a creative and artistic choice rather than a genre (2007: 236). Scholars put the emphasis on the influence of American, French and German noir visual style on post-war Italian films on criminal activities and figures.³ Thematically, the emphasis is put on those cinematic manifestations’ attempts to explore post-war Italian culture, society and/or political context aiming at bringing about anxiety, disturbance and disruption. The two non-mafia gangster films selected — Carlo Lizzani’s *Banditi a Milano* (*Bandits in Milan/The Violent Four*, 1968) and Michele Placido’s *Romanzo criminale* (2005; *Romanzo criminale*, 2006) — are particularly significant for the purpose of this analysis insofar as they both critically reflect on the connection between criminality and capitalism. By analysing different stages of capitalism in Italy — namely the effects of the Italian Economic Boom in the 1960s, and consumerism of the

1970s and 1980s — they are effective examples of the flexibility of gangster film to address shifts in historical and cultural paradigms over the course of its history in the same way film noir does (Mason 2002: xv).

In *Bandits in Milan*⁴, Lizzani portrays the true story of the Cavallero gang⁵, which pulled off a series of heists in Milan between 1963 and 1967. According to Pietro Cavallero (also called Piero Cavallero and played by Gian Maria Volonté) and Sante Notarnicola (played by Don Backy), the main members of the gang, the gang carried out bank robberies, at least originally, for political reasons: the plan was to do robberies in order to send money to the fighters for the independence of Algeria (Armati 2006: 127). The chronological path of this particular group, however, highlights how rebel proletarians such as Cavallero and Notarnicola ultimately turned into small company managers under the influence of capitalism and the consequent lure of wealth. Yet the most striking aspect of their criminal activities was the extreme violence used to pursue their ends; from their first robbery on 8 April 1963 to their last robbery, on 25 September 1967, the gang carried out 18 heists, killed 5 people, injured 29 and kidnapped several others.

Like Lizzani's *Bandits in Milan*, *Romanzo criminale* is strictly connected to real-life events that took place in post-war Italy. Inspired by Giancarlo De Cataldo's novel published in 2002, the film is based on the story of the real-life *Banda della Magliana* crime gang's rise to power in the 1970s and 1980s in Rome. Unlike Italian mafia organizations, the *Banda della Magliana* was not structured around a hierarchical pyramid. It was instead composed of various decentralized cells, each working on its own. Making equal shares and living off dividends obtained from the criminal association, they quickly took over Rome. Like Cavallero's gang, they were protagonists of extremely violent criminal acts. They did not have overt political motivations, even though the members of the gang professed allegiance with the Italian neo-

fascists, and Italian authorities tied the gang to neo-fascist terrorist activists. Instead, their actions were — at least initially — a reaction to the economic marginalization they and their families experienced in the capitalistic society of the 1970s. However, like Cavallero's gang, they ended up embracing wild consumerism. Placido's film concentrates on three original members of the gang, Franco Giuseppucci (renamed Cesare Rocchi aka Libano in the novel and film), Enrico De Pedis (renamed Bruno de Magistris aka Dandi) and Maurizio Abbatino (renamed Francesco Avolio aka Freddo). The film was a commercial success in Italy and one of Italy's overseas film successes in recent years.⁶

In this context, we will now consider not just what is in these films, but also how a viewer potentially responds to their content and, above all, characters, and look at what this means for the social critique featured in them. Indeed, as Murray Smith illustrated in his *Engaging Characters* (1995), our propensity to respond cognitively and emotionally to fictional characters is a key aspect of our viewing experience and enjoyment. This is particularly true for *Bandits in Milan* and *Romanzo criminale*, since both films essentially provide a critique of different phases of capitalist Italy through the portrayal of gangster protagonists. Both films show that, in the post-war period, Italy was changing not only in terms of economic and political strategies, but also in terms of the social behaviour and expectations of Italians, attitudes that were reflected in the evolution of post-war criminality. In particular, and crucially, these films also emphasize the evolving behaviour of individuals within different criminal contexts as a consequence of the increasingly pervasive capitalist system, thus providing a controversial social critique that merits greater critical attention. In the context of this analysis, Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* in epic drama (1964), or in Fredric Jameson's words the *V-effekt* (1998), is also particularly relevant and helpful. Brecht claimed that by distancing or alienating

emotionally the audience from the characters and their stage action, the audience would not become involved in or sympathise emotionally with the characters. By contrast, spectators would be in a position which allows them to reach an intellectual level of understanding of the characters' predicaments. In other words, while distanced or alienated emotionally from the characters and their actions, the audience would be empowered on an intellectual level to analyse the social and political elements exposed in a text (1964).

This analytical approach will allow us to investigate whether and to what extent the two selected films create a sympathetic engagement between the gangster protagonists and the audience. Through an analysis of the representation of the protagonists and their narrative subjectivity and point of view, in this article we investigate how and why these two films — very similar in many respects — may end up providing a different experience to their respective audiences. It will be argued that both films share some characteristics — such as the connection to real life events in post-war Italy; a mixed influence of American film noir and local cinematic tradition; and the representation of the structure of the gangs and their criminal activities as a result of capitalist ideology — however, as we shall see, they differ in their representation of the protagonists and their victims. This difference in terms of audience experience to these films is meaningful because it proves that, in the Italian context, the gangster film shares with film noir the same elasticity Mason has detected in American gangster cinema as discussed previously. In particular, Mason points out that American gangster film shares one of its most important elements with noir: the “tendency [...] to identify the failures of American ideology without actually criticising the ideology itself, or offering any solution” (75). While not offering a solution, the Italian gangster film, we argue, may operate a critique of capitalism and consumerism by producing different gangster figures to mediate changing social concerns and

public discourses around criminality and capitalism. At least, as we shall see, this happens with *Bandits in Milan* and *Romanzo criminale*.

Bandits in Milan: violence as a consequence of the Italian Economic Miracle

Lizzani's film focuses on the Cavallero gang and illustrates the way the new generation of criminals of the immediate post-economic miracle period made a transition from the use of non-violent to violent methods, and took the ethos of the capitalist system to a ruthlessly logical conclusion, that is, the common and insatiable desire to appropriate a part of the prosperity and wealth that was generated in the period from 1958 to the mid-1960s. In particular, despite the daring way in which Pietro Cavallero challenges the capitalist system and the police for political reasons, at least initially, as the plot unfolds the protagonist effectively turns into a sort of manager of his criminal organization, an individual who embodies the same capitalist values that he was originally fighting. This is reflected in the main protagonist's appearance, specifically in the scene where Cavallero arguably pretends to play the role of the economic miracle entrepreneur. Although this scene is particularly short, Cavallero is well dressed and does not hesitate to give out money to the group of candidates who applied for the post of secretary of the bogus pen company created by Cavallero in order to cover the gang's illicit activities. This is an example of distorted ethics of the capitalist system, somewhat reminiscent of the sequence in which the mayor gives out money to the poor women who come to the city hall to ask for charity in Francesco Rosi's *Hands Over the City* (1963).⁷ Furthermore, Cavallero accurately plans and organizes the gang's workload, hires a secretary and prioritizes public relations by sending letters to banks and newspapers in order to run his illicit activity. In short, he acts in a manner that embodies the behaviour of an ambitious and increasingly affluent entrepreneur — at least to

Cavallero's way of thinking. In other words, the film highlights the growing importance of outward appearance in the age of Italy's economic miracle, a phenomenon that surfaces in one-to-one relationships as individuals seek to maintain a perceived sense of decorum. These aestheticized appearances contrast with the decidedly amoral attitudes that govern the inner workings of the capitalist system and its goal of accumulation at the expense of more abstract concepts, such as workforces, institutions and society as a whole.

Although the film seems to imply that Cavallero and his accomplices embarked on a criminal career for monetary gain, thereby minimizing the possible influence of political ideology, Lizzani's directorial input endows the character of Cavallero with a certain ambivalence. For example, in the scene when he is hiding from the police with his accomplice, Lizzani depicts a bandit who reads Camus and Marx, but who, as he takes stock of his criminal activity, talks as if he is a businessman: "Cinque anni di lavoro, sono 17 rapine. 75 milioni. 14 milioni all'anno divisi per 3, vengono circa 4 milioni a testa. Poco più di 300,000 lire al mese" [17 robberies and 75m (Italian lira) in five years; 14m divided by three is around 4m a year each, that is, slightly more than 300,000 lira a month].⁸ Therefore, the criminal activity of the Cavallero gang did not allow its members to live affluent lifestyles, as at the end of each month, each member received more or less 300,000 Italian lira, which at that time represented the average salary of a Fiat employee. This can be explained by the large sums of money invested in weapons and in the creation and development of the bogus pen company that served as a front for their activities; as Cavallero mentions in the same scene: "Poi mettici le spese di rappresentanza, l'ufficio, le macchine, le autostrade, i pranzi, le cene. Caro mio, costa caro fare il rapinatore!" [Then if one also includes the money spent for entertainment expenses, the office, cars, motorway toll, lunches and dinners, well my dear, being a robber is costly!]. In terms of

political ideology, in *Bandits in Milan*, there is only one sequence during which Cavallero implicitly mentions the Communist Party, when the gang members visit the gunrunner, Danilo Crepaldi, in his apartment in a ski resort. In this sequence, Crepaldi says: “Tu stai calmo che hai già rotto i ponti un po’ con tutti. Prima ti hanno buttato fuori dal partito, poi ti hanno fatto fuori anche...” [Calm down you, you have already broken off relationships with everyone. You were expelled from the (Communist) party, then you were sent away...] to which Cavallero replies: “Lì dentro a ciance sono tutti bravissimi” [They are great speakers but small doers] and then he adds “io voglio mangiare subito, la mia guerra me la faccio da solo. Sono uscito dalle masse e mica per farmi le pellicce” [I want to act now and fight this society on my own terms. I’ve risen above the masses and not because I want to make money]. This key concept, which is only briefly introduced in the film, is reinforced by Sante Notarnicola⁹ who, in his *L’evasione impossibile*, emphasizes the important role played by the project of generating finance for revolutionary ends, in motivating the gang’s criminal activity:

Il pensiero di compiere un gesto così estraneo alla mia personalità – cioè una rapina – sia pur motivata da finalità non egoistiche, non mi piaceva. [...] Era l’unico modo per passare dalle parole ai fatti. Con i soldi avremmo acquistato armi per i nostri compagni. Avremmo collaudato le nostre capacità, per poi, col tempo, scegliere altri obiettivi. La convinzione indiscussa era che prima o poi la situazione sarebbe diventata davvero rivoluzionaria. Noi saremmo stati precursori della lotta armata.

[I didn’t like the thought of doing something so foreign to my personality, that is a robbery, although this was not motivated by personal financial gain. [...] It was the only way to put words into action. The money would have been used to buy weapons for our comrades. We would have put our skills to the test and then, in due time, we would have set further targets. Our

unshakeable belief was that sooner or later the revolution would have broken out. We would have been the pioneers of armed struggle.]

(1997: 45)

Evidently, the director's intention was to emphasize the contradictory nature of the protagonists' personalities, although these contradictions are not able in themselves to shed light on why they embarked on a career as bank robbers. This ambiguity may also be explained by the historical circumstances during which the film was shot and produced. The gang's final robbery at the Banco di Napoli in Largo Zandonai in Milan took place on the 25th of September 1967; Pietro Cavallero and Sante Notarnicola, the two main members of the gang, were arrested a week later on the 3rd of October; Lizzani started shooting the film in November 1967 and the film was completed in March 1968, only six months after the robbery and three months before the trial which began on the 3rd of June. This short chronological clarification explains why *Bandits in Milan* can be defined as an example of what are known as *instant movies*, films based on the reconstruction of real events which took place shortly before the films themselves were shot. This mode of production influenced the film's content because it meant that Lizzani's cinematic portrayal of the situation was almost immediate, since there was no time for an elaborate reconstruction of events from different, detailed sources.

However, one of the most important features of the instant movie is that of allowing directors to represent events with a minimum of political and social rhetoric and romanticized reconstruction. The immediacy of the instant movie format does not lend itself to detailed research as regards the backgrounds of real-life characters. This is a factor which partly explains why, in *Bandits in Milan*, Lizzani does not present a detailed analysis of the criminals' motivations and

perspectives, thereby minimizing the intellectual remit of the film. This also explains why, in *Bandits in Milan*, once a range of new criminal phenomena and their environments have been introduced — nightclubs, gambling dens, brothels, and the process behind the recruitment of prostitutes — the last robbery carried out by the Cavallero gang constitutes the central part of the film, and features various narrative devices and technical effects which elicit a strong emotional involvement from the viewer as events are reconstructed from different perspectives. In particular, the immediate aftermath of the robbery — a car chase sequence in which the gang's car quickly heads for the outskirts of Milan, followed by an unmarked police car — is the film's nucleus in terms of dramatic and narrative importance. By this point the viewer knows many details about the lives of all the protagonists; the bandits, the detectives, and the victims. The flow of emotions experienced by viewers and the cognitive goals that they simulate are complex and fluctuating in *Bandits in Milan* because the director provides viewers with three different perspectives or narrative levels. In fact, the processes of the viewer's engagement and evaluation of the film's characters is facilitated by embedding them in the narrative after the introductory documentary sequence. The information given on the bandits creates an almost total emotional detachment on the part of the viewers towards them. However, the prolonged spatio-temporal attachment and the intense subjective access given to the criminal protagonists creates the possibility of engagement as viewers cognitively recognize the bandits' aims and methods of achieving them. In particular, the film contains sequences designed to engender cognitive identification with the members of the Cavallero gang. For example, there is close narrative alignment with the gang when they are planning their last bank robbery, since the viewer is given access to the preparations which provide the criminals with the necessary information to successfully carry out the robbery. This also indicates how accurate and meticulous criminals

became in organizing their illicit activities in order to reach perfection and effectiveness, which reflected the way in which companies were managed during the period from 1950 to 1963. Managerial decisions were, in fact, taken according to an increasingly accurate analysis of the market and production. Therefore, all resources, including human resources, were used in the most profitable way and, thanks to well-organized management, companies could aim to make extremely rapid technological advances and increase their production and profits. By introducing and applying similarly systematic methods, the Cavallero gang conformed to capitalist management ideology, which had a profound influence on the development of their criminal activities. This may arguably reflect Lizzani's intention to re-elaborate notions of cinematic realism in the attempt to depart from the humanitarian rhetoric of Neorealism and in the light of the emerging Italian political films, with the aim of building a more solid account of these criminals and the social and political context in which they acted.

However, despite the close narrative alignment with the gang members and Lizzani's attempt to provide the film with a certain degree of political depth, the viewer's engagement remains at a cognitive level, because it is difficult to identify emotionally with the criminals after only sporadically sharing their perspectives and reactions during the film. The only exception to this is Cavallero, into whose character viewers are given a degree of subjective access, but, as discussed earlier, the *instant movie* format prevents any form of attachment to the character. In general terms, the private lives of the protagonists are not delineated in much detail and despite Lizzani's occasional attempts to introduce a degree of psychological and political depth, *Bandits in Milan* is arguably typified by cases of *opaque subjectivity* which, as Smith puts it, is "a performance not allowing us to form any clear picture of the character's motives and intentions" (1995: 151). In other words, despite giving the spectator ample access to the subjectivities of

criminal characters and the consistent way the narration follows the spatio-temporal path of those characters throughout the duration of the film, the gang members and their reasons for embarking on such a career is not analysed and consequently is unclear. This is probably due to the fact that, by directing an *instant movie*, Lizzani did not have time to conduct the necessary research which might have provided a more perceptive analysis of the psychological reasons for the development of crime during this period. This would have given the audience the possibility of reaching a sustained sympathetic engagement with Pietro Cavallero and the other members of his gang.

***Romanzo criminale* as a critique to consumerism**

We have seen that a critique of post-war Italian society is central to Lizzani's film. This is also true for *Romanzo criminale*. Like the Cavallero gang in Lizzani's film, the Banda della Magliana gang is organized like a company. It is indeed a cooperative society where all the members of the gang are initially equal. The income from their illegal activities is re-invested into legitimate business, generating huge profit. The gangsters are also attracted by status symbols of Italian consumer society, such as cars and luxurious dwellings. They waste their money buying objects typical of a consumeristic society in a vain attempt to be socially accepted. The film shows that in spite of being able to spend profusely, the members of the gang are not able to get happiness or recognition from society. This is a clear criticism of the rampant consumerism in Italian society in the 1970s and 1980s, in a period (the 2000s) when wild capitalism and its consequences in terms of social inequality and environmental issues gained space in the Italian political discourse. It also shows how the gang's pseudo socialist economic structure is soon turned into a capitalist company where single gang members act as the leader and Chief

executive officer (until they are murdered and replaced by a fellow member) and where gang members are increasingly preoccupied with their own income and wealth. Undoubtedly, the film also criticizes Italian society of the 1970s and 1980s as superficial, and identifies the capitalist system as the main cause leading the criminal protagonists to unhappiness, isolation and finally, betrayal. For example, at the apex of his criminal career, the emerging leader of the gang, Libano (played by Pierfrancesco Favino), is portrayed as a solitary figure. The night before he is murdered, the film shows Libano in his beautiful villa in the outskirts of Rome. In a long sequence the camera follows him wandering around several, empty rooms. He eats alone, he takes cocaine and he ends up near his luxurious swimming pool — another status symbol — unable to find peace. This sequence is evocative of the final part of *Scarface* (1983) where the protagonist, played by Al Pacino, is progressively abandoned by his family and encounters his death in an empty mansion. After Libano's death, Freddo (played by Kim Rossi Stuart) and an affiliate to the gang, Nero (played by Roberto Scamarcio), take refuge in another of Libano's properties, a farm in the countryside. In the kitchen they find a table full of books:

Freddo: "Che erano suoi questi libri?"

Nero: "C'è ancora la plastica".

Freddo: "Li avrà comprati un tanto al metro".

[Freddo: "Did these books belong to him?"

Nero: "They're still wrapped in plastic".

Freddo: "He may have bought them in bulk".]

The accumulation of books is a pathetic attempt on the part of Libano to "buy" a desired education. Freddo, who becomes the leader of the gang following Libano's demise, is only able to communicate love to his younger brother through presents, such as a new scooter. His gifts

cannot protect Gigio from his destiny: he will die of an overdose towards the end of the film. However, the character that fully embodies a 1980s consumer frenzy is the third and final leader of the gang, Dandi (played by Claudio Santamaria). The third part of the film sees him living in the lap of luxury in the centre of Rome, well groomed, dressed in the latest fashion, and obsessed with his image. In order to achieve the gang's leadership he has betrayed his friend Freddo. Thanks to his contacts in the secret service he is the only member of the gang who avoids jail. Abandoning his former associates to their destiny, he is able to mix with businessmen and powerful politicians.

As with the case of Libano, however, his money and status do not buy him love or culture:

[Dandi] "Belli, che so grechi, questi quadri?"

[Antique dealer] "No, Luigi XVI".

...

[Dandi] "Incartami pure questi Luigi".

[Dandi: "These paintings are nice. Are they Greek?"

Antique dealer: "No, they are Louis XVI".

...

Dandi: "Wrap up these Louises!"]

This scene in an antique shop symbolizes Dandi's marginality in spite of his apparent success. Shopkeepers and politicians fear him, but do not respect him, and Dandi is not even loved by his wife Patrizia, a beautiful ex prostitute — the typical femme fatale of the film noir — who resorts to alcohol in order to cope with her life with Dandi, another clear homage to De Palma's film. Undoubtedly, *Romanzo criminale* presents many elements of film noir, as identified by Mason,

such as the presence of a femme fatale, Patrizia, with whom both Dandi and the gang's nemesis, Inspector Santamaria, are in love, a flash-back structure and the narrative of double-cross and betrayal.

By showing the gang's luxury life, the director Placido does not spare the audience scenes in discos and expensive locales. Most of the action of Placido's film is moved from Magliana, the suburb where the gang originated and operated, to the city centre and to glamorous locales. Unlike the representation of Cavallero and his gang as shabby characters, except for the brief sequence mentioned previously, in which Cavallero arguably plays the role of the economic miracle entrepreneur, Placido's film makes use of fabulous period costumes, scenes of extravagant lifestyle, and attractive and famous actors. With its use of costumes and sunglasses, of vintage cars and a catchy soundtrack, the film contributes to what Christian Uva defines as a general revival of the 1970s that are accorded "the status of mythical refounding of the Italian collective imaginary" (2007: 89).

As mentioned, Lizzani played a fundamental role in creating a metropolitan neo-gangsterism by intertwining the aesthetic of the American gangster movie with elements of Italian neo-realism. Likewise, it is clear that *Romanzo criminale* is indebted to the American tradition. According to Bonsaver, "the American models for the film are Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, and the camera work in De Palma's *Scarface* and Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* as well as the Italian B-movie gangster films of the 1970s" (2006: 80). As Pezzotti has mentioned elsewhere (2016: 217), Placido's movie also evokes Sergio Leone's *C'era una volta in America* (*Once upon Time in America*, 1984). In her *American Gangster cinema*, Mason defines Leone's film as a "gangster epic" (xi) that "articulates a historical vision to highlight larger social forces at work" (144) and this is precisely what *Romanzo criminale* does. Like *Once Upon a Time in America*,

Romanzo criminale presents a prologue in which the innocence of the young protagonists is crushed brutally by a murder and the subsequent arrest of one of them. The film is then divided into three parts, each one taking the name of one of the main characters, and follows their personal life and career during the 1970s and 1980s. While the novel from which it originates is a powerfully executed noir highlighting collusion among criminal organizations, the Italian secret service and terrorists, the director puts the theme of friendship among the protagonists at the centre of the narrative. As Resmini argues, Placido turned the epic of the novel into individual tragedies (2016: 252) by concentrating on the individual stories of the anti-heroes. Placido's choice to shape the movie as a story of lost innocence creates, to borrow the words of Smith, "the optimal conditions for an intense, sympathetic engagement" (1994: 47) with the protagonists. In this sense, *Romanzo criminale* is different from *Bandits in Milan* insofar that, as an instant movie that concentrates on the preparation and execution of a bank robbery and focuses on the victims of Cavallero's criminal actions, *Bandits in Milan* is only able to create a cognitive engagement. This also means that, while viewers are cued to engage emotionally with the protagonists of *Romanzo criminale*, a heightened V-effekt can be noted in *Bandits in Milan*; viewers will be distanced emotionally enough from the protagonists and their actions to engage intellectually with the social and political context in which the criminal events take place.

The prologue of *Romanzo criminale* is crucial to show how the exclusive alignment with the villains from the beginning of the film may create the optimal conditions for a sympathetic engagement. In the initial scene the viewer watches young Libano, Dandi and Freddo as well as their friend Grana, stealing a car. What looks like bravado turns very soon into tragedy. Grana, the driver, does not stop at a police checkpoint and runs over a policeman. From this very scene it is obvious that the focus of the director is on the young protagonists: while their excitement

and reaction to the incident is highlighted by a sequence of alternate close ups of their young and beautiful faces, the policeman involved in the accident is a shadow barely distinguishable in the nocturnal scene. Furthermore, the viewer is not told whether he will survive. While the audience is not exposed to the policeman's wounded body and his suffering, they are well aware of the serious condition Grana is in, following the accident. The young boys take refuge in a caravan parked close to the beach and it is soon obvious that Grana is not going to survive. The camera lingers on his suffering face and stays on him when he finally dies. Chased by the police, the three surviving boys run along the shore. Libano, who was successfully escaping, returns to rescue Freddo from a policeman. Beaten up, he suffers a permanent injury to his leg, a reminder throughout the narrative of his loyalty to his friends. Fragments of this sequence return as flashbacks throughout the film and in particular around the death of each of the three protagonists. These flashbacks serve to reiterate the friendship of the three protagonists and remind the audience of their lost innocence. This aspect allows us to draw a parallel between the two films; in *Bandits in Milan*, no matter how merciless and corrupted by the capitalist society of the period the protagonists are, their political integrity and working class roots are reminiscent of Pasolini's concept of the noble simplicity of the proletariat who struggle to adapt to the increasingly consumerist society of post-war Italy, anticipating what directors such as Claudio Caligari (*Toxic Love* 1983, *The Scent of the Night* 1998 and *Don't Be Bad* 2015) would explore a few decades later in his films. Similarly, this concept also emerges from *Romanzo criminale*, in which the protagonists' coming of age reflects a criminal generation that, in the words of Santandrea, seems to have "incattivito il suo spirito, compromesso la sua vivace intelligenza popolare, smarrito la propria amabile purezza [per sfociare in un] dirompente desiderio di

emancipazione”. [turned nasty, compromised its proletarian wisdom, lost its good-natured innocence [to result in] a strong desire for emancipation]. (2019: introduction).¹⁰

Equally importantly, the initial scene in *Romanzo Criminale* also facilitates a view of the villains as victims of police brutality and, ultimately, of society at large. Indeed, their crimes are subsequently framed as revenge against an unfair society that has marginalized them and their families. Several episodes in the film endorse this view. Interestingly, when the gang decides to start a war with rival criminal organizations, the protagonists declare that they are not afraid to die. Libano says: “Non ci hanno già ammazzato mille volte al minorile, quando abbiamo dovuto dire sissignore a chi ci trattava come merde? Non si ammazza un uomo due volte”. [They have killed us one thousand times when we were at juvie and had to say ‘yes, sir’ to those who treated us like shit, haven’t they? You don’t kill a man twice]. The gang’s first exploit, the kidnapping of baron Rosellini, is depicted as revenge on Libano’s part as Libano’s parents had worked for baron Rosellini and they had been treated like beasts. Moreover, in the above-mentioned scene at the antique shop, Dandi says to the antique dealer that he wants to live in the city centre, from where his family had been evicted when Dandi was a child. These examples make evident the attempt at emphasizing the victimhood of the villains and highlighting society’s responsibility for their life choices. This element is also present in *Bandits in Milan*, where Cavallero starts his criminal career in order to fund his political activity and fight capitalism, even though, ironically, Cavallero ends up being fascinated by, and ultimately becoming a victim of, consumerism and capitalism.

The protagonists of *Romanzo criminale* also show a high degree of sensitivity thus contributing to a substantial identification with the audience. The best example is the episode of the *strage di Bologna*. The Bologna attack happened on 2 August 1980 when a bomb exploded

in the second-class waiting room of the Bologna railway station, instantly killing 85 people and injuring two hundred. The Bologna massacre was attributed to the neo-fascist group NAR, and several members were convicted over the attack, but the investigation also uncovered murky links to organized crime groups and even possible ties to the Italian secret service.¹¹ While there is no proof of the involvement of the Banda della Magliana in what is still the deadliest terrorist attack on Italian soil, the film intertwines the gang's history with this atrocity. This was something that Placido strongly wanted (Uva 2011: 90): he shows a secret agent arranging for a gang associate, Nero (played by Riccardo Scamarcio), to murder the man sent to plant the bomb. The gang leader of that time, Libano, reluctantly agrees to help, while Freddo disagrees and goes to Bologna on the day of the attack. He is present when the bomb explodes. A controversial scene where a shocked Freddo wanders around the rubble following the *strage di Bologna* is a clear attempt at humanizing the criminal protagonist: shocked by the vision of innocent lives destroyed, Freddo decides to renounce his criminal life and leave Italy with his girlfriend Roberta.¹²

A means by which the film facilitates identification with either the gangster or the victims is the representation of violence in the narrative. In Lizzani's film, violent scenes are very realistic and the director indulges in the consequences of the gang's actions on innocent people. Although the criminals' perspectives prevail throughout the film, Lizzani gives space to the victims' viewpoints, too. By being the object of violence committed by the Cavallero gang and arguably by the police too, the victims' perspective evokes intense emotional responses and despite the short spatio-temporal attachment and the limited subjective access to the victims, Lizzani elicits a positive evaluation of the victims from viewers, providing the possibility of an intensive, albeit short, identification with them. Consequently, the viewer's sympathetic

engagement to the victims is likely to distance the viewer from the potential emotional resonances of the criminals' narrative thread.¹³

By contrast, in *Romanzo criminale* all the gang's victims are other criminals and they are depicted either as petty figures or extremely violent characters who deserve what happens to them. This film emphasises the spectacular side of the criminal act. Violence happens in beautiful settings (such as the Spanish steps in Rome, where Libano, Dandi and Freddo murder *Terribile*, the leader of a rival gang) and is always accompanied by a retro-style soundtrack, both Italian and American, that defuses the shock the audience may feel.¹⁴ These characteristics were in line with the aesthetic of the American gangster movie of the 1980s and 1990s and made *Romanzo criminale* a palatable film for the international market which was now open to the Italian cinematic output after the international success of films such as *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), *Mediterraneo* (1991), *The Postman* (1994) and *Life is Beautiful* (1997) that won important prizes at the Academy Awards, respectively in 1990, 1991, 1994 and 1998. Only at the end, when the spiral of violence is amplified, does the film reveal — borrowing Mason's words — a “tension between the glamour of the pleasures provided by the gangster world and the reality of the violence with which this is inextricably entwined, and between the licence the gang grants its individual members and the prohibitions it enforces” (149). The pleasure the audience feels in watching a romanticized version of criminal life somewhat fades towards the end of the film where it becomes more challenging to share the moral values of Freddo (the protagonist of a series of murders of gang members to avenge Libano's death), and especially Dandi who betrays his gang members and saves himself. However, the theme of friendship remains till the end: in spite of betraying Freddo, Dandi helps him escape from prison. In the final stage of the film, Freddo, the last surviving friend of the Libano-Freddo-Dandi triangle, is murdered. The images

of a dying Freddo are alternated with a flash-back with sepia tone where the protagonists, children again, run freely on the beach, a clear attempt at re-establishing an emotional attachment within the audience.

Analysing these films through the lens of film noir allows us to understand to what extent noir conventions and the investigative format of American crime stories were used as “flexible vehicles through which to explore murders, unsolved mysteries, corruption, assassinations, and social problems that have been constant features in Italian civic and political life for more than sixty years” (Wood 2016: 93). Specifically, this allows a focus on an aspect of these films which has been so far neglected by academia, that is, a critique of capitalism and consumerism as empty values that do not bring any happiness or the desired integration into society to the protagonists. In this article we have argued that both *Bandits in Milan* and *Romanzo criminale* represent the structure of the gang as a company functioning within and in accordance with the wild capitalistic culture dominant in Italy between the 1960s and the 1990s; and the gangster’s life choices as dominated by the consumeristic ideology of their respective times. Lizzani frames his critique within the capitalist managerial ideology at the beginning of a period of great economic and social transformations in Italy, in the early 1960s and the social unrest in the late 1960s that put into question traditional hierarchies both in the university and the economic systems. Placido concentrates on the consumerism that characterised Italian society in the 1980s and 1990s through the prism of Italy in the early 2000s when environmental and anti-global themes were gradually getting ground in the political discourse. By critiquing different manifestations of capitalism — the managerial ideology brought about by the economic miracle

and the rampant consumerism of the 1980s and 1990s — the Italian gangster film demonstrates the flexibility that expresses “the transformative qualities of the [noir] genre” (Mason 2002: xv). By using a cognitive approach, we have also highlighted how the representation of the protagonists and their stories, the narrative point of view, the use of settings, costumes and make up are all pivotal in creating a sympathetic engagement in *Romanzo criminale*, while in *Bandits in Milan* the audience’s engagement with the protagonists remains at a cognitive level. An emphasis on the subjectivity of the victims contributes to creating an emotional detachment from Cavallero’s gang and makes it more difficult for the audience to develop any sympathetic attachment to the gangsters. By contrast, an emphasis on the life stories (including their childhood) of the *Banda della Magliana*’s gangsters and their victimization by society allows the audience to participate emotionally in their tragic destiny. This can be explained by the proximity between the events and their cinematic representation. Cavallero’s story was reconstructed and shot only a few months after the events, when the violence perpetrated by the gang was still in the public’s mind. On the one hand, Lizzani could not justify the gang’s violence without offending their victims and their families; on the other the director did not have time to reflect on the inner motivations of Cavallero and his gang and consequently opted for a realist and meticulous reconstruction of historical events which reflected the evolving phenomenon of gangsterism within metropolises such as Milan and Turin. By contrast, Placido was able to re-interpret a story many years after the events occurred. This made more palatable his romanticizing of the figure of the gangster. This also recalls similar operations performed by American films such as *Scarface* or *Once upon a Time in America* to which *Romanzo criminale* is clearly indebted and a more general revival of the 1970s in recent Italian pop culture.

Finally, an interesting question that this analysis elicits is the degree of influence that a cognitive or an emotional response may have on the reception of the social and political messages delivered in these films. While one needs to consider that the reaction of the audience may be subjective and difficult to monitor, following Brecht's concept of *V-effekt*, it may be argued that by emotionally involving its spectators, *Romanzo criminale* does not allow them to detach themselves from the text: the experience of a climatic catharsis of emotion leaves viewers complacent thus preventing them from critically reflecting on the political and social issues exposed in the film. On the other hand, by arousing a cognitive response, *Bandits in Milan* may have a more profound impact by soliciting a critical perspective that recognizes social injustice and exploitation, even though the format of the instant movie may minimize the intellectual remit of the film. While this question is probably destined to remain open, it is clear that the Italian gangster film, like its American counterpart, shares many characteristics with film noir, and, in particular, the ability to respond to the social and political context of the time. In so doing, the gangster film can be seen as a creative and artistic choice and its analysis should not be confined to its generic conventions.

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¹ See in particular Renga (2013, 2014, 2019); Leotta (2011; 286-96); O'Healy (2010, 83-101); Bianchi and Sabbatino (2009); Babini (2004, 229-50).

² In Italian, the term “Mafia” only refers to the criminal organizations originating in Sicily. Mafia organizations developing in different geographical areas have their own names and

characteristics. Generally speaking these criminal organizations are old and follow ritualistic rites, in terms of initiation and affiliation, as well as replicating a family structure. See Dickie (2004, 2011, 2014); Allum (2008); Di Lorenzo (2006); Stille (1995); Arlacchi (1993); Falcone (1992). Non-mafia gang associations are a more recent phenomenon and do not involve rituals or rigid hierarchies.

³ See Caldiron (1992, 1999), Giovannini (2000), Wood (2007, 2010 and 2016).

⁴ *Bandits in Milan* was presented at the 18th Berlin Film Festival and won the 1968 David di Donatello awards for best direction and production and the 1989 Nastro d'argento for best screenplay. The Grolla d'oro for best actor was awarded to Gian Maria Volonté. The film was very successful at the box office in 1968, earning 1,768,000,000 liras. See http://www.torinocittadelcinema.it/schedafilm.php?film_id=465&stile=small (consulted on 12 August 2019).

⁵ The *banda Cavallero* was initially composed of four members: Pietro Cavallero, Sante Notarnicola, Danilo Crepaldi and Adriano Rovoletto. In 1967 Donato Lopez, aged 18 at the time, replaced Crepaldi, who died in an air crash.

⁶ It came ninth in the list of Italian films at the box office in 2005, earning 4,822,864.22 euros. See <http://www.anica.it/rassegna/anicainforma.pdf> (consulted on 30 June 2017). It also won 8 David and 5 Nastri d'argento.

⁷ *Mani sulla città/Hands over the city* is a 1963 film by Francesco Rosi, starring Rod Steiger and Salvo Randone. It is a story of political corruption in post-WW2 Italy that denounces bad practice in large scale suburban development.

⁸ All translations in this article are ours, unless otherwise stated.

⁹ Sante Notarnicola comes from a poor Apulian family pushed to emigrate to the industrial

periphery of Turin, at the end of the 1950s. In July 1962 he participated to the Piazza Statuto riots in Turin, in support of workers and their struggle against Fiat. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) labelled the rioters as thugs and accused the struggling workers of being troublemakers against the democratic bargaining in Fiat. As a result, many rebellious young communists, such as Notarnicola and Cavallero, decided to distance themselves from the Communist Party and embarked in the project of generating finance for revolutionary ends, which motivates the Cavallero gang's criminal activity. The gang members were sentenced to life for multiple murders and attempted murder at the trial which took place in June 1968. As he served his sentence, Notarnicola took part in several demonstrations and mutinies in Italian prisons and soon became an icon of the young extra-parliamentary communists' revolt. In his book *L'evasione impossibile* (1997), Notarnicola provides a detailed analysis of his political engagement and the reasons why he embarked in such a radical project to pursue his political ideals and principles. He was released in 2000.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the representation of criminal gangs in Rome in Italian cinema and television from the 1970s to the present see Santandrea (2019).

¹¹ For an analysis of terrorism in Italy see Ginsborg (1990).

¹² For a more detailed analysis of the Bologna attack scene in *Romanzo criminale* see O'Leary (2013: 243-57) and Pezzotti (2018: 51-52).

¹³ For an analysis of the narrative perspectives and their cognitive and emotional impact on viewers in Lizzani's *Bandits in Milan* see Paoli 2011.

¹⁴ In real life, this murder occurred at Tor di Valle racecourse, in the outskirts of Rome. For an analysis of *Romanzo criminale*'s soundtrack, see O'Rawe (2009, 214-26).