

**Foreign Settings in the Fascist-Era *Giallo*:
Italian Writers' Creative Explorations of Criminality and Cultural Difference**

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Abstract

The 1930s saw an explosion in the publication of crime writing in Italy, but initially readers' appetite for crime fiction was fed almost entirely by translated imports from the US, Britain and France. Even as publishers began promoting crime writing by Italians, foreign models and settings remained important, and several early Italian writers set their work in foreign countries. This article, which draws on both textual analysis and archival research, examines some foreign-set novels produced by Italian authors during the Fascist years, and seeks to identify the function and appeal of foreign settings in the depiction of criminality in that period. These books, peopled by exotic 'Others', comment on corruption, freedom of the press, cultural diversity, racial difference, policing, criminality, as much at home as abroad. The distant settings offered safety and freedom, as well as escapism or distraction, and the opportunity to experiment with genre.

Keywords: *giallo*; crime fiction; Fascism; censorship; foreignness; Mondadori

Though sometimes thought of as little more than escapist light reading, crime fiction can provide revealing insights into a society's ills, fears and ideological debates (see e.g. Pezzotti 2014, 6–8; Pieri 2011; Somigli 2005). This is true of Italian crime fiction even under Fascism. Although various kinds of (formal and informal) censorship affected both publishers and authors of crime novels, the years of Mussolini's rule, and particularly the 1930s, coincided with the 'golden age' of Italian crime fiction (Pistelli 2006). Most crime fiction published in those years came from overseas but this was also a period in which Italian writers began experimenting with the genre. They drew inspiration from its international and cosmopolitan character to carve out a space in which to explore cultures and subcultures outside the Italian mainstream. In this article, I investigate the early years of the genre in Italy and particularly the relationship of Italian crime novelists to notions of foreignness and cultural diversity. Several early Italian proponents of the genre chose to set their mystery stories outside Italy, and their work is revealing because it tells us at least as much about Italy at the time as it does about (perceptions of) other countries and peoples. Such foreign settings are at once puzzling, given the regime's overt xenophobia, and comprehensible, given the restrictions on creativity occasioned by certain censorship requirements. In light of the significance of this historical period, and the important place crime fiction would go on to have in Italian writing, it is worth exploring what foreign settings might have represented for those writers.

The present study is based both on an examination of the themes and settings of a number of Italian crime novels, and on archival research into relevant correspondence with – and within – Mondadori publishing house. For my analysis, I draw on a corpus of around a dozen foreign-set *gialli* by four Italian authors (Tito A. Spagnol, Ezio d'Errico, Cesare Jenco and Giorgio Scerbanenco), all published by Mondadori during the period 1934–1942, roughly the second half of the *ventennio fascista*. Spagnol's works are set in the US and Paris, d'Errico's (part of a series) in Paris, Jenco's on the high seas, and Scerbanenco's (another series) in Boston. Letters preserved in the Mondadori archive show that a great deal of time, effort and reflection went into the preparation and selection of the crime novels released, and into nurturing and managing the stable of authors. Far from being seen as disposable pulp fiction that could be churned out without much consideration or care, crime novels constituted part of a carefully thought-out publication programme for Mondadori, and this was seen as a genre whose time had come. The novelists were often very emotionally and intellectually invested in their work, and at their best were ambitious in their literary endeavours, curious and bold in their fascination with cultural difference, and resourceful in their response to censorship. I argue that in these novels the authors operated in a new, international cultural space that allowed them a degree of ideological commentary, thematic variety and inspiration for genre experimentation. My study shows how this is evident both in the works themselves (in themes, structure and content) and in the dedication and persistence with which authors advocated for their own writing and for the genre more generally. By finding safe and productive ways of engaging with the foreign, authors of *gialli* published during these difficult years were able to contribute to the growth and establishment of a tradition that continues to this day to engage with themes that have international reach.

It is no accident that all the selected novels were published by Mondadori, 'the biggest, and most active, Italian publishing house of the fascist period' (Billiani 2008, 61). Elvio Guagnini (1979, 440) has observed that the development of the crime fiction genre in Italy was quite unusual because it was part of a coherent editorial project, and the main figure behind this project was Arnaldo Mondadori, whose Milan-based house was rapidly expanding and modernising during the *ventennio* (Rundle 2010, 34) and who was by far the most prolific publisher of crime fiction. He was not only a shrewd businessman but also had considerable appreciation for the genre,¹ launching a series of yellow-covered paperback detective novels, 'I Libri Gialli', in 1929. Theories proliferate as to the origins of the choice of colour scheme (see e.g. Orsi and Volpatti 1988, 277–78), but in Italy crime, detective and mystery novels of many kinds are generally known as *gialli* to this day. The affordable volumes put out by Mondadori, whose advertising materials boasted 'This book will keep you awake at night!', were soon a runaway success. Just four titles were released in each of the series' first two years, but reader enthusiasm was considerable, and from 1931 onwards, between twenty-three and twenty-five *gialli* came out each year until the series was wound up in 1941.² While other publishing houses, including Mediolanum, Casa Editrice Universale and Martucci (Somigli 2005, 71), also began releasing crime novels during these years, none had the prominence of Mondadori.

Crime fiction under Fascism

The development of crime fiction in Italy is inextricably linked, in complex and sometimes paradoxical ways, with the Fascist regime's changing policies and processes regarding cultural production and consumption. The reading public's increasing enthusiasm for *gialli* in the 1930s was against the backdrop of a regime that began to disapprove quite strongly of this kind of writing, and particularly its accessibility to the public thanks in part to the low cover price of books in

series like Mondadori's 'Libri Gialli'. One reason for this disapproval was that the genre, by its very nature, made a lie of the regime's own 'alternative truth' that in Fascist Italy there *was* no crime because efficient and incorruptible forces of law and order, combined with universal well-being and contentment, meant criminal activity simply had no place there (Pezzotti 2014, 14–15; Rundle 2018, 842; see also Sinibaldi 2014). Even references to crime in the press were discouraged from the late 1920s (Rundle 2000, 70), and further curtailed from 1933 (Thompson 1991, 130, 138). Another concern was the fact that, in those early years, the vast majority of the 'Libri Gialli' were translations, usually from English, with the work of writers such as Edgar Wallace and S. S. Van Dine especially popular.³ Italian readers' voracious appetite for foreign crime fiction sat uneasily with the regime's xenophobia and its policy of cultural autarchy (Guagnini 1979, 440–41; Rundle 2000, 2018). Jane Dunnett, among others, has observed how 'importing cultural goods (...) clashed with the aim of promoting *italianità*, or "Italianness", that was so trumpeted by Fascist leaders' (2002, 97).

To counter the influx of foreign works, from the early 1930s the authorities sought – in various ways and with varying degrees of success – to regulate the publication of translations (Dunnett 2002; Fabre 2007, 33–34), and quotas were introduced to ensure that a proportion of any book series (*collana*) was written by Italians. As publishers sought to meet their quotas there was a veritable explosion of crime writing produced by Italian writers (Crovi 2002, 44), among them those discussed in the present study. Though home-grown crime novelists had the advantage of their nationality, the content of their work was nevertheless closely scrutinised. For example, certain topics, such as suicide and abortion, were to be avoided in fiction (Dunnett 2002, 101–2), and in 1937 it was decreed that the culprit in a *giallo* must not be Italian (Crovi 2002, 52; Pistelli 2006, 234). Such strictures naturally affected novelists' creative processes.

Negotiation was often a key feature of censorship under Fascism, particularly in the early years (Rundle 1999, 431–32; Billiani 2007, 17) and Arnaldo Mondadori had considerable success in his discussions with representatives of the regime in charge of publication approvals (Rundle 2010, 90–96).⁴ Nevertheless, the climate for *gialli* worsened and the regime went on in 1941 to ban serialised crime fiction and drastically reduce the numbers of crime novels any publishing house was permitted to release. By August 1943 crime novels were banned entirely, but by then Mondadori's 'Libri Gialli' had already been wound up (Rundle 2010, 192–93). Letters preserved in the archive are testament to the very personal toll this took on some major Italian authors. In September 1941 d'Errico wrote to the publisher of 'the storms the *giallo* has had to weather in recent times',⁵ and just two months later, in a tone of some despair at the fact that the newspapers had now begun presenting all criminals as 'avid readers of *gialli*', he announced he would quit writing them upon submission of the one he was currently working on (his twentieth), in the hope of returning to the craft at some future point, when it would no longer be 'equated with training young bandits'.⁶

Translating foreign texts, co-opting foreign locations

Crime fiction was an imported genre and, due no doubt to high demand and tight deadlines, the translations into Italian were often rather poor, and frequently suffered significant cuts, rewriting and simplification (Spurio 2011, n.p.). According to Alessandro Varaldo, who with title number 21 (1931) was the first Italian-born writer to be published in the 'Libri Gialli' series, high-quality translations were what set Mondadori *gialli* apart from the rest.⁷ Indeed, writer, translator and editorial consultant Lorenzo Montano, who headed 'I Libri Gialli', wrote to Arnaldo Mondadori towards the end of that series' first year that one key reason why *gialli* had not hitherto been widespread in Italy, was 'the terrible translations'.⁸ He himself took responsibility for checking, editing

and improving the translations in Mondadori's 'Libri Gialli' series for at least the next two years until he took on a further editorial role with the company.⁹

As noted above, though translations were popular, publishers were paradoxically obliged by the regime to release locally written *gialli* alongside those imported from overseas, and it appears there was no shortage of supply. One might have expected Montano to have been happy with more Italian authors attempting to write *gialli*, given the heavy workload associated with getting translations up to standard, and the 'negotiation and compromise' that were often required of translators working under the regime (Sinibaldi 2014, n.p.). Local authors' awareness of the kinds of topics that were anathema to the authorities meant that they might be relied upon to exercise some preventive self-censorship, as was the case, for example, in Franco's Spain (Camus Camus 2010). However, it seems that the home-grown product was largely viewed by the publishing house as something of a liability. As early as August 1932, the influx of submissions from local *giallisti* was becoming 'a real affliction' for Montano, causing him to lose precious time reading 'endless rubbish'.¹⁰ A number of Italian submissions were accepted, but Montano sought to spread them out so that they did not appear too close to one another,¹¹ and in 1939 he was advised that Arnoldo Mondadori felt that titles by local authors were appearing too frequently.¹²

Although within Mondadori the homegrown *gialli* were seen as inferior, the house did their best to publicise them with strap lines that emphasised both their quality and their Italian origin. For example, a page at the back of Spagnol's *L'unghia del leone* advertises the 'revelation of Italian *polizieschi*', listing seven recent works by Varaldo, Lanocita, De Stefani and Comez. A cover image for this same novel appearing in Pistelli (2006) also describes the work as 'an Italian revelation', while another strap line he quotes proclaims Spagnol 'a master of the *poliziesco*, and Italian as well!' (188). In fact, a lot of these locally produced *gialli* drew heavily on Anglophone and French models, because that was what readers demanded (Rambelli 1979, 73–74) and were familiar with. They were also often set in a foreign country, and thus presented foreign policing traditions and fashions in (fictional) detection, and it is the depiction – and creative potential – of such foreign settings that is the focus of my study. The texts exploited certain popular (and marketable) aspects of a foreign literary tradition and culture, while also subtly reflecting domestic concerns. (For a discussion of some similar instances of this phenomenon in genre fiction across Europe, see Maher 2018, 385–86.)¹³

The vogue for overseas settings among Italian *giallisti* is often attributed to the aforementioned stipulation, from 1937, that the guilty party in a fictional crime must not be an Italian. Setting the whole story in a foreign country was one way an author could conform to the requirements of the censors and at the same time have a suitably large pool of potential perpetrators to keep readers guessing about 'whodunit'. For example, almost all the characters in d'Errico's Commissario Richard series, set in and around Paris, are – predictably enough – French. Similarly, Scerbanenco's Jelling series from the early 1940s is set in Boston and the characters are primarily American. Other Italian-penned novels of the *ventennio* are not only set overseas but, thanks to plots involving international espionage or trade, deploy a purpose-built international cast. The plot of Spagnol's *La notte impossibile* (1937), which unfolds in Paris, involves an American secret agent investigating the theft of plans for the fortification of the Panama Canal, and features Russian, French, Nicaraguan, Guatemalan and Japanese characters/suspects. Jenco's *La morte sul 'Timor'* (1939) is set on a steamship owned by an Englishman; the crew and passengers are British, American, French and Chinese, with additional 'local colour' provided by pirates on the China Seas.

While the requirement to depict criminality as a necessarily foreign failing undoubtedly induced a kind of self-censorship, in some cases, the self-imposed constraint provided creative

opportunities. I argue below that the appeal foreign settings and characters held for Italian authors was most likely not purely practical or logistical, but also ideological: foreign locations were a way for authors to make comments, albeit veiled ones, about culture and society in Italy and abroad with less risk of encountering the ire of the censors. Moreover, at a thematic level, foreign settings afforded the opportunity to introduce elements of exoticism and freshness that facilitated the mix of escapism and titillation that many readers seek in crime fiction. Finally, non-Italian settings inspired by foreign examples of crime writing had advantages for the development of this new genre in the Italian context, allowing authors to experiment with different models of plot construction, characterisation and investigation. In the three sections that follow, I explore in more detail the ideological, thematic and generic potential of foreign-set crime fiction in Fascist Italy.

(Indirect) social critique

Mark Chu (2000) has observed that one side effect of crime fiction set overseas is that it can give the reassuring impression that crime and criminality are more pervasive ‘there’ than ‘here’. This, perhaps, is why, during the Fascist years, Italian translators and publishers sometimes highlighted negative features of US culture in order to emphasise its difference from the Italian and to reassure readers that the social problems depicted in American novels were not a concern in Fascist Italy, a phenomenon documented in Dunnett (2002). For *giallisti* concerned about the Fascist regime’s sensitivities about crime (fictional or real-life), there was a degree of safety to be found in foreign settings, since the author could not be accused of perpetuating a negative image of Italy by depicting its seedy underbelly. Indeed, some of the novels examined here make explicit reference – through ‘statistics’ that may or may not be fictional – to the ubiquity of crime in the foreign country or city. For example, in Scerbanenco’s *Boston*, blackmail is common, with three or four cases per day (2008 [1941], 12) and, according to his protagonist Arthur Jelling, every year two hundred police officers are killed on the job (17). The city’s residents are depicted as rubbernecks who turn out in number at the slightest hint of crime, ‘with that particular taste Americans have for a spectacle’ (152). D’Errico’s crime fighter, commissario Richard, also cites statistics: in Paris, some twenty people are reported missing every day (1938, 21). In Spagnol’s *Sotto la cenere*, too, criminality is rife and the rule of law in peril, at least according to the district attorney (1938b, 64–65). The same author depicts New York, and particularly Wall Street, as a site of corruption and dirty deals (Spagnol 1934, 123), as well as more forgivable acts of lawbreaking such as bootlegging (‘not, after all, according to the idea we all have of justice, a heinous criminal act’, 46).

Of course, readers are always free to draw comparisons – whether favourable or unfavourable – between any foreign setting and their own environment. Spagnol avails himself of this flexibility particularly in *L’unghia del leone*, whose cosmopolitan New York setting would likely have held great appeal for Italian readers thanks to the Hollywood movie industry, which exerted enormous influence on Italian tastes and fashions in those years (Dunnett 2005, 113; Gundle 1996, 312–316; Rundle 2010, 141). The plot of the novel centres around organised crime and political corruption, themes that would not have been at all welcome in an Italian locale. Barbara Pezzotti has observed how Spagnol was ‘able to use crime fiction to make a comparison between the illiberal systems of Mussolini dictatorship and the Anglo-Saxon democracies that defend civil liberties’ (2014, 185). Especially notable is his depiction of a free press, something that Mussolini’s regime had been quite effective in muzzling. Spagnol was himself a print journalist and, as he recounts in his *Memoriette* (1970, 163), he knew about suppression of the press firsthand, having gone into exile after the offices of his employer, the daily *Il sereno*, were burned down. He continued to work as a journalist, first in Paris and then in Hollywood. His time in the US afforded the author

familiarity with a setting he could deploy very effectively in his crime writing, not just in *L'unghia del leone* (1934) but also in the novel *Sotto la cenere* (1938b) and the novella *L'ombrellino viola* (1938a). His familiarity with the country lends him an air of authority – his 'American' novels include explanatory footnotes on cultural details, and foreignness is further inscribed through the frequent appearance of English words, interjections and phrases (occasionally accompanied by glosses into Italian). While this textual level cannot be examined in any detail here, it certainly supports an interpretation of Spagnol's work as having a culturally open-minded, almost didactic, quality to it.

It is significant that the main detective in *L'unghia del leone*, Alfred Gusman, is a gagged journalist recently fired from the *Evening Sun*, and that early on, the book's secondary detective, the lawyer-narrator James Sullivan, gets most of his information about the case from the newspapers and then relates it to readers. This is a convenient way for a first-person narrator to provide the necessary background, but is also significant in light of the restrictions on the press in Fascist Italy. The book might present the US as a site of crime and gangland activity, but it is also a place where crimes are written about freely in the newspapers, which can be relied upon in understanding, even solving, a case. Moreover, it is explicitly mentioned that the police communicate procedural information with the press (42).

Some critique of Fascist values can also be detected in Scerbanenco's Jelling series. The unassuming protagonist's introspective, intuitive qualities mean he is a far cry from the *superuomo* that the Fascist regime sought to promote (Paoli 2016, 50). A police archivist, Jelling solves cases through reflection and empathy, rather than violence, intimidation or manly heroics. D'Errico, too, presented an upstanding but unconventional detective; his commissario Richard is 'sedentary and kindly', and 'not at all athletic' (d'Errico 1937, 27). Moreover, the author presents well-functioning police and judicial systems in his Paris novels, something which has been interpreted as an indirect critique of the state of affairs in Italy at the time (Pezzotti 2014, 24).¹⁴ In short, Scerbanenco and d'Errico use foreign settings and public servants to comment on Italian society, justice and policing, allowing readers to draw their own comparisons and conclusions about disparities with their homeland.

Exoticism, cultural diversity and the appeal of the foreign

The synopsis on the front dust jacket flap of Cesare Jenco's *La morte sul 'Timor'* (1939) promises that, 'Although by an Italian author, this *giallo* is certainly not lacking in exotic and mysterious elements'. In allaying readers' concerns about insufficiently exotic content, this blurb provides another clue as to the appeal of foreign settings, over and above their practicality in times of censorship. Novels set in distant places held the promise of an escape from the daily grind of life in Italy to the glitz of the Brooklyn Follies, the pathos of the artists' quarter of Paris, or the drama of a pirate raid. They tend to be peopled by characters from different ethnic, cultural and sometimes even racial backgrounds. These figures' social and professional status is also often potentially exotic or at the very least 'distant' from the typical Italian reader's reality: victims, perpetrators and innocent bystanders mixed up in these crimes include socialites, dancers, gangsters, secret agents, the disabled and mentally ill, hypnotists and other circus folk, puritan types, hunters, outlaws, and even a cross-dressing deserter.

It is important to note that the representations of cultural and ethnic diversity are at times beset by simplistic stereotyping, or even downright racist. For example, d'Errico (1936, 79) depicts Paris's jazz scene and the 'ballo negro' performed by artists of African origin, where there is a 'primitive', 'savage' quality to the music making, albeit in combination with a degree of control

and ‘impeccable rhythm’. In Spagnol’s *La notte impossibile*, also set in Paris, characters go dancing at the ‘Ballo Coloniale’. On arrival one of the group screws up her nose at the animal smell, and is told it is the smell of ‘negri’ (1937, 25). Soon, shots ring out and the police arrive – there has been a disagreement between ‘negri’ and the authorities shut the place down for the evening (29). Such representations, displaying a tension between the appeal of an exotic ‘Other’ and a deep-seated anxiety or distrust, are likely to have been familiar to readers at the time. They reflect the Fascist ambivalence about a deeply orientalist and romanticised notion of Africa (as extolled, for example, in the song ‘Faccetta nera’) and the supposed superiority of the Italian ‘race’.

Perhaps the most interesting take on racial difference in the novels examined here is Jenco’s *La morte sul Timor*, which exploits and (at times) overturns prejudices, stereotypes and preconceptions regarding the Chinese. There are undoubtedly highly problematic aspects to the depiction of Chinese characters in this novel, in which the English owner of Boyd Steamship Co. Ltd. hatches an elaborate plan to protect his business, which has increasingly been the target of Chinese pirates. Although they only appear towards the very end of the book, Jenco’s description of the pirates is very racially charged: their skin is repeatedly described as yellow and their main form of communication seems to be through sneers and grimaces (Jenco 1939, 144, 145, 146, 155). One of the novel’s biggest twists relates to Boyd’s right-hand man Ming, who embodies multiple stereotypes of the Chinese: he is learned and servile, ‘always affable and smiling’ (12), but his frequent smiles serve only to make his behaviour more suspicious, especially as they show off his dreadful teeth, which are the subject of several grotesque descriptions (Jenco 1939, 12, 18, 171). Ultimately, Ming turns out to be a narrative red herring, depicted in strongly negative terms precisely so the reader will assume him to be among the culprits rather than on the side of the investigation. By travelling on the ship in an elaborate disguise (though his teeth almost give him away), he is able to unmask traitorous elements within the shipping company and help to save the day. Through the variety of ethnicities in his novel, justified by its exotic setting, Jenco is able to inject a small degree of cultural nuance into the story – while some non-white characters are villainous, others are astute, learned and loyal. This is no small thing in a country where racial laws sought to impose homogeneity and extol a white supremacist ideology.

Genre models, borrowings and tributes

Perhaps the most striking way in which newness is introduced to the Italian literary system through crime novels set in foreign countries is at the level of genre. The authors exploit not only foreign settings but also foreign (typically British, US and Franco-Belgian) modes of story-telling. Billiani (2006, 67-68) has identified the important role foreign literatures played in introducing new literary and genre models to Fascist Italy. Her focus is on translations, but the process was further helped along by Italian authors of crime fiction series set overseas. In the texts examined here, novelists frequently co-opt popular foreign models of crime writing or even take the opportunity to trickle out a manifesto of sorts about the craft. Luca Somigli has shown that an imported genre is not always a good fit with target-culture readers’ horizon of expectations, and as it is gradually incorporated into the local production of popular fiction, imported conventions need to be rearticulated, rather than simply replicated (2005, 72, 76). Several foreign-set *gialli* from the Fascist years do just this.

Spagnol’s *L’unghia del leone* is a very early example of an Italian take on the American hard-boiled (Dunnett 2011, 14; Pezzotti 2014, 23). It has a gritty urban setting, rampant corruption and a tough, cynical (and ultimately self-serving) private investigator (cf. Scaggs 2005, 55–84) who, instead of handing the culprits over to the authorities, comes to a mutually agreeable

arrangement with representatives of the State and goes home considerably richer. Spagnol also experimented with other borrowed subgenres, such as the locked-room mystery (*La notte impossibile*, 1937) and a variation on the country-house mystery in which the murder has taken place in a hotel (*Sotto la cenere*, 1938). Spagnol's metafictional play is most evident in the story-within-a-story of *La notte impossibile*, a clever meditation on celebrity, detection styles, crime writing, and the notion of fictional characters becoming real – or at least seeming real to a vulnerable reader. The plot hinges upon a deluded impostor pretending to be Alfred Gusman, protagonist of *L'unghia del leone*, whose bizarre and idiosyncratic investigative methods are seductively intriguing to one avid, but mentally ill, reader who himself commits crimes in order to then flamboyantly 'solve' them. Through such overt reflection on the crime fiction phenomenon, Spagnol was asking readers to engage actively and critically with the genre they were consuming with increasing enthusiasm. This mix of influences and literary experimentation suggests Spagnol read widely within the genre of crime fiction and was influenced by both American and British models. An early reader's report on *L'unghia del leone* by Lorenzo Montano judges the book to be inspired by – but not equal to – the work of S. S. Van Dine, and in fact recommends the choice of an Italian theme for the author's future submissions.¹⁵ Montano left the final decision in Arnoldo Mondadori's hands¹⁶ and *Unghia* did get published, but perhaps Spagnol took Montano's advice to heart, as he also produced two crime novels set in Italy. These, too, had a certain Anglophone influence, however, in the shape of the Chesterton-inspired priest-detective Don Poldo (Spagnol 1935, 1936; cf. Rambelli 1979, 75; Covi 2000, 17).

Ezio d'Errico's Commissario Richard books also had international inspiration. They are widely seen as influenced by Georges Simenon's Maigret series (see e.g. Guagnini 1979, 456; Rambelli 2016), which Mondadori first published in Italian translation in 1932. Pezzotti (2014, 24) credits d'Errico with introducing to Italy the figure of the psychological detective, and this effort to shape Italian crime writing is often quite explicit in his novels. Commissario Richard rails against the vogue for the (often implausible) deductive methods of American and English detectives, and advocates that police focus instead on intuition and the psychology of the suspects and victims (see e.g. d'Errico 1936, 1937, 1938). Several years into his crime writing career, this was still a preoccupation for the highly prolific d'Errico. In response to a suggestion from Arnoldo Mondadori that he might make the endings to his *gialli* 'more analytical', d'Errico described his own process as 'the opposite of the clockwork mechanism the English and the Americans construct', though he acknowledged that 'ideally, perhaps, one would blend the two systems (at least up to a certain point), so as not to deprive fans of the pleasure of reconstructing the machine piece by piece'.¹⁷

Another Italian crime writer some scholars see as fusing foreign traditions during the *ventennio* is Scerbanenco, with his series of Jelling novels set in Boston. Guagnini (1979, 456) is of the opinion that Scerbanenco's model is the work of Erle Stanley Gardner, who wrote more than eighty novels of forensic detection with the lawyer Perry Mason as protagonist. In fact, as Marco Paoli (2016, 49) convincingly argues, in the figure of Arthur Jelling Scerbanenco manages to combine the 'scientific and logical methods' of traditional Anglophone puzzle mysteries with the 'psychological intuition' of Simenon's Maigret or d'Errico's Richard. Both Benedetta Bini (1989) and Pezzotti (2014) attribute Scerbanenco's choice of an overseas setting primarily to censorship considerations, and it does indeed seem to be the case that his choice of Boston was not really motivated by the creative possibilities afforded by this specific milieu and the novels show little engagement with cultural difference. Scerbanenco's depiction of Boston is rather lacking in detail and verisimilitude, especially when compared to the American and French settings brought to life by Spagnol and d'Errico respectively. Many characters' names and place names are implausible or spelt in ways that betray minimal familiarity with the US and with the English language, for example,

Ramdome, Arrouws (Scerbanenco [1940] 2008), Dady Dadies and Tom Fharanda (Scerbanenco [1942] 2011). But this lack of cultural and linguistic credibility notwithstanding, Scerbanenco's Jelling series marks an important stage in the author's development and in the evolution of Italian crime fiction. Bini (1989, 1019) sees the Jelling books as 'an apprenticeship' for Scerbanenco, affording an opportunity for him to begin his landmark contribution to the evolution of the Italian *giallo*, which she sees as a conjunction between sentimental, hard-boiled and police procedural models. As Paoli (2016, 36) observes, after the Jelling phase, with its puzzle mysteries, Scerbanenco shifted his (and his readers') attention from 'enigma and detection' to the social background of crime in his later Milan-set Lamberti novels, which went on to become very important in the canon of Italian crime fiction.¹⁸

Towards transculturality

Crime fiction in the twenty-first century has become a truly international and transcultural phenomenon and has even begun to be seen as a form of world literature (see e.g. Erdmann 2011; King 2014). This has been thanks in large part to the spread of English, French and American models and their enthusiastic adoption and modification within new target cultures (see e.g. Robyns 1990; Mandrell 1997, 61–63). In Italy, this was an ongoing process over many years, even decades. The various examples I have explored in this article represent early steppingstones in the journey towards establishing crime fiction as an important genre within the Italian system of popular fiction. Today, foreign themes, settings and contexts are part and parcel of many Italian *gialli*, which often explore the transnational nature of twenty-first-century crime, as well as the interplay between crime, social status and cultural identity in what is now a culturally heterogeneous nation. If, as Anderson, Miranda and Pezzotti put it, 'crime writing as a genre is a space that lends itself to exposing, denouncing, addressing and [...] constructing Otherness' (2012, 1), what conclusions can we draw about the attempts at engaging with the foreign that characterised some Italian crime fiction during its difficult beginnings?

There is no doubt that choosing a setting outside Italy helped Italian crime writers to avoid trouble with the censors during the 1930s and 1940s; politically acceptable culprits (i.e. non-Italians) and veiled or indirect critique of the regime were easier to slip into a work set outside Italy. However, what afforded Italian crime writers of the period the necessary creative scope for constructing compelling plots and engaging in international literary conversation was a culturally and socially diverse milieu that included an intriguing mix of characters, with some variety in ethnic or sociocultural background. Each of the texts discussed in this article situated crime and investigation among social outsiders or others likely to be somewhat removed from the average reader. These include people of different (and thus potentially 'exotic') ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds, as well as artists, performers, the staggeringly rich and the desperately poor, the drug-dependent, and other groups typically living their existence outside the cultural mainstream.¹⁹ Focusing on such groups in an Italian context would have been difficult, both because of the country's considerable ethnic homogeneity at that time, and because non-conforming groups and subcultures were so marginalised as to be rendered invisible by the regime. While any move towards a true transculturality, stretching both 'across' and 'beyond' traditional understandings of culture (Welsch 1999, 206 n. 14), was still some distance away, one can sense in the works examined here a gentle and cautious pushback against some of the cultural separatism that characterised Fascism, with its emphasis on a culturally and ethnically homogeneous unified nation.²⁰

Moreover, by situating their works in parts of the world already quite strongly associated with crime fiction (Paris, the United States, the high seas), Italian proponents of the nascent *giallo* were

able to engage with an international genre that the English- and French-speaking worlds were, at that stage, doing rather better. Being a part of an international phenomenon, or at least buying into the illusion of this, was a way of experimenting and playing with what might otherwise have been a somewhat restrictive set of genre conventions that were in turn further constrained by the dictates of the regime. The long-standing distinction in Italian criticism between high-brow and low-brow cultural production (see Pieri 2011, 1–2) means that early Italian crime fiction did not at the time receive the critical attention it deserved, but my examples demonstrate that Italian authors engaged both creatively and critically with foreign antecedents of the genre, whether through Spagnol's metafictional play or d'Errico's characters' commentary on fashions in crime fiction. Ultimately, these and other contributions helped the genre evolve into the varied literary subsystem we see today within Italian writing. This kind of reflective engagement is also evidenced in *giallo*-related correspondence with the publishing house quoted in earlier sections. Arnoldo Mondadori and his representatives were active in discussions about settings, styles of deduction and foreign literary inspiration with d'Errico and Spagnol, in particular.

By examining a selection of crime novels Italian authors chose to set in foreign countries during the Fascist period, I have identified a range of strategies whereby authors could engage with the foreign even in the face of a xenophobic regime bent on promoting cultural autarchy: they expressed veiled or indirect critique of the regime, introduced a degree of cultural heterogeneity through their 'exotic' settings, and through metafictional play contributed to the development and refinement of the genre for the Italian context. Even working within the constraints imposed by censorship, thanks to their flexibility and their mix of styles, genres and linguistic varieties, these authors and their novels 'stretch or go beyond the notionally tight confines of a national context, culture, or language', to borrow from Emma Bond's exploration of transnationalism (2014, 417). This was a crucial period for the establishment within the Italian literary system of a genre that nowadays – thanks to globalisation and international mobility – frequently lends itself to exploration of transnational concerns and transcultural identities. I have sought through this article to show how popular fiction during Fascism was a quietly international phenomenon in which we can discern some precursors of transcultural longing and attraction despite very difficult and inward-looking circumstances. However, several more areas remain ripe for further study. These include the content and emphasis of crime fiction published by houses other than Mondadori during the *ventennio*, as well as questions of readership and reception of Fascist-era *gialli*. I have not undertaken any detailed textual analysis here, but Spagnol's works, in particular, lend themselves to that kind of examination, as the author used loanwords and footnotes extensively in his foreign scene-setting. The vogue for overseas settings by no means ended with Fascism and this, too, provides scope for further study. For example, Scerbanenco's postwar New Mexico novels demonstrate a very different kind of engagement with an exotic American setting from the ill-defined Boston of the Jelling series, and reveal Italy's changing perceptions of America, a country whose fascination as a site of crime continues to this day, for example in the work of Giorgio Faletti, who wrote several best-selling thrillers set in the United States. Further analysis of Italian crime writers' historical and enduring fascination with international milieux will no doubt continue to shed light on Italy's role, desires and aspirations within intercultural and transcultural contexts and conversations.

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Notes on Contributor

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Notes

1. One of the *giallisti* in Mondadori's stable, Ezio d'Errico, described him as both 'enthusiast' and 'expert', with a valuable understanding of the mechanics of the genre. Letter from d'Errico to Arnoldo Mondadori, 10 June 1941. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Ezio d'Errico 1941.) All translations from Italian are my own.
2. The series was revived in 1946 under a slightly different name, 'Il Giallo Mondadori', and at different periods in its history, books in the series have appeared as often as every fortnight, or even weekly.
3. A full list of the 266 titles published in the 'Libri Gialli' series can be accessed from https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Il_Giallo_Mondadori (accessed 20 July 2019)
4. It should also be noted that that regime's public stance against *gialli* was not necessarily uniformly followed in private. For example, in a postcard to Mondadori (dated 5 January 1934), Alessandro Varaldo reported that he had just entrusted Galeazzo Ciano with a nicely bound copy of his latest *giallo* (*La scomparsa di Rigel*) to be passed on to *il Duce*. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Alessandro Varaldo, 1934.)
5. Letter from d'Errico to Arnoldo Mondadori, 15 September 1941. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Ezio d'Errico 1941.)
6. Letter from d'Errico to Enrico Pieni, 23 November 1941. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Ezio d'Errico 1941.)
7. In a letter to Arnoldo Mondadori (undated but likely from late 1929 or 1930), Varaldo described the translated *gialli* put out by other publishing houses as 'foreign dross invading our market, translated in a dreadfully slapdash way'. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Alessandro Varaldo.)
8. Letter from Montano to Arnoldo Mondadori, 25 September 1929. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Lorenzo Montano, 1929.)
9. Letter from Montano to Arnoldo Mondadori, 23 December 1931. Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Lorenzo Montano, 1931.
10. Letter from Montano to Arnoldo Mondadori dated 4 August 1932. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Lorenzo Montano, 1932.)
11. Letter from Montano to Arnoldo Mondadori dated 25 June 1935. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Lorenzo Montano, 1935.)
12. Unsigned letter to Montano from a representative of the publishing house, 22 May 1939. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Lorenzo Montano, 1939.)
13. For reasons of space I do not examine here those novels set in Italy but featuring foreign characters, though this, too, was an important phenomenon in those years. It is perhaps best exemplified by certain works of Augusto De Angelis, which have been studied in some detail by Somigli (2005) and Pezzotti (2014, 25–39).
14. Somigli (2005) has noted that De Angelis, too, through his detective, commissario De Vincenzi, 'shed[s] the self-assurance that had characterized the [English and French] archetypes of the genre (...) and replace[s] it with a doubtful and tentative mode of probing the human beings with whom he comes into contact' (Somigli 2005, 81).
15. Unsigned reader's report, likely from Lorenzo Montano, dated 7 August 1932. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Tito A. Spagnol, 1932.) Jenco's adventure on the high seas, too, was seen as somewhat derivative by Mondadori's 'Gialli' team ('a terrible imitation of Wallace'), but nevertheless made it to publication. Letter possibly from Luigi Rusca (see Gallo 2002, 203) to Lorenzo Montano, 22 May 1939. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio Storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, *Arnoldo Mondadori*, fasc. Lorenzo Montano.)
16. Short note ('postilla') from Lorenzo Montano to Arnoldo Mondadori dated 7 August 1932. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Lorenzo Montano, 1932.)

17. Letter from d'Errico to Arnoldo Mondadori dated 10 June 1941. (Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milano, Archivio Storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Arnoldo Mondadori, fasc. Ezio d'Errico.)

18. It should be noted that Scerbanenco also wrote two novels set in New Mexico, *La mia ragazza di Magdalena* (1949) and *Rossa* (original title *Innamorati*, 1951). These are not discussed here as they were written after the demise of the Fascist regime.

19. De Angelis does something similar, albeit in an Italian setting, with the foreign characters in his *gialli*.

20. It should be noted that this phenomenon was not limited to crime fiction, but can also be observed in other areas of literary production under Fascism.

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Italian summary

Negli anni Trenta si verificò un grande aumento nella pubblicazione di gialli in Italia, ma all’inizio, a stuzzicare il palato dei lettori per questo tipo di scrittura furono quasi esclusivamente opere tradotte, importate da Stati Uniti, Gran Bretagna o Francia. Anche quando gli editori italiani cominciarono a promuovere la produzione giallistica domestica, modelli e ambienti stranieri rimasero importanti, e parecchi giallisti italiani ambientarono i loro libri in paesi stranieri. Utilizzando sia l’analisi testuale che ricerche d’archivio, questo articolo esamina alcuni gialli italiani scritti durante l’epoca Fascista e ambientati all’estero, con lo scopo di identificare la funzione e l’attrattiva dell’ambiente straniero nella rappresentazione della criminalità in quel periodo. Questi libri, popolati da esotici ‘Altri’, esprimono opinioni sulla corruzione, la libertà di stampa, la diversità culturale, le differenze razziali, la polizia, e la criminalità, sia in Italia che all’estero. Un’ambientazione lontana offriva sicurezza e libertà, oltre a un’evasione o una distrazione dalla realtà, e l’opportunità di sperimentare con il genere del giallo.