

Artigos temáticos

A serial distrust: conspiracy and blame in the Italian *poliziottesco* and news media

Estado de desconfiança. Violência, aplicação da lei e conspirações no *poliziottesco* italiano

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.34623/k3v7-2z03>

Artigo recebido em 2023-06-14

Artigo aceite em 2023-07-26

Artigo publicado em 2023-09-21

Abstract

The article explores the *poliziottesco* (Italian Cop Thrillers) to document its contribution to the national debate on political, criminal and institutional violence in the early 1970s. It investigates the representation of the police and the judiciary in films with state-driven conspiracies at the centre of their plots. The article interrogates the possibility of using these films as historical documents by connecting them to news media discourses around the so-called *strategia della tensione* (strategy of tension), a series of terrorist attacks aiming at artificially raising political tension in Italy. Positioning the films as intermedial texts (Rajewsky, 2005), it is possible to identify shared representational and interpretative strategies between the seriality of Italian newspapers and that of these low-budget and fast-produced genre products. The use of news media as devices and news media narratives in the films allows them to intercept both the trauma related to the outcomes of terrorist attacks and the rage for the lack of effective state action. This approach sheds a new light onto often critically dismissed products and aims at situating them as a place of negotiation for the attribution of blame for the failures of the Italian state in the struggle against political violence.

Este artigo explora o filone do *poliziottesco* (*thrillers* policiais italianos) para documentar sua contribuição para o debate nacional sobre violência política, criminal e institucional no início da década de 1970. Investiga a representação da polícia e do

poder judicial em filmes que apresentam conspirações dirigidas pelo Estado no centro das suas tramas – *Esquadrão de Execução* (Vanzina 1972), *Profissionais Violentos* (Martino 1973), *Policia Assassino* (Ercoli 1975), *Ação Silenciosa* (Martino 1975). Abordando os debates em curso sobre o cinema popular (filone) italiano (Fisher 2014, 2019; Marlow-Mann 2013; O’Leary 2011), este artigo questiona a possibilidade de usar esses filmes como documentos históricos, conectando-os aos discursos da mídia em torno da chamada estratégia de tensão, uma série de ataques terroristas com o objetivo de aumentar artificialmente a tensão política na Itália. Posicionando os filmes como textos intermediários (Rajewski 2005), é possível identificar estratégias representacionais e interpretativas compartilhadas entre a serialidade dos jornais italianos e a desses produtos de género de baixo orçamento e produção rápida. O uso dos meios de comunicação como dispositivos e a reelaboração das narrativas dos meios de comunicação nos filmes inserem-nos num “ritual político” (Elliot, 1981) elaborando tanto o trauma relacionado com os resultados dos ataques terroristas como a raiva pela falta de ação eficaz do Estado contra eles. Esta abordagem lança uma nova luz sobre produtos muitas vezes rejeitados pela crítica, indo além de interpretações que se concentraram principalmente na natureza derivada dos filmes de género italianos. Em vez disso, pretende situá-los como um lugar de negociação para a atribuição de culpas pelas falhas do Estado italiano na luta contra o terrorismo.

Keywords

poliziottesco • Italian cinema • news media • *strategia della tensione* • terrorism

poliziottesco • cinema italiano • meios de comunicação social • *strategia della tensione* • terrorismo

Introduction

Bertone: “My men don’t feel comfortable shooting anymore. Every time they, unfortunately [sarcastic], shoot at a criminal, there are some problems, and the first people to create problems are journalists.”

Journalist 1: “But they were murderous robbers. Nobody would have had anything to object. We criticise you when you break a student’s head or fire at workers....”

Journalist 2: “...or when you throw anarchists out of the window.”

Bertone: “The Pinelli case is still open, and if somebody has to pay, he will pay for it.”

Journalist 1: “I doubt it...”

– *Execution Squad* (Vanzina, 1972)

Commissario (police inspector) Bertone’s polemic confrontation with the press presented above epitomises the dual quality of a cycle of films that focused on the most controversial civic institution of that early 1970s, the police. The scene from *Execution Squad* (Vanzina, 1972) attempts to replicate not only a familiar trope of Hollywood police movies – the clash between begrudged cops and sensationalist journalists – but also a conflict around the meaning and legitimacy of state violence – a prominent feature of Italian news outlets covering an intense season of protest. This article explores Italian Cop Thrillers of the early 1970s, the so-called *poliziottesco*¹. It addresses the shared elements of seriality between the movies and news media to document how the former contributed to the negotiation of the blame for state inefficiencies against political violence in Italy. The films are part of the milieu

1. The original derogative implication of the label *poliziottesco* (Bondanella, 2009, p. 453) is not intended here. It is used to mark a distance from other local and international productions of the decade centred on police work.

of Italian genre production called *filone* cinema. The term *filone* relates to Italian genre production between the late 1950s and the early 1980s characterised by specific production and marketing features. *Filone* cinema points to specific strands of Italian genre movies and the subcategories within these strands – subsets or sub-strands – which emerged from the commercial exploitation of previously successful international and local models. It is a label that finds agreement among scholars even if other definitions have been proposed to establish a difference from mainstream cinema – Koven proposes “vernacular cinema” in his analysis of the *giallo* (Koven, 2006). Implying issues of repetition and seriality, O’Leary (2011, p. 83) and Wood (2005, p. 11) label them “cycles” or “strands”, with Wood (2005, p. 11) clarifying that they are “a strand of similar films, rather than a genre”.

The *poliziottesco* responded to the success of Hollywood blockbusters like *Bullit* (Yates, 1968), *Dirty Harry* (Siegel, 1971) and *The French Connection* (Friedkin, 1971), mixing local and international tropes to maximise the potential for profit. It usually featured a police inspector using a heavy hand to uncover, avenge, defeat, and destroy – each not mutually exclusive – the villain of the day. The films put criminal, political, and institutional violence on screen, establishing powerful associations with the contemporary socio-political context through their use of news media idioms and newspapers and television as narrative devices. The primary focus of this article is a sub-cycle of the *poliziottesco* comprising a group of films produced between 1972 and 1975 that presented a police inspector uncovering state-driven conspiracies. This sub-cycle, defined by Fisher (2014) as “state conspiracy mode”, usually involves: faceless high ranks of the police, the secret service, or the judiciary as the ringleaders; state-sponsored terrorism (both left- and right-wing but primarily linked to reactionary conspiracies); attempted *coup-d’états*; undefeated powers-that-be; and protagonist defeated or killed.

The article first explores the construction of the relationship between the fictional plots and the material conditions of 1970s Italy through news media. Secondly, it addresses three events, the bombing of Piazza Fontana, the attempted *coup-d’état* of Junio Valerio Borghese, and the assassination of

Commissario Luigi Calabresi to analyse their impact on the narrative of the films. Finally, it investigates how changes in news media discourses around these events influenced shifts in the representation of the police and the judiciary in the state conspiracy mode of the *poliziottesco*. Accordingly, it focuses on two groups of films, the first produced between 1972 and 1973 – *Execution Squad* (Vanzina, 1972), *The Violent Professionals* (Martino, 1973), *High Crime* (Castellari, 1973), *The Great Kidnapping* (Infascelli, 1973) – the second produced in 1975 – *Silent Action* (Martino, 1975), and *Killer Cop* (Ercoli, 1975). Arguably, cinematic police officers and judges changed their roles and function in the fictional plots according to evolving discourses on law and order in news media, with the latter becoming the scapegoats for the failures of the Italian state in the struggle to contain violence in the country.

1. Sharing serial features – the *poliziottesco* and news media

“Words! Newspaper headlines for a couple of days, a pomp funeral and then smaller articles on inside pages. [...] Thus, people will become indifferent in a week or two. It is as inevitable and fatal as a heart attack, but who killed him? Our system!”

– *The Violent Professionals* (Martino, 1973).

Scholarship on *filone* cinema has already identified indirect links to the socio-political concerns of their production times. History-oriented studies in English and Italian language inserted the *poliziottesco* into the cultural production dealing with the representation of terrorism (Uva, 2007; O’Leary, 2011; Leotta, 2013) and justice (Vitiello, 2013) in Italian cinema, and the elaboration of the political imagery in Italy (Uva and Picchi, 2006). According to Fisher (2014) and Marlow-Mann (2013), it is essential to consider the *poliziottesco* not for the accuracy of its representation of actual events and institutional figures but as a platform reworking such events and figures to exploit their emotional charge. As noted by Marlow-Mann (2013), the *filone*

invested in the creation of an emotive experience by deliberately addressing social and political issues that resonated with the audience. The result was a rather ambiguous ideological position.

The *poliziottesco* reworked a conflict between Italians and their civic authorities that peaked dramatically in the 1970s with increased political and criminal violence. The coordinates of this conflict were familiar because they had been already mediated by and experienced through news media, helping filmmakers to project fears and anxieties on a recognisable urban landscape. In this respect, Buttava (1980, p. 116) commented that the *filone* performed a sort of *pornografia cronachistica* (news pornography), exploiting the novelty of the news to maximise the emotional impact of the violence portrayed on screen. The films constructed a “flat present” that compressed into film narratives references to different events that unfolded across the first half of the 1970s and gave consistency to the films’ story world. The same flat present resonated with the mode of representation of the material conditions of 1970s Italy deployed by news media. Arguably, it is central to trace the shifts of media discourses at different moments of the decade to comprehend the historical significance of these fast-produced movies. News media are one of the sources available to film historians to infer the amount of information available to interpret the action portrayed in the movies. Accordingly, issues of accuracy or truthfulness of such information are not particularly relevant. It is a matter of zooming in on specific interpretations born and died within a minimal time.

Rajewsky’s idea of intermediality can help to interpret news media use in the films. Intermediality refers to when a “given media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means” (Rajewsky, 2005, p. 53). *Poliziottesco* films referenced news media practices and discourses to contextualise the action and develop protagonists, villains, specific narratives, and themes according to current events. The imitation of the news coverage of the assassination of an actual *commissario* – Luigi Calabresi – to comment on the death of a fictional police inspector (Figures 1 and 2) is an example of this practice.



Figure 1. The fake edition of *Il Secolo XIX* commenting on the murder of Commissario Scavino (James Whitmore) in *High Crime* (Castellari, 1973)



Figure 2. *Corriere d'Informazione* commenting on the assassination of *Commissario* Calabresi (Calabresi assassinato a rivoltellate davanti a casa, 1972, p. 1)

The similarities concern not only the form but also the narrative construction of the front page and serve to provide fiction with a factual dimension through cinematic means. Scavino (Figure 1) is not just a *Commissario* but is the “*Commissario* of the drug affair”, like Calabresi was the “*Commissario* of Pinelli” (Figure 2). The fake edition of *Il Secolo XIX* (Figure 1) also replicates the ritual press performance that characterised the reporting of institutional deaths. The article on the right reports the “Unanimous disdain” for the act, expressing solidarity by commenting on the outrage of Italian citizens and institutions. The article on the left comments on the “Obscure threat” menacing public order and democracy and connects the event

to the deadly and mysterious action of unnamed enemies of society.

The repetitive use of these narrative devices supports the adaptability of the *filone*, exemplifying how the *poliziottesco* can be illuminated through established scholarly notions of “seriality” (Wagstaff, 1992; Kelleter, 2017). In terms of conscious marketing and formal strategies, the use of similar titles (often starting with *La Polizia* – the police) and using a limited number of actors for the same roles contributed to defining the *poliziottesco* as a cycle. Christopher Wagstaff addressed the serial features of *filone* cinema, comparing it to that of telefilms. The films can be read as a non-linear cumulative – or episodic – seriality where each instalment amended the standard formula to respond “to political events, cinematic trends and attendant economic opportunities” (Fisher 2019, p. 180). This formulaic approach allowed filmmakers to start the action from scratch in the subsequent film, using and referring to the idioms of news media to connote a set of recognisable serial features. Commissario Giorgio Caneparo’s (Luc Merenda) outburst in *The Violent Professionals* (Martino, 1973), presented at the beginning of this section, criticises the letter of condolence from the Minister of the Interior to the colleagues of *Commissario Del Buono* (Chris Avram), murdered in the previous scene. The scene comments on the meaning of institutional deaths in the wake of the killing of *Commissario Luigi Calabresi* (May 17, 1972) by replicating a recurrent practice of news media: the reporting of messages of condolence to the victims of political violence from prominent institutional figures. Caneparo reacts against the hypocrisy of the messages lamenting the lack of protection given to law enforcement agents by the higher ranks of the state. Luc Merenda repeats the same words two years later playing *Commissario Solmi* in *Silent Action* (Martino, 1975). This time, his words are not directed at his superiors but at the television. They comment on yet another news on civic institutions’ ineffective action in the face of mysterious murders. Merenda’s words had become part of a set of standardised reactions associated with the protagonists of the *poliziottesco*. The meaning of these words was not attached anymore to the context of the assassination of a police officer. The

serial features of the *filone* created the space to use a recurrent film trope to reference other media discourses in the struggle over the meaning of violence that characterised the decade.

2. Imitating news media discourses – the *strategia della tensione* as a serial text

The conspiracy sub-strand of the *poliziottesco* originated with the film *Execution Squad*. Its plot connected with two politically charged events: the bombing of Piazza Fontana and Borghese’s attempted coup. The film merged and compressed the two events – separated by one year – into a single narrative because the account of the two events developed by the press offered that possibility. Italian newspapers had been trying to connect and attribute order to a series of attacks and provocations by developing a “grand narrative” that fed from a climate of suspicion against political opponents, the government, and the state. The serial features of this “grand narrative” in crime news provided the elements to develop a recognisable fictional narrative depicting the criminal effort of a single reactionary organisation with ramifications in the Italian state. The press had labelled this effort *strategia della tensione* (strategy of tension), which linked the chain of terrorist attacks in the early 1970s to the action of reactionary groups sponsored by sectors of the state, aiming at seizing power in Italy² (Cento Bull, 2012). The bombing of the Bank of Agriculture in the Milanese Piazza Fontana on December 12, 1969, and the following investigations became the primary ground to fuel this conspiracy climate, empowered by institutional misconduct, omissions, and mistakes.

In the aftermaths of the explosion, newspapers reported thirteen dead and ninety wounded (Orrenda strage a Milano. Tredici morti e novan-

2. In later decades, on the basis of judicial evidence, it was ascertained that the bombings of the early 1970s, including Piazza Fontana, were “part of a deliberate strategy to place the blame upon leftist groups, whereas extreme-right groups were in fact responsible for the massacres” (Cento Bull, 2012, p. 7).

ta feriti, 1969, p. 1). The police and the judiciary directed the investigations against leftist groups, arresting Anarchist Pietro Valpreda after four days. Conservative news outlets celebrated the efficient work of Italian civic institutions (Bugialli, 1969, p. 1; Cervi, 1969, p. 1) that had provided a culprit to a nation shocked by a massacre defined at that moment as the “most cruel and brutal attack in the history of Italian terrorism” (Ora grave, 1969, p. 1). Yet, not everybody accepted the account of civic institutions. The attack concluded a season of mass protest that had spread across different sectors of Italian society (Lumley, 1990). The main opposition party, the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI), interpreted the attack as part of the “fascist provocations and reactionary manoeuvres” (Strambaci, 1969, p. 1) aiming at stopping the advancement of the working class. At the left of the Communist party, extra-parliamentary groups soon connected the attack to the action of deviant state apparatuses, striving for the return of the Fascist dictatorship (*Lotta Continua*, 1970, p. 13). The media played a pivotal part in elaborating and disseminating these conspiracy theories. News media, political magazines, theatre, and cinema participated in the attempt to fill the gaps left by the Italian judicial system. As Deaglio writes, “[f]rom 1979 to 2005, nine trials attempted to reach the truth about the bombing, but no judicial truth has been reached” (2017, p. 171). Consequently, the battle over the interpretation of Piazza Fontana and subsequent acts of political violence was primarily fought through media, addressing polarised political constituencies. The *poliziottesco* participated with its own idioms placing civic institutions at the centre of their plots and using news media to address this struggle over interpretation.

In 1971, the revelation of Borghese’s attempted coup added another element to support the theory of “reactionary manoeuvres”, accompanied by accusations of institutional misconduct. Junio Valerio Borghese, the former commander of the *X MAS*, a division of the Navy that operated in support of Nazi Germany in the fascist *Repubblica Sociale di Salò* (1943-45), was the leader of the *Fronte Nazionale* (National Front). The Front established a compact anti-communist cartel at the right of the parliamentary neo-fascist party, *Movimento Sociale*

Italiano (MSI). The group’s plan involved disruptive actions that “would create a widespread climate of distrust, alarm and anxiety, paralysing government and exposing the ruling class’ impotence and corruption. Moderate public opinion would raise its voice for law and order to be enforced at all costs” (Ferraresi, 1995, p. 118). The *Fronte Nazionale* also sponsored citizen’s committees called *comitati di salute pubblica* (committees of public health), which self-declared mission was to protect citizens from the violence of leftist protesters. Borghese attempted the coup in the night between the 8th and the 9th of December 1970 but called back the operation at the last moment. Three months later, newspapers reported the attempted coup and discovered that the police had not retired Borghese’s passport (Madeo, 1971a, p. 1; Madeo, 1971b, p. 1), allowing him to escape abroad. The newspaper of the PCI, *l’Unità*, reported the coup in terms of police cover-ups, abetment, and conflict with the judiciary. An association of ideas linked police misconduct to the weak action of the government not asking for Borghese’s extradition, suggesting a shared motif between them (p.g., 1971, p. 1). Borghese was only the first of a series of attempted coups that involved right-wing personalities and that newspapers labelled *trame nere* (black plots)³. The same black plots linked inextricably with Piazza Fontana. In the climate of emergency that characterised the aftermath of the bombing there had been numerous pleads to establish special laws to fight terrorists (Difendere la libertà, 1969, p. 1), which sounded even more suspicious when, in 1972, the press revealed the investigations for the bombing of Piazza Fontana had turn to neo-fascist groups.

Execution Squad premiered in February 1972, only a few months after these revelations. In the film, *Commissario Bertone* (Enrico Maria Salerno) faces a wave of criminality in Rome and a group of vigilantes – a mysterious citizen committee called

3. The minister of Defence, Giulio Andreotti, submitted to the judiciary a dossier prepared by the secret service in September 1974. The document evidenced four attempted coups in the previous years, starting from Borghese’s and concluding with the last attempt in August 1974 (Crainz, 2003, pp. 483-484).

Roma Pulita (Clean Rome) – that targets criminals who escaped justice. When his superiors start to ask to suspend constitutional rights to be able to use violence and get results, Bertone begins to suspect an attempt to orient public opinion in favour of authoritarian measures. He discovers that actual and retired police officers, nostalgic of the order of the old times, hides behind the group of vigilantes, aiming at overturning democracy. A final confrontation with his mentor, former *questore* (local chief of police) Stolfi (Cyril Cusack), a prominent figure in the conspiracy, leads to Bertone's assassination. The film's success convinced Italian producers of the profitability of this conspiracy-fuelled formula that hinted at current events and was flexible enough to be adapted in the movies to come. The repetition involved in the reporting of trials and police investigations contributed to make familiar a narration of the investigative procedure that the film used to contextualise its fictional action. Violent cinematic excesses could be situated within precise spatio-temporal coordinates through the reference to news media idioms, structures, and content. This operation also contributed to the emotional charge of the movies, which exploited the diffused "feeling of alienation and cynicism derived from the accumulation of articles, trials, and public demonstrations" (Foot, 2009, pp. 424-425) that surrounded the events and procedures reworked by the films. The assassination of *Commissario* Calabresi in May 1972 offered the movies the possibility of adding a further layer to their representation of the police, making Calabresi-like characters the moral compass of the Italian state in the state conspiracy plot of the *poliziottesco*.

3. Death of a Commissario

Luigi Calabresi's life changed with the death of Giuseppe Pinelli, an anarchist railworker who had been detained during the investigations on Piazza Fontana and fell from the window of Calabresi's office at the 4th floor of the Milanese police headquarters. At the press conference, the police described Pinelli's death as a suicide dictated by the collapse of his alibi. This event, summed with the witch-hunt against anarchists in the aftermath of

Piazza Fontana, made Calabresi the symbol of the strategy of repression of leftist dissent, fuelled by a harsh media campaign against him sponsored by the extra-parliamentary leftist group *Lotta Continua*. As Foot (2009, p. 408) documents, the Pinelli affair was consistent with the mythology and history of the left, and indeed many associated it with the death of other anarchists of the past in Italy and the United States. Not surprisingly, the police initially directed the investigations on Calabresi's murder at local and international leftist groups – namely the German Baader-Meinhof (Zicari, 1972, p. 1). Nonetheless, the investigations soon turned towards the extreme right, as it had happened just a couple of months before with the investigations on the Piazza Fontana bombing.

The struggle over the meaning of political violence is central to comprehending the role of Calabresi-like characters in the conspiracy mode of the *poliziottesco*. *Commissario* Calabresi had been part of conspiracy theories at different levels: as a sponsor of an international anti-Communist plot before he died; as a victim of the strategy of reactionary provocations after his death. The latter interpretation endured until the end of the 1970s. The "ghost" paradigm, a retrospective reading focused on the guilt (Curti, 2006, p. 97) and disavowal (O'Leary, 2011, p. 102) of leftist filmmakers dominates scholarly interpretations of the reworking of Calabresi in the *poliziottesco*. Curti interpreted the transformation of Calabresi into an exemplary figure as "if cinema felt to owe something to the *commissario* and wanted to be forgiven" (2006, p. 97), considering the involvement of eminent figures of Italian cinema in the media campaign against him. On the other hand, O'Leary, recognising the lack of political sophistication of *poliziottesco* filmmakers, analysed the shift of blame from left to right as a signal of "a mechanism of disavowal [...]. The murder of Calabresi was the fulfilment of a widespread desire and so becomes the emblem of a sense of communal guilt" (2011, p. 102). Even if Curti's and O'Leary's interpretations present valuable points, the references to Calabresi in the *poliziottesco* – and not in any other film of that time – seem to denote that a part of Italian cinema felt entitled to use his controversial figure without the need for political complexity. It signals the conscious effort

to exploit the tragedy in a context where leftist filmmakers withdrew from the theme. The films, as O’Leary argues, were not meant to be believed but worked as a “fantasy projection” – part anxiety about the uncertainty and the lack of justice, and part wish fulfilment of a resolution of the menaces of political and criminal violence (O’Leary, 2011, p. 95). Calabresi embodied this tension between anxiety and wish fulfilment, attracting sympathy and hatred from different sectors of the audience. The same tension could be projected towards the main protagonist of the films, and, consequently, towards the entire police force, which, in the public discourse, alternated between the role of the victim of political violence and the perpetrators of state repression.

Fictionalised renderings of the assassination of *Commissario* Calabresi became a central plot point of the state conspiracy mode of the *poliziottesco*, varying according to the evolution of the investigations on the murder but also according to the public debate on the legitimacy of police violence. Like the real police officer, in *High Crime* (Figure 3) and *The Violent Professionals*, both from 1973, the Calabresi-like character is killed down by his house and is the protagonist’s mentor. Notably, in *The Violent Professionals*, the assassin holds a copy of the newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Figure 4). It points to his German origins in line with current news on the actual investigations around the murder of Calabresi, but it lasts only a couple of frames, just the time to suggest an international plot that could serve well the conspiracy framework of the film.



Figure 3. *Commissario* Scavino is killed down by his house in *High Crime* (Castellari, 1973)



Figure 4. The assassin of *Commissario* Del Buono reading the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* in *The Violent Professionals* (Martino, 1973)

The interaction between these Calabresi-like characters and the protagonist linked the action to contemporary debates on the legitimacy of police violence. The police were, at the same time, the centre of controversy for violence and misconduct, and political symbols of the struggle to secure order in the country. Accordingly, in the films, the violent policeman – the protagonist – was paired with a more experienced, democratic, and progressive mentor. As such, the pair and the dialogues between them embodied two sides of the debate, one advocating for a firmer hand against violence and the other demanding a fairer treatment of suspects and a restraint from violence. The mentors’ deaths served to unleash the rage of the protagonists and justify their violence. By comparison, these fictional deaths elevated the figure of Calabresi – once the symbol of police violence, now a martyr in the struggle against criminal, political, and institutional violence. Thus, the films produced in 1972 and 1973 seem to employ death as an emotional trigger that prompted audiences’ identification with the heroic lower and mid-ranks, and rejection of the treacherous higher ranks of the police. The portrayal of the higher ranks aligned with news media representations that focused on incompetence, corruption and nostalgic tendencies. Not surprisingly, in *Execution Squad* and *The Great Kidnapping* (Infascelli, 1973), the mind behind the series of homicides and kidnappings is the former *questore*, reinforcing with their final speeches the nostalgia for the order of the “old

times”. In *The Violent Professionals*, it is the actual chief of police, Mannino (Chris Avram). Narratively, their plots to provoke an authoritarian takeover of power serve also to realign the violent policeman with the parameters of democratic policing.

Reaching the middle of the decade, this representation shifted with little exceptions⁴. In the 1975 film *Silent Action*, the Calabresi-like character is the protagonist. He ends up killed down by his house by three individuals that, even if slightly hidden, can be associated with the primary suspects for the murder of Calabresi (Paolucci, 1975, p. 1) at the time of the film’s release – neofascist militants Nardi, Stefano, and Kiess.

In 1973, *High Crime* and *The Violent Professionals* removed the link between Calabresi and police brutality. In 1975, *Silent Action* exploited the new framework of interpretation concerning Calabresi’s death – a victim of a reactionary conspiracy. As the controversy concerning Calabresi had faded in favour of a new heroic status in mainstream news media, *poliziottesco* filmmakers could construct the reference without the need to provide “escape points” for democratic readings of the character. The violence attributed to Calabresi’s media persona before his death could be left unquestioned in the new iterations of cinematic police inspectors. The reference to Calabresi had become part of an established formula, severed from the controversies concerning the actual point of reference. More importantly, the increasing number of police fatalities at the hands of criminals and political extremists had contributed to building a more favourable political climate for the police force. Death allowed the movies to obfuscate the issue of police violence for Calabresi and his cinematic counterparts. This time, however, violence and death did not lead to the redemption of the protagonist but consolidated the lack of hope for the resolution of the action by democratic terms.

4. Similar to the previous incarnations, in *Killer Cop* (Ercoli, 1975), the Calabresi-like character is a dear friend of the protagonist, who refuses violence and is killed in a scene that randomly references *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972).



Figure 5. Two men (one is out of frame driving) and a woman kill Commissario Solmi down by his house in *Silent Action* (Martino, 1975)



Figure 6. news of the order of arrest for Nardi (top), Stefano (left), and Kiess (right) for the murder of *Commissario* Calabresi (Paolucci, 1974, p. 1)

4. Judges as moralisers; judges as scapegoats

Judge Di Federico: “Justice is not a race or a sports competition, Minister. [...] this time, I don’t want to risk somebody committing suicide at the wrong moment, or a roll of wiretappings disappearing mysteriously, or a tape being tampered with or, above all, that after two or three years, it is discovered that I’m not the competent judge anymore.”

– *Killer Cop* (Ercoli, 1975)

The increased intensity of terrorist action in Italy in 1973-1974 significantly impacted media discourses on political and institutional violence in Italy. The attribution of blame for the failures in protecting citizens and securing justice for the perpetrators shifted towards the judiciary. The bombings targeting police headquarters in Milan (May 1973), a union demonstration (May 1974), and the *Italicus* train (August 1974) multiplied the news around investigations directed at opposing political factions. In this context, the judiciary became the primary target of criticism from news media, commenting on delays, cover-ups and excessive tolerance towards neofascists (Russo, 1974, p. 1; Passanisi, 1974, p. 1; Calvino, 1974, p. 1). A once untouchable institution became a more recurrent subject of criticism also in films. The dialogue above from *Killer Cop* exemplifies the outcome of this process. Judge Di Federico lists many of the controversial issues that had characterised the judiciary in the first half of the 1970s. The items of that list did not need specific explanations. The dramatic efficacy of the remarks relied on premises both internal and external to the text. On the one hand, filmmakers could count on audiences' familiarity with a dynamic already seen in other similar films – investigators lamenting the obstacles put in their way. On the other hand, they could connote this familiar film trope with information that Fisher (2014, p. 174) defines “prior knowledge”. For Fisher, this prior knowledge responded to the imperative for rapid profit and could be “assumed to be shared by their [the movies'] immediate target market” (Fisher, 2014, p. 174). News media played a central role in constructing different levels of prior knowledge for different sectors of the audience. In the case of *Killer Cop*, this information was used to direct at the judiciary the blame for the inconclusiveness of political investigations.

Similar to *Execution Squad*, *Killer Cop* reworks the massacre of Piazza Fontana and works within the framework of the *strategia della tensione* by presenting a fictional bombing executed by ideologically confused youths and orchestrated by a mysterious organisation with ramifications in the higher ranks of the state. In this interpretive framework, Judge Di Federico's fear that “somebody commits suicide at the wrong moment” could be

linked to the death of Pinelli and other witnesses in the investigations surrounding Piazza Fontana⁵. The concern regarding “a roll of wiretappings disappear[ing] mysteriously, or a tape being tampered with” connected with important investigations impacted by the mysterious disappearance of evidence. On Italian newspapers, the tendency was to blame the judiciary for these disappearances, implicitly accusing them of covering up for the powers-that-be (Anon., 1973, p. 1; Martinelli, 1973, p. 1). Finally, Di Federico's fear “that after two or three years, it is discovered that I'm not the competent judge anymore” resonated with any person following judicial news. The issue of conflicts of competence – the conflict between different *procure* (the offices of inquiring magistrates) concerning the right to investigate – was a primary element of discontent by news media. Conflicts of competence had been signalled to have considerably hindered various investigations, including those on the *trame nere* (Gambescia, 1974, p. 1), neo-fascist bombings (c.s., 1974, p. 1), and Piazza Fontana (Paolucci, 1975b, p. 1). Thereby, connecting to Fisher's (2014) argument, Di Federico's words confirm the extent to which the interpretation of the fictional action relied on a knowledge assumed to be shared by the films' target audience because news media had already mediated it.

Again, the connection between judges and contemporary debates on law and order depended on their interaction with the protagonist and shifted according to the evolving role of the judiciary in the public discourse. In earlier films of the state conspiracy mode of the *filone* like *Execution Squad* and *The Great Kidnapping*, the judge was a young and progressive deputy that supervised police work. Not dissimilarly from the pairing of the progressive mentor and the violent cop described in the previous section, this couple embodied opposing

5. In the investigations on a series of bombings in 1969, the testimony of Alberto Muraro accused Franco Freda, a neo-fascist that will be arrested in 1972 for Piazza Fontana. Muraro was found dead in September 1969. Initially, the fact was interpreted as a suicide, but was later linked to cover-ups in the framework of the *strategia della tensione* (Consigliere missino indiziato per l'omicidio Muraro, 1972, p. 1).

conceptualisations of law and order. The progressiveness of this idealist side of the judiciary was framed as a sign of weakness that contrasted with the urgency of a violent response from the police suggested by the graphic representation of the atrocities of ruthless criminals. Nonetheless, this relationship between the mid-ranks of the police and the judiciary ended up being one of mutual respect through the sacrifice of protagonist. The films suggested the collusion of unseen high ranks of the judiciary with the reactionary forces, but the face of the conspiracy that pointed at a problematic institution came from the ranks of the police. By 1975, however, the prior knowledge that the filmmakers considered to be shared by the target audience seems to be that the entire judiciary is powerless at its best, or complicit at its worst. Films like *Killer Cop* and *Silence the Witness* (Rosati, 1974) have the judiciary complicit with the conspirators. The police did not cease to be depicted as an agent of reactionary subversion (see, for example, *The Left Hand of the Law*, Rosati, 1975). However, the judiciary became the primary target of accusations and their failures the reason for the defeat of the state in the struggle against violence. At the beginning of the decade, the conspiracies always revolved around the high ranks of the police (*Execution Squad*; *The Violent Professionals*; *The Great Kidnapping*). In 1975, the best thing that an honest judge could do was to surrender to police methods and retire to other matters (*Killer Cop*, *Silent Action*).

Conclusion

The glorification of police action should not come as a surprise, considering that the organisation of the *filone*, mainly due to prominent action features, tended to give the last word to police officers. Violence was both the means and the evidence – clearly not in terms of the legal procedure – that police inspectors needed to deliver justice. The episodes of extreme violence by bloodthirsty criminals and terrorists proved that an extreme reaction was needed. O’Leary saw in these cinematic police officers “a scapegoat and fantasy representative who assuages or avenges the spectator’s sense of social and economic insecurity or political impo-

tence” (2011, p. 103). Across the cycle of films, the “fantasy representative” remained firmly attached to more and more violent police inspectors. The role of the “scapegoat”, however, was more ambivalent and, as this article explained, shifted with the changes in media discourses around state action in the struggle against political violence. In *The Violent Professionals* and *High Crime*, the role of *Commissario Del Buono* and *Commissario Scavino* can be connected to their sacrifice, which claimed the existence of a more progressive police and returned the violent protagonists to the parameters of the law. It was a noble sacrifice that served the narrative and the moral dimension of the films. Conversely, judges did not sacrifice for the greater good but were “offered” to audiences to avenge their “sense of social and economic insecurity or political impotence” (O’Leary, 2011, p. 103). Blaming the judges could allow audiences to identify with the angry reaction of the police. It also permitted the release of the emotional tension related to audiences’ distrust towards sectors of the Italian state in the framework of the *strategia della tensione*. The judges in the films where the real scapegoats who “explained” the inefficiency of the state in tackling terrorism in Italy. In the extreme cases, they also embodied the corruption of the state. Police inspectors continued to sacrifice themselves, dying in the process of unveiling conspiracies. Judges, transitioning from a position of isolation into one of extreme visibility in the early 1970s, could be positioned less problematically as the scapegoat offered to placate the rage of Italian audiences.

Apart from these changes, the nihilistic approach of the conspiracy mode of the *poliziottesco* stayed consistent, denying a solution to the mysteries on screen. The films revealed some hints of the accomplices and executors of the conspirative orders, but the puppeteers remained faceless – literally blocked from audiences’ gaze (Figure 7 and 8) – like they had remained nameless on the pages of the newspapers covering the season of terrorism in the early 1970s.

This sort of narrative device makes it even more problematic to look at individual films for accuracy of representation. As shown in this article, the reworking of actual events was primarily based on emotion and shock rather than verisimilitude, and it served to construct a flat present able to

evoke a state of rage, impotence, and dismay of the citizens facing a faceless and obscure threat. A similar approach can be found in news media, where journalists were trying to make sense of confusing and contradicting evidence and institutional cover-ups by collating all the events into a “grand narrative” labelled *strategia della tensione* or *trame nere* alternatively.



Figure 7. Deputy prosecutor Ricciuti (Mario Adorf) confronts a man, hidden from the sight of the viewer. The conversation qualifies him as a high magistrate keen to cover up the conspiracy exposed by *Commissario Bertone* in *Execution Squad* (1972)



Figure 8. A shadow covers the face of the main conspirator in *Killer Cop* (1975)

Conversely, as part of a cycle, the films can help to identify patterns of representation that are useful to engage with how the filmmakers interpreted the events of the decade. These patterns also support an evaluation of what filmmakers felt was

the best way to intercept and channel audiences’ feelings through their representation of the action and morality of different civic institutions. The feeling of political impotence was represented by complete distrust towards the possibility of effective collective action, made it impossible by the state itself. The denial of the full resolution of the action with the death of the protagonists in many of the films of the conspiracy mode – from *Execution Squad* to *Silent Action* – supports this reading. Violence was the only effective means to fight criminals. Nonetheless, it was never enough to dismantle the corrupted system where conspiracies proliferated. This cynical view of current socio-political conflicts was the answer of the *poliziottesco* to the threat assumed to be perceived by the ideal addressee of the *filone*. The actions and behaviours of civic institutions in the movies embodied the voices of a divided society struggling to attribute meaning to the violence experienced in the streets and through media. The interaction between these civic institutions shows how they were used to dramatise the negotiation of the blame for the failures of the Italian state.

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Como citar e licença

Olesen, G. (2023). A serial distrust: conspiracy and blame in the Italian *poliziottesco* and news media. *ROTURA – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*, 3(2), 12–27. <https://doi.org/10.34623/k3v7-2z03>

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