

The stereotypical gag in Carlo Emilio Gadda's and Pietro Germi's detective stories.

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Introduction

This paper analyzes two short standalone comedic pieces in the founding works of the Italian literary and cinematographic tradition of the detective story:¹ Carlo Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* [*That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*] (1946-1957)² and its film adaptation *Un maledetto imbroglio* [*The Facts of Murder*] (1959) directed by Pietro Germi. The high regard in which Gadda is held by literary scholars has, for quite a long time, obstructed a proper acknowledgment of the relevance of both detective stories within the history of the genre. This tendency has recently been redirected by scholars who,³ departing from the logic of the palimpsest, consider both works as artistic products in their own right.⁴ Following this recent trend we investigate the use of short standalone comedic sequences in topical passages of the detective plot as an overlooked analogy between the two works.

In particular we focus on two passages where 'stereotypical gags' are integrated in the plot. By stereotypical gags we mean brief sequences of self-contained and trivial humor which are embedded in the main plot but do not affect its development, and which trigger no emotional involvement in the audience. Although they do not interrupt the overarching plot from a narrative point of view, those gags add an authorial comment on the storyline. Since gags are largely based on clichés, which bring the audience to laughter because they recall actions and behaviors that are comical to a well-established social convention, we argue that the perception of stereotypical humor in a non-humorous context proves to be particularly productive (or rather disruptive) when the given context is that of the detective novel. Indeed, when the gag is embedded in a non-humorous context, as in our case study, it determines how funny the storyline turns out to be (D'haeyere 2011: 24).

Because of the variety of approaches in humor studies, the complexity of the authors' poetics and their evolution in time, we single out just one humoristic feature, rather than aiming for a

¹ On Italian crime fiction see Rambelli 1979, Carloni 1994, Pirani et al. 1996-2000, Crovi 2002, Pistelli 2006, Cicioni and Di Ciolla 2008, Pieri 2012.

² *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* by Carlo Emilio Gadda was published as an incomplete version in the journal *Letteratura* in 1946 and then as an unabridged version by Garzanti in 1957.

³ See Sesti 1997; Ricci 2002 and 2005; Palumbo 2012; Santi 2017. On the relation between *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* and *The Facts of Murder* see also: Gutowski 2002; Santi 2008a; Santi 2008b; Codelli 2012.

⁴ On the topic see Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013.

general discussion of Gadda and Germi's humor.⁵ Drawing on Vandaele's emotive-intentionalist approach to narrative humor (Vandaele 2010 and 2012), we discuss how the stereotypical gag sets in motion both satire and parody, and we address the disruptive power of modernist laughter with respect to the detective novel genre in Gadda and Germi's works.

The facts of laughter

The story invented by Gadda and adapted by Germi can be summarized as follows: in an upper middleclass flat in Rome, a robbery is committed. A few days later, the landlady of the flat opposite is killed. The plot follows the double investigation of the two interconnected crimes. The investigators solve the robbery first, then go on to crack the murder case.

In Germi, the gag is placed at the end of the openings credits when the initial shot reveals an old, and very elegant apartment building. Suddenly a gunshot pierces the calm and sunny day, with voices screaming "Thief!", "Police!", "Stop him!", "Catch him!"⁶ and residents appearing on the stairs and at the windows. The thief speeds down the stairs and flees down the streets of the city whilst someone tries in vain to catch him (*Facts* 00:02:24-46). The entire sequence is tense and dramatic, and yet, there is also humor. The first resident who chases the thief is a distinguished old man (interpreted by Antonio Acquà): he rushes out of his apartment, in his dressing gown, brandishing a firearm and fires warning shots into the air. When he aims his pistol at the ceiling of the staircase, the man in turn receives a shower of plaster on his head. The sequence ends with the mass appearance of the frightened residents who crowd around the shocked robbed neighbor (*Facts* 00:02:46-03:04).

In other words, *The Facts of Murder* opens with a dramatic event, namely the criminal violation of the security of the house, and sets up its first main theme, that is, the helpless fear of the residents of a house that has been targeted by a criminal. In this dramatic context, a character makes a complete fool of himself as he tries to protect his threatened community. Despite the circumstances, the spectator giggles at this old man who brushes plaster off his hair. After this gag, the character continues to be the object of laughter in the sequence which follows: on arriving at the scene of the crime, one of the police officers (brigadier Oreste, interpreted by Silla Bettini) sees the old man gesticulating with the pistol still grasped in his hand. Brigadier Oreste addresses the old man by saying "Calm down granddad! Do you have a license for

⁵ Humor in Gadda's work has been extensively studied; see at least: Roscioni 1994, Bonalumi 1995, Pedullà 2001, Papponetti 2002, Ciccarelli 2007, Donnarumma 2001 and 2015, Godioli 2011 and 2015. Germi's humor has been studied only with reference to the films released after *The Facts of Murder*, when Germi delivers some of the masterpieces of the Comedy Italian Style; see at least Sesti 1997, Grande 2003, Fournier Lanzoni 2008, Comand 2011, Leclerc-Dafol 2012.

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated Italian quotations have been translated by the authors of the paper.

that?” and subsequently disarms him. Hereupon the general is outraged and replies: “How dare you? I am General Pomilia!” The officer responds with a slightly sarcastic “Um, well, then” and hands over the weapon (00:03:30-00:03:40).]

In Gadda’s *That Awful Mess*, the gag is located in the ninth chapter, in the sequence where the stolen property is found and recovered, the thief’s accomplice is arrested and the thief’s identity is revealed. The sequence unfolds as follows: a young private of the military police, nicknamed both as Cocullo and Farafilio, searches the modest house of a girl under the watchful eye of his superior, Pestalozzi. Cocullo/Farafilio finds, in a bedside table, a heavy chamber pot which Pestalozzi orders him to pick up and bring to him, suspecting that the stolen goods are hidden in there. Although suspense is here at its peak, and the characters on stage reach an emotional climax too, as the solution of the first mystery approaches, the gravity of the moment is tainted by humor. Indeed, in the effort to pick up the chamber pot, Cocullo/Farafilio lets slip an inappropriate noise:

“Stop! You take it!” he [Pestalozzi] ordered Cocullo. The girl stood up. The trusty Farafilio bent down. He introduced both hands into the cabinet: to seize, with the one, the brimming chamber pot by the handle, to press it respectfully from the opposite side with the palm of the other, as if caressing its kindness. so rotund on the opposite and non-handled hemisphere. And he extracted it from the tabernacle (and it was heavy as it rarely had been) in the position proper to the user, or even to the owner, who prepares at night to employ it for its lower purpose. (...) Too scarce, then, for the almost boyish opulence of the brave soldier, the olive-drab tunic freed for public view his posterior rotundities, properly covered with cloth of the same color. Emphasized by the crouching position, they seemed to emulate and to surpass completely the smooth rotundities of the pot, as if a pump had swollen them, the kind on a tripod, that bicycle mechanics have. The incredible fullness was about to burst—so it appeared—the median rear seam of the trousers: which seemed, instead, only to loosen, in the taut zigzag of a line of reluctant thread, of a blue-green color, darker than the green of the cloth. The seam being pressed beyond its capacity, the breaking point was not reached. A sharp shot re-echoed in the room instead. No: it wasn’t a revolver’s bullet. Farafilio, poor boy, very probably blushed, with that patchy manner of blushing that he had, in his good, but severe face. Crouched as he was, his face against the commode and the pot in his arms, the purple did not spread. The humble duty had expressed itself: that was all: certain postures favor certain nomenclatures, as if eliciting the sound from the very sources of the same. The girl remained silent, amorphous. The corporal’s brow became clouded: in the silence (Gadda 2007: 317-318).

The comic function of the character is clear in the whole passage, though, the scatological gag surprises the reader when the sequence’s gravity reaches its peak. Both gags go not unnoticed, yet their impact on the detective plot and their innovative potential have been overlooked. This

has happened mainly because scholars' attention has been drawn by Gadda and Germi's most evident innovations to the detective story genre committed to the storyline of the murder. Indeed, in Gadda, the investigator solves the case but the author does not reveal the murderer's identity. Germi's solution seems more traditional, because the guilty party is identified and prosecuted. And yet, when the arrest is made, the film takes an unexpectedly bitter tone, so much that even the investigator seems to run away from the consequences of his acts (Deriu 1995: 73). Both endings frustrate the audience's expectations, while the investigation of the robbery seems to conform to the more traditional rules of the genre. Yet, as we look at the stereotypical gag, this turns out to be more subversive with respect to the audience's expectations and the genre conventions than noticed so far.

The stereotypical gag: a theoretical framework

A detective novel, as any other genre, triggers a cluster of expectations from the audience. When Gadda and Germi release their stories, the traditional narrative pattern of 'crime-detection-solution' and the positivistic trust in rational investigation, which is typical of the golden age crime novel,⁷ still prevail in main stream detective novels.⁸ This detection reassures the bourgeois audience that the murder is "an offence against the established order" (Aird 1999: 185) and conveys a sentiment of hope that the dark side of society, that manifests itself in criminal transgression of social boundaries, can be controlled. This traditional narrative pattern assumes the audience to experience given moral and emotional states, among others: disdain and indignation toward crime and criminals, empathy toward the characters on stage, in particular the victims and detectives, and relief when justice is done. Yet, when the narration infringes the genre's conventions, it can frustrate both the audience's expectations and their moral/emotional reactions. In what follows we analyze how this happens when the

⁷ Although the precise periodization of the golden age is controversial, its flourishing can roughly be placed between the two world wars. Crime stories of the XIX century and the golden age mainly focus on detectives gifted with uncommon analytical skills and mirror the positivistic confidence in rational capability to explain human action. The 'clue-puzzle' of the golden age is defined by the presence of multiple suspects, the fair play with the reader who "must be informed of each clue that the detective sees" (Knight 2003: 79) and, above all, rational circumstantial detection.

⁸ In the XIX century, the development of national law enforcements in Western societies attracts the attention of novelists who begin to center their narrations on professional detectives of police corps. As such, the policeman hero takes the field by the second half of the XIX century and then develops into an established protagonist in the XX century, when the detective novel rises to a main stream subgenre of crime novels. See Scaggs 2005. As a result, detective stories promote "the values of the modern police discipline, defending bourgeois property values, sexual morality and bureaucratic rationalities" (Keyman 2003: 44) and they assure the reader that society is equipped to guarantee justice (Schütt 2003: 75).

stereotypical gag, a seemingly minor device, is inserted in topical passages of the detective novel's narrative path.

In our analysis we draw on Vandaele's emotive-intentionalist description of narrative humor as "the production and/or exploitation of incongruity and superiority relations among the participants [...] of narrative texts: author, narrator, reader/spectator, character" (Vandaele 2012: 59).⁹ Yet, incongruity and superiority can both be established, and operate in a humoristic context only if participants intellectually and emotionally commit to them, i.e. only if participants 'project intentional (humor) perspectives' on a narrative act (Vandaele 2012: 85). In this way, narrative humor presumes the creation of a specific intentional perspective and identifies a source of intentionality (a humorous agent). Vandaele states that humor arises not from an autonomous comic power of things or subjects but in the 'perceptibility' of a humorous agency, that is "the narrator as a humorist or [...] the narration as a form of humorous agency" (Vandaele 2010: 736). This attaches importance to humorous agents as the pivotal features in narrative humor, where narrator, character and reader/spectator are cast in "humorous roles": humorist, victim and audience (Vandaele 2010: 743).

Gadda and Germi's stereotypical gags cast the narrator in the role of the humorist agent which, as we will discuss, shows a varying degree of visibility (and therefore perceptibility). Indeed, the humorous agency can be foregrounded or backgrounded, i.e. be more or less visible and perceptible to the audience. Thereby it determines also the relationship between the participants and the kind of humor perceived. The stereotypical gags that we analyze, trigger both satire and parody by foregrounding and backgrounding their agency, laughing at the same time both with and at their audience.

On the one hand, in our case study, explicit satire¹⁰ emerges when the agent of humor is foregrounded. In satire the agency is easily detectable and narrator and audience ally themselves in targeting the characters as victim. Here humorist and audience criticize together

⁹ Vandaele elaborates on two scholarly traditions of humor studies that associate humor with a perception of incongruity or one of superiority. The theory of incongruity (Shultz 1976, Kiken 1977, Raskin 1985) asserts that the violation of logic boundaries pushes the receiver of a message to frame a given content in an unexpected way, and suggests that humor originates in this detection of incongruity and of its subversive and illogical power. Theorists of superiority (La Fave, Haddad and Maesen 1976; Gruner 1997), instead, focus on the social rather than cognitive aspects of humor and argue that in a humoristic sequence there is always someone who judges, an audience that acts as an accomplice, and a third part who is mocked because depicted/perceived as abnormal and different. A third tradition should be mentioned, that of release, which draws mainly on Freud (1976 [1905]) and Bergson (2002 [1900]) and conceives humor in relation to societal boundaries and constraints, as a device that allows psychic energy to break free from the inhibitions imposed by society. Although this perspective can be crucial to a general understanding of Gadda and Germi's humor, this theoretical framework is less productive for the purposes of our analysis, therefore we will leave it in the background. On humor studies see at least: Attardo 1994 and 2001, Bardon 2005, Chapman 1976, Morreall 2009 and Mulkay 1988.

¹⁰ On satire see Griffin 1994 and Greenberg 2019.

social behavior and society-related schemes represented by the mocked character. On the other hand, Gadda and Germi deliver parody by backgrounding the humorous agency. When this agency is backgrounded, its intent and effect are less perceptible. As such, the relationship between the participants changes, since the narrative humor becomes more subtle for the audience to detect. The aim here is to subvert the schemes of the genre in order to disorient the audience. Hence, the authors target their own audience and its trust in the narrative path of the detective story. In this case, parody is not used as a device which is meant to make the audience laugh (or brings only a small fraction of it to laughter),¹¹ while satire is meant to make everyone laugh by clearly exposing the failure of someone or an institution.¹²

Stereotypical gag and satire

In the two sequences we have presented the stereotypical gag is delivered with very little effort: both spectator and reader alike laugh, incited by a cretinous, stereotypical humor. These gags operate on two different levels. On the one hand there is the act that is risible – the self-embarrassment of the old general and the scatological accident of the young soldier –, on the other hand there is the subject that is mocked. This subject is an important aspect to note, since laughter implies a feeling of superiority with the derided subject being lowered to an inferior level with respect to who is laughing.

In Germi's film, the derided subject is a pompous old general and the audience laughs at the stereotype of the smug ex-soldier who is unaware of his own decay. The humorous cliché tackles the historical context too, since the events are set at the end of the 1950s and the general in question has carried out his service as a high-ranking official during Fascism. Therefore, when the narrator triggers in the audience a sense of superiority that downplays the respectability of the old man, he also allies with the audience in targeting the old general as a representative of the military establishment.

The subject of the ridicule in Gadda, private Cocullo, is also serving in the fascist army. Indeed the novel is set during the Ventennio and Gadda frequently highlights the young man's affiliation to the army by calling him a brave soldier and by making a point of his grey-green uniform. The mechanism is the same: not only does the humor center around a stereotype – the

¹¹ On the topic see Hutcheon 1985. Although it can have a funny side, parody per se is merely a genetic mutation. It is created in an already consolidated system (in this case, a genre), when a certain element that does not belong to that system is introduced. The effect that the heterogeneous element has is that it brings to light the conventionality of the consolidated system (Tynjanov 1968). Therefore we do not draw on Genette's description of parody as a humoristic adaptation of a text (Genette 1997), since we consider it to be reductive.

¹² On the topic see Quintero 2007.

big clumsy guy who suffers an embarrassing unforeseen event – but it also targets a representative of the army and more specifically the military police.

Here, the humorous cliché turns out to be satirical. In fact, Gadda and Germi push the stereotypical gag beyond the mockery of prototypical human types (the big clumsy young man, the pretentious old man) and in doing so, the ridicule also sweeps over instances of the nonfictional world such as the army, the military police, and superior officers. This mirrors the derision already widespread in the popular satire of the time, against high-ranking officers and military police. Indeed, popular opinion singled them out as being to blame for the errors and crimes committed by the Italian army in the two wars. In other words, the author's satire targets a subject that the audience perceives as inferior (as a stereotypical comic subject) and that is demeaned as a representative of an establishment in crisis of status.

It is not surprising that in Gadda and Germi the humorous mode and the detective story attract each other: the humorous mode is a component of the Italian crime novel since its origins.¹³ Moreover, both humor and detective novels deliver a social analysis and elaborate our fears. Indeed, from the very inception of the genre, detective stories have been used to describe and analyze the social context in which a crime takes place. Gadda and Germi are no exceptions. Hence, when their humor blends itself into criminal stories, as in this case, it easily becomes satire.

Thanks to the satirical use of the stereotypical gag, social criticism becomes more accessible to the wider public. Gadda struggled throughout his career with the desire to reach a vast public, and the certainty that this public was too idiotic or too compromised with the world's idiocy to be a worthy audience. In *That Awful Mess*, his most successful book, Gadda experiments with the popular genre of the detective novel and here his satire, when conveyed by features such as the stereotypical gag, reaches its moment of greatest simplification for the benefit of the average reader. Germi also aims at reaching the average spectator, but he neither fears nor despises the wider public, as Gadda does; on the contrary, his goal is to seduce and then educate the masses. For this reason, in *The Facts of Murder* he presses down on this very same humor pedal and will do so even harder afterwards, in his satirical comedies.

Stereotypical gag and detachment

¹³ The humorous tone is present in Gadda and Germi's Italian forerunners too, as it can be seen in Emilio De Marchi's *Il cappello del prete* [*The Priest's Hat*] (1887) which is "considered to be the progenitor of the modern detective novel in Italy" (Dowling 1999: 142).

A peculiar trait of Gadda's works is that he firmly places the lack of sense of society and of its morals in front of his readers. Moreover, as Godioli puts it, "the ludicrous aura surrounding Gadda's hardened individuals is primarily meant to highlight the pressure exerted by social compulsions" and "laughter serves as a counterbalance to the traumatic aspects of social homogenisation" (Godioli 2015: 112). Laughter has thus cognitive potential as it is opposed to the lies of societal morality (Godioli 2011: 141 and 143). For Germi, in detective stories social analysis and committed humor intersect since they grasp the essence of human social behavior. As Germi puts it: "it is sad that there are fights and blood, but everything else, thoughts, acts, facts that surround and provide a backdrop to the crime are things you do not know if they are more ridiculous or stupid" (Germi qtd. in Moscon 1961: 44).

In both cases, humor imposes a critical distance and causes detachment since it affects the empathy of both reader and viewer. This is the second relevant aspect of the two passages in case. The comic experience is a detached one since the "humor of a narrator suggests a playful disinvolvement with story world activity" (Vandaele 2010: 743). Germi and Gadda not only trigger the feelings of disinvolvement and superiority typical of humor, but they also enhance these feelings by way of the cliché, putting empathy even more at stake. Indeed, as a learned behavior, cliché stimulates a conventional and unconscious reaction that incites neither the reader, nor the viewer to sympathize with the characters. In other words, the detachment increases because of the brevity and the stereotypical character of the episodes. Moreover, the victims of the gag evoke very little empathy because they have limited psychological depth. In both narratives, the ridiculed characters are secondary and find themselves in the spotlight only for the time necessary to pass into dishonorable memory. Both characters perform a unique function: they are nothing but prototypical protagonists of a stereotypical gag.

Moreover, Germi and Gadda experiment with the destructive power of humor in topical passages of the detective plot: the opening sequence and closing sequence of a crime related storyline. In traditional detective stories, these topical passages heighten the empathy toward the characters and their tragic destiny. Therefore, the detachment determined by the sentiments of superiority and social criticism of the gags not only undermines the empathy for the two ridiculed subjects, but also for the very story in which they take part. The gag conveys an anti-empathic effect which is not limited to the scope of the protagonists of the gag but extends to the context in which the gag is embedded: the criminal plot and its tragic meaning.

In these passages, laughter functions like a snap of the fingers that not only awakens viewers and readers but thwarts their empathy too. The audience emotionally distances itself from the tension of the detective story's tragic moment, and finding itself in a position from which it is

difficult, if not impossible, to re-establish empathy. This effect is amplified by the absolute lack of correspondence between the humor perceived by readers and viewers, and the tragic moment experienced by the characters. In the sequence of Germi's film, the residents of the building experience the anguish of seeing the security of a home violated by an external aggressor. As a result, they do not notice general Pomilia's ludicrousness.

In Gadda's book, not a single character wants to smile at the loud breaking of wind of the soldier. Thus, the viewer and the reader cannot project their understanding of the sequence on any character on stage. Therefore, a smile creeps across the faces of the audience, but it does not enter into the fictional world where there is no wink of an eye, no break in the tension, nor any acknowledgement of the occurrence. On the contrary, the audience can only find some correspondence on another level of intentionality, namely that of the disrespectful authors who show no mercy for the characters and their drama.

Stereotypical gag and parody

The effect of the gag is not limited to satire and detachment, since it also has a parodic value determined precisely by its position in the plot. Indeed, in canonical investigative stories, sequences where a crime is committed, and the mystery is solved are moments of truth and gravity. In the former, violence enters the safe realm and jeopardizes the social order while the latter shows how society can regain control of the violence by unmasking and prosecuting criminals. The unexpected smile triggered by the gags imposes a distance from these moments of truth and strips them of their gravity as the reader perceives them as clichés of the genre. As such, the passages turn out to be parodic since they unveil the conventionality of the plot. This unveiling also shows the fallibility of the stories in the understanding of reality since it exposes the reassuring plot (crime-detection-solution) as a mere narrative mechanism, which can tell no truth.¹⁴ Thereby parody reveals that the narrative path from danger to safety, mystery to truth, social disorder to social cohesion is unreliable. In doing so, book and film expose the reader and the viewer to an insoluble epistemological uncertainty: on the one hand, Gadda and Germi detach the reader and the viewer from the crime and its consequences by way of the anti-empathetic effect of the stereotypical gag. Additionally, they locate the gag precisely where the canonical narration puts the milestones of the reassuring 'crime-detection-solution'

¹⁴ It must be noted that playful features present in Arturo Lanocita's *Quaranta milioni* [*Forty Millions*] (1931) and Luciano Folgore's *La trappola colorata* [*The coloured trap*] (1934) entail the parody of the foreign model (Rambelli 1979: 53). However in these works parody affects the surface, e.g. the recurrent patterns of the genre, rather than its values. The opposite can be seen in Gadda and Germi, who push the boundaries of detective fiction much further into the modernist poetics.

pattern. On the other hand, they do not restore the pattern elsewhere. The rupture is left open in the heart of the investigative plot which proves disorienting.

In sum, the crime investigation brings Gadda and Germi to understand that circumstances, contexts, and morals render life and its tragic seriousness humorous, and essentially silly and meaningless. Hence, the parody unveils a paradox and they entrust it to the public. Reality, suggest Gadda and Germi, is a random sequence of tragedy and humor chaotically mixed, and no investigation can restore the order threatened by crime, because, in their view on the world, there is no order. As such, the plot related to the robbery matches the innovative traits of the storyline of the murder. Both the end of the book and the film, as we have said above, fail the expectations of the reader and the viewer by delivering a noncanonical ending to the storyline of the murder. That storyline delivers a more explicit subversion of the genre conventions, whereas the investigation of the robbery shows a more subtle rebellion; however, by the time the ending comes, the two plots align with one another. Germi is much more subtle and yet catches the attention because humor in *The Facts of Murder* is much less pervasive than in *That Awful Mess*. In the latter, although the parodic effect of the stereotypical gag in unfunny contexts is equally remarkable, it goes easily unnoticed in Gadda's redundant use of bombastic humorous devices throughout the novel.

The detective novel and the evolution of humor in Gadda and Germi

Laughter is one of the most visible constants of Gadda's work and permeates *That Awful Mess* as well as all of Gadda's other texts in its multiple forms (satire, grotesque, sarcasm, pastiche...). Criticism has dealt with Gadda's invasive humorous verve since his first publications. Yet, as Godioli states, Gadda's use of humorous devices changes throughout the years as his poetics evolves and criticism has not yet correctly tackled this evolution and its relation to what Godioli calls "modernist laughter" (Godioli 2011: 189). Modernist laughter expresses a negative stance on reality as it reveals the hollowness of social forms and structures and the risible meaninglessness of human life. This disenchanted view does not coincide with modernism as a whole but can be considered as a peculiarly coherent trait of European modernism. This pessimistic sometimes even nihilistic laughter is the only way left for modernist writers to assert a truth, albeit in a negative way, and basically assesses the epistemological crisis sensed by modernists. In this context Gadda takes a stance on his own since he does not reject the possibility of a meaningful truth at least until the *Cognizione del dolore* [*The Experience of Pain* (1937-1941)]. Instead, Gadda is driven by an ethical imperative to act, although in vain, through literature. Indeed, Gadda's prose until the Forties is

characterized by what Godioli defines as “modernist satire”, which paradoxically aims to restore a wholeness (Godioli 2011: 196). The fact that *The Experience of Pain* is left unfinished can be interpreted as a symptom of the failure of this poetics.

As from *That Awful Mess* a new chapter begins. Here Gadda’s humor also evolves and pastiches and digressions gain importance as devices that emphasize chaos (Contini 1989).¹⁵ Moreover, the contraposition between an exceptional individual and society, a peculiar narrative pattern of Gadda, evolves in so far that the exceptional individual increasingly becomes a humorous and idiosyncratic misfit (Godioli 2015: 108-112).

Hence, *That Awful Mess* marks a turning point in Gadda’s humourism which moreover aligns with the evolution of the detective novel genre. When Gadda publishes *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, epistemological uncertainty has already become an enduring state in Western literature where dubiety of knowledge undercuts the reliability of the modernist narrator (Kern 2011: 199). Modernist crime stories tackle the meaning of investigation at its very core. This means that the storyteller puts the reader or the spectator in a state of uncertainty and that the development of the modernist idea that uncertainty and doubt are an inseparable part of knowledge affects the genre at an epistemological level (Weinstein 2005).

We have already underlined how Gadda and Germi do it in the murder plot: either the storyteller does not explicitly unveil the truth, which is the case in Gadda, or he lets the audience doubt whether the unveiled truth is good or not, as in the case of Germi. In questioning the confidence in rationalism, modernism takes hold of the detective novel and its hero, and unveils their darker sides. Here a more human and marginal hero, the one of the hard-boiled noir, comes into being next to the rational investigator of the golden age, warrant of the values of society. This new hero – which is represented by inspector Ingravallo in Gadda and Germi’s story – is a marginal policeman, who problematizes social values and morality rather than embodying them, and who fulfills his duty even though he is aware of the questionability of social values. It must be noticed that both Gadda and Germi are acquainted with the models of the U.S. noir of the Forties. Those models, as Naremore puts it, “like modernism [...] are characterized by urban landscapes, subjective narration, nonlinear plots, hard-boiled poetry, and misogynistic eroticism; also like modernism, they are [...] ambivalent about modernity and progress” (Naremore 1998: 45). Hence, Naremore states, noir would not have been possible without modernism. Along with some technical features of the U.S. noir Gadda and

¹⁵ According to Godioli, Rabelais becomes a relevant model in Gadda’s prose after WWII and takes the place of Manzoni and Dickens; moreover, digressions, before *That Awful Mess*, are always related to the plot (Godioli 2011: 190-191).

Germi inherit its modernist sensitivity, in particular the lack of faith in objective reality, and concerns for the problems and the violence caused by contemporary industrial society.¹⁶ In particular when Germi introduces those traits in his production, his protagonist changes radically. The noble outsider prominent before *The Facts of Murder* (Bachmann 1966: 25) leaves the stage for a more complex figure, much closer to Gadda's Ingravallo, who is a solitary and tormented investigator. After *The Facts of Murder* the protagonists of Germi's Comedy Italian Style will become iconically idiosyncratic misfits, not very different from Gadda's heroes as from *That Awful Mess*.

Yet, if Gadda's literary modernism is not controversial,¹⁷ criticism has not yet acknowledged Germi's cinematic modernism,¹⁸ although this is crucial in understanding the inherent epistemological crisis underlying *The Facts of Murder* and depicted in his Comedy Italian Style. In recent years Barattoni has "attempt[ed] to establish twenty-five years of Italian motion-pictures [from the mid-Fifties to the end of the Sixties] as a formal and aesthetic continuum characterized by an explicit modernist sensitivity" (Barattoni 2012: 2). Germi, and especially *The Facts of Murder*, are not taken into proper consideration and no link is established between humorous devices and modernist sensitivity, however Barattoni sketches the context in which Germi's poetics evolve. Indeed, Germi's productions can be divided in two distinct phases: the first includes his films of the Forties and the Fifties and is marked by the absence of humor;¹⁹ the second spans the Sixties and the Seventies and is characterized by the considerable presence of humor.²⁰ The films of the former period are tragic and moving stories. In them, Germi passionately participates in the postwar reconstruction of the nation.

¹⁶ Despite the importance of foreign models, Germi emphasizes his need to create Italian-based crime stories and claims that his adaptation of Gadda's novel is the first national example of this kind. "Today, if an Italian director thinks of a detective film, he does not think of the absurd 'gialli' of any English or American professionals, but he thinks of our police who exist, arrest criminals, have their own uniform, their own physiognomy. He thinks of an Italian crime film" (Germi 1989 [1949]: 30). "Perhaps the importance of the film [The Facts of Murder] lies in the fact that it is the first Italian detective film; that is, a new thing, a way of seeing a reality that has never been represented, that of the police and their work in a society where certain facts happen" (Germi 1960: 18). "I'm interested in inventing films, going through genres, trying what hasn't been tried yet. The Facts of Murder, for example, arose from the fact that there were no Italian 'gialli' and everyone said: gialli cannot be done, because our police are neither frightening nor conveying a fatal sense of the law. They only make you laugh. So I tried" (Germi 1963: 15).

¹⁷ See at least Donnarumma 2006, Di Martino 2009, Baldi 2010, Luperini and Tortora 2012.

¹⁸ See Naremore 1998 and 2019; Trotter 2007; Wood 2011, Raczkowski 2017, Solomon 2019.

¹⁹ *Il testimone* (1946), *Gioventù perduta* (1948), *In nome della legge* (1949), *Il cammino della speranza* (1950), *La città si difende* (1951), *La presidentessa* (1952), *Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo* (1952), *Gelosia* (1953), *Amori di mezzo secolo*, *Il episodio* (1954), *Il ferroviere* (1956), *L'uomo di paglia* (1958).

²⁰ *Divorzio all'italiana* (1961), *Sedotta e abbandonata* (1964), *Signore & signori* (1966), *L'immorale* (1967), *Serafino* (1968), *Le castagne sono buone* (1970), *Alfredo Alfredo* (1972). To this list should be added *Amici miei* (1975, Mario Monicelli) for which Germi wrote the story and screenplay. He was not able to shoot it because of his untimely death.

The films of the latter period, however, are pessimistic and disenchanting, even though they are extremely entertaining. They are cynical stories that represent human weakness and confront the audience with what Germi and Gadda would have called the infantile stupidity of the world, a farce by cretinous comedians. The change in register is radical. In the earlier films, as Bachman puts it, Germi “extolled, often, the spirit of man and his individual strength, even in the face of evil”, while his later works have become “a lot more pessimistic” although a lot funnier (Bachman 1966: 25). In this change, Germi does not disown the moral perspective of the first period. Rather, he just chooses the new mode of Comedy Italian style.²¹

The Facts of Murder constitutes a clear exception to this framework and stands at the junction between the first and second phases (Santi 2017: 105 and passim). In this film, comedy and tragedy overlap for the first time but still, not in the ways proper to Comedy Italian style. Comedy Italian style is a sort of lightened Neorealism without any more hope, in which laughter is a symptom of a conflict, an irresolute discomfort: that which the Italians have with their own country. In *The Facts of Murder*, humor begins to emerge in the tragic facts of life. Shortly after this first evolution, a tragic background will emerge behind the exhibited human ridiculousness.

At the end of his career, Germi finds himself much closer to Gadda’s desperate humourism than even he himself perhaps would have expected. Nonetheless, in *The Facts of Murder* and *That Awful Mess* humor is differently displaced. In Gadda’s novel, laughter affects everyone, and is widespread throughout the novel. The only relief that the author concedes to his own characters (and readers) is before the violent death (Sesti in Prudenzi 2007). The pages describing the cadaver of the murder victim (Liliana Balducci) are indeed the only ones in which Gadda’s humor is not targeted on the character. Beyond that exception, it is impossible to divide up Gadda’s characters into either laughable or not funny. On the contrary, Germi holds a clear line between the humorous and the tragic. Some characters are exclusively funny, others are amusing only in a few sequences and others, not at all. This characterization is organized in a pyramidal way: the closer the characters are to the tragic action (the murder), the less they evoke laughter. Marginal characters and the crowd are both described with a humorous slant. The humor then takes on nuances that become increasingly more complex, and progressively vanishes, as the different characters climb in the hierarchy of the cast. As a result, victim, murderer, and conniver are unambiguously non-humorous characters. It is also

²¹ On this topic see Leclerc-Dafol 2012.

interesting to note that, in *The Facts of Murder*, humor does not dominate the narration in its entirety either (Santi 2017: 141-142).

Conclusions

As previously mentioned, “when cognitive schemes located in the field of art are broken, parody may be in sight, while transgressing socially positioned schemes is fundamental to satire” (Vandaele 2002: 234). In our case study, satire is displayed at a more visible level, indeed, the object of laughter is the society in which the two stories are set. Parody, however, acts on a less visible level and targets the genre of the detective story. Both the fore- and backgrounding of the authorial agency is proportional to the accessibility of Gadda and Germi’s humor: the influence of the author is evident when he presents the humorous cliché in a conventionally encoded way, and delivers its easy understandable satirical message with little effort. When Gadda and Germi rely on parody, however, it becomes more elitist, meaning that satire and parody affect the audience in different ways on the basis of their ability to understand the device.

When looking at satire, the character is mocked by both the author and the audience who are allies sharing a common understanding. By contrast, parody is only perceived by a narrower and more trained percentage of the audience that is acquainted with the stereotypes of the genre and with parody. The average audience finds itself taunted by the surprising reversal of the conventions. In the end the audience is mocked by the author, who is no longer an ally as he abandons viewer and reader with nothing but the empty shell of the crime story and an inane laugh in the background.

For these reasons it can be said that the stereotypical gag becomes a modernist device, since it conveys an epistemological uncertainty, subverts genre conventions and questions social boundaries and values. This use of the gag does not represent the most outspoken aspect of the authors’ experimental innovation, but it is emblematic for Italian modernism, where traditional forms and genres are not necessarily rejected in a blatantly avant-garde way but rather corrupted from the inside. Indeed, on the one hand Gadda and Germi’s innovations rely on features that are already present in the national tradition of the detective novel.²² On the other

²² Next to the humorous tone, early Italian crime novels already show a certain degree of epistemological uncertainty too. A notable example is Alessandro Varaldo’s *Il sette bello* [*The Seven of Diamonds*] (1931). Varaldo disregards the golden age’s fair play with the reader by providing a chaotic and uncoherent distribution of clues and information (Rambelli 1979: 39-40). The unmanageable amount of redundant evidence is a peculiar trait of Gadda’s *That Awful Mess* too, along with two other features of Varaldo’s book: the humorous tone, and the interest in psychological analysis that mocks the scientific method of deduction (Pezzotti 2017: 16). These last two also characterize Germi’s *The Facts of Murder*.

hand, they both continue the existing experimentation of the Western modernist detective novel and show similarities with a last modernist practice, that of investing narrative “with the expressive force and affective intensity that are customarily associated with more performance-based practices” (Solomon 2016: 5). Gags, as a kind of standalone comedic pieces, are historically related to the slapstick inserts that characterized U.S. silent comedy from its very beginning. Gags and slapstick are both short humorous narrative inserts that are proper of variety theatre and of the comical theatrical tradition.

Slapstick is characterized by a remarkable degree of violence in both the actions that it depicts and the feelings of superiority that it triggers in the audience. As such, slapstick also “calls into question our relationship to others and reveals our repressed desire to humiliate other human beings” (Andrin 2010: 227) as much as humor. As Solomon argues, slapstick penetrates the literary sphere “when a formally innovative writer puts on the page a grotesquely disputing variant of the comic delirium that had formerly appeared only on the silver screen, the result is a slapstick modernism” (Solomon 2016: 151). Hence, slapstick can exert a disrupting effect on our perception of the narrated story since it explores everyday life conflict and “the way life and the world defeat the best-conceived purposes” (Gunning 2010: 149). The violent tone of slapstick reveals the traumatic relation between subjects and society which is peculiar to modernists’ poetics, and conceals the authors’ ethical commitment toward modernity and society.

In sum, in the case of Gadda and Germi we can assess a modernist use of the gag since their gags highlight the authors’ ethical stance and, as in “the artistic experimentation associated with high modernism”, they line up with “the socially disruptive lunacy linked to the comic [...] genre” (Solomon 2016: 2). Besides, the very choice for the detective novel genre reconciles the elitist tendency of avant-garde modernism with mass consumed artifacts and “enables us to identify the impact of elite modernists on what can be termed an emergent ‘vernacular or mainstreet modernism’” (Solomon 2019: 310, Solomon quotes from Raczkowski 2017: 153).²³

Hence, even the shortest humoristic passages endorse the innovative stance flagrantly visible in the subversion of the genre’s convention committed to the murder plot. In the robbery plot the mystery is solved and yet, because of the detachment, because of parody, because of the broken alliance with the audience, the unreliable author shows his true face. As a consequence, after *The Facts of Murder* Germi’s confidence in the truth leaves the stage for a bitter glance

²³ See also Hansen 1999.

on society, where everything becomes risible, as much as in Gadda. For the latter, as from *That Awful Mess*, a laughter that does not discredit every single character and every single aspect of social life becomes impossible.

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