

Colloquium

COMPOSITE IDENTITIES

Percorsi tra cinema, teatro, letteratura,
musica, scienze sociali e politiche

A cura di Anna Maria Chierici e Fulvio Orsitto

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In copertina:

Marsha Steinberg, *Open Space* (olio su tela, cm 225 × 170), 1975.

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Anatomical Identities: A Paradigm Shift in Global Crime Fiction

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1. THE NEW MARKER OF CRIME FICTION

Crime fiction in all its manifestations is a bestselling genre in today's international publishing market. Statistics indicate that mystery, thriller and crime novels are among the most popular narratives in the Western World (Herold 2019; Rowe 2020). In contrast to the current decline of the global book trade, this widespread success is linked to the great adaptability of crime fiction to new reading platforms, such as audiobooks and e-books, and, even more, to its susceptibility to transmedia, which has led to the global distribution of crime TV series on digital platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and the like. Indeed, crime fiction has become a giant transmedia phenomenon with the public (Messent 2012, pp. X, 241).

Within the new global panorama a paradox is emerging: while the entertainment industry pushes for constant novelty and sensational voyeurism in order to keep the public engaged in such a broad offer, an imitative literary and audio-visual production leads the market exploiting standardised plots, settings and procedures. In such a homogeneous and predefined set of patterns, a new *marker* of the crime genre has emerged: most of the latest bestseller or successful TV series begin with the graphic representation of an overexposed and often brutalised body; soon after, a crime scene investigation kicks into action involving the expertise of the white-suited forensics, coroners, legal doctors and other death professionals. From this corpse-crime scene opening formula, scientific methods and the anatomical dissection of bodies will not only play an essential role in solving the mystery but, more importantly, will also influence the very structure of the detection. As Brecht stated, in an age marked by the impact of science, such as the one we live in, it is not so much important that scientific methods are described in the narrative but rather that

science influences the way the genre is conceived (Brecht 1967, pp. 93-102). Medical dominance has become the current standard of crime fiction and one of the factors in its growing exportability and translatability precisely because a pervasive and authoritative medical culture has permeated and transformed contemporary society and has been called upon to answer crucial questions about human identity and existence.

2. THE EVIDENTIAL PARADIGM

Certainly, the fashionable connections among medicine, science and crime fiction, which are in the limelight today, rest on the tonnes of visual medical culture that have invaded the media landscape, from medical shows to the news. Moreover, the power of these images comes from the fact that they stem from the experience of each of us when we find ourselves in an emergency room or hospital facility; our feeling of weakness and impotence there; the perception of our life and fate being entirely in the hands of the expertise of doctors; and our faith in their technique.

But is this trend new? In fact, crime fiction and medicine have been inter-related from the beginning and by their very essence since the *clinical eye* and the *investigative eye* have the same kind of ability to bring the truth to light by deciphering signs that are imperceptible to amateurs. As historian Carlo Ginzburg argued, they are the result of the same «evidential paradigm», that is, a hermeneutic paradigm based on conjectures, which emerged in the human sciences in the late 19th century (Ginzburg 1990, p. 117). Thus, detection employs the conjectural model of medical semiotics, which is the discipline of examining and interpreting symptoms to diagnose diseases inaccessible to direct observation. The word itself derives from the Latin *detegere*, which means to discover and reveal. Detectives such as August Dupin and Sherlock Holmes could solve the most intricate cases not only because they applied a scientific method – fragmenting the problems into a series of sequential, simple and evidential steps and using the technological aid of photographs, blood, ash and fingerprint tests – but also because they saw the *invisible*, the tiniest clues with which to venture prodigious inferences (Eco, Sebeok 1983). Yet, essential as it is, the link between the medical discipline and crime fiction goes far beyond the method of investigation.

3. WHO DUNNIT?

Who has done it? That is the question usually asked when a murdered body is discovered and the crime story is set in motion. It reflects the widespread intellectual habit of reading everyday life as an enigma to be solved: searching for the culprit, discovering the motive, collecting evidence, evaluating suspects

and verifying the clues are all expressions of a collective way of thinking (Manai 2006, p. 66). However this question also echoes that which, in Western society, is asked in front of the sick body or the corpse: what is their illness, or how did they die? As Vittorio Spinazzola pointed out, the narrative engine of the crime novel is precisely the fascination emanating from the death drive, that irrational and inevitable factor that modern scientific empiricism could not eliminate. Not only has this genre played with the public's never dormant voyeurism and its attraction to morbid sensationalism but it has also made death *speakable* in a society that increasingly blamed and treated it as an unnatural and criminal fact to be avenged and punished (Spinazzola 2010, p. 24).

But what kind of death are we talking about? The popularity of this genre has been closely linked to a series of historical events that occurred in the mid-19th century in European and North American societies that were confident in scientific and technological progress. In those years the rapid urbanisation imposed the creation of city institutions like Boards of Health and the Metropolitan Police. Thus the modern investigation became structured, Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory and Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology acquired prestige, anthropometric classification techniques were widespread and fingerprints were discovered. Overall, these changes created a specific way of looking at and narrating the world and death, namely the tendency to transform the crime into an object of investigation and the murdered body into the first clue, a corpse to be dissected and interrogated. And medicine, again, gave its most essential contribution to this shift.

Indeed, the progressive diffusion of the clinical method – the circumstantial examination of symptoms that leads to the diagnosis – was instrumental at the end of the 17th century for the emergence of modern medicine as the most influential system of knowledge of the human body, but it would not have been so without the contribution of pathological anatomy (Foucault 1973, p. 4). The more the autopsy practice was encouraged in universities and hospitals, supported by new legislation that made it possible to inspect corpses for scientific purposes, the more the possibility of immediately opening the body after death made the organic origins of disease evident and localised into organs. Thanks to a gesture that violates the corpse, the dark and dense opacity of bodies emerged to light, producing a structural change in the relationship between visible and invisible. Doctors and scientists projected onto the living the gaze practised on the dead, as it were. Desacralised and transformed into a unique and irreplaceable object for medical practice and studies, the human body entered the domain of scientific and technical knowledge and anatomy established itself as a model of learning and thinking.

The representation of the dead body as an object of investigation, as a *thing* that speaks its truth to the coroner/detective, is the result of an aesthetic and epistemological shift in the mentality of Western society that has gradually *reified* the body, alive and dead, and has biologised human identity, anchoring it to physical and anatomical data.

4. CODED IDENTITY

While the corpse was becoming a thing on the anatomical table and human identity was enduring an inexorable medicalisation, in the late 1870s the body of the criminal also became the privileged object of study for disciplines that proposed new ways of preventing crime by controlling potentially dangerous individuals. Influenced by Darwinian evolutionism and animated by the desire to understand the various forms of *alterity*, phrenology and criminal anthropology saw the emergence of scholars such as Cesare Lombroso, Alexandre Lacassagne, Francis Galton and Henry Faulds. They tried, unsuccessfully, to link the potential dangerousness of people to their morphology, in search of the biological causes of crime and the physical stigmata inscribed in the appearance of the *delinquent man*. Despite the strong criticisms suffered from the outset, especially for the failure to consider the socio-economic causes of crime, Lombrosian science became an accepted doctrine and was used for concrete social proposals, influencing criminal jurisprudence and the administration of punishment. Ultimately it laid the foundations of racist and eugenicist ideologies.

Within the expanding societies and the massive migratory flows of the end of the 19th century, the anthropological gaze on the savage/criminal offered an exceptional solution to the problem of controlling an anonymous mass of people and the melting pot of the urban crowd. In the wake of these studies, a number of different and competing identification systems were proposed and gradually applied to the whole population. Adopted by police and criminal institutions all around the world, the anthropometric measurement system called *Bertillonage* or *portrait parlé* (spoken portrait) was based on the meticulous measurement of less variable parts of the body, which were then recorded on an individual card, and accompanied by an analytical verbal description of the separate features and marks. The records also featured two photographs, one full face and one profile, as in today's mug shots, and used a morphological vocabulary for each aspect of the human face and a system of standardised abbreviations and symbols («abridged writing»). Although not particularly efficient and easily susceptible to errors, this system made it possible to transform the offender's body into a code that could travel in space and time, be read, transcribed and reconstructed (Cole 2002, pp. 37-49).

Nevertheless, it was the scientific research on fingerprints that marked a fundamental step in the process of codifying and biologising human identity. Initially used by the British colonial administration to control the indigenous people and in the main American ports during immigration procedures, they proved to be a formidable tool for classifying and identifying a growing group of potentially dangerous subjects. Dactyloscopy transformed the identity of people into an index anchored to biological data, inserted into a rational and bureaucratic mass system, which contributed decisively to the idea that the person corresponds to an organic uniqueness, visible and distinguishable from

all others. The efficient Galton-Henry classification system eventually favoured the adoption of dactyloscopy instead of the biometric system in the courtroom, where it became one of the strongest and most accredited forensic evidence techniques in criminal hearings until the 1990s, when DNA appeared.

In this way, the colonial mentality of monitoring and identifying people was imported into Europe and America and applied to those citizens who needed to be kept under control. Progressively, the use of fingerprints was expanded and they became not only the cornerstone of the criminal justice system, but also the foundation of a rational and bureaucratic mass system that ended up involving the whole population in a universal language. The body began to be deconstructed, visualised and biologised, split into organic and individual pieces. As Courtine and Vigarello claimed, dactyloscopy impressed on Western culture the belief that a person is anchored to a unique and stable biology that can be translated into visual, abstract and codifiable images. Conversely, from minimal traces, one can reconstruct the global perception of an individual (Courtine, Vigarello 2005, pp. 275-288).

The most important discovery for the identification of criminals, after fingerprints, came from genetics. In 1984 the first DNA fingerprint was created, which launched the era of genetics at the crime scene and, in 1996, mitochondrial DNA was admitted as evidence in an American court. Even if the physical integrity of the genetic traces left on the crime scene can be at risk for several reasons (Greenwood 2016, p. 29), DNA still represented a further, and extremely powerful step in the association of identity with a single organic body, which begins with birth and ends with death. Contemporary society offers DNA in all its forms: while queuing for blood tests, an advertisement tries to convince the public to take a test for genetic predisposition to disease; heraldic family tree searches have now been enriched with relatively inexpensive kits for collecting DNA at home and sending it to a lab in Houston, Texas, to discover vague ancestors. These data, of course, will finish in international databases that eventually enrich the super power of pharmaceutical companies, among others.

Faulds and Galton failed in the search of fingerprints for traces of evolution and a code that determined genealogy, ethnicity, character, intelligence, propensity to disease and crime. Objectionable as the search was, it was no more so than that of those who, today, seek a genetic legacy of the delinquent person, thus falling into a rampant post-Darwinian determinism. Instead of flat skulls and protruding jaws, now the debate invokes the *crime gene*, while, not dissimilarly, medicine looks for the predisposition to pathologies in hereditary markers. Even the contested science of physiognomy is back in vogue, broadcasted in prime time for a global audience with TV series such as *Lie to Me* (2009-2011) and *Criminal* (2019).

And it is not just about genetics. Today's technologies of retinal scanning, voice spectrometry and facial recognition have brought the analysis of human identity to increasingly microscopic levels, fragmenting the body into

anatomical traces that are used, not only by the criminal justice system, but also, increasingly, by civil society (Balsamo 1996, pp. 5-6). The construction of identity goes towards an extensive biologisation. More than ever, bodies are now fixed in codes, producing a growing mass of data that are kept in gigantic and meticulous archives and circulate on global networks.

5. UNPRECEDENTED MEDICALISATION

The process of objectification of the body, more and more conceived, treated and studied as a thing (but like no other), as well as the progressive biologisation of human identity, have occurred together with an unprecedented medicalisation of Western society and, gradually, of the entire world (Courtine 2015). The development of identity, moments of passage such as birth, initiation into adulthood, illness and death, mental suffering, body aberration, marginality and crime are just some of the areas that have been taken over by medicine and been reduced to facts of nature. Medicine has been employed, not only to treat diseases, but also as a guide to existence, socialisation and behaviour, concurrent with traditional forms of knowledge. *Bare life*, which is existence increasingly understood in bio-medical terms and isolated from the spheres of value and ethics, is becoming the new paradigm (Nguyen 2006, p. 89).

At the same time, the clinical-anatomical gaze of medicine, as it was named by Foucault (1973) became less clinical and more anatomical, in a progressive shift of importance of the anatomical hermeneutic paradigm, which aspires to a systematic knowledge of reality, as predicted by Ginzburg (1990, p. 118). Thus, the interpretation of symptoms has made way for the search for internal bodily evidence: at the beginning, through autopsy, microscope, and chemical analyses and, later, through increasingly advanced visual devices. This has been possible thanks to chemical and physical innovations applied to the medical field that revolutionised the way of perceiving and treating the body, basing its perception on visual media. In this way, the anatomical method has turned into a virtual exploration of a living, transparent body. As Michaud outlined, in the name of prevention, today's medicine regularly probes the body's organs and cavities with technologies and surgical interventions that minimise violence, which are aided by visual tools, such as x-rays, scintigraphy, MRI, CT, TDM, medical micro-exploration, laparoscopic and endoscopic surgery (Michaud 2006, pp. 431-436). More recently, even the nervous system and the brain chemical-physical functioning are becoming visualisable: neuroscience aspires to see thought and emotions.

Moreover, biomedical technologies, today, intervene more and more effectively in the processes of modelling and construction of the identity, in a modification that reaches cellular levels and brings the process of objectification and commodification of human materials to new heights. The body is

conceived less and less as an organism and more and more in terms of its composite parts, which can be harvested, transplanted and sold. Alienated from the person, the body provides elements, such as organs, semen, oocytes, blood, embryos and fragments of DNA, that can circulate as commodities (Scheper-Hughes 2000). Of course, the potential of biomedical engineering and genetics to remodel the body, at both an individual and collective level, has raised some of the most complex ethical and political questions in modern society.

6. THE CRIME SCENE

Scientific discoveries and technological innovation also had a profound impact on the prosecution of crime, which was revolutionised by the belief that a crime scene contains all the data useful for the solution of the case and by the flourishing of disciplines capable of interpreting and presenting them as evidence before the judges (McDermid, Rende 2016, p. IX). After the foundation of the first crime laboratory, in 1910, and the establishment of the so-called Locard principle («every contact leaves a trace»), collecting, documenting and recognising the traces left on the crime scene allows one to connect victim and criminal, to put them at a scene and to understand how they interacted. Therefore, investigative techniques and forensic evidence came to have an increasing weight in the courtroom with experts called to testify. Forensic sciences came to the fore.

As in medicine, the solution of a crime has been sought in the lab, through a mounting number of procedures and tools: from toxicology and entomology to the analysis of larvae, from the use of paraffin gloves to detect the residue from gunpowder to that of the luminol test to detect the presence of blood and other bodily fluids. The advent of the scanning electron microscope (SEM), in particular, marked a turning point, making it possible to perform the morphological examination of micron-dimension objects and, thus, to identify the individual elements of the matter (Lucarelli, Picozzi 2006, pp. 101-102). More recently, the analysis of bacterial footprints left at the scene to establish the time of death has been developed, together with 3D reconstructions with laser scanners, which allow latent fingerprints to be detected with new precision, while the use of CT to perform virtual autopsies identifies signs of murder not detectable with conventional tests (Greenwood 2016, p. 28).

This approach to crime has been reflected in second millennium crime fiction, which, after the epistemological crisis of the modernist and post-modern avant-garde ended¹ and the ethical and political aspiration of *noir* and *neo-noir*

¹ Avant-garde literature experimented with the structure of crime fiction to represent the chaos of the world and the crisis of thought. The open and problematic thrillers of writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Marco Denevi left the plot unsolved, or proposed different and

was exhausted², appears to have returned to a neo-positivist paradigm of knowledge and to a renewed confidence in the heuristic power of the scientific method, empowered by the technological arsenal, to bring reality back to biophysical and individualising explanations. It is true that the body has always figured centrally in crime fiction, as has the idea of using science as an aid to police investigations (in Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe stories, detectives examined corpses, human blood, ashes, hair etc.), however recently there has been a real explosion in the popularity of the sub-genre that more explicitly features the ability of the forensic investigator or the pathologist to read and interpret the organic traces of the body.

In today's forensic-medical mystery – *Body of Proof* (2011-2013) serves as an example of the subgenre – investigators no longer just *act* like a doctor, they *are* doctors. A progressive shift of importance, from the figure of the guessing investigator to that of the scientist, has occurred. As Parke claimed, if intuition won over science in Edgar Allan Poe's stories, now it is just the opposite (Parke 2007, p. 20). Fingerprints and genetics have entered the category of pop icons of an era obsessed with technological accuracy. Thus, narration unfolds around the representation of bodies, increasingly fetishised and reified by the scientific instruments that fragment and classify them: they have become the focal point of stories (Palmer 2001, p. 54). Criminal mysteries are inevitably brought back to the aseptic space of hospitals, laboratories and morgues where the evidence is analysed.

The investigation starts with the body of the victim, which is the most precious clue and the first witness. After being collected at the crime scene, the cadaver is usually displayed in the lab, an aseptic and dry space despite the butchery procedures that take place in it, which is the elective *locus* of death in contemporary Western society (Lock 2002; Favole, Ligi 2004). Autopsy, which aims to discover the cause and dynamics of death and, in the case of a murder, can deliver certain proof of the crime or a clue to guide the investigation, ensures that the corpse tells its story. Starting from the traces and marks left on the corpse, a journey backwards is undertaken to reconstruct the crime, identify and possibly arrest the murderer, as if it were the victim him/herself talking to the specialist in charge.

Actually, the dead body is not just in the lab, it is everywhere and extends its boundaries all over the places it has touched. The signs at the scene, the

all possible solutions, or even decreed the death of mystery fiction. Thus, they expressed the impossibility of finding the truth, the inextricable complexity of a world dominated by chance.

² *Neo-noir* refers to *noir*, the term used in Europe to denote the American hard-boiled crime fiction *à la* Dashiell Hammet. This label was assigned to crime literature that, in the 1960s and 1970s and principally in France and Italy, expressed a clear critique of middle class hegemonic society. In the 1980s there was a revival of this subgenre, especially with the success of James Ellroy's novels. The graphic and harsh style of his works, full of splatter and horror traits and aimed at denouncing the injustices of mass society, became a model for *neo-noir* writers.

traces left by the criminal inside or around the victim, are also examined in the search for a truth deposited into the ultimate, fragmented components of the matter. In a way, the real crime scene, today, is inside the dead body: only by opening and reducing it to its parts does the truth come to light. Thus, for example, the success of the corpse-in-the-trunk recurring topic, in which both the body of the dead and the body of the car have to be submitted to the same techniques. The autopsy paradigm has been extended beyond the corpses to material things: the car being dissected, disassembled, observed with the same optical prosthesis as the cadaver itself. And even if the corpse itself is gone, has been dumped somewhere in a ditch, the traces of its presence are still around, which science will be able to spot. The corpse cannot leave the trunk, its eternal coffin, as it were.

7. A TEAM OF PROFESSIONALS

Semiotic observation of the crime scene, evidence collection, comparative analysis of traces and, of course, autopsy examinations have become a real cult, with characters like Herbert Lieberman's anatomist pathologist Paul Konig, Patricia Cornwell's coroner Kay Scarpetta, Michael Connelly's detective Harry Bosch and Kathy Reichs' forensic anthropologist Tempe Brennan. Novels and scripts show an in-depth knowledge of the procedures of the police, pathologists and forensic technicians of all kinds, often employing a documentary style that inserts archive finds, either true or (more often) fictional. The style used for representing the crime, the corpse and the investigation is often graphic and mimetic of the scientific and police lexicon, besides being characterised by cinematographic techniques that emphasise the visual dimension.

However, more than books it was the many television serials dedicated to the work of the scientific police that brought back trust in science and the evidence, with the solid certainties of DNA, fingerprints, luminol and ballistics. The biggest impact on the public's taste and expectations came with the worldwide successful TV series *CSI*, which began in 2000 and continued with spin-offs and the myriad of programs created in its wake, including forensic documentaries and reality programs (Weber, Timmermans 2010, p. 62). Its motto is that «evidence doesn't lie»: if material proofs are sufficient, with the right inferences and the best technologies, they will certainly lead to the truth. Technical evidence and the quasi-magical ability and efficiency of the forensic team to visualise the invisible, became the main focus of the narrative. As Hausken stated, instead of looking for the motive, the *CSI* detectives look for evidence, as if science could restore the infringed social order and technology solve all the troubles of this world (Hausken 2014, pp. 7-10).

In the wake of the resounding success of *CSI*, the new protagonist of crime fiction is the forensic investigator/pathologist, or rather, the team of

professionals who solve cases by examining and comparing genetic and other biological clues, with a fair representation of gender, colour, age and ability so as not to disappoint the political correctness required by the box office and enforced by the Hollywood studios. In this role, they represent not only the authority of law and order but also the almost irrefutable authority of science. There are countless examples of this overbearing homologation of the visual representation of a commodified and medicalised body, of a science and technology fetishised and represented as almost infallible, especially in those TV series made available on the Netflix platform, which has broadened public access to a very wide choice and has become one of the most effective means of disseminating cultural characteristics globally.

Here, the display of a set of ever-present elements is never missing. In particular: close-ups of some of the more morbid details of the corpse; undressed, overexposed and sexualised bodies (mostly feminine, but increasingly also masculine), operations of both torture and surgery with and without anaesthesia; crime scenes dominated by the white-dressed forensics; operating tables surrounded by experienced doctors and attentive detectives; crime illustrative boards; collections of photographs, ballistic reports, fingerprints, blood splatters, organic samples, etc. What is largely missing, however, is that task of inquiring, unmasking, and denouncing of the social, political and economic causes of crime, which has its roots in the very functioning of our neo-liberal society, that the 1980s and 1990s international *neo-noir* had proclaimed as its mission. Today's crime fiction seems to have returned to a conservative moralism and individualisation of the responsibility in the vision of deviant behaviour. Under the constant drumbeat of bodies, which appear at the same time brutalised and sanitised by a pervasive medical discourse that tends, not only to control, normalise and medicalise crime, but also to reduce it to its biology, the genre participates in the predominant, neo-positivist, cultural hegemony.

8. THE STORY OF A REVERSAL

In the recent return of the crime genre to praising science and medicine, the replacement of the *conjectural* gaze, overcome by an *anatomical* cognitive approach to knowledge and detection, has become evident. Brilliant intuitions have given way to the microscope. In other words, it is the story of a reversal. Doctors ceased to be useful idiots or amateurs on the crime scene, as Dr. Watson was represented by Conan Doyle – «Elementary, my dear Watson» – while now their medical gaze, together with their scientific and experimental expertise, are proved to be very useful indeed. Truth is searched for in the cells and in the genes, so the investigation has become a matter of looking deeper and deeper into the material substance of things. And even when detectives deal with minds, rather than bodies, for example when examining the motives and fantasies of a serial killer, we have the impression of

seeing an autopsy of the mind. The incredible epiphanies of August Dupin and Sherlock Holmes have not totally disappeared, but they have been reduced to moments of intuition and suggestions, a sort of police instinct. The solution to the mystery – and let's not forget that the mystery at the core of crime fiction is nothing but death – has gone from being a *jurisprudential* truth, based on the deciphering and interpretation of the clues and the dialogue with people, to a *scientific* truth, based on the seeming objective study of material evidence. In fact, in contemporary society, as well as in fiction, science tends to become the ultimate judge.