



Ellen Victoria Nerenberg. *Murder Made in Italy: Homicide, Media, and Contemporary Italian Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. xiv + 384 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35625-3; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22309-8.

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## Dark Stories from the Belpaese: Contemporary Crimes in Italy

Italy's nickname is "il Belpaese," the Beautiful Country, an appellation deriving from its natural beauty, its exquisite art, its excellent food, its music and musical language and, of course, its inhabitants, who are admired for their elegance, their relaxed attitude, and their friendliness and envied for their sex appeal. From the mid-seventeenth century through the nineteenth century, travellers on the Grand Tour, from Europe and later from America, flocked to Italy to admire its capital of art and culture. Italy's identification with beauty has not waned through the centuries and today the "made in Italy" tag is still a guarantee of style, not to mention the Oscar recently awarded to Paolo Sorrentino for his film *La grande bellezza* (2013). But Italy is also the country that experienced Fascism, the Mattei affair, terrorism and the Red Brigades, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino's assassinations by the Mafia, "clean hands," and, in the last twenty years or so, "reality" murder.

This is the backdrop against which Ellen Nerenberg examines in her interesting volume three prominent murder cases which struck three different Italian communities during the 1990s in the north of Italy. In part 1 she examines "the serial double homicides of couples in flagrante delicto that took place in Florence between 1975 and 1984 and were attributed to the 'Monster,' allegedly Pietro Pacciani, who was tried for these crimes in 1994" (p. 1), which remain unsolved; in part 2 she analyzes the "double homicide of Susy Cassini and her son, Gianluca De Nardo, in the small northern Italian town of Novi Ligure" (p. 1), for which two teenagers, her daughter Erica and her boyfriend Mauro "Omar," were convicted and incarcerated. Both teenagers were released, Omar in 2010 and Erika in 2011. Part 3 discusses the "case against Annamaria Franzoni, accused and convicted of the 2002 murder of her son, Samuele" (p. 1), which happened in

Cogne, in the Valle D'Aosta, Italy's "deep North." After spending six years in jail, Franzoni was released in June 2014 and granted house arrest. The volume ends with an epilogue in which Nerenberg considers the case against the US citizen Amanda Knox and her Italian boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, who were charged with the murder of the British Erasmus student Meredith Kercher, killed in Perugia on the night of November 1, 2007, and who were finally acquitted by the Supreme Court of Cassation on March 27, 2015. The latter case summarizes Nerenberg's approach to these case studies inasmuch as she identifies the media's obsessive and intrusive attention as one of the key aspects of the cases examined. "The cultural, social and political context of contemporary Italy" stands as a backdrop to this analysis, which includes "fictional and nonfictional narratives" (p. 1), and uses Italian cinema and novels of the 1990s as methodological tools. In particular, Nerenberg examines Roberto Benigni's *Il mostro* (1994) and the films of Dario Argento, which all concern the theme of serial killings, whereas Nanni Moretti's *Caos Calmo* (2008) and *La stanza del figlio* (2001) are used for the reading of parental grieving, "maternal melancholy," and the crisis of the Italian family.

In her examination Nerenberg employs four key concepts: moral panic, media spectacle, *cronaca* or true crime, and the body, in order to give, following Clifford Geertz's definition, a "thicker description" of contemporary Italy's sociocultural milieu. Of these concepts, the most poignant is certainly the moral panic, which creates an emotional response from the public, generated by the obsessive media attention, coupled with a certain morbid insistence on details. Such a phenomenon underlines all the cases considered in the book and, I would add, has dominated the lives of Italians since the mid-1990s. Indeed, the media trials preceded and, in some

cases may have influenced, the judiciary trials, generating factions for and against the alleged perpetrators and almost producing a sentence. Nerenberg rightly suggests that the media, considered in various forms such as TV coverage, blogs, and other social networks, represented a mode of “viral” dissemination, interpretation, and manipulation of the events, aimed at offering, or rather consolidating, a certain image of maternity and femininity, as in the case of the Cogne murder. Nerenberg argues that in all cases the same media attention generated a sense of “disavowal.” In the case of the Monster of Florence, “Italians disavow[ed] serial killing and identif[ied] it as an American phenomenon” (p. 47). In the case of the double homicide, Erika’s cry, “the Albanians did it” implied that foreigners, and not Italians, were the murderers, whereas Annamaria Franzoni’s suggestion that an intruder had entered the house and killed little Samuele (p. 161) implied that a mother couldn’t possibly kill her own child. In Erika’s case, though, her accusation was soon discovered to be a childish attempt at blame shifting, as proved by forensic investigations.[1] Likewise, Annamaria Franzoni gave an explanation that shifted the blame onto somebody else. In both cases it seemed a natural human behavior, almost expected in such circumstances.

The three murder cases are also examined in light of fictional literature, such as that by “pulp writers” the Young Cannibals (p. 136), and the literature of the abject concerning children’s experience of violence, as in Susanna Tamaro and Simona Vincis’s novels. Nerenberg suggests that such literature reveals a distressed young generation of Italians who seem “particularly vulnerable to the kind of influences that the Cannibals exercised in their work” (p. 143) and who could fall prey to a “pack mentality.” Nerenberg’s intriguing interpretation perhaps gives excessive importance to the influence of such literature on a youth generation that dedicates relatively little time to reading and tends to spend its free time on reality-style activities, performing as ‘YouTubers,’ bloggers, or Facebook stars.[2] Given this premise, as Nerenberg rightly observes “there is no consensus among theorists about whether violent acts imitate external stimuli” (p. 100), and it is indeed interesting to note that the same verbal violence, analyzed in these literary genres, is found in other artistic forms of the 1990s. I am thinking in particular of Sarah Kane’s play *Blasted* (1995), which offers a representation of extreme violence, both visual and verbal, aimed at shocking the readers/viewers and at generating in them awareness of the violence we are all exposed to in our lives. Moving from Michel Foucault’s concepts of “biopower” and “biopolitics,” Ketu Ka-

trak interweaves Jill Dolan’s concept of “hopeful feeling’ during performance” with the argument developed by James Thompson, and explains that “for both theorists, spectators’ affective responses inside the theatre trigger for some audience members a sense of social justice that they may take outside the theatre.”[3] In her book *Theatre & Violence* Lucy Nevitt suggests that what Adriana Cavarero calls *horrorism*, a concept also considered by Nerenberg in her analysis, is the opposite of terrorism, inasmuch as it acts as a sort of immobilizer of the viewer/reader, who remains paralyzed by the violent act (s)he witnesses.[4]

Nerenberg’s study represents a useful tool for the reading of contemporary Italy crimes from a cultural studies perspective. Besides, each case is introduced by a thorough historic context, which provides the reader with the necessary background to position the events in a definite local cultural milieu. Indeed, the comprehensive account, at the beginning of each chapter, of the events and of the judiciary procedures is extremely beneficial to the right contextualization of the facts. In addition, the detailed description of the novels and films examined provides a convenient overview of contemporary Italian literature and cinema. What is less convincing is the epilogue, which examines the murder of the British student Meredith Kercher in 2007, in which Nerenberg expresses a personal view on the Italian judiciary system and on Italy’s presumed xenophobic attitude towards Amanda Knox. History is full of cases of miscarriage of justice where foreigners are involved, and the one that jumps to mind is the case of the Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who in 1921 were convicted of robbery and murder in New York and sentenced to death; they were electrocuted on August 23, 1927. One could argue that Italians in the 1920s in the States were considered as threatening as the immigrants who have been entering Italy in the last twenty years or so. Yet, in Sacco and Vanzetti’s case their political involvement represented the true reason for their conviction and execution. In Amanda Knox’s case, instead, the “judicial media circus,” fueled by the American and British press and cultivated by the Italian press, determined “an extraordinary media clamour about the case, due not only to the tragic events leading to the death of a twenty-two year old ... but also to its international resonance, which provoked a sudden rush which, in the frantic search for one or more culprits to give to the public, certainly was not beneficial to the search for real truth.”[5] The quoted lines have been excerpted from the decision of the Supreme Court of Cassation, pronounced on March 27, 2015, which acquitted both Knox and Sollecito of the murder of Kercher,

and annulled the previous sentence without ordering a retrial, while upholding the three-year jail sentence for Knox for defamation of Patrick Lumumba. The key concepts of moral panic and media spectacle reappear in the epilogue, where Nerenberg concludes with the parallel between Knox's prison diary, Silvio Pellico's *Le mie prigioni* (1832), and Antonio Gramsci's *I quaderni del carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*) (w. 1929-35). However, it is worth remembering that both Italian patriots were incarcerated for their political beliefs and died penniless in prison. On the contrary, the conclusion of this case, which enriched Amanda Knox by four million dollars as a result of her book *Waiting to Be Heard*, published by Harper Collins in 2013, would suggest that this was just another post-modern "reality" murder.

## Notes

[1]. This observation comes from my direct participation in the investigative journalism series *Evil Up Close*, broadcast by Sky Television in 2014 in various countries, including the United States, and which analyzed five crime cases that occurred in Italy between 1993 and 2012.

[2]. See on this point 2015 ISTAT's report on Italy's reading rate at <http://editoria-digitale.com/2015/01/15/listat-certifica-anche-per-questanno-cosa-e-come-non-si-legge-in-italia/>.

[3]. Ketu H Katrak, "Stripping Women of Their Wombs': Active Witnessing of Performances of Violence," *Theatre Research International* 3, no. 1 (2014): 32.

[4]. Lucy Nevitt, *Theatre & Violence* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 3-4. This was also my personal experience when I saw the theater monologue *The Encounter*, directed and performed by Simon McBurney, at Warwick's Arts Centre on October 10, 2015. During the show the performer started to smash all the props on stage and mimicked an action of self-harm, slashing his arm. I felt paralyzed by such an outburst of violence.

[5]. See the full reasoning of the Supreme Court of Cassation at <http://www.giurisprudenzapenale.com/2015/09/08/processo-meredith-depositate-le-motivazioni-della-corte-di-cassazione-cass-pen-360802015/>.

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