

Images of the European Crisis: Populism and Contemporary Crime TV Series

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During the last two decades a dramatic shift in the production and distribution strategies of TV series has taken place on a global level. This article discusses how these broad changes also led to a transformation in the form and the themes of European crime series, which emerge as ideal objects to study the representation of European societies in contemporary popular culture. The article looks at recent serial crime dramas such as *La casa de papel*, *Suburra*, and *Peaky Blinders*, which have abandoned the classic formula of European crime TV series, usually focused on the figure of the detective and primarily addressed to a national audience. Designed for an international market, these series provocatively concentrate on the figure of the criminal and adopt an explicitly sensationalist approach. The article argues that this style and the bleak depiction of European society in these series are both an expression and a critical representation of the rise of populism across the Old Continent.

Recent TV crime dramas are an ideal subject for a study of both the transnational circulation of popular narratives in Europe and their representation of contemporary European society. The DETECt project assumes that the crime genre, especially but not exclusively in its television form, is not only one of the most exportable cultural products but also one of the most sensitive to – and sometimes critical of – the phenomena that are transforming the Old Continent socially, culturally and politically.

Inherent characteristics of the genre and the impact of the significant changes that dramatically altered the television market in the past few decades have made the crime drama an increasingly apt vehicle for producing significant and engaging representations of contemporary Europe (Hansen *et al.* 2018). On the one hand, crime narratives provide a commentary on how modern States, with their policing and judicial apparatuses, have shaped European societies. Since the genre's early appearance in the nineteenth century, the plots and characters at the centre of the crime genre have been regarded as representations of crucial social issues affecting European countries as much as the rest of the world (Knight 2010; Evans *et al.* 2012).

On the other hand, television shows have been dramatically altered by the technological, economic and cultural transformations of the European media market since the late 1990s, as producers, broadcasters and authors – not to mention national and EU institutions – needed to adapt in order to guarantee and actually improve the transnational circulation of their products (Bondjberg *et al.* 2017).

This article highlights how some contemporary European serial dramas responded to such market changes by reworking the crime genre. Since most TV series in Europe are produced by public or private broadcasters that aim to reach a national, mainstream audience, the majority of European crime shows traditionally focus on the figure of the police detective, offering a positive representation of the State's police forces as well as of the nation's cultural identity. Influenced by contemporary American shows focused on criminal antiheroes, however, several recent European series were instead designed to obtain a global circulation. As a result, the forms and the themes of the shows implicitly or explicitly challenge such reassuring representations of European societies. This article provides an overview of such trends, highlighting an increase in the quantity and the quality of crime shows reflecting on the crisis of the European Union and the rise of populism over the last few years. Building on this perspective, the final section of the article looks more closely at three series that are representative of this trend: *La casa de papel* (Antena 3 and Netflix, 2017–), *Suburra* (Netflix, 2018–), and *Peaky Blinders* (BBC2 and BBC1, 2013–).

These shows were produced by public/commercial broadcasters and by the leading streaming service with the goal of achieving an international audience, as they are obviously influenced by the 'quality' serials created by the leading American and European cable and premium channels, such as HBO or Sky. In fact, they even have as their narrative and thematic focus criminal antiheroes modelled after American predecessors, such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), as well as one of the most acclaimed European series of the past few years: *Gomorra* (Sky, 2014–). What is most interesting is the way the American models are reworked by the screenwriters and directors of these shows to address the social and cultural history that has led to the rise of left- and right-wing populism in three key European countries: the United Kingdom, pre- and post-Brexit referendum, and Spain and Italy, two countries badly damaged by the 2011 European economic crisis.

From Classical Detective Fiction to Contemporary Crime Narratives

Since its emergence during the first half of the nineteenth century, modern crime fiction has circulated widely across the Old Continent, marking the European popular imagination at a crucial moment in its history. In fact, modern crime narratives have always been a transnational phenomenon, from the lasting impact of the *Mémoires de Vidocq* (1828–1829) on the work of Poe and Gaboriau to the countless imitations of Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1843–1843) published all over Europe (and much

of the world), from highwaymen stories such as *Jack Sheppard* (William Harrison Ainsworth, 1843) to the rise of the private detective and the creation of Sherlock Holmes, one of the most successful characters in mass culture, in 1887. Since assuming its 'classical' form, the so-called whodunit, during the 'Golden Age of Detective Fiction' in the early part of the twentieth century, the genre has been widely discussed by major literary and cultural theorists who have studied its formal and logical features (Shklovsky 1990 [1925]; Caillois 1983 [1948]; Todorov 1977; Ginzburg 1979; Eco and Sebeok 1983) as well as its political and ideological value (Orwell 1944; Knight 1980; Mandel 1984). From both points of view, classical European *detective* fiction has often been considered as a predictable and reassuring genre, if not inherently conservative (Auden 1948; Wilson 1944, 1945; Chandler 1950; Moretti 1983).

While much of this criticism examined the formulaic structure of classic detective fiction and the figures of more or less heroic detectives and their investigative methods, the current article emphasizes the genre's strong relationship with the social and political contexts in which it first emerged and then developed. In fact, the genre was born at the moment when modern police forces were being established in Europe, and its transformation over time constantly registered the renewal of techniques of policing, increasingly integrating the new scientific and technological approaches for the identification of criminals and the enforcement of the Law and its punishments (Knight 2010, 3–25). In the last decades, these connections led scholars to adopt a Foucauldian approach to the genre from both a literary and a cultural perspective (Miller 1989; Pepper 2016). Such an approach proves the importance of looking at crime narratives in relation to the modern state's development of policing techniques over the last two centuries, and confirms that crime fiction is a suitable object to use to study the rise of a new social organization increasingly based on the use of scientific apparatuses to discipline both individuals and communities. As Foucault himself notes in *Discipline and Punish*, in this period the traditional folk narratives, which centred on criminals and their fates (as in the famous *Newgate Calendars*), were replaced by stories focused on the investigator, seen as a representative of the State, and on the very process of detection, described through the rationalistic perspective highlighted above (Foucault 1979, 69).

Other theoretical frameworks have placed a similar stress on the association between classical European crime fiction and the controlling functions of the modern State. In spite of her radically anti-Foucauldian stance, Joan Copjec (1994) suggests looking at the rise of detective fiction in conjunction with the development of modern statistics and its application to the control of the population. In particular, Copjec examines the figure of the detective and narrative devices such as the locked-room mystery, arguing that they can be read as a representation of (the inevitable failure of) science's ambition to obtain complete mastery over reality. In his ideological reading of the detective story, Franco Moretti (1983) insists that its fundamental function is to promote the reader's acceptance of mass society's conformism through a radical stigmatization of individuality as such. Using a different scientific metaphor, Moretti argues that Sherlock Holmes was presented as the 'doctor' able to cure

the ‘illness’ of English society, represented by individualistic criminals attempting to disrupt the established order, explicitly embodied by the British State.

This key aspect of classical European crime fiction is of course relevant for DETECT’s research topic. While the enormous transnational circulation and trans-cultural impact of crime fiction can certainly be counted as a contributor to the development of a common cultural heritage, traditional detective fiction has been largely associated with characters and authors strongly tied to a fundamental conservatism as well as specific national schools and national identities. The main examples of British and French detective fiction, in fact, dominated the genre for much of its history and shaped most of the narratives created throughout the rest of the continent.

While, in the last few decades, European detective fiction in its literary form has lost its close association with conservative ideology (Knight 2010; Evans *et al.* 2012), contemporary television series still confirm the association between these narratives and national identities. European countries have created their own domestic detective and police series deeply rooted in local contexts, which sometimes achieve a certain continental popularity by embodying national stereotypes. The eponymous hero of *Commissioner Montalbano* (RAI, 1999–), for instance, has become – first and foremost for the domestic audience – a quintessential icon of Italianness. The police-women protagonists of Nordic Noir shows such as *The Killing* (DR1, 2007–2013) and *The Bridge* (STV1, 2011–2018) are regarded in connection with established ideas about the progressive gender politics of Scandinavian countries. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that two of the most transnationally successful European series of the last couple of decades are in fact two quintessentially British detective series: the 23-year-old show devoted to Inspector Barnaby (*Midsomer Murders*, ITV, 1997–) and the updated adaptation of Sherlock Homes himself (*Sherlock*, BBC, 2010–). As a result, these kind of crime narratives still emphasize the role of the State and a certain association between detective fiction and national identities.

At the same time, however, the important changes that occurred in American television during the last two decades have also promoted a different approach to crime narratives, and serial dramas more broadly, in Europe. In particular, the themes, stories and characters typical of the (post)modern crime genre provide an ideal subject for what has been variously labelled ‘Quality Television’ (Akass and McCabe 2007), ‘Post-Network’ television (Lotz 2009, 2014b) and ‘Complex Television’ (Mittell 2015). The impact of a gangster show such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) on the contemporary TV serial narratives is well known, as is that of subsequent crime series such as *The Shield* (FX, 2002–?), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–2013), *Breaking Bad* (2007–2013), and so on. One of the most significant elements that these series have in common is the much-discussed figure of the male anti-hero, which has dominated the so-called ‘Third Golden Age of Television’ even beyond this particular genre (Martin 2012; Lotz 2014a).

The current essay stresses how these shows, participating in and reworking the tradition of crime narratives, bring to the foreground of contemporary popular

culture not only a (quasi-ironic) depiction of the heroic detective and the honest policemen but also a variety of contradictory characters, ranging from violent and corrupt cops to cold-blooded killers that are also sensitive fathers.¹ Looking at this corpus, the framework adopted to study classical detective fiction (even in its contemporary television form) clearly must be reassessed. Instead of the detective's ability to maintain control and prevent the 'infection' brought about by the criminal, the aforementioned American crime dramas clearly depict an unstoppable corrosion of traditional social bonds and the rise of fierce competition between individuals, families and (neo-)tribal groups that are often portrayed as disenfranchised communities. These shows have become among the most influential on European and global television and can be seen as the symptom of a distinct turn in the history of the genre in its televisual form. Rather than focusing on the legitimization of the Law and the police, these series explore the psychological, social and political contradictions that affect the individuals and the groups that form these institutions (*The Wire*, *The Shield*, *Dexter*) and, most often, of those that oppose them (*The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*).

Suffice it to mention three key series in this context. *The Sopranos* is focused on New Jersey mobsters and can be seen as an elegy on the cinematic myth of the Italian-American mafia. *The Wire* gives equal space to the points of view of the policemen and that of the members of various Baltimore gangs, offering a multi-layered, sociologically and historically grounded analysis of a realistic criminal ecosystem. *Breaking Bad* tells the epic story of the rise and fall of a simple teacher turned into a drug lord, and has been regarded as a transparent allegory of the increasing anger felt by a struggling, American white middle class. All these crime narratives clearly abandon, or even reverse, the paradigmatic superimposition of the genre with the representation of police forces in the successful implementation of the Law: *The Sopranos* offers no insight into the work of the police and focuses entirely on the perspectives of the Mafiosi; *The Wire* alternates between the two opposing points of view, making the audience's shifting alignment with the cops or the criminals one of its essential structural traits; *Breaking Bad* strictly places the viewers in the shoes of the honest-man-turned-criminal-kingpin, propelling them into a careful exploration of what it means to trespass on the zone outside the Law.

These few examples clearly show how contemporary crime dramas explicitly address the social, historical and political transformation of Western countries in the last few decades marked by an accelerated globalization and an increasing financial deregulation, and that they confront the audience with a world in which national identities, States, and police forces seem to be distant from, if not hostile to, the common citizens.

1. The fact that fiction and cinema (in particular since the New Hollywood) had already largely explored such figures does not disprove but actually supports my argument. Censorship on TV crime narratives was only relaxed when premium cable channels such as HBO dramatically entered into production: this change happened in the late 1990s, that is, when the privatization and globalization of the television market took over public, national broadcasters, opening up the genre to new competition as well as new audiences.

Crime Shows and the European Crisis

As mentioned above, this significant change in American crime dramas should not be read simply as a representation of actual social changes but also, and primarily, as the consequence of recent shifts in the modes of production and distribution of television shows. The phenomenon is well known and has been thoroughly analysed in the research conducted by scholars already cited (Lotz 2009, 2014b; Mittell 2015). While there is no need, then, to discuss it here in detail, it is interesting to keep this background in mind while addressing the European context.

A few years later than in the United States, European television started to adopt, and adapt, some of the new production and distribution strategies as well as the thematic and stylistic novelties that had been introduced by American television. Since 2007, a number of innovative crime shows have been produced. In addition to detective series and procedurals such as the aforementioned *The Killing*, *Sherlock* and *The Bridge* or the French *Braquo* (Canal +, 2009–2016), the British *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013–2017) and the German *Babylon Berlin* (Sky Deutschland, 2017–), an unprecedented wave of series about criminal antiheroes was released across the continent, included the Italian *Romanzo criminale* (Sky, 2008–2010), *Gomorra* (Sky, 2014–) and *Suburra* (Netflix/RAI, 2017–), the Norwegian–American *Lilyhammer* (NRK1/Netflix, 2012–2014), the British *Peaky Blinders* (BBC2, 2013–), the Romanian *Umbre* (HBO Europe, 2014–), the Hungarian *Golden Life* (HBO Europe, 2015–2018), the Spanish *La casa de papel* (Antena 3, 2017–) and the German *Dogs of Berlin* (Netflix, 2018–).

All these series achieved an unusual, although relatively limited, level of transnational recognition, and together they reveal the impact of contemporary American shows. First, they adopted long serial narratives instead of the typical episodic format of traditional detective series. Second, they focused on the criminal's perspective – possible a complete first in European television, as it had been for the American series of the previous decade. These series, in fact, paid tribute to both US films and television through explicit allusions to Hollywood's classical approach to the aesthetics of the crime genre. It is interesting to notice here that one of the earliest contemporary European series to concentrate on the figure of a gangster, *Lilyhammer*, was not only a Norwegian–American coproduction and the very first show to be advertised as a Netflix original, but also a sort of unofficial, humorous spin-off of *The Sopranos*. The protagonist was basically a variation on one of the recurrent and most beloved characters in the American series, Silvio Dante, and was played by the same actor, Steven Van Zandt, who portrayed Dante. While the list of direct links and implicit parallels between the forms and the narratives of the European and American crime shows is long, taking a systemic perspective will allow me to highlight some specificities of the European productions.

The process leading to the appearance of these shows indeed resembles that which had been taking place for some time in the US. From the late 2000s, Pay-TV channels such as Sky and HBO Europe tried to play the role that basic and premium cables had in the American context, as they began to produce so-called 'quality'

series, explicitly designed to achieve international visibility. These transnational broadcasters obviously built on the American models. With *Romanzo criminale*, *Gomorra* and *Babylon Berlin*, Sky aimed to position itself in the market of ‘complex’ television – not coincidentally, critics have frequently compared *Gomorra* to *The Wire*. But the impact of American shows also involved traditional broadcasters: both public and private broadcasters, such as the BBC in the UK and Antena 3 in Spain, adopted stylistic and thematic elements taken from the shows produced by competitors such as Sky and HBO, raising the bar in terms of narrative complexity and the representation of immoral characters, sex and violence. Of course, in the last few years, the rise of Netflix and other Over-the-Top (OTTs) streaming services brought several new contenders into this market, intensely promoting the transnational circulation of some of the products mentioned above. The case of *Lilyhammer*, the first ‘Netflix Original’ discussed above, is emblematic. As is well known, Netflix was also instrumental in the completely unexpected international fame of *La casa de papel*, which would have otherwise remained a modest domestic success, and is responsible for producing its third and a fourth seasons. Finally, not only does Netflix promote globally all of its series, such as the aforementioned *Suburra* and *Dogs of Berlin*, but also those produced by its competitors, such as Channel 4’s *Top Boy* (2013–2017).

As was the case for the American shows, their European counterparts offer a new take on the representation of the State in crime narratives, at least in the field of television seriality. Building on those models, these series depict deep rifts in contemporary society, directly or by allegory. The exploration of the State’s absence (*The Sopranos*), inefficiencies (*The Wire*), and corruption (*The Shield*) is as central in the European context as it is in the American one: *Gomorra* portrays a neighbourhood abandoned by policemen to the governance of criminal bosses; *La casa de papel* presents its protagonists as Robin Hood figures fighting against an oppressive and brutal establishment; *Peaky Blinders* and *Suburra* enter the palaces of power, only to show that they are as corrupt as the lowest, criminal levels of society, to which they are linked by their shared economic interests. What, then, is really peculiar, and specifically European, about the crime shows produced in the Old Continent during the last few years?

As we will see in the next section, some of these series – significantly, the few that have achieved a wider transnational fame – clearly address the social and political issues of their countries and those of Europe more broadly and, particularly, the question of the rise of populism. These ties to contemporary politics set them apart from other European productions. In these shows, the links between State corruption and organized crime reach very high levels of both legitimate and illicit institutions; moreover, the shows link such collusion to the activities of neo-fascist groups. This is the background of the Italian series *Suburra*, which followed in the footsteps of *Romanzo criminale* and preceded the very recent *Zero Zero Zero* (Sky, 2020–), all produced by the same studio. Even more provocative is the BBC show *Peaky Blinders*, in which a well-known gangster, Thomas Shelby, commits several political murders and terrorist attacks on the orders of hidden branches of the British State, some of which come directly from Winston Churchill. While the protagonist is

rewarded for his services with a seat in the House of Commons, the show does not intimate a mutually beneficial alliance between different sectors of society. Rather, it foregrounds its criticism of the *raison d'état* and describes its antihero as a romantic, albeit brutal, rebel against the State. And there is more. While the European Union seldom receives any mention in European television dramas, in one of the most discussed European crime shows of the last few decades, *La casa de papel*, the protagonist's harangue against the European Central Bank forms a pivotal moment of the plot.²

As these shows dramatize popular disillusionment with the State, it becomes clear that critical perspectives emphasizing the representation of the State and its disciplinary power are perhaps not entirely appropriate. On the contrary, a theoretical framework such as Ernesto Laclau's (2005) conceptualization of populism might be more useful, as proven by the fact that *La casa de papel* explicitly references the Indignados, the Spanish political movement that was directly influenced by Laclau's theory (Errejón 2014). For Laclau, populism is nothing but the general form that politics has tended to take in contemporary, late-capitalist society. Instead of earlier views of society based on class struggle, in which the battle is waged between different ideologies or in other complex networks of economic and cultural conflicts, the key ideological fight now seems to occur between those who are (supposedly) included in the circles of power and everybody else. To support such discourse, political movements promote unstable, and often ephemeral, coalitions among all those who oppose the 'Powers That Be'. For Laclau, what can hold together these scattered sectors of society is the mobilization of some common signifiers, such as 'the people', which is immediately and diametrically opposed to 'the elites' (economic, political and cultural). Such 'empty signifiers' facilitate political mobilization and generate collective subjectivity, not *in spite* of but precisely *because* of their very vagueness. The result is clear: rather than the promotion of the scientific ideologies and disciplinary apparatuses that sustained the rise of the modern liberal States, such a perspective emphasizes dramatic social conflicts, quite often represented as the people's struggle against a State occupied by anti-democratic and corrupted elites.

In the next section, I will argue that the narratives and aesthetics of series such *La casa de papel*, *Suburra* and *Peaky Blinders* echo such populism by eliciting a visceral response in the audience through their sensationalist, melodramatic storylines as well as their grim representation of contemporary European society.

Populism in Contemporary European Crime Drama

La casa de papel explicitly engages with debates about the current European crisis. Produced and broadcast in Spain by the private network Antena 3 in 2017 and brought to the world's attention by Netflix in 2018, its plot revolves entirely around

2. Obviously, these shows differ from any detective or police series as the State is described in very dark tones.

a spectacular (and highly mediatized) conflict between the protagonists and the Spanish State. As in a generic heist film, the protagonists of *La casa de papel* are an assorted ensemble of outcasts, each with a working class, sub-proletarian or minority background, who attempt a daring robbery, which the audience is invited to see as the transparent allegory of a revolt against some sort of Establishment.

In *La casa de papel*, however, the target of such rebellion is more explicit than usual. In the first two seasons, the story focuses on the protagonists' assault on the Royal Mint of Spain, where they barricade themselves over several days with the goal of printing 2.4 billion euros with which they plan to escape. Throughout the series, the conversations among the characters and especially the short 'lectures' delivered by the leader of the group (the 'Professor') clarify the robbers' attempt to gain the favour of public opinion by presenting themselves, through a careful manipulation of the media, as rebels fighting against a ruthless and unjust elite. That is, *La casa de papel* consciously taps into the anti-establishment discourse that is at the core of the different kinds of populism that both left- and right-wing movements have recently, and successfully, adopted across Europe. The series makes this subtext all too obvious in a climactic scene (Season 2, Episode 8) in which the 'Professor' delivers a monologue to gain the support of Inspector Raquel Murillo, who is in charge of his arrest:

In 2011, the European Central Bank made 171 billion euros out of nothing – just like we're doing, only larger. 185 billion in 2012; 145 billion euros in 2013 – do you know where all that money went? To the bankers! Directly from the Mint to their pockets. Did anyone say that the European Central Bank was a thief? 'Liquidity injections' they called it. They pulled it out of nowhere, Raquel, out of nothing. [Picks up a 50 euro note]. What's this? It's nothing Raquel, this is paper. [Tears the note]. It's paper, you see! It's paper! I'm making a liquidity injection, but not for the bankers. I'm doing it here, in the real economy, with this group of losers.

This monologue is not the only unambiguous reference to contemporary European politics. *La casa de papel* pays homage to the Indignados movement, which at the outbreak of the 2011 European economic crisis protested against austerity politics and led to the constitution of Podemos, the first European, left-wing party admittedly inspired by Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism (Errejón 2014). In the eighth episode of the first season, in fact, the 'Professor' explicitly tells his collaborators that they will become the heroes of the Spanish people, just as the protesters who camped in Madrid's square Puerta del Sol on 11 May 2011 did before them.

The series' reception proves that these references were not overlooked but taken up by many fans and critics in spite – or probably *because* – of their vagueness and superficiality. Especially in certain parts of Southern Europe, such as Italy, demonstrators used the iconic Dali masks used by the characters in the show (in the same way in which, a few years earlier, the Guy Fawkes mask from *V for Vendetta* was adopted in the activities of the Occupy movement). Fans and commenters have vigorously debated the way in which the show addressed such complex problems and events. While it is not possible to discuss this issue in detail here, it is obviously interesting to stress that the most successful European crime series of these last

few years is also that which has most blatantly conveyed a confused and yet effective indictment of the European Union's current policies as an elite project, a message with which fans, critics and activists alike have thoroughly engaged.

The second example to be discussed here is the Italian show *Suburra*. Produced by the studio Cattleya in collaboration with Netflix and the national public broadcaster RAI, the series builds on the international success of a previous serial created by the same company and some of the same creative staff: *Gomorra*.

Suburra develops (in the form of a prequel) the characters and themes addressed first in the novel published by Giancarlo De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini in 2013 and later in the film directed by Stefano Sollima in 2015 (both with the same title). In various ways, all these works fictionalize a complex network that connected organized crime, neo-fascist organizations and local politicians in Rome's City Council in the early 2000s. From its very opening scenes, the series also focuses on the involvement of the Vatican State in a variety of morally questionable, illegal and even murderous activities. *Suburra's* bleak description of a network of entirely corrupted institutions immediately reminds the viewer of the desperate world of *Gomorra*, which was the obvious model for the show and whose critical acclaim and transnational fame were chiefly due to its brutal representation of the criminal activities of the Neapolitan camorra. In *Gomorra*, however, the choice *not* to portray the State's institutions, the media, or any characters unrelated to the criminal milieu emphasizes the disconnect between the protagonists and the rest of society, as the series enacts a (rather pessimistic) exposé of the abandonment of this part of society by the State. The case of *Suburra* is quite different.

Here, the characters come from many social backgrounds, as all sectors of Roman society – from the poorest slums to the richest palaces, from the youth gangs to the most powerful political and religious figures – appear to be connected to each other and to profit from the criminal activities that move the plot. The series' sensationalism is visible in its themes as much as in its narrative structure and audiovisual style: the main characters are involved in a crescendo of killings that include the murder of each other's fathers, their own siblings, their own lovers and a plethora of more or less central figures; further, the acts of violence are always brutally represented. The role of Netflix as co-producer can be seen as one of the causes for the show's sensationalist aesthetics, which tries to keep up with the explicit representation of violence in HBO or Sky productions such as *Gomorra*. However, *Suburra* does not display the same slow pace, laconic characters, epic overtones and largely nocturnal urban spaces of its predecessor, *Gomorra*. A signature trait of the series is its combination of a very bright visual display of Rome with over-the-top sinister events and bloody situations. This mixture creates a hallucinatory effect by superimposing an unusually critical (for Italian television) representation of hidden sectors of Italian society on a hyperbolically melodramatic narrative and aesthetic style.

The depiction of one of the main characters shows this point very openly. At the beginning of the series, Amedeo Cinaglia is a local politician described as a true idealist, whose temperament and beliefs obviously remind the (Italian) viewer of

the populist party, Five Stars Movement. In the span of a few episodes, Cinaglia is first forced and then lured by the supreme boss of Roman organized crime to become a ruthless individual who starts manipulating everybody around him and finally orders a murder to facilitate his career. More than the utter corruption of the politician, what strikes the viewer most is the overt sensationalism in the swiftness of his change and the exaggerated representation of his appearance and behaviours. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the populism of series such as *Suburra* is not only located in their treatment of social and political themes but also, and perhaps primarily, in their sensationalist aesthetics.

This aspect is also obvious in the narrative and stylistic strategies of *Peaky Blinders*, one of the most popular of contemporary European crime shows, from its breathtaking accumulation of twists and suspenseful, climactic scenes to its heavily stylized soundtrack, whose self-aware abuse of anachronistic contemporary rock music focuses the viewer's attention on the 'coolness' of the characters' looks and behaviour.

The series explicitly addresses the issue of populism in its content as well. The protagonists, the members of the Shelby family, are a group of gangsters emerging from disenfranchised communities. They live in working-class Birmingham and are the first generation of an itinerant Roma family to have settled in this urban industrial context. As the series stages repeated conflicts between the characters and the British State, it constantly foregrounds class-based and ethnic marginalization. In fact, the State is almost a co-protagonist in *Peaky Blinders*, as its official and unofficial representatives constantly try to manipulate the Shelbys and turn their criminal activities to the State's advantage. Thomas Shelby, the brilliant and ruthless antihero at the centre of the narrative, is a veteran of the First World War, affected by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, whose intelligence and detached cruelty help him become powerful and rich at the expenses of his opponents in both illicit and legitimate institutions. Over the show's five seasons Shelby's business grows from a local gambling ring to a compound of factories and international financial enterprises, finally culminating in his election to a seat in Westminster as a Socialist MP.

Since its first episodes, *Peaky Blinders* mixes fictional and actual political events. In the first season, the protagonist is swept into his friend's and his sister's activities with the Communist Party. In the third season, Shelby faces Trade Union protests at his factory while trying to deal with members of the Communist movement. In the fifth seasons, now an MP, he infiltrates Mosley's Fascist movement, in synergy with Winston Churchill himself. The representation of Churchill's character, in fact, is particularly interesting, as the series provocatively shows the European Statesman par excellence embroiled in a number of dubious schemes: in Season 1 Churchill works with some nefarious members of Northern Ireland's Unionist police force to repress the Irish; in Season 3 he partners with decadent Russian aristocrats to order the killing of innocent workers and frames the Soviet Union for this violence; and in the fifth (and most recent) season he plots once again with Shelby, still a renowned gangster, even if this time for the clearly noble goal of fighting Fascism. The story arc of this fictional Churchill thus follows Shelby's trajectory and articulates a rich

representation of the political struggles of the interwar period, which highlights dramatic inequalities and the British State's brutal repression of Irish republicans, communists and socialists. As is often the case in the gangster genre, in fact, *Peaky Blinders* thus presents itself as an allegory of the transformations of Western capitalism in a period of dramatic social, economic and political turmoil, which can be read as a transparent metaphor for the current critical situation in Europe.

As said earlier, however, what makes the show a rather symptomatic expression of the current crisis lies not only in its treatment of these populist themes but also in its sensationalist aesthetics, and, especially, in the frequency and brutality of its representation of violence. As is the case for *Suburra*, *Peaky Blinders* relishes the sadism of its characters and the, often gratuitous, pure brutality of their actions. Most episodes contain scenes involving some beating and killing, and the series frequently indulges in graphic representations of such violence. Matched with its fast-paced and thrilling narrative and the extreme aestheticization of its audio-visual style, such sensational attractions are another conspicuous allusion to the social conflicts that shake the Old Continent, while simultaneously making of this crime show an ideal commodity in the transnational market of 'post-network' digital television.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted how contemporary TV crime shows responded to the general shifts that during the last two decades occurred in the modes of production, distribution and consumption of serial dramas by embracing a new approach to the genre, which is clearly distinct from classical European detective series. The result has been the opportunity to engage with themes and adopt a narrative style that made it easy to express some of the social tensions that have been shaking the Old Continent in the last few years.

To conclude I wish to reiterate that this phenomenon per se is nothing particularly new. The crime genre had already played a similar role in earlier moments in European history and in other media. In the 1910s, for instance, the novels and films devoted to criminal antiheroes, such as Arsène Lupin and Fantômas, became a global sensation, perfectly expressing the emergence of the new, twentieth-century mass culture through their excessive and violent imagery (Pagello 2014). From the 1960s onwards, moreover, crime fiction, film and comics were freed from the censorship that had always kept the representation of violence and sex in mainstream popular culture down to a minimum. In the new context, literary crime narratives acquired a new cultural capital, leading more and more authors to experiment with the potential of the genre. Promoted through labels such as 'neo-polar' in France, 'Mediterranean Noir' in the Southern countries and 'Nordic Noir' in the Scandinavian region, the work of these novelists consciously employed crime narratives to reflect on wide social, historical and political concerns. They turned the classical formulas of detective fiction into a means for examining matters of urgency: the State's role in war and terrorism, political corruption; identities constructed on the basis of nation, ethnicity, and

gender; and issues of trauma and memory (Evans *et al.* 2012). In short, crime writers did not miss the chance to address controversial social and political issues, making what had been seen as a conservative and escapist genre into one of the most diverse and critical categories of popular culture (Knight 2010).

The recent diversification in European TV crime series, therefore, is not really surprising. Technological and economic changes finally led to a reduction in censorship from which other media had benefited several decades earlier. Simultaneously, the opening of the market to a variety of new players, platforms and audiences led to an increase in the ambitions of the creators, who grasped the opportunity to prove how television narratives could explore a wider variety of themes and forms. In this sense, it is possible to see this recent wave of the genre in European television, and its sensationalist, or populist aesthetics, as the consequence of the same trend in contemporary television that we have also seen in the US context. And yet it is significant that the decline in the hegemony and the control played by State-run television across Europe since the 1980s, and the parallel increase in the competition from global competitors, was finally matched with the emergence of narratives focused on the corruption, the purely repressive role or, simply, the absence of the State. Coming from countries at the centre of the current European crisis, crime shows such as *La casa de papel*, *Suburra* and *Peaky Blinders* present extreme and yet symptomatic images of the new instability of national and international institutions in the Old Continent.

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