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## Stories of Revenge in Italian Popular Culture. A Narrative Study of Vigilante Films

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# Stories of Revenge in Italian Popular Culture. A Narrative Study of Vigilante Films

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*Abstract:* In recent years, we have witnessed, particularly in Italy, a growing support for the “self-defence” argument and the vigilante justice. This troubling phenomenon requires further empirical and theoretical attention to determine why and how media manage to draw the interest of the public when they tackle revenge and private justice topics. The objective of this paper is to explore narratives of private revenge in popular culture, specifically in Italian cinema. The first section introduces some reflections on the relations between narrative and criminology and the interest of cinema in revenge tales. Then follows a reconstruction of the historical evolution and narrative structures of both American and Italian vigilante films. Finally, a detailed analysis is presented of a representative sample of Italian films of the genre, highlighting the narrative structures and main themes, as well as the similarities and differences with respect to the American models.

*Keywords:* private justice, vigilantism, narrative, popular criminology, vigilante film

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## Introduction

“Revenge may be wicked, but it’s natural”, says Miss Rebecca to Miss Sedley, justifying her misanthropy in the novel *Vanity Fair* by William Thackeray. This simple observation neatly summarises the ambivalence with which western culture has always considered revenge.

On the one hand, revenge is “wicked”, in the sense that over the centuries it has been considered irrational, uncontrolled, disproportionate, archaic, illusory and morally unacceptable. Revenge is a practice that threatens the social order and for this reason the historic forces driving the concentration of power have always been antagonistic towards it (Courtois, 1984; Foucault, 1973/2000), right down to the modern day. In the words of Max Weber: “In the past, the most varied institutions—beginning with the sib—have known the use of physical force as quite normal. Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber, 1919/1946, p. 78). Those philosophers who have contributed to the constitution of the modern state (for example Hobbes, Locke, Pufendorf, Spinoza, Montesquieu) have been forthright in their condemnation of all forms of revenge.

On the other hand, revenge is “natural”, on both the individual level, in the sense that it is a “moral response that belongs to humans’ ‘normal’ behavioral repertoire” (Gollwitzer, 2009, p. 151), and the social level, in the sense that it is a practice attested in all epochs and societies (Terradas Saborit, 2008). This is proved by the fact that revenge is one of the most ancient cultural themes and is among the most frequently represented in world art and literature, even today:

“From Greek to Indian mythology, from visual to written art forms, from groups to individuals, from folk lore to sophisticated formal studies, from law to culture, revenge continues to be a thorny area of enquiry. Needless to say, it has the potential of generating an immense amount of psychological, literary, social, existential, and cultural responses” (Chauhan & Halpert-Zamir, 2019, p. 1).

We may consider revenge to be a masterplot, a story “that we tell over and over in myriad forms and that connects vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears” (Abbott, 2002, p. 42). In contemporary society, it is cinema, the “supreme story-teller” (Metz, 1991, p. 45), which has told the greatest number of revenge stories to the widest audience, often adapting the innumerable stories already told by literature, the theatre and oral tradition. Peter Robson, author of two key studies of the topic (2016a; 2016b), notes that in the index of the *VideoHound Guide to Films* there are something in excess of 1,000 films under the broad heading of “revenge”, which “appears to be the largest cate-

gory in this comprehensive guide and suggests that this is, indeed, a theme that permeates the most influential sector of popular culture” (Robson, 2016b).

The objective of this essay is to explore the representation of revenge in Italian cinema. Obviously, the wide range of practices associated with the concept of revenge requires us to sharpen our focus, which will mainly be personal revenge, i.e. the situation in which a common citizen decides to avenge themselves for a crime suffered without seeking assistance from the law. We are thus dealing with private or vigilante justice. The theme has been extensively narrated by Hollywood and others besides, to the point of constituting a specific genre by itself, i.e. the vigilante film: “vigilante films are about what ordinary citizens do when the justice system does not meet their expectations and fails them” (Robson, 2016a, p. 175). American films of this genre, for example the *Death Wish* paradigm, have also been successful among the public in Italy, and their stories, characters and moral justifications are now rooted in the collective imagination. In addition, they clearly represent the main reference in production and stylistic terms for Italian films on this theme. For comparative purposes therefore, the pages that follow will also take a close look at the American vigilante film.

My own interest in this genre and its social implications derives from my discussions in the last few years with students taking the Crime and Media module in the degree course in Sociology at the University of Salento. The favourite crime films of these twenty-year-old Italian students do not include the classics that I would have expected, such as *The Godfather* or *The Departed*, but vigilante films such as *V for Vendetta* and *Law Abiding Citizens*, two films that leave much to be desired, in my opinion, from the aesthetic and ideological point of view. And yet it was precisely the desire to understand this cultural and generational divide, as well as the differing approach to criminological theory, that became a focus of my research.

Aside from the stories of individual lives however, the concerns that form the background to this essay should be considered on a broader socio-legal and criminological level. They are linked to the rise of certain troubling phenomena in contemporary societies, particularly in Italy, specifically certain opinions on private justice that are becoming increasingly frequent in public and legal discourse and social practices in Italy. I refer for example to the growing support for the “self-defence” argument: according to a survey published by one of the most popular Italian daily newspapers, the *Corriere della Sera*, more than half of Italians (51%, with higher percentages among the lowest socio-economic groups) believe that recourse to personal defence is always legitimate and that the current norms need to be changed in order to reflect this (Pagnoncelli, 2018). I also refer to the more favourable attitude towards the possession and use of weapons by private citizens: 39% of Italians are in favour of easing the criteria for gun ownership for personal defence (it was 26% in 2015), while the

number of firearm licences in 2017 was 20.5% greater than in 2014 (CENSIS, 2018; De Nardis, 2018). Lastly, I refer to the progress in the current Italian legislature (elected in 2018) of the self-defence reform bill, which at the time of writing is expected to affirm that a citizen's reaction is not punishable by law, precluding any investigation and assessment by prosecutors.

It is a commonplace in the most authoritative comments by sociologists and criminologists to trace the causes of such alarming developments mainly to the panic created by media campaigns and to the exploitation of that panic for political purposes by right-wing parties. From this perspective, favourable attitudes to private justice are entirely emotional and irrational, given the statistics, which show for example the falling number of homicides and thus the decreasing risks for citizens.

However, as a social scientist, I believe that the above-described phenomena require a theoretically more complex analysis (Grandi & Pavarini, 1985). In addition, there is a need for more empirical studies to determine, among other things, what the media actually say about revenge and private justice, and why and how they manage to draw the interest of the public when they tackle these topics. We also need to ask ourselves why the average citizen is calling for more self-defence and less state and less law; why the response to a perceived lack of security is personal possession of weapons; and why Italy seems to be adopting sensitivities and practices with regard to crime that are closer to the tradition of vigilantism usually associated with American exceptionalism.

Answering these questions is difficult however because, as Zimring (2003, pp. 103–104) points out, “the vigilante content of policies or behavior is a matter of interpretation, and such interpretations can always be contested. In that important sense, vigilantism, like beauty, is always in the eye of the beholder”. This fine simile confirms the utility of studying narratives of private revenge in popular culture.

The next section will present some reflections on the relations between narrative and criminology and the interest of cinema in this theme and stories of revenge. The 3<sup>rd</sup> section will present a reconstruction of its historical evolution and the narrative structures of American vigilante films. The 4<sup>th</sup> section will describe the presence of the theme of vigilante justice in Italian cinema. The final sections will present a more detailed analysis of a representative sample of Italian films of the genre, highlighting the narrative structures and main themes, as well as the similarities and differences with respect to the American models.

### **Narratives, criminology and the revenge scenario**

This study is based on a series of theoretical positions that underline the importance of narratives to a deeper understanding of social life in general

and of crime, criminals and social reaction – including revenge – in particular.

In the social sciences, the term narrative lends itself to a multiple definitions, all of which however include the essential features identified by (among others) Hinchman and Hinchman, according to whom narratives should be defined “as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it” (1997, p. xvi). Narratives are a process by which meaning is constructed in the context of interaction between narrator and audience by means of the causal explanation of courses of actions. Narratives thus have a powerful explanatory capacity since “they give sense to reality and, in so doing, are means for the comprehension of aspects of the world” (Longo, 2016, p. 27). In addition, via narratives it is possible to empathetically access the point of view of the main character of the story, whether this be the narrator or another person, a real or a fictional figure (Bruner, 1990, pp. 50–52; Cohn, 1978). This happens above all in the “evaluation” moment of the story, which is what transforms a simple chronicle of events into a fully formed narrative (Elliott, 2005; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; White, 1987). Lastly, as Walter Benjamin observed in his essay *The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, a narrative “contains, openly or covertly, something useful” and “the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers” (1936/2007, p. 86). Stories are designed to accomplish particular aims, they are strategic, functional, and purposeful (Riessman, 2008). Narratives thus play a role in the lives of individuals and in society in general.

It is precisely this performative character that makes narratives interesting for criminology. Indeed, criminologists produce their own specific narrations, for example psychiatric reports and criminal profiling (Verde, 2010, 2017), and they use offenders’ narratives as a means to study the motivations behind their actions. But from the perspective of narrative criminology, narratives are “criminogenic—or, conversely, peace- or desistance-promoting—factors” (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, p. 85), not merely sources of data but the causes of criminal identities and actions. From this derives an important epistemological principle:

“Whereas narratives are distinctive strategies for characterizing the world and agents in it, narrative criminologists are largely uninterested in what the world and agents in it are really like [...] The narrative criminology scholar has an interest in them whatever their presumed accuracy or inaccuracy. We wonder about the impacts of stories; it matters little whether they are ‘true’ or ‘false’” (Presser, 2016, p. 139).

In order for a narration to produce a given set of behaviours it needs to be credible, not to refer to a real event (Sandberg, 2010). In general, in the

research into narratives, the notion of ‘validity’ should be replaced by that of ‘credibility’ (Czarniawska, 2004, pp. 131–132).

Recognition of the knowledge and performative functions of narratives is an aspect that narrative criminology shares with other consolidated theoretical approaches such as cultural criminology and popular criminology. The latter, according to Nicole Rafter, is “a category composed of discourses about crime found not only in film but also on the Internet, on television and in newspapers, novels and rap music and myth. Popular criminology differs from academic criminology in that it does not pretend to empirical accuracy or theoretical validity”. And yet, says Rafter, “popular criminology’s audience is bigger [...] and *its social significance is greater*, for academic criminology cannot offer so wide a range of criminological wares” (2007, pp. 415, emphasis added). It is no surprise that interest in popular criminology has coincided with the emergence in many Western countries, including Italy, of penal populism: popular discourses about crime are becoming increasingly central to the construction of crime policy, at the expense of the contribution of civil servants and academics (Pratt, 2007).

Rafter (2007, p. 417) also states that “if we define criminology as the study of crime and criminals, then it becomes clear that film is one of the primary sources (albeit an unscientific one) through which people get their ideas about the nature of crime.” The popular criminology perspective is inspired by concepts such as popular legal culture (Friedman, 1989) and the law and film movement (Greenfield, Osborn, & Robson, 2010; Machura, 2016), both interested in the depictions of law and legal personnel in literature and entertainment media. In this regard, it should be remembered here that the Italian socio-legal scholar Vincenzo Tomeo wrote what is probably the first major work on law and film, *The Judge on the Screen* (Tomeo, 1973), a particularly interesting book for our purposes because it proposed an inspiring analysis of the narrative structures of Italian films of that era centred on the figure of the magistrate.

The question posed by criminologists interested in the cultural and popular dimensions of the law and order debate is how films influence perceptions of crime, how they create meaning with regard to the nature of heroes, villains and victims, and how they forge people’s attitudes towards law, the judicial system and punishment. According to the studies of “cognitivist” film scholars (Bordwell, 1985; Bordwell & Carroll, 1996; Branigan, 1992), analysis of filmic narration helps provide answers to these questions. Indeed, narration “is not primarily a matter of style or mode [...] but a question of how information reaches the audience and is mentally or emotionally processed. It is thus a key factor in how a film addresses, involves, implicates, activates, and manipulates the spectator” (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002, p. 37).



It is not possible here to pursue our inquiry beyond the references to the authors and the questions they raise. Rather, we shall seek to briefly apply these notions to the objective of this study, which is revenge stories in cinema. First and foremost, it may be useful to recall Todorov's insights into the nature of minimal plot structure. For him, "an "ideal" narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical" (1977, p. 111).

The basic plots of revenge stories replicate this ideal structure. They exploit a fundamental component of the narrative mechanism, highlighted by Longo (2016), which is the fracture in what had previously been taken for granted, by which order is broken and then re-established. As will be seen below, vigilante films portray, with great expressive power, first the rupture of ordinary reality, for example the killing of a relative, and then a way of getting past this dramatic experience and returning to the flow of ordinary life.

In reality, all films, and not just those centred on revenge, "tend to consist of hypercoherent narratives that organize experience to a much greater degree than we would normally face in our lives" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 80). To clarify this emotional-cognitive function, Plantinga applies the concept of "paradigm scenarios" proposed by de Sousa. Paradigm scenarios are cultural scripts that take into account two elements: "a situation-type providing the characteristic objects of the specific emotion-type and then a normal, appropriate reaction to the situation type, a set of responses which are both biologically and culturally determined. Paradigm scenarios are learned first from daily life as small children and later reinforced by the stories, art, and culture to which we are exposed. Later still, they are supplemented and refined by literature and other art forms capable of expanding the range of one's imagination of ways to live" (De Sousa, 1987, p. 188). For Plantinga, in our epoch it is films that replicate paradigm scenarios in popular culture:

"Emotions are ways of interpreting the world, constructing and drawing from narrative paradigm scenarios that frame a situation as one for which a particular sort of response—anger, indignation, compassion, jealousy, for example—is appropriate. The prefocused narratives of movies, then, are also ways of interpreting the world, not only by what they show, but in their manner of focusing emotional response" (2009, p. 82).

One of the most recognizable narrative paradigm scenarios is the revenge scenario (Plantinga, 2018). In a film, the revenge can be a small-scale episodic scenario within a broader narrative, or the dominant structuring narrative,



as is the case in the revenge film, the western revenge plot and the vigilante film that interests us here.

In any case, “the revenge scenario works because it is a reliable way to elicit the strong emotions that draw viewers: anger, resentment, and hatred at the evil that is perpetrated on a sympathetic protagonist, and then delight and relief as vengeance is taken and the scales of justice are perceived to have been brought back into balance” (Plantinga, 2018, p. 231).

There exists therefore a constitutive link between the narrative structure of film, like that of literature, and the most common emotions through which we interpret reality and decide to act. And this also true of the sentiments and emotions associated with revenge and private justice, which are stirred by means of precise narrative choices: for example the frequency of evil acts endured by the victim, the suspense as we await the victim’s reaction, and the climax of the violence by which the avenger achieves resolution. In the end comes the satisfaction of the viewer’s desire for retribution and this produces, in his or her eyes, the restoration of justice. As we will see in the following paragraphs, such a conclusion is typical of the vigilante American film, while in Italian films it is more the exception than the rule.

### **Private justice and vigilantism in American cinema**

It is first of all necessary to set out a typology of the ways in which the broad and ambivalent concepts of private justice and revenge have been represented in American films. There is the theme of the revenge of the many, of a social group or an entire community against the individual wrongdoer (e.g. *Fury*, 1936). And there is the revenge of the state against the citizen, the brutality and insensitivity of which is exemplified by prison and execution films (Robson, 2016b).

In contrast, there is the revenge of the individual against one or more persons, or even against an entire system of power (e.g. *V for Vendetta*, 2005). In the majority of films that portray revenge, the main character is the direct victim of a wrong or a crime. An example is the genre of the rape-revenge film, whose main plot is the vendetta of the raped woman against her aggressors (Heller-Nicholas, 2011; Claire Henry, 2016; Projansky, 2001; Read, 2000). Revenge may also be sought by the victim’s partner, parent or brother, or by another person who has a relationship of solidarity and affection with the victim (e.g. *Man on fire*, 2004). Lastly, there is the figure of the avenger, who punishes the aggressor even without having a direct relationship with the victim. However, the avengers themselves have usually suffered a similar form of violence or injustice.

What do the variants of these stories of victimisation and revenge have in common? In general, it is the failure of mediation between victim and ag-

gressor by a third party seeking to ensure that justice prevails and revenge is unnecessary. In other words, the state, with positive law and a functioning judicial system, appears unable to do its job. In some cases in these films, for example those set in the Wild West or in the lawless metropolis, the institutions of the law are entirely absent and the victim is alone, forced to rely exclusively on their own resources. In other cases, the institutions of the law are actively involved but fail in their duty to ensure justice, at least in the eyes of the main character and the audience. According to Robson (2016a), the failure of the law is the key feature of the vigilante film: from this failure derive the various narratives and interpretations of the problem and the various moral dilemmas that arise.

This claim certainly has merit. And yet, I would also highlight another element shared by many films on private justice and revenge, i.e. the notion, sometimes explicit sometimes only implied, of a society in crisis, a crisis of which crime, the criminal and an unjust judicial system are clear symbols. In the plots of these films, the widespread violence and the absence of respect and solidarity, along with the loss of meaning, are conditions that are added to, and at times even seem to explain, the absence or the failure of the law. It is this situation of anomie degenerating into intolerable violence that necessitates an avenging reaction that will re-establish order. Think of films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The Brave One* (2007), which, as Rafter & Brown rightly point out (2011), portray the everyday reality of the characters in the terms of social disorganization theory.

Thus, in these films the two themes – the crisis of society and the crisis of the law – seem to go hand in hand. Indeed, it could be said that the interdependence of the two levels finds its most effective narration right here. In truth, this also happens in those cop films in which the role of the avenger is played by a policeman (what may be called “cop-turned-vigilante” films, e.g. the *Dirty Harry* series, 1971-1983). Here it is a policeman who decides to deliberately go beyond the limits of the law and procedure in order to obtain the absolute justice that his moral code demands. Much more rarely, Hollywood has entrusted this role to a judge (*The Star Chamber*, 1983).

Below we provide a brief account of the development of the vigilante film in the cinema of Hollywood. One of the first cycles of films of this type is seen in the early 1930s, with titles such as *The Secret Six* (1931), *The Star Witness* (1931), *Beast of the City* (1932) and Cecil B. DeMille’s *This Day and Age* (1933) (Clarens, 1980). In these films, violent gangsters that threaten families and tyrannise American cities without meeting effective opposition from either the police or the judicial system are eventually defeated by various means, thanks to the direct initiative of citizens. These may be young students or elderly veterans of the Civil War, but all are guided by the healthy values of American society.

More or less in the same period, the introduction of the Hays Code (1930-1967) entailed a ban on stories of “crimes against the law”, including revenge: “Revenge in modern times shall not be justified”, according to the code. It was possible to portray revenge only when set in less developed civilisations in which law was precarious (Robson, 2016a). In this sense, the most appropriate context became the Wild West, with innumerable westerns based on revenge plots (e.g. *The Searchers*, 1956).

Subsequently, in the 1950s and 60s, cinema continued to offer stories of families threatened by crime, home invasion, desperate and ruthless gangsters and violent juvenile gangs. However, as in films such as *He ran all the way*, *Desperate Hours* and *The Young Savages* (1961), the victims and the criminals have much in common and revenge is consciously rejected.

In the 1970s American cinema underwent a radical change in the portrayal of stories of private justice, offering a specific sub-genre, the vigilante film, whose characteristics we shall now discuss. From the 1970s onwards, the vigilante film, together with the coeval genre of cop films (e.g. *The French Connection*, 1971; and of course the *Dirty Harry* series), enjoyed constant success at the box office. This change cannot be explained without reference, however brief, to certain factors, two of which are internal, i.e. of the world of cinema itself: the shift from the Hays Code to the MPAA film rating system and the change in the narratives, particularly the intensification of the visual representation of violence, as in the final scene of the film *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Factors external to the world of cinema include two major social developments: the normality of high crime rates and the acknowledged limitations of the criminal justice system (Garland, 2001).

The private justice and revenge films of this period, such as *Straw Dogs* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974), portray, albeit with significant differences, the dramatic transformation of a normal citizen, meek and peaceful, perfectly civilised, into a violent man who deliberately chooses to kill in order to defend-avenge his world from the evildoers, given that neither the law nor the institutions are able to do so. Since that time, this simple plot has been replicated innumerable times. The *Death Wish* series with Charles Bronson would continue with a further four episodes up until 1994 (all successful, except the last), and a remake in 2018. Other films of this genre were also very successful, benefiting from the participation of top-flight actors and directors. To cite just a few among the most famous: *Eye for an Eye* (1996), *Death Sentence* (2007), *The Brave One* (2007), *Gran Torino* (2008), *Law Abiding Citizen* (2009), *The Equalizer* (2014) and *The Equalizer II* (2018), without counting the other innumerable B-movies in this genre. Clearly, the continuous presence of vigilante films in cinemas and on television is proof of the hold that the genre has on the American public.

Despite the numerous variations on the theme seen in these films, their narrative structure consistently incorporates the conventions of three Hollywood macro-genres: the thriller, with its emphasis on the victim (Rubin, 1999); the crime film, with its emphasis on the causes and consequences of a crime (Spina, 2017); and the action movie, with its foregrounding of action scenes and violence (O'Brien, 2012). Peter Robson (2016a) has drawn up a handy list of the narrative conventions of the most important and representative films of the vigilante film genre. We present here a brief description of these eight phases.

1. *Setting the scene.* These films mainly open with the scene of an ordinary, calm family environment, in a middle-class social context.

2. *The disruptive random event.* The family idyll is devastated by an event of extreme violence, sudden and unexpected: crime bursts into the tranquil bourgeois setting and the partner and/or the children of the protagonist are killed or viciously attacked. Two parallel worlds collide: on one hand, free citizens, individualists, responsible for their own lives; on the other, alcoholics or drug addicts, people with nothing to lose, who act in an entirely irrational and irresponsible way. It goes without saying that often they belong to a different ethnic group or culture from that of the protagonist.

3-4. *The law takes its course - The system malfunctions.* The subsequent phases are essential: in civil society the shattered equilibrium must be restored by the judicial system, but the whole point of these stories is that this does not happen. Indeed, either the police are not able to identify and arrest the culprit or the concrete application of the law during the trial (i.e. due process and its associated guarantees) fails to apply the right penalty and thus to satisfy the victim's expectations of justice.

5. *Tentative revenge reaction suppressed.* In the meantime the protagonist persists in their state of victimisation: they do not immediately seek revenge but rather a return to normality, without success. The level of suffering and anxiety remains high.

6. *Trigger to revenge.* New situations of stress and violence (the victim may be mocked, suffer a fresh act of aggression, hear of violence committed against others, etc.), together with the ongoing failure of the law to take its course, trigger a process, instant or more pondered, autonomous or facilitated by others, of conversion towards the need for revenge.

7. *Successful elimination of the "evil."* After this moment, with any qualms eliminated, revenge follows its violent and unstoppable course: the "evildoers" are eliminated by the avenger with brutality and ruthlessness. The universal revenge film master-plot denies the culprit any chance of forgiveness.

8. *Coda.* The final scenes encapsulate the definitive meaning of the story and sum up its moral. These American films usually concluded with a new alliance between the avenging citizen and the law, the act of revenge not be-

ing punished by the officers of the legal system, who on the contrary respect it and consider it justified. At the same time, the avenger obtains the approval and solidarity of their community of reference. They can finally return to their normal life – or perhaps continue their avenging mission.

As mentioned above, this narrative scheme has many variants but is stable and consistent in innumerable films. The plot of a revenge story is familiar and natural for the audience. The vigilante film has a schematic, recurring and convincing interpretation of reality.

An important theme here is the opposition between civilisation and wilderness, which is also a recurring motif in the western genre (Wright, 1977). In this sense, *Death Wish* is a film-manifesto that deserves greater attention, over and above its questionable aesthetic value. The theme of civilisation, understood with reference to the theory of Norbert Elias (Elias, 1939/2000) as the ability to control one's impulses and violence, emerges frequently in the film. Right at the beginning, Joanna, the pretty wife of the main character, Paul Kersey, who will be brutally murdered at home by a band of thieves, tells her husband "we are too civilized". Later, in the middle of the film, Kersey's son-in-law applies the label "civilised" to those citizens who no longer know how to react directly to the rising tide of criminality and are forced "run and hide" from the dangerous heart of the city to the more peaceful middle-class suburbs. Kersey, in turn, after the trauma he has suffered travels for work from New York to Tucson, from the liberal city to the more authentic West: in this way he convinces himself of the need to rediscover the spirit of the frontier, which consists of the ability to defend oneself – by oneself – with the use of weapons. His former liberal ideals – "soft on crime", concerned for the weak and the disadvantaged, a conscientious objector and against the use of weapons – are by now forgotten: he has converted (Lenz, 2003, pp. 128–129) and is ready for his avenging mission.

Another theme that strengthens the plausibility of the story and ensures that the audience will identify with the main character is the feeling of the loss of control, and more generally alienation, that the protagonist experiences, a theme that has also been incisively explored in Italian films. The victim is not only impotent with respect to the crime that surrounds him but also unable to have any influence on the judicial system, broadly presented as a faceless bureaucracy indifferent to his plight (again from *Death Wish*, in the words of the main character's son-in-law: "You want to know what they are? Statistics on a police blotter. Mom and Carol, along with thousands of other people. And there is nothing we can do to stop it"). This state of impotence is further emphasised when the victim who becomes an avenger is a woman or an elderly person. *Harry Brown* (2009) is a British film in which the elderly main character lives on an estate controlled by aggressive gangs of youths who ruin the lives of the residents, who can only suffer in silence.

In order to avoid travelling through a dangerous tunnel controlled by the gangs, Brown arrives too late at the hospital where his wife has already died: “the gang here have become kings [...] Harry can only stand and watch. He has lost all agency” (P. Elliott, 2014, p. 50).

This is the point where the narrative mechanism of Hollywood comes into its own, imposing on the story the expected change of perspective. As Leitch notes (Leitch, 2002, pp. 82–88), American crime films have little time for the figure of the victim who spurns vengeance: a “stoic” but “static” main character blocks the progress of the story. If there is a victim at the centre of the story, as is the case in vigilante films, they must become a victim-hero, passing from suffering to action, and then to revenge. Thus, it is perhaps the requirements of the plot, more than ideological considerations, that affirm this central value in American culture, i.e. the idea that the individual must be the master of his or her own destiny, against all odds. Furthermore, often the avengers of vigilante films have special skills that facilitate this transformation, particularly their background in the army or police and their familiarity with weapons (e.g. the heroes of *Death Wish*, *Gran Torino*, *Law Abiding Citizens*, *The Equalizer*).

However, the weaker the victim, the more the public tend to identify with them and support them, as happens in those films, and there are many, in which the person avenging the crime is a woman. But the victim turned avenger carries a further element of interest: their ambivalence (Leitch, 2002). This ambivalence does not go so far as to transform the victim-avenger into an evildoer like their assailants, despite the violence they enact in the process of obtaining revenge. Indeed, as already pointed out, it is the absence, the weakness and the ineffectiveness of the justice system seen in these film that justifies the victim-avenger.

This brings us to a reflection of socio-legal and criminological interest. The critical representation of the law seen in vigilante films is no exception in the discourse of the media in general. On the contrary, it is in line with a widespread impression constructed by literature, cinema, television series and news media. Indeed, the exasperation of the vigilante, the citizen-victim-crime-fighter who fights crime with greater success than the officers of the law, is merely the most emotionally compelling of any number of central figures in the entertainment narratives of popular culture. Referring to amateur detectives and the avenging superheroes of the comic books, one cannot disagree with Surette’s observation that “the success that private citizens and private investigators have enjoyed when solving crime in the media has been impressive” (Surette, 2015, p. 117). It should be remembered that the equally popular figure of the maverick policeman who successfully fights crime by disregarding conventional procedures, formalities and hierarchies is also in this mould.



*I, the Jury* (1947), the title of the first of Mickey Spillane's novels to feature the avenging detective Mike Hammer, is the perfect distillation of a victim-avenger who, in the act of revenge, identifies, captures and judges the criminal, imposing and carrying out the sentence, all at the same time. This combination of the various roles of justice in a single individual leaves no space for understanding either the crime or the criminal. Indeed, the latter is the personification of a bestial and irrational impulse that brings us straight back to the tension between civilisation and barbarism.

To conclude, however, it should also be remembered that the American vigilante film whose main characteristics we have just described, a genre which has always enjoyed success among the cinema-going public, represents in positive terms only a specific and clearly delimited part of the broader historic, cultural and political phenomenon of vigilantism. Indeed, these films celebrate and justify – while highlighting the ambivalence – only private justice, the avenging and restorative mission of the individual. In contrast, they tend to condemn collective justice, that of groups of citizens or entire communities. This is clearly illustrated by a masterpiece such as *Fury* (1936) by Fritz Lang, the story of the revenge of one man against an entire community that had tried to barbarously lynch him; and by *The Star Chamber*, in which one of a group of judges, whose mission is to punish criminals who have been wrongly acquitted as a result of the malfunctioning of their trials, re-converts to the cause of the law and reports his colleagues to the police; and by a film such as *A time to kill* (1996), in which a citizen is acquitted for an act of private vengeance while a group which had sought its own violent revenge, the Ku Klux Klan, is condemned.

It is no coincidence that in the above-mentioned films and in others, the condemnation of group justice is the work of judges, juries and trials, i.e. by means of the official figures and procedures of the law. This even happens in one of the most exemplary films of the new conservative attitudes to crime and punishment that pervaded the vigilante films of the 1970s, i.e. *Magnum Force*, the second of the films in the *Dirty Harry* cycle. Here, inspector Callaghan (who is still a policeman with a badge, however atypical) fights a group of his colleagues involved in a private struggle outside the bounds of the law against criminals and deviants. The line that serves as a leitmotiv of the film is “a man's got to know his limitations”, which seems to remind us that not every demand for justice outside the law is admissible, and that revenge must be morally justified and controlled by the institutions.

### **An account of the evolution of the vigilante film in Italy**

In order to describe the cinematographic and cultural background of the Italian films that will be analysed and compared with their American coun-



terparts here, it is necessary to briefly reconstruct the way in which Italian cinema has tackled the theme of revenge and private justice. What follows is an exploration, not claimed to be exhaustive, of the evolution of the Italian vigilante film<sup>1</sup>.

In general, stories of private justice and revenge have been told by Italian cinema through the lens of its most popular and characteristic genres, i.e. historical, mythological, Westerns and melodramas (in which revenge is framed within tormented family or romantic relations). Then there are films that portray revenge in the context of common and organised crime.

Two recognisable currents are of particular interest here, although we do not have the space to discuss them in depth. The first is the practice of vendetta in Sardinia, an island considered in popular culture, but also in literature, to be wild and pastoral, reflecting its ancient Nuragic civilisation. Indeed, many films set on the island, both dramas and comedies, have been inspired by the conflict between modernity and an ancient past. Specifically, this concerns the tension between the positive law of the Italian state and the custom-based law of certain parts of the island, in which the principle of vendetta plays a key role. Films such as *Bandits of Orgosolo* [*Banditi a Orgosolo*] (1961) are derived directly from the studies by Pigliaru and his book *Barbagian Revenge as a Legal System* (1959), in which he investigates customary law among certain pastoralist communities in Sardinia, specifically the so-called “Barbagian Revenge”.

The second current is the rape-revenge film, which arose in the 1970s, inspired by coeval American examples and includes many exploitation films (e.g. *Last Stop on the Night Train* [*L'ultimo treno della notte*], 1975), some narratively more complex films (*The Stendhal Syndrome* [*La sindrome di Stendhal*], 1996; *The Unknown Woman* [*La sconosciuta*], 2006), and others directly inspired by real events (*No Apparent Motive* [*Senza movente*], 1999). A film that should be considered on its own, although it deals with a girl seeking revenge against the boys who abused her, is the extremely interesting *The Girl from Millelire Street* [*La ragazza di via Millelire*] (1980).

The Italian vigilante film in its fullest sense arose (and disappeared) in the 1970s, the main character usually being a police inspector. Guided by the conventions of the cop film, the so-called “poliziottesco” genre saw a rapid rise in popularity in Italy precisely in those years (Bondanella & Pacchioni, 2017; Curti, 2013). Among the stylistic and production considerations that

<sup>1</sup> Since, to the author’s knowledge, a complete and reliable reference on the *Videohunt* model is lacking, the reconstruction that follows is based on the most authoritative encyclopaedias of Italian cinema (Mereghetti, 2018; Morandini, 2018), the IMDB ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) and Mymovies ([www.mymovies.it](http://www.mymovies.it)) databases, and the archives of Italian daily newspapers (*Il Corriere Della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*) using “giustiziere”, “vendetta” and related terms as the search phrases (excluding comedies, horror films, shorts and direct-to-video productions).

favoured the rise of the cop film were the decline of the genres that had been dominant in Italian cinema in the previous decades, particularly the home-made westerns and comedies, and the substantial fall in cinema audiences as a result of the growth of television. The cop film reprised the narrative and stylistic conventions of the Spaghetti Western, transposing them to the context, which appeared equally wild and violent, of contemporary Italian society. In addition, it used the themes and motifs of the political cinema of the 1960s, albeit with “different ideological intentions” (Brunetta, 2009, p. 210; Marlow-Mann, 2013). The influence of the American films of the period, such as *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*, was considerable, but not, as we will see, sufficient to entirely annul the films’ specifically Italian characteristics.

Among the external factors affecting the development of the Italian cop film, which was considered realistic and was inspired by real events, was the increase in political violence and crime in Italian society. The cinema of these years, in a close but at the same time conflictual dialogue with Italian intellectuals, looked at these phenomena through its own narrative lens, contributing to the “total disintegration of the idea of the state in the popular imagination” (Brunetta, 1995, p. 833). A famous example is the film that won Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* [*Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*] (1970). The crisis of the state was also depicted as the crisis of the relationship between citizens and the institutions and officers of the law. The seminal – and unfortunately unequalled – work by Vincenzo Tomeo (1973) reflects on these themes analysing the sudden flourishing in 1971 and 1972 of Italian legal films after decades in which the cinema rarely paid any attention to issues of justice.

This is the cultural, thematic and narrative background in which the themes of private justice and the crisis of the law are tackled in the films of the 1970s. Without forgetting the comedy *In the Name of the Italian People* [*In nome del popolo italiano*] (1971), in which a prosecutor presents false evidence in a trial in order to portray himself as a crusader against the corruption and immorality of Italian society, two films would provide the model for the subsequent vigilante-cop films: *Confessions of a Police Captain* [*Confessione di un commissario di polizia al procuratore della repubblica*] (1971) and *Execution Squad* [*La polizia ringrazia*] (1972). Both films depict the impotence of the police and the law in the face of the brutal power of the Mafia and growing metropolitan violence. Through the doubts and the misadventures of the protagonists (two police inspectors), the possible recourse to private justice (administered by policemen themselves or by secret groups of vigilantes) is explored. The conclusion of these films is that the response to the crisis of confidence in the institutions and the temptation to seek private vengeance lies in the hard work and rigour of committed judges, but the

ambivalence of the problem is clearly amplified and not resolved by these narratives.

The great success of these films inspired dozens of emulators, in which the increasingly reductive and simplified exploitation of the themes went hand in hand with ever more spectacular violence and action. The “problematic” police inspector, to paraphrase Tomeo, would eventually give way to the resolute avenger cop (e.g. *High Crime* [*La polizia incrimina, la legge assolve*], 1973; *Violent City* [*Roma violenta*], 1975; *The Big Racket* [*Il grande racket*], 1976; *Double Game* [*Torino violenta*], 1977).

The 1970s saw a large number of police inspectors but few cases of a common man playing the role of avenger. An initial group of films can however be considered typical of the vigilante genre as described in the previous section and exemplified by *Death Wish*. These works deployed directors and actors, narrative components and forms of representation that were typical of the Italian cop film. In 1974, three months after *Death Wish* was released in the USA (and thus before its arrival in Italy), Italian cinemas showed *Street Law* [*Il cittadino si ribella*], which enjoyed considerable success (grossing over 1.8 billion lire in the 1974-75 season; Curti, 2013, p. 123). 1975 saw the release of *The Manhunt* [*L'uomo della strada fa giustizia*] and *Kidnap Syndicate* [*La città sconvolta: caccia spietata ai rapitori*], followed in 1976 by *Rome, the Other Face of Violence* [*Roma, l'altra faccia della violenza*] and in 1977 by *Death Hunt* [*No alla violenza*]. Despite their differences, the plot of these films was centred on a citizen – always a man, usually middle class or perhaps a manual worker – who seeks revenge against desperate criminals who the police will not or cannot arrest.

Paraphrasing Clarens (1980, pp. 322–324), while the above-mentioned films are “vigilante films”, the following films of the same period are “films about a vigilante”: *An Average Little Man* [*Un borghese piccolo piccolo*] (1977), *The Gun* [*L'arma*] (1978) and *A Dangerous Toy* [*Il giocattolo*] (1979), all films lying outside the canon of the cop film. Made by top-flight directors with some of the most representative Italian actors of the period, they tackle the figure of the vigilante in decidedly more problematic, reflective and dramatic terms.

In Italy, the 1980s and 90s saw the emergence of organised crime, the scourge of heroin and the struggle against systemic corruption. In this context, the figure of the vigilante, whether policeman or citizen, becomes increasingly improbable, partly as a consequence of a renewed interest in the figures of the law. In the cinema and on television there were many heroic police inspectors and judges, committed to the point of martyrdom in the struggle against the Mafia and the degeneration of politics (Spina, 2016). Apart from *Angel with a Gun* [*L'angelo con la pistola*] (1992), the only film to mention for this period is *Camorra (A Story of Streets, Women and Crime)* [*Un*

*complicato intrigo di donne, vicoli e delitti*] (1986). Here, in a rarity for Italian cinema, revenge is sought by a group of mothers against the Camorra and heroin dealers.

In recent years, private revenge is once more a topic of interest. Now, however, the focus seems to have shifted towards vengeance as the inevitable response to an existential condition, rather than social problems, violence or powerlessness. Indeed, these are stories set in the desperate world of petty crime and violent and deprived urban areas. Some of these films are independent productions or by new directors (*Tre punto sei*, 2002; *Rabbia in pugno*, 2013; *Il codice del babbuino*, 2018; *Rabbia furiosa*, 2018, based on the same true story that inspired *Dogman*), while others are decidedly in the cinematic mainstream, such as *Cemento armato*, 2007, *Lo chiamavano Jeeg Robot* (2016) and *Dogman* (2018; winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes festival).

To summarise, what emerges from this exploration of nearly 50 years of cinematographic production is that in Italy a consolidated and lasting tradition of vigilante films was not established. From a thematic and stylistic point of view, it is hard to identify a homogeneous and consistent body of work, except for the small group of films made in the mid-1970s similar to *Death Wish*. Not counting the figure of the avenger cop, interest in the citizen avenger has been limited and inconstant, and this perhaps suggests that the vigilante has little appeal for the national cultural industry<sup>2</sup>. This does not mean however that this figure has had no hold on the Italian public, although this may be limited to its Hollywood version: but an assessment of this aspect lies beyond the objectives of the present study.

### **Analysis of the narrative structures of the Italian vigilante film**

In order to identify the narrative structures and thematic cores of Italian revenge films, and specifically the causal links, characters and attribution of moral responsibility, an integrated structural and thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) was performed on a sample of six films considered to provide a “relevant range” (Mason, 2002, p. 124) of work depicting private justice in Italian cinema. The concept of representativeness used here is based on: a) the consistency of the films with the private justice and vendetta masterplot; b) their consistency with the narrative and stylistic conventions of the vigilante genre (regarding the components it shares with thrillers, crime films and action films); c) its verisimilitude and credibility with respect to the historical and social context of reference; d) its relevance to the collective imaginary.

<sup>2</sup> The vigilante is almost absent from television series. Comic books are possibly a different story but these will not be addressed here.

On the basis of these criteria the following films were selected: *Street Law* (1974); *The Manhunt* (1975); *An Average Little Man* (1977); *A Dangerous Toy* (1979); *Camorra* (1986); *Dogman* (2018). Except for the first criterion, common to all the films here, the other representativeness criteria are met by the sample investigated here to varying degrees. For example, some films are not strictly of the vigilante film genre: *Camorra* has the structure of a thriller but deploys the narrative resources of the Neapolitan “sceneggiata”, while for much of their running time, *An Average Little Man* and *A Dangerous Toy* have the characterisation and situations of the “Commedia all’italiana”. These films, which were generally appreciated by the public and/or the critics, were made by established directors and starred popular actors (with the exception of *Dogman*, whose leading actor was a newcomer). Their presence in the collective imagination is demonstrated by the vitality and persistence of their stories and their style<sup>3</sup>: the first two films of the sample belong to a family of Italian cop films that has been rediscovered in the last few decades, appreciated by critics, cinema-goers and even directors (including Quentin Tarantino). *An Average Little Man* is the usual symbolic reference cited by Italian news media when presenting crime reports involving a common citizen who has decided to play the role of avenger, a function which it paradoxically shares with *Death Wish*. Lastly, these films are often compared with each other, by public and critics alike, as is the case for example of *An Average Little Man* and *Dogman*. This corpus of films is not homogeneous, whether in terms of their historical context, ideological intention or narrative: the differences – but also their shared features, of which there are many – will be highlighted in the analysis. As the comparison will show, the Italian films are quite different from the American canon, and indeed differ strongly amongst themselves.

As already mentioned earlier, the analysis of the films makes reference to narrative theories arising from literary and semiotic studies. It is thus necessary to establish working definitions that can guide the work of deconstruction and interpretation of the films. In this regard, a series of fundamental concepts have been adapted from Bal (2017), Bremond (1980), Chatman (1980) and Casetti & di Chio (1990). For Bal (2017, p. 5), analysis of narrative forms proceeds via a three-layer distinction: the *narrative text*, which is “a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (“tells” the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof”; the *story*, which is “the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and “colouring” of a fabula”; finally, the *fabula*, “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors”. These distinctions are intu-

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of style, see Bordwell & Thompson (2013).

itively applicable to the analysis of films, understood as narrative texts that tell, each with its own distinctive aesthetic and communicative resources, a specific story that in turn presents, with its own order of events and set of characters, the same *fabula*, whose essential content, in our case, is revenge.

To this scheme may be added Bremond's definition, according to which "all narrative consists of a discourse which integrates a sequence of events of human interest into the unity of a single plot" (1980, p. 390). In this way, the consideration of human interest is added to the logic of the narration, because "it is only in relation to a plan conceived by man that events gain meaning and can be organized into a structured temporal sequence". Stressing the goal-orientation of the action that characterises each narrative restores importance to the character and the meaning of their actions as well as their psychological traits: as Ricoeur (1984/1990, p. 41) points out, in this way "the agent and the sufferer find themselves elevated to the rank of persons". This also makes the relationship between narratives and interpretative sociology (*verstehende soziologie*) in the Weberian sense explicit. The stories can thus generally be interpreted as processes of improvement or deterioration with respect to the characters' aims.

The work of Chatman is very useful, particularly his summary of the various narratological theories and their application to the narrative structure of films. Some of the concepts used in this analysis represent a reworking of the categories identified in *Story and Discourse*. Lastly, the empirical definition proposed by Casetti & di Chio of narratives as a "sequence of situations, in which events are realised and persons do things in specific surroundings" (1990, p. 165), together with the analyses of specific examples that these authors propose, makes it possible to deconstruct the main components of cinematic narration.

For reasons of space, in this analysis of a sample of Italian films, we will focus on the content (*story, fabula, histoire*) rather than on the expression (*discourse, récit, sjuzet*). First and foremost, we will analyse the level of plot events (the transition from one state to another state), i.e. how the action and the sequences of events are structured, in the awareness that it is this structure that then co-determines the viewer's cognitive and emotive reception of the film (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002). Indeed, in films as in all narratives, the temporal dimension is crucial, since it connects the events to each other via causal relations that may be explicit or implicit but are in any case comprehensible and interpretable by their target audience (Chatman, 1980; Longo, 2016). In addition, certain considerations will be made regarding the level of the existents, and in particular the characters, the agents that perform the actions. Needless to say, this analysis does not claim to be either systematic or complete, seeking rather to be consistent with the cognitive purposes of the essay.



We may read the logical succession of the events with reference to the phases of the scheme set out by Robson, so as to compare the Italian films to their American counterparts. This is no easy task however. Indeed, the American films of the vigilante genre are characterised by what has been called a “strong narrative regime”, (Casetti & di Chio, 1990, pp. 206-211), i.e. a logical chain of events achieved thanks to the equilibrium of the various phases and the priority assigned to the actions of the characters. The latter are identified by means of an axiologically dichotomous scheme, of the hero/antihero type (or victim/tormentor, etc.). Only two of the Italian films selected here can be classed as having a similar narrative regime: *Street Law* and *The Manhunt*, i.e. the two films that are narratively and ideologically closest to the *Death Wish* model. In contrast, the other films have a “weaker” – or more complex – narrative regime, in which the action plays a less important role than the psychological exploration of the characters and the representation of the contexts. In addition, in the Italian cases, the weight of the various narrative blocks identifiable in the vigilante film genre differs in terms of order, duration and frequency from film to film (Chatman, 1980, pp. 62-79). At times, the congruent phases of the American films are simply not applicable to the Italian films.

The events of a story constitute the plot. In Italian vigilante films, the kernel of the plot consists of the following chronological phases:

1. *Setting the scene*. Two films (*The Manhunt* and *Dogman*) open with a static situation consisting of scenes of daily life, in the family or at work, at the centre of which is the main character. *An Average Little Man* takes us straight into the context of a middle-class family intent on a crucial objective, i.e. to get the young son a job in the ministry where the father is already employed. In the film, this phase accounts for almost exactly half the running time. This upsets the equilibrium of the plot of the vigilante film genre but at the same time it makes it possible to explore, more than any other film examined here, the psychology of the characters and the environments in which they act. In contrast, the remaining films open directly with a series of events affecting the various protagonists, who are immediately characterised as sufferers, that is “affected, in one way or another, by the course of narrated events” (Bremond, 1973, p. 139). The setting of the events is a daily context of violence and fear punctuated by burglaries, robberies, abductions, drug-dealing and – for Nunziatina, the only female main character in this sample, in the film *Camorra* – rape.

2. *The disruptive random event*. In the first few minutes of *The Manhunt*, the daughter of the main character is killed during a robbery. In *An Average Little Man*, the son is killed by the robbers, but this happens halfway through the film, marking a turning point in the plot that convinces the main character to abandon his previous approach in favour of revenge. In contrast, in



the other films, the events attributable to villainy (Propp's function VIII, "the villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family"; Propp, 1928/1968, pp. 30-35) are neither unique nor sudden, but, as mentioned previously, have been familiar to the main character and the viewer from the start. Rather, they are repeated with such frequency as to finally goad the protagonist into reacting – a climax structure – which then leads to the final resolution. It should be remembered, with Bordwell (1985), that the frequency of the events has the effect of strengthening some of the viewer's interpretations of the story as a whole: in these films, the repetition helps to convey the idea that the violent events can no longer be tolerated by the main character and that their revenge is the justifiable reaction to the last straw.

3-4. *The law takes its course and the system malfunctions.* In *A Dangerous Toy* and *Dogman*, after the first violent event, a new figure (the police inspector) appears on the scene. However, his attempts to improve the main character's situation and restore a sense of equilibrium are unsuccessful. Indeed, the police are represented as incapable or not interested in meeting the urgent expectations of the protagonist-victim. In *An Average Little Man* it is precisely the father's decision to seek revenge that prevents the arrest of his son's killer. In *Camorra* the mothers' revenge is from the start an independent act, not counting on the police, who on the contrary are considered antagonists on the same level as the Camorra gangsters they are fighting against. In *A Dangerous Toy* and *Dogman* the police's intervention in the story is actually a setback for the main character, who is arrested and held in prison. If the criminal is never even arrested, then logically we cannot proceed to the adjudicative phase in a trial.

5. *Tentative revenge reaction suppressed.* Having suffered serious loss and receiving no answers from the institutions, the characters continue to be threatened and attacked by the same criminals who victimised them before, as well as being derided by the police and journalists. The heroine of *Camorra* must constantly endure the aggressive approaches of the men she meets while being stigmatised as an ex-prostitute. The film's main characters, the mothers who will later avenge themselves, watch helplessly as the drugs trade continues to wreak havoc, while their work and family situations degenerate. The wife of the office worker Vivaldi in *An Average Little Man* is so shocked by the loss of her son that she becomes paralysed and loses the power of speech, while the wife of the accounts clerk Barletta in *A Dangerous Toy* falls seriously ill. In contrast, despite being constantly overwhelmed by his oppressor and the others in his neighbourhood, the little hero of *Dogman* does not seek revenge, but only recognition. In the films most consistent with the conventions of the vigilant genre (*Street Law* and *The Manhunt*, but also *A Dangerous Toy*) the decision to seek revenge is arrived at gradually, by means of a logical sequence of interconnected events including the search for

the culprits, the conversion of the protagonist to a more aggressive approach and the acquisition of weapons. In these specific phases of these films, helpers and donors help the protagonist with their plans for revenge: in *Street Law* the helper is a petty criminal who provides information and weapons; in *The Manhunt* the helpers are a transvestite who knows the milieu of the underworld and the lawyer leader of the “Movement for civic self-defence”, a secret vigilante organisation. In *A Dangerous Toy* the donor is a policeman who offers the main character the magical object, the pistol, thereby helping to raise the self-esteem of the humble accounts clerk by revealing to him the one talent in which he truly excels, i.e. marksmanship. It could be objected that the police play the role of allies, but in *A Dangerous Toy* the policeman in question is essentially a friend (indeed the only friend), and is thus outside the institution of the “police”. In the films *An Average Little Man* and *Dogman* no helper or donor figure influences the revenge.

6. *Trigger to revenge*. This phase of the story sees a new act of violence, which this time is followed by reflection and the irrevocable decision to take revenge. There is a moment in the story in which the events demand an assessment of what to do, i.e. the evaluation phase (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). It is here that the meaning of the story is fully expressed, unfolding in the passage from the complicating action to the resolution.

It is the narrator/protagonist as a psychological unit who is the subject of the evaluation. As in all narratives, in films we are made aware of their feelings and reasoning by means of various techniques of literary and theatrical derivation (external and internal voice-overs, dialogues, monologues, etc.) (Cohn, 1978; Longo, 2016). But devices typical of cinematographic narration, such as photographic and framing techniques, moving cameras, the soundtrack, etc., are also deployed. This then is the most important narrative section because it strengthens the viewer’s inferences regarding the explanation and justification of the main character’s act of revenge. For this reason, for the researcher as much as the viewer, it is the most important part of the film from a social perspective. In the films *Street Law*, *The Manhunt* and *A Dangerous Toy*, the story of how the common man comes to pursue private justice is told by means of dialogue. Indeed, it is via the repeated dialogues between the protagonist and his allies – or more often his adversaries, who may be police inspectors or journalists – that the justifications and risks of revenge, as well as the legal and moral obstacles to it, are represented. At its core, the justification of private justice lies in: a) the need to defend (or re-establish) one’s dignity in the face of the abuse suffered, whether it be crime or humiliation (“I cannot lose my self-respect”); b) the lack of alternatives, given the isolation of the main character and the limited contribution of the police (“the man in the street has no other choice but to defend himself”). In these dialogues, it is usually the main character’s wife or partner who

seeks to dissuade him, although this has no effect on the action. By means of this narrative mechanism, the transformation of the citizen into a vigilante unfolds as a gradual and predictable transition. In *A Dangerous Toy*, the dialogues between husband and wife, which take place in the context of an anguished marital break-up, also highlight the transformation of the timid accounts clerk into a bitter vigilante who sees guns as the means of his psychological redemption (with the wife saying to her husband "...I want to understand", "...I don't know who I married any more", "...you scare me"). These dialogues, more complex and dramatic than the other examples, pave the way for an unusual ending, in which the woman's actions play a more decisive role than the other films in the sample. In *Camorra*, the situation is evaluated in the long (almost 5 minutes) and dramatic monologue by Carmela, the leader of the mothers who have decided to secretly organise a way of killing the heroin dealers who have caused the deaths of their children. Here, with the emphasis typical of the Neapolitan "sceneggiata", revenge is represented as an irrepressible need arising from protracted suffering, from the mother's "torment", and from the impossibility of finding peace or returning to ordinary life. However, it is also depicted as a collective and "political" decision that can be made only thanks to the solidarity of women in the face of male violence.

On the opposite end of the scale is Marcello, the main character of *Dogman*, who is a meek man in a violent world who undergoes a sudden change that will drive him to seek revenge. The last straw occurs when he is badly beaten in front of the whole neighbourhood by his tormentor as a punishment for a single timid gesture of rebellion. Here the evaluation is not expressed in words but in a significant scene in which the main character and his daughter go scuba diving, via the metaphor of emerging from the water. In contrast, *An Average Little Man* is an unsettling film because it portrays revenge as "natural": it is neither pondered nor explained, and is not pre-saged for the viewer by a moment of evaluation. Revenge is taken without hesitation as soon as the main character is given the slightest chance. It is only afterwards, in a dialogue-monologue with his mute wife, that the main character seeks to justify his actions (if convicted, his son's murderer would have received a light sentence) and to acquit himself.

7. *Successful elimination of the "evil."* This action is narrated with spectacular violence and the complete negation of the evildoer's personhood. In the films closest to the vigilante canon (*Street Law* and *The Manhunt*, and to a lesser degree *A Dangerous Toy*), this happens through classic scenes of ambushes and shoot-outs, but in the other films revenge takes more complex forms. In *An Average Little Man*, the revenge consists of the fully-fledged torture of the criminal, performed as a spectacle for the eyes of the main character and his wife, and as such it is ultimately an intimate and private

act. In *Camorra*, the mothers' revenge entails killing the drug-dealers of the Camorra and marking the deed by sticking a syringe in their genitals. In *Dogman* the animal-like tormentor of the main character, the manager of a dog-grooming parlour, is tricked into allowing himself to be trapped in a dog cage. The protagonist does not want to kill him but only to force him to show some respect ("you have to apologise"). However, his adversary's bestial nature is uncontrollable and the only solution is to strangle him. Lastly, in *A Dangerous Toy*, the revenge that the main character is about to take turns against him. Indeed his own wife shoots him to prevent him from degenerating completely from innocent victim to guilty avenger.

8. *Coda*. The closure of the Italian films confirms the considerable distance between them and the American model. Only one film, *The Manhunt*, closes with a renewed alliance between the citizen avenger and the law: the police inspector does not punish the avenger and the main character abandons the role of vigilante. However, the viewer knows that the revenge has gone against the wrong people and that it is the police, seemingly incapable until now, who have solved the case (although the criminals have been killed and not tried). *Camorra* closes in a courtroom, at the beginning of the trial of the avenging mothers, with the hope that justice will finally condemn the real perpetrators of the violence and the destruction of the city. In contrast, the other four films end in defeat and isolation. In *Street Law*, after eliminating the criminals who persecuted him, the engineer is pressured by the Commissioner into declaring that it was the police who solved the case: his search for justice and his rebellion are now meaningless, as if they had never happened. The protagonist of *A Dangerous Toy* is left dying in the arms of his wife, also sick, alone, with no help from anyone. In *Dogman*, the little hero who has finally avenged the whole neighbourhood carries the heavy corpse of his victim into the middle of the square, and sits there awaiting recognition from the others who may or may not come. The elderly office worker in *An Average Little Man*, now retired, is alone, his wife dead. He is the only character in these films who will apparently continue as a vigilante.

In order to grasp the meaning of these "narrative cycles" (Bremond, 1980), it should be noted that in most cases the decision to seek revenge leads to a process of deterioration rather than improvement of the main character's initial situation. In some cases the failure is evident (*Street Law*, *An Average Little Man*, *A Dangerous Toy*, *Dogman*), in another, the solution is left hanging (*Camorra*) and it is up to the viewer to infer how the story will end, while it is only in one (*The Manhunt*) that the hero solves his problem.

To conclude, the deconstruction of these six stories enables the identification of some common structural traits, although they are present in the films to varying degrees:

- a. For much of the story, the role of the main character is that of a sufferer, obliged to endure the actions of other agents;
- b. The main character is alone, finds few (if any) allies and many antagonists;
- c. The officers of the law either play a marginal role or their actions have the effect of worsening the situation or frustrating the actions of the main character;
- d. The step towards resolution via evaluation takes up a significant part of the film, in terms of running time, frequency and expressive intensity; the decision to seek revenge is the fruit of a gradual process involving saturation of the conditions seen at the start of the story;
- e. When the main character decides to act the result of his endeavours is a process of deterioration.

### Primary themes and motives of the Italian vigilante film

This exploratory analysis reveals the presence of themes and motifs common to the selected films which it is worth looking at more closely. These include: the role of women, the alienation of the male protagonists, the widespread anomie and violence and the lack of confidence in the justice system. I will give a few examples of how texts on film represent these themes, highlighting at the same time similarities and differences with respect to American vigilante films.

In Italian cinema, revenge is a male affair. In the selected films (with the exception of the rape-revenge film), but also in the others with plots centred on private justice, the main character is always a man. In contrast, the female characters suffer from illnesses or mental instability, and they appear mostly in domestic settings, like the caring housewives of *An Average Little Man*, *A Dangerous Toy* and *The Manhunt*. Lastly, women are subordinate to men, the explicit object of their anger and an outlet for frustrations generated by the crisis of manhood experienced by the main characters (as in various episodes in *Street Law*, *An Average Little Man*, *A Dangerous Toy*). As we have seen, the function of the female characters is rather that of dissuasion: they present the arguments against private justice with reference to feelings of fear, fatalism, fragility and superstition. The wife of the accounts clerk in *A Dangerous Toy* plays a less passive but no less tragic role: she supports her husband's initial impulse to adopt self-defence but then watches it develop with growing anxiety, to the point that she herself becomes the avenger's executioner.

In contrast, *Camorra* is rather unusual with respect not just to this theme but also others. In this film, revenge is seen from a female and feminist point

of view. The film's main character, Nunziatina, was forced into prostitution at a young age by her brother, and now as an adult never meets a man who does not sexually assault her. The revenge here then is not just that of mothers against drug-pushers, but of women against male power, which pervades society and reverberates with violence inflicted on women, children and the entire city.

On one hand these films reproduce female stereotypes, but on the other they highlight the crisis of male identity. This is represented symbolically (the weapon in *A Dangerous Toy* as a substitute for the main character's virility; the syringe in the testicles in *Camorra*) but above all via the construction of the male protagonists. The latter endure strained conditions, in which freedom and self-determination are structurally denied by the society in which they live. The engineer rebels because the symbols of his self-realisation (house and money) are profaned by criminals. Unlike his partner, he cannot tolerate the attack on his personal liberty or the sensation that he is a coward. For him, as for the other male protagonists, it is his self-esteem that is at stake. The accounts clerk in *A Dangerous Toy* is humiliated by all those he meets, apart from his wife and one friend: he is chained (literally, as in the opening scenes) to this system without even noticing and only the use of weapons seems to offer him a chance to break out of his alienating routine. The office worker in *An Average Little Man* also discovers that he has no real control over his life or that of his son. Many motifs in the film confirm this: the servile bows, the lack of respect from his colleagues and superiors, his failure to achieve any success or fulfilment in the workplace. His job itself is bureaucratic and seemingly completely without logic. Only in private, because the separation of family and society is sharp, does he manage to self-represent as a resolute and hard man. His existential condition is grey, as is ably conveyed by the film's cinematography. It is clear in all these stories that private justice is a reaction to a no-longer-tolerable condition of alienation and resentment.

In the Italian films, the crisis of the individual is also the crisis of society. But unlike the Hollywood vigilante films the tension between civilisation and the jungle is represented in more problematic forms. The hero of the American vigilante film is generally a linear character, who has ambivalent traits but in the end manages to recover his moral compass, as well as social recognition, thanks to his heroic acts of private justice. In contrast, the Italian hero is more ambiguous. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the main characters of *An Average Little Man* and *A Dangerous Toy*, both tragic films, are played by two of the greatest Italian comic actors, respectively Alberto Sordi and Nino Manfredi. Comedy has been the main genre by which cinema has tackled the contradictions of Italian society, including issues of law and justice (Tomeo, 1973).



The hero of *Dogman* is a petty criminal: a dealer and consumer of cocaine and a thief. In addition, he admires the thug who oppresses him and seeks his approval. The hero of *A Dangerous Toy* is an accomplice to the dodgy dealings of his unscrupulous boss and he cheats on his wife at the first opportunity. In this sense, the main character of *An Average Little Man* is the most interesting. The critics referred to him as the Italian Doctor Jekyll (Russo, 1977), seeing in him the coexistence of loving family bonds and violent impulses. The film's director, Monicelli, described him as "a man with a closed mind, egotistical and absolutely without social values" (cited in Russo, 1977). The authoritarian way in which he treats his wife, his nostalgia for fascism, his arrogance in traffic, the devious ways in which he seeks to make sure his son gets the job, including joining the Freemasons, together establish the anti-social ethics of the film's main character.

Franco Ferrarotti, one of the most famous Italian sociologists, noted that the film explores the amoral familism typically associated with Italian society: "Monicelli's film is important because it is founded on the violent and asocial undertones of this warm placenta, this bourgeois microcosm" (cited in Russo, 1977). In this sense, the close-up in the opening scene of the film, in which father and son brutally crush with a stone the head of the small fish that they have just caught, sets the scene for the film as a whole: violence is an inherent part of that entire social class, the petty bourgeois, as the title of the film itself suggests, and the white-collar Vivaldi is a malleable representation of it.

And yet, today we may allow ourselves a more historicised reading of this film and others, reducing the emphasis on the ideological preoccupations and psychological interpretations. Indeed, considering the narrative structures of these films, revenge cannot be considered either as an instinctive action or as the expression of a violent subculture. Despite their differences, these stories portray a general state of demoralisation in the Durkheimian sense, in which the individual feels and appears alienated and powerless. The everyday violence and widespread crime are the symbols of this anomic condition. The beginning of *Street Law* is almost a documentary, showing a series of crimes committed in the main character's home town (Genova). As the director E. Castellari pointed out, "we are telling what is happening right now, and we must show right from the start all of today's facts, what newspapers are talking about, that's why the citizen rebels ... everyday violence just outside our door!" (cited in Curti, 2013, p. 123). *Camorra* is pervaded by the metaphor of drugs as a poison that corrupts and destroys the whole of the city of Naples. In *Dogman*, it is not just the plot and the repeated scenes of beatings and gratuitous cruelty that convey the idea of a violent society ruled by the law of the jungle. The decision to set the film in what is virtu-



ally a ghost town<sup>4</sup> situates every action in a profoundly degraded context in which it is hard to descry the traces of a community or social capital. The dust, wind and tumbleweed-like plants in the movie recall the Wild West and its reflexive associations with lawlessness.

But the scene that is theatrically most expressive of what we have been saying is found once again in *An Average Little Man*. In the cemetery of the city (Rome) there are no spaces to bury the dead, and family members, including the film's ill-fated protagonist, must wait for an indeterminate period or attempt to bribe the officials into finding them a burial spot for their deceased. The mortuary is the scene of grotesque chaos, with coffins piled up in no particular order, making it hard to find the one containing the family member, showing a lack of respect for the dead and the living alike. This long scene, not essential to the plot, was considered by critics to be excessively macabre or surreal, and yet it is precisely the means by which the film conveys the sense of totally anomic social organisation in which the characters find themselves.

The impression of a society where the juridical and moral norms are defunct, ruled by the law of the strongest, is reinforced by the fact that the officers of the law are ineffective or violent themselves. The fact that the trial phase is never represented, although it is present in the American vigilante films, is in part due to the well-known difficulty experienced by Italian cinema, but also television and literature, in seeking to portray the judicial process, since the Italian trial system does not lend itself to legal thrillers (Spina, 2016). This is not the case with the police. For the purposes of the plot of a revenge story it is sufficient, as in the American films, to show the inefficiency of the institution or the uneasy balance between the need for retribution and the rights of the individual. However, in the Italian films there is a further connotation. The police are depicted as a bureaucratic institution, distant and lacking empathy towards the suffering of the victim. Indeed, the police seem to be in conflict with the citizen, who, in turn, feels a deep mistrust of the officers. This lack of trust goes so far as to preclude any investigation and trial, as with the office worker Vivaldi in *An Average Little Man*.

## Conclusion

Although the Italian films analysed belong to different periods and genres, they share a number of recurring themes and motifs. This convergence is obviously explained by the revenge scenario which these films are all based on. But this is not the only reason: these narratives seem to reflect, and at

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<sup>4</sup> Villaggio Coppola, a town built on the coast of Campania in the 1960s, today almost completely abandoned and in a state of advanced blight.

the same time to replicate, interpretations of reality that are rooted in Italian society. Indeed, at times they even appear to herald current trends, such as the scene of the crowded firing range in *A Dangerous Toy* or the main character's ingrained distrust of investigations and trials in *An Average Little Man*.

What then is the "moral" of these stories? That the ordinary citizen lives in a sort of a Hobbesian state of nature despite having entrusted their freedom to the power of the state, a state whose laws are not able to ensure peace and security. In reality, the violence represented by these films is not just that of the criminal, but is a structural aspect of society, which is reflected in economic, social and gender relations, as well as in the law itself, which is perceived as external and imposed from above. The attempt to achieve private justice is not an aberration or the result of some upheaval, but a considered and logical solution. And yet, it does not seem to be the result of a genuine choice, but rather a "natural" development, given the failure of the avenger's attempts to reconcile himself with society and the law. The reasons for revenge are personal, linked to individual or family suffering, but at the same time they are socially significant: toying with both the emotional and the rational side of the viewer, these films seem to be asking: "What would you do in their place?"

In the preface to the novel *An Average Little Man* by Vincenzo Cerami (1976) on which the film was based, Italo Calvino notes that it is a "story of victims and at the same time of monsters". I believe that in addition to being an excellent indication of method, this assessment helps to understand why the protagonist of these Italian films is almost never a figure that the public can completely identify with. This "hero" is ultimately a loser, and perhaps this is the most striking difference with respect to the American vigilante films. Whereas in the latter, private justice and its hero are legitimised by virtue of a fundamental harmony with the core values of American society, in the Italian vigilante films, revenge is almost always depicted as a solitary and meaningless act.

This should not lead to the simplistic conclusion that the ideological message of the Italian vigilante film is against private justice. Nor would it be correct to argue the opposite, i.e. that this kind of film legitimises the armed citizen avenger. Any such conclusion should first and foremost be historicised and contextualised, as is necessary for all reflections on the question of revenge (Marci, 2013). As with all films, the message is not set in stone but rather is constructed by multiple processes of reception and appropriation suggested by the narrative structures implied by the revenge paradigm scenario.

For Jean Carbonnier (2001), revenge is a sort of Jungian archetype, a primitive phenomenon never far below the surface. Philosophers, anthropologists, jurists and sociologists have all made extensive reference to narra-

tives in order to understand the ethical value and social function of revenge, as well as the means to go beyond it. They have turned to Shakespeare (who else?), to Ismail Kadare's novel *Broken April* or to dialect folk tales as Pigliaru did (Pigliaru, 1959), to give just three examples. But if we seek to understand the resurgence of the revenge archetype in contemporary societies, is it not a mistake to neglect cinema (but also television and social media)?

In this study, we have sought to demonstrate how vigilante films are not merely a commercial product for entertainment purposes but also an opportunity for discovery and reflection on the part of both the wider public and, from the point of view of popular criminology, the researcher. These films seem to confirm an ancient intuition, namely that feelings of hatred and revenge arise from resentment and a crisis of self-esteem (which applies to both the individual and the social group). They warn us of the excessive distance that exists between citizens and the institutions of the law, a distance that is also one of the primary causes of penal populism. The analysis of their narratives sheds light on the problematic contrast between rationality and emotions within which issues of justice and punishment are typically framed. They force us to go beyond the elitist attitude with which, as Solomon notes, "we dismiss as beneath contempt and unworthy of discussion those *powerful negative feelings* that in fact move most people and help form their political views and opinions on social issues" (2001, pp. 125, emphasis added). We don't like to admit it, but the average citizen, perhaps even today, closely resembles the monster-victims of these films, be they the arrogant engineer of *Street Law* or the rancorous old man of *An Average Little Man*.

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