



## A ‘Bottom-Up’ Approach to Transcultural Identities: *Petra* and Women Detectives in Italian TV Crime Drama

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An analysis of recent Italian crime series featuring female detectives as lead shows how Italian crime narratives have elaborated original representations of these figures, often in an ambivalent dialogue with other

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approaches, such as the portrayal of women detectives in Nordic Noir fictions and TV series. Our analysis is functional to conceiving European identity as a space of dialogue between different identity constructs, including gender, within the context of the crime genre. Moving from these premises, our aim is to analyse the Italian series *Petra*—a Sky original show in partnership with the production company Cattleya, first released in 2020—within the larger context of contemporary European TV crime productions, to investigate the recurrences, similarities, and differences in the construction, representation, and consumption of TV female detectives, through a conceptualization of what has been called ‘mediated cultural encounters’. Moreover, in the final part of the chapter we consider Rosi Braidotti’s claim of the necessity of a “post nationalistic understanding of cultural identity” as a framework of analysis for the inter-related issues of gender, multiculturalism, and European identities (Braidotti).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND KEY CONCEPTS

On the level of co-production and distribution agreements, TV productions may be read as *cultural encounters* insofar as they can favour transnational mobility, interactions between professionals in the creative industries from different countries, and, more generally, any kind of practical exchange between different production cultures. On the level of both representation and reception, TV series and the social discourses they inspire can be conceived as *mediated cultural encounters*, a notion that suggests a less tangible mobility of narrative models, visual styles, and social imagery (Bondebjerg et al.).

A key asset for European cultural integration, mediated cultural encounters allow “our own local reality and experience [to meet] other European realities” (Bondebjerg et al. 4) so we can experience something new and unexpected that can ‘alter the way one understands one’s own culture’ (Bondebjerg et al. 12). In this respect, mediated cultural encounters can contribute to what Trenz (2016) has called “banal Europeanization”, an expression used to emphasize how the perception of Europe as an imagined community in everyday life can be ‘more important than the grand narratives of identity floating around in both the EU and its individual nation states’ (Bondebjerg et al. 4). Given the massive popularity of the crime genre across Europe, TV crime dramas have an enormous potential in terms of cultural encounters: in fact, social commitment and entertainment can be variously combined in these narratives,

above all by virtue of the genre's distinctive narrative mechanisms, which allow the central themes and key challenges of contemporary European societies to be addressed in engaging ways.

Furthermore, this specific combination of commitment and entertainment becomes a crucial point when it comes to issues of cultural identity and specifically European identity, defined as the sense of belonging to a common cultural community stemming from the shared consumption and appreciation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. We argue that the idea of mediated cultural encounters allows the question of European identity to be addressed from a 'bottom-up' perspective. While, on an official level, the European Union's conventions, treaties, declarations, policies, and legislative and communication initiatives establish a set of shared values on which to base an idea of European identity that is constructed in a 'top-down' manner, mediated cultural encounters contribute to actualizing these values' enormous potential for aggregation and make us experience them in our daily lives.

This bottom-up approach to European identity is therefore obviously connected to the idea of 'banal Europeanization' and stresses how through mediated encounters "we experience diversity and difference, we get a new perspective on our own life and history, and perhaps we also discover that Europe is not just something over there in Brussels. Europe is actually us..." (Bondebjerg et al. 5). The notion of identity adopted throughout this contribution is 'inherently plural rather than unitary' (Connell 106). In other words, we subscribe to the idea that identity can only be understood as a network of diverse belongings referring to different categories, including gender, ethnicity, religion, politics, and many more social and cultural dimensions. A plural conception of identity emphasizes that multiple identities may connect people in various ways, foster their sense of common belonging, and stress their similarities, rather than their differences, thus discouraging the use of the concept of identity 'for claims made by individuals about who or what they are in terms of difference from other people' (Connell 107). Accordingly, European identity ought to be interpreted as a space of interaction and dialogue between multiple forms of identity, including cultural, social, national, local, and, indeed, gender identities—which are the focus of this contribution.

From a top-down perspective, gender equality is a fundamental EU value and a core EU objective. To achieve this crucial objective, a strong policy background promotes gender equality in all sectors of European societies. In conjunction with this growing political interest in gender

parity issues in political, economic, and cultural life, starting from the 2010s a large and increasingly growing number of studies have mapped, from a mainly quantitative perspective, the presence and representation of women in different working environments. The majority of these studies today highlight how gender issues can be better analysed within a broader framework aimed to promote diversity in terms of sexual orientation, race, age, religious and political orientation, socioeconomic background, disabilities, and other under-represented dimensions of identity.

From a bottom-up perspective and in the more specific context of TV crime dramas, the challenge of the woman detective, a traditionally problematic figure in the light of both gender and genre norms, and the different solutions proposed in different cultural contexts of the continent shed light on the formation of a plural and shared sense of belonging to a European 'imagined community' promoting diversity and gender equality.

In her *The TV Crime Drama*, Turnbull (2014) argues that 'the portrayal of women in the crime drama series has served as an index of women's changing role in society while providing a catalyst for debate, both in the popular press and in the field of feminist media studies'. Similarly, female characters in the crime genre allow for an understanding of how gender and genre norms are questioned and re-negotiated within the wider social context (Gledhill 2012; Hoffman 2016).

As Gates stated, 'key conventions of the female detective are established at the end of 1800. The problem with having a female heroine at the center of a detective story at this time was how to reconcile traditional notions of femininity with the perceived masculine demands of the detective plot' (14). Klein has addressed the problem of the intersection between gender and genre through the notion of 'script', underlining that "the script labeled detective in readers' minds did not naturally overlap or even mesh with the labeled woman" (Klein 4). Dresner has expanded this perspective, suggesting that the detective's qualities are traditionally and culturally coded as masculine, "either the hyper-rationality of the intellectual detective or the casual violence of the hardboiled detective" (1). In this respect, the "female investigator is presented as fundamentally flawed [and] serves as a marker of the incompatibility of the cultural categories of woman and detective" (Dresner 2).

Unless she is too young (Nancy Drew) or too old (Miss Marple or Jessica Fletcher) for romantic relationships, the woman detective is often single, divorced, or widowed—in any case, alone. However, as Reddy shows very well, "solitariness for a woman has far different meanings than

does solitariness for a man, as historically women have been defined by their relationships with men. [...] Solitariness of female detectives is not presented as a badge of honour but as a condition dictated by prevailing gender definitions” (Reddy 197–198). The lonely female investigator, unmarried and without a family, tends to be perceived—in fact like her criminal counterparts—as an ‘unnatural’, incomplete, or at least utterly unusual woman. As Gates points out: “There is something unnatural about the woman who denies the socially prescribed but perceived as natural roles of wife and mother” (15).

In recent years, ‘unnatural’ and ‘flawed’ female investigators of Nordic Noir like Sarah Lund (*The Killing*, DR, 2007–2012) and Saga Norén (*The Bridge*, SVT1 and DR1, 2011–2018) have continued to foster the irreducible ambiguity of the woman detective. On the one hand, both Sarah’s and Saga’s characters respond to stereotypes of female hyper-emotionality and openness with a masculinization of their personality, based on a cold and hyper-rational demeanour that has often been considered a male trait, especially in the context of investigative and police professions. On the other hand, both women are represented as dysfunctional in their private lives, incapable of nurturing meaningful sentimental relations and a gratifying social life, as if they were to be punished for their professional success with their inability to attain satisfying personal relations.

The massive success of Nordic Noir across Europe (Badley et al. 2020) has popularized these traits and affected the ways in which different cultural traditions in crime fiction nowadays address the figure of the female detective. A reference point for prestigious productions willing to travel across Europe, the Nordic model for representing fictional detective heroines has been variously transformed, re-located, and translated into different national and cultural contexts, thus proving that these figures continue to represent a great challenge to the norms and conventions of the crime genre, as well as an important key to interpreting how gender identities are socially re-negotiated in the European arena.

POLYPHONIC ADAPTATION AS MEDIATED TRANSCULTURAL  
ENCOUNTER: *PETRA*'S JOURNEY FROM BARCELONA  
TO GENOA

The production and text-based analysis we provide in this contribution, as an exemplary case study at both an international and national level, focuses on the TV crime drama *Petra*, a project developed by Cattleya and co-produced with Sky. On a national level, Sky and Cattleya are key players to understand the renewal processes of Italian TV. In addition to distributing in Italy the most interesting products of 'quality' or 'complex' TV (Mittell) developed abroad, especially by HBO, since 2008 Sky has been producing original content (the premium-based model; see Barra and Scaglioni 2021) that reworked traditional Italian TV dramas both at a narrative and thematic level, also introducing strongly innovative visual styles. Sky's first two original productions were crime series: the hit *Romanzo criminale—La serie* (2008–2010) based on Giancarlo De Cataldo's novel of the same name (also the basis for a 2005 feature film directed by Michele Placido), which proposed a classic all-male, team-based narrative model focused on criminals as anti-heroes; and *Quo vadis, baby?* (2008), based on a novel series by Grazia Verasani featuring an unconventional female private-eye, Giorgia Cantini.

Although *Romanzo criminale* set the model of some of the most popular male-led TV crime series of the following years, including global hits such as *Gomorrah* (Sky, 2014–2021) and *Suburra—La serie* (Netflix, 2017–2020), the Italian public broadcaster Rai responded to premium fiction with a particular emphasis on female points of view and female characters, especially in detective stories such as *Non uccidere* (2015–2018), *L'allieva* (2016–2020), *Imma Tataranni—Sostituto procuratore* (2019–), *Bella da morire* (2020), *Le indagini di Lolita Lobosco* (2021–), and *Blanca* (2022–) (D'Amelio, Re 2021). In this respect, *Thou Shalt Not Kill* (*Non uccidere*) stands out for its experimental character, achieved thanks to its pervasive references to Nordic Noir, from its visual style to the use of locations, from its gloomy atmosphere to the 'masculine' female protagonist, combined with the refusal to use comedy insertions.

More than ten years after *Quo vadis, baby?* with *Petra* Sky and Cattleya joined the trend of female-led detection stories affected by Nordic Noir elements already inaugurated by Rai in 2015. Interestingly, the series press book claims and emphasizes the centrality of the 'feminine' (to which the city of Genoa is also referred) in the entire production, that is, both in

terms of on-screen representation and behind-the-scenes employment of professional women:

Petra Delicato, non-conformist heroine.  
 Paola Cortellesi, extraordinary performer.  
 Maria Sole Tognazzi, the intelligence in direction.  
 Alicia Giménez-Bartlett, the inspiring bestseller.  
 Four women, four novels, four episodes, one new series: *Petra*.  
 And then let's add Genoa: a beautiful and difficult city, as a great theatrical diva who suddenly returns in a poignant role.<sup>1</sup>

On an international level, which is the main focus of our analysis, *Petra* represents a paradigmatic example of a transcultural as well as transmedia encounter. The character of Petra Delicado came to life in the successful crime novel series by Alicia Giménez Bartlett.<sup>2</sup> Already adapted for Spanish television in a controversial 'Madrid version' in 1999, the literary series has again been adapted in Italy more than 20 years later. In the migration from literature to television, temporal and spatial dimensions are particularly important.

In terms of both geographical representation and narrative models, the adaptation appears at first glance entirely internal to the poetics of Mediterranean Noir (Reynolds et al.; Turnaturi), capable of showing its richness and diversity (as in the dialogue between the Italian and Spanish narrative traditions) without leaving the sea but accepting the challenge of transferring the literary storyworld from Barcelona to Genoa. However, the spatial dimension ends up being further enlarged and enriched precisely because of the different context in which the Italian TV series is produced and in light of the temporal distance that separates it from Bartlett's first novels: as mentioned above, the changed context of production and reception means that the Mediterranean Sea metaphorically meets the North Sea, and that Nordic Noir impacts the TV version produced by Sky and Cattleya as a prestigious cultural model with an international vocation.

This transcultural encounter between the Mediterranean and the Nordic traditions is, on the one hand, facilitated by the literary source and, on the other, deliberately sought after in terms of production strategies. As producer Arianna De Chiara<sup>3</sup> explains:

We realised that we had to try and find our own way. On the one hand, we had to differentiate *Petra* from the typical Italian imagery, as it has been consolidated over the years through the series produced by Rai and Mediaset. At the same time, we didn't want to go directly towards the dark Scandinavian colours. This search for the right tone was done in parallel, both in writing and in the visual treatment.

One can clearly see the intention to align with an international production model both in the choice and mode of representation of the city of Genoa and in the adoption of a particular visual style.

We can understand the choice of location based on three main reasons. The first has to do with the analogies between Genoa and the city in which the novels are originally set. "If you have read the books", say the scriptwriters, "you know that Barcelona is a character which lives through its neighbourhoods and its social stratifications. It is a big city by the sea, a big port, a bustle of cultures and people".<sup>4</sup> As De Chiara explains, Genoa offered all these elements, and particularly a geomorphological and architectural (and therefore visual) 'verticality', as well as a historical, social, and cultural stratification. As director Maria Sole Tognazzi also points out, "Genoa is a city that, depending on the neighbourhood, allows you to narrate different moods".<sup>5</sup> The second reason lies in the use of Genoa to embody *Petra's* character and her escape from Rome, her city of origin in the Italian transposition. As the scriptwriters pointed out, "Genoa is also a 'shy' city, and it seemed perfect to represent *Petra's* character and her choice to 'stand aside'". Finally, Genoa appeared to be a lesser seen and less conventional location, able to dialogue with contemporary international models. "The need and desire to broaden narrative horizons" also meant a broadening of "visual horizons" (De Chiara) that made it necessary to "break away from the reference to Montalbano, therefore Sicily was a 'taboo area". Production and location manager Michele Ottaggio confirms: "We wanted to rule out any Southern city because we wanted a slightly more Northern setting, a city with an industrial past, with a slightly more European atmosphere".<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, a location's atmosphere and communicative power cannot be separated from the way it is represented. On the one hand, the scriptwriters claim to have "never imagined a sunny TV series, which is the stereotype of Italy in the world. Our references have always been to the North: [...] the light in *Petra* is a Northern light, not a Southern light, and it corresponds perfectly to the type of character and the type of story". On



the other hand, they recognize the contribution of Tognazzi's visual style, which was able to visually represent that kind of atmosphere, and her own specific authorial style, which gives the series a European character because it conveys a particular 'poetics'. As Tognazzi explained:

We watch TV series from other countries. Sometimes we are fascinated by the very fact that they come from abroad, it almost becomes an element of attraction, because it allows you to travel, which is fiction's great value. [...] Exportability should not influence you, you should not shoot having a given country as a target in mind. I knew that Genoa would be seen in many parts of the world, and this was a responsibility, but I had in mind how I wanted to tell and represent it. I didn't want to deliver a postcard-like Genoa, but I wanted to tell it as if it were a character, and a character to all intents and purposes.

On closer examination, Genoa is both similar to and different from Petra's character. For example, it takes on bright tones when the wide urban views accompany Petra's journey from home to the police station. Contrastingly, the environments in which Petra lives and works have dark, aseptic tones and stand out as geometric and 'angular' like her personality.

A challenging catalyst for transcultural exchange already present in the literary source was the character of Petra, whose characteristics fall perfectly within the trend recently made so popular by Nordic Noir: the tale of an independent female investigator, who does a job she loves, refusing to conform to social stereotypes and deciding freely on her own life. "With regard to female characters, TV series have been forerunners", says Tognazzi, "not only foreign series, but Italian ones as well, particularly in the crime genre and mainstream TV, certainly not in films. It is as if TV shows opened a new trend of more free, unconventional, and politically incorrect female protagonists".

The scriptwriters mention that Giménez Bartlett once described Petra as an "archetype of a moment in a woman's life": like many other protagonists of contemporary European crime, Petra is a woman caught "in the arc of an inner revolution", and for this reason she is particularly problematic, tough, distrustful, and solitary. The extraordinary strength of this character type lies in the fact that, if it is grasped and represented in all its complexity, it can detach itself from its original spatial-temporal coordinates but then manage to function again as a 'mediator' and a

fundamental key to enter new spatial-temporal dimensions. The main principle here is that of the 'situated' character, although the specific territory may change. The scriptwriters conclude: "The challenge was to provide [the character with] a mood. [In this way] the character's identity won out over the specific places". Moreover, the subordination of place to the identity of characters and their relationships belongs to Giménez Bartlett's poetics:

When I write detective novels, the location is functional to the characters. Depending on the neighbourhood in which the events take place, you have to consider the social characteristics of that neighbourhood. [...] I do relatively little research on locations. I don't do like those writers who begin their novels in such a way that you can go and visit the places they write about. For example, when I need a place that doesn't exist, I create it, I position it, and that's all. And if any of my readers go looking for this specific bookshop or bar, they will probably be disappointed. [...] First comes the story, and then comes reality. [...] What works really well for me is auditory memory. [...] I think this is why I really like writing dialogues and I hate descriptions. I prefer not to be specific about places. [...] I prefer impressionistic descriptions [...]. I think this is one of the most innovative changes in the modern novel compared to the nineteenth-century novel, which reproduced houses and landscapes in quite exasperating detail (Casavella et al. 34).<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that Petra's character presents distinctive and problematizing features with respect to the Nordic model, which are expressed through irony, which is crucial in both the novels and the Italian series, as well as through Petra's relationship with vice-inspector Fermín Garzón (Antonio Monte in the Italian adaptation): it is mainly through this relationship that we perceive Petra's individual traits as 'anomalies' and 'flaws', but it is always through it that these anomalies are progressively put into a different perspective and that Garzón/Monte's supposed 'normality' is questioned.

We argue that the novels and the Italian TV series share a polyphonic approach, in the Bakhtinian sense of the term (Bakhtin 1984), whereby identities are constructed and reconstructed only in relation to another's gaze. The dialogue between different 'voices' and 'points of view' is first and foremost an end, rather than a means, and not only takes place between characters, but within each character's consciousness. This

polyphonic nature amplifies the power and richness of these crime narratives as 'mediated cultural encounters'.

Alternatively defined as feminist, postfeminist, or anti-feminist, Petra's character is difficult to pin down.<sup>8</sup> Intolerant of labels and heedless of other people's judgement, she is mostly defined by her ability to overturn those social conventions which she cannot suppress to her own advantage. The situations Petra explicitly refers to as "taking advantage of the fact of being a woman" are essentially the moments in which, in questioning the suspects of the sexual assaults she is investigating in the novel *Death Rites*, she reverses expectations and assumes a controlling role and an attitude of prevarication, if not of open and harsh humiliation, by means of a violent and scurrilous language that scandalizes, at least initially, her male colleague. In many other cases, the inversion of masculine and feminine traits takes place within her relationship with Garzón/Antonio. This inversion of gender roles, as well as of the expectations associated with them, entirely shapes *Death Rites* starting with the interrogation of the first victim of rape, whom Petra confronts coldly and uneasily, as opposed to her subordinate, who instead approaches her with empathy and humanity.

According to Viñals (2014), Petra acts in a postfeminist environment since she does not fight for women's rights but for her rights as an individual. Petra denounces gender as a socio-historical role, the same way she denounces all social conventions. However, a postfeminist reading of *Petra* risks overlooking some other central aspects and reducing its complexity. As the author states in the Sky promo *Una giornata con Alicia Giménez Bartlett*, "the relationship between Petra and Garzón's different social classes is as important as their relationship as a man and a woman". Petra is a well-off, educated woman of middle-class extraction; Garzón is uneducated and of working-class extraction. Furthermore, Garzón is a policeman close to retirement with much experience; Petra is a forty-year-old woman who has practised law for a long time and has no experience outside the documentation department of the police force. All these elements determine their relationship and behaviour, which cannot be reduced only to gender issues because these do not exhaust the characters' complex and stratified identities. Finally, these complex and plural identities are not stable. They change over time and, above all, through the relationships established between the characters. The ironic and critical reflection on identity continues to move between the unmasking of the stereotype and the recognition of the 'social inevitability' of the stereotype.

At the beginning of their relationship, Petra herself is the bearer of prejudices and stereotypes in her harsh judgement of Garzón/Monte's conformism and moralism. Through her confrontation with Garzón/Monte, she realizes that she cannot escape prejudice and changes her point of view about her colleague. In the novel, what brings them closer is the discriminatory accusation made by the father of a rape victim: "A woman and an old man, is that all the police have to offer to us citizens?" A little further on, it is Petra herself who bitterly identifies with the stereotypes: "We were ridiculous, incompetent, pathetic: the fat vice-inspector and the 40-year-old woman claiming women's rights. A farcical picture!" The line is slightly modified in the Italian TV adaptation, and both the feminist slant and the reference to the vice-inspector's size are removed. When Petra insinuates that he doesn't like having a woman as his boss, Monte justifies himself by explaining that it's only because this is the first time for him. Petra sarcastically retorts: "An archivist and a policeman nearing retirement won't last long, anyway".

As the 1990s feminist attitude is generally softened in the adaptation, the dialectic between the characters is broadened to include other aspects and deepen the characters' private lives. For example, the dialectic on the theme of food is emphasized, and Monte is entrusted with the typical affective relationship with the culinary world that has so much relevance in the Mediterranean detective fiction tradition:

- Look inspector, let's get one thing straight, I'm not a sandwich person. For me, lunch is a hot dish, and if appropriate a glass of wine.
- No... Let's get one thing straight, vice-inspector: an inspection here at Samarcanda had to be carried out, so we might as well put a sandwich in the middle of it, but... The hot dish, you have your wife cook it in the evening.
- My wife is dead. And I live in an apartment building.
- Then you'll have to make it yourself.<sup>9</sup>

On the occasion of a dinner party, Monte surprises Petra twice, challenges her preconceptions, and proves he can stand up to her in terms of irony and cynicism. The first time is when Petra invites him to accompany her to a dinner with her first ex-husband, and he comments:

- Well, you hang out with your ex-husbands a lot.
- They're like grease on your hands. It never goes away.

- What's that got to do with me?
- I don't want to go alone. So, are you coming?
- That depends.
- On what?
- On the restaurant.<sup>10</sup>

The second time, during dinner, is a dialogue with her ex-husband, freely revised from the novel:

- Do you know what kind of woman Petra was before? A successful lawyer, ambitious, refined, she never went to bed without a chilled glass of champagne. In the kitchen, of course, she didn't get her hands dirty, in conversation she was always half a tone below the others, never a word out of place.
- And do you know what kind of woman Petra is now? See that bruise? Do you know how she got it? Collusion with a serial rapist. Because our Petra moves between whores and gangsters as if they were family friends. Not to mention certain interrogations, such as the other day, for example, when she put a convicted felon on his ass [...] all topped off with a spectacular vernacular... I'm afraid she's still the same in the kitchen, but otherwise, how can you not love her? She's such a delight to be with.

In the adaptation, however, it is especially Petra who shocks Monte, upsetting his habits, as if she could drag him along with her in that 'arc of inner revolution' that she has chosen to undertake. When, speaking of happiness, Petra seems to take it for granted that Antonio has experienced this feeling during the many years spent with his wife, he comments: "I used to think thought so... Now I don't know anymore". And in the dialogue at Samarcanda café that marks the conclusion of the case, Antonio alludes to his intention to be bribed in a smuggling case he has investigated (a free interpolation compared to the novel):

- Look, you've got the wrong idea about me... I also have a... dark side...
- What can I say? I hope you've at least got a lot of money out of that.
- Just enough to change life. You see, Petra, since I've met you, I've found I've wasted a lot of time. You've had two marriages, two jobs... Would you be in a relationship with me?
- Vice-inspector! What's the proposal?

- No no no... You don't understand. No, we're both fine on our own. It's just that if I had to choose someone to have a chat with, I'd choose you.
- Thank you, Antonio, I'm flattered. But... I've already changed enough. But it was nice working with you.
- For me too.<sup>11</sup>

### PETRA AS FEMINIST PALIMPSEST

As already mentioned in the section “Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts”, the choice of a female detective in the crime genre—which presents many conservative elements—implies certain complications in the gender-based genre conventions, and may raise the question of how feminist the text can actually be held to be. As Klein states, the formula of detective fiction rejects feminist change entirely, as the detective is traditionally a male loner who is in charge of restoring the status quo disrupted by criminals, while the feminist movement—especially the radical one—demands social changes and new attitudes in human interactions. Thus, Klein claims that “the feminist detective winds up supporting the existing system which oppresses women, when she re-established the ordered status quo” (201). Alison Littler reinforces the claim stating that

If, for example, ‘feminist’ is used in a liberal-humanist-independent career-woman-in-control-of-her-own-life sense, then most certainly the recent series of women private eyes are feminist. If, however, ‘feminist’ refers to a woman deconstructing phallogocentric ideologies wherever they are naturalized and structured into social, cultural and political practices, then a feminist private eye is a contradiction in terms (133).

This contradiction between feminist ideals and the detectives’ behaviour seems irresolvable. However, what happens when the female detective openly acts in defiance of the existing system and the perceived ‘manliness’ of the crime genre? Is it possible for feminism and the crime formula to ever coexist? We think that the flourishing of female detectives in recent TV crime series can offer a clue to answer this question by providing a better understanding of the complexity of gender relations and their connection to power and injustice in a European geopolitical and cultural setting.

The literary character of Petra Delicado has been hailed as a contemporary and highly original feminist institutional detective in a male-dominated

field (the police) and a predominantly patriarchal country (Spain), in which feminist instances still clash with deep, entrenched forms of Latin machismo and sexism. While never calling herself a feminist, Petra is often at odds with traditional, conservative gender norms: she refuses to have children, divorces two times, and rejects domesticity. Petra is thus best described as having “feminist inclinations without explicitly defining herself that way” (Klein 202).

Gimenez Bartlett’s character has even been given her own autobiography, *Sin muertos*, published in 2021, in which the author sheds light on her complex feminism, firmly setting Petra as a product of changing times in 1970s Spain. Through her autobiography we learn that Petra, born in the 1950s and a young woman in the 1970s and 1980s, is torn between the values she grew up with, associated with traditional feminine conditions such as marriage and motherhood, and the social changes brought by the 1970s, with their re-definition of gender roles and women’s place in society.

Petra is a complex character with respect to both gender and genre norms. As a police inspector, she is relegated to office duties until she is given her first investigation, merely due to shortage of staff. While she proves herself in the field and leaves office duties at the end of the first book, she remains an unusual police inspector, too educated, too rich and bourgeois to really belong to the police homicide team, too much of a loner for the male-dominated camaraderie, too independent to fit into the stereotypical gender norms entrenched in the Spanish society. The issue of class—intertwined with gender—is indeed explored in the books and takes centre stage in the autobiography. Petra belongs to the bourgeoisie and has a conflictual relationship with some of the gendered requirements of her class, such as marriage and motherhood, rejecting the latter but accepting the former.

Petra’s character in the Italian TV series retains most of the characteristics of her counterpart in the books, in particular the complex relationship with the gender norms that are perceived as ‘natural’ for a woman within her social context and her positioning as a bourgeois woman in a male working-class-dominated field. This complex and often ambiguous attitude toward what it means to be a woman allows the series to avoid not only traditional gender clichés but also new stereotypes, such as the hyper-masculine female detective. This complexity is shared by other female detectives of recent Italian TV productions, such as Eva Cantini in *Bella da Morire* and Imma Tataranni and Lolita Lobosco in the namesake shows.

In the opening sequence of *Petra*'s first episode, Petra is presented as a figure at odds with basic conservative understandings not only of womanhood, but of sociality at large. We first see a closeup of her finger kicking a cricket on her cup, then another closeup of her back, and finally a long take of her sitting on the couch, alone, drinking a cup of tea. A courier arrives with a package, Petra greets him with a few words, and lets him in. The courier looks around the apartment, which is filled with unopened boxes. The courier thus assumes that Petra has just moved in, but she replies she has been living there for two years. The minimalist apartment, the carelessness of the unopened boxes, and the attitude of Petra—laconic, nonplussed, cigarette to her lips—depict a woman who refuses both domesticity and attachment. Through the figure of the curious courier we also find out that the crickets in the house are actually food for her pet spider. This detail, which wasn't there in the books, serves to represent Petra's conscious effort to reject the qualities that are commonly attributed to women, such as sweetness, dependency, emotionality, and care. Later on, Petra indeed confesses to her colleague Antonio Monte that, after two failed marriages, her spider is her longest and best relationship of her whole life, as a spider "doesn't ask for anything, doesn't need anything".

In our interview with director Maria Sole Tognazzi, she explained that while the crime genre and the serial format were both complete novelties for her, the character of Petra was already familiar, as it reminded her of other female characters she had moulded in her previous filmography. For instance, she said that Petra's self-sufficiency and independence and her desire to live alone reminded her of Irene, the character played by Margherita Buy in her film *Viaggio sola* (2013). Both women are in their forties, with a demanding yet satisfying job; they both have chosen to live without a partner or children and are self-supporting and content with their lives. In *Viaggio sola*, Irene does question her life choices at some point, but in the end she recovers her confidence in the life she has chosen for herself. In the *Petra* series, the protagonist's life choices are initially questioned by her colleague Antonio Monte, who finds that her lifestyle is not suitable for a woman. In Tognazzi's words, it is crucial in today's media productions to support representations of independent women who are happy in their lives even without partners or family, to emphasize that women do not need to be in a relationship to be fulfilled. Indeed, Tognazzi claims that the appeal of Petra's character lies in her willingness to make her own decisions about her life, even if they are unconventional and not always aligned with societal conventions, such as choosing to



divorce multiple times, to live alone, and to be emotionally self-sufficient.

In the comments section of Sky's *Petra* Facebook page, the majority of viewers declared to like both Antonio Pennacchi's (Antonio Monte) and Paola Cortellesi's acting and praised both the cinematography and the location, acknowledging Genoa as an unusual yet fascinating choice:

Beautiful. Congratulations to Tognazzi. And kudos to Cortellesi, every role she plays is flawless.

A beautiful production. Paola Cortellesi confirms to be very good. Then Genoa: a beautiful city.

It enraptures you, I always imagined Cortellesi as a comic actress, but in this role, rough, raw, she's really good, even her colleague, Andrea Pennacchi, really good.

Congratulations to the director, I think the casting is really appropriate. Paola Cortellesi finally plays her part.

Cortellesi and Pennacchi are very good. The series is a bit noir, I think it reflects the books beautiful settings with engaging atmospheres and realist dialogues, I really liked both Cortellesi and Pennacchi.

However, the construction of the character itself is a matter of controversy, with some commenters praising the depiction of an interesting woman, complex and difficult, and others claiming she is too cold and bidimensional.

If this is the evolution of a woman, it is better to have the 1950s model. Being emancipated does not mean being cold, vulgar, arid, and mimicking men. This character is all wrong and over all already outdated. Cortellesi was not the right choice because she was too identifiable with a certain type of cinema and humour.

I have yet to understand where the protagonist's coldness comes from, in my opinion it hides fragility. I had the feeling that her personality comes from the past, the care with which she keeps certain things, such as the dog's toy... there is something else in *Petra*, but as always we only focus on the appearance.

Will we find out what has made her so unaffectionate? What has happened before????

I'm glad to have seen beautiful images of Genoa, but I do not like the plot and I find the personality of *Petra* too vulgar and cold.

Viewers mostly criticize Petra's extreme coldness, puzzling over the reasons for a behaviour that seems almost pathological, but also finding references to other female detectives popularized by the Nordic Noir, such as Saga Norén in *The Bridge* or Ellie Miller in *Broadchurch*.

Although Petra is depicted as tough and ironic in the books, the TV series emphasizes the unlikable traits of the character. 'Unlikable' is a term that Roxanne Gay attributes to complicated female characters in literature and media, and which underlines their refusal to 'play the part' of the nice girl (Gay 2014: 94). Unlikable and difficult women have been at the forefront of TV productions in the last decade, as seen in all genres from crime to drama to comedy, such as in *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019), *Fleabag* (Amazon, 2013–2019), *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2019–), and *The Queen's Gambit* (Netflix, 2020).

According to Pinedo, a new wave of feminist politics has indeed focused on the notion of 'difficult women', a term moulded on Brett Martin's analysis of 'difficult men' in his study of the anti-heroic protagonists of recent complex televisual narratives (Pinedo 2019: 2). Unlike the extremely bad, immoral behaviour of their male counterparts—for instance, drug dealing and murders in *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013) and *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–2022), however, the attributes associated with being a difficult woman—such as not smiling, cold demeanour, brusque manners, straightforwardness, and an active sexual life—would barely register as bad in a male (Pinedo 2019: 2). On the contrary, when seen in a woman these same behaviours are generally considered to be the result of abnormalities or pathologies and often explained as consequences of trauma, mental illness, or even neurological disorders (Dall'Asta 2021), such as Saga Norén's autism or, in our case, Petra's mysterious traumatic past, which left her wary of emotional bonds and sentimental relationships.

Despite her detached behaviour, Petra does form lasting attachments: in the books, she goes on to marry for the third time and becomes a step-mother for her husband's four children. In the series, Petra's solitude and independence give space to the development of her unexpected friendship with Antonio/Fermín, creating the conditions for the emergence of an odd couple in which their two respective personalities are balanced in an interesting way.

As mentioned above, Petra and Antonio come from two opposite worlds: working class and conservative the older Fermin, bourgeois and progressive the younger Petra. However, their friendship allows for a gender reversal that is both an ironic take on and a critique of rigid views of

gender relationships. For instance, while being a product of his working-class, male-centred environment, Antonio seems to be more in tune with his emotions and shows a 'feminine' side by often appearing hopelessly romantic and a caring, trustful person; Petra, on the other hand, beyond her 'in control' attitude, is clearly in denial about her feelings and emotions.

Let's consider again Petra's and Antonio's opposite styles of interrogation of the young girl who has been raped in the first episode. Petra is hasty and blunt; seemingly unmoved by the victim's plight, she treats her without compassion. Antonio is instead sympathetic, so much so that he offers her something to drink and comforts her before asking questions. Not only does this narrative structure allow for the exposure of the performativity of gender roles, but it enables wider reflection on what it means to be a woman, and a man, in our contemporary times, beyond reductionist, essentialist views of womanhood and manhood. Another question explored through the relationship between Petra and Antonio is their different attitudes towards sex. While Antonio is a romantic who does not understand sex without love, Petra has no problem in pursuing casual sex and is amused by Antonio's embarrassment. While the sexual promiscuity of female characters has often been linked to deviancy and trauma, for example in the construction of the femme fatale character type in the noir genre, in the case of Petra this behaviour is normalized and even considered physiologically necessary.

Is such a 'gender swap' a sufficient element to label a series and its protagonist as feminist? Obviously not, but the representation of women who explicitly talk about sexual pleasure and casual sex without being stereotyped as prostitutes, nymphomaniacs, or femme fatales is still very rare, especially on Italian TV, and can thus be considered a step forward towards a new imagination of female desire and affectivity beyond stigmatization and guilt, in line with recent representations of female sexuality in international crime series, such as those seen in *The Fall* (BBC Two, 2012–2015), *Mare of Easttown* (HBO, 2021), or even the aforementioned Italian mini-series *Bella da morire*.

Sky's *Petra* can thus be regarded as a palimpsest in which the complex 1990s feminism of the books is mixed with the influence of contemporary Nordic Noir TV heroines. Indeed, viewers' comments on the Sky Original's Facebook page underline that the series' heroine doesn't completely adhere to the literary character and rather brings to mind the female detectives of *Broadchurch* and *The Bridge*, especially in relation to the protagonist's harsh attitude and independent behaviour:

Cortellesi's character reminds me of the female detective in the series *The Bridge*, the original Swedish.

I think the inspiration of *Petra* is the British crime series *Broadchurch*.

Moreover, the cinematography shows Genoa as a Nordic city, immersed in a cold, dark light, with a shy and restrained atmosphere which echoes *Petra*'s self-imposed solitude and surliness. The parallel between the character and the location—which, as already noted, is often defined in 'feminine' terms—emphasizes both the centrality of a new, complex female imagery in recent Italian crime TV productions, mediated through the Nordic Noir influence, and the aim to update the geographical characteristics of the Mediterranean Noir with the choice of unusual, somewhat peripheral locations.

## CONCLUSION

In her lecture 'Gender and Europe', feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti highlights the need for new images that would help us move towards a post-nationalistic understanding of cultural identity, one that "adequately reflects the social realities which we are already experiencing, of a post-nationalistic Europe" (Braidotti 10). Following Braidotti's invitation, we argue that *Petra* constructs a 'new social imaginary' of European TV crime production, through a reimagining of mediated cultural encounters as pathways for a negotiation between North and South as well as between different models of femininity, both transculturally and across time. The complexity and ambiguity of *Petra*'s character signal that she inhabits multiple identity positions (woman, police officer, Italian, European), at the same time questioning what it means to have so many different identities.

Contemporary TV crime dramas mobilize popular desire and imagination across Europe thanks to their transnational circulation and reception, which not only foster the process of 'banal Europeanization' but also offer an opportunity for "a process of transformation of identities parallel to the processes of change in Europe" (Braidotti 17). The relatively new phenomenon of female-led television crime dramas participates in this process by offering positive representations that challenge stereotypical images of both gender relations and national landscapes and culture, thus promoting a novel transnational as well as post-nationalistic sense of European identity through cultural and social imagery.

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## NOTES

1. Nils Hartmann, Senior Director Original Productions, Sky Italia (courtesy of Cattleya). All translations from Italian and Spanish have been made by the authors.
2. The first book, *Ritos de muerte*, was published in Spain in 1996, translated into Italian in 2002 (*Riti di morte*) and into English in 2008 (*Death Rites*).
3. Online interview, 10 December 2020.
4. Online interview with Furio Andreotti, Giulia Calenda, and Ilaria Macchia, 10 December 2020.
5. Online interview, 30 November 2020.
6. Online interview, 7 December 2020.
7. Cf. also King (2017) and Tirone (2019).
8. Cf. also Godsland (2002), Thompson-Casado (2002), Yang (2010), Venkataraman (2010), and Tirone (2018).
9. *Petra*, 1x01, *Riti di morte*.
10. Ivi.
11. Ivi.

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