

# The Stereotypical Gag in Carlo Emilio Gadda's and Pietro Germi's Detective Stories

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Résumé de l'article

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# THE STEREOTYPICAL GAG IN CARLO EMILIO GADDA'S AND PIETRO GERMI'S DETECTIVE STORIES

MARA SANTI AND GUYLIAN NEMEGER

*Abstract:* This article analyzes two comic incidents portrayed in Gadda's *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* and its adaptation *The Facts of Murder* by Pietro Germi. We argue that the inclusion of what we term 'stereotypical gags' in the detective novel functions as a modernist device that brings about a distancing of the audience and acts to distort the boundaries of genre. We show how the stereotypical gag both foregrounds and backgrounds the authorial humorous agency and results in satire and parody, respectively. In the first case, the authorial agency explicitly endorses humorous clichés and mocks along with the audience's societal conventions. In the second case, humour generates a less obvious incongruity with respect to the discourse of the genre, resulting in parody through which the authorial agency mocks the audience and its trust in the values of the traditional detective story.

## Introduction

This paper analyzes two short standalone comedic pieces that are among the founding works of the Italian literary and cinematographic tradition of the detective story:<sup>1</sup> Carlo Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (*That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, 1946–1957)<sup>2</sup> and its film adaptation *Un maledetto imbroglio* (*The Facts of Murder*, 1959) directed by Pietro Germi. The high regard in which Gadda is held by literary scholars has, for quite a long time,

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<sup>1</sup> On Italian crime fiction see Rambelli; Carloni; Pirani et al.; Crovi; Pistelli; Cicioni and Di Ciolla; Pieri.

<sup>2</sup> *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* by Carlo Emilio Gadda was published as an incomplete version in the journal *Letteratura* in 1946 and then as an unabridged version by Garzanti in 1957.

obstructed a proper acknowledgment of the relevance of both detective stories within the history of the genre. This tendency has recently been redirected by scholars who, departing from the logic of the palimpsest, consider both works as artistic products in their own right.<sup>3</sup> Following this recent trend, we investigate the use of short standalone comedic sequences in topical passages of the detective plot as a so far overlooked analogy between the two works. In particular, we focus on two passages where ‘stereotypical gags’ are integrated in the plot. By stereotypical gags we mean brief sequences of self-contained and trivial humour which are embedded in the main plot but do not affect its development, and which trigger no emotional involvement in the audience. Although they do not interrupt the overarching plot from a narrative point of view, those gags add an authorial comment to the storyline. Since gags are largely based on clichés, which bring the audience to laughter because they recall actions and behaviors that are comical within a well-established social convention, we argue that the perception of stereotypical humour in a non-humorous context proves to be particularly productive (or rather disruptive) when the given context is that of the detective novel. Indeed, when the gag is embedded in a non-humorous context, as in our case study, it determines how funny the storyline turns out to be (D’haeyere 24).

Because of the variety of approaches in humour studies, the complexity of the authors’ poetics and their evolution in time, we single out just one humoristic feature, rather than aiming for a general discussion of Gadda and Germi’s humour.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Vandaele’s emotive-intentionalist approach to narrative humour, we discuss how the stereotypical gag sets in motion both satire and parody, and we address the disruptive power of modernist laughter with respect to the detective novel genre in Gadda’s and Germi’s works (Vandaele, “Narrative Humour (I)” and “Narrative Humour (II)”).

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<sup>3</sup> See Sesti; Ricci, ‘*Awful mess*’ and “*Pasticciaccio* di Gadda;” Palumbo; Santi, *Quer pasticciaccio*. On the relation between *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* and *The Facts of Murder* see also: Gutowski; Santi, “Palazzo” and “*Maledetto imbroglio*;” Codelli. On genre and adaptation see also Hutcheon and O’Flynn.

<sup>4</sup> Humour in Gadda’s work has been studied extensively; see at least: Roscioni; Bonalumi; Pedullà; Papponetti; Ciccarelli; Donnarumma *Gadda: romanzo e pastiche* and “Maschere della violenza;” Godioli, *Scemenza* and *Laughter*. Germi’s humour has been studied only with reference to the films released after *The Facts of Murder*, when Germi delivers some of the masterpieces of the Comedy Italian Style genre; see at least Sesti; Grande; Fournier Lanzoni; Comand; Leclerc-Dafol.

### The facts of laughter

The story invented by Gadda and adapted by Germi can be summarized as follows: in an upper middleclass flat in Rome, a robbery is committed. A few days later, the landlady of the flat opposite is killed. The plot follows the double investigation of the two interconnected crimes. The investigators solve the robbery first, then go on to crack the murder case.

In Germi, the gag is placed at the end of the openings credits when the initial shot reveals an old, very elegant apartment building. Suddenly a gunshot pierces the calm and sunny day, with voices screaming “Thief!”, “Police!”, “Stop him!”, “Catch him!” and residents appearing on the stairs and at the windows.<sup>5</sup> The thief speeds down the stairs and flees through the streets whilst someone tries in vain to catch him (*Facts* 00:02:24–46). The entire sequence is tense and dramatic, and yet, there is also humour. The first resident who chases the thief is a distinguished old man (interpreted by Antonio Acquà): he rushes out of his apartment in his dressing gown, brandishing a firearm and fires warning shots into the air. When he aims his pistol at the ceiling above the staircase, the man in turn receives a shower of plaster on his head. The sequence ends with the appearance of the frightened residents who crowd around the shocked robbed neighbor (*Facts* 00:02:46–03:04).

In other words, *The Facts of Murder* opens with a dramatic event, namely the criminal violation of the security of the house, and sets up its first main theme, that is, the helpless fear of the residents of a house that has been targeted by a criminal. In this dramatic context, a character makes a complete fool of himself as he tries to protect his threatened community. Despite the circumstances, the spectator giggles at this old man brushing plaster off his hair. After this gag, the character continues to be the object of laughter in the sequence that follows: upon arriving at the scene of the crime, one of the police officers (brigadier Oreste, interpreted by Silla Bettini) sees the old man gesticulating with the pistol still in his hand. Brigadier Oreste addresses the old man by saying “Calm down granddad! Do you have a license for that?” and subsequently disarms him. Hereupon the man is outraged and replies: “How dare you? I am General Pomilia!” The officer responds with a slightly sarcastic “Um, well, then” and hands over the weapon (00:03:30–00:03:40).

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated Italian quotations have been translated by the authors of the paper.

In Gadda's *That Awful Mess*, the gag is located in the ninth chapter, in the sequence where the stolen property is found and recovered, the thief's accomplice is arrested and the thief's identity is revealed. The sequence unfolds as follows: a young private in the military police, nicknamed both as Cocullo and Farafilio, searches the modest house of a girl under the watchful eye of Pestalozzi his superior. In a bedside cabinet, Cocullo/Farafilio finds a heavy chamber pot that Pestalozzi orders him to pick up and bring to him, suspecting that the stolen goods are hidden in there. Although suspense is here at its peak and the narrative reaches an emotional climax as the solution of the first mystery approaches, the gravity of the moment is tainted by humour. Indeed, in the effort to pick up the chamber pot, Cocullo/Farafilio emits an inappropriate noise:

"Stop! You take it!" he ordered Cocullo. The girl stood up. The trusty Farafilio bent down. He introduced both hands into the cabinet: to seize, with the one, the brimming chamber pot by the handle, to press it respectfully from the opposite side with the palm of the other, as if caressing its kindness, so rotund on the opposite and non-handled hemisphere. And he extracted it from the tabernacle (and it was heavy as it rarely had been) in the position proper to the user, or even to the owner, who prepares at night to employ it for its lower purpose. [...] Too scarce, then, for the almost boyish opulence of the brave soldier, the olive-drab tunic freed for public view his posterior rotundities, properly covered with cloth of the same color. Emphasized by the crouching position, they seemed to emulate and to surpass completely the smooth rotundities of the pot, as if a pump had swollen them, the kind on a tripod, that bicycle mechanics have. The incredible fullness was about to burst — so it appeared — the median rear seam of the trousers: which seemed, instead, only to loosen, in the taut zigzag of a line of reluctant thread, of a blue-green color, darker than the green of the cloth. The seam being pressed beyond its capacity, the breaking point was not reached. A sharp shot re-echoed in the room instead. No: it wasn't a revolver's bullet. Farafilio, poor boy, very probably blushed, with that patchy manner of blushing that he had, in his good, but severe face. Crouched as he was, his face against the commode and the pot in his arms, the purple did not spread. The humble duty had expressed itself: that was all: certain postures favor

certain nomenclatures, as if eliciting the sound from the very sources of the same. The girl remained silent, amorphous. The corporal's brow became clouded: in the silence (Gadda 317–318).

The comic function of the character is clear in the whole passage, although the scatological gag surprises the reader when the sequence's gravity reaches its peak. Both gags do not go unnoticed, yet their impact on the detective plot and their innovative potential have been overlooked. This happened mainly because scholars' attention has been drawn by Gadda's and Germi's most evident innovations to the detective story genre in relation to the storyline of the murder. In Gadda the investigator solves the case, but the author does not reveal the murderer's identity. Germi's solution seems more traditional, because the guilty party is identified and prosecuted. And yet, when the arrest is made, the film takes an unexpectedly bitter tone, so much so that even the investigator seems to run away from the consequences of his actions (Deriu 73). Both endings frustrate the audience's expectations, while the investigation of the robbery seems to conform to the more traditional rules of the genre. Yet, as we look at the stereotypical gag, this overlooked narrative aspect turns out to be more subversive with respect to the audience's expectations and to the genre's conventions than noticed so far.

### **The stereotypical gag: a theoretical framework**

A detective novel, as any other genre, triggers a cluster of expectations from the audience. When Gadda and Germi publish and release their works, the traditional narrative pattern of 'crime-detection-solution' and the positivistic trust in rational investigation, which is typical of the golden age crime novel,<sup>6</sup> still prevail in mainstream detective novels.<sup>7</sup> Detection reassures the bourgeois audience that the

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<sup>6</sup> Although the precise periodization of the golden age of crime novels is controversial, its flourishing can roughly be placed between the two world wars. Crime stories of the nineteenth century and of the golden age mainly focus on detectives gifted with uncommon analytical skills and mirror the positivistic confidence in rational capability to explain human action. The 'clue-puzzle' of the golden age is defined by the presence of multiple suspects, the fair play with the reader who "must be informed of each clue that the detective sees" (Knight 79) and, above all, rational circumstantial detection.

<sup>7</sup> In the nineteenth century, the development of national law enforcements in Western societies attracts the attention of novelists who begin to center their narrations on professional detectives within police corps. As such, the policeman-hero takes the field by the second half of the

murder is “an offence against the established order” (Aird 185) and conveys a sentiment of hope that the dark side of society, which manifests itself in criminal transgression of social boundaries, can be controlled. This traditional narrative pattern assumes that the audience experiences specific moral and emotional states, such as disdain and indignation toward crime and criminals, empathy toward the characters — in particular the victims and detectives — and relief when justice is achieved. Yet, when the narration infringes the genre’s conventions, it can frustrate both the audience’s expectations and their moral/emotional reactions. In what follows, we analyze how this happens when the stereotypical gag, which is a seemingly minor device, is inserted in topical passages of the detective novel’s narrative.

In our analysis we draw on Vandaele’s emotive-intentionalist description of narrative humour as “the production and/or exploitation of incongruity and superiority relations among the participants [...] of narrative texts: author, narrator, reader/spectator, character” (Vandaele, “Narrative Humour (II)” 59).<sup>8</sup> Incongruity and superiority can both be established, and operate in a humoristic context only if participants commit intellectually and emotionally to them, i.e. only if participants ‘project intentional (humour) perspectives’ on a narrative act (85). In this

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nineteenth century and then develops into an established protagonist in the twentieth century, when the detective novel becomes a mainstream subgenre of the crime novel (see Scaggs). As a result, detective stories promote “the values of the modern police discipline, defending bourgeois property values, sexual morality and bureaucratic rationalities” (Keyman 44) and they assure the reader that society is equipped to guarantee justice (Schütt 75).

<sup>8</sup> Vandaele elaborates on two scholarly traditions of humour studies that associate humour with a perception of incongruity and with a perception of superiority. The theory of incongruity (Schultz; Kiken; Raskin) asserts that the violation of logic boundaries pushes the receiver of a message to frame a given content in an unexpected way, and suggests that humour originates in this detection of incongruity and of its subversive and illogical power. Theorists of superiority (La Fave, Haddad and Maesen; Gruner) focus instead on the social rather than cognitive aspects of humour and argue that in a humoristic sequence there is always someone who judges, an audience that acts as an accomplice, and a third part who is mocked because depicted/perceived as abnormal and different. A third tradition that should be mentioned is that of comic release, which draws mainly on Freud (*Jokes*) and Bergson (*Le rire*) and conceives humour in relation to societal boundaries and constraints, as a device that allows psychic energy to break free from the inhibitions imposed by society. Although such perspective can be significant to a general understanding of Gadda’s and Germi’s humour, this theoretical framework is less productive for the purposes of our analysis, therefore we leave it in the background. On humour studies see at least: Attardo, *Linguistic Theories and Humorous Texts*; Bardon; Chapman; Morreall and Mulkay.

way, narrative humour assumes the creation of a specific intentional perspective and identifies a source of intentionality (a humorous agent). Vandaele states that humour arises not from an autonomous comic power of things or subjects but in the 'perceptibility' of a humorous agency in "the narrator as a humorist or [...] the narration as a form of humorous agency" (Narrative Humour (I) 736). This attaches importance to humorous agents as the pivotal features in narrative humour, where narrator, character and reader/spectator are cast in "humorous roles:" humorist, victim and audience (743).

Gadda's and Germi's stereotypical gags cast the narrator in the role of the humorist agent, which — as we will discuss — displays a varying degree of visibility (and therefore perceptibility). The humorous agency can be foregrounded or backgrounded, i.e. be more or less visible and perceptible to the audience. It thereby determines also the relationship between the participants and the kind of humour perceived. The stereotypical gags that we analyze trigger both satire and parody by foregrounding and backgrounding their agency, laughing at the same time both with and at their audience.

In our case study, explicit satire emerges when the agent of humour is foregrounded.<sup>9</sup> In satire, agency is easily detectable and narrator and audience ally in targeting the characters as victim. Here, humorist and audience together criticize social behavior and societal structures represented by the mocked character. Gadda and Germi instead deliver parody by backgrounding the humorous agency; when this agency is backgrounded, its intent and effect are less perceptible. As such, the relationship between the participants changes, since the narrative humour becomes more subtle and harder for the audience to detect. The aim here is to subvert the schemes of the genre in order to disorient the audience. Hence, the authors target their own audience and its trust in the narrative development of the detective story. In this case, parody is not used as a device to make the audience laugh (or to bring only a small fraction of it to laughter), while satire is meant to make everyone laugh by clearly exposing the shortcomings of a character or an institution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On satire see Griffin, Greenberg and Quintero.

<sup>10</sup> On parody see Hutcheon. Although parody can have a funny side, it is per se merely a 'genetic mutation.' It is created in an already consolidated system (in this case, a genre), when a certain element that does not belong to that system is introduced. The effect that the heterogeneous element produces is that of bringinng to light the conventionality of the consolidated system



## Stereotypical gag and satire

In the two sequences presented here, the stereotypical gag is delivered with very little effort: both spectator and reader alike laugh, incited by a cretinous, stereotypical humour. These gags operate on two different levels. On the one hand there is the act that is risible — the self-embarrassment of the old general and the scatological accident of the young soldier —, on the other hand there is the subject that is mocked. This subject is an important aspect to note, since laughter implies a feeling of superiority, with the derided subject being lowered to an inferior level with respect to who is laughing.

In Germi's film, the derided subject is a pompous old general and the audience laughs at the stereotype of the smug ex-soldier who is unaware of his own decay. The humorous cliché tackles the historical context too, since the events are set at the end of the 1950s and the general in question has carried out his service as a high-ranking official during Fascism. Therefore, when the narrator triggers in the audience a sense of superiority that downplays the respectability of the old man, he also allies with the audience in targeting the old general as a representative of the military establishment.

Private Cocollo, the subject of the ridicule in Gadda, is also serving in the fascist army. The novel is set during the 'Ventennio' and Gadda frequently highlights the young man's affiliation to the army by calling him a brave soldier and by making a point of his grey-green uniform. The mechanism is the same: the humour not only centers around a stereotype — the big clumsy guy who suffers an embarrassing unforeseen event — but it also targets a representative of the army and, more specifically, of the military police. Here, the humorous cliché turns out to be satirical. In fact, Gadda and Germi push the stereotypical gag beyond the mockery of prototypical human types (the big clumsy young man, the pretentious old man) and in doing so, the ridicule also sweeps over instances of the nonfictional world such as the army, the military police, and senior officers. This mirrors the derision already widespread in the popular satire of the time, against high-ranking officers and military police. Indeed, popular opinion singled them out as the target of blame for the errors and crimes committed by the Italian army in the two wars. In other words, the authors' satire targets a subject that

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(Tynjanov). We therefore do not draw on Genette's description of parody as a humorous adaptation of a text, since we consider it to be reductive.

the audience perceives as inferior (as a stereotypical comic subject) and that is demeaned as a representative of an establishment that experiences a crisis of status.

It is not surprising that in Gadda and Germi the humorous approach and the detective story attract each other: the humorous mode is a component of the Italian crime novel since its origins.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, both humour and detective novels deliver a social analysis and elaborate our fears, and from the very inception of the genre detective stories have been used to describe and analyze the social context in which a crime takes place. Gadda and Germi are no exceptions. Hence, when their humour blends into criminal stories, as in this case, it easily develops into satire. Thanks to the satirical use of the stereotypical gag, social criticism becomes more accessible to the wider public. Gadda struggled throughout his career between the desire to reach a wider public, and the certainty that this public was too idiotic or too compromised with the world's idiocy to be a worthy audience. In *That Awful Mess*, his most successful book, Gadda experiments with the popular genre of the detective novel and here his satire, when conveyed by features such as the stereotypical gag, reaches its moment of greatest simplification for the benefit of the average reader. Germi also aims at reaching the average spectator, but he neither fears nor despises the wider public, as Gadda does; on the contrary, his goal is to seduce and then educate the masses. For this reason, in *The Facts of Murder* he adopts the stereotypical gag and continues to do so even more broadly in his satirical comedies.

### **Stereotypical gag and detachment**

A peculiar trait of Gadda's works is that he firmly places the lack of societal cohesion and morality in front of his readers. Moreover, as Godioli observes, "the ludicrous aura surrounding Gadda's hardened individuals is primarily meant to highlight the pressure exerted by social compulsions" and "laughter serves as a counterbalance to the traumatic aspects of social homogenisation" (Godioli, *Laughter* 112). Laughter has thus cognitive potential as it is opposed to the lies of societal morality (Godioli, *Scemenza* 141, 143). For Germi, social analysis and committed humour intersect in detective stories, because they grasp the essence of human social behavior. As Germi puts it: "it is sad that there is death and blood,

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<sup>11</sup> The humorous tone is present in Gadda's and Germi's Italian forerunners too, as it can be seen in Emilio De Marchi's *Il cappello del prete* (*The Priest's Hat*, 1887) which is "considered to be the progenitor of the modern detective novel in Italy" (Dowling 142).

but everything else, thoughts, acts, facts that surround and provide a background to crime, you do not know if they are more ludicrous or foolish” (Germi qtd. in Moscon 44).

In both cases, humour imposes a critical distance and causes detachment, since it affects the empathy of both reader and viewer. This is the second relevant aspect of the two episodes being analysed. The comic experience is a detached one since the “humour of a narrator suggests a playful disinvolvement with story world activity” (Vandaele, “Narrative Humour (I)” 743). Germi and Gadda do trigger the feelings of disinvolvement and superiority typical of humour, but they also enhance these feelings by way of the cliché, further undermining empathy. As a learned behavior, cliché stimulates a conventional and unconscious reaction that incites neither the reader, nor the viewer to sympathize with the characters. In other words, the detachment increases because of the brevity and the stereotypical character of the episodes. The victims of the gag evoke very little empathy also because they have limited psychological depth. In both narratives, the ridiculed characters are secondary ones and find themselves in the spotlight only for the time necessary to pass into dishonorable memory. Both characters perform a unique function: they are nothing but prototypical protagonists of a stereotypical gag.

It should be noted that Germi and Gadda experiment with the destructive power of humour in topical passages of the detective plot: the opening and closing sequences of a crime-related storyline. In traditional detective stories, these topical passages heighten the empathy toward the characters and their tragic destiny. Therefore, the detachment determined by the sentiments of superiority and by the social critique of the gags not only undermines the empathy towards the two ridiculed subjects, but also towards the very stories of which they are part. The gag conveys an anti-empathic effect which is not limited to the protagonists of the gag but extends to the context in which the gag is embedded: the criminal plot and its tragic meaning. In these passages, laughter functions like a snap of the fingers that awakens viewers and readers and at the same time thwarts their empathy. The audience emotionally distances itself from the tragic tension of the detective story and finds itself in a position from which it is difficult, if not impossible, to re-establish empathy. This effect is amplified by the absolute lack of correspondence between the humour perceived extra-diegetically by readers and viewers, and the diegetic tragic events experienced by the characters. In the sequence of Germi’s film, the residents of the building experience the anguish of seeing the security of

a home violated by an external aggressor. As a result, they do not notice general Pomilia's ludicrousness.

In Gadda's book, not a single character wants to smile at the loud breaking wind of the soldier. Thus, the viewer and the reader cannot project their understanding of the sequence on any character; a smile creeps across the faces of the audience, but it does not enter the fictional world where there is no wink of an eye, no break in the tension, nor any acknowledgement of the occurrence. On the contrary, the audience can only find some correspondence on another level of intentionality, namely that of the disrespectful authors who show no mercy for the characters and their drama.

### **Stereotypical gag and parody**

The effect of the gag is not limited to satire and detachment, since it also has a parodic value determined precisely by its position in the plot. In canonical investigative stories, sequences where a crime is committed and the mystery is solved are moments of truth and gravity. In the former, violence enters the safe realm and jeopardizes the social order, while the latter shows how society can regain control of the violence by unmasking and prosecuting criminals. The unexpected smile triggered by the gags imposes a distance from these moments of truth and strips them of their gravity as the reader perceives them as clichés of the genre. As such, the passages turn out to be parodic since they unveil the conventionality of the plot. This unveiling also shows the fallibility of the stories in their understanding of reality, since it exposes the reassuring plot (crime-detection-solution) as a mere narrative mechanism, which can express no truth.<sup>12</sup> Thereby parody reveals that the narrative path from danger to safety, from mystery to truth, from social disorder to social cohesion, is unreliable. In doing so, book and film expose the reader and the viewer to an insoluble epistemological uncertainty: on the one hand, Gadda and Germi detach the reader and the viewer from the crime and its consequences by way of the anti-empathetic effect of the stereotypical gag.

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<sup>12</sup> It must be noted that playful features present in Arturo Lanocita's *Quaranta milioni* (*Forty Millions*, 1931) and Luciano Folgore's *La trappola colorata* (*The coloured trap*, 1934) entail the parody of the foreign model (Rambelli, 53). However, in these works parody affects the surface, e.g. the recurrent patterns of the genre, rather than its values. The opposite can be seen in Gadda and Germi, who push the boundaries of detective fiction much further into the modernist poetics.

Additionally, they locate the gag precisely where the canonical crime narrative positions the markers of the reassuring ‘crime-detection-solution’ pattern. On the other hand, Gadda and Germi do not restore the traditional pattern elsewhere. The rupture is left open in the heart of the investigative plot, which thus proves disorienting.

In sum, the crime investigation brings Gadda and Germi to understand that circumstances, contexts, and morals render life and its tragic seriousness humorous, and essentially silly and meaningless. The parody unveils a paradox and they entrust it to the public. Reality, suggest Gadda and Germi, is a random sequence of tragedy and humour chaotically mixed, and no investigation can restore the order threatened by crime, because, in their view on the world, there is no order. As such, the plot related to the robbery matches the innovative traits of the storyline of the murder. Both the end of the book and the film, as we noted above, fail the expectations of the reader and the viewer by delivering a noncanonical ending to the storyline of the murder. That storyline delivers an explicit subversion of the genre conventions, whereas the investigation of the robbery shows a more subtle rebellion; however, by the time the ending comes, the two plots align with one another. Germi is much more subtle and humour in *The Facts of Murder* is much less pervasive than in *That Awful Mess*. In the latter, although the parodic effect of the stereotypical gag in unfunny contexts is equally remarkable, it goes easily unnoticed because of Gadda’s redundant use of bombastic humorous devices throughout the novel.

### **The detective novel and the evolution of humour in Gadda and Germi**

Laughter is one of the most visible constants of Gadda’s work and permeates *That Awful Mess* as well as all of Gadda’s other texts in multiple forms (satire, grotesque, sarcasm, pastiche, etc.). Criticism has dealt with Gadda’s invasive humorous verve since his first publications. As Godioli states, Gadda’s use of humorous devices changes with time and the evolution of his poetics, but criticism has not yet correctly tackled this evolution and its relation to what Godioli calls “modernist laughter” (Godioli, *Scemenza* 189). Modernist laughter expresses a negative stance on reality as it reveals the hollowness of social forms and structures and the risible meaninglessness of human life. This disenchanted view does not coincide with modernism as a whole, but can be considered as a peculiarly coherent trait of European modernism. Such pessimistic and sometimes

nihilistic laughter is the only way for modernist writers to assert a truth, albeit in a negative way, and is ultimately a way of assessing their perceived epistemological crisis. In this context Gadda takes a separate stance since he does not reject the possibility of a meaningful truth, at least until the *Cognizione del dolore* (*The Experience of Pain*, 1937–1941). Instead, Gadda is driven by an ethical imperative to act, although in vain, through literature. Gadda's prose until the 1940s is characterized by what Godioli defines as “modernist satire;” which paradoxically aims to restore a wholeness of meaning (Godioli, *Scemenza* 196). The fact that *The Experience of Pain* is left unfinished can be interpreted as a symptom of the failure of this poetics, and then with *That Awful Mess* a new chapter begins. Here Gadda's humour also evolves and pastiches and digressions gain importance as devices that emphasize chaos (Contini).<sup>13</sup> The contrast between an exceptional individual and society, which is one of Gadda's peculiar narrative patterns, evolves insofar that the exceptional individual increasingly becomes a humorous and idiosyncratic misfit (Godioli, *Laughter* 108–12). Hence, *That Awful Mess* marks a turning point in Gadda's humourism, which also aligns with the evolution of the detective novel genre. When Gadda publishes *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, epistemological uncertainty has already become an enduring condition in Western literature, where impossibility of knowledge undercuts the reliability of the modernist narrator (Kern 199). Modernist crime stories tackle the meaning of investigation at its very core. This means that the storyteller puts the reader or the spectator in a state of uncertainty and the development of the modernist idea that uncertainty and doubt are an inseparable part of knowledge affects the genre at an epistemological level (Weinstein).

We have already underlined how Gadda and Germi achieve this epistemological uncertainty in the murder plot: either the storyteller does not explicitly unveil the truth, which is the case in Gadda, or he lets the audience doubt whether the unveiled truth is good or not, as in the case of Germi. In questioning Western confidence in rationalism, modernism takes hold of the detective novel and its hero, and unveils their darker sides. A more human and marginal hero, that of the hard-boiled noir, comes into being next to the rational investigator of the golden age, defender of society's values. This new hero — which is represented by inspector Ingravallo in Gadda and Germi's story — is a marginal policeman, who

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<sup>13</sup> According to Godioli, Rabelais becomes a relevant model in Gadda's prose after WWII and replaces Manzoni and Dickens; also, before *That Awful Mess*, digressions are always related to the plot (*Scemenza*, 190–91).

problematizes social values and morality rather than embodying them, and who fulfills his duty even though he is aware of the questionability of social values. It must be noted that both Gadda and Germi are acquainted with the models of the 1940s U.S. noir. Those models, as Naremore observes, “like modernism [...] are characterized by urban landscapes, subjective narration, nonlinear plots, hard-boiled poetry, and misogynistic eroticism; also like modernism, they are [...] ambivalent about modernity and progress” (*More than Night* 45). Hence, Naremore states, noir would not have been possible without modernism. Along with some technical features of the U.S. noir, Gadda and Germi inherit its modernist sensitivity, in particular the lack of faith in objective reality, and concerns for the problems and the violence caused by contemporary industrial society.<sup>14</sup> When Germi introduces those elements, his protagonist changes radically. The noble outsider prevalent in his films before *The Facts of Murder* (Bachmann 25), is replaced by a more complex figure, much closer to Gadda’s Ingravallo, who is a lone and tormented investigator. After *The Facts of Murder* the protagonists of Germi’s Comedy Italian Style become iconic idiosyncratic misfits, not dissimilar from Gadda’s heroes. However, while Gadda’s literary modernism is not controversial,<sup>15</sup> criticism has not yet acknowledged Germi’s cinematic modernism,<sup>16</sup> although it is crucial to understand the inherent epistemological crisis underlying *The Facts of Murder* and depicted in his Comedy Italian Style. In recent years Barattoni has “attempt[ed] to establish twenty-five years of Italian motion-pictures [from the

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<sup>14</sup> Despite the importance of foreign models, Germi emphasizes his need to create Italian-based crime stories and claims that his adaptation of Gadda’s novel is the first national example of this kind. Germi states that “today, if an Italian director thinks about a detective film, he does not think of the absurd ‘gialli’ of any English or American specialized writer, but he thinks of our police force that exist, arrest criminals, has its own uniform, its own identity. He thinks of an Italian detective film” (“Difesa del cinema italiano” 30). In “Storia di un uomo all’antica” he observes that “perhaps the importance of the film [*The Facts of Murder*] lies in the fact that it is the first Italian detective film; that is, a new thing, a way of seeing a reality that has never been represented, that of the police and its work in a society where certain things happen” (18). As per the innovative aspect of his cinema Germi declares: “I’m interested in inventing films, rummaging through genres, trying what hasn’t been tried yet. *The Facts of Murder*, for example, was born because there were no Italian ‘gialli’ and everyone said, gialli cannot be made, because our police don’t inspire either fear or the ultimate appreciation of the law, they just make people laugh. They only make you laugh. So I tried” (“O Turati” 15).

<sup>15</sup> See at least Donnarumma *Gadda modernista*; Di Martino; Baldi; Luperini and Tortora.

<sup>16</sup> See Naremore, *More than Night* and *Film Noir*; Trotter; Wood; Raczkowski; Solomon, *Crime*.

mid-Fifties to the end of the Sixties] as a formal and aesthetic continuum characterized by an explicit modernist sensitivity” (2). Germi’s films, and in particular *The Facts of Murder*, are not taken into consideration and no link is established between humorous devices and modernist sensitivity. Barattoni, however, delineates the context in which Germi’s poetics evolve. Germi’s productions can be divided in two distinct phases: the first includes his films of the 1940s and 1950s and is marked by the absence of humour; the second spans the 1960s and the 1970s and is characterized by the considerable presence of humour.<sup>17</sup> The films of the first period are tragic and moving stories. In them, Germi passionately participates to Italy’s postwar reconstruction. The films of the latter period, however, are pessimistic and disenchanting, even though they are extremely entertaining. Their cynical stories represent human weakness and confront the audience with what Germi and Gadda called the infantile stupidity of the world, a farce by cretinous comedians. The change in register is radical. In the earlier films, as Bachman observes, Germi “extolled, often, the spirit of man and his individual strength, even in the face of evil;” while his later works have become “a lot more pessimistic” although a lot funnier (25). With this change, Germi does not disown the moral perspective of his early films, he just chooses the new mode of Comedy Italian style.<sup>18</sup>

*The Facts of Murder* constitutes a clear exception to this duality and stands at the junction between the first and second phase (Santi, *Quer pasticciaccio* 105). In this film, comedy and tragedy for the first time overlap, but not in the ways proper to Comedy Italian style, which can be considered a sort of lightened Neorealism without any more hope, in which laughter is a symptom of conflict, of the irrisolute discomfort that Italians experience towards their own country. In *The Facts of Murder*, humour begins to emerge in the tragic facts of life. Shortly after this first

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<sup>17</sup> The first phase includes: *Il testimone* (1946), *Gioventù perduta* (1948), *In nome della legge* (1949), *Il cammino della speranza* (1950), *La città si difende* (1951), *La presidentessa* (1952), *Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo* (1952), *Gelosia* (1953), *Amori di mezzo secolo, II episode* (1954), *Il ferroviere* (1956), *Uomo di paglia* (1958). The second phase includes *Divorzio all’italiana* (1961), *Sedotta e abbandonata* (1964), *Signore & signori* (1966), *L’immorale* (1967), *Serafino* (1968), *Le castagne sono buone* (1970), *Alfredo Alfredo* (1972). To this list should be added *Amici miei* (1975, Mario Monicelli) for which Germi wrote the story and screenplay; he was not able to shoot it because of his untimely death.

<sup>18</sup> On this topic see Leclerc-Dafol.



evolution, a more consistent tragic background will emerge behind the exhibited human ridiculousness.

At the end of his career, Germi found himself much closer to Gadda's desperate humourism than he would have perhaps expected. Nonetheless, in *The Facts of Murder* and *That Awful Mess* humour is differently displaced. In Gadda's novel, laughter is widespread throughout the narrative and affects everyone. The only time of relief that the author concedes to his own characters (and readers) is before the violent death (Prudenzi). The pages describing the cadaver of the murder victim (Liliana Balducci) are the only ones in which Gadda's humour is not targeting the character. This exception aside, it is impossible to divide Gadda's characters into ludicrous and not ludicrous. On the contrary, Germi holds a clear line between the humorous and the tragic. Some of his characters are exclusively funny, others are amusing, but only in a few sequences, while others and not funny at all. This characterization is organized in a pyramidal way: the closer the characters are to the tragic action (the murder), the least they evoke laughter. Marginal characters and the crowd are both described with a humorous slant. Humour then becomes more nuanced and complex, and progressively vanishes, as the different characters climb the pyramid of demise. As a result, victim, murderer, and conniver are unambiguously non-humorous characters. It is interesting to note that in *The Facts of Murder* too, humour does not dominate the narrative (Santi, *Quer pasticciaccio* 141–42).

## Conclusions

As previously mentioned, “when cognitive schemes located in the field of art are broken, parody may be in sight, while transgressing socially positioned schemes is fundamental to satire” (Vandaele, “Humour mechanisms” 234). In our case study, satire is displayed at a more visible level and the object of laughter is the society in which the two stories are set. Parody, however, acts on a less visible level and targets the genre of the detective story. Both the fore- and backgrounding of the authorial agency is proportional to the accessibility of Gadda and Germi's humour: the author's influence is evident when he presents the humorous cliché in a conventionally encoded way, and delivers its easy understandable satirical message with little effort. When Gadda and Germi rely on parody, however, humour becomes more elitist, meaning that satire and parody affect the audience in different ways on the basis of their ability to understand the narrative device.

When looking at satire, the character is mocked by both the author and the audience who are allies and share a common process of understanding. By contrast, parody is only perceived by a more selected audience that is acquainted with the stereotypes of the genre and with parodic devices. The average audience finds itself taunted by the surprising reversal of the conventions and in the end it is mocked by the author, who is no longer an ally and consigns to the viewer and reader nothing more than the empty shell of the crime story and an inane laugh in the background.

For these reasons, the stereotypical gag can be considered a modernist device, as it conveys an epistemological uncertainty, subverts genre conventions and questions social boundaries and values. This use of the gag does not represent the most outspoken aspect of the authors' experimental innovation, but it is emblematic of Italian modernism, where traditional forms and genres are not necessarily rejected in a blatantly avant-garde way, but are rather corrupted from the inside. On the one hand Gadda's and Germi's innovations rely on features that are already present in the national tradition of the detective novel.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, they continue the existing experimentation of the Western modernist detective novel and show similarities with the belated modernist practice of investing narrative "with the expressive force and affective intensity that are customarily associated with more performance-based practices" (Solomon, *Slapstick Modernism* 5). Gags, as a kind of standalone comedic pieces, are historically related to the slapstick inserts that characterized U.S. silent comedy from its very beginning. Gags and slapstick are both short humorous narrative inserts that are proper of variety theatre and of the comical theatrical tradition. Slapstick is characterized by a remarkable degree of violence in both the actions depicted and the feelings of superiority that it triggers in the audience. As such, slapstick also "calls into question our relationship to others and reveals our repressed desire to humiliate other human beings" (Andrin 227). As Solomon argues, slapstick penetrates the literary sphere "when a formally innovative writer puts on the page a grotesquely disputing variant of the comic

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<sup>19</sup> Next to the humorous tone, early Italian crime novels already show a certain degree of epistemological uncertainty too. A notable example is Alessandro Varaldo's *Il sette bello* ("The Seven of Diamonds," 1931). Varaldo disregards the golden age's fair play with the reader by providing a chaotic and uncoherent distribution of clues and information (Rambelli 39–40). The unmanageable amount of redundant evidence is a peculiar trait of Gadda's *That Awful Mess too*, along with two other features of Varaldo's book: the humorous tone, and the interest in psychological analysis that mocks the scientific method of deduction (Pezzotti 16). These last two also characterize Germi's *The Facts of Murder*.

delirium that had formerly appeared only on the silver screen,” and “the result is a slapstick modernism” (*Slapstick Modernism* 151). Hence, slapstick can exert a disrupting effect on our perception of the narrated story since it explores everyday life conflict and “the way life and the world defeat the best-conceived purposes” (Gunning 149). The violent tone of slapstick reveals the traumatic relation between subjects and society, which is peculiar to modernist poetics, and reveals the authors’ ethical commitment toward modernity and society.

In sum, in the case of Gadda and Germi we can assess a modernist use of gags since the authors employ them to highlight their ethical stance and, as in “the artistic experimentation associated with high modernism,” they line up with “the socially disruptive lunacy linked to the comic [...] genre” (Solomon, *Slapstick Modernism* 2). The very choice for the detective novel genre reconciles the elitist tendency of avant-garde modernism with mass consumed artifacts and “enables us to identify the impact of elite modernists on what can be termed an emergent ‘vernacular or mainstreet modernism’” (Solomon, “Crime” 310).<sup>20</sup> Hence, even the shortest humoristic passages endorse the innovative stance flagrantly visible in the subversion of the genre’s conventions related to the murder plot. In the robbery plot the mystery is solved and yet, because of his detachment, parody and the broken alliance with the audience, the unreliable author shows his true face. As a consequence, after *The Facts of Murder* Germi’s confidence in truth is replaced with a bitter glance on society, where — as in Gadda — everything becomes risible and laughter discredits every single character and every single aspect of social life.

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<sup>20</sup> Solomon quotes from Raczkowski 153. See also Hansen.

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