

Cesare Pavese and Film Noir: A Case of Convergent Sensibilities

Preliminary remarks: Pavese, America and the Cinema

While studies on Cesare Pavese have now spread out over a wide area, the Piedmontese writer's long-standing interest in cinema has yet to generate much critical attention. Mark Pietralunga renewed interest in this area in 1991, and short essays by Stefano Della Casa and Lorenzo Ventavoli both appeared in 2007.¹ This paucity of attention is contradicted by regular references to the cinema in Pavese's letters, notebooks, short stories and novels. Indeed, it is probable that much of Pavese's early enthusiasm for American culture derived from seeing American films, as Pavese himself explained in a letter he wrote on April 5, 1930 to his Italian-American friend in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Antonio Chiuminatto. Here the force of a twenty-two-year-old's ingenuous admiration for all things North American springs forth unabated:

You are the peach of the world! Not only in wealth and material life but really in liveliness and strength of art which means thought and politics and religion and everything. You've got to predominate in this century all over the world as before did Greece, and Italy and France. I'm sure of it. What in their little sphere have American Movies done in old Europe—and I've always abused those who maintained [sic] it was their financial organization and advertisements which brought them up: I say it is, not even their artistic value, but their surpassing strength of vital energy don't mind whether pessimistic or joyful—what, I say, have done Movies will do the whole of your art and thought (*Lettere* 117).

These words are the earliest written evidence that Pavese followed the cinema regularly, though the following year he penned the short story "Arcadia," in which he left mention of the film actors that starred in the American westerns, adventure films, comedies, romances and dramas available to the movie-going public in Turin during the 1920s. It is in the early collection of stories entitled *Ciau Masino* (later published in the *Racconti*). "Arcadia's" young, middle-class protagonist Tommaso Ferrero "amava molto il cinematografo,

ma aveva i suoi gusti” (59).² As Tommaso puts it:

I film americani. Costava poco entrare in quei cinema e si vedevano le cose piú belle. Buck Jones, Giorgio O’Brien, Olive Bordeu [sic], Sue Carol—il mare, il Pacifico, le foreste, le navi. Ma soprattutto le cittadine dell’America, quelle case nitide in mezzo alle campagne, quella vita schietta e elementare. Tutto era bello. Gli uomini, individui sicuri, forti, con un sorriso tra i denti, pugni sodi ed occhio aperto. Le ragazze, sempre le stesse dai villaggi alle metropoli, corpo chiaro, volto allegro, sereno, anche in mezzo alle sventure. Si usciva leggeri da quei film. Nel centro dicevano che erano cose banali senz’effetto e senza vita, ma a Masino pareva proprio d’imparare a vivere assistendo a quelle scene (60).³

Fifteen years later in an entry in his private notebook *Il mestiere di vivere* Pavese reaffirmed the constancy of his interest in film. In describing himself on February 22, 1946 he noted:

Sei tornato a passar solo, la sera, nel piccolo cine, seduto nell’angolo, fumando, assaporando la vita e la fine del giorno. Guardi il film come un bimbo—per l’avventura, per la piccola emozione estetica o mnemonica. E godi, godi immensamente. Sarà cosí a settant’anni, se ci arrivi (282).⁴

In the years that intervened between these two documents the Fascist authorities sent Pavese to Brancaleone Calabro in internal exile from August 4, 1935 to March 15, 1936 (Wlassics). While there he was able to keep abreast of the films playing in Turin because he received the *Gazzetta del Popolo* on a semi-regular basis, at that time Turin’s most widely circulated newspaper (Della Casa). Thanks to a letter Pavese wrote from Brancaleone on March 2, 1936 to his sister Maria in which he reminisced about life in Turin, we also know that the “Alpi,” the “Statuto” and the “Ideal” were three cinemas he attended on a regular basis (*Lettere* 337).

Going to the movies is also an activity enjoyed by many of the characters in Pavese’s novels: in *Il Compagno* (1947) Pablo (43) and Carletto (76) go there; in *La casa in collina* (1948) so do Corrado and Cate (106); in *La bella estate* (1949) Ginia (39) and

Severino (43) go to the movies on separate occasions, and Ginia and Amelia also go to see a film together (53). In *Tra donne sole* (1949) Becuccio invites Clelia to see a film (305) just a few pages after she reflects on a conversation between her girlfriends Nene and Rosetta and is reminded of a specific film genre with “ragazze americane” (294).⁵ Pavese’s last novel, *La luna e i falò* (1950), refers to the screen in the creation of Anguilla’s girlfriend Nora, who often wants to be taken to the movies (16), and through the schoolteacher Rosanne, who aspires to a Hollywood film career (85). In addition, Pavese sought to write for the cinema himself. He left four drafts of ideas for films, though none of them was ever realized or published during his lifetime.⁶ To all of this we can add the fact that Constance and Doris Dowling, the American film actresses that Pavese knew during his last year of life, both appeared in noir films.⁷ As is well known, Pavese dedicated his last love poetry and *La luna e i falò* to Constance.

Film noir

From beginning to end film noir spanned a period of perhaps eighteen years, from *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) to *Touch of Evil* (1958), and was given its name in 1946 by the French film critic Nino Frank, who needed a term to apply to the dark cast of American wartime cinema, which had been kept from European screens until after W.W. II (Krutnik). The films that especially caught Frank’s eye were *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Laura* (1944) and *The Woman in the Window* (1944). The first three of these began life as hard-boiled detective or crime novels--in this case by Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler, respectively.⁸ Not only did many noir films share this same type of parentage but several authors of detective novels, such as Chandler, also adapted works (mostly by others) for the cinema (O’Brien).

Cain is particularly important in this context because Pavese acknowledged the influence of Cain’s narrative rhythm and treatment of time on his own 1941 novel *Paesi tuoi*.⁹ Tibor Wlassics observed over twenty years ago that the parallels between *Paesi tuoi* and Cain’s 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings*

Twice were “numerous and conspicuous,” and Pavese would have been able to read Cain’s novel in the original before it was made into one of the three film versions released during his lifetime in 1939, 1943 and 1946 (Wlassics 107).¹⁰ Still, while *Paesi tuoi* is narrated in the first person (a hallmark of much detective fiction and film noir) and ends with a sudden act of criminal violence, it does not manifest many other typical aspects of film noir.

An assiduous filmgoer, Pavese was certainly aware of the glut of noir films that invaded the Italian market after W.W. II, as he was of the rise of Italian neorealist cinema during the same period.¹¹ Owing perhaps to the psychological cost of W.W. II in terms of human suffering and its inevitable repercussions on American culture, noir typically features weak, traumatized male protagonists who, in contrast to the tough hard-boiled fiction hero, feel trapped or alienated by their circumstances. Nonetheless, noir cinema framed the vulnerability and victimization of its male heroes in terms both glamorous and appealing, heroes who—just like their literary models—also feel threatened by women (Krutnick). Indeed, the duplicitous, double-crossing or outright evil woman was a staple of feminine eroticism in noir film: the *femme fatale*.¹² This transformation in the representation of femininity may be due in part to changes in the status of American women during W.W. II: a period of time in which they achieved unprecedented economic and social autonomy, but to a degree not encouraged by the patriarchal culture to which they were, and still are, subjected (Hirsch). In fact, it is as if the misogyny of noir films were meant to exact vengeance on the postwar woman for having trespassed onto the territory of patriarchal authority.

As a result of their descent from the double bloodlines of detective fiction and the gangster or crime film of the 1930s, most noir films also include violent action scenes, or at least the threat of violence, though noir plots and their heroes do not necessarily conform to models of detective fiction. Usually, fistfights, chases, shootings, murders, abductions and the like take place at night in confined urban spaces such as hotel rooms, bars, apartment houses, nightclubs, restaurants and city streets. These confining spaces serve as implied threats to the autonomy and freedom of the male noir protagonist, who is frequently pursued through hallways, stairwells

and back alleys. Filming inside automobiles, a common but ingenious technique, functions as a way to suggest encroachment upon the physical and psychological boundaries of noir characters even further (Hirsch). It conveys a sense of the urgency and pace of urban life, while the automobile's mobility provides a logical way to connect successive scenes geographically distant from one another.

From detective novels noir also borrowed a tendency to show its characters engaged in verbal sparring matches, each one firing terse wisecracks at his antagonist. The convergence of these remarks may well derive from Dashiell Hammett's preference for a clean, pared-down dialogue, as well as from Raymond Chandler's characters, who are rarely able to resist the urge to fling ironic barbs at each other (Hirsch). Howard Hawks' 1946 version of Chandler's 1939 novel *The Big Sleep* contains justifiably famous examples of this sort of banter between detective Philip Marlowe (played by Humphrey Bogart) and his client Mrs. Regan (played by Lauren Bacall).

It has been suggested that noir has its dark roots in the German Expressionist cinema that gave birth to films such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924) and Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), (Hirsch). Directors of Germanic origin became some of the best noir filmmakers working in Hollywood (or precursors to them)--especially Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger (Hirsch,).

I contend that aspects of the noir sensibility can be found in works of Italian fiction published during noir's heyday. Among these I would point to Natalia Ginzburg's 1947 novel *È stato così*, which is a murderess' confession in the form of a long flashback. Structurally--and in a sense thematically--it bears a resemblance to Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, made three years later in 1950. Noir themes can also be found in Alberto Moravia's work, and in particular in the opening story of his 1954 collection: *Racconti romani*. Entitled "Fanatico," the story recounts a bungled attempt by three poor Romans to kill a taxi driver and steal his vehicle. Some of Pavese's works share or anticipate this sensibility.

Four early short stories

Even before noir films made their way to Italy after W.W. II

Pavese wrote four stories in the late 1930s and early 1940s in which male working-class protagonists become entangled in acts of violence or criminal activities. “Misoginia,” “Temporale d’estate,” “Carogne,” and “La giacchetta di cuoio” include noir themes and sensibilities as integral parts of their structures so that they constitute four cases of pre-cinematic noir.¹³

At the heart of “Misoginia” (1936) is an unnamed misdeed, though we never learn what it is nor whether its perpetrators are ever apprehended—a fact that endows the story with the characteristics of a mystery. Giusto and his older sister run an isolated hotel in the countryside on a road leading up through the Alps into France. One evening haggard young Renato and a slightly older young woman arrive on foot after their car has run out of gas a short distance away. Tired and frightened, they express an urgent need to cross over into French territory as soon as possible. Since neither the reader nor Renato and his sister uncover the truth about the relationship between their two guests, this uncertainty heightens the story’s narrative tension and air of mystery. Giusto’s sister also raises the suspicion that the two young people are on the run after having committed some criminal act: “[Q]uei due avevano la tremarella, ne avevan fatta qualcuna, a parlargli improvviso trasaltavano come conigli” (170).¹⁴ In these terms Pavese establishes a situation that raises more questions than it answers and prepares the reader to expect a narrative resolution in conformity with the parameters of detective fiction or a crime story. After the young couple reluctantly decides to spend the night, Giusto and Renato return to the car to push it over to the hotel. At that point Giusto alludes to the gasoline that Renato had forgotten to get enough of before setting out and he declares “ch’era meglio essersi dimenticata, delle due, la ragazza” (169).¹⁵ This remark is the first in a string of misogynistic comments that Giusto utters, ostensibly as expressions of male solidarity, but it conjures up the specter of a possible rift between his two guests and augments the already-menacing elements of mystery and possible criminal wrongdoing. Just before dawn the next day Giusto offers Renato some cognac to calm his nerves. As Giusto says: “Toglie il batticuore. Le donne non lo capiscono,” and he adds “da uomo a uomo” that “toccare il confine è niente: passarlo, e con un donna che strilla, è la

questione” (171).¹⁶ Giusto and his sister make sure the couple has provisions, a blanket and a guide through the mountains, but he also tells Renato: “ho trent’anni, e ho sempre veduto le donne cavarsela e restarci l’uomo” (174).¹⁷ Here, nearly all of the basic noir characteristics are already present: crime, mystery, suspense, misogyny, terse, vernacular dialogue (though not wisecracking), a nocturnal setting, as well as some of the most common leitmotifs of both American crime fiction and noir films, such as automobile travel and alcoholic drink.¹⁸ What is noticeably missing however is any representation of real violence or an urban setting. In light of these characteristics, “Misoginia” seems very much a literary exercise in the vein of the North American crime or mystery story: the same genre that would give birth to film noir in the following decade. Pavese’s interest in American literature dated back at least as far as his university thesis on Walt Whitman, and when he penned “Misoginia” he had been publishing translations of contemporary American fiction for five years, so at this point he may have already read not only Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, published two years earlier, but other American fiction like it. After all, as an editor at Einaudi Publishers, Pavese was the one who would become principally responsible for introducing American literature to the Italian public (along with Elio Vittorini). The story’s thematic nucleus, clamorously declared in its title, was an organic part of American crime fiction of the 1920s and ‘30s, and can be considered a characteristic of the genre.¹⁹ From this perspective, “Misoginia” is a nod to the American crime story, in which the female object of desire also functions as antagonist to the male subject. This arrangement plainly demonizes women, whom it nonetheless eroticizes even as it posits them as potential adversaries of the male detective. A condensation of detective fiction and love story, this apparent reduction of both forms leads instead to a more complex state of mind for the male subject: at once attracted and repulsed by women, he often withdraws to become an observer of them. These are also the psychic parameters underlying Giusto’s misogynistic remarks to Renato, whom Giusto fears is a man about to confront a dangerous border crossing with a traveling companion he can’t trust.

“Temporale d’estate” (1937) displays some of the same plot

characteristics, such as violence and misogyny, as well as other elements such as terse, vernacular dialogue. It recounts a crime of opportunity, when an ex-convict out rowing on the Po with a friend crosses paths with a young woman who, like him, is seeking shelter from a fierce summer storm. Instead of helping, he rapes her and then watches as she drowns trying to escape. Even more than in “Misoginia,” the male protagonist is defined principally in opposition to the objectified female subject, but here exhibits an extreme form of violence, sexual dominance and callous indifference to human life. Moro is an urban, working-class criminal, and the dominance he exerts over his victim seems to indicate the degree to which his fear of the feminine overwhelms the pull he nonetheless feels toward her. As in “Misogina” the urban setting typical of the crime story (and later of the noir film) is apparently absent here, but the story’s events actually take place on the Po river right where it flows through Turin, as if to suggest that male violence against women lies just beneath a thin veneer of civilization like the forces of nature themselves. Certainly the story’s title implies this perspective too. “Temporale d’estate” is a crime story, but one in which the dynamics of sexual attraction and repulsion typical of the American crime story of the early twentieth century become distorted. Moro’s high anxiety in the face of the feminine may also be complicit with psychic regression to a position of primeval consciousness, a fact which overlaps with Pavese’s reading of Lévy-Bruhl’s *Mythologie Primitive* the year before. In this context, rape signals a return to a condition of psychological primitivism that does not preclude even bestial behavior.²⁰ At the same time, the story has a characteristically cinematic structure. Focusing on only two of its four characters at a time (Moro and Aurelio on the one hand, and Clara and Bianca on the other), Pavese develops two separate narratives contemporaneously and cuts back and forth between them as film editors do. Bianca’s rape and drowning marks the point where the dual narrative nuclei collide and indicates the conclusion and resolution of their narrative tension.

In “Carogne” (1937) the reader discovers that an escaped convict, Rocco, has already murdered the man with whom he suspects his girlfriend Concia has betrayed him. Again we are presented with a crime story including the dynamic of male

attraction-and-repulsion vis-à-vis the female object of desire, as well as an array of narrative visual descriptions that anticipate leitmotifs of noir cinema, especially with respect to the effects of light and darkness. An actual structure of luminosity informs the configuration of the story and Rocco's relations with Concia. Accordingly, at the story's beginning set inside the idle lassitude of Rocco's jail "le voci dalla strada giung[ò]no intrisi di sole" but as the narrative unfolds Rocco moves from this light-filled environment into a middle ground of attenuated illumination: the shaded interior of a friend's home where he can hide until nightfall and venture forth under cover of darkness (247).²¹ Once it arrives he steals away to the house in the country where Concia works as a maid, arriving in time to see bushes near the house sliced (i.e. "spacca[ti]") by the headlights of a car as it pulls away (264). As in the noir film, the contrast and motion of the headlights' beams against the surrounding darkness suggest both speed and violence, and they anticipate Rocco's subsequent acts of violence. From a hidden position in the dark he observes Concia and others through the beams of car headlights, and then waits outside until a light goes on in a second-story window. Nocturnal settings such as this were a staple of the noir film set, and noir directors employed the juxtaposition of light and shadow as a metaphor for emotional states (often a sense of entrapment) or to represent heightened dramatic tension.²² In this instance, Pavese's orchestration and control of light serves to communicate several things. With respect to the house he observes, Rocco's position in the dark marks him as an outsider in an emotional and existential sense in addition to a physical one. His total envelopment in darkness also stands in for his lack of emotional serenity: he is bent on revenge and consumed with rage. When he surprises Concia in the dark kitchen alone, he overpowers her and they engage in a physical struggle as he vituperates against her for her treachery. What little dialogue there is is terse and clipped--very close to the taught repartee found in the noir crime film:

--Perdonami, Rocco, --gemette buttandogli il braccio libero al collo. Rocco non rispose e le prese il braccio per staccarlo. Allora Concia levò da sé il braccio e gli menò un'unghia in viso. Lottarono in silenzio e Rocco tornò a sbatterla contro il

muro, inchiodandola col peso di tutto il corpo. Per le narici graffiate sentí l'odore forte di lei. Concia lanciò un [sic] strido acuto che gli fendé le orecchie. --Sta' zitta, --ansimò Rocco, tappandole i denti, --sta' zitta, puttana, nessuno ti sente--. Concia gli morse il pugno e s'afflosciò un'altra volta. --Sta' zitta, --disse Rocco staccandosi, --sta' zitta, altrimenti ti scanno-- (265).²³

This dialogue is so mannered and film-like that Pavese must have realized it himself, and it must be for this reason that he made Rocco and Concia accuse each other of acting, as if they were both performing in films (267-68). Even the description of Rocco's movements inside the dark house repeats common techniques of noir camerawork in order to convey his point of view and thoughts: "Giunto all'uscio si volse e cercò con gli occhi la figura bianca. La vide scura contro la finestra e sentí che lo guardava disperatamente" (269).²⁴ Finally, the story's conclusion recalls the ironic twist characteristic of the weak noir anti-hero's fate: Rocco realizes that he is being sought by the police everywhere and, having no place to hide, walks back into jail.

"La giacchetta di cuoio" (1941) creates an atmosphere of mystery by using an uncomprehending child narrator to relate the climate of sexual tension and jealousy between two adults. This situation is only relieved when the working-class male protagonist strangles his girlfriend and throws her body into the Po. Like the preceding stories, this one is without an urban setting, has very little dialogue and lacks most of the accoutrements of urban life that noir films fetishize, but it does include nighttime settings as well as other cinematic elements: several times characters are set within window frames, a favorite device of noir films to suggest the idea of enclosure or entrapment. On different occasions Pavese also delineates the facial expressions of the two protagonists as well as the quality of their glances. These descriptions are strongly suggestive of the "shot" and the "reverse shot," frequently used in close-ups and in sequence to show narrative point of view in film.

All four stories have plots in which elements of pre-noir crime fiction predominate from beginning to end, but they are not typical of Pavese's fiction. Rather, they are literary exercises that represent a road not followed. In appearance their brevity and simplicity and the popular sources that inspired them keep these short works from

reaching the complexity achieved in longer forms, but the dialectic between popular content and seriousness of purpose is a constant in all of Pavese's works.

La luna e i falò

Unlike the four stories, and written well after the arrival of noir films in Italy, circumscribed parts of *La luna e i falò* can be said to have significant noir-like attributes, which only arise in those chapters having American settings (of which there are three, out of thirty-two: chapters three, twelve and twenty-one). Because the scope of this novel outdistances that of film noir, these chapters' noir facades are only the first of several layers of meaning that can be peeled back from their surfaces. In chapter three (set in San Francisco, El Cerrito and Oakland, California) the protagonist, Anguilla, recalls his swing-shift job as a short-order cook and bartender in a cheap, roadside restaurant and gas station where his girlfriend Nora has also found work as a cashier. The gritty, semi-public space easily stands in for film noir's urban environments in which the happenstance of social interaction proffers situations ripe in opportunities for conversation—at the very least—and often occasions for disagreement, violence or criminal activity. When a truck driver and fellow expatriate from Piedmont happens by one evening, the two men reminisce about people and places in Piedmont as Nora fixes her hair and then tunes in dance music on the radio when she feels annoyed at them. Anguilla has already informed the reader that he has grown tired of Nora, and as his conversation with his customer progresses the two men realize they share the same low esteem of American wine, women and band music. A little later Anguilla observes that in America “avevano non soltanto la sbornia, ma anche la donna cattiva”(17).²⁵

As in the noir film, the misogynistic tone here is unmistakable, but owes its existence to causes that extend well beyond the boundaries of film noir and its American literary background. Much of *La luna e i falò* is concerned with a mythic return to childhood and the past, and to their recapture through memory. This narrative focus derives from Pavese's interest in myth and ethnology as well as primitive consciousness, which was piqued by his reading of Karl Kerényi and James Frazer (in addition to

Lévy-Bruhl) in the 1930s.²⁶ As in other works, *La luna e i falò* sets up a series of binary themes in opposition, such as city/country, childhood/adulthood, and maturity/immaturity. Among these is a thematic pair comprised of the American countryside (devoid of fecundity) and Piedmont's (which is richly invested with attributes of fertility). In Anguilla's consciousness, this same surfeit of value is also attached to women he knew in Piedmont, though in contrast to them *La luna e i falò* presents American femininity as a locus of profound lack and alterity.²⁷ It is for this reason that Anguilla finds his relations with American women unfulfilling and eventually returns to Piedmont. In other words, the ultimate cause of Anguilla's misogyny is both more complex and more highly articulated than that we come across in film noir, even though both Pavese's novel and noir films seem to reach a similar misogynistic point of arrival.

The nocturnal setting of this episode in a bar and grill is, however, in perfect harmony with classic noir taste and is even reminiscent of the restaurant setting in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. When Pavese has Anguilla pour his guest a glass of beer and then some "whiskey proibito" he underscores the noir-like quality of this venue further, since drinking alcoholic beverages—along with smoking and making telephone calls—was a quintessential noir pursuit (16).²⁸ Anguilla later goes outside to smoke, but while he and his acquaintance continue their conversation he tells the reader, "Parlammo tutta la sera, fin che da fuori non sfiatarono il clacson" and that "Nora gridò che facessi smettere il clacson" (16-17).²⁹ This information is consonant not just with the noir milieu (on account of the ever-present automobile), but it punctuates Pavese's description as if the car horn were part of a film soundtrack that included both the background noise of automobiles and the dance music that Nora has found on the radio. In addition, the episode is largely narrated in the first person, which coincides with the narrative voice most commonly used in hard-boiled fiction, a fact which also made it the ideal voice in which to make narrative flashbacks in film, a time-honored technique of the noir director.³⁰ While the dialogue between Anguilla and the truck driver lacks the aggression and irony of standard noir banter, it does retain the weighted terseness so characteristic of the exaggerated masculine

posturing found in film noir. In the following paragraph the driver initiates their exchange, and Anguilla replies:

. . . se sapevo che si beve questa roba . . . Mica da dire, riscalda, ma un vino da pasto non c'è . . . —Non c'è niente, --gli dissi, --è come la luna. . . . Il mio amico strinse le spalle, si chinò e mi disse sul banco facendo cenno all'indietro con la mano: --A te queste donne piacciono? Passai lo straccio sul banco. — Colpa nostra, --dissi. —Questo paese è casa loro. . . . --È come questa musicchetta, --disse lui. —C'è confronto? Non sanno mica suonare . . . (16).³¹

In chapter twenty-one Anguilla provides a third-person account of his relationship in Fresno, California with his paramour Roseanne. Pavese breaks the syntax there with direct quotations of Roseanne's words that impart the quality of dialogue and are remarkable because they reproduce spoken American slang from the 1940s. Unlike the exchange between Anguilla and the truck driver above, Roseanne's language retains the wisecracking aspect so commonly found in noir cinema:

[P]er lei una cosa sola contava—decidermi a tornare con lei sulla costa e aprire un locale italiano con le pergole d'uva—a *fancy place, you know*—e lì cogliere l'occasione che qualcuno la vedesse e le facesse una foto, da stampare poi su un giornale a colori—*only gimme a break, baby* [Q]uando le chiedevo perché veniva a letto con me, rideva e diceva che dopotutto ero un uomo (*Put it the other way round, you come with me because I'm a girl*). . . . Non toccava una goccia di liquore (*your looks, you know, are your only free advertising agent*) . . . (86).³²

These textual examples lack the almost-canonical noir attributes of criminal activity and violence found in the preceding stories and are isolated from the context of the rest of the novel, which does not share their characteristics. The stories all manifest aspects of noir plot development, themes and dialogue in addition to characteristics of editing (“Carogne” and “Temporale d'estate”), lighting (“Carogne”) and camera work (“Carogne” and “La giacchetta di cuoio”), but the quotations from *La luna e i falò* show that these more closely

approximate the speech patterns, conversational banter and soundtracks of film noir. The length of Pavese's last novel allows it the room to develop more highly articulated period dialogue as well as give greater attention to details of the noir setting: particulars that endow it with a riper sense of noir style—in spite of a missing noir plot. Both the stories and the novel provide a glimpse into Pavese's interest in American popular literature and film, but their noir characteristics confirm the fact that the writer's primary concerns lay elsewhere.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The articles by Stefano Della Casa and Lorenzo Ventavoli both appeared in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Cesare Pavese e la "sua" Torino* held at the Archivio di Stato in Turin from May 9 to June 17, 2007. Umberto Mariani has also included the essay "Antonioni e Pavese: Storia di un grande amore letterario" in his monograph on Pavese.² "loved the cinema a lot, but had his own tastes" (my translation).

³ "American films. It didn't cost very much to go to the movies and see the most beautiful things. Buck Jones, George O'Brien, Olive, Bordeu [sic], Sue Carol—the sea, the Pacific, forests, ships. But most of all small-town America: those tidy houses in the countryside, the simple straightforward kind of life. Everything was beautiful. The men: strong, sure individuals with a smile on their faces, hard fists and open eyes. The girls, always the same whether from small towns or big cities, clear skin, happy, calm faces even in the midst of adversity. After seeing these films you left feeling lighter. Downtown they would say that they were banal, lifeless and would never amount to anything, but watching those scenes Masino was left with the impression that he was really learning how to live" (my translation). Olive Borden (1906-1947) acted in films from 1924 to 1934. She was linked to George O'Brien romantically and worked under directors such as Mack Sennett, John Ford and Howard Hawks.

⁴ "You have started spending your evenings alone again, sitting in a corner of the little cinema, smoking and savoring life and the end of the day, watching the film like a child, for adventure, the pleasure of beauty or an awakened memory. And you enjoy it, you enjoy it immensely. It will be the same at seventy, if you live that long" (trans. Murch).

⁵ "American girls." Although Clelia's recollection here is of a film category rather than a single movie, Lorenzo Ventavoli surmises that she is making a reference to

George Cukor's 1939 film *The Women*, released in Italy as *Donne* (185).⁶ Cesare Pavese e la "sua" Torino, 95. Pavese's drafts were published posthumously as "Il diavolo sulle colline" and "Breve libertà" (*Cinema Nuovo* 8.141 (1959): 389-395 and 396-400); "Amore amaro" (*Cinema Nuovo* 9.147 (1960): 390-396) and "Il serpente e la colomba" (*Cinema Nuovo* 16.188 (1967): 258-279), which has an alternate title: "La vita bella."

⁷ Constance appeared in *Black Angel* (1946), *Blind Spot* (1947) and Doris in *The Lost Weekend* (1945), with Ray Milland—which won the Oscar for best picture that year—and *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), with Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake.

⁸ Foster Hirsch notes: "For both the writers and their protagonists, "hard-boiled was first and foremost a matter of style. It was a stance, a way of observing and behaving that demanded the suppression of any openly expressed feeling. Hard-boiled toughness was indicated by appearance, by occupation, by personal habits, and by manner of speech. Dressed typically in trench coat and fedora, a constant smoker and a heavy drinker, the hard-boiled hero was a man of the city, usually though not always engaged in criminal detection, a cop or a gumshoe. Moving through the criminal underworld with a shield of ironic and wry detachment, this self-conscious he-man figure used violence to contain violence . . ." (24). According to Lee Server, the darkness of hard-boiled American fiction was also recognized explicitly in the name of "a new line of French paperbacks called *Serie Noire*" that published translations of works by authors such as Hammett and Cain (1). O'Brien points to Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *Red Harvest* as the first hard-boiled novel, published in the wake of the editorial success of the pulp magazine *Black Mask*. Founded by H.L. Mencken in 1920, from 1926 on *Black Mask* published more and more detective fiction (63).

⁹ See the essay "Ragioni di Pavese," written in 1946 and published posthumously in *Saggi letterari* in 1951. There Pavese wrote: "l'americano che per il suo «tempo», per il ritmo del narrare mi gravò sulle spalle davvero, nessuno al tempo di *Paesi tuoi* lo seppe dire: era Cain" (223).

¹⁰ See Pierre Chenal's *Le Dernier tournant* (1939), Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) and Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946).

¹¹ In Pavese's radio interview on June 12, 1950 he stated: "Quando si parla di Hemingway, Faulkner, Cain, Lee Masters, Dos Passos, del vecchio Dreiser, e del loro deprecato influsso su noi scrittori italiani, presto o tardi si pronuncia la parola fatale e accusatrice: neo-realismo. Ora, vorrei ricordare che questa parola ha soprattutto oggi un senso cinematografico, definisce dei film che, come *Ossessione*, *Roma città aperta*, *Ladri di biciclette*, hanno stupito il mondo—americani compresi—e sono apparsi una rivelazione di stile che in sostanza nulla o ben poco deve all'esempio di quel cinematografo di Hollywood che pure dominava in Italia negli stessi anni in cui vi si diffondevano i narratori americani" (*Saggi* 263-64). While Pavese's carefully worded statement refers here to the "stile" of neorealist film, the inclusion of Cain's name shortly before the reference to *Ossessione* implicitly recognizes that the story of this 1943 film by Luchino Visconti derives from Cain's 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

¹² Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo point out the pervasiveness of this dynamic by

- indicating a rare exception to it, since “[t]he only classic noir directed by a woman, [Ida] Lupino’s *Hitch-Hiker*, . . . dispenses with the femme fatale” (222).
- ¹³ Except for “La giacchetta di cuoio,” which was included in the collection of short stories *Feria d’agosto* (1946), these stories—relatively early works—were published only posthumously in the two-volume collection *Racconti*.
- ¹⁴ “They’re scared to death, those two. They’ve done something. If you speak to them when they don’t expect it they jump like rabbits” (trans. Murch).
- ¹⁵ “It would have been better to leave your girl behind rather than the gas” (my translation).
- ¹⁶ “Takes away your palpitations. Women don’t understand that,” and he adds “man to man, that getting to the border is nothing. It’s crossing it that’s the problem, especially with a woman who can’t keep quiet” (trans. Murch).
- ¹⁷ I’m thirty, and I’ve always noticed that women manage to get out of trouble, leaving the man behind to deal with it” (my translation).
- ¹⁸ O’Brien notes that “a large percentage of the hardboiled writers were alcoholics” (126).
- ¹⁹ On the contrary, in considering misogyny in Pavese’s work, several, such as Davide Lajolo, Armanda Guiducci (119), and Dominique Fernandez have sought to trace its origin to autobiographical sources or to the psycho-sexual configuration of Pavese’s personality.
- ²⁰ On September 15, 1936 Pavese wrote in *Il mestiere di vivere*: “Il libro di Lévy-Bruhl *Mythologie Primitive* lascia supporre che pensando la mentalità primitiva la realtà come scambio continuo di qualità e di essenze, come flusso perenne in cui l’uomo può diventare banano o arco o lupo e viceversa (ma non l’arco diventare lupo, per esempio), la poesia (immagini) nasce come semplice descrizione di questa realtà (il dio non *somiglia* al pescecane, ma è pescecane) e come interesse antropocentrico. Insomma, le immagini (ciò m’interessa!) non sarebbero gioco espressivo, ma positiva descrizione”(46).
- ²¹ “the voices heard in the street seem to be drenched in sunlight” (my translation).
- ²² “*Noir* stories are about departures and lapses from the normal world, and the films’ deliberate visual styling enhances the kind of transformation from reality to nightmare that the narratives dramatize. The most well-known of *noir*’s visual inflections, its virtuoso lighting, is borrowed directly from the German Expressionists. Compulsively addicted to shadows, and to high contrasts between light and dark, the *noir* screen offers a cornucopia of patterns of chiaroscuro, as pools of shadow surround and sometimes overtake small centers of light. As the characters are menaced by a hostile world, so sources of light within the frame are attacked by an invading, pervasive darkness” (Hirsch, 90).
- ²³ “Forgive me Rocco, --she groaned, throwing her free arm around his neck. Rocco didn’t answer and took hold of her arm to remove it, so Concia removed it herself and clawed at his face with her fingernails. They fought in silence and Rocco threw her up against the wall again, nailing her down with the entire weight of his body. Her strong smell came to him through his scratched nostrils. Concia let out an ear-splitting shriek. --Shut up, --panted Rocco, plugging up her mouth, --shut up, whore, no one can hear you--. Concia bit his fist and then went limp

again. --Shut up, --said Rocco detaching himself from her, --shut up, or I'll slit your throat--" (my translation).

²⁴ "When he reached the door he turned and looked for her white face. He saw her dark outline against the window and knew that she was looking at him in desperation" (trans. Murch).

²⁵ "and it wasn't only their drink that was bad but their women, too" (trans. Sinclair)

²⁶ *Il mestiere di vivere*, 15 settembre 1936 (46) and 19 novembre 1939 (150).

²⁷ This issue is discussed in some detail in "Value and Devaluation of Nature and Landscape in Pavese's *La luna e i falò*."

²⁸ Billy Wilder's 1945 noir *The Lost Weekend* is the story of a writer's struggle with alcoholism and won the Oscar for the best film that year. Barbara Stanwyck, who starred in the 1948 noir *Sorry, Wrong Number*, was nominated for an Oscar for her portrayal of a woman confined to her sickbed who accidentally discovers that her husband is planning to murder her. Long sequences of it show Stanwyck on the telephone.

²⁹ "We talked all evening, until they'd nearly broken his horn outside" and that "Nora shouted to me to make them stop hooting" (trans. Sinclair).

³⁰ A well-known example is William Holden's voice-over narration in the flashback at the beginning of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950. The viewer is presented with the spectacle of Joe Gillis' corpse (Holden) as it floats on the surface of a Hollywood swimming pool. Off-screen, Gillis' voice nonchalantly recounts the events that led up to his own murder.

³¹ "But if I'd known that they drink this sort of stuff. . . . There's no denying, it warms you up, but there's no wine hereabouts [. . .] --There's nothing here, --I said. --It's like living on the moon. [. . .] My friend shrugged his shoulders and bent over the counter, pointing over his shoulder. --Do you like these women?" he asked. I gave the counter a rub. --It's our own fault, --I said. --This is where they belong. . . . --It's just like this music of theirs, --he said. --There's no comparison. They don't know how to play at all" (trans. Sinclair).

³² "[O]nly one thing mattered to her—to get me to go back with her to the coast and open an Italian bar, hung with vines (*a fancy place, you know*) in the hope that someone would see her and take her photograph and have it printed in one of the coloured weeklies (*Only gimme a break, baby*). [. . .] When I asked her why she came to bed with me, she laughed and said after all I was a man (*Put it the other way around, you come with me because I'm a girl*). [. . .] She never touched a drop of liquor (*Your looks, you know, are your only free advertising agent*) . . . " (trans. Sinclair).

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