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The Smell of Crime. Towards an Olfactology of the Italian Crime Novel

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Introduction: Smell, the Detective Novel, and the Bodily Experience of Reading

- 1 The sense of smell, considered a primordial sense deeply rooted in human cognitive mechanisms, has always maintained a special connection with literary narration, and in particular with the crime fiction genre. Its ancestral nature and its ability to evoke immediate emotions and involuntary memories make it a narrative tool of extraordinary evocative power (Candau, 2000; Herz, 2016; McGann, 2017). This biological characteristic gives olfactory representations a unique narrative effectiveness, capable of triggering deep emotional responses in the reader and transforming the act of reading itself into

an embodied experience (Calabrese, 2025, pp. 55–60; Gallese et al., 2015; Zwaan, 2004). Cognitive neuroscience suggests that reading sensory descriptions can activate the same brain regions as direct perception, creating an embodied simulation of the olfactory experience described.

- 2 In the context of *the detective novel*, which emerged in the second half of the 19th century with Edgar Allan Poe and developed through the rational investigations of Conan Doyle, attention to material, sensory, and bodily details has always played a crucial role (Calabrese & Rossi, 2018). While, in the genre's classical phase, a deductive or abductive model—centered on tangible evidence and objective observations—dominated, with the evolution toward American hard-boiled noir and, later, the contemporary psychological thriller, sensory perception—and smell in particular—has taken on increasing importance in the construction of atmosphere and the articulation of suspense (Calabrese & Rossi, 2018, pp. 7–10).
- 3 *Suspense*, a foundational element of the detective novel, is rooted in deep dynamics of anticipation and empathic simulation, engaging specific areas of the brain (Calabrese, 2025, pp. 71–72). Smell plays a crucial, not incidental, role here: described odors become vectors of tension, indicators of danger, and instruments for evoking ambiguous atmospheres.
- 4 From an *embodied* perspective, olfaction constitutes a privileged pathway that activates complex cognitive and emotional processes, provoking somatic reactions in the reader that transform reading into a perceptual simulation of the narrated world (Gottschall, 2012, pp. 104–133). Our study analyzes the evolution of the olfactory element in Italian *crime novels* through three emblematic authors—De Angelis, Scerbanenco, and Carrisi—demonstrating how its treatment reflects profound transformations both stylistically and in the sensory relationship between text and reader¹.
- 5 Our analysis, centered on the Italian context, acknowledges the influence of international models that have made olfaction a distinctive element². It examines olfactory stereotypes through three crucial phases of the genre: De Angelis (1930s–1940s), father of the Italian giallo (Pistelli, 2006); Scerbanenco (1960s–1970s), the innovator of postwar noir (Boni, 2016; Via, 2014); and Carrisi, a representative of

the contemporary psychological thriller (Crovi, 2020; Giordano, 2023). This study reveals not only a stylistic evolution but also transformations in the conceptualization and narrative use of olfaction.

1. Methodology

- 6 Our interdisciplinary approach integrates tools from narrative semiotics, linguistic analysis, and cognitive science. This latter perspective allows us to interpret olfactory representations as narrative devices that elicit somatic responses in the reader. Reading sensory descriptions may recruit perceptual and affective processes associated with sensory experience, contributing to an embodied simulation of the narrated world (Gallese et al., 2015).
- 7 This methodology draws on recent theoretical developments regarding embodiment in artistic reception (Gallese et al., 2015, pp. 15–19; Marks, 2000; Mondal, 2023; Sobchack, 2004)³.
- 8 Following the biology of literature (an approach that studies the biological and cognitive foundations of literary creation and reception), we consider reading as an experiential practice rooted in perceptual-emotional simulation (Casadei, 2018).
- 9 These are theoretical hypotheses that require experimental validation. Our study does not aim to demonstrate neural activation, but rather to identify linguistic structures that may trigger immersive responses (Caracciolo & Kukkonen, 2021). Our results remain exploratory and non-deterministic.
- 10 Our analysis identifies three linguistic elements contributing to the sensory experience of reading:
 1. **Perceptual olfactory words:** terms referring directly to smell (“fragrant,” “foul-smelling”) (Barsalou, 2008; Pulvermüller et al., 2005).
 2. **Bodily references to olfactory perception:** descriptions of gestures related to the act of smelling (“sniffs the air”) that elicit a motor simulation.
 3. **Emotional lexicon associated with odors:** terms linking olfactory perceptions and emotions, simultaneously involving sensory and emotional brain regions (Citron, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2015). These three categories were selected because they correspond to the main mechanisms of sensory activation identified by cognitive neuroscience in the processing of literary texts.

- 11 The analysis is based on a corpus of works by the three authors⁴, examining the evolution of olfactory elements in terms of frequency, complexity, and narrative function. The choice of these three authors is justified by their representativeness of three distinct historical periods of Italian giallo, their influence on the genre, and the availability of a textual corpus sufficiently rich for quantitative and qualitative analysis. This approach allows for the study of olfactory stereotypes as indicators of deep structures of thought and cultural representation (Gottschall, 2012).

Short Lexical Dictionary

- 12 This preliminary lexical analysis, conducted using Voyant Tools, provides the quantitative foundation necessary for the qualitative interpretation that will follow in the analytical sections.
- 13 Analysis of *the corpus* reveals a surprisingly broad and varied olfactory lexicon⁵, in the novels of the three authors⁶. The word *odore* is the most frequent: 158 occurrences in Carrisi, 94 in De Angelis, 49 in Scerbanenco. De Angelis stands out for his systematic use of *fiuto* (25) and *fiutare* (18), expressions of a sensory sensitivity consistent with the figure of the intuitive investigator. Carrisi uses a wide and physically marked range (e.g., *fetido* 4, *miasma* 4, *maleodorante* 5, *puzza* 30), often associated with physical tension or horror. Scerbanenco, though quantitatively more restrained, surprises with 61 occurrences of *profumo*, often linked to ambiguous female characters. The entire corpus contains over 30 distinct olfactory lemmas, from *zaffata* to *fragranza*, confirming that olfaction is a fully integrated narrative and stylistic axis, and not merely an incidental description.

2. Smell as an investigative tool

14 3.1. Smell as a clue: from objectivity to subjectivity

- 15 Before analyzing how smell functions as an investigative tool in the works of our three Italian authors, it is worth taking a brief, necessarily limited look at the famous international precedents that have helped define the archetype of the “sniffing” investigator.

- 16 In detective novels, Sherlock Holmes is perhaps the first detective to systematically use smell as an investigative tool. In his fight against crime, Holmes demonstrates an extraordinary ability to recognize and classify dozens of different tobaccos based on their scent, as well as to detect perfumes, poisons, and other chemicals. This ability is perfectly in line with his image as a scientist-detective who uses all his senses to gather empirical data.
- 17 As Murielle Wenger observes, Simenon was a true “novelist-nose,” capable of imbuing his pages with the scents of time and place, while his creation, Inspector Maigret, is described as a “commissaire-nose,” whose investigative methodology consists essentially of “sniffing,” “sniffing out” atmospheres and places to better absorb their essence. Maigret’s olfactory approach, intuitive and strongly linked to sensory immersion in the environment, offers an interesting point of comparison for understanding the evolution of the role of smell in Italian crime novels.
- 18 More recently, Kay Scarpetta, the forensic scientist protagonist of Patricia Cornwell’s thrillers, represents an evolution of this approach in scientific and forensic terms. Scarpetta uses her sense of smell in a technical and professional manner to analyze crime scenes and corpses, recognizing odors associated with decomposition, chemicals, or pathological conditions that provide crucial information for the investigation. In both cases, the sense of smell is part of a scientific and rational approach that does not, however, exclude a somatic and emotional dimension of perception.
- 19 From De Angelis to Carrisi, we seem to observe a gradual transformation in the investigative function of smells, shifting from a material and objective evidence to an increasingly subjective and metaphysical intuition. This evolution reflects not only stylistic changes but also a shift in the cognitive models that may be involved in reading. For example, the progression from an analytical approach in De Angelis (where scent remains an objective clue) to a more subjective dimension in Carrisi (where it becomes a psychological metaphor) engages the reader’s interpretive abilities in different ways.
- 20 But let us now examine, in detail, how olfactory elements function in the narratives of our three authors. For De Angelis, smell is above all a technical clue, a material element that the detective must be able to

recognize and interpret with scientific precision. Commissioner De Vincenzi, the protagonist of his novels, possesses this ability in a particularly developed form

- 21 At the start of the investigation into the murder of banker Salier, Commissioner De Vincenzi examines one of the two revolvers found and deduces that the weapon has not been used recently:

Annusò il foro di uscita. Certamente quella rivoltella non aveva sparato di recente (*Il banchiere assassinato*, p. 194);

→ He sniffed the exit hole. That revolver certainly had not been fired recently;

- 22 At another crime scene, De Vincenzi investigates the suspicious death of Gastone Lértora, who was found dead. During the autopsy and examination of the scene, the theory of poisoning begins to take shape:

L'odore del cloruro di anile è fortissimo. Odor di caramelle. Ma si volatilizza assai presto e scompare senza lasciar traccia (*La barchetta di cristallo*, p. 3561).

→ The smell of anil chloride is very strong. A smell of candy. But it evaporates very quickly and vanishes without leaving a trace.

- 23 And again:

La fialetta era vuota e l'odore di mandorle amare che mandava era acutissimo (*Il canotto insanguinato*, p. 2886);

→ The vial was empty, and the smell of bitter almonds it gave off was very sharp;

- 24 The smell is presented as a scientific and objective fact: cyanide has a bitter almond smell that an experienced investigator recognizes immediately; the smell of gunpowder makes it possible to determine whether a weapon has been used recently. In De Angelis's work, smells thus retain a dimension of objectivity and chemical and material verifiability, which makes them concrete evidence within the in-

vestigation (*cyanide, aniline chloride, chloroform*). His olfactory language, precise and almost clinical, suggests a primarily analytical approach to smell as an investigative tool, inviting the reader to engage in a cognitive processing of the clue rather than an immediate emotional response.

- 25 In Scerbanenco's work, the scent-clue takes on a rawer, more visceral dimension, retaining its materiality but enriched with a more intense emotional component, as in the following story, in which the two protagonists, Donatello and his fiancée Irene, arrive at an isolated country house and discover a recent newspaper, a clue that someone has been there recently. Searching for other clues, they notice an overturned bottle of schnapps in the bar cabinet

Donatello si inginocchiò e annusò quelle macchie scure [di grappa].
L'odore aspro della grappa gli tolse quasi il respiro (Scerbanenco,
Cento, p. 63).

→ Donatello knelt down and sniffed those dark stains [of grappa].
The sharp smell of the grappa almost took his breath away.

- 26 The smell is no longer merely an objective fact, but the expressive vehicle of a traumatic empathy with the victim; the smell is an element that does not merely provide information but provokes an immediate emotional response in both the character and the reader. Scerbanenco's writing, with its more intense emotional lexicon associated with smells, seems to invite a deeper engagement with the physical dimension of the investigation, suggesting an approach to smell in which sensory perception and emotional response are intrinsically linked.
- 27 In Carrisi's work, finally, scent as an investigative clue takes on a mysterious, almost supernatural dimension, becoming perceptible only to characters endowed with a particular, almost mediumistic sensitivity.
- 28 In *The House of Lights*, Pietro Gerber, the child hypnotist and protagonist of several novels, finds himself in the childhood home of Eva, a little girl who may be possessed or influenced by a dark presence linked to a game called "Arimo." Upon entering the "lilac room," which

belonged to Eva's deceased mother, Peter notices the collection of perfumes, strangely described as "ghost essences":

la stanza lilla, dove c'era la consolle con la collezione di boccette coi profumi di sua madre, essenze di spettri (*La casa delle luci*).

→ the lilac room, where the console table stood with the collection of little bottles holding her mother's perfumes, essences of ghosts

29 Other examples:

Ovviamente non c'era nessuno. Solo quei sette ceri che emanavano un profumo dolciastro, pregnante e fastidioso (*La casa delle luci*);

→ Obviously there was no one. Only those seven candles giving off a sweetish, pervasive, and irritating scent

Dal terreno esalava un buon profumo di muschio. In sottofondo si udiva lo scrosciare di un ruscello, nascosto chissà dove nella vegetazione (*L'educazione delle farfalle*).

→ A pleasant scent of moss rose from the ground. In the background one could hear the rushing of a stream, hidden who knows where in the vegetation

30 The olfactory element partly transcends its material dimension to become a perceptible manifestation of metaphysical realities (that is, realities that go beyond immediate physical experience to touch upon spiritual and psychological dimensions), invisible to the ordinary senses. It is no longer merely a material clue, but a bridge to other dimensions of experience.

2.2. The Investigator's "Nose": A Persistent Metaphor

31 While the role of smell as a clue has evolved significantly, the metaphor of "sniffing" as an essential quality of the investigator (and their collaborators) remains a constant among the three authors, albeit with different nuances (see Wenger, 2017):

32 See in De Angelis:

De Vincenzi non ebbe bisogno di fiutare, per sentire l'odore di mandorle amare (*Le sette picche doppiate*, p. 3066);

→ De Vincenzi did not need to sniff in order to smell the bitter almonds

Può darsi...ma il mio fiuto mi dice che non è stato soltanto un attacco di angina (*La barchetta di cristallo*).

→ Maybe... but my nose tells me it was not just a bout of angina

33 In Scerbanenco:

Aveva fiuto ed era un uomo di ferro (*Il cane che parla*);

→ He had a nose for it and was a man of iron

34 Finally, in Carrisi we find:

Sapeva fiutare un crimine quando se ne presentava l'occasione (*Il cacciatore del buio*);

→ He could sniff out a crime when the occasion arose

35 It is interesting to note that the olfactory metaphor for intuition persists across eras and styles, suggesting a deep, perhaps universal, link between the cognitive experience of intuition and the sensory experience of smell.

36 In all three cases, investigative intuition is expressed through the olfactory metaphor of “sniffing,” an ability that transcends pure rationality to draw upon a more immediate and instinctive form of knowledge. However, an evolution is also discernible: while in De Angelis the nose remains subordinate to rational intelligence, in Scerbanenco and Carrisi it becomes a form of existential wisdom born of experience.

- 37 The link between intuition and smell is rooted in our bodily experience, as smell is the sense we use to perceive dangers and opportunities before our rational consciousness kicks in (Lakoff & Johnson, 2022).

3. Olfactory Topography

Milan Through Smells: From the Urban to the Symbolic

- 38 Setting plays a key role in building *suspense in detective novels*.
- 39 For some of our authors (De Angelis and Scerbanenco), Milan is a central and recurring presence and, for this reason, offers an interesting case study for the evolution of the olfactory representation of urban space in Italian crime novels.
- 40 Olfactory descriptions of urban spaces are not mere decorative elements but contribute to the formation of true cognitive maps (Tversky, 2003), anchoring events and characters to sensory traces that enhance the memorability of scenes.
- 41 The theory of embodied simulation suggests that spatial descriptions that include sensory references such as smells can make the reading experience more immersive, inviting the reader to construct a richer and more detailed mental simulation of the narrative environment.
- 42 The evolution from De Angelis to Carrisi shows how these “olfactory landscapes” gradually become more subjective and fragmentary, reflecting changes not only in literary representation but also in the cognitive perception of space.
- 43 In De Angelis, pre-war Milan is described through smells that reflect its well-defined social stratification (Crovi, 2020; Pistelli, 2006).
- 44 In the novel *Giobbe Tuama & Co*, Commissioner De Vincenzi finds himself in the humble, bare hotel room where Giobbe Tuama, a mysterious and destitute character and central figure of the investigation, is staying. The atmosphere is oppressive, and, opening the window, De Vincenzi seeks fresh air:

De Vincenzi andò alla finestra e l'aprì. L'odore di polvere, di umidità, di rancido era insopportabile (Giobbe Tuama, p. 673);

→ *De Vincenzi went to the window and opened it. The smell of dust, of damp, of rancidness was unbearable*

45 Milan is also present through specific place names:

Adesso, che aveva respirato il profumo dell'appartamento di via Abbondio Sangiorgio (*Sei donne e un libro*, p. 523);

→ *Now that he had breathed in the scent of the apartment on Via Abbondio Sangiorgio*

46 with highly evocative interior scenes:

47 But we also find the smells of the bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, or aristocratic city:

Il salotto di madama Cripopoulo ! [...] Qui dentro si soffoca dal caldo e per di più c'è un odore oleoso di legno di sandalo bruciato (Giobbe Tuama, p. 766);

→ *Madame Cripopoulo's living room! [...] Here one suffocates from the heat, and on top of that there is an oily smell of burnt sandalwood*

48 These smells define clearly delineated social spaces: working-class neighborhoods with their domestic and modest smells, but also, at times, heterodox social spaces such as those dear to De Angelis, who was particularly attentive to the circles of the declining aristocracy. The spatial reference system constructed through smells is precise and toponymic, with a clear separation between working-class and aristocratic circles. Each smell is associated with a specific social script (Schank & Abelson, 1977), easily recognizable by the reader. Cognitively, this olfactory topography creates in the reader an ordered and hierarchical mental map, reflecting a social order that is still relatively stable (Lynch, 1960).

- 49 Scerbanenco's Milan is that of the economic boom, a far more contradictory and violent space whose smells reveal sharper social contrasts (Boni, 2016; Sebastiani, 2023). One can still find areas far removed from raw urbanization and concrete, as in this description where Alberto, a tormented man who has just committed a violent act to defend his sister, finds himself in an isolated house, likely in the countryside or in a less urbanized suburban area, where he seeks physical and moral refuge:

Qualche minuto passò, nel secco, tenero odore di orto che veniva dalla finestra (*La sabbia non ricorda*);

→ A few minutes passed, in the dry, tender smell of the vegetable garden coming through the window

- 50 contrasting with the more familiar settings of the expanding metropolitan city:

illuminava sonnolenta il vialetto che conduceva sullo stradone. Le sembrò di sentire ancora un vago residuo odore di benzina (*La sabbia non ricorda*);

→ it drowsily lit the little path leading to the main road. She thought she could still smell a faint lingering smell of gasoline

- 51 with the resulting Milanese toponyms:

Fece un lungo giro, poi tornò in via Vincenzo Monti, risalì nel suo appartamento, e notò subito il terribile odore di grappa che l'invadeva (*Milano, calibro 9*);

→ He took a long walk, then returned to Via Vincenzo Monti, went back up to his apartment, and immediately noticed the terrible smell of grappa that pervaded it

Salì sul 23 pieno. Il freddo nebbioso dava uno strano odore a tutta quella gente che in tram la circondava, un odore di fungo levato dalla ghiacciaia, di umido gelato. Solo da bambina, quando a Roma andava a scuola e ogni mattina [...] da piazza del Risorgimento a via Giovanni

Lanza, ricordava di aver avuto la stessa sensazione, insieme con l'odore di tela cerata della sua borsa di scuola (*Cinema fra le donne*).

→ *She got onto the crowded number 23. The foggy cold gave a strange smell to all those people around her on the tram, a smell of mushroom pulled from the icebox, of damp chill. Only as a child, when in Rome she went to school and every morning [...] from Piazza del Risorgimento to Via Giovanni Lanza, did she remember having had the same sensation, together with the smell of the oilcloth of her school bag*

52 Scerbanenco's settings also feature various olfactory sensations:

veniva, non si capiva da dove, un odore di minestra calda (*Cinema fra le donne*);

→ *there came, one could not tell from where, a smell of hot soup*

Nel buio caldo e maleodorante della stanza vide entrare Irene (*La sabbia non ricorda*);

→ *In the hot, foul-smelling darkness of the room he saw Irene come in*

Una finestra in mezzo ai due letti dava sul cortile e la scala di ferro antincendio la ostruiva a metà. Un vago odore di brillantina e di sudore ristagnava sempre lì dentro e anche a tenere aperte le finestre tutto il giorno non andava via (*Lo scandalo dell'osservatorio astronomico*);

→ *A window between the two beds looked onto the courtyard, and the iron fire-escape stairway blocked it halfway. A faint smell of hair pomade and sweat always lingered in there, and even keeping the windows open all day it would not go away*

53 the ever-present interior of prostitution, evoking its entire world through the smell:

Ma poi si vide in quel miserabile appartamento per coppie squillo in cui, nonostante la classe di certi mobili, del lampadario, dei tendaggi, si sentiva odore di marciapiedi e di sfruttatori (*Cento*, p. 163).

→ *But then he saw himself in that wretched apartment for call-girl couples where, despite the class of certain furniture, of the chandelier, of the drapes, one could smell sidewalks and pimps*

- 54 In Scerbanenco, Milan is a city-body, whose industrial odors (*gasoline*) mingle with those of endemic neo-capitalist violence:

Ma il ricordo di quei ragazzi urlanti nel dolciastro nauseante fumo della propria carne bruciata, era un ricordo invincibile, di quando lui era un uomo e non un farabutto (*Milano, calibro 9*);

→ *But the memory of those boys screaming in the sweetish, nauseating smoke of their own burning flesh was an invincible memory, of when he was a man and not a scoundrel*

se Simeone diceva di sì era perché aveva sentito odore di soldi, e lei, povera, vecchia zitella era proprio quell'odore che aveva voluto fargli sentire (*Milano, calibro 9*).

→ *if Simeone said yes it was because he had smelled the smell of money, and she, a poor old spinster, was precisely that smell she had wanted to make him sense*

- 55 The olfactory topography is that of a city in the midst of transformation, where the old and the new, wealth and poverty coexist in a disorienting chaos (cf. Wenger 2017; 2023; Crovi, 2020; Reverdito, 2014; Sebastiani, 2023; Via, 2014).
- 56 For Carrisi, we observe fluid and multifaceted settings in which the cities of Rome and Florence—the primary settings of the two sagas, dedicated respectively to the protagonists Marcus and Pietro Gerber—demonstrate greater adaptability to narrative plots and characters and are colored by their emotions.
- 57 Pietro Gerber, the children's hypnotist, is in Florence, immersed in a complex and harrowing investigation into the abduction of a child and the mother's memory loss. He moves through the historic center at night, enveloped in a cold and desolate atmosphere:

Nelle strade deserte del centro storico, l'unica consolazione era il profumo dei camini accesi (*La casa senza ricordi*);

→ *In the deserted streets of the old town, the only consolation was the scent of the lit fireplaces*

58 Other examples:

Il fruttivendolo, il fioraio, il panettiere, le piccole botteghe di quartiere, le cassette di arance, il profumo dei fiori e del pane fresco, le voci familiari e il saluto dei passanti (*L'educazione delle farfalle*);

→ *The greengrocer, the florist, the baker, the small neighborhood shops, the crates of oranges, the scent of flowers and fresh bread, the familiar voices and the greeting of passersby*

Nella stazione di servizio deserta, il freddo della notte si mischiava all'odore di benzina (*Io sono l'abisso*)

→ *At the deserted gas station, the cold of the night mingled with the smell of gasoline*

fa freddo e c'è odore di brodo (*Io sono l'abisso*).

→ *it is cold and there is a smell of broth*

59 Serena, the protagonist of *The Education of Butterflies*, finds herself in a forest, a place that for her evokes connotations of both refuge and mystery or potential danger, linked to past experiences and the search for a missing person:

in mezzo a un boschetto [...] s'incamminò. L'aria era fresca ma non fredda. Dal terreno esalava un buon profumo di muschio (*L'educazione delle farfalle*);

→ *in the middle of a thicket in the middle of a grove [...] she set off. The air was fresh but not cold. A pleasant scent of moss rose from the ground*

- 60 And even when specific social spaces are mentioned, the author tends toward a metaphorical representation of their role:

I ricchi erano particolarmente bravi a occultare la propria spazzatura, altrimenti la puzza avrebbe ammorbato lo splendore che li circondava (*Io sono l'abisso*).

→ *The rich were particularly good at concealing their own garbage, otherwise the stench would have tainted the splendor that surrounded them*

- 61 Beyond specific urban spaces like Milan, certain symbolic locations from the crime genre recur frequently in the olfactory descriptions of the three authors, allowing us to appreciate the evolution of their treatment through codified narrative *topoi*.
- 62 Hospitals and healthcare facilities, government offices, and police stations, for example, frequently appear in the novels of our corpus.
- 63 The olfactory representation of these institutional settings can be interpreted, from an embodied perspective, as an invitation to the reader to recall socially shared cognitive schemas. The smell of hospital disinfectant, for example, automatically evokes a whole *scenario* of behaviors, expectations, and emotional valences linked to the hospital experience (Schank & Abelson, 1977). The evolution, from De Angelis to Carrisi, shows how these cognitive schemas gradually become more subjective and psychologically charged.
- 64 Finally, the crime scene can be configured in crime fiction as an implicit—or sometimes explicit—olfactory space, a highly codified narrative space structured around the discovery and description of the body, the intervention of forensic investigators, and the collection of physical evidence. As Muryn et al. (2016) point out, this is a “normative scene” that repeats itself with stable variations and can be identified by a matrix of recurring narrative and linguistic constructions. In this context, the sense of smell plays a crucial role even when it is not directly mentioned: the reader, confronted with a decomposing body, a closed and damp space, traces of blood or fluids, is led to “smell” with their nose what the text allows them only to guess. The smell of death, of enclosed spaces, or of technical interventions (disinfectants,

reagents) contributes to the creation of a dense and unsettling atmosphere. In these cases, smell acts as a silent, implicit, yet effective narrative device in building the emotional tension of the investigation (for examples drawn from our *corpus of novels*, see 3.1. and 3.2.).

- 65 It is also worth noting that the crime scene is now configured as a highly codified olfactory space, one that has developed far beyond literature. Indeed, the crime genre has undergone a significant transmedia expansion—defined by Jenkins (2006) as “transmedia storytelling”—from the novel to film, then to television series such as *CSI* and *True Detective*, and finally to contemporary video games. This hybridization of media has generated new representations of olfactory stereotypes, where the invisible dimension of smells finds innovative representational strategies through visual and auditory solutions that enrich the genre’s expressive potential.
- 66 Carrisi’s olfactory topographies create more subjective and fragmentary cognitive maps in the reader, reflecting a postmodern perception of space as a psychological projection rather than an objective fact. Odors are described through abstract conceptual metaphors (“consolation”) and systematically linked to complex emotional states.
- 67 Carrisi’s settings thus seem to invite the reader into more fluid and subjective mental simulations, in which space itself becomes a psychological projection rather than an objective geographical reference (“hiding the splendor”; “consolation” from the “smell of lit fireplaces”).

4. Olfactory Characterization of Characters

Construction of identity through smells

- 68 For all three authors, smells also play a fundamental role in characterization, defining the characters’ social, professional, and moral identities. It should be noted that this characterization, which one might also consider, beyond extratextual interpretations, suggests that the specific uses of smells in the text may simply refer to the construction of particular characters (from a strictly literary perspective and not necessarily a sociological or cultural one).

- 69 The evolution of the olfactory characterization of characters that we observe in our three Italian authors can be better understood when compared to certain influential international models.
- 70 Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, for example, is characterized by his own scent, that of his pipe tobacco, but also by his ability to perceive and classify the scents of others, thereby reconstructing social and moral identities (Knight, 2004, pp. 75–89).
- 71 Simenon, in his portrayal of Maigret and other characters, uses body odors and perfumes to establish precise indicators of social class and morality. The dichotomy between “positive” and “negative” smells that we found in our authors (particularly in Scerbanenco) mirrors that present in the Maigret corpus, where, as Wenger (2023) notes, female and male smells are clearly distinguished into categories of positivity and negativity that reflect implicit moral judgments.
- 72 In a more modern approach, Patricia Cornwell characterizes Kay Scarpetta as a professional accustomed to daily contact with odors that most people would find unbearable (Knight, 2004, pp. 200–215). Her ability to maintain her clarity and scientific objectivity in the face of decomposing odors or chemicals used at a crime scene is an integral part of her professionalism and identity. In this sense, smell is not only a character trait but also an element that defines her relationship to the world around her.
- 73 In De Angelis's work, scent is above all a detail—seemingly secondary, yet a marker of class. In *Il mistero delle tre orchidee* (*The Mystery of the Three Orchids*), De Vincenzi finds himself in the apartment of Susanna Verena, a young and charming actress involved in the mystery:

un forte odore di crema, d'acqua di colonia e di lavanda aleggiava lì (*Il mistero delle tre orchidee*, p. 3322);

→ a strong smell of cream, of cologne, and of lavender hung there

- 74 And again:

ancora sparso nell'aria un fortissimo odore di acqua di colonia e di tabacco aromatizzato (*Il mistero di Cinecittà*, p. 3181);

→ *still scattered in the air a very strong smell of cologne and flavored tobacco*

75 De Angelis uses relatively neutral olfactory terms ("scent," "smell") combined with adjectives of moderate emotional intensity ("rich," "strong"). This approach suggests a characterization that combines elements of social recognition with emotional elements.

76 In Scerbanenco, personal scent becomes much more visceral and direct. In the following example, the olfactory description refers to Ugo, the carpenter who is having an affair with Irene, Alberto's sister, and who is linked to his trade and way of life:

Portava con sé, sempre, un vago odore di trucioli, di legno, e di vino rosso (*La sabbia non ricorda*);

→ *He always carried with him a faint smell of wood shavings, of wood, and of red wine*

77 Other examples:

Giannuzzo [...] gli si avvicinò di mezzo passo, così che Roberto ne sentì l'asprigno odore di traspirazione (*La sabbia non ricorda*);

→ *Giannuzzo [...] moved half a step closer to him, so that Roberto caught the sourish smell of perspiration*

quando vedevano il suo arrivo si portavano il pollice e l'indice al naso, come chi sente un cattivo odore e smettevano di parlare (*Milano, capitolo 9*);

→ *when they saw him coming they would bring thumb and forefinger to their nose, like someone catching a bad smell, and would stop talking*

78 The use of adjectives such as "sour" and direct references to bodily fluids ("sweat") suggest a more physical and immediate approach to olfactory characterization. In Example 35, the ritual gestures of protection against unpleasant odors also invite the reader to directly share the character's sensory experience. This narrative strategy re-

flects a more materialistic aesthetic and a more direct approach to corporeality, in keeping with Scerbanenco's social criticism and raw realism.

- 79 In Carrisi's work, personal scent often transcends materiality to become a vehicle for complex psychological states. Little Eva, the protagonist of the novel **The House of Lights** and a child with presumed paranormal abilities, speaks to Pietro Gerber, the children's hypnotist. When she describes her perception of her mother (who is deceased but whose presence lingers), the olfactory association creates an undeniable perceptual link:

Mia mamma profuma di sapone di Marsiglia (*La casa delle luci*);

→ *My mother smells of Marseille soap*

- 80 Other examples:

Quindi afferrò la manica di una giacca maschile, se l'avvicinò per annusarla e riconobbe subito il profumo dell'uomo con cui aveva fatto sesso fino a poco prima (*L'educazione delle farfalle*);

→ *Then she grabbed the sleeve of a man's jacket, brought it close to smell it, and immediately recognized the scent of the man with whom she had had sex until shortly before*

L'alito gli puzzava di alcol e di sigarette (*L'educazione delle farfalle*);

→ *His breath stank of alcohol and cigarettes*

La puzza era la sua natura, gli serviva per tenere lontani i nemici (*L'ipotesi del male*);

→ *The stench was his nature, it served him to keep his enemies away*

- 81 The more straightforward descriptive use of smells (37, 38) is complemented by more complex examples (39), in which smell is no longer merely a physical attribute but becomes a metaphor for psychological identity ("the stench was his nature"). Carrisi seems to develop an ap-

proach in which sensory perception is intimately linked to psychological dimensions that invite the reader to make an interpretive effort that goes beyond simple social categorization or immediate emotional response.

5. The Emotional Dimension of Smells

Disgust and repulsion: the evolution of the olfactory representation of death

82 Death, a central element of the crime genre, is treated in an extremely different olfactory manner by the three authors, revealing a progressive emotional and conceptual intensification. These representations exploit the direct link between the sense of smell and the limbic system, triggering immediate and visceral emotional responses in the reader (Haidt et al., 1997).

83 In De Angelis, the description of the smell of death is relatively subtle:

Qui c'è puzzo di cadavere (*Il mistero delle tre orchidee*, p. 3362);

→ *There is a stink of corpse here*

L'odore non era più forte che in anticamera, ma dava la nausea (*La barchetta di cristallo*, p. 1437);

→ *The smell was no stronger than in the antechamber, but it was nauseating*

E appena dentro, un odore forte, strano, che prendeva insensibilmente alla gola (*Il canotto insanguinato*);

→ *And just inside, a strong, strange smell that imperceptibly gripped the throat*

84 The smell is mentioned but not described in detail, in keeping with a sensibility that maintains a certain emotional distance even in the face of violent death.

85 In Scerbanenco, the smell of death takes on a much more visceral and unsettling dimension:

Aveva risentito il disgustoso odore che veniva da quella porta, dolciastro e insostenibile (Cento, p. 268);

→ *He had smelled again the disgusting smell coming from that door, sweetish and unbearable*

86 The description becomes much more precise (“sweetish”), unlike De Angelis, who limits himself to factual observations (“strong, strange smell”). Scerbanenco’s vocabulary directly draws on the register of primal emotions and physical reactions, directly involving the reader in the experience of disgust.

sentiva che vi era molto sangue, nell’auto, e l’odore del sangue umano [...] scatena terrori ancestrali, voglia di fuggire, di urlare (idem, p.)

→ he sensed that there was much blood, in the car, and the smell of human blood [...] unleashes ancestral terrors, the urge to flee, to scream

87 Here too the emotional reaction (“ancestral terrors,” “the urge to flee, to scream”) is made explicit, directly involving the reader in the experience of disgust.

88 In Carrisi’s work, the smell of death retains its physical dimension, even in its absence:

E lui si portava ancora addosso il puzzo del sangue (Io sono l’abisso);

→ *And he still carried on himself the stench of blood*

c’era il puzzo di morte (L’educazione delle farfalle);

→ *there was the stench of death*

Se mamma e babbo fossero davvero là sotto dovremmo avvertire
l'odore dei morti (*La casa senza ricordi*)

→ If mom and dad were really down there we should be able to smell
the dead

89 Conclusions

90 An analysis of olfactory stereotypes in Italian crime novels reveals a significant evolution that reflects broader cultural shifts: from markers of class and material clues in De Angelis, to visceral expressions of social criticism in Scerbanenco, to becoming metaphysical bridges between the physical and the psychological in Carrisi.

91 This sensory parable demonstrates how olfaction has evolved from an essentially descriptive and investigative narrative device into a tool for deep psychological exploration, while retaining certain universal archetypes (the investigator's "nose," the association between smell and morality, the mnemonic dimension) that reveal profound continuities in the cultural conceptualization of olfaction.

92 The identified evolution suggests promising research avenues: from extending the analysis to other Italian crime novelists, to studying cognitive effects using neuroscientific tools (for example, how the primary emotion of fear is linguistically manifested), to comparisons with international literary traditions. This study represents a first step toward a "literary olfactology" of the noir novel, demonstrating how the analysis of olfactory stereotypes can offer an innovative perspective not only on an established genre, but also on the representation of the body and bodily experience in contemporary literature.

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NOTES

- 1 The textual examples are taken from the original Italian editions and translated literally into French for illustrative purposes, despite the existence of French editions for some of Carrisi's novels. This approach preserves the consistency of the linguistic analysis of narrative uses of smell in their original wording, thereby avoiding the variables introduced by translation choices that can alter the sensory components.
- 2 Georges Simenon's Maigret represents an important narrative paradigm, just as, in another field, Patricia Cornwell's novels featuring the medical examiner Kay Scarpetta do (see 3.1. and 5.1.).
- 3 The concept of “visual sniffing” proposed by Mondal (2023) offers an interesting interpretive model: the idea that certain images can evoke olfactory responses through synaptic memory can be usefully transferred to literary analysis, where verbal descriptions might function as “sensory bridges” that invite the reader to complex bodily responses.
- 4 Our analysis is based on a corpus consisting of eleven novels from the Inspector De Vincenzi series by De Angelis (1935–1942), six significant works by Scerbanenco (1961–1974), and eight representative novels by Carrisi (2012–2024). The full titles and precise bibliographic references for these works are detailed in the “Primary Sources” section of the bibliography.
- 5 For a description and analysis of basic olfactory terms in Italian, see Perugini (2026).

6 The lexical analysis was conducted using the Voyant Tools software, which allowed for the extraction of frequencies and distributions of the main olfactory lemmas. A detailed analysis of the results will be developed in a subsequent study.

RÉSUMÉ

English

This study analyzes the evolution of olfactory stereotypes in Italian crime fiction through the works of three emblematic authors: Augusto De Angelis, Giorgio Scerbanenco and Donato Carrisi. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that integrates narrative semiotics, linguistic analysis, and embodied cognition theories, the research examines how smell functions as an investigative device, a means of characterization, and a means of constructing narrative atmospheres. The analysis reveals a progressive transformation: from social marker and material clue in De Angelis, to visceral expression of social critique in Scerbanenco, to metaphysical bridge between physical and psychic dimensions in Carrisi. This evolution reflects profound cultural changes in Italian society, from pre-war social stratification to postmodern fluidity, suggesting that the olfactory element is not simply descriptive ornamentation but an essential narrative device for creating suspense and emotional reader engagement. The study proposes a new methodological perspective for analyzing Italian crime fiction, demonstrating the potential of a literary *olfactology* of the genre.

INDEX

Keywords

smell, italian crime fiction, olfactory stereotypes, embodied Cognition, crime fiction

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