

Mon semblable, mon frère: Adaptation Strategies, Imaginary, and Aesthetics in Marco and Antonio Manetti's *Diabolik* Trilogy*

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Abstract

Diabolik has marked a decisive watershed in Italian culture and imagination. Confronting the way it traversed sixty years of Italian history allows us to examine the complex plot that links Italian comics to medial and socio-cultural changes. This article investigates the relationships between the comics series and the cinematic *Diabolik*, discussing the mechanisms of adaptation and remediation, the changes in aesthetic forms and symbolic references that have aimed to intercept a vast and heterogeneous audience over several years and different media. We will analyze the evolution that *Diabolik*'s storyworld has undergone, from the establishment of the comics series to the film adaptations, examining how the franchise has traversed and adapted to the changing imaginaries and spaces (physical and medial) in constant metamorphosis, and considering how it has responded to the identity needs of Italian audiences from the 1960s to the present. Finally -- and, crucially -- we will focus on the trilogy recently directed by the Manetti brothers (*Diabolik*, 2021; *Diabolik - Ginko all'attacco!*, 2022; and *Diabolik - Chi sei?*, 2023), considering the relation it bears to the comics series, discussing the semiotic and aesthetic choices through which the filmmakers have adapted the hypotexts and remediated the original material, and highlighting its palimpsestuous character.

Keywords: Comics; Crime Movies; Intermedial Adaptation; Imaginary; *Diabolik*.

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Introduction

The character created by the Giussani sisters has had such a substantial impact on Italian audiences that, over the years, it has become, through intricate processes of intermedial transfers and transmedial expansions, the centrepiece of a complex, branching narrative ecosystem (Innocenti and Pescatore 2017). This ecosystem is markedly character-oriented and has developed in unpredictable directions in its early days. On the one hand, its ramifications have reflected the influence of the many creative instances that have succeeded one another in the *Diabolik*verse, multiplying its refractions across the most disparate media objects (Quaianni Manuzzato 2024). On the other hand, they have responded over time to the identity needs of audiences who, from the 1960s to the present, have found in *Diabolik* an echo of the shifting cultural temperament that Italy has experienced. Indeed, throughout its more than sixty-year history, the comic has generated adaptations, references, rewritings, fan practices, and merchandising, each time hybridising with the poetics of the authors who have taken charge of its creation and resonating with the historical, social, and medial trends that have emerged over time.

This article investigates the intricate relationships between the *Diabolik* comics series and its cinematic adaptations, focusing on the transformations in aesthetic forms and symbolic references. It also delves into the mechanisms of adaptation and remediation that have sought to engage a broad and heterogeneous audience over multiple years and media platforms. Particular attention is given to the most recent extension of the franchise: the trilogy of films directed by Marco and Antonio Manetti (*Diabolik*, 2021; *Diabolik - Ginko all'attacco!*, 2022; and *Diabolik - Chi sei?*, 2023). The study begins by contextualising the comics series within its historical framework, highlighting the genealogy of *Diabolik* and its reflection and adaptation to contemporary socio-cultural dynamics, re-symbolizing them in its themes and aesthetics. It then examines the relationship between the films and the comics series, discussing the semiotic and aesthetic strategies employed by the filmmakers to adapt the hypotexts and repurpose medium-specific narrative techniques from the comics. Additionally, it underscores the palimpsestuous nature of the film trilogy, illustrating the layered and intertextual dimensions of this latest cinematic endeavour.

1 The *Diabolik* Comics Series, or Italian Society Behind the Mask

Born in 1962 during the height of the economic boom, the series created by the Giussani sisters served as a potent metaphor for the transformative changes affecting Italy at the time. The 1960s in Italy, also known as the 'economic miracle,' were marked by significant shifts in consumption and production dynamics fueled by dramatic economic, urban, and industrial growth. This period also witnessed the Italian middle class's assimilation of new cultural values and social structures, markedly different from those of early 20th-century Italy, still primarily rooted in an agricultural economy.

The advent of television led to a significant reshaping of desires and identity needs, thereby instilling new consumption patterns and media practices in Italian society. This transformation elicited a discernible impact within the culture industry, as illuminated by Gino Frezza's observations:

One can notice phenomena of increased wealth but also social solid imbalance and inequality; major international, European, and Italian conflicts are ignited (these are the years of the Berlin Wall, Kennedy's assassination, the Cuban missile crisis, and the centre-left in Italy). But the media system has changed its axis from the previous decade; it no longer revolves around the centrality of cinema and its spectacular genres, but rather around television, the dimension of the communicative flow that squares old perceptions of space and time, reformulates them, reactivates cultural archives, and imposes real-time information (2008: 87, our translation)

In this evolving landscape, Italian comics underwent a transformation facilitated by the dynamic interplay between serial storytelling and single authorship, a hallmark of fumetti. On the one hand, there is a concerted effort to (re)discover Italian creators, facilitated by the emergence of *auteur* magazines such as "Linus" in 1965, which provided new platforms for experimental narratives. On the other hand, the proliferation of crime comics during the 1960s, as highlighted by Castaldi (2010), reflects the societal and media transformations of the time – a period marked by rapid social changes and technological innovations alongside persistent con-

servative attitudes (Curti 2018). In both respects, comics matured by transcending previous associations with juvenile themes, thereby cultivating a desire among readers to challenge and subvert societal norms, prohibitions, bans, and censorship. This cultural tension is found in works like *Diabolik* and its successors – notably *Kriminal* (1964) and *Satanik* (1964) – and in the concurrent rise of erotic-porno comics.¹ Influenced by 19th and early 20th-century French crime fiction, these narratives departed from contemporary English productions by focusing on criminal antiheroes such as Rocambole, Arsène Lupin, Fantômas, and Zigomar, figures who enticed readers to align with the pleasures of transgression and the illicit (Dall'Asta 2004; Spinazzola 2018).

Moreover, as *romans-feuilletons*, these works rested on a double seriality anticipating that of comics, being initially published in serial instalments in magazines and later collected in books that, in turn, boasted very long editorial histories, giving shape to long series of novels. In common with crime comics, these novels were set in the “new consumption places typical of the modern industrial city” (Pagello 2022: 178) and displayed a fascination with emblems of modernity such as “electricity, new technologies, fast vehicles, and extraordinary consumer goods [...], inviting readers to marvel at this era filled with new commodities” (Letourneux 2017: 156). Following Letourneux, Pagello suggests that “the violent and destructive impulses represented in these novels [...] can thus be seen as an expression, a playful and aestheticising staging of the unconscious of the emerging consumer society” (2022: 178).

Similarly, in Italian crime comics, the timid appearance of violence and eros had the function of laying bare the hypocrisies of the bourgeois order, paving the way for a desire to transcend the limits of the representable, experiencing on one's own (medial) skin the consequences of transgression and sexual pleasure. Indeed, in this period, the emergence of feminist and student movements greatly favoured the circulation of new social discourses and imaginaries that challenged the traditional beliefs and values based on a patriarchal Catholic society that had characterised Italy up to that time (Maina and Zecca 2022).

Diabolik is the first Italian comic to push the serial medium in subversive directions, initially frightening parents and conservatives to no small degree. The Giussani sisters were even referred to by specific press of the time as “the murderous sisters” (Albano 1974) or “the ladies of terror.” Perhaps for this reason, *Diabolik* was prudently set in Clerville, an imaginary town across the border (Steccanella 2022) – on the surface, a paradise for the upper-middle class that nonetheless hides intrigues and hypocrisies. This setting provides fertile ground for *Diabolik*'s escapades. The setting is a metaphor for the frustrated desires for order and prosperity typical of the era. However, the existence of dark criminal realities underlying the idyllic surface reveals the contradictions behind this veneer of perfection. The audience's voyeuristic desire to ‘spy’ on the rot of Clerville can be interpreted as a response to a changing society, eager to peer beneath – and transgress – the surface of social conventions, where the search for the truth behind appearances became increasingly salient. Moreover, in addition to the tensions of the capitalist system, the 1960s were the setting of a series of transnational political-economic plots that are often still obscure today. Concerning these tensions, the figure of the outlaw (and that of his double, the secret agent) stands in the spectral position of the invisible observer and maneuverer, rather than victim, paradoxically recovering an agency denied to real people by actual historical events.

Diabolik's proficiency in infiltrating and exposing society's latent contradictions exemplifies a yearning to penetrate beyond superficial appearances, catering to and gratifying the audience's voyeuristic inclinations. The talent for altering his visage and adopting various identities further accentuates the theme of identity fluidity, subtly alluding to queerness. In a cultural milieu where tensions foreshadowing the sexual revolution were suppressed and regulated by authorities yet palpably present, *Diabolik*'s androgynous features – embodied in his soulless, seductive clear eyes – and his protean abilities resonated with the audience's (particularly the female one's), emergent desire to explore and experiment with social and sexual paradigms.

Over time, the comic underwent significant transformations, navigating a delicate balance between continuity and innovation within its serial framework (Boccia Artieri 2023). On the one hand, it assimilated external societal changes – notably in the portrayal of technology, lifestyles, and occupations – and gradually introduced subtle shifts in its narrative fabric. Notably, Eva Kant evolved from a two-dimensional sidekick to a fully re-

1. Since 1966 Renzo Barbieri and his publishing house “Editrice 66” established the genre of pornographic comics in Italy. They were active until the 1980s, with more than one hundred different titles.

alised partner-in-crime whose heightened agency reflected the feminist currents of the 1970s. On the other hand, the comic maintained a stable narrative structure, characterised by recurring plot motifs and predominantly static, undeveloped characters lacking extensive backgrounds or personal histories (24-25).

However, Diabolik's persona gradually softened over time, emphasising his cunning and wisdom while toning down his earlier cruel and vengeful tendencies. The Giussani sisters deliberately relinquished the more macabre and ruthless aspects to competitors (Hunt 2016), focusing instead on the complicated intrigues and dramatic heists central to the series. As noted by Vaturi (2012), the initial allure of the charismatic yet troubled protagonist, perhaps a response to the moral rigidity under strain during the 1960s, gradually diminished with evolving societal realities: terrorism, crime waves involving figures like Vallanzasca and criminal organisations such as Banda della Magliana and Uno Bianca, and Mafia-related massacres.

This evolution is mirrored in Diabolik himself, who, while retaining his criminal core and ethical code, develops a newfound sensitivity characterised by respect for morality and empathy towards the vulnerable, marking a subtle transformation over time. Nevertheless, Diabolik never radically changes, stuck in the eternal present as the comic prototype of crime narratives that wallow in genre tropes while thematising the everyday violence behind capitalism's promises of wealth and luxury. This faceless, morality-free capitalism is mirrored by Diabolik's many masks – the one that hides his face and the many with which he disguises himself as other people – which, as Frezza (2008) notices, is both an homage to the Giussanis' own models (notably *Fantômas*) and the anticipation of a similar “repertoire of signs and symbols” (90) that would appear in subsequent spy movies (Frezza mentions the *Mission: Impossible* franchise).

In the following sections, the exploration will delve into the depth beyond *Diabolik*'s apparent simplicity, revealing an impact extending far beyond the comics series' confines. This is unsurprising, as comics often serve as a laboratory for complex narrative practices, capable of problematising the relationship with contemporaneity and the imaginaries it generates.

2 *Conforme a cosa?* Imaginaries and Aesthetics of the *Diabolik* Movies

Despite the franchise's extensive history and numerous iterations, the recent cinematic trilogy directed by Marco and Antonio Manetti (2021, 2022, 2023) represents only the second attempt to bring it to the big screen. The first endeavour occurred during the comic's peak popularity and was characterised by adaptations approaching the source material with significant creative license. This trend is evident in the embrace of pop art and psychedelia that defined Bava's iconic film, *Diabolik* (1968), as well as in Steno's comedic take, *Arriva Dorellik!* (1967).

During a time when Italian cinema was heavily influenced by comic books, as shown by the release of Umberto Lenzi's adaptation of *Kriminal* just two years earlier (1966), Bava's *Diabolik* emerged as a representation of sexual and economic hedonism and anarchic impulses. This was despite the constraints imposed by Astorina (the rights holder) and the limitations on violence by Dino De Laurentiis. (Pezzotta 2013; Hunt 2018; Pagello 2022).

Concerns over copyright issues and apprehensions regarding misrepresentation possibly arose due to the fact that Bava's film took too much liberty in adapting the original franchise's thematic and visual elements. These concerns hindered the production of subsequent films until the recent trilogy helmed by the Manetti Bros., produced by Carlo Macchitella and the Manetti Bros. themselves in collaboration with Mompracem, Rai Cinema, and Astorina. Indeed, the Manetti Bros.' rendition of *Diabolik* displays a markedly different posture from Bava's, fitting into a wave of similar projects expanding the Italian comics repertoire cinematically (e.g., *Dampyr*, 2022, conceived as the foundation of the imminent Bonelli Cinematic Universe). These projects aim to replicate the established success of US comic movie franchises while revindicating their own Italian-ness. They also follow the good results of recent Italian films drawing from similar genre imaginaries: Gabriele Mainetti and Nicola Guaglianone's *Lo chiamavano Jeeg Robot* (2015) and *Freaks Out* (2021), and Gabriele Salvatores's *Il ragazzo invisibile* (2014) and *Il ragazzo invisibile - Seconda generazione* (2018).²

2. It is also worth mentioning the precursor *Nirvana* (Salvatores, 1997), perhaps the only example of Italian-style cyberpunk and certainly a white fly for Italian cinema in those years.

To capture the essence of the comics series and emphasise the character's Italian heritage, the Manetti Bros. and their co-writers (Michelangelo La Neve and Mario Gomboli) referenced three albums from the 1960s, maintaining their original time and place settings. The selected issues are the third, *L'arresto di Diabolik* (published in March 1963), which inspired the first movie (2021); the sixteenth, *Diabolik - Ginko all'attacco!* (published in April 1964), which lends its name to the eponymous second film (2022), and the 107th, *Diabolik, chi sei?* (published in March 1968), providing the title and main plot for the third film (2023). This choice gives the films a retro aesthetic that engenders at least two effects: for fans of the comic hypotext, an intensification of the nostalgic revival of their totemic object (Stephan 2019); for newcomers, a layer of exoticism superimposed on the movie, perhaps with an eye on foreign audiences.

Indeed, while the Clerville of the 1960s was crafted by blending elements from Milan and France (particularly the French Riviera) to create an aspirational space for the petit-bourgeois readers of the time, the cinematic Clerville is a collage of locations set in a timeless, idyllic Italy. This Italy reflects the sedimentation, in the contemporary imaginary (especially abroad), of the Belpaese at its zenith, the epitome of beauty and style.

Nevertheless, despite a professed fidelity to the source material and the apparent kinship between the languages of comics and film, any adaptation involves choices that have formal, semantic, and symbolic repercussions. The cinematic *Diabolik* is no exception. Although much of the trilogy uses the comics as storyboards and plot structures, the choices made by the Manetti Bros. are neither trivial nor, in some cases, intuitive.³ The most conspicuous of these changes pertain to the portrayal of the main characters: Diabolik's seductive and mysterious profile is retained, but some of the excesses of his early character are tempered. In this regard, Luca Marinelli's portrayal in the first film and Giacomo Gianniotti's in the second present two contrasting readings: Marinelli's is characterised by alienation and menace, whereas Gianniotti's is marked by swagger and irreverence. The antagonist and foil to the King of Terror is Valerio Mastandrea's Ginko: perpetually dissatisfied and melancholic, aware of the futility of his task against such an unmatched adversary, obsessed with the idea of capturing Diabolik, and, for that very reason, Freudianly prone to sabotaging his plans and remaining constantly dissatisfied.

Even more significantly, Miriam Leone's Eva Kant is granted an agency the character initially lacked, reflecting her evolution over the years and the changed social sensibility. Acting as a counterpoint to Eva Kant is Duchess Altea of Vallenberg (Monica Bellucci), Inspector Ginko's lover, a character well-known to fans of the series, who functions to create a mirror pair to the criminal duo and undergoes an inverse denouement at the end of the second movie: Diabolik, who seemed to have abandoned Eva, is revealed to have been orchestrating his plan with her all along, while the relationship between Ginko and Altea, continually deferred by his obsession with chasing Diabolik, suffers as the consequences of the Inspector's obsession. In the trilogy's third chapter, this character square reaches full realisation when a criminal gang unexpectedly captures Diabolik and Inspector Ginko, and Eva Kant and Duchess Altea join forces to save their respective partners. This episode again highlights the growing agency of the two female characters while also underscoring the close relationship between Diabolik and Ginko, united by their defeat and their monolithic character, counterbalanced by the adaptability and pragmatism of their partners.

The third film introduces a new variable: the criminal gang that, in Ginko's own words, "is more dangerous than Diabolik." Noteworthy is the portrayal of these villains, especially when compared to those from the 1968 comic issue. The latter is deeply rooted in the iconography of the comics: impersonal, corpulent figures clad in long raincoats over formal suits and ties. Conversely, the movie's villains are depicted as thin, nervous, psychologically unstable, and dressed to evoke the criminal gangs of the 1970s and 1980s, an imagery (and imaginary) deeply embedded in Italian historical reality.

The introduction of this variable in the third film also signifies the temporal progression of the trilogy. While the first two films are set in the mid-1960s, the third appears to be in the 1970s. The murderous violence attributed to these criminals poses a genuine threat of brutally disrupting social order, starkly contrasting with Diabolik's ingenious schemes, which deftly manoeuvre within bourgeois society without upsetting its balance. A symbolic reflection of this disruption of the established order can be seen in the foregrounding of Ginko

3. A similar profession of allegedly absolute fidelity could be noted, for example, in Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (2009), which analogously, and despite the stunning visual resemblance, shows significant differences from the graphic novel.

and Diabolik's relation to their unfit or absent paternal figures: Ginko's guilt-driven determination stems from a corrupt judge, while the criminal chieftain King, a new Chronos, tries to kill the young Diabolik, only to be killed by the latter in an Oedipal handover. In this context, the third film portrays Diabolik and Ginko as united by an ethic, an honour code of behaviour that distinguishes them from the ruthless, murderous new criminals and their unprecedentedly violent subversion of the status quo.

3 Location da sogno: Spaces, Retro, and Glamour

Far from condensing its symbolic value on its protagonists, the films express their imaginary through the spaces inhabited by the characters and the upper-class life they embody – made up of fashion, jewellery, and the posh Italian cocktails that Diabolik and Eva drink together (one cannot help but notice the iconic Campari red at the end of the second film). High society, suggestion, and exoticism in Clerville are opposed to transgression, prohibition, and the illicit through the same paradoxical relationship of attraction and repulsion that has driven thousands of readers toward consuming the comics.

One of the films' most complex tasks was to give physical form to Clerville, the town that serves as the backdrop for Diabolik's criminal adventures.⁴ Primarily shot in Bologna (plus several scenes in Milan and those set in the fictitious seaside town of Ghenf, shot in Trieste), the film shapes a monumental Italian city from the late 1960s (Lago 2021), characterised by a retro, glamorous flavour. It is strange for the viewer who possesses the references in their encyclopedia to find oneself disassembling the visual mosaic of the film whenever encountering familiar architecture. This engenders a supplementary playful pleasure that was already the Manetti Bros.' signature in the TV series *Coliandro*, where Bologna was an added character.

In this regard, the Manetti Bros. expand and problematise the relationship the films bear with spaces compared to the comics. In fact, on the one hand, the landscapes in the Giussanis' comics are meant as attractors for petit-bourgeois escapism, offering exotic settings and futuristic technologies (Panarari 2023); on the other, visually, they serve as purely functional backgrounds for the stories, foregrounding their (extremely theatrical) action: they do not refer to recognisable architecture and are drawn with a thinner, undetailed trait, unlike the characters, which are marked and dynamic. In Manetti Bros.' films, instead, the settings fully take on not only a physical but a clearly symbolic role. In defining a city laden with the charm of the 1960s, they “perfectly condense the deformations of Italy's economic boom” (Spoladori 2022, our translation). The design of these places alternates between Art Deco remnants – for example, the wealthy houses of Clerville's high society, which bear a resemblance to the over-the-top, expressive interiors of the *Columbo* series – and modernist pieces, at times essential, at times majestic. The distribution of such references is fascinating: Diabolik's lair is a jewel of modernist design, functionalist, minimalist, and elegant, made of steel and plastic, with a colour palette oscillating between white, black, and shades of grey. It is consistent with the character, his movements and suit⁵ (Lago 2022) and starkly contrasts with the opulence of the immense cavern inhabited by Bava's hedonistic criminal. His antagonist, the irreproachable Inspector Ginko, on the other hand, moves in settings that are a synthesis of Art Deco and rationalism: marble and dark wood, sharp, square lines, and objects acting as correlatives of his exquisitely retro character (of the monumental pastness typical of the Italian public administration): the ever-present pipe, a stately Citroen Ds Pallas (the same car, incidentally, as in Hunebelle's *Fantômas*), and so on. This way, Ginko also channels a distinctive nostalgia towards noir and mystery classics, epitomised by the character of the old-mannered inspector who solves crimes ‘the old-fashioned way’ with the help of iron logic and discipline (Baschiera and Caoduro 2021). The meticulous work of Noemi Marchica on set design and Ginevra De Carolis on costumes effectively counterpoints the characters through their surroundings, thereby complicating and deepening their relationship with the space and era they inhabit. Diabolik's glacial prowess serves as a disruptive factor for Clerville's high society. While it generates anxiety for the rational Inspector Ginko, it simultaneously exerts a charm on those seeking an escape from the monotony of fashionable life, exemplified by Eva Kant in the first movie.

4. On the spatial imaginary in the comics series, see Bandirali (2023).

5. Diabolik's feline movements and dark suit are symbolically subsumed by the panther from which he took his name, as we discover in the third film.

The society within which *Diabolik* moves is decadent and bourgeois, for the use of an audience fascinated by exoticism and eroticism, frightened and attracted by crime, and deriving pleasure from the ostentation of wealth (Lago 2021). Exemplary, in this sense, is the opening of *Ginko all'attacco!*: a show attended by all of Clerville's high society, designed to display an opulent collection of jewellery. This sensationalised moment introduces a society's values that greatly emphasise luxury and appearance. In this sense, the third movie partially breaks with this imagery, aligning with the pulp tropes of *poliziottesco* that the Manetti Bros. had already adopted through their production: the erotic tensions become explicit in the striptease scene, and the mansion of Manden, the lawyer who runs the criminal gang, resignifies the stylistic references of the previous movies. Counterpointing a shady, ruthless character, Manden's Art Deco house is furnished with a vulgar, tawdry taste, inviting a voyeuristic gaze without eschewing its moralism towards the ostentation of wealth – in this case, deriving from illicit activities. This traces a gap between the splendour of manifest wealth and its backstage, nonetheless to be read as two superficial sides of the same coin. Evidence of this is the depiction of the suburbs in which the underworld operates, the symbolic space of crime: set in Bologna's most central district, the upper-class shopping alleys near Piazza Maggiore, it is portrayed as a dark, narrow, lived-in space whose illicit dimension is reinforced by synecdoche through the presence of prostitutes along the streets.

4 *Uguali e diversi*: Meaning-making and Remediation Strategies from Comics to Films

As said, on a formal level, the films' proximity to their source is found in a series of aesthetic choices that remediate the aspects of the comics that the Manetti Bros. consider salient. This applies not only to visual choices concerning the scenography but also to directorial ones, mainly affecting three elements: dialogue, pacing, and cinematography.

The dialogues in the first film aims at mimicking (the pace of) the conversation in the comics, a characteristic that has been criticised by several reviewers for being overly emphatic and repetitive (Spoladori 2022). In addition to their estranged, theatrical acting, what is striking is the absence of overlap between the lines of the various characters, who respectfully follow each other's turns to speak. The result is reminiscent of soap operas, since this choice is prototypically aimed at maximising comprehensibility. Indeed, it is adopted by narratives aimed at entertaining mass audiences at times of lesser attention (e.g., during household chores). The choice to “indulge in the ‘distraction-proof’ structure typical of popular comics” (ibid.), recreating the closed and orderly space of comic balloons, goes against the more realistic and ‘mature’ genre tropes of the contemporary cinematic detective story, which is particularly evident if compared to the neo-noir style now predominant in *auteur* crime movies (Bould et al. 2009; Keesey 2010). Nonetheless, it is a callback to a genre with different consumer practices – namely, the *littérature de gare*, whose easy-to-read novels were designed for an audience of petit-bourgeois commuting workers who bought them at the stations to entertain themselves during train rides. The Giussanis had designed *Diabolik* in this vein, adopting the small, manageable format of 11.5x16.9 cm paperbacks, about 120 pages long, with a basic, regular layout, prototypically hosting two or three panels per page. Those stories displayed exciting, short adventures across easy-to-read issues, whose repetition and redundancies were meant to lure those unaware of the series regardless of their entry point.

A preliminary reflection should be made on the different semiotic affordances enlivened in adaptations. Although cinema and comics are both multimodal media, the former is audio-visual and (prototypically) mimetic, conjoining photographic images and sounds, recreating the impression of motion and simulating a calligraphic transcription of reality. The latter, on the other hand, is verbo-visual and iconic, combining static images – prototypically drawn, simplified, and resulting from a selection of salient details of their referents – and text (dialogue, captions, onomatopoeia, etc.), which primarily represents sound by appealing to what Ihde calls “auditory imagination” (2003; see also Hague 2014). This aspect is particularly salient in comics like *Diabolik*, which makes extensive use of thought balloons (even more so than captions) and redundant dialogues to offer hooks to the sporadic or first-time reader and help them follow the plot without having to go back and recall or reinterpret events that have already happened. The cinematic medium presents an inevitable difficulty in remediating this kind of enunciation, because a too-prominent use of voice-over (the most accepted convention through which film enunciates thoughts) is seen as a transgression to prototypical medium-specific narration,

meaning that the medium can do it but usually avoids doing so extensively.⁶ The strategy adopted by the Manetti Bros. to solve this *impasse* is that of the proliferation of dialogues commenting on or clarifying the actions unfolding, with no voice-over. Probably also because of the awareness of the estranging effect that this real-time commentary creates, it is accompanied by a compensatory strategy, the foregrounding of a soundtrack (created by Pivio and Aldo De Scalzi, and featuring original theme songs by Manuel Agnelli, Diodato, and Calibro 35 with Alan Sorrenti and Mike Patton) that sounds like a homage to (or a pastiche of) any crime movie ever made.

A related aspect in *Diabolik* pertains to the pacing of action and rhythm, highlighting a fundamental difference in storytelling between the two media. Comics advance through salient moments, fragmenting and selecting the action across frames to compose a narrative sequence (Mikkonen 2017). This is especially true of classic adventure comics, where the narrative focuses almost exclusively on action. Montage, the cognitive process that most distinctly substantiates the film language (at least in narrative cinema), is similarly based on fragmentation and selection. Yet, differently from comics, film editing must recompose unitary sequences (even short ones), connecting individual moments in a more considerable succession and following principles of fluidity and continuity. Obviously, these very principles can be intentionally transgressed to achieve different semantic effects. In the case of *Diabolik*, the implications of this difference in media are exemplified by a scene from the first movie, introducing one of Diabolik's numerous skills: his ability to imitate the voice of individuals he kidnaps and replaces flawlessly. Here, the criminal is depicted learning the voice and cadence of Bob, the waiter who will attend to Eva Kant. In the comic, the scene takes up a page and a half, closed by a caption that summarises how "having listened several times to Bob's voice", Diabolik now knows how to imitate it "in all the smallest dialectal inflexions" (*Arresto* 14). Genette calls this kind of narrative frequency "iterative" since an action repeated several times is described in a single occurrence (1972). Conversely, the Manetti Bros. stage Marinelli's character in an empty room, as he repeats several times, in an obsessive and emotionless manner, a recording of the waiter's voice. This foregrounds the effort, time, and blind dedication required of the protagonist for his mission. This shift to an anaphoric frequency (again, following Genette, an action that happens several times and is narrated several times), on the one hand, gives us back a "neurotic, almost psychotic" character (Spoladori 2022); on the other, it peculiarly conveys the visually static nature that characterises the comics hypotext. The filmmakers further stress this staticity across the three movies through other expedients: most notably, fixed perspectives with low dynamism, resting on peculiar framings (primarily medium and long shots).

Other explicit remediations of the language of comics, such as crossfades and split screens, mimic the layout and reading progressions that characterise comic reading. These strategies become particularly salient in the third film, which also features a split-screen whose partitions mimic (remediate) torn sheets – the reference to the paper support pointing to the materiality of comics.⁷ Spaces are used in a similar, albeit more subtle, manner: several shots (e.g., the opening of the first film) show the façades of squared-off buildings, framing fixed, symmetrical spaces that recreate the *cadrage* effect proper to comics panels. The architecture portrayed is complicit in creating an effect of staticity and squareness: monumental, imposing, ranging from Art Déco to Italian Rationalism, to works from the second half of the 20th century: one can mention the towers of the Bologna fairgrounds by architect Kenzo Tange, or the Brutalist Marian shrine built in Trieste by Antonio Guacci (which in the incipit of the second film serves as Ghenf's museum and the object of a spectacular robbery by Diabolik).

Finally, *Diabolik - Chi sei?*, both the comic and the movie, are marked by numerous flashbacks. While the comic – as said, in the sign of easy readability – represents the flashbacks classically, through a cloud-shaped, wavy layout reminiscent of thought balloons (which materialises the *débrayage* by semiotically linking the act of remembering and the embedded story), the film resorts to a different, yet equally conventional expedient, temporarily switching to black-and-white. While prototypically marking the past, this strategy also remediates

6. Voice-over is more common in some genres – for example, again, in the (neo-)noir – but its use is still debated: consider the different versions of *Blade Runner* (1982; 1992) with or without Deckard's off-screen voice to guide viewers and make up for narrative ellipses.

7. On the other hand, the third movie also features several unnatural zooms in, probably to be read as homages to B-movies' cheap cinematography.

the comics' palette; moreover, in the film, it allows for the isolated red of the rubies and blood, an explicit reference to the neo-noir aesthetic and notably Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005).

5 Portrait of the Adventurous Thief in Mask: Intertextuality, Genre Fiction, and the Retrofuturist Imaginary

Roland Barthes, speaking of a barometer that Flaubert describes in *A Simple Heart* (*Un coeur simple*), states that the function of lingering on the details of objects that play no role in the unfolding of the plot is to create a "reality effect" (1968) – that is, to substantiate the realist illusion. In this sense, Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) shows us a revealing sequence: Wayne receives a defective batch of graphite masks when devising and assembling his costume for the first time. The trusty butler Alfred explains that, consequently, it will be necessary to wait for the next shipment of 10000 (substantial orders are meant to avoid suspicion) that comply with the specifics. Appealing to these kinds of realist details is a contemporary trend in approaching otherwise inherently anti-realist themes – we could call it the "serious turn" of genre fiction featuring heists, spies, and superheroes.

The Manetti's films adopt the opposite strategy: they take on the imaginary of their hypotext transparently, accepting its naivetés without parodic variations or resemantizations. At the same time, however, they weave overt and hidden references toward the constellation of works connected to that hypotext in both an endogenous and exogenous sense. In the first sense, the films often treat the main comics hypotexts – the three *Diabolik* issues that they adapt – rather as palimpsests, more open to combinatory *bricolage*,⁸ interpolating the original plots with episodes drawn from different comics issues and subtly integrating the evolution that characters have undergone over years of serial publication. Eva Kant's increased centrality in the story is rendered, for example, in the way she manages to get Diabolik out of prison in the first film, which is taken, with some adjustments, from a much more recent story (*Diabolik – Ultima Mossa*, n. 535, 1989 – the same phantasmal hypotext of *Ginko all'attacco!*).

From a different perspective, the films demonstrate a keen awareness of genre tropes and cinema history at large. In the third movie, everything looks like a quote, a reference to another film, or a scene that we have already watched somewhere. Additionally, they reference specific works that share similar imaginative concepts and media influences. This is most evident in Mastandrea's *Ginko*, which merges the firmness of the Inspector from the *Diabolik* comics with several traits of Inspector Zenigata from Monkey Punch's manga *Lupin III* (1967-1969), mainly as portrayed in the anime since its debut in 1975. Interestingly, *Lupin III* was already a hybrid between the book series created in 1905 by Maurice Leblanc and the James Bond movies that were popular when the manga was written (Pellitteri 2023).

This opens to another family resemblance brought forth by the Manetti's *Diabolik*, finding a central articulation in the mask worn by their Diabolik. Unlike the comics, Diabolik's mask is neither part of the suit nor made of the same fabric; instead, it is a stand-alone piece of silicone. Even more than Bava's film (where Diabolik's suit was made of leather and his mask of rubber), this is reminiscent of the synthetic mask of the big-screen adaptations of *Fantômas*, directed in the 1960s by André Hunebelle (*Fantômas*, 1964; *Fantômas se déchaîne*, 1965; and *Fantômas contre Scotland Yard*, 1967).⁹ Hunebelle's *Fantômas* connects the series of novels written by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, the Giussanis' comic inspired by the *Fantômas* novels, and the broader world of retro spy-fi genre. This genre is known for its thrilling adventures set in exotic locations and featuring futuristic gadgets (Biederman 2004). The beginning of the trilogy's first film – a chase sequence that seems to wink at *poliziottesco* films until Diabolik's E-Type Jaguar flies off-screen – can be read in this sense. Indeed, Hunebelle's second *Fantômas* movie featured a similar scene in which the thief took flight in his Citroën. The mediation is still Bava's film, whose "aesthetic of abundance" (Hunt 2018: 83) centred on designer objects, futuristic technology and protean means of transport (2018: 77-84; see also Pagello 2022: 183).

8. The reference for both terms is Genette (1982).

9. For an overview of the many crossmedial incarnations of *Fantômas*, see Dall'Asta (2004); Castelli (2011).

Significantly, though, in the same years, Hunebelle was also directing the series of film adaptations of the adventures of OSS117 - the French James Bond, one is tempted to say, if not for the fact that both Jean Bruce's novels and its film adaptations predate the latter: the debut *Tu parles d'une ingénue* (1949) anticipates Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* (1953), and Jean Sacha's film *OSS 117 n'est pas mort* (1957) antedates Terence Young's *Dr. No* (1962). The imaginary (and imagery) that *Diabolik* shares with Hunebelle's *Fantômas*, *OSS117*, and *James Bond* is indeed that of 1960s spy-fi. The reference to Bond is evident in *Diabolik - Ginko all'attacco!*, which opens with a theme song performed by Diodato and closes with a seafront intercourse much more reminiscent of Sean Connery's hypermasculinity than of the luscious yet chaste kisses featured in the Giussanis' comic. The Manettis' *Diabolik* is thus anchored in a 1960s genre imaginary made up of secret identities, histrionic heroes, and the many gadgets that spy-fi brought to a phantasmal life. Indeed, while never existing in real life, this imaginary nonetheless has been capable of shaping the fantasies of a generation. Radioactivity, dynamite, soporific gases, lasers, Pentothal, scopolamine, Morse alphabet, and, of course, deadly acids: the playful retrofuturism of this *passé* universe celebrated the escapist remains of the Western fantasy of unlimited agency on the real, stirred with pre-modern-magic and late-capitalist wonder for the wizardry of modern technology.

The same imaginary is taken up by the hyper-quotationist Ur-*Diabolik* created by the Manetti Bros. without any ironic detachment and the lysergic and hyperkinetic excesses of Bava's film, as if the Bondian *übermensch*, defined by "gadgets that extend the capabilities of his physical body" (Greinacher 2011: 56) and yet not quite posthuman, was still possible today. While this is not an isolated case - see the successful *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (2015), adapted by Guy Ritchie from the 1960s TV series - it is strikingly far from operations such as the comedic remakes of *OSS117* written by Jean-François Halin and directed by Michel Hazanavicius (*OSS 117: Le Caire, nid d'espions*, 2006, and *OSS 117: Rio ne répond plus*, 2009) and Nicolas Bedos (*OSS 117: Alerte rouge en Afrique noire*, 2021), which instead seem to affirm the impossibility of taking up this imaginary without denouncing its white, male, colonialist positioning.

6 Conclusions

While reactions to the movies have been significantly polarized (with a prevalence of disapproval), the Manetti Bros' cinematic adaptation of *Diabolik* is a complex operation which entertains layered relationships with its hypotexts and, above all, with the imaginary they express. The relationship between cinema and comics hence proves again to be a fruitful ground for investigation, conceiving ever-new remediation strategies.

In this sense, the three *Diabolik* films demonstrate unexpected synergies, given by a mixture of closeness to the Giussanis' comics and references to related franchises and genre tropes. The choices of settings, clothes, and design updates and repurpose the genre imaginary, setting the action in Italy not as the picturesque parenthesis of a larger adventure, but as a constituent element of the *mise-en-scène*. In this regard, the films successfully reproduce the exotic charge that attracted early readers of *Diabolik*'s comics. However, the exoticism in the Manettis' films is substantiated by different mechanisms than their source: its retro charm, owing to the fictitious space-time of the 1960s Clerville, and the staging of evolutions and changes in a society still capable of being frightened and amazed by the King of Terror.

In the end, the work that the Manetti Bros. have done on the *Diabolik* films is only superficially animated by the desire to propose a faithful adaptation of the comics: by considering the relation it entails with the comics' hypotext, this article has shown instead how numerous factors and references are at play, which not only owe to the original franchise, but re-propose and rethink its imaginary for a changed audience, a different period, and a different media. One may wonder if a further nostalgic drive resides in the symbolic value of the three films: the true object of remediation, given by the heterogeneity of strategies and references deployed, would then be the desire for *divertissement* aroused by the reading of comics, of cheap distraction - with their rules and aesthetics, their rhythms and practices of fruition, and their capacity to continuously reimagine themselves and always put on a new mask.

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