

The Squallor phenomenon Social and political satire in Italian music during the First Republic¹

Nicolino Applauso

Often labeled with the umbrella term *rock demenziale*, the Italian music band Gli Squallor represented one of the most prominent expressions of social and political satire in modern Italy. This is evident in their mocking and farcical parodies of Italian politics and cultural conventions. In addition, if we consider the period in which Squallor started to gain popularity (in the mid-1980s), they could also be regarded as important agents of the discontent that characterized the last stages of the First Republic.

This article explores selected songs from Gli Squallor in order to analyze the dynamics of their very peculiar satire in relation to Italian music culture, society, and politics. I will approach Gli Squallor in a general sense by focusing on their political allusions (as in the song *Alluvione*), and then more explicitly by examining their satires against specific political leaders such as Gianni De Michelis (in *Demiculis*) and Umberto Bossi (in *Berta II*). Squallor created parodies from conventional songs by utilizing nonsense, surrealism, hyperboles, linguistic experimentations, and obscene language. In doing so, they engage in ‘metasatire’, successfully ridiculing Italian music, radio, and television. I will conclude by showing the peculiarity of their satire, which has become a very popular, iconic symbol of dissent, all the while escaping classifications and consistently desecrating the canon and even themselves.

Parody and satire in Gli Squallor

Gli Squallor was founded in 1971 by Alfredo Cerruti, Giancarlo Bigazzi, Daniele Pace, and Gaetano Savio, who were at the time very successful and renowned Italian music producers, songwriters, and composers.² From 1973 to 1994, they produced 14 albums selling more than 2 million copies, and were involved in two movies, which sold for about 5 billion lire.³ What is remarkable about Gli Squallor is that they started the band as an irreverent prank to mock singers and the entertainment industry, without any serious artistic ambitions, and maintained this disengaged attitude throughout their twenty-year career. This is confirmed by the fact that the Gli Squallor never performed their songs in public and never resorted to any publicity

¹ I would like to thank Claudio Simeone for giving me permission to use the lyrics and album covers included in this article, all of which are taken from his webpage ‘Era meglio quando c’erano gli Squallor,’ <http://www.squallor.com>. I am grateful to Eston J. Teter for retrieving a copy of Carla Rinaldi and Michele Rossi’s documentary *Gli Squallor*, which enriched my research with valuable data. I am also indebted to Fabrizio Foni for his suggestions and observations about the album cover *Mutando*.

² The band made its first appearance in 1971 with the singles *38 luglio* and *Raccontala giusta*, followed by the album *Troia* in 1973. Originally, Gli Squallor included also Elio Gariboldi, but he left the band after a few years; see A. Lo Giudice, ‘Squallor: I poeti del turpiloquio’, *Ondarock*, <http://www.ondarock.it/italia/squallor.htm> (last accessed February 12, 2014).

³ *Gli Squallor: Un documentario di Carla Rinaldi e Michele Rossi*, CNI musica, 2013.

to promote their new albums. Despite the lack of promotion and live performances, remarkably, The Squallor phenomenon drew significant attention in Italy, and the group even reached a cult status. Recently, their popularity was revived in the live show 'Ridere 2009' by the comic trio Ardone-Peluso-Massa, on the television show *Chiambretti Night*, and finally, in a 2011 documentary about the band, *Gli Squallor: Un documentario di Carla Rinaldi e Michele Rossi*.⁴

One of the main reasons for their success in the 1980s was the unconventional and forceful vulgarity that was so prominent in their lyrics, in their equivocal titles and in the album covers, which all contained strong sexual puns and undertones. Their most memorable titles are *Palle*, *Vacca*, *Pompa*, and *Manzo*, which literally mean 'balls', 'cows', 'pump' and 'beef' (or 'bull'), though they are also used as slang terms that refer to sexual jargon, i.e. 'testicles', 'whore', 'fellatio', and 'penis' respectively. To reinforce these linguistic ambiguities, the artist Luciano Tallarini created album covers that featured both meanings through double allusions. For example, the album cover for *Vacca* has a cow standing by the sidewalk dressed as a prostitute with fishnet stockings.

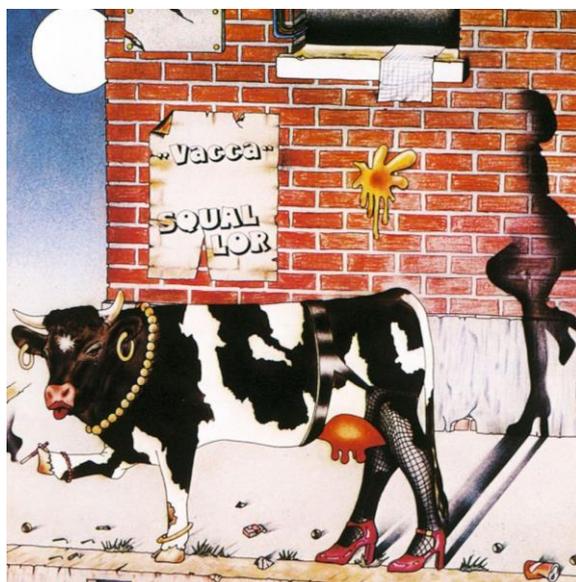


Image 1 Gli Squallor, *Vacca* (1977)

The cover of the album *Palle* contains a similar double meaning as it depicts two billiard balls on either side of a pool stick, cleverly evoking images of the male sexual organ (or 'balls').

⁴ G. Chianelli, 'Ardone-Peluso-Massa rileggono gli Squallor', *Repubblica.it*, August 23, 2009; <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2009/08/23/ardone-peluso-massa-rileggono-gli-squallor.html> (last accessed February 12, 2014). *Chiambretti Night* devoted an entire episode to Squallor on April 7, 2010; see <http://www.tvblog.it/post/19176/al-chiambretti-night-ieri-la-squallor-story-con-ciro-ippolito-e-alfredo-cerruti>.



Image 2 Gli Squallor, *Polle* (1974)

Other albums, such as *Mutando* and *Scoraggiando*, equivocally show images that play on malapropisms, thus evoking underwear and farting (i.e., ‘mutande’ and ‘scoreggiando’).⁵ The members of Gli Squallor, on the other hand, were never identified on the album covers, and were hardly known by name even by their own supporters. Nor was anyone aware of the fact that they were accomplished and influential lyricists and music producers. To complicate matters further, Gli Squallor was not associated with a particular region in Italy or to a particular studio, each of the members being native to different Italian cities, thus constituting a hybrid linguistic and geographical pastiche.⁶

Gli Squallor employed a diversified style in each song, which was often narrated by Cerruti. Their style is as diverse as the themes discussed, which range from music and show business (with parodies of famous pop songs and singers), sexual practices, and obscene language, to parodies of radio and television commercials, and consumerism (expressed, for example, by bizarre Neapolitan-speaking American Indians). With songs such as *Piazza Sanretro*, *Unisex* and *Pret-a-porter*, finally, Gli Squallor targeted delicate issues such as homosexuality and corruption in the clergy.

Although politics was not prominent in their repertoire, each album dedicates at least one song to current Italian politicians and institutions associated with both right and left-wing politics.⁷ Songs such as *Alluvione*, *Vota Verdi*, and *Revival* are vivid examples of caustic political satire. These songs show how Gli Squallor ridicules politicians and political groups by depicting them as suspicious, self-oriented, hungry for votes, and often misleading the Italian public. *Revival*, for example, features a cynic political leader who incites the crowd to follow him toward victory, which ultimately leads them to Coca Cola parties and orgies. The leader in question is clearly associated with far right-wing politics, as evident by his tone of voice, which recalls Dictator Benito Mussolini. Here Gli Squallor’s satire becomes even more biting

⁵ The cover of *Mutando* is also a tribute to the influential Japanese illustrator Hajime Sorayama, who in the 1980s was at the peak of his career.

⁶ Cerruti and Savio were from Naples, Bigazzi from Florence and Pace from Milan.

⁷ Starting from the album *Pompa*, Gli Squallor created the character of Pierpaolo, a young man who phones up his rich father to blackmail him while he travels around the world. His father seems to depict a politician belonging to the Democrazia Cristiana party. In each subsequent album, Gli Squallor always included a song dedicated to Pierpaolo.

if we frame it within its own original historical context of the early 1980s. The speech of this pseudo-Mussolini is called 'revival' to suggest that fascist propaganda is experiencing a rebirth in Italy. Indeed *Revival* evoked current right-wing terrorist organizations, such as *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari*, who at the time of the song claimed responsibility for the 1980 Bologna train station bombing.⁸

Gli Squallor's early years (1973-1983)

In order to better understand this peculiar musical trend in relation to social and political satire, I shall first approach selected songs from Gli Squallor's earlier period, and then more politically explicit songs from their newest albums. Their third and fourth albums, *Vacca* and *Pompa*, constituted a defining moment in the history of the band for the use of more explicit sexual and obscene references in the lyrics, and a style of performance characterized by improvisational comedy through narration and recitation.⁹ The song *Alluvione* for example, is recorded with a voice-over that stages an imaginary radio report of a devastating flood from the town Fontana ('fountain') in the district of Scroscio ('rain shower') organized by local politicians and the Italian government at large. The narrative is introduced by a trumpet playing a military tune reminiscent of a national anthem, which creates the effect of an official civic ceremony that involves all Fontana citizens:

Buonasera signori e signore vi parlo da Fontana in provincia di Scroscio. Sta per succedere quello che succede quasi tutti gli anni: L'alluvione. Quest'anno il sindaco, però, ha organizzato le cose in grande stile, hanno già intasato le fogne e i tombini. La popolazione si prepara, in grande stile direi, hanno già comprato alcuni casermoni per ricoverarsi dentro, ma non sono in vendita.

This initial part sarcastically suggests that prominent politicians are the masterminds behind a devastating man-made flood, which is unleashed at the expense of the citizens who ironically buy shelters that cannot be officially sold. The Fontana citizens are thus depicted as gullible and cheerful victims ('sono tutti felici') who are amazed by the spectacle of the ribbon-cutting ceremony inaugurated by the mayor. His peculiar ribbon-cutting ritual involves the opening of the new flood-making business, which is reinforced by the ambiguous slogan: 'Se non c'è la valanga compratevi la stanga'. Through this marketing strategy, the mayor is not only bringing devastation to the city, but he is also deceivingly proposing a phony profit for his citizen, since his promise implies 'la stanga' a term for shaft or figuratively a situation of hassle. Indeed 'la stanga' arrives upon the Fontana citizens once the flood takes over the city, thus changing the scenario from festivity to desolation:

Lampi, tuoni, tortorelle, colombi alluvinati cronici, ci sono anche i bitumi di immondizia che vagano come dei randagi in fuga, inseguiti da topi, scarrafoni, giostre galoppanti, alcuni idrofubi che stanno passando per le strade. Tutti contornati da torte, tortoni fatte dagli assessori comunali, tutti ingaggiati per distribuire una goccia ad ogni cittadino, ma ormai più di una goccia è il fiume a casa vostra.

⁸ The right-wing terrorist organization, *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari*, was responsible for the devastating bombing attack at Bologna's train station in 1980, causing the death of eighty-five people and wounding 200; see A. Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation*, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2007.

⁹ *Troia* and *Palle* employed more harmonious tunes mainly based on parodies and surreal humor, as evident in the songs *La risata triste* and *Raccontala giusta Alfredo* (both in *Troia*) or *Bla bla bla* and *Angeli negri* (in *Palle*).

The song develops the motif of exploitation at the expense of the naive citizens when the correspondent discloses that the government has hired ‘assessori comunali’ (‘council members’) to distribute ‘una goccia ad ogni cittadino’, even though ironically there is abundant water supply in each flooded house. The recitation continues with the imagery of the polluted and inundated city. Finally, the reporter – while gargling – declares that the flood was kindly offered by the government and will likely be exported to other Italian towns and to the rest of the world: ‘Eccola qui, tutta sporca, nera un alluvione nera, macchiato di giallo colorato, l’arcobaleno dell’alluvione. Arrivederci’. The final depiction of the multicolored flood could allude to the involvement of various political entities, which are ambiguously associated with different colors, further expanding the political implications of Squallor’s subtle satire.

Besides its apparent levity, *Alluvione* contains serious historical references to specific events that had occurred in Italy. Thus, as suggested by Luca Barattoni, it seems to allude to the 1963 landslide and flood resulting from the rupture of the Vajont Dam near Venice, followed by the destruction of five downstream villages and the death of some two thousand people.¹⁰ The Italian government, through the Department of Public Works, owned and managed the dam and during 1970s was directly involved in the tragedy.¹¹ Thus, as *Alluvione* was being produced, the trial for the notorious Vajont flood disaster was still ongoing, and the song could be interpreted with this specific context in mind. Furthermore, the topic of floods in connection to political corruption had recently been commercialized by the blockbuster American TV Film *Flood!* (dir. Earl Bellamy), distributed in Italy in 1976 under the title *Diluvio: la furia di un fiume*. The movie narrates a story very similar to the Vajont Dam disaster, and like *Alluvione* features a corrupted mayor who is responsible for the disaster. Through a fictionalized radio report, Gli Squallor cleverly depicts gullible Italians enchanted by media sensationalism and exploited by a corrupted Italian government.

Other songs contain more subtle political allusions to the period of the so-called *Prima Repubblica*. One vivid example is offered by *Confucio* from the album *Cappelle* (1978). The title *Confucio* refers to the celebrated Chinese philosopher and universal symbol of wisdom and virtue. If we consider Gli Squallor’s distinctive strategy of double entendre, the term ‘Confucio’ acquires an ironic value, especially since the sketch features a cynic politician who speaks at a crowd during a chaotic rally. Alongside his inconclusive speech, a listener can identify various mixed voices that either crudely shout swearwords at him, or ask questions unrelated to the assembly (‘Mario, dove sei? Ho perso il bambino’), while disco music reels smoothly in the background. The general effect of the music vignette is a comic muddle where nose-thumbing frames a political speech of an unidentified member of Parliament who tries to convince his audience about his dogmatic importance (‘siamo noi che facciamo la classe politica ... che guidiamo il popolo’). Although the speaker never discloses his identity, he declares that his party has led Italy for thirty years and is currently still guiding the Italian people, thus could likely be a member of the Democrazia Cristiana, the first party at the 1976 General Elections, until January

¹⁰ L. Barattoni, ‘Gli Squallor’, *Squallor.com*, <http://www.squallor.com/rassegna-stampa/gli-squallor-luca-barattoni/> (last accessed November 1, 2014): ‘Assistiamo ad un Vajont pianificato dallo stato italiano’.

¹¹ The Italian government was charged by the Court of Appeal for punitive damages in 1971, but assigned the reparation agreement only in the year 2000. See: N.A., ‘Trentasette anni per il risarcimento del Vajont,’ *Corriere delle Alpi*, <http://temi.repubblica.it/corrierealpi-diga-del-vajont-1963-2013-il-cinquantesimo/37-anni-per-i-risarcimenti-del-vajont/> (last accessed February 12, 2014).

1978.¹² In these years, the Italian government was undergoing a situation of uncertainty due to an economic crisis, political scandals (most notably the Lockheed Scandal), and numerous acts of political violence and terrorism.¹³ In *Confucio*, the unnamed politicians echo this atmosphere of conflicts marked by ‘ingiustizie sociali’ and provide the irreverent spectators with implicit references to eminent Italian personalities of the times, such as the leader of the Partito Comunista, Enrico Berlinguer, (‘il saggio di Sassi’, hinting at his origin from Sassari) and the Judge Mario Sossi (‘saggio di Sossi’). In 1974 Sossi was kidnapped and then released by the terrorist left-wing organization, the Red Brigades, while Berlinguer was involved in the – much criticized – formation of a political alliance with the Democrazia Cristiana run by Giulio Andreotti, the so-called ‘historical compromise’, in an attempt to achieve more political stability. Being that *Confucio* was released in 1978, when Andreotti’s cabinet obtained the vote of confidence, I argue here that the song may very well refer to this precise historical moment.

Moreover, during the release of the album *Cappelle*, the notorious abduction and subsequent murder of Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro, again by the Red Brigades, took place. This momentous event undoubtedly heightened Gli Squallor’s implicit mockery of the Democrazia Cristiana amongst the Italian audience, especially if we consider the party’s controversial position during Moro’s kidnapping, i.e. refusal of any negotiations with the terrorists. This scenario of uncertainty and reproach is indeed confirmed by the last declaration of the speaker who at the end avoids all rhetoric and bluntly admits his desire to gain votes and remain in power despite the alarming political situation: ‘in sintesi, l’unica cosa che a noi ci interessa sono i voti. O li portate a me o li portate a lei. Ma... non se ne parla neanche di riforme o di cose perché noi siamo qui e non ci muoviamo più’. This confession unveils the strong self-interest of the political leader who finally admits that his party is both unmovable and unproductive. *Confucio* ends with a derisive curse from the speaker who finally loses his diplomatic coolness and shouts at the crowd: ‘ma ve manna a fanculo!’, while the audience indignantly retorts in both Neapolitan and Milanese dialects (‘Mariuolo! Ladro!’ ‘trujun’), thus representing a microcosm of Italy. In conclusion, although Gli Squallor crafts a burlesque political rally, its inner contradictions and exaggerations expose current controversies over scandals and corruptions, thus crafting a mordant satire of the Italian government during a very divisive time.

Explicit political satire in Gli Squallor’s final years (1985-1994)

A gradual shift takes place in the treatment of political issues throughout Gli Squallor’s twenty-year career. While earlier albums contain generic political references, their latest albums featured songs such as *Vota Verdi*, *Demiculis*, and *Berta II*, which focused more explicitly on current Italian political leaders and parties alluded to by name. This trend is also evident from the more politically charged titles of their last two albums, *Cielo duro* (1988) and *Cambiamento* (1994). The first clearly evokes the sentence ‘Ce l’ho duro’ (‘I have it hard’), the notorious macho expression coined by the leader of the Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi, who used this

¹² The Democrazia Cristiana held a prominent position in Italian politics for more than forty years. On January 1978, Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti of the Democrazia Cristiana resigned and new elections were ordained; see R. Wagner-Pacifci, *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1986, p. 22.

¹³ The Lockheed Scandal was an international scandal which involved prominent government officials from different nations who accepted bribes from the U.S. aerospace company Lockheed for the sale of aircrafts; see Wagner-Pacifci, *The Moro Morality Play*, cit., p. 23.

sexual slogan to declare the political reliability of his party.¹⁴ *Cambiamento*, on the other hand, remarkably does not contain any explicit sexual reference neither in the title nor in the graphic cover, which simply features the band name Gli Squallor (in multicolored letters) and the album title *Cambiamento* in black letters over a white background.



Image 3 Gli Squallor, *Cambiamento* (1994)

According to Antonio Lo Giudice, a portrait of Bossi with testicles in place of his chin was originally planned as the album cover of *Cambiamento*, but the record company rejected the idea and imposed the current one.¹⁵ Despite this restriction, the term ‘cambiamento’ still suggests the new political atmosphere of transformation experienced in Italy in 1994, when Bossi’s Lega Nord and Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia gained front position in Italian politics, moving the political spectrum to the right.

In the 1985 album *Tocca l’albicocca*, one can find the sardonic political satire song, *Vota Verdi*, which explicitly names an Italian political party. The Verdi political party was the first environmental political force in Italy and gained its momentum in the 1985 local elections by receiving 600,000 votes.¹⁶ If we consider these specific historical circumstances, it is significant that in 1985, when the Verdi just started to gain popularity, Gli Squallor dedicated an entire comic sketch to their party. This shows how the band members were not only pioneers in political satire, but also very responsive to the many changes that were occurring in Italian politics at that time. *Vota Verdi* is a biting vignette acted through improvisations by two characters wandering in a hypothetical future Naples after the stunning victory of the green party: ‘la Democrazia Cristiana ha preso l’uno per cento, il Partito Comunista meno quindici come Bolzano, i Verdi il novantotto per cento e ti lamenti’. The victory has changed the face of the city, now unrecognizable. Instead of familiar monuments such as the Maschio Angioino Castle and the Duomo, the city is now a jungle with

¹⁴ For more information about the Lega Nord, see D. Tambini. *Nationalism in Italian Politics: The Stories of the Northern League, 1980-2000*. London-New York, Routledge, 2001.

¹⁵ Lo Giudice, ‘Squallor’, cit. Both Giancarlo Bigazzi and Jacqueline Savio also recount this anecdote in an interview in the documentary mentioned earlier on, *Gli Squallor: Un documentario*, cit.

¹⁶ See R. Della Seta, *La difesa dell’ambiente in Italia: storia e cultura del movimento ecologista*, Milano, FrancoAngeli Editore, 2000, pp. 51-52.

lions, monkeys, crocodiles, and other exotic animals. One of the characters complains about the bizarre fact that he cannot smoke cigarettes nor drink coffee because the Verdi have now banned them, in order to prevent smog. He concludes that perhaps things were better with the previous political turmoil, which at least provided Italians with some diversions: ‘Ma mi lamento perché prima in quel bordellone si viveva meglio, c’era qualche cosa, qualche divertimento. Qua c’ammafa?’. This visionary skit questions the extreme environmental policies advanced by the party and show the damaging effect of political zealotry, expressing the idea that no matter how innovative and well-intentioned it might seem, at the end it brings a demoralizing social regression. Hence, after mocking the catch-all party of the Democrazia Cristiana in *Alluvione*, the left-wing in *Confucio*, and the far-right ideology with *Revival*, Gli Squallor does not hesitate to sneer at old and new political trends (such as the Verdi’s ecological creed), showing the flexibility of their satire.

This continues more forcefully in their latest albums with explicit songs that aggressively mock other emerging political parties and leaders such as Gianni De Michelis from the Partito Socialista Italiano (in *Demiculis*) and Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Northern League (in *Berta II*).¹⁷ Both songs introduce unusual settings (such as Greece and the Sirtaki dance for De Michelis and Brahms’ classical Hungarian dance for Bossi) as well as violent insults at the expense of both politicians. De Michelis (who in 1986 was Minister of Labour and Social Security and Inner Cabinet Member of the Craxi Government) is depicted as a greased, filthy man who is only driven by his thirst for money and power. This satirical portrait starts with the birth of De Michelis from the perspective of his mother:

Piccolo, goffo, con dei riccioloni unti già dietro, e un paio di fogli in mano del ministero. ‘E una mamma che può dire quando il figlio parte, fa carriera? Una mamma che può dire? È disperata! Vedere questo chiattono che parte, va in quella barca... e diventa ministro e fa un sacco di soldi’.

The chronicle continues with the narration of Demiculis’ major political victories in the ‘Camera’ and ‘Senato’, due to the smell of his rigged armpits that defeat his political enemies and the injection of the drug ‘Political: un piccolo medicinale base di Fanfani e Andreotti... Forattini!’ Cerruti finally ends the story with the death of Demiculis, which occurs when a car runs him over. Other than numerous attacks against De Michelis’ physical appearance, the song also questions the motivations behind his political career. An irreverent passage contains the explicit allegation that De Michelis has climbed to political success for his own economic gain, at the expense of his hometown Venice: ‘Sta facendo soldi a catena. E a Venezia apre mostre ... mostre apre: già è un mostro lui!’ Here Gli Squallor explicitly refers to De Michelis’ campaign for Expo 2000 in Venice and his notorious involvement with Venice Mayor Nereo Laroni (who in February 1986 received notice of investigation for suspicion in bribes).¹⁸ The theme of political corruption will make national headlines

¹⁷ *Berta II* is the sequel of the original *Berta*, which was published in the 1977 album *Pompa*.

¹⁸ See G. Vergani, ‘Ecco i miei conti correnti, rispondo di me non del PSI’, *Repubblica.it*, February 8, 1986, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1986/02/08/ecco-miei-conti-correnti-rispondo-di-me.html> (last accessed February 11, 2014). See also B. Visentini, ‘Ma basta un Expo per salvare Venezia?’, *Repubblica.it*, November 12, 1986, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1986/11/12/ma-basta-un-expo-per-salvare-veneziah.html> (last accessed February 11, 2014).

with the major corruption scandal of *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville), only a few years after *Demiculis*, from 1992 to 1994.¹⁹

Gli Squallor's last album, *Cambiamento*, ironically comments on this new post-*Tangentopoli* scenario at the ebb of the *Prima Repubblica*. Like *Vota Verdi* and *Demiculis*, *Berta II* openly criticizes the contemporary political party of the Lega Nord, evaluated with sneering distrust. Bossi is depicted as an unrestrained, desperate sex fiend who begs Berta, a Neapolitan woman, to sleep with him. The skit is staged as a poetic contrasto (reminiscent of its most renowned medieval antecedents 'Rosa fresca aulentissima'), as Cerruti alternates Bossi's northern inflection with Berta's Neapolitan dialect.²⁰ Again there are specific references to Bossi and his associates (i.e., Marco Formentini), his political agenda of secession of the north, as well as his notorious flamboyancy, which are all vehemently cited by Berta:

Ma che vuo', tu e Forchettini? Jatevello 'n culo tutt'e due! Vi voglio vede': 'A Lega Nord, 'a lega sud, 'a secessione, ma che so' 'sti strunzat'e mmerda? Vi siete montat' a testa? Pù! All'anima 'e chitemmuort, Te e Forchettini. Ahhh! Me so' sfogata....

After this off-color tirade and rejection, Berta unveils her preference for a well-endowed colored man from Africa called Pasquale. Thus, Gli Squallor delivers its final blow to Bossi and his self-proclaimed slogan 'Ce l'ho duro', as well as to his strong anti-immigration campaign. Similarly to *Confucio* and *Demiculis*, Gli Squallor reintroduces the character of the opportunistic political leader who is so much driven by his own self-interest that he even goes against his most cherished political belief in order to satisfy his primal appetite: 'Io per te vado via dalla Lega e vengo al sud, fondo il primo movimento Fica Unita Pigliatevella. Non so che dire per farti convincere, t'ho portato i Mon Cheri Ferrero da Parigi'. Berta rejects this final desperate plea and, more explicitly than any other Gli Squallor character, names the ridiculed politicians by his last name: 'Bossi è passato, è tutto finito. Ci vediamo al prossimo ellepì. Arrivederci'. However, the sketch does not finish with this lapidary conclusion, but surprisingly reintroduces the African man Pasquale who expresses his concerns about Italy and the Lega Nord:

Scappare in Eritrea un'altra volta. Troppo casino qui, gatti, trenini, Bossi...
Mamma mia, vado via, va... ci vediamo prossimo ellepì.
[...] ho paura io, questa gente in Italia, troppi bianchi, mamm' d'o Carmine...
Cos'è questo? Io sono un povero negro, una grazia ti prego,
dillo alla pecora bianca, fa' sparì 'sta mutanda.

This conclusion further complicates Gli Squallor's satire because it juxtaposes Bossi's prejudice with the one expressed by the 'povero negro' character who communicates with broken Italian and a Neapolitan dialect. Thus, in addition to Lega Nord and its leader, *Berta II* also mocks African immigrants who were the victims of racial prejudice. Its satire stirs mixed feelings while providing Italians with a grotesque

¹⁹ *Tangentopoli* involved a groundbreaking investigation into kickbacks given for public works contracts, causing the downfall of the Democrazia Cristiana and the Partito Socialista, and the end of the so-called *Prima Repubblica*; see S. Koff & S. Koff, *Italy: From the First to Second Republic*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 32-39. Remarkably, Gli Squallor in *Cielo duro* (1988) forecasted the trials of *Tangentopoli* with the song *Carceri d'oro*. Lo Giudice, 'Squallor', cit.

²⁰ Gianfranco Contini compiled the most authoritative critical edition of Ciullo d'Alcamo's 'Rosa Fresca Aulentissima'. G. Contini (ed.), *Poeti del Duecento*, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, vol. I, 1960, pp. 173-185.

caricature of deceit, excess, opportunism, and perversion, the prime causes of the *Tangentopoli* scandal.²¹

Assessing the satire of Gli Squallor

Clearly, Gli Squallor is a phenomenon deeply rooted in the 1970s and the political scandals of the last phases of the *Prima Repubblica*. However, their albums are more than a mirror of the times, because they also depict their intransigent position of continuous desecration of mainstream ideas and novel political tendencies. It is indeed problematic to even categorize Gli Squallor as a musical band, since they never performed in public or in live concerts (and for this reason they have been also labeled as ‘prima ghost band del mondo’).²² It is due to this intrinsic originality that Gli Squallor attracted a robust community of followers, mainly characterized by male teenagers, who promoted each album by words of mouth. Alternatively, disk jockeys played their most popular songs in discotheques at late hours during closing time.²³ What contributed to Gli Squallor’s cult status was the fact that their first albums were never aired on national radio stations due to the state-owned network RAI’s monopoly on telecommunication in Italy, which enforced strict censorship laws. Following the 1974 ruling by the Constitutional Court, RAI’s monopoly was declared unconstitutional and private radios – or *radio libere* – started to broadcast and gradually proliferate.²⁴ This important change allowed Gli Squallor to gain more exposure throughout Italy, as made evident by the fact that in 1977 *Vacca* ranked in the top twenty of most sold albums in Italy. This success was confirmed by their first featured movie, *Arrapaho*, their second film and tenth album *Uccelli d’Italia*, and the album *Tocca l’albicocca*, with which they reached their apex in 1985.²⁵ But this limelight was also accompanied by several civil lawsuits, and most remarkably even an attempted murder.²⁶ On February 20, 1977, while promoting *Vacca* in the recording room of Radio Milano International (R101) the members of Gli Squallor were the victims of a drive by shooting. Although the perpetrators were never apprehended, they clearly intended to murder or scare Cerruti and Gli Squallor. This violent act was perpetrated either by a terrorist organization that strongly reacted to the band’s irreverent political and religious satires, or as an act of revenge of a more personal nature.²⁷ This demonstrates that their reception was as controversial as their songs, even if the identity of Gli Squallor was never disclosed to the public. The fact that they ridiculed all ideologies and boldly showcased sexual perversion most

²¹ Gli Squallor’s use of sexual perversion in connection with politics could also be perceived as a metaphor for political power and could be juxtaposed to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò*; see M. A. Macciocchi, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Paris, Grasset, 1980, pp. 127-58.

²² F. Prisco, ‘Chiedi chi erano gli Squallor: In un documentario rivivono i padri del rock demenziale’, *Il Sole 24 ore*, September 26, 2012, <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2012-09-26/chiedi-erano-squallor-documentario-090411.shtml?uuid=Ab7vFojG> (last accessed February 11, 2014).

²³ *Gli Squallor: Un documentario*, cit.

²⁴ V. Franceschelli, *Convergenza: La ‘convergenza’ nelle telecomunicazioni e il diritto d’autore nella società dell’informazione*, Milano, Giuffrè, 2009, pp. 63-64.

²⁵ Despite its low budget, the movie *Arrapaho* grossed a total of 5 billion lire. *Uccelli d’Italia* ranged 17th. See *Billboard*, October 6, 1984, p. 60; *Tocca l’albicocca* reached the top ten on the Italian Billboard. *Billboard*, August 3, 1985, p. 72.

²⁶ Gli Squallor experienced numerous lawsuits for slander, obscenity, and religious profanity starting from their 1977 album *Pompa*. This forced Cerruti to occasionally hire a lawyer before finalizing an album in order to avoid further charges; for the lawsuits and the act of attempted murder see *Gli Squallor: Un documentario*, cit.

²⁷ The journalist Stefano Della Volpe speculated that the motive for the shooting was likely related to a lover’s revenge since minutes prior to the shooting, Cerruti was performing live on the radio and received a phone call by a woman who asked him: ‘Perché non ti fai mai vedere? Affacciati alla finestra’. S. Della Volpe, ‘Clamorosa sparatoria a Radio Milano International’, in: *Corriere della sera*, February 20, 1977.

certainly contributed to their presentation as an ambivalent force of social and political criticism.

Indeed, the content of their pieces do not privilege or promote any political ideals or social groups. As Federico Vacalebre eloquently states, it is difficult to label Gli Squallor politically as they ridicule everybody, from right-wing conservators to left-wing liberals:

Scomodi a sinistra ('Mi ha rovinato il '68' con finale liberatorio e inno all'anno successivo) come a destra, gli Squallor resteranno nella mente di chi li visse in tempo come gli alieni del pop italiano: ci voleva coraggio, ricordano in molti, per entrare in un negozio di dischi e chiedere lp che si intitolavano 'Troia', 'Pompa', 'Vacca'... Non a caso fecero ricchi il mercato pirata.²⁸

Vacalebre's term 'alieni del pop italiano' keenly describes the difficulties to place them within a given canon and their inevitable destiny to be relegated to the underground world. Ilaria Urbani evaluates them as authors of a type of music that is 'la più sboccata, antiperbenista e anticonformista mai esistita'.²⁹ These appraisals strongly emphasize the originality and subversive nature of Gli Squallor. However, various observers and scholars have failed to notice a very crucial point about this intriguing band. None of its members, for example, can be associated with independent record labels, nor can their music be technically regarded as alternative or independent. Quite the contrary, each of their albums was produced through established and mainstream record companies such as Cbs, Cgd, and Ricordi. In 1977, when Gli Squallor first published *Pompa* with Cgd, established Italian singers such as Umberto Tozzi and Loredana Bertè were also under the same company. Likewise, in 1983 – when Gli Squallor published its album *Arrapaho* with Ricordi – the influential record company also recorded artists such as Milva and Fabrizio De Andrè. Moreover, the members of Gli Squallor were also accomplished musicians, composers, and music producers, in particular Bigazzi who is unanimously recognized as one of the most successful lyricists of Italian pop music.³⁰ Music producer Cerruti, on the other hand, was the artistic director of the three record companies that published Gli Squallor's fourteen albums.³¹ Hence, we must not overstate Gli Squallor's anti-establishment quality, its own members and record companies being well established in the music business, so much that their albums could be paradoxically regarded as self-produced by the same establishment they were ridiculing. The very existence of Gli Squallor therefore suggests that satire should not always be evaluated as a genre intrinsically subversive and wholly outside the system.

This observation further problematizes Gli Squallor phenomenon and the complex nature of their political and social satire. Theorists and practitioners of satire often claim that the genre of satire must be exclusively anti-establishment and must be estranged from the same system that it mocks.³² Even though the Squallor phenomenon cannot be entirely detached from the establishment, their disaffection

²⁸ F. Vacalebre, 'Sorrisi, canzoni e parolacce: chiedi chi erano gli Squallor', *Il Mattino*, July 9, 2013; http://www.ilmattino.it/spettacoli/musica/sorrisi_canzoni_e_parolacce_chiedi_chi_erano_gli_squallor/notizie/302264.shtml (last accessed February 11th 2014).

²⁹ See I. Urbani, 'In un film la storia di un gruppo spregiudicato', in: *La Repubblica Napoli*, September 26, 2012, p. 10.

³⁰ A. Nove, *Giancarlo Bigazzi: il geniaccio della canzone italiana*, Milano, Bompiani, 2012.

³¹ See 'Pene al pene', in: *Panorama*, May 8, 1979, p. 167

³² See for example the influential study by M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1941; J. Henderson, *Comic Hero versus Political Elite*, in: A. H. Sommerstein, S. Halliwell, J. Henderson and B. Zimmerman (eds), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis*, Bari, Levante Editori, 1993, pp. 307-16.

from its dynamics, as evident from the lack of serious advertisement or commercial ambitions, indeed accentuates their genuine satirical value. Most recently, the popular satirist Daniele Luttazzi offered a powerful definition of satire:

Chi fa satira non è migliore dei suoi bersagli. [...] La satira è contro il potere. Contro ogni potere, anche quello della satira. La logica del potere è il numero. Uno smette di fare satira quando si fa forte del numero di chi lo segue.³³

While defining the personal limits of satire within the individuals who create it, Luttazzi claims that satire is a contradictory form of expression that can be both dissident and self-denigrating. In other words, satire can only be taken seriously if it shows the self-critical sincerity of its own demise. Indeed, theorists have acknowledged this complexity while explaining the etymology of the word 'satire', which the Romans called 'satura', to evoke the stuffed plate of a mixed variety of fruits to be offered to the gods.³⁴ In addition to this meaning, satire has also been associated to the satyrs and as such goat-like and naked 'because, just as goats are fetid and dirty, satire uses fetid and filthy words, and it is naked' because it speaks plainly, unveiling the truth.³⁵ Multiplicity, pastiche, and self-irony are all stylistic elements of satire that are very well present in all of Gli Squallor's pieces. Take the introduction of their third album *Vacca*:

Dopo i Beatles, i Pink Floyd e Orietta Berti, nacquero gli Squallor.
Fenomeno di successo, fenomeno di cesso, ma sempre un fenomeno era.
Tutti correvano da loro, loro correvano dagli altri e s'incontrarono.
Quando non si videro più, dissero:
'ma dove sono andati a finire gli Squallor?'
Sono andati in Vacca! M m m m m m m m m m m m ... ua.

Cerruti here jokingly declares that Gli Squallor have been a phenomenon well-circumscribed within an established and respected music tradition. Indeed, long before them, parody and satire played an important role in Italian pop music with artists such as Quartetto Cetra, Renato Carosone, or Fred Buscaglione. Yet it is hard to find an Italian band like Gli Squallor that resorted to such an extreme of verbal violence and wicked sarcasm, while avoiding personal fame. On the contrary, Gli Squallor had no public image, and remained entrenched within this inner paradox characterized by the coexistence of the status of outsiders ('alieni del pop italiano') alongside the status of products of conventionalism (Bigazzi, Cerruti, Cgd, and Ricordi). Their paradox still haunts us today because although Gli Squallor never attempted to leave a legacy, it would be questionable to say that they achieved this goal. Popular Italian comic bands such as Skiantos, Elio e le storie tese, Prophylax, and Gem Boy, as well as comedians like Federico Salvatore, Gianfranco Marziano and Sora Cesira could very well embody the persistence of the remarkably indelible mark that Gli Squallor, through their caustic humor, brought to Italian music and culture.

³³ D. Luttazzi, 'Il cosa e il come,' *MicroMega*, <http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/il-cosa-e-il-come/> (last accessed February 12, 2014).

³⁴ K. Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 45.

³⁵ C. Honess, 'The Language(s) of Civic Invective in Dante: Rhetoric, Satire, and Politics', in: *Italian Studies*, 68, 2 (2013), pp. 157-64, p.162.

Keywords

Satire, Italian music, Italian politics, Gli Squallor, vulgarity

Nicolino Applauso is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Italian at Loyola University Maryland. He studied at the University of Bologna, and received his PhD from the University of Oregon. He has previously taught at Florida State University, the University of Oregon, Colorado College, Bucknell University, and Susquehanna University. His main research interests are humor and political satire, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italian literature with an emphasis on political invective, and comic poetry during wartime. He published various articles on Rustico Filippi, Cecco Angiolieri, Dante, and the politicized reception of Dante during Berlusconi's Seconda Repubblica. He is currently completing a monograph on Dante and medieval political invective in Italy and co-editing a volume on Dante and satire.

Dept. of Modern Languages & Literatures
Loyola University Maryland
Maryland Hall 455
4501 N. Charles St.
Baltimore, MD 21210 (USA)
napplauso@loyola.edu; napplauso@gmail.com

RIASSUNTO

Gli Squallor: La risata triste e le pernacchie

La satira sociale e politica nella musica italiana durante la Prima Repubblica

Anche se spesso viene catalogato con il marchio onnicomprensivo di 'Rock demenziale', il gruppo musicale italiano degli Squallor rappresenta uno dei fenomeni più incisivi di satira politica e sociale nell'Italia moderna. Ciò appare evidente se si esaminano i numerosi pezzi contenuti nei loro album, che presentano brillanti e corrosive parodie di noti partiti e politici, nonché di tendenze culturali e sociali dominanti. Se consideriamo inoltre il periodo in cui gli Squallor raggiunsero il massimo successo (verso la metà degli anni Ottanta), essi possono anche rappresentare l'importante voce di dissenso che caratterizzò gli ultimi decenni della cosiddetta Prima Repubblica. In questo articolo viene esplorata una selezione dei loro più importanti testi, con lo scopo di analizzare le dinamiche della loro particolarissima satira in relazione alle tendenze culturali, sociali e politiche allora in voga in Italia. Ci si sofferma inizialmente sulle varie allusioni politiche presenti in modo generico in pezzi come *Alluvione*, per poi passare all'analisi di pezzi che presentano una satira politica più esplicita contro noti partiti (come i Verdi) e politici dell'epoca, quali Gianni De Michelis (con *Demiculis*) e Umberto Bossi (in *Berta II*). Gli Squallor hanno creato parodie di famose canzoni utilizzando il nonsense, un umorismo surreale ed iperbolico e spaziando tra sperimentazioni linguistiche ed un linguaggio osceno. In questo modo, l'articolo sostiene che gli Squallor si sono dedicati alla 'metasatira', deridendo con successo l'industria musicale e radiotelevisiva italiana. Alla fine offre una riflessione sulla complessità della loro satira che anche se si è affermata come simbolo emblematico dell'anticonformismo, rimane nel contempo un fenomeno difficilmente catalogabile, perché in continua dissacrazione del canone e, in definitiva, anche di sé stesso.