



## Guilty for per 24 hours. The media lynching of Azouz Marzouk

by Paola Andrisani

It was on the evening of December 11, 2006, when the killing in Erba was consumed. Four bodies were torn to pieces: Raffaella Castagna, her two-year-old son Youssef, Paola Galli, Raffaella's mother, and Valeria Cherubini, a neighbour in the village<sup>1</sup>.

Only Mario Frigerio escaped the fury of the murderers by a miracle: he will point out the perpetrators of the massacre in Olindo Romano and Rosa Bazzi, residents on the ground floor of the building.

In 2011, a Court (Corte di Cassazione, Section I, 3.5.2011 dep. 5.9.2011, no. 33070, Pres. Chieffi, East. Caprioglio, ric. Romano)<sup>2</sup> rejected the appeals lodged by the defences of Olindo Romano and Rosa Angela Bazzi, already sentenced in the first instance by the Como Court and in the second instance by the Milan Court of Appeal to two life imprisonment, with daytime isolation for three years, for the offences of aggravated multiple homicide, fire (Article 423 of the Criminal Code), home invasion and the offence of carrying a weapon outside the home, as well as for murder and attempted murder. This ruling was final.

The so-called "Erba massacre" is probably one of the "most heinous crimes in the history of our country", as Massimo Astori, the prosecutor who first investigated the facts, declared. A crime that has marked the conscience of public opinion in the years following the day of the massacre, and which has continued, and continues to do so today, to animate the media debate regarding the events of the trial, and not only.

This story has rapidly transformed, through the words and images of the media, into a sort of "criminality show", whose main actors lose their authenticity to play the role of media characters, to raise the audience of networks. And it is in this way that the Erba massacre enters fully into what is defined as the "geography of the spectacularization of crime"<sup>3</sup>.

But let's take a step back to the day of that terrible crime.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Andrisani P., *La strage di Erba*, in *Rapporto sul razzismo in Italia* (a cura di G. Naletto), Manifestolibri Roma, 2009, pp. 56-58.

<sup>2</sup> The ruling can be found here: <https://www.penalecontemporaneo.it/upload/cassazione%20erba.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See: Polesana M. A., "Criminality show. Il caso di Erba, Azouz Marzouk e la costruzione mediatica del colpevole", Carocci, Roma, 2010.



Immediately, without any objective evidence, a few hours after the crime there is already a “designated” murderer: Abdel Fami Azouz Marzouk<sup>4</sup>, husband and father of two of the victims, but above all “the foreigner”, “the Muslim” and “the felon”. For the media there is no need to wait for confirmation or verification: the nature of the murder requires a culprit, as quickly as possible. And from the search for a scapegoat to the media process, the step is very short.

No one suspects the “nice citizens”, Olindo and Rosa, and the initial accusations against Azouz Marzouk spread thanks to the choral work of the media. Azouz is, in fact, wanted by the police, but is not yet found guilty by any official source. Yet, in the very first few hours, investigators and the media point to only one lead. A quick phone check and a little caution would have been enough to dispel all the accusations.<sup>5</sup>

The statements of the Chief Prosecutor of Como, Alessandro Maria Lodolini, who, instead of adopting formulas of circumstance, feeds the media with certainty: “We suspect that the author of the crimes is her husband. We have a good chance of catching him”, do not suggest caution.

From 11 p.m. onwards of that tragic night, it is a succession of headlines and news with a strong vein of racism. The nightly editions of the news are no less than that<sup>6</sup>.

The Erba story is an exemplary case because this time it's not the killers who misdirect the investigation, but the investigators themselves who make a resounding blunder.

A blunder enough to ensure that, a few hours after the tragedy, the news is no longer that of the massacre, but the problem of the immigrant presence in Italy. From being a crime news item, the fact shifts to the political editorial offices of newspapers and the news, and the topic of discussion and confrontation becomes even the pardon approved by Parliament a few months earlier (31 July 2006, ed.)

Soon, however (even though it was already too late with respect to the reactions triggered by the imprudent statements of the chief prosecutor), the Carabinieri ascertained, thanks to phone records, that Azouz was not on the run: he had been in Tunisia for a week, in Zaghouan with his parents. The first to support him is Carlo Castagna, Azouz's father-in-

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<sup>4</sup> Azouz Marzouk, tunisian, had regularly arrived in Italy in 2001. He had met his wife and got married in 2003, in 2004 they have a baby Youssef. In 2005 he was arrested for drug dealing and condemned to three years. After his release he kept his “life style”, that put it at odds with his wife. The two never got a divorce or split.

<sup>5</sup> In a similar case in Novi Ligure something very similar had happened. A young woman had killed mother and small brother and blamed a “gang of albanians”. What is disturbing, in cases like this, is precisely the automatism and the consequent emphasis on the “perception” of danger and social alarm caused by the “fear of the foreigner”, which in turn amplifies the demand for security. See Corrias P., *Vicini da morire. La strage di Erba e il Nord Italia divorato dalla paura*, Mondadori, Milano, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See: Andrisani P., *ibid.*



law, father, husband and grandfather of three of the victims. He is the first to try to put a stop to racist hatred towards him.

The media, incapable of finding a new scapegoat, begin to gossip ("The Tunisian was cheating on his wife - Raffaella's letters", *Il Giornale*, December 13; "An ex-boyfriend killed Raffaella", *La Stampa*, January 5 2007) to fill the void in the chronicle of the massacre.

Days pass. Olindo and Rosa are arrested around one o'clock on January 8 2007. They are let out, with a stratagem, from the back of their house, because photographers and journalists have now invaded the interior of the court in Via Diaz. It is legitimate to wonder whether they would have used the same caution and caution if Azouz had been there instead of them. Probably not: perhaps, in this case, it would have been more "useful" to immediately put the monster on the front page, as it has already happened too often.

Azouz goes from "guilty" to "victim". And then from "victim", he becomes a media product built to mirror and embroider the tragedy.

And the journalist-show business takes advantage of it, cancelling with a skilful blow all the racist hatred vomited for days. Azouz Marzouk soon becomes a real "showman", passing through TV national programmes such as *Piazza Italia* and *Porta a Porta*. There is no television program that does not invite him to tell the story of which he has become the "victim". Azouz "divo" is even recruited by the duo Fabrizio Corona and Lele Mora (VIP photographer the former, and agent of the stars the latter), who become his agents.

The "media consecration" reaches its climax with a special episode of *Matrix* (the TV talk on Channel 5, conducted by Enrico Mentana) on July 2007, seven months after the massacre. An episode that is defined as "experimental" - with a red dot to indicate that it is intended for adults only. And after the consecration, the spectacularization continues when the name of Azouz circulates about the possible participants of a reality show.

The Erba massacre, one of the most controversial crime stories of recent times, is a valid field of analysis and study, not so much for its brutality or the alternation of investigative operations<sup>7</sup>, but for the incredible story of the attribution of blame to the young Azouz.

In this regard, it should be remembered that it was precisely the massacre of Erba and the easy racist accusations against Azouz Marzouk that reopened the debate on migrants' rights when they become protagonists of news events. Azouz's media lynching did not go unnoticed: the first body to urge newspaper editors and journalists' representatives to develop a reflection was the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

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<sup>7</sup> E. Montolli, *L'enigma di Erba*, Rcs Periodici, 2010 e E. Montolli, F. Manti, *Il grande abbaglio. Due innocenti verso l'ergastolo? Controinchiesta sulla strage di erba*, Aliberti, 2008.



But the newspapers slipped on this warning. The process through which Azouz's "media character" took shape and consistency must be placed within a "guilt" that did not fail even after the embarrassing ritual of partial corrections by the media. In Azouz's case (as Marco Opiari also notes in his book<sup>8</sup>), the only newspapers that escaped lynching were "the manifesto" and "Liberation". And among the media that accused him, very few apologized ("Il Corriere della sera", among the big ones) and very few did not ("La Repubblica", is the most important example).

The National Press Federation (FNSI) and the Journalists Guild, on the other hand, accepted the invitation to the debate and began work on a text<sup>9</sup> ("Deontological Protocol on Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Victims of Trafficking and Migrants") which saw the light and was approved by the National Council of the Guild between April and June 2008.<sup>10</sup>

This media coverage of Azouz was the resounding effect of a xenophobic prejudice that had actually begun to manifest itself in the 1980s. The effects were so devastating that some journalists were brought to reflect on the important weight that language and rhetoric used in news story can become a misleading and discriminatory.

The judicial acquittal of Azouz, after the long series of sentences, is beyond any doubt. And yet, media insisted focusing on his past of drug dealings as it had any relevance in the homicides. It is difficult to understand what minor crime or tabloid gossip has to do with the four bodies that were tortured on the evening of December 11 2006, if it were not for the media construction connected to him.

At the end of September 2019, the Erba massacre was once again in the news. A court accepted the request of Olindo Romano and Rosa Bazzi's lawyers to transmit to the Court of appeal of Como the request for new investigations on some findings at the scene of the crime. It is him who gave the news: the "non-protagonist not guilty", Azouz Marzouk, who announces that he has set up a team of experts and consultants to try to shed new

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<sup>8</sup> Opiari M., *Il mostro quotidiano. Il «caso» Azouz Marzouk e la costruzione della notizia*, Città aperta editrice, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> See: Mastantuono P. "La Carta di Roma: non un giornalismo buono, ma un buon giornalismo per raccontare l'immigrazione", here: <http://www.libertacivili.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Primo-Piano-Mastantuono-Carta-di-Roma.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> The Association [Carta di Roma](#), instead, was founded in December 2011 to implement the deontological protocol for a correct information on immigration issues. It was founded by the National Council of the Order of Journalists and the National Federation of Italian Press and brings together, to date, about twenty associations of organized civil society. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the National Office for Racial Antidiscrimination are permanently invited.



light on the so-called Erba massacre. After 13 years, Azouz returns, despite himself, to make people talk about him again.