

New Trends in Italian Cinema

New Trends in Italian Cinema:
“New” Neorealism

Edited by

Carmela Bernardetta Scala and Antonio Rossini

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

New Trends in Italian Cinema: “New” Neorealism,
Edited by Carmela Bernardetta Scala and Antonio Rossini

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2013 by Carmela Bernardetta Scala and Antonio Rossini and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4591-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4591-5

Per tutti coloro a cui è stato negato il diritto di vivere,

ai quali non è stata data la possibilità di scegliere

*Per tutti i bambini che non hanno mai conosciuto l'infanzia e per quelli
che sono morti senza mai vivere*

Per le vittime innocenti di Scampia...

CONTENTS

Introduction

New Trends in Italian Cinema: “New” Neorealism

Antonio Rossini and Carmela Bernardetta Scala 1

Sodom and Gomorrah: Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò* and Matteo Garrone’s *Gomorra* as a Comprehensive Critique of Fascist and Post-Fascist Italy, from the Outside-In

Tania Zampini 9

Le vite rubate

Carmela Bernardetta Scala 35

Journeying into Italy’s Past and Present: Gianni Amelio’s *Lamerica*

Ernesto Virgulti 49

Il ‘Neo-neorealismo’ di Ermanno Olmi

Antonio Rossini 63

Non sarà il caso di ri-cominciare a parlare di “neo-neorealismo”?

Il caso di “Anche libero va bene”

Laura Leonardo 95

INTRODUCTION

NEW TRENDS IN ITALIAN CINEMA: “NEW” NEOREALISM

ANTONIO ROSSINI
AND CARMELA BERNADETTA SCALA

It is true that sometimes one has to take a step back to move forward, and the recent rebirth of the Italian cinema industry proves that. Indeed, just when it seemed that Italian cinema was on the verge of an inevitable collapse, it was able to re-invent itself and breathe a “new” life into the art of film-making. However, in order to re-invent and regenerate itself Italian cinema had to take a step back and return to *la via maestra*, that of neorealism. This originated a new production of “documentary-style” films such as *Gomorra*, (Garrone), *Lamerica* (Amelio), *Centochiodi* and *Terra Madre* (Olmi), (all of which will be discussed in this volume) in which the old school of neorealism blends perfectly with the new trends in Italian cinema which we have called “new-neorealism”. This book intends to analyze and explore this return to the past, with the intent to unveil the reasons that have brought our modern directors to feed on the work of their great predecessors.

It is worth noting, however, that a reflection on Neorealism had already been initiated by one of its fathers, Rossellini himself. In 1959, fourteen years after *Rome Open City*, the Italian maestro shoots *Il Generale Della Rovere*, the all but heroic wartime tale of a small time swindler turned by a German colonel into a collaborator to help dismantle the Resistance network in the occupied Milan of 1944-1945. The movie was filmed and produced under stringent pressure during a three month period to meet the Venice competition deadline and was eventually awarded the Golden Lion, marking Rossellini’s only critical and commercial success comparable to that of *Open City*. Recently, in 2009, the Criterion Collection, has released a new edition accompanied by some invaluable extra material, notably

comprising interviews with Isabella Rossellini, Renzo Rossellini, and Adriano Aprà.

The salient feature of this wealth of contributions resides in the assessment of the very issue at the core of this collection of essay: how to deal with the legacy of neorealism in the face of an evolving society and challenging new times. This was true for Rossellini at least on two levels: the far from heroic plot (it does not mythologize the efforts of the partisans against the Germans but the make-do toils of a man that perhaps embodies the hundreds of thousands of Italians who did not help but, rather, decided to sit on the fence) and the style and vision of his own film-making (Rossellini had already produced many movies that marked a substantial departure from the 'trilogy' and had discovered television, as Renzo Rossellini points out, a far reaching medium for whose viewers he had produced a famous documentary on India).

How did Rossellini confront the challenge? He emphasized the chronological distance from the events by using silent movie devices like stock footage played as a backdrop for the action (as it is evident in the case of the members of the resistance in Milan), juxtaposing the archival footage of a bombed house to the evidently fake, as well as pensive, by standing of the actors on a pile of rubble carefully reconstructed on the set, and, finally, by contrasting the epic image of the horizon of Rome framing the final execution of *Open City* with the painted backdrop of Milan, ironic stage of the swindler's own execution in the San Vittore jail.

In the printed material accompanying the Criterion Collection edition of 2009 James Monaco cleverly remarks:

One scene is especially important in hindsight. At the end, when the firing squad is exacting its vengeance, the victims stand in front of a curiously painted wall, with a city landscape, that adds a strange poignancy to the tragic event. (Rossellini had shot scenes of the inmates painting the mural themselves that did not make the final cut.) This seemingly eccentric feature foreshadows most of Rossellini's work for the next fifteen years. In the sixties and seventies, he concentrated on historical and educational subjects and invented numerous techniques for melding artificial settings with realistic action. The father of neorealism became the father of "artificial realism".

This, however, marks the quintessential attitude of neorealist filmmaking. As Isabella and Renzo Rossellini maintain in their respective interviews, given the priority of a strong ethical stance before both reality and the audience, given the maestro's declared aspiration to an art that should help the critical elaboration of the viewer, it is normal to resort to any type of artificial technique both to avoid an increase in the costs of the production

and a loss of authorial freedom. What the viewer is really after, Rossellini seems to suggest, is not a blind obedience to the formal canon of neorealist cinematic practice, but, rather, a commitment to honesty, truth, and, maybe, in this case, even forgiveness for some shady figures active during the Nazi occupation.

Fourteen years after *Rome Open City*, the job is not to revive that spirit by obedience to a normative form and to a stale attitude of praise: rather, the moral obligation is to assess all that was left out back then and this, on ethical grounds, should not bar any stylistic or technical avenue for the director.

The contemporary generation of Italian film-makers felt the need to tell the 'naked' truth, to go back in the streets and capture life as it happened, limiting the time spent on a professional set; when on the set their cameras became mirrors where reality was simply reflected but not embellished. Revisiting this old approach to reality and film-making provided them with the means to voice their disappointment, their sadness and their bewilderment with the world around them. The same had happened to their predecessors as Vittorio DeSica's words clearly suggest:

"The experience of the war was decisive for us all. Each felt the mad desire to throw away all the old stories of the Italian cinema, to plant the camera in the midst of real life, in the midst of all that struck our astonished eyes. We sought to liberate ourselves from the weight of our sins, we wanted to look ourselves in the face and tell ourselves the truth, to discover what we really were, and to seek salvation..."¹

Italy today obviously is not a postwar country anymore; however it still faces many challenges: the government still does not provide stability for its citizens; unemployment continues to spread especially in the south; society is changing due to the high number of immigrants; the structure of the family (the very core of Italian society) is changing and is actually crashing under the weight of the stress imposed on it by the many demands and the many uncertainties of today's world; poverty and the crime related to it are rising consistently.

One of the finest connoisseurs of Italian Cinema, Millicent Marcus, has keenly perceived the ebbing and flowing nature of the Italian Cinema's attitude towards neorealism and its incredibly seminal staying power. Indeed, she is the first one to have talked openly about 'new neorealism' about some young contemporary directors with reference to not just the formal qualities of their cinematography, but to the moral urgency behind their choices.

“I am proposing here ...that neorealism constitutes *la via maestra* of Italian film, that it is the point of departure for all serious postwar cinematic practice, and that each director had to come to terms with it in some way, whether in seeming imitation (the early Olmi), in commercial exploitation (the middle Comencini), or in ostensible rejection (the recent Tavianis). The sporadic outburst of neo-neorealism (*The Organizer*, *Accattone*, and *Bandits at Orgosolo*) are only the most obvious examples of a cinematic memory that will not disappear, and that dictates, if not the outward form of the modern film industry, at least its conscience.”²

Nonetheless, Marcus’ acumen has regaled us with yet another critical gem which, albeit originating in her discourse on the Holocaust’s space in contemporary Italian Cinema, has great repercussions on the object of this collection of essays:

With the Fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the following dissolution of the Italian Communist Party, the selective reading of Second World War history could give way to the other stories, or indeed, the stories of ‘the other,’ that emerged from this highly charged past. In terms of the Shoah, it was as if the floodgates had finally been opened, and the belated work of confronting this anguished episode in Italian national history could finally begin³.

If the end of the Cold War was so effective on the assessment of the Holocaust in Italy, its consequences on the engagement of directors with the all plaguing rift of Italian society caused by the political clash between left and right, Atlantic allegiances and moral dependence on the Soviet Union, political terrorism in the 70s, and the resilience of society at large have been equally deep. Profoundly politically engaged (and not always formally compatible with neorealist filming practice, as in the case of Bellocchio) films such as Giordana’s *La meglio Gioventù* (2003), Bellocchio’s *Buongiorno Notte* (2003) or Martinelli’s *Piazza delle Cinque Lune* (2003), to name but a few, would have never been shot before the momentous events mentioned by Marcus.

Only with the loss of strategic importance in the grand schemes of the Cold War and with a much less invasive presence of American interests in the decision making processes of national politics, could Italy revisit the scars of its 1943-1945 civil war, of its political terrorism—stemming, on the left, from the misconceived notion of the alleged betrayal of the ideals of the Resistance, and, on the right, from a nostalgia for the ‘republican’ Fascism of Salò—and the so-called Tension Strategy.

Reflecting on the socio-political disintegration of their country some filmmakers have decided to “plant the camera in the midst of real life”

once again and brought the nude reality to the big screen, among these there is definitely Matteo Garrone.

Garrone, as Tania Zampini will discuss in her essay “Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò* and Matteo Garrone’s *Gomorra* as a Comprehensive Critique of Fascist and Post-Fascist Italy, from the Outside-In “, was deeply inspired and influenced by the neorealist masters and especially he shared Pasolini’s discontent towards society and its corruption. Garrone’s breakthrough 2008 film, *Gomorra* and Pasolini’s no less striking 1975 opus *Salò, or, the 120 days of Sodom* are separated by more than a generation and at first viewing, read as completely disparate projects. Upon closer inspection, however, the pair of films, following the biblical pairing of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, views together as a comprehensive critique of post-modern Italy. The one exposes a nation on the brink of collapse from and appropriating an allegorical *external* perspective; the other sheds light on its precarious international position from *within* and by way of a distinct, precise, and local vantage point reflected as much in the content represented as in its very representation, visually and aurally. Diametrically opposed stylistically, Pasolini’s and Garrone’s films partake in different ways of the same neorealist roots, and are linked at their concern for the future of a severely troubled nation.

Furthermore, Garrone follows neorealism also in his choice to employ real people, the *scugnizzi* of the Neapolitan streets with their unique features and language, rather than professional actors; and to tell their ‘real’ stories no matter how sad and violent. There is no happy ending for the protagonists of this movie; their destiny inevitably leads to death, failure and defeat. We would have liked to see Marco and Ciro turn their back at organized crime and move away from their *ghetto*, but instead they are captured by the myth of *Scarface* and are fascinated by the wealth and the power that all the mobsters seem to have. They dream to rival one of the big clans and at the end they pay dearly for their cockiness. The last scene of *Gomorra* that unveils the boys’ fate is utterly poetic but also very sad: the camera silently closes on the truck that delivers the corpses of Marco and Ciro to the ocean, no one will ever find them, no one will never know what happened to them, they will be forgotten just as Scampia has been forgotten by the rest of the world. Garrone in *Gomorra* took his camera to the streets of Scampia not simply to shoot a movie, but with the intent to ‘document’ reality. He went there to show us that a war is still going on, the war against organized crime, and that it is not unusual for people in certain parts of the country to walk the streets and run into a dead body. He documented how an innocent child becomes corrupt in order to escape misery, how a man loses every hope when he sees his

work exploited by the mobsters, (like Pasquale the tailor whose work is 'stolen' by his employer who works for the organized crime); he denounced to the world that in forgotten Italy it is still too easy to die. Ultimately, Garrone brought to the screen Saviano's protest and rebellion against organized crime and the *omertà* that reigns around it, as suggested also by Carmela Scala in her essay.

In his essay on *Lamerica* Ernesto Virgulti analyzes and assesses Amelio's debt to neorealism while pointing out his (Amelio's) innovations and originality. In *Lamerica* with the arrival of the Albanians, Amelio saw Italian history repeat itself: the depressed socio-economic conditions of Italy's postwar era reflected those of Albania today; and Italy, once in search of the American dream, has now become Albania's 'Lamerica'. But the film is not just a metaphor of the emigrant experience. In addition to re-visiting Italy's socio-historical past, Amelio also re-visits its cinematic traditions. In making his film, Amelio employed many aesthetic principles used by the filmmakers of the post-war era, like Rossellini and De Sica. To be sure, *Lamerica* contains a number of techniques and characteristics of neorealism, such as on-location shooting, natural lighting and sound, linear narration, the unity of time and action, unobtrusive editing and especially the use of non-professional actors. In fact, of the myriad of characters in *Lamerica*, only three are professional actors: Enrico Lo Verso, Michele Placido and Piro Milkani. Another neorealist practice taken up by Amelio is the use of newsreels. The opening credits are accompanied by authentic newsreel footage chronicling Fascist Italy's invasion and colonization of Albania in 1939. There follows a jump-cut to 1991, and the arrival, fifty-two years later, at the same Port of Durazzo, of two Italian entrepreneurs, Fiore and Gino, another way of reinforcing the connection between past and present. Amelio also utilizes several intertextual motifs and themes that are reminiscent of the classic films of neorealism, especially Rossellini's *Paisà* and De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*. Even the main narrative of *Lamerica*, which revolves around the journey/quest of Gino and Spiro/Michele, is not unlike that which Antonio and Bruno embark upon in *Ladri di biciclette*. In both films, the journey is the means by which the protagonists not only (re)connect with one another, but also achieve a greater understanding of themselves and others. In sum, the journey embarked upon by the film's protagonists is also a reflection of the director's personal journey into his family's past, Italy's socio-political history and its cinematic traditions.

In, "Ermanno Olmi's backward conversion: 'neorealism' between *Centochiodi* and *Terra Madre*?" Antonio Rossini describes, analyzes, and assesses the last two major works by Olmi. Specifically, three are the main

foci of the essay. First, he will consider what changes intervened in Olmi's style when he set out to produce *Centochiodi*, as the maestro himself admitted, his last feature film. Second, he will address the nature of his unique first long-documentary, released in 2010, *Terra Madre*. Indeed, this last effort constitutes a revolutionary step perhaps towards a new hybrid form of movie production. *Terra Madre*, in fact, incorporates at least three major segments: It opens with a typical news-broadcast-style description of the Mother Earth event held in Torino in 2006; it then moves to the incredible original footage portraying the life of a modern-day hermit who, incredibly, decided to live in absolute seclusion from society and in close contact with nature for thirty-five years; and, eventually culminates in the final portion of the movie which is an intense, rich, and lyrical depiction of the life of a farmer over four entire seasons. Can the "polyphonic" nature of this documentary, which ends in nothing but lyrical imagery, be considered Olmi's step towards a new neorealist style? Rossini will show how on grounds of aesthetic and moral awareness, stylistic complexity, and political militancy, Olmi's last masterpiece can be considered germane to the productions of such *auteurs* as Rossellini and Visconti. Third and last, the contribution will explore the subtle, and yet intense, "dialogue" existing between *Centochiodi* and *Terra Madre*, thus highlighting how the documentary-like style of the last feature film foreshadows and paves the way for the "feature film nature" of the last sequences of *Terra Madre*. In conclusion, Rossini argues how if not minutely in cinematic technique, Olmi's last stance is certainly akin to neorealism as a cultural experience.

Finally, in "*Non sarà il caso di ri-cominciare a parlare di "neo-neorealismo"? Il caso Di "Anche libero va bene"*", Laura Leonardo proposes a comparison between *Anche libero va bene* a movie by Rossi Stuart, (2006), with the neorealist 'school' at large. Leonardo will unveil the influence that films such as *Ladri di Biciletta* had on Rossi's approach to film making. Indeed, both movies *Ladri di Biciletta* and *Anche libero va bene* depict the drama of a father who has to struggle with depression and with the obligation to take care of his children. The profound difference between the two stories is however that Antonio Ricci's family in De Sica's movie is united in spite of all; instead, Renato's family in Rossi's movie crumbles under the pressure of the adverse circumstances, or so it seems. The whole story is seen and told through the eyes of Tommi, (Alessandro Morace, at his first acting experience), Renato's eleven year old boy, who, in spite of his parents failure in raising him and his sister, is able to cope with the stress of a dysfunctional family finding his own place in the world. Tommi is the most realistic out of all the

characters, he is even more believable because he does not seem to act, his emotions are perceived as real by the spectators. All of this is possible thanks to Rossi's ability in the use of the camera. In an interview for Cineuropa.it in 2006, Rossi Stuart stated that while making his movie the only objective he had in mind was "massima autenticità"; hence his camera had to remain almost immobile while shooting, acting like a mirror where the feelings and the emotions of the protagonists could reproduce faithfully and freely. Reflecting upon the peculiar use of the camera and the attention paid to introspection, the journey within of each protagonist, the parallel with neorealism becomes evident and Laura Leonardo in her essay intends to further explore this connection.

In conclusion, this study is an attempt to explain and illustrates the lure that neorealism still holds on Italian cinema through the analyses of some of the most exemplary works of this "new-neorealism" trend. Furthermore, it is not our intent to propose this study as exhaustive, rather we would like to consider it simply as the first step into a very fertile territory for all the scholars interested in cinema and specifically in Italian cinema.

Notes

¹ *La table ronde* 149 (May 1960), 80

² *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. xvii

³ *Italian Film in the Shadow of Aschwits*. Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2007. p. 18

SODOM AND GOMORRAH:
PIER PAOLO PASOLINI'S *SALÒ*
AND MATTEO GARRONE'S *GOMORRA*
AS A COMPREHENSIVE CRITIQUE OF FASCIST
AND POST-FASCIST ITALY,
FROM THE OUTSIDE-IN

TANIA ZAMPINI

Genesis 14 through 19 recounts the infamous story of Sodom and Gomorrah - an episode that has lent its name to countless artistic works ever since. When it becomes clear to Lot and Abram that sharing geographical boundaries and competing for resources will lead to conflict, Lot uproots and takes his family to the outskirts of Sodom, where "the men ... were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord."¹ Their sin, of course, is not yet clear at this point in the biblical narrative. The only things known about the twin cities are their alliance with other neighbouring cities and their involvement in a war over trade and goods. Despite the already "unorthodox" activity in both places, God delays his destruction of the cities in response to Abram's plea: unless the number of righteous men in Sodom, specifically, is any less than ten, God's clemency should be granted.² When the Sodomites insist on lying with Lot's angelic visitors one night, however, God's patience finally runs thin, and both Sodom and Gomorrah are flooded with sulfuric rain that burns them to the ground, leaving no trace. Lot, for his benevolence and hospitality, is spared, and he and his family are ushered to safety. His wife, however, grieving the ruins behind her, fails to resist the temptation to turn and look at Sodom in its wake; she is turned to a pillar of salt and sees her own untimely death.

In 1975, Pier Paolo Pasolini, adapting the Marquis de Sade's *120 days of Sodom*, writes, directs, conjectures his last filmic piece, *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom*: a retrospective allegorical application of the infamous French text to the political situation in Italy under Mussolini's regime

headquartered in the Lombard city of Salò. In 2008, Roman filmmaker Matteo Garrone names his socially-critical award-winning piece on the Neapolitan camorra *Gomorra* in a move that would call the attention of film scholars and critics not only to the close phonetic overlap of the biblical city and the Neapolitan dialect word for “mafia,” (signaled also, of course, by the name given to Roberto Saviano’s book on which the film is based)³ but also to Pasolini’s earlier work and its recall of Gomorra’s biblical counterpart, Sodom. At first viewing, Pasolini’s and Garrone’s films read as completely disparate and entirely unrelated projects, the one a highly stylised and literarily pregnant rendering of the politics of power and abuse, the other a hard-hitting, unassuming, grittily honest portrayal of the camorra’s ubiquitous effects on daily living in Naples. Upon closer inspection, however, the pair of films, following the biblical pairing of the cities of Sodom and Gomorra, view together as a comprehensive critique of post-modern Italy, stylistic components of a growing genre of post-fascist neo-realism, and linked at their concern for the future of a vanishing nation. The Italy they treat – fascist, and vulnerable to post-fascist, neo-fascist relapse, respectively – is, more than the portrait of a state of emergency, a place to leave indefinitely; turning back, as it was for Lot’s wife, ensures an absolute personal collapse.

Stylistically, these book adaptations, though they explore the same fundamental question, function at opposite ends of the filmic spectrum both, however, pointing to a new category of socially-conscious filmmaking. By 1975 a long way removed from its auteur’s neorealist origins, *Salò* is the representation of a strongly-marked internal and *national* problem from without: an external approach to a domestic conflict addressed, however, to a very specific subset of the Italian population – Italy’s literary elite. *Gomorra*, by contrast, is a near-suffocating and close-to-claustrophobic account of a local problem with national consequences of international and widespread appeal. Pasolini applies an at least French (if not international) and at least literary (if not “artistic” more generally) lens to a crisis felt within his country and understood by still fewer inside it; Garrone provides close-up snapshots of one community in one Italian city which stand in for, allude to, and open the door onto the larger problems the country in which they occur faces. It is, beyond their shared political concern, the constant interplay of “inside and outside,” of external perspective and internal space inherent to Pasolini’s works more generally and also present in Garrone’s major filmic project, *Gomorra*, that allows critics to place the above-mentioned works in the same cultural field of reference. It is, furthermore, the applicability of the “grey zone” theory to

each of these works – albeit in vastly different ways – that draw them still closer together as twin projects, thirty-three years separated.

Pasolini's film, like the Marquis de Sade's text on which it is based, was not well-received upon its release in 1975, and not surprisingly: the *anni di piombo* surrounding it, though provocative, did less than hoped (by some, Pasolini among them) to reorient Italy's national politics or the discourse surrounding them. By the time of Salò's production, the *Movimento sociale italiano*, once again under the leadership of Giorgio Almirante, had picked up considerable steam after a period of slow but generally sustained growth.⁴ The party – one of the largest and most significant in Italy at the time – was originally founded post-war by a group of fascist veterans, it bears mentioning, and, despite a number of policy changes over the years and an increasing penchant toward conservatism, maintained its emblematic and symbolic association with Mussolini's regime well into the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁵ In such a cultural climate, even Pasolini's arguably milder vocalisations of political discontent – his *Lettere luterane* and *Scritti corsari*, both huge influences on Saviano's thought – though viewed energetically within the community in which they took root, were dismissed or frowned upon in upper political circles.⁶ Salò would make a still larger splash. That is not to say that it enjoyed no attention or international acclaim: soon after its appearance in – and disappearance from – Italy, it was dubbed in French under the direction of Jean-Claude Binette. It was not until the late 1990s, however, that Salò would receive the scholastic attention it deserved, as it was soon after its release banned in Italy for the next twenty years.⁷

Salò's close affiliation with France was born, however, far earlier than the film's success there. It began with Pasolini's interest in and adaptation of the infamous *120 days of Sodom*, written from the Bastille during the French revolution and subject to the same fate as Pasolini's film: de Sade's manuscript was initially lost and, when eventually found, ignored, deplored, or dismissed until the 20th century. Although Pasolini's film is by no means a letter-for-letter adaptation of Sade's work, a general overview of the *120 days of Sodom* in the context of its original composition will be necessary to understand Pasolini's position in employing it as a viable tool for his artistic representation of fascist and post-fascist Italy.

Perhaps most obvious about Sade's *120 days of Sodom* is its indulgence of the author's frequent penchant for vulgar and "morally depraved" sexuality. In a villa high in the Black Forest, four male protagonists – libertines and men of power made rich by military campaigns for Louis XIV – intermarry with each others' daughters, then

recruit a company of sixteen boys and girls - virgins between the ages of 12 and 15 - eight men in their 20s, and four old women and former prostitutes to subject to a series of humiliating sexual acts, worsening from one month to the next, cumulating first in sodomy, then in traditional rape of the female victims. The main, though not exclusive, function of the prostitutes is to act as “tutors” to the young virgins in matters of sexual depravity: each day, one is asked to tell stories about her experiences within a specific subset of sexual activity, which will then act as a springboard for the sexual violence each of the four libertines subsequently carries out on his chosen victims. Although the prostitutes are not spared the cruelty of the libertines, enlisted as they are to keep the participants of the “game” from transgressing against its rules as established by the four libertines - each of whom represents a different stratum of French power in the 18th century: nobility, church, courts, and high finance -⁸ they are no less placed in an authoritative position over the younger victims who look to them for performative cues.

Pasolini's very interest in de Sade's tale and the specific elements he chooses to incorporate in his own reconstructed narrative speak at once to his overall approach to the problem of his contemporary Italy as he sees it. Pasolini, like de Sade, situates his project in an old château that, although it is supposed to stand in Salò proper, lies visually remote from any neighbouring community. It is a place where, as the chosen victims are told, “siete fuori dai confine di ogni legalità”⁹ trapped in a game in which they are not innocent subjects, but outlaws.¹⁰ Like de Sade, then, Pasolini removes the activity of his film from any internal space with which his spectators might be visually aware, reflecting his own and his audience's shared estrangement from the political Italy in which they find themselves; both authors shift their narratives to spaces outside the confines of the societies they latently or blatantly critique. But while de Sade, to a degree, at least, “expatriates” his villains, placing them outside the confines of France while he writes from a restricted location within it, Pasolini, filming in Italy proper, fills his remote villa with Italian subjects, not, like de Sade's characters, social figures in lecherous decline, but the same political and ecclesiastic figures at the height of their influence and power in the nation. Pasolini's film is undoubtedly intended for an Italian audience and is especially tailored to be culturally and literarily relevant to them: Pasolini constructs the events of the château at Salò within a Dantesque framework – one which, he insists, is already present, even if only implicitly, in de Sade's text, but one which, for obvious reasons, would resonate on a deeper level with his ideal, Italian, elite audience than with any other.¹¹ He is explicit in his spatial and temporal location of the

plot; as Erminia Passannanti points out, “Salò si apre con la didascalia ‘1944-1945. Nell’Italia settentrionale durante l’occupazione nazifascista: Anti-Inferno’ e con alcune carrellate che offrono squarci paesaggistici di una località nordica sul Lago di Garda.”¹² Still, despite his pronounced efforts at rendering the situation he depicts immediately relevant, Pasolini’s film stylistically keeps his viewers at bay – at a nervous and uncomfortable distance.¹³

The alienating sensation of the film and its instantaneous endorsement of an external perspective is felt as early as the opening scene, regardless of its geographic proximity to its ideal Italian audience. *Salò* opens with a disinterested pan of a non-descript Italian landscape only passively identified, by a street-sign viewed in a corner of the screen, as *Salò*¹⁴; some boys from bourgeois families selected potentially to partake in the libertines’ imagined game ride across the screen on bikes, filmed from a marked distance. The grass is green and rich, and the shot is visually stunning, but the camera rests on no detail and denies the viewer an opportunity to connect with anything on screen.¹⁵ In fact, in this specific interlude, both the camera and the subjects of its gaze are in perpetual motion, preventing the viewer from fixating his or her attention on any one character or any action portrayed. The clip presented immediately prior to this first encounter with the *Salò* Republic’s male victims, by contrast, shows the film’s four antagonists sitting in a dark room, silent, around a table, each signing the rule book from which they will later read. Here, the camera, like the characters it films, is static and inert. Audiences are invited – and constrained – to focus on these four representatives of the Italian fascist regime.

In the scenes to follow, and as the gathered boys are examined and selected, the camera reveals a similar directorial obsession with the constant interplay between “internal” and “external” perspectives: the scene opens and closes in an empty, vast, and high-ceilinged room, the boys are lined up on the viewer’s left, while the libertines and their following, facing them, scrutinize them to the viewer’s right. Here, the camera moves first from wide pans of the room to close-ups on the faces of the boys and the libertines, alternately. Tellingly, it never lingers on any given face long enough for real inspection: the boys are given time enough only to state their names and exchange still innocent smiles with their eventual aggressors. Only two boys are inspected in this segment – the ones who will consequently become most easily recognisable by viewers. The others are as if without identity.¹⁶ Viewers’ attempts at accessing the internal space of any given character with whom they must, later, objectively sympathise, then, from the outset, are undermined by

Pasolini's cinematic and photographic approach to his subjects. They are further separated from the film's protagonists a short skip ahead, where the rest of the boys appear behind a glass wall in a space the libertines will again claim with their invasive presence from an external space.¹⁷

What Pasolini achieves in the opening segments of his film, then, is a visual progress from an external space – the countryside from which the boys are selected – to an internal space – the selection rooms and the villa that will eventually house them. Garrone takes the opposite approach in the first scene of *Gomorrah*. His film opens in utter darkness with a sound only later recognisable as the product of fans in a tanning salon.¹⁸ The first decipherable image viewers are offered, thirty seconds later,¹⁹ is a close-up of a man standing in a tanning bed, surrounded by lamps. The camera, inching closer and closer to the man's face as the image becomes lighter and clearer, rests on this image for another thirty seconds before jumping to a close-up of another man staring at his reflection in a mirror.²⁰ These men, like the three next characters shown, are filmed more or less from the same point of the body: the shoulders up. The camera's focus on bust close-ups is only interrupted by its momentary interest in the hand of a man being manicured. Contrary to Pasolini's long, landscape shots and wide camera pans, the first three and a half minutes of Garrone's film take place exclusively in interior spaces – the tanning salon – and zero in on intimate physical details of the characters displayed. It is only in the minute or so to follow, however, that the difference between Garrone's and Pasolini's approach is more distinctly marked. Once Garrone's mafia bosses conclude their affairs in the tanning salon, they are seen leaving the premises, moving back to an external space of which viewers are offered only a glimpse. As they exit the scene, the camera returns to their victims in the tanning salon, moving from close-up images of two among them, to larger shots of each taken from a more distant vantage point outside their tanning beds.²¹ Not unlike Pasolini, Garrone invites viewers to behold his subjects from without or at a distance, but not without first experiencing the moments they live from their perspective.

Pasolini's distancing effect does not begin and end with the spectator's visual remoteness from the characters themselves – a distance early achieved and sustained throughout the film. It is further promoted by a pervasive and haunting *voyeurism* that runs the length of the film. When we first meet the young girls to be selected for the game, we see them peering out at the libertines in the corridor from the room that contains them.²² Their spectacle is mirrored by the voyeuristic stance Pasolini has his viewers assume a short while later, watching one of the girls enter a room for inspection through an open window²³ and dissociated from the

perspective of any character involved in the scene until seconds after the action takes place.²⁴ When the chosen victims are taken to the villa to which they will be confined for the following four months, they are distinctly separated both from the viewer and from the libertines who look down at them from the second-storey gallery deliberately intended to resemble Mussolini's now infamous balcony in Piazza Navona, Rome.²⁵ When the prostitute-storytellers appear to the libertines and victims to recount their tales of sexual lasciviousness, they are both filmed and viewed from afar: they float down a long staircase visually at the center of the long, ample sala delle orgie and stand at the end of an equally long table.²⁶ During their narration, they remain removed from both the libertines and the band of victims, a distance transgressed only as the film – and the scenario it depicts – disintegrates into increased depravity: late in the girone della merda, one of the libertines dances with Signora Maggi; later, in the girone del sangue, Signora Castelli sits in another of the libertine's lap.²⁷

The *voyeurism* effect is greatest achieved, however, in two particular scenes, both of which also lend themselves to film scholar David Forgacs' reading of *Salò* as a distinctly anti-pornographic text and film in its consistent distancing aesthetic. First, still in the girone delle manie, the libertines enforce, impose, and witness the "marriage" of two of the film's most accessible protagonists, Renata and Sergio. The libertines carry out the wedding ceremony, Renata and Sergio fully dressed in appropriate paraphernalia, then have the pair strip completely and lie with each other in the center of one of the villa's "humiliation chambers." The libertines, and the viewers, watch from across the room – or across the screen – as the two, on cue and under direct command, begin to embrace in what is intended to be the consummation of their marriage and their "love."



The scene is interrupted by the libertines and Signora Vaccari only as the pair approach the moment of penetration, at which point, the libertines insist on the preservation of each victim's respective virginity.



Later, in the *girone della merda*, this same Renata, whose mother was killed in an effort to keep her daughter from falling into the hands of the fascist libertines, is chastised for crying at one of Signora Maggi's stories about a similarly protective mother, and is ordered to eat a pile of fecal matter produced by one of the quad. Entirely nude, again, and surrounded by a room of watchful eyes, Renata is handed a spoon and, once the libertine has dutifully stepped aside, sobbingly obliges.

In both scenes, the involved victims, even at their most vulnerable, are *watched* and *observed* from the outside. The action rendered on film is "unpleasurable, it's coercion, it's violence, it's degradation, it's torture, and it's framed in that way, that keeps you at a distance, whereas in pornography, you want to go in close."²⁸ In both scenes, Pasolini yet again enhances the film's complicated interaction of internal reality and external perspective.



One step removed from the spectator's observation of the characters on screen, what renders *Salò* still more inaccessible is the very development – or lack thereof – of these characters themselves. Pasolini's and Sergio Citti's screenplay reveals that each of the chosen victims, in addition to the four prostitutes and the four libertines, has a name. Still, in the film's 116 minutes, only a handful are spoken in passing, let alone repeated or remembered. Renata and Sergio have, since the film's widespread rerelease in 2000, become its most memorable characters – but only in filmic analysis are they referred to by name. Not only nameless, repeatedly, the band of boys and girls are reduced to nothing more than their bodies, appearing faceless: following one story shared by Signora Maggi in the *girone della merda*, the victims are made to participate in a contest for the perfect bottom. In impeccably lined rows, in the dark, they sit bottoms and backs up, legs, arms and faces tucked beneath them, so that even the boys are indistinguishable from the girls.²⁹

What is more, the victims in *Salò*, although they are at least in theory bound to each other by circumstance and linked by the terrifying experiences they share, display no explicit show of solidarity. It is true that toward the film's end, some come to be shown in intimate relationships with each other; of particular note is the affection between Eva and one of the other girls introduced early in the film and dramatically confirmed in its later scenes.³⁰ Still, despite these rare occasions of genuine camaraderie – or more –, Pasolini's victims are, essentially, self-interested and closed

not only to viewers, but to those immediately all around them. By the film's end and in repeated attempts at saving themselves or lessening the punishments they are to face, a number of victims demonstrate their willingness to expose the transgressions of their peers. Otherwise put, *Salò* is a discourse constructed *around* its characters; spectators are afforded no close, interior view of any one, or any one series, of characters so that while they may shudder at the atrocities perpetrated and suffered, they remain fundamentally unable to identify or truly sympathise with any afflicted victim – undeniably part of Pasolini's expression of Italy's not only political but social and emotional state of emergency. Pasolini's characters do not *relay* his message; they *are* his message. Their existence and their symbolic position of submission, rather than their individual identities are to be of interest.

Thirty-three years later, *Gomorrah* is not any more character-driven, as both Bernadette Wegenstein and Martin Scorsese have recently pointed out.³¹ The book out of which it was created, though an embellishment (often) or reinterpretation of lived experiences, follows its author's direct dealings with the Neapolitan camorra – a framework that permits readers to identify or sympathise, at least, with this one entity.³² The filmic adaptation, however, does away with even this small measure of subjectivity.³³ In a style representative of what might be termed post-modern neorealism – and more will be said about this later –, Garrone interweaves five key narratives against the more general background of Naples's disseminate mafia activity: the stories of Totò, the young mafia apprentice, Roberto, the aspiring businessman, Don Ciro, the allowance dispenser, Pasquale, the tailor, and Ciro and Marco, the rebellious young men eager to create their mafia stronghold over Scampia, the only district of Naples they have ever intimately known. No one of these plots is given any preference over any other, and no one character ever holds the opportunity clearly to reveal himself to the audience. Garrone's aim in capturing and projecting these stories is to expose the way the film's characters *live*, rather than *feel* their world. Garrone's characters function in two fundamental ways, then: to illustrate the ease with which even comparatively "innocent" members of society are pulled into The System, and the difficulty with which they attempt to leave it.

At the one end of the spectrum sits Totò who, barely pubescent, finds himself, two-thirds into the film, being forced to choose between being "with" the camorra, and betraying an old family friend, or against it, at the risk of endangering himself or his family.³⁴ At the other end sits Roberto, the only character who successfully escapes the ensnarement of the camorra by dissociating himself from Franco, his employer, and the

manager of quarries and various wastelands for commercial dumping. In between lie Don Ciro, disillusioned by and seeking solace from the repeated accusations of dishonesty and parsimoniousness against him, Pasquale, coerced into dealing with the Chinese mafia and only narrowly escaping death as a result, and Ciro and Marco, eager to make reputations for themselves, but struggling to do so on their own terms. The film is built on and organized around an overarching sentiment of *entrapment* – an effect it achieves not through the inaccessibility of its characters, however, but through the objective depiction of the environment around them.³⁵

The film's opening scenes and the way in which they convey the camorra's smothering stronghold on its members have previously been discussed. The tomb-like space Garrone creates in these first sequences is recreated elsewhere in the film, albeit in less striking or less obvious ways. With the exception of one shot (of different import), all of Don Ciro's scenes are filmed in familial spaces – the homes of the wives, mothers, widows, and widowers receiving compensatory camorra pay. When he is filmed outside the context of these spaces, Don Ciro appears in transit from the one to the next, as if his entire existence depends upon these unrelenting runs. Interestingly, the camera generally follows him closely, zooming in on his face, or on a near-view of him from behind as he is seen by those left in his absence. Still, despite these, some would consider, invasive cinematographic practices, spectators remain distinctly separated from his internal realm of consciousness: they see only his immediate and visceral reactions to the mafia violence around him, but are afforded access to none of his cerebral reflections on the same events. Don Ciro never, or only seldom, speaks beyond numbers, figures, and vapid apologies for the oversights of his superiors.³⁶ Shortly after he is terrorised by new members on his "list" in a scene that, rather than openly capture his reaction, more often features him smothered by other figures present or by the filmic frame,³⁷ he stops responding to questions entirely.³⁸ Still more tellingly, the last time viewers see Don Ciro, they watch him walk, then run from the scene of a camorra-related crime; the further he gets from the blood-bath just witnessed, the further viewers are pulled away from him, the camera fixated in its objective third party position. Garrone has us follow his character for as long as he is still within eyeshot, but always from an impregnable distance.³⁹

Ironically or of particular note, however, arguably the film's most intimately familial moment occurs in Roberto and Franco's storyline – the only one immediately to signal the film's overall concern with the more global issues at hand in camorra dealings. In search of more viable

dumping sites, Franco and Roberto one day find themselves in the home – in the *master bedroom* – of a Neapolitan family eager to supply them with such a space in return for monetary compensation adequate enough to cure its ailing patriarch. The room framing the two opposing couples⁴⁰ – the one dependent on The System, the other necessarily exploiting its link to it – is by all accounts a “typically Italian” space: the bed sits at the center of the room, flanked on either side by simple, pragmatic night-tables. Apart from a crucifix hanging centered over the bedframe, the décor is sparse and unremarkable. The couple in question itself is perhaps at its most vulnerable social position: the father of the family lies ill and barely able to speak in bed wearing only his underclothes; his wife sits beside him, loyally holding his hand, all the while “talking business” with men who she hopes and assumes will become the family’s saving grace. The couple speaks in Neapolitan dialect, and the language of their every-day exchange; Roberto is silent while Franco replies in a more (but still not absolutely) standardized Italian.

The spectator here becomes a voyeur in the most sincere way possible, like elsewhere in the film eavesdropping on a genuine conversation held in a private space. In fact, he first overhears the conversation occurring in the room from right outside its door and at the end of a hallway leading up to it.





Like Pasolini's viewer, he enters the room from afar, but once he is there, assumes his presence as immediately as those captured on film: as if sitting at the very foot of the bed, he is a sixth participant in a family drama the larger environmental connotations of which Garrone is no less careful to demonstrate.⁴¹

