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Abstract: Taking as a starting point John Champagne's recent argument about the queer representations of Italian masculinity contained in Garrone's *Gomorra*, this paper aims to connect the queer masculinity of the film's characters with the negative judgement on their lives and actions suggested by the film. In particular, it will be argued that queerness is used alongside the Neapolitan-ness of the characters to portray them as Others, in order to alienate the audience from them. In other words, it will be suggested that the film does not celebrate the queerness of the characters, but uses it as a means to portray them as deviant to a non-Neapolitan, heterosexual audience.

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Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra*: A Politically Incorrect Use of Neapolitan Identities and Queer Masculinities?¹

MARCELLO MESSINA

Introduction

In his essay published in the last issue of this journal, John Champagne argues that Matteo Garrone's film *Gomorra* (*Gomorrah*)² "contains queer representations of Italian masculinity"³: in particular, after mentioning the opening scene in the tanning booth, Champagne describes the scene in which the two aspiring *camorristi*, Marco and Pisellino, practice with their stolen machine guns, half-naked on the beach, as highly homoerotic, and as culminating in "a kind of simultaneous orgasm, [with] the two of them shouting and cheering as the camera moves back and forth several times between them."⁴ Champagne's argument is extremely convincing and here will be expanded in order to examine the relationship between the representation of the two characters as queer Italian males and the general representation of Southern Italians as Others within Italian culture, which Garrone's film arguably perpetuates and endorses. In this essay, it will be argued that:

- a) Marco and Pisellino, similarly to most characters in Garrone's *Gomorra*, are not presented as Italians, but specifically as Neapolitans/Southern Italians, with the deliberate intention of establishing (or perpetuating) a binary between the two categories; and that
- b) The queer masculinity of the two characters serves to further alienate them from the audience: in other words, queerness is used to reinforce the 'deviancy' of the two characters, something already inherent to their representation as Southern Italian criminals.

The South as Other (and as Queer)

It has been argued that common representations of the South are the result of a characteristic Italian national ethnocentrism,⁵ also described as a "virulent and violent caucacentrism."⁶ In light of this fact, the South and its inhabitants are commonly depicted as the inverse of inherent values of Italianness, and treated as an internal Other, instrumental to the fabrication of a national Italian

¹ I would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of the anonymous reviewers, together with that of the editor. Endless thanks also to Victoria Mascord and Adam Fergler,

² *Gomorra*, directed by Matteo Garrone (2008; Rome: 01 Distribution, 2009), DVD.

³ John Champagne, "Italian Masculinity as Queer: An Immoderate Proposal," *gender/sexuality/italy*, 1 (2014): 11, <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/italian-masculinity-as-queer/>, accessed January 27, 2015.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ See John Dickie, "Stereotypes of the Italian South, 1860-1900," In *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited*, eds. Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 114-147. and John Dickie, "The South as Other: From Liberal Italy to the Lega Nord," *The Italianist*, no. 14 [Special Issue - Culture and society in southern Italy: past and present] (1994): 124-140.

⁶ Joseph Pugliese, "Whiteness and the blackening of Italy: La guerra cafona, extracomunitari and provisional street justice," *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 5, no. 2 (2008): 2.

<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/702/877>, accessed January 27, 2015.

identity.⁷ In this way, characteristics such as laziness, backwardness, a widespread inclination for crime and illegal behaviours, to name but a few, are typically attributed to the South and its inhabitants.⁸ At times during the past century, these ideas have met considerable recognition in some scientific and academic circles, resulting, for instance, in theories that affirm that Southern Italians are affected by an atavic predisposition to criminality,⁹ that their societies lack horizontal cooperation due to the predominance of amoral familism,¹⁰ or even that the income gap between North and South in Italy is due to differences in average IQ, with Southerners being allegedly less intelligent than Northerners.¹¹

The image of the South is thus constantly constructed and re-constructed as the result of a dialogue with the North and the rest of Europe: this dialogue is characterized by a peculiar “imbalance between the two parties involved.”¹² Not uncommonly, changes and evolutions undergone by dominant systems of meanings have affected considerably the representation of the Other. For instance, as Gribaudi suggests, a shift in the evaluation of patriarchy throughout Europe has produced a change in the perception of the prevalent model of family in the South:¹³ the South was initially criticized for lacking a predominant model of patriarchal family¹⁴ but later stigmatized precisely for being a predominantly patriarchal society. Often, these contradictory images coexist rather than replace each other.

A similar twist in perception has arguably characterized the representation of issues related to homosexuality and homophobia: in brief, a previous image of a South characterized by an uncommon tendency to accommodate homosexuality, identified by Dall’Orto with the notion of “Mediterranean homosexuality,”¹⁵ has been superseded by an image of a South characterized by an endemic homophobia. As explained by Burgio, this is due to the fact that the South enjoys a substantial autonomy in the cultural articulation of the dichotomy *homosexual vs. heterosexual*.¹⁶ When this autonomy is observed, in different historical moments, through the prism of a “modernity” embodied by the North of Italy and the rest of Europe, it is either considered “deviant” and “sodomite,” or “backwards” and “homophobic,” depending on the particular ideological context of the moment. This, in turn, produces contradictory images, ranging from the idea of *popolo donna*

⁷ See Dickie, “Stereotypes of the Italian South”, Dickie, “The South as Other”, or also Gabriella Gribaudi, “Images of the South: The Mezzogiorno as seen by Insiders and Outsider,” In *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited*, eds. Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 83-113.

⁸ Gribaudi, “Images of the South.”

⁹ See for example Cesare Lombroso, “L’ultimo brigante: Giuseppe Musolino,” *Nuova Antologia* 181 (1900): 508-516. or Cesare Lombroso, “Il cervello del brigante Tiburzi,” *Nuova Antologia* 150 (1896): 591-600. or else Alfredo Niceforo, *L’Italia barbara contemporanea: Studi e appunti* (Milan; Palermo: R. Sandron, 1898).

¹⁰ See Edward Christie Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958). and Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Richard Lynn, “In Italy, North-South Differences in IQ Predict Differences in Income, Education, Infant Mortality, Stature, and Literacy,” *Intelligence*, no. 38 (2010): 93-100.

¹² Gribaudi, “Images of the South”, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 107-109.

¹⁴ See Niceforo, *L’Italia barbara* and Banfield, *The Moral Basis*.

¹⁵ Giovanni Dall’Orto, “Mediterranean Homosexuality,” In *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes (New York: Garland, 1990), 796-798.

¹⁶ Giuseppe Burgio, *Mezzogiorno maschi. Gli adolescenti gay dell’Italia meridionale: Una ricerca etnopedagogica*. (Milan; Udine: Mimesis, 2008), 46-48.

proposed by Niceforo,¹⁷ to more recent representations of a homophobic South.¹⁸ Again, rather than superseding each other totally, these contradicting images can also coexist, and be used as alternatives, depending on the specific need.

It is perhaps within this very coexistence of contradictory images on gender domination and sexual orientation that it is possible to locate an inherent deconstruction of dichotomies that could arguably imply the idea of Southern Italian masculinity as queer: this does not only validate Champagne's claims, but locates them within the racialized power relations predicated on the North/South divide that characterizes Italy. As noted by Champagne, the inherent queerness of Italian masculinity cannot be dissociated from the Other-ness of Italy as a whole within a North American/Western European context:¹⁹ in a similar way, the queerness of Southern Italy cannot be dissociated from its role as an Other within the Italian context. Southern Italian masculinity, in other words, is queer as part of its being Other.

The purpose of this work is to suggest that the depiction of the characters of *Gomorra* as queer is intended precisely to create a distance between the character and the audience, which in turn serves to isolate and stigmatize the behaviour of the *camorristi*, to prevent the possibility of identification with the characters. The queerness of the characters is only one of the features that serves to pinpoint them as Others within Italian society: several other characteristics, all ascribable to common representations of Southern Italy, are used to this purpose. Before evaluating how the elements of queerness function as a means to alienate the characters from the audience, it is useful to touch upon the ways in which other elements concur to serve the same purpose. As a priority, it is crucial to comprehend how the feature film directed by Garrone deviates from the original book by Saviano.

Gomorra(s)

Considerable differences can be identified between Saviano's book *Gomorra*²⁰ and the homonymous movie directed by Matteo Garrone.²¹ Saviano's work focuses mainly on the analysis and denunciation of the economic processes that grant the *camorra* territorial and military power over the Campania region in Italy. As a result, the book is permeated with numerous references to the active role of Northern Italian companies in relation to such phenomena as waste disposal²² and unfair market penetration in the territories of Southern Italy.²³ In general, Saviano gives an account of the fundamental interplay between the *camorra* and the politico-economic centers of power that govern

¹⁷ Niceforo, *L' Italia barbara*, 293.

¹⁸ A rather astonishing example of such stereotyped views is contained in a recently US-published guidebook: "Even though Italy has had rather liberal legislation regarding homosexuality, Sicily remains one of the major bastions of homophobia in Europe. Some of the islanders express antigay attitudes that might belong more appropriately to the Middle Ages. Open displays of affection between same-sex couples meet with obvious disapproval by intolerant islanders", in Darwin Porter and Danforth Prince, *Frommer's Sicily*, 4th Edition, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009), 51. The above quote perfectly synthesizes images of the South of Italy as Other: homophobia is associated to backwardness and deviancy from a "liberal", and Northern, Italian norm.

¹⁹ Champagne, "Italian Masculinity as Queer," 1.

²⁰ Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006).

²¹ Garrone, *Gomorra*.

²² Saviano, *Gomorra*, 314-325.

²³ *Ibid.*, 215-127.

Italy. This, in turn, permits an understanding of the *camorra* as a large-scale phenomenon, in a way to avoid attributing exclusive responsibility to the socio-cultural characteristics of the populations that inhabit Southern Italy.

Saviano himself pointed out the fact that Garrone's film transposes the focus of the narrative from the fixation with economic issues that had characterized the book into an attention for the anthropological aspects of the story. He claimed that "in comparison with the novel, the film discusses the anthropological aspects: the rooms, the smells, the massacres. It's an apocalypse. The obsession with business that had characterized my book is absent from Garrone's *Gomorra*."²⁴

Garrone also acknowledges that there are fundamental differences between the book and the film, and claims that those differences are the result of a precise poetic choice, in that he "wasn't, unlike Saviano, strictly interested in a journalistic type of denunciation."²⁵ He continues by telling that "when I met him to discuss the project, I told him that, if 'you agree to work with me, I'm going to go in another direction.'"²⁶

Garrone's approach has often been described as neutral, aimed at presenting the facts without expressing a judgement.²⁷ Greenburg notices that, alongside the neutrality, there is a feeling of resignation,²⁸ and goes on to argue that "the style of filming, as well as the subject matter, shocks the viewer and urges the Italian public to condemn the Camorra".²⁹ The neutrality therefore appears to be only superficial and the film seems to urge the audience to view the characters and their lives in a negative light. Garrone maintains that he "tried to write from «the inside», choosing certain characters from the book without glamorizing them."³⁰

Now, whereas Saviano's book expressed a clear and articulated condemnation of the *camorra*,³¹ Garrone's film can only suggest a rejection of the *camorra* through association with elements that are commonly perceived as negative. It is precisely here that lies the function of the anthropological approach mentioned above. In fact, it has been claimed that this approach to the narrative entails, at times, a Lombrosian attitude towards the characters, who seem irreversibly predisposed to crime.³² The impression of predisposition is constructed by means of several elements, the first of which is the use of non-professional actors taken from the street, in a way that

²⁴ Saviano in Antonio D'Orrico and Roberto Saviano, "Saviano: 'I boss volevano mettere le mani sul film *Gomorra*,'" *Corriere della Sera Magazine*, May 13, 2008, http://www.corriere.it/spettacoli/08_maggio_13/magazine_gomorra_078a4c5c-20d0-11dd-b34d-00144f486ba6.shtml, [my translation], accessed January 27, 2015.

²⁵ Garrone in Richard Porton and Matteo Garrone, "Inside 'The System': An Interview with Matteo Garrone," *Cineaste* 34, no. 2 (2009): 14, <http://www.cineaste.com/articles/inside-the-system-an-interview-with-matteo-garrone>, accessed May 28, 2015.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Antonio Javier Marqués Salgado, "El viaje de Matteo Garrone a través de la Campania," paper presented at the XV *Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Italianistas* (Universidad de Córdoba, 2014).

²⁸ Katherine Elizabeth Greenburg, *Rewriting Historical Neorealism in Matteo Garrone's "Gomorra"* (Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: 2010), 27-28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁰ Garrone in Porton and Garrone, "Inside 'The System,'" 13.

³¹ Greenburg, *Rewriting Historical Neorealism*, 27.

³² "Gomorra, il verismo post-atomico di Garrone e Saviano," *Varesenews*, May 29, 2008, <http://www3.varesenews.it/cinema/gomorra-il-verismo-post-atomico-di-garrone-e-saviano-99688.html>, accessed January 27, 2015.

resembles Neorealism.³³ As Saviano notes, “the actors that shoot their guns have often done so in their real lives as well. They shoot rapidly, leaving no room for any aestheticism. [...] Often the actors, they told me, struggled to differentiate between their ordinary lives and those of the characters that Matteo [Garrone] asked them to play.”³⁴

To enhance the sense of authenticity and realism, these non-professional actors, often coming from the *camorra* itself, act in the real-life sets of Scampia, one of Naples' suburbs, and Casal di Principe, a town next to Naples. Contrary to Saviano's book, the film rarely escapes the surroundings of Naples, except for one brief section, set in various locations of what appears to be the Veneto region, where two of the protagonists negotiate a waste-disposal deal with a Northern Italian businessman. Other than that, the facts remain confined to Naples, with no clear evidence of any correlation between the lives of the *camorristi* and the large-scale economic processes that influence them.

Directly related to this last feature is the use of Neapolitan as the primary language of the film: in Italy, to facilitate comprehension, the film was released with Italian subtitles.³⁵ It has been argued that the choice of associating the Neapolitan language with the depiction of the lives of the *camorristi* implies a negative perspective of the former, being regarded as backwards and peripheral.³⁶ For the purpose of this work, it is sufficient to note that the use of Neapolitan as the predominant language might concur in circumscribing the depicted events to Naples and its surroundings: the *camorristi* speak a language that needs to be translated with subtitles to be understood by the Italian audience, meaning that the *camorra* is a phenomenon of the Other, confined to a reality that is both peripheral and, linguistically, substantially different to that of the spectator.³⁷

A third expedient, akin to the two listed above, is the almost exclusive use of *neomelodica* songs in the soundtrack, in light of the diffused tendency to associate this musical genre, largely diffused among the Southern Italian lower classes, to the phenomenology of the *camorra*.³⁸ Far from attempting to deconstruct the allegations of involvement with *camorra* activities moved against some

³³ Greenburg, *Rewriting Historical Neorealism*, 30.

³⁴ Saviano in D'Orrico and Saviano, “Saviano: ‘I boss volevano mettere le mani sul film *Gomorra*’” [my translation].

³⁵ Michele Ossani, “Gomorra: Dal libro al film uno sguardo lucido e dirompente sulla camorra,” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, May 23, 2008, <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/SoleOnLine4/Tempo%20libero%20e%20Cultura/2008/05/saviano-gomorra.shtml>, accessed January 27, 2015.

³⁶ Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, “Gomorra. Le néoréalisme « dialectal » à l'épreuve des préjugés,” *Mescladis e còps de gula*, 2 October 2008, <http://taban.canalblog.com/archives/2008/10/02/10805575.html>, accessed January 27, 2015.

³⁷ Iovino citato in Ibid. I personally maintain that the use of regional languages such as Neapolitan and Sicilian should be encouraged as much as possible. However, here I am concerned about the context and the purpose for which Neapolitan is used. The languages of Southern Italy are avoided in some other contexts: for example, instead of being proposed in the original version with subtitles, *Baaria*, directed by Giuseppe Tornatore (Rome: Medusa Film, 2009), DVD. was dubbed in Italian for the mainland national market, despite being originally filmed in Sicilian, see “L'epico «Baaria» doppiato per Venezia,” *Messaggero Veneto*, August 1, 2009, http://ricerca.gelocal.it/messaggeroveneto/archivio/messaggeroveneto/2009/08/01/NZ_13_TV1.html, accessed May 27, 2015. This double standard, applied to two languages that are equally incomprehensible to the Italian audience, can perhaps be interpreted in light of the different purposes of the two films. *Gomorra* is a film about criminals, and can be entirely distributed in Neapolitan; *Baaria* is a film with positive characters, with whom the audiences should identify, and cannot be distributed in Sicilian in the national Italian market outside of Sicily.

³⁸ See Roberto Saviano, “Canzone criminale: La musica di Gomorra,” *La Repubblica*, February 12, 2012.

neomelodica musicians,³⁹ it is important to note Garrone's use of a musical genre whose very existence, in the Italian imagery, constitutes a sort of confirmation of the supposed connection between Southern Italian culture and the mafias.

The elements analysed above can help clarify the nature of Garrone's approach, in that the film seems to use elements of Neapolitan and Southern Italian identity as a means to nudge the audience towards a negative judgement of the portrayed stories. In other words, the Other-ness of Southern Italy functions as an instrument to alienate the lives of the protagonists from the audience. As explained above, this has the effect of narrating the affairs of the *camorra* as phenomena circumscribed to the geographical and cultural spaces of Naples and Southern Italy, arguably disavowing Saviano's fixation with the connection between the *camorra* and global economy.⁴⁰ The *camorra* becomes indissoluble and indistinguishable from Neapolitan identity, as articulated by Goffredo Fofi in the following comment:

Garrone's film is probably better than Saviano's book. [...] [Garrone's] *Gomorra* clarifies very well that the *camorristi* are an integral part of all Neapolitan society. It is difficult to distinguish the killers' ideology, as living and surviving in Naples means sitting at the banquet of extortions, crimes and drug dealing.⁴¹

The reiterated association between aspects of Southern Italian identity and the sphere of criminality confirms the aforementioned Lombrosian quality of Garrone's approach: the implicit link between the Neapolitan-ness of the characters and their predisposition to crime is exactly in line with Lombroso's theories.⁴²

Marco and Pisellino

The relationship between Marco and Pisellino (Sweet Pea) is highly corporeal during the whole film. They spend a lot of time sitting tight on Pisellino's scooter; they touch, hold and hug each other in almost every scene of the film. The physical and emotional proximity between the two builds up to the beach scene described by Champagne (2014: 11). After their first robbery, Pisellino dances in front of Marco, trying to hug him in celebration of their success, and, despite Marco's attempts to shrink back, manages to kiss him on the cheek. When the pair is caught and threatened by the local *camorra* boss, Marco embraces Pisellino on the scooter; they then hug each other after finding an arsenal of weapons belonging to the local *camorristi*. After the orgasmic gun blast scene on the beach, they go to a strip club and try to have sex with two female strippers; up until parting to enter their respective strip-booths, they proceed arm in arm, as if trying to reaffirm their bond before the sexual

³⁹ However, for a much more balanced approach to the *neomelodica* music, see Goffredo Plastino, *Cosa Nostra Social Club: Mafia, malavita e musica in Italia* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013).

⁴⁰ On Saviano's insistence about the need of understanding the *camorra* as an international phenomenon, Adriano Farano and Roberto Saviano, "Roberto Saviano: «La Camorra? Un problema europeo»," *cafébabel*, October 8, 2007, <http://www.cafebabel.it/societa/articolo/roberto-saviano-la-camorra-un-problema-europeo.html>, accessed January 27, 2015.

⁴¹ Fofi in Ugo Di Pace and Goffredo Fofi, "«Il cinema e l'arte contro la merce», in cattedra a Fisciano con Goffredo Fofi," *Corriere Del Mezzogiorno*, November 19, 2009, http://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/napoli/notizie/arte_e_cultura/2009/19-novembre-2009/cinema-arte-contro-mercein-cattedra-fisciano-goffredo-fofi-1602033865197.shtml, accessed January 27, 2015.

⁴² See Lombroso, "L'ultimo brigante" and Lombroso, "Il cervello del brigante Tiburzi".

act. Even when they are killed in an ambush by the local *camorristi*, they lie dead side-by-side, with Marco's arm still resting on Pisellino's back.

The two often emphasize verbally the need to act together as a duo, without being associated with anybody else. For instance, when a boss offers affiliation with him, Marco replies: "we want to stay alone, only us. We don't want to be under anyone. We don't like these things, to be under other people. We're just for us, and that's it."⁴³

While continuously stating their indissoluble bond, both physically and verbally, they also feel the need to display their heterosexual masculinity to each other, as shown in the scene in the strip club.

It seems clear, then, that the relationship between Marco and Pisellino is, as suggested by Champagne, existing on a continuous spectrum between heterosexual homosociality and homoeroticism.⁴⁴ Champagne goes on, adding that "the film also suggests that there is something stunted in these two young men who seem easily swayed by promises of money, motorcycles, and the chance to shoot."⁴⁵ Queerness is not associated with positive characters, but with criminals whose incompatibility with the Italian audience is attained through the elements of Neapolitan identity examined in the previous section.

The film's displays of masculinity identified as queer by Champagne, i.e. the beach scene with Marco and Pisellino and the initial scene portraying the *camorristi* in the tanning booth,⁴⁶ are described as "grotesque, if not absurd" by Porton.⁴⁷ It is not difficult, then, to claim that the queerness of the two characters is used alongside their regional identity and their alleged predisposition to criminality in order to alienate them from the audience. The film presents a couple of Neapolitans – Italy's Other *par excellence* –, who desire to become professional criminals, and endows them with a "grotesque" type of masculinity: it does not celebrate the queerness of the characters, but uses it as a means to portray them as deviant to a non-Neapolitan heterosexual audience.

Conclusion

A late writing by Lombroso identified a number of supposed analogies between criminals and homosexuals:

Similar to the existence of natural-born criminals, there are natural-born invert⁴⁸ who, since the early years of their lives, and without a specific cause, displayed an excessive and carnal interest for people of the same sex. [...] The psychology of the latter is the same as the psychology of the former: totally amoral, often criminal, and, above all, strange.⁴⁹

It is not difficult to envisage the influence that this type of representation exerts on some of the public. Therefore, whilst avoiding speculation on whether Garrone's use of Lombrosian imagery

⁴³ Garrone, *Gomorra*.

⁴⁴ Champagne, "Italian Masculinity as Queer," 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11-12.

⁴⁷ Porton in Porton and Garrone, "Inside 'The System,'" 12.

⁴⁸ Medical term used in late 19th/early 20th century to refer to homosexuals

⁴⁹ Cesare Lombroso, "Del parallelismo tra l'omosessualità e la criminalità innata," *Sodoma* 2, no. 2 (2010): 70-72.

is intentional, it is however possible to conclude that Garrone's *Gomorra* could promote an interpretation of the *camorra* which suggests links between criminality, atavic predisposition, Neapolitan identity and homosexuality, in line with Lombroso's theories.

As stated by Champagne, "[q]ueering Italian masculinity remains a difficult but urgent task".⁵⁰ alongside this crucial priority, an analysis of Garrone's *Gomorra* could also suggest that it is essential to deconstruct common narratives about Southern Italian and Neapolitan identities, and refute suggestions about the possibility of an atavic predisposition to crime.

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