eScholarship
California Italian Studies

Title

Waste Management: Garbage Displacement and the Ethics of Mafia Representation in Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra*

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9dz1s5kc

Journal
California Italian Studies, 2(1)

Author
Bondavalli, Simona

Publication Date
2011

DOI
10.5070/C321008932

Copyright Information
Copyright 2011 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at https://escholarship.org/terms

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Waste Management: Garbage Displacement and the Ethics of Mafia Representation in Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra*[1]

Simona Bondavalli

E così era la sua vita, una continua ricerca di vuoto
(And such was his life, a continuous search for the void).
--Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra*

Upon hearing the phrase "waste management and organized crime," television viewers are likely to think of *The Sopranos,* where the business of waste disposal provides an effective façade for Tony Soprano's other family business.[2] In Matteo Garrone's film *Gomorra* (2008), however, waste management *is* mafia business, and the protagonists' relationship to garbage defines their identity in ways that go beyond their profession and their participation in organized crime. Waste and the technologies required for its management are useful instruments for the exploration of both the mafia's extensive involvement in lawful economy and the process of subjectivity formation implicit in the society that sustains modern organized crime. New waste management technologies, and the absolute control over matter they presume, reflect processes of identity construction that are prevalent in contemporary camorra and that imply a completely fictitious control of the self. Ultimately, waste functions as a metaphor for organized crime in Garrone's film, but the complex and nuanced representation of waste questions the viewers' assumptions about the mafia. Neither charismatic heroes to mythologize nor vulgar crooks to dismiss, *mafiosi* have undergone a "cleaning" process whose result involves the audience in a new way. Inasmuch as waste management renders all viewers complicit in the criminal acts performed on the screen, the mode of representation of waste opens up a space of resistance and suggests an ethical position for the spectators. Technologies of waste mirror technologies of the self and offer new approaches to the filmic depiction of a social phenomenon that cinema both portrays and nourishes.

Previous filmic representations of the mafia encompass a variety of approaches. Both Italian and American mafia movies include films that glorify the *mafioso* as a solitary hero who acts against the state authority, an image inaugurated by the early Pietro Germi's *In nome della legge* (1949) (In the Name of the Law); films that denounce "the political and social degradation of mafia-infected regions," like Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962; see Bonsaver 2008, 22); and narratives of powerful mafia figures and families, which celebrate the organization as "a source of highly charged spectacle," like Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, and 1990; see Small 2005, 43). In Hollywood productions the spectacle of wealth and violence tends to undermine any recognizable critical position, whereas Italian films are for the most part

---

[1] I would like to thank my colleague Guzzi Blumenfeld and the anonymous reviewers at *California Italian Studies* for their comments and precious suggestions on earlier versions on this essay.
[2] *The Sopranos,* created by David Chase (HBO 1999-2007).

unquestionably anti-mafia. Many movies and television series like *La scorta* (Ricky Tognazzi, 1993; The Escort) and *La piovra* (1984-2001; The Octopus) privilege the law enforcement point of view, while alternative approaches choose comedy as a critical tool: they present the mafia as a possible object of ridicule and laughter as a dangerous weapon. This is true of Roberto Benigni's *Johnny Stecchino* (1992) and Roberta Torre's *Tano da morire* (1997; To die for Tano) and *Sud Side Stori* (2000; South Side Story). Ridicule is also among the weapons employed by Peppino Impastato in Marco Tullio Giordana's *I cento passi* (2000; One hundred steps), a movie that offers an insider's view of Sicilian mafia combined with a nostalgic evocation of 1960s creative protests, drawing the viewers into an emotional identification with the protagonist.

Gomorra's innovative approach to the representation of organized crime concerns both the choice of subject and the position it suggests for the viewer. Neither cop story nor epic tale of powerful *mafiosi*, Matteo Garrone's film provides a multifaceted portrait of today's *camorra*, the organized crime system originating in and around Naples. Inspired by Roberto Saviano's comprehensive account of the *Sistema*, its narrative structure and many stylistic choices highlight the most modern aspects of this organization: its horizontal development, globalized reach, and the capillary diffusion of the economic dynamics on which it subsists. Among the stories in Saviano's book, "vero e proprio macroserbatoio di intrecci sulla varia umanità criminale legata al Sistema" (De Sanctis 2008, 37; a real macro-reservoir of plots on the variety of criminal types connected to the System), Garrone favors the stories of unknown, unglamorous characters who are deep-rooted in the popular milieu. Far from epitomizing the actions of fascinating gangsters in picturesque locales, *Gomorra* shows the businesslike functioning of an organization against the grey and dreary background of the northern periphery of Naples. Through five loosely knit storylines, the film creates a choral portrait of an economic mechanism that is nourished as much by drug deals as by *haute couture*, and that involves street urchins as well as apparently respectable business men. The vicissitudes of young aspiring mafia soldiers and wannabe solo gangsters are intertwined with the daily business of a money runner and a talented tailor.[3] The fifth story, which deals with waste management, is the only exception to the focus on the "budello ultrapopolare nel quale Garrone sceglie di affondare lo sguardo" (De Sanctis 2008, 38; ultra-popular alley in which Garrone chooses to direct his probing look). It is also the story in which, while remaining quite faithful to the book for plot and characterization, Garrone's trimmed down style most diverges from Saviano's epic. The book finds its genre definition in an "effetto-valanga di storie" (Wu Ming 2009, 69; the effect of an avalanche of stories) consistent with a poetic of hyperbole; the movie, and the waste management episode in particular, are regulated by an aesthetic of reduction. Vast empty spaces, minimalist dialogue, and elliptical montage create an understated portrait of *camorra* that challenges many stereotypes. Acknowledging the effects of cinema's mythmaking on modern *camorra*, the film carefully avoids creating charismatic gangsters and quotable lines that could encourage imitation. It also insists on the transitory and relational nature of value and usefulness, of resources and waste, of self and objects. In so doing it offers a non-essentialist view of *camorra* that questions established relations

[3] Massimo Gaudioso, who co-wrote the screenplay, describes the selection of stories as regulated by the desire to "privilege only a few episodes of minor characters: not protagonists of History with a capital 'h,' but on the contrary maybe victims, secondary figures" (De Sanctis, Monetti and Pallanch 2008, 122).

between the viewers and organized crime, and suggests a position of resistance that is linked to our complicity.

While Garrone's inventive approach to the subject matter of Saviano's book has prompted critics to describe the relationship as inspiration rather than adaptation, the waste management episode is in many respects faithful to its source.[4] It is the only story that follows closely some of the events narrated by Saviano and even adopts lines of dialogue directly from the book. In the protagonists we recognize Franco and the other businessmen that Saviano introduces as the "stakeholders" of waste management.[5] Intermediaries between companies and landowners for the disposal of industrial and chemical waste, they walk around not simply "osserv[ando] il paesaggio ma pens[ando] a come poterci ficcare qualcosa dentro. Come vedere tutto l'esistente a mo' di grande tappeto e cercare nelle montagne, ai lati delle campagne, il lembo da sollevare per spazzarci sotto tutto quanto è possibile" (Saviano 2006, 320; observ[ing] the landscape but think[ing] about how to stick something in it. Like seeing the world as a big carpet and looking to the mountains, around the countryside, for the corner under which everything possible can be swept). Given this similarity, we may also identify Roberto, the educated young man who learns the ways of waste management, as a visual equivalent of Saviano's ambiguous author/narrator: an "I" who at times "prende in prestito il punto di vista di un molteplice" (borrows the points of view of a multiplicity) and at other times "è l'autore e testimone oculare" (Wu Ming 2009, 29; is the author and eyewitness) of the events narrated. Unique to this episode, the character of Roberto offers an "insider's look" on events similar to that obtained elsewhere through long takes and extensive use of a hand-held camera.[6] Although objective third-person point-of-view shots prevail in this episode, they are punctuated by a few subjective shots that align the viewer with Roberto's gaze in key moments. The name of the character renders explicit a narrative and ethical function that is as important for the film as it is for the book, enhancing the complexity of the viewers' relationship with it and offering a locus of resistance that the book lacks.[7]

In an attempt to find "l'immagine dell'economia, qualcosa che potesse dare il senso della produzione, della vendita, le operazioni dello sconto e dell'acquisto" (Saviano 2006,

---

[4] "A voler rintracciare tra le pagine di Saviano scelte da Garrone possiamo imbatterci tutt'al più in un esile scheletro di dati, una scarna sequenza di azioni e rintocchi dal potenziale drammaturgico ancora tutto da esplodere. Più che alla selezione delle storie e dei personaggi, gli autori del film hanno dunque lavorato a una ideazione vera e propria, rielaborando completamente la traccia appena indicata da Saviano" (De Sanctis, 2008, 38; In trying to trace the stories chosen by Garrone from Saviano's pages, at most we come across a thin skeleton of data, a gaunt sequence of actions and resonances whose dramatic potential was still unexploited. More than working on a selection of stories and characters, the film authors worked then on a true invention, completely revising the outline barely indicated by Saviano).

[5] The English word is used in the Italian text. No direct equivalent is provided by Saviano: he defines their activity as that of intermediaries, but always refers to them as "stakeholders."

[6] The implicit reference here is to the "*sguardo interno*" (*internal gaze*) that according to Francesco Crispino "viene realizzato con l'adozione quasi sistematica della macchina da presa 'a spalla'…pronta a seguire da vicino i protagonisti, a coglierne l'immediatezza delle azioni, a essere *dentro* ciò che accade (2008, 49; is realized by an almost systematic adoption of the hand-held camera…, ready to follow the protagonists closely, to catch the immediacy of their actions, to be *inside* what happens).

[7] The importance of this episode within the film economy is also signaled by the casting of Toni Servillo, the only well-known professional actor in the movie: the visibility this choice grants to the character and his activity is comparable to Saviano's choice to dedicate to the waste discourse his powerful closing chapter.

310; an image of the economy, something that could give an idea of the production, the sale, the discount and purchase operations), Saviano concludes that garbage dumps are "l'emblema più concreto d'ogni ciclo economico. Ammonticchiano tutto quanto è stato, sono lo strascico vero del consumo, qualcosa in più dell'orma lasciata da ogni prodotto sulla crosta terrestre" (ibid.; the most concrete emblem of any economic cycle. They pile up everything that has been, they are the true trail of consumption, something more than the footprint left by each product on the earth's crust). More than the drug deals, even more than the very profitable business of cement that was described in previous chapters, garbage disposal embodies the far-reaching and capillary control of economic mechanisms by *camorra*. The countryside around Naples and Caserta is a series of "mappamondi della monnezza, cartine al tornasole della produzione industriale italiana. Visitando discariche e cave è possibile vedere il destino di interi decenni di prodotti industriali italiani" (313; maps of trash, litmus papers of Italian industry. By visiting dumps and quarries it is possible to see the fate of whole decades of Italian industrial production). Saviano spends a great deal of time describing in detail the discarded matter: from shredded banknotes to the paper used for cleaning cows' udders, from printer cartridges oozing hexavalent chromium to human skulls and other "materiale cimiteriale" (graveyard material), from household garbage to "le scorie derivanti dalla metallurgia termica dell'alluminio, le pericolose polveri di abbattimento fumi, in particolare quelle prodotte dall'industria siderurgica, dalle centrali termoelettriche e dagli inceneritori" (316; dross deriving from thermal metallurgy of aluminium, the dangerous dust of gas precipitation, in particular that produced by the iron and steel industry, by thermoelectric plants, and by incinerators). The report of various official investigative operations that uncovered illicit disposal of toxic materials alternates with a first-hand account of the narrator's wandering around the dumps on his Vespa, and his sensory encounter with garbage infuses even the impersonal paragraphs. Towards the end of the chapter, the narrator's proximity to the materiality of garbage increases as he tells of crossing the "Land of Fires" on foot, a handkerchief on his mouth to protect him from the fumes emanating from the improvised incinerators operated by Rom boys in the pay of the mafia: "il fumo che attraversavo non era denso, era come se fosse una patina collosa che si posava sulla pelle lasciando una sensazione di bagnato" (327; the smoke I was crossing was not dense, it was like a sticky patina that landed on your skin leaving a wet feeling). The last few paragraphs offer an apocalyptic image of mountains of garbage soaked with pouring rain, the narrator completely drenched and yet feeling "una sorta di bruciore che mi saliva dallo stomaco e si irradiava sino alla nuca" (330; a sort of burning sensation that was rising from my stomach and irradiating up to the back of my neck). It is anger, no doubt, but it burns inside his body like the toxic fumes rising from illegally discarded drums which dry burned, "senza fiamme" (without flames), the face and hands of the truck driver transporting them (328). Finally, the dramatization of the struggle to survive "in terra di *camorra*" (in the land of *camorra*) becomes most explicit in the book's closing paragraph:

> Avevo i piedi immersi nel pantano. L'acqua era salita sino alle cosce. Sentivo i talloni sprofondare. Davanti ai miei occhi galleggiava un enorme frigo. Mi ci lanciai sopra, lo avvinghiai stringendolo forte con le braccia e

> lasciandomi trasportare. Mi venne in mente l'ultima scena di *Papillon*, il film con Steve McQueen tratto dal romanzo di Henri Charrière. Anch'io, come Papillon, sembravo galleggiare su un sacco colmo di noci di cocco, sfruttando le maree per fuggire dalla Cayenna (331)

> (My feet were immersed in the mud. The water had risen to my thighs. I felt my heels sinking. In front of my eyes a huge fridge was floating. I threw myself on it, I clutched it, holding it firmly with my arms and letting it carry me. I thought of the last scene from *Papillon*, the movie with Steve McQueen taken from the novel by Henri Charrière. I too, like Papillon, seemed to be floating on a sack of coconuts, using the tides to escape from Cayenne).

The effect of the final cry, "'Maledetti bastardi, sono ancora vivo!'" ('Damn bastards, I'm still alive!') is closely connected with the sense of physical suffocation that emanates from the last pages of the book. If it is inevitable to draw a metaphorical connection between garbage and mafia culture, both maintaining a hold on the narrator's feet as he struggles not to drown, only the intense physicality of the description prevents the garbage from getting lost in its symbolic value.

In the film, however, garbage as such, the motley, smelly, slippery matter that one associates with dumping sites, never appears on the screen. The *rifiuti* that pervaded newspaper pages and TV screens in late 2007 and early 2008, when the news of the garbage emergency travelled around the world and renewed the stereotypical image of Naples as the site of irreducible, uncontainable chaos, have no place in the movie. Despite choosing the powerful story of waste disposal from the myriad available to him, Garrone performs a visual adaptation that turns away from the specificity of garbage. In addressing the business of garbage, he concentrates on the disposal of toxic industrial waste, equally problematic, but much less noticeable.[8] Invisible and intangible, waste is absent from the mise-en-scène and only occasionally mentioned in the dialogue, producing a sense of indeterminacy that may be disorienting. While the elimination of garbage may certainly be ascribed to aesthetic concerns – muddled overflowing heaps of rubbish may clash with Garrone's own minimalist visual style – its consequences exceed aesthetics and relate to the specificity of the subject matter. In other words, this representational strategy acquires a particular significance because the invisible object is waste and because the subject of the movie is organized crime.

Due to the disturbing nature of waste, a visual encounter with garbage may generate visceral reactions that are difficult to control.[9] In considering different viewer responses

---

[8] Garrone actually shot footage of children foraging in a huge smoking garbage heap but did not include it in the final cut. This decision reinforces the thesis of a conscious distancing from the specificity of garbage on Garrone's part. I am indebted to one of my anonymous reviewers at *CIS* for this clarification.

[9] A complete and concise overview of studies on the relationship between waste and subjectivity is provided in Cohen and Johnson (2005). Hawkins (2006) offers a post-structuralist perspective on this relation that is particularly helpful in explaining the anti-essentialist approach favored by Garrone. Kristeva (1982) provides a psychoanalytic study of disgust and abjection as forces of subject formation. Essential reference points in any study on waste include Douglas (1966), Thompson (1979), and Strasser (1999).

to waste, a movie that strives to offer a non-traditional representation of *camorra* needs to consider the consequences of those responses at the level of connotation. By keeping trash off the screen, Garrone "refuses the essentializing move in much moral judgment that renders rubbish always already bad, thereby denying paradox and ambiguity" (Hawkins 2006, 22-23). The film avoids presenting garbage as the inherently bad but unavoidable aspect of modern society that generates either horror or pity or a mixture of similar reactions. The displacement of garbage averts any immediate gut response, be it disgust or fascination, and creates a space for reflection on waste technologies and their effect on the modern self, as well as on organized crime and its relationship to contemporary society.

The treatment of space in this episode coheres with the need to offer the viewers a different perception of waste. Consequently, while the other episodes in the film are centered – from both a visual and a narrative viewpoint – on the materiality of goods and money and on the hands exchanging them, the story of Franco and Roberto is defined by vast empty spaces: abandoned gas stations, decommissioned quarries, deserted farmland. The medium-length shots and close-ups that draw the viewers close to Totò and Don Ciro in the first two episodes are replaced by long shots, "da cui emerge il vero protagonista dell'episodio: l'ambiente degradato" (Crispino 2008, 50; which let the real protagonist stand out: the degraded landscape). The stakeholder's unique relationship with the landscape is conveyed from the very beginning through the recoding of an empty space: an extended long shot of a still and silent gas station is the set for the introduction of the protagonists. Franco's head emerges from a manhole in the distance, calling out "Roberto!" The latter adds to the viewer's bewilderment as he springs out of a second manhole, a few metres away from Franco brushing his suit with his hands. Our superficial interpretation of this space as worthless is revealed as inaccurate. There is space underground that viewers do not see: although it is not shown and not described in the elliptical dialogue between the two new characters, the underground space may be more important than what is visible, but its use will become clear only later. The next sequence confirms this perspective: a long shot of a rock wall in what appears to be a desert. When the camera, moving on a vertical line from top to bottom, reaches the ground, Franco and Roberto appear in the distance. Their voices, heard before their figures came into view, had suggested a greater proximity. We realize now that a vast space separates us from the speakers. The disorienting effect once again makes the audience interpret the space around the characters as empty and available. The sense of void draws us in, making us feel the need to adjust our view and learn to interpret it.

Garbage is the great absent, and Garrone's elliptical cinematography suggests that its absence from the screen is as important as those empty spaces. We are being trained to look in a different way at the space in which the characters move. "Col tempo ho imparato a vedere con gli occhi degli stakeholder," says Saviano of his own apprenticeship (2006, 320; With time I learned to see with a stakeholder's eyes). "Uno sguardo diverso da quello del costruttore. Un costruttore vede lo spazio vuoto come qualcosa da riempire, cerca di mettere il pieno nel vuoto; gli stakeholder, pensano invece a come trovare il vuoto nel pieno" (ibid.; A look that is different from that of the builder. A builder sees an empty space as something to fill, tries to fill the void; stakeholders, instead, think of how to find the void in that which is full). In an abandoned quarry Franco sees a prospect: "Non ti preoccupare," he says to the quarry owner, "tu l'hai

svuotato, e io te lo riempio" ('Don't worry, you emptied it, and I will fill it up'). The mention of the owner's cement factory in the same conversation confirms the close connection between two profitable activities through which *camorra* leaves an indelible mark on the land: construction and waste disposal. The strong presence of the former is affirmed elsewhere in the film through the *Vele,* the housing project in Scampia where a substantial number of scenes are set. The bulk of the building, shown both from the outside and in its labyrinthine interior, is a perfect example of the "*cemento armato*" that sustains *camorra*'s empire. Like a fortress with guards on its turrets, the *Vele* building defines the territory of *malavita* and defends it from intrusions by the law. The quarry appraised by Franco and Roberto is thus ideally the *Vele*'s negative space, created by extracting construction material from the earth. Waste disposal is, in this perspective, the underground activity complementary to urban development, and in its attention to the economic dynamics at the basis of the System, the film *Gomorra* accounts for both: the stronghold of concrete and the perpetual search for the void.

However, the absence of garbage from the screen does not necessarily imply its interment, and the movie goes beyond the interpretation of waste disposal as the complementary activity to construction. As a reflection on the relationship between organized crime and contemporary society, the film indicates social and economic dynamics that can be understood in terms of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) defines as the shift from "heavy modernity" to "light" or "liquid modernity" characterizing the latter part of the twentieth century. Heavy modernity is regulated by the concepts of solidity and regularity: the refuse of industrial production and modern lifestyle has no place in its rational order and therefore needs to be excluded, hidden from view, forgotten. The builder and the waste stakeholder are complementary and crucial to heavy modernity: the former as an agent of "territorial conquest" affirming wealth and power that are "embodied and fixed, tied in steel and concrete and measured by their volume and weight" (ibid.,115); the latter dedicated to the "generalized process of exclusion of the useless" (Evans 2006, 112). Liquid modernity, on the other hand, is regulated by the concepts of lightness, speed and flexibility: "travelling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity – that is for their heavy weight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance – is now the asset of power" (Bauman 2000, 13). This phase of modernity has superseded the domination of space through enclosure and exclusion, and attaches more value to ease of movement and opportunities for change: "it is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today – not the durability and lasting reliability of the product" (14). Nothing is rigorously excluded from liquid modernity and everything can be manipulated, including garbage:

> Liquid modernity reacts to garbage not by excluding it, but by converting and reintroducing it into the cycle of production, consumption, and reproduction. The final triumph of late capitalism is to turn the merely useless into raw material for future output, and to transform the resistantly non-identical into a convertible commodity (Evans 2006, 109-110).

The interment of waste in abandoned stone quarries, just like the corresponding construction of imposing architecture, belongs to heavy modernity. In liquid modernity, the practices of garbage handling shift from disposal to management: the problem is no longer simply to discard the refuse efficiently and economically, but to reconfigure its use. Repurposed, revalued, and recycled, waste participates in a cultural economy that moves away from fixed identities, for both objects and people.

Besides integrating the stakeholder's activity in the context of contemporary society, the displacement of waste in the film adds complexity to its metaphorical significance in the discourse of organized crime. If the garbage filling Saviano's pages suggests a relationship with *camorra* experienced as a physical struggle against forces that infringe upon the narrator's everyday life, it also reaffirms a notion of *camorra* as the irreducible other that needs to be kept at the margins of law-abiding society. The dematerialization and commodification of waste we witness in the movie, on the other hand, employs the metaphorical significance of refuse to offer a more complex representation of contemporary *camorra*. Analogously to other storylines that show the vast economic ramifications of the System, the garbage episode blurs the line between legal and illegal business and shows the inadequacy of geographical and social localization. Following in the tradition of Gramsci's analysis of the complicity of the modern, industrialized North in the historical underdevelopment of the South, *Gomorra* goes beyond the dichotomy underlying that reassessment. Contemporary *camorra*, as it is represented by both Saviano and Garrone, is no longer an exclusively southern phenomenon and thus can no longer be viewed through the prism of North-South relations.[10] The waste management episode accounts for these circumstances and proposes a different image of *camorristi*. While a socially defined, localized and dirty-handed *camorra* would relate to most viewers like the blue-lit prologue sequence – familiar as a cinematic image, but substantially alien – a network of businessmen circumventing the ever-increasing EU regulations to realize a profit may situate most viewers differently. Besides the fundamental economic component, however, the movie takes into account the visceral reactions that any discourse on waste is bound to provoke in viewers, and the possible consequences of its metaphorical association with organized crime. The abjection of the self that, according to Julia Kristeva, accompanies our direct encounter with filth is carefully avoided. Instead of eliciting the "repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage and muck"(2), the film invites us to think about the shifting demarcations between trash and resource and the new questions they raise. Rather than the irreducible matter that needs to be contained and controlled, waste is the protean substance whose management requires new technologies. In presenting waste as an unstable category, dependent upon classification and human relations, Garrone doesn't assign a positive value to it, but he draws attention to the complex operations associated with its management. Diverging from Saviano's epic take

---

[10] For Antonio Gramsci's reassessment of North-South relations in Italy and his reflections on the *questione meridionale* see *The Southern Question* (2005). For a historical overview of representations of the Italian south, see Gabriella Gribaudi's essay "Images of the South" (1996). Notable among more recent studies of the Southern Question is Nelson Moe's *The View from Vesuvius: Italian culture and the Southern Question* (2002) which examines European and Italian representations of the South before the unification and in the context of the Risorgimento. Pasquale Verdicchio's work analyzes the Italian south as an instance of colonization (1997). See also the introduction to his edition and English translation of *The Southern Question* (Gramsci 2005).

on the reality of *camorra*, Garrone privileges an ethical approach that highlights the relational nature of waste and the need for different strategies of resistance. Instead of an immediate cultural indicator of moral judgment, waste becomes the problematized space of subject-object relationships and identity formation.[11]

Franco's success is based on his knowledge and control of the technologies of waste management. Seeing "with a stakeholder's eyes" has wider implications than appraising the dimensions and capacity of spaces assigned to waste interment. His "perpetual search for the void" is not simply a search for spaces to fill, but the need to establish a distance from waste that is the condition for its successful management. It is fitting that Roberto's true apprenticeship takes place in northern Italy, far from the fields and quarries of his native Campania because, in order to practice modern waste management, he has to learn to subordinate waste to new actions, new categories, and new identities. All these procedures require the stakeholder's physical removal from the materiality of the refuse. The ride in the water taxi on the Venetian Grand Canal marks Roberto's entrance into a new world, where common actions are performed differently. It may appear surreal to him, but it is perfectly functional and his success depends on his ability to navigate the new reality. He has to learn about waste classifications and how to manipulate them in order to generate a profit while guaranteeing the "*clean*" disposal that the respectable client requests: "Mi interessa solo che sia *clean*, poi il resto non mi interessa" (My only concern is that it is 'clean'; the rest doesn't concern me). While apparently voicing a concern for appropriate disposal procedures for the toxic material he is trading, the entrepreneur is endorsing the operation that Franco will perform, "cleaning" the refuse without further concerns. The English adjective "*clean*" that he chooses is not simply a sign of the globalization of Italian business: it is an identification of the EU certification as foreign and, possibly, unrelated to the material to which it is applied. For the producer whose company's reputation is at stake, all that matters is the seeming conformity to the law. The "rest," i.e. the correspondence of label to material is, both literally and figuratively, none of his business.

In the entrepreneur's request that the disposal be "clean," toxic waste has already begun the process of dematerialization that Franco will conclude. After the business meeting, in a hotel room, Roberto receives a lesson on waste classification: reading through contracts and browsing pictures of possible dumping sites on a computer, the stakeholders navigate the intricate legislation regulating waste disposal. As we quickly learn, all waste is ontologically unstable and its classification determines its value and destination. It is nothing more than an abstraction, a series of "things that are materialized and dematerialized through actions" (Hawkins 2006, 14). Learning the stakeholder's trade, then, means also learning how to "clean" poisonous refuse through reclassification as composting material. Detached from its production and initial classification, waste can be handled through the click of a mouse: its specificity, its toxicity, is easily removed, and its relocation and recycling are now possible. Roberto's puzzled look reflects the viewer's bewilderment at Franco's unproblematic approach to waste recoding.

---

[11] Actually, possible instances of Kristeva's "utmost of abjection," the encounter with a corpse, can be found at the beginning and at the end of the movie. The lingering shot on the naked dead bodies in the spa, in the blue-lit opening sequence, inevitably reminds the viewers of their own materiality. In the closing sequence, however, the encounter with the dead bodies of Marco and Ciro is mediated by the intervening encounter with the "thingness of waste" that I discuss later in this essay.

The ontological instability on which the commodification of waste is predicated allows the stakeholder to control both its identity and his own. No longer the irreducible matter whose exclusion is necessary for the preservation of the self, no longer the abject on which the existence of one's "own and clean self" is predicated (Kristeva 1982, 65), waste is viewed as a resource whose management requires respect for its complexity. The stakeholder, however, disregards the complexity at the basis of modern recycling practices: he makes and unmakes waste in a fantasy of control that establishes the self as all-powerful. In his straightforward approach to waste recoding, he perceives his activity as unidirectional. However, as Gay Hawkins shows in *The Ethics of Waste*, managing garbage is a relational process in which "it is possible to see the mutual constitution of human subjects and inanimate wasted objects" (2006, 2-3). While Franco behaves like a demiurge who can turn volatile matter into anything the market needs, his apparent subordination of waste through displacement and recoding "doesn't just deny the persistent force of objects as material presence, it also denies the ways in which we stay enmeshed with rubbishy things whether we like it or not" (80). The stakeholder's subjectivity, constructed through a fantasy of control sustained by garbage displacement, is consistent with the movie's depiction of *camorra* as a system integrated in liquid modernity. The technologies of waste management employed by Franco illustrate not only the ontological instability of garbage but also the "intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities" in a society where, "both [persons and things] have lost their solidity, their definiteness and continuity" (Lasch, quoted in Bauman 2000, 85). This is the world depicted in *Gomorra*: a society of consumers, who "shop around in the supermarket of identities" (Bauman 2000, 83), in search of profitable opportunities, quick gratification, and easy escape. The shortsightedness of the entrepreneur who has no concerns for the destination of the toxic waste he trades is not that different from the gangsters' obsession with personal care and appearance – also portrayed in the movie – while the soil on which they live is poisoned. They both assume an absolute control of the self that disregards the multiple ways in which their bodies remain connected to garbage.

The acts of self-determination performed by the entrepreneur and the stakeholder are also similar to those of gangsters and local bosses who, recounts Saviano, mould their criminal identity on famous movie characters and find public recognition thanks to their cinematic masks (2006, 266-282). The *camorra* culture that produces bosses with nicknames like Sandokan Schiavone and Gennaro MacKay is embodied in the movie by the two kids who "play *Scarface*." Thinking that "recitando la parte giusta, il film della [loro] vita forse poteva cambiare" (ibid., 277; by playing the right part, the movie of [their] life maybe could change"), Marco and Ciro boast a power they don't have and take the self-confidence of movie heroes into the cut-throat reality of local crime. If the initial scene of their episode – Marco reciting Tony Montana's lines under Ciro's directorial instructions – may appear an innocent game, the sequence immediately following shows how fully they live their cinematic identity: the kids rob Nigerian drug dealers with a recklessness that betrays their complete detachment from reality. Playful and rash, oblivious or disrespectful of the rules regulating access to *camorra* clans, the two teen-agers live in a movie of their own creation. Marco and Ciro's relationship with *camorra* is completely mediated by cinema: after meeting the local boss, they recite his words to each other as if they were lines from a bad movie. The boss is not charismatic

enough to gain their admiration (he is no Tony Montana) and in ridiculing his lack of style they feel justified in their insubordination. When they spy some gangsters hiding a load of weapons in an abandoned building, the images appear to them framed in a window, surrounded by the darkness of their own hiding place: the whole experience is clearly evocative of a movie theatre and, after watching the movie, Marco and Ciro step onto the screen and steal the guns. In these acts of cinema-inspired megalomania, however, these kids are not isolated fools: the setting of that initial *Scarface* sequence suggests the extent to which their behaviour is emblematic. The bathtub in which Marco concludes his "*Il mondo è nostro*" (the world is ours) monologue is a fragment of the famous villa of *camorra* boss Walter Schiavone: an exact reproduction of Tony Montana's sumptuous Miami mansion, in Casal di Principe.[12] The kids are clearly emblematic of a system that finds in cinema a model for the articulation of criminal subjectivity.

Faithful to Saviano's words, Garrone shows us through this story that "non è vero che il cinema è menzogna, non è vero che non si può vivere come nei film e non è vero che ti accorgi mettendo la testa fuori dallo schermo che le cose sono diverse" (2006, 279; it is not true that cinema is a lie, it is not true that you cannot live like in the movies, and it is not true that you notice by sticking your head out of the screen that things are different). Invincible in their own eyes, Marco and Ciro appear in all their frailty in the surreal sequence that has become the symbol of the movie: standing on a desolate beach, wearing only underwear and sneakers, they test the stolen AK-47s discharging them on a little island off shore. Their nearly naked bodies, lanky and pale, establish a compelling contrast between the powerful guns they embrace and their own sense of invulnerability. In this respect they also recall, in an oblique manner, the naked bodies of the prologue: there, the bodies bathed in dark blue light suggest science fiction; here, set against a grey wasteland, they evoke a post-apocalyptic movie. In both cases the bodies are the awkward vehicles of a self-assurance based on a seemingly never-ending fantasy. And in both cases, the film reminds us of the displaced materiality of those bodies by lingering on their dead weight once the fantasy has come to an end. In the land of *camorra*, you can live like in the movies: "se altrove ti può piacere *Scarface* e puoi sentirti come lui in cuor tuo, qui *puoi essere* Scarface, però ti tocca esserlo fino in fondo" (Saviano 2006, 280; If elsewhere you may like Scarface and may feel like him in your heart, here you *can be* Scarface, but you have to be him to the end). The acknowledgement of the role of cinematic images and that of garbage in determining subjectivity go hand in hand in the film: within a framework of liquid modernity, the act of garbage displacement is akin to the creative acts of self-determination performed by *camorristi*. You can make fertilizer out of hide-tanning waste by simply renaming it, just as you can be Tony Montana by reciting his lines. You can pretend to control refuse and never get your hands dirty,

---

[12] "Si racconta a Casal di Principe che il boss aveva chiesto al suo architetto di costruirgli una villa identica a quella del gangster cubano di Miami, Tony Montana, in *Scarface*. Il film l'aveva visto e rivisto. L'aveva colpito sin nel profondo, al punto tale da identificarsi nel personaggio interpretato da Al Pacino.… Al suo architetto, raccontano in paese, il boss consegnò direttamente il VHS del film. Il progetto doveva esser quello del film *Scarface* e nient'altro" (ibid. 2006, 267; They say in Casal di Principe that the boss had asked his architect to build him a villa identical to that of Miami Cuban gangster, Tony Montana, in *Scarface*. He had watched and re-watched the movie. It had struck him deeply, to the point of identifying with the character played by Al Pacino.… Rumor has it that the boss directly gave the VHS tape of the movie to his architect. The blueprint had to be that of the movie *Scarface* and nothing else).

handling only papers, computers, and phones. You can pretend that the toxic refuse you trade really is clean and won't contaminate the land that produces your fruit. But the fantasy works only if you maintain that distance throughout. You can live like in the movies, but you have to live there to the end:

> C'è un momento solo che è diverso, il momento in cui Al Pacino si alzerà dalla fontana in cui i colpi di mitra hanno fatto cascare la sua controfigura, e si asciugherà il viso pulendosi dal colore del sangue.… Ma questo non ti interessa saperlo, e quindi non lo comprendi (279)

> (There is only one moment that is different [from the movies], the moment when Al Pacino will get up from the fountain in which the machine gun shots made his stunt double fall, and he will wipe his face, cleaning off the blood colouring.… But you don't care to know this, and therefore you don't understand it).

Marco and Ciro never experience that moment. Only in the bucket of the bulldozer that disposes of them at the conclusion of their exhilarating escapade do the boys' bodies acquire the materiality displaced in their delusion of unlimited power.

While Marco and Ciro live their own movie to the end, Franco and Roberto occupy a more ambiguous space. Franco's activity as a stakeholder is based on a series of creative acts that define him as well as the waste he classifies: he "cleans up" toxic waste and transforms it into fertilizer, he ships "humanitarian aid" to Third World countries, he allows companies to save money and jobs, and he even facilitates Italy's participation in the EU. These acts establish him as a respected businessman who travels to interesting places and does important wide-ranging work; a trustworthy employer, who gains the approval of Roberto's honest father; and a knowledgeable stakeholder, who inspects cargo wearing a hazmat suit and is believed when he labels it "humanitarian aid." Demonstrating that styles of waste disposal are also styles of self, the stakeholder's identity is constructed through creative strategies analogous to those underlying waste classification. Learning to see with a stakeholder's eyes means for Roberto participating in these fictions and distancing himself from the material consequences of his actions. Apparently more aware of the relational quality of waste management than Franco, Roberto seems hesitant to accept the fantasy of control that sustains the stakeholder's identity. He remains *in limine*, a spectator more than an actor in Franco's movie. Their different attitudes become explicit when, unlike the Scarface kids, they are offered a chance to stick their heads out of the screen.

The opportunity to step out of their self-created film arises when a truck driver mishandles some drums of toxic refuse. The trucker's hands covered with blood suddenly bring the materiality of waste to the attention of the viewers, to all intents and purposes tearing the screen on which Franco was projecting his own movie. The hands at the centre of the screen also establish continuity with the sequence of hands exchanging money and goods throughout the opening shots of the first two episodes. Contrasted with

the everyday quality of those exchanges, which obscured all ontological differences between objects in the flow of commodities, the blood on the trucker's hands embodies even more powerfully the specificity of waste that only apparently had been lost in the exchange. Ignoring that ontological claim, Franco removes the reluctant drivers and replaces them with street kids. Equipped with extra seat cushions and a palpable sense of adventure, the kids step onto the trucks, remove the dangerous material from the screen and restore the stakeholder's distance from waste. A brief extreme close-up of a truck crossing Franco's path as he makes his way out of the quarry only temporarily obstructs his vision, which is immediately recuperated in a long oblique shot down the cave, a look that makes the vehicles moving in the distance appear like toy trucks. The distance from the materiality of waste is re-established, and waste management relocated to the realm of child's play. While Franco is able to regain his vision and resume his manipulation of reality, Roberto has definitely stuck his head out of the screen and cannot really go back. This experience opens up for him the possibility of a different vision and a different relationship with waste.

The effectiveness of Franco's gesture in restoring his control and distance from the materiality of waste becomes evident in the next sequence, set at the house of a farmer who is providing land for garbage disposal. The sick man in bed and his family around him complain about the poisonous nature of the "compost" dumped in their fields, which is presumably the cause of his illness. Just as Franco is preparing to deliver his reassuring speech to cut their grievances, they request more deliveries. The daughter's gesture, rubbing her thumb and forefinger together, makes their motivation even more explicit. The hands requesting money replace the blood-covered hands of the trucker on the screen and reveal the extent to which waste dematerialization has been accepted and internalized. The possibility of illness as its embodiment is disregarded. Waste is an abstraction, which materializes only as money. The unidirectional approach to waste that sustains Franco's business and his subjectivity is re-established.

As he leaves the sick man's room, Roberto rejects the generally accepted notion of waste. In the previous scenes, waste's materiality, displaced by Franco's actions, revealed itself in unforeseen and undesirable forms and was ignored. It cannot be ignored when it reappears in the conspicuous form of a case of freshly harvested peaches. In the gift of a forgetful old lady, Roberto finds "la forza…di ribellarsi e scegliere finalmente da che parte non stare, facendone al tempo stesso l'unico personaggio del film a cui sia concessa una possibilità di salvezza: l'unica speranza, l'unico spiraglio di luce nel grigiore fangoso di quelle terre infettate" (De Sanctis, in De Sanctis et al., 41; the strength…to rebel and finally choose where to stand, making him, at the same time, the only character in the movie who is given a possibility to escape). Paradoxically, Roberto's act of resistance is occasioned by a gesture that signals the acceptance of this system, if only to reveal its absurdity. The peaches are the synecdoche of the process of waste recycling: bright, beautiful, ripe fruit, ready to be consumed. Consumption would validate the product and sanction the technology, so when Franco disdainfully discards the peaches, the fallacy of the process and of his absolute control over waste is unmasked. Roberto's gaze, a 45-degree subjective shot on the peaches discarded on the side of the road, can only acknowledge what Franco's gesture has established: the fruit is inconsumable garbage. But in appearing as such, the peaches suddenly make a claim on the man looking at them: they establish "the persistent force of objects as material presence" and remind the

onlookers of "the ways in which we stay enmeshed with rubbishy things whether we like it or not" (Hawkins 2006, 80). At this point they indicate "less an object than a subject-object relation": precisely the relationship that the dematerialization performed by Franco denied. When peaches suddenly reveal their "thingness," that is "the sensuous presence that exceeds the materialization and utilization of objects" (Brown 2001, quoted in Hawkins 2006, 74), Roberto cannot ignore their claim. They assert their identity as inconsumable garbage at the very moment their rehabilitation appears complete. Roberto's encounter with the peaches is an encounter with the thingness of waste, which reorders his relationship with it and motivates him to change paths: "when we encounter waste as things the affective energy that can accompany this, the sense of wonder or horror, can be the impulse for new relations: a motivation for a different ethics, a sudden inspiration for a new use" (Hawkins 2006, 84-85).

Dematerialized and displaced, returned as fruit and then discarded, garbage still functions as a metaphor for the invisible ties connecting the mafia to contemporary society at large. However, rather than insisting on the irreducibility of garbage as a visible sign of the persistently violent presence of *camorra* in southern Italy, Garrone's film highlights its commodification and the ontological instability on which it is based. Waste is a commodity that acquires value through circulation. It is not refuse to discard and hide, but rather a reusable substance whose management has effects both on the matter and on the subject. Analogously, the mafia ceases to be the irreducible other, a localized phenomenon residing at the margins of law abiding Italy, and is presented as an intrinsic constituent of global capitalism in its late, liquid phase. The real underworld of organized crime is its active participation in the "short term mentality" of contemporary economy (Bauman 2000, 147): a society that offers "the freedom to pick and choose, but also – and perhaps most importantly – the freedom from bearing the consequences of wrong choices" (89), where relationships are consumable products rather than engagements, and "domination consists in one's own capacity to escape, to disengage, to 'be elsewhere'" (120).

The dematerialization of waste performed in the movie suggests the audience's complicity and is accompanied by an invitation to resistance. Since the modern *camorra* we see in the film is not localized and easily identifiable, and because the economic system that sustains it belongs also to the viewers' world, the audience is encouraged to remain engaged and maintain a critical attitude. Our apprenticeship in waste management proceeds alongside Roberto's, who maintains an ambiguous position throughout. Apparently not rooted in *camorra* culture, he is trained to become a stakeholder but excluded from direct contact with more traditional *camorristi*.[13] This position *in limine* allows him to become a natural stand-in for the viewer inside the movie: as he gradually becomes aware of his involvement in murderous activities, he is faced with an ethical choice that becomes, in turn, the viewer's choice. The alignment of points of view is made explicit in the port scene: the initially impersonal medium-length shot of two men in hazmat suits walking out of a cargo container is revealed as a subjective point-of-view shot through the use of sound. Roberto's breath from within the hazmat suit subjectivizes the gaze and aligns the viewer with the apprentice as he apparently consents to Franco's

---

[13] Roberto's background is introduced through an encounter between his father and Franco at the airport. The father claims to have done everything in his power to keep the son away from crime and this non-involvement becomes important as the story unfolds.

manipulation of reality. We share Roberto's perplexity when he helps the street kids drive the trucks in the quarry, and we are still aligned with him when we see him walk away from Franco's car after the peaches incident. The peaches make a claim on us as well: waste asserts itself as a vital thing at the same time that it returns to trash status. Its effect is to remind us that our relationship with waste is not fixed, just as our relationship with the System is multifaceted and in constant change. Our encounter with the peaches is the only sign of resistance in the movie, and it acquires further significance in relation to the film's ending. When the bulldozer scoops up the bodies of Marco and Ciro, asserting human waste as the only definite non-value in a culture of transience and infinite recyclability, the image of the discarded peaches remains as a reminder of waste's instability: dead matter can be brought back to life and living subjects can become waste. In both cases, the actions that make and unmake waste also make and unmake us, in a subject-object relationship challenged by our inescapable intimacy with waste. We are all in the waste management business, but we don't need to live the movie to the end.

Bibliography

Allen, Beverly, and Mary Russo, eds. 1997. *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Bonsaver, Guido. 2008. "Charismatic Criminals." *Sight and Sound* 18 (11): 22-23.

Brown, Bill. 2001. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28: 1-21.

Cohen, William A., and Ryan Johnson, eds. 2005. *Filth: Dirt Disgust and Modern Life*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Crispino, Francesco. "Gomorra." 2008. In Non solo Gomorra: Tutto il Cinema di Matteo Garrone, edited by De Sanctis, Pierpaolo, Domenico Monetti and Luca Pallanch, 45-53. Cantalupo in Sabina, Rieti: Edizioni Sabinae.

De Sanctis, Pierpaolo, Domenico Monetti and Luca Pallanch, eds. 2008. *Non solo Gomorra: Tutto il cinema di Matteo Garrone*. Cantalupo in Sabina, Rieti: Edizioni Sabinae.

Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.

Evans, David H. 2006. "Taking out the Trash: Don DeLillo's Underworld, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage." *Cambridge Quarterly* 35 (2): 103-32.

Forgacs, David and Robert Lumley, eds. 1996. *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. Lanham, MD: Oxford University Press.

Garrone, Matteo, director. 2008. *Gomorra*. Fandango.

Gramsci, Antonio. 2005. *The Southern Question*, translated by Pasquale Verdicchio. Toronto: Guernica Editions Inc.

Gribaudi, Gabriella. 1996. "Images of the South." In Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction, edited by Forgacs, David and Robert Lumley, 72-87. Lanham, MD: Oxford University Press.

Hawkins, Gay. 2006. *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Moe, Nelson. 2002. *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Saviano, Roberto. 2006. *Gomorra*. Milan: Mondadori.

Small, Pauline. 2005. "Giordana's *I cento passi*: Renegotiating the Mafia Codes." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 3(1): 41-54.

Strasser, Susan. 1999. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company.

Thompson, Michael. 1979. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Verdicchio, Pasquale. 1997. *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Wu Ming. 2009. *New Italian Epic: Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*. Turin: Einaudi.