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THE CINEMA OF MATTEO GARRONE

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Abstract: Best known for his film *Gomorra*, Italian director Matteo Garrone has attracted considerable critical consideration because of the film's bleak, authentic portrayal of contemporary Italian society. In my article, I focus on the two films directed a few years before *Gomorra*, *L'imbalsamatore (The Embalmer, 2002)* and *Primo Amore (First Love, 2004)* and discuss Garrone's cinematic and narrative techniques. Thanks to his ability to visualize today's illness in contemporary Italy, Garrone's cinema is a sign of Italian Neorealism's lasting heritage which, throughout the years, has evolved into a new form, producing innovative meanings and images, reflections of today's chaotic times. If in the highly awarded *Gomorra* Garrone reveals these social issues through a drama about the devastating effects of criminality on individuals, in *L'imbalsamatore* and *Primo Amore* Garrone explores similar issues through stories of personal pathology, obsessive behavior and twisted sexual relationships. Thanks to his cinema, then, we are reminded of the influential role of Neorealism in cinema, but also of the existence of an Italian society consumed by violence and obsessions.

Introduction – Garrone and Italian Neorealism

When Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* won the 2008 Cannes Grand Prix, shared with compatriot Paolo Sorrentino's film *Il Divo*, the victory of his account of the ruthless Italian criminal organization known as *camorra*,ⁱ surprised the public and critics. Although *Il Divo* received critical acclaim for its blunt depiction of Italy's corrupt politicians and its scandals, the cinema of Garrone attracted considerable critical consideration because of its bleak, authentic portrayal of contemporary Italian society.ⁱⁱ

The American popularity of *Gomorra* that followed the European acclaim, shed light on this young Italian filmmaker, winner, among other awards, of the Best Screenplay at the Chicago International Film Festival and a 2009 nominee for the Golden Globes' Best Foreign Film. The Roman born filmmaker found fame and appreciation in and outside Italy, proving to be a fascinating new voice in Italian cinema.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss Garrone's earlier films, *L'imbalsamatore* (*The Embalmer*) and *Primo Amore* (*First Love*),ⁱⁱⁱ and bring attention to a significant voice in Italian cinema. Because of the unpredicted international success of Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* and Paolo Sorrentino's *Il Divo*, some film critics have seen in these films a sign of a re-birth, a "resurrection" of Italian cinema. A few critics have even gone further and have implied that, with Garrone's *Gomorra*, a new "Italian Neorealism" was born. In an interview by Richard Parton that appeared in *Cineaste*, Garrone admits to an unconscious influence of Neorealist filmmakers such as Rossellini, but underlines that Neorealism was a product of the post-War period and, therefore, a result of unique social and economic conditions.^{iv} Despite the specific historical context in which Italian Neorealism originated, it is worthwhile to think of this young filmmaker's style as a contemporary version of that aesthetic movement.

Garrone points out that the careful attention to the real living conditions of his films' characters, the use of vernacular language, together with his choice of non-professional actors, are clear reminders of characteristics that contributed to the creation of Neorealist cinema.^v His choice of mixing professional and non-professional actors offers an insight in the director's artistic intentions to provoke and shock viewers. In analyzing Matteo Garrone's earlier films, this paper suggests that Garrone's cinema signals Italian cinema's recovery from a state of 'creative stagnation'. His popularity represents a move back to stories about 'real people' and 'real situations', which is strikingly reminiscent of Italian Neorealism.

There is an original component in Garrone's cinematic style and that comes from his attention to details in the depiction of Italy. Other contemporary directors' films have also paid attention to social and cultural tensions in contemporary Italy. Among these are Marco Tullio Giordana, *I Cento Passi* (*One Hundred Steps*), 2000; Tonino Zangardi, *Prendimi e portami via* (*Take me away*), 2003; Francesco Munzi, *Saimir*, 2004; Stefano

Reali, *Verso Nord (Without Conscience)*, 2004; Cristina Comencini, *La bestia nel cuore (Don't Tell)*, 2005; and Giuseppe Tornatore, *La sconosciuta (The Unknown Woman)*, 2006. Matteo Garrone stands out, however, for a cinematic view that comes from a particular visual style. Trained as a painter, Garrone embraces cinematography with a style that reflects an emotional involvement with his art. By mirroring contemporary social and cultural instability, Garrone's filmmaking has become one of the most significant voices in today's Italian cinema because he employs a visually engaging look at social problems. As suggested by Italian film critic Goffredo Fofi in his preface to the anthology, *Non Solo Gomorra. Tutto il cinema di Matteo Garrone*, Garrone's filmmaking emerges from the latest and most innovative cinematic voices because of his refusal to make films simply to denounce societies and peoples. His stories are about people he has known and as a result, the tone is one of engagement, and the view is from the inside.^{vi}

If we look back to the years during which Italian cinema gained international recognition, Federico Fellini, Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Vittorio de Sica, Bernardo Bertolucci, the Taviani Brothers, and Giuseppe Tornatore come to mind. These directors represent a variety of voices that contributed to the establishment of Italian cinema as a worldwide cultural and artistic marvel. Garrone, who followed in their footsteps and acquired international acclaim, demonstrates that an inventive filmmaking style has reached artistic maturity. His cinematic style relies on the importance of details and simple gestures, and as a result, the characters in his films are able to appropriate the mannerisms and moods of the people they embody and then display a subjective interpretation of reality. In his speech when accepting the Cannes Grand Prix, Garrone referred to *Gomorra* as an example of what cinema means: an interpretation of a reality more than a projection of a situation because it was always his intention to move his viewers. "Emozionare è per me la cosa piu importante." ("To me, the most important thing is to move people")^{vii}

Gomorra, a series of dramas related to *camorra*, one of the most powerful Italian criminal organizations, reveals several moments of emotional intensity. Memorable is the shooting of two young boys, Marco and Ciro, two people who inhabit the tense, gripping community affected by *camorra*. This sequence stands out in the film as one of the most significant moments as it exemplifies the core of this drama: *camorra* touches everyone's

life, like a spreading disease that infects Italian communities. Women and children too are involved in this great danger, as Marco and Ciro's premature deaths clearly emphasize. In the end, Marco and Ciro have to pay with their own lives because they dared to defy camorra's powers. Their death is a reminder of the blindness of violence as the two boys face a cruel death. In this sequence, the camera follows Marco and Ciro as they are on the beach, in their underwear, playing with machine guns as if they were toys. All of a sudden, this playful yet dangerous game is ended by the killers.

While in *Gomorra*, Garrone depicts his characters denouncing the corruption and uncontrollable violence camorra produces, in the films made prior to it, he captured the characters' painful conditions without actually passing his judgment. In *L'imbalsamatore* (2002) and *Primo Amore* (2004),^{viii} the filmmaker sets up gloomy scenarios in which the viewer is asked to quietly participate and witness the range of emotions that characters are going through, surrounded by a space that not only confines them but also mirrors their despair. In his cinema, Matteo Garrone has always shown a curiosity about outcasts and the spaces and landscapes that surround them. From *Terra di mezzo* (1996) to *Ospiti* (1998) and *Estate Romana* (2000), his considered interest in prostitutes, immigrants, and artists living in Rome has contributed to making his cinematic world a well-crafted space in which to project the harsh reality of those who live on the outskirts of society.

Garrone's stylistic characteristic as a filmmaker lies in the investigative eye that makes him study peoples and places before shooting since he is interested in understanding how people are, how they think, where they come from, and how he might represent them effectively. His early films represent moments in the development of his artistic view. They also reflect the creative phases in which poignant depictions of social outcasts create a typology of those people who, even though rejected by society, contribute to making Italy a multifaceted country. His cinema thus offers a view of the underground world, a topic that rarely finds sympathy in the audience. Garrone's portrayals of obsessive attraction and deadly passions in *L'imbalsamatore* and *Primo Amore* exemplify this unique visual style. Directed in 2002 and 2004, these films illustrate dangerous obsessions; a closer look at the films also suggests symbolic readings, critiques of today's Italy, a society as Garrone sees it, devoured by selfishness,

loneliness and despair. In this desolation, pathological feelings have replaced fulfilling loving relationships.

Love, Obsession and *L'imbalsamatore*

In *L'imbalsamatore*, Garrone reveals a profound understanding of how people struggle to relate to each other on an emotional level, but also of the thin line that separates love from obsession. The film narrates the story of Peppino Profeta (played by Ernesto Mahieux), a taxidermist, who works for the *camorra* and implants contraband drugs in dead bodies after he carefully prepares them for their final destination. The film opens with Peppino meeting Valerio (Valerio Foglia Manzillo), a handsome waiter who is easily persuaded to give up his job and work as his assistant. The two men develop a special bond that takes them on an unexpected journey. These men's destiny moves towards a deadly and inevitable ending given Peppino's uncontrollable obsession for Valerio, a behavior that he desperately tries to repress. When Deborah (Elisabetta Rocchetti) enters Valerio's life, Peppino sees this woman as an intrusion into their relationship and thus tries to eliminate her. By luring Valerio into promiscuous sexual encounters with other women, Peppino aims at sabotaging the couple's relationship, inevitably provoking an outburst of jealousy in Deborah and leading Valerio to be confused about rather than convinced about his love for her. One day, Valerio and Deborah decide to leave Peppino and move back to her native northern town in order to start a new life away from the illegal criminal organization and the dangerous influence that Peppino still has on Vittorio. In an expected twist, Peppino meets the couple at Deborah's family home and finds out that Vittorio and Deborah are expecting a baby. In a desperate attempt to convince Valerio to return to Caserta with him, Peppino threatens the woman with a gun, as he blames her for taking Valerio away from him. He dies while in the car, next to his beloved Valerio who agreed to join him only to save Deborah's life.

The relationship between Peppino and Valerio starts like a perfect friendship as they work together and relax together until the harmony of the two men's relationship is disrupted by the presence of a beautiful, sexy woman. In a powerful sequence, Deborah

challenges her “rival,” Peppino, in an argument meant to assert that only she, a woman, can own and control Valerio’s life. The film’s conclusion also suggests a similar reading: Valerio and Deborah are meant to be together as their love is socially acceptable whereas Peppino’s obsessive desire for another man needs to be destroyed because it is considered “forbidden” by society. As Valerio and Peppino are in the car and about to leave Deborah behind, gunshots are heard. The scene that follows shows the couple getting rid of Peppino’s body, plunged in the dark waters of a river. The real cause of Peppino’s death is left unclear, as if Garrone wants to give the viewer the power (and freedom) to decide whether Peppino’s death was caused by Valerio or self inflicted. Despite this ambiguous conclusion, it is still possible to read in Peppino’s death the ultimate sacrifice love entails when rage and infatuation prevail but most significantly when it defies its conventional norms. To reinforce this notion, one can point out that it is Deborah, a woman, who challenges Peppino’s sexual confidence by mocking his sexuality. In another significant scene, Peppino, Valerio and Deborah are in a hotel room, and Deborah convinces the two men to dress up as women. Peppino’s depiction here demands some critical consideration as his heavy make-up vividly makes him resemble a drag queen. The camera follows the three characters from a certain distance, gently moving around their bodies, to allow a complete look at the scene. This visually intriguing scene recalls a similar moment in Fellini’s depiction of the festive atmosphere in the Carnevale (Mardi Gras) sequence of *I Vitelloni* (*The Young and the Passionate*).

In Fellini’s 1953 account of five young men living in the small Adriatic town, Alberto (played by Alberto Sordi) is dressed up like a woman; at the end of the party, he sadly reflects upon a life which slowly drifts away. In that powerful image of Alberto resembling a gloomy clown, Fellini projects his benevolent view of selfish, childish men who, like Alberto, are unable to accept life’s responsibilities. Garrone seems to depict a similar drama: Peppino is dressed up as a woman, wearing a costume to emphasize his inability to reveal his real self, his need to mask his real sexual identity. Selfish and afraid to fully and openly embrace his sexuality, surrounded by loneliness and misery, he fails in life, as much as in his performance of a man pretending to be a woman or as a man pretending to be someone else. Peppino is a short, out of proportion man, his physical appearance closely resembling a dwarf, a man who relies on the criminal world

to be socially recognized and accepted. The mask he wears, that of the straight man who flirts with women, is also a symbol of a society that creates categories more to contain than to let people express their identity.

Primo Amore: Love for disease

In *Primo Amore*, the film released two years after *L'imbalsamatore*, the filmmaker continues to explore obsessive passions and fatal attractions. As in *L'imbalsamatore*, the viewer is invited from the very beginning to enter the realm of passions, in this instance, between two heterosexual people, Vittorio (Vitaliano Trevisan) and Sonia (Michela Cescon). The film is based on a book-confession entitled *Il cacciatore di anoressiche*, in which the author, Marco Mariolini, confesses to the murder of a young woman, Monica Calò. Found guilty of the crime committed in 1998, Mariolini describes in his book published a year prior to his crime in 1997, the origins of his obsession for anorexic women. As he explains in his book, pathological behavior led him to fall in love with an anorexic woman, Monica Calò.^{ix} After an initial relationship, Monica left him to escape from his cruelty, but eventually fell into his trap again and, with her death, ended Mariolini's pathological obsession.

Garrone's film tells the story of Vittorio and Sonia, a goldsmith and a store assistant, and the abusive relationship they develop when they move in together. This is an obsessive and pathological relationship because it is based on Vittorio's demands to that Sonia lose weight so he can fully appreciate (and "love") her. Sonia at first accepts his requests as if she has to please him to be appreciated by him. She then realizes that he is depriving her of her own life and ultimately finds the strength to end this oppression. In Garrone's cinematic account of Vittorio's tragic obsession, the viewer is invited to enter into a forbidden space: that of a most secret desire and obsession: an uncontrollable and totalitarian love or the desire to love so deeply one owns the beloved's mind and body. In this space, as in *L'imbalsamatore*, viewers are once again left to wonder about the emotions evoked by Garrone's images and by their own responses to a narrative that shows how controlling another's mind and body can be mistaken as an act of love.

In an intriguing reading, Maria Vittoria and Paola Golinelli discuss *Primo Amore* from a psychological perspective, emphasizing the effects that Garrone's film produces on the audience. Although anorexia, they claim, "remains as much unknown as it is painful,"^x the film succeeds in letting us witness the struggle and the emotional involvement of the two characters through painful images that speak of deprivation and physical as well as psychological abuse.

In adapting *Primo Amore* from the book based on the actual story of its author, a killer, Garrone inevitably refers to several medical pathologies—anorexia, mental illnesses—in order to speak metaphorically. As he explains in the last section of *Non solo Gomorra*, the film was meant to address the instabilities and insecurities of two people who search for a normal life together by means of what they believe is love.^{xi} Vitaliano Trevisan, a renowned writer from Vicenza, plays the protagonist Vittorio. The filmmaker decided to cast Trevisan as the film's protagonist mostly because of the writer's introspective and somewhat mysterious personality. This element, together with the choice to shoot the film in Trevisan's native town furthers the possibility of Garrone creating a character in a more realistic, authentic way. The drastic loss of weight endured by the actress Michela Cescon during the film's shooting also contributes to the true-to-life portrayal of a dramatic, tragic obsession and its dangerous outcome.

Most interestingly, with this film, Garrone moves from the familiar space of Rome seen in previous films to the northern province of Vicenza to show the dull, isolated landscapes that surround the characters. In this space, the filmmaker highlights the couple's struggle to adapt to a "normal" life. Furthermore, the filmmaker's curiosity about the real drama of a sick man, Mariolini and his obsessive desires for slim, even skeletal and emaciated women, gives him the opportunity of reflecting on Italy. If on the surface Italy appears a shining collection of artistic beauty and richness, of economic growth and prosperity, using a different lens, reveals a country consumed by violence, from racial intolerance to political and social divisions based on geographical borders. The horrific obsession between Vittorio and Sonia in *Primo Amore* suggests Italy's darkest side, that characterized by violence and undisclosed corruption, unruly passions and dangerous obsessions which are responsible for spreading insecurity, instability, and loneliness. *L'imbalsamatore* followed a similar artistic path, as it was loosely based on a

real event that occurred in Italy.^{xii} In it, Garrone expressed his concerns about social issues that revolve around human interaction and values and examined the fragile boundaries between good and evil.

Garrone's peculiar vision of obsessive emotions uncovers a fascination that the filmmaker has with the human body. Rather than focusing on the physical aspects that denote beauty—generally employed by male filmmakers to address femininity and sexuality—in *Primo Amore*, Garrone privileges the sinister consequences of an obsession that derives from looking at a human body.

Determined to shape Sonia's body in order to make of her the perfect ideal of feminine beauty, Vittorio maintains an almost diabolic control over her body and mind. Sonia agrees to lose weight, as if this were the ultimate proof that love exists between her and Vittorio because of her sacrifice in letting him appropriate her body. Vittorio's bleak, obsessive look, while staring at Sonia when he first sees her in the bar at the bus station, projects his uncontrollable desire for her body. During their first conversation, Vittorio's prevailing power over her is well illustrated when he succeeds in convincing her to stay in the bar. While in the bar, despite Sonia's initial uneasiness caused by Vittorio's disappointment in noticing Sonia's body, not as thin as he was expecting, she is nonetheless attracted to his charismatic persona. The life they start together is based on a co-dependence –Vittorio depends on Sonia's anorexia because only by “molding” her body, can he fulfill his obsessions. Sonia's life depends on Vittorio's desires to feel she is fully accepted, resulting in a sinister game of attraction, destruction and self-destruction. Vittorio's pathological glances at her silhouette contain a wide range of emotions whenever he is confronted with the overwhelming forces that push him to take over Sonia. Close-ups of Vittorio and Sonia's face are often used in scenes when the narrative demands an emotional involvement on the part of viewers.

Italian writer Italo Moscati suggests that Vittorio's obsession comes from wanting to deprive Sonia of all feelings, as if she is a metaphor for today's Italian society which has become, on the surface, wealthy, gaining “weight” and getting comfortable with its excessive futile commodities.^{xiii} This fascinating reading adds to the complexity of this fatal attraction, especially since it is based on a true story. It points to another significant aspect of the film: the symbolism given the “numbness” and human isolation

often found in the lifestyle of the northern provinces. As mentioned by Garrone in an interview, the depiction of the suburban Vicenza in *Primo Amore* gives him the ideal situation to depict a relationship between a man and a woman in which the geographical space becomes a metaphor for loneliness and psychological instability.

Similarly, the space embodied by the two towns chosen for *L'imbalsamatore*, Caserta (near Naples) and Cremona, reinforces the importance the filmmaker gives to space. In this film, the journey the three characters take in the second half of the film brings them from the southern town of Caserta to the northern province of Cremona. Like Vicenza in *Primo Amore*, these towns in *L'imbalsamatore* symbolize more than a geographical space. The cinematography employed by Garrone in depicting the different landscapes of the two towns, using sunny and well lit scenes in the southern town and rainy and dim ones in the northern one, clearly suggests an inner division, a separation between spaces that is more than visual, symbolizing the social and cultural fracture between the industrial North and the agrarian South. Once again, Garrone decides to let the landscape, its regional variety and cultural diversity, speak by itself with long shots that offer the viewer an imagery absorbed with symbolic significance.

Desolate scenery functions as a mirror of the lonely and at times dull life that both Sonia and Vittorio experience. Since their first encounter in the bar at the bus station, the viewer realizes that women's and men's different mannerisms and roles in communicating symbolize a relationship based on a hierarchy. Vittorio is the dominant figure, demanding attention and assertive to the point that Sonia, once she becomes emotionally involved in this relationship, moves in with him. Sonia is not only submissive to his desires; her submission is the result of loneliness and a desire to be with someone.

From the moment Sonia moves in with Vittorio, the couple starts playing out a masochistic and at times horrific relationship in which the man psychologically, more than physically, dominates the woman. As mentioned earlier, controlling another's body by having her lose weight is for Vittorio the acknowledgment of the power he has over Sonia. Is this obsession a distorted, limited vision of love? Does brutality triumph? The film does not provide an answer as it leaves the viewer to interpret through the images the strange dynamics developed between the two.

Gold is at the core of this film in the characterization of Vittorio as a goldsmith, another reminder of a metaphor that functions to speak of obsessions in terms of a desire for shining, aesthetically perfect beauty more than for emotional and profound connection. Vittorio's need to mold Sonia's body also signifies his reaching a fulfillment, almost a spiritual enrichment that only an ideal of beauty with a body that becomes a perfect embellishment of a self can give. A body that can be shaped and adjusted according to his own desires: this is the ultimate manifestation of love that Sonia's body symbolizes for Vittorio.

In conclusion, Vittorio and Sonia present the different ways in which an obsession can be manifested and even mistaken for love: it can become a tool through which one possesses the other, as if by metaphorically eating the beloved, one can fulfill his/her desires to love. There is no joy or happiness in the relationship developed between Sonia and Vittorio, and death seems to be the ultimate way to consummate their mutual dependence. As for Vittorio, prevailing over Sonia is, in his pathological state, the only way he can experience what he feels love is but, at the end, Sonia finds the strength to rebel and put an end to her (and his) misery. In the end, Sonia's reaction to Vittorio's dominance adds a new component to the complexity of the character: her female agency. By hitting Vittorio and making him unconscious and thus helpless, Sonia, a female body and mind controlled by male dominance, evolves from being a property, an object to mold, to an active pursuer of life.^{xiv} Vittorio and Sonia lose touch with the surrounding reality because they are so preoccupied with their own relationship. *Primo Amore* therefore succeeds in revealing the dangerous and distraught consequences of love when confronted with uncontrollable obsessions.

Conclusion

Although showing characteristics of two different genres, noir *Primo Amore* and drama-horror *L'imbalsamatore*, these films share a common theme: sexually confused narcissism and obsession, if played out in relationships can only lead to self-destruction, psychological abuse, physical violence, and death. Furthermore, Garrone's films offer a close look at what loneliness provokes in some people's mind. Close-ups on Vittorio's face together with a voice-over narrator let the audience become intimate with the unique

life of a man, a goldsmith, whose passion for molding objects is slowly and dangerously transformed into the desire to shape a woman's body in order to make her an object of reverence. In choosing to depict this kind of loneliness and passion, for gold and for the female body, the film indicates a way in which female bodies symbolize empty containers. Bodies are therefore conceived as beautifully constructed and ornamented empty boxes in which values, morals, and beliefs are absent.

From these films, stories of uncontrollable passion and intense, maniacal desires, emerges an examination of Italian society infected by loneliness so intense it is like a disease. Whereas in *Primo Amore*, an uncontrollable obsession felt by Vittorio aims at controlling Sonia's body and mind, in *L'imbalsamatore*, the obsession is lived through Peppino's attraction for Valerio. This attraction is beautifully, but painfully and ironically depicted by the filmmaker in his choice of opening the film by having the viewer experience the couple's first encounter through the eyes of a vulture, a marabou.

It is fascinating to discuss Garrone's choice of a marabou, a bird known for having an unpleasant appearance. This physical connotation reminds the viewer of the appearance of Peppino, an unattractive short man with awkward mannerisms. But it does more. The marabou is a vulture, a scavenger who eats mostly carcasses and animals' entrails. The distinction between the two sexes of these birds is based only on the color of the plumes and the smaller size of the male bill. The physical unattractiveness and the sexually confused identity of Peppino mixed with the fact that this bird survives by eating carcasses, metaphorically connect the bird to Peppino. What this bird does to others, eating corpses to survive, is a reminder of what Peppino does for a living, removing entrails from bodies and beautifying them to make them look acceptable and even attractive. If the marabou eats bodies to survive, Peppino wants to appropriate the beauty he does not have by loving beautiful bodies. Love once again equals possession and obsession, revealing the necessity to own, mold or even build beauty in a body in order to find fulfillment and completeness.

It is through the eyes and blinking of this vulture that we, viewers, become part of the story, as if Garrone were to make us relate to instinctual reactions, where love as valued by human beings is reduced to animalistic desires, with no sympathy for those who cannot survive in the jungle. We see the outside world from this bird's eyes; he is

caged, recalling similar forms of constraints found in the film, the most obvious one being the closeted homosexuality of Peppino. Not only is his sexuality caged; Valerio is confused when he decides to settle with Deborah to fulfill his role of becoming a father. These are allusions to societal expectations that confine people into fixed categories, without opportunity to live freely, with no obligations. It is interesting to point out that Deborah too, turns out to be “imprisoned” in the role of a future mother when she, a free spirit, wants to travel, live day by day without obligations and responsibilities.

A metaphorical reading of both *Primo Amore* and *L'imbalsamatore* implies that Garrone's imaginary is a world mostly made by outcasts, men and women who function as embodiments of emotions that, once confronted with the audience's own reality, opens a discourse on life and expectations. In these films, Garrone does not assume a judgmental role but chooses to show the ill nature of Italian society while the viewer is asked to participate without blaming or taking sides. Thus, for the Italian audience, viewing Garrone's films signifies entering a visual world, a familiar sphere as they recognize spaces and cultural elements that form Italian identity.

In an interview that appeared in *Non Solo Gomorra*, the director affirms: “In cinema, reality is tied to the way we look at it and how we represent it and thus to the capacity that we have to transform it, to reinvent it. In this way, one cannot speak of objective reality, all depends on where we choose to put our look and the look is always subjective, it has always something to do with the creative process.”^{xv} Film allows Garrone to look at reality, whatever that might be, and to depict its particularity as he sees it. He is able to look closely and in doing so he reveals some truths about Italy as these are reflected in the lives of his characters.

Choosing the right actors, non-professional and professional, as he does in *L'imbalsamatore* and *Primo Amore* as well as in *Gomorra*, shooting on locations, referring to real events, all contribute to making Garrone's unique perspective on reality available to the viewer.

Gomorra's success comes from an innovative cinematic style explored by Garrone in his early films, *L'imbalsamatore* and *Primo Amore*. Although coming from a different historical time, Garrone's cinema shares some of the characteristics that have made Italian Neorealism internationally well-known and appreciated. Garrone employs

non-professional and professional actors, shoots on location and explores Italy's social margins to bluntly open today's chaotic reality to audiences.

Thanks to his ability to visualize today's illness in contemporary Italy, Garrone's cinema is a sign of Italian Neorealism's lasting heritage which, throughout the years, has evolved into a new form, producing innovative meanings and images, reflections of today's chaotic times. If in the highly awarded *Gomorrah* Garrone reveals these social issues by telling a drama about the devastating effects of criminality on individuals, in *L'imbalsamatore* and *Primo Amore* Garrone explores similar issues through stories of personal pathology, obsessive behavior and twisted sexual relationships. Thanks to his cinema, then, we are reminded of the intense and uncontrollable passions and of the relentless corruption that affects our society at every level of existence.

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Notes

ⁱ *Gomorrah* is an adaptation from the successful book written by Roberto Saviano.

ⁱⁱ Films critics and scholars have paid attention to Matteo Garrone after *Gomorrah*'s success. Here is a small selection of articles on the Italian filmmaker: Jan Weissberg, "Gomorrah," *Variety*, 411, n. 2, 2008; Silvia Angrisani and Guido Bonsaver, "That's Camorra," *Sight and Sound*, November 2008; Ryan Gilbey, "An offer you can't refuse," *New Statesman*, 13 October, 2008; Francesco Pettinari, "Tradire per fedeltà," *L'indice dei Libri del Mese*, vol. 25, n. 7, 2008; Rajko Radovic, "McMafia Rising," *Film International*, vol. 7, n.1, 2009; Manohla Dargis, "Lesser-known Mobsters, as Brutal as the Old Ones," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Both *L'imbalsamatore* and *Primo Amore* were nominated in major Italian and European Film Festivals for several categories, from best actor/actress to best film/director and music.

^{iv} Richard Porton, "'Inside the 'System.' An interview with Matteo Garrone." *Cineaste*, vol. XXXIV, n. 2, 2009: 12 - 15.

^v For specific studies on Italian Neorealism, see the works done by Peter Bondanella (*Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*); Gian Piero Brunetta (*Storia del Cinema Italiano dal 1945 agli anni ottanta*); Millicent Marcus (*Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*); Luigi Micciché (*Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*). These texts provide a rich ground for understanding Italian Neorealism and its reference to social realism.

^{vi} Goffredo Fofi, “Prefazione. Garrone contro Franti (e contro il cinema di denuncia).” *Non solo Gomorra*, 5-8.

^{vii} The translations from Italian into English are mine. This quote can be found in “Il crepuscolo della bellezza. Lo sguardo e il metodo di Matteo Garrone,” by Pierpaolo De Sanctis. *Non solo Gomorra*, 9.

^{viii} *L’Imbalsamatore*, dir. Matteo Garrone, perf. Ernesto Mahieux, Valerio Foglia Manzillo, Elisabetta Rocchetti, Fandango, 2002; *Primo Amore*, dir. Matteo Garrone, perf. Vitaliano Trevisan, Michela Cescon, Fandango, 2004. The films mentioned in this article are available in major video stores, and also on online (“Netflix”).

^{ix} Marco Mariolini, *Il cacciatore di anoressiche*. 3rd ed. (Legnano, Milano: Edicom, 2009)

^x Maria Vittoria Costantini and Paola Golinelli, “The Anorexic Paradox. Matteo Garrone’s *First Love*.” *Projected Shadows. Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Representations of Loss in European Cinema*. Ed. By Andrea Sabbadini (New York: Routledge, 2007) 54.

^{xi} *Non solo Gomorra*, 169.

^{xii} Garrone’s idea for his film came from a story he read in the book *Fattacci* by Vincenzo Cerami. In this story based on a real event, a young man is willing to do anything, from drugs to prostitution, from illegal pornographic videos to murder a closeted gay in Rome just to afford to buy a new motorcycle. *Non Solo Gomorra*, 164.

^{xiii} Italo Moscati, “Un filo di Gramigna nella Gomorra diffusa,” *Non solo Gomorra*, 61.

^{xiv} The film’s open ending suggests that the viewer does not need to know what happens after Sonia hits Vittorio. The difference between the film and the real drama of Monica Salò, who in real life ends up being killed by Mariolini, indicates once again the filmmaker’s rejection of adhering to the real events. What matters the most to the Italian director is to create situations in which audiences can reflect upon life and, most of all, be moved by its tragic outcomes.

^{xv} “Nel cinema la realtà è legata allo sguardo con cui la rappresenti e quindi alla capacità che hai di trasformarla, di reiventarla. In questo modo non si può parlare di realtà oggettiva, tutto dipende da dove scegli di porre il tuo sguardo e lo sguardo è sempre soggettivo, ha sempre a che fare con un processo creativo.” Maurizio Bracci, “*Gomorra*, il film. Conversazione con Matteo Garrone,” *Non solo Gomorra*, 69.