

ЛИТЕРАТУРОЗНАНИЕ И КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЯ

LITERARY AND CULTURAL WORKS

LITERATURE AS EVENT: GENRE MUTATION, AUTHORIAL BODY, AND TRANSMEDIA IMPACT IN ROBERTO SAVIANO'S *GOMORRAH*

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ABSTRACT: The contemporary cultural milieu of the 21st century has fundamentally altered how literature is produced and consumed, shifting its conceptualization from a static textual object to a dynamic ‘event’. My paper explores this paradigm shift through a detailed case study of Roberto Saviano’s 2006 work, *Gomorra: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples’ Organized Crime System*. This study is a part of my broader research project on the literary representation of Naples in our century. By examining *Gomorra* and its portrayal of the camorra (the organized crime group active in Naples and the Campania region), this study investigates how contemporary literature strongly ruptures the boundaries between fiction, factual data, and the author’s subjective reality. The analysis is structured around three central pillars: the ontological mutation of the literary genre, the paradoxical inverse relationship between the author’s physical visibility and his public credibility, and the power of the literary text—especially when supported by other mass media—to transform and influence the very segment of reality it has depicted. In the volatile transmedia space of the new millennium, literature is no longer a mere reflection of the world, but a powerful, active happening that actively reconstitutes the political agency of the public and reshapes the reality it portrays.

KEYWORDS: 21st-century literature; Roberto Saviano; *Gomorra*; Unidentified Narrative Object; authorship; transmedia; camorra; performative text.

Introduction: the *Gomorra* case and research objectives

My paper focuses on one of the most disruptive, paradigm-shifting, and far-reaching literary events of 21st-century Italy: Roberto Saviano’s *Gomorra*. Published in 2006, this work has, over the last two decades, transcended its initial national boundaries to sell more than twelve million copies worldwide, with translations in over fifty languages.

However, its interest lies not merely in its extraordinary commercial triumph, but rather in its profound aesthetic, political, and sociological implications for contemporary literature. *Gomorra*, whose subtitle is *A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples’ Organized Crime System*, operates as a raw, investigative descent into the Neapolitan camorra (the organized crime group active in Naples and the Campania region). Yet, it aggressively rejects the traditional sociological framing of organized crime. For centuries, the literary and cultural representation of Naples has oscillated between romanticized Grand Tour stereotypes of natural beauty and fatalistic portrayals of southern backwardness. Saviano dismantles this dichotomy entirely. He exposes the camorra not as a localized, archaic street-level phenomenon rooted in ancient traditions, but as a hyper-modern, multinational capitalist enterprise. He demonstrates how its economic tentacles seamlessly infiltrate and dictate global markets, ranging from the high-fashion sweatshops of the European garment industry to the illicit management of international toxic waste, real estate investments across Europe, and global drug logistics. I present this case study as it forms a core component of my broader, ongoing research project concerning the literary representation of Naples and the Mediterranean space in the 21st century.

My research specifically explores how *Gomorra* decisively ruptures the traditional boundaries between narrative fiction, empirical factual data, and the author’s subjective reality. To systematically address this rupture, the analysis is structured around three central pillars.

The first concerns the ontological mutation of the literary genre itself. The second addresses the paradoxical inverse relationship between the author's physical visibility and his public credibility in the digital age. The third explores the performative power of the literary text, and its subsequent transmedia adaptations, to transform and actively influence the very segment of reality it initially sought to depict.

The transformation of the literary genre

First, we must critically address the mutation of the literary genre. *Gomorrah* resists neat categorization, posing a significant challenge to traditional literary criticism. Reviewers, particularly in English-speaking countries, have historically struggled to pin the book down. When the text reached the United States and the United Kingdom, critics arbitrarily assigned it labels such as *docufiction*, *faction*, *creative non-fiction*, or simply *investigative journalism*. Within the Italian theoretical context, *Gomorrah* is best understood through the lens of the New Italian Epic, a conceptual framework theorized in the late 2000s by the Bolognese literary collective Wu Ming. According to this framework, Saviano's work epitomizes what they define as the UNO: the Unidentified Narrative Object (Wu Ming, 2009). The UNO is characterized by its fundamental refusal to separate verifiable truth and storytelling. Saviano's book textualizes the real by meticulously weaving raw archival materials, wiretap surveillance transcripts, dense macroeconomic data, and police interrogation files directly into a fiercely subjective, heavily stylized, and deeply emotional first-person framework. Most traditional novels of the 19th and 20th centuries mainly relied on simulating reality through stylistic artifice, creating an illusion of the real (Barthes, 1968). Saviano conversely rejects literary invention in favor of a direct, almost combative confrontation with objective data. To fully grasp how this hybrid style operates within the text, we can look at some of the most striking sequences in the book. A prime example is the opening chapter set in the commercial port of Naples. The author does not begin with a traditional narrative hook; instead, he describes the mechanical, relentless movement of shipping containers. The scene escalates into a terrible and factually grounded image: the doors of a defective container swing open, and the frozen corpses of undocumented Chinese workers rain down onto the pavement. Through this powerful literary image, Saviano instantly connects the abstract data of globalized maritime logistics with a visceral, haunting reality.

Another highly illustrative moment is the chapter dedicated to the high-fashion tailoring workshops hidden in the impoverished hinterland of Campania. Saviano tells the story of Pasquale, a highly skilled but underpaid tailor working for a camorra-controlled sweatshop that receives subcontracted orders from major luxury brands. Pasquale discovers that a pristine white suit he meticulously crafted in a dark, illegal workshop is being worn by Angelina Jolie on the red carpet of the Academy Awards in Hollywood. Through this localized narrative, Saviano effectively maps the invisible thread that connects southern Italian exploitation to the pinnacle of global glamour, proving that the legal and illegal economies are not separate spheres, but parallel forces feeding the same capitalist machine. To understand the epistemological shift that *Gomorrah* represents within the Italian intellectual tradition, we must look to one of its most crucial literary predecessors. In a famous 1974 article published in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Pier Paolo Pasolini famously declared: "I know. But I do not have the proof" (Pasolini, 1974).¹ Writing during the dark years of Italy's political terrorism, Pasolini was asserting the role of the public intellectual who, through deductive reasoning and political intuition, could see the truth behind systemic corruption and state-sponsored violence, even in the absence of judicial evidence. Saviano takes Pasolini's postulation and inverts it for the 21st century. Paraphrasing Pasolini, Saviano writes: "I know, and I can prove it. I know how economies originate and where they get their smell. [...] And the truth of the word takes no prisoners because it devours everything and turns everything into evidence" (Saviano, 2006).² This inversion represents a generational paradigm shift. While Pasolini relied on the sheer force of his intellectual intuition, Saviano operates in an era saturated with information. He has access to thousands of pages of judicial records, wiretaps, and financial reports. His literature, therefore, is not an act of intuitive guessing, but an act of narrative organization. He takes the cold, impenetrable mass of bureaucratic and legal data and breathes life into it through the lyrical, rhetorical power of the literary word. The narrative does not invent the

¹ "Io so. Ma non ho le prove". This and subsequent translations into English were made by the author.

² "Io so e ho le prove. Io so come hanno origine le economie e dove prendono l'odore [...] E la verità della parola non fa prigionieri perché tutto divora e di tutto fa prova" (p. 234).

truth; rather, it illuminates the evidence, giving it a moral weight that legal documents alone cannot achieve. Of course, we must acknowledge that the blending of narrative fiction and objective reality was certainly not born with Saviano. On the contrary, from Truman Capote's non-fiction novel to the New Journalism of the 1960s and 70s (Capote, 1966; Wolfe & Johnson, 1973), in many areas of 21st-century culture and literature, the boundaries between fiction, essay writing, and journalism had become increasingly fluid. What is radically new with Saviano is the contemporary forms and the technological frame through which this intermingling occurs, dominated (as we will see in the following two sections of this paper) by the rapid spread of virtual reality.

The redefinition of the authorial figure

Second, our discourse must confront the mutation of the authorial figure under our current mediatized conditions. Roberto Saviano represents a profound and tragic paradox in 21st-century authorship, forcing a complete re-evaluation of how intellectual authority is constructed, maintained, and perceived. To fully grasp this shift, we must contextualize the historical evolution of authorial credibility. Throughout the 20th century, particularly in Europe, a writer's visibility was very frequently of a physical, tangible nature. The credibility, authority, and public influence of prominent intellectuals were directly proportional to their physical presence in the public square. They were public bodies engaging directly with society. They were seen holding court at literary salons, marching at the forefront of political protests, debating in television studios, and occupying university halls. The author's body was the primary vehicle for their political engagement. In the new millennium, Saviano turns this dynamic completely upside down. Following the explosive publication of *Gomorra*, and specifically after a public speech in the town of Casal di Principe where he explicitly named local camorra bosses in their own territory, his denunciation resulted in severe, highly credible death threats. This forced the state to place him under strict, armed police protection, initiating a life of permanent physical seclusion. He was severed completely from a normal, visible social existence, forced to live in a sequence of undisclosed safe houses and armored vehicles.

Yet, this extreme lack of physical visibility in the real world has determined an unprecedented, almost ubiquitous hyper-visibility in the virtual reality. Today, his authority and credibility are inextricably linked to his digital presence and are inversely proportional to his physical visibility. The more his physical body is locked away and concealed from the public eye, the larger and more powerful his digital avatar becomes. He projects his voice across global social media networks, international editorial columns, and continuous video links. He moves from the hidden, claustrophobic confines of a safe house to the limitless amplification of global digital platforms. His forced absence from the physical world has transformed him into an omnipresent digital intellectual.

In 2015, while nominating the writer Elena Ferrante (who, as is well known, has never revealed her true identity) for the prestigious Strega Prize, Saviano expressed a concept that, although referring to the specific theme of anonymity, nevertheless seems applicable to the more general relationship between a writer's lack of physical visibility and the efficacy of their literary message: "I have discovered that there are truths difficult to write without anonymity; I have discovered that there are truths that prefer the face to dematerialize, to remain in the shadows, because the things said are so personal that adding flesh and blood would mean one of two things: renouncing the authenticity of the story, or dying of it" (Saviano, 2015).³ Saviano's physical vulnerability serves as the ultimate anchor for the text's truth claims: his endangered body acts as an incontrovertible synonym of truthfulness. He is the ultimate transmedia intellectual, using his paradoxically hidden body to wield a power that terrifies systemic corruption. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the contemporary Italian literary landscape is actively dismantling the twentieth-century paradigm of the authorial figure. Saviano is not alone in this; we can look to the collective Wu Ming and the elusive Elena Ferrante, who, for different reasons, also challenge these old forms. The Wu Ming collective (whose members do not hide their real identities) subverts the idea of the artist as a strongly individual figure by adopting collective authorship and shared pseudonyms, shifting the focus from individual ego to communal storytelling. Elena Ferrante, on the other hand, challenges the media's obsession with the author's biography by concealing

³ *"Ho scoperto che esistono verità difficili da scrivere senza l'anonimato, ho scoperto che esistono verità che prediligono che il volto si smaterializzi, che resti nell'ombra, perché le cose dette sono talmente personali che aggiungere carne e sangue vorrebbe dire due cose: rinunciare all'autenticità del racconto o morire"*.

her real identity entirely, demanding that the text stand absolutely on its own. Saviano represents a third variation: his identity is known, but his physical body is removed by force.

Performative impact and transmedia extensions

Finally, regarding the complex relationship between literature, mass media, and reality at the beginning of the new millennium, it is vital to analyze the performative power of the text. In contemporary culture, literature has become an active, dynamic agent capable of reshaping the very reality it describes. In the years following the publication of *Gomorrah*, its massive international success spawned a vast transmedia system. The text was first adapted into a critically acclaimed, award-winning feature film directed by Matteo Garrone in 2008.

Subsequently, it was developed into a highly successful multi-season television series broadcast between 2014 and 2021. Saviano himself actively participated in both adaptations, working as a screenwriter, which ensured a thematic continuity across different media platforms. However, the transition from literature to cinema, and then to serialized television, profoundly altered the nature of the narrative impact. Matteo Garrone's 2008 film remained very close to the spirit of the Unidentified Narrative Object. Utilizing a style heavily influenced by Italian Neorealism, Garrone shot the film on location in the degraded suburbs of Naples, employing many non-professional actors. The film lacks a traditional, cohesive narrative arc, a conventional musical soundtrack, or clear protagonists to root for. It is an immersive, fragmented, and coldly observant piece of cinema that emphasizes the grim, unglamorous reality of the criminal lifestyle, echoing the book's documentary approach.

The television series conversely adopted a fundamentally different aesthetic and narrative strategy. To sustain a multi-season format, the Sky production team created complex, character-driven story arcs. While the series retained a high degree of realism in its settings and language, it inevitably centered the narrative entirely on the internal power struggles of the camorra clans, featuring charismatic, albeit ruthless, anti-heroes. The state, the police, and civil society are almost entirely absent from the screen. This transmedia expansion achieved a cultural penetration arguably even deeper than the original book, but it also triggered a complex and deeply troubling sociological phenomenon. Numerous academic studies in criminology and media sociology, alongside first-hand accounts from professionals operating on the front lines of camorra-controlled territories (detectives, anti-mafia prosecutors and judges, prison staff, and street priests), have documented a disturbing trend of emulation. They noticed how the behavior, the specific linguistic slang, the aggressive posturing, and even the dress codes depicted in the television series generated a powerful mimetic effect among real-life young camorra affiliates, often referred to as the 'baby gangs' (Benvenuti, 2017; Di Gennaro & Iavarone, 2023).

Here, we encounter an extraordinary cultural short-circuit. We are presented with an entire system of art forms (literature, cinema, and premium television) that were born with the explicit ethical purpose of representing, dissecting, and denouncing a horrific criminal reality. Yet, the aesthetic appeal, the dramatic tension, and the stylized modalities through which they operate end up deeply impacting reality itself. Rather than merely describing the camorra, the transmedia expansion of *Gomorrah* inadvertently provided a lexicon and even a lifestyle for it. Real young criminals began to appropriate the catchphrases, adopt the body language, and mimic the aesthetic of the actors playing the fictionalized roles of young criminals. These actors, in turn, were playing roles that had originally been written by drawing inspiration from preceding generations of real criminals. This therefore creates a real and terrible vicious circle.

The ethical debate surrounding this phenomenon remains fierce within Italian cultural discourse. Regardless of where one stands on this ethical divide, the sociological fact remains undeniable: the narrative object has breached the confines of the page and the television screen to actively mold the behavior on the streets of Naples.

To conclude, the analysis of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorrah* serves as a definitive and vital case study for understanding the modern condition of literature. It fully confirms that the contemporary cultural landscape of the twenty-first century has fundamentally and irreversibly altered the mechanisms through which literature is produced, disseminated, critically consumed, and integrated into the broader societal fabric.

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