

## *Da fatti realmente accaduti: Performing History in Contemporary Italian Cinema*

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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.

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Recent scholarship on Italian cinema has begun to confront more openly the problematic discourse surrounding an apparent need to rely on (neo-) realism as a “prescriptive rather than a descriptive term” (O’Leary and O’Rawe 107).<sup>2</sup> An interesting instance of such debate can be drawn from a discussion of Paolo Sorrentino’s *Il divo* (2008) in the 2010 film edition of the journal *The Italianist*. Millicent Marcus offers an analysis of the film in terms of its inter-relating political comment and flamboyant stylistics, putting forward a diluted prescription of realism through her original classification of the film as “post-realist” (“The Ironist” 246). Her approach triggered dispute in the two included responses, specifically in regard to the scholar’s reliance on “a new category [ . . . ], following on the heels of the largely meaningless ‘neo-neorealism’” (Marlow-Mann 263). Marcus’s sense of the term, while evidently self-consciously employed, aims to register Sorrentino’s film as being in a “complex state of ‘afterness’ with respect to the tradition of neorealism”, whereby such a tradition is to be associated with “a strong ethic of civic commitment and a language of filmic signs whose referentiality is never called into question” (Marcus, “The Ironist” 246). Simplifying slightly, the ‘afterness’ in this notion of film relies, as testified in *Il divo*, on “a process of linguistic remodelling that incorporates contemporary media codes while preserving the moral agenda of the realist tradition” (Marcus, “The Ironist” 246). Let us attempt to illustrate this

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<sup>1</sup>(Saviano 279) [“It is not true that cinema is a lie, it is not true that life is not like the movies and it is not true that when you turn away from the screen you see that things outside are different”]. Unless specified otherwise, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup>This is discussed further in O’Leary and O’Rawe’s co-edited special edition of *Italian Studies* entitled *Thinking Italian Film*, especially O’Rawe’s article on ‘I padri e i maestri’. As Robert Gordon notes, it has also been raised at numerous debates held at international conferences on Italian Studies and Screen Studies (qtd. in O’Leary and O’Rawe 124).

further via an important example in the film, the representation of the kiss between then Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti and mafia *capo* Totò Riina. The subject of the scene is certainly a questionable referent: first described by a mafia *pentito*, the ‘bacio Andreotti–Riina’ soon became a symbolic metaphor within the public imagination for a corrupt government. The representation of the *bacio* in Sorrentino’s film combines a striking *mise-en-scène* with a highly stylised extra-diegetic soundtrack (“Conceived” by Beth Orton). We can assume that the scene is representative of post-realism according to Marcus’s definition, then, as it combines an awkward referent with a stylised linguistic code, yet retains a strong moral impetus.

In his response to Marcus’s article, Alex Marlow-Mann finds fault in her reading of the film *in the light of* realism, suggesting that this sequence, among others, “seem[s] to owe nothing to the tenets of realism (post- or otherwise) but instead resemble[s] *fantapolitica*, employing a fictitious situation or imaginary events in order to cast light on a real political situation” (266). The problem, for Marlow-Mann, echoing O’Leary and O’Rawe, is rightfully one of pigeon-holing, where the weight of a term can enforce certain readings, and suppress others. Nevertheless, should we move to overlook momentarily the baggage of terminology, Marcus’s description of the scene and of the film’s content-style relation would not be without bearing, since it is precisely within the combination of referent and aesthetics that the scene offers political comment. It is not coincidental that these two, referent (link to another reality) and aesthetics (presentation of another reality) are the unchanging foundations to any understanding or practice of realism.<sup>3</sup>

The stylistic choices made by a film-maker in precisely the engagement with referent can quite evidently range enormously between representational and creative modes. Robert Gordon, responding to O’Leary and O’Rawe’s polemic, puts it that “like Lumière versus Méliès, it is at least as plausible that realism and fantasy (mimesis and poesis) are in a constant overlapping two-step in the history of all forms of representation” (qtd. in O’Leary and O’Rawe 124). Already pertinent in reference to the *bacio* Andreotti–Riina, the metaphoric dance between fact and fantasy moreover becomes a vital foundation to and crucial credo in this essay.

This essay seeks to interrogate the engagement with historic referents in four contemporary, successful Italian films, and to offer insight into the performance of historical (in)accuracy. In this context of historical representations, a desire to perceive above all a dialectic between mimesis and poesis is vastly productive, as it moreover allows us to re-codify traditional categories of representation. Here I refer to the wider theoretical context surrounding the contributions of cinema to historical discourses, which in turn finds root in the rejection of the universalising, objective notion of history. Hayden White understands any historical text as being composed of five stages:

- (1) chronicle; (2) story; (3) mode of emplotment; (4) mode of argument; and
- (5) mode of ideological implication. I take “chronicle” and “story” to refer to “primitive elements” in the *historical account*, but both represent processes

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<sup>3</sup>For a more comprehensive rundown on the various realist modes of the motion picture, see Peucker.

of selection and arrangement of data from the *unprocessed historical record* in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an *audience* of a particular kind. As thus conceived, the historical work represents an attempt to mediate among what I will call the *historical field*, the unprocessed *historical record*, *other historical accounts*, and an *audience*. (*Metahistory* 5)

This delineation of the components of a historical text identifies the stages at which the original fact is open to creative interpretation. The suggestion is that even texts which we have recognised as ‘historical’ have more in common with the ‘literary’ than had been imagined. Indeed later, in “The Historical Text as Literary Artefact”, White makes this association more explicit:

*How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making operation. And to call it that in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge.* (195)

White’s ironic use of the terms *literary* and *historical* quite evidently serves to skew their traditional oppositional codification. Criticism of (historical) art has been renewed by this theoretical approach.

The influence of this strain of thought is apparent in film studies, where there has been movement since the 1990s to re-evaluate filmic history as well as historical film (e.g. Rosenstone, *History on Film*; Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*) and recent scholarship on non-fiction film (Bruzzi) and specifically on docudrama (Rosenthal) has begun to reject ‘pure fact’, thus implicitly prioritising a kind of ‘semi-fact’. Stella Bruzzi’s widely influential argument that documentaries are “performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity” (1) aims to problematise the precedent, pandemic belief that documentary (specifically the observational mode) can represent unadulterated reality. Simultaneously, specialists of the docudrama or the historical film, modes of film which have traditionally been distrusted for their reliance on persuasive techniques which skew truth claims and risk the territory of propaganda, have begun a theoretical defence (Rosenstone, *History on Film* 1–31).<sup>4</sup> On the docudrama, Bruzzi has noted that:

The docudrama output of the past 30 years is predicated upon the assumption that drama can legitimately tackle documentary issues and uncontentiously use non-fiction techniques to achieve its aims. It thus becomes possible for drama to perform a comparable function to documentary. (185)

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<sup>4</sup>Steven Lipkin’s (not unproblematic) description of the docudrama constitutes an exemplary emphasis on the mode’s persuasive aspect: “the overall thrust of a docudrama is neither exposition or logical argumentation, but persuasion. Docudrama survives to persuade us to believe that what occurred happened much as we see it on the screen” (ix).

Highlighting examples such as *Who Bombed Birmingham?* (Mike Beckham, 1990), which contributed to the ultimate acquittal of the Birmingham Six, Alan Rosenthal's observation that "docudrama [. . .] has an effect on society far greater than the average documentary" (xvii) suggests (as well as an interesting competitiveness between the two scholars and their film modes) that docudrama is certainly capable of engaging with 'documentary issues'. Citing examples of docudramas from the 1960s and 1990s, Bruzzi identifies instances of what she views as 'non-fiction techniques'. Considered choices, such as the inclusion of non-actors, members of the public with direct links to the film's subject matter, are labelled as 'performed'; these aim to "draw the audience into the reality of the situations being dramatized, to authenticate the fictionalization" (185).

That a film employ formal structures that attempt to invoke or represent reality is nothing new—Bruzzi's observations are compatible with both Rosenstone's adaptation of Roland Barthes's 'reality effects' (*History on Film* 16) and Kristin Thompson's 'realist motivations', to give just two examples. Thompson argues for a cinema criticism which renounces any strict vocabularies of analysis and treats each film in the first instance as autonomous, by approaching primarily its form (3–4). Inspired by the work of the Russian formalists (in particular Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Eikhenbaum), she argues that a film offers a purely aesthetic realm which is *deliberately* distant from real life: in the latter we have a 'practical perception', whereby we "filter from [the world] those elements that are relevant to our immediate actions"; in the former we are "[plunged] into a non-practical, playful type of interaction" which is "separate from our everyday existence" (Thompson 8–9). This approach does not mutually exclude other methods of analysis such as Marxist or psychoanalytic, for instance, and it allows us to depreciate realism. For Thompson, realism is simply a 'motivation' of a film, where,

motivations are sets of cues within the work that allow us to understand the justification for the presence of any given device. If the cues ask us to appeal to our knowledge of the real world (however mediated that knowledge may be by cultural learning), we can say that the work is using realistic motivation. And if realistic motivation becomes one of the main ways of justifying the work's overall structures, then we generalize and perceive the work as a whole as realistic. (198)

Illustrating her argument with canonical realist films such as *The Rules of the Game* (Jean Renoir, 1939) and *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), Thompson considers specific subject matter, location shooting or (once again) non-professional actors, as well as the rejection of non-realist cinematic norms (self-differentiation) to be instances of these cues or devices (205).

The theory of the realism effects/motivations/performances has emerged in response to a theoretical turn away from any notions of cinema as reality within a period of postmodernity; scholarship, perhaps audiences too, quite apparently will no longer accept poiesis or mimesis as autonomous on any level. The move from realism as a style to realism as a formal mode can perhaps be historically placed within a period of postmodern questioning of representation, and a shift towards

textual self-awareness—it is of course not coincidental that the above-referenced discourses in film history are united by Rosenstone to ‘postmodern history’ (*History on Film* 3). A consequence of this crisis of representation, as I will seek to demonstrate, is that realist references located in a more contemporary cinema become self-conscious and ‘performed’, and increasingly complex and contradictory. Here it is worth considering an introductory example.

Matteo Garrone’s *Gomorra* (2008), the adaptation of Roberto Saviano’s exposé of the Campanian mafia, the Camorra, is certainly no exception as a film which relies heavily on a performance of realism.<sup>5</sup> The film includes a set of intertextual citations which, similarly to those identified by Thompson in *Bicycle Thieves* (205), function as statements of stylistic intent. *Gomorra*’s textual quotation nevertheless goes beyond that of its neo-realist precedent, eschewing the dichotomy of the former (namely, Hollywood cinema is not realist, by citing it and objecting to it *Bicycle Thieves* therefore is). The intertextual references, noted by Pierpaolo Antonello, are reasonably eclectic, from *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960) to *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *The Professor* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1986) and *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983), as well as the television series *The Sopranos*. Though similarly ironic, these references are employed less as a signposted point of departure than “in order to convey the particular short-circuit between reality and fiction that was highlighted by Saviano” (Antonello 382). The section of Saviano’s book to which Antonello refers, quoted at the beginning of this essay, is in reference to the imitative behaviour of the Marco and Ciro figures, faithfully transferred to the screen, of Hollywood films such as *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) and *Scarface*. The message in both cases is thus that the shocking, presumed plastic violence of these films is the reality of the young *camorristi*. As such, these citations serve ironically as an enforced accentuation of mimesis.

The complex attempt to enact or evoke reality through these citations is part of a process which could be called *performative realism*, adapting Bruzzi’s terminology. The notion of performativity quite evidently brings with it some complexity. Already the root notion of a performance, which bears implications of exhibition or mask, is compatible with Thompson’s neo-formalist reading of the film as essentially created. There is a further phenomenological aspect which is of interest too, though: in following Bruzzi, who takes inspiration from J. L. Austin, the performativity of the techniques implies that “they function as utterances that simultaneously both describe and perform an action” (187). These instances, I argue, are attempts to define *and* enact a certain reality—this is apparent in the above citation of *Scarface*. The performance of realism should nonetheless not be taken as a sign of art as reality, and cannot be removed from the context of the dialogue of mimesis and poesis. Further instances of this in Garrone’s film and in *The One Hundred Steps* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2000), and reflection on performative realism as a mode of historical film will be the focus of the first section of this essay.

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<sup>5</sup>As O’Leary and O’Rawe illustrate, the film has triggered a re-emergence of the term *neo-neorealist*, though they view this as being “for reasons that are as much ideological as aesthetic” (110).

It is interesting to compare the example from *Gomorra* with the *bacio* Andreotti–Riina of *Il divo* used above to introduce this topic. The flamboyant formalism of the scene that was picked out by Marcus makes no such claim to a reflective quality; rather it revels in its own poetic creativity, nevertheless retaining some form of historical referent. In the second section below, I will examine the powerful performance of formalism in relation to Sorrentino's film and the 2005 *Romanzo Criminale* (Michele Placido), in order to consider comparatively a different approach to history on film that is nonetheless also a consequence of the rupture in traditional representations. I will focus once again on formal techniques which evoke this dislocated history, doing so in reference to Linda Hutcheon's notion of 'historiographic metafiction'.

A brief word on the films which I have chosen for analysis: though all mainstream and linked loosely in terms of a narrative based on (often organised) crime, the four films have ultimately very different intentions and as such assume different stylistics (equating *Romanzo Criminale* and *Il divo*, for instance, may seem surprising in light of their contrasting registers). It will also be clear that *Gomorra* is less historically situated than the other films—though I take it as contemporary history—and that this and *Romanzo Criminale* are further problematic as adaptations of written works which in themselves are adaptations of history. Nevertheless, it is hoped that provocatively uniting these films will offer some more varied insight into the contemporary attempts to represent history and perhaps trigger further debate in this fertile area.

### Performances of Realism

An investigation of several 'epi-texts' of *Gomorra*, predominantly key reviews and interviews with the film crew, leads us to further instances of the film's performances of realism. For an important example, the press pack which accompanied the film's release at the Cannes Film Festival included two notes, one from Garrone and the other from Saviano:

The raw material I had to work with when shooting *Gomorra* was so visually powerful that I merely filmed it in as straightforward a way as possible as if I were a passerby who happened to find myself there by chance.

The stories you are about to see were taken from real life. These facts happened and continue to happen in Neapolitan districts such as Scampia or in the area of Caserta. There, as in other places, the lives of thousands of men and women, many very young, are controlled and ruled by criminal forces and their violence.<sup>6</sup>

Though we cannot assume any direct influence of the film's press pack, the key notions of a minimal distance between the narrative of the film and reality, and specifically the fly-on-the-wall style to which the director (-cameraman)<sup>7</sup> testifies recur

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<sup>6</sup>These citations are transcribed from the press pack, pages 4 and 6 respectively. The press book can be accessed at the Biblioteca Luigi Chiarini at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Rome.

<sup>7</sup>Cinematographer Marco Onorato discusses his collaborations with Garrone, and the work that the director undertakes as cameraman himself in Monetti and Pallanch (especially 93–95).

in much of the subsequent material which supported the film's release (e.g. Graselli). In interviews with the director this becomes a repeated point of reference, where he plays up the importance of 'verisimilitude' as "[ridando] quel senso di invenzione continua che sta alla base della realtà" (qtd. in Braucci 72) ["returning that sense of continual invention that lies at the foundations of reality"], and relates "eliminando ogni desiderio di far sentire la mia presenza come regista" ["eliminating every desire to make my presence as director felt"] to a cinematic style which he labels "war reportage" (qtd. in Chatrian and Renzi 54). The film's director of photography, Onorato, has also stated that "noi dovevamo semplicemente essere il più possibile invisibili, sia come regia che come fotografia, un occhio che segue quello che succede e basta" ["we had simply to be as invisible as possible, in terms both of direction and photography; an eye which follows everything that happens and no more"], even quite interestingly stating that *Gomorra* "è l'antitesi de *Il divo*" (qtd. in Monetti and Pallanch 94) ["is the antithesis of *Il divo*"]. These assumptions are, however, problematic. In terms of cinematography, though Garrone relies for the most part on a handheld camera, which on the surface might imply a more objective style, it is important to recognise what Francesco Crispino labels as the "rari, ma comunque estremamente significativi, movimenti 'attivi' della macchina da presa" (49–51) ["rare, but nevertheless extremely significant 'active' movements of the camera"]. Moreover the consequential and recurrent notion that the film is *anti-didascalistico* (Graselli 3) seems far too sweeping given the complicity that the camera's position often demands (for instance the shot in which Maria is murdered): the film has a very explicit anti-mafia moral stance.

*Gomorra* was shot on location at the Vele di Scampia, a housing project by now infamous for its crime levels,<sup>8</sup> and Garrone employed local residents as support actors. Such a move, in the same way that Thompson observes in *Bicycle Thieves* (205), performs realism via a proximity to reality: the assumption is that local inhabitants create a more accurate representation of the location (see D'Orrico; Rich). The rhetoric of the film which emerges from such devices has in fact been furthered since the film's release, with the news of the arrests of three of *Gomorra*'s players for crimes linked to the Camorra (Tricomi). Quite strikingly one of these cases is narrated in the DVD features *Five Stories* (Melania Cacucci, 2008): Giovanni Venosa, who plays the role of the *capo* responsible for the murders of Marco and Ciro, was arrested in January 2009. The case has become anecdotal for the director, who defends his conscious employment of a *camorrista* in terms of an honest, accurate representation of the reality.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Saviano testifies to the extreme crime rates in this location, noting that the ratio between drug dealers and inhabitants is the highest in Europe, and among the top five in the world (75). The housing project is frequently visited in films such as Francesco Rosi's *Neapolitan Diary* (1992) and various hyper-realistic and/or undercover investigative documentaries made for Italian television, such as *Lucignolo a Scampia* (2008) or in an episode of *Ballarò* (2007). Anton Giulio Mancino also notes the use of Scampia as a form of citation (47).

<sup>9</sup>Garrone made these comments at a post-screening interview held at the University of Washington Rome Center, 1 December 2010.

Perhaps the moment of explicit performance of realism, where the film most powerfully evokes an external reality, is at *Gomorra*'s close, as the screen fades to black before producing a series of titles which relate several shocking statistics surrounding the mafia. This is a common motif in historical Italian mafia films: *Ordinary Hero* (Michele Placido, 1995), *Giovanni Falcone* (Giuseppe Ferrara, 1993) and *Fortapasc* (Marco Risi, 2009) all finish with a few lines of text which attempt to align the film with the historical event(s), and *The Professor* begins in this way. Marcus identifies 'post-scripts' of the narrations of *Law of Courage* (Alessandro di Robilant, 1994), *Placido Rizzotto* (Pasquale Scimeca, 2000) and, crucially, *The One Hundred Steps* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2000), where the final dialogue in addition to the post-script, which details the death of Peppino Impastato and the arrest of his murderer, assume an 'epitaphic' function: as "cinematic tomb inscriptions designed to transmit the legacy of moral engagement and social justice" ("In Memoriam" 292). And yet what Marcus overlooks is the implicit second function of these words: as epitaphs the words powerfully and persuasively align the fictionalised story with the historical chronicle.

*The One Hundred Steps* includes numerous instances which perform realism either by openly citing the history of Impastato, or by using intertexts to present a concrete historical context; for instance it makes a quite explicit reference to the kidnapping of Aldo Moro via the use of newsreel footage.<sup>10</sup> Though brief, the sequence in Giordana's film contributes a historical and tragic realism to the event, playing on the common knowledge that the bodies of Moro and Impastato were found on the same day. Work has also been done elsewhere on the use of literature (Marcus, "In Memoriam") and music (D'Onofrio) as signifiers of socio-political context. More direct performances of realism via citation of the story of Impastato include slow-motion shots that are reconstructions of photographs (see figure 1), the wider use of photographs after the film's 'epitaph', and even a quite striking resemblance between Luigi Lo Cascio and Peppino Impastato.<sup>11</sup> The deliberately slowed motion or altered colour of these images, contrasting the rest of the film, constructs a timelessness and an unequivocally 'factual' status such that we might consider them 'epitaphic' in their own right.

As with *Gomorra*, the rhetoric of realism in this film masks a wider rejection of historical accuracy. This is most accentuated via the normalisation of characters which emerges from a comparison with their historical counterparts. This is immediately clear in the figure of Peppino Impastato who is romantically portrayed, in contrast to the real man who reportedly was sullen and often isolated himself from friends (Behan 133). Moreover, the apparent homosexuality

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<sup>10</sup>Moro, twice prime minister of Italy and President of the Christian Democracy party, was kidnapped by the extreme-left Red Brigades cell on 16 March 1978, and kept in captivity until his murder on 9 May that year. The left-wing terrorists had picked him out as the key representative of the 'historic compromise', whereby the centre-right Christian Democracy and the left-wing Italian Communist Party had entered into discussions of a controversial political alliance. For more on the history of the 'caso Moro' see Drake.

<sup>11</sup>"Luigi Lo Cascio, [ . . . ] che recita la parte di Peppino, cui somiglia in modo impressionante" (Vitale 247) ["Luigi Lo Cascio, who plays the part of Peppino, resembles him to a striking degree"].



(a)



(b)

Figure 1: (a) A photograph of Impastato's funeral (from Behan); (b) the funeral sequence in the film

of Impastato is only very subtly signposted within the film, adhering to the risky, heteronormative representation of the family on which the film relies.<sup>12</sup> At times this stock-characterisation of *The One Hundred Steps*'s protagonists quite drastically normalises the narrative: a striking instance is that of Peppino's uncle, Cesare Manzella, who is sympathetically portrayed as a kind, traditional grandfather-figure. Cesare is polarised with the character of Don Tano Badalamenti, who assumes the antithetical role which contrasts the good one of Cesare. The film even identifies Tano as responsible for Cesare's assassination, through the hysterical response of the latter's widow as the former attends his funeral. This is supported via the character of Stefano Venuti: "quelli come lui l'hanno scannato. Quelli che vogliono prendere il suo posto" ["people like him killed him. People who want to take his place"]. Though Badalamenti historically did assume Manzella's position, the suggestion that Badalamenti was complicit in the murder of Manzella is

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<sup>12</sup>As D'Onofrio notes, this is an assumption without grounding made by many critics and historians, perhaps representative of a wider desire to omit Impastato's sexuality from historical records (222n). It is implied within the film during the lengthy conversation with Salvo:

Peppino—Per Giovanni sembra tutto facile . . . Conosce questa ragazza, la presenta agli altri del gruppo, la fa conoscere a mia madre . . . perfino mio padre ha un debole per lei [ . . . ]

Salvo [lo provoca]—Appena incontri quella giusta, vedrai che riesci anche tu.

Peppino—Non lo so. Non credo.

It is nevertheless testified to directly in some sources, including interviews carried out by Anna Papparcone and Impastato's published diaries (116–20).

absurd: a contemporary *carabinieri* report testifies to the two men closely working together, and, as Salvo Vitale points out, the explosion of the Fiat Giulietta was an unrelated revenge killing, being

la risposta di Angelo La Barbera alla scomparsa di suo fratello Salvatore, di cui il Manzella, secondo una sentenza istruttoria dell'8 maggio 1965 contro Greco Salvatore, avrebbe, in concorso con lo stesso, premeditato la morte e occultato il cadavere. (55)

[Angelo La Barbera's response to the disappearance of his brother Salvatore. According to a preliminary sentencing on 8 May 1965 of Greco Salvatore, with whom he collaborated, Manzella premeditated the murder of Salvatore La Barbera and then concealed his body.]

The truths about the players in the history of Peppino Impastato can thus be seen to have little in common with the reality played in *The One Hundred Steps*: rather the film quite evidently and at times extremely embellishes the truth, rendering it unrecognisable. We might regard this as what O'Leary labels 'sentimentalised politics' ("Marco Tullio Giordana" 216), where the emotional value of the action is accentuated to diverse persuasive functions.<sup>13</sup>

The film's conclusion on an epitaph/post-script ultimately serves to underscore the director's final insistence upon the film's claim to truth. This can be compared to a further filmic post-script which is cited within *The One Hundred Steps*: the metacinematic projection of Francesco Rosi's *Hands Over the City* (1963), of which only the last few shots are re-presented. Giordana very explicitly focuses upon *Hands Over the City* via first a disorienting movement from filmic to pro-filmic, and then a verbal reference from Peppino, who repeats the post-script, "i personaggi e i fatti qui narrati sono immaginari, è autentica invece la realtà sociale che li produce" ["the characters and the events narrated here are imaginary, what is authentic is the social reality which produces them"]. Ironically, the sentiment expressed by Rosi/Peppino could be seen as evocative of Giordana's style where, as the explicit intertexts testify, the 'realtà sociale e ambientale' ['social reality and environment'] is vigorously mimicked, but the characters are liberally fictionalised.<sup>14</sup> Nothing of this sentiment, however, is echoed in Giordana's own post-script, which singularly enacts the historical reality: "Peppino Impastato è stato ucciso il 9 maggio 1978. Nel 1997 la Procura di Palermo ha chiesto il rinvio a giudizio di Gaetano Badalamenti come mandante dell'omicidio" ["Peppino

<sup>13</sup>When comparing the performances of realism in *The One Hundred Steps* and *Gomorra*, it is necessary to take account of the notable distance between release dates. It would be possible to argue in relation to audience trends that the approach to discussions and debates on filmic reality which relied on sentimentalism in the 1990s and early 2000s had moved on by the release of Garrone's film. Though space prevents further expansion of this point, instances in this genre might be *Ordinary Hero* or *The Bodyguards* (Ricky Tognazzi, 1993).

<sup>14</sup>It might be unwise to assume an unproblematic historical accuracy in the socio-political context of Giordana's film, since his historical reproduction will evidently be highly subjective (cf. White, "Historical Text") and therefore more utopian than realistic, as D'Onofrio observes (222–23). Nevertheless, the wider context of 1970s Sicily and organised crime is undoubtedly engaged, and it is the wider, more general rejection of a thorough historical reality which links Rosi with Giordana.

Impastato was killed on 9 May 1978. In 1997, the office of the Public Prosecutor ordered the trial of Gaetano Badalamenti for the murder”].

The use of postscripts in the film is representative of its schizophrenic nature in terms of engagement with reality and claims to truth, whereby on the one hand it seeks to embody Rosi’s method: in the words of Peppino himself after the screening of *Hands Over the City*, “un film è sempre un’opera d’arte e non riproduce mai la realtà così com’è, ma attraverso un certo sguardo, attraverso un certo taglio interpretativo, appunto la reinventa questa realtà, la trasfigura, e la carica di senso” [“a film is always a work of art, and never reproduces reality exactly as it is, but rather from a certain perspective, from a certain interpretative cut; in other words it reinvents this reality, it transfigures it and loads it with meaning”]. Yet on the other hand the insistence on the performance of realism within key moments of the story enacts a different process, denying the spectator the option to read the film’s reality as ‘reinventata’.

The strategic uses of symbolic location shooting and historical reference, as well as persuasive epi-textual descriptions of these films, are apparent instances of performative realism. Identifying these points via a comparison between the seemingly contradictory moments of deep subjectivity and fictionalisation risks defining the films in a terminology of mimetic success or failure which is long defunct. There is nevertheless an evident risk in the performances of realism becoming a strict interpretative code, which frustrates the interpretative freedom of the spectator. This is comparable to Jacques Rancière’s observation on the artist who makes excessive recourse to ‘teaching’ modes as reverting to an ‘ethical’, rather than an ‘aesthetic’ regime of art which leaves no space for the ‘emancipated’ interpretation (62). These claims are of course not straightforward in any way, and would require expansion in a forum different from this. My aim instead is to pose this as one possible mode of historical representation, recalling the words above, within a dialectic of mimesis and poesis, where the film-makers attempt to re-centralise the otherwise dislocated referent. In essence, the film-makers rely on these methods to achieve the by now defunct aims of mimetic realism, the impossibilities of which are highlighted by the contradictions and schizophrenic relationships with reality. Further, comparative insight on this mode can be found in the conclusion. I will turn now to an alternative to historical representation.

### **Historiographic Metafiction**

The differentiation of *Il divo* from *Gomorra* and *The One Hundred Steps* in universal terms is unwise—it also employs a post-script that aligns the narrative to a concrete referent, for instance, which details Andreotti’s fate beyond the *Tangentopoli* or ‘Bribesville’ scandal, and which evidently serves as a referential foundation to the film. There is also apparent use of filmic citation in *Il divo*, though this is a point of divergence where it remains far less reliant on irony or commentary than the quotation observed above in *Gomorra*. Reviews of Sorrentino’s film pick

out citations ranging from Quentin Tarantino-esque pop-noir, to classic horror film and, domestically, to Federico Fellini and Elio Petri. Certainly it is not difficult to find instances of each, be it the opening shot of Andreotti, which recalls the Pinhead demon from the *Hellraiser* films (Clive Barker, 1987) (see figure 2), or the arrival of the ‘corrente Andreottiana’ of the DC, a “more-or-less explicit citation of [Quentin Tarantino’s 1992] *Reservoir Dogs*” (Marlow-Mann 264) (see figure 3).



Figure 2: (a) *Il divo*, (b) *Hellraiser*



Figure 3: (a) *Il divo*, (b) *Reservoir Dogs*

Although these similarities seem far from coincidental, Sorrentino in fact denies having employed any intentional or direct citation whatsoever (qtd. in Piccardi 13). In a sense, though, we might view this point as irrelevant precisely where the citations do not serve as an internalised commentary on the topic (comparisons between Andreotti and Pinhead are ultimately either limited or forced, and risk undermining the complex portrait of the politician). Instead these loose citations are simply integrated into the film’s own aesthetics of pastiche, and the director’s comments that throw the determinacy of citation into doubt might be viewed as another form of epi-textual persuasion that contributes to an interpretative code. The bracketing or the rejection of the referent here—for in this case the referent is another film, rather than a historical chronicle—fits into and introduces well the wider stylistic approach to historical representation adopted by this film and by *Romanzo Criminale*.

Placido's film is similarly dislocated from the historical events which inspired the film, the story of the *Banda della Magliana* (though the film is effectively an adaptation of an adaptation, Giancarlo De Cataldo's 2002 eponymous novel). The aesthetics of its representation of this history nonetheless rely ostensibly on the conventions of the gangster film genre—quite evident instances of this appear throughout the film, suffice it to consider momentarily the characterisation and in particular the deaths of the protagonists. Already the narratives of the gang leaders are steeped in a romantic notion of comradeship which emerges from the oneiric opening sequence, in which Libanese, Dandi and Freddo, as well as the short lived Grana, are introduced and christened. The three consequential leaders of the *banda* are stock versions of, respectively, a dominant leader, a cowardly dandy (!), and a tragic hero. These are reflected in the three death sequences: Libanese is betrayed, literally stabbed in the back in a *vespasiano* before he stumbles into one of Trastevere's central piazzas, where the melodramatic soundtrack, stumbling POV camera and soft focus contribute to a fitting end to the natural leader: "muore, escluso e solo, trafitto dalle coltellate, come un imperatore romano di fronte al bagliore cupo dell'oro dei mosaici di Santa Maria in Trastevere" (Turco 548) ["he dies, isolated and alone, stabbed repeatedly, like a Roman emperor before the sombre glow of Santa Maria in Trastevere's golden mosaics"]. Dandi is assassinated aptly outside one of his clothes boutiques in via del Pellegrino, and Freddo outside the Basilica di Sant'Agostino, where earlier his fate seemingly had been sealed in a symbolic conversation with Roberta in front of Caravaggio's *Madonna di Loreto*. Both Dandi's and Freddo's deaths come steeped in melodramatic styles and sounds, which ultimately conform to the tragedy of the gangster who must, as Robert Warshow put it, ultimately, and due to the irresolvable contradictions in his life, perish (Warshow 103).

In this pivotal article, Warshow was one of the earliest critics of the gangster film to reject outright 'reflectionist' readings of the genre in relation to historical chronicle (100). By phrasing the film as a historical one, this is certainly not my intention. Instead, dealing with a film like *Romanzo Criminale* as a historical text requires, as Rosenstone would put it, the right critical distance. We are not to register these deaths as historically accurate—far from it<sup>15</sup>—but to take the film as an (overtly stylised) depiction of the period and themes of the history behind the *Banda della Magliana*. Rosenstone compares the 'mainstream drama' category of the historic film, with which Placido's film coheres, to a popular or micro-history which places individuals within a 'historical process' and invites extensive emotional responses into the narrative, "attempting to destroy the distance between you and the past" (*History on Film* 16).

A part of the construction of a historical process in both *Il divo*'s and *Romanzo Criminale*'s narratives comes from the direct citation of historical events, albeit

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<sup>15</sup>For the sake of illustrating the narrative's creative originality, one might note the incoherences between the deaths of Libanese, Dandi and Freddo, the last of whom is actually still alive. See for example Bianconi for a narrative of the *banda* based more on historical chronicle.

used to a different end to the historical citation of *The One Hundred Steps*. Whereas in Giordana's film, efforts were made to reproduce faithfully historical events both for political motives and to ground the narrative in a coherent chronology, *Il divo* only loosely reproduces the reality of key historical events, preferring to skew historical coherency in favour of stylistic statements. An illustrative example of this is to be found in the opening sequence, during which the spectator is visually assaulted by a number of murder sequences—of Roberto Calvi, Michele Sindona, Mino Pecorelli, Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, Giorgio Ambrosoli, Aldo Moro and Giovanni Falcone—which jump unpredictably between the late '70s and early '90s. Though there is some evidence of faithful historical re-creation, such as Sindona being poisoned in prison and Calvi hanging from Blackfriars Bridge, a possible performance of realism is undermined by the disorienting camera movements and informative captions, which “dance about the screen in a kind of free-floating semi-otic abandon” (Marcus, “The Ironist” 253).

The liberal representation of history is demonstrative of the director's notion of history as a text, and specifically a text which is open to parody as understood by Hutcheon. The literary theorist reminds us that the use of parody does not necessitate an assumption of comedy or humour, rather it signifies “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (*Theory of Parody* 6). This is evidently applicable to *Il divo*, where the representation of historical events is parodied not for the purpose of humour but in order to mould the film's aesthetics in adherence to the ironic ‘spettacolarità’ surrounding Andreotti to which Sorrentino refers in the film's subtitle (‘La straordinaria vita di Giulio Andreotti’, in Italian; ‘The Spectacular Life of Giulio Andreotti’ is the tagline of the international release).

The ways in which the deaths of Aldo Moro and Giovanni Falcone are repeatedly interwoven into Sorrentino's history of Andreotti further the parodied representation of history, to an evidently political end (as with the *bacio*). Sorrentino entirely removes the historical context and period from both cases: Moro, for instance, appears only within the psyche of Andreotti, echoing the latter's guilt over the former's death (“noi abbiamo lasciato uccidere Aldo Moro” [“we allowed Aldo Moro to be killed”]). Falcone is symbolically represented by a skateboard, the one used by Totò Riina and his *picciotti* to roll enough dynamite underneath the A29 motorway to destroy Falcone's convoy; later the skateboard rolls through the halls of the Senate and disturbs the various ministers, an imaginary symbol which is imposed upon an otherwise ‘real’ scene. It is such a use of history which allows us to shift our definition of the film further: rather than simply a historical film or docudrama, we can borrow further from Hutcheon and view the film as ‘historiographic metafiction’. The importance of this otherwise quite specific strain of post-modern literature, “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 5), lies precisely in its bold and self-conscious representation of the mimesis–poiesis dialectic. As such, the narratives

of these texts do not depend on a constricting need for historical accuracy, “un-innocent, paradoxical historiographic metafiction situate themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction” (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 124). This is precisely Sorrentino’s approach, as symbolised by strongly self-aware representations of Moro and Falcone.

*Romanzo Criminale* enacts a similar dismissal of performances of realism, and an obviously comparable manipulation of historical events. In this regard it is the film’s references to ‘the Moro affair’, once again, which are representative. Within the narrative, the leaders of the *Banda della Magliana* are approached by a mysterious Italian G-man and asked to locate the body of the missing DC leader. Before this, we are confronted with a scene in which Placido cuts together a sequence of shots of the gang in a disco with familiar newsreel footage of Via Fani; interestingly including disparate visuals but the same voice-over as used in *The One Hundred Steps*, Massimiliano Menichetti’s words “Il presidente della Democrazia Cristiana, l’onorevole Aldo Moro, è stato rapito poco fa a Roma, da un commando di terroristi” [“The leader of the Christian Democracy, the Honourable Aldo Moro, was abducted not long ago by a terrorist group”]. This evidence of audio-visual deconstruction is coherent with O’Rawe’s analysis of the scene, in which she illustrates how inconsistencies between the two settings, along with the soundtrack, “Lady Marmalade” by Labelle, reveal “a profound commentary on the narrative” (“More More Moro” 222). Though the references to Moro do signal a concrete historical period, this is only a coincidental function of the footage and is certainly not unproblematic: the chronology of the newsreel events is distorted (we move from the famous photo of Moro inside the ‘people’s prison’ back to via Fani, 16 March), and the date of the Labelle song, 1974, means that its inclusion “is [ . . . ] not used as a precise temporal marker” (O’Rawe, “More More Moro” 217). Quite apparently the historical event is not foregrounded in order to perform realism, but rather manipulated so as to offer political comment. Once again, this is demonstrative of the film as a form of historiographic metafiction. Such an interactive review of the past becomes, in fact, a tentative act of appropriation, paradoxically prioritising and problematising this key historical context: in this sequence the same, familiar newsreel footage of the *strage di Via Fani* is rewritten, enshrined in a ‘new context’, and yet as such it is also powerfully interrogated. As O’Rawe notes, “the Moro montage points up the gaps in knowledge about the event, leaving the spectator with a full visual and aural experience, but with a troubling sense of these aporias” (“More More Moro” 221).

We can take the use of historiographic metafiction within these films as a second possible approach to history (the first being performative realism), that instead prioritises the poetic over the mimetic. As with the previous case, though, the dialectic of the imagined or creative with the representational or reflectional must undermine this constantly. Whereas the performance of realism attempts to distance the fictionality of the text, to persuade the viewer to overlook it, here the accentuation or performance of fictionality seeks to dislocate the historical chronicle. “Historiographic metafiction”, notes Hutcheon, “problematizes the activity of

reference by refusing either to bracket the referent [ . . . ] or to revel in it” (*Poetics of Modernism* 119). This technique, or perhaps more widely the technique within the mode of historical film advocated by Rosenstone, allows a representation of history in which fictionalisation and historical chronicle are not mutually exclusive, and a value-based, hierarchical analysis of either would serve no purpose.

### **Conclusive Remarks: Parodying History**

This discussion has identified two approaches to the deployment of historical referents in contemporary Italian cinema. By focusing on formal techniques, my aim has been to avoid describing them in any universalising or mutually exclusive terms, rather simply as two (of many) approaches to dealing with history. Essentially it is useful to view both of these modes of representing history together as efforts of parodying history, where Hutcheon’s emphasis on an etymological review of *parody*, where *para odos* relates not so much to a ‘counter-song’ as a ‘beside-song’ (*Theory of Parody* 32), is welcome: the parody of history in these texts, irrespective of their claims to truth, is an accompaniment or commentary which seeks to promote further discussion and interpretation. Overall this is a productive step which allows reflection on the topics covered but also on historiography itself, interrogating the way history is evoked. It would evidently be unwise to take these specific case studies as universal models for ‘doing’ history in the Italian case, however we can nonetheless identify formal trends in the representation of history. For instance, many of the above films are located within O’Leary’s notion of “tainted heritage film[s]” which he labels “patrimonio all’italiana”: “the real historical events are embedded in a context of Italian art, fashion, design and glamorous characters that adduces these events as aspects of a haptically delectable and exportable past” (*Tragedia all’italiana* 71).<sup>16</sup> As O’Leary (*Tragedia all’italiana* 245) does, and indeed as Rosenstone does in reference to dramatic historical films generally (*History on Film* 16), we might be inclined to read these texts as a form of popular history, which becomes a useful key to interrogate questions surrounding inclusions and absences in relation to wider issues of spectatorship.

The presence of the dialogue between poiesis and mimesis—here perhaps a truism that I have overemphasised—is key to their understanding, in order to encourage a happy and valid rejection of both empty and prescriptive notions of realism. Nevertheless, a central aim in my sketch of performative realism and historiographic metafiction has been that of locating them specifically ‘in a complex state of afterness’, to borrow Marcus’s phrasing, in relation to precisely such dichotomic readings of the terms. Only in first acknowledging the dialogue between mimesis and poiesis can these observations emerge. Evidently, whether or not we take issue

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<sup>16</sup>O’Leary makes these observations in relation to a series of references to Aldo Moro as a cameo in several films, including *The One Hundred Steps*, *Romanzo Criminale* and *Il divo*. In these terms, the persistence of the figure of Moro in these films and beyond shifts, with interesting results, from a passing reference to a historical period to “a traumatic site of history” (*Tragedia all’italiana* 30) and “a great role” in Italian culture (71; see 27–77).

with the latter half of her definition, the ‘post-’ of Marcus’s ‘post-realism’ terminology brings an apparent self-consciousness which is very relevant and applicable to this context.

My understanding of these tendencies in contemporary Italian cinema is that precisely this turn towards the self-conscious informs their performativity. We could label both the foregrounding and dislocating of historical referents as performative where (once again, following Bruzzi/Austin) it attempts both to describe *and* perform that reality, while also self-conscious of the essential impossibilities of attaining authentic objectivity or subjectivity. This poses some interesting questions about how these two techniques specifically might work in terms of their social function, in particular whether performative realism might have a similar social function today to that of social realism or mimetic realism widely in the past. If, then, a performance of realism has a political function—consider for instance that of the shocking statistics at the end of *Gomorrah*—then this in turn raises the question of whether a political function in a text can be performed, too. Further study of the phenomenological aspect of performative politics would undoubtedly prove very fruitful.

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