

The Architectural (De)Composition of Gomorrah

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Fig 1. Gomorrah film cover



Fig 2. Toto



Fig 3 Don Cirio



Fig 4. Roberto

The Architectural (De)Composition of *Gomorra*

Gomorra (2008)(Fig 1.) is a film directed by Matteo Garrone based on the non-fictional work of Roberto Saviano, an investigative journalist who publically exposed the workings of the Neapolitan organised crime clans known as the Camorra. The majority of the film is purposely set in Scampia¹ within a rundown social housing complex to overtly examine the relationship between architecture and society. This essay will first look at the architecture's influence upon the main characters and how their social situations are reflected in their surroundings. Subsequently, the essay discusses whether architecture could ultimately be the cause of social decline in the region.

The film is based on the non-fictional work of Roberto Saviano, an investigative journalist who publically exposed the workings of the Neapolitan organised crime clans known as the Camorra². The film has received widespread critical acclaim as well as being nominated for the Palme d'Or and winning the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008 (Festival de Cannes, 2008). Five separate plots are entwined to form the film narrative covering many of the illegal activities linked to the Camorra and how they have impacted on the civilian way of life.

1. Toto (Salvatore Abruzzese) (Fig 2.) is a 13 year old delivery boy who observes a confrontation between police and a Camorra clan where a gun and pack of drugs is dropped. He returns both items to the gang and is welcomed into group being initiated by being shot in the chest whilst wearing a bulletproof vest. Moods intensify between the clan and a separatist clan resulting in a member of Toto's being shot. A plan is hatched to get revenge by killing Maria (Maria Nazionale), the mother of a member of the Scissionisti di Secondigliano³ which relies on Toto, having delivered groceries and being friendly with her, to draw her out of her home to be mercilessly shot down.
2. Don Ciro (Gianfelice Imparato) (Fig 3.) is an intermediary who dispenses money to the families of incarcerated De Lauro clan members. He is attacked by members of the Scissionisti and becomes increasingly paranoid for his own safety. Eventually he attempts to leave but is told he has to sell out his De Lauro bosses to buy his freedom. Consequently he leads the Scissionisti to a meeting where he collects the money for distribution when bullets rain through the window killing everyone except a blood splattered Don Ciro who shakily leaves the building, and presumably Scampia.
3. Roberto (Carmine Paternoster) (Fig 4.) is a waste management graduate who has recently began working for Franco (Toni Servillo), a professional looking business man with Camorra links who manages deals to illegally dump toxic waste in abandoned quarries or unused plots of land. During a particularly large operation a driver is accidentally covered in a toxic

¹ A newer district formed on the Neapolitan outskirts (Fistola, 2008)

² Unlike the mafia's pyramidal hierarchy, the Camorra consists of a series of clans in a more horizontal hierarchy with each jostling for position within the Campania region of Italy (Albanese, Das, & Verma, 2002). It is now believed that there are as more than 100 separate Camorra clans across Italy with approximately 7000 members making it the largest organised crime syndicate in the country (FBI, 2014). The organisation had been linked with various illegal activities including; cigarette smuggling, extortion, political corruption, blackmail and counterfeiting (FBI, 2014). It is also claimed that the Camorra have a monopolising grip on the regional waste management companies sparking a refuse crisis in 2008 when refuse workers went on strike in protest against criminal deals to dispose of toxic, industrial waste from the north of the country in Campania's already stretched landfill sites (Pomeroy, 2008)

³ *Secessionists of Secondigliano*



Fig 5. Pasquale



Fig 6. Marco & Ciro



Fig 7. Street view of Vele di Scampia

substance from one of the drums they are transporting and is left with hideous burns. After Franco refuses to call an ambulance for the injured man the drivers refuse to work on, consequential Franco employs children to drive the lorries of toxic waste into the quarry either unaware or not caring about their load. Roberto struggles with the morality of what they are doing and following this and an encounter with an old woman offering them free fruit grown in polluted soil Franco had previously dumped under, he quits his job and is seen walking away up a country road.

4. Pasquale (Salvatore Cantalupo) (Fig 5.) is a talented *haute couture* tailor working for Lavarone (Gigio Morra), a clothing factory owner with Camorra connections. He takes on a night job at a new rival Chinese factory, training the unskilled workers to produce high quality garments. Lavarone learns of Pasquale's additional work and is forced to order a drive by shooting on the car carrying him and his Chinese employer Xian. Only Pasquale survives and he is next seen in a motorway diner watching a TV showing Scarlett Johansson wearing the dress he had made⁴. With a rueful smile he returns to his lorry and drives away having left his tailoring job for the moral relief of haulage driving.
5. Marco and Ciro (Marco Macor and Ciro Petrone) (Fig 6.) are two teenagers that dream of becoming gangsters and running their own clan. They begin by robbing a drug dealing African immigrant at the infamous Hotel Boomerang in Casel Volturno, the scene of an actual massacre between Camorra and African gangs resulting in 7 deaths and destruction of the Hotel, only a concrete shell remains (Squires, 2008). Giovanni (Giovanni Venosa), the local clan leader, summons the boys and warns them against any more attacks, a warning they ignore instead following clan member to their gun store and stealing all their weapons. They are next seen on the marshlands around the Regi Lagni canal estuary firing their stolen guns into the opposite bank in only their underwear. Having run out of money they rob an arcade and spend their earnings in a strip club where they are attacked by clan members who demand their guns back. Unsure of how to stop the two boys, Zio Vittorio (Vittorio Russo) a high ranking gangster offer the boys money to kill Giovanni. They agree the deal but it is a setup resulting in their being ruthlessly gunned down and carried away in a digger scoop.

The district of Scampìa is home to 90,000 inhabitants however only half are registered on the census, and of 45,000 recorded, 70% are represented by public housing (Fistola, 2008). The majority of the population is made up of evacuees from the 1980 earthquake and live in poor conditions in an overpopulated area with poor transport links to the city centre and high unemployment (UN-HABITAT, 2003). It is therefore unsurprising that organised crime thrives in the region, actively oppressing socio-economic development, seeing it as a threat to their control (UN-HABITAT, 2003). In the fifteen months between January 2004 and April 2005 there were 76 killings in the district (Fistola, 2008), the majority of which happening in the infamous Le Vele di Scampìa⁵ (Fig 7.), a public housing complex completed in 1975 as part of the post-war modernist social housing explosion, designed by Franz Di Salvo (Danico, 2009), the public housing complex in which the majority of the film is set.

⁴ Garrone is referring to Angelina Jolie who wore a counterfeit dress to the 2001 Academy Awards ceremony. Garrone was unable to attain the footage of Jolie from the Academy so footage of Johansson at the Venice film festival was used instead (DiGiacomo, 2009)

⁵ *The sails of Scampìa*



Fig 8. Walkways suspended across void



Fig 9. Unite d'Habitation - Le Corbusier , Marseille, 1952

Fig 10. Rubbish at base of void



The complex is nicknamed Le Vele due to the triangular profile of the 20 storey high blocks. The buildings have been considered uninhabitable, yet following the aforementioned earthquake, many families moved into the abandoned apartments and with a lack of enforcement from the government and police, organised crime clans have taken control (Tesauro, 2012). The sails themselves are composed simply of two large linear buildings connected by suspended walkways that provide access to both sides (Fig 8.). The resulting 'public' space, particularly as you go lower down the building, becomes incredibly dark with poor ventilation and crumbling materials. After years of neglect by squatting residents, the 'sails' are a decaying relic of post-war optimism and an infamous symbol of Camorra influence as well as social degrade.

There are clear influences visible in Salvos's master plans from Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation (Fig 9.). In particular the objectives and values of Corbusier's scheme were imitated; "The creation and development of bands of friendship between the inhabitants"; "the organization of collective activities (social, cultural, artistic and recreational)"; "the defence, in all spheres, of the interests of its members, on all occasions when the interests in question were linked with the standard of living in the Unité"; "the participation of the inhabitants of the Unité in the determination of the material and moral administration of the Unité and its dependencies in an atmosphere of mutual understanding with all people who may be directly or indirectly interested" (Corbusier, 1952). The design was intended to be a settlement for families to integrate within a large community creating a utopian city model with large parks, recreational facilities, copious parking and multi-lane roads, that encouraged interaction between all inhabitants. The reality that Salvo created was a dystopian ghetto where rubbish fills the floor of the central void (Fig 10.), crime is a way of life, where large parks and copious car parks are venues for drug deals and multi-lane roads are used for street races (Bassolino, 2011). This is the gritty reality so well depicted in Gomorrah which, we should not forget, is based on the actuality exposed by Saviano.

Garrone's use of handheld cameras in multiple scenes conveys the paranoiac atmosphere to the audience, never allowing the view to rest (Fig 11.). Shots hug the walls down narrow corridors and turn blind corners with the characters; the claustrophobia is palpable within the decaying environment. The monolithic ziggurat is visibly in disrepair having forgone any form of large scale maintenance, the government effectively giving up on the complex by allowing squatters to move in and Camorra gangs to gain power. The film is documentary-like as it does not afford the view the escapism of popular fictional film; it counteracts the rhetoric of mainstream glamorisation of organised crime created by films such as The Godfather Series, instead depicting a gritty undignified way of life.

The antithesis between intention and reality in the 'sails' is strengthened by another iconic setting in which the viewer is introduced to Marco and Ciro at what remains of Walter Schiavone's luxury Villa (Fig 12.). The building was designed to be an exact replica of that of Tony Montana's kitsch home in the film Scarface. However unlike its garish portrayal, the reality in which the boys find themselves is completely bare, stripped back to just the grey concrete structure. In this scene they are acting out Montana's gun battle with the Colombians shouting quotes from the movie both declaring themselves as their idol. This Hollywood idealism couldn't be further away from the Camorra's actuality where they live in the 'sails' along with the rest of the people, neighbours to their drug addicted customers, sharing the same walkways as the people they extort. There is nothing



Fig 11. Hand held camera shots that hug walls and look over shoulders



Fig 12. Walter Schiavone's bare villa and Tony Montana's kitch villa from Scarface

glamorous in Garrone's depiction yet the young characters, Toto, Marco and Ciro, and to some extent Roberto, are still drawn into their world.

Language plays a key role in describing the tensions within the region. Differences in dialect are most evident in the relationship between Pasquale, who speaks in a Neapolitan dialect, and Xian, who uses poor, broken Italian. During the film you find a mutual respect built between the two; Pasquale takes up tai chi and develops a taste for Chinese cuisine, where Xian's Italian greatly improves as well as showing great interest in Pasquale's tailoring and family (Berger & Komori, 2010). However, what ends this emerging friendship is a drive-by shooting by the Camorra which, as with all acts of violence in the film, gravitates back to the 'sails'. Here only Neapolitan dialect is used and even shared between rival clans who cannot go to certain areas of the same complex due to the strict borders between each other's territories (Berger & Komori, 2010). Outside of the 'sails' harmony is proven to be achievable but once within the structure society breaks down to an internal conflict governed by territorial logic and a thirst for power.

It should therefore be asked if blame lies with the architecture for failing so badly that society cannot function within or is human nature's potential for violence the cause of the merciless nightmare that is the 'sails'.

The title of the film would indicate the later. *Gomorra* is a clear reference to the biblical cities of 'Sodom and *Gomorra*' (Fig 13.). The cities are declared, in the book of Genesis, to have been destroyed in a rain of fire and brimstone cast down from the heavens "because the cry of Sodom and *Gomorra* is great and because their sin is very grievous" (Gen. 18, 20). Abraham pleads with God to spare the city arguing that, despite the many sinful, there is the possibility there are still righteous inhabitants. God only makes one guarantee, "I will not destroy the city for ten's sake" (Gen., 18, 32), meaning God would spare the thousands of sinners for ten righteous men. Evidently no honest citizens were found⁶ and God executed his sentence levelling both cities to the plain (Curi, 2009).

Garrone's parallels between the residents of 'Sodom and *Gomorra*' and the inhabitants of the 'sails' is unmistakable. The film/'sails' contains no moralism and what little morality there is, either removed or lost by the end; Marco and Ciro begin as foolish children play acting to their favourite film; Toto is an innocent child before being contaminated by the Camorra when he betrays his friend; Roberto leaves the region when he learns of the true impact of the illegal dumping; Pasquale leaves when he experiences Lavarone's merciless nature; Don Ciro flees when he realises he is in the middle of a violent gang war.

Umberto Curi however, takes this further suggesting it is a precursor of a deeper, destructive human condition. The film's concentric manner circulates around the 'sails' suggesting a microcosmic example of a macrocosmic future, in particular the role of violence within society "relation between order and conflict, between force and law, between violence and justice." (Curi, 2009) Curi uses Thomas Hobbes's description of war from *Leviathan* (1651) (Fig 14.), proposing that a state of war does not require fighting, it is merely when "will to contend by battle is sufficiently known." (Hobbes, 1651) This is a pre-state society when the lack of force to dominate all men is absent, a cold war where a level of peace is maintained due to the overwhelming possibility of total

⁶ With exception to Lot, Abraham's nephew, and his family



Fig 13. The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorra – Peter Schaubroeck (No date).

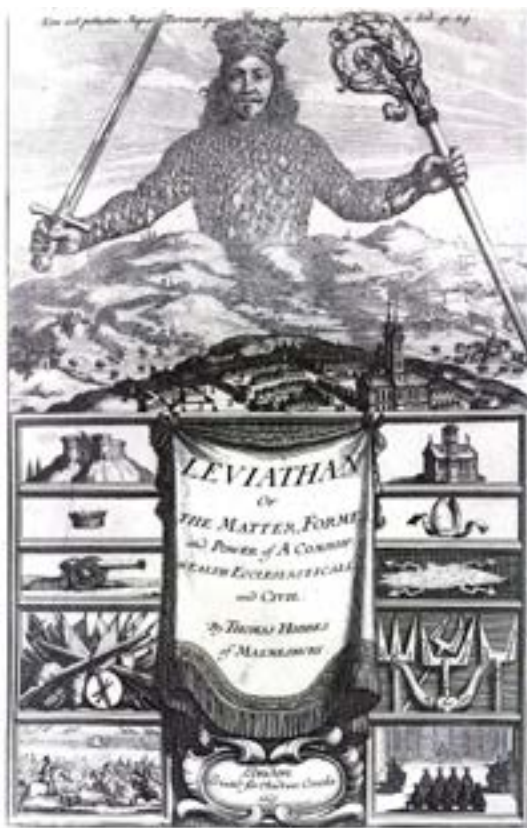


Fig 14. Leviathan - Thomas Hobbes (1651)

annihilation (mutually assured destruction). In this circumstance the state is therefore a means of survival, the population surrender their natural rights to avoid individuals working only in their own interest since there is always the threat of violence in a 'state-free' society. Curi claims that humans are not social beings and in the conception of 'state-run' society the population forego their natural aspirations to dominate in favour of a "conditioned freedom, through which what I acquire in terms of personal safety is, so to speak, offset by what I lose in terms of the possibility of concretely asserting that natural concupiscentia." (Curi, 2009)

The conclusion drawn from this is that the state only exists due to the immaturity of humanity being incapable of the discipline and control which is compatible with human survival. The state "monopolises legitimate force" as a means of controlling a community.⁷ By regarding the state as a purely fictional creation for survival Curi suggests that the film is a depiction of a post-state threshold, on the brink of forming "a society beyond the state" (Curi, 2009) where humanity has matured to a stage where violence is individually controlled and the strongest rise without preceding privilege. Curi describes the grand forms of the 'sails' as "a sort of spaceship ready to blast off towards a future that may be awaiting each and everyone one of us" (Curi, 2009), a post state future.

However, it could be argued that the architecture has become an archaeological ruin to a lost and forgotten state that failed its citizens. The 'spaceship' Curi describes appears to actually be a relic of the architect's grand ambitions for a harmonious community, lost in its own deprivation to become a mere shadow of a utopian dream. Salvo's master planned complex was based, let's not forget, on Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation*, a single standing community complete with shops, laundrettes and playgrounds. This formation has proven successful in Corbusier's schemes creating a harmonious self-governing society in the form of building counsels and meetings. The failure of the 'sails' is made up of several failings, not all of them within Salvo's control.

The tall void down the centre of the building is far too narrow and punctured with many walkways that create shade and segregation to the point where you can have a drug deal and confrontation occur on one level and a wedding procession on the walkway below (Fig 15.). This segregation allows clans to operate independently and the formation of boundaries between rivals becomes simple. In addition despite the copious space for parking and wide roads, transport links to the city centre are poor. Most inhabitants are not able to afford cars and rely heavily on public transport but poor rail links and intermittent bus services as well as congestion in the centre of Naples hit an already struggling community. Without adequate levels of employment it is easy to see the appeal of joining the Camorra clans just for survival.

Despite these short falls external factors were also to blame for the demise of the complex, many of which the government were at fault for. Firstly allowing the design to be built in the first place without adequate infrastructure seems foolish in hindsight. Secondly, they allowed squatters to move into empty apartments unchallenged and have done little to remove them. These squatters do not maintain the structure adequately, often dumping large amounts of waste at the bottom of the central void (Cantile, 2013). This situation was exacerbated by the influx of evacuees from the 1980 earthquake. This lack of government control allowed the Camorra clans' control to spread through the complex to the point where police forces rarely enter, and when they do, they do so in high

⁷ An individual's right to force is therefore surrendered to the state



Fig 15. Wedding procession on one walkway while drug deal taking place above



Fig 16 Aerial view of remaining la Vele di Scampia

numbers (Danico, 2009). The extent of Camorra control is evident as Garrone required a special pass from the Camorra to film within the 'sails', with members also acting in the film and giving advice on realism (Marrese, 2008).

What is evident from *Gomorra* is Garrone's insistence on depicting a realistic imagining of life in the region. The result is a gritty and often hard to watch film of a dystopian reality. At the centre of the story is the 'sails,' a ruin of a once hopeful social housing scheme. The deterioration of the building mimics the decomposition of society within its walls into a stateless existence splattered with violence stemming from rivalries between Camorra clans. It is clear that the architecture was not successful and the architect is by no means faultless in its collapse, however, government failings in allowing squatters and the Camorra to move in did not help. The post-state society that exists with is not (yet) the next evolutionary social step that Curi describes. The dilapidated environment created by the architecture has bred an equally crumbling society. Whether you agree with Curi or not there is no denying that the 'sails' is a dire environment to live in. The design has allowed society to disintegrate and consequently re-evolve into a crime led abyss, or precursor if Curi's beliefs are shared. The references to biblical 'Gomorra' would suggest that Garrone considers the 'sails' to be riddled with wickedness, beyond saving, even beyond the forgiveness of God and ultimately deserves to have fire and brimstone rain down upon it.

List of Illustrations

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Fig 2. Toto.

Gomorrah, 2008. [Film] Matteo Garrone, Italy: Fandango.

Fig 3. Don Ciro.

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Fig 7. Street view of Vele di Scampia.

Pernarella Enzo, (2012), Le Vele di Scampia [ONLINE]. Available at: <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/79410741> [Accessed 31 March 14].

Fig 8. Walkway suspended across void.

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Fig 9. Rubbish at base of void.

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Fig 12. Walter Schiavone's bare villa and Tony Montana's kitch villa from Scarface.

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Fig 13. The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorra – Peter Schaubroeck (No date).

Schaubroeck, Peter. De Verwoesting van Sodom en Gomorra. N.D. Oil on panel. Private ownership.

Fig 14. Leviathan - Thomas Hobbes (1651).

Hobbes, T. (1651). Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastically and Civil (1909 ed ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Fig 15. Wedding procession on one walkway while drug deal taking place above.
Gomorrah, 2008. [Film] Matteo Garrone, Italy: Fandango.

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