

“The Mafia” as Transformational Object

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1. Mafias are constituted not only by the material conditions that their affiliates and associates manage and create. They are also constituted by the semiotics of popular cultural, journalistic, scholarly and juridical work that attempts to capture mafias discursively. Organized crime affiliates manage, and even create, these resources to generate atmospheres of fear, desire and indeterminacy to enhance their image among the people in their midst, an image that has very real material consequences.

For some people, whether mafia affiliate, associate, or neither of the two, these material-semiotic renderings hold the power of what Bollas (1979) might have called a transformational object. That is, they are figurations of “the mafia” that bear people’s projected desires for something in the future that will transform the present. “The mafia” is evocative and alluring because it holds for people who come into contact with affiliates the possibility for success and wealth. “It” embodies, here and now, the realization of future dreams. In Campania, crime clan affiliates are particularly ostentatious, performing prepotency and supremacy through overt violence, conspicuous consumption and grand gestures of celebrity. These figures enact a hyperbole. They make the hyperbole plausible, and even make it feel possible, for people who are in their thrall.

For Bollas, it’s not the object that is desired. Rather, what’s desired is the transformation that the object promises. The transformational object is identified with a formative process, reminding one of “something never cognitively apprehended, but existentially known, the memory of the ontogenetic process, rather than thought or fantasies that occur once the self is established” (Bollas 1979: 99). Crime clan affiliates certainly feed the fantasies of established selves, but I would argue that they also tap into an inchoate experience of the self: the feeling of approaching repair and resolution inside oneself and in the world one inhabits. This feeling manifests itself in one’s pursuit of wealth and success, in the desire to realize individual greatness in a world remade through the things and experiences of wealth and personal sovereignty.

Transformational objects access and reignite intense affective, pre-cognitive experiences of the originary experience of being mothered. This experience is

not an object relation, but rather a process in which a “facilitating environment” (Winnicott 1965: 230-241, cited in Bollas 1979) sustains life and transmits to the infant, through a particular idiom, an “aesthetic of being” (Bollas 1979: 97).

In Campania, one way in which “the mafia” becomes a transformational object is by way of its capillary management of the richest source of affective intensity: the realm of the family. Crime clans weave fictive and blood kin through processes of patriarchal mothering. The ascent to greatness is marked by one’s command of respect and one’s achievement of riches. When one falls short of the ascent, male melodramas of love and ill-fated schemes to sustain family life provide the aesthetic contours that render life choices sensible in a higher moral order than that ordained by law. These processes are also reactivated in non-affiliates, sometimes more diffusely, sometimes more directly, as they pursue their own goals in their own life melodramas. That is, some people may share or mimic the concrete pursuits of crime clan affiliates, while others may share only the aesthetic of being. The difference is both significant and insignificant. On the one hand, it is a juridical question (to share the pursuits of crime clans is legally sanctioned as *associazione mafiosa*). On the other hand, the aesthetics of being that both crime clans and non-associates share renders the mark of “criminal” a negligible discursive operation. The originary sense of self and world is what matters, beyond the details of the discursive world.

Below is a preliminary tracing of “the mafia” in Campania as a transformational object. I follow how “it’s” presence is felt in popular culture and everyday experience as the affective intensity of family and an aesthetics of being that prioritizes wealth and personal sovereignty.

2. At the end of 2018, one of the most successful *neomelodico* singers, the 30-year-old Naples-adopted Sicilian Tony Colombo, released the song *Ti aspetto all’altare* (I’m waiting for you at the altar)¹. The song is Colombo’s bold public declaration of love for a woman other than his wife, Luana La Rosa, with whom he has three young children. It’s bold because it tests Mediterranean family-making norms: unions are sacred, especially when there are children to care for. Of course, men transgress this code regularly, but to announce it on social media in such a spectacular fashion, and not as a transgression or dilemma, but as pure affirmation, is striking. The song and the music video make no reference to his current marriage and make no justificatory gestures. A love union is a self-same

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wun-JhIAyt8>, viewed on 12/31/18.

perfect object that needs no explanation.

The music video provides a literal illustration of the lyrics, as is usually the case with *neomelodica* music. We see Colombo quietly setting up a stage in the *vicolo* outside his lover's apartment. He has hung in big illuminated letters the words *I'm waiting for you at the altar* on the wall facing her window. He's preparing a serenade, a public declaration for all the neighborhood to witness. The neighborhood is in on the secret – a crowd cheers and eggs him on as he prepares the love-event. He sings, "A thousand cell phones turned on and recording this love story I have with you". His lover appears at her window, smiling and swaying to his song. He imagines her meeting him at the altar: He watches her coming down a long aisle. She reaches him and they recite the same words, swearing that they love one another. Even those who didn't believe in their love will have to see it come true (*s'anna lassà pure lloro chi nun crerev a st'ammore e ce ven a guardà*)². This last verse is the only reference to a dilemma – is it the union he has broken or is it the union he has replaced it with? Either way, the song makes no concessions. Love triumphs over all.

This mediatic, pop-cultural, affective-aesthetic event is unremarkable in itself. It has all the features of Neapolitan hetero love-by-numbers: The public serenade, the church as the institution that consecrates the union, and the wedding's consummation. He sings, "Tonight the gift that I want is to make a child with you"³. His lover, perhaps is his (new) transformational object. The comments posted under the music video on YouTube and on his Facebook page, are mixed. Some lament that Colombo has left another beautiful woman, others express concern about the effects on his children, and still others decry his public announcement of it all (*le cose si fanno in silenzio!!!!*)⁴. None, however, directly address the question of his lover's identity: Tina Rispoli, the widow of the notorious crime boss, Gaetano Marino, a.k.a. '*o moncherino*.

Gaetano's brother, Gennaro, is currently serving his sentence for a conviction of mafia association and homicide. Gennaro is believed to have led the revolt of the *scissionisti*, a breakaway gang that battled the gang of the Naples suburb Secondigliano to whom they paid tribute for operating a massive drug trade in the suburb of Scampia. The feud resulted in over a hundred brutal murders and

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wun-JhIAyt8>, viewed on 12/31/18.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wun-JhIAyt8>, viewed on 12/31/18.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wun-JhIAyt8> and <https://www.facebook.com/tonycolomboofficialpage/>, viewed on 12/31/18.

tens of arrests. Gaetano's role in the alliance before the split was ambassador to criminal organizations in Albania. In the summer of 2012 he was shot multiple times in broad daylight on a crowded beach. The murder was described as mafia-style and interpreted as a continuation of the vendetta against the *scissionisti*.

In Naples *mafiosi* are public figures and many even invite public attention. It's therefore not unusual for Tony Colombo to display his romance with the widow of a well-known violent gang leader. Gaetano Marino was in the spotlight once before by way of other kin, his daughter, the singer Mary Marino. When Mary was twelve she appeared on a Rai Due New Year's program called *Canzoni e Sfide*. She had no particular stand-out qualities as a singer. Her voice was unexceptional and clearly untrained. She did not sing in Neapolitan. She did not even have folkloric or kitsch qualities to satisfy an orientalist TV viewership that fetishized Naples. And yet, Mary was given the stage so that she could perform her song, "Letter to Papà." In the song she expresses her love for him and her appreciation for all the ways he shows love to her. When the song is over, another performance begins. The host of the show invites Mary to give her father a kiss. He's sitting in the front row with his wife, Tina Rispoli, and we see the him stand up and kiss his daughter⁵.

Roberto Saviano, who brought the unsettling details of this love scene to public attention in an editorial he published on Facebook, posed all of the pertinent questions that arise from it (this, if nowhere else, is where Saviano's expertise lies): How was it that Gaetano Marino sat in the first row of the Catanzaro theater where the transmission was recorded, and how was it that the cameras were turned on him? It would have been excusable for the child of a mobster to dedicate a song to him on the national TV networks, because a child's love for her father is a self-same perfect object, regardless of the father's deeds, but to bring the father himself into the scene has no other explanation than crime clans' influence over the entertainment industry⁶.

In Campania crime clan affiliates own their own TV and radio stations, music recording studios and talent agencies. Through money and influence (a.k.a. violent persuasion), they can produce a singer's success. This phenomenon appears to be the perfect example of cultural hegemony, but in fact it's not. Very few songs of the songs that circulate through this media apparatus lionize or even re-

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jERxE3EdnxU>, viewed on December 31 2018.

⁶ https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/02/10/news/saviano_racconto-29655083/, viewed on December 31 2018.

ference crime bosses. The vast majority of the songs are about love, that is, love for lovers and kin. In this well of affect another potency lies, however.

The singers who are produced in this system appear on regional or neighborhood TV narrowcasts and take song requests from viewers. They perform at weddings, baptisms and piazza concerts. They live in their home neighborhoods. They are celebrities of a particular kind: they are accessible and ordinary, the only mark of difference being their ability to provide a heightened performance of the aesthetics of being that their peers also experience. Singers are proximate heroes who embody the possibility of others becoming heroes too. The apparatus that produces them is a reality system, a cross-platform extension of reality TV. One appeal of reality TV is that it offers a viewer the access to participate, not just in the lives of its protagonists, but as a potential protagonist himself. The proximate celebrities of this song industry sing about lovers and family in an idiom (literally and figuratively) deeply familiar to audiences, drawing on a shared well of affective potency. *How* singers get to be celebrities, and sometimes even how crime bosses get to be crime bosses, are details that are eclipsed by the evocative force of the transformational object.

The aesthetic of being that is affirmed in these circulations of affect does not quite reproduce what has been imagined, in popular cultural, journalistic, and even scholarly discourse as the "good mafia." Rather, the indiscriminate, pre-personal, and public quality of affect suspends the marker "mafia" altogether.

Matteo Garrone's 2012 film *Reality*, following his international success with *Gomorra* (2008), demonstrates this point. The film tells the story of a Neapolitan fishmonger bewitched by the mediatic universe built by Berlusconi. In this diegetic world, Cinecittà is not the manufacturer of neorealist or hyperreal representations (descriptors that apply to *Gomorra*); rather, it is "reality" in its quintessence, embodied in the reality TV show *Big Brother*. After his audition for the show at Cinecittà, the fishmonger returns to Naples and waits to hear if he has been selected. He begins to see Big Brother all around him, phantom casting agents who have come to surreptitiously observe him and gather further impressions to make their decision. Everyday life itself, for Arena's character, becomes an audition for the Real. When he asks for reassurance from the former *Big Brother* star who first auditioned him, he's told, "Never stop believing. Never give up". The fishmonger takes the advice to hyperbolic limits, already living the great transformation that he believes is near. His belief triggers the fervor of his family and even the neighborhood, who all behave as if his achievement were a *fait accompli*.

Garrone cast in the leading role Aniello Arena, a former crime clan affiliate serving a life sentence for triple murder. Garrone said that Arena was a natural fit for the role because, having already spent 20 years in prison, he would look at the world with a child's eyes, a "modern 'Pinocchio' who is taken in by the promise of fame", when temporarily released for the shooting (of the film)⁷. Arena would perform the "real" dreaming Neapolitan encountering the Real – in this case, the spell of consumer-capitalist Berlusconian spectacle, "reality". Indeed, Arena said that he had dreamt a similar dream as a young man growing up seeing camorra bosses with fantastic wealth and status.

Garrone takes what he explicitly depicts in *Gomorra* and diffuses it across the skin of *Reality*: "the mafia". In *Gomorra*, aspiring mobsters rehearse dreams of greatness – wealth, success, power and celebrity – in reenactments of scenes from Brian De Palma's 1983 film *Scarface*. In *Reality*, an actual mobster reenacts his own childhood dreams of greatness, but as an ordinary workaday Neapolitan. In *Gomorra* "families" thrive and die together when they feud. In *Reality*, an entire family and even the neighborhood, are enlivened when they believe one of their own nears greatness.

The diffusion of "the mafia" is simultaneously aesthetic and affective in form. Again, *Reality* demonstrates this well. The film begins with a lavish wedding scene, a Louis XIV-style enactment at La Sonrisa, a banquet hall well-known in Naples as the premier setting for crime clan weddings and *neomelodico* performances. A chariot driven by a man in a 17th century French costume takes the bride and groom down a city road, and then turns into a long driveway. When it reaches the gates, bewigged 17th century royalty open them. The chariot enters and comes to a stop and the bride and groom emerge from it. They cut a red ribbon and doves are released into the sky. Then they kiss. The love union ceremony has begun at the sprawling Versaillesesque hall.

This overwrought performance, which regularly plays out in actual reality, is clearly not intended to be a convincing royal wedding. It hyperbolizes an aesthetic of being, rendering it kitsch. Kitsch is both failed aspirational mimicry and excessive sentimentality. Kitsch is populist at heart; it brings unattainable wealth and status within reach, saturating its symbols with the hominess and realness of

⁷ Garrone explained: "His weeks on the set were not just a holiday out of jail but the discovery of a world".

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/may/20/former-mafia-killer-hit-cannes>, viewed on 12/31/18.

ordinary folk and their family-making.

Whereas kitsch has been infamously defined as aspirational mimicry, the "obvious, easy and direct sign of the kind of aesthetic response one would like to picture oneself as having," that is, a taste for luxury, this 17th century reenactment offers something more (Binkley 2000: 139). It transmutes "failed" imitation into an aesthetic value itself, transvaluing insincerity into sincerity (Binkley 2000: 140). The visible seams of this lux aesthetic enhance rather than undermine its potency; it is a (de)constructed aesthetic that declares distinction while openly displaying its operations. Through hyperbole, this lux aesthetic performs "realness."

The hyperbole attracted the attention of TV network Discovery Italia, whose subsidiary Real Time launched the reality show *Il boss delle cerimonie*. Cast in the role as boss was Antonio Polese, the actual manager of La Sonrisa. The banquet hall was sequestered years before the launch of the TV program. La Sonrisa's proprietors, Polese's brother and associates, were convicted of constructing the hall by way of an illegal subdivision (the court nevertheless allows the hall to operate and the reality show to be recorded). Sadly, this perhaps is unremarkable. More remarkable, however, is a journalist's revelation in "L'Espresso" that Raffaele Cutolo, the celebrity boss of the now defunct *Nuova camorra organizzata*, was recorded saying that he had bought the structure that is now La Sonrisa and that it is worth almost ten times its original value⁸. Polese refuted the assertion and threatened the journalist: "He'll pay dearly for this"⁹. Polese cannot deny that he and four of his associates purchased on behalf of Cutolo the castle in Ottaviano that became his headquarters. Polese and his associates were convicted and served two and half years for *favoreggiamento*.

Tony Colombo regularly performs at La Sonrisa. He has undoubtedly performed at crime clan celebrations. He may have a crime clan impresario. In January of 2017 he posted a photograph on his website of the Casalese Nicola Inquieta, his Romanian wife, Tina Rispoli and Colombo himself. Inquieta was convicted for laundering Casalesi clan money in Romanian real estate¹⁰. Accompanying the photo Colombo posted is the message: "*Grazie a quest'uomo meraviglioso,*

⁸ <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2014/02/13/news/sul-castello-del-boss-delle-cerimonie-c-e-l-ombra-di-raffaele-cutolo-1.152907>, viewed on December 31 2018.

⁹ <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/03/06/il-boss-delle-cerimonie-contro-lespresso-la-paghera-cara/905010/>, viewed on December 31 2018.

¹⁰ <https://www.stylo24.it/cronaca/michele-zagaria-nicola-inquieto-resta-italia/>, viewed December 31 2018.

*amico compagno di viaggio, un viaggio appena iniziato*¹¹.

More recently, Colombo's romance with Rispoli, Marino's widow, drew the ire of people who conduct themselves camorra-style. In November of 2018 unknown protagonists shot up the door and windows of Colombo's Secondigliano recording studio, Colombo House Dreams¹². When one gets too close to the transformational object the transformation can no longer necessarily be idealized. Colombo's dream may be turning into a nightmare.

But Colombo dreams on, with greater hyperbole. Also in 2018, he posted a second music video about his love for Rispoli, *E Chist' Ammore Sta Parlanno Tutt' O' Munno*¹³. The lyrical content is the same. One YouTube commenter laments the repetition:

Però stai facendo tutte canzoni uguali, stesso tema, stessa melodia semp a stessa lagna ogni video voi due ca v vasat, i tuoi monologhi ecc . non voglio criticare la vostra storia perche' io ti seguio come cantante del resto nun m n fott.. ma torna un po a fa e canzon e na vot tony ce stai accrenn semp o stess.

The illustration that the video provides is markedly different, however. It leaps directly into a fairytale aesthetic of being. It opens with the unmistakable Disney film credit animated logo, a flying fairy's swirl of stardust. Colombo and Rispoli enter the gates of the Versaillesesque villa at Disney Paris. They spend all day until nightfall in this fairytale world. He feels his love for her existentially, like a recurrence of his very origin: he sings, "*se torna a nascere / dint'anabbraccie sarà / l'ammore e a felicità / cu tutt'l'anem*". The video closes again with the swirl of stardust, now under the words, "*La favola continua*".

Mafias become transformational objects by consolidating material-semiotic, affective and aesthetic resources that they access or even generate, but they do not do so in isolation. Media, juridical and administrative bodies also play their part. RaiDue showcased crime boss Gaetano Marino and his family on the TV program *Canzoni e Sfide*. Rai Cinema coproduced Garrone's *Reality* starring for-

¹¹ https://www.ilmattino.it/caserta/inquieto_nicola_romania_pitesti_cantante_boss-3725499.html, viewed on December 31 2018.

¹² https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2018/11/03/raid-contro-cantante-neomelodico-ipotesi-ven-detta-per-la-love-story-con-la-vedova-del-boss_a_23579521/, viewed on December 31 2018.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvrRfYNGYyU>, viewed on December 31 2018.

mer *camorrista* Aniello Arena, whom the Italian court granted temporary release from prison. The Film Commission of Regione Campania funded and Discovery Italia produced *Il boss delle cerimonie*, a TV series starring Antonio Polese, who was convicted for his association with Raffaele Cutolo, and set on a sequestered property that has hosted crime clan unions but is nevertheless permitted by the Italian court to generate substantial income¹⁴.

The final act of Tony Colombo's spectacular union appears to have received similar support. In March of 2019 he and Tina Rispoli arrived in a Rolls Royce at the castle Maschio Angioino, where they married, displacing *100 Passi verso il 21 marzo*, a previously scheduled gathering "in memory of innocent victims of the mafia"¹⁵. After the ceremony, they celebrated at none other than La Sonrisa, with a lineup of several *neomelodici* singers, fireworks, and a wedding cake in the shape of the Eiffel Tower. The ceremony was preceded by the entrance of the bride in Secondigliano, in which Rispoli rode in a carriage drawn by four white horses, accompanied by a marching band and acrobats, stopping traffic in the densely populated periphery of the city. Two days prior, Colombo performed a pre-wedding concert in Naples' main square, Piazza del Plebiscito for some two thousand fans. Video drones captured the event and the footage became Colombo's next music video, "Ti amo amore mio," at the end of which Colombo thanks the mayor of Naples, Luigi De Magistris, for making the event possible. De Magistris denied having given his permission and Colombo and Rispoli were issued fines for unpermitted use of public space, among other infractions, but how Colombo and Rispoli were able to pull off such large-scale public events, largely without interruption, remains an open question.

Colombo proves by example that if you never stop believing, your dreams can become reality. As a transformational object, "the mafia" promises wealth and personal sovereignty staged with the affects and aesthetics of family-making. And behind the scenes a wider political, juridical and mediatic infrastructure supports the spectacle.

¹⁴ <https://notizie.tiscali.it/politica/articoli/finanziamenti-pubblici-al-castello-delle-cerimonie/> viewed on May 1 2019. *Il boss delle cerimonie* is now called *Il castello delle cerimonie* and is hosted by Polese's daughter, Imma Polese.

¹⁵ https://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/03/28/news/il_matrimonio_di_tony_colombo_e_tina_rispoli_al_maschio_angioino-222721396/, viewed on May 1 2019.

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Abstract

As a transformational object (Bollas 1979), "the mafia" bears people's projected desires for something in the future that will transform the present. "The mafia," is evocative and alluring because it holds for people who come into contact with affiliates the possibility for success and wealth. "It" embodies, here and now, the realization of future dreams. In Campania, crime clan affiliates are particularly ostentatious, performing prepotency and supremacy through overt violence, conspicuous consumption and grand gestures of celebrity. These figures enact a hyperbole. They make the hyperbole plausible, and even make it feel possible, for people who are in their thrall.

In quanto "transformational object" (Bollas 1979), la mafia orienta i desideri delle persone verso un possibile futuro, verso una possibile trasformazione del presente. La mafia è suggestiva e seducente perché lascia immaginare, a coloro che entrano in contatto con i suoi affiliati, possibilità di successo e di ricchezza. Incarna, nel qui e nell'ora, la realizzazione di sogni futuri. In Campania, gli affiliati ai clan criminali mettono in scena la propria potenza e la propria prepotenza attraverso forme di violenza ostentata, consumi eccessivi, esibizioni di personaggi celebri. Queste figure presentificano un'iperbole. Rendono l'iperbole plausibile, facendola avvertire come possibile anche alle persone che gravitano nella loro sfera.

Key words: Mafia; transformational object; camorra; Campania; hyperbole.

Parole chiave: mafia; oggetto trasformatzionale; camorra; Campania; iperbole.