

1.7: A' Storia e' Maria: Gender Power Dynamics and Genre Normalization, ('Imma contro tutti', Francesca Comencini)

'e mo Marij addò sta  
Marij che fa  
Marij nun se chiamm cchiù Marij'  
(Franco Ricciardi, *A' Storia è Maria*)<sup>1</sup>

The seventh episode of the first season of *Gomorra: la serie* could be defined 'Mariological', for it foregrounds an interesting renegotiation of social and cinematic gender stereotypes in the context of mafia movies, with visual and thematic references to general religious, and in particular Catholic, iconography — a recurrent feature in representations of Italian organized crime. At the centre of the plot are Donna Imma who, after the imprisonment of her husband and the departure of her son Genny to Honduras, is now the indisputable boss of the Savastano clan, and Marta Giacobone, a transgender character who goes by the name of Luca and who, after her father's suicide, seeks protection and help from Imma. The symbolic centrality of the maternal feminine – and its eccentricity when framed within the parameters of organized crime – is teased out by Comencini, who establishes a dialectical tension between the exceptional role of Imma and the looming normalization exerted by male dominated violence and power. In this sense, the title of the episode, 'Imma contro tutti', foregrounds the exceptional nature and the precariousness of her position in that she is surrounded by male phallic domination, which she tries, albeit without long-term success, to regiment and control.

Image 1: Imma takes centre stage

The name 'Immacolata' is of course emblematic because of its Mariological reference, but takes on an antiphrastic ironic connotation when thinking of Imma's capacity and willingness to carry out systemic violence. Imma seems at first to propose a different way of dealing with the clan by personally stepping in, bypassing typical delegations in the command structure, and granting support to women, all the while avoiding the straightforward retaliatory logic of clan wars. However, in the final showdown with the rival clan, she makes it clear that it should not be assumed that a female boss would handle violence differently from a man. The exercise of power within a camorra feud demands no exception in this regard.

In his attempt to embrace a transgender identity, Marta/Luca clearly functions as a metonymy or synecdoche for Imma, for he embodies in flesh the transitional gender position Imma is trying to hold within the hierarchical power structure of the camorra. This is in fact represented not in terms of non-binary stabilization of identity, but rather in their necessity (both Imma's and Luca's) to embrace the language, position, and attitude of men. As Luca tells clan members, 'the penis doesn't make a man, brains do'.

In foregrounding both a female and a transgender protagonist, 1.7 dwells upon the social peculiarities of the Neapolitan and camorra culture. The camorra differs from the *cosa nostra* and the *'ndrangheta* when thinking of the roles embraced by women when the men in their lives are jailed or murdered. Indeed, Comencini borrows from an established historical repertoire in which women within the camorra have played the role of 'capesse' or 'female boss', but also 'vedette, usuraie, trafficanti di droga e anche componenti di gruppi di fuoco, spietate assassine, abili imprenditrici dell'illecito'.<sup>2</sup> In cinematic terms, the exceptional

position of women in the hierarchical power structure of the camorra was already foregrounded by David Chase in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) in the episode 'Commendatori' (2.4) when in Naples Tony meets Annalisa, a very attractive boss of a local clan who, like Imma, commands as her husband is imprisoned.

Gender fluidity is also much more accepted in the camorra than in the *cosa nostra* or 'ndrangheta. For example, recent cases of the camorra boss Anna Terracciano, known as 'O masculone', who is a declared lesbian, or Ketty (Ugo) Gabriele, a *femminiello* who became a powerful mobster, speak to a more general acceptance of sexual diversity within camorra culture.<sup>3</sup> However, *Gomorra: la serie* performs a normalizing function whereby characters who transgress traditional gender roles such as Luca and Imma are ultimately punished through violent death. The exceptionality of the Neapolitan and camorra context is eventually reframed within the parameters of the mafia movie genre where 'phallic masculinity' and male violence are key elements that guide the narrative.<sup>4</sup> Comencini situates 1.5 and 1.7 within specific generic conventions and intertextual dialogues. For example, 1.5 recalls Paolo Sorrentino's unconventional mafia film *Le conseguenze dell'amore* (2004) in its thematization of how Italy's mafias have expanded beyond regional borders. In addition, Franco Musi, the Savastano family accountant and broker who is forced to commit suicide after he squandered the family's finances, reminds of us of Titta di Girolamo from Sorrentino's film. 1.7 instead makes explicit reference to Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 *The Godfather*, *The Sopranos*, the cinema of Quentin Tarantino,<sup>5</sup> and Garrone's film.

Image 2: Imma surveils Le Vele

Other symbolic means of gender normalization are detectable throughout the episode. For example, Maria drives a Fiat Cinquecento, the stereotypical car for affluent housewives and sophisticated female city dwellers in Italy. Imma never sits in the back as her husband would normally do, but occupies the lateral front seat in the typical position of the housewife. Gender normalization is also exerted by Imma herself, who addresses Luca not by his preferred name but simply as Marta, thus complying with the traditional gender power binary logic generally at work in the mafia.

In this idea of reframing any deviation from the normative and traditional framework, the episode is also rife with references to religious iconography, which refers to established historical and phenomenological observations of mafia culture, but also acts as a conspicuous counterpoint to the violent ethos of the camorra. Since its origins, the mafia has in fact instrumentally drawn upon Catholic symbolism, reconfiguring an upside down religion, in a form of archaic and superstitious religiosity.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, references to the Virgin Mary or to the popular Padre Pio of Pietralcina are ubiquitous in *Gomorra: la serie* and are positioned to be in juxtaposition with ordinary criminal acts. This inverted dynamic is teased out by Comencini as a further layer to read the protagonists of 1.7. For instance, the opening scene is subtly emblematic: Marta's father Enzo Giacobone enters a statuary shop owned by loan shark Franco Martucci, aka Lecca-lecca. When he sees a statue of the Virgin Mary, he touches it and makes the sign of the cross so as to seek her protection. Inside the shop, Lecca-lecca asks that a statue of Snow White, a towering woman dominating a group of male dwarves, be moved away, foreboding Imma's final demise.

Image 3: Imma's death foretold

The misogynist and sexist stereotype of the woman as 'saint' and 'whore' is here foregrounded. Maternal care in the episode is epitomised by the various mothers who seek help for their sons and daughters from both Imma and the Virgin Mary, in an oxymoronic

juxtaposition. Indeed, Ciro demonstrates consideration and kindness when he sees a mother pushing a pram in a drug-dealing area, yet a similar pram is turned into a criminal instrument when it is used to transport drugs.

Imma and Luca are the targets of contempt by other mafiosi as they embody new power positions that other women might also attain in the camorra. Both are assailed by sexist insults, for example when Ciro calls Imma ‘a very ugly woman’ (‘cessa’) or ‘a bitch’, or when Luca is described by Lecca-lecca as ‘una lesbica sporca’. In addition, Luca is killed when wearing a wedding gown, the stereotypical symbol of feminine identity. When her body is carried from the butcher shop to the hearse, the coffin passes in front of a tabernacle shrine which holds a small statue of the Virgin Mary and the camera then pans to frame first Imma’s driver Maria and then Imma herself. Then, the sequence cuts to show clan members in the drug dealing area shouting ‘Maria, Maria’ to alert others as to the arrival of the police, ironically conflating the notional enemies from which the clan should run away, the cops, and the authority of women.

#### Image 4: Luca’s transgender identity

In this wide palette of religious symbolism and sacrificial dynamics, the episode also prefigures Imma’s demise when the statue of the virgin Mary is beheaded or when Luca dies and Imma’s dog is killed by Genny who forebodingly declares ‘I should have killed you too’. In this final scene Genny in fact re-establishes the hierarchical gender roles within the family. The stray dog adopted and ‘baptised’ by Imma was a clear substitute for her son who she literally sacrifices for the sake of a deal with the Honduran-based drug cartel.<sup>7</sup> Once again, maternal care is turned upside down through an anti-Oedipus or Medean structure that resonates with the first season of *The Sopranos*, where Tony’s mother Livia works to have her son ‘whacked’. The notion of a controlling mother met with an anti-Oedipus response is further emphasized by how Imma deals with Ciro when she regularly infantilizes him, for example when she asks him to obey and stay put, and gives him a low-ranking job. When Imma informs Ciro of his newly demoted role, he aptly sits in the back seat of her car, a place normally reserved for family children. However, this child eventually will kill his own mother.

‘E mo Marij addò sta / Marij che fa / Marij nun se chiamm cchiù Marij’

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<sup>1</sup> ‘and now Maria where is she / what is she doing / if she is still called Maria’. As noted by Giancarlo Lombardi in this collection, this song features in the opening sequence of 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Maria Zaccaria, ‘L’emergenza rosa. Dati e suggestioni sulle donne di camorra’, *Meridiana*, 67 (2010), 155-173 (p. 155).

<sup>3</sup> Gabriella Gribaudo, ‘Donne di camorra e identità di genere’, *Meridiana*, 67, (2010), pp. 145-154 (p. 153). For more on the figure of the femminiello, see, Mariano D’Amora, ‘La figura del femminiello/travestito nella cultura e nel teatro contemporaneo napoletano’, *Cahiers d’études italiennes*, 16 (2013), 201-212.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this see Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield eds., *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Fred Gardapé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 2006), esp. 15-20; Catherine O’Rawe, ‘Roberta Torre’s *Angela*: The Mafia and the “Woman’s Film”’, in *Mafia Movies: A Reader*, ed. by Dana Renga (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 327-

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37, but especially Dana Renga, *Unfinished Business: Screening the Italian Mafia in the New Millennium* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), which treats specifically the role of women in, around, and against Italy's mafias and includes two chapters on Roberta Torre's *Angela* (2002), and Edoardo Winspeare's *Galantuomini* (2008) that focus on women with power in the mafia.

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly evident in the scene in which Luca is murdered while wearing a white wedding gown, with a clear reference to *Kill Bill* (2003). Also, when two hit-men sent by Imma to settle the score with Lecca-lecca await their target in the car, they casually chat about sunglasses that one of them purchased from the American outlet in the NATO airbase in Naples ('American originals') which is an obvious reference to *Pulp Fiction* (1994) when Vincent Vega e Jules Winnfield chat about cheese burgers and beers sold at the McDonald's in Amsterdam.

<sup>6</sup> See Alessandra Dino, *La mafia devota. Chiesa, religione, Cosa Nostra* (Roma: Laterza 2010).

<sup>7</sup> This reference might be to the final scenes of *The Godfather* and the christening of Connie Corleone's son.