Before or beyond narrative? Towards a complex systems theory of contemporary films
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Citation for published version (APA):
Amsterdam: Rozenberg
PART 3: PATTERN

In the last part of this dissertation I will focus more closely on the borderline cases of complex films, taking as an example the Italian film *Gomorrah* (*Gomorra*, Matteo Garrone, 2008). The issue of place, space and spatialization of the diegesis will be discussed in detail in the individual case of *Gomorrah* in Chapter 7 and further in the general context of complex films in Chapter 8. I will also suggest that modes of discourse other than narration, and particularly description, become pertinent in these films. The last chapter (Chapter 9), with an eye to the other parts of the dissertation, will question through the concept of ‘pattern’ whether complex films with their spatialized form of presentation involve emergent types of textual and cognitive organization.

7. Systems in crisis: *Gomorrah* as a case of complex cinema

If *Gomorrah* were a static picture, it would offer a *tableau vivant* of a world in crisis. It is the “System”114—as the locals call Camorra, the criminal organization controlling the area of Campania in Italy—that in the film seems to be employing all the means it has available for its homeostatic preservation. However, in this chapter I am not going to talk about this System in detail, because the film itself does not. Instead, it focuses on five different and partial perspectives upon a diegetic world that unfolds through them and declares itself, at the very end, as part of our real world—where Camorra is expanding. Thus *Gomorrah* creates its own ‘system’ that emerges from the bottom-up through the separate trajectories of six characters, drawn in a fragmented and disorienting space.

**One world, five perspectives**

Don Ciro (Gianfelice Imparato) is a ‘submarine’ in Camorra’s slang, that is, a bagman entitled to dole out a monthly financial benefit to the families of imprisoned members of Camorra. In his everyday trajectory from door to door, Don Ciro draws the invisible links of the clan’s network, crossing the ‘streets’ of the housing complex where both he and his ‘clients’ live their lives—streets which are actually narrow passageways between the different compartments and levels of the building. Although Don Ciro does not seem perfectly comfortable in the role he has in this peculiar community, his identity and self-respect are dependent upon the acceptance of the group, which he—or the money he circulates—holds together. However, as the clan that prevails in the area—and for which Don Ciro works—loses its power, obviously facing economic problems, one by one the people he used to consider...
“brothers” become enemies. At first, he successfully manages to negate the unrest that starts taking place around him, ignoring its inauspicious signs. A “bunch of morons warring against us” can do no harm: these are the words he uses to calm down the worrying woman (Maria) who confesses to him that her son joined the secessionists. However, as more and more people around him die, Don Ciro gets to realize that he has to consider his own role in this “war”. It becomes clear that he cannot continue to be a money-carrier for the leading clan; but neither can he do the same work for the opposite camp. The secessionists need the money for more drastic action; to “shoot and kill” in order to establish their power. So Don Ciro has no choice, if he wants to survive, other than to ‘buy’ his life, following the new power constellations, and to remain obedient and ‘invisible’.

Things are not better for those who now enter the established clan, as they watch the strings that used to hold it together breaking. Toto (Salvatore Abruzzese), a kid who lives in the same housing complex with Don Ciro, and who has just joined the drug trafficking that thrives in the area, is also forced to participate in the local civil war and betray his ‘brothers’. He has to play the ‘hook’ in order to help his superiors kill Maria, the mother of his close friend who became a secessionist. Toto cannot have his own say in this decision, and in his case, his age makes things worse; he is just a kid among older Camorristi and he has to obey their orders. His desire to grow up and become a ‘man’ made him eager to join the local clan, but the real experience of participating in its business has unglamorous aspects. In any case, it seems doubtful as to whether Toto would have been able to avoid his involvement in Camorra’s drug trafficking; he grew up being part of the System that reigns in his neighborhood, and his recruitment comes as a natural consequence of this inclusion.

Marco (Marco Macor) and Ciro (Ciro Petrone) are two other teenagers, who despise the ‘bosses’ of their area and have Tony Montana from De Palma’s Scarface as their idol. Armed with influences from gangster movies and a good deal of naiveté, they think that they can set up their own drug traffic business, and keep all the money and the thrill for themselves. Driven by their ambition, they turn down an offer to join the prevailing clan, or to ally with other secessionists. But with this they seem to commit against Camorra a ‘sin’ bigger than all others, for which they will have to pay a high price.

Roberto (Carmine Paternoster) has recently found a job in the waste disposal business—Camorra’s most profitable niche. Coming from a low-class family and lacking the necessary connections to find a decent job in Naples, he was sent to work for a noble businessman (Franco, played by Toni Servillo), next to whom he discovers that words such as “redevelopment” and “humanitarian aid” might have a dubious meaning. Roberto finds difficulties in adapting to the amoral way of conduct of his boss, and, in a burst of disgust, he quits his post, even though he knows that his future career prospects outside Camorra are thin.
Finally, Pasquale (Salvatore Cantalupo) is a tailor who has been working his whole life for a local sewing industry, which is apparently also controlled by the System. The small local industries have to compete with each other and abuse their workers’ rights so as to achieve good deals with the ‘haute couture’ traders. After one of these unfavourable—in terms of unpaid overtime—deals, Pasquale is approached by a Chinese businessman, who tries to set up his own dressmaking industry. The man offers Pasquale money in order to teach his craft to the immigrant workers. Pasquale hesitates to accept the offer, but eventually he gets convinced, to see the Chinese apprentices treating him with a respect that he had never experienced next to his boss. However, when those who control the area find out that Pasquale dared to sell his craftsmanship to the rivals, he hardly manages to survive the clan’s vengeance. His longing for self-respect that motivated his steps outside the familiar network and his attempt for individuation are simply not permitted in Camorra, as he ends up realizing in the most humiliating way. The only ‘independent’ option left to him is to abandon his art and become a truck driver.

The above synopsis reveals that it is almost impossible to narrate what is happening in Gomorrah, and to construct one (or five) coherent stories out of it, without using the word ‘Camorra’, which corresponds to this criminal (but also economical and social) organization that the film is ultimately ‘about’. It is this Neapolitan criminal organization that Roberto Saviano, the writer of the book Gomorrah, on which the film is based, decided to confront with his book. However, the film never uses the name Camorra (or ‘System’), and never helps us draw a larger picture to interpret the events we witness as viewers, except after its ending. This, one could argue, is the very process of narrative as a cognitive and also textual mode of organization. With narrative it is always at the end that we can construct the larger picture and put every piece in its place. However, in this chapter I will show how Gomorrah, through the complex space it weaves, subjects narrative to another organizing principle, which follows a different logic.

**Obscure space**

The plot of Gomorrah does not follow the homonymous book but rather ‘improvises’ on some disconnected passages of it. Some characters, who are only mentioned in passing in the book, create the diegetic world of Gomorrah through the ensemble of their singular perspectives. Both literary and filmic versions of Gomorrah are narrated “from the inside” as Garrone explains: “I thought that Saviano wrote the book from ‘the inside,’ thereby changing how the Mafia was characterized in literature. I also tried to write from ‘the inside,’ choosing certain characters from the book without glamorizing them” (2009). Gomorrah shares the
realistic style of its literary source, although it develops a different way to express it. In the film, the first person narration of Saviano’s prose is entirely substituted by the partial viewpoints of the characters, whose individual trajectories are followed separately (with many bifurcations) from the beginning until the end, through the interwoven episodes.

As I broached in the beginning of this chapter, Camorra stays an obscure ‘world’ throughout the whole film. As Saviano points out in the book, “Camorra” is a term that only external observers use to describe the activity of many different clans in the broader area of Naples—a name the reference of which is often followed by ironic smiles from the locals. Placing us indeed in the position of an ‘insider’, the words “Camorra” or “System” are never heard during the film. In the book Gomorrah, however, the ‘naming’ is done already on the cover, with the help of the subtitle. The subtitle of the English version (Picador publisher, 2008) is quite explicit: “A personal journey into the violent international empire of Naples’ organized crime system”. The original Italian subtitle is even more explicit: “Viaggio nell’impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della Camorra” (“a journey in the economic empire and the dream for prevalence of Camorra”). But it is not only the subtitle of the book that differentiates it from the film. Saviano’s book is to a large extent a journalistic exposition of the activities of the System, being very explicit in actual details and containing names of people and places. Saviano gives a special importance to ‘naming’, associating it with facing. Regarding the power of naming, he draws inspiration from Pasolini, and for that of ‘facing’, from the Biblical story of Gomorrah, according to which Lot’s wife, turning back to face the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, turned into a pillar of salt.\textsuperscript{116} The film Gomorrah, however, suspends naming. During Gomorrah, as Radovic says, “the clues are everywhere but the big picture is a frayed patchwork of brutally rough sketches” (2009: 7). It seems as if the elements of Gomorrah resist, through their spatial disparity, their own integration into the System. However, the pattern that their stories weave connects them into a complex system before their final inclusion into ‘the’ System of Camorra.

Apart from avoiding the reference to Camorra, it is also extremely difficult to ‘speak’ about Gomorrah without referring to real-life places and events. Toto and Don Ciro represent different viewpoints on the same place at the same time: Scampia at the time of the ‘war’ (feud) of Camorra. This war actually took place in 2004 when the clan of Di Lauro, controlling the area in the North of Naples (especially the suburb of Scampia), was fought by secessionists who demanded their operational autonomy.\textsuperscript{117} However, Gomorrah does not make reference to the actual names of people and places involved in this war.

Apart from the stories of Don Ciro and Toto that take place in the same locale and obviously unfold in parallel, the viewer cannot be certain whether the stories of the other characters are chronologically contemporaneous or not, despite their parallel placement in
terms of editing. The temporal registers of *Gomorrah’s* stories remain undefined, and the same happens with their spatial coordinates. The diegetic space, as a cognitive composition of the ‘places’ a film contains—according to André Gardies’ distinction between place and space in cinema (1993)—in *Gomorrah* becomes difficult for the viewer to construct.

The film was shot on locations where Camorra’s business actually takes place. The places of shooting vary depending on which one of the five ‘perspectives’ the film focuses on each time. The epicentre of all stories is the area North of Naples. Other scenes of the film (like those featuring Ciro and Marco) were shot in the area of Casal di Principe, a municipality situated 25 km northwest of Naples, which is the hometown of some notorious clans of Camorra (but also of the author of the book *Gomorrah* Saviano). The first scene featuring Ciro and Marco was shot inside the “villa di Walterino”—the nickname of the former local ‘boss’ Walter Schianoni—in Casal di Principe. This villa, as Saviano mentions in the book, was modelled on the villa of Tony Montana in *Scarface*. The countryside close to Marcianise in the province of Caserta seems to be the—diegetic— basis for Roberto and Franco’s business, as Franco names Marcianise as the place where the disposal cargo heads to. The (actual) housing project Le Vele (The Sails) in Scampia was the setting of the scenes featuring Toto and Don Ciro (Nadeau 2008). This is how the housing project is described by a journalist of *The Washington Post*: “One notorious set of apartment buildings featured pyramidal wings connected by ramps and staircases crisscrossing within a concrete canyon” (Williams 2005).

Philosopher and film theorist Mario Pezzela characterizes Le Vele in *Gomorrah* as a “shapeless no-place” (2009: 249). Interestingly, the area’s mayor uses the same characterization for Le Vele in the documentary *Napoli Napoli Napoli* (Abel Ferrara 2009).

“No place” is a characterization that could also be used to refer to the diegetic space of *Gomorrah*. The term “non-place” has been coined by the anthropologist Marc Augé to describe the places where the subjects of supermodernity are found in transit, like, for instance, supermarkets or airports (1995). Such non-places do not retain any particular characteristics of the actual geographical place where they are situated. Moreover, crowds in them are subjected to the strictest surveillance. Although in the case of Le Vele, the term “no-place” has not been used with the theoretical loading that Augé gives to non-places, but probably in the sense of a place that is unbearable to live in, and which will never turn into a real ‘home’ for its inhabitants, the comparison is nonetheless tempting, as it offers a chance to think further on the film’s connection to place and space, and the way that it adjusts, along with other ‘complex’ films, to spectators of supermodernity who are found in continuous transit.

Although *Gomorrah* was shot on location, it very rarely provides the names of places. On the contrary, the film makes its best to render the places obscure and even unrecognizable.
This almost uncannily echoes with the biblical parable of Sodom and Gomorrah, about which Umberto Curi observes:

Ever since antiquity, in the histories of Flavius Josephus and Strabo, and right down to the most recent archaeological research, no one has been able to locate precisely where the two cities were. This means that, yes, they certainly did exist, but it is not possible to say where in the known world they were actually located, before being turned to smoke. The uncertainty of their geographical location is of itself a significant fact. […] Perhaps, in an intermediate area somewhere near the Dead Sea. Perhaps, much closer to us than we suspect. Perhaps, without fully realizing it, we ourselves are inhabitants of those cities. (Curi 2009: 245-246)

This spatial uncertainty that the contemporary *Gomorrah*, along with its Biblical counterpart, put emphatically forth, allows it to be at once local and universal, present and eternal, locatable and ‘ubiquitous’.\(^{118}\)

Some local audiences have actually criticized the film for marking the few places mentioned in it with Camorra’s blueprint (Tricomi 2008). However, the place is never directly indicated in *Gomorrah*.\(^{119}\) Locations are named in passing when action obviously takes place elsewhere: Marcianise is mentioned in Venice, where Franco negotiates with a local entrepreneur, while Naples is mentioned in some airport where Roberto’s father thanks Franco for taking his son into his business. Finally, Ciro and Marco mention Casal di Principe, which is not a seaside place, while hanging out at some port. The place in *Gomorrah* remains indefinite while the space of the film is being composed and differentially experienced through the spatial shifts performed, in terms of cinematography, editing and narrative.

**Realism and disorientation**

*Gomorrah* has been mainly discussed, both by film critics and scholars, with regard to realism. On the one hand, as an Italian film, it is considered to be continuing the tradition of Italian neorealism. On the other hand, it draws on the realism of modernist movements. Certainly *Gomorrah* combines some of the key characteristics of realism as a cinematic style that André Bazin praised, finding its exemplary manifestation in the movement of Italian neorealism (see Wagstaff 2007): it is shot on location, uses in part non-professional actors,\(^{120}\) some of whom are indeed members of Camorra (as revealed in the press), makes use of deep space, and has an episodic structure. The work of the director of *Gomorrah*, Matteo Garrone,\(^{121}\) has been placed in this neorealist tradition (diCarmine 2010), and his method has been described as an active search for authenticity, a “studied spontaneity” (Radovic 2009: 9),
which he achieves by proceeding to an almost ethnographical field research on the places he shoots.

At the same time, *Gomorrah* contradicts neorealism’s avoidance of artifice in the camera work and editing as well as its refusal to let the camera be expressive in itself, features that Gianetti points out as characteristic of this cinematic movement (2005: 476). *Gomorrah*’s cinematography and editing are strongly present and determine the structure of its plot. From this aspect, some influence from the realism of modernist *avant-garde* movements can be noted. In any case, it is not so much the realism of neorealism that is being challenged in *Gomorrah*, and perhaps even less the one of modernist cinema. What is rather being challenged is the representational realism associated with central perspective, which cinema inherited from Renaissance’s pictorial modes (Elsaesser 2009d: 6). In my view, *Gomorrah*’s connection to realism needs to be placed in the context of disorientation and ‘located unlocatedness’ that the film creates. In the following part of this chapter, I will first describe *Gomorrah*’s aesthetics of disorientation, which arguably demand a discontinuous and dynamic engagement of the viewer with the filmic environment. Then, I will show how this complex spatial experience is enhanced by the equally disorienting and disordered narration. Thus, I will not so much connect *Gomorrah* to the tradition of realist and modernist movements, but to the tendency of complex films.

In *Gomorrah*, a disorienting effect is achieved by the camerawork and editing of the film. Through shifts between different types of vision and motion, *Gomorrah* creates a discontinuous experience of the places depicted. I use the term ‘shift’ here in order to highlight the element of transfer, which implies at once a spatial relation and an abrupt (dis)connection. *Gomorrah*’s cinematography is characterized by shifts in terms of the camera’s placement and movement, the focus of the lens, the point of view and the lighting.

To enter the local microcosm formed by Camorra’s activities, *Gomorrah* employs handheld camera, which became, from Italian neorealism to the new waves and *cinéma vérité*, the landmark of a cinematographic style associated with realism. In *Gomorrah* the handheld camera becomes a tool of disorientation as it moves through the labyrinthine passageways that comprise the literally inescapable Neapolitan slum (including Le Vele and the buildings around it), where life is unthinkable beyond Camorra. However, at certain moments *Gomorrah* abruptly breaks with the handheld camera style, distancing its view and effectuating extreme shifts of scale. Thus, on the one hand, the handheld, amateur-like shooting adapts to the quick, spasmodic pace of Don Ciro or follows Marco’s and Ciro’s play with guns, capturing bodies in close-up. On the other hand, this style is often abandoned, and the shooting shifts to long-distance or bird’s eye view shots, which are again to be contrasted with close-ups on faces. In a characteristic scene, a long shot tilts down following the edge of a tall quarry to end up on a
human figure barely distinguishable in front of the giant cliff. Then a cut suddenly transfers us to a close-up of Roberto’s face. The use of wide and bird’s eye view shots, also characteristic in more ‘professional’, Hollywood-style shooting, do not soothe the viewer’s overall feeling of spatial (sensorimotor) disorientation; on the contrary, they enhance it through their juxtaposition with their opposites, such as the handheld shooting and the extreme close ups. Spatial disorientation is also effectuated at moments when we cannot even distinguish the presence of the characters in the frame. This happens, for instance, at the scene where we first encounter Roberto and his boss during their quest for the ideal disposal location, when they test the capacity of an abandoned gas station. At first, we can only hear their voices as we watch a shot of a landscape that seems empty; only when we manage to adjust our focus (and without the camera helping us to do so by zooming) we can distinguish the presence of figures in the background.

The technique of deep focus praised by Bazin is not prevailing in Garrone’s film. Rather, “additional layers of tension” are created through the imposition of limitations on the depth of field, as Rajko Radovic observes. This way “the surroundings are reduced to an out of focus mix of stark light and threatening sounds” (Radovic 2009: 9). This blurring of the surroundings happens in many scenes of the film, especially those involving the dilemmas and frustration that the characters encounter (for example, in the scene where Pasquale is approached by the Chinese businessman, or the one in which Toto runs away from the scene of Maria’s murder). A critic finds in *Gomorrah* a “contrast between deep and shallow focus”, with the latter communicating “a sense of a constant, ungraspable, unknowable violence which envelops and blurs clear and distinctive perception” (Duckworth 2008). The shifts between deep and shallow focus in *Gomorrah* are as abrupt as those between small and large scale.

The “ungraspable violence” that can be felt in *Gomorrah* is created by a sense of omnipresent surveillance by the System, which is not an abstract controlling structure but the social network itself, the way people relate to each other at a local level. In the space that this network creates, every single person involved in Camorra, from the pathetic drug dealers to the powerful bosses, becomes a node in a web of surveillance. This web is not created by bags and wires (nor by high-tech GPS devices) but by interpersonal relations bound to the place, reproducing the global model of distributed control at a local level. The camera enters this web and becomes an eye that could belong to any node of this network. And the labyrinthine spatial arrangement of the housing project that functions as one of the film’s key-settings intensifies the feeling of entrapment.

In a scene of *Gomorrah*, Don Ciro, having just survived an assault by two secessionists, walks in a dark passageway of the housing complex and looks around him with a frightened expression. In what seems to be an eyeline match, the camera glances at the dark
corridors of the lower and the opposite level of the building. The shot seems subjective, infiltrated as it is with Don Ciro’s fear. Without cut, the glance of the camera, which, as we are lead to assume, represents the glance of the character, moves to capture Don Ciro himself, who has now walked past that spot and can be seen from the back. His gaze towards the other side of the building is thus included into the gaze of someone (or just the camera) following him. Such *mise-en-abyme* embedding of gazes is among the techniques employed in order to achieve the effect of ‘lookers being looked at’, as well as to create constant shifts in the reality registers of *Gomorrah*, undermining forms of identification and perception based on central and omniscient perspective.

Finally, contrasts between light and darkness across different episodes and locations (the scenes of Roberto mostly take place in open air, where the disposal quarries are bathed in plain sunlight, while in the scenes of Don Ciro, shadows are prevalent) as well as within episodes (for instance in the open and closed spaces of the housing complex) set up a game of visibility and invisibility, surveillance and hiding. Particularly interesting in terms of lighting is the opening scene before the credits, where the blue fluorescent light washing the bodies of the foppish Camorristi creates a surreal and disorienting effect (see Ratner 2009).

The multiplication of perspectives and the effect of disorientation that *Gomorrah* achieves make the viewing experience a struggle to oneself within the filmic environment. *Gomorrah* could thus be considered in the context of a “new” kind of realism that becomes manifest in films of contemporary world cinema, where paradoxical forms of perspective proliferate. In new realism, Elsaesser notes, “The world […] manifests itself as having special properties. Relations of size are different, distance and proximity take on equally dangerous features, temporal registers no longer line up, terrible or miraculous things can happen” (2009d: 9). In such disorienting conditions of cinematic reception, the world is not posited in a frame and offered in its entirety to an immobile spectator, but calls for a multiple and almost haptic way to relate with it. Radovic observes that in *Gomorrah*, the field of vision is limited to action itself (2009: 7). I would add that in this film, vision comes after action, as it is through a painstaking process of adjustment and orientation that we finally get to see (visually perceive) what happens.

**Complex narration in Gomorrah**

Through its shifts in scale, focus and point of view, *Gomorrah* prompts the spectator to relate to the film through movement, displacement and re-orientation. But *Gomorrah* does not produce dislocation only through editing and cinematography, but also through the *syuzhet*, creating shifts from one story and character to the other. Thus, I would argue that *Gomorrah*
reproduces at the level of storytelling the spatial complexity of its visual composition. The latter can thus be placed not only in the context of the well-established (modernist, neorealist, and, in terms of theme, gangster film) cinematic traditions, but also in that of the contemporary ‘complex narrative’ tendency, which produces its own characteristic visual modes.

The script of *Gomorrah*, loosely based on the homonymous book of Saviano (first published in 2006 in Italy), is a product of collaboration between Garrone, Saviano and six more scriptwriters. To some extent reflecting the multiple processes followed in the writing of its script, *Gomorrah* has a multiple-thread plot structure, which the director has characterized as episodic, a term often used to indicate anthology-like or multi-plot films. Although Garrone refers to Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà* (Paisan, 1946) as a source of inspiration (Garrone 2008), the episodes of *Gomorrah* are extremely interwoven in comparison to Rossellini’s film. Thus, *Gomorrah* also stands close, in my view, to more recent ‘complex narrative’ films, such as *Short Cuts* and *Pulp Fiction*. As Radovic observes, “The narrative of *Gomorrah*, understandably, doesn’t follow a single or a straight line. It twists, turns and ducks for cover just like the gangsters do” (2009: 7).

If we separate the main plot threads of *Gomorrah* we get five different ‘stories’ or episodes. Providing each character with a number we have the following distribution: 1 for Don Ciro, 2 for Toto, 3 for Marco and Ciro (who act together), 4 for Roberto and 5 for Pasquale. The fragments of episodes appear in the film in the following order:

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1-2-1-2-3-4-5-2-1-2-4-3-5-1-2-4-1-3-2-1-5-2-1-4-5-3
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From this depiction one may see that the parallel stories of Don Ciro and Toto form something like the ‘axis’ of the film. The film (re)turns seven times to each of the episodes of Don Ciro and Toto and four times to each other episode. Most of the time, the scenes of Don Ciro and Toto are placed next to each other, because of the common place (of the housing complex) they share, although the two characters never meet. In terms of duration devoted to each character’s episode, the distribution is more even. The elliptical narration and the discontinuous editing effectuate an internal fragmentation of the episodes, so that the viewer has to get accustomed to an interrupted rhythm as s/he watches one and the same sequence of action. For instance, we see Don Ciro in his house putting on a bullet-proof jacket, then walking past Maria at the passageway in front of her house, trying to ignore her cries (because any interaction between them could prove dangerous for both, after the ‘betrayal’ of Maria’s son) and then at the parking lot on the lower level of the housing complex, hiding behind a cement column. With this by cuts interrupted ‘start-and-pause’ rhythm each episode or
episodic piece (i.e. sequence belonging to one of the separate plot-threads) is multiplied in its own space and duration.

With its multiplicity of stories, Gomorrah displays characteristics of the forms of narration that have been more broadly called “post-classical”: “A preliminary look into the narrative construction of these […] films shows a clear preference for multiple protagonists who participate in different stories that diverge and converge at different paces within the same film” (Thanouli 2008: 10). But how does Gomorrah ‘fit into’ the different typologies of ‘narrative complexity’?

In the typology of modular narratives that Cameron suggests, he distinguishes a group of “episodic” narrative films, “organized as an abstract series or narrative anthology”. Here he classifies multiple-protagonist films such as Alejandro González Inárritu’s 21 Grams and Babel (Cameron 2008: 6, 13-15). Gomorrah, with its episodic structure, shares common elements with such modular narratives but would probably not be considered one by Cameron, who gives priority to the temporal dimension of modularity. For example, we do not find moments in Gomorrah when the temporal sequence that the spectator has so far been following is subverted. However, even though Gomorrah does not lead to such reordering of the temporal sequence, its episodes are far from following an uninterrupted temporal progression. They are fragmented into pieces that interpenetrate with those of other episodes. Moreover, they are composed by shots and scenes that are loosely—and often abruptly, due to the discontinuous editing—connected to each other.

Gomorrah’s narrative structure is also reminiscent of Bordwell’s network narratives, because of the different, autonomous characters and stories it contains. But it is not the interactions between characters that form Gomorrah’s network, because almost all encounters and interactions are suspended in this film. Thus, while the films that Bordwell discusses as network narratives contain stories that crisscross each other sooner or later, in Gomorrah such crisscrossing is, if not completely absent, then significantly downplayed. Don Ciro and Toto walk in the same streets but never meet. The link that indirectly connects them is primarily the setting—the housing complex where they both live—and the character of Maria, who is both a friend of Don Ciro and the mother of Toto’s best friend. Like Toto and Don Ciro, the other main characters of Gomorrah never interact with each other and the five stories stay autonomous throughout the film (despite being interwoven through editing), in a way that differentiates Gomorrah from ‘network narratives’ such as Short Cuts or Magnolia.

Every narrative is composed by separate elements, which are sooner or later connected in a causal-logical sequence. Narrative elements (such as characters) are not introduced to recipients unless they have a role to play in the succession of the story and its ultimate coherence towards the end. Thus, even in narratives that resist unification, such as ‘network
narratives’, the strangers will at some point intersect, if not through tight causality then through chance, and their contribution to the larger picture will become clear. However, in some exceptional cases, like *Gomorrah*, these intersections are suspended: the separate stories composing the narrative network do not ever come together; there is no final unification in *Gomorrah*, neither an overall dramatic culmination, as Michael Covino observes (2009: 75). Our (hypothetical) wish for a miraculous or chance-driven intervention that would unite the separate destinies of *Gomorrah*’s characters and produce a sense of humane affection (like it happens in *Magnolia*, *Babel* and *Crash*) is left unfulfilled. In this respect, *Gomorrah* resembles the films that Bordwell characterizes as “borderline cases” of network narratives. For example, referring to the film *Slacker* (R. Linklater, 1991) he observes: “The story action doesn’t bring the characters face-to-face, and the narration doesn’t bare unexpected connections among them” (Bordwell 2007: 215). This phrase could also be used to describe the diegetic interactions in *Gomorrah*.

Like the films that have been characterized as “forking-path” (Bordwell) or “possible world” (Perlmutter) films, it can be argued that *Gomorrah* also creates a (subtle) play between potentiality and actuality, highlighting the presence of the former in every choice taken. At the same time it suggests that perhaps it is not contingency but necessity that drives the characters’ choices. The potentials are not endless in the sense that all choices are pragmatic. They are driven by the instinct for survival and adaptation to changing and uncertain conditions. Thus, choices in *Gomorrah* depend on the specific ‘starting conditions’ given to each character: when Don Ciro realizes that the inhabitants of Scampia have never been ‘brothers’, as he liked to fantasize, he is forced to take sides in order to keep himself safe from harm, even if this means to betray his former peers. Toto decides to join Giovanni’s clan but then he is forced to cooperate in the murder of Maria. Marco and Ciro decide to work as autonomous gangsters but they are also forced to stay out of the way. Pasquale has been exploited by his boss for his whole life, but when he decides to work autonomously, he is forced to either stay subordinated or lose his job. Roberto is placed in the waste disposal business out of financial necessity, but when he realizes that his ethics is not as ‘flexible’ as that of his boss, he is obliged to quit his job.

A series of events compose every episode, each of which culminates with the protagonist suffering the consequences of their choices. However, *Gomorrah* does not ever give up on demonstrating a type of agency that could be characterized as “performative” (see Elsaesser 2006: 216). There is a tension created between choices for integration into the System and choices for autonomy. But this tension does not suggest a binary opposition between the two: all stories are placed in a continuum between integration and autonomy, with each character occupying a different position in this continuum, and testing the degrees of
freedom left to him. Individual heroes with their different motives, either sense of community (Don Ciro), need for a job (Roberto), need for self-respect (Pasquale), ambition (Ciro and Marco), or just ‘feel for the game’ (Toto), they all try their chances to survive in or outside the System. This game between integration and autonomy can be distinguished in all of the stories developed—in terms of plot structure—in parallel, creating a pattern that connects the characters despite their physical and communicative disconnection.

As Saviano writes in the book *Gomorrah*, referring to the people who live in the broader area of Naples: “For the people who haven’t been born here, this place doesn’t mean anything. All guilty, all forgiven” (Saviano 2007; translation mine). It is the belonging to the place that makes them guilty, and this same belonging that gives them redemption, because they are unable to break free from it. But the film *Gomorrah* persists in exploring this (in)ability, catching the dynamism of the System in a perpetual present—spatially multiplied through the presents of a number of protagonists—where possibilities, however limited, are still up for grabs. The film thus emphasizes not only the kind of ‘resisting’ agency similar to the one that the character of Roberto shows (considered by various critics as the fictional counterpart of Saviano in the film), but perhaps, even more, the agency that is exerted through every choice and action taken inside the System.

Thus, although the network of Camorra seems to extend far beyond the miserable suburbs of Naples and its dwellers, swallowing every possibility for change inside its muddy harbor and toxic land, *Gomorrah* insists in posing dilemmas and testing its characters, keeping them in a continuous movement; not only an external and physical but also an internal and psychological movement. At the same time, the viewers are placed in a similar position with the characters, continuously prompted to shift to different contemporaneous trajectories and to adapt to an ever-changing cinematic and diegetic environment, in which the separate stories of *Gomorrah* develop.

**Multiplicity and transmediality in *Gomorrah***

Storytelling as such is not rejected in *Gomorrah*, the way it is in fundamentally non-narrative films (such as actuality films, experimental and art films, certain documentaries etc.—filmmic categories in which, of course, none of the “complex films” discussed in this thesis can be included). But what we can see in *Gomorrah* and other films of the complex narrative tendency is how narrative itself becomes in them the object of a non-narrative composition, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Moreover, *Gomorrah* is not open-ended in the same way that other complex films are, such as the oft-cited *Run Lola Run, Fight Club* and *Donnie Darko*, or the previously discussed *The Final Cut* and *Burn After Reading*. All separate stories in *Gomorrah* are given some kind of closure, depending on how
each character finally negotiates his inclusion into the System. Although Gomorrah contains stories that have a certain beginning, middle and end, the film’s purpose is not, in my view, solely to narrate these stories but rather to describe a world in which all episodes unfold. Even though Gomorrah ‘closes’ narratively five times (as all five episodes have some kind of resolution), it still remains open-ended, as I am now going to explain.

Following Gomorrah, the viewer is called to compose its world by inhabiting it before knowing it. In the same way that action and movement precede vision, facing, naming, and ultimately knowing—in the sense of rational grasping of an object—are suspended. After the end of the film, though, right before the end credits, Gomorrah seems to be endorsing—along with the book—naming. Thus, it ‘names’ Camorra and gives us in titles information about its international action in the actual world, from the drug trafficking to the waste disposal; the concluding title refers to Camorra’s investment in the reconstruction of the Twin Towers, after the 9/11 attack. Especially in the case that the viewer lacks previous information, but also because of the film’s avoidance of sharing it—which affects all viewers no matter how informed they are—these ‘facts’ displayed at the very end have a shocking impact. It is of course a common practice in films ‘based on a true story’ to communicate to the viewers real facts before the end titles. However, I think that this kind of naming has a special importance in the case of Gomorrah, because of its contrast with the rest of the film.\textsuperscript{127}

From one aspect, the information shared at the end allows us a somewhat more coherent grip on the stories retrospectively. It does not however allow us to construct a narrative that will include all the separate stories. We cannot reinterpret the film as the ‘story of Camorra’; actually, we still know nothing about Camorra. The information at the end creates a post-filmic link that connects the film’s storyworld to the world out there, or nowhere, in which we find ourselves equally disoriented, at the very moment that we think that we may finally achieve some orientation in the diegetic universe. Gomorrah gives us a clue to understand what has been going on in the plot so far; at the same time it points at what remains incomprehensible, that is, the workings of our actual world and the role of Camorra in it. The suffocating feeling created in the film is thus extended beyond the diegesis. Thus, what appears as ‘knowledge’ at the very end of Gomorrah, when the film’s network is given the name of Camorra, is rather the introduction of uncertainty at a higher level. Without naming the System it refers to, Gomorrah manages to posit the viewer inside its inescapable world; the ending of the film makes our actual world appear contained in the one of Camorra, instead of the other way around. The recipient is thus addressed by the film not only as spectator or narratee but also as a node in a larger network, that of global economy and the systems it supports and is supported by, such as the criminal system of Camorra.\textsuperscript{128}
Through its multi-thread and multi-character plot structure, *Gomorrah* partakes in a larger group of world cinema and also big studio productions (such as those discussed in Part 2) that share the “network narrative” format. Apart from partaking in this narrative tendency, however, the film of *Gomorrah* creates its own networks that supersede the film itself as an individual unit and expand into the broader media sphere. As already argued, with its closing the film on the one hand gives the viewer a clue to fill some gaps of understanding, on the other hand though, it leaves him/her baffled about the workings of Camorra. This reveals the ‘transmedia’ character of the film: it is by reading Saviano’s book and collecting information from other sources that a clearer picture of Camorra, as well as of what has been going on in the film, can be gained.

Transmediality has been pointed out as a feature of the literary movement into which the book of *Gomorrah* has been classified, according to Wu Ming 1 (2008). This movement, named New Italian Epic, has a manifest tendency to create “transmedial communities”, stimulated by the participatory spirit of the novels themselves as well as that of their writers. So there have been various “spin-offs” from New Italian Epics: films and TV series, video-games and board games, internet communities, theatrical plays, music etc. (Wu Ming 1 2008).

Based on a ‘New Italian Epic’ (Saviano’s book), the film *Gomorrah* also shows a collective spirit, on the level both of screenwriting (by its six scriptwriters) and textual composition (with its multiple characters and episodes). It also shares with New Italian Epics the feature of transmediality, adding more nodes to the network that the preexisting book started. Henry Jenkins, one of the most oft-cited theorists of transmediality, considers this feature to be related to the multiplicity of characters within the diegesis, as well as to the open-endedness of the latter. As he points out,

> transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story. (Jenkins 2007; emphasis mine)

*Gomorrah* is of course in many respects different from the film examples that Jenkins brings about. But it also has significant similarities with the complex transmedia objects he describes. The process of ‘world building’ is encouraged in *Gomorrah* both in the relationship
between spectator and screen—due to the obscure and disorienting style and editing—and also in the relationship between the spectator and the world beyond the film, a world which is no less obscure and complex.

The film *Gomorrah*—as well as my approach of it—ends with an ‘observation’ of its diegetic world in relation to our world,\(^{134}\) not to create a coherent narrative, but to produce further complexity, as it now embeds an environment of other systems, and creates more connections between them. Thus *Gomorrah* forms a complex system both internally and diegetically, and externally, being itself a node in economical, social and cultural networks of which the film partakes and creates. The complex diegetic space of the film reproduces in a fractal way the complex space of its environment, to which viewers and social subjects have to adapt by developing new skills of orientation. In the following chapter, I will argue that the mode of organization under which *Gomorrah* subsumes narrative can be compared with that of description in literary theory. This mode has implications upon the viewer’s construction of the diegetic space as an emergent world.