

Edited by Dana Renga

MAFIA MOVIES

A Reader

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

©University of Toronto Press Incorporated 2011
Toronto Buffalo London
www.utppublishing.com
Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-0-8020-9969-3
ISBN 978-0-8020-9665-4



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer paper with vegetable-based inks.

Toronto Italian Studies

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Renga, Dana, 1971–
Mafia movies: a reader / by Dana Renga

(Toronto Italian studies)
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8020-9969-3 (bound). – ISBN 978-0-8020-9665-4 (pbk.)

1. Gangster films – United States – History and criticism 2. Gangster
films – Italy – History and criticism 3. Mafia in motion pictures, I. Title.
II. Series: Toronto Italian studies

PN1995.9.M23R45 2011 791.43'6556 C2011-900251-5

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).

36 Growing Up *Camorrista*: Antonio and Andrea Frazzi's *Certi bambini*

ALLISON COOPER

Antonio and Andrea Frazzi's *Certi bambini* (2004), based on Diego De Silva's eponymous novel, dramatizes the process by which the Neapolitan Camorra comes to supplant traditional Italian social institutions like the Catholic Church and the family.¹ The film describes, through the story of its eleven-year-old protagonist, Rosario, the ways in which poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment in contemporary Naples force the city's youngest inhabitants into the street and into the arms of the Camorra. In highlighting the causal relationship between Naples' inadequate social structures and the social reproduction of violence perpetuated by the Camorra, the film aligns itself ideologically with such post-Second World War neorealist films as Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) and *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946), even as it makes a marked departure from those films' neorealist aesthetic in its employment of a distinctive cinematographic style best described as 'high-gloss neorealism.'² The following chapter examines *Certi bambini*'s treatment of organized crime in Naples within the film's broader cinematographic and cultural contexts, exploring in particular its relationship to Peter Brook's dystopian film *Lord of the Flies* (1963) and a Freudian world view that pits the aggressive individual, whose instinctual violence is exploited by the Camorra, against the processes of civilization.

Set in the early 2000s, *Certi bambini* depicts an unnamed yet clearly recognizable Naples and its surroundings in a period of pronounced mob violence.³ By the time of the film's release in 2004, Campania, and indeed Italy as a whole, had become accustomed to the Camorra clans' internecine feuds, but the organization's increasing disregard for the lives of innocent bystanders and the minors it corrupts suggested that

a troubling transformation of its criminal values was taking place. Scholars like Tom Behan, Felia Allum, and Percy Allum have linked this transformation to a fundamental change in the Camorra itself, which, from the post-Second World War period through to the early twenty-first century, has become less a social organization dedicated to personal advancement than a business enterprise devoted to making money.⁴ The value of a human life, then, once discounted in a *camorrista* code of values privileging honour above all else, is depicted in *Certi bambini* and more recent films like Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* (*Gomorra*, 2008) to have decreased even further in the pursuit of increased profits.⁵

Certi bambini's subject is the failure of Italian society to protect its children against this corruption, and the ease with which certain children adopt the Camorra's indifferent attitude towards human life. Perhaps the most troubling social consequence of this attitude has been the organization's increasingly successful exploitation of minors as drug runners and, in extreme cases, as child assassins.⁶ This practice began in earnest in the mid-1990s in response to state crackdowns on organized crime, as bosses realized that the legally protected status of minors provided them and the Camorra immunity from prosecution. Between 1990 and 1992, for example, Campania saw a 93 per cent increase in the number of children under the age of fourteen who were charged with crimes.⁷ This relatively new social reality in Naples is presented in *Certi bambini*, which recounts the adolescent Rosario's conversion by, and ultimate affiliation with, the Camorra.

The film locates Rosario at a crossroads where he must choose between the community of his local Catholic parish and the more seductive subculture of the Camorra. With only an aged, befuddled grandmother to act as his guardian, he forms tenuous relationships with the residents and volunteers at a local home for young women administered by the church, but they are not enough to safeguard him from the attention of local *camorristi*. When events occur at the home that compel Rosario to defend his honour and avenge the death of a female friend who is also his precocious love interest, he is drawn to the Camorra and, in particular, to its recourse to violence as a means of resolving problems.

Adopting the conventions of the mafia movie as well as those of the coming-of-age film, *Certi bambini* presents Rosario's passage from child to *camorrista* through a series of flashbacks anchored in the film's narrative present. As Rosario journeys on a metro train towards a destination revealed only at the film's end, the events leading to the story's

dénouement are disclosed one by one. This disjointed exposition underscores the lack of continuity in Rosario's upbringing, just as the premise of the film's opening sequence, in which Rosario and his friends dare each other to cross several lanes of traffic on a busy Italian highway, underscores the precarious nature of his existence. The prologue's suspenseful pace suggests that, like many mafia movies, *Certi bambini* will have a significant action component (and indeed many of the film's sequences are equally suspenseful), yet an early visual allusion to Peter Brook's 1963 adaptation of *Lord of the Flies* alerts attentive viewers that the film has more to offer by way of social commentary than its action-packed prologue might otherwise suggest.

Brook's film, like the 1954 novel by William Golding upon which it is based, famously recounts the efforts of a group of British schoolboys to govern themselves after they are marooned on a deserted island, and the disastrous results that follow. As Rosario and his friends scramble up an embankment and through the brush in the opening frames of *Certi bambini*, graphic continuities between their journey and that of Ralph, Piggy, and the other boys in *Lord of the Flies* mark similarities between the films that are also thematic. In both works, adolescent boys are left to their own devices and, in the absence of adults, their social practices become increasingly brutal as violence supplants the rule of law. This visual allusion to *Lord of the Flies* in the opening frames of *Certi bambini* evokes the earlier film's setting of social isolation. The outskirts of modern-day Naples, it suggests, are just as isolated as *Lord of the Flies'* deserted island, at least for children like Rosario and his friends. As we soon discover, the Neapolitan children in the Frazzi brothers' film react to that isolation much like Ralph, Piggy, and Jack do in *Lord of the Flies*, forming gangs and adopting violent means to increase their chances of survival.

Unlike the spare *mise en scène* of *Lord of the Flies*, which facilitates the film's allegorical critique of modern society, *Certi bambini's* *mise en scène* underscores the social realities of contemporary Naples. Youth gangs like the one formed by Rosario and his companions do indeed roam Naples' neglected neighbourhoods and waterfront, abandoning their schooling and tenuous family lives in search of alternative forms of social acceptance. As their members commit thefts and assaults, their actions bring them into contact with members of the Camorra, who then pressure them to commit increasingly violent criminal acts. Yet, even as the graphic continuities that initially link *Certi bambini* to *Lord of the Flies* are succeeded by a more sweeping cinematographic vision of

Naples' poverty and isolation, the earlier film remains a touchstone as it becomes clear that *Certi bambini* shares its thematic concern with the descent of the individual and the state into violence. The downward trajectory of the boys in both films implicitly criticizes the adults and the state that permit such a thing to occur: grownups are at fault in the diegetic world of the films due to their inability to safeguard society's youngest members, the representatives of its future and hope for a functioning society, as are the grownups in the non-diegetic world of the films' spectators. Both stories serve as an admonition that, without a return to civilization, the violence into which these children are raised will be socially reproduced through primitive, regressive rituals and rules intended to sanction and perpetuate it. This is what takes place in *Lord of the Flies*, when the murderous tribe formed by one of the boys to oppose the rule of another engages in ritualized slaughter, and in *Certi bambini* when Rosario confirms his participation in the Camorra with similarly ritualistic acts of slaughter. In both films, violence seems to offer surer prospects of survival than non-violence, represented in *Lord of the Flies* by Ralph's attempt to civilize the island society, and in *Certi bambini* by the efforts of Santino and Don Alfonso – figures associated with the church's home for young women – to present Rosario with an alternative to the Camorra.

Freud's theory of the divided self is one interpretive key to the conflicts among the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, whose interactions are read in this light as an outward manifestation of the battle of will that takes place in the individual's psyche as the civilizing superego seeks to check the primal drives of the id.⁸ The violence that increasingly characterizes Rosario's actions in *Certi bambini* issues from a related Freudian paradigm: that of the Oedipal complex. Characters and narrative in the film are organized neatly around a Freudian patriarchal structure in which male authority is predicated upon the Law of the Father – the paternal injunction that forbids the son from sleeping with his mother and, by extension, acts as an injunction against violence.⁹ Rosario, for example, is a wayward filial figure who wishes to sleep with Caterina, the young woman who befriends him at the home. Caterina's pregnant state confirms her symbolic role as mother in the film, just as Santino's encouragement of Rosario casts Santino in a fatherly role. Rosario's decision to affiliate himself with the Camorra is conditioned by an Oedipal logic, as he discovers Santino and Caterina making love and, rather than repress his desire for Caterina, sets Santino up with a plan intended to publicly humiliate or even harm his rival.

The Camorra, with the mobster Damiano as its representative, presents itself to Rosario in the film as an alternative family: one that – unlike the one constituted by Santino, Caterina, and Don Alfonso – encourages him to express, rather than repress, his violent impulses. Damiano replaces Santino as a paternal figure, just as he replaces traditional Christian familial values of love and compassion with fear, indifference, and violence through a violent initiation ritual that has him ruthlessly shooting his own dog, ‘Dottore,’ and then demanding that Rosario finish the job. Damiano’s cruel execution of a seemingly beloved pet, carried out to demonstrate his power and authority to Rosario, and Rosario’s subsequent transformation into a *camorrista* as he is rapidly acculturated into the organization, is thus framed in the film as the violent consequence of the family’s and the church’s failure to protect Italy’s youngest generation. Moreover, the scene reveals the mechanism by which the Camorra, as an alternative to those institutions, ritualizes violence and guarantees its social reproduction through the induction of young recruits like Rosario.

If the Camorra is a substitute for Rosario’s absent family in *Certi bambini*, it is a false one since one of the primary ways in which the Camorra distinguishes itself from (and has arguably gained primacy over) the Sicilian Mafia is through its lack of insistence on blood ties for access to the organization.¹⁰ Newcomers like Rosario may join with relative ease, as the film suggests, but they may just as easily be cast out of the group (as the dog Dottore’s abrupt exit symbolically demonstrates). Yet the film does not, as some mafia films do, engage in a simplistic division of the world into good and evil, with family and church in the former category and the Camorra in the latter. Beyond Rosario’s own inadequate family (his grandmother’s befuddlement is the result of the Rohypnol that she regularly takes), the other biological family that we encounter in the film is composed of a mother who prostitutes her pre-adolescent daughter to Rosario’s friends. This scene, like many others in the film, underscores the tenuous way in which children like Rosario survive, as well as the complicity of the failing family in their exploitation and delinquency. This scene also raises troubling questions about the highly gendered nature of female roles in the film – the depictions of Caterina and the young girl suggest an adherence to traditional conceptions of gender roles that we know, from sources like Roberto Saviano’s *Gomorra* and the work of researchers like Felia Allum, no longer define the lives of women in Naples and in the Camorra.

As the failed efforts of Santino and Don Alfonso suggest, the Frazzi brothers' critique of the family extends to the spiritual family ostensibly formed by the Catholic Church, embodied in the film by Don Alfonso, the priest who administers the home – a sort of halfway house – for young women. Don Alfonso reveals the extent to which the church has lost touch with modern reality when he reassures the young, unwed Caterina that her pregnancy is 'the most beautiful thing that could happen' to her. Yet that pregnancy, instead of being the most beautiful thing that could happen to her, kills her as she haemorrhages to death in a poorly staffed emergency room. Like Pope Benedict XVI, who recently observed that 'Naples obviously needs substantial political action, but first still, a profound spiritual renewal,'¹¹ Don Alfonso underestimates the devastating effects of the Camorra, and of Naples' related socio-economic decline, upon all of the city's inhabitants. Caterina and her unborn child are just two of the many human casualties of Naples' desperate lack of resources, a situation unlikely to change with its spiritual renewal.

Anti-Mafia activists have condemned films like *The Godfather* for their commercialization of the criminal underworld,¹² but *Certi bambini* resists this kind of critique, as we have seen, through its refusal to elevate any social group in the film and in its commitment to depicting the everyday struggles of Naples' most marginalized, vulnerable inhabitants against a predatory Camorra. Indeed, the film's subject matter, the violent exploitation and corruption of youth in the harsh socio-economic conditions of an embattled Naples, suggests that its proper cinematographic context is as much Italian neorealism as it is the mafia movie genre. Like De Sica's *Shoeshine*, for example, *Certi bambini* utilizes child protagonists to underscore the enduring consequences of the failure of Italy's inadequate institutions. But both films' social critiques derive their power as much from their young protagonists' seemingly innate cruelty, as they do from their victimization. The young protagonists of *Shoeshine*, like Rosario and his companions in *Certi bambini*, become victimizers when confronted with society's indifference to their fate, capable of the same kind of violence as their adult role models. This uncomfortable reality – the Freudian notion that every individual is inherently violent, even (or especially) a child – is fully expressed in *Certi bambini*'s disturbing ending, when Rosario performs an execution at Damiano's behest and completes his assimilation into the Neapolitan criminal underworld. Once Rosario's hit has been carried out, he

shrewdly conceals his actions by joining a group of children engaged in an innocent soccer game near the scene of the crime. Now a confirmed *camorrista* and killer, he hides in plain sight, and *Certi bambini's* viewers are left to contemplate his bleak future and that of a society whose youngest, most vulnerable members are corrupt.

In conclusion, I'd like to reflect upon *Certi bambini's* narrative structure, which might appear overly determined in relation to the neorealist mandate that cinema set aside artifice in the effort to depict reality. In the Frazzi brothers' film, a flashback structure ensures that we end up where we began, and underscores the impossibility of true progress in order to demonstrate contemporary society's regression to a less-civilized state. It is worthwhile, however, to consider the extent to which Rosario's fate, and that of the young children upon which his character is based, is also overly determined, be it by Freud's death instinct or by a Camorra canny enough to exploit it. Ultimately, the hopeless, inexorable course of these children's lives is guided, if not by the hands of directors like the Frazzi brothers, than by those elusive hands over the city alluded to in Francesco Rosi's 1963 film, *Hands Over the City*. The latter have exerted their influence over Naples and its residents since the inception of the Camorra centuries ago and, judging by the bleak portrait of the city presented in *Certi bambini* and similar films, may well continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

- 1 *Certi bambini* has been released in English-speaking countries under various titles, including *A Children's Story* (U.S.), *Certain Children* (Australia), and *Stolen Childhood* (Canada). For consistency's sake I will refer to it hereafter by its Italian title.
- 2 Stephen Holden, 'Film Festival Reviews: A Global View of Human Experience that Tells Some of the Stories Behind the News,' *The New York Times*, 26 March 2005, Arts Section (online edition), retrieved 15 June 2009 from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400EFDD113FF935A15750C0A9639C8B63>
- 3 For a recent description of the Camorra's activities in and around Naples, see Felia Allum and Percy Allum, 'Revisiting Naples: Clientelism and Organized Crime,' *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 13, no. 3 (2008): 355.
- 4 See Allum and Allum, 'Revisiting Naples,' and Tom Behan, *See Naples and Die: The Camorra and Organized Crime* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002).

5. For more on organized crime and the devaluation of human life, see Renate Siebert, *Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1996), 76–8.
6. See Felia Allum, 'Becoming a Camorrista: Criminal Culture and Life Choices in Naples,' *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2001): 343.
7. Behan, *See Naples and Die*, 160–3.
8. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). Freud writes: '... the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and ... it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization' (118).
9. For a more thorough analysis of the function of the Law of the Father in the mafia film, see Danielle Hipkins' excellent analysis of Pietro Germi's *In the Name of the Law* in this volume.
10. For a detailed discussion of the symbolic significance of blood relationships among members of criminal organizations, see Anton Blok, *Honour and Violence* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), chap. 5.
11. Phil Stewart, 'Pope Condemns Camorra Violence on Naples Visit,' Reuters, 21 October 2007 (online edition), retrieved 20 June 2009 from www.reuters.com/article/idUSL2147706620071021
12. See, for example, Luigi M. Satriani, 'Della mafia e degli immediati dintorni,' in Stefano Morabito, ed., *Mafia, 'Ndrangheta, Camorra. Nelle trame del potere parallelo* (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 2005), 33–7.