

28 Francesco Rosi's *Hands over the City*: A Contemporary Perspective on the Camorra

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In his 2006 book *Gomorrah*, which has received worldwide acclaim, Roberto Saviano opens one of the most evocative and intense sections of his work (in [chapter 3](#)) with the remark that ‘the clans’ power remained the power of cement. It was at the construction sites that I could feel – physically, in my gut – all their might ... Cement. The petroleum of the south. Cement gives birth to everything.’¹ Saviano’s attack on the Camorra’s real estate speculation is visualized in the very first scene of Francesco Rosi’s *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands over the City*, 1963), which opens with a panning shot of Naples dominated by a dense row of imposing buildings – signs of an unstoppable, wild urbanization – looking down on a valley where the fertile agricultural land and a lonely pine tree still represent the fecundity of the city and its traditional Mediterranean beauty. The mass of threatening buildings is at first destined to proceed in another direction, but corrupt developer Edoardo Nottola wants to change the urban development plan, and build ‘with no strife and no worries, at all profit and no risk,’ in the farming zone surrounding the industrial city. He need only get the approval from the local administration, and in the second scene, Nottola achieves his goal.

This scene provides the film’s first significant example of the collusion between political institutions and the economic world. Such collusion is the central topic of Rosi’s work and is also in the foreground after a fatal accident in Vico Sant’Andrea, one of Naples’ poorest neighbourhoods. An old building there has collapsed due to nearby construction, killing two people. Nottola, who is responsible for the accident, is also a member of the right-wing party in power at city hall. In exchange for economic favours from the municipal government (total control over bids, contracts, quarries, cement, and workers), he ensures that his party will have sufficient votes to win the upcoming elections. After the accident, Nottola’s candidacy and the success of his party are at risk, since both De Vita, leader of the left-wing party, and the citizens of Naples hold him responsible for the casualties. Nottola refuses to withdraw his candidacy, and in order to continue his real estate speculation, he allies with the centrist Christian Democratic Party (DC). The DC wins the elections, and Nottola remains in power.

In *Hands over the City*, the parallels between Saviano’s contemporary account of the Camorra and Rosi’s analysis of the links between the economic world and the political administration multiply, thus confirming that as early as 1963, Rosi was able to provide a lucid analysis of what is today considered the true nature of the Camorra: it is a criminal organization that bases its power on an illegal alliance between economic forces and political institutions. Hence, Rosi’s work can be considered a reliable forerunner of Saviano’s book, and as such, its relevance is reaffirmed and

reinforced in contemporary Italian cinema and society. But how did Rosi expose such profound connections between Camorra activities, the business world, and political power? Furthermore, why did Rosi not employ the word Camorra in his film?

Let us return to the second scene: it is set at city hall, where we find a reproduction of the Naples landscape – the buildings and the farming area we encountered in the first scene – in a miniature model that defines the urban plan. The mayor, representative of the right wing, employs a masterpiece of rhetoric to implicitly announce that Nottola's wish has come true. According to him, the city plan has been 'the subject of intense debate,' and a specially appointed committee of urban planners 'has chosen the area north of the city' to be developed, namely, the area in which Nottola is interested for his own speculation. Rosi's sarcasm is striking when we consider that the 'special committee' has been constituted to satisfy Nottola's demands. The 'intense debate' probably never occurred, and Nottola played a significant role in the council's decision. This becomes evident as the mayor speaks to the city council utilizing the same words with which Nottola had clearly manifested his intentions in the previous scene. Nottola's goal – summed up in his statement, 'We just need to convince the city to bring roads, sewers, water, gas, power, and telephone lines here' – is almost perfectly mirrored by the mayor's words: 'Where now there's only a squalid expanse, the city will bring roads, water, power, and gas.' The lexical correspondence between Nottola's list of the city's improvements and the mayor's speech is not the only formal element that defines Rosi's first example of the collusion between business and politics. In city hall, those buildings that appeared so threatening in the first scene are now presented on a small scale and paralleled by a row of politicians standing stiff and still next to the model of the city. Those men are truly in control of Naples, and the buildings are a manifestation and extension of their power. Rosi circumnavigates the model through three different camera angles, conveying that the suffocating buildings of Naples are only the direct expression of the asphyxiating presence of those politicians, who indeed have the city in their grasp, literally and metaphorically.

It is clear by now that no economic strategy can take off without the strong support of the political system. However, in this case, the commercial initiative is not a legal one, and it is perpetrated against the poor, 'the significant Other, the absent Other,'² victims who are absent from the scene but present in the viewer's mind as the objects of social discrimination. These people, in fact, die under their crumbling houses, or they are evicted and deceived with false promises of a better life.

Rosi's denunciation of illegal activities is delivered in the film by the engineer De Vita, who attacks corrupt politicians for distorting ethical values. He calls attention to the crucial problem of ethical responsibility, and his appeal to ethics is ironically echoed by the mayor of the city, who earlier asked the government for economic assistance and moral support: 'The support we request from the national government is not merely of a financial nature. It's also an ethical matter.' Later, the mayor will ask the inquiry board to investigate the accident since he intends 'to put forth ethical values [*moralizzare*] ... relatively speaking, of course.'³ But what kind of ethical initiative can ever come from politicians, for whom money is the essence of ethics? Rosi provides an example of distorted ethics when he shows the mayor giving money to the poor who come to city hall to ask for charity. The mayor's generosity, compassion, and sense of democracy towards the indigent are, in reality, a means to build consensus. 'Councilman De Vita, see how democracy works?', the mayor jovially asks his companion after his munificent display. After all, Nottola, responding to attacks in a newspaper, had already candidly admitted that if city hall did not stop construction after the accident, it was because he (Nottola) held 'the purse strings.' Ethics also becomes an

issue for Balsamo, a member of the DC, who wants to withdraw his candidacy because his ethical responsibility towards public opinion prevents him from being on the same electoral slate as Nottola. Professor De Angeli, leader of the DC, replies, 'In political life, moral indignation is a worthless commodity. You know what the only true sin is? Losing.' De Angeli's statement clarifies that the only possible logic is that of power. More than forty years later, Saviano points out that *camorristi* consider ethics to be 'the limit of the loser, the protection of the defeated, the moral justification for those who haven't managed to gamble everything and win it all.'⁴ In other words, for *camorristi* in the past as in the present, ethics is a clear sign of psychological weakness and a limit to the achievement of political and economic power.

Though Rosi emphasizes the dishonesty and unlimited power of those who have money and who occupy political positions in the local administration, he also makes a plea for the common people – those on the screen and in the audience – to be more critical and active. A group of disenfranchised inhabitants of Vico Sant'Andrea are shown through theatrical and circular pans and medium close-ups as De Vita reminds them that they still have the power to vote. 'Did you give them your vote?', he asks. 'And now here are the consequences. Can't you understand that you give them the power to do what they want? After all, what did they do for you?' Michel Ciment remarks that Rosi believes the spectator can perform an 'act of freedom' in choosing something different from the status quo. This act of freedom 'is however tied to the thought process of the director who involves the spectator in his inquiry, leads him to uncover and become aware of the hidden meaning of complex social relationships.'⁵

Throughout the film, Nottola and other politicians with whom he is affiliated can be regarded as the prototypes for the present-day Camorra bosses, especially in view of Saviano's contemporary insight into the Neapolitan criminal world. Nevertheless, in Rosi's film the words Camorra and *camorristi* are never pronounced, not even by De Vita, who unmasks the trade-off between politicians and businessmen. The latter are not delineated as typical Camorra leaders and henchmen: they do not violently and openly kill, they do not speak in dialect, and they seem to be well educated. They remind us of the (new) generations of bosses described by Saviano: 'New generations of bosses don't follow an exclusively criminal path; they don't spend their days on the streets with the local thugs, carry a knife, or have scars on their face, they watch TV, study, go to college, graduate, travel abroad, and are above all employed in the office of the mechanisms of power.'⁶ Saviano underscores that contemporary bosses surround themselves with artworks, and they manipulate both their culture and their public image (often based on famous film characters) to express their power. In Rosi's film, De Angeli shows his knowledge of art and appreciation of beauty as he speaks with Balsamo about Luca Giordano's and Francesco Solimena's paintings, and Nottola comments harshly on his own picture chosen for public display during the elections. He is aware of the power of his appearance. In other words, the film offers an image of those in power that does not nourish the people's traditional perception of Camorra criminals. In this way, Rosi distances himself even from his previous mafia movie, *La sfida* (*The Challenge*, 1958), in which he offers a classic picture of *camorristi* who are mainly occupied with the illegal traffic of goods and the murder of those who do not respect the hierarchy established by Camorra bosses.

Let us return now to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay: What, then, is Camorra? Why doesn't Rosi employ the word 'Camorra' to identify the illicit activities represented on the screen? Why is Rosi's work considered a film on the Camorra? Rosi's *Hands over the City* has the merit of proposing and formalizing for the first time on the screen the true nature of the Camorra

in its most dangerous aspect, namely, its alliance with political institutions. Rosi was certain that 'mechanisms leading to speculation would have originated political corruption, economic pressure without scruples and all sorts of compromises and alliances with the Camorra.'⁷ According to the filmmaker, it was between 1958 (*The Challenge*) and 1963 (*Hands over the City*) that businessmen began their transformation into Camorra bosses.⁸ If in 2006 Saviano contends that Camorra is an obsolete term that should be replaced with the word *Sistema* (a sophisticated system of illegal political and economic relations on a local, national, and international level), so Rosi in 1963 shows that the Camorra is not solely visible in serial murders, extortions, the smuggling of goods, or kickbacks; it is now encountered first and foremost in the illicit agreements between political representatives and businessmen often connected with Camorra clans. Today, according to Saviano, the *camorristi* are above all businessmen.

It could be argued that the absence of the word Camorra in the film is due to Rosi's adoption of a method of denouncement that was both conventional and safe. However, considering Rosi's previous films (*The Challenge* and *The Magliari*, 1959; *Salvatore Giuliano*, 1961) and especially the ones that followed *Hands over the City* – *Il caso Mattei* (*The Mattei Affair*), 1972; *Lucky Luciano*, 1973; *Cadaveri eccellenti* (*Illustrious Corpses*), 1976; *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*), 1979; *Tre fratelli* (*Three Brothers*), 1981 – this explanation may be inaccurate and superficial. Let us go a bit further. According to Tom Behan, who studied the origins and the development of the Camorra,⁹ the organization was already known in the 1960s for its illegal activities and especially for its links with local and national politicians. Therefore, when the film premiered in 1963, people were well aware of how the Camorra acquired power. Hence, spectators both then and today may connect the politicians in power in the film with the highest representatives of the Camorra, particularly if the context is the city of Naples. In commenting on his film, Rosi too takes for granted the connection between politics and the mafia: 'The developer Nottola ... in order to achieve his own goals involves the general political entourage of the various powers – political power, economic power with *the complicity of organized crime*.'¹⁰

Furthermore, one could argue that Rosi also omitted the word Camorra in order to expand its meaning so as to encompass all situations where power is manipulated to the disadvantage of those who are defenceless and subject to discrimination. The filmmaker hints that one can be a *camorrista* without necessarily being tied to the Camorra. Bribes, blackmail, secret and illicit agreements, corruption, dishonesty, venality, and lack of ethical values are features of the Camorra but also of individuals or groups that act illegally but cannot strictly be identified as affiliated with the Camorra. Manuela Gieri insightfully observes that the true story of the film 'deals with morality of power and its ethics, or lack thereof ... the true subject-matter is the inner logic of power.'¹¹ Finally, the absence of the word Camorra may also be ascribed to Rosi's personal poetics, his peculiar aesthetic creed that often makes litotes and understatements powerful and effective means of communication. In his films, understatements, along with music, lighting, and performance, increase the spectators' anxieties around absolute unchecked power.¹²

Numerous analogies between Rosi's film and Saviano's book strengthen the critical relevance of *Hands over the City* today. Another filmmaker, Marco Tullio Giordana, understood this importance when he inserted the very last shot of Rosi's film into his own film *I cento passi* (*The One Hundred Steps*, 2000), which is about the protagonist's fight against the mafia and its devious links to local political institutions. Giordana asserted that '*Hands over the City* in my film created an internal rhyme. It was a very explicit declaration.'¹³

In 1992, Rosi returned to Naples to shoot the documentary *Diario Napolitano* (*Neapolitan Diary*)¹⁴ as a follow-up to *Hands over the City*. The documentary begins with the same wide-angle panoramic shot of Naples' sprawling periphery. The spectator is taken into a crowded tenement building that is strikingly similar to Le Vele, the housing project where Matteo Garrone sets part of the story of his film *Gomorra* (*Gomorrhah*, 2008).¹⁵ In *Diary*, juvenile delinquency is the film's initial focus. Then Rosi, both director and actor of the documentary, leads the viewer through the congested traffic of Naples to the University of Architecture, where a conference is taking place. In attendance are professors, architects, entrepreneurs, historians, students, and, most importantly, the director of the Camorra Observatory, the director of the Juvenile Justice Center, and a judge who attests to the film's connection to the Camorra. The purpose of the debate is to understand what has really changed in the thirty years since 1963. The screening of *Hands over the City* prompts comments that underscore a sense of stasis. If anything, problems have worsened. When the film ends, Rosi addresses the audience and establishes a direct parallel between Naples and Palermo. As Rosi speaks, the viewer sees images of the mafia's lethal attacks on Judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino (both killed in 1992). The Camorra that in *Hands over the City* is an obscure presence is openly denounced in the documentary as an organization that has increased its power over the last thirty years. The documentary proceeds with an homage to Naples through images of its beautiful coastline and of Mount Vesuvius, and of its artistic treasures, prestigious history, and culinary gems. However, several times Rosi disrupts the enticing harmony of these images with his troubled reflections on organized crime; we see an interview with a Camorra killer, as well as images from the films *Excellent Cadavers* (1976) and *Lucky Luciano* (1973), both of which expose the power of organized crime and its affiliations with political institutions.

Neapolitan Diary confirms and reinforces the relevance of *Hands over the City* today. It ends with Rosi meditating on the scene of the building collapse from his 1963 movie. As the spectator, too, watches the sequence, the images run slowly in reverse so that the building rises up and stands again. *Hands over the City*, then, is brought back together with Rosi's heartfelt hope in the rebirth of the city.

NOTES

- 1 Roberto Saviano, 'Cement,' in *Gomorrhah: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System*, trans. Virginia Jewiss (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 210, 214.
- 2 Manuela Gieri, 'Hands over the City: Cinema as Political Indictment and Social Commitment,' in *Poet of Civic Courage*, ed. Carlo Testa (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 47.
- 3 Note that in Italian the adjective and noun 'morale' is also used in the political sphere. The direct translation, then, is 'ethical' or 'ethics.'
- 4 Saviano, 'Cement,' 112.
- 5 Michel Ciment, 'Dieci proposte per un elogio a Francesco Rosi,' in *Francesco Rosi*, ed. Vittorio Gacci (Rome: International S.p.A., 1995), 6.
- 6 Saviano, *Gomorrhah*, 250.

- 7 Francesco Rosi cited in Enrico Costa, 'Francesco Rosi. *Le mani sulla città*. 1963–2003,' in *Cinemacittà: The International Journal of Architecture, Urban Studies, Cinema and Communication*, ed. Enrico Costa (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 2003), 25.
- 8 Francesco Rosi, interview with author, Rome, 31 July 2009.
- 9 Tom Behan, *The Camorra* (London: Routledge, 1996); *See Naples and Die* (London: Tauris, 2002).
- 10 Interview with Rosi in Manuela Gieri, 'Le mani sulla città. Il cinema di Francesco Rosi,' *Corriere Canadese* (3 November 1994): 7.
- 11 Gieri, 'Hands over the City: Cinema as Political Indictment and Social Commitment,' 50.
- 12 For instance, the tense soundtrack by Piero Piccioni that anxiously accompanies key moments in the film increases a sense of unease, particularly at the end of the film when the spectator reads on the screen that, although the film's characters are imaginary, the story reflects the social reality.
- 13 Marco Tullio Giordana in Costa, 'Francesco Rosi. *Le mani sulla città*. 1963–2003,' 42.
- 14 Initially created for Italian TV, this film (*Neapolitan Diary*) is featured in *Hands over the City*, The Criterion Collection, 2006, Double-Disc DVD.
- 15 Rosi wanted to shoot some scenes in Le Vele, but the neighbourhood committee did not approve the initiative. Rosi remarked, 'It is a matter of time. Today the Camorra is much more disclosed and Le Vele in Naples has become its representation.' Rosi, interview.