The subject trapped in *Gomorrah*: Undecidability and choice in network cinema

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*Gomorrah* (*Gomorra*, Matteo Garrone, 2008) is loosely based on the homonymous book of Roberto Saviano (first published in 2006 in Italy), with the script mainly improvising on some fragmented passages of the book, which tries to imagine the life under Camorra from the point of view of singular characters. Despite – or maybe because of – this multiple point-of-view narrative, a product of the collaboration between six scriptwriters including the director and the author, the film manages to communicate the feeling of anxiety and entrapment that the reader of the book gets by turning its pages. And the source of this feeling does not only lie in the ‘System’¹ of Camorra, the criminal organization that controls the area of Naples in Southern Italy and the lives of its people, but also in a larger, global system, of which Camorra itself is a part. As the writer of the book notes, ‘Camorra’ is just a name used by external observers to describe the activity of many different clans of the broader area of Naples; a name whose mentioning is often followed by ironic smiles by the locals. The criminal character of Camorra’s activity is totally integrated – and even subverted - by its economic, mercantile and business activity.

The Neapolitan harbor as described by the author of *Gomorrah* is more than a place ruled by criminal organizations. It is the heart of the European economy, the place where all the products coming from the cheap labor markets of the East arrive in Europe and stay in Naples’ docks for a while before making their way to the wealthy European capitals, or even the United States. These semi-criminal organizations, which function following the rules of free market, are the hidden side of the European economy, a much wider economic system that engulfs the systems of organized crime like the one of Camorra. That is why the entrapment in the System of Camorra that the film (and the book) articulate in agony is something that matters for everyone, and not only for the small criminals and pathetic drug dealers populating this contemporary Gomorrah.

**Structures and choices**

*Gomorrah’s* episodic structure reminds us of the ‘network’ (Bordwell 2006), ‘complex’ (Simons 2008), ‘modular’ (Cameron 2008), or ‘post-classical’ (Thanouli 2008) narratives, which have become rather popular in film production across the globe. These narratives have as a common denominator the ‘complexity’ with which subjectivities, places and temporalities intermingle in them. They also show “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). These films get attached to the individuality of the characters, often following their body movements from very close; yet at the same time, the narrative’s multiplicity decomposes individuality. Following a bottom-up approach (from the individuals to the networks they compose), network films re-enact agency before and beyond structure. From this point of view, network films can be seen as a multiple-performance, on behalf of their multiple agents/heroes, of an emergent agency. Structures and transcendent variables

¹ ‘System’ is the term that locals use when referring to Camorra, according to Saviano.
often intervene, but there is always a tension created, a confrontation between parts and wholes, which renders these narratives ethically and politically intriguing. This confrontation is played out on the level of form, which challenges the classical modes of narrative.

_Gomorrah_ seems like a strange hybrid of Italian neorealist film—marks of which are, among others, the use of non-professional actors and the episodic structure—and contemporary network narrative. Yet, Garrone uses the network narrative structure in _Gomorrah_ to create a literally inescapable labyrinth of material existence, without hope of salvation. Unlike what happens in other contemporary films with similar structure, where ‘different stories converge’ at some point(s) in the film (e.g. _Crash, Babel_), or even in classical neorealist cinema, in which the contingent paths heroes take retain the promise of a better future, _Gomorrah_ leaves no space for unification between its separate stories nor for a hypothetical future resolution of each one of them: the separate episodes composing the narrative network do not ever come together; there is no final integration in a coherent storyline, and it is perhaps exactly this lack that burdens the spectator long after the film’s ending.

The fragmented narration takes the viewer by the hand and makes her follow the handheld camera that literally walks in the Daedalean streets of Secondigliano and Scampia, the neighborhoods in the North of Naples where life is unthinkable beyond Camorra. The multiple episodes/story-threads corresponding to the different characters are densely interwoven, each one being regularly interrupted by scenes belonging to some other episode. Unlike other ‘complex narratives’ though, no technological gadgets (on the narrative level), nor techniques such as flashbacks and flashforwards (on the narrational level) are employed to make the storytelling complex. _Gomorrah_’s temporality is not modular and recomposable, but multiplicitous in a different way: through the parallel accumulation and resonance of the characters’ individual trajectories, which interweave to compose the network of Camorra. The multiplicity of stories and their contingent evolvement may create the impression of a plurality of alternative paths and choices that a complex network encloses, but at the same time it shows how all paths lead to the same impasse.

Don Ciro (Gianfelice Imparato) is a ‘submarine’ in Camorra’s slang: a bagman entitled to bring a monthly benefit to the relatives (mainly wives and widows) of men who used to work for some powerful clans of Camorra, but now are either imprisoned or dead. The benefit reaffirms on a monthly basis the loyalty of these people to the clan. In his life so far, Don Ciro has always been the connecting link between the different families that compose the clan’s network. As soon as the ‘war of Camorra’ breaks out, with some local ‘bosses’ demanding their operational autonomy from the clan that controls the area, there is no way for Don Ciro to continue his work as a bagman for the leading clan; the new bosses need the money for more drastic action (to ‘shoot and kill’). So he has to choose between staying loyal to his ‘boss’ or joining the secessionists—but as it immediately becomes clear, if he wants to save his life he has no other choice but

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2 Garrone was not explicitly influenced by this recent tendency of cinematic complexity but, as he mentions (2009), by the 1946 film of Roberto Rossellini, _Paisà_ (Paisan), which also had an innovative in its times-episodic structure.

3 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 Secondigliano), was fought by secessionists.
to cooperate with those who demand it from him.

Not only Don Ciro but also those who now enter the ‘established’ clan realize that the links that used to hold it together are broken. Toto (Salvatore Abruzzese), a kid who recently joined the drug trafficking that thrives in Scampia, is also forced to betray ‘his brothers’. He has to let himself be used as a ‘hook’ in order for his superiors to catch and kill an innocent woman. This is only too hard for Toto, as this woman, Maria, happens to be the mother of a close friend of his, who joined the secessionists.

Ciro (Ciro Petrone) and Marco (Marco Macor) are two other teenagers, who -having Tony Montana from De Palma’s Scarface as their idol - dream of creating their own autonomous business and becoming themselves bosses in their area. However, they end up brutally killed, after denying an offer to join the ruling clan, or to ally with other secessionists.

Pasquale (Salvatore Cantalupo) is a tailor who has spent his whole life working for a local sewing industry that belongs to the System. But when he dares to sell his craftsmanship to the rivals - the newly-come Chinese dress-making industries - he hardly manages to survive the clan’s vengeance. The price is to abandon his craft and become a truck driver.

And finally, Roberto (Carmine Paternoster) manages to quit the waste-disposal business he used to work for – a business which is perhaps the cornerstone of Camorra’s business activity. However, as we will soon find out, he is doomed to remain a part of an eco-system as rotten as that of Camorra’s System; a toxic fruit that grew out of the tree of social corruption.

Inside the System’s network, all characters come to a point at which they have to choose, but the choices they need to make are always binary. They try to articulate the possibility of a third way beyond the choice imposed on them, but even language cannot provide them with words to describe such a possibility. ‘We’ll see...’ mumbles Toto in front of the older boys of the clan, who press him to get involved in the murder of his friend’s mother. Toto tries to gain time; the woman has always been nice to him. He asks to postpone the moment of his decision. But the answer he gets is fierce: ‘there is no “we’ll see”.’ If he refuses to cooperate, the consequences might be lethal. Even the thought of quitting the System altogether turns into a dead-end: ‘Va fare pizza!’ (Go make pizza) is what his boss yells at Roberto, when the latter chooses to be a loser rather than a participant.

Like the waves in the harbor of Naples, that, according to Saviano’s description in the book Gomorrah, seem reluctant to touch the dirty mad of the shore or go back to the open sea, “immobile, stubbornly resisting, impossibly still, clinging to their foamy crests, as if no longer sure where the sea ends” (Saviano 2008, 121), the characters in the film also seem to be wavering between ways that they hesitate to follow, between choices that do not belong to them. And the network of Camorra seems to be extending far beyond the miserable neighborhoods of Naples and its dwellers, swallowing every possibility for subjective agency inside its muddy harbor and toxic land.

Gomorrah, although sharing common features with the network narratives, could also be considered as being critical against networks, the complexity of which here ends up reduced to binary choices. Either you are with us or against us. Either you live or die. Either you are a winner or a loser. The ‘game’ suddenly becomes simple. In the contemporary glocal conditions, networks have become systems of control in dispersal (Galloway and Thacker 2007). As it also happens in the case of criminal organizations, control does not come from a sovereign
centre but is instead materialized in local commercial transactions in every part of
the world. Thus the Mob functions as a network as well, and Misha Glenny refers
to the ‘mob franchising’ that takes place across countries, with clans lending their
‘brand name’ to other emerging groups that extend the network of their business
(2009). Older organizations try to track, patronize and exploit the new ones, but
without creating them. When a change of power takes place, and established
economic interests are being threatened, the scale of the network’s reach
becomes visible, as it happens in Gomorrah. In the film, the ‘global’ tracking is
reproduced on the local level, where every single mobster, from the lower level of
the drug dealers to the higher of bosses, is being surveilled not only through bugs
and wires but also – and mainly - through the interpersonal network that the clan
itself forms. Gomorrah thus displays, through its dispersed narrative, an
inescapable totality of control, which is not only the case for the ‘Camorristi’, but
also for many other ‘lawful’ individuals living in more privileged parts of the world.
The philosophical and socio-political task would then be to ask how subjectivity is
transformed and how agency is affected by this unification of control expressed in
so many ways across economy and literature, cinema and organized crime,
informational networks and cultural products.

**Choices and decisions**

In social theory, moments of choice similar to those that Gomorrah’s
characters have to face are considered moments of reflexivity, of configuring
one’s position in the existing situation in relation to the structures that define it.
The reflexive realization of one’s position in the world enables the articulation of
individual trajectories with structure but also against it; it is a moment that can
arouse agency (Archer 2007). In the theory of ‘reflexive modernization’ this
moment is scattered and multiplied, as a consequence of the abolition of
certainty characterizing the late (or ‘second’) modernity (Beck, Giddens and Lash
1994). Thus reflexivity stops being a moment and becomes an ongoing process,
necessitated by the general uncertainty prevailing in ‘risk societies’.4
Contemporary subjectivity seems to be even more fragmented than the theories
and narratives about it.

Ulrich Beck suggests as a cure to the constant state of undecidability and
ambivalence of contemporary society, ‘a new way of acting’, following
ambivalence instead of avoiding it, turning it into a strategy of individual worldly
conduct, which has to become ambivalent and flexible itself (1994). On the other
hand, this ‘immanent’ reflexivity becomes almost trivial, or even superimposed by
the circumstances of late modernity. The individuals populating the societies of
reflexive modernization have to be constantly flexible: able to accommodate to
new situations and choose among existing alternatives. The members of Camorra
– both the ‘weak’ nodes and the bosses – adopt a similarly flexible strategy,
always struggling to keep pace with the precarious power constellations.
Undoubtedly criminal organizations were not what Beck and the other theorists of
reflexive modernization had in mind when they articulated their theory of reflexive
modernization. However, what Saviano describes as guiding Camorra’s flexible
way of conduct, i.e. the logic of an unbridled economic liberalism, is compatible
with Beck and his co-writers’ observation that ‘the continued technical, economic,
political and cultural development of global capitalism has gradually
revolutionized its own social foundations’ (Beck et al. 2003, 2), as some of its

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4 term coined by Beck.
most robust foundations lie in organized crime. To prevail in the market over one’s competitors: this is the wheel of internal change in Camorra’s network. Moments of reflexivity in the course of the film (such as the one of the tailor Pasquale) open up only two intertwined ways: to survive or to prevail; because the third way, to escape, leads to a dead-end.

According to Beck, in the second modern era the old ‘problems of order’, which were clear and demanded decisions, are substituted by ‘risk problems’, where uncertainty, ambivalence and undecidability prevail (1994, 9).5 Beck implies that while individuals in a way used to take decisions being to some extent obliged to follow one way instead of another, according to some hierarchy of values and priorities, today they have to take up more risks because the choices are multiple and the information about the alternatives diverse. But is there really a difference between order and risk in Camorra’s choices? Rather, here risk seems to become a new kind of order.

The individuals in Gomorrah are obliged to be attentive and flexible, measuring and evaluating the dynamics of the situation, following the clan that seems to be more powerful, drawing an opportunistic type of living that at the same time is the only one left to them if they want to survive. Risk does not stop with choices; there is no place for rest and peace. The subordination to the order that the clan imposes is precarious, just like the power of the clan itself. The succession of bosses and dominant clans is so fast and unpredictable, just like it has to be in order for the money to circulate between different ‘protected’ companies and the market to be kept in a state of constant renewal, as the system of global economy demands it to be. Risk is always present not only as the cause of choices but also as their outcome.

Beck stresses that in this state of uncertainty and undecidability, ‘risks not only presume decisions, they ultimately also free up decisions [..]’ (1994, 10), and leave open the possibility of ‘a rethinking and a new way of acting beginning here, which accepts and affirms the ambivalence [..]’ (12). However, Gomorrah does not seem to share this optimism. Decisions may be freed up, but how ‘free’ they really are is still a matter under consideration. What would then be the philosophical and cinematic alternative to the – often suffocating in terms of subjective agency – effects of reflexive modernization and its networks?

A philosophical model that attempts to reunite subjectivity with agency through decision has been suggested by philosopher Alain Badiou. The palpable, reflexive subjectivity of our late modern, ‘network’ society – of which Camorra is sketched as a distorted but intensified mirror in Gomorrah - is perhaps what Badiou’s theory of the subject at the same time accurately addresses and fiercely fights.

For Badiou there is an important difference between the ‘counting’ of the various worlds/situations (a structure that places their elements in categories or ‘sets’) and the ontological counting of which all elements partake. Being is not ‘counted-as-one’ (Badiou 2006, 25); it does not follow the rules of the situations, but those of ‘infinite multiplicity’. So, what constitutes a subject according to Badiou is the subversion of the laws of a situation in favor of the laws of ‘being qua being’. Such a subversion takes place through a decision led by the faith to what ‘inexists’ in the situation’s counting (2006, 406-9).

A subject for Badiou consists in the fidelity to this decision, although this
has to be taken from the ‘standpoint of an undecidable’ (ibid, 197). We might find
ourselves on such a standpoint after having encountered an ‘event’, of which the
ethical nature is condemned to remain forever uncertain. This is because, in
Badiou’s platonic universe, we cannot objectively know if what we perceive as an
event is a carrier of a ‘truth’ in the world or not. However, a subject is what is
constituted by the decision to follow an event and its uncertain truth, despite the
‘irreflexivity’ of such a decision. Even if reflexivity can never be achieved in the
existing conditions, there can be decision nonetheless.

From this perspective, there is a crucial distinction between choice (à la
reflexive modernization) and decision (à la Badiou): to choose is usually
associated with a selection between alternatives, but to decide can open up a
whole new world of infinite multiplicity. What subjective decision opposes is the
expression of an absolute immanence that excludes any possibility for an
alternative way of being beyond this globalized and unified field of choices
between already-set categories. An event is what brings this non-closure of the
world to the fore, and at the same time demands a decision that, in the
inescapable material situation that one partakes, makes his life a trajectory
between what elapses the counting-as-one, the ‘generic set’ or ‘void’ of every
situation, that connects all its elements.

Although choices in the age of reflexive modernization and its complex
networks are of different order than the Badiouian, ‘ontological’, decisions, most
of the criticism exerted to Badiou and most of the enthusiasm concerning his
philosophy is about the political implications that he adds to his conception of
subjectivity, which leave the door open for a worldly, even ‘social’ – although
Badiou would disapprove of the term - articulation of his theory of the subject.

Let us now see how Badiou’s theory of the subject could or could not
survive in the worldly ‘situation’ of Gomorrah. Although for Badiou death is
irrelevant to the constitution of subjects (2009b, 268), and only the infinity of
being is able to guide decisions beyond the finite nature of ‘human animality’ and
its sole concern for survival (2001, 48-9), in material situations like those
narrated in Gomorrah, death and the risk of one’s life are omnipresent. ‘I don’t
want to die. The war is not for me’, Don Ciro says with his trembling voice to the
secessionist mobster who threatens him. ‘But you’re in it; you know that’, is the
answer he gets. And being in the war, he has no choice but serve the most
powerful clan if he wants to survive.

Isn’t it then unrealistic to ask from these devastated strugglers for survival
in Gomorrah to decide otherwise? Isn’t it similarly utopian to ask the same even
from the relatively more privileged employees of more ‘legal’ than Camorra’s
enterprises, who constantly face the fear of unemployment? And what ‘choosing
otherwise’ can mean if the System of Camorra is something that exceeds Camorra
itself, and spreads in the global networks of economy?

In Badiou’s doctrine, every individual is ‘counted’ as belonging to different
groups and identities. In the ‘world’ or ‘situation’ of Camorra, the counting

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6 Here reflexivity does not refer to the configuration of an individual’s position in her
social environment (as in social theory and the theory of reflexive modernization) but of
the position of the individual elements of every kind of environment (or ‘world’) with
respect to being as infinite multiplicity.
distributes people in the different clans and different factions of the organization. For the characters belonging to Gomorrah’s world, the counting is always there before their choices. There is no escape. Thus, a choice between rivaling clans could not alter the counting itself; one’s belonging to a clan is what the situation counts, and those who do not belong to one populate what Badiou calls the ‘edge of the void’ of this situation (2006, 175), because, although they are included in this world, they do not belong to its sets. However, in Gomorrah’s ‘situation’, inclusion is belonging; it is almost impossible for these individuals to break free, literally counted as they are in the lists that Don Ciro each time receives before taking off to distribute the money to the ‘loyal ones’. However, the plot is placed at the instance of a derangement of this counting. The old order shows its cracks and the new order is still ambivalent. In this period of crisis, the belonging-inclusion in Camorra’s network is also affected. The contingency of inclusion – and subsequently of their constitution as individuals – becomes apparent to the characters at this turning point for Camorra. Such instances could be considered as preparing the ground for events – and for subjectivization – to take place.\footnote{This is said by turning to some extent Badiou against Badiou, as he supports that an event cannot be prepared by a situation but only appears as a break with it.}

In Camorra, agency and structure, individuals and the System, seem to be forming an organic whole. The characters’ individuality is intertwined with Camorra. Camorra is the air they breathe; it is their world and nothing else. Like it happens in every kind of network, a high degree of co-dependency is observed: identities are constituted through the links that connect the individual to the clan where he belongs and to the other nodes in the network of the clan. Don Ciro’s identity and self-respect have been directly dependent on the acceptance of the group, which he himself holds together in some way – or rather, not him, but the money he carries. However, it now becomes apparent that the inhabitants of Secondigliano have never been brothers, as Don Ciro likes to fantasize. Their identities as individuals are dependent on their positioning in the network and the edges that they share with other ‘nodes’. As soon as these edges are cut off because of a re-distribution of power, the individuals have to face the fact that they might not ‘naturally’ belong to their inclusion to a certain clan. Mediation thus collapses leaving the subjects faced with the immediate materiality of their condition. The othering of the kin group and the collapse of bonds only reveals the original sickness of this bonding. As one by one the people he used to consider as ‘brothers’ become enemies, Don Ciro – but also, in varying degrees, all the other individuals in the film – have to reconsider their own belonging to the clan.

Pasquale’s cooperation with the Chinese has been a revelation to him – a relationship that turned out more ‘humane’ than the one he used to have with his employer. The Chinese apprentices treated him with a respect that he never experienced being subordinated to his boss – who has been exploiting his craftsmanship since he was a kid. No ‘event’ here, but just a longing for self-respect motivated Pasquale’s steps outside the familiar network, an attempt for individuation that is simply not permitted in Camorra, as he ends up realizing in the most humiliating way.

On the other hand, Toto cannot have his own say either, but in his case his young age makes things worse – he is just a kid among older mobsters, and he has to obey their orders. Self-achievement has also been his motive: his desire to grow up and feel like a ‘man’ that made him so eager to join Camorra –
something that he would not be able to avoid either way, as he grew up being a part of the System that reigns in his neighborhood.

Lastly, Marco and Ciro, armed with gangster-movie influences and a good deal of naïveté, thought that they could make a difference by keeping all the money and the thrill for themselves. Driven by their ambition, they seem to have committed against Camorra a sin bigger than all the others, and that is why they have the worst ending.

All characters of Gomorrah have their own individual motives. When they attempt to step out of the System, they do not do so because they follow some event or ideal, but because the crisis of their ‘world’ enables them to think of themselves beyond their ‘counting’, even though the System proves potent enough to mutate and enclose the secessionists’ as well as the other characters’ weak attempts for agency in its suffocating embrace. Therefore, Gomorrah challenges the theory of subjectivization-in-decision that Badiou holds, showing the poor chances for subjective emergence in a world like the one presented in the film. Gomorrah offers insights into the phenomenology of the world’s counting, where the networked articulation of multiplicity is perhaps trapping individuals and organizations in even more complex ways than before, threatening oppositional agency and eliminating the possibility of subjectivization.

In this legislative counting that their specific situation imposes, the heroes of Gomorrah do not really decide. They are forced to choose, not by ‘events’ that illuminate them – as it happens in Badiou’s theory – but by external necessity, by the change of forces that takes place in the war of Camorra. Saviano also makes this observation in his book: the inhabitants of Secondigliano do not choose; they are always offered choices. Every decision is uncertain so nobody takes one except if an event forces them to do so (Saviano 2008, 98). But this event is not the one described by Badiou as the appearance of a truth of the multiplicity’s being in the world; it is just an incident forcing the subordination to a decision externally configured:

> desire alone isn’t enough to change anything around here. A decision is not what will take you out of trouble, and taking a stand or making a choice won’t make you feel you’re acting in the best way possible. Whatever you do, it will be wrong for some reason. This is true solitude. (Saviano 2008, 172)

One wonders if this solitude in the encounter with decisions is so far from the one that almost every individual in reflexive modernization faces. We are constantly faced with offers and multiple choices, but we always have to choose between them. There is no ‘beyond’ this horizon. In this view, the network of Camorra is an intensification of the globalized network of contemporary economy. Every choice seems to be wrong, as it is unable to change something significantly. This may be the political tragedy of networks – to paraphrase Galloway and Thacker, who talk about ‘the political tragedy of interactivity’ (2007, 124) –: that they maximize the pre-established control and regulation, giving it another form, adequate for the circumstances of globalization. Under these latter, networks are swallowed in the order of Camorra, in a multiplication of choices of inclusion and marginalization, which resemble the ones and zeros of the binary code. There is a position outside this ‘game’, but it seems to be a position for losers, which only certifies the game’s prevalence.
Evental universality

Although Badiou’s theory addresses some problems with regard to contemporary subjectivity that reflexive modernization does not, it still remains insufficient because it introduces an insurmountable gap between the situation and the decision that might alter it. In the following part of this paper, keeping in mind the above criticism, I will proceed to explore how the cinematic dynamics released through Gomorrah may constitute a constructive phenomenological critique of Badiou’s theory of the subject and the ontological, ‘evental’ decisions that produce it; a critique which at some points meets Badiou’s own phenomenological reconsideration of his ontology in his latest book Logics of Worlds (2009b). But first I will try to show how some aspects of Badiou’s theory of the event might reveal the network of Gomorrah as not totally closed in its counting. It is not the complete detachment of the Badiouian event from the situation, but its ‘universality’ that becomes manifest in Gomorrah.

For Badiou, the event is ‘an immanent break’ (Badiou 2001, 42): it comes when a so far indiscernible multiple, the ‘void’ that every situation contains in its counting, makes its appearance (which however lasts only for an instant). This multiple, which brings to light the infinite multiplicity of being, is ‘generic’ (2006, 335), because its elements are common with those of all other counted entities that the situation contains. Thus, when making its appearance in a world, an event abolishes the situation’s counting, highlighting what rests uncountable by it and connecting all the categories and identities that in the situation have to stay distinct. Surpassing the individual identities, an event paves the way for a collective form of agency to be constituted (as subject). Thus, a kind of ‘universality’ is the basic feature of the alternative, ‘evental’ logic that we find in Badiou’s doctrine.

To see if the evental ‘logic’ and its universality becomes manifest within Gomorrah’s narrative world, let us take as an example the story/episode of Roberto (Saviano’s alter ego) and his attempt to detach himself from the System after his acquaintance with the actual consequences of the monstrosity of his job in the toxic waste disposal. Coming from a low-class family himself, Roberto witnesses the pathetic attempts of an old dying man and his family to sell their last piece of land to Roberto’s boss in order to turn it into a garbage bin for toxic waste. Hundreds of other small landowners in the area do the same in order to find a way to pay out their loans. Roberto seems unable to attend this inhumane give-and-take that takes place around the deathbed of the landowner and walks out of the room to the open air. There an old woman, who mistakes him for someone she knows, offers him a box of peaches from her garden to take home with him. On their drive back, Roberto’s boss asks him to get rid of the peaches, because ‘they stink’. His words remind Roberto that the peaches were grown in the same piece of land where their firm disposes toxics. Obeying his boss and getting rid of the poisoned fruits on the side of the road, Roberto makes his decision; he cannot go on. He has a fight with his boss and walks away from the car. However, his ‘escaping’ figure is gradually being ‘swallowed’ in the poisonous landscape that the frame ironically encloses as Roberto disappears in the distance.

Yet, if we could think of Roberto as participating in the formation of a subject through his decision to abstain from Camorra’s network, that would be because the ‘truth’ that he follows renders the differences that Camorra imposes insignificant. For Badiou truth procedures ‘manifest the common-being, the multiple-essence, of the place in which they proceed’ (2006, 17); and the subject
of a truth is ‘a finite moment of such a manifestation. A subject is *manifested locally*’ (Badiou 2006, 17). Similarly, what could be considered as becoming manifest to Roberto in this sequence is ‘the truth of the collective’s being’ (*ibid*), of what connects this land and its people. A multiplicity without hierarchies triggers Roberto’s decision: the dying man, the old demented woman who offers him the fruits, the dying, poisoned land where the peaches finally return. In Camorra’s world, a truth would be what connects the different identities in it – the elements of this particular scene, but also, as I will stress later, the protagonists of the multiple episodes – by what is common in every single one of them, rendering the counted differences insignificant.

As I will argue, what could be conceived as *Gomorrah*’s filmic event is of another kind than the Badiouian one, and it is not confined to the narrative representation of a ‘truthful’ choice, as in the case of Roberto’s character. *Gomorrah* is eventful without containing an event, pointing at what the Badiouian theory has not yet, in my view, succeeded: the relation between the world and the event, and the possible emergence of truths by material, in the particular case cinematic (technological, visual and affective) means – something that Badiou points at with his reversion of the platonic myth of the cave, when he argues for the ‘sensible creation of the Idea’, rather than the Idea’s ‘descent into the sensible’ (2009b, 19), but he does not always get at when discussing about films.

**Topoi and points: *Gomorrah* as a ‘tensed topology’**

In his recent phenomenologically oriented second volume of *Being and Event (Logics of Worlds)* Badiou develops a topological ‘theory of points’, which might constitute a path taking us out of the impasse sketched above. In Badiou’s ‘ideology of immanence’ (Badiou 2009b, 10), a world is not always ‘atonic’, tending ‘towards indifference and not-choice’ (*ibid*, 431), but contains ‘points’ that enable choices between a ‘yes’, to follow a generic truth, or a ‘no’: to stay in the counting (400). These ‘points’ are existential intensifications which render the decision to follow the truth of an event - and thus to open up an infinite world of being - into a choice between alternatives, the one of which is the infinite multiplicity. Thus, the binarism of inclusion-exclusion, which is superimposed to (or underlying) the network of ‘infinite choices’ of reflexive modernity, is what Badiou addresses with a similarly binary choice (Hallward 2008).8

Atonic worlds are simply worlds which are so ramified and nuanced – or so quiescent and homogeneous – that no instance of the Two, and consequently no figure of decision, is capable of evaluating them. (Badiou 2009b, 420)

In contrast to such atonic worlds, in *Gomorrah* we witness the unfolding of a ‘tensed’ topology, first of all through its narrative representation of the situation: the crisis of the System’s old order, which is depicted in the film, makes the world of Camorra lose its atonicity and become a battlefield. In such a situation, decisions become possible: ‘decision, which is nowhere in an atonic world, is

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8 Badiou draws the existential meaning of choice from Kierkegaard: see *Logics*, pp. 425-35.
everywhere in a tensed world’ (422). The points are thus the slots through which events might enter and derange the situation’s ‘established’ counting.

It is not hard to detect some tension between the function of the ‘point’ in Badiou (the site that can be contracted into a twofold choice –yes or no) and his view of the ‘event’ as ‘coming out of nowhere’ (Hallward 2004, 16), since, at least until Logics, Badiou insisted that there can be no relation between the event and its site (ibid, 13), or the event and the situation that it disrupts (relation was thus absent between the event and the world).

In the Logics of Worlds, the event acquires degrees of intensity that it did not have in Being and Event. Points are the topological operators that distribute intensities ‘according to an allocation of space’ (Badiou 2009b, 415). These intensities exhibit ‘a simple division’ (ibid), that of the choice between a yes and a no. From the point of view of the situation, what appears is a site that may or may not be an event, depending on the degree of intensity that the topology of the situation will ascribe to it (by the points it contains). Thus, events may not have any effect, if the conditions of a world do not give them intensity – do not make them events.

In Gomorrah’s tensed topology, every story/individual episode reveals a point as it brings forward a choice for the characters. However, the degree of intensity that this choice will acquire – and its prospects to become a subjective decision or not – depends on the mediation of this intensity by its representation (as narrative) but also its presentation (as shot composition and editing) in the film itself. Cinema has the ability to create intensities through its temporality, and spatial composition of shots and scenes, which connect, through juxtaposition and parallelism in the case of network films, different elements of the represented situation, and different points of view upon the same world. From this perspective, cinema calls for a conception of the event as anticipated, similar to the one that Badiou himself proposes when discussing the work of Beckett and its evenementialite’ (‘eventness’), as Andrew Gibson points out (2006).

Badiou’s ontology, with the ‘evental universality’ that it brings forward, suggests that there are different ways to relate than those ‘calculated’ by the conditions of the situation. It is the filmic topology that makes this alternative, multiple way of relating appear. The space it creates with the characters’ separate but intersected stories, ascribes intensity to the world of Camorra (a miniature of a global situation, as already mentioned), and highlights the choices that may or may not be taken.

The various shifts created through both narrational and cinematographic means in Gomorrah transform the filmic topos into a vessel of multiplicity, revealing tensions that a conventional, linear narrative and editing approach would leave silent. The narrative point of view is not unified but intentionally multiplied, and, although the represented situation (Camorra) remains the same, the number of episodes introduces a differential experience of it. The ‘one’ narrative world allows for the different worlds contained in it to appear, as if ‘anticipating’ an event, which, if it cannot happen in one world, it may in some other. Thus, even though Gomorrah’s closed world seems suffocating, given the dead-end to which most of the heroes’ individual trajectories seem to lead, its making is paradoxically open to contingency through multiplicity; it has an evental orientation.

If Gomorrah is seen as a topological space, the points contained in it, the contradictions between its distinct elements, suggest a differential distribution of intensities. This ‘tensed topology’ is created through the narrational juxtaposition
of the different stories within *Gomorrah* that never assimilate, forming autonomous and distinct worlds within the world of Camorra.

The eventfulness of *Gomorrah* lies beyond the narrative representation of Roberto’s decision; in *Gomorrah*, both the diegetic and the filmic space is multiply approached, and this creates a ‘tensed’ topos. *Gomorrah* distributes intensities differentially, not only through its complex narrative structure, but also through its complex shot and scene composition. It creates for us spectators a complex spatial experience, as we get to see from close and from distance (with shifts in scale and abrupt breaks with handheld shooting, as bird-eye view shots and close ups succeed rapidly one another through cuts), from outside and inside (the contrast between the two often being underlined through mise-en-abyme structures), in light and in darkness (through scenes in plain daylight being contrasted to others taking place in the dark). We are positioned, along with the heroes, in a place where everyone is being tracked but also tries to hide, and we experience this place differentially through the multiple stories of its inhabitants, sensing the connectedness and the isolation at the same time – a sense that is facilitated by the extensive use of shallow focus, which isolates characters from their background (Duckworth 2008). Subjectivization through *Gomorrah* is created at interfaces and borders where separated and often contrasting elements of the filmic space neighbor, and in the encounter with points, which are indicators of the tensions latent in the topology of the film, but also of a universality that might connect its elements beyond their current counting.

To accept that an evental encounter can ‘be prepared’ in cinema through such ‘tensed’ topologies – despite Badiou’s, at least before the *Logics*, ontological refusal to accept a connection between being and the world of appearances, between the event and the situation – implies that cinema mediates not only the world (as its representation) but also the event (as break, tension, and ‘point’ in this world). Moreover, it implies that through this ‘topological turn’ in Badiou’s thought, the ‘impure art’ of cinema – as Badiou characterizes it – can in some way connect the lived world with the infinite multiplicity of being, through the ‘paradoxical relations, entirely improbable connections’, that it offers to us (Badiou 2009a, 1).

Although in Badiou’s earlier work, the event was not seen as constructed, in his latest writings it seems to be conditioned by the world’s topology; it is allowed to be to some extent prepared, although not by a pre-existing subject-will, but by the tensions – and relations – latent in a world. Points are marks of tensions, ruptures and discontinuities indicating that the world containing them is not whole. Our connection with these points is for Badiou an evental encounter. Our ability to have a ‘ubiquitous’ and differential experience of multiple belongings – an experience that network films provide to us – makes us encounter these ‘eventful’ tensed worlds. This experience is not created by movement in a continuous, linear narrative and cinematic space-time, but is to be found in tensions, encounters with borders, edges and worlds within.

To conclude, *Gomorrah*’s ‘borderline’ intervention to ‘network’ cinema, on the one hand, allows this filmic tendency to be re-thought as a ‘tensed topology’ rather than an ‘atonic’ parallelization and unification of worlds and characters, and, on the other hand, suggests for Badiouian theory of the subject a mediated

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9 David Bordwell calls ‘borderline’ those network films in which the protagonists never meet, and no unification or resolution is effectuated.
materiality that is needed in contemporary complex situations. And in a way this realizes what Badiou himself hopes for, but cannot always see happening:

that cinema will be overcome by cinema itself. After the philosophy of cinema must come – is already coming – philosophy as cinema, which consequently has the opportunity of being a mass philosophy.’ (ibid, 5)

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**Filmography**

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