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## **Chapter 7**

### **An Italian Ecosystem: *Gomorra***

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Italian audiovisual production companies are not usually considered for their ability to create complex narrative environments, even if there are peaks and emergencies of cross-media world-building from time to time. In the last years, however, the expertise of global media companies infiltrated Italian standards of production, generating stories and creating worlds worth of massive, international distribution, which penetrated deep under the skin of national popular culture. In time, these stories became regular narrative ecosystems, adhering to most of the characteristics pointed out in the first part of this book.

This chapter will focus on one case study, chosen for its national and international success, for its pervasiveness in the Italian popular culture, and for its transformation in a specific model of production and distribution within cultural industries. I am talking about *Gomorra*, an ecosystem including: a book, theatrical performances, a critically acclaimed fiction film, a documentary about the film backstage, a television series produced by Sky Italia, official materials about the making of the series, some music videos, a few web parodies, and a lot of unofficial merchandising and viral memes. In other words, *Gomorra* produced a wide “media colonization” (Guerra 2017, 247) of Italian imaginary, while being present in the international discourse as well.

It is not the first Italian television narrative going viral: already in the 1980s, *La piovra* was a television drama of great success, exported to over 100 countries and mentioned in international literature (Buonanno 2012, 52). It is worth noticing that both *La piovra* and *Gomorra*, as well as *Romanzo criminale* (whose transmedia extension has been analyzed by Boni 2013), the recent *Suburra*, and many other television narratives that have been exported internationally address the relationship between criminal organization and society, exploring the linkages between various forms of community organization, both illegal and institutional. In other words, their narratives are focused on the human ability to create systems and networks, and such elements reflects on their formal structures through characteristics such as seriality, scalability, modularity, and so on; such integration between levels, all aimed to an idea of balance within the object and with the other objects it relates with, is key to their success.

[page 114] **An Ecosystem Is Born: From the Book to the Art Film**

*Gomorra* had a perfect timing, when compared to the ongoing transformation of the media industries all over the world: the book was published in 2006, it debuted as a performance in the

Neapolitan theater *Mercadante* in 2007, the film was distributed in 2008, and the television series, heavily advertised since 2013, started in 2014 (and it is still in production). Hence, this ecosystem fully engages with the decade that Amanda Lotz has addressed as the moment of emergence of a “post-network era,” to indicate the transformation within the television industry as well as the wider discourse about and through media. The relevance of media companies in this setting is spread onto multiple niches, and the audiences directly and autonomously contribute to the media production and sharing (2014, 5-6). The television series particularly depends upon such transformation, and are created as that “programming that people seek out and specifically desire,” meaning the “prized content” of post-network television (Ibid., 12). As we will see later in this chapter, *Gomorra – La serie* has been created by Sky Italia with the label of “event,” something exceptional that should not be missed and that must be pursued by the audiences.

Beyond the strictly economic idea of a “prized content,” *Gomorra – La serie* is also produced as “quality television,” a concept firstly defined by Robert J. Thompson in the late 1990s and rephrased later by Fricker:

it breaks the rules of established television; it is produced by people of quality aesthetic ancestry outside the field of television; it attracts a blue-chip audience; uses ensemble casts and multiple, overlapping plot lines that indicate literary values; includes social and cultural criticism; and creates a new genre by combining old ones (Fricker 2007, 14).

Since *Gomorra – La serie* is an essential part of Sky Italia’s strategies of original programming, it is far from being produced outside the field of television; however, its contents and formal choices still responds to Thompson’s description (Thompson 1996). In particular, it is the idea that the characters of quality drama are not “just emotional individuals”, but “social and political actors” (Cardwell 2007, 27) that emerges in our case study. The interlacing of fiction with real, socio-political consequences, has been vibrant since the first publishing of the book, with its author, Roberto Saviano, actually threatened with death by Camorra for his exposé. The hybridization between fiction writing and reportage also enhanced the impact of the book over its audiences (Rivoletti 2015), spreading it internationally and detailing at the same time Camorra’s activities and its presence in ordinary business and political life.

The book is therefore part journalistic inquiry, part anthology of short stories, based on quickly-sketched characters. Saviano’s skill lays in his [page 115] ability to narrate such a complex system through impressive tableaux, wherein each partial description is a synecdoche, containing the main elements that pertain to the whole organization. These tableaux affect the collective perception of criminality, pervading the mediascape and spreading through the public sphere. The book, however, is pervaded by the presence of the narrator, identified with the author “Saviano” by the use of first person singular, and considered as a direct witness of criminal activities (Rivoletti 2015, 107). The data about Camorra’s business, mingled with the rhetoric of a private and unique narrative, and with the description of real situations, produces a universalizing process, granting the participation of a wide audience (Rivoletti 2015, 113). In this way, the book became part of popular discourses, addressing how the criminal activities are the basis for the success of global economies and making everyone see the impossibility to trace clear boundaries between Camorra and other forms of business.

The same representation of the Camorra's multiple faces, including entrepreneurial activities conducted by middle-class men, kept together by the mediation of the author "Saviano", is reproduced on the stage: Ivan Castiglione is "Roberto" in the *Gomorra* stage play, written by Saviano while editing the book, directed by Mario Gelardi, and represented since October 29, 2007 at the Mercadante Theater of Naples (Rimini 2017). Both the play and the film analyze the world inhabited by the criminals, conjugating external observation with a formal proximity to the experiences of the camorristi and the many characters orbiting around their groups. However, the two experiences propose a different take on the point-of-view that filters the narrative. To translate the first person singular noticed by Rivoletti, brought on the stage through the narrator character, the film prefers to manipulate the relationship between image and sound, recurring to the reproduction of the subjective sound as listened by a specific character: for instance, in the scene when the young Roberto (Franco's assistant in the toxic waste illegal business) is wearing a protective suit to deal with the waste, the audience only hears his breathing through the ventilation system until a worker opens the suit, letting other sounds in. It is interesting to notice that Franco is wearing a suit as well, but the timing of the sounds we hear makes us think that we are adhering exclusively to Roberto's subjectivity. Roberto, however, is not the only character to whom the audience is associated by the formal choices of the film (Holdaway 2014, 205-206). In other words, in the film, the first person focus of the novel is scattered over many characters, implying a less univocal moral and ethical position, and a more contradictory ideology embraced by the camera. The association with Roberto's perspective is the more evident, as well as the one that comes closer to most of the middle-class audience, usually considered at distance from the represented criminals; it is also relevant that this character shares his first name with Saviano himself. But the audience shares the point of view with other main characters as [page 116] well, most of all Don Ciro the middleman, Pasquale the tailor, and the youngster Totò, the characters that are less defined by grotesque tones, and formally more sympathetic.

### **Making the Ecosystem Real: From the Art Film to the Quality Television Series**

The filmic passage is pivotal in the transformation of *Gomorra* into an ecosystem, as it was a multilayered reference for all the narrative devices that came later, and particularly for the television series, which pursues its specificity but maintains Matteo Garrone's visual complexity as a basis for comparison. The close relationship in the visual elaboration of the *Gomorra* environment proposed by the television series and the film is one of the elements that contributes to draw *Gomorra – La serie* near to the "quality" products of US cable television, particularly premium cable such as HBO (Brembilla and Pescatore 2013). The serialized elements included in this type of product, with multiple storylines and narrative structure depending on the idea of "episode," are presented through stylistic choices near to "the non-televisual genre of European art cinema" (Feuer 2007, 150). The film *Gomorra* is fully part of the "European art cinema" (Pravadelli 2017), as it was directed by an internationally acclaimed "author," and awarded with the Grand Prix during the prestigious Cannes Film Festival in 2008, among other awards. The relationship between the television series and cinema aesthetics has been made explicit also by the marketing strategy of the series: for instance, the first season was theatrically distributed after its broadcasting on Sky Cinema 1; moreover, to promote the third season, the first two episodes received a preview through

theatrical distribution in 300 copies, a few days before its first broadcasting through the pay channel Sky Atlantic, and ranked first in the opening weekend box office (La Repubblica 2017). It is also the multifaceted and unique mix of the traditions of realism and mannerism (Holdaway 2014) which contributes to its “art film” reputation. As already hinted, the film *Gomorra* produces a manipulation of the audience’s reactions through different grades of adherence to the characters and their political and cultural positions, exposing the paradoxes of globalization and its criminal aspects; at the same time, it uses long takes and discreet camera work, reproducing Scampia and other Neapolitan neighborhoods, meaning Camorra’s “actual spaces,” and therefore enhancing the imbrication between criminal activities and ordinary life.

### Mapping the Ecosystem

As already happened with Saviano’s book, reportage and fiction work together in the film in keeping alive the attention of the audience as well as producing indignation for the power of Camorra as a global criminal [page 117] enterprise. If the critical discourse around the film was focused on the “realistic” reproduction of criminality and its networked presence over the Italian landscape, as well as on the use of non-professional actors, sometimes even involved in Camorra (Marcus 2016), the formal configuration of space, characters, and time produces complex environments. Such a focus on space and environments is made evident in the Virtual Reality miniseries called *Gomorra VR – We Own the Streets*, produced by Sky Italia and Think|Cattleya and presented during the 74<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival in September 2017. Such a product presents a complex experience for its audiences, which puts together the immersion in an explorable environment, with original narrative elements (Anon. 2017).

The book, the film, and the series all share a multilayered map of the described territory, a space that on the one side reproduces the network of power behind the Camorra system, and on the other side gives a precarious orientation structure for the audience. The ideal center of the whole system is Scampia, with the characteristic skyline produced by “Le Vele,” monstrous project buildings where most of the fictional camorristi live.



Fig. 7.1: The project buildings “Le Vele” in Sampia (Naples).

Because they are able to move within this space, the fictional characters are able also to orientate themselves all over the rest of the world, as in *Gomorra – La serie* is the case of *Ciro l’Immortale*: after being the only member of his family to survive the devastating earthquake of 1980 when he was only a few months old, *Ciro* can equally survive in Naples (Italy), Barcelona (Spain), or Sofia (Bulgaria). Such an empowerment through the characters’ ability to physically move in their space of origin, also works the other way around: *Genny Savastano* needs to control the horrific, invisible, and undefined space of Honduras in order to acquire the power over *Scampia* and *Secondigliano* he is entitled by birthright.

The spatial organization of the narrative, both in the film and the series, underlines the scattering of the spaces as well as their stratification: on the one side, we have high buildings, represented through the [page 118] bundling of floors, stairs, doors, windows, and especially galleries and bridges linking one with the other; on the other side, the characters can be suddenly dispersed in small towns, beaches, highways, or cities, which stay anonymous or whose spatial relations are evidently hidden by camerawork and editing. In this way, the narrative underlines the constant presence of frontiers and borders that the characters trespass, usually without permission of the power representatives, as a defiant or bold act against them. The youngsters, for instance, repeatedly invade the residential space of the eldest, usually running around narrow streets, parking lots, or pedestrian areas of the projects on their motorbikes, eventually firing their guns – which is actually a recurring image within the series.

Interestingly, the series programmatically changes the characters performing the role involved in such a scene: each time, a new group challenges the authority, and different leaders are those who are challenged; sometimes, we are not even fully aware of who these characters are. Such a structure fulfills a double necessity: It creates a recurring module in the narrative, a node in the plot that makes radical changes in the power balance, without any necessity to explain or motivate it according to rational, linear trajectories, and it shows one of the main characteristics of the *Camorra* in front of other criminal organizations (and specifically *Mafia* and *’Ndrangheta*), denoting it as more apt to the global scenario of neoliberalism: it is an economic, territorial system, without official affiliations or rituals, whose main leaders can therefore constantly change, if it is useful to maintain its internal and external balance and efficiency (Sgueglia 2012). No one is essential for the survival of the system, and everyone is expendable and replaceable. Every position for the subjects in the system is a place, not an identity, and can be equally covered by most people to make the system work.

The spatialization of narrative in *Gomorra* therefore proposes a constant correspondence between the positions of characters on a geographical map and on an ideal map of the power structures organizing their relations and the represented communities, and it is also reflected in the décor and the sets (Noto 2015). Space is not just a geographical, measurable expression: it is a symbolic territory, culturally declined, which molds the community inhabiting it through its own shape – and vice versa. In this sense, both the film and the television series reproduce in each spatial portion the power relations dominating the whole criminal organization, including the tensions derived by shifting gender, economic, hierarchical positions.

In other words, the representation of spaces in *Gomorra – La serie* is based on the idea of scale, where each portion reproduce the whole. Each space, as in classic cinema, determines a narrative portion; such a fragment however is at the same time essential to the production of the vast narrative, and modular as well, meaning that it can be easily replaced by other narratives with other

characters. The film *Gomorra*, too, is composed by modular narrative sections, as described by [page 119] Millicent Marcus in her analysis (2016, 309-310); the resulting pluralistic and anti-totalizing view is accentuated in the television series, as it is replied in a narrative spiral from season to season.

In this way, the representation of spaces and situations in *Gomorra – La serie* mirrors its narrative configuration and can be assimilated to a fractal. The fractal model has been used as metaphor to better articulate the organization of chaos in narrative complexity (Cameron 2008, 61), and, “being a self-similar, integral and split structure at one time, participates in the formation of infinite number of conceptual domains in a fictional text” (Bystrov 2014). Such a geometric structure allows the proliferation of narrative modules, each one reproducing the major dynamics between the characters proposed by wider sections – each scene includes elements from wider narrative arcs within each episode, or developing through the whole season, or even characterizing the series itself. Interestingly, such a fractal design organizing the narrative trajectory is also considered the way to visualize the balancing tensions within a natural ecosystem and the complex organization of its multiple elements: “Fractal topographies [...] index [...] the disjunctive and ‘contradictory registers’ of human agency. [...] Fractals thus help us to stretch our historical imagination and cultural criticism into multi-scaled and multi-agentic realms” (Lekan 2014:178).

Fractals, in other words, are the way a system organizes itself, creating modular schemes replicating themselves in scale. This is also the organization of the criminal system itself, with multiple cells operating together for mutual survival, each one which reproduces the wider hierarchical structure organizing the system as a whole. Camorra, who calls itself “O’ Sistema” (“The System”), is an open system, in the sense that its members regularly change (mainly because they are arrested or killed), it is deeply interconnected, and is made of biotic elements (its members) and abiotic ones (global markets and other power centers, both legal and illegal, in all their declinations). The main difference between an ordinary ecosystem and the Camorra is the existence of a few bosses who affect its development directly, in a more hierarchical distribution of power. However, Camorra, in a way that is typical of ecosystems, is mainly oriented toward the preservation of balance: if one boss is perceived as a menace for the survival of the other parts of the system, s/he will be subjected to a (violent) removal and promptly substituted by someone else. Indeed, the way the organization has been run by the Di Lauro clan is described by Saviano in his book as “fractal” (Saviano 2016<sup>2</sup>:1024), with each part reproducing the structures of the whole.

### **Economies of the *Gomorra* Experience**

The aim of such a parallel between the visual organization of living ecosystems and that of artificial ones, produced with a specific economic intent (both Camorra and *Gomorra*), is to emphasize the complexity [page 120] and multiplicity of elements at stake when we address a narrative that is so vast and multilayered, underlining its almost-chaotic status. The ecosystem can be a useful metaphor that produces various meanings: on the one side, it proposes a hypothetical organization for the materials involved in the narrative production; on the other side, the metaphor enhances the impossibility to actually systematize all these materials in one elegant model; finally, it focuses on the production of multifaceted experiences for its audiences, generated by the inhabitable worlds it maps.

The systemic complexity of *Gomorra* is widened by its mirroring the specific criminal organization's structure, as well as by the interlaced economic and cultural systems it involves in its production. First of all, the success of its book is also due to the fact that it has been published by one of the main Italian editors, Mondadori, with all its tradition of national and international distribution, with its ability to trace marketing strategies for its products, and its overall cultural power. Mondadori is controlled by the Fininvest Group, one of the main Italian entertainment industries, and as a publisher, it detains both the power for economic investments and the cultural power of tradition (it was founded in 1907).

The film has been produced by Fandango, considered one of the main "independent" studios of art films in Italy since 1990s (and it grants the "art quality" of the film), with the economic power of the Italian public broadcaster RAI and in collaboration with Sky Italia, granting for a wide theatrical distribution (01 Distribution is controlled by RAI Cinema and it is ranked second among the Italian distributors, after the Fininvest-controlled Medusa, according to data published by ANICA, 2016), as well as for pay and free television broadcasting through Sky and RAI channels.

To produce the television series, Fandango and Sky Italia cooperate with the film producer Cattleya, who had already involved Saviano for a television project (Barra and Scaglioni 2013, 28), the Italian television network La7; and German Beta Film and other international partners, who granted the presence of the product in the international market. It is interesting to notice that the news of the acquisition of Cattleya by the British ITV Studios has been promoted by identifying Cattleya specifically as the "*Gomorrhah* producer" (e.g. Jacques 2017, Clarke 2017). The intention is for ITV Global Entertainment to handle international distribution for Cattleya's products, including *Gomorra – La serie*, but also the other Italian television series about criminal organizations produced by the Italian studio (Roxborough 2017).

## **Ecosystems and Brands**

As can be deduced by the list above, all the main Italian cultural companies are involved in creating the narrative ecosystem named *Gomorra* and can be considered part of the reason why such world has been so successful both nationally and internationally. Moreover, *Gomorra – La [page 121] serie* comes as conclusion of a small revolution within Italian television. It is the final result of a production process of "quality" television series started in 2008 by Sky Italia, based on the tradition of mainstream fiction production by national broadcaster. The pay tv producer put together the skills coming from years of film and television adaptations, fiction and heritage narratives, to create a product exportable beyond the national borders, in order to generate a transnational network of co-producers and distributors (Barra and Scaglioni 2013, 21). To underline the difference between the fiction produced by national public broadcaster, the pay tv products are characterized by specific visual styles; in the case of *Gomorra – La serie*, the heavy filters chosen by the directors of photography (Paolo Carnera, Michele D'Attanasio, Vittorio Omodeo Zorini, Ivan Casalgrandi) are a visual trademark and spill themselves in other media products lingering around the main series (Checcaglini 2017). Moreover, the pay tv fictions are aimed to the creation of an event, unique and original, but also high-concept: recognizable, reproducible, communicable. Finally, from this core narrative, it must be able to build a whole world in order to generate a potentially cross-media storytelling, a spreadable narrative able to involve its audiences in multiple practices – as consumers as well as members of a fandom.

Such products define themselves for aiming to be part of a “cult” phenomenon, as described by Umberto Eco: the “cult” object is the one that can be “broken” in parts, in a series of excerpts that can be usable in other contexts (Eco 1985, 4); its narrative must be composed by “archetypes,” meaning “a pre-established and frequently re-appearing narrative situation that is cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts, and provokes in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a *dejà vu*” (Eco 1985, 5). Because of the cultural capital needed to recognize these products and “correctly” use them, “cult” series are constructed through a rhetoric similar to “quality television” (Pearson 2010, 15); however, it does not mean that it must stay confined within a restricted and expert audience. In this sense, *Gomorra* is part of what Matt Hills has labeled “mainstream cult:” a product which “hybridizes aspects of ‘mainstream’ exhibition/distribution (or in TV terms, cultural reach and popularity) with the textual layerings, details, and diegetic world-makings of ‘cult’ media” (2010, 71). Moreover, in contemporary cross-media scenario, the quotable excerpts from the cult object are part of complex practices of worldbuilding, acted out by the producers and the audiences as well. “Cult and quality”, Pearson writes, “serve as marketing brands to attract particularly desirable audience segments” (2010,16). Such an articulated branding strategy involves a specific and glamorous visual style beyond the high-concept narrative, able to grant instant recognition for the object because of its impact on audiences.

Recognizability and extractability (Jenkins 2009) cooperate in spreading the narrative ecosystem across the audiences’ everyday lives, both [page 122] through other companies’ initiatives and because of the addressees’ participation in the worldbuilding. So, beyond the specificity of a narrative structure organized as a fractal at every level and in each involved media, *Gomorra* behave as a complex narrative ecosystem because of its popularity at a national and international level. As discussed in the introduction to this volume, the repetition, modularity, and scalability of serial narratives, mixed with the popularity of television fiction, and with the complex worldbuilding of cross-media storytelling, is essential to the creation of a narrative ecosystem. This one is specifically widened by the production of grassroots contents, as well as by the appropriation of its identity from other producers and companies (Napoli and Tirino 2015, 198).

Because of its extensiveness, *Gomorra – La serie* is not only a key part of Sky Italia branding strategy, defining the media company and its television series; it also is part of the brand *Gomorra* itself. The relationship between branding and storyworld building has been widely addressed by Freeman in the first chapter of this book; here, I would like to point how *Gomorra* as brand is literally extended to official and most of all to unofficial merchandise created around the television series and its characters. Within the Italian section of Amazon, for instance, it is common to see items commercialized through the keyword “Gomorra,” in particular fashion items, that become an essential part of characters’ iconic image, also affecting the brands and the audiences. For instance, the Bob Sdrunk Faith sunglasses wore in Season 2 by Ciriaco De Falco, became the character’s ‘trademark’, gave the brand instant popularity (with a relevant rise in sales), and triggered a wide range of product imitation, ultimately becoming a cult object for the series’ fans (Martin 2017).

[page 123]



Fig. 7.2: The Bob Sdrunk Faith sunglasses wore in Season 2 by Ciro Di Marzio.

The popular frenzy around *Gomorra* as a wide cultural phenomenon is evident in the profusion of unofficial merchandise, for instance t-shirt and smartphone covers decorated with the “cult” sentences pronounced by the main characters, but also the traditional nativity set figurines for sale on the streets of Naples. The *Gomorra* ecosystem legitimates the mythologization of the lives of camorristi; moreover, as it mashes up catholic iconography with the representation of Camorra, it finally authorizes the explicit presence of criminals in the very heart of popular religion, placing them in Bethlehem. One can say that the figurines are an actualization of the idea of “cult following” generated by this kind of television series (Pearson 2010, 8).

On the other side, elements from *Gomorra* have been used to create parodies of this sanctification of criminality, for instance the viral web series *Gli effetti di Gomorra sulla gente* (*The Effects of Gomorra on People*), produced by The Jackal for their YouTube channel, with several millions of visualizations for each episode. The web series itself has become a “cult” product, object for recuts and other form of reuse, and inspiration for other parodies and narratives around *Gomorra*.

The audiences reached by The Jackal is in many cases the same targeted by Sky Italia for its original series: middle-class males, with an age range included between 15 and 54 years old (with specific attention to the core 35-45) and characterized by cultural and educational capital (Scaglioni 2013, 52-53). Especially with the expansion of the Video on Demand section offered by Sky Italia, both online and through the decoder, the audiences must be able to navigate within a large amount of content and find their products, as it happens with a YouTube channel.

Hence, the Jackal’s web series answers to the needs expressed by another section of the audience, the part that wants to put distance between itself and the mythologization of the criminals sometimes hinted by the television narrative. At the same time, it is another emergence of the many and complex levels of interaction between the institutional products of the narrative ecosystem and the audiences’ activities, which inscribe themselves within the idea of “spread fandom” (“fandom

diffuso”) emerging [page 124] in contemporary products. According to this perspective, “textual and technic competences, interpretative abilities and affective tensions, usually attributed to fans, are more widely spread among contemporary audiences, and can be activated each time it is needed by the engagement through a specific experience of fruition” (Penati and Sfardini 2013, 68). The *Gomorra* ecosystem specifically asks for such competent audiences, able to appreciate, for instance, the cultural clash going on behind the idea of Genny Savastano as Disney Prince: when The Walt Disney Company bought the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox from Rupert Murdoch, it also bought Sky Italia and its products. The Jackal commented the acquisition with a new wave of viral memes, composed by images from the Disney Classics associated with the iconic sentences of *Gomorra – La serie*; soon, other content producers released on the web memes and mashup videos with Disney Classics scenes redubbed with fragments from *Gomorra*’s soundtrack and dialogues.



Fig. 7.3: One of the memes produced by The Jackal, associating Disney Classic *Robin Hood* (1973) to the moment, early in the series, when *Ciro* incites a reluctant *Genny* to shoot a man.

[page 125] The *Gomorra*-inspired content, spread all over the media, is therefore modular, partially serialized, and creates a layered narrative that constantly renews itself. The many versions of the narrative are neither conventional adaptations, nor legible in terms of autonomy or dependence from one another. Furthermore, not all of them derive from a single, central source, but many of them proliferate autonomously at the edges of the franchise. Each product could be read as an independent text, but to do so would disguise its wider relations to popular culture, not to mention its ability to be a living part of a complex system. Overall, *Gomorra*’s narrative is in every respect an ecosystem that is balanced and spreadable at the same time and regulated by biotic and abiotic elements: in one word, it is alive.

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