

Russo, P

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**Storylining engagement with repulsive antiheroes: Towards a cognitive poetics of TV
serial drama narrative: The case of *Gomorra* – *The Series***

Paolo Russo, Oxford Brookes University

Abstract

The unprecedented success of Italian crime drama serial *Gomorra – The Series* has spurred much interest in the industry as well as a lively critical debate. Little attention, however, has thus far been paid to the creative process behind the series. This article contributes to filling this gap by investigating the branding strategies and the writing strategies that have informed the development process. Particular emphasis is given to the analysis of the storylining techniques employed in the development of the arcs of Season 1 with a view to unpacking how, in turn, these determine mechanisms of the viewers' engagement with characters. As typical of much contemporary serial dramas, these are predominantly antiheroes and therefore our allegiance to them is questioned when problematic issues are raised, as in the case of violent actions and dubious moral choices. The investigation combines three interplaying methodologies – i.e. a genetic approach, close textual (quantitative and qualitative) analysis and a cognitive theoretical framework – to offer a general poetic model for analysing serial narrative. While the article deals with one particular case study, the more general aim is to contribute to developments in the field of cognitive studies of serial drama, with a specific focus on creative development and writing practices.

Keywords

TV drama

Gomorra

storylining

branding

character engagement

perverse allegiance

Introduction

Gomorra – La serie (*Gomorra – The Series*) (2014–present) is Italy’s most successful TV series to date, having sold to more than 50 countries worldwide, and quickly achieved cult-like status, with SundanceTV set to shoot a US remake following their acquisition of the first two seasons from The Weinstein Company (Holloway 2016). The release of Season 1 was hailed by *Variety* as ‘Italy’s answer to *The Wire*’ (Vimercati 2014) and that of Season 2 as ‘one that throws in hearty helpings of Golden Age classics like *The Sopranos* and *The Shield*’ (Ryan 2016). For a TV series, it has also attracted unusually rapid and extensive attention from academia. A 2016 issue of *The Italianist* features a whole dossier containing short reviews of all twelve episodes of Season 1, and a forthcoming volume edited by Dana Renga (2017) will include an entire section of scholarly contributions devoted to the series.

However, for the most part the critical literature available thus far has focused on thematic issues, such as gender politics and the supposedly glamorized depiction of crime and violence from a cultural studies perspective. Little, if anything, has been written that explores the creative process behind the series.

This article offers an investigation of the specific development and writing strategies employed by the series creators. Particular emphasis will be placed on the storylining process in order to show how – unlike the original 2006 book by Roberto Saviano and its feature film adaptation in 2008 – the creators have systematically prioritized a non-parallel approach to building narrative that is unusual in TV series. More specifically, I will focus on how

storylining can inform and pre-determine our engagement with characters that, for the most part, are antiheroes with mostly negative traits. I will therefore interrogate the writers' choices that determine the eventual representation of violence in crime fiction, thus addressing the affective response of viewers to aesthetic and ethical questions raised in the series. To this purpose I combine three methodologies:

1. A genetic approach – for this case study it involved collecting and collating primary source materials and first-hand information and facts by interviewing the Head Writer of the series (Bises 2015).
2. Data drawn from a close analysis of the series episodes (limited to Season 1).
3. A cognitive theoretical framework that allows me to unravel the mechanisms of the viewers' engagement with the characters and the issues portrayed (e.g. violence) as a result of the work done by the writers.

This combination, I believe, offers a general poetic model that looks effectively at both production and reception practices. Analysing the end product with a detailed knowledge of its genesis will show how choices made at storylining/development stage, although consciously planned and carefully executed, can be significantly influenced by the modes and conditions of production. As concerns the theoretical models adopted, I will apply the widely accepted paradigm of the three levels of engagement, as originally put forth by Murray Smith: recognition, alignment and allegiance. It must be pointed out, though, that while studies of feature films informed by a cognitivist approach have flourished in the last fifteen years, serial TV drama narrative and writing for TV drama remain relatively unexplored territory. Recently, Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2012) have published an article in *Projections* that outlines a number of theoretical models – e.g. exposure effect, sunk

cost effect, investment model, instant intensity – that are applicable to the study of serial television and of character engagement in particular. Jason Mittel’s volume *Complex TV* (2015) provides a comprehensive approach to the paradigm shift from episodic to serial narrative that has been the hallmark of innovation in television drama for the past two decades. Mittel models his study as an interplay between cognitive poetics, close textual analysis of several primetime serials and the study of viewing practices to unpack how viewers engage with forms of serialized narrative. His chapter on characters, as well as Bruun Vaage’s *The Antihero in American Television* (2016), is of particular interest for this study as it focuses on the growing reliance on antiheroes as lead characters in contemporary serials, as is the case of *Gomorra – The Series*.

The genesis of *Gomorra – The Series*: Branding strategy, adaptation choices and modes of production

This article is part of a broader research that focuses on crime dramas originally commissioned and/or broadcast by Sky Italy that in recent years have become international hits as a result of a well-calculated branding strategy, clearly aiming at competing with US imports, that comes down to identifying a successful author of a successful novel from which a successful feature film has already been made. Scaglioni and Barra (2013) propose a broad-ranging exploration of the so-called ‘Sky model’. Although at the time of their publication successful series such as *Gomorra – The Series* and *1992* (2015–present) were still in development, Scaglioni and Barra envisaged this model as a driver of innovation for serial television in Italy. This strategy has become instrumental to the international success of its Italian series to the extent that other global networks have now followed in its wake: Saviano’s more recent novel *Zero, zero, zero* (2015) has been optioned by Canal+, and

Suburra, the 2013 novel by Giancarlo De Cataldo (author of *Romanzo criminale* [2008–10]), has already been adapted into a feature film (2015), this too directed by Sollima, with Netflix set to release a TV series in 2017.

A key product of this strategy, *Gomorra* follows in the wake of *Romanzo criminale – La serie* (2008–10) from which it inherits the creative formula and part of the production/creative – namely, director Stefano Sollima and executive producer Gina Gardini. The author of *Gomorra*, Roberto Saviano, has himself become a brand, partly due to the worldwide success of his books but also as a result of the dire consequences that this success has meant on a personal level. As known, the Camorra crime syndicate vowed to kill Saviano following the international success of *Gomorra* (the book) and therefore he has been put under special protection and lived in hiding for several years, very much like Salman Rushdie. One might object that such a strategy – i.e. book/feature film/TV series – seems like a banal formula to exploit the same product in different formats and outlets. However, when we look at the approaches that have been put into work to turn the book into a feature film first and into a drama series later, we get a clear sense of how *Gomorra* lends itself to a very flexible and creatively prolific adaptation process.

The book (published in 2006) comprises eleven chapters: each one can be read as a stand-alone story, and most contain multiple interconnected micro-stories. These micro-stories do not follow any particular chronology; they can be read in any order and yet, taken as a whole, give shape to that magmatic mosaic that is the criminal world described by Saviano. The book has the narrative pace and style that would be typical of a novel but is in fact a non-sense exposé that blends countless facts, in-the-field reportages, reports from dozens of trials and prosecutions, police enquiries, and years of daily work as a journalist in the

territory around Naples. Notably, the book lacks consistent protagonists and a discernable continuous plot (or plots) that, as such, could be employed to shape a suitable narrative either for a feature or for a serial drama.

The feature film (made in 2008) alternates five stories, the materials for which are mostly sourced from four chapters of the book. However, the treatment of these materials varies significantly from one story to the other. To give just a couple of examples: the story of Pasquale – the gifted tailor who works for a clandestine Chinese textile factory – draws its narrative material in broad strokes from the first two, very substantial chapters of the book; the plotline that follows don Ciro – the submarine (i.e. the gofer) who delivers the monthly salaries to the families of clan affiliates who have been jailed or killed – was blown up to full story length from just a couple of pages (for a comparison, see Saviano 2007: 139–41).

For the TV series the creators' approach to adapting the book was exactly the opposite. It is typical of drama series to develop multiple interweaving storylines, just like the feature film did to a certain extent. However, the series uses relatively small portions of a few pages from two different chapters as loose inspiration to develop essentially one main plotline that every now and then is interrupted by temporary diversions. More specifically, these are Chapter 5 (titled 'Women') and Chapter 4, recounting the clan war in the district of Secondigliano in the northern outskirts of Naples. In order to understand how the series was storylined, it is necessary to trace the complex genesis of the project.

The scale of the success enjoyed by the first season of Sky's *Romanzo criminale – La serie* (2008), both nationally and internationally, was groundbreaking to the extent that, for the first time in Italy, it created a demand for so-called quality drama, and crime drama in particular.

The following year, Saviano pitched an idea for a TV series to Cattleya, the lead production company behind *Romanzo criminale – La serie*: although it shared the same subject matter, this idea was not taken from the book and, although optioned, it was not developed further. In 2008, *Gomorra* (the feature film) was released as well, produced by Fandango, who owned the rights on Saviano's book. Eventually, Fandango and Cattleya joined forces and agreed to develop a series format based on the *Gomorra* brand, with Cattleya in charge of executive production, and Fandango to coordinate creative development. The project started only in 2010 when Fandango hired Head Writer Stefano Bises, joined by Leonardo Fasoli soon after. By that time Bises was already a most experienced TV drama writer, having contributed to some of the most successful police procedural and crime dramas in Italy of the previous decade, in addition to hugely successful comedy series *Tutti pazzi per amore* (2008–12); no less experienced was Fasoli, who had worked with Bises at the first season of the crime drama *Squadra antimafia – Palermo oggi* (2009–present). Bises and Fasoli developed a first format featuring an extensive horizontal plotline pegged to a central protagonist very similar to Saviano himself, who worked as a functional entry point to the criminal underworld of Naples. Fandango found this first version too conventional and rejected it, requesting a more 'experimental' approach instead. Bises and Fasoli came up with a second format that consisted of six self-contained stories, each one autonomous and yet sharing the same setting/diegetic world as the others. Each story would have different characters, some fished from Saviano's book, others not. This echoes the approach used by the writers of the five autonomous, and yet interconnected stories of Garrone's filmic adaption. And while this may sound unusual for serialized narratives, when one considers the typical formats of Italian television productions of the past decades it is clearly not so experimental after all. Typically, and unlike most other countries, at least until *Romanzo criminale – La serie* switched to the 50-minute format, Italian productions of televised drama would stick to the 100-minute

format, which was symptomatic of a long-standing reliance on methods (of production, direction, and even writing) derived from feature films (see Zanatta 2014). As the planned six stories would last two episodes each for a total of twelve episodes, one can easily see how they would have fitted into this tradition.

While developing these stories, in 2011 the two head writers were joined by writer-director Paolo Sorrentino and by writer Ludovica Rampoldi. At the time of joining the *Gomorra* project, Sorrentino had already enjoyed international recognition thanks to *Il divo* (2007) and *This Must Be the Place* (2011); however, he had not yet reached the planetary fame that would follow *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*) (2013), *Youth – La giovinezza* (*Youth*) (2015) and HBO's series *The Young Pope* (2016). Rampoldi had only collaborated on minor projects, but was in the writing team of the Italian version of *In Treatment* (2013–present) when she joined *Gomorra*, and would go on to boost her international profile as one of the creators of *1992* (2015–present). The new team redeveloped the six stories into a third format, very much informed by Sorrentino's typical witty humour that was eventually considered too out of touch with the true nature and content of the *Gomorra* brand. This further rejection brought the project to a standstill for an unspecified time with Sorrentino moving on to his own projects.

Work on the series project resumed in 2012, when Cattleya decided to bring in director Stefano Sollima, with whom they had worked at *Romanzo criminale – La serie*. It took the creative team up to eight months to come up with a fourth proposal that ditched the idea of the six mini-films for a more conventional approach to serial narrative. The new format focused on old-school Camorra, a rather traditional criminal organization still very much rooted in the more rural areas of the province of Naples (and beyond) outside the reach of the

metropolitan area, where a seamless sprawl of illegal factories operate alongside rogue control of clandestine immigration flows. For the first time after almost three years, with one season already storylined and ready to move on to script stage, the series format was green-lit in October 2012; pre-production started and so did location scouting, with principal photography scheduled to begin in January 2013.

However, while receiving, the creative team came to realize that the area of Scampia, near the Secondigliano district, held the potential for a much more layered, complex and eventually captivating narrative world. One image in particular has become an iconic synonym for Camorra: the infamous complex known as Le Vele (The Wings) located in Scampia that provides the main setting of at least two stories in the feature film and most of Season 1 in the TV series. The new setting did not simply entail a return to a metropolitan area of Naples; it also raised a significant challenge. The criminal organization that controls Scampia and the surrounding areas of the city is vastly different from the more traditional Camorra mentioned above. Unlike other mafia organizations, like the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, the new Camorra has managed to become a global brand in its own right. The British edition of Saviano's book is titled *Gomorrah: Italy's Other Mafia* (2007), but in the translation the original subtitle gets lost: *Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra* (which, in English, translates roughly as 'Voyage across the economic empire of the Camorra and its dream of domination'). This is to point out that the Camorra is not simply a criminal organization: it is an economic powerhouse on a local and global scale. They are modern entrepreneurs running an immensely vast, highly specialized drug-peddling business with very precise rules and mechanisms, including workflows, salaries, pensions, and its own welfare system that the old-school syndicate cannot match.

This late realization convinced the writers to change all the storylines once again and turn them into a fifth version that depicted this profoundly unsettling world. With two months left before shooting, the only option was to skip the preparation of individual episodes' scene-by-scenes, and design and incorporate all the necessary changes directly into the scripts, many of which were being written while previous episodes were being shot. The new plotlines drew factual inspiration from the diaspora that led to an all-out clan war in 2003–04 that resulted in the fall from power of the then ruling Di Lauro family, which is also accounted for in Saviano's book. In the series we find some of the dynamics of the various feuds, such as the return of the 'Spagnoli', a defeated clan that had fled to Spain after losing the previous war. Still, it must be pointed out though that, despite the similarities, the series develops its own fictional world and characters: the Savastanos are not a portrayal of the Di Lauros.

Production of Season 1 eventually kicked off in February 2013, scheduled to wrap by the summer. However, managing the schedule soon became an almost impossible task due to the outbreak of a new bloody feud with frequent shootouts in the streets. After numerous delays, principal photography had to be stopped for more than one month, with only three episodes in the can, and most of the allocated budget already gone. Season 1 had a budget of about 14 million euros in total, an average of almost 1.2 million euros per episode, which is significantly higher than usual for an Italian series. This unplanned interruption dictated one further rewrite of the remaining episodes, which had to be cut down by ten script pages each so as to reduce shooting time, and related costs, as much as possible. While this did not result in yet another version of the series format, the writers had to make countless substantial changes, with Bises editing everybody else's scripts until the very last day.

(For the sake of completeness, it is worth mentioning that the team of writers also included journalist Giovanni Bianconi, Filippo Gravino and Maddalena Ravagli, with the latter the only one to continue with Bises, Fasoli and Rampoldi on Season 2. Saviano as well was credited as writer in all the episodes of Season 1.)

Season arcs and character engagement: Cognitive theory meets storylining techniques

The resulting format for Season 1 develops the arcs of five primary characters, all of whom are members of the fictional Savastano family and its affiliates in their fight for power over the Camorra crime syndicate. I share Mittel's preoccupation that characters should not be studied merely in terms of actor performance or stardom, however important these might be in an industry where most often productions are green-lit based on whether such key Unique Selling Points can be attached to a given script or series format. In fact, characters are a crucial element of narrative construction that is not limited to generic traits and functions but requires detailed analysis within a general poetic model that looks at both production and reception practices (Mittel 2015: 118–19). This becomes a particularly intriguing challenge when most, if not almost all the protagonists in any one story are antiheroes, as is the case with *Gomorra*. Surely not to be limited to traits and narrative functions is *character recognition*, one of the three components of Murray Smith's model of character engagement – the other two being alignment and allegiance, both to be explored further on in this article. Recognition is important because it establishes patterns of hierarchy between characters via their relations and interactions. These patterns fuel and at the same time are fuelled by the power dynamics between the characters, and end up establishing an initial set of expectations. In long-running serialized narratives, the logic presiding over this hierarchical structure

means that viewers will expect primary characters to populate the story for most of the series' life, if not until the very end.

And yet *Gomorra* seems to do just the opposite. On a basic representational level the fact that so many primary characters are killed off (Imma in Season 1, don Pietro and Salvatore Conte in Season 2) or disappear for entire episodes finds justification in the ruthless laws that govern the world portrayed in this story. Closer scrutiny though reveals that this is the outcome of specific choices made by the writing team at storylining stage. Of the five main protagonists, two are at the top of the power dynamic hierarchy: Don Pietro Savastano and his rival, Salvatore Conte, who leads the 'Spagnoli' clan. Since Conte is introduced as the clear antagonist, his appearances are limited to every two or three episodes when big confrontations occur. However, Don Pietro, who clearly dominates the scene initially as the unquestionable leader of the syndicate, essentially disappears after Episode 4 following his transfer to a maximum-security prison in northern Italy several hundred miles from Naples. This means that, for the most part, the three characters that we recognize as the main drivers of the narrative in Season 1 are Imma and Genny (respectively, wife and son of Don Pietro) and Ciro Di Marzio, who initially occupy a lower level in the hierarchy. Recognition in TV series is important because long formats rely heavily on so-called instant intensity: at every new episode, we retrieve narrative information stored from watching previous episodes that allows for instant re-engagement with characters and plotlines with which we are already familiar (see Blanchet and Bruun Vaage 2012: 32), where instantaneity stands for quick recognition at the same level of intensity reached previously. Since lead characters in serials tend to reappear in most episodes, the related instant intensities tend to form patterns that are repeated on fairly regular basis. *Gomorra* is peculiar in this respect because, once established, its instant intensity patterns related to character recognition black out

systematically every two or three episodes. In fact, they shift pretty much at every new episode after Episode 4 and the departure of Don Pietro as the main focus of the narration.

This is better understood by moving on to Smith's second level of engagement: that is, character *alignment*. A more adequate notion than identification, alignment is usually referred to in terms of which characters guide us through the narrative and negotiate our point of view on the events being narrated. Simply thinking of this as an equivalent of physical proximity as mediated by the audio-visual medium would be a limited interpretation of what alignment is and does. Instead, I argue that, especially in TV series, alignment is key to effective storylining and therefore has crucial implications in terms of structural construction of the long arcs of a season, very early on during the development process.

We learn from Smith and Mittel that alignment consists of two components: our 'exposure' to characters as the storylines unfold, and our access to their subjective states. First of all, alignment builds our attachment to characters as we follow their experience throughout the diegetic events (Mittel 2015: 129). In this sense, alignment is a quantitative function depending on-screen time. As illustrated effectively by Blanchet and Bruun Vaage, it works by exposure: the more time we spend with the characters, the more familiar we become with them, and the more our affective disposition towards those characters gets stimulated (2012: 22). In other words, it determines our investment in the character. A good method for analysing such investment as a result of creative decisions made during the storylining process consists in mapping out beat by beat our exposure to each character. If we extend this analysis to all the twelve episodes of Season 1, we can visualize the results in the diagram below (Figure 1).

[PLACEHOLDER – CHART – ATTACHED AT END OF ARTICLE]

Figure 1: Character alignment as a result of storylining season arcs.

One might also choose to measure alignment by using the aggregated screen time per character per episode, but in *Gomorra* temporal distribution is very balanced overall, with consistently similar beat durations, and therefore the resulting diagram would actually be very similar to the one presented here. What immediately transpires from this visualization is that – with the exception of Episodes 2–4, when don Pietro’s dominating on-screen presence seems to determine a more regular pattern, albeit only temporary – the way character alignment is designed regularly breaks our exposure at every new episode and, consequently, juggles our alignment between characters. Or, put simply, it does not allow us to attach ourselves to any given character for too long, a factor not to be overlooked when most characters are antiheroes as we shall see below.

The second component of character alignment – which, of course, is complementary to exposure – is given by all those textual structures that provide relevant narrative information to cue our access to the subjective states of the characters: emotions, feelings, thoughts. Because interior monologue is totally absent in *Gomorra*, these textual structures can only come in the shape of external markers; and while both physical appearance and wardrobe play a vital role in enhancing these portrayals, for the purposes of this analysis I am more interested in what the characters do within a given dramatic context (see Mittel 2015: 130). The related markers for this – i.e. encompassing actions, dialogue and performance – must therefore be scripted specifically in ways that regulate and charge our alignment to determine the third level of engagement: *allegiance*.

Allegiance is shaped gradually but continuously by the moral structure of the text, thus guiding our evaluation of the characters. However, allegiance combines two complementary types of reaction. The first one is a cognitive response that produces our evaluation in absolute terms: that is, whether we feel sympathy or antipathy for a character based on their actions, behaviours, beliefs (Smith 1999: 185). Tan elaborates on this response process by defining a structure of empathy that alternates between sympathy, admiration and compassion based on a double balance (with three possible values: stronger than, equal to, weaker than) in the relations between characters, and between character and viewer (1996: 172). For instance, on a very basic level, in *Gomorra* we can generally observe that we may tend to empathize and feel compassion for *Ciro* because he is weaker than *don Pietro*. The second type is an emotional response that defines our empathic engagement with the character, and is aroused especially by situations when the characters we attach ourselves to have to face conflicts and/or other characters, or when they show some positive traits or weaknesses. It is a relative type of morality at work here that explains why and how we can invest emotionally in characters with negative traits whose reprehensible moral values we do not share, particularly when they are pitted against other, more unsympathetic characters.

Raz and Hendlar have championed neuro-cognitive empirical studies that demonstrate how these combined responses are activated by two subsystems in our nervous system. One (named ES, or Embodied Simulation) mirrors emotions and bodily states, thus triggering a visceral response to situations of distress caused to others by present or imminent threats. Conversely, the other system (ToM, or Theory of Mind) processes information about past and likely future events by adding cognitive distance in our response as a result of mentalized simulation. Typically, cinematic devices rely on both modes with varying proportions,

although, as Raz and Hendler conclude, genres that involve more action tend to elicit a more visceral response (2014: 93–99). As exemplified below, the narrative strategies employed in *Gomorrah* challenge this conclusion. By systematically fragmenting our alignment to characters, the continuity of any visceral response is broken at more or less regular intervals, thus forcing frequent reframing that requires higher levels of cognitive activity and, as a result, challenges the formation of regular patterns of allegiance. As argued by Torben Grodal, while it is true that most TV crime dramas – and *Gomorrah* is no exception – rely heavily on ‘seeking procedures’ and so-called ‘HTOFF scenarios’ (that is, Hiding, Tracking, Observing, Fleeing, Fighting) that foreground rage, fear and aggression, the combined devices illustrated above call for constant re-contextualization of any emotional arousal (2010: 74–75). As confirmed by Bises and Rampoldi, this combination was a conscious choice made by the writers when storylining the season arcs. On the one hand, this gave them scope to explore in more detail the thematic polyphony of the world portrayed in the series, from drug-related issues to political corruption, to the lack of social policies and infrastructure that generates in the local communities a widespread feeling of diaspora from the rest of the world (Piacenza 2016). On the other hand, as concerns the characters, it equipped the writing team with a powerful tool to change the narrative focus continuously and therefore systematically challenge our allegiances to any of these antiheroes (Bises 2015).

Storylining the antihero, or how to serialize perverse allegiance

In his volume, Mittel differentiates the antihero of serial television dramas from the antihero typical of literature. Where the latter usually lacks discernible heroic qualities, the former combines those with recognizable albeit negative traits: unsympathetic, ambiguous, morally

questionable and, above all, conflicted (2015: 142–43). As we shall see, this remarkable combination poses a significant challenge when storylining a season's arcs. For the sake of simplicity, I will limit my analysis to examples that for most part illustrate the fluctuating pattern of our alignment with *Ciro*, Don Pietro Savastano's most trusted street soldier, and his conflicted relationship with his boss. I will first provide some quantitative data from Episode 1 to illustrate how the notions outlined above translate into effective narrative strategies that establish initial patterns of recognition and alignment; I will then add qualitative elements from other episodes to show how these patterns get regularly reframed when we start looking at relations between characters and combine our reactions to each variation in order to form allegiances.

As emerges from close analysis, like most other episodes of the first season Episode 1 consists of 36 story beats. Fourteen are spent unfolding the only plotline that develops real action: that is, the Savastano clan attempting to teach a lesson to Conte. Of those fourteen beats, only three are clear bursts of dramatic cues that trigger a more visceral response. As opposed to these, 25 beats are all designed to establish the characters and their relations, and for the most part they feature dialogue or face-to-face confrontation. In particular, if we look at how alignment works, the writers clearly wanted us to align with *Ciro*. *Ciro* is involved in the action line and in all three violent sequences, sometimes at the giving, others at the receiving end. However, when we analyse the rest of the episode:

- In eight beats *Ciro* is shown in intimate family moments, as a caring father and husband.
- The whole episode shows us the close friendship between *Ciro* and *Attilio* (who is another, more experienced street soldier of the Savastano clan). *Attilio* appears in

nineteen beats, mostly alongside Ciro. Ciro never had a father and Attilio is portrayed and several times described as a surrogate one for him. Attilio too is a loving family man and both families are shown to be friends with one another.

- Unfortunately, Attilio is killed in the showdown against Conte's men. Therefore Ciro loses his friend and surrogate father, and in three subsequent beats is shown to be in great distress.
- To sum up: despite what he does for a living, Ciro has positive, if not likable traits; he suffers a tragic loss; and he is in visible pain.
- Also crucial, in at least four beats Ciro verbalizes his disagreement with Don Pietro's leadership of the clan, including the ill-advised decision to fight Conte that proves fatal for Attilio, which of course Ciro blames on Don Pietro.

When we move on to Episode 2, we might expect to find narrative devices in place that confirm and even reinforce our engagement with Ciro; yet on the contrary, we are forced to align with Don Pietro. Don Pietro exudes charisma and is feared and respected by everybody; but never in the whole series (at least in Season 1) does he provide any cue that makes our allegiance to him get as near as with Ciro. In this respect, Don Pietro is quite different, for instance, from Tony Soprano. Instead, the new alignment pattern builds on our response to the conflicted relation between Don Pietro and Ciro. One subplot of Episode 2 provides a revealing turning point in this sense. Don Pietro is worried that his son Genny is too immature and does not have what it takes to inherit his leadership of the clan; he then instructs Ciro to teach Genny how to kill. In a later scene, Ciro executes a junkie in cold blood when Genny panics and proves himself unable to do so. For the first time, this action troubles our allegiance to Ciro. We certainly do not empathize with Genny, but we do feel some compassion for him. On the other hand, Ciro just showed he can be a ruthless murderer.

In the following scene an angry *Ciro* tells *Genny* not to tell his father about his failure to execute his order: in short, they lie to *Don Pietro* in order to avoid painful consequences. Dialogue and performance work immediately to defuse our natural tendency to evaluate *Ciro* negatively, by reinforcing him as a character forced by circumstances he cannot control, in this case being the weaker character in his relation to *Don Pietro*. In Episode 1, a telling scene with *Attilio* explains that if *Ciro* keeps showing his contempt for *Don Pietro* he will end up dead, and most likely *Attilio* will be ordered to carry out the job. It is an established practice within crime syndicates to order a friend or even a relative to kill someone who has been sentenced to death so that the victim will not expect that to happen and cannot try and flee. At the same time, the person who has been ordered to execute the killing cannot refuse to comply, because otherwise s/he would be killed. In short, *Ciro* had to kill the junkie for two reasons: first, because he was given an order he could not disobey; and second, to cover up for *Genny*. Not doing so would imply having to pay a steep personal price. As a result, while we morally disapprove his murderous action, we preserve our sympathy for the renegade – as put by *Lombardi* in his review of Episode 1 (2016) – that is, our allegiance to *Ciro*.

This pattern keeps being reinforced in other episodes, with *Ciro* being subjected to continuous humiliations:

- In Episode 2, when *Don Pietro* finds out *Ciro* lied about *Genny*, he forces *Ciro* to drink his urine to prove his loyalty.
- In Episode 6, *Imma* – who never trusted nor liked *Ciro* – sends him to Spain, officially to settle things with *Conte* but, in fact, to part *Ciro* from *Genny* and keep him away from Naples; in Spain, *Conte* humiliates *Ciro* in at least three different circumstances, even forcing him to face two near-death moments.

- Back to Naples in Episode 7, Imma demotes Ciro to supervise the low-level drug trafficking in a peripheral area.

This forms a pattern of accumulation that pushes our emotional investment towards Ciro at least until Episode 9, when a new turning point occurs. In order to get himself out of trouble and pit the Savastanos against Conte for his own benefit, Ciro ruthlessly beats up, kills and burns an innocent teen girl – an episode, like most others in the series, inspired by the true story of a 22-year-old girl named Gelsomina Verde, brutally tortured and murdered in 2004 during the first Scampia feud mentioned above. Ciro's action finally puts the viewer in a conflicted position because of what Blanchet and Bruun Vaage call the 'sunk cost effect' at play in serial narratives (2012: 30–31): by now we have invested too much in Ciro and therefore we tend to cling on our attachment to him, despite our perceived horror at his brutal action. In an essay that echoes William Flesch's preoccupation with understanding (in terms of inherited biological conditioning) the appeal of violent characters in feature films such as Clint Eastwood's Harry Callahan, Henry Bacon concludes that we are 'likely to align with the altruistic punisher' – typical of the vigilante cycle of films – when the victim is 'totally despicable' (Bacon 2015: 75–76). Ciro, of course, is no upholder of any acceptable moral universe; but unlike Don Pietro, Imma and Conte, whose decisions and actions are almost always dictated by cold calculations to retain power with force at somebody else's expense, Ciro's violent actions find justification at two opposite ends of the allegiance spectrum. In the first few episodes, he is either trying to protect himself, his family or Genny; on the other hand, from the get-go he does have his own hidden agenda as he plots to frame Don Pietro and use Genny to climb the hierarchy of the syndicate. From the point of view of the writers, this ambivalence – mostly played on a gap between sympathy and empathy for the character – enables them to keep the viewers aligned with the character and even rooting for him in his

clash with the Savastanos, without pledging complete allegiance, which, in turn, keeps us invested in that character and seeking for further developments.

However, this balance is fatally compromised in the aforementioned Episode 9: far from being despicable, Ciro's young victim is totally innocent and as a result it becomes impossible for the viewer to find any justification in his actions anymore. The viewers' complex engagement with Ciro's character will escalate even further in Episode 1 of Season 2, when he murders his wife Debora. While this seemingly strikes a fatal blow to our engagement patterns with Ciro, at the same time it gives the writers a chance to set the character on a new, difficult path (a new arc) for some kind of redemption, and therefore renew related narrative options. This also points to a general issue with characters of serial narrative who need to remain relatively stable without changing much in order to maintain our allegiance, especially antiheroes whose actions we might find less justifiable because of such change, as is the case of Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008–13) as analysed by Mittel (2015: 157–78) and Bruun Vaage (2016, Chapter 3). Interestingly, Radha O'Meara (2015) disputes that characters change over the long, linear narrative arcs of serials while remaining more static in episodic series. In *Gomorra – The Series*, for example, Genny's comeback in Episode 8 is accompanied by a striking physical transformation – signalled by eye-catching external markers (e.g. muscled-up physique, hairdo, flashy wardrobe) – and is a turning point of Season 1, reflecting his growth from immature slacker to ruthless gangster. Genny's maturation is typical of younger characters in gangster stories but hardly points to real change in terms of shifting morality. Throughout Season 2, Ciro seems to grow more and more desperate for change, feeling remorseful for killing his own wife; don Pietro shows a more intimate, even humane side through his relationship with newly introduced female character

Patrizia. In both cases, this urge to change exposes their vulnerability and ends up with their eventual demise.

The international DVD release of the series tagged *Gomorra – The Series* as the Italian answer to *Breaking Bad*. Although the clear intention was to bank on the success of AMC's globally successful show, the comparison is questionable. Walter White is no doubt the ultimate antihero, and *Breaking Bad* does feature plenty of crime and gangster elements; however, a more useful comparison would be with either *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) or *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–14). When analysing serial storylining, in most cases we find ourselves aligned with one or two main protagonists throughout most of a season, although there may be occasional dips when secondary characters do come to the fore and alternate in engaging with those protagonists. For instance, throughout the first two seasons of *Boardwalk Empire* Nucky Thompson and Jimmy Darmody constantly compete for audience alignment. When Jimmy dies at the end of Season 2, we stick with Nucky in virtually every episode of all subsequent seasons. Consistency in alignment facilitates what Smith (1999) defines as perverse allegiance, further exemplified by Smith himself in his much-cited analysis of Tony Soprano (2011). Tony is appealing in spite of being a negative role model because by showing his positive traits and human weaknesses and by increasing the familiarity (i.e. exposure) with those aspects, the viewer is able to split sympathetic allegiance from moral evaluation without questioning the value of the latter. When looking at Italian drama series, to a certain extent the same reading can be applied to the protagonists of *Romanzo criminale – La serie* and to Libanese in particular. However, both Bises and Rampoldi confirmed an awareness that none of the *camorristi* characters in *Gomorra* could resemble a Walter White, Tony Soprano or Libanese. This analysis shows that *Gomorra – The Series* does not cater for the same kind of alignment and related allegiance; rather, the approach embeds

those characters in their own contradictions: ‘a ruthless murderer can also be a loving husband or a genuinely religious person; a doting father or a son who worries for his mother’s life’ (Piacenza 2016, my translation). As Mittel puts it, ‘contradictions create layers of interpretive engagement for viewers to exert our own social intelligence’ through a type of operational engagement with narrative construction (2015: 161, 163).

Conclusions: The *real Gomorrah*, international appeal of Italian series and the writers’ role

Ciro Di Marzio, Genny and the other primary characters of *Gomorrah – The Series* are quintessentially modern inasmuch as they function in the narrative as heroes with whom we align and to whom we temporarily pledge our allegiance, only to eventually be disappointed and repulsed by them. William Brown calls on Stanley Cavell’s notion of revulsion to suggest an ‘ethical mode of engagement’ with explicit violence in extreme films (2013: 25–6). Along similar lines, Grodal (2004) tackles the ways in which Lars von Trier’s films block off empathic identification. However, both these accounts’ main preoccupation pertains to stylistic choices made by the directors of those films. It is unquestionable that director Stefano Sollima has imprinted his unmistakable style in his depiction of the diegetic world of *Gomorrah*. However, I argue that the particular, ambivalent appeal of *Gomorrah – The Series* originates from the work of the writers. Citing the spate of films depicting violence in the early 1990s, Devin McKinney suggests that the uneasiness they may cause can be co-constructive by prompting us to ‘look at horror, feel it, smell it, take the chance of getting sick with it’ (1993: 21–22). Bises explains how the creators spent time in the field – very much like Saviano did for his book – scouting the reality of the territory in Scampia and in the surrounding districts, and checking facts in trial papers, public enquiries and so forth. And

although the facts have then been fictionalized and adapted to the format at hand, on one hand the level of accuracy and thoroughness stands as a safeguard from accusations of gratuitous excess; on the other, narrative construction forces us to look at the sickening scale of the horror that has become everyday reality in the world it depicts. Reinforcing Bises' statement, and with reference to *Romanzo Criminale*, *Gomorra* and *1992*, Rampoldi maintains that recent Italian serial dramas have managed to be successful at home and abroad precisely because creators, producers and networks have finally ditched the reassuring attitudes that have dominated television shows for years, and have started to show the painful contradictions of the country's past and present through complex narratives and ambivalent characters (Piacenza 2016). Sky as a network and Cattleya and Fandango as producers have been key to breaking ground in this direction in the last decade. Rampoldi mentions the success story of Denmark after production company DR imported the role of the showrunner in their productions, with the way forward being to value and strengthen the creators' vision and the writers' role. It is telling that in her insightful introduction to an otherwise laudable special issue of *The Italianist* dedicated to *Gomorra – The Series*, Dana Renga mentions Stefano Sollima as the showrunner (2016: 287); and in the same issue, in his review of Episode 12, Guglielmo Pescatore insists that Sollima 'was responsible for just over half of the season' (2016: 348–50). Neither Renga nor Pescatore mentions the writers. Italian TV writers often denounce a widespread resistance in the industry to acknowledging the importance of their role as opposed to their US counterparts. In fact, Bises confirms that, in order to have a showrunner proper, as concerns *Gomorra – The Series* one would have to conflate his role as Head Writer with those of director Stefano Sollima and executive producer Gina Gardini. (For more on the debate around the role of writers in the Italian film and television industry, see the proceedings of a round table with writers Isabella Aguilar, Daniele Cesarano [Head Writer of *Romanzo Criminale – La serie* and of the forthcoming

Suburra – The series; most recently appointed to the role of Commissioning Editor of Rai Fiction, the TV drama-producing branch of Italy's public broadcaster], Devor De Pascalis, Angelo Pasquini, Barbara Petronio and Paola Randi that I organized and hosted in Rome in May 2014 [Russo 2014].)

In conclusion, by wedding a cognitivist framework to a genetic approach to the development of the series from the creators' perspective, and to a close reading of Season 1 of *Gomorra – The Series*, this article has shown how character development is crucial to, and an ingrained element of, storylining the narrative and the narration of the long arcs of a series in order to engage the viewers in intimate and yet complex ways. Consequently, storylining plays a key role in determining how – through varying patterns of recognition, alignment and allegiance – viewers will receive and react to a clash between emotional reactions that require and cause affective investment in the characters, and reflective/meta-emotional reactions that elicit moral condemnation. Furthermore, by tracing an accurate genealogy of the series project it is also possible to consider the material conditions and modes of production that impacted on important creative decisions with regard to narrative construction and characterization.

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Contributor details

Paolo Russo is senior lecturer in film studies at Oxford Brookes University. Also a professional screenwriter, he is currently in pre-production on *Burns*, a TV drama series to be produced by CYSA. He has co-written the feature film *Three Days of Anarchy* (2006), premiered at Tokyo IFF and at 30+ international festivals.

Contact:

Oxford Brookes University, School of Arts, Headington Road, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK.

E-mail: paolo.russo@brookes.ac.uk