Project Background/CIE Grant

Received the grant to participate in Food Conference, Perugia in June 2012.
The momentum from that topic brought me to the next project on food in mafia films.

Worked on what food and mealtime symbolized in the films of Ferzan Ozpetek whose signature scenes revolve around large groups of family/friends eating at the table.

SHOW OZPETEK SLIDE

While his films often present us with conflict at the table or use food to highlight the personal struggles of marginalized characters (gay men, a Jewish concentration camp survivor, a Turkish refugee to name a few) Ozpetek, like many other Italian directors before him, ultimately represents mealtime and the exchange of food as an act of reconciliation, bonding, and/or community-building in the sense of friendships but also national identity.

Ozpetek’s films tend to take place in Rome in broadly middle-class settings or in intellectual/artistic circles and he offers luscious shots of delicious food.

But, I like the dark side.
When a colleague asked me to participate in a project about Italy's “other” mafias on film, I thought it would be a good opportunity to look at the symbolic use of food in films that take place in settings where people are struggling for survival and whose communities and families are being destroyed by organized crime.

What I found was that in the past almost two decades there have been seven feature films whose main focus is the Camorra, six of which use food and eating to express the effects of the Camorra on society. (I look at five of them in this presentation--the other is a documentary, *Biutiful Cauntri* (2007). There is also an American documentary, entitled *Toxic Napoli* (2010), that is available free on YouTube.)

This happens for a variety of reasons--I explore some of them in this talk.

1) The convergence of the importance of mealtime to families and the importance of the family in Italian cinema as a way to look at larger social issues. The Camorra destroys families therefore the link between the disintegration of community and family bonds would go hand in hand with the disintegration of the culture of the table.

2) There are real and urgent food and environmental crises that have been occurring in the past 20 years that directly affect the region.

3) An attempt to create alternatives to some popular film genres such as “Food Films” and American “Mafia Films.”
I found that in the films I looked at food, the lack of it, the dangers associated with it, and the substitution of it with non-nutritive substances, was used to symbolize the hopelessness, brutality, corruption, and generally toxic (in terms of both physical health and social relationships) environment that the characters live in.

The majority of films offered no consolation, reconciliation, or glimmers of hope but rather a bleak landscape of broken conviviality and poisonous consumption.

**Films**

*Mozzarella Stories* directed by Edoardo De Angelis (2011)

A comedy that deals with a family run mozzarella company fighting against Camorra extortion and competition from a new company run by business people recently arrived from China and which produces superior mozzarella and lower prices.

*Gomorrah (Gomorra)* directed by Matteo Garrone (2008)

A gritty and apocalyptic depiction of the way in which the Camorra operates.

Based on the novel by Roberto Saviano.

*See Naples and Die (Vedi Napoli e poi muori)* directed by Enrico Caria (2007)

A “docu-fiction,” about the neighborhoods most intensely affected by the Camorra.

*A Children’s Story (Certi bambini)* directed by Andrea and Antonio Frazzi (2004)
A bleak film that follows Rosario, an eleven-year old boy as he tries to navigate the various attempts to recruit him into a Camorra clan while also taking care of his only relative, a grandmother who is addicted to prescription drugs.

*Sacred Silence (Pianese Nunzio, 14 anni a maggio)* directed by Antonio Capuano (1996)

Another bleak film about Nunzio, a 13-year-old boy who is caught between his drug-addicted brother who works for the Camorra, a mother who has abandoned him, a father who is mentally ill, and a heroically anti-mafia priest who offers him refuge but who also sexually abuses him.

For the sake of this presentation, the majority of clips that I show will be from *Gomorrah* because it is the only one of the five that is available on DVD with English subtitles.

**Important Terms/Background**

“*Food Films*”

Food films are a recently defined category. Those who accept that the genre exists, accept that a film is a food film when food is employed as the main narrative engine, as an instrument of conflict resolution, and as the turning point in the plot. Furthermore, that food “is often the vehicle through which utopian states manifest themselves in the films” and that a sensual visual
style and enhanced shooting techniques (such as close-ups), are applied to food. (Parasecoli: 82). You might have heard the term “food porn” to describe this style. In Italy, these types of films also tend to evoke a certain pride in national/regional identity through food. And these are the types of films that tend to get exported and viewed by international audiences.

The films I looked at are not part of this genre.

I argue that they can be seen in opposition to the kinds of European art house “food films” that appeal to international, and especially U.S. audiences, that allow viewers “to position themselves as cinephiles appreciating exotic images and ‘authentic’ scenes of foreign cultures” (Hoecherl-Alden, 2010, p. 120).

However, these Camorra films do feature food (or its absence or substitution) “as a symbolic element ‘charged with cinematic power and resonance.” (Nicholson 2001, p. 79).

Rebecca Epstein’s research on how food functions in specifically non food films, in particular American gangster films, has been helpful to me. She notes that food and its consumption, preparation, or absence “lends depth to characters, advances the narrative, and, ultimately intensifies the brutal displays of violence” (2006, p. 195).

“Mafia Films”

Organized crime has been portrayed in Italian films since at least the 1950s (despite the fact that it wasn’t until the 1990s that concrete information about the existence and management of the organizations became available to law enforcement).
However, there is no tradition of the “Gangster Film” in the history of Italian cinema. And there is no tradition of romanticizing the mafioso, or even humanizing him by presenting him as an anti-hero as in many American films/t.v. (such as *The Godfather, GoodFellas, The Sopranos*). Italian films about the mafia most often represent the point of view of the victims of the mafia whether they are outspoken anti-mafia martyrs or villagers living in silence and fear. When mafia members are featured in Italian films they are often people forced to work with the mafia, problematic characters on the margins of power or they appear as physically ill or grotesquely violent to the point of pure evil.

**Italian Mafias**

What we generally think of as The Mafia is now thought of by scholars as a number of different mafias. Four major mafias have been identified in Italy: The Cosa Nostra (often also know as The Mafia) in Sicily, The ‘Ndragheta in Calabria, The Sacra Corona Unita in Puglia, and the Camorra in Campania (Naples). Each of these organizations has its own structure and organizational rules, and they often differ significantly from each other even though they also must interact. It is important to note that most reputable scholars these days link the development of Italy’s mafias to the development of the Italian State (and capitalism). When Italy was unified in 1860 and Southern Italy came under the control of the centralized government, the government proceeded to make deals that kept the peasants powerless and less of a threat to perceived stability but these deals allowed the resources of Southern Italy to be diverted to the north and also for organized crime to step in in the place of
government institutions, unlike what happened in the north. The mafiosi became a class of “middlemen” between the masses and those in power. Thus, the idea that the government of Italy and the mafias of Italy have always been intertwined.

Camorra
The Camorra is the Campanian mafia. Slightly different historical roots than the Sicilian Mafia, but essentially the same idea. Criminal organization predated the unified Italian State but inserted itself as “middleman” between the government and the “people” upon unification. Camorra organization is different. There are clans, but unlike the “pyramid” structure of the Cosa Nostra, the Camorra has a more “horizontal” structure that allows for more flexibility, easier replacements when a boss is killed or imprisoned, and the constant spawning of new clans. This also means more conflict and feuding between clans since there is less of a hierarchical organization. It also seems that while the Sicilian Mafia is losing its local power due to media attention, public outrage over the assassinations of judges Falcone and Borsellino in 1993, and the consequent anti-Mafia movement there, the Camorra is rapidly gaining in numbers and influence. In 1983 there were about 12 clans and now there are about 111 with 6700 members, more than any of Italy’s other mafias (Saviano, 2007). They are adaptable as well, having formed alliances with international crime organizations. As opposed to the Mafia, which is often equated with an octopus (a single head with powerful tentacles), the Camorra is compared to the Hydra (the monster that sprouted two heads for every one that was cut off) (Behan, 2009, p. 161). This makes it very difficult to eradicate the Camorra.
Additionally, the Camorra is known for its recruitment of young boys.

**SHOW SLIDE WITH QUOTE ABOUT BOYS.**

Thus, I believe, part of the reason for the despair in the films and the deep anxiety about nurturing that gets expressed through food in these films.

*Ecomafia*

This is a new term invented by the Italian environmental organization Legambiente. It refers to activities by criminal organizations that have damaging effects on the environment. These activities range from the business of toxic waste dumping, the use of illegal construction materials, to the trafficking of endangered or exotic animals and illegal excavation of archeological sites. The majority of these activities also take place in areas historically dominated by Italy’s mafias. For my research the toxic dumping is most important, and it is also most prevalent in the region of Campania. Ways in which food safety has been compromised by the Camorra include the poisoning of farmlands due to dumping which then yield toxic produce and which also kills farm animals who graze in contaminated areas. There have also been mozzarella crises stemming from buffalo ingesting contaminated food. There have also been crises involving bakeries (up to 2500 in the region are Camorra-controlled) using contaminated wood to fire their ovens. (Behan data.)
Additionally, there are entire areas of Campania designated with special names like “The Triangle of Death” where the incidence of liver and bladder cancer is much higher than in other areas in Campanian and in Italy.

It should be noted that majority of the toxic waste dumped in these areas comes from various industries/companies in Northern Italy who contract with the Camorra to get rid of their waste cheaply and illegally.

So, again, we can’t look at organized crime as just a “Southern Problem.” While it is the South that suffers most, people from all regions and at all levels of business and government are involved.

Roberto Saviano

Roberto Saviano (born and raised in Naples) is an Italian author and journalist who, at age 26, published the “non-fiction novel" Gomorra after having studied and observed up close the Camorra’s multiple activities. That same year, in 2006, he received death threats and has lived with 24-hour protection since then. Since then he has also become a major authority on and Italy’s most well-known activist against organized crime. Some Italians, including then-Prime-Minister Silvio Berlusconi, accused him of defaming the country by exaggerating the presence and influence of the Camorra in Italy and others have tried to discredit his theories about the link between Camorra and the free market, but the book sold over 2 million copies in Italy and was also an international success. Saviano has received
many national and international awards and honors for his work. He co-wrote the film *Gomorra* which received similarly high critical praise both nationally and internationally.

**Observation #1**

The Camorra’s intrusion into the daily lives of people from Campania, especially family life and the lives of children, is represented in these films through its intrusion into all aspects of food and mealtime: production, distribution, acquisition, and consumption.

This idea appears in all five films in various ways.

**Show quote from Saviano.**

I have divided the ways in which this intrusion occurs into several categories.

A. Overview: Control of access to and safety of food.

The following two clips are from *Sacred Silence*.

The first takes place in a traditional Neapolitan pizzeria. The protagonist Nunzio and his brother Giovanni are dining together. Giovanni tries to make Nunzio understand that the Camorra is not to blame for all the city’s ills. He asks Nunzio who he thinks paid for the pizzas and states that without the Camorra they would die from hunger. The pride and joy of Naples--the authentic pizza napoletana--becomes a shameful
reminder of illegality and corruption, and a reminder that the Camorra has a hand in
the preparation and consumption of it.

SHOW CLIP.

I think this second clip is interesting because it reminds me of a decadent Roman
banquet on wheels. Totally surreal. In it, the anti-mafia priest encounters two boys
who pull up to his church on a scooter, dangling a bunch of grapes and asking if he
wants one. Father Lorenzo asks where they got the grapes since they are out of
season and they reply that if you know the right people in Naples, you can get
anything.

SHOW CLIP.

In the upside down world of Camorra-dominated Naples, seasons don't matter, all
that matters is power and connections. It is implied that this is an unnatural
environment.

The third clip I have is from Gomorrah and has to do with the film's toxic peach story
line.

Roberto and his boss Franco (in the toxic dumping business) visit a family who has
been paid for their land to be used as a dumping site. It is a grotesque scene in which
the dying father--we assume he is sick from the toxic waste--wants to make sure
another deal is made for more dumping. Roberto then encounters a woman in the
garden who gives him a gift of peaches—a meaningful gesture in that no money is exchanged.

**Show CLIP 8 from *Gomorrah*.**

The peaches are the only beautifully filmed food item in the film. The color, the way they are centered in the frame. But these are ironic shots—the peaches are toxic and, we are told, stink. Roberto and Franco argue in front of a softly lit, kind of glowing field, again ironic given its toxicity.

In yet another example of ecomafia activities, in *See Naples and Die* the director tells us that he started out to do a film about the region’s famed apples but discovered that the orchards had all suspiciously disappeared.

B. Non-nutritive substances: These examples involve drugs, junk food, and dangerous bodily fluids. (Some of these examples might be upsetting to you.)

In *Gomorrah*, drugs are prepared, packaged and exchanged on dining tables and using kitchen utensils.

Tötö’s delivery of groceries is cross-cut with a scene of hands exchanging drugs and money.

There are numerous scenes in which the remnants of junk food (soda cans, Burger King wrappers, candy bars) appear in almost off-handed ways. One might argue that these items are simply there to create a sense of realistic detail, but I think they are
more significant based on the large numbers of scenes they appear in and on the film’s general concern with the disintegration of healthy and socially productive foodways.

**Show Gomorrah CLIPS 1, 3, 4, and 6.**

In *A Children's Story* children ingest blood from people they have murdered (in order to destroy evidence) and semen from older men who are abusing them as substitutes for the kind of bonding that providing food to them would solidify.

C. Disruption of conviviality and hopelessness of attempts to recreate it.

In *Certi bambini* at the alternate space set up by the Church in which troubled teens can dine together, mealtimes always descend into chaos--it is impossible to establish reasonable rules of behavior at the table--not in a comic way, but in a disturbing and violent way.

In *Sacred Silence*, the parish priest also establishes an alternative space for troubled teens but we soon learn that there is a price for the refuge from the violence of the streets. We learn this through an unexpected cut from a scene of Nunzio and Father Lorenzo dining together to one where they are in bed together.

In *Gomorrah* Totò’s friend sadly proclaims that the two boys can no longer share a pizza together because they are in rival clans.
D. In a number of the films, interactions around food end in betrayal, violence, and/or death. In many cases, the offering, receiving, and sharing of food is equated with vulnerability. While the nurturing/convivial gestures in these scenes serve to make viewers more sympathetic to certain characters, it almost always signals their downfall.

For example, *Gomorrah*, the motherly figure Maria gives Totò a tip for the delivery while she makes a pot of pasta sauce in her kitchen--the only glimpse we get of “authentic Italian food” in the entire film. Then Totò must lead her into a trap where she will be killed as part of his initiation. The symbolism of killing the nurturing mother speaks yet again to the anxiety surrounding the destruction of the family.

In another example from *Gomorrah*, Pasquale is another sympathetic character, and his relationship with food is used to enhance his humanity. But it also marks him as vulnerable to attack from the Camorra.

*Show CLIPS 5 AND 7 from Gomorrah.*

In one more example from *Gomorrah*, two aspiring yet inept delinquents, Marco and Ciro, share a meal of french fries when a clan boss joins them. They are an inseparable duo who have delusional aspirations based on the film *Scarface*, yet they have a sad innocence about them as well, which is featured in this scene. They are like children enjoying their french fries. The boss, who refrains from eating,
deceives these two young guys and during this dinner conversation he sets them up to be murdered.

Show CLIP 9 of *Gomorrah*.

Camorristi are never shown eating at table together in this film. Commensality = weakness. (Compare to *The Godfather*.)

**Observation #2**

In addition to using food story lines to symbolize the disintegration of social/familial bonds, these films enter into an intentional dialog with Italian “foodie films” as well as with American mobster films. I believe that these dialogs are related to the presentation of Italian national identity.

A. The Anti-Food Films.

As discussed earlier, these are not your typical “Food Films.”

Show slides with examples of “Food Films.”

Most of all, the association of food and dining with violence, the lack of “food porn,” and the refusal to console and comfort through food sets them apart from the genre.

B. The Anti-Mafia Film Films.

One particular feature of the Camorra is how many camorristi emulate the behavior of cinematic American gangsters.

**SHOW QUOTE FROM SAVIANO ON THE FEEDBACK LOOP.**
In general, Italian Mafia Films resist portraying the seductiveness of the gangster lifestyle and attempting to undo any imagined connection between (Southern) Italian identity and mafia.

American mobster movies have tended to celebrate the seductiveness of the gangster lifestyle and create a link between (Southern) Italian identity and mafia. Therefore, in light of this feedback loop, it strikes me as necessary to briefly compare some well-known food scenes from The Godfather, Goodfellas, and The Sopranos with our Camorra films.

**Show clips from American movies.**

Comment that while the use of food is by no means limited to one meaning, and can even convey ambivalence, the outcome is often one in which a) pride in Italian heritage is generated by food references and imagery, and b) bonding, comfort, commensality, and belonging are expressed through the offering and accepting of food (along with power and gender relations, etc.). I found that unlike the American films, the Italian Camorra films challenge audiences to find any pleasure, beauty, commensality, comfort, or sense of pride in Italian cuisine as represented by these directors. Neither camorristi nor non-camorristi enjoy their time at the table together.

Even when food looks delicious, which is rare, the deliciousness is tempered by the dialog, as in the case of the pizzeria and peach sequences.
In these films, then, if food = national/regional identity, then identity = shame.

**Observation #3/Conclusion**

I have saved the least depressing observation for last.

There are a few instances when a longing for a past, a past that perhaps never even existed, in which commensality did occur, orchards were not toxic, and regular people could produce and buy food outside of the Camorra-controlled market. For example in the peach clip from *Gomorrah*, the woman who gives the gift of peaches, not knowing that they are radioactive, Pasquale and Xian forming a friendship--more than a business association--over a meal.

In *Sacred Silence*, at a scene during a pathetic family dinner filled with soda bottles and a blaring television, Nunzio’s aunt begins to speak directly to the audience about how life used to be even 5 or 10 years earlier, and how she had tried to take Nunzio in and create a strong family for him.

In *Mozzarella Stories*, the disappearance of the old ways of mozzarella production is lamented even while the necessity of change is acknowledged.

In all these films, there is a vague sense that things were better in the past. While this may or may not be the case, the yearning for a lost state of perceived community and health can be seen as what anthropologist James Clifford has called “critical nostalgia.”

According to Clifford, “‘critical nostalgia’ is a way ‘to break with the hegemonic corrupt present by asserting the reality of a radical alternative’” (p. 114).
I want to close with a scene from See Naples and Die that I think represents this sense of a “radical alternative” to the corrupt present. It is a simple scene in which the filmmaker, who has returned to Naples after a bout of homesickness (nostalgia), gets together with friends in order to share a meal, reminisce, and recount their various terrifying experiences with both the Neapolitan criminal world and the ineptitude of law enforcement there. The scene directly follows a scene in which Roberto Saviano, alone and isolated on a dock, speaks despairingly to the camera about the overwhelming nature of the Camorra’s control over the region and beyond. The friends around the table are outraged yet playful, and serve as the embodiment of commensality.

Show clip from See Naples and Die.

There are no subtitles so just enjoy the sound of Neapolitan and the radical alternative that the simple act of dining together can be.
Scenes

_Gomorrah_

5:45, Totò delivering groceries cross-cut with dealers selling drugs.

12:30, Drugs at the table

27:05, Junk food as an afterthought on table with weapons; guy eating candy bar

34:12-35:50, At the airport, Burger King trash in the background

45:00, Pasquale eating with the Chinese

57:06, Drugs in blender

1:31:26, Pasquale in the car that crashes

1:46:16-1:53:00, The dying man and the old women with the peaches; ironically beautiful and colorful; the only fresh food we see.

1:55:50, Marco and Ciro with the french fries
Sacred Silence

10:05, Father Lorenzo encounters the grape eaters

1:13:36, Nunzio and brother in pizzeria; the conversation taints the pizza.

See Naples and Die

24:28, friends at the dinner table