

THE MAFIA'S SYSTEM OF SILENCE IN COMMUNICATION, FILM AND
LITERATURE: PERVERSIONS OF SOCIETY AND TRANSGRESSIONS OF *OMERTÀ*

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ABSTRACT

ADRIANA CERAMI: The Mafia's System of Silence in Communication, Film and Literature: Perversions of Society and Transgressions of *Omertà*
(Under the direction of Ennio Rao)

The Mafia's communicational codes, whether written, unwritten, spoken or unspoken, demonstrate a system of silence that overpowers individuals and institutions within its society. This domination reveals itself through the Mafia's perversions of common societal structures. The Sicilian Mafia, for example, distorts and exaggerates both the Sicilian family structure and the Roman Catholic tradition. Cosa Nostra appropriates certain values and rituals from the Church and family to benefit their own cultural system. The Camorra exposes a perversion and manipulation of the Campania region's communication and economic systems. This examination looks at the literary, factual, cinematic, economic and journalistic manifestations of the Mafia's linguistic and behavioral codes, both within and outside the system of silence.

DEDICATION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION ON THE MAFIA AND ITS CODES

Nowadays there is an infinite amount of documentation on Cosa Nostra and the Camorra: articles, nonfictional and fictional books, documentaries and films. These mediums study the function of the mechanisms within such secret societies; they analyze their language and modes of communication with the objective of deciphering codes. None of these accounts and interpretations, however, existed until the age of silence was terminated and voices began to be heard. Prior to the Sicilian journalist Giuseppe Impastato and his courageous act of denouncing the Sicilian mafia, there was mainly silence from the public about its real and dominating existence. Sicilian residents and businessmen complied with the system, paying their *pizzo* and never speaking openly against the organization. Before Roberto Saviano and his chilling testimony on the Camorra's system there was mostly silence from the Campanian population about the group's grip on the Italian economy. These silences were and still are largely due to the fear that these criminal organizations instill in the denizens of "their" territory and economy. As long as Sicilian business owners pay their *pizzo* and avoid "naming names" to the police or taking action against the mafia, they should not have any problems. So, in a way the Sicilian population is unknowingly coerced into taking the oath of *omertà*, a code of silence and loyalty to Cosa Nostra. The traditions of the mafia organization infiltrate and dominate the social conduct of the local citizens. On the other side of the spectrum, the *uomini d'onore* must knowingly abide by this code, promising

never to reveal information about business to anyone outside the circle. The Camorra works similarly, as it is in the organization's best interest to keep business information concealed and coded. At the same time, it is also beneficial for bystanders to remain silent in order to avoid becoming an obstacle for the Camorra. Silence implies loyalty to criminal organizations, and loyalty means compliance with their systems, resulting in sustained power for the Camorra. In the Sicilian Mafia the term *omu di panza* is used for a man who knows how to keep quiet, while a *pentito* is a repentant Mafioso who discloses information to the police in return for protection and a way out of the system (Lobner 6). As a general rule in Sicilian culture, ratting on someone is considered a cardinal sin. Not murdering a human being, but divulging confidential information is what separates human beings from wild animals. Backstabber, betrayer, blabbermouth, canary, deep throat, double-crosser, fink, informant, rat, sneak, snitch, source, squealer, stoolie, stool pigeon, tattler, tattletale, turncoat, whistle-blower, etc—all are the exact opposite of what it means to be a *uomo d'onore* and *omu di panza*, each of whom swears on a code of silence and to uphold *omertà*, the virtuous code of behavior.

If these criminal organizations cannot freely discuss business within and outside of their groups, then how do they communicate? If they possess a code of silence, then they must also have a code of communication. It just so happens that the two overlap. First of all, silence refers to the absence of verbal communication, so it leaves room for messages in the form of actions, eye contact and gestures. Second, silence, as the absence of both verbal and visual signs, can also convey a message revealing that which is left unexpressed. In 1984, the *pentito* Tommaso Buscetta revealed to Giovanni Falcone: "In my world, no one ever asks anything; but if someone wants to, he can make you understand with just a sentence, a

movement of the head, a smile...even with silence” (Gambetta 121). Silence does not necessarily mean the total absence of verbal communication. It can imply a specific usage of words and their meanings: a sort of code within a code. “Cryptic signs, allusions, and metaphors are the means by which Mafiosi communicate, or sometimes fail to communicate” (Gambetta 121). A Palermitan policeman and writer Giuseppe Alongi wrote in 1887: “It is strange, that in that hot and colorful country where ordinary speech is so honey-sweet, hyperbolic, and picturesque, that of the Mafioso is curt, restrained, and decisive” (quoted in Hess 1973: 52). When a theater actor pauses in silence to convey an emotion he/she may increase the dramatic. What he/she does not say, but breaths or gestures, can speak worlds. The same is true for the Mafia: their message does not lose power when communicating in codes. Alongi juxtaposes curtness and decisive speech with colorful, honey-sweet, hyperbolic and picturesque speech, but what I see more than a contradiction is a parallel of intensities. Both modes of communication are on two opposite ends of the spectrum, but they are both at the same level of concentration. They can be equally dramatic modes of communication. So although silence, curtness and decisive speech all look to minimize outward expression, they can still generate a message of equal or greater intensity than an openly dramatic expression.

What else can be expected of a country that has had such a long history of foreign domination and exploitation of the lower classes, conflicts between the bureaucratic state and the sub-cultural attitudes, and between non-state and actual state powers? Alongi elucidates such history with the harsh reality of the Sicilian people’s inability to take advantage of their own liberation from feudalism. “[...] Il popolo siciliano abbruttito dalla miseria e da secolare servitù era impreparato alla libertà, non seppe usarne, ond’è che rimane estraneo alla vita

pubblica, fonda il suo diritto nella violenza privata, vede nel Governo un nemico più o meno forte da combattere subdolamente, e i pochi abili coalizzati sfruttano le forme liberali dell'amministrazione" (Alongi 157). After centuries of exploitation, the majority of Sicilians could not envision otherwise; the few that could imagine having power saw organized violence as a method for governing Sicily. In Mafia and Mafiosi, the scholar Henner Hess thoroughly examines the development of Sicily's social structure in relation to the Mafia's development. He also studies the history behind the systems of power and depicts the reality of the Mafia as a natural consequence. According to Hess, Sicily's political structure:

[...] has always been marked by a very definite situation – an extraordinary weakness of the formal government machinery, popular mistrust and even hostility towards all state organs, and a withdrawal into an informal system of self-help institutions, chiefly the family and clientelist groups. This lack of loyalty towards formal organizations is not, in the historical perspective, some irrational factor, but must be understood as an entirely purposive, rationally motivated behaviour pattern. It is a product of Sicilian history. (Hess 15-16)

Giuseppe Alongi's examination of the Mafia also supports this declaration. He states: "[...] La causa principale della maffia non risiede nell'ordinamento economico, ma nella mente e nel cuore del contadino, nelle condizioni storiche e morali dell'ambiente" (159). There is no doubt that Sicily's political and economic history (from feudalism to the latifundia) influenced its cultural and social structure, for the mistrust of formal government still to this day permeates the region. The purpose, though, of studying Sicily's history is not only to establish the origin of Mafia behavior, but – what is more – to see the point of convergence between the Mafia's and the Sicilians' code of communication. Hess appropriately expands his argument to the socio-economic conditions of the Sicilian population in particular during

the 19th century. He underlines the role of communication in the lack of progress of Sicily's social structure and, conversely, in the development of "self-help institutions":

That a large number of Sicilians could neither read nor write was a consequence and in turn an important cause of the unilateral emphasis on informal structures [...] The chronic weakness of the state resulted in the emergence of self-help institutions, and the exclusive power position of informal groups subsequently made it impossible for the state to win the loyalty of the public, while its resultant weakness again strengthened the family, the clientele and *mafioso* positions. (Hess 28-29)

If most Sicilians were illiterate, then we must conclude the same about most *Mafiosi*.¹

Especially in the 19th century, Sicilians were more culturally similar to their "protectors", who exercised a sort of feudalism, than to the state which first exploited the people under feudalism and then surrendered to the Mafia's hold on the political system. To return to Alongi's point about the differences between ordinary and Mafioso speech, the two rightly diverge in the delivery of the expression (the mode of speech) because of the subject and the area under which they fall. On the other hand, the two types of speech converge on their intensity and urgency of the message. In other words, regardless of the subject matter and the mode of expression they both have reputations for being dramatic.

On Silence and its Meanings

"Speech is woven from the thread of silence." (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Dauenhauer 123)

As I stated earlier, silence can be as dramatic as speech and even more so. The twentieth-century Platonic thinker and writer Max Picard viewed silence as a kind of power,

¹ In his chapter on the *Mafioso*, Hess makes note of its uneducated origins: "Frequently even rich *mafiosi* are illiterate and thereby betray their low origin. Vito Cascio Ferro could neither read nor write; Nitto Minasola had never been to school; Calogero Vizzini had been to school for only three years and was always regarded as illiterate" (Hess 49).

in particular with religious connotations: “In no other phenomenon are distance and nearness, range and immediacy, the all-embracing and the particular, so united as they are in silence” (Picard 2). Although Picard’s analysis of silence in his book The World of Silence is lacking in theory, he does offer some interesting points about the nature and evolution of silence:

In the ancient languages one notices that the birth of words from silence was not taken for granted but was considered an event of sufficient importance to require a pause in the flow of language before the arrival of the next word. Words were constantly being interrupted by silences. (Picard 46)

Normally silence is seen as being interrupted by words, since it is often rare and therefore sacred in our society (in churches, in libraries, and even in nature). To imagine silence as being the interrupter of words is worth pondering along with the following quote:

When two people are conversing with one another [...] a third is always present: Silence is listening. [...] the words are spoken as it were from the silence, from that third person, and the listener receives more than the speaker alone is able to give. [...] At the end of the Platonic dialogues it is always as though silence itself were speaking. The persons who were speaking seem to have become listeners to silence. (Picard 9)

From these observations silence implies more than an absence of words, as in a negation of speech.² Silence suggests the existence of a listener and evidence that that listener is truly listening. For in a dialogue, how can one be sure that the other is listening unless he/she pauses in silence to obtain a sign of either comprehension or miscomprehension? Picard’s analysis of silence shows us that the phenomenon is also a device of human understanding.

² Bernard P. Dauenhauer, who looks at the ontological significance of silence as a phenomenon, emphasizes the mistake of viewing silence as either a negative or a derivative phenomenon, that is silence as an utterance. According to Dauenhauer silence is “a phenomenon which is at least equiprimordial with utterance” (Dauenhauer 5). In other words, the roots of silence are the same as those of speech. Dauenhauer later states that “[...] all utterances are essentially exteriorizations, by way of indications, of already expressed meanings.” (Dauenhauer 92)

Another approach to silence that I would like to observe is that of Niklas Luhmann, who examines silence within the context of society. For Luhmann, society is the arena in which varieties of speech and silence actively interact; speech and silence have a dialectic relationship. In his own words: “Society can also include silence within communication – for example, in the sense of attentive silence, in the sense of an eloquent silence, or in the sense of “qui tacet consentire videtur” [one who is silent appears knowing]. It is of course also possible to speak about the difference between speaking and silence. [...] every system [of communication] includes something and excludes something else” (Luhmann 34). In addition to the more obvious differences between speech and silence, within the mode of silence, there are also various shades of meaning.

Kurzon explains the various models of silence in the following classification:

(11) I may not say anything, (12) I must not say anything, (13) I will not say anything, and (14) I shall not say anything. The interpretation of silence (11) “I may not say anything” can denote either that ‘it is not possible for me to say anything’, or a deliberate wish not to speak: behind the may lies a will, where “I may (=will) not say anything” means ‘I don’t want to say anything’. (Kurzon 40)

He then narrows his examination to the Sicilian Mafia, omertà and its treatment of silence:

Both these deontic interpretations suggest outside sources of authority that have power over the silent addressee. Such sources may be a person or persons, or even a code of honour. One such code of honour is the omertà – or code of silence – of the Sicilian Mafia. [...] It is expressed as an unwillingness to testify in court or to have any official contact with the authorities. (Kurzon 40-1)³

³ The word “deontic” in this quote signifies “that which refers to obligation”. In this case it is referring to the interpretations of silence as having obligatory connotations.

Kurzon's interpretation neglects to develop a clear connection between *omertà* and the concept of a controlling oath. He sees Mafioso behavior more as a personal choice to remain silent rather than an external force that prohibits speech. With a close inspection of the testimonies of Buscetta and other *pentiti* of the Sicilian Mafia in the 20th Century, it is possible to conclude that although the *omertà* is observed by willing *uomini d'onore*, it is also strictly enforced by the Mafia. If the code of silence is violated by a Mafioso, an appropriate consequence within the system would be elimination from the system – that is, death. The risk of losing one's life creates a constant state of fear for all participants in the society. Niklas Luhmann elaborates on the risk-factor of communication: “[...] any communication puts something at stake (enjeu), risks something – namely, rejection. The risk lies in focusing on one point (a sentence, a statement) and in selecting precisely this point from among many other possible ones. One cannot avoid this risk, for communication requires self-determination” (Luhmann 34). We will see shortly how this risk plays out in the mafia's code of communication. But first I would like to touch on writing as a mode of communication and code in order to anticipate how the Mafia utilizes its form.

Writing in Codes

-“*Language is a code because it is, in the first instance, a correlational device*” (Eco 171-172).

-“*La scrittura è propriamente un codice di secondo grado, in quanto rappresentazione della lingua, cioè del codice comunicativo primario, per mezzo di segni grafici*” (Marchese 234).

When examining codes, Umberto Eco writes: “[...] at its very birth, the idea of code appears wrapped in ambiguity: bound to a pan-communicative hypothesis, it is not a guarantee of communicability but, rather, of structural coherence and of access between different systems. An ambiguity rooted in the twofold meaning of communication:

communication as a transfer of information between two poles, and as accessibility or passage between spaces” (Eco 168). Bernardo Provenzano’s code shows to be a prime example of this kind of communication. His mode of communication takes this concept rather literally, in which his codified messages move, via messengers, from a place of hiding and isolation to a web of destinations outside of that cove. He transfers information which at the same time allows and prohibits access to his world. With its cryptic messages and primitive method of distribution the Provenzano code both excludes and permits the comprehension of a message. Especially in cases of interception, do the messages provide the possibility for access to the nature of the system—that is the structure of the Mafia. Ambiguity is a tool that the Mafia utilizes regularly when communicating. It assures that the person communicating and the person receiving the message are the ones meant to understand a certain code. Consequently, outsiders are naturally unable to decipher the true message underneath such ambiguity. According to Angelo Marchese, writing is defined as a conscious operation (and hence reflected, even if it pertains to certain aspects of the unconscious) that the author puts into practice through the objectification of his message, in creating a literary message, inserted therefore in the grand scheme of literary communication (234-235).⁴ So from the act of writing, whether a person means to or not, he/she is communicating to someone using a certain structure, or in my interpretation, in using a code. Roland Barthes characterizes writing as being born from the author’s reflection on the social function of its very form. Writing is the morale of form; it is the choice of the social area where the author decides to establish the nature of his own language (235). The study of the

⁴ The original quote is as follows: “Potremmo definire scrittura l’operazione consapevole (e quindi riflessa, anche se attinente per certi aspetti all’inconscio) che l’autore attua nell’oggettivare il suo messaggio, nel formarlo in quanto messaggio letterario, inserito quindi nel grande sistema della comunicazione letteraria”

Mafia's written messages has led to many discoveries about the nature of their language, and therefore of their social structure. So before looking at how these theories of communication apply to Bernardo Provenzano's *pizzini* I will first examine the foundation of Cosa Nostra's social structure.

Cosa Nostra: a Distortion of the Sicilian Family and Church

For a Mafioso, risk lies in his choice of words, gestures or even in the act of silence. Communication and its mode of expression is a risk that cannot be avoided, especially since messages are fundamental to the existence of the Mafia. Not only is there a risk in the way one expresses oneself, but there is also the risk of saying too much, of exceeding the limits of information. It is my opinion that *omertà* is in fact a condition of external force precisely because it instills an active awareness and fear about the dreadful consequences of its violation. In his book on the Mafia, Men of Honour, Giovanni Falcone specifically writes about the permanent sense of mortality that engulfs the life of a mafioso:

[...] the constant risk of death, the low value placed on the lives of others, but also on one's own, force them to live continually on the alert. We are often amazed by the incredible quantity of details that besiege the memories of the men of Cosa Nostra. But when one lives, as they do, in expectation of the worst, one is forced to gather even the smallest crumbs. Nothing is useless. Nothing is a product of chance. The certainty of the closeness of death – in a moment, a week, a year – infects them with a constant sense of the utter precariousness of their lives. (Falcone 56-7)

The concept that “nothing is a product of chance” is a crucial point. Just as the existence of the Mafia is calculated and precise, so are their modes of communication. The Mafia is a social structure, like a family. In fact, the basic unit of Cosa Nostra is referred to as “la

famiglia” precisely because it is made up of families (*cosche*), with traditional “values” of honor, respect for blood relatives, loyalty and friendship. Falcone describes this family structure as an extreme exaggeration of typically Sicilian codes of behavior and values (Falcone 44). One of the examples Falcone writes about comes from his own observation:

One day I saw an interesting scene on a street. A man was shouting and gesticulating at another man who had parked his car side-on across the street, stopping traffic. The first man was upset, shouting. The other man looked at him with complete indifference and then carried on talking to his friend as though nothing had happened. The first man suddenly clammed up and walked away quietly. He had understood, seeing the confident manner of the other, that if he had insisted things would have taken an ugly turn and he would have emerged the loser from the confrontation. This is Sicily, island of power and of the pathology of power. (Falcone 45)

In Sicilian culture, until the middle of the twentieth century the family had a well-defined male-dominated structure: the father was the head of the family, followed by uncles, brothers and sons. One upheld a ranking and responsibility according to age and ability to support the welfare of the family. Everyone in the family contributed to its prosperity. This sense of family is expressed through love, and love is shown through clear communication. Love indeed has different “languages”, each of which is expressed in a particular mode: working and earning for the family; showing physical affection; expressing agreement; even meting out punishment, as it can be seen as a “tough love”. In order to maintain a healthy dynamic each member of the family must show their love using these comprehensible “languages”, otherwise a lack of communication would result in the weakening of the family structure.

The families that make up Cosa Nostra posit an appropriation of this concept of family to the point of perversion. The familial structure, which was once centered on love, is detached and positioned around a distortion of love: fear. This fear is a cause or even an effect of greed for money and power. It is also the result of the lack of straightforward

communication. With the replacement of love with fear family members are prevented from communicating freely. For this reason the structure requires a code of communication and basis for maintaining power and unity within and outside of the structure: *Omertà*.⁵ This social phenomenon is one manifestation of the Mafia's distortion of family and Church. It is a way of conduct implemented at the moment of induction into the Mafia. The commandments are explained to the candidate as the following:

[...] not to desire the woman of another man of honor, not to profit from prostitution, not to kill other men of honor, except in cases of absolute necessity, not to talk to the police, not to seek conflict with other men of honor, to always behave responsibly and correctly, to keep absolutely silent about Cosa Nostra to all those who are not part of it, never to introduce oneself to another man of honor (the rules state that another man of honor, known to both, must put them in contact, guaranteeing that they both belong to Cosa Nostra by saying the words 'This man is the same thing'). (Falcone 86)

After this explanation, the candidate must be sworn-in through a ritualistic ceremony involving a sacred image (usually the Virgin Mary who is considered the patron saint of Cosa Nostra), the burning of that image and the blood of the candidate's index finger. In his book Dishonoured Society, John Follain refers to Cosa Nostra's initiation ritual as a "second baptism" for the Mafioso, while Cosa Nostra can be considered a "Church" with severely implemented "commandments:" there are harsh consequences for those who violate the laws.⁶ This may be the most extreme divergence from the Roman Catholic religion, in that a

⁵ Michele Pantaleone defines *omertà* as an instinctive and brutal solidarity between all of the affiliates of the system. It is a structure assuring that not one single Mafioso ever feels isolated, even when he is detained and will need to serve a long sentence. When there are conflicts between families or powers, *omertà* is the certainty of being able to count on the help and protection of "amici degli amici." It is the faith in the power of the organization and its bosses (Pantaleone 19).

⁶ Follain describes the earliest accounts of this ceremony as owing very much to the Church: "The first report dates from 1877. Candidates for membership of the Stuppachiarì brotherhood in Monreale outside Palermo had to smear the effigy of a saint with their blood and then burn the effigy as they swore allegiance. A decade later,

transgression of the Ten Commandments certainly does not lead to death or even excommunication (the Inquisition has been long over even in Sicily!). In the Church, the violation of a commandment leads to the individual's need for repenting and forgiveness and the Church's provision of the sacrament of Confession. This concept of compassion posits an extreme divergence between Roman Catholicism and Cosa Nostra. The first structure is based on love (God is love) and forgiveness; the second is based on fear and punishment.

The use of the Catholic structure and rituals in a Mafia setting is strictly appropriation. From the use of Christian values in *omertà*, to the naming of certain rankings and roles of the "family," the Mafia removes a structure that evokes power and holiness and applies it to its own needs. Names such as "Godfather" or "Don," which are prominent in Hollywood films on the Mafia, evoke a religious power and authority.⁷ On the contrary, the actions of a Mafioso are completely devoid of Christian virtue. We can see here not just a perversion of the Sicilian family, but more specifically (especially since Catholicism has deep roots in Sicilian society) of the Roman Catholic structure and tradition. Cosa Nostra appropriates sacred symbols and rituals to its own system of power. In the section on written code, I will show how this religious appropriation manifests itself within text when I examine Bernardo Provenzano's *pizzini*.

Judge Giovanni Falcone was well aware of the perversion of the traditional family structure, as he recalls his own personal observations on the Sicilian and the Mafioso ways of life. He states: "I was born in the same neighborhood as many of them. I know the Sicilian

the Fratuzzi sect of Bagheria ended its rite of initiation with the new member firing a pistol at a crucifix to show that 'after shooting at the Lord, he would have no difficulty in murdering his father or his brother' (Follain 35).⁷ *Uomini d'onore* are viewed by the Mafia as soldiers, which name contains the religious connotation of "crusader," of Christian soldier.

spirit well. From an inflexion in the voice, a wink of the eye I can understand much more than from a long statement. My *pentiti* know that I know that the Mafia is nothing more than a distortion, an exaggeration, an extreme and aberrant version of the traditional Sicilian way of life” (Falcone 52). Not only is Cosa Nostra a deformation of the traditional Sicilian family structure based on love, it is also a distortion of religion (of God as love) and therefore of communication (of love expressed to the family). If love is the basis of communication for a Sicilian family, i.e. uttering a sound to express love to another, then fear is the foundation for Cosa Nostra. The fear of death propels the Mafia to communicate in codes. At the onset of fear the codes of silence, ambiguous, cryptic and curt languages take form.

Camorra: Perversion of Communication and Economic System

If Cosa Nostra is a deformation of the traditional Sicilian family and Roman Catholicism, then the Camorra is an exaggeration and abuse of both the free market economy and the local media. In his book Gomorra, Roberto Saviano describes the mentality of young boy camorristas as being a sort of “coscienza da samurai liberisti” (129). They know that if they want absolute power they must pay. Saviano cites the letter of a young camorrist who was in juvenile prison:

Tutti quelli che conosco o sono morti o sono in galera. Io voglio diventare un boss. Voglio avere supermercati, negozi, fabbriche, voglio avere donne. Voglio tre macchine, voglio che quando entro in un negozio mi devono rispettare, voglio avere magazzini in tutto il mondo. E poi voglio morire. Ma come muore uno vero, uno che comanda veramente. Voglio morire ammazzato. (Saviano 129)

From this young boy’s letter we can see a true perversion of economic values – of ownership – which become exaggerated to the point that the boy is willing to die just for these “things”

he desires. The camorristi of the System are highly concerned with economic power. They are geared towards becoming the managers, bosses, and CEOs of business, the landlords, masters and kings of the world. Not only are they concerned with having financial success in their hometown, they look to influence the global market. The connection with their global economic power and their communicative code is a subtle one: the Camorra's "soldiers" are lured into the System through capital gain, through their values of materialism and economic power. These teenagers, who are basically still children, will kill and die for the gains of the System (a monopoly over clothing and construction businesses) because it means their own gain as well (trivial items such as *motorini*, clothing, cell phones, etc). In leading such a risky life, in a sense it is as if these kids are already dead once they are in the Camorra. The murders they commit and their own deaths are a mode of communicating the System's economic code. The casualties of the camorristi help maintain the Camorra's influence on the town's economy. Through telephone calls and letters that describe the lifestyle these kids lead, through the vocalization or written messages of what they value we can understand how they contribute to and ultimately how they are eaten up by the System.

L'importante è concentrare il più possibile dolore, tragedia e terrore. Con l'unico obiettivo di mostrare la forza assoluta, il dominio incontrastato, l'impossibilità di opporsi al potere vero, reale, imperante. Sino ad abituarsi a pensare come coloro che potrebbero risentirsi di un gesto o di una parola. Stare attenti, guardinghi, silenziosi, per salvarsi la vita, per non toccare il filo ad alta tensione della vendetta. (Saviano 133-134)

In such a violent atmosphere, the only mode of survival, if not struck by the Russian Roulette that eventually hits unlucky individuals, is to abide by the System's code of silence in both oral and gestural communication: to mind one's own business and never object to the real and ruling power. For Saviano, observing the Camorra so closely and becoming so

familiar with their codes, one can only ask how he was not sucked into their vacuum of power. He states that he kept his perspective and refrained from protesting by remembering the number of deaths since he was born: 3,600. However, counting the dead, Saviano clarifies, is not necessary to understand the business of the Camorra. Although the deaths are the most visible trace of the Camorra, they certainly are not the most revealing.

Roberto Saviano has emphasized the effects of such hyperbolic structures, in his book Gomorra as well as in televised programs, as maintaining much of their power from words and silence. In choosing certain terminologies, a specific order of words, or no words at all, the Camorra-controlled media manipulate realities. In a recent televised event, Saviano spoke about the Camorra's strong hold on the local newspapers. One way in which the Camorra maintains its power and identity is through the headlines, in particular the names by which the *camorristi* are referred. Nicknames such as "*Bin Laden*", "*o sceriffo*", "*formaggino*", "*o nasone*" have a comical element about them, especially to an outsider of Caserta, but underneath the comical layer they convey a seriousness that only natives can truly understand. It is much like the Roman Catholic titles appropriated by the Sicilian Mafia. Locals of the province of Caserta know exactly who is being referred to when they see the nickname "*o lupo*". In recognizing the name, locals are automatically forced to think of the larger system of the Camorra and the power that lies beneath all the names. Since only a native can truly comprehend the gravity of such nicknames published in the local newspapers, the reality of such a world becomes extremely closed in and protected from all that are not fluent in the Camorra's linguistic code. Nicknames are a prime example of the linguistic code as a fortress of power.

Local newspapers are practically direct indicators of the Camorra-dominated towns. In his book Gomorra, Saviano describes a case in which a truce between two camorrist families (the Spagnoli and the Di Lauro) is actually printed in the local daily newspaper.

Saviano writes:

Un patto voluto dagli altri clan secondiglianesi e forse anche dagli altri camorristici, i quali temevano che il silenzio decennale sul loro potere potesse essere interrotto dal conflitto. Bisognava nuovamente permettere allo spazio legale di ignorare i territori di accumulazione criminale. Il patto non è stato trascritto da qualche carismatico boss in una notte in cella. Non è stato diffuso di nascosto, ma pubblicato su un giornale, un quotidiano. In un articolo a firma di Simone Di Meo apparso su “Cronache di Napoli” il 27 giugno 2005 è stato possibile leggerlo, comprenderlo, capirlo. Ecco i punti d'accordo pubblicati. (Saviano 140-141)

Everything is laid out on the table for the public to see and yet there are no objections, there is silence. The Camorra is able to conduct business out in the open because there is silence. Within a society on which criminal organizations thrive, silence plays a fundamental role on many different levels. On one level, the people who partake in the criminal organization follow a code of silence (*omertà* in the case of Cosa Nostra) which assures that no one speaks or gestures to outsiders about their business. On another level there are the citizens who live amongst the criminal organizations and must keep silent for fear of death if they were to show opposition. There are politicians and government officials who also stay silent about the reality of the Mafia or the Camorra, for economic or political reasons. Then there are journalists like Giuseppe Impastato and Roberto Saviano who have studied these systems closely. Impastato was one of the first to break the silence about the mafia and paid for it with his life. Saviano only recently broke the silence about the Camorra on national television and with the publication of his book. So, silence infiltrates not just the organization

but also the people indirectly involved, through a sort of exclusive inclusion. Those who know about the criminal organizations are forced to remain silent for fear of death. There is tremendous risk in breaking the silence on the Camorra because it is a fundamental element of their power.

Through linguistic codes the Camorra controls who understands the news and what information or interpretation to make understood. Consequently, depending on what gets printed on a local level, it influences what gets transmitted on a national level. Officially there are two to three deaths related to the Camorra a day in the Campania region. But, only when the violence reaches catastrophic levels does the news reach ears beyond the region. Real events are silenced especially by the Camorra's way in which it manipulates news for its own benefit. For example, when an innocent person is accidentally killed by a camorrist, instead of showing the suffering that the family feels as a consequence of their loss, the newspapers will most likely reverse that pain and suffering to the camorrist's favor, encouraging sympathy for him rather than the wronged innocent. The innocent are silenced and the guilty hold a monopoly on the communicative platform. This kind of silencing prohibits people from truly understanding what is happening in their own world.

Another way in which the Camorra exercises its power within the media is with how headlines are phrased for stories of "cronaca nera"; for instance, "Giustiziato Sindacalista." This headline indicates that one, the member of a labor union of the town did something very wrong, according to the Camorra, and that two, he was executed without trial for these actions; something perfectly fine according to the Camorra. He was executed without trial and, according to the headline, without any objections. Behind this headline is a power that can decide to make justice, which is above all not the state, and assassinate because a person

with an influential role erred. Saviano's main point is that these headlines create a strange world that is NOT separate from ours, although it may seem that way. On the contrary, it is a world of business, of massacres; a world that dresses major cities (Milan, Paris, Berlin, etc); a world that is described using banal, distorted, hyperbolic and indifferent words, all of which outsiders cannot understand unless translated by a bilingual person, much like Giovanni Falcone. Both Saviano and Falcone are examples of having fluency in both the "untainted" and the deformed languages.

CHAPTER 2

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE CODE OF HONOR: SILENT, WRITTEN AND SPOKEN

So far I have examined communication from within the Mafia which abides by the laws of *omertà*. The Mafia's choice of communication, whether spoken, unspoken, written or unwritten in code, is firmly connected to its mode of survival. Cosa Nostra aims at maintaining the hierarchical structure, when passing on information and carrying out jobs, all while keeping non-mafia and anti-mafia figures outside of this system. What are enigmatic codes to investigators are instead established and comprehensible messages between sworn-in men of honor. But, as historical events reveal about organized crime, systems based on fear are doomed to break down. The primary reason we know today about the Mafia's structure and modes of communication is through former Mafiosi who have testified to investigators and judges (non-men of honor). *Pentiti* are those who have gone against the code of *omertà* to help the anti-mafia break down the wall of silence about the system.

Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano*

One cinematographic and historical example of this break in *omertà*, and therefore of communication, is *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961) by the director Francesco Rosi. This film addresses the imposed code of silence on outsiders to the structure of the Mafia: on townspeople, on journalists, and even on the bandits. In fact, the bandits associated with Giuliano find themselves in an awkward place once they are imprisoned for the massacre at

Portella della Ginestra. They are faced with two different codes of silence: that of Giuliano and that of the Mafia and politicians. Just as fear founded and maintained the banditry's structure, so it prompted its collapse. When one man broke the silence and spoke against the bandits, he immediately turned the structure upside down weakening its very foundation and power.

In the film *Salvatore Giuliano*, we are immediately confronted with various angles of Salvatore Giuliano. At first the camera shoots at a high-angle, creating a bird's eye view of the scene: his corpse is sprawled out prone on the ground with a pistol beside him. Giuliano is surrounded by various people watching in a courtyard while one man takes inventory of his articles of clothing and possessions. In the next shot the camera pans across Giuliano's corpse from foot to head. He is examined by the camera, creating a landscape of Salvatore Giuliano first as a negative image, and then as a positive image. Following the body shots, we are then directed to the surroundings of the scene, Montelepre and its townspeople. There is a cut to the street from which we see policemen enter the scene, and then a high-angle shot of the courtyard to where the townspeople observe the scene from above. They are all silent. The police then force the investigators and journalists to leave the scene. This provokes dissent especially from the journalists, who want answers and see that the story is anything but clear and consistent, especially when considering details such as the lack of blood on the ground and the discrepancies about the number of gunshots heard that night. The journalists are forced into an overriding structure of silence.

A defining scene regarding this structure of silence is that in which a journalist questions a local vendor about his knowledge of the bandit Giuliano. After the vendor

discovers that the journalist is Roman, and therefore a “foreigner”, he concludes that he is incapable of understanding the situation at Montelepre precisely because he is not Sicilian.

Film critic Giorgio Bertellini views this statement as a synecdoche of the film:

Not only is the journalist from Rome but so, figuratively, is the audience. [...] since Rome here represents not just the Italian State as an oppressive force but the entire world of northern civilization in which the impersonal rule of law has replaced the traditional personal loyalties of *omertà* which define relations within the community. Furthermore, this ‘Rome’ is the mental world supposed to be inhabited by the audience. Neither the journalist nor the audience, [...], will ever fully understand Giuliano [...]. All that the film, like the journalist, will be able to do is bring out pieces of the puzzle. It will not fully put them together and neither will the audience. (Bertellini 136-137)

For one to truly grasp what goes on in Montelepre, one must first be Sicilian, and moreover from Montelepre. Only then one can begin to unveil the truth. It is not enough to observe and inquire. One must be a master of code reading, for the Sicilian culture has a lot to do with deciphering signs. In his book on Cosa Nostra, Giovanni Falcone writes about his experience growing up in Sicily and how one is “trained” in the subtleties of communication, from expressive proverbs to gestures and pauses of silence. Sicilian culture is at the same time animated and subtle. Expressions can be stylistically vibrant but also structurally enigmatic. In this sense, the Sicilian way of life is like a system of codes, and in order to live within such a society one must have the ability to read signs.

Throughout the film *Salvatore Giuliano*, communicative signs are present in both cinematographic style and content. There is a trend of high contrast black and white cinematography, which is consistent with the two contrasting modes of communication mentioned above. This contrast is also expressed in the different behaviors of the characters

in the film. The first mode (of traditional Sicilian culture) is represented by the vocal and unforgettable townspeople when they are confronted with the local and foreign authorities: the men yell for freedom and the women scream with grief. The second mode of behavior has to do with a distortion of this culture and therefore a silencing in expression. This can be observed from the taciturn bandits, Mafiosi, and politicians in the courtroom. They all seem to abide by a code of silence, until one of the bandits goes against the structure.

Ambiguous communication and pure silence evoke a distortion of the traditional Sicilian family creating a break in straightforward communication. Because Montelepre is laden with ambiguity and uncertainty it is nearly impossible to decipher the truth about the story of Salvatore Giuliano. Who supported him and whom did he maintain? Who killed Giuliano and who Pisciotta? Inconsequently, Rosi's film investigates these turn of events by incorporating elements that lend themselves to being the most basic and truthful elements of the story: he consults the official records of events, he shoots the film in Giuliano's town of Montelepre, and he films the inhabitants who witnessed that actual turn of events. The manner in which the film is shot reveals the inaccessibility of both Giuliano as a bandit and of the truth about his death, of Pisciotta's death and the roles of the Mafia and politicians. Rosi conveys this by using the technique of the flashback in time and space, and never shooting a close-up of Giuliano's face. The film, just as the real-life investigators, arrives at ambiguous and uncertain conclusions because the modes of communication—between Pisciotta and Giuliano, Pisciotta and the Mafia, Giuliano and the Mafia, the Mafia and politicians—are all based on a foundation of fear, and indirect communication. Each person involved, from the bandits to the politicians, contributes to an entangled web of distorted

messages. Breaking down the wall of silence in order to reveal the truth is impossible for the investigators and for Rosi; they can only evoke doubt about the deaths of Giuliano and Pisciotta. Rosi's film does not raise a verdict, but it does imply suspicions about the relationships between the bandits, the mafia, and the politicians. If we are ever to arrive at a truth, the wall of silence must not be broken down from the outside, but rather from within the structure of communication. *Omertà* must be broken down. The death of Gaspare Pisciotta was most likely intentional, especially since he was willing to cooperate with authorities, and to break the silence about the Mafia and corrupt politicians. If Pisciotta had survived, his testimony might have answered many questions about these ambiguous relationships and the truth behind the events of Montelepre and Portella della Ginestra. Through the actual trials of Portella della Ginestra and investigative films like *Salvatore Giuliano*, the wall of silence has been somewhat chipped away, creating more space for dialogue on the Mafia.

Writing within the Confines of *Omertà*: Provenzano's *Pizzini* and Sciascia's Novels

While spending years in hiding on the hillsides of Corleone, Bernardo Provenzano established the nature of his own language. He created a code and method of communication that reflected Cosa Nostra's code of honor and at the same time evoked precision and urgency: *pizzini*. The *pizzini* are like living bodies, of Provenzano, of his orders, of his thoughts and concerns. During his hiding, the *pizzini* acted as an extension of Provenzano's mind and body, moving from a rural hiding spot to the town of Corleone and beyond. The messages acted as accomplices of mafia activity, revealing the transactions of organized crime. The mafia boss lived this double existence through the mechanism of the *pizzini*. Il codice Provenzano describes the mechanism as based on "writing that remained a necessity to Cosa Nostra. Not necessarily for blackmail [...] but to secure the very rules of survival, regardless of the danger that it brought with it" (13).¹ So in this sense the *pizzini* contain a dichotomy: on one hand, they work as a survival tactic for Cosa Nostra's operations; on the other, they serve as evidence for the investigation and capturing of Provenzano and his men. In the first mode, the *pizzini* are accomplices; while in the latter example they become witnesses to organized crime. But before the "little messages" can become either, they must be deciphered in order to unravel the web of power. What does this code look like stylistically and mechanically? How does it relate to the approach of literature on the Mafia?

First of all, Il codice Provenzano claims that the *mafioso* term *pizzini* does not accurately reflect the reality of the messages:

¹ This is my own translation of: "La scrittura è rimasta una necessità per Cosa Nostra. Non certo per i ricatti, che pure hanno costellato la vita della mafia siciliana, ma per fissare le regole stesse di sopravvivenza, nonostante il pericolo che ciò comportava" (Codice 13).

In realtà, “pizzini”, come dicono i mafiosi, non rende a fondo l’idea. Perché i messaggi di Bernardo Provenzano sono vere e proprie lettere, talvolta anche di più pagine. Sempre redatte a macchina, la vecchia tradizionale meccanica o quella elettrica. Su un foglio bianco [...] che il padrino tagliava e modellava secondo una sua misura prestabilita [...] forse dalla praticità di chiudere i messaggi a soffietto fino a ridurli a un pizzino, appunto. Per questo, non scriveva mai su tutto il foglio, ma lasciava una larga striscia bianca al fondo, cosicché potesse fare da custodia, su cui scrivere il codice del destinatario. E poi sigillava tutto con lo scotch trasparente, in modo che al postino risultasse leggibile soltanto quel codice ma non il contenuto del messaggio. (Codice 41)²

Just the physical aspect of the message, the code being the only visible part and the real message buried beneath the code, defines the whole mechanism in its most authentic form. The tiny folded and taped square acts as a façade to the larger surface area which carries a weighty message. It is ironic to call the texts “little messages” because in reality they indicate very specific and explosive messages.

With the investigation and capturing of Provenzano, adhesive letters and numbers were found in direct correspondence to various verses of the Old and New Testament.³ *Pizzini* were composed with a meticulous code, in which Provenzano manipulated the Bible and a dictionary. Although he only attended school until the second grade of elementary school, there are so many simple spelling mistakes, easily avoidable with a dictionary on

² This is my own translation of the: In reality, the term “tiny messages”, as the mafiosi say, does not illustrate their true reality, because Provenzano’s messages are true and unique letters, sometimes even pages long. They are always written on typewriters, with either an old traditional version or an electric one. On a white sheet [...] that the padrino would cut and shape [...] folding the messages like a bellows until it became a “tiny message” precisely. [...] For this reason, he never covered the whole sheet, but left a wide empty space at the end, [...], to write the number code of the recipient. He then sealed everything with transparent tape, so that only the code, and not the content, was legible to the messenger (Codice 41).

³ “[...] E una Bibbia che portava i segni di una lunga meditazione: il funzionario di polizia [...] notò subito lettere e numeri adesivi che erano sistemati in corrispondenza di alcuni versetti del Vecchio e del Nuovo Testamento” (Codice 4).

hand, that defining them accidental is unfeasible. The following citation illustrates his style of *sgrammaticature* in which he inverts “chi” with “cui”:

Ho ricevuto, 5.160 E. non mi dici, x **cui** sono, aspetto tuo chiarimento in merito [...] Vuoi il 2% perché se vuoi la partecipazione? mi devi dire con **cui** si devono mettere d'accordo e in **condatto**, si come io aspetto, notizie x darle? [...] Sò che la verità, vieni sempre a galla, **mà** ci sono casi che nel tempo che vieni fuori la verità? c'è **cui** paga da innocente. (47)

Provenzano always made the same errors. As stated in Il codice, he utilized “mà”, “nonò”, “nonè”, ending the words with the wrong vowel, preferably an “e” or an “i”. The following excerpt demonstrates these vowel inaccuracies:

[...] C'è il tempo che tu mi dai questa rispposta **chiare**, per io darla e come andare **avante**. Perché se c'è bisogno della persona, io non ho persone per questo lavoro. Attento al più presto questa tua risposta. (47)

Aside from accents in the wrong places, one of his most common “mistakes” is the inversion of the “t” with the “d” – condento or condeto as opposed to contento – as well as the “c” with the “g”, all being characteristic of the Sicilian dialect. In addition to the dialect-infused language within the pizzini the influence of Sicilian expressions is inevitable, and therefore not surprising to see as in the following message:

[...] Senti, mi parlano, di una cosa, che **ve la veti giostrato**, insieme: Cioè la situazione, di quel feudo, dove tramite te, c'è un tuo zio, che sà, e che, dovesse portare, avanti la situazione per riscuotere. (48)

As explained in Il codice, the verb *avere* in Sicilian dialect is *aviri*. The past participle of *giostrare* would then be: *aviti giostrato*. Provenzano searches for the expression in Italian but ends up creating a mix incredibly singular: “Ve la veti giostrato”. It is nothing other than the

transfer of pronunciation (48) into writing – a colloquial expression which gives the text a sense of urgency. Despite Provenzano’s lack of formal education he did have an understanding of the difference between Italian and Sicilian. His writing evokes a consciousness of style, of choosing a word, a spelling, or a mode of expression over another. This consciousness spans the formal quality as much as the content of the *pizzini*. The investigators of Il codice affirm Provenzano’s depiction as a “*ragioniere*” or “*professore*” and find a certain meditative quality behind the reasoning in his messages. However, this “spiritual reasoning” does not have to do with religiousness, but rather with a newly found meditative way of thinking and, more importantly, method and style of communication. In one of the more well-known *pizzini* he writes:

[...] ti prego di essere calmo, e retto, corretto e coerente, sappia sfruttare l’esperienza delle sofferenze sofferiti, non screditare tutto quello che ti dicono, e nemmeno credere **ha** tutto quello che ti dicono, cerca sempre la verità prima di parlare, e **rigordati** che non basta mai avere una sola prova per affrontare un ragionamento per **esserni** certo in un ragionamento occorrono tre prove, e correttezza, e coerenza. (37)

This measured way of thinking and judging is absolutely practiced by Provenzano in writing his messages. He is extremely careful in them, always beginning with “Carissimo” even if he had something to complain about or to communicate unfortunate news: “Carissimo, con l’augurio che aveti, passato Una Buona Felicissima Serena Santa Pasqua, e che vi trovi a tutti in ottima salute. Come grazie a Dio, al momento, posso dire di me” (40). The *pizzini* are concerned with appearance, aiming for the tone of a *buono sovrano*, and never a *tiranno*. Provenzano demonstrates a ritualistic way of writing, always beginning and ending his letters in the same manner, invoking God. Therefore, the *pizzini* utilize religious terminology as a

code, referring to certain figures inside Cosa Nostra. They are present in the form of a closing – “Vi benedica il Signore, e vi protegga!” – or as giving thanks – “grazie al mio Adorato Gesù Cristo al momento ha provveduto lui.” Il codice highlights this religious tendency:

[...] è nella Bibbia che doveva aver trovato maggiore ispirazione, perché – ironia della sorte – la prima cosa che aveva messo in evidenza nella ormai famosa introduzione all’edizione delle Paoline è: ‘La perseveranza nella pratica del bene’. Così il commiato di ogni pizzino non era casuale: ‘Il Signore vi benedica e vi protegga’. È il libro dei Numeri, capitolo 6, versetto 24. che Provenzano aveva immancabilmente sottolineato. Ancora numeri, in una simbologia divenuta pratica di vita criminale, per proteggere l’organizzazione. (130)

The Bible was a major resource for his reasoning and writing. In a sense, Provenzano practiced a sort of selective and textual Catholicism, taking what appealed to his needs and leaving out that which did not. The *pizzini* are testimony to the heavy veil that the mafia culture wears, whether in spoken word and gesture, or as in the *pizzini*, in writing. The tradition of symbols and codes is present in each of these forms of communication.

This tradition passes over into literature on the mafia, and we will see later in what form. This then takes us to the overlapping of imagination and real life. While the *pizzini* illustrate a more functional interest in language and style, rendering the messages comprehensible to a select audience, literature on the mafia utilizes language and style to paint a picture of that world. The question remains: is the rendering realistic or impressionistic? What can be said about Sciascia’s depictions of the mafia and its mode of communication?

In Letteratura sulla mafia, the writer Vito Mercadante describes the phenomenon of “the idea of art as a reflection of reality”, as that which allows society a forum for discussion

(5). He outlines the Sicilian literary tradition of *verismo*, from Verga to Pirandello, and its pioneering realistic reflection of Sicily. The Sicilian author Vincenzo Consolo also displayed this trend of realism, but from a different angle. He described Sicilian literature as being “peripheral with a precise physiognomy, of historical and social themes, almost never being intimate” (97). This sort of “co-existence” of two contradictory trends – the peripheral and the precise – is also described in Brancati and Muscetta’s anthology of literature on the mafia: “Il significato di un’opera d’arte narrativa deve essere cercato nel ‘rapporto tra due mondi: il mondo fantastico creato dall’autore e il mondo ‘reale’, cioè quello percepito da noi tutti attraverso i sensi” (25). In literature on the mafia, this “real world, perceived through the senses”, is the mafia and its culture that permeates Sicily and its authors. In the case of Provenzano, as the author of the *pizzini*, the sense behind his messages is present in the bridge between symbol and bare meaning, between artifice and reality. Authors on the mafia are not too dissimilar than Provenzano or vice versa, in the sense that they each communicate a hidden message. The truth is masked, and only understood by those who possess the tools to read through the façades. In literature on the mafia, the subconscious of the writer and the story’s truth are veiled by style and rhetoric. For Provenzano, the truth behind Cosa Nostra, is hidden in his code. So, how does modern Sicilian literature then approach the reality of the mafia? What are the characteristics of the texts’ language and narrative style? Let us focus on the texts of Leonardo Sciascia, a Sicilian author in whose novels the phenomenon of the mafia is essential.

A ciascuno il suo, Sciascia’s first mafia-centered novel, is particularly intriguing for its amorphous language and narrative style. The story begins with an anonymous letter

threatening a pharmacist's life. Initially, the characters interpret the death threat as either a joke or a sign of envy, without any connection to the mafia. As events and dialogues unfold, however, one learns that the mafia is a real protagonist in their world. Since the novel is written in standard Italian, with hardly any sign of Sicilianisms or mafia-related proverbs, at first the presence of the mafia seems minor. The language of *A ciascuno il suo* attains an enigmatic quality, neither using dialect nor elevated language. The author writes in a sober style, composed of elusive and roundabout dialogues, and therefore prohibits the reader from obtaining a full comprehension of the story. In fact, the majority of the scenes include the Professor Laurana, either in dialogue with other characters or in contemplation, without revealing the true intentions of anyone. The narration oscillates between the third person (Sciascia) to the first (Laurana), through free indirect narration, adding to the enigmatic quality of the novel. One assumes that in the end Laurana will reveal the truth to the reader, but just as the truth of the murder mystery is hidden within the text, so is the mafia – the very element that weaves its way through the story literally eliminating the primary character Laurana. To understand the meaning of the story, one must not only observe *how* things are expressed, but *what* and *what is not* expressed, as in an inference. A noteworthy scene, in which the mafia becomes the subject of discourse, is that which involves the exchange between Professor Laurana and Don Benito.⁴ In this scene the two characters discuss the existence and power of the mafia in Sicily. Laurana has trouble grasping the concept of the reality of the mafia.

Don Benito responds with a strong reflection:

⁴ This scene is highlighted in Brancati and Muscetta's anthology, *Letteratura sulla Mafia* (90-92).

[...] il fatto è, mio caro amico, che l'Italia è un così felice paese che quando si cominciano a combattere le mafie vernacole vuol dire che già se ne è stabilita una in lingua... Ho visto qualcosa di simile quarant'anni fa: ed è vero che un fatto, nella grande e nella piccola storia, se si ripete ha carattere di farsa, mentre nel primo verificarsi è tragedia [...]. (102-103)

At the time of the writing of Sciascia's novel, Italy was still under the impression that Fascism had ended criminal organizations. In actuality the mafia was very real, and it played a powerful role in the Sicilian society, especially in politics. Don Benito underlines the fact that at the moment the state was finally combating the mafia signified that the mafia had already existed in language among the people, that it had been given a name.

Sciascia's other novel about the mafia, Il contesto, also addresses this idea of the emergence of language preceding the collective reality. In the book Midnight in Sicily, Peter Robb focuses on Il contesto, mainly because it has the effect of a "concentrated hit of the daily papers in Italy [...]. Hideous deaths, disturbing coincidences, plenty of detail, enveloping menace and no real knowledge at all" (160). Robb writes of the novel: "[...] the logical processes of detection, clarification and resolution are reversed, and what seems at first a reasonably straightforward problem, susceptible to rational solution, starts spiraling down into a murky vortex of hidden powers, obscure relationships and concealed motives" (Robb 159-160). Just as in the *pizzini*, what may appear devout religious faith is in reality code for business proceedings; what seems to be a grammatical error is intentional and laden with connotations; nothing can be passed off as void of meaning. The problem comes with assigning meaning to signs and symbols, just as one would do in a textual analysis. Whether their foundation is the mafia or the tradition of the detective novel, both the *pizzini* and the novels of Sciascia illustrate an authentic meditation behind their codes – a heightened

awareness of expression, resulting in an enigma for the reader. What stands out in Il contesto is this literary pre-existence of a real-life story; an unconscious prediction that then materialized, and the impulse to mask such a coincidence. For these reasons Sciascia's novel has a mystical and enigmatic quality about it, which seems to embody the whole spirit of Sicily. In his conclusive note in Il contesto Sciascia explains his position as a writer:

[...] ho scritto questa parodia partendo da un fatto di cronaca [...] ad un certo punto la storia cominciò a muoversi in un paese del tutto immaginario; [...] E si può anche pensare all'Italia, si può anche pensare alla Sicilia; ma nel senso del mio amico Guttuso quando dice: "anche se dipingo una mela, c'è la Sicilia". La luce. Il colore. E il verme che da dentro se la mangia? Ecco, il verme, in questa mia parodia, è tutto d'immaginazione. Possono essere siciliani e italiani la luce, il colore, gli accidenti, i dettagli; ma la sostanza vuole essere quella di un apologo sul potere nel mondo, sul potere che sempre più digrada nella impenetrabile forma di una concatenazione che approssimativamente possiamo dire mafiosa. (Sciascia 114-115)

A writer cannot escape his roots, and for a Sicilian writer *roots* imply the reality of the mafia. Even if Sciascia had attempted to exclude Sicily from his writing, it would have been impossible for him, just as a Sicilian mystery novel without the mafia would have been unnatural; hence his affirmation that the surface of the writing may be random, but the substance of the work always addresses the apologue on the power in the world, that which corrupts into an impenetrable form of the mafia: an element that always weaves its way through art. In fact the word *context* derives from the Latin, *contexo* which means to weave, entwine, and twist together.

The *pizzini* act as an extension of Provenzano's body. His texts take on flesh and blood: they achieve mobility and maintain a web of power. Similarly, Il contesto is described by Peter Robb as: "The text as tissue, the text as web, a tissue of lies, a web of allusions"

(Robb xxii). A ciascuno il suo also evokes this sort of labyrinth of truth. Roland Barthes defines the word “text” in his book The Pleasure of the Text:

Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. (Barthes 64)

When discovered by investigators, the *pizzini* emptied its meaning, purposely deceiving the outsider. Literature on the mafia functions as artistic expression, but it is also a testimonial of the mafia’s existence. The culture and influence of the mafia is so strong that even fiction has truth in it, whether realistic or impressionistic. The major disparities between *pizzini* and literature on the mafia are their content and objectives. *Pizzini* are written to carry on and veil mafia activity, while mafia literature aims to highlight this façade, and yet such works as Il contesto attempt to detach their stories from actuality, creating another layer to interpret. Sciascia’s mystery novels and *pizzini*, the literary code and Provenzano’s code, are all formed around a nucleus of the mafia. The two forms of appearance thrive on an opaque and ambiguous style in order to uphold hidden meanings. As stated in Il codice, “Decifrarli [*i pizzini*] significa risolvere un giallo fitto di crimini e connivenze. In questo libro, tutti gli elementi indiziari più preziosi” (Codice book back). From the start, A ciascuno il suo conveys a similar overlapping of the imaginary and the real with an introductory quote from Poe’s The Murders in the Rue Morgue: “Let it not be supposed, from what I have just said, that I am detailing any mystery, or penning any romance”. Both the *pizzini* and Sciascia’s novels claim to be neither fiction nor real life, but something in the middle. The dual nature

of these texts is essential to their success in deceiving an investigator or creating a sense of suspense. It is a reflection of the mafia's *uomini d'onore* and Sciascia's murder mysteries, of appearance versus meaning, and the efficacy of ambiguous language and narration. Whether in silence, spoken word, or writing, the code of the Mafia is essential to the survival of this family unit founded on fear. The Mafia is compensating for the lack of love and trust which normally allows for free and direct communication.

***Pentito*—Betraying or Upholding the Code of Silence?**

Tommaso Buscetta is one of the most prominent men of honor from Cosa Nostra to have broken the silence about the Mafia. After numerous blood-baths between various families of Cosa Nostra and in turn the murdering of his relatives, Buscetta decided that he wanted out of the structure. The fear of losing another family member was what prompted him to denounce the code and to become a *pentito*.⁵ Through violence, the perversion of the family structure was revealed to him. In Buscetta's opinion, this time Cosa Nostra had gone too far in killing young family members who were not even part of the Mafia. He interpreted their actions as a violation of the code of honor, and in consequence a corruption and loss of meaning in the system. According to Buscetta, since the code of honor emptied its meaning by not upholding what it professed to be, his decision to break the silence about Cosa Nostra was not a transgression of *omertà*. What is more, since he no longer belonged to Cosa Nostra and its code of honor, Buscetta's testimonies to Judge Giovanni Falcone did not represent a breach of the communicative modes of a man of honor: speaking in codes but always speaking the truth. Falcone considered the language and behavior of Cosa Nostra as an acquired culture; and in fact, he demonstrated fluency in this language, earning him respect from Buscetta and therefore the willingness to testify. From Buscetta's testimony, Falcone recalls an interesting example of communication: a cynical anecdote as an indirect means of expressing an urgent message. Falcone refers to the conversation with Buscetta:

I was talking to Buscetta about a murder; he was convinced it was a Mafia assassination, I was less sure. Buscetta said, 'I want to tell you a little story.' I understood at once that he wanted to tell me something indirectly. 'A

⁵ The use of the word "pentito" to signify the betrayal and confession of a "man of honor" is, in itself, a perversion of Church since the verb "pentirsi" contains the religious connotation of a confession.

guy has an infection in an unfortunate place, on his buttocks. He goes to the doctor and says to him, 'Doctor, I was stepping over some barbed wire, I got scratched, and now the wound is infected.' The doctor examines him and declares, 'As far as I can tell, it doesn't seem to have been caused by barbed wire.' The other replies, 'Doctor, I swear the infection occurred as I said, but you cure it as if it was what you think...' Buscetta's message: 'You don't believe this is a Mafia crime, but I am sure it is. Investigate it just as if it were a Mafia crime.' (Falcone 36)

To one who is not fluent in the communicative code of Cosa Nostra, this story would make no sense. But, for one who is clearly fluent in this type of discourse, the story reveals a very clear message. So, while the delivery of the message is indirect, the meaning of the message is on the contrary direct.

Much before the surfacing of the informer Buscetta came the *pentiti* of the Camorra. Although different in its values to the Sicilian Mafia, the Camorra displays a similar structure based on fear and the code of silence. In 1983, the Nuova Camorra Organizzata experienced a weakening in their structure due to the "desertion of some of its key men who, once arrested, broke the code of silence, turned against their former associates, and collaborated with the Justice Department" (Jacquemet 1). The result was a large crack-down on the NCO, of 856 arrests and their extremely detailed and revealing confessions. In his book, Credibility in Court: Communicative practices in the Camorra trials, Marco Jacquemet examines the NCO informers' "spectacular testimonies" and "performances" and, as a consequence, the dilemma of credibility they created for the authorities. Many of the informers' confessions, apart from being disturbingly detailed, were also so straightforward that the judges found it difficult to hold them as veritable testimonies. Their code of communication was so unlike their code of silence that all accounts were thrown out of court. The performances of the NCO *pentiti* demonstrate a diversion from Buscetta's type of testimony: instead of revealing information

about the Mafia (a transgression of *omertà*) yet still maintaining *omertà* within the code of communication (upholding of *omertà*), the camorristi show a transgression of *omertà* both in content (revealing information about the Camorra) and style (in their code of communication).

Thanks to the cooperation between fearless investigators like Falcone and Borsellino, and the *pentiti*, who betray their systems of power and protection in exchange for protection from those very systems, we now have the possibility to understand the Mafia's codes and structure and fight against their hold on society.

The Problem of Silence

While it may seem that the code of silence restricts communication, in effect, it can also be liberating. Within and alongside the mechanism of the Mafia, the code of silence defines what is and is not acceptable communication for a "man of honor." Silence, gestures, cryptic and curt language are all forms that aid in exchanging messages without betraying the code. Tommaso Buscetta's offers an example of silence that is liberating. He can manage to say all that he wants about Cosa Nostra, he just chooses a roundabout way to do so. *Omertà*, or the code of silence, is not only a code of behavior, it is also a codified language made up of many sub-languages. Using codified language to talk about confidential business, such as in the example of Bernardo Provenzano's *pizzini*, is exercising freedom of speech while still abiding by *omertà*.

On the contrary, once a message is unintentionally intercepted and deciphered – for example by the investigators of Provenzano's case – the linguistic code then becomes arbitrary, as the Mafia's structure depends on maintaining anonymity and confidentiality.

Codes, like technology, evolves constantly and with great velocity, eventually becoming obsolete and in need of an “update”. Within the frame of organized crime and its mode of communication, when a Mafia structure is infiltrated from the outside it is forced to alter its system of signs in order to maintain its *omertà*. This is a paradox that authorities and journalists face: in learning and divulging information about Mafia structures and communication, in breaking the silence about the Mafia, they risk losing familiarity and mastery of a code. The process is much like the movement of a fisherman’s scale. On one side are the Mafia and its code, which contains a new form and therefore weighs quite a bit. On the other side are the infiltrators and investigators, who have experience with the former codes but must start again from a state of silence. The latter side of the scale is quite light, but if the infiltrators can gain the testimonies of more recent *pentiti*, the scale all of a sudden brings them closer to cracking the Mafia’s new code.

A Final Synthesis on the System of Silence

The Mafia’s communicational codes, whether written, unwritten, spoken or unspoken, demonstrate the perversion of a more familiar and visible structure within Sicilian and Campanian society. For Cosa Nostra this system is a distortion and exaggeration both of the Sicilian family structure and the Roman Catholic tradition. The Mafia appropriated certain values and rituals from the Church and family to benefit its own cultural system. The code of silence is a prime example of a perversion of family and Church, whose foundation on love allows for free and direct communication. *Omertà*, instead, is largely based on fear, and therefore requires codes of communication in order to avoid outside infiltration and

deciphering of such codes. Before their interception and before the capturing of Bernardo Provenzano, the *pizzini* acted as the DNA of Cosa Nostra. Even more than illustrating a microcosm of Provenzano's linguistic code – about his warped style of communication – the *pizzini* also hold information about the entire structure and functioning of the Mafia. On a macro level, the cryptic code of the *pizzini* reveals the extreme deformation of the common social structures of family and Church, so much so that it almost becomes unrecognizable, especially to an outsider.

Francesco Rosi's investigative film, *Salvatore Giuliano*, addresses the figure of the outsider in the person of the Roman journalist who asks around town to find out the facts of the story. The journalist's realization is a notion that the entire film conveys to the audience: the notion that it is necessary to belong to a specific community (in this case Montelepre) with its code of behavior and language as a precursor to understand the truth about the rapports between Salvatore Giuliano, Gaspare Pisciotta, the Mafia and politicians. Just as a "man of honor" is required to be an expert at expressing and interpreting signs, gestures, messages and silences, so do activists, journalists and investigators when attempting to find the truth where the Mafia is involved. Judge Giovanni Falcone understood this necessity, as did many investigators afterwards, but before his time there were very few voices speaking up against the Mafia. In the 1960's and '70's, Leonardo Sciascia had written several crime novels either subtly or explicitly involving the Mafia, but he had literary protection and creative license on his side. Journalists, on the other hand, were not so free to speak up about the Mafia. In the town of Cinisi, Giuseppe Impastato dared to break the silence about the Mafia. Impastato had seen the reality of the Mafia from up close growing up in a Mafia-

dominated atmosphere, so he had access to its language of signs. In fact, his family was somehow connected to Mafia dealings, so in a way he had first-hand knowledge and understanding of their codes and structure. Just like Falcone and unlike the investigators of Salvatore Giuliano's case, Impastato was an atypical outsider. He possessed familiarity with the Mafia's codes of behavior and communication.

Writer and activist Roberto Saviano has a similar type of access to the Camorra's system. By growing up in the Camorra territory and speaking its language, he was able to infiltrate its deformed structure and language of signs. The Camorra distorts not only the economic system, which takes effect on both national and global levels, but also the Campania region's communication system. The "System" is so dominating that it even overpowers the original structures of a free market economy and freedom of speech. The local newspaper headlines tend to present stories from the Camorra's point of view, glorifying its crime and arrests while ignoring or manipulating the stories of victims of violence in order to sympathize with the camorristi. While the Camorra abuses its power by controlling how stories are written and publicized, the local audience of the media is, at the same time, knowledgeable about the Camorra's linguistic code and silent about its system of domination.

Just as in the cases of Giuliano and Cosa Nostra, people that have no direct involvement in the system are indirectly involved in their simulacra of a society. These Mafia structures are systems of silence imposed not only on its members but also on innocent inhabitants of the territory. As we can see from the examples of Giuseppe Impastato,

Giovanni Falcone and Roberto Saviano, breaking down this wall of silence is possible once the linguistic code is broken.

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