Not Against, but Beyond the State

Umberto Curi

“The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. [...] And Abraham gat up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord: and he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace” (Gen., 19, 23–28). In the Biblical account, God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah appears almost out of the blue, with practically nothing having been said about the two cities previously. We know only (Gen. 13, 11–12) that, upon their return from Egypt, “Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan” while Lot settled in the cities of the plain of Jordan and “pitched his tent toward Sodom.” We know also – indeed, this is the most important detail – that “the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly” (Gen. 13, 13).

The exemplary punishment inflicted upon the cities of the plain of Jordan is also the occasion for a singular controversy between God and Abraham, a sort of logico-legal dispute, which seems to prelude Job’s debate with the Lord later in the Biblical narrative. Just after foretelling the birth of the son so long awaited and desired to him who will be considered the father of faith and to his wife Sarah, God reveals to Abraham his intention to punish the inhabitants of the cities, “because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous” (Gen. 18, 20). While aware of his nothingness (“I am but dust and ashes”), Abraham pleads for the salvation of the cities, raising the possibility that in them, among the multitude of the wicked, there may nevertheless be a minority (50, 45, 40 ... 10) of righteous men. Surprisingly, in the end the dialogue is left hanging. There is only a pledge by the Lord – “I will not destroy the city for ten’s sake” (Gen., 18, 32) – after which they simply take their leave: “And the Lord went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place” (Gen. 18, 33). Hence, convinced by his interlocutor, God will not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if he finds even just ten righteous men in the cities. To avoid wronging an infinitesimal minority of the righteous, he will spare a legion of the wicked their just punishment.
What follows, in the *Genesis* account, is only a confirmation of the pledge God made in the legal debate with Abraham. Lot, his wife and his two daughters are sent away from Sodom in great haste, and will find shelter in the city of Zohar. Immediately afterward, God’s wrath rained down upon the cities of the plain of Jordan and everything – inhabitants, vegetation, cities – was destroyed and turned to smoke. Looking back to see the effects of the divine wrath, Lot’s wife “became a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19, 26). The “moral” of this intense Biblical passage appears to be evident in its lapidary peremptoriness: among all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah not even ten righteous individuals could be found. Apart from Lot, who was sent away in time and, thus, spared, all the people who lived in those cities were so wicked that they deserved to be “overthrown” by the fire and brimstone of the Lord. The hypothesis raised by Abraham in his conversation with God – “peradventure ten righteous shall be found there” – and hence his plea to save the cities in their name, proved to be without foundation. Even if *Genesis* does not say so explicitly, the moral of the story is that, except for Lot, *all* the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah deserved their terrible punishment: “the cry against them is great and their sin is very grievous.”

We can understand, then, why Sodom and Gomorrah enter Western cultural tradition as paradigms of an irredeemable condition – as concrete testimony to a wickedness without limits and without any possible justification. What is more, we understand why they can act as allusive exemplifications of a situation without any prospect of salvation, sealed in the total lack of all hope.

Matteo Garrone’s film must be read at this “height.” It can be adequately interpreted only if referred to its Biblical matrix, as its very title attests, and is thus not to be taken as a mere cinematographic “transposition” of Roberto Saviano’s best-seller essay-novel, and even less as a sociological study on the phenomenon of the Camorra. Garrone, rather, gives us a bitter and sorrowful reflection on the human condition, on the structurality of the evil immanent in the organization of society, on the indelible role that violence, in all its forms, plays in the concrete relations between individuals. The director’s decision to erase any concrete reference to the city of Naples, concentrating all the action of the film in the closed universe of a single neighborhood and, indeed, of a single housing project (the now infamous architectural complex know as *Le Vele* [The Sails]), is indicative of an approach that is light years away from any merely “documentary” intent to give us, again, an umpteenth – and, ultimately, hoarse – denunciation of the criminal exploits of an organization called Camorra. There is no moralism in this film, which is positively icy in its programmatic disenchantment. No indignation is revealed by the sharp and direct images, deliberately devoid of appeals to any generic, superficial emotivity.

What the film works on – also from the strictly cinematographic standpoint, in its use of a motion-picture camera that moves in a literally *concentric* manner – is the individuation of a microcosm, taken as the symbolic compendium of a more general situation, a macrocosm we all share, which – to different degrees and in different ways – involves all humanity. At the center of this intense meditation, in the dry and essential style, eschewing aesthetic frills, of his previous films (the nocturnal *The Embalmer* and the anguished, and still underestimated, *First Love*), Garrone poses a radical – and candidly philosophical – question regarding the role of violence in defining the relations within a community. To put it even more explicitly, the film focuses on a theme
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that has been tackled many times in the history of Western thought; namely, the relation between order and conflict, between force and law, between violence and justice.

It was Thomas Hobbes who gave us what is probably the most cogent formulation of the question. In *Leviathan*, chapter 13, he writes: “During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man. For war consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known.” Hobbes’s description in *Leviathan* of the state of nature clearly individuates the two fundamental elements that characterize the condition that precedes the birth of the State. The first is the spread of violence not as a sign of a primitive barbarism but, on the contrary, as the consequence of the lack of a “force” capable of dominating the force of all men, and therefore of imposing a common “awe” on every man. Secondly, the war that characterizes the state of nature does not necessarily consist in “the act of fighting,” since it suffices that a “will to contend” ready to turn into an actual battle be “sufficiently known.” But perhaps, even more than these two elements, the decisive point that comes to light in this passage regards the character of the State, which emerges from the process of its constitution.

For Hobbes, the system of norms and of rules in which state authority is expressed does not correspond to any presumed intrinsic rationality; rather, it exclusively obeys the necessity that the *bellum omnium contra omnes* be kept from overwhelming one and all, threatening the human species in its entirety with extinction. Hence the State, in principle, is in no way superior to the condition of nature, but simply has a different relationship with the necessity that individuals survive. Men, therefore, give up their natural rights, controlling those appetites that otherwise would inevitably lead them to want to appropriate everything, for the sole purpose of preserving their own lives, since they are always threatened with violence. The State is not only *not* an expression of a *natural* inclination of human beings; man is not only *not* “by nature” a *social being*, a *zoon politikon*. Indeed! the decision to endorse a collective contract, which is the conceptual origin of the modern State, stems from the individuals’ renunciation of a fully expansive expression of their subjectivity, of their “natural right to everything,” of their otherwise irrepressible aspiration to dominate everything that surrounds them. It follows that the very existence of the State is, in some sense, testimony to a loss of authenticity, to a forced subjection, to a fundamental limitation of freedom. In binding myself to rules imposed by the State I opt for a sort of conditioned freedom, through which what I acquire in terms of personal safety is, so to speak, offset by what I lose, in terms of the possibility of concretely asserting that natural *concupiscencia* which, in the century after Hobbes, will be exalted and effectively sanctified by classical political economy.

So, the option that leads to the birth of the modern State rests on an act that depresses the individual’s possibility of free expression, nearly to the point of nullifying it. The very acceptance of rules, the respect for norms, independently of their actual necessity and rational cogency, are evidence of a condition of minority, of disempowerment, of subordination, which individuals accede to in order to ensure their physical safety. However precious this good may be deemed to be, and however decisive we may deem the role it plays for the very survival of each individual, it is hard to get away from the idea that the State is nevertheless a superfetation, arising from historical contingencies, but that nevertheless does not respond to – and, indeed
contradicts—the natural necessities of human beings. Individuals have need of the State, only because they do not, so to speak, have the “maturity” to live in the natural state, because they are childishly incapable of disciplining violence, because they have to delegate to others that which, by themselves, they are incapable of doing: namely, of controlling the development of violence in such a way that it be compatible—and not in antithesis—with the survival of the human species.

All this is confirmed by the fact that the genesis and the functioning of the State by no means eliminate violence but, rather, are designed to institutionalize it, by giving the State a monopoly on legitimate force and, even more, through the recurrent and far from exceptional use the State itself makes of violence. What we have here, then, is essentially a transferal of violence—from isolated individuals to the State—rather than its complete extinction. By concurring in the establishment of the State, I choose to give it my share of natural right for the use of force, and therefore I myself limit that which, otherwise, would tend to manifest itself with no pre-established bond.

But this option, defined in contractual terms, is therefore, at all events, subject to well-defined clauses—it is, obviously, neither irreversible nor eternal. On the contrary, at least in principle, it is possible to imagine a new phase of in the evolution of human life, in which individuals cease to make use of that—properly speaking—“manufactured” article we call the State and fully recover their own autonomous disposition for directly exercising the natural right to violence, with the warning that it not give rise to a spiral of self-destruction. It is possible, that is, to conceive of a condition in which rules and prohibitions, norms and impositions, can be abandoned, with the advent of interpersonal relations that let the strongest emerge, but without this entailing a flaring up of violence outside any order or control. In this perspective, the State would ultimately appear as the expression of a still immature—infantile—phase in human history, in which, unable adequately to master the use of force, men submitted to the observance of a multiplicity of rules (which, very often, were completely irrational or, at any rate, without foundation), only because they were incapable of disciplining and directing their natural and irrepressible propensity for violence. If it is true that the State is a historically determinate expression whose origin can therefore be described, then its supersession is equally imaginable, when men will have attained a full maturity that keeps them from being crushed by the full expression of natural force.

A society beyond the State, or, if you will, the role of violence in a society that has come of age, and has gotten beyond the infantile necessity of the State—this is the problematic issue tackled in Garrone’s film. Exactly the opposite of what has been written, unduly and surreptitiously attributing sociological ambitions or moralizing intentions to the author, Gomorra by no means describes a pre-political condition but, rather, brings us to the threshold of a scenario that regards a not so distant future. A time in which the necessity of the State has been overcome. In which rules will not configure a pre-established code of prescriptions and prohibitions, but will stem directly from the power relations within society. A future in which individuals will fully retake possession of their right to use force, while remaining within limits that prevent the self-annihilation of the entire society. Against any reading in terms of “backwardness”—always misleading, when the theme of organized crime is tackled in rigorously economic and political-science, rather than uselessly emotive, terms—the film shows what may—or, perhaps, will—be the forms of social life, once the necessity of the State has been overcome. Indeed,
the architecture we see in the microcosm of Scampia resembles not an archaeological
ruin, testimony to a past that is not ours, but a sort of spaceship, ready to blast off towards
a future that may be awaiting each and every one of us.

In particular, among the many emblematic characters and the many situations that
explicitly “speak” in this direction, the case of the two young rebels, destined to be killed
by the Camorrist old guard, is probably the most significant. They express, in fact, the
parting from any and all rules, however and by whomever defined, the deliberate with-
drawal from the inevitably authoritarian forms of the State – be it the “legal” State, or
that mirror image of the State constructed by the Camorra. Totally carefree, unbridled,
even joyful, they regain all the natural exuberance of an individuality projected exclu-
sively to express its own appetites, without recognizing any external restraint. Their aim
– which, in part, they even manage to attain – is a new state of nature, conquered by pro-
grammatically overcoming any form of “Statehood,” by deliberately demolishing the
idola through which the institutionalized force of the State tends to express itself. While
the repressive power of the State – embodied by the police and the Carabinieri, and the
subversive power of the Camorra (both exhausted exponents of a model of society that,
in any event, has just about had its day) face off and attack one another, in the name of
a legitimacy that each, in its own way, contests – the two young people are brimming
with the future, even with innovation, supercharged by the irrepressible vitality with
which they clear every hurdle, tear up every agreement, deliberately break every rule,
trample on hypocritical conventions and out-of-date norms.

This new “post-State” condition is perhaps the new “order” towards which we
are proceeding, the abyss towards which, like maddened sheep, we are all running
headlong. In this scenario – in which we have become adults, and so have overcome
the necessity of the State – force can once more become the main social regulator,
can define hierarchies and set priorities, can make the strongest emerge, while con-
demning the weak to the subjection that is their due. Gomorrah – an ancient name,
that comes from the very roots of our culture, and is for this reason also capable of
indicating its future – speaks to us of this. By no means does this film refer to what
is, in any event, a localized phenomenon of organized crime. It alludes, rather, to a
human condition irremediably marked by the fall; to a humanity that is constitutively
capax mali; to a society that prospers in the reproduction of violence, rather than in its
elimination. Like Garrone’s film First Love, also this one plunges into the depths of
our being, scours the many forms of our abjection, delves into our destiny, questions
– without illusions – our possibilities of salvation. Expect no happy ending. No facile
redemption is at hand. Toni Servillo’s line in the film is applicable to each and every
one of us. Referring to those who have decided to break with the Mob, setting out
alone on a road whose goal is dim, he says, “Don’t think you’re any better than me!”

There is a detail in the Bible story regarding the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah
– Sodom is mentioned by itself in Genesis 18-19, but elsewhere (Isaiah 1, 9 ff.; Amos
4, 11; Zephaniah 2, 9) they are always mentioned together – that is probably not for-
tuitous. Ever since antiquity, in the histories of Flavius Josephus and Strabo, and right
down to the most recent archaeological research, no one has been able to locate pre-
cisely where the two cities were. This means that, yes, they certainly did exist, but it is
not possible to say where in the known world they were actually located, before being
turned to smoke. The uncertainty of their geographical location is of itself a signifi-
cant fact. While there is no question about the existence of these two cities in which human wickedness was so utterly concentrated, it is not possible to say precisely where they were. Perhaps, in an indeterminate area somewhere near the Dead Sea. Perhaps, much closer to us than we suspect. Perhaps, without fully realizing it, we ourselves are inhabitants of those cities.

(Translated from the Italian by Giacomo Donis)

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Seeing Evil. Notes on Matteo Garrone’s Gomorrah
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Since the days of Rosi’s *Hands Over the City* we have not seen an image of Naples so free of rhetoric; and after Rossellini few had described a reality so steeped in metaphysics, tragedy, and unredeemed destiny. *Gomorrah* is not a document on a city or on a criminal system. Garrone’s Naples is like Anghelopoulos’s Greece, or Straub’s Sicily. It is a reality that conceals a reference or a symbol at every turn, and in this case the signs refer us to the claustrophobic domination of an inexorable destiny.

The frequent use of the hand-held camera – an insistent echo of *cinéma vérité* – closes in on the characters, on their actions and faces, moving horizontally, the stylistic hallmark of a universe without aperture, closed in the immanence of situations and bodies. The Camorra is a criminal construction, but one so total and impenetrable that it seems a second nature. Here, even the dreams take on a homogeneous form of “system.” The blind courage, the unlimited desire for power, that animate the two boys Marco and Ciro, drive them to imitate “spectacular” models and myths; in fact, we see them for the first time in a large, dark room in *Le Vele* [*The Sails*], while they pretend to shoot at and rail against the “Colombians,” the enemies of their Hollywood idol, Al Pacino’s Tony Montana. Like Montana, they want to assert the grandiose image they have of themselves, challenging the Camorra bosses on their own turf. They steal the clan’s weapons, and then go to the waterfront where, screaming and dancing, they shoot aimlessly into the emptiness. “We want everything,” “We don’t like being bossed,” as one of them says, declaring his plan for omnipotence. The story of Marco and Ciro is the only one in which we see the sea, and it is on a beach that they meet their end, with their bodies being picked up and carried away by a mechanical digger. Otherwise, Garrone makes no figurative reference to Naples, shows us no element of the traditional

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1 “The Sails,” the Scampia building complex where part of the film is set.
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iconography of the city, in a deliberate and anti-spectacular askesis that is designed to underscore the universal and not only local character of the “system.”

In any event, the connection between spectacular mythology and the universe of crime goes far beyond the domination of the Casalesi clan. The story of Marco and Ciro – like the other four in the film – presents us with a microcosm of power relations that is condensed, abbreviated, exaggerated but, in general, indicative of the rout of modernity in which we live. This is evident from the first frames, where the Camorrists are tanning their tattooed bodies in a beauty salon, in a sort of narcissistic and consumerist rite that leaves them defenseless before their killers. What confronts us here is not an archaic and barbaric universe that has nothing in common with our everyday lives but, rather, the exemplary exaggeration of precisely the psychical and behavioral traits that characterize the idiotic and brutish universe of the contemporary society of the spectacle.

Each story recounts a different aspect of the power relation, the master-slave relation, that is the only conceivable social bond in the universe of the film. The absolute passion for power excludes all others. There is no love in this universe, and even sex is reduced to the voyeuristic and consumerist contemplation of a lap dance, in the nightclub sequence.

If Marco and Ciro stage a dream of delusional and senseless domination, Ciro the money-counter is dominated by fear. His quiet, quasi-“white-collar” occupation (he distributes benefits to the families of Camorrists in prison) is thrown into confusion by the Camorra “war.” When he realizes his group is on the losing side, an irresistible terror – and the desire to submit to the new masters – drives him to betrayal and to complicity in a murder. Don Ciro is the absolute servant. In the decisive sequence we see him framed from behind, deaf to every call, while, crushed by fear, he goes down one of the dismal corridors of *Le Vele*. His bent and mediocre figure is an emblem of the banality of evil, which constitutes the other pole of the two boys’ frenzied desire for power and death. What is more, Don Ciro performs the ritual, and recurrent, act that cadences the entire course of the film: he counts money. This act is shown a number of times and in different situations, as if to tell us that, at bottom, the permanent engine and only unifying factor of violence and death is the abstract flowing of rivers of money.

For that matter, why be faithful to something or someone in a Camorra war? As one of the boys says at a certain point in the film, on one side there are friends, on the other enemies, without their being divided by any recognizable sign or value. A terrible conflict is underway, but it is entirely internal to this universe, between factions that share its laws, and there is no way out of the situation. No subject, no hope leads beyond it. It is the condition of a pre-political struggle for pure prestige and the assertion of power; it is the Hobbesian jungle of the search for supremacy. It seems, in fact, that the Camorra corresponds to the characteristics of what Guy Debord defined as an “integrated spectacular” regime, whose prime model is the Mafia. On the one hand, abstract financial power, which functions independently of the money’s criminal origin; on the other, a network of family and personal dependences, which, however, is ready to dissolve the instant a stronger group manages to prevail: “The Mafia flourishes in the soil of contemporary society. Its expansion is as rapid as that of all the other products of the labor by which integrated spectacular society shapes its world. The Mafia grows along with the swift development of information technology and
industrial food processing, along with urban redevelopment and shanty-towns, secret services and illiteracy."

In the film, the “modern” aspect of the Camorra is represented by the elegant and managerial figure of Franco, the garbage “technician.” When we see him for the first time his assistant, Roberto, is coming up from an underground drain, in the empty space of an abandoned gas station; the roof of the gas station looms like an obsessive and oppressive triangle at the center of the screen. Technical geometry, which dominates a dead landscape, in which men traffic with the underground, with sewers and garbage. In another sequence, he is conversing – responsible and reassuring – with an entrepreneur from the Veneto, who wants to dispose of his toxic waste in the South. Principles of competence and efficiency, pure capacity for “technical” management of the problem, perfect neoliberal spirit of “governance”: Franco is, on principle, indifferent and neutral with respect to the origin, the causes or the effects of the “problem” (the death of thousands of people due to contamination, the destruction of the earth).

Then again, apart from the sad figure of Don Ciro, the ferocious bond of personal dependence also prevails in the young boy Totò, who is forced to betray Maria and have her killed. The Camorra is a ferocious hybrid between the impersonal financial flow of money and the archaic bond of death and blood that marks human relations. The greatness of Gomorra lies in its showing how the new criminal power is distinguished by this co-existence of archaism and technical modernity, and that this is the dominant behavior of the new technico-political elites: “In the final analysis it is the particular form of development chosen by the economy of our epoch which dictates the widespread creation of new personal bonds of dependency and protection.”

As a matter of fact, a code of honor, now dépassé, is cited from time to time in the course of the film: do not kill women, do not kill young boys or use them for murders. But these elementary and archaic rules are violated one after the other. In a central sequence of the film, trucks full of toxic waste drive past on friable roads – landslides waiting to happen – built at various levels of a quarry, while Franco, with his usual competence, directs the operations. The trucks are driven by young boys, because no one else is willing to do it.

If Don Ciro is totally incapable of rebelling against the “system,” Pasquale the tailor is under the illusion that he can beat it thanks to his work. The Chinese offer him, even more than money, appreciation of his skill, of his mastery. In the sequence in which he enters the Chinese factory for the first time, we see him greeted with applause, treated with deference, they call him “maestro,” while he is surprised and amazed by such a reception. Nevertheless also work, like childhood, like dreams of greatness, is destined to be crushed and humiliated in the power relations imposed by the Camorra. It is a true anthropological and historical catastrophe, which is shown to us figuratively in the ambush sequence, in which the small Chinese entrepreneur is killed, and the car skids in the surreal landscape of a monumental cemetery, as if the desire for freedom paled in the deformed figures of a rhetorical grotesque. Stone angels and Greek columns of all styles, artificial and broken, mime the image of a culture that has lost all dignity.

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3 Ibid., p. 95 [p. 69].
and sacredness and limits itself to quoting chaotically a past reduced to commemorative frills – all this, the metaphor of a dead power, which reabsorbs and devours Pasquale’s living work and creative desire. Under such circumstances, the act Pasquale performs has something of the heroic: he gives up his job, refusing to continue serving the “system.” Roberto, the garbage technician’s assistant, did something similar, preferring to set off alone towards an unknown destiny. These are humble gestures of possible rebellion, while the stupendous dress tailored by Pasquale is worn by the great actress, who receives her Oscar. No one will ever know its creator.

The catastrophe that invests the world of *Gomorrah* does not spare its language. The Neapolitan dialect spoken by the bosses and, especially, by the younger boys is a sort of neo-language – broken, guttural, elementary, barely deciphered by the subtitles. Like Hitler’s German, this jargon expresses nothing other than indications and impulses of violence and the drugged hysteria of outrage. The linguistic catastrophe is coupled with the anthropological. The real has lost its symbolic network, which gave meaning and possibility to human relationships: the faces, actions and words of the Camorrists, who at the end of the film kill Marco and Ciro, are impenetrable and inexpressive like a piece of raw material, before which even the beginning of a dialogue or a discourse seems impossible. The people seem to have regressed to plebs, to have become a dark and compact mass, similar to the crowds that provided the raw material for totalitarian exaltations. Garrone is as far as can be from Hollywood romanticism, which transforms godfathers and Mafias into occasions for hero worship and adventure.

The true figurative emblem of this universe is the monster project of *Le Vèle*, which seems to condense the oppressive destiny of the characters in an architectural image. The familistic archaism of the Camorra, the hundreds of people bunched up together in a narrow space, co-exists here with a modernist architecture in iron and glass, the waste of a distant avant-garde, hurled down into an unlivable and shapeless non-place. In a full-frame shot we see the two spaces of the building, composed of a sort of pyramid of cement and, on the right, a squat tower – summary references to places of war, of sacrifice, and of death. In the interior, in dark places and deserted hallways, the most impressive sequences of the film are played out, such as the scene of the boys’ initiation into the “system.” Terrified, lined up, covered with bulletproof vests like shells, one by one they come up to the Camorrist, who fires a pistol shot to the heart. Whoever does not faint and gets back up on his feet, like Totò, has become an adult and, at the same time, has symbolically accepted a destiny of death.

In Italy in recent years – years after the elegant and stupid “white telephone” cinema of the end of the Fascist era – we have seen quite a lot of “white cell-phone” cinema, “playlets Italian style,” as Fofi called them; or feel-good loft stories full of farewell kisses, which in fact serve to conceal the increasingly ferocious conflicts taking place in our country and the new fascism that is today cradling our idiocy. Garrone gives us a radical cognition of pain, the indispensable premise for a lucid will to resist.

*(Translated from the Italian by Giacomo Donis)*

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