

Naming the Mafia: Representation and the Construction of the Mafia Imaginary

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Abstract

This paper investigates how cultural representations contribute to the construction of the mafia imaginary in contemporary Italy. Rather than approaching the mafia exclusively as a historical or criminal phenomenon, the study examines the narrative processes through which it becomes culturally intelligible and symbolically meaningful. Through a comparative analysis of the television series *Il capo dei capi* (Taodue, 2007) and Gaetano Savatteri's novel *La congiura dei loquaci* (Sellerio, 2007), the article explores how different media construct distinct forms of visibility, emotional engagement, and public understanding of organized crime. While serialized television tends to organize the narrative around the charismatic figure of Salvatore Riina, producing a biographical structure that risks aestheticizing violence through personalization and emotional proximity, Savatteri's novel develops a counter-narrative centred on truth, institutional failure, and the structural nature of mafia power. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Stuart Hall, Pierre Bourdieu, Umberto Eco, and Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, the paper argues that literary and audiovisual texts do not simply reflect reality but actively participate in the production of symbolic frameworks through which the mafia is interpreted. Rather than evaluating the historical accuracy of these representations, this study focuses on their formal organization and cultural effects. Particular attention is devoted to narrative focalization, characterization, temporality, and symbolic hierarchy, demonstrating how different aesthetic strategies either reinforce or challenge dominant representations of organized crime. Ultimately, the paper argues that the mafia imaginary is not merely inherited from history but continuously negotiated through cultural production, where literature and television play a decisive role in shaping collective memory and public perception.

Keywords: mafia, cultural representation, cultural imaginary, Italian literature, television studies, symbolic power

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Introduction

The mafia occupies a unique position within contemporary Italian cultural memory. Although it constitutes a historical, political, and criminal phenomenon that has been extensively investigated by historians, sociologists, magistrates, and journalists, public knowledge of the mafia is shaped not only by judicial evidence or historical documentation but also by the narratives through which it is represented. Literature, cinema, television, and more recently digital media have contributed significantly to constructing the symbolic frameworks through which Italian society—and international audiences—understand organized crime. Consequently, the mafia exists simultaneously as a historical reality and as a cultural representation.

This distinction constitutes the starting point of the present study. Rather than asking whether a particular literary or audiovisual work faithfully reproduces historical reality, this article examines how narrative forms construct different ways of seeing, interpreting, and imagining the mafia. The question is therefore not simply what the mafia is, but how narrative representation participates in making it culturally visible.

The relationship between organized crime and cultural representation has become increasingly relevant over the last decades. Since the international success of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*,¹ mafia narratives have circulated far beyond the Italian context, contributing to the emergence of a powerful global imaginary based on family loyalty, honour, violence, and charismatic leadership. Italian television subsequently developed its own tradition of mafia storytelling through productions such as *La Piovra*, *Il capo dei capi*, and, more recently, *Gomorra*. At the same time, Sicilian literature has proposed alternative narrative strategies that seek not to spectacularize criminal power but to interrogate its historical, social, and ethical foundations.

Among contemporary Italian writers, Leonardo Sciascia² occupies a particularly significant position. His novels and essays profoundly transformed the literary representation of the mafia by shifting attention from criminal exceptionalism to the intricate relationships linking power, justice, silence, and institutional responsibility. Rather than portraying the mafia exclusively as an organization of violent criminals, Sciascia explored the mechanisms through which violence becomes socially tolerated and politically protected. His reflections continue to influence subsequent generations of Sicilian writers, including Andrea Camilleri and Gaetano Savatteri, whose works develop different but related forms of civic engagement through narrative.

The present article focuses specifically on the comparison between two works published in 2007: the television series *Il capo dei capi*, produced by Taodue for Mediaset, and Gaetano Savatteri's novel *La congiura dei loquaci*. Although both works address the Sicilian mafia, they do so through radically different narrative structures. The television series constructs its story around the biographical rise of Salvatore Riina, making the mafia intelligible through the continuity of a central protagonist. Savatteri's novel, by contrast, refuses the heroic centralization of criminal power and instead portrays the mafia as a diffuse system of social relationships sustained by silence, complicity, and institutional weakness.

¹ Coppola, F. F. (Director). (1972). *The Godfather* [Film]. Paramount Pictures.

² Sciascia, L. (1961). *Il giorno della civetta*. Torino: Einaudi.

This divergence raises an important theoretical question. If representation is not merely a neutral reflection of reality but an active process of meaning production, then different narrative forms inevitably produce different understandings of the same historical phenomenon. Television seriality, because of its duration, visual immediacy, and emotional continuity, tends to encourage long-term familiarity with its protagonists. Literary narration, on the other hand, often privileges ambiguity, interpretative distance, and structural complexity. The difference therefore concerns not only medium but also the conditions under which audiences are invited to construct meaning.

The theoretical framework adopted in this article draws primarily upon Cultural Studies and theories of symbolic power. Stuart Hall's conception of representation emphasizes that meaning is produced through culturally shared codes rather than directly transmitted from reality. Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates how media institutions contribute to defining what becomes publicly visible and socially significant. Jean-Pierre Esquenazi further argues that audiovisual narratives should be understood as social objects whose meanings emerge through the interaction between textual organization and audience interpretation. Finally, Umberto Eco reminds us that mass culture does not simply reproduce ideological structures but actively participates in shaping collective imaginaries through symbolic forms.

Within this perspective, the concept of the “mafia imaginary” assumes particular importance. The imaginary does not designate a fictional distortion of reality but the structured ensemble of representations through which a society symbolically organizes its understanding of a phenomenon. The mafia imaginary therefore emerges at the intersection of historical experience, media discourse, literary production, and collective memory. Its forms evolve over time, reflecting changing cultural sensibilities and political contexts while simultaneously influencing public perceptions of organized crime.

This article argues that *Il capo dei capi* and *La congiura dei loquaci* exemplify two distinct modes of constructing this imaginary. Whereas the television series privileges personalization, dramatic continuity, and emotional accessibility, the novel develops a strategy of narrative disenchantment that resists the spectacularization of criminal power. Rather than opposing fiction to reality, the comparison seeks to demonstrate how different aesthetic choices generate different symbolic configurations of the mafia, ultimately shaping the ways in which violence, authority, and justice become thinkable within contemporary Italian culture.

The analysis therefore contributes not only to the study of mafia representations but also to broader debates concerning the cultural production of meaning. By examining the relationship between narrative form and symbolic power, the paper aims to show that representations of organized crime are never merely descriptive. They constitute acts of cultural mediation that influence how societies remember the past, interpret the present, and imagine the nature of power itself.

From the Mafia Phenomenon to the Mafia Imaginary

The Sicilian Mafia has traditionally been studied through historical, legal, and sociological approaches. While these perspectives have significantly improved our understanding of organized crime, they do not fully explain how the Mafia became a powerful cultural symbol. Beyond its historical reality, the Mafia has progressively evolved into a cultural imaginary shaped by literature, cinema, television, and public discourse.

A key question underlying this research concerns the relationship between the historical phenomenon and the emergence of the word *mafia*. Historical evidence suggests that forms of private power, patronage, and violence existed before the term itself entered public language. Pietro Calà Ulloa's report of 1838 already describes networks of local authority based on reciprocal protection, corruption, and informal justice, yet the word *mafia* never appears. This gap suggests that a social phenomenon may exist before acquiring the language through which it becomes publicly recognizable.

The first documented public appearance of the word *mafiusu* dates back to Giuseppe Rizzotto's play *I mafiusi di la Vicaria* (1863). As John Dickie has argued, this work marks the beginning of a cultural process in which the Mafia became not only a historical reality but also an object of representation (Dickie, 2004). From this moment onward, the phenomenon entered the public imagination through literature before becoming the subject of historical and sociological inquiry.

Among the earliest scholars to analyse the Mafia systematically, Leopoldo Franchetti interpreted it not as a simple form of criminality but as a system of private power that emerged where the State failed to monopolize legitimate violence (Franchetti & Sonnino, 1877). In *La Sicilia nel 1876*³, Franchetti argued that the Mafia functioned as an alternative mechanism of social regulation, capable of guaranteeing protection, arbitrating conflicts, and exercising authority through informal networks. This interpretation shifted attention away from individual criminal acts toward the broader political, economic, and social structures that allowed Mafia power to flourish. His work laid the foundations for modern Mafia historiography and continues to influence contemporary historical research (Dickie, 2004; Lupo, 2004). Franchetti's interpretation remains a crucial point of reference for contemporary historians such as Salvatore Lupo, who further developed the analysis of the Mafia as a historical and social phenomenon embedded in the transformation of nineteenth-century Sicilian society (Lupo, 2004).

During the twentieth century, Leonardo Sciascia profoundly renewed the literary representation of the Mafia. Rather than focusing exclusively on violence, he explored the relationship between power, justice, silence, and institutional responsibility. In his essay *Il calzolaio di Messina*, Sciascia illustrates the original ambiguity surrounding the adjective *mafioso*, suggesting that it initially referred less to criminal identity than to social prestige and the capacity to provide protection. Andrea Camilleri further developed this perspective by portraying the Mafia not as the action of exceptional individuals but as a diffuse system of political, economic, and social relations embedded in everyday Sicilian life (Camilleri, 1994).

This evolution can be better understood through the theoretical contributions of Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall argues that representation actively produces meaning rather than simply reflecting reality (Hall, 1980). Pierre Bourdieu shows how symbolic power determines what becomes publicly visible, while Jean-Pierre Esquenazi emphasizes that literary and audiovisual works function as social objects whose meanings emerge through audience interpretation. Similarly, Umberto Eco demonstrates that popular culture contributes to constructing collective imaginaries rather than merely reproducing historical events (Eco, 1964).

³ *La Sicilia nel 1876*, published in 1877 by Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino after their investigative journey through Sicily, is widely regarded as one of the foundational works of Mafia historiography. Rather than describing the Mafia merely as a criminal association, the authors interpreted it as a system of private power rooted in the weakness of state institutions and in the socio-economic structure of post-unification Sicily.

Within this framework, the concept of the *Mafia imaginary* refers to the symbolic system through which society interprets organized crime. It is not opposed to historical reality but develops through the interaction of historical experience, cultural production, and collective memory. The following comparative analysis explores how different narrative forms participate in constructing this imaginary, producing distinct representations of violence, power, and justice.

Comparative Analysis

Although *Il capo dei capi* and *La congiura dei loquaci* were both published in 2007 and address the Sicilian Mafia, they construct two fundamentally different representations of organized crime. Their divergence lies not in the historical events they portray but in the narrative forms through which the Mafia becomes meaningful.

Il capo dei capi adopts a biographical structure centred on Salvatore Riina. The historical development of Cosa Nostra is largely filtered through the rise of a single protagonist, whose personal story provides continuity and emotional engagement. This narrative strategy simplifies a complex historical phenomenon by concentrating attention on one charismatic figure. The opening sequence⁴, in which Riina is shown under arrest while the camera repeatedly focuses on his wedding ring, immediately establishes the coexistence of two identities: the ruthless Mafia boss and the family man. This humanizing perspective is further reinforced through his relationship with Ninetta Bagarella. Their courtship, marriage, and family life occupy a significant place within the narrative, encouraging viewers to perceive Riina not only as the leader of Cosa Nostra but also as a husband and father.

Throughout the series, scenes of domestic life coexist with acts of extreme violence, producing a process of humanization that reduces the critical distance between the protagonist and the audience.

Such aesthetic choices do not justify Riina's actions, yet they contribute to making him the central point through which viewers experience the history of the Mafia. Violence becomes integrated into a coherent narrative of personal ascent, and the structural dimension of organized crime risks being overshadowed by the biography of an individual leader.

Savatteri's *La congiura dei loquaci* adopts the opposite strategy. Rather than focusing on a charismatic boss, the novel portrays the Mafia as a diffuse system sustained by institutional weakness, silence, and social complicity. Lieutenant Adano's investigation never offers complete certainty; instead, it reveals fragmented truths and the difficulty of identifying responsibility within a deeply interconnected network of power.

Strongly influenced by Leonardo Sciascia, Savatteri rejects the spectacularization of criminal leadership. Justice appears fragile, institutional failures become central, and the detective narrative serves less to restore order than to expose its absence. The reader is therefore encouraged not to identify with a single protagonist but to reflect critically on the mechanisms through which Mafia power permeates society.

⁴ The opening sequence of Episode 1 introduces Riina under arrest, while Episode 2 develops his relationship with Ninetta Bagarella, reinforcing the protagonist's domestic and emotional dimension.

These contrasting narrative strategies illustrate Stuart Hall's conception of representation as an active process of meaning production. Neither work simply reproduces historical reality; each organizes it according to different symbolic frameworks. Whereas *Il capo dei capi* privileges personalization and emotional continuity, *La congiura dei loquaci* favours fragmentation, critical distance, and structural interpretation.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power further clarifies this distinction. Cultural products influence what becomes publicly visible and socially meaningful. The television series establishes Riina as the dominant symbolic figure of the Mafia, while Savatteri redistributes attention across institutions, collective responsibilities, and everyday forms of power. The result is not simply two different narratives but two different ways of imagining organized crime.

The comparison therefore suggests that aesthetic choices have significant cultural consequences. Narrative focalization, characterization, and emotional proximity shape the ways in which audiences perceive violence, authority, and justice. Rather than functioning as neutral representations of historical reality, literature and television actively participate in constructing the Mafia imaginary and, consequently, in shaping collective memory itself.

Discussion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that representations of the Mafia cannot be evaluated solely according to their historical accuracy. Their cultural significance lies equally in the narrative forms through which they organize reality and shape public understanding. In this sense, literature and television do not simply document organized crime; they actively participate in constructing the symbolic frameworks through which the Mafia is imagined, remembered, and interpreted.

The comparison between *Il capo dei capi* and *La congiura dei loquaci* reveals two distinct representational models. The television series privileges narrative continuity and emotional engagement by organizing the story around the biography of Salvatore Riina. This strategy allows viewers to follow the historical evolution of Cosa Nostra through a single recognizable protagonist, making an otherwise complex historical process accessible to a broad audience. However, the same narrative logic also concentrates symbolic attention on the criminal leader, encouraging emotional proximity and potentially reducing the structural complexity of the Mafia phenomenon.

Savatteri's novel adopts the opposite perspective. Instead of centralizing criminal power within a charismatic individual, it disperses responsibility across institutions, political actors, and social practices. The investigation led by Lieutenant Adano never produces complete certainty; rather, it exposes the opacity of power and the limitations of judicial truth. Consequently, the novel shifts the reader's attention from individual criminality to the broader mechanisms that allow Mafia power to survive within society.

These contrasting strategies support Stuart Hall's argument that representation is an active process of meaning production rather than a neutral reflection of reality. Both works construct coherent symbolic worlds, yet they encourage different forms of interpretation. One invites identification through narrative continuity; the other encourages critical distance through fragmentation and ambiguity.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power further reinforces this interpretation. Cultural products contribute to defining what becomes socially visible and meaningful. By selecting protagonists, organizing events, and establishing hierarchies of attention, narrative works influence the collective perception of organized crime. In this respect, the aestheticization of the Mafia should not be understood exclusively as the result of explicit ideological choices but also as a consequence of narrative structures capable of transforming violence into dramatic coherence.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that the Mafia imaginary is continuously negotiated through cultural production. Television, literature, and other media do not simply inherit pre-existing representations; they reinterpret, reinforce, or challenge them according to different aesthetic conventions. Understanding these mechanisms is essential not only for Mafia Studies but also for broader debates concerning media, memory, and cultural representation.

Finally, this research opens a broader perspective that extends beyond the comparison developed in this article. The relationship between the historical emergence of the Mafia and the gradual construction of its cultural imaginary deserves further investigation, particularly regarding the first public appearance of the term *mafiusu* and the evolution of its meanings from the nineteenth century to the present day. Such questions constitute a promising field for future interdisciplinary research combining history, literature, media studies, and cultural analysis. The present analysis therefore constitutes a first step toward a broader investigation into the historical emergence of the term mafia and the gradual construction of the Mafia imaginary from the nineteenth century onwards.

Conclusion

This article has examined how two contemporary Italian works construct different representations of the Sicilian Mafia and, consequently, different forms of cultural imagination. Through the comparison of *Il capo dei capi* and *La congiura dei loquaci*, it has argued that narrative representation is not simply a vehicle for recounting historical events but a fundamental process through which organized crime acquires symbolic meaning.

The television series organizes the Mafia around the figure of Salvatore Riina, producing an emotionally engaging narrative centred on personal biography and dramatic continuity. Savatteri's novel, by contrast, rejects this logic of personalization and presents the Mafia as a diffuse system of social, political, and institutional relations. These different aesthetic strategies generate distinct symbolic configurations, influencing the ways in which audiences perceive violence, authority, justice, and responsibility.

Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall, Pierre Bourdieu, Umberto Eco, and Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, this study has shown that representations should be understood as active forms of cultural production rather than passive reflections of reality. The Mafia imaginary emerges through the interaction between historical experience, narrative form, and audience interpretation. It is therefore neither fixed nor homogeneous but constantly redefined through literature, television, cinema, and public discourse.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests that studying the Mafia requires moving beyond the traditional opposition between historical reality and fictional representation. The central issue is not whether a narrative is faithful to reality but how it contributes to constructing the symbolic frameworks through which reality itself becomes understandable. In this sense, the

Mafia imaginary represents not a secondary aspect of the phenomenon but one of its most significant cultural dimensions.

Future research may further explore the origins of this imaginary by investigating the emergence of the term *mafia*, its earliest literary representations, and the historical processes through which a local social phenomenon gradually became one of the most influential cultural symbols of modern Italy.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that generative AI was used as a language support and editorial assistance tool during the drafting and revision of the manuscript. All research questions, interpretations, arguments, source selection, and final scholarly responsibility remain entirely those of the author.

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