

Saviano's Eyes

Robert Viscusi (January 13, 2012)



Roberto Saviano has the eyes of a prophet who has seen Italy plain. Gramsci in jail, Dante in hell. This is the Italy where Popes die mysteriously and there are secret cities under secret cities under the ones on the map. Saviano's eyes bring this Italy with them.

Watching the video of his public lecture at NYU last December 8, one sees those eyes scanning the room as he speaks. More to the point, the video itself scans the room. One camera at least was devoted just to that work. These are not crowd shots. These are faces, individual, totally legible. You can almost see the Facial Recognition Algorithms snagging them as the camera slowly, very slowly, pans. Anyone in the room might be the feared assassin.

I wasn't there. I don't know whether the assassin showed up either. At one point Saviano made a pleasantry about how nice it was to be in New York teaching and not to be living with his bodyguards for the first time in five years. I call it a pleasantry because it was very hard to believe that those



guards were not among the faces in that crowd. Serious faces, all of them. Among them well-known persons: the Baronessa Zerill-Marimo, foundress of the Casa Italiana at NYU, the director Stefano Albertini, the historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat. But plenty of others. And anyone in the room might have been feeling the danger. It was implicit in the detailed and continuous surveillance of the audience, from the beginning to the end of the evening.

Universal surveillance, the latest curse of our time, mingled harmoniously with the theme of Saviano's talk. It was about the mafia as a universal curse, a world-historical condition. Yes, Saviano did speak about the provincial squeamishness of Italian Americans who jump out of their seats, as if they had seen a mouse, whenever someone begins to speak about the Sopranos. And yes, he did pay homage to the transatlantic heroes of justice, from Joe Petrosino to Giovanni Falcone, who gave their lives in the struggle against the malavita.

All the time, he stood there talking, a young man who dare not present a bride or a lover or a child of his own, because he could not protect any one who belonged to him. Thanks to the mafia, he lives like a hermit saint, on top of a column in the desert, where he can see everything but touch almost nothing.

And, prophet that he is, he can witness. Universal corruption. A banking system in the hands of international tricksters and thieves, who sail the high seas of illicit payments, profits made of the arms and legs of soldiers and prostitutes, the lungs and brains of drug addicts, drones, automatic weapons, radioactive cores, blood diamonds – the cosmos of lucrative trash. Many mafias, many countries, many occult systems of knowledge. Saviano speaks eloquently of how much Italy has learned about fighting the mafias he has learned to see everywhere. This new vision of the world is Italy's latest gift to everyone else, it would seem. Mafias are everywhere, let us show you what to do with them.

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