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Francesco Rosi: An Interview

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The implication here is that the power of the Mafia and the loyalty (at least the refusal to inform on it) it receives from many Sicilians are due, in part, to the Italian government having reneged on many of its obligations to the island. At times, in the face of Northern exploitation, the Mafia has been the only agent protecting the interests of the Sicilians. Perhaps the film is saying, thus, that Italy has gotten the Sicily it deserved, and that given the chances offered by education and social reform, these stout people could play a vital part in contemporary Italian society, as did Antonio in going North.

I do not mean to undercut the film's achievements by stating that cinematically, it provides no surprises, and needs none. A film concerned with social documentation requires no more than the direct, narrative style that Lattuada has wisely seen fit to make use of. Technical credits are all first-rate, especially the harsh black-and-white tones captured by Armando Nannuzzi's cameras which add a documentary flavor while also excellently serving to high-

light the violence which underlines this film.

The material explored in *Mafioso* is so engrossing and the performance of Sordi so expert, that it would be easy to overlook the film's minor faults. However, though Lattuada subtly details the manner in which the Mafia tightens its hold on Antonio, a little too much time is spent observing material extraneous to the dramatic structure of the film. The film, as a result, tends to drag after the first hour. Two further minor points of criticism: When Antonio arrives in New York, the director goes wild with sharp camera angles and abrasive cutting. Antonio had, it is true, made the trip to New York in an airfreight crate, but it's still overdone. Finally, the director's image of American gangsters is derived exclusively, it would seem, from the George Raft and Edward G. Robinson films of the 'thirties and 'forties. These American Mafia heavies would have better been replaced by some direct observation of their current counterparts.—YALE M. UDOFF.

GIDEON BACHMANN

Francesco Rosi:

AN INTERVIEW

Rosi is still a virtual unknown to American moviegoers, though in Europe he has been a major figure since winning, in 1963, the Golden Lion of San Marcus, the first prize of the Venice Film Festival, for *Mani Sulla Città* (*Hands Over the City*). And now Rosi has completed another film, *Momento della verità*, which is anxiously awaited by the critics. As the title, *Moment of Truth* indicates, it is a bullfighting story, and in it Rosi attempts to solidify his

formula of finding his story in reality, of creating a dramatic form of documentary film, which he believes eliminates "the boredom of truth." The only film that Rosi has made which has been shown in the United States on anything resembling a public scale is *Salvatore Giuliano*, the story of the Sicilian bandit leader of the Mafia, killed under mysterious circumstances some years after the war to the accompaniment of one of the biggest scandals in the Italian gov-

Rosi
directing
MANI
SULLA
CITTA



ernment. But Salvatore's story (a real story, documented and re-enacted from the historical records) was not Rosi's first film—he had already completed *La Sfida* and *I Magliari*—but it was the first film that created a stir, largely because of its combination of an explosive subject matter and a form which in its mixture of actuality and dramatization showed the way for Rosi's later amalgamations of the real and the construed. This film was immediately successful, garnered prizes at a number of festivals, brought about some serious political double-taking in Italy, and put Rosi in the class of film maker generally—and often wrongly—known as “engaged.”

In fact, Rosi is not a man who seems really to know what his own political views are, and his films do not really take positions in that sense. Nor does he seem to be secure in his aesthetic principles. His first films, those before *Salvatore Giuliano*, while dealing with ostensi-

bly social themes—a feud among market racketeers in Naples and the adjustment problems of Italian workers in Germany—did so in fully dramatic terms, with chase-buildups, name actors, intercutting, sombre lighting, and the rest, and while the viewer was being called upon to participate in the particular plights, he was not led to any conclusions other than the realization that some things in the world were bad. But in *Salvatore Giuliano*, through a coincidence of circumstance and ability to utilize it filmically, Rosi suddenly became the standard bearer, *malgre soi*, of the group of young Italian film makers who have chosen a sort of engaged realism as their form: Olmi, De Seta, Pasolini, Bertolucci, Brass, and Festa Campanile.

Perhaps I should not use the adjective “young” in so sweeping a manner. This group is not a group, but their films follow similar lines, and some of these, like de Seta's *Bandits at Orgosolo* and Olmi's *The Job*, have found at least

sporadic American exhibition. But these are all men in their thirties or early forties. What makes them young is the concern that their works show for the conflicts in today's Italy between the accepted and the underlying realities of daily life—that is to say, between that which the normal Italian accepts as his lot and that which he really feels; in short, a concern for the injustices that Italian society inflicts upon itself.

But Rosi is a bad standard bearer, although he makes good films, because he has not decided to be one. He makes his films out of a consciousness that he lives in an unjust society, and out of an artist's capacity of showing this injustice on the screen. He has a knack for finding the small detail, the significant pebble, as it were, and to reconstruct, out of these found elements, a rather traditionally theatrical continuity. While telling his stories, he reverts continually to naturalism, and while he portrays the slums of Naples in documentary manner, his camera simultaneously dramatizes. He is not a documentary film-maker and he is not a teller of stories. His new film about bullfighting, in which he is no longer aided by the presence of an extraordinary actor like Rod Steiger in *Mani Sulla Citta*, shows his weaknesses completely: it is formless, non-coherent (not incoherent), it cannot decide whether to use the techniques of *cinéma vérité* or Gianni di Venanzo's romantic dusk-color camera, his staged scenes clash badly and ineptly with the endless, and bloodily realistic, corridas, and finally, his point that bullfighting is a poor man's way of gaining wealth and attention until he falls victim to his ambition and therewith to the system, is in no way upheld consistently and we are carried to moments of exaltation that tend to glorify rather than to attack the corruption of the ring.

It seems safe to assume by now that Rosi's name will, in the next few years, loom larger in Italian cinema. The success of his films will continue to be fostered by their subject matter, and perhaps he will find a more single-minded conviction and a style to express it. There seems no doubt today that he is one of the most dynamic

of Italian directors, a Neapolitan in blood and derivation, and that he has chosen to follow a hard road for an artist in Italy: to buck the establishment, to enter courageously those halls where producers often fear to tread, and to make his statements without pity. There is danger in his road, but it is a danger he could overcome.

As a young man he studied law, and in fact there remains an interest in law in his film work: both *Salvatore Giuliano* and *Mani Sulla Citta* are concerned with legal and courtroom procedures, and contain lengthy sequences set in court. Rosi today, however, feels that his sole reason for having studied law was because he had not properly decided his life's road, and not because he had or has an intrinsic interest in it. As he says:

Perhaps the fact that there are scenes of courts in these two films of mine is a residue of my studies, a sort of remorse for not having finished them, but I didn't insert them because I want to make a point about our legal system or because law interests me still.

But you do seem to have interests in making films that go beyond cinema; I mean, from seeing your strong, often programmatic films, one retains the impression that film-making for you is only the best way to say something of a value that goes beyond film making. In SALVATORE GIULIANO you tackle the problem of the Mafia and make some courageous attempts to brand government corruption, and in MANI SULLA CITTA you attack, rather severely, corruption in city government and tie-ins with monopolistic industry. So your films become carriers of messages that go beyond entertainment, beyond art.

This is not my intention. I do not want to create works of propaganda. I think my interest in these matters derives from the fact that we, in Italy, have arrived at the conquest of democracy rather late, and that in fact this conquest is still continuing, and thus each one of us is actually participating in this conquest through his own conscience in his daily life. So I think that I make these films simply out of a sense of participation in the daily development of the

society in which I live. I am probably making them in this way in order to deepen my own understanding and the understanding of others of our daily reality.

Do you believe that making films can be solely a pursuit of personal research? Or does it always have to be at the same time a clarification for others?

Well, I'll give you an example. This may show you that there is no difference between the two possibilities. When I made *Mani Sulla Citta* I was amazed to find out how intrinsically important, and far-reaching for each citizen, can be the discussions in city council in a large city. Because my film dealt with corruption in the city administration, I had to do research to discover how this corruption travels, and finally I included in the film both my research and the conclusions I had found. Thus my own search became a clarification for others.

MANI SULLA CITTA carries an end title which says: "All the characters and events in this film are fictitious. The social and economic situations which have given birth to them, are not." And you treat things that many other directors would be afraid to treat, with accuracy and courage. Do you consider yourself a pioneer of a new kind of Italian cinema? Or do you feel that your work falls into the tradition of SPERDUTI NEL BUIO and classic neorealism?

Of course, I benefit from a certain tradition of realism in Italian art, but I also think that my work is very timely and tied to this particular historical moment. What I try to do now, is not to apply a story that I have invented to an existing reality—as has been the practice in Italian cinema—I rather try to analyze that which really exists around me, and to find a story in it. I try not to invent characters and situations, but to find them in actuality, in the life around me. I want my stories not to express themselves solely in their mechanical progressions, nor through a traditional psychological analysis of the participants, but rather through the morality, the behavior, the dialectical placement of the participants in history, as condi-

tioned by the environment and the society of which they are part. I want to find characters that are hidden in reality itself, not characters whose actions and emotions can be prejudged and guessed as in novels. Unfortunately the cinema has established a whole tradition of fiction and invention, so that today it is only unreal characters and foreseeable conclusions that the public wants in films. I am trying to break this tradition by looking for characters in real life, whose actions and reactions may not always be so predictable; characters less literary and closer to life.

Does that mean that you are more interested in making a statement about history than you are in telling the story of individuals?

No. I always concentrate on the stories of individuals. But I am trying, through these stories of individuals, to relate a condition, to "tell a city" (*raccontare una citta*). There is no space or time in a normal film to do this by showing everything and everybody that exist in reality in a specific place, nor can I do justice to a specific time through the psychological concentration on a few people. Thus I must find a middle way, and in *Mani Sulla Citta*, for example, I have tried to show only a few individ-

Rosi directing Rod Steiger



uals, but to show not their private lives but their public lives, and thus in telling the story of few I hope to have alluded to the story of the many. By telling the public lives of the men that I choose, I can indicate a larger truth than I could by telling only the souls and the private lives of some few citizens.

Unlike documentary films, you do not try to provide, in your work, all the information that could be gathered by an objective observer. By choosing pieces of reality, selected typical characters, you weave a pattern that leaves a lot to be filled in by the viewer. Do you intentionally want to make the reviewer work more than is usual in traditional films?

It shouldn't be too great an effort for the public, but they should have the sense of participation, yes. I don't want them to be simply sitting there, following everything only with their emotions; I'd like them to employ their logical and rational faculties as well.

Do you want to create a non-emotional cinema?

Oh, no! The road of the cinema is the road of emotions. It cannot follow the logical progression of an essay. The first impact, the language of the image, is emotion. All logic can only be expressed, in cinema, through the emotive door. But we cannot stop with the emotion: it should be utilized for the expression of a deeper meaning, as an entry to an involvement on a logical level. And film should help its viewers to develop judgment. That's also why I don't believe films should be too long—this hampers the growth of something inside the person, something that he could otherwise go home with, think about, and maybe derive some positive use from. Constant bombardment with emotions dulls his sensibility and capacity for thinking. At the same time I try to keep him amused, but I hope that he will obtain a sense of participation from that part of my films that makes him think. I like it, when people laugh, but I like it equally well when they cry, or when they ask questions. I think people should feel that film is something that calls to them, not something

that arrives, all ready, leaving them all their laziness. One cannot watch a work of art, especially a film, in complete laziness. If you go to a museum, and see a Goya, you are shocked, you feel ill, perhaps, or wonderful. But not indifferent. You can't walk out feeling the same as when you walked in. I don't think it's possible, anyway. The same should happen in films—I mean, in those films that try to be more than mere escapism. There should be, behind the images, the feeling of culture, the feeling of the "civism" of the men who made it. If not, it is an insult to the intelligent viewer.

Are you so sure that the public doesn't sometimes prefer to be insulted, in return for not having to work? And isn't it inherent in the form of the cinema that it makes the decisions for you? For example: you can watch your Goya as long or as little time as you choose; but in cinema, it is the director who decides how long a shot will be held on the screen, and thus it is he who controls your emotional reactions, at least as far as the time element is concerned. And with color and photography, acting and direction, he also controls, almost completely, all your other reactions. How are you going to leave the viewer enough freedom to react as an individual?

I think that all the films that really reach people reach them precisely through this process of control. The film-maker takes the public by the hand, and for two hours, or an hour and a half, he leads you through his world. It's a completely emotional relationship, and that's why it's such an enormous responsibility to make films. The cinema is the only art form, the only means (and I include television in the definition of cinema in this context) which allows you to make thousands of people think the same thing at the same time. It is the most terrible responsibility. Just think how the cinema has changed the face of Europe: even if we had not wanted to, we couldn't have helped becoming, in a certain way, Americanized. And not only we in Europe. Look at Japan, for example. Think about youth all over the world today: it's

becoming uniform, it changes to adopt an image suggested by the cinema. Can you imagine this responsibility? The fact is, that making films is not a private function, like poetry can be (or like some think it can be). So it is better to think about the effect of your films before making them. Not with a conscious decision to "do good," but with the knowledge that they will be heard widely (and I'm saying "heard" and not "seen" consciously). But I don't think an artist should start with the clear notion of trying to change society. This could easily lead to works that have very little to do with art. I don't want to make manifestos, but I try to remember that films can influence the customs of a whole historical period. The way I am, if I express it openly in film, can be of meaning to others, but only if I don't consciously try to impose myself. If the work is really part of me, and thus really resembles me, then—through the fact that I am part of a certain historical moment—the work can have contemporary meaning.

Does there exist, for you, an objective truth?

There exists an objective reality. But truth is that which each one of us manages to harvest from this reality, to interpret and to express.

Then if you make a film that is to speak—as you say—to millions, you must consider also the truth seen by others, because it may differ from yours?

Consider it, yes, but bow to it, no. I must consider it from two points of view: first, because I hope my films will have a wide distribution, and if I expect a positive result, I must make them so that they can have this distribution. And secondly, because I am also one of the millions, and hope that my truth corresponds to the basic truths of my time. All arts, today, have become more public. Even paintings have come out of the palaces of the nobility into general circulation, and thus have become social movers, in a certain sense. And of course film has always addressed itself to the mass; that is its function. By "positive result" I simply mean that it fulfills its function in that sense. It is destined to "arrive," and the man of the cinema must

occupy himself with this—also commercial—arrival. But this is a problem that artists have in all disciplines. The only difference is that the cinema is such a big industry. A painter can work in a certain revolutionary way all his life without being understood, and he can say to himself that this is fine, because one day he will be understood, that he is ahead of his time, that he understands things the others do not yet understand. But in cinema there exist other rules, rules not only for the distribution of film works, but also for their creation. It's because it costs more than a painting, very simply. And although we often see changes in these rules occurring as a result of the courageous departures on the part of one or another man of the cinema, and although the public taste may often cause a change in these rules, or a change in public taste may be caused by such a departure, the basic facts remain: film is destined for the mass. One keeps hearing the same tired old stories from producers: that the public is infantile, that it lacks any cultural refinement, that it is insensitive, and often the financial results of a film bear out these theories. But often there are exceptions: films that are difficult of language but manage to have an enormous success. This is the area in which research is important: how to make films that can carry serious thoughts but at the same time obtain wide circulation. In cinema the discovery of the relationship between the creative origins of an idea and its creative expression is much more important than in the other arts. We must learn to relate the levels of creation with the levels of comprehension.

How do you avoid "talking down"?

It's not just a matter of low common denominators, as you seem to imply. It's also a psychological fact: people, when they are in groups, somehow seem to be more readily convinced by more accessible forms. The individual judgment is influenced by the suggestivity of the mass, by many small factors that cannot be controlled. A man alone judges a work differently than one who is part of even a small group of, let's say,

ten persons. This can be both good and bad—sometimes people alone do not find something funny in a film, but if others are laughing, they find it funny, too. Or else, they may be taken aback by the lack of reaction of the group to something they feel is funny, and be stifled into silence. Man is a social animal. And all this is on top of the fact that films are often projected badly and the sound is reproduced badly. It would be wonderful if you could control everything until its “arrival,” but one can’t. So what is left to do is to take into consideration the thousand possibilities of wrong or unexpected turns in the road.

Does this “taking into consideration” imply adjusting the work to the possibility of misunderstanding? What I am trying to find out in this entire conversation, is the point where consciousness enters—at what point does the thing that is being said become more important than the work of art as art—or does it ever? And if it does, how do you keep from being propagandistic?

It is a question that each artist must answer for himself, and each member of the public as well. I am not so sure that to speak to the mass means lowering one’s standards, and certainly not diminishing what one wants to say. There is a common language in the world, it is the language of emotion. We each love, hate, feel joy, hunger, cold and happiness. Each one, from the “lowest” to the most intellectually refined, speaks this language. I think your “point of consciousness” doesn’t always have to be reached at all—the artist expresses himself much less consciously than critics often believe (or want to allow him), and it is through this language of emotions that things often get said without being said in clear terms; it is in this way that I think the *being* of an artist speaks directly to his public, provided he is really part of his time. And it doesn’t depend on the story, the world success of the Olivier *Hamlet* is caused by its universally recognizable language of emotion, not by its contemporaneity. Its truth is believable everywhere.

I see a great danger in believability. Nobody cares about the “real truth” in a clearly fake film like GONE WITH THE WIND. But when one makes films like you—shooting in real streets and utilizing real situations—people see trees, streets, people that are real and therefore believable. And so they automatically assume that the overriding truth that is inherent in your film is also the real truth—the objective truth—and they are misled into believing not only that such an overriding truth exists, but also that it is the one you present. What then happens to your stipulation that the viewers should be allowed, each one, to make their own interpretation of reality? It seems to me that you become, whether you want to or not, an apostle for a very specific reality, for a personal truth.

No, because I demonstrate it dialectically. I must make people understand that what I show is *one* truth, and that others may exist. What I try to show is this inner fight, my inner fight, to find my truth, in the things that I show. But even my own interpretation of the truth that I see is a dialectical interpretation. I must make the public participate in my dialogue with reality, in my research. It is only if I fail to make them understand that mine is just one interpretation, that I could fall victim to the danger that you outline. But I try always to make clear in my films that what I say is what I see, not what objectively exists. That is, as in all other arts, I see a certain reality, interpret it, digest it, and try to render it to the public in the way in which I see it, but not by saying to them that it is the only one that exists. Thus reality, digested by me, becomes the expression of my personality. And it doesn’t matter whether you make films that are contemporary in setting, or deal with history or drama—what a man says in film is what he has understood from life, is that which he is.