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Author(s): GARY CROWDUS

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FRANCESCO ROSI

ITALY'S POSTMODERN NEOREALIST

BY GARY CROWDUS

In his latest film, *Neapolitan Diary* (1992), Francesco Rosi uses a variety of cinematic 'notes'—interviews, archival footage, fictional scenes, TV news clips, documentary sequences, personal reminiscence, and even a bit of tourist sightseeing—to portray the social and physical decay of Naples, his birthplace, over the last three decades. Also blended into this semidocumentary assemblage are brief excerpts from several of Rosi's earlier films—*Hands Over the City*, *Lucky Luciano*, and *Illustrious Corpses*—which, tellingly, offer *Neapolitan Diary*'s most incisive commentary on the social malaise which today characterizes this historically renowned Italian city. Rosi's alternately angry and nostalgic film is a native son's expression of concern for the sad, precipitous decline of Naples and his fear that, as he explains, "If Italy gives up here, it'll give up everywhere!"

The profound civic conscience of *Neapolitan Diary* is nothing new for Francesco Rosi who, throughout a thirty-seven year directorial career of remarkable thematic consistency, has produced a series of films that chronicle the modern political history of his country. Whether original screenplays or literary adaptations, they have offered politically provocative investigations of issues such as the Mafia, government corruption, unemployment, emigration, political terrorism, the economic underdevelopment and cultural marginalization of southern Italy, international drug traffic, and the church.

Making films, in fact, is the way Rosi has chosen to involve himself in the political life of his country. "I am not a professional politician," he has explained, "but I have always had a sort of political vocation which permits me to participate in



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one way or another in the political problems of Italy. I think the best way to do so is through my work."

His films are anything but dull sociology or civics lessons, however, because Rosi is a filmmaker with an impressive command of cinematic technique that he employs to convey his social themes in a visually expressive and emotionally powerful manner. The result is invariably such a compelling presentation that, whether writing about his films or discussing them with the filmmaker (see accompanying interview), one tends to emphasize the issues they explore at the expense of the often considerable cinematic artistry on display.

One recalls, nevertheless, such memorable scenes as the 'Night of the Sicilian Vespers' montage in *Lucky Luciano*, with its stylized, slow-motion rendition of a series of Mafia murders accompanied on the soundtrack by the strains of an Italian aria; the deliciously expressive *mise-en-scène* of body language involved in the political negotiations that take place in the back rooms of the Naples city council in *Hands Over the City*; the long traveling shot through the southern Italian countryside in *Eboli*, church bells ringing joyously in the background, the peasants stopping work in the fields, as *Il Duce* on the radio proclaims Italian victory in the Abyssinian War; or the mass arrest scene in *Salvatore Giuliano* in which small groups of Sicilian women, hysterical with fear, run down the narrow, cobblestoned streets of Montelepre, the individual groups gradually streaming together, the flow building until, en masse, they flood the town square cordoned off by soldiers.

Perhaps Rosi's most significant artistic contribution has been in his development of what is most appropriately called—please excuse the trendy expression—a *postmodern* esthetic which audaciously combines disparate formal elements and styles—fiction, documentary, historical re-creation, archival materials, and so on—so that his films are finally as much political for the way they are structured as for the choice of subject matter.

While Rosi's films are intensely political, they are far from tendentious or propagandistic in nature. Although he is clearly a man of the left, Rosi is not an adherent to any particular party. He has on occasion been a fellow traveler of the Communist and Socialist parties in Italy, but he never resorts to polemics or didacticism in his work. His best films are structured as investigations in which, having first thoroughly researched and scrupulously documented his subjects, he then offers his interpretation of the facts and events, being careful when necessary

to leave plenty of room for ambiguity and complexity. Rosi readily acknowledges the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of ever discovering the absolute truth about some issues, and he has always expressed distrust of those who claim to possess the Truth. In the long run, Rosi is more interested in encouraging critical thinking among his viewers than he is in persuading them to accept a specific viewpoint.

In this regard, Rosi believes it is more important to ask relevant, even nagging questions and to raise important issues for public debate than to provide easy answers or reassuring resolutions. His investigative approach invites viewers to join him in the complex but important search for the reality hidden behind official government statements or ideological smoke screens. In this sense, Rosi makes challenging films because he demands an alert and concerned viewer, one willing to work a little bit with him. "The public," he explains, "should not be just passive spectators of a story."

In addition to generating nationwide political controversy in Italy, Rosi's films are highly regarded throughout Europe, where they have often won top prizes at film festivals and are the subject of numerous books by leading critics. There has unfortunately been no comparable critical recognition of Rosi's work in this country, although some of his biggest fans are contemporary American filmmakers who grew up watching his films. During his 1992 promotional tour through Italy for *JFK*, for example, Oliver Stone praised Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* and *The Mattei Affair* as films whose unusual investigative structure had greatly impressed him. Martin Scorsese has called Rosi "one of the great masters of contemporary cinema," a filmmaker who has "succeeded in delineating an entire culture with magnificent artistry as well as the sharp eye of the ethnographer."

The main reason why Rosi's work is not better known among general moviegoers in this country is that his films, with few exceptions, have been poorly distributed in the U.S., when they have been distributed here at all. Of his sixteen feature films, only five are currently in distribution. Four films previously released here have been out of circulation for years, and the remaining seven, except for the occasional festival or retrospective screening, have never been shown here. On the occasion of the first complete North American retrospective of Rosi's films, scheduled for the Fall of 1994, a brief survey of his career will hopefully encourage greater appreciation of the work of one of Italy's foremost contemporary filmmakers.

Born in 1922, Rosi's cinematic roots are in postwar neorealism. His first film production work was as assistant director to Luchino Visconti on the classic *La terra trema* (1948), a seminal experience during which he worked on location for six months in a Sicilian fishing village. He later served as assistant director to Michelangelo Antonioni, Mario Monicelli, and Luciano Emmer, and worked as a screenwriter on films such as *Bellissima* (1951), *Processo alla città* (1952), and *Racconti romani* (1955).

By the time of his first directorial effort in 1958, *La Sfida* (*The Challenge*), Italian neorealism, which had flourished during the Forties and early Fifties, was in serious decline. Rosi's film, which won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival that year, was hailed as a sign that perhaps the fading neorealist movement would be revived by a new generation of directors. Based on an original story by Rosi, who also collaborated on the screenplay, *The Challenge* dramatizes the rise and fall of an ambitious young criminal who tries unsuccessfully to buck the control of the Naples fruit and vegetable market by the *camorra* (the Neapolitan version of the Mafia). The film's gritty depiction of the Naples urbanscape reflected the young filmmaker's admiration for American *films noirs* by Jules Dassin, John Huston, and Elia Kazan. Although its commercial considerations (such as the casting of sexpot actress Rosanna Schiaffino) and genre conventions are evident, *The Challenge* also reveals both the serious interest in social analysis and the cinematic flair that would come to characterize Rosi's work.

That same combination of socioeconomic inquiry mounted in a well-executed if conventional dramatic format also distinguishes Rosi's second film, *I magliari* (1959), which portrays a group of emigré Italian workers in West Germany trying to take advantage of that country's 'economic miracle.' The *magliari* or 'ragmen' of the title work their door to door scam by representing worthless dry goods as priceless, handwoven fabrics and selling them at inflated prices to gullible customers. Within the larger context of a depressed economy which forces the unemployed from Italy's impoverished South to emigrate north, Rosi is primarily concerned with the social dynamics of this group of small-time swindlers on foreign soil. This poor man's *camorra* is shown to be, despite the smaller stakes of the enterprise, no less closeknit, hierarchical, or vengeful than its larger, more deadly Mafia model. The film is memorable for its ensemble acting, featuring a colorful group of character actors who complement the leading roles played by Alberto



Sicilian police document the death of Italy's most notorious bandit chieftain in the opening scene of Francesco Rosi's controversial 1961 film on the Mafia, *Salvatore Giuliano*.

Sordi as the group's premier con artist, Renato Salvatori as the innocent newcomer who refuses to play by the rules, and Belinda Lee, who, while fulfilling her function as the film's 'romantic interest,' nevertheless provides a deft and poignant character sketch of a woman forced to choose between love and economic security.

Although both of these early efforts stood out from the purely commercial cinema of the period, as well as from the final, formulaic phase of neorealism, neither film even began to suggest the groundbreaking esthetic qualities of Rosi's next film. *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961) completely burst the bounds of conventional neorealism, replacing its romanticized social portrayal of the working poor and dispossessed with a desentimentalized, in-depth sociopolitical analysis. This landmark film is widely recognized as marking a distinct departure in both form and content not only for Rosi but also for Italian cinema and even European cinema in general of that era, advancing the mode of consciously political cinema to more formally complex and politically sophisticated levels.

Although based on the exploits of the eponymous Sicilian bandit, an Italian folk-hero fighting for Sicily's postwar independence from Italy, the film is anything but a conventional biography. Giuliano utters no more than a few lines of inconsequential dialog and is seen only occasionally throughout the film, either as a distant figure running through the mountains or as a corpse. Giuliano is merely a vehicle for Rosi's real subject, a

crucial period of postwar Italian history during which the Mafia enjoyed a resurgence and forged new political alliances. Organized crime and other reactionary political forces enlisted Giuliano's band of 'freedom fighters' to help them fight the growing electoral strength of the Communist Party and the postwar rise of trade unionism (one key incident in this struggle, the massacre of workers and peasants at a Communist Party May Day rally in 1947, is dramatically re-created in the film). Once the 'red threat' had been overcome and the right had consolidated its power in the 1948 Cold-War-influenced election, Giuliano outlived his usefulness and quickly became a political liability. Rosi's film begins with the discovery of Giuliano's bloody, bullet-riddled body in a courtyard in Castelvetro, Sicily, on July 5th, 1950.

It was during his extensive research for the film, while working his way through a mass of books, newspaper and magazine articles, photos, newsreels, eyewitness accounts, official government statements, and courtroom transcripts, that Rosi realized that such an investigative approach was the only logical way to structure his film. The available evidence presented such a complex, ambiguous, and often contradictory account of the events that he felt the most politically credible and dramatically engaging format would be one which conveyed that same sense of uncertainty and frustrating inability to discover the absolute truth.

Salvatore Giuliano thus avoids a conventional narrative approach or a chronological development and instead repeated-

ly flashes back and forth within a time frame between 1945 and 1960. These alternations between historical periods function not merely as conventional temporal flashbacks or flashforwards, but express more of an ideological movement within the film designed to connect a particular fact or event with its causes or consequences. *Salvatore Giuliano* is no simple inquest on the death of a bandit. Instead, the mythical figure of Giuliano serves as a vehicle for the portrayal of a larger human tragedy born of a specific set of social relations, an examination of Sicily as an impoverished and oppressed land, with a personality like Giuliano shown to be a product of the era's social, political, and economic circumstances.

The film stirred a nationwide controversy in Italy because of serious questions it raised about complicity between the police, the government, and the Mafia, and eventually led the Italian Parliament to establish an Antimafia Commission. No longer merely a marginal criminal enterprise, the Mafia in postwar Italy had so thoroughly corrupted or compromised political parties and government agencies—including cleverly manipulating the traditional rivalry between Italy's two police forces, the *polizia* and *carabinieri*—that it had not only facilitated the uninterrupted continuation of its criminal operations but also virtually assured its political ineradicability.

Salvatore Giuliano presents its explosive political inquiry in forceful cinematic terms. Director of photography Gianni Di Venanzo's widescreen black and white cinematography not only captures the contours and textures of the sunbaked Sicilian landscape, it also conveys its moods and the sense of oppressive heat, with its strong contrast of shimmering sunlight and deep shade, its mountainous terrain crisscrossed by mule paths, and whitewashed stone homes surrounding desolate village squares. Mario Sandrei's deft editing throughout includes several sequences whose rhythmic development and cumulative emotional power are virtual showpieces of the art of film editing. In addition to his politically provocative organization of the historical documentation, Rosi elicited surprisingly accomplished performances from a largely non-professional cast (only two professional actors appear in the film), many of whom participated in the original events, which lend a powerful immediacy and authenticity to this historical re-creation.

Rosi would use this same investigative approach in his 1972 film, *The Mattei Affair*, which, like *Salvatore Giuliano*, begins with the mysterious death of its title character. On October 27, 1962, Enri-

co Mattei, head of the state-owned petroleum conglomerate, ENI, died in a plane crash en route from Sicily to the Milan airport. Mattei was one of the boldest and most charismatic leaders of Italy's postwar economic reconstruction, when the national economy was shifting from a primarily agricultural to a more industrialized basis. Mattei was a left wing Christian Democrat, a self-styled champion of the working class who wanted to eliminate poverty in Italy, advocated spending private profits for public works, and supported Third World liberation struggles. He challenged the control of the Western oil companies cartel, the 'Seven Sisters,' and competed successfully against them for business with the oil-producing nations in the Third World and the Soviet Union. His support of the Algerian FLN's war of independence against the French won him death threats from the OAS. But this rightist paramilitary organization was only one of Mattei's many enemies, a group which also included the Mafia, Western oil companies, Italy's secret service, and the CIA. Although a sequence in the film suggests the sabotage of Mattei's plane, Rosi is not so much interested in solving the mystery of Mattei's death as he is in using the events surrounding it, as he has explained, as "a pretext for telling twenty years of Italian history."

The film's narrative is made up of a mosaic of documentary, semidocumentary, and dramatic elements—a TV obituary of Mattei, interviews with authors of books on Mattei and the international politics of oil, a mini-documentary on the global oil market, and even scenes of Rosi himself conducting interviews and doing research for the film. The dramatic spine of the film features Gian Maria Volonté's dynamic performance as the aggressive, ambitious, and populist Mattei, evoking both the positive and problematic aspects of such a politically progressive capitalist. He was a self-made man of the people who became one of the most powerful figures in postwar Italy, threatening the fragile democracy of the new Italian Republic by building his public enterprise into a virtual state within the state. Rosi's examination of Mattei's role during a turbulent period of Italian history helps us to understand a world in which oil can cause revolutions, wars, political assassinations, and the overthrow of governments.

Lucky Luciano (1973), the third of what might be called Rosi's 'political biogra-



Enrico Mattei (Gian Maria Volonté), left, surveys a new oil well site in Francesco Rosi's *The Mattei Affair*.

phies,' also utilizes a thoroughly documented investigative approach and a fragmented historical narrative, here spanning a time frame between the Sicilian-born gangster's rise to power in 1931 and his death in 1962. In the process it portrays the Mafia's transition from an old-fashioned world of Sicilian godfathers and gang rivalries to its modern development as an industrialized, multiethnic, corporate-like, international organization. As in *Salvatore Giuliano* and *The Mattei Affair*, what is of interest to Rosi here is less the biography or psychology of Salvatore Lucania, popularly known as Charles 'Lucky' Luciano, but the social, political, and economic context in which he lived and operated.



Gian Maria Volonté as Mafia boss Salvatore Lucania in Francesco Rosi's *Lucky Luciano*.

In fact, Rosi deliberately downplays the genre's characteristic reliance on gunplay and other scenes of violence. Apart from a highly stylized representation of the September 1931 'Night of the Sicilian Vespers' (in which Luciano engineered his own rise to power as the 'Boss of Bosses' in America by the coordinated nationwide murders of forty rival Mafia *capos*), the film has only two shootings, both of which suggest the filmmaker's ironic homage to gangster film conventions. As

Rosi explained, he was less interested in the Mafia's methods of killing per se than in analyzing "the reasons why they kill, and what lies beyond and behind the killing."

The chief architect in organizing the Mafia's international drug traffic, Luciano was also a criminal genius when it came to developing the political influence of the Mafia. Luciano was adept at old-fashioned payoffs to politicians, as the film makes clear in revealing Luciano's financial contribution to New York District Attorney Thomas Dewey's successful campaign for Governor. This knowledge lessens the irony of Luciano later being pardoned after serving only nine years of a fifty year sentence by Governor Dewey who, as a politically ambitious DA some years earlier, had engineered Luciano's highly-publicized prosecution.

The official explanation for Dewey's February 1946 pardon of Luciano was that it was in recognition of the imprisoned mobster's wartime "services" to the American military. The government had indeed indebted itself to the Mafia for its assistance to the U.S. Army during its 1943 landing in Sicily and subsequent advance up the peninsula, a cooperation which enabled the Mafia during the Occupation to reestablish its control throughout Sicily and in many southern Italian cities. By putting the Mafia's illegal power at the service of the government's legal power, Luciano succeeded in compromising the latter for the benefit of his criminal enterprise. It is this interdependence, this symbiotic relationship, between the Mafia and the State which is the focus of *Lucky Luciano*.

The film, for example, shows Luciano's right-hand man, the notorious Italian-American Mafia chieftain Vito Genovese, who served as translator for U.S. Army Colonel Charles Poletti, brazenly stealing U.S. Army supplies for sale on the black market. Genovese also served as advisor on political appointments to the civil administration of newly liberated cities, which led to many Mafia members being appointed as mayors.

One of Rosi's earliest and most highly regarded films, *Hands Over the City* (1963), represents one of his few departures from the more open-ended investigative approach he introduced in *Salvatore Giuliano*. It was presumably his outrage at the political scandal surrounding real estate speculation in his hometown of Naples in the

early Sixties which led him, in writing the screenplay with fellow Neapolitan Raffaele La Capria, to more freely blend fact and fiction in order to deliver a more forthright denunciation. The film features Rod Steiger (amid a largely nonprofessional cast), in a powerful, impressively Italianate performance (complete with expressive hand gestures!), as Edoardo Nottola, a construction entrepreneur and right wing member of the Naples City Council. Nottola is attempting to use his political position for personal financial gain by combining some shady real estate speculation with his influence over municipal development plans. When a tragic accident at one of his construction sites leads to the establishment of an investigating committee, Nottola's schemes are challenged by the left wing deputy De Vita, which in turn generates some behind-the-scenes power brokering and a pre-election switching of political allegiance. *Hands Over the City*, as Rosi describes it, is intended to dramatize "a debate of ideas, mentalities, but above all of moralities."

It's not the left, however, which wins this debate. The efforts of the investigating committee, made up of representatives from the City Council's right, center, and left parties, are unable to uncover any blatantly illegal activities showing Nottola's responsibility for the building collapse. The problems contributing to such tragedies are revealed to be systemic in nature. Instead of being primarily concerned with protecting the interests of its average citizens, the municipal bureaucracy and political administration are shown to be so completely at the service of—indeed, in the hands of—renegade entrepreneurs like Nottola that public service all too easily becomes a means for private gain.

Many viewers are likely to find *Hands Over the City* a more emotionally engaging work than the more austere intellectual approaches of *Salvatore Giuliano*, *The Mattei Affair*, or *Lucky Luciano*, since the film's political debate is personalized in the dramatic characterizations and interactions of Nottola, De Vita, and other well-defined figures among the political fray. Although aiming to make a more clearly partisan statement with *Hands Over the City*, Rosi nevertheless introduces some ambiguities into the confrontation which prevent it from being reduced to simplistic stereotypes of noble left wing deputy vs. evil capitalist developer. Throughout, in fact, the film conveys an implicit critique of De Vita and other left wing members of the City Council for not being able to play political hardball against their conservative opponents, for



Right wing councilman Maglione (Guido Alberti, center) confers with Naples Mayor De Angeli (Salvo Randone) to head off a possible investigation into his business activities in this scene from Francesco Rosi's dramatic exposé of a Naples construction scandal, *Hands Over the City*.

perhaps being too romantic, naive, and even self-indulgently moralistic about their politics.

This same, rather pessimistic thesis characterizes Rosi's two experiments in a more abstract, almost mythical political narrative style in *Illustrious Corpses* (1975) and *The Palermo Connection* (1990). The former, based on a novella by Sicilian author Leonardo Sciascia, is set in an unidentified country that is nevertheless unmistakably recognizable as Italy, and features Lino Ventura as Rogas, an honest police inspector investigating a mysterious series of assassinations of judges. In the process, he uncovers a plot by unknown reactionary forces within the government to use this strategy of tension to set the stage for a coup d'état.

Illustrious Corpses functions as a sort of philosophical *policier*, meditating on notions of—indeed, even the possibility of realizing—truth and justice in a social system whose institutions are thoroughly compromised and corrupted. Apart from its function as metaphysical inquiry, the film seems designed to express Rosi's concerns, doubts, and even anxieties about the then-current debate over the 'Historic Compromise' between the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party and Italy's experiments during the Seventies with Eurocommunism. The film ends by posing a political dilemma for the left wing party (clearly the Italian Communist Party, although never explicitly labeled as such in the film) and a deliberately provocative twist on Antonio Gramsci's precept that "The truth is always revolutionary."

The Palermo Connection, freely adapted from Edmond Charles-Roux's novel,

Oublier Palermo, has echoes of *Illustrious Corpses* in that, although it begins as a realistic film, it soon develops into a somewhat metaphysical allegory. It involves Carmine Bonavia (James Belushi), a young, second generation Italian-American running for Mayor of New York on a controversial campaign advocating the legalization of drugs. On a pre-election honeymoon trip to Sicily with his new wife (Mimi Rogers), Bonavia finds himself set up in a murder plot by the Mafia designed to blackmail him into dropping his controversial campaign issue.

Unfortunately *The Palermo Connection* (released only on video in the U.S.) has none of the historical or philosophical resonance of *Illustrious Corpses*, and the potentially provocative issue of the legalization of drugs serves as little more than a plot gimmick. Since the Bonavia character is portrayed throughout as little more than a cynical political opportunist, it's also hard to accept his suddenly principled conversion which leads to the film's somewhat melodramatic conclusion. Although Rosi also seems to be making a statement about the persistence of ethnic traits through successive generations—in this case, Sicilian males' quick-tempered and exaggeratedly *macho* notions of honor and respect—the film nevertheless proves to be one of his few disappointing efforts.

While *Illustrious Corpses* and *The Palermo Connection* are set in contemporary times, three of Rosi's other literary adaptations have historical settings.* *Uomini Contro* (1970), based on Emilio Lussù's World War I

memoirs as an Italian infantryman, is not just another antiwar film. While it certainly succeeds in exposing the absurdity and human waste of modern warfare, it is more concerned with exposing the cultural and class differences within the Italian Army. The generals and other officers, who are thoroughly imbued with blindly patriotic notions of “discipline, honor, and sacrifice,” come from upper class, even aristocratic, backgrounds while the infantry troops, uneducated and largely illiterate, have been conscripted from the peasant and working classes.

The film is set during a typical period of stalemated trench warfare in 1916-17. An Italian Army division is ordered repeatedly to assault an impregnable Austrian mountaintop position which decimates wave after wave of Italian attackers, including a squad outfitted in tank-like body armor. General Leone (Alain Cuny) is determined to capture the strategic mountain peak regardless of the cost in human lives. The troops are thus confronted with an increasingly desperate choice between a futile, virtually suicidal assault or execution by firing squad for desertion.

Rosi's film might be described as a more politically radical version of Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*, with Kubrick's humanitarian field commander, Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas), replaced here by two lieutenants. The socialist Lieutenant Ottolenghi (Gian Maria Volonté), before he dies in battle, proselytizes against the true class enemies of the troops—General Leone, the king, and other government leaders who have gotten them into this war—while his protégé, Lieutenant Sassu (Mark Frechette), is executed by firing squad for encouraging rebellion within the ranks. In Rosi's film, however, unlike a similar situation in *Paths of Glory*, when the troops receive the final order to make the suicidal assault, they turn and fire on their commanding officer.

Although Rosi's adaptation of Carlo Levi's classic novel, *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1979), is set during the Thirties, its concerns are still remarkably contemporary since the problems of Italy's South, the *mezzogiorno*, have remained relatively unchanged during subsequent decades.

Levi was an antifascist intellectual exiled by Mussolini in 1935, at the start of the Abyssinian War, to the village of Gagliano in the remote southern province of Lucania. His novel, which recounts the nearly two years he spent among the peasants of this desolate region, is equal parts anthropology, political science, and personal memoir.

Gagliano, Levi wrote, is a world “hedged in by custom and sorrow, cut off from History and the State, eternally patient,” a land “without comfort or solace, where the peasant lives out his motionless civilization on barren ground

illuminating memoir, we also gain a greater understanding of the peasants' attitudes to life and the age-old nature of the exploitation and injustices they endure. In a marvelously nuanced portrayal of a northern intellectual's encounter with primitive peasant culture, Gian Maria Volonté (who, if you haven't already guessed, is Rosi's favorite actor) depicts a highly educated and cultivated man—Levi was a doctor, writer, and painter—who observes this strange new world with a sense of artistic detachment and nonjudgmental attitude. He is an intellectual with enough humility to try to

understand the peasant way of life, one marked by ancient traditions and superstitious beliefs. Levi gradually develops an enormous sense of respect and even love for his peasant neighbors and for their remarkable stoicism in enduring a life of back-breaking physical labor, suffering, and tragedy.

Rather than attempting to impose on the peasants his own, more enlightened viewpoints, Levi chooses to learn from them, thereby developing his own political awareness, especially in terms of understanding their strong antiauthoritarianism. Isolated from the rest of Italian society, preoccupied with eking out their precarious existence from the region's harsh, arid, and rocky terrain, the peasants voice a longstanding and deep-seated distrust of government and all other self-proclaimed representatives of “civilization” and “progress” which, in their experience, have only been interested in exploiting them. They show no interest at all, for example, in the country's new fascist government, although its virtues and exploits are loudly extolled from a balcony on the village square by the town's mayor.

Rosi produced two versions of *Christ Stopped at Eboli*—a three and a half hour version shown in four parts on Italian TV and a two and a half hour theatrical version—but U.S. audiences saw only an abbreviated two hour version (which also had its title shortened to *Eboli*). It nevertheless garnered extensive critical acclaim here as a powerfully moving adaptation of a classic literary work, a film of unusual philosophic depth and rare humanist sentiment. Hopefully this fall's retrospective will give U.S. viewers their first look at the full-length TV version or at least the uncut theatrical version.



General Leone (Alain Cuny) meets with troops outfitted in Farina body armor preparing for an assault in Francesco Rosi's *Uomini Contro*.



Carlo Levi (Gian Maria Volonté) is exiled to the desolate province of Lucania in Rosi's adaptation of Levi's novel, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*.

in remote poverty, and in the presence of death.” For Rosi, Levi's book offers another opportunity to expose the problems of Italy's underdeveloped South—unemployment, emigration, disease, malnutrition, cultural and political marginalization. True to the spirit of Levi's book, Rosi aims not merely to generate superficial feelings of sympathy for the plight of the peasants but to arouse a sense of outrage and indignation at the existence of this “other Italy.”

Since the film captures a good deal of the contemplative and insightful qualities of Levi's poetic, rambling, but profoundly

The poetic and lyrical qualities as a filmmaker that Rosi demonstrated so impressively in *Eboli* are developed even further in his following film. *Three Brothers* (1981) marks a new development in Rosi's work because of the greater prominence accorded the emotional and psychological aspects of its principal characters. Whereas in the early political inquiries such as *Salvatore Giuliano*, *Hands Over the City*, and *The Mattei Affair*, the private lives of the characters were largely ignored in order to focus on their social roles, in *Three Brothers* these personal elements are much more prominently blended with the sociopolitical issues. As Rosi explained it, his aim was to produce a film "which would describe events in the private life of the characters which are determined and conditioned by public events." This new dimension, then, does not so much indicate a major shift in Rosi's work as it does a more fully rounded artistic approach to the same social and political problems of postwar Italy which have always concerned him.

Although the film's three brothers grew up on a farm in southern Italy, like most Italian men they have long since emigrated to northern Italian cities where today each of them—a judge in Rome, a social worker with delinquent youth in Naples, and a union militant on the Fiat assembly line in Turin—leads a life beset with problems and concerns that are emblematic of contemporary Italian society. The telegraphed news of their mother's death momentarily reunites them with their elderly, grief-stricken father on the family farm. In this pastoral setting, far from the strife and turmoil of their daily lives, they reminisce about boyhood experiences, visit old friends and acquaintances, engage in political arguments, and spend a night of fitful sleep before carrying their mother to her grave.

The film is structured as a richly textured mosaic of reality and fantasy, past and present, with the characters' dreams, nightmares, utopian visions, and nostalgic memories blended into the film's present tense narrative, so that we are not always immediately aware of where one begins and the other leaves off. If the brothers

reflect the chaotic social conditions of contemporary urban society, their elderly father represents a world more attuned to natural rhythms and with a stronger sense of fundamental human values. It is, in fact, through Charles Vanel's moving portrayal of the aged family patriarch—tall, unbent despite his advanced age, with a deeply lined face—that the film strikes its deepest emotional chords.

Three Brothers is Rosi's most pastoral and elegiac work. Although it touches on many social issues of contemporary concern—including political terrorism, dysfunctional family relations, juvenile delinquency, drugs, and industrial unrest—it is perhaps in reminding us of the importance of love and human solidarity that the film becomes most relevant. It is this reassertion, as Rosi commented, of "the old and eternal values that we all carry

ers, he emphasizes the personal psychology of his characters in order to reveal how their states of mind are a function of, and thereby help to illuminate, the social and political turmoil in which they are enmeshed.

The addition of biographical detail to *Salvatore Giuliano* would not have aided that film's demonstration of how a mythical folk-hero like Giuliano is an outgrowth of historical circumstances, a figure manipulated by larger social forces. But in *Three Brothers*, when the reasoned, professional advice about the appropriate social response to terrorism voiced in public by the magistrate, Raffaele (Philippe Noiret), is later complemented by the horrific nightmare of his own bloody, political assassination, we better understand the human depths to which the terrorist threat has shaken contemporary society. The angry young filmmaker of the early, hard-hitting political exposés has clearly not so much mellowed in his later years, then, as he has matured as an artist.

Throughout their careers, it has been said, the greatest filmmakers continue to make the same film. Rosi's next film project, not surprisingly, is described as a panorama of thirty years of Italian history. If this forthcoming work is anything like his earlier films, then, it is sure to be another politically provocative and emotionally enriching bit of testimony from Italy's foremost cinematic witness to his—and our—times. ■

*Rosi's oldest historical setting is featured in *More Than a Miracle* (1967) which is based on seventeenth century Neapolitan folk tales recounted by Giambattista Basile. Producer Carlo Ponti's insistence on a fairy tale/love story approach starring Omar Sharif and Sophia Loren unfortunately overcame Rosi's interest in the authentic popular culture aspects of these folk tales. Most fans of the director's work consider this film one of the few anomalies in an otherwise remarkably consistent career of projects which Rosi has, for the most part, personally initiated and artistically controlled.

The retrospective will also give viewers the chance to see Rosi's only films not set in Italy, the three Hispanic projects: *The Moment of Truth* (1965), about a young peasant's rise through the class system to become one of Spain's greatest matadors; *Carmen* (1984), his naturalistic rendering of the Bizet opera, starring Plácido Domingo and Julia Migenes-Johnson; and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1987), an adaptation of the Gabriel García Márquez novel which examines a "crime of honor" in a South American village.



Donato Giuranna (Vittorio Mezzogiorno) helps his new bride find the wedding ring she briefly lost during a visit to the beach in a scene from Francesco Rosi's *Three Brothers*.

within ourselves" as artfully contrasted to "the forces which threaten them" that won Rosi rave critical reviews and honors for the film. It has certainly been his most critically and commercially successful film in the U.S., even being honored with an Academy Award nomination as Best Foreign Film.

While this newly developed attention to human psychology and sentiment reflects an enlargement of Rosi's artistic methodology, it also confirms the constancy of his political perspective. In earlier films such as *Salvatore Giuliano*, *The Mattei Affair*, and *Lucky Luciano*, Rosi largely ignored the psychological dimensions or personal aspects of his characters' lives, using their activities as a means to examine the broader social and political milieu. In a later film such as *Three Brothers*