



**Politics and Society in Italian Cinema,  
1945 – 1975**

David Gariff

National Gallery of Art

*My school was the streets, the Communist cells, the cinema, variety entertainment, the municipal library, the struggles of the unemployed, the detention cells, clashes with the police, the studios of artists of my age, the film clubs. And then I also learned from those who at the time were called “professional revolutionaries.”*

— Elio Petri

In 1976 the art historian Federico Zeri (1921 – 1998) published an essay titled “La percezione visiva dell’ Italia e degli Italiani nella storia della pittura” (“The Visual Perception of Italy and the Italians in the History of Painting”).<sup>1</sup> In this provocative text, Zeri attempted to analyze the way in which Italians, from the time of Cimabue to the present, came to understand their world through the images of art history. He argued that their perception of the world was more or less a homogeneous one, something contrary to our common notion of Italian regionalism and pro-urban aspects of cultural identity.

In a section embedded at the end of his essay, Zeri extolls the seminal importance to Italian

cinema of the early neorealist film *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1942) by Luchino Visconti (1906 – 1976):

*The essential aspects of what has been called cinematic neorealism find their ultimate definition in Luchino Visconti's Ossessione, more so than in La terra trema. In that archetype, the repertory of characters, shots, topographical choices, and visual cues is rooted in the soil of a vast figurative culture... This, however, is an investigation that art criticism has yet to conduct: the story that has followed, which has beginnings with Visconti and with his perception of Italy in a cinematic light, is taking place before our eyes, with such richness and variety that one is forced to acknowledge film as today's leading art, just as operatic music was during the Romantic age or architecture during the early Renaissance.<sup>2</sup>*

Beginning in Italy's immediate postwar period and continuing through the economic miracle of the 1950s, the political spasms of the 1960s, and the so-called "years of lead" of the 1970s,

culminating with the kidnapping and assassination of ex-Prime Minister Aldo Moro (1916 – 1978), Italy's "leading art" — as acknowledged by Zeri — was cinema. Comparable to the literature and great frescos of past epochs through which Italians had come to understand their world and confront their unique virtues and vices, so now through the stories and screen images of Visconti, Roberto Rossellini (1906 – 1977), and Vittorio De Sica (1901 – 1974) was a new reality of word and image being presented to a public in search of its modern identity.

This audience, as Zeri might have said, was steeped in the cultural, geographical, and historical traditions of storytelling and imagery. It would grow, along with the new medium, in its sophistication and demands, creating a symbiotic relationship between life, art, imagery, and narrative, ultimately leading to a golden age of cinematic achievement comparable to the earlier accomplishments of Renaissance painting.

The Gallery's celebration *Titanus Presents: A Family Chronicle of Italian Cinema*, while inclusive of films by such well-known

directors as Visconti, De Sica, Federico Fellini (1920–1993), and Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), highlights the works of a younger generation of directors indebted to their more mature colleagues and mentors. These include Francesco Rosi (1922–2015), Elio Petri (1929–1982), and Ermanno Olmi (b. 1931). With these three directors we find a respectful acknowledgment of Italian cinema’s neorealist traditions but, at the same time, a more probing and at times confrontational engagement with leftist politics expressed through a documentary or semidocumentary style. Other directors included in this group but not represented in the current Titanus series are Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), Bernardo Bertolucci (b. 1941), the Taviani brothers Vittorio (b. 1929) and Paolo (b. 1931), and Marco Bellocchio (b. 1939). A connecting link between and among all these distinguished Italian directors is their commitment to the political film genre.

Few directors in the history of Italian cinema were as deeply devoted to the political film as Francesco Rosi. Often called the “poet of civic courage,”<sup>3</sup> Rosi produced a series of intense,

politically charged films including *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands over the City*, 1963), and *Cadaveri eccellenti* (*Illustrious Corpses*, 1976). His films are testaments to the director’s social and political engagement and to his belief in the power of film to seek truth, affect change, and affirm human dignity.

Despite the presence of one of Italy’s great comedic actors, Alberto Sordi, in Rosi’s early film *I Magliari* (1959),<sup>4</sup> Rosi’s deeper concerns—exploitation of immigrant workers, effects of organized crime—are plainly apparent. We are struck by similarities with the socially relevant postwar films of the American director Elia Kazan (1909–2003), such as *On the Waterfront* (1954), a debt that Rosi freely acknowledged.<sup>5</sup>

*I Magliari* introduces a theme that came to have major importance throughout Rosi’s career—the plight of the southern Italian forced to seek employment in the north (either in Italy or Europe)—part of the larger “Southern Question” referring to the long history of economic and social inequality between Italy’s north and



those regions south of Rome referred to as the Mezzogiorno. A problem existing from the earliest days of Italian unification, its treatment in Italian cinema has a rich history from neorealism to the present day. Speaking to this point about *I Magliari* in 1979, Rosi said:

*I wanted to continue my investigation of the world of the marginalized, of the marginalized culture of the man of the South who is forced, by a very precise social factor, to "invent" a job for himself.<sup>6</sup>*

Two years after *I Magliari*, Rosi would create one of the masterpieces of Italian cinema, *Salvatore Giuliano*, a story about the life and death of a Sicilian outlaw set against the troubling and complex social and political forces that have shaped Sicily over time.

The formal structures and thematic range of the Italian political film were bolstered by Rosi's slightly younger contemporary, Elio Petri. Petri's body of work contains some of the best-known and most popular Italian films of the late 1960s and 1970s. They include: *A ciascuno il suo*

*(We Still Kill the Old Way, 1967)*, *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto (Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion, 1969)*, and *Todo Modo (One Way or Another, 1976)*.

Petri's early inspiration and training are closely tied to his friendship with one of the elder statesmen of neorealism, Giuseppe De Santis (1917 – 1997), whose work is also represented in the Titanus festival. De Santis was part of the seminal group of young directors emerging in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Many of these filmmakers were associated with the avant-garde and short-lived periodical *Cinema*, published in Rome from 1939 to 1940. *Cinema*, a government-sponsored journal, played an important role in the early development of neorealist film. De Santis had collaborated with Visconti on the script for *Ossessione* in 1942 and later directed one of the four sections of the 1945 film *Giorni di gloria (Days of Glory)* that documented the German occupation of Rome and the Italian resistance. This latter film was made in the same year as Rossellini's better-known *Roma, città aperta (Rome, Open City)*.

Petri's themes stressing social reform, the plight of the working class, and political corruption owe much to De Santis. But Petri's films also explore a darker existential angst and neurosis. His style progressively became more expressionistic in his desire to expose the rampant abuses of power, mistrust of authority, and hypocrisies of contemporary Italian society and politics. Working during one of Italy's most traumatic periods of protest, violence, and assassinations, the so-called "years of lead" (a reference to the number of bullets strafing Italian cities at the time), Petri also found inspiration in collaborations with the Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciascia (1921 – 1989) and the gifted actor Gian Maria Volonté (1933 – 1994).

Petri's second film, *I giorni contati* (*The Days Are Numbered*, 1962), was inspired by an actual event in the director's life. His father, a metalworker, physically exhausted from a job he started at the age of twelve, decided to stop working; he never fully explained the reason to his son.<sup>7</sup> Indebted to the neorealism of De Santis, *I giorni contati* nevertheless shares a strange kinship with another film from the same year, Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (*The Eclipse*). Indeed,

in Petri's film the director approaches the theme of existential alienation that will forever be associated with Antonioni. Petri's protagonist, however, functions within the wider world of labor and its relationship to the individual and to society at large. That is to say, Petri's vision is as much political as it is personal.

Elio Petri's untimely death from cancer in 1982, at the age of fifty-three, was a profound loss for Italian cinema. He completed eleven films in his brief career. Though his final body of work was small, Petri had waged an uncompromising war on Italian power, privilege, and politics. At times with subtle precision, at others through direct assaults, Petri's films awakened Italians to their own descent into a modern inferno.

Amidst the chaos and trauma of this period, one director sought to reclaim the soul of Italy and Italian life. Emerging from the same neorealist roots as Rosi and Petri, Ermanno Olmi made films that are spiritual meditations encapsulated in one of the director's favorite expressions: "Cinema is not my life. Living is."<sup>8</sup> Far less polemical than Rosi or Petri, Olmi possessed a vision that speaks of the sacredness

of ordinary life — a major theme found also in the films of Pasolini. Both Rosi and Petri responded to the French New Wave films of Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930) and François Truffaut (1932 – 1984). The visual language and rhythms of Olmi's films find their counterpart in the intimate sensibility of the French director Robert Bresson (1901 – 1999).

Olmi's *I fidanzati* (*The Fiancés*, 1963) captures the slower pace and quiet storytelling associated with Bresson. Sacrificing the documentary feeling of neorealist film, *I fidanzati* is more lyrical, stressing the emotional plight of countless Italians forced to leave their homes and loved ones to seek employment elsewhere — this time, it is a Milanese factory worker who finds a job in Sicily. Leitmotifs of loneliness, nostalgia, and the tribulations of love that often accompany long separations reside at the heart of this deeply humanistic film, alongside its ruminations on man, nature, love, and the obligations of work.

The festival *Titanus: A Family Chronicle of Italian Cinema* is a testament to one of Italy's most personal and eccentric family-run film studios, and a chronicle of one of the country's

greatest periods of filmmaking: 1945 to 1975. The achievement of Titanus was especially rich between the years 1945 and 1964, a period bookended by the gritty realism of such De Santis films as *Giorni di gloria* (1945) and *Roma Ore 11* (*Rome 11:00*, 1952), and the later opulence of Visconti's *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963). Throughout its best decades the films produced at Titanus studio charted and affected the course, not just of Italian cinema, but of Italian art, life, and politics.

#### Notes

- 1 Federico Zeri, "La percezione visiva dell' Italia e degli Italiani nella storia della pittura," in *Storia d'Italia, Atlante*, vol. 6 (Turin, 1976), 53–114.
- 2 Zeri, "La percezione visiva dell' Italia e degli italiani," 63.
- 3 See: Carlo Testa, ed., *Poet of Civic Courage: The Films of Francesco Rosi* (Wiltshire, England, 1996).
- 4 Released internationally under the Italian title.
- 5 Francesco Bolzoni, *I film di Francesco Rosi* (Rome, 1986), 24.

6 Aldo Tassone, *Parla il cinema italiano*, vol. 1 (Milan, 1979), 284.

7 Goffredo Fofi and Franca Faldini, eds., *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano (1960–1969)* (Milan, 1981), 153.

8 Deborah Young, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven," *Film Comment* 37, no. 2 (March/April 2001): 57.

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Cover: *I giorni contati (The Days Are Numbered)*, Elio Petri, 1962, 35mm, courtesy Titanus

Center: *I Magliari*, Francesco Rosi, 1959, 35mm, courtesy Titanus

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