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The Films of Francesco Rosi

*Edited by*  
Carlo Testa

*cinema voices series*



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(Giuseppe Di Leva, "Tradimenti", in Giuseppe Di Leva (libretto) and Lorenzo Ferrero (music), *Nascita di un'opera*: Salvatore Giuliano [Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1987]: 29-31; emphasis in original), thus making explicit the parallels with the willing martyrdom of Jesus.

<sup>104</sup> Chandler: 195-199; Attanasio and Sciortino: 237-241.

<sup>105</sup> Chandler: 203-206.

<sup>106</sup> Giuliano had originally planned to hide at the farm of Giuseppe Marotta, a Mafioso. However, the latter did not want to host the bandit, and therefore asked De Maria to shelter Giuliano (Chandler: 173-175).

<sup>107</sup> Chandler: 207. According to Maxwell (199), Pisciotta was sentenced on 4 May 1951.

<sup>108</sup> Chandler: 208.

<sup>109</sup> How he was poisoned remains something of a mystery to this day (ibid). Attanasio and Sciortino (260) offer the most concrete theory. Pisciotta, who had stated that he expected to be killed, was under guard 24 hours a day. He shared his cell with his father and prepared all his own food. On the morning of 9 February 1954, he prepared coffee for himself and his father. Both added sugar to it and drank it. Almost immediately Aspanu began to feel ill and yelled, "They poisoned me". Eventually, he died in intense pain. He had been killed by a dose of strychnine allegedly sufficiently strong to kill 40 dogs. Since strychnine was later found in the sugar, no one could understand why his father did not also die. Attanasio and Sciortino's answer is that the poison was in pills Pisciotta took for his tuberculosis, pills that were furnished to him by the prison administration. They contend that the strychnine was added to the sugar after the fact to deflect attention from the real killers.

<sup>110</sup> Crowds: 20. Emphasis in original (first instance); emphasis added (second instance).

<sup>111</sup> Translated from the French: "La manière de monter Giuliano répondait à une exigence narrative qui était de raconter les faits en donnant au public cette impression de confusion, d'absence de clarté avec laquelle ces faits sont advenus dans la réalité" (Ciment: 89).

<sup>112</sup> Crowds: 21. See also Umberto Eco, as quoted in Sitney: 200.

<sup>113</sup> See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il cinema impopolare", *Nuovi Argomenti* 20 (October/December 1970): 166-176 (reprinted in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo eretico* [Milan: Aldo Garzanti Editore, 1972: 273-280]. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, edited by Louise K Barnett, translated by Ben Lawton and Louise K Barnett (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988): 267-275.

<sup>114</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, "Il Principe" e "Discorsi" (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971): 65. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (eds), *The Portable Machiavelli* (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1979): 126.

## ***Hands Over the City: cinema as political indictment and social commitment***

*Manuela Gieri*

The year of the release of Francesco Rosi's *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands Over the City*) is 1963, a date which constitutes an important step in the history of Italian postwar cinema. It was the year of Federico Fellini's *Otto e mezzo* (8½), Marco Ferreri's *L'ape regina* (*The Queen Bee*), Lina Wertmüller's *I basilischi* (*The Lizards*), but also of Dino Risi's *I mostri* (*The Monsters*), which came just one year after his *Il sorpasso* (*The Easy Life*), a film with which Risi definitively transformed the *commedia all'italiana* by employing the *grotesque* in his powerful and devastating indictment of contemporary Italian society. In *The Monsters*, Risi again offered a grotesque gallery of monstrous portraits drawn by Italian contemporary society, a society that had been affected by the rapid growth experienced in the aftermath of the Second World War and had been the breeding ground for monstrosities of different kinds. The *grotesque* is also the mode of discourse chosen by Ferreri in *The Queen Bee*, and by Wertmüller in *The Lizards*. In her directorial debut, Wertmüller constructs a political satire of Italian provincial life which displays only a superficial similarity with Fellini's *I vitelloni* (*The Young and the Passionate*, 1953), a film with which it has often unfairly been compared. In this film Wertmüller describes "the reactionary apathy of some zones of southern Italy in analogy with the typical immobility of lizards in the sun".<sup>1</sup>

The theme of the apathy of the south is instead historically explicated in another 1963 film, Luchino Visconti's astonishing cinematic tour de force, *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), an adaptation of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's 1958 novel. Visconti's film finds in the melodramatic imagination its privileged territory as it exposes the historical and political contradictions of Italian 19th century Risorgimento. By 1963, Fellini, on the other hand, had already provided us with his own uncompromising portrayal of contemporary Italian society amidst the general crumbling of Western civilisation in his cinematic allegory, *La dolce vita* (1959), and with 8½ he seemed to withdraw into the more private territories of creative imagination and artistic freedom.

Within this extremely composite panorama, *Hands Over the City*,

Rosi's fourth feature film, was a surprise winner of the Golden Lion at the 24th Venice Film Festival. The film provoked a wealth of conflicting and even violent reviews from both the Right and the Left. In general, critics reacted to its content and form alike, since the former was clearly undermining the collective attempt to build a Centre-Left government, and the latter was fast moving away from the heritage of neo-realism as Rosi elaborated his own personal and provoking interpretation of "realism". From the right wing, who saw themselves directly attacked onscreen, the protest was fierce, as one reads in *Il Secolo d'Italia*, the daily newspaper of the Fascist party: "Since *Hands Over the City* is not art but politics, let's talk politics...it's not cinema but factious political speech...Francesco Rosi has given a defamatory and partisan speech, he has made a marxist film".<sup>2</sup> In another right-wing newspaper, the *Corriere Lombardo*, one reads of "the worst film ever seen at the Venice Film Festival. And there will be no smart ass or menacing letter that will make me change my mind".<sup>3</sup> In the Centre-Right, the reactions were equally – if not more – outraged, as exemplified by Gian Luigi Rondi's review in the daily *Il tempo*:

No, no and no. Don't come and tell us that this is how one should make movies...This is neither cinema or healthy polemic: it is a political speech, an electoral harangue transformed into cinematographic spectacle merely with political intentions, and with very limited cultural and artistic preoccupation.<sup>4</sup>

Equally extreme but positive were the reactions of the Left, as exemplified in the review by Ugo Casiraghi in *L'Unità*, the daily newspaper of the Italian Communist Party:

A wonderful film...Rosi has authored his most mature work. Even more mature than *Salvatore Giuliano*, it equals the former in dramatic effect but surpasses it in coherence and clarity. *Hands Over the City* addresses the audience with increased lucidity...It is a film-essay with the clarity of a limpid and documented sociological study...The only weakness on the artistic level seems to be the internal and dialectic relationship between 'public' and 'private' character.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most frequently recurring accusations in the many critiques the film received was exactly the lack of depth of the characters – i.e. the scarce psychological delving which would have supposedly given the story scope and profundity. Rosi has repeatedly commented on

this aspect of his filmmaking in general, and on one occasion specifically stated:

I think that the psychology of a film springs from the editing since it is not so much *the psychology of the individual characters but it is that of the narrative structure, of the relationships the director, the author, weaves with the subject-matter and with the characters; it is not the psychology of the various characters taken and developed one by one*, but it is that of the general picture given by the narrative structure from which there emerges the general psychology of the characters together with that of their individual behaviour...The true psychology is in the editing. *I am the psychologist when I make the film.*<sup>6</sup>

In Rosi's filmmaking, editing is therefore of utmost importance. So too are casting and shooting insofar as he often re-creates events in actual places and with "real" people. For instance, in *Salvatore Giuliano* one finds the *real* Portella delle Ginestre and some of the people who witnessed Giuliano's story; in *Hands Over the City*, Naples and its people provide the perfect setting for the film, in addition to two of the protagonists in its story. Such a casting and shooting strategy is meant to obtain a particular dramatic atmosphere which Rosi has defined as "psicodramma" ("psychodrama").<sup>7</sup>

The critical response in Italian film journals was also lively and controversial. Here Rosi was generally praised for the ethical substance of his work, mostly recognised as inherited from neo-realism, but was often criticised for his aesthetic choices, considered a step backwards when compared to his previous film, *Salvatore Giuliano*. Such a perspective is exemplified by the words of Lorenzo Quaglietti:

The distance that separates *Hands Over the City* and *Salvatore Giuliano* is substantial...Often Rosi has deviated from that rational line of ideal debate that he intended to follow: the subsequent unbalances greatly undermine the stylistic unity of the film, and make it difficult to accept it on an artistic level. This is not to say that the film has no relevance, since its importance lies mostly in two undeniable qualities: the choice of the theme and the intentional rejection of the canons of spectacle.<sup>8</sup>

Stefano Roncoroni's assessment of the film in his article on Rosi's cinematic evolution answers Quaglietti, when he states that "[f]or Rosi *Hands Over the City* represents a move forward in relation to

*Salvatore Giuliano* because of its better defined ideological commitment and its stronger moral attitude".<sup>9</sup> Yet, the critic continues by stating that Rosi's cinema is still unclear as to which direction to take, caught between two fundamental tendencies, one leaning towards description and the other towards narration.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, therefore, one has to acknowledge the fundamental controversy created by the releasing of *Hands Over the City* in a critical entourage which reflected the political and ideological debate in Italian society as a whole. Outside Italy, on the contrary, the film received a generally positive and enthusiastic response, especially in France where, since neo-realism, critics have proved to be constantly receptive and attentive to Italian cinema. One example is Amédée Ayfre's review in *Téléciné*, where she underlines the rigorous political indictment and the powerful stylistic innovations which the film displays:

This film, because of its ardent style, its polemic efficiency and its unquestionable generosity, gives the patent of cinematographic nobility to an aesthetics of the *logos*, grounded on the word, on language, that is, the kind of eloquence thought to be proper of other means of expression.<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \*

*Hands Over the City*, although moving from a case of real estate speculation, is unquestionably a film about the morality of power, and as such is an abstract work organised as a debate on ideas. The filmic tale is episodic and constructed with essentially verbal means. The action springs not from the characters, as they are essentially "non-characters", true abstractions, but from language in its dialectic and creative function. Every narrative sequence contains an introduction as well as an initial and a conclusive debate. With the exception of the opening sequence – where, in a piece of cinematic bravura, Rosi films the tumbling down of a building, juxtaposed with the silent close-up of developer Edoardo Nottola's face – in general the camera neutrally records the verbal activity of the various participants in this inclement trial to an entire collectivity.

The plot of the film develops around a case of real estate speculation, within the larger context of the corrupt political situation in a huge Italian city of the south, Naples. The demolition of a building in a street within one of the oldest sectors of the city provokes the denunciation of developer Nottola, City Councillor of the Right. The investigation, enacted by a multi-partisan committee

nominated by the city council, sheds no light on the events, thanks to the connivance of the city council, where the Right has the majority, and to Nottola's intervention. The name of the developer, however, is so thoroughly compromised that his party asks him to withdraw from the electoral list; after all, the gain they have been planning from the real estate speculation is more important than his victory in the elections. Yet, Nottola knows that if he is not elected he will soon have to beg for permission to build, and pay his way. He knows that his failure to be elected will make him a slave of the politicians.

Thus, on the eve of the elections, Nottola offers his votes and those of four friends involved in the speculation to the party of the Centre. This move provokes the reversal of the political arrangement in the city council, as the Centre wins the elections. Later, even the powerful ill feelings between the Right and the five turncoats are recomposed because of their common interest in exercising power over the city. Nottola is nominated City Councillor for Real Estate Development and will continue building in the designated area, even gaining the benediction of the Church, an institution that does not find a concrete embodiment in any of the characters of the film, but is ever-present. At one point in the film, for instance, as he is deciding to switch sides, Nottola goes to church and prays. Later, when Balsamo, a representative of the Left within the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democratic Party), visits their leader, Professor De Angeli, the latter shows him with pride an altar he has in the house, and this event prefaces one of the most poignant moments of the story. In the closing sequence of the film, the bishop of the city of Naples gives his blessing to the laying of the first stone in the new construction site, sanctioning the ultimate corruption of men and their environment.

The characters are split between the dominators and the dominated. The latter are most often physically absent from the diegesis of the film, yet they are constantly present insofar as they are the significant "Other", the "absent Other" in everyone's discourse. Over the years, Naples has provided Italian cinema with a large metaphor for the country, as Italy was moving out of the immediate postwar years, through the *miracolo economico* and an all-too-fast growing society into the present. From Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) – where, in the Naples episode, the director gave a portrayal of corruption and deterioration – to Vittorio De Sica's *L'oro di Napoli* (*The Gold of Naples*, 1954), gold was to be found in Naples in the ability of Neapolitans to regenerate themselves through their relentless creativity and joy of life. Yet, necessarily prefaced by Nanni Loy's *Le quattro giornate di Napoli* (*The Four Days of Naples*, 1962), *Hands Over the City* finally shatters that fertile image of the city and presents an unquestionably gloomier situation. In the opening

segment of the film, as the camera pans over a labyrinthine landscape of cement, a voice-over informs us: "There it is...This is the gold of today". Clearly referring to De Sica's film, in which Naples still belonged to its people, and which documented its rich and colourful popular culture – its "gold" – Rosi's work from its very beginning elucidates the cynical philosophy of the dominators which necessarily prevails over that of the dominated, whose position is instead as labyrinthine and confused as their landscape:

The beginning immediately takes the spectator within the polemical, crude and violent reality by showing the city from above, grasping the chilling significance of a disproportioned growth, one enacted without thought and without clear choices in the programming...It is the radiograph of a disordered city, a photo-document able to capture in reality the truth that is identified with dialectic clarity.<sup>12</sup>

The end-titles running over the same panning shot of the city inform the audience that, while the characters and events we have just viewed are imaginary, the reality that produces them is authentic. Rosi is obviously commenting on the critical realism that informs his cinema and is the result of the choices imposed upon him by a rigorous ideological critique of the social and environmental reality which produces inequalities and injustices. In this sense his cinema removes itself from Italian neo-realism and displays the powerful influence of the great American social realists such as Elia Kazan and Jules Dassin.

Edoardo Nottola, masterfully played by Rod Steiger, is only apparently the evil character, the corrupted developer who patiently weaves the complicated plot which will lead him to make the 5000% profit he talks about in the opening of the film. Yet, Rosi himself once stated that evil is not Nottola, but the social condition which produces him, paralleling Orson Welles's statement that evil is not Othello, but jealousy.<sup>13</sup> Another tempting parallel here is between Welles's Citizen Kane and Rosi's Nottola, as both characters are driven by thirst for power. Yet, the two directors' approach to characterisation is fundamentally different. Welles pointedly delves into and patiently draws Kane's psychology through a remapping of his memories. Rosi, on the other hand, consistently avoids psychological investigation of the character. In this respect, Quaglietti seems partially correct and partly confused when he states that

The characters of the film, especially because they are non-characters, in the common definition of the term...with only

few exceptions (Salvo Randone, for instance),<sup>14</sup> are drawn geometrically, they lack the flexibility necessary to express fully and dialectically...the social group they symbolize.<sup>15</sup>

In an interview given during a recent visit to Toronto on occasion of the presentation of the complete retrospective of his works, Rosi commented on the positions taken by some Italian critics on his method of characterisation:

When the films were first released in Italian movie theatres specific sectors of aesthetic criticism scolded me since they saw in this kind of procedure not a novelty, but a poverty of artistic representation. But I wondered how it was possible not to see that the characters were treated in such a fashion as to emphasise the context, to underline what happens collectively in society. The developer Nottola in *Hands Over the City*, who, in order to achieve his own goals, involves the general political entourage of the city and creates the premises for the corruption of the various powers – political power, economic power with the complicity of organised crime – seemed more interesting to me than Nottola's psychology, if he had a wife, two lovers, three children.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that the characters escape traditional definitions inasmuch as Rosi is trying here to perfect a new mode of filmmaking, his own personal interpretation of *cinema vérité* which forces the spectator to participate in the action as the documentation of truth progresses, and certainly not to identify with the characters and their dramas.

It is accurate to say that the characters are designed geometrically. They are just one element of a film as perfect as a theorem, a geometric work which proceeds with the lucidity of an investigation into a crime, however, that is in the making as the film unfolds. That is, the significant "crime" is not the tearing down of a building; rather, this is just an effect, a symptom of the crime that is truly perpetrated, which is the ultimate corruption of political power, the interruption and severance of the relationship of trust between the people and those they elect. Rosi's film expresses the indictment of an entire political class, and in this sense the work is an arraignment of the entire collectivity. With its trial-like atmosphere, the film becomes increasingly claustrophobic as Rosi's camera consistently avoids openings and digressions, and impassively records the facts. Our gaze is encaged within the frame of the screen. Panning shots are relegated to the beginning and the closing of the film, but they merely record the labyrinthine landscape of cement, thus conveying an effect of

closure. Nothing can be seen beyond the labyrinth, and nothing else exists but a muddle of cement born out of corruption and degradation.

The discursive strategy of the film is the *ars oratoria*, the public speech filled with social commitment:

*Hands Over the City* is indeed a work with an oratory style, as it aims at overcoming the didactic coldness and unavowed artifice of a certain *cinéma vérité* with the warmth and candour of a discourse that openly declares its nature, that wants to be *discourse* and thus employs situations, feelings and characters as subject matters, without getting to abstract symbols or arbitrary superimpositions.<sup>17</sup>

It is certain that the *ars oratoria* flourished in times of civil passion and has always reflected a collective tension to redefine issues such as the morality of power in periods of social and political turmoil. Italy in the early 1960s was undoubtedly a tormented battlefield of opposing ideologies concerning the proper direction the country ought to take. Such a situation was paralleled by a movement aimed at overcoming instances of neo-realism in the cinema, and acquiring new discursive strategies for cinematic realism in general. Rosi plays a central role in the definition of a new mode of filmmaking which is political, engaged in social critique, and committed to realism.<sup>18</sup>

*Hands Over the City* relies abundantly on words, as they proliferate in a text which is internally episodic. In each episode there is an introduction, an opening speech and a closing speech. The first sequence is exemplary insofar as the panning shot over the city constitutes the introduction. This is followed by Nottola's speech where he lays bare his plot involving a global transformation of the land just outside the city to his own gain, in addition to that of his accomplices. The "closing speech" of this episode is given by the panning shot over the labyrinthine city as his last words are heard over the image: "There it is...This is the gold of today". We are then taken inside the municipal council of the city of Naples, where Nottola's plan to change the original city planning is presented by the Mayor not only as an economic, but also as a moral commitment. These words evoke the next sequence as a helicopter pans over the planned construction site where men in black are gathered to foreshadow the future alliance between Right and Centre which at the end of the film will be sanctioning the fully accomplished "crime", the real estate speculation and the remapping of power. With the reorganisation of city planning comes the reshaping of power.

After this prologue, in which we have been shown the three *loci*

of the action – the city of Naples, the municipal council, and the site of the crime, the land of the speculative development – the opening credits run over a screen fully occupied by images of a crowded and chaotic urban situation. Rosi's camera then leads us to a construction site in an old downtown neighbourhood, as the workers are perforating the soil to set the foundations for a new building. While it is normally impassive, the camera in this sequence becomes powerfully present and sympathetic as it records the daily activities in Vicolo Sant'Andrea, a poor, lower-class district in Naples. Rosi then proceeds to show the tumbling down of a building next to the construction site in a spectacular piece of cinematic bravura. This is the only instance in the entire film where the director makes his presence clearly felt in both the visual and the sound track. Here he adopts subjective techniques, such as accompanying a deafening roar in the diegesis with a non-diegetic, thoroughly unrealistic silence broken by the diegetic sound of the siren of the ambulance as a wounded child is taken to the hospital. After this emotional moment, the camera will relocate itself in an impassive position and will neutrally record the development of Rosi's investigation.

Yet, although the plot is a case of real estate speculation, the filmic investigation will not aim at uncovering the responsibilities behind the crash. That particular inquiry is developed within the diegesis of the film by a special committee nominated by the city council following a fiery meeting the day after the events in Vicolo Sant'Andrea. On the contrary, Rosi's own investigation begins with the opening of the film, is in the making throughout it, and coincides with the film's progression. It is not the plot, but the story of the tale told. The true story of *Hands Over the City* deals with the morality of power and its ethics, or lack thereof. The real estate speculation is a pretext; on the contrary, the true subject-matter is the inner logic of power. The film is a dispassionate investigation of the morality of power through the progressive unmasking of the lie behind a façade of social harmony and political consensus.

Within this fluid work, where the coordinates change but the form constantly aims at reaccessing the originary geometry, the catalyser is Nottola. He is the owner of the construction company, Bellavista (ironically, "beautiful view"), which is responsible for the destruction of the building; he is a municipal councillor representative of the Right who will later join the Centre, specifically the Christian Democratic Party. He will offer them his votes, acquired with money and favours, but especially with the backing of Neapolitan organised crime, the *camorra*, in exchange for the position of City Councillor for Real Estate Development. He is also the perfect embodiment of the ideology of power, and, like those who dominate, he moves in an

eccentric and disconnected way aiming at returning everything to that apparent harmony which will allow him to dominate. Being moved and defined only and exclusively by his greed for power, Nottola moves within the political entourage and remaps the power structure to his advantage. If the rules do not work, they must be altered, and will be; consequently, nothing really changes. Impressive parallelisms can be established with Visconti's *The Leopard*,<sup>19</sup> insofar as both films address this very issue, albeit from different visual angles. Contrary to other works in his filmography, such as *Salvatore Giuliano* or *Il caso Mattei* (*The Mattei Affair*, 1972), which investigate past events, *Hands Over the City* deals with the present and prefigures the future. Such a discursive strategy bears powerful similarities with Visconti's film, despite the fact that *The Leopard* is set in the 19th century.

The opponent to Nottola is Councillor De Vita, a vocal representative of the Left. They face each other directly only once in Vicolo Sant'Andrea, when the police force the inhabitants to leave their homes after Nottola has managed to convince the majority party in the city council (i.e. his party, the Right) that the only solution is to declare all the buildings in the street uninhabitable. The sequence is reminiscent of the first meeting between Romolo Catenacci (Aldo Fabrizi), a corrupt real estate developer, and Gianni Pelago (Vittorio Gassman), a former Resistance fighter who becomes a young and ambitious lawyer, in Ettore Scola's 1974 film, *C'eravamo tanto amanti* (*We All Loved Each Other So Much*). Yet, ten years and major social and political transformation – or rather deterioration – separate the two films. In Rosi's work, the young leftist councillor De Vita is not lured by Nottola's manipulative speech about his fundamentally good intentions as he shows De Vita the interior of one of his new buildings. During the film De Vita is one of the few who mentions and brings forth issues of morality and remains unchanged as the story unfolds, since he is the mouthpiece of an awakened yet now silenced "Other". There is no agreement here with those who maintained at the time of the release of the film that De Vita's character is unconvincing due to the fundamental artificiality and schematism with which he originates discourse in opposition to the logic of power. The repetitiveness of his discourse is the product of his only motivating tension, that of denouncing social conflict and political injustice: he stays clearly on the side of those who lose, those who are dominated, and, insofar as he is their agent and their mouthpiece, he has no reason to bring everything back to an artificial harmony.

There is no consonance in the chilling universe Rosi depicts in *Hands Over the City*, and thus one finds there a young and ardent Jiminy Cricket that reminds the viewer of this disharmony. A decade later, the situation would evolve (or deteriorate) to a point that Scola

will no longer be able to afford a fully positive character such as De Vita. His embodiment in *We All Loved Each Other So Much* is Gianni Pelago, who after the war sells out to the corrupt developer, Romolo Catenacci. Having lost sight of the ideals that animated his actions during the civil war, he espouses the logic of the dominators to a point where, later in the film, he changes so profoundly as to become even worse than Catenacci himself. Scola's statement, although within the boundaries of comedy, expresses in the best spirit of a national comedic tradition a thorough indictment of postwar Italy. The fundamental difference between the two films is not the diverse stylistic choices but the target: in Rosi's work the accused is the Italian political class, while in Scola's film it is the entire society in its various class articulations. The only class that is partially "saved" in Scola's film is the working class as embodied by Antonio (Nino Manfredi). This fact ultimately reconnects Scola's film with the ideology of Rosi's discourse, as De Vita essentially speaks for the working class.

The core and true motor of Rosi's discursive strategy, however, is neither Nottola nor De Vita. On the contrary, it is Professor De Angeli, the representative of the Centre, of the Christian Democratic Party, who will eventually become the new Mayor of Naples. He is the mastermind behind the film's elliptic and abstract structure. The core of the story is provided by his meeting with Balsamo, a young representative of his own party, who is in dissent with the party line that wants Nottola to join their group. As a doctor and as the director of the city hospital, Balsamo sympathizes with those who suffer and are expropriated by heartless political rulers. This is exemplified when, at the end of a meeting of the special committee that has to investigate the crushing of the building in Vicolo Sant'Andrea, he asks De Vita to join him for lunch, but first shows him the true victims, the children who live in those asphyxiating neighbourhoods with no air or sun, and especially the boy who has lost his legs during the accident. As Nottola is about to enter the list of candidates to office for the Christian Democratic Party in local elections, Balsamo visits Professor Angeli at his home. The masterfully planned sequence opens with tracking close-ups of paintings as a voice-over asks, "Do you like painting?". As the camera unveils the source of the questions, Professor De Angeli, he is smiling and leading Balsamo (and us) to uncover another beauty hidden in his house, an altar surrounded by walls filled with *ex votos*. After all, quite ironically, his surname means "of the angels" – he is the messenger of Christian planning, since he is the leader of the Christian Democratic Party, a political organisation officially backed by the Catholic Church. When Balsamo questions the appropriateness of being in politics side by side with Nottola, De Angeli begins his long harangue, which constitutes the ideological



justification of the crime perpetrated in front of our eyes within and without the film – the speculation that corrupts our environmental, social and political reality:

Dear Balsamo, we are the ones who make public opinion. A big party such as ours can digest people such as Nottola at any time. Think instead of the responsibility taken on by a politician in face of such dilemma. You can alter the situation drastically, and you don't do it because of a question of moral incompatibility. And the beauty of this is that by doing so you don't destroy the Nottolas, you merely pretend they don't exist.<sup>20</sup>

To this Balsamo answers in outrage: "You seem to imply that power is everything" ("Lei parla così come se il potere fosse tutto"). And promptly and unequivocally comes De Angeli's reply: "Dear Balsamo, in politics moral indignation is of no use. Do you know what is the only mortal sin? To be defeated." ("Caro Balsamo, in politica l'indignazione morale non serve a niente. L'unico grave peccato sa qual è? Quello di essere sconfitti.")

Unquestionably, this is the ideological fulcrum, the chilling philosophy that guides the actions leading to the "crime". The climax will be reached in the sequence where De Angeli manages to lead the exponents of the Right to make peace with the "traitors", Nottola and his accomplices. The atmosphere is that of a black mass, an eerie ceremonial that introduces an element of the uncanny and of surrealism in an otherwise "realistic" story. The ending of *Hands Over the City* serves as a necessary preface to *Cadaveri eccellenti* (*Illustrious Corpses*, 1975), a baroque tale of eminent deaths amongst magistrates and judges in an unnamed southern Italian city. Reality no longer needs to be investigated, as it surpasses imagination in this Kafkaesque tale with Buñuelian tinges, where the trial is over and executions must be performed.

If, prior to *Hands Over the City*, Rosi had any hesitation over the path that had to be taken to overcome neo-realism, with this film his message was loud and clear, and he thereafter continued his work towards the creation and development of his own personal interpretation of realism by focusing quite openly on narration, rather than description. In this he followed the suggestions offered in an Italian context by Visconti, and in the United States by the powerful tradition of cinematic social realism. In opposition to the regressive line followed by other masters of neo-realism, such as Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, in the mid-1950s Visconti committed himself to a type of cinematic narration no longer revolving around

immediacy and chronicle, but focusing on both documentation of facts and interpretation of reality. It is in this period that the crisis of neo-realistic certitudes occurs, both in the cinema and in literature; this crisis will eventually lead to the innovative trends in both fields expressed in the early 1960s. In 1963, the world of letters recorded the birth of the so-called "Gruppo '63", that is the Italian *neoavanguardia* whose action was entirely ideological in form and content. In the cinema, although never formalised officially, one records a similar innovative and almost revolutionary tension as Italian directors moved definitively away from neo-realism, although choosing diverse discursive strategies. For Rosi and others, such as Gillo Pontecorvo and Elio Petri, the goal was to develop a form of *critical realism* aimed at unmasking the lie behind the surface of things, to make cinema an instrument for knowledge. As Rosi himself once stated:

I strongly believe in cinema as an instrument for a knowledge of things. For instance, let's consider these famous 'Italian mysteries' people talk about...I have investigated these mysteries...worrying not so much about giving answers, since to give answers is the main preoccupation of the traditional mode of filmmaking. I concerned myself more with asking questions, with raising questions to the audience so that the spectator would become a protagonist of the stories, not remaining a passive viewer.<sup>21</sup>

Asking questions instead of giving answers is ultimately a strategy aimed at building within the audience not only the capacity to interpret reality, but also the ability to foresee the effects of present actions on the future. Such an ability is intrinsically significant to the possibility for a radical transformation of society. Ultimately and paradoxically, some of the questions posed by Rosi in many of his films were to be matched by history itself. The recent earthquake in Italian politics enacted by the pool of magistrates called "mani pulite" ("clean hands") finds an anticipation in Rosi's work with such films as *The Mattei Affair*, but most importantly, *Hands Over the City*. Ironically, there is an important moment in the film when, immediately after the falling of the building and during an animated session of the city council, representatives of the majority party, the Right, raise their hands screaming that they are clean. The 1978 murder of Aldo Moro, former Prime Minister of Italy and leader of the Christian Democratic Party, was lucidly foreseen by Rosi's *Illustrious Corpses*, as history is proving that, while the killing was physically enacted by the Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades), mystery surrounds the instigators of Moro's death.

Powerfully grounded in historical materialism, Rosi's method of cinematic investigation of reality declares the deceit concealed behind social harmony, and the contradictions lying behind a political consensus built on lies and false promises. This is his most valuable legacy to the young generation of Italian directors as they are trying to rejuvenate a tradition of critical realism that seemed to have been eclipsed.<sup>22</sup> One ought to distance oneself from the reality and find the necessary detachment to make cinematic works valid in time and for eternity, such as *Hands Over the City*, since, in Rosi's words, "a film when it is successful is valid for eternity and for universality".<sup>23</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ernest Ferlita and John R May, *The Parables of Lina Wertmüller* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977): 10.

<sup>2</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Poiché *Le mani sulla città* non è arte, ma è politica, ebbene bisogna buttarla in politica...più che cinema è fazioso comizio politico...Francesco Rosi ha fatto un discorso diffamatorio e partigiano, ha realizzato un film marxista". Marco Monti, *Il Secolo d'Italia* 8 January 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Il peggior film visto...a tutte le mostre di Venezia. E non ci sarà barba di santo, né lettere minatorie che mi potranno far cambiare idea". F M Pranzo, *Corriere Lombardo* 12/13 October 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Translated from the Italian: "No, no e no. Non ci si venga a raccontare che è così che si fa del cinema...Questo non è cinema e non è neanche sana polemica: è comizio, è fazione, è discorso elettorale, trasformato in spettacolo cinematografico solo a scopi politici, con pochissime preoccupazioni culturali ed artistiche." Gian Luigi Rondi, *Il tempo* 6 September 1963.

<sup>5</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Un film splendido...Rosi ha firmato la sua opera più matura. Più matura anche nei confronti di *Salvatore Giuliano*, che eguaglia in drammaticità, ma sopravanza in coerenza e in chiarezza. *Le mani sulla città* parla ancora più lucidamente al pubblico...È un film-saggio, con l'evidenza di un limpido e documentato studio sociologico...l'unico punto sostanzialmente debole, sul piano dell'arte, ci sembra quello del rapporto interno, dialettico, tra personaggio 'pubblico' e 'privato'." Ugo Casiraghi, *L'unità* 6 September 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Io penso che la psicologia di un film viene fuori dal montaggio perché la psicologia di un film non è tanto la psicologia dei personaggi quanto quella della struttura narrativa, delle relazioni del regista, dell'autore con la materia e con i personaggi; non è la psicologia dei vari personaggi intesa e sviluppata una per una, è il quadro generale della struttura narrativa dalla quale viene fuori una psicologia generale dei personaggi insieme con quella del loro comportamento singolo...Quindi la

vera psicologia è nel montaggio. *Lo psicologo sono io quando faccio il film.*" Quoted in Franca Durazzo Baker (ed), "Sono lo psicologo del film e non del personaggio. Colloquio con Francesco Rosi", *Cinema nuovo* 28: 261 (October 1979): 21. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: 20.

<sup>8</sup> Translated from the Italian: "La distanza che separa *Le mani sulla città* da *Salvatore Giuliano* è notevole...Spesso Rosi ha deviato da quella linea razionale di dibattito ideale, che ha dichiarato di aver voluto seguire: i conseguenti scompensi minano fortemente l'unità stilistica del film, ne rendono piuttosto difficile l'accettazione sul piano dell'arte. Ciò non vuol dire che il film non abbia una sua...non trascurabile importanza, che risiede, soprattutto, in due sue innegabili qualità: la scelta del tema e l'intenzionale ripudio dei canoni dello spettacolo." Lorenzo Quaglietti, "Fermenti anticonformistici nei film italiani e inglesi", *Cinema* 60 4: 39 (November 1963): 62-63. See also Stefano Roncoroni, "Evoluzione filmica di Francesco Rosi", in *Filmcritica* 14: 137 (September 1963): 520-528.

<sup>9</sup> Translated from the Italian: "*Le mani sulla città* costituisce per Rosi rispetto a *Salvatore Giuliano* un passo avanti per il più preciso impegno ideologico e per il più forte atteggiamento morale". Roncoroni: 525.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Questo film, per il suo stile acceso, la sua efficacia polemica e la sua incontestabile generosità, dà la sua patente di nobiltà cinematografica a una estetica del *logos*, fondata sulla parola, cioè l'eloquenza che si poteva credere riservata ad altri mezzi di espressione". Amédée Ayfre in *Téléciné* 113-114 (1963), as quoted in Francesco Bolzoni, *I film di Francesco Rosi* (Rome: Gremese Editore, 1986): 73. More recently, foreign critics have paid homage to Rosi's cinema as testified by the numerous articles appeared in internationally renowned film journals. For example, see Gary Crowds, "Francesco Rosi. Italy's Postmodern Neorealist", in *Cineaste* 20: 4 (1994): 19-25.

<sup>12</sup> Translated from the Italian: "L'inizio immette subito lo spettatore nella realtà polemica, cruda, violenta, mostrando la città dall'alto, cogliendo il senso agghiacciante di una crescita sproporzionata, fatta senza mediazioni, senza scelta di programmazione. È la radiografia di una città disordinata, una fotografia-documento che coglie, nella realtà, quella verità che si individua con chiarezza dialettica." Edoardo Bruno, "Poesia e impegno civile", *Filmcritica* 14: 139-140 (November-December 1963): 652.

<sup>13</sup> See Michel Ciment, *Le dossier Rosi* (Paris: Editions Ramsay, 1987): 28.

<sup>14</sup> Randone plays Professor De Angeli, the leader of the Centre, which will eventually become the new Mayor of the city of Naples.

<sup>15</sup> Translated from the Italian: "I personaggi del film, anche e proprio in quanto non-personaggi nella comune accezione del termine...sono, ad eccezione di alcuni (Salvo Randone, ad esempio) delineati geometricamente, mancano di quella duttilità indispensabile proprio per esprimere

compiutamente, dialetticamente...la categoria sociale di cui sono il simbolo". Quaglietti: 62-63.

<sup>16</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Quando i film sono usciti per la prima volta nelle sale italiane mi fu anche rimproverato da una certa critica estetica che vedeva in questo procedimento non tanto una novità ma una povertà di rappresentazione artistica. Ma io mi chiedevo com'è possibile non vedere che questi personaggi sono trattati così per dare più evidenza a un contesto, per dare più evidenza a quello che accade collettivamente nella società perché il costruttore Nottola in *Mani sulla città* che per raggiungere i suoi interessi coinvolge la politica generale della città e crea il presupposto della corruzione dei vari poteri, del potere politico, del potere economico con la complicità anche della criminalità organizzata, ai miei occhi sembrava estremamente più interessante che occuparmi della psicologia del costruttore Nottola, se avesse avuto una moglie, due amanti, tre figli". Rosi, quoted in Manuela Gieri, "Le mani sulla città. Il cinema di Francesco Rosi a Toronto", *Corriere Canadese* 3 November 1994: 7.

<sup>17</sup> Translated from the Italian: "*Le mani sulla città* è, effettivamente, un'opera di carattere oratorio, tende cioè a superare la freddezza didascalica e l'artificio inconfessato di certo cinema-verità con il calore e la sincerità di un discorso che si dichiara apertamente tale, che vuole essere *discorso* e impiega perciò situazioni, sentimenti e personaggi come argomenti, senza finire nell'astrattezza dei simboli o nelle forzature arbitrarie". *Cineforum* 3: 30 (December 1963): 966-967. Zambetti retrieved the analogy for his discussion of *Hands Over the City* included in his volume on Francesco Rosi for Il Castoro Cinema published by La Nuova Italia in 1976. The chapter is indeed entitled "L'oratoria come stile (*Le mani sulla città*)" ("The ars oratoria as style [*Hands Over the City*]"): 51-71. Emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> His lesson was to be followed by many in Italy, as testified by Gillo Pontecorvo, overwhelmingly in his *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1966) and by Elio Petri, especially with *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto* (*Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*, 1969), but also abroad and even in the United States, as testified by the homage to Rosi at the 1994 presentation of a retrospective of his works at the Lincoln Center in New York paid by US directors such as Oliver Stone, Francis Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg and Sidney Lumet.

<sup>19</sup> It is sufficient here to remind one of the conversation between Don Fabrizio, the Prince of Salina, played by Burt Lancaster, and his nephew, Tancredi, played by Alain Delon. To the young man's worry over the events that could change their situation dramatically and take away their power, Fabrizio Salina answers: "If we want everything to stay the same, then everything must change. Did I make myself clear?" ("Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi. Mi sono spiegato?"). See Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il gattopardo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985): 21.

<sup>20</sup> "Caro Balsamo, l'opinione pubblica la facciamo noi. Un grande partito come il nostro, i Nottola li può digerire quando vuole. Ma pensi piuttosto alla responsabilità che si assume un uomo politico di fronte a questo dilemma. Lei può cambiare la situazione da così a così e non lo fa per una

questione di incompatibilità morale. E il bello è che facendo così lei non distrugge i Nottola, fa solo finta che non esistano."

<sup>21</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Credo molto nella funzione di partecipazione del cinema al processo di conoscenza delle cose. Per esempio, prendiamo la questione di questi famosi 'misteri italiani' di cui si parla tanto...questi misteri io li ho indagati". Quoted in Gieri: 7.

<sup>22</sup> Such a tension is powerfully testified by the films of Gianni Amelio, Silvio Soldini, Carlo Mazzacurati, but also of Gabriele Salvatores who, even though moving within the tradition of Italian cinematic comedy at its best, nevertheless makes a cinema aimed at questioning the foundations of Italian contemporary historical, social and thus political discourse in the name of "realism".

<sup>23</sup> Translated from the Italian: "Un film quando riesce è un film che è valido per l'eternità e per l'universalità". Quoted in Gieri: 7.