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Italy Viewed Through Two Families and Two Lenses

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Franco Rosi's "Three Brothers" and Bernardo Bertolucci's "Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man" are two current Italian films that focus on that venerable Italian institution, the patriarchal family, using it to play variations on a common set of social and political themes. Both movies touch on terrorism, the generation gap, the strains of urban life—in other words, on the ills of Italian society. Each film places a heavy thematic burden on their familial characters and has taken the risk, in the process, of flattening them into abstraction. In Mr. Bertolucci's ultimately disappointing

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"Tragedy," this is precisely what has happened. Not so, in Mr. Rosi's quite extraordinary "Three Brothers," where the family manages to be both universal and particular.

The latter film's story is simple—so simple that it hardly seems a story. Covering 24 hours, it follows three brothers who, when their mother dies, are summoned by their elderly father to the family farm. Their day of mourning is spent wandering about their small southern village, evoking memories, renewing acquaintances; while their night is passed in the bedroom they shared as boys. There they reminisce, fantasize about the future, and exchange sorrows, regrets and concerns.

The eldest, age 50, is a prominent judge who lives with his wife and son in Rome. Having agreed to serve as examining magistrate in a case involving terrorists, he is torn between a sense of duty and fear of reprisal. "Each day," he says, "I must accept the risk of dying." He has nightmares of being gunned down by Red Brigades. The middle son, 10 years younger and unmarried, teaches delinquent boys in Naples. Devoutly religious and deeply idealis-

tic, he dreams of happy children sweeping the world clean of drugs, guns and filth. The youngest brother, aged 30 and the most rebellious, is a militant leftist who works in a Turin factory.

Clearly, these brothers—separated by age, profession and politics—are intended as a cross-section of Italian society, as an image of divided, anarchic Italy. They are also evidently meant to represent the archetypal Italian family—a family whose sons are uprooted and dispersed and whose dead and dying parents embody a way of life which the film suggests, with no small measure of regret, is irretrievably lost.

All of this may sound schematic and in a sense it is. Still, the film never seems the least bit mechanical. Partly, this is due to the truthfulness with which Mr. Rosi has rendered his people and world. Captured in exquisite and memorable images, the village, with its pebbled streets and rough stone walls all bleached white by the southern sun, is almost palpably real. And so too are its denizens—from the ancient, toothless crone, once the eldest son's nurse, who complains that she can no longer tend to her garden, to the peasants who spend long lazy afternoons arguing politics in the cafe.

As for the brothers, they are—if typical and representative—also sharply defined as individuals. It helps that they are played by actors who fully inhabit their roles—Michael Placido as the youngest, Vittorio Mezzogiorno as the middle son and, best of all, the gifted Phillippe Noiret as the eldest. Better still is 89-year-old Charles Vanel, who, as the family's reticent, internalized patriarch, is given few words to utter, but manages with his lined face and red-rimmed eyes to convey an astounding range of feeling.

The film also avoids seeming schematic through its sense of balance and the richness of its emotional texture. There may be talk here, even argument, but there is no polemic. Not that Mr. Rosi's attitudes aren't frequently made very clear or that

at certain moments one doesn't sense a heavy moralism—for example, the somewhat cloying utopian dream of the middle brother. Even here, however, that moralism is tempered by a pervasive generosity and compassion, tenderness and humanity.

In contrast to Franco Rosi, Bernardo Bertolucci keeps us at ironic distance from his family, which comprises a wealthy, self-made manufacturer of Parmesan cheese, his elegant French wife and their 20-year-old son. Indeed, we are so removed from them and their concerns that when the film's plot is set in motion by the terrorist kidnapping of the manufacturer's son we find ourselves speculating on what the action might *mean* instead of feeling any terror or tension.

It's not only that the kidnapping is awkwardly staged and confounds us as much as the queer behavior of the "ridiculous man"—the manufacturer/father. (In the midst of his tragedy, for instance, he does a weird disco dance with his maid.) It's that Mr. Bertolucci indulges in playing distracting and distancing confidence games: Has the son really been kidnapped or is it all a pretense? Are his buxom girlfriend and worker-priest pal in on the plot? Is he dead or isn't he? And is his return at the end illusion or reality?

But though "Tragedy" is clearly a frustrating film, it does have its fascinations. The performances by Ugo Tognazzi as the hero and Anouk Aimee as his wife are appealing and there are several very amusing sequences (best of all, a group of voracious money-lenders sitting about singing "Volare"). And here and there one does get a glimpse into the complex interrelationships between a disintegrating family and a disordered society.

Some 25 years ago, social historian Luigi Barzini posed this question of his native land: "If the Italian family weakens, will anarchy reign supreme?" Italy has, since that time, offered Mr. Barzini a partial answer. And so too, though in different ways, these current Italian films.