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## 12—FRANCESCO ROSI

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The audience should not be just passive spectators

*Although Francesco Rosi is one of the most highly regarded directors internationally, he still remains largely unknown in the United States. The interview which follows took place in 1975 at the time of a Museum of Modern Art retrospective screening of his films and focused on the three for which he was then best known: Salvatore Giuliano (1962), The Mattei Affair (1972), and Lucky Luciano (1973). In Salvatore Giuliano, Rosi looked at the life of a Sicilian folk-hero-bandit with Mafia links who at one time called for Sicily to secede from Italy. The style is a journalistic documentary-like reconstruction in which a mass of conflicting accounts, dubious statements, inexplicable events, and ambiguous motivations underline the realities of postwar Sicily. Ten years later, The Mattei Affair utilizes the same approach to follow the career of Enrico Mattei, the president of Italy's state-controlled petrochemical concern, who died in a mysterious plane crash in 1962. A key interest is Mattei's activities with developing nations who wanted to take control of their oil industries from Anglo-American interests. With Lucky Luciano, Rosi takes up related themes in tracing the cooperation between legal (state) and illegal (Mafia) power. Of particular interest is the U.S. Army's cooperation with the Mafia. Rosi spoke about his work with Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas.*

**Cineaste:** *The structure of many of your films involves a sort of journalistic reconstruction, as in Salvatore Giuliano, where you piece together many different facts and interpretations. In that film you also use a lot of flashbacks and flashforwards—even your style of flashback is complicated, you don't use simple flashbacks.*

**Francesco Rosi:** It's a new kind of flashback, maybe, because it's not used only for the temporal, the time, aspect. In *Salvatore Giuliano* and in *Mattei*, too, it involves the necessity to communicate to the audience the impossibility of reaching the truth. The structure of *Salvatore Giuliano* grows out of an attempt to get as close as possible to the truth. I utilize many different elements to present my interpretation, an interpretation of the relationship between the legitimate power, the state, and the unofficial power, the Mafia. There are many, many different facts, many, many different implications, many, many different collusions between the Mafia and the legitimate power. But in all these elements at my disposal, there are also many doubts, many uncertainties, so I have to communicate to the audience the *impossibility* of reaching the truth. This confusion in the film—of the facts, of the actions, of the different interpretations—is the same irritation that one feels in life when you realize the absolute impossibility of getting at the truth. And it's this feeling I want to convey to the audience.

In addition, this movement, this balance between the past and present and the future represents the confusion that the establishment, the power, encourages in order to keep everything in the dark. In real life, the power tries to keep everything in its place because order is the best way to keep things stable. But when you look at all the different pieces of a puzzle and move them around and you can't fit them all together, this is the beginning of a disorder that the power doesn't want. So, this confusion, this impossibility of fitting together all the different pieces of the puzzle, those things which disrupt the stable and quiet situation, for me this means the beginning of a disorder that makes the power uneasy.

When I realized this during the research for the film—all the stuff of *Salvatore Giuliano*, the various episodes, the trial, the historical and political events—I refused to narrate all these facts in the traditional way. The traditional way, of course, would have been to have used a journalist as the main character—as one of my screenwriter collaborators suggested to me—but I refused because it was clear to me that *I* was the journalist, the narrator, the camera lens was the journalist. I didn't need a journalist character, I needed to convey to

the audience the impossibility of being a journalist in this pit of vipers, this relationship between the legitimate power and the Mafia.

But attention!—because there is another problem. The Mafia is not just what the normal audience believes it to be. The Mafia is also in the first police, the second police, the third police—because we have three police forces in Italy—*carabinieri*, *polizia*, *polizia segreto*.

So with *Salvatore Giuliano* the structure was determined during the actual work on the film—the research I conducted became the basis for the film's dramatic structure. It's the same thing for *The Mattei Affair*—the feeling, the atmosphere, the relationships, are the same. In *Lucky Luciano* there is a little bit of this, but essentially that film called for a historical preparation—all the flashbacks—and even an ideological preparation in order to understand the character of Lucky Luciano. It's very different for *Hands Over the City* because there it's my presumption to have gotten something, to have gotten one opinion on it, and to communicate this opinion to the audience. I tell them, "Now I'm going to narrate to you what I pretend to have gotten and you judge for yourself." This is completely different. So it's not the same style for all my films. Each film demands its own style.

**Cineaste:** *You seem to have a fascination with the Mafia in your work. Why?*

**Rosi:** Fascination? I am fascinated because I live in a Mafia system. You, too, live in a Mafia system. The power is a Mafia system.

**Cineaste:** *You mean literally, that the state and the Mafia are so closely intertwined that they're one for all intents and purposes?*

**Rosi:** Let me read something for you, I have a definition here of the Mafia which I think is a very good one. [Reads]: "The Mafia is an association with criminal intentions for the purpose of illicit enrichment of its members and which, by the use of violent means, imposes itself as a parasitical intermediary between property and labor, between production and consumption, between the citizen and the state." This is a definition given by a Sicilian judge during one of the thousands of Mafia trials. It appears in a preface by Leonardo Sciascia to a study of the Mafia written by a German student, a marvelous study entitled *La Mafia*. I think it's the best definition of the Mafia because it's the most modern one, this conception of its function as an intermediary between property and labor, production and consumption, and between the citizen and the state. That's why I'm fascinated with the Mafia!

**Cineaste:** *In other words, it provides a scale model to understand the power relationships.*

**Rosi:** Yes, of course. And another reason is that I was born in the south of Italy where the mafioso mentality is such a reality, although it has changed considerably. I am fifty-two now but when I was a child the Mafia was another thing altogether. The Mafia went from Sicily to the U.S. and came back from the U.S. with another face, an industrial face. That's the importance, I think, of *Lucky Luciano*—it's the passage from the old Godfather to the modern conception of the Mafia, as a corporation. He's an industrialist now and in *Lucky Luciano* he's like my uncle.

**Cineaste:** *One of the striking things about Lucky Luciano is the downplaying of the violence so typical of films of this genre.*

**Rosi:** Yes, the choice I made for this film's approach involved a refusal—I won't say a refusal of all the temptations of this ambience of violence—but a choice above all to look *behind* these characters and events and ask myself and the audience to reflect on the ambiguity of these connections.

My intention with *Lucky Luciano* was not so much to portray the horror of violence but the horror of living in a world which is built around violence. We know that certain things for which Lucky Luciano was responsible are undeniable, even though no one was able to make him pay for his misdeeds, either because the proof was insufficient or didn't hold up, or perhaps because his protectors were high up in the government. That accounts for the pessimism which permeates the film. The film's ambiguities intended to reflect the ambiguities about the complicities amongst those people who actually held state power in their hands.

The film is also an attempt to penetrate into the obscure psychology of a man who had this illegal type of power—even though at that point most of it had been taken away from him, he still had some power left which was very useful to him. Maybe someone wanted him to remain powerful, perhaps even the police themselves, so as to in a sense justify their mistakes, their inability to capture him legally. The new Mafia bosses also felt that he was much more powerful than he actually was, maybe only in order to distract attention from themselves.

So in the film we see Lucky Luciano as an old man, sick, tired, who lives in a modest apartment in Naples, a city he doesn't love, in a country he doesn't understand, and with a melancholy for America, a powerful country, a world he has lost, where the game is

stronger, more bitter. I wanted to recount the sunset of a Caesar, the inglorious end of a *capo* who knew how to stay in the game till the bitter end, or who perhaps *had* to stay in the game till the end.

So it's this approach which distinguishes my film from others about the Mafia. I refuse the spectacular rhetoric of cinema violence, instead leaving space for a series of interrogations which very clearly imply the guilt of all the people of power, legal power, who move in the margins of the system and to whom the law gives a formal recognition which allows them to reach their criminal objectives.

**Cineaste:** *In The Mattei Affair, you seem to make Mattei a hero.*

**Rosi:** No, it only seems so for technical reasons, because when you make a film with one character, one protagonist, he comes out as a hero. I tried to show a problematic character with some negative aspects and some positive aspects—some of these I agree with, others not, and I hope, in fact I am sure, that that comes out from the film itself.

The danger of Mattei was the difference between his first four or five years and his last five or six. In the first years, from 1945 to 1952, the political and economic situation in Italy needed the rupture of a man like Mattei because the country was stagnated in a completely center-right situation, more right than center, with landowners, old industrialists, in a capitalist situation without movement. Then the same institution Mattei created to bring about social reform, even if a populist one, changed completely into its opposite. It came to be a corporation, a state capitalism stronger than the state itself. This was the danger of Mattei. But we must not forget that a man like Mattei is not one who imposes himself on a bunch of destitute people—he's evoked by the social situation and then accepted by the people. And the fact is that *all* the political parties, all the political factions around Mattei, from the Christian Democrats to the Communists, accepted him. The Christian Democrats were in control but they didn't control Mattei. There is never a strong man in a democracy unless there are also people who accept him.

**Cineaste:** *There are scenes of yourself making the film within the film. What was your reason for doing this?*

**Rosi:** Two reasons. One reason is that the film is an investigation, a research, and it needs the form of an investigation. Another reason is that one of the journalists accumulating documents and evidence for me disappeared. He was working for me because I had asked him, as I had also asked other journalists, to provide me with documentation on the last two days of Mattei in Sicily. When you

prepare a film like this, you need a lot of documentation, not only from a historical point of view but also from a human point of view, as to the behavior of the character, because my goal is to represent a real-life character, not just another character like him. I can *interpret* the reality but I cannot *create* the reality. So, anyway, I asked this journalist, an excellent journalist named De Mauro who worked in Sicily and who knew Mattei, to get me documentation on the last two days because in those two days Mattei visited many villages and had many meetings. I spoke to De Mauro twice in one week by telephone, as you see in the film, but he never told me anything else because a month later he disappeared and hasn't been heard from since. At the time, we strongly suspected that his disappearance was connected with the research for my film because it had uncovered the problem all over again. We also had certain other suspicions because De Mauro had been conducting his own research about the drug traffic from Sicily to the U.S. Now we think it all may have something to do with the current political situation in Italy, so we are completely confused about this kidnapping of De Mauro. But during the preparation of the screenplay, I decided to put myself and this episode in the film for the simple reason that it was the truth. I was convinced it was my duty to do so—it is the testimony not only of a fact but also of what a film can lead to.

**Cineaste:** *There are other, more ambiguous scenes in the film regarding certain events—for instance, the sabotaging of Mattei's plane.*

**Rosi:** I am convinced that if Mattei wasn't killed that time, surely another time someone . . . this is my conviction. I mean, I don't have any evidence to give as proof to the audience that Mattei was killed in that way. I am *very, very, very* suspicious but, finally, it doesn't make any difference because it's not so important to know *how* they killed Mattei or even *if* they killed Mattei but whether there were actually many reasons to kill Mattei.

Actually, I would like to make a continuation of the film—it would be very interesting to cover the period from the death of Mattei up to the present time. This is what I feel like doing when I see *Mattei* now, I would like to make another film. But it's probably too soon, we don't have the sufficient distance from the facts now.

**Cineaste:** *Has Mattei been a successful film from your point of view?*

**Rosi:** It has been very successful internationally, in Latin America, France, Japan—not an economic success, although it wasn't a

failure either—but from a critical point of view it has been very successful. The problematic dimension of the film is accepted much more by audiences in Europe. Here, I don't know, because the film was not really distributed—only two or three days, I don't know, maybe a week.

**Cineaste:** *No, you're right, I don't think Mattei played more than a week or so in New York and I doubt if it got many engagements outside the city. In fact, both of your last two films have received very shabby treatment from their distributors. I understand that Lucky Luciano opened on the West Coast on the lower half of a double-bill at drive-ins and here in New York they opened it on 42nd Street!*

**Rosi:** Yes, for *Mattei Affair*, I think it's fairly easy to understand, at least I think so, but I'm not sure. I mean, you know—Paramount, Gulf and Western . . . maybe no, maybe yes.\*

**Cineaste:** *It smells. . . .*

**Rosi:** Yes, I mean, here was a film that won the Grand Prize at Cannes, but it was released suddenly, without publicity, without saying anything about it.

**Cineaste:** *They tried to release it as just a thriller. You couldn't tell from the ads that it was about the international politics of oil. . . something which six months later became very topical.*

**Rosi:** Yes, there was a prophecy about all that. As for *Lucky Luciano*, that was another thing. The problem was that Avco-Embassy tried to release it as a commercial gangster picture—which was completely wrong—hoping to make a quick buck on it. We arranged a special screening of the film and Norman Mailer was there and he loved it. He even gave me some lines to use but the distributor didn't use them.†

**Cineaste:** *Well, they opened it on 42nd Street and Norman Mailer is nothing on 42nd Street. How do you find working with Gian Maria Volonte?*

**Rosi:** He's very, very intelligent and very instinctive. He has a real instinct for acting and, at the same time, not only a political consciousness but also a profound consciousness of the psychological

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\*Paramount Pictures is a subsidiary company of Gulf and Western, a corporate conglomerate whose multinational corporations are involved in such widely diversified areas as oil, life insurance, auto parts, zinc mining, cigars, meatpacking, and sugar production in Latin America.

†“It is the finest movie yet made about the Mafia, the most careful, the most thoughtful, the truest and most sensitive to the paradoxes of a society of crime. So it is a picture with marvelous episodes, a fine sense of irony and the breath of art in every sordid detail.”

structure of the character. He does research with me—it's the normal work of an actor, or at least if you're a good actor you work this way.

**Cineaste:** *You work with the same director of photography on each of your films, too.*

**Rosi:** Yes, Pasquali de Santis, my current director of photography, used to be the camera operator for Gianni di Venanzo, my preceding director of photography. When Gianni di Venanzo died, I took the camera operator and promoted him to director of photography because I like to work with people I know.

**Cineaste:** *In Salvatore Giuliano the black and white photography is sometimes almost like an abstract painting. Is this deliberate or are these accidents you accepted?*

**Rosi:** It's very difficult to draw the line between what you decide beforehand and what you accept during the shooting. It's very difficult.

**Cineaste:** *Many times the interior is dark and a door opens, there's a flash of light and these pieces of white open up the screen.*

**Rosi:** You know, the fact is that black and white is the only way to make good cinema. Color is the end of good cinema—I don't like color.

**Cineaste:** *But you have to use it.*

**Rosi:** Yes, I have to because now they don't accept black and white and I proposed to make many of my last films in black and white. Color is more realistic than black and white but in the worst sense, not in the best sense. Black and white is imaginative, it's a suggestion, not a limitation. In color, the red is red, the yellow is yellow, but in black and white it's absolutely free.

**Cineaste:** *Why is it that there are so many politically-motivated filmmakers in Italy?*

**Rosi:** I don't think it's too difficult to explain. In Italy, even now, there are two societies—one which has evolved at the modern, technological level, and another one at the level of the third world. Before, this difference between the North and the South of the country was very clear, very sharp. Today there is great confusion between the North and South but there is still this difference between these two kinds of societies. And it is through the struggle between these two societies that we will reach an equilibrium and a possible platform of social justice in Italy.

There is an old anti-progressive culture with a paternalistic and authoritarian conception of the state, but this conception is based on complicity and corruption at the level of under-state power—the sub-

government, the invisible government—and it is a conception based above all on a social class, the bourgeoisie in the highest positions of the government. This is a real social class in Italy, a class that defends itself and its privileges by blocking any progress, even progress on just a social level. It is not just a question of a struggle between capitalism and socialism, it is a fight between privilege and any threat or challenge to that privilege.

There is another very, very important thing—in Italy we have been oppressed for centuries and centuries by the Catholic, apostolic, Roman Church. It's a cancer of the human conscience, a cancer which devours everything, because it impedes any positive, human progress. It's a tragedy, a real tragedy, because the equilibrium between the classic left and the classic right in Italy also has to respond to its influence.

There's also the whole influence of neo-realism in the Italian cinema. You know, of course, all about the development of neo-realism. After World War II, there was a virtual human renaissance and during that period the Italian cinema was more important than Italian literature. Neo-realism was an investigation of the human condition involving a continuous balance between real life and real character and the search for a possible truth. Where was this possible truth?—we didn't know, we searched, trying to avoid the use of schemas.

After the first phase of neo-realism, there was a second phase which consisted of a time for reflection and a critical examination of the first phase. In the beginning, neo-realism involved only the attempt to be a witness to reality, with no critical perspective, just a desire to record reality. But this was not enough. After a while, neo-realism had become fashionable, it was just another mode—you had a pre-determined format and all you had to do was put all the neo-realistic gimmicks into this format. I refused this schematicism because it was merely rhetoric and my personal solution was for my investigative research to provide the narrative structure for my films.

But, to get back to your original question, I think it's this whole panorama which provokes a continuous explosion of contradictions and which accounts for the large number of filmmakers in Italy who are interested in political problems.

**Cineaste:** *To what extent in this process do you feel the Communist and Socialist parties play a role?*

**Rosi:** In Italy, all the real, progressive culture is near or within the

Communist and Socialist parties. After the war there was a big confrontation between the left and the right and that was something we needed. Today it's different but I still think we need a clear opposition, a clear left opposition and, personally, I prefer a common left opposition, ranging from a radical position to the Communist position.

**Cineaste:** *Where do you yourself fit into that spectrum?*

**Rosi:** I am not a militant in any political party. I am very close to the Communist Party and Socialist Party—it depends on the situation. I prefer to be a *compagno de la strada*, a fellow traveller, of both parties. The Italian political situation requires this kind of flexibility.

**Cineaste:** *Do the extra-parliamentarians have any influence on you?*

**Rosi:** It depends—Il Manifesto, yes; the other extra-parliamentarians, no.

**Cineaste:** *Your films demand much more from an audience. You make the audience work.*

**Rosi:** Yes, my films demand a little work from the audience, I ask them to cooperate with me. I think we filmmakers have a great responsibility, both political and moral. After all, we are not obliged to make films, but we do make films and I think they are a very powerful way to say something to an audience. The world often changes through the cinema. The American way of life arrived in Europe through films—first films, then through blue jeans, Coca-Cola. . . .

But I do try to have the public collaborate in my search for a possible truth. The public should not be just passive spectators of a story that's being told. In my films, I pose questions and I conduct research, and this research, this search for some truth, is quite often the very structure of the film, that is, as I explained earlier, the research itself is the narrative structure.

Naturally, I don't forget the emotional way of reaching an audience—the emotional way, of course, is the traditional way for filmmakers—but I refuse to entrust my work, my research, only to the emotions. In the traditional filmmaking, the audience is considered as a child, as having an infantile mentality. I refuse this because I have more respect both for myself and for the audience. But I am a filmmaker and I make films with emotions, not only with ideas.

**Cineaste:** *Otherwise you'd just make documentaries. . . .*

**Rosi:** Yes, all right, I don't make documentaries. My films—if it's possible to say that my films involve a particular method—my films are both, they're a compromise between the two. It's not a *documentary* way of making films but a *documented* way, because I believe that the truth very often contains much more imagination than fiction.

But for me the documentation is only the first step, a point of departure, for my work. At a certain point, after I have something documented, I stop, because I don't want to be pedantic, I don't want to be a professor. But I don't want to convey lies or stupidities, either. If you choose to narrate something about a real person—Salvatore Giuliano, Mattei or Lucky Luciano—you cannot invent, in my opinion, but you can interpret. There is a big difference. Why fabricate something just because it makes for more spectacular cinema and an easy way to grab the audience? No, I have all the room I need in my films to interpret the reality and this is the important thing for me, the interpretation of the facts. A fact, one fact, about a man means nothing. What I'm attempting to do is to connect the facts with the man, to follow the logical line from his actions to the consequences of those actions.