

Document Citation

Title	Hands over the city
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Le mani sulla città (Hands over the city), Rosi, Francesco, 1963

HANDS OVER THE CITY

Directed by Francesco Rosi. Screenplay by Francesco Rosi, Enzo Provenza and Enzo Forcella. From the novel by Raffaele La Capria. Director of photography, Gianni di Venanzo. Editor, Mario Serandrei. Music, Piero Piccioni. Art Director, Massimo Rosi. A Galatea production, distributed by Connoisseur. Italian, 1963. Original title, *Le Mani Sulla Città*.

One doesn't think of the cinema as a likely medium for political thought, yet, on looking back, political interest can be seen as a strong undercurrent in many memorable films. In the 19-teens, films reputedly swung the American public in favour of hating the Kaiser. The German cinema of the '20s abounded in political topics, and the '30s brought a flood of political movies from notably, France (Clair's *Le Dernier Milliardaire*, Renoir's *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*) and America (*Mr Deeds Goes To Town*, *Gabriel Over the White House*). After the war the genre was somewhat discredited by over-idealistic efforts like *Wilson*, by Hollywood's awful anti-Red cycle, and of course by the critics' naive touting of Russian propaganda films. Nonetheless, the post-war years saw many political films from America (*The Farmer's Daughter*, *The Fountainhead*, *On the Waterfront*, *A Face in the Crowd*). And since 1945 the great countries for political films have been, England and Italy. English films have approached political issues in such a diversity of idioms that critics hardly connected, as political, such films as *A Matter of Life and Death* and *The Millionairess*, *Hungry Hill* and *Look Back In Anger*, *Chance of a Lifetime* and *I'm All Right Jack*, *Fame is the Spur* and *No Love for Johnny*.

The Italian approach has been more conspicuous, because consistently identifiable with the neo-realist idiom. Nearly 20 years on, *Bicycle Thieves* may seem slightly sentimental, and *Bitter Rice* over-melodramatic, in presenting their Marxist critiques of society. But, ever since *Rocco*, the Italian cinema has been approaching political themes ever more directly. *Le Mani Sulla Città* is, in a sense, the consummation of Marxist neo-realism, in that it dispenses with individuals who represent their class, and with stories which symbolise social issues. Story and style are shaped to show one thing: the structure of power in society, and the way in which real, economic interests undermine the facade of the political system—a facade which fools the politicians themselves as much as anybody else. In being about politics quite directly, it parallels a recent crop of American films, notably *Advise and Consent*, *The Best Man* and *The Ugly American*. But these films were distinctly romantic in suggesting that the most important thing about politicians in their 'sincerity'. Rosi's film is more sophisti-

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cated and cutting, and for those filmgoers who don't turn blue at the thought of taking Marxism seriously its cynicism about Western politics is distinctly refreshing—and, I'd say rather nearer the sad truth than the American films.

Rod Steiger, quietly and strongly, plays Nottola, a Naples tycoon who gets valuable building contracts from the ruling right-wing partly in return for buying them votes. When, as a result of his pile-driving, an old tenement capsizes, a commission of enquiry has to be held, and Nottola's political cronies plan to ditch him. He then offers to transfer his support to the centre party, who, after tussling with their conscience, decide to accept him, since they'll only continue impotent in opposition. They win the election. The price of his support turns out to be made Commissioner of Buildings. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* . . . The left-wing partly (fairly evidently the Communists) continues to harass the new ruling partly as they harassed the old, but are just as impotent as before . . .

In outline the attack on the two 'bougeois' parties (Butskellism?) may seem rather schematic, but Rosi's treatment enriches it with a fine, dry, sophisticated tone. Nothing in the film distracts us from the political intrigue (Nottola has a wife and a son, whom, we never see). And precisely because Rosi's film is so concentrated it renders, acutely, the human quality of political involvement. The scenes of debating chamber rowdiness are all the more hilarious because of their accuracy, and here Rosi is very much in the neo-realist tradition. The deputies of each shade are played by extras from those backgrounds and with those opinions; the Communist delegate is a Communist delegate; indeed, there are only two professional actors in the film.

Rosi's concessions to showmanship are minimal. The stern, pompous faces of the 'right', and the leading Communist's concern with the people, leave me at least in little doubt of which side Rosi wants us to be on; and that Nottola is the nearest thing in the film to a villain (if there is a villain, other than the corruption which is the curse of Italian society). Yet

what strikes one is not so much an unfamiliar view of politics as the realism of its mechanics: how wistfully irrelevant and how specious is the leader of the centre party in his attachment to the art of the past; how constantly exasperated is the Communist delegate; how disconcerted he is by Nottola's retort that it's he, the businessman, who's rehousing Italy and getting things done, even if they're not the best things; or how constantly and humiliatingly he is forced to hooligan tactics in the Council chamber. The glimpses of the procedures of power are quite fascinating as hostile politicians tentatively approach one another, how they slip from the almost involuntary bonhomie of working partners to the exasperations of conflict, how commission of enquiry sets about looking for the needle of responsibility in the bureaucratic haystack.

Rosi's style is beautifully adjusted to his theme, and so smoothly self-effacing that, paradoxically, it gives keen aesthetic pleasure. The debating scenes avoid the runs of reverse-angles one might expect and long, slow, gliding long-shots of the entire scene gives us a feeling for the 'pattern', the tensions of co-existence. In the same way, after showing the collapse of the tenement, the camera stresses passers-by,

fire-engines, all the apparatus of the system. As a result of this sentimental restraint, the shots which might have been sentimental (the injured child, and, later, a hospital scene) have, instead, a sober dignity. The camera's relatively few, brief probings into the common people are rich in their sense of people's despair, confusion and doggedness. There are one or two touches of very dry, sly, deadpan humour, as when the Communist deputy, before hurrying off for lunch, carefully locks his car (he too is, in fact, protecting his property from the people . . . !). The opening sequence of splendid new buildings is beautifully conceived and photographed (and how those buildings have changed in meaning when the sequence is recapitulated at the end).

The film is a connoisseur's item in that its Italian subject matter can't really be of wide appeal here. Nonetheless, it's so deft and impressive it's almost a minor classic. And its trenchancy has, in an indirect, but mischievous way, an odd sidelight on English politics. Some of the speeches one can hear from the public galleries of the Commons are, after all, so daft, that I for one can't wait for parliamentary debates to be televised, in full, so that everyone can see for himself what bumbling idiots lawmakers can be, and, instead of being overawed by them, set about keeping them up to democratic scratch. Meanwhile, the Council Chamber scenes in Rosi's films are the next best thing in catching the underlying absurdities of politics.

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