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Rocco and His Brothers

Rocco and His Brothers, directed by Luchino Visconti (*La Terra Trema*, *Osessione*), is the story of a peasant family that migrates to Milan from Lucania, in the primitive, poverty-struck south of Italy—like Tennessee hillbillies moving to Detroit. The first hour is extremely good, in a style that might be called "heightened realism"—the acting and photography are romantically exaggerated, but the aim is naturalistic, something like *Greed*. One is involved, one is delighted by the humor and tenderness and dignity and god-awfulness of people living together: the quarrel at the betrothal party, the moving into the dank basement flat, the scenes in the boxer's gym and the laundry. But then the heightening goes too high. The last two hours are dominated by two terrible scenes of violence: the rape of a "decent whore" (why are movie whores always decent?) by the brother she had rejected, a rape that is committed in the helpless presence of the brother (Rocco) she loves and that is followed by an interminable running fight between the two brothers; and later the murder, protracted and brutal, of the whore by the first brother. These scenes reminded me unpleasantly of the shower-bath murder in *Psycho*; they seemed to correspond not to the requirements of the work of art, but to some neurotic need in the artist—or perhaps his sense of the exploitability of such a need in his audience.

Nor did I believe in Rocco, who is right out of Dostoevski's *The Idiot*, another Prince Myshkin who returns good for evil. His reaction to the rape of his girl is to break off relations with her and insist she go back to his brother because the rape has shown she is more needed in that quarter. Not unnaturally, she feels this is monstrous and goes back to her ravisher only in order to humiliate him, the final upshot being her murder. *The Idiot* has much the same plot line, including the murder, but one believes it because Myshkin is made credible. But Visconti is no Dostoevski. When Rocco tries to go beyond naturalism, it becomes not tragedy but grand opera.

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