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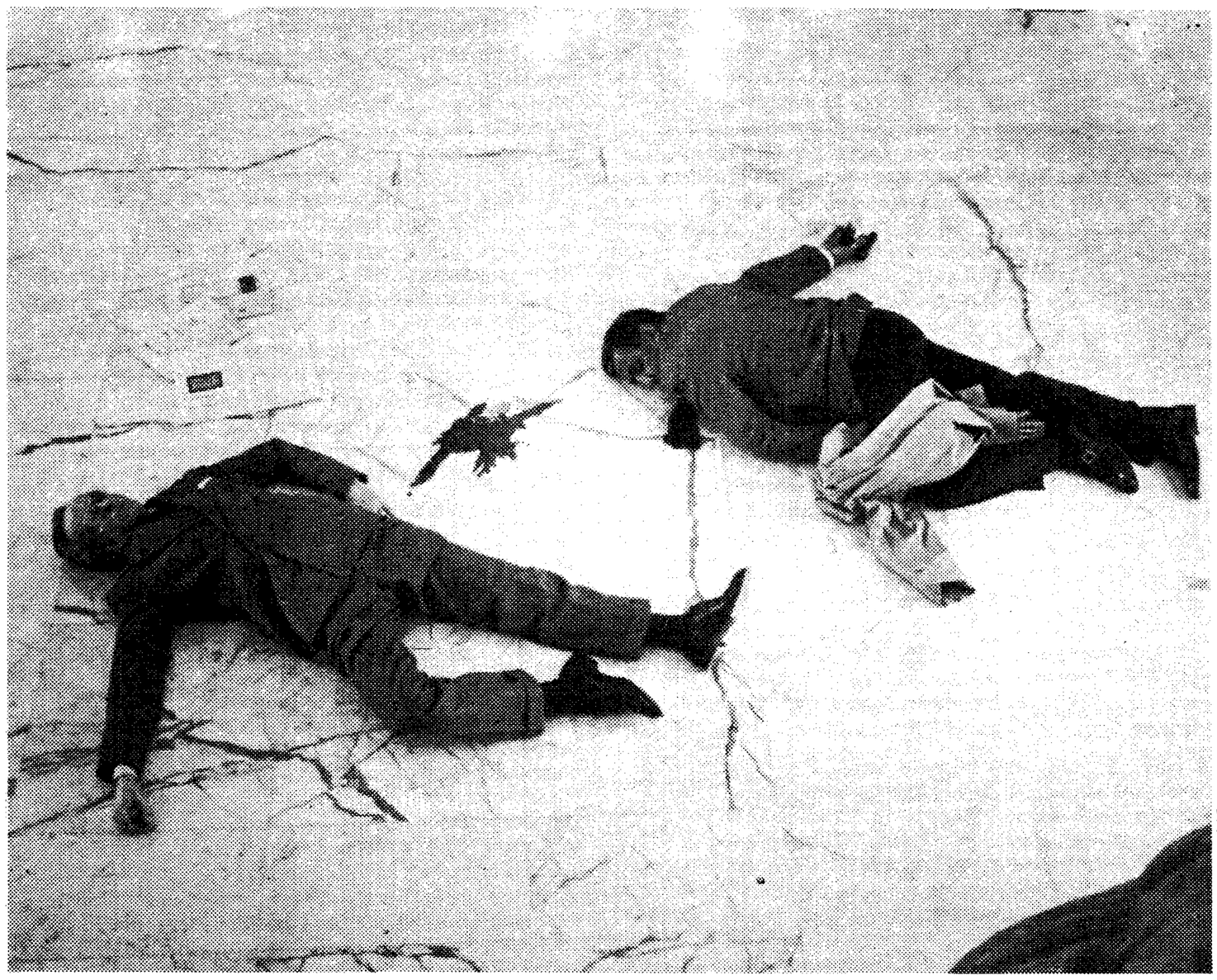
AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO ROSI

By George Robinson

Everything in my interview with Francesco Rosi, director of **Salvatore Giuliano, Hands Across the City, The Mattei Affair,** and **Lucky Luciano** bespeaks a deeply committed Marxist philosophy at work, as do his films. Rosi's working methods, like the films themselves, are the product of a Marxist epistemology, formed by the writings of such men as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Rosi insists throughout the interview on the filmmaking process as an ongoing research into objective social reality, conditioned by the relationship between the artist and that reality. All knowledge "is produced in the practice of material interaction between men, women and objects," as James Roy Macbean has written. Consequently, Rosi's mise-en-scene and his working methods are materialist, and he shies away from the mystification of power figures, preferring, in films like **Luciano** and **Mattei**, to deal in facts rather than speculations, in social reality rather than mythos. The results may seem a bit cold, like a Brancusi sculpture as re-worked by Bertolt Brecht, but they are among the most profoundly radical works the cinema has produced to date.

My interview with Rosi occurred shortly before the first public screening of **Cadaveri Eccellenti**, his latest film, at the New York Film Festival and, consequently, that film was our first topic of conversation.



Cadaveri Eccellenti

GR: First of all, Signor Rosi, I liked **Cadaveri Eccellenti** very much. What, exactly, do you think it has to say for an American audience? Can it be taken as a film about Watergate and the other related machinations of the Nixon administration?

FR: I consider both the movie and the novel on which it is based, **Il Contesto (The Context)** By Leonardo Sciascia, as statements about power, the relationship between power and the citizen. I think that any public crimes with an implication of political power behind them, such as Watergate, can be referred to through this film, for an American audience.

GR: One of the most important ways in which the film differs from your other major films is in structure. In **The Mattei Affair, Salvatore Guiliano,** and **Lucky Luciano,** the narrative is structured around a search for a central figure who is elusive, enigmatic, unknowable. **Cadaveri**, on the other hand, is an inversion of this, with a clear central figure whose search is somehow insoluble. This brings to mind two questions: why this switch to a more linear narrative-line, and is that switch the reason for the casting of a clear-cut audience identification figure, like Ventura, as the lead, rather than a more ambiguous persona like Volonte?

FR: The difference is not just in the different origins of the film, although here there is the novel. There is another difference. The reality of the time in which **Salvatore Guiliano** or **Mattei Affair** was made is different from now. The tension is stronger now — the possibility of understanding clearly what relation there is among the different aspects, faces of the institutions which wield power is less clear, more confusing, more — I would not employ the word, but I don't know another which means the same thing — mysterious. I know this word is dangerous, because mystery is too near to myth. I am not trying to destroy the myth, but to research a way to destroy the myth. I know that it's difficult unless the people are conscious of this power, of the possibility of destroying this power.

Another difference is that in the earlier films, the investigator was myself, off-screen, with my voice, my intentions, the structure of the film. In the latest film, the investigator is in the film, and is a victim of the ambiguities he meets in his trip into the institutions, the corruptions, the implications (of his investigation itself). The film is like a trip; Ventura starts as a simple normal detective, but he enters a more complicated reality, and this reality is very confusing, because the institutions themselves provoke that confusion with their power.

I needed the identification of the audience with the main character. I needed for them to make the same trip as he does. With a figure like Volonte, with all his ambiguity, he immediately evokes the political nature of the contradictions of the film; I needed, in this film, for the film itself to do that, for it to come from me. And for that reason, I preferred an actor like Ventura. For me an actor like Ventura is more adaptable, more suited for the role.

GR: How far from the novel did you go in the adaptation?

FR: In substance, the film is the same as the novel. Leonardo Sciascia agrees. But there is in the film some updating — the book was written in 1971, the film was made in 1975. In those four years, many things have changed in Italy, not only the political and social tensions, but the daily life in the country. I have been obliged to do the updating, and in the film I think you can recognize more of the physical aspects of the country and of the Italian situation. In the book, Sciascia doesn't talk clearly about Italy or Sicily, even if the reader can think he is talking about Italy or Sicily. In literature, in the book, the instrument (of the author) is the word, the **metafora**. The film is physical, a physical art, completely different. You cannot duplicate the ambiguities of the **metafora.**

GR: Do you generally work very close to a written script or is there improvisation with the actors?

FR: I have a structure. I have dialogues, but I prefer to work continuously on the script, all through the filming, in a rapport with the actors and the situations. I always leave the door open in my work. The screenplay grows up during the shooting. I make changes, I add lines with the actors. In a film, I don't always have just professional actors — even in this film, in which the professional actors are many — and with non-professional actors, you need some flexibility. You cannot oblige a non-professional actor to read an exact line.

I changed many things in this film, particularly in the break between the first and second parts — I shot **Cadaveri** at two different times, with a break in-between. I was obliged to examine the script in the light of the changing Italian political reality.

GR: How do the professional actors that you have worked with respond to the non-professional actors? Do they get along well?

FR: They work very well. It depends on the feeling in which you put them. I remember with Frank Wolff, in **Salvatore Guiliano**, he was acting with Sicilian peasants, and they didn't understand English at first. But after a year or so, from the feeling which I put into them (non-professionals in general) they begin to understand. The big confrontation was in **Hands Across the City** between Rod Steiger and Guido Alberti. Alberti was an industrialist. In the film he played a very important character, and most of his scenes were with Rod Steiger, a very professional actor.

GR: What kind of working relationship do you have with Pasqualino de Santis, who's shot most of your films?

FR: The film is a research. And research needs collaboration. I think the director of photography is certainly one of the most important collaborators, because through the photography, you can establish the different feelings of the scenes. The light is the most important way to establish the feeling of a scene. I put my feeling for an ambiance from reality — I work with Pasqualino, I show him what I want, I explain to him what I want, and then, together, we make a research. But technically, it's

GR: What part do you play in the cutting of your films? What is your relationship with your editors?

FR: I work from the first moment to the last, from the original idea to the final product. So I work on all the editing, and I sometimes change the structure of the film in the editing. **Mattei Affair**, for instance, starts where the script finished — it's completely reversed.

GR: How do you feel about the distribution your films have received in the United States?

FR: I have not been lucky with the American distribution of my films. **Salvatore Guiliano** was shown in a little theater, they wanted to re-cut it and I stopped them. They didn't believe in the possibility of the film.

Paramount bought **Mattei Affair**, and opened it on a Sunday — they told me in Rome, by cable, on Friday night. This is the way to kill a film, not help it, not distribute it.

David Stone, an American independent distributor who owns two theaters in London, the Cine-Gates I and II, distributed **Mattei Affair** there, and it played in the two theaters for six months. Why, in two different countries, but with the same language, is there this enormous difference? Why is a big American distributor deciding that the American public cannot accept a film with a particular statement, a particular — if you wish — political feeling? I think this is an insult to the audience. All my work is based on the idea of having an audience alive and responding, participating. I reject the idea of the audience as victim — as just receiving a product. For that reason, I make questions of my films, I don't give resolutions of problems. The problems are open in a dialectical way. I am not able to give the final answer. My impression is that some critics in this country want the opposite — they want to "know" something. But I don't know. The ambiguity is not mine — it is in the facts, in life.

With **Lucky Luciano** I had the same thing (with the distribution in America.) They didn't believe in the potential commercial possibilities of the film. They decided that the film was completely intellectual, and distributed it in exactly the opposite of the way I would have liked to have seen it handled. If you think that a film is intellectual, then you need the right theater, and you show the film in the original version, with subtitles, and publicity campaign which explains, which introduces the film to an audience. **Lucky Luciano** was put into anonymous theaters on double features. (In New York, it opened in the nabes, double-billed with **Carnal Knowledge**! — GR)

This is not the way to handle an "intellectual" film, if such a thing as intellectual and non-intellectual

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films exists. I think there are authentic films and non-authentic films, good movies and bad movies. I don't differentiate between intellectual and non-intellectual movies – I differentiate between the real relationship which your work can establish with reality (and an unreal one.) If your relationship is authentic at least part of this rapport will come across to an audience.

I don't know with this film **(Cadaveri Eccellenti).** The film is owned by United Artists (in Europe). I hope it is shown here in the original version, with subtitles, first. You know there are many problems here with European movies.

GR: Was **Lucky Luciano** cut when it was released here?

FR: I don't know. I refused to see it on a double feature. In England it was cut.

GR: Is it difficult for a politically committed filmmaker to work in Italy?

FR: No. I think it's easier. Italy may be the only country where, for thirty years, since the end of the war, we have continued to make social and political films.

GR: Do you see yourself, then, as part of an unbroken line that runs from Rossellini, Visconti and the neo-realists?

FR: Sure.

GR: How do you see yourself in relationship to other leftist filmmakers in Europe, for instance, Jean-Luc Godard, whose approach is so different from yours?

FR: There are many ways – the way of Godard, of Costa-Gavras, of Petri, my way. Every one has his own approach to reality.

GR: And the American cinema? Do you relate to that tradition at all?

FR: When I was a kid, I went to the movies, and I liked American movies, but I don't deliberately set out to make movies in that line. Of course, the American cinema is a very important one, always has been. You find many fine directors there. I don't like to speak about so-and-so as a "direct influence." Sometimes, you make a film apparently influenced by another film, but without ever having seen the other film. When I made **Mattei Affair,** many people said to me, "Ah, you have seen **Citizen Kane** many times!" But I had never seen it before. I did see it after. I do have admiration for Orson Welles, as well as for Elia Kazan and Jules Dassin. Indirectly, surely, I absorbed a part of that culture.

GR: You've always described yourself as an optimist, with a deep hope for the future. Yet your films are very pessimistic.

FR: I am pessimistic, but I am not cynical. I am pessimistic with my mind, but I am optimistic with my sense of responsibility, in my will, in my heart.

Francesco Rosi filmography

La Sfida (The Challenge) (1958); **I Magliari (The Swindlers/The Con Men/The Hustlers)** (1959); **Salvatore Giuliano** (1961); **Le Mani Sulla Citta (Hands Over the City)** (1963); **Il Momento Della Verita (The Moment of Truth)** (1965); **C'era Una Volta (More Than a Miracle/Happily Ever After)** (1967); **Uomini Contro (Man Against/ Just Another War)** (1970); **Il Caso Mattei (The Mattei Affair)** (19[illegible] **Di Lucky Luciano (Lucky Luciano)** (19[illegible] **[illegible]ccellenti (The Exquisite Corpses)** (1975)

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