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'Lucky Luciano'

amount of exhumed information can guarantee possession of the truth. In every biography there must be craters; the realistic way to fill them in is by using the adjacent landscape.

In the case of Enrico Mattei, variously described during the 1950s as 'the most powerful Italian since Julius Caesar' (an American newspaper) and 'the most important since Marco Polo' (Chou En-Lai), there was considerable ground to be covered. Having talked his way into control of the state oil company immediately after the war, Mattei set out to eradicate private speculators in Italy's limited natural resources, and to challenge the Middle Eastern monopoly held by the so-called 'seven sisters', the major Western oil companies. Breaking unconcernedly with the terms normally offered in oil negotiations, he championed the people of the Third World with the insistence that they should be the first to benefit from the wealth that was there to be mined from their own countries. It was a lesson, of course, to which they paid close attention, with long-term results. It was also a policy which created enemies for Mattei, and his sudden death was an event of significant political convenience in a number of areas, to the extent that suspicions were inevitably voiced about its cause. Eight years later, a journalist investigating Mattei's last hours for the purposes of Rosi's film disappeared without trace, and again it could be inferred that political interests were being protected. His colleagues, interviewed for the film, commented sadly: 'People like things to stay as they are . . .'

Such thickets of ambiguity provide fertile territory for speculative journalism, but Rosi is careful to avoid accusations, stating firmly that he simply wants to raise some questions for the public to consider. What we make of them is presumably up to us, which seems a little unjust in that it's Rosi's own selection of the available facts which is being presented and we have to take on trust what he considers vital to our understanding of the case. If Rosi has done all the research without reaching a verdict, how can *we* be in a position to draw any conclusions? His film depends, in short, on the assumption that Rosi knows more than he's telling—an assumption which of course adds many a meaningful nod and wink to the film's glancingly elliptical course. It also, unfortunately, renders it invalid as factual documentary; what *The*

Mattei Affair gives us is fiction tantalisingly disguised as history.

It's the standard formula for neo-realism, of which Rosi (along with Ermanno Olmi) appears to be one of the few surviving practitioners. At its purest, neo-realism requires a cast of non-actors, an elegiac visual style, and a moral standpoint on the popular side of Leftist; *The Mattei Affair* fits these specifications closely, with the one interesting exception that Mattei himself is played by today's Tognazzi, the ubiquitous Gian Maria Volonté. They merge into a single, mythic figure, explosive, dominating, endlessly on the move, a fabulously rich revolutionary nationalist promising equal wealth for all. As with *Salvatore Giuliano*, the film revolves round a character about whom little is known but volumes have been written, and as with *Hands Over the City* we are being called to celebrate a heroic ingenuity and vitality, the god-like disbursement of sheer power, without wasting too many tears on conventional legal processes. Rosi clearly places no trust in lesser mortals; even when he finally bursts into the film himself and starts asking awkward questions at the airport bar, the waiters edge nervously away, shaking with instant guilt. There's always a plot, and everyone else is always in on it—the police, the government (of whom, imaginably for diplomatic reasons, we see remarkably little in *The Mattei Affair*), the Mafia, the aeronautics experts, the witnesses. Like Peter Watkins, Rosi brings conspiracy to our attention and invites our outraged concern. As with Watkins, it is the essential selectivity of film that renders his statistics unreliable.

So *The Mattei Affair*, like *Salvatore Giuliano*, is the saga of a folk hero, and in the manner of its telling it lives up to its subject, punching along with a magnificent clamour of images as if trying to put Charles Foster Kane out of business. As the news of Mattei's death is phoned incredulously around 'the world, the office lights go on, layer by layer, across the façade of his headquarters, and the concept seems perpetuated throughout the film as table-lamps are lit, flashlights crackle, police signals revolve, and the giant torches of burning gas illuminate barren landscapes. At the end, even the lightning flashes as a vivid alternative to the sabotage theory. In the eye of the storm, Volonté provides his own hurricane perform-

The Mattei Affair and Lucky Luciano

Amid the confusion of police interrogators, newspapermen and sightseers, a mechanical shovel hauls fragments of wreckage from a muddy crater. As a reconstruction of the air crash that killed Enrico Mattei near Milan in October 1962, the opening of Francesco Rosi's *The Mattei Affair* (Cinegate) establishes with brutal clarity that to dig up information is never a simple task. And later, when the twisted remains of Mattei's private jet are set out in macabre mosaic to be argued over by the experts, the further point is made that no

ance, a volatile bolt of energy, tearing down the corridors of state, flying proprietorially over Sicily, and casting a hungry gaze at the moon ('I wonder if there's oil up there?'). But the film's touch is just as sure away from all the colours and crowds. There is, for instance, the splendid lunch at which Mattei is placidly snubbed by an American oil baron, a deft and ironic drama observed with precision timing. Whether it really happened that way seems immaterial; as cinema, it's unarguable.

With *Lucky Luciano* (EMI), made the following year (1973), one would have expected Rosi to have an easier time. After *The Godfather*, films about gangsters seem unlikely to attract unwelcome attention in the wrong quarters; they are also popular enough to be immune from tampering, except by the censor for reasons of violence rather than of running time. The English version of *Lucky Luciano*, however, is twenty-one minutes shorter than the Italian, and since its moments of bloodshed are both infrequent and discreet the abbreviation is puzzling. Certainly it hasn't improved the rhythm of the film, which staggers at an uneven pace from one conference scene to the next like a delegate with jet-lag; but the cutting has also been unable to disguise what looks at times like an extremely hurried production assignment and a literally unspeakable script lifted verbatim from official records of meetings and interrogations.

As usual, the photography by De Santis is Rosi's trump card, and *Lucky Luciano* is unfailingly spectacular, particularly in the scenes of the American advance through Italy in 1944. What diminishes it is the detail—not the Glenn Miller band turning out war-time hits but the unconsumed sandwiches, not the supply train going by in the distance but the self-conscious group of beggars in the foreground. The conflict of purposes appears to be artistic rather than political this time: a gangster film is called for, all spattered shaving-foam and perforated furniture, but what Rosi has in mind, as with Mattei, is some mud-probing, an investigation into the real feet beneath the clay ones. For the purpose, he enlisted the extraordinary nemesis figure from the Narcotics Bureau who hunted Luciano for ten years; playing himself as to the manner born, Siragusa makes a bucolic Pat Garrett to Luciano's Billy, and his evident satisfaction in the role bears an authentic chill.

Luciano, like Mattei, proves an elusive martyr. Volonté (of course) plays him with weary eyes and a forgiving smile, pinching his

nose from time to time like an absent-minded vicar. He says little, does nothing. That he was capable of dominating the entire Italian drug racket seems unthinkable, and Rosi doesn't seek to persuade us on the point. Instead, Luciano subsides into a dusty death from heart failure, suspected and accused on all sides, but complaining only, on the few occasions that he does talk, that Naples is a trivial setting for a man who once confronted President Roosevelt. When gangsters are called for, the film introduces Rod Steiger, huge and curly in a role that's too small for him, methodically slapping girls' bottoms, and eradicated nastily among the dustbins. Like the film, he's an affectionate and welcome experiment, but he's a long haul from neo-realism. It would seem that Rosi prefers his deaths and his villains to be more equivocal.

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