



GAETANA MARRONE

The Cinema
of
Francesco Rosi

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To Maria DiBattista

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Preface

Francesco Rosi (1922–2015) occupies a unique place in postwar Italian, indeed postwar world, cinema. His films show a consistent formal balance while representing historical events as social emblems that examine, shape, and reflect the national identity. This important body of work, which has made a vital mark on the works of directors like Martin Scorsese, remains to be examined for the English-speaking audience. This study addresses Rosi's films as mosaics fashioned out of "clips" collected from the various stages of production, most specifically from the director's own archival materials. My approach situates each film in its artistic and cultural context but also attends to the specific forms and ethical commitment that characterize each film.

The historical poetics that I am proposing here is not one that favors content over form. Rosi's style integrates the close observation of daily life and behavior with spectacular *mise-en-scènes*. His early films in particular are closely indebted to the stunning physicality of Visconti's nonprofessional actors in *La terra trema* and the fluid movement of Rossellini's crowd scenes in *Roma, città aperta*. Over the years, Rosi has offered us films that trace an intricate path between the factual and the imagined. His cinema is a cinema of civic consciousness that transcends geographical boundaries but also opens our minds to mysteries that have no obvious solution.

Rosi's films draw upon a variety of thematic materials, but two preoccupations seem to be central. The first concerns the instability of the democratic state; the second involves a critical reflection on the past. This book examines how these preoccupations inform and inspire Rosi's creative use of film as document (and as spectacle). This is, inevitably then, a study of the specific cinematic techniques that characterize Rosi's work and that visually, compositionally, express his vision of history and the elusive "truth" of past and present social and political realities. The term "historical" will be used in the broad sense of history as a drama based on actual persons or events and will also apply to those films adapted from literary sources but whose sociohistorical setting is intrinsic to the story itself. I am interested in exploring how Rosi's cinema, subject to the narrative conventions of fiction, is a vehicle for pondering our relationship with the present as well as the past. His body of work represents perhaps the most sustained meditation on the delicate balance between the recording/representational capability of cinema and presence of the authorial voice or intentions.

A remarkable coincidence underlies my journey through Francesco Rosi's cinema. Sicilian born but raised in continental Italy, near Milan, I grew up as a child hearing the story of Salvatore Giuliano, told by my maternal grandfather who lived in Castelvetro. The storyteller brought together in the figure of the bandit the realities of many Sicilians; facts and fabulous tales were all ingrained in the island's harsh social conditions, including poverty and death. As the story goes, Giuliano was

promised safe expatriation to America and was scheduled to leave from the town's military airport the night of his death. In time the hero of popular culture assumed the role of historical character, even more so in Rosi's film where "dies" the popular hero. Ironically enough one of my grandfather's sons, Uncle Baldassare, was recruited by the Rosi production team and appears in the film's opening scene. New stories circulated in the family about the excitement of the *dal vero* shooting of *Salvatore Giuliano*. This is the story of a book foretold.

Acknowledgments

The book you are about to read is the fruit of research conducted over the years and in several places. During my numerous expeditions to Italy, many individuals and institutions facilitated my work and helped me shape the ideas in this book.

First of all, let me express my deep gratitude to Carolina Rosi for her support and various kindnesses and for granting me permission to quote from her father's private collections, which are the foundation of my research, and to the Compagnia di Teatro di Luca De Filippo for materials concerning the production of *Napoli milionaria!*, *Le voci di dentro*, and *Filumena Marturano*.

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For the book's photographic reproductions, I am especially indebted to Lina Wertmüller, Piero Marsili Libelli, Riccardo Rosi, Emanuela Acito at Reporters Associati & Archivi, Sabina Ambrogi at the Archivio Enrico Appetito (for Mario Tursi), Archivio Strizzi, Luciano Romano, Max Botticelli, Laurel Masten Cantor, and Sergio M. De Iudicibus.

xii Acknowledgments

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As always, I appreciate and admire P. Adams Sitney's interpretative skills, who also shared in Rosi's visits to Princeton and always inspires me to approach cinema as a way of life. And I owe the most to Gerardo, for lending his artistic eye to my visual interpretation.

Over the years, I was privileged to share many long interviews and off-the-record conversations with Francesco Rosi. The intellectual and affective bond I enjoyed with him and Giancarla has sustained the making of this book.

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Most photographic illustrations in this book are taken from Francesco Rosi's personal collection. They comprise photographic texts, production stills, and frame reproductions. Other photographs taken from a variety of sources, including private collections, will be credited. They will all be referred to as "frames."

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Introduction

Francesco Rosi's reputation as a filmmaker rests on the moral coherence and artistic integrity of his work. His seventeen feature films map a topography of the political complexities and social difficulties facing the Italian nation since the fall of fascism. They constitute a body of work of great importance for both cultural history and a realist theory of cinematic representation. "A film," Rosi has said, "sees, documents, denounces, imagines, and narrates."¹ In a 1996 keynote address he makes these aims more specific: "I have always believed that the main function of cinema is to report and to witness reality and as a medium to tell stories through which sons can better understand their fathers and learn how to judge these stories in the context of History."²

Rosi's *cinema come testimonianza* ("cinema as witness") is a cinematic meditation on the challenges posed by Antonio Gramsci's notion of historical identity and meliorism, especially as it expresses itself through the dynamics between hegemonic and subaltern cultural forms. In particular, Rosi's self-reflexive films of the late 1970s and 1980s meditate on Gramsci's concept of hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group."³ Specifically, Rosi is concerned with how this hegemonic power bears on the *questione meridionale* (or the "southern question"). What interests him most is how characters react to the social norms and economic structures that define their historical condition. His method of inquiry is grounded in factual interpretation and a strong sense of the director's didactic responsibility vis-à-vis his audience:

A film is a responsible act. It is especially so for the filmmaker. He should not separate himself from his role as a creator; the creative act should be a part of his moral engagement. As a result, the film always has a pedagogical function. It provokes and at the same time it becomes a source of reference and verification for the viewer.⁴

Rosi's cinema possesses such an ideological density that it is capable of stimulating nationwide controversial debates about the dynamics and rhetoric of political, economic, and judicial forces. It brings to light the hidden threads that weave the fabric of what the director calls "another possible truth" that is set against the historical (official) point of view. Rooted in analytical paradigms, Rosi's films do not attempt to retrieve or reconstruct the missing part of the truth. They rely on a labyrinthine narrative structure, in which the sense of an enigma replaces the unidirectional path leading ineluctably to a designated end and solution. In Rosi, the labyrinth becomes a

figure of changing patterns and directions, a metaphor of movement, charting landscapes of intricate (and shadowy) cultural complexity. Rosi moves beyond realism to probe the limits of rationalist discourse for understanding and “settling” the past. He relies instead on a multifaceted and layered process that reveals and is dependent on a great capacity for invention. Most saliently—and disturbingly—he rejects closure and fixity in favor of an open form that points to the future. The truth itself, so fragmented and confused, may never be discovered.

Rosi's *cinema come testimonianza* is achieved and reflected in his method of directing. His logical investigations are conducted by an omniscient eye and translated into a cinematic approach that embraces the details of material reality with the panoramic perspective of a dispassionate observer. Visually, Rosi's detached objectivity is articulated through the paradigmatic use of two opposing optical focal lengths that announce and permit the scope of his vision: he shoots from above with wide-angle lenses and from below with the telephoto. His films thus transcend the split identity of Italian cinema, commonly divided between documentary social realism and allegorical spectacle. His critical eye passionately questions the most notorious mysteries haunting the collective unconscious of the Italian Democratic Republic: from the enigmatic murder of the legendary bandit Salvatore Giuliano (a significant figure in the Sicilian independence movement) and the unexplained death in a plane crash of oil tycoon Enrico Mattei to the paradoxes of criminal society figured in the approximate portrait of Mafia boss Lucky Luciano and the illustrious corpses of political conspiracy in the mid-1970s. Rosi's films have also denounced emigration, economic exploitation and social oppression, the specter of urban terrorism (the *anni di piombo*). Critics agree that Rosi's cinema is a *cinéma de prise de conscience*, or, as Raffaele La Capria defines it, the *cinema del nostro malessere nazionale* (“of our national malaise”).⁵ Many have noted, and he himself has observed, it is a *cinema di testimonianza civile* (“of civic witness”).⁶ Rosi takes special care to dramatize the perspective from which history will be investigated; he adopts a viewpoint intended to provoke an informed response from his audience.

The nature of Rosi's epistemological realism derives from the cinema of Luchino Visconti, the filmmaker who exercised the greatest influence on Rosi's personal aesthetics. On several occasions, the Neapolitan auteur has described his first encounter with the director of *La terra trema*:

I was introduced to Visconti by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi. Visconti liked to hire young people who somehow had to create their own positions. I became part of that clan made up of a few faithful followers with a courageous captain, who had everything working for him: beauty, intelligence, money, aristocracy, generosity, and cruelty. . . . During my six months of working with him at Acì Trezza, I watched him with admiration and fear, and I learned all the basics that I now know. However, Visconti has also ruined me. At this time, I became convinced of his fundamental approach. He used to say: “Wait to make your film until your stomach aches every time you think about it.”⁷

What is impressive about Rosi's career is that he was able to make only the films he "ached" for. Tough-minded, emotional yet rational, resilient in pursuing his goals through long years of apprenticeship, Rosi embodies the principled man who dares to defy the establishment even when subject, as Rosi was, to death threats. He tackled volatile social and political subjects and power groups: the Neapolitan camorra (*La sfida, I magliari*), the Sicilian mafia and the political body (*Salvatore Giuliano, Cadaveri eccellenti, Dimenticare Palermo*), corruption in Naples (*Le mani sulla città*), the enigma of the Mattei affair, the Italian Army and the horrors of war (*Uomini contro*). He is a Promethean figure of Italian cinema who has worked outside of the studio system since the late 1950s, who has endured the ordeals of filming exclusively on location even when it meant shooting in the scorching heat of the Colombian countryside (*Cronaca di una morte annunciata*) or in the ragged environment of Giuliano's homeland, Montelepre, with hundreds of nonprofessional actors and, toward the end of his career, under the extreme cold winter of the Ukraine (*La tregua*). Rosi admitted that he loved *le sfide* ("challenges"). He oversaw every creative aspect of the film-making process, which he defined as a collective adventure. It is perhaps Federico Fellini who offers us the most poetic portrait of Rosi when he describes him as a condottiere, "who lives his film as if it were a heroic undertaking where will, courage, integrity, and sacrifice are demanded."⁸

In America, Francesco Rosi's reputation as a filmmaker remains curiously bound to *Salvatore Giuliano*, generally considered his masterpiece. This 1962 film has fascinated critics and theorists for its structural complexity, fragmented filmic text, and a particular narrative technique that devolves, as Umberto Eco has pointed out, from the real "content" or "situation" of the film and constitutes its most important statement.⁹ Rosi's was an innovative method of communicating with raw journalistic materials and an authorial power of imagery, cinematic representation which transcends the surface of a lifelike reality. *Salvatore Giuliano* established Rosi as the craftsman of a new genre (docudrama), a form of critical social commitment. Rosi's lens probes the Sicilian landscape, attempting to connect the details of local life to the larger picture of national political practices.

For the average spectator, Rosi's early films may be difficult because his subtleties of form and elliptical rhythm make his subject appear more obscure than it is. He juxtaposes the past and the present without transitions, and he layers time in a seamless way. This is an intentional, even didactic strategy. Rosi violates his audience's expectations by eliciting their active participation. The cinema, as he perceives it, addresses a spectator who must not be passive but must become an interlocutor of the film, with the freedom to form independent conclusions.¹⁰

Thus, Rosi rejects the traditional cinematic discourse of spectacle (with its inherent passivity) to promote instead a dialogical rapport, or *dibattito*, between the screen and the spectator. This is also the key structuring concept subtending the director's definition of political cinema: to actively engage the viewer in a dialectical exchange of ideas. In a country profoundly devoted to comedy and melodrama, he avoids comforting fictions that distract film audiences from real matters. Rosi's preoccupations

do not differ substantially from those of contemporary photojournalism and network television's reportage. They raise questions about objectivity in history and culture: the great agony of the South with its economic and cultural subjection to the hegemonic North, the difficulty of finding work without emigration, the play of power within hierarchies structured by political domination, the violent conflict between one's own drives and the ambitions of others.

Rosi's characters are the villainous (anti-)heroes who self-destruct by challenging the power system that has nurtured their violent drives. For these rebellious Titans death is an epiphany, always executed as a public punishment. Later films feature more reflective characters who journey to the past in order to interpret the present. In these works, Rosi dramatizes the experience of inner as well as physical travel, traversing spaces where the fictive and the real confront each other, spaces that also become sites of artistic writing (*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, *La tregua*). These experiences lead to a recognition scene where we understand the cultural context of present lives. In *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and *Tre fratelli*, the culture of the past, often identified with the South, signifies not only the characters' buried lives but Italy's collective memory. For Rosi, memory does not suggest nostalgia: it *is* history, in the sense that it summons a critical and moral judgment of one's personal past and of a national historical past.

Rosi depicts a disquieting topography of contemporary Italy: a world of shadows. The shadows Rosi's characters see are those cast by terrorism, international narco-traffic, alienation, and the horrors of the Holocaust. The closing image of *La tregua* has Primo Levi tear off a piece of bread; a simple action liberates the individual from the bondage of the past. In this powerful image, the imaginative element prevails over the historical situation. This is Rosi's *verità poetica*, what gives a subtle narrative texture to his films.

As a liberal socialist intellectual, however, Rosi did not search or work for a utopian society. From the outset, he explored the ambiguities of postwar Italian politics and challenged popular historical knowledge with the zeal of a crusader. Though close to the Communist Party, Rosi eventually detached himself from the radicalized groups of the left to embrace reformist rather than revolutionary ideals. In a 1992 interview in *La Repubblica*, the director clarifies his ideological stance:

I have always been and will always remain a reformist who believes that to carry out certain reforms in Italy, even liberal ones, would be considered revolutionary. At the time of *Le mani sulla città*, I was labeled a communist not only by the right-wing parties but also by the liberal moderates. . . . I was someone who believed in the possibility of putting an end to the havoc in our cities and hoped that a government of center-left could accomplish reforms that would make our country a more modern and civil one. We need reforms. The alliance between the politicians, certain entrepreneurs, and criminality has thrived. It requires a great deal of courage to continue to hope in the possibility of reforming and revitalizing our country.¹¹

As Martin Scorsese put it in a tribute to the Neapolitan director, Francesco Rosi “has succeeded in defining an entire culture with great artistic sensibility, and with the keen eye of an ethnographer.”¹²

We can see this ethnographic eye at work in the way Rosi’s films project compelling images of social reality. A character like Salvatore Giuliano is at once an outlaw, a man of the South, and an emblem of power relations. From the beginning of his career, Rosi disdained simplistic solutions to such complex problems as the Mafia, political corruption, and the *questione meridionale*, which was central to Gramsci’s writings; nor did he attempt to exploit collective anxieties, although his films often anticipated issues of great public concern. The final sequence of *Cadaveri eccellenti* foreshadows the chilling truths of a nation on the verge of collapse after the assassination of premier Aldo Moro on 9 May 1978 by the Red Brigades. Rosi’s “detective” inquiry into the inner workings of the Italian Democratic Republic maps out an *intrico*, or “puzzle,” that has no other solution but to sustain the enigma. This method has come to seem more prescient over time. Far from being dated, his films appear more logical now than ever; what was obscure forty, fifty years ago explains today’s unnerving political and social instability.

Rosi’s filmic texts unfold within a diversified cultural field in which history, politics, literature, and photography intersect and intermingle. They are distinguished formally by an intense fragmentation of the visible surface of reality. He chooses to represent obscurity as real rather than to project a false clarity into situations: his films are based on, and composed of, fragments and/or details, which are presented to the viewer as they are. Gian Piero Brunetta has called Rosi’s filmic narrative form *a grafo sparso*, or an irregular construct that leads the viewer to a labyrinthine path where “the processes of concealing and erasing the truth prevail on its disclosure.”¹³ Rosi’s aesthetics and his logical investigation of historical events by means of fragments and/or details evoke a method of work employed in archaeology. He assembles all kinds of materially verifiable documents to reconstruct the mazes of subterranean truths: newspaper clips, photographs, books, archival materials, interviews, and witnesses become his interpretative tools. In this way, he works to trace and retrieve suppressed knowledge and invisible but potent realities.

We can characterize Rosi’s method as neobaroque. Indeed, his cinema is distinguished by an internal architectonics that answers to Omar Calabrese’s definition of “neobaroque” as a general attitude and a category of form. It is important not to mistake, or simplify, the term “neobaroque” with a return to the baroque. In the critic’s own words, it consists of “a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and a system in favor of instability, poly-dimensionality, and change.”¹⁴ Rosi moves along a series of lacunae and limits in which visible forms exhibit “a loss of wholeness.” This “neobaroque” style also combines, in later films, with a certain classical taste for iconographic representations. As the convolutions of Rosi’s narrative plots illustrate, he is not ultimately concerned with celebrating the absolute truth or with following the linear movement of a traditional story. The important thing for Rosi is to interpret reality, to expound the meaning of causes and effects,

to look at the facts differently, without attempting to solve the puzzle reality always poses. As he explains to *Cineaste* editor Gary Crowdus:

In some of the Italian mysteries that my films have dealt with, a single truth doesn't exist, so I don't want to offer a simple answer. The films are interested in the search for truth and in encouraging reflection. To be effective, the questions the films ask must continue to live in the viewer even after the film is over. After my first few films, in fact, I stopped putting the words "The End" at the conclusion because I think films should not end but should grow inside us. Ideally, they should grow inside us over the years, the same way that our historical memory grows inside of us—and films are our most vital historical documentation.¹⁵

If traditional audiences find Rosi's films enigmatic, they do so in large part precisely because he omits a reassuring closure: we are left on a macroscopic threshold beyond which we perceive a whole with a piece or pieces missing. Time does not allow the audience to pause and reflect about what is happening on the screen.¹⁶

To recognize that Rosi is preoccupied with the material surface of reality is not to imply that his films are insensitive to the psychological depths of character development, the situations of the emotional life. To override the viewer's possible emotional identification, he demystifies legendary figures such as Salvatore Giuliano, Enrico Mattei, and Lucky Luciano. As a result, his films have seemed disturbingly opaque to some critics. For example, Paul Coates speaks of the "opacity of the image" and writes that psychology "is just what Rosi's films lack."¹⁷ Ultimately, for Rosi, cinema casts an eye on reality, and he emphasizes this precisely by leaving to the audience the task of interpreting what they have just seen.

* * *

Rosi was thirty-five years old when he directed his first feature film, *La sfida*. His encounter with the cinema was almost by chance: in 1948 Luchino Visconti engaged him as an assistant director of *La terra trema*, shot on location in Sicily. During the next ten years Rosi worked on two more films by Visconti, *Bellissima* (1951) and *Senso* (1954), and assisted Luciano Emmer, Michelangelo Antonioni, Mario Monicelli, and Vittorio Gassman, among others. His early work showed promise, but it took him a long time to discover a method of inquiry grounded in documents and experimentation. In Part I, I focus on Rosi's beginnings as well as the films of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Neapolitan director was forging his new and original cinematic language and beginning to take on controversial subjects such as the harsh reality of emigration and the subculture of the South, the collusion between organized crime and the state, local and national economic alliances. Technically polished, *La sfida* and *I magliari* (Chapter 1) rely on conventional cinematic strategies of structuring narrative, particularly in respect to dialogue and enhanced sound effects. Rosi shows an intelligent eye for what he admired most about neorealism: its depiction of a slice of life and

the urgency of shooting on location. Chapter 2 addresses the director's engagement with the political potentials of film. *Salvatore Giuliano*, which established Rosi as an auteur of international reputation, serves as a model of the films of detective inquiry (*Il caso Mattei*, *Lucky Luciano*). Here, historical characters who engage in intricate power relations often succumb to the very system that brought them to power. These films disrupt and challenge traditional concepts of cinematic time, thus prompting the viewer's active participation. Chapter 3 deals with the explosive relationship between social and political power groups. In *Le mani sulla città*, with his style secured, Rosi develops a visual and aural rhetoric to denounce civic corruption in Naples in the figure of a ruthless property developer and his political allies. *Cadaveri eccellenti* (based on Leonardo Sciascia's novel *Il contesto*) attests to the director's profound civic conscience as he investigates politically provocative situations—the assassination of judges—in the form of a murder mystery. His most underdiscussed and undervalued film *Il momento della verità*, and *Carmen* (adapted from Bizet's opera), are the object of my study in Chapter 4. These works, both set in Spain, expose the cruelty of bullfighting and the violence of societal codes, revisiting the sacrificial nature of ancient rituals and myths. In Part II, I analyze films which, grounded firmly in social history, are exemplary of Rosi's cinematic incursions into more luminous, introspective realms. He tackles old themes in a new light. His photography becomes more diffused, and his pace is slower. A sense of confusion and fear accompanies the characters' sense of failure and loneliness. Rosi enters a more reflective, perceptual phase as he investigates the distant, desolate world of the South in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, an account of Carlo Levi's exile in Basilicata during the fascist era; or, increasingly disillusioned by the failure of the political class, he tackles the tragedy of urban terrorism, following Aldo Moro's shocking murder by the Red Brigades, and a search for personal identity in *Tre fratelli* (Chapter 5). In Chapter 6, I address a revisitation of the political (personal and collective) unconscious in *Uomini contro* and *La tregua*. The first, inspired by Emilio Lussu's World War I memoirs *Un anno sull'altipiano*, exposes the type of military callousness inherent in trench warfare, deploring the deaths of the poor peasant-soldiers who were sent to slaughter in the name of abstract patriotic ideals; the second centers on Primo Levi's journey home and how, as a Holocaust survivor, he spiritually triumphs over the dehumanizing experience of Auschwitz. Finally (Chapter 7), Rosi returns to Naples to revisit, in *Diario napoletano*, his own past and addresses the political failures that transformed his hometown into an anarchic city symptomatic of the national malaise. Rosi's belief that we can recapture the reasons to continue to hope is at the basis of his last adventurous journey: to stage Eduardo De Filippo's plays.

In presenting Rosi's cinematic development, I shall discuss films primarily in chronological order to preserve the historical record of Rosi's stylistic and thematic investigations. I also account for a given film's various stages of production, editing, and distribution. Biographical details are invoked only if they address crucial aspects of filmic productions or otherwise illuminate the director's way of thinking. I draw extensively on Rosi's writings and interviews, his diaries, drawing plans, working

scripts, and other unpublished materials. These sources provide a unique insight into the director's working method and creative process. I shall discuss at length several films that have been unavailable to general filmgoing audiences in America due to limited distribution. One of my hopes is that this study will bring these films back into wider public view.

PART I
FRAGMENTS OF HISTORY

Power, Politics, Representation

More than anything I have tried in my films
to get to know and understand my Country, and
to represent it in its actuality and truth.

Francesco Rosi

1

Early Years, Early Films

Even the Chiaia group has emigrated . . .
but everyone has Naples in his heart.¹

Imaginings of a Neapolitan Adventurer

In the winter of 1946–1947, Francesco Rosi leaves Naples, his hometown, never to return except for his artistic inspiration. “I preferred to run after adventure,” he once told Callisto Cosulich, “I call it a true adventure because I did not have tangible proof or a valid verification that I actually had talent. . . . For all I knew I could have been entering the gates of Hell.”² After a brief stay in Milan, he settles in Rome, the cinema capital. As Rosi was to describe in later years:

I spent my childhood in a happy Naples and my adolescence in a Naples full of vitality, of passions and stimuli that favored an escape from the death and destruction of war, of marvelous people such as Eduardo, Peppino, Titina, and Totò. . . . In this Naples, we formed a group of hopefuls: Ettore Giannini, who was a little older and introduced us to the theatre, also Pio Squitieri to the cinema. We were trying to do something and to discover our way: Antonio Ghirelli, Giuseppe Patroni Griffi, Raffaele La Capria, Luigi Compagnone, Maurizio Barendson, Achille Millo. Naples could not offer us any opportunities beyond what we were searching for; but we certainly gave Naples something in return, even though we left. I became a filmmaker, which I always wanted to do.³

The “escape” of such hopeful young intellectuals, better known as “the boys of Via Chiaia,” proved a historic one in many ways.⁴ They all achieved a prominent place in the artistic world: La Capria became a literary writer; Patroni Griffi a playwright/director; Ghirelli, Compagnone, and Barendson journalists; Millo a theater actor. For Rosi, in particular, it was decisive. The city of Naples and the South were to play a major role in his career once he had left. Many of his characters and stories can be understood as a projection of his desire to recapture (and reproduce) the sense of adventure that inspired his early years in Naples. In an unguarded moment, Rosi sums up this period of his life: “I used to spend my days in the ancient part of the city. It was my passion. The alleyways and the sea introduced me to life, they made me understand

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everything I know. I have always tried to retrace these experiences every time I make a film.”⁵ Here we have the key to the “story” he tells over and over again: you can journey to another place but never become another person.

Born on 15 November 1922 into a middle-class family, Rosi belonged to a generation for whom the Fascist régime and the Second World War produced profound changes in personal attitudes, which eventually developed into anti-fascist and reformist beliefs. He attended the prestigious Liceo Umberto I, discovered cinema at a very young age, and became an assiduous movie buff. Rosi claims to have been inspired by Chaplin’s *The Kid*, when he was barely four. He credits his father Sebastiano for this decisive discovery: a gifted amateur photographer and caricaturist, he entered a portrait of little Franco in an MGM “Jackie Coogan Look-Alike Contest.” The picture did win a prize, but the family never went to Hollywood due to his mother’s opposition to crossing the ocean. The birth of a filmmaker seems to have been gestating, in fact, when he started to be photographed by his father. A veteran of World War I and a director of a maritime agency, he loved to cast his son as a model/actor. He was constantly following Franco with a Pathé Baby movie camera. Equally important was Sebastiano Rosi’s hobby for sketching. Under the pen name of “Rosy” he contributed his artwork to various magazines, including the legendary *Monsignor Perrelli*, *Vaco ‘è pressa* (Neapolitan for “I am in a hurry”), and *Il giornale dei tifosi*. At the age of two, Francesco became the mascot for “Kinglax” chocolate laxatives. There were less happy tales behind these theatricals of family life: a socialist at heart, his father was forced to join the Fascist National Party after he had been prosecuted for a satirical cartoon in which he depicted the king as a trembling and weeping child overshadowed by a bulldog with the head of Mussolini.

His father’s work in photography and sketching was the crucial influence on the future filmmaker. He recalls his father’s improvised darkroom as a magical place:

I used to sit in a corner of a dark closet of a room which my father converted into a lab and I watched him work. In that period, the process of developing photographs was a magic event. There were trays with chemicals where you would immerse the film, and the printed photos were put to dry held by clothes pins. All this happened in darkness. My dad used to cover the big window with a blanket and the only source of light came from a magnificent crafted lamp, with a red and a blue bulb, which could be switched on and off according to the need.⁶

References to photography continued to be a great part of Rosi’s visual language.

Rosi grew up in a large, tightly knit family. His personal recollections are a mixture of impressionistic stories and real emotions. There can be little doubt that his sense of adventure was inherited as a family trait. He proudly mentions a paternal grandfather (Don Ciccio Rosi), a self-made man originally from Calabria who loved opera, history, and archaeology and would take him as a child through “that labyrinth of stones, human beings, and stories which is Naples”;⁷ a maternal grandfather (Emanuele Carola), a rich businessman who married a fifteen-year-old cousin (Giulia),



Frame 1.1 Little Franco in 1925, photographed by his father Sebastiano

eventually lost his wealth by gambling in Sanremo and Montecarlo; his grandmother Giulia, on the other hand, used to carry a shotgun as a form of protection and respect. He also remembers a number of eccentric figures with great affection: the family cook who believed he could fry ice cubes; uncle Alberto, nicknamed *o' pescatore* ("the fisherman"), who used to take him fishing at 3:00 a.m. and trap male octopuses by using

females as bait; aunt Amelia, the opera singer, who kept her dogs in very expensive linens from Flanders; uncle Pasqualino, the theater lover, who treated his pet goats, Morina and Bianchina, to ice cream at the exclusive Cafè Gambrinus.

Rosi's tales of adventure are astonishing for their exuberant tone and vivid narration. They suggest a semi-mythical feeling for his own past that he will later learn to control through his commitment to a documented approach to history. Nothing proved more inspiring than the impact of the Americans on the social customs of his city: "The Americans had brought us bread, but also the cold cuts. In other words, freedom. They made us see that an inferior person could communicate to a superior while both resting their feet on the desk. It was the end of an authoritarian era, which had existed in Naples from the beginning of time."⁸ The Americans were also well known for their inexhaustible thirst for the visual. Both Rosi and his father had been making numerous sketches, well paid. "They even wanted their toilet paper decorated," Rosi jokingly recollects.⁹

In his artistic investigation of contemporary life and form, Rosi will, with an eye to reality, give free reign to his imagination. He had learned his life lessons from his Neapolitan family and the culture of the South. He seemed headed for a life spent working in radio, in newspapers, and in the theater.¹⁰ A remarkable encounter offered him an alternative, perhaps the most exultant yet exhausting adventure so far: the uncharted territory of *La terra trema* (1948).¹¹

La sfida, or the Aesthetics of Rigor

Ten years later, Rosi premieres *La sfida* (*The Challenge*, 1958) at the Venice Film Festival, a tense drama set in a decidedly unpicturesque Naples.¹² Although he had gained some knowledge collaborating with Amidei, Flaiano, Emmer, and Gassman on screenplays and on feature films during the 1950s, Rosi's practical production experience came from the months he spent in Sicily assisting Visconti and later on the sets of *Bellissima* and *Senso*. Working with the neorealist master convinced him that he had the imagination necessary to confront the technical and conceptual challenges offered by a fiction film. *La sfida* attests to how thoroughly he had learned from Visconti's working method, exemplified in the maestro's passion for a spatial and temporal coherence. Guided by what he calls "the beauty of rigor," Rosi envisions the director as an inspired, self-sufficient, benevolent tyrant, driven by the desire to channel his inventive *élan* through professionalism and severity, someone who demands from everybody the utmost dedication and responsibility: "Visconti taught me the importance of total intervention in the sense that the director has to know everything, has to be at the source of everything, and must absolutely be in control."¹³ As for neorealism, Rosi has indicated quite clearly that Visconti, Rossellini, and De Sica had shown that the director could become witness to his times with immediacy and moral rigor and that the aesthetic form is an important part of content, not a mere appendage of the director's vision. Thus, some critics' belief that Rosi's films are less

sophisticated stylistically than thematically seems a limited point of view. For Rosi, the director must, first and foremost, formulate a “documented” understanding of his subject (what he calls *film documentato*);¹⁴ next he must move from his selective attention to source materials (or documents) to the construction of the plot. This process is a creative one during both the preparation of the screenplay and the actual shooting, which often enlists nonprofessional actors and involves improvisation. The final editing is also viewed as creative work. Significantly, Rosi in the course of his career has worked with only two editors: Mario Serandrei and Ruggero Mastroianni.¹⁵

The youthful adventurer in Rome during the postwar era and the mature man who undertook *La sfida* had learned so many things. He was fascinated by the medium and marked by these first exciting years which testified, in Francesco Casetti’s words, to “the widespread *acceptance* of cinema as a cultural fact.”¹⁶ He was not afraid to trust his “rigorous” neorealist apprenticeship and to take on a wide range of potentially controversial subjects concerned with the complex actuality of a contemporary Italy. Rosi’s approach to filmmaking evolved over time, but the bond with the artistic heritage of Visconti remains a repository of specific notions and ideas throughout his long career. One ironic consequence of this ineffaceable heritage is that, reviewing *La sfida* for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, François Truffaut acknowledged the (Viscontian) exactness of Rosi’s *mise en scène* but dismissed the Italian critics’ exorbitant (positive) reception. “In the end,” he writes, “such films earn a living for those who speak about them.”¹⁷ Truffaut’s comment is telling, for it points to some critics’ engagement with creating value and meaning for a film, often from a political vantage point. Rosi adhered to the spirit of neorealism, its ethical commitment, and its faith in the language of film as a means of education and social denunciation. Yet by the time he shot *La sfida* neorealism was no longer a preeminent intellectual force. The situation and the role of cinema had changed in the mid-1950s: Fellini’s *La strada* (1954) and Antonioni’s *Il grido* (*The Outcry*, 1957) had mobilized a new kind of “objective” reality, which focused on the elusive dimensions of interiority and the relevance of the pure visual given. Rosi’s early films can be appreciated through the conventions of neorealism but do not signal a mere revisitation of its early aesthetics.¹⁸ With *Salvatore Giuliano* came the need to tell stories that followed chains of causes and effects but that were charged with a strong sense of ambiguity: here we see the emergence of Rosi’s originality, the surfacing of a desire to mold his own type of cinema.

It was Visconti who convinced Lux studios to offer Rosi the opportunity to direct feature films. Rosi recalls that it all began with *Senso*:

We were shooting crowd scenes in Trastevere, near Via Garibaldi. Like any assistant director I was following Visconti’s orders. At a certain point Gualino, who represented Lux Film, visited the set. I remember him as a sort of condor, thin, pale, and bony, sustained by a diet of only vegetables and mineral water. Just by his appearance, he was someone who would command respect, as did Visconti who was a very serious man, but a laidback seriousness. Next to Gualino there was Dr. Gatti, also from Lux. They watched a couple of set ups and complimented

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Visconti . . . who simply gestured and said: “You have to compliment my assistant. He is the one who has done everything.” Then Dr. Gatti called me over and asked me if I had an idea for a film that I could direct.¹⁹

Thanks to Visconti, Rosi was able to realize his long-standing wish to become a director with *La sfida*. He began with what he knew best: he imaginatively used Naples’ natural landscape and the city’s urban popular culture.²⁰

The film centers on the rise of the ambitious Vito Polara (José Suárez), a small-time contraband dealer (*’o guappo*) who quickly becomes someone the Camorra boss, Don Salvatore Ajello (Decimo Cristiani), has to contend with.²¹ When the Camorra tries to enforce its monopoly on the local vegetable and fruit market and Vito refuses to comply, his *sgarro* (“insult”) to the criminal organization brings disaster. Soon after he marries the beautiful Assunta (Rosanna Schiaffino), he is gunned down in front of her very eyes. The film is a forceful statement of Rosi’s future themes, the seductions and traps of power, the collusion between organized crime and business, the harsh social reality of Italy’s South.²²

Critics were quick to label *La sfida* a gangster movie, with a love story grafted on for box-office appeal. At the Venice Film Festival, it was humorously nicknamed *Il fronte dell’orto* (“On the Orchard Front”). Elia Kazan’s social problem drama and Jules Dassin’s realistic gangster films, particularly *Brute Force* (1947) and *Naked City* (1948), became primary references and representational models. Rosi acknowledged that the violent tone of his Naples may have been influenced by his viewing of Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954), but he deftly parries the critics’ accusation of *americanismo*. “I am happy with this accusation,” he responds, “after all some American films are lessons of courage and style.”²³ There is no doubt, writes Alberto Moravia, that Rosi discloses “a sort of Stendhalian interest for a typically energetic and violent world,” but he seems “to have approached the sordid story with a preeminent aesthetic interest; in the American films, a traditional puritan morality always prevails.”²⁴ In reviewing *La sfida*, the Marxist critic and theorist Umberto Barbaro praised Rosi’s directorial bravura and self-assurance and appreciated the film’s visual construction but argued that Rosi ultimately succumbed to commercial cinema and its dominant aesthetic of the super-spectacle by idealizing the figure of the *camorrista*.²⁵ What Rosi shows is an informed eye for what he admired most about neorealism: its privileging a fact or a slice of life. In a letter to the Roman newspaper *Il Paese*, which published a critical debate about *La sfida*, the director emphasizes this aspect: “I intended to make a film that would break away from the *filone* of sentimental comedies which many say has to please the general public. I intended to tell an event born and conditioned from Italian life.”²⁶ It is important to underscore this statement since we can see an ideal convergence between the cinematic tradition that had shaped his prior experience and Naples as a site of problematic national realities. Film director Elio Petri was one of the reviewers who detected the presence of this Neapolitan tradition, particularly the naturalistic dramas of Salvatore Di Giacomo and Raffaele Viviani.²⁷ Rosi felt himself invested with the role of interpreter of his city’s social sphere, overloaded

with tensions and contradictions. He takes a *dal vero* approach to representation and depicts a convincingly squalid portrait of Naples.

Indeed, as the shooting began on 6 August 1957, a local journalist could not help but wonder if Rosi was portraying “the usual vulgar lie against Naples”:

Which secrets will he unearth to attract moviegoers to the theaters, a fresh new story on Naples and the Neapolitans? We don't want to know what the young director and his screenwriter have in mind. However, it's not difficult to imagine. Then, there is nothing left but to remind those in charge of the film that the “Camorra” is, for Naples, a thing of the past and, more precisely, it belongs to the past.²⁸

Such concerns betray an anxiety, even resentment, about sensationalism that typically characterizes public discourse on the Camorra, a phenomenon that rules the Neapolitans' daily lives. ‘*O Sistema* (“The System”), as it is known by insiders nowadays, which accumulates capital and participates in government, extends its tentacular power to the political, economic, and social fabric of the nation. This is attested in Roberto Saviano's depiction of the criminal society and its international reach in *Gomorra* (*Gomorrhah*, 2006).²⁹ For Rosi, the Camorra is not just a criminal organization; it breeds a culture and a certain mentality. It is a familiar way of experiencing and feeling life.³⁰ This spirit animates the new landscape of Italian cinema and directors such as Matteo Garrone whose *Gomorra* (2008), adapted from Saviano's book, is indebted to the (neo)realist heritage but with a socially charged darker vision on the emotional toll that a life of crime takes. Naples is envisaged as a snapshot of hell.³¹

The press's initial misgivings about Rosi's film proved to be correct. For Rosi, the Camorra was not a thing of the past. Most of all, *La sfida* is loosely based on actual events that took place in present-day Naples: the Pupetta Maresca affair. The facts are these: Assunta Maresca, better known as *Pupetta* (“little doll”), was a former beauty queen who became a famous figure in the Camorra. She made the newspaper headlines in 1955 when she shot in broad daylight Antonio Esposito, the killer of her husband Pasquale Simonetti (also known as *Pascalone e' Nola*), a local *camorrista* who worked in the fruit and vegetable market in Naples. Pupetta's vendetta and the ensuing trial captured the popular imagination. Writers such as Ettore Giannini, Domenico Rea, and Ugo Pirro attended the trial of the *vedova nera* (“black widow”); folk songs were written about her, and film ideas were developed. For the first time, the Court of Assizes in Naples allowed microphones so that the crowds could hear the outcome. Maresca was sentenced to eighteen years of imprisonment, later reduced to thirteen by the Court of Appeal.³²

From its inception, Rosi's intentions were clear, “to tell a factual story with the same precision and objectivity of a journalistic or photographic reportage. Various photographs of Cartier-Bresson contain this kind of visual force which is at times superior to an entire film.”³³ As a result, Rosi's story unfolds in distinct frames, almost like a photographic shoot, with a dramatic power at times akin to that of the

neorealist masters. Above all, Rosi's visual style has great affinity with the work of the great French artist, for whom a photograph represents a personal appeal to the world.³⁴ Like Cartier-Bresson, Rosi is both a witness and an investigator of our historical times. His films share riveting depictions of troubling social conditions and the attitude they reflect toward the camera as medium.

Rosi's photojournalistic approach was skillfully deployed to create the impression of an uninflected social chronicle, rather than an item in the *cronaca nera* (or "crime news"). The suggestiveness of the Maresca story relies entirely on its quick-paced rhythm that gives a fateful tone to this popular incident of everyday life in Naples. For Rosi, "this is the new Naples, not made up of the bourgeoisie but of urban proletarians who want to pull themselves out of centuries old poverty with a 'fast violent resolve.'"³⁵ This is the Naples that he attempts "to document" in *La sfida*. One can explain the film, as Sandro Zambetti and Jean Gili have done, in terms of Polara's dissatisfaction with the fast-growing society that surrounds him.³⁶ As he enters a world of luxury flats and sports cars, Vito exemplifies a product of Italy's postwar "economic miracle" that somehow causes his social disintegration: he is the victim of the ideology of *arrivismo* ("social climbing") and rampant *consumismo* ("consumerism"). Whatever social commentary the film ventured, it first had to satisfy Rosi's demand that it presented a human being locked in an absorbing power struggle.

Another strong factor in the film's composition is a musical score that gives Rosi's film a melodramatic intensity, especially at the end. *La sfida* begins with the collective sounds and voices of Naples' popular neighborhoods. The opening credits, however, are introduced with the sound of timpani, which then roll over into the beat of a drum. Rosi takes the theme of a town crier as if he is announcing the street news of the day: two voices off-screen (male and female) perform Neapolitan folk songs. The staging of the film's narrative creates an internal musical rhythm in crescendo: a melodic song articulates the love story; a cacophony of voices punctuates Vito's ascent and short-lived success as a *camorrista*; the music's ominous premonition that something awful is about to happen during the protagonist's confrontation with the farmer who refuses to hand over his goods; melodrama dictates the closing images, when Don Salvatore Ajello, an unscrupulous Camorra boss of fact, guns him down execution style.³⁷ Our emotions are stirred, some might say manipulated, by the final shot of Assunta leaning over Vito's lifeless body in a desperate cry. Passion and violence are deeply ingrained in the Neapolitan urban social life.

Music is also a crucial element in the staging of Assunta's sultry seduction of Vito, in which she hangs out the washing (coily leading him to the much-publicized rooftop sequence). Assunta's singing "Malinconico autunno" (the winner of the 1957 Neapolitan Song Festival) awakens Vito from his restless afternoon siesta. Her voice is like a siren call that attracts him to the window. As she climbs up the stairway to the rooftop, he follows her in a kind of dance choreographed at different levels, moving upward to the various terraces, and ending with the poetic image of the line of white sheets, breathing in the sun. In this setting of dreamy eroticism, they share intimacy in a fleeting encounter. The allure of the siren is broken by the loud voices of the

neighboring women shouting to inform Assunta's mother of her daughter's escapade. But the provocative seduction of Assunta's voice has worked: Vito's announcement "If I feel like it, I may end up marrying her" ends the quarrel cheerfully. In this long sequence, Assunta emerges as a primary character, not subservient to the Camorra plot. Assunta is introduced while looking through a window, studying Vito's habitual movements. She then follows him as he leaves the apartment and trails him through *vicoli* ("alleyways") and piazzas. She reappears about halfway into the film, leading to the rooftop sequence. Her determined character has been established from the very first shot.



Frame 1.2 Rosanna Schiaffino in *La sfida* (*The Challenge*, 1958)

More interesting is how Rosi emphasizes, in contrast to the women's animated vocal interaction (with its theatrical tonalities), hypnotic silence over dialogue once Vito and Assunta reach the rooftop. Their intimate exchange is played out in a form of mime dance: he makes advances toward her, she pushes him away and runs, and, in a game of cat and mouse, she waits for him to catch up. Her body language and her charged glances assert the power of femininity: Assunta is the subject, rather than the object, of seduction. Time seems to slow down. The ambient sound has been cut out and replaced with a combination of light music and silence. Rosi's graphic compositions are the result of a careful placement of figures and objects (such as the diagonal series of laundry baskets which lead the eye from Vito to Assunta entering in the

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upper frame). Most of the scene is shot in wide angle to establish a sense of place, with the exception of the lovers' embrace and kiss, which is photographed with a normal lens. The rooftop is like a labyrinth, one terrace leading to another rise in tiers. The bright sunlight reflects from the white surfaces as well as their clothing and therefore creates an optical aura in which the light bounces off the surface of the film as well as the actual lens. The scene concludes in an embrace that freezes into two human forms that become one: their bodies are carefully placed in the foreground as if posing for a movie poster. Leaning against Vito, Schiaffino's sensuous body, fully exposed to our gaze, becomes a horizontal landscape.³⁸ This image speaks of the connection between representation and erotic fantasy, but the effect is not quite manneristic, as some critics have argued.³⁹ This is one of the most poetic scenes directed by Rosi; its labyrinthine architectural display foretells his mature art and modernist narrative plots.



Frame 1.3 Assunta's seduction of Vito (José Suarez) in the rooftop sequence

While the first part of the film constructs a melodic portrait of the city and spatially conveys sensuality (Schiaffino has no dialogue, she gazes), the second part, the representation of Vito's defiance and confrontation with Don Salvatore Ajello, involves a musical intensification. In the land of the Camorra, music sets up the final battle, showing the inevitable result of hubris in the fruit and vegetable trade, turning the positively solar love on the rooftop into a dark city melodrama, with murder in the urban *ventre* ("belly").⁴⁰ This is the random moment which befalls Rosi's tough