Power and Plague

George De Stefano (April 23, 2015)

A homage to Francesco Rosi's political cinema and the US premiere of the Taviani brothers' film about love and the Black Death

Rosi and Taviani, two of the most illustrious names in post-World War II Italian cinema, belong to three film artists: the late director Francesco Rosi, and the directing and screenwriting team of Paolo and Vittorio Taviani. Rosi and the Taviani brothers were the focus of two events in New York this month. At the Italian Institute of Culture (IIC) on April 17, a panel of Rosi devotees paid homage to the Neapolitan director of such landmark films as Salvatore Giuliano and Le mani sulla citta (Hands over the City). At the Tribeca Film Festival on April 20, Paolo Taviani spoke at the American premiere of his and Vittorio's latest film, "Maraviglioso Boccaccio [2]" (Wondrous Boccaccio).

Rosi, who died last year at age 92, had a career that spanned four decades, from the late 1950s to the late '90s. He was a politically engaged filmmaker who created an investigative cinema that explored and exposed the connections between illegal and legal power. In "Salvatore Giuliano" and "Le mani sulla citta", and in other works such as "Il caso Mattei" (The Mattei Affair) and "Cadaveri

Eccellenti" (Illustrious Corpses), Rosi probed beneath the surface of events to uncover occult power relations. He particularly was concerned with how the nexus of legality and illegality fostered inequality and injustice in southern Italy.

At the IIC event, the panel included Antonio Monda, co-founder and artistic director of Lincoln Center's Open Roads: New Italian Cinema [3] festival and the recently appointed director of the Rome Film Festival; Gary Crowdus, editor of Cineaste [4] magazine; and actor John Turturro, who starred in Rosi's final film, "La Tregua" (The Truce). Roberto Saviano, the Neapolitan journalist and author of the organized crime exposé "Gomorra," appeared via a prerecorded video. (Visa problems apparently prevented him from appearing in person.) Gaetana Marrone Puglia, a professor at Princeton University and the author of a forthcoming book about Rosi's cinema – the first such study in English – was the moderator.

Rosi's politics, and how they informed his films, was a recurring topic. Gary Crowdus said that in the United States, critics called Rosi a "Marxist director" in order to "pigeonhole and dismiss him." Crowdus read excerpts from several reviews of "Salvatore Giuliano" to support his point. The dismissive and philistine comments by such prominent critics as Judith Crist, Andrew Sarris, and the New York Times' Howard Thompson, were dismaying to hear. But if the 1962 film's nonlinear and elliptical style confounded American critics, "Salvatore Giuliano" now is regarded as a masterpiece, and one that influenced such filmmakers as Costa Gavras, Oliver Stone, and Ken Loach.

Saviano called Rosi "a genius" and "an immortal." He said that while Rosi's was a cinema of "indagine" (investigation), it also was one of "denuncia" (accusation or denunciation). Saviano, who became friends with the director after Rosi expressed his admiration of "Gomorra," observed that Rosi was "not a documentarian or a journalist but a filmmaker."

Antonio Monda said that although Rosi was a leftist, he was neither a Marxist nor a "slave of ideology." Monda's comments missed a crucial point about the director: Rosi's leftist politics, far from being incidental to his art, were in fact central to it, and especially to the films he made in the '60s and '70s. As Crowdus noted, "The films were political in structure and content." In them, the "indagine" is an open-ended search for truth that challenges audiences to think and question, and not passively observe. In that regard, and in their treatment of historical events, they reflect the influence of Bertolt Brecht [5], the Marxist playwright and theoretician who also influenced Bernardo Bertolucci and Luchino Visconti, among other Italian directors. And regardless of whether Rosi was or was not a committed Marxist, he indeed was close to the Italian Communist Party – a "fellow traveler," in American parlance.

John Turturro provided the evening's most diverting, and moving, comments. His involvement with Rosi began when Martin Scorsese sent him a lengthy letter "about all his [Rosi's] films and how he was one of the great masters." He recalled that he was "blown away" by "Salvatore Giuliano" when Scorsese screened the film for him. When Turturro and Rosi met in the early '90s, they discussed a film version of "La Tregua" (published in English as "The Reawakening"), one of the books in which the Italian Jewish author Primo Levi [6] recounts his horrific experiences as a prisoner in the Auschwitz death camp. After numerous delays, the film was shot in 1996 in the Ukraine, with a thin, haggard, and bald Turturro playing Levi.

From the start, the production was plagued with problems – bad weather, not enough money, the death of cinematographer Pasqualino De Santis, and Turturro's own battles with Rosi. When Turturro

showed the completed film to Harvey Weinstein, the head of Miramax films didn't like it: "He found it not sentimental enough, not obvious enough. He said he wouldn't release it." When Weinstein asked Turturro to make another film for Miramax, the actor agreed – but only if Weinstein would release "La Tregua." Weinstein acquiesced, but he gave the film only a limited release. "It's not a great film," Turturro acknowledged. "It's a very delicate film."

Turturro concluded on an emotional note, saying that Rosi "changed my life." "He introduced me to so many things, to so many writers, and to the [Southern Italian] world that I come from. I loved him, and love him, very much."

Not so Wondrous Boccaccio

Paolo Taviani appeared at the Tribeca Film Festival without his screenwriter brother Vittorio, who stayed home in Italy. Vittorio's absence was a disappointment; as anyone who has seen their appearances at New York screening of their films well knows, i fratelli Taviani – both in their eighties – put on a very entertaining brother act. Unfortunately, their latest film, "Maraviglioso Boccaccio" (Wondrous Boccaccio), an adaptation of five stories from "The Decameron [7]," also was a letdown. It is pictorially lovely, with its lush Tuscan landscapes and its attractive, mostly young cast. But it's a mild effort that pales next to a far more vivid and earthy adaptation of Boccaccio – Pier Paolo Pasolini's "The Decameron [8]" (1971). Whereas Pasolini's film – set in Naples, rather than Tuscany – is raw, carnal, and bawdy, the Tavianis' is PG-13 Boccaccio.

Of the 100 tales collected in "The Decameron," the Tavianis chose five to adapt; all of them love stories. They also incorporated a framing device absent from Pasolini's and other Boccaccio adaptations: the 1348 outbreak of the plague in Florence. The film opens strongly, with a young male plague victim hurling himself to his death from a roof. Ten young Florentines, women and men, flee the plague-ridden city to spend a fortnight at the country home of one of them. There, they tell each other stories to while away the time and forget about the Black Death.

Before the story telling begins, they decide not to have sex during their sojourn in the countryside – an odd and ill-advised choice by the Tavianis. The ostensible reason is to prevent jealousy and hurt feelings among them, but the vow of chastity doesn't feel credible, not with these young, sexy Florentines, and not in these circumstances. Worse, the chasteness colors the stories they tell: there's little erotic tension or heat in any of them; at most, they are mildly ribald, as in the story of a lusty abbess. In "Maraviglioso Boccaccio," two lovers die, one murdered, the other a suicide; a child wastes away from sickness and dies; a wife kills her husband with a rock to his skull. But none of the episodes carries much dramatic force; they come across as charming but sanitized folk tales. Everything, even Florence under the Black Death, is too pretty, too clean, and bloodless.

After the screening, Paolo Taviani acknowledged that he and Vittorio had taken substantial liberties with Boccaccio, re-writing his stories and changing their endings. He said "The Decameron" was just the "starting point" for their film, much as they used Pirandello's stories as source material for their 1984 film "Kaos." He remarked that he had fantasized about what Boccaccio would think of the film. "He might at first say, 'What the hell did you do to my book?' But maybe on second thought, he'd say, 'You did the right thing.'"

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