



Indagine su un Cittadino al di Sopra di Ogni Sospetto (Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion, directed by Elio Petri, 1970)

A man, Gian Maria Volonté, murders a woman he has a relationship with, but then he leaves fingerprints everywhere and phones the police himself before leaving. He drives to the police station and we find out that he is the head of the Homicide Squad; even more disturbingly, he has just been promoted as the head of the office that deals with political crimes. His colleagues admire him and fear him. He leaves evidence everywhere on purpose, because he wants to find out whether he really is “a citizen above suspicion”: if he will eventually be arrested by his own colleagues it means that the law is the same for every citizen. The film presents vividly, besides the murder plot, the social unrest preceding and following the bombing of Piazza Fontana and the intolerance of the police towards all forms of civil dissidence. A small explosion due to a home-made bomb at police headquarters gives the murderer/police inspector the perfect excuse to

round up a number of left-wing students and carry out his fantasies of repression.

Elio Petri predicted the season of police repression and the political strategy that followed Piazza Fontana: the government pointed the finger at left-wing extremists, taking advantage of the widespread popular fear of communism to establish a rigid political order relying on police authority. It was well known that those responsible for the bombing belonged to the opposite side of the political spectrum. As the film shows, the police had license to do anything in its powers to keep the country under control: Pinelli, the anarchist, was the victim of a highly questionable political choice. It is from this film onwards that critics will start talking of “Italian political cinema”: a film that shocked Italy because of its historical actuality and that was enormously, and unexpectedly, praised. Thanks to Volonté’s great acting skills, his character became “a universal metaphor of the perversion of power”¹.

La Classe Operaia Va in Paradiso (The Working Class Goes to Heaven, directed by Elio Petri, 1971)

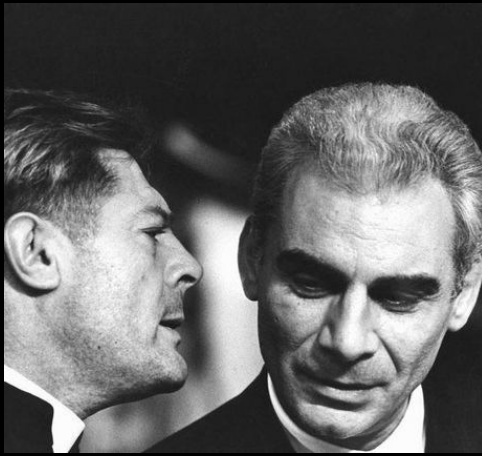
Lulù (Gian Maria Volonté) works in a factory: loved by the management, hated by his colleagues, he is the fastest worker, and the production times for piecework are modeled on his speed. This doesn’t bring him any economic advantages and it’s interesting to note the squalor of his living conditions: the cheap décor of his house, his son sleeping in the living room. Outside the factory, groups of communist students try to convince the workers to rebel to the “masters”, to the owners. Interestingly, they’re divided in groups, from moderate to radical, with different political objectives; it was custom at the time for different political student groups to picket the factories to recruit from the real working classes. Lulù loses his



finger because he doesn’t turn off the machine when he extracts each piece he produces: it saves him 3 seconds per piece, it makes him more money. He opens his eyes and joins the fight against the factory owners. The film shows committees of Trade Unions and workers discussing in the factory, the workers attacking the management, going on strike and dividing over crucial issues.

Slowly, Lulù loses his mind: this is what happens when you work in a factory. A man has the right to know what he produces: what are the pieces he makes all day for, where do they go? Unlike Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, who can always find new ways of surviving and still feel like smiling, Lulù is destined to stay in the factory, until he goes completely mad. Factory work is a long, repetitive hallucinatory nightmare at the end of which there is only madness. The lunatic asylum will be Lulù’s retirement home.

¹ Alessandra Ofelia Catanea, “Ribaltamenti Pericolosi. L’immagine Divistica di Gian Maria Volonté negli Anni di Piombo,” in *Schermi di Piombo: il Terrorismo nel Cinema Italiano*, ed. Christian Uva (Rubbettino, 2007), 151



Todo Modo (directed by Elio Petri, 1976)

“Every way to accomplish the will of God”: this is the meaning of the film’s title, a sentence by Ignacio De Loyola. The ministers of the DC (Christian Democracy) party, which governed Italy at the time (and for decades since the end of World War II) meet in an isolated hotel where they will undergo spiritual renewal. But, instead, they all die in mysterious circumstances, one by one. The film is a dark, caustic political satire on the corruption and political failures of the DC led by a man, Gian Maria Volonté, who looks and speaks disturbingly like Aldo Moro, who was Prime Minister at the time. In the films there are echoes of business speculations, internal fights between the different DC currents, closeness to the mafia: the film picks up the “sinister echo of history”, and

“anticipates prophetically the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro, who in the film, is represented as he who will have to “carry the cross of compromise to the top of a Mount Calvary of new power settlements””.²

Two years later Moro was assassinated by the Red Brigades, following his attempt to accept a historical compromise with the PCI (Communist Party). Volonté also paid a high price for attacking the DC so shamelessly, and his career was ruined by this film. Moro was at his political peak, and too many people found Volonté’s interpretation distasteful. The director himself, Elio Petri, declared:

*“I personally binned the first two days of shooting of Todo Modo, in agreement with the producer and Volonté himself, because the similarity between Gian Maria Volonté and Aldo Moro was nauseating, embarrassing, a kick in the stomach”*³.

Volonté as Moro takes possession of the film, becomes the film. This is why it lasted no longer than a month at the cinema. The film is a macabre allegory of power and greed, a parable of self destruction, a claustrophobic nightmare. One of the highest peaks of Italian cinema.

Banditi a Milano (Bandits in Milan, directed by Carlo Lizzani, 1968)

If this was a Hollywood film, people would have it on DVD everywhere. This is great entertainment. A city full of criminals, car chases, a gang of bandits robbing banks, wounding and killing random people in the streets. Thrill, action, excitement, but with the style and groovy music of the 1960s. But of course, since it’s an Italian film, the events portrayed are all painfully true. The film narrates the story of a gang of bank robbers led by the bandit Cavallero, played of course by Gian Maria Volonté; a man of great intelligence, but violent and psychotic. The men are all left-wing radicals, aiming to use the stolen money and weapons in view of the long anguished revolution. The film shows a background of daily violence in Milan: girls being assassinated because they refuse to be prostitutes and extortion rackets. The connections with the present are disturbing and discomfiting: 174 members of the Calabrese mafia (‘ndrangheta) are now awaiting trial in Milan for extortion. The citizens of Milan are exasperated. The plot is built through flashbacks and careful reconstructions, in a documentary style; the last robbery, at the end of which the gang is arrested, and risks being lynched, is reconstructed minute by minute, and so are the lives of those who died that day, randomly shot in the streets.



In this case Gian Maria Volonté embarked on an extremely entertaining project for easy fruition. But nothing he does can ever be apolitical, and the film must induce some form of reflection and criticism. So the digestion of this exciting film is actually long and painful, as one remembers that every single moment of it is real: the crimes, the innocent victims.

² Christian Uva, *Schermi di Piombo: Il Terrorismo nel Cinema Italiano* (Rubbettino, 2007), 36

³ Quoted in Catanea, “Ribaltamenti Pericolosi”, 155



***Il Caso Moro* (The Moro Affair, directed by Giuseppe Ferrara, 1986)**

This film faithfully portrays the abduction of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978 and the captivity of the statesman for 55 days in a small room with no windows. What made quite a few people angry (the DC party leaders, for example) is the director's insinuation that the DC categorically refused to free Moro, obeying the orders of the CIA, although they knew very well where he was being held. Besides the CIA, also the Secret Services and the secret Masonic lodge P2

(Propaganda2) wanted Moro dead. The P2 members occupied the highest positions of power: Secret Services and army generals, politicians, powerful businessmen. This was the first film to tell this story, happened eight years before, which still burned like an open wound in the heart of the country. The film is based on accurate documentation gathered from witnesses' accounts, the production team's and the director's personal research; but unfortunately it develops into a sort of fictional television drama, which seeks to reproduce everything in its smallest details, including the appearance and the language of the real life characters, with an involuntary caricatured effect⁴. The quest for accuracy and the complexity of the events makes the film enjoyable, but flat; it gives the impression that all the answers have been given, but it can only be an illusion.

In any case, even with its kitschy music and TV-drama appearance, it's a brave piece of historical reconstruction and an entertaining film. And I haven't mentioned Volonté yet: he also strives for accuracy, imitating Moro in his gestures, his way of speaking. But he doesn't become a caricature, he becomes Moro himself, as Italians had not seen him in those 55 days: human, frail, and yet brave, capable of forgiving those he once considered friends, and not afraid of death, which he knows is coming. If Italians had not been tormented enough by Moro's death, Volonté forced them to mourn him a second time through this film.

***Io Ho Paura* (I am Afraid, directed by Damiano Damiani, 1977)**

Like *Banditi a Milano*, a thrilling and entertaining piece of cinematography, extremely tense, and with an complex plot worth of any good American crime story. But the beauty of the film is its truthfulness, its subtlety, and the tragedy of the characters involved, normal people, who stand in for many real life magistrates, police officers, and innocent witnesses who lost their lives trying to do the right thing. This is one of those examples of Italian political cinema where you really wish the events portrayed were fictional.

The film opens with a magistrate assassinated in front of his wife with the young policeman assigned to him for protection. Gian Maria Volonté is also a policeman, Graziano, who is afraid of dying on the job, like most real life policemen protecting magistrates at the time. The Red Brigades had killed magistrate Francesco Coco and all the policemen with him in 1976. While director Damiani comes from the *poliziottesco*, and the theme is strongly influenced by that genre, Volonté's character, very different from the tough *poliziottesco* policemen, makes this film fresh and touching: he admits he's afraid, thus "becoming the spokesman of a widely spread sentiment among all levels of society at the time"⁵. Graziano is assigned to an elder judge who should not cause him any trouble, but of course, the judge start investigating on the bombing of a train by right-wing extremists. A fact that recalls the tragedy of the train Italicus, bombed in 1974. The film proposes the *poliziottesco* theme of right-wing terrorists dealing with the secret services, causing the death of innocent citizens: an incredibly contemporary theme, but told from the personal point of view of the victims, of those constantly in danger. Graziano's fear, his sense of threat and uncertainty is also that of all Italians of the time. Damiani attempts to depict the hidden, monstrous face of power from the point of view of an everyman, managing to portray the feeling of paranoia of those years, the impossibility of comprehending the reasons and the scale of these secret maneuvers. Is it a coincidence that this powerful, truthful film is now virtually impossible to find?



⁴ Uva, *Schermi di Piombo*, 58-59

⁵ Uva, *Schermi di Piombo*, 37



***Il Caso Mattei* (directed by Francesco Rosi, 1972)**

“Rosi’s focus on personality is purely political. His characters are chosen because they embody an identifiable crisis at a precise moment in the life of the republic...The lives of the men he has chosen to represent on screen were intimately and often agonizingly intertwined with the workings of the state. [...] Rosi is a part-artist, part-investigative journalist. His work has always had a contemporary impact on the viewer, as he keeps the public mind riveted on issues which simply will not go away, and to which the citizen must remain alert as matter of civic duty.”⁶

Enrico Mattei, played by Gian Maria Volonté in the film, was the head of ENI (National Agency for Hydrocarbons), the state-owned oil and gas company, until he died in mysterious circumstances in 1962. Rosi’s film runs on two parallel tracks: the portrayal of Mattei’s goals and career as a fictional account, which rests on Volonté’s great mimetic talent, and the reconstruction of the causes and dynamics of his death, made in a documentary style, which slowly unravels as the director gathers piles of evidence and witnesses’ accounts. Who wanted Mattei dead? Mattei was dealing directly with Middle-Eastern oil producers, cutting out the middle man: the Seven Sisters, the handful of oil giants who controlled the global oil production and distribution. He was paying the Arab and North African producers 75% of the profits, thus giving countries such as Algeria and Iran the possibility to gain economic and political independence from France and the USA, enraged by Mattei’s interference with their foreign affairs. Finally, Mattei wanted Italy to be independent and self-sufficient: this also enraged the oil companies, mostly North American, since the USA needed to keep Italy financially (and thus politically) dependent on them, as it had been since the end of World War II. For Rosi, Mattei’s last two days in Sicily could unravel the whole mystery, and he might have been right: Mauro De Mauro, the journalist he had hired to investigate those two days was assassinated by the mafia. As for Volonté, he was more to Rosi than an actor: he was a “genuine collaborator, working closely with Rosi on historical interpretation”⁷. While Mattei was certainly not a saint, Volonté memorably portrays him as a man who really cared for the future of his country and was not afraid of the dangers involved.

***Sacco e Vanzetti* (directed by Giuliano Montaldo, 1971)**

In New York, 1920, two Italian immigrants and anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were arrested on the accusation of being bank robbers and murderers. After a controversial trial, they were sentenced by an extremely racist and politically biased judge to the electric chair, even though the defense lawyer provided an alibi through numerous witnesses. However, these witnesses were Italian, and therefore considered less reliable: morally and racially inferior people, compared to the American



bank clerks who had confidently identified Sacco and Vanzetti as the robbers. The case caused the indignation of millions of people. Years later, in order to re-open the case while Sacco and Vanzetti were rotting in a state prison, a famous and respected American lawyer collected undisputable evidence that identified the real robbers. The judge, however, refused to start a new trial: Sacco and Vanzetti were then not being killed because they were robbers and murderers, but because they were anarchists. In a time of social unrest, with many socialist, communist, and anarchist immigrants reaching the American shores, attempting to create alternative sets of beliefs, an example had to be made by inflicting an exemplary punishment on the two anarchists.

Vanzetti, played by Gian Maria Volonté, is the more talkative and stronger of the two men. He asks for the governor’s clemency, who in turn asks him: would this act of clemency be considered as positive by the anarchists in the world, or would it be seen as a sign of weakness? What would you do in my place? Sacco and Vanzetti were sacrificed in the name of a political strategy, very much like Aldo Moro or Giuseppe Pinelli. Vanzetti, regretting having asked for clemency, bitterly replies: “I merely asked for an act of justice”. The film speaks of Italy as much of 1920s America; because of his openly political persona, Volonté always speaks of Italy,

⁶ Harry Lawton, “Enrico Mattei: The Man Who Fell to Earth,” in *Poet of Civic Courage: The Films of Francesco Rosi*, ed. Carlo Testa (Greenwood Press, 2006), 60-61

⁷ Lawton, “Enrico Mattei”, 78

no matter where the film is set. As for Vanzetti's moving speech at the end, it could be Volonté speaking, since the two men's identities and beliefs neatly overlap.



Sbatti il Mostro in Prima Pagina (Slap the Monster on Page One, directed by Marco Bellocchio, 1972)

The film starts with actual footage from communist and anti-communist protests of the 1970s; fights between the crowd and the police, political chants, violence, guerrilla warfare in the streets. Then the film evolves naturally into fiction, showing communist students throwing Molotov bombs at the office of the conservative newspaper *Il Giornale*. The damage is minimal, nobody is hurt, but the cynical chief editor Bizanti (Gian Maria Volonté) inflates the accident to cause a political scandal in view of the imminent elections. He is not only cynical and morally corrupt, but he bypasses his director and takes orders regarding what to publish (and what to cover up) from a mysterious character, a businessman, who is known for financing fascist terrorists. He builds an alternative, subversive and illegal, agenda for the newspaper, with the intent of manipulating public opinion and influencing the election results. Then, the perfect political scandal

presents itself: a young girl from a wealthy family is raped and murdered, and the last person seen with her is a communist militant.

The story is carefully constructed around this 'monster' figure: the young communist radical, the perfect moral and political monster. Bizanti entrusts the case to a young journalist, who finds out that the young communist might not be guilty. But the real murderer would not serve the political purpose. An innocent man, once again, is sacrificed on the altar of public opinion to serve obscure political interests. On the other hand, the communist groups portrayed in the film are also rather dislikeable: shameless opportunists who carry guns and attack the police. But, to be fair, they are treated like scum and the newspapers portray them as much more vicious and dangerous than they actually are. So the plot isn't entirely one-sided: it's just that the real danger, the actual threat, comes from those with a respectable face like Bizanti, or the obscure businessman who manoeuvres him from behind the scenes. They are the real monsters, and they are extremely powerful. Volonté has rarely ever been this cruel and repulsive in a film, but he hides it well behind an elegant, cold exterior, and a posh soft 'r' typical of the Italian upper-classes.

Gian Maria Volonté: Un Attore Contro (Gian Maria Volonté: An Actor in Revolt, directed by Ferruccio Marotti, 2005)

I included this documentary, which literally translates to "An Actor Against", as a conclusion of the programme because it shows the man Volonté as well as the actor. The stories, told by the colleagues and directors who worked with him, are very entertaining and they show an actor who took his work extremely seriously; an actor who used make his own research for each film, by interviewing policemen and witnesses or watching footage of the person he had to interpret, in order to 'become' the character, physically and psychologically. They also show a shy and yet tough man with a unique personality and appeal. The footage of his early work (such as the television adaptation of Dostojevkij's "The Idiot") is fascinating to watch. At the end of the documentary, one gets the clear impression that his death left a black hole in the Italian film industry, a lack that nobody will ever be able to fill.

