"The word 'terrorism' is a word invented by the reactionary press to poison the minds of its readers and hide the justifiable acts to which all the revolutionary movements are forced to resort."

Costa-Gavras

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Cover: STATE OF SIEGE
“CINEMA IS NOT FOR AN ELITE BUT FOR THE MASSES”

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIO PETRI

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Elio Petri is one of a small number of contemporary European directors of the Left—including Costa-Gavras (Z and STATE OF SIEGE), Yves Boisset (L’ATTENTAT and R.A.S.), Gillo Pontecorvo (BATTLE OF ALGIERS and BURN!) and Francesco Rosi (HANDS OVER THE CITY and THE MATTEI AFFAIR)—whose films convey politically didactic themes in popular cinematic formats.

Born in Rome in 1929, Petri graduated from the University of Rome with a degree in literature and soon afterwards became film critic for L’Unita, daily newspaper of the Italian Communist Party. In 1960 he wrote a best-selling work of reportage about a tragic incident involving the collapse of a staircase on which 200 girls all seeking the same job were jammed. It became the basis for director Giuseppe De Santis’ 1952 film, ROME 11 O’CLOCK, and soon led to a career as a screenwriter for Petri. Throughout the ‘50s he wrote scripts for De Santis and a number of other Marxist and neo-realist directors such as Carlo Lizzani and Gianni Puccini.

After completing a few documentary shorts, Petri directed his first feature, L’ASSASSINO, in 1961. Featuring Marcello Mastroianni, the film was not released here until five years later and then in a badly-dubbed version as THE LADY-KILLER OF ROME. His next two films—I GIORNI CONTATI (1962) and IL MAESTRO DI VIGEVANO (1963)—were never released in the U.S. Petri’s first feature to be successfully released here was THE TENTH VICTIM (1965), a futuristic parable about a world in which violence has become institutionalized into an international competition called ‘The Great Hunt.’ Spectacular action scenes and Pop Art gimmickry and visuals received greater emphasis than the satirical aspects, however, and the net result was a film that, as critic John Simon noted, shuddered uneasily “between 1954 and THUNDERBALL.”

Petri’s next attempt at a thriller with a theme was much more successfully realized. A CIASCUNO IL SUO (released here in 1966 as WE STILL KILL THE OLD WAY) is an engrossing exploration of the pervasive and all-powerful influence of the Mafia in Sicilian society. The film was well received critically but did such poor business during its New York run that it never received a national release. Petri’s next film, A QUIET PLACE IN THE COUNTRY (1968), a psychological thriller with supernatural undertones, was not released here at all.

Petri is best known here for his 1969 film on the abuse of police power, INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION, which was the subject of critical controversy here and of considerable political controversy in Italy, where expressions of contempt for the police are punishable by law. It’s a tautly-edited, beautifully photographed thriller with a pulsing musical score by Ennio Morricone and an electrifying performance by Gian Maria Volonté as the arrogant, authoritarian and reactionary Police Inspector and ‘citizen’ of the title.

At the picture’s opening, Volonté, newly appointed Head of the Political Intelligence Division of the Rome Police Department, kills his mistress because she has been deriding his virility and, as a test of his power, deliberately leaves clues at the murder scene. His staff subordinates continually reject the clues pointing to his guilt, however, and after a bomb blast at police headquarters, Volonté tries to pin the murder on a young anarchist. After the truth finally becomes known, Volonté files a full confession with his superiors and goes home to await arrest. A dream sequence follows in which Volonté’s superiors arrive at his home but refuse to believe in his guilt and end their visit with a toast to him. The concluding scene then shows the actual arrival of his superiors, the final shot—in which the blinds to the room are drawn and a quote from Kafka’s The Trial is used as an end title—implying that he does indeed go unpunished since his conviction would undermine the authority of the status quo.

The film focuses on the psychological—in this case the psychopathological—aspect of the main character and although Volonté’s performance occasionally lapses into caricature of the fascist mentality, INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION nevertheless remains one of the most provocative attempts in recent years to bring a fundamental political question to popular attention.

Petri’s last two films, THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN (see reviews in our Vol. V, No. 2 issue and the Spring ’73 Film Quarterly) and PROPERTY IS NO LONGER A THEFT, discussed below, have not yet been released here.

The following interview with Petri was conducted by Joan Mellen and will appear in her forthcoming book, The Cinema of Rebellion (Horizon Press). The interview took place in May 1972, after Petri had completed WORKING CLASS and before he began production on PROPERTY.

Q: Can you tell me something about your intellectual and political development?

A: I can talk only about the things I am conscious of, not of those I am not. There are things that probably escape me. We cannot have an exact, scientific consciousness of our entire development.

Q: Were there any major educational experiences in your life that led to the development of your political consciousness?

A: I am of Marx’s opinion that man is a social animal; but with Freud I believe as well that there is an unconscious that influences us. From one point of view I can be conscious above all of the social influence. And from what is not in my films you can deduce the unconscious part.

Q: How did you start in films?

A: I began going to the movies as a kid. In those days the cinema was the nickelodeon. In the thirties Italian cinema was either a fascist cinema or an escapist one. But as opposed to the escapist cinema in Italy at that time, there was the American cinema as well. American cinema in the thirties, insofar as it was a cinema depicting social evils like unemployment and gangsterism, played a large part in the formation of film-makers of my generation. Of course, American cinema at that time also involved an invasion, an army of films through which America was already occupying Italy and Europe. Before the Americans landed in Salerno and
Anzio during the war they had already arrived through their films.

Q: Are you referring to a cultural imperialism of the Americans in Italy before the Second World War?
A: It was not a matter of imperialism. America was using Hollywood films as propaganda in favor of the American system, presenting the American consumer society as a model. This was the real bridgehead of the Americans in Italy, the real victory. And this is why I think American capitalism should be very grateful to Hollywood and its productions. Nevertheless it must also be said that the healthy part of our youth, those with democratic tendencies, saw instead in the American cinema a democratic point of reference and an antifascist model. This ties in as well with the literary production in those years, from Hemingway to Steinbeck.

Q: Do you see Rossellini affected by this process?
A: No, I’m speaking about my own generation rather than about Rossellini’s. In my opinion, on the contrary, the generation that preceded mine was primarily influenced by French naturalism. But after the war both generations converged to use cinema as an instrument leading to knowledge about reality. In the final analysis, the best American cinema was realist.

After the years of fascist obscurantism and of provincial escapist films, a cinema appeared which was looked on as a means toward liberation and to freedom. I began to work in the cinema as a scriptwriter in this first wave of realism.

Q: With whom did you work in the early years?
A: Mostly with De Santis. Those years in Italy after the war meant a defeat of the forces that had organized the resistance to fascism, not only to overthrow fascism, but to change as well the social structure that had led to fascism. This was a period of strong capitalist restoration and a setback to the antifascist and popular parties. The new social relationships that were being established during this new phase of capitalist restoration immediately produced in society the phenomenon of alienation. Rossellini, Visconti, Antonioni and Fellini, developing the neo-realist legacy, tried to testify to the psychological and human damage of alienation. My earlier films also reflect this point of view. However by the time of my second film, I GIORNI CONTATI (THE DAYS ARE NUMBERED), I believe my central theme was already autonomous from the type of research into the psyche carried out by Fellini and Antonioni.

Q: You were no longer preoccupied with this question of psychological alienation?
A: No. In my first film, IL ASSASSINO (THE MARTYR), I was preoccupied with the question of psychological alienation. In my second film, in spite of a strong existentialist accent, there was already a clear position taken against work. Alienation was studied not as a psychological phenomenon, but as a social fact.

Q: The alienation of labor in the Marxist sense?
A: Yes. In the sense of Marx and of Sartre. This is the basis of my work and in the last analysis it can be found in all my work. As the movement of opposition to capitalism in both Europe and Italy in particular has gathered strength, the political character of my films has been enriched and strengthened in consequence.

Q: Does the growing anti-capitalist feeling among intellectuals in Europe account for your winning the Grand Prize at Cannes in 1972? Could THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN have won the Grand Prize at Cannes five years ago?
A: I don’t know. This could even mean the opposite, a symptom of the contrary.

Q: Do you mean that these ideas are no longer dangerous and that therefore they can be more easily accepted?
A: Yes. Ours is the kind of society that absorbs everything and turns it back into consumerism. It provokes a phenomenon of interjection through which people assimilate the reasoning of the opposition.

Q: You emasculate your opposition by giving it a prize, by saying that it’s acceptable—so that it ceases to be an opposition?
A: All is absorbed into consumerism. At the same time we must take into account that out of any two or three hundred films, only three or four have any social content. The rest are love stories, westerns, mysteries, without the slightest intellectual, let alone social, engagement.

Q: We were surprised that Vittorio, whose films are generally considered too radical to be distributed in the United States, should also win a prize at Cannes.
A: But Vittorio’s IL CASO MATTEI was produced with the help of American money. Sooner or later it will be bought by the Americans. My film, THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN, sooner or later will be bought too. It remains to be seen whether we who are trying to work through the system in order to raise the consciousness of the audience, in spite of the ability of the system to absorb everything, are doing the right thing. What we can say is that all this is a mirror of what’s happening now and that we cannot escape it given the way cinema is conceived today.

Q: Do you see a contradiction in the fact that in the United States THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN will be seen only by the bourgeoisie?
A: This contradiction exists here too to some extent. But I think that my effort in this film can be of some use even in this direction since I tried my best to force the middle class audience to identify with the workers. The film is not aimed at convincing those who already have my political and ideological convictions. Rather, it tries, through a dialectical process, to reach those who are still outsiders to these ideas.

Q: Do you have a broader definition of the working class than Marx had?
A: No. I’m saying, with Marx, that we have to wait for the workers to free us all, since they have nothing to lose. The production relationships alienate us all with the exception of the exploiters. Human beings must regain their subjectivity and escape the role of objects into which they have been forced by today’s means of production. This is true of the workers, but it is true as well for technicians, intellectuals, artists, women.

Q: Was the film shot in an actual factory. I read somewhere that Agnelli tried to sabotage the shooting of THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN by telling other factory owners in the Milan area not to permit you to shoot the film in their factories?
A: As far as I know Agnelli himself did not try to prevent the shooting of the film. However, the factories to which we applied for a permit for shooting never granted us that permission. The film was finally shot in a factory which was about to close down, whose owners were in jail for bankruptcy. The workers were, for the most part, real workers, although many actors were used as well.

Q: Does the film have a hero in the sense of someone who has superior consciousness to the other characters—as opposed to a film like THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS which tries to have no hero, but use the masses as hero?
A: No, the hero of my film is not a positive one in any sense. The originality of the film consists in its having put aside all Soviet iconography, all the trappings of socialist realism usually invoked in films about workers, and any attempt to propagandize. The main character is split into many parts—as we all are—and he has only a partial understanding of what is happening. Within him are all the forces that exist outside of him, he is made up of them. Inside the main character all the other characters are present. He is all these things at the same time: a Stakhanovist, a slave to the boss, interested in production for its own sake, a TV watcher, an anarchist, middle class, a revolutionary, a trade unionist—a we all are.
Q: Does he resemble in any way the hero in INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION?
A: No, there is a major difference insofar as in INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION the hero's schizophrenia was limited to the pathological use of power whereas the schizophrenia of the hero of THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN still shows some positive signs.

Q: What are they?
A: The instincts within himself that aim at changing society, and reality. In some sense I believe that schizophrenia is a big step forward when compared with Manicheanism. Of course these ideas are expressed in very simple, popular, didactic terms. Cinema is not for an elite, but for the masses. The acting and the use of the camera must be a spectacular one. We as well have to take into account the rich, popular tradition which is the basis of the Italian theatre and cinema, and of Fellini, of course, in particular.

Q: Is there a connection in THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN between sexuality and politics as there was in INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION?
A: Yes, of course. There is a Reichian type of relationship. Because I think that nowadays there is no possibility for culture other than an interdisciplinary one. I am convinced that Reich marks a significant meeting point between Marxism and psychoanalysis. It is clear that all the repressions of our childhood are used by society to make us into instruments of production. When a worker is a slave to the machine, his sexuality is being employed in the rhythm of production.

Q: It seems clear that you were using Reich for the characterization especially of the Inspector in INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION. It seems to be a case of the relationship between latent homosexuality and fascism.
A: Yes, especially insofar as it is from the mechanism of sado-masochism that authoritarianism draws its strength. Of this sado-masochism, latent homosexuality is only a symptom. It is also clear that the superego wants to make love to the ego and dominate it.

Q: Is there caricature in the portrayal of the Inspector or is this simply part of the expressionism of the film?
A: The snobbish, intellectual cinema requires understatement. But, unfortunately, reality is caricature and I believe that cinema should stress this, even if it means resorting to very popular forms; it should not fear sliding into kitsch. One can get lost among all those distinctions of 'middlet', 'highcult', 'popcult', because this manner of splitting the culture can involve as well aspects of a racist nature.

Q: Do you mean in the sense of excluding certain groups from understanding the film?
A: From one exclusion to the other, who is the last to be excluded? We must fight against all ghettos, and in the notion of kitsch there is the attempt to create a ghetto. There is implicit in kitsch the notion of an elite, and then there is the elite of the elite of the elite. It is a labyrinth.

Q: What is it about the young student in INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION that allows him to break the Inspector down in the jail scene?
A: The student becomes the sadist in this case. He holds the whip, the proof of the Inspector's guilt. But all this is not a science. It is also a matter of having fun while building these mechanisms. They might even be wrong from a psychoanalytic point of view, and they might even be useful only to understand my unconscious.

Q: That sounds like Bertolucci.
A: (Laughter)

Q: Do you find the crime melodrama, the detective story, an illuminating form to explore bourgeois society? In the crime film don't political points often get lost in the violence and in the action in general?
A: Yes, but we have to understand that our entire life is a form of private investigation—a detective story—on all sorts of
matters. As children we begin to investigate about sex, then about culture, then economic and social structures. Society by and large is built upon mystery; it is as if they wanted to keep secret what is really happening. I'm 43 and in spite of all my investigations I've never succeeded in understanding what really happens on the Stock Exchange.

Q: Do you feel that these investigations of our lives involve the same degree of violence as they do in the crime melodramas?
A: It depends on how earnestly you want to get to the truth. If you stop at the obvious answers, you will enjoy a pleasant life, but in total ignorance.

Q: Do you see the first scene of INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION—the murder of his mistress, Augusta—as an investigation into the Inspector's own unconscious?
A: I see it as a parable. The only way to eliminate his mistress—insofar as she has become the enemy, the witness of his weakness and his sexual inadequacy—is murder.

Q: Is it an evasion, an escape, from the type of investigation we have been discussing?
A: On the contrary, it is the extreme consequence of an investigation. In the investigation of his sexual relationship with this woman he has discovered his own impotence—which is ultimately the impotence of authority. Thus he has to destroy the proof of this impotence so that authority can rule again.

Q: Do you admire Z OR THE CONFESSION which also employ melodramatic technique to express political themes?
A: Z is better than THE CONFESSION, although it suffers from the fault of taking place in a half-imaginary country. But still it is a very positive film in many ways. THE CONFESSION has the fault of not having been made in Czechoslovakia by Czechs. Thus it is simply an anti-Soviet instrument. I think that attempting to make a film against totalitarianism, trying to find national connotations based on our own human experience, is finally against all kinds of totalitarianism. But one has to speak of his own experiences.

Q: You would then be against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968?
A: Of course I'm against the invasion. But a Communist can make a film speaking of his own relationship with Stalinism, with the cult of personality, by talking about his own party and his own country. Why a film on Czechoslovakia when you have the French Communist Party and the Italian Communist Party....

Q: With all the political film-makers in Italy, no one has made this film about the Italian Communist Party.
A: Because in spite of everything, the Italian Communist Party is still our best guarantee of freedom. Without the Communist Party we would live here as in Spain under Franco.

Q: You would not then support the Manifesto group?
A: I'm in favor of a renewal, a total change of structures within the Communist Parties everywhere in the world, and of all the socialist societies in the sense of workers' control, a workers' democracy. In this sense I agree with the Manifesto group. However, the majority of the Italian workers are still with the Communist Party. This is a contradiction among the people, as Mao says.

Q: Do you have any sympathy for Godard's recent films, PRAVDA, SEE YOU AT MAO, WIND FROM THE EAST, his use of film as a political, political weapon?
A: I have great admiration for Godard. I haven't seen all of his recent films, but I did see STRUGGLE IN ITALY. I still like his work, although I think that his efforts are useless. I don't believe one can make a revolution with cinema. To speak to an elite of intellectuals is like speaking to nobody. I believe that a dialectical process should be initiated among the great masses—through film and any other possible means. Within this strategy even Godard's films are important, especially when they are clear. Unfortunately, when you appeal to an elite, you fall into the trap of intellectualism.

Q: Which film-makers have you admired—past and present?
A: Unlike some of the nouveaux vagues film-makers, I don't have a complex toward great masters. To me a very great political director was Von Stroheim, maybe one of the greatest who ever lived. From him you can trace the line that comes down to me.

Q: Was there any influence of Buñuel in INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION, especially in the dream sequence at the end?
A: Not Buñuel. If anyone, Lubitsch. Although I think that surrealism is one of the important components of modern expression, my main cultural matrix or influence is expressionism—which is the other main component of modern expression. I have great admiration for Buñuel, but my search for technique moves in a different direction, even in the search for effects. Buñuel is after the elements of dissociation of the real image within our consciousness. He is after the absurdity of the real while I'm looking for the absurdity of the social.

Q: How would you describe the role of women in your films? In INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION we see women through the eyes of men as castrators, whores and sado-masochists.
A: In THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN the women are the best element of the film. The hero's two wives have far more consciousness of social contradictions than he. His young mistress has far more political consciousness than he. In both THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN and INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION the women are the basis of the social pyramid.

Q: In the sense of being oppressed?
A: Yes. They are the human beings who suffer most from the condition of being objects. They are the objects of both sexual and economic exploitation.

Q: Have you seen the American film JOE? It portrays the working man as a fascist and enemy of the revolutionary. What do you think accounts for this contemptuous conception of the working class in the American cinema?
A: I am not well prepared enough to answer this question. Of course I'm familiar with a great deal of American sociological analysis from C. Wright Mills to Marcuse. And I may be wrong, but I still hold onto the belief that even in America the working class is the carrier of hope. But it may be an illusion at this point. I might be wrong, but I must say that in the film you mention I saw a fascist worker, but I did not see a revolutionary student. And in this lies the ambiguity of the film. Drugs are presented as the only point of reference in the struggle against the bourgeoisie. I don't think drugs are sufficient to change the social structure. I have nothing against the use of drugs, but I know for sure that they are not going to be of any use in the political struggle. To be against drugs is not a sign of fascism. Goering took drugs. The founder of the Nazi party was a well-known junkie from Munich. Even the notion of fascism must be seen in a Reichean sense. Thus I think that springs of fascism can be found in everybody without distinction, even in the most revolutionary people. I'm using 'fascism' in the same sense as Reich used the word, as a pathology of the soul. A black is not necessarily anti-fascist—or anti-racist.

Q: Do you see any connection between INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION and Bertolucci's THE CONFORMIST, Visconti's THE DAMNED or Saura's GARDEN OF DELIGHTS as treatments of fascism?
A: No. I liked THE CONFORMIST and THE DAMNED very much. But the only similarity I see is that each of these films portrays fascism from its own point of view.

Q: What is the meaning of the title, THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN?
A: Paradise or heaven means power.

Q: Does it have a religious sense as well? Is it simply a call
Gian Maria Volonté in INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION

to the future?
A: Yes, in the film it says that in paradise there is fog.
Q: Yet it involves a spiritual renewal on earth?
A: Yes, of course. But the protagonists of this renewal will always be us.

Q: How do you find working in so many films with Gian Maria Volonté—as an actor and as a political personality?
A: He is very good. Volonté, as not many actors are doing, is conducting his own private struggle to escape being turned into an object. This struggle is useful to the director too when he is trying to create more complex characters as well as schizophrenic ones.

Q: Did you admire the Montaldo film SACCO AND VANZETTI in which Volonté also appeared?
A: Yes, but I personally prefer films about today's political reality and I prefer a fictional treatment of political themes rather than this documentary approach. However I think it was the right time to make a film on Sacco and Vanzetti, when at this particular moment in Italy they are beginning to persecute anarchists again.

Q: Are you familiar with the Italian Marxist film magazine Ombre Rosse and what is your feeling about it?
A: I know of it but I don't read it. I don't generally believe in extreme political positions, especially in Manichean ones. Very often they take moralistic positions almost of a Catholic nature and they are puritanical. I believe in cinema as a social phenomenon rather than as merely an aesthetic one. I would be more interested in a magazine that would treat cinema from the sociological, political and psychoanalytic points of view. But there is not such a magazine, especially a non-sectarian one. The very fact of having these three different points of view would be a guarantee against sectarianism.

Q: Do you have any future plans for your next film?
A: My next film will be, almost without my having planned it, the third of a trilogy because it is a film about property, or rather about theft.

Q: A detective story?
A: No. It is the story of a thief who begins to steal from only one owner. In a sense it involves an analysis of what is 'natural' in the relationship between our psyche and the sense of property, an analysis of what can be considered a natural, legitimate sense of property or ownership in our society today as opposed to the excessive, pathological sense of property. It explores the boundary beyond which the sense of property becomes an illusion. It also treats how, as a result of our education, our psychical structure has been determined by the concept of property. These shoes, for instance, I can call mine and it is all right. Other things I shouldn't have the right to call mine.

Q: Like what? Pictures, land, houses...?
A: Of course. The problem is that these things should belong to everybody.

Q: Is there any similarity between your idea and Kurosawa's in HIGH AND LOW? His kidnapper is enraged at the white house belonging to the shoe maker. . . . Seeking revenge because of the inequity of the distribution of property.
A: No, my story is different. In the Kurosawa film there is still a sado-masochist relationship between the kidnapper and the owner. My character is just a thief. He is only a transgressor of the right of property.

Q: Is he politically conscious at all?
A: In his own way. But he is an anarchist.

Q: Have the films of Kurosawa had any impact on you and your generation?
A: Yes. He has had many followers. But now there is an extraordinary young Japanese director named Oshima who seems far more conscious of Japan's basic problems, especially those of the family. He is a great director.

(Coincidently, the next issue of Cinéaste will include an interview with Nagisha Oshima.—ed.)