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## *Elio Petri*

*and the Legacy of Italian  
Political Cinema*

BY LARRY PORTIS

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# The Director who Must (not?) be Forgotten:

## Elio Petri and the Legacy of Italian Political Cinema, Part 1



“‘Servant? I’m nobody’s servant!’ Dirk Bogarde advances the proletarian position...’

**By Larry Portis**

**Keywords:** Elio Petri, Italian cinema, political cinema, neo-realism, post-fascism, class, pop art, the 1960s

*The great political dilemma* of our time is that we – that is, those of us who aspire to some fundamental democratic transformation of social relationships in contemporary societies – live in the backwash of earlier political upheavals. This is true throughout the western industrial-capitalist countries. More specifically, social movements and political protests germinated after the Second World War and then culminated in



## ‘Petri fused political analysis and film art more successfully [...] than any director before or after.’

examples of pseudo-revolutionary activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s that continue to be markers structuring political perceptions. The evolution of political film-making is part of this history and the little-remembered Elio Petri is its most important director. Petri fused political analysis and film art more successfully and comprehensively than any director before or after.

Somebody had to do it. What I mean is that Petri’s accomplishments emerged naturally out of social conditions and political preoccupations. There is no need to assert that the man was mysteriously imbued with special gifts in accordance with some romantic conception of artistic genius.

Here is an overall assessment of Petri’s work, made after an intense recent viewing and reviewing of it at the Mediterranean Film Festival in Montpellier, France.<sup>1</sup> Elio Petri, I say on this publication’s website, is ‘arguably the best of Italian “political” filmmakers’ (Portis 2009). Petri, spawned by the post-war wave of Italian neo-realism (he was Giuseppe De Santis’s directing assistant), made and released his first feature film in 1961 (*The Murderer/Il Assassino*) starring Marcello Mastroianni. Over the next twenty years, he made a dozen films that startled critics and public alike. In films like *The Tenth Victim/La decima vittima* (1965), *We Still Kill The Same Way?/A ciascuno il suo* (1967), *Investigation of a Citizen Beyond Suspicion/Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni* (1970), *The Working Class Goes to Heaven/La*

*classe operaia va in paradiso* (1971) and *Todo modo* (1976) he combined social criticism and political commitment with an exploration of existential subjectivities in individuals. In other words, he tended to go beyond political denunciation and ‘psychological’ studies by showing that we cannot understand one dimension of reality without showing how different dimensions are interrelated. In doing this, he was considered the equal, at the very least, of Federico Fellini, Marco Bellocchio, Bernardo Bertolucci, Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini and the other prominent directors of his day. But during the rather sectarian years of political contestation not everyone understood his accomplishment. Or perhaps some understood all-too-well. By the end of the 1970s times were changing, and then Petri suddenly died in 1982 at the age of 52.

Well, so much hyperbole must be justified. More importantly, it must be explained. It must be done both in terms of what Petri did and of how specific historical conditions contributed to the genesis of his work.

During the early post-war period, the case of Italy is exceptional. Italy was unique in experiencing two periods of dramatic political change within the first thirty years following the defeat of fascism. No other European country was liberated, or liberated itself to the same extent from more than twenty years of fascist political domination. Only the situation in France was comparable. But France’s liberation, after four years of Nazi

occupation, proved to be more quickly 'manageable' than Italy's. Of course the CIA intervened in the political affairs of both countries in order to marginalize their Communist Parties and contain radical tendencies. In Italy, however, the result of twenty years of political frustration born of suppressed social aspirations and conflicts produced an exceptional wellspring of commitment and idealism. Neo-realism in the Italian cinema was the powerful fruit of these frustrations.

The second period of political effervescence in Italy occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, although it might be more accurate to say that this period was the logical continuation of the first. During both periods, the Italian political scene was more volatile than elsewhere because progressive and reactionary forces alike realized the struggle remained critical. A generation passed under fascist government simultaneously produced deeply rooted fascist sentiments on the Right, and long-lasting fear and hatred on the Left. There could be no consensual papering-over of the recent past, as there was in France.

'Neo-realism' is more accurately understood as a will to infuse political struggle into Italian film. Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City/Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946) announced not so much social realism as cinematographic intervention in political debate. Other films, those that seem to fit more conveniently into the category of social realism (such as Vittorio De Sica's unavoidable *Bicycle Thieves/Ladri di biciclette* (1948) might be better understood as a highly normative, politically coded depiction of the structural dysfunction of capitalist society. The depiction of chronic unemployment and the injustice and despair it engenders are calculated efforts to incite animosity towards the system of social relations and its institutional framework. Alternatively, we can understand these political films of Rossellini and De Sica as being inspired by the immediate context of fascism's demise and the exhilaration of liberated social and political discourse. But whether born of momentary enthusiasm, political opportunism or ideological commitment, such films are political interventions.

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### Who was Elio Petri?

He is of the first generation of post-fascist film-makers. Born in 1929, Petri never had to

accommodate his ideas to the realities of the fascist regime as did, for example, Rossellini and De Sica, born respectively in 1906 and 1901. More importantly, this major film-maker had a singular destiny, one linked in a remarkable way to the political and cultural contradictions of Italian society during the post-war period. Petri's father was an artisan metal worker who met Elio's mother when she worked as a waitress in her father's milk bar.

Given these social origins, Petri was perhaps lucky to have been an only child. As such, he was sent to a good, Catholic school where his classmates were from the privileged classes. There he received the beginnings of a classical education. But his formal education ended early, his adolescence coinciding with the war and the fall of the fascist regime. In 1944, at the age of 15, he began to read Marx and became a film buff. In the maelstrom of the liberation of Italy he joined the Communist Party and wrote about the cinema for its newspaper, *L'Unità*. In 1950, he began to work for Giuseppe De Santis, becoming his first assistant. Thus began a long apprenticeship with this major director of the neo-realist school. It was both a practical and intellectual education. It made Petri a cultivated intellectual, but one who never received university instruction.

Petri's social origins are of primary importance in any attempt to understand his films. Politically, his parents had a great and complex influence over their son. Petri described his father as a fervent support of Soviet Communism and his mother as a fervent Catholic. A major influence over the child was his paternal grandmother, a strong-minded woman who hated fascism with a passion. What are the implications of this proletarian childhood? First, it means Petri's social origins differed significantly from those of other prominent Italian directors known for their 'neo-realist' or political films.

Petri was bound to be a social 'misfit' and thus beset by a kind of cognitive dissonance in relation to his peers in the profession. Thanks to this situation, he was relatively immune to the kind of appropriated 'leftism' that distinguished the quasi-majority of his colleagues. His familiarity with the world of the working class allowed a critical distance, a capacity not to accept politically correct dicta. During his lifetime, this

distance tended to make him enigmatic to other intellectuals and artists. His exposure to, or rather the necessity of interacting with different social milieus on a practical, existential basis lent him subtlety in dealing with questions of interests and values, of idealism and politics.

### Petri in relation to his fellow directors

Social class perspectives weigh heavily in attempts to represent society in any medium of expression. It is important, therefore, to briefly look at those who might be compared to Petri.

Only Vittorio De Sica (1901–74) can be considered as having had a social background similar to Petri's. But De Sica's social origins are merely a relative exception to the rule. Born into a 'lower middle-class' family, De Sica was obliged to seek (white-collar) employment, but nevertheless had the leisure to take acting classes as an adolescent. He embarked quickly on a theatrical career and became a major film star during the fascist era. The fall of Mussolini enabled his change of artistic direction.

If the career of De Sica was that of a 'petty bourgeois' who overcame significant obstacles in the struggle to express his social convictions cinematographically, this was not the case of the other great figure at the origins of neo-realist cinema: Roberto Rossellini (1906–77). Rossellini benefited from his father, who built the first cinema in Rome. Wealth and privileged contacts with the film industry, and with the fascist regime, facilitated his career as a director. From 1937 until the fall of Mussolini he had success after success. There are those who claim that Roberto's friendship with Vittorio Mussolini, son of the *Duce*, helped in this regard.

Another director whose career began during the fascist years is Mario Monicelli (born 1915). Son of the journalist Tomaso Monicelli, he entered the profession thanks to a friend whose father was given the responsibility, by Benito Mussolini, for the construction of the film studios at Tirrenia. Monicelli's social milieu and the political context reigning during his formative years may bear a relation to his propensity for the comic.

Two other directors of great importance during the post-war renaissance of Italian cinema

are Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75). Antonioni, son of wealthy landowners, made films centred on existential dilemmas in which individuals were faced with making decisions in situations over which they had very limited control. In this sense, Antonioni's films can be considered 'social', but there is a careful, or perhaps conditioned, avoidance of any assertion of political conviction or will. It is perhaps to Antonioni's credit that he never attempted to depict the lives of the poor and downtrodden. His best films, at least from a sociological or political point of view, feature the well-to-do professional classes, those of an intellectual or artistic sensibility, in the throes of personal confusion and inter-personal tension. As for Pasolini, son of a career military officer who won fame by saving Mussolini's life, the tensions created by his immediate social and family environment in relation to his artistic and literary predilections led first to acceptance of fascist ideas and then to an about face towards the end of Mussolini's dictatorship. Like so many other young people of the time, he was drawn towards the Italian Communist Party as much of the population joined the resistance movement.

Significantly, Petri's mentor Giuseppe De Santis (1917–77) was not compromised. His communist sympathies and his active resistance during the Second World War could not be tainted by any suspicion of opportunism. But De Santis, too, was relatively privileged socially; he was a student of philosophy and literature at the University of Rome who was drawn into film studies. He was influenced by Cesar Zavattini, and then worked as a journalist for *Cinema* magazine. What distinguishes De Santis is the depth of his anti-capitalist political commitment.

Federico Fellini (1920–93), whose parents were small property owners and worked in commercial pursuits, is of the same generation as De Santis and also was a major contributor to neo-realism. *La Strada* (1954) and *The Nights of Cabiria/Le notti di Cabiria* (1957) are important events in the movement. However, Fellini was not preoccupied by political or philosophical questions in spite of the fact that his work is decidedly progressive.

Another outstanding director of this generation is Francisco Rosi (born in 1922), perhaps the

closest to Petri given the importance of political themes in his work (see *Red Shirts/Camicie rosse* (1952), *The Challenge/La sfida* (1958) and *The Mattei Affair/Il Caso Mattei* (1972), although the prominence of political themes lessened as his career progressed. Rosi was a law student at university before beginning his work in cinema as an assistant to the aristocrat Luchino Visconti. In Petri's age cohort, there is Ettore Scola (born in 1931) who has made films with a political backdrop, but without making political issues the central theme.

The turn towards contemporary political film-making peaks, in fact, with Petri although, throughout the 1960s a new generation of people, generally younger than him, came to prominence including most prominently Marco Bellocchio and Bernardo Bertolucci.

Born in 1939 into a bourgeois family. Bellocchio was a university philosophy student before working in cinema. Bernardo Bertolucci, born in 1940, was the son of a prominent intellectual (Attila Bertolucci), poet, art historian, anthologist and film critic. Being the eldest son of such a man probably had something to do with the fact that Bernardo Bertolucci became a published author at a quite young age. He received the prestigious Premio Viareggio for his first book, among other such prizes during the same period. It is relevant to know that Attila Bertolucci was instrumental in the publication of Pier Paolo Pasolini's first novel, and that Pasolini then hired the younger Bertolucci as his first assistant in the filming of the former's *Accattone* (1961). Bertolucci also was supported by his brother Giuseppe Bertolucci (born in 1947), theatre director and playwright, and by his cousin, Giovanni Bertolucci (1940–2005), a film producer with whom Bernardo frequently worked.

All of this is not to say that Bertolucci and the others lacked merit, on the contrary. But those born into a social and professional milieu corresponding to their aptitudes enjoy advantages that those, like Petri, do not have and which almost excludes them from opportunities to develop their potential. There is nothing surprising in the fact that political film-making is generally not done by people of proletarian origins; what is singular is that someone of this type actually did it and had commercial success in doing it.

Related to his social origins, Petri's 'practical orientation' is also notable. He recognized that, in spite of his facility as a writer (as attests his early experience as a journalist and critic), he did not approach scriptwriting from a 'literary' standpoint but rather from a sociological perspective:

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I never considered myself to be a literary person. At the best, I could have become a sociologist, or perhaps a psychiatrist, or even a zoologist, but never a literary person even if I have no problem with narrative writing. Basically, I'm more interested in general ideas than in aesthetics. Today, in my opinion, to choose the cinema as a mode of expression means to choose general ideas over aesthetic considerations. (Gili 1974: 29)

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Although it would be unreasonable to say that Petri was devoid of social ambitions, it can be argued that no desire to 'rise above his condition' compromised Petri's political convictions by moderating the critical force of his representations of social and political realities. Clearly, the political atmosphere was an advantage in this regard. But whereas this atmosphere, the result of the specific conjuncture of circumstances, obliged his peers to 'politicize' their aesthetic inclinations, Petri can be said to have taken advantage of these conditions to go beyond simple representation in posing the most fundamental questions implicit in 'neo-realist' or leftist political perspectives. This is what distinguished his films from those of his contemporaries, and those on or touching upon political questions since his death almost three decades ago.

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### Career: The first phase

Elio Petri was 24 years old when he made his first film. *Nasce un campione/Birth of a Champion* (1954) is a short film about a cyclist; it considers the activity of cycling as representative of popular culture and the film certainly falls into the category of neo-realism. His second film, also a short, is *I sette contadini/The Seven Farmers* (1957), a film made under the influence of the events in Hungary in 1956. He later affirmed that his objective in making the film was to show that his political convictions remained intact in spite of his break with the Italian Communist Party because of the Soviet Union's intervention in Hungarian affairs during that year.

## Articles The Director who Must (not?) be Forgotten

Petri's first feature film, *The Lady Killer of Rome/L'assassino* (1961), stars Marcello Mastroianni. The story of a young antique dealer accused of the murder of his mistress and financial benefactress, *The Lady Killer of Rome* risks being viewed today as a rather obscure depiction of existential alienation,<sup>3</sup> along the lines of Albert Camus's *The Stranger/L'Étranger* (1942, made into a film by Visconti in 1967). The film is a strong political statement, but one lost to succeeding generations because perceptions of institutions and political agency have changed.

Here is the problem. The character played by Mastroianni is subtly revealed to be of working-class origins, in spite of the elegance of his appearance and manners. The very fact of being an antique dealer, an unusual professional occupation for such a person, renders him suspicious, and not only to the authorities. It reveals a psychic, emotional insecurity that exudes a kind of existential guilt intrinsic to his character.

This is one of those films where, it appears, nothing much happens, somewhat as in Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960). With such a film, the spectator can be lost in a flow of subjectivity. What is real? How to escape the viscosity of alienated existence (as Jean-Paul Sartre asks in *Nausea/La Nausée* (1938))? In 'reality', however, the film was a commentary on social and political conditions in Italy. In fact, Petri explains that this was a 'post-Antonionian' film in that it was about the inability of the character to communicate. But Petri intended to go beyond a mere statement of this condition in order to reveal how social class relations are central to the exercise of institutionalized authority.

The film is not simply about the character of the presumed murderer played by Mastroianni; it is ultimately, but only in part, about the specific character formation of someone who commits suicide, which in a Catholic country is a profoundly incomprehensible act, a taboo. It is also about the mental formation of a working-class person on the make, someone who attempts to present himself as someone else, someone belonging to another social class. The psychic consequences of such confusion of social identities are a political subject in all late-capitalist societies. Equally, the film is about law enforcement, revealed in the film to be political in the most profound sense. The maintenance of social order takes precedence over any

'objective' assessment of responsibility. Mastroianni is not the murderer, but because of his social aspirations and the stratagems he uses to achieve them, he is guilty, and he knows it, or at least feels it. In Petri's words, Mastroianni is guilty of 'being inhuman, of being completely dehumanized, of accepting this process of dehumanization and of seeing human relations as relations between his subjective needs and other people. The others are objects that he simply uses for his own purposes' (Gili 1974: 30). In addition, once Mastroianni is 'suspected' by the police of having committed a murder he is, of course, guilty until proven innocent, a (pre-) judgment that is institutionalized in countries that have not incorporated *habeas corpus* and other peculiarities of English legal traditions.

In the end, Mastroianni is cleared of any suspicion in the crime, mainly because the murderer commits suicide. But the police are shown to be cynical about finding the real culprit. They mention that Mastroianni's family had included anarchists and anti-fascists, this is a fact to consider. What they want is a guilty person and so their job is to *construct* guilt, not to detect it. In doing so, the police are shown to be actively willing to overlook fraud and deceit. Mastroianni's antique dealings are revealed to be larcenous, but at the end of the film the police commissioner says that Mastroianni is 'a good boy' (in the sense of being honest and sensible). This paternalistic judgment is a self-satisfied reflection on the necessity of maintaining the social and political status quo at the expense of social ideals and political convictions. People like Mastroianni's character are not dangerous to the social order.

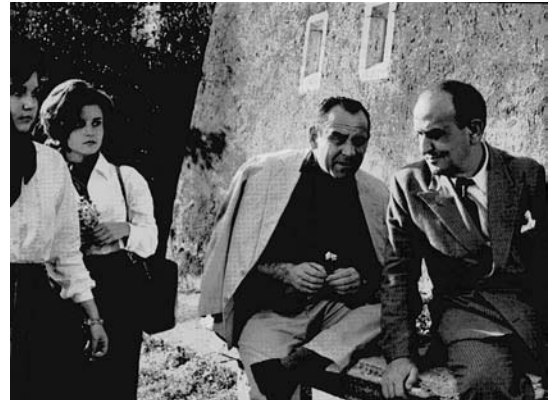
In 1973, Petri revealed that he was obliged to make 90 cuts in the dialogue of *The Lady Killer of Rome*. Moreover, he employed an actor to play the police commissioner (Salvo Randone) who spoke with a strong Sicilian accent. Because the association of Sicilians (that is, the Mafia) with the representation of the police in Rome was considered (by the producers and others) as being an unacceptable charge of institutional corruption, Petri was compelled to dub this key actor; otherwise the film would not be released.

Yet another remarkable dimension of this film is the depiction of its feminine characters. There are three feminine roles in the film: the murdered mistress (played by Micheline

Presle), Mastroianni's fiancée, and Mastroianni's mother. For Petri, all these women are victims, a condition in which they are voluntarily complicit because, having 'remained bound by a psychological vicious circle', they defend masculine privileges. For him, 'women were the first slaves of human kind' and 'even in bourgeois society', he affirms, 'women are at the bottom of social pyramid that crushes them'. The reproductive function of women has, he says, become *historical*, and thus lends itself to the reproduction of social and psychic models. The liberation of women cannot, therefore, be dissociated with liberation, period (Gili 1974: 30).

Capitalist social relations are also the subject of Petri's second feature film, *Numbered Days/I giorni contati* (1962). Here the focus is on work and labour. The story is about an ageing plumber (played by Salvo Randone) who witnesses the death of a man of his age riding on the same bus. Suddenly, he realizes how tenuous life is; working day after day means not being able to explore existence. He began working at his trade when he was 12 years old, and now he is 52. Shocked into perceiving his environment differently, scenes familiar to him now seem frightening – political demonstrations, burning garbage at housing projects, horses being taken to the slaughterhouse. He firmly decides to stop working.

But beginning a new type of existence, one without work, is not so easy for a man who has done nothing but work for almost his whole life. Alienated to the point where existence seems without meaning, the ex-plumber does not know what 'to do' or even whether he has the will to do anything. He returns to the country home in which he was raised, but learns that surviving in the country would mean a new kind of drudgery and social isolation. He explores a relationship with a young female neighbour, but learns that the difference in age involves forced representation and a new realm of (sexual) desperation. He goes to see a prostitute, and discovers that his plumbing is somehow dysfunctional. Needing money, he lends himself to an insurance scam that requires letting his arm being broken, but at the last minute backs out, deciding that easy money is perhaps not so easy after all. Finally, he goes back to work, to a work that has sapped his vitality, one that has kept him from living. The problem is that alienated work is part of a system



**‘Working in capitalist society leads to a spiritual death preceding physical death...’**

of cultural isolation, the non-communicability necessary for economic exploitation and political control. Working in capitalist society leads to a spiritual death preceding physical death, the 'ultimate reward' for having sacrificed one's self for the capitalist system.

For Petri, *Numbered Days* is not a neo-realist or social realist film because it is not so much about a particular situation but rather about work itself. For him, it is a political film that calls into question the nature of work by invoking existential realities of time and death. All other aspects of existence – sex, love, friendship, self-identity... – are fatally conditioned by inevitable realities. Work is a temporary means of either avoiding confrontation with existential realities that determine individual (and collective) being or of coming to grips with it.

It is significant that Petri was inspired to make this film because, as he explained, his own father decided to stop working at the age of 50. He simply could not continue to do the same thing that had filled, perhaps devoured, his existence for almost his entire life. Petri was not, therefore, applying mechanically some Marxist dictum concerning the alienation of work. In fact, his father and the plumber in *Numbered Days* were artisans, not factory workers. Artisans are workers who control the productive process, who master the machinery and have special skills. But these recognized





‘[Petri’s] father decided to stop working at the age of 50. He simply could not continue...’

‘specialists’, too, are subject to the deadening of perception and the loss of vitality characteristic of a system that is cultural and social as much as it is economic and commercial. The ultimate oppression is spiritual, and that means emotional and philosophical deprivation. Even the privileged workers are victims of capitalist social relations. This is the most profound meaning of social ‘oppression’ and ‘exploitation’.

Work, art, and human fulfilment may seem to be difficult subjects for popular films. But, for Petri, films should not be made exclusively for either elites or the ‘people’. For him, a ‘political film’ is not one that proclaims slogans for spectators who need confirmation of what they already think; if people who do not share the slogans are exposed to them, the effect on their ideals will be nil. Real political cinema is for the



“The twenty-first century will be the one of legalized violence”.

greatest number of people and should engage them on every level to think more deeply about something that is important to their lives. Political cinema is not a matter of partisan politics, but rather of helping people to develop a more completely critical understanding of the society in which they live. *Numbered Days* is a story about ordinary life situations and it is simply designed to provoke reflection in people who work.

By the mid-1960s, Petri’s talent was generally recognized and he was able to extend his efforts to inspire critical, political consciousness in a large public. In the early 1960s, after having read a science-fiction short story by Robert Sheckley (‘The Seventh Victim’ (1953)) and visited the United States, he decided to make a film focused on US society and culture. However, the script he wrote for *The Tenth Victim* (1965) was ambitious both in terms of its critical content and its potential production costs. After much rewriting and uncertainty, the project was finally picked up by producers Carlo Ponti and Joseph Levine, and then Ponti’s hesitations further delayed the project.

Years after the realization of the film, Petri mused that he never understood why Ponti associated himself with it. Probably, he said, it was because Ponti knew Petri could get Marcello Mastroianni for the lead role. Logical enough, a

film in English starring Mastroianni and Ursula Andress had box-office potential in the mid-1960s. But had Petri suddenly gone ‘commercial’, abandoning his convictions? Hardly. With this film, Petri threw himself into a kind of cunning subversion using the forms of popular art and cinema to call into question state and society.

Ostensibly, *The Tenth Victim* is a spoof of the highly popular James Bond films in which the action is projected into the early twenty-first century. Extensive use of contemporary popular music (including jazz), the new ‘pop art’ and the latest technology allows us to anticipate a highly recognizable future. But all this, like the use of special effects, masks the real changes that have occurred in society and culture, changes that are the simple development of current tendencies.

Here is the story. In this future society, television has assumed such enormous importance that it is used to modify the behaviour of citizens and give them a necessary sense of security. One of the prime vectors of this collective behavioural therapy is the popular TV show called ‘The Big Hunt’. As it is announced at the beginning of the film, violence in society will be overcome because ‘The twenty-first century will be the one of legalized violence’. ‘The Big Hunt’ is a safety valve, a spectator sport that siphons off violent impulses into vicarious viewing as individual players accept to track and kill their opponents on film for the benefit of the viewing public.

The rules are that killing should be restricted to the players, who have been fully informed about each other. The goal for an individual hunter is to eliminate ten others; killing the ‘tenth victim’ wins the grand prize and, of course, corresponding fame. We can imagine the TV ratings obtained by pitting beautiful people like Andress and Mastroianni against each other. Significantly, the Big Hunt is regulated by the government’s ‘Big Hunt Ministry’, because ‘only the Big Hunt can give the world a sense of security’. The propaganda services of the ministry exhort the population: ‘Do away with the terrible war of the masses, and join the Big Hunt.’ Another public announcement proclaims: ‘Why have birth control, when you can have death control?’

Due to budget restrictions, Petri was obliged to shoot the film in Rome, and not in the United States as he wished. But the action takes place



in the early twenty-first century, so it made sense to depict the Italian capital as having been extensively 'Americanized'. For example, even the Pope in Rome is now a United-Statesian. More generally, a certain 'globalization' is in evidence, and Petri included a sequence showing a massive Chinese demonstration in honour of a Chinese champion of the Big Hunt. The consequence of these changes – a kind of vague cultural debasement, very 'pop', in fact, is vulgarity in all its forms. It is a new 'liberal-ity' in which dignity and principles have given way to a generalized kitsch that has become the dominant cultural aesthetic. For example, 'rest areas' on the highways offer prostitution as a relaxation before getting back on the road, with a pick of nationalities and payment in cash or charge. Drugs also are commercially available for the same purpose. In such a society, 'trash' culture cannot exist, for it is orthodoxy itself.

In spite of this globalization, some national differences remain. For example, Address is surprised that Mastroianni's parents live hidden in his home and asks why he hasn't turned them over to the state. He explains: 'We are in Italy, and we can't do that. So we hide them. Sometimes we



**'only the Big Hunt can give the world a sense of security'**

disguise them as teenagers.' He then asks how she handled the problem of her own parents, and Address responds: 'Oh, I was born in the artificial insemination centre in Hoboken.'

This is a society entirely given over to commercialization and selfish sensory indulgence. In depicting a society devoid of political consciousness and social solidarity, as always Petri develops the sexual dimension as revealing of psychic tensions born of the social pathologies of capitalist culture and social relations. Notable in this regard is Address's impressive metal bikini, the top part of which, we learn towards the end of the film, is a double-barrelled firearm. In this film, Petri goes beyond the social themes developed in François Truffaut's version of *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and anticipates the extravagances of John Waters, Pedro Almodóvar and Álex de la Iglesia.

One of the surprising aspects of Petri's work is its variety. If he consistently offers a subtle critique of capitalist society, each succeeding film differs strikingly from that which came before. After *The Tenth Victim* and its mercilessly garish depiction of the vulgarity and decadence of contemporary commercial culture, he then made *We Still Kill the Old Way/A ciascuno il suo* (1967) a sober, black-and-white film about social relations in Sicily. Here we are thrown back into the most traditional, 'closed society', one of family tensions, treasons and loyalties, local politics, religion and feudal relations. There is an air of mystery that permeates this film, similar to that dominating Antonioni's *L'avventura*. The difference is that Petri, while also evoking existential



“We are in Italy, and we can’t do that. So we hide them. Sometimes we disguise them as teenagers”.’

angst and its expression in a troubled amorous relation, uses the convention to reveal how such egoistic or solipsistic concerns can be manipulated in the pursuit of more cynical objectives.

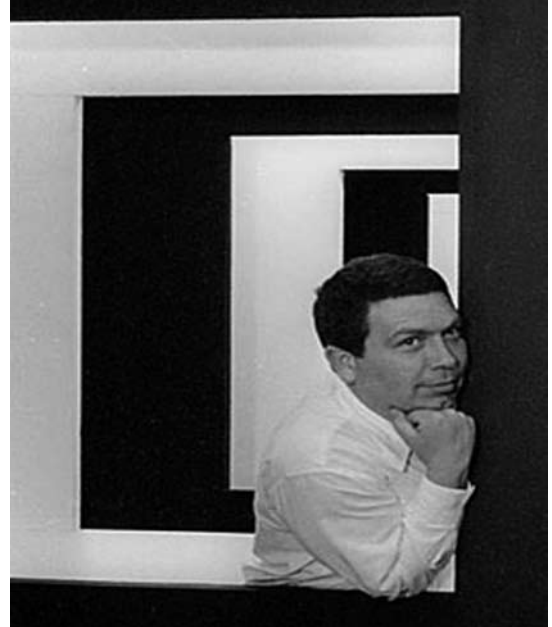
Gian Maria Volonte is the main protagonist as a lonely, leftist professor who takes it upon himself to investigate the murder of a friend. In doing so he falls in love with the murdered friend’s widow. His investigation uncovers a network of highly placed conspirators; but what could be more natural in Sicily, where the Mafia reaches into every corner of social existence – politics, the Church, business and even love affairs. From this point of view, the Mafia is just a highly specific, and particularly colourful, regional organization of political and social control. Volonte’s obstinate investigation is used by the spinners of this web of crime and corruption as an opportune element of the crime itself. Only minutes before he falls victim to the authors of the original murder (he is professionally kidnapped and then blown to bits), he learns that the object of his amorous infatuation is a central figure in the criminal conspiracy.

So what is the point? Is this a pessimistic take on the difficulty of combating the evil of the Mafia, a sort of precursor of Francis Ford Coppola’s fatalistic *The Godfather* (1972)? Hardly. First, Petri was most interested in showing how the Sicilian Mafia is, indeed, an essentially regional form of social and political oppression, equivalent to what fascism is on a national level. Second, his intent was to reveal the lack of realism of Volonte’s character, a leftist professor. Not only did the professor report his findings to the

lawyer implicated in the murder, he was careful not to speak to the police, who were, in fact, led to suspect the professor. How to explain this behaviour? According to Petri, the professor was an idealist incapable of grasping the systemic mechanisms of social and political control. He was incapable because of his attachment to ideas and values necessary to his professional identity and typical of his social class, a character trait that may explain the failings of part of the political Left in Italy, or elsewhere.

In the end, this is a film about the Mafia, not primarily as an organization preying upon the population, but rather as a cultural syndrome reaching into the mentality and, thusly, influencing the behaviour of almost every member of the society. Petri later explained that the professor’s ability to understand the situation was limited by the contradiction between his philosophical and moral idealism, on the one hand, and on the other hand by his assimilation of a cultural disposition to follow the moral imperatives of a gangster society, an unconsciously held code of behaviour secreted by a particular system of domination and exploitation. In later films, Petri will show, or at least suggest, how on a national level this system has merged with that of the capitalist state.

The following year (1968) Petri made *A Quiet Place in the Country/Un tranquillo posto di campagna* in which he focused on the artist. Ostensibly, the film is about a successful artist in the abstract expressionist vein feeling the need to recharge his batteries, so to speak, in the isolation of a beautiful old house in a pastoral setting. In the



## 'It is impossible not to think that Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) is a remake of this film.'

1960s, abstract expressionism had taken on the trappings of the vogue for 'pop art'. What had been largely incomprehensible to the general public during the early post-war period was now incorporated into up-to-date commercial fashion and accepted as a component of enlightened modernity. And this is what interested Petri – the political implications of an aesthetic trend expressing social and cultural change.

Franco Nero and Vanessa Redgrave play the lead roles in *A Quiet Place in the Country*. Leonardo (!) is the artist; Flavia is his companion and agent. During Nero's sojourn in the country house, we learn that the artist's inspiration is based on a mastery of certain techniques and on fantasies about reality. In order to gain familiarity with those involved in the production of 'pop art', Petri observed and filmed the US artist Jim Dine in the act of painting. What interested Petri were the 'expressive rhythmic gestures' manifest by the artist at work. According to Petri, these automatic, nervous gestures were emotionally conditioned reflexes revealing the relation between the artist and the objects of his creative expression. As far as Jim Dine

was concerned, says Petri, it was as if 'he always wanted to appropriate objects and insert them into his work; it was like a continual theft of reality in a constant attempt to express something. There was a terrible despair in this little film.' It was a kind of nervous narcissism, and this is what Petri wanted to elucidate.

What we see in the film is the disintegration of the artist's personality as his lack of creative inspiration, or should we say his inability to creatively channel his fantasies, leads to psychosis. The reasons for this mental breakdown are multiple, but let us say that the interplay of personal neuroses and social and cultural pathologies accentuate the rather vague 'illness' labelled 'schizophrenia'. It is impossible not to think that Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) is a remake of this film. At any rate, Vanessa Redgrave was there to take things in hand when her psychically unstable, but commercially viable artist was no longer able to function without becoming a danger to himself and to others. Significantly, in the course of the film Leonardo expressed hatred for advertising and, at least in his recurrent nightmares, exhibited a

desire to murder his beloved Flavia in the most violent and gory manner. But once interned in an expensive loony bin, the deranged 'pop' artist is encouraged by Vanessa/Flavia to paint small, easily marketable paintings on virtually an assembly-line basis. As Flavia contentedly observed after filling her limousine with Leonardo's paintings: 'He has never painted so well!'

Petri's melding of the individual psychological, the social and the cultural is as remarkable as that of Luis Buñuel in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) or *The Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). But beware, film viewer: this somewhat flippant review of the film fails to render its analytical profundity and technical virtuosity. Analysis of this film, as for the others Petri made, must go beyond such superficial comparisons.

Petri said of *A Quiet Place in the Country* that, ultimately, he was motivated to say something about art and the creative process in our processed world where, as Marx said a century and a half ago, every thing 'melts into air'. If, explained Petri, the abstract expressionists and other 'pop' artists may be seen as 'avant-garde' and 'modern', they are only expressing alienation differently from previous generations of artists. For him, the problem is that 'the relationship between the painter and nature is still "romantic", it is still the "return to nature", to simplicity, to pure food, to what still makes humankind happy' (Gili 1974: 62–63). What the pop artists seemingly do not understand is that this romantic vision of nature is only a myth, that reality is quite different. Problems of alienation have always existed, but the society has changed and, consequently, the artistic expression of alienation has changed. Pop art, no matter its appeal to popular sensibilities, is the surface sign of profound anxieties that the mastery over (and the destruction of) nature has engendered in society and in the human psyche.

Released in 1968, *A Quiet Place in the Country* coincided with the beginning of a new era of political activism in Italy and the rest of the world. In the new context, Petri's films garnered prizes and critical raves everywhere, even as they became more critical of social and cultural domination and more subversive of established authority. Petri is, in fact, best known for his late films: *Investigation of a Citizen Beyond Suspicion/Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni* (1970), *The Working Class Goes to Heaven/La classe operaia va in*

*paradiso* (1971), *Property is No Longer Theft/La proprietà non è più un furto* (1973) and *Todo modo* (1976). But when does such analysis become unacceptable? This is the subject of the next instalment.<sup>4</sup> •

### Contributor details

Larry Portis is the author of a number of books on history, culture and politics and often writes about the cinema.

### References

Gili, Jean A. (1974), 'Rencontre avec Elio Petri', in Jean A. Gili (ed.), *Elio Petri*, Nice: Faculté des Lettres et Science Humaines, Section d'Histoire.

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### Endnotes

1 Over the years there have been a few other retrospective viewings of Petri's work: Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (May 2001); Cinematheque Ontario (2002); Circolo Italiano di Boston and the Harvard Film Archive at the Harvard Film Archive (June 2003); Filmhouse, Edinburgh, Scotland (June 2005). The Montpellier retrospective benefited from the presence of Paola Petri, Elio Petri's companion, of Jean Gili, film critic and friend of Petri, and of Henri Talvat, specialist on all aspects of Mediterranean cinema and who arranged for most of Petri's films to be shown at the festival in October–November 2009.

2 This English title is wholly inaccurate. A more literal translation would be: 'To Each What He or She Deserves'. The novel by Leonardo Sciascia, on which this film was based, *A ciascuno il suo* (1966), was translated as *To Each His Own*.

3 As the English title suggests, the film also has been understood as a sort of murder mystery.

4 Which we plan to publish in our fourth issue of the year, *Film International* 46. (Editor's note)