BOOK REVIEWS

Elio Petri:
Writings on Cinema & Life
by Elio Petri; edited by Jean A. Gili; translated by Camilla Zamboni and Erika Marina Nadir.

“To speak to an elite of intellectuals is like speaking to nobody,” said Italian director Elio Petri (1929–82) in a 1973 interview published in Cineaste (Vol. 6, No. 1) to back up his criticism of the turn toward “intellectualism” in Jean Luc-Godard’s latest work. Asserting his “great admiration for Godard,” Petri nevertheless pointed out that he didn’t believe “one can make a revolution with cinema.” Yet Petri was steadfast in his dedication that “a dialectical process should be initiated among the great masses—through film and any other possible means.” With his own work, Petri tried to make a contribution: “I, on the contrary, believe in mainstream culture. My film should be seen by people who laugh and cry, and who will talk about the film,” he is quoted in the welcome new volume, Elio Petri: Writings on Cinema & Life, edited by French film historian Jean A. Gili, a renowned Italian cinema specialist.

In that quote, Petri referred to his gleefully perversely, almost Punch-and-Judy-style deconstruction of capitalism, La proprietà non è più un furto (Property is No Longer Theft, 1973). But he could be talking about any of his films. The brightest disciple of Giuseppe De Santis (a communist who tried to forge mass enlightenment out of the legacy of neorealism), Petri saw cinema similarly—as a popular art that allowed for encouraging thought-provoking social analysis. Pushing the Brechtian Volksstuck into baroque, often supremely sardonic pop-art territory, Petri became one of Italy’s internationally renowned auteurs. His confidently stylized, blistering paranoia smash Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto (Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion, 1970) even received the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film (and netted Petri and frequent cowriter Ugo Pirro a screenplay nomination) after winning the Grand Prix at Cannes. Hardly Petri’s only festival triumph during a heyday for politicized Italian cinema—his follow-up La classe operaia va in paradiso (The Working Class Goes to Heaven, 1971) shared the Palme d’Or with Francesco Rosi’s Il ciao Mattei (The Mattei Affair, 1972)—Investigation also caused considerable political controversy in Italy. But critically, Petri’s acidic studies of social mechanisms and subjection, usually served up in grand genre guise, met with considerable resistance at home. In the book’s introduction, Gili relates a disastrous screening of La classe operaia at the film festival “Il cinema libero” in Poreta Terme in 1971: protesters accused Petri of reformism, and French colleague Jean-Marie Straub was at hand to burn the reels of the film. Called “reactionary” and a “fascist,” Petri was of course anything but. Actually, his increasingly dark vision—if La classe operaia is an angry attack on industrial dehumanization that managed to offend all sides, his masterpiece Todo modo (1976) seems deliberately fashioned to fulfill that very purpose—has been proven sadly right by Italy’s political and cinematic fate.

This may have helped the ongoing reconsideration of Petri’s work, who by now stands out as one of Italy’s finest directors during the Sixties and Seventies. Hired to do research for De Santis’s fact-based neo-realist key work Roma ore 11 (Rome 11 O’Clock, 1952), Petri became a close collaborator as cowriter and assistant director for various projects, directed his first short in 1954, and graduated to features with the remarkably assured character study L’assassino (The Assassin, 1961), starring Marcello Mastroianni as a murderer suspect. Later, Petri considered this his only contribution to the then-voguish (from Fellini to Antonioni) films dealing with psychological alienation. But Petri’s follow-up I giorni contati (Numbered Days, 1962) proved a breakthrough toward something like existentialist realism—and a stance that allowed the director to study alienation “not as a psychological phenomenon, but as a social fact.” With his fourth film, the allegorical science fiction extravaganza Il decimo vittima (The Tenth Victim, 1965), Petri fully turned toward genre material. Subsequently, his Sicily-set Leonardo Sciascia adaptation A ciascuno il suo (We Still Kill the Old Way, 1967) served as an international breakthrough and inaugurated many key relationships, most notably with Gian Maria Volonté, who went on to deliver astonishing (anti-)star turns for Petri in Investigation, La classe operaia, La proprietà, and Todo modo. Unmistakably portraying prime minister Aldo Moro (although the character’s name is just given as “M.”) in the latter, Volonté’s ingeniously executed ballet of evasive gestures and looks is in itself a full expression of what Petri sought to expose by reshaping another philosophical Sciascia crime plot as a direct attack on the Christian Democratic Party “that governed Italy for thirty years, and shipwrecked the country politically and culturally,” as he points out in an intriguing essay on his Sciascia adaptations in the newly translated book.

A seemingly eclectic but actually very helpful selection of such hard-to-find Petri pieces, the aptly titled Writings on Cinema & Life is posited in Gili’s introduction as homage to “a man that was like a big brother to me, a brother who had a lot to teach and pass down.” The result definitely serves as a touching tribute, showing Petri as an enormously educated and gifted writer graced with a remarkable sense of humor, but just as capable of well-reasoned and sound analysis as of occasional bon mots. (“The artistic maturity of the director is manifested through the medium of a perfect and almost nauseating naturalism,” he remarks apropos of Elia Kazan’s A Streetcar Named Desire.) Meanwhile, the selection spans almost Petri’s entire career, also allowing for an appreciation of the breadth and depth of his interests. The first chapter combines pieces written in 1957–58 for the dissident communist magazine Città aperta, on which he served as a member of the editorial board. Politicized in his early years, Petri had broken with Italy’s communist party, the PCI (though clearly not with communism), after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. Reflections on cinema and political engagement figure prominently here, whether he’s assessing certain directors (Pietro Germi, Luan Antonio Bar- den, Kazan), taking stock of Soviet cinema in the light of Ilya Ehrenburg’s recent reflection of the first years of Khrushchev’s Thaw, or presenting an outline for a cheap film, whose production would “never be tolerated.” (In a way, with Todo modo, Petri man-
aged to make that film after all.) There’s also a pointed, clearly autobiographically inspired short story about the regular humiliation of a scriptwriter begging for his pay, who muses during the negotiations that “Mussolini would have been perfect as a producer for these types of film.”

The second chapter elaborates on “The Debate About Italian Cinema,” serving as a short guide to the challenges faced by an engaged, uncompromising filmmaker like Petri during two turbulent decades. Characteristically skeptical, he concludes the opening 1962 questionnaire to “new” directors with: “Very few people, in our country, truly love democracy.” Despite intermittent assertions of his belief in Italian cinema, the section’s final text, published only months before Petri’s death in 1982, comes to a resigned conclusion: “The Left Is Indifferent to Our Cinema.” At that point, Petri had been facing increasing production difficulties after Todo modo, which the Christian Democratic Party’s Bartolo Ciccardino had condemned on television after seeing a clip: “Petri is like Goebbels, this film is like Süss Terrors!”

Petri’s last period of activity up to Buone notizie (Good News, 1979), a film that happened almost by accident, is the focus of chapter four, combining Petri’s Sciascia notes with two (sometimes overlapping) interviews on Todo modo, and a real find—Petri’s long internal memo for state television RAI on his internationally unreleased four-hour TV adaptation of Sartre’s Le mani sforzate (Dirty Hands, 1978). The French philosopher was a key figure for Petri’s artistic development, and the director delivers a clear-headed, lengthy analysis of Sartre’s political thought, as well as adding his Italian perspective in typically exacting (“boring on neurotic,” Gili correctly remarks on another occasion) prose.

No less typical, Petri opens with general considerations on the role of television and its (ab)use as a medium for complacency: his sharp wit showcases a critically minded and comprehensively knowledgeable as well as immensely pleasurable writer. So do his discussions of two painters—Picasso and Claudio Bonichi—in the penultimate chapter, excitingly animating his films even in their darkest moments and perfectly expressed in the third chapter, hitherto ignored: “Nuova cucina” assembles the “culinary film criticism” Petri wrote in 1980 for the eponymous food magazine of Ugo Tognazzi. “Apocalypse Now begins where a lunch would end.” Petri quips in the first pan, clearly having fun with the format. “Coppola sacrifices gastronomic precision in favor of beauty and the marketing of images,” he complains cheekily to arrive at valid criticism of this “gastronomic (and otherwise) apocalypse”—An enormous napalm barbecue for those who no longer believe in steak.” Brilliant and hilarious, these light-hearted, yet laser-sharp pieces show Petri at his height, mounting a full-scale deconstruction of Fellini’s hang-ups via a tongue-in-cheek protocol of all the instances of food and drink (and sex) ostentatiously not consumed in La città delle donne (City of Women, 1980) or turning Kramer vs. Kramer’s reactionary, but effective, tear-jerking inside out in a delicious discussion of a drama “that is indeed a gastronomical one, which at the end reaches a true catharsis and is built around a French toast that becomes the symbol of familial unity.”

—Christoph Huber

**I Do and I Don’t:**

_A History of Marriage in the Movies_


_I Do and I Don’t_ is about a film genre that doesn’t officially exist—the marriage movie. This is the situation Jeanine Basinger hopes to correct. Basinger, a respected and versatile film scholar who is as comfortable and informative writing about the Westerns of Anthony Mann as she is about women’s films, sets out to trace the history of the marriage movie from its beginnings in silent films (some carrying irresistibly brazen titles like _Married Flirts, The Marriage Playground, Restless Wives, Flapper Wives, _and_ Lubitsch’s inimitable _The Marriage Circle_), through the talkies of the studio era, which disguised and marketed marriage movies as domestic dramas or love stories, up to the present day, where marriage movies flourish on cable and in indie cinema (_Married Life, The Kids Are All Right, Blue Valentine_).

En route, Basinger discovers the dominant, “bipolar” structure (I do and I don’t). “I do” films represent marriage in what Basinger calls “the popular moving-forward, active mode (young couple get married, things go wrong, all ends well).” The “I don’t” films are disobliging, refusing to look forward for hope or relief. They typically are “told backwards as a flashback (everything has gone wrong after a young couple got married and things have so far not ended well).” This structure has proved remarkably sturdy and adaptable. It upholds Cecil B. DeMille’s (whom Basinger feels should be regarded as the Father of the American Marriage Movie) _For Better or Worse and The Cheat_ but also the Coen brothers’ _Fargo_ (an “I do”) and _I Don’t_ marriage movie collapsed into one).

Studios thought in terms of such simple formulae and Basinger tries to think as they do to explain why marriage movies took the forms and expressed the (predictably conventional) attitudes they did. Studios, she argues, were cautious in representing marriage on screen. Their business, as they saw and tried to protect it, was to entertain movie audiences with escapist fantasies about couples surmounting all obstacles to their enduring happiness or to caution them with tales of soul-killing incompatibility, ugly divorce, even marital homicide. But they also wanted to make sure that the vision of marriage they presented, whether lighthearted or dark-spirited, did not appear to undermine the institution itself. If they failed to “reassure everyone one that married domesticity was a useful and rewarding enterprise,” Basinger argues, they risked alienating and losing their core audiences.

This account of studio thinking is based not only on Basinger’s extensive research...
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