

# Karlový Vary International Film Festival

July 3 to July 11, 2015

## Tribute to Elio Petri

Elio (Eraclio) Petri was born into humble circumstances in Rome on January 29, 1929. An only child, he grew up in the city's working-class quarter, finding success at school thanks to his exceptional intelligence. After expulsion from Catholic school for political reasons, his career began as an activist, film journalist, and coordinator of cultural activities for the youth-oriented offshoot of the Italian Communist Party. He contributed to the periodicals *l'Unità*, *Gioventù nuova*, and *Città aperta*. "My school was the streets, the movie theater, communist cells, music halls, public libraries, standing by the unemployed in clashes with the police, shootouts, lynchings, the studios of artists my age, film clubs, gatherings, as well as meetings with those who at the time were called professional revolutionaries," Petri reminisced. In 1956, however, he left the Communist Party in protest over the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Uprising.

The creative part of Petri's life, cut prematurely short by cancer, unfolded during three intense decades of postwar Italian development: the renewal of the war-torn country, the Christian Democrats' long-term consolidation of power, the economic miracle, the strengthening communist influence, 1968, and the subsequent "leaden" seventies, marked by increasingly extremist policies and frequent terrorist attacks. Thanks to his origins, Petri was able to maintain his authenticity throughout his life. He was no armchair supporter of the left, with politics always playing a significant role in his personal and creative life. He stood on the side of the working class, the weak and downtrodden, and the bullied. He had contempt for the ruling class, both on the right and the left ends of the political spectrum. It was his view that, in the presence of power, one risks misusing it sooner or later.

Meeting Giuseppe De Santis was a key moment in Petri's career; the director took him on as an assistant for the filming of *Bitter Rice* (*Riso amaro*, 1948), a seminal work of Italian Neorealism. De Santis enjoyed equal renown as the director of *Rome 11:00* (*Roma ore 11*, 1951), with Petri co-authoring the script, albeit uncredited. He collaborated with his mentor on several other films in both capacities (assistant and writer), also penning scripts for other filmmakers, such as Aglauro Casadio and the recently deceased Carlo Lizzani. De Santis' training allowed the self-taught Petri to familiarize himself with the fundamentals of the craft and, at the same time, to painstakingly formulate opinions on culture and politics.

After the two short films *Birth of a Champion* (*Nasce un campione*, 1954) and *The Seven Farmers* (*I sette contadini*, 1957), he worked with Tonino Guerra on the script for the artfully constructed detective tale that would become his feature debut as a director, *The Assassin* (*L'assassino*, 1961). Soon afterward he shot the existential drama *Numbered Days* (*I giorni contati*, 1961), one of the pivotal titles of Petri's career, although today it enjoys less buzz than some of his later movies. Bernardo Bertolucci saw as unique Petri's ability to creatively fill the space between postwar realism and the Italian cinematic existentialism that came almost 20 years later; *Numbered Days* is a flagrant illustration of this thesis.

In the mid 1960s, Petri shifted toward a lighter genre with *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965), an adventure picture with futuristic overtones. He used it, however, to attack the consumerism and complacency of the masses and to expose the attendant ease with which they could be manipulated. Petri's world acquired greater political involvement with one of his most mordant movies, *We Still Kill the Old Way* (*A ciascuno il suo*, 1967), adapted from the novel by renowned Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia. The writer-director's team also welcomed phenomenal actor Gian Maria Volonté and outstanding screenwriter Ugo Pirro, two of Petri's repeat collaborators.

After the experimental intermezzo entitled *A Quiet Place in the Country* (*Un tranquillo posto di campagna*, 1968), on which Petri began his fruitful cooperation with film music legend Ennio Morricone, came a series of four titles that transformed Petri into the most intriguing filmmaker of his era. He became an author of stylistically fascinating works with a strong philosophical and political subtext; a creator who, with every subsequent film, pushed the boundaries of his previous movie; an unyielding commentator on abuses that aggrieved and angered him. In his most celebrated film, *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (*Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*, 1969), a work that claimed the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, he employs a grandiose elegance and mercurial spontaneity to settle accounts with corrupt Italian police who were responsible for numerous "unsolved" murders of innocent protesters. Coming next, *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (*La classe operaia va in paradiso*, 1971) shared the Grand Prix with Francesco Rosi's *The Mattei Affair* (*Il caso Mattei*, 1971) at Cannes; the work is a cynical, aggressive, and unsettling treatise on the pernicious influence of mechanical, mind-numbing drudgery on an individual's integrity. In the pointed satire *Property Is No Longer a Theft* (*La proprietà non è più un furto*, 1973), the culmination of his "trilogy of neurosis," a bank clerk (who is allergic to money) decides to teach a

greedy butcher a lesson – and along the way the director shows that “to have” and “to be” are incompatible states of existence. The uncontested pinnacle of Petri’s artistic-political output came with his loose adaptation of another Sciascia novel, *Todo modo* (1976). The expressive scope and uncommon creative courage of this delirious lampoon likely represents the most uncompromising cinematic exposé anywhere of corrupt power.

Petri is considered the least appreciated and most overlooked of the fundamental figures of Italian postwar film. For his part, Franco Nero, whom Petri directed in *A Quiet Place in the Country*, regards him as the most significant filmmaker to come out of the Apennine Peninsula. Yet due to his moral, artistic, and political integrity, which forced him, as man and filmmaker, to call things exactly as he saw them, he became politically “inconvenient.” Petri poured the frustration and pessimism permeating the latter phase of his career into the brooding motion picture *Good News* (*Buone notizie*, 1979), which examines the desperation of the artist whose message falls on nothing but deaf ears. Petri was unable to finish a planned film starring Marcello Mastroianni, *Chi illumina la grande notte*. His life and career came to an untimely end in the fall of 1982.

“Today, in order to shoot something you have to love film and be crazy. And that’s the only positive thing about it.”  
Elio Petri

Karel Och

|  | Basic film info       | Section |
|--|-----------------------|---------|
| <a href="#">The 10th Victim</a> / La decima vittima  | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">The Assassin</a> / L' assassino  | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">Elio Petri: Notes on a Filmmaker</a> / Elio Petri...appunti su un autore                               | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">Good News</a> / Buone notizie  | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion</a> / Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">Numbered Days</a> / I giorni contati   | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">Only One Name in the Headlines</a> / Soltanto un nome nei titoli di testa                              | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">The Property Is No Longer a Theft</a> / La proprietà non è più un furto                                | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">A Quiet Place in the Country</a> / Un tranquillo posto di campagna                                     | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">Todo modo</a> / Todo modo  | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">We Still Kill the Old Way</a> / A ciascuno il suo  | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |
| <a href="#">The Working Class Goes to Heaven</a> / La classe operaia va in paradiso                                | Tribute to Elio Petri |         |

First Previous      Next Last

© 2014 Film Servis Festival Karlovy Vary, a.s. All rights reserved

Created by [Motion Media](#)