

# Studies in European Cinema

## The Pedagogy of Political Film. Elio Petri's *Todo Modo*

--Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>Petri's <i>Todo Modo</i> (1976) - based on Sciascia's novel - features Marcello Mastroianni as a priest in charge of a group of politicians from the ruling party of the Christian Democracy on a spiritual retreat in a hotel. Here they begin to die one by one in unexplained circumstances. Petri's declared aim was to damage the party as much as possible. The intention - which also motivates the distance from Sciascia - was to delimit a specific reality so to embed its distortions into the fabric of the film. However the film was received mainly as an allegorical representation.</p> <p>This article argues that <i>Todo Modo</i> is both an effective example of European political cinema from the 1970's, because of the specificity of its analysis, and a lesson for political cinema in general. The film shows the need for political cinema's pedagogical efforts to embrace reality's distortions, rather than attempting to elucidate them.</p>

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## **The Pedagogy of Political Film. Elio Petri's *Todo Modo***

There is no Revolution without 'exemplary acts'. But it is Revolution itself, this suddenly decisive change by which a society confounds itself with its own rupture, which gives any act its explosive force, its potential to be an example, which is to say, without example.

(Blanchot 2010: 98)

### **The repulsion of commitment**

Following the critical success of his *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto/Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (Petri, 1970)<sup>1</sup> and *La Classe Operaia Va in Paradiso/The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (Petri, 1971)<sup>2</sup> Elio Petri radicalized his political-popular style and started producing a number of films that he qualified as 'repulsive' (Petri 2012: 226). The term applies in particular to *La Proprietà non è più un furto/Property Is No Longer a Theft* (Petri, 1973) and *Todo Modo* (Petri, 1976), two works whose political message resides precisely in their rejection of principles of good taste. In these films the criticism levelled at the groups perceived as responsible for the socio-economic disaster of 1970's Italy is more direct. However, the severity of the

attack does not translate into a more austere adherence to realistic devices. Quite the opposite, the urgency for clarity and personalization allows Petri to mobilize an even richer imaginary, organized around formal choices that become less and less comforting. Instead of illustrating events through lucid reconstruction of the facts and detailed rendering of the situations (something that other European political filmmakers – Pontecorvo, Rosi, von Trotta, Schlöndorff, Loach - will keep doing) Petri shows the facts as black holes, attractive and elusive enigmas.

The political situation Petri observes in Italy is one dominated by the widespread corruption of State authorities and by the drifting of leftist groups into armed struggle. The Christian Democracy (DC) party had held a relative majority in Parliament since the very first elections (1948) and had therefore been in power for almost thirty years, forming several governments and building alliances on the right and on the left. The DC appears in the mid 70's as the centre of corruption, entangled in multiple scandals, largely responsible for the failure of Italy to mature into a European democracy. The one large parliamentary group never to have formed a government with the Christian Democracy was the Communist Party (PCI), the biggest communist party in the West, counting on a vast number of militants and a substantial presence in the territory. In 1975 Aldo Moro – then President of the Christian Democracy – was attempting precisely this: to form an alliance with the Communists, by including them within the government. Reflecting on Moro's effort, Petri writes: 'Moro [...] conceived the unconceivable: a change that would not change anything, a movement that could develop into immobility, a whole that seemed empty, a Left that would go Right, a Right that would go Left, but always

complicit with the worst part of his party' (Petri 2007: 155).

*Todo Modo* largely reflects this climate. The film features Marcello Mastroianni as Don Gaetano, a priest in charge of a group of politicians, notaries and industrialists from the ruling party headed by their President (Gian Maria Volonté) on a spiritual retreat in a hotel-bunker called Zafer. Here, amid secret consultations, spiritual exercises, the theft of sacramental bread, more or less unexpected visits (including a character called Him, played by Michel Piccoli) the eminent personages begin to die one by one in mysterious circumstances.

The significance of Petri's film can be traced initially through the productive resonances it establishes with its source, the novel bearing the same title and published in 1974 by Leonardo Sciascia. Since Petri has been often classified under a rather uncomplicated version of political cinema, dominated by solid commonplaces, this detour is necessary to show that his 'political' is something more (and less) than Petri's reception normally takes it to be. His tuition promotes at once pictorial clarity and transgressive denunciation, and sustains itself on the tension between surface and depth. One should be warned therefore that while discussing Sciascia (and with him Pasolini and Barthes) we are in fact speaking *towards* Elio Petri.

### **Two versions of politics and Sciascia's dualities**

Leonardo Sciascia's work seems structured on a series of intertwining dualities. The conflicting combinations running through Sciascia's production add problematic depth to both his novels and his political and critical writings. This essential difficulty affects every attempt to interpret or adapt his work.

One encounters first of all a twofold understanding of politics: on the one hand a desire for politics, understood as investment in the idea of the public good, to guide the life of the State and on the other the acknowledgment that when this happens – when the political class takes over – one inevitably witnesses the disaster of the State and the emergence of a distorted idea of citizenship. However in Sciascia's work the 'excess of evidence' that marks such disastrous reality does not result in the dismissal of the ideality of politics. In fact this ideality is reinforced in its necessity precisely because the real does not carry out its promises. In *L'affaire Moro* – a text occasioned by the kidnapping of the leader of the Christian Democracy Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades and published four years after *Todo Modo* – Sciascia writes that the Italian problem is not that the State is badly run, but that this simply has never existed (Sciascia 2003: 514). The duality emphasizes here on the one side the need for the idea to participate in reality and correct reality's distortion and on the other the recognition that the conditions for such participation have not matured. In Sciascia's writing the ideality of politics attempts to feed a political reality that refuses to be nourished and prefers to perish of starvation.

The second duality points to the play between content and form. In Sciascia's writings these cast on each other a series of contradictory demands. While form and style become more and more concise, controlled and composed, the subject matters Sciascia chooses invoke enigmatic and turbulent national events so that at times his work assumes the traits of a deliberate political trial. This trial addresses not simply the specific distortions of the Italian political class, but is directed against power in all its diverse manifestations. Sciascia maintains throughout his work an interest for marginal historical figures and events, which precisely because of their marginality allow him to wage a war

against power. Aldo Moro himself becomes one of these figures during his captivity, when he finally uses the word ‘power’, against his ‘friends’. In reporting the words from a letter addressed by Moro to his family, in which the leader discusses arrangements for his funeral, Sciascia emphasizes the following passage: ‘I do not want around me the men of power’ (Sciascia 2003: 543).

Pasolini calls this antagonism between form and content Sciascia’s ‘double realism’ (Pasolini 1985b: 224) and traces at the heart of Sciascia’s work a double inheritance. It is the cohabitation of two distinct traditions of realism that marks Sciascia’s singularity. Pasolini writes: ‘Sciascia’s heroes are lifted from the Italian realist tradition, which implies an objectivity that is only implicitly critical, while Sciascia’s narrative style derives from a different tradition: a European version of realism that attains existential objectivity not through mimesis, but through its own expressive concision’ (Pasolini 1985b: 224). These two realisms produce a ‘mysterious and suspended style’ (Pasolini 1985b: 224), in which both versions are fragmented and used as devices, tools, internal mechanisms. The dualism produces an ambiguous result: ‘as a realist writer Sciascia’s mind-set is necessarily rational, but the subject matter he writes about defies in itself every attempt at rationalization’ (Pasolini 1985b: 226). Sciascia can be seen to appropriate and rielaborate elements from Stendhal and Pirandello, Maupassant and Voltaire, De Roberto and Brancati. From one tradition he inherits the need to bury expressivity, to suppress the gesture of the writer, in order to let the real emerge; from the other he receives the idea that the real itself is opaque, forever covered, militarily protected by the confusion of language. Aldo Moro, again after his transformation into a victim of the very language he had more than anybody developed,



will write in a letter to his wife: ‘The confusion of languages has gone so far!’ (Sciascia, 2003: 564). It is worth nothing that the book closes precisely on this sentence. In Petri’s film *The President’s wife* (played by Mariangela Melato) speaking to her husband before his address to the hall invites him not to abuse his usually mystifying language and in particular to avoid the word ‘magmatically’ (*magmaticamente*).

In Sciascian expressions like ‘the citadel of the Christian Democracy’ (Sciascia 2003: 484) one should therefore not read an hyperbole or simply a metaphor. For Sciascia the ruling party has structured itself precisely as a city within the city, a state within the State, an enclosure ‘which seemed open but [...] turned out to be well guarded and fortified’ (Sciascia 2003: 484). Sciascia tends to avoid the metaphorical or hyperbolic expression, in particular when attempting to penetrate the confusion and ambiguity of power, precisely because what we do not know must be expressed in the most exact terms. All one knows of the ‘citadel’ is that there is something on the inside that cannot be known. The expression is therefore at once a political judgment – the public good is in fact private – and an exercise of linguistic exactness, through which Sciascia confronts the confusion of language, that very confusion that had become apparent even to Moro.

### **Truth and its games**

This peculiar interaction of content and form shapes Sciascia’s inquisitive approach to truth noted by several commentators (Ambroise 1987; D’Alessandra & Salis 2005; Gentile 1995). Sciascia’s investigative practice draws a very singular trajectory and offers one more side to the essential dualism already discussed. On the one side Sciascia repeatedly asserts the primacy of reason: it is through logical procedure that one can

question truth and its value. Sciascia uses reason as a tool in opposing the intricacy of truth to its blind and politically biased affirmation. However, rather than using reason to discover a different truth, he uses it to lay bare the process that leads to the fallacious affirmation of truth, often employing news items or ‘minimal history’ to oppose grand narratives and the politically motivated institution of truth. The procedure therefore leads from clarity to obscurity and not the other way around, as the tradition of the detective novel would suggest. In fact Sciascia rejects the illumination, the ‘moment of grace’ proper of all detective novels (Sciascia 1999: 1183).<sup>3</sup> Sciascia leads his reader from truth to the procedures put in place by power to establish truth. In this context reason serves to shift emphasis from acknowledged truths to the process that has produced their affirmation, distribution and acceptance. Readers are therefore left not with a new truth, but with the enigmatic *working* of truth, the recognition that truth works from detours, omissions and misinterpretations. Sciascia’s truth-procedure opposes truth and reinstates the enigma, thus suppressing facile acceptance with the opacity of the real. Sciascia’s emphasis on the primacy of reason leads to inexplicable enigmas, precisely because it is only through the emergence of ambiguities that a truth-procedure can be recognized.

### **Fireflies and funereal masks**

In order to understand *Todo Modo* – both the novel and the film – one needs to undertake an exercise of reverse philology. This exercise retraces the strategy deployed by Sciascia in *Todo Modo* (1974) in the pages of *L’Affaire Moro* (1978). The latter has appeared to a number of commentators as the ‘question to the answer already published four years before’ (Cotroneo 2013: 95). In the opening section of the book on Moro,

Sciascia recalls Pasolini and the ‘disappearance of the fireflies’ (Sciascia 1999: 468). In his *Scritti Corsari* Pasolini describes the political phase immediately before the kidnapping of Moro as characterized by ‘a completely new language’ (Pasolini 1999b: 410), but also by ‘an absolute power vacuum’ (Pasolini 1999b: 409). This absence of power affects precisely those who still think of themselves as men of power. It is only in language that the shift to new forms of power can be evaluated. The ‘citadel’ of the Christian Democracy has been emptied, the men who remain inside have lost their political significance. The power that was there administered, in accordance with the values of the Fascist regime, has now moved elsewhere. In this new phase, which follows the disappearance of the fireflies, the leaders of the Christian Democracy have become ‘funereal masks’ (Pasolini 1999b: 409), behind which is a void. The citadel is therefore now busy with men who do absolutely nothing, who speak a language that says nothing because there is nothing to say, while preserving the form of a language that says. The real tragedy is in this figure of men still caught in a nervous agitation, unaware of the emptiness of their gestures and words. The cittadella is still fortified, but its fortifications are monuments, vacant effigies of the power that was.

It is against this background that Pasolini outlines the idea of a ‘trial’ against the most eminent members of the Christian Democracy (Pasolini 1999a: 637) and identifies the emptiness of the ‘new language’. It is to language that Sciascia resorts to explain Moro and the political situation that has followed from his kidnapping by the Red Brigades. It is to this ‘new language’ that Sciascia has devoted his novel *Todo Modo*.

### **Loyola’s lack of signs**

The centrality of language for the political argument developed by *Todo Modo* can be analysed by considering Sciascia's choice to associate the book with the figure of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The title itself is lifted directly from Loyola's First Annotation in his *Spiritual Exercises*: 'every way [*todo modo*] of preparing and disposing the soul [...] in order to seek and find the Divine Will [...] is called a Spiritual Exercise' (Loyola 2007: 3). Sciascia borrows the expression from Loyola not simply because the spiritual exercises offer a solid metaphor for the gathering of the leaders of the ruling party. It is not enough to say that Sciascia uses Loyola's system because the weekly structure of the exercises allows him to enclose the narrative in a precise temporal grid. Moreover while the overlapping of religion and mundane affairs, somehow typical of the Jesuits and so criminal in the Italian leaders, is certainly a resourceful political motif, Sciascia is pointing to something at once more and less explicit. The fact that many DC leaders, and Moro in particular, did cut priestly figures is certainly not overlooked, but while Sciascia deploys all this 'excess of evidence', the reference to Loyola penetrates the construction of the novel at the level of 'language' even more than in the manifestations of the characters. The entire register of *Todo Modo* plays on the impossibility to understand what is being said and therefore on the growing ambiguity of the plot. As mentioned before since the novel derives its dramatic structure from the detective story, Sciascia constantly pushes the readers to decipher the signs and traces and deduce – through intuition or careful reconstruction of the evidences – a series of illuminating answers. However, as Pasolini also notes (Pasolini 1985a: 314), this familiar procedure is repeatedly frustrated. The frustration grows not simply because the reasons behind the murders remain inscrutable, but because the conversations the characters are constantly

engaged in ultimately reveal nothing. It is here, in this revealing *nothing* (which is even more problematic than *not-revealing*) that one can trace the significance of Loyola's work for the novel. It is also here that the story finds its political force.

In his three studies Roland Barthes defines Sade, Fourier and Loyola as founders of language and coins for them the term 'logothetes' (Barthes 1997: 3). According to Barthes, Loyola's creation aims to provide the expressive tools for a method of decision-making. However Loyola's system produces a constant deferral of the decision and substitutes to it the continuous weighing up of available possibilities. As Barthes writes: 'we see Ignatius wait, watch the motions, note them, account for them, persist in eliciting them [...] there is but one outcome to this dialogue [...] it is to make the withholding of the mark itself into an ultimate sign (Barthes 1997: 75). It is this deferral that withholds every revelatory sign that Sciascia appropriates from Loyola's system: a language where the absence of meaning is itself the very meaning, the sign of the power vacuum. The insolvability of the murders proceeds from this essential absence. As Pasolini writes: 'the mechanisms that produce the assassinations are a priori excluded from any possible investigation' (Pasolini 1985a: 314). It is this Loyolan element that Petri recuperates from Sciascia's novel. Reflecting on the context of the book Petri writes:

the ways that power has been administered by the Christian Democrats in Italy over the past thirty years exactly resemble the process described by Barthes [...] The Christian Democrats in power do count their mistakes and crimes, but only to hide them: and the fact that they hide them becomes 'in its urn, a sin that will add to the original list' and so on to infinity (Petri 2007: 153).

The mechanisms at work in *Todo Modo* cannot be traced back to any logical procedure and it is this absence of motive that makes the assassinations meaningful. What is politically relevant in Sciascia is neither the resonance between the characters and the real leaders of the Christian Democracy, nor the metaphors that allow readers to draw the parallel between factual and fictional events, but the absence of signs as to why and how these men rule the country. It is therefore around this most literary element that Sciascia crafts the political impetus of the novel. There is nothing political anymore, here is the political message of the book, its lesson, its warning and its schooling.

### **Petri and ritual cinema**

As mentioned Sciascia never abandons the problem of truth. He rather emphasizes how truth should always be conceived of, followed in its procedures, challenged at the point of its emergence, and never simply accepted. In this sense Petri remains in his film very faithful to Sciascia. In *Todo Modo* the director starts from clarity and slowly proceeds towards the acknowledgment that it is indeed impossible to overcome the essential ambiguity of the situation. The assassinations respond to a practice that no investigation can clarify. Petri does not disclose the killer(s), leaving the enigma to eat itself, to contaminate everything. Petri presents the Christian Democracy as a power without power, uncertain as to its ideological principles, held together by greed and organized in ever more unstable affiliations. However Petri himself admitted of pushing the idea of a faceless power even further than Sciascia. This imposed a correction to the tone of the book towards the farce: 'I forced Sciascia's hand also in the tone of the film,

which became the grotesque proper of a black farce, and by doing so it seemed to me not only to follow Sciascia's indication – “in their abject mystification and grotesqueries” - but also to evoke that blackest climate that one could feel in Italy’ (Petri 2007: 155). Moreover Petri is aware of having been more direct in his denunciation: ‘I forced Sciascia's hand in making the film more explicit than his book, through my personalization of the attack’ (Petri 2007: 154).

In his review of the film Italian writer Alberto Moravia describes it as an example of ‘ritual cinema’, based on ‘on an essential ambiguity, whether because the director is himself involved in the world he condemns, or because he can't anchor his discourse to a clear and solid political thought’ (Moravia 1983: 80). Moravia then adds: ‘Elio Petri's film resembles both formally and structurally a profane mystery [...] the decision to limit the plot to the narrow boundaries of our current political situation gives it the tone of a pamphlet, with all the violence, contingency and superficiality implied in the term’ (Moravia 1983: 80). Moravia closes his short article by underlining the ‘parodic character of the film, most visible in the figure of The President played by Gian Maria Volonté’ (Moravia 1983: 80).

Moravia's analysis moves three main objections to Petri's film (and perhaps to Sciascia's novel):

- the film finds formal refuge in the structure of the ritual because the author lacks the vision that would allow him a clear and transparent explication of the real and in particular of the current political reality; the film is therefore confusing;

- by withdrawing into this highly artificial structure the film ends up being flattened to a superficial and sometimes tautological critique; the film is therefore empty;
- rather than interpreting the real through the lens of satire, therefore using parody as critique, the film collapses into the parody of critique, a subversion of subversion, which is reactionary despite itself. To paraphrase Lukacs' argument against modernism: the film distorts distortion and renders its assault immaterial (Lukács 1963: 75); the film is therefore overall reactionary.

These three criticisms can be summarized into one: the film drifts away from formal and intellectual coherence and therefore reneges on its political promise. However Moravia's judgment seems to contrast with Petri's professed intentions. In a number of interviews on *Todo Modo*, Petri repeatedly declared that the aim of the film was to move an open and explicit assault on the Christian Democracy. In a conversation with Jean Gili, Petri says 'I was set on a specific goal: to damage the Christian Democracy' (Petri 2007: 157). In the same interview he then adds: 'in order for the attack to be understood, every reference had to be clear, without any room for equivocation' (Petri 2007: 158). When comparing his film with Sciascia's work, Petri admits to having exacerbated the novel's undertones in order to deliver an even more personal offensive against some of the party's prominent figures (Petri 2007: 154). Invited to judge his film in the light of Moro's kidnapping and assassination (the events happened two years after the release of the film) Petri asserts a strengthened conviction as to *Todo Modo's* 'political and aesthetic' significance (Petri 2007: 105). However, the director expresses a certain regret for not having pushed himself enough, for having bowed in front of good taste: 'what I



regret, if anything, is having given in to that “measure”, to that “good taste”, that seem to be the distinctive elements of the current political and cultural poverty’ (Petri 2007: 157). The elements that emerge from Petri’s interviews therefore can be summarized in a number of remarks:

- the members of the ruling party criticized in the film are not referenced by way of metaphors, but according to the most stringent identifications: Petri wants the film to make them appear and not to invoke them. The film aims to intervene on individuals and on a specific reality;
- Petri defends his political and aesthetic choice, therefore either opening up the life of the film beyond the specific reality it aimed to criticize or asserting that nothing of that reality has actually changed. Either the film has a future or the reality does not have any;
- Petri criticizes himself for having ultimately conceded too much to an external aesthetic principle which demands from him a ‘good film’.

Petri seems to outline then a strategy based on two core principles: clarity and transgression. The two work together and collaborate in shaping the intertwining of form and content. In other words, one has to be very specific, clear and transparent if one is to transgress or one has to transgress and risk everything if one wants to produce transparency. In the first case it is transparency that allows for transgressive transformations to emerge, in the second it is the attempt to transgress that opens up the possibility of clarity. It is here that Petri decides not just the fate of *Todo Modo*, but that

of his entire work and offers his singular contribution to political cinema. At the end of his interview with Gili, Petri sketches an aesthetic manifesto:

People are used to look at the events of everyday life without ‘seeing’ and this is true in particular of political life. These are part of a *routine* managed by an *elite* with its own incomprehensible code [...] In a political film one has to challenge the obvious, one has to show that the *obvious* is less *obvious* than it appears. However, one has to do this without sublimating the material. The obvious must be rendered less banal. The obvious is full of signs that must be submitted to the analysis of the eye (Petri 2007: 166).

Petri’s statement addresses the need for political film to transfigure: the immediacy of reality is such that in order to extricate it one must necessarily introduce a form of mediation. This form of mediation in itself unveils the fact that reality is nothing immediate or rather that its immediacy is in fact a semblance. It is this semblance that must be reproduced on the screen in order for the political ‘buried’ within reality to emerge. For Petri the political force of a film cannot be conveyed through mimesis, since such procedure would replicate the very device that allows the status quo to be perceived as obvious and incontrovertible. Ideological distortion covers as it were the very surface of everything. Dealing with this surface is a properly political act only if the film manages at once to deliver the transparency of reality (its explicit absorption by ideology) and to transgress this transparency by showing that it is as a monstrous distortion. Delivering transparency while at the same time transgressing it is the task of the

pedagogy implicit in every political film. Adorno expresses similar concerns when, in a discussion on realism and film, he names the calculated mediation between explicit and inexplicit form as the only resource for the success of artistic works (Adorno 2005: 142).

Taking Petri's two principles into account, it is possible to return to Moravia's critique and read it under a new light. What Moravia calls the 'ritual' is what Petri understands as the transgression of the obvious and what Moravia describes as the pamphletic style of the film responds for Petri to the need to present the obvious in the clearest possible terms. As mentioned for Petri these two elements – transgression and clarity – form part of one strategy: finding a balance between the Adornian alternatives of clear and amateurish form (Adorno 2005: 142). The very lack that Moravia's critical judgement identifies at the heart of the film – the political promise is missed due to the artificial rituality of the form (lack of political analysis) and the superficial treatment of the content (lack of political vision) – is in fact Petri's aesthetic proposal. The question could be put in terms that echo Adorno's discussion of commitment. According to Adorno the question of commitment remains a pressing one, since it collaborates to define the artwork itself. Two conflicting positions emerge: one that sees in committed art a stripping away of the magic of works of art and their a-political pleasure, and a second which takes this magic to be a distraction from political battle, which art should help to fight (Adorno 1980: 177). Adorno remarks though that 'each of the two positions negates itself with the other' (Adorno 1980: 178): on the one hand committed art exacerbates the attempt to cancel the distance from reality, while on the other autonomous art ends up in a self-refutation of its own claim for autonomy. A peculiar

meeting ground between the two is found in the claim according to which ‘political falsehood stains aesthetic form’ (Adorno 1980: 186). Adorno commends Brecht for inviting his audience to think, but denounces Brecht’s distortions as unconvincing. To distort reality and the social milieu to prove a thesis finally ends up undermining the form of the thesis itself (Adorno 1980: 187). The idea that bad politics produces bad art and viceversa should not be read as the need to reconcile the two. The formulation demands rather a deeper understanding of their distance. In relation to Kafka and Beckett’s work Adorno writes that ‘by dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without and hence only in appearance’ (Adorno 1980: 191). This final twist ultimately seems to indicate Adorno’s privileging of art’s autonomy, however, this is certainly not because of the lack of explicit commitment or because, more generally, one is called to acknowledge that art cannot fulfil its political promise. The opposite seems true. Adorno writes: ‘it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics’ (Adorno 1980: 194).

What Moravia misunderstands in Petri’s work is precisely this: it is the autonomous dimension of the film that drives and embodies its political attack. The film becomes politically relevant once it claims its own autonomous way of understanding the specific political reality it aims to describe and act upon. In those passages where the film appears to be politically implausible, where it defines its own space and produces a singular picture of politics, rather than receiving this from the outside, there its critique becomes more forceful.

Moravia seems to anchor his judgement to a model of mimetic denunciation from which a course of action can be immediately derived. Petri instead works according to a different principles. Rather than chasing mimesis, he seems to move towards what Jacques Rancière names ‘dissensus’, therefore implicitly abandoning Brecht in favor of Kafka (as in more general terms he did throughout his career). As Rancière writes, art and politics each define a ‘dissensual reconfiguration of the common experience of the sensible’ (Rancière 2010: 140). What Moravia denounces is the lack of ‘agreement between sensory presentation and a regime of meaning’ (Rancière 2010: 144). It is precisely because an agreement is not reached that Petri’s film stands as a particularly important lesson for political cinema in general. As Rancière writes in relation to the films of Straub and Huillet, ‘there is no politics of cinema: there are singular figures according to which filmmakers try to link the two meanings of the word politics [...] politics as that which the film is about and as strategy of an artistic process’ (Rancière 2012: 111). With *Todo Modo*, Petri anticipates the passage between two models: from a model of denunciation, that coerces films to produce political effects and a model capable of inverting the relation art-politics by showing their drifting programs, while leaving on art its ‘accidental’ responsibility. This second model should be able to imagine political forms ‘reinvented from the many modes through which the arts of the visible invent looks, organize bodies in space’ (Rancière 2012: 136). Petri insists on the idea that in order to save the political force of art, the duality art/politics should not be recomposed, the filmmaker should not strive for reconciliation, awaiting for his work to be validated according to this or that political strategy or praxis. As Rancière puts it: ‘art is a practice of dissensus. And it is by means of this dissensus, and not by enlisting in a cause, that

artworks receive their specific quality and get linked to an external good' (Rancière 2009: 96). Rancière then turns to Adorno to explain that it is this internal contradiction that bestows on art its power in the form of a lack: 'internal contradiction is what generates the opposition between artistic production and the eclecticism that governs commercial aesthetics' (Rancière 2009: 96).

Petri's declared intention is to cause political damage to the Christian democracy, but his procedure remains that of the work of art. There is a contradiction, or 'disaster' in Lyotard's language, but it is by way of this very contradiction that the work succeeds.

### **Dancing on vowels**

The horizon of every political film crosses the vertical line of pedagogy. However, for a political film to be successful, the encounter with this line must be treated as a vanishing point, protracting the film beyond itself, while at the same time diverting teaching from the obedient repetition of content. The embrace that teaching offers to political cinema should be accepted only with a degree of suspicion. Because teaching presents political cinema with the conditions for its realization, the temptation to relinquish cinema absolutely to pedagogy is always strong. The attempt to frame the horizontal dispersion of cinema within the verticality of teaching results in bad pedagogy. A political film made under the pressure of the concept to be taught, the lesson to be learned, will always fail itself and side with bad pedagogy. In this situation cinema resigns itself to the role of the 'know-all'. The teacher's pet attitude consists in transforming the complicity between teacher and pupil with regard to the learning experience, the fragility of a shared ignorance, into the systematization of modes of

behavior, codes of conduct, tics and habits. In other words, what becomes important is not to share the master's transitory ignorance, so to benefit from his return to knowledge, but to construct an apparatus in the form of a *vademecum* or codicil. The codicil, a minute but decisive adjustment, formally conforming to the requirements, amends and replaces the content and the practice of learning with a series of gestures. The teacher's pet knows that he needs not understanding the lesson for he has already understood *how lessons work*. Knowledge comes from the repetition of a series of gestures and the dutiful assumption of a number of poses. The teacher's pet is therefore always in anticipation of the content, he always reacts before the content is discussed, since he has incorporated into his private handbook all content in the form of a stringent and economic formula: learning means responding adequately to the teacher's authority.

Political cinema risks immersing itself in this situation, becoming on one side the teacher's pet by dogmatically mimicking the tics and nods of those influential intellectuals whose ideas it believes to propagate, while all the time betraying them, at least on the level of the form; and on the other side the unhappy teacher who promotes a syntax of repetition and asks its audience to speak out loud, but in unison. If political cinema is to fulfill its goal, to form its own pedagogy, then it must carefully craft its way, so that its teaching becomes something else and more than *what is taught*. Reversing a Adorno's expression one could say: teaching waits to be woken and transformed into thinking. In other words teaching is expected to trigger something completely different from *what is taught*, so to extend well beyond the content delivered and create the conditions for a new content to be taught. Petri's model of clarity and transgression points precisely in this direction. Two moments can be extracted from the film as

evidence of this. In the episode that opens with the title card 'The Holy Rosary' the notaries are gathered in the hall of the hotel and are about to receive instructions from Don Gaetano. The concrete gallery resembles a vast garage or hangar; the ceiling is very low and the white statues suggesting episodes of the Crucifixion that are scattered all around are lit by a fluorescent violet light. The notaries and Don Gaetano form a black mass, which starts moving up and down the hall at increasing pace. Don Gaetano's voice becomes louder and steadier as he pronounces the litany – 'Mater purissima, ora pro nobis... Turris eburnea... Domus aurea...' - until he is almost shouting and running from one end of the hall to the next; the politicians in black suits behind hardly keeping up with him. As the performance is reaching its climax, the oscillation of bodies is stopped by the death of one of the notaries, announced by a colleague, while Don Gaetano is still pacing and shouting 'Mater admirabilis...Mater boni consilii...'. The entire scene is structured around choreographed movements, like a moment in a musical when the most ordinary gesture initiates the performance, which then immediately eclipses the immediate context. The difference is that in the scene just described, rather than moving from a collision on the sidewalk to a series of pirouettes, the audience is accompanied through the act of praying within the oscillation of a black mass performing a sort of dance macabre in a fluorescent cave.

The second moment relates to one of the conversations that The President has with the detective Sgalambri (played by Renato Salvatori) in the crypt of the hotel. Here the President asks Sgalambri to read a number of acronyms written next to the name of one of the victims. As Sgalambri starts reading – 'Scaia, Ifim, Rate, Ortis' – the President explains that the acronyms all refer to companies owned by the State and run by the



victim in question. The President then enumerates other similar acronyms – ‘Eagap, Nadopra, Cita, Pensis, Anasarda’ - which compose the beginning of a jingle from which one expects a song to erupt.

In these two instances one is not too far from Gene Kelly and Donald O’Connor’s masterful dancing routine in *Singing in the Rain* (Donen & Kelly, 1952). The two are repeating the words pronounced by a diction teacher, paying attention to articulate in the right way the dull and meaningless refrain *Moses supposes his toses are roses, but Moses supposes erroneously*. All of a sudden, the sounds obediently uttered by the two become an invitation to singing and dancing, the content of the lesson becomes the ground for new musings, diction becomes singing, homeworks become coreography, subverting the lesson and opening it up to transformative and transgressive decisions.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The film won the *Grand Prix* at the 1970 Cannes Film Festival and *Best Foreign Film* at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Academy Awards.

<sup>2</sup> The film won the *Grand Prix* at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival

<sup>3</sup> Sciascia finds the first example of detective story in the Bible and identifies in the prophet Daniel the first detective (Sciascia 1999: 1184).