



Carlo Testa, ed.. *Poet of Civic Courage: the Films of Francesco Rosi*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. 202 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-313-30278-7.



Reviewed by David Wilt

Published on H-Film (June, 1998)

Despite the critical and popular success of his films, Francesco Rosi is hardly a household name, even in cinema circles. Those who have seen *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1979) and *Three Brothers* (1980) may not recognize Rosi as the director of these works, and a deeper appreciation of his talent is hampered by the fact that most of his films are unavailable or are at the least difficult to find in the United States, a point made several times in this book.

Francesco Rosi was born in 1922. Although interested in cinema since childhood, he enrolled in law school to please his father, who wanted him to have a stable profession. However, military service in WWII interrupted Rosi's studies, and after the war he abandoned law to work in radio, theater, and eventually in the film industry. After many years as an assistant, Rosi directed his first feature, *The Challenge*, in 1957. Since then, he has made fifteen additional features (and contributed an episode to a multistory film), including the Academy Award-nominated *Three Brothers*. His most recent feature is *La Tregua* (1996).

Poet of Civic Courage contains six chapters on individual films, a 1994 interview with the Italian director, a short article on "The Future of Italian Cinema" written by Rosi for an Italian newspaper, a filmography and a bibliography.

As useful as this book might have been in any case--since it sheds light on an underappreciated filmmaker's career--*Poet of Civic Courage* is particularly interesting because the contributors all approach Rosi and his films from the perspective of the overriding socio-political nature of his work. Thus, each article adds another piece to a unified whole, as opposed to the type of anthology in which each article addresses a different aspect of the topic (some articles on individual films, some on the director's overall "vision," and so forth). The direction and tone of the book are set by editor Testa in the introduction "... in [Rosi's] work, civic courage, rising above specific political banners, blends with a poetic, artistic eye and creates a world of many facets" (p. 2).

Rosi is a political filmmaker, and as Harry Lawton notes in his chapter on The Mattei Affair, "the theme that fascinates the director is the han-

dling of power in Italy in the context of governance, economic control and political influence" (p. 61). And yet, each author writes about Rosi's political conscience from a different perspective. For example, Ben Lawton's analysis of *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961) dissects the complex narrative structure of this tale of a real-life Sicilian bandit-patriot--also the subject of Michael Cimino's *The Sicilian* (1987),--demonstrating how the form of the film is integrally bound up with its content.

Other chapters discuss *Hands Over the City* (Manuela Gieri), *The Mattei Affair* (Harry Lawton), *Lucky Luciano* (Claudio Mazzola), *Illustrious Corpses* (Salvatore Bizzarro), and *Three Brothers* (Millicent Marcus). The authors utilize a variety of methods in their analysis of Rosi's work, some comparing screen "reality" with history (many of Rosi's films are based on actual people and events), others taking a more formal approach. However, the chapters all come back to the basis of the book--and of Rosi's work--"his civic conscience [which] has become the trade mark of films that investigate major socio-political issues of the last four decades" (p. 88).

While the inability to see many of Rosi's pictures will continue to hinder a true appreciation of the director's body of work, *Poet of Civic Courage* should certainly lead to a greater awareness of Francesco Rosi's talent and perhaps inspire some readers to actively seek out such films as are available.

This review is copyrighted by Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies and the Historians Film Committee, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~filmhis/>. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Film & History reserves print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollinspc@aol.com).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-film>

Citation: David Wilt. Review of Testa, Carlo, ed. *Poet of Civic Courage: the Films of Francesco Rosi*. H-Film, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2123>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.