



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Illustrious Corpses

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

During his peak years Rosi was one of Europe's premier explorers of criminal-political rot and social anxiety. This key film is a rich and resonant expression of Years of Lead tension, and one of the best political thrillers since *Z* (1969).

It begins in the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo – a sanctified shrine of desiccated flesh and bone – where a judge (a dialogue-free Charles Vanel) is assassinated. More judges get shot in public, and weary straight-arrow detective Lino Ventura is assigned the case, initially suspecting the Mafia, and then eventually falling down a rabbit hole of official conspiracies and government plotting, all set against a broiling background of strikes, student protests and violent state repression.

As in Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), a major suspect is never seen (he's even cut out of photographs); virtually everyone else the hero confronts, at every level of the state, is a master of lies. Rosi works his spatial magic here, limning a contemporary Italy made of haunted ancient spaces so massive and shadowy that we feel, as Ventura's vexed shamus does, that secrets, historical and brand new, are everywhere and nowhere is safe. (The feedback loop between Rosi and his stepsons Coppola and Bertolucci is plain to the eye.) Paranoia is built into Rosi's framing and Pasqualino de Santis's cinematography, and the more the narrative uncovers, the more it's clear that the real story is hidden, with ideology left aside in favour of raw power. 'The truth is not always revolutionary,' a riposte to Gramsci's communist fervour, is the film's ultimately cynical position, in a culture otherwise consumed by left-right extremes.

Michael Atkinson, *Sight and Sound*, November 2021

Illustrious Corpses is more a political thriller than a docudrama. Rosi's most suspenseful film, it unmasks the crypto-fascism ingrained in the higher echelons of Italy's judicial system during the Giulio Andreotti era, when the ties between the government and the Mafia appeared closer than ever. Based on a novel of savage irony by Sicilian author Leonardo Sciascia, *Illustrious Corpses* follows the efforts of police inspector Rogas (played by an impassive Lino Ventura) to solve a series of perplexing murders. Three senior magistrates have been assassinated in 20 days; the closer Rogas comes to the truth of the conspiracy, the more vulnerable he becomes. The film opens and closes on a note of death, and with the crimes still unexplained. The stench of hypocrisy in high places finds a visual equivalent in the rubbish piled up in the town streets.

The film's most unnerving moments occur during the inspector's conversations with two of the doomed magistrates. One is the paranoid Judge Rasto (Alain Cuny), clearly following the orders of an unseen power clique; the second is none other than the president of the Supreme Court (Max von Sydow), who tells Rogas, with ineffable complacency, that judicial error does not exist. He compares the pronouncement of justice to the celebration of the sacrament. Once again, as in another Rosi's work, *Hands over the City*, the Church is a bulwark for the establishment.

The state's iniquity lurks behind the pomp of authority, whether it be the head judge clad in scarlet finery or the ominous solemnity of a funeral procession for one of the magistrates. The only hope for the future seems to lie in nature itself; seconds before his murder, the aged procurator played by Charles Vanel – one of Rosi's favourite actors – pauses in a sunlit street and gazes at the flowers on a wall as though recognising their life and innocence.

Illustrious Corpses was dismissed by some leftist critics in Italy as being too abstract. That, however, is precisely the strength of Rosi's cinema: that all power is inscrutable. The film's refusal to incriminate individuals, focusing instead on an abstract evil, endows it with a universal relevance that spreads far beyond national borders.

Peter Cowie, *Sight & Sound*, May 2013

A contemporary review

Nothing is so impressive in *Illustrious Corpses*, Rosi's latest essay in political conspiracy theory, as the way it looks. In place of the journalistic roughness, drive and urgency of *The Mattei Affair*, this film has the air of a pageant – a mythically foreboding, politically obscure spectacle which seems, with dreamlike inevitability, to be unfolding some secret process in the affairs of men. What makes that process appear so ineluctable yet so indefinable – and testifies simultaneously to Rosi's powers as a stylist – is its ability to compel belief that everything on the screen, not just the people but the landscapes and architecture they inhabit, have some assigned role in the grand design. The film's peculiarly bleached appearance, which drains away any strong colours but seems to highlight qualities of design and texture, conspires to suggest secret affinities which together make up the totalitarian style of whoever is stage-managing such diverse events as the assassination of high officials, garbage men's strikes, demonstrations by young Leftists, and finally the disembodied roarings and clankings which come to afflict the System's paranoid victims. It is this sinister interconnectedness which Rosi's highly controlled method conjures up, most complexly when it involves an intersection of styles, the old and the new (usually old ideals and new corruptions), as in the final assassination in a gallery full of classical Greco-Roman sculpture, or the pompous funeral oration and procession for the first murdered justice that take place in an old city square dominated by heroic statuary.

The film's use of geography and design to cross-reference attitudes and ideologies works as well with people as with architecture. Lino Ventura's craggy, earthy features – clearly outlined like some natural, fissured formation in the stark colour scheme – suggest reassuringly stolid, imperturbable qualities in the investigator Rogas; qualities that are emphasised when a physiognomical pairing takes place in the scene where Rogas questions a peasant with similarly watchful leathern features (asked about one of the dead judges, the peasant waves his hand at a crowded hillside of high-rise buildings in reference to the less than pristine public servant: 'He was made of cement and smoke'). The sense of violation is thus all the greater when even Rogas, carried uncaring into high places by his enquiries, is gradually beset by an unnameable dread and finds the justice in which he had so implicitly believed beginning to disappear around him.

Rogas' unspoken idealism in his respect is also a clue to the direction of Rosi's political attack: notions of justice, democracy and open government

are not just fictions in the context of the real mechanics of power, but fictions which have the power of myth in men's minds. Hence the sense of earthquake as they slowly tumble in Rogas' mind – best summarised by the odd scene in which he is bothered by an inexplicable rumbling outside his apartment in the early morning.

It is this which sets *Illustrious Corpses* apart from other films on like conspiracies though there are certainly similarities with Alan Pakula's two essays in political paranoia. Where the myths of the American hero are skittled one by one in *The Parallax View*, *Illustrious Corpses* tilts at the awesome panoply and impartial wisdom of the law.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1977

ILLUSTRIOUS CORPSES (CADAVERI ECCELLENTI)

Director: Francesco Rosi
Production Companies: P.E.A. - Produzioni Europee Associate, Les Productions Artistes Associés
Producer: Alberto Grimaldi
Production Secretaries: Paolo Fabbri, Lynn Kamern
Unit Production Manager: Franco Ballati
Production Supervisor: Alessandro von Normann
Administration: Sergio Giussani, Anna Maria Novelli
Assistant Directors: Gianni Arduini, Bruno Cortini
Continuity: Franca Santi
Screenplay: Francesco Rosi, Tonino Guerra, Lino Jannuzzi
Based on Il contesto *by:* Leonardo Sciascia
Director of Photography: Pasqualino De Santis
Camera Operator: Mario Cimini
Assistant Camera Operators: Marcello Mastrogirolamo, Adolfo Bartoli
Editor: Ruggero Mastroianni
Assistant Editors: Lea Mazzocchi, Ugo De Rossi
Art Director: Andrea Crisanti
Assistant Art Director: Aurelio Crugnola
Collaboration on the Casa Patto sets: Mario Ceroli, Renato Guttuso, Mario Schifano
Set Decorators: Arrigo Breschi, Marco Dentici
Costumes: Enrico Sabbatini
Costumes Assistant: Gianni Viti
Wardrobe: Adriana Masseroni
Make-up: Franco Freda
Hair: Adalgisa Favella
Titles: Studio 4
Music: Piero Piccioni
Sound Recording: Mario Bramonti
Microphone Operator: Giuseppe Muratori
Sound Mix: Romano Checcacci
Sound Effects: Renato Marinelli

Cast

Lino Ventura (*Inspector Amerigo Rogas*)
Alain Cuny (*Judge Rasto*)
Paolo Bonacelli (*Dr Maxia*)
Marcel Bozzuffi (*indolent man*)
Tina Aumont (*prostitute*)
Max von Sydow (*Chief Magistrate Riches*)
Fernando Rey (*minister of justice*)
Charles Vanel (*Prosecutor Varga*)
Renato Salvatori (*Police Inspector, Roga's Friend*)
Tino Carraro (*chief of police*)
Maria Carta (*Signora Cres*)
Luigi Pistilli (*Cusani*)
Paolo Graziosi (*Galano, leftist at Patto's party*)
Anna Proclemer (*wife of author Nocio at Patto's party*)
Carlo Tamberlani (*archbishop*)
Enrico Ragusa (*capuchin monk*)
Corrado Gaipa (*supposed mafioso*)
Claudio Nicastro (*General*)
Francesco Callari (*Judge Sanza*)
Mario Meniconi (*homosexual mechanic*)
Accursio Di Leo (*Roga's assistant*)
Alfonso Gatto (*Nocio*)
Silverio Blasi (*chief of political police*)
Renato Turi (*television announcer*)
Giorgio Zampa (*Amar*)
Florestano Vancini (*Amar's successor*)
Ernesto Colli (*agent*)
Alexandre Mnouchkine (*Patto*)
Felice Fulchignoni (*mayor*)

Italy/France 1976
120 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Illustrious Corpses (Cadaveri eccellenti)

Thu 21 Oct 20:30; Mon 25 Oct 14:15; Fri 19 Nov 20:40; Sat 27 Nov 18:10

Un Flic Fri 22 Oct 14:20; Tue 23 Nov 20:45; Mon 29 Nov 20:55

Chinatown Sun 24 Oct 11:50; Wed 27 Oct 14:15; Sat 20 Nov 20:30

Heat Sun 24 Oct 14:30; Sat 13 Nov 16:30; Mon 15 Nov 13:40

Devil in a Blue Dress Thu 28 Oct 20:50; Wed 17 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by *Empire Magazine* Contributing Editor Amon Warmann)

Murder on the Orient Express Sat 23 Oct 17:30; Sun 7 Nov 18:10; Tue 16 Nov 14:15

Blue Velvet Tue 26 Oct 14:30; Tue 2 Nov 18:00; Sat 13 Nov 20:45; Sun 21 Nov 17:40

Dirty Harry Wed 27 Oct 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film scholar Hannah Hamad, Cardiff University); Sun 14 Nov 18:20; Fri 26 Nov 20:45

The Silence of the Lambs Fri 29 Oct 20:40; Wed 3 Nov 19:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor Yvonne Tasker, author of *BFI Film Classics The Silence of the Lambs*); Thu 18 Nov 14:40

No Country for Old Men Sat 30 Oct 11:00; Mon 1 Nov 20:30;

Wed 24 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

In the Cut Sun 31 Oct 18:30; Tue 30 Nov 18:10

House of Bamboo Thu 4 Nov 20:50; Thu 11 Nov 14:30; Mon 15 Nov 18:10

Kiss Me Deadly Fri 5 Nov 20:40; Sat 20 Nov 18:00; Sat 28 Nov 12:15

Zero Dark Thirty Sat 6 Nov 17:30; Tue 9 Nov 14:15; Sun 28 Nov 15:20

Inside Man Mon 8 Nov 20:30; Thu 25 Nov 14:30; Tue 30 Nov 20:20

The Long Goodbye Wed 10 Nov 17:50 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sat 27 Nov 20:40

Shaft Fri 12 Nov 20:50; Tue 23 Nov 18:20

The Manchurian Candidate Sun 21 Nov 14:50

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