

Power Plays, Italian Style

George De Stefano (May 19, 2009)



Paolo Sorrentino's portrait of Giulio Andreotti is an investigation of post-WWII Italian politics

Il DIVO

Written and Directed by Paolo Sorrentino

An Artificial Eye Release

Giulio Andreotti is without doubt one of the most sinister, and fascinating figures in modern political history. Seven times Italy's Presidente del Consiglio (similar to a prime minister), the Christian



Democratic leader embodied pure power, which he wielded with cunning, duplicity, and supreme cynicism. Margaret Thatcher, the former conservative British prime minister, described him as having “a positive aversion to principle.”

Andreotti's career is punctuated by accusations conspiracy, corruption, and collusion between government, the Mafia, the fascist Masonic lodge known as P-2 (Propaganda Due), and the Vatican. Although he has been indicted, tried, and even convicted of high crimes by ordinary tribunals, the court of appeals subsequently acquitted him of all charges, and today, at 90, he sits in Parliament as a Senator for Life.

This enigmatic and formidable figure has met his match in Paolo Sorrentino. The young Neapolitan director's justly acclaimed film “Il Divo” is a witty, unsparing, and devastating portrait of the statesman whose many suggestive nicknames include “The Black Pope,” “Moloch,” and “Beelzebub.”

But “Il Divo” is far from a conventional biopic. Sorrentino, who also wrote the film, presents Andreotti's life and times as the true -- if murky -- history of Italy from the end of World War II to the present.

A protégé of Alcide De Gasperi, the founder of the Christian Democratic Party, Andreotti entered politics in 1946 when he was elected to the Constituent Assembly, the body charged with drafting Italy's new Constitution. A year later he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Italy's parliament, and from then on he was regularly re-elected. Appointed undersecretary to De Gasperi's cabinet, he obtained his first cabinet position in 1954 as interior minister in Amintore Fanfani's government.

Andreotti was elected Presidente del Consiglio in 1972, but his first government lasted only nine days – the shortest-lived in the Republic's history. The last of his seven governments ended in 1992, just a year after it was formed. When the Christian Democratic Party collapsed in the wake of the massive political corruption scandal known as Tangentopoli (“Bribe City”), Andreotti faced prosecution on various charges. In 1996, he was indicted for collusion with the Mafia and for complicity in the 1979 murder of the investigative journalist Mino Pecorelli, shot to death in Rome.

The so-called “trial of the century” on the Mafia charges lasted for more than three years and ended in Andreotti's acquittal because “the fact does not exist,” that is, prosecutors were not able to conclusively establish his collusion with Sicilian mafiosi, including the monstrous Totò “The Beast” Riina. Mafia pentiti (turncoats), including Tommaso Buscetta, who revealed the structure of Cosa Nostra to Giovanni Falcone, testified about Andreotti's Mafia connections. Buscetta told prosecutors that Andreotti had ordered Pecorelli's murder and that the Mafia carried it out. (Pecorelli had published articles alleging Andreotti's involvement with both Cosa Nostra and the murder of Aldo Moro.) Totò Riina's driver said he witnessed meetings between Andreotti and Riina. But Andreotti indignantly noted that the accusations against him came from men not exactly known for moral probity – Riina's driver admitted killing ten men on his boss's orders.

Sorrentino presents the charges of Mafia collusion as fact. He depicts a meeting between Beelzebub and the Sicilian devil Riina at the latter's country villa; Sorrentino even includes a scene reported by pentiti – Andreotti's actual initiation into La Cosa Nostra.



In 2002, Andreotti, along with Mafia boss Gaetano Badalamenti, was found guilty of complicity in Mino Pecorelli's murder and was sentenced to 24 years in prison. (Pecorelli's actual killer has never been found.) Silvio Berlusconi, himself on trial for bribing a judge, furiously demanded the overhaul of Italy's justice system. Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini (a character in "Il Divo") compared the devout Andreotti to Jesus Christ, declaring, "Without a doubt, at the end there will be a resurrection."

The cardinal's words were prophetic. Andreotti's conviction – and Badalamenti's -- was overturned in 2003 by Italy's highest court. Separate rulings that year and in 2004 cleared him of ties to the Mafia. Andreotti was "resurrected" alright, but by travesties of justice, not divine intervention.

Sorrentino, through brilliant use of montage, portrays a series of high-profile murders – the shooting of Pecorelli, the poisoning of Mafia banker Michele Sindona, the assassination of the anti-Mafia magistrate Giovanni Falcone, and the killing in Palermo of Salvo Lima, the Mafia-backed Christian Democratic politician often described as Andreotti's Sicilian proconsul. Sorrentino alternates these killings with a number of suspicious suicides that occurred during Andreotti's time in power, including those of the mobbed-up Vatican banker Roberto Calvi, found hanging from a bridge in London, and Christian Democratic deputy Vittorio Sbardella aka The Shark (amusingly portrayed by Massimo Popolizio as a preening blowhard).

One of Sorrentino's most daring moves is his treatment of the 1978 kidnapping and murder of former Christian Democratic premier Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. On the day Moro was kidnapped, the parliament was to vote on his "historic compromise" proposal that would have brought Italy's Communist Party into the government for the first time. Andreotti, then Presidente del Consiglio, was adamantly opposed to Moro's proposal. He, along with Minister of the Interior Francesco Cossiga and Enrico Berlinguer, the head of the Communists, took a hard line against negotiating with the Red Brigades for Moro's release.

Moro, while in captivity, wrote a memoir in which he revealed information about Italy's political and military secrets, and he bitterly criticized many of his fellow Christian Democrats, especially Andreotti. Sorrentino depicts Andreotti as troubled, even remorseful, over Moro's death. He actually confesses his guilt to his favorite priest. In another scene, Moro's specter appears to Andreotti and condemns him, saying his blood is on Andreotti's hands.

But his pangs of conscience don't lead to penance. Andreotti rationalizes everything, all the byzantine plots, the betrayals and the murders as necessary evils to protect Catholic Italy from the supposed threat posed by the Soviet Union and Italy's Communists. Sorrentino has Andreotti, speaking directly to the camera, confess to his misdeeds. His self-justification is that those who wield power must do evil in order to achieve "good" ends. For Sorrentino, fascinated by Andreotti but clearly appalled by him, Beelzebub's good is Italy's evil.

A disturbing, and depressing tale, to be sure. But viewing "Il Divo" is anything but, thanks to Sorrentino's bravura filmmaking. "Il Divo" is his fourth feature, following "L'Amico di Famiglia" (The Family Friend), 2006, "Le Conseguenze dell'Amore" (The Consequences of Love), 2004, and "L'uomo in più" (One Man Up), 2001. With "Il Divo," Sorrentino, not yet 40, joins the front ranks of not only Italian directors but of international filmmakers. His cinematic mastery makes "Il Divo" a thoroughly compelling experience. Working with his usual cinematographer, the superb Luca Bigazzi, he creates a number of dazzling set pieces in which camera movement, fluid editing (by Cristiano Travaglioni) and music fully realize the ideas in his screenplay.

But the heart of the film is Toni Servillo's amazing performance as Giulio Andreotti. Servillo, one of Italy's foremost actors, took on a daunting challenge when he agreed to play such an impassive, extremely restrained, and inscrutable character. Aided by a flawless makeup job and Nosferatu-like



prosthetic ears, Servillo builds his performance on physical details -- Andreotti's slouching and his stiff gait, his nervous hand gestures, and unblinking stare. Andreotti suffered from migraines, and through Servillo's acting we understand them as physical manifestations of an inner turmoil -- and spiritual rot, despite the showy piety -- that belied the placid exterior he presented to the world.

At times, such as when Andreotti, an insomniac, prowls the late night streets of Rome, his bodyguards close by, he seems like an extraterrestrial.

Servillo's Andreotti raises his voice only once, otherwise speaking in soft, bland tones. Nearly every utterance is an aphorism that reveals his deep cynicism -- "Thinking ill of your fellow man is a sin, but you've guessed right," "Power consumes those who don't have it," "When in the Gospel they asked Jesus what truth was, he did not reply."

And what is the truth of Giulio Andreotti? In Paolo Sorrentino's view, he was a statesman who served another state older and more powerful than the Italian Republic -- the Vatican. It's not by chance that whenever we see Andreotti with the members of his Christian Democratic faction, Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini is among them, a political as well as religious eminence. "Il Divo" is, in a sense, a symphony of duets -- between religious and secular power, and between organized crime and politics. The harmonizing of what should be discordant pairings still provides, as Sorrentino's terrific film reminds us, the soundtrack to Italian politics.

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