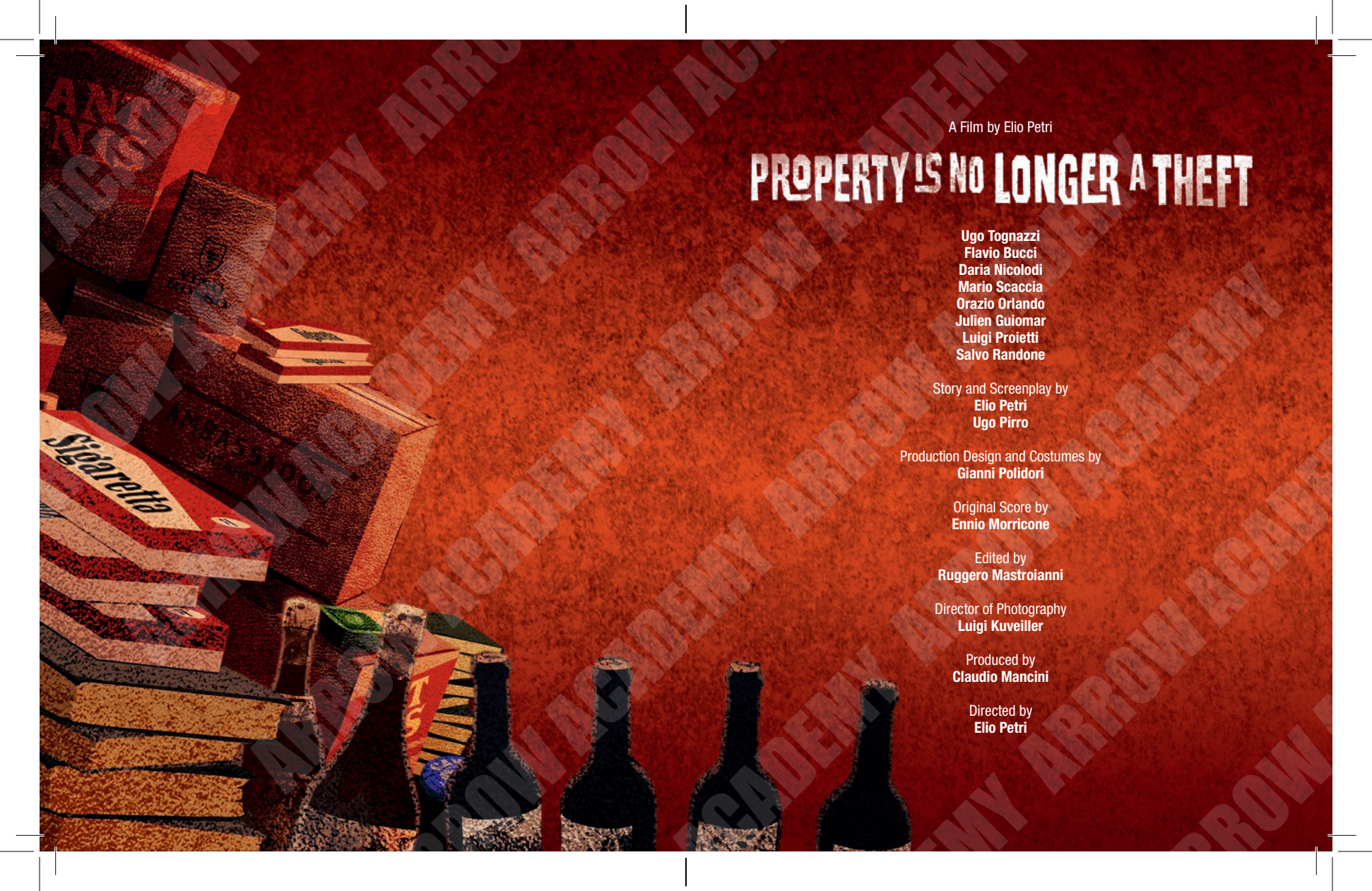


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A Film by Elio Petri

# PROPERTY IS NO LONGER A THEFT

Ugo Tognazzi  
Flavio Bucci  
Daria Nicolodi  
Mario Scaccia  
Orazio Orlando  
Julien Guiomar  
Luigi Proietti  
Salvo Randone

Story and Screenplay by  
Elio Petri  
Ugo Pirro

Production Design and Costumes by  
Gianni Polidori

Original Score by  
Ennio Morricone

Edited by  
Ruggero Mastroianni

Director of Photography  
Luigi Kuveiller

Produced by  
Claudio Mancini

Directed by  
Elio Petri



## A GROTESQUE ENTANGLEMENT OF PROPERTY, POWER, AND DESIRE

by Camilla Zamboni

Property, power, and desire: these are the themes that violently emerge from Elio Petri's film *Property Is No Longer a Theft* (*La proprietà non è più un furto*). Released in 1973, the film focuses on Total (Flavio Bucci), a bank teller who is allergic to money bills and who becomes obsessed with the idea of rebelling against a capitalist society ruled by the love and accumulation of property. He thus targets a wealthy butcher (Ugo Tognazzi) who regularly comes to the bank to deposit cash, and decides to steal from him everything that the butcher holds dear: the knife that he uses to cut the meat in his shop, his beloved hat, and even his young lover Anita (Daria Nicolodi). In his crazed pursuit of justice, Total sees theft as the only way to punish those who have accrued property in legal yet immoral ways, and targets the butcher as he is the embodiment of that rich and corrupt class. Yet, as Total realizes that even the act of stealing is subject to the rules of capitalism, his ideological fervor wanes and he is left in the hands of the man that he sought to punish. Order is restored, and the wealthy proprietors are back in power.

Property, for Petri and co-writer Ugo Pirro, was the foundation of capitalist society and the root of man's alienation. The two adopted Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's idea that economic and political power are mirror images, thus creating a discourse on property and power as intertwined and both harmful to society (Proudhon is present also in the title of the film – which is an homage, albeit sarcastic, to his famous declaration that “property is theft”). As Aldo Tassone reports in *Parla il cinema italiano*, for Petri “property can only produce illness and ill people; it can only symbolize sexual frustrations and it is what allows capitalist societies to keep man prisoner.”<sup>1</sup> Thus the director's vision in the film was informed by a strong desire to critique what, to him, was the diseased capitalist Italian society of the 1970s through the depiction of man's obsession with profit and his penchant for class hatred. Pirro writes that his and Petri's goal was to “mock the idea of ownership by portraying it as a skin disease, an itching” that, in the film, affects the protagonist, Total.<sup>2</sup> The idea of power – in this film, economic power – as disease is not new in Petri's work. *Property Is No Longer a Theft* came after the director's most famous and controversial

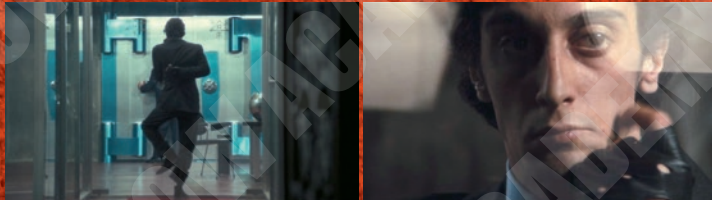
<sup>1</sup> Elio Petri, as cited in Tassone, Aldo. “Elio Petri.” *Parla il cinema italiano*. Milano: Edizioni il Formichiere, 1980. p232.

<sup>2</sup> Pirro, Ugo. *Il cinema della nostra vita*. Torino: Lindau, 2001. p100.



films, *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion* (*Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*) in 1969 and *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (*La classe operaia va in Paradiso*) in 1971; several critics have referred to this group of films as “the trilogy of power” or “the trilogy of neurosis”, since they all examine different kinds of power (authoritative power in *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion*; capitalist labor relations in *The Working Class Goes to Heaven*; economic power in *Property Is No Longer a Theft*<sup>3</sup>) and how it becomes a source of illness, mental and physical, for those who experience it. The association of power and disease, and particularly its physical manifestation on the bodies of the actors, becomes the powerful tool through which Petri delivers his visceral political and social critique of 1970s Italy.

In *Property Is No Longer a Theft*, Total indeed shows signs of a mental and physical illness, and admits to it. In his monologue, which opens the film, he maintains that “in the struggle, legal or illegal, to obtain what we don’t have, many fall sick with shameful illnesses; they become plagued, inside and outside.” As he speaks, his face exhibits all sorts of nervous tics, making him the embodiment of his own words. In the following scene, the audience sees Total at work: he wears gloves, and suffers from continuous itching and odd tics as a result of his proximity to money.



Thus Total, as the name suggests, serves as a representation and a reminder, for the viewers, of the whole spectrum of effects that the struggle for property and power produce, according to Petri and Pirro. Yet every other character in the film is also affected by their contact with money, a recurrent element that becomes the symbol for economic power, as well as a measure with which to evaluate a person’s whole life.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This thematic trend continues in Petri’s following film, *Toto Moda* (1976), in which the director attacks Italy’s political class. When representing political power, Petri delves deeper into the grotesque and even macabre representation of the devastating effects of power on society, and in the film the whole country is plagued by an unknown epidemic.

<sup>4</sup> Several examples of this can be found throughout the film. For example, when Total asks for a loan to the director of the bank, he cannot obtain one since he does not own any property as a guarantee. Further, when Total asks his father how much money they have in their bank account, the father replies that they have what they deserve – again measuring their life’s value with money.

The association between people and money is most striking in the opening titles sequence, which follows a camera zooming in and out, tilting up and down, and panning left and right on a painting by artist Renzo Vespiagnani depicting caricatures and sketches of all the main characters. At first, the faces are juxtaposed with close-ups of money bills, creating a connection between two seemingly separate parts of the painting; eventually, however, the camera zooms out to reveal how the banknotes are superimposed onto the human faces, becoming appendages of the human bodies and blending into their flesh.



This conflation of flesh and money also characterizes the butcher. As he is first introduced in the film, he walks into the bank to deposit money and brings prime cuts of meat to bribe bank employees. He is first presented to the viewers holding both meat and money – the two symbols of his power – in his hands, and several extreme close-ups direct the audience’s attention to his hands as he passes meat and money to the bank tellers. In a later scene, he is shown in his butcher shop, where it is revealed that meat – and his habit of charging customers too much – is the primary source of his wealth: he is on a pedestal, along with his prime cuts, overlooking a crowd of customers; he also occupies the only lit space in the shop, which further underscores his position of power.





Petri's decision to have a butcher as the symbol of property and power is to express the "vulgarity" that he associated with the nouveaux riches of the post-economic boom years in Italy. Ugo Tognazzi plays the character in a boisterous way: he is loud, self-assured, arrogant, and opulent in his taste. His shop, his clothes, his house, and even his lover show off his wealth, which sharply contrasts with his vulgar lines and his poor language – he uses Roman dialect and often swears; thus he becomes, in Petri's words, "a grotesque representation" aimed at revealing and denouncing the bourgeois attempt to separate "the fecal activity, or wealth accumulation, from the apparently refined private activities."<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely this grotesque representation that emerges in every aspect of the film and becomes its expressive register. The grotesque, an expressive mode that has been often associated with Petri's body of work, expresses a departure from what, for an individual or a society, is conforming to their idea of naturalistic representation. It involves elements of deviation, exaggeration, or distortion, often used together to evoke unease, disgust, fear, and anxiety. In *The Grotesque*, Philip Thomson defines the grotesque as "the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response,"<sup>6</sup> in which a jarring conflation between the opposite elements of laughter on one hand, and horror or disgust on the other, forms the structure of both what is considered grotesque, in form and content, and the human's response to it. This ambivalent response – both emotional and intellectual – is never resolved and instead remains in a "state of tension," which contributes to the sense of discomfort that accompanies the grotesque.<sup>7</sup> In order to express the sickening and pervasive effects of property and power on society, Petri resorts to the ambivalent nature of the grotesque, and creates characters, spaces, dialogues, and even camera angles that all contribute to creating a sense of profound discomfort in the viewer through a jarring combination of the comic, the unsettling, and the disgusting.

Petri applies the grotesque first and foremost to his characters: all of them have, in their behavior and in their physical appearance, elements that are at once comical and unsettling. The boisterous butcher is often covered in blood deriving from his work, an apt depiction of his sins; his mistress Anita is beautiful and ditzzy, yet she is portrayed – and recognizes it in her own monologue – as an object; Total, despite his noble desire to punish the wealthy and bourgeois society, suffers from rashes, declares himself a "Marxist-Mandrakist," and resorts to theft to achieve his goals; his father, though poor and excluded from owning property, is greedy and petty; and even the police chief is revealed to be corrupted. The picture that emerges is that of a whole society that is at once farcical and disturbing, in which every person is only concerned about their own profit – as Total explains, "selfishness is the fundamental sentiment of the religion of property."

5 Elio Petri, cited in Pirro, Ugo. *Il cinema della nostra vita*. Torino: Lindau, 2001. p103.  
6 Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972. p27.  
7 *Ibid.*, p5.

The characters' motivations and goals are further highlighted by a series of Brechtian disruptions in the narrative, in which characters explain their roles, their worries, and their secrets directly to the audience. In these sequences the actors are lit from above or below, against a black screen; the scenes are reminiscent of theatrical asides, but the truth that the characters deliver to the audience is often disturbing, and, particularly as it is often accompanied by laughter, contributes to the overall discomfort of the viewer. This is particularly true in Total and Anita's monologues; after admitting their own fallacies, they repeat, while staring and addressing the camera, that they are the same as the viewers, thus inviting them to an uncomfortable complicity. Further, Total and Anita are also the actors that are most grotesquely transformed in their appearance. As Pirro writes, Petri "transformed Daria Nicolodi's elegant face and body with trivial and obscene acting and gestures, making her a figure cut out of a German expressionist film;" and he "chose actor Flavio Bucci to play Total due to his neurotic style of acting, his grey face, and his dark eyes, restless like those of a bird, which made his recitation unsettling."<sup>8</sup> Thus it is particularly perturbing for the audience to identify with characters that bear the signs of the capitalist system both on their bodies and in their words.

Total has another monologue later in the film, in which he reveals another truth: that property is not a theft, but rather a disease, in that one cannot "be" and "have" at the same time and must suffer the consequences of this contradiction. He shows the symptoms of the same illness on his own body, both with his itching and his crazed behavior, thus contributing to both undermine his own message and further alienate the viewer.

In the final confrontation with the butcher, in which the wealthy man explains to him that it is impossible to bring down a system built on property, Total is unable to accept any compromise that would allow him to be part of the society he has tried to subvert throughout the film – and instead further taunts the butcher by stealing a few more of his personal objects. Despite his father's pleas and his own desire to become a wealthy proprietor, he refuses the butcher's offer to be a partner in crime, and settles instead on his own form of thievery, "Marxism-Mandrakism" – perhaps a newfound way to solve the sickening contradiction posed by a society founded on property.

At the end of the film, however, Total is eventually killed by the man he swore to persecute. His demise is not cathartic nor central to the narrative; it happens quickly and it is abruptly dismissed as the film ends. By contrast, the death of the professional burglar Albertone is followed by a public funeral and a eulogy on the pivotal role of thieves for society, which "owns its social order to thieves," because by "stealing out in the open, [they] cover those thieves who steal under the guise of legality." This scene happens right before Total's own

8 Pirro, Ugo. *Il cinema della nostra vita*. Torino: Lindau, 2001. p102.





death, suggesting that thieves of all kinds make up our society, but must occupy specific positions and accept its rules. With his act of defiance, Total is not trying to cure the “illness of envy and property,” but rather to expose it – and through him, Petri wants to show that “the struggle between the butcher-owner and Total is inside all of us.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the director provocatively suggests that we, as a society, refuse to acknowledge our own belonging to a capitalist system and that we, like the butcher, eliminate any self-critique that challenges our beliefs.

Petri’s message thus becomes a “desperate cry, an anguished vision of man who pursues profit and is devoured by class hatred, with no chance of redemption.”<sup>10</sup> The director admits that *Property Is No Longer a Theft* is more bitter and biting in tone than his previous works, due to his desire to denounce a “profound state of malaise”<sup>11</sup> among intellectuals and filmmakers of his time. It is not surprising then that the film was attacked unanimously by critics all over the political spectrum, as it cut too deep into the bourgeois society of 1970s Italy. While *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion* and *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* tackled specific segments of the population (the police force, the work force), *Property Is No Longer a Theft* was an all-out attack on the very concept of property, ownership, and bourgeois values – and thus an attack to the population that produced, consumed, and critiqued the film. Pirro calls the decision to shoot the film “a subversive and intolerable gesture that touched something hardened deep inside of us, something of which we were not aware; it was a game of self-destruction, an unconscious act of self-incrimination;”<sup>12</sup> thus the sense of extreme unease raised by the film started within the authors, and insinuated itself inside the psyche of the press on both sides of the political spectrum.

Yet Petri’s critique is in line with his other films of the period: from *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion* to *Good News (Buone notizie)*, 1979, the director eviscerated and exposed all aspects of what he saw as a “hysterical reality” in a disorienting “hysterical world” made of “many decrepit, corrupted, and decayed values.”<sup>13</sup> This way of representing and expressing that kind of society was through grotesque tableaux that elicited visceral reactions from the audience and, he hoped, would create discussion and awareness. Society, however, was perhaps not yet ready to respond to his provocations.

*Camilla Zamboni is a PhD student in Italian Film at UCLA. Her main research interests are Italian political cinema of the 1960s and 70s and the representation of power and authority in Italian film. In this, she has paid particular attention to the films of Elio Petri, in the hope that her work will help revive a reputation that has been neglected for far too long.*

9 Petri as cited by Madeo, Alfonso. “Sono un uomo indignato e nauseato, la provocazione l’ho voluta io!”. *Il corriere della Sera*, 4 September 1973. Print.

10 Pirro, Ugo. *Il cinema della nostra vita*. Torino: Lindau, 2001. p104.

11 Petri and Madeo, op cit.

12 Pirro, op cit, p101.

13 Petri and Madeo, op cit.





## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Property is No Longer a Theft (La proprietà non è più un furto)* was restored on behalf of The Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino and the Cineteca di Bologna from the original negative. The film was scanned at 4K resolution from the original camera negative and digitally restored in 2K resolution. The audio was sourced and restored from the optical negative. All restoration work was completed at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

**Discs and Booklet Produced by** Anthony Nield  
**Executive Producers** Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni  
**Production Assistant** Liane Cunje  
**Technical Producer** James White  
**QC Manager** Nora Mehenni  
**Authoring** Silversun  
**Subtitling** IBF  
**Artist** Nathanael Marsh  
**Design** Obviously Creative

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Tom Bell, Michael Brooke, Flavio Bucci, Federico Caddeo, Sigrid Larsen, Claudio Mancini, Pierantonio Mecacci, Benito Moschetti, Gigi Proietti, Camilla Zamboni



ARROW



ACADEMY

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