

Three Brothers

Produced by Antonio Macri and Giorgio Nocella; directed by Francesco Rosi; written by Tonino Guerra and Francesco Rosi, based on "The Third Son," a story by Andrei Platonov; cinematography by Pasqualino de Santis; edited by Ruggero Mastroianni; designed by Andrea Crisanti; music by Piero Piccioni; starring Philippe Noiret, Michele Placido, Vittorio Mezzogiorno, Andréa Ferréol, Marta Zoffoli, and Charles Vanel. Blu-ray, color, 113 min., Italian dialogue with English subtitles, 1981. An Arrow Academy release, www.arrowfilms.co.uk/.

On its original release, *Three Brothers* was praised in the mainstream press of many countries, but greeted with dismay by admirers of director Francesco Rosi for its apparent stridency and sentimentality.

It is an adaptation of "The Third Son," a 1935 short story by Andrei Platonov, claimed by some as the greatest Russian writer of the twentieth century. Rosi is faithful to the bones of Platonov's highly compressed story, but transforms it by moving the setting from an unidentified Soviet region to a historically and geographically specific Italy. The Giuranna brothers of the title leave their families and/or workplace in large cities at the request of their father, Donato (Charles Vanel), a nonagenarian farmer in the blindingly beautiful but physically harsh Southern region of Apulia, to bury their mother (played as an old woman by Gina Pontrelli, as a youth by Simonetta Stefanelli).

The stridency may derive from the film's schematic representation of the family members as "emblematic of the tragic fact of living every day for us" (Rosi in a director's statement reprinted in the disc's booklet). There are roughly ten years in age between each brother, and each is characterized not only by the social status of their work, but also by the effect this public role has on their private lives.

Fifty-something Raffaele (Philippe Noiret) is a judge assigned to a case against

political terrorists (these are the twilight years of left-wing paramilitary groups such as the Red Brigades in Italy and the Red Army Faction in West Germany) after a series of assassinations of his predecessors. His wife (Andréa Ferréol) is frantic with fear, made worse when she starts receiving death threats before Raffaele has even accepted the job. Their son has disengaged himself from this domestic crisis by liaising with an older, seemingly unsuitable woman, and cannot be found when he is needed.

Bachelor Rocco (Vittorio Mezzogiorno; Rosi claims the echo of Visconti's thematically similar *Rocco and His Brothers* was a happy coincidence) runs a borstal whose inmates escape for nocturnal thieving sprees. He agonizes over the manifold injustices of the world, and, as he tells his macho younger brother Nicola (Michele Placido), occasionally visits prostitutes because it is difficult to find a decent woman to settle down with. Militant trade unionist Nicola finds his difficulties agitating for rights at work commensurate with domestic failure; he has left his Northern wife and young daughter after the former confessed to an affair.

Using these three figures and their parents, Rosi seems to present an allegory of recent Italian history and social change—unchanging rural life under Mussolini; war and liberation (from what?—the parents and their community seem perfectly content); the flight of economic migrants from the impoverished South for the industrial North; the postwar economic miracle, with its winners and losers, the losers resisting socioeconomic dispossession with crime and drugs; the enduring power of the Mafia; and the development of both labor unrest and student terrorism during the governments of corrupt prime minister Giulio Andreotti. The brothers, it is argued, are not individuals in the psychologically "rich" sense of the nineteenth-century novel (the greatest Italian example of which, Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, is cited by Raffaele's schoolmaster friend), but ciphers, representing ideas or trends in the manner of a sociological tract.

The sentimentality comes from the crude dialectic between the urban life of the sons, whose movements and emotions are restricted by cramped domestic spaces and a monumental and alienating public sphere—the film's credits contrast an insistent human heartbeat on the soundtrack (recorded from a real surgical operation) with an unmoving, forbidding architectural grid—and the rural life they left behind. This paradise is signified by sunny, wide-open spaces, where even derelict interiors are transformed into portals of discovery by Nicola's imaginative daughter Marta (Marta Zoffoli); and by washes of Piero Piccioni's lyrical music on the soundtrack.

Donato's blessed manner and devotion to his wife incarnate an impossible integrity against which the brothers' compromised urban lives cannot compare; present terror, dissatisfaction, and alienation are no match for his idyllic memories of married and communal life. Worse, admirers of the psychologically neutral, formally rigorous, investigative dramas with which Rosi made his name (such as *Salvatore Giuliano*, *The Mattei Affair*, and *Illustrious Corpses*) point to *Three Brothers* as the moment of his artistic decline into international co-productions based on prestigious artifacts of high culture (Bizet's opera *Carmen*, Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*).

Such criticism is misguided. It must be stressed that Rosi was not some sort of hack journalist in film, indifferent to questions of cinematic style or thematic complexity. How could the man who trained under Luchino Visconti—a Marxist who luxuriated in ornate camera movement, music, and décor—not be part of the great sensual tradition of Italian cinema as eulogized by Godard in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*? Rosi was the left's answer to Jean-Pierre Melville; both were steeped in the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s and absorbed economy of character and narrative, and the ability to stage complex sequences with self-effacing bravura.



Vittorio Mezzogiorno and Charles Vanel in *Three Brothers*.



Philippe Noiret and Michele Placido in *Three Brothers*.

Forget the story of *Three Brothers* for a moment and just follow Rosi's camera, look at the way he stages complex compositions and movements in emotionally charged long takes. The sequences where Donato and his dog are found by Rocco, where Marta explores the barn, or where Nicola dreams of a difficult reunion with his wife Giovanna (Maddalena Crippa), are just three outstanding and varied examples. Look at Rosi's feeling for the unique qualities of different light sources, facilitated by his legendary director of photography Pasqualino De Santis—the blinding Southern sun, outside in open spaces or against walls, or filtered inside through curtains; the artificial Northern night; a candle; a light bulb. You don't realize how good the Blu-ray transfer is until you see the simple but intense gleam of the light bulb in the brothers' bare bedroom.

This is not to claim that formal beauty somehow "excuses" the stridency or sentimentality alluded to earlier. It is better to ask: is the film so strident? Or sentimental? Are the characters really so one-dimensional? Take Raffaele the judge, for instance, described as a reformist representative of "the professional power establishment" or "status quo" by Millicent Marcus in "Beyond Cinema Politico: Family as Political Allegory in *Three Brothers*," her exemplary essay also reprinted in the booklet. As Marcus implies,

however, what people say—in real life, as much as on film—is not necessarily the essence of their character. Compare the decent, rational, slightly sanctimonious things Raffaele says and the way Noiret (one of cinema's greatest actors) performs the character for Rosi's camera. He is introduced driving a car, swerving toward the camera with an unsettling, slightly fierce, certainly accusatory look. Even after his faint-hearted interlocutor appears on screen, it seems as if the judge is accusing the viewer.

Raffaele spends most of the film in a depressive slump—hardly the representative of anything civic and positive, more the embodiment of a man at the end of his tether, torn between fidelity to his probably self-destructive principles and his love for a family that may even despise him if he *did* turn down the job. His droop disappears in one extraordinary sequence when he goes to the village bar—his parents aren't cursed with modern conveniences like the telephone—to return his wife's call. He tries to reassure her—himself?—about the death threats, but the way the sequence is shot, with Raffaele's palm pressed against the telephone, its physical forcefulness without anchor against a glass pane that disrupts all sense of orienting perspective, is like something out of a horror movie or 1950s melodrama, not a sober sociopolitical tract.

It has been said that Raffaele's dream/fantasy sequence differs from that of his brothers and father because of its negative outcome—he is gunned down on a bus by student terrorists as fellow passengers flee to avoid bearing witness. But what if this is as much a wish fulfillment as Nicola's reunion with Giovanna, Donato's memories of his beloved wife, or Rocco's ludicrous fantasy of literally cleaning up the fallen modern world? What if Raffaele yearns for renunciation, self-abnegation, escape? How could such a reading alter our view of his character?

Similar readings against the surface of the film could be applied to the other characters. Nicola *talks* a lot, noisily, about social justice and workers' rights, but in action he is mostly self-absorbed, arrogant, even thuggish; the threats to his masculinity in both private and public spheres are redirected in outward aggression. The cues signifying Rocco's repressed homosexuality suggest that family and community life were not as idyllic and open as first made to seem. Small-town life breeds loneliness that can lead to a form of psychic dysfunction; witness the dazzled elders surrounding a TV screen like something out of an Edward Hopper painting. It's an enervatingly male world, too—in a film centered on the death of a woman, its men are unable to imagine women as agents, as anything other than nurturing, idealized, or infantilized.

