



Investigation Of A Citizen Above Suspicion

Director: Elio Petri
Country: Italy
Date: 1970

A review by Vincent Canby for *The New York Times*:

Elio Petri's complex, entertaining new Italian film, "Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion," which opened yesterday at the Baronet Theater, is a suspense melodrama with the moral concerns of angry satire. A psychotic policeman, the chief of the homicide squad who has been newly promoted to head the political intelligence unit, sets out to affirm, "in all of its purity," the concept of authority — that absolute power before which all men become servile children, if not idiots.

One hot summer afternoon, the Inspector (Gian Maria Volonte) pays a call on his mistress (Florinda Bolkan), a beautiful, kinky masochist with whom he acts out fantasies based on famous crimes. "How will you kill me this time?" she asks. "I'll cut your throat," he says, and she shivers with pleasure. A few minutes later, as they are thrashing around between her Op-patterned sheets, he takes a razor blade and slices her jugular vein.



Afterwards, he takes a shower, has a drink (carefully leaving his fingerprints on the glass and the bottle), places a torn thread from his tie under her finger nail, makes several bloody footprints in the hall, and then calls the police to report the crime.

As the investigation of the murder proceeds, the police, at the Inspector's urging, first focus their interest on the dead woman's homosexual husband, then on an anarchist student with whom she's been having an affair. The Inspector, however, comes to realize that the conviction of an innocent man will not prove his own inviolability.

Thus he arranges a kind of final test, whereby his subordinates and superiors must face the indisputable evidence of his guilt, which, if denied, will be the ultimate affirmation.

Mr. Petri ("A Quiet Place in the Country," "The Tenth Victim") is a Communist who does not make light films lightly, a fact, I fear, that prevents him from being taken as seriously as he should by movie purists—a breed known for both lack of humor and complete intolerance for baldly stated dialectics.

However, although Mr. Petri quite consciously makes movies about ideas, he has, in his "Investigation," made a movie in which the ideas, and the man who seethes with them, have the shock and impact of the most fundamental kind of melodrama.

When it opened in Italy early this year (and later, when it was shown at Cannes), "Investigation" was hailed for the ways in which it exposed the corrupt, authoritarian practices of the police, who place themselves above their own laws. For me, however, it is not most interesting on this social level, or even on the psychological level, if the film means to demonstrate the manner in which power corrupts.

The Inspector does make some reference to his long enjoyment of power, and the film, in flashbacks, does suggest that the girl prompted her own death, first by convincing the Inspector that he was above the

law, and then by ridiculing his sexual performance. (As did Bernardo Bertolucci in "The Conformist," Mr. Petri equates repressive political philosophy with derailed sex.)

The film, however, is not especially convincing as a case history—at least, I was not convinced that, had he gone into another line of work, the Inspector might not have become a psychotic supermarket manager.

It is as a kind of political parable that "Investigation" is a stunning movie. From the start, one is fascinated by the methods (rather than origins) of the Inspector's madness, by the terrible logic of his paranoia (at one point he gives an extraordinary speech in which he equates murderers with agitators, rapists with anarchists), and by the brilliance with which he constructs his apotheosis. "Investigation," unlike "The Conformist," is not about the rank-and-file Fascist. It is about a duce, not necessarily Il Duce, but any duce.



Dominating the film, which moves forward with the relentless momentum of a good, solid policier, is the performance of Mr. Volonte, who has been seen in this country before ("For a Few Dollars More," "Wind From the East") but never for particular mention.

Mr. Volonte has the cruel upper lip and the heavily lidded eye of the young Olivier, and he has the manic energy of the early Cagney, even down to the almost choreographed way in which he walks. One minute he is noisy and arrogant, the next he is obsequious and sly. When he talks to a subordinate, he fondles the back of the other man's neck, although the thought of someone's doing that to him would probably make him literally ill. It's a fine performance, full of stylized detail, like the movie it helps to define.

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