



# Salvatore Giuliano

Director: Francesco Rosi

Country: Italy

Date: 1962



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A review by Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian*:  
(The article is from Derek Malcolm's list of his top 100 films of all time.)

Francesco Rosi, once called the heavy conscience of the Italian cinema, was born in Naples - a possible reason why most of his films are about corruption. His most famous film, though, was made in Sicily.

It is almost certainly the best film about the social and political forces that have shaped that benighted island. It looks almost like a documentary as it traces the career and downfall of Salvatore Giuliano, a bandit who became a legend on the island after his violent death in 1950. Yet the word Mafia is never once mentioned, and Giuliano himself is hardly seen. All the superficial clichés of a well-known genre are thus subverted.



Rosi performed the voiceover himself, at least in the Italian version, and structured the film round the bandit's death. Giuliano is seen as a corpse in the first sequence, with a city official reading a detailed description of his death. This gives us no clue to the questions we want answered - a deliberate ploy by Rosi, who is determined that we should think for ourselves as the film progresses. He merely provides evidence, often elliptical. But the result is a fascinating study not only of the tentacles of crime, but of a whole way of life.

We are not allowed to be passive spectators because we see Giuliano only briefly, with Rosi using flashbacks chronicling his story from the end of the second world war. We witness the growth of the Sicilian separatist movement, an attack on a communist peasant gathering, a kidnapping and the government, separatists, police and army linking up at various times with the criminal forces they are supposed to oppose.

Using local non-professionals as actors and with his camera sweeping over the mountainous terrain that concealed Giuliano from his enemies, Rosi builds up a formidable picture of a time and place. It is a style that has its roots in neo-realism, but Rosi is interested more in society than in the individual characters that other directors (such as Vittorio de Sica) examined so sympathetically. Giuliano remains a legend throughout; the nearest we get to a conventional figure is his murderer, who emerges from the background only as the film reaches its final stretch.

Everything in the film was based on extensive historical research, including official court records and journalistic accounts. But Rosi makes no attempt to make complete sense of them, since it is virtually impossible to do so. At the end of the film, what Rosi has carefully assembled is not so much the facts as a reading of what lies behind the confused story of Giuliano's life.



Possibly only Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* managed so brilliantly to summarise a slice of by now half-remembered history, and Rosi never quite achieved the same mastery of tone and atmosphere again. Later, he made *Lucky Luciano*, a more conventional Mafia story, and films such as *The Mattei Case* and *Illustrious Corpses*, dossiers on power and corruption that relied on a much more ornate style and the brilliance of actors such as the great Gian Maria Volonte to sustain their considerable eloquence.

But Salvatore Giuliano has never been bettered as an interpretation of history without resort to special pleading. It's as if the film-maker is standing back and providing clues that we have to interpret ourselves. This is something Hollywood would never do, and justifies European cinema as much as any other film of what now looks like a golden period.

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