

though, is usually achieved only when the would-be biographer remains humble enough, as he exercises his imagination on the facts at hand, to allow his subject to retain his basic humanity. Force the object of your inquiry into a preconceived schema and, no matter how compelling the narration, the portrait deteriorates into caricature.

Seen in this light, it would be difficult to imagine a more daunting biographical project than that of “capturing the essence” of the inscrutable Italian politician Giulio Andreotti. Born in 1919 and still serving in the Italian parliament as a senator for life, Andreotti simultaneously incarnates both a person and a type, a recognizable individual and the very embodiment of a much larger, peculiarly Italian way of doing politics.

For much of the second half of the 20th century and beyond, Andreotti has been Italy’s most powerful politician during a period when Italy has held the dubious distinction, in the words of the historian Dennis Mack Smith, of leading the way in “major mysteries of state”, with “so many unsolved crimes that were in one way or another linked to high officials.” From the average Italian in the piazza to well placed political observers, Andreotti has always seemed the one man who could unlock these shadowy conspiracies, should he but choose to speak out.

Certainly his résumé suggests a capacious insider knowledge. A conservative leader of the centrist Christian Democrat Party, Andreotti has been a high-level minister in thirty governments since 1947, and was seven times Italian Prime Minister. Throughout his political career, Andreotti cultivated his reputation as a Machiavellian statesman and world-weary wit, one of whose most famous aphorisms—“Power wears out those who do not have it”—found its way, perhaps appropriately enough, into the script of *The Godfather Part III*.

A master of the tactics of accommodation and *sub rosa* deals, Margaret Thatcher memorably described him as having “a positive aversion to principle.” During his heyday, Andreotti was always ready to adjust his political position according to the tactical needs of the moment. A devout Catholic, he nonetheless infuriated the Vatican when he signed Italy’s first abortion



The Essential Italian

Michael McDonald

What is the aim of biography? Leon Edel, who devoted much of his life to answering this question, both as a critic and as the author of a magisterial five-volume life of Henry James, summed it up as “capturing essences.” Taking his cue from the visual arts, Edel explained “that a painted portrait or a chiseled bust cannot be a total biography. But at its best, when the bust or portrait comes from the hand of a master, it is certainly more than a mask, it is an essence of a life.”

Skilled portraiture, whatever the medium—paint, stone, words, film—aims to penetrate the façade of everyday appearance in order to unlock deeper mysteries. Success,

decree into law in 1978; a lifelong anti-Communist, he routinely courted Communist support to achieve his parliamentary aims. Though he was driven at times to employ harsh police measures against the Mafia, overwhelming proof has accumulated that Andreotti's faction in Sicily systematically promoted the careers of politicians with Mafia ties to secure votes, doling out, in return, public works contracts rivaling the profits of the drug trade as a source of *malavita* money.

What accounts for the startling contradictions, the duplicity, the “bizarre mixture”, as Alexander Stille memorably put it, “of holy water and Realpolitik”? A Christian Democratic colleague once opined that it stems from Andreotti's roots in “a certain Jesuitical, clerical tradition in which you accept that in a fallen world you have to work with the material at hand.” Whatever the reason, if Italy's curse, as is often said, is to find itself home to three world powers, the Republic of Italy, the Roman Catholic church and the Mafia, Andreotti's curse is to have become the mysterious human symbol of the tortuous relationship binding all three. And the various nicknames that Italians have bestowed upon him—Beelzebub, the Prince of Darkness, the Black Pope—are ample testimony to his inglorious transmogrification in the public imagination from mortal man into something much more sinister.

Capture the essence of all *that* in a film biography? Impossible, you might say. And yet, judging by the critical acclaim it has received (the jury prize at Cannes; the European Film Award for Best Actor to Toni Servillo, who plays Andreotti) and its financial success (more than \$10 million in box office receipts in Europe), 39-year-old Neapolitan director Paolo Sorrentino has risen to the task with his 2008 film, *Il Divo: The Spectacular Life of Giulio Andreotti*, which was released in the United States this spring.

The biopic of the man dubbed “il Divo Giulio” (“the divine Julius”—yet another nickname, this time in mock homage to his Caesar-

like influence over Italian politics) is an unusual one, owing more of a debt to the flamboyant Hollywood gangster films of Scorsese, Coppola and Tarantino than to anything native to Italian filmmaking. Less neo- than hyper-realist, in some respects it might even be more accurate to describe *Il Divo* as a surrealist documentary, replete with invented scenes and ghostly apparitions, that leaps back and forth over a twenty-year period in Italian history stretching from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. To the extent that the film is anchored in any one time, it is the roughly two-year period from 1991, when the 72-year-old Andreotti was forming his seventh and last government, to 1992 when the Christian Democrat Party, as well as most of Italy's other major political groupings, became mired in the welter of sleaze—dubbed at the time, and possibly forever more, *Tangentopoli* (bribeopoly)—that would lead to their eventual disintegration.

The surrealist note of biographical inquiry is struck in the film's opening scene, where we see Servillo as Andreotti, head down, at a distance, writing at his desk about his career. (Andreotti is, in fact, a prolific, award-winning, writer with over two dozen books, including various published *Diaries*, to his credit.) Concomitant with the camera slowly moving to focus on his face, the narrative voice-over has Andreotti speaking about how he has outlasted his enemies, all mysteriously dead, and how “aside from the Punic Wars”, he has been blamed for every misfortune in Italian history. Finally, Andreotti straightens up and we have our first clear view of his impassive face covered with acupuncture needles, a treatment undertaken in a desperate attempt to treat his recurrent and crippling migraines.

The image is striking. But what is it meant to represent? A Dantean punishment for his political sins? It lingers in the mind as does another, later shot of Andreotti standing in a dark room (the play of light and shadow is a recurrent feature of the film), his head obscured—or rather, replaced, Magritte-like—by the glowing white orb of a light as he downs more medicine for his headaches. Andreotti as numinous cipher?

Il Divo

Directed by Paolo Sorrentino
110 minutes (Music Box Films)



courtesy Music Box Films

Toni Servillo (seated, center) as Giulio Andreotti

Sorrentino leaves us no time to ponder the meaning. Instead there follows a—what else could one call it?—murderously paced montage of assassinations of prominent people from different times and places straight out of *Goodfellas*. We see the deaths of the iniquitous “Vatican bankers” Roberto Calvi (shown hanged under Blackfriars Bridge in London) and Michele Sindona, poisoned in a jail cell, in the early 1980s; Judge Giovanni Falcone, senior investigator of Mafia activity in Palermo, killed in the summer of 1992 by a bomb placed on a skateboard and rolled into a pipe under the road leading from the Palermo airport; journalist Mino Pecorelli, editor of the weekly magazine *Osservatore Politico*, shot dead in his car on a Rome street in March 1979; a Mafia hit man gunning down the Christian Democrat politician Salvatore Lima in Sicily in 1992; a machine gun riddling Aldo Moro’s body in 1978 following his kidnapping by the Red Brigades.

It is a mosaic of brutal killings in a dizzyingly compacted space of screen time, chronologically disjointed and yet oh so stylishly presented. But again, the viewer is entitled to ask: What does it

mean? No moviegoer attending a cinema where *Il Divo* is playing—unless perhaps the moviegoer is Dennis Mack Smith himself—will have the slightest clue. Or rather he will have one big one: He will realize that Andreotti must somehow be behind the executions he has just witnessed. Why else would they be included in a film subtitled *The Spectacular Life of Giulio Andreotti*?

The film also focuses on Andreotti the private man: Andreotti alone, with his priest, his wife and with his long-serving secretary. Thus we see Andreotti on a nocturnal walk, as his armed security guards look warily around, at 4 a.m. (the Prime Minister is an insomniac) before entering a church to confess his sins. These scenes seem to be thrown into the mix largely in order for Andreotti’s character to display his fabled wit. Priest: “Why do you surround yourself with certain people?” Andreotti: “Trees need manure to grow.”

Turning to Andreotti’s public life, Sorrentino constructs a stunning slow-motion sequence as Andreotti’s cronies gather before his seventh and last government is introduced to the press. As they exit their chauffeured black limousines

or high-priced sports cars, chatting away on cell phones or escorted by Italian beauties, onscreen titles appear with their names and nicknames such as “The Shark”, “Lemon”, and, needless to say, a Cardinal from the Vatican who is known as “His Healthiness.” It’s a rogues’ gallery of spin-doctors, toadies and fixers, and Sorrentino nicely captures the atmosphere of corruption as they quibble over the coming political spoils in a vast marbled bathroom. At a pulsating, tenebrous dance party later that evening Andreotti sits on a sofa, his wife at his side, immobile and imperturbable at the center of the celebration’s decadent frenzy—another audaciously infernal image. Soon we see a meeting of Andreotti’s faction in which they discuss securing the Presidency for him. This fades into semi-comical horse-trading scenes shot in the regal elegance of Montecitorio—the seat of the Italian Parliament and Palazzo Chigi—the Prime Minister’s office.

Andreotti was indeed a possible candidate for the presidency of the Italian Republic at that time; but in May 1992 his plan went awry when the brutal murder of Falcone by the Mafia on the road from the Palermo airport shocked the electoral college—a shock Sorrentino cleverly renders by having a skateboard rolled through a main hall of the Parliament—into choosing someone outside the main party machines. Again relying on a dizzying cross-cutting technique to mimic the overall theme of a maze of subterfuge and conspiracy, the film then becomes even more fragmented as Andreotti’s career begins to unravel until, finally, the “facts” behind the initial montage of murders are fleshed out in extended episodes.

Thus, Sorrentino will show Mafia turncoats (the so-called *pentiti*) claiming that Pecorelli, a muckraking journalist, was killed to prevent him from publishing information that could have damaged Andreotti’s career; that Calvi and Sindona were murdered to prevent them from revealing their associations with Andreotti in the infamous P-2 Masonic lodge; and that the mob killed Lima to send a “signal” to Andreotti that the decades-long political support they had provided to him would end unless the various “maxi-trials” of mafiosi then underway were called off.

In these instances, Sorrentino, who also wrote the screenplay, relies heavily on transcripts, many of them from journalists. But this doesn’t stop him from employing imaginative license. One of the few scenes shot not in chiaroscuro but in bright daylight depicts Andreotti meeting with the notoriously brutal Salvatore Riina (also known as Totò Riina), the Cosa Nostra’s boss of bosses. This scene relies upon an unproven allegation raised by Palermo prosecutors using evidence from a Mafia turncoat. According to the prosecutors, Andreotti met Riina in Palermo on September 20, 1987. The Mafia boss, they claimed, kissed him on the cheek before initiating him into the Mafia with a bloody prick of the finger.

In a further leap of poetic license (never a good sign in serious biography) Sorrentino also

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depicts, as if in a dream, Andreotti admitting his guilt to his wife. Andreotti’s voice rises in to a fevered pitch as his monologue is interspersed with scenes of a graveyard. It is a key scene providing, as it does, the underlying motivation, as Sorrentino sees it, for his actions. But in the end it amounts to little more than dime-store Machiavellianism. Andreotti admits that he embarked upon a tension strategy designed to provoke radical elements to promote the dominance of centrist parties because—brace yourself: “È necessario fare del male per realizzare il bene.” At times it’s necessary to do evil to do good.

What happens next, however, in Andreotti’s life as well as in the film, puts this dictum to the test. It is the trial: Andreotti was tried and initially convicted of ordering the Pecorelli murder. Sentenced to 24 years for the killing, he never served a day in prison. His conviction was eventually overturned. Other verdicts over Mafia conspiracy indictments were “timed out” by a statute of limitations, or dropped for lack of evidence. Andreotti rather admirably attended each and every hearing, head bent over his

notes, and contested the accusations one by one until the final sentence of absolution was pronounced. But courtroom verdicts such as these, as Sorrentino's film proves, did little to cleanse his image.

I*l Divo* is an entertaining and engaging film. It is flamboyant but not over the top. The editing is sharp, the cinema sound operatic, relying on both classical and rock music. By way of technique it does not suffer from what it owes to Coppola and Scorsese. The de-chronologized mosaic of violence and political imbroglios is quite often maddeningly difficult to follow. (I know Italian politicians who have viewed the film and still had a hard time of making sense of the connections.) But the film succeeds admirably at conveying a sense of the chaos, venality and intrigue-laden nature of the Italian political scene at the end of the First Republic. Indeed, even Andreotti, who has viewed the film, has admitted that "it's well done aesthetically."

But Andreotti also pronounced the film mean, malicious and a disgrace. Maybe he is taking the film too personally, though it is easy to forgive him on that count. Sorrentino seems to be suggesting in the whirl of action and impressions he sets before the viewer that you don't need to know any more than the typical Italian citizen did at the time to get the point: Andreotti represents the banality of evil, Italian style. Sorrentino has given us a film more about what Andreotti means in the Italian popular imagination (which is, to be fair, no mean feat) rather than what he is, in essence, as a man. He establishes Andreotti as a remote, lonely figure, and at the same time a wily, Sphinx-like one. But above all he establishes Andreotti as a metaphor for Italian political power, indeed as a model for the solitude of power. It is because he is meant to be metaphor more than man that Andreotti shuffles about lightly as in a labyrinth of heavy chiaroscuro. He flits across the screen in shadows like a soul trapped in Purgatory.

This works in part because the acting is masterful. Toni Servillo gives a bravura performance by accentuating Andreotti's physical characteristics—a technique at which he succeeds every bit as much as did Dustin Hoffman

in *Rain Man*. Servillo plays Andreotti with his head sunk in his shoulders, old-fashioned black tortoise-shell glasses slipping down his nose. His ears are pushed out, and his hands are interlaced and held at breast level as he walks. Servillo's portrayal is a kind of deadpan caricature blinking from behind thick glasses. It is fun to watch because it fits the director's purpose, but it suggests no great psychological depth, à la Al Pacino in *The Godfather*. Servillo builds Andreotti's character out of a pile of cynical aphorisms delivered in a diffident and mousy, mostly monotone voice. In a way Sorrentino's Andreotti ends up resembling a Latin version of Peter Sellers's "Chauncey Gardiner" in *Being There*—an absent presence, somehow malevolent, but without any of the rascal-like charm.

As well executed and enjoyable a film as this is, Sorrentino provides little in the way of psychological depth to help viewers understand what makes Andreotti—as he has directed Servillo to play him—tick. He repeatedly shows Servillo/Andreotti gulping down soluble aspirin and reminding his cronies to keep a particular migraine medicine on the market. Is this a case of psychosomatic revenge for the memory of so many evil deeds? Fine. Even assuming so (which is doubtful) what aspect of Andreotti's character does it unlock? In another scene Sorrentino has Andreotti mechanically handing out food, gifts, toys and money to his constituents, evidently to fulfill his social and charitable obligations. All of which adds up to saying Andreotti is a quirky, old-style politician who has headaches.

Il Divo thus has its limits as biography. The question is, are these limits inherent to the choices Sorrentino made, or are they the result of his flaws as a director? It is perhaps not possible to understand a man, particularly a political man, without understanding Italian society and the politics of the period. Andreotti reflected the deeply rooted conservatism of large parts of Italian society. It is not, perhaps, too much to say that Andreotti the man long since disappeared into Andreotti the public icon. We can thus forgive Sorrentino his sins, most of them, anyway. 🍷

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