

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Il Divo*]

Italian Opera

By Steve Sailer

MOST MOVIE CRITICS are more concerned with film than with life, but my goal has been to help make movies, those pungent yet unreliable distillations of life, compelling for the reader who is more interested in the world than in cinema.

Consider “*Il Divo*,” a baroque stylized biopic about Giulio Andreotti, seven times prime minister of Italy in the 1972-92 era, then a perpetual defendant in murder and Mafia trials from 1993 to 2003. Paolo Sorrentino’s “*Il Divo*” is a film of aesthetic ambitions—the owlish politician inhabits a De Chirico Italy of sinisterly empty arcaded streets—and some historical significance.

Still, the labyrinthine “*Il Divo*” would be impenetrable to any American who hasn’t read up on Italy’s lurid recent past. Andreotti’s rival, former prime minister Aldo Moro, was kidnapped and murdered by the Red Brigades, various Vatican-connected bankers died in fashions that would have amused the Borgias, a Masonic lodge served as a seeming government-in-waiting for a post-coup Italy, and brave magistrates investigating the Mafia were blown up.

Italian politics, with its constantly collapsing governments, strikes Americans as a joke. Yet the fundamental questions of Italy’s Cold War years were deadly

serious: would the unruly joys of Italian daily life succumb to the grayness of a Communist state, the Cuban tragedy writ large? Just how many Machiavelian machinations in the name of saving Italy from the Reds could be borne?

We often heard in 2002 that the U.S. did such a wonderful job reforming Germany and Japan after World War II that we were bound to accomplish the same in Iraq. Unmentioned was the 1943 American invasion of western Sicily. Needing to keep civil order without tying up troops, we turned control over to local anti-Fascist men of respect, *Mafiosi* who had been lying low during Mussolini’s crackdown. It worked, but the blowback lasted 50 years. After the war, to keep Italy’s huge Communist Party out of power, the U.S. subsidized the Christian Democrats, who relied on Mafia get-out-the-vote capabilities in the south.

In the Anglo-American world, to label anything a “conspiracy theory” is to dismiss it out of hand. In Italy, by contrast, conspiracy theories are the default explanation for how the world works because conspiracies are the main mechanism by which politicians get done what little they do. In Italy, the political is personal. To understand historical events, you need to tease out the occluded connections among the players.

As “*Il Divo*” demonstrates, Italy needed to be led during those difficult decades by the least operatic politician imaginable and can only now afford to revert to more stereotypically Italian showboats such as Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Like a more cultivated, less bumptious version of the Daleys who have ruled Chicago for 41 of the last 54 years, *Il Divo* is not a diva. Andreotti doesn’t bluster from balconies nor even

bother to cut a stylish figure. He listens carefully, forgets nothing, and confines his own utterances to mordant witticisms. As portrayed by Toni Servillo of the recent Neapolitan mob movie “*Gomorrah*,” Andreotti is a thin, stoop-shouldered man who never talks with his hands. Telegraphing his introversion, he keeps his chin tucked to his sternum, his elbows tight to his ribs, and makes only the most primly clerical symmetrical gestures. Servillo’s characterization is reminiscent of Austin Powers’s nemesis, if only Dr. Evil were underplayed by Jack Benny.

Margaret Thatcher reminisced about Andreotti, “He seemed to have a positive aversion to principle, even a conviction that a man of principle was doomed to be a figure of fun.” “*Il Divo*’s” nightmarish depiction of Italian politics raises an unsettling point. In Andreotti’s defense, he at least was born into his system, while America is now led by a man who, with every opportunity in the world beckoning, carefully chose to make his career in our closest equivalent: Chicago politics.

Having been acquitted on a second appeal in the shooting of a journalist investigating Moro’s death and saved by the statute of limitations from conviction for his 1970s alliance with the Sicilian Mafia, Andreotti is still influential as a Life Senator at 90. The unflappable maestro commented on “*Il Divo*,” “I don’t agree with Sorrentino’s portrayal of me, but I understand he had to make certain dramatic choices to make it interesting; my real life is actually quite boring.” Unfortunately, an American would have to be as well-informed as Andreotti to make sense of “*Il Divo*.” ■

Unrated, but would be PG-13.

BOOKS

[*Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy*, Marcus Daniel, Oxford University Press, 400 pages]

Fighting Words

By Patrick Allitt

IT'S DIFFICULT FOR US to get into the frame of mind of Americans in the 1790s. We know that the Republic was going to endure for at least the next two centuries, but they didn't, and to many of them it seemed terribly vulnerable. Britain was still a military threat. The French Revolution was turning to terror, anarchy, and conquest. Worse still, the Whiskey Rebellion, breaking out when the Constitution was well short of its tenth birthday, threatened the nation with internal collapse, just as Shays' Rebellion had brought down the government under the Articles of Confederation a few years before. Rival political factions, Federalist and Republican, were growing stronger and more antagonistic, despite a widely shared belief that factions and parties were signs of moral decay. Anyone who today thinks of George Washington's presidency as a golden age should spend an hour or two leafing through Marcus Daniel's *Scandal and Civility*. A history of political journalism in the 1790s, it also offers a readable narrative of the decade's turbulent events and bitter disputes.

The six newspaper editors profiled by Daniel believed that the citizens of a republic should be well informed. A taste for news was in fact widespread in the generation that had lived through the upheavals of the 1770s and 1780s. Nearly all white Americans were literate, and even those who were not enjoyed listening to the news being read aloud in public places. In the early days of the Constitution, most newspapers struck a pose of editorial neutrality and concentrated on passing along a wide array of stories from

home and abroad. As the political temperature rose, however, these editors backed one or other of the new political parties. Their high-mindedness gave way to character assassination, gossip, and outright propaganda. By the late 1790s, journalism was coming into disrepute for its scurrility, its tendency to inflame partisan passions, and its poisoning of political life. As Daniel remarks, "the violence of the printed word often flowed off the page and into the streets, provoking verbal and physical assaults, duels, public demonstrations, and riots."

These editors were a colorful group, six workaholics who had to meet tight deadlines, write prolifically, know the financial and technical side of the printing business, brave recurrent yellow-fever epidemics in filthy cities, and risk arrest for sedition. They also had to maneuver in the shifting currents of national politics as they scrambled for government patronage. They had fascinating careers outside journalism, too. Philip Freneau (formerly James Madison's college roommate at Princeton) was as much a poet as an editor—he wrote thousands of lines of nationalist doggerel, energized by his hatred of the British and his love of the new Republic. Noah Webster is remembered today more as a language and spelling reformer than as an editor; he wrote America's first dictionary and believed that the American language ought to be purified of corrupt old English vestiges. Benjamin Franklin Bache, the favorite grandson of Benjamin Franklin, spent his formative years in France when the grand old man was America's ambassador there, and knew Paris better than New York or Philadelphia. William Duane, educated in Ireland and an important figure among English radicals, had spent ten years as a soldier and writer in Calcutta before being deported for criticizing the East India Company.

Those who took the Federalist side in the politics of the 1790s—Webster, John Fenno, and William Cobbett—argued for a strong central government, a powerful presidency, and sound financial institutions of the kind then being established by Alexander Hamilton, the first

secretary of the Treasury. Suspicious of democracy, they favored established religion, social hierarchy, and restraints on popular passions. Hamilton and John Adams often wrote pseudonymously in their pages, justifying their policies and rebutting opposition attacks. Adams also published under his own name, in Fenno's *Gazette of the United States*, his *Discourses on Davila*, a tract on the hazards of democracy and equality.

By contrast, those who supported the Democratic Republicans, Freneau, Bache, and Duane, shared Thomas Jefferson's vision of a decentralized agrarian Republic, worried that a strong presidency might lead to a revival of monarchy, dreaded the rise of a new aristocracy, and applauded Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791). Freneau, convinced that the Federalists' economic policies would create inequalities of wealth, promoting luxury and corruption, urged his readers to "sweep the legislative floors of such vermin ... who devour liberty in the bud and suck the vitals of the honest industrious farmers, merchants, and tradesmen."

The prickly Cobbett, an immigrant from England, was the most gifted writer and the most vituperative. Calling himself "Peter Porcupine" and editing the Philadelphia Federalist *Porcupine's Gazette* from 1797, he argued that the Jeffersonian Republicans were the equivalent in America of the French revolutionary Jacobins and would bring catastrophe to the new nation. As Daniel notes, Cobbett broke down a previously honored distinction between the personal and the political, mocked local dignitaries like the radical doctor Benjamin Rush, whom he called a "murderous quack," and made annihilating attacks on Republican politicians and writers. Convicted of libel in a campaign orchestrated by the Philadelphia Republicans, he wrote a brilliant defense of press freedom before fleeing the country in 1800.

Why did politics become so contentious in the 1790s, and why did journalism follow suit? Daniel shows that the Federalists' and Republicans' disagreement over the future of the Republic was closely linked to the unfolding events in