

# Antonio Pietrangeli

(Rome, 19 January 1919 – Gaeta, 12 July 1968)

by Elena Dagrada

University of Milan



Antonio Pietrangeli was born in Rome on 19 January 1919. His father was an engineer and his mother a school teacher. Although already enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine, in 1941 he started to attend the cinema circles revolving around the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia; then, Umberto Barbaro, Luigi Chiarini and Francesco Pasinetti enlisted him as a film critic in the editorial board of *Bianco e Nero*, the periodical of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. In 1945, he graduated in Medicine (he also practiced for a while, renewing his registration with the Doctors' registry until the end of his

life), but his interests for literature and cinema always prevailed. He wrote for the film magazine *Cinema* as well (only one article), and in 1942, with Mino Donati and Massimo Mida Puccini, he founded and directed *Si gira*, a journal that promoted a realistic renovation of Italian cinema, but was suppressed by Fascism after a few issues.

Between 1941 and 1942, he started to visit film sets. He was production assistant of *Via delle Cinque Lune* (The Five Moons Street, Luigi Chiarini, 1942) and, with Giuseppe De Santis, assistant director of *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, Luchino Visconti, 1943), revising dialogues and being credited as screenwriter. In 1943, these experiences likely lead him to write, together with Umberto Barbaro, the important essay *Appunti sulla regia cinematografica* (Notes on Film Direction), that remained unpublished until 1995.

After the Liberation of Rome, his cultural activities extended further, and came to include translations, editing of book series, collaborations to cultural papers (*Domenica*, *Mercurio*, *Città*, *Cosmopolita*, *Cronache*); up to April 1946, he collaborated with the column *Sala di proiezione* with the film magazine *Star*, earning the

reputation of uncompromising critic. Between 1946 and 1947, he also wrote film critiques for several journals, such as *Fotogrammi*, *La critica cinematografica* and *Film Rivista*. Most importantly, he was an essayist: among others, he wrote the second (chronologically speaking) organic essay on Neorealism (the first one being published by André Bazin a few months earlier), *Panoramique sur le cinéma italien*, which came out first in France, in May 1948, on the prestigious *La Revue du Cinéma*, and only afterwards in Italy. He also became the first national president of the “Federazione Italiana dei Circoli del Cinema”, founded in 1947.

It is worth mentioning that in 1948, he stood on the Fronte Democratico Popolare ballot for the first parliament elections of the newly born Italian Republic. He was not elected, but such an event testifies to his genuine interest for society and its important transformations then occurring, which Pietrangeli sensitively analysed in his films. Not by accident, the protagonist of his pictures is very often the contemporary woman, with her mutations in the social context of the time. Even when he returned to a male perspective, or to comedy, he never renounced to depict the intimate dimension and deep solitude of his characters, and women's roles and renewed behaviour is always the trigger element.

Among others, he wrote the commentary for the documentary *La nostra guerra* (Our War, Alberto Lattuada, 1945) and *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, Luchino Vis-

conti, 1948). As a screenwriter he collaborated with Pietro Germi in *Gioventù perduta* (*Lost Youth*, 1948), Alessandro Blasetti in *Fabiola* (*Id.*, 1949), Alberto Lattuada in *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity*, 1948) and *La lupa* (*She Wolf*, 1953), William Dieterle in *Vulcano* (*Volcano*, 1950), Mario Camerini in *Due mogli sono troppe* (*Honeymoon Deferred*, 1951), Gianni Francolini in *Amanti senza amore* (*Prelude to Madness*, 1948), *Anselmo ha fretta*, also known as *La sposa non può attendere* (*The Bride Couldn't Wait*, 1949), *Ultimo incontro* (*Last Meeting*, 1951), *Il mondo le condanna* (*The World Condemns Them*, 1953) and Roberto Rossellini, for whom he co-wrote *Europa '51* (*Europe '51*, 1952)—where he also played the role of the psychiatrist—*Dov'è la libertà* (*Where Is Freedom*, 1954) and *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy* AKA *Strangers*, 1954). Yet, numerous are his unfulfilled collaborations (particularly with Visconti) and projects, among which the most significant is probably *Le ragazze chiacchierate* (*The Girls They Talked About*), which became *I delfini* (*Silver Spoon Set*, Francesco Maselli, 1960).

His first film direction was *Il sole negli occhi* (*Empty Eyes*, 1953), a sharp portrait of a young maid, Celestina, arrived in Rome from the country. Still close to Neorealism, but characterised by a deep costume analysis, it stands out for the detailed cross-hatching of characters, especially the protagonist, who foreshadows the depiction of many future Pietrangeli's women,

who are marked by spontaneity, innocence, sincerity, and yet a life-exploitation by mean and self-serving men.

After the short *Girandola 1910* (Pinwheel), episode of *Amori di mezzo secolo*, (Mid-Century Loves, 1954), Pietrangeli experimented with comedy in *Lo scapolo* (The Bachelor, 1955), a box-office hit with Alberto Sordi, yet a movie capable of drawing a scathing society picture, anticipating somehow the “comedy Italian style” for its in-depth bitterness where comedy meets tragedy. Alberto Sordi also plays the leading role in the next *Souvenir d'Italie* (*It Happened in Rome*, 1957), also starring Vittorio De Sica and Massimo Girotti, in perhaps the most impersonal film by Pietrangeli. The following film, *Nata di marzo* (*March's Child*, 1958), on the contrary, is another very personal portrait of a young woman, apparently spoiled and fickle, actually a litmus test for an analysis of a bourgeois couple relationships, in the social context of the economical boom in Northern Italy.

For Pietrangeli, the '60s started with the important *Adua e le compagne* (*Love à la carte*, 1960), a remarkable fresco about the social exclusion of four ex-prostitutes after the closure of the whorehouses that followed the implementation of the Merlin Law. Then, after *Fantasma a Roma* (*Ghosts of Rome*, 1961), an unusual fairytale and yet a satirical picture, attained with the collaboration of Italian writer Ennio Flaiano, the decade continued with another female portrait, *La Parmigiana* (The Girl from Parma, 1963), from a novel by Bruna Piatti. Starring a young Catherine

Spaak in the role of the unconventional Dora, *La Parmigiana* presents an unconventional narrative structure too, mostly composed by flashbacks. An unconventional narrative structure also characterises *La visita* (*The Visit*, 1963), where another woman—an excellent Sandra Milo in the role of a small-town single lady—is portrayed with deep delicacy and sharpness. Then, after the success of *Il magnifico cornuto* (*The Magnificent Cuckold*, 1964), from a pièce by Fernand Crommelynck, where once more costume comedy meets social analysis, notably love and sexual relationships, Pietrangeli could finally make *Io la conosco bene* (*I Knew Her Well*, 1965), unanimously considered his masterpiece.

Planned since 1961, Pietrangeli based it upon the investigation of the pin-up world, populated with wannabe actresses in movies and advertising. And again, he recurred to an unconventional narrative structure, rhapsodic and fragmented, to tell the story of Adriana (a young and perfect Stefania Sandrelli), who arrives in Rome from the country looking for fun and success, but accumulates private and public failures, humiliating jobs, wrong encounters with men, mostly profiteers. Her sudden suicide reveals that her indifference was probably only apparent, and, in a way, it concludes the attempted suicide of Celestina in *Il sole negli occhi*.

After directing Sordi again in the short *Fata Marta* (Marta, the Fairy), an episode of *Le fate* (*The Queens*, 1966), Pietrangeli died accidentally by drowning near Gaeta on 12 July 1968, during the shooting of his

last film, a work about the marriage crisis of a wealthy couple from Turin, which was released in 1969 with the title *Come quando perché* (How, When and with Whom) and completed by Valerio Zurlini. He was only 49 years old.

### FILMOGRAPHY

*Il sole negli occhi* (Empty Eyes, 1953)  
*Girandola 1910* (Pinwheel 1910, 1954) – Episode of *Amori di mezzo secolo* (Mid-Century Loves, 1954)  
*Lo scapolo* (The Bachelor, 1955)  
*Souvenir d'Italie (It Happened in Rome, 1957)* \* In USA the movie was released in 1959  
*Nata di marzo* (March's Child, 1958)  
*Adua e le compagne* (Love à la carte AKA *Hungry for Love*, 1960)  
*Fantasma a Roma* (Phantom Lovers AKA *Ghosts of Rome*, 1961)  
*La Parmigiana* (The Girl from Parma, 1963)  
*La visita* (The Visit, 1963) \* In USA the movie was released in 1966 with the Italian title  
*Il magnifico cornuto* (The Magnificent Cuckold, 1964)  
*Io la conoscevo bene* (I Knew Her Well, 1965)  
*Fata Marta* (Marta, the Fairy) – Episode of *Le fate* (The Queens, AKA *Sex Quartet*, 1966)  
*Come, quando, perché* (How, When and with Whom, 1969) \* completed by Valerio Zurlini and released posthumously

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carpiceci, S., *Antonio Pietrangeli, Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 83, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma 2015.
- Detassis, P. – Morreale, E. – Sesti, M. (eds.), *Antonio Pietrangeli: il regista che amava le donne*, Edizioni Sabinae, Roma, 2015.
- Detassis, P. – Masoni, T. – Vecchi, P. (eds.), *Il cinema di Antonio Pietrangeli*, Marsilio, Venezia 1987.
- Maraldi, A, *Antonio Pietrangeli*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1991.
- Morelli, Guglielmina – Martini, Giulio – Zappoli, Giancarlo (eds.), *Un'invisibile presenza. Il cinema di Antonio Pietrangeli*, Centro Studi Cinematografici, Il Castoro 1998.
- Pietrangeli, A., *Panoramique sur le cinéma italien, La Revue du Cinéma*, n. 13, May 1948, it. tr. *Cinema italiano sonoro*, Quaderno FICC, 1950.
- Tosi, V., *Quando il cinema era un circolo (1945-1956)*, Edizioni di Bianco e Nero, Fondazione Scuola nazionale di cinema, Rome 1999.