Art and Movies

di Murray N. Rothbard

CINEMA PARADISO
Directed by Giuseppe Tornatore with Philippe Noiret

Long-time readers know that I am decidedly not a fan of foreign language movies: not because it is a chore to read subtitles, but because they are invariably horrible examples of aggressively avant-garde, anti-bourgeois cinema. Hating as "commercial" movies that appeal to the average movie-goer, the foreign movie-maker proclaims his superior esthetic sensibility by scorning interesting plot, tight writing and directing, meaningful dialogue, glamorous photography, or colorful settings. Instead, the typical foreign movie has zero plot, minimal dialogue, and wastes enormous amounts of time on close-ups of the brooding actors' gloomy faces, all seemingly photographed in the midst of some dark and dank box. The ineffable and pointless boredom of these motion pictures are apparently supposed to embody the alleged boredom of bourgeois life. In actuality, it is not life, but these infernal movies, that both embody and induce boredom.

The trouble, however, is not with foreigners *per se*. Italians and Frenchmen, for example, would rather and do spend their time watching *Dallas* and Clint Eastwood than waste their time and money watching their compatriots' crummy movies. Moreover, it was not always thus. Jean Renoir, the wonderful 1930s French movies featuring Raimu, and much of the modern work of Eric Rohmer demonstrate that the problem is not with the nationality or language, but with the depraved riffraff who make today's foreign movies.

But once in a while there comes a shining exception to the rule. In addition to granting *Driving Miss Daisy* its best picture award for 1989, the Motion Picture Academy gave its foreign-language movie Oscar to Guiseppe Tornatore's lovely, charming, funny, and heart-warming (as well as heart-breaking) *Cinema Paradiso*. Disappearing fairly quickly from the screen the first time around, it came back in the wake of the award. Go see it: it's the best foreign-language movie in many a year, and splendid in its own right.

Cinema Paradiso is a heart-felt autobiographical valentine by director and screen-writer Tornatore to the small town in Sicily in which he grew up during and after World War II. The movie is a rich tapestry of life in the Sicilian town, a town without cars or means of entertainment except the local cinema, where everyone crowds in to see the latest Italian or Hollywood product. The central character, Salvatore, marvelously played for most of the film by a child actor, is fascinated by the life of the projectionist, the center of movie magic. The projectionist, Alfredo, magnificently played by the great French actor Philippe Noiret, reluctantly becomes a mentor to the boy, whose father had been killed in the war. The local priest views all the movies first, censoring out the – horrors! – kissing scenes, which Alfredo lovingly clips out and saves.

When, over a decade later, the movie theater burns down, a large shining new theater is built, funded by a Neapolitan who had just won the lottery. (As one local complains: "Those Northerners have all the luck!") In the new dispensation, the local priest no longer has censoring rights, and the local youth go bananas at the love scenes: "Kissing! After thirty years!" Loving the now grown boy, and blinded during the fire, Alfredo orders Salvatore to leave the stifling atmosphere of the Sicilian town, which has allowed him no real life and to go seek his life and fortune in Rome, never to look back.

The death of Alfredo, however, inexorably draws Salvatore, thirty years later and famous as a movie director in Rome, back to his home town for his funeral. He finds enormous change; the town, now packed with automobiles and TV sets, has no more use for the movie theater, which is being torn down for a parking lot. I won't give away the climactic discovering of Alfredo's carefully wrought final present for Salvatore, but suffice it to say that it's at least a two-handkerchief (decidedly non-avant-garde) ending. Don't miss it!