

Mafioso

Italy | 1962 | 102 minutes

Credits

Director	Alberto Lattuada
Screenplay	Rafael Azcona, Bruno Caruso, Marco Ferreri, Agenore Incrocci, Furio Scarpelli
Photography	Armando Nannuzzi
Music	Piero Piccioni

Cast

Antonio Badalamenti	Alberto Sordi
Marta	Norma Bengell
Rosalia	Gabriella Conti
Don Vincenzo	Ugo Attanasio

Mafioso: The Octopus's Tentacles

Up until the early 1960s, Italian cinema represented the Mafia as a mythological and mysterious phenomenon (and thus not without a certain amount of fascination), in stories told as if they were westerns set in Sicily, as in Pietro Germi's *In the Name of the Law* (1949). But in 1962 two films were released that challenged this prevailing attitude: first, Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano*, and later in the year, *Mafioso*, by Alberto Lattuada. Although coming from diametrically opposed perspectives, both films set out to describe the criminal society of the Cosa Nostra without softening, much less idealizing, the merciless and brutal reality of *la piovra*—"the octopus." And both films were huge successes on the Italian peninsula, among the top ten box office hits that year. The public demonstrated its sensitivity to the fact that there was an endemic evil in the country, something that was still hidden behind a curtain of silence and censorship, which these films unveiled in all its violence and intrigue.

Rosi's film is a painstakingly documented reconstruction of the nefarious relationships between the Mafia, banditry, and economic and political power in Sicily between 1943 and 1950. The story of the bandit Giuliano and the schemes that led to his assassination becomes a vehicle for piecing together the puzzle of a real event that was atrociously typical and ominous, not least because no one was punished. Lattuada's film also recounts a true story. The author of the film's scenario, the painter Bruno Caruso, had in fact known the protagonist—the hired assassin—and had even painted a portrait of him, yet remained ensconced in the secrecy of the *omertà* that protects the Cosa Nostra. If Rosi's film has the appearance of a documentary (notwithstanding the fact that it was filmed entirely on sets), Lattuada's film reinvents what happened with grotesque stylistic elements that do not deform or change reality but unveil the events in a harsher light, exposing their deeper essence.

Originally the film was supposed to be directed by Marco Ferreri, but at that time he had only made three features, in Spain (they remained unreleased in Italy), and one short. He did not, therefore, have the backing of Alberto Sordi, who preferred to work with a well-known director like Lattuada (he had already played a small role in Lattuada's 1947 film *Flesh Will Surrender*). (Tonino Cervi, the film's producer—for Dino De Laurentiis, who had an exclusive contract with Sordi—however, maintained that Sordi was afraid Ferreri would make "a film outside normal cinematic boundaries, and he [Sordi] liked things to be conventional.")

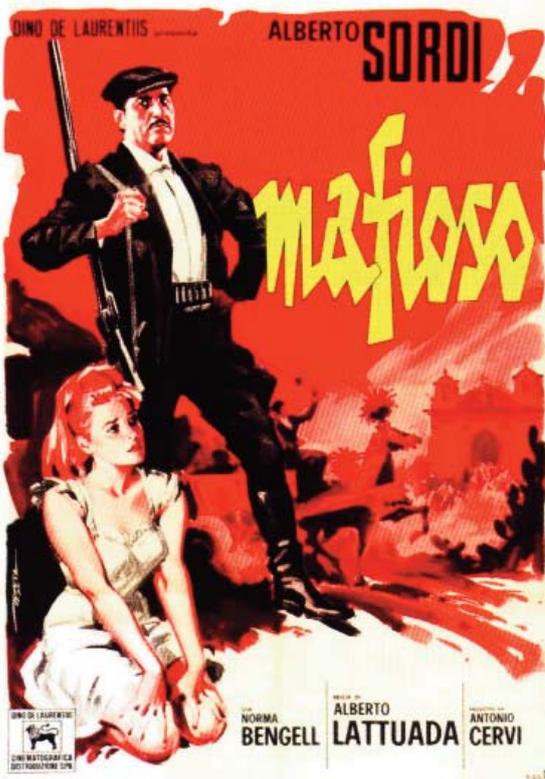
The screenplay, written by Ferreri and Rafael Azcona, was entrusted to Age and Scarpelli (two masters of Italian comedy), who reworked it in collaboration with Lattuada. The idea for the hit man's voyage to New York, "packaged" in a trunk with a time bomb that could back up the assassin's alibi, was in fact brainstormed by Age and Scarpelli. Initially this seemed too far-fetched, and the scene provoked some discord in production, but some years later it was discovered that this exact same scheme had actually been used by the Mafia.

The title of the film—*Mafioso*—is a word that designates an identity and everything that goes with it. The protagonist, Nino Badalamenti, was a *picciotto* (youngster) who tagged along to help the Mafia on a few minor operations. In so doing, he proved such faithfulness and complete loyalty that Don Vincenzo recommended he leave Calamo, the village where he was born, and move to Milan to find a respectable job, with solid career potential, in a large firm. He undergoes a metamorphosis, taking on the appearance and thus the exterior identity of a real Milanese. So devoted to his work that he has forgone a vacation for many years, he eventually decides to take one and goes home, where he is caught in a trap of horrendous regression and drawn back to his fate as an assassin.

In Brief

In Alberto Lattuada's brilliant dark comedy *Mafioso*, auto-factory foreman Nino (Alberto Sordi) takes his proper, modern wife (Norma Bengell) and two blonde daughters from industrial Milan to antiquated, rural Sicily to visit his family and get back in touch with his roots. But Antonio gets more than he bargained for when he discovers some harsh truths about his ancestors—and himself. One of the first Italian films to look frankly at the Mafia, Lattuada's devastatingly funny character study is equal parts culture-clash farce and existential nightmare.





in the shadow of the Cosa Nostra, from which he thought he had freed himself forever. He returns to his birthplace, to the heat and the small, self-enclosed world of his family, beneath a blazing sun that blankets everything and everyone. Instead of a loving and nostalgic interlude for him to visit parents, relatives, and friends, it turns into an occasion for Badalamenti to make a compromise with the more profound and hidden reality of his homeland: a reality of violence and death, in obedience to ancient and ferocious codes that unfold according to rituals of unimaginably ruthless and secret cruelty. To pay up for the favor he was granted, he agrees, almost despite himself, to become an assassin for hire in New York (where nobody knows him and therefore nobody can trace who sent him). For Badalamenti, this means taking on the identity of a mafioso from head to toe, conscious of the secret pact he has made with the Mafia.

Lattuada's film describes with keen subtlety the poisonous ambiguity between the appearances of an age-old tradition, with pretensions to great dignity and a decorum based on honor and strict morality, and the bloody and inhuman reality that traps everyone in a web of slimy connivance. In the first place, there is Badalamenti's father, a wizened old man, suspiciously maimed, who never takes off his hat. In addition to the latent violence seen in the brawl he walks away from with a landowner who wants to force him to accept a new sale price for his own land, he himself gives his son the hunting rifle, knowing full well that his itinerary is destined to be far from an innocent country outing.

This game of appearances becomes emblematic of the sinister connotations of a postcard Italy whose social and political dynamics take root behind the luminosity of Mediterranean landscapes. The character Don Vincenzo (played by Ugo Attanasio, Lattuada's father-in-law, who had already played the role of an

overbearing father in Fellini's *The White Sheik*) incarnates this Italy. His false bonhomie as the father-protector who irons out every dispute in Calamo hides an arrogance that is seen in his confrontations with the decadent old Sicilian aristocracy—the last offspring being the Baroness of Traglia, who asks him for an explanation and receives a cutting remark in return. Above all, it hides an inexorable power to corrupt that draws in everything with its tentacles. A portrait of the dictator Franco stands out in the dark light of Don Vincenzo's house, an allusion to the ties between gangsterism and totalitarian regimes (at the time, the Spanish caudillo was firmly entrenched in power). This touch may have originated with an idea in the first screenplay, by Ferreri and Azcona.

Lattuada and his screenwriters gave Don Vincenzo coded speech that always alludes to something else and often foreshadows danger. Badalamenti becomes the victim of this in the splendid sequence, shot at night, when he comes face-to-face with his godfather, his benefactor, in a car. The contrast of the two faces, which seem enormous when placed so close together, reveals Nino's surging fear and cowardice. A mélange of disparate expressions forms a mask for the godfather, who has decided to use the young man he was supposed to protect as a marionette. The language used by Don Vincenzo, even more surreptitious and allusive than usual, is another threatening weapon of insinuation and intimidation.

The sequence where Nino meets up with old friends who never left Calamo, on a beach, where they are admiring the exaggerated voluptuous female figure they've crafted as a sand statue, is an allusion to the sexually repressed lives of Sicilian youth. These youth, who have graduated from school but are unemployed, pursue bookish questions that have nothing to do with their reality and the problems of where they live. It is as if they are disassociated from the real world, not only because they romp as adolescents, lovingly ogling female bodies, always yearned for from afar, but also because they have no understanding of the poisonous system that imprisons them.

Submission to a "godfather," Lattuada suggests, is the condition of an Italy sickened by underground crime, and is not confined to Calamo or even only to Sicily, but has ramifications everywhere. It has insinuated itself in the north, at the heart of the large Milanese firm where Badalamenti's boss, Dr. Zanchi, is an Italian-American version of Don Vincenzo, as well as in New York, where the man in the hat and dark glasses gives Nino the coordinates of his "target."

But it is above all through Badalamenti's disguise that Lattuada sketches out the servility that stimulates the "economic miracle" in Italy, a country that is undergoing "development without progress" and is still submerged in its age-old, ancestral evil.

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