

## Christ Stopped at Eboli



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Francesco Rosi. Produced by Nicla Carraro & Franco Cristaldi. Screenplay by Francesco Rosi, Tanino Guerra & Raffaele La Capria. Based on the 1945 novel *Christ Stopped at Eboli* by Carlo Levi. Production Design by Andrea Cristanti. Cinematography by Pasqualino De Santon. Music by Piero Cristaldi. Edited by Rugero Mastroianni. Cinematic length: 150 minutes. Distributed by

RCA/Columbia Pictures in the U.S.A. Cristaldi Films elsewhere. Production Companies: Rai2, Video Cinematografia, Action Films. Cinematic release 1979: DVD release 2003. Rating 85%. All illustrations are taken from the public domain.

## Cast

Carlo Levi: Gian Maria Volonte

Don Luigi Magalone: Paolo Bonnacelli

Barone Nicola Rotunno: Alain Cuny

Luisa Levi: Lea Massari

Giulia Venere: Irene Pappas

Don Traiella: François Simon

Don Cosimino: Antonio Allocca

Doctor Milillo: Enzo Vitale

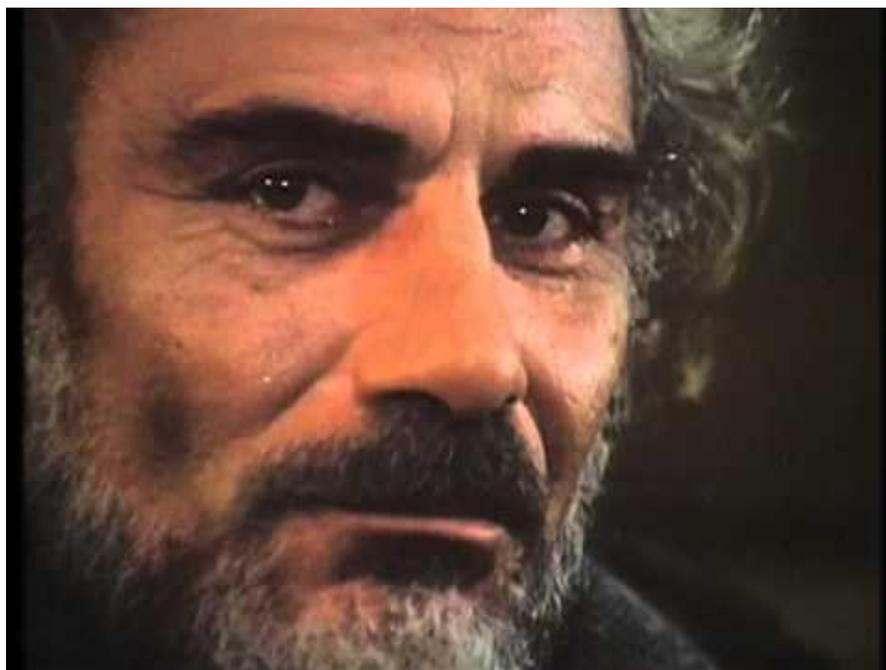
Carmelino Venere: Carmelo Lauria



## Review

*Christ Stopped at Eboli* does not refer to some biblical place where Jesus preached, although the town where most of the movie is set appears so old, so stony and undeveloped that it could be in the biblical Middle East. The idea behind the title as the main character narrates, must be that all Christian values, all mercy from God and all of his abundance stopped at the Italian town of Eboli, After that we are south of there in the lands that God forgot, stony, arid and bare, with only a gash through the mud to pass for a road. This land is Luciana in southern Italy, away from the coast and the train line, after that a small old bus takes travellers to the small Medieval towns where only the occasional car, rifle, pair of spectacles, fedora or printed book show that some development has occurred since around the fifteenth century.

Welcome to Mussolini's Italy 1935: the film takes the audience there initially through the narration of Carlo Levi. We see this world from his outsider's viewpoint. Obviously a well-educated northern Italian, obviously well off as he appears as stylishly dressed and immaculate: he looks like what he is - someone from another world.



*Gian Maria Vonté as Carlo Levi. In this still he is aged and looking back to his days in exile.*



*The embarrassed fascist mayor tries to talk Carlo Levi round to writing more circumspect letters*

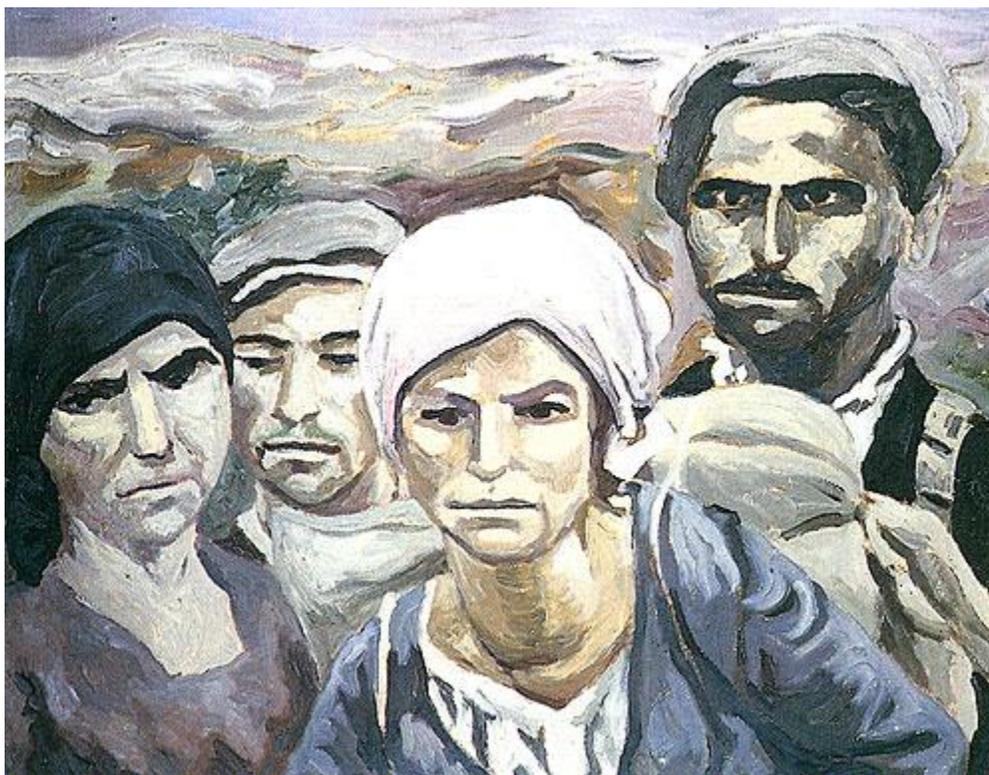
Gradually we learn why on earth he appears there. Mussolini had a policy of internal exile for his political opponents, critics or those who did something to get on the wrong side of the local fascists. We are never told exactly what Carlo has done to be exiled and as the local fascist mayor says, it was probably some minor infringement. He explains the rules for an exile's behaviour to Carlo as if he were a distinguished guest in a slightly stricter hotel than is usual. He should not consort with the other exiles who are communists and low class riff-raff and he must limit his walks to the town. He must not cause trouble. When he does go for a walk he will be accompanied. Gradually he finds himself drawn into the life of the village and the peasants. Technically he is a doctor but he prefers painting and writing, but the peasants want a reliable doctor...

Carlo Levi stays at the centre of the film, but it becomes an ensemble piece and yet with the characters rotating around him in succinct, understated but rounded characters who are not stagey or didactic, a rare cinematic achievement. Francesco Rosi was a director whose films are permeated with empathy for his characters; he gives them well-rounded characterisations without going into villainy or heroism,

but in a welcome contrast to the over done cynicism of so many films, he emphasises the best in people. Even the fascist mayor has some humanity: when he has to read and censor Carlo's letters he clearly does the task reluctantly and with embarrassment. When he tries explaining to Carlo why he should not write such things it becomes apparent that by the fascist rules he should arrest Carlo, not give him a polite warning. The aged, nervous priest courageously



preaches in church against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, explaining that the fascist line that the Ethiopians are pagans who do not deserve their land works as a double lie, the Ethiopians are Christians and no land should be stolen from any people whatever they believe. When in response the mayor calls on all good fascists to leave the church few do. Few cheer at the compulsory fascist rally either, the locals look sullen, at best bored. Carlo's sister Luisa has the courage to visit him in a world where associating with exiles in front of fascists must be at best unwise.

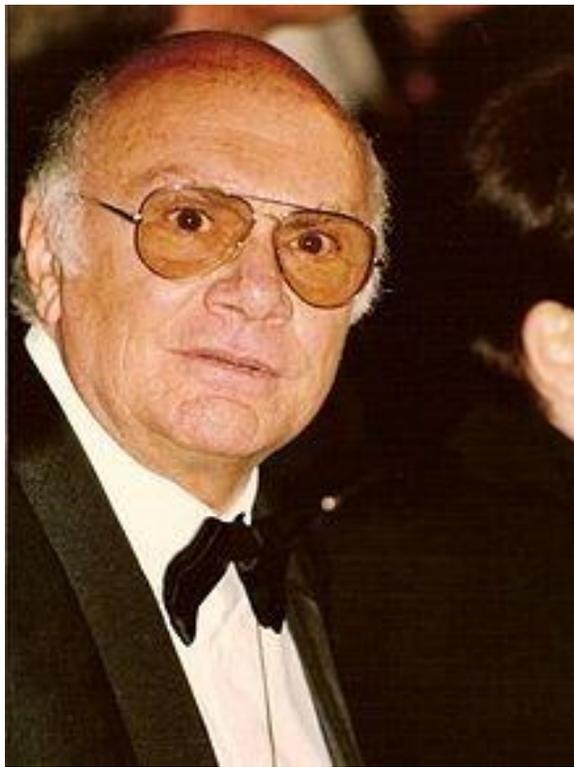


Despite these tensions *Christ Stopped at Eboli* comes across as being not so much about the conflict between fascists and anti-fascists, as it is about the cycle of life. Rosi depicts this as being over a year in a closely knit Italian community that has to battle to stay on subsistence level. Rosi and his cast do this with restraint and understatement. Village life comes across as well observed without being patronising. This time the setting becomes more than an exotic locale where the outsider comes to visit, have adventures and then leaves. We see Carlo many years

later surrounded by portraits of Luciana's peasants and villagers. Their faces have an intense and haunting quality, for both him and the audience.

It would have been a mistake to have usually extremely dynamic, intense performers Gian Maria Vonté and Irene Papas going into their frequent acting style so full of focused angry energy: that would have clashed with the reflective, understated mood of the film. Instead everything has a seamless unity to it, that is the way good films are made.

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*Francesco Rosi 1922-2015*