

Unexpectedly restrained: Italian filmmaker Matteo Garrone's *Dogman*

Emanuele Saccarelli
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Directed by Matteo Garrone; written by Garrone, Ugo Chiti and Massimo Gaudioso

Dogman is the most recent work by Italian filmmaker Matteo Garrone (*The Embalmer*, *Gomorra*). The film, received favorably at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, has now opened in the United States. It is a serious attempt to deal with a difficult, and in the present climate not particularly promising subject.

Although it departs from the facts of the original case in significant ways, *Dogman* is based on a horrific murder that shook the city of Rome and made national news in February 1988.

The killer Pietro De Negri subsequently became known as the “Dogman of the Magliana,” the latter at that time being one of the roughest working class neighborhoods on the outskirts of Rome. He committed his deed after being repeatedly subjected to intimidation and abuse by a local hoodlum, Giancarlo Ricci. Having trapped his tormentor by a ruse in one of the cages in his dog grooming shop, De Negri then proceeded to torture and kill Ricci in an exceedingly brutal fashion.

The actual details of the story remain somewhat murky and controversial. In response to renewed attention to the case due to the release of Garrone’s film, the mother of the victim has stated the dog coiffeur was merely a patsy who took the blame for a crime committed by others.

Nonetheless, the story powerfully affected the consciousness of a certain generation of Italians, particularly in Rome. The murder’s shockingly sadistic elements, salaciously reported by the press at a time when such stories were perhaps not as common—or, for that matter, as commonly portrayed on film—no doubt played a role.

More fundamentally, the story resonated and was deliberately presented as one of righteous revenge, tapping into the frustrations and anger of “ordinary” people.

The incident took place in the period of the notorious “Banda della Magliana,” an organized crime group with extensive links to the neo-fascist right, which ran roughshod over the city, and which was lionized in the cult film and

then television series *Romanzo Criminale* (*Criminal Novel*, 2005 and 2008, respectively). More broadly, this was also a period of rampant political corruption (the “clean hands” scandal blew the lid on such practices in the early 1990s), rising unemployment rates and a wave of right-wing “reforms,” including the slashing of redundancy fund benefits the same year as the murder.

All of this contributed to enormous frustrations, certainly in working class neighborhoods in cities like Rome. When the “dogman” carried out his revenge, for a misguided section of the downtrodden population, at last the little guy had stood up to intimidation and abuse. Graffiti praising the dogman appeared on the streets of Rome following the crime.

One might have imagined, considering the current cultural atmosphere, that such a story could have attracted exactly the wrong kind of artistic interest. A film about the dogman could have slipped almost seamlessly into the grooves of the well-established torture and porno-sadistic tendencies in contemporary film. Garrone could just as easily have ridden the wave of the often uncritical fascination with criminality and gangsterism in contemporary film, having already done so to a considerable extent in his previous film *Gomorra*.

Instead, *Dogman* displays unusual and, frankly, unexpected sensitivity, approaching its difficult subject humanely and with considerable restraint. Garrone (born in 1968), who is from Rome and was a young man at the time of the murder, stated that he began working on this project 13 years ago, but could not shoot the film until he found a suitable actor to play the protagonist.

Significantly, the director added that what he found in Marcello Fonte, the actor who gives a powerful performance as the dogman, was his “great humanity,” which enabled the director to finally deal with the story in an appropriate manner.

Visually and narratively sparse, *Dogman* relies on the ability of the main actor. There are few characters, saying little to each other and operating in a forlorn setting. In fact, there is a certain artificiality to the unspecified seaside

location chosen by Garrone. Everything is a bit too neatly run down and desolate. But when the camera is on Fonte, who could conceivably have been asked to portray a monster, the viewer feels his humanity in its emotional complexities, and sympathizes with the impossible conditions in which he finds himself.

Marcello is a physically weak man, on that score totally incapable of handling the intimidation and abuse dished out by Simoncino (Edoardo Pesce), his tormentor. Yet long before the horrific denouement, Marcello takes a stand courageously in his own way, and tries to salvage a dignified existence.

He deals drugs on the side, and participates more or less unwittingly in petty crimes in the wake of Simoncino. But Marcello loves his job and through it, and his relationship with his daughter, is shown repeatedly to be a decent human being. His relationship with Simoncino is moreover not simply based on violence and crime, bullying and intimidation, but also contains elements of friendship in a setting where it was impossible for it to find anything resembling a productive or healthy channel.

Marcello at one point saves Simoncino's life, even though his death would have been convenient. At another point he takes the fall for Simoncino—one suspects not simply because he fears the consequences of crossing him—and as a result is sent to jail for a year.

Dogman merely hints at what's in store for Marcello, in a remarkable scene showing his long walk before entering his cell. One senses the brutality that awaits in the faces of the unsavory fellow prisoners he passes by. But they, too, look like human beings rather than cartoon characters. The face of the last man shown in the scene stays with the viewer.

Even Simoncino, while far from a well-rounded character, is not a monster either. He bullies his way around town, at the mercy of his drug cravings and, in a sense, his own physical might, which allows him to get his way too easily. His physical presence is genuinely frightening, and the director is able to make it linger by more subtle means even when he isn't there, such as the dreadful roaring of his bike's engine, first getting fainter, indicating he is leaving, then closer. Simoncino is sadistic and cruel, but here and there one sees glimpses of genuine affection for Marcello.

All this is done convincingly and in a manner that actually departs substantially from the real story of the dogman—at least from the manner in which it was reported. This is particularly true of the murder carried out by Marcello.

The event featured monstrous acts of mutilation and torture which the actual dogman, Pietro De Negri, apparently freely confessed to without any sign of remorse. These were perhaps made even more disturbing when the autopsy revealed they were carried out for several hours,

mostly after the victim's death.

In the film, Marcello begins to treat Simoncino as he does his dogs—slowly gaining his trust, coaxing him with treats in the form of cocaine rocks, and finally succeeding in getting him to grudgingly enter into a cage. But there is a flip side to this, because the dogman actually loves and cares for his dogs, once going to extraordinary lengths to rescue one that had gotten in the way of a criminal effort. In any case, *Dogman* significantly blunts the element of vengeance that was apparently so central to the story it is inspired by.

Marcello's stated motivation is not revenge, but getting his cut of the money from the robbery for which he did time. He needs it, we surmise, to repair the damage his time in prison did to his relationship with his daughter. Marcello then asks Simoncino for an apology, and demands respect. In Garrone's *Dogman*, the murder is not the result of a calculated plan. Virtually every act of violence that follows Simoncino's entrapment is forced upon Marcello by the circumstances and by his victim's sheer physical strength.

It is not a question of morally and factually sanitizing an otherwise unspeakable event, but of extracting its essential human content. The people involved did in reality do terrible things, but were themselves the contradictory products of immense social degradation and of a system they did not control.

It is rarely reported that Pietro De Negri served 16 years of a 24-year prison sentence, with time off for good behavior, which included helping to care for prisoners suffering from AIDS and assisting foreign prisoners with bureaucratic matters. Upon release in 2005, he returned to his wife and daughter, started working as a delivery man, asking the media to be left alone. Garrone's film avoids the low-hanging fruit of mindless violence and revenge, and tries to get a deeper truth.

There are problems, to be sure, including a disappointing conclusion that muddles the crucial question of Marcello's motivations. It should also be said that Garrone seems to understand human beings far better than the social conditions that produce them. Yet in *Dogman* he has made a serious film while swimming against a strong current.



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