

CINEASTE

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Roberto Rossellini's War Trilogy: Rome Open City by Guiseppe Amato, Ferruccio De Martino, Rod Geiger and Roberto Rossellini; Paisan by Roberto Rossellini and Rod Geiger; Germany Year Zero by Roberto Rossellini

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Roberto Rossellini's War Trilogy

Rome Open City

Produced by Giuseppe Amato, Ferruccio De Martino, Rod Geiger and Roberto Rossellini; directed by Roberto Rossellini; written by Sergio Amidei, with the participation of Federico Fellini; cinematography by Ubaldo Arata; edited by Eraldo Da Roma; music by Renzo Rossellini; starring Anna Magnani, Aldo Fabrizi, Marcello Pagliero and Harry Feist. DVD, B&W, 103 min., Italian with optional English subtitles, 1945.

Paisan

Produced by Roberto Rossellini and Rod Geiger; directed by Roberto Rossellini; written by Sergio Amidei, Federico Fellini, Rod Geiger, Alfred Hayes, Klaus Mann, Marcello Pagliero and Roberto Rossellini; cinematography by Otello Martelli; edited by Eraldo Da Roma; music by Renzo Rossellini; starring Carmela Sazio, Robert Van Loon, Dotts M. Johnson, Alfonso Bovino, Maria Michi, Gar Moore and Achille Siviero. DVD, B&W, 126 min., Italian with optional English subtitles, 1946.

Germany Year Zero

Produced by Roberto Rossellini; directed by Roberto Rossellini; written by Roberto Rossellini, Max Colpet and Carlo Lizzani; cinematography by Robert Jullard; edited by Eraldo Da Roma; music by Renzo Rossellini; starring Edmond Meschke, Ernst Pittschau, Ingetraud Hinze, Franz-Martin Gröger and Erich Gühne. DVD, B&W, 73 min., Italian with optional English subtitles, 1948. A Criterion Collection three-disc box-set release, distributed by Image Entertainment, www.image-entertainment.com.

Although preceded by several notable works that can reasonably stake their claim to having ushered neorealism into Italian cinema—most overtly Antonioni's documentary short *Gente del po* (1943) and Luchino Visconti's proto-noir *Ossessione* (1942)—Roberto Rossellini's war trilogy remains, along with Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), the movement's central, defining point of reference. In his recent documentary *My Journey to Italy*, Martin Scorsese says he learned who he was and where he came from only after watching *Rome Open City* on television with his family; whilst in one of the accompanying interviews included by Criterion in this box set, film historian Adriano Aprà enthuses that "it's one of the most perfect films... Rossellini ever made."

This trilogy thus comes with considerable weight and baggage. Indeed, like *Citizen Kane* (1941) or *À bout de souffle* (1960), these films are difficult to watch today with any real objectivity, away from the twin pillars



Roberto Rossellini, circa 1940s (photo courtesy of Photofest).

of the canonized neorealist lineage and the repeated pronouncements of critics such as Colin McCabe, who has championed Rossellini as the single most influential European filmmaker of all time. In spite of such acclaim and significance, however, what is still striking about *Rome Open City* and *Paisan* in particular is how lightly and unostentatiously they shoulder their status as groundbreaking, canonical works. These are not exploratory experiments in form and technique in the mold of Welles, nor playful

variations on and ruptures in the vocabulary of genre cinema à la Godard. Rather, they evince a raw vitality that almost transcends questions of form, style and artistic predisposition. It was a matter of necessity—of working on short ends of film stock and shooting on city streets wrought with destruction and deprivation—because for Rossellini in particular these films simply had to be made, their subjects demanding to be brought to international attention.

The narrative of *Rome Open City* is precisely framed between the opening shot of marching German soldiers and its exact mirror image of a group of children (who have been working for the resistance) walking away from the site of an execution. Located between these contrasting pictures of a dark past and a potentially positive future lies what is, in effect, a thriller plot concerning the efforts of the occupying Nazi forces to apprehend members of the Italian underground, including a priest, and of the web of ties and personal relationships that both help and threaten the resistance effort. This film was, in a sense, Italy Year Zero, as the prevailing industry had been unequivocally disrupted by the Germans and then closed down by the Allied forces for its fascist connections, leaving Rossellini among a select few directors (De Sica, Giuseppe De Santis, Alessandro Blasetti, Mario Camerini) implicitly charged with rebuilding Italian cinema from the very bottom.

Like Vittorio De Sica, Rossellini had been a part of this fascist-run commercial cinema, working on commercial features throughout the war years. In particular, he directed humanistic, patriotic, technically accomplished but largely unambitious and impersonal war dramas like *The Pilot Returns* (1942), *The White Ship* (1942, a glorified to the point of



The pregnant Pina (Anna Magnani) is the fiancée of Francesco, a member of the resistance to the German Occupation, in Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945).



Partisans in the Po Valley episode of Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

propagandistic account of naval life) and *The Man with the Cross* (1943). From the opening scene of *Rome Open City*, depicting a German raid on a flat from which a prominent resistance fighter has just escaped, it is clear that a practiced commercial sensibility is at work. Indeed, two of the film's key actors, Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi, were by 1945 established comedy performers, while the other key roles of the resistance hero Giorgio and his girlfriend Marina are star roles that one could easily imagine having been played by, say, Jean Gabin and Michèle Morgan, or Italy's own Massimo Girotti and Clara Calamai. Similarly, the chief antagonists in the film—the Nazis Major Bergmann and his assistant Ingrid—are overtly villainous figures in the Hollywood mold of Claude Rains. They remain largely ensconced in their headquarters, cut off from the reality outside and with the former in particular directing operations and looming over the city like a veritable Dr. Mabuse made Italian incarnate.

Both Bergmann and Ingrid in fact figure in an uncomfortably reactionary discourse on Rossellini's part in *Rome Open City*, one that has tended to be skirted over in those numerous accounts of the film that have stressed its revolutionary humanism and social relevance. They are both more or less explicitly codified as homosexual, an association of sexual otherness (deviance) with literal evil that stands beside Maria Michi's selfish vamp on the one hand and Anna Magnani's mother-and-wife-to-be on the other in a dichotomous triangle that, along with the heroic figure of the priest, becomes synonymous with dogmatic religious, conservative values and sermonizing that leaves an unpleasant residue on an otherwise hardheaded and bighearted film.

Thankfully, alongside this generic framework and conservative piety is an unforced, rigorously unsentimental gutter-eye view of the hardships suffered in the immediate postwar period, with a contrapuntal emphasis on the almost banal, quotidian aspects of mere survival that support and sustain the ostensibly more heroic efforts of the resistance. Pina, for example, is first introduced gathering bread following the looting of a bakery, and thereafter the help she offers to

her partner and his associates is always shown alongside the domestic chores that keep a semblance of normality in her life amidst the increasing chaos in the city outside. Magnani's career-transforming and persona-defining performance adds immeasurably here (this was the key stepping stone between her early work and her most iconic role as Pasolini's Mamma Roma almost two decades later). Like Ricci's wife in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), this character is a stable, pragmatic, levelheaded rock for those around her, and the actress' natural warmth, humor and humility gradually assume center stage and the chief, empathetic point of human contact.

Made immediately in the wake of *Rome Open City* with international investment and a much bigger budget, *Paisan* builds on the style and central theme of its predecessor in a number of ways. Despite Bordwell and Thompson's curious claim in *Film History* that it is the most documentarylike film of the trilogy, it in fact overtly anticipates what would become arguably the defining aspect of Rossellini's modernist cinema of the ensuing decade in films such as *Stromboli* (1950), *Europa 51* (1952), and *Voyage to Italy* (1954): namely, the layering of a fictive, ostensibly melodramatic, central story upon a discursive foundation that emphasizes the notion of a creative intervention in and interrogation of reality, of realism on screen, rather than just a representation of the real. The narrative is comprised of six distinct, largely novelettish episodes between Italians and the Americans who are liberating the country from the Germans. Almost all are connected by a newsreel account of the



Karl-Heinz Koehler (Franz Martin Gröger, left), a German soldier in hiding, and his younger brother Edmund (Edmund Meschke) in *Germany Year Zero* (1948) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

Allied forces' progression through Italy, from Sicily in the South to the Po Delta in the North (both paradigmatic neorealist locales). They are further linked thematically by a study of progressive communication and understanding amongst the Americans and Italians, and also of the primacy of perception and point of view, the often unreconciled gulf between what is seen and what is real.

Beginning with a story that explicitly foregrounds a mistaken attribution of murder on the part of the Americans, each vignette points up the extent to which its characters bring specific suppositions to bear on the stories in which they are involved and on the other characters that they meet. For instance, the black G.I. who does not recognize the dire poverty in which the young boy who steals his boots lives, demanding rather naively to see his mother and father and believing him to be simply a delinquent. Only with the final, in many ways most powerful and moving, episode (which details partisan conflict with German forces), does Rossellini dispense with this theme, much as he dispenses with a discursive prologue by moving directly from one location to another, one story to another. At this point it is as though the film has become a documentary, with the Italians and Americans working in close, productive unison against a common enemy and the narrative methodology simply following suit and becoming a concise objective correlative.

Building on this final episode of *Paisan*, *Germany Year Zero* confuses and conflates the boundaries between documentary and fiction even further. Its story of a young boy and his family struggling to survive in the utter devastation of postwar Berlin achieves a symbiosis between the two forms to the extent that it may be considered both a film about documenting social reality and a documentary about filmmaking within it, about shaping and sculpting fiction from fact. It is also the first film in which the mature Rossellini style begins to take shape—long takes and frequent sequence shots, mobile, discreetly distanced and observational camerawork, and dedramatized narratives characterized by digressive development, by an accrual of detail over incident, chronology over causality. From the opening traveling shots around the city—shots that implicitly seem to be searching for a subject amongst the ruins—Rossellini's restless, eye-level, reactive rather than autonomous camera looks forward to Truffaut's in *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) in defining its horizons along with those of its protagonist, in a sense looking both at and with him simultaneously. In point of fact, given the prevalence of children in neorealism—not only *Rome Open City* and *Paisan* but De Sica and Cesare Zavattini's *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944) and *Shoeshine* (1946)—*Germany Year Zero*, with its shattering dénouement, may be taken as one of the works that brought the curtain down on the move-

ment. It is the logical end point, the ultimate purge of postwar desolation, and it is fitting that Rossellini subsequently moved away from the city and out to the Amalfi Coast to make *The Miracle* (1949).

Rossellini thus brings a far more marked ambiguity to bear in this particular film, something apparent in the way he builds on the troubling sexual component of *Rome Open City*. The young protagonist, Edmund, is accosted and befriended in the street by his old school teacher, a pedophile (indeed someone who appears to live in a coven of pedophilia in a large abandoned house). Rather than a simplistically coterminous presentation of Nazism and sexual perversity, however, it is revealed that this teacher kept Edmund out of the Hitler Youth, while the boy's brother and bed-ridden, slowly dying father (whose physical ailment is juxtaposed with the teacher's sickness) were ideologically-committed Nazis, the former to the extent that he remains frightened to leave the house lest he be arrested for "fighting to the end."

Edmund himself further underlines this ambivalence. A neat, fresh-looking blonde-haired boy, he balances a potentially symbolic innocence of spirit with an Aryan physiognomic ideal that is made clear when he becomes susceptible to the survival of the fittest discourse expounded by his teacher. That is, when he finds himself ideologically corrupted by words (and this after a speech by Hitler has been heard booming around the shell of a building on a record player). It is a potent moment, one of this trilogy's most iconic, and a succinct summation of the direct, unadorned artistry that many see as one of Rossellini's greatest strengths.

Extras-wise, a balanced, complementary mix of new and archival material gives a useful glimpse of the reaction to these films over the years since they irrevocably changed the landscape of postwar European cinema. Of the latter, Rossellini himself figures strongly—in a series of introductions to the three films made for French television in 1963, and in a taped conversation from 1970 between the director and students at Rice University. New material comes in the form of useful interviews with, and video essays by, numerous film scholars, while an added interview with the Taviani brothers (directors of *Padre Padrone* [1977] and *Night of the Shooting Stars* [1982]) adds a moving personal valediction to the otherwise analytical and anecdotal nature of the special features. A 2001 documentary on Rossellini, and a featurette and commentary specific to *Rome Open City* (the latter by Italian film scholar Peter Bondanella taken from the 1995 laserdisc release of the film) add further weight to what is a comprehensive package, and one that fills a significant gap left by Criterion's hitherto narrow concentration on Rossellini's later work for cinema and television. One hopes that *Stromboli* and *Europa 51* in particular will follow soon.

—Adam Bingham

Belzec

Directed by Guillaume Moscovitz; cinematography by Guillaume Schiffman, Stéphen Massis and Carlo Varini; edited by Lise Beaulieu. DVD, color, 100 min., in Polish, Hebrew, and French with English subtitles, 2005. Distributed by Menemsha Films, www.menemshafilms.com.

Between March and December 1942, on a trapezoidal stretch of sandy soil measuring 862 by 902 feet, a small team of about two dozen SS euthanasia technocrats, aided by a corps of vicious Ukrainian and *Volks-deutsche* guards, murdered as many as 600,000 Jewish civilians and an uncertain number of Roma "Gypsies." This forlorn plot, located on a short railway spur just off the main line between Lublin and Lvov, was named Belzec, after an obscure Polish farming village lying just four hundred meters away. Over the course of six months, trainload after trainload of emaciated, terrified human beings from Poland, Germany, Austria, and the Soviet Union arrived in cattle cars at Belzec after having been confined by the Germans in the ghettos large and small that served as the first stage of their carefully planned "final solution to the Jewish question" in Europe. Reassured by the SS commandant and his staff that they would be put to work after a hygienic shower, the victims undressed en masse without incident and then were harried with bayonets and whips through a narrow, camouflaged channel until reaching one of the largest structures in the camp.

Measuring eighty feet long and forty feet wide, the building contained six rooms bearing signs labeled "Bath and Inhalation," but which were actually gas chambers. Into these rooms, the Nazis forced Jewish workers to pump exhaust fumes from a large engine motor that asphyxiated all who had been forced inside. The process took twenty minutes. Hastily thrown into huge trenches nearly twenty feet deep, the corpses were exhumed starting in November 1942 and cremated with gasoline and wood on open pyres built on railroad ties that burned for days and weeks on end, fouling the air for miles around. By the Spring of 1943, Jewish slave laborers buried or scattered the ashes along with any bone fragments that the flames had not consumed. The workers were shipped off to the sister death camp of Sobibór to be murdered; the land was then plowed up and new stands of young trees were planted. In 1944, the Germans installed a Ukrainian family of farmers to prevent local Poles from prospecting for Jewish valuables they mistakenly believed lay underneath the surface. All had more or less been restored to what had been in 1939 before the German assault on Poland. But for the memories of the local villagers and the testimonies of three Jews who escaped from the camp and somehow managed to survive the war, Belzec would likely have become an entirely forgotten chapter in the Nazis' war against the Jews.