



Italian cinema and the hard road towards democracy, 1945

Gian Piero Brunetta

To cite this article: Gian Piero Brunetta (1995) *Italian cinema and the hard road towards democracy, 1945*, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 15:3, 343-348, DOI: [10.1080/01439689500260221](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439689500260221)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439689500260221>



Published online: 15 Sep 2006.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 57



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Italian Cinema and the Hard Road towards Democracy, 1945

GIAN PIERO BRUNETTA, *University of Padova*

Pina: When will this war come to its end? Sometimes I feel I can't take it any longer. It seems that the winter won't end.

Francesco: It will, Pina, it will ... The spring will come back, it will even be finer than usual for we'll be free. We must believe it, we must want it ... We are fighting for something that has to happen, that will happen. The way may be long and hard but we'll arrive, we'll see a better world! And what's more, our sons we'll see it! (*Open City*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945)

There is, in the simple, linear narrative structure of *Open City*, various strands of ideological, ideal and moral tension as well as various levels of time: the present, all pain and waiting (it is the winter of 1944); the past, implicitly still alive, for which people have to pay with blood and collective mourning; the future, the promise of a better world. Warfare is oriented toward peace; death and sacrifice toward solidarity, resurrection and hope.

Most aspects of the post-war Italian cinema derive from *Open City*, direct testimony of the fight for liberation and a tribute to the will for rebirth among the Italian people. Born of an unpredictable break with the past, Rossellini's film is a prototype, a model and, even today, an unavoidable starting point [1].

When Rossellini finished his film, the northern part of the country was still occupied by the Germans. Italy was therefore divided into two parts: the film's title, "open" city, was directed toward an "open" future [2] and it is not by chance that the movie ends with the boys, who have witnessed the execution of the priest, Don Pietro, going back to the town, "along a way to hope surrounded by ruins" as Pasolini noted [3]. People did not realize it when the film was first released, but Rossellini was disrupting every traditional code of representation, thanks of course to Anna Magnani, the personification of a new kind of woman [4]. Cocteau correctly noted that, for the first time in Italy, "the eye of a man became the people's, while the eye of the people identified with that of a man".

Unwittingly, Rossellini became head of a group of filmmakers who had no programme or common ideal, but who wanted to open their eyes, explore the visible, and affirm the value of life (three films, released in 1945, use the word 'life' in their titles). Italy was then in ruins but the Italians were ready to rebuild. The cinema, more than any other form of artistic creation, was to unify their energy and give them a renewed

sense of optimism [5]. The films of Rossellini, Vergano (*The Sun Rises Again*, 1946), and Blasetti (*A Day in Life*, 1946) do not glorify heroism—they expose the rediscovery of common moral principles and ideals that people believed were lost.

The Screen as a Collective Diary

Historians now acknowledge the importance of the cinema as a source of evidence [6]. Films which touch on reality, at random, introduce circulation signs which refer to the collective history of people. These signs, with the passing of time, acquire a kind of “historical added value”; their accumulation creates new historical objects [7].

Fiction films (with the action taking place in the past as well as the present) do not treat the whole history of a country but may represent a significant part of that history. Many forgotten movies are now accessible so that we can study the cinematic production of the post-war period as if it were a huge text which can be gone over in various ways. Films disclose the life of simple people [8] not unlike the spectators who saw them on the screen. In this article, setting aside the matter of artistic quality, I would like to suggest a few routes in the cinematic territory, in order to show the dynamics of a society and the various changes which affected the country during the Reconstruction, when Italy was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial economy [9]. People who were previously simply part of the scenery, became visible and, sometimes, were even the main characters of a new kind of story. Their lives, with their concerns and aspirations, were not very different from the lives of most ordinary people even if, in some cases, they sacrificed themselves for an ideal (*Open City* but also *The Great War* and *Generale della Rovere*). These were humble lives whose story was picked up by film directors in the streets or from stories in the daily press. Steno opens his *A Day in Court* (1954) with a caption: “We would like to thank all those who, unwittingly, just because they were mentioned in newspapers, have helped us”. At the beginning of *Arrivano i Dollari* (*Dollars are Arriving*, 1957) we are told that we are going to see “An ordinary place, somewhere in Italy”. As for the main characters of the *Girls of the Spanish Steps* (1953) they are, the caption reads, “three girls who worked in an atelier on the other side of the square, three girls like many others”. The post-war cinema shows, in a way not seen before, how the condition of the Italians evolves. It creates a sort of “public diary” in which imaginary events coexist with actual ones. It places side-by-side attitudes which demonstrate that a nation cannot be reduced to its lowest common denominator [10].

The Italian cinema is unique, even if we compare it to the American one, because it attempts to describe a country from the bottom up. It stresses the proletarianization of the lower middle-class as well as the trend of the working class towards a middle-class outlook. It can be argued that the disappearance of this social stratum, in which different people were simultaneously improving their condition or growing poorer, deprived the cinema from its most important topic. The cinema was able to show the progress of Italy towards democracy and create a genuine image of the state, without compromising with the government. Some of these films embody the spirit of the period; they are part of the “imaginary furniture” of those who lived after the war. There are also films that represent an event or a period, films likely to supplant the traditional sources used by historians. Consider *Open City*, *Paisan*, or *Germany, Year Zero*: these allow viewers to have direct contact with the deepest spirit of resistance as well as with the significance of a European tragedy.

The Hard Road towards Democracy

What has been emphasized so far is the contradictory nature of the world as staged on the Italian screens. We must go further. This cinema was made by technicians and directors who had been either anti-Fascist, apolitical or even Fascist. Whatever their past, they were united by a strong professional solidarity which enabled them to resolve their political conflicts. The story of Italian cinema is better understood as an attempt at recreating unity, while acknowledging the existence of differences. Neorealism, the most interesting product of the period, looks like an uneven, discontinuous territory where nothing is perfectly consonant with the whole system.

The war modified all that was previously expressed by the cinema: values, functions, relationships—even language. The ruins were simultaneously a datum and a metaphor. Rossellini played a crucial part in this period because he showed how human beings could fight to establish new connections among themselves. Resisting Fascism, in Rossellini's films, became essential not from a purely political point of view but because resistance settled "a common adherence to values superior and unquestionable"[11]. Rossellini's war trilogy revealed the cost of liberty. Liberty had been regained but it became clear that, even in the cinema, democracy was not given once and for all; it had to be worked for day after day. Significantly, a few characters, for instance those played by Totò or Alberto Sordi, looked as if they did not know that they lived in a democracy. They never wondered what the duties involved in liberty might be. For them the State was an abstraction, an absent father or mother whose only function was to look after people's welfare.

Liberated from Fascist oppression, Italy shared common ideals but was far from united. Italian cinema was able to represent the conflict between antagonistic forces. Expectations and disillusionment, stability and repression can be seen in many films shot during the three years that followed the war. The future, which at first looked totally open, became, for the film characters, a dead end. Many very different films, Rossellini's *Francesco Giuliare di Dio* (1950) and *Europe 51* (1951) but also, Steno and Moncelli's comedies, starring Totò, or Zampa's movies, introduced confused situations and characters, a progressive darkening of the idea of democracy in people's mind—an evolution which resulted in an invasion of films celebrating the American model, while the Soviet alternative was totally ignored. Very soon the cinema illustrated the worst public and private shortcomings of the Italians.

Scriptwriters and directors contrived a series of small worlds in the framework of an incoherent, confused social landscape. However, they attempted neither to recreate the totality of this landscape, nor to evoke the various forces that supported it. Ideological differences were not represented as a shortcoming. "When will this war come to an end?" a character asks in *A Day in Life*. "Very soon", is the answer, "if we all go in the same direction". In *To Live in Peace* (1947), Zampa shows that, although they are on two opposed sides, an Italian citizen and a German soldier (a citizen in uniform) can become friends and share common concerns. The condemnation of Nazism is perfectly clear right from the beginning—and it helps avoid a similar condemnation of Italians who collaborated with the Germans: Vancini's *The Long Night of 1943* is the first to discuss, as late as 1960, Fascist failings, yet the Nazis were never confused with the whole German people. Even in *Open City* the identification between Germans and evil was not absolute; there were Germans who tortured and killed but also those who no longer believed in Nazism, deserted, and were cowards.

There is therefore, from 1945 through to the beginning of the cold war, a tension,

able to generate new energies and promote reconstruction, which is brilliantly expressed in cinema. Films are good at showing how politics becomes a pre-eminent aspect of national life. By showing faces, locations, objects, the movie camera succeeds in making spectators observe the desires as well as the fears of the Italians. *Desires* by Pagliero and Rosellini, a film whose shooting began in 1943 but which was not completed until 1945, is filled with a total distrust of everybody, a perfect moral vacuum: "I don't care for anybody", the main character tells us, "they are all alike" [12]. There is, on the one hand, a will to reconstruct the country ("There is work to be done, up to the year 3000" a demobilized soldier says, while looking at the ruins of Turin, in Lattuada's *The Bandit*, 1946), a will to affirm that human beings can build their own lives (Visconti's *The Earth Quakes*, 1948, is crucial in this respect) but there is also a passive acceptance of destiny in many films [13]. Dictatorship is over but people do not know how they can live in the new-born democracy. Some characters make fun of it. In Steno and Monicelli's *Dog's Life*, 1950, Nino Martoni, a famous comic, says scathingly: "The time when we couldn't talk is finished. We are in full democracy." Others feel totally confused, as in *Easy Years*, 1953: "I'm afraid you have too many contradictory ideas. You have to make a choice" or: "Fashion doesn't stop changing. We favour, alternately, order and discipline or liberty, Empire and colonies, or social justice. If someone starts fighting for an idea and defending a programme, another person stands against him". All this is perfectly expressed in the speech by the aristocrat Tadini (Played by Alberto Sordi) who attempts at selling people soap bubbles in *It Happened at the Police Station* (1954): "Citizens, you know in what time we live. A time in which everything can be told, everything can be done, a time in which nobody knows what has to be told or done. A time in which the captain becomes a lady and the lady a mess corporal. A time in which everything is attached to a string, like a balloon—a balloon called uncertainty. My dear citizens, stick to the instant, stick to the shortest moment of liberty, stick to your illusions which will soon vanish like soap bubbles". Democracy is almost never understood as open to individual relationships with full respect for the public good.

The concerns of the women led by Anna Magnani in Zampa's *Angelina* (1947), the tragic-comic fate of Zampa's main character in *Difficult Years* (1947), the despair and moral misery of Edmund in *Germany Year Zero* and the many films starring Totò help us understand a continuity between past and present. The cinema shows, more clearly than any other historical source, how social protest was channeled, how the democratic state was perceived, what ordinary citizens expected from it, and how the illusions of the post-war era came to an end. A line in Steno's *The Unfaithful* (1953) reveals how precarious peace and liberty appeared: "Everyone is looking for more entertainment. Time passes: what's going to happen tomorrow? misery? another war? Let's have fun while that's still possible". People pretend to have changed [14] but signs, gestures, personal links, friendships, memories, words—everything indicates a continuity between Fascism and democracy. In *Neapolitans in Milan* a character, speaking of a Fascist leader, says with a sigh: "Dear Don Salvatore—when he was here, things like that couldn't succeed". In the first *Don Camillo* (1952), a teacher wants to be buried with the royal flag on her coffin. In Zampa's *Easy Years*, an MP confesses: "I am faithful to the Republic but we must admit that we were satisfied with the monarchy". In *Dogs and Cats* a protagonist goes back, in his political speeches, to the slogans of Fascism: "Order and power". In *The Doctor and the Witch* protagonists spontaneously use the Fascist calendar. Consider the a dialogue in *Sunday in August*: "Propaganda is the strongest weapon"—"Who used to say that?"—"Well ... better forget it". Films betray

a nostalgia for a regime in which everything seemed to be well-ordered: "Remember what it was like, you could buy a paper in Palermo, Bolzano or Turin and find the same news, the same photographs, the same headlines. Today people can print whatever they want: do you prefer that?"—"What can we do? It's democracy! It has turned out like that!" protagonists complain in *The Bigamist* (1953).

Totò, the great comic, provides us with the best possible guide to political confusion. When a marquis, in *Totò Blind* shouts a Fascist slogan, Totò nicely interrupts him: "You can no longer use it, it's forbidden today". In both *Totò in Hell* and *Going to Piovarelo* people recall the good old days of the March on Rome. Sometimes censors let Totò be sharply critical: in *The MPs* he says: "There are no roses without thorns, no government without Andreotti" when Andreotti was the unmovable leader of the Christian democracy. He said also, paraphrasing one of the most famous speeches of Mussolini: "Ours is a country of navigators, saints, poets and under-secretaries" (*The Memory Loss of Collegno* (1962)). Making fun of all political parties, in *Totò and Caroline*, he sang the famous Communist hymn, *Long Live Communism* with the words of a nationalist song and changed the slogan "Down with bosses" into "Long live love". Post-war Italian cinema suggests the ironic protection of the evasive witness on the stand under oath who says "I have no present recollection"—but does.

Correspondence: Gian Piero Brunetta, via Canestrini 83/bis, 35127 Padova, Italy; FAX 39(0)49.875.52.76.

NOTES

- [1] Alain Bergala ("Rossellini ou la modernité nécessaire", in J. Aumont, ed., *Conférences du collège d'histoire de l'art cinématographique* (Paris, 1992) rightly calls Rossellini a filmmaker of the "unavoidable modernity", someone who had not sought to break with the past but was forced by circumstances to innovate.
- [2] As has been cleverly noted by Fabio Ferzetti ("Citta e cinema. La periferia urbana nella cinematografia italiana" in F. Fiorentini, ed., *Città come*, Rome, 1988 p. 25): "City 'open' to the eye of the cineaste, to the wish to represent, on the screen, a country obliterated by twenty years of propaganda".
- [3] *La religione del mio tempo*, 1962, Rome, pp. 62–63.
- [4] "Open City showed a woman who had nothing in common with the weak ladies of the inter-war period, a modern woman, free from prejudices and from the servitude of her sex, aware of her dignity ... a character who was a revolutionary symbol" (V. Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico*, Milan, 1985, p. 85).
- [5] As has been explained by E. Di Nolfo, a historian who pays attention to the importance of film as an historical source of evidence (*Le paure e le speranze degli Italiani, 1943–1953*, Milan, 1986). In *L'Espresso* (2 August 1992), Giorgio Bocca goes so far as to write: "There was more faith, action and hope in 1945 Italy, with one fifth of all houses in ruins and half of the railways out of use, than today, when eighty percent of the population own their own houses, use their cars to go on holiday, and do not worry how they will survive".
- [6] As can be inferred from the increasing number of historians who use it. Let me mention, among many others, Nicola Tranfaglia, Mario Isnenghi, Peppino Ortoleva, Nicola Gallerano, Silvio Lanaro, Giovanni De Luna, and Marcello Flores d'Arcais.
- [7] "With the cinema, various elements of social life, which are not correlated, are linked together and acquire a new meaning ... Seemingly unimportant deeds disclose the hidden dynamic of social relationships", P. Ortoleva, *Scene del Passato* (Turin, 1991)
- [8] "Gens de peu" as the French sociologist Pierre Sansot puts it in his *Gens de Peu* (Paris, 1991).
- [9] Changes affecting towns are analysed in my paper, "La piazza cinematografica, il rito, la festa, le voci, i silenzi" (*I nuovi argomenti*, 1985, pp. 137–143). For the country, see M. Isnenghi, "Il

- ruralismo nella culture italiana" in P. Bevilacqua, ed., *Storia Dell'agricoltura Italiana in età Contemporanea*, III, (Venice, 1991), pp. 901-905.
- [10] M. Sesti, "La vita quotidiana nell'età neorealista" in A. Farassino, ed., *Neorealismo. Cinema Italiano, 1945-1949* (Turin, 1989), pp. 115-120.
- [11] A Caracciolo, "La vita quotidiana" in *Quaderni di Vita Italiana*, 3, July-September 1987, p. 268.
- [12] "Germans, Fascists, you are all the same once you have got your gun" Carmella says in the Sicilian episode of *Paisan*.
- [13] "My fate is already sealed" the main character of *Desires* keeps saying. The same conception of an unavoidable fate is expressed in the films of Matarazzo, Genina and Cottafavi.
- [14] In *Going to Pioverolo*, Totò encounters the secretary of a Christian democrat MP who was previously the secretary of a Fascist leader but pretends to remember nothing regarding the past.

Gian Piero Brunetta teaches history and film criticism at the University of Padua. His many books include La Storia del Cinema Italiano, 4 vols. (Roma: Riuniti, 1993); Cent'anni di Cinema Italiano (Bari: Laterza, 1991) and Buio in Sala (Venice: Marsilio, 1989).