

the achievement of Roberto Rossellini

Author(s): Alan Casty

Source: *Film Comment*, FALL 1965, Vol. 2, No. 4 (FALL 1965), pp. 17-21

Published by: Film Society of Lincoln Center

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43753273>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Film Society of Lincoln Center is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Comment*

JSTOR

the achievement of Roberto Rossellini

by Alan Casty

IT IS BY NOW apparent that in the new film, and in the new film criticism, we are in the Age of the Director.

From all sides—from *Time* and *Life* to the esoteric—and in all forms—articles, monographs, pamphlets, elaborate books—we are being amply provided with studies of the work, the unified *oeuvre*, of directors of personal vision, statement and form.

Yet it is one of the typical ironies of this newly rich and highly fanatical revolution that we can find in the serious criticism of the film magazines that same eager and constant unearthing of new heroes and premature burying (or at least stereotyping) of old that we find in the fads and vogues of the adolescents' movie magazines. I can think of no more illustrative a case of the shortness of critical sights and memories than that of Roberto Rossellini. He has fallen prey to an almost complete critical disregard, ill-regard and mis-regard. With occasional exceptions, all we usually get in references to him are something vague and historical about Neo-Realism and the citation of the titles of two of his films.

It seems to me that Rossellini is much more than that. He is not only one of the earliest, but also one of the most influential examples of a director who through a long, although erratic, career has created a body of work with the personal unity of a man's vision of the world and the artistic unity of means chosen to fulfill that vision in form. In current terms, he is a true *auteur*, in the valuable sense of that partisan word, a sense in which both content and form are united and not played against each other as the creation of a single man, his character and personality. An *auteur*, then, who helped to shape a way of doing things, a tradition of the new whose criticism is so obsessed with the new that it has already discarded his work.

Both Rossellini's themes and forms have been the object of misinterpretation and distortion. Rossellini's work, it must be admitted from the start, suffers from lapses of taste, and even intelligence, from melodrama and sentimentality. He is in some ways a *naif*, a romantic, but then in some ways so are Truffaut, Godard. Possibly the problem is that his form of naiveté, of romantic simplification, is less fashionable than theirs. Theirs leads to the tongue-in-cheek reneging of an awareness of itself, his to the excesses of an intense sincerity. A useful point of comparison is Dickens. Like Dickens, Rossellini does not always know when to stop, either with actions or emotions. But like Dickens, too, the excesses are bound up with a way of looking at life. For both, life is a staggering montage of images of degradation, deprivation, destitution, degeneration; for both, the human spirit is besieged by brutality, terror, selfishness, inauthenticity. Yet, for both, the human spirit maintains the possibility of regeneration. It is the constant confrontation of these two extremes that threatens the work of both (and I don't mean to imply that they have surmounted that threat with equal success) with the excesses of melodrama and sentimentality.

Rossellini's work portrays a quest: for heroism, for moral grandeur, for (as he has put it) "faith as an essential part of human life," for some form of human dignity in the very midst of the ruins of our dignity and our time. The terms of the ruins, of the horrors, and the terms of the heroism, of the dignity, have changed through the years; and so, too, have the forms chosen to embody them. But, for most critics, if a Rossellini film was not clearly Neo-Realism, it was nothing much at all. My purpose is to let his films be what they are, to trace the changing terms of his quest for affirmation and for a personal idiom in which to capture that affirmation.

In *OPEN CITY* and *PAISAN* (his first post-war films and for many, I might say, his last) he used the jagged, rugged techniques of what was to be christened Neo-Realism to record with a kind of personal frenzy the jagged wounds of war. The editing was nervous, abrupt and startling; even mistakes added to the immediacy of the naturalism. Images were often unbalanced on the screen, the camera focused haphazardly, as though it had happened upon something and captured its existence in its raw, disheveled state. Even the grainy texture of the film, the crudeness of some of the actors, contributed to the newsreel-like naturalness; but, even here, this was more than surface realism, in the sense of having a perfect imitation as the goal. It was all heightened expressively, not only to record the images of our depravity, but, despite much that has been said about Neo-Realism, to shape a comment on that depravity with the images chosen.

Rossellini did this with passing shots—a hallway so dirty you could smell it, the sweaty, twisted sheets of a bed in which love had been reduced to lust—and with big, bravura scenes—a woman torn up by machine-gun fire from the Gestapo car she is running toward, a partisan leader writhing against the wall as he is tortured, half-standing, half-hanging from large iron rings, his features torn and bloody, until finally a blow-torch is applied to his throat. The shared agony in the response of a priest, who must watch this torture, pulls us into a sharing of the heart of this darkness.

The excesses, the melodramatic savoring of these horrors, seemed appropriate for the monstrous excess of war itself. And the crisis of war allowed him to venture a heroism, compounded of physical courage and honor, in the grand, traditional manner. Here were the first Rossellini heroes, juxtaposed sharply against the horrors: the partisan leaders who resist suffering and death for the cause they have faith in; the priest who declares (finally at the cost of his own life) his solidarity with the anti-clerical, Communist partisans; the lovers (usually seeking to be re-united) who suffer death for their attempts at love and communication; a band of partisans and British and American special troops who resolutely go about their business of war in the face of certain extermination by German troops—the cold, empty marshlands of the Po valley fittingly impassive and eternally uncaring, unconcerned, an apt correlative image for this acting-out of the ambiguity of human dignity and futility.

PATENTLY SUSCEPTIBLE to sentimentalizing these terms of heroism were further romanticized (despite the “realistic” surface) by the inevitability of their failure. What keeps them emotionally effective within these two films is the presence of the all too palpable terrors of man at war as that presence is appropriately conveyed by the methods of Neo-Realism.

In Rossellini’s next film, *GERMANY YEAR ZERO*, made in 1947, despair and bitterness in the face of these terrors proved insurmountable. In it, Rossellini hates with such vehemence that the Neo-Realism—the unremitting gallery of shots, brutal both in content and composition—becomes a kind of reverse romanticism. The hard-edge images of what might well have been real events produce too heightened a whole when forced to carry the propagandist contrivances of the plot. The basic metaphor is of the rubble of postwar Germany as the inhuman parallel to the rubble of human nature that Naziism had produced. Like the rats, scurrying amid the ruins, the people have been reduced to animals. For food, they pounce with drawn knives on the body of a starved horse. For food, a young girl submits to debauchment. For food, a young

boy kills his own father. His plunge from innocence to degradation is typical of the excesses of the plot. Convinced by the leader of a black-market gang—a former and continuing Nazi—that the aged and weak are better off dead, he agrees to kill his father and then kills himself. Still, the separate images of physical and spiritual disintegration have the typical Rossellini power. And this time they are unrelieved; no phoenix of the heroic spirit (however futile) rises from these ruins.

Rossellini had to seek it elsewhere. Wartime and political destruction and hatred had become a dead end, and he veered off abruptly from it and, significantly, from the basic idiom and the limitations of the Neo-Realist technique. In this period (which, possibly by more than coincidence, parallels his love affair and marriage with Ingrid Bergman), his protagonists were in the main women who, in one way or another, are faithful to a personal, highly eccentric vision of love and God in the world, despite the hostility, brutality and betrayal of the world around them. Here Rossellini begins to employ a much more personal form of expression: at first an obvious, grandiose symbolism, and openly romantic, even hyperbolic general manner, and later a loosely episodic lyricism.

The earliest of these films was *THE MIRACLE*, produced in 1948, a forty-minute vignette that appeared in America (to an accompanying uproar about blasphemy) as part of a three-part anthology called *WAYS TO LOVE* (the other parts were not by Rossellini). In it, Rossellini attempted a kind of perverse, ironic Biblical paraphrase, as he focussed on the emotional torment and final apotheosis of a demented peasant girl who is seduced by a bearded wayfarer played by Fellini. She thinks he is a vision of St. Joseph, and so imagines her pregnancy to be immaculate. With what is obviously his primary intuition of form, Rossellini sought to build a paradox: through the very brutality of the images of the seduction and of the cruel badgering of the girl in a church plaza by a horde of mocking townspeople, through the very intensity of her suffering and her madness (captured in relentless, uneven, and uneasy closeups), she transcends the brutality and hate to obtain a lonely communion in a monastery, high atop a hill, up which the townspeople, led by the town intellectuals, the college students, have driven her. Somehow the spirit of the deep, transcending love symbolized by the virgin birth is present in so sordid, so grotesque a creature, so desperate a life.

Although there is in *THE MIRACLE* still much of the hurried, awkward power of Rossellini’s Neo-Realism, there is now a much more pronounced lingering over certain images, a more careful building of scenes and an ordering of visual patterns, a greater suggestiveness, a greater operatic range in the acting of Anna Magnani—

all of which tend to make more emotionally effective his basic convention of exaggerated contradiction, of paradox.

THE PROVOCATIVE AMBIGUITIES of this metaphor of love in the modern world were reduced to romantic simplicities in *STROMBOLI*, with Ingrid Bergman. Bergman, the embodiment here of a full-blooded, natural vitalism, has made a marriage of convenience with a fisherman on a small, backward island. She is misunderstood by her husband, ostracized as an adulteress, and emotionally pilloried by narrow-visioned townspeople. She plots her escape; but after a night alone atop the magnificent volcano, amid the caressing vistas of the glories of the sunrise, the birth of a new life, she experiences a mystical revelation and recognizes the need for a sacrifice to the acceptance of the contradiction of glory and petty evil that is love, that is, the Divine in the world. In the chopped-up commercial version shown in America, the full, lengthy panoply of the closing imagery was sharply abridged (as was the somewhat different imagery at the close of Antonioni's *ECLIPSE*), but even when taken in full dosage it would be hard to justify in *STROMBOLI* this sudden emergence of the archetypal mountain-and-dawn symbolism of mysticism with the banal circumstances of the characters and plot. The symbolism remains gratuitous, unearned, and the conversion and affirmation unconvincing. The case is thus a representative example of Rossellini's recurring problem of imposing visual images that are inconsistent with or prisoners of a contrived plot.

In his next film, however, Rossellini did find both circumstances and images that were, in the main, commensurate with his vision. Called both *EUROPE 51* and *THE GREATER LOVE*, it was shown in a mutilated version and suffered unwarranted obscurity in America.

Here he again used images of horror to effect the paradox of love, and here the influence on him of the French religious mystic and existentialist, Simone Weil, is made manifest. With an awesome, if not in some ways pathological, intensity, Weil had sought to leap "the infinitely distant gap" separating man's life of pain and evil from God, to leap this gap through the communion of love, because "God is essentially love." This love, she felt, might be achieved by direct mystical union with God (Bergman in *STROMBOLI*) or by the impassioned sharing of the lot of the most afflicted, the exiles, the outsiders (Bergman in *THE GREATER LOVE*). "Our life," she said, "is nothing but impossibility, absurdity," yet we must immerse ourselves in this absurd, must embrace it, for "contradiction is our path leading toward God, since we are creatures and because creation itself is a contradiction." Here, con-

ceptualized, is what Rossellini had been seeking to express in his dramatic metaphors of horror, pain and destructiveness.

In *THE GREATER LOVE*, he expressed it in a manner that even parallels some of the life of Simone Weil. (Weil, too, it might be noted, had moved from a political concern to a personal concern.) In the film, Bergman, married to a rich American capitalist, is shocked into a recognition of the inauthenticity of her life of parties and clothes and sophistication when her love-deprived son throws himself down the stairs at the height of one of her parties and dies. She seeks a true axis for her life by sharing the agonized death night of a tubercular prostitute, sharing the guilt of a murderer whom she helps to evade the police, and finally by sharing the doom of the most afflicted of all, the insane. In the original version, the entire second half of the film is a powerful expressionistic vision of the ineluctable core of horror in the world, conveyed through Bergman's experience in an insane asylum: the antics of the mad, the huge, naggingly off-center closeups of the faces of the mad, the disconcerting suddenness of the transitions of the mad, the distorted sense of perspective of the mad, the world turned mad. When Bergman (who has been sent to the asylum on a ruse, so as to escape a jail term as an accomplice to the murder) is offered freedom, she refuses. For, in a typical paradox, she has realized that only here, with the "exiles," free of all interfering categories, dogmas and social conventions, only here has she really communicated, really felt the union of love, the full commitment of love. As is the case in all of Rossellini's films of this period, it is only through her immersion in the "destructive element" itself that she has created love and herself.

This, the realization of a saint, is again not an easy one to make convincing, and Rossellini was not entirely successful. For one thing, he again fails to unify the talky, expository, realistic sequences with the expressionistic ones. But, as a metaphor, with those giant, haunting, tragic faces of the doomed as its core, the film has a powerful resonance.

In his next two films, Rossellini reprises the same subject—first, the realizations of a saint, then the regeneration of love and faith—but in both films there is a sharp break in form. The weak expository sequences and plot contrivances are dropped; in their place is a loose lyricism that relies on brief episodes and visual imagery to convey the kind of spiritual transcendence that plot could not achieve. In these films are foreshadowed many of the approaches and techniques of the new film. Truffaut has called the first, *THE FLOWERS OF ST. FRANCIS*, the best film of all time. In a recent poll, several continental critics named the second, *A VOYAGE IN ITALY*,

as one of the ten best films; and yet both rest snugly in obscurity.

THE FLOWERS OF ST. FRANCIS is a tender, lyrical evocation of the possibilities of saintliness, and yet it is not sentimental. In transforming the scene of the destruction of life from our own time to the 13th Century, and in transforming the loving self-abnegation of his heroines to the self-immolating love of St. Francis and his disciples, Rossellini has lost some of the intensity of his usual situations and images; but he has also avoided the consequent pitfalls. Here, his sense of the resurrection of the spirit within the wreckage of society is projected and enhanced by the mythic simplicity and sharpened by a juxtaposition of disparate elements that has within it a quiet, yet humorous irony.

One can see what Truffaut liked in, and learned from this film, the simple imagery but complex emotions of such scenes as these. Francis, torn by the conflict of his need to embrace a leper (Weil's outcast) and his revulsion, stands tested and tormented in a wordless scene, the warning clapper of the leper the only sound. Sobbing, he throws himself to the ground, kissing the leper's foot, debasing himself before the debased. Brother Juniper, in the midst of the fire and spectacle of a medieval siege, at last triumphs, through the wisdom of a humorously infuriating naïveté, over the tyrant Nicolai, persuading him to lift the siege even while the tyrant is glorying in the fitting of a new suit of powerful and gaudy armor.

A VOYAGE IN ITALY (which, as far as I can discover, was never given a general release here) returns to the present and more realistic problem of the regeneration of love in a ruined marriage; but it retains and even extends the episodic construction and more importantly makes even more central use of the visual imagery of the surroundings. Particularly through his favorite device of ironic contrast, Rossellini uses the "objective correlative" of the surroundings to delineate without the need of plot development the emotional states of the principals of an empty, alienated marriage as they wander through a vacation in Italy. Not only in situation but in mode is there here a foreshadowing of a kind of thing now associated with Antonioni. Unlike Antonioni, however, Rossellini attempts to have the surroundings also work as "plot," and he uses them—particularly the vital, natural piety of the peasants—to effect the characteristic regeneration in the principals. One can see how Antonioni's much more pessimistic use of the technique better suits current taste in such matters.

It is part of the strangeness of Rossellini's career that this breakthrough into new ground meant the end rather than the beginning of something. It was followed by five years of relative inactivity, obscurity and artistic

failure. We had the pageantry of heroism in the epic of GARIBALDI or the pageantry of saintliness in the filmed version of Joan of Arc, but these were certainly no consolidation of a breakthrough in form. At the root of the problem might well have been the flaws of temperament and taste that were always apparent in his work, the insecurity and uncertainty that were the less valuable underside of his constant shifting of modes of expression; but at the root, too, certainly were the failure of critical acceptance of his "middle period" works, the subsequent failure of these works to achieve financial success and of further works to gain financial backing.

And then, suddenly, through some mystery of creativity, Rossellini, in GENERALE DELLA ROVERE, found the perfect vehicle, the intellectual balance, the discipline (and apparently the long refused financial backing) for what is in some ways the most mature, sophisticated and deeply probing version of what he had been seeing and trying to show all along.

In this film, there is a return to plot, even a return to some of the forms of Neo-Realism; but this time the irony that has always been a part of his striking juxtapositions is kept hard, witty. It, in turn, keeps sharp the edge of the Rossellini paradox: heroism in absurdity, dignity in the ruins of self. It is indicative that the gross physical horrors of the wartime world, to which he has returned, are kept hovering beyond the edges; only at the climax does physical brutality actually get pictured, and then only in its results. For this, despite the plot, is a film of character, of a credible search—and one that is only partly intentional—for authentic identity in a world that is inauthentic, brutal, absurd. The complex nature of this particular identity sets the qualified terms of the kind of nobility the film posits as possible. For the search is indeed an ironic one: by a confidence man who has assumed in his life many identities and who, in the climactic irony, finally and paradoxically chooses himself only by choosing to be someone else—the General, the hero.

TECHNICALLY, THE FIRST HALF of the film is the most striking. Employing an episodic, even repetitive construction, Rossellini takes his time and slowly builds the monotony, the falseness, the deadness, the *nausée* of this life of the confidence man. Here is a telling series of images of chaotic, empty commonplaces, appropriately disordered, without strong plot impetus, and yet meaningful in the pattern imposed on them: gum chewing and food nibbling, gambling, empty sex in the image of the movies, false promises, phony schemes, false sapphires and the empty sincerity that insists that they are real, despair hidden by external smiles and internal deception.

This life of complete deception is given a climactic

revelation in the long tirade of self-justification delivered by the confidence man to the Italian families to whom his fraudulent schemes (even with the lives of their relatives) have been revealed. This tirade builds an intensity of insistence on truth the more it begins to reveal the beginnings of a recognition of falsity.

This recognition is carefully developed in the second half of the film, which employs a straight-line plot with more restraint than previously shown in a Rossellini film. As the confidence man is forced by the Germans to assume the role of the General, he is at first only caught once more in a trap, in one more phony scheme. But the implications of the new role—of the interrelationships between his actions and the lives of others—soon begin to affect him. Other men are moved by him, inspired by him (that is, by the General he is playing so that he can obtain information for the Germans). One man is tortured for him, commits suicide right in front of him, for him and his cause. When he himself is tortured, another man, deserting his cleaning brushes, in anger and in pride shouts the news in the echoing central chamber of the cellblock, and he, too, is dragged away. The web of responsibility between man and man has tightened.

At this point, we are allowed one of the film's rare long, sustained closeups: the battered face of the "General" as he is shown a letter and picture sent to "him" by the "real" General's wife. Tears soften the pain in his eyes as he looks at the photo of *his* wife and children, as he knows, at long last, who he is. He may hesitate, in the fear of his humanity, even further, but it is clear that he will finally defy the Germans, will personally choose the role of the General, the hero, and thus himself, and his death. Yet even the cause he commits himself to, in a last impasse of irony, is ambiguous. If only they could have waited, and still have been true to themselves, the Americans would soon have liberated them, anyway.

It is finally, then, a qualified, an absurd heroism, but one still closely linked with Rossellini's gallery of those who, like the phoenix, seek to find themselves amid the debris of their own humanity.

One further irony remains. Again, no new flurry of creativity or artistic fulfillment followed; no consolidation of the breakthrough could be effected. Certainly this

could be cited as another instance of Rossellini as dabbler (as Gavin Lambert once called him, "the dilettante of the the Italian Cinema"). And, in the light of the fitful and erratic nature of Rossellini's career, there is some justification in interpreting the constant shifting of the bases of his technique as an indication of an inability to grasp as his own the various styles attempted. But this must be seen as only one side of the unresolved paradox that is the career and work of Rossellini.

The same career reveals as well the artistic integrity of a constant search for an appropriate form and the fertile inventiveness to make that search an achievement. We can cite details that reveal the overall formal unit: the variations, from the beginning, in the use of an episodic structure, the variations in the use of sharp juxtaposition and irony, the variations in the use of correlative imagery, in the use of a realistic surface.

We can cite the details of the influence of specific technical innovations on other directors. We can cite the continuity of concern, of theme. But the most important unity and the most important influence of the work of Rossellini are found in his basic approach to the film, an approach that has since become the common assumption of the new film and of the new film criticism; to sacrifice neither content to form nor form to content, but rather to search for that personal and yet thoroughly cinematic form that can fulfill a personal vision of the world and man. Even in the successes of his failures and the failures of his successes, Rossellini has provided valuable testimony of that search.

Roberto Rossellini



SUBSCRIBERS:

Please report all changes of address promptly to **FILM COMMENT**, 11 St. Luke's Place, New York, N.Y. 10014