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REVISITING THE RESISTANCE OF ROBERTO ROSSELLINI'S CINEMA

AMY CHAMBLESS

FOR the better part of the 20th century, film historians primed Neorealism as a revolutionary movement capable of documenting Italy's denunciation of Fascism and the culture associated with it. In the desire to contradistinguish pre- and postwar culture, critics dealt cinema of the twenties a bad rap, reducing it to products of propaganda or evasion, while Neorealism became increasingly heralded as a politically committed cinema, unafraid to confront real people (the common man) and recent historical realities. Neorealist directors became the modern Italian *auteurs*, with their pet ideas to dramatize and their own cinematic ideologies regarding the forms most suitable for representing them. Luchino Visconti used the intrigue of a love triangle generating betrayal and murder to bring issues of economic struggle and parasitism to the screen in *l'Osessione* in 1943. In *Ladri di biciclette*, Vittorio De Sica focused a whole ninety minutes on the day in which his hero vainly seeks his stolen bicycle, encountering inept bureaucrats, corrupt politicians, hypocritical clergy and a swelling class of unemployed Romans along the way.

Roberto Rossellini's masterpieces show even more grit in the choice of controversial subjects. In *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946), he dealt with the raw subject of war. Though humor intercedes to momentarily ease the burden of evil, the casualties are neither stylized in a way that allows the viewer distance from the filmic reality, nor sublimated by singular acts of heroism. Both films take violence as a phenomenon of everyday life in Nazi-occupied Italy. Equally important to the portrayal of victims of that violence is the portrayal of those who fought against it, the *partigiani* and the American soldiers, in *Roma città*

aperta and *Paisà* respectively. Both films offer interesting meditations on the idea of resistance.

Resistance is a hard phenomenon to define. In at least a century of interest in counter-hegemonic movements, it has absorbed accretions of meaning from various disciplines. While historians have described specific cases of opposition to forms of unjust domination (in this case, the Italians' defense against Hitler's continuing siege on their soil following the Armistice), sociologists have identified general factors that lead individuals to take great risks to oppose the status quo, whether in episodic collective behavior or in an organized social movement.¹ The crowd psychology concepts popularized by Gustave Le Bon at the turn of the century have been corrected by theories that suggest that potential resisters are not descended upon by the masses and flung prostrate before the will of the group or charismatic leader, but rather act in accordance with their rational faculties and moral memory (Oberschall 4-5). Further, there are identifiable incentives that lead them to assume the risks involved in collective action. These incentives include a gratifying sense of solidarity among individuals with whom one might not otherwise consort (Oberschall 21). The success of a social movement depends upon various degrees and kinds of commitment, from those who participate in an armed struggle, to those who offer food or hiding to their compatriots who assume the greater risk. This second group of supporters has been called the *conscience constituency* (Oberschall 23). They are often the forgotten ones, overshadowed by their high-profile leaders, but the very interest in this group by scholars in recent decades suggests a move away from the mythological paradigm that has favored single-handed heroes and heroines.² In regards to studies of resistance movements during the war years, Rossellini beat scholars to the punch in reclaiming the untold story through a distinctively un-Hollywood style of filmmaking.

¹ In contrast to social movements, collective behavior simply consists of a spontaneous outbreak of defiant actions. Examples include the mob scene at the bakery in *Roma città aperta* or the mob of peasants in Bertolucci's *1900* who maul the cursed Attila before executing him. Social movements are distinguished by their scale, level of organization and impact (Oberschall 2).

² The American Civil Rights Movement is one such example. Traditional histories celebrated the heroics of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. while more recent attention is called to all those who fought segregation in the shadows and through their organizational effort made the in-roads that the leader's rousing speeches spoke of.

In *Roma città aperta* two groups represent opposition to the German stronghold. On one extreme, there are the *partigiani*, who use armed tactics to thwart the Nazis' hold of the city. Into this group fall the men who fire at the convoy of Nazi trucks carrying Italian prisoners. How does Rossellini handle these heroes? In a war film of the Hollywood studio era, such men would have appeared at the vertex of the dramatic action, ensuring a positive outcome for the good guys. In *Roma città aperta*, these men are privileged neither in character nor in narrative position. Their faces are barely seen and their identities remain unknown to the viewer. Further, the main outcome of the ambush is of negative value for resolving the tensions of the plot. Pina's fiancé Francesco was one of the prisoners in tow, and his return to his family as a result of the partisan attack produces a state of tension in the viewer, inclined to chastise Pina in hindsight for not having had the self-restraint that would have saved her from being gunned down.

The largest group of resisters in *Roma città aperta* falls into the category of *conscience constituents*, those who do not take part in the armed struggle but assist others who do: sheltering them, providing them with falsified documents, and ferrying missives among them. The priest, Don Pietro and Pina fall into this category and it is *their* actions that give the plot its internal structure and momentum. It is significant of Rossellini's representation of history that the stories of smaller people are told. But what account is given for their incentives to participate? There is no indication that the Nazis have personally aggrieved Don Pietro, and his vocation locates him squarely within an institution that has traditionally favored the preservation of the status quo over revolutionary initiatives, in contrast to the Marxist education of a Manfredi. However, it is precisely because of his priestly vocation that Don Pietro experiences resistance as a moral necessity and holds individuals responsible for distinguishing between moral and immoral behavior, with no allowance for claims of ignorance or impotence. For him, resistance is a way of being, independent of one's social or institutional moorings, hence, his ability to collaborate with communists, traditional adversaries of the Catholic establishment.

Pina's involvement in the movement is not the result of one pivotal dramatic event, but rather develops organically out of her distaste for war and her feelings of solidarity with her community. By beginning his drama *in medias res*, Rossellini takes the viewer to the heart of life in an

occupied city. The details of the protagonists' lives prior to the first scene are unimportant. Their incentives to participate in the struggle are not made dramatically necessary through a concatenation of causal events but are taken for granted as a natural response to the conditions of occupation, under which resistance offers itself to people of all vocations and stations, not just to a distinguished few. In fact, immediately after the release of *Roma città aperta*, Rossellini was applauded for choosing not a Manfredi or Don Pietro as the protagonist, but rather the whole city of Rome (Sitney 30). Long shots of urban landscapes are used above and beyond the traditional establishing shot. The narrative, episodic rather than continuous, trundles behind various characters as they knock around the city, while the editing, though dictated by thematic and continuity concerns, also unites these characters in their common mission. By refusing to privilege the story of any one character, Rossellini dramatizes with subtle insistence the shared fate of the occupied Romans. He also uses the city to emphasize the enduring nature of Rome that will outlive the caprices of dictators and even the ravages of war.

Important for the idea of a heroless resistance is an example of collective action strategically placed near the beginning of the narrative: the bread riot. In this memorable scene, a crowd convenes outside a bakery, demanding that the bread be freely distributed among them. This is a spontaneous event whose momentum relies upon mass dissatisfaction and growing awareness of the potential for group efficacy. Positioning this scene near the beginning of the film does more than give audiences a slice of hard-knock life in 1943 Rome. It introduces the possibility of resistance as collective action, only to reveal later in counterpoint the drama of resistance that derives from the individual's solitary decision over whether or not to exercise his potential for it.

The *conscience constituency* is critical in this film. Thematic interest lies in the potential of ordinary citizens like Pina and Don Pietro to abet and protect Manfredi, while others like Marina betray him. Although the film makes the right choice obvious, the matter of how to judge the wrong one must have been a delicate one for Rossellini. In reality, the Germans were not the only enemy, although they appeared in the end the most virulent one. The Fascists and all those who cooperated with the regime and profited from it were also to blame. The question was whether or not a postwar audience was ready for this kind of soul-searching. Some believe that for Rossellini it was not. By incarnat-

ing evil in characters like Bergmann and Ingrid and by making the biggest crime of the Fascists that of helplessness, Rossellini, they claim, made an ideological decision – to emphasize national unity over the more egregious condition of in-group betrayal (Sitney 36). Marina's selling-out is condemned, yes, but within a subplot in which her own role of victim is dramatically established. Abandoned by Manfredi and socialized to measure her value to men by the furs she dons, she is easily lured into the Nazis' clutches. By staging her manipulation and seduction by Ingrid, a more overt figure of evil, Rossellini transfers Marina's culpability, transforming her character into a nearly innocent prey.

Roma città aperta was praised by critics for its noble lack of artifice, an aspect that would become a hallmark of neorealist cinema. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that its director practiced a kind of moral relativism in the name of an objective method. As we have demonstrated, the moral question is neither ambiguous nor evaded in Rossellini's films. What he does reject for his cinematic text are facile associations between moral conduct and rewards. He does not glorify resistance as a struggle that after great sacrifice produces immediate results for the good. Rather, he treats it in its unglamorous entirety, constituted by moments of daily existence, rather than skimming the most dazzling moments off the top. In this focus on the everyday conditions of men and women under siege, there is another ideology at work that derives from aesthetic as much as political considerations. This ideology challenges the traditional cinema of Hollywood and distinguishes itself by its refusal to treat human experience in the same romanticized and individualistic manner. This ideology is at work as themes of resistance resurface in Rossellini's second great drama of Italian occupation, *Paisà*.

In this film consisting of six separate stories, the *partigiani* whom we met in *Roma città aperta* have been upstaged by the American soldiers who occupy Italy from Sicily to the Po delta. Each episode, in fact, follows a different soldier as he enacts his role as liberator. As members of a national army, these men's incentives for combat against the oppressors differ from those of the Italians. There is no indication that they are mobilized by a consciousness of injustice, an experience of deprivation or the identification with the occupied Italians. They are, in a real sense, just doing their job. While Rossellini will problematize their status as liberators, it is in their relationship with the Italians, their *conscience constituency* that he will take Hollywood heroics to task.

In Episode One, the encounter between American soldiers and Italian villagers results in a collaboration against the Germans. But the collaboration is complicated. The mutual suspicion suggests that this will not be a case of two sides teaming up and routing the enemy. The soldiers' aim is to get help in finding a deserted tower in which they believe the Nazis are skulking. The Italian girl, Carmella, who agrees to show them the way, makes clear that she is only motivated by her desire for help in locating her missing father and brother. In this model of collective action, there is no emotional identification between the two groups, no collective consciousness, only a cost-benefit equation at work to determine that each side might have something to gain by pooled resources. The mutual distrust persists, as the soldiers, upon reaching their goal, stop Carmella from running away and delegate one of their own to guard her. However, Carmella trusts the armed soldiers no more than she does the Germans or Fascists and contemptuously states this to her guard, Joe.

Suddenly, something happens between Joe and Carmella that sets in motion a kind of conversion story that may even have a happy ending. It is one of the shortest amounts of time two people have ever fallen in love on screen, and they do so, quite amazingly, in the course of a conversation of missed synapses. Joe from Jersey speaks no Italian, Carmella no English, and for a while they amusingly carry on two different conversations at once. In a context of prosaic attempts at communication, a common symbol traverses the linguistic barrier between them: a shooting star stirs in both the longing for the end of the war.

And then, just when the viewer is starting to feel warm inside, there is a barely audible shot from off-screen and Joe crumples noiselessly over. The Germans have spotted the pair by the small flame of his match that he distractedly lit to show his new girlfriend pictures of his family. The conversion myth is resumed as Carmella moves from the role of *conscience constituent* to that of armed resistor by taking the gun from Joe's body and shooting one of the German soldiers, despite her distaste for weapons and war. On a Hollywood set, Carmella's transformation and her act of resistance would no doubt have resulted in a crucial upset against the German troops in the area, pulling in the American soldiers behind her. But in keeping with his ideology of resistance, Rossellini subverts the conversion story he begins. Carmella is promptly shot by the Germans and the episode ends with the soldiers' return to find their

friend's body and their conclusion that the Italian girl has betrayed them. What an ending! The audience has been teased into thinking that love might overcome the battle odds and led the Americans to a new faith in their conscience constituents. No such satisfaction. Just as naturally as everyday people can carry out acts of resistance, Rossellini seems to suggest, so too can they perish without the least effect on history. Like Pina's death in *Roma città aperta*, Carmella's has had no impact on the plot. The story ends with her death and the Americans' suspicion of her confirms that they have undergone no change in attitude.

The next two episodes also deal with relationships between an Italian civilian and an American soldier. Here too the relationships first suggest a redemptive moral lesson, but such premises are ultimately cast into doubt. The assumption that individual moral behavior will result in a moral and more livable society is, unsurprisingly, held by the American soldiers, who claim as liberators full credit for an unambiguous victory of good over evil. In the second episode, Joe, the army officer believes that the war was fought for civilized values and that little Pasquale who has stolen his shoes has made a mockery of that very principle and must be taught a lesson. The moral high ground Joe takes, however, is eventually called into question when he goes to take the matter up with the child's parents. He finds Pasquale's home amidst the rubble left by Allied bombing, and learns that the parents were also casualties of that campaign. The ideology of conversion in which the errant child mends his ways is chucked in favor of an ideology that recognizes the unreliability of those very values in a devastated society. Critic Christopher Wagstaff describes the ideology as an essential part of Rossellini's new dramaturgy that carries the viewer beyond the traditional dichotomy between right and wrong (45). After confronting head on the devastation of the child's moral community, Joe no longer feels entitled to his definition of morality; in fact, he no longer feels entitled to his shoes.

In Episode Three, a flashback device is used to compare the dreamy idealism of the American soldier right after he liberated Rome with his disillusionment six months later at the moral corruption of the city. This corruption is epitomized for him by the profiting prostitutes who have de-mystified his image of Italian femininity. When the viewers realize that he is moralizing to the very girl he idealized six months ago, before she began selling her services, they are heartened by the girl's remorse.

In a sequence that suggests a tale of rehabilitation and happy endings, she arranges another meeting between her soldier and her alter ego, the innocent young girl he knew before. However, the tension does not get resolved, as the soldier never shows up for his date and thus fails to help her fulfill her redemptive mission. Again, the American's simplistic moral attitude functions first to propose conversion to moral righteousness, (in the spirit of Hollywood), only to then deny viewers that opportunity for catharsis. Liberation has put an end to German occupation, but the destruction caused by both oppressors and liberators lives on. No simple moral action can mitigate the living damage done by the German's war on Italian soil, and neither history nor Rossellini's cinema fulfills the Hollywood promise of happy endings.

Gianni Rondolino has discussed the *tempi morti* (the white space) or the *attese* that characterize many of the episodes of *Paisà* and contribute to the dramatic build-up.³ Waiting pervades the first episode: Joe waiting for the return of his companions; Carmella waiting to return to the church; the American soldiers waiting to ambush the Germans; the Germans waiting to ambush the Americans. This has a profound effect on the representation of struggle. The sphere of action in which armed and unarmed resistance occurs is not mythologized in an action narrative condensed by singularly determinative acts, but is placed squarely in the context of everyday existence.

Rossellini's ideology of resistance may be threatening to some, because it challenges the popular notion that the struggle between a few good and bad men determines the fate of society. It is unsettling to view individuals as possessing the simultaneous potentials to do good or evil. It is disquieting to see good people martyred with no real result. His dramatization of man's experience under occupation contains a heuristic method by which the reader learns to think outside of traditional histories and beyond the ideology of war drama that matured on Hollywood sets. In conclusion, the ideology of *Roma città aperta* and *Paisà* offers several insights: (1) heroic acts of resistance may do nothing to forward the cause of the righteous and the deaths of the innocent may be remem-

³ Rossellini writes: "A mio modo di vedere – l'essenziale nel racconto cinematografico è l'attesa: ogni soluzione nasce dall'attesa. È l'attesa che fa vivere, l'attesa che scatena la realtà, l'attesa che dopo la preparazione – dà la liberazione . . . l'attesa è la forza di ogni avvenimento della nostra vita: è così anche per il cinema" (in Rondolino 102).

bered as senseless martyrdoms; (2) resistance is carried out by more than the armed struggle, the heart of it lying with its unarmed constituency, and (3) resistance is more than the sum total of actions and their consequences but is defined as a freedom that each individual may exercise.

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