

Movies: Reassessing Rossellini: Restoration of Rome Open City, the director's masterpiece, prompts a look at why he later retreated from the neorealism it introduced

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MOVIES

Reassessing Rossellini

Restoration of *Rome Open City*, the director's masterpiece, prompts a look at why he later retreated from the neorealism it introduced

JOSEPH LUZZI

MY HISTORY OF ITALIAN cinema begins with gunfire.

Allied forces land in Sicily in July 1943 and surge north, liberating one section of the Italian peninsula after another; the Gestapo realizes that it is breathing its last and increases the cruelty of its persecutions in proportion to the futility of its cause. Rome, ancient *mater* of the West, home first to Caesar's secular empire and then the Christian Church, is about to be declared an "open city," a military free-for-all available to the strongest party, nation, or political group. Just months after American and Allied troops seize control of Rome in June 1944, Roberto Rossellini begins work on *Rome Open City*, a film that mixes fact and fiction in narrating the struggles of four Roman partisans prior to the liberation.

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Political tribulations and economic deprivations compel the 38-year-old Rossellini, son of the builder of Rome's first movie theater, to make do

with the limited resources at hand: poor film stock, nonprofessional actors, and unadorned sets of city streets under natural light. The film is set in the first half of 1944: the Roman people endure Nazi occupation while much of the nation undergoes civil war as Italian Resistance fighters struggle against the Fascists. By the time the film is released, however, the *partigiani* (partisans) have already captured Benito Mussolini and hanged his executed body upside down in Milan's Piazzale Loreto.

Rome Open City (1945) is the first and best-known film in the War Trilogy that made Rossellini famous, and its recent release on DVD by the Criterion Collection will change the way we view it. In addition to removing dirt, debris, scratches, and the like, Criterion's version also smoothes out the rough visual transitions between the scavenged and mismatched film stocks the director used to make the film. Watching it is like viewing the restored Sistine Chapel: the "new" work is not more or less beautiful, but it is different—sharper and clearer, certainly, if less romantic. The first time I studied the film closely, the effect was so powerful that

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I decided to devote much of my subsequent career to Italian cinema; the restoration returns that thrill of starting over.

Rossellini's protagonists are the intellectual engineer Manfredi, the working-class printer Francesco and his pregnant fiancée Pina, and the local priest Don Pietro. In the comic, often slapstick atmosphere of the first half of the film, the Roman genius for *arrangiarsi* (getting by) outfoxes even the deadly bureaucracy of the Nazi occupiers. However grim the situation, the Romans manage to enjoy life. Scenes of family high jinks abound, including frantic dinner-table discussions laced with double-entendre. Don Pietro even finds time to play soccer with his young flock.



punctured only by Pina's cries.

"Francesco! Francesco! Francesco! Francesco! Francesco!"

In a crucial scene from Italian neorealism, Pina (Anna Magnani) resists Gestapo troops just prior to her murder.

EVERYTHING CHANGES after the gunfire—from the momentum of the film to the history of Italian cinema and, by extension, Italy's public memory of the war. The Gestapo raids an apartment building containing Francesco. While the Nazis search the premises, a guard gets fresh with the volatile, voluptuous Pina (played by the magnificent Anna Magnani). She slaps away his hand and insults him. Her belly seems to swell not only with a new life but also with the force of her political cause, and the viewer is lulled into the false sense that these leather-tough and vibrant *partigiani* just might be able to fend off tragedy. Then suddenly, writhing in the arms of his captors, Francesco emerges from the building.

"Francesco! Francesco! Francesco!" Pina shouts, as the Nazis pull him toward an armored truck.

"Pina! Pina! Pina! Pina!" he cries, while she tries to disentangle herself from the German soldiers.

The background noise fades to silence,

Pina breaks free and begins to run after the truck that has just left with Francesco. For an eternal moment, the camera frames her solitary sprint. The viewer realizes what is about to happen, and Don Pietro covers the eyes of Pina's son. The German machine guns exhale, dropping Pina in the middle of the road. The audience senses that something momentous has happened, and Don Pietro cradles Pina's dead body just as the Virgin Mother holds the crucified Jesus in Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Pina is dead, and Italian cinema is reborn.

Many critics believe that the second half of Rossellini's *Rome Open City*, after Pina's murder, inaugurates the "new realism" or neorealism, the documentary-like film movement that shaped postwar Italian cinema from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. After the death of Pina, Rossellini, in classic neorealist fashion, conveys explicit political and social messages that challenge the viewer to connect his work to the larger task, faced by Italians, of *rifare* (remaking) their country after the physical devastation and moral degradation caused by two decades of Fascism and a world war. For example, when the fugi-

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tives Manfredi and the grieving Francesco (liberated from the Germans just after Pina was shot, making her death seem pointless) visit a restaurant, the audience sees German soldiers leading actual lambs to slaughter. The Germans ask an employee to prepare their mutton, but he replies that he is not a butcher; their response, predictable enough, is to say, no problem, we will be the butchers. "Yes," the employee answers, "you specialize in this."

The moral instruction increases as the movie progresses. After the Nazis capture Don Pietro toward the end of the film, he faces his firing squad with a mixture of stoicism and Christian resignation. "Do not be afraid," the priest who reads him his last rites tells him. "*Non è difficile morire bene*," he answers, "*è difficile vivere bene*" (It's not difficult to die well; it's difficult to live well). Then the film's supreme allegorical figures enter the frame: the Roman youths who have formed a guerrilla squad of anti-Fascist resistance under their leader, the aptly named Romoletto (little Romulus), belated heir to the founder of the Eternal City. The boys salute their shepherd and pit their whistles against the Latin of the attending priest and the barks of the Gestapo. Don Pietro sits in silence and stares into heaven, while the Italian firing squad misses on purpose, refusing to kill a priest. A Nazi officer, who earlier in a drunken stupor had decried the inhumanity of the war, seizes the occasion to accuse the squad of cowardice and kill Don Pietro himself. The scene, like the movie, concludes in full

neorealist visual fashion: to signal the eventual triumph of the Resistance over Nazism, the youths march away in indivisible union, with the Rome that must be rebuilt before them and the dome of Saint Peter's looming on the horizon. Perhaps Pina did not die for naught after all.

ROSSELLINI, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti belonged to the first generation of post-World War II neorealist filmmakers who

served as masters, both honored and rejected, to the emerging auteurs who would make Italian cinema a staple of the international avant-garde: Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, among others. Martin Scorsese spoke for many younger filmmakers when he described Rossellini as the "father of us all." The same man so preoccupied with his craft that he once sent his children, including Isabella Rossellini, to live outside his home became, ironically

enough, the unofficial patriarch of neorealism.

The opening scene of the film, where Germans march in lockstep to a national folk song, has always seemed a preeminent example of the noble, almost Franciscan poverty of Rossellini's neorealist practice. All the elements are in place: the documentary-like capture of a fleeting moment of everyday life, its nondramatic unfolding in real time without obtrusive editing, grainy film stock that presents the blurred image in all its raw directness, and a scene laden



with sociopolitical implications. Since we seem to be watching actual soldiers, my hunch is that Rossellini shot the brief sequence during the Nazi occupation and later added it to *Rome Open City* when he began the film after the liberation. In an earlier DVD edition, the soldiers are shrouded in darkness, though the march presumably takes place in daylight, and the buildings in the surrounding public space are barely visible. In fact, the poor film quality in the earlier versions of *Rome Open City* gives the impression that the movie was made in some gloomy northern city rather than the sun-drenched Italian capital. The Criterion edition brings light back to the opening march, and the physical spaces of Rome emerge with all their dramatic contours. The scene's restoration makes the contrast between the opening march and the closing one—of the partisan youths walking in unison toward Saint Peter's after Don Pietro's execution—all the more poignant.

AFTER THE CRITICAL and commercial successes of his neorealist films, Rossellini went through different phases, from the highly psychological films made with his wife Ingrid Bergman in the 1950s to the cycle of television documentaries shot in the 1960s and 1970s. His journey was physical as well as aesthetic. This full-blooded Roman—by both birth and exuberant outlook—spent much time late in life in Houston, a guest of the philanthropic de Menil family that sponsored his work on bridging the gap between the scientific and humanistic branches of learning. In one of his unfinished documentaries from the period, the once-hand-some, dark-haired director, now gray and thick, interviews scientists at Rice University about the atomic age.

In the seeming randomness of Rossellini's career a profound singleness of purpose obtained. However lacking in commercial appeal, neorealism enjoyed a cultural prestige at home and abroad that placed a burden on neorealist directors and their successors.

Rossellini tired of having all his films compared to *Rome Open City*. We can no longer continue to make films about war-ravaged cities, he claimed, and he asked audiences and critics to stop judging him by outdated criteria. By the 1950s, he retreated from the political statements of his earlier reportage-style films and made introspective ones like *Europa '51* (1952) and *Voyage to Italy* (1954), an anatomy of a dysfunctional marriage that for many signals the end of neorealism proper. He switched from filming bombed-out cities to filming bombed-out souls.

In the notes to Criterion's release of *Rossellini's History Films: Renaissance and Enlightenment* (2008), his biographer Tag Gallagher writes that by the late 1950s the director was increasingly appalled by the mass media's "cretinization of adults" and its relegation of humanity to Plato's cave ("slaves who think of themselves as free"). Rossellini went so far as to proclaim that "cinema is dead," and from 1959 to 1977 he shot some 42 hours of didactic movies for Italian television. His radical about-face was, for many, hardly fortuitous: historians complained about the inaccuracies of these later films, audiences of their slow pace, and critics of their lack of cinematic appeal. His best-known history film, *The Age of the Medici* (1973), is at 255 minutes a typically meandering work, originally released as a three-part television series about Renaissance Florence. The film was shot in English with the hope that it would be picked up by America's fledgling PBS. (It wasn't.) The opening scene, where Florentine bankers in full Renaissance garb gather around the remains of the family patriarch Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, makes you wonder how the father of neorealism had come to make such a lavish historical costume drama. Why had the man who made *Rome Open City* devoted his energies to a made-for-TV spectacle with an extremely rigid if not contrived dialogue and scenario? Was it for *this* that Pina died?

But the distance between the ruined streets of *Rome Open City* and the sumptuous Floren-



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tine antechambers of *The Age of the Medici* is not so great. Rossellini was a moralist for whom neorealism was as much an ethical as an aesthetic position. *Germany Year Zero* (1948), third in the War Trilogy, takes place in postwar Berlin and documents a nation's attempt to rebuild with rubble at its feet and guilt in its heart. The Italian release of the film opens with Rossellini's camera scanning the debris of the devastated city, and a legend appears telling the audience that "when ideologies [viz. Nazism] stray from the eternal laws of morality and Christian piety . . . they end in criminal madness." I tell my students to imagine a film beginning with such an injunction today; I cannot.

This ethical mandate shaped Rossellini's cinematic practices from decade to decade; the films changed to accommodate his moral vision. Early in his career, neorealism satisfied the Italian need for heroes in an age when so many had been corrupted by the experiences of war and Fascism. By the 1950s, the bombed-out cities had been rebuilt, but new problems had arisen. In Rossellini's view, only public education on the scale offered by television could address this crisis of knowledge. He saw no reason why the complexities of history could not be simplified for general consumption. And so the free-wheeling reportage of the postwar ceded to the staged dialogues of television histories. Rossellini once described the great difficulty people encounter in their relationship with chance. Rather than trusting the shapes our lives might assume independent of our will, his view suggests, we tend to measure our days according to a self-generated plan. We do so, Rossellini believed, to our detriment—for in change and in chance there is opportunity.

His notion takes me back to Pina's fateful sprint in *Rome Open City*. Courage is all about taking risks and embracing chance, and Pina's run will come up short once the machine guns fire. But Pina's courage endures. Likewise, whatever one thinks of Rossellini's own career sprint, from film to film and genre to genre, no one can deny his bravery. ●