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Roberto Rossellini

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Roberto Rossellini

LAURO VENTURI

LAURO VENTURI went to Rome to study Italian cinema after graduating from Harvard. He was assistant to Mario Soldati in the production of *Fuga in Francia*, Soldati's most recent film, and to Luciano Emmer in the production of Emmer's films on art. He is a regular contributor to several European periodicals.

I

IN THE YEARS immediately preceding and during World War II, several good, interesting films revived the hopes of the critics in Italy and established new directors. Among these films were Soldati's *Piccolo mondo antico* (*Ancient Little World*) in 1940, Castellani's *Un colpo di pistola* (*A Pistol Shot*) in 1941, Lattuada's *Giacomo l'idealista* (*Jim the Idealist*) in 1942, and Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*) in 1943; and in them are discernible several elements which again appear in the offerings of the "neo-realistic Italian school" in 1945: the use of the outdoors (*Piccolo mondo antico*), of nonprofessional actors (*1860*, directed by Blasetti in 1935), and of a special, still very "French-school" regionalism (*Ossessione*).

With the German occupation and war in the homeland, Italy almost completely ceased to produce films. But after Rome was liberated by the Allies, a new wave started, and it was a tidal wave.

During all this time, Roberto Rossellini, who was born in Rome in 1906, was serving his apprenticeship at the L.U.C.E., a national institute for newsreels and documentary films; he signed three documentaries: *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Fantasia sottomarina* (*Submarine Fantasy*), and *Il ruscello di Ripasottile* (*Ripasottile's Brook*), the latter two of which deal with the life of fishes.

In 1938, Goffredo Alessandrini, who must have seemed to Rossellini the "established director" from whom he could learn, was preparing *Luciano Serra, pilota* (*Luciano Serra, Pilot*), and Rossellini joined him as script writer, one of the six who were to sign the finished product.

[1]

In 1941, under the supervision of Francesco De Robertis, Rossellini made his first film, *La nave bianca* (*The White Ship*). With *Alfa Tau* and *Uomini sul fondo* (*Men at the Bottom*) Commander De Robertis (he held that rank in the Italian navy) had established himself as a director who exploited flag-waving and military situations with a certain style. His films of yesterday and today do not have enough intrinsic value to survive the test of time. *La nave bianca*, the scene of which is a hospital ship in wartime, is a typical De Robertis story. There is little or nothing in it that announces the Rossellini to come, although his documentarist's attitude toward the subject and some intense dramatic scenes should be noted. It was a success, however, and in the following year Rossellini found himself director of *Un pilota ritorna* (*A Pilot Returns*), another propaganda film, produced by Vittorio Mussolini's own A.C.I. This war film contained certain reconstructed "documentary" sequences on the life of pilots that saved it from being run-of-the-mill. In 1943, he directed *L'uomo della croce* (*The Man of the Cross*), in which can be detected his intention of creating a personal directorial style, if nothing more. It is still war propaganda, but the human element emerges and a certain poetry rises from the war scenes. Although all these films had some success in Italy, Rossellini was considered "a director without special qualities, who had not succeeded in making a name for himself."¹

In 1944, Rossellini started working on a movie called *Desiderio* (*Desire*). It was a pedestrian story of violent passion, of country girls who come to Rome to make good and instead turn bad. Whether he became disgusted with it or found something better to think about is hard to say; the fact remains that Rossellini abandoned the production, which was later to be completed by Marcello Pagliero and, rightly, forgotten by everybody.

Rossellini's greatest merit, in 1945, was to feel to the utmost the condition, the situation, and the life of his country, and to wish to express what he felt and saw. Nine-tenths of all movie

¹ Adriano Baracco, "Roberto Rossellini," *Cinema*, Milan, October 2, 1948.

directors, European or not, would have refused to work under the conditions that faced Rossellini in 1945. Nevertheless, he went to work in abandoned garages, with insufficient lighting equipment, with outdated negative film, and without money. The script writer lent his apartment for the shooting of the opening scenes, the actors chipped in, and, as happens when there is enough energy, the money was found and the shooting proceeded. The results seemed pretty bad, the photography was rudimentary, the dubbing was hurried and mostly out of synchronization. This film was called *Roma città aperta* (*Open City*). Its enormous success in the United States made Rossellini, shook Hollywood, and put Italy back on the moviegoer's map. The world had caught up with him: Rossellini had found himself. He could let himself go—as his subsequent films, *Paisà* (*Paisan*) in 1946, and *Germania anno zero* (*Germany, Year Zero*) in 1947, gave evidence.

Tired of the war and of its aftereffects, Rossellini then attempted some experiments: *Amore* (*Love*) in 1947–1948, and *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (*The Evil-killer Machine*) in 1948.

After this, many plans and many contracts passed through his hands. A film he was supposed to direct, *La contessa di Montecristo*, was retitled *Aria di Roma*, then quickly scrapped when Hollywood, presenting the opportunity to direct Ingrid Bergman, beckoned to him. Having reached agreements for the production of a film called originally *Dopo l'uragano*, and now tentatively called *Terra di Dio* (*God's Earth*), Rossellini began directing it on April 8, 1949, at Stromboli Island.

II

Rossellini's aims, methods, and results are so closely knit together that it would be useless to consider them separately. He is interested, almost polemically, in present-day life. Looking about himself he receives certain emotions from which derive his opinions; and he wants to express his opinions as directly as possible in his films, by recreating what he has seen in such a way as to convey

these opinions and arouse in the audience reactions and emotions similar to his own. In this, Rossellini plays his full part of poet: at best he is lyrical; at worst, simply an illustrator. And he fluctuates constantly between the two, for the following reasons.

Since *Roma città aperta* Rossellini has worked without a script. He believes in immediate inspiration, and a whole sequence may follow from a decision made on the spur of the moment, on location, or on the set, when he enters into immediate contact with his actors. However, he surrounds himself with writers, assistants, and secretaries; and all of them have the continuous task of suggesting, along the lines indicated by a twenty-page skeleton script, possible developments of plot or the progression of a sequence. Some solutions are refused, others accepted; the decision rests always with Rossellini.

This could lead Rossellini, as it has others, to a pictorial style based on impressions and sensations—a *Louisiana Story* or a *Tabu*,—but it does not, because Rossellini adheres constantly to the human element and never brings himself to turning the camera away from it. People are too much alive and too responsive in their constant struggle to be put aside for long.

Rossellini's actors do not perform according to their own logic or the logic of the part they play, but follow Rossellini's logic, which is mainly governed by what he sees in the story to be told. There is therefore no development of character, no savagely contrived suspense, no astute doses of comic relief. It is reality recreated so as to release an emotion that arises almost accidentally from the material presented.

A method of creation so temperamental and spontaneous cannot give rise to a thought-out, balanced whole. Certain aspects of the plot and certain narrative passages attract Rossellini more than others, and he therefore studies them more closely, renders them more passionately. Not all the sequences can or should be on the same emotional level: the emotional sequences gain from being contrasted with the undistinguished ones, which may be

important to the narrative or to tying the sequences together but do not afford Rossellini a pretext for a visual expansion of the content.

Rossellini knows when a sequence, or a scene, is going to sustain his film, and he assumes an attitude of disinterest toward the rest. What his films lose in construction they gain in immediacy—in an almost physical contact with the material in front of the camera. He does not care if, from shooting without a script, he commits a few or many of those grammatical errors which send script girls to an early grave. It may take as many as three dissolves, as it did in *Desiderio*, to tie together three shots of two persons crossing a garden: without the dissolves they would appear to be going back and forth but not forward.

Once the contact between audience and actors is established, Rossellini relies on continuous improvisation. As long as the public follows the emotions of the scenes, or, more properly, of the scenes in which Rossellini's emotion expresses itself, he is satisfied.

There are in *Roma città aperta* four or five of these instants of startling visual force and profound emotional content: for instance, the sequence in which the SS invade the tenement house, culminating in Pina's death; the return of the children-saboteurs; the execution of the priest. These lyrical passages are balanced by strangely superfluous scenes introduced in an attempt to create a plot—the cocaine addict, for example. And yet, even this was true: "The part of Marina Mari, the drug-stupefied actress who betrays her lover and hands him over to the Germans, was played by the same woman who called me when the SS were searching my apartment. . . . *Open City* was made under the impression, the suggestion, and the influence of what we had just lived through,"² writes Sergio Amidei, the author of the script. For the sake of history, let us note also that the real-life priest whose adventures the film depicts was called Don Giuseppe Morosini.

² Sergio Amidei, "Open City Revisited," *New York Times*, February, 1947.

But not all these elements were equally felt by Rossellini. In *Paisà* as well as in *Roma città aperta* there is a deep understanding and love for the human being, and an equally exceptional dramatic understatement and concise power. Far from exploiting its numerous climactic incidents, Rossellini chose to present these episodes for what they were worth, without preparation, without suspense. Certain episodes are naturally more fully realized, more deeply felt, and better reproduced than others. "In *Paisà*, Rossellini's method is fully applied. The actors are taken from the street, and it seems that the episodes are invented on the spot. The film is certainly unequal within itself, but for this reason perhaps it reveals even more the personality of the director, creator of images and situations. When the situation is interesting, Rossellini is capable of losing himself in it."³

This method culminated in *Germania anno zero*. There, the final sequence, beginning with the return of the father from the hospital, is the climax of Rossellini's art. The first three fourths of the film are given over to the exposition, and to the creation of the moral and physical atmosphere; an introduction, awkward in spots and hardly developed, is all that remains of the secondary themes which the twenty-page outline provided. Little by little, after the work had actually begun, Edmund's sister, his brother, and the loose girl he loves and redeems, all disappeared in the background, and Edmund, the boy whom Rossellini found on a playground and in whom were crystallized all his emotions, alone remained. This done, Rossellini could concentrate fully on the boy and perform his feat, that of the visual exasperation that accompanies the sequence of the boy playing through the bomb-scarred streets of Berlin, his slow climb to the top of the destroyed building, and finally his suicide, the catharsis.

"Edmund's father and mother said yes, and Rossellini took the boy to his hotel, made him wash his hands, combed his hair, and took him to lunch. 'You must be very rich,' said the boy as soon as

³ Francesco Pasinetti, "Roberto Rossellini," *Gazzetta del Cinema*, Rome, August 21, 1948.

they sat at the table; 'only very rich people can have a tablecloth in Germany.' 'You'll say that in my film,' said Rossellini. 'All right. What is the name of my film?' asked the boy. 'Berlin, Year Zero.' 'What does it mean?' 'You'll understand it when you see it,' answered Rossellini. 'Not before then?' 'No. Before then it will be enough that I know what it means.'"⁴

Rossellini is neither harassed commercially nor too much interested in "what the public wants." He goes on calmly saying what he thinks is worth saying, showing what he deems worthy of being shown. He uses his mental capacities to the full, and everything interests him. He may move between great extremes, from the crude peasant to the sophisticated bourgeois, if he feels there is a movie in it. This he did with *Amore*. *Amore* consists of two short films, *La voce umana* (*The Human Voice*) and *Il miracolo* (*The Miracle*), the first of which was shot when he was taking a busman's holiday in Paris before starting on *Germania anno zero*. Here again we have the exasperation of the content from a visual point of view: *The Human Voice* is a single sequence, a glorified screen test of the actress Anna Magnani. Rossellini works best out of doors, and all the interiors of his films have a contrived, uneasy look about them, as if the camera were ashamed of spying on the actors. And *La voce umana* is limited to the bedroom and bathroom in the apartment of a woman who receives a phone call from her lover who is abandoning her. Even considered solely as an experiment, it is not entirely successful; Magnani is excellent though miscast, but Rossellini feels cramped, and often points his camera to the windows of the sunless rooms as if anxious to go outdoors.

And outdoors he goes in the second part of the film, *Il miracolo*. This time, Magnani is a crude shepherdess who believes a passing tramp to be St. Joseph, and who gives birth in a deserted church on a mountaintop to a child she believes to be Jesus reincarnated.

Both of the characters played by Magnani are crazy: the bour-

⁴ Luigi Morandi, "Letter from Berlin," in a Roman newspaper.

geois is crazed with grief at being abandoned by her lover; the peasant woman is the mystically crazed village idiot. Each scene is rendered with a violent immediacy. Each scene is shot as it is thought up and as it is seen. Whether it will tie in with the preceding or the following scene has no importance: Rossellini can dissolve, or fade, or use some mechanical improvisation.

Under the hot sunlight of the Amalfian coast the adventures of the crazy woman are cruelly taken apart by Rossellini. The beggar who kicks down interminable flights of stairs the woman's worldly possessions (her blanket and the tin can in which she keeps her food) reaches instants of sadistic intensity; the way the woman receives the mocking congratulations of a group of students, and prays to her saint, are tributes to Magnani's acting as well as to Rossellini's directing; the slow, painful climb to the church on top of the mountain, where the disgraced and derided woman finds herself alone with a goat and gives birth to her holy child, is an excruciating finale. In a half hour the film expresses the passing of the nine months by means of the progressive stages of decay in the woman's clothing, in a series of separated, sketchy scenes that are treated by Rossellini as if he feared to be moved by them. He is never sentimental, or even emotional; often he remains cold. But from the agglomeration of these scenes, some in good taste and some not (the scene in which the woman discovers herself to be pregnant reminded me of the crudest scenes in Murnau's *Faust*), arises the emotion that the spectator feels, and Rossellini's full message of humanity.

Amalfi and its rocky coast are again the scene of the next Rossellini movie, *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (*The Evil-killer Machine*). Here, Rossellini has a definite message: the philosophical concept that there are no good people and no bad people, and hence that it is impossible to judge the evil ones without judging the good ones. It is the story of a village photographer who is given the power to kill whomever he photographs. After a moment of revenge and exultation in his own powers he destroys his camera.

“Almost a fairy tale, but enclosed inside a clear and full narration of facts and adventures seen from a point of view of dry reality, fictionless realism; as if everything had happened yesterday, or could happen tomorrow. [The part of the devil] is taken by an eighty-year-old man . . . who has come down from the mountains at Rossellini’s call and agreed to act the comedy, to play the part. And he strikes histrionic attitudes during the test, with slight licentious gestures. He has never been to a theater, he has never seen a movie. He knew, though, that he was a handsome old man, heavy with serene experience.”⁵

What has risen out of Rossellini’s imagination in connection with this twentieth-century fable remains to be seen. He himself abandoned further comedy plots, even though they were interpreted by his favorite actress, Anna Magnani, to return to the themes in which he found himself for the first time: people shaken by the holocaust of war, and the aftermath of war reflected in the people who are its victims.

The story of Karin Bjorsen, *God’s Earth*, offered him such a plot. From the rushes that have thus far reached Rome the film promises to maintain Rossellini’s spontaneity as well as his high artistic standards. The film is being created day by day under the constant rumbling of the Stromboli volcano, created little by little as the suggestions arise from the land itself, from the extraordinary half-deserted town where everybody will be an actor.

“That morning Ingrid [Bergman, playing Karin Bjorsen] was startled and shocked on seeing a fisherman slit open a live turtle. ‘Let’s put this scene in the film,’ suggested [Sergio] Amidei [writer]. They are trying to find motives that will shock and horrify Karin Bjorsen when she first comes to the island. ‘It would be even worse if a child did that instead of a fisherman,’ Ingrid said. Rossellini smiled and looked at Amidei. Ingrid is ready for neorealism.”⁶

⁵ Fabrizio Sarazani, “Ad Amalfi siamo tutti attori,” in *Fotogrammi*, Milan, June, 1948.

⁶ Lamberti Sorrentino, “La prova del vulcano,” in *Tempo*, Rome, April 23, 1949.

Ingrid Bergman's leading man has been found: he is a fisherman from Sorrento, and what decided him to accept the part was the fact that in one day of acting he earned more than in a week of fishing. The twenty-page skeleton script provides one of the characteristic Rossellini sequences: pregnant, frightened and disgusted, Karin Bjorsen climbs to the top of the volcano, as Edmund climbed to the top floor of the bombed building and the shepherdess to the church on top of the mountain.

As we have seen, Roberto Rossellini is a complex personality. He is directing a film that *might* get to Radio City Music Hall, and he knows it. He is playing a crucial hand, but will not make concessions on that account. Now, eleven years and nine films after his *Ruscello di Ripasottile*, he still remembers his fishes: "When I chase fishes under water, I resolve all the directing problems that are waiting to be solved; after underwater fishing, I reach the camera with clear, precise ideas in my head."

III

It would be hard to say that Rossellini is the leader of the new Italian school; it is perhaps more accurate to consider him part of this school and not assign to him any qualities of leadership. His best works have something in common with the best of the Italian production: "... the actuality of the themes, the directness with which these are handled (an audacity that has often been taken for brutality), the simplicity of means of expression, a thought-out simplicity which is not to be confused with lack of skill."⁸

This revolutionary approach was in the air in 1945, and consisted mainly in one's being aware of the economic and political situation of the country and interested in it. That many directors have held to this point of view is evident if one considers that in little more than two years there were produced *Roma città aperta*,

⁷ Lamberti Sorrentino, "Un film e un idillio," in *Tempo*, Rome, April 16, 1949.

⁸ Aldo Vergano, "Il nuovo realismo," in *Pagine Nuove*, Rome, December, 1947.

De Sica's *Sciuscìa, Paisà*, Vergano's *Il sole sorge ancora*, Lattuada's *Il bandito*, Blasetti's *Un giorno nella vita*, De Santis' *Caccia tragica*, Zampa's *Vivere in pace*, and that this attitude persists in the second group of "neorealist" films, *Germania anno zero*, Visconti's *La terra trema*, De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, Lattuada's *Senza pietà*, Germi's *In nome della legge*.

There is no submission by the director to a neorealist formula, but each director sees it according to his own temperament and art: nothing could be more diametrically opposed than *Germania anno zero* and *In nome della legge* than *Ladri di biciclette* and *La terra trema*. And yet, all these films have the same physical contact with humanity, with a social and moral atmosphere that is current and alive.

It has been brought to my attention that several challenging points of view have been voiced in the United States about Rossellini: one, that his Italian audiences have not responded to his work with the same enthusiasm as his international audience. This seems both obvious and natural, and nothing to be ashamed of. There is one Rossellini film for five hundred Hollywood musicals shown in Italy; surely, Esther Williams has no more passionate fan than the Italian schoolboy. To the Italian, *Bathing Beauty* is a picture from another world, something new if not different, something in which to escape. And to the American audience, which has just as many reasons to want to escape, although it is diametrically opposed to the Italian's, *Open City* is the exotic film. No one is a prophet in his own country. As for the second dissenting argument, that Rossellini is a naturalist who tends to record rather than to give form, I hope to have shown that it is not so; and may I remind the outspoken but not analytical person who originated it that the very action of composing a shot, the very act of cutting a strip of film to a given length, tend to give form. Far too often, form is mistaken for formalism, and if there is one thing Rossellini is not to be criticized for, for better or for worse, it is being a formalist.

Pietro Germi, an up-and-coming Italian director, whose last film, *In nome della legge*, ranks with the best, recently wrote: "I am not sure that there can be such a thing as neorealism in the films. That which is usually called neorealism is only a 'careless' and 'not constructed' way of narrating a story, which belongs, with all the properties of a personal style, only to Rossellini, and comes to him from his particular talent as a documentarist."⁹

This backhanded compliment is certainly based on observation: but the fact remains that Rossellini, by being "careless" and by "not constructing" his films, has reopened in our decade a little-explored road for the cinema to follow: that of truth, social consciousness, and reality.

THE WORKS OF ROBERTO ROSSELLINI

1941. *La nave bianca (The White Ship)*. Direction: Francesco De Robertis. Story: Francesco De Robertis. Scenario: Francesco De Robertis, Roberto Rossellini. Cameraman: Emanuele Caracciolo. Music: Renzo Rossellini. Locale: Hospital ship. Production: Scalera. Distribution: Scalera. Produced with the collaboration of the Italian Navy Department.
1942. *Un pilota ritorna (A Pilot Returns)*. Direction: Robert Rossellini. Story: Tito Silvio Mursino. Scenario: Michelangelo Antonioni, Massimo Mida, Rosario Leone. Cameramen: Vincenzo Saratrice, Crescenzo Gentili. Music: Renzo Rossellini. Actors: Massimo Girotti, Gaetano Masier, Lilli Denis, Aldo Lulli, Michela Belmonte. Production: A.C.I. Distribution: A.C.I. Europa Film.
1943. *L'uomo della croce (The Man of the Cross)*. Direction: Roberto Rossellini. Story: Asvero Gravelli. Scenario: Asvero Gravelli, Alberto Consiglio, G. D'Alicandro, Roberto Rossellini. Cameraman: Guglielmo Lombardi. Settings: Gastone Medin. Music: Renzo Rossellini. Actors: Alberto Tavazzi, Roswita Shmidt, Hilde Doris, Alberto Capozzi, Zoia Weneda, Antonio Marietti, Piero Pastore. Production: Continentalcine. Distribution: ENIC.
1944. *Desiderio (Desire)*. Direction: begun by Roberto Rossellini and finished by Marcello Pagliero. Story: A. I. Benvenuti. Cameramen: Lombardi brothers. Music: Renzo Rossellini. Actors: Elli Parvo,

⁹ Pietro Germi, "Forse non esiste il neorealismo," in *Secolo Nuovo*, Rome, April 10, 1949.

- Massimo Girotti, Carlo Ninchi, Roswita Shmidt. Production: SAFIR.
1945. *Roma città aperta (Open City)*. Direction: Roberto Rossellini. Story: Sergio Amidei. Scenario: Sergio Amidei, Federico Fellini. Cameraman: Ubaldo Arata. Music: Renzo Rossellini. Actors: Aldo Fabrizi, Anna Magnani, Marcello Pagliero, Vito Annichiarico, Nando Bruno, Harry Feist, Giovanna Galletti, Francesco Grandjacquet, Passarelli, Maria Michi, Carla Rovere. Locale: Rome. Production: Escelsea. Distribution: Minerva Film (Italy), Mayer Burstyn (U.S.A.).
1946. *Paisà (Paisan)*. Direction: Roberto Rossellini. Story: Sergio Amidei, Roberto Rossellini, Marcello Pagliero, Federico Fellini, Renzo Avanzo. Cameraman: O. Martelli. Actors: Maria Michi and nonprofessionals. Production: O.F.I.
1947. *Germania anno zero (Germany, Year Zero)*. Direction: Roberto Rossellini. Story: Roberto Rossellini. Scenario: Roberto Rossellini, Carlo Lizzani, Kolpet. Cameraman: Robert Juillard. Music: Renzo Rossellini. Actors: Edmund Moschke, Franz Kruger, Barbara Hintze, Sandra Manys. Locale: Berlin. Production: Tever-Film, Sadfi, Universalia Film. Distribution: G.D.B.
- 1947–1948. *Amore (Love)*: (1) *The Human Voice*; (2) *The Miracle*. Direction: Roberto Rossellini. Story: Jean Cocteau (1) and Federico Fellini (2). Scenario: Tullio Pinelli and Roberto Rossellini (2). Cameramen: Robert Juillard (1) and Aldo Tonti (2). Music: Renzo Rossellini. Setting: Christian Berard (1). Actors: Anna Magnani, Federico Fellini. Production: CEIAD.
1948. *La macchina ammazzacattivi (The Evil-killer Machine)*. Direction: Roberto Rossellini. Story: Eduardo di Filippo, Fabrizio Sarazani. Scenario: Giancarlo Vigorelli, Sergio Amidei, Fabrizio Sarazani, Franco Brusati. Actors: Marilyn Buford, Bill Tubbs, Gaio Visconti, Joe Falletta. Locale: Amalfi coast. Production: Universalia Film.
1949. *Terra di Dio (God's Earth)*. Direction: Roberto Rossellini. Story: Sergio Amidei. Actors: Ingrid Bergman and nonprofessionals. Locale: Stromboli Island. Production: BERO-Hughes-RKO.