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Notes on Five Italian Films

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*, and to Luciano Emmer in the production of Emmer's films on art. He is a regular contributor to several European periodicals, and his "Roberto Rossellini" appeared in Volume IV, Number 1, of the *Hollywood Quarterly*.

Cronaca di un amore

In *Chronicle of an Affair*, Enrico, an industrialist, asks a private investigator to inquire into the past of his young wife, Paola. The operative unearths an "accident" that enabled Paola to get rid of a school friend and to acquire the other girl's fiancé, Guido. The snoopings of the detective are reported to Paola and Guido, and bring them together again. Once more they fall in love. Paola persuades Guido to kill her husband. The night chosen for the crime, while Guido is waiting for the husband, Enrico overturns in his car and is killed. Guido abandons Paola.

This is a singular film in the general panorama of Italian production, inasmuch as it relies on psychological realism rather than on the realism of action. It deals, furthermore, with a class of society so far unexploited and unexplored by the Italian cinema: the high industrial *bourgeoisie* of Milan. And it is a daring, individual work, imbued with the taste and personality of its director, Michelangelo Antonioni.

Antonioni leans over his characters and dissects their emotions. The fourth-rate hotel bedrooms in which the lovers meet are amphitheatres, where the actors are crudely exposed to the unemotional eye of the camera, are bathed in a cold surgical light that reveals their smallest gestures and even brings out a glaring scar on Paola's forehead. Always a factor in this analysis, Antonioni's camera watches the actors from a high angle. His use of a fluid, "motorized" camera technique is not intended to create a mood, but simply to record the growing hysteria that already exists in the characters as he has conceived them. In other words,

his camera movements are not expressionistic, nor are they merely functional; they are introspective and thereby give an impression of the fright, uncertainty, and helplessness of the characters.

This can best be exemplified by two scenes, one which takes place in an office building, and the other on a bridge. As Guido Aristarco describes it in his article "Cronaca di un amore":

Paola's classmate-rival lost her life by falling or being pushed down an elevator shaft; Paola violently criticizes her husband to Guido in a sequence that takes place on the stairs of an office building: the elevator is constantly in motion, interrupting the dialogue of the two actors, reminding them continuously of that other crime/accident. And the camera follows them as they climb higher and higher to escape being overheard, until, when Paola shouts her hatred of her husband, she leans over the balustrade to look down the elevator shaft.

Planning the murder, the couple look over a bridge as the locale for it. After showing us the roads on both sides of the dried-up little river, Antonioni's camera pans slowly over the landscape to reach Paola in close-up; then it continues the movement to reveal Guido climbing up the bank and walking toward Paola. Slowly the camera moves around the actors, follows one or the other, surrounds them, almost touches them; thus the internal restlessness of the characters is conveyed to us.¹

This technique requires a great amount of visual planning and imaginative cutting from scene to scene, as indeed Antonioni has done. More planning would have helped the script, however, for it tends to wander and to leave certain characters—Guido, for instance—only bare sketches in comparison with Paola, who bears the weight of the whole film.

Antonioni shows as little sympathy toward the environment in which the action takes place as he does toward his characters; the latter seem isolated from their environment, dwelling in a social and emotional vacuum of their own. Since Antonioni's culture and personal inclinations have enabled him to recreate with such keenness of understanding the psychological agitation of the char-

¹ Guido Aristarco, "Cronaca di un amore," *Cinema* (Milan), November 15, 1950.

acters, and his work in the documentary has helped him to reproduce so effectively the actual physical environment of the action (to scan the landscapes and the buildings as if they were actors in the film), it is a pity that he has not been able to visualize a more coherent and original milieu and give it some part to play. His documentary work, on the contrary, seems to hinder Antonioni in one or two instances when he falls into the temptation of keeping a shot on the screen for its decorative values even after the shot has fulfilled its purposes. On the other hand, Antonioni uses these pauses to keep his rhythm as constant as possible. The camera technique he has chosen for this film prohibits those fireworks of cutting back and forth that are usually served up when the action becomes dramatic. He prefers to keep the action inside the shot rather than create it by cutting, and this distinguishes him among Italian directors.

The music in the film is used as a *leit motif* of death, recurring whenever the former crime-accident and the crime-to-be are mentioned. It is scored for piano and saxophone and will, erroneously, remind many people of *The Third Man* music. It, too, is cruel and effective, and it sends shivers down the spines of those who expect the usual dramatic musical accompaniment for full orchestra.

Prima Comunione

At the beginning of *First Communion* a voice chants:

“It’s Easter, it’s Easter,
We are all good,
Let’s write on the walls
Long Live Charity . . .
It’s Easter, it’s Easter,
We are all kind,
The writer and the director,
And Signor Carloni . . .”

Signor Carloni's goodness, however, is not exemplary. Irascible, loud mouthed, quick tempered, he detects insults everywhere and answers them with both fists, with the authority that a thriving bakery shop and a civic title give him. This is bound to get him in trouble as, on Easter morning, he sallies forth from his house in his brand-new car to fetch, in time for the ceremony, his daughter's first communion dress. He gets the dress, but on his way home loses it in a quarrel with a stranger. His struggles to find another dress, to postpone the ceremony by attempting to bribe the priest, and, on the side, to contrive a tryst with the high-class kept woman next door, make up the body of the film. At the end, when all hope is lost, a cripple returns the dress, in time for the communion.

This is the rarefied emotional atmosphere dear to writer Cesare Zavattini, which he plays in various registers: the light and folksy, as in *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* (*Four Steps in the Clouds*), the human, dolorous, and socially conscious, as in *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*) and *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thief*), the comic and bourgeois, as in *Prima Comunione*, and the surrealistic and fantastic, as in *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*).

Alessandro Blasetti has directed this farce at a fast-running pace. The shots follow each other disjointedly, as if Blasetti had either little idea of the general tone and of the position in the film of each individual sequence, or as if he had simply failed to create a rhythm that would have established and sustained this general tone of comedy. A spirited musical *leit motif* adds more speed. The general effect is one of jumpiness; there is no smoothness in either the direction or the cutting, both of which show no awareness of certain basic principles of film rhythm. The speed with which Carloni becomes involved in one incident and then another does not replace rhythm, and it is strange that such a swiftly moving film should seem so heavy handed.

The novel storytelling device of stopping the narration to go back over the previous scene and see what would have happened had Carloni been kind and polite, instead of mean and bitter, is

an ingenious and pleasing technique the first few times it is used. Eventually, however, it becomes a redundant running gag that tends to unbalance the film.

Blasetti seems to have directed this picture for laughs, and piled gag upon gag: the squeaking shoes that mercifully become silent during the middle of the film, only to begin squeaking again, louder than ever, when Carloni is in the echoing church; the retired colonel, so patriotic that, to him, even Easter is a national holiday and an occasion for unfurling flags; the beggar who has change for a thousand-lire bill in neatly folded ten-lire wads; the maid who breaks a pitcher at the beginning of the film and gets rid of the pieces only at the end of the picture.

These incidents of character are rendered by the actors as if they are fully aware of the comic qualities of their actions, presented in a theatrical manner that explicitly tells the audience to be amused without always actually amusing it. This lack of subtlety, a clash between the lightness of the plot and the pedestrian heaviness of the directing, cutting, and characterizations—as well as the pretentiousness of the moral message—prevents the film from reaching the level of poetic comedy which its makers intended. They came close, however, to achieving it.

When this film was shown at the Venice Festival, not one reviewer failed to compare it to René Clair's *Le Million*, emphasizing the ballet-like movements and the humor of certain of the situations. Merits that the French film possesses—the perfect pacing, the visual construction of an homogeneous whole, the lightness of touch, the imaginative realization of the situation—are absent from *Prima Comunione*. Yet despite all its failings, the Italian picture has a realism of setting and atmosphere that gives it a superb tone of veracity; Blasetti's Rome is devoid of monuments and other pilgrim attractions, it is the Rome of crowded busses, lazy cab drivers, and sporadically functioning elevators. With *Cronaca di un amore* we had a realistic psychological study, with *Prima Comunione* a realistic comedy.

Il cammino della speranza

Two directors have attempted this year to speak of the peasants, of their plights and aspirations. *Road of Hope*, the first of the two films, deals with a group of Sicilian sulphur miners who abandon their island for economic reasons. A large group of Sicilians—all individually characterized with deliberate touches—moves up through Italy, encountering other people, meeting with adventure, discovering the variety of social, economic, and human feelings that weld the population of the peninsula into small groups, just as they did the inhabitants of the island. Cheated by a crook who collected all their money on the promise of getting them across the French border, the Sicilians are stranded in Rome, where the police order them to return to their Sicilian village. Some of the travelers get lost in the maze of the city and disappear. Others, defeated, accept return to Sicily. Still others continue their journey, but only a handful reach the French border. Within the group of Sicilians develop clashes that provide a love interest neither hackneyed nor out of place.

The beauty of the film rests mainly in its balance between folklore and realism, between the outside world and the group of emigrants. It is an arresting film that Pietro Germi has created, deeply Italian in the emotions it shows, in the characterizations, in the epic progression from sequence to sequence.

Epic realism has its difficulties, which Germi has successfully resolved by using a camera technique quite different from that employed by Antonioni in *Cronaca di un amore*—few camera movements, rapid cutting, concentration on reactions in close-ups. The rhythm is fast and steady, controlled to the split second. Instead of speaking too long and belaboring a point, Germi prefers to cut before it is completely said. The participation of landscape and settings is unobtrusive and yet essential; the actions and the moods of the more developed of the characters seem to be keyed to the specific environment in which they find themselves.

In one of the best sequences of the film, the setting has inspired Germi to such a degree that, through simplicity of means and austere cutting, he reaches sheer poetry. The young couple who were married the morning of the departure from Sicily finally succeed, after many days in third-class railway carriages, in being alone. They leave the barn where the farm hands are dancing, and run to a beech-tree grove nearby. One of their friends sees them leave; he grabs a guitar and follows them, then loses sight of them and sits on the grass to play. Practically all this sequence is in long shots within the dimly lit wood. The glimmering trees, the rapidity of the action, the stylized love scene between husband and wife, the slow guitar music—all contribute to a sense of lyricism.

The music, unfortunately, does not always rise to the standard of the film. Instead of keeping to native music throughout the picture, Rustichelli often has attempted to comment on the action with Wagnerian crescendoes for full orchestra—passages that not only disturb and obscure the film, which is built on austere pure lines, but also clash with the infrequent but excellent native guitar playing.

For a director who has always maintained the absolute necessity of a well-constructed plot, here Germi has contradicted himself. *The Road of Hope* is not “constructed” in the academic sense of the word. It has no beginning and no ending; its sequences follow each other only in time. Progression here is mainly visual, and a *deus ex machina* is twice needed to push the story along. The “someone-is-ill-and-can’t-travel” device is used to allow the two main characters to declare their love for one another, and the “coincidental reunion” to motivate a von Stroheim-like knife duel in the snow. However, these flaws in the script, determined by a commercial necessity to be traditional, do not lessen the value of the film, and the excellence of the direction, the photography, and the acting fully compensate for them.

It may be interesting to note that there is more than one

similarity between *The Road of Hope* and *The Grapes of Wrath*: similarities of concept, of environment, of directing. In many ways this picture is an Italian translation of the American film, done with intelligence and rooted in the soil on which it was shot. The same profound understanding that John Ford showed for his dust bowlers, Germi shows for his sulphur miners; with this both directors have achieved universality.

Non c'è pace tra gli ulivi

The second of the peasant sagas is de Santis' *No Peace among the Olive Trees*. The film itself would have passed unobserved were it not for its lavish production, pretentious camera technique, and the fact that de Santis has not accepted adverse criticism calmly, but has fought back in speeches and magazine articles.

The story that de Santis relates is largely a realistic one. A shepherd from Ciociaria returns from the war to find that his flock has been stolen by a rich landowner, a crude man not averse to the use of violence. After injuring each other and various members of their families in the struggle that follows, the shepherd and the landowner fight a final duel, the former armed with a rifle, the latter with a sub-machine gun. The shepherd comes out the winner.

To tell this realistic story de Santis has used a technique that makes full use of today's mobile camera. He is apt to descend from a long shot of the landscape to a close-up of an actor, follow the actor for thirty yards, turn twice around him and then soar up into the air again, without cutting once. De Santis' taste in frame composition is also highly academic; his actors are so obviously posed, and move so artificially from one position to another, as if they were drilling, that it destroys any feeling of veracity. All in all, the actors are so unnatural as to seem no more than abstractions. The whole opening sequence shows the soldier returning and meeting his fiancée, who meanwhile has been promised to the landowner. The couple never look at each other, but gaze at the horizon as they speak. They perform a kind of walking ballet

around the rocks, followed by the camera, and then embrace, still not looking at each other. This was commented upon—and not very kindly—by most reviewers, and de Santis answered them in a long article in which he said:

I have been faithful . . . to the reality of Ciociaria, even to that particular way of striking attitudes and of gesturing of the Ciociarian peasant, often exhibitionistic, at times even grotesque; to that custom among the young people to love each other without looking at each other (which is a reality that persists outside the limits of my region, and is common to all southern people, hidden and modest in the rule of their passions). . . .²

What de Santis has done is perhaps true to life. But if it is true, it is not credible; if it is real, it has not the appearance of reality, and therefore remains false. We could adopt Flaiano's answer:

When the actors take a position on a rock, legs wide apart, it is not to keep their balance, but rather to pose like a statue. . . . And with similar secret intentions they hold a rifle or carry a lamb around their shoulders. One is left with the suspicion that their poetry is second-hand poetry, and that it conforms to a design foreign to the reality it illustrates. . . .³

The directing here, even more formalistic than that in *Bitter Rice*, has therefore hidden the qualities that otherwise might have made it a good film. De Santis deliberately sought to create a popular epic tale of blood, superstition, and hatred, set against a peasant background. But in his effort, he fell prey to a far too complicated technique that was as far separated from the content of *No Peace among the Olive Trees* as, say, De Sica's technique corresponded exactly to the content of *Bicycle Thief*.

Francesco, Giullare di Dio

It is probably because there has never been another motion picture of this kind, that it is so difficult to speak of *Francis, God's*

² Giuseppe de Santis, "Non c'è pace," *Cinema* (Milan), November 15, 1950.

³ Ennio Flaiano, film review in *Il Mondo* (Milan), November 25, 1950.

Juggler. The standards of criticism—personal and subjective at best—are here governed by personal sympathy and even affiliation. That is what happened at the Venice Festival. Rossellini had enlisted the help of two of the best-known Italian critics, but they found themselves practically alone in their appreciation of the film. One wrote: “Rossellini seems to have happily overcome many dangerous obstacles: his friars, his youthful Francis, his ascetic St. Chiara, move like so many flowers stroked by the wind in the vast Umbrian valleys; they are not figures but ‘outlines’ of figures, and a lyrical ecstasy is born in them because they are all fused in a single choral group governed by a single motivation, a single psychology.”⁴ On the other hand, another critic declared: “A Work like Rossellini’s *Francis* is based on two assumptions: the genuine candor of its makers and the genuine candor of its public. Rossellini’s whole past renders doubtful the first condition, and the public’s present tastes exclude the second.”⁵

The film consists of eleven episodes among the simplest and gayest of St. Francis of Assisi’s self-recorded spiritual experiences. He and his friends face the difficulties of a friar’s life with the most joyful, childlike, and candid reactions. This becomes at times sheer simplemindedness, and one is somewhat disconcerted to remember the revolutionary and dynamic power that that religious movement had, and which, in the film, is deliberately ignored by Rossellini.

His scope is quite clear: using the many painted interpretations of these eleven themes for visual inspiration, he draws, with the greatest possible simplicity, eleven pictures. Were it possible, I think that he would have done away with movement altogether. The film does not pretend to be a spectacle, but rather a morality play, a sacred representation. The moods of the film are innocence and delicate grace, joyful sacrifice, mortification, obedience, and love—just what the public has been accustomed to expect from motion pictures. These qualities inflame the little friars and cause

⁴ G. L. Rondi, “Panorama del Festival,” *La Fiera Letteraria* (Rome), October 9, 1950.

⁵ Arturo Lanocita, “Francesco, Giullare di Dio,” *Il Messaggero* (Rome), August 27, 1950.

them to seek in the valleys, in the woods, in the enemy camp, and in the towns occasions to try their faith.

There is coherence in this between the simplicity of the action, the sketchiness of the directing, and the friars' embarrassed acting. There is also coherence within Rossellini who, having tried a more or less "constructed plot" with *Stromboli*, returns to his natural element with these eleven sketches. As usual in Rossellini's work, some of the sequences interested and inspired him more than others. St. Francis kissing the leper, the meeting of Fra Ginepro and the Tyrant, and the final episode are well done, carrying a flavor of the times, of the spirituality of the characters, and an undercurrent of drama that renders them quite credible and at times poetical. In all the other episodes the concentration upon simplicity backfires, and the scenes hardly have a chance to get under way before they are over. Yet even in these, the landscapes, in which nature becomes identified with the emotions and actions of the friars, correspond to the spirit and the mood that Rossellini set as his goal. It is another step in Rossellini's search for himself, and although the results are unsatisfactorily far from *Open City*, he is still searching in the same direction.

Cronaca di un amore (Chronicle of an Affair). Production: Villani, 1950. Director: Michelangelo Antonioni. Script: M. Antonioni. Screenplay: M. Antonioni, Daniele d'Anza, Silvio Giovanetti, Francesco Maselli, Piero Tellini. Cameraman: Enzo Serafin. Music: Giovanni Fusco. The cast: Lucia Bosè (Paola), Massimo Girotti (Guido), Fernando Sarmi (Enrico), et al.

Michelangelo Antonioni was an assistant to Marcel Carné. Short subjects: *Gente del Po (Inhabitants of the Po Valley)*, 1943–1947; *N.U. (Street Cleaners of Rome)*, 1948; *L'amorosa menzogna (The Amorous Lie)*, 1949; *Superstizione (Superstition)*, 1949. Features: *Cronaca di un amore (Chronicle of an Affair)*, 1950.

Prima Comunione (First Communion). Production: Universal-Franco-London Film. Director: Alessandro Blasetti. Script: Cesare Zavattini. Screenplay: A. Blasetti, C. Zavattini. Camera man: Mario Craveri. Music: Enzo Masetti. The cast: Aldo Fabrizi (Carloni), Gaby Morlay (Mrs. Carloni), Lucien Baroux (the priest), Ludmilla Duranova (the kept woman), Andreina Mazzotti (the maid), Almirante (the colonel), et al.

Alessandro Blasetti has been a director for twenty years. His best and best-known films are *1860*, 1933; *Un'avventura di Salvatore Rosa*, 1940; *Un giorno nella vita (A Day in Life)*, 1946; *Fabiola*, 1949; *Prima Comunione*, 1950.

Il cammino della speranza (The Road of Hope). Production: Rovere-Lux Film, 1950. Director: Pietro Germi. Script: P. Germi, Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli. Screenplay: F. Fellini, T. Pinelli. Cameraman: Leonida Barboni. Music: Carlo Rustichelli. The cast: Raf Vallone (Saro), Elena Varzi (Barbara), Saro Urzi (Ciccio), Franco Novara (Vanni), Liliana Latanzi (Rosa), et al.

Pietro Germi. Born in Genoa, 1914. Attended the Experimental Center of Cinematography, Rome, as an actor. Films directed: *Il testimone (The Witness)*, 1945; *Gioventù perduta (Lost Youth)*, 1947; *In nome della legge (Mafia)*, 1949; *Il cammino della speranza (The Road of Hope)*, 1950.

Non c'è pace tra gli ulivi (No Peace among the Olive Trees). Production: Forges-Davanzati-Lux Film. Director: Giuseppe de Santis. Script: Gianni Puccini, G. de Santis. Screenplay: Libero de Liberi, G. de Santis, Larlo Lizzani, G. Puccini. Cameraman: Piero Portalupi. Music: Goffredo Petrassi. The cast: Lucia Bosè (Laura), Raf Vallone (Francesco), Folco Lulli (Agostino), Dante Maggio (Salvatore), Maria Grazia Francia (Maria Grazia), et al.

Giuseppe de Santis. Films directed: *Caccia tragica (Tragic Hunt)*, 1947; *Riso amaro (Bitter Rice)*, 1948; *Non c'è pace tra gli ulivi (No Peace among the Olive Trees)*, 1950.

Francesco, Giullare di Dio (Francis, God's Juggler). Production: Rizzoli, 1950. Director: Roberto Rossellini. Script: R. Rossellini. Cameraman: Otello Martelli. Music: Renzo Rossellini. The cast: Aldo Fabrizi (Nicolaio), friars from the Franciscan order.

Roberto Rossellini. Born in Rome, 1906. Films directed: *La nave bianca (The White Ship)*, 1941; *Un pilota ritorna (A Pilot Returns)*, 1942; *L'uomo della croce (The Man of the Cross)*, 1943; *Roma città aperta (Open City)*, 1945; *Paisà (Paisan)*, 1946; *Germania anno zero (Germany, Year Zero)*, 1947; *Amore (Love)*, 1947-1948, consisting of two short films, *La voce umana (The Human Voice)* and *Il miracolo (The Miracle)*, the latter recently shown as part of the trilogy *The Ways of Love*; *La macchina ammazzacattivi (The Evil-killer Machine)*, 1948; *Terra di Dio (God's Earth)*, 1949, released in the United States as *Stromboli*; *Francesco, Giullare di Dio (Francis, God's Juggler)*, 1950. (For additional material on Rossellini, see "Roberto Rossellini" by Lauro Venturi, *Hollywood Quarterly*, Volume IV, Number 1.)