

Roma città aperta: an Introduction

Filmed and released in 1945, *Roma città aperta* is set just the year before, during the Nazi occupation of the Italian capital. The film's title references a period of approximately nine months, beginning on August 14, 1943 when the Italian government declared Rome an "open city," and ending on June 4, 1944, when American troops entered the city. In designating Rome an "open city," the Italian government indicated that the capital had abandoned all defensive efforts and could be peacefully occupied by the German military, hoping thereby to protect the city and its inhabitants from an extended battle for control. And while Rome's cultural landmarks may have been spared destruction by the Nazis, the city's inhabitants were condemned to a period of enormous hardship once the Germans occupied the city at the beginning of September 1943. It is this suffering and the Roman response to it that Rossellini sought to represent on the cinema screen.

Conscious of the fact that some viewers may be watching *Roma città aperta* for the first time, I will keep comments regarding the plot as broad as possible. In short, I will do my utmost to avoid plot spoilers. The film revolves around a selection of characters, each connected, in very different ways and to varying degrees, to the Italian Resistance movement. *Roma città aperta* is very much a choral film, as it depicts multiple characters whose intersecting stories together paint a picture of Italy's recent history. Indeed, the opening credits underscore this proximity to the very recent past as we read that, although the characters are fictional, they are inspired by the "tragic and heroic chronicle of the nine months of Nazi occupation."

Rossellini's chorus of characters is as follows:

- Giorgio Manfredi, a leading figure in the Italian Resistance to the Nazi occupation,
- Don Pietro Pellegrini, the local parish priest who actively assists the Resistance,
- Pina, a pregnant, widowed mother due to marry again in the coming days,
- Francesco, Pina's fiancé and an active member of the Resistance,
- Marcello, Pina's son who has joined a children's resistance under the leadership of Romoletto
- Laura, Pina's sister who works in a cabaret club entertaining the Nazis and the fascists,
- Marina, Giorgio's girlfriend who works with Laura at the cabaret,
- Major Bergmann, a sadistic Nazi commander in Rome,
- Ingrid, Bergmann's spy.

Together, these characters represent the variety of Rome and the resulting range of responses to the wartime hardships. In building the choral representativity of his film, Rossellini encompasses key oppositions that reflect, among other things, social class—Pina is working class while Giorgio represents the middle classes—, politics and ideology—Giorgio is a committed communist and declared atheist while Don Pietro aids the Resistance fighters driven by a Catholic impulse to help those in need—, morality —Pina's spontaneous goodness and Bergmann's sadism—, and solidarity —Pina remains loyal to her humble origins and seems to have a natural aversion to figures of authority while Laura and Marina are keen to climb the

social ladder and are willing to consort with Nazis in order to do so. Unsurprisingly, Rossellini's sympathies are reserved for those who privilege their ties to community over their commitment to their own individual survival or advancement. Indeed, the film's ethical message is grounded in what has been described, by Peter Bondanella among others, as Rossellini's vision of a Christian humanism grounded in principles of solidarity, humility, and compassion. The question of solidarity is perhaps the most pressing. Rossellini's film points to the need to come together in suffering and to find our common humanity. It is this impulse that allows the professionally Catholic Don Pietro to find common cause with the atheistic communist Manfredo. Moreover, it is this same impulse that leads Rossellini to permeate his film with a Christian symbolism that lauds the values of freedom, the duty of mutual care, and the nobility of martyrdom. This is a type of universalizing Catholicism echoed in Don Pietro's claim that he who fights for justice and liberty, whatever his political or ideological beliefs, "walks in the ways of the Lord, and the ways of the Lord are infinite."

Setting aside the details of the film's narrative, we can say that, despite the tragedies endured by Rossellini's characters, the conclusion of the film offers a qualified optimism, as it points to a postwar Rome in its final shot of the band of children walking together toward Rome. As Millicent Marcus has pointed out in *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, at the center of the cityscape visible behind the children is the dome of St. Peter's Basilica. For Marcus, the visibility of the dome suggests a post-fascist refoundation of the city (52-53). It is no coincidence, as Marcus too points out, that the child-leader of Marcello's Resistance group is called Romoletto, a name that consciously echoes that of Rome's original founder, Romolo or Romulus. Moreover, this final sequence seems to answer and even negate the film's opening credits, which also show St. Peter's dome followed quickly by a shot of German soldiers marching.

The tempered optimism of *Roma città aperta* sets this film apart from the other two made by Rossellini in the immediate aftermath of the war, and which, together with *Rome Open City*, form his war trilogy. I refer to *Paisà* [*Paisan* (1946)], a film divided into six episodes narrating the gradual liberation of the Italian peninsula from the Nazis, and *Germania anno zero* [*Germany Year Zero* (1948)], which explores the suffering of the Germans in Allied-occupied Berlin, focusing on twelve-year-old Edmund and his family. All three films share a focus on the war and, specifically, an attention to the devastating effects of war on the civilian populace of both Italy and Germany.

Roma città aperta is not only the least pessimistic of the three films, but it is also the least cinematically innovative. Often hailed as the foundational film of a new style of filmmaking classified as neorealist, *Roma città aperta* actually maintains stronger connections with the film practices typical under fascism. In other words, in terms of narrative and cinematic technique, the film is not really all that innovative and its iconic status as cinematic groundbreaker is not entirely merited. Examples of conventional cinematic language and tone abound. We might reference the crosscutting or parallel editing employed in the sequence in which the Nazis climb the staircase in Pina's building just as Don Pietro and Marcello descend with Romoletto's weapons. Here the crosscutting or switching back and forth between the Nazis and Don Pietro constitutes a proven strategy for adding suspense to the narrative. The film is also largely

melodramatic in tone, relying on entirely unsubtle clichés like cartoonishly wicked Nazis like the rather camp Major Bergmann and Ingrid of the permanently arched eyebrows, as well as a morally compromised temptress like Marina. The film also draws on a comic tradition that not only predated neorealism but is also absent from most of the other films associated with neorealism. Don Pietro is the source of much of this humor. This is no coincidence as he is played by Aldo Fabrizi, a renowned comic actor who, like Anna Magnani (Pina), came to the cinema by way of the vaudeville stage. In *Roma città aperta*, this theatrical tradition translates into the physical humor of the frying pan scene and the lighthearted humor in the scene with the statues, which, it will come as no surprise, was probably penned by Federico Fellini.

That said, however, there is much that was novel and significant in *Roma città aperta*. It is undeniable that Rossellini's unrelenting focus on the harsh realities of wartime was new to the Italian cinema screen. While war had long been the subject matter of film, the tone had largely been a heroic or patriotic one. Rossellini's focus, for example, on the harrowing experience of physical torture sets this film apart from the norms of fascist cinema. In addition, Rossellini brought Roman cadences and accents to the screen due to his casting choices, which included placing a few professional Roman actors beside a cast of non-professionals. We should also note his use of Roman locations. Indeed, Rossellini filmed on the streets of the city, streets in which, just the year before, events like those depicted in the film most certainly happened.

These elements have led critics to consider Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* as the foundational film of Italian neorealism, a cinematic movement that emerged in the immediate postwar period and was associated with such diverse directors as Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti, Giuseppe de Santis, and, of course, Rossellini. While it is hard to imagine De Sica having anything in common with Visconti, critics have identified some tendencies that came to characterize the neorealist approach. However, we should not see this as a checklist and, as will become clear, not all of these traits apply to any one director. Neorealist traits include the following: subject matter focused on the struggles of the common people during the war and its aftermath; on-location shooting often in the ruins of postwar Italian cities; use of non-professional actors; use of authentic speech (accents and dialects); deliberate use of rough techniques, both situational and aesthetic; a search for an invisibility of style and related use of extended sequence shots; rejection of elaborate plots.

As will be obvious once you view the film, not all of these tendencies apply to *Roma città aperta*. It certainly cannot be described as having a pared down plot and Rossellini's editing is not at all invisible. Yet, the film has achieved an iconic status and is globally renowned and even revered. The making of the film has also become legendary as, according to the tales told, Rossellini stole film and electricity in order to shoot his movie. Carlo Lizzani even made a film about the making of *Roma città aperta*, *Celluloide* [*Celluloid* (1996)]. What is strictly true or provable in these legends may not ultimately matter, and this is fitting for a work that is said to signal an entirely new way of making films. As with every foundational moment, the border between truth and legend blurs. Perhaps what really matters is that today, 76 years after Rossellini began shooting his film and, we should add, in the middle of another historical moment of shared suffering, we are still watching *Roma città aperta*.