

Original Article

Remembering Rossellini's *Open City*: Five Minutes That Defined Neorealism

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Abstract - This commentary on Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) situates the film as a pre-eminent pillar of the Italian Neorealist movement, providing extensive cultural context as a means of appraising the documentarian intentions behind the work. It proceeds to move into a shot-by-shot analysis of a five-minute sequence widely considered to be the film's apex, probing into filmic elements, production methods, and the encroaching destruction in its periphery to divulge new insights into the precarious creation and everlasting impact of Rossellini's magnum opus. At its core, the analysis holds two main aims: to expound on *Open City*'s defiance of the conventions that marked the preceding Fascist period and to spotlight its ingeniously poignant depiction of the clandestine Italian Resistance, immortalizing their sustained passion amidst brutal Nazi occupation.

Keywords - Cinema, Composition, Neorealism, Rossellini, War.

1. Introduction

Unknowingly bearing the emblems that heralded a new era of Italian Neorealist cinema, Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) recounts the hostilities of the Communists, Catholics, and *Partigiani* united under the Italian Resistance against the Nazis as they undergo a brutal occupation of wartime Rome, declared an 'open city' in 1943 to avoid military damage in World War II (1). Filmed two months after its liberation in June of 1944, Rossellini's sole intention to "picture of the essence of things" immortalizes the destruction of the *Città Eterna* and the fortitude within its inhabitants. Few essays encompass the entirety of *Open City*'s periphery and provide accessible analysis of its apex, hence justifying the intention behind this commentary.

2. Cultural Context

Before the fall of the fascist *il Duce* Benito Mussolini in 1943, Italian cinema had been disillusioned by 'Telefoni Bianchi' films, subservient comedies that distracted from the toil of the working class by proliferating escapist narratives of affluence and prosperity that idealized the regime (2). Heavily manipulated by the state through the *Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche*, (3) Mussolini founded the prestigious Cinecittà film studios in 1937, which spearheaded production until its destruction in the Allied bombings of 1943, then turned into a *centro disollamento* (refugee camp) (4). The sudden absence of facilities and lack of funds in wartime for something as frivolous as film forced Italian directors to seek provisional, unorthodox means of

production; for one, Rossellini shot *Open City* on scraps of discarded 35mm film stock from black market sources, funded the film by selling nearly all of his possessions (5), hired mostly non-actors, and enlisted real German prisoners-of-war as extras (6).

Such socioeconomic context offers both the backdrop and definition of Italian Neorealism (1943-1950). Subverting Fascist conventions by mimicking the crudity of traditional European newsreels (7), the movement pioneered a documentary film style marked by handheld cameras, illusionist editing, and on-location shooting, devoid of close-ups or fabricated melodrama; the films were only made poignant by the postwar devastation that rippled through the ruins of the Italian working-class, riddled with unemployment and political disunity (8). Adeptly put by Rossellini himself, "The actual facts were each more dramatic than any screen cliché." (9) Neorealism veers from moralizing, rendering savage truths previously censored with implacable objectivity. Such prompted *Open City*'s international success after winning the Palme D'or at the Cannes Film Festival, reappropriating the Italian Resistance, and achieving what theorist Siegfried Kracauer defines as realist cinema's highest goal: a redemption of physical reality (10).

The extract forgoing analysis (55:38-1:00:38) is undeniably the climax of both the narrative and Rossellini's filmic intentions, depicting pregnant mother, Pina, being



gunned in the street by Nazi soldiers for chasing the truck capturing her fiancé, resistance-collaborator Francesco during a *rastrellamento*, cutting to an ambush that frees him and his comrades. Such is followed by the beginning of the film's second act, wherein traitor and Nazi collaborator Marina Mari agrees to hide Francesco and her lover Manfredi. As is the academic consensus, elements of the sequences' cinematography and *misé-en-scène* prove instrumental in cementing *Rome, Open City's* ascendancy on viewers, concomitantly designing and achieving the paragon of Italian Neorealist cinema.

3. Cinematography

3.1. Framing



Fig. 1 Annotated still

Perhaps Rossellini's most succinct commentary of his style is, "Things are there, why manipulate them?". (11) In *Figure 1*, the director cleverly utilizes the layout of the tenement building to emphasize both Pina's emotions and portent surroundings. The harsh natural backlight, accentuated by the high-contrast look of Rossellini's Leica film stock, highlights Pina's frenzied silhouette, belittling it by way of a wide shot, with the composition of other motionless figures and the stillness of the camera stressing her contrasting irrationality. Deep focus draws attention to Pina's jeopardy in the legion of soldiers on the street; the framing of her path becomes exceedingly narrow through the doorframes, foreshadowing her impending peril. In context, Pina's struggle recreates that of Teresa Gullache, who was pregnant and shot in Rome by the Germans a year earlier for attempting to throw a bundle of food at her husband, captured by SS officers (12). Much like Teresa, Pina thus symbolizes female duality within the period; (13) fierce defiance of Fascism (evidenced through Magnani's disheveled look and passionate performance, unkempt with the previous era's female protagonists), but also its invariable retort to traditional gender roles, both being sacrificed for their devotion to their male partners, despite glaring warnings of the consequences. As such, the culmination of elements in *Figure 1* distances Italian viewers from Pina, limiting their

sympathies and examining her hysteria as a vain demonstration of affection when considering her encroaching surroundings.

3.2. Movement



Fig. 2 Annotated still

In 1995, the Italian Government issued a commemorative stamp featuring a frame from the above shot, asserting Pina's death as a defining emblem of war. (14) Though the sequence lasts just over a minute, hastening her death with the accelerated cutting of the Eisensteinian montage, what arguably immortalizes its power is the lingering devastation depicted in *Figure 2*. A POV shot imposing Francesco's line of sight from the back of the German truck, the dolly movement continues to track backwards after Pina is killed, rendering it clear that she is, physically and narratively, forcefully left behind. Her death leaves both our spectatorship and society unchanged, maintaining a detached high-angle and natural lighting that reveals the feet of an unmoved soldier juxtaposed with a distraught *Piccolo*. Neither Rossellini nor Magnani (despite being one of the only trained actresses in the film) make any effort to extend the moment with agony or blood present in Gullache's death (12) or draw attention to her pregnant condition. Instead, the wide depth of field places equal focus on the debris surrounding her on the Via Raimondo Montecuccoli (15), which bore the US Air Force's bombing of the nearby Tiburtino Railway Station in 1943 (16), an attempt to break the will of the Italian people. Considering such context, Rossellini uses such techniques to have Pina's death contend both the cycle of devastation and the unwavering spirit of the resistance, which transcends all means of reason and mortality itself.

3.3. Composition

Historians cite the events of 1943-1945 to have offered Italians "a compelling myth of national solidarity", briefly uniting the Communists and Catholics in a 'Popular Front' against Fascism (17). Through a medium shot (the closest in the sequence), a shallow focus, and a 1:37:1 aspect ratio

similar to the proportions of contemporary art, Rossellini places a deliberate emphasis on the image of priest Don Pietro holding Pina's body, managing to visually emulate Italian sculptor Michelangelo's *'Pietà'* ('Pity'), depicting the Virgin Mary gazing upon Jesus Christ after his crucifixion (18). Paralleling Pina's death to that of Christ, despite her 'unholy' condition of being pregnant out of wedlock and pending marriage to communist Francesco, acknowledges the unity evoked by the resistance. Further, asserting her body as sacred renders her a martyr, mirroring the legacy of Gullache, whose death "caused such a sensation that the soldiers had to release Girolamo (her husband) in a few weeks" (12). Naturally, Rossellini's composition provides an antithesis to Pina's delirium depicted thus far, honoring her actions while condemning the context of her death. Such effect is best summarized in David Forgacs' reception of the scene: "Whatever her motive may be, then, her act is associated with her courage and her refusal to bow to the arrogance of power..." (10)



Fig. 3 Annotated still

4. Mise-en-Scène

4.1. Location

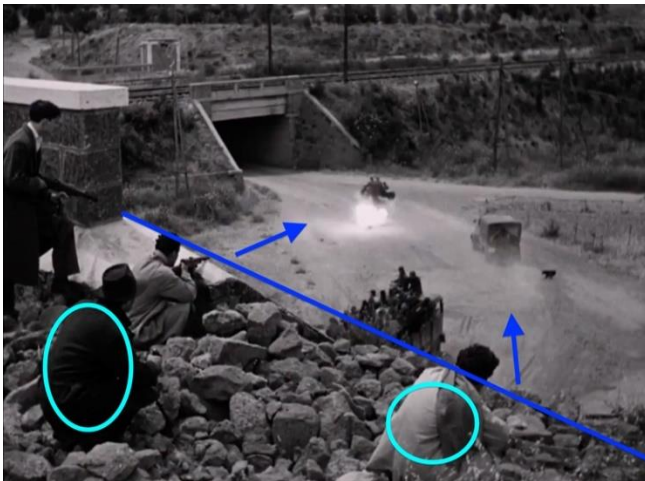


Fig. 4 Annotated still

Scholar Martin Clark cites the *partigiano* as having "specialized in surprise attacks... guerilla warfare as part of a spontaneous rising, military rather than political". (10) In Figure 4, the *partigiano* can swiftly be distinguished from the Italian fascists through their civilian **costumes** as opposed to uniforms; Rossellini suggests from the outset a successful ambush through their positioning in the foreground of the frame, enlarging their figures, rendering them bigger than the Nazi operation below. Amplified by the high-angle, Italian viewers are able to identify the on-location setting of the EUR district, adding a layer of irony, as it was designed in the late 1930s by Mussolini to 'reflect Fascist ideology' and celebrate the 20th anniversary of the regime (19). The proceeding ease of the attack- the sequence akin to one of a Hollywood action film, with a swelling musical score that glorifies the ambush- thus serves as Rossellini's response to what R.B Bosworth calls "the Fascist claim to the ownership of the 'myth of Rome'", (10) by constructing at the very least, a cinematic countermyth through the aforementioned film elements, which simultaneously serve to prove Pina's death futile through Francesco's escape.

4.2. Props



Fig. 5 Annotated still

Professor Millicent Marcus casts Marina Michi as a "classic diva of prewar Italian *divismo* cinema (est. 1910)", marked by a decadence that embodies "European culture preceding the First World War" (10), though writer Federico Fellini lessens such glamour through her shared beginnings with Pina and sacrifice to join the Nazi's upper-class milieu. Her betrayal is presaged to viewers in *Figure 5*; Rossellini uses a still camera, the rule of thirds, a medium depth of field, and placing his key light above the table to draw viewers' attention to Pina's costuming: a gold watch, bracelet, and fur coat (a reward for putting Manfredi in jeopardy), impossible to have obtained as a night-club performer in 1943-1944, wherein the nation struggled with hyperinflation and "lost a third of its national wealth" (8). The lowered gazes of Francesco and Manfredi render them oblivious by way of grief, particularly to what Rossellini frames starkly in the

center: a handful of food ration coupons, which Marina appears to possess in extreme surplus. The Germans imposed strict rationing in response to the existing food shortage of 1942, intensified by military operations and severe drought in the southern regions, which, in turn, deteriorated national nutritional standards (20). As such, Rossellini's composition, spotlighting the prop to Italian audiences, alludes, if not confirms, Marina's collaboration with German forces, imbuing suspense into her subsequent housing of Manfredo and Francesco in her apartment.

5. Conclusion

Evidently, Rossellini's landmark *Rome, Open City*, ingeniously employs elements of cinematography and misé-

en-scene to defy the conventions of the preceding Fascist period, pioneering a blunt visual style to emphasize both the sustained passion and unrelenting brutality weathered by the Italian Resistance. It is perhaps only by way of Rossellini's frankness that an individual in the present may entirely absorb the tragedy undergone by the Italians, moved over 78 years later by the echo of their rallying cry for a world that may finally be free— and perhaps only due to the palpable effect of his honesty that Neorealist cinema engulfed theatres and the international psyche.

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