HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Rossellini's Films

POLITICS

Introduction A key theme in Rossellini's early films is the political situation during and just after World War II. The director made his name with his war trilogy, in which he forged a documentary style approach to film-making that influenced other directors around the world. The terrible suffering, both physical and emotional, depicted in those early films is unforgettable. Even in his later films (such as *Fear* and *The Machine that Kills Bad People*), the stench of fascism can be detected. Another kind of political message is conveyed in his historical film about the Garibaldi movement (*Viva L'Italia*), which celebrated Italian nationalism.

Rome, Open City The most prominent subject matter of this film is the German occupation of Rome. With semi-documentary authenticity, it tells the story of how the Germans and their Italian fascist hosts hunted down, tortured and executed members of the resistance movement and their supporters. Although the film includes some elements of ambiguity (the compromised position of Marina, who betrays Giorgio, and the German officer who questions the self-image of Nazis as the 'master race), it is a wholehearted valorisation of the resistance and condemnation of the fascists. The political message is clear even before the story even begins, when we read on screen that 'this film is based on the heroism and the tragedy of the nine-month occupation of Rome by the Germans.' The Germans, especially the Italian-speaking SS Commander, are ruthless if not always effective. Nearly every Italian, even a gang of little boys, is either a supporter of the resistance or an active fighter against occupation. When everyone is evicted from Pina's building, the women and children struggle with the soldiers and hit them with their fists. There is an underground printing press, a more than sympathetic priest and an army of 500 waiting in the mountains. There are also mini-cases of mutiny, when, for example, the Italian guard at the building persuades the German officers to let Don Pietro in. Even more dramatic is the refusal of the Italian soldiers in the firing squad to shoot a priest. While that sentiment is plausible, the film does present a somewhat false picture of an alliance between the church and the resistance. Don Pietro is as much a hero as Giorgio, and the final image of the Vatican in the distance suggests that the Catholic church blesses the spirit of resistance. In fact, however, the Vatican made a pact with Mussolini, cloaking it as a necessary stance of neutrality. When interrogating Don Pietro, the SS Commander tries to drive a wedge between the church and the resistance, whereas, in fact, the church never supported the active resistance. Despite this misleading element, the film does faithfully represent the anger and humiliation of Rome, when (in August 1943) the King declared it an 'open city,' meaning that it would not resist occupation. Rossellini's film shows just how strong and widespread the resistance actually was.

Germany, Year Zero This film is dominated by physical suffering. After his first two films in the war trilogy (*Rome Open City* and *Paisan*) showed the effects of war on Italian society, Rossellini turned his attention to Germany, and to Berlin, which he visited in late summer 1947 and shot most of the scenes. Consider the first scene, which opens with a high overhead shot of a cemetery and then focuses on old women and children digging graves. Grave digging was not a bad job to have after the war, when there were still a lot of bodies to bury. Little Edmund is shooed off because he's too young, but the final shot in the film shows his own dead body, which someone will have to bury. In between that beginning and end, we see a city devasted by war, by bombs, by poverty and by starvation. People rip flesh off a dead horse, young women turn to prostitution, young girls sleep with young boys, young boys become petty criminals, rich men cheat little boys and the whole town seems to be caught up in a web of illicit transactions. Time and time again, the lack of food is mentioned. Edmund's father's illness is diagnosed as lack of nutrition, and he is ecstatic when describing the good food at the hospital, with 'real milk.' Edmund is proud to come home with a handful of stolen potatoes. Tinned meat, probably bought on the black market, is deemed the equivalent of 300 marks. In addition to starvation, society is corrupt. Even the upright Mr Rademacher doesn't hesitate to cut off the Kohlers' gas supply. Teachers, like Mr Henning, turn out to be sexual predators in disguise. The suffering of people in Berlin in the period after the war is well documented by historical research, and this film provides a dramatic illustration of their tragedy.

Paisan All the relationships in the six episodes of this film are formed in the crucible of war, which heightens their tensions and leads to tragedies. Carmela picks up Joe's rifle and shoots a German only to be killed herself. The love at first sight between Fred and Francesca was ignited by the joy in both American soldiers and local population at the liberation of Rome; but the reverse side of their war-generated romance is that it is also destroyed by the war when Fred is suddenly called away and girls in Rome (including Francesca) fall prey to the easy money earned by sleeping with the soldiers. Harriet, the nurse in episode 4, loses her old lover (a painter turned partisan leader) to a German sniper. The final episode, in the Po River delta, has a high body count, including a whole family who are massacred for simply feeding the partisans. Looking across the totality of the vignettes, we can say that Rossellini combined the glory of victory with the ugly reality of death.

General Della Rovere Curiously, this is a political film without politics. It concentrates on the relationship between two men, one Italian and one German, neither of whom has any real political commitment. Col Müller dislikes torture and all the barbarity associated with the Gestapo, while Bardone gets along just fine with the occupying German army. These two chaps become friends, share a drink and laugh about the oddity of war. In one key scene, Bardone says, 'These are difficult times, for everyone. Both sides need to show understanding. The propaganda of hatred ruins the soul. Don't lose hope. Our German friends are almost always understanding.' Both men seem to be saying, 'Let's not have any animosity just because your army is killing my people. Let's respect each other while our armies are fighting to the death.' The film's apolitical stance reflects the attitude of a large portion of the Italian population. Italy was always muddling up its politics, first an ally of Germany and then joining the Allies. The real-life General Della Rovere was a committed anti-fascist and passionate leader of the resistance, but the film is not about him. It is about a man who pretends to be that hero without sharing his politics. When Bardone accepts death at the end, it is more a person moral decision that one based on ideology. Significantly, the film is based on the story of the real-life hero as told by a journalist who himself switched from supporting fascism to fighting it. If there is any clear political message, it is that collaboration is as Italian as pasta.

General Della Rovere Despite the focus on double identities, the film does present the true suffering of war, though not as prominently as in Rossellini's famous war trilogy. In the opening shots, for example, we see a poster on a wall: 'Deserters and draft-dodgers will be shot and executed'. Stray cats scavenge in dark, empty streets. Air raid wardens emerge from bombed-out buildings. Groups of women line up to get water from a single pump. One of the women looks up and says, 'It's cloudy today. They probably won't bomb us today.' Later on, there are bombing raids and blaring sirens, which remind us that while Bardone/Grimaldi is playing out his games, others are suffering and dying. Indeed, the death of the real General Della Rovere in the film (when he tries to evade a checkpoint) is terrifying. Then, there is the torture in prison and the cold-blooded murder of the men by the firing squad. The film is not about war but everything that happens does so as a consequence of war.

Viva L'Italia The headline theme of this historical docu-drama is the nationalist movement led by Garibaldi (and Mazzini). It focuses on the campaign of 1860-61, when he led a small army (the 'expedition of one thousand') that conquered Sicily and most of Italy on behalf of King Emmanuel of Sardinia, leading to the declaration of a united Italy. With a title 'Long Live Italy,' and accompanied by the singing of several patriotic songs from the period, the film is an unabashed glorification of Garibaldi, his men and their patriotism. The first and last shots show the Italian national flag waving in the air to the music of the national anthem. Italy's nationalist movement, which followed the revolutions in America and France and influenced later ones in Russia and China, is today a source of great pride, not dissimilar to the American revolution for Americans. While faithfully representing the complex political factionalism within Italian nationalism, the film centres of the heroic stature of Garibaldi, who repeatedly speaks of 'Italy' and 'united Italy,' which were new ideas at the time. Those ideas grew out of a broad cultural movement called 'Rising Again' (*risorgimento*) in the early part of the nineteenth century in opposition to foreign domination. It celebrated the rich cultural heritage of Italians. For example, in the film, Garibaldi and his men consider their movement to be a resurrection of the ancient Roman Empire. And that is why the film ends with Garibaldi promising that he will return to active soldiering 'in Rome.' Significantly, when Mussolini took Rome in the 1930s, he said he was completing Garibaldi's campaign. A few years after

completing this project, Rossellini directed *General Della Rovere*), which examined a different variety of Italian nationalism, the fascist movement of the 1930s and 1940s. *Viva L'Italia*, however, remains his monument to Italy.

Viva L'Italia A second political theme in this film is the leadership of Garibaldi. By the 1960s, when the film was commissioned, Garibaldi had acquired the status of a saint in Italian culture. Without tarnishing that reputation, Rossellini set out to 'humanize' the god-like figure, so we see him in mundane settings, in bed, in his night clothes, sitting on the ground, smoking a cigar, peeling oranges, putting on his glasses and so on. This 'warts-and-all' portrait did not please everyone, although it arguably ended up creating another kind of mythic figure: the man of the people. What is undeniable is the leadership skills that Rossellini's Garibaldi possesses. Several key scenes show him in discussion with his officers regarding military strategy. Always, he is calm but resolute, patient but passionate. He is a dictator and was widely referred to as such, even by himself, but he also listens to his associates, including his young son. Equally important, he leads his troops on the battlefield, suffers with them, rejoices with them and eats with them. Another aspect of his leadership is that he temporarily sacrifices his personal ambition (taking Rome) for the greater good of the movement. Another leader might have had a rush of blood and marched on the capital. Garibaldi is not a king, but through his style of leadership he earns the loyalty of his men and the wider population.

Fear As in other Rossellini films (such as *The Machine that Kills Bad People*), *Fear* contains subtle but unmistakable hints of Germany's recent Nazi past. Indeed, the director said that he made the film in order to explore how far the country had come after the war. The opening shot of a famous clock tower makes it clear that the story is set in Munich, the centre of Hitler's movement. Then, we see a uniformed man raise his hand, in imitation of a Nazi salute, to direct traffic. The expressionist cinematography also alludes to the Nazi period. From the beginning, then, the film invokes German's immoral past as the context for a story of a marriage compromised by infidelity and blackmail. Within the story itself, the chemical factory, which had been running for decades, is another strong link to the past. In the story, the factory tests poisons on rats, but what did it do during the late 1930s and early 1940s? Albert himself is a scientist who was imprisoned after the war, and the suggestion that he was involved in the 'final solution' is strengthened by the fact that he is played by an actor with a known Nazi past.

The Machine that Kills Bad People Another theme smuggled into this comedy is politics. More specifically, we see that political righteousness is not only dangerous, it can be sinister. This message is suggested by the subtle but repeated hints and images of the recent fascist past in the country. We need only look at Celestino's first victim, the town policeman. 'He thinks he can be a dictator just because he wears a uniform,' Celestino says. Then a photograph shows him wearing a fascist uniform and giving the raised arm salute of the fascists. That raised arm is mocked after the policeman is killed by Celestino's magic camera and his coffin is constructed with a protruding wing to house the arm. Even after death, it seems, a fascist is a fascist. When an orchestra plays at the saint's celebration, we hear Wagner's *Tanhauser*, considered to be almost the national anthem of fascism. Even the fireworks display resembles night flares during the war, and the procession looks something like the mass rallies that dominated the fascist period in Italy. Even in peace time, Celestino appears to be fighting fascism, like the partisans who are valorised in Rossellini's earlier films.