HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Themes in Rossellini's Films

RELIGION

Introduction Although religion is something that we might not readily associated with Rossellini's films, it is a strong theme in his work. The role of the church in the resistance movement is highlighted in *Rome, Open City,* while the phenomenon of a miracle is central to two films: *The Machine that Kills Bad People* and *Love,* story 2.

The Machine that Kills Bad People Beneath its playful surface, this film contains serious content, some of it satirical, and some of it without comedy at all. The most obvious theme is that of religion and morality. Harking back to 'The Miracle' (the second story in Rossellini's *Love*), another saint makes an appearance early on in this film. St Andrea appears in the form of an old man to our hero, the crusading and credulous photographer, Celestino. Using the saint's gift of a magical camera, Celestino begins to sprinkle divine justice over the town. The problem is, the saint is an imposter. He's not Andrea; he's the devil. Before that revelation at the end, however, local people react to the strange events in their town by declaring them to be miracles when they are positive (for example, a good catch of fish, approval of public funds) and attributing them to the 'evil eye' when they are negative (mostly deaths). The priest plays it straight during a discussion about morality when he says it's all down to 'intentions' and that 'God will look into men's hearts'.A more nuanced view is expressed by the doctor when he says that it's hard 'to tell good from bad these days because they're all mixed up'. Celestino, fired by a sense of righteousness, has no doubts that he knows who is good and who is bad. However, it turns out that the three poor people who inherit Donna Amalia's will are evil thieves. Celestino has good intentions, but the results of his actions are not always morally defensible. That seems to be the message conveyed by the final words, spoken by the narrator, who says, 'Do good, but not too much…Don't be too hasty to judge others.' In other words, religious fervour is dangerous.

Love (story 2) Nanni's story illustrates the enduring question about the similarities between deep religious faith and madness. How do we distinguish hallucinations from genuine religious visions? The lines between madness and religious imagination had been blurred, as in the life of the English poet William Blake, for centuries. But, in today's world, or even in post-war Italy, if a homeless man claimed to be the son of god, who would believe him? More than likely, he would end up in a mental institution. In the cinematic story, appropriately titled *The Miracle*, Rossellini explores these questions through the pious Nanni. Of course, we see that the wandering man is not Saint Joseph, though he is made to resemble him. The point is that Nanni believes that he is her saint, her beautiful saint, who has come to her aid in the past. The story tries not to judge Nanni, but rather to pose a question about the power of miracles. For example, when she asks two monks if they have seen miracles, one says everyday and the other says never. Then there is the second miracle, of her pregnancy. Again, the film is deliberately vague about whether or not she had sex with her Saint Joseph; one can argue it either way. Her pregnancy is real enough, but when she claims it's a gift from god, like a virgin birth, the local people mock her pretence of spiritual power. They are, presumably, devout Catholics themselves, but perhaps they fear a woman who has spiritual powers. Like the village idiot, they castigate her as 'the devil' and drive her away. Is Nanni a madwoman, unhinged and unreliable? Or is she a visionary, a person whose deep faith enables her to see what others cannot? Rossellini leaves the question hanging in the air. What is not in doubt is that the two miracles make her happy.

Rome, Open City The role of the church in this film is woven into its political message, but it exists as a theme in its own right, too. Although the little boy Marcello, who is part of the resistance, expresses the opinion that the church 'is a waste of time these days,' for the most part religion is seen as a positive force in fighting the occupiers. That force is personified in the figure of Don Pietro, who is an active supporter and also a voice for Christian teachings. He speaks of the need for mercy, courage, endurance, sacrifice and self-reflection. When Pina, a pious woman, complains that she can't take the war any longer, he counsels her (and, by extension, others) to reflect on their individual lives and pray for forgiveness for their sins. At the point of death, Don Pietro himself asks God to forgive his executioners for 'they know

not what they do.' His faith is contrasted with the atheism of the SS commander. During his interrogation of the priest, the German man is bothered by Don Pietro's religious comments about mercy and God's will. At one point, he orders him 'not to preach.' When Don Pietro refuses to cooperate and halt Giorgio's torture, the German shows him the mutilated body of his friend. Then he mocks the priest's faith, saying, 'Is this your Christian charity? Your love for your brother in Christ?' Later, the SS man admits that he was rattled by the priest, whose belief in Christ is as firm as his own atheist ideology. Finally, the influence of religion on the story is illustrated by the scene in which Giorgio is tortured to death. When the camera closes in on his bowed and bloodied face, it has a deliberate resemblance to the crucified Christ. It cannot be lost on the Italian cinema-goers of that era that Christ was also a political rebel who died for his cause.