

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 devastated 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 than 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 on 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 Germany'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.

SOCIETY

Introduction Rossellini's neo-realist cinema is largely confined to documenting the horrors of the war and its aftermath. In his later films, he tended to examine emotional truths rather than those of socio-political reality. However, one film that does offer a sharp social critique is *The Machine that Kills Bad People*, which functions as a transition from the war trilogy to the later psychological dramas. Another film with a social theme is *Germany, Year Zero*, with its focus on Edmund's loss of innocence.

The Machine that Kills Bad People Another target of the film's commentary is social change, which is turning the town upside down. In the inventive opening sequence, we watch as a hand sets up the town with cardboard cut-outs, much like a property developer promoting a project to potential buyers. Then we have the influx of the Italian-Americans, with their money and their 'big ideas' to knock down the medieval castle and build a luxury hotel: nothing could be more symbolic of change than that. Notice also that the hotel is to be built on land that is the town's old cemetery, where the war dead are buried. Clearly, the new entrepreneurial spirit of the 1950s is sweeping the past aside. Bill's young niece, in her revealing bathing suit, also symbolises new life-styles that the town will have to confront when the tourists pour in. On top of all this, the film suggests the dangers of new technology, the very backbone of modernity. The visitors whiz into town in a new-fangled jeep, but that is not the 'machine that kills.' That label is attached to the innocent camera, which only indicates that the real dangers of technology are not always apparent. Given the subtle political messages in the film, we might say that its title refers also to the dangerous machines developed by Hitler's fascist regime. The science of eugenics and the invention of the gas chamber were manifestations of modernity in Nazi Germany. The atomic bomb, used by the Allies, was also a killing machine, and at one point, Celestino actually likens himself to a nuclear device. However we choose to interpret the title, it seems clear that the 'machine' stands for the industrial and technological revolution that was changing life in traditional towns like that in the film. Change is so pervasive that we cannot even tell a saint from the devil.

Germany, Year Zero Alongside more sociological content, this film also dramatises the loss of childhood innocence, as seen in the story of Edmund and other youngsters in the film. Aged about thirteen, Edmund is both a child and a young adult. In post-war Berlin, though, he is thrust into adult roles much too early, while still clinging to his boyish pursuits. With his father ill and his brother in hiding, little Edmund must contribute to the family finances, which he does by lying about his age to work as a grave-digger, by trying to sell a scale and a record (of Hitler's speech) on the black market and by learning the tricks of the trade from Jo, a slightly older and much more corrupted boy. Edmund has no idea what Christl is doing with Jo and his gang, not until he hears accusations about his own sister's immoral behaviour. His young eyes opened, he goes back to the gang and tries to 'rescue' Christl, but she pushes him away and calls him a 'baby.' That scene illustrates his transitional status: he knows that sex is not right for Christl, but he is too young to understand or do anything about it. He himself is the sexual target of Henning but only seems to grasp that the man's interest is wrong. Similarly, he hears that his father wants to die and his teacher says something that seems to justify poisoning his father, but he is mortified when the act is done. He is simply too young to have undertaken such a task. Even at the end, before his suicide, we see that Edmund is still a boy. He wants to play football, he makes an attempt at hopscotch and he plays with a toy gun. When he falls from the building, it is the culmination of a story of a boy thrust too early into the role of a man.

PSYCHOLOGY

Introduction Even when he was focused on political issues, Rossellini had one eye on the psychology of his characters. For example, his war trilogy contains themes of guilt and courage. Later films highlight fear, jealousy, loyalty and the general torment of a woman's mind. It is this combination of realism and psychological depth that injects his films with dramatic power.

Rome, Open City Both the political and the religious figures in the story, both the fighters and the priest, embody its central theme of courage. The priest shows bravery when he agrees to take the money (hidden in a book) to a resistance fighter outside the city and also when he goes into the building to hide the bombs. These are dangerous undertakings; if caught, he would be shot. The same goes for little Marcello and his gang of boys, who actually blow up a storage tank in a railway yard. Other smaller acts of bravery are scattered throughout the story, but the most sensational occurs at the end, when Giorgio is tortured and Don Pietro is made to watch. Even for us, viewing the film in our peaceful homes, these scenes are visceral and horrific. Giorgio is slowly beaten and burnt to death, but he refuses to divulge any information about the resistance. The ordeal for Don Pietro is, if anything, even more terrifying for he has the power to stop the torture and release his friend. But he, too, will not talk. Somewhere, deep inside themselves, they both find the strength to endure the terrible physical and psychological suffering. That courage is the backbone of the resistance movement.

Germany, Year Zero The theme that underlies this multi-character and event-filled film is that of guilt. Virtually every character feels guilty at one point or another. Edmund's father, for example, indulges in a long monologue about how he is burdening his family. Having just come back from hospital, where he ate well, the old man is lying in bed at home, where he is just another mouth to feed. He begs god to end his life and lessen the load carried by his family. Listening to his speech, Karl-Heinz can only weep when the father tells him to register, get work and help the family. But Karl-Heinz is a coward, a soldier who served in the war and now has lost the courage to live. When talking with Eva, the daughter, Karl-Heinz says he, too, is suffering from the guilt of not doing his part for the family. Eva also wishes she could do more than earn a few cigarettes by flirting, but she would feel terrible if she took to prostitution and cheated on her fiancé, who is a POW. Then comes Edmund's guilt. He thought he was doing the right thing by poisoning his father. After all, the old man had asked for death and Mr Henning, his teacher, had said that people must have courage to let the weak die. After serving his father the poisoned tea, Edmund walks away into the dark shadows. When the three siblings gather around the corpse, Edmund hangs his head. 'Is he free now?' he asks, in hope. And when he explains to Henning what he's done, his teacher blames him for acting immorally. Poor Edmund is now guilt-stricken and cannot relieve himself of that feeling by confessing his terrible crime to anyone. He is haunted and rids himself of guilt only by suicide. Edmund's story is representative of Germany's story, a country racked by poverty and suffering, but above all by a collective sense of guilt for participation in or condoning of Hitler's barbaric regime. That psychological scar will remain for decades after the physical healing is completed.

Fear We don't have to look far to find the primary theme of this film. It's the title itself: fear. But kind of fear? Certainly not the kind that makes a little girl scream in the night. Instead, it is a more invidious sense of doom, of being trapped and guilty because you have created this hell for yourself. Irene's fear clings to her; she cannot escape it, except for the brief weekend in the countryside. Wherever she is, we see her face registering the dread that she carries within. In the opening scene, for example, when she is trying to tell her lover Erich that the affair must end, she says 'when I have to leave you and go back home, there's such a feeling of guilt. Such fear.' That she would feel guilt is understandable, but why fear? Because Rossellini wants to crank up the emotional intensity and while her guilt has a specific cause, her fear does not. It haunts her throughout the story, in her pained facial expressions, her clumsy lies and her erratic behaviour, such as reaching out for the phone and not picking it up. An atmosphere of apprehension is created also by the thriller plotline, chilling score and noirish lighting. Tension rises with every scene because, like Irene, we do not know what to expect next, or how she can extricate herself from the noose around her neck. Events are closing in on her, and there's no escape.

Journey to Italy If we had to single out one factor that poisons their marriage more than others, it would be jealousy. Both partners fall prey to this corrosive emotion, and more than once. First, when they bump into Alex's friends in their hotel in Naples, Katherine takes note of his more than polite attention to a particularly attractive woman. When she asks if he knows her well, his curt answer is 'yes.' Similarly, he is annoyed when she dazzles the men at a gathering in a rich family's house

where they go for dinner. 'Jealous?' she asks him, and he brushed it aside, but we know that he was jealous. When Alex separates himself from Katherine and enjoys a few days on Capri, a perceptive woman tells him that he is jealous about his wife. That makes us think back to an earlier scene, when Katherine told him about Charles, her poet friend before their marriage. Piqued, he demanded to know if she had been in love with him. She said no, convincingly, but added that they had a great rapport. From then on, Charles and his poetry becomes a sore point with Alex. Somehow, he can't forget the passion with which Katherine described her last meeting with Charles, before the marriage. Once that worm of jealousy has burrowed into his thick skull, it torments him. As for Katherine, she is mildly annoyed at Alex's debonair behaviour with other women, but she would have been shocked by his near-infidelity with a prostitute he picked up on the streets of Naples and extremely angry at his serious flirtation with a young woman who turned out to be missing her husband. The jealousy that each feels is both a symptom of their lack of rapport and a cause of their breakdown.

Love (stories 1 & 2) The theme that connects these two very different stories is their exploration a woman's mind. Such a focus on the inner state may seem at odds with neo-realism's commitment to documenting the 'material facts' of social and economic realities, in all their gritty detail. However, Rossellini's earlier films (especially the war trilogy) showed a similar interest in dramatising the psychological realities of its main characters (think of Joe and Carmela in *Paisan*, and of Edmund in *Germany, Year Zero*). The two stories brought together under the title 'love' can be seen as forming a whole in that one examines romantic love and the other sacred love. In both cases, the love is overwhelming to the point of mental instability, and in both the woman is abandoned. There are key differences, too. The unnamed woman in *The Human Voice* seems likely to commit suicide, something that Nanni did consider but then rejected. And now the simple peasant woman is at peace with the world, as she breast-feeds her miracle child. Another contrast, is that Nanni faces social ostracism, whereas the unnamed woman never ventures outside her apartment. Finally, the most important difference is that, in the end, the unnamed woman is left to confront her inner demons, while Nanni is able to rejoice in that birth of her miraculous baby.

Viva L'Italia This profoundly political film also has a theme of loyalty. By their very nature, radical political movements and wars of liberation require intense commitment to a cause. And given the complexities of the political jigsaw that was Italy in the mid-nineteenth century, any assertion of loyalty was likely to be a betrayal, as well. These fault lines play a large role in the story told in the film. To unify Italy, Garibaldi must not only drive out the foreign powers but, at the same time, create alliances with the rulers of the various parts of Italy--in Naples, in Turin, in Venice and in Rome. For example, just after Garibaldi wins a great victory, his campaign is jeopardised by the arrival of the Piedmont army, who have a different agenda. Another kind of loyalty-cum-betrayal is present in the conspirators who help Garibaldi at various points of the story. They are the citizens of Naples, for example, who turn against their ruler and give their support to the new man. In addition, betrayal is represented by the royalist troops who defect to Garibaldi's army. More personalised examples of loyalty are shown in Garibaldi's handing over his command to King Emmanuel, in whose name he had begun his military campaign. Finally, a broad question of loyalty arises in connection with the Catholic church. Because the Pope was protected by French troops, many people considered Garibaldi's movement to be a betrayal of religion.

RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction Psychological issues in Rossellini's films are often concentrated in the relationship between the central characters. An obvious example is love in the film with that title, while others include the damaged marriage in *Journey to Italy* and the variety of odd friendships in *Paisan*. Of course, nearly every one of his films has a key relationship, but only in a few is that bond the central theme.

Love (story 1) This is a story about the power of love, in particular its power to destroy a woman who has lost her man (whether husband or lover, we don't know). From the opening shot of her pained face to the final shot of her hysterical, repeated cry ('I love you!'), the woman falls apart before our eyes. Throughout the conversation, she tells the man that she is calm, and at times she appears composed, but those moments are swept away by alternating torrents of profound grief and desperate hope. The power of her love is measured by the depth of her despair when that love is taken from her. She loves him so deeply that even now, when he is leaving her to marry another woman, she does not want to hurt him. She apologises for any misunderstanding, for any slight criticism he might detect in her words. She calls him 'sweet' for calling her back and tries to put on a brave front so that he will not feel guilty. Slowly, as the conversation progresses, she seems to disintegrate, to become more shrill, more pathetic and more unstable until the final moment when she collapses in grief because the sound she heard outside is not his footstep. Only then does she fully accept that he has left her, and she has nothing left to live for. We know that she considered taking too many sleeping pills, and now we fear that's what she'll do.

Journey to Italy This film presents the story of a marriage on the rocks that is saved by a miracle. Katherine and Alex have endured eight years of a loveless union, with no affinity, affection or children. The two are diametric opposites, the romantic woman with the workaholic male, though the scales of sympathy are heavily tipped toward poor Katherine. The journey to Italy to sell a house is an excuse, on her part, to rekindle their romance, but it only exposes and then enlarges the emotional gap between them. Cut off from their daily routines at home, in which they seemed 'perfectly happy,' they now have to confront each as individuals. They find that they are strangers and, worse, that they don't even like each other. They separate physically when he goes to Capri to flirt with women, while she buries her anxiety in the museums of Naples. The film unveils the breakdown of a marriage with precision, noting each little raised eyebrow or caustic remark that adds to a volcanic eruption that comes at the end when they declare that they want a divorce. There is no single reason, no infidelity (though Alex contemplated cheating on her), no revelation and no skeletons in the closet. That would have made the disintegration of their relationship more dramatic and more typical of other films about marital breakdown. Instead, Rossellini, the neo-realist, shows us how a series of ordinary moments and undramatic events can slowly accumulate and result in a sensational conclusion. Married life, the film reminds us, is often boring and frustrating; couples drift apart without knowing it, until it's too late. Only a miracle saved this banal marriage (and the film) from ending with pain.

Paisan Despite the wide range of stories in these six episodes, most focus on friendship. Some of these are predictable, such as men fighting on the same side, whether American, Italian or British. Or among men of the same profession, such as the chaplains and the monks. But the examples in the first two episodes stand out as unlikely pairings, especially because the language and culture gaps are so wide. Carmela and Joe are thrown together for the worst of reasons. She wants to use the Americans to get back to her family, and they want to use her as a guide. Neither trusts the other. But when Joe and Carmela are left together in the deserted castle, something miraculous happens. With little words and gestures, they come to understand something of the other, even if it is vague and fragmentary. Their disjointed conversation (if you can call it that) is framed by a view of the sea, a setting appropriate to a love story. When their language lesson reaches the point of a mutual understanding of their names, they shake hands. And when Joe dies, Carmela picks up his rifle to seek revenge. It is a beautiful and moving short story about friends. A similar emotion is evoked at the end of the next episode, in which another Joe, a black American soldier, gets similarly stuck with a little kid in the port of Naples. Joe is in his own world, filled with nostalgia, anger and regret. The kid is just a nuisance, until he visits his neighbourhood and sees the kind of life the boy has. Now, the big man and the little boy share something special.

GENDER

Introduction Women play central roles in several Rossellini films, but the specific theme of gender (including gender inequality and gender stereotypes) is prominent in only two. *Rome, Open City* has been controversial because the female characters are either the conventional maternal martyr or the femme fatale. Gender stereotypes also feature in *Fear*, but a stronger theme is the misogyny suffered by the wife.

Rome, Open City This film appears to present a heroine, but a closer look suggests that the female characters as a whole reinforce gender stereotypes. For example, the two key women in the story, Pina and Marina, are pitted against each other as polar opposites. Pina is the heroine, the pious woman and pregnant widow, who is loyal to the cause and to her fiancé, Francesco. She takes part in a bread riot, she is concerned about her son, Marcello, and she is deeply in love with Francesco. Most important, she dies in an attempt to prevent him being taken away by the Germans. In contrast to her as the female martyr, Marina is the femme fatale. She is weak, superficial and unstable. Interested in drugs and luxury, she betrays the cause and gives information that leads to the arrest and, later, the deaths of Giorgio and Don Pietro. A third woman is Ingrid, the evil traitor who is also a lesbian. Unlike Marina, she is a strong person and does not have the excuse of poverty to explain away her behaviour. Instead, she is a calculating opportunist, whose commitment to the 'master race' ideology is firm. What these portraits of female characters show is that a woman cannot be both independent and virtuous. Pina is controlled by her love and her role as a mother; Marina wants to be independent but is too weak to shake off her addictions; Ingrid, the mannish non-woman, is simply too vicious to earn our sympathy. In the end, these women are either powerless mothers who die, weak addicts who betray or powerful women who are not feminine. Perhaps the film's attitude toward women, reflecting society's view, is best expressed by little Marcello. As he goes to bed one night, his sister complains she he never takes her with him on his sabotage missions. He says he can't because she's a girl. 'Can't women be heroes?' the sister asks. 'Sure,' Marcello says, 'but women always mean more trouble.'

Fear The theme of gender is present in this story, though not prominently. For example, there are a few obvious instances of gender stereotyping, such as the gifts given by the parents to their children. The boy gets an air rifle and the girl gets a doll. She wants a rifle, too, but is told by her father that 'little girls shouldn't play with rifles.' Irene, on the other hand, is not a typical passive woman. It is noteworthy that the family car is always driven by Irene and not her scientist husband. Also, she is the one who runs the factory, having done so in his absence during the war. Albert, however, is uncomfortable with this role reversal and suggests that she could step down from her managerial role and become more of a mother. But a more sinister element of the misogyny is the psychological abuse that Irene suffers at the hands of her husband. Once the revelation is made that he is behind the blackmail plot, we see that Irene is being tested like a lab rat. Her reactions are observed by the dispassionate scientist in order to determine just how much emotional stress she can take before she confesses to her crime. Albert subjected his daughter to the same kind of test during the incident of the missing air rifle. He bullied her until she cracked. This theme of experimenting with Irene's mental health is made explicit in the final scene, when she goes into the laboratory and stares at the rats and rabbits in their cages. She identifies with them because she is one of them.

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.

CULTURE

Introduction The importance of culture in shaping people's lives is a theme found in three Rossellini films. The six episodes of *Paisan* are tied together by their common element of cross-cultural interaction, often resulting in misunderstanding. Another kind of miscommunication, this time between lovers, is found in *Love (Story 1)*, while the ability to understand a foreign culture is at the heart of *Journey to Italy*.

Paisan The thread that unifies these six episodes is the theme of cross-cultural interaction. There are many different kinds of interaction shown in the film, ranging from romantic and strategic to theological and opportunistic. American soldiers mix with Italians from all walks of life, soldiers, prostitutes, street urchins and closeted monks. They also form alliances with British soldiers, while retaining their hatred of the Germans. The sequence of six episodes follows a progression from misunderstanding to understanding. In the first three episodes, for example, the interactions lead to misunderstanding because of the language barrier; still, the characters manage to gain a little comprehension through their shared humanity, assisted by photographs, songs, gestures and phrasebooks. And in each case, a profound understanding emerges that changes at least one person. In episode 1, Carmela, who was angry and distrustful, senses that Joe is a good person and tries to avenge his death. In episode 2, another Joe has no clue as to who Pasquale, except that he's a thief. But when he sees the poverty of his neighbourhood, he reappraises his own poor financial situation back home. In episode 3, Francesca is inspired to leave her life of prostitution when she accidentally meets the man whom she fell in love with six months earlier. In episodes 4, 5 and 6, Americans actually speak Italian, although their stories do not end in happiness. By the end of the sequence (episode 6), the tragedy is not that the two groups don't understand each other, but that they are separated by others: the POWs are shown respect while the partisans are executed. Taken as a whole, the film is a subtle exploration of the interaction between Americans and Italians on a micro-level, where suspicion is overcome by a common humanity. As the Italian title of the film (*paisa*) suggests, they are all comrades.

Love (Story 1) This story also contains a theme of communication, a topic theme that Rossellini explored in an early film (*Paisan*). The story is titled 'The Human Voice' because it is a voice that stands between the abandoned woman and suicide. The conversation by telephone is the only contact she has with her ex-husband/lover, and, in fact, with the outside world. It is what keeps her sane. 'Just keep talking to me,' she says. 'I want to hear the sound of your voice...If you hang up, I'll die.' Again, later, she says, 'If you didn't call back, I'd go out of my mind.' Her distress is increased when the line cuts out and she can no longer hear his voice. And when the line is restored, we hear the relief in her voice. The vital role of communication is also dramatised by the instances of miscommunication. Often she says that he has misunderstood what she meant and that she isn't blaming him. In the end, though, even her telephone can't save her. She has very little left. He is leaving her. She wants him to take their dog. His suitcases are packed and ready to go. He is about to burn her letters. All she has is the telephone, and his voice on the other end. Freud's 'talking therapy' had become popular in Italy, as elsewhere, by the late 1940s. Rossellini turned it into a harrowing cinematic experience.

Journey to Italy The title is important in calling attention to the fact that this is a journey to Italy, not to some dreary English seaside town. All the drama takes place in a country famed for its romance, art, history and religion, and under the shadow of the fiery and volatile Mt Vesuvius. From the beginning, Italy itself becomes part of the story. The place is noisy, there are too many insects, the wine is good, the food spicy and the people relaxed. Alex notes that it's a good country to sleep in and begins to relax himself. Katherine becomes more immersed in history and culture, through the museums and her drives into Naples, where she sees Madonna shrines and pregnant women. While workaholic Alex is bored, she is charmed by an Italian phrase (*dolce far niente*), which roughly means: 'how sweet it is to do nothing.' Three cultural experiences play a more direct role in the story. First, Katherine visits the catacombs with its thousands of disinterred skulls and where Natalie prays for a child, which sets a train of thought in her about her own childlessness. Then comes their visit to Pompeii where they witness the discovery of two skeletons buried two thousand years ago. 'Perhaps husband and wife,' their archaeologist friend Burton says. Deeply affected, Katherine has Alex take her home, and he also admits to have been moved by the experience. Lastly, they get caught up in the religious devotion of a saint's procession. Briefly separated, they find each other and embrace.

Skulls in the catacombs, skeletons in Pompeii and a religious festival—together they create an unexpected shift in their hearts and they are reunited.

FALSENESS

Introduction Although we can identify elements of deception in several Rossellini films (such as *Fear* and *The Machine that Kills Bad People*), it is a theme only in one. *General Della Rovere*, in fact, is shot through with falseness, despite the fact that it is based on a real story.

General Della Rovere Underlying the overt politics of the film is the intriguing theme of appearance versus reality. Who is the protagonist? He is a distinguished-looking, well-dressed, charming, middle-aged man named Emanuele Bardone, who is a gambler and a conman. However, he introduces himself to others as Col Grimaldi, now an engineer, though once an officer in the Italian cavalry. In truth, he was dismissed for debts and embezzlement and then convicted for various crimes from fraud to bigamy. Then this man impersonates General Della Rovere as part of a bargain to free him if he identifies a partisan leader held in prison. In effect, this is the story of a double imposter (Bardone who is both Grimaldi and Della Rovere) who is charged with the task of identifying another man. Such deception, lying and spying is unavoidable in a country occupied by a foreign power, when one loyalty is laid on top of another. But the film emphasises this ambiguity in both plot detail and characters. First, there is the prominence of the ring, a fake ring that Bardone has given to his girlfriend. For the opening third of the story, he tries to sell it, claiming it is 'rare' and 'oriental' and a 'sapphire,' when, in fact, it is practically worthless. Second, there is Bardone himself, who is a fantasist, a man who believes in his own lies. He even appears to be convinced that the ring is genuine. His most significant example of self-deception, however, is his successful impersonation of the general. When he dies at the end, we are left wondering if he might have really become the hero he so desperately would have liked to be.