

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Rossellini's Films

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.

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.