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Rossellini and Realism

The Trajectory of a Career

When Roberto Rossellini was born on 8 May 1906 into a very well-to-do Roman family, his father's involvement in the design and construction of the Cinema Corso, still one of the most important theaters of Italy's capital, was an auspicious coincidence that, in retrospect, seems to foretell his eventual choice of profession.[1] But little about Rossellini's early years will help explain why his name would eventually be inextricably connected to the moment in Italian cinematic history known as neorealism, or why his entire career would be continuously defined by controversial discussions over the relationship between art and realism, cinema and society. At the fashionable Collegio Nazareno where Rossellini attended high school, he made a number of friends who would later prove useful to his career: Marcello Pagliero, later to play the role of the Communist partisan leader in *Roma città aperta;* Giorgio Amendola, who was the son of one of Italy's most famous antifascist leaders and became an important member of the Italian Communist Party and delivered Rossellini's funeral oration on 6 June 1977; and Franco Riganti, who became a film producer in the fascist period and provided Rossellini with an entrée into the film industry.

As a result of his excellent social and economic position, his charming personality, and his good looks, Rossellini seemed destined to become a playboy rather than a film director, and there was always something of the nonchalance of the nonspecialist in his approach to the cinema. Rossellini was always fascinated by airplanes and racing cars. Given the emphasis upon the virtues of danger and speed proclaimed by both the avant-garde futurists and the Fascists in Italy at this time, it would be surprising if such daring qualities did not appeal to a young man of his breeding and dis-

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position. When supervising the African aerial sequences of *Un pilota ritorna* in 1941–42, Rossellini amazed the troupe with his enthusiastic work in the planes with his cameramen, logging some two hundred hours in the sky. Much of his youth was spent around automobile racing, and even after he had achieved international fame in the immediate postwar period as a director, he persuaded Aldo Tonti, the cameraman of several of his films in that period (*Il miracolo, Europa '51*) to accompany him on the legendary Mille miglia automobile race in 1953.

Rossellini's career would be marked by successive love affairs, marriages, and scandals that would eventually fill international tabloids. It is therefore not surprising that the initial cause for his contacts with the film industry had as much to do with his interest in pursuing beautiful women as it did with his desire to work there. Around 1932, he met a young actress named Assia Noris, who was making her debut in a comic film. Noris was the daughter of Russian parents who had been born in prerevolutionary Petrograd, and she would soon become one of the Italian cinema's most attractive stars, often linked in romantic roles with Vittorio De Sica, perhaps the most important comic actor of the 1930s in Italy. She eventually married Mario Camerini, the most original director of film comedies during the fascist period, in which both Noris and De Sica often starred. Rossellini married Noris impulsively, but the marriage (celebrated in a Russian Orthodox church) was annulled only forty-eight hours after it had taken place. By the time Rossellini eventually married Marcella De Marchis in 1936, he had apparently spent most of the money he had inherited from his father and was forced to provide for his wife and family by actually going to work in the only profession that interested him and in which he knew numerous people who might provide him with sorely needed letters of recommendation – the cinema.

Rossellini began working as a sound technician, progressed to film editor, and gradually advanced to working on scripts with other directors before he achieved the post of assistant director and then director. Shortly after Rossellini entered the cinema, we find him making no less than six short films, only one of which still survives: *Dafne* (*Daphne*, 1936), about which little is known; *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, 1936), a nature film inspired by Debussy's music; *Fantasia sottomarina (A Fantasy of the Deep*, 1939), the only one of these brief works extant; *Il tacchino prepotente* (*The Overbearing Turkey*, 1939); *La vispa Teresa (Lively Teresa*, 1939); and *Il ruscello di Ripasottile (The Brook of Ripasottile*, 1941). It was during Rossellini's work on these brief films that he received the crucial break of his early career, an invitation to collaborate

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on the making of Goffredo Alessandrini's *Luciano Serra, pilota* (*Luciano Serra, Pilot*, 1938) as assistant director and scriptwriter. Rossellini's introduction into Alessandrini's troupe probably had more to do with the fact that he was a friend of the producer, Franco Riganti, and of Vittorio Mussolini, who was supervising the film, than any wealth of cinematic experience on his résumé. Rossellini's collaboration with Alessandrini and his close friendship with the Duce's son raise one of the most interesting issues that critics must face in dealing with Rossellini's cinema – Rossellini's relationship to the fascist cinema and to important Fascists associated with the cinema.[2] This perplexing question leads to an even more intriguing critical problem – the relationship between the prewar cinema in fascist Italy and the postwar Italian cinema characterized by the rise of neorealism.

Fascist Cinematic Culture and Rossellini's Artistic Origins

The Italian cinema during the fascist period (1922–43) was virtually ignored by mainstream film critics and historians until only recently. Thus, in 1945, Cesare Zavattini, soon to become famous as the scriptwriter for Vittorio De Sica's greatest neorealist classics, declared that the two decades under fascist rule had not produced "a single film, let me say not one – that is, not 3,000 meters of film out of thirty million shot" – that was worth discussion. Carlo Lizzani, a neorealist director active as a film critic during the fascist period, asserted in his history of Italian cinema, which was, until a decade ago, the standard Italian text, that "not one photogram" of the hundreds of films made between 1938 and 1943 should be remembered or regretted if lost, since they constituted merely "a cold listing of commonplaces in a squalid and monotonous recipe book."[3] Italians were understandably anxious to forget the fascist years, which ended with the collapse of the regime and a bloody resistance struggle between 1943 and 1945 that assumed the proportions of a civil war before hostilities ended. Critics, film historians, politicians, and even veterans of the film industry who had learned their trades during the fascist period had every interest in emphasizing the originality and revolutionary quality of what succeeded the fascist cinema – Italian neorealism – and to denigrate everything that came before it. For three decades after the war until a retrospective in 1975 and a conference in 1976 inspired a fresh, new look at fascist cinema in Italy, the highly charged ideological climate in Italian intellectual life simply would not allow a dispassionate analysis of the period's film production. As a result, until recently the over seven hundred films produced during the fascist period were virtually ignored by scholars and critics, and this critical neglect

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inspired by ideological blinders resulted in the eventual loss of the only remaining prints of almost half these films.[4]

Numerous traditional interpretations of the Italian cinema of the fascist period were immediately challenged by this new approach to the subject. The first and most immediate critical impression was that of surprise. Because practically no one had ever actually bothered to study the films in question, no one had ever imagined that so many were so good or that the average quality of the industrial product of the period was so high. In the second place, virtually all the ideological commonplaces about the period were immediately abandoned. The most significant outcome of this reevaluation of an entire period's cinematic production was the assessment of the role of political ideology in it. Virtually all recent studies of the films in question reject classifying it as a cinema of propaganda. In fact, these studies conclude that out of the over seven hundred films made, only a few can be called "fascist," although a larger number have patriotic or nationalistic themes.

Such a drastic reassessment of fascist cinema strikes directly at one of the most deceptive myths of Italian film historiography – the persistent interpretation of postwar Italian neorealism as a completely revolutionary and

Mussolini arrives to inaugurate the opening of Cinecittà, the heart of the commercial film industry during the fascist period, when Rossellini began his career in the cinema. *Source*: Cinecittà Archives

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original phenomenon, the result of a clean and absolute break with both Italian film traditions under fascism as well as those classic "rules" established by the Hollywood model. As we shall see from our examination of Rossellini's major neorealist works, neorealism's relationship to its past and to the dominant cinematic language of Hollywood was far more complex than this myth of originality suggests. As a matter of fact, Italian film culture under fascism was a rich, multifaceted, and highly heuristic springboard for postwar cinematic production. The most obvious contribution of the fascist period to postwar cinema was to provide a well-trained and thoroughly professional cadre of directors, writers, and technicians no nation other than the United States could surpass. Mussolini's regime itself contributed a great deal to preparing the Italian cinema for its future with the foundation in 1935 of the Centro sperimentale di cinematografia, the professional film school that is still in existence, as well as the construction of the even more important studio complex of Cinecittà, which was inaugurated by Mussolini himself on 21 April 1937. Cinecittà remains today the focal point of Italian cinema and is one of only a few key studio complexes in Europe capable of rivaling Hollywood facilities. The day Mussolini selected for the inauguration of Cinecittà was significant, for the regime considered 21 April a national holiday, the anniversary of the founding of ancient Rome. Although the famous photograph of Mussolini behind a movie camera at Cinecittà with the motto "The cinema is the most powerful weapon" (a citation by Mussolini of Lenin) seems to reflect the regime's preoccupation with the cinema's propaganda potential, it was a potential exploited primarily in the famous newsreels produced by the fascist regime's Istituto Luce (an abbreviation for L'unione cinematografica educativa).[5] Only rarely were commercial films expected to reflect the regime's ideology. Most Fascists were content to allow the film industry to provide mass public entertainment.

Abundant evidence demonstrates that the fascist regime took a genuine interest in the health of the film industry and wanted it to flourish, without, however, insisting upon ideological purity in its products. In fact, the totalitarian regime's model was Hollywood, not the rigidly controlled popular culture of Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany.[6] In 1934, Luigi Freddi (1895–1977), a former supporter of Marinetti's futurist movement and a staunch member of the Fascist Party since its foundation in 1919, was appointed director of the Direzione generale per la cinematografia, a bureau that was placed within the Ministero per la cultura popolare (commonly referred to as the "Minculpop"). Freddi later became president of Cinecittà in 1940. By all accounts, Freddi was an able administrator interested more in promoting a profitable, commercial industry much like that of Hollywood than

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The figure of Mussolini at the inauguration of Cinecittà, presented as a director peering through a camera lens to emphasize the importance his regime gave the cinema, rises over Lenin's famous definition of the cinema Mussolini was fond of quoting: "The cinema is the most powerful weapon." *Source*: Cinecittà Archives

in directing a propaganda machine. In 1935, a special government fund for the production of Italian films was approved by the Banca nazionale del lavoro, and around the same time, Count Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law – undersecretary and then minister for press and propaganda – encouraged the creation of university film societies ("Cinegufs," clubs associated with the Gioventù universitaria fascista, or the GUF). In 1934, the regime added cinema to the internationally famous arts festival in Venice (the Biennale), and it consistently supported the development of an Italian cinema to compete with its Hollywood model by sending its most important ministers to the festival.

Perhaps the most consequential (even though indirect) link of Mussolini's regime to the cinema was through the dictator's son Vittorio, who was personally involved in production and scriptwriting. He was also the head of a very influential film review, *Cinema,* around which a group of intellectuals gathered who were vigorous opponents of a cinema of amusement and entertainment (paradoxically, the fascist regime's preference), and who argued forcefully for a new cinema of realism that would be truly Italian.

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The *Cinema* group included Giuseppe De Santis, Carlo Lizzani, Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Mario Alicata, to mention only those individuals who played a key role in the neorealist cinema of postwar Italy. Rossellini became a close friend of Vittorio Mussolini, and much of his success during the fascist period may be attributed to this personal connection.

The myth that the fascist cinema was primarily a cinema of ideological propaganda is based on the assumption that the regime preferred a cinema designed to mobilize the masses politically. In fact, the fascist regime preferred a successful commercial cinema based on the Hollywood model, complete with the star system, a collection of important auteur directors, and a genre-oriented subject matter.[7] Paradoxically, the voices calling for a realistic cinema employing documentary techniques with the goal of presenting "authentic," "believable," and specifically *Italian* landscapes or stories came from within the ranks of the left-wing Fascists as well as from the group around Vittorio Mussolini, most of whom became Communists after the fall of the regime. Although Vittorio Mussolini held strong views on Italian cinema, he rarely imposed them on the young intellectuals he protected. A perfect example of this fascist call for an anti-Hollywood brand of cinema with everyday realism as its goal can be found as early as 1933 in an essay called "The Glass Eye" by Leo Longanesi, an important journalist and writer who strongly supported the regime at the time:

> We should make films that are extremely simple and spare in staging without using artificial sets – films that are shot as much as possible from reality. In fact, realism is precisely what is lacking in our films. It is necessary to go right out into the street, to take the movie camera into the streets, the courtyards, the barracks, and the train stations. To make a natural and logical Italian film, it would be enough to go out in the street, to stop anywhere at all, and to observe what happens during a half hour with attentive eyes and with no preconceptions about style.[8]

Anyone comparing Longanesi's essay "The Glass Eye" with Cesare Zavattini's often-cited neorealist manifesto "A Thesis on Neo-Realism" will immediately be struck by the similarity of the two aesthetic positions.[9] The truth of the matter is that the fascist cinema began the search for cinematic realism; this impulse was later brought to fruition in the immediate postwar period when cinematic realism could benefit from the greatly increased freedom of expression after the fall of the regime.

Roberto Rossellini's apprenticeship in the cinema took place precisely

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when such an interest in a new cinematic realism was being expressed by a number of ideologically diverse individuals in Italy. A number of the techniques in his postwar neorealist classics have precedents in films made during the fascist period. The use of nonprofessional actors, so striking a technique in Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (*Open City*, 1945) and *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946), and in the classic neorealist films of Visconti and De Sica, was masterfully employed by Alessandro Blasetti in his 1934 epic film *1860*, which sets the lives of ordinary people against the backdrop of Garibaldi's invasion of Sicily. Blasetti not only employed nonprofessionals but he allowed them to speak their Sicilian dialect, a use of authentic language that was practically unnoticed by film historians until Visconti did the same thing in his celebrated neorealist treatment of Sicilian fishermen, *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948). The move from constructed studio sets to authentic outside or indoor locations, another of the traditional formulae associated with Italian neorealism, was frequently a feature of some of the most important of the films shot during the fascist period. Blasetti's *1860* is an excellent example of this on-location work, but even before this, in his silent *Sole* (*Sun*, 1929), Blasetti had celebrated Mussolini's reclamation of the Pontine marshes in an epic film regrettably destroyed during the last war. Augusto Genina's *Lo squadrone bianco* (*The White Squadron*, 1936) was shot on location in Libya and contains very beautiful desert sequences. The most impressive sequences of Walter Ruttman's *Acciaio* (*Steel*, 1933) were shot inside the giant steel mills at Terni and are masterful examples of rhythmic editing within a semidocumentary style typical of many neorealist films. Mario Camerini's early comedy *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* (*What Rascals Men Are!* 1932) contains remarkable location footage of the city of Milan and its industrial fair that traditional criticism has not usually associated with the comic genre or with Camerini. *Luciano Serra, pilota* contains remarkable African footage that Rossellini supervised as Alessandrini's assistant director. The simple fact is that the use of nonprofessional actors, real locations, and documentary techniques was part of a growing trend toward film realism in the fascist cinema even before the advent of neorealism, and it is doubtless in this context that Rossellini learned of the effectiveness of such techniques.

When Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940, the film industry there (as in Nazi Germany, Great Britain, and the United States) was expected to do its bit to assist the war effort, providing not only newsreels but also popular entertainment that bolstered the regime's political and ideological goals. As a result, the most innovative aesthetic experiments in

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the cinema at the time involved what have become known as "fictional documentaries."[10] Essentially, such films would employ documentary footage and authentic locations (battleships, airfields, military outposts) from the war, combining them with a fictional framework; in some cases, nonprofessional actors were employed (the actual protagonists of the events portrayed), and in other instances, famous actors appeared with ordinary sailors, soldiers, and airmen.

Perhaps the most influential impetus to this kind of filmmaking, a model Rossellini could not have ignored, was the phenomenal success of a film of this type begun even before war broke out and released in 1940: Augusto Genina's *L'assedio dell'Alcazar (The Siege of the Alcazar),* a film that led all others at the box office during that year.[11] It was awarded the Mussolini Cup at the Venice Biennale for the Best Italian Film of the year, and although its political content might cause us to question the validity of such an award, the film won abundant praise for its innovative cinematic qualities from none other than Michelangelo Antonioni, writing in the leftist journal *Cinema*. He underlined the film's lack of rhetoric, its grounding in recent history, and his opinion that the film's value sprang from its creation of an "epic feeling" from believable acts of sacrifice and drama by single individuals. Of particular interest is Antonioni's comment that the film has a "choral" quality (one of the most typical descriptions of Rossellini's work in the fascist period and the immediate postwar neorealist era).[12] Antonioni also notes that Genina successfully uses the group of soldiers and civilians defending the Alcazar fortress for Franco's army against an overwhelming force of Republican soldiers to create a microcosm (he calls it a "small city") of life that permits the intensification of emotions and drama within a tightly controlled and almost claustrophobic cinematic space. Rossellini would do something very similar in his own "fascist trilogy" and even more brilliantly in the torture sequences of *Roma città aperta.*

The cinematic merits of *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* are real, just as its clearly ideological tone cannot be ignored. In a prologue, the viewer is told that the heroic defense of the Alcazar was a symbol of the ideological struggle of Franco's fascist forces against bolshevism in Spain. The prologue insists, however, that the story is reported with historical accuracy, a claim that may be generally accepted. Nevertheless, Republican soldiers are depersonalized and depicted as ugly, brutal, and treacherous, taking hostages and executing prisoners without much remorse, whereas the defenders of the fortress are portrayed as honorable military officers obeying the rules of "civilized" warfare. There is nothing in *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* that should

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shock the viewer of the usual run-of-the-mill American combat films during the same period. Few national cinemas were able or willing to portray the enemy in a positive light. The interior scenes were constructed at the Cinecittà studios, and the exterior scenes were completed on location at the Alcazar amidst the ruins that still remained when the footage was shot. The texture of the photography and the skillful reproduction of the interior sets, combined with on-location Spanish footage, give practically no hint that the film was not entirely done on location.

The "fictional documentary" quality of the film arises from the distinctive rhythm that Genina produces by alternating between dramatically re-created battle scenes and more intimate moments inside the fortress that reveal the unfolding of sentimental dramas. Actual documentary footage of such historical events as the bombing of the fortress by the Republican air force is also skillfully edited together with the footage Genina produced. The dramatic appeal of the film derives from a highly traditional story of the conflict between love and duty, honor and sacrifice. A rich, spoiled woman named Carmen (Mireille Balin) who has taken refuge in the Alcazar becomes transformed and learns to work for the common good by nursing the wounded, thereby attracting the attentions of the film's stalwart military hero, Captain Vela (Fosco Giachetti), who can love her only when she realizes that she must embrace the Fascist virtues of discipline and self-sacrifice.

The critical problem in a film such as *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* was perceived by everyone, especially the Fascist officials who would have to bear the responsibility of a commercial failure if the large sums of money invested in Genina's film did not make a profit. Luigi Freddi read the script before production began, and in a letter to Renato Bassoli, the producer, Freddi defines the script as a "fictional documentary" ("*un documentario romanzato*") and worries about the combination of the realistic or historical part of the film with its fictional or emotional part:

> While it is certain that the part which we have defined as "documentary" (that is, the real events recreated by technical and artistic means) attains a very high emotional content (from which, however, arises a serious defect, as I will explain later), the imaginative part, that is the dramatic part in the sense of the spectacle, the part created expressly to connect the evocation of historical events with the unrelated human events, seems to me to be very weak.[13]

The completed film was certainly more successful in combining history and fiction than Freddi had predicted from a reading of its script. In fact, Ales-

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