SIDNEY GOTTLIEB

Introduction

Open City: Reappropriating the Old, Making the New

Like only a handful of other works – *Birth of a Nation* (1914), *Potemkin* (1925), *Citizen Kane* (1941), and *Breathless* (1960) come most readily to mind – Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945; hereafter referred to in my essay simply as *Open City*) instantly, markedly, and permanently changed the landscape of film history. It has been credited with helping to initiate and guide a revolution in and reinvention of modern cinema, bold claims that are substantiated when we examine its enormous impact, even to this day, on how films are conceptualized, made, structured, theorized, circulated, and viewed. But the film has attained such a mythic power and status that we must be careful not to give in to uncritical enthusiasm. To combat this tendency (as well as to analyze and celebrate the film's perpetual appeal) the present volume is designed as "revisionary," offering a fresh look at the production history of *Open City*; some of its key images (particularly its representation of the city and various types of women); its cinematic influences and influence on later films; the complexity of its political dimensions (including the film's vision of political struggle and the political uses to which the film was put); and the legacy of the film in public consciousness.

Occasionally the effect – and, in fact, the intention – of this reexamination is to demythologize certain aspects of the film and the legends that surround it. For example, several of the essays herein note the various ways that *Open City* bears many traces of the kind of cinema it intends to replace – perhaps supporting the somewhat deflating argument that Rossellini was in fact no thoroughgoing

innovator, but perhaps also indicating that no revolution can proceed *ex nihilo*, and that innovation frequently rests on dialectical continuity and reappropriation rather than clean slates and completely new beginnings. And despite *Open City*'s reputation as a watershed moment, not only in Rossellini's development as one of the quintessential modern filmmakers, but also in the emergence of a distinctive and reinvigorated postwar cinema in general, each one of the essays calls attention to unresolved tensions, gaps, contradictions, and loose ends in the film that keep it from being entirely coherent, progressive, and politically and aesthetically consistent. The overall effort, though, is not to undermine but to reaffirm the extraordinary power and ongoing importance of *Open City*, and fine-tune our awareness of how it unquestionably and effectively challenges conventional films, filmmaking practices, and experiences of film by offering an alternative to the classical, Hollywood-dominated, corporate-industrial model of a cinema of distractions, gloss, high profitability, and low seriousness.

ROSSELLINI: BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Roberto Gastone Zeffiro Rossellini was born on May 8, 1906, in Rome and had many reasons to describe his childhood as "easy" and "very happy."[1] He grew up in a prosperous and loving family, surrounded by servants, material comforts, and intellectual and artistic stimulation – the latter especially provided by his father, a designer and builder, resolute liberal (during a time when liberalism was often blamed for the country's many problems), dedicated though not very successful writer, and host of a long-standing weekly salon. Rossellini remembered his home as "full of joy and fantasy," but also recalled being "at odds with the world" from "the moment I was born."[2] What might otherwise seem like an idyllic youth was marked by long periods of illness and increasing restlessness, boredom, self-indulgence, and inquisitiveness, all, as it turns out, key elements of his character and, perhaps not surprisingly, his cinematic art.

It is difficult to know exactly how and why he gravitated to a career in filmmaking. Initially, he resisted gravitating to a career in anything and spent most of his time, once he dropped out of school,

living off money from his family and earning a reputation as a free spirit (and spender), fast car driver (at a time when cars were scarce), and romantic adventurer involved in many erotic affairs as well as a quickly annulled marriage to a young actress, Assia Noris. He married, more seriously this time, Marcella De Marchis on September 26, 1936. Perhaps he was settling down a bit. A few years earlier, he had run through his inheritance and, forced to work for a living, turned to the film industry. This may have been a reluctant choice: As he pointed out in a later interview, "Before that I had a nicer job, that of a son, which I liked much better."[3] But it was also a logical step: he had a variety of friends in the business; he had screenplay writing experience, which made him some money and gave him a foot in the door and further contacts in this growing (and government-supported) enterprise; and he found that filmmaking allowed him to pursue much that was dear to him, including his interest in mechanics, his unconventional and still far from settled lifestyle, and what he described as his "zest to understand," a "predominant theme" in his works from the very beginning.[4]

Rossellini's apprenticeship took many forms: he was a sound technician, helping to dub foreign films into Italian; a piecework contributor to various screenplays; an assistant director; and the writer and director of a series of his own self-financed short films blending documentary and fantasy. His most substantive early work was collaborating on the screenplay and, according to some sources, directing parts of Goffredo Alessandrini's *Luciano Serra, pilota* (1938), one of the key films of Fascist-era cinema. This was followed by three films he directed, often referred to as his "fascist trilogy": *La nave bianca* (*The White Ship*, 1941), *Un pilota ritorna* (*A Pilot Returns*, 1942), and *L'uomo dalla croce* (*The Man of the Cross*, 1943). In his essay in this volume, Peter Bondanella, without suggesting that Rossellini was a fascist ideologue, argues persuasively for the multilevel continuity among these films and the ones that follow, and in general emphasizes the deep roots of antifascist neorealist cinema in some of the developing "tendencies" in Fascist-era cinema. But there is no disputing the fact that Rossellini's next three films, his so-called "war trilogy," mark a decisive breakthrough in his career and in modern film history: *Open City*, *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1947), and *Germania anno*

zero (*Germany Year Zero*, 1947) established Rossellini as one of the "fathers" of neorealism and helped move Italian films to the forefront of modern cinema, both critically and commercially.

If he was one of the founders and key representatives of neorealism, Rossellini was also one who refused to be bound by any cinematic template. As I argue in my essay in this volume, even his "classic" neorealist works like *Open City* challenge neorealist (as well as other cinematic, political, and moral) orthodoxies, and his films after the "war trilogy" do so even more relentlessly. Not entirely unintentionally, he generated tremendous controversy, and not just in circles where the nuances and future direction of neorealism and Italian cinema were hotly debated. *Il miracolo* (*The Miracle*, 1948) was widely attacked as blasphemous, and even though it was the focal point of a successful fight against film censorship in America, it helped to brand Rossellini, at least in some circles, as a dangerous character. And he made front-page news for his personal life as well: after seeing and being deeply moved by *Open City* and *Paisan*, Ingrid Bergman wrote him a letter, offering to make a film with him, and this was the first step in what was to many a scandalous love affair. They subsequently married, had three children together, and made five films that mark a definable period in Rossellini's career: the "Bergman films," including *Stromboli* (1949), *Europa '51* (1952), and *Voyage to Italy* (1953), were commercial failures but dazzling explorations of spiritual distress and failures in communication that solidified his appeal to a new generation of cineastes, especially those gathered around the influential journal, *Cahiers du cinéma*, and helped lay the foundation for cinematic revolutions that we now associate with the French New Wave directors and Italian modernists like Antonioni.

Rossellini never lost his interest in historical subjects: *Il generale Della Rovere* (*General Della Rovere*, 1959) and *Era notte a Roma* (*It Was Night in Rome*, 1960) revisit the war period, examining recurrent issues for Rossellini of fear, loyalty, entrapment, and the ironies of heroic conduct; and *Viva l'Italia* (1960) and *Vanina Vanini* (1961) chronicle events from the pivotal Risorgimento era, a recurrent reference point in the continuing drive for liberty in twentieth-century Italy. But his idea of historical cinema was changing: he was shifting toward a new medium, television, which offered him a new audience

and stable source of funding and technical support no longer available to him in the commercial cinema; he was turning to new subjects from various parts of the world – India, for example, which he traveled to and filmed extensively in 1957 – and a wide range of time periods – the age of Louis XIV, for example, in a film of 1966, and the age of the apostles in a film of 1968; and he was broadening his approach to history, focusing on pivotal moments that represented important shifts in human consciousness as well as long views, durational histories, if you will, that portrayed such things as the centuries-long age of iron (*L'eta del ferro*, 1963) and the perennial human struggle for survival (*La lotta dell'uomo per la sua sopravvivenza* [1967–69]).

The last twelve years or so of Rossellini's career were his most prolific, aided by his increasingly characteristic use of long takes and a zoom lens, which allowed him to film quickly. This period is his least accessible and appreciated, but must be reckoned with to understand fully what Bondanella describes as Rossellini's lifelong but especially late dedication to "cinema as a didactic tool."[5] He tried to further this project not only in his final films, intended to bring large numbers of people into vital and life-changing contact with key historical events and figures, such as Pascal (1972), Saint Augustine (1972), Descartes (1973), and Jesus (1975), but also by his many interviews and writings on film; his activities as the director of Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (1968–73), the Italian state-sponsored film school; and his connections with scientists and media technicians and theorists at Rice University in the United States. When Rossellini died of a heart attack on June 3, 1977, his best and most influential films were several decades and more behind him, but he was still at work on projects that consolidate and enhance his legacy as one of the visionaries and builders of a cinema of analysis, education, provocation, and inspiration.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF *OPEN CITY*

Near the beginning of her essay in this volume, Marcia Landy includes a very useful brief summary of *Open City* (pp. 87–88), which the reader unacquainted with the film may turn to for a quick orientation. What I offer in this section is a somewhat more detailed

overview, setting out the main lines of the plot but also attempting to broaden and to some extent complicate the way we look at the film by paying particular attention to its rhetoric and aesthetic techniques as well as its realism, carefully designed structure and repeated allusions to other films, and remarkable acts of reappropriation in service of the "springtime for Italy" it prophecies and attempts to usher in.

Even before the action of the film begins, we are provided with important information by the title and credit sequence. The working title, *Yesterday's Stories*, highlights the immediacy and relevance of the plot, but the final title, *Rome Open City*, is more resonant and specific. It associates what we will see with a well-known genre: this is a "city" film, treating Rome as not only a literal setting but as a living entity, in some ways, as Millicent Marcus notes, "the protagonist of the story" as well as a real and symbolic space that will be traversed, examined, contested, and reclaimed.[6] A key part of the cityscape appears behind the title and credits (although not in the American release version), including the dome of St. Peter's cathedral, which reappears in the background in the closing sequence as well, the first of many repetitions and echoes that are woven into the film (see Fig. 13).[7] The title alludes to a precise historical period in 1943–44, after the fall of Mussolini but before the Allies completed their successful march through the country, when the Germans agreed to designate Rome as "open," in effect demilitarized and not subject to occupation, attack, or military control. They disregarded this agreement literally as soon as it was made and proceeded to inhabit and rule the city with the kind of brutality documented in the film, but also attempted to use this designation to shield themselves from Allied attack. Rossellini counts on the fact that his audience would acknowledge the obvious irony and duplicity here, but from beginning to end the film also works on a much deeper and broader level to define what true "openness" entails: a shared personal capacity to accept and transcend some social and political differences and disagreements to establish not only an effective opposition to fascism but a lasting fair and inclusive community, and a cinematic style "open" to basic human needs and able to capture without distortion the often messy and unpredictable reality that rarely figured in conventional films.

The film begins with German soldiers marching in lockstep through a dark street in the city they have occupied, singing a strident military song about their homeland. (The film will end reversing this image, with a group of Italian boys walking silently, but with a stirring orchestral accompaniment in the background, comforting each other in pairs as they move toward the brightly lit city they are in the process of restoring.) The first segment of Rossellini's next film, *Paisan*, actually includes a reference to its dark setting as "like Frankenstein's castle." Nothing like this is specified in *Open City*, but the huge stone building rising up in the shadows in the background immediately places us in the realm of horror. The "monsters" are not supernatural demons but Nazi functionaries, monstrous enough as they carry submachine guns into an apartment and tower over two old women, searching for a man they identify as Giorgio Manfredi. Manfredi, though, looking like a man on the run in a classic mystery film, has already escaped across the rooftop: agility and mobility as well as endurance prove to be defining marks of the members of the Resistance.

The scene dissolves to the office of the commanding officer of the Germans, Major Bergmann, and Rossellini quickly summarizes the Nazi character, mentality, and method. Bergmann is, to be sure, part caricature, played as an effete and blasé sadist, mincing as he parades around in his administrative domain (we never see him outside) and wincing in annoyance when the torture he ordered causes too much noise for his refined sensibility. He is also part cinematic villain: when he sits at his desk, holds up a series of photographs, and tells the Italian police commissioner how he uses a far-reaching surveillance network to travel through and control the city, he bears an unmistakable resemblance to Fritz Lang's master criminal, Dr. Mabuse. Rossellini adds to this impression of villainy by putting dark shadows across the top of Bergmann's head, as well as that of the commissioner. But along with these stylized touches, Rossellini also begins to build up a picture of a dangerous force that cannot simply be hissed off the stage: the scream of the tortured professor, which will be echoed later by Manfredi's screams, is shockingly real, and is only one of a series of accumulating details that break through the screen, as it were, and remind the audience less of cinematic Mabuses and imaginary houses of horror than real-life tyrants like Gestapo commander

Herbert Kappler, one of the recognizable models for Bergmann, and infamous places of interrogation and torture like the one in the German embassy at 155 Via Tasso.

Bergmann wants to break the unity of the Italian people – the sight of him standing in front of a map of Rome explaining his plan to divide the city into fourteen sectors (see Fig. 14) would presumably be a dramatic reminder to an Italian audience that the Nazis stand for everything that the revered nineteenth-century revolutionary movement, the Risorgimento, successfully fought against – an Italy of fragments, hardly an Italy at all – and smugly argues that the city can be contained (closed rather than opened) by surveillance and terror. As if to counter these claims, Rossellini dissolves to a scene that illustrates how the city will not be so easily controlled. An angry and hungry crowd of people, mostly women, has stormed a bakery and "liberated" it of bread. Rossellini uses comic touches but also direct explanatory statements by some of the participants to carefully establish that this action is not spasmodic, unprincipled, and violent – at least insofar as it does not hurt anyone physically – but just and necessary during times of great need. This scene also introduces us to Pina, evidently one of the instigators of the "celebration" at the bakery, and alerts us from the very beginning that this woman is not only at the emotional and moral but also the political heart of the film. There is some bantering later among the children about whether or not "girls" can be heroes and effective parts of the Resistance movement. Pina's example settles the issue definitively, although the film also dramatizes that not everyone, woman or man, can live up to her high standards.

Here as elsewhere in the film, Rossellini frequently moves from one scene to another with a vertical wipe. This technique, where one image is replaced by another moving across the frame, is commonplace in early action-adventure and mystery films, reinforces an episodic structure, and quickens the pace by leaving out shots that are merely transitional and establishing, concentrating our attention on what is dramatically essential. But these quick shifts and ellipses in *Open City* are balanced by more drawn-out sequences that call our attention to other essential, although not necessarily dramatic, actions. Several wipes help Rossellini move Pina from the bakery back to her apartment, but when she meets Manfredi, who is looking for

Francesco, his friend and Pina's fiancé, time seems to expand as they get to know one another, moving from initial distrust to friendship and even intimacy as they discuss important and inevitably personal matters (talk about politics flows naturally into talk about love). It is very interesting to see how Rossellini decides what is "essential" and what is not: he uses a wipe to compress even further the time it takes Pina's son, Marcello, to walk down a short flight of stairs as she asks him to go out on an errand, but while Pina and Manfredi are talking, Rossellini holds a shot patiently, even as Pina walks out of the frame and then back in with coffee. An important bond is forming between them, and Rossellini does not hurry them – or us – through the process.

Manfredi needs to meet with Don Pietro, a priest active in the Resistance, so Pina sends Marcello to bring him back to the apartment. Rossellini cuts to black, and we quickly see it is the black of Don Pietro's robe. He is in motion (almost always a virtue in *Open City*), and a moving, hand-held camera captures not only the energy and joy of the boys playing soccer (sound is important here as well: their group noise, like that of the crowd earlier at the bakery, is one of the vernacular languages of *Open City*, communal and exuberant) but also the way that the priest is both referee and participant, alternately blowing his whistle and kicking the ball, a precise image of the dual responsibilities he has to negotiate outside the ball field as well. Only after viewing the entire film do we become fully aware of how evocative this scene is, how much of what is to come is implicit here: the ball hitting Don Pietro on the head is a comic touch, but looks forward to a deeper wound, and the moment when he hands his whistle to one of the older boys to take over for him as he departs is surprisingly and almost inexplicably poignant, a preview of how the film must end.

Don Pietro and Marcello walk out through the church to the street, where the real holy actions and confessions happen in the film. (As Martin Scorsese, deeply influenced by neorealism and Rossellini in particular, will say at the beginning of *Mean Streets* [1973], "You don't make up for your sins in church. You do it in the street. You do it at home.") The camera follows them as they walk (a technique repeated later when Don Pietro walks with Pina and hears her confession), and although Don Pietro is not altogether pleased by the radical slogans

Marcello mouths, picked up from his friend Romoletto, about the need to "close ranks against the common enemy," a sudden extreme close-up (used rarely, as a kind of special effect in the film) of the boy reinforces his sincerity, and whether he knows it or not, Don Pietro is on the way to follow Marcello's good advice. He meets Manfredi, the "denounced" Communist who must stay in hiding, and agrees to pick up money for him and deliver it to help the fighters in the Resistance movement harbored nearby. There may be a bit of an in-joke here, as the million lire hidden in the books Don Pietro is to carry is exactly the budget-busting amount that Aldo Fabrizi, the actor playing him, initially demanded as his fee. Fabrizi at least gets his hands on a million lire in the film, and also gets an opportunity to show off his comic talents. While waiting in a shop to make the pickup, Don Pietro sees two statues, one of a nude woman, the other of St. Rocco, who appears to be staring at the nude. Don Pietro modestly turns the nude statue around, only to be shocked by St. Rocco now apparently staring at her backside, so St. Rocco needs to be adjusted again. This is one of several delightful comic interludes in the film, and is no less amusing even if we recognize that it was probably lifted directly out of an old music-hall routine – if not from *Behind the Screen* (1916), one of the great short films by an old music-hall master, Charlie Chaplin.

The tone changes markedly though as a wipe moves us from the literally underground meeting of the men planning Resistance activities to the brightly lit nightclub dressing room, where Marina, earlier identified as Manfredi's lover, sits in front of a mirror and nervously looks in her handbag for drugs (evidently pictured in more detail in shots censored from the American release version). Marina is joined by Lauretta, Pina's sister, and the two of them chatter about their personal needs and attraction to the "things that are bad for us, but we do them all the same." When Ingrid, the female counterpart of Bergmann, enters the room, bringing drugs, she completes a triptych that, in almost medieval fashion, depicts an ominous progression: Lauretta is a giggling, flighty young woman, satisfied to enjoy the easy life assured by sleeping with "Fritz"; Marina is a lost soul, soon to betray her man; and Ingrid is a hardened she-Nazi, a woman-seducing demon.