

Critique of "Rome Open City" by Maria Buratti

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Like the subsequent *Paisà/Paisan* (1946) and *Germania anno zero/ Germany, Year Zero* (1947), the first part of Rossellini's 'trilogy of war' observes the effects of the Second World War on ordinary people.

The film ushered in the era of Italian neorealism, and the first element that signals an important break with the cinema of the past is its subject matter, which is drawn from real events. History resides in the everyday stories of the common experiences of the people of Rome: hunger, fear, patrols and curfews; the threat of torture by the Nazis; discontent over drawn-out hardship and overcrowded housing; widespread social problems and the measures necessary to survive them.

The interweaving storylines (Don Pietro, the militants, Francesco and Pina, the band of child Partisans, and the inhabitants of the housing block) form into a fresco. The choral aspect of the story corresponds to a new conception of the role of the actor; alongside professionals like Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi, who abandon conventional acting styles to give a sense of merely 'existing' in front of the lens (despite some comic and melodramatic touches emanating from Fabrizi's origins in the theatre), appear non-professionals taken from the streets: their ordinariness is marked by a consonance between natural physical type and character, creating an apparent document of reality (this productive amalgamation of character and actor being much praised by André Bazin).

In contrast to the Gestapo officer in charge of 'scientific patrols' who – looking at photographs of wanted Partisans – claims to stroll through the streets of Rome without having to leave his office, Rossellini's camera searches the urban locality for its characters and their stories. People appear intimately bound up in their environments and the location shooting reveals a ruined landscape.

Instead of subjecting human beings and places to the demands of narrative and spectacle, Rossellini observes stories that seem to emerge naturally from the devastated, bombed-out city.

To adequately document this geographical, human, and social landscape destroyed by the war requires a new cinematic language.

Of course, many conventional aspects of film grammar exist alongside more innovative aspects: the economy of the narrative drive; the use of classical editing and generic conventions; the caricatured aspects of some of the minor characters such as the police sergeant and the sacristan. But the urgency of documenting real life tragedy and of sticking to the events is manifested in the immediacy of the relation between fiction film and reality. The sense of authenticity to the artistic innovations of *Roma città aperta* comes from its attitude towards reality, its willingness (which Rossellini described as 'waiting') to let reality unfold before the camera rather than re-order it neatly to the dramatic necessities of the story. Rossellini allows chaos into the film's form, and in doing so finds new ways of making its action progress: the ending is left open, the link from cause to effect is slowed down, and space is given to the characters' smallest actions, allowing events to unfold according to their actual duration (as exemplified in the scene where Manfredi is tortured). Breaking apart the harmonious form of classical cinema, *Roma città aperta* brings to the screen the disorder of reality.