

# eScholarship

## California Italian Studies

### Title

Libera nos a malo: Violence and Hope, Image and Word in Rossellini's *Roma città aperta*

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5pv7m0s3>

### Journal

California Italian Studies, 6(2)

### Author

Stewart, Fiona M.

### Publication Date

2016

### DOI

10.5070/C362028145

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## “Liberate us from evil”:

### Violence and Hope, Image and Word in Rossellini’s *Roma città aperta*

Fiona M. Stewart

Orthodox Christianity has long held a view of life that is realistic but not pessimistic; optimistic but not idealistic. It acknowledges the violence, suffering, and evil that human beings witness and experience on a daily basis, but strongly asserts that this is not the way life should be. Moreover, Christian eschatology claims to hold out hope: God has declared that one day He will set all things right.<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Kolker sees a similar dynamic at work in most neorealist films, where “characters inhabit a ruined, collapsed world” and loss and sacrifice are “the necessary conditions of [...] victory.”<sup>2</sup>

This article examines Roberto Rossellini’s film *Roma città aperta*, released in 1945. It seeks to demonstrate that Rossellini intends to deliver a message of individual and national hope, in line with the historic and orthodox Christian eschatology outlined above.<sup>3</sup>

While some of Rossellini’s later films, such as *Il miracolo* (1947) and *Stromboli* (1950), also have explicitly Christian overtones, *Roma città aperta* stands apart—even from *The Messiah* (1975)—for the prominence it gives to the crucifixion and for its visual and lexical echoes of Christ’s sacrificial death. That is, in *Roma città aperta*, Rossellini engages with and deploys historic, orthodox Christian liturgy and iconography, while in Rossellini’s other “Christian” films, Christ, the Savior of sinners, is largely jettisoned in favor of a more inspid and esoteric spirituality, often portrayed by protagonists with psychological problems or, as in *The Messiah*, a Christ for Marxists.<sup>4</sup>

If *Roma città aperta* had been shot and released in 1948, rather than 1945, we might be inclined to a more ironic reading of this film: by 1948, the wartime collaboration between Italian Catholics and Communists had dissipated in the face of Cold War tensions and suspicion. As it is, Rome was liberated by the Allies on 5 June 1944, and the film was conceptualized that August by Rossellini, Sergio Amidei, and Federico Fellini. Shooting began in January 1945, while the Germans still occupied Italy’s northern cities, and the film was released in September of that year. Memories of the German occupation were thus still raw in the minds of the film’s first Italian audiences. It can be argued that in drawing on Christian iconography and liturgy—powerful and emotive in their familiarity to church-going Italian audiences of 1945—and juxtaposing them with images of the reprehensible violence recently experienced, Rossellini and Amidei created a sense of transcendence consistent with Christian eschatology that engenders

---

<sup>1</sup> Biblical teaching as a whole and Revelation 21:5 in particular points to this idea: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Kolker, *The Altering Eye: Contemporary Italian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 64.

<sup>3</sup> In a brief article first published in 1946, Meyer Schapiro argued that one of the main themes of *Roma città aperta* was the collaboration between the Church and the Resistance: “[This theme] is carried through in many details and even assumes the pattern of a familiar Christian legend” (“A Note on ‘The Open City’: Some Comments on Farrell’s Review,” *October* 128 (2009): 86).

<sup>4</sup> Ted Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1998), 116.

individual and national hope for renewal post-Liberation.<sup>5</sup> The filmmakers thus adopt a Christological narrative, whose inherently “universal key” was very much in harmony with the goals and priorities of the *Partito comunista italiano* (PCI) at the end of World War II. In short, Rossellini’s Christological narrative does not, and is not intended to have, a social and political value consistent with historic international Communism. Rather, with words and images familiar from their Christian faith, Rossellini conveys to the original Italian viewers that their wartime suffering should be understood as pointing to the possibility of a collective national renewal;<sup>6</sup> that these words and imagery predated and outlasted the Fascist *Ventennio* would likely not have been lost on the original audiences.

André Bazin, in his letter to Guido Aristarco, editor-in-chief of *Cinema Nuovo*, tackled film critics’ perceived objections to Rossellini’s aesthetic framework:

It is true, nonetheless, that one does have a right to reject the moral or spiritual postulate that is increasingly evident in his work, but even so to reject this would not imply rejection of the aesthetic framework within which this message is manifest unless the films of Rossellini were in fact films *à thèse*, that is, unless they were mere dramatizations of *a priori* ideas. But in point of fact there is no Italian director in whose work aims and form are more closely linked and it is precisely on this basis that I would characterize Rossellini's neorealism.<sup>7</sup>

Rossellini’s “aims and form” in *Roma città aperta* are indeed closely linked. From the outset, it is clear that Rossellini and Amidei envisaged creating a film that would encourage and inspire their viewers, “something to revitalize the spirits of the Italian people, something positive.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Rossellini was, according to his biographer, conscious he had a responsibility in society which could be fulfilled “by telling the stories of the people around him.”<sup>9</sup> Italo Calvino, in his oft-quoted essay on neorealism, describes how after the war everyone had a story to tell.<sup>10</sup> Rossellini and Amidei drew on both their own and others’ experiences of Rome’s occupation to craft the film script. Thus they wove together a rich tapestry representative of recent popular experience, both Catholic and Communist.

Filmed in the first half of 1945, *Roma città aperta* embodies the post-*svolta di Salerno* outlook of the PCI. On 1 April 1944, the social and political ideology and goals of international communism were put on hold as the PCI, and particularly its leader, Palmiro Togliatti, recognized the more pressing concern of ensuring national liberation and a willingness to work

---

<sup>5</sup> In 1956 some 69% of Italians still attended Mass weekly. By 1998 this had dropped to 41%, a relative decline of 40%. For a fuller discussion see Roberto Marchisio and Maurizio Pisati, “Belonging without believing: Catholics in contemporary Italy,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 4:2 (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Here I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer who, in commenting on an earlier draft of this article, urged me to further consider the political value and motivation of Rossellini’s Christological narrative. While this final version may not have gone in the direction for which the reviewer advocated, the discussion is, I believe, stronger for his/her input. Any factual errors or weaknesses in analysis are of course entirely my own.

<sup>7</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 96-97.

<sup>8</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> The first edition of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* was published in 1947. Calvino subsequently added a preface to the 1964 edition which became one of the most feted essays on neorealism. Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun, rev. Martin McLaughlin (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 8.

with “ideological adversaries for the common good of the entire nation.”<sup>11</sup> On 6 June, the day after Rome’s liberation, Togliatti issued a declaration, “Instructions to All Comrades and to All Party Cadres,” that could not have expressed more clearly the PCI’s desires to work for the common good:

2. The insurrection we are aiming for must not be that of a political party or of a section only of the anti-fascist front. It must be the insurrection of the whole people of the whole nation.
3. Always remember that the aim of the insurrection is not the imposition of political and social transformations in the socialist or communist sense. Its aim is national liberation and the destruction of fascism. All other problems will be solved by the people through a free popular consultation and the election of a Constituent Assembly when the whole of Italy will have been liberated.<sup>12</sup>

While neither Amidei nor Rossellini were members of the PCI, Amidei’s home was a regular meeting place for influential Italian communists, including Togliatti. Antonio Gramsci’s writings shaped the thinking of these progressive intellectuals. For Gramsci, revolution was “intellectual and emotional rather than materialist”; further, he argued that “The way to convert Italians to Communism [...] was to respect Catholicism while forging alliances between the working classes and the intellectuals and artists. Thus would be created a culture both national *and* popular—the only sort of culture capable of abolishing exploitation.”<sup>13</sup> Rossellini heard many of these discussions and their lasting impact can be seen in his postwar actions and films. After the Liberation, Rossellini, in collaboration with others from the film industry, appealed for an “entente between Catholic and Marxist intellectuals” and worked on developing collaborative cultural programs.<sup>14</sup>

Several scholars have noted a congruence between Communist and Catholic protagonists in Rossellini’s film. Marcia Landy draws the two ideologies together as she notes that Manfredi and Don Pietro “exemplify the high-minded ideals of anti-Fascist Resistance, identified not only with the Communist Left but with Christian morality.”<sup>15</sup> Ward, on the other hand, argues that “rather than any synthesis of opposing ideologies, the language they share owes its existence more to Manfredi’s renunciation than Don Pietro’s adoption of a Communist vocabulary. Indeed, the film is at pains to underscore the Christian message that underlies Manfredi’s communism by drawing analogies between him and Christ.”<sup>16</sup> In line with this privileging of Christianity over Communism, Rossellini’s biographer, Tag Gallagher, notes that the initial support of the left for *Roma città aperta* dissipated in the 1950s with the charge that “he had not after all, [...] been interested in class struggle but rather in ‘Catholic historicism’”:

Rossellini (they would charge) avoids the need to investigate the actual, historical Resistance, the need to illuminate the dialectic among the concrete social forces

---

<sup>11</sup> David Ward, *Antifascisms: Cultural Politics in Italy, 1943-1946: Benedetto Croce and the Liberals, Carlo Levi and the ‘Actionists’* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Donald Sassoon, *The Strategy of the Italian Communist Party: From the Resistance to the Historic Compromise* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 111.

<sup>14</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 116.

<sup>15</sup> Marcia Landy, *Italian Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 322.

<sup>16</sup> Ward, *Antifascisms*, 92.

involved in it, the need to examine history's laws and forces. In his ahistorical, spiritualist vision it is not the dialectal forces of history which will make possible humanity's triumph but rather Christian love.<sup>17</sup>

If accounts of the film's genesis are reliable, class struggle had never been part of the discussion. Nor was this a film to chronicle or investigate the historical Resistance and occupation. Rather, this film was a collage of moments, drawn from real life, and thus representative of Roman experience during the occupation. By adopting a Christian key and a Christological narrative, Amidei and Rossellini focus not on the twenty years of Italian Fascism which had led the country to its current plight and division, but rather on elements of Italian cultural and religious life which had had some two millennia of unifying influence on Western civilization. In so doing, Rossellini and Amidei remind Italians of the foundations on which the peninsula's culture had been built, and therefore point them to solid foundations on which to unify and rebuild the country postwar. In addition, the transideological collaboration of Manfredi and Don Pietro in *Roma città aperta* prioritizes the values they hold in common and their shared vision of a better tomorrow. Ward notes that "it is hard to pin down Manfredi or Francesco, Pina's fiancée [sic], as Communists at all, so thoroughly do their behavior and values conform to the standardized codes of the 'good and honest' guy."<sup>18</sup> Instead, he continues, "Manfredi and Francesco insist at all times on the far more nebulous, idealistic, ideologically neutral, and inoffensive vocabulary of Christian humanism that André Bazin has located at the heart of Italian neorealism."<sup>19</sup>

The body of this article begins with an overview of the correlation between visual image and spoken word in *Roma città aperta* as a whole. It then examines Don Pietro's death within the context of the other deaths in the film. Thirdly it seeks to demonstrate that, despite the fact that Rossellini and Amidei were agnostics, they deliberately and skillfully deployed Christian doctrine, often syncretized with Communist ideology, to craft a film that would have seemed at once realistic and hopeful to its original Italian audience. The final section of the article shows this craftsmanship in action through a close reading of the liturgical lexicon and visual images in Don Pietro's execution, the final four minutes of the film.

Don Pietro's execution brings to a climax the powerful marriage of image and word, violence and hope, that is apparent from the film's establishing shot. The title appears with a rooftop panorama of the Eternal City, St. Peter's well-known dome centered in the frame. Its central position is held for a few seconds and then the camera pans left, and the *Vittoriano*, or *altare della patria*, enters the shot. This iconic monument serves a triple purpose: it is a memorial to Vittorio Emanuele II, the first king of unified Italy; it celebrates the country's unification and freedom; and it commemorates those men and women who died securing and defending Italy's liberty. To focus on this potent symbol of Italian sovereignty and freedom at the opening of *Roma città aperta* is, of course, no casual coincidence: title and film alike tell the story of another generation of Italians and their struggles and sacrifices to regain national sovereignty and freedom. The camera continues to pan left, heading away from Piazza Venezia and on towards Piazza di Spagna. Already we can hear singing and the sound of marching boots. But these are German voices and German boots. That this is a menacing, occupying foreign

---

<sup>17</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 171.

<sup>18</sup> Ward, *Antifascisms*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Ward, *Antifascisms*, 91.

power quickly becomes clear as the bright, expansive cityscape is replaced by a dark, tight shot of the Spanish Steps and the distinctive helmets of marching German troops.

Throughout the film, the choice of language and its juxtaposition with particular images is significant. The German language is heard over or alongside images of violence and oppression, obtrusive in its status as the language of the foreign occupier. This is seen, for example, as the Germans and Fascists surround Pina and Francesco's palazzo: an interpreter conveys the German officer's orders to the Fascists who then sweep the building, rounding up their compatriots. Italian is paired with images of resilience and fortitude, hope and common enterprise in an effort to overcome the occupier. It comes then as a surprise that Italian is the dominant language in the scenes at the Gestapo headquarters in Via Tasso, both in Major Bergmann's office and in the torture chamber. As Peter Bondanella notes, in reality the Fascists would typically have helped the Gestapo with translation; in Rossellini's film, however, Major Bergmann speaks directly to the Roman Police Commissioner, Manfredi, and Don Pietro in Italian, and so blurs the Italian connection to Nazi Germany.<sup>20</sup> By blurring the lines between Italian Fascists and Nazi Germany in this way, Rossellini and Amidei emphasize, firstly, that while this film is about a transideological struggle for national liberation, it also depicts an epic battle between good and evil; secondly, because both the Italian Fascists and the German Nazis speak one common language, Italian, the film minimizes the perception of the Resistance as a fratricidal civil war. Latin, the language of the church until the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), is married with images that transcend the temporal, offering the teleological perspective from which the film's hopefulness ultimately derives.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to set the final scene within the broader context of Rossellini's juxtaposing of violence and hope, image and word, throughout the film as a whole. *Roma città aperta* has numerous incidents of violence, physical and psychological. Four characters die or are killed: Pina is gunned down as she chases her captured fiancé; the Austrian deserter hangs himself rather than face interrogation by the SS; Manfredi, the Communist partisan, dies at the hand of torturers in the Gestapo headquarters; and Don Pietro is executed by a firing squad. In brief, each of these episodes of violence are bound up with individual and national hope, or a lack thereof.

Pina, in life the quintessential *romana popolana*, to borrow the words of Mark Shiel, expresses all the indignation and righteous desire of Romans for freedom.<sup>22</sup> We first meet her as she emerges with her spoils from the fray of the women's raid on the bakery: Pina and the other women are here seen acting in rebellion against the oppression and deprivation brought on by the war and the German occupation.<sup>23</sup> Pina's vocabulary and behavior incorporate the cadences and

---

<sup>20</sup> Peter Bondanella, audio commentary on *Roma città aperta*, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Gallagher describes the force of post-war cinema as "the euphoria of the truth." However, he leaves the reader with the impression of his own underlying cynicism, a sense that it was all too good to be true, as he goes on to say: "melodrama was at the core of Amidei's conflict of good against evil [...] Pitted against stereotypes of eternal damnation were stereotypes of nationalism, Christianity, solidarity, populism, morality and existentialism" (*Adventures*, 138). Certain incidents and scenes undoubtedly deployed stereotypes, often for comic effect (for example, the sexton who participates in the raid on the bakery is presented as a hypocritical simpleton as he explains his haul to Don Pietro with the words: "I don't know which holiday it was. Not even the baker knew"). However, as my analysis unfolds, I aim to demonstrate that to dismiss the Manichaean battle in *Roma città aperta* as simply one stereotype amongst others is to miss the depth and nuance of Rossellini and Amidei's engagement with Christianity and their intended Italian Catholic audience.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Shiel, "Rossellini and the City," interview on *Roma città aperta*, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Like many details in this film, the raid on the bakery is drawn from historical fact. Bread riots in Rome began on 1 April 1944. On 7 April 1944 women and children raided a bakery in the Ostiense district of Rome that served German troops. Ten of the women involved were subsequently captured and executed by the SS in reprisal (Robert

rhythms of Roman Catholicism even though, pregnant and unmarried, she is the first to acknowledge that she is something of a lapsed believer and that her life has been inconsistent with Christian morality. Walking with Don Pietro the evening before her wedding, she informally makes her confession—poignantly, this confession will be her last. As she walks and talks with Don Pietro, not only does she confess her specific sin of being pregnant out of wedlock but she also looks for divine intervention in the suffering of their present reality: “Ma Dio non ci vede?” (“Can’t Christ see us?”). Here, too, in Don Pietro’s reply, we see that Pina is the representative voice of the *romana popolana*: “Tanti mi fanno questa domanda, sora Pina” (“Many ask me that question, sister Pina”). Her death, however, while consistent with her spontaneous and plucky persona, seems utterly futile. She breaks free from the German soldiers, desperately calling for her fiancé Francesco; while attempting to prevent his arrest on this their wedding day, she sees him taken away on the German army truck. In a reverse tracking shot, we see her gunned down in cold blood by a bullet that seems to come out of nowhere. Don Pietro then cradles her broken body in a pose clearly reminiscent of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*.<sup>24</sup> Yet Pina’s violent death, unlike that of Christ, offers no hope to others, only grief and loss; it is just another civilian death, the collateral damage of total war. Within minutes, Francesco is freed by a group of partisans who ambush the truck, underlining the utter futility of Pina’s death.<sup>25</sup> As Siobhan S. Craig points out, the *pietà* is a composition already well-established in Rossellini’s fascist-era work, and one which returns repeatedly in his postwar films: “The gentle cradling of a wounded or dead body becomes a defining posture of the hero in Rossellini’s fascist war films [...] [I]n the later [neorealist] films, the sacrificed figures are fascism’s victims, not its martyrs. Rossellini’s trademark *pietà* has been recontextualized: rather than an exaltation of the fascist ideal, it has been rewritten as a condemnation of it.”<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, the Austrian deserter’s death shows how the loss of all hope results in self-inflicted violence and suicide. Without the political and religious hope of the other protagonists, the Austrian shows an alternative response to the violence of evil—utter despair. After experiencing the horror of Monte Cassino, he deserts and comes to Don Pietro for shelter. We never learn his name. His lack of courage and moral fortitude is intensified in the contrast he presents with the implicit heroism typically associated with the Unknown Soldier alluded to in the opening shot of the *altare della patria*. *Roma città aperta* tends to present characters in black and white rather than allowing for shades of grey, as we may note in the depiction of the Austrian deserter. He is wearing the uniform of the German army but belongs to the Austrian nation from which Italy had won its freedom during the *Risorgimento*. His nationality, character, and behavior are no mere coincidence in Rossellini and Amidei’s schema: in the film, Germans

---

Katz, *The Battle for Rome: The Germans, the Allies, the Partisans, and the Pope* (NYC: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 350).

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Father Virgilio Fantuzzi argues that each episode of the film concludes with Christological iconography. See his interview in the Criterion Collection DVD, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Perry offers a thoughtful but very different reading of Pina’s death. He states: “The deepest Christological significance communicated through personal sacrifice is found in Pina’s death [...] In this cinematic recreation of a *pietà*, we have the sacred roles reversed: a woman in this case, like the men in hundreds of biographies, embodies the significance of martyrdom and the promise of ultimate victory” (Alan Perry, “Literary and Cinematic Representations of Sacred Italian Resistance Memory: The Holy Partisan-Martyr as Hero,” *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies* 33/2 (1999): 441). Karl Schoonover takes a different position to most critics, rejecting the idea of any symbolism in Pina’s brutalized body and instead arguing that the depiction of this and other violence to the body stands at “the center of the film’s invention of a moral position of bystanding” (Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 114).

<sup>26</sup> Siobhan S. Craig, *Cinema After Fascism: The Shattered Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25–26.

are consistently presented as having no redeeming qualities, and in the immediate post-war, many Italians spoke of the Resistance to Fascism as a “second *Risorgimento*.”<sup>27</sup> The Austrian deserter embodies both these traits, although for a brief moment, as we first meet him, we might be tempted to wonder if here we have a “good German,” given that he has walked away from the barbarity of the battlefield. Within the Catholic hermeneutic that frames this film, the death of the Austrian deserter stands apart from Pina’s murder and the martyr-like deaths of Manfredi and Don Pietro. Already in his so-called Fascist trilogy, Rossellini’s cinema had begun to explore the tension between men with and without hope: the contrast between the Austrian deserter and the Italians is amplified given that news of his death arrives as Manfredi and Don Pietro are already experiencing the violence of the Gestapo interrogators.<sup>28</sup>

The deaths of Manfredi and Don Pietro constitute the fulcrum of *Roma città aperta* on several levels. The violence meted out by the Nazis and Fascists against them is, in Rossellini’s schema, the violence perpetrated by the wicked against the righteous. *Roma città aperta* presents the Nazis as the epitome of evil; the Fascists play a much smaller role and are seemingly half-hearted—indeed, even inept—in their violent acts.<sup>29</sup> The union in their final hours of two supposedly implacable foes, Don Pietro, the Catholic priest, and Manfredi, the Communist partisan, testifies to three things: first, to the collaboration between partisans of both worldviews during the Resistance; second, to the hope that Church and Communists would work together to eventually overcome the violence and oppression of the Nazis and their Fascist sidekicks; and third, to the fact that Rossellini and Amidei are skillfully grafting an historical, materialist message of political rebirth onto the Christian roots of his postwar Italian audience.

Manfredi dies under the brutality of the German torturers. He dies heroically, uttering not a word and so protecting his fellow partisans. The Christological iconography of the torture scene has already been well-analyzed by numerous scholars, as has the irony of presenting Manfredi, the atheist Communist, as a sacrificial Christ-figure.<sup>30</sup> His death is not the subject of the present study but its *mise-en-scène* and its explicit echoes of Christ’s last moments on the cross are an important part of the context for critiquing the juxtaposition of image and word in Don Pietro’s execution. Visually and orally the scenes of Manfredi’s death draw on Christ’s crucifixion, sometimes in a precise echo, sometimes in a carefully orchestrated reversal for maximum emotional impact. For example, strung up against the wall of the torture chamber, arms outstretched, Manfredi’s body visually echoes that of many an artistic representation of the crucifixion. There is thus an explicit parallel with Christian belief: this man is dying on behalf of others, not to atone for their sins, but to shield them from the brutality of the Gestapo forces. Orally, in a reversal of Christ’s crucifixion, it is not Manfredi the “crucified” who triumphantly shouts, “It is finished!” before he bows his head and dies; rather, these words are uttered by Don Pietro, the witness, immediately after Manfredi expires and just before the priest issues his curse.

---

<sup>27</sup> On the Resistance as a “second *Risorgimento*,” see for example, Claudio Pavone, “Italy: Trends and Problems,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2/1 (1967): 51; or, more recently, Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991), 180, and Tom Behan, *The Italian Resistance: Fascists, Guerrillas and the Allies* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 57.

<sup>28</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> The apparent ineptitude of the Italian Fascists is made clear in the response of Major Hartmann, the German officer, to the failure of the Fascist firing squad to kill Don Pietro. The failure to hit Don Pietro would, however, seem to be deliberate on the part of the Italians: even the Fascists drew the line at executing a priest.

<sup>30</sup> See for example, Perry, “Holy Partisan-Martyr,” 440–441; Roy Armes, *Patterns of Realism* (South Brunswick, NY: A. S. Barnes, 1971), 74; Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Italian Film from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 63.



While Christ's final words are transferred to Don Pietro, there is still an element of triumph in Manfredi's silence. Immediately prior to this statement, Don Pietro had turned to Manfredi and said, "You didn't talk!" Manfredi's head then falls to his chest as he dies, reassured in the fact that he has not failed his companions. A more subtle touch is seen in Major Bergmann's declaration that Manfredi is to be buried under the name on his false papers, Giovanni Episcopo. Even in the choice of this character's pseudonym, Amidei makes a nod to Christianity: the title *Episcopo*, that is, bishop or shepherd, is most fitting for Manfredi who has, in one sense, given his life for the sheep, his fellow partisans.<sup>31</sup>

Don Pietro watches Manfredi's suffering through the open door to the adjacent room. He is brought to Manfredi's side as the partisan breathes his last. After murmuring a brief prayer over his dead companion, Don Pietro turns to the Germans and curses them with a ferocity that makes the Germans literally step back. Aghast at his own words, Don Pietro then drops to his knees in front of Manfredi and begins to recite Psalm 130, one of the penitential psalms: "De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam" ("From the depths I cried out to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice"). This is the last we see of Don Pietro until he arrives at the site of his execution. The echoes of Christ's last words on the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—and indeed the manner in which Don Pietro's words contrast with those of Christ, set the scene for the priest's death.<sup>32</sup> Through Don Pietro's words and actions the filmmakers emphasize that while the Germans might consider themselves "the master race"—Captain Hartmann's ironic concluding comment to Manfredi's death scene—there is an ultimate authority at work to whom each, including the priest, must give account. Indeed, Don Pietro had stated as much explicitly in his opening conversation with Major Bergmann.

Already it should be evident that *Roma città aperta* is a rich tapestry of Judeo-Christian ideas, words, and images. Yet neither Roberto Rossellini, the film's director, nor Sergio Amidei, the principal scriptwriter, were practicing Catholics.<sup>33</sup> It is nevertheless my contention that the juxtaposition of Don Pietro and the unnamed priest's words with the visual elements and action of the film holds the key to understanding what is an essentially Christian depiction of violence and hope. Amidei was a member of the Communist Party and had himself been a partisan during the war. Rossellini, on the other hand, had represented the Christian Democrats in the subcommittee of the *Comitato Nazionale della Liberazione* but cannot be described as a Christian: in fact, he tells us explicitly that he doesn't believe in God,<sup>34</sup> and is known never to

---

<sup>31</sup> Given Manfredi's role as the film's Christ-figure, the implicit link with Christ's own words in John 10:11 is worth noting: "I am the good shepherd. The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Another important Judeo-Christian motif, the sacrificial lamb, has already been introduced much earlier in the film. Manfredi is at the trattoria with Francesco and Marina when the German soldiers arrive with "meat," in the form of two sheep that they then kill with a bullet to the head. Marina goes over to the window to look, takes in the scene and mutters, "Povere bestie" ("Poor beasts"), before burying her head in Manfredi's shoulder. This scene is echoed in a frame at the end of the film. Marina enters the torture chamber with Major Hartmann, sees Manfredi's broken body and lets out a drug-induced giggle which quickly changes to a shriek of horror as she comprehends the reality of the scene before her and slumps to the floor. As the one who had betrayed Manfredi, she arguably feels greater compassion for the sheep in the earlier scene.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 15:33.

<sup>33</sup> Perry speaks of Rossellini's "own identity as a Christian humanist" ("Holy Partisan-Martyr," 440). While this seems an efficient and reasonable way of categorizing Rossellini's approach, it sits uneasily with Rossellini's self-proclaimed belief in nothing. Perry is not the only scholar to label Rossellini a "Christian" or a "Christian humanist."

<sup>34</sup> An extract from Gallagher and Hughes' interview with Rossellini serves to show how his cinematic technique reflected the religious beliefs of his characters and audience rather than his own:

have been a practicing Catholic.<sup>35</sup> According to his friend later in life, Father Fantuzzi, Rossellini stated explicitly, even aggressively: “Io – non – credo – in – nulla” (“I – don’t – believe – in – anything.”)<sup>36</sup> Yet he evidently had a clear understanding of the central tenets of Christianity and indeed an affinity for the Christian message. In an interview with Mario Verdone in 1952, Roberto Rossellini states:

Christianity does not pretend that everything is good and perfect: it recognizes sin and error, but it also admits the possibility of salvation. It is the opposing camp which only allows man to be perfectly consistent and infallible. To me that is monstrous and insensible. The only possibility I see for getting nearer to the truth is to try and understand sin and be tolerant of it.<sup>37</sup>

Rossellini’s understanding and representation of Christianity is thus very much in harmony with historic Christianity and the New Testament itself. But how do we reconcile Rossellini’s antipathy to dogma and orthodoxy with the focus on, and use of, Christianity that pervades his films?<sup>38</sup> As Bondanella has observed, “Rossellini was never known for his ideological consistency.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it would appear that Rossellini saw no inconsistency in simultaneously decrying all ideologies and metanarratives—and his was a “life-long polemic” against ideologies—while expressing himself in the language of one ideology to advance his artistic ends.<sup>40</sup> For example, in a 1954 interview, Rossellini explains his approach with reference to the Judeo-Christian “Golden Rule”: “My personal ‘neo-realism’ is nothing but a moral position that can be put into four words: love of one’s neighbor.”<sup>41</sup> Another interview from the same year quotes him as saying, “All human history consists of passages from slavery to liberty, even though at a given moment slavery may be stronger. I want my cinema to be a message of faith, of hope, of love [...], an appeal to humanity.”<sup>42</sup> The echo of Pauline language is apparent even to those who have only heard 1 Corinthians 13 read at a wedding ceremony.

---

*Gallagher:* Do you believe in God now? *Rossellini:* No. *Gallagher:* In any sort of God or any sort of mysticism? *Rossellini:* No, not at all. *Hughes:* You really didn’t when you made *Stromboli*? *Rossellini:* I am looking at people who believe in God. Should I superimpose my own thought? *Hughes:* But a year ago you told me that the attitude of the early fifties was essentially religious. *Rossellini:* I said that? No. Perhaps I said that the opinion of people was that my films were religious. I think that’s absolutely nonsense. Religion is all around us all the time, so if you have to show human beings, you have to show human beings as they are, not abstractions. Tag Gallagher and John W. Hughes, “Roberto Rossellini: Where are we going?” in Roberto Rossellini, *My Method: Writings and Interviews*, ed. Adriano Aprà, trans. Annapaola Cancogni (New York: Marsilio, 1992), 230.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Father Fantuzzi, *Roma città aperta* DVD, Criterion Collection, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> See Roberto Rossellini, “Colloquio sul neorealismo,” *Bianco e Nero 2* (1952), trans. Judith White. In Rossellini, *My Method*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> Speaking to Dacia Maraini in 1973, Rossellini said: “Any form of orthodoxy terrifies me because it makes me feel dead. Doctrines and disciplines are often necessary, but I have always dreaded them [...] The dead should be part of our culture, of our knowledge, but they should not oppress us with their dogmas.” Quoted in Rossellini, *My Method*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Peter Bondanella, *Roma città aperta* DVD, Criterion Collection, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 30.

<sup>41</sup> François Truffaut, “Rossellini: Je ne suis pas le père du néorealisme...” *Arts*, 16 June 1954. The principle of the “Golden Rule” is also found in Confucius, *Analects*, XV.24 although the Judeo-Christian tradition offers the earlier expression of the concept (cf. Leviticus 19:18).

<sup>42</sup> Emilio Lonero, “Un messaggio di fede, di speranza, di amore,” *Rivista del Cinematografo* (June 1954): 16.

Gallagher suggests that Rossellini's understanding of human history follows that of the 17th-century philosopher, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) and, in his own day, Benedetto Croce (1866–1952). Croce's philosophy is indeed helpful in trying to reconcile the overt Christianity of Rossellini's work (not only in *Roma città aperta* but also in later films) with his professed atheism, or more accurately, his proclaimed lack of belief in anything. For example, Croce, in his 1944 essay, "Perché non possiamo non dirci cristiani" ("Why we cannot help calling ourselves Christians"), states:

The rise of Christianity was the greatest revolution that the human race has ever accomplished [...] the Christian revolution worked upon the very centre of the soul, upon the moral consciousness, and by emphasizing the inner essence of that consciousness, almost seemed to confer on it a new power, a new spiritual quality, which had hitherto been lacking in humanity. Pre-Christian men, heroes and men of genius, did marvelous deeds, created magnificent art, and handed down to us rich treasures of style, of thought and experience; but in all of them we find wanting that authentic touch of brotherhood in one communion which Christianity alone has given to human life.<sup>43</sup>

"That authentic touch of brotherhood in one communion": it is this idea that sparks the marriage between communism and Christianity in *Roma città aperta*. Brotherhood and communion in pursuit of freedom from oppression by forces of evil; brotherhood and communion in pursuit of national liberation and, thereafter, it was hoped, the social and political revolution that the PCI had temporarily put on hold. The epigraph in *Paisà* (1946), the second film in Rossellini's war trilogy, is more explicit still: "When ideologies stray far from the eternal laws of morality and Christian compassion that are at the base of human life, they finish in criminal madness." Or, to borrow Gallagher's formulation: "For Croce, history is not 'what happened'. It is a story with emotion and meaning for today."<sup>44</sup> Rossellini's neorealism, and *Roma città aperta* in particular, was "quintessentially Crocean: a reliving of the past (a *ricorso*) in order to create a new human reality today."<sup>45</sup> So, while allegedly eschewing all metanarratives, Rossellini's employment of Christian form and content, and his juxtaposition of violence and hope in *Roma città aperta*, are geared towards retelling a particular story—that of Christ's death—"with emotion and meaning for today." Thus just as Christianity's telos is liberation from sin and reconciliation to God through Christ's sacrificial death, *Roma città aperta* draws on that story to hold out the hope of national liberation and social renewal through the sacrificial deaths of Manfredi and Don Pietro. Indeed, as Ward observes, "the film is at pains to underscore the Christian message that underlies Manfredi's communism by drawing analogies between him and Christ."<sup>46</sup> As in the quotation from Croce above, Christianity effected its "revolution" in human history by operating on both a vertical and horizontal plane: the vertical, the soul's relationship with God, is transcendent; on the horizontal plane, this results in a transformed relationship with one's fellow man, "love of one's neighbor."

---

<sup>43</sup> Benedetto Croce, "Perché non possiamo non dirci cristiani," *My Philosophy and Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Times*, trans. E. F. Carritt (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951), 38. [https://archive.org/stream/myphilosophy029247mbp/myphilosophy029247mbp\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/myphilosophy029247mbp/myphilosophy029247mbp_djvu.txt) (accessed 15 July 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 31.

<sup>45</sup> Gallagher, *Adventures*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ward, *Antifascisms*, 92.

If liberty plays such a central role in Rossellini's films, where does hope come from in *Roma città aperta*? Hopefulness reaches a crescendo in the final minutes of Rossellini's masterpiece. However, this hope, the energy driving the desire for liberty, was established much earlier in the film. Indeed it had to be in order for the final moments of the film to assume the teleological importance that will be argued in the final section of this article. Two key scenes establish the hopefulness that gives life and joy to the otherwise tragic conclusion of the film.

The first scene is a conversation between Pina and Francesco as they sit together in the stairwell on the night before they are to be married. Pina is weary, trachled by the daily struggles of wartime and also the tense relationship with her sister. Francesco tries to encourage her by lifting her eyes from the present struggle to the goal in view:

- Pina: I'm so tired!

- Pina: But when'll it end? Sometimes I just can't go on. *This winter it seems like it'll never end!*

- Francesco: *It'll end, Pina, it'll end, and spring will come back, and it'll be more beautiful than ever, because we'll be free.* We have to believe it, we have to want it! [...] I think that's the way it is, that we shouldn't be afraid now or in the future. *Because we're in the right, the right's on our side.* Understand, Pina?

- Pina: Yes, Francesco.

- Francesco: We're fighting for something that has to be, that can't help coming! Maybe the way is hard, it may take a long time, but we'll get there, and *we'll see a better world! And our kids'll see it!* Marcello and—and him, the baby that's coming...(Close Up) so you shouldn't ever be afraid, Pina...whatever happens. [Italics mine]

This scene is rich both in emotion and teleological and ideological significance. Francesco speaks as the Communist representative of the anti-Fascist Resistance, articulating several ideas that are common currency in partisan memoirs and oral testimonies. Firstly, he links the coming spring, and all the richness the term connotes, with the coming liberation. Just as we tolerate the harshness of winter thanks to the certainty of spring with all the new life and new beginnings it offers, so too Francesco encourages Pina to persevere and not to give up hope. Francesco's comment can possibly also be read more metaphorically, with "spring" representing a renewed pursuit of the political and ideological goals of communism; the pursuit of such goals, currently superseded by the need for national liberation, will seem all the more beautiful when they again become the focal point of the PCI and the basis on which to reconstruct a liberated Italy.<sup>47</sup> Secondly, Francesco makes a bold truth claim: "we're in the right, the right's on our side." In 1945 the truth and legitimacy of this statement would have been unquestioned by the majority of

---

<sup>47</sup> Togliatti's announcement in May 1944 marked a major switch in the PCI's official policy. Yet even prior to the armistice of 8 September 1943, communist leaders had begun to reassess their priorities: "If the immediate strategy was to liberate 'the nation,' then the PCI was obliged to work with far more moderate forces. While arguments between left-wing parties often involved abstract discussions about socialism and communism, when dealing with more conservative forces the name of the game was making concrete compromises" (Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 50–51). Pavone's monumental essay, *Una guerra civile*, provides a comprehensive analysis of the three wars being fought after 8 September 1943: a patriotic war, a civil war, and a class war (for a succinct treatment, see Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 56–60). While the author of this article does not dispute that three wars were being fought during the Resistance, the film under discussion, Rossellini's *Roma città aperta*, emphasizes the transideological unity of those fighting a patriotic war.

Italians. That the partisans were on the side of right as they fought against the oppression of Fascist and Nazisocialist totalitarianism was held to be self-evident. Thirdly, Francesco expresses the hope so often voiced by partisans: “we’ll see a better world!”<sup>48</sup> The oral testimony of one *staffetta*, Tersilla Fenoglio Oppedisano, puts it this way: “That work as a courier really excited me because the objective I perceived was a new humanity, a just, clean world. The Liberation for me was a partition that separated me from a marvelous future.”<sup>49</sup>

The second scene that helps us interpret the significance of the film’s final frames is that in which Don Pietro is introduced. We first meet him as he plays football with the boys of his parish; these same boys will, as Bondanella notes, subsequently be the only witnesses to his death.<sup>50</sup> Implicit in this relationship between Don Pietro and the boys is hope for Rome’s future. These young boys are led by Romoletto whose very name draws on that of Rome’s mythical founder and so implicitly embodies hope for the city’s future. As the city and the country’s next generation, Romoletto, Pina’s son Marcello, and the other boys witness the travesty of the priest’s execution and know that his only “sin” is to have acted against the forces of evil in an attempt to liberate his country. Don Pietro has witnessed the martyr-like deaths of Pina and Manfredi, and acted in an attempt to triumph over evil and usher in a better world. It is clear that the implicit message is that the group of young boys, now witnesses to Don Pietro’s execution, will follow in his footsteps, acting to conquer the evil enemy occupier and bring social and political renewal to a liberated Italy. According to Schoonover, as the boys watch through the fence, whistling to get Don Pietro’s attention, “it is here that the film most clearly redeems the position of eyewitness and makes its claim for the ethical agency of spectatorship.”<sup>51</sup> This is where the filmmaker, like Michelangelo’s famous hand of God, seems to break the fourth wall and reaches out to touch the war-weary original spectator with the hope of national regeneration and new social and political life post-Liberation.<sup>52</sup>

Turning our attention then to the final sequence of the film depicting Don Pietro’s execution we should note one simple but important point: given that this predates Vatican II, the elements of the Catholic liturgy that we hear over the frames are in Latin. It seems that these elements have been arranged to suit Rossellini’s purposes rather than follow the order of Mass. For the majority of viewers in 1945 these words would likely have been familiar and understood given that most still attended Mass at least weekly.<sup>53</sup> Rossellini is deliberately tapping into the Christian DNA of his Italian audiences with the goal of communicating an optimistic social and political message by means of familiar religious language. Watching the film with subtitles, English or Italian, the Latin liturgical elements are not translated. Rossellini was thus counting on the fact that viewers would, on hearing the familiar liturgy—whether fully understanding the Latin or not—correlate the visual images on which the words are superimposed with historic Christian eschatology and so draw a greater sense of individual and national hope.

We turn then to the final events themselves. Don Pietro arrives at the execution site. He steps out of the prison van and, accompanied by another priest who will minister to him as he approaches death, turns his eye to the chair that has been set up for the execution. It is worth

---

<sup>48</sup> See Behan, *Italian Resistance*, 71.

<sup>49</sup> Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 404.

<sup>50</sup> Bondanella, *Roma città aperta*.

<sup>51</sup> Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*, 130.

<sup>52</sup> Bondanella further notes that it is important that both Francesco and Marcello survive: they survive to bring about the rebirth of the Italian nation post-war, and they escape the clutches of the Gestapo to provide the audience with hope for the future (DVD commentary, Criterion Collection).

<sup>53</sup> Marchisio and Pisati, “Belonging without believing.”

noting in passing the visual echo of the frame in which Pina meets her death. Mark Shiel notes the inherent symbolism in Rossellini's use of visual spaces in relation to Pina's death: she makes a frenzied dash after her captured fiancé, Francesco, away from the Germans and Fascists, through the dark, suffocating alley and out into the open expanse of the street, where she is, suddenly and pointlessly, gunned down.<sup>54</sup> In a similar way Don Pietro emerges from the dark, enclosed space of the prison van and a long shot from his point of view to the execution chair conveys that same sense of imminent freedom from oppression, albeit (for both Pina and Don Pietro) by means of death.

This is further intensified as we note the words Don Pietro and the priest begin to intone as they commence the walk towards the chair.

Priest: Pater noster, qui est in caelo, sanctificetur nomen tuum...

*Hartmann is smoking his cigarette. (Half Figure)*

Priest (*off screen*): ...adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua...

*Murmuring prayers, Don Pietro and his companion approach the chair from the left. Don Pietro sits down, facing the back of the chair. The two plainclothesmen begin to strap him to it (Medium Shot).*

Priest (*off screen*):...sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie...

The camera meanwhile tracks right with Don Pietro. As he approaches the execution chair, the well-known words of the Lord's Prayer ring in his ears. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" emphasizes to Christian ears that even in this period of evil, violence, and oppression—and remember that Rossellini has a clearly delineated sense of good and evil throughout this film—God is still on his throne. The accompanying priest goes on: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" expressing man's longing that God might establish his perfect reign of righteousness and set right everything that is clearly so wrong in this world broken by sin. "Sin" has become a rather unfashionable term but it is, as we saw above, a term that Rossellini readily used to explain the reality he experienced. And then note the ironic juxtaposition of the plainclothesmen tying Don Pietro to the chair as the priest continues, "thy will be done...*on earth* as it is in heaven" [*italics mine*]. This marriage of words and image serves to emphasize the moral reprehensibility and teleological, social, and political implications of what is about to unfold.

The plainclothesmen finish securing Don Pietro to the chair as we hear "Deliver us from evil." He is tied to the chair backwards, as though to suggest that his executioners cannot or will not look the priest in the eye as they fire. Both Don Pietro and Manfredi had devoted themselves to pursuit of national deliverance from the evils of Fascism and the German occupation. For Don Pietro, this deliverance will now come through death. For Italy, deliverance will eventually come through the Liberation of the Allies and the partisans.

The accompanying priest then begins to intone the intercessionary words of the *Ave Maria*. On a nod from the plainclothesmen, he steps away from the execution chair, saying, "Holy Mary, pray for us." This scene takes us back to that earlier moment when Pina, walking with Don Pietro the night before her wedding day—which turned out, instead, to be the day of her death—asks: "How'll we ever forget all this suffering, all these anxieties, all this fear? *She stops*."

---

<sup>54</sup> Mark Shiel, *Roma città aperta*.

Doesn't Christ see us?" Don Pietro had replied to Pina saying, "A lot of people ask me that, Pina [...] Yes, the Lord will take pity on us. But we have so much to be forgiven, and so we must pray, and forgive much." His reply to Pina looks forward not only to his own prayer for forgiveness after cursing the Germans who had tortured and killed Manfredi, but also to his own final plea that God would forgive his executioners: "Padre perdonami loro" ("Father, forgive them for me").<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, it acknowledges the need post-Liberation for forgiveness amongst Italians if nationally and individually they are ever to move on from the suffering, anxieties, and fears they had experienced. In Rossellini's schema, recognition of the reality of sin and the possibility of forgiveness thus holds out hope.

The camera then cuts to reveal the arrival of Romoletto's ragged little band. They begin to whistle and catch the attention of one of the members of the Fascist firing squad. The camera crosscuts between the boys, the firing squad, and Don Pietro. Schoonover makes a strong case for the moral significance of this crosscutting that would have been apparent to Italian and international audience alike:

Narratively, the event offers a venue through which to remind the viewer of the parties crucial to this historical moment: Nazi commanders, German officers of lesser rank, clergy, Italian soldiers serving the Nazis, the Resistance, and the local children who are Italy's future. That said, this scene can nevertheless still be understood without knowing the historical and political contingencies of wartime Italy. The chair containing the victim stands at the center, and around him are positioned different groups: morally depraved officers with an unending tolerance for brutality occupy one area, collaborators with questionable allegiances soon to be transcended by their inner moral truth stand in another area, and ethical if seemingly powerless witnesses stand along the perimeter.<sup>56</sup>

And yet it is these "seemingly powerless witnesses" who are the future. As the priest begins to recite the *Gloria Patri*, Don Pietro hears the boys' whistles, raises his head and sees them for the first time. The words of the *Gloria Patri* take on particular significance as they are melded with the final frames of the film: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be." On the final syllables of the *Gloria Patri* the soldiers fire. Don Pietro's head drops. The boys' heads drop. Don Pietro lifts his head and the camera cuts to Major Hartmann who orders an Italian soldier to fire and "Put an end to it!" The Italians have deliberately missed in their aim: an act that here suggests the hope that these Italians are not wholly wicked and therefore potentially redeemable. In a fury, Hartmann, who when drunk had offered the most perceptive and incisive analysis of Germany's ideological blindness, takes his pistol and shoots Don Pietro.

It is here that Rossellini's incorporation of the Christian liturgy reaches its crescendo and ends the film on an optimistic and hopeful note despite the travesty unfolding before our eyes. Hitler might have hoped that his Third Reich would last a thousand years. Mussolini might have

---

<sup>55</sup> Don Pietro's words are clearly an echo of Christ's words on the cross: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Rossellini's protagonist, however, makes a subtle change to the words that perhaps serves to capture the added bitterness of being executed by an Italian Fascist firing squad: "Padre *perdonami* loro" ("Father, forgive them *for me*"). The English subtitles miss this detail, simply translating Don Pietro's words as "Father, forgive them."

<sup>56</sup> Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*, 133.

dreamed of rebuilding the power of the Roman empire. Now both regimes are in their death throes and reduced to executing Catholic priests. But the Catholic audience has just been reminded that God is unchanged: “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.” These are the last words the audience hears in *Roma città aperta*. The priest concludes the *Gloria Patri*, the final gunshot rings out, and the camera then crosscuts between victim, executioners, and witnesses, before ending in a dramatic tracking shot that takes us, visually, full circle, back to where we started with the dome of St Peter’s in the center of the frame. The marriage of sound and image here conveys that the evil of this present situation is transient. The original viewers of *Roma città aperta* would perhaps have been better able than the average viewer today to critique the import of this juxtaposition through greater familiarity with the words of the Tridentine Mass. In the Latin Rite, immediately prior to the *Gloria Patri*, are the words: “Spera in Deo, quoniam adhuc confitebor illi: salutare vultus mei, et Deus meus” (“Hope in God, for I will still praise Him, the salvation of my countenance, and my God”). Even with limited fluency in Latin or minimal familiarity with the Tridentine Mass, the visual images alone would have conveyed to the original audience the transcendent nature of Rossellini and Amidei’s interpretation of Rome’s wartime suffering: this is not the end of the story, there is hope, and good will ultimately triumph. While the Christian iconography and liturgy point primarily to the transcendent, in emphasizing the transient nature of the present evil, there is room too for social and political hope, knowing that Fascism and the German occupier would one day be overthrown.

This more immediate social and political hope is to be found in two visual elements in the film’s final frame. Firstly, Romoletto and his gang, “the new apostles of Italy, are their country’s hope born in love out of sacrifice,” as they march silently, sadly, arms around each other’s shoulders, back towards the city.<sup>57</sup> They are no longer powerless witnesses confined behind the fence but rather “agents of change [...] liberated and freed from its constraints”: they thus carry the hopes of the Italian people—regardless of political affiliation—for the future.<sup>58</sup> Millicent Marcus sees here not only agency but also a fitting circularity and suggests that the boys’ march “is the corrective to the initial march of the occupying troops as [they] reclaim their city for the future of justice and hope that their political activism bespeaks.”<sup>59</sup> Their “political activism” is expressed earlier in the film by their enthusiastic parroting of Marxist slogans the viewer assumes have been heard from older communist partisans. And yet, while thus loosely linked to the PCI, the boys seem to function as “agents for national change,” irrespective of political leaning. Secondly, as we reach the final frame, St. Peter’s once again dominates the Eternal City, and all we hear is the score. Marcus’s comprehensive interpretation of the dome’s significance concludes with a metaphorical triptych that conveys the teleological impetus of Rossellini’s *Roma città aperta* for which this article has argued:

This monument (“San Pietro” in Italian) is a visual allusion, of course, to Don Pietro and it suggests that the ideals for which he died—secular activism under the aegis of Christian spirituality—will govern the liberated city, just as Rome herself spreads out under the dome of St. Peter’s in Rossellini’s final *mise-en-*

---

<sup>57</sup> Perry, “Holy Partisan-Martyr,” 443.

<sup>58</sup> Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*, 133. Perry gives particular importance to the boys ideological neutrality: “One of the few instances of effective collective resistance to the Germans on screen, the boys represent a group of Italian nationals, but they are also an unthreatening and nonspecific vision of Italian nationality” (“Holy Partisan-Martyr,” 134). We are meant to assume, it would seem, that this neutrality is predicated on the boys’ youth although early in the film Marcello is heard regurgitating to Don Pietro the communist rhetoric he has imbibed.

<sup>59</sup> Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 49.



*scène*. Rome thus becomes a symbol of regeneration in its threefold typology—as capital of the pagan past, as headquarters of the Christian present, and as a figure of the Kingdom of God to be founded on earth at the end of time.”<sup>60</sup>

“Secular activism under the aegis of Christian spirituality.” Why should secular activism need the protection of Christian spirituality? As Marcus observes, Rome in Rossellini’s film cannot be separated from Christianity, and yet Rossellini is at best ambivalent towards Christianity. He adopts this aesthetic framework to better communicate this secular activism to his fellow-Italians, who, whether believers or not, were at least familiar with Christian liturgy and iconography. Francesco and Pina, Manfredi and Don Pietro are the four central protagonists. Francesco and Manfredi are communist partisans, Pina and Don Pietro are socially and politically engaged Catholics. Each couple is, for the time being, focused on one goal: national liberation, in line with PCI policy at the end of the war. Yet it is the Christological narrative and not communist ideology that shapes and drives the film. Rossellini had set out to create something that would uplift the Italian spirit, something positive, and he achieves his objective through a deliberate emphasis on reconciliation and a return to Christian values,<sup>61</sup> an emphasis which is driven home, in Don Pietro’s execution and the film’s conclusion, through the juxtaposition of violence and hope, image and liturgical words.

## Bibliography

- Armes, Roy. *Patterns of Realism*. South Brunswick, NY: A. S. Barnes, 1971.
- Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2. Translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Behan, Tom. *The Italian Resistance: Fascists, Guerrillas and the Allies*. New York: Pluto Press, 2009.
- Bondanella, Peter. *The Films of Roberto Rossellini*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Calvino, Italo. *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*. Translated by Archibald Colquhoun. Revised by Martin McLaughlin. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Craig, Siobhan S. *Cinema After Fascism: The Shattered Screen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Croce, Benedetto. “Perché non possiamo non dirci cristiani.” In *My Philosophy and Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Times*. Translated by E. F. Carritt. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951.
- Gallagher, Ted. *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*. Boston, MA: Da Capo, 1998.
- Katz, Robert. *The Battle for Rome: The Germans, the Allies, the Partisans, and the Pope*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- Kolker, Robert P. *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Landy, Marcia. *Italian Film*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Liehm, Mira. *Passion and Defiance: Italian Film from 1942 to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

---

<sup>60</sup> Marcus, *Italian Film*, 52–53.

<sup>61</sup> Ward, *Antifascisms*, 90.

- Lonero, Emilio. "Un messaggio di fede, di speranza, di amore." *Rivista del Cinematografo*, June 1954.
- Marchisio, Roberto, and Maurizio Pisati. "Belonging without believing: Catholics in contemporary Italy." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 4/2 (1999): 236–255.
- Marcus, Millicent. *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Pavone, Claudio. "Italy: Trends and Problems." *Journal of Contemporary History* 2/1 (1967): 49–77.
- . *Una guerra civile: Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991.
- Perry, Alan R. "Literary and Cinematic Representations of Sacred Italian Resistance Memory: The Holy Partisan-Martyr as Hero." *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies* 33/2 (1999): 433–457.
- Revelli, Nuto. *Il mondo dei vinti*. Turin: Einaudi, 1977.
- Rossellini, Roberto. *The War Trilogy*. Edited by Stefano Roncoroni. Translated by Judith Green. London: Lorimer, 1973.
- . *My Method: Writings and Interviews*. Edited by Adriano Aprà. Translated by Annapaola Cancogni. New York: Marsilio, 1992.
- Sassoon, Donald. *The Strategy of the Italian Communist Party: From the Resistance to the Historical Compromise*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.
- Schapiro, Meyer. "A Note on 'The Open City': Some Comments on Farrell's Review." *The New Internationalist* 12/10 (1946): 311–13. Republished in *October* 128 (2009): 84–89.
- Schoonover, Karl. *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
- Truffaut, François. "Rossellini: Je ne suis pas le père du néorealisme..." *Arts*, 16 June 1954.
- Ward, David. *Antifascisms: Cultural Politics in Italy, 1943-1946: Benedetto Croce and the Liberals, Carlo Levi and the 'Actionists.'* London: Associated University Presses, 1996.