

Document Citation

Title	Acts of the apostles
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Source	<i>Pacific Film Archive</i>
Date	
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	18-19
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Atti degli apostoli (The Acts of the apostles), Rossellini, Roberto, 1968

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

ATTI DEGLI APOSTOLI (ACTS OF THE APOSTLES). Italy 1968. Dir Roberto Rossellini. Adapt Vittorio Bonicelli, D. de la Rochefoucault, R.R. Luciano Scatta. Phot Mario Fiorelli. Mus Mario Nascimbene. Cast Eduardo Torricella (Paulus), Jacques Dumur (Peter), Mohamed Kovka (John), Bradai Ridha (James the elder), Zoviten (James the younger), Zignan Honune (Stephen). Production RAI/ORTF/TVE/Studio Hamburg.

Due to visions only of the truncated version of **ACTS OF THE APOSTLES** (two out of the five episodes, under the general title 'From Jerusalem to Damascus'), the first problem arises with a consideration of Rossellini's intrinsic attitude towards his material. The extraordinary equilibrium demonstrated by the work is one created by the dichotomy between separate but related necessities, on the one hand, a fastidiously 'scientific' epochal reconstruction, and on the other, the need to transform the specifically historic onto a universal ontological plane. These 'historic figures' (Peter, Paul), placed before us, are metamorphosed into 'models of action' through a moral aspect.

Yet, despite its subject, the movie of Rossellini is humanist rather than Christian in its conception, although his mise-en-scene testifies to the acceptance of the presence of

a higher spiritual reality. This is demonstrated in the sequence when Ariostarchus, the slave, points out to the newly appointed Roman governor the place where Christ collapsed under the weight of the cross. As they talk, the camera cranes up unobtrusively and delicately to set the characters in the spiritual context, isolating them in deference to their environment. Similarly, Rossellini is careful to demonstrate the sanctity of Golgotha itself; as the two characters approach the hill, the camera situates them in long-shot to one side of the frame, with the environment again dominant.

However, Rossellini seems more concerned with the validity of the apostolic action qua human action. He is concerned with the dignity of the behaviour of the apostles as human beings, rather than as disciples of Christ, although the one function evidently relates to the other. An example of this

FRANCO OLMI: a filmography

- 1953-1961: about forty documentaries, including
LA DIGNITÀ DI GIACCAIO (1954)
MANNON: L'INFERNO DUE (1956)
- 1959 *IL TEMPO SI È FERMATO (TIME STOOD STILL)*. Italy. 80 min. Prod Edisonvolta S.p.A. Scr Olmi. Phot Carlo Bellerio. Ed Carlo Colombo. Mus Pier Emilio Bassi. Cast Natale Rossi, Roberto Seveso, Paolo Quadrucci.
- 1961 *IL POSTO (THE JOB)*. Italy. 105 min. Prod Titanus. Scr Olmi. Phot Lamberto Caimi. Cast Loredana Detto (Antonietta), Sandro Panzeri (Domenico).
- 1963 *I FIDANZATI (THE FIANCES)*. Italy. 75 min. Prod Titanus Sicilia/22 Dicembre. Scr Olmi. Phot Lamberto Caimi. Ed Carlo Colombo. Mus Gianni Ferrio. Cast Carlo Cabrini (Giovanni), Anna Canzi (Liliana).
- 1965 *E VENNE UN UOMO (A MAN CALLED JOHN)*. Italy. 90 min. Prod Vincenzo Labella. Scr Olmi and Labella. Phot Piero Portalupi. Ed Carlo Colombo. Mus Franco Potenza. Cast Rod Steiger (Pope John), Adolpho Celi (the Bishop), Pietro Gelmi.
- 1968 *UN CERTO GIORNO (ONE FINE DAY)*. Italy. 102 min. Prod Cinema-Italoleggio Cinematografico-Istituto Luce. Scr Olmi. Phot Lamberto Caimi. Ed Olmi. Mus Gino Peguri. Cast Brunetto Del Vita (Bruno), Lidia Fuortes (girl interviewer), Vitaliano Damiani (Davioli), Raffael Modugno (the artist), Giovanna Ceresa (Account Executive), Mario Crosignani (Elena).
- 1969 *I RECUPERANTI (THE SCAVENGERS)*. Italy. 104 min. Prod R.A.I.-T.V./Palumbo Productions. Scr Olmi, M.R. Stern, Tullio Kezich. Phot Olmi. Ed Olmi. Mus Gianni Ferrio. Cast Andreino Carli, Antonio Lunardi, Alessandra Micheletto.

comes with the parallel between the rectangular enclosure of the 'commune' and the similar enclosure of the sacrificial altar of the Sanhedrin. Mostly, Rossellini's camera is at ground level during the scenes in the commune; if the community-life is shown from a high-angle or through long-shot, it is because a sense of the totality, the inclusiveness of this life necessitates it. Characters within the frame move from group to group, are united by the long takes of Rossellini, the smooth panning around the courtyard; there is an impression of flux, of a certain communal rhythm, which is extraneous (although not necessarily so) to religious connotations. Rossellini gives us images in close-up of the simple labour of the community, the baking of bread, the weaving of mats. Indeed, throughout the film, the Christian life has been identified with the simplicity of peasant work; one notes the beginning of the movie, where the conversation between the governor and the slave is encapsulated by Rossellini in images such as the potter at work in the small house, or the locksmith in his alley-booth, on which the camera lingers after the principal characters have exited from the frame. However, the sacrificial square of the Sanhedrin is viewed almost entirely from a high-angle shot; the aim is not to present the inclusiveness of a life equivalent to that of the commune but to insinuate a moral context through a suggested comparison. The courtyard is, in fact, shown through slow-pans following the actions of characters; the emphasis is on a grim ritualism, a meaningless blood-letting, at the centre of which is the constant flame of the huge sacrificial altar, with the blood running to its centre. Against the imagery of water (cf. the Pentecostal baptisms, the washing of feet before meals) is posited the fire of the Sanhedrin, as a prefigurement of the gratuitous violence of Stephen's martyrdom.

This symbolic antithesis is, in fact, another aspect of the essential dualism at the centre of Rossellini's method in this film, a dualism arising from the inherently humanist ethic which informs it. It is important to emphasise, however, that, despite the didactic historico-moral foundation of *ACTS OF THE APOSTLES*, this is not a schematic dualism; as ever, Rossellini's vision manifests itself in the unity of the individual image. His film accords well with Panofsky's concise definition of humanism (in *The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline*), for what it presents is both 'the insistence on human values' but also 'the acceptance of human limitation'. And this presentation, continually implying the *context* of the action, is achieved by a very stringent *mise-en-scene*, consisting almost entirely of the zoom-shot; this camera-movement continually elevates the discourse from an individual plane to a contextual one, by relating character to situation, action to environment.

One recalls the 'context' shots of early Rossellini; in *GERMANY YEAR ZERO (1947)*, for example, where rapid tracking-shots were followed by a sharp lateral movement, situating the character, indicating environment and purpose.

In that movie, this technique was subjected to a rigorous gradation; from the boy's journey to his family's dwelling, or the schoolmaster's flat, to the bomb-shelter of the young girl, and that final image of the ruined street up which he walks while bells peal overhead, before committing suicide. In *ACTS OF THE APOSTLES*, these shots re-appear (cf. the appearance of the apostles in the streets of Jerusalem at Pentecost) and retain a validity for Rossellini; it is important to note, for example, that Paul is never seen in such a context (that is, with a specific direction) until *after* his conversion, when he is seen entering Damascus.

But mostly it is the function of the zoom to suggest contexts and to supply the connections between the human actions of the apostles and an abstract 'religious' tone. The first important use of the camera-movement is purely contextual: the Governor and Ariostarchus in the temple at Jerusalem. Rossellini zooms in for the conversation and then out once more. But the scene in the commune when Mathew is chosen as the apostolic successor to Judas imparts a symbolic level to the functionalism of the movement; after he has been chosen, and the disciples kneel to pray, Rossellini slowly zooms out, enlarging the sphere of vision as the physical reality fuses with a higher, spiritual reality. This is the stylistic key to the movie, by means of which the aesthetic is capable of sustaining an abstract, almost allegorical burden. On two occasions during which Peter is the central figure (his speeches at Pentecost and in the temple after the healing of the beggar), we find again this zoom movement, 'out' as expression of the supernatural, placing the merely human in a perspective, 'in' as expression of the mortal and the immediate. This inverse movement represents a dialectical style, exemplifying alternately action and limitation, but fusing them through the quality of the image, concentrating on the human action, but unifying it through the abstract expression of belief. An example comes in the sequence when Peter, John and Stephen preach in the temple, in defiance of the Sanhedrin. The structure of the sequence is composed of a zoom-out and a zoom-in, repeated three times (for each disciple as he preaches), connected by two zip-pans. It is precisely the formal stylistic repetition which reveals continuity in the individual action.

The summation of Rossellini's movie is the image of Stephen's corpse hanging upside-down from a tree; with the zoom-out, we see the connection between human heroism and religious martyrdom, the tragedy (achievement and cost) of the Christian movement, a protest against universal brutality, the synthesis of human and superhuman, the growth of the tree and the death of the martyr. *ACTS OF THE APOSTLES* ends with the restoration of Paul's sight and his joyful cry - 'I can see', thus beginning and ending with an affirmation of lucidity which is the fruit of Rossellini's deceptively simple aesthetic.

PETER LLOYD