

Document Citation

Title	Alma mater
Author(s)	Daniel Mangin
Source	<i>SF Weekly</i>
Date	1995 Jan 18
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Mamma Roma, Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 1962

SF Weekly

1-18-95

Alma mater

Examining postwar Italy through a mother's love in Pasolini's *"Mamma Roma"*; hustling across a color-coded campus in Singleton's *"Higher Learning"*

PURISTS OFTEN ARGUE THAT RELIANCE upon dialogue and verbal exposition undermine the cinema's potential for visual expression. Many fine films have emerged despite these supposed limitations, but it takes a work like the black-and-bright-white *Mamma Roma* (1962) — the second feature of the late Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Attaccone*, *Salo*), only now getting a U.S. theatrical premiere — to remind one just how magical it is when a movie "speaks" through its pictures.

Mamma Roma revolves around a reformed prostitute (Anna Magnani) who whisks off her long-unseen 17-year-old son, Ettore (Ettore Garofolo), to the Italian capital, where she hopes to build a better life for them. The reappearance of her ex-pimp Carmine (Franco Citti), Ettore's minor acts of delinquency and *Mamma Roma*'s kooky scheming make for progressively more troubled, if occasionally humorous, times.

Mamma loves her baby boy a bit too much, which Pasolini sets up visually right from the start. Magnani strikes a seductive pose moments into their reunion and scrunches her son's face into an awkward grimace as they dance intimately in their new apartment. After she resorts to blackmail to secure a job for Ettore, one of her cohorts from the street mixes Oedipal and religious metaphors, conjecturing that Mamma Roma would "climb on the cross for that boy" if necessary. "You'd better believe it," responds Magnani.

Mamma Roma's dilemmas — specifically her inability to transcend her shady history and economic straits — are a springboard for Pasolini's examination of the '60s Italian psyche: the drive for "respectability"; the nostalgia for fascism; the past's oppressive intrusion on the present; the correlation of sexual politics and social intercourse. In illustrating the last point, the director employs the "props" of Rome to spectacular effect: Ruins in unmistakably sexual configurations are essential elements in an extended mating ritual, much to Mamma Roma's chagrin, between Ettore and a local slattern (Silvana Corsini).



WHEN IN ROME When one of her cohorts from the street conjectures that *Mamma Roma* (Anna Magnani) would "climb on the cross for that boy," the more-than-maternal madonna responds, "You better believe it."

Despite *Mamma Roma*'s emphasis on class and economics, the Marxist-laced political and historical commentary is more muted than in most Pasolini films, in part because Magnani crafts her role in the broadest possible strokes. She never forgets she's Anna Magnani, the star, in the role of Rome incarnate — and viewers won't either. Although she's most amusing, one can see why she disappointed Pasolini, who was looking to create an archetype but got caricature instead.

The upside of Magnani's performance is that it

subverts Pasolini's didactic tendencies — a presence like hers might have decreased the ennui generated in his later works like *Canterbury Tales*. In any case, the actress' giddy demeanor is not entirely inappropriate. Magnani may not smother Garofolo quite the way Pasolini had in mind, but she exudes a primal vitality that, coupled with the director's lyrically edited imagery, personifies the diverse forces he saw at play in postwar Italy.

Daniel Mangin