

Document Citation

Title	Open city
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Portland State College. Film Committee</i>
Date	1967 Oct 27
Type	program
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Roma, città aperta (Open city), Rossellini, Roberto, 1945

Rome, Open City

P.S.C. FILM
COMMITTEE

PRESENTS

OPEN CITY

By ROBERTO ROSSELLINI

FRIDAY OCT. 27, 1967

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OPEN CITY

Previous to the war in Europe there was an extremely active cinema in Italy. But it was a kind of cinema that is greatly similar to the cinema in Italy today. It was aiming straight for the wallet and not for the mind. Also Mussolini was in power and he imposed many restraints concerning the subjects that were available for use in Italian film. With the advent of the war the cinema carried on in this vein. All films were either the tales of epic heroes or they were light types of comedies.

Then the end of the war in Italy was in sight. The Americans were just outside of Rome and the Italians, expecting to be free of the Germans at any moment, rose up in a resistance movement against the Germans. The failure of the rebellion, which was put down savagely by the Germans. This uprising was to serve as the basis for the first film of Roberto Rossellini, Open City.

Production for the film began before the Germans were completely out of the city. Using whatever raw filmstock that they could buy, much of it through the black market, they began shooting in the streets of Rome, using almost entirely non-actors and very little lighting equipment. The result was not the polished quality of the former Italian cinema, but the hazy, some times badly-exposed film that proved to resemble the kind of photography only seen in the newsreels, and this gave the subject a kind of authenticity that the bright cheery films of Italy, and of this country, could never hope to achieve.

There were other things introduced in Open City. Anna Magnani, the female half of the star billing, was one of the surprises. The use of her in a non-glamorous role was strictly against the rules of sensible, money-making film production. The sex-symbol of Hollywood was replaced by the new earthy type of woman, and Anna Magnani was the prototype. Anna Magnani had done no acting prior to this film so she was, as the majority of the persons in it, a non-actor. Her talents carried her on into acting as a profession in contrast to most of the "earthy" actresses.

Also appearing in this film was a new kind of realism that had never been seen before. Nothing was held back in trying to convince the audience that they were actually seeing a man tortured; every scene was shot on the street or in the actual places; all of this was opposed to the well-lighted perfectly recorded films made in a glossy studio manner that the Italian public, and much of the world was accustomed to viewing. The impact of this film was felt in every phase of filmmaking, all around the world. This was a film that had been produced cheaply, but effectively.

This film proved to be the beginning of an entire movement in the Italian cinema, and the formula it set was used unfailingly by all of the serious Italian filmmakers to follow. Bicycle Thief, La Strada, Umberto D, and many others by first Fellini, De Sica, and Rossellini, and then others such as Antonioni and Ermanno Olmi. The movement has profoundly affected the cinema and created much of it as it exists today. Perhaps no other period in the short history of film has proved as productive and invigorating. And Open City was the film which proved to be the leader of this movement. - G.G.

A review from The Nation

by James Agee Apr 13, 1946

Open city is a story of underground resistance during the late phases of the German occupation of Rome. The heroes are an underground leader; a co-worker and friend of his who hopes to marry a widow, pregnant by him; a priest who, generally at great risk to himself, is eager to help all of them. The villains are an epicene Gestapo officer; his Lesbian assistant; and a rudderless young Italian girl, misled by dope, sex, poverty, and easy money into betraying the patriots. The widow is shot down in the street. The leader dies under torture, without denouncing his comrades. The priest, who has to witness the torture, does so without pleading with the victim to give in and without ceasing to pray for his courage; then he is executed. The widow's lover survives; so does her eight-year-old son, who is active, with other children, in an effective underground of their own.

I have no doubt that plenty of priests, in Italy and elsewhere, behaved as bravely as this one. Nor do I doubt that they and plenty of non-religious leftists, working with them in grave danger, respected each other as thoroughly as is shown here. I see little that is incompatible between the best that is in leftism and in religion -- far too little to measure against the profound incompatibility between them and the rest of the world. But I cannot help doubting that the basic and ultimate practicing motives of institutional Christianity and leftism can be adequately represented by the most magnanimous individuals of each kind; and in that

degree I am afraid that both the religious and the leftist audiences -- and more particularly the religio-leftists, who must be the key mass in Italy -- are sold something of a bill of goods. I keep telling myself that the people who made the film were still moved to reproduce recent experience and were in no state of mind and under no obligation to complicate what they had been through; I recognize with great pleasure how thoroughly both the priest and the partisans are made to keep their distinct integrities; and the fire and spirit of the film continually make me suspicious of my own suspicions. Nevertheless, they persist; so I feel it is my business to say so. If I am right, as I hope I am not, institutions of both kinds are here, as so often before, exploiting all that is best in individuals for the sake of all that least honors the individual, in institutions.

One further qualifier, which I mentioned a few weeks ago, no longer applies; some especially close details of torture have been cut, with no loss I feel, considering the amount of backstairs sadism any audience is tainted with. I have another mild qualifier: Open City lacks the depth of characterization, thought, and feeling which might have made it a definitively great film.

From there on out I have nothing but admiration for it. Even these failures in depth and complexity are sacrifices to virtues just as great: you will seldom see as pure freshness and vitality in a film, or as little unreality and affectation among the players; one feels that everything was done too fast and with too fierce a sincerity to run the risk of bogging down in mere artistry or

meditativeness...The film's finest over-all quality, which could rarely be matched so spectacularly, is the immediacy. Everything in it had been recently lived through; much of it is straight reenactment on or near the actual spot; its whole spirit is still, scarcely cooled at all, the exalted spirit of the actual experience. For that kind of spirit there has been little to compare with since the terrific libertarian jubilation of excitement under which it was all but inevitable that men like Eisenstein and Dovzhenko and Pudovkin should make some of the greatest works of art of this country.

Roberto Rossellini, who directed this film, and Sergio Amadei, author and script writer, are apparently not men of that order of talent; but they are much more than adequate to that spirit and to their chance. They understand the magnificence of their setting -- the whole harrowed city of Rome -- as well as the best artist might and perhaps better, for though their film bristles with aesthetic appreciation and eloquence, these are never dwelt on for their own sake; the urgency of human beings always dominates this architectural poetry; nor are the human beings or their actions dwelt on in any over-calculated way. The raid on the bakery, the arrest of the priest and the partisan leader, the rescue of the partisan captives, and a sequence during which all the inhabitants of a tenement are hauled down into a courtyard by a German searching party are as shatteringly uninvented looking as if they had been shot by invisible newsreel cameras.

The scene which shows the violent death of the widow and the violent reaction of her son -- in cossack and cotta -- has this same reality, plus a shammed operatic fury of design which in no way turns it false. There are quieter scenes

which I admire fully as much -- a family quarrel, an apartment scene involving two men and two women, and a casual little scene between the underground leader and the widow in which anyone of even my limited acquaintance with underground activity will recognize the oxygen-sharp, otherwise unattainable atmosphere, almost a smell, of freedom. The performances of most of the Romans, especially of a magnificent woman named Anna Magnani, who plays the widow, somewhere near perfectly define the poetic-realistic root of attitude from which the grand trunk of movies at their best would grow ...

A partial list of Rossolini's films includes:

The Return of the Pilot (1942)

Man of the Cross (1943)

Open City (1945)

Paiza (1946)

Germany Year Zero (1947)

Amore & Il Miracolo (1948) -- a two part film --

Francesco, Giullare de Dio, (1950)

No Greater Love (1952)

Next week's film is Nothing But a Man (1964) directed by Michael Roemer an independent filmmaker. This is a film of the personal struggle of a Southern Negro and his wife in a hostile society.

It has won the Prix San Giorgio and City of Venice Prize at the Venice Film Festival, 1964, as well as the National Council of Churches Award in 1965, "for a film which portrays human society and its cultural environment in such a way as to enhance understanding of the family in its richness and variety."

Also there will be a short film, Time Piece. We hope to make short films a part of our program oftener in the coming terms.

Page 8

Starting at 10:00 P.M.

THE CABARET:

Poet MARK STRAND, best known for his poems in such periodicals at The New Yorker, Partisan Review, Atlantic, The Nation, and many others, will read in the Cabaret at 10:30 tonight. Located in the basement of College Center, the Cabaret is free and open to the public. Coffee will be served.