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**OPEN CITY (Citta Aperta)**

Italy, 1945

Directed by Roberto Rossellini,  
screenplay by Sergio Amidei and  
F. Fellini, featuring Anna Magnani,  
Aldo Fabrizi, Marcello Pagliero.  
103 minutes, Italian dialog, English  
subtitles.

"...human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality."

Thirteen years after the war whose concluding ironies, illusions and brutalities it signalized, Rossellini's classic strikes home with as much, perhaps even more, dramatic force. To an adult audience about equally divided between those who remembered seeing the film in the late 1940's and those who were viewing it for the first time, Open City's torture scene seemed almost without parallel. Some of the original details (blowtorch at the throat) had been edited out of the version we witnessed but these were hardly missed. As T. S. Eliot suggests, there is perhaps a protective device in audiences: when suffering becomes too extreme to watch, disbelief sets in. Despite the most lurid details, such as the shaking of a hydra-headed whip, the agony of the Italian partisan (Marcello Pagliero) in the Gestapo persuasion room remained convincing to the end. Such violent hands had been laid on the emotions that people sat in a state of numbness when the lights went on. To follow the martyrdom of the priest (Aldo Fabrizi) with a group discussion seemed an act of insolence.

Strong medicine indeed, yet the questions have to be asked: Is this an example of art or an assault on the senses? Is this realism or simply poor cinema? Do we praise the film because of its influence on subsequent motion picture development or because (like Samuel Johnson's dog who could walk on its hind legs) Rossellini made it under such trying circumstances? Does it remain good drama?

If we require of art an evenness of quality, then Open City is deficient in some respects. Much has been said about the drab, dark, deeply-shadowed photography which by its very deficiencies contributed to the mood and sense of reality. We know now how unsought these effects were, like some accident or mishandling in a kiln which produces an unusual new pottery glaze. In 1946 some critics acclaimed this "artistry", yet the haphazard visibility of scenes is obvious even to the non-technician. Apart from substandard photography, we find a carelessness throughout in the casting of German parts. Certainly we do not require that every Nazi should personify the muscular, blond, Nordic ideal. But we do find an epicene Gestapo leader, with his mustachioed subaltern, rather improbable. We are asked to believe that a disciplined Communist Party official who had outlasted the Spanish Civil War and Mussolini's Black Shirts would place his life in the hands of a narcotics user, and that this mistress of long standing (or any Italian) would fail to understand the consequences of apprehension by the Gestapo. There is a moment of crudely contrived symbolism when two German soldiers dispatch two sheep with bullets to the brain. And generally, the first half of the film moves slowly, weighted with conversation and domestic details, while the broad background of the story--World War II, American invasion/liberation of Italy, the siege at Caserno, collapse of the Italian fascist government, takeover by its ostensible ally, declaration of Rome as an open city, all the history Rossellini knew would be fresh in the minds of his audience--is virtually omitted.

If this is the worst that can be said about Open City, what is the best? Well, to begin with, it brings us the younger Anna Magnani--vigorous, earthily sexy, first in a line of postwar Italian beauties to challenge the Hollywood idea. Next it brings us children, burdened with adult tasks, serious beyond their years, lovable, the hope of the future. We are reminded that the impact of the war and its

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aftermath on young people was a special and poignant concern of Italian films (Shoe Shine, for example, of which Sergio Amidei was also a script writer). But the tension between the man-like roles assumed by children and the implacable authority of parents has never been better expressed, nor with keener humor, than in Open City. Late one evening the heroic young partisans return from a successful demolition job. Gravely they shake hands, then mount the stairs of the apartment house with growing dismay as, at doorway after doorway they are snatched inside by anxious, angry adults and spanked for being out after dark.

This is an aspect of the film which many of us had forgotten--its touches of rare comedy. There is the hungry sexton casting off religious scruples to join the raid on the bakery shop. There is the priest's consternation over whom should carry the million-lire package, his delicate sense of propriety in turning the statue of St. Rocco to face away from a naked Aphrodite. There is the droll-sour expression of a dilapidated Roman policeman giving the "heil Hitler" salute. And the deliciously funny scene where the priest hides the bomb and machinegun in bed with the paralyzed old man. It should be remembered that Aldo Fabrizi had a prewar career as a comedian; all the more remarkable later is his great malediction scene, his face and fists swollen to fill the screen in a thundering curse on the Germans.

Some aspects of the film which attracted critical praise when it was first released are now no longer easy to assess, notably the realism. Postwar audiences must have remarked on scenes in which a pregnant woman discusses her forthcoming marriage, or a female dope addict administers the drug and later is the object of homosexual attentions, or a V-shaped bodice is carelessly open, or a little boy sits on the potty. Motion pictures have come a long way in frankness since 1945, and much that must have seemed exceptional in Open City (billed at the time as a sex-shocker) is now commonplace.

What has not been lost, however, is appreciation of the editing. Surely one of the greatest transitions in cinema takes place at about the mid-point of the film. The priest is administering last rites to the paralyzed man as the Gestapo breaks into the room; shamefaced, they withdraw. Next the priest is frantically trying to revive the old man whom we now learn he has knocked out with a frying pan. We cut back to the apartment courtyard where the residents have been herded by the Nazis. One of the soldiers starts to caress Anna Magnani. As she contemptuously shakes him off she sees that her fiance has been captured and is being dragged towards an army truck. She runs after it, shrieking. A burst of machinegun fire and she falls to the street. In two minutes we have moved from sacrament to comedy to sex to death. What a fantastic sequence!

We agree with Richard Griffith's analysis of the film: "It was not a justification of a people who had succumbed earliest to fascism, and resisted it least, but a description of their own shame and agony at their national disgrace." Curiously, the target is German fascism, not the homegrown Italian variety. Open City has been called a humane document. There is love for all people, with all their imperfection. The priest thunders his malediction, then begs the Lord's forgiveness. But far from generating love, Open City ends on a paean of hate and bitterness which, in our mind, carries over as a unifying principle to Paisan. The two Rossellini pictures radiate from the same core experience. The film, in our opinion, is a flawed masterpiece, cemented with more passion than art, something of an Italian allegory. It deals realistically with mortal emotions at a significant moment in history. "This is how it was." If this is not the whole story, if this is not as good a story as might have been told, Open City is the most authentic dramatization of that moment we possess.

Mark Reinsberg