

I Rossellini's *Open City*: The founding

WHEN MANFREDI, the partisan leader who has been captured by the Nazis at the end of *Open City*, refuses to divulge the secrets of the Committee of National Liberation, explaining that he wants to live up to the heroism of his comrades who died for their silence, the Gestapo leader, Bergmann, immediately stereotypes him as grandiloquent and insincere. "You Italians, whatever party you belong to, are all addicted to rhetoric. But I'm quite sure that you will see things my way before dawn."¹ Bergmann is proven twice wrong, both in his certainty that Manfredi will break under torture and in his characterization of all Italians as creatures of rhetoric whose deeds will never match their extravagant promises. The Nazi chief's accusation, however, is not limited to the bravado of political prisoners under Gestapo interrogation, for it extends to all of Fascist Italy, whose penchant for rhetoric was so well exploited by that archjournalist and manipulator of headlines, Benito Mussolini. Not only was rhetoric the most important subject in Italian high schools, but it was the very foundation of the national legal profession, whose members populated the ranks of the Fascist hierarchy.² Mussolini spoke directly to this Italian love of the grand gesture, of the *bella figura*, whose form became an end in itself, regardless of the speaker's ability to make good on his promises.

¹Roberto Rossellini, *The War Trilogy*, trans. Judith Green (New York: Grossman, 1973), p. 126. All quotes from the screenplay will come from this edition and subsequent page references will appear in the text.

²See Edward Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience*, (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 216.

By linking Manfredi's imminent martyrdom to Bergmann's indictment of Italian rhetorical excesses, Rossellini makes the partisan's death an expiation of that cultural weakness, and a prophecy of a new national style free of empty bombast.³ In truth, Manfredi's deeds are entirely commensurate with his words, for he acts in accordance with his pledge to reveal no partisan confidences, and his behavior under torture is the very antithesis of rhetorical in his commitment to absolute silence. Even when his supreme defiance could give vent to words as Bergmann allows him one last chance to speak and save his life, Manfredi does not deign to utter his contempt but spits in the interrogator's face, and thus condemns himself to the worst possible death.

In Manfredi's antirhetorical stance, Rossellini embodies his own polemic response to a cinematic tradition of historical extravaganzas, white telephone comedies, and propaganda films. *Open City* was to be the repudiation of an industry as wedded to rhetoric as the Mussolini regime under which it flourished. The filmmaker's most obvious antirhetorical ploy was to dispose of all the physical trappings of prewar cinema, making a virtue of the necessity imposed upon him by the straitened circumstances of a wartorn industry. The lack of studio space, the absence of sophisticated equipment, and the scarcity of film stock forced Rossellini to adopt the simplicity of means that was responsible for the authentic and uncontrived look of his finished product. His resort to location shooting and to understated lighting contributed to the newsreel quality which has often been ascribed to *Open City*, while the inconsistency of the film stock, bought in bits and pieces from street vendors, and the unstable electric current, which sometimes fell as much as 15 to 20 volts in mid-shoot-

³ Much has been written about neorealism's antirhetorical stance. See, for example, Chiarini, "A Discourse on Neo-Realism," in *Springtime*, ed. Overbey, p. 151. Bruno Torri calls *Open City* a film "senza retorica" in *Cinema italiano: Dalla realtà alle metafore* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1973), p. 13. Pio Sinistra, (1971), p. 58.

ing, gave the film a roughness and a spontaneity matching the very historical circumstances of its birth.⁴ For Rossellini these technical difficulties did not present obstacles so much as challenges, propelling him on to ever more inventive solutions and establishing that talent for improvisation which would constitute one of the greatest strengths, and limitations of his career.⁵

Open City is not only antirhetorical in its technical simplicity, but in its subject matter as well. The term "chronicle" has been applied again and again to describe the experiences of a group of Resistance fighters, set in Rome between the onset of the Nazi occupation in September 1943 and the Allied liberation of the city in June 1944.⁶ The film tells the story of Giorgio Manfredi, a Resistance leader; Francesco, a printer for an underground newspaper; Pina, his fiancée and organizer of the neighborhood women; Marcello, her activist son; and Don Pietro, priest and committed partisan. In their pursuit are the Gestapo forces of occupied Rome, led by Bergmann and his henchwoman, the evil and seductive Ingrid. The link between the two groups is Marina, Manfredi's ex-mistress, who is corrupted by Nazi drugs and Ingrid's caresses. The film opens with the arrival of a German search party at the apartment of Manfredi, who manages to escape over the rooftops and find refuge with Francesco on the eve of his wedding to Pina. When a group of child terrorists dynamites a gasoline truck, Nazi attention is called to the neighborhood and a roundup of partisans follows. Manfredi manages to elude capture again, but Francesco is caught and

⁴ See Vernon Jarratt, *The Italian Cinema* (London: The Falcon Press, 1951), p. 58.

⁵ For an example of producer objections to Rossellini's improvisational technique, and for the director's defense of his *modus operandi*, see Rossellini, "Ten Years of Cinema," in *Springtime*, ed. Overbey, p. 103.

⁶ See, for example, Luigi Malerba and Carmine Siniscalco, eds., *Cinquanta anni di cinema italiano* (Rome: Bestetti, 1954), p. 54. The film's attempt to chronicle recent historical events is made explicit in its original title, *Storie d'ieri*. See Liehm, *Passion and Defiance*, p. 64.

Pina, in her desperate pursuit of the truck that carries her fiancé away, is killed by machine-gun fire. After the prisoners are freed by partisan ambush, Manfredi, who had led the assault, and Francesco seek refuge at the apartment of Marina. Rebuffed by a moralizing and unforgiving Manfredi, Marina betrays his escape plans to the SS. Now it is Francesco who eludes capture, while Manfredi, Don Pietro, and an Austrian deserter are carted off to Gestapo headquarters. In their refusal to divulge anti-Fascist secrets all three meet their deaths—the deserter by suicide, Manfredi by torture, and Don Pietro by execution.

Though the events of the narrative are certainly fictionalized, the term chronicle is not misapplied, for the story is a pastiche of actual occurrences fused into a coherent whole whose general fidelity to the historical record far outweighs its recourse to any formal or aestheticizing effects.⁷ "We made *Open City*," wrote Sergio Amidei in 1947, "under the impression, the suggestion, and the influence of what we had just lived through. More than that, we all have been the instrument of the will of the underground army that was anxious to write its page for the book of history."⁸ Indeed, the historical roots of the narrative are deep and pervasive, extending from the fact of the Nazi occupation itself to many

⁷Recent American criticism has converged on the antirealistic elements of *Open City*. According to Martin Walsh, "Rome, *Open City*; The Rise to Power of Louis XIV: Re-evaluating Rossellini," *Jump Cut*, 20 July 1977: 13-15; and Peter Brunette, "Just How Brechtian Is Rossellini?" *Film Criticism* 3 (Winter 1979), 37, Rossellini's failure to make explicit the terms of his cinematic discourse and his insistence on the transparency of his medium have earned him the label of "illusionist," who pawns off his fictions as if they were realities in the best tradition of Hollywood. It follows that the only filmmakers who could possibly escape such charges of illusionism would be those highly self-conscious ones who make the language of the medium a major thematic preoccupation, leading to the *reductio ad absurdum* that the only valid subject for realist cinema is the impossibility of realist cinema.

⁸Sergio Amidei, "Open City Revisited," *The New York Times*, 16 February 1947, sec. 10, 5.

of the particulars of the narrative action.⁹ Manfredi's initial flight from the Nazis was inspired by Amidei's own rooftop escape, the execution of Don Pietro was drawn from that of an actual partisan priest, the death of Pina was based on an incident witnessed by the actor Aldo Fabrizi, and the bombing of the gasoline truck was modeled on an actual episode of the Resistance youth.

The characters' authenticity is of two sorts, deriving either from the concrete historical figures they impersonate or the popular types they represent. Authentic in the former way is Bergmann, a composite of Gestapo chief Herbert Kappler and Nazi commander Eugen Dollmann; Don Pietro, a fictional rendering of Don Morosini, the activist priest whose story was to be the original subject of a short documentary film; and Manfredi, a figure of Resistance leader Celeste Negarville.¹⁰ Lacking in concrete historical counterparts, the more "popular" characters are authentic in another way—embodying various aspects of the city's reaction to the Nazi occupation.¹¹ Francesco represents the underground press and hence the city's commitment to keep information flowing in order to counter the partial and highly doctored coverage of the Fascist news, and to further the spread of Resistance ideals. Pina, as one of the organizers of the neighborhood women, represents the spirit of popular insurrection against the occupying forces, while Lauretta, Pina's sister, and Marina

⁹On the authenticity of the film's facts and historical figures, see Armes, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 68, and Jarratt, *Italian Cinema*, p. 59. According to Giuseppe Ferrara, even some of the dialogue is historically authentic. See *Il nuovo cinema italiano*, p. 106. Such historicity is what leads Ferrara to call *Open City* "the first authentic example . . . of historical film," p. 108.

¹⁰The idea for the film began as a short documentary on the activist priest, and then came to include a second documentary on the child-resistance movement in a fusion of the two subjects with other interpolated fictional material. See Armes, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 68.

¹¹According to Fernaldo Di Giammatteo, such characters "synthesize a historic situation," thus creating the "choral" nature of *Open City*. Cited in Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema italiano*, p. 109.

dramatize the weakness and corruptibility of those who found collaboration the easier route. It is through these last two, both daughters of the working classes, that Rossellini avoids sentimentalizing the proletariat, showing that for every Pina there is a Lauretta or a Marina, ready to exploit the situation for selfish and mercenary ends. Indeed, he goes to some lengths to establish the working-class origins of the two women, making Lauretta the family member who is ashamed of her humble origins, and Marina a childhood crony who has made it in the show world through Fascist connections. Thus Rossellini does not allow us to ascribe Marina's complicity to any bourgeois decadence, nor to a lifelong dependence on luxury, but instead to a personality weakness that makes her succumb to the seductions of drugs, fur coats, and lush surroundings.

The fact that Pina and Marina both share the same humble origins cannot be overstressed, for it shows that Rossellini holds Marina fully responsible for her choices, making Pina the standard against which this traitress is constantly measured. The consequences of two sets of moral decisions are embodied in these two women who are compared to each other throughout the film in terms of physical appearance, amorous expectations, emotional style, and cinematic precedents. Marina is a throwback to the *femme fatale* or the diva tradition of prewar Italian cinema. We first see her in bed against a luxurious headboard with a cockleshell design, which leads our gaze to her as the center of a glamorous set. We learn later what this elegant image costs her to maintain in the midst of a wartime economy. Her showgirl salary suffices to pay for her silk stockings and cigarettes alone, and necessitates a more lucrative sideline to cover the cost of room and board. Plain, unpretentious Pina, on the other hand, is a reverse diva who dresses in bobby socks and allows herself the luxury of silk stockings only once, on her wedding day. Whereas Marina first appears to us alone in a private space, Pina is introduced to us as she emerges from a crowd, estab-

lishing her status as a *popolana* whose identity is very much bound up with the community of which she is both organizer and member. Her language, with its dialectal cadences and colloquialisms is another social indicator, which locates her squarely in the popular midst. Marina instead speaks a neutral, nonregional Italian in keeping with her pretensions to social mobility. As the quintessential *popolana*, Pina incarnates the strength and self-possession that we see evidenced throughout the neighborhood, especially in the scene of the Nazi raid where women stand up to the German soldiers with great anger and personal dignity. Paradoxically, Pina's very strength is what leads to her destruction, for it will not let her watch as the Nazis cart off Francesco, but compels her to run after him and face the ensuing barrage of machine-gun fire. While Pina dies in the name of strength and defiance, Marina survives because of her weakness, and when confronted by the spectacle of her dead lover Manfredi, she merely faints in a coward's version of Pina's heroic death.

Perhaps the most telling commentary on the differences between the two women emerges from parallel conversations with their respective partners in love. To get any privacy, Pina and Francesco must talk on the stairwell outside their apartments, and although Pina is exhausted and demoralized by her feud with Lauretta, Francesco is able to encourage her with his partisan prophecies of a better world. Theirs is a tender and idealistic exchange punctuated by humorous recollections and hopeful foreshadowings. The analogous conversation between Marina and Manfredi is diametrically opposed in staging, substance, and tone. Set in Marina's diva boudoir, the discussion quickly degenerates into accusations and counteraccusations of the bitterest and most vindictive sort, ending in a stalemate of rigid, mutually defensive positions that admit of no compromise or progress. Where the dialogue between Pina and Francesco is future-oriented and transcends the dilemmas of self, that of Marina and Man-

fredi is limited to egocentric concerns that confine them to an immobile present. Underlying the interpersonal success of the one woman and the emotional bankruptcy of the other is their divergent approach to love itself, which Pina sees as an internal drive set in motion by an act of free will, while Marina sees it as an external force that tyrannizes those who become its prey. For Pina, the woman in love is an active determinant of her fate and is morally accountable for the course of her passion, while Marina sees herself as the passive victim of an uncontrollable power to which she abdicates all personal responsibility. Pina reveals her activist stance in responding to Manfredi's nostalgia for Marina's simple, working-class roots. When he concludes "she's not the right kind of woman for me. Maybe if I'd known her before, when she lived in Via Tiburtina. . . ." Pina replies, "Well, a woman can always change, especially when she's in love" (26-27). While Pina sees the woman as the author of her own amorous transformation, Marina attributes love's alchemy to another source. "If you'd really loved me," she tells Manfredi, "you'd have changed me" (110), thus externalizing the cause of her moral decline, just as later she will project onto drugs and the enticements of Ingrid all responsibility for her forthcoming betrayals. Marina's concept of love as a transcendent and destructive passion is given words by the song overheard in her dressing room while she ransacks her purse for narcotics. "At Copacabana, at Copacabana, on moonlit nights, the woman who loves you kisses you, takes you, holds you, enfolds you, inflames you with love. At Copacabana they steal your heart, at Copacabana is the life of love" (40-41). The exotic setting, loss of self, the forfeit of control, all identify this as the predatory passion that subsumes the beloved into another order of being where conscience and consciousness are left behind. Ironically, it is Ingrid, appearing at the end of the scene with caresses and more drugs, who fulfills this "Copacabana" sentiment, playing the *femme fatale* to



1. Deeply moved, Pina (Anna Magnani) listens as Francesco (F. Grand-Jacquet) expresses his hope for the good outcome of the partisan struggle.

Marina, and revealing the exploitative and dehumanizing implications of such a passion.¹²

The transformations worked by love, be they the malignant, externally imposed ones of Marina, or the purifying, internally motivated ones of Pina, are not limited to the thematic level of the film, but also reveal important formal and symbolic applications. Indeed, the entire film may be said to be about transformations—of people, of genres, and of the systems of signification that typify a culture. Rossellini's interest in the second and third kinds of transformations is what makes him the founder of a new cinematic mode and of a new cultural vision—in short, it is what makes him the first neorealist.

The generic transformation is the most obvious and the easiest to identify, thanks to Rossellini's own celebration of the "spontaneous creations of the actors: of Anna Magnani and of Aldo Fabrizi in particular."¹³ He goes on to cite their debt to the vaudeville stage, which offered such valuable training to the leads in his film, making the regional theater, both in its popular manifestations (the variety shows or *avanspettacoli*), and in its more formal, literary versions (the dialectal plays of Eduardo de Filippo, for example), one of the most important influences on *Open City*. Indeed, this source explains much in the tone and staging of the film, from the use of dialect itself to the slapstick humor, which is handled so brilliantly and appropriately to provide relief in moments of almost unbearable dramatic intensity. Thus, the anxiety generated by the Nazi roundup is lightened by Don Pietro's faked administration of the last rites to the old man who provides his and Marcello's excuse for entering the tenement under Nazi surveillance to confiscate the contents of the boy terrorists' arsenal. Rather than dissipate the dra-

¹² The primacy of the sentimental theme in the film is suggested by Armes, who argues "in one sense indeed it would be perfectly valid to view the film as a study of the success and failure of love." *Patterns of Realism*, p. 74.

¹³ Quoted in Verdone, "Colloquio sul neorealismo," p. 8.

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matic tension of the scene, this interlude both heightens and eventually resolves it by providing the unexpected comic ending to a seemingly impossible predicament. When the old man sees Don Pietro about to give extreme unction, he rebels with every ounce of the considerable life-energy remaining in him. With the soldiers about to enter any minute and the old man's panic rising, Don Pietro has no time to lose. Rossellini spares us the actual scene of the priest's knocking the man unconscious with a frying pan, since the violence of such a spectacle would diminish our delight and surprise at the good outcome of his expedient.

Another homage to the slapstick tradition of regional theater is the scene of the boys' homecoming after their successful demolition of the gasoline truck. Puffed up by their daring, they face the parental consequences of their postcurfew return with bravado, only to be spanked ignobly like the small children they really are. Rossellini uses the architecture of the tenement to great advantage as each landing provides a resounding punishment for the children who live on it. Again Rossellini spares us the gory details, focusing instead on the other children whose faces register the fact of the punishments suffered by their comrades within. As the group of survivors dwindles at each landing, the facial expressions deteriorate with the knowledge that "we're next." The sequence is brilliant not only in its mixture of comic and cinematic effects, but in the wonderful irony that condemns those who defied Nazi authority to the tyranny of parental authority, which not only afflicts, but (far worse) infantilizes, its victims.

The regional theater is also discernible in the many details of domestic life that appear independent of the plot, yet that greatly enhance the sense of the quotidian pervading the film. Thus the spectacle of two girls' carrying a demijohn of water down the stairs of the tenement as Manfredi waits for Pina to get the apartment key has no other purpose than to show us an aspect of life as lived. Similarly, Pina makes the bed as

she talks to Manfredi, a streetcar passes while Marcello leads Don Pietro home, the soccer game goes on after Don Pietro entrusts its supervision to another boy, and numerous other details conspire to show that this world continues to exist even after Rossellini's camera crew has left the scene.¹⁴

The film promises, then, to be a domestic idyll in the tradition of Italian regional theater, replete with familiar detail, local color, love interest, slapstick humor, and a classical comic resolution in the marriage of Pina and Francesco.¹⁵ Midway into the story, however, these generic expectations are violently reversed by the death of Pina, which shocks us out of our comic complacency and shifts the film into a tragic mode.¹⁶ In this transformation of genres, Rossellini reveals that the potential domestic comedies of contemporary life were turned into tragedies by contact with the world beyond the hearth; indeed, that history would not leave the private space alone, or to put it another way, that given the times, Pina could never simply remain the comfortable Donna Rosa of Eduardo de Filippo's *Sabato, domenica e lunedì*. Neorealism may be said to begin with the death of Pina, which forces her story to open to history and forsake any easy withdrawal into literary formulas and predictable plots.¹⁷

As a measure of this generic transformation, we have only to look at the various uses to which humor is put throughout the film. In the first half of the story, where the modes of the regional theater prevail, we have popular banter of a fairly neutral, standard sort. Agostino, the sexton of Don Pietro's

¹⁴For further striking examples of this *quotidianità*, see Liehm, *Passion and Defiance*, p. 64.

¹⁵On the expectations for a comic happy outcome, see Baldelli, *Cinema dell'ambiguità*, pp. 52–53.

¹⁶On the critical tradition of dividing the film in half, see Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema italiano*, pp. 113–14. I agree with Ferrara, who deplors the tendency to privilege the mode of the first half and condemn that of the second. On the other hand, Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 39, sees the entire film as a mixture of tragicomic elements.

¹⁷On Pina's death as the film's opening out to history, see Ferrara, "Neorealism: Yesterday," *Neorealism*, ed. Overbey, p. 202.

church, is the source, and the object, of much clerical humor, sparked initially by his enthusiastic, if unauthorized, participation in the raid on the neighborhood bakery. When Agostino snatches a roll from one woman's share of the spoils, she protests, "Hey Agostino, why don't you go get some yourself?" "I can't, I'm a sexton," he answers, "I'd end up in Hell," to which the woman replies as she retrieves her roll, "then you'll eat your cake in Paradise" (16). Later, the joke continues when Don Pietro and Marcello bump into an Agostino laden with bread, who explains that the bakers were celebrating that morning. "I don't know what holiday it was. Not even the baker knew. Excuse me, Don Pietro, I have to go" (30–31). The clerical humor takes a visual turn in the religious shop above the basement headquarters of the Resistance press. Don Pietro's sensibilities are offended by the juxtaposition of a statue of San Rocco and that of a voluptuous nude. At first he turns the nude away, giving San Rocco the benefit of an equally appetizing dorsal view, when he realizes that it is the saint who needs repositioning, not the nude.

This benign, almost childlike humor gives way to sarcasm and mockery in the second half of the film where it serves as a coping mechanism for a people in the throes of despair. During the raid on the tenement, the soldiers tell one woman not to worry about leaving her laundry behind. "Get outside. No one's going to touch your stuff. We're here!" "Of course, how stupid of me," she answers. I didn't think of that" (82), relishing the irony of a situation that ensures the safety of her dirty clothes, while threatening the lives of her husband, brothers, or sons. We find a similar handling of sarcasm in the restaurant scene when two German soldiers bring live sheep to provide the meat for their main course. Flavio, the proprietor, objects, "I'm a cook, not a butcher," and when the soldiers offer to slaughter the animals themselves, he comments, "Oh yes, you people are specialists" (98).

A minor character who appears once in each half of the film, well illustrates the change in humorous usage that accompanies the more general shift from domestic comedy to public tragedy. The paralyzed old man makes his first cameo appearance during the family quarrel on the eve of Pina's wedding. Oblivious to the emotional fireworks in the adjoining room, he voices his exclusive concern for the fate of the wedding cake and for the *mangiata* (gorging) which will constitute his part in the next day's festivities. This delightful hedonism becomes something much more poignant in the second half of the film, when the old man appears in another comic scene whose stakes are much higher and whose thematic implications much more serious. His refusal to "play dead" as Don Pietro and Marcello seek to hide Romoletto's weapons under his sheets signals the will to life and to resistance that characterized the people in their finest and most desperate hour. The fact that the old man is not named, and that he is paralyzed and sick, makes him an emblem of that Rome which was damaged and helpless, yet unwilling to surrender either to superior military force, or to its own will to die.

Thus the emblematic figure of the old man corroborates what the film's title suggested all along—that the protagonist of the story is Rome itself, as a place, as a people, and as a historical entity.¹⁸ The several maps of the city that recur throughout the film serve to remind us of its thematic importance and of the plurality of meanings that attach to it. The first map we see is in Bergmann's office, providing the background for the conversation between the Gestapo chief and the Fascist police commissioner about the ensuing drag-net for partisan leaders. This map represents the Nazi-Fascist image of Rome—a city to be drawn and quartered for

¹⁸ Gianni Rondolino points out how Rossellini combines individual story with recent Roman history "in such a way as to compose a sort of fresco in which the story of each one is confounded with that of the entire city." See *Rossellini*, p. 52.

its audacity in resisting the occupation sanctioned by international law. Significantly, the map is divided into many subsections in accordance with the Schröder plan to smoke out resisters, but also in accordance with the more general technique of separating the people from each other in the time-honored tradition of divide and conquer. The second map of Rome is located in Francesco's apartment and it labels centers of underground activism. In diametrical opposition to Bergmann's map, Francesco's aspires to unify and coordinate the various Resistance strongholds by sharing intelligence through the underground press as well as through personal contacts. It is perhaps no accident that Manfredi's tortured, blood-lined face, which we see again and again in closeup at the end of the film, recalls the contours of these two maps and the two "Romes" they represent, lacerated by years of war and the most recent struggles for military dominance.

In working with the image of the city, however, Rossellini must perform an important act of recuperation, for he cannot forget that Mussolini had made of Rome a symbol and a justification for all his imperialist exploits. The title *duce*, the ancient Roman salute, the classicizing architecture, the claim to the Mediterranean as *mare nostro*, and the *fascie* themselves show how Mussolini used the trappings of antiquity to adorn his campaign for power. "Rome must appear marvelous to all the peoples of the world," he said in 1926,

vast, ordered, potent, as it was at the time of the early empire of Augustus. You will continue to free the trunk of the great oak of all that still encumbers it. You will make passages around the Theater of Marcellus, the Campidoglio, the Pantheon: all that grew around them in the centuries of decadence must disappear. You will also liberate the temples of Christian Rome from profane and parasitic constructions. The ancient monuments of our history must loom in the

necessary solitude. Hence, the third Rome will spread over other hills, along the banks of the sacred river as far as the beaches of the Tyrrhenian Sea.¹⁹

The Fascist state thus constitutes *la terza Roma*, typologically fulfilling the figures of Augustan Rome and Christian Rome that Mussolini sees as his historical models. All that intervenes between these climactic moments of political and spiritual supremacy is seen as decadent, parasitic growth, although elsewhere, Mussolini is quick to invoke other historic precedents, such as the Risorgimento or the heroics of World War I as prefigurations of his Fascist state.²⁰ The city, referred to significantly, if pretentiously, as *L'Urbe* and *caput mundi* represents, above all, the notion of empire, and when Il Duce alludes to Christian Rome, it is to the Renaissance popes whose archaeological passion for antiquities matched Mussolini's own.²¹

Rossellini must somehow undo this damage to the dignity and integrity of Rome as a historical idea before he can use it to further his anti-Fascist intent. The filmmaker's strategy of revoking Mussolini's title to the symbols of antiquity and then appropriating them for his own purposes explains the symmetry of the triumphal marches that introduce and conclude the film. *Open City* begins with the procession of German soldiers into a square of the occupied city and ends with the return of the young boys into Rome on the Via Trionfale

¹⁹ Quoted in Francesco Saporì, *L'arte e il duce* (Milan: Mondadori, 1932), p. 1.

²⁰ Garibaldi is thus called "dictator" (p. 119) and is lionized in the official Fascist celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his death, while Mazzini Fascism (p. 187). A monument to the soldiers fallen in World War I culminates in a triumphal image of Mussolini (p. 115). All in Saporì, *L'arte e il duce*.

²¹ Ibid., p. 10. For further analysis of the function of the figure of Rome in Fascist rhetoric, see Arthur R. Evans, Jr., "La croce e il coltello: Malacarne Quarterly 23 (Winter 1982).

(Triumphal Way). Theirs is the corrective to the initial march of the occupying troops as the boys reclaim their city for the future of justice and hope that their political activism bespeaks. Another clue to Rossellini's interpretive strategy is the identity of the boys' leader—he is Romoletto, whose symbolic significance is twofold, both in its allusion to the myth of Rome's founding, and in its revelation of the Fascist taste for naming children after classical heroes.²² The filmmaker is thus able to challenge Mussolini's mythomania by revising the myth according to anti-Fascist ideals.²³ Like Mussolini, Rossellini's Romoletto will look to the past for his model and his justification in refounding the city, but he will select republican Rome, rather than imperial Rome, as his historical exemplar. The boy's physical mutilation serves as a reminder that post-Fascist Rome operates under the literal and figurative handicaps incurred by the events of its immediate past. Like Romulus' aboriginal city, Romoletto's will also be founded on fratricidal blood in the bitter civil war between Nazi-Fascist collaborators and the finally triumphant soldiers of the partisan cause.

However, we would be seriously remiss if we were to advance a strictly secular interpretation of the image of the city. Indeed, to do so, we would have to relegate Don Pietro to a merely ornamental role in the narration, and to ignore the considerable external evidence of Rossellini's Christian humanism.²⁴ But Don Pietro's central position in the film, the shy and indirect protestations of faith made by other characters, and the constant allusions to the relationship between

²² See Ben Lawton, "Italian Neorealism: A Mirror Construction of Reality," *Film Criticism* 3 (Winter 1979), 14.

²³ This side of Mussolini's antiquarianism is evidenced by the celebration of Hellenic myths in Agrigento under the direction of Ettore Romagnoli (p. 41) and the Duce's interest in those archaeological findings that were most suggestive of Rome's mythic past (p. 26). Both in Saporì, *L'arte e il duce*.

²⁴ According to Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 38, it is the Christian humanist message which prevails in *Open City*, taking precedence over any realist social analysis.

Church and political activism all argue for the inclusion of the religious theme in any serious reading of *Open City*. We should begin, however, by positing the distinction that Rossellini himself upholds between the Church as institution and the Christian faith not always perfectly embodied by its worldly agents.²⁵ Indeed, the Church as political entity comes under repeated attack by Rossellini for its neutrality, a stance necessitated by the signing of the Lateran Treaty between Mussolini and the Vatican in 1929. Marcello's truancy from catechism class is thus ascribed to the Church's aloofness from the anti-Fascist struggle. "How come you never come to the oratory anymore?" asks Don Pietro. "How can a guy go waste time at the oratory, the way things are" (29) is Marcello's partisan rejoinder. Later, when Don Pietro tells the printer Gino that he had offered Manfredi asylum in the monastery of San Giovanni e Paolo, the response is a tacit criticism of the Church's political nonalignment. "I know, Father, but there are only a few of us, and if everybody goes into the monasteries . . ." (38).

Despite this contempt for certain aspects of the institutionalized faith, Rossellini nonetheless evidences a deep respect for the power and the dignity of the Christian message. Pina herself is a believer who finds the idea of a religious wedding far more congenial than a civil ceremony under the auspices of Fascist authority. Her informal confession to Don Pietro, as she accompanies him to the rendezvous with Manfredi's partisan contact, shows how unnecessary the formal trappings of Church worship are to the sincere expression of religious sentiment. And despite her "fallen" condition as an unwed mother who dies without those sacraments which would entitle her to some portion of sanctifying grace, Rossellini accords her the dignity of a saint. Her death is fol-

²⁵James Agee's failure to honor this distinction is what leads him to question the validity of Rossellini's Marxist-Christian synthesis at the end of *Open City*. For his doubts about Rossellini's ideological optimism, see *The Nation*, 13 April 1946, 443.

lowed soon after by a scene in church where the desperate prayer to the Madonna seems addressed to Pina herself: "Mater Purissima . . . Mater Castissima . . . Mater Inviolata . . . Mater Intemerata . . . Mater Amabilis . . . Mater Admirabilis . . . ora pro nobis . . . ora pro nobis" (102-103). Pina's presence, even in death, is felt throughout the second part of the film, not only as the standard against which the other female characters are measured, but as a figure who watches over the action, indeed, who even intercedes in answer to the congregational plea "ora pro nobis." It is she, in a sense, who saves Francesco's life when Marcello delays his would-be stepfather's final departure for the monastery to give him Pina's scarf. This momentary hesitation spares Francesco the fate that Don Pietro, Manfredi, and the Austrian have to suffer, giving Pina's scarf a kind of talismanic effect on the lives of the man and boy she loved, and conferring upon her a quasi-mystical power to intervene in their behalf.

Even Manfredi, a communist and hence "an atheist and an enemy" (130) of the faith (at least as Bergmann would have it), tries to make confession to Don Pietro after their capture by the SS. "I have to tell you the truth. I'm not the man you think I am. I'm . . ." (124), he begins, only to be interrupted by the Austrian deserter who announces the approach of the Nazi guards. Manfredi's and Pina's impulse to confess to Don Pietro derives less from the fact that he is a Church official than that he is the best possible embodiment of the Christian imperative to social justice. As such, he redeems the Church by showing that its political neutrality constitutes by no means the sole interpretation of the Christian mandate.²⁶ Far from condemning the film to a narrow pietism, Don Pietro opens it up to a plurality of moral perspectives by vindicating not only the heterodoxy of Church

²⁶Indeed, the historical counterpart to Don Pietro, Don Morosini, was not alone in his dissent. See the comments of Fausto Amodei as reported in Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema italiano*, p. 115.

doctrine but also the multiple bases of political action in the secular domain. Whether the participants in the struggle are Marxists, humanists, monarchists, or Christian soldiers does not matter as long as the fight is directed toward the divinely sanctioned end of social justice. When Bergmann questions the propriety of Don Pietro's collaboration with a communist, he explains "I am a Catholic priest and I believe that a man who fights for justice and liberty walks in the pathways of the Lord—and the pathways of the Lord are infinite" (130). Don Pietro invokes divine authority not to privilege his own ideological position, but to show that petty sectarian differences are of no account when viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. Don Pietro's Rome will thus be an open city in the truest sense of the word, accommodating a multiplicity of perspectives in a society that refuses all absolutes except those of freedom and social justice.²⁷

Don Pietro's role in the story and his final martyrdom to the partisan cause make Romolettos's refounding of the city a rebirth as well. When the boys march back to Rome after witnessing the priest's execution, they do so against the backdrop of St. Peter's in the closing shot of the film.²⁸ 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-scène*. Rome thus becomes the symbol of regeneration in its threefold typology—as capital of the pagan past,

²⁷ On the film's presentation of a plurality of perspectives and on its refusal to privilege any one, univocal truth, see Brunetta, *Storia*, pp. 321 and 373. Indeed, this interpretation of the film's title as a plea for ideological openness is corroborated by the group of Marxist dissidents who, in the wake of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, began a journal called *Città aperta* in which disaffected members of the PCI could voice views which differed from the straight party line.

²⁸ On the spiritual implications of this shot, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, pp. 41–

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. This apocalyptic element is introduced at the moment of Don Pietro's execution when the young priest in attendance recites from the Lord's Prayer "adveniat regnum tuum: ("may thy kingdom come" [155]) in a promise of that future when the secular ideals of the classical past will fuse with the spiritual ideals of the Christian present to form that Rome "onde Cristo è romano" ("where Christ is a Roman" [*Purg. xxxii*, 102]).

Though Rossellini's film spoke with an optimism and a faith appropriate to the events of 1945, subsequent developments have proved him more a dreamer than a prophet. No leader emerged to carry out this synthesis of Marxism and Catholic humanism, and no social order arose to fulfill his political imaginings.²⁹ Yet *Open City* had enough power and momentum to sustain its vision and to inspire an entire cinematic movement dedicated to its realization. Later filmmakers would modify the particulars of the vision, but none would question its essential rightness nor its urgent claim to repeated artistic expression. Rossellini and his colleagues may not have founded the social order of their political dreams, but they did found a cinematic movement whose adherents constituted a citizenry of its own, as loyal and as committed, in many instances, as the Romolettos and the Marcellos of the neorealists' visionary city.

²⁹ Not surprisingly, Rossellini came under attack by Marxists for propagating this "fairy tale of national agreement on the part of opposed forces and hierarchies." Baldelli, *Cinema dell'ambiguità*, p. 84. For Rossellini's ideological waffling in *Open City*, see the same volume, pp. 76–88.