

## Rossellini's "War Trilogy"

### *Open City*

The landmark film of neorealism and the work that announced a new direction in European cinema to the world was Rossellini's *Open City*. It so completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of the moment it was created—1945, the minute the war ended, when the reconstruction of Italy had not yet begun—that it stands as a kind of symbol for the period itself.<sup>15</sup> The conditions of its production (relatively little shooting in a studio, film stock bought on the black market and developed without the normal viewing of daily rushes, postsynchronization of sound to avoid laboratory expenses, limited financial backing) did much to create the myths concerning neorealism. With a daring combination of styles and moods ranging from use of documentary footage to the most blatant melodrama, Rossellini captured forever the tension and the tragedy of Italian experiences during the German occupation of Rome and the beginnings of the partisan struggle against the Nazi occupiers. Its plot is an intriguing reflection of the contradictions inherent in that struggle and focuses upon a few dramatic episodes in the lives of a handful of simple characters: Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi), a partisan priest, joins with a Communist partisan leader named Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero) to combat the Nazis. Manfredi's former mistress Marina (Maria Michi) eventually betrays him to the diabolic Gestapo officer, Major Bergmann (Harry Feist). A working-class woman named Pina (Anna Magnani) is engaged to be married to a typesetter named Francesco (Francesco Grandjacquet), a friend of Manfredi's, and she is already expecting his child. These characters are strongly stereotyped into good and evil categories, depending upon their attitude toward the Resistance. It is not enough for Bergmann to be a monster; he is also depicted as an effeminate homosexual, while his assistant Ingrid (Giovanna Galletti) is a viperish lesbian who seduces Marina with expensive fur coats, presents, and drugs to obtain information about Manfredi. Since Rossellini cares most about how the tragedy of warfare affects common people, he concentrates the action around the impending marriage of Francesco and Pina, intertwining it skillfully with the narration of the Gestapo's brutal search for Manfredi and his comrades. As a result, Rossellini creates a narrative combining fact and fiction, reality and artistic invention. While he fuses Catholic and Communist elements of the Resistance into a coherent storyline, he never avoids the hints of tension between the two major sources of anti-Fascism, two groups who will oppose each other when the struggle against the Nazis has ended. Manfredi, for instance, expresses his mild disapproval of Pina's marriage in a church but reluctantly admits that it is better for a partisan to be married by a partisan priest than by a Fascist mayor at city hall. In spite

of Don Pietro's obvious good intentions, a leftist printer tells him sharply that not everyone in Italy can hide from the Germans in monasteries. When Bergmann arrests Manfredi and Don Pietro, he tries unsuccessfully to move the priest to betray Manfredi by arguing that the Communists are the sworn enemies of the church, but Don Pietro declares that all men who fight for liberty and justice walk in the pathways of the Lord.

More than adherence to any programmatic attempt at cinematic realism, the tone of *Open City* is thus far more indebted to Rossellini's message of Christian humanism. The good characters are set sharply apart from the corrupt ones by their belief in what Francesco calls an impending "springtime" in Italy and a better tomorrow. Marina is corrupted by Ingrid not because of political convictions but because of her lack of faith in herself, which makes her incapable of loving others. Marxists and Christians alike adhere to Rossellini's credo embodied in Don Pietro's last words before he faces a firing squad at the end of the film: "Oh, it's not hard to die well. It's hard to live well."<sup>16</sup> Beneath the surface of the work, which often seems closer to a newsreel than to fictional narrative, a profoundly tragicomic vision of life juxtaposes melodramatic moments or instances of comic relief and dark humor with the most tragic human experiences to reconstruct the reality of a crucial moment in Italian history. When Fascist soldiers arrive at the workers' apartments near the Via Casilina to look for concealed partisans, Manfredi and the others manage to escape because the troops are preoccupied with trying to peer up the women's skirts on a staircase. A sympathetic Italian policeman looks on while Pina and other women loot a bakery, and rather than doing his duty, he only remarks sadly that it is too bad he is in uniform, because he cannot take any bread for himself. When German soldiers enter a restaurant where Manfredi is eating, we fear that he will be captured, but this moment of suspense is immediately undercut by our discovery that the Germans have only come there to butcher a live lamb and to eat it, and our fear (as well as Manfredi's) dissolves with the humorous quip made by the restaurant owner—he had forgotten that Germans were specialists in butchering!

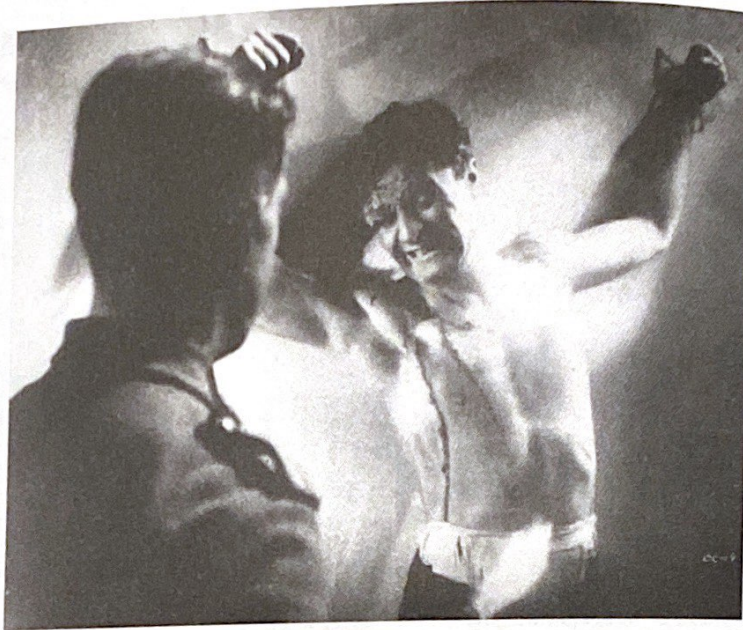
*Open City* revolves around Rossellini's shifting perspective from a comic to a tragic tone, and nowhere is this more evident than in the film's most famous sequences, the search of Pina's apartment building that results in her eventual death in the street, mercilessly machine-gunned by German soldiers as she races toward Francesco, her fiancé, who has been arrested and will be taken to a German labor camp. This misfortune occurs on their wedding day. The promise of a better tomorrow, Francesco's "springtime," will never come for them, and the happy day ends in total despair. But this tragedy is preceded by a comic introduction, a sequence scripted by none other than Federico Fellini. Just before her death, Don Pietro and Marcello, Pina's son, arrive at the apartment building—supposedly to give the last



Perhaps the most famous shot in the history of the Italian cinema: Pina races toward her lover just before being gunned down by German troops in Rossellini's *Open City*. Credit: CSC

rites to Pina's father, but actually to secure and conceal weapons and bombs kept there by Romoletto ("little Romulus"), the crippled leader of a group of Roman children who have become partisans. In spite of Rossellini's often quoted assertion that dramatic editing is not required in filmmaking, here he skillfully creates a moment of suspense as he cuts back and forth between the priest's frantic search for the weapons, on the one hand, and the menacing ascent of the suspicious Fascist officer, on the other. When the Fascists enter the room, Don Pietro peacefully administers the last rites to an old man stretched out on a bed. Only after the soldiers leave and Don Pietro frantically attempts to revive the sleeper do we realize that, to keep him quiet, Don Pietro has knocked him unconscious with a frying pan and concealed the contraband weapons under the bed. But this slapstick comedy routine immediately shifts to the darkest of tragedy as Pina, in defiance of the German soldiers, runs after the truck carrying Francesco away. We hear a burst of machine-gun fire, Marcello races toward his mother screaming, and Pina lies dead in the street, her right leg bared to the garter belt, an image suggesting the obscenity of her unnecessary death. Ironically enough (and Rossellini never misses the opportunity to accentuate a sense of irony), in the next sequence partisans ambush Francesco's truck, and he escapes. Pina's death, like so many others in wartime, was pointless.

Equally unforgettable is the scene at Gestapo headquarters in the Via Tasso, and the sequences there are constructed around the juxtaposition of different moods and techniques. Here the actual structure of the set underscores the film's dramatic theme. It is also important to emphasize that, despite the myth that Italian neorealism avoided studio sets (some film



In Rossellini's *Open City*, the Nazi officer Major Bergmann calmly observes the horrible torture of Manfredi, the partisan leader. Credit: MOMA

historians claim that this may be explained by the fact that war damage and refugees had made Cinecittà's studios unusable), many of the most memorable parts of this film were shot in four sets that Rossellini had built in the basement of a vacant building on Via degli Avignonesi in downtown Rome. (Today a marble tablet marks the spot for tourists and film buffs.) These sets are Don Pietro's sacristy, Gestapo headquarters, the adjoining torture room, and another adjoining room where the German officers relax between rounds of interrogation. Two doors lead out from the office in which Bergmann questions first Manfredi and then Don Pietro: one opens onto the torture chamber inhabited by ghoulish soldiers whose fingers are stained with blood and who light their cigarettes from the very torch they use on Manfredi with complete indifference to his suffering; another door opens onto the parlor where Bergmann's colleagues relax with music, liquor, and female companionship, oblivious to the human suffering on the other side of the door. Bergmann moves effortlessly among these three locations, and his physical movements (viewed most often from the perspective of Don Pietro, who remains in the central room and peers through each door with difficulty, since his eyeglasses have been damaged) emphasize the emotional distance between their separate worlds.

Manfredi's torture is one of the most horrifying of many such scenes in the history of the cinema. Yet Rossellini achieves this startling impact on his audience not by showing us merely the reality of the torture with minute attention to detailed close-up shots, but rather by exploiting the power of our imaginations and focusing upon the reactions of Don Pietro, nearby. We see Don Pietro's anguished face while voice-overs convey the screams

from the other room; our revulsion at this sound is further increased by masterful touches of black humor. While Don Pietro is moved to tears, a German soldier quietly sharpens his pencil and awaits Bergmann's orders without reaction. When Manfredi dies without betraying his cause, Rossellini frames this Communist partisan leader as if he were photographing the crucified Christ, employing the traditional iconography familiar to us all from numerous works of religious art. The lighting of this crucial scene also reflects that stark backlighting associated with German expressionist cinema of the 1930s.

As Manfredi is dying, a drunken Nazi officer (Major Hartmann), listening to the piano in the adjacent salon, argues against Bergmann's view that the Italian partisan will betray his cause. Bergmann believes he will talk because the Germans are a master race—otherwise, what meaning does this war have, he asks. Hartmann remembers that in World War I, French patriots refused to talk under torture as well, and in his drunken stupor, Hartmann seems to be a sympathetic German, a “good” Nazi. Yet, the next morning, when Don Pietro is led to his execution, the same Hartmann, now sober, commands the firing squad, and when the Italian soldiers forced to do the Germans' dirty work aim away from Don Pietro, obviously wanting to avoid killing a priest, it is Hartmann who arrogantly delivers the coup de grâce with his sidearm. Rossellini's concluding shots in *Open City* accentuate the religious tone of the entire film: Romoletto, Marcello, and the other children walk away from the priest's execution and are followed by the panning camera that sets them, Italy's future, against the backdrop of the dome of Saint Peter's Cathedral. Out of a moment of tragic despair, Rossellini creates a vision of hope from the first of the many symbolic images associated with children that will characterize many of the great neorealist classics.

### *Paisan*

The melodramatic plot of *Open City* aims to manipulate its audience with different moods (now comic, now tragic) and presents obviously stereotypical protagonists (good Italians, bad Germans). In spite of the fact that this film marks the beginning of the neorealist era, Rossellini's first international success must, in retrospect, be considered a relatively traditional melodrama, both in terms of style and content, rather than an attempt to create a new film realism. To a far greater extent, Rossellini's next film, *Paisan*, reflects the conventions of newsreels documentaries, even though it too goes beyond the mere statement of facts or depictions of actual events. It is also one of the most original of neorealist works in terms of style. Its episodic organization revolves around a step-by-step narrative of the Allied invasion of Italy, beginning with the early landings in Sicily and moving successively to the occupation of Naples; to a moment six months after the

liberation of Rome; to the struggle between Fascists and partisans for control of Florence; to the visit of three American chaplains to a monastery at Porto Tolle, in the Apennines; and finally to the capture of Italian partisans and their American advisors in the Po River Valley. The film also exploits many of the conventions of wartime documentaries of the 1940s (conventions that many postwar critics confused with realism): pincer movements on a map, an authoritative narrative voice-over, and actual newsreel footage introduce each of the six episodes, as if this were an army training film. Made when the rubble of the destruction was still visible in Italian cities, much of the film's photography retains the grainy quality and the immediacy of subject matter we associated with the newsreels no longer shown in our movie theaters but that at the time were the equivalent of the evening television news on network- or cable television for us today.

Nevertheless, Rossellini's true subject is not merely a realistic view of the Allied invasion. Instead, he aims at a more philosophical theme—the encounter of two alien cultures, Italian and American. This encounter on the screen had already taken place culturally during the last Fascist period, and would continue in the first decade after 1945: Italian intellectuals had already come to grips with American writers, and now real Italians would meet real Americans and greet them as their liberators. The results of this fateful juncture in history are shown in brief, individual vignettes set against a backdrop of the Italian landscape, itself one of the main protagonists of the film. The meeting of two different worlds involves a variety of problems subtly treated by Rossellini, such as linguistic communication or its frequent breakdown, as well as empathy or antipathy between alien cultures and peoples. The film's Italian title—*Paisà*, a colloquial form of the word *paesano* (countryman, neighbor, kinsman, even friend)—was typically used by Italians and American soldiers as a friendly form of address, and the implications of its deeper meanings provide the basis for Rossellini's exploration of the Italian-American encounter.

Little indication exists that any basis of comradeship is possible between the two groups as the film opens in Sicily. The Sicilians are suspicious and afraid of the GIs even though one American's parents came from Gela, a nearby town. The Americans are rightly dubious of the Italians' intentions. After all, Italy and Germany are allied, and they have just been fighting German and Italian troops in North Africa. The Americans call the Italians "Eye-ties," not necessarily a friendly form of address. One of the townspeople, a young girl named Carmela (Carmela Sazio), however, volunteers to lead the Americans through a minefield. Most of this first episode focuses upon an incomprehensible conversation between Carmela, who speaks no English, and Joe from Jersey (Robert Van Loon), who speaks no Italian, not to mention Sicilian dialect. Despite the ensuing linguistic comedy of errors ("shooting star" versus *stella cadente*, "home" versus *come*), they reach an

## Vittorio De Sica's "Trilogy of Solitude"

### *Shoeshine*

When Rossellini's "war trilogy" is compared to the three major neorealist classics by De Sica, it becomes abundantly clear that there was no single aesthetic or programmatic approach to society in their films. As André Bazin perceptively wrote, "Rossellini's style is a way of seeing, while De Sica's is primarily a way of feeling."<sup>27</sup> Rossellini's style can be more easily described as a method that constantly explored the boundaries of fact and fiction, illusion and reality, whereas De Sica more frequently injected innovative touches into what are often rather traditional storylines typical of the films he created during the years immediately before the end of the war. Rossellini certainly began his career much closer to the film documentary, after his experiences producing his "war trilogy" and his association with De Robertis. As noted earlier, De Sica began his career as a professional actor and turned to direction in 1940 after becoming one of Fascist Italy's most popular actors and singers.

De Sica's collaboration with the scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini began in 1942 with *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944), and Zavattini scripted De Sica's greatest films after the war's conclusion. Indeed, *Shoeshine* may most accurately be seen as a continuation of some of the characteristics of this earlier work: *Shoeshine* employs the same kind of relatively elaborate screenplay (whereas Rossellini's scripts are somewhat elemental); it employs studio locations quite frequently, perhaps more frequently than Rossellini's neorealist works; and it continues the drama of childhood innocence corrupted by the adult world that De Sica presented so masterfully in *The Children Are Watching Us* and that Rossellini explored in his films as well. Two shoeshine boys—Pasquale (Franco Interlenghi) and Giuseppe (Rinaldo Smordoni)—use their hard-earned money to buy a horse, but they become involved in a black-market scheme because of Giuseppe's older brother and are sent off to a reformatory prison for juvenile offenders, where their friendship is gradually destroyed by the social injustice usually associated with the adult world and authority figures in the film. After an escape, Giuseppe's accidental death (blamed on Pasquale) concludes De Sica's exploration of the tragic impact of the adult world on youthful friendship.

Within this elaborately plotted film, De Sica's camera style incorporates a profound understanding of the aesthetic possibilities of mise-en-scène editing, a style obviously indebted to the French masters of a preceding generation, or to Orson Welles. He constantly employs camera angles or shot placements to underscore the progressive limits imposed upon the freedom of the two children. The credits of the work are superimposed over the set of the children's prison, an ominous hint of future disaster. The opening scene



In De Sica's *Shoeshine*, the faces of Giuseppe and Pasquale in prison underscore the corruption of youthful innocence by a cruel, adult world.  
Credit: MOMA

of the film, shot on an exterior location, is a view of the galloping horse that represents the ideal of freedom in the film, a gauge against which the rest of the film should be measured. While on horseback, the children are shot from a low-angle perspective, one that ennobles their character and gives them the appearance, as Bazin once noted, of an equestrian statue. When they pursue their trade shining shoes, however, the same low-angle shot from their perspective underscores their humble status in the world. The sense of confinement continues to build with a number of shots through cell windows that place the two boys in a tight, claustrophobic atmosphere and restrict their movement. The climactic scene of the film—set outside the prison and staged not on location (unlike the opening shot of the galloping horse) but, instead, inside a studio—concludes the sense of confinement as the aesthetic qualities of the photography merge perfectly with Pasquale's tragedy. Like Renoir or Welles, De Sica frequently exploits the possibilities of deep-focus photography to pack a great deal of visual information into a single shot. His treatment of a prison riot is typical: three visual planes act to delineate the human drama only implicit in the plot or the dialogue. In the background in deep focus are the rioting children; the middle plane contains the boy who will act as a peacemaker between the two shoeshine boys; and in the foreground stand Pasquale and Giuseppe.

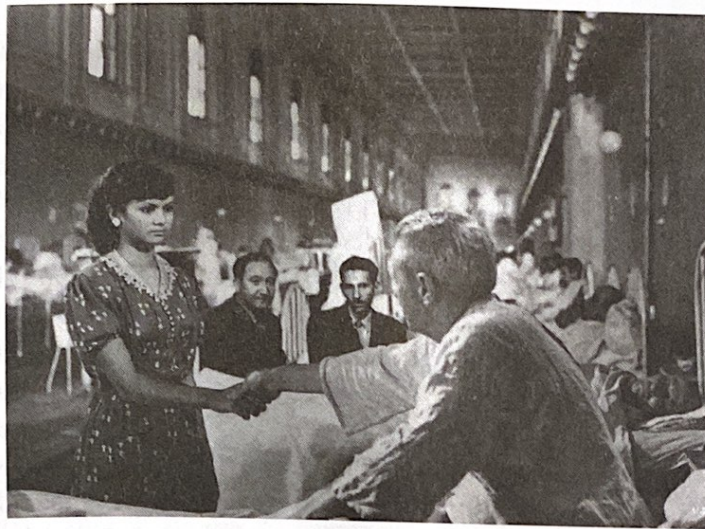
The visual complexity of De Sica's photography combines with a highly elaborate plot. The story begins and ends with the vision of the horse, a free spirit whose final escape symbolizes the end of a friendship. Pasquale betrays Giuseppe in prison, revealing the details of the black-market operation, only because the prison guard fools him into believing that they are

## *Umberto D.*

*Umberto D.* completes De Sica's neorealist "trilogy of solitude." (*Miracle in Milan*, released before *Umberto D.*, represents a special critical problem treated in chapter 4.) It was De Sica's favorite work, produced with his own money, and its disastrous record at the box office was due in some measure to the fact that, in it, the director offered few sentimental concessions to the public's tastes. Yet André Bazin's judgment upon seeing the film when it was released—that it was a genuine masterpiece—has now been generally accepted. The film portrays a brief and traumatic period in the life of a retired pensioner, Umberto Domenico Ferrari (Carlo Battisti), as well as his complex relationship with his pet dog and the young woman in his apartment building. Once again, De Sica's choice and direction of nonprofessional actors is brilliant: he gave the title role to a professor from Florence whose facial expressions and general appearance perfectly capture the mannerisms and the moral values of an older generation. While the film deals courageously with the problem of the aged in modern society, it steadfastly

refuses any sentimental resolution. De Sica pictures Umberto D. not as a lovable, jolly old man but as a cross, irritable, and grouchy type, since the director wanted him to have an untidy, unpleasant disposition and to emphasize the point that the aged can be a nuisance to others and sometimes even to themselves. Unlike Ricci, who has at least the protection of a family, Umberto lacks even this comfort, and most of his friends are already dead. There remain only his mongrel dog and Maria (Maria Pia Casilio), a pitiful unwed mother whose plight is even more desperate than Umberto's, for she will lose her position as soon as Umberto's bigoted landlady discovers her condition.

Because Umberto is part of the middle class, his life often revolves around the protection of outward appearances—a clean shirt, proper behavior, and good manners—what the Italians call a *bella figura* in public. As inflation and illness erode his meager pension, Umberto is more afraid of losing face, of appearing poor to others, than of poverty itself. De Sica thus poses a dilemma similar to that posed in *The Bicycle Thief*: Will Umberto's problems be resolved with a mere increment to his pension, or is social reform incapable of curing human solitude? Though exterior locations are important in *Umberto D.* (and De Sica exploits many of the imposing monuments in Rome to set off his protagonist's poverty against their grandeur), the bulk of the interiors were shot in the studios of Cinecittà. Thus, this film is one of the few neorealist classics to depend as much upon the resources of a professional studio as upon on-location shooting. The studio allows De Sica to express himself in a very complex camera and editing style, not typical of most neorealist films. His camera is very mobile: instead of the usual process shots simulating travel in moving vehicles, De Sica brings the camera into city trolleys and taxi cabs. He employs a wide variety of camera angles to emphasize Umberto's disorientation. He frequently shoots through keyholes and at reflections on mirrors for sophisticated visual effects. Even more remarkable are the visual effects achieved through extensive use of deep-focus photography both within studio interiors and outside on location. Umberto's insignificance in Italian society is immediately obvious in De Sica's first scene—an extremely high-angle shot down on a crowd of demonstrating pensioners. The camera's position accentuates their vulnerability, and as police cars sweep them effortlessly off the street because they have failed to request a parade permit, De Sica shows them to us as if they were insects being brushed aside, a visual hint that is reinforced later when the maid scatters a swarm of ants in her kitchen. Older people are simply expendable. In four different locations, the depth of field in his photography goes beyond the simple representation of any "real" spatial distribution of objects, producing a visual correlative of Umberto's loneliness and solitude. The long, empty hall of his apartment projects a sterile, hostile, foreboding atmosphere. The many rows of hungry men eating in



In De Sica's *Umberto D.*, the servant girl visits Umberto in the hospital, providing the director with another opportunity to use his deep focus photography to advantage. Credit: MOMA

a charity soup kitchen he frequents, similar to the endless rows of pawned linen in *The Bicycle Thief*, inform us that Umberto is no isolated case but only one of thousands of elderly Italians cast aside by society. The long halls of the hospital with their endless lines of elderly patients suggest the desperation people in De Sica's universe must feel. Finally, the endless rows of trees interspersed with playing children closing the film after Umberto's unsuccessful suicide attempt allow the main characters—the old man and his dog—gradually to merge into the background and out of our vision in a lyrical ending reminiscent of the disappearance of Ricci and Bruno at the end of *The Bicycle Thief*.

*Umberto D.* may also be the neorealist film that most closely fits Zavattini's prescriptions for what neorealist cinema *ought* to be, a set of principles outlined most clearly in his often-cited manifesto, translated variously as "A Thesis on Neorealism" or "Some Ideas on the Cinema."<sup>32</sup> Zavattini advocated that neorealist films should respect real time or duration: ninety minutes in a character's life should require ninety minutes of screen time, and a film about the purchase of a pair of shoes should possess as much dramatic potential as the account of a war. Bazin's famous essays on Italian realism in *What Is Cinema?* quite rightly praise two scenes in *Umberto D.*, both of which respect duration: Umberto's retirement to bed, and the maid's awakening in the morning and her work in the kitchen. Each of these scenes, according to Bazin, show Zavattini's concept of duration, where "the real time of the narrative is not that of the drama but the concrete duration of the character . . . the film is identical with what the actor is doing and with this alone."<sup>33</sup> In the maid's sequence, De Sica maintains a perfect coincidence

between narrative film time and that of the protagonist: refusing to give any dramatic structure to her mundane activity, respecting every intimate detail of reality equally and making no hierarchical choices among them. The sense of time's duration weighs upon the viewer just as it does upon the maid, and her simple, yet eloquent, gestures require no dialogue whatsoever to tell us all we need to know about the tragedy of her life. De Sica may well have learned something of this technique from an equally celebrated sequence in Visconti's *Obsession*, where an exhausted Giovanna sits in her kitchen (a scene analyzed in chapter 2).

In some respects, the sound track of *Umberto D.* represents a step beyond the style of *The Bicycle Thief*. Umberto's ungrateful, mean-spirited landlady, once kept alive during the war by Umberto's surplus ration coupons, now wants to evict him, and she even rents out his room by the hour to adulterers and prostitutes. Yet, she is such a hypocrite that she will doubtless fire Maria once she realizes the young woman is pregnant out of wedlock. The decor of her apartment, her lover, and her friends all show the landlady's selfishness, superficiality, and venality, and the immoral qualities and callous behavior she exhibits are underscored by the sound track, which always associates her with opera heard on a record. She views operatic music not as an expression of genuine emotions (something she would be incapable of understanding either in art or in life) but as a means of confirming and improving her social status. Opera, with its refined control of emotion and its theatrical or melodramatic qualities, stands as a counterpoint offered by De Sica to the genuine, elemental, and truly pathetic human suffering experienced by Umberto and the maid but completely ignored by the landlady.

The structure of *Umberto D.*'s plot may be compared to the two neorealist films already examined: the role of Umberto's dog parallels the symbolic qualities of the horse in *Shoeshine* and the bicycle in *The Bicycle Thief*. Umberto's pitiful dog represents a burden willingly assumed by the old man, his only link to life and ultimately the only thing that prevents his suicide. No doubt De Sica was aware that the presence of such an innocent and vulnerable creature would guarantee a sentimental response to his film, just as the presence of children in other films plays upon his audience's emotions. Some critics persist in believing that playing with our emotions in the cinema must conceal some perverse ideological program, one that advocates accepting the status quo without question.<sup>34</sup> As in both *Shoeshine* and *The Bicycle Thief*, each of which employ parallel subplots, De Sica again delineates character in *Umberto D.* by playing the old man's tragedy against that of the maid. Throughout the film, she is his counterpart in suffering, but Umberto rarely understands how similar his or her lives actually are, just as no one else understands his plight. When Maria's negligence allows his dog to escape, Umberto scolds her for her carelessness immediately after

she has told her boyfriend about her pregnancy and has been abandoned by him. In his concern for his dog, Umberto remains completely insensitive to Maria's pain, while he expects others to recognize his problems. Human loneliness fails to produce a sense of empathy in De Sica's characters, and as the film concludes, Umberto stands alone with his dog, his problems and his solitude still unresolved. Bazin cleverly remarked that "the cinema has rarely gone such a long way toward making us aware of what it is to be a man. (And also, for that matter, of what it is to be a dog)."<sup>35</sup> De Sica has also shown us in no uncertain terms that there is very little difference between the two conditions.

### Luchino Visconti and Verga: *The Earth Trembles*

The discussion of Luchino Visconti's *Obsession* in chapter 2 reveals it as one of the precursors of Italian neorealism. After making *Obsession* Visconti became directly involved in the Resistance against the Germans, aiding escaped Allied prisoners of war behind German lines and concealing partisans in his Roman villa. Attacks on German occupiers of the Eternal City in Rome led to bloody reprisals—including the massacre of 335 Italian hostages at the Fosse Ardeatine on March 24, 1944—and a subsequent roundup of anti-Fascists included Visconti, who, though eventually sentenced to death, later escaped from prison with the assistance of his guards. In the following year, Visconti returned to work in the theater until an American psychological warfare group asked him to film the trials and executions of Pietro Koch and Pietro Caruso, the former being the very man who had interrogated him in prison. Directed by Mario Serandrei (1907–66), who collaborated with Visconti, De Santis, and Marcello Pagliero (Manfredi in *Open City*), *Days of Glory* (*Giorni di gloria*, 1945) became a collective documentary on the Resistance and Italy's liberation. But the young aristocrat had not forgotten his earlier association with the intellectuals on the journal *Cinema*, nor had he completely ignored the advice contained in the early essay by Alicata and De Santis published by *Cinema* in 1941. Entitled "Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema," the essay called for a return to the best realist traditions of Italian literature:

Our argument leads us necessarily to one name: Giovanni Verga. Not only did he create a great body of poetry, but also he created a country as well, an epoch, a society. Since we believe in an art which above all creates truth, the Homeric, legendary Sicily of *I Malavoglia*, *Maestro Don Gesualdo*, *L'amante di Gramigna*, and *Jeli il pastore* offers us both the human experience and a concrete atmosphere. Miraculously stark and real, it could give inspiration to the imagination of our cinema, which looks for things in the space-time of reality to redeem itself from the easy suggestions of a moribund bourgeois state.<sup>36</sup>

Besides the literary example of Verga, Visconti must certainly have encountered some of the writings of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who had focused much of his writing on the problems of Italy's impoverished southern region. Thus, with initial financial backing from the Italian Communist Party, Visconti arrived at the Sicilian fishing village of Aci Trezza, the setting for Verga's *The House by the Medlar Tree*, with the intention of filming a trilogy on a prospective revolution in the Mezzogiorno (the term used to denote the South of the peninsula) brought about by a union of fishermen, miners, and peasants, the kind of national-popular alliance Gramsci envisioned between southern agricultural workers and northern factory workers. The one film he actually completed—*The Earth Trembles* still retaining the subtitle "The Sea Episode" ("Episodio del mare")—was thus only the first part of the project he envisioned.<sup>37</sup>

Visconti employed absolutely no studio sets or sound stages in this film. Special lighting effects were used only during certain difficult night scenes on the sea. The characters were portrayed by the townspeople of Aci Trezza. As a result, *The Earth Trembles* fits many of the traditional definitions of neorealism perhaps better than any other well-known neorealist film besides Rossellini's *Paisan*. Visconti's method of directing the nonprofessionals involved explaining the day's shooting to the villagers, describing the events to be filmed, and soliciting their opinions as to how they would respond in similar circumstances. Their spontaneous reactions were then incorporated into the script, which thus evolved, and the film progressed. Visconti also rejected the usual Italian method of shooting without synchronized sound and dubbing the sound track afterward during editing. Instead, he insisted upon the authentic voices and sounds of the Sicilian environment, and in doing so, he also took a revolutionary cultural stance—one shunned by cinema during the Fascist period, which normally avoided using Italian dialects in favor of a standard Italian. Visconti instead used the dialect of the simple people he filmed, believing that the authenticity of the film would be achieved only if the nonprofessionals expressed themselves in their own language. Because the dialogue seemed incomprehensible to some Italians, he then chose to employ a voice-over, an objective narrative voice in Italian, to provide an often-ironic commentary to the storyline. In places, he also interjected Italian subtitles in place of subtitles in dialect. Two of his young assistants, Francesco Rosi (1922– ) and Franco Zeffirelli (1923– ), both became directors themselves, although only Rosi seemed to follow Visconti's interest in film realism.

Visconti modifies Verga's novel considerably, moving the focus from the father of the fishing family to his young son, Antonio, called 'Ntoni (Antonio Arcidiacono), who rejects tradition and seeks to better himself by opposing the corrupt middlemen who exploit the fishermen by paying them very little for their daily catch. Verga's novel emphasized a pessimistic

fatality and did not leave room for change through social reform in what he depicted as a timeless world unchanged for centuries by history.<sup>38</sup> At 'Ntoni's insistence, the Valastro family mortgages the family home to purchase their own boat and so avoid working for others, but the need to meet the mortgage payments forces them to fish in bad weather, and a storm destroys the boat, resulting in foreclosure on all their real property. The family's attempts to oppose the harsh economic system fail totally, and 'Ntoni must eventually humiliate himself by begging the middlemen for a job as a day laborer on one of their boats.

Visconti's adaptation of Verga's novel is closer to Greek tragedy than to the revolutionary conclusion of the projected Marxist trilogy Visconti originally wanted to film, for that unfilmed story would have ended in the rise of a class consciousness and the growth of proletarian unity among peasants, miners, and fishermen. Visconti's aristocratic aesthetic sensibilities altered Verga's story considerably, and there was never any chance that the northern nobleman would ever produce a piece of mere propaganda for his leftist friends. In spite of his realistic attention to authentic locations, dialect, and the use of nonprofessionals, Visconti's emerging cinematic style in *The Earth Trembles* sometimes contrasts sharply with any purely ideological message.

Aci Trezza's universe is circumscribed completely by the two huge rocks in the harbor, the rocks that, according to ancient legend, Polyphemus the Cyclops hurled toward the fleeing Odysseus. The spot seems outside time or history, except for 'Ntoni's disastrously unsuccessful attempts to bring social reform to it. Visconti's plot also seems to reflect the traditional five-act structure associated with classical tragedy, with the tragic reversal and the downfall of the main protagonist occurring in the conventional place: (1) 'Ntoni first challenges traditional ways of living; (2) he then turns to direct action, first casting the fish merchants' scales into the ocean and creating a riot, leading to his imprisonment and subsequent release when the middlemen realize that they need the fishermen to survive, and this new knowledge leads 'Ntoni to persuade his family to buy the new boat, but their attempts to become entrepreneurs set them apart from the rest of the village; (3) a brief moment of happiness ensues, as the happy family salts anchovies together; (4) disaster strikes at sea, the boat is lost, and the family's last catch is sold for almost nothing, causing the family to disintegrate (one brother leaves home, a sister is dishonored, and 'Ntoni becomes a drunkard); (5) 'Ntoni encounters a young girl by his now abandoned boat, realizes his fatal error in basing his hopes on the traditional family and capitalist entrepreneurship, rather than upon a new sense of class consciousness and unity, and remains hopeful for the future, as he returns to the sea, much as the Valastros have always done, receiving his mother's blessing.

The cyclical, timeless quality of life in Aci Trezza is captured perfectly by Visconti's cinematic style. The director's signature, typically slow panning shots with a stationary camera or long, static shots of motionless objects produces a formalism that is infrequent in documentary film or feature films with realist pretensions. Characters enter into and exit from a carefully controlled frame, the pure aesthetic qualities of which once reportedly moved Orson Welles to complain that Visconti photographed fishermen as if they were *Vogue* fashion models!<sup>39</sup> This strange objection, one that would deny beauty to poverty and restrict realism to distasteful objects, has, however, no place in Visconti's homage to the mythical dimensions of the fishermen's daily struggle to survive. In no other Italian film of the neorealist period does the photography capture the inherent nobility of its subject matter so well as in his unforgettable images of the women, black shawls wrapped about them and beating in the wind, while they wait motionlessly for their men to return from the storm at sea.

More than any other neorealist director except for Vittorio De Sica, Visconti employed extreme depth of field in both exterior and interior shots, and his careful framing of each shot embodies the same *mise-en-scène* techniques already examined in De Sica's best films. Visconti thus achieves a marvelous sense of open space as he shows us the Valastros' world. One brilliant shot combines the exterior world of the men with the interior female world, as the camera is placed within the dark house with the women but shoots past them through the doorway into a brightly lit exterior. Another shows us the three Valastro men washing and talking in two separate rooms, as the women carry on their activities in different locations: outside



Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* endows images of fishermen's wives waiting for their husbands after a storm at sea with all the dignity of classical sculpture.  
Credit: CSC

the depth of field Visconti captures a rooftop conversation that includes the entire neighborhood. But his use of certain techniques is never predictable: a deep-focus shot during the first part of the film may capture the family's solidarity and unity, whereas the same kind of shot toward the end of the film emphasizes something entirely different—the family's separation and alienation not only from the other villagers but from one another as well.

Visconti's personality may well be the source of some problems in an analysis of *The Earth Trembles*. The descendant of one of Italy's oldest and noblest families (the Visconti were once rulers of Milan in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance), Visconti himself displays a progressive, if not completely Marxist, ideology in his works that often seems to clash with his obvious love for the beauty he discovers in the very society he condemns. This contradiction is true not only of *The Earth Trembles* but also of his other best-known films: *Senso*, a.k.a. *The Wanton Countess* (1954), *The Leopard* (*Il gattopardo*, 1963); and *The Innocent* (*L'innocente*, 1976), his last film. Even as 'Ntoni delivers his moving speech concerning the need for united collective action ("We have to learn to stick up for each other, to stick together. Then we can go forward."),<sup>40</sup> his tone of self-sacrificial martyrdom is closer to Christian than to Marxist precepts. It is no accident that when he returns to work, his sister puts the family portrait photograph back next to that of the Sacred Heart. Christian and Marxist ideas seem equally appropriate for this timeless world. 'Ntoni casts a pair of "Judas" scales into the sea to protest prices paid for fish, and behind the grinning middlemen we can dimly discern barely erased slogans from Mussolini's Fascist regime. The artist in Visconti triumphs over the party ideologue, however, for the film's storyline and its cinematic style accentuate the cyclical, archetypal quality of life in a mythical, ahistorical world much like that chronicled by the novelist Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* a few years earlier. The film opens and closes with shots of fishing boats gliding over a glassy sea; they are framed between the gigantic rocks that form the symbolic boundary between Aci Trezza and the world of history and ideology (that is, the world of the North). Daily activities in the fishing village—eating, mending nets, family conversations, courtships, the mother's blessing before going to work—all become part of a timeless ritual, the character of which is emphasized by the extreme length of Visconti's shots, many of which last three to five minutes without a cut. Even the narrative voice-over serves to reinforce the sense of stoic pessimism pervading the film. Rather than a Marxist fable about the necessity of class struggle, Visconti presents an archetypal drama within the structure of the nuclear family, as old, timeless, and compelling a tale as any Homeric ballad.