

ROME OPEN CITY

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Rome Open City was the first film to bring the Italian cinema to the attention of an international audience after the Second World War. In New York a subtitled print was shown on 25 February 1946 at the World Theatre, a 300-seater on 49th Street. It was enthusiastically received and would run there for the next twenty-one months. A review in the American Communist newspaper *The New Masses* said it 'proves again that a low-budget picture can be magnificently successful, that such films can be made by progressive groups ...; that we do not have to depend upon Hollywood and commercial production exclusively for the kind of films that should be made'.¹ In Paris, where it was shown in a preview screening to critics in November 1946 (together with Rossellini's next film, *Paisà*, which had been completed that summer), Georges Sadoul wrote: 'This work, made with almost no money and no means, brings more to the cinema than two hundred recent Hollywood films, despite their unlimited capital and technical resources. ... A new realism is born, which owes much to newsreels, the journalist's investigations, the work of the documentary film-makers.'² In both the USA and France, and later in Great Britain where it was first screened in May 1947, it opened up an import market for Italian films which would allow the work of other directors, like Vittorio De Sica, Giuseppe De Santis and Luchino Visconti, to become known in these countries.

The film's early reception as a quasi-documentary was probably due at least as much to its closeness to the events it reconstructed as to the way it was directed or photographed. These events had taken place in Rome in the first months of 1944 when it was under German occupation. Allied (British and US) troops had entered the city on 4 June 1944 and the film had begun to take shape that summer. The script was written between September and December 1944. The film went into production in January 1945, when the Germans still occupied the north of Italy and as Soviet troops were advancing west across Poland. It was post-produced in the summer of 1945 (all the sound was post-synchronised) and its first public screening was in Rome on 24 September, five months after Italy was liberated and just three weeks after the Japanese capitulation in the Pacific. As Dino Risi put it, reviewing the film in Milan in October, the film's subject was still 'scorching'.³ Shot partly on location in streets and in a working-class tenement, with the residents as extras and untrained actors in the cast, it depicted events particular to one city. At the same time, it

touched on experiences and memories of the war which were common to people elsewhere and this helped give it its strong resonance with audiences both at home and abroad. Rossellini later complained that it was coolly received by critics in Italy and snubbed at Cannes in 1946.⁴ However, the notion that it made little impact in its home country is false. It got many enthusiastic notices and as soon as it began its public run in Italy (October 1945) it played to packed houses and became the biggest-grossing film of the 1945–6 season.

The film was seen in retrospect as the founding work of Italian neo-realism, the starting point of a new kind of cinema, and it became a landmark for independent and radical directors in many countries. Jean-Luc Godard wrote in 1959, in a review of Jean Rouch's *Moi, un noir*, 'all roads lead to *Rome Open City*.'⁵ The Brazilian director Glauber Rocha said in the early 80s:

Without cameras, without film, without a laboratory, without technical assistance, without actors, without production ... with nothing ... just with ideas ... Rossellini would say 'ideas generate images' ... the desire for ideas is materialised. ...

Rossellini is the first director to discover the camera as an 'instrument of investigation and reflection'. His style of framing, lighting and his rhythms of editing will create, starting with *Rome Open City* (1945), a new method of making cinema.⁶

Just as the early reviews provide evidence of the film's immediate impact, so statements like these show the strength of its enduring legacy. Yet they all show how that legacy became exaggerated and the nature of the film distorted. Looking back at *Rome Open City* over half a century later it is not difficult to pick holes in the claim that it was a completely new kind of film, poor in means but rich in ideas, the film which ushered in a movement that negated all of Hollywood and much of pre-war European cinema. One can point, for instance, to precursors of social realism in Italian films before the war and to residues of older film styles and genre conventions after it, not least in *Rome Open City* itself. One can point to pre-war and wartime examples of a 'documentary style' in films about contemporary social issues (including ones made in Hollywood, such as John Ford's film of *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1940), of location shooting, of the mixing of non-fiction footage with fictional reconstruction and of

trained actors with 'non-actors' (for instance in the films of Robert Flaherty and Pare Lorentz), as well as to other early 'reconstructed documentaries' about the resistance, like René Clément's *La Bataille du rail* (1946). And while it is true that *Rome Open City* was made in unusually adverse conditions, when the main Rome studios were out of action, film stock was hard to find and the normal channels of production finance had dried up, and that some members of the cast had no previous acting experience, one can also point out that it starred two established actors, Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani, that it was not made on a particularly low budget by contemporary Italian standards, that the majority of scenes were filmed in studio sets and that most of those who worked on the film, including the principal screenwriter Sergio Amidei, the director of photography Ubaldo Arata and the editor Eraldo Da Roma, were experienced professionals. Rossellini too was hardly a beginner and he was not really all that marginalised, at any rate not as much as he would claim afterwards. He already had a director's credit for three war films made when the Fascist government was in power and it was partly this record, plus his two locally bankable stars, which helped persuade his producers to risk money on his venture in financially precarious times. Finally, unlike almost all Rossellini's subsequent films, from *Paisà* onwards, *Rome Open City* contained some stereotyped characters and a fully-written script, to which Rossellini adhered closely in production, dense in dialogue and including various comic lines, gags and routines written by the assistant screenwriter, Federico Fellini. Its pathos and its message of heroism, solidarity and co-operation between people of different political beliefs against Fascist barbarism were easily assimilable by a mass audience. Rossellini himself said in retrospect that the film was 'polluted' with a type of seductiveness that in his later work he had sought to eliminate altogether.⁷

Yet, despite all this, *Rome Open City* is rightly considered a key film in the history of the cinema. It is a work of great emotion, indelibly stamped by the conditions of its making, by the war and the anti-Fascist struggle, and it is one of a number of works from that period to have established a movement towards a realistic and committed art. For all its dramatic manipulation of complex events into a linear story of defiance, courage and redemptive hope it remains a brilliant portrayal of life in a city under occupation. However, it is important to be clear about what it is and what it is not. It was essentially a transitional film – for Rossellini, for the cinema, for a society coming out of two decades of Fascism – rather than a