

Rossellini and the View in the Broken Mirror

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The clash between American and Italian cultures pervades all six episodes of *Paisà*. Rossellini attempts in these discreet vignettes to establish a cinematic language that transcends traditional barriers of culture and language to capture with painstaking verisimilitude the shattering of illusions that occurred as a result of World War II. The failure of language as a means of communication makes way for a new cinematic language unique to Rossellini's vision. Indeed, this cinematic language exposes the naked truth of a world stripped of illusion in the wake of the war. This is especially poignant in the story of the young American soldier Fred and the Roman young woman Francesca, Rossellini's raw rendition of love among the ruins.

What transpires between Fred and Francesca subverts the Hollywood narrative of "boy meets girl" to tell a different story--one of hardship, resentment and loss--the true wartime love story. This is the "real" associated with Neorealist cinema, what Peter Bondanella describes as "a common aspiration to view Italy without preconceptions and to employ a more honest, ethical but no less poetic cinematic language in the process" (Bondanella 121). The vignette opens with scenic shots outside of Rome. Voice-over narration describes the historical context leading up to the liberation of the city. In these introductory scenes we find the Neorealist taste for the documentary, which as Bondanella notes was favored by the Fascist regime at one time supported by Rossellini (120-121). In this documentary sequence, the American troops march through the streets of Rome. Tanks drive through the *vie* as the narrator announces the date, June 4th 1944, the day the Americans arrived in Rome. We see cheering crowds, parades, an atmosphere of feverish celebration of the liberation and its prospects for the end of the war.

In the very next sequence, the words, ‘*SEI MESI DOPO*,’ (six months later) appear across the screen. The scene shifts to a dark and dingy street. A cigarette salesman yells ‘AMERICA’, a lone voice heard in the background as the camera takes us inside a bar filled with Roman women and American soldiers. Here nostalgia, which will play a profound role in the vignette, rears its head for the first time as the soldiers reminisce about the day they arrived in Rome and recount their feelings of triumph and celebration. In the poorly lit, dingy bar, the joy and optimism associated with that day is gone, and their memories are as lacking in enthusiasm as they are laden with melancholy. We encounter Francesca for the first time in the bar, seated with three American soldiers who are amusing themselves by trading war experiences, another instance of nostalgia at work. The soldiers appear indifferent to her, as she is to them. Francesca seems distracted, even anxious; we have the impression she is surveying the bar, looking for someone. A woman confronts her in Italian; Francesca retorts, ‘You’ll starve when these guys leave. No more little hats. You’ll be in rags, like before.’ The audience gets a first glimpse into the “prostitution” these women succumb to in order to survive. Francesca and the woman exchange blows, drawing the attention of the American military police, who take the extreme step of arresting all of the Roman women in the bar. In this setting, Rossellini exposes the tension, distrust and mutual aggression between the two sides, American men and Roman women, at odds with one another. The optimism and openness of six months earlier seems long gone. Something changed in the months following the liberation--the contrast between the opening scene and the scene in the bar makes that apparent. Rossellini, however, leaves as yet uncertain the reason for the change.

In the confusion of the arrest Francesca manages to escape. The shot fades out and frames Francesca making her way down a dark *via* where she comes upon an American soldier (Fred), who is so drunk he can hardly stand. She stops and in English asks him for a cigarette and a light.

She then attempts in English to convince him to come with her, the obvious insinuation being for a sexual encounter. At first, he resists: ‘I don’t want to go with you’, he says in a harsh tone. She takes his arm and leads him to an apartment building. Again, he is reluctant and does not want to follow her inside. Persisting, she leads him to a room that appears to be located in a boarding house. Francesca tries to lighten the mood by kissing the side of his mouth, a quasi-romantic gesture, to which he is impervious. He heads for the bed. The body language highlights the disconnect between the two. Fred hardly looks at Francesca; they make no eye contact, and their physical interactions are forced and void of pleasure. They appear to be heading toward a crass, mechanical act of lust, a meaningless encounter between strangers. As she undresses, Francesca attempts to redeem the encounter from its soulless depths by dimming the light and attempting to converse. Fred, however, remains indifferent, even as Francesca lies in bed and begins to caress his body with hints of tenderness. Fred pushes her away. ‘Rome is filled with girls like you’, he says coldly. Ironically, only when he is repulsing her overtures, does he break out of his indifference; pushing her away is his only genuine reaction to her. Otherwise, he refuses to look at her.

The camera zooms in on Fred’s face, framed in a close-up shot, as he remembers the day the Americans arrived in Rome, a day of celebration and sunshine, filled with joy and the promise of romance. According to sources at the time Rossellini’s depiction was accurate: “The Allied troops found themselves welcomed wherever they travelled by throngs with flowers, requests for food, and offers of hospitality, especially in prominent cities such as Rome and Naples” (Harris 137). Fred’s face fades out and the camera moves into a flashback of a day six months earlier, which he continues to describe briefly off-screen. The Fred and Francesca vignette is the only segment of *Paisà* that features a flash-forward and a flash-back. In the flashback Fred descends

from the tank where he had been for hours and makes his way into the crowd in search of a drink of water. Francesca is in the crowd, a beautiful, fresh faced young woman, smiling from ear to ear. She leads him away from the cheering crowds to her apartment where she serves him a glass of cool water. Their encounter is drenched in sunshine, and presents an emotionally jarring juxtaposition to their later meeting on the dark, deserted narrow street. Fred's desire to quench his thirst with water, a symbol of purity and life, stands in contrast to his later state of debased inebriation, representing a need to quench despair rather than thirst. His drunkenness adds profound poignancy to the base sexual encounter Francesca and he are about to engage in. On that sunny afternoon of their first meeting, their encounter is charged with warmth and affection. Though the flashback scene in a sense mirrors their later encounter, rather it is a reverse image. In both scenes they confront a language barrier; yet in their first meeting they share a palpable romantic connection expressed in smiles, gestures, the exchange of glances and prolonged eye contact, all signs of affection. The romantic connection is heightened by the *mis en scène*. Words are not necessary to inform the audience what is going on. The cinematic language communicates perfectly. Significantly, this is equally true within the four walls of the squalid room where Fred and Francesca again find one another by happenstance six months later.

Artistic attempts to describe the traumatic experiences of the war came up against the limitations of traditional cinema and literature to convey with full accuracy the reality of the depth of atrocity and human devastation, psychic as well as physical. Rossellini is operating on two levels, on the one hand exposing the limitations of language as a means of expression, which he does through interactions between the Italian women and the American soldiers, who struggle between English and Italian to understand one another. On the other hand, Rossellini is making the case for the new cinematic language of Neorealism. Indeed, Giuliana Minghelli identifies

Neorealism as “an intuitive impulse to make cinema *as if* starting from zero, beyond traditions, ideologies, even cinema itself” (Minghelli 15). In the concluding scenes of the Fred and Francesca story Rossellini exposes the role of illusion as culprit, in order to make the case for realism as the cinematic language of the future. At the outset I made the claim that Rossellini subverts the Hollywood romance. In the flashback sequence Rossellini proves that he can create a romantic illusion up to Hollywood standards. Francesca and Fred share tender moments to the accompaniment of violin music, long embraces, longing gazes, a caress of the hand, a wistful goodbye, all of the insignia of romantic love to evoke, not romance per se, but more significantly the *illusion* of romance, which is after all what Hollywood romance is—illusion. By overstating the romance of the initial encounter, their reunion six months later shatters the illusion with even greater force. Rossellini thus makes his point: illusion has no place in the neorealist vision.

In bed Francesca suddenly appears to recognize Fred as the soldier she encountered six months earlier. Fred is outside the frame; his voice is heard off-screen. The two seem to talk over one another, each in their native language, as if to acknowledge that conversation between them is impossible. Francesca takes up the whole frame; her eyes well with tears as her gaze fixes in Fred’s direction. Choreography plays an important role in establishing what is going on. Francesca moves to the foot of the bed. The shot features Fred in the background, slightly blurred, at the head of the bed opposite Francesca. Their body language also communicates their inability to connect. Fred does not realize the woman he is with is indeed Francesca, the woman of that first day, who he longs for in the same way he longs for the early euphoria of victory. He continues to cling to his illusions of victory and his first encounter with Francesca. The pain caused when reality is juxtaposed to illusion accounts for his drunkenness. Yet it is the illusion that also blinds him to reality and causes him not to recognize Francesca.

Francesca also clings to the illusion of their first encounter. When she does recognize Fred, she cannot confront the reality of where they both find themselves and of the circumstances of their second meeting. She does not identify herself. Instead, as if she too sees her earlier self as someone else, she seeks to re-impose the illusion by telling Fred she knows where Francesca lives, and that tomorrow he will be united with her. Francesca needs to change the setting, to see Fred—and for him to see her—in the light of a new morning at a different address to re-create the illusion. The inability to face reality is why Francesca leaves Fred in the bedroom without revealing who she is. This is her last-ditch attempt to keep the illusion alive.

Fred falls asleep and Francesca leaves in a hurry, instructing the owner of the boarding house to give Fred a piece of paper with an address and a note imploring him to go there in the morning. The shot fades out once again to frame Fred, presumably the morning after, standing with a fellow soldier, the Colosseum in the background. The Colosseum is an iconic image replete with symbolism—a ruin of a past Roman glory that Mussolini fecklessly promised to recreate. Fred takes the piece of paper with the address out of his pocket, and his companion asks, ‘What’s that?’ Fred responds, ‘just the address of some whore’, and throws the slip of paper to the ground. Illusion is replaced by disillusionment. We see Francesca waiting in the doorway to her house in the pouring rain. Rossellini resorts to melodrama. The images are all reversed; rain instead of sunshine; Fred gets into the truck, instead of stepping out; he leaves, a departure instead of an arrival. André Bazin best articulates what Rossellini sought to achieve;

For Rossellini, facts take on a meaning, but not like a tool whose function has predetermined its form. The facts follow one another, and the mind is forced to observe their resemblance; and thus by recalling one another, they end by meaning something which was inherent in each and which is, so to speak, the moral of the story—a moral the mind cannot fail to grasp since it was drawn from reality itself. (Bazin 61)

The encounters between Francesca and Fred can be viewed as a metaphor for Italy's own complicated relationship with the *ventennio fascista*. In this sense, fascism was also an illusion. Perhaps Francesca's initial "failure to remember", to borrow from Giuliana Minghelli's analysis of Neorealism, is a symptom of Italy's fascist past—a feeling of an absent past brought on by the trauma of war (Minghelli 4). Rossellini is ultimately identifying the repercussions of a nation stripped of its spirit and illusions. As for Fred and the American perspective, they fought and won, and yet Rossellini shows the hollowness of this victory to the soldiers who find themselves far from home, locked indefinitely inside the bombed-out ruins of a foreign place.

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