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as Social Evaluation**

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## **Roberto Rossellini's Compassion as Social Evaluation**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines how Roberto Rossellini's neorealist films, *Rome Open City* and *Paisan*, utilize the emotion of compassion to examine the social and historical significance of the women in the postwar Italy. Furthermore, it also focuses on the role of the female protagonists and the compassionate responses they suggest to clarify their position in society. Additionally, this study will propose interesting observations on the emotion of compassion itself, and its mechanisms that produce an image of idealized womanhood.

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Roberto Rossellini is considered one of the most influential filmmakers of all time. With his trilogy of films – *Rome Open City*, *Paisan*, and *Germany Year Zero*-- made during and after the Second World War, he offered a transformative mark on cinema. With their stripped-down aesthetic, non professional casts, and unconventional approaches to story telling, these strongly emotional works became international acclaimed and came to define neorealism. The aim of this article is to refer to the first two movies mentioned in their relationship with compassion.

*Rome, Open City* (Rossellini 1945) is regarded as a masterpiece of Italian cinema, for both its visual and historic significance. In the 1970s and 1980s such critics as, among others, Arthur Knight, Pierre Sorlin, Peter Bondanella, Ben Lawton, and Mira Liehm have centered on the historical and humanist aspects of the work. More specifically, Millicent Marcus (1986: 38), (2008: 427) and Alan Perry (1999) focused on the representation of Pina as a Resistance activist as well as a suffering character.

In the same way, in analyzing *Paisan* (Rossellini 1946) critics such as Celli and Cottino-Jones have underlined the historic value of the movie, such as the historic domination of the country, while others as Bondanella, Carvalho, and Amberson have underlined the movie's stylistic qualities, emphasizing, for instance, the movie's hybrid method or its dialectical relationship and comparison with the structure of the modern short stories. Other scholars highlight a range of numerous other components such as the importance of children (Fisher, Traverso), or the meaning of the postwar ruins, (Steimatsky).

In this abundant field of scholarship on *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan* rather few works analyze the female gender roles in relation to their social functions. For instance, in her examination of *Rome Open City*, JoAnn Cannon (1997: 155) critiques the inequality between the heroic importance attributed to men and the secondary function of women. Examining *Paisan*, Millicent Marcus refers to the suffering of Carmela for avenging the friend fighter as a means to suggest frustration toward the protagonist's sacrifice, which is misunderstood by the American soldiers.

I wish to argue, however, that Rossellini uses the emotion of compassion

as an instrument to look at the social and historical significance of the women in his films narrative. In particular, this study centers on the implications of the female protagonists' compassionate responses in order to elucidate their functions in society and the neorealist perception of female identity in the postwar period.

In order to examine the images and meanings of compassion constructed by Rossellini in his depiction of women as social agents, I consider the theories of compassion developed by Edith Stein (1964), Martha Nussbaum (2001), and Maureen Whitebrook (2002). Compassion is regarded here as the emotional involvement in another individual's life, communicated through a change of consciousness or an act aimed to better the other's condition. This emotional participation may be communicated through words, actions, or

gestures that identify another person's difficulty. My model of compassion has been shaped by Aristotle and Martha Nussbaum's examination of this emotion. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* defines compassion as a painful emotion in response to another person's ill fortune or distress. It is characterized by the following three elements: (a) the suffering is serious rather than frivolous, (b) the suffering is not caused primarily by the person's own accountable behavior, and (c) the pitier's own probability of suffering is similar to that of the sufferer (1385b). In *Upheavals of Thought* (2001: 321), Nussbaum proposes as the third element required for compassion, the 'eudemonistic judgment (this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted)'. An examination of the previous components will allow an understanding of the sufferers' role in the community and through their offered or accepted compassionate responses, ways to value their social recognition or rejection allowing us to speculate on the possible reasons for their social discriminations.

### **Pina's and Carmela's compassion**

An examination of the representations of compassion and the female protagonist may be read as an attempt to reproduce stereotypical associations between the emotions and female gender traits. On the contrary, recent critical studies have persuasively argued that emotions are socially and culturally constructed<sup>1</sup> and as a source of knowledge, they change from culture to culture and also within cultures.

*Rome, Open City* provides several examples of people's anguish during the German occupation and ways to combat it. While Rossellini presents the male figures fighting the politics and oppression imposed by the foreign occupant and therefore being involved in resistance actions, he introduces the female characters opposing the political situation through actions that aim to solve their daily problems. The movie opens with a German patrol marching across Piazza di Spagna in Rome, indicating the occupation of the city; then it begins to consider the repercussions of that historic event. We then see Gestapo headquarters, where Major Bergmann and the Italian police commissioner are planning to capture Manfredi, a political opponent. The opening scenes highlight Bergmann's intolerant attitude toward his enemies, as he shows indifference to the sounds made by tortured prisoners. In contrast to the representation of men, who are vigorously involved in the fighting or brutally captured, the women are depicted as fighting for food. Since the beginning Rossellini distinguishes precise gender roles and appropriate ways to express them.

After the descriptive reconstructions of the historical context of the opening scenes, Rossellini presents the women's looting of the bakery as an inevitable consequence of material repression. The women may reasonably

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<sup>1</sup> The works by Catherine Lutz, for instance, amply demonstrate this.

evoke compassion because they are stealing bread, a staple of survival, and because one of them, Pina, is pregnant. Furthermore, the presence of children underscores the women's social status as mothers and may help to justify their involvement in the raid. This scene illuminates Pina's social background and establishes her significance in the story. As the organizer of the pillaging of the store, she is depicted as an ordinary woman facing the lack of food and proposing a radical response. The viewer's gaze is directed first toward her upper body, which emerges among the other individuals, then toward her whole image, to emphasize her pregnancy, as the script presents her:<sup>1</sup> 'A pregnant young woman, Pina, makes her way out of the noisy crowd raiding the bakery' (Rossellini 1973: 16).<sup>2</sup> After that we see her picking up a small loaf of bread that she has lost in the shuffle; a sergeant approaches and helps her, without showing any disapproval of her actions. The subsequent scene focuses on the representation of Pina's attempt to protect her shopping bag, full of bread, from the prying hands of other women. Whereas the created image of other women communicate an undifferentiated through unable to understand fully the significance of the looting, Rossellini focuses on Pina's pregnancy, her rebellious streak and political awareness, thus marking her as a prominent protagonist in the story.

The depiction of Pina's capability as an active participant in the political struggle appears also in her conversation with the resistance fighter, Manfredi. Pina explains that she and other women have raided a bakery; when Manfredi asks if the women were conscious of their actions, she replies, 'Well, some of them do know why they are doing it. ... But most of them just grab as much bread as they can. And this morning somebody filched a pair of shoes and a scale' (Rossellini 1973: 23). This scene complicates the meanings suggested by the women's behavior. Though Pina hints at political motivations ('some of them do know why they are doing it'), she also acknowledges that most of them simply take advantage of the situation.

Through Pina's doubtful facial expression, Rossellini shows her hesitation in answering as she first emphasizes their accountability and then admits their self-interest. Rossellini conveys here not only Pina's feeling of disappointment regarding the other women, but also her desire to express her understanding and solidarity with them. In this situation Nussbaum's three prerequisites for compassion are present and this emotion is thus triggered. In fact, Pina's perception of her collaborators' suffering is serious and undeserved and furthermore, she recognizes them as significant individuals in her scheme of goals. Rossellini introduces precise shots on Pina's caring eyes and controlled gestures or Manfredi's inquisitive and genuine manners to invoke the importance of the events the two characters are discussing. Moreover, Rossellini creates visual signs such as the light on Pina's facial look that appear

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<sup>1</sup> The script for *Rome, Open City*, as with many other movies by Rossellini, was written by Sergio Amidei in collaboration with Federico Fellini. Roberto Rossellini, *The War Trilogy* (1973), translated by Judith Green, will be cited throughout this study.

<sup>2</sup> All the page references are to Roberto Rossellini's *The War Trilogy*.



to valorize her expression of understanding toward the women and make an appeal to spectators.

In order to understand the repercussions and implications of Pina's statements about other women, it is helpful to draw on Edith Stein's work on compassion and empathy (1964: 105), which plays key functions in the formation of one's persona.<sup>1</sup> By comparing other values to their own, individuals learn to consider their principles and assess their significance. In this context, Pina's compassionate responses toward her companions highlight social implications of her individual behavior, because it may be viewed as an idealized model for other women in the new Italy. In this manner, Rossellini's representation reveals a totalizing perspective that does not sufficiently recognize differences between people or groups.

The bakery scene is important in clarifying the created image of Pina's social, economic and political position, as well as her perspective. Even though the women have carried out an illegal act, the circumstances they are experiencing reasonably call for compassion toward their plight. When Pina tries to defend her hard-earned bread from another woman's grab, the camera shows the sergeant who has witnessed the whole scene and who, considering his position, responds in unexpected fashion. Rather than sternly rebuking Pina, he reprimands Pina in a compassionate way, apparently attempting to defend instead of punishing her. He simply observes, 'But, Miss Pina, this is a crazy thing to be doing in your condition!' (Rossellini 1973: 16) and then offers to see her home. Pina's reaction to the sergeant expresses her justification for her actions:

Pina: I'm supposed to die of hunger!

Someone, probably the baker's wife, shouts for help through the noise of the crowd.

Baker's wife (off screen): Sergeant, help!

Pina, to baker's wife: Go hang yourself!

Sergeant: I'll see you home.

They go off screen to the right.

Voices shouting: Bread, bread, bread, we want bread!  
(Rossellini 1973: 16)

In this scene, Rossellini's portrayal of the female protagonist consolidates her status in relation to other female characters. The baker's wife, for instance, who belongs to a higher social class, receives no attention at all. The sergeant's compassionate acquiescence acknowledges Pina's extreme condition as she actively attempts to overcome a real need. Her actions, which could be prosecutable, are instead approved by the choir of voices shouting for bread.

The sergeant's compassionate response recognizes Pina's suffering, yet Rossellini renders the protagonist's position more complex by depicting part of her suffering as self-imposed: she is pregnant outside of wedlock. This element

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction between empathy and compassion is not significant for this investigation, which aims to analyze the political and social repercussions of emotional involvement. Stein's (1964) discussion of 'empathy' is pertinent also to the present analysis of compassion.

complicates our understanding of compassion as it challenges Nussbaum's notion that when individuals generate their own affliction they typically do not generate compassionate reactions (2001: 322). But Rossellini affirms Pina's responsible behavior and personal awareness through the images of her confession to the priest, Don Pietro. Pina regretfully admits that she had made many wrong decisions in the past; even though pregnant, she is not ashamed to get married in church. Then she reveals her astonishment at her future husband's decision to marry her.

Pina: I have thought so many times he could really have found somebody better'n me—yes, a younger girl, not a widow with a child, and without a cent. Because I've had to sell everything to keep going ... and things keep getting worse. How'll we ever forget all this suffering, all these anxieties, all this fear? ... Doesn't Christ see us? (Rossellini 1973: 53)

Pina realizes that, through her pregnancy, she is making an already difficult existence even more so. However, her recognition of her responsibility and individual limitations, along with her despair regarding the historical circumstances, instigate compassion for her condition.

In a similar way Rossellini builds the character of Carmela in *Paisan*. The film reconstructs the life of Italians from the moment the Allied troops invaded Sicily to the time they liberated Italy from the Nazi occupation. Central themes of the movie are not only the difficulties in communication between people who speak different languages, but also the unity they are able to achieve through their shared pain. This movie presents the microcosm of the war, consisting in six segments that illustrate the Italian Liberation, which extends from Sicily to the Po Delta. In the first vignette, a group of American soldiers arrive in a Sicilian village and try to find help from the local people. Carmela, a young woman, decides to help and show them the way across a mine field. Afraid for her potential betrayal, one of the soldiers guards Carmela in a castle where, at the beginning, she refuses to communicate and collaborate. Toward the end, she will risk her life to vindicate him showing that human beings have a strong capacity for compassionate involvement. In fact, following the principles of Aristotle that trigger compassion, Carmela's opinion of her friend's destiny is serious rather than frivolous. Furthermore, she also realizes that she could be susceptible to the same treatment. However, Rossellini complicates the situation by not including the second Aristotelian element to activate compassion, which is the lack of responsibility of the sufferer. Rossellini introduces the visual element of the flash light used by the soldier to show Carmela a picture of his family that obviously underlines his accountability allowing the Germans to locate and kill him. Although Carmela's acquaintance is in part responsible for his death, compassion is equally offered demonstrating the difficulty to establish rigid boundaries within which this emotion operates.

Rossellini presents Carmela as a simple peasant woman whose courage and awareness of the dangers of the war make her a distinct protagonist among other individuals. In fact, after the first scenes depicting a bombing on the coast

of Sicily and the following allied landing, Rossellini presents a group of residents hidden in a church where the American soldiers arrive. He makes clear that the Germans before leaving set mines throughout the area. For this reason, the residents suggest the assistance of a local person, such as Carmela, who was familiar with the area and mines because she was seeking out her family members. The spectator's attention is directed toward specific elements that construct Carmela as a singular female character. Initially, she is presented between two figures of women: an old sitting peasant woman and a girl standing showing her intimate connection with family members or community. Other cinematic connotations create Carmela's personality as uncultivated and unconventional one, as for instance, her curly and uncombed hair or her square collar dress buttoned on one side. Carmela's self-assurance is conveyed through her confident and distinct way of speaking her dialect and a certain looking straight on her interlocutors' eyes. Later, Rossellini offers a close shot of Carmela's upper back and sturdy shoulders to significantly illustrate her physical strength and energy, which are emphasized in the following outdoor shots when the viewer's attention is caught by the woman's injured ankle, another visual component to suggest her daring and intrepid character. This is how Rossellini presents the dialogue between Carmela and the American soldier:

Tony: Are you the one that knows the way over the lava?

Carmela: I go that way everyday to take my father his lunch.

Tony: Is it a path or a road?

Carmela: It's lava.

Tony: Isn't there somebody who can lead us? Someone in your family?

Carmela: No. My brother and my father have been away for four days. Twice I tried to leave the church to look for them...

Carmela: But the other people were afraid to let me go alone. I'll lead you... I know the way. I'll come with you. ((Rossellini 1973:174)

This scene communicates not only Carmela's attachment to her family through her bravery but also the difficult emotional circumstances she is experiencing, her awareness about the events of the war, her ways to cope with them, and her generosity toward the soldier. Thus, Rossellini may appeal to compassionate involvement through the protagonist's struggle and individual events. The importance of personal circumstances in relation to compassionate responses is highlighted in Maureen Whitebrook's *Compassion as a Political Virtue* (2002: 537), which examines compassion as a response to personal suffering. Emphasizing the importance of knowing the 'particulars' of an individual situation in order to appreciate someone's vulnerability, she argues that compassionate responses are generated when people experience concern for others who have suffered physical or emotional pain. In the example of Carmela, compassion may be offered to recognize the woman's position of vulnerability and valorizing the patriarchal values that her position of daughter entails. Likewise, in the example of Pina and the bakery, compassion may be offered to acknowledge the woman's new condition of susceptibility, thus emphasizing her traditional role of mother and future wife. This interpretation

is confirmed by Cannon's (1997: 147) analysis of the female protagonist viewed primarily as a mother. In her view, Pina's importance is associated with her ability to generate potential leaders for the new nation. On the other hand, the previous scenes depicting the women as actively engaged in providing food for their families and helping the Allied, calls attention to more dynamic qualities that project a more energetic female role in the public sphere of society. Lucia Re clearly points out that during the Fascist time women were made to be daughter, mother and wife and "their only natural and politically desirable place was in the home" (2000: 190). Rossellini may be suggesting a more emancipated image of a woman who simultaneously values her functions as daughter, mother and wife and as advocate for social reform.

## Conclusion

The representations of compassion examined above open new lines of inquiry for investigating *Rome, Open City*, and *Paisan* underlining possible similarities with and deviations from the fascist patriarchal ideology, which neorealist artists attempted to eliminate. Rossellini crafts the human emotion in his foremost character representation and addresses to spectators to highlight and endorse modern women's political and social involvement. However, the film also suggests that those qualities are valued only when females also demonstrate patriarchal values such as commitment to the roles of daughter, wife and mother associated with the domestic sphere, which were particularly glorified by Fascism.

In contrast, the neorealist director denies any compassionate response from characters on screen toward female figures embodying behaviors that contrast with the patriarchal definition of woman. Thus, Rossellini's construction of female identity may reveal an unwitting correspondence with the one adapted by the Fascist creed. As Robin Pickering-Iazzi (1995: x-xi) clarifies: "Fascist discourse reinforced women's maternal role but recast it as a political contribution to the state". Rossellini's portrayal of Pina's and Carmela's gestures and acts of compassion suggests approval of the women who combine concern for the family with an active social conscience. Moreover, Rossellini's representations of compassion bring to light features of women's identity that may recall those suggested by Fascist films. Both Fascist and anti-Fascist representations, in fact, often depict the condition of female dependence. Pina and Carmela as the female protagonists anchored to their family values, may be influenced by those representations and may underscore Rossellini's connection to that traditional figure of woman, convincingly analyzed by Marcia Landy (1986: 115).<sup>1</sup> Although *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan* are generally regarded as one of the first neorealist works to celebrate

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<sup>1</sup> This similarity between Fascist and neorealist films may be clarified by Ruth Ben-Ghiat's (1992) explanation of the origin of neorealism.

the new anti-Fascist Italian identity, they still present the influence of earlier films with regard to women's roles.

In the final analysis, neorealist films clearly say more about the images of women's roles the director wishes to project than they do about actual female involvement in the Resistance. For instance, the actress who plays the role of Marina, Maria Michi,<sup>1</sup> was herself actively involved in the liberation of Italy.<sup>2</sup> However, her experiences did not inform the image of womanhood that she represents in Rossellini's film. Rossellini's vision of female involvement in the Resistance is also in stark contrast to the actual letters that women, captured and condemned to die by the Fascists or Nazis, wrote to their families.<sup>3</sup> Laura Antonelli (2006: 182) provides interesting excerpts from a letter that one such woman, Irma Marchiani, wrote to her brother, as an example of these women's heroism in the face of death. The strong and independent dedication to political activity that emerges in Irma Marchiani's letter contrasts with Rossellini's representation of female characters and disregard contemporary models of women who were more directly partaking in the fight. Irma Marchiani's letter and other, similar historical documents offer ample evidence of women's participation in the battle against Fascism. Rossellini's characterization of the socially committed Pina and Carmela as a compassionate protagonists, whose caring responses highlight their social position, opens up new ways of reading these characters.

The representation of Pina and Carmela as moderate rebels, still attempting to perform a traditional domestic role, generates new questions about the construction of a postwar female Italian identity, disclosing Rossellini's traditionalist approach and neorealism as a less comprehensive ideology that preserves more similarities with Fascist principles than has often previously assumed.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnes in *Patterns of Realism* (1971: 69) and JoAnn Cannon in 'Resistance Heroes and Resisting Spectators: Reflections on Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta*' (1997: 155) describe Maria Michi's involvement in the Resistance.

<sup>2</sup> Liliana Cavani, *Donne nella Resistenza/Women in the Resistance* (1965), is another valuable work that underlines the historic evidence of women's dynamic involvement in the Resistance. Commissioned in memory of the twentieth anniversary of Italy's liberation, this documentary includes several interviews of women participating in the conflict. One of them, Marcella Monaco, organized the liberation of Sandro Pertini, President of the Italian Republic in 1978, from the Regina Coeli prison. Also, Martin Ritt, *Jovanka e le altre/Jovanka and the others* (1959) is a remarkable confirmation from Yugoslavia of brave female-led resistance against the Germans.

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