Open City, Rossellini and neorealism: Sixty years on

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[1] For Bakhita, it is always important to know from where one speaks. The place from which I speak is that of a person who grew up in Italy during the economic miracle (pre-1968) in a working class family, watching film matinees on television during school holidays. All sort of films and genres were shown: from film noir to westerns, to Jean Renoir’s films, German expressionism, Italian neorealism and Italian comedy. Cinema has come to represent over time a sort of memory extension that supplements lived memory of events, and one which, especially, mediates the intersection of many cultural discourses. When later in life I moved to Australia and started teaching in film studies, my choice of a film that was emblematic of neorealism went naturally to Roma città aperta (Open City hereafter) by Roberto Rossellini (1945), and not to Paisan or Sciuscà or Bicycle Thieves. My choice was certainly grounded in my personal memory – especially those aspects transmitted to me by my parents, who lived through the war and maintained that Open City had truly made them cry. With a mother who voted for the Christian Democratic Party and a father who was a unionist, I thought that this was normal in Italian families and society. In the early 1960s, the Resistance still offered a narrative of suffering and redemption, shared by Catholics or Communists. This construction of psychological realism is what I believe Open City continues to offer in time.

To understand how Open City positioned victims and perpetrators, portrayed partisans and their use of violence, and constructed a narrative of suffering and redemption, this essay will discuss Open City as a discourse in which the partisan is the bearer of meanings, and the intersection of everyday life with historical events (the war, the Nazi occupation of Italy and the Resistance) is the signifier of historical realism. In the moment of its production, Open City was seen to show the value of Catholic and Communist unity through the depiction of human suffering, equally distributed between Catholics and Communists, contributing to the creation of the myth of the Resistance as a unifying narrative of the public good. Four subsequent re-writings of the Resistance are clearly haunted by the initial unity strategy of the political parties that participated in the Resistance, transforming the Resistance into the second dividing point in Italian national identity after the nineteenth century Risorgimento unification movement. Thus Open City’s analysis commands a reading of the film against sixty years of Italian party politics, Italian cinema’s own history and the film’s many interpretations that have been laid down in the same period. The essay first unpacks the Resistance as a site of production of meanings, its uses and different understandings of agency, identifying four moments in which the Resistance narrative was charged with different meanings. Then a short discussion of the current rearticulation of history and memory in Western contemporary popular culture will provide a critical framework in which the concern of contemporary Italian society with the past can be positioned beyond the national boundaries. The essay’s final two parts produce an account of the many critical evaluations of Open City, and a close analysis of the intersection between history and everyday life in the film.

This complex analysis will reveal that Open City offered in 1945 an original comment on the Resistance that, retrospectively, disposes of the moral dilemma which has been haunting the Italian Left for the last twenty years. In fact, the film anticipated questions in recent revisionist discourses related to the use of partisan violence. Current interrogations suggest that the partisans were not lawful combatants, thus they were unable to represent Italians in the fight against Nazism and irresponsibly exposed civilians to Nazi reprisals. In Open City’s inner realism, fabricated with everyday life, the partisan Manfredi is thrown into the ups and downs of ordinary life. Rossellini constructs a story that alternates between happiness and tragedy, between identification (with the Roman characters) and distancing (from the Germans). This emotional tension contributes to the construction of a clear-cut divide between good and evil, in contrast to shades of guilt, trauma and self-repentance that emerged in the last twenty years of the century. The vision of a common life in Open City availed the myth of the Resistance as a unifying narrative. This legacy effectively paralysed the Italian left for the following decades since it internalised the myth that the war was fought solely against Fascism.

The Resistance narrative

The Resistance has always been a contested site for identity. However, in the context of the broad revisionist project that has been dominating historical debates in the West in the last twenty years, today the Resistance has become a central site in Italian contemporary political and cultural debates for unearthing stories of individuals or groups who have been excluded from official versions of history.

There has been an ongoing ideological struggle between different parties over the Resistance mythology, and in particular over the ownership of ideals and goals produced within the Resistance discourse. The movement of liberation from Fascism has, from time to time, become a site of social control, memory, identity and even consumption. Changing historical interpretations have commanded different regimes of visibility, excluding or including stories and participants, creating different narratives that validated over time different stories and instances of agency. Representations in literature and film have closely participated in this juxtaposition of narratives.

The unity against a common enemy (the Nazis) became the official and mandatory version that limited a particular reading of the Resistance until 1968 and then again in the
1990s. The return to the original interpretation is important because it is clear that subsequent accounts of the Resistance were haunted by the traces of their predecessors. Left movements in the late 1960s, and again in the 1990s, struggled with a sense of loss of that original meaning, having to come to terms with a reversal of language and roles. From *guerra di liberazione* (liberation war), the Resistance became *guerra civile* (civil war). This reframing writes off the Germans, leaving the Resistance as a purely domestic problem of enduring conflicts between the Left and the Right, and between partisan factions.

Reading the Resistance narrative today means to explore both variations and limitations. It is now possible, retrospectively, to look at four moments in postwar Italian cinema in which Fascism and its demise have been represented. The first occurred immediately after the war, when the depiction of its devastating effects on Italian society and life was a central concern for the neorealist directors. The martyrdom of partisans, the brutality of the Nazis and the drama of the war provided subject-matter for what appeared as a break with Fascist cinema, thus it metaphorically provided a narrative of redemption from Fascism for the Italian nation.[2]

Early films portrayed the Resistance as the grand epic that legitimised the constitution of the Republic, although books such as Cesare Pavese's *La casa in collina*– The *House on the Hills*, 1948; *La luna e i fili*– The *Moon and the Bonfires*, 1949) and Italo Calvino's (il sentiero dei nidi di ragno– The *Path of the Nest of Spiders*, 1947; Ultimo viene il corvo – *Last Comes the Raven*, 1949), both from positions of sympathy for the Italian Communist Party (PCI), had already posed some doubts about unity in the Resistance. These books, written soon after the war, were later included in the national curriculum in Italian literature, so that they handed down different perspectives of the war to subsequent generations.

Along with a narrative of unity against the Nazi enemy, the harsh reality of the necessity of partisan violence is another defining idea in the Resistance narrative. This is a highly contentious issue in today's debates about the moral standing of partisans, but *Open City* already embedded in its text this moral dilemma, accepting it as a casualty of freedom. Rossellini humanised the Communist Manfredi through the complexity of his psychology: Manfredi must live in hiding, he cannot enjoy a public life; thus he must end his relationship with Marina, to whom he is, after all, attracted because of her beauty and glamour. Don Pietro’s forgiveness— and indeed his collaboration with the Communist side of the Resistance — is the signifier for the forgiveness for the partisans’ acts, as they were caught between the necessity of violence and freedom. However, Don Pietro is also a contradictory figure.

He is forced to witness Manfredi’s torture, in the hope that he will reveal the names of the leaders of the Resistance. But Don Pietro does not speak. He is conscious of the fact that if he reveals what he knows, more people will die. At the same time, Don Pietro becomes an accomplice of the Nazis because, with his refusal, he contributes to the death of Manfredi. Bergmann forces his interpretation of the Resistance on Don Pietro by attempting to convince him that the partisans are *tranchi tiratori* (unlawful combatants) who violate international laws by fighting against occupying forces.[3] At this point, Don Pietro answers that whoever fights for justice and freedom walks in God's steps. There has been much speculation about the fact that Don Pietro mentions Justice and Freedom, the Catholic partisan group. However, many radical partisan groups, such as anarchists and socialists, also fought in the group Justice and Freedom, testimony to the complicated alliances and divisions among the partisans. Don Pietro avails Manfredi’s acts from a humanist point of view by praying for him. Bergmann warns Manfredi: after the war, will their reactionary allies still be on their side?

Unlike the unity between Catholic forces and Communists portrayed in *Open City*, the divisions in the Resistance, according to Scoppola (1995), started from the beginning thanks to the immediate politicisation of the movement. These divisions could not be accommodated within the ‘Resistance strategy’ of the PCI (Sassoon 1981, p. 80). When the PCI secretary Palmiro Togliatti returned from Russia to Italy in March 1944, the question of the political and social transformation of Italy was put aside because the united front against Fascism became the Resistance slogan. Togliatti proposed to postpone the choice between republic and monarchy, leaving the problem until after Italy was liberated from Fascism. He saw instead the beginning of a phase of progressive democracy.

In a much-quoted declaration, Togliatti states:

Always remember that the aim of the insurrection is not the imposition of political and social transformations in the socialist or communist sense. Its aim is national liberation and the destruction of fascism. All other problems will be solved by the people through a free popular consultation and the election of a Constituent Assembly when the whole of Italy will have been liberated.

(in Sassoon 1981, p. 18)

The value of Catholic and Communist unity in *Open City* reflected Togliatti’s restriction of partisans’ wider ambitions and his loyalty to Soviet one-nation communism. However, when the PCI was excluded from the government in 1947, the anti-Fascist unity between the parties ceased, and the myth of the Resistance became more contradictory and complex. The PCI at this point vindicated its primacy in the armed struggle against Fascism and Nazism; the Party transformed the Resistance into a point of difference from the other parties. The Resistance became the departure for the realisation of the democratic regime and this had to be an exclusive achievement of the Communist Party. Memories of division and conflicts between the partisans or between the partisans and the population were repressed almost completely.

The second re-writing of the Resistance. In the late 1950s and early 1960s a narrative of disillusionment about the values carried by the liberation movement was articulated in films released in a context of resurgent class conflict in the factories of Northern Italy. This conflict was accompanied by the fear of the persistence of Fascism in the Italian Republic and feelings of betrayal of the class struggle by the PCI in 1945: *Una vita difficile*, by Dino Risi (1961), *Tutti a casa*, by Luigi Comencini (1960) and Rossellini’s *Il generale Della Rovere* (1959) are among the many relevant films released at this time. These films’ narratives present a tension between exposing cracks in the monolithic account of the Resistance by the PCI, on the one hand, and supporting class struggle on the other: the main characters are closer to the *uomo qualunque*[4] but they eventually gain political consciousness as the story unfolds, becoming accidental heroes of the Resistance. By contrast, in the early 1960s, the production of records with Resistance songs, monuments, poems, photographic exhibitions and public history lectures in the main northern Italian cities competed with deconstructionist discourses but contributed to the glorification of the Resistance. The liberation movement was now appropriated by the state in an attempt to normalise the first Christian Democrat government with the participation of the Socialist Party.[5]

In the early 1970s, attempts by neo-Fascist groups to seize power re-proposed the problem of the persistence of Fascism in the high ranks of Italian ruling class. The ‘hot period’ of student and worker revolts in 1967-72 which identified symbolically with the shorthand *il sessantotto* (the sixty-eight), was felt in Italy as well as in other European countries as an historical watershed. It ignited a cultural transformation that not only involved all the fields of human agency and of interpersonal relationships, but it involved shifts in the perception of history because it privileged the recounting of history told from below and against hagiographic narratives, and promoted accounts of hidden stories outside the orthodoxy of the PCI.

The third phase of the Resistance narrative. The 1968 protests were directed at the politicians who were governing Italy, but also against the PCI, because its reformist politics were seen as a betrayal of revolutionary instances that had brewed in some of the most radical groups of partisans during the Resistance and among Communist themselves.[6] Retrospectively, 1968 witnessed the death of any allegiance to collective transformation among the left intelligentsia, and embraced a form of radical individualism. The triangulation of Marxism, psychoanalysis and semiology introduced the possibility of exploration and affirmation of subjectivity beyond analyses of social inequalities (Foucault 1983). This led to a multiplication of subjectivities and identities that would emerge around the middle of the 1970s.
Thus, on the one hand, victims of Nazi reprisals have been able to go through processes of healing through oral history and remembering, of trauma and failure by the Left to respond to the attacks coming from neo-nationalist resurgences. This grand event and of a certain notion of history and agency, so lamented in this context of alternative and revisionist stories that started to emerge in the 1960s, in the wake of decolonisation and rise of social movements. From the late 1970s, the ‘culture of the Resistance’ emerged. This was an episode of violence between two opposed partisan factions that occurred at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, 1989. The PCI crisis reopened old wounds. The question that emerged then concerned whether the guilt for the reprisals against civilians must be attributed to the Germans and the Fascists, who materially carried out the executions, or must instead be directed at the partisans who, with their actions, provoked them. A book published in 1991, *Una Guerra civile: Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Carlo Pavone), tried to come to terms with this question and with the equation that fascism equals communism — similar to the equation that emerged in the Western World between Nazism and Stalinism, and between the Holocaust and the Gulag. Pavone’s book attempted to reaffirm the partisans’ right to resist Fascism and Nazism with the use of violence.

Persistence of history and marketing of memory

As mentioned previously, recent films about the Resistance privilege accounts that had been suppressed in the early days of the post-war period. Academic literature about histories and regimes of memory, and the dichotomy between history and memory, are now so abundant that it is superfluous to examine in detail the memory discourse. It is sufficient here to briefly recall that both deconstructive discourses in the late 1960s and in the 1990s can be seen within a broader search for different traditions, and in the context of alternative and revisionist stories that started to emerge in the 1960s, in the wake of decolonisation and rise of social movements. From the late 1970s, the ‘culture of memory’ (Huyssen 2000, p. 25) has become pervasive in Europe and the United States. A broad obsession with remembering and forgetting has swept across the two continents to the point that we can indicate this preoccupation as a global ‘musealisation’ of culture.

Unquestionably, representations of history, memory, oral history and historical debates are functional to local political and cultural discourses, and energise alternative social movements and marginalised groups. However, the memory culture cannot be separated from its commodification and spectacularisation in media, film, new media, museums, literature, pop music and so on. Indeed, as Huyssen so aptly demonstrates, the question of incorrect or truthful representation is superfluous: serious accounts of history or popular (fun) renditions of collective memory are both mass-marketed (2000, p. 29). With the capitalist appropriation of the culture of memory, contemporary culture’s obsession with the past and nostalgia may contribute to an atrophy of the present and of the future, limiting the ability to imagine, by those very groups that advocate change and empowerment, a different future and discourses of social change.

Indeed, one of the major critiques of contemporary Italian cinema by Italian critics in the late 1980s and 1990s was that the new generation of Italian directors who focused on history, nostalgia and trauma were unable to project a filmic image that represented contemporary Italian society and reality (Sesti 1987; Follì 1994). Sandro Pettaggia, a well-known screenwriter, stated in the Left-wing newspaper *il manifesto*, almost in answer to these accusations, ‘Out there, there is nothing, or there is very little and it is very tiring to go and look for it. And anyway we no longer have the strength to do it.’ (in Galimberti 1996, p. 366). This assertion can clearly be framed within a discourse of loss (of the grand event and of a certain notion of history and agency, so lamented in this *fin de siecle*), of psychological distance from the events of the war and especially within a culture of trauma and failure by the Left to respond to the attacks coming from neo-nationalist resurgences. Thus, if, on the one hand, victims of Nazi reprisals have been able to go through processes of healing through oral history and remembering, on the other, this obsessive
Undeniably, one of the values of availing historical document. Here, too, the everyday and history work in synergy and in contrast at the same time, as the King exercises his firm hand of power through A later film, shots, we recognise Manfredi, but the action is rendered ambiguously as an anonymous episode of the liberation war. The long shot framing the partisans storming toward the men arrested during Gestapo's search in Pina's building. During the search, Francesco is also taken away. In the partisan ambush, framed in a sequence of medium to long images and sounds/dialogues rather than just its visual iconicity. In other words, the richness of documentary footage supports the truth of drama, while drama resists or succumbs to the reality of the devastating effects of history on everyday life. This mixing, in Open City, has often been explained as parallel editing, but looking closely at several scenes and shots, one sees that this juxtaposition bears some resemblance to dialectical montage. An excellent example is the sequence that includes the death of Pina, shot by a German soldier in the street, the following segment with the partisan attack to the German trucks that are taking away prisoners, and the cut to the trattoria where Manfredi, Francesco and Marina's faces. There are two short segments between Pina's death and that of the sheep, so that the two images are not in close sequence. This can be explained as a reminiscence of many Fascist films' controlled narrative, a subtle self-censorship employed by filmmakers to embed meanings within a dramatic linear story. The sly humour in the answer of the restaurant's owner can also be considered a dialectical counterpoint. Many of these comic gags in the film have been undervalued and chastised as comic relief, but they in fact work as contradictory relationship between images and dialogue. In other words, the richness of Open City's signifying system is based on the subtle combination of images and sounds/dialogues rather than just its visual iconicity.

Rossellini stated in a 1951 interview, on the set while making Europe 51, that neorealism emerged unconsciously as dialectical filmmaking, which then evolved in its conscious existence during the war and in the immediate postwar period to record human existence and social life (in Verdone 1992, p. 34). Rossellini put down it to irony and scepticism – for him, two qualities of the Latin-Christian civilisation, the constant search for truth. This is, beyond aesthetics and form, the driving force of his films, which is well explained in his dialectic approach to subject matter. Rossellini was not a Catholic, and did not think of himself as a religious person (Rossellini in Maraini 1992, p. 8), but certainly identified with those Judeo-Christian ethical values handed down through humanism and the Renaissance, and shared in Western culture.

It is useful to recall one film in particular that Rossellini made before Open City: La nave bianca (The White Ship, 1943), a fictionalised war propaganda documentary (a docudrama in today's words), in which Rossellini mixes documentary footage of war ships with the romantic story of a wounded soldier and the attending nurse (the historical with the fictional/emootional). Similarly, in the opening sequence of Open City, the scene of the German soldiers marching in the streets of Rome, singing a German song, is taken from a newsreel. This splicing of documentary footage is matched later on in the film in the re-enacted scene where a group of partisans ambush the Germans, liberating the men arrested during Gestapo’s search in Pina’s building. During the search, Francesco is also taken away. In the partisan ambush, framed in a sequence of medium to long shots, we recognise Manfredi, but the action is rendered ambiguously as an anonymous episode of the liberation war. The long shot framing the partisans storming toward the German trucks has two functions: we are positioned with the partisans’ point of view, but at the same time we witness the action from a distance, typical of war footage. We can only assume that Francesco has been liberated, as in the following scene they meet with Marina in a trattoria.

A later film, La pris du pouvoir by Louis XIV (1962), is also a mock documentary. Frame compositions are directly inspired by portrait paintings of Louis XIV that work as the availing historical document. Here, too, the everyday and history work in synergy and in contrast at the same time, as the King exercises his firm hand of power through submitting the aristocracy to the menial everyday administration of the manneristic royal protocol.

Undeniably, one of the values of Open City resides in its contingency, its ability to capture the everyday and the grand event as history was unfolding. In this sense, Open City is as much about the everyday as it is about history, and the two work in harmony and contrast at the same time, as the King exercises his firm hand of power through submitting the aristocracy to the menial everyday administration of the manneristic royal protocol.
City can be defined a film made in the present tense because the three moments of production, reception and the historical event coincide. Italian viewers had a high level of critical awareness, based on a close knowledge of the storyline rooted in their experience of everyday life. The proximity and contingency with the events depicted in the film brought Italian audiences into the presence of a collective national identity in the absence of a political and social establishment. However, it is also true that, by being the first mass-mediated recount of the war, Open City also created the first instance of distance of Italian audiences from the event.

The film was also able to capture the rare moment of freedom from industrial constraints in filmmaking. Despite the neorealist directors’ very limited ambitions, this freedom and the lack of routine led to an unprecedented creativity and initiative that gave birth to both the reality and the myth of Italian neorealism. On this point, Rossellini commented in Cahiers du cinéma that the Second World War, with the destruction of Cinecittà studios and the German ransacking of technical equipment, constituted a unique moment in Italian filmmaking (1955, pp 3-4). Film directors enjoyed freedom from Fascist censorship that compelled filmmakers to a very controlled narrative, which they resisted by disruptions in the vein of dialectical montage, whose traces are embedded in Open City either in the form of splicing newsreel footage or in the contradictory relationship between images and dialogues.[13] Neorealist filmmakers themselves contributed to the construction of this myth, based on “unintended superficial characteristics” (Wagstaff 2000, p. 37), such as non-professional actors, use of locations, dialect or regional accent. This myth, as discussed previously, was also sustained by subsequent layers of critical evaluations, and by neorealist directors and writers’ own post-neorealist theorisation.

The first re-evaluation of Open City came soon after its first release. After a first screening for a small audience of critics at a local film festival in Rome in September 1945, the critics’ comments were harsh (Rossellini 1955, p.4). It was only in 1946, after the screening of both Open City and Paisà in Paris, that Rossellini became seen as the mastermind of Italian cinema. This triggered Italian critics to reconsider and re-evaluate the film, which led eventually to its enormous success with Italian and international audiences. In Italy alone, with an average ticket price of 33.4 Italian Lira, Open City earned 162 million Liras (Spinazzola 1974, p. 19). This means that nearly five million people, in a war-torn country where money and jobs were scarce, went to see the film.[14]

**Everyday life in Open City**

Open City is set during the Nazi occupation of Rome. The Americans are mythological beings, as in one of the initial scenes thebrigadiere accompanying Pina asks her if the Americans ‘really exist’. Pina’s gaze at her building, now partly rubble, makes a sharp comment on the war: as a result of the strategic disagreement between Americans and British, the anti-Nazi coalition’s interests did not coincide with those of the Resistance. As a matter of fact, the Allies’ slow liberation of Italy allowed German reprisals against the partisans, thus cleaning out any troublesome communists for their final offensive in the Spring 1945 (Battaglia 1964, p. 468). The first idea conveyed by Rossellini is thus that of a population left to fend for itself, in which the only structured organisation is the Resistance movement and the actions of a group of children. In Paisà, Rossellini changes his view and forces a fictitious interpretation: the Allies not only mingled with the population and suffered with them, but also actively contributed to and died for the Resistance movement.

Open City tells the story of Pina, Don Pietro, Giorgio Manfredi and Francesco during the Nazi occupation of Rome, that occurred between 8 September 1943 and June 1944. They all participate in the Resistance movement with various degrees of responsibility and involvement and from different ideological positions. The story unfolds along three days: Pina, engaged to Francesco, is killed by a German during a round-up in her apartment building on the morning of her wedding; Francesco is arrested and taken away, but is liberated during a partisan ambush. On the third day, Manfredi and Don Pietro are arrested by the Gestapo. Manfredi is tortured and dies, while Don Pietro is executed by a German officer as Italian Fascist soldiers refuse to shoot a priest. The link between the Roman characters and the Germans is Marina, a vaudeville soubrette, drug addict and a lover of commodities. She betrays Manfredi, her lover, for a fur coat and drugs in exchange.

There have been now countless descriptions of Open City, its gender politics, its depiction of the relationship between space and the characters, its uneasy blend of drama, realism and comedy. Little attention has been paid to its portrayal of the relationship between everyday life and the events of the war. Indeed, the depiction of everyday life has been seen as a remnant of Fascist popular film, a stain on neorealism, as Angelo Restivo calls it, that emerges through the tension between the ‘master narrative, set up by the Nazis, and acts of resistance to this narrative’ (2002, p. 26). Restivo’s sophisticated analysis identifies in Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategy (top-down practices of centralised social control) and tactic (practices of everyday life) a key element that explains the constant tension in Open City between realism and melodrama. Clearly, Restivo places everyday life within melodrama while assigning the unfolding historical events to realism. Without this tension, he maintains that Open City’s storyline would dissolve into a ‘reportage of everyday life in a Roman palazzo’ (2002, p. 27). Thus it is the master narrative, German occupation, that transforms all the sketchy episodes of everyday life into a narrative line: the grand event gives reason to, and supports, the story.

However, we need to be aware of the fact that depicting cycles of the everyday is a key characteristic of neorealism. The historical – the contingency of war – is certainly important, but without the presence of everyday melodrama, a continuity with the past could not be demonstrated.

Also, an examination of the use of space in Open City contributes to the understanding of the intersection between history and the everyday. The alley that provides a way in and out of the building is visually shot as a space between two walls, with access provided by a window in one wall. The stairs are a place of encounter and comfort; the common laundry, apartments, the sacristy and the Church, and even Marina’s middle-class apartment, provide a place to escape to from the threatening outside world. The exception is the Gestapo headquarters. This is a space that dominates the story, one that is feared from the beginning of the film, when Rossellini, soon before the soldiers’ march, frames the street name, playing on the audience’s knowledge of what was taking place in via Tasso. It is there that Manfredi and Don Pietro are taken and interrogated. This place is further rendered alien to Italian viewers because, in the original film print, none of the dialogues between Germans is dubbed in Italian. Copies of the film that have been remastered and distributed for Italian viewers continue to maintain this distancing feature: Italians and Germans were, after all, speaking a different language.

Thus it is not in oppositional categories, but in intersecting narratives and interstitial spaces, that Rossellini’s combination of drama and documentary footage, everyday life and history, classic narrative with moments of disruption occur. One example of this intertwining of everyday life with momentous events is the encounter between Pina and Manfredi, which occurs within the first ten minutes of the film. After having participated in the assault of the bakery by a group of women, Pina returns home. Here the ingegner Giorgio Manfredi is waiting, looking for Francesco, Pina’s fiancé and a communist comrade. Manfredi needs to contact Don Pietro, a priest collaborator with the partisans. Inside Francesco’s apartment, Pina discusses with Manfredi the assault on the bakery, the role of women in the Resistance and their political consciousness. During this conversation, Laurenta, Pina’s younger sister and Marina’s friend, shouts from next door and enters the room asking for her stockings (an example of irony and disjunction between competing stories). There is no dominant narrative here, as Pina and Manfredi’s conversation continues on their political aspirations and Pina’s personal life with Laurenta’s request as a counterpart. This is an example of how Rossellini used the effect of montage as an interplay of point and counter-point without interrupting the narrative flow. Private life and greater events are constantly intertwined in the film, without hierarchical ordering or trivialisation of everyday life against history, as if one could not exist without the other.

After Manfredi delivers a message for Marina through Laurenta, Pina offers to make a coffee and leaves the room. The simple gesture of offering coffee to her guest, a ritual and a tradition, is in fact the essential trace of everyday life and everyday time which, as Bakhtin observes in his analysis of Goethe’s *Italian Journey*, is also historical time. The
setting, the kitchen, is inseparable from the action that takes place in it. It is in the kitchen, drinking coffee or having dinner, that an Italian family would talk about the war, the partisans, the Germans or unemployment. The two narratives intertwine, availing each other. As in Goethe's description of a typical Italian sunset — 'The bells ring, the rosary is said, the maid enters the room with a lighted lamp and says “Felicissima notte!”' (in Bakhtin 1986, p. 31) — the kitchen in Open City is a social space that is historically determined because it creates the continuity in the 'unbroken line of historical development' (Bakhtin 1986, p. 31). Bhabha commented on Goethe's disclosure of everyday life by noting the 'vision of the microscopic, elementary, perhaps random, tolling of everyday life in Italy' (1994, p.142) that represents the realism over the romantic and that especially emerges as the metaphor for national life.

There are other scenes in the film that visualise everyday time and everyday gestures: cooking cabbage in the sacristy, Pina and Giorgio affectationally chatting on the stairs of the building, away from the crowded apartment, the preparation for the wedding, and eating out in the trattoria. All these moments continue the unbroken line of historical development above and beyond the historical events, which are instead limited in time and contingent. These gestures are an obvious fictional reconstruction of real life, but they are moments of truth in that they repeat aspects of national social and cultural experience which work to construct emotional realism. They are taken from everyday life, one that would be experienced by Italians at anyone point in time. The intersection, rather than the hierarchy, between everyday life and the contingency of war, contributed to the political and ideological ambiguities in Open City because the representation of the unbroken line of everyday life, despite the disruption of the war, constituted for Italian postwar audiences the reassuring continuity with the past in spite of wider revolutionary ambitions.

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 Endnotes

 [1] I wish to thank Jason Jacobs at Griffith University, for reading this article and providing me with feedback. I would also like to thank Prof Anna Haebich and Fiona Paisley, co-directors of the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas for their generous offer of a Research Fellowship in 2005. During that time I had the opportunity to develop, among other projects, also this essay.

 [2] However, Italian post-war cinema continued some important changes in cinematic language and structure of narrative that were already present in some films produced in the last years of Fascism (see the volume Memoria, Mito, Storia: La parola ai registri – 37 interviste) (Amaducci et al 1994).

 [3] Here Bergmann refers to the convention of L’Aja, (1907). According to this convention, an Open City is declared by a government when all the military operations in the city are suspended. The city must not be considered a military target, therefore there should not be threat posed to the civilian population. This holds some kind of irony as, on the contrary, the Nazis were conducting their military operations, with arrests, interrogations, torture and murder of suspect partisans. In 1999, the Italian Supreme Court dismissed the claim made by relatives of some of the victims of Fosse Ardeatine about the responsibility of partisans in the Nazi reprisal in which more than 300 people were killed. The Supreme Court appealed to the same convention, which states that in the absence of an organised army, anyone who takes the army to defend the nation against the occupier is to be considered a lawful combatant. This episode demonstrates how ingrained the divisions about the Resistance are in Italian society.

 [4] Uomo qualunque means “common man”. The paritò dell’uomo qualsunque (Common man Party), founded in 1944, inspired people who were disillusioned with politics, and later with state bureaucracy and the tax system. The party harvested some votes during the 1947 elections and survived until 1948.


Neorealism. Roberto Rossellini and Rome Open City. Roberto Rossellini, Director of Rome Open City. In recent years these films have been re-read to prove that Rossellini was more concerned with improving his technique than with fascist ideology. Many traits of neorealism are already present in these three films: little camera movement, “documentary-style.” Rossellini’s life & work prove that he was no fascist sympathizer, and not one to join political parties; he was a Christian humanitarian. Rossellini (cont) • The success of Rome Open City catapulted him into world notoriety • He shot almost at the same time another film, Paisà, which is even more “documentary-like.” • The term neorealism was first widely used in the late 1940s to describe what became the most famous and influential film movement. It sprang up in Italy as a reaction against the artificiality of the so-called “white telephone” school of upper-class comedies and melodramas then popular under fascism, favouring instead naturalistic pictures shot on authentic locations using non-professional actors. But the name that will always be associated with neorealism is Roberto Rossellini, and most especially his Rome, Open City (1945) and Paisà (1946), two rough, grainy movies set in Italy during the second world war. They helped change the face of world cinema and, with Germany Year Zero (1948), set in the ruins of postwar Berlin, came to be known as his War Trilogy. Two years before Roberto Rossellini started shooting Rome, Open City on January 18, 1945, the famed Italian director had just completed another war trilogy. Inaugurated with the 1941 navy flick The White Ship, followed a year later by A Pilot Returns, and crowned in 1943 with Man of the Cross, the trilogy celebrated the Italian army’s questionable exploits in the war fought on the side of Nazi Germany. Universally praised for their perceived authenticity, the films that effectively constitute the foundation of Italian neorealism—a supposedly genuine representation of “things as they really were”—present a highly debatable version of reality, historical and otherwise. Rossellini’s 1945 film, a cinematic landmark of Italian neorealism, has been digitally restored and is now touring North America. In an interview last year even Pope Francis expressed his admiration for “Rome Open City.” But despite its enduring power, many viewers have seen “Rome Open City” projected only in poor-quality prints. Through Sept. 25, Film Forum in New York is screening a new digital restoration, with revised subtitles, the first complete restoration. It was restored by Cineteca Nazionale—Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinematografia, Coproduction Office and Istituto Luce Cinecittà. It is expected to tour to cities including Vancouver, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago and Cambridge, Mas