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Notes on the End of *Rome Open City*

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Among the most iconic images in world cinema, the final shot of Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* has inspired an effusion of critical commentary that bespeaks not only its cinematic significance but also its historical resonance. As the film draws to its emotional close, the camera pans to follow a band of children, witnesses to the execution of the anti-Fascist priest don Pietro, as they march on a hillside overlooking the city of Rome, seen in a long shot with the dome of St. Peter's clearly visible in the distance (See Figure 1). Some critics have interpreted this image as a sign of Italy's post-war hope, with the children, galvanized by don Pietro's martyrdom, symbolising an auspicious future, a new beginning, a national rebirth.[1] Others, however, focusing on the children's dejected expressions, as well as on the physical handicaps of Romoletto, the boy leading the procession, offer a more sombre interpretation, one that foregrounds the lingering damage wrought by Fascism and suggests a darker post-war future for these youths and for the Italian nation they are said to represent.[2] Recognising the comparable plausibility of these contrasting interpretations, many declare

[1] See, for instance, Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*. New York: Continuum, 2009, p. 42; Giovanna De Luca, *Il punto di vista dell'infanzia nel cinema italiano e francese: revisioni*. Naples: Liguori Editore, 2009, pp. 50-51, 63; Fernanda Moneta, *Cinema neorealista e infanzia violata*. Seconda edizione riveduta e ampliata. Rome: UniversItalia, 2012, pp. 120-121; Giuliana Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 125, 127; Vincent F. Rocchio, *Cinema of Anxiety: A Psychoanalysis of Italian Neorealism*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999, p. 49; Emiliano Morreale, "Bambino." *Lessico del cinema italiano. Forme di rappresentazione e forme di vita*. Ed. Roberto De Gaetano. Milan and Udine: Mimesis, 2014. Vol. 1. 107-171 (pp. 119-120).

[2] See, for instance, David Forgacs, *Rome Open City (Roma città aperta*). London: BFI Publishing, 2000, p. 59; Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 49; Pietro Cavallo, "Un paese in bianco e nero. L'Italia del '48 in cinque film." *Le linee d'ombra dell'identità repubblicana. Comunicazione, media e società in Italia nel secondo Novecento*. Eds. Pietro Cavallo and Gino Frezza. Naples: Liguroi Editore, 2004. 81-105 (p. 94); Ben Lawton, "Italian Neorealism: A Mirror Construction of Reality." *Film Criticism* 3 (1979): 8-23 (p. 14); Pio Baldelli, *Roberto Rossellini*. Rome: La Nuova Sinistra, 1972, pp. 34, 37-38.

Rome Open City's ending to be inherently—indeed deliberately—ambiguous.[3] My interpretive wager, however, is that it is possible to adjudicate between the competing critical camps and to arrive at a more persuasive—not to say definitive—analysis of the film's final shot. It is thus my aim in this brief essay to explore several conjectures that, if I am correct, may yield new insights into the implications and connotations of the conclusion to Rossellini's post-war masterpiece. Since that masterpiece has often been made to serve not just as an expression but also as a virtual embodiment of its historical moment, and has even been credited with changing the course of Italian history, the search for new insights into its conclusion takes on added importance.[4]

Figure 1: The final shot of Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City*.

My first conjecture emerges from a consideration of the origins of the film's final sequence, the creative decisions and collaborative solutions that eventually produced the

[3] See, for instance, Pierre Sorlin, "Children as war victims in postwar European cinema." *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*. Eds. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 104-124 (p. 116); Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cent'anni di cinema italiano*. Vol. 2. *Dal 1945 ai giorni nostri*. Bari: Editori Laterza, 1998, p. 29; Marcia Landy, "Rome Open City (1945), Roberto Rossellini." *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*. Ed. Jeffrey Geiger and R.L. Rutsky. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005. 400-421 (pp. 409-410, 417-418); Peter Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 50-51; Lesley Caldwell, "*Ragazzo fortunato*? Children in Italian Cinema." *New Visions of the Child in Italian Cinema*. Eds. Danielle Hipkins and Roger Pitt. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2014. 59-78 (pp. 65-66).

[4] See, on this point, Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano. Dal neorealismo al miracolo economico 1945-1959*. Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2001, p. 410; Stefania Parigi, *Neorealismo. Il nuovo cinema del dopoguerra*. Venice: Marsilio, 2014, pp. 49-51.

now-famous image that closes *Rome Open City*. Beginning from Alberto Consiglio's *La disfatta di Satana* (The Demise of Satan), a treatment for a film on the anti-Fascist activities of don Pietro Pappagallo, a priest killed in the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, Rossellini and his collaborators at first devised an ambitious project that would combine this war-time narrative with another set after the liberation. Largely discarding the proposed post-war coda, however, they soon revised the project they had come to call *Ieri-Domani* (Yesterday-Tomorrow), renaming it *Storie di ieri* (Stories of Yesterday) to emphasise their renewed focus on the recently-concluded war and occupation. These stages in the creative process help to shed light on the conclusion of the finished film, because while both *La disfatta di Satana* and *Storie di ieri* were to close with Don Pietro's death, neither proposed to follow it with the shot of marching children that closes *Rome Open City*. Instead, the former treatment was to finish with a shot of the priest "facing forward, under machine-gun fire," while the latter would have concluded with him dying "serenely under the bullets of the execution squad."[5] Appended to the project only later, the shot of the children that follows the priest's death in *Rome Open City* must certainly affect the impression conveyed by the execution itself, which in these earlier iterations was to have been conducted with an abruptness comparable to Pina's death in the finished film.[6]

The addition of the children's march—and of the child-centred narrative of which it is the culmination—altered the project in other ways as well. Critical consensus holds that *Rome Open City*'s protagonists and narratives were drawn from specific events and historical personages: don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi), as we have seen, was inspired by don Pappagallo, as well as by the life and death of another priest, don Giuseppe Morosini, who was tortured and executed by the Gestapo; the character of Pina (Anna Magnani) was similarly inspired by

[5] These treatments are reproduced in Stefano Roncoroni, *La storia di* Roma città aperta. Genova: Le Mani, 2006, p. 421. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Italian are my own.

[6] This comparison is explored in Roncoroni, *La storia di* Roma città aperta, pp. 21-24.

Teresa Gullace, a Roman woman murdered by the Nazis; the partisan leader Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero) was inspired, it is said, by a composite of Communist partisans, including Sergio Amidei and Celeste Negarville, two of *Rome Open City*'s screenwriters.[7] In this regard, the plotline involving Pina's son Marcello (Vito Annicchiarico), his friend Romoletto (Giacomo Cottone), and the other Roman children is anomalous in having no single historical source and no basis in a specific or chronicled war-time event. Instead, in drafting the story of the child-partisans Rossellini and his collaborators are thought to have drawn on Ferenc Molnár's 1906 novel *The Paul Street Boys*, and in particular on two cinematic adaptations of Molnár's narrative: Frank Borzage's 1934 *No Greater Glory* and Alberto Mondadori and Mario Monicelli's 1935 silent version, *I ragazzi della via Paal*.[8] Both of these films, it bears noting, conclude, like *Rome Open City*, with a stirring children's march. Nevertheless, Rossellini and his collaborators substantially modified the material on which they were drawing, and with it the film they were making.

Whereas in *Rome Open City* the children are witnesses to the murder of an adult, in Molnár's novel and its cinematic adaptations it is instead one of the boys who loses his life, and the children's procession thus follows behind the lifeless body of one of their own, carried forward by the boy's grieving mother (See Figure 2). This is a striking difference, and one that bears directly on the interpretation of the image that closes *Rome Open City*. It is a difference, as well, that seems to have resulted from—and perhaps also to reflect—a debate between Rossellini and his creative team. The available evidence suggests that while the director wanted to follow Molnár's plot more faithfully, Alberto Consiglio, author of *La*

[7] On the historical origins of the film's subjects, see John Michalczyk, "Inspiration for the Partisan Priest in Rossellini's *Open City* (1945)." *The Plume & the Palette: Essays in Honor of Josephine von Henneberg*. Eds. Pamela Berger, Jeffery Howe, & Susan A. Michalczyk. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. 85-100; Ugo Pirro, *Celluloide*. Milan: Rizzoli, 1983, p. 154; Giuseppe Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema italiano*. Florence: Casa Editrice F. Le Monnier, 1957, pp. 105-106.

[8] Mario Monicelli, *L'arte della commedia*. Ed. Lorenzo Codelli. Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1986, pp. 17,19; Stefano Della Casa, *Mario Monicelli*. Florence: Il Castoro, 1986, p.12.

disfatta di Satana, argued that three deaths were already too many and that a fourth, the death of a child, would make the film too maudlin. Rod Geiger, who helped to produce the film, likewise proposed a happier ending to increase the film's appeal to an American market. The screenwriter Sergio Amidei, in turn, advocated an uplifting ending for ideological reasons, in order to hold to the political line advanced by the Italian Communist Party.[9] Rossellini, in contrast, is thought to have wanted his film to be more "politically ambiguous."[10] There was evidently a struggle over the film's conclusion, therefore, which may help to explain the ambiguity that some have identified in its final shot.

Figure 2: The final scene of Frank Borzage's *No Greater Glory.*

My conjecture is that the struggle was as much ideological as aesthetic, turning not only on questions of narrative contrivance but also of political messaging. There would have been ample reason for such an ideological struggle, given the fractious political context in which Rossellini's film was envisioned, produced, and released. After all, post-war Italy was riven by a long-running dispute over the fate of the nation's children after Fascism: the so-

[9] On the debate over the film's conclusion, and its political message, see Pirro, *Celluloide*, p. 105; Maurizio Giammusso, *Vita di Rossellini*. Rome: Elleu Multimedia, 2004, pp. 83-84.

[10] Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1998, p. 139; Roncoroni, *La storia di* Roma città aperta. Genova: Le Mani, 2006, pp. 21-24.

called “problema dei giovani,” or youth problem.[11] As countless commentators at the time made clear, because Mussolini’s Fascist regime had ruled Italy for more than twenty years, the younger generations had only ever known Fascism. They had been raised in a Fascist society, had received a Fascist education, and had been inculcated with Fascist principles. Fascism had placed particular emphasis on indoctrinating children, whom Mussolini called “the faithful guardians, for eternity, of the new, historic civilisation that Italy is creating with work, with discipline, with harmony.”[12] Youth organisations like the Opera Nazionale Balilla, whose membership at its inter-war peak had swelled to more than 1,500,000 boys aged eight to fourteen, were judged by Fascist officials to be “the strongest instrument” available for forming a new political mentality, offering paramilitary training intended to banish “ideas of universal and perpetual peace from the minds of these children.”[13] They supplemented a school system that, according to then minister of education Giuseppe Bottai, was intended to be “Fascist in its organisation of teaching, in its method, in its structure, in its style.”[14]

After 1945, there was real doubt as to whether the same children who had been educated in such a system could become the loyal citizens of a nation reborn under the sign of anti-Fascism. The reclamation of Italy’s children, formerly Mussolini’s “faithful guardians,” was thus felt to be one of the most pressing and one of the most challenging tasks

[11] See Luca La Rovere, *L’eredità del fascismo. Gli intellettuali, i giovani e la transizione al postfascismo 1943-1948*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008; Pietro Secchia, *Lotta antifascista e giovani generazioni*. Milan: La Pietra, 1973, pp. 133-134; Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991), pp. 551-560.

[12] Mussolini’s message to students, 20 Oct. 1928, Anno V, cited in Luigi Marrella, *I diari della gioventù italianissima*. Manduria: Barbieri Editore, 2006, p. 18. On the indoctrination of youth under Fascism, see also Patrizia Dogliani, *Storia dei giovani*. Milan: Mondadori, 2003, pp. 108-178.

[13] Renato Ricci, “Gioventù tedesca e gioventù italiana.” *L’Illustraizone italiana*, 1937; Herman Finer, *Mussolini’s Italy* (New York: H. Holt, 1935), both of which are quoted—and the former of which translated—in Alessio Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 6-7, 36.

[14] Giuseppe Bottai, *La carta della scuola*. Milan: Mondadori, 1939, p. 303.

facing the post-war coalition.[15] Even before the war's conclusion, in fact, while the north of Italy was still under Fascist rule propped up by German occupation, Guido De Ruggiero, at the time the Minister of Education of the Allied-controlled Kingdom of Italy, noted that "for us the youth problem is truly of the first order."[16] Ferruccio Parri, the first Prime Minister of a liberated and reunified Italy, insisted that "the problem of our youth is a fundamental problem for our future."[17] Alcide De Gasperi, who followed Parri as Prime Minister from 1945-1953, argued that Italian youth, "having had their education in the so-called Fascist climate […] need a corresponding period of time to reorient themselves before giving their allegiance to one or another party."[18] None of these political leaders seems to have believed that Italy's children were prepared immediately to join in—let only to represent—the country's post-Fascist future. Like Palmiro Togliatti, head of the Italian Communist Party, they understood themselves to be facing "a profound generational problem, on which depends the fate of our entire country."[19]

There is reason to believe that Rossellini and his collaborators sought to confront this problem directly. After all, these issues were not only being debated during the making of *Rome Open City*, they were being debated by some of those who helped to make the film. In particular, Celeste Negarville, one of the models for the character of Manfredi and collaborator on the screenplay for Rossellini's film, was outspoken in his call for a systematic

[15] See Ugoberto Alfassio Grimaldi and Marina Addis Saba, *Cultura a passo romano. Storia e strategie dei Littoriali della cultura e dell'arte*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983, pp. 11-19; Monica Galfré, *Il regime degli editori. Libri, scuola e fascismo*. Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2005, pp. 178-196; Antonio Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione dalla Grande Guerra a Salò*. Turin: Einaudi, 2005, pp. 36. 393.

[16] Guido De Ruggiero, "I giovani." *La Nuova Europa* 7 Dec.1944, p. 9

[17] Ferruccio Party, *Atti Parlamentari, Resoconti delle discussioni 1948-1952*, pp. 30014-30015, quoted in Anna Ascenzi, "Education for democracy in textbooks: the case of history texts in Italian schools in the years following the Second World War." *History of Education & Children's Literature* 2.1 (2007): 173-194.

[18] Alcide De Gasperi, reported in Ruggiero Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963, pp. 10-11.

[19] Palmiro Togliatti, "Ai giovani," *Rinascita* 1.2 (July 1944): 1-2.

response to the "youth problem." This issue demanded immediate attention, Negarville insisted in an article in *Rinascita*—an article published, it should be noted, in January 1945, the same month that shooting on Rossellini's film began—because "it would be quite naïve to think that Italy's younger generations could escape, entirely and spectacularly, Fascism's ill-fated ideological and political influence."[20] Negarville had sought to address the problem of Fascism's influence on the young well before the Liberation, arguing as early as 1936 that Italy's "youth must be helped […]. But we can help them effectively only if we remain conscious of their mentality, their education, their way of understanding Fascism and modern society."[21] He continued to argue this point after Fascism's defeat, when the "youth problem" was exacerbated by the challenging conditions of the post-war recovery, as he explained in April 1945, noting that the fall of Fascism had brought with it "the distressing spectacle of abandoned children" and asserting that it was the duty of all Italians to "make these children into citizens worthy of a democratic country."[22] Repeatedly, and passionately, Negarville insisted that the young needed to be reclaimed, re-educated, and reformed before they could be expected to contribute to Italy's rebirth.

That conviction, framed within the wider debate over post-war youth, helps to expose the contextual complexity of *Rome Open City*'s depiction of youthful valour. For Negarville and his fellow screenwriters, the young were a symbol of Italy's challenging recovery, not a solution to Italy's problems. Troops of daring children, radicalised by visions of courageous sacrifice, were thus as likely to recall their country's totalitarian past as to portend its democratic future. Under a Fascist government whose official anthem was "Giovinezza"

[20] Celeste Negarville, "Una generazione influenzata dal fascismo." *Rinascita* (Jan. 1945): 22-24 (p. 23).

[21] Celeste Negarville, "Per un movimento giovanile italiano." *Lo Stato Operario* 10.10 (Oct. 1936): 687-693 (p. 692).

[22] These comments are reproduced in Angiola Minella, Nadia Spano, and Ferdinando Terranova, *Cari bambini, vi aspettiamo con gioia… Il movimento di solidarietà popolare per la salvezza dell'infanzia negli anni del dopoguerra*. Milan: Teti Editore, 1980, p. 39.

(Youth), images of marching youths like the one that closes Rossellini's film had been far from uncommon (See Figures 3-4). However much *Rome Open City* worked to reclaim them, it is difficult to imagine that such images could be seen as entirely positive, entirely encouraging, or entirely straightforward. It is difficult to imagine, as well, that the director and his collaborators could have ignored the cultural baggage of the imagery they adopted.

Figure 3: Balillas in Rome.

Figure 4: Balillas depicted in a 1935-36 school diary.

My second conjecture, in fact, is that in constructing the film's conclusion *Rome Open City*'s creative team knowingly drew on Fascist representations of youth in order subtly to signal the lingering influence, and with it the lingering threat, of Fascism after the war. It is widely recognised that Rossellini and his collaborators attempted something similar with the third film of what has come to be known as the neorealist trilogy, *Germany, Year Zero*

(1948), where the repercussions of Nazi rule are shown clearly to be felt even among the children. That film's historical pessimism has at times been contrasted with the vision represented in *Rome Open City*, the first film in the trilogy, but the contrast may not be as clear as has been assumed.[23] Many have noted that the leader of the band of marching boys in *Rome Open City* is called Romoletto, little Romulus—a sign, it is often said, of his appointed role in re-founding Rome after Fascism.[24] Tellingly, however, the Fascists had similarly emphasized the role of Italy's children in founding a new Rome, and they had done so in remarkably similar terms. Not only were the youngest children of the Balilla, those aged six to eight, called the "Figli della lupa" (Children of the Wolf), in honour of Romulus and Remus, but Romolino and Remoletto were also the names of the heroes of a popular comic strip in *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, the most widely-read children's publication in Fascist Italy.[25] Among the most overtly propagandistic comics to appear in the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, "Romolino e Remoletto" recounted the attempts of two members of the Balilla to join in Italy's colonial project in order to found what they explicitly envisioned as a new Roman Empire (See Figures 5 and 6).[26] In a series of African adventures, and later in a triumphant return to the home front to fend off foreign invaders, these comic-strip children not only

[23] Adriano Aprà, "Rossellini oltre il neorealismo." *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*. Ed. Lino Micciché. Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1999. 288-299 (pp. 293-294); Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano,* pp. 369, 414-415; Giovanna De Luca, *Il punto di vista dell'infanzia*, p. 69.

[24] Ward, *Antifascisms,* pp. 102-103.

[25] See Antonio Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione della Grande Guerra a Salò*. Turin: Einaudi, 2005, p. 298; Juri Meda, *È arrivata la bufera. L'infanzia italiana e l'esperienza della guerra totale (1940-1950)*. Macerata: eum edizioni, 2007, pp. 52-53; Claudio Carabba, *Il fascismo a fumetti*. Rimini: Guaraldi Editore, 1973 (pp. 104-106); Claudio Carabba, *Corrierino, Corrierona. La politica illustrata del Corriere della sera*. Florence: Guaraldi Editore, 1976, pp. 81, 84; Renata Lollo, Preface to *Il «Corriere dei Piccoli» in un secolo di riviste per ragazzi. Atti del Convegno Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano, 28 marzo 2008*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2009. VII-XVII (pp. x-xi)

[26] On the ideological implications of this comic, see Valentina Del Pizzol and Stelio Villani, "La lunga marcia di Bruno l'illustratore." *Dalla A. alla Ang.: Bruno Angoletta, professione illustratore*. Ed. Erik Balzaretti. Turin: Little Nemo, 2001, p. 47; Giorgio Montecchi, "Bruno Angoletta, un ardito illustratore per la gioventù italiana." *Piccoli eroi. Libri scritti per ragazzi durante il ventennio fascista*. Ed. Massimo Castoldi. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2016. 109-120 (pp. 118-119); Fabio Gadducci and Matteo Stefanelli, "L'avventura lunga un secolo del *Corriere dei Piccoli*." *Il secolo del Corriere dei Piccoli. Un'antologia del più amato settimanale illustrato*. Eds. Fabio Gadducci and Matteo Stefanelli. Milan: Rizzoli, 2009. 7-13 (pp. 9-10).

idolized but also emulated the combatants fighting for Italy, just as the children in Rossellini's film would idolise and emulate the partisans fighting the anti-Fascist Resistance. It is well known that Federico Fellini, who collaborated on *Rome Open City*'s screenplay, had been a devoted reader of *Il corriere dei piccoli*, and had repeatedly drawn on its imagery in his work as a filmmaker, with evident borrowings in films such as *La Strada* (1954).[27] It seems possible, therefore, and perhaps even probable, that this Fascist comic strip was among the inspirations for Romoletto and the other children in Rossellini's film. If so, it joins Mondadori and Monicelli's 1935 adaptation of *I ragazzi della via Paal*, a film sponsored by the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (GUF), the leading student organisation in Mussolini's Italy. Whether or not such borrowings were intended deliberately to convey an ideological message, as I have argued, they were likely to remind contemporary audiences of Fascism's continuing hold on the cultural imaginary, and thus of the historical challenge facing Italian society as it sought to rebuild and reform after the war.

[27] On the influence of the *Corriere dei piccoli* on Fellini, see Tullio Kezich, *Federico Fellini: His Life and Work*. Trans. Minna Proctor and Viviana Mazza. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, p. 9; Paola Pallottino, "Fellini e il 'Corriere dei Piccoli'. Ipotesi sulla genesi, non solo iconografica, de *La Strada*." *Federico Fellini da Rimini a Roma 1937-1947. Atti del convegno di studi e testimonianze, Rimini, 31 ottobre 1997*. Rimini: Fondazioni Federico Fellini, 1998. 71-75. On Fellini's contributions to *Roma città aperta*, see Kezich, *Federico Fellini*, pp. 77-82; Peter Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 38-42.

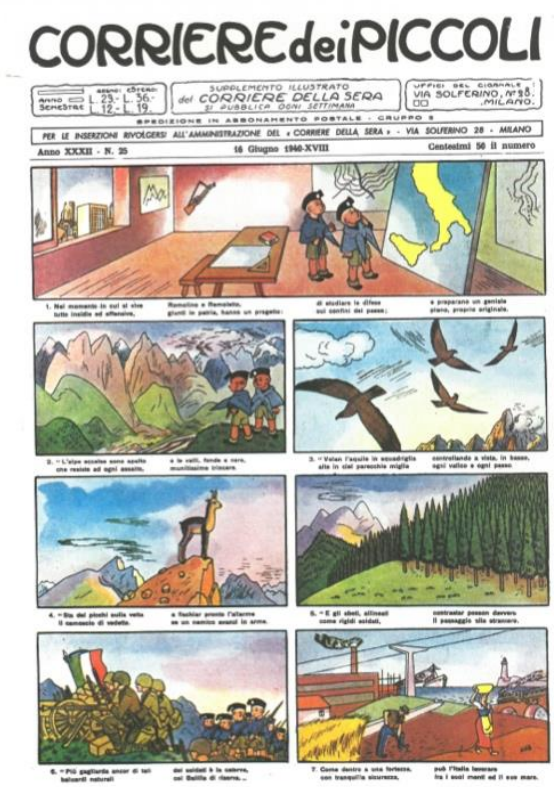

Figure 4: Romolino and Remoletto in *Corriere dei Piccoli* 16 June 1940.

Figure 5: Romolino and Remoletto, detail

As time has passed, however, the standard interpretation of the children's role and representation in *Rome Open City* has shifted substantially. It was formerly held, as Millicent Marcus put it, that Rossellini's film dramatized in some significant way "the conscience of a country coming to terms with its recent historical past," an interpretation largely in line with the one I have outlined above.[28] Yet in recent years, with most historians and cultural critics increasingly convinced that after the war Italians failed to terms with their problematic past,

[28] Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, p. xv.

the case has often been made that *Rome Open City* symptomatically "denied," "ignored," or "repressed" Italy's troubling history.[29] This act of repression, moreover, is frequently said to have been reinforced by the film's conclusion, with the celebrated closing shot taken to represent a false image of national redemption, a visual analogue to the country's supposed desire to shrug off the weight of its difficult recent history.[30]

I wish to present the opposing case, emphasising the political conflicts and problematic memories evoked by the conclusion's contested imagery in order to suggest that *Rome Open City* facilitated a powerful and compelling confrontation with the past. If the scene can be taken as a visual analogue to post-war political opinion, I would argue, it is to the opinion expressed, for instance, in a 1945 editorial from the first issue of the influential journal *Società*, which posited that post-war reconstruction would necessarily require a prolonged historical reckoning. "This is an enormous victory, redounding to the entire human race, now and to come," the editorialists maintained in their assessment of the war's conclusion. "The destiny of humanity was threatened, and we took it in our hands and walked along the path to salvation."[31] Immediately after this declaration of collective emancipation, however, the editorialists turned to a discussion of collective responsibility. "We necessarily bear the consequences of our past," they wrote; "we are burdened by the inheritance of an Italy that rushed into an unjust, aggressive, and imperialist war, and was, to the benefit of all,

[29] See, for example, Sam Rohdie, "A Note on the Italian Cinema During Fascism." *Screen* 22.4 (1981): 87-90 (p. 90); Torunn Haaland, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, p. 3; Rocchio, *Cinema of Anxiety*, p. 101; Siobhan S. Craig, *Cinema After Fascism: The Shattered Screen*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 21; Marcia Landy, *Italian Film*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 83; Guido Oldrini, *Il cinema nella cultura del Novecento. Mappa di una sua storia critica*. Florence: Casa editrice Le Lettere, 2006, p. 294.

[30] See, for example, Giacomo Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema since 1945: The Politics and Aesthetics of Memory*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 49-50; R.J.B. Bosworth, "Film Memories of Fascism." *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*. Eds. R.J.B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 1999. 102-123 (p. 108); Maurizio Zinni, *Fascisti di celluloide. La memoria del ventennio nel cinema italiano (1945-2000)*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2010, p. 25; P. Adams Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema: Iconography, Stylistics, Politics*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, pp. 41-42.

[31] "Situazione." *Società* 1.1-2 (1945): 3-7 (p. 3).

defeated."[32] *Società* celebrated Italians' newfound liberty, that is to say, while at the same time reminding them of their longstanding culpability, stressing the opportunities for the present while insisting on the errors of the past. Indeed, the journal's editors made clear their belief that the two were inseparable, that past errors were the very impetus for any meaningful present transformation. "Our plight, and the plight of the whole human race, means nothing if it does not give birth to a new society," they explained.[33] Only by creating a better world, in other words, could Italians know they had properly atoned for their past iniquities. Only by confronting their history, only by confronting Fascism, could Italians hope to pursue their national redemption.

My conjecture is that *Rome Open City* sought not only to represent such a redemptive confrontation with Italy's problematic history but also to inspire the audience to undertake it. On this point, an insight from Gian Piero Brunetta proves essential. Here is his account of the image that closes Rossellini's film.

> It is a walk full of uncertainty, but Don Fabrizio's sacrifice becomes a necessary Station of the Cross for a defeated nation to enter a period of peace and hope. In a country whose moral unity is destroyed the boys are the only innocent figures to whom the task of opening new roads can be entrusted. In this concluding scene, after having created a perfect congruity between the boys' gaze and that of the spectators, Rossellini's puts in perspective, along the same visual axis, the spectators, the protagonists and the urban space.[34]

I do not concur entirely with Brunetta's description, finding the case for the children's innocence to be somewhat overstated, given the way their depiction echoes Fascist imagery and thus evokes the thorny "youth question." Nevertheless, I am indebted to Brunetta for his essential insight that the children reproduce the audience's gaze, that they are stand-ins for

[32] "Situazione," pp. 3-4.

[33] "Situazione," p. 6.

[34] Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cent'anni di cinema italiano*. Vol. 2. *Dal 1945 ai giorni nostri*. Bari: Editori Laterza, 1998, p. 29.

the film's viewers, who have likewise witnessed don Pietro's execution, and whose walk from the theatre is thus adjacent to the boys' walk from the scene of the priest's martyrdom. This insight strikes me as all the more illuminating, in fact, if we do not take the boys to be entirely innocent, since that would serve meaningfully to reinforce the need for redemption, for renewal, for conversion: the boys' own need, to be sure, but also the audience's. Bearing witness to the priest's sacrifice could then be understood as a truly transformative act.

The description of *Rome Open City*'s final shot that is outlined in the film's shooting script strongly implies this sense of transformation.

> The children proceed, silent, disturbed, disorganised they reach the main road. Slowly, almost unconsciously (as if they were guided in their actions and in their feelings by the musical score) they reassemble, they gather themselves, they quicken their gate. The dejection disappears from their faces, giving way to a cold light, limpid, clear as the sun that illuminates the dome of St Peter's.[35]

In this account, which guided the filmmakers as they worked on set, the boys' response follows two distinct stages. At first, they are said to be "disturbed," which is perfectly understandable given that among them is Marcello, who has not only witnessed the murder of his mother, gunned down in the streets by German soldiers, but who has also now joined the others in bearing witness to the violent execution of his guardian and mentor, the priest who comforted him at the scene of his mother's death. In the next instant, however, this violent execution is shown to have galvanized Marcello and the other children's resolve, as their attitude begins to change and "[t]he dejection disappears from their faces." This disappearance may suggest post-war optimism, as some have argued, just as the boys' dejection may support the more doleful interpretation that others have given the scene. With its richly evocative imagery, *Rome Open City*'s conclusion is almost certainly able to bear the

[35] The script is reproduced in Roncoroni, *La storia di* Roma città aperta, p. 328.

weight of both interpretations. This is not to say that the film's closing image is essentially ambiguous or indeterminate, however. Rather, it is to say that in the post-war context, optimism and uncertainty, hope and crisis, were neither easily separable nor consistently opposed.

What I mean to suggest is the following: as Marcello, Romoletto, and their compatriots walk together away from the site of don Pietro's execution, they convey a sense of hope for the future, but theirs is hope tinged with despair, a future burdened by the weight of the past. They may look forward to the springtime that Francesco promised Pina, but their winter has not yet finished; the film's final image may be bathed in sunshine, according to the shooting script, but the boys nevertheless walk under a "cold light." Whatever Rossellini's collaborators might have wished, that is to say, *Rome Open City* by no means offers a conventionally happy ending; whatever contemporary critics might maintain, these boys in no way embody any conventional sense of childhood innocence. They bear the signs of the trauma they have witnessed, the degradation they have experienced: Marcello's tears, Romoletto's limp, are emblematic of the terrifying knowledge that Fascism and war have endowed them. Even in their moment of resolve, in fact, as their expressions change to reflect their solidarity with don Pietro, a martyr to the anti-Fascist cause, the boys evoke aspects of the Fascist past, harkening back to a problematic history that many Italians would rather forget. They are thus a visual embodiment of post-war Italy in the truest sense, reflecting the country's recovery in all its complexity by presaging not only the triumph of the Resistance but also the impasse of the "youth question." They signify a resolution that is decidedly partial, a transformation that is manifestly unfinished, a future that is necessarily deferred. This is only a happy ending, therefore, if it is recognised not to be an ending at all.

Rome Open City reaches its true conclusion not with the boys but with the audience. Withholding narrative resolution, the film places the boys and the viewers in the same

position: both have borne witness to the martyrdom of don Pietro; both will need to complete the transformation this act portends. Only if they—the boys, the viewers—understand the message that has been conveyed, the duty that has been imparted, will true closure be achieved. In a moment of historical upheaval, when the consequences of Italy's past—the "youth problem," the persistence of Fascism—continued to threaten a fragile future, *Rome Open City* could aspire only to point the way forward towards an unrealised, uncertain, and perhaps unattainable future resolution that lies beyond the film's iconic final shot.