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Respecting Rossellini

Peter Bondanella

The Films of Roberto Rossellini

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In approaching a film text, it has been my experience that one should not attempt to read it straight through and expect to absorb and apply all the information at once. Like a powerful film, a powerful film text holds something new to discover with each encounter. A text that traces the career of a particular filmmaker should serve not only as a reference to the person's accomplishments but also as a compliment to his or her work in a way that provides insights and inspires the viewer or reader. Peter Bondanella's *The Films of Roberto Rossellini* is such a text. In fact, Bondanella goes beyond this. He doesn't just reveal the work of Rossellini, he presents the reader with the achievements of the filmmaker within the context of the world of cinema (and the world, for that matter).

The Films of Roberto Rossellini is an in depth exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of Rossellini's working methods. It also does a wonderful job of dispelling many of the myths and stereotypes associated with Italian cinema (such as the idea that early neorealist filmmakers worked exclusively with 'non-actors', for example, Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani had extensive theater and film experience prior to their work on *Roma città aperta*), as well as presenting a history of Rossellini's contributions to both fascist cinema and neorealism, and includes his relationship and work with Ingrid Bergman, as well as his later work in television. This is done mainly through the analysis of seven of his major works (*L'uomo della croce*, *Roma città aperta*, *Paisa*, *La macchina ammazzacattivi*, *Viaggio in Italia*, *Generale Della Rovere*, and *La Prise du pouvoir par Louis XIV*) all which represent major points in his career.

In the preface Bondanella says that his text 'aims at analyzing the true original elements of Rossellini's style and defining the many ways in which he helped to shape the history of post-war Italian cinema'. For someone unfamiliar with the evolution of Italian cinema this text is a good introduction to how film in Italy transformed during and after the post war period. Rossellini epitomized the transition from fascist cinema to neorealist cinema. In fact, one might conclude that he **was** the transition.

Many general film texts and course studies that touch on the emergence of Italian cinema almost always ignore the pre-neorealist era in Italy. It is as if there were no movie cameras in Italy until 1945. When asked about Italian cinema, today's film student might only be able to talk about Fellini or De Sica or Antonioni. Some might comment on Rossellini and the emergence of 'Italian neorealism', but few are aware of what predated these popular names. In fact, had it not been for the earlier fascist cinema many of the characteristics that we associate with neorealism and Italian cinema as a whole would not have come to be.

This is where Bondanella's text comes into play -- 'Italian film culture under fascism was a rich, multifaceted, and highly heuristic springboard for post war cinematic production.' (5) Statements such as this are well supported in the text. We learn that many of the institutions that still support the Italian film industry today, such as the Centro sperimentale di cinematografia and Cinecitta, were originated during fascist years. In fact Mussolini's regime was more interested in 'promoting a profitable, commercial industry much like that of Hollywood than in directing a propaganda machine' (6). We also learn that the search for cinematic realism began in fascist cinema. According to the text, the industry turned to 'fictional documentaries' during the early part of World War II. For the novice film student these discoveries cast a new light on Italian cinema and provide a solid point of reference to understand where Rossellini was coming from.

At the same time the text does a wonderful job of showing where Rossellini fitted into the evolution of Italian cinema. It touches on his involvement with the fascist cinema, his friendship and work with Mussolini's son Vittorio, his break from fascist cinema, his collaborations with Federico Fellini, his eventual move away from cinematic realism, his work (and relationship) with Ingrid Bergman, and his return to realism with his work in television. Bondanella does a fine job of presenting the reader with a balance of Rossellini's social and cinematic experiences. The text is careful not to take on too much of a tabloid mentality in dealing with a lot of the behind-the-scenes issues that followed Rossellini, such as the various romantic scandals that swarmed him. Still, Bondanella is quite aware that these stories were a part of what made up the mystique of Rossellini.

Since this is a text that is aimed to stimulate the general educated reader and student it is hard to find any holes or weaknesses in the reading. However, one area that Bondanella fails to even scratch the surface of is the role of Rossellini's brother Renzo in the creative process. Fourteen of Rossellini's sixteen films from 1941 (*La nave bianca*) to 1953 (*Viaggio in Italia*), including six of the seven films that this text focuses on, feature musical scores by Renzo. Yet the only mention of Renzo in the text is of his contributions to work other than Roberto's films. We learn that Renzo wrote the musical score for *I tre aquilotti* (which was not a Rossellini film, although we are told that Roberto may have worked on the film without credit), and that he scored Roberto's theater production of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, but nowhere in the text is there any mention of the degree of Renzo's involvement with the development to Roberto's films.

While *The Films of Roberto Rossellini* seems to lack some insights into the creative genius of the filmmaker it still succeeds as a historical text. Indeed it works well as a companion for any student of film, especially those interested in the evolution of post-war cinema. Rossellini was instrumental in helping develop the rejection of classic, mainstream ideals. Bondanella's text makes it quite clear that many of the revolutionary filmmakers and critics (especially the French New Wave) that present day film people uphold with high regards point to Rossellini as a major source of inspiration. An example being how Rossellini's introspective period, that involved his work with Bergman, was ridiculed by the Italian critical establishment but praised by members of *Cahiers du Cinema* as some of the best work of all time.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that Bondanella's book is a text for all time or even a text for all film students for that matter. However the text is a wonderful compliment to any study of Italian cinema. By exposing misconceptions and revealing history, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini* does more than stimulate the film student. Like Rossellini's films, it challenges the consciousness of the person who experiences it. It dispels myths and creates new ones at the same time.

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