Notes on the end of *Rome, Open City*

**ABSTRACT**

Among the most iconic images in world cinema, the final shot of Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*) (1945) has inspired an effusion of critical commentary but little critical consensus, instead giving rise to opposing interpretations. I argue that the shot, in which the camera pans to follow a band of children as they march on a hillside overlooking the city of Rome, was shaped by a post-war dispute over the fate of Italian children after Fascism. Re-educating and re-claiming these children was felt to be one of the most pressing tasks facing Italy after the war, and I argue that it was this task that Rossellini and his collaborators sought to represent and even to undertake in their film. Thanks to their efforts, the final shot of *Rome, Open City* facilitated both a compelling confrontation with Italy’s Fascist past and a convincing – if far from straightforward – vision of its post-war future.

**KEYWORDS**

Fascism  
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post-war  
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martyrdom, symbolizing an auspicious future, a new beginning, a national rebirth (see, for instance, Bondanella 2009: 42, Luca 2009: 50, 51 and 63; Moneta 2012: 120–21; Minghelli 2013: 125 and 127; Rocchio 1999: 49; Morreale 2014: 119–20). Others, however, focusing on the children’s dejected expressions, and 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 that they are said to represent (see Forgacs 2000: 59; Marcus 1986: 49; Cavallo 2004: 94; Lawton 1979: 14; Baldelli 1972: 34, 37–38). Recognizing the comparable plausibility of these contrasting interpretations, many declare Rome, Open City’s ending to be inherently – indeed deliberately – ambiguous (see, for instance Sorlin 1999: 116; Brunetta 1998: 29; Landy 2005: 409–10, 417–18; Brunette 1996: 50–51; Caldwell 2014: 65–66). 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 article to explore several conjectures that 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 (see, on this point, Brunetta 2001: 410; Parigi 2014: 49–51).

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 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 that they had come to call *ieri-Domani* (Yesterday-Tomorrow), renaming it *Storie di ieri* (Stories of Yesterday) to emphasize 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’.2 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.2

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, and 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 Teresa Gullace, a Roman woman murdered by the Nazis; and 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.3 In this respect, 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 chronicle 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* (Monicelli 1986: 17 and 19; Della Casa 1986: 12). 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 disfatta di Satana*, argued that three deaths were

1. These treatments are reproduced in Roncoroni (2006: 421). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Italian are my own.
2. This comparison is explored in Roncoroni (2006: 21–24).
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, similarly proposed a happier ending to increase the film’s appeal to an American market. The screenwriter Sergio Amidei, in turn, advocated an uplifting ending to hold to the political line advanced by the Italian Communist Party.\(^4\) Rossellini, in contrast, is thought to have wanted his film to be more ‘politically ambiguous’ (Gallagher 1998: 139; Roncoroni 2006: 21–24). 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.

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-called ‘problema dei giovani’ or youth problem (see La Rovere 2008; Secchia 1973: 133–34; Pavone 1991: 551–60). 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’.\(^5\) Youth organizations such as the Opera Nazionale Balilla, whose membership at its inter-war peak had swelled to more than 1,500,000 boys aged 8 to 14 years, 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’.\(^6\) They supplemented a school system that, according to then minister of education Giuseppe Bottai, was intended to

\[\text{Figure 2: The final scene of Frank Borzage's No Greater Glory (1934).}\]
be ‘Fascist in its organisation of teaching, in its method, in its structure, in its style’ (Bottai 1939: 303).

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 facing the post-war coalition (see Grimaldi and Saba 1983: 11–19; Galfré 2005: 178–96; Gibelli 2005: 36, 393). 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’ (De Ruggiero 1944: 9). 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’. Alcide De Gasperi, who followed Parri as Prime Minister from 1945 to 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’. None of these political leaders seems to have believed that Italy’s children were prepared immediately to join in – let only to embody – 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 (Togliatti 1944: 1–2).

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 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’ (Negarville 1945: 23). 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’ (Negarville 1936: 692). 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’. 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.

This 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. For them,
troops of daring children, radicalized by visions of courageous sacrifice, were as likely to recall their country’s totalitarian past as to portend its democratic future. Under a Fascist government whose official anthem was ‘Giovinezza’ (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 similarly difficult to imagine that the director and his collaborators could have ignored the cultural baggage of the imagery that they adopted.

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 subtly to signal the lingering influence, and with it the lingering threat, of Fascism after the war. It is widely recognized that Rossellini and his collaborators attempted something similar with the third film of what has come to be known as the neorealist trilogy, Germania anno zero (Germany Year Zero) (1948), where the repercussions of Nazi rule are shown clearly to be felt even among the children. This 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 (Aprà 1999: 293–94; Brunetta 2001: 369, 414–15; De Luca 2009: 69). 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 (Ward 1996: 102–03). 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 6 to 8 years, 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 (see Gibelli 2005: 298; Meda: 2007: 52–53; Carabba 1973: 104–06; Carabba 1976: 81, 84; Lollo 2009: x–xi). Among the most overtly propagandistic comics to appear in Il Corriere dei Piccoli, ‘Romolino e Remoletto’ recounted the attempts of two members of the Balillato 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). ¹⁰ 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 idolized but also emulated the combatants fighting for Italy, just as the children in Rossellini’s film would idolize and emulate the partisans.

Figure 5: Romolino and Remoletto in Il Corriere dei Piccoli 16 June 1940.

¹⁰ On the ideological implications of this comic, see Del Pizzol and Villani (2001: 47); Montecchi (2016: 118–19); Gadducci and Stefanelli (2009: 9–10).

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 organization in Mussolini’s Italy. Whether or not such borrowings were intended deliberately to convey an ideological message, as I argue, 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.

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 that I have outlined above (Marcus 1986: xv). Yet in recent years, with most historians and cultural critics increasingly convinced that after the war Italians failed to come to terms with their problematic past, the case has often been made that Rome, Open City symptomatically ‘denied’, ‘ignored’ or ‘repressed’ Italy’s troubling history (see, e.g., Rohdie 1981: 90; Haaland 2012: 3; Rocchio 1999: 101; Craig 2010: 21; Landy 2000: 83; Oldrini 2006: 294). 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 (see, Lichtner 2013: 49–50; Bosworth 1999: 108; Zinni 2010: 25; Sitney 1995: 41–44).

I wish to present the opposing case, demonstrating how the political conflicts and problematic memories evoked by the conclusion’s contested imagery allowed Rome, Open City to facilitate a powerful and compelling confrontation with the past. If the film’s final 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’ (Anon. 1945: 3). 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, defeated’ (Anon. 1945: 3–4). *Società* celebrated Italians’ new found liberty, that is to say, while at the same time reminding them of their long-standing 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 (Anon. 1945: 6). Only by creating a better world, in other words, could Italians know that 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.

(Brunetta 1998: 29)

I do not concur entirely with Brunetta’s description, finding the case for the children’s innocence to be somewhat overstated, since 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 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 gait. 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.\footnote{The script is reproduced in Roncoroni (2006: 328).}

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 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, *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 that they have witnessed, the degradation that they have experienced: Marcello’s tears, Romoletto’s limp, are emblematic of the terrifying knowledge that Fascism and war have imparted to 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 recognized 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 unrealized, uncertain, and perhaps unattainable future resolution that lies beyond the film’s iconic final shot.

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