Rome Open City (1945); Paisà (1946); Germany Year Zero (1948); Stromboli (1950); Viaggio in Italia (1954); all Roberto Rossellini

The further WWII recedes, and the more room Rossellini has to make for Ingrid Bergman, the less interesting his films get. Bergman wanted to make real, raw movies with him after so much fake Hollywood stuff, but old habits die hard: see, in the last reel of Stromboli, how immaculate her skin and hair remain, even though she’s just walked over a volcanic peak, through choking clouds of ash and smoke. Did the actress, or the distributors, insist? Did the director not care? Or was it just an unchecked hair-stylist and an over-conscientious make-up girl? Bergman should have insisted on being mussed-up – but the problem is, she’s a superstar slumming it in a low-budget film with a non-professional cast, and doesn’t really know how to adjust.

Her character is a north European woman (a displaced Lithuanian / Swede), in a southern Italian environment. She’s married a fisherman because she can’t emigrate to Argentina. The alienation of the actress from the “neo-realist” style is almost a metaphor of the alienation of the woman from the society, though as with other attempts to justify miscasting metaphorically (Anthony Perkins, lost as Joseph K. in The Trial, for instance), it doesn’t work when you watch it.

In one scene, the woman seems to try and seduce the island’s priest; she finally curls up with another fisherman, who owns a boat, and promises to get her away. Bergman isn’t able to descend with her character to such a level of physical and moral desperation.

Rossellini is better when depicting what her husband does for a living. The tuna-fishing sequence is so vivid and bloody, it’ll put you off tuna-and-cucumber sandwiches for life.

In Viaggio in Italia, Bergman’s relationship with George Sanders, her husband, is so ill-defined, Sanders is so far out of his depth, and they’re both given so little help by the flat lines and under-realised situations, that all you can do is gape at the sight of two professionals struggling in what looks like an amateur movie.

The prop-men really should have worked harder at the plaster casts of the man and woman – doppelgängers for Bergman and Sanders – that they’re digging out at Pompeii, all pristine in their 2,000-year-old deaths. This is sad stuff: two idioms which could never match. Hitchcock, we’re moved to protest, directed Bergman with
infinently greater care. Away from her Hollywood packaging, she’s nowhere near such a good actress.

We see the intention behind the sequences where Bergman stares at Roman statues at the Naples museum, stares into pits belching smoke, and, finally (with Sanders), experiences an epiphany while staring at the religious procession: Italy reminds, Italy teaches, Italy heals. But first, it’s all shot and edited so clumsily (what is it they’re moved by in the procession?) and second, the middle-class couple they play have been so inarticulate and inert from the outset that we have no faith in their ability to develop at all. And as Bergman, miscarrying, invoked the deity at the top of the volcano at the end of Stromboli, I found myself muttering, “Tilda Swinton could have done this much better”.

Rossellini pitches Italian characters against Italian landscapes and events ten times more effectively in Paisà, made the year after the war ended. More effectively for having nothing but amateur actors in his viewfinder.

The Po estuary, in the last, horrible, uncompromising segment of that film, looks the bleakest place on earth.

The film was made in an improvisatory way, moving up the Italian peninsular from south to north, from narrative materials provided by local people, recollecting events of just one or two years previously.

Paisà is so moving because of the unpolished performances, though at least one – the girl in the Roman episode – seems to me a professional: she’s in Rome, Open City, too. Insert Ingrid Bergman into its streets, coasts, caves, apartments and monasteries, and you’d diminish it. It really is a masterpiece of concision. Each of its six sections could make a full-length scenario. Apart from the section in the monastery, it refuses, too, to create any feel-good factor. For hundreds of thousands of people, WWII offered no way out – you just suffered, and then you died.

Apart from the last section – about the massacre, by the Germans, of irregular allied fighters and partisans in the flatlands at the mouth of the Po – the most memorable parts are the Roman section, and the monastic section, where the three military chaplains visit the Franciscan monks, and almost enlarge their minds. In the Roman section a G.I. and a Roman girl meet on the day of the city’s liberation, and fall in love, but have to part. Months later he returns, meets her when drunk, and doesn’t recognise her. She’s had, in the interval, to become a prostitute to keep from starving, and for some time she doesn’t recognise him either. The absurd situation carries a horrible ring of truth, and the moment when she realises who he is, and what has happened to them even now the war’s over, is sad beyond words.

In the one comic section, three American military chaplains descend on a Franciscan monastery, and are given beds for the night. The monks assume that all three are catholic, and are shocked when the only chaplain who speaks Italian reveals that one of his colleagues is “protestante,” and the other “ebreo”. Consternation and horror: one old monk falls on to his knees and prays for divine protection. The wonderful expressions of humble willingness to listen and understand on the monks’ faces, as the Catholic padre explains how, over two years’ battle experience, he has come to respect the two other padres profoundly, are enhanced when we realise that Rossellini is using real monks instead of actors. The monks invite the three to the refectory to dine, while they (the monks) fast: the chaplains’ gratitude is given an ironic perspective because we know, but they don’t, that the food they’re eating is all
out of the tins which they’ve themselves brought as presents, and has been prepared
hurriedly, with amazement at what America can do these days, by the monk in charge
of the kitchen, who would otherwise have no food to cook at all.

The blessing which the Catholic army chaplain prays for at the dinner is infinitely
more moving than what happens to Bergman and Sanders at the end of Viaggio …
even though the guy saying the lines (a real U.S. army chaplain),

Paisà is a film to watch over and over again.

The same can’t in honesty be said for Germany Year Zero, where all the
characters – inhabitants of a crowded flat in post-war Berlin – are, apart from one, just
mean, selfish, and desperate to survive. There’s the ex-Wehrmacht brother, in hiding
from the Allied police; the dying father who insists on his position as head of the
family; the big man in the room next door who thinks he runs the flat, and wishes
the old man dead … it’s a teutonic version of the crowded flat in which Anna Magnani
lives in Rome Open City, except that there it’s over quickly, and the old man in Rome
is done comically. Unlike most of the characters in Paisà, no-one in Germany, Year
Zero seems to merit admiration or empathy, apart from the little boy, the hero, whose
attempts to survive and provide for the rest make up the movie’s main narrative
thread.

Hitler may be dead and most of
Berlin pulverised, but no-one’s learned
anything, not yet. It’s a bleak picture of a
society defeated but unchanged and
unredeemed. The boy goes for advice to
his old teacher, who’s lost his job because
(he implies), he can’t renounce his
Nazism, and who appears – as does
another man in his flat – to harbour
paedophile feelings for his ex-pupil.

The plot becomes contrived; the childish suicide in the film’s last scene convinces
no more than any other depictions of childish self-destruction. The film may be too
unpleasant, but Rossellini’s exterior filming (in Berlin’s French sector) is superb.
There’s nothing like a city bombed and shelled flat for providing images of social
psychosis.

Rome Open City is, for such a famous title, one of the biggest misnomers in
cinema history, since for the whole action Rome is under Nazi occupation and isn’t an
open city at all – or am I missing something?

A certain stereotyping is visible. Where in the later Berlin film all the adult
Germans are either status-fixated or paedophiles or both, here the two main Nazis are
gay, which gives an extra edge to the way they victimise the (needless to say) hetero
Italians. I’d like to know more about the Austrian actor Harry Feist, who positively
primps and minces as the Gestapo chief: where did they get him from? Did he have to
go back to the internment camp between shoots? The Gestapo chief’s name is
Bergmann, and his lesbian friend, who bribes the drug-addicted cabaret girl into
treachery, is called Ingrid – did the actual Ingrid Bergman see the film, and feel that
Rossellini needed educating?

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1: Not so (2011); he plays the depot manager in Clouzot’s Le Salaire de la Peur.
2: All the German actors and extras in Rome Open City were P.o.W.s.
It’s the priest (as it turns out, a heroic priest), played by Aldo Fabrizi, who provides the film’s one sole comment on Italians and sex. This is also the film’s only joke. In an early scene, he’s in an antique shop, and sees the statue of a saint next to another statue, which is nude. Shocked, he turns the nude statue away from the saint, only to register further shock on realising that the saint is now staring at the nude statue’s bum: so turns the saint away completely.

The film’s reputation for being a ground-breaker in terms of documentary-style, newsreel-grainy, instantaneous filming, is not well-earned. Look at the sequences in Boudu Sauvé des Eaux, made thirteen years previously, in which Michel Simon staggers about Paris and finally throws himself into the Seine, and you’ll see location shooting just as raw and grimy as anything here. And two zip-pans – firstly of Magnani’s fiancé being hauled in a German truck, and then of Magnani herself, chasing desperately after him – have a careful focus and depth which must have taken some setting-up and skill.

The torture sequence is done in a studio, with lighting and composition as careful as any done under normal pre-war conditions.

It’s the unanswerable horror of this sequence, in which the resistance leader is blow-torched, which, I suspect, gained the film its instant reputation for a new degree of realism. Despite the way the Gestapo chief taunts him with the paradoxes in his political situation, (he’s fighting with right-wing Italians who hate everything he stands for), he reveals nothing, and, in what is in truth a mercifully short time by Gestapo standards, dies.

As in Germany, Year Zero, the children suffer last. The two sheep brought into the trattoria and shot by the hungry Germans are metaphors for them. As Magnani, the mother, is shot, Fabrizi, the priest, cradles her son for comfort. When in the last scene, Fabrizi, the priest, is shot, the children, whose whistling persuades the Italian firing-squad not to fire, stare hopefully, only to see the German officer in charge shoot Fabrizi instead. Rossellini’s last shot is of the children going back into Rome, with this time, no adults left: one of them cradles the now doubly-bereft boy as they march miserably away.