

GE II (SEMESTER II)

Topic: Rome open city

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Directed by Roberto Rossellini in 1945, just after World War II came to an end, this story of Italian resistance to the German occupation of the capital city is a favorite of directors, including Jean-Luc Godard and Martin Scorsese, who has called it “the most precious moment in film history.”

Playing for a week at the Nuart in West Los Angeles in a new digital restoration, “Open City,” originally shot with film stock purchased on the black market in Rome, is not as easy to pigeonhole as its celebrated status might have you believe.



Officially, this picture is revered as the first example of a then-revolutionary style that became known as Italian neorealism, a moviemaking method that concerned itself with the lives of ordinary, often poor people by shooting on streets instead of in studios and using non-professionals instead

of polished actors.

What makes “Open City” special is that it doesn’t follow its own rules. It is both realistic and melodramatic, passionate and dispassionate, using newsreel-style cinematography but unafraid to indulge in big emotions.

And though later neorealist landmarks such as Vittorio De Sica’s “Bicycle Thieves” worked exclusively with untrained individuals, “Open City” used two established Italian stars, the great Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi.

It also had the advantage of Rossellini, who within a few years would become embroiled in a scandalous affair with Hollywood

star Ingrid Bergman. Working here with a few screenwriters, including a young Federico Fellini, Rossellini displays a sensitivity to character and psychology that is especially visible in the film’s more intimate scenes.

Though intended as a tribute to those who fought back against the Germans, the good people who sacrificed and sometimes lost their lives, “Open City’s” world is not one where the resistance is a force apart from the general population.

Rather, this is the story of a range of ordinary folks who rise to the

occasion, who balance their personal lives with their political commitment, who live in a situation where the battle is ongoing and even children feel the need to “forge a coalition against the common enemy.”

“Open City” (the title refers to Rome’s late-war status as an

undefended metropolis) opens with the Germans surrounding a building as the man they are seeking, a resistance leader named Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero), escapes across the rooftops.

Though his sometime-mistress, an actress named Marina (Maria Michi), is kept in the dark as to his whereabouts, Manfredi has gone to another apartment house where his colleague, a printer named Francesco (Francesco Grandjacquet), has a place.

There he meets Pina (Magnani), a widow with a small child whom we’ve met earlier as part of a group of hungry people who’ve

liberated bread from a collaborationist bakery. We also are introduced to Don Pietro (Fabrizi), the local Catholic priest who makes common cause with the anti-clerical resistance because the need to repel the invader trumps all other concerns.

Pina and Francesco are a couple. In fact, she is noticeably pregnant, and the pair is due to be married the next day by Don Pietro. The emotional heart of the film is a conversation the engaged couple have in a stairwell, where Francesco reassures a worried and exhausted Pina that “we’re fighting for something that must come; we’ll see a better world.”

In this, as in all her scenes, Magnani is a force to be reckoned with, an actress who comes alive on-screen as few others have. (“Open City” was the breakthrough for Magnani, who ended up with some key roles in Hollywood, including winning a lead actress Oscar for “The Rose Tattoo” in a part Tennessee Williams wrote especially for her.)

Implacably pursuing the resistance is the German Gestapo, an altogether less nuanced group led by the effete Maj. Bergmann (Harry Feist) and his sinister right hand, Ingrid (Giovanna Galletti).

Though we can sense it is inevitable, elements of the betrayal, graphic torture and sudden death that are the daily currency of these characters continue to be disturbing, even today. Above all else, “Rome, Open City” is concerned with the survival of morality in an immoral world, a theme expressed by Don Pietro.

“It isn’t hard to die well,” the priest says. “It is hard to live well.”