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The Italian Cinema and the Left: On Rediscovering Roberto Rossellini-Filmmaker

Rome.

The story of Roberto Rossellini is a very Italian story, not an European story, encompassing Italy in change from the Fascist period until 2009. It is a very Italian story because Italy, separated from the rest of Europe by the Alps, is, and perhaps always has been, something apart, still today considered by North Europeans an exotic place to escape to. Read Roberto Rossellini and think Italy of the past seventy-five years.

The Italian film director, Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977), known as 95% neo-realist, was highly successful in his film career. Yet—and here are two pieces of information that might be news for cinema buffs—after growing up in a bourgeois family near pre-Dolce Vita Via Veneto in Rome and then tinkering in insignificant cinema during the Fascist era, he later became a maker of Italy's cinema of the Left. Late in his life, Rossellini then had a vision, a vision light years distant from European filmmaking: in the 1970s, far ahead of his time, he became enamoured of the East and dreamed of a rejoining of the Occident and Islam.

Writers and filmmakers create in their work a certain aura about themselves, while, at the same time, projecting a message, a theme, in the best of cases something universal. The filmmaker of genius is also to some extent a visionary. However, to become a visionary he must first be able to see life as it is, touch it, smell it, taste it, suffer for it, and hopefully also in the end, to love it. That is what Italian filmmakers did in post-war Italy during that brief period of maybe five years when they created their neo-realistic cinema that changed the world of cinema. The filmmaker genius then builds on the foundation of his life

experience, and, if he is lucky, he might experience moments of transcendence in his art and produce a masterpiece.

As I delved into that past in my “Rossellinian” days, I quizzed people who finished school and entered life in the “neo-realist years” after World War II. All agree that life itself was truly more real then; in its simplicity it was full of hope and promise; anything was possible. Paradoxically, the atmosphere of the turbulent 1970s, after the revolt of 1968 and the subsequent explosion of native terrorism, emerged also a quaint, folksy image of Italy, which today survives only abroad, not in Italy. Those were not “the good old times” for Italians.

The Italy that remains in the imagery of many non-Italians died decades ago. Globalization and capitalism have extinguished the feelings of solidarity that infected the 1960s and 70s. If the mood in Italy then also smacked of revolt and anarchy, today it is every man for himself. To the extent that it even exists, today’s cinematographic Italy reflects a lifestyle marked by ugly commercial TV, advertising, and audience share. Never was the Italian expression “Stavamo meglio quando stavamo peggio” (Life was better when things were worse) more valid.

ITALIAN CINEMA AND THE LEFT

Once there was a cinema of the Left in Italy. A cinema *on* the Left. It was a direct and clear-cut appeal to vote for Left parties, led then by the Italian Communist Party, the PCI. That Left cinema emerged in a specific Italian atmosphere of post-Fascism, some appreciation of which is necessary to understand what its cinema was about.

On one hand, the McCarthyism that choked Hollywood had little effect on the Italian cinema. But the youth upheaval of the 1960s that exploded in 1968 was vivid; resistance was in the air. First revolt, then terrorism exploded against Italy’s stagnant political system largely financed and controlled by the United States. In those times the Rome Communist newspaper, *Paese Sera*, printed up to six editions a day, with exposés and scoops, one of which in the 1980s was the Iran-Contras scandal. The Left cinema supported the various social and political battles of the Left parties. Every night, cinema theatres—prime vision and many less expensive second and third vision theatres in the periphery—were packed to the rafters, some with sound systems so bad that it was hardly comprehensible. Cinemas of Rome were noisy, either too hot or too cold, a heavy blue cloud of smoke rising toward the ceiling, mostly young people, and everybody of the political Left. If you arrived late you were destined for the front rows. Nobody cared. You lit up and joined the crowd. Everybody smoked, especially at the cinema. Especially at the Left cinema. And

everybody talked about film directors, nearly all of whom were of the Left. They reflected the one-half of Italy that was Left.

The love affair “cinema-Left” was mutual and seemed eternal. It was based on convictions and commitment. When the Left parties called, the cinema was present. Likewise, from war’s end until the 70s the Left parties supported the cinema. It was a love relationship. The Italian cinema of the 60s and 70s had a colour. It was red: the cinema of Rossellini, Visconti, Pasolini, Rosi, Pontecorvo, Montaldo, Antonioni, Comencini, Monicelli, Damiani, Pirro, Scola, Scarpelli, Bertolucci. Their films separated Left from Right.

After the euphoria, however, the cinema and the Left separated. The passionate affair lasted until the late 70s, by which time the political parties had become power centres and outgrown their need for their cinema ally. At the same time state television had exploded on the scene, becoming more powerful instruments of propaganda than the cinema could ever have dreamed of. The decades-long love affair of the Left and cinema lost its ardour, the partners drifted apart, into separation, if not divorce, leaving the Italian cinema industry literally up the creek. Thus ended the great Italian cinema that had conquered the world.

Italian filmmakers have spoken openly of the cause of the divorce. Francesco Rosi: the political parties became power centres. Giuliano Montaldo: the fear that your film denunciation would be used to justify terrorism. Furio Scarpelli: our incapacity to satirize the Left as we do the Right. Still, others like Bernardo Bertolucci and Gillo Pontecorvo kept the faith in a potential renewal of the Italian cinema. Unfortunately, it never happened. The crass commercialization of Italian life, cheapness, vulgarity and imitation of America crushed most initiatives. Even if today, from time to time, a good art film somehow emerges from the swamps, Italian cinema is at rock bottom.

THE FILM DIRECTOR

Novelist and tireless film critic Alberto Moravia wrote in the introduction to his collection of 144 film reviews entitled *Alberto Moravia Al Cinema* that the director or film author is the only element that really counts in quality films, that is, in *film d'autore*. Actors just act, for better or worse. Good films, he stressed, are not to be considered “starring whom or about what but *by whom*.” The director expresses himself, always facing new problems, always in change. The actors and the photography have their role, but the direction is the central aspect. “The cinema is also an aesthetic product and as such should be enjoyed also for its images, but such a criterion would be too limited.”

The concept of the author's film was diametrically opposed to the Hollywood studio system in which film companies like Paramount, MGM, Warner Brothers, and Twentieth Century Fox controlled all aspects of film production. Huge corporations controlled the kinds of films that were made, as well as the directors and the actors. The star system was born. Filmmaking became big business. This was the other side of the moon from the Italian Left cinema of the neo-realist period of committed artistic filmmaking.

A good example of the committed cinema was Francesco Rosi. From a comfortable middle class Naples family, Rosi entered the cinema after the war as an assistant to Luchino Visconti, before making his own intensely socially committed cinema, highlighted by films like *Hands On The City* (Mani sulla città), 1963, about the rampant building speculation devastating Italy's cities during the so-called "economic miracle". The film begins with the catastrophic collapse of a high-rise building and many deaths, inquests into which are blocked by political machinations. Rosi's film denounces the crime.

In the new era of television and garbage films and born-overnight actresses, Roberto Rossellini's son, Renzo Rossellini Jr., said about the end of the Left-cinema affair in an interview with me in Rome's Gaumont Italia offices in the early 1980s: "Nothing succeeds like success." He knew what he was talking about, for he and Gaumont Productions made their compromises with changing times in exchange for a prime place in European cinema.

NEO-REALISM BORN FROM THE WOMB OF FASCISM

Neo-realism in the cinema emerged from the false consciousness, the silly propriety and the insistence on form and pretence and triumph so prevalent under Fascism. It emerged from the war experience, the pathological fear of another war, and from the ideological standoff between East and West. Concerning the Cold War influence, Eric Rhode in his *The History of the Cinema-From Its Origins To 1970* writes: "Its (the Cold War) immediate influence was that audiences looked for qualities of warmth, however simulated. Critics praised the Italian neo-realist films for their spontaneous humanity and discounted their often contrived sweetness."

The scarcity of American films during World War II permitted the German cinema to monopolize the European market and the Italian cinema to grow quickly. When an avalanche of American films arrived after the war, it was evident that Hollywood had not progressed one iota. The European cinema, instead, was rich in ideas. It wanted to be heard in the world. Though the German film industry was destroyed, France and especially Italy were ready. The names of Rossellini and De Sica spread through the world. Neo-

realism then exploded on the scene. No longer Hollywood studio films, but author's films of the dozens of film directors who were to change world cinema forever.

I want to backtrack for a moment to elucidate the involvement with Fascism of Italy's artists in general, among whom Rossellini was a budding figure. Complacent conformity and opportunism, I believe, is the worst criticism one can attribute to the Rossellini of that period; he was already 36 when Italian Fascism collapsed. Conformity and opportunism go hand in hand. Under Fascism, style was all-important. Observation and critical thought were frowned on. In you didn't accept Fascist values of family and patriotism, you had to adapt or escape abroad as Moravia and other intellectuals did.

As a rule, authoritarian systems rely on compromised artists to portray false images. The artist who practices compromise follows the victors. Inevitably the compromised artist sticks to the middle; he avoids saying what he feels for fear of his place in society. Italian intellectuals since the time of Italian unification in mid-19th century were largely obedient or silent as they were during Fascism. The bored indifference of the Italian people as a whole—not only that of its intellectuals and artists—facilitated the twenty-years of Fascism.

It was no wonder that after the war Europe's liberal generation, especially its creative artists, gravitated toward Communism. Despite the *Ventennio*, the twenty years of Fascism, Socialism was still a potent part of the Italian psyche, as it had been since the end of the 19th century. Communists and Socialists led the partisan anti-Fascist battle and after the war the new Italian Republic was based on labour and anti-Fascism.

Italian critics began trying to pinpoint the precise dates in the middle of last century in which Italian intellectuals converted from Fascism to Communism. Many artists had already confessed that they were once Fascists but dated their exit from the regime in early 1938, chiefly in order to distance themselves from Italy's brutal racial laws. The truth is that some of them had continued to collaborate with the Fascist regime until the end.

In any case, in the post-World War II era, a majority of European writers and film directors were of the Left. In Italy, most adhered to the Italian Communist Party. Their change in political colour was a highly subjective matter. Hollywood in the McCarthy era and the surprising number of turncoats suggest what would happen to American intellectuals—what has already happened to many—in the face of an American Fascism.

On the back of Europe's devastation and Italy's physical and moral destruction resulting from a combination of Fascism and military defeat, neo-realism arrived as a world seen through children's eyes, the eyes of a bicycle thief or the eyes of a destitute workingman.

“For although Mussolini’s Fascism had been ostensibly destroyed,” Rhode continues, “its influence persisted everywhere in post-war Italy. The better neo-realist films tended to include many of the confusions and hesitations of this newborn society: its superstitions, both pagan and Christian, its vaguely Marxist yearnings and its hunger for dependence (in part assuaged by the post-war role of the United States in Italy.). The enthusiasm stirred by these films throughout the world reveals how far they embodied an ideology of more than just Italian national interests.”

But they also presented an ambivalent and unsatisfactory response to authority, as did Fellini later.

ROSSELLINI DIAGNOSI

I sometimes wake up mornings with the melody of an old song in mind and spend the day trying to reconstruct lyrics I once knew. Yesterday it was a disturbingly incomprehensible word image: “wedding walls.” Wedding Walls? An hour later I remembered a recent photo of a wedding party of a relative celebrated in the shadow of a heavy stonewall in Florence, decorated with green and brown vines.

Today I woke with walls still in mind and it dawned on me that it was linked to Rossellini. I recalled writer Alberto Moravia’s analysis of Rossellinian imagery. As Moravia (I should note here that in his film critic role Moravia in his review of 144 films wasted very few words on Rossellini.) recalls, Rossellini’s vision of life was marked by ceremony and ritual. In that, he, like any Roman of that epoch, was used to the rites at St. Peter’s and the Vatican. Now, think St. Peter’s and Vatican City and you think walls. Powerful thick walls for all eternity. For many Italians, the “ritual-walls” imagery still holds today. One dominant Italian dream is a house surrounded by such a stonewall. Ceremony fired Rossellini’s imagination, making his realism as mysterious as it was impeccable. In an early Rossellini film about the Sun King, Louis XIV, *La Prise du Pouvoir, The Conquest of Power*, everything—games, love, meals, death—is ritual. The fascination with rites remained embedded in Rossellini for a lifetime. Roberto Rossellini loved ceremony and St. Peter’s but he was not a saint. He was an Italian of his times. His daughter with Ingrid Bergman, Isabella Rossellini and her twin sister Ingrid, both describe him as a womanizer. Women, women galore. He loved them. Not only his three wives and Anna Magnani. His women had a way of overlapping. His was a luxurious bourgeois life of days in bed, surrounded by books and served by one woman or the other. His was also a fast life of fast cars that not even his later love for mystical India changed. A friend of mine who lives on Rome’s Fleming Hill hanging over Corso di Francia told me how in the night he used to

hear the roar of powerful motors racing down below along the Avenue leading from the Tiber River toward the hills of north Rome. Everyone said it was Roberto Rossellini in his red Ferrari.

Yet, once on the film scene, Roberto Rossellini was a giant. “He might not have been popular with the masses,” Isabella said in an interview a few years ago, “but he was incredibly important for other artists.” In Bernardo Bertolucci’s second film of 1964, *Before The Revolution*, the 22-year old director has one character exclaim: “One can’t live without Rossellini.” I have never heard or read that Bertolucci explained exactly why, but he clearly had in mind that post-war epoch that was especially confusing to non-Europeans whose wartime experiences perhaps had consisted simply of limited food or fuel rationing or separation of families. Though today, over decades years after the death of the father of Italian neo-realism, moviegoers of the world get along without him, he, like Paul Bowles, has become a cult figure, like a misty and faded god in a fresco on the walls of an Etruscan tomb long since ransacked by robbers.

Nonetheless, Italian neo-realism, born out of Fascism and the aftermath of World War II, swept across the world. One of its basic concepts was that the images it projected counted not for what they added to reality but for what they revealed of it. The new school of cinema received its international consecration among enthusiastic French film critics. Paradoxically, it happens frequently that Italian cultural landmarks gain more recognition abroad than at home. In no other country is more appropriate the adage that “No man is a prophet in his own country.”

Here, Rossellini steps forward as the father of a movement. In a special way Rossellini, but also the other Italian Neo-realists, gained international fame and importance. Especially in France, where they influenced what came to be known as the Nouvelle Vague. When Truffaut was asked what he had in common with other Nouvelle Vague filmmakers, he answered, “love for the flipper and for Rossellini.” Because of Rossellini’s influence on French filmmakers, Truffaut labeled him “the father of the French New Wave.”

Roberto Rossellini made a trilogy of neo-realist films: *Rome Open City* (Roma Città Aperta), about the city of Rome; *Paisan* (Paisà), a chronicle of the liberation of Italy from Fascism-Nazism; *Germany Year One* (*Germania Anno Zero*), the reality of a great country, defeated and destroyed materially and morally. The trilogy was followed by *Europa 51*, about the illusory peace reigning in Europe that had only been materially reconstructed. Though the four films demonstrated Rossellini’s capacity for rapid

assimilation of his world, he could never film history alone. He always had to deal with the individual created by his world, facing the ruins created by the war. For that, he went to an island-microcosm in Sicily, which provided the title of his film, *Stromboli*, his first film with Ingrid Bergman, who after their torrid love affair became his second wife.

Snobbed in Italy, *Rome Open City* won the Cannes Film Festival of 1946. Written by Rossellini in collaboration with Federico Fellini and Sergio Amedei, with Anna Magnani in a leading role, the film tells the story of a priest tortured and executed by Nazi occupiers in front of the children of his parish for his collusion with the Resistance.

After having had his say about Italy, Europe and war and peace, Rossellini went to India to satisfy his inexhaustible curiosity. In his film, *India*, he no longer dealt in the particular but strove toward a global vision. Truffaut wrote that “*India* is as different from my *Hiroshima* as the North Pole is from the South Pole. But what is important is that both were poles, not filmed romance-theatre but films about poetic meditation, about music, that is, about the cinema of tomorrow.”

Yet, the practising Catholic Rossellini was not really different from most Romans, who, though they travel to faraway places, they never want to leave the eternal city. They reach Milan or Munich or maybe Bombay and they’re constantly on the phone with Rome, reporting every detail and wishing they were in Rome. ‘After lunch we’re having a look at the cathedral.’ Or, ‘After dinner, a stroll in the old town. You should be here.’ Because of that dichotomy of spirit, they’re strange, ingenious, and unpredictable. It’s the untamed wild animal inside them.

Rossellini’s was a generation that needed heroes. He perceived the dichotomy between his enormous success and the ugliness of the historical moment. I might exaggerate if I hint that he was a bit socially bipolar. Most certainly he had something of the modern Italian caught up in a complex interplay between freely chosen submission and submission demanded by an outside force and reinforced by the false consciousness created by both Fascism and the nefarious Rome bourgeoisie from which he emerged. In him, the conflict between interiority and exteriority was recklessly at play. Otherwise he wouldn’t have overcome his Romanness to become the universal maestro he became.

Rossellini, like Fellini, believed he spoke the truth, even when he was lying. Man is after all a paradox. To reinforce Moravia’s words about the fundamental role of the director, it should be recalled that already in the 1930s the director, the film author, had become the principle element of films. He was the diva, the maestro, the dictator on set. Much more important than actors, story or setting, as was the old rule of Hollywood’s studio system.

In his neo-realistic films, Rossellini created a raw image of a destroyed and suffering world. No wonder that for him, and for the other filmmakers of his times, reality was both elusive and profound, the way they mixed authentic people and authentic locations with actors and studio sets. As French critic André Bazin stressed, neo-realists did not simply touch up a film story with bits of reality, as if reality were mere decoration. Their idea was to retain the mystery and ambiguity of reality whose meanings we then have to piece together for ourselves. In that sense, neo-realism was the other side of the moon from vulgar reality shows. The idea of neo-realists was to dialogue with reality, not cage it and make it recite.

CHANGING TIMES, CINEMA CRISIS

As time passed and ideas changed, TV and terrorism kept Italians at home, filmmaking costs soared, empty cinema theatres began closing, the Left parties, now power centres, abandoned their cinema artists, Italian cinema could not compete economically with the US film industry, and economic crisis wracked the Italian cinema. Cheap garbage films arrived. The cinema had less time for socio-political struggles. The battleground was cruel and elusive and few Don Quixotes were found. Moreover, also the man of the Left himself was in crisis. One wondered if the filmmakers themselves had become indifferent to their old ideals.

ROSSELLINI SEMINAR

I found among piles of old magazines in my room an issue of the magazine *Cinecritica* with a report on a seminar on Rossellini held in Pisa in 1969, with the director present. The first question raised there has long intrigued me personally: an unidentified participant asked Rossellini point blank if in his cinema he intended offering solutions to the problems he proposed.

Rossellini: “In general, and this is a line I always follow, I believe it is very important to make precise diagnoses. There is a phenomenon, then one must look at it closely, examine the profound causes. The most important however is to examine people, and their attitudes and behaviour that arise naturally and so often cause tragic mistakes. The commitment to being a man entails an enormous risk: but, otherwise, there is only sterilization and congealment. I try to make diagnoses that penetrate to the depths of things. Nothing more. It is beyond my mentality to propose solutions. One can begin with the attitude like ‘Now I’m going to tell you everything’ but this is something I will never do.”

This recalls Umberto Eco who in an interview with me said about multinationals: “Multinational empires exist today. They are not an invention of protesters or terrorists. I

don't want to moralize and say that multinationals are bad. They are the form that modern industrial organization has taken in capitalistic society. It's also true that multinationals are always disturbed by local events and local political decisions. Look at what happened in Chile, and now in many places. This is one of the problems of our times. But don't ask me for a solution. I just note it."

The answer is disturbing. It is not enough. I don't know what I expected from Eco or from Rossellini besides diagnoses but it is frustrating to hear such creative artists and thinkers reluctant to think in terms of solutions. Rossellini himself explained that he hesitated for fear of being didactic, with, most probably lessons learned from authoritarian Fascist times.

Concerning commitment, Rossellini did add on a more positive note that "it's necessary to have courage and to accept one's responsibility, and to remain within the concept of progress. It is unthinkable to stop it or block it. My aspiration, my dream, is that each person be truly himself, with all the risks this implies. If one participates completely one can stay linked to reality." That is: "Know thyself."

A FAMILY OF FILMMAKERS

Rossellini's father built Rome's first movie theatre; his brother Renzo was a successful composer, especially of music for the cinema; his son, Renzo Jr. became a film director and producer. Renzo Rossellini Jr. first collaborated with his father Roberto as an Assistant Director, in Italy and in France, and later as his producer. Renzo Jr. founded Gaumont Italia and Artisti Associati Spa. The two companies produced and distributed more than 100 films including: *City of Women*, *Orchestra Rehearsal* and *The Ship Sails On* by Federico Fellini, films by Ingmar Bergman, Ettore Scola, Francesco Rosi, Mario Monicelli, Nanni Moretti, the first film of Roberto Benigni as actor, by Marco Ferreri, *The Last Metro* by Francois Truffaut, *Querelle de Brest* by Rainer Fassbinder, *La Pelle* by Liliana Cavani, *Nostalghia* by Andrei Tarkovsky, *Don Giovanni* by Joseph Losey, *Cotton Club* by Francis Ford Coppola, *Ragtime* by Milos Forman and *Identification of a Woman* by Michelangelo Antonioni. Renzo Jr. worked with the Allende Socialist government in Santiago de Chile, has taught the cinema art at Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV in Cuba and at the Foundation for Development and Democracy in Santo Domingo. He was President of the Roberto Rossellini Foundation.

During the 1980s I often stopped in Renzo Rossellini's offices on the Rome hill of Monte Parioli to pick up documentation on new productions of Gaumont, then Europe's major film producer. If Renzo was there we exchanged a few words and I once interviewed him.

Renzo Jr. was long in the vanguard of Europe's intellectual battles and worked to overcome the decline of the Italian film. In 1974 he organized Rome's first private leftwing radio station, Radio Città Futura. He was the emblem of a new generation of Italian filmmakers, less artistic, more down-to-earth and concerned with immediate problems.

The subject of the interview was "The Italian Cinema and the Left." This was the period when many preached that ideology was dead and that the terms Left and Right were useless and meaningless. "If by Left one means a way of relating to life and society in a way that respects the intelligence of the individual, the necessity for growth and calls for the assumption of social responsibility by the individual," Renzo said, "then I think that is the attitude of culture in general. In that context, culture itself is Left."

Concerning the Italian cinema and the Left, Renzo explained that the post-war Italian cinema was an instrument to explain things people did not know about Italy: that Italy in reality was anti-Fascist; that it had been subjected to military occupation; that during Fascism Italy had tried to retain its identity; that Italy organized a resistance movement; that new Italy wanted a different kind of society. The Italian cinema and intellectuals were the flower in the lapel of the PCI, the great workers party. The American-backed Christian Democratic government, engaged in the division of power, facilitated political corruption and degeneration. As a result, progressive culture was identified with the Left, with the Communist Party.

"A series of events shook the certainty and justness of the Left battle, of its utopia, of its progressive function. The discovery of the repression in the USSR, excesses in the Cultural Revolution in China, events in Vietnam after its liberation from the USA, the verification of imperialist tendencies within Marxism, combined to shake the Left. I think the fundamental value of the man of the Left is his critical sense. In that respect, the man of the Left today is improved. He is now capable of criticizing dogmas.

"In the 50s and 60s there was nothing else to do but change decrepit cultural fashions. For that reason, Italy became more a prototype, less influenced then by American and French culture than other cultures were. The film genre of the Italian comedy, for example, is entertainment. But it is filled with the Italians' irony about reality, an irony applied also to the most tragic matters.

"Today the form of engagement in the cinema is different. One no longer speaks in ideological terms. Film directors depart from within themselves rather than from abstract political themes, often pompous and triumphant. I refer of course to art films, not the

consumer spectacles that drug the masses and have nothing to do with the Left or commitment. In order to be committed and critical the intellectual must maintain his independence from political parties which I see as criminal associations. This is a sign of our strength. For we are at war, a war of ideas. The only alternative is to be an intellectual of the regime, as happened here under Fascism when intellectuals put themselves under the protection of the party. Those who do that today are false intellectuals. Political parties are afraid of the critical cinema and dry up the water in which the cinema thrives. In TV, the apparatus controls, cuts, edits, decides in advance what each character will say. Television is one of the great problems of our age, of our culture, that stands behind the levelling of culture that creates men who resemble each other. The cinema must combat this levelling process, in order to defend the individual. The cinema is free and therefore considered an enemy. The modern idea, even in the Left parties, of leaving the problems of creativity to the market is a paradox.”

Unfortunately, in Italy the political parties and the market and TV won the battle hands down. The Italian cinema died. That ‘s the situation today.

In the late 1950s, when Roberto Rossellini was making *Il Generale Della Rovere*, starring Vittorio De Sica, Renzo began working with his father. Until Roberto’s death in 1977 Renzo was his father’s right hand, occasionally finishing a film his father had begun. “On the set I thought the way he thought, considering what he would have wanted to do. Therefore, I never developed my own personality as a director.” Consequently, Renzo became a producer, which was not a radical career shift. The film producer is a father figure; the director his son.” That reversed father-son relationship reflected the protection the genius Roberto Rossellini needed. It left him free to create his cinema and at night careen down Corso di Francia in his red Ferrari with a new lady friend.

Meanwhile, politically aware Renzo followed international political transformations throughout the world, particularly the de-colonization-liberation movements in Africa and Latin America. The cinema for him became a militant tool. He made documentaries on liberation movements in Asia, Africa and South America and developed a great personal love for the Islamic world. Renzo went to Egypt in 1967, working with his father on a 12-episode TV series entitled *La lotta dell’uomo per la sua sopravvivenza* (*Man’s struggle for survival*). When the bombings of the Six Day War began, the Italian Embassy evacuated Italians from Cairo and the Rossellinis had to abandon shooting.

However, Renzo’s life changed after his father’s death; he had to abandon the luxury of political engagement for commercial filmmaking. Most people prefer straightforward

commercial films: an expensive product, comprehensible, with everything explained in a simple manner. On the other hand, when the film language is poetic, philosophic, or ethical and moral, as is the case with quality art films, the masses don't understand. Hollywood films to which people are addicted are seldom ethical, moral, social or poetic. This is the model which the European film industry considers an operation of cultural colonization. The European Union had the potential capacity to create structures to counter American cultural predominance but that dream was a chimera.

Yet, there is hope. From time to time a good Italian film magically appears that thrills Italians, Europeans and sometimes arrives also in the USA. One such was the film of 2003, *The Best of Youth*, *La Miglior Gioventù*. The film story spans the crucial years from 1966-2000—youth unrest and the upheavals of 1968, terrorism in the 1970s and 80s, the corruption of public life. It touches on love, family relations, revolt, idealism, politics, illness, tragedy. The film won many top awards in Italy, France and other European countries, and in the USA at film festivals in Denver, Seattle and Palm Springs.

After searching in vain for an English translation of Roberto Rossellini's article, "Guardare all'Islam", Looking at Islam, written in the 1970s and included in the above mentioned September 1987 number of *Cinecritica*, I have translated here a slightly abbreviated version of it. The article was only publicized later ago in the Italian press. The purpose of his article was to explain his never realized project for a series of films destined for TV and schools and universities to show the history of Islamic thought and to ask Moslem countries for help in their production. The article has historic value. It is striking in that it could have been written today.

LOOKING AT ISLAM

By Roberto Rossellini

Now that the world is more and more torn by new misunderstandings and unusual resentments, it is urgent to do something useful. A new fracture has taken place between the western world, proud of its pragmatism, and the Moslem world which, finally reawakened, is encouraged to make up for lost time.

I believe the Moslem world's traditional profound capacity to meditate, theorize and philosophize can cure the presumptuous empirical practicality of the western world and many of the tragic consequences derived from its actions.

The objective situation of our planet (the vertiginous population growth, the ecological drama, the accumulation of arms of mass destruction, the potential capacity for genocide,

the crisis of the economic-social system) compels us to work patiently to mend the human species.

If we men of the earth will be capable of this then we will also be capable of moving toward a radiant future, a future no longer dominated by misanthropy but by philanthropy.

I am aware that my words may raise suspicions. In fact, today the western world to which I belong is in crisis and makes offers of collaboration, but also threats. I am trying to see things in another light and to act differently: maybe I am a utopian. But my life, my actions and what I have done, I think, can show what I believe. I am convinced that there can be salvation if we men find a way to live conscientiously. That requires that each of us knows more. By developing our thinking we can dominate our instincts. Instinct is impulse, our unconsidered inclinations; thought is deliberation, conception, consideration. To think one must know.

Today, we of the West, because of our education, but also because of our presumptions and chauvinism, do not know the Moslem world at all. We do not know how much it has counted for our own culture; we do not know how fundamental it has been for the development of our science and technology of which we are so proud.

Anything at all may happen. But in order not to hate or destroy each other and to work together, we must know each other well.

The history of the Moslem world is unusual, at least for its variety and extension: it succeeded in fusing very diverse cultures. This phenomenon is reflected in its composition: Arabs, Persians, Syrians, Greeks, Indians, Indonesians, et al. From the fusion and concord of diverse ethnic groups and their cultures emerged an immense development of its philosophy (as well as its poetry). The acumen and harmony of its thought produced the extraordinary evolution of mathematics, algebra, trigonometry, that gave rationality to the phenomena of nature and the universe.

Along the routes of reason and coherency, the Moslem world contributed to all fields of knowledge: from agriculture to medicine, from the invention of windmills to paper, from mechanics to the natural sciences. Without Arabic numbers, we would not understand anything today. In fact, there is no science without method.

But there is more. We still cannot identify ourselves as men; but to move toward understanding of ourselves, a first step was necessary, the most difficult step, that of situating our planet earth in its place in the universe. All of that came to us from the Moslem world.

The world should know that medicine, astrology, pharmacology, optics, mechanics were all developed in Jundishapar and Baghdad, which were great centres of convergence and refuge for all the world's sciences. Where would philosophy and history be today without Cairo, Isphahan, Algiers, Alexandria, Cordova, Granada, and without Al Khawarizin, Al Biruni, Omar Kayyam. Avicenne, Averroes, et al?

The western world, by nature racist, would do well to remember that the cradle of civilization and human progress were Africa and Asia. Without the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Phoenician and Indian civilizations where would we be today?

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