

Life at the Periphery: The urban politics of Neorealism in post-war Rome

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The final scene of Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (Excelsa Film 1945)

The traumatic disruption of everyday life caused by World War II and the Reconstruction that followed reconfigured the relationship between 'inside' and 'outside' spaces in post-war Rome. This transformation was projected onto the Neorealist screen in different forms, reinforcing the crucial shifts between centre/periphery, domestic/urban, interior/exterior.

Films such as Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (*Roma Città Aperta*, 1945), Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di Biciclette*, 1948), *Umberto D.* (1952) by De Sica and Cesare Zavattini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962) presented realistic experiences of the city, demonstrating the effects of economic development and how the traditions of the Italian domestic interior were forfeited for economic and social mobility. The peripheral, which included the group of citizens relegated to the periphery of society and distanced from any access to political and economic advancement, was set in opposition to a literal and metaphorical centre of power. Ironically, this centre was not the dictatorial remnants of Mussolini's fascist regime. Corrupted power was portrayed as either German Nazism or the equally violent effects of an imported neo-capitalism. Despite these hardships, the characters in these films attempted to preserve the interior domestic realm and protect it from the threat of political and economic upheaval.

To the Neorealist directors, the slogan "Take your camera into the streets" meant pursuing a certain social realism, but it also produced a range of emblematic, outsider characters, for whom the street was the centre of life (Armes 1986: 184). Cesare Zavattini, screenwriter with De Sica, and one of the founding theorists of Neorealist film, described his working method: "I go out into the street, catch words, sentences, discussions ... Afterwards, I do with the words what I do with the images. I choose, I cut the material ... to capture the essence, the truth." (Zavattini 1966) Zavattini's summoning up of the streets was a response from an industry that had previously been confined to shooting in Mussolini's Cinecittà studios. These films, shot outside the studios and in the streets, featured characters whose psyches were in turn formed by their interaction within the city. Such figures included Giorgio Manfredi, the Resistance fighter in *Rome Open City*, who would move throughout the city at night along rooftops, *Mamma Roma*, who earned a living as a prostitute walking the streets at night, and Antonio Ricci, the poster hanger whose job was to assist in introducing a new economic order of consumers by applying layers of advertising to city surfaces (Armes 1986).

Based on these observations, this essay examines key Neorealist films for their structure, layered meanings, and discourses in a quest to better understand the urban politics at play, and, more importantly, to demonstrate how the city was used as a means to understand new modes of temporal and spatial cognition. In one direction, the Neorealist cinematic tactic of using spatial elements of the city to narrate the plot foreshadows the "cognitive mapping" of Kevin Lynch and, in the other, inaugurates what Gilles Deleuze (1989) has termed the "time-image".

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Lynch's research, conducted during the 1950s, was contemporaneous with many Neorealist films. His book, *The Image of the City* (1960), was the result of a series of studies into the "perceptual form of the city" funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and conducted by the Joint Center for Urban Studies, a collaborative effort conducted by Harvard University and MIT (Appleyard 1978). The research was ground-breaking in that Lynch, in a spirit similar to Neorealism, based his studies on empirical data taken from people on the street who he would ask to "draw maps, make sketches, describe routes, [and] recognize photographs" of the city (Appleyard 1978). More importantly, he introduced to the field of urban planning the value of "imageability", which described the enduring visual perception of a city by its occupants.

This way of envisioning the city corresponds with the analysis of film critic André Bazin, who proclaimed that directors such as Rossellini and De Sica created a new type of cinematic image, a "fact image" that portrayed everyday life as a form of "reconstituted reportage" (Bazin 1967). Building upon Bazin's insight, Deleuze argues that this new image, the time-image, signals the collapse of what he calls "the sensory-motor schema", overturning an earlier cinematic concern in pre-war cinema with "movement-images", images that depict a direct correlation between what characters perceive and react to, and which typically affirm a chronological unfolding of the past, the present, and the future.

Conversely, the time-image blurs this temporal sequence and it was in Neorealism that these new temporal images were first employed. Deleuze recognises in them the inauguration of modern cinema along with a new type of character – the on-looker as opposed to a person of action, a "character as spectator", and attributes this propensity to observe, rather than to act, to a new range of discontinuous, or disrupted spaces in the post-war environment that called for an intensified cognition (Deleuze 1986: 120). The time-image is what results from this break in spatial co-ordination and responds to a new type of urban condition that Deleuze refers to as the *any-space-whatever*. As he explains:

Another [image], more specific to the cinema ... arose from a crisis of the action-image: the characters were found less and less in sensory-motor 'motivating' situations, but rather in a state of strolling, of sauntering or of rambling which defined *pure optical and sound situations*. The action-image then tended to shatter, whilst the determinate locations were blurred, letting *any-spaces-whatever* rise up where the modern affects of fear, detachment, but also freshness, extreme speed and interminable waiting were developing. (1986: 121-122)

It is in the context of the *any-space-whatever* that Lynch's urban cognitive markers are particularly poignant. With this in mind, the analysis undertaken here of the spatial politics and the urban imageability of Neorealist film is structured upon a series of markers Lynch and his team identified as enabling inhabitants to navigate their living environments – specifically, paths, districts, edges, nodes, and landmarks. Lynch's study of cognitive urban markers is applicable for this study since his original research was based on establishing a method of examining how people negotiate their way through the city according to their own *mental maps*. It will be shown that the creators of Neorealist cinema employed similar urban indicators in their films, using the city as a vehicle to advance the plot, and more importantly, as an animated palimpsest to play out the changes in the social and

political landscape. By examining the role of the city, its layers of neighbourhoods, districts, and landmarks as portrayed in Neorealist cinema through Lynch's cognitive urban markers, this paper explores how the mapping of spatial politics in these films premise Deleuze's theorisation of the Neorealist time-image as representative of a new mode of modern thought.

District

Rossellini's *Rome Open City* depicts the lives of Resistance fighters in Rome during the Nazi occupation of the city in June 1944. The term "open city" refers to this period where the Germans proclaimed Rome to be an "open city", a zone without military control. However, despite this declaration, the Germans continued to occupy the city, and, as depicted in the film, each side had their own plan to reclaim what was cynically characterised by Rossellini as the "open city" (Gottlieb 2004).

Representative of the Nazi Regime is the Gestapo officer Major Bergmann, who devises a strategy of occupation according to the Schröder plan, where Rome is divided into various sectors with a clearly defined centre and surrounding outer districts. His idea is to carve up and conquer the city in order to capture the Resistance fighters. He declares to the Italian Police Commissioner sitting before him, "The city will be divided into 14 sectors. The Schröder Plan, which we have already applied in several European cities, allows us, using the minimum effort, to comb scientifically through large masses of people." The Nazi forces implement the re-territorialisation of the city, through districts, as a main war tactic (Rossellini 1973).

For the Germans, military control and power is cognitively mapped out in *Rome Open City* through what Lynch came to describe as "districts", or what he defined as "medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent, which the observer mentally enters 'inside of,' and which are recognizable as having some common, identifying character". Moreover, as Lynch notes, these districts are characteristically "identifiable from the inside, [while this difference is...] also used for exterior reference if visible from the outside" (Lynch 1960: 47).

The Resistance also has a plan, as evidenced by a map of the Lazio region pinned on the apartment wall of one of the Resistance fighters, Pina. The map is larger than the Gestapo's, encompassing more of the region and perhaps foreshadowing their attack from the outside. Implementing guerrilla warfare tactics, the Resistance had no need for portioning off the city into districts. This would have limited much of the movement's advantages such as extraordinary mobility and the ability to launch ambushes from outside along the city periphery.

The meaning behind the appearance of the maps in this canonical Neorealist film is twofold. The maps not only point out the difference in military tactics between enemy and compatriot, but they also suggest, to future generations of Neorealist filmmakers, how the city can assist in the story's narration by using recognisable urban markers.

A similar type of mapping occurs in *Mamma Roma*, a film that was Pasolini's response to Rossellini's *Rome Open City*. Pasolini alluded to this historic cinematic precedent when he cast Anna Magnani, who originally performed the motherly heroine role of Pina, for the role of Mamma Roma, a reformed prostitute. For Pasolini, this decision was a statement about the deterioration of Rome as embodied in Magnani's character – from a martyr of the Resistance to a prostitute of the Italian Economic Miracle. *Mamma Roma* overcomes her situation by accumulating



Gestapo officer Bergmann in *Rome Open City* (Excelsa Film 1945)



The Gestapo's Schröder Plan (Excelsa Film 1945)



The map of the Resistance in the background encompasses Rome and the entire Lazio region (Excelsa Film 1945)

enough wealth to purchase a new apartment in the new INA CASA housing developments in the Tuscolano district. This move facilitates her retirement from prostitution and permits her teenage son, Ettore, to return to live with her after years of separation.

The relocation to this new apartment (by architects Mario De Renzi and Saverio Muratori) marks a critical step in the journey to that version of the city centre that accords with Mamma Roma's bourgeois aspirations. Unfortunately, however, Mamma Roma's former pimp returns, threatening to reveal her secret and thus forcing her to go back to the streets. Ettore, discovering his mother's previous profession, is thrown into a downward spiral leading to petty thievery, jail and, ultimately, his death.

Mamma Roma's hope for a better life hinges upon living within a district of Rome where she is surrounded by others with similar class aspirations. Her upward social mobility is not enough to overcome their doomed existence within this area of Rome where the laws of destiny will not allow them to belong. For Pasolini, these housing developments located outside Rome's city walls symbolised all that was wrong with Italian society: its false materialistic aspirations and its superficiality that resulted from the Economic Miracle. He attempted to illustrate the ugly nature of what he saw as the rise of petty individualism and express the tragic sentiment that "no sooner do marginal cultures come into contact with the centre than they are destroyed" (Viano 1993: 85).

Landmarks

Landmarks are another important means by which the viewer is oriented within these films. Lynch describes these cognitive markers as being used as points-of-reference where:

... the observer does not enter within them, they are external. They are usually a rather simply defined physical object: building, sign, store, or mountain ... Some landmarks are distant ones, typically seen from many angles and distances, over the tops of smaller elements, and used as radial references. (Lynch 1960: 47)

Rossellini is adept at using landmarks to narrate his films. *Rome Open City* contains an explosive scene that takes place in Mussolini's abandoned and incomplete EUR development. Resistance fighters set up an attack of a German truck transporting Resistance prisoners outside the city near the Tiburtina Bridge. The scene purposefully presents Mussolini's new capital outside Rome, with the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* (by the architects Ernesto B. La Padula, Giovanni Guerrini and Mario Romano) and, in the following scene, the *Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi* (by Adalberto Libera) in the background, both serving as identifying landmarks. These sites and buildings are noteworthy since the existence of this neighbourhood originates from Mussolini's desire to create a new centre of governmental power upon land outside the city's historic centre. The selection of the setting, with its characteristic landmarks in the background, assists the viewer in locating the scene within the EUR district. It also suggests that the enemy, once drawn out from the centre into the forsaken territory of the periphery, can be defeated.

In the final scenes of *Rome Open City*, the parting shot follows a bunch of young boys who had just witnessed the execution of one of the film's main characters – the Resistance fighter and priest Don Pietro. The boys walk toward the centre of



Mamma Roma and her son Ettore in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (Arco Film 1962)



A bored Ettore lies with his head upon an aqueduct ruin with new housing developments in the background (Arco Film 1962)



The Resistance fighters wait to attack German soldiers in the periphery of Rome near the Tiburtina Bridge in the shadow of the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana*, an icon of fascist architecture (Excelsa Film, 1945)



The Resistance fighters ambush the German soldiers in the periphery in *Rome Open City*. (Excelsa Film 1945)



The view from Mamma Roma's new apartment of the Church of St. Giovanni Bosco (Arco Film 1962)

Rome with the dome of St. Peter's in the background, suggesting to an Italian audience that the future of Italy resides within the Catholic Church. Pasolini alludes to this final moment in the final scene of *Mamma Roma*, where the main character, upon hearing the news of her son's death in jail, attempts to jump from her apartment window. All the while, she stares at the paradigmatic view of another church, St. Giovanni Bosco, a landmark which had mesmerised her throughout the film.

The view of the distant church can be read in many ways, but its key significance is that it performs as a character within the narrative. For *Mamma Roma*, the St. Giovanni Bosco church represents the 'inside', the centre, and the attainment of a chaste soul accompanied by the petty bourgeois lifestyle with all its trappings. However, as David Bass notes, unlike St. Peter's in *Rome Open City*, St. Giovanni Bosco is cast as a landmark signifying misplaced hope:

Even though the view from her window, at which she despairingly throws herself as the film ends, seems Rome-like enough – the modern church of St. Giovanni Bosco's cupola appearing like a displaced St. Peter's on the horizon – it will never be the 'Rome' after which she is named. (Bass 1997: 91-92)

Paths

Before World War II, Mussolini moved the urban poor residents from the centre of Rome to newly-built neighbourhoods at the periphery in order to make way for more prosperous development. This ultimately came to be termed by Italians as the *sventramenti*, or "disembowelment" of the city. One of the biggest problems resulting from the operation was that the new neighbourhoods had no substantial transportation links to the centre (Sassoon 1986). De Sica highlights this situation in his film *Bicycle Thieves*, where bicycles become the means of overcoming a lack of transportation planning and therefore the only hope for survival. The film tells the story of Antonio Ricci and his son Bruno's scouring of post-war Rome for their stolen bicycle. The search creates a wandering narrative tracking various indeterminate paths and leaving the viewer without a clear understanding about their location. Paths, according to Lynch, function as "channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. [Such as ...] streets, walkways, transit lines, railroads" (1960: 47). Where for Lynch such paths are key to framing our sense of location in urban space, in *Bicycle Thieves*, the loss of definitive destination, like the absent bicycles themselves, induces a lapse of framing.

The itinerary of Antonio and Bruno's search includes the police station, trade union headquarters, the open markets of Piazza Vittorio and Porta Portese, a church, the apartment of a psychic, a brothel, and Via Panico, where the thief is finally found, though without the bike – therefore allowing him to escape arrest. Ricci's avoidance of the city centre throughout the search is suggestive of his immigrant status (he migrated from the South in hope of work and a better life), but it is also testament to the centre's capacity to ultimately determine his circumstances. The periphery then serves to metaphorically underscore the distance between Ricci's potential success in building a new, prosperous life, and his inevitable failure. The film suggests, by its wandering viewpoint, that it is no longer possible in the post-war urban landscape to conjoin pathways and overcome distance – both physical and cognitive. Much as Deleuze suggests of the time-image, it is exactly the "dispersive situations, the deliberately weak links, the voyage form, the consciousness of clichés, [and] the condemnation of the plot" which occur through



One of the first scenes of Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* at the Val Melaina development in the periphery of Rome (Produzioni De Sica, 1948)

and along paths in *Bicycle Thieves* (emphasis in original, 1986: 210). He specifically cites De Sica and claims that the post-war economic crisis inspired the Italian director to disrupt the connection between action and situation: “There is no longer a vector or line of the universe which extends and links up the events of *The Bicycle Thief* [sic]; the rain can always interrupt or deflect the search fortuitously ...” (211-212).

Layers and thresholds

In post-war Rome we do not suddenly see a totally new urban landscape, induced by war and the Marshall Plan. Rather, through a type of porosity, a new capitalist society seeps through the surfaces of an older Rome. A scene depicting Ricci’s first day on the job shows him hanging a poster for a film featuring the glamorous American actress Rita Hayworth, covering over an existing illustration of a round-faced Italian woman. In the next cut, we see the remains of another poster on the wall, a propaganda poster for American aid, stating “Aid from America: grain, carbon, provisions, medicine. They help us to help ourselves.” Whether it is Ricci applying additional layers of posters onto the walls of Reconstructed Rome, or his wife tugging at layers of linens to sell in order to retrieve his pawned bicycle at the start of the film, the emphasis of surface layers and their application to the walls and surfaces of Rome reveals the meaning of this cultural, urban-economic changeover.

An allegorical layering of spaces and surfaces can also be seen in the film *Umberto D.* De Sica portrays the troubled life of Umberto Domenico Ferrari, a retired government worker trapped by his economic situation. He is a bachelor without children or income and unable to pay the rent owed to his landlady, who threatens to evict him, despite his claims that he supported her during the war.

Umberto’s room is the locus of the film and the source of his impending disenfranchisement. His landlady’s desire to shed the memories of war as quickly as possible and to pursue a new bourgeois lifestyle, is complicated by Umberto’s presence. For De Sica, the target of the film’s withering critique is not the Italy of the fascist regime, but rather the new country formed by the Economic Miracle, which not only required the physical eviction of characters such as Umberto from the centre of Rome to some peripheral abode, but also their psychological occlusion from the conscience of Italian society.

Perhaps no other Italian Neorealist film depicts this savage, post-war societal transformation by way of an interior more clearly than *Umberto D.* Viewers are made to stand in the room with Umberto, agonisingly observing every banal gesture of a man heading to an outside more absolute than the exterior of his apartment. The long hallway outside his room stands in for the impossible passage to another societal world; archways, layers of satin draperies, door handles, keyholes, all make up a variously scaled, landscape of impenetrable thresholds.

The analogy between Umberto’s life and his room is further compounded when Umberto returns from treatment in the hospital to find his room in total disarray, with layers of wallpaper torn off, and a huge hole in the wall. His dishevelled room, which had recently survived the violence of war, is left as abject testament to the violent effects of capitalist development. As Roy Armes depicts it, “Umberto’s interior life and its exterior manifestation in the ‘cameretta’ are doomed to extinction by the landlady’s empire-building schemes.” (1986: 154) The film concludes with Umberto roaming in the park, finally resigned to the forces that have rendered him centre-less and peripheral.



The ironic overlapping of the Hayworth poster over the image of the traditional Italian woman points to a larger cultural invasion experienced by Italians.

Ricci asks his wife to trade in the object of Italian tradition and family life – *le lenzuola* – in order to obtain the bicycle which will provide her husband with physical mobility within the city.

De Sica and Zavattini repeatedly frame Umberto D within thresholds in order to exaggerate the long perspective shots, as seen in the interior of the hallway, as the gateway to the city of Rome at the Piazza del Popolo in *Umberto D.*

Umberto returns to his room, only to find that it is being demolished for impending renovation – plans which do not include him.

Again using a long perspective view, Umberto finally retreats from his room in the city centre (Rizzoli, Produzione De Sica, and Amato Film 1952).

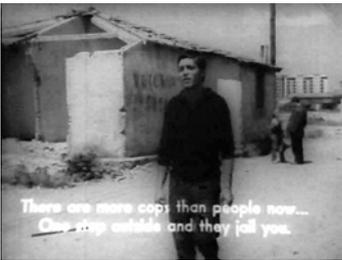
Any-space-whatever

Imported consumer capitalism, brought about by the Marshall Plan and the resulting rise in real estate values, transformed Rome and the Italian household. A politics of space became a vital issue in the representation of the city via the new cinematic realism. As suggested above, Deleuze's notion of *any-space-whatever* is apt here, particularly, as he puts it, because it is a "space in which the source of control, the centre of power, is curiously difficult to apprehend. It is a space in which the intangibility of global capitalism is particularly apparent." (1986: 172) It was these transformations, and the changing nature of urban society, that Neorealist film sought to measure.

Capitalism was, at that stage, in the process of finding new ways to successfully exploit *any-spaces-whatever* – characteristically empty, isolated, or demolished places. Neorealist cinema, for its part, amounted to a reflecting glass where Italians were presented with their transformed cities and the new relationships of inclusion and exclusion necessary for their inhabitation (Restivo 2002). "In the city which is being demolished or rebuilt, Neorealism makes *any-space-whatevers* proliferate – urban cancer, undifferentiated fabrics, pieces of waste ground – which are opposed to the determined spaces of the old realism." (Deleuze 1986: 212) For Lynch, *any-spaces-whatever* are antithetical to the cognitively coherent maps induced by clear urban markers – they are spaces of disconnection, inaction and temporal paradox, in which disenfranchised characters are subtracted from meaningful and comfortably enclosing routines. At the peripheries of the transforming urban centres, *any-spaces-whatever* proliferate.



With a silhouette of Roman aqueducts on the horizon, Ettore and a newfound group of friends begin to explore the *any-space-whatever* in *Mamma Roma* (Arco Film 1962).



A scene from Pier Pasolini's film *Accattone*, where the main character walks by a building, its graffiti calling out "We want housing" (Arco Film 1961).

This is evident in *Mamma Roma*, where Pasolini layers ancient themes within the film's modern context by placing Mamma Roma's new white apartment block adjacent to an abandoned field. The site mimes the vacancy and absence of substantive connection at the centre of Mamma Roma and Ettore's new life together. *Any-spaces-whatever* can also be found in Pasolini's first film, *Accattone* (1961), which takes place in the *borgate*, the outermost ring of the city, where the very poorest of the country live. It presents a realistic view of life in the remote, ragged edges of society, where inhabitants are not in conflict with an interior or centre – their concerns are much more basic: hunger and despair amidst the affluence of the early 1960s. Almost the entire movie takes place in the *borgate*, where even the surface of a building covered in graffiti cries out, "We want housing!"

Conclusion

The reign of Neorealism lasted less than 10 years, later to be revived and referenced by directors such as Pasolini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Ermanno Olmi. The genre's demise can be attributed to political pressure (Dalle Vacchi 1992): in 1949 – with the Christian Democratic Party in power – the hostility towards films depicting social injustice in Italy increased. More precisely, the government did not want images of misery exported to the rest of the world as it was attempting to rehabilitate itself. Giulio Andreotti, head of the Department of Cultural Affairs, created the "Andreotti Studio Law", which gave the government the power to halt the export of any Italian film which "might give an erroneous view of the true nature of our country". It also precluded films from being shot anywhere else but *inside* the studios at Cinecittà with trained actors and skilled labour (Armes 1986: 28).

Neorealist cinema, with its mobilising of professional and non-professional actors in actual Roman locations, provided Deleuze with the model of the “character as spectator”, an observer caught up in the strange eruptions of time that post-war cinema was intent on capturing. For Deleuze, Neorealism revealed a new mode of thought, a cognition forced to think through the lapses of causation evidenced everywhere in public and private urban life.

Contemporaneous with the making of many Neorealist films, Lynch discovered, through a study of the perceptions of individuals in urban streets, that the city was cognitively mapped through a series of urban markers. With Lynch’s research into the city’s “imageability”, as well as Bazin’s “fact-image”, we witness how a post-war convergence of city and cinematic “images” sought to confront, and in key ways make sense of, the strange environments Deleuze conceptualises with the time-image.

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