

Disputing Rossellini: Three French perspectives

James Harvey-Davitt

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Abstract

In his burgeoning body of film theoretical work the French philosopher Jacques Rancière repeatedly turns to some canonical films by Neorealist pioneer Roberto Rossellini. Not simply retreading tired motifs of Neorealism, Rancière's comments offer some profound new insights, revolutionising prior perspectives on Rossellini. In this article I shall put Rancière's perspective into dialogue with two of the most significant of these perspectives: André Bazin's and Gilles Deleuze's. In doing so I shall claim that Rancière's approach departs radically from the canonised, standardised Neorealist conception of Rossellini. Instead, I wish to claim that he describes a modernist artist primarily concerned with aesthetic clashes. In doing so I shall contemplate how the meaning of these films has evolved since the era of their contemporary reception, demonstrating the congruence and disparity between these three disparate approaches.

Keywords: Roberto Rossellini, Andre Bazin, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Neorealism, realism, modernism

In *Film Fables*¹ Jacques Rancière contests some deeply-held theoretical stances on a number of canonical auteurs. He claims these auteurs countered the soullessness of their industrial constraints through a shared act of 'thwarting': 'to thwart its servitude, cinema ... constructs dramaturgies that thwart its natural powers'.² In doing so he confronts attempts to sanctify a particular approach to cinema – from the films of Bresson to the theories of André Bazin and Gilles Deleuze. For Rancière there is no 'pure cinema'; at the most there is only the appearance and subsequent undermining of such purity. The consequences of this assertion are such that many assumptions of film theory are called into question. Not simply communist

then, Sergei Eisenstein is said to ‘put communism to the test of cinema’;³ not simply making formulaic Westerns, Anthony Mann’s films drive classical narrative to its absolute limits; not simply realist, Roberto Rossellini’s post-war films are assigned a primarily formalistic intent. The third case provokes this discussion, urging reconsideration of some key perspectives on the Neorealist pioneer. In this article I argue that Rancière’s Rossellini is a severe departure from those prior conceptions – in conversation with, critiquing, but ultimately removed altogether from both Bazin’s early assessments and Deleuze’s later conceptualisations. In this way I see Rancière’s as a contemporary revision of two major French contributors to writings on Rossellini.

This is not to ignore alternative approaches to Rossellini. Categorisations of his films of the post-war era range from the radically propagandistic (on both ends of the political spectrum) to the flaccidly conservative. Rossellini was an Italian filmmaker with roots in a peculiarly Italian state system of production. This initially places him in a Fascist industry of propaganda before his major role in the shaping of the subsequently devolved *Cinecittà* and the new humanistic landscape of Italian art cinema. Unsurprisingly therefore, Italian reception contemporary with his films was deeply ingrained in the trauma of their post-war climate. Audiences largely chose to favour a cinema of escapism over Rossellini’s inward glance.⁴ Nevertheless, internationally speaking, the ideological nature of Rossellini’s films is highly disputed. Indeed, the difficulty of assigning a particular ideological position to these films has provided much of the incentive behind their continuing interest for scholars. In this way the critical consensus on Rossellini has mirrored that of his close friend Bazin. The ideological critiques put forward by the likes of Annette Michelson and Brian Henderson in the 1960s are directed at a Bazinian theory of reality, which developed as a direct consequence of Bazin’s viewing Rossellini’s Neorealist films. Thus it is impossible to consider any new trend of thought on Rossellini’s films without taking into account Bazin’s perspective.

Unlike Bazin’s less systematic writings, Deleuze put Rossellini at the heart of a philosophical system of thought about cinema which subsequently became incredibly influential for film theory. At the end of *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*⁵ Deleuze pinpoints the crisis marked by Rossellini, which signalled a turning point in cinema: cinematic immobility of narrative and action, responding allegorically to the historical shock and novelty of atrocities both witnessed and unwitnessed during the war. Departing from the moral and ideological debates that previously dominated discussions of Rossellini’s films, Deleuze’s response at once refreshed an under-

standing of Bazin and broke new theoretical ground. In *Cinema 2: The Time Image*⁶ Deleuze regards these films as significant for the peculiarity of their aesthetics. In doing so he reminds us that it was primarily this formal tendency (not an *a priori* moral or ideological imperative) of which Bazin spoke. For Deleuze what is *realist* about these films is their ability to implicate the spectator by dwelling on the experience of time (*durée*). The transition from Bazin to Deleuze is explained by a shift in the philosophical foundations of the latter's thought: from the phenomenology of Bazin to the Bergsonism of Deleuze. I will elaborate on the implications of this transition in due course, so it suffices for now just to clarify the critical influence of Deleuze's approach. While his perspective only appeared after much of the ideological furore on Rossellini, the analytical debates on Neorealism,⁷ and what Peter Brunette described as the consensus acceptance of *l'effet de réel* of these films,⁸ the philosophy emanating from his observations stood to profoundly influence film theory as we know it. In this sense then, while certain other perspectives on Rossellini are no less enlightening than Bazin's and Deleuze's, none have caused quite the impact of these two thinkers.

In order to understand Rancière's perspective in contrast to his predecessors I will first repeat what has already been achieved superlatively elsewhere⁹ – that is, I will elaborate on the perspectives of both Bazin and Deleuze. I will keep this brief and as unwavering as possible while allowing for consideration of the significant scholarship in the field of Bazinian and Deleuzian theory along the way. I will then move on to the work of Rancière. The trajectory of this article therefore shifts from Bazin's realism to Deleuze's 'any space whatever'¹⁰ and then Rancière's moments of antagonism. I initially outline Bazin's Rossellini as indicative of what I call an *essential reality*. This first point takes up the more nuanced view of Bazin recently articulated by Daniel Morgan, but it also questions the implications of privileging an *a priori* idea of reality in Rossellini's films. My second point considers how Deleuze somewhat confuses this demarcation. While recognising the congruencies of Bazin's analyses (discussing the historical determinism of the narrative and aesthetic qualities) I consider how Deleuze's approach relates to the *pure immanence* central to his philosophy.¹¹ This offers an alternative perspective on the representation of reality from that of Bazin. Deleuze locates a dialectical character in Rossellini's films (representing both reality and reality's unrepresentability). This concern is also central to my third point. For Rancière, Rossellini's films are exercises in the 'pure collision of extremes'.¹² Departing from both Bazin and Deleuze however, this most recent of the three perspectives under-

mines the mimesis of Bazin and Deleuze's transformative perspective, claiming instead that the films contain no apparent predetermined schema or resulting synthesis. By navigating Rancière's complicated analyses I hope to demonstrate the continuing relevance of Rossellini's films and the profound impact they have had on the history of film theory and the aesthetics of film.

In *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach*¹³ Christopher Wagstaff fleetingly notes how both Bazin and Deleuze appear to privilege the experiential dimension of Neorealist cinema as a determined break from classical convention, relating this focus to their shared interest in phenomenology. For Wagstaff this aids our understanding of what is special about Rossellini's films, enlightening spectators through their expansion of conventional historical or cultural film analysis.¹⁴ We might bring in Rancière's attention to the aesthetic dimension of Rossellini's films as an addendum to Wagstaff's observations. In each case Rossellini's films are shown to give rise to ways of thinking and forms of experience beyond known ideological or artistic categories. The significance of the case of Rossellini's films and the widespread hesitation of further problematising the foundations of Neorealism is further evidence of the resistance to *theory* in recent years. This article responds to those who wish to anaesthetise the films of Rossellini, the films of Neorealism, or the meaning of Neorealism in general, urging unceasing engagement with the texts and their layers of suggestive figuration. As Wagstaff notes, in response to one Italian scholar's desire to compile a definitive account of Neorealist cinema, we scholars risk little in our stance of detached observation.¹⁵ As I aim to show here the often daring nature of these three perspectives is perhaps enough to signify their importance.

1 Bazin's essential reality

In light of the wealth of recent scholarship (so called 'neo-Bazinian' theory) undertaken which reassesses Bazin's work in order to set certain assumptions straight, it seems imperative to reiterate one particular debunking with regard to his realism. I mean here to reiterate the problems inherent in what Daniel Morgan has called the 'standard reading'.¹⁶ Two propositions lie at the heart of this reading. First, Bazin argues for a necessary and determinate relation between the ontology of the photographic image and the realism of film. Second, Bazin gives an account of the ontology of the photographic image that is best understood in terms of a commitment to

the reproduction of an antecedent reality, via the mechanical nature of the camera's recording process.¹⁷

As Morgan demonstrates, Bazin sees a more complicated relationship between style and reality.¹⁸ If we trace the evidence of this claim through Bazin's writing itself, Rossellini's films are perhaps more indicative than any other body of work. Take for example the difference between Bazin's argument in 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema'¹⁹ and the one in 'An Aesthetic of Reality'.²⁰ Bazin locates Rossellini's 'stripping away of all expressionism'²¹ not in *Rome, Open City* (1945) but in the second and third films of the war trilogy, *Paisà* (1946) and *Germany, Year Zero* (1948). It seems there is an implicit recognition of the formalistic tendencies in *Rome, Open City*. This is made more explicit in the latter essay when he discusses Anna Magnani's role in the film. He states that the mixing of professional and non-professional actors demonstrates Rossellini's subordination of the actor to the *mise-en-scène*. Thus, as much in the first of Rossellini's post-war films as in *Journey to Italy* (1954), Bazin avoids linking Rossellini's Neorealism to a definitive privileging of indexical reality. As he states in his 'Defence of Rossellini':²²

there is no such thing as pure neorealism. The neorealist attitude is something that one can approach to a greater or lesser degree.²³

Thus, Bazin recognised something besides realism early on. That this was not viewed as essential to Bazin's theories in the first place is perhaps due to the secondary importance he gives to these elements – this 'something else' to which he adds 'the plastic beauty of images, the social sense, the poetry, or the comedy and so on'.²⁴ He shrugs off these traits as secondary to Rossellini's single, forceful intention: to give a picture of things *as they are* or have recently been. While I concur with Morgan's criticism of elementary perspectives on Bazin, the concern for representing reality mimetically is undeniable. Thus, when Bazin responds to Guido Aristarco of the Marxian journal *Cinema Nuovo*, his apologia for Rossellini's 'regard for reality'²⁵ must have fallen on deaf ears. Fuelled by a Brechtian urge for the critical estrangement from reality, these critics could not possibly have sympathised with Bazin's subservience of film to reality. For Bazin, Rossellini is not concerned with a historical materialist demand for the inevitable changing of reality – he is just trying to articulate an existing reality more clearly. His films of the post-war period are geared toward imaging a precise depiction of a realistic experience, be that through the

interlacing of archive and fiction in *Rome, Open City* or the expressionistic revelatory sequences of *Journey to Italy*.

The film at the heart of Bazin's 'Defence' essay, *Europe '51* (1952), demonstrates this point. Bazin refers to the myriad techniques diverging from the documentary realism of the celebrated war trilogy, aimed solely at illuminating a particular experience of reality. He declares that

[t]he art of Rossellini consists in knowing what has to be done to confer on the facts what is at once their most substantial and their most elegant shape – not the most graceful, but their sharpest in outline, the most direct, or the most trenchant.²⁶

He speaks here of 'conferring on the facts' – a rebuttal of the 'standard readings' if ever there was one. The stylistically flexible *Europe '51* forces Bazin to clarify his original statements on Rossellini in the 'Evolution' essay. The portrayal of the 'ambiguity of reality'²⁷ is thus defined not by a particularly discriminatory aesthetic criterion; rather, it becomes known through the clarity of the 'fact' (by which we presumably understand to mean the truth of our present state of existence). Irrespective of his reliance on his new movie star wife Ingrid Bergman (at the heart of Aristarco's criticisms), Rossellini is solely interested in depicting reality authentically. Even though he does not say so explicitly, Bazin's conviction continues his earlier claims on Magnani's presence in *Rome*. He celebrates Bergman's ability to magnify something concealed beneath the surface of the Rome (indeed, Europe) of the 1950s.

Bergman's star presence at the centre of this film is just one of a number of features that deviate from and contrast with the aesthetics of Rossellini's earlier Neorealist films. We might discuss her character in isolation from her performance and its embodiment of traits foreign to the conventional Neorealist protagonist. Irene is a bourgeois woman who begins to spend time in the slums of Rome as a way of digressing from the tortuous grief of losing her only son. Even without taking up the Marxian terms of the *Cinema Nuovo* critics, the exposition of *Europe '51* places her concerns first, views the ghettos of the poor through this subjective lens, and uses this setting as a platform for her psychological trauma. This is at odds with the collective spirit of *Rome, Open City* and *Paisà*. The formal approach of one sequence in particular is even more startling than the incorporation of the middle classes into 'the extension of the neorealist' themes.²⁸ One of the adventures Irene embarks upon involves covering for a woman (she has met by chance) in her job at a factory. The factory is an experience like

no other Irene has ever come across – how to demonstrate the enormity of this shock in ways true to the spirit of the Neorealist ‘regard for reality’?

The authenticity of the amateur performance was central to Rossellini’s earlier films: the horror of Marina upon finding her slaughtered lover (*Rome, Open City*); the delight of the child who takes advantage of the African-American soldier in *Paisà*; the innocence of Edmund in the face of mounting injustices (*Germany, Year Zero*). This is a stark contrast to the vigour of the factory scene in *Europe ’51*. Like her predecessors, Bergman is initially the source of the scene’s mood. She is shown in close-up agonising over the strangeness of the environment, caught between two workers whose happiness serves to amplify the terror on Irene’s face. At the same time, counter-balancing the intensity of the image, the sound of the machinery is deafening – it is all we hear when she approaches the factory. Once inside when Irene encounters the apparatus of her workstation, Rossellini uses an approach that not only seems at odds with his previous techniques but contradictory to Bazin’s comments in the ‘Evolution’ essay. We see a progressively quick montage, intercutting between Irene’s terrified expression and the shunting cogs of the machinery. This is the moment to which Bazin must have been referring in the ‘Defence’ essay when he described Rossellini’s changed realism which had shifted from the anti-montage continuum of reality²⁹ to ‘the resources of abstraction’.³⁰ It also demonstrates what Morgan has referred to as ‘Bazin’s Modernism’,³¹ as he recognises Rossellini’s commitment to the spirit of reality and all the artistry, abstraction, and artifice necessarily entailed.

In sum, when we trace Bazin’s perspective on Rossellini from the few important lines of a famous early essay to the later more substantial analyses, a noticeable shift appears in his understanding of realism which comes to inform his influential theories more generally. Nevertheless, even when at his least materialist – when he speaks of ‘the way some bodies can exist in either an amorphous or a crystalline state’³² – Bazin views the reality of the world outside the cinema as Rossellini’s priority. His films are ‘reality as it is visible through the artist’,³³ which is as close as he ever comes to going beyond mimetic representation.

2 Deleuze’s new space

When Bazin speaks of a ‘crystalline state’ by which a body can appear he means to refer to the way a filmed subject captured in its indexical physicality by the camera is able to stand for more than its immediate appear-

ance. The multiple dimensions outlining what some call *the soul* come to the surface in this crystalline image. Perhaps more famously connected to the metaphor of the crystal, Gilles Deleuze arrived at a slightly (but significantly) different conclusion. For Deleuze the crystal signifies a crisis, a moment of confusion between the real and the imaginary, bringing about coalescence between the two.³⁴ The difference between Deleuze's crystal and Bazin's is crucial to understanding the difference between their takes on Rossellini in general. For Bazin the crystalline nature of Rossellini's realism works to clarify 'the truth', magnifying its multiple layers in ways essential to our understanding of it. For Deleuze the crystal does the opposite: it complicates matters, bringing about something new and calling into question the very fabric of reality. This is a useful starting point for understanding his brief but nonetheless important comments on Rossellini.

Before Deleuze arrives at his discussion of 'the crystal-image' he first uses Rossellini's films to illustrate a crisis in world cinema reflective of historical upheaval and demonstrative of a profound aesthetic progression. The juncture (repeating the lineage of modernist revolutions in other mediums) signified by Rossellini's films is the Copernican overturning of time's subordination to movement. Unlike classical cinematic narratives which plot a story from *a* to *b* to *c*, films like *Germany, Year Zero*, *Stromboli*, and *Europe '51* focus on a protagonist's *seeing* rather than *doing*.³⁵ Similar to Bazin's take on Rossellini then, Deleuze describes this novelty according to the overturning of the classical pre-war conventions, replacing them with a more pensive attention to understanding reality. Deleuze only mentions Bazin in passing,³⁶ but he marks an important reference and departure point:

[h]owever, we are not sure that the problem arises at the level of the real, whether in relation to form or content. Is it not rather at the level of the 'mental', in terms of thought?³⁷

Deleuze means to challenge Bazin's privileging of reality in Rossellini's films by first probing precisely *whose* real is being represented. If Bazin suggests Rossellini's films ask 'what is the current state of reality?' Deleuze suggests they penetrate deeper into that representational inquiry in order to ask 'what does it mean to perceive the current state of reality? What *changes* when we perceive it?' Thus, instead of celebrating the expansion of Neorealist aesthetics in *Europe '51*, Deleuze instead celebrates the potential innovation deriving from those expansions. Each one of Irene's stops on

her journey through the slums of Rome exemplifies what he refers to as a 'pure optical situation':³⁸

[h]er glances relinquish the practical function of a mistress of a house who arranges things and beings, and pass through every state of an internal vision, affliction, compassion, love, happiness, acceptance, extending to the psychiatric hospital where she is locked up at the end of a new trial of Joan of Arc: she sees, she has learnt to see.³⁹

Deleuze is not arguing against the Neorealist framework (whichever way we assert that) of these films; rather, he is taking that framework to stand for a great deal more than Bazin had dared. Of course, Bazin's grand equation of Rossellini's art with some unrepresentable spiritual inner being (what Andrew Sarris described as the *élan*⁴⁰) is hardly a trivial claim. For Deleuze, Rossellini breaks more ground than Bazin had anticipated. Preceded by Edmund in *Germany, Year Zero*, Bergman's protagonists in *Stromboli*, *Europe '51*, *Journey to Italy*, and *Fear* (1954) inhabit uninhabitable spaces and spend their time – the film's duration – demonstrating their inhabitability. Rossellini's attention to the *durée* of that new spatial experience over and above any action therein signifies a profound break. This ability to 'see' things anew would cause waves of aesthetic innovation throughout the history of cinema, from its first descendant in the form of the French New Wave to its most recent conceptualisation in the form of 'slow cinema'.

Echoing Bazin, this allegorises the unknown nature of post-war Europe; more than this, it credits Rossellini with opening up an entirely new space of representation – what he calls an 'any space whatever'.⁴¹ This is a sincere departure from the mimesis of Bazin's perspective, explained through their different philosophical foundations. Dudley Andrew's biography configures Bazin's multitude of philosophical reference points,⁴² but he never confines him to one perspective. Yet due perhaps to his theory of realism (or the 'standard' one at least), numerous critics reduce his writing to a phenomenological perspective.⁴³ Deleuze, in contrast, is a self-proclaimed Nietzschean and Bergsonian. While the former plays some role in his *Cinema* books, the latter determines the entire thrust of his argument. The distinction between Bazin and Deleuze's idea of 'the real' as it is played out in Rossellini's films can be located at this level:

[i]t will be noted that phenomenology, in certain respects, stops at pre-cinematographic conditions ... it gives a privilege to natural perception ... [For Bergson], the model would be rather a state of things which would constantly change, a flowing-matter in which no point of anchorage or centre of reference would be assignable.⁴⁴

Deleuze's recognition of the absence of 'a centre of reference' negates the separation between the signifier and signified – between the indexical image and its indexed reality. This radical shift in logic requires subscription to the idea of an immanent 'plane of images' first conceptualised in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.⁴⁵ This redefines how we perceive reality, negating the representative logic, levelling out the relationship between real life and its cultural forms – like cinema. Thus, when Irene enters the 'any space whatever' of the Roman slums, her time there stands for more than the magnification of a psychological experience of reality. In this sense Irene embodies the schizophrenic character Deleuze and Guattari speak of (a result of and response to capitalist modernity).⁴⁶ If there is a crystalline effect in *Europe '51* the dimensions it opens out to have radical implications for the realities of the film's spectator as much as they do for the film's previously ignorant protagonist. Deleuzian theory dictates that the image as it is received inhabits the same space of reality as the one in which it is produced. In short, Rossellini does not merely represent a reality – he alters *the only* reality. This scene becomes an actualising process of novel perception for Deleuze – not a 'regard for reality' but the transformation of reality into a new space of experience.

While Deleuze initially credits Bazin with the founding of the Neorealist criteria and in turn works with those ideas, he dislodges the privilege afforded to Bazin's idea of reality. Rather than simply being represented like never before in these films it is being created anew. Deleuze's Bergsonian perspective affords Rossellini's films a consciousness apart from the world they represent. This utopian potential reflects the idealism of Rossellini, Zavattini, and De Sica, all of whom proposed a desire to change the way we experience cinema by showing what had never been shown, giving a voice to those without. The champion of Deleuze's perspective is therefore his notion of 'the seer'; after the war Irene embodies a collective international stasis in the face of enormous evil. The seer symbolises a site of reflexivity, reflecting back the spectator's own viewing of the film. Whereas before this rupture the character merely stood as an empty vessel for the identification of a spectator, Deleuze suggests that the character himself has become a spectator. This break from the logic of action to the logic of

durée makes the character 'see what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action'.⁴⁷ In this way Deleuze attributes Clement Greenberg's modernist doctrine to the cinema through Rossellini; the turn to duration and the denial of action embodies a critical evaluation of cinema's classical conventions.⁴⁸

While Deleuze posits a more radical conception of Rossellini's films and challenges their capacity for representing reality, he only arguably negates their mimetic function altogether. That is, while the plane of immanence on which the film and its historical subject are situated determines Deleuze's definition of reality, he still accounts for the significance of these images in their historical context. The seer still only refers to a spectator in a symbolic, dialogical gesture. This implies a parallel (not shared or 'immanent') universe for film and spectator. Undermining some of the primary assumptions of Rossellini's films, Rancière's thought avoids this.

3 Rancière's antagonism

With Rancière the risk-taking mentioned by Wagstaff appears to reach a peak. Here, Rossellini's films are even more self-conscious than Deleuze implied. Rancière prioritises the authorial hand in a way that overpowers the mimetic reality of Bazin and the spatial novelty of Deleuze. He refers to the tonally-compromised depiction of the resistance in *Rome, Open City* to demonstrate:

[t]he impatience with which these characters, so eminently reasonable and measured in thought and action, throw themselves into harm's way doesn't just fly in the face of the notion that this is a model political film ... Their rush to hurl themselves into the trap is as far away from Marxist political conscience as from the patience of Bazin's phenomenology and of Deleuze's sensoriality. Their impetuosity translates the director's desire to get to the one thing that really interests him: the meeting of antagonistic elements, the pure collision of extremes.⁴⁹

This audacious claim effectively negates the Bazinian idea of Rossellini as a director with 'faith in reality' rather than the image.⁵⁰ Even at his most radical remove Deleuze never does this. Recent reassessments of Rossellini which dare to challenge the Bazinian reading of Rossellini's Neorealism never go as far as this. While Wagstaff tests the boundaries of what constitutes Neorealism in Rossellini by focusing on the comedic register, this is

always within the realms of realism. In other words, by claiming Rossellini is solely interested in a single moment of antagonism, Rancière's Rossellini is a unique one. He virtually negates the historical context of these films. By explicitly subordinating all other features to the desire for a singular expression of antagonism, the films acquire an ahistorical quality – a *pure extremity* removed from all other signification, unassignable to the allegorisation of an era or culture. This perspective drives Rossellini to the most radical version of modernism, to the point which Deleuze himself could not foresee: opacity, flatness, removed altogether from a symbolic function.

In order to qualify this daring thesis Rancière discusses all the films Rossellini made from *Rome, Open City* up to his final collaboration with Ingrid Bergman, *Joan of Arc at the Stake* (1954). In each film the narratives are referred to as subservient dramaturgies (the development of 'antagonistic elements') geared towards this ultimate moment of antagonism. In *Rome, Open City* Pina's dash towards certain death serves only to hurry her lover to the final destination – the torture chamber that plays host to the finale. Marina's indulging in the fruits of her betrayal happens in the same space as Manfredi's martyrdom. This conclusion embodies the pure collision of two extremes: asceticism and idolatry.⁵¹ The image of Marina's revelation (that her giving in to the forces of evil have resulted in the death of her lover) produces a union between two conflicting ethics. As Rancière puts it,

[t]he scandal that gives the fabric to Rossellini's films is somehow always related to an ambiguity at the point where renunciation and incarnation meet. But we should say that Rossellini's particular genius is that he can bring these diverging roads together in the conciliation of an image⁵²

Rossellini repeats this antagonistic tendency in *Germany, Year Zero* at the two most dramatic moments. Both deaths – the boy's murder of his father and his own suicide – represent the disparity between two logics. The first calls into question the idea of childish innocence. When Edmund poisons his father under instruction from his Nazi teacher, he does so because he knows his father is weak. This childish perception is therefore divided paradoxically between the desire to put a stop to the pain and murder. Rancière not only notices that these diverging roads join in this moment, he also recognises an antagonism happening at the level of the scene's form. As Edmund mixes the potion he carries our vision away from the soundtrack of the living room debate into the kitchen; but the sound

remains where he left it. This juxtaposition of sound and image produces a clash, mirroring the clash of extremes in his act.

A similarly antagonistic moment occurs in the final sequence. As Edmund plays amongst the shadows of the destroyed building Rossellini dwells upon the ambiguity of his suicide. Rancière claims the clash of joy and doom is reflected in the image – the clash of black and white in the light cast down through the blown-out window. For Rancière the ambiguity of Edmund's final expression symbolises the overriding unresolved nature of Rossellini's films in general. Unlike Deleuze's Edmund who reconfigures the spaces of destruction into spaces of play, Rancière allows neither optimism nor cynicism into his perspective. Rossellini's images are a coalescence of two extremes, leaving the trace of both to remain, not allowing one to outdo the other. In order to elaborate on this important nuance between the two perspectives I refer again to *Europe '51*. He counters both Bazin's regard for reality and Deleuze's creation of a new form of reality in favour of something more confounding, unassignable, ambiguous, and irresolvable.

Europe '51 offers the clearest indication of Rancière's dispute with prior perspectives on Rossellini, due perhaps to his return to a discussion of the film on a number of occasions.⁵³ Most of his repeated observations refer initially to his re-viewing of the film years after his initial Marxist take on the plot (a narrative trajectory of the bourgeoisie towards sainthood by way of the working class).⁵⁴ He describes, upon a re-viewing, a realisation of the confounding character of Irene's actions. This develops throughout the film by way of the random nature of her actions but is demonstrated most overtly at two particular moments that bring together two extremes. The first is Irene's initial sight of the slums. Her friend (the Communist journalist Andrea) has sold this place to her in a certain light. As she explores the area the clash between rich and poor is clear to see. Soon however, the simplistic binary of rich and poor, strong and weak, is destabilised. When she visits a second time, alone, she strays from the path assigned to her by Andrea and instead follows some children who found a body washed up on the shore. This opens her eyes to some of the more concrete realities and responses to those realities which are absent in Andrea's descriptions. Irene follows the children to their home where she meets their mother – the woman whose job she will take on at the factory. The circular pan of the camera – on her initial sight of the town and on her later misdirected wandering – reflects the overwhelming change in perspective, pulling her from preconceived ideas about 'the poor' toward gen-

uine experience. This wandering out of the field of vision, out of the known categories, is what Rancière refers to as a 'step to the side':

Rossellini shows us the sensible action of this conversion, the action of a gaze that turns around and pulls its body along with it toward the place where its truth is in question ... This is how her madness begins: she takes a step to the side, losing her way. The moment arrives when the call of the void has an effect but no longer makes sense.⁵⁵

The unassignable nature of that first act reverberates through Irene's subsequent misadventures, confounding her family who eventually equate her actions with insanity – she is ultimately committed to an asylum. There in the film's final shot Rossellini's ability to bring together two diverging roads in a single image is epitomised. As Irene looks out through her barred window to her new friends in the slums, we see them mourn for her. Following Rossellini's *St Francis* (in *Francis, God's Jester* [1950]), Irene stands before her devoted subjects from behind the bars of an insane asylum in an image that makes the line between madness and sainthood indistinguishable. Deleuze equates this final image with Irene's eventual success in 'learning to see'⁵⁶ – effectively siding with the perspective Rancière adjusts on his re-viewing. Alternatively, Irene becomes 'schizophrenic': she develops an ethics of belief in a world that denies such beliefs. Rancière refuses to classify Irene in this way. For him Irene does not offer any sort of commentary on the alienating procedures of capitalist modernity. Decisively indecisive, Rancière's Rossellini chooses a *mise-en-scène* that is 'point for point, the active refutation of this simple scenario of a world in ruins and disturbed consciences'⁵⁷ The difference between the new resolutions provided by Deleuze's Rossellini and the irresolutions of Rancière's is illuminated in their response to this final image of *Europe* '51.

For Rancière, Rossellini's films offer pure illustrations of antagonism; moments that put into dialogue the clash between two extremes – not, as Deleuze would have it, a dialectical sum of those extremes. As Rancière has stated elsewhere⁵⁸ Deleuze's avowed commitment to immanence – his philosophical vitalism and rejection to transcending what exists – is contradicted when he privileges something that exceeds reality. This appears most commonly via the concept of 'the inhuman', but it is locatable also through his perspective on Rossellini and the seer. The seer goes beyond the predefined fields of vision, but not to bring about a *tension* on a plane of immanence (as is actually the case in Rancière's perspective); rather, he *transcends* the plane, locating a new reality, signifying new resolution out of Rossellini's ambiguities. Whereas Bazin, Deleuze, and Rancière have all called attention to the persistent ambiguity of Rossellini's films only Ran-

cière incorporates this ambiguity into his conclusions, making it the central conceit of his films. This final point pulls together Rancière's Rossellini and Rancière's theory of spectatorship – itself developed out of the necessity for accepting ambiguities as they stand.

[A]rtists construct the stages where the manifestations of their skills are exhibited ... The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story.⁵⁹

Dwelling on the irresolvability of Rossellini's antagonisms allows Rancière to bring Italian Neorealism into line with the unforeseeable desires and expectations of a new audience. Like Rancière himself, returning to discussions of decades before him and opening them up to new, exciting points of departure, Rossellini's films become more than representations of a bygone time. Audaciously disputing conventional approaches to this era in Rossellini's work, Rancière could be accused of a kind of violence, dehistoricising and appropriating the films toward his own personal investment (of revising the modernist project). Nevertheless, whether or not we take Rancière's aesthetic imperative to disrupt convention too emphatically, one cannot doubt the novelty of his insights and the ethos of his conclusions. In this most recent of the three perspectives analysed herein we find a body of work in its least conclusive, least determined state, leaving us surely compelled to revisit the films afresh with newfound openness.

Tracing the path from Bazin to Rancière there is a sense that Rossellini's films have become less definite, that the initial certitude around his realist aesthetics and his humanist intentions (after an era of profound inhumanity) has become increasingly contestable. The significance of Rancière's comments, as I have claimed, is based on this confusing of things. Against the crystalline effect of both Bazin's and Deleuze's responses, Rancière's Rossellini is concerned with de-clarifying reality – but also, paradoxically, delimiting its possibilities to a singular aesthetic encounter with antagonism. By claiming there is no higher meaning to these films, no new level of perception resulting from the immobility brought about by the historical rupture, Rancière situates the spectator at the nexus of this moment of collision.

By way of conclusion I would like to briefly return to my earlier comments on this philosophical tradition in approaches to Rossellini (and to cinema more generally). As these three thinkers demonstrate, this means privileging neither the historical dimensions of a subject matter, the artistic influences on a filmmaker, the ideological determinants of production, the moral of a tale, nor the complex logics of a narrative. Demonstrated in

the trajectory Bazin-Deleuze-Rancière, cinema's potential for generating new ways of thinking and new forms of experience appears most pronounced when we consider films in a philosophical sense. In each of the perspectives discussed one finds a concerted effort to avoid subordinating Rossellini's films to the environments they arose from, each time allowing the particularity of the film itself to frame the context of the discussion. Irrespective of the status of philosophers and artists it is very rare that a profoundly innovative and daring thesis arises which reshapes our understanding of canonical artists while also informing the writings of that philosopher. In this sense and as much as these three perspectives have an enduring effect for those of us trying to understand the films of Rossellini, the director himself is credited with developing Bazinian, Deleuzian, and Rancièreian theory. The complementary relationship of film and philosophy is richly pronounced therein.⁶⁰

Notes

1. Rancière 2006.
2. Ibid., p. 11.
3. Ibid., p. 31.
4. As discussed by Bondanella in the opening chapter of his *The Films of Roberto Rossellini* (1993).
5. Deleuze 1983a.
6. Deleuze 1983b, p. 1.
7. Extensively collated in Fanara's *Pensare il neorealismo* (2000).
8. Brunette 1985, p. 35.
9. Including Rodowick's *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (1997), Flaxman in the introduction to his edited collection *The Brain is the Screen* (2000), and Rushton's *The Reality of Film* (2011).
10. Deleuze 1983b, p. xi.
11. Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 41.
12. Ranciere 2006, p. 126.
13. Wagstaff 2007.
14. Ibid., p. 28.
15. Ibid., p. 39.
16. Morgan 2006, p. 445.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Bazin 1972a, pp. 23-40.
20. Bazin 1972b, pp. 16-40.
21. Ibid.
22. Bazin 1972b, pp. 93-101.
23. Ibid.
24. Bazin 1972b, p. 100.

25. Ibid., p. 101.
26. Ibid.
27. Bazin 1972a, p. 37.
28. Bazin 1972b, p. 100.
29. Bazin 1972a, p. 37.
30. Bazin 1972b, p. 101.
31. Morgan 2013.
32. Bazin 1972b, p. 101.
33. Bazin 1972b, p. 98.
34. Deleuze 1983b, pp. 66-67.
35. Ibid., p. xi.
36. 'Against those who defined Italian neo-realism by its social content, Bazin put forward the fundamental requirement of formal aesthetic criteria. According to him, it was a matter of a new form of reality, said to be "dispersive, elliptical, errant, wavering, working in blocs, with deliberately weak connections and floating events"' (Ibid., p. 1).
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., p. 2.
39. Ibid.
40. Sarris 1962, p. 563.
41. Deleuze 1983b, p. xi.
42. Andrew's *André Bazin* (2013) navigates us through an enormous range of perspectives (again, exclusively French) which come to bear on Bazin's compromised idealism – or materialism, depending on which standpoint one chooses to take him. My point is that Bazin's general position tends to be conflated with a phenomenological tendency, when in fact Andrew's well-informed account puts Bazin at odds with his contemporaries (like Merleau-Ponty).
43. This phenomenological perspective is something different from more recent ideas about embodiment influenced by the likes of Sobchack and Plantinga.
44. Deleuze 1983a, pp. 59-60.
45. Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 350.
46. Ibid.
47. Deleuze 1983b, p. 3.
48. Greenberg 1993, p. 86.
49. Rancière 2006, p. 126.
50. Bazin 1972a, p. 24.
51. Rancière 2006, p. 129.
52. Ibid., pp. 129-130.
53. Rancière 2003, 2004, 2006, 2012.
54. Rancière 2012.
55. Rancière 2003, pp. 116-117.
56. Deleuze 1983b, p. 2.
57. Rancière 2006, p. 134.
58. Rancière 2010, pp. 169-183.
59. Rancière 2009, p. 22.
60. Thanks to Richard Rushton for his helpful comments and encouragement regarding the conclusion of this article.

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About the author

James Harvey-Davitt is a PhD student and teacher in the Department of English, Communication, Film and Media at Anglia Ruskin University. His thesis focuses on the production of agency in contemporary global cinema through consideration of the political and aesthetic philosophies of Jacques Rancière.