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OPEN SPACES, LIMINAL PLACES:  
THE DEPLOYMENT OF THE SACRED IN *OPEN CITY*

“[T]he world becomes comprehensible as world, as cosmos,  
in the measure in which it reveals itself as a sacred world.” — Mircea Eliade

**R**oma città aperta (1945, hereafter *Open City*) appears to unfold in time, but this is an appearance only. The linearity of the story is a conventional device, a narratological epiphenomenon of a diegesis in which time is suspended and space, unshackled from its subordination to temporality, becomes utopic. In mere moments the partisan hero Manfredi travels (off-screen) an improbable distance across the city, a lapse in verisimilitude often attributed to dramatic necessity.<sup>1</sup> Instead it belies the conventional view of *Open City*'s realism which, in fact, transcends the time-bound representations of documentary. The film's successful evocation of the concrete—its authenticity—depends on a mythopoetic *mise en scène*. The *real* ruins and *real* survivors provide a hyperreal index establishing the “being there” of the camera, its self-conscious presence in pure diegetic space.<sup>2</sup> Beyond Rome's military designation as an “open city,” Rossellini's Rome is truly open, a liminal place of resistance at once political and metaphysical.

The prevailing reading of *Open City*, and the foundation, explicit or not, of the documentarian view of Neorealism, emphasizes an eschatological thematic. This

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<sup>1</sup> David Forgacs, though noting the film's symbolic use of imagery, attributes Manfredi's transportation to “dramatic effect.” See “Space, Rhetoric, and the Divided City in *Roma città aperta*,” in *Roberto Rossellini's Rome Open City*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 119.

<sup>2</sup> See Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford University Press, 1988). Geertz demonstrates how anthropologists depend on “the highly situated nature of ethnographic description” to convince their readers they have “been there” (p. 5). Neorealism, I submit, aspires to a cinematographic analogue of the ethnographer's discursive means of establishing verisimilitude.

is understandable: the film's two heroes, a Catholic priest and a communist partisan, represent respectively the sacred and secular poles of a common historicist paradigm. Marxism's analogue of Judeo-Christian teleology—with divine agency displaced by algorithms embedded in the dialectical unfolding of history—is well-known. Yet, despite Rossellini's "Christian humanism"<sup>3</sup> and Popular Front ideology, *Open City* eschews both Christian and Marxist forms of eschatological closure. The film's theological conception of time is heterodox: the sacred moment, sustained in an eternal present, displaces the deferred salvation of a distant and purely transcendental reckoning. *Open City's* heresies are not limited to Christianity. Rossellini breaks too with Marxist historicism privileging immanence-outside-of-time, a spatial *Aufhebung*, which supersedes the immanence-within-time of the dialectic. Rossellini's Rome is neither papal nor Comintern; it is a New Jerusalem, an avatar of the politico-religious phantasm of early-modern religious radicals, Millenarian insurrectionists against clerical and secular authority alike.<sup>4</sup> Salvation is nigh in *Open City*. Rome reassumes the aura of a sacred *place*. The diegetic world deployed in the narrative engages the transformative power of the liminal, of the ritualistic, to *emplace* the numinous and render eternity palpable.

#### *Eternity Made Palpable*<sup>5</sup>

For Mircea Eliade, *homo religiosus* (re-)sacralizes the world through gesture—among other literal embodiments of the "sacramentalization of physiological life."<sup>6</sup> Physical movements, performed with *grace*, are the foundation of ritual (and, after the decline of ritual, mysticism). Eliade's conception of sacred emplacement puts a premium on what is called here the *kinesiological* manifestations of the numinous, ontogenesis through gesture. A kinesiology of the sacred obtains in *Open City*. The actors' bodies, the lyricism or vulgarity of their gestures, serve as indices of sacralization and profanation. While dialogue retains its significance, the *unarticulated* is saturated with ontogenetic presence. *Open City* reprises the origins of drama, its genealogy, like ritual, tracing back to Dionysian spectacle. Through gestures, Rossellini's actors, like the shamans of antiquity, create a *place* out of *space*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2004 [1983]), 38.

<sup>4</sup> On early modern Millenarianism, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> Theophile Gautier, *One of Cleopatra's Nights* (Gillette, NJ: Wildside Press, 1999), 15. Gautier captures the immanence in the ancient Egyptian Sublime—"eternity made palpable"—the effort, expressed in stone, to invoke rather than merely represent a sacred eternity.

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1959), 170. Eliade acknowledges that the term *homo religiosus*, and much else in his conception of the sacred, is informed by Rudolf Otto. See Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1923).

<sup>7</sup> According to Huston Smith a qualitative difference obtains between *space* and *place* in sacred experience. "Place is not space. Whereas space is abstract, place is concrete." *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 370-

Three kinetic-sacred interfaces—the ritualistic, the dramatic and the quotidian—coalesce in the actions of *Open City's* protagonists. The narrative mostly unfolds in Don Pietro's<sup>8</sup> parish, a working-class quarter which provides sanctuary to partisan operatives. This intimate community, an extended family of comrades and neighbors, contrasts starkly with the ephemeral and sadistic milieus of the Nazis and their Italian collaborators. The differences are palpable; one can almost smell them. Rossellini's camera produces an olfactory as well as visual intimacy: the odors of home—freshly boiled pasta, laundry drying—permeate Pina's block in contrast to the stale smoke, gaudy perfume and perspiration of Marina's dressing room and Major Bergmann's headquarters. Gestures serve as a kinesiological index of profanation and re-sanctification, of inauthenticity and authentication, of metaphysical evil and redemption. A profound intimacy of flesh and object obtains with the film's heroes. A simple meal becomes a sacrament as Manfredi and Francesco gracefully handle their plates and utensils. Don Pietro caresses everything he touches: books, a football—even a bomb. And Pina, most of all, grasps the world with large, maternal, peasant hands. In such hands objects are redeemed at the node where physical grace and metaphysical grace align. The intelligible world of appearances is transformed into a tactile world of intimate touch. Everyday objects are uplifted to reliquary and assume ritual significance as sacerdotal performance and aesthetic gesture converge.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, one detects little intimacy in the manipulations of the “fallen” characters, only furtive encounters between culpable fingers and objects reduced to their naked instrumentality. Ingrid dispenses her furs with the brusque detachment of a shop clerk concerned solely with their use-value in the economics of betrayal. Marina paws at stockings that have long since lost, for her, their polymorphous sensuality. Major Bergmann incessantly brandishes cigarettes he never seems to finish. Harry Feist's mannered acting signals the inauthenticity, the unreality of the German officer. In profane hands, objects reduce to caricature and symptom; gesture degrades to exposition.

Bodies assume a singular concreteness on Rossellini's polymorphous perverse screen. The entire body communicates by virtue of the close-up, in the isolation of an expression or gesture. The deployment of the human form signals the contrasting metaphysical status of the characters. “Fallen” bodies—particularly those of women—belong solely to the world of mere organism. Marina, brought

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<sup>8</sup> The film's characters mentioned in this essay are played by the following cast: Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi); Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero); Francesco (Francesco Grandjacquet); Pina (Anna Magnani); Major Bergmann (Harry Feist); Marina (Maria Michi); Lauretta (Carla Rovere); Ingrid (Giovanna Galletti).

<sup>9</sup> Here Rossellini stands as a twentieth-century avatar of an artistic tradition stretching from the Renaissance in the Low Countries to Pre-Raphaelite Britain in the 1800s, a tradition that drew upon the convergence of ritualistic, dramatic and quotidian experience. Two examples, spanning this genealogy, come immediately to mind: Jacques Daret's *Virgin and Child in an Interior* (1435) and John Everette Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849).

to a sudden awareness of the brutal consequences of her betrayal, collapses on the threshold of a torture chamber, the voluptuous animality of her body emphasized by the fur coat her treachery has earned her.<sup>10</sup> The sensuous but degraded contours of Marina's and Lauretta's half-dressed bodies are revealed in relief by slips and gowns—luxuries obtained through *collaboration horizontale*. Together with the debauched revels of drunken Nazi officers, these images signal eroticism debased to brute carnality, flesh stripped of sublimity.

This contrasts with the "passions" of the partisans and their benefactors, whose ordeals embody metaphysical absolution. Manfredi subsides in a chair, a broken mass, as interrogators sear and tear his flesh, his silence compounded by the mute witness of his martyred corpse. Romoletto's boyish frame, lamed but unsubdued, assumes a greater physical, and moral, heft on the crutches which support his tireless efforts to join the uprising. In the film's most famous, and pathetic, scene, Pina crumples in the street when summarily machined-gunned by a German soldier. Here Rossellini achieves his most convincing documentary effect—a coolly objective treatment that would normally distance the viewer from the events. Yet it is precisely by avoiding clichés of heroism and sentimentality that the camera intensifies the emotional shock of Pina's senseless death. A series of incidental shots foregrounds the heroine's corporeality—a full-figured body in motion—thus accentuating the transcendence of the spontaneous and selfless actions that precipitate her death. Here Rossellini realizes Artaud's dictum that "a violent and concentrated action is a kind of lyricism."<sup>11</sup> In a soteriology of free will, one's actions determine the dispensation, or its withholding, of grace.

*Open City's* realism is antithetical to scientific objectivity; its naturalism is analogous to an older aesthetic informed by Neoplatonic rather than positivist conceptions of the real. Gothic and Renaissance savants drew no distinction between Nature and art. Michelangelo's sculptures, to cite a salient example, reveal a sublime reality concealed in the raw marble. Disclosing the figure buried within, Michelangelo participated in the act of Creation as God's prosthesis in the perpetual ontogenesis of the world.<sup>12</sup> *Disegno*, which posits the natural world as an emanation of the supernatural, privileges onto-poetics over mimesis.<sup>13</sup> Although Rossellini's medium is quite different from Michelangelo's, it is no less suited to an aesthetic of revelation. In fact the peculiar material qualities of film—its dependence on projected light—makes it ideally suited for an art of the

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<sup>10</sup> Marina's usefulness consummated, a disdainful Ingrid summarily "skins" her.

<sup>11</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 82.

<sup>12</sup> Michelangelo's sculptures stop the divine emanations and hold them in a state of perpetually unrequited tension. In his *David* we discover the subliminal life of mineral and sinew. This isn't Man pulled from the original clay. Michelangelo does not create *ex nihilo*. He reveals his subjects the way a geologic age reveals the origins of the world.

<sup>13</sup> Allan Megill uses the term "onto-poetic" to describe an aesthetic that privileges creation over re-creation. See Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

epiphany, for an aesthetic of grace *à la* the Gothic luminescence of Abbot Suger.<sup>14</sup> Rossellini's technique serves ontogenetic rather than representational aims. He does not seek to represent reality but to reveal it. His Realism is that of the *Ideal* abiding in flesh, mineral and bone that awaits only celluloid to manifest the point where light and matter articulate.<sup>15</sup>

In Platonic aesthetics the *Ideal* is axiomatically conceived as a visual phenomenon, as a *Form* that can be seen, if only with the pure disembodied *cogito*. One never finds the Ideal epitomized in sound, touch, taste or smell. But Rossellini upturns this Platonic paradigm in a paradoxical manner. Cinema, more than any other art, is a medium of sight, tacitly lending itself to the unfolding of Platonic essences. The actions of *Open City's* protagonists transpose the Ideal from the visual to the embodied—to touch, to smell, to taste—in a Neoplatonic subversion of the Ideal through *mise en scène*. Tactile sensations, conveyed—even mediated—via the physiology of the actors, are the sine qua non of *mise en scène*. As André Bazin, the impresario of *mise en scène* maintains (in a reference to Rossellini's Neorealist colleague De Sica), "the film is identical with what the actor is doing and with this alone....pure action." Rossellini's characters "cosmicize" themselves: "Gesture, change, physical movement constitute for Rossellini the essence of human reality."<sup>16</sup> And, as Eliade maintains, "Even the most habitual gesture can signify a spiritual act."<sup>17</sup> In a profane world, graceful polysemus gestures have been usurped by monolithic, goal-directed actions. Resacralization requires overturning the utility of the gesture.<sup>18</sup> Through drama, as with ritual, "ordinary objects, or even the human body, [are] raised to the dignity of signs"; "it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds."<sup>19</sup>

It is, appropriately, Don Pietro who liberates institutionalized gestures from the profane, collaborationist constraints of the Fascist milieu. Unlike the other protagonists in *Open City*, Don Pietro engages all three kinetic-sacred interfaces, the quotidian, the dramatic and the ritualistic. He is doubly a liminal figure. In his capacity as priest, he mediates, through his sacramental offices, between individuals and the Divine. His ministrations to partisans and deserters mark him as a renegade within a Church that had aided the normalization of

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<sup>14</sup> See Georges Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980-1420*, trans. Eleanor LeVieux and Barbara Thompson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 97-135. Duby emphasizes the importance of the Neoplatonic association between God, Light and Logos, in the theology of the late Medieval era.

<sup>15</sup> André Bazin's ontological conception of Rossellini's aesthetic has parallels with that which I define as Neoplatonic. See Bazin, *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 16-40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 77; 100 [my edit].

<sup>17</sup> Eliade, *op. cit.*, 183.

<sup>18</sup> Kakuzo Okakura writes that in Taoism, as in many Asian religions, "it was the process, not the deed, which was interesting. It was the completing, not the completion, which was really vital." *The Book of Tea* (New York: Dover, 1964), 15. Gestures, freed from goal-directed exigencies, are vital to the *emplacement* of the sacred as lived experience.

<sup>19</sup> Artaud, *op. cit.*, 94; 99 [my edit].

Mussolini's régime. Catholic ritual form, in the hands of Don Pietro, becomes a form of resistance. Monolithic sacraments become rituals of differentiation, at once distinguishing and solidifying the identity of the sacred, non-Fascist community. Yet, as a priest, he is at once a participant in his parishioner's community and an outsider. Don Pietro's liminality is also attested by his role in the Resistance; he moves in the partisan milieu without completely belonging to it. His connivance with the Resistance makes him at once a political outlaw and a religious renegade. Like the heretics of the sixteenth century, he is delivered into the hands of secular authorities for punishment.

Don Pietro endures a hero's death but not—in terms of the symbolism of its *mise en scène*—the death of a martyr. That role is reserved for the unlikely figure of the communist partisan Manfredi.

The aims of Don Pietro and Manfredi merge in a soteriological synthesis typical of Millenarianism. Salvation is *at hand* in the act of purging the clerical (spiritual) and secular (material) oppressors of the powerless. Each character serves as the dialectical counterpart of the other. Each possesses a moral code determined by faith and by circumstances. The exigencies required for Resistance leads to some unexpected juxtapositions: Don Pietro's non-judgmental attitude toward the pregnant and unmarried Pina contrasts significantly with Manfredi's puritanical reaction toward the promiscuous drug-addict Marina. Each reaction is informed by a Millenarianism that views the sacred as immediate, where salvation and damnation are determined not by one's adherence to a particular dogma but to one's choices in a concrete struggle between Good and Evil, between Love and Hate, Fascism and Resistance. Pina's pregnancy registers, concretely, the erotism of the Resistance, its faith in the *continuity* of an authentic Italy versus the *discontinuity*—metaphysical and political—of the Fascist state. Marina's promiscuity and drug addiction, meanwhile, will have dire consequences for the partisans and their abettors.

Don Pietro's insistence that Manfredi is "saved" signals the redemptive nature of the latter's selfless actions in the present struggle, not his adherence to particular dogmas of the Church (or *any* Church). The deaths of Don Pietro and Manfredi seal the correspondence between the two men. Don Pietro dies a secular death by firing squad while Manfredi, the devout communist, perishes in a claustrophobic *mise en scène* encoded with images of the Passion. The doubling of these two heroes seals the soteriological symbiosis between their two ostensibly different ideologies. In the end, Don Pietro's conception of redemption ironically *uplifts*—in the Hegelian-Marxian sense—Manfredi's. The priest signals the sacrificial nature of Manfredi's death pronouncing Christ's last words over the broken body of the partisan martyr: "It is finished."

*Open City* contrasts a sacred Rome—the Popular Front utopia unfolded in the film—and the profane Rome of the Fascist-Nazi era. More significantly, it contrasts this Ideal-Rome with the post-war period of political compromise

already apparent during the film's production.<sup>20</sup> Yet these two worlds exist on the same plane; the utopia deployed in the film uplifts the profane world of historical fact. Sacred space, which is inherently heterogeneous—pregnant with possibility—emerges only in a *chiaroscuro* vis-à-vis homogeneous profane space, light relieved by darkness. The film's title signals a heterogeneous liminality that appears in several guises. Multiple thresholds, or points of transition, are deployed: rooftops, stairwells, side-streets, industrial suburbs, courtyards and crawlspaces; all of them marginal to the centripetal stretches of the social order—wormholes to deterritorialized, unorthodox possibilities. Homogeneous space abets homogeneous, profane, time. In *Open City*, the spaces of social, political and ecclesiastical orthodoxy fold claustrophobically upon themselves, while the periphery retains, *pace* Foucault, possibilities for resistance.

Rossellini's camera pulls a sacred presence from the granite, stone and mortar of a desacralized Roman reality. *Open City* is not a chronicle—even a fictionalized or idealized one—of historical events, but history's transgressive Doppelgänger, the *non-place* of a sacred Rome deployed only as light projected onto a screen. Rossellini's film punches a hole in the *existential ceiling* of a recalcitrant reality.

Yet Rossellini by no means dispenses entirely with the techniques of documentary filmmaking nor does he dismiss the facts of history. To do so would be to regress to the realm of pure fantasy. *Open City's* subversive realism works precisely because it retains elements that replicate the given. As an intervention, *Open City* privileges praxis over reportage, pursuing a dialectic between the non-fictive and the hyper-fictive, between the verisimilitude of documentary (the *real* Romans, the *real* buildings) and the theatrics of melodrama (the romantic entanglements; Pina's death; Manfredi's interrogation)—a dialectic between the given and the *ought-to-be* that accentuates the *made-ness* of the film.<sup>21</sup>

#### *The Eternal City*

*Open City* does not end with the anticipation of utopia; it is a revelation of the utopic singularity of the partisan moment. Rossellini sustains Rome in its fullest liminality, in a new dispensation deployed in a perpetual state of becoming. *Open City* neither mythologizes nor commemorates the partisan struggle in occupied Rome; it supersedes it. In the final shot, St. Peter's is suspended in the ellipses of the marching schoolboys, signaling a story not so much to be

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<sup>20</sup> Hence, the argument presented here challenges the prevailing reading of the film as an optimistic confirmation of the Popular Front hopes of the liberation period.

<sup>21</sup> On the melodramatic elements in the film, see Marcia Landy, "Diverting Clichés: Femininity, Masculinity, Melodrama, and Neorealism in *Open City*," in *Robert Rossellini's Rome Open City*, 85-105. For Landy, the film's melodrama "shakes the foundations of realism," and I concur with the proviso that it does so only if one conceives of realism as a monolithic aesthetic. Rossellini's Neorealism is best understood as a latter-day variant of Neoplatonism. I also concur with Landy's argument that *Open City* cancels "a reductive historicism that insists on fidelity to events and focuses instead on questions of belief [and] the mediated nature of 'reality'" (p. 94 [my edit]). The melodrama draws attention to the film's status as a made—which is to say *ontogenetic*—object.

continued as reprised.<sup>22</sup> *Open City* redeems a Rome profaned by the Nazis, and preserves the city as the site of a sacred resistance in which the collapse of the partisan utopia is infinitely deferred. The liminal supplants the teleological. The ruins of contemporary Rome mingle with those of the classical city, the destroyed structures of the present rendered as timeless as the broken lintels of the Colosseum. Both the ancient and the modern debris serve as an index not of destruction but of creation, an index of the *pre-formed*, the *pre-natal*, overrich in the potentiality of rebirth. The End of History is postponed in Rome as *imago mundi*—the city as Pleroma, *pre-created* and infinitely heterogeneous.

Caught on film the “Eternal City” becomes truly timeless, Italy’s future suspended rather than foreshadowed or anticipated. Rossellini’s Ideal Rome is at once already at hand in the social and political realities of 1944 and a *no-place*, an *outopia*. The metaphysical liminality of the diegetic world is built upon the more mundane “liminality” of occupied Rome. The real city and the events that have recently unfolded there are foregrounded in the narrative and in the images—particularly the location shots, that comprise the film’s *verismo*. The ruined buildings and many of the extras are “real” (or more precisely hyperreal inasmuch as they become indexes of a past open to decontextualization). Yet Rossellini does not simply document the recent past. In *Open City* the real serves as more than the *a priori* of a romanticized revision, or as the departure point toward the dialectical resolution of a social or historical crisis. The real serves as the raw material of a creative act in which reality is not represented but made. Rossellini invokes an asynchronous history to suspend the past as an experience in *the present of the filmic space*. Such an ahistoricism, abetted by the apparatus of cinema itself, signals a mythopoeic reprisal of the past that surpasses conventional ideological representations in a presentizing engagement that radically preempts nostalgia. The diegetic Rome of *Open City* exists in an eternal, atelic cycle of pure duration, one evoked in the embodied experience of its phosphorescent protagonists.

Dismayed by the imminent collapse of the Resistance-era Popular Front, Rossellini privileges the liminal moment of the Occupation itself; he puts this moment back into play in *Open City*. This sacred, or in political terms, utopian *place* is precisely that which Rossellini wishes to preserve and sustain. Hence *Open City*’s denouement is neither an ending nor a new beginning, but the resumption of a cycle anchored, as the final frame reveals, on Rome’s epicenter, St. Peter’s Basilica.

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<sup>22</sup> The film abounds with ambulatory sequences in which much of the exposition unfolds. These movements themselves are elliptical, connecting ultimately with other sequences of exposition and finally action: Pina’s death, signaling not closure, but the cycle of life; Marcello saves Francesco with the scarf taken from his mother’s corpse.



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