Europe ‘51: Irene’s Moral Quest for Redemption

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Roberto Rossellini describes his take on neorealism as “primarily a moral position which gives a perspective on the world. It then becomes an aesthetic position, but its basis is moral.”¹ In what Mark Shiel calls the second phase of Italian neorealism, Rossellini’s fascination with morality and spirituality becomes ever present, especially after his films of the 1940s.² Rossellini’s 118-minute, 1952 film, Europe ‘51, sheds light on the everyday issues faced by Italians, and brings to light the moral dilemmas that exist as a result of the war. Ingrid Bergman’s character in Europe ‘51, Irene Girard, undergoes a significant change as she embarks on a journey of redemption after the loss of her son. As a result of this traumatic event, Irene has both a social and moral epiphany: the way in which Irene dresses, acts, and communicates completely changes. Social status and wealth become petty to her; instead she devotes her time to helping the vulnerable, like the poor, the sick and the corrupt. The Christian theme of morality is clear in the film, including the Catholic teaching of salvation in Irene’s quest. Irene’s journey echoes the mission of Saint Francis, and this Catholic iconography is utilized in this film to emphasize her transformation. This moral transformation is documented throughout the film, and this essay will analyze the pivotal scenes that build Irene’s character. Irene’s first acts of selflessness when buying medicine for an ill boy, her day working at the factory, and her willingness to help ‘save’ the soul of the young criminal all shape Irene’s moral enlightenment. Irene’s unconditional love results in her confinement to a sanitarium and, importantly, reflects Rossellini’s message about society at large in the post-war world. As the world returns to normality following the horrors of

¹ Donatella Spinelli Coleman, Filming the Nation: Jung, Film, Neo-Realism and Italian National Identity (New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 89.
the war, society does not react positively to Irene’s actions. In this paper, it will be shown that the theme of morality is central in *Europe ‘51*, and particularly in Irene’s quest of redemption catalyzed by the moral shock of her son’s death. Her transformation into a more loving person of all of humanity reflects Irene’s moral and spiritual awakening. By utilizing Catholic iconography and values, Rossellini sheds light on the moral dilemmas faced in the aftermath of the war, and the social reality of Europe in 1951.

The theme of morality is apparent in Irene’s actions and growth as an individual devoted to charity toward others. In *Europe ‘51*, Rossellini confronts the “moral and emotional uncertainties” that existed in the post-war period through Irene’s personal journey of redemption. The death of Irene’s son, Michel, acts as a catalyst for Irene to embark on this quest of moral redemption, and to express her selflessness and love for all people, including the sick, the poor, and ‘the lost souls’. The film explores the function of guilt: Irene essentially convinces “herself that her son committed suicide from lack of affection.” Her moral struggle is at the forefront of the film as she grapples with the idea of human suffering, initially of her son, and then of the less fortunate she meets on her journey. The trauma of Michel’s death enables her to gain a new perspective on the world, and of the society in which she lives. Rossellini explains, “Irene lives in a community of moles, and so she feels pity. This feeling of pity seems to me the most human gesture in the whole film.” It is ultimately these feelings of pity and compassion that drive Irene to seek out those who are in need and to offer her love. Rossellini describes how his films are meant to “[follow] someone with love and [watch] all his discoveries and

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impressions”; thus, Irene’s discoveries and impressions stem from her belief of the moral responsibility to love and offer help to those who need it.⁷

At the root of Irene’s quest to settle the moral qualms she has faced are Christian values and morals. In addition to these Christian values, Catholic symbols are prevalent in the film, especially as Irene’s transformation echoes Saint Francis’ mission. In his “examination of the human subject”, Rossellini “display[s] a greater religiosity of tone and frequently deploy[s] Catholic iconography” in *Europe ‘51*.⁸ Irene’s journey of redemption is a reflection of Christian teachings of love, compassion and sympathy and, as she transforms, her love becomes unconditional. *Europe ‘51* brings attention to “individual spiritual enlightenment” as Irene embarks on an “essential, spiritual human quest.”⁹ The film, according to Rossellini, tells the story of “man’s participation in the divine spark”, as it establishes “a dialogue between suffering humanity worrying over ideals and hopes, and Him who gives that humanity its justification and meaning.”¹⁰ Rossellini also explores the Christian tradition of salvation. In Irene’s own personal quest to redeem herself, she also encourages the ‘lost souls’ to re-center themselves morally and to seek salvation. In many of Irene’s speeches, Christian values and morals are conveyed, especially as they echo teachings in the Gospel. After Irene’s shift at the factory, she meets with Andrea, her husband’s Communist cousin, and explains to him, “by the sweat of thy brow shalt thou earn thy bread. Perhaps only then will we all feel closer, more like equals, all humbled in the same way, and we’ll all seek salvation together.”¹¹ Again, at the end of the film when Irene meets with the priest in the insane asylum, she exclaims, “I came to earth not to lose sinners, but

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⁸ Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, 104.
¹⁰ Roberto Rossellini, quoted in Gallagher, 389.
to save them. This is the miracle of Christianity.” These two quotations represent Irene’s mission to not only aid those with their struggles, but also to those who have become lost in life, who are downtrodden, and who have turned to sin.

To further emphasize the theme of Christianity, Rossellini utilizes Catholic iconography, and reflects the teachings and mission of Saint Francis of Assisi in Irene’s journey. Rossellini’s fascination with Saint Francis first appeared in his 1950 film, Flowers of St. Francis. Irene is a Franciscan-like character, someone who makes her life profoundly moral, but society of the modern day reacts negatively and deems her to be crazy.12 When Irene rejects Andrea’s communist understandings of society, and of awakening the lower classes’ class-consciousness, Irene articulates her dreams of an eternal paradise, one that is for both the living and the dead, and one that is much more spiritual. This philosophy of love, according to Peter Brunette, is not just a reflection of Catholicism, but also one that is “clearly Franciscan in inspiration.”13 When Irene aids the dying prostitute Ines, a photo of St. Francis appears to be on the bedside table. In Irene’s quest to express her unconditional love, she “will continue to find herself through helping the mentally afflicted, just as Rossellini’s St. Francis is transfigured when he embraces a leper.”14 Irene’s selflessness and charity encompasses all of humanity, much like Saint Francis’.

The scenes are crafted in a way as to not only push the plot forward, but to also convey a message to the audience about Irene’s unique character and about postwar society at large, where morals are subordinate. Irene’s transformation is documented in many important scenes, and four pivotal scenes that built Irene’s character will be described further within this paper. The beginning of the film gives the audience insight into Irene’s life as the wife of a wealthy

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13 Brunette, Roberto Rossellini, 145.
diplomat, before her son passes away. A wealthy, upper class woman like Irene cares about her appearance, and she is seen in a lavish dress and is decorated with jewelry. The start of the film introduces Irene as part of a world that is insensitive, and one that portrays “self-centered vanities.” Her son’s suicide, which she believes was caused by her lack of affection, causes Irene to view the world in a new light. The “moral shock is so violent that it plunges her into a crisis of conscience” and her first act of selflessness occurs when she buys medicine for a family who cannot afford to buy it for the ill son. Brunette explains that this is a pivotal moment in Irene’s transformation, as she “is motivated enough to transcend her narcissistic suffering and begin moving beyond the concerns of self toward the service of others.” This initial action opens her eyes to the whole other world of people living in suffering, and motivates her to offer her help.

Another crucial moment in Irene’s journey of redemption is when she decides to cover a shift at the factory for Passerotto, a single mother of six, to ensure that she does not lose her job. Irene’s demeanour and appearance begins to change, no longer does she dress aristocratically or lavishly; when she enters the factory, she wears a plain frock and a short grey coat. The way in which the factory scene was filmed is significant in conveying a message about Irene’s transformation. As Irene enters the factory, she becomes “lost in extreme long shots that dwarf and isolate her.” This factory scene is crucial in ridding Irene’s old identity, as the “huge whirling machines reduce her to a nonentity, she who has been so selfish and egocentric.” Irene’s observations about how the machine functions does not solely come from her

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17 Brunette, Roberto Rossellini, 143.
18 Roberto Rossellini, 144.
19 Ibid.
perspective, the audience also shares the same point of view, and thus “the identities of the observer and the participant have become blurred; no longer a rich woman trying to help the poor from the outside, she is a worker herself.”20 For a moment, Irene’s privileged background is forgotten. The factory work she completes not only exposes her to the everyday work of the lower class, but also allows her to sympathize with them.

Irene’s role in helping a young criminal escape and her being institutionalized as a result, mark important aspects of her transformation. The theme of salvation and the Catholic iconography once again become prevalent towards the end of the film as Irene encourages the thief to flee, but to also turn himself in to the authorities in order to ‘save’ himself. After sympathizing with the individual, she encourages him to search for his moral consciousness. On her own personal journey of redemption, she encourages those suffering to do the same. Her love has no bounds; her mission to help those who have been deserted applies to all of humanity. When Irene admits to the police that she helped the criminal escape, she explains that she was just helping a “poor lost soul”. Irene’s institutionalization after her confession represents a crucial point in her transformation: “Irene’s actions in the final sequence, of breaking off all worldly family ties and assuming a saintly attitude of abandonment in her declaration of absolute devotion to the needs of others” is the film’s most direct allusion to St. Francis.21

The reaction to Irene’s behaviour can be understood as Rossellini’s critique on society and of Europe in the post-war world. Shiel explains, “as Italy turned to peacetime normality, Rossellini became more interested in detecting underlying weaknesses in the social and moral status quo.”22 During the war, and all of the horrors that came with it, morals became

20 Camper, “Europe ’51: The Greatest of These . . .”
21 Ora Gelley, Stardom and Aesthetics of Neorealism: Ingrid Bergman in Rossellini’s Italy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 121.
22 Shiel, Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City,105.
subordinate, when survival became the top priority. Rossellini brings to light the moral dilemma that is faced following the end of the war, as “the most urgent issue facing the post-war world was not material, but a lack of vision, in the humanist or spiritual sense.” Accordingly, “Rossellini’s concern with human existence in the world marked by oppression and suffering as a result of war, fascism, poverty or social convention” is confronted in this film through Irene’s journey to re-center herself morally, and to redeem herself for the mistakes she has made in the past. Europe of the early 1950s does not accept Irene’s behavior - if she claimed to be part of the Communist party or if she claimed to be a religious missionary, society would have fewer objections. Bazin argues that Irene’s moral anguish may derive from social nature, and society’s lack of concern for the suffering. The upper class, bourgeois family, “which is impervious to anxiety, as well as the priest, for whom spiritual problems must crystallize in religious sociology, or the communist militant who believes only in revolutionary efficiency” are all fooled, and do not accept Irene’s behaviour. Instead, the “humility of an individual, jolted by love, threatens existing social order.”

In *Europe ’51*, Rossellini brings light to the moral qualms that were experienced in the post-war world in portraying Irene’s personal struggle, and her goal to redeem herself. Her son’s attempted suicide, which results in his later death, morally shocks Irene, as she believes that her lack of affection and care for her son triggered his suicide attempt. Within Irene’s journey to redeem herself, Christian values and symbols are exhibited within the film. Irene’s newfound desire to offer unconditional love to those who are suffering, and her personal quest of salvation

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26 *Andre Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, 173.
and to save the ‘lost souls’ directly relate to the Christian teachings. Moreover, Catholic iconography, specifically in the form of Saint Francis is used frequently to emphasize Irene’s moral and spiritual transformation. In denouncing her riches and devoting herself to love, charity and sympathy, she becomes a saintly figure. While there were many scenes that documented the building of Irene’s character, this paper outlined four pivotal moments that symbolize Irene’s new identity and society’s negative reaction to her actions. Rossellini explores human existence in the world that suffered from war, chaos, and oppression while portraying Irene’s journey. Morality and redemption are central themes within the film, which are incorporated when addressing the greatest issue following the war in Europe: conquering the moral dilemmas and qualms of the past and seeking out redemption.
Bibliography


