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**The US in Italy, *Paisan* in America:
Cinema in the Occupation of Italy**

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Abstract

Paisan, Roberto Rossellini's film about the battle for and occupation of Italy by Allied forces during World War II, played for sixteen weeks in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1949. It also did well in Cleveland and Philadelphia. The success of this neorealist film indicates the liberation of Italy resonated beyond elite circles in New York and Los Angeles. The appeal of Rossellini's movie was all the more striking given during the occupation, Hollywood worked with the US State Department to reclaim the Italian film market for itself. This essay explores the American occupation of Italy as an episode of postwar American and Italian cultural history in which Hollywood studios sought to reenter Italy and Italian films helped shape Americans' perceptions of liberated Italy.

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Andrew Buchanan and Kaeten Mistry have highlighted the importance of war-time and postwar Italy in American expansion into Europe. Similarly, Susan Carruthers has demonstrated the role of Italy in the American myth of the “good occupation” during the 1940s. However, the success of Italian neorealist films such *Paisan*, and also *Shoeshine*, among US moviegoers suggest that not all Americans were satisfied with efforts to explain American involvement in Europe as an unqualified success. For these movies offered a more complex, unsettling depiction of Americans as liberators and occupiers. *Rome Open City*, though set during the war, was also enormously popular in postwar America. It too complicated the narrative of American liberation of Italy by foregrounding the Italians themselves, even communists, in the fight against Nazis. American accounts of occupied Italy such as John Hersey’s *A Bell for Adano*, therefore, competed with Italian imports that offered more qualified representations. Drawing upon American media and popular culture sources such as *Life* and *Saturday Evening Post* as well as both American and Italian film portrayals of occupied Italy, and US State Department records, I argue Italian neorealism in America was part of a wider US discourse about the occupation of Italy and its discontents. Not simply art house cinema but participants in American understandings of themselves in the world, neorealist movies mediated debates over the role of US presence in Italy. Not just war, but occupation too was movie-made for American audiences.

In late December 1947, the popular American magazine, *Life*, reported on the last of the US occupying forces leaving Italy. “U.S. Army Leaves Italy on its Own,” it proclaimed.¹ The soldiers, and by extension the United States, had done their job in securing the country, the article implied. “For some Italians there was heartbreak,” it stated. But the Americans were going home to leave the country in the hands of its own people. “The Yanks,

¹ “U.S. Army Leaves Italy on its Own,” *Life*, December 29, 1947, pp. 9-13.

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who had come to an Italy torn by war, had left it with at least a hope of peace,” the article concluded. One era in Us-Italian relations appeared to have concluded, according to *Life*.

Three months later, in March 1948, however, Americans returned to Italy through the arrival of *Paisan* (*Paisà*) at the World Theater in midtown Manhattan.² Roberto Rossellini’s bracing film allowed US moviegoers to reengage with the recent war and occupation of Italy. Many responded eagerly.

Critics acclaimed it. Bosley Crowther, the noted film critic for the *New York Times*, was so impressed with the film, he wrote two reviews of it. In his first, he asserted *Paisan* “marks a milestone in the expressiveness of the screen...This is a film to be seen and seen again.” Less than two weeks later, he penned another article on the film claiming, “It is rare indeed, that the public is presented with a film in which a whole new way of expressing staggering ideas is daringly displayed. Yet such a picture is ‘Paisan.’”³ Robert Hatch in the *New Republic* wrote *Paisan* added to Rossellini’s achievement with *Open City* and made him “among the greatest living practitioners of the motion picture.”⁴ The American film industry also celebrated the film. *The Hollywood Reporter* proclaimed *Paisan* “a motion picture masterpiece, a great human document.” The *Motion Picture Daily* asserted, “[a]t times it has an almost spiritual dimension,” but was careful to note the movie also had great commercial potential, “Its booking possibilities,” the paper wrote, “easily go beyond the limits of art and foreign-language houses.”⁵

² Because this essay explores the reception and significance of Italian films within the United States, I will identify them, except where noted, by their translated English titles by which American moviegoers and commentators would have known them.

³ Bosley Crowther, *Paisan review*, «New York Times», March 30, 1948, p. 26 and B. Crowther, *Ultimate Irony of War*, «New York Times», April 11, 1948, p. 11.

⁴ Robert Hatch, “Movies: Director’s Picture,” *New Republic*, March 29, 1948, p. 31.

⁵ Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collection, Production Code Administration Records, Motion Picture Producers Association, *Hollywood Reporter* and *Motion Picture Daily* reviews of *Paisan* in *Paisan 1946* Folder, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll30/id/11766/rec/1> (accessed June 19, 2022).

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Indeed, *Paisan* became a big hit in the Us. It wasn't simply a darling of the critics. It ran for nearly a year at its first theater in New York. That, however, was just the beginning. For *Paisan* did well across the country. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for instance, it ran for a remarkable sixteen weeks, evidence this "foreign" Italian film was not just a sensation for the East Coast, New York cosmopolitan classes.⁶ It had reach in many places and among many people and signaled a newfound American awareness of the cinema emerging in Italy since the end of the war.

Yet why would this Italian movie strike such a chord with American audiences? Particularly given its bleak, disturbing tone, its complicated subject matter, and its unconventional structure, *Paisan* was an unlikely attraction for Us moviegoers just as they were leaving behind their own postwar adjustments and beginning to enjoy the comforts of the "American century" in the late 1940s.

Paisan, of course, is a film that has enjoyed intensive critical and scholarly attention over the decades. Indeed, it has often, assumed the role of epitomizing neorealism itself. The influential French film theorist Andre Bazin lauded the film in his early account of the "new Italian school," going so far as to claim that "major Italian films" could be arranged "in concentric circles of decreasing interest around *Paisà*."⁷ Similarly, shortly after its release, the US cultural critic Robert Warshaw offered a lengthy, though ambivalent assessment in the pages of the influential *Partisan Review* journal.⁸

By the end of the century, scholars had become less interested in delineating the character and boundaries of neorealism. *Paisà* became the focus of wider concerns including its role in the cultural construction of the

⁶ On *Paisan* in Pittsburgh, see "National Spotlight: Pittsburgh," *Motion Picture Herald* (hereafter *MPH*), April 30, 1949, p. 32.

⁷ Andre Bazin, *Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of Liberation*, in Bert Cardullo (ed.), *Andre Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, New York, Continuum, 2011, pp. 29-50.

⁸ Robert Warshaw, *Paisan*, in R. Warshaw (ed.), *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture*, Enlarged Edition, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 221-229.

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Italian nation after World War II.⁹ Angela Dalle Vacche argued the film embodied Rossellini's effort to sustain an Italian national body through unity and continuity with its historical past.¹⁰ Millicent Marcus emphasized how the formal dimensions of the film's montage served "as a model of national unity predicated on difference." Not simply an element of the editing process, *Paisà*'s deployment of montage, Marcus claimed, gave expression to "the fragmentation and disjunction" of Italy itself that provided the energy to "move forward in time" and foster a liberation from a "discredited past."¹¹

More recently the film has been examined through has turn to the cultural studies. Giuliana Minghelli for instance has interpreted *Paisà* as part of neorealism's "cinema of mourning and atonement, a cinema of *the present haunted by the past*," not of the war but the longer twenty years of fascism.¹² In this context, the film's representations of landscape provide a vehicle to show what otherwise can't be directly addressed regarding the history of Italian fascism. Its famous Po River episode in this account illustrates how "[n]eorealism lies over burial grounds; it arises at the site of trauma." Marisa Escolar, on the other hand, has foregrounded the gendered rendering of the redemption narrative of occupation *Paisà* enacts by attending to its often overlooked and critically neglected Rome episode.¹³

Finally, Francisco Pitassio interprets neorealism less as a canon of films or a cinematic movement and more of a wider transformation of postwar Italian culture itself, extending beyond the classic films to popular

⁹ In discussing scholarly interpretations within the critical historiography, I refer to the film as the scholars cited identify it.

¹⁰ Angela Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 180-218.

¹¹ Millicent Marcus, "Rossellini's *Paisà*: National Identity by Means of Montage", *Italian Quarterly*, 2000, pp. 295-302.

¹² Giuliana Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film: Cinema Year Zero*, New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 39-87.

¹³ Marisa Escolar, *Allied Encounters: The Gendered Redemption of World War II Italy*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2019, pp. 42-65.

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comedies, photo-romances, and photography in the decade after World War II.¹⁴ Attentive to the wider cultural currents both shaping and shaped by it, Pitassio sees neorealism as part of broader transnational developments and practices. This shift opens useful new avenues of investigation of *Paisà* beyond both arthouse auteurism and strictly national contexts. Indeed, just as Pitassio argues Italian neorealist possessed transnational dimensions, *Paisà* itself registered additional significance and impact as it migrated from Italy and penetrated postwar Us in the late 1940s.

The story of *Paisan* in the United States, therefore, offers a vantage point to consider a host of important issues of the 1940s including Us involvement in Italy, American encounters with Italian culture, and the role that film played in mediating new transnational realities of the early postwar era. The acclaim and success of *Paisan* is instructive not only for what it reveals about American perceptions of war-time and occupied Italy but also for highlighting conflicts within American society itself in a transitional moment between the New Deal progressive era in the US and the ascendancy of the Cold War. A film about Us-Italian encounters illuminates a range of discontents and tensions among Americans as they grappled with making sense of themselves among other peoples after World War II.

Premiering in Italy in 1946, *Paisan* arrived in the Us much later, not until 1948. A closer look at just how well it did among American moviegoers demonstrates the impact this film had within American culture. The World theater, where *Paisan* first played in the Us, had become a showcase for the new Italian cinema. Two years earlier in February 1946, it had premiered Rossellini's previous movie *Open City* (*Roma città aperta*) to much

¹⁴ Francesco Pitassio, *Neorealist Film Culture, 1945-1954: Rome, Open Cinema*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

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success.¹⁵ *Paisan*'s long tenure at the same theater indicated Rossellini's earlier film was no fluke and that there was real interest in Italian movies among Americans.

In early 1949, *Paisan* began a wider release at circuit theaters and independent movie houses throughout the US where it enjoyed enormous success. In addition to playing at a single theater for sixteen weeks before moving to neighborhood movie theaters in Pittsburgh, *Paisan* did remarkably well in other parts of the country.¹⁶ *Motion Picture Herald*, a leading American film industry trade journal reported in March that in Philadelphia, *Paisan* "set a new record for a local film showing, passing the 500th consecutive performance...the longest consecutive playing of any film in one theater in the last 22 years."¹⁷ The movie played eleven weeks in Cleveland, Ohio, then was picked up by the Warner's circuit of theaters in the city for further exhibition.¹⁸ In Boston, it also ran for eleven weeks.¹⁹ It enjoyed seven weeks in Minneapolis, Minnesota.²⁰ These were striking numbers for a non-English speaking film in the US and evidence that *Paisan* resonated with American audiences.

Further, it wasn't only in specialized "art house" theaters that *Paisan* played. For instance, it opened in the Joy theater in New Orleans, one of the new premiere theaters in the city. In addition, it played in Columbus, Ohio at the Broad theater downtown, a house that held up to 2800 seats.²¹ In Memphis, Tennessee the movie opened

¹⁵ Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. On *Roma città aperta*, see David Forgacs, *Rome Open City (Roma Città Aperta)*, London, British Film Institute, 2007; Sidney Gottlieb, *Roberto Rossellini's Rome Open City*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹⁶ "National Spotlight: Pittsburgh", *MPH*, April 30, 1949, p. 32.

¹⁷ "National Spotlight: Philadelphia," *MPH*, March 12, 1949, p. 31.

¹⁸ "National Spotlight: Cleveland," *MPH*, March 19, 1949, p. 29.

¹⁹ "National Spotlight: Boston," *MPH*, March 26, 1949, p. 37.

²⁰ "National Spotlight: Minneapolis," *MPH*, March 19, 1949, p. 31.

²¹ On *Paisan* in Columbus see "National Spotlight: Columbus," *MPH*, April 2, 1949, p. 34. On the Broad theater itself, see <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/6890> (accessed July 5, 2022).

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Loew's Palace with 2200 seats.²² It showed at the Ritz in Albany, New York, an 1100 seat theater where it did "big business." It also ran in the nearby city of Troy.²³ While *Paisan* may have had shorter runs in some of these bigger theaters, the fact that it was booked at the big downtown houses in several major cities in the US indicates the cultural relevance this Italian film enjoyed in the United States in the late 1940s.

Part of the movie's surprising success was surely due to the fact that it was about Americans themselves in Italy. Unlike *Open City* or *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri di biciclette*), *Paisan* foregrounded the US presence in the liberation and occupation of Italy. While the movie lacked recognizable stars, each episode included American characters and much of the film was in English that made this "foreign" movie more accessible to US audiences than other films from abroad.

In addition, the film was often marketed in ways intended to heighten its exploitation potential. Ads for the film encouraged viewers to imagine it as more erotically charged than it proved to be. One blared "the lives and loves of GIs in Italy," accompanied by an image of Maria Michi in a negligée and stockings, taken from the Rome episode in the film.²⁴

Given the long runs and packed houses of *Paisan* in a number of American cities, the titillation factor of the movie's advertising, however, probably doesn't account for all its success. Had moviegoers expected a racy, sexually daring film, they would have been disappointed by most of the other chapters in the film. Additional

²² "National Spotlight: Memphis," *MPH*, April 30, 1949, p. 31. On the Palace see: <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/4184> (accessed July 5, 2022).

²³ On *Paisan* in Albany and Troy, New York, see "National Spotlight: Albany," *MPH*, March 12, 1949, p. 27 and *MPH*, March 19, 1949, p. 29. On the Ritz theater, Albany, see: <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/20393> (accessed July 5, 2022).

²⁴ See for instance <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/1161/photos/233355> (accessed July 5, 2022). On the marketing of Italian neorealist films in the US, see Nathaniel Brennan, *Making Meaning, Branding Neorealism*, in S. Giovacchini and Robertt. Sklar, (ed.), *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style*, Jackson, MS, University of Mississippi Press, 2012, pp. 87-102.

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aspects of the film most likely also played an important role in attracting American audiences to *Paisan* an attraction.

For the film intervened in a widespread US discourse about Italy's liberation and occupation in the mid-1940s. Through numerous cultural venues, Americans had been repeatedly encouraged to see the US involvement into Italy as an uncomplicated good. If they faced difficulties, it was only because Italy itself was such a politically compromised and materially impoverished society. Without US aid and leadership, the American people were told, Italians would descend into chaos and fall into the hands of the communists. Occasionally, some Americans raised doubts about the efficacy and wisdom of US policy in Italy. But such voices competed against the predominant claims of what Susan Carruthers has called the "good occupation" myth of American liberators of the Axis nations.²⁵ It was against this background that *Paisan* offered US audiences an alternative perspective, challenging facile, ideological dichotomies between American virtue and Italian corruption and suggesting instead a democratic vision of suffering, loss, and misunderstanding.

The US presence in Italy during the war and occupation entailed not only a military and political endeavor but a cultural one as well. Even before the war was over, American officials planned for Italy within an emerging US vision of the world. Italy was to be both remade along democratic lines, understood in US terms of political liberalism and capitalism, and open to American influence and guidance.

This was by no means an easy task. As Kaeten Mistry has argued, American interests in Italy were susceptible to multiple contending forces both among Italians and within the US government. Further, American policy makers allowed themselves too much credit for the developments in postwar Italy.²⁶

²⁵ Susan. L. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016.

²⁶ Kaeten Mistry, *The United States, Italy, and the Origins of Cold War: Waging Political Warfare, 1945-1950*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

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But that Us planners envisioned Italy in cultural terms — as both problem and opportunity — is clear from such documents as “Long Range Policy Guidance for Italy,” by Wallace Carroll, Deputy Director of Area 1 of the Office of war information (Owi) in the US government.²⁷ In a lengthy fifteen page memo dated November 1944, Carroll painted a bleak picture of Italian society in order to argue for an extensive postwar role for the Owi in “the creation of a state of mind” in Italy “which will aid our foreign policy.”²⁸

Many Italians, he claimed, had abandoned fascism only because it had failed and was defeated not because of any real distaste for it as a political system or ideology. Twenty years of fascist rule had deeply deformed the Italian people including intellectuals. “Right now,” he wrote, “the intelligentsia do not know how to judge themselves or their own culture in the light of their own personal responsibility and their guilt.” They had been pawns in the fascist regime’s “campaign against the United States.” Intellectuals, Carroll claimed, had used prominent “American realist writers such as Steinbeck, Caldwell, and Faulkner” against the Us itself; their works had been twisted into evidence that America was a “country of destitution and poverty with a few living off the misery and the toil of the majority.”²⁹ This was a curious claim considering that some Italian intellectuals found in these writers an attractive alternative to fascist culture.³⁰

Too many Italians, Carroll believed, had still to come to terms with the magnitude of their failings as a fascist nation. “The Italians,” he insisted, “are still so shocked by the events of the last two years that they do not realize the depth of the fall of their country.” He claimed it was imperative for the Us to educate Italians into hard truths they needed to learn. “It is going to be one of the OWI’s most important tasks to keep the record

²⁷ National Archives at College Park MD (hereafter NACP), Record Group 208, *Records of the Office of War Information*, Area File 1943-1945, Records of the Historian, Box 2, Entry 6C, Wallace Carroll, “Long Range Policy Guide for Italy,” November 23, 1944.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ See for instance: Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922-1943*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 129-130; P. Adams Sitney, *Italian Cinema: Iconography, Stylistics, Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 41.

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straight, pointing out the defeat was the result of Fascism in the same way in which our victory was a result of our democratic way of life, and that what befell Italy is the responsibility of the Italians themselves.”³¹

Carroll framed Us-Italian relations as a story of Italian guilt and America virtue. He pitted a victorious American democracy against a debased Italian culture corrupted by fascism. Italians therefore would need to be remade through careful Us tutelage into freedom loving, democratic citizens. In order to accomplish this, the Us would have to teach Italy of the values and achievements of American culture.

The Owi official considered the challenges the Us faced in postwar Italy great but not insurmountable. He believed Italian dependence on the Us gave the Americans an opportunity to influence and shape Italy towards its ends. “In the same way in which Italians expect food, supplies and machinery from abroad, they expect information, guidance and leadership...In the same way in which they hope the Americans will rescue them from starvation and economic chaos, they hope that American thought will rescue them from the quagmire of their own conscience.”³²

Carroll did acknowledge “new and hopeful forces” in Italy which contrasted with the “grim picture” he painted of the country. He noted the existence of a small group of citizens who “defied tyranny for 20 years” and had “the courage to shoulder the burden of defeat and chaos.” He pointed to the “sincerity and drive” of the labor movement which expressed a “love of democracy.” He also recognized the “partisan movement” whose efforts had been “constantly underrated” and constituted “one of the most brilliant chapters of Europe’s fight against Nazism.”³³

These factors gave Carroll some hope. But he believed much work needed to be done to properly convince Italians of the benefits of taking direction from the Us. Fascism had poisoned them. But Hollywood movies

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

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had also given them a distorted picture of true America. Instead, an extensive cultural mission of education, instruction, and public relations with the goal of teaching Italians the American way of democracy, liberty, labor and civic life was needed. This would have to be a transformative project of Italy itself. “Democracy as a set of rights and duties,” Carroll insisted, “must be instilled in the Italians.”³⁴

This, however, was also intended as a project of discipline. Italy would in the process of becoming democratic under American leadership would also come to know its place under a Us organized postwar world. If the cultural mission to Italy was not pursued, Italians, “will think of America merely from their own point of view,” and fail to recognize the “many pledges that America has toward itself and toward the rest of the world.”³⁵

Carroll’s plan for the Owi would not come to fruition. The agency was disbanded shortly after the war’s end. However, many of his ideas for an extensive mission of promoting American interests through information, education and cultural diplomacy were taken up by the State department and the United States Information Service in the years after the war. Carroll’s report is noteworthy for its early articulation of culture as a central arena for Us-Italian relations. But particularly revealing are its the assumptions of American superiority and the diminution of Italian agency in the encounter between the two nations.

For such ideas and attitudes were not unique to the Owi official. They were expressed in many forums in American culture during the 1940s. Popular media such as magazines and cinema played important roles shaping American perceptions of Italy during the war and postwar years. Americans were repeatedly encouraged to perceive their country as saviors of Italy and Italians as recipients of Us largesse, good will, and talent. The Us was as Susan Carruthers has argued, the “good occupier” whose actions were undertaken for noble reasons.³⁶ In the process, however, Italy and Italians became transformed into passive objects of

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

³⁶ See S.L. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation*, cit.

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destitution and misery in need of American help and direction. In addition, because Italy was construed in American popular discourse as a landscape of chaos and disorder, the fear of an alien communism was never far from American discussion of Italy in the years of liberation and occupation.

An article from the popular *Saturday Evening Post* in September 1944 exemplified many of these themes, its title indicative of the anxieties the war and occupation in Italy held for some Americans. “Bankrupt Italy is Capable of Anything,” it announced, accompanied by a large black and white photo of two destitute women holding children, one that could be mistaken for dead or dying. A caption ran: “A stark depiction of the complete degradation of a nation—her people living in fear and hunger, her leaders corrupt, her daughters turning to prostitution to make a living.” Allen Raymond, the author of the article, opened his lengthy essay by declaring, “Italy is defeated morally as well as physically. Italy is defeated—divided—bankrupt—helpless. Italy is flat on her back and without energy enough to scream. She whimpers for help.”³⁷

Echoing some of Wallace Carroll’s sentiments of Italy, the American reporter categorically asserted, “This country is profoundly corrupt. It is trained in corruption and steeped in corruption, from the lowest functionaries to the highest.” The article introduced its readers to the miseries that were Italy—hunger, prostitution, inflation, social and moral breakdown. “It is,” Raymond intoned, “into such a country that we Allies have arrived.” The Allies therefore assumed the role of feeding the hungry, rebuilding the infrastructure, and stabilizing an Italian nation that, the essay made clear, the Italians could not do on their own.

It also highlighted the looming threat of communists, suggesting that Italy had been overrun by radicals. Indeed, Raymond implied the “anything” of his article’s title that Italy was capable of, might be to turn Red. “[L]et nobody mistake it, Italy is now in midstream of a strong revolutionary current. Every available index of public opinion shows the three left-wing parties, the Communists, the Socialists and the Action Party, have the

³⁷ Allen Raymond, *Bankrupt Italy is Capable of Anything*, «Saturday Evening Post», September 24, 1944, pp. 9-11, p. 42.

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majority of the urban masses of Italy within them, and everybody who knows Italy expects that backing to be increased.”

Saturday Evening Post's attitude towards the left can be seen in the article's treatment of Italian communists and partisans. On the one hand, Raymond claimed, “The Russian influence here is visible everywhere in the growth of the Communist Party.” But he asserted that some members “who but yesterday were strong-arm boys for the black-shirt Fascists are now strong-arm boys for the red-shirt Communists.” On the other hand, the reporter's description of the partisans, whom he saw as “men who really have caught the idea of the great American dream of democracy,” erases the actual, substantial role of Italian communists in the fight against the Germans.³⁸

Associating Italy with the dangerous prospect of communism was not uncommon in the American press as can be seen in *The American Mercury*'s, “The Communist Threat in Italy,” by Gene Rea, published a year later in September 1945. Indeed, even in the early postwar months, some in the United States already understood Italy in Cold War terms. The possibility that Italians might choose a more socialist future for itself could not be imagined. It could only be the result of forces that worked upon the Italian people. If not the result of the precarious social and economic situation of the country after war, then it was due to the machinations of the Soviets. Rea explained the dire situation of Italy to his American readers in terms of the “trojan horse principle” whereby Soviet communists deceitfully sought to infiltrate Italian institutions for the sake of turning the country Red. “The Communist Trojan Horse has its work all mapped for it in Italy,” Rea warned. But unlike Raymond who believed the Italian partisans were in effect good Americans, Rea claimed, “Young, dare-devil Communist-inspired Partisans have boasted to me that they have enough war booty hidden to fight a major battle.” Led by Moscow, operating in bad faith, seeking to maximize social chaos, Italian communists, in Rea's account, threatened to destroy Italy. If they couldn't take power through political means, he suggested, the communists “would not hesitate” to “start a national uprising” to “seize the government by force. The

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

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implication, of course, was the Us needed to act to prevent such a catastrophe. In Rea's account of Italy, Italians themselves had little agency. Nor were they accorded their own complexity. Instead, they were the objects of wider forces shaping their future.

Even when American media discourse did not frame Italy in a premature Cold War context, it still emphasized the work of Americans as good saviors of the Italian people.³⁹ Nowhere is this better seen than in another *Saturday Evening Post* article from April, 1944, also written by Allen Raymond, entitled, "How Naples was Raised from the Dead."⁴⁰ The Christological connotations are clear. The Italian city had died but now enjoyed new life. Unlike other accounts of Naples that recognized the devastations the war wrought upon the city and its consequences for its citizens, Dawson suggested Naples had been reborn. But, in his article, this had everything to do with the admirable, practical work of the Allies, particularly the Americans. As he noted, "This wasn't an all-American operation, but an Anglo-American one, though the bulk of the equipment and most of the manpower were American." In this particular telling of the American redemption narrative, Raymond singled out the practical skills and ingenuity of Us army engineers in the "restoration" of Naples. "[I]n this army operation in Naples and its vicinity, one figure certainly stood out in heroic proportions. It was that of a United States Army engineer. That was the man who did the bulk of the hard, grueling, fast work in repairing the damage and putting the whole region in operation condition." Thus did Yankee know-how overcome the destitution of the Italian people and save their wrecked city.

This image of the good American redeemer could also be found in John Hersey's popular 1945 novel *A Bell for Adano*, and the 1945 Hollywood movie directed by Henry King. A fictional story about the Americans in Italy, it rendered the basic goodness of the Us in terms of an Italian-American officer Major Victor Joppolo and his efforts to assist the townspeople of Adano under Allied occupation of Italy. As Susan Carruthers has

³⁹ For a recent account of narratives of redemption in American literary works about the occupation of Italy, see M. Escolar, *Allied Encounters*, cit..

⁴⁰ Allen Raymond, *How Naples Was Raised from the Dead*, «Saturday Evening Post», April 8, 1944, pp. 22, pp. 91-92, p. 94.

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demonstrated, Hersey's book provided an influential portrait of the "good occupation" that many Americans wanted to believe about themselves overseas in the countries they defeated.⁴¹ As Joppolo (played by John Hodiak in the film version) says to the town's priest about the aims of the Americans, "we want to bring good." The major's success in restoring a bell to the town's city hall symbolizes this basic goodness of the Americans' intentions towards the Italian people and their occupation. American moviegoers, as well as readers, were thus presented with further treatments of the virtue and superiority – on account of virtue — of the Us presence in Italy that parallel the accounts they read in the press.

When not celebrating the beneficial power of Americans, Us media stressed the abjection of Italians during the occupation era. In 1947, *Life* magazine turned its famed photo-journalism upon Italy itself, in an article entitled, "Italy: An ancient citadel of culture faces a new threat," with photographs by the noted Alfred Eisenstadt.⁴² The threat was whether a robust communist movement in the country would short circuit a budding national recovery. But in both words and images, the article portrayed Italy as a spectacle of misery. "In the harsh, barren countryside there is only grinding toil," the article proclaimed. "In the cities there is unemployment, filth and the futility of life in the slums." One page highlighted Naples. Unlike Dawson's earlier account of a city on the way to being restored, *Life* emphasized its poverty. "The worst city slums of the Western world are in Italy. The worst slums of Italy are in Naples...there are literally miles of tenement streets, festooned with laundry, stinking with filth which runs in open gutters." A full page photo of a Neapolitan street with laundry hanging above provided visual support, accompanied by the garish caption, noting the "black squalor of big-city slums...and the fetid air." Another photo depicted lines of men, out of work, sitting on a street, their heads buried in their arms, an image of despair and economic misery. "Slum youths," the caption asserts "become black-market tricksters or petty criminals."

⁴¹ See S.L. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation*, cit., particularly, pp. 35-40, pp. 305-307. See also, Andrew Buchanan, "'Good Morning Pupil!' American Representations of Italianness and the Occupation of Italy, 1943-1945," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 43 (2), pp. 217-240.

⁴² "Italy: An ancient citadel of culture faces a new threat," *Life*, November 24, 1947, pp. 119-134.

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This reduction of Italians to objects of pity and disdain served to further the article's purpose of communicating the stakes of Italy's political unrest for the country's nascent economic upturn. As the headlines of one page proclaim, "Recovery: Its progress is encouraging but Communists could stop it." Italian industry had started to rebound, *Life* claimed, but was "plagued by class warfare" which could jeopardize the promising signs of renewal

Written at the end of the same year when the Marshall Plan was proclaimed, *Life's* portrayal of Italy fit neatly in a wider American narrative about the direction Italians should take as they sought to rebuild from the war. The promise of a new Italy depended on following the lead of the US model of society and economy. But the Italian political situation, with its energetic communist and socialist parties, threatened such a future. To underscore its doubts about Italy, *Life's* article ended on a less than optimistic note: "For a sensitive people with an abiding lust for life, the Italians' tragedy today is they have never learned to govern themselves."

US media and popular culture in the 1940s, therefore, left little room for Americans to accord Italians their own complexity or humanity. They became passive victims of war, social breakdown, or communist manipulations. The very real precarity and suffering of the Italian people of the war and occupation years all too often became fodder for an elaboration of Americans own self-understanding as a generous, democratic, benevolent people. Italy, in this context, proved an important ground for developing a model of moral superiority and political confidence that many Americans would take with them into the Cold War.

While US popular culture distorted American perceptions of Italy, Hollywood, with the assistance of the US government, undertook a quiet campaign to return to Italy. In the final months of the war, the American embassy in Rome assumed active interest in Italian legislation regarding the film industry in Italy. The American studios had largely left Italy in protest against restrictions placed upon them by Mussolini's regime in the late 1930s. Anticipating the end of the war, Hollywood was eager to reenter Italy but sought an end to all fascist regulations. The US State department sought to advance the studios interests in its negotiations with the Italian government. As a memo, dated January 16, 1945, from the American ambassador in Rome, Alexander Kirk, to the Italian minister of foreign affairs, indicated, "The American Government has expressed the desire that the American conception of private competitive enterprise may be reflected in such legislation

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affecting the film industry as may be adopted by the Italian Government covering the post war period.”⁴³ Such a policy, of course, would provide the Hollywood studios with enormous advantage in the Italian movie market, given the disparities between American film production and the decimated Italian film industry at the end of the war.

A Temporary Film Board was established by the Psychological Warfare Branch of the Allied governing authority in Italy composed of representatives of the American, British, and Italian governments as well as figures from the Italian film industry to address legislation regarding movies.⁴⁴ One goal was to clean the industry of fascist policies. But Italian government officials also worried that Hollywood would flood Italy after the war with its movies and undercut the renewal of a native film industry. A major issue of contention, therefore, between the Americans and Italians became the Italian government’s interest in establishing a minimum number of days in a year that movie theaters would need to show Italian movies. The Us embassy however adamantly rejected such proposals, concerned about its effect for the Hollywood studios in Italy. Initially the Italians had suggested ninety days. But this was unacceptable to the Americans, calling it a “quota” system. Through the course of negotiations in the spring of 1945, the Italians agreed to lower the minimum to sixty days. Yet the Us officials remained opposed to such legislation, asserting that it “involves the quota principle, which is objectionable in any form.”⁴⁵

Ultimately, the US, promoting the Hollywood studios, defeated minimum requirements. The first legislation regarding the postwar Italian film industry did not stipulate the minimum days of exhibition for Italian movies. As Gene Caprio of the American Embassy in Rome wrote in his report after the passage of the film legislation in Italy, “As far as their opinions can be ascertained, here, the American companies are satisfied with the new

⁴³ NACP, Record Group 59, Department of State, Central Decimal Files, 1945-1949, Motion Pictures, Box 6933, Alexander Kirk to Secretary of State, “Italian Film Legislation,” January 19, 1945.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, Kirk to State, “Creation of Temporary Film Board,” March 21, 1945.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, Kirk to State telegram, April 20, 1945.

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decree. They are in a favored position to profit by the re-opening of the market because of technical, organization and financial advantages.”⁴⁶

Through the course of these events, Us officials and American film industry representatives communicated with each other as is evident from correspondences between Rome, Washington, and New York where the leading American film industry trade organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) was headquartered. For instance, during the spring 1945 as the Temporary Film Board met, Francis Colt de Wolf of the Telecommunications Division of the State department forwarded Ambassador Alexander Kirk’s report regarding film legislation negotiations to the Secretary of State onto Carl E. Milliken of the MPPDA. As deliberations in Rome by late April appeared to be moving in the direction of the American, and Hollywood, position, de Wolf wrote Milliken, “I feel sure that you will find this report interesting and, perhaps, encouraging.”⁴⁷ Similarly, the State Department telegraphed the embassy in Rome about Hollywood’s concerns regarding the proposed minimum days for Italian movie exhibition, “Governor Milliken of the Hays Organization [a reference to the MPPDA] has expressed to the Department the opposition of his association to the Exhibitors Quota and the concern that this might be only the first of other restrictive measures which will unjustly discourage American film operations in Italy.”⁴⁸ In early May, de Wolf updated Milliken about the film legislation, “Of chief interest, you will be pleased to know that the Embassy adopted a firm attitude against the exhibitors quota which was desired by the Italian interests, and as a result the Italian representatives on the Board withdrew this item from further consideration.”⁴⁹

The initial legislation the Americans won from Italy was not necessarily the last word. The American film industry and Us and Italian governments would engage in sustained negotiations in the postwar years regarding regulation of American movies in Italy. No sooner were the first laws passed, in fact, then there were

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, Gene Caprio, “Memorandum: The Italian Film Industry,” November 3, 1945.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, Francis Colt de Wolf to Carl E. Milliken, April 25, 1945.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, State Department to American Embassy, Rome, April 26, 1945.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, De Wolf to Milliken, May 8, 1945.

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discussions of revising them by Italians. Yet the developments in 1945 indicate the enormous power of Hollywood in influencing film policies across the Atlantic. The American government was not a neutral player in the world of postwar film. It actively advocated for Hollywood interests. And the American studios in return boasted of its role in promoting the American way of life abroad.

It is against the backdrop of both American perceptions of Italians as a passive people in need of Us salvation and the active efforts by Hollywood and the government to flood Italy with American movies that *Paisan* in America can be placed. For the film challenged both reigning assumptions about Us-Italian relations and the unidirectional influence of American culture. As Peter Bondanella has argued, *Paisan* offered a “philosophical theme—the encounter between two alien cultures, Italian and American.”⁵⁰ Here was no Major Joppolo saving the day for Italians and the American army alike. Instead, through the course of the six chapters of the film, Americans are confused, uncertain, and even cruel. They need to learn as much as lead. They fail as much as they succeed. Above all, they struggle to understand another people. And when they do forge understanding, it occurs through suffering, loss, and a recognition of a shared vulnerability. The precariousness of intercultural relationships as much as the living conditions of Italians who suffered through warfare is the preoccupation of Rossellini’s movie.⁵¹

Paisan establishes this concern in the first of its six episodes, set in Sicily. The American soldiers are initially mistaken for German troops by the Italians who have taken refuge in the town church. The Americans don’t trust the townspeople. They are skeptical of the young woman Carmela who they commandeer to lead them through a mine field set by the retreating Germans. The Italians, in turn, fear for her in the company of strange American GIs. The entire scene set in the church possesses intensifying tension as the Americans and Italians

⁵⁰ Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, New York, Continuum, 2011, p. 72.

⁵¹ In this regard, the film is strikingly different from the “occupying gaze”, that Andrew Buchanan has argued informed American perceptions of Italy during the war years. See “‘I Felt like a Tourist instead of a Soldier’: The Occupying Gaze—War and Tourism in Italy, 1943-1945,” *American Quarterly*, 68 (3), 2016, pp. 593-615.

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circle around one another with suspicion and doubt, suggesting the fraught and mutually difficult character of the encounter between the two peoples. In a small but telling gesture, as the soldiers head out of the church with Carmela to guide them, one of the Americans roughly shoves an older Italian man out of his way, the occupier asserting his dominance. In such details, *Paisan* suggests however legitimate, even praiseworthy, the US mission to defeat the Germans and liberate Italy may have been, it entailed its own forms of violence.

Later, one of the soldiers, Joe, and Carmela begin to form a tenuous bond of friendship in the tower the Americans occupy. But that new beginning ends tragically when Joe foolishly lights his cigarette lighter and is killed by a German sniper's bullet. When his comrades come upon the scene they assume Carmela, "that dirty little Eye-tie," as one of the soldiers calls her, was responsible for Joe's death. However, Carmela meets the same fate as the American, when she is killed by the Germans. The GI Joe and the Italian woman are united but in death. Giuliana Minghelli's account of *Paisan*'s landscape as "burial ground" thus extends to its transnational character as well.⁵²

Similarly, the film's second episode disrupts conventional notions of a virtuous US presence in Italy through its story of an African American soldier, Joe, and the young boy, Pasquale, set in occupied Naples. The boy leads a drunken Joe through the city, believing him an easy mark as a representative of American prosperity the US military embodied. While Pasquale seeks to distract the soldier, Joe dreams of returning to the US a hero. Yet eventually reality intrudes upon his hopes and he remembers the racism and poverty that await him back in the States as an African American. That some actual black American soldiers found more of a hero's welcome in Italy than in the US provides a trenchant historical context for *Paisan*'s depiction of Joe.⁵³ Amidst the rubble and wreckage of Naples, this black soldier tells Pasquale "I don't want to go home." But Pasquale, forced by his own compromised and destitute situation, eventually steals Joe's shoes when the American passes

⁵² G. Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory*, cit., p. 44.

⁵³ Christian O'Connell, "A Roman Holiday? African Americans and Italians in the Second World War," *History*, (2021), pp. 775-803.

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out. Later, when Joe catches up with the boy, he demands Pasquale return his shoes. This leads the boy to take Joe to the caves outside the city. Joe sees the squalid condition in which Pasquale, and many other Neapolitans displaced from their homes, live. He also learns the boy's parents have been killed by the bombing of the city. The episode ends with Joe driving away in his Jeep, leaving Pasquale behind, having witnessed in the conditions of the very people the Allies liberated something of a mirror of his own experience back in America. In *Paisan's* rendering of the black American soldier and the Italian orphan, the occupation becomes, less a story of victory and liberation, and more a vivid account of shared precarity and suffering.

The unsettling, fractious character of Us-Italian encounter can also be seen in what has been described as *Paisan's* "most enigmatic" episode set in a Romagna monastery.⁵⁴ Three Us chaplains, a priest, Protestant minister, and Jewish rabbi are welcomed by Franciscan monks to spend the night as a respite from the military fighting occurring beyond the walls of the monastery. Initially gracious, the monks become agitated when they learn that two of the chaplains are not Catholic. They in fact question the American priest as to whether he has attempted to turn his colleagues away from their religious errors and to the true faith. Yet the American informs them that he has not because he is convinced of the goodness of both the Protestant minister and the Jewish rabbi. The episode highlights the clash between "tri-faith America" and Italian Catholicism.⁵⁵ A story that juxtaposes the violence of the war without with the "peace" within the monastery, it nevertheless hints that the "humility" and simplicity" of religious faith the American priest claims to have found among the monks may also harbor their own forms of division. Its critique of the monks' intolerance, however, is undermined by the suggestion that for all the marvels of modern Us consumer culture such as canned goods and Hershey chocolate the chaplains brought with them, the invading armies lacked the spiritual resources that could be found only in the quiet recesses of Italian Catholicism.

⁵⁴ P. Bondenella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, cit., p. 75.

⁵⁵ On the concept of "tri-faith" America, see Kevin Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to its Protestant Promise*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

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Rossellini's film, therefore, provided an alternative to Hollywood's celebration of American victory. The popularity of *Paisan* among American audiences may have been due to its subtle challenge to the claims produced by US policy and popular culture regarding the inherent goodness of American presence in Italy. In other words, the film suggests a bracing and powerful rejoinder to the "good occupation" that Carruthers elucidates. Indeed, as she argues, a number of Americans at the time, particularly the soldiers who served as occupiers, recognized the official line promoted by government and journalists was not the whole story.⁵⁶ Arriving in the US in the late 1940s, after the Americans had removed most of their occupying army from Italy, *Paisan* offered confirmation of the human complexities and cultural ambiguities of Americans in Italy and Italian perceptions of the US.

Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, while the film garnered success in the US, it also engendered a backlash. Indeed, its popularity was the cause of discomfort. For some saw the movie as part of a worrisome influence of foreign cinema. At a time when the American film industry experienced a dramatic decline in box-office profits, foreign movies, particularly Italian, such as *Paisan* and *The Bicycle Thief (Ladri di biciclette)* captured US moviegoers' attention. Their popularity indicated not all Americans were completely satisfied with the fare Hollywood offered.

Foreign movies did not represent a serious challenge to the American studios' profits. But movies like *Paisan* did suggest an alternative kind of movies that increasingly appealed to audiences. Cultural guardians of the US film industry, however, critiqued such films as moral threats to America. *Paisan* in particular was one of the films singled out as responsible for increased violence in American movies. In a June 1949 *Motion Picture Herald* article entitled, "The Heavy Hand of Brutality is Leaving Its Mark on the Screen," Fred Hift claimed, "Many feel that the increase in the picturization of brutality is patterned in part after a number of foreign

⁵⁶See S.L. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation*, cit..

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pictures that reached U.S. shores within the past year...Hollywood has been influenced by the harsh realism in such efforts as the Italian 'Paisan'..."⁵⁷ Similarly, Terry Ramsaye, also in the *Motion Picture Herald*, without mentioning *Paisan* by name seemed to have the film on his mind when he wrote in August, 1949, "In Europe, the picture makers, along with the rest of the people, are still fighting the war. Their pictures record and reflect their poignancy, their bitterness and their hates. That product coming over here, some of it with critical acclaim for its 'realism' and its burdens of message, has tended to contaminate the American picture makers' performances."⁵⁸ In the film discourse of people like Ramsaye and the *Motion Picture Herald*, a major forum for American movie theater exhibitors, "realism" coded a "foreign" un-Americanism, and "foreign" represented an unacceptable realism.

If one considers the many ways American foreign policy makers, journalists, cultural critics, and Hollywood moviemakers misconstrued Italians in the years of liberation and occupation, *Paisan's* recognition of the difficulties of cross-cultural entanglements and its exploration of the fragile possibilities of human connection between different peoples is all the more striking. Existing in a liminal moment after World War II, between the Popular Front and the Cold War Marshall Plan, *Paisan* offered as much a caution against simplistic understandings of the postwar world as a recognition of its hard fought birth.

⁵⁷ Fred Hift, "The Heavy Hand of Brutality is Leaving Its Mark on the Screen," *MPH*, June 4, 1949, p. 25.

⁵⁸Terry Ramsaye, "Shudders and Horrors," *MPH*, August 20, 1949, p. 7.