

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Paisan (Paisa) 1946

Roberto Rossellini

OVERVIEW

This was Rossellini's second feature film, and the second instalment in his 'war trilogy', following *Rome Open City* and preceding *Germany, Year Zero*. The film is divided into six episodes set in six different locations, beginning in Sicily and ending in the Po river valley, roughly matching the advance of the Allied forces up the Italian peninsula from 1943 to 1944. Each episode was written by a different person and each stands on its own, the only linking theme being the cultural and linguistic gap between the Allies and the Italians. Despite that gap, the film's title means 'friend', 'compatriot' or 'comrade', referring to the bonds forged between the soldiers and the civilians during war. Following Rossellini's universally-acclaimed *Rome Open City*, some critics felt that *Paisan* fell short of that high standard. Others argue that it established a new aesthetic for documentary-dramas, given the authenticity of the locations and actors, and the use of historical footage and voiceovers to link them together. Rossellini also used many non-professional actors and often discarded scripts in favour of coached improvisation. The film won several awards, including Best Foreign Language Film from both the New York Film Critics Circle and the ANICA (Italy's National Film Organisation). In addition, Rossellini himself was named winner of the International Critics award at Venice.

SYNOPSIS

Part I: An American soldier and a local Sicilian girl form a tender friendship in a ruined castle, surrounded by German troops. After finally managing to build a rapport, he is shot dead and she is thrown into the sea to drown.

Part Two: A black American soldier forms a friendship with a little boy in the port of Naples. Neither understand the other, except through music and broken English, although the soldier suspects the boy is trying to steal his boots. Joe, the American, is taken to the boy's slum neighbourhood and gets an insight into the orphan's life.

Part Three: An American soldier in liberated Rome is picked up by a prostitute, but instead of sex he tells her the story of how he fell in love with a girl when he first entered the city six months earlier. The prostitute realises that she is that girl, unrecognisable now, and promises to take him to her in the morning. She gives him her address, but when he wakes up, he throws the address away, not knowing who she really is.

Part Four: Harriet, an American nurse, joins forces with a partisan in order to cross over the river in to the German-occupied half of Florence. She is looking for her former lover, now a leader of the partisan forces, and he is trying to get back to his family. They make the perilous journey, but Harriet finds out that her lover is dead.

Part Five: American military chaplains are welcomed into a Catholic monastery, in a recently liberated area. All is cheerful until the monks learn that only one of three foreigners is Catholic. At a meal prepared for their guests, the monks fast in order to win the gift of salvation from god for the two 'lost souls.'

Part Six: American OSS troops work closely with partisans in the German-controlled part of the Po River delta. Despite their cooperation, and indeed because of it, a whole family of partisan supporters is massacred. The partisan fighters are captured and killed by the Germans, while the Americans are treated with clemency as POWs.

MAIN CHARACTERS (separated by episode)

Carmela	Carmela is a young Sicilian girl.
Joe 1	Joe is an American soldier in Sicily.
Joe 2	Joe is a black American soldier in Naples.
Pasquale	Pasquale is a street orphan in Naples.
Fred	Fred is an American soldier in Rome.
Francesca	Francesca is a prostitute in Rome, who was once his girlfriend.
Harriet	Harriet is an American nurse stationed near Florence.
Massimo	Massimo is a partisan who lives in Florence.
Martin	Martin is an American military chaplain and also Catholic.
Dale	Dale is the leader of the American OSS unit.
Cigolani	Cigolani is the leader of the partisans working with Dale.

STORY

Part 1

Americans arrive During the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943, a night patrol of American soldiers enters a village. They go into the church, where a group of local people are hiding. With no common language, each group eyes the other with suspicion. Some of the locals think the armed men are Americans, others think they're Germans. When it is clear they're Americans, everyone relaxes and welcomes them. Still the Americans herd everyone into one room and there is fear all around. One American, whose family is from Sicily, speaks Italian, which allows the two groups to communicate, though some locals think he is lying. Other locals speak of their sons dead or missing in battle. Finally, the Americans get the information they want: the Germans left that morning, laid mines on the coast and fled north across the lava fields, which is rough going.

Carmela Luckily, a woman named Carmela knows the way and agrees to lead the Americans toward the Germans. Others warn her against going with the foreign soldiers but she wants to join her family, who have already fled to the north. The American platoon leader is also suspicious of the 'girl' and wonders if she might lead into a trap. Six soldiers leave with Carmela, while the others stay behind with the villagers in the church.

Castle On the way, they come to a ruined castle on the seashore, where one soldier, Joe, is left to stay with Carmela, while the others go ahead. She's not happy with that arrangement and wants to return to the church. The Italian-speaking soldier explains that they will try to find her family and bring them back to her. In any case, he says, when they return, they will all go back to the church.

Joe and Carmela Left alone in the deserted castle, Joe and Carmela try to communicate but only manage to exchange names. Each prattles away in their language, and the other understands nothing. Slowly, the cheerful Joe manages to break down Carmela's distrust, and through gestures and photos of his family they grow to understand each other a little. When he uses his lighter to show her a photo, he is spotted and shot by a German soldier.

The Germans Carmela hears the Germans coming and hides, but they find her. One of them also speaks Italian and tells her not to be afraid, that they are comrades. Then they begin to make sexual jokes and threats. Saying she'll get them some water, she goes to find Joe in another part of the castle. When she sees that he is dead, tears form in her eyes. Meanwhile, a terrific battle is heard between bomber planes and artillery guns overhead. The Germans wonder if they will have to retreat or engage in a counter-offensive

Deaths Carmela takes Joe's rifle and shoots one of the Germans before they kill her by throwing her over a cliff. Hearing the gunshot, the Americans go back to the castle. Finding Joe dead, they assume that Carmela shot him and curse the 'damned little Ital'.

Part 2

Joe and Pasquale The Allies have moved up the Italian peninsula and liberated Naples. The port of Naples is now the hub of the war effort, moving men and materials over the mainland. It is also the centre of a thriving black market, selling sex for cigarettes, with street urchins as middlemen. In the midst of a police raid, one of these boys, an orphan named Pasquale, helps a drunk Afro-American soldier, named Joe. The boy leads him away from the police and into a theatre where they watch marionettes enact scenes from the Crusades, with the 'white' hero fighting the 'blackamoor.' Joe gets excited and goes up on stage to box with the marionettes. When he is thrown out, Pasquale goes with him.

Dreams Together, they stumble over the rubble of the bombed town, communicating mostly through song and music. The boy plays the harmonica and the soldier sings the blues. Joe then goes into an extended monologue, acting out his dreams of being a bomber pilot and receiving a hero's welcome back in New York, where the mayor greets him. Although he understands none of the words, Pasquale is completely enthralled by Joe's enthusiastic enactment of his dreams. Exhausted, Joe admits to himself that he doesn't want to go home because it's a shack. Pasquale warns him not to fall asleep because then he'll steal his boots.

Reality Joe, sober and in uniform, is driving a military police jeep when he spots Pasquale trying to steal goods from the back of an open lorry. After he puts the boy, he realises the boy is Pasquale and accuses him of stealing his boots. The boy denies it but takes him to his neighbourhood on the outskirts of the town and hands over boots that are not Joe's. When Joe sees how poor the families are and finds out that the boy is an orphan, he is overcome with remorse, drops the boots and leaves.

Part 3

Welcoming the liberators Following the northward advance of the Allies, the story moves to liberated Rome, where the victors are welcomed by the local population. In the crowds of cheering people, young girls smile and shake the hands of the conquering heroes.

Fred and a prostitute Six months pass and the soldiers are relaxing in a bar with local girls. The women begin to insult each other and a fight breaks out. The military police appear and haul some of the women away as suspected prostitutes. One of the women escapes, picks up a half-drunk soldier, named Fred, and takes him to her room. He is not interested in sex, but she urges him with her limited English ('C'mon, baby'). Once inside, she starts to undress but he says 'Rome is full of girls like you. You're all alike.'

Fred's story Fred tells her how wonderful it was when they first entered the city, with the girls so happy and smiling. He remembers one in particular, a girl named Francesca. In a flashback, we see Fred in that glorious moment of celebration. A young woman, who looks a lot like the prostitute, takes him inside her house to get him water. They communicate through a few words in both Italian and English. He begins to understand what she says but cannot himself speak Italian. She reads sentences from an English phrase book, and he repeats the few Italian sentences he's memorised. Caught up in the joy of that moment, they realise that they've fallen in love. When Fred has to leave, he promises to come back.

The present. Listening to him, the prostitute realises, as we do, that she is the Francesca in his story. She says that in the morning she will take him to the house where his Francesca lives. She leaves him sleeping but gives the landlady a note with her address on it and tells her to give to him in the morning. In the morning, he assumes it is the prostitute's address and throws it away. In the final shot, we see Francesca waiting for him at the old house, in vain.

Part 4

A divided city In Florence, one side of the river is controlled by the Allies, while the other is still occupied by German and Italian fascist troops, though Italian partisans engage them in battle. All the bridges, except the famous Ponte Vecchio, have been destroyed by the retreating Germans so the Allied troops cannot help the partisans.

Harriet Wounded partisans are treated at an American Red Cross hospital some distance from the city. Harriet, an American nurse who lived in Florence in the past and speaks Italian, is worried about a man she knew, a painter named Guido who lives in Florence. A wounded soldier tells her that he is called 'the Wolf' and is now the leader of a partisan brigade. She wants to find him but is told it's impossible because he keeps himself hidden.

The search Harriet is told to go to Rome for a needed rest, but she disobeys orders and goes into the liberated side of Florence and asks about the Wolf. Wandering around, she runs into Massimo, a wounded partisan who has been separated from his family, who live in the German-occupied side. Harriet sees newspaper headlines that the Wolf is wounded.

Secret passageway Harriet and Massimo find a passageway in a museum that crosses over the river. But some partisans don't want them to use it because it would alert the Germans and prevent the partisans from using it themselves. And even if they did cross over safely, they'd be picked up immediately by German soldiers. Ignoring these dangers, Harriet and Massimo cross the river through the raised passage. They dodge street patrols and manage to find a man who tells them where to find the partisans and, maybe, the Wolf.

Success and failure Scurrying across rooftops, through courtyards and hiding in the shadows, they reach the neighbourhood where Massimo's family is staying. The streets are deserted except for German soldiers, but they manage to reach the partisan area. Massimo is told he can't cross the street to get to his family lives because it's too dangerous. He dashes across anyway, prompting a gun fight in which a partisan is badly wounded. Harriet helps drag the wounded man into a building, while other partisans execute traitors in the street. As Harriet comforts the dying man, she listens to him moan about the death of the Wolf. She is devastated.

Part 5

Guests at the monastery At a hillside monastery, monks celebrate the Allied victory by ringing bells. Soon, they welcome the arrival of three American army chaplains, led by Martin, who is Catholic and speaks Italian. The other chaplains are a Protestant and a Jew. The hosts refuse the American's cigarettes but accept their chocolate bars, while they ask them about the damage to their home towns and offer a glass of homemade apple liqueur.

Warm welcome The visitors are shown to their rooms, while the head monk learns from the cook that there won't be enough food for everyone at dinner. Martin gives the monks cans of eggs, milk and butter, which amazes them. The Americans are impressed with the monastery garden but question whether a life of seclusion is best for religious men.

Crisis The rapport between hosts and guests is threatened when it is discovered that one of the chaplains is a Jew. The news spreads quickly through the monastery, prompting prayers by the monks, who also associate the protestant chaplain with the heresy of Martin Luther. The head monk tells Martin that they must all try to save the lost souls of his two companions. Martin speaks of the equality and tolerance of all faiths, but the monks are determined to do something to save the Protestant and the Jew.

Salvation As hosts and guests file into the dinning room, the Americans are told that a vow of silence is observed during meals. They all sit down and the Americans are served, but not the Italians. The head monk explains to Martin that they have decided to fast in order to obtain salvation for the two lost souls. Martin begs forgiveness for speaking and says that he has learned a lesson of humility and peace from the monks.

Part 6

Danger in the delta It is now the end of 1944 and the war in Italy has moved farther north. Americans OSS (military intelligence) soldiers, led by Dale, are supporting partisans fighting the Germans in the marshland of the Po River delta. We first see a dead partisan floating in the river.

One of the Americans detonates an explosion to distract the German lookouts while an Italian partisan retrieves the body. Paddling canoes among the high reeds, the two men take the body to their comrades on shore, where Dale is told that the US Army has ordered the OSS to cease operations and for the partisans to return to their homes. We also learn that this small OSS cell is cut off from the others, surrounded by Germans and running low on ammunition and food.

Plan The plan is for a plane to come at night and be guided by fires to drop supplies. The partisans bury the dead man and, along with the Americans, row their boats to a safe spot, where they set up their radio. Dale is taken by a partisan to a friendly house, where they eat and then return to the others, bringing food and wine.

Massacre After nightfall, they light three fires to attract the plane, but a partisan puts them out when he hears shooting. Dale and his guide return to the house, where they see that a massacre has taken place. Bodies lie strewn over the ground, and a traumatised child screams.

Rescued British aircrew The next day, as British planes attack a nearby German position, one crashes in the river and the men rescue two British crew. They use the radio to arrange for another plane-drop that evening and set off in their boats to take the British men to a hiding place. On the way, the British tell them that the Germans are coming up the river in gunboats, which means they are in great danger.

Partisans drowned Minutes later, the German boats arrive and the men are captured. The partisans are separated from the Americans and British, who are taken into a house and treated to a lecture by an English-speaking German officer who extols the virtues of Nazism. When Dale asks about the partisans, the officer explains that they are criminals, not POWs, and not thus covered by the Geneva Convention. Outside, the partisans lie on the ground, expecting to be shot. In the morning, when the partisans are handcuffed and pushed into the river to drown, Dale and one of the British POWs try to intervene but are shot dead.

THEMES

1. Culture The thread that unifies these six episodes is the theme of cross-cultural interaction. There are many different kinds of interaction shown in the film, ranging from romantic and strategic to theological and opportunistic. American soldiers mix with Italians from all walks of life, soldiers, prostitutes, street urchins and closeted monks. They also form alliances with British soldiers, while retaining their hatred of the Germans. The sequence of six episodes follows a progression from misunderstanding to understanding. In the first three episodes, for example, the interactions lead to misunderstanding because of the language barrier; still, the characters manage to gain a little comprehension through their shared humanity, assisted by photographs, songs, gestures and phrasebooks. And in each case, a profound understanding emerges that changes at least one person. In episode 1, Carmela, who was angry and distrustful, senses that Joe is a good person and tries to avenge his death. In episode 2, another Joe has no clue as to who Pasquale, except that he's a thief. But when he sees the poverty of his neighbourhood, he reappraises his own poor financial situation back home. In episode 3, Francesca is inspired to leave her life of prostitution when she accidentally meets the man whom she fell in love with six months earlier. In episodes 4, 5 and 6, Americans actually speak Italian, although their stories do not end in happiness. By the end of the sequence (episode 6), the tragedy is not that the two groups don't understand each other, but that they are separated by others: the POWs are shown respect while the partisans are executed. Taken as a whole, the film is a subtle exploration of the interaction between Americans and Italians on a micro-level, where suspicion is overcome by a common humanity. As the Italian title of the film (*paisa*) suggests, they are all comrades.

2. War All the relationships in the six episodes are formed in the crucible of war, which heightens their tensions and leads to tragedies. Carmela picks up Joe's rifle and shoots a German only to be killed herself. The love at first sight between Fred and Francesca was ignited by the joy in both American soldiers and local population at the liberation of Rome; but the reverse side of their war-generated romance is that it is also destroyed by the war when Fred is suddenly called away and girls in Rome (including Francesca) fall prey to the easy money earned by sleeping with the soldiers. Harriet, the nurse in episode 4, loses her old lover (a painter turned partisan leader) to a German sniper. The final episode, in the Po River delta, has a high body count, including a whole family who are massacred for simply feeding the partisans. Looking across the totality of the vignettes, we can say that Rossellini combined the glory of victory with the ugly reality of death.

3. Friendship Within the broad category of culture, there is a more specific focus on friendships. Some of these are predictable, such as men fighting on the same side, whether American, Italian or British. Or among men of the same profession, such as the chaplains and the monks. But the examples in the first two episodes stand out as unlikely pairings, especially because the language and culture gaps are so wide. Carmela and Joe are thrown together for the worst of reasons. She wants to use the Americans to get back to her family, and they want to use her as a guide. Neither trusts the other. But when Joe and Carmela are left together in the deserted castle, something miraculous happens. With little words and gestures, they come to understand something of the other, even if it is vague and fragmentary. Their disjointed conversation (if you can call it that) is framed by a view of the sea, a setting appropriate to a love story. When their language lesson reaches the point of a mutual understanding of their names, they shake hands. And when Joe dies, Carmela picks up his rifle to seek revenge. It is a beautiful and moving short story about friends. A similar emotion is evoked at the end of the next episode, in which another Joe, a black American soldier, gets similarly stuck with a little kid in the port of Naples. Joe is in his own world, filled with nostalgia, anger and regret. The kid is just a nuisance, until he visits his neighbourhood and sees the kind of life the boy has. Now, the big man and the little boy share something special.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Carmela (part 1) Carmela is a young Sicilian girl, probably in her mid-teens, who agrees to lead the American soldiers on a hunt for the Germans. She is independent and somewhat surly but softens and shows bravery and loyalty in the end.

Independent Carmela reveals her independence in the early scene inside the church when the Americans are trying to find a way to track down the Germans. They hear that Carmela knows the way because she has already 'run away twice' to try and join her family. Despite the danger, she speaks up and says, 'I'll take you there. I know the way.' One of the women warns her not to go with 'strangers', but Carmela pushes her away and leads the men out of the church and across the treacherous lava fields. She hasn't smiled, but she knows her own mind and will not be deterred by others who are afraid.

Angry Separated from her family by the war, Carmela is not a happy person. From the first moment we see her, she is scowling under her dark, unkempt hair. It doesn't help, also, that the Americans are suspicious of her motives and treat her almost like an enemy. When she is left alone with Joe in the castle, she gets frustrated and wants to go look for her family. But Joe grabs her and there is a little scuffle. Freeing herself from his grasp, she sneers at him. 'You're all the same. You, the Germans, the fascists. Men with guns.' She has suffered a lot and the anger is understandable.

Loyal Carmela shows us another side to her character when Joe is shot by the Germans. She hides his body and is then discovered by the Germans in the castle. Using the excuse that she'll bring them water, she leaves the Germans and looks for Joe, with whom she did manage to establish a rapport. She finds him, where she left him, but now he is dead. With a pained look on her face, she utters a single word, 'Joe.' Then, swiftly but silently, she picks up his rifle and shoots at the Germans. Her attempt at revenge is unsuccessful but it demonstrates her loyalty.

Joe (part 2) Joe is a black American military policeman in Naples. For most of his episode, he is drunk and belligerent. He is also lonely, depressed and dreams about a homecoming from the war that he knows will never happen. At the end, he gains some insight into the lives of Italians and, as a result, his own life.

Desperate Joe's desperation is revealed in a wonderful few minutes when he entertains little Pasquale. They are sitting on a pile of rubble, the detritus of war, when he launches into an extended performance of a fighter pilot, complete with engine noises. He imagines he's a war hero and tells Pasquale about the reception he will receive at the Waldorf Astoria. The meal set out for him is lavish. 'There's chickens, there's turkeys, wine, whisky, beer' he says, sweeping his hand in front of the imagined feast. There are thousands of servants to serve him, the hero. 'Going home,' he says, 'going home,' now imitating a man riding on a train. Abruptly, he stops. 'Home. I don't want to go home. My home is an old shack.' He is a man of dreams, desperate dreams because they will never come true.

Francesca (part 3) Francesca is an attractive young woman in Rome, who makes money through prostitution. But, only six months earlier, she was a sweet, demure girl welcoming the Allies into liberated Rome. She is ashamed of her moral decline, especially when she meets the American soldier she fell in love with earlier. She attempts to resurrect that earlier romance but is bitterly disappointed.

Broken-hearted The final shot of the Rome episode sums up Francesca's story. Working as a prostitute, she has met Fred, the man she fell in love with only a few months before. Now, he doesn't even recognise her. After a night of talking, and no sex, she leaves him an address where he can find his old sweetheart (herself) in the morning. The next day, we see Fred tear up the address (because he assumes it's just for the 'whore') and then we see Francesca. She is standing in the rain at the address, waiting for Fred. She looks one way, then the other. He isn't coming. Despair is written all over her face. She's lost him a second time.

Martin (part 5) Martin is a burly, gregarious American military chaplain. As a Catholic, he feels at home with the monks in the monastery where he and his associates are guests. He offers them gifts of tinned food and cigarettes, and he admires their kitchen garden. He is also a thoughtful man, who tries to explain to the monks that Jews and Protestants are not 'lost souls.' As he says, they just follow a different faith.

Reflective Martin's moment of revelation comes during the evening meal served by the monks to their guests. He and his two American companions sit at one table, with the monks at other tables. The Americans are served, but not the monks. When Martin asks why, he is told that the monks are fasting in order to win salvation for the two lost souls beside him. He thinks for a minute and then addresses the monks. He hesitates, not sure what to say or how to express it. Then, he stands and says that he is indebted to the monks for teaching him a lesson of humility and sacrifice. It has given him the 'peace of mind' that he 'had lost in the trials and tribulations of war.' Prior to this, Martin had assumed that his tolerant viewpoint was right and that the monks were blindly prejudiced against other religions. Now, he has been humbled by their 'pure faith' in their actions dedicated to the welfare of others.

Harriet (part 4) Harriet is an American nurse serving with the Red Cross outside Florence. Some time earlier, she lived for two years in the city and met a painter for whom she still carries a flame. She is a spirited and determined person, brave and resolute, and also a little reckless. Her determination overcomes obstacles, but in the end she is left in despair.

Determined Both she and Massimo want to cross over the river to the German-occupied side of the city; she wants to find her old lover (now a leader of the partisans), and Massimo wants to join his family. They are told that there is a passageway over the river, but it is dangerous. Even if they get across, the streets are deserted and patrolled by Germans. 'Even doctors and nurses have difficulty getting around, and they are authorised,' they are told. Harriet listens with concern on her face. When they are told that they would be 'at the mercy of the Germans,' Massimo sadly accepts defeat. But Harriet breaks free and dashes down the passageway. The others try to stop her, in vain. She is determined and no amount of danger will deter her.

Dale (part 6) Dale is the leader of a small OSS unit operating behind German lines in the Po River delta. He is a leader with compassion, who is concerned with the welfare of his men. When he gives orders, he speaks calmly, as if he's making a suggestion. He treats his men and his partisan allies with equal dignity. He is battle-hardened but retains his humanity.

Principled Dale shows his sense of right and wrong at the end of the episode, when he and his men, both Allies and partisans, have been captured by the Germans. He and the other Allied soldiers are treated as POWs, while the partisans are considered 'bandits' without the protection of the Geneva Convention. Dale is concerned about the partisans, who are kept outside on the ground, while he and his men are given food and drink inside. Then, in the morning, his worst fears come true. He watches as the partisans, their arms tied behind their back, are pushed one by one into the river, to drown. When the first one is pushed, he screams and rushes forward to stop the murder of his comrades. He is shot dead. Dale dies for his principles.



(Carmela and Joe in part 1)



(Joe performs for Pasquale in part 2)



(Francesca listens to her old boyfriend tell a story in part 3)



(Harriet comforts an injured soldier in part 4)



(Martin, right, with the monks in part 5)



(Partisans and allies see the German gunboats in part 6)