

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## ***The Machine that Kills Bad People*** 1952

(*La macchina ammazzacattivi*)

Robert Rossellini

### OVERVIEW

Based on a story by Eduardo De Filippo and Fabrizio Sarazan, *The Machine that Kills Bad People* was Rossellini's first venture into comedy, though it also packs a satirical punch. Its tone is a long way from his war trilogy, but it shares with his other films (*Paisan*, *The Flowers of St Francis and Love*) a fascination with religious thinking, especially miracles and visions. It has nothing of the neo-realist focus on hard material reality and owes much to *commedia dell'arte*, but it is also similar to De Sica's *Miracle in Rome*. Rossellini called it his 'isolated experiment,' an appropriate description, though it is still a very enjoyable farce, involving corrupt politicians, stolen wills, bogus saints and rich American tourists. Rossellini became disinterested in the film, which was shot in 1948, and abandoned it, leaving it to be completed by another director four years later. After very negative reviews, it was shelved and virtually forgotten, though recently it has been considered an important work in the director's overall career.

### SYNOPSIS

Celestino, the photographer in a small town, meets a stranger, who appears to be the town's patron saint and gives him the power to kill people with his camera. Celestino takes advantage of this magical power to eliminate a wide range of 'bad' people, including corrupt politicians and greedy moneylenders. Fancying himself as an avenging angel, he goes too far, especially in the matter of an old woman's will. Meanwhile, a group of rich Americans have landed in town, eager to build a luxury hotel but creating a wave of public hostility against them. When Celestino realises that he has become too ruthless in bumping off his enemies, the old man is revealed as the devil, who graciously revives his victims.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Celestino	Celestino is the town photographer.
Old man	An old man turns out to be the devil.
Joe	Joe is an Italian-American.
Bill	Bill is another Italian-American.
Helen	Helen is Bill's wife.
niece	Bill's niece is also with them.

### STORY

*Prologue* 'Ladies and Gentlemen,' announces the narrator, 'I am here to present the Prologue to our story'. Then a hand creates the setting, arranging cardboard cut-outs of a sea, a town and mountains. Next come the characters, also cut-outs, every kind of person from the scoundrels to fools, who are placed inside the town. 'Listen,' the narrator says, 'and you'll laugh from the bottom of your hearts.'

*Italian-American tourists* A jeep stops on the beautiful Amalfi coast and a group of Americans get out to admire the view. Bill and Joe are Italian-Americans come back to the mother country; Bill's wife and their niece is also with them. Joe and Bill point out the rocks where the American and Italian troops came ashore as part of the invasion during the war. But now they want to build a hotel and attract rich American tourists. All they need is the permission from the mayor, and one or two other authorities. The niece notices graffiti on the mountainside, which names Saint Andrea as the patron of the little town below them. It turns out it is the Saint's day, which is celebrated by a big festival. Motoring on, they hit an old man on the road, but when they look, they can find no body.

*Celebration* Celestino, the local photographer, takes pictures of the procession of the saint's effigy. Others in the crowd point out the two newly returned 'Americans', and an old woman pours scorn on the fake piety of 'criminals' like the mayor who still owes her money. The day of celebration ends with the effigy being guided back into the church, accompanied by a full orchestra and a fireworks display.

In the crowd, we glimpse the old man who was hit on the road.

*The old man* After dark, the old man walks through the deserted town and knocks on Celestino's house. He wants a place to spend the night since the hotels are full. Celestino complies and then complains that the saint doesn't care about people any more, the harvest is poor and so is the fishing. He hopes for a miracle from the saint, but, the old man says, miracles have to be deserved. Then he says, 'good people have a duty to do something, otherwise they're helping bad people. The good people should kill the bad people.'

*Illicit lovers* A young man knocks on the door and Celestino lets him in. He is Romeo, son of one of the richest men in town. He is in love with Giulietta, and meets her in secret in the back of Celestino's shop. Celestino turns a blind eye to this sin, in return for a few cigarettes.

*Magic camera* The old man looks at the photographs in Celestino's studio and asks about the local policeman, named Agostino. Celestino says he's a bully and 'rotten to the core.' The old man says it's time to sort him out and tells Celestino to take a photograph of an existing photograph of the man. When the photo is taken, cries are heard outside. Celestino goes out and sees that Agostino has died. Celestino returns to his house and finds the old man gone. When the pair of illicit lovers want to exit through his house, he hesitates, with the old man's words ringing in his ears, but he relents. Then he realises that the old man must be the saint himself!

*Miracles* When the fishing boats come back early the next morning, they celebrate an unusually large catch, but a dispute rages about the right price. Greedy men decide to ask the mayor, who is attending Agostino's funeral. Because he died with his arm raised (in a fascist salute), a special coffin had to be made to accommodate the protruding limb. The next miracle is that Rome has authorised the payment of 11 million lira to pay for new public works in the town.

*Proof positive* Celestino ponders what to do with the special powers given to him by the saint. In order to be absolutely sure it works, he takes a photograph of a donkey, pins it on the wall and takes a photo of it. The donkey dies standing up. The photographer runs to the church to seek advice from the priest, but the priest is so enthusiastic about the public funds given to restore the church that Celestino says nothing.

*City hall* Next, Celestino sneaks into a meeting in the mayor's office, where people argue about how to spend the windfall of 11 million, each one trying to feather his own nest. Celestino says he has a tool to establish justice, but the mayor brushes him aside and welcomes the two Italian-Americans who have come to build a new hotel. Others in city hall call the mayor a scoundrel, while he tells the investors that he is battling against corrupt politicians.

*Events* Poor labourers gather together and decide that they should decide how to spend the funds. Celestino says they're selfish, too. The young niece goes sunbathing with her top off and the townspeople beg Celestino to take her photo. The two lovers, Giulietta and Romeo, are caught by the police and condemned by onlookers. A group of young men sneak up to a hotel window, watch the niece undress and release a mouse into her bedroom to frighten her.

*Celestino dispenses justice* Celestino now decides to use his killing machine to eliminate all the selfish, greedy people in town. One by one, they are struck dead by his secret actions. When the rich Donna Amalia is struck down, the mourners are keen to find out who inherits. But she's not actually dead, more like a state of paralysis.

*Stolen will* Two relatives, Don Gaetano and Don Felice, break into her desk and discover her will, which leaves all her money to the three poorest people in town. 'It's an injustice,' they cry and one man runs off with the document. Celestino catches up and orders him to return the will; a struggle takes place and the man knocks out Celestino with a blackjack.

*Thieves frozen dead* Bill and Joe, and the wife and niece, move to another, more luxurious accommodation in town, an old mansion filled with oil paintings. When Don Gaetano, the owner, is found standing in rigor mortis, another set of grieving greedy relatives arrive. Celestino threatens the other man, Don Felice. If he doesn't return the will, he'll die like Don Gaetano. Don Felice responds by jabbing his forefingers at him, like horns, to ward off the evil eye. The next day, while attending a funeral of Don Gaetano, Don Felice freezes to death. Celestino then takes the stolen will from the dead man's pocket.

*Greedy mayor* Next, the Americans are shown to the mayor's house, where they are promised 'no

one will die.' Celestino arrives and shows the will to the mayor, who tries to talk him out of it, arguing that splitting the inheritance would be a bad idea. It would be wasted, he says, because the poor don't know how to manage money. Whereas, if the money were entrusted to someone with ability, intelligence and honesty, well, then...Before he can finish, Celestino grabs the will and leaves.

*A change of heart* When Celestino returns the will to the bed-ridden Donna Amalia, she revives enough to tell him to burn it. 'I won't give anyone anything,' she says. 'I'll take all the money with me.' Celestino replaces the will in the desk and calls her a damn moneylender. Back in his studio, he zaps her with the camera.

*Scandal* People are upset that the mayor has sold the cemetery to the Americans, who want to build their hotel on that site. Cries of scandal ring through the town. With all these people dying, where will they bury them? Hearing of this, Celestino goes into his house. When Donna Amalia's will is read, the mayor objects and is then frozen dead. Now, the Americans are on the move yet again, and there is gossip. 'They're a jinx. Someone dies wherever they stay,' says one person. 'It's the evil eye,' another says.

*Not so innocent poor* The three poorest men inherit Donna Amalia's money, but it turns out that they are thieves. When Celestino hears this, he vows to get his revenge against the now-rich thieves and they soon freeze to death. The doctor confronts Celestino about his ill-conceived campaign but gets hit over the head. Feeling guilty, Celestino calls himself an 'evildoer.' He summons the old man, whom he accuses of being the devil. The man admits as much and appears in his true form, as a devil, with horns.

*Reprieve* The old man tells Celestino that none of his victims have gone to Hell.' Celestino asks him to bring his victims back to life and suggests that he himself needn't return to Hell. He shows him how to make the sign of the cross as a way of renouncing his past life and living on earth. When the devil crosses himself, he once again appears as an old man and all six victims are revived.

*Moral* The hand that set up the story returns to take down the set. A narrator says: 'The moral is: Do good, but not too much...Don't be too hasty to judge others.'

## THEMES

*1. Religion* Beneath its playful surface, this film contains serious content, some of it satirical, and some of it without comedy at all. The most obvious theme is that of religion and morality. Harking back to 'The Miracle' (the second story in Rossellini's *Love*), another saint makes an appearance early on in this film. St Andrea appears in the form of an old man to our hero, the crusading and credulous photographer, Celestino. Using the saint's gift of a magical camera, Celestino begins to sprinkle divine justice over the town. The problem is, the saint is an imposter. He's not Andrea; he's the devil. Before that revelation at the end, however, local people react to the strange events in their town by declaring them to be miracles when they are positive (for example, a good catch of fish, approval of public funds) and attributing them to the 'evil eye' when they are negative (mostly deaths). The priest plays it straight during a discussion about morality when he says it's all down to 'intentions' and that 'God will look into men's hearts'. A more nuanced view is expressed by the doctor when he says that it's hard 'to tell good from bad these days because they're all mixed up'. Celestino, fired by a sense of righteousness, has no doubts that he knows who is good and who is bad. However, it turns out that the three poor people who inherit Donna Amalia's will are evil thieves. Celestino has good intentions, but the results of his actions are not always morally defensible. That seems to be the message conveyed by the final words, spoken by the narrator, who says, 'Do good, but not too much...Don't be too hasty to judge others.' In other words, religious fervour is dangerous.

*2. Politics* Another theme smuggled into this comedy is politics. More specifically, we see that political righteousness is not only dangerous, it can be sinister. This message is suggested by the subtle but repeated hints and images of the recent fascist past in the country. We need only look at Celestino's first victim, the town policeman. 'He thinks he can be a dictator just because he wears a uniform,' Celestino says. Then a photograph shows him wearing a fascist uniform and giving the raised arm salute of the fascists. That raised arm is mocked after the policeman is killed by Celestino's magic camera and his coffin is constructed with a protruding wing to house the arm. Even after death, it seems, a fascist is a fascist. When an orchestra plays at the saint's celebration, we hear Wagner's *Tannhauser*, considered to be almost the national anthem of fascism. Even the fireworks display resembles night flares during the war, and the procession looks something like the mass rallies that dominated the fascist period in Italy. Even in peace time, Celestino appears to be

fighting fascism, like the partisans who are valorised in Rossellini's earlier films.

3. *Society* Another target of the film's commentary is social change, which is turning the town upside down. In the inventive opening sequence, we watch as a hand sets up the town with cardboard cut-outs, much like a property developer promoting a project to potential buyers. Then we have the influx of the Italian-Americans, with their money and their 'big ideas' to knock down the medieval castle and build a luxury hotel: nothing could be more symbolic of change than that. Notice also that the hotel is to be built on land that is the town's old cemetery, where the war dead are buried. Clearly, the new entrepreneurial spirit of the 1950s is sweeping the past aside. Bill's young niece, in her revealing bathing suit, also symbolises new life-styles that the town will have to confront when the tourists pour in. On top of all this, the film suggests the dangers of new technology, the very backbone of modernity. The visitors whiz into town in a new-fangled jeep, but that is not the 'machine that kills.' That label is attached to the innocent camera, which only indicates that the real dangers of technology are not always apparent. Given the subtle political messages in the film, we might say that its title refers also to the dangerous machines developed by Hitler's fascist regime. The science of eugenics and the invention of the gas chamber were manifestations of modernity in Nazi Germany. The atomic bomb, used by the Allies, was also a killing machine, and at one point, Celestino actually likens himself that nuclear device. However we choose to interpret the title, it seems clear that the 'machine' stands for the industrial and technological revolution that was changing life in traditional towns like that in the film. Change is so pervasive that we cannot even tell a saint from the devil.

#### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Celestino** Celestino is our flawed hero. He is kind but naïve in his understanding of good and evil, a simplistic view that results in his moralistic crusade through the town. He has good instincts—to support the poor and fight the rich—but he learns that life is more complicated than dividing up the world in that fashion. In the end, he is chastened by the devil disguised as the saint.

**Hypocritical** When we first meet Celestino, he allows a complete stranger to sleep the night in his house-cum-studio, showing that he is a congenial and generous person. Soon, though, we hear his complaints. No one buys the fish anymore, and the lemons are rotting without being picked. 'Saint Andrea has forgotten us,' he says with a sigh. 'The rich think only of themselves. If things carry on like this, we'll die of hunger.' He moans about good people getting a raw deal and bad people getting away with things. Then, he lets in a young man and accepts a few cigarettes from him as payment for allowing him to use his back room for an assignation with his lover. And for keeping his mouth shut about such illicit goings-on. Here we have Celestino complaining about bad people while at the same time contributing to bad behaviour. And all for a few cigarettes. He says he does it out of 'sympathy,' but the old man (saint and devil) sees through his hypocrisy.

**Simplistic** Later on, we see that Celestino has a simplistic view of morality. He is on the side of the poor, which is all to the good, but his sense of good and bad is naïve, a black and white picture of the world that can do more harm than good. That weakness is illustrated in a scene when he is running around town in connection with the old lady's will and bumps into the doctor and the priest, who are resting in the shade. 'Sit down. Where are you going in this heat?' the doctor says, perceiving that Celestino is heated up by his moral crusade. Celestino says he's on serious business, 'working for justice', fighting bad people and supporting good people. The doctor points out that good and evil are not so easily separated, but Celestino says that 'we have to kill off all the bad people. Only then we will be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' Celestino, the moral crusader, is unable to appreciate the complexity of the world. That's one reason he cannot see the devil in the saint.

**Remorseful** At the end, however, Celestino does realise that his campaign of revenge against the evil people has backfired. Donna Amalia's money has been given to the three poorest people in town, as stipulated by her will and as championed by Celestino. Then, he is told that those same three are not poor at all because they are the worst thieves in town. As a result, he kills the three thieves with his magic camera. Then, when he struggles with the doctor who tries to stop his crazy campaign, Celestino knocks him out and fears he has killed him. Only then, does the penny drop. 'I'm a criminal,' he says to himself. 'I'm an evildoer.' Later, in the same scene, he has a heart-to-heart talk with the old man unmasked as the devil. Now, Celestino has climbed off his high horse and tries to understand just what he has done. Luckily, his victims are restored to life and Celestino has a burden lifted from his guilty shoulders.

**Old man** The old man is a complicated and fascinating character. Part old man, part fake saint and part failed devil, he has the wisdom of experience and is able to counsel Celestino to curb his righteous campaign. He gains our sympathy in the end as a poor devil who has lost his job, but, even then, we are not quite sure what to make of him.

**Principled** The old man is a mystery from the moment that he seems to vanish after getting hit on the road by the Americans' car. When he turns up at Celestino's house, he seems to be a quiet and polite person. He reveals his sense of right and wrong quite soon, after observing Celestino collude in the secret meeting of two young lovers. He listens patiently as Celestino explains that he helps out the lovers because their families don't get on. 'In return for cigarettes,' the old man says, with a knowing wink. Celestino protests that his motive is purely sympathy for the lovers. The old man then tells him that he 'must honour' his father and his mother if he wants to live in peace with himself. It is a gentle reminder that Celestino should not deceive himself about his motives and must be honest. This advice is spoken in a kindly manner, befitting the age and apparent wisdom of the stranger.

**Sad** The old man is finally revealed as the devil, but he does not quite fit the image of a long-tailed monster with his sharp pitchfork. He has horns, like Satan, but he looks more like an emaciated refugee. 'Yes,' he says, 'I'm the devil. A poor, lonely, wretched devil.' He never does anything right, he admits, and he's failed this time, too. He's too old for this type of thing. He had high hopes for his invention of the killing camera and had hoped to destroy the whole town. 'I hoped to get ahead and make a name for myself,' he confesses. 'Even in Hell, there are rich people with connections'. But he failed to achieve his objective and does not look forward to his future in Hell. Poor devil. This is the genius of Rossellini's film, which manages to make the devil an object of our sympathy.

**Joe** Joe is the embodiment of an American go-getter. He is an optimistic, enthusiastic, bubbly businessman who sees opportunities everywhere. He even smokes the emblematic long cigar. Again, like the other characters in this semi-farce, he is an exaggeration of a type yet still realistic enough to be convincing.

**Entrepreneurial** Joe's character is clearly revealed in his first scene, when he and his friend stop on the road to admire the view of the town below them. 'It's a gold-mine,' he says, while his friend's wife can only see a pile of rocks. His plan is to tear down the castle and build a luxury hotel, which will attract all the thousands of American soldiers who landed on that shore during the war, plus their parents, wives, girlfriends and friends. Millions and millions will come, he enthuses. Of course, they'll have to buy the land that is now a cemetery, but that's not a problem because the mayor is Joe's friend. Although Bill, the other Italian-American, is a little less confident, Joe is bursting with optimism. He is living spirit of American enterprise,

**Proud** Joe may be American in his business spirit, but he remains a proud Italian in other respects. We see that side of his character when the group of Americans are staying in an old house that belongs to Joe's family. After some young men play a prank on Bill's niece by releasing a rat into her bedroom, Bill confronts Joe about the house. 'You said it was in your family for four generations,' he says. 'Oh, no,' Joe corrects his friend. 'It's five generations.' Then Bill insults him by calling the house a zoo, but Joe deflects that comment and tries appease his friend. Joe is trapped between his American friend and his Italian family, and he defends his family. He is a proud Italian-American.



(Celestino loads up his killing machine)



(One of his victims struck dead during a funeral procession)



(The hand sets up the town in the opening sequence)