

Performing Rome

Allison Cooper

To cite this article: Allison Cooper (2017) Performing Rome, The Italianist, 37:2, 263-267, DOI: [10.1080/02614340.2017.1332719](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2017.1332719)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2017.1332719>



Published online: 11 Aug 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Performing Rome

Allison Cooper

Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Cinema Studies Program, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME, USA

What is the relationship between performance and place in Italian narrative cinema? This essay offers some preliminary answers to this question through a brief analysis of film performances associated with the city of Rome. Acting, like setting, constitutes a fundamental component of *mise-en-scène* and, also like setting, is shaped by other filmic elements such as camera angle and movement, lighting and editing. Rome's neighbourhoods, monuments and landmarks are narrative spaces that have loaned themselves to myriad interpretations: historical, ideological, psychological and symbolic.¹ Performances associated with the city, however, have not been considered with the same degree of attention.

When performance does receive the same interpretive attention as setting, or any other element of *mise-en-scène*, it is unclear whether it does so on its own merit. That is, the relationship between star persona and place easily subsumes the relationship between performance and place, a gesture that elides the distinctive aspects of a given performance and its emplacement in a particular setting. The case of Anna Magnani illustrates this perfectly. Throughout her career she enjoyed (or perhaps 'tolerated') an especially over-determined association with Rome, thanks to her roles in films strongly linked to the city including *Roma città aperta* (Rossellini, 1945), *Bellissima* (Visconti, 1952) and *Mamma Roma* (Pasolini, 1962), among many others. Viewers familiar with Fellini's *Roma* (1972) will recall how it addresses this question of star and setting's commensurability via a confrontation between the director's camera and Magnani, playing herself. The encounter between camera and actor is staged in a dark and deserted Roman street, ostensibly in the working-class neighbourhood of Trastevere, where the director's disembodied voice observes that Magnani 'potrebbe essere anche un po' simbolo della città [...] Una Roma vista come lupa e vestale, aristocratica e stracciona, tetra, buffonesca [...]'. Magnani responds to this in the down-to-earth fashion for which her characters are known, correcting the director's conflation of actor and setting with a good-natured '*Chi sono io?*', shutting a door on the camera and, by extension, its attempts to frame her performances exclusively within the context of the city.

Of course, filmmakers, viewers and scholars do identify Magnani with Rome in precisely the way Fellini suggests in *Roma* and, indeed, the actor's identification with the city does obscure her acting to some degree.² This is particularly evident in Pasolini's decision to cast her as the eponymous protagonist of *Mamma Roma*, which was based, in no small part, on her iconic identity as a *popolana* and on the symbolic weight that her earlier

role as Pina in *Città aperta* would lend to his film.³ Having become enmeshed in the circularity of Magnani's star image and her film roles, Pasolini then critiqued the actress's performance in *Mamma Roma* as inauthentic. He felt that the prostitute-turned-entrepreneur character of Mamma Roma was too much at odds with Magnani's 'true' identity as 'petite bourgeoisie' and therefore inaccessible to the actor. Consequently, he believed she failed in her performance to 'bring out the ambiguity of subproletarian life with a petit bourgeois superstructure'.⁴

These vignettes about Magnani related to *Roma* and *Mamma Roma* highlight several ways in which narrative cinema relates performance and setting. First, and perhaps most essentially, it juxtaposes them in the pro-filmic sense – that is, as complementary aspects of mise-en-scène. In *Roma*, for example, Magnani strolls distinctively (performance) through a darkened Trastevere street (setting). Second, it imbricates them via other elements of film style, such as camera angle and movement, lighting and editing. For example, *Roma* emphasizes Magnani's charismatic dismissal of the director's association between her and Rome via the slamming door (performance) and the cut that rhythmically reinforces it (editing). Third, narrative cinema relates performance and setting via intertextual associations linked to an actor's previous roles. For example, Magnani's aforementioned stroll along a Trastevere street in *Roma* invokes the symbolic weight of similar actions performed by her other Roman characters: Pina's headlong dash behind the truck carrying Francesco away from her in *Roma città aperta*; Maddalena's long, disillusioned trek across Rome with her rejected daughter in *Bellissima*; and Mamma Roma's ambulatory monologues in Pasolini's eponymous film. Fourth and finally, narrative cinema links performance and setting through extra-filmic associations with a performer's off-screen persona – Magnani's iconic status as a *popolana* of Rome, for example, which contributed to Pasolini's decision to cast her in *Mamma Roma*. As these examples illustrate, Magnani's case offers a particularly expansive point of departure for a more sustained discussion of how performance relates to place in Italian cinema. Her individual performances and career as a whole give rise to questions about roles strongly imbued with a sense of place. These questions are amplified further when one considers them alongside Magnani's 'failed' career outside of Italy, in Hollywood, where her performances in films such as *The Rose Tattoo* (Daniel Mann, 1955) garnered praise from American critics but condemnation from Italians, who viewed them as caricatures of Italianness.⁵ As Catherine O'Rawe demonstrated, when Magnani was required to suppress her distinctive Roman voice and its connotations of class, gender and region, her English-language performances suggested a kind of 'vague Italian otherness'.⁶ To what degree, then, are Magnani's performances dependent upon their juxtaposition with setting, either at the level of mise-en-scène or via other elements of film style? To what degree is the performance of place dependent upon intertextual or extra-filmic associations?

Of particular interest to my own research, which examines filmic representations of Rome, is the question of how, if at all, our understanding of performance in Italian screen studies might be influenced by the spatial turn taken by the social sciences and humanities in the 1990s. Increasing interest in the notion of space has led film scholars to new readings of its significance in films and to the adoption of space as an organizing context for historical and social accounts of Italian cinema. Some particularly compelling examples of how colleagues re-evaluate filmic texts in light of the spatial

turn can be found, for example, in essays on Italian cinema collected by John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel in their 2011 anthology *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* – I'm thinking in particular of Rhodes' own article on the significance of the EUR in Italian films and Michael Siegal's article on Rome's non-places in Argento's *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (1970).⁷ In their work, Rhodes and Siegal both demonstrate how Rome's interpretive richness as a setting emerges even through filmmakers' recourse to the city's 'non-places', to borrow Marc Augé's useful designation. Similarly, Natalie Fullwood's *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space* (2015), examines the relationship between cinema and social change during Italy's economic boom of the 1950s early-1960s, through an analysis of gender and space in the popular genre of Comedy, and Italian Style.⁸ Though inflected differently by the authors of the aforementioned works, cinematic spaces – specific or generic settings and places – accrue meaning through their relationships with the characters that are emplaced within them (or whose presence is noticeably missing). The performances of the actors playing those characters are what give cinematic spaces their particular resonances.

Un giorno speciale (Francesca Comencini, 2012) and *Nina* (Elisa Fuksas, 2012) are two recent films that invite further investigation into the relationship between place and performance, especially as they pertain to performances associated with Rome. In *Un giorno speciale*, Gina, an aspiring young actress from Rome's periphery, agrees to an encounter with a politician that her mother claims will help her to realise her dreams. As her meeting in the city is delayed repeatedly, Gina develops a relationship with Marco, a newly hired driver sent to fetch her, and the two pass the time engaged in a spectrum of activities ranging from innocent to illegal. As Danielle Hipkins has argued in a recent analysis of the film, Gina's eventful journey from the city's indistinct outskirts to its historic centre and back provides a modern-day gloss of Pasolini's critique of the near-totalizing influence of consumer culture in Rome and, more broadly, in Italy. In Gina, Hipkins sees the embodiment of a postfeminist girl whose subtle forms of resistance make her a sort of contemporary Pasolinian 'firefly'.⁹ One scene in particular that catches Hipkins' attention involves Giulia Valentini's distinctive performance of Gina, who in turn performs Scarlett O'Hara's famous soliloquy about returning to Tara in *Gone with the Wind* (1940) on the Spanish Steps. It is an extraordinary performance of place(s) – of Rome and of Tara – that constructs a richly layered relationship between acting and setting by juxtaposing the labile symbol of Tara as a centre that cannot hold for Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind* with Rome's historic centre and its centrifugal forces of economic and political power that repel Gina back to the city's periphery.

Valentini's performance of place begs to be analysed alongside a second film from the same year, Elisa Fuksas' *Nina*, whose somnolent plot presents what might be described as an anti *Un giorno speciale* (a sort of *Un giorno qualsiasi*). Fuksas' film accomplishes this via its deployment of Diane Fleri as Nina, a somewhat aimless university student whose summer sojourn as a pet sitter in a depopulated EUR presents, albeit obliquely, some of the same economic and social crises affecting Italy's youth that interest Comencini in *Un giorno speciale*. As Nina wanders among many of the EUR's distinctive sites (sunbathing, for example, at the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana) their relative emptiness conveys the film's preoccupation with a generation of young Italians seemingly abandoned by those in power and left to fend for themselves. Like Marco Bellocchio's *L'ora di religione (Il sorriso di mia madre)* (2002), *Nina* dismantles symbolic sites of power

in Rome by overwriting them according to the desires of its protagonist. In *L'ora di religione*, Ernesto Picciafuocco – the film's artist protagonist – creates an experimental, computer-generated film whose subject is the dismantling of the Vittoriano. Both Ernesto's film-within-a-film and *L'ora di religione* suggest a connection between the protagonist's mysterious love interest and the symbolic destruction of institutionalized power. Similarly, *Nina's* protagonist re-imagines one of the EUR's monolithic structures transformed through her desire for Fabrizio, a fellow flâneur, in a dream sequence in which the two meet each other under an arcade whose columns have become an assemblage of origami works invoking the Asia that Nina studies and longs to visit. As with *Un giorno speciale*, *Nina's* protagonist is responsible for the film's distinctive performance of place.

Alongside Valentini's and Fuksas' 21st-century performances of Rome, are numerous others equally deserving of critical attention. In my book in progress, which analyses depictions of Rome in relation to the sacred and profane dialectic with which it is often associated, I single out several recent performances for the relationships they develop with the Eternal City, either via their imbrication with other elements of film style or for the intertextual and/or extra-filmic associations with the city that the actors contribute. Among these are Toni Servillo as Jep Gambardella in *La grande bellezza* (Sorrentino, 2013), Michel Piccoli as Cardinal Melville in *Habemus Papam* (Moretti, 2011), Asia Argento as Sarah Mandy in *La terza madre* (Argento, 2007) and Barbara Bobulova as Irene in *Cuore sacro* (Ozpetek, 2005), to name just a few.

If, as I have argued above, narrative film closely links performance and place, how might changing conceptions of place and its significance in Italian cinema studies affect our understanding of performance? Or how might Italian screen studies' growing interest in performance illuminate our understanding of Italian filmmakers' recourse to places like Rome? On the one hand, the spatial turn's generation of increasingly social and cultural approaches to film studies, and those approaches' dependence upon tools traditionally associated with the social sciences, have relegated performance even further to the edges of cinema studies. On the other hand, the effort to understand performance in light of its relationship to place can restore some of the film text's centrality, which has been challenged by those same social and cultural approaches. In *The Image of the City*, urban planner Kevin Lynch observes that, to understand a beautiful city and its urban scale of time, size and complexity, 'we must consider not just the city as a thing in itself, but the city being perceived by its inhabitants'.¹⁰ The films and actors discussed here perform Lynch's argument that the city is far more than a physical construct through which its denizens pass; it is the product of a dialectical relationship between urban space and those who inhabit it.

Notes

1. See, for example, *World Film Locations: Rome*, ed. by Gabriel Solomons (Chicago: Intellect Books/The University of Chicago Press, 2014); *Rome, Postmodern Narratives of a Cityscape*, ed. by Dom Holdaway and Filippo Trentin (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013); and *Cinematic Rome*, ed. by Richard Wrigley (Leicester: Troubador, 2008).
2. See, for example, Mary Wood, 'Woman of Rome: Anna Magnani', in *Heroines without Heroes: Reconstructing Female and National Identities in European Cinema, 1945–51*, ed. by Ulrike Sieglöhr (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 148–59; Tony Mitchell, 'The Construction and

- Reception of Anna Magnani in Italy and the English-Speaking World, 1945–1988', *Film Criticism*, 14 (1989), 2–21; Maurizio Viano, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 85–88; and Millicent Marcus, 'Pina's Pregnancy, Traumatic Realism, and the After-Life of *Open City*', *Italica*, 85 (2008), 426–38.
3. Mary Wood, 'Woman of Rome', in *Heroines without Heroes: Reconstructing Female and National Identities in European Cinema, 1945–51*, ed. by Sieglöhr, p. 154, and Maurizio Viano, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice*, p. 88.
 4. Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 49.
 5. Tony Mitchell, 'The Construction and Reception of Anna Magnani in Italy and the English-Speaking World, 1945–1988', p. 14.
 6. Catherine O'Rawe, 'Anna Magnani: Voice, Body, Accent', in *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices*, ed. by Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 157–72 (p. 168).
 7. John David Rhodes, 'The Eclipse of Place: Rome's EUR from Rossellini to Antonioni', in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, ed. by John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp. 31–54 and Michael Siegal, 'The Nonplace of Argento: *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* and Roman Urban History', in *Taking Place*, pp. 211–31.
 8. Natalie Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Space* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
 9. Danielle Hipkins, 'Of Postfeminist Girls and Fireflies: Consuming Rome in *Un giorno speciale*', *Forum Italicum*, 50 (2016), 166–82.
 10. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Boston: MIT and Harvard College, 1960).