

*Refugees in Cinecittà.*

By Marco Bertozzi and Noa Steimatsky.

Vivo Films, 2012.

52 minutes. DVD format, color.

Acclaimed for his *Appunti Romani* (Roman notes, 2004), a strikingly beautiful reworking of archival footage of Rome, documentary filmmaker and scholar Marco Bertozzi has followed up with a work whose subject has inspired few recorded images and whose treatment of the themes of memory, loss, migration, and exile asks us to rethink the ontology of found-footage cinema itself. A collaboration with film scholar Noa Steimatsky (on whose research the documentary is based), *Refugees in Cinecittà* pieces together a history that, when mentioned at all in standard histories of Italian cinema, had been reduced to a one-sentence contextualization of the practical necessity (that then became neorealism's defining aesthetic choice) of filming in the city streets immediately after World War II: The Cinecittà studios were unavailable to the reemerging Italian film industry from 1944 until 1950 because they were being utilized as a refugee camp.

Steimatsky and Bertozzi's collaboration not only unpacks the hidden history of Cinecittà's refugee camps but also turns it on its head since the repeated refrain of the film is the question: Why did neorealist filmmakers ignore the reality of the refugee camp? After all, the subject matter seems tailor-made for a Cesare Zavattini script, with the requisite poverty and desperation visited particularly and heartbreakingly upon children. The film provocatively leaves the question unanswered and instead goes on to right a historical wrong by retrieving rare archival footage of the refugee camp, mixing it with newsreel footage from the era, and cross-cutting it with brightly colored images of some of the camp's former residents returning to the site. Now elderly, these are the children of Cinecittà, those forsaken by neorealism, whose accounts of their memories as refugees, both vivid and fragile, support and elaborate on what little filmed footage exists of the camp from the period: snippets of Italian and U.S. newsreel footage; images from a relatively unknown fiction film funded by the Allies titled *Umanità* (Humanity, 1946), part of which used the camp itself as a backdrop and its residents as extras; and fragments from an informational film called *Thanks, America* (1948), which acknowledged U.S. charity efforts on behalf of the camp.

With images of the camp itself in such short supply, the film instead uses the refugees to reflect on the discrepancies between the present and the past and between history and memory. The opening sequence sets the tone with aerial views of Rome from newsreel footage accompanied by scratchy recordings of the refugees' voices (from the English subtitles): "I never said a word. So far nobody has." "We were right there, in Cinecittà." "I tried to forget." This acknowledgment that the story is untold gives way to memories of the camp and descriptions of the living conditions there. The overlapping voices convey a fragmented history, acting as the soundtrack to newsreel footage that pans across the postwar Roman terrain, from its outskirts to its center and finally to its opposite edges, the Cinecittà lots. With these visuals the film announces its strong sense of place, but it is a sense that is attenuated by the memories — some fading, some reluctant, some perhaps idealized or even incorrect — of the past residents of the camp who return to tell their stories.

In addition to Steimatsky's narration, the film uses the former residents' testimonies to supplement its archival images in various ways. They serve as our tour guides to the space, pointing out where their family cubicles might have been on the soundstage (in one particular case, the narration notes with irony, the location is Soundstage 5, where Federico Fellini later recreated the Via Veneto). But the ex-refugees also narrate the archival footage themselves, as when one man watches rare old clips digitized onto a laptop. The flow of images is manipulated—stopped, played backward and forward—as he spots his mother, sister, and the boy who would become his brother-in-law. Sometimes the former refugees “animate” still images from photographs and carefully assembled albums that they pass from one to the other as they try to decipher or remember the stories behind them. Lastly, and perhaps most compellingly, they serve as straightforward interviewees, talking heads addressing a camera that at times seems to want too much from them, lingering on their faces as their voices trail off, unable or unwilling to recall further details.

The interviewees' reconstruction of memory is fragile, as we see when a woman is telling the story of the mice she once found nesting in her straw bed at Cinecittà: Suddenly her home phone rings. She stops, a look of genuine worry settling on her face. “I didn't shut off the telephone. What should we do?” she asks. The interruption breaks the spell and brings the viewer squarely back into the here and now.

The legacy of the Cinecittà camp is far-reaching: In addition to housing those Italians who were left homeless by wartime bombing, the camp also acted as a way station for orphaned Jewish children from all over Europe who were to be sent to Palestine, as well as for Italian nationals who had been temporarily repatriated from the North African colonies. Although not represented by the selection of ex-residents appearing in the documentary, many of its former residents would settle in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Cinecittà, then, was just one stop on many postwar migrants' voyages to new homes in the Italian diaspora.

Recently, Cinecittà has undergone a different kind of occupation: Striking workers (lighting engineers, set builders, etc.) occupied the soundstages in the latter half of 2012 to protest the proposed building of a movie theme park, hotel, and health spa on the grounds. While Cinecittà's days seem to be numbered, its history is still being told. Bertozzi and Steimatsky's film provides us with images of a Cinecittà that had been (willfully, as the ex-refugees attest) forgotten and hints at how many more stories might yet emerge from there.

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