

Please note: The photo-essay simply tells the story of the film in intermediate-level Italian. This is a basic, literal translation to assist Italian learners understand the text. In writing our photo-essays, we aim for a fluid Italian and write a translation to match it. We hope that this language-learning tool will be engaging and enlightening. It's no substitute for material written at a native-language level that explores the film in depth!

The images are an important part of the photo-essay. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog, so that you can see the screenshots and clips that go with the text. These visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the links to other references in the blog itself.

Thank you, and enjoy!

La ciociara, Part I

English title: "Two Women"

Vittorio De Sica, Dir. (1960)

Summary

During World War II, Cesira, an Italian shopkeeper, brings her daughter to the countryside from Rome in order to keep her safe. The war will catch up with them anyway.

The opening titles scroll against photos of Rome in wartime: July 1943. In the center: 1. National Monument to Victor Emmanuel II (or "il Vittoriano"). On the right: the St. Peter's Basilica seen through Road of the Conciliation, the largest Catholic church in the world. Watch fascinating footage of the Basilica before, during, and after Mussolini had the residential "Spina di borgo" neighborhood razed in order to provide a grander view of the Basilica through the Road of the Conciliation.

Sandbags protect the building on the left. On the right, a map on the wall shows us that this is Italy at the time of the African colonies.

The scene opens on a street outside the shop of Cesira (Sophia Loren). Two men pass each other and give the fascist salute. Suddenly, the air raid siren sounds. We hear some explosions; people in the street scatter. Emerging from her shop, Cesira looks up and then closes the security gate at the doorway.

Inside the shop, some customers wait for the bombing to stop. The force of the falling bombs knocks products off the shelves. Amid all the tumult Rosetta (Eleonora Brown), Cesira's 12-year-old daughter, faints.

Cesira rushes over and takes her daughter in her arms. She asks someone to bring water and becomes frantic seeing that the water doesn't come soon enough. Finally, she tells Rosetta, "It's all over, they've left. Open your eyes, look at your mamma."

At that moment, Cesira makes a decision. She tells her young daughter, "I'm going to take you away from here. I'll close up the shop and take you away from Rome."

The customers begin to leave the store. One stops outside, stares down the street toward an area that has been bombed. A woman runs by screaming "My house!" A newspaper headline tells about the devastation of Rome by the bombings.

Cesira ducks under the half-open security gate and continues along the street, fixing her hair as she walks past a group of men reading the newspaper aloud. She enters a coal depot.

"Giovanna," she says, "You have to give me a hand. I need to take my daughter away."

"Where do you want to go?" he asks.

"Away from Rome, away." She asks him if he will keep an eye on her shop while she's away.

Giovanni (Raf Vallone) looks at her, and, with a sudden look of kindness, says he's sorry that she's going away.

A worker comes in and Giovanni puts a load on his back.

"I expect you back in an hour," he says.

"Why an hour?" asks the man.

"In an hour," Giovanni repeats impatiently.

When the worker has left, Giovanni closes the door and returns to the room where Cesira is waiting. She tells him, "If anything happened to Rosetta, I would have murdered someone."

Walking around her, he stands in the light of the open door. "You can ask me for anything," he says. "I know," she answers. "You were always a true friend to my husband."

Outside, we see children playing in the sunlight.

Giovanni flirts with her, talking about her dead husband. He walks to the windows and slowly closes them.

She tells him that during the last two years of her marriage, before her husband died, she slept alone. Giovanni makes a suggestive comment. She replies, "You don't know me."

She gets up to leave but he gently pushes her back into the chair. He says that it's a dead hour there; no one will come.

“You love me a little,” he says as he walks towards her.
She looks at him incredulously. “Think about your wife.”
“If a bomb kills her, I’ll marry you,” he answers, shocking her.

He reaches out for her. She tells him to stop and they struggle. A flash of light from the fireplace lights up Cesira’s face and then returns it to darkness. Eventually she surrenders to him – from loneliness, from desire or simply because this is the price she must pay for Giovanni to mind her shop when she leaves Rome.

Cesira leaves Giovanni’s shop and then turns back.

She calls out to him from the doorway and he comes to her. She leans against the doorpost, looking stern but also vulnerable. “Giovanni, you must never let my daughter know about this, understand? Get it into your head that, for me, nothing happened. We are like we were before.” He simply replies, “See you tomorrow.”

But then, as she turns to leave, he smacks her on the bottom. She swings back, furious and says, “Don’t have this master attitude! I don’t have masters!” With a push, she knocks over a bucket of coal.

But apparently Cesira forgives him. With a dissolve, we switch from this scene at the coal shop to the train station the next day where Giovanni has come to say goodbye to Cesira with a bottle of wine. She says gaily, “Thanks also for this! Put a new lock on right away.”
He replies, “I already told Gaetano!”
“That’s good.”

He adds, “If there’s anything new, I’ll write to you.”
“Not me! I don’t write,” she responds, “It takes me a whole page for one word!”
“Some greetings are enough,” he insists.

She asks, “Maybe you could come some Sunday?”
“I already thought of that! Ciao!”

Cesira and Rosetta sit on the floor of the crowded train. Rosetta falls asleep immediately. Cesira tells a fellow passenger, “My daughter was so excited about leaving that she didn’t sleep last night. Poor thing!”

We see that the train has left the city and is passing through mountainous countryside. Horses travel on one of the freight cars.

The packed train rolls on. Cesira sleeps with Rosetta in her arms.

Suddenly the train screeches to a halt. Everyone wakes up, disoriented. The passengers lean out the windows and ask the conductor what’s happening. “A bomb has blown up the rails. It will take four or five hours to repair it.”

“Look at Mount Forcella,” Cesira tells Rosetta. She asks the other passengers, “Where’s Sant’Eufemia?” and decides that it would be quicker to walk. She tells her daughter it will be a long way and Rosetta replies sweetly, “I like to walk, Mamma.”

Cesira gets off the train and helps Rosetta down. From a window a passenger hands her suitcases to her.

Some German soldiers hand her sack to her. She asks them when the war will be over. They reply that they’ll be home for Christmas.

Cesira rolls up some cloths and she puts them on her head. She stands up, picks up a suitcase and places it on her head. Then she hands a roll to Rosetta. The passengers hanging out the windows suddenly begin to cheer, “Brava! Brava!” Apparently, they’re from the city and aren’t familiar with the way country people carry things.

Rosetta is not so used to it either. Her mother explains to her, “It’s done like this. Put it in the middle of your head and don’t keep your neck stiff.” As they start walking away from the train, the passengers cheer them on, yelling “Be careful! Pay attention!” There are cries of “Auf wiedersehen!” and “Arrivederci!” Apparently, the Germans are quite comfortable among the Italians.

Cesira and her daughter take off their shoes and walk barefoot like peasants. Struggling with her suitcase, Cesira mutters, “I’ve lost the skills myself, damn!” She has been in the city a long time.

CAPTION: Cesira and her young daughter Rosetta leave Rome behind.

Mother and daughter have stopped at a peasant’s house to wash. The woman comments that her sons can’t stop looking at them, which makes Cesira uneasy. Nevertheless, she decides to spend the night there. She and the peasant woman discuss payment for the room.

Noticing that two Italian soldiers are approaching through the trees, the woman warns her sons, who run away. The soldiers arrive and ask where her sons are. She responds that they are fighting for Mussolini.

Seeing Cesira, who is combing Rosetta’s hair, one of the soldiers asks the peasant woman who the two women are. She tells him that they are from Rome and are headed for Sant’Eufemia.

The men warn the peasant: her sons are deserters and if they catch them they will have to shoot them. She has her husband serve them wine. They drink and then hold out their glasses for more.

Rosetta is holding a mirror while Cesira arranges her hair.

The soldiers approach them, “What do they say in the capital, Signora?”

“Bombs this big come,” she answers, gesturing.

“In a month, you’ll see what happens. We’re determined to finish it.”

“Let’s hope so.”

The soldiers suggest that she stay in Fondi, that in Fondi there is food and that in Sant’Eufemia there is not even flour. But Cesira says she’s from there; people know her there.

One of the men suggests that Cesira could stay at their Headquarters and help out in the kitchen. He reaches out his hand to Rosetta, asking, “Would you rather come or stay with the goats?” Cesira firmly removes his hand. She will probably spend the trip protecting her daughter from men who don’t even realize that she’s just a little girl.

CAPTION: Cesira threatens with a rock the soldiers flirting with Rosetta.

When he reaches out again, Cesira insults him. He replies that she deserves to be shot, but the peasant woman intervenes, telling Cesira that the men are Fascists, respectable people. The other soldier says, “They’re women; it’s not worth it.” The soldiers leave, but not before telling Cesira that they could forcibly take her to Headquarters because it’s war time.

A crossfade brings us to the following morning. Cesira is at the window. A rooster crows. She leans out and looks around outside.

She shakes her daughter to wake her up, telling her that it’s daylight. They need to get going before the men come back. She leaves money for the room on the table and they take off.

As the two walk along the road, with their suitcases on their heads, Cesira tells Rosetta, “You’ve never been on a mule.”

“Never, Mamma.”

They’re overtaken by a man riding a bicycle. Cesira stops him and asks where they could get two mules to go to Sant’Eufemia. “On foot, the baby is not going to make it.”

He says that he doesn’t know. He’s from the next village, Forcella, and can’t help her.

There’s a low ominous drumbeat and the wind starts to blow. Suddenly the three look up and see a formation of fighter planes overhead. “They’re on their way to Rome again,” the man comments. He says goodbye and rides off.

But he is wrong. We hear the roar of the planes get louder as they swoop down and start shooting. Rosetta flies into Cesira’s arms; the man on the bicycle is shot and killed.

Cesira takes her daughter’s arm. “Let’s cut this way”

“But mamma, that old man...?”

“What do you want to meddle with, darling?”

A dissolve takes us to Sant’Eufemia.

As the two walk, we hear a group singing along with an accordion. In a beautiful touch of synchronicity, we see a peasant walking with a jug on her head like our two walking with their suitcases on their heads. As they approach the group, the singing dies down and stops.

Everyone looks at Cesira and Rosetta.

Apparently, Cesira has not been there for quite a while. She introduces herself and shares her recollections. Cesira and the residents start exchanging updates about people that they know.

“What air! You suddenly feel like talking in dialect,” says Cesira and adds something in dialect. She asks about family members and finds out that someone has moved to Naples, someone else is dead. She turns and points to the place where she was born.

Finally, Cesira asks if she can stay at the family home, but everything is already occupied by the people at the table, who are also refugees.

Someone suggests that the loom could be moved from the weaving shed and Cesira and Rosetta could stay there.

Cesira tells the head of the household, “Paride, remember we’re family.”

“Here we are all family.”

“I’m not going back to Rome. This morning we almost got ourselves killed.”

“How?”

“An airplane killed a cyclist, poor thing.”

“Here we’re far from everything. The English will be here soon.”

It is decided that the frame will be moved. Cesira and Rosetta can stay there.

The people around the table begin to argue about the war. Michele (Jean-Paul Belmondo) accuses some of being fascists and of wanting the war. A man responds that he talks as if he wasn’t Italian. After the young man leaves in disgust, the group resumes singing – a fascist song.

While someone works at the loom, which has been moved into the house, the family eats and discusses the costs of food and what is available. (In the background, a woman washes her feet in a basin.)

At the sound of planes, Cesira looks up, concerned, but someone tells her not to be afraid; they pass by every night.

Rosetta gives her cousin an arithmetic lesson, using the bread in her hand. The grown-ups talk about a relative who's a POW in Russia who misses his baby girl.

Rosetta says, "How lovely, Mamma! It makes me feel like praying."

"Then pray, my angel, pray."

Rosetta crosses herself and kneels in prayer.

Michele approaches Cesira, apologizing for his behavior at the table. She tells him she wasn't offended and asks what the planes are doing with the lights. He replies, "They're spying on troop movements."

"Can they see us too?"

"Definitely."

The next scene touches on one of the film's themes: how the war is making little Rosetta grow up. In their room, Cesira is giving the girl a bath. The mother dumps a bucket of water over her daughter's head, commenting nonchalantly that she is starting to have a woman's behind. Suddenly the window opens. It's Michele!

Rosetta, ashamed, covers herself with her arms. Michele, just as mortified, runs away. Cesira just laughs.

From the window, she calls to Michele. He apologizes; he was just coming to invite them for a walk. "Don't be afraid," responds Cesira. "She's a baby."

Rosetta, on the other hand, replies that she never wants to see him again. Cesira reassures her, "He didn't see you."

Poor Michele. Cesira remarks that he seems crazy. "His father spent a fortune to educate him, only to be insulted by his son."

"But he said some true things", Rosetta says.

"What do you know about life my precious daughter?" But Cesira and Rosetta can't be too mean to him because his father has prosciutto, pasta, everything!

A dissolve brings us to a new day. Rosetta is running in a field with Michele; Cesira is not far behind.

Rosetta has a book with her. Michele asks what it is about and takes it from her to read it. Cesira takes care of her daughter's hair. When he finds out that Rosetta goes to a convent school, Michele comments, "From nuns, you don't learn the truth." This makes the devout little girl angry and she runs away.

Michele apologizes, but he adds, "Sometimes I have to say what I think."

Cesira and Michele have an intimate talk about personal things and about politics. He never had a girlfriend. Cesira comments, "You can do without a lot of things, but not love."

Suddenly Cesira hears someone talking and looks up. The soldiers from Fondi – where Cesira and her daughter spent their first night – are here! Dressed in civilian clothes, they're talking to Rosetta. Cesira jumps up and runs to her.

They are looking for the shortcut to Sella. Cesira points to it.

They know that Michele is an anti-fascist. They tell him that Mussolini has been put in prison. Michele smiles.

One of the men points a gun at Michele, "Twenty years of glory ruined in a day, in an hour!" The men scare Rosetta, who hides in her mother's arms. She tells the fascist to put the gun away. His companion convinces him: "The Germans will get him. Let's go." The two take off.

"A new life will begin for us!" Michele exclaims. Cesira says they can go back to Rome now. Michele answers excitedly, "Yes, we're free!" He kisses her and her daughter. Overjoyed, he runs off to tell the news to his father, his mother, to everyone.