

Ayn Rand's "We the Living"

New Life in a Restored Film Version

by Michelle Marder Kamhi

Although Ayn Rand's first novel, *We the Living*, has acquired neither the fame nor the notoriety of her other major fictional works, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, it is the private favorite of many of her most ardent admirers. Based substantially on her own life in Bolshevik Russia before she left for the United States in the mid-1920s, it was, she later stated, "as near to an autobiography" as she would ever write. (Just how near, is amply documented by her biographer Barbara Branden in *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, reviewed in *Aristos* 5/87.)

The circumstances of Rand's youth in Petrograd (St. Petersburg, now Leningrad) after the communist revolution are vividly evoked in *We the Living*: the general poverty and hunger, while speculators grew fat on ill-gotten gains; the constant threat of disease; the systematic deprivations and restrictions visited on Rand's family because they were "bourgeois"; in sum, the institutionalized hopelessness of life under Soviet rule. And, not surprisingly, Rand's most deeply held values and convictions are embodied in the novel's heroine, Kira Argounova—a fiercely independent young woman who dreams of becoming an engineer, a builder of bridges, much as her creator had dreamed of becoming a writer. Less intellectual than Rand's later novels, with their more intricate plots, more idealized characters, and lengthy philosophical monologues, *We the Living* vividly dramatizes, through a rather idiosyncratic love story, the inexorably destructive effect of totalitarianism, especially on the best individuals. In the end, Kira and the two very different men who love her perish, in one way or another, as do many of the secondary characters who people the novel. The story is Rand's simplest, most direct, most passionate statement of her personal philosophy of the supreme value of the individual.

Reception of the Novel

First published in 1936, *We the Living* delivered a searing indictment of the collectivist ideal, at a time when many intellectuals in the West had been seduced by the ostensibly moral appeal of socialism. "Too controversial" to be commercially promising, the manuscript had been circulated for two years before a publisher was found for it. When the book finally appeared (in the same year as *Gone with the Wind*), it was ignored in the



Alida Valli as Kira and Rossano Brazzi as Leo

major daily newspapers and drew very mixed reactions in the periodical press—reactions largely reflecting the reviewers' political biases.

On the whole, the political and moral premises of *We the Living* were rejected outright or, at best, only half understood, though a number of reviewers praised the writing. *The New York Times Book Review*, for example, found the novel "slavishly warped to the dictates of propaganda," yet acknowledged the author's "remarkably fluent English" (mastered in the span of a decade) and grudgingly conceded: "Miss Rand can command a good deal of narrative skill, and her novel moves with alacrity and vigor on occasion."

Another reviewer, a Russian émigré writing in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, concluded: "Ayn Rand has preserved in her pages a graphic story of what could happen and often did happen in Russia in 1922"; but she failed to grasp Rand's view that the evils under early Bolshevism were fundamental, not just temporary aberrations. (That failure no doubt contributed to the bitterness Rand later vented when she called the review "disgusting" and quite unreasonably charged that it "gave a synopsis only, expressing absolutely no opinion," as cited by Barbara Branden.) In any case, the prevailing sentiments

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among intellectuals in America in the thirties were such that sales of the novel in the first year after publication were sluggish, and the publisher, seeing no prospects beyond the initial edition of 3,000, destroyed the type.

An Unlikely Film Venture

Given the inauspicious debut of *We the Living* in the United States, and the production of an abysmally unsuccessful stage adaptation (as *The Unconquered*) on Broadway in 1940, it is an intriguing twist of cultural history that Rand's anti-totalitarian novel attracted the attention of filmmakers in Mussolini's Italy in 1942. With the sanction of Fascist authorities hoping to capitalize on the novel's anti-communist content, an unauthorized film adaptation of *We the Living* (in Italian, *Noi Vivi*) was produced near Rome—at virtually the same time, it is worth noting, that the American film classic *Casablanca* was made in Hollywood.

Though no literary rights were obtained (since Italy and the United States were then still at war), and the project was therefore in violation of international copyright law, *We the Living* received a lavish studio commitment. The director, Goffredo Alessandrini, was well-established in the flourishing Italian film industry; and a glittering roster of stars and supporting actors was drawn up for the project. The central role of the novel's indomitable heroine went to Alida Valli, already a film veteran and a leading actress at twenty-one. Valli, who will remind many of Garbo, had the beauty, talent, and personal affinity to bring Kira vibrantly to life. ("I'm not going to tell you anything about how to interpret the part," Alessandrini is said to have told her, "because you are Kira.") Though newer to films than Valli, Rossano Brazzi was, with his refined good looks and his seemingly effortless expression of contempt, a perfect choice for Kira's first love, Leo Kovalensky—the young aristocrat destroyed as much by his own cynicism and pessimism as by external circumstances. And to the pivotal role of Andrei Taganov, the idealistic G.P.U. agent who falls in love with Kira, Fosco Giachetti—then Italy's foremost leading man—brought a sensitivity and personal magnetism that more than compensated for his age (close to forty, he was a decade older than the Andrei of the novel). Finally, a superlative supporting cast was assembled, and extras were drawn from the sizable community of Russian émigrés then living in Rome.

Contracts had been signed, and the numerous participants committed to an imminent shooting schedule, when the filmmakers found themselves without a workable script. Rejecting a free-wheeling adaptation prepared by two well-known writers assigned to the project (who had transformed the would-be engineer Kira

into a ballerina!), Alessandrini proceeded on schedule, without a complete script in hand. With little time for "creative" alterations, the novel was followed closely; most of the important scenes were shot, adhering to Rand's plot, characterization, and dialogue to a degree unusual in cinematic practice. So much usable footage resulted that *two* full-length films were produced—*Noi Vivi* and *Addio, Kira*—released in Italy in the last months of 1942, when war-weary Italians were growing disenchanted with Mussolini's disastrous regime.

Like *Casablanca*, which also centered on a love triangle played out amidst political tyranny and intrigue, the films based on *We the Living* were critically acclaimed (*Noi Vivi* won the Volpe Cup at the 1942 Venice Film Festival) and went on to enjoy extraordinary popularity. Unlike *Casablanca*, however, *Noi Vivi* and *Addio, Kira* disappeared from the screen months after their release—because, it is generally believed, the Fascist authorities belatedly recognized their implicit criticism of Fascism and banned them. (A recent article in *Liberty*, a small libertarian monthly, contends that the films were never banned—a contention repudiated by the producers as based on tenuous evidence.)

To what extent the original film version of *We the Living* was intended as a veiled anti-Fascist statement or merely, on its face value, as an engrossing love story set against a background of anti-communist sentiment, is difficult to say with any assurance. But the well-corroborated popular response to *Noi Vivi* and *Addio, Kira* strongly suggests that, whatever the intention of the filmmakers, the oppressed Italian public readily saw parallels between life under communism and life under Mussolini's Fascism—parallels certainly consistent with Rand's intent. In her Foreword to the revised edition of the novel, published in 1959 (since then, notably, total sales of the book have exceeded two million copies), the author emphatically stated:

We the Living is not a novel "about Soviet Russia." It is a novel about Man against the State. . . .

. . . It is a story about Dictatorship, any dictatorship, anywhere, at any time, whether it be Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, or—which this novel might do its share in helping to prevent—a socialist America.

Rediscovery and Restoration

Through the vision and tenacity of three individuals—Rand's former lawyer, Henry Mark Holzer; his wife, attorney Erika Holzer, herself the author of a suspense novel about escape from Soviet tyranny (*Double Crossing*, reviewed in *Aristos* 12/83); and an independent filmmaker, Duncan Scott—the remarkable 1942 film adaptation of *We the Living* has recently been released in the United States in an

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authorized, re-edited version. Beginning in the 1960s, with the Holzers' determined sleuthing through bureaucratic mazes and industry channels to locate and purchase the original negative of the Italian version, the project has taken more than two decades to complete.

Ayn Rand herself became directly involved in the undertaking in 1969, when she viewed *Noi Vivi* and *Addio, Kira* with Scott and the Holzers. (Years before, she had been shown a print by Brazzi.) On the whole, the author was enthusiastic—far more satisfied than she had been with the film of *The Fountainhead* (though she had written that screenplay herself)—but she did not approve of some of the changes introduced by the Italians, in part to appease Fascist censors. Furthermore, the two films could not be shown together commercially unless the total running time of 240 minutes were cut. Consequently, it was agreed that the footage would be re-edited by Scott, both to shorten it and to bring it closer to Rand's meaning.

The bulk of the editing was done almost immediately, following the general approach agreed on with the author in the initial screening session. (Most of the editing involved dropping the subplot segments, leaving the main plot episodes virtually intact.) But some substantive problems remained to be resolved. Unfortunately, Rand—who was going through the most turbulent period of her personal and professional life—never managed to find the time or energy to address them. Thus the film was once again consigned to storage—until 1982, when Rand's heir, Leonard Peikoff, negotiated with the Holzers to revive the project. (The Holzers and Scott, who are co-producers of the authorized version, co-own the film; royalties for the literary rights go to Rand's estate.)

The film now in distribution is just under three hours long, and is designed to be shown with an intermission between the two parts, originally screened separately. It carries English subtitles, prepared by Duncan Scott and Erika Holzer, and based directly on the novel wherever possible, rather than on the film dialogue. (In the initial Italian translation and adaptation for the film, numerous changes had been introduced, sometimes inadvertently, into the dialogue; these deviations from Rand's work had been compounded by a poor English translation accompanying the original print of the film.) Viewers who understand Italian may find the occasional discrepancy between the voice track and subtitles a bit disconcerting; but an alternative course considered by the producers would have been worse. Rand herself had at first suggested that a dubbed English version be produced, both to supply appropriate dialogue and to replace some of the music.

(She was not critical of the richly romantic score composed by Renzo Rossellini, only of the soulful Russian song used in a few key scenes in place of the light-hearted music-hall tune she associated with Kira.) A dubbed version was soon ruled out as prohibitively expensive, however, since the individual sound tracks (for music, dialogue, and special effects) were no longer available and would have had to be completely re-recorded.

As the work progressed, however, one crucial scene—in which Andrei appears before a purge tribunal—was dubbed, in Italian. The scene (invented by the Italians) contained dialogue grossly inconsistent with Rand's philosophy; but because it was necessary to the film's story line, it could not be dropped. To avoid a potentially jarring disparity between the Italian voice track and the English subtitles (based on dialogue in the analogous episode in the novel, in which Andrei delivers an impassioned speech to his Party Club), Scott elected to dub new dialogue in Italian.

In its present form, the scene significantly advances both the plot and the theme. When the G.P.U. chief reminds Andrei that their "first obligation is to live for the common good," Andrei defiantly replies: "Every honest man lives for himself." And before the tribunal can pronounce its death sentence upon him, he announces that he is ready to die. Although the dubbing will escape notice by many viewers, and was probably the best solution possible for that scene, the artistic effect of the film as a whole is surely better served by the present subtitled version than it would have been by the complete dubbing originally proposed. With Giachetti, as with the other superb

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actors in this film, vocal quality and inflection are integral to an effective performance.

Another major problem was presented by the ending of the Italian version, which adhered literally to the story line of the novel yet failed to capture its spirit. (In the novel, Kira is fatally shot while attempting to escape across the border; but the narration stresses that she dies triumphant, true to her vision of the life she believes she and Leo would have had, had they been free. In the original film version, the action took place too abruptly,

however, giving no suggestion of the novel's final note of triumph.) At Rand's behest, the concluding scene was edited out, leaving the present version to end with Kira revisiting the garden where she and Leo first met. Kira's ultimate fate is thus left to the viewer's imagination—guided by the prior scene, in which she tells Leo of her plan to escape. The outcome is not difficult to surmise.

Such alterations of another filmmaker's creative work were not lightly undertaken by Scott. But because the Italians had stolen Rand's literary property and she was not involved in the adaptation, he regarded the 1942 film as an incompletely realized work and his role as one of "finishing" or "restoring" the work according to the author's intent. He deserves much credit for his unobtrusive re-editing, particularly for his skillful reconstruction of Andrei's death scene. A suicide in the novel, the episode had been transformed by the Italians into a murder by G.P.U. agents, very likely to make the communists seem more evil. Using the available visuals, with music he borrowed from other scenes, Scott artfully reconstructed both the sound and the picture track, eliminating the murderers and suggesting the suicide, with a subtlety appropriate to the understated action of the scene as Rand had written it.

Private vs. Public Focus

The opening titles of *We the Living* are shot over a backdrop of flames, underscored by a musical theme of pulsating urgency. What is burning is not seen, only the flames themselves, suggesting that the whole world, at least the world of the film, is on fire. An abrupt cut to a train moving through a snow-covered countryside comes as something of a shock, leaving the flames unexplained, perhaps implying that a public conflagration is yet to come. As the film proceeds, however, no great fire occurs—only these small fires of personal ruin: Kira and Leo burning their books after being purged from the university; and, later, Andrei (just before his suicide) burning his mementos of the revolution, with his souvenirs of Kira, when both dreams are dead for him.

The present film version of *We the Living* has, in fact, very few public scenes. And the few there are contain their own intensely private moments, so that the focus of the action remains intimate and personal. Early in the film, for example, there is the student council meeting, in which the members of the old guard make a moving last stand, restrained but courageous, against the Red insurgents. It is a stirring scene, set in a cramped indoor amphitheater, with the bourgeois students pitted against the revolutionaries, who are abetted by opportunists like Kira's cousin Victor and spurred on by the oratory of the scheming Comrade Sonia. The scene, culminating dramatically in the singing of the old student anthem and the rival

"Internationale," reveals much, however, beyond its public, political content.

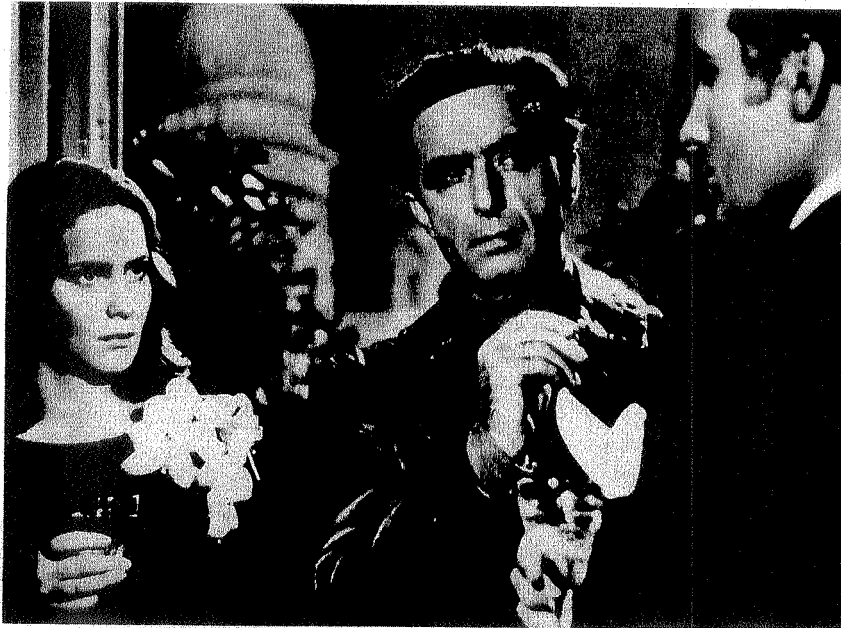
It is in this setting that Kira and Andrei come together for the first time, from their two opposing worlds, in a mutually provocative brief encounter that is charged with subtly sexual as well as political innuendo. And two other key characters, Comrade Sonia and Pavel Syerov, are swiftly developed—the hypocrisy of their public personas being exposed at close range. Seeking election to the student council, Comrade Syerov proclaims: "We're not here to further our petty personal ambitions"; but moments later, when he thanks Sonia for her speech on his behalf, the camera moves in to catch the unsavory pair as she leans menacingly toward him and snarls: "Words don't interest me. You can show your gratitude by your actions." It is a first glimpse of the political and personal corruption that will eventually engulf the three principal characters.

The focus in this film version of *We the Living* remains not only personal but inward. Whereas Rand devoted much of her fictional narrative to describing the physical hardships endured by the characters (hardships she clearly showed as taking their toll on the spirit), the present film largely omits such external detail, focusing instead on the moral and psychological aspects of the dramatic conflict—a focus magnified by the intensity of the acting, the intimacy of the direction, and the finesse of the black-and-white cinematography, as well as by the editing.

Thus we see little of Kira's day-to-day struggle for the bare necessities of life, but are made acutely aware of her moral predicament. When Leo falls ill and is denied access to a public sanatorium, the only way Kira can obtain the money to send him to a private hospital is by becoming Andrei's mistress. She thereby becomes involved in a life of lies with both men, though she loathes deception. (When asked, early in the film, why she wants to become an engineer, she explains: "It's the only profession where I don't have to learn any lies.") Several of the alterations made by the Italian filmmakers serve to heighten Kira's inner conflict, which is exacerbated by her growing affection for Andrei (who proves to be a more worthy object of her love than Leo). In the film, Leo's homecoming from his eight-month stay in a sanatorium in the Crimea, for example, surprises Kira, immediately following a particularly tender love scene with Andrei. As played by the luminous Valli, Kira is all

guilty uneasiness in Leo's embrace, as if she would like to wash away any trace of Andrei before being touched by Leo.

By contrast, Leo's outward struggle (which becomes, in part, Kira's as well) is more fully detailed. His pursuit by the G.P.U., his efforts to find work, his failing health, are succinctly dramatized. But his primary conflict is nonetheless internal: it is the battle, soon lost, against his own fatal pessimism and shallow pride, which



Kira, Andrei (Fosco Giachetti), and Leo

are evident from the outset. Eventually, unlike Kira—who chooses to die rather than compromise her aspirations—he is willing to give up every important value and principle (including his love for her and his self-esteem), to live in physical luxury though he is dead spiritually. (Brazzi brings a praiseworthy measure of sympathy and interest to the problematical role of Leo, the least admirable of Rand's trio of characters.)

Of the three, it is clearly Andrei whose character and transformation are the most compelling, in the film as in the novel. It is he who undergoes the greatest change, a change which powerfully affirms the theme of the story. Caught between his growing love for Kira and his previously unquestioned sense of duty to the cause which he had truly believed would better men's lives, he must finally confront the reality that Kira has betrayed him—because the revolution has betrayed them all. ("What's the difference if one aristocrat dies?" Kira was told when she begged for medical care for Leo.) Realizing that Kira has deceived him because it was the only way she could save Leo's life, Andrei recognizes the evil of the system he has fought for; and, unlike Leo, he forgives Kira her deception. His final gesture—to rescue Leo from prosecution by the G.P.U., though he despises him personally—is the ultimate expression of

his love for Kira.

In the film, as in the novel, Andrei's credibility and impact as a character are greatly enhanced by one of the key secondary characters, Stepan Timoshenko, a coarse-mannered but good-hearted sailor who has come up with Andrei through the revolutionary ranks into the G.P.U. (One of Rand's finest fictional creations, Stepan is wonderfully realized in the film by Giovanni Grasso.) Stepan's humanity and sense of justice are revealed early in the film when he saves Kira and Leo from instant execution during their attempted escape from Russia, because he discovers that Leo is the son of old Admiral Kovalensky, who has recently been summarily executed by the communists. "They shot him. I wouldn't have done it," Stepan later declares to Kira, and explains: "Kovalensky was blinded commanding the Baltic Fleet. He was my admiral." Then this powerful bit of understatement: "He was not the worst commander we had." Announcing that Leo will be released, Stepan adds: "We don't fight children. Especially ones who find time for love on a spewing volcano."

Vastly different as Andrei and Stepan are outwardly (Stepan is boorish; Andrei, innately genteel, almost aristocratic in his bearing), a deep friendship binds them and infuses their moving confrontation near the end of the film. When Stepan has been expelled from the G.P.U., for "unreliability," he tries to warn Andrei, who he knows will soon fall victim to the spreading purge. "I'd give the last of these rotted guts for you—and still it wouldn't save you!" he cries in despair. And as he leaves, Andrei murmurs, in full awareness: "Another is going."

The scene with Stepan not only affirms Andrei's worth, his goodness and nobility in a context apart from Kira; it also makes clear that the injustice of the political system is pervasive. Whereas Andrei might otherwise seem an isolated victim, we know through Stepan that the system destroys all its best men. It is thus not incidental but inescapable that the best are destroyed, while the worst flourish, in *We the Living*. Rand believed passionately that no other outcome is possible in a totalitarian state, because its premises are fundamentally immoral. Moral men cannot survive whole in spirit within such a system, she was saying.

Nor was it arbitrary that her account of the personal devastation under collectivism be told through a love story. If the

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purpose of human life is, as she believed, the happiness of the individual, what more natural way to represent the effects of a political system than to show its impact on this most profound and private of human relationships?

Inevitably, there have been losses in the abridgment from novel to screen and from the four-hour Italian version to the present film. Of the doomed love affair between Kira's cousin Irina and the impetuous counter-revolutionary Sasha, for example, we see nothing. Sasha appears, unidentified, for but a few brief moments in the student meeting early in the film. Irina's role is not much larger. Anyone who has read the novel will undoubtedly miss this touching subplot, especially the poignant scene of the couple's final parting, on diverging trains in the wilderness of Siberia (an episode not filmed by the Italians). Let those who have charged Rand with heartlessness read that scene in the novel and fail to be moved.

But, in the end, the film is the stronger for its omissions. Focused on the central triangle of Kira, Leo, and Andrei, it achieves a powerfully concentrated effect, a deep catharsis of emotion.

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Fifteen years ago, *Casablanca's* principal screenwriter, Howard Koch, attempting to account for that film's enduring popularity, stressed the importance of the story line—"a logical flow of incidents involving characters with whose emotions and motivations audiences can identify." In contrast, Koch noted, the average contemporary film emphasizes special effects and setting, at the expense of a significant story. The contrast he drew with respect to *Casablanca* a decade and a half ago, holds as true for *We the Living* today. Despite all the cultural and technical transformations that have occurred in the intervening half-century (transformations which may make occasional details of dialogue, action, and cinematic technique seem dated), Rand's story as played out by these actors can still grip the mind and charge the soul. A

Aristos
THE JOURNAL OF ESTHETICS

Vol. 4 No. 4
December 1988

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Aristos (ISSN 0737-0407) is published bimonthly by The Aristos Foundation Inc. Yearly subscription (six issues) in U.S. and Canada, \$25 (U.S. currency); elsewhere, \$30. Back issues, \$4. We are not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or other items, and no material will be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and sufficient postage. Address all editorial and subscription correspondence to Aristos, P.O. Box 1105, Radio City Station, New York, NY 10101. Foundation-related correspondence should be addressed to The Aristos Foundation, 147 West 94th Street, New York, NY 10025.

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