

Riso Amaro / Bitter Rice (1949)

Director: Giuseppe De Santis

Writers: Giuseppe De Santis (story), Carlo Lizzani (story)

Stars:

	Vittorio Gassman	...	Walter (as Vittorio Gassmann)
	Doris Dowling	...	Francesca
	Silvana Mangano	...	Silvana
	Raf Vallone	...	Marco

Academy Awards, USA 1951

Nominee Oscar	Best Writing, Motion Picture Story Giuseppe De Santis Carlo Lizzani
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Cannes Film Festival 1949

Nominee Grand Prize of the Festival	Giuseppe De Santis
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Storyline:

Francesca and **Walter** are two-bit criminals in Northern Italy, and, in an effort to avoid the police, Francesca joins a group of women rice workers. She meets the voluptuous peasant rice worker, **Silvana**, and the soon-to-be-discharged soldier, **Marco**. Walter follows her to the rice fields, and the four characters become involved in a complex plot involving robbery, love, and murder.

If this film seems excessively proletarian, it is important to remember that Italy was impoverished after WWII and that the Communist Party very nearly came to power in 1948 and probably would have done so had it not been for CIA intervention. The crane shots and other camera work, as well as **the superb acting of the women in the smaller roles**, are masterful in depicting the drudgery of the toil of the women working in the rice fields. Other aspects of the camera work are masterful. Probably the most famous, or notorious, scene in the film is the one where Mangano takes a reed and playfully pokes Vittorio Gassman with it. Gassman's character is not amused; he takes the reed from her and proceeds to whip her with it repeatedly. Notice the way the camera moves with Gassman as he approaches her, then moves with Mangano as she tries to move away from him in terror. This is masterful camera work. The finale of the film is shattering as well.

There is the story of misguided passions among four people in the rice fields of Northern Italy and there's no subtlety in the telling. It gets off to a rather slow start while developing the characters played by Silvana Mangano, Raf Vallone, Doris Dowling and Vittorio Gassman. **Only Vallone, as an army sergeant, is a "good guy" among a band of thieves** destined to face tragic consequences of their unbridled lust and fatal attraction. He resembles an Italian version of the young Burt Lancaster.

Along the way, there are **some interesting scenes of workers in the rice fields** and their work habits, enhanced by moments whereby they chant and sing what they are supposed to be thinking as a sort of counterpoint to the action unfolding in the story.

Done in the popular neo-realistic manner prevalent during post-World War II in Italy, it tells a convoluted tale that, in the end, only tells us that crime does not pay. The story heads toward a stormy conclusion in a slaughter house, engrossing right up until the fabricated final moments for Mangano, a fitting conclusion to a steamy melodrama.

Along a few weeks in Northern Italy, many women leave their families and jobs and move to the rice fields to work in the harvest of rice. The lovers Francesca (Doris Dowling) and Walter (Vittorio Gassman) has just robbed a valuable jewel from a hotel, and Francesca joins a group of workers while escaping from the police. A silly and sensual worker, Silvana (Silvana Mangano), gets closer to Francesca fascinated by the precious necklace she found hidden in Francesca's mattress. When they arrive to the lodge, they meet Sergeant Marco (Raf Vallone), who is discharging the army and feels attracted by Silvana. A square of love is formed with tragic consequences.

Riso Amaro is an **original neo-realistic dramatic romance** that presented Silvana Mangano to the world, leading her to a position of star. She is extremely beautiful in the role of the peasant Silvana, especially while dancing with the handsome Vittorio Gassman. Doris Dowling is also excellent, performing the suffering Francesca, a women abused by her scum lover.

This very Italian product by Giuseppe de Santis shows **a pretty ordinary crime story**, excellently interwoven with **an impressive decor of harsh season labor in the rice-fields of Northern Italy**. The thousands of women, up to their ankles in the water, breaking their backs in the burning sun to earn a few bucks, make a truly great setting.

Riso Amaro has been labeled as neo-realism. Another issue worth mentioning is its female lead **Silvana Mangano, ex miss Rome**. To the standards of 1949 miss Mangano's performance in this film was shocking. This earned *Riso Amaro* a lot of publicity, in particular in strongly Roman Catholic Italy.

It comes across as **a realistic portrayal of life in the rice fields of Italy**, and is undoubtedly well-made with a haunting, natural quality about the whole production.

This tug of war between **Italian neo-realism** and **Hollywood glitz** and **melodrama** reaches its boiling point during the climax, which pits the four against each other in a slaughterhouse, under the cover of night. It's a mesmerizing scene that is brimming with **symbolism, pathos, artful audience manipulation** and **suspense**. Considered as a marriage of form and technique, the climax is a marvel though seen as a corruption, the film hammers home a deeply anti-consumerist message.

In the film, the character Silvana represents **enchantment with behavior modeled in American films**, such as **chewing gum and boogie-woogie dancing**. Her downfall shows director Giuseppe De Santis's condemnation of these products of American capitalism. In addition, Silvana was considered by many audiences to be overly-sexualized. This sexualization and the melodramatic presence of death and suicide in the film cause it to diverge from typical Italian neorealism.

The story is interesting in that it is set somewhere different and shot on location. It also has a beginning that grips you.

Reviews:

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/riso_amaro_bitter_rice

<https://www.spietati.it/riso-amaro/>

http://www.cinema4stelle.it/riso_amaro_ieri.html