

Robert Phillip Kolker

The Altering Eye

Contemporary International Cinema



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The Altering Eye covers a “golden age” of international cinema from the end of WWII through to the New German Cinema of the 1970s. Combining historical, political, and textual analysis, the author develops a pattern of cinematic invention and experimentation from neorealism through the modernist interventions of Jean-Luc Godard and Rainer Maria Fassbinder, focusing along the way on such major figures as Luis Buñuel, Joseph Losey, the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha, and the work of major Cuban filmmakers.

Kolker’s book has become a much quoted classic in the field of film studies providing essential reading for anybody interested in understanding the history of European and international cinema.

This new and revised edition includes a substantive new Preface by the author and an updated Bibliography.

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Cover image: From Luis Buñuel’s *Los Olvidados* (1950). Courtesy of Films Sans Frontières.

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1. The Validity of the Image

The cinema was born with neorealism.
Giuseppe Bertolucci

The word “realism” is the most problematic in any discussion of cinema. Because the first principle of filmmaking is the photographic reproduction of something that exists—a street, a room, a face—and the putting of that photograph into motion, the idea that film has a close relationship to the physically real world is inescapable. On top of this come the claims of widely different filmmakers that the narratives they construct out of these moving pictures are themselves “real,” that they mirror, “the world,” show us life, give us psychologically valid characters. But such statements are founded on unexamined assumptions. The photographic image is an image—physically and perceptually removed from its origins in the world. Film narratives and their characters may be based upon some aspects of actual behavior, but are in fact more strongly based on conventional film narrative behavior and our expectations of how characters in film ought to behave. They and their stories are no more real than any other fictions.

The term is, however, constantly evoked (and occasionally revoked, for a Hollywood filmmaker when threatened will claim that movies are only escapist entertainment). “Realism” formed the basis of André Bazin’s criticism. Bazin, whose theoretical position was grounded in the belief that film could create images spatially and temporally faithful to the fullness and richness of the world, was the major critical influence on postwar European film culture and founder of the French New Wave. He drew his ideas from a variety of filmmakers, from Robert Flaherty and Eric von Stroheim to Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, and William Wyler. But the films he most admired, that seemed to authorize his theory, were those made in Italy beginning just after the war, as part of a movement that took for itself the name of neorealism.

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This movement is our starting point, for here is where the past and future of European filmmaking fused and separated, and where modernism took hold. Neorealism, by its title, reclaimed the territory of reality, and in that reclamation denied the claims of past filmmaking while announcing itself as a beginning for filmmaking to come. Every serious filmmaker to follow had first to understand what neorealism was about before proceeding with his or her own approach. When Giuseppe Bertolucci (Bernardo's brother) said that "the cinema was born with neorealism," he was not indulging in southern European hyperbole, but locating the origin of contemporary film.¹

There are few terms in the language of film criticism that have such general use and recognition as "neorealism," nor is there another so well defined, placed, and understood; for the critical term was used contemporaneously with the phenomenon it described, and by those involved in creating the works so described. While the origins of the term itself are not clear—David Overbey presumes the first time it appeared in print was in 1942, but in the context of an Italian critic's description of French cinema—what it defines is.² "Neorealism" refers to an aesthetic movement that created a group of films in Italy between (approximately) 1945 and 1955. Its best known representatives are Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *Germany, Year Zero* (1947); Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (1947); Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Miracle in Milan* (1950), and *Umberto D.* (1951); Fellini's *I vitelloni* (1953) and possibly *La strada* (1954) and *Nights of Cabiria* (1956). There are other films, less well known, and there are important antecedents, such as Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942), and even more important descendants. These films were shot on location; they used non- or semi-professional actors; they employed an unembellished narrative whose subject was the working or peasant class in a state of extreme poverty and deprivation (with a concentration upon children). There is an apparent reticence on the part of the neorealist filmmaker to comment upon the images he is creating, and the narrative formed by the images seems to yield an objective, though certainly not documentary, perspective. This apparent objectivity is countered, however, by sentimentality, an almost melodramatic expression of love and sorrow toward the subjects of the film.

The visual elements of neorealism are immediately recognizable in any of its representative films. The harsh grayness of the cinematography, the framing of the characters amidst barren urban or country squalor, in ruined tenements or desolate town squares, walking along a wall, the camera set or tracking at a diagonal to the character and background, are all visual codes that immediately signal a particular attitude and approach to the subject—that signal, more than anything else, "neorealism." The desolation of the *mise-en-scène* (the structure and elements of the visual space, which both defines the characters and is defined by them) does not



The death of Pina (Anna Magnani). *Rome, Open City*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

so much reflect as contain and surround the desolation of the characters. They are their surroundings: poor, ruined, and seemingly without hope. But always enduring. The suicide of the young boy, Edmund, in *Germany, Year Zero* is an unusual act for a neorealist character, mitigated by the fact that Edmund comes to stand for Germany and the destruction it brought upon itself. In *Rome, Open City*, the deaths of Pina, Manfredi, and Don Pietro at the hands of the Germans are a sign of affirmation. Their humanity is transferred, within the film, to the children who carry on their struggle, and, outside the film, to the audience, whose understanding of their struggle validates it and their deaths.

The violence and death in Rossellini's war films are unusual and do not become a major part of neorealist narrative structure. Rather, the violence that is most often committed on the characters is economic, and they are defined by their poverty. *Bicycle Thieves* exemplifies the pattern: the only way for the central character, Ricci, to work is to have a bicycle. When it is stolen by someone even poorer than he is, there is absolutely no recourse to anyone or anything. To get the bicycle out of hock in the first place, Ricci and his wife had to pawn their sheets. When the camera pans up the shelves and shelves of sheets pawned by others out of similar need an almost universal condition is revealed. Ricci loses his bicycle and is lost. The film observes his wanderings with his little son Bruno in their attempt to find either the bicycle or the culprit, an attempt impossible from the start

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and ending with Ricci in his despair trying to steal a bike, getting caught, and walking off with Bruno, disappearing into the crowd.

This essentially passive losing and enduring of the poor provide an unalterable narrative structure for neorealist filmmaking. Like the formal construction of the narratives of these films, the events of the narratives can be abstracted into immediately recognizable patterns—so much so that, from the vantage point of many years, neorealism seems to be nothing more than a genre, with all the predictable conventions and responses that make up any other film genre.³ If it were only a film genre, one among so many others, the movement would not be as important as I have said. It would fall into place as a momentary coalescing of themes and structures, developed out of certain historical events by a group of filmmakers with similar ideas about what could be done with their medium, nurtured by a rather high degree of international success. It is true that, like other genres, neorealism grew, peaked, and diminished. By the mid-fifties its practitioners had all gone on to other kinds of films; controversy continued in Italy over what they had done and why they were not doing it any more; and European cinema in general went into a short creative retreat. When the New Wave broke in the late fifties, little overt relationship to the Italian school was apparent. The new generation of filmmakers paid much homage to Rossellini (Godard had him co-write the script for *Les carabiniers*, 1963). But the young French filmmakers seemed more concerned with Hollywood films than with European, and neorealism seemed to assume a comfortable, esteemed place in film history, often referred to, but ignored as an influence.

Yet we have to look twice. There are two neorealisms: one is the genre of films made in Italy in the decade between 1945 and 1955. The other is a concept, an aesthetics, a politics, a radical reorientation of cinema that changed the perspective on what had gone before and made possible a great deal of what came after. Occasionally concept and execution came close together in the films made by Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti, Fellini, and others during that decade, and I do not mean to imply that theory was more important than execution. But we can only fully understand what we see in neorealism by looking at the images of its films through the theory, and the theory from a particular historical perspective. Neorealism is a pivot, a “break,” in the sense that Louis Althusser uses the term to express the point at which a new consciousness begins to appear, in this instance, a new consciousness of cinematic image-making and storytelling.⁴

In order to understand this “break,” we need to examine something of the cinematic history that preceded neorealism and something of the theory of that history as well. Within that context the ideas of the neorealists will become clearer and their films can be examined not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a considered response to what had preceded them. In the brief survey that follows I wish to describe some alternate notions about film history and hook together the jagged edges of schools, movements,

and the works of individuals who countered prevailing trends and rapidly solidifying traditions. After presenting a context that helps to clarify what the postwar Italians were doing as they (quite unconsciously) laid the ground for the great period of European filmmaking that followed them, I shall try to look at their ideas and films in the spirit in which these were expressed and made. Then it will be possible to look at them again from a more critical point of view and discover some things that went wrong, but which, in so doing, made possible a further response and further altered directions in cinema's aesthetic history.

Conventional histories of film would indicate a straight line of development. From Lumière and Méliès through the great figures and movements to the present day, neatly interlocking stages of filmmaking seem to move in orderly progression, with various apotheoses reached along the way. In this perspective, Lumière started it all in 1895. His little shot of a train pulling into a station so startled its first audience that they pulled back in fear. Méliès the magician followed, doing tricks on film; he invented optical effects and fantasy cinema. From these two sources developed the two major kinds of film: documentary and fiction.

The rest, in the conventional view, flowed almost naturally. Edwin S. Porter discovered the possibility of creating narrative structure by intercutting sequences, thereby allowing different elements of story to coexist in an illusion of simultaneity. D. W. Griffith further developed and refined the technique, "invented" the closeup, and perfected parallel montage, that fundamental element of film narrative construction in which two events separated in space but coexisting in time are paralleled to one another for contrast, suspense, and tension. In Weimar Germany, expressionist cinema formulated psychological structures through artificial, highly stylized sets that reflected characters' states of mind. In post-revolutionary Russia, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein further developed Griffith montage into a primary formal device by means of which the audience was led toward meaning by the relationship or (in Eisenstein's case) the collision of images.

The thirties marked the ascendancy of American film, the growing strength of the studios with a concomitant strengthening of studio styles, the star system, genres, moral structures and strictures, and, as important as all of these, economic markets. Although there were major figures abroad, with Jean Renoir foremost among them, European film was somewhat eclipsed in the thirties. Fascism and World War II put a halt to most creative filmmaking in Europe until the mid-forties and the rise of neorealism. The fifties marked the beginning of the fall of the American studios and the rise of major European figures, Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini in the forefront. With the appearance of the New Wave in France and elsewhere, European film regained the ground it lost in the thirties and forties, reasserting its influence and its importance as the

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serious alternative to American film.

There is nothing wrong with this skeletal linearity. It plots out the major events and directions; it is, in fact, a plot of sorts for a historical narrative, which, when fleshed out with detail and analysis, provides the basic story of film. But the telling has itself become something of a genre, with the same figures and the same configurations recurring. In recent years some important variations and revisions to the tale have been made. Subjects have been rearranged and new ones introduced. Important questions have been raised about the primacy of certain figures and discoveries, particularly in the early days of film. The effects of technological developments on film form have been studied in an attempt to overcome separation of technical history from the aesthetic. The economics of the film business is no longer looked upon as a separate study, but as integrally involved with both technological and aesthetic developments.⁵ Among the most important revisions in film history are those involving the place of the viewer in that history. Every change in the formal patterns of film narrative construction, and every change in the content and subject matter treated and created by that narrative construction, has meant changes in the way the viewer reacts to the narrative, changes in what is asked of and what is done to him or her, changes in the relationship of spectator to film being observed.

Like any narrative form, film is incomplete until perceived by a viewer. Therefore, to understand the movements and stages of film history is to understand how filmmakers wanted their cinema to be read. The creation and arrangement of images by a Russian in the twenties and a Frenchman in the sixties, or by F. W. Murnau in *Nosferatu* (1922) and Werner Herzog in *Nosferatu* (1978), are not only to be understood in terms of periods, movements, and subjective inclinations that dictate certain forms and approaches. A reverse perspective is possible. We may ask what is dictated by the form and content of a certain period or a certain filmmaker. How is the viewer expected to deal with the images and their narrative structure? I do not necessarily mean a specific spectator in 1908 or 1919, for that would demand a crude kind of guesswork and create the danger of false premises. Although films do give us clues as to what a culture was about at a given period of time—perhaps even indicate what people were thinking—my point here is to inquire how those images address the world, the viewer in the world, and most important, the cinematic conceptions and preconceptions of how the world can be addressed. Answers can be found in the films and the history that surrounds them. Further, by breaking into the linearity of history and counterpointing movements and figures, the hidden history of the spectator's role and the filmmaker's attitude toward it can be discovered.

With this in mind we can get a better notion of neorealism's place and its demands. The conventional history tells us, quite accurately, that Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti—all active in films during the fascist period—wanted, after the war, to break from the studio and the

ideologically bound, middle-class cinema that had been prominent in Italy. It was called the "white telephone" school, a term that sums up the decor of a cinema of quasi-elegant bourgeois escapism that demanded little but that its audience yield itself up to an elegant world of love affairs and romantic intrigue. As a response to this kind of filmmaking, Rossellini, with scriptwriters Sergio Amidei and Federico Fellini, and De Sica, in close collaboration with screenwriter and movement theorist Cesare Zavattini, took to the streets and to the working class. Rossellini, writing a script as the Germans were fleeing Rome, begging raw film stock from American newsreel cameramen, filming without direct sound (a tradition still followed in the now technically sufficient world of Italian film production), created a film about the work and deaths of Italian Partisans almost on the spot. He followed *Rome, Open City* with two films that continued a kind of immediate history of war's end. De Sica and Zavattini concentrated on the refuse of the war, the adults and children on the streets, in jails and tenements. Visconti went a somewhat different route. A leftist nobleman, he received his film training with Jean Renoir in the late thirties. In 1942 he had made what is generally considered to be the first film with major neorealist tendencies. *Ossessione* is of strange heritage. It is based on James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, which had been filmed earlier in France and was again filmed in 1946 by Tay Garnett at MGM, with John Garfield and Lana Turner in the place of Massimo Girotti and Clara Calamai (and filmed yet again by Bob Rafelson in 1980 with Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange).

Ossessione is a great sexual melodrama with wretched working class characters who inhabit or wander through the poverty of the Po Valley. In it Visconti achieves a texture, almost an aroma, of sweat and lust that is simultaneously repellent and attractive, creating an intensity of image rarely seen in European film up to that time. But *Ossessione* was only a preparation for neorealism. When Visconti made *La terra trema* in 1947, the first of a never-completed trilogy on the workers and peasants of Sicily, he used a non-professional cast and introduced the political element that only hovered on the periphery of *Ossessione*. *La terra trema* is not a film of sexual passion, but of a passion for liberation and independence.

In taking their cameras outside, using largely non-professional casts, and dealing with the working and peasant class in politically and economically determined situations, these filmmakers were indeed reacting against their own national cinematic tradition. But they were reacting as well to the larger tradition of Western cinema originated and perfected in Hollywood. They did battle against what they saw as a cinema of escape and evasion, uncommitted to exploring the world, seeking instead to palliate its audience, asking them to assent to comedic and melodramatic structures of love and innocence, of unhappy rich people and the joyful poor, of crime and revenge, the failure of the arrogant and success of the meek, played by stars of status and familiarity in roles of even greater



An aroma of sweat and lust. *Osessione*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

familiarity. It was a tradition of cinema that asked little of the spectator besides assent and a willingness to be engaged by simple repetitions of basic themes, a tradition that located the spectator in fantasies that had the reality of convention.

The polemics of neorealist theory actively attacked this tradition. In the early fifties, Cesare Zavattini wrote:

This powerful desire of the [neorealist] cinema to see and to analyze, this hunger for reality, for truth, is a kind of concrete homage to other people, that is, to all who exist. This, among other things, is what distinguishes neorealism from the American cinema. In effect, the American position is diametrically opposed to our own: whereas we are attracted by the truth, by the reality which touches us and which we want to know and understand directly and thoroughly, the Americans continue to satisfy themselves with a sweetened version of truth produced through transpositions.⁶

“Produced through transpositions”: the phrase captures precisely the problems the neorealists had with the film that preceded them. Their concern was with the most fundamental process of narrative film, the methodology and ideology of representation, and the ways the spectator was asked to observe and partake in it. In the “transpositions” of reality into conventional images that occurred in American film and, by association, in Italian cinema of the thirties, they found only an evasion of reality and a diminishment of its complexity. Their response was to

challenge those evasions and to reevaluate a history of cinema that ignored an entire class of people and denied its audience access to certain realities of existence. It is a cinema most familiar to most filmgoers, and while its origins and development are well documented, they bear some repetition and reevaluation in order to understand what the neorealists and their followers were challenging.⁷

Films were made, originally, for working-class audiences. But the economic reality was that large amounts of money could not be made from peep shows in working-class neighborhoods; profit and respectability could come only from an audience with money and respectability. Two things were immediately needed to attract this group: elegant exhibition and a film content that combined the blandest, seemingly most inoffensive morality with sexual titillation which could in turn be defended by a high moral tone. In American filmmaking (but by no means restricted to it) the result was an ideological leveling that began in the early teens and continued with various dips and curves into the early forties. The economic, political, and psychological complexities of the film audience's experience were largely transposed into images that sweetened life by simplifying it and denied economic inequality by denying that such inequality had any importance for happiness. It was a cinema of amelioration in which good characters achieved marriage and a middle-class life, where obedience and sacrifice were rewarded. The moral codes and dramatic constructions developed by D. W. Griffith in the teens set a pattern that popular cinema has embellished and continuously brought up to date. In the dominant cinema that America created and shared with the world, the dominant ideology was rarely questioned and a political context rarely recognized, analyzed, or criticized.

The transposition of social and moral complexities into melodramas of virtue rewarded and suffering transcended was accompanied by a transposition of another sort. Filmmakers developed a style that became as manageable as the content the style expressed. Narrative elements and their construction—the arranging of shots and sequences—were experimented with in the early part of the twentieth century, perfected by Griffith during his Biograph period (1908-13), and became a universal standard by the time sound was adopted. The mark of this style is continuity, an uninterrupted and unquestioned or unquestioning flow of events, a narrative construction so smooth and assured of its ability to promote its content that it becomes invisible. The flow of images on the screen assumes the reality of the given, as immediate and self-sufficient—*self-evident*—as the ideology it promotes.

The style grew out of trial and error, not complicity or conspiracy, and there were as many varieties of it as there were studios in various countries with filmmakers who attempted to impose some individuality on the work they did. What is more, it is a complex style, based on conventions that, because they were repeated so often and accepted so thoroughly, are looked upon by most viewers and filmmakers as the

natural way to tell cinematic stories. Cutting from an establishing shot into various parts of the action; always completing actions by, for example, following a character in matched cuts from one place to another so that all action is accounted for; breaking up a dialogue into a series of over-the-shoulder shots, from one character to another, with eyelines perfectly matched—these and other small details of construction make up a pattern of storytelling that the neorealists felt the need to reconsider. They realized that, whether practiced by MGM, Rank, Ufa, Gaumont, or the studios of Cinecittà, the classical style—the zero-degree style, as it has come to be called—was a complex of conventions, of formal and contextual choices, made, repeated, and naturalized: a transposition, to return to Zavattini’s phrase, of the various realities of human experience and their expression into the simplified, expectation-fulfilling discourse of cinema.⁸ National cinemas were dedicated to a comfortable situating of the spectator’s gaze in a cinematic world where space was whole and enveloping (even though it was made up, particularly in American film, of short, fragmentary shots), time complete and completed in an easily apprehendable order. Within this small but complete world the passions of both character and spectator would be large but manageable, directed in assimilable curves and, above all, predictable and resolved.

The neorealists were certainly aware that while this style was dominant, it was not all-inclusive. Small matters, such as the use of the over-the-shoulder shot—the so-called ping-pong method of dialogue construction—were not universally adopted by the European studios. More important, there were early reactions to the dominant form that prepared the ground for their work. The most significant is found in the films and critical theory of Sergei Eisenstein, who provided the first major alternative to the kind of cinema being developed by Griffith in America. He understood, more thoroughly than did Griffith himself, the possibilities of editing, regarded montage as the essential structuring principle of filmmaking, and sought to use it to transpose reality into a cinema that prodded consciousness, attacked traditional politics and morality, and stimulated thought as well as emotion. In the collision of images that made up the structure of his films, Eisenstein sought to create a dynamics that would impel the viewer to a recognition and understanding of revolution. His films were a structure of and for change, the opposite of Griffith’s, which were a structure of and for rest and resolution. Discussing the classical closeup, Eisenstein wrote in his 1944 essay “Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today”:

The American says: *near*, or “close-up.”

We are speaking of the *qualitative* side of the phenomenon linked with its meaning....

Among Americans the term is attached to *viewpoint*.

Among us—to *the value of what is seen*.

In this comparison immediately the first thing to appear clearly relating to the principal function of the close-up in our cinema is—not only and not

so much to *show* or to *present*, as to *signify*, to *give meaning*, to *designate*.

It is not the comfortable situating of the spectator's gaze that concerns Eisenstein, but the meaning of the gaze, the reason the spectator is seeing a particular structure of images at a particular time in the course of a film. On Griffith's cross-cutting he wrote:

...this *quantitative accumulation* [of images] even in such "multiplying" situations was not enough: we sought for and found in juxtapositions more than that—a *qualitative leap*.

The leap proved beyond the *limits of the possibilities* of the stage—a leap beyond the *limits of situation*: a leap into the field of montage *image*, montage *understanding*, montage as a means before all else of revealing the *ideological conception*.⁹

Where the American style creates suspense by multiplying incidents, provoking the viewer to experience tension with the promise that the tension will be eased with rescue and affirmation of security, Eisensteinian montage structure exposes the notion of security. The rhythm of images is the rhythm of historical analysis and revolutionary change. Rather than tension, Eisenstein's cutting provokes a movement through situations to a resolution that is itself further movement. Thus the people of Odessa celebrate the mutiny of the Potemkin's crew; they are attacked by Cossacks, who in turn are fired on by the ship; the ship's uprising is then joined by the rest of the fleet. And each sequence is formed by a dynamic, often violent, rhythm of images that provoke the spectator and demand an intellectual and emotional reaction to the events.

There was no doubt in Eisenstein's mind that Griffith's cinematic forms also revealed an ideology.

In social attitudes Griffith was always a liberal, never departing far from the slightly sentimental humanism of the good old gentlemen and sweet old ladies of Victorian England.... His tender-hearted film morals go no higher than a level of Christian accusation of human injustice and nowhere in his films is there sounded a protest against social injustice....

But montage thinking is inseparable from the general content of thinking as a whole. The structure that is reflected in the concept of Griffith montage is the structure of bourgeois society. . . . In actuality (and this is no joke), he is woven of irreconcilably alternating layers of "white" and "red"—rich and poor. . . . And this society, perceived *only as a contrast between the haves and the have-nots*, is reflected in the consciousness of Griffith no deeper than the image of an intricate race between two parallel lines.¹⁰

Eisenstein appreciated Griffith for his ability to make the narrative elements of film into flexible, expressive structures. But he saw that these structures never moved beyond the self-satisfied repetition of middle-class social ideals. The close-up "showed" and punctuated emotional response. Cross-cutting, or parallel montage, manipulated cinematic space and time, creating a suspense that was resolved when the "space" of danger and

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“space” of rescue were finally joined and the hero rescued the heroine (or the reverse in the “Mother and the Law” section of *Intolerance*). Griffith’s montage was sufficient to his ideology: pietistic, racist, conservative, closed off from most political and social concerns (only rarely, as in an early Biograph short, *A Corner in Wheat*, could Griffith break out of this enclosure, creating a montage of rich and poor in something like a political context. The pleas against injustice voiced in *Intolerance* are so broad and sentimental that they avoid any analysis or adequate understanding of history). The forms of his films were themselves manifestations of Griffith’s social, political, and psychological attitudes, and Eisenstein was the first writer on film to understand that form is ideological. In response to American film, he promoted not only an explicit political content, but a political form and an alternative to the conventions of continuity begun by Griffith and advancing through the twenties. Against the pretenses of illusory realism—the form that hides itself so that content may appear to emerge effortlessly and without mediation—Eisenstein held out the possibility of a realism of the cinema itself, which spoke clearly in its own voice, not hiding its means, but using them to manifest and clarify political and social realities, transposing them into the dynamism of the image. “Absolute realism,” he wrote, “is by no means the correct form of perception. It is simply the function of a certain form of social structure.”¹¹ American film attempted to erect its “realism” as an absolute, as the universal way to tell cinematic stories. Against this attempt Eisenstein, and other major figures outside America (and a few inside), fought.

The neorealists did not explicitly recognize Eisenstein as a cinematic forebear. (Few postwar filmmakers did.) His intrusive style, his insistence that the shot—the single unit of a recorded image—is only the raw material to be manipulated into the montage construction, went against their desire to use film as a disengaged observer of social existence. But if they did not explicitly recognize his importance to their own work, it is there nonetheless. If the style of neorealism owes little to Eisenstein’s means of expression, it owes a great deal to his desire to express a political alternative to the dominant cinema. That was what the neorealists wanted to do, and Eisenstein’s work made doing it easier for them, even if only as an unacknowledged model. So did other major attacks against the American style, less political than Eisenstein’s and somewhat more in line with what the neorealists would be doing; they provide further examples of the dialectics of perception and response that make up the history of cinema.

At first thought, German expressionism could not appear more different in intent and execution from postwar Italian cinema. Yet it is an important precursor. The opposite of Eisenstein’s style, expressionism operated through the exaggeration of *mise-en-scène*. The shots made by Eisenstein and his cinematographer, Edward Tisse, though always put to the service of the larger montage structure, are carefully constructed and



The expressionist image. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

composed, dynamically calibrated reinventions of historical events—or events that should have occurred in history. Even in *Ivan the Terrible*, which reflects an expressionist influence, the images are at the service of history. But expressionism denied history, at least the history of external human events, and created instead closed and distorted images of psychological states. The exaggerated *mise-en-scène*, the use of painted sets to create distorted reflections of emotional stress and imbalance, provide a third term in the developing cinema of the twenties. To the growing strength of Hollywood melodrama and its obsessive continuity, to Eisenstein's clash of the images of history, expressionism opposed a cinema of legend and myth, presenting cultural archetypes and psychic struggle in the form of tableaux. In films like Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (a nightmare fairground of the mind, originally intended to be a somewhat revolutionary statement about the madness of authority, but changed by its producer into simply a vision of madness); *Der Golem*; Fritz Lang's version of Nordic myth, *Siegfried and Kriemhild's Revenge*, and his myth of a proto-fascist future, *Metropolis*; Murnau's version of *Faust* and his *Nosferatu*, the first Dracula film, the world is expressed in gesture and design removed not only from familiar perception, but from the perceptual conventions emerging in film outside the expressionists' experiments. "The declared aim of the Expressionists," writes Lotte Eisner, "was to eliminate nature and attain absolute abstraction."¹²

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This is of course an aim different from those of both American cinema and Eisenstein. For them “nature,” the “real” world, were starting points, just as the neorealists later claimed the real world to be their point of origin. But in their attempts to avoid the world as it was and instead build their own with the artifice of paint and light, the expressionists were concentrating attention on the image and inviting the spectator to examine and react to that image as a notion of a state of mind—an intent not totally different from Eisenstein’s or the neorealists’, despite the different ways each pursued it. This requires some explanation, for Eisenstein’s montages of revolution or the neorealists’ images of poverty and despair are rarely considered akin to the expressionist world of bizarre shapes and shadows. But the dependence upon the image in all three forms an important link. It is a peculiarity of perception that what one tends to recall from an Eisenstein film is a shot rather than a montage sequence: a face; the movement of the woman’s long hair over the opening drawbridge in *October*; the boots of the Cossacks stomping down the Odessa Steps, the falling baby carriage, and the woman’s bleeding eye in *Potemkin*.¹³ This may be because visual memory cannot store a montage, but only continuous movement. More likely it is because of the power of Eisenstein’s images. When one thinks of an expressionist film, one recalls a background (or more accurately a backdrop), the shape of a window painted on a wall or a frozen gesture. Expressionist film was the cinema of the designer; in it the formal organization of strained lines and figures is of predominating interest. It ran counter to all the other cinematic movements of the time. Even the French avant-garde of the twenties, who borrowed from expressionism, still based their images very much on the possibility of things actually seen. The images of expressionist film have little effect apart from themselves, apart from the fascination of the image itself. Expressionism was a short-circuited form, and as such has been reviled by most critics and filmmakers of a realist bent. Yet the expressionists’ dependence upon the image actively counters the classical American style, which attempts to subordinate image to character and both to an unimpeded progress through narrative conflict to resolution.

The irony is that expressionism has had more of an influence on film than Eisenstein has. Eisensteinian montage became a debased form which was used in the thirties most often by Slavko Vorkapich in Hollywood to create “symbolic” episodes (like Jimmy Stewart’s tour of Washington in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*), or for rather effective special effects (as in the earthquake sequence of *San Francisco*). While the internal dynamics of Eisenstein’s cutting have taught many filmmakers a great deal, its political possibilities have been largely ignored. Expressionism, on the other hand, had an effect on the Hollywood style. Its major directors were brought to America, and their style influenced the Universal horror films of the thirties and was taken up by Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, which in turn influenced forties *film noir*, which in its turn influenced the



The Eisenstein image
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

New Wave filmmakers. When the German cinema was revitalized in the seventies, expressionism became more than an influence; it emerged as a problematic. Werner Herzog struggled with it, going so far as to remake Murnau's *Nosferatu*, imitating some of it and simultaneously removing many of its essential elements. Rainer Werner Fassbinder understood the expressionist urge. He never copied the style, but knew its intent, and created a *mise-en-scène* of observed entrapment that is in the expressionist tradition. However, Fassbinder, like his contemporary Wim Wenders, may have gotten his expressionist tendencies as much from American *film noir* as from his own cinematic tradition.

These criss-crossing influences will be examined in more detail as we proceed. Here it is important to note that in its emphasis on the function of the image, expressionism was one part of the response to the American tradition that touched neorealism,* particularly as it modulated in the mid-twenties into a form called *Kammerspiel* (chamberwork), a smaller, more open narrative structure that concerned itself less with aggravated psychological or mythic states and more with the immediate desperations of life in the Weimar Republic. (*Kammerspiel* was part of a larger artistic movement at the time called *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*—the “new objectivity,”

* “Response” is used figuratively here. German expressionist film is, of course, part of a large movement in the country's theatre, literature, and painting.

or “matter-of-factness.”) In this form its potential influence on neorealism became even greater.¹⁴

There were still other responses and influences, in particular two figures who were part of the movement leading toward neorealism. The reactions to the Griffith tradition examined so far all came from outside the United States, but the approach to cinema he fostered did not go uncontested in America. Erich von Stroheim, who had been Griffith’s assistant, provided a strong contrast to the work of his mentor. In his major films of the late teens and twenties—*Blind Husbands*, *Foolish Wives*, *The Merry Widow*, *The Wedding March*, and *Greed*—he responded to Griffith’s pastoral landscapes, studio-set cities, and fanciful recreations of historical periods by creating two alternative worlds. The most predominant was a fantasy, late-nineteenth-century Middle Europe, a place of aristocratic decadence, the diabolical corner of the operetta kingdom—the dark capital of Ruritania, where noblemen drank blood and crippled girls were forced into marriage by pitiless fathers engaged in whorehouse orgies, and murdered bodies were deposited in sewers. Too grotesque for melodrama (though permitting just some sentimentality), smirking at the morbid moralism of Griffith and his followers, von Stroheim’s lurid universe created a corrective dialectic. Cruelty takes the place of virtue, squalid death the place of rescued honor, perversity wins out over innocent passion.

In *Greed* the corrective has a different quality. Its world is contemporary, its characters working class, its physical detail built out of locations as well as sets. While too much ought not to be made of this—much of silent film was shot outdoors, on location—*Greed* goes further than most in turning locations into environments that detail the characters’ social condition. The tenements, offices, bars, amusement parks they inhabit reflect their economic and social status as well as their diminished spirits. The inhabitants of *Greed* are among the meanest and most brutal in cinema, American or European, up to that time. They are perverse and obsessed, murderous in the extreme. The final shootout between the two male characters handcuffed together in the middle of Death Valley presents images grim in their expression of a willed, unsentimental destruction. Grim, but with a sense of von Stroheim’s delight in the nastiness he portrays and his cold observation of aberrant behavior. Perhaps this emerges as a major legacy of von Stroheim’s: a distance from the characters and their surroundings, an ability to observe with some humor and some horror the details and charms of perversity in a manner that cuts through the simplicities of melodrama that were developing under Griffith’s tutelage. Von Stroheim’s films ask of the viewer a willingness to observe the details of degeneracy with no hope offered for relief. The inhabitants of *Greed* are observed rather like insects under glass, and von Stroheim asks us to share with him the entomologist’s pleasure at viewing his specimens. *Greed* and his other films are a prophecy of Luis Buñuel’s unputying exorcising of bourgeois pieties.

His ability to observe detail recommended von Stroheim to André Bazin, who in turn recommended him to a new generation of filmmakers: "But it is most of all Stroheim who rejects photographic expressionism and the tricks of montage. In his films reality lays itself bare like a suspect confessing under the relentless examination of the commissioner of police. He has one simple rule for direction. Take a close look at the world, keep on doing so, and in the end it will lay bare for you all its cruelty and its ugliness. One could easily imagine . . . a film by Stroheim composed of a single shot as long-lasting and as close-up as you like."¹⁵ The last part of this statement may be truer to Bazin's conception of von Stroheim and where he fits into Bazin's aesthetic history of cinema than it is of the director's work. And as far as influence is concerned, von Stroheim's was almost as diffuse as Eisenstein's. Perhaps only Buñuel picked up directly the line of happy perversity that runs through von Stroheim's films. Otherwise, von Stroheim was a principal in the movement of antimelodrama, the kind of filmmaking that turns away from conventions of easy emotional manipulation and the deployment of stereotypical characters with whom the viewer can "identify." But however indirect, his influence is apparent in the neorealists' work. Like von Stroheim in *Greed*, they are attracted to working-class characters, though they come to these with a compassion von Stroheim would scorn. Even more important, the sense of detail, the environment that does not exaggerate the characters' state but defines it, the ability to make observation function in the place of editing are all qualities the neorealists looked to adapt.

It must be noted in passing that von Stroheim played another major role for future filmmakers to observe, understand, and use to their benefit, that of Hollywood martyr. He was the first major figure to suffer from the growth of filmmaking into a heavy industry, with the capital-conservation, maximum-profit, minimum-expenditure mentality that goes with such growth. Von Stroheim was fired from both Universal Studios and MGM for his obsession with detail and his profligacy with time and money. *Greed* was originally forty-seven reels long. Von Stroheim himself cut it almost in half; then Goldwyn Studios, at the point of the merger which would create MGM, had it cut to ten reels, the only form in which it is available, the rest having presumably been destroyed. The few films he was able to direct after that were almost all re-cut by their studios.¹⁶ With the coming of sound and the complete normalization of production, von Stroheim's directorial career was over. He was too slow, too meticulous, too arrogant for the line. What happened to him in Hollywood, as well as what happened to Eisenstein (his footage for *Que viva Mexico* was stolen from him and his idea for a film of Dreiser's *American Tragedy* given by Paramount to the safely non-revolutionary Joseph von Sternberg) and then to Welles (who was removed from RKO for making extravagant, non-commercial films), did not go unheeded by European filmmakers, who attempted with some success to keep control over their work.

The economic and industrial aspects of filmmaking played as important a part in the emergence of a new cinema after the war as did the aesthetic movements and the work of major individual filmmakers. The neorealists reacted as strongly against the methods of American film production as against the form and content of the films those methods produced. In turning away from studios to location shooting with non-professional players they joined economic necessity and aesthetic desire in an attack against the complex of events that made it difficult for a filmmaker like von Stroheim to work. And so his career had a double influence. Both what he did in his films and what was done to him and his films by the studios gave future filmmakers much to consider.

Von Stroheim's career directly converges with that of another formative figure who remains to be acknowledged along the way to neorealism. Jean Renoir has stated that von Stroheim's *Foolish Wives* was a major influence on his early work, and his admiration was directly recognized when he gave von Stroheim an important role in *The Grand Illusion* (1937). But Renoir's work goes beyond von Stroheim. His career reflects the political, economic, and aesthetic shifts that have occurred in cinema over a great period of time—almost its entire history, from the silent era to the late sixties. Only the work of Hitchcock and Buñuel also spans so great a period, though their longevity is the only thing they have in common with Renoir.

Renoir's cinematic embrace of the world is more open and gentle than that of either his contemporaries or von Stroheim. Hitchcock's gaze discovers the terrors of seeing too much, revealing anarchy and irrationality; Buñuel and von Stroheim delight in these very things; but Renoir's look reveals a world in which the violence we see and do is at the service of a larger understanding of bourgeois frailty and proletarian need. "Everyone has his reasons," says Octave, the character played by Renoir in *The Rules of the Game* (1939)—one of the most quoted lines in any film—and it stands for Renoir's notion of human behavior, from the anti-bourgeois anarchy wrought by Michel Simon in *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932), to the justified murder of the odious boss Batale by his employee in the Popular Front film *Le crime de M. Lange* (1935), to the elegies for a dying aristocracy in *The Grand Illusion* and *The Rules of the Game*. Renoir's is a cinema of understanding, of the embracing attempt to comprehend history and the function of men and women in it. The other movements and figures we have been observing are limited in comparison. He has ranged through a variety of stylistic approaches and subjects, through them all seeking ways to make the spectator's eye participate in the image, which embraces a large field, probes and elaborates, but does not close it off. The relationships of Renoir's characters to each other and to their environment are determined by a narrative and visual openness, a sensitivity to shifting attitudes and allegiances and the movements that indicate them. His use of camera movement and cutting creates a scope of activity, an interplay of face, gesture, and landscape that invite connection and enlargement. Bazin

writes:

Renoir . . . understands that the screen is not a simple rectangle.... It is the very opposite of a frame. The screen is a mask whose function is no less to hide reality than it is to reveal it. The significance of what the camera discloses is relative to what it leaves hidden. But this invisible witness is inevitably made to wear blinders; its ideal ubiquity is restrained by framing, just as tyranny is often restrained by assassination.¹⁷

The image, even Renoir's, cannot show everything, and in the dialectics of the seen and the not-seen lies an important part of his talent. In his use of deep focus, his persistent but gentle panning and tracking, the respect he shows to the spaces his camera organizes and to our orientation as spectators within those spaces, he indicates always an awareness of more. In his films of the thirties there is always something beyond what is immediately before the camera. But what is beyond is not a fearful otherness, but a *witness*, a continuation and an expansion. Griffith enclosed his world within the melodrama of parallel montage, framing the heroine's face and the hero's, separated, but needing to come together, overcoming the world's opposition. Von Stroheim locked in on the details of sordidness. The expressionists denied an expansion into the world by ignoring it. For them reality was the space created within the frame; if not a stage space, certainly a staged one. Eisenstein was open to the realities of history, but his montage encouraged the viewer to create an intellectual, historically relevant space from the dialectical images juxtaposed on the screen. He provided the material and its initial structure; the viewer completed the design.

Renoir is, therefore, one of the first major filmmakers to open up screen and narrative space, to give his viewers room, to allow them active participation. Like Eisenstein, he requires the spectator to aid in the completion of the film's total design; but unlike Eisenstein's, his films have spatial continuity, and the spectator need only continue the connections Renoir provides. The viewer is somewhat more passive before a Renoir film than before one by Eisenstein, and the combination of this passivity and Renoir's openness leads often to a sense of ambiguity in his work. The elegiac attitude toward class structure in *The Grand Illusion*, the open embrace of the multitude of political and social perspectives in *The Rules of the Game*, do create problems of ascertaining point of view. But there is no uncertainty about the fact that Renoir introduces the important elements of trust and respect into his cinema. He is a director of movement and attitude, of characters who work through and are affected by historical as well as personal change. He is able to create formal structures expressing process, alignments and realignments, movements of characters and of the audience's responses to characters that are more open than melodrama permits. Renoir moved away from the rigid and determining structures of the figures and schools that preceded and surrounded him and replaced

them with observed emergences of characters and situations that are fluid and changing. The closest formal analogy to *The Rules of the Game* is a symphony. As in a complex work of music, the inhabitants and events of this film work by statement and variation, through themes and characters taking dominant and recessive positions, through the crossing and re-crossing of lines of movements. (It is no accident that Octave is a would-be orchestra conductor.) Unlike music, of course, these movements are created by human figures acting with and reacting to each other in a precise narrative pattern. But in orchestrating their movements and actions rather than setting them on a trajectory within a predetermined space, Renoir is able to create an illusion of multiplicity and interdependence. The movements of the participants in the rabbit hunt, the interpenetration of servants and masters during the ball, the seemingly spontaneous series of decisions and mistaken identities that lead to the shooting of Jurieu, mark out a pattern of social imbalance, collapsing order, and characterological weakness that grows from no fixed point, but instead a number of points, moving, converging, departing. *The Rules of the Game* is a rich film; Renoir made no other as rich. Yet all of his best work creates to some extent this flow of chance and counter-chance and shares a generous visual and narrative field with the viewer.

Chance and counter-chance and the generosity of visual and narrative space became major elements of the new cinema of the sixties, and Renoir reigned as a guiding figure. Truffaut attempted to emulate him most directly, while Godard took his openness of form to its limits. All the major filmmakers of the sixties shared to some degree the respect Renoir had for his viewer. The neorealists provided the bridge between him and them, and one film of Renoir's was of particular importance to their work. Although, as Raymond Durnat points out, the subject of *Toni* (1934) is romantic passion and the *crime passionnel*, Renoir smuggles it through a quasi-objective study of working-class life in the manner the neorealists were to favor.¹⁸ He observes his characters' passions within, and determined by, a particular milieu and a particular class. The film is about a migrant worker in France, whose barren life in a quarry is mitigated by opportunities for love, ruined (and here Renoir cannot escape from thirties stereotypes) by a fickle woman. But more important than the story of the film is its treatment. Shot on location and creating a *mise-en-scène* that does not merely place its inhabitants within a landscape but implicates them in it, the film observes a physical detail of character and place that looks forward to Visconti's *Ossessione*. In fact Visconti is the only one of the neorealist directors who knew of the film prior to 1950, and *Ossessione* may be a source for the transmission of Renoir's ideas to the neorealists.¹⁹ But it is even more likely that Renoir came upon some notions of cinema which in theory and execution predated what the neorealists came upon independently some ten years later. Twenty years after making *Toni*, Renoir himself spoke about it in the language of a neorealist:

Good photography . . . sees the world as it is, selects it, determines what merits being seen and seizes it as if by surprise, without change.... At the time of *Toni* ... my ambition was to integrate the non-natural elements of my film, the elements not dependent on chance encounter, into a style as close as possible to everyday life. The same thing for the sets. There is no studio used in *Toni*. The landscapes, the houses are those we found. The human beings, whether interpreted by professional actors or the inhabitants of Martigues, tried to resemble people in the street.... No stone was left unturned to make our work as close as possible to a documentary. Our ambition was that the public would be able to imagine that an invisible camera had filmed the phases of a conflict without the characters unconsciously swept along by it being aware of its presence.²⁰

Renoir expresses more of a documentary urge than the neorealists would have cared for, and in reality *Toni* is nothing like a documentary, for its melodramatic content finally causes its attempted objectivity to collapse. Yet in Renoir's statement of intent—as well as in some aspects of the film—we can see parallels to the neorealist desire. Here is Rossellini writing in 1953: "The subject of neorealist film is the world; not story or narrative. It contains no preconceived thesis, because ideas are born *in* the film *from* the subject. It has no affinity with the superfluous and the merely spectacular, which it refuses, but is attracted to the concrete."²¹ However, despite what Renoir says, the "concrete" in *Toni* is almost an afterthought, as if he had a story and sought an interesting way to present it. There is no sense of it being born "in" the film. Nevertheless neorealism lies as a possibility in his work, as it does in expressionism and *Kammerspiel*, in Eisenstein, and even in the dominant melodramatic forms of American cinema. For in cinema, as in any art, the creation of any one form predicates the possibility of a response to that form. As each major movement or individual dealt with the notion of realism, interpreting film as a reflection of the "real" world or the creation of a new reality that would clarify experience, the function of the image changed; and each change represented another notion of what the image was capable of. The neorealists wanted the image to deal so closely with the social realities of postwar Italy that it would throw off all the encumbrances of stylistic and contextual preconception and face that world as if without mediation. An impossible desire, but in it lay the potential for yet other assaults on cinema history, another modification of the role of filmmaker and spectator.

We are in a position now to look again at neorealism proper. I have noted some of its basic elements—location shooting, poor working-class subjects played by non-professionals, use of the environment to define those subjects, an attitude of unmediated observation of events—and have examined some movements in cinema that preceded it. But something was needed to bring those various elements and the responses to earlier movements together, and that immediate cause was the end of World War II and the defeat of fascism. Only once before had a major historical

event created a new cinema—when Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and their colleagues responded to the Russian Revolution with cinematic languages that spoke of changed perceptions of individual and social life. The end of the war in Italy did not signal major change, only devastation; years of repression were ended and an occupied country was suddenly on its own, free to look at itself and its past. The left and liberal sectors shifted their attention from the bourgeoisie and attempted to come to terms with the social and cultural conditions of those suffering most after the war. With the right momentarily in retreat and the center beginning to form, something of a Marxist position was able briefly to take hold. In film, that position was made manifest in the choice of the working class as subject and expressed formally in a desire to observe representatives of that class in day-to-day activities of survival without, as Rossellini says, the interference of the superfluous and the spectacular. Perhaps even without melodrama. At such a time misery could no more be embellished than it could be ignored. The poverty and neglect were real, and the ideology responsible for them was no longer operating to negate its responsibility and to transpose reality into a mockery of itself. Fascism is essentially a politics of melodrama and spectacle. In its political shows, its emotional excess, demand for sacrifice, and apotheosis of death as the most noble act of the hero, it manipulates emotion toward predetermined ends. The neorealists wanted no ends predetermined; not even means. They wanted to observe the postwar world freed of the mediations and diversions that had helped create the war in the first place, and felt that if they allowed the movie camera to gaze at the world without interference, the lives of the poor would reveal themselves and their stories would grow from the simple act of observation.

Thus melodrama and any sort of formal demagoguery were to be avoided; they wished their new cinema to be non-directive in its attitude toward its subject and to allow its audience the freedom to respond to that subject with as little extraneous guidance as possible. Some neorealist theory called for doing away with anything that might interfere with the raw material of raw life—even narrative itself. Zavattini wrote: “. . . the neorealist movement recognized that the cinema should take as its subject the daily existence and condition of the Italian people, without introducing the coloration of the imagination, and thereby, force itself to analyze it for whatever human, historical, determining and definite factors it encompasses.”²² In 1948, an Italian Catholic critic, Felix A. Morlion, wrote:

the Italian neorealist director prefers simplicity. He is not eager to obtain effects through sensational editing in the manner of Eisenstein and Orson Welles. His goals are different: humble cinematography, seemingly unoriginal editing, simplicity in his choice of shots and his use of plastic material [the visual design of the film]: all go to give his interior vision substance. . . .

The Italian neorealist school is based on a single thesis diametrically

opposed to that thesis which regards the cinema only in terms of lighting effects, words, and purely imaginary situations. Neorealism's thesis is that the screen is a magic window which opens out onto the "real"; that cinematic art is the art of recreating, through the exercise of free choice upon the material world, the most intense vision possible of the invisible reality inherent in the movements of the mind.²³

These words recall Bazin's remarks about Renoir, but go even further. Bazin recognized the dialectical play of revelation and withholding in Renoir, the image's ability to suggest reality by what it hides of it. The neorealists theorized a Reconstruction of all the formative elements of film and of the tensions between form and content that might manipulate the subject of the film or the spectator. Bazin picks up the call and, writing about *Bicycle Thieves* in 1949, says it "is one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema."²⁴

Some twenty years later, Godard ended *Weekend* with the words "End of Story. End of Cinema." In 1967, the neorealist urge to break down the narrative forms and conventions of the entertainment film was still being evoked, although by this time, at the close of a decade of modernist filmmaking, the call seemed more likely to be heeded than it had been in the mid-forties. For when we look at neorealist film now, such statements as Morlion's or Bazin's seem more like wish-fulfillment than anything else. But to the Italian intellectuals of the time, and to Bazin in France who saw in their ideas not only a vindication of his own theories but a way to revitalize all of cinema, overstatement was necessary. It is the tradition of aesthetic manifestos to declare the death of the forms they challenge and to claim they begin the art anew. More important, the logic of the neorealists' thinking was correct. If film was to become a tool, a way of getting at the lives of people whose lives never were the subject of cinema; if film was to be an eye, a way of looking at a world rarely seen clearly in cinema, then all the methods film had used to evade observation of this world had to be eschewed. Not merely must the white telephones go, and the entire class those telephones signified, but also the cinematic constructions that perpetuated their irrelevance must be repudiated.

"The basis of every good work of art," wrote Morlion, "is not what people *think* about reality, but what reality actually is."²⁵ The filmmaker must suppress his interpretive powers, his transpositional powers (to revert to Zavattini's term), and eliminate the conventions that make the transpositions of reality possible. The neorealists would return to zero (another call repeated by Godard). They would start with the photographic origins of film, its ability to record images of the world "objectively." In 1945, Bazin wrote: "For the first time between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man."²⁶ This insight would be scorned

by most photographers and filmmakers. But its theoretical impact was enormous. Both Bazin and the neorealists were looking at the cinematic medium as just that, a medium, a means of getting to the world and getting the world to us without intervening in it. "Reality is there, why change it?" De Sica said. The neorealists believed that the cinematic image could be depended upon to reveal the world seen by the filmmaker if the filmmaker merely looked and kept his counsel, interfered as little as possible.

And so Bazin theorized about what he called the "image fact,"

a fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact, thanks to other imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships. Unquestionably, the director chose these "facts" carefully while at the same time respecting their factual integrity... But the nature of the "image facts" is not only to maintain with the other image facts the relationships invented by the mind. These are in a sense the centrifugal properties of the images—those which make the narrative possible. Each image being on its own just a fragment of reality existing before any meanings, the entire surface of the scene should manifest an equally concrete density.²⁷

The image is a kind of monad, a part of reality that incorporates within itself the fullness and complexity of the world from which it is taken. Its initial "meaning" is only that it *is*, and the spectator revels in this fact. Further meaning accrues to it when it becomes part of a narrative by being connected to other "image facts."

Bazin did not know—or would not recognize—that this is very close to Eisenstein's concept of the shot as a "montage cell" that achieves meaning only in relation to other shots.²⁸ However, the difference between their two concepts is telling. For Eisenstein the shot is only valuable in relation to the montage. For Bazin the phenomenon of narrative that occurs when one shot (and for the sake of simplicity I will equate "image" and "shot") is connected to others is almost secondary to the miracle of the shot's ability to be a precise rendering of reality. Neither Bazin nor the neorealists regarded the image as being in service to a larger montage structure. "The assemblage of the film must never add anything to the existing reality," Bazin says.²⁹ The image may give of itself to other images so that a narrative can exist, but it must retain independence and its own validity. And in practice, the neorealist film does not draw attention to its cutting. While not quite in the Hollywood zero-degree style, its editing is invisible, as Morlion said it must be. Rossellini and De Sica in particular cut mainly to reposition the gaze, center it on the major event in the sequence or the major participants in a dialogue. Their cutting rarely adds information, but is functional in the very best sense, guiding our concentration without manipulating it. Closeups and point-of-view shots (in which we see the character and what the character sees) are used sparingly, and whenever possible the environment figures as strongly as the individuals within it. The image generates all the meaning it can; commentary is inside it.

A fine example occurs in *Bicycle Thieves*. Ricci, the central character, is in his first morning on his new job, pasting up posters on walls. A co-worker is showing him how to do it. With significant irony, they are putting up a poster of Rita Hayworth—a premier sign of forties Hollywood with all the connotations of glamor, artificiality, and contrivance that De Sica was attempting to abjure.* The subject here is not glamor or contrivance, but an unassuming workman on his first job in a long time, learning his rather simple task. The sequence begins with the camera to the left of the characters, at a diagonal to them and the wall on which the poster is going up (neorealist characters, as I noted earlier, are always observed by walls, the urban boundaries of their lives). As Ricci's co-worker shows him what to do the camera executes a simple dolly and pan toward him as he pastes Rita to the wall. The shot is framed by two ladders. De Sica then cuts unobtrusively to a more distant shot from the other side, again diagonal to the characters and the wall. The camera is far enough from them so that we can see two little boys on the street (whom we had barely glimpsed previously), beggars, one of whom is playing an accordion. The accordion player moves toward the ladder, and Ricci's co-worker turns briefly to look at him. The little boy puts his foot up on the ladder and receives an unceremonious kick from the workman (who this time doesn't even turn around). As the boy walks away, another man walks into the frame from screen right, moving down the diagonal in front of the men at their work. He is well dressed, a tidy middle-aged bourgeois with a pipe. As he walks along the wall, the boys walk after him, and the camera, as if taking a casual interest in this event, pans away from Ricci and his colleague to follow the man with the two children in calm pursuit. But "follow" is not quite accurate, for the camera does not dolly toward them and there is no cut to a closer position. It merely pans away from its central concern to observe this seemingly peripheral event. The accordion player plays. The other little boy tugs at the well-to-do man's sleeve (a little further along the street we notice a man sitting in a chair by the curb). The well-to-do man ignores the boy, who turns and walks back to his friend. At this point there is a cut back to Ricci and his co-worker, who continues his instructions, the shot framing them in basically the same diagonal position as before. The two men then get on their bikes and the camera pans with Ricci as he heads off on his own, passing the two boys on the sidewalk.

The whole sequence lasts less than a minute. It gives us next to no information about "plot" and merely advances the narrative toward its first crisis, which occurs in the next sequence when Ricci's bike is stolen. If such a series of events occurred in a literary work, it might be called "descriptive" or "atmospheric." But there is more to it than that. Here,

* The concept of the sign is borrowed from semiology and indicates a unit of meaning made up of a physical expression (the poster in this instance) and its attendant denotations and connotations.



Ricci pastes up the Rita Hayworth poster. *Bicycle Thieves*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

we might term the sequence *milieu gathering*, the expansion from direct concentration on the central character to his immediate world. It is an expansion of the frame, but not in the measured, almost choreographic style of Renoir's expansions of screen and narrative space. De Sica's digressions are more casual; they assume the point of view of interested observer, concerned with the main character, but interested as well in the world that surrounds him. As observer, the camera attempts to be non-judgmental and non-provocative as well. Its movements do not provoke us or confront the characters, do not lead us on or compromise them through a prearranged strategy, a reframing meant to excite expectation or anxiety. We are asked only to share an interest in the commonplaces of this particular world, which become less common by the simple and unexpected attention given them.

This careful neutrality is not present throughout the film, and De Sica does play upon expectations when, for example, Ricci and his tattle son Bruno search for the stolen bicycle in the marketplace. Anxiety is created when Ricci—and we—think Bruno may have drowned, and when father and son discover the thief and are surrounded by the people in his neighborhood. De Sica even indulges in a commentative montage. During their search, Ricci and Bruno stop at a restaurant. As Bruno eats his meager pizza he looks over his shoulder at the rich family at another table, and De



Ricci and Bruno walk the streets. *Bicycle Thieves*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

Sica cuts between Bruno and that family's little boy stuffing himself with an enormous meal. Nor is the digression with the street urchins entirely innocent of narrative import and emotional preparation. It occurs at the high point of Ricci's life in the film: he has work. The beggars foreshadow his later situation, bicycle stolen, himself almost turned thief in desperation, walking the streets hopelessly.

In fact neither De Sica nor any of the neorealists were pure in their execution, nor were they willing to take very great chances. Certainly not as great as, for example, Godard in *Sauve qui peut (La Vie) (Every Man for Himself)*, where he pans or cuts from a central narrative event to anonymous people on the street. But this is not yet the moment for criticism. Godard could indulge in radical dislocations of attention precisely because De Sica had pointed the way. As I indicated, neorealism was a delicate concatenation of theory and practice, and at this point I am more interested in ways in which the theory was successfully realized than in how it was compromised.

The beggars sequence in *Bicycle Thieves* summarizes the major goal of the movement for formal restraint: "During the projection of the film," Luigi Chiarini wrote about Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* in 1950, "the audience no longer sees the limits of the screen, does not sense a skillful artifice, and no exclamations are uttered about the virtuosity of the directors and actors. The images have become reality, not seen with lucid detachment as in a mirror, but grasped in their actuality and very substance. The formal presence of the filmmakers has dissolved in that reality."³⁰ What was happening in the frame was more important than what the filmmaker might do with the frame or to the frame. The Hollywood style of the thirties did not concentrate on the image, but on the way the image could present stock characters in excessive situations, knitting these images into a smooth continuity that made up the narrative. The neorealists did not defy continuity, but neither did they sacrifice the image to it. They allowed the image to create a world, casually, and with as little embellishment as possible. Even when the "everyday" is extraordinary, as in *Rome, Open City*, there is an attempt not to make it more than it is. Rossellini tries to restrain the image, holding it to the observation of poor people doing heroic things—resisting and fighting the Nazi occupation—rather than making them appear heroic. The heroism emerges from their acts and their deaths. No comment is made upon it because no comment is needed.

If the word "realism" in film has any meaning at all it lies in this phenomenon: the refusal to make more of the image than is there, and an attempt to allow the fewest and simplest faces, gestures, and surroundings to speak what they have to say and then to move on. This is what neorealism discovered and what was passed on to the next generation. Whether in the casual observation of the beggars in *Bicycle Thieves*; the brief look on Bruno's face of disbelief mingled with fear when he finds

himself standing among clerics speaking German (a language with many connotations to a postwar Italian); the simple two-shots of Pina and her fiancé on the tenement staircase talking about their future in *Rome, Open City*; or the point-of-view shot from the fiancé being taken away in the German's truck, watching as Pina runs after him and is shot down, there is in the best of these films a *desire* not to embellish or do more to the characters or the viewer than is necessary. In Visconti's *La terra trema*, where great care is taken in composing images, where boats and harbor and the people who inhabit them are given an Eisensteinian grandeur, the visual care expresses Visconti's desire not for embellishment, but for honor. There is an admiration of these people and their struggle which does not make them more than they are; perhaps just what they are. Visconti is not dealing in the exaggerations of early socialist realism, the poster nobility of workers and peasants, but with a class of people in a particular geographical area (Sicily) to whom attention needed to be paid. The documentary urge inherent in much of the neorealist aesthetic also leads him a step further; the rich images are accompanied by a voice-over commentary which, even though it often merely repeats or sums up what we have already seen or will soon see, also attempts to provide an extra objective perspective, a concerned voice to match the concerned eye that forms the images. But some contradictions begin to emerge. Within this documentary impulse, almost contrary to it, there is a desire to go beyond creation of an illusion of unmediated reality. Visconti will not drop all aesthetic pretense. He observes his world, coaxes it into being, frames and composes it, regards it in the light of his own admiration and compassion, honors it, and finally monumentalizes it. There are images in the film that call for an aesthetic response, an appreciation of the way they are lit and composed. And the manipulation of the narrative, like that of the images, is designed to move us in particular ways.

In the end, the calls to remove subjective contemplation and mediation and reduce aesthetic interference, while necessary to the moral work of the neorealists, were recognized as impossible to follow. The outstanding fact about the movement is that they were committed to making fiction films, not documentaries, despite the impulse toward documentary in their theory and occasionally in their practice. The subjective urge was always present, and finally recognized. Chiarini wrote: "Facts speak through the suggestive force of neorealism; not as brutal documentary, because absolute objectivity is impossible and is never 'purified' out from the subjective element represented by the director; rather, in the sense of the historical-social meaning of facts."³¹ In their urge to purify cinema, they never gave serious thought to using documentary, as had John Grierson in England during the thirties, or Dziga Vertov, who wanted to chronicle post-revolutionary Russia with his kino eye in the twenties. There was nothing for the postwar Italians to chronicle with documentary. There was no revolution and they did not find lyricism in work or sponsorship

by government and business to create such lyricism as Grierson and his followers had. Instead they chose to dramatize and give structure to postwar events and to a class of people rarely considered worthy of narrative in the cinema. They invented characters, but allowed them to be played by individuals who were close to those characters in their own lives. They told a story but at the same time attenuated it, subordinating conventional continuity and character development to the observation of detail. Bazin wrote: "The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis."³² Just as the "image fact" achieves importance by the effect of its real presence, so "the concrete instants of life" contained by the image achieve importance beyond drama, beyond narrative even. Seeing an image of life itself is a dramatic event; it need not be manipulated into something greater than itself. The neorealists sought a form that would attenuate the structures of fantasy in traditional film. The spectator would be offered small, unelaborated images built from the lives of a certain class of people at a certain moment and in a certain place. These images would, finally, request the viewer to recognize in them not "reality" but an attempt to evoke the concrete the immediate; they would request an attention and a willingness to trust the image not to betray either its subject or the spectator

In *Paisan*, the second of his three films on the war, Rossellini comes closest of all the major neorealist filmmakers to making a fictional narrative that does not intrude upon subject and observer. The film integrates at least three approaches: it is a quasi-newsreel documenting the movement of American troops from Sicily northward to the Po; within this historical structure it presents six episodes, in specific geographical locations, sketching small dramas occurring between the soldiers and Resistance fighters and the people; and within these episodes it reveals, tersely and without embellishment, some attitudes, agonies, defeats, and victories, military and personal, that resulted from the deprivation of war and two foreign invasions, German and American.

The *mise-en-scène* throughout most of the episodes is one of catastrophic destruction and barrenness, of heaps of rubble or empty streets through which individuals pursue each other or search for those who have become physically or emotionally lost. In the Naples episode a black American MP meets a small boy, another of those street beggars who populate the neorealist universe. The episode is built out of a series of small ironies and understandings. When they first meet, at a street fair complete with fire-eater, the soldier is drunk, and a group of young children try to rob him. The boy follows the soldier and the two of them visit a puppet show, which depicts the white crusader Orlando battling a Moor. The black American liberator watches a display of ancient racism and in his drunkenness attacks



“Joe” and the little boy on the rubble heap. *Paisan*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

the white puppet. The boy leads him away through the ruined streets to a rubble heap where the two sit. The soldier plays a harmonica and talks of his fantasy of a hero's welcome in New York, realizes it is a fantasy, and says he does not want to go home. He falls asleep, and the sequence ends in a manner typical of Rossellini's approach through the film. The little boy shakes him, tells him rather matter-of-factly, "If you go to sleep, I'll steal your shoes." The soldier sleeps. The image fades to black.³³

The episode concludes with the soldier finding the little boy again (although at first he does not recognize him), yelling at him, taking him home to the cave where he and many other children live, war orphans left to their own squalor. The soldier comes to a quiet understanding of the poverty that makes thievery an ordinary childhood activity. He does not take the shoes offered him by the little boy (which are not the ones he stole from him anyway) and simply leaves. The last shots are a closeup of the boy's sad, scared face and a distant shot of the soldier driving off. Swelling music provides the only punctuation. Emotions are not wrung from us here, and the revelation of the city's hopeless poverty that we share with the black soldier, which ironically reverberates with his own situation as a black man, remains understated. Rossellini need only suggest the horror that often proceeds from understanding, or, in more precise neorealist terms, permit revelation to occur through observation

of the individuals in their environment, and allow both them and us the reactions appropriate at the moment and place of the revelation. He need not expand on these self-contained and self-expressive images: the poor children in primitive conditions who must steal to live; the black American soldier, hero, drunkard, understanding the poverty, unable to have any effect on it. Recognition passes in the exchange of glances within the film and across the film to the audience, who are then left between the look of the child and the soldier in the distant jeep.

The film's other episodes work in similar patterns. Some are a bit more melodramatic, such as the Roman episode, about an American soldier who spends the night with a prostitute he does not recognize as the woman he once loved. Or the Florence episode, in which an American nurse seeks her Partisan lover, only to discover he has been killed. But even here the personal drama is undercut by that essential neorealist wonder at things observed. Again, Rossellini is most concerned with the way this piece of history looks, and the Florence episode is constructed primarily of scenes of the nurse moving through the streets of an open city. The urban landscape takes precedence over the woman's search, and her discovery of her own loss is undercut by Rossellini's re-creation of the physical emptiness and random violence of a wartime city, where a jug of wine is pulled across the street by a rope so the enemy will not spot the people, and a group of British soldiers sit on a hill viewing church architecture through binoculars.

In one episode, we are set up for melodrama and then denied it. The visit of a group of American chaplains—a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jew—to a Franciscan monastery would ordinarily threaten (certainly in an American film) either a great deal of cuteness, choking sanctimoniousness, or a lesson in the virtues of brotherhood. But again, Rossellini refuses to extend significance or commentary beyond the demands of the moment. We learn that the Franciscans served the town during the war by caring for the peasants' animals. The Americans wonder at the age of the monastery and offer the friars cigarettes and chocolate, as well as more substantial provisions. The friars in return show hospitality and, among themselves, great consternation over the fact that one of the chaplains is Jewish and another Protestant. When the friars confront the Catholic chaplain with their concern over the souls of the Jew and the Protestant, he quietly acknowledges it without sharing it. At dinner, the friars fast, "because Divine Providence has sent to our refuge two souls on which the light of truth must descend." The Catholic chaplain appears to hesitate at their remarks and then gets up to speak. It is just at this point that our expectations are denied. Our training in Hollywood melodrama would lead us to expect the chaplain to give a fulsome defense of his colleagues and a plea for understanding. Rossellini's chaplain says: ". . . I want to talk to you. I want to tell you that what you've given me is such a great gift that I feel I'll always be in your debt. I've found here that peace of mind I'd lost in the horrors and the trials of the war, a beautiful, moving lesson



A chronicle of war's terrors. *Paisan*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

of humility, simplicity, and pure faith...."³⁴ Sanctimoniousness is replaced by understanding, conflict by acceptance, and embellishment is foregone.

Throughout the film the images create and then seem to recede behind a simple historical presence, the fictive record of a particular moment. Again, this is not the Hollywood style of invisible form; we are quite conscious of the effect of withholding and foreshortening. Artifice is present, recognized, *and* self-effacing simultaneously. As viewers, we are aware of the restraint and its results, a continuous blocking of our desire for conclusiveness, for emotional statement, for closure.

Paisan is a difficult film to evaluate fully. The acting—which is hardly acting at all in a conventional sense—is erratic and so against our expectations of professional performance that it appears amateurish. The cutting, even more than in other neorealist films, is perfectly functional, getting the narrative from here to there in the swiftest way possible. The structure of the episodes is so truncated that it produces an off-handedness that elevates incompleteness to the status of a structural necessity. But the attenuation and lack of climax is thematic as well as structural. The history covered by the film goes just up to the complete liberation of the country and does not even permit a final satisfaction from that event. The last episode concerns the joining of American and Allied soldiers with Italian Partisans against the Germans in the Po Valley during the last weeks of the

war. It opens with the image of a body in a life preserver floating down the river, carrying a sign reading "Partisan," placed there by the Germans. The episode ends with Germans shooting their captives on a boat, the bodies falling one after the other into the river. In between these events is a chronicle of terrors: the liberation army surrounded by Germans on the Po marshes, peasants attempting to gather eels for food, a weeping child on the river bank, a Partisan shooting himself in his despair. Within the war film genre, this episode negates completely the conventions of individual heroism and substitutes a barely cohesive group struggle that is itself apparently hopeless. It is bearable only because we know that the Allies and the Partisans did win. The commentary over the floating bodies at the end tells us, "This happened in the winter of 1944. A few weeks later spring came to Italy and the war was declared over."³⁵ It is only within this context that the episode loses its connotations of futility and instead comes to express a grim persistence with a promise of victory emerging from loss.

Or more accurately, in neorealist terms, it comes to represent itself, its images self-sufficient in their historical validity, demanding of us nothing more than an immediate comprehension of them. But when I say that *Paisan* or any other neorealist film comes to represent itself, I am not suggesting that it is a self-referential form. The creation of a film narrative that comes to signify mainly the creation of a film narrative was the work of the modernist movement that followed neorealism and was made possible by it. Such an operation could not have been further from Rossellini's or his colleagues' minds. What I am suggesting is that the foreshortened emotions created by the foreshortened structure of *Paisan*, their incompleteness and inconclusiveness, permit and indeed force the viewer to deal with them with a minimum of directorial assistance. Which may be why this film, more than any other of the period, is so unsatisfying within the context of our cinematic expectations, and most successful in the context of neorealist theory. It refuses to do more than show, or demand more than that we understand what is shown. Beyond that there is the possibility for us to integrate the narrative with our understanding of the history its images reflect, a history of pain and loss, of deprivation and struggle, and of some kind of victory.

The players in this version of history have little personality or life beyond their presence in the narratives; what we see of them is as much as we ever learn about them. Rossellini gives us nothing in the way of past, future, or psychological background for his characters. The "Joe" of the first episode reminisces to an uncomprehending Italian girl of his home in America. The "Joe" of the second episode fantasizes a heroic homecoming for himself to an uncomprehending little boy. But in neither case do the thoughts and feelings of these characters provide the psychology or motivation we are used to finding in melodrama, and in neither case do their feelings lead anywhere. In the first instance, "Joe" is shot by the Germans when he lights a cigarette lighter to show Carmela pictures of

his family. Carmela is herself killed when she tries to shoot the Germans. The drunken fantasies of the second "Joe" only lead to a realization of his unheroic life, and when he falls asleep his boots get stolen. Even the sentimentality latent in the Roman episode, in which a drunk American soldier doesn't recognize the prostitute he has picked up as a girl he met and fell in love with six months earlier, is undercut. The pathos threatened when the prostitute attempts to re-create the past by slipping away from the drunken soldier and leaving him her old address, hoping he will come to her and recognize her as his former love, is left unfinished. The next day the soldier looks at the address and throws it away without recognition. Francesca is left waiting; the soldier drives off. Nothing more is made of it.

The "psychological realism" missing in *Paisan* is a basic component of film melodrama, Hollywood or European, so basic that melodrama is partly defined by its presence. It is the means by which characters are given a "life" and personality that appear to bear some relationship to the lives of the film's viewers. The character talks, has memories, passes through events, indulges in introspection and confrontation, suffers, endures, triumphs, or dies, often triumphing in death. In short, the psychologically motivated character has experiences and memories which reveal a personality. But these are often exaggerated and stereotyped, mirroring not the concerns of real individuals in a real society, but the conventional attitudes and personalities of other "psychologically motivated" characters in the history of film. They may change from period to period and country to country, depending on changes and differences in reigning ideologies; they often reflect contemporary fantasies and change as the fantasies change. But despite what "psychological realism" may tell us about our fantasies and our ideology, it tells us nothing about the realities of the immediate world and immediate experience, which is why the neorealists tried to do away with it. For them situation takes the place of psychology, the type replaces the individual, the ordinary the heroic. What we know about a character is what we see of that character in action in his or her environment; no other motivation is needed.

Bazin, writing about the Florence episode in *Paisan*, says, "Attention is never artificially focused on the heroine. The camera makes no pretense at being psychologically subjective.... As if making an impartial report, [it] confines itself to following a woman searching for a man, leaving us the task of being alone with her, of understanding her, and of sharing her suffering."³⁶ If, Bazin might have added, we care to do so. This episode, like all the others in the film, gives us permission to move on and not be alone with the heroine, not identify with her. The spectator is not distanced from the characters as in a film by Resnais, Godard, or Fassbinder, filmmakers who want completely to cleanse their characters of psychological conventions and their audience of expectations. The neorealists wanted only to avoid heaping upon the spectator clichéd emotion extraneous to what was needed to understand the character in his

or her immediate situation, and rather to allow audience response to flow from the “image-facts” and not a preconceived notion of character. In his war trilogy Rossellini comes close to conventional character psychology in the figure of Edmund, the child of *Germany, Year Zero*, who commits suicide after following the advice of a Nazi to kill his ailing father. But here the enormity of the crime and of the act of a child’s suicide goes well beyond the cinematic conventions of troubled children with troubled families in troubled times. Again the physical and political landscape merges with the individual and his actions in an almost allegorical interchange. The child is as ruined as his surroundings. When he is not in the tenement flat his family shares with others, he is walking the shattered streets of Berlin (an activity he shares with most neorealist characters), as lost as the country he represents. His suicide becomes Germany’s own and his actions are explained finally not by his own emotional nature, but by his function as a historical symbol. His life and death outrun their local narrative function and come to stand for a greater history. At one point in his wanderings, he is given a recording of a Hitler speech by his old Nazi teacher to sell on the black market. In the ruins of the Chancery building, Edmund plays the recording and Hitler’s voice echoes. We see an old man and a young child listen in some bewilderment. The camera pans the ruined cityscape as Hitler boasts of bringing the country to its glory.

Meaning flows from the relationship of word and image and history, and the ironies of Edmund’s life and his leap to death in a bombed-out building become, finally, more than can be contained within a mere psychological narrative. The “dailiness” the neorealists sought expands in *Germany, Year Zero* not to some vague universal statement of innocence lost, but to a large and specific judgment about history. Zavattini wrote:

Whereas in the past, cinema portrayed a situation from which a second was derived, and then a third from that, and so on each scene being created only to be forgotten the next moment today, when we imagine a scene, we feel the need to “stay” there inside it; we now know that it has within itself all the potential of being reborn and of having important effects. We can calmly say: give us an ordinary situation and from it we will make a spectacle. Centrifugal force which constituted (both from a technical and a moral point of view) the fundamental aspects of traditional cinema has now transformed itself into centripetal force.³⁷

The melodramatic urge-shared by the conventional war film as by most genres-seeks to force the trials of its characters outward into large statements of suffering and transcendence that are greater than history, sometimes greater than the characters themselves. Rossellini reverses the melodramatic urge of the war genre, collapses it into the immediate images of ruin in *Germany, Year Zero*, or the particular struggles and defeats in *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan*. History is drawn, with the spectator’s gaze, into the images, which then communicate back to the viewer the place of

the character in history, often subjected to history. Most neorealist cinema operates on this principle: characters inhabit a ruined, collapsed world; their fight against it is momentarily and minimally heroic, like that of the Partisans in *Rome, Open City*, or the fishermen in *La terra trema*. Their struggle is an external one; little psychological torment is involved. The despair of Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves* or the old man in *Umberto D.* is not so much personal as it is social, a despair at not being able to gain an economic self-sufficiency. All of these characters lose by the end of the film, but in their loss there is the attempt to express a wider gain. The whistling of the Partisan children gathered around the executed priest at the end of *Rome, Open City* is the most commanding sign of life coming out of destruction in any of the films, and the executions of the Partisans at the end of *Paisan* suggest not a dismal end of struggle, but the necessary conditions of its victory. No glory is given to the deaths, but nothing is taken away from their function in the wider fight. And besides they allow us to hate fascism even more.

But at this point, at the recognition that all neorealist films end in images of loss, or at best endurance, we can discriminate some more between theoretical intentions and practical realizations. Let me repeat a statement by Zavattini: "It should . . . be clear, that contrary to what was done before the war, the neorealist movement recognized that the cinema should take as its subject the daily existence and condition of the Italian people, without introducing the coloration of the imagination, and thereby, force itself to analyze it for whatever human, historical, determining, and definite factors it encompasses." Looking back on the movement when he wrote this, Zavattini announced clearly the shift from middle-class subjects and moralism to a more objective observation of the working class, "without introducing the coloration of the imagination." He is aware that it is only a bravura statement, and he admits that the narrative urge of the neorealists is strong; "they tell stories and do not apply the documentary spirit simply and fully."³⁸ The essays from which these remarks came make up an apology. Neorealism as a coherent movement was fading when Zavattini wrote them between 1952 and 1953, and there were many attacks upon it from both right and left. In his apology Zavattini's bad faith becomes apparent as he continues to support the theories of the movement against his own inability to see them through. As a practitioner, Zavattini the screenwriter, De Sica's collaborator, never shied from the coloration of the imagination or from attempts to use it to move the audience. And while he and the others were successful in breaking the "bourgeois synthesis" of traditional cinema, they were not successful in analyzing "whatever human, historical, determining and definite factors" were encompassed by "the daily existence and condition of the Italian people." They showed that existence and showed it well; they rarely analyzed it. While they went far in creating an "intensity of vision . . . [in] both the director and the audience" and "a dialogue in which one must give life, reality, its historical

importance, which exists in each instant,"³⁹ they rarely dealt with history in such a way as to indicate that their characters might control it rather than only suffer it. They permitted the spectator to see a particular world, but never to see past it. They sometimes suggested, but never clearly presented, possibilities for change in that world.

Nor were their attempts to revise narrative structure complete. For all they did accomplish, they could not, or would not, move away from an essentially sentimental attachment to their subject. The desire for objective observation never replaced sympathy for the characters, a sympathy which manifested itself in the communication of the social-political despair the characters suffered. Images which in theory were meant to be intense observations of daily existence were, in fact, perhaps by the nature of that daily life, images of pathos. The wanderings of Ricci and little Bruno in *Bicycle Thieves*, their frustration at every turn, the sequence in which Ricci thinks his son has drowned after he has cuffed him in anger, the threats against Ricci by the crowd protecting the thief, Ricci's own attempt at stealing a bike, Bruno's reproach, and their final walk, hand in hand into the crowd, all constitute a pattern guaranteed to arouse our sadness and frustration and make our emotions echo the characters'. Melodrama is just barely avoided in *Bicycle Thieves*, as it is in *Rome, Open City*, by the refusal to allow the characters to suffer psychologically and by keeping the movement of the characters and their story simple, without predictable curves of passion, and anchored in the physical and historical environment the images create. Rossellini does make special demands on our reactions in the death of Pina, the torturing of Manfredi, and the execution of Don Pietro in *Rome, Open City*. In that film he is perhaps too close to the realities of fascism to be able to distance himself from its terrors, and not yet aware that an identification with and emotional reaction to viewed pain and suffering can preclude an understanding of it.⁴⁰ He learned this quickly, and *Paisan* attenuates direct emotion almost completely. De Sica and Visconti never learned it.

This structural difficulty, the inability to separate their own emotions and ours from the characters they create, is compounded by the neorealists' insistence on using children as the fulcrum on which to turn these emotions. It is easy to understand the attraction, for children are the most visible and obvious sufferers in any political, economic, and social disaster. They are helpless and therefore wronged the most. To see these wrongs through them, from their perspective, or at least with them as central participants, is to perceive the scope of these wrongs most immediately. The problem—and it is unclear whether Rossellini and De Sica were aware of it—is that the use of children results in a special pleading which, at its worst, becomes cynicism, a vulgar way to assure audience response. The neorealists fortunately missed being vulgar; they did not miss a certain cynicism and a great deal of naivete. Eric Rhode, one of the few historians not captivated by neorealist children and able to see the faults

of the movement as a whole, accuses the filmmakers of committing moral blackmail. His analysis is important enough to be quoted at length:

Through his portrait of Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera*, [Bertolt] Brecht had implied that all claims to charity are a form of licensed thievery. He had recognized how in an unjust society the exploited can exploit the exploiters in a way that traps everyone into some form of guile. De Sica and Zavattini are not willing to accept responsibility for this conception of society. They reduce everyone to a childlike state, as though everyone were a child in the sight of God. Their childlike perception of the minutiae of daily life tends to be passive, for all its delicate precision. They cling to the surface of things, and in their clinging assume a perpetual complaint. Brecht had understood that once adults slip back into childlike states of mind and displace responsibility for the community elsewhere, they prefer to complain rather than take action when the community fails to satisfy their needs; and since these needs are seldom satisfied, they tend to imagine that their lives are ordained by some malignant power.⁴¹

Though De Sica and others used children to focus their view of society and our emotional reaction to it, I do not agree with Rhode that they assume a childlike perception themselves, nor do I think their perception to be passive. The passivity in their films exists elsewhere. I do agree, however, that the omnipresence of children is a way for them to avoid a certain responsibility. A child, by all the definitions of middle-class morality, is helpless and in need of constant protection by either parents or charity. The neorealist child gets none from the latter and only as much from the former as the parents can spare in their own desperate attempts at survival. The desolation continually observed by the neorealists' cameras is not only unabated, but seems unabatable, as does the poverty that is created by and inhabits the desolation. Within this desolation the children suffer mutely and serve as witnesses and as surrogates for our point of view. Here is where Rhode's perception is acute, for in attaching our point of view to the suffering child, the neorealists put us in a state of passive and helpless contemplation. De Sica and Zavattini are the main offenders, but even Rossellini, whose children in *Rome, Open City* are active participants in the Partisans' fight, overplays his hand and our perception by giving them a greater role than they deserve and we need in order to understand the situation. None of these filmmakers acknowledged Brecht's principle of sustained, distanced analysis in the work of art, an analysis that disallows emotional identification and passive acceptance of events by the audience. And so their stated desire to see the world clearly and without conventional cinematic preconceptions came into conflict with their inability to withdraw themselves from a sometimes clichéd sympathy for the helpless. The result was that the neorealists ultimately failed the people they portrayed by being unable or unwilling to create for them victory over their situation (even in Rossellini's war films the victory is only alluded to), and failed their audience by too often allowing them to

sentimentalize rather than analyze character and situation.

Early in their careers, and perhaps only because of their antifascism, the neorealists seem to have had leftist sympathies which drew their attention to the poor and abused. They were not, however, revolutionaries. Though they changed the aesthetics of Western cinema, they did not call for a change in the structure of Western society. What was more, the aesthetic they promoted countered the idea of change. It demanded they observe, but not alter what they saw; it constrained them from offering their characters much more than pity and sentiment. A notion of passivity is built into neorealist theory, and as a result the filmmakers only allow their characters and their audience to reap the rewards of passivity: more pain, more poverty, softened somewhat by a notion of stoicism and endurance (on the part of the characters) and sadness, understanding, and not a little bit of superiority (on the part of the audience).

In the twenties, Eisenstein could create film that was revolutionary both in form and content; he had the force and support of a historical revolution behind him. There was no such support in postwar Italy only the grimness of a ruined country with an uncertain future. Suffering overtook celebration, and the filmmakers who emerged to document this moment were more taken by the suffering than by anything else. After all, suffering of this stature had never before been documented on film, certainly not without softening and an artificial leap to a change in fortune. Committed to the retention of simple but eloquent details, to an unadorned but compassionate image, the neorealist filmmaker was not free to alter them or to express anything more than what he saw. It was, finally, a self-defeating cycle, and it can be seen operating in a most troublesome way in Visconti's *La terra trema*. This film was to be the first part of a great neorealist revolutionary trilogy about the social and political struggles of fishermen, miners, and peasants living in the poverty-ridden south of Italy. The project was started with financing from the Communist Party and in its original conception had a revolutionary thrust and a notion of the poor triumphing over their oppression that might have taken the film beyond the usual neorealist observations of passive suffering. Visconti did not follow through on this original concept, partly because his ideas changed as he was shooting and partly because the project never worked out as intended.⁴² Only the first part was made and in its time suffered because of its pace, its length (over three hours), and, in Italy, its dialogue. Visconti used a non-professional Sicilian cast who spoke their own dialect, largely incomprehensible to the rest of the country (which is one reason a voice-over commentary was added). For some time after its initial screenings, the film was available only in a cut, greatly reduced version. But seen whole, and despite (or because of) its changed intentions, it can be taken as a *summa* of the movement. All the immediate textbook concerns of neorealism are attended to. The film is shot on location and acted by the inhabitants of the location, who play roles close to their own lives. Visconti

shows a careful eye for the rich but simple detail that defines these lives and renders movingly the looks and gestures, light and texture of their world.

His images are made with extreme care, and the use of deep focus and silhouette, the lights of boats at sea, the sweeping pans of land and ocean, all indicate an admiration, even a celebration of what is seen. It is not an idle formalism (this crept into Visconti's work soon enough), but, as I noted earlier, an attempt to draw attention, to honor the place and its inhabitants. This attitude can be glimpsed in some sequences of *Bicycle Thieves*, where De Sica honors his working men not with nobility, certainly, but with a sense of purpose and control, as in Ricci's first morning of work, when he and Bruno join other men in the streets just after dawn, going for their buses, dominating the landscape and the early light. Visconti goes much further than De Sica.

But in *La terra trema* visual splendor and the observation of novel detail begin to exercise more control over the narrative than does a sense of social and political revelation. Visconti succeeds in documenting the town and inhabitants of Aci-Trezza—more than documenting it, organizing the buildings, the coastline, the fishermen and their families in images that finally overwhelm them. "The documentary moment prevails over the ideological," Geoffrey Nowell-Smith writes, and the picturesque prevails over the documentary. Meanwhile the revolutionary intent that Nowell-Smith cites as the initial driving force of the film gets turned into a moving neorealist affirmation of enduring humanity. The film at times approaches, in Nowell-Smith's words, "an anthropological cinema in which the anthropologist sets the scene and comments on its significance, but retires from the picture when it is actually being taken so that his presence is no longer felt."⁴³ And so a problem arises. Visconti tries to have things two ways: he attempts to make a visual record of a place and a way of life, unencumbered by an authorial presence; and he attempts to apply an authorial presence through the voice-over commentary and by forming this record into a narrative of rebellion and failure. His desire to document a people and their environment, his decision not to depict a successful revolution, his intrusion into the narrative to guide our emotions result in a powerful but conflicted work.

The film traces the fortunes of a poor fishing family who attempt to make themselves independent of the *padroni*, the omnipresent bosses, wholesalers in this instance, who take the results of the family's difficult labor, pay them poorly for it, and then sell it at a large profit. The early part of the film observes the Valastros' work at sea, their family life, their bitterness at being unable to sell their own catch. Visconti's commentary, spoken throughout the film, tells us of their poverty and anxiety and their few simple pleasures. We are presented with a cycle of work and domesticity interspersed with innocent flirtations, all of which is knitted together by a voice-over narrator who speaks for the people, asking

how they could be content with their exploitation. One member of the family, the older brother 'Ntoni, is not. Against the protestations of his conservative grandfather, he leads a small rebellion. The fishermen gather after the catch; 'Ntoni throws the wholesalers' scales and baskets into the water and is promptly arrested by the police. The wholesalers realize that, without the fishermen to catch fish for them to sell, they will not make money. They have 'Ntoni released from jail.

At this point Visconti begins to evade the difficulties in the situation he has created. 'Ntoni, freed, persists in carrying out his struggle for liberation from the owners, and in so doing confronts the unwillingness of his fellow fishermen to join him. He takes the dangerous step of mortgaging his family's house to get the money he needs for his independence. Visconti observes the neighbors' suspicions and their playful mocking of the Valastros; he is sensitive to the shifts in class attitudes. In their momentary wealth, with money from their house and a good catch, the Valastros become the rich and are suspected by the other workers. Both 'Ntoni's girlfriend and his sister's boyfriend express an insecurity about this sudden wealth. It is just here that the "anthropologist" is at his most subtle, and here that the would-be revolutionary filmmaker withdraws and the melodramatist enters, leaving his characters, their situation, and the audience to fend for themselves against the intrusion of cinematic convention. The Valastros reach a high point of success. They have a good catch. They manage to get help from their neighbors in salting the fish. There is laughter and music. 'Ntoni and his lover run happily through the countryside to make love at the shore. Every message sent out by the activity on the screen begins to arouse a single melodramatic expectation: a disaster is inevitable. Visconti cannot help doubling the expectations set up by the images: the narrator emphasizes the couple's happiness, an emphasis that sets up an inevitable response. The happiness will not last.

Visconti dissolves from the couple to the windy dock. The men return to the sea. They go off in the boats and the screen fades to black. The image fades up on a pan of the harbor and town, ending on a bell ringer. The narrator tells us that the sound of the bell in Aci-Trezza makes hearts sink, for it means a storm is approaching. The pattern is obvious. The storm comes; the family at home are deeply worried. We are shown images of women in black, silhouetted against the shore, looking out expectantly to the turbulent sea. The Valastros survive physically, but their boat, and therefore their livelihood, is ruined. One of the wholesalers tells 'Ntoni he will pay for all this. In truth Visconti, the owner of the narrative, will make the family, and us, pay dearly. The decline in fortune from this moment is precipitous and direct. The wholesalers cheat the family, a brother leaves home with a stranger to work in the north, a sister takes up with a town official, 'Ntoni finds companionship with the town drunks because they are the only ones who will not laugh at him. The family's house is sold; they end up in rags. "All that is left of the Valastros," says the



'Ntoni and his brothers in rags. *La terra trema*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

narrator in a remark that suggests Visconti may be luxuriating in the fall of his characters, “are their eyes with which to cry.” ‘Ntoni must humiliate himself before the wholesalers he once tried to beat, beg for work before a boss who sits beneath the fading but still clear imprint of Mussolini’s name on the wall. The film ends with the Valastros settling into their broken-down new house and ‘Ntoni returning to the sea, understanding that his failure was due to a lack of solidarity among the fishermen, but indentured to the *padroni* more thoroughly than before.

Mussolini’s name on the wall above the wholesaler is an important emblem, meant as a contrast to the hammer and sickle seen on the wall outside the wholesalers’ office and elsewhere. Visconti alludes to the two political orders, one indicating repression, cruel and arrogant power, the other a communal spirit, the strength of the fishermen together, working for themselves. But with the prominence of Mussolini’s name over the boss’s head, Visconti seems to suggest that the pull of the right is strongest, that repression will continue and a successful communal struggle is not about to occur. He does not say or indicate why he thinks this and allows the political substructure of the film to be diminished by the melodramatic curve that takes over the narrative. The characters are pulled away from the possibilities of political struggle and given over to that most simple and diverting of dramatic conventions, fate. Like so many of their cousins in other neorealist films, the Valastros suffer and lose. Their spirits are unbroken, but save for ‘Ntoni’s important understanding that only in unity can the fishermen face the wholesalers, they are without direction or hope.

Though I have said that one of the most important elements of neorealism was its attempt to counter melodrama—the fixed curves of loss and sacrifice and unearned emotional response that had become the supporting pattern of most commercial cinema—I have now to modify that argument and say that though Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti would have liked to move into an anti-melodramatic mode, they succeeded only on occasion; the conflict between their desire to create an observed social-political reality and their attachment to old forms of sentimental storytelling was never resolved, for a variety of reasons. Predominant among them is that these filmmakers often confused one concept of “realism”—an attempt to explore the actual conditions of people, hoping, perhaps, that from the revelation of these conditions might arise a notion of how to change them—with a literary and cinematic convention of “realism” that holds a narrative to be “realistic” if it is sad and if its characters come to an unhappy or unresolved end. They also felt obliged, as I indicated earlier, to follow out the logic of their aesthetic. If neorealism was to concern itself with the observation of existing conditions, and that observation revealed a seemingly insuperable and stagnant poverty, then that was what had to be shown.⁴⁴ To have dramatized change would have injected into the fiction a subjective impulse contrary to the dictates of observation.

The resulting conflict was often more than the films could bear. The

neorealists may have hoped their films would work dialectically, that their exposure of poverty, suffering, and endurance would suggest possibilities for change in the social structure. But this dialectic rarely operated successfully. For what is ultimately communicated in most of the films is not hope but, to apply Nowell-Smith's comments on Visconti, "a deeply rooted pessimistic fatalism" which pulls too strongly against "a more optimistic intellectual conception of the possibilities of human action" that the filmmakers might want to suggest.⁴⁵ No one and nothing helps Ricci when his bicycle is stolen. He goes to a community center after the event for help. On one side of the hall is what appears to be a Communist Party labor meeting, in which a speaker tells the gathering of the need for more jobs. Ricci's personal needs are rebuffed by the speaker. At the other end of the hall some people are rehearsing a show, making entertainment at this most serious point of Ricci's life. The Party will not help him, and only a friend, a garbage man who is rehearsing, steps forward with the promise of aid. The next day the garbage man and another friend briefly help Ricci look for his bicycle, but he is soon left alone with his son in a hopeless and humiliating venture which winds up only in a general affirmation of humanity—a powerful affirmation, to be sure, but also an easy one to make. Nothing specific is offered for the particular case of Ricci and his family or those like him. Similarly, at the end of *Umberto D.* De Sica and Zavattini's old man (abused old age here takes the place of abused childhood) who is unable to live on his government pension and has been thrown out of his lodgings, contemplates suicide, but finally, with his little dog, surrounded by children in the park, decides to go on. For what and how is not made clear. Again an affirmation of life takes the place of an analysis of how such a life can be affirmed. We are not permitted to despair, but neither are we given any concrete reason not to.

This notion of the need to endure hardship and despair with hope comes out of another conflicting strain in the neorealist endeavor, the attempt to merge a leftist understanding of class and social structure with Catholic faith.⁴⁶ Behind the neorealist aesthetic lay the belief that an openness to the world would lead to revelation; that the filmmaker need only gaze into the book of God's creatures to discover the truths of humanity. Bazin writes that De Sica's strength lies

in not betraying the essence of things, in allowing them first of all to exist for their own sakes, freely; it is in loving them in their singular individuality. "My little sister reality," says De Sica, and she circles about him like the birds around Saint Francis. Others put her in a cage or teach her to talk, but De Sica talks with her and it is the true language of reality that we hear, the word that cannot be denied, that only love can utter.⁴⁷

In two instances the religious simplicity that Bazin found in the neorealist endeavor was literally expressed. Rossellini made a film about Saint Francis in 1950, and in 1964, after the movement was long over,

Pier Paolo Pasolini filmed *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. In both instances the spectacle and exaggeration that are part of the American genre of biblical cinema are replaced by a simplicity and matter-of-factness (bordering on the childish in Rossellini's film) that subordinate awe to the ordinary and build significance from what the viewer may make of the events rather than how those events are made. The artfulness of Pasolini's film lies in the rigorousness of its adherence to neorealist principles and its sense of documenting the biblical text with the simplest of black-and-white cinematic images.

But Bazin's meditation has nothing to do with films that have a religious subject matter per se. He is indeed attempting to find in neorealism a Catholic openness to God's work in nature and a faith that faith itself will reveal the divinity in the world. It is a faith that simply will not work, for it turns insight away from the political and social nature of existence into quietism and into hope with no basis in reality. Anger is dissolved into sentimentality. The neorealists politicized the image, made it reveal the sufferings of a class; at the same time they insisted that their revelations could not go beyond what was seen by the compassionate eye, which had to remain passive in the face of those sufferings. The strains became too much and the neorealists became less and less able or willing to sustain the contradictions inherent in the form and content of their work. In 1950, Zavattini and De Sica made *Miracle in Milan*, in which one of the finest neorealist environments, a squatters' city in an urban wasteland, generates a narrative of the triumph of naivete and wish-fulfillment. A young man, innocent and good to the point of simple-mindedness, leads his people out of poverty and the clutches of an industrialist who wants their oil-rich land only with the aid of ghosts and angels. The poor literally fly to heaven, "towards a kingdom where good morning really means good morning."⁴⁸ Neorealism becomes neo-fantasy, "simply a fairy story and only intended as such," says De Sica.⁴⁹ His intentions may not be questioned; but his images may. They are, some of them, among the best-realized cityscapes in the movement. Early in the film there are renderings of gray buildings and streets (photographed by G. R. Aldo, who was cinematographer for *La terra trema*) that look forward to the style Antonioni would develop in the late fifties and early sixties. But by this point in his career De Sica seems unwilling to trust the validity of his images and needed to transcend them with optical effects and a narrative growing out of a childish fantasy that betrays extreme pessimism, as well as the reactionary belief that the poor will only find their reward in another life.

The rapid decay of its original impetus in the early fifties indicates that neorealism was perhaps a genre after all, a specific concatenation of form and content that responded to historical and social events and was guided by theories fraught with contradictions. When the situation created by those events changed, disappeared, or was radically altered, and when the contradictions could no longer be contained, the genre changed. It had



Gray buildings and streets. An anticipation of Antonioni's visual style in an early sequence of De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

become repetitive or—in the case of *Miracle in Milan*—silly; its form and content simply used each other up, and the filmmakers wanted to go on to other things. Finally, too, the state had its word and censored what was left of the movement. In the late forties, the audience for Italian film was excellent abroad, but poor at home. The movement came under political attack—by the left for not providing a strong enough model for analysis and change, by the right for being too left, and by the center coalition government in power for keeping away Italian audiences and portraying Italy in a bad light abroad. The government won. Italy joined NATO and, as a recipient of aid from the Marshall Plan, was enjoined to control and if possible do away with any activity that might be taken for left-wing. In 1949 the Christian Democrats placed Giulio Andreotti in charge of the film industry with powers to subsidize only those films that were “suitable.. to the best interests of Italy.” Statements made by government ministers at the time indicate the direction being taken— the direction indicated in *Miracle in Milan*—toward a cinema of passivity and pacification:

Film is merchandise. If the government has the right to control the export of vegetables and fruits to make sure that they are not rotten, it also has the right, and the duty, to prevent the circulation of films infected with the

spirit of neorealism.

Film is escape, relaxation, forgetfulness for the poor. The people have need of bread and circuses.⁵⁰

A Hollywood mogul could not have better expressed these reassertions of traditional cinema, the balm and embalmer of a society.

However, the fact remains that, as a collective movement, neorealism was already on the decline as the government asserted its authority over it. Its three major practitioners were all anxious to move on, particularly into international production, where fame, profit, and escape from government restrictions might be better realized. Their films were already popular abroad, and Rossellini sealed this popularity by scandal—first with “The Miracle” (1948, one part of a film called *L’amore*), which brought down the anger of the Catholic Church and various legions of decency in the United States, and then by an affair with Ingrid Bergman which resulted in a series of romantic and melodramatic films. One of them, *Voyage in Italy* (1953), was of major importance to the French New Wave and to Michelangelo Antonioni. I will return to it in the next chapter. Visconti, whose *Ossessione* could be said to have started the movement, moved the furthest beyond it. By the time he made *Senso* in 1954, his direction was clear: it is a large-scale, color costume drama, its English-language version co-written by Tennessee Williams and co-starring the American actor Farley Granger. His appearance is part of a peculiar phenomenon in fifties Italian film. The neorealist imperative to use non-professional players went through a transmutation. Professional Italian actors began appearing in the Italians’ post-forties films, but with them, and in major roles, came various actors from America, their voices dubbed into Italian and giving performances better than they ever managed at home. Anthony Quinn plays Zampanò and Richard Basehart plays the clown in Fellini’s *La strada* (1954); Basehart appears with Broderick Crawford in the same director’s *Il bidone* (1955). Steve Cochran, who usually played a gangster in American film, became one of Antonioni’s first lost, wandering figures in *Il grido* (1957). In the sixties and seventies American actors of greater stature appeared. Burt Lancaster became a sort of alter ego for Visconti, first in *The Leopard* (1963) and then in *Conversation Piece* (1975). In Bertolucci’s *1900*, Lancaster was joined by Donald Sutherland and Robert De Niro. At its inception, this phenomenon seemed to offer those directors who were still working in the neorealist mode a way of using unfamiliar faces while still having actors with some training. Also, by casting these Americans as Italians, the filmmakers created a conflict of styles and personality that offered rich material to manipulate.

But in Visconti’s case, Granger’s appearance in *Senso* may be the result of a desire for a pretty face rather than an unusual mix of acting styles, and the film makes clear Visconti’s move into glossy international production. It would be an easy judgment to say that the rapidity with which Visconti

left neorealism indicates his small commitment to it. But that would be to misjudge the style of his forties films. The images of *Ossessione* and *La terra trema* demonstrate a greater desire for eloquence, for overstatement, than do those of his contemporaries. His is an essentially operatic spirit, dependent on large gestures, opulent design, and melodramatic movements.⁵¹ In the forties these lay below the surface of his films; the subjects and forms of neorealism did not permit them freedom. But when these forms broke down in the fifties, Visconti was freed. In *Senso*, a contessa meets her Austrian lover at the opera; indeed, they have their first confrontation with the opera stage in the background. This is a film of great passions, betrayals, and tear-stained faces; its only relationship to neorealism occurs in the occasional exteriors where characters walk down barren wartime streets (the film is set in 1866 amidst the Italian fight against Austrian rule). Visconti was to deal with a variety of subjects in his work, but *Senso* established his approach—his decadence, if you will—manifested in his need to pump up his *mise-en-scène* and stuff the cinematic space he creates with opulent detail that overwhelms the characters, who in turn overwhelm themselves with melodrama. I do not use the word “decadence” lightly. Visconti continually worked against his best political instinct—almost all his historical films deal with the rupture caused by the coming to power of the middle class in Italy—by an indulgence in spectacle which is never quite fulfilling enough for him. It is quite possible to reduce the structure of some of his later films, like *The Damned* (1969) and *Death in Venice* (1970), to a series of zoom shots among decaying characters and situations, zooms that neither select nor reveal, but only pile on non-signifying details in operatic proportions.

Others of the original neorealists did not move quite so far beyond their original tenets. De Sica, however, pretty much let his sentimentality and a sense of sexual exploitation get the better of him. His 1960 film *Two Women*, written by Zavattini from an Alberto Moravia novel, attempts to recapture the wartime milieu and images of uprooted wanderers. But it is largely undone by the gratuitous exploitation of its star, Sophia Loren. It is a vindication of the original neorealist desire to *avoid* star players, for rather than become part of the *mise-en-scène*, which is what the neorealists wanted their players to do, Loren in this later film *is* the *mise-en-scène*. All space is organized around her, more accurately around her physical and vocal presence, and all other observations are dominated by her. Only Rossellini managed to keep close to the notion of observation, of allowing the camera to create the illusion that it was attentive to a given and ongoing situation. After his cycle of films with Ingrid Bergman in the fifties, Rossellini undertook a variety of projects, including a documentary on India, until in the mid-sixties he began a series of histories for Italian television: *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (a film which got commercial theatrical distribution outside Italy), films on St. Augustine, Socrates, Pascal, the Medici, the Apostles—a modern cinematic encyclopedia. These films pretend to be

not so much recreations of history (although that is of course what they are) as observations of the making of ideas, filmed in long, gentle shots, the zoom lens (a kind that is Rossellini's own invention) moving from person to person in each particular sequence with a casualness that is both spontaneous and ceremonial. The camera gazes and inquires, permits the characters to expound while locating them in an environment that indicates historical time and place without extravagance.

These films are, among other things, responses to Visconti's histories (as well as to Hollywood costume drama).⁵² They present discourse—coherent, defined expression—rather than aria, a sense of possible location rather than grandiloquent decor, and above all display a calm distance from their subject. They do not have the passion of Rossellini's forties war trilogy, though their dramatic reserve is in a direct line from *Paisan*. Politically they are committed to a centrist position, accepting the "great ideas" and events of the past with very little analysis or question about their social genesis (again the neorealist premise of observation overtakes the need for understanding what is observed). At the beginning of *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*, Rossellini shows a group of "common" people working and chatting by the riverside as a group of court doctors ride by on their way to treat the ailing cardinal. The people talk about royalty, the difficulty they have in finding doctors for their own ills, and about the way life went on after the British chopped off their king's head. They represent the same kind of endurance and ongoing-ness shown by the poor in the forties films and demonstrate the same lack of inquiry about that condition on the part of the director. But although these films reveal the same uncertain commitment to political understanding that the neorealists suffered at the peak of their movement, they remain the closest to the original neorealist tenets, respecting the images they create and the audience who observes them.⁵³ Rossellini maintained a talent for being both withdrawn from and engaged with his material at the same time, creating the illusion that he is allowing events to play out freely before his camera.

One figure, Federico Fellini, who is closely associated with the neorealists, has hardly been mentioned so far, even though he is the best known Italian filmmaker outside his country. There has been such a great deal written on him already (more than the complexity of his work will bear) that I want to make only a few remarks. Fellini belongs, like Antonioni, to the second wave of Italian filmmakers, who began their production in the fifties. However, he began his work with the forties group, collaborating with Rossellini on the scripts of *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan*. He co-directed his first film, *Variety Lights* (1950), with Alberto Lattuada, a minor neorealist filmmaker not very well known outside Italy, who turned to and is still making comedies that are occasionally exported. Three of Fellini's fifties films—*I vitelloni*, *La strada*, and *Nights of Cabiria*—stand as signposts out of the movement proper and into ways of expanding and revising the genre so that it could ultimately spread its influence

to other styles, other concepts of filmmaking. *I vitelloni*, for example, is not concerned with the poor, but with a group of young men in a small town. Sons of lower-middle-class parents, they avoid work, avoid action, circling the town square and its streets, one of them marrying and learning painfully to be faithful to his wife, one finally leaving the town and its apathy. Visually, the film's exteriors are among the best examples of the hard-edged black and gray neorealist style. The nighttime sequences show the influence of American *film noir* (examples of which were by this time just getting to Europe). Unlike his forties predecessors in Italy, however, Fellini does not define his characters exclusively by their environment. More than in Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*, it imposes on the characters, rather than reflecting their social and economic condition. It contains them, it even frightens them. The would-be writer of the group, Leopoldo, looks for support to a visiting *artiste*, one in a long line of Fellini masters of ceremony-cum-ringmasters-cum-fakers. Out in the dark, windy square, Leopoldo begs this man to help him be somebody, to take him out of this boring town where nothing ever happens. The old man, quiet, mysterious, non-committal, leads Leopoldo through the dark and down to the harbor. But the night, wind, and shadows are too much for Leopoldo, as are the promises of the unknown that they hold. He runs off, the old man laughing after him.

Environment begins to take on something of the symbolic here, and while there is only a hint of this in *I vitelloni*, the symbolic snared Fellini in his later work, until finally environment became decor, smothering character without revealing it. But here restraint holds, and Fellini refrains from attempts to investigate psychology and turn memory into set design, willing still to observe behavior with graciousness and a certain distance. The episodic structure of *I vitelloni* enables him to be flexible, to move into and away from his characters, collect incidents in the lives of his young men that are funny and poignant, but non-judgmental. At the end of the film, one of them gets up the courage to leave the town. Urged on by a young boy who works at the railroad station (Fellini modified the function of the neorealist child; here and in later films the child or the child-like is a source of innocent understanding, often allowing an adult character insight into his own jaded life), Moraldo boards an early morning train. As it pulls out, shots of him are intercut with retreating traveling shots of his friends at home, in bed—an expressionist sequence of sorts, extrapolating Moraldo's state of mind and revealing the situation of all concerned. It compares the activity of one of the characters with the passivity of the others without eliciting from us any strong approval or disapproval. We are not forced into a confrontation with the characters, and the film ends with the railroad boy who, smiling, walks the rails back to town—an intermediary figure who diffuses our concentration and separates us from the action.

This is the last film in which Fellini permitted even this much distance

to exist. A need for psychological investigation and for huge statements about large emotions overwhelms his later films. *La strada* and *Nights of Cabiria* remain rooted in neorealism, in the observation of the poor and disenfranchised wandering in a desolate landscape. But the landscape recedes as carefully premeditated characters in finely tuned melodramatic narratives move forward and demand emotional response. Bazin, attempting to defend *Nights of Cabiria*, writes, “. . . we . . . now . . . see the characters no longer *among* the objects but, as if these had become transparent, *through* them.”⁵⁴ In fact, character begins to separate from objects, and soon the two will fight unsuccessfully for Fellini’s—and the audience’s—attention. Fellini becomes concerned with *significance* which, in the films from *La strada* through *8 1/2* (1962), means probing desperate characters and insisting that the audience share their emotional turmoil. Unlike Ingmar Bergman (perhaps Fellini’s only rival in international movie fame), Fellini does not permit his characters a fearful and obsessive introspection. He is close enough to his tradition to observe them from the outside in.⁵⁵ Gelsomina, in *La strada*, is defined by Giulietta Masina’s expressive face (full of ticks and reactions borrowed partly from Charlie Chaplin, partly from Jane Wyman’s performance in the 1948 American film *Johnny Belinda*), by the character’s poverty and physical isolation, by her association with children and animals, and of course in contrast to the brutish Zampanò, the itinerant strong man who treats her worse than an animal. But Fellini exaggerates his images, gives them a great deal of emotional force. He makes them plead with us for our attention and reaction. Gelsomina distracts us from her place in the landscape. The relentless cruelty of Zampanò turns him into an abstraction—and in fact it is the process of abstraction, the pull on the characters out of their situation into something of a lecture on brutishness and innocence, that constitutes both the success and failure of the film.

In *La strada*, Fellini develops an important extension of neorealist possibilities. By forcing his images and creating confrontations informed by ideas that reach for great significance—the transcendence of innocence in the face of lumpish brutality—he is giving character and landscape a connotative dimension and a moral structure. He is also personalizing his characters more than the forties neorealists would have done, and with curious results. The neorealist character is neither a stereotype nor an abstraction, but a representative, a figure of his or her class. While the characters in both *La strada* and *Nights of Cabiria* have class attributes, the abstraction process is one of declassification, removal to the status of impassioned idea or, perhaps more accurately, of moral marker in a landscape of despair (a purple phrase adequate to Fellini’s intentions). The political morality of the neorealists was embedded in their choice and treatment of character and place; Fellini adds to this his abstract morality, and we are asked to make the tally. He wants moral perception and judgment where the neorealists wanted observation and comprehension;

on top of that he wants profound emotional reactions. The melodrama that always threatened neorealist narrative is now indulged in without embarrassment. The lonely, abused Gelsomina befriends a clown, a man as foolish and innocent as she, but unlike her, willing to stand up to Zampanò. The strong man kills him. Gelsomina becomes more pitiable than before and is abandoned by Zampanò, though not before he shows some expression of guilt. After a passing of time, Zampanò wanders through the streets of a town and hears someone singing music associated with Gelsomina. A woman hanging wash on a line tells him Gelsomina is dead. A devastated Zampanò pretends not to be moved. He does his strong man act, but the camera itself refuses to participate. As a punishment, and to point up Zampanò's aloneness, it retreats to the exterior of the circus ring as he goes through the mechanics of his performance. But this retreat from proximity is not sufficient. The roaring, brawling animal must show some notion of humanity, some salvation. He returns to the sea at night (the persistent, if not terribly original, Fellinian "symbol" of rebirth), sits on the sand and begins to sob, then falls on the beach, clutching the sand the way the clown he killed clutched the ground in his death throes. The camera pulls back and up—this time not leaving him alone but exposing him fully to our gaze—music swells, and we are left wrung dry.

There is no denying the power of this; there is also no denying, on rational reflection, that we are being manipulated, that Fellini has rejoined an earlier and persistent cinematic tradition, the very one the neorealists attempted to alter. Certainly he felt he was dealing with more important subjects than those undertaken by Hollywood melodrama, though in fact they are the same subjects—the struggles of good and evil, innocence and corruption, the place and worth of the self in a cruel world—presented in a more abstract, apparently more sophisticated form. But only apparently. The forms of melodrama and their demands for unmediated emotional response are largely the same regardless of the particular subject. Fellini finally abandoned the neorealists' call for observation and a measure of disengagement, he closed up the spaces of engaged observation and reentered the arena of grand emotion and moral generalization. He continues in this area through *La dolce vita* (1959), where his concern is with a rich, middle-class urban milieu, which (like all such milieus examined by sixties European filmmakers) is without values, compassion, or direction. He flirts briefly with some modernist effects of memory and perception in *8 1/2*, a film that marks the end of his creative period. In it he tries to give form to his own personality, erect a model of his own experience, and succeeds because here the film's spectacle, its fragmented structure of memory and desire, permit some distance, allow it to become more a reflection upon memory and desire than merely a story of a set-upon film director who can no longer get his projects off the ground. The film has the energy of discovery, of form being invented and images elaborated. But the self-indulgence intimated in the film was not held down. In his

following works, Fellini moved into the artifice of spectacle, the fantasies of memory, which became more insular and repetitive as he proceeded.

Fellini's decline is not without its lessons about film history. Unlike many of the filmmakers who followed in the wake of neorealism and extended its possibilities—directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, Truffaut and Godard—Fellini slipped back to a melodramatic mode via expressionism, an autobiographical expressionism in which the structures of memory and fantasy are limned out with history relegated to a backdrop and nostalgia elevated above analysis. He returns to a romanticism that insists that the productions of the artist's life and imagination must be of interest simply because they are the productions of the artist. The images of such films as *Juliet of the Spirits*, *Satyricon*, *Amarcord*, *Roma*, *The City of Women* are meant to be valid simply because they are Fellini's images. But this redundancy, like all such, has a gap in its center. The demand for attention is based only on our supposed curiosity about the workings of a single, and not singular, imagination. Otherwise, these films respond to nothing. In his later films he wishes to create worlds that express some profound psychological truths, but manages to make images that only correspond to his own fantasies and—when the spectacle is stripped away—unexceptional memories. The endless movement of grotesque faces within the landscape of a world-cum-carnival must be taken on faith. Bad faith.

I risk here the accusation of being a "realist" of the most fundamental kind, somewhere close to Siegfried Kracauer, perhaps, whose *Theory of Film* promulgates the myth of an ideal cinema that passively records an "ongoing" world without changing what it sees.⁵⁶ But this is quite the opposite of what I am getting at. The film image does have a presence and immediacy and a perceptual status that seem to parallel the way we look at the world itself. But it is an image and not the "reality" of our day-to-day perception. ". . . The secret of film," writes Christian Metz, "is that it is able to leave a high degree of reality in its images, which are, nevertheless, still perceived as images."⁵⁷ Neorealism never mistook the image of reality for reality itself, and in fact wished to make the image an eloquent device that would be valid in the way it communicated behavior, emotion, action and reaction, history and place. No matter what kind of film, image is artifice and there is never any confusion on the spectator's part about this fact. The question of major importance concerns the degree to which the image makes the spectator aware of its status as a made object. The neorealists wanted their images to reveal a world ignored by conventional cinema and to present that world unmediated by cinematic stereotyping. They depended upon the artifice of the camera eye to transcend artifice and create a version of reality more stark, immediate, and accessible than that of the past. They questioned the "reality" of American and American-influenced film because it was a reality that did not examine its illusory nature and did not provoke the spectator to examine assumptions about

the world or the methods of observing the world cinematically. Fellini is a filmmaker who forgot these questions and the answers. While he remains deeply committed to the artifice of the image, he forgets that this artifice is meant to generate meaning. A gap is created between his introspections and the viewer's desire for his images to communicate something. In the end nothing is revealed but commonplaces. In his later films, the neo realist urge to reveal and question has disappeared beneath an irrelevant (and sometimes—as in *Orchestra Rehearsal* and *The City of Women*—reactionary) subjectivity.

The complexities of artifice, the extent to which the filmmaker requires the spectator to be aware that the image is a construct—a special and specially perceived version of reality—will concern us in some detail in the next chapter. Here I wish to indicate some of the immediate results and influences of the neorealist movement and the effects it had on various cinemas, including American. Partly by coincidence, and partly by direct influence, a movement toward “documentary realism” started in American film in the mid-forties. Filmmakers began shooting on location, and in such works as Elia Kazan's *Boomerang!* (1947), Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil*, and Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* (both 1948) the expressionism of *film noir* is modified by a more subdued relationship of character and surroundings. Place is established as a defining presence. None of these films were anything like what the Italians were doing at the same time; they share only the desire to get out of the studio. But in the hothouse world of Hollywood filmmaking, where any exterior shot in closer proximity to a character than the knees up was done in the studio against a rear-screen projection of a background, this desire to look at the world was of great importance—short-lived importance, for American filmmakers retreated back into the studio in the fifties. But when the studios ceased operating as self-sufficient entities, filmmakers returned to the streets, and the look of American cinema changed. The neorealist influence was in the far distance, filtered through the influence of the French New Wave, but a link was present.

Neorealism's influence in Europe was more complete and impressive. In England, the tentative and short-lived beginnings of cinema independent of Hollywood, dealing with the cultural and social concerns of the country, were patterned after the work of the postwar Italians. The so-called Kitchen Sink School, including such films as Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* (1958), Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), Tony Richardson's *Look Back in Anger* (1959) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963), turned, like the Italians before them, from middle-class subjects to the working class; they observed characters in relation to their environment in hard gray tones, and through their images attempted to get their audience to examine a part of the culture that their cinema had hitherto ignored or treated with moral condescension. The English version of neorealism ran into similar thematic

and formal problems as had the Italian. The films were unable to get either close enough to or far away enough from their characters to effect a radical change in the conventional ways characters were understood. They tended toward the melodramatic, even the hysterical, in their evocation of the pain and frustration of stagnant lives, and more often than not took that stagnation as so much of a given that frustration was played upon as an emotional asset. The British neorealist characters are rarely permitted even those signs of endurance and reintegration into the sad flow of life allowed the Italian. The British filmmakers, working largely from scripts drawn from novels or plays, could not, it seems, break out of the individualist tradition of psychological realism. Their films are largely character studies, and in attempting to join the tradition of the motivated, introspective, suffering hero with the neorealist urge to create characters who must be understood from a social rather than a subjective perspective, they set up a tension that was finally unresolvable. Their working-class characters, set within the environment of the industrial midlands of England, are frozen by that environment and by their class. They rail against it, fight against it, pretend to stand over and against it, but cannot or will not overcome it. (Let us stand back from the fiction: they cannot or will not be *allowed* to overcome it, for as in traditional melodrama, audience reaction is earned by their failure rather than by victory or assertion.) The characters' joys are minimal, their suffering intense.

Albert Finney's Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is obsessive in his attempts to impress his vitality onto a monotonous factory life and to negate any preconceptions people may have of him. But in the end he stands with his girlfriend on a hill overlooking a new housing development, on the brink of slipping into the moribund life he has fought. The vitality of these working-class heroes is always denied, not merely because of the impossibly oppressive economical and social system that surrounds them, but because of their psychological make-up, or rather the psychology made up for them by their creators, which denies them any possibility for change or escape. Frank Machin, the Richard Harris character in Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (a film which mixes a flashback time structure influenced by Alain Resnais with an operatic style of gesture and delivery borrowed from Visconti), endures and perpetuates a masochism and self-hatred figured in the brutality of the slow-motion soccer game that ends the film and encapsulates his life. In those instances when self-hatred should turn into defiance, it is turned inward rather than imposed upon the world that created it. In *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, the Tom Courtenay character, imprisoned in reform school, given special treatment because of his athletic ability, stops just short of winning a race because it would mean yielding to the wishes of the authorities. It is a powerful and frustrating ending for the film, and perfectly enigmatic. No reason is offered for the character's self-defeat other than some vague motivations of pride, stubbornness, and, again,

masochism. The “realism” attained by such frustration is created only in its opposition to a conventionally happy ending; social realities are presented not in an attempt to understand them, but as a narrative device. In British neorealism, class is made a background to the study of unusual characters.

It may be unfair to single out British cinema for special criticism. It has carried on a decades-long struggle with American influence and American money without, to this day, being able to discover a successful means of independent production. Its “neorealist” movement was just one of many false starts toward the establishment of an independent national cinema. That it adopted to a greater extent than did the Italians a melodramatic, psychological approach can, perhaps, be explained by the direct influence of American cinema as well as the confusions suffered by the middle-class intellectual writers and directors approaching what was for them a new subject matter. But while the films are not complete successes, they are important as documents of the spread of the neorealist influence: a “new” cinema in England presented itself in a neorealist mode.⁵⁸

The same happened in India, whose first internationally recognized film (from a country whose internal film production was the highest in the world) was a neorealist work. Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (1955) brings to bear on its local subject a feeling for country landscape worthy of Griffith and Renoir, and an observation of a family struggling with poverty constructed with less sentimentality but with all the intensity of De Sica, who was a direct influence.⁵⁹ Like De Sica, Ray works through the point of view of children, though without De Sica’s special pleading. *Pather Panchali* and the films that follow it and make up a trilogy—*Aparajito* and *The World of Apu*—are concerned most of all with building images of faces and landscape, of faces in a landscape, and with detail, textures, and spatial relationships that define events more quietly than sentimentality and melodrama. The films have the value of anthropology for viewers unfamiliar with the rural Indian landscape and its inhabitants, and Ray observes with something of the anthropologist’s eye the detail and the intricacies and painfulness of family relationships.

In a sense, Ray’s early films make use of neorealist technique in a “purer” form than did those who originally developed it, a phenomenon that may be explained by the fact that he had a chance to contemplate the form as those in the heat of its development could not. We see this “purity” again in another film that is part of the beginning of a new movement. Nelson Pereira dos Santos’ *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*), made at the beginning of the Cinema Novo movement in Brazil in 1963, is a grim and unelaborated fictional documentation of a family living, desperately, on the *sertão*, the dead plain of northeast Brazil. Once again we see a response to the elaborate fictions of American cinema in a simple, unadorned study of the progress of wretchedness and poverty, images that do not yield to the softening of cliché and, like the best works of neorealism, offer hope only through the revelation of intolerable lives—revelation that might be

a prod to action. Dos Santos wrote: "Neorealism understood that within a capitalist society it is possible to practice, through cinema, a humanistic, transforming mode of thought. That was the great lesson of neorealism.... And Cinema Novo is the application of the method in Brazil."⁶⁰ *Vidas Secas*, along with works like Ruy Guerra's *Os Fuzis* (1963), was a major statement of the need for aesthetic and political change, as were the Italian films of the forties. Brazil in the sixties, like Italy in the forties or Britain in the late fifties, was unaccustomed to having film image a despairing poverty, a family's endless and hopeless wandering of an endlessly inhospitable landscape. As in Italy, the new movement met political opposition. Unlike that in Italy, it developed into a highly experimental and deeply political mode, particularly in the films of Glauber Rocha, whose experiments extended the limits of neorealism, but remained rooted in it.

Within the genesis of contemporary international cinema, probably the most unexpected and hilarious influence of neorealism is on Luis Buñuel, who (at this writing) is the world's oldest working filmmaker and whose career all but encompasses the history of film. Buñuel began in the French avant-garde with *Un chien andalou*, a surreal short film made with Salvador Dali in 1928. After the outrage over *L'age d'or* (1930)—his lunatic fantasy of obsessive love, the history of the church, and the biology of the scorpion—he made one short film, a 'documentary,' *Las Hurdes* (1932), about a region in Spain so poor and primitive that its inhabitants are presented as being beyond compassion as well as help. (No foreshadowing of neorealism here, only the expression of a sensibility never moved to pity by the outrageous.) There followed eighteen years of silence. Not even Buñuel's biographers are certain of the details of what he did or where he was during that period. According to his own testimony he worked in Europe as dubbing adviser for Paramount Pictures and supervisor of co-productions for Warner Brothers. He did some producing; he represented the Spanish Republic in Hollywood until the end of the Spanish Civil War and then worked for the film department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York until it was discovered that he was the director of *L'age d'or* and he resigned. He then went back to Hollywood and may possibly have worked as an assistant director (one rumor is that he was assistant to Robert Florey on a film called *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1947) about a disembodied hand, which turns—or crawls—up again in Buñuel's own film *The Exterminating Angel*, 1962).⁶¹ In 1946 he moved to Mexico, where he was once again able to make his own films, although at first only a few local potboilers. He reports that his producer, Oscar Dancigers, asked him "to put up an idea for a children's film. I gingerly suggested the scenario for *Los Olvidados*...."⁶²

Gingerly indeed! *Los Olvidados* (1950) is Buñuel's reemergence into international filmmaking, and a film as violent, anarchic, and funny as those with which he ended the first part of his career in the early thirties. But with some major differences. *Los Olvidados* is more subdued than *Un*

chien andalou, which contains probably the single most notorious image in the history of cinema: a man slicing open a woman's eye with a straight razor. *Un chien andalou* is an anti-narrative, a series of surreal images whose chronology and spatial relationships are purposefully dislocated to dislodge the viewer from the complacency of continuity. *L'age d'or*, the film that followed, has a narrative of sorts: a man obsessively pursues a woman through a series of overwhelming obstacles and outrageous hindrances. Buñuel's eye is on the obstacles and hindrances; he is more interested in observing a huge cow on a bed, a peasant and his cart in an upper-class drawing room, or a man hurling a burning tree, a bishop, and a stuffed giraffe out the window than he is in his story. More accurately, such incidents, as well as the interruptions that allow him to pursue a history of imperial Rome or a history of the scorpion, become the narrative Buñuel is most interested in, the history of madness induced by repression. It is a history still spoken in the language of Dada and the surrealists, a language Buñuel never forgot, but modified and modulated, used as a subversive tool.

Los Olvidados does not fight narrative but embraces it, and by doing so subverts it. The form Buñuel chooses to embrace is directly connected to the Italian neorealists, for he tells the story of poor children in the slums of Mexico City, uses some non-professional players, and opens the film as if he were going to document the dreadful conditions of the breeding ground of delinquents in a major city. The narrative parameters of *Los Olvidados* offer excellent proof of how well neorealism had established itself as a major cinematic genre whose conventions were immediately usable, recognizable, and finally able to be turned inside out. This film is no document of poverty and delinquency, no objectively observed gathering of details of daily life among Mexico City's poor. Neither is it merely a sad gaze at the suffering of innocent and guiltless children in an oppressive world. Buñuel's children are no more innocent than his adults, perhaps less so. His adults are merely dulled into insensibility by the brutality of their world. The children take an active and gleeful part in promoting that brutality.

Buñuel uses neorealism to reassert himself into the mainstream of narrative filmmaking and to rearrange and revalidate his own methods of narrative construction. Like the neorealists' films, *Los Olvidados* tells its story in a linear and logical order. However, every opportunity to disturb that order is taken. Like neorealism, the film carefully observes the characters and their squalid environment, but Buñuel insists on intruding upon the observation and capturing not merely the exterior of everyday life, but its ludicrous and perverse interior and the events that make the interior visible—a blind man flailing at his young tormentors with a stick that has a nail protruding from one end or stroking the back of an ailing woman with a live dove; a gang of toughs robbing a legless man, lifting him out of his begging cart and leaving him flailing on the sidewalk; a



The perversity of the Buñuelian world. *Los Olvidados*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)



young girl in a barn pouring milk over her thighs.

He wishes to describe the unconscious of his subjects with the same observed detail as the neorealists used to describe their external lives. Indeed Buñuel is the neorealist of the unconscious, and his camera's searching and tracking around faces and events with an apparent objectivity, is in fact seeking entrance not into their souls but into their terrors and perversity. A boy, Pedro, has a dream about his mother and Jaibo, another tough, who will sleep with Pedro's mother and eventually beat him to death. The dream begins with a tinkling of bells and the crowing of cocks. A chicken descends in slow motion. In a flurry of feathers, Pedro sees the grinning corpse of one of Jaibo's victims under his bed. Thunder crashes; the mother, with a manic grin, comes to Pedro, holding a chunk of raw meat in her hands. Her slow-motion movements make her ominous and threatening, an angel of death. The wind blows inside the room, the mother advances to Pedro; but before he can get the meat, Jaibo reaches out from under the bed and grabs it from the mother's hand. Every opportunity is offered in this dream sequence for old-fashioned Freudian analysis. But Buñuel, unlike all other dream-makers in the history of film, only tantalizes us with meaning, while overwhelming us with image. It would be safe to say that the dreams of Buñuel's characters, here and throughout his work, have the effect of our own dreams; they have latent meaning, but their primary effect is to awe and discomfort the viewer—as dreams do the sleeper. The unconscious of Buñuel's characters intrudes upon their conscious and upon ours, and their conscious life intrudes upon their unconscious. To Buñuel's eyes, both lives are lived simultaneously and are open to observation without comment. He invests the neorealist image—the hard, deep-focused, black-and-white world of poverty—with a concern for the unspoken and the unspeakable, with a subjectivity that is always present and never explained.

Buñuel's success lies in his ability to merge the dreams the characters have in the narrative with the narrative itself and to evoke out of the images he creates a range of disturbing realities. Early in the film the blind man is knocked down by a gang of toughs. He lies in the mud, and the camera, accompanied by a crash of music, pulls back to reveal a chicken staring into the man's blind eyes. The image is unexplained, unmotivated, and although it is followed by a shot of Pedro sitting in a chicken coop (the boy—like Buñuel himself—is obsessed with chickens), neither the staring bird nor the boy's chicken fetish is ever accounted for.

Ultimately, the perverse linkage of perverse images disturbs the viewer so thoroughly that Buñuel is able to provoke a classic reaction of pity and fear growing from a state of disbelief and horror like that which might accompany a dream. Jaibo kills Pedro and is himself killed by the police. Over his dying face is superimposed the image of a stray dog padding down a rain-slicked road in slow motion as voices on the sound track call: "Look

out, Jaibo. The mangy dog. It's coming.... No ... no ... I'm falling into a black hole. I'm alone.... As always my son. As always. Good night."⁶³ Pedro's body is discovered by some people who do not want to be discovered with it. They carry it in a sack on the back of a donkey, through the shanty town in the night. Pedro's mother, who is looking for her son and unaware he is dead, passes them. She does not even ask if they have seen him; she merely passes in the dark and says "Good evening." She goes off one way and they another, finally dumping her son's body in a rubbish heap.

The "realism" of *Los Olvidados* is so severe in its manifestation of depravity, the grotesque, and the dreamlike that it prevents any sentimental attachment, and creates instead a withdrawal into contemplation. The final sequence of the film is moving, but also terrifying in its coldbloodedness. Through it, Buñuel almost manages what the neorealists wanted to attain—a precise rendering, without comment, of everyday occurrences—but could not attain because sentimentality or unfocused belief in human endurance stayed their hand. Buñuel's "everyday" life is a carefully contrived series of evils whose motivations are never explained. Poverty and brutality coexist, though one does not necessarily account for or explain the other.

There are moments in the film when Buñuel does attempt to give conventional motivations to his characters. Pedro suffers from a lack of maternal affection. Well-meaning prison officials attempt to rehabilitate him by showing trust. But these interludes of the ordinary only point up a larger structure in which the unconscious is given an image (something the neorealists would never have dreamed of doing) and commonplace motivations are subordinated to a more revealing design. The weaving of the conventional, the inexplicable, and the perverse forces attention to the images themselves along with their disturbing content and does not permit retreat into the comfort of the already known. "I wanted to introduce mad, completely incongruous elements in the most realistic scenes. For instance, when Jaibo fights and kills the other boy, the camera movement reveals the framework of a large eleven-story building under construction in the distance; I would have liked to put a big orchestra of a hundred musicians on it. One would have seen it just in passing, indistinctly. I wanted to put in a lot of things of that kind, but it was totally forbidden."⁶⁴ His producer may have forbidden some obvious surreal imagery, but more important, the repression imposed by the need to work in a commercially viable form forced Buñuel to play the disturbing, the questioning, the perverse with and against "the realistic scenes" until they fed off and counterpointed each other. The result is a neorealism of assault and disturbance and, most important, an indication of the directions in which the movement could lead. After *Los Olvidados* Buñuel left neorealism far behind, though what he learned of the possibilities of using and altering its images has stayed with him throughout his career.

The Italians in the late forties provided a source of revitalized image-making that was picked up from country to country, by filmmaker after

filmmaker. What started as a national movement came to alter the history of film. Some of that history will be examined in the chapters that follow. But here I want to make a leap of some thirty years and examine three Italian films of the late seventies, by filmmakers of differing temperaments and points of view, working under different circumstances and conditions, yet each reaching directly back to his cinematic roots and showing them still to be vital. In making this leap I will be dealing with changes in cinematic attitudes and styles that I have not yet detailed; however, by bringing neorealism proper up to date, I will be able then to fill in some of the intervening ground in elaborating the development of contemporary cinema.

The films in question are Bernardo Bertolucci's *1900*, Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, and Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's *Padre padrone*, all released between 1976 and 1978. While *Padre padrone* and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* are small-budget films, made for Italian television but distributed commercially, *1900* is a major production with an international cast, distributed by Paramount, which enforced upon it a successive whittling-down. The film originally ran about five and a half hours. Bertolucci cut it to four, and Paramount cut about another fifteen minutes when they finally gave it a limited release in the United States. As it is now distributed the film is only a notion of Bertolucci's work and, as I have not seen Bertolucci's original cut, much of my commentary will of necessity be an extrapolation, working from the film as it is available in the United States to a supposition of its original form. Despite this problem, *1900* is a major film and Bertolucci, of course, a major figure in contemporary cinema. A second-generation postwar Italian filmmaker, heir to the neorealists, follower of Godard, he created three films—*The Spider's Stratagem*, *The Conformist* (both in 1970), and *Last Tango in Paris* (1972)—in the modernist tradition (they will be examined in detail later on) which sum up some of the major movements in contemporary cinema.

The element that links these three films is their subject matter, the peasantry—a social-economic class that could hardly be more distant from most Western filmgoers. Indeed, it is as distant from contemporary film as was the working class in the forties. The peasantry is only an idea to most people, though it still exists in Italy—indeed in any country where a rural, agricultural working class attempts to make a living working farms. For the narrative imagination, from the nineteenth century on, the peasantry is made up either of lumpish boors, proto-revolutionaries, or sturdy men and women who suffer or accept their lot. They are often given mythic status, looked upon with pity and reverence, with romantic awe as the repository of natural wisdom, or with political hope as the procrustean bed of revolution. Each of the three films deals with, or partakes of, one or another of these literary myths and attempts to construct from it a narrative that explains history or defines humanity through the peasant class. In *1900* Bertolucci attempts a familial epic of revolution, of socialism growing



Families in groups.

Above: La terra trema (Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive);
below: The Tree of Wooden Clogs (Gaumont/Sacis/New Yorker Films)



and flowering through one area of Italy during the twentieth century, embodied in the friendship and struggle between the peasant Olmo and the *padrone* Alfredo. In the short version, the struggle centers around the rise of fascism, the event that informs contemporary history and, in one way or another, lies at the core of much important European cinema. In *Padre padrone*, the Taviani brothers examine the contemporary peasantry through the growing consciousness of one individual, a man who was literally indentured by and to his father as a shepherd (the title of the film means “father-master”) and attempts a painful and incomplete escape to become an intellectual who can study the world that held him prisoner as a child. Olmi’s *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* appears to be the most neutrally observant, demythified film of the group, examining life on a particular farm in Lombardy at the end of the nineteenth century.

Of the three, it is the closest to the neorealist aesthetic. Olmi is the oldest filmmaker of the group. He began his work in the late fifties and his best-known film before *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, *Il posto* (1961), is a gentle, almost off-handed series of episodic sequences focusing on a young man and his first job, with all the neorealist elements of unobtrusiveness and detailed observation of people in an urban environment (though the environment here is one of bustling renewal, rather than the grim poverty of fifteen years earlier). *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, though taking place at another time and with an entirely different subject, retains many of the elements of that earlier film. Olmi makes use of a non-professional cast who take part in activities—some of which must still be part of the peasant farming tradition—observed in almost documentary detail. He retains the neorealist notion of attention to the “image fact,” the particulars of daily routine and of place worked into sequences that impose no apparent point of view except that of engaged observation.

What is particularly remarkable about his use of this part of the neorealist tradition is that he builds his images out of small bits and pieces of the observed whole. In his commentaries on the neorealists, Bazin stressed again and again their refusal to interfere with what they saw by cutting unnecessarily into the image. Olmi cuts incessantly and his shots are very short. We see what he wants us to see, at the moment he wants us to see it. But despite this, he manages to seem as non-directive as possible. The fragmentation becomes cumulative, each piece expanding and altering our observation of the activity, resulting in a kind of fugal counterpoint (Olmi in fact uses Bach for the film’s musical accompaniment) of daily activity and personal drama—many dramas—intricately woven one with the other. The result is a rhythm that unites and propels all the parts. The warmly colored images and restrained, self-contained activities of the characters emerge from their editorial construction not merely whole, but with the illusion of integral continuity to which the audience is made delighted and sympathetic subject.

The illusion operates on many levels. The formal continuity expresses Olmi's notion of the quiet persistence of these people who, in the best neorealist tradition, endure and persevere, despite the most difficult constraints of personal deprivation, oppression, and of history itself, which seems (according to the film) to go by them with no effect. Their isolation and insulation are so severe that a kind of self-defeat becomes apparent. The tight, almost clockwork construction of the film traps its inhabitants, closes them off from the world around them, and tries to convince us that the events shown are unassailable and unalterable, particularly by the inhabitants of the film itself. Like many of the neorealists, Olmi is content to see his characters as uncomplaining recipients of economic oppression; he will show the oppression, reveal the poverty, indicate the small ways the community help each other out. In the end, however, there emerges the sense of realism-as-pessimism that he shares with his tradition. Worse than pessimism, worse than the illusion of reality as passive suffering, Olmi seems to preach quietism in the face of disaster. He is aware of the disaster. A brief epigraph near the beginning of the film locates it in time and place and succinctly sums up the peasants' state: "Two thirds of the harvest were the landlord's due." But within the film this grim reality is not dwelt upon; it remains as a given, as something which must be endured. We see the landlord, the *padrone*, at a few points in the film, a fat little man, supercilious and lazy, but with no real personality other than meanness. Olmi is uninterested in him, except as a contrast to the warm vitality of the peasants and as instigator of the evil deed that ends their community. The economic and historical facts of his existence and the feudal structure he and his peasants are part of can only be understood through the poverty and grueling work the peasants endure, which offer the viewer some opportunity to perceive the reality of their condition in a way the peasants themselves never seem to do.

Olmi wants to be within the sphere of their labor, rather than outside analyzing it. Therefore, he concentrates upon the daily activities of his people, who are innately good and hopeful. The core narrative events of the film concern a father who, upon the urging of the local priest, sends his son to school. Unlike the father in *Padre padrone*, this one expresses hope and amazement over the possibilities of schooling, rather than viciously denying it. Even though he has small means and a large family, including a baby who is born in the course of the film, he urges the boy on. When the child breaks a shoe on his way home from school, the father quietly goes out, cuts down one of the *padrone's* trees, and fashions a new clog for his son. In the course of time, the cut tree is discovered and the *padrone* orders his bailiff to throw the offending family off the farm. This is done quickly, unceremoniously, and with no support whatsoever for the family from the other members of the community, who peer out at the scene from behind their windows, or the priest (who does not even make an appearance when the family is removed). It is important to emphasize that

these events, while a central part of the film, are interwoven with many other events and characters. Through the film's contrapuntal structure, Olmi avoids any excess of attachment to the characters on the audience's part and any undue sentiment created by the events.

But he also indicates that these events were inevitable, and that no thought of changing them ever occurred to those who suffered them; nor does he indicate that the peasants have any alternatives to passive obedience. At a village fair, a socialist—well dressed, bearded—makes a speech. His appearance is calculated to separate him from the peasants he addresses with words on citizens' rights and the abolishment of privilege. The camera looks at the crowd, but is particularly interested in one peasant whose eyes wander from the speaker to a gold coin lying at his feet. The sequence proceeds by giving full attention to this individual and his pains to step on, pick up, and carry off the coin to the farm, eventually hiding it under a horse's shoe. This leads to great comedy later on when the man cannot find the coin and proceeds to spit on and beat up the horse, accusing it of having stolen it; the horse has to be saved by the other members of the community. What is troublesome in all this is the ease with which Olmi removes us from political reality; how easily he indicates that greed is more important to the character than ideas.

Later in the film a newly married couple leave the farm for a honeymoon barge trip to Milan. As they pass through a town, the smoke of a battle is seen. A priest gives the couple (and the audience) some minimal information about the fighting taking place between police and demonstrators and begins moralizing about lack of faith and respect for one's neighbors. In Milan, the couple pass by some demonstrators being herded off by the police. But their attention is on themselves and their goal, a convent where they spend their wedding night and are given an orphan child to take back with them to the farm. In their simplicity, the couple accept another burden, their familial and religious duty permitting little hesitation when the child is offered. One must accept on faith—and the film is so loving in its detail that it is difficult to accuse it of bad faith—that these people were oblivious to what was going on about them.

Yet it is clear that Olmi purposely separates the consciousness of the peasants from an understanding of their world, that he attenuates that consciousness, directs it toward their work and their continuing attempts at survival and encloses it within tradition. As I said, it is possible to read the film dialectically—as we can the films of the original neorealists—to discover in the hermetic, hopeless world of these people the extent of their oppression and the need for change. But, if the neorealists squelched the dialectic through sentiment, Olmi does the same by embracing the peasants' lives with such warmth and detail that we may well forget about political response and indulge, with him, in a kind of warm appreciation of their strength in the face of hardship.

Finally, the film inherits the best and the worst of the neorealist legacy.

It asks us to embrace the strength and fatalism of its beleaguered characters and indulges in a non-judgmental attitude in the face of events that the filmmaker feels must be observed without overt manipulation. It recalls the arguments about the illusion of objectivity, the “reality” of observed events and individuals that goes on without the intervention of the filmmaker’s consciousness. The historical validity of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* is beyond question. There were peasants, as there were (and are) other groups, who did not respond to their condition except with passive endurance. In that light the film operates in the good faith of the neorealist desire to present the world in its dailiness, unencumbered by preconceptions. But because its objectivity is only an illusion created by Olmi’s skill— he chooses to create an insular, unreflective peasant world whose inhabitants seem to be untouched by the events around them—the spectator is actually being manipulated by its form and content into the position acceptance and sad contemplation—is offered, like the film’s inhabitants, the opportunity to accept rather than judge.

Earlier I noted Bazin’s revelation of the ideal neorealist moment: “No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema.” *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* attempts to achieve this ideal, to make cinema vanish in the act of perfect observation. But in his less enthusiastic moments Bazin knew better: “. . . Every realism in art was first profoundly aesthetic,” he wrote “...Realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice.”⁶⁵ And with this recognition a turn away from the neorealist aesthetic occurred. The filmmakers who followed the movement understood that accepting without question the illusion of an unmediated observation of the world is a trap that can result in diminished responsibility on the filmmaker’s part. They understood that the arguments about an objective versus a manipulative cinema can be circular and endless unless such arguments are turned into a dialectic. Reality, finally, is not “out there,” and there is no hope for the image to be true to such an abstract, idealist notion. The image can be true only to a filmmaker’s reading of “reality” and his or her ability to give such a reading a voice, imply a point of view or interpretation, to make images that direct and comment while permitting the spectator room to join the act of interpretation. The neorealists themselves knew this, and Olmi chose an artifice that created the illusion of observed activity. The history of film after neorealism is the history of how much overt recognition was given by the filmmaker, by the film itself, to the artifice that created it, that made it appear “real” or as a commentary about “reality.” The two other films in our peasant trilogy demonstrate an awareness of forcing the image, of forming and directing it to specific ends, of exercising an obvious control far greater than the Italian filmmakers of the forties would have wanted. Like *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, 1900 is set in a farm in northern Italy, and it concerns the activities of peasants and owners; yet it foregoes any illusion of objectivity. Bertolucci breaks a number of major neorealist

premises. The cast is professional, and almost anything but Italian: Robert De Niro and Gerard Depardieu play the padrone Alfredo and peasant Olmo; Dominique Sanda is Alfredo's wife; Burt Lancaster and Sterling Hayden are the owner and worker of an earlier generation; Donald Sutherland plays a fascist. In its construction, the film actively avoids the convention of unmediated observation and instead creates large, striking images of figures in interiors and landscapes that are each composed not to capture small, off-handed activities, but to render large and purposive gestures. In the tradition of Visconti, Bertolucci bases his work in operatic conventions—political opera, for the movements, the recitatives, the arias of 1900 are all in the cause of socialism and the triumph of the left. Where Olmi is content to observe an enduring quietism, restricted in place and time, Bertolucci examines the possibilities of long-term struggle between landowner and peasant, with fascism providing the pivot around which the struggle turns. The lines are drawn clearly and broadly: the peasantry are good folk and much more aware of their state than in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* because they know who they are and what their social and economic position is; they know, too, that it must change. They are close to the soil, close to history, and politically astute. The fascists are portrayed without mitigation as mindlessly and murderously evil. The owners are trapped in between, liberal, indecisive, jealous, desirous of protecting the workers, unable to give up privilege, caught in a status quo that no longer exists; that never existed, because (as Bertolucci understands it) the peasants were aware of the system and acted against it as best they could.

Early in the film, in a sequence that takes place after the turn of the century, the padrone calls out the peasants to announce that, because of a crop failure, they will have to work for half pay. "We don't get double pay for a double crop," is one response. Another response is made by a worker who quietly slices off his ear as a mark of protest. It is a dramatic gesture, indicative both of the anger Bertolucci allows his peasants to express at the situation and also of their momentary misdirection of that anger. It is only a temporary misdirection, however, for they strike, and even though the padrone brings in scabs, and the police circle the fields, organization has begun. The strikers march with a red banner and, in a Punch and Judy show, the puppets play out the peasants' side against the police. In response the actual police beat down the puppets. The peasants attain some degree of political organization; but it is diverted as World War I ensues and the fascists rise to power in the twenties. Alfredo, the new padrone, becomes embroiled first in the decadent uppermiddle-class life of Rome and then in a marriage that fails because of his refusal both to confront the fascists at home and to side with his childhood friend, Olmo, who represents the forefront of the peasants' struggle. After establishing the lineage of the ruling and working families, their personal and political struggles, the American version of the film focuses on the conflict among four characters: Olmo and Alfredo, personal childhood friends and class



The peasants' revenge against Attila (Donald Sutherland). 1900
(Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

enemies; Alfredo's wife, who perceives more clearly than her husband the threat of the fascists, whom he attempts to placate, even at the risk of Olmo's life; and Attila, the local fascist leader.

Alfredo, his wife, and Olmo are traditionally "well-drawn" characters. They exist with full "personalities," struggle with and suffer internal conflicts of conscience, duty, friendship, and loyalties—conflicts which eventually pull the film off course. Attila, on the other hand, is a straightforward, two-dimensional, almost allegorical figure of political and moral evil. His character is molded to fit perfectly the historical design of the film. He is an idea of fascism pure and unadorned, a figure who takes equal pleasure in smashing a cat (which he pretends is a communist and ties to a post) with his head, bashing out the brains of a child by whipping it around the walls of a room, or crushing an old woman behind a door. Attila's is not a banal evil, but an active, calculated one. His evil is so great that his rise and fall structure the movement of the American version of the film.

When Italy is liberated on April 25, 1945, nature blooms and the peasants take to the fields with pitchforks to destroy Attila and his wife. (In the first American version of the film, this sequence opened the action, so that the body of the film explained the peasants' act of revenge and set up Attila as a powerful force of reaction against which Bertolucci could match the progressiveness of the peasantry.) After the war, with Attila dead,

Alfredo is tried by a peasants' court, in the middle of the farmyard, under a red patchwork canopy the peasants have been making for years. Good dialecticians to the end, they declare the *padrone* dead, but allow Alfredo to survive as living proof that the concept of ownership is dead. But their victory over history is incomplete. Italian soldiers representing the postwar government take their guns away. The crowd disperses, leaving Alfredo, Olmo, and a young boy whose name is also Olmo. Alfredo asserts his survival and the survival of his class. He proclaims "The *padrone* lives!" and engages his old friend in a wrestling match that extends forward and backward in time: through old age and back to when they were children, daring each other to lie between the rails while a train passed over them. An old Olmo watches an old Alfredo lying crosswise on the rails. There is a cut to a shot of a mole emerging from the ground, then to a train going over a young Alfredo lying between the rails. The shot is held on him, lying with his hands over his eyes, and the film ends.

This sequence attempts to sum up the film and with it the political movements in rural Italy throughout the century. Its montage of time, friendship, opposition is Bertolucci's key statement about the continuing struggle between classes and the individuals who represent them. By emulating some Eisensteinian techniques (the sequence is a homage to Eisenstein) he hopes to indicate that the dialectics of film history also continue. The neorealist premise of *1900*—its embracing of a poor and struggling class of people—is encompassed by the Eisensteinian urge to manipulate and arrange events toward a didactic end. But Bertolucci is so far away from the Eisensteinian tradition that he can only allude to it and strain toward a symbolic gesture.

Eisenstein could joke with his montage, as in *Strike*, when company spies are compared to animals, or be deadly serious, as when, in the same film, a sequence of workers being shot down by the police is intercut with shots of animals felled in a slaughterhouse. He could use montage within a sequence to expand time, stretching and repeating gestures to emphasize the moment, as in the plate-breaking sequence of *Potemkin* or the bridge raising in *October*. In the final sequence of *1900* these great effects are reduced. The struggle between worker and owner is ongoing; history moves like a train, running over both; consciousness emerges like a mole from the ground. The end of *1900* (and I am only supposing that it is the ending originally intended by Bertolucci) shows something of a problem inherited from the film's neorealist origins. Because there was no revolution in Italy after the war, the neorealists were unable (and, for reasons already discussed, unwilling) to allow their characters to triumph. Bertolucci is able to provide a fantasy of triumph that is modified by history and character. He wants a victory for the left, but knows a clear-cut victory is unlikely; he loves his two struggling characters and does not want either one to triumph to the other's detriment. Alfredo's indecisiveness is meant to manifest a kind of liberal-centrist position and sensibility, one which

gives all sides their due without a defined moral or political commitment. Olmo, the strong and politically sophisticated peasant, struggles with his own emotional attachments to Alfredo, with whom he grew up. The conflicts between friendship, political necessity, and history become too strong. Bertolucci knows that, historically, neither Alfredo's nor Olmo's side triumphed. Like Visconti's *La terra trema*, Bertolucci's revolutionary project is thwarted by the realities of Italian society. While he feels free to posit the rise of a radical consciousness through the middle of the century, he does not feel free to speculate on the direction of that consciousness after the second World War. Finally, the Eisensteinian techniques appear almost as parodies, for the kind of historical conflicts Eisenstein reflected and developed in his films are not available to Bertolucci. Character is substituted for history; attention becomes focused on two attractive individuals; and finally, everything gets stuck in the glamor of international filmmaking.

There is no better way to understand the appropriateness of the neorealists' use of non-professional or little-known players than by watching in 1900 well-known American actors and a French movie star impersonating Italian peasants and landowners. (It is almost as if Bertolucci seriously considered the possibilities, if not the ramifications, of the legend surrounding *Bicycle Thieves*—that De Sica was offered American backing for the film if he would use Cary Grant in the role of Ricci.) The conflict between personality and character and history permits neither closeness to nor distance from the narrative, but rather requires a constant attempt on the part of the audience to integrate the actor into the role and the character into the historical events going on. Bertolucci created what was to be an epic history but was cut down by the exigencies of distribution, by his own desire to mimic the grand style of Hollywood production, and by his inability to draw a satisfying conclusion.

The film is, finally, a hybrid—a conscious mixture of Eisenstein, of *La terra trema* (but with the workers offered some possibility for victory rather than melodramatic defeat); *The Leopard*, Visconti's ornate spectacle in which Burt Lancaster plays an aristocrat caught in the last stages of the Italian *Risorgimento*; and *Gone with the Wind*. While rooted in neorealism, 1900 branches through the history of film; style and direction, form and content clash, and despite all its exuberance the film fails to cohere. This cannot be blamed solely on the cuts made in the original version. The film attempts too much and its images are both trivial and portentous, wanting to communicate both the scope of history and some discrete elements of ordinary life with a grandeur that is often at odds with the speculative and inquiring nature of the narrative. In the end Bertolucci leaves his main characters in a state of uncertainty and his audience in a state of dissatisfaction.

The Tree of Wooden Clogs and 1900 seem to move in opposite directions, the one celebrating the stoical endurance of the peasantry, the other

examining their revolutionary fervor. Both, however, suffer an identical problem of perspective. They romanticize their subject. Bertolucci's is a revolutionary romanticism, an expression of great historical consciousness and action among the peasant class. There were revolutionary outbreaks such as those depicted in the film, but Bertolucci's celebration is too unquestioning, unanalytical, and inconclusive. When the film tries to come to terms with the inconclusiveness of the revolution its ambiguities damage the narrative movement that has already occurred. Olmi's is a more serious and detrimental romanticism. His admiration of the peasantry as a suffering but uncomplaining class, caught up in their toil, blissfully innocent of the trap they are in, runs the risk of sanctification, of creating a myth of heroic, holy passivity.

There are alternatives to the approach of Olmi and Bertolucci. *Red Psalm* (1971), a film by the Hungarian director Miklós Jancsó, offers one of the best responses to the neorealist endeavor and dilemma, and it will be examined in some detail in the last chapter. Another alternative appears in *Padre padrone*, the third film of the unintended peasant trilogy that appeared in the late seventies. Of the three it is the most removed from its neorealist origins, and therefore the most successful. By taking a neorealist subject and then severing it from a neorealist treatment, the film manages to reflect back upon its origins as well as upon the legacy of the movement.

The immediate structural difference between *Padre padrone* and the forties tradition is its point of view. It concentrates on a single figure and uses that figure as a perceptual locus, observing and judging events from the perspective of the central character. This would seem not to be very different from the methods of Rossellini in *Germany, Year Zero* (a film admired by the Tavianis and alluded to in *Il prato*, a film made for Italian television after *Padre padrone* but not commercially released in the United States) or De Sica in *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D.* Each of these narratives focuses on a central character and observes the world if not through that character's point of view, then certainly parallel to it. But the neorealists used this direct or indirect first-person point of view not to analyze a character's feelings or even perceptions, but to place that character in a situation and observe actions and reactions. In *Padre padrone* the Taviani brothers partake as well as observe; they "report" on the phenomenon of the contemporary peasantry—in this case the shepherds of Sardinia in Italy's wretchedly poor south—through the eyes and developing personality of Gavino Ledda, the individual upon whose life the film is based. The result is a film about growth and change, about learning and development in a situation where it is difficult for an individual to grow, learn, or change. It is also about the violent interaction of a son and father—not the innocent suffering of a child struggling in the misery of his father's world (a favorite theme of the neorealists), but the struggle of a child against a father whose brutality is a reflection of their world. The film focuses objective social-economic reality through a subjective conflict. Whereas the neorealists wanted the viewer to



The father takes Gavino out of school. *Padre padrone*
(Museum of Modern Art Film Still Archive)

supply the subjective response to what they hoped would be an objective rendering of character and events, the Tavianis rework this methodology—in light of the thirty years of narrative experimentation that separates *Padre padrone* from the neorealist tradition—into a complex of subjective, sometimes almost expressionist, inquiry into states of mind, first- and third-person commentary on events, and subdued objective observation of the world inhabited by their characters.

The complex is achieved by locking the narrative off from most authorized conventions of “realism,” neo or other. The film begins and ends with the “actual” Gavino, who first introduces and then sums up his experience; not in the form of a separate introduction and conclusion, but rather as part of the film’s *mise-en-scène*. He is introduced to us documentary fashion, through a voice-over commentary, as he stands in the school building that will be the setting of the film’s first sequence. He is whittling a stick for his “father”—that is, for the actor playing his father—who is waiting to enter the classroom to take the young Gavino (a child playing Gavino as a little boy) out of school and put him to work in the fields. At the end of the film, we see the “actual” Gavino again, bringing up to date the recent events of his life, addressing the camera as he points out the activity in town due to the presence of the film crew. The camera pans to a window and we see the town square with people gathered around the film equipment truck.

There is a cut back to Gavino and a zip pan (a quick, rushing movement) back to the schoolroom, back to the opening of the film, the father again leading the young Gavino out to work, repeating his warning to the other children, who are mocking Gavino, that it will soon be their turn. As at the beginning, the camera holds on the frightened children, their teacher looking away helplessly; there is a cut to the town square as the sound of the wind that plays over the fields is heard, and a dissolve to the "actual" Gavino, this time sitting in the meadow, the place that held him captive as a child. The film ends with a closeup of his back, rocking as he did in his childhood insecurity, then stopping as the wind blows and the clarinet concerto that was Gavino's solace as an adult comes up on the sound track.

Contained in the opening and closing of this film is an element of construction that was of major importance in the development of European and Latin American cinema in the sixties. We, as audience, are made to recognize the film as an artifact, as something consciously constructed, with actors impersonating characters, and with its own specific ways of showing reality. The beginning and end of the film joke with its status as documentary, its basis in "fact," and the ease with which fact elides with fiction. The Taviani brothers take such care in manipulating their film into this status of self-consciousness that there is no possibility of looking at it as the observation of ordinary life. It announces itself as the conscious creation of an extraordinary life; not only do the subject and the narrative continually comment upon each other, but the presence of a controlling narrative "voice," separate from both, shapes and controls the whole. In 1977 there was nothing unusual about this, and the complexity of these multiple points of view is not very great when compared to what had been done by filmmakers in the sixties and early seventies. However, in comparison to neorealism, the complexity is extreme. In the body of the film we are shown many events with a force and immediacy that tend to break down the provocative distance created by its opening and closing. Gavino's attempts to endure and escape his father's brutality and his isolated shepherd's life tend to absorb our perception and response completely, particularly early in the film where the father's violence against the child reaches appalling heights. But even here, the filmmakers intrude in such a way as to remove us from the action when our sympathy threatens to overtake us, them, and the material. At one point, after beating Gavino senseless for leaving his fold to speak with a friend, the father holds him and sings. The camera frames the two in a perfect image of a *pietà* and the father's singing is joined by other voices on the sound track as the camera drifts away from the two figures to the countryside. The viewer is permitted to experience revulsion at the beating, relief at the father's show of concern. But a break in identification with the events occurs with the ironic allusion to Catholic iconography, and separation is created as the camera moves away and the other voices are heard. The viewer is reminded again of the father's threat as a closeup of him is suddenly inserted, followed by a fade to black.

The Tavianis refuse to allow a single attitude or mood to predominate for too long. The bleakness of poverty is not as unrelenting in this film as it was for the neorealists, and is the source less of pity and compassion than of frustration and anger. It can even yield images that are (or can be made) ludicrous and amusing. Immediately after the fade to black on the father, we see Gavino, his face swollen from his beating, milking a goat. For all his efforts, he cannot keep the goat from defecating in the milk. His frustrations are spoken off-screen in threats to the animal, to which the animal itself responds, "speaking" to Gavino through his imagination, threatening to continue its unpleasant activities so the father will beat Gavino some more. In despair, Gavino attempts to drown the goat in its own fouled milk. Then a chain of association begins that the Tavianis find irresistible. In the midst of his altercation with the goat, Gavino sees two other animals copulating. He notes this and begins stroking the goat; there is a cut to Gavino's young friend in the neighboring field fornicating with a mule. We hear heavy breathing on the sound track. We see other children masturbating with chickens. A chorus of heavy breathing builds. Gavino's father sees the children, gets excited, rides off to his wife, and leaps upon her. Other adults proceed to the same occupation as the chorus of heavy breathing reaches a crescendo and the camera pans the town.

There is much good humor in this, and at no one's expense, except perhaps the goat and the chickens. The scatology and sexuality are not exploitative as they are, for example, in Ettore Scola's neorealist parody *Down and Dirty* (1977). They are one of the means the Tavianis use to alter the narrative tone and structure and diminish reliance on conventional chronology or spatial continuity. Such digressions and shifts in point of view provide as well a means to approach, with discretion, the psychology of the characters, or at least their emotional and physical reactions, without presuming to reveal them entirely or to reduce them to stereotypes.

Later in the film, an older Gavino sits in his meadow, learning to play a broken accordion he bought for two goats from some wanderers. He has slit his lip with a knife so his father will think he was robbed and beaten. The camera pans the awful, rocky place he inhabits and moves back to Gavino as these words appear on the screen: "I am Gavino, son of the shepherd Efisio, who is the son of the shepherd, Luca. The cold has filled our pens with fleas. The fattest ones are under my armpits.... I am Eligio, son of the shepherd, Giovanni, who was the son of the Carabinieri, Enrico. I had to eat cheese that was too fresh. When I blow on my tongue, it burns." The camera continues to pan the meadow as sounds of sobbing are heard on the sound track and a boy on a donkey rides past, crying. More words appear: "Angels of paradise who play so sweetly, I'm Matteo, and I beg you: let a basin of boiling water appear that I can put my feet in, for I'm dying of cold." Sobbing and sad music are intermixed with the waltz associated with Gavino's accordion, and the sequence ends with a closeup of the crying rider and the words, "Mine is a prayer." This sequence is

immediately followed by a shot of the father walking along, worrying that Gavino is slipping away from him, worrying that he must keep his mind nimble, which he does by reciting the multiplication table to himself. In the opposite direction rides Sebastiano, a shepherd who smokes his cigar with the lit end in his mouth, so his enemies will not see him in the dark. As the camera follows him, he decides to make peace with them. He meets with them; they make up and proceed to slaughter their sheep together until one of the enemies turns and bashes Sebastiano, kills him, and steals his sheep.

No one mood is permitted to wear itself out, and no opportunity is missed to manipulate the viewer's perspective and the tone of particular events, and to comment upon them in the imagery or on the sound track in a manner that is not quite psychological, sociological, or directly political, yet manages to combine these three modes of inquiry. Sympathy, outrage, awe, concern are all elicited without any one reaction predominating. *Padre padrone* is a didactic film in the best sense. We are engaged and yet asked to keep our distance, and we learn with some force of an exotic and appalling way of life through a film that is itself somewhat exotic in its mixture of styles and levels of discourse. But the various levels are never foreign to the subject of the film. Gavino is a peasant who became an intellectual, who went from barren fields to a somewhat less barren life in the army, and finally to a university where he became a linguist and studied the dialect of his region. Throughout he kept returning to his home and the shadow of his father. The conflicts of this process are realized in the conflicting perspectives of the film. Just as Gavino learns language that will help him to understand and control his world, the film learns the narrative language that best describes him and his past and best speaks to us of the character, his surroundings, and his history.

The Italian filmmakers and theorists of the forties discovered alternatives to the artificial language of commercial cinema. They allowed the image to record and reveal a historically viable world, a "real" world, stories of which would be more eloquent and moving than the middle-class melodramatics of conventional film. In so doing, they made available to the filmmakers who followed them a starting point from which to build new languages of the image, new narrative forms. The "break" in film history that neorealism created led to many experiments in restructuring and revitalizing cinematic storytelling, renewing inquiry into the cinematic possibilities of telling these and different ways of engaging the audience in their telling. Having considered the new models of image-making the neorealists provided, we can proceed to examine the structures that were built by the filmmakers who followed them.