

Chapter Two

What Is Neorealism?

BY BERT CARDULLO



Rome, Open City, dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1945.

The term “neorealism” was first applied by the critic Antonio Pietrangeli to Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione* (1942), and the style came to fruition in the mid-to-late forties in such films of Roberto Rossellini, Visconti, and Vittorio De Sica as *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Shoeshine* (1946), *Paisan* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), and *The Earth Trembles* (1948). These pictures reacted not only against the banality that had long been the dominant mode of Italian cinema, but also against prevailing socioeconomic conditions in Italy. With minimal resources, the neorealist filmmakers worked in real locations using local people as well as professional actors; they improvised their scripts, as need be, on site; and their films conveyed a powerful sense of the plight of ordinary individuals oppressed by political circumstances beyond their control. Thus Italian neorealism was the first postwar cinema to liberate filmmaking from the artificial confines of the studio and, by extension, from the Hollywood-originated studio system. But neorealism was the expression of an entire moral or ethical philosophy, as well, and not simply just another new cinematic style.

Still, the post-World War II birth or creation of neorealism was anything but a collective theoretical enterprise—the origins of Italian neorealist cinema were far more complex than that. Generally stated, its roots were political,



The Earth Trembles, dir. Luchino Visconti, 1948.

in that neorealism reacted ideologically to the control and censorship of the prewar cinema; aesthetic, for the intuitive, imaginative response of neorealist directors coincided with the rise or resurgence of realism in Italian literature, particularly the novels of Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Vasco Pratolini (a realism that can be traced to the veristic style first cultivated in the Italian cinema between 1913 and 1916, when films inspired by the writings of Giovanni Verga and others dealt with human problems as well as social themes in natural settings); and economic, in that this new realism posed basic solutions to the lack of production funds, of functioning studios, and of working equipment.

Indeed, what is sometimes overlooked in the growth of the neorealist movement in Italy is the fact that some of its most admired aspects sprang from the dictates of postwar adversity: a shortage of money made shooting in real locations an imperative choice over the use of expensive studio sets; and against such locations any introduction of the phony or the fake would appear glaringly obvious, whether in the appearance of the actors or the style of the acting. It must have been paradoxically exhilarating for neorealist filmmakers to be able to stare unflinchingly at the tragic spectacle of a society in shambles, its values utterly shattered, after years of making nice little movies approved by the powers that were within the walls of Cinecittà.



Obsession, dir. Luchino Visconti, 1942.

In fact, it was the Fascists who, in 1937, opened Cinecittà, the largest and best-equipped movie studio in all of Europe. Like the German Nazis and the Russian Communists, the Italian Fascists realized the power of cinema as a medium of propaganda, and when they came to power, they took over the film industry. Although this meant that those who opposed Fascism could not make movies and that foreign pictures were censored, the Fascists helped to establish the essential requirements for a flourishing postwar film industry. They even founded (in 1935) a film school, the Centro Sperimentale in Rome, which was headed by Luigi Chiarini and taught all aspects of movie production. Many important neorealist directors attended this school, including Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luigi Zampa, Pietro Germi, and Giuseppe De Santis (but not De Sica); it also produced cameramen, editors, and technicians. Moreover, Chiarini was allowed to publish *Bianco e Nero* (*Black and White*), the film journal that later became the official voice of neorealism. Once Mussolini fell from power, then, the stage was set for the development of a strong left-wing cinema.

The Axis defeat happened to transform the Italian film industry into a close approximation of the ideal market of classical economists: a multitude of small producers engaged in fierce competition. There were no clearly dominant firms among Italian movie producers, and in fact the Italian film industry as a whole exhibited considerable weakness. The very atomization and weakness of a privately-owned and profit-oriented motion-picture industry, however, led to a *de facto* tolerance toward the left-wing ideology of neorealism. In addition, the political climate of postwar Italy was favorable to the rise of cinematic neorealism, since this artistic movement was initially a product of the spirit of resistance fostered by the Partisan movement. The presence of Nenni Socialists (Pietro Nenni was Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Communists in the Italian government from 1945 to 1947 contributed to the governmental tolerance of neorealism's left-wing ideology, as did the absence of censorship during the period from 1945 to 1949.

Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* became the landmark film in the promulgation of neorealist ideology. It so completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of its historical moment that this picture alerted both the public and the critics—on the international level (including the United States) as well as the national one—to a new direction in Italian cinema. Furthermore, the conditions of this picture's production (relatively little shooting in the studio, film stock bought on the black market and developed without the typical viewing of daily rushes, post-synchronization of sound to avoid laboratory costs, limited financial backing) did much to create many of the myths surrounding neorealism. With a daring combination of styles and

tones—from the use of documentary footage to the deployment of the most blatant melodrama, from the deployment of comic relief to the depiction of the most tragic human events—Rossellini almost effortlessly captured forever the tension and drama of the Italian experience during the German Occupation and the Partisan struggle against the Nazi invasion.



Rome, Open City, dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1945.

If, practically speaking, Rossellini at once introduced Italian cinematic neorealism to the world, De Sica's collaborator Cesare Zavattini—with whom he forged one of the most fruitful writer-director partnerships in the history of cinema—eventually became the theoretical spokesman for the neorealists. By his definition, neorealism does not concern itself with superficial themes and synthetic forms; in his famous manifesto "Some Ideas on the Cinema" (1952), Zavattini declared that the camera has a "hunger for reality," and that the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the historical richness as well as the political importance of actual, everyday life.

Although inconsistently or irregularly observed, the basic tenets of this new realism were threefold: to portray real or everyday people (using nonprofessional actors) in actual settings; to examine socially significant themes (the genuine problems of living); and to promote, not the arbitrary manipulation

of events, but instead the organic development of situations (i.e., the real flow of life, in which complications are seldom resolved by coincidence, contrivance, or miracle). These tenets were clearly opposed to the prewar cinematic style that used polished actors on studio sets, conventional and even fatuous themes, and artificial, gratuitously resolved plots—the very style, of course, that De Sica himself had employed in the first four pictures he made, from 1940 to 1942 (*Red Roses* [1940], *Maddalena*, *Zero for Conduct* [1941], *Teresa Venerdì* [1941], and *A Garibaldian in the Convent* [1942]).



The Children Are Watching Us, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1943.

Unfortunately, this was the cinematic style that the Italian public continued to demand after the war, despite the fact that during it such precursors of neorealism as Visconti's *Ossessione* and De Sica's own fifth film, *The Children Are Watching Us* (1943), had offered a serious alternative. Indeed, it was as early as 1942, when *Ossessione* and *The Children Are Watching Us* were either being made or released, that the idea of the cinema was being transformed in Italy. Around the same time, Gianni Franciolini's *Headlights in the Fog* (1941) was portraying infidelity among truck drivers and seamstresses, while Alessandro Blasetti's *Four Steps in the Clouds* (1942) was being praised for its return to realism in a warm-hearted story of peasant life shot in natural settings.



Obsession, dir. Luchino Visconti, 1942.

Influenced by French cinematic realism as well as by prevailing Italian literary trends, *Ossessione*, for its part, was shot on location in the region of Romagna; its atmosphere and plot (based on James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1934]), moreover, were seamy in addition to steamy, and did not adhere to the polished, resolved structures of conventional Italian movies. Visconti's film was previewed in the spring of 1943 and quickly censored, not to be appreciated until after the war.

In its thematic attempt to reveal the underside of Italy's moral life, shared with *Ossessione*, *The Children Are Watching Us* itself was indicative of a rising new vision in Italian cinema. In exhibiting semi-documentary qualities by being shot partially on location at the beaches of Alassio and by using nonprofessional actors in some roles, *The Children Are Watching Us* was, again along with *Ossessione* as well as the aforementioned pictures by Blasetti and Franciolini, a precursor of the neorealism that would issue forth after the liberation of occupied Rome.

De Sica's film was not a financial success, however, and its negative reception was in part engineered by those who saw it as an impudent criticism of Italian morality. The unfavorable reaction to *The Children Are Watching Us* was also influenced, of course, by the strictures of the past: during the era of Mussolini's regime and "white telephone" movies (the term applied to trivial romantic comedies set in blatantly artificial studio surroundings symbolized by the ever-present white telephone), an insidious censorship had made it almost impossible for artists to deal with—and for audiences to appreciate—the moral, social, political, and spiritual components of actual, everyday life.



The Children Are Watching Us, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1943.

After the Second World War, a different kind of “censorship” obtained: that of the *lira*. For, in 1946, viewers wanted to spend their hard-earned *lire* on Hollywood movies through which they could escape their everyday lives, not on films that realistically depicted the effects of war—effects that they already knew only too well through direct experience.

Italian audiences, it seems, were reluctant to respond without prompting to an indigenous neorealist cinema intent on exploring the postwar themes of rampant unemployment, inadequate housing, and neglected children, in alternately open-ended and tragic dramatic structures populated by mundane nonprofessional actors instead of glamorous stars. (Indeed, one reason for neorealism’s ultimate decline was that its aesthetic principle of using nonprofessional actors conflicted with the economic interests of the various organizations of professional Italian actors.) It was the unexceptional, not the extraordinary, man in which neorealism was interested—above all in the socioeconomic interaction of that man with his environment, not the exploration of his psychological problems or complexities. And to pursue that interest, neorealist cinema had to place such a man in his own straitened circumstances. Hence no famous monument or other tourist attraction shows that the action of De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* or *Shoeshine*, for example, takes

place in Rome; furthermore, instead of the city's ancient ruins, we get contemporary ones: drab, run-down city streets, ugly, dilapidated houses, and dusty, deserted embankments that look out on a sluggish, dirty river Tiber.



Shoeshine, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1946.

As for the Italian government's own response to the settings, characters, and plots of neorealist films, in January 1952, Giulio Andreotti, State Undersecretary and head of the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo (a powerful position that had direct influence on government grants as well as censorship, and that led ultimately to the right-wing Andreotti's own corruption, exposure, and disgrace), published an open letter in *Libertas* (a Christian-Democratic weekly) bitterly deploring the neorealist trend in the Italian cinema and its negative image of the country—a letter that was quickly reprinted in other journals. Andreotti took direct aim at De Sica, who was castigated for exhibiting a subversively “pessimistic vision” and exhorted to be more “constructively optimistic.” (De Sica later stated that if he had had to do *Umberto D.* [1952], for one, over again, he would have changed nothing except to remove the “uplifting” final shots of children playing—precisely the kind of “positive” conclusion Andreotti seemed to be calling for.)

It was this atmosphere of interventionist government criticism that hampered the exportation of neorealist films during the 1950s; the “Andreotti

Law” of 1949 had established wide government control over the financing and censorship of films, including a right to ban the export of any Italian movie that Andreotti himself judged “might give an erroneous view of the true nature of our country.” In November 1955 the “Manifesto of Italian Cinema” was published in response to Andreotti’s *Libertas* letter by the French journal *Positif*—a manifesto that spoke out against movie censorship and was signed by the leaders of Italian neorealism, with the names of De Sica and Zavattini prominent among the signatures. By this time, however, postwar neorealism was rapidly waning as the burning social and political causes that had stimulated the movement were to some extent alleviated or glossed over by increasing prosperity. In a society becoming ever more economically as well as politically conservative, nobody wanted to throw away his capital on yet another tale of hardship and heartbreak on the side streets of Rome.

Although neorealism was gradually phased out of the Italian cinema in the early 1950s as economic conditions improved and film producers succumbed to the growing demand for escapist entertainment, the movement’s effects have been far-reaching. One can trace neorealism’s influence back to the entire postwar tradition of films about children, from Luis Buñuel’s *Los Olvidados* (1950), René Clément’s *Forbidden Games* (1952), and Kjell Grede’s *Hugo and Josephine* (1967) to Kobei Oguri’s *Muddy River* (1981), Hector Babenco’s *Pixote* (1981), and Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* (1988); one can also trace neorealism’s influence beyond the twentieth century into the twenty-first, in such children’s films as Mahamat-Saleh Haroun’s *Abouna* (2002), Hirokazu Kore-eda’s *Nobody Knows* (2004), and Andrei Kravchuk’s *The Italian* (2005). It could even be argued that François Truffaut’s *The Four Hundred Blows* (1959) owes as much to De Sica’s *Shoeshine* as to the following films of his fellow Frenchmen: Jean Vigo’s *Zero for Conduct* (1933), Jean Benoît-Lévy’s *La Maternelle* (1932), Julien Duvivier’s *Poil de carotte* (1932), and Louis Daquin’s *Portrait of Innocence* (1941).

Most recently, the Iranian cinema has confirmed the neorealist legacy in such pictures (some of them also concerned with the lives of children) as Kianoush Ayari’s *The Abadanis* (1993), a virtual reworking of *Bicycle Thieves* in contemporary Tehran; Abbas Kiarostami’s Koker trilogy (1987–1994) presenting a documentary-style look at mountain life in northern Iran before and after the terrible earthquake of 1990, particularly the first of these three films, titled *Where Is the Friend’s House?*; Jafar Panahi’s *The White Balloon* (1995); Majid Majidi’s *The Children of Heaven* (1997); and Samira Makhmalbaf’s *The Apple* (1998).

Neorealism’s influence on French New Wave directors like Truffaut is a matter of record, but its impact on the American cinema has generally been ignored. For, in the postwar work of American moviemakers as diverse as

Nicholas Ray (*They Live by Night*, 1948), Elia Kazan (*Boomerang!*, 1947), Jules Dassin (*The Naked City*, 1948), Joseph Losey (*The Lawless*, 1950), Robert Rossen (*Body and Soul*, 1947), and Edward Dmytryk (*Crossfire*, 1947), stylistic elements of neorealism can be found together with neorealism's thematic concern with social and political problems. The Italian movement has even had a profound impact on filmmakers in countries that once lacked strong national cinemas of their own, such as India, where Satyajit Ray adopted a typically neorealist stance in his Apu trilogy, outstanding among whose three films is *Pather Panchali* (1955).

In Italy itself, neorealist principles were perpetuated first by Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni. De Sica himself exerted a profound influence on both of these directors: to wit, with its grotesque processions of fancily as well as raggedly dressed extras against an almost abstract horizon, *Miracle in Milan* (1951) is "Fellinian" two or more years before Fellini became so; and without De Sica's unembellished portrait of modern-day alienation in *Umberto D.*—his astringent detachment and strict avoidance of sentimentalism—a later portrait of alienation such as Antonioni's *La notte* (1960) seems almost inconceivable.

Neorealist principles were perpetuated not only by Fellini and Antonioni but also by the first as well as the second generation of filmmakers to succeed them. Among members of the first generation we may count Ermanno Olmi, with his compassionate studies of working-class life like *Il posto* (1961), and Francesco Rosi, with his vigorous attacks on the abuse of power such as *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961). These two directors are joined, among others, by Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Accattone*, 1961), Vittorio De Seta (*Bandits of Orgosolo*, 1961), Marco Bellocchio (*Fist in His Pocket*, 1965), and the Taviani brothers, Vittorio and Paolo (*Padre Padrone*, 1977). And these filmmakers themselves have been followed by Gianni Amelio (*Stolen Children*, 1990), Nanni Moretti (*The Mass Is Ended*, 1988), Giuseppe Tornatore (*Cinema Paradiso*, 1988), and Maurizio Nichetti (*The Icicle Thief*, 1989), to name only the most prominent beneficiaries of neorealism's influence.

What happened to neorealism, then, after the disappearance of the forces that produced it—World War II, the resistance, and the liberation, followed by the postwar reconstruction of a once morally, politically, and economically devastated society? Instead of itself disappearing, neorealism changed its form (depending on the filmmaker and the film) but not its profoundly humanistic concerns. Indeed, I think we can confidently say by now that neorealism is eternally, as well as universally, "neo" or new.