***Italian neorealism***

SUMMARY

*Italian neorealism* is a movement of filmmaking associated with a select group of Italian filmmakers in the latter years of, and the years immediately following, the Second World War. The most popularly regarded of these are directors, Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, Vittorio de Sica and his regular collaborator, the writer Cesare Zavattini. The films they made in this period all share an interest in the state of Italian society in the wake of war, and a concern with what shape the reconstruction of that society should take. Benchmark titles of this kind include *Ossessione* (*Obsession)* (Luchino Visconti, 1943), Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* (Roma, città aperta) (1945) and *Paisan* (1946), and de Sica’s *Bicycle Theives* (*Ladri di biciclette*) (1948). While its proponents often refuted its status as a generic or aesthetic style, the films of neorealism were pioneering in their use of non-professional actors in key roles, in their preference for contingency and neglect of classical narrative structure, and in their shooting scenes on location in the city streets and country landscapes of war-torn Italy. As well as making some of its most significant films, Zavattini and Rossellini were also two of its most articulate commentators. Both regularly reiterated a desire to contemplate humanity in order to rediscover morality: a reaction to Fascism’s recent manipulation of both. While the great aims of these filmmakers were not matched by their audience reception (as illustrated by their box-office returns), it was ironically the poetic and aesthetic innovations which made a lasting impression on the subsequent history of cinema.

MAIN ENTRY

The term ‘neorealism’ implies a sense of novelty with regard to stylistic realism in its classical sense. While Peter Bondanella (1995) recognises the rarity of its proponents referring to traditional realism, Millicent Marcus (1986) relates the cinematic neorealism to Italian literature prior to the war. These writers, Marcus notes, provided the narrative prototype for what was to become ‘an alternative to the clichés and falsehoods of the Fascist film industry...the authenticity so lacking in contemporary cultural models’ (Marcus, 1986: 19). Torunn Haaland (2012) goes further, considering the theoretical basis of neorealism by referring to twentieth-century writing on realism, in order to clarify the logic of this label. Combining Roman Jakobson’s ‘maximum verisimilitude‘ (Jakobson, 1971: 38) with Erich Auerbach’s historicization of the random individual’s everyday life (Auerbach, 1953: 489), Haaland suggests that through its concern with extending the moral and social components of traditional realism, its borders are extended further, generating a *new* form of realism (Haaland, 2012: 34). In short, Italian neorealism continues nineteenth-century literary themes of social and environmental constraints upon individuals, but contains something novel in its reinforcement of the social-morality element, and its specific relation to the historical events which it immediately responded to. It is this latter point which caused philosopher Gilles Deleuze to celebrate its singular response to an era that ‘greatly increased situations we no longer no how to respond to’ (Deleuze, 1988: xiii).

Mark Shiel (2006: 8-9) has dated the initial coinage of the term “neorealist cinema” back to 1943, by two different authors. First was Mario Serandrei, who used the term to refer to the “striking immediacy” of Visconti’s *Ossessione* (*Obsession,* 1943). Second was Umberto Barbaro, who used the term to refer to the films of René Clair, Jean Renoir, and Marcel Carné: all French filmmakers making films ten years prior to Visconti. The influence of the French cinema of the 1930s is further elaborated upon by Pasquale Iannone (2013), who claims that ‘any discussion of the roots of neorealism cannot fail to take in the 1930s films of Jean Renoir’ (ibid.: 59). Iannone discusses a number of films from internationally disparate production centres, ranging from the Soviet montage films of Vsevold Pudovkin and the Weimar films of Robert Siodmak, to Robert Flaherty’s anthropological reconstructions and the subtle social commentary of Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. In these films, Iannone stresses the development of narrative themes and aesthetic techniques, which come together in a unique way in the films of the Italian neorealists.

Visconti’s Obsession (an adaptation of James M Cain’s The Postman Always Rings Twice [1934]) is generally regarded as the turning point of Italian cinema – away from the farcical comedies of the state-run Cinecittà studios, whose concern was escapism in wartime, towards the soberness of poverty and destruction as a way of critically dissecting contemporary society. Besides *Obsession*, other benchmark examples of neorealism include Rossellini’s historical trilogy, *Rome, Open City, Paisan,* and *Germany, Year Zero* (Germania, anno zero) (1948), Visconti’s *La Terra Trema* (The Earth Trembles) (1948), Giuseppe de Santis’s *Bitter Rice*  (*Riso amaro*) (1949), de Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves, Shoeshine* (1946), and *Umberto D* (1952), the last of which is thought by many to be the last truly neorealist film.

Despite the insistence of many of its directors that neorealism is a matter of social outlook and not a stylistic tendency, many commentators have asserted particular formal and thematic trends within the films. Nowell-Smith et al (1996) summarise its core characteristics as a method of location shooting and non-professional actors, a desire to get closer to everyday reality, a focus on the masses after the war, and an ideological concern with the hopeful era of Fascism’s immediate aftermath, and the disillusionment when the social climate failed to improve (ibid.: 87). A major contributor to Italian neorealism’s stylistic debate was the enormously influential French critic, André Bazin. In his essay, ‘The Evolution of the Language of Cinema’ (2005), Bazin asserts neorealism’s reinstatement of ambiguity to reality through its common rejection of montage. He refers to The Earth Trembles as ‘a film composed almost entirely of one-shot sequences’ (Bazin, 2005: 38).

Legacy

Through a combination of ultimately unattainable pedagogical principles, poor box-office returns, changing interests of spectators as time passed, and changing concerns of some of its key filmmakers and the rising star of new Italian cinema, Italian neorealism ceased as a movement in its original form in the early-1950s. The reintroduction of Hollywood cinema (after Mussolini’s ban was lifted) and the attempt to compete through a more industrial form of Italian production, effaced the chances of neorealism continuing to exist – except in the compromised popular form of ‘Neorealismo Rosa’*,* a watered-down, comedic overturning of the original’s intentions. Its legacy is probably most noticeable in the gritty, urgent efforts of Third Cinema*,* the Iranian New-Wave, and other subsequent national cinemas arising from areas of conflict and impoverishment.

Selected bibliography and further reading

Bazin, André (2005) *What is Cinema? Volumes I and II,* California: University of California Press. (Volume I includes the seminal ‘Evolution’ essay, while volume II includes several vital essays on neorealism.)

Bondanella, Peter (1995) *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present,* New york: Continuum. (A significant in-depth critical analysis of Italian cinema, from its inception up to the present.)

Deleuze, Gilles (1989) *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* London, New York: Continuum. (One of the most ambitious books ever written on the cinema, tracing a multitude of films with the intention of comprehending a philosophy of film. Italian neorealism’s role is pivotal, since it instigates this particular approach based on time.)

Haaland, Torunn (2012) *Italian Neorealist Cinema,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (A strong overview, with particular attention paid to how neorealism pushed the boundaries of realism.)

Iannone, Pasquale (2013) ‘The Roots of Neorealism’, *Sight and Sound,* May 2013,23 (5), London: BFI.

Marcus, Millicent (1986) *Italian Cinema in the Light of Neorealism,* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. (Includes close-readings of seventeen films from the neorealist era up to much later Italian films, charting the development and decline of its initial aspirations.)

Nowell-Smith, G., Hay, J., Volpi, G. (1996) *The Companian to Italian Cinema,* London: BFI.

Shiel, Mark (2006) *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City,* London: Wallflower Press. (Stakes the claim that the most significant and utopian of the neorealist films are those based in the urban space.)

Wagstaff, Christopher (2007) *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach,* Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press. (A close analysis of *Rome, Open City, Paisan,* and *Bicycle Thieves,* with specific attention paid to the relationship between the art of the film and its relationship with the world it depicts.)

Selected filmography

*Bicycle Thieves,* Vittorio de Sica, 1948.

*Bitter Rice,* Giussepe de Santis, 1949.

*Germany, Year Zero,* Roberto Rossellini, 1948.

*Ossessione,* Luchino Visconti, 1943.

*Paisan,* Roberto Rossellini, 1946.

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

*Shoeshine,* Vittorio de Sica, 1945.

*The Earth Trembles,* Luchino Visconti, 1948.

*Umberto D.,* Vittorio de Sica, 1952.