Italian Neorealism: A Mirror Construction of Reality

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Over the years the term Neorealism has been employed to describe what might loosely be defined as a trend or movement in Italian art, literature, and cinema. Beyond that, there is little agreement. After the first enthusiastic response to neorealism in cinema, particularly as expressed by Bazin, an increasing number of critics have begun articulating serious political and aesthetical reservations. For the politically oriented, neorealist films seem to offer no real answers, no real solutions; for the aestheticians, the films are not sufficiently "real." Many of the theoreticians of the movement (Cesare Zavattini, Umberto Barbaro, Alberto Lattuada) reiterated the necessity to adhere strictly to the painful reality of the insignificant, minimal event, eliminating entirely any intromission of fantasy. According to the four point program outlined in Barbaro's well-known 1943 essay in *Cinema,* neorealist films were to: 1) get rid of the "naive and mannered clichés which have formed the larger part of Italian films"; 2) abandon "those fantastic and grotesque fabrications which exclude human problems and the human point of view"; 3) dispense with "historical set-pieces and fictional adaptations"; 4) exclude the rhetoric which pretends that all Italians are "inflamed by the same noble sentiments."[1] Lattuada's equally famous essay published in 1945 echoes Barbaro's concerns in slightly different terms: "So we are in rags? Then let us show our rags to the world. So we are defeated? Then let us contemplate our disasters. So we owe them to the Mafia? To hypocrisy? To conformism? To irresponsibility? To faulty education? Then let us pay our debts with a fierce love of honesty and the world will be moved to participate in the great combat with truth. This confession will throw light on our hidden virtues, our faith in life, our immense Christian brotherhood. We will meet at last with comprehension and esteem. The cinema is unequaled for revealing all the basic truths about a nation."[2] And while Mario Verdone continues to stress the importance of the realism of

the movement,[3] Simon Hartag writes of *Bicycle Thieves:* "The artifact which pretends not to be one is self-defeating, and the real world continues after "The End' ";[4] Roy Armes says of *Paisa* that "Rossellini's success with this sextet of stories derives from an evasion, not a resolution of the needs of the ninety-minute feature film which the artless contrivances and coincidences of *Paisa* would be too weak to support";[5] and James Agee dismisses *Rome, Open City* as an attempt to sell the Italians a bill of goods.[6]

The neorealist filmmakers seem to be as confused as the theoreticians and critics. Rossellini reaffirms constantly his commitment to realism, to a documentary approach to the cinema.[7] This commitment notwithstanding, without the least hesitation, he does a complete about face and states that, "in the final analysis it's the ideas that count, not the images."[8] Zavattini, who conceived of and advocated the "pedinamento" school of filmmaking (get a camera; follow a person you have never seen before; photograph this person constantly for 90 minutes),[9] wrote *Toto il buono*, the novel on which he and De Sica based the most completely fantastic film of the neorealist period, *Miracle in Milan.* De Sica passed with the greatest of ease from his role as latin lover in an endless series of comedies, starting in 1932 with Mario Camerini's *Gli uomini che mascalzoni (What Rascals Men Are*), to the direction of half a dozen of the masterpieces of neorealism, and then back to a parody of his original roles in films such as *Pane, amore e fantasia* (1953). What, then, *is* neorealism?

A Brief History

The term neorealism first appeared in 1930 in an essay in which Arnaldo Bocelli outlined the literary production of that year. The neorealist works were described as analyzing the human condition in light of the social environment and of objective psychological insights, and as avoiding the then prevalent stylistic and formal hedonism. Foremost among these works, which until then had been generally overlooked or undervalued by the critics, was Alberto Moravia's *Gli indifferenti (The Time of Indifference*, 1928). And while it was not until the years immediately following the Second World War that neorealism reached its zenith and became virtually a household word, its roots extend into the 19th century. The subject matter and the linguistic experimentation of neorealism—the depiction of the lower classes as protagonists, the regional, provincial settings; and the borrowings, influences and the use of dialectal expressions—can be traced back to Emile Zola, Giovanni Pascoli, and Giuseppe Verga. From the critical realists and the naturalists, the neorealists inherited the depiction of everyday life and the perception that the interests of the different social classes do not necessarily coincide. But, while naturalism's sympathy for the worker offered no solution, often neorealism emulated socialist realism. However, while numerous neorealist works reveal a more or less explicit faith in marxist dialectical conflict, in the inevitability of historical evolution, and in the irresistible power of collective effort, they do not, generally share the doctrinary optimism of socialist realism and its faith in the consequent inescapable solution. At the same time, neorealism reflected the Italian fascination with the American dream and its glorification of the limitless potential of the individual.

Over the years, many, if not most, critics have conceived of neorealism as a primarily ideological, leftist movement, ignoring all too willingly all contradictory data. Italo Calvino, among the neorealist writers, presents the most explicit rejection of the conventional definitions of neorealism in his 1967 preface to *I sentieri dei nidi di ragno (The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* 1947).[10] Even though Calvino states repeatedly that neorealism was not a "school," (Scuola), and that he speaks only for himself, his comments do shed light on much of neorealist literature. Calvino acknowledges the importance of the "extraliterary" elements in neorealism—the war, the Italian political situation under Mussolini, the partisan experience—but he reiterates on several occasions that the neorealists were concerned more with expression, the form of the stories to be told, than with the stories themselves; that, although concerned with content, they were compulsive formalists; that they were fully aware that the "musical score is more important than the libretto".[11] Time and again he alludes to the importance of the literary sources of neorealism, which include not only Verga, but also Ippolito Nievo, Ernest Hemingway, Isaac Babel, and Alexander Fadeev, and then he returns to the cornerstone of his reflections: the literariness of neorealism. The importance of neorealism, he suggests, is not to be found in its subject matter, which changes constantly from writer to writer, nor in the idealogy which also changes, but in the revolutionary rejection of the major trend in the history of Italian literature, the urge to write elegantly, according to the somewhat artificial canons of the official Italian grammars. Neorealism represents the single major effort since Dante to give the Italian spoken language a written form, a process intended both as a legitimization of new forms. Given the nature of this linguistic experiment, which in many ways emulated the experiments of the American writers of the Thirties, the subject matter treated and the ideology presented had to reflect a popular, if not proletarian, point of view, and in any case had to come into conflict with the more traditional class structure. According to Calvino, the writers who best exemplify the literary range of neorealism are Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and Beppe Fenoglio.

Regardless of the importance and merits of neorealism in literature, when one hears the expression, Italian neorealism, one cannot help but think of the films produced in Italy between 1945 and 1951 by directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti. And yet, the attempts to define neorealism in cinema, to establish its chronological, ideological, aesthetic, and human parameters, have only recently met with any degree of success. Lino Micciché, in "Per una verifica del neorealismo," establishes a point of departure for all future work.[12] Neorealism did not suddenly materialize in the years immediately following the second World War, nor was it the major trend in the Italian cinema of the period. Its roots may be found in Nino Martoglio's *Sperduti nel buio (Lost in the Dark,* 1913-14), and in Gustavo Serena's *Assunta Spina* (1915). Since that time, parallel with the spectaculars and the frivolous comedies—and often incorporated in them— one find works containing elements which will later be considered intrinsically neorealistic. Among the forebearers of neorealism are Alessandro Blasetti's *Sole (Sun,* 1929) and *1860* (1932), the documentaries

of Francesco De Robertis (*Uomini sul fondo/S.O.S. Submarine,* 1941), and of Rossellini (*La nave bianca/The White Ship,* 1941), and the sentimental comedies starring Vittorio De Sica (*Gli uomini che mascalzoni; Teresa Venerdi,* 1942). And while some critics feel that the 1942/43 season, with Visconti's *Ossessione (Obsession),* Blasetti's *Quattro passi fra le nuvole (Four Steps in the Clouds),* De Sica and Cesare Zavanttini's *I bambini ci guardano (The Children Are Watching Us),* and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Gente del Po (People of the Po),* marks the beginning of neorealism, Micciché disagrees, pointing out that the films cited above represent at best a rejection of the past, of Italian cinema's glorification of imperialistic adventures and of upper class protagonists.

It is with Rossellini's *Roma, città apera (Rome, Open City,* 1945) that we find the first and only critically and financially successful neorealist film. Based loosely on the clash between partisans, fascists, and nazis, the film's realism was largely the accidental result of a limited budget, poor film stock, erratic sources of electricity, and the very physical appearance of the city and its inhabitants. Still, it is *Rome, Open City* which establishes the ideological and aesthetic point of departure of filmic neorealism, and which is the model against which all subsequent neorealist films are judged. Neorealist films, thus, will tend vaguely towards a populist left, while also incorporating somewhat mystical notions of Christian brotherhood. They will focus on the lower classes as protagonists, but they will by no means limit themselves to the proletariat. On the contrary they will include, among others, landowning farmers, technicians, small businessmen, students, priest, policemen, soldiers, and government emplyees. They will have a documentary-like appearance, even though it be achieved through totally contrived means. They will usually be based on purportedly real events which they portray in a romanticized manner, when they are not based on literary sources which they distort at will. Finally, they will use non-professional actors, to some extent, to help reinforce the aura of realism. But, while these are the salient characteristics of filmic neorealism, they were not adopted programmatically by the various filmmakers, nor were they equally stressed in the different films. Rather, the filmmakers, like the writers, seem to have found in the reality around them matter which each, according to his personal vision, attempted to transform into what De Sica has called the "poetry of real life."

In the years that followed, only Rossellini's *Paisà (Paisan,* 1946), Pietro Germi's *In nome della legge (In the Name of the Law,* 1948), De Sica and Zavattini's *Ladri di biciclette (Bicycle Thieves,* 1948 and, Giuseppe De Santis's *Riso amaro (Bitter Rice,* 1949) were relatively successful at the box office. Films such as Visconti's *La terra trema (The Earth Will Shake,* 1947), De Sica and Zavanttini's *Sciuscià (Shoeshine,* 1946), Rossellini's *Germania anno zero (Germany Year Zero,* 1947), De Sica and Zavanttini's *Miracolo a Milano (Miracle in Milan,* 1950), and *Umberto D.* (1951), which today are considered classics, flopped miserably. In fact, of the 822 feature films produced in Italy between 1945 and 1953, only 90 can de described as neorealist in the broadest of terms. Still, even if neorealist films were relatively few in number and not always well received, their importance in the history of the cinema is unquestion-

able. In their concern for and study of the everyday world they expanded the narrative and aesthetic potential of the cinema and were, thus, the inspiration for much of the debate over the function and nature of the cinema which has continued for the last thirty years.

The debate still persists. By and large viewers tend to view neorealist films through the darkly tinted lenses of their prejudices. Thus one finds acolytes worshiping at the temple of realism, or avenging harpies defecating on its altar. What is needed is a theory capable of containing the apparently contradictory poles of neorealism.

Rome, Open City

More than any other film, *Rome Open City* supposedly adheres to the non-cinematic codes which are considered real locations. It is, however, immediately obvious, even to the casual viewer, that these devices are employed in a totally subjective manner. The film is patently propagandistic: its glorification of the unity and heroism of the antifascist forces conveys a number of impressions which, even though qualified, are historically questionable. The implied suggestion that, with the defeat and expulsion of the Nazi-fascists, the problems of Italy would be wolved is obviously simplistic and, as current events reiterate daily, rather inaccurate, Criticisms directed at the film in this sense, however, fail to perceive that the socio-political considerations merely constitute the metaphor for the inventive nucleus of the film.

In *Rome, Open City* we find two sharply contrasting categories of profilmic qualifiers. On the one hand we have the wealth of casual details revealing the material misery of the people of Rome: the crowded apartments, the family squabbles, the scarcity of bread and water, the overflowing trolley cars, and the physical destruction of much of the city. On the other, we have the homosexual or asexual depiction of the Germans, the contrasting fertility of the Italians, the heroics of the children, and the various speeches of both Germans and Italians. The first series of qualifiers is descriptive, since the identity of denotation and connotation is virtually absolute and instantaneously conveyed. Conversely, the second series is narrative, since the full connotative impact, resulting from a temporal progression, is vastly different from the denotation. Thus it might be argued that the realism of *Rome, Open City* depends on the descriptive elements, while the narrative ones continuously contradict it. The asexual or homosexual depiction of the German, for example, has often been identified as a moment of excessive symbolism, and thus is considered a flaw in terms of the film's realism.[13] Metz, however, argues that the "perception of the narrative as real, that is as being really a narrative, must result in rendering the recited object unreal."[14] If this awareness can be demonstrated in the film, then those elements which are traditionally considered to be its flaws will require a drastic reinterpretation.

Rome, Open City frequently employs dialectical structures in a manner reminiscent of socialist realism. As the film opens we are shown the German raid on Manfredi's apartment and, soon thereafter,

the women's raid on the bakery. Later, the Germans' raid on Pina and Francesco's tenement is followed by the partisan raid on the truck convoy. Between these two sets of raids, we find the children's destruction of the German gasoline truck which, presumably, suggests that while the German repression is ultimately futile, and while the partisans and the women at best carry out a break-even struggle, it is the younger generation which in engaged in positive action against the common enemy. This dialectical structure is reiterated in the physical arrangement of Bergmann's SS headquarters. Bergmann's office, in fact, is flanked by a lounge and a torture chamber. The results of the apparently antithetical *loci* of pleasure/corruption and pain/oppression find their synthesis in his office. In much broader terms, throughout the film we observe the dialectical conflict between the partisans (both Catholic and Communist) and the nazi-fascists. In the final shot of the film, in which for the first time we see the skyline of Rome, we see the children in the foreground with St. Peter's in the background. This final shot would seem to suggest a perfect new synthesis of Catholicism and Communism, of past and future, and it is in this manner that, unconsciously, several critics have interpreted it. Armes writes that "when they go back down into the city after witnessing the execution of Don Pietro, one can assume their political education incomplete."[15] This interpretation is expressed even more forcefully when he writes: "with its possibly idealized picture of Communist and Catholic working in total unison (visually the tortured Manfredi has distinct similarities with the crucified Christ), it stands witness to the beliefs of the months immediately following the Liberation when all men of good conscience felt unified in one cause."[16] More bluntly, Agee states that the film was selling the Italians a "bill of goods."[17]

These interpretations of the final shot of the film are acceptable only at a very superficial level. A closer reading suggests that nothing is what it seems to be, or that at a minimum each event conceals something which might seem totally unrelated. The raid on the bakery is not merely a manifestation of hunger, it is politically motivated. (Pina and Manfredi discuss this fact explicitly in Italian. Unfortunately these lines are not translated into English in the subtitles.) The children are not really heroes; ultimately, they are only children, terrified of parental punishment. The "good" German who condemns German racism in a drunken stupor, reveals himself to be no different from the butchers of the sheep when he executes Don Pietro. The Austrian deserter who terrifies Don Pietro is not an enemy. The raid on the German convoy is not a result of Pina's death, dissolve notwithstanding. Manfredi may be Ferraris, but he is certainly neither Manfredi nor Episcopo.

The challenge directed at an apparently objective reality may also be seen in the failure and virtual absurdity of all speeches. Francesco's "spring to come" will never be seen by Pina. Bergmann's racist justification for the war is contradicted by Manfredi's silence. Manfredi's moralistic and hypocritical condemnation of Marina results directly in his own death. And if words can be misleading, so can images. It might be argued that when Don Pietro turns the statue of San Rocco from that of the naked woman, he is being led astray by the iconic relationship between the statues—a reproduced reality— and

real people, much in the same way in which we, if we see film as reality, are being led astray. The awareness of the medium implicit in the preceding example is reitereated with considerable subtlety, and yet in a totally explicit manner, by Bergmann's photographic excursions through Rome. Not only does Bergmann link the photgraph of Manfredi to another of Ferrari, but the last name ascribed to Manfredi is Giovanni Episcopo, a name whose only connection with reality is a photograph. And that is not all. The name Giovanni Episcopo is taken from a literary source, in this instance the title of one of D'Annunzio's lesser-known short stories, a Russian-style confession of a crime. The irony, obviously, is that not only has Manfredi committed no crime, excepting the highly questionable Nazi point of view, but also that he is praised by Don Pietro, a priest, for not having confessed on his death bed.

Finally, in total contradiction with the conventional interpretations of the film, it might be argued that the last shot further reveals the filmmakers' awareness of the medium and, by extension, the consciousness of the unreality of the recited object. The leader of the children is, in fact, Romoletto. This new "little Romulus" may be seen as one of the founders of the new, open Rome. But, is this an "idealized picture of Communist and Catholic working in total unison"?[18] This Romulus is both a physical and emotional cripple, and even though he may cry at Don Pietro's death, it is clear that the future is not seen by Rossellini as simplistically as has been suggested elsewhere, since the synthesis presented by this shot may well be said to contain within it the terms of the new dalectectical oppostition which even today remains unresolved in Italy.

Mirror Construction of Reality

Rome, Open City has little basis in reality. It is a synthesis of memories and fantasies filtered through highly creative minds, and it is bracketed by economic, technical, and physical limitations. And yet its realism, which an analysis shows to be highly subjective, continues to obsess us. This elusive, evocative power derives from the fact that *Rome, Open City* is a game played by the filmmakers and witnessed by the viewers, and as such it is a *construction en abyme* of reality. Each time one has identified and analyzed one layer of the film's apparently two-dimensional surface, one discovers yet another deeper and often contradictory layer. *Rome, Open City* rejects the dualistic world vision articulated more recently by the game theories of Huizinga, Callois, and Benveniste, which put in opposition reality and unreality, seriousness and play, usefulness and gratuitousness, work and leisure, and science and literature.[19] As a matter of fact, it is virtually impossible to find one scene or even one single frame which can be contained entirely by the qualifiers in either category.

Eugene Fink writes that play "is an essential element in man's ontological make up, a basic existential phenomenon."[20] In *Rome, Open City* games are played on two levels: 1) games which occur in the diegesis; 2) games which the director plays with the very substance of film. In the first instance the director films a game (e.g., Don Pietro's soccer game). In the second we find unconventioanl juxtapositions of words, images, and sounds, and intertextural and intratextual references which reveal the filmmaker's awareness of the

medium, (e.g., Don Pietro and the statues; the policeman who, when asked why he does not do anything during the bread riot, says, "I can't , I'm in uniform; the shot of the bombed building which follows immediately the question, "Do you think the Americans really exist?"; Bergmann's photographic excursions through Rome; names such as Romoletto and Giovanni Episcopo). This playfulness increases in quantity and sophistication with each successive neo-realist film, and leads inevitably to such completely self-referential works as Fellini's *8½* .

Paisà

Given what has been suggested concerning *Rome, Open City,* it is not surprising that the awareness of film as "unrealization of the recited objects" is further reiterated and more forcefull expressed in *Paisà.* While both *Rome, Open City* and *Paisà* are considered neo-realist films, there is considerable difference in the way the director attempts to convey the illusion of reality. The realism of *Rome, Open City* derives primarily from the supposed reality of events, personages, locations, from the democratic camera work, and from the wealth of apparently insignificant details. The film's flaws, in realistic terms, are a result of compromises with the "great combat with truth": the implied unity between the Church, the badogliani, and the Communists; the stringent causal justificaiton for all events; and the romantic depiction of the children. The film's realism is also undermined by the conventional use of humor, the various rhetorical speeches, and by a number of melodramatic close-ups. In *Paisà* the approach is entirely different. It does not rely on the reality of events, location, and characters for its realism, even though it does contain newsreel footage, and even though a number of the actors were non-professionals. The realism of *Paisà,* in fact, is openly and avowedly subjective.

The major structural difference between *Paisà* and *Rome, Open City* is that the former, as opposed to the more conventional stucture of the latter, is composed of six episodes held together by a frame. Roy Armes, in *Patterns of Realism,* suggest incorrectly that "there is little attempt in *Paisà* to link the six episodes."[21] While each episode is sufficient unto itself, the film is cohesive and internally coherent, and the various episodes are connected by intricate structural interrelationships. It should suffice to mention the most obvious example: in the first episode, Carmela, the Italian, sacrifices herself uselessly for Joe, the American; in the last episode, Dale, the American, sacrifices himself uselessly for the Italian partisans, and in both cases the tragedy is the resulty of the lighting of a flame. In more general terms, it is possible to note that episodes one, three, four, and six, to a greater or lesser degree end tragically, while two and five have somewhat happier endings since, in the latter, the effects of the war are less apparent.

The film, however, is not concerned with the great and glorious allied victory, nor is it a manifestation of socialist realism in which the lower classes rise and break the chains of bondage. Finally, the film does not represent, as Armes suggests, the impossibility of communication because of language barriers. *Paisà* focuses, instead,

on the problems of alientation of the film appear to be actively, and often desperately, pursuing their personal concerns, as opposed to the positve characters in *Rome, Open City,* who all appear to have a common ideal. The focus on alienation is reinforced structurally by the film's episodic, fragmented organization. There would also appear to be a parallel between the non-conventional structure of the film and the non-conventional, non-verbal, pre-rational devices through which the alienation is bridged. The challenge directed at the assumption that communication is a logical, two-way process is further reinforced by the fact that, even in the episodes in which communication seems to occur most successfully and is not truncated tragically (the second and the fifth), this success depends on the perceiver rather than the transmitter. It is, in other words, the Black G.I. who understands the *scugnizzo,* and not vice-versa; it is the American Army chaplain who understands the monks, and not vice-versa.

Paisà belongs in that broad category known as "modern" art. As such, by definition, it requires the participation of the spectator. The errors which occur when one accepts appearances at face value are clearly identified throughout the film, and in particular in the puppet show in the second episode. The choice of a puppet show is, per se., appropriate since the manipulation is so clearly and literally visible. Our attention is drawn to the medium by shots which show us not only the puppeteers quite literally pulling the strings, but also the orchestra which underlines the emotional impact of given scenes through its musical commentary. This exposure notwithstanding, Joe the Black G.I., leaps on the stage to defend the Black Knight. But he, at least, has an excuse: he is drunk. What is ours, the film asks, when we fail to perceive this film as film? The puppet show, by revealing the mechanisms through which the "illusion of reality" is created, and by showing one man's reaction to this illusion, should lead us to view the film critically. Finally, the puppet show is important because it offers us a key to understanding all the episodes, and it focuses on a unifying theme which runs throughout the movie: the distinction between oppressor and oppressed is tenuous at best. Although present throughout the film, this concept is perhaps most perfectly synthesized in the G.I. in the second episode: Joe is Black (and as such oppressed), a member of the American occupation forces (and, as such, an oppressor), drunk (and, as such, oppressed), and an M.P. (and, as such, an opressor). Which is he ultimately? The alternation of roles is interrupted, briefly, by an instant of communication, dependent on his perception that the *scugnizzo* "knows the troubles (he has) seen."

Bicycle Thieves

Bicycle Thieves is unquestionably the most sophisticated neorealist film, and quite probably the one in which the illusion of reality is best handled. Of it Bazin wrote: *"Bicycle Thieves* is one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more plot, no more mise-en-scene. It is in the end the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality: no more cinema."[22] Bazin however, would never have accused it of being an "artifact which pretends not ot be one." He not only postulated that "realism in art can only be achieved in one

way—through artifice,"[23] but he clearly outlined many of the artifices employed in this film. Unfortuantely, however, he felt compelled to call this "the only valid communist film of the whole last decade,"[24] unfortunately, not so much in terms of his premises, no matter how intellectually questionable, but because this statement has been prostituted all too often to serve the ends of tendentious critics.

De Sica himself, on several occasions, stressed the non-political nature of his films: "If with the excuse of neorealism one wanted to make political propaganda, these would be the first films I personally would refuse to have anything to do with. Propaganda should be left to the newspapers, posters, and election speakers."[25] Nor is he interested in a "banal documentary"; rather, as Armes observes, he explicitly states that it is a "poetic transposition of reality" which is the point of departure of his work.[26]

There was nothing casual about the preparation of this film. Six months were spent elaborating the script; every scene and every visual image was discussed by De Sica and Zavattini. Given these premises, it would seem strange if the film were to fail to manifest an awareness of itself as film. The difficulty here, however, lies precisely in what Bazin calls the transparency of the film.[27] The choice of the protagonists, the settings, the narrative, are deliberately such that they appear totally natural; descriptive and narrative elements, in other words, seem to overlap to the extent that they appear undistinguishable and perhaps even interchageable. Through a close analysis of the film, however, it is possible to penetrate its surface patina and identify many of the statements of unrealization. Within any given shot we discover that the choice and arrangement of the expressive devices is highly deliberate. Consider the physical relationship between Ricci and Bruno, for example. Not only can we observe the counterpoint effect already described by Bazin,[28] we can also observe a process of distantiation operated either diagonally across the screen or through the intromissionof other objects, and shifting of the relationship in terms of their reciporcal placement on a vertical plane.

The exclusion of the poor from the simplest pleasures of life is expressed through the closing of doors and shutters, and almost inevitably prefigures further troubles. This process is expressed in a particularly powerful manner in a series of shots in the thief's house. The policman and Ricci frame the window. The policeman asks Ricci: "Are you sure you recognized him?" Ricci: "Yes . . . of course I did." Through the window, on the opposite wall we see a statue of a Madonna and Child. After some discussion, the policeman and Ricci move to stand in the same position bedside another window. Across the street, a woman stands in front of a window holding a child in the same exact position as the Madonna and Child. The policman asks Ricci: "And you couldn't find anyone to be a witness?" Ricci: "I had other things to do besides taking names." As Ricci replies, the woman closes the shutters, connoting rather strongly that, contrary to what is suggested at the end of the film, Ricci has little for which to thank a Lord who seems to help only those who are most proficient at helping themselves.

There are numerous other instances in which elements, which at first sight might seem to be merely descriptive, as objective cor-

relatives become indistinguishable from the narrative elements, and thus would seem to reveal the filmmakers' awareness of this film as unrealization. Antonio's moral struggle (to steal or not to steal the bicycle) is placed against the background of the wrestling statues above the stadium entrance. And certainly the juxtaposition of the grandiose Roman bridges and of Ricci, at precisely the moment in which Antonio fears that he has also lost his son, is not merely denotative. As for the film's editing, it is sufficient to mention Ricci's desperate search for the old man through the city. Their total confusion is revealed through a series of pans, cuts, and dissolves which leaves the viewer equally disoriented. This sequence, as well as any other, serves to exemplify the manner in which the filmmakers transform what might have been merely a series of descriptive shots into an integral part of the narrative.

As if to acknowledge that the filmmakers are aware of this film as film, and therefore as unrealization of the objects recited, we find two complementary references to the medium in the film. The first and most blatant consists of the Rita Hayworth poster; the second, of the sanitation worker's statement that movies bore him. Although several interpretations are possible, at the simplest level, these references would seem to indicate that De Sica was not only aware of the kind of escapist film fare his compatriots desired but also of the probable response of the same public to his film. The most complete statement of awareness of artistic intent and of the concomitant unrealization of the recited object is expressed through the juxtaposition of the variety show and the party meeting. De Sica's refusal even to attempt to fuse politics and art is clearly revealed when some of the participants in the political discussion drift loudly into the rehearsal area. The are immediately expelled by one of the actors who says: "Either we talk or we rehearse. Get out!" While both the political speech and the song are to some extent similar (both deal with oppression), their expressive devices and functions are not. The song, and by extension the film, are primarily concerned with problems of the individual on a level which not only is non-political, but which, as is revealed through the extended argumentation of the pitch of *gente* (people), focuses on its affective /aesthetic qualities to the virtual exclusion of all else.

Other Neorealist Films

The awareness of the medium, revealed by different devices which draw attention to the film as unrealization of a temporal sequence of events, may be found in numerous other films made between 1945 and 1951. In Luigi Zampa's *Vivere in pace (To Live in Peace,* 1946), the protagonist, a journalist, expresses his desire to wrtie a story similar to that which will unfold on the screen. As the film closes, however, he states that, as reporter, he is only capable of writing articles, not stories, thus justifying the fable-like quality of this film, and, at the same time, programmatically rejecting the supposedly objective, newreel-like code of neorealism. With De Santis' *Riso Amaro (Bitter Rice,* 1948), the awareness of the film as unrealization will be manifested on several levels: profilmically, by the choice of Silvana Mangano and by the arrangement—or perhaps more

accurately, by the disarray—of her clothing; filmically, by the numerous subjective shots. We also find an example of the mask of darkness (or light) as objective correlative, a device which Fellini will use in his films. Finally, not only can we observe that the news reported by the radio and the newspapers is invariably false, thus implying a considerable lack of faith in the possibility of an objective rendering of reality, we also find the protagonist (Silvana Mangano) expressing explicitly her faith in the veracity of that printed medium which is both most mendacious and yet most closely resembles film: the *fumetto.* While the commercial success of the film was assured by the faithful adherence to the code of *Grand Hotel,* the film challenges its own reality through its explicit attack on its primary source.

Given the evolution of the awareness of film as the unrealization of the recited objects, films such as *8½* would seem to have been inevitable. Certainly, from this perspective, the transition from neorealism to metacinema, particularly as represented by Fellini's earliest films, *Luci del varietà (Variety Lights,* 1950) and *Lo Sceicco bianco (The White Sheik,* 1952), would seem to be the result of an inescapable evolution. In *The White Sheik,* in particular, we can already perceive a programmatic discussion of all those elements which we have come to identify as manifestations of the destruction of the illusion of reality and which, by extension, are intended by the filmmakers to cause us to reflect upon the film as film. The awareness of the medium, however, as has been shown, did not spring full-blown from the films of the fifties and the sixties; rather its evolution may be observed from the earliest post-war films. Over thirty years have passed since those films were made, and yet their power is such that the most interesting films of recent years deal explicitly with the impact of neorealism on Italian life and cinema.

Neorealism Re-viewed

Padre Padrone (1977) is considered by some to be the finest Italian film in years. It is a free adaptation of the autobiography of Gavino Ledda, a Sardinian who lived as a shepherd in virtually complete solitude and illiteracy from the age of six until he joined the Italian army at the age of twenty. Sardinia is a beautiful, harsh country, whose people, and particularly its farmers and shepherds, often live as their forefathers did, in a primordial, mythical past. It is one of the last bastions of unbridled patriarchal power. Gavino lives in this world for fourteen years. His upbringing is brutal. For the least infraction of his rules, Efisio, his father, and master (in Italian: "*padre, padrone*") beats him mercilessly, and gradually Gavino is exposed to society, technology, and the Italian language. He becomes a radio technician, he learns Italian, then Latin and Greek, he finishes the classical lyceum, and then goes on to get a university degree in comparative philology and to write his best-selling autobiography.

Given the intrinsic power of this real story, we expect that it be told in a straightforward (neo)realistic terms. In our minds we are prepared for something like De Seta's *Banditi a Orgosolo* (1961), or a more contemporary version of Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage.* What we

have, instead, is a melange of traditional and contemporary techniques and styles which interferes constantly with our suspension of disbelief. And while *Padre Padrone* can be understood easily by virtually all viewers, the use of pans to indicate shifts of time rather than space, the overlapping of different narrative levels, the internally unexplainable presence and absence of sound, the casting of the protagonists, and the narrative non sequiturs are puzzling and disturbing. This film, like all the Taviani films, is intended to confront viewers with their lack of cultural preparation. The class system, they argue, does not want viewers to think, and thus, through the mechanics of the marketplace, it imposes completely standardized material where form is concerned. At the same time, however, Taviani's films reject the solipsistic avant-garde cinema. For them cinema is inevitably metaphorical and it must have a "meaning" (senso). Thus, while they are committed to stylistic experimentation, it may not be an end in itself. The film, the actual physical experimentation, must make a statement.[29]

If at the simplest of levels *Padre Padrone* concerns the love/hate relationship between fathers and sons, ultimately the film focuses on the relationship between contemporary Italian cinema with its genitor: neorealism. Taviani seems to feel that while other countries have been experimenting with new forms, Italian filmmakers have been resting on their laurels. While neorealism taught Italian filmmakers much, it has now become an oppressive, restrictive force which must be thrown over. Contemporary Italian filmmakers must stand on the shoulders of neorealism to see further, to move ahead. Thus *Padre Padrone* becomes a programmatic exploration and rejection of neorealism, and a search for new expressive devices. Those which the critics defined as the canons of neorealism are all programmatically undermined. While we are told that the film is based on real events, we are also told that it is a free adaptation, modified according to the needs of the filmmakers. While the real protagonist, Gavino Ledda, appears in the film as narrator, he does not resemble Saverio Marconi, the actor who portrays him on the screen. While the film is shot on location, the real places are so completely mythicized by the lyrical camera work as to lose all naturalistic impact. The sounds we hear are not necessarily realistic (in this connection it should suffice to think of the music which surges forth at the most improbable times and places). Finally, the film is completely devoid of the typical neorealistic sentimentalism.

Neorealism, like Efisio in the film, is a middle class Italian pretending to be a peasant. And while it has taught Italian filmmakers much, it is also fiercely repressive. For Italian cinema to grow, the film argues, it must not forget the lessons of neorealism, nor can it overlook the cultural tradition of the western world, but it must go beyond all this. Having learned the language of nature, of technology, Italian, Latin, Greek, and music, somehow the film must find its own voice. Like Gavino, whose specialization is comparative Sardinian dialects, the film goes back to its roots, but it no longer simply uses them (as Visconti did in *La Terra Trema*), it must now study them dispassionately. The film suggests that the acquisition of knowledge occurs through the acquisition of language. Gavino evolves from a primitive, physical, sensorial condition, to a less primitive, more

emotional stage, characterized by the acquisition of music, to a more advanced, more intellectual, linguistic level. It is only with the last stage, with the acquisition of language, that one can perceive the universe, and finally get to know oneself. As the film ends, Gavino is alone once again in his mountain, but he has found his voice, and thus has stilled the atavistic fear of the booming death knell of the sound of silence.

Ettore Scola's film, *C'eravamo tanto amati* (*We All Loved Each Other So Much,* 1977), which is as entertaining as *Annie Hall,* as intellectual as *Last Year at Marienbad,* and as political as *Memories of Underdevelopment,* must be read on several different levels. The film tells the story of three men, Gianni (Vittorio Gassman), Nicola (Stefano Satta Flores), and Antonio (Nino Manfredi), who fought together as partisans during World War II. After the liberation they go their separate ways, and then all eventually end up in Rome. Presumably, the three idealists, who had fought together, will now work together to create a better world. This, however, is not to be. All three fall in love (although in a couple of cases lust may be the more accurate term) with the same woman, Luciana (Stefania Sandrelli). The class antagonism which had been suppressed during the war begins to crop up once again. Gianni, who has become a lawyer and a millionaire, would prefer to forget his erstwhile friends. Nicola, a professor and film critic, seems to believe that as an intellectual he is above Antonio, whom he calls a "bourgeois proletarian." Only the latter, an orderly in a hospital, seems to care for his former companions, and even he begins to have second thoughts as time passes.

The film, however, is more than the simple story of the passing of time and friendship. It is also a history of Italian cinema after World War II. Soon after the film opens, in color, we have a flashback to the adventures of the three men, shot in black and white, in a style reminiscent of neorealist films. Throughout the film this process continues: the scenes of a given historical period are shot in the style of that period. These reflexive devices are underlined by the repeated screenings of scenes taken from several Italian and foreign classics (*Bicycle Theives, L'eclisse, Of Human Bondage*) by references to several filmmakers (and among them Rossellini, Antonioni, De Sica, Zampa, Amedei, Welles, Resnais, Germi, and Fellini), by the reenactment of Eisenstein's Odessa steps sequence, by discussions of technical devices and theoretical and critical issues, by the recreation of the famous Trevi Fountain sequence from *La Dolce Vita* (directed by Fellini as Fellini, and mistaken for both De Sica and Rossellini), by freeze frames and film loops.

These devices add to the entertainment inherent in the basic narrative structure of the film. Beyond this, they serve as a constant reminder that we must be careful not to confuse facts, fantasy, and film. Film scholars can spend the next twenty years compiling concordances for all the references to other films found in *We All Loved Each Other So Much.* At the same time, however, the average Italian blue-collar worker should be able to see the film and immediately perceive its political message. It is rather clear, in fact, that Luciana represents Italy, Gianni the bourgeoisie, Nicola the intelligentsia, and Antonio the proletariat. The relationships between the three men and, to an even greater degree, between the men and Luciana, present in

crystal clear terms Scola's perception of the role the different classes have played in the history of Italy over the last thirty years. The ongoing terrorism in Italy, culminating in the assassination of Aldo Moro, strongly suggests that the powers-that-be have not perceived that, if the aspirations of Italians continue to be thwarted, as they are shown to be in the film, there will be a revolution.

The film is dedicated to Vittorio De Sica. It is clear, however, that De Sica and his films belong to the beloved past, much as do the memories of partisan activities. In the present of the film De Sica reveals himself to be no better than Gianni, an exploiter who has finally succeeded in desensitizing himself completely. In an interview within the film, De Sica discusses the device he used to make Enzo Staiola (Bruno in *Bicycle Thieves*) cry at the end of the movie. With an enormous smile on his handsome, pampered face, the director says that he hid cigarettes in Enzo's pockets, and then accused him of stealing them. As the audience applauds his ingenuity, his fatuous smile becomes even broader; his lack of concern for Enzo is clear for all to see. The future of Italian cinema requires that the submissiveness taught by such films as *Bicycle Thieves* be forgotten as definitively as Antonio, Nicola, and Luciana forget Gianni. The future, the film tells us and shows us, is ambiguous, open-ended, and perhaps vaguely threatening, but, without a doubt, interesting. Certainly this will be the case so long as Italian cinema continues to be a mirror construction of reality, so long as it remains true to the organizing principle underlying neorealism.

NOTES

[1]Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas in Cinema," *Sight and Sound* (Oct. 1953), pp. 64-69.

[2]Alberto Lattuada, trans., Pierre Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 98.

[3]Mario Verdone, *Il cinema neorealista da Rossellini a Pasolini* (Palermo: Celebes, 1977), p. 143.

[4]*The Bicycle Thief: A Film by Vittorio De Sica,* trans. and intro. by Simon Hartag (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 10.

[5]Roy Armes, *Patterns of Realism: A Study of Italian Neo-Realist Cinema* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1971), p. 81.

[6]James Agee, rev. of "Open City," *Nation,* CLXII (13 April 1946), pp. 443-444.

[7]Verdone, p. 34.

[8]Verdone, p. 35 (trans. mine).

[9]Verdone, p. 19.

[10]Italo Calvino, *I sentieri dei nidi di ragno* (Torino: Einaudi, 1947).

[11]Calvino, p. 8.

[12]Lino Micciché, "Per una verifica del neorealismo," *Il neorealismo italiano: Atti del convegno della X mostra internazionale del nuovo cinema* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1975), pp. 7-28.

[13]Armes, p. 73.

[14]Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 21. See also *L'analisi del racconto: la grande sintagmatica del film narrativo* (Milano: Bompiani, 1969), pp. 205-25.

[15]Armes, p. 73.

[16]Armes, p. 75.

[17]Agee, p. 443.

[18]Armes, p. 75.

[19]Jacques Ehrmann, "Homo Ludens Revisited," *Game, Play, Literature,* ed. Jacques Ehrmann (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 41.

[20]Eugen Fink, "The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play," *Game, Play, Literature,* ed. Jacques Ehrmann, p. 19.

[21]Armes, p. 81.

[22]André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce-que le cinema?* IV (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1962), p. 56, trans. Simon Hartog, *The Bicycle Thief, p. 7.*

[23]André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* II, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 26.

[24]Bazin, *What is Cinema?* p. 51.

[25]Armes, p. 145.

[26]Armes, p. 145.

[27]Bazin, *What is Cinema?* p. 57.

[28]Bazin, *What is Cinema?* p. 54.

[29]Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, "Linguaggio e ideologia del cinema," in *Cinema e utopia: i fratelli Taviani, ovvero il significato dell 'esagerazione,* ed. Cooperative Nuivi Quaderni (Parma: Nuivi Quaderni, 1974), pp. c4-c7. See also "Critica e nuovo cinema," in *Cinema e utopia,* pp. c6-c15.