Roots of Neorealism

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In Southern Italy, before and during World War I, there was a lively school of film-making heavily influenced by the theories and literature of such people as Zola, Dumas *fils,* and others in France. Some of those who translated these works into Italian were also playwrights and novelists, and their work indicates how very much they were impressed by these Frenchmen. The film by Gustavo Serena, *Assunta Spina* (1915), has precisely this history, having first been a play written by one of the foremost Neapolitan translators, theorists, poets, and playwrights, Salvatore Di Giacomo.

Other films of great importance during this period, which also had similar roots, are *Cenere* (Febo Mari, 1916) and *Sperduti nel buio* (Nino Martoglio, 1914). All of these films take as their subject matter what the artists took to be the real lives of the working people. There is much attention to the environment as a causative factor in the emotions and actions of the people. In *Assunta Spina,* interior and exterior space are intermingled as a way of articulating the manner in which the environment intrudes upon the lives of the characters. The actions of the people are inflected by the world in which they live and the predilections with which they are born. The films are unique to their environment—Italian people in an Italian landscape embroiled in Italian themes which are told in an Italian style.

This brief flowering of naturalistic cinema was devastated by World War I, its economic and political aftermath. At a time when D'Annunzio and Italian comedians, such as Cretinetti, reigned supreme, it is surprising that this period existed at all. But it did and there were repercussions for years to come. The next real emergence of such naturalistic tendencies can be seen in Alessandro Blasetti's *Sole* (1929) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in Mario Camerini's *Rotaie* (1929).

Blasetti's *Sole* was, as he put it, "an act of faith." He felt very strongly that the way to revitalize the Italian industry was by using Italian themes and by treating them in ways that were Italian in spirit and style. *Sole* is such a film, as powerful as it is awkward and adolescent. For Blasetti it was the most personal film of all those that he directed. The honest depiction of the people, particularly the peasants, is not just a banal realism. It is a genuine interest. The subject of the film, the reclaiming of the Pontine marshes, is uniquely Italian. The use of non-professional actors, and the extensive shooting on location, are harbingers of things to come.

Rotaie, a film made by Camerini, is very different from Blasetti's *Sole* and yet it too indicated a new direction for the Italian cinema. In some ways *Rotaie* resembles the German *Kammerspiel* film. Rich in details and very analytical, there is little concern with rhetorical devices or effects. A very simple film, narrating a single state of mind and displaying a fascinating ingenuity, it is a work about the passage from obsession to self-knowledge, about the movement from compulsive behavior to the acceptance of responsibility. It has a simple moral view. Get a job and become respectable; be honest and you will be happy. This particular moral dimension dominates most of Camerini's films and most of the films made during the early 30s. Personal happiness is achieved through love and work.

But while *Rotaie* and *Sole* seemed to indicate a sudden flowering of Italian cinema, that promise was not so quickly fulfilled. While the Fascist government gave great attention and support to the newsreels and the documentaries produced by an organization established by the Mussolini government, Istituto Nazionale L.U.C.E. (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa), commercial filmmakers got almost no help from the government until the early 1930s. The assistance was too little, however, for foreign films were so dominant that in 1934 the Italian government had to impose certain limits on this importation. Additional incentives were given for the showing of Italian films, and a fund was established by the government to fund feature films. The government had already set up a state school of cinema, the Centro Sperimentale, and in 1937, it opened the Cinecitta studios, a mammoth complex of studio and sound facilities. The government came to support the Italian commercial film industry, primarily as an economic function and not as a propaganda one.

It was of course impossible to completely avoid propaganda. Before 1935 the film censorship office was mainly concerned that nothing anti-Fascist show up in any of the Italian films. After 1935, however, when the Ministry of Press and Propaganda took over the film censorship office, the efforts were much more aggressive. There were financial rewards for films which spread Fascist cultural ideals. As a result the film-goers were presented with a false sense of the world. They rarely if ever were confronted with any of the economic, social or political problems of the day. Their sense of security and national pride was a false one, at least as far as it was created by the cinema. The gains of *Sole* and *Rotaie* were quickly lost, at least for the time being.

The end result of the encouragement by the state was an abundance of production. The biggest financial rewards from the government went to the films with the largest box office receipts. It is

possible to assume then that the films most often made were those which were most likely to be popular with audiences. The largest percentage of films available to us today reflects not the worries and concerns of the Italian people, but their fantasies, their wish-fulfillments, their dreams.

Yet the naturalistic urge, begun before the first World War and nurtured by films such as *Sole* was not lost during the 30s. One can certainly sense this urge in a number of films, notably *1860* (Blasetti, 1934), *Acciaio* (Ruttmann, 1933) and, of course, in Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943). The same attention to detail and the feel of everyday experiences are also present in *La nave bianca* (Rossellini, 1942) and *Uomini sul fondo* (De Robertis, 1941). Numerous other films, particularly *Fari nella nebbia* (Franciolini, 1942), *La peccatrice* (Palermi, 1942), and *Il grande appello* (Camerini, 1936) also demonstrate this attempt, in varying degrees, to represent the appearance of things. Particular attention is given to the everyday life of the working class people—their jobs, their families, their responsibilities. And in a film such as Camerini's *Il grande appello,* the shooting on location in Africa, among the soldiers, results in footage which has a convincing appearance of documented reality.

But what is missing from most of these films, particularly those in the earlier part of the 1930s, is a true moral ambiguity. That quality begins to creep into the films during the latter half of the 1930s and early 1940s, and emerges more fully after the war.

It is extremely important to note that during this same period one of the films most frequently studied at the Centro Sperimentale was that earlier Neapolitan film, *Sperduti nel buio,* and that the reason for studying it was to hold up, as a model, a film which was uniquely Italian in subject matter and style and which dealt honestly with life.

A number of films in the late 1930s and early 1940s begin to confront the irony, contradicitons and disappointments of life. They explore ways in which life is not happy, that evil is not always punished and good rewarded, and that human relationships and life are immensely complex. In *Fari nella nebbia* (Franciolini, 1942), a truck driver separates from his wife and discovers that he is unhappy without her. He takes up with another woman and then finds that she was unfaithful with a friend, a fellow driver. The obligatory encounter approaches, and it seems that the driver will kill the other man. But at the last moment, he becomes calm, realizes his true feelings and plans to return to his wife. The usual obligations of the well-made plot are discarded, replaced by a moment of human insight and spontaneity.

In *Sissignora* (Poggioli, 1941) a young woman loses her aunt, is shunted around from terrible job to terrible job, has her one love affair ended by some resentful relatives, endangers herself by nursing a child who has scarlet fever, then catches the disease herself and dies. A minor tragedy or a melodrama, the film is animated by a delicate but real suffering. The film has not provided an easy solution, not tried to persuade the audience that all people who do good will be justly rewarded in this life. At the ending of *I bambini ci guardano* (De Sica, 1944), the little boy's father has killed himself. The mother, who was unfaithful to the father and deserted the son, returns to pick up the

child. He refuses to go with her, despite the love he has shown throughout the film. It is a harsh, austere work.

Some of the same moral ambiguity is present in *T'amerò sempre*, and some of the same irony is a part of *Addio giovinezza!* (Poggioli, 1940). There is much of the same complexity of feeling in the endings of *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* (Blasetti, 1942), *Sorelle Materassi* (Poggioli, 1943), *La tavola dei poveri* (Blasetti, 1932), in the slow disintegration of the family in *Come le foglie* (Camerini, 1934), and in the final moments of *La peccatrice* (Palermi, 1940). In the latter film, a young woman has suffered years of meaningless jobs and exploitation because she was abandoned by a former lover. Toward the end of the film, she returns to a cafe where they once met. He is sitting in a corner by himself. There is a long moment as she disdainfully watches him eat. He is preoccupied with the food, the wine, and his eating. As he gets up to leave, they speak briefly. He hardly remembers her, and he has no notion of the life she has had to lead as a result of his indifference. Words, images, and music create an intense mood.

What is implicit in these brief statements about certain films which began to explore a moral ambiguity is that one can see in the development of cinema during this period a decreasing reliance on rhetoric. Whereas the films in the early 30s seem to have an optimistic view of the world and want to impose that view upon the viewer, the films in the later 30s are less sure of themselves and the world. A pessimism has crept in, and with it there has disappeared much of the rhetoric. The later films are less strident, less opinionated, and less willing to impose anything upon their viewer. They are willing to confront and present the inconsistencies and contradictions of life.

One of the most interesting ways in which this naturalistic tendency moves slowly toward Neorealism is in the depiction of eroticism. In his early films, for instance, Blasetti represents an honest erotic attraction between men and women. It is quite powerful. After the early 1930s such strong eroticism is less apparent. Camerini prefers to have a compelling fondness between his men and women; the passion is more sweet than erotic. In some of the more literary films, the attraction is more psychological and rarely has any physical manifestation. That is certainly the case with *Un colpo di pistola* (Castellani, 1942) and *Gelosia* (Poggioli, 1943), for example. By the time of *Fari nella nebbia* (Franciolini, 1942) and *Ossessione* (Visconti, 1943), particularly the latter, the eroticism is very evident. The physical attraction between the man and the woman is obsessive. In the same Visconti film there is even some suggestion of an erotic attraction between two men, Gino and Lo Spagnolo, which is quite unusual since almost all of the images of masculine relationships in previous films were built around honor, sacrifice, bravery, duty, brotherhood, or friendship. With its erotic overtones, *Ossessione* is a development out of the films of the 1930s, but in its moral vision it belongs to the same period. Evil is after all punished. But the raw physical power of the film is a precursor of things to come, not only in the Neorealistic films which will immediately follow the war, but also in the erotic dimension of later Neorealistic films, such as *Bitter Rice*.

The history of Italian cinema during the 1930s is really many histories, and it is misleading to try to deal with the period as if the films did in fact belong to some heterogeneous body of work. One can, however, trace the development from naturalism to Neorealism in and through the changing relationships between men and women, and one can see in the increasing absence of rhetoric that a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, even pessimism, has begun to appear in the films. From 1929-44, at least as represented on film, the moral nature of the universe is changing. It is the story of Blasetti's *Vecchia Guardia* and the march on Rome, in reverse. In 1922, amidst a state of confusion and chaos, the Fascist state was born, promising to save the country from its problems. Overtly and covertly the films began to echo that promise and faith. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the films begin to go backwards, reflecting the same confusion, perplexity, and ambiguity from which the country was supposed to have been saved in 1922.

When Blasetti made *Sole* there was already a rich history of naturalism, developed around the beginning of World War I in the Neapolitan cinema which produced such films as *Sperduti nel buio, Cenere,* and *Assunta Spina. Sole* built upon this tradition and so did Neorealism. The intervening years kept this tendency alive and, moreover, there was developed during the 30s a large, productive, energetic film industry which was an important training ground for the likes of De Sica and Rossellini. Neorealism was born, then, not by some spontaneous generation as if by magic, but rather out of pessimism, the effects of the war, and also out of a rich cinematic tradition begun in Naples before World War I and advanced full speed during the 1930s.