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Peter Bondanella

Looking back at the Italian neorealist novel in 1964, Italo Calvino declared that neorealists "knew all too well that what counted was the music and not the libertto...there were never more dogged formalists than we; and never were lyric poets as effusive as those objective reporters we were supposed to be."[1] However, traditional approaches to Italian neorealist cinema (as opposed to fiction) have usually accepted the premise that these films constitute a cinema of "fact" or "reconstituted reportage." Neorealist aesthetics are, therefore, explained in terms of social themes, the use of nonprofessional actors, on-location shooting, documentary effects, the rejection of theatrical or cinematic conventions, and a respect for the ontological wholeness of time. This view ignores Calvino's warning and overlooks the fact that major works of Italian literary neorealism treat mythical or symbolic realities (not primarily social ones), employ unreliable or subjective narrators, and embrace a clearly anti-naturalistic narrative stance, breaking the rules of literary realism established by James, Zola, or Verga.[2] If the term "neorealism" is to retain any special significance, it should refer to the similarities between literary and cinematic works typical of a fixed historical moment and a specific artistic style. As I have argued elsewhere, a careful analysis of major neorealist films reveals their consistent focus not only upon social reality but also upon the dialectic of reality and appearance, usually the appearance or illusion of reality produced by artistic means.[3]

If we approach post-war Italian cinema from this perspective (one gained, in part, from an assessment of its literary counterpart), we derive certain critical advantages. A wider variety of works can be included within the rubric of neorealism (especially those which do not deal primarily with social problems or which are conceived in a comic vein). Furthermore, we need no longer feel compelled to discuss the so-called "crisis of neorealism" as if it were an intergral aspect of Italian cinematic history: the early works of Federico Fellini or those by Rossellini in the 1950's cannot be said to constitute a "betrayal" of realist principles, since such principles were never

accepted entirely by the directors in question. This "crisis" can now be more accurately considered as a crisis in the history of neorealist criticism which reflected the views of men such as Guido Aristarco, Andre Bazin, and Cesare Zavattini.[4] Nonetheless, expanding the meaning of the term neorealism leaves an important task unfinished. Works usually overlooked in discussions of neorealism because of their deviation from a purely realist aesthetic must now be reintegrated into a more comprehensive interpretation of this moment in film history. Both self-conscious treatments of the interplay between reality and appearance, Rossellini's *The Machine to Kill Bad People* (1948) and De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1950) illuminate issues crucial to any reconsideration of Italian neorealism.

According to many leftist Italian critics, these two works evince a generally conservative reaction and prove that a political and economic crisis in Italian society was systematically ignored in the cinema on account of political or financial pressure on directors and producers, who displayed a cowardly willingness to make films for escapist entertainment rather than for progressive social change.[5] However, this is an unfounded assessment of these two films, for both Rossellini and De Sica explicitly rejected a strictly realist aesthetic during this period. De Sica remarked that he made *Miracle in Milan* to resolve problems of "form and style."[6] In 1952, Rossellini defined realism as "simply the artistic form of truth,"[7] and stated that he had made *The Machine to Kill Bad People* in order to shift his work toward the traditional Italian *commedia dell'arte*. He declared that men possessed two opposed tendencies, each of which the cinema must respect: "quella della concretezza e quella della fantasia. Oggi si tende brutalmente a sopprimere la seconda...Dimenticando la seconda tendenza, dicevo, quella della fantasia, si tende a uccidere in noi ogni sentimento di umanita, a creare l'uomo robot: il quale deve pensare in un solo modo, e tendere al concreto."[8] ["that of concreteness and that of imagination. Today we tend to brutally suppress the second one...By forgetting the imaginative tendency, as I was saying, we tend to kill in ourselves every feeling of humanity and to create the robot-man who thinks in only one way and tends toward the concrete."]

Despite the marked differences between the earlier works of Rossellini and De Sica, *The Machine to Kill Bad People* and *Miracle in Milan* share a remarkable number of stylistic and thematic similarities. Both employ frequent comic gags that betray obvious debts to silent film comedy (Chaplin and Rene Clair) or to traditional Italian comic theatre (Rossellini's subject was suggested by Eduardo De Filippo); Rossellini's work even opens with a traditional prologue in verse and a stage full of characters set up by the hand of a puppeteer or *capocomico*, and it closes with a rhymed epilogue and a moral. Because of this link to similar dramatic and cinematographic conventions, both films reveal a similar approach to characterization. Neither director is principally preoccupied with the subtle psychological nuances he achieved in such works as *Germany Year Zero*, *Bicycle Thief*, or *Umberto D.* Instead, characters are almost without exception motivated by a single force—greed and self-interest on the one hand, or pure goodness on the other—and their actions identify them as traditional comic types. The storyline of each film is equally simple and represents what may best be described as an allegory or a fable

to the bedrock of reality and to fulfill a god-like role in his small village (not unlike that of a film director on the set). Interestingly enough, Celestino does not perform this miraculous photographic feat with a direct duplication on film of objects in the "real" world. Instead, he must first take a photograph of another photograph to accomplish this. As any good Platonist knows, he is two steps removed from the world of tangible objects or sensory reality by the time he takes the second picture and is engaged in the essentially self-reflexive act of producing a work of art from another work of art, not from reality itself. While creating an elaborate joke of Celestino's self-delusory activity, Rossellini emphasizes a fundamental characteristic of filmic art. In a comic manner, he tells us emphatically that photography (and by extension, the cinema as a branch of this art form) is incapable of separating good from evil or of readily distinguishing reality from appearance. Celestino takes the demon to be the patron saint of the town, and when he attacks the rich to help the poor, he learns that some of the wealthy are not entirely evil (Donna Amalia's will leaves her money to the three poorest people in the village), and that the poor share the selfish vices of the rich. Nowhere is there any clear distinction between diametrically opposed metaphysical or ethical positions. The camera, viewed as a means of acquiring knowledge of social reality by overly optimistic neorealist theorists, has been reduced to a fallible instrument which reflects not reality but human subjectivity and error.

The main character of De Sica's *Miracle in Milan,* Totò, is as concerned over good and evil as Celestino. Yet, he is infinitely more innocent and naive, without a malicious thought in his heart. A white dove given to him by his foster mother Lolotta enables him to fulfill the wishes of every poor person living in the shantytown outside Milan until it is taken away from him, and he and his friends are forced to escape their wicked oppressors by flying on broomsticks over the cathedral of Milan! Here, we are clearly in the realm of fantasy, of the fairy tale or the fable, in spite of the often-cited remark of the scriptwriter, Cesare Zavattini, that "the true function of the cinema is not to tell fables."[9] The film attacks the very definition of neorealism canonized in the essays of Andre Bazin. Although the storyline of this fable echoes the social concerns characteristic of neorealist works, De Sica's style departs even more radically than that of Rossellini in *The Machine to Kill Bad People* from the traditional definitions of neorealism. Chronological time is rejected, as is duration or ontological wholeness; common-sense logic is abandoned as well, and the usual cause and effect relationships between objects in the "real" world are replaced by absurd, even surreal events (the sunlight shines in only one spot at a time; angels or magic spirits visit earth; people are granted any wish they desire). The fantastic is bodied forth by a number of special effects that appear only rarely in neorealist works: people fly over the cathedral of Milan on broomsticks, thanks to process shots; images are superimposed upon other images; smoke seems to reverse its course; rapid editing makes it seem that hats chase a character out of sight of the camera's eye.

De Sica goes beyond Rossellini's metaphoric discussion of realism through the symbolic image of the camera and concentrates upon the place of the imagination itself (which may, as in *Miracle in*

involving the relationship of the rich to the poor, the evil to the good. Although Rossellini's film is perhaps simpler from a technical point of view because it contains fewer special photographic effects while De Sica's exploits surrealist comic effects in the manner of Rene Clair, it is also more richly plotted, with sub-plots parodying both the story of Romeo and Juliet and Rossellini's own film *Paisan* (in particular, the arrival of the Americans in Italy). While the thematic content continues what is usually considered a typical neorealist preoccupation with social justice and socio-economic problems in post-war Italy, it is precisely their attention to style which makes these works significant. In Rossellini, there is an extended treatment of the very nature of photography, while in De Sica the conventions usually associated with neorealism are brought into question. In so doing, each director provides the viewer with a clearer idea of the limits of neorealism in his works.

With *The Machine to Kill Bad People,* Rossellini presents an extended meditation, albeit in a comic vein, on the relationship between photography or artistic reality and the equally noble reality of ethics and moral conduct. A demon grants to Celestino Esposito, a professional photographer, the miraculous power of causing evildoers to disappear from the face of the earth by means of his camera (*la macchina* of the original Italian title). A good man consumed by moral indignation, Celestino takes his weapon and turns upon those in his village who exploit the poor and act only out of self-interest. Soon, several of the town's most illustrious citizens (Donna Amalia, the loan-shark; the mayor; the policeman; the owner of a fleet of fishing boats and trucks) suffer the same comic fate: once Celestino photographs a previous picture of them, they are frozen in that pose and pass to their reward. As the film progresses, Celestino becomes impatient with all the inhabitants of his village. The poor, themselves no better than the rich, have exactly the same greedy motives alluded to in the prologue, where we have already been warned that "In the end, nice or not / they resemble each other a lot." Rapidly demoralized by this discovery, Celestino embarks upon a plan to destroy everyone, since all are imperfect, and in the very act of doing so he murders the good town doctor who has been trying to stop him from photographing another picture of the entire village. Driven by remorse, Celestino decides to punish himself with his magic camera but only after he has eliminated the demon who granted him this miraculous power. Before he can succeed, however, the demon reappears, becomes a convert when Celestino makes the sign of the cross, and restores Celestino's victims to life as if nothing had ever happened. A final moral is delivered in the epilogue: "Do good but don't over do it! / Avoid evil for your own sake. / Don't be hasty in judging others. / Think twice before punishing."

Rossellini is chiefly concerned with the symbolic importance of the camera and, by extension, the nature of photography itself. In good neorealist fashion and reminiscent of statements made by such important figures as Cesare Zavattini, Celestino views the camera as a means of separating reality from illusion, good from evil, substance from appearance. Photography is, for him, a metaphor for a way of knowing, for a means of apprehending essential moral and ethical facts; it enables him, so he believes, to penetrate the surface of events

Milan, employ the camera as a means of expression). The entire film is thus an extended metaphor, a hymn to the role of illusion and fantasy in art, as well as in life, and is not merely a frivolous entertainment. De Sica tells us that the human impulse to creativity in the work of art, like the broomsticks which carry the poor over the church steeples of Milan, is capable of transcending social problems but not of resolving them. Filmic art can only offer the consolation of beauty and the hope that its images and ideas may move the spectator to social action that will change the world.

Rossellini's film questions the cognitive potential of the camera and undermines the belief that good and evil are easily distinguished. De Sica's work affirms Rossellini's doubts that the poor or downtrodden of the world are morally superior to the wealthy or their exploiters (indeed, the poor in the shantytown of *Miracle in Milan* aspire only to becoming wealthy themselves and are equally selfish), but it makes an even more positive statement about the place of the imagination (the element of *fantasia* Rossellini mentioned in his remarks concerning *The Machine to Kill Bad People*) in both filmic art and life. While Rossellini limits the power of the camera to discover reality, De Sica demonstrates that the camera can uncover new dimensions of experience through the poetry of the creative fantasy. Seen from this perspective, each work reveals itself to be not merely a comic fable about the rich and the poor but also a significant treatment of the relationship between reality and illusion. The distance traveled by Rossellini or De Sica since *Paisan* or *Shoeshine* is not as far as most believe and is more a change of degree than of kind. *The Machine to Kill Bad People* and *Miracle in Milan* clearly mark the outer boundaries of the Italian neorealist movement, since they push the dialectic of realism and illusion almost to the breaking point.

NOTES

[1]See the preface Calvino added in 1964 to *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1976), p. vii, for his complete re-evaluation of neorealism.

[2]These general remarks apply to such neorealist masterpieces as Elio Vittorini's *In Sicily* (1941), Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945), Italo Calvino's *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947), and Cesare Pavese's *The Moon and the Bonfires* (1951). Vasco Pratolini is the only major writer whose works (especially *Metello*, which appeared in 1955) adhere closely to the canons of literary realism. For the most recent survey of the interrelationships between neorealist film and neorealist fiction, including a perceptive critique of traditional approaches to this material, see the entry on "Neorealism" by Ben Lawton in the *Dictionary of Italian Literature*, eds. Peter and Julia Conaway Bondanella (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 353-57.

[3]"Early Fellini: *Variety Lights, The White Sheik, The Vitelloni,*" in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 220-39.

[4]See Guido Aristarco, *Antologia di Cinema Nuovo: 1952-58* (Florence: Guaraldi, 1975), esp. pp. 1-151; various essays by Bazin, now available in English in *What Is Cinema? Part Two* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971); a brief exchange of positions between Aristarco and Fellini in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism,* pp. 60-69; and Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in Richard Dyer MacCann, ed., *Film: A Montage of Theories* (New York: Dutton, 1966), pp. 216-28.

[5]For a recent expression of this widely held opinion in Italy (with particular reference to *Miracle in Milan*), see Alfonso Canziani and Cristina Bragaglia, *La stagione neorealista* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1976), pp. 95-99.

[6]Vittorio De Sica, *Miracle in Milan* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), p. 13.

[7]"A Discussion of Neo-Realism: Rossellini Interviewed by Mario Verdone," *Screen* 14 (1973-74), 70.

[8]Cited by Gianni Rondolino in *Roberto Rossellini* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1974), p. 5.

[9]See Zavattini's essay "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in MacCann, ed., *Film: A Montage of Theories.*