



# Re-envisioning the Nation: Film Neorealism and the Postwar Italian Condition

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## Abstract

Emerging out of the ashes of Fascism, Italian Neorealist films were inexorably tied to the social, political, and economic reorganization of the nation in the immediate postwar years. Coupled with the advent of new cinematic techniques that characterized the genre (the use of non-actors, natural lighting, on-location shooting, and the absence of melodrama), the reassertion of local and regional realities in Neorealist films marked a sharp break from Fascist-era depictions of a national ideal. By injecting presentations of poverty and class conflict into the urban setting and deconstructing the rural idyll, Neorealism offered a new means of imagining national unity based on class consciousness and consent as opposed to coercion. The attempts to present the “social truths” of the postwar period revolved around the transformation of the iconic images central to Fascist constructions of the nation. Luchino Visconti’s *La terra trema* (1948) is discussed as emblematic of the shared moral and stylistic unity of the genre.

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## Introduction

In his examination of the relationship between cinema and socio-cultural transformation in Italy, P. Adams Sitney identifies two specific periods in which film has most actively participated in the (re)construction and communication of the changing nation: the immediate postwar period of the late 1940s, and the early 1960s, years marked by the apex of Italy's "economic miracle" (Sitney 1995, ix). These "vital crises" in political, social, and economic reorganization that confronted the nation correspond with the two cinematic genres that have become most emblematic of Italian national cinema, both internally and externally: Neorealism, and the "Auteur" or "Art" films of the late 1950s and 1960s. Although a considerable amount of critical analysis exists concerning the politicized films of the second "vital crisis" and their relationship to transformative cultural issues (e.g. Bondanella 1990; Brunetta 1979; Crowds 1983; Jameson 1992; Landy 1994, 2000; Marcus 1986; Restivo 2002; Rifkin 1977; Spinazzola 1974; Sorlin 1996), the impact of Neorealism is still predominately encased within a formal or aesthetic analytical shell. The innovativeness of Neorealist films has almost exclusively been tied to their newness in cinematic style and narrative form, viewed as symbolic of the great break or divide between classical and modernist, action-image and time-image cinema (Deleuze 1986, 1989).

Emphasis on the *techniques* of Neorealist filmmaking, specifically the stylistic commonalities found in the propensity of location shooting, natural lighting, the use of non-actors, and voyeuristic long shots, has largely obfuscated equally important and socially driven content and commentary. Similarly, the identification of Neorealism as a decisive counter to the cinema under Fascism is too simplistic in its reduction of Neorealism to a reactionary movement. It occludes, for example, the fact that many of the Neorealist directors, including Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Giuseppe De Santis, Luigi Zampa, and Cesare Zavattini, began their careers during the Fascist era.

Contrary to common considerations about Neorealism as a stylistically bounded movement, director and film theorist Carlo Lizzani has insisted that the most acute unifying factor in these films is their "hybridization of culture" (in Tartagni 1989). To Lizzani, this includes both the tendency to represent multiple social classes across diverse regions (specifically a novel emphasis on the working class and the South) and to illuminate the exchange of traditional social roles brought on by the war. Equally important is Lizzani's suggestion that Neorealism itself is best characterized by a hybridization of genre. Counter to prevailing assessments, no singular narrative form unites the films. Neorealist works instead tend to be composites of multiple narrative structures. They are amalgams of tried-and-true genre formulas central to prewar Italian cinema, ranging from melodrama, comedy, and historical epic to documentary and suspense. More than technique or

narrative, an obsessive emphasis with re-imagining the nation through the portrayal of social reality serves as the primary unifying element. Tied by what Millicent Marcus (1986) refers to as “*una nuova poesia morale*,” Neorealist films, via their dramatization of endemic and problematic cultural, regional, and class differences between North and South, city and country, presented a powerful populist counter-argument to the coercive and homogenizing vision of nationalism under Fascism. Through the injection of local and regional social realities into cinema, Neorealism exposed the fallacies of Italian unity ascribed to the Risorgimento while simultaneously offering a radically new concept of nationalism based on class consciousness, cultural heterogeneity, and regional complementation in a postwar environment characterized by the widespread reconstruction of the nation’s politics, economy, and culture.

In this essay I attempt to present a counter-argument to the view of Neorealist film developing “out of nowhere”, springing organically from the cultural void and political and economic uncertainty of the immediate postwar period. My intention is to identify Neorealism, in a very Gramscian sense, as representative of a “molecular transformation” of the existing Italian state, standing in contrast to Fascism’s intended project of the wholesale creation of a new form of the nation. Incorporated in such a reading is a necessity to position the divergent political paths that inform the contrasting strategies of constructing nationalism based upon either force or consent (Urbinati 1998, 375-6). First, I locate Fascist filmmaking influences on Neorealist directors as a means of highlighting the transformative (as opposed to revolutionary) nature of the artistic movement. Second, I examine the primary methods ascribed to Fascist interpretations and representations of the nation and nationalism. I then compare these to the emphasis and use of realism in Neorealist endeavors in order to outline the central filmic modes of resistance used to counter Fascist models. Third, I illustrate via a dissection of the primary visual tropes of Fascist cinema how Neorealist directors sought to co-opt and transform the predominant semiotic codes of the regime through a contradistinctive socio-political lens. Lastly, I relate the points above in specific detail to Luchino Visconti’s film *La terra trema* (1948) which, I argue, exists as the most acute and politically-driven Neorealist example of re-envisioning nationalism.

It is my hope that this essay will serve as but one small example of how individual films, film genre, and their associated criticism and commentary may serve as primary texts in the construction of historical geographies of the twentieth century. In the case of Italy, in which the correlation of place and national cinema is perhaps more concretely defined than any other, the impact of film as social identifier and pedagogic tool *must* be included in any attempt to describe the pervasive postwar tensions surrounding the ideological construction of the new republic. The impact of cinema as the cardinal communicative channel is largely the result of the combination of multiple characteristics of Italian society as a

whole in the immediate postwar years, including: the lack of a national-popular literature, low literacy rates (especially in the South), low nation-scale oriented periodical subscription and readership, the absence of television, high levels of film production, importation, and cinema attendance, and high rates of theatre-screen (*seconda* and *terza visione*) creation, particularly in the South per Catholic Church sponsorship (Bondanella 1990; Brunetta 1993; Wagstaff 1987). Together, these attributes bespeak of the *necessity* to utilize film and film analysis in an inquiry centered on the contextualization and nature of representations vital to this specific period of Italian history.

### **The Resurgence of Realism: Fascist Era Influences on Neorealism**

It is impossible to divorce Neorealism from the cinema under Fascism. Its response to Fascist ideology and iconography, specifically to Fascist representations of the nation, led to an awakening in artistic and social imaginations of Italian nationalism.

Obscured in genealogical outlines of Italian cinema is the fact that the framing of cinematic depictions of the “Real” inherent in Neorealist films has identifiable precedents in the Fascist cinema of the 1930s. A common assumption is that the “Neo” element attached to realism describes the discernable break whereby postwar artists attempted “to create an imagined community to replace the (equally media-constructed) imagined community of the fascist period” (Restivo 2002, 24-25). In reality, the term refers more to the general movement within the Italian arts beginning in the 1930s (primarily with literature) that drew widespread inspiration from the *verismo* tradition in Italian fiction, painting, theatre, opera, and even cinema of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Verismo* itself is derived from and indebted to the writings of Giovanni Verga, one of the most heralded of modern Italian writers, whose works on the Mezzogiorno focused heavily on authentic and unmelodramatic portrayals of southern Italian social organization and customs, regional identity, and naturalism.

The renewed interest in Verga’s *verismo* in the 1930s reflected a desired aesthetic shift away from the diffuse influence, particularly in film, of the writer Gabriele D’Annunzio. In general, D’Annunzio’s writings were marked by themes of “racism, nationalism, colonialism,...antidemocracy, and imperialism” (Landy 2000, 310) and as Jared Becker has commented, it is he “above all others who orchestrates the shift from a nineteenth-century culture of nation-building to a culture of radical nationalism and imperialist aggression” (1994, 211). *Dannunzianesimo* is equated most strongly with illusionism, melodrama, and the nationalist rhetoric housed within the plethora of historical epics central to Fascist filmmaking in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although *dannunzianesimo* may have been the largest inspirational pool for Fascist cinema of the 1930s, the resurgence of realism via the *verismo* tradition also affected directors and films supportive of the state. Two particular directors have come to be synonymous with Fascist-era endeavors into cinematic realism: Mario Camerini (e.g. *Rotaie* 1929; *Gli uomini che mascalzoni!* 1932; *Darò un milione* 1935; *Il signor Max* 1937; *Grandi magazzini* 1939) and Alessandro Blasetti (e.g. *Sole* 1929; *Terra madre* 1930; *Resurrectio* 1931; *La tavola dei poveri* 1932; *Palio* 1932; *1860* 1934). Both men were extremely influential to Neorealist filmmakers of the subsequent decade through their novel address of contemporary urban and rural life and their often ambiguous treatment of the historical eras and events from which Fascism derived its representational connections to Italian unity and greatness. Predominantly comedic in form, Camerini's films often centered on working-class protagonists of northern cities and their estranged relationship to the alterations of the urban social and physical landscape brought on by Fascist modernization policies. Consequently, the films of Camerini are frequently associated (through their assessment and dissection) with the ideology of *stracittà* (urbanism or supercity), a movement popularized in literature of the early 1920s that heralded the Fascist tenets of cosmopolitanism, urban renewal, and industrial development (Hay 1987; Landy 2000). The impact of Camerini on Neorealism is emphasized by Lizzani's view of the director as "the great confessor of the Italian lower middle classes" (1979, 22) in an era when the upper- and middle-class bourgeoisie (owing largely to their support of and importance to Fascist nationalism) were the most widely represented social class, typified by their preponderance as subjects in the *telefono bianco*<sup>2</sup> genre.

In contrast, Blasetti's films are customarily identified with the rural and localist convictions of *strapaese* (ruralism or supercountry), a literary movement originally formulated as a counter to *stracittà* that nonetheless was co-opted by the state as a means of representing (and conveying) the vital nature of the agrarian worker to the desired achievement of domestic self-sufficiency. Compared to Camerini, the impact of Blasetti on Neorealism has little to do with a nascent socio-political critique. Rather it is his "convincing sense of realism," his interest in "regional naturalism" and tradition, and his ability to blend the historical drama and documentary in ways that remain sensitive to diverse connections to the past based on class and region that Neorealism borrows from so heavily (Bondanella, 1990, 14-15).

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<sup>2</sup> The *telefono bianco* (white telephone) or *telefoni bianchi* films--so named because of the frequent inclusion of a white telephone in the bedroom--were largely comedies centered on "the foibles of upper-class life" (Landy 2000, 8) tending to emphasize class hierarchy, luxury, and social conservatism.

Although films bearing the imprint of *stracittà* and *strapaese* presented idealized and ultimately unrealistic versions of the complexities of the Italian working classes, their existence definitely expanded the formal cinematic boundaries for addressing contemporary social issues. Through their incorporation of technical modes of filmmaking that would come to be defining conventions of Neorealism, the films of Camerini and Blasetti set the stage for a cinema reactive to the state's representations of the nation, a cinema that "unleashed the powers of the false, where conventional notions of truth, virtue, heroism, good and evil, and, above all, the real and the artificial are put into crisis, and where the possibility of a more complex relation to the world is possible" (Landy 2000, 15).

### **Framing the Nation: Fascism, History, and Metaphor**

Although the works of Camerini and Blasetti created a highly influential cinematic lens with which to examine (and often deconstruct) the dichotomies of rural/urban, traditional/modern, local/national, and North/South, they were far outweighed in sheer numbers by a specific genre that more readily defined the ideological imaginations of Italian unity under Fascism. The historical epic served as the primary cinematic platform in which Fascism sought to construct and to legitimate a totalizing version of the nation. Aside from the overtly propagandist "black" films, newsreels, and 'documentaries' central to the mass communication of Fascist socialization policies, the historical epic developed as the principal cinematic genre in which notions of state virility and hegemony were codified through the equation of Fascism with historic episodes defined by Italian dominance, international influence, and national unity. As Marcia Landy has stated, "the cinema under Fascism ransacked earlier historical moments--the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the Risorgimento, and World War I--to create a pastiche of elements drawn from popular folklore, literature, opera, and current events" (2000, 52). Analogies drawn between Italy's "glorious past" and the Fascist state underlined the ideological need to portray Fascism as a truly nationalizing movement, as the realization of modern Italian unity begun, but never completed, during the Risorgimento (e.g. *1860* 1934; *Il dottor Antonio* 1937; *Piccolo mondo antico* 1941) (Gori 1988). Treatments of the more distant past often sought to justify Fascist colonialist and imperialist endeavors through their conflation with the military triumphs of the Roman Empire (e.g. *Aurore sul mare* 1934; *Lo squadrone bianco* 1936; *Scipione l'Africano* 1937; *Luciano Serra pilota* 1938) and the cultural hegemony and innovation ascribed to the Renaissance (e.g. *Lorenzino de' Medici* 1935; *Condottieri* 1937).

A substantial body of work exists on the utilization of historical allegory to construct and convey nationalism in Fascist cinema (e.g. Bosworth and Dagliani eds., 1999; Gori 1988; Hay 1987; Landy 1996; Lazzaro and Crum eds., 2004; Mancini 1985; Reich and Garofalo eds., 2002; Sorlin 1996). Little of this

scholarship focuses on the relationships between this historical metaphor and the reactive emphasis of Neorealist works. Two elements are of particular interest in this regard as a result of their subsequent renouncement and/or alteration by Neorealism: the penchant for spectacle and the iconographic representations of both physical and cultural landscapes that constitute the nation. The illumination of the ways in which Fascist films constructed signs and symbols of the nation and framed the narrative space in which such representations were housed is essential to understanding the elements and avenues of resistance inherent in Neorealist films. As Landy has stated:

Since neorealism eschewed the monumental and epic dimensions of the historical film that often functioned in the interests of nationalist rhetoric, and since it seemed to offer new versions of the nation, it presented new forms of address and interrogation to filmmakers involved in postwar reconstruction, decolonization, and reconsiderations of the subaltern. . . . [It] was a movement that aimed to make connections with the Risorgimento, the unification of Italy as a nation, and the unfinished revolution. It was a cinema of anti-Fascism, expressing the aspirations of the Left, focusing on social injustice and the arrogance of power, critical of the clichés and formulas of genre and with the spectacle and rhetoric of the cinema under Fascism (2000, 17, 13).

Counter to the embodiment of the nation under Fascism, “the Italian experience of the immediate postwar was that of history that remained to be written, of meanings that remained to be fixed. For Italians, the postwar period was one of social antagonisms that existed at the level of the *Real* of history” (Restivo, 2002, 10).

## **Realism and Resistance**

In summarizing the thoughts of Tim Cresswell (1996), Peter Jackson (1988), and Don Mitchell (2000) on the tactics of cultural subversion, Pamela Shurmer-Smith has stated that “often the politics of resistance takes the form of spectacle, shock, or irreverent play as an effective means of subverting power” (2002, 37). Each of the above geographers has, in his or her own way, illustrated how spectacle and the carnivalesque have regularly been utilized by marginalized groups to debase hegemonic constructions of culture, politics, and even public space. Although geographers have deftly illustrated, using examples ranging from the Middle Ages, Dadaism, 1960s Europe, to Punk music, how spectacle, carnival, and *détournement* have served as means for subverting dominance, what avenues for contestation exist when spectacle itself is the primary mechanism used to convey cultural hegemony? In such an instance, Mitchell, citing Guy Debord

(1994) and Michel de Certeau (1989), suggests that the most effective tactic “is quite literally to remake the situation, transform the images, [and] counter the spectacle with even more spectacular spectacles” (2000, 165). As useful and prevalent as this strategy may be, it is in contradistinction to the principles of Neorealism.

The transformative nature of Neorealist films resides in the absence of spectacle, artifice, and escapism. Instead, it relies on a more objective portrayal of contemporary reality that cleaves history from the conceptualization of Italian unity, favoring instead the poetic aspects of everyday life over allusion and metaphor. Through an emphasis and celebration of local and regional specificity, Neorealist films expose the failures of Fascism’s equation of nationalism with grandiose moments from the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and the Risorgimento. Such aggrandizements of historical episodes meant vastly different things to peoples in different regions of the nation. The Renaissance, and in particular, the Risorgimento, were not inherently national. Different regions experienced these movements dissimilarly, and thus maintained, largely in the case of the South, a very different sentiment towards these “glorious pasts”, namely an identification with exclusion, alienation, and domination. Such sentiments were reinforced by the fact that Fascism’s support base rested predominantly within the urban North. As a distinctly northern movement, then, Fascism “set on establishing stability to northern industry and commercial agriculture of the Po Valley” (Agnew, 2002, 93). This endeavor ultimately compounded the view of Fascism’s self-anointed task of completing the “unfinished business” of the Risorgimento as “a failure, in that revolutionary goals were betrayed by the subsequent hegemony of the North over the South” (Landy, 2000, 60).

Thematically, the uniting factor of the master works of Neorealism, including Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione* (1943) and *La terra trema* (1948), Vittorio De Sica’s *I bambini ci guardano* (1944), *Sciuscià* (1946), and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), Alberto Lattuada’s *Il Mulino del Po* (1948) and *Senza pietà* (1948), Roberto Rosellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Paisà* (1946), and *Stromboli* (1950), Giuseppe De Santis’ *Caccia tragica* (1947), *Riso Amaro* (1949) and *Non c’è pace tra gli ulivi* (1950), and Luigi Zampa’s *Vivere in pace* (1947) is a concern for representing the ordinary and everyday struggles of the working class in the uncertain climate of postwar reconstruction. By “minimizing the effects of spectacle” Neorealist films provided “direct access to the images by means of long take photography and minimal editing, and through middle distance shots that could enable the viewer to assimilate the character’s specific relationship to the environment” (Landy, 2000, 161). Through transformation of the iconographic tropes central to Fascist cinema, Neorealism posited a new path to Italian national unity. The key was consent instead of coercion, a collectivity understood via the representation of the most elemental struggle to survive, a condition afflicting all Italians, across regions and classes, in the environment of postwar plight.

## Iconographies of Reinvention

Of the plenitude of semiotic devices utilized by Fascist propagandists throughout all media, four themes are most relevant to the scope of this article: crowds, landscape, youth, and poverty. Given the focus on envisionments of Italian nationalism in film, these subjects of representation are all, albeit in differing ways, related to concepts of belonging, identity, inclusion/exclusion, and citizenship (in terms of rightful contribution to and defining qualities thereof). They are also among the most prevalent topics entertained by both Fascist and Neorealist cinema. This allows for a contrast and comparison that extends beyond isolated individual works, highlighting instead, via a concern for film genre, the most problematic socio-cultural issues paramount to the specific postwar Italian environment. With the exception of youth, these themes all contain a geographical dimension in that the desire to control the *representation* of space is embroiled in the broader project of defining acceptable uses of both public and private and urban and rural spaces on the ground. In Neorealist films, crowds become sites of resistance and localized allegiance as opposed to symbols of occupation and submission. The conquest of nature and both national and international space is eschewed, replaced by a greater emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between cultural practice and the environment. The idealized portrayal of urban luxury and Fascist modernization of city space is deconstructed through a realistic presentation of the pervasiveness of urban poverty. Youth, in its most elementary form, is symbolic of the fledgling postwar republic. However, it is also a theme ripe with connotations concerning state education and welfare and, in the case of Neorealism, innocence lost to the reworking of traditional familial roles demanded by the postwar plight. For all involved in the exposition of the Neorealist viewpoint, it was essential to counter these iconographic tropes central to the Fascist representation of the nation. Equally vital was the necessity to posit and present a determined and cohesive semiotic explication of nationalism that would stand in contrast to alternative ideological constructions of the postwar nation that were to arise in the immediate years following World War II, years marked by a new cultural-political war in which the rights to define and control the forward path of the nation were at stake.

### Crowds

As the symbolic embodiment of the masses, the divergent portrayal of the crowd in Neorealist films is indicative of the desire to empower those marginalized under Fascism through the representation

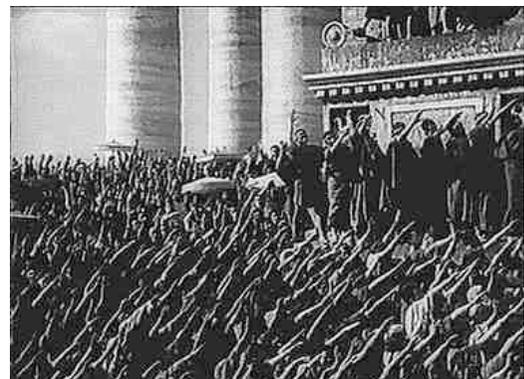


Figure 1: Scipione l'Africano (1937) © ENIC

of a collective will. As Lizzani has indicated, crowds in Fascist films exist largely “as a passive amalgam--an indistinct, orderly, militarized mass . . . a colorful, vociferous, applauding chorus that forms a backdrop for one character or another. In other words, the crowd is folklore--the populist, rural collectivity that corresponds to Fascist populism” (in Tartagni, 1989). Epitomized by scenes in *Scipione l'Africano*, the crowd is devoid of any individuality or affect, imagined instead as subservient to and blindly supportive of the patriotic rhetoric spewed forth by a charismatic leader. In contrast, Neorealist depictions of crowds are characterized by activeness, both in terms of their portrayal of the dialectics *within* the crowd itself and as sites of rebellion and resistance to authority. In the climactic sequence of *Roma, città aperta*, the character of Pina ardently attempts to rally the crowd that has assembled as the Germans round up the men of the neighborhood. When her lover, Francesco, is taken away, Pina physically confronts the SS officers constraining the crowd. Breaking free from an officer, Pina runs to the truck where Francesco is being held, only to be shot and killed in the process. Instead of solidifying the complacency and fear of the crowd bearing witness, Rossellini's suggestion is that resistance, even if it leads to death, is a necessity of freedom, and passivity will no longer be tolerated.

Rebellion is a central tenet of the crowd scenes in *Il Mulino del Po* as well; however, the effects of resistance are decidedly more optimistic than in *Roma, città aperta*. Lattuada's film centers on day laborers who work the wheat fields of the Po Valley under miserable conditions for little pay and reward. When their dissatisfaction culminates with a refusal to work, landowners call in the military to force them back to the fields. Rather than submit, the workers (predominantly women) occupy the fields. As the soldiers prepare to fire upon them, the crowd stands united, shouting “up with the union!”, ultimately forcing the military to acquiesce rather than become agents of mass murder. In this instance, Lattuada conveys how the collective spirit and will of the crowd has the capacity to institute change.

Along with serving as a vehicle for the opposition to authority, Neorealist filmmakers also envision crowds as instruments of localized unity. This is particularly evident in the scene in *Ladri di biciclette* in which the central character of Antonio Ricci confronts the thief who has stolen his bicycle. Antonio follows the thief to his neighborhood and tries to force him to return his vital property. In the process, a crowd assembles in support of the thief. To the crowd, it is unimportant whether the boy is guilty of the crime or not. What is solely important is the protection of one of their own from the perceived persecution of an outsider.



Figure 2: *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) © Produzioni De Sica/ENIC

## Landscape

As part of the desire to equate the nation with historical episodes of cultural and political dominance, Fascist depictions of the Italian landscape often glorified majestic and monumental aspects of the city. The verticality inherent in their images of urban architecture, ancient ruins, and state monuments is symbolic of Fascist hierarchical social stratification. Public space is closed, sanitized; it is organized around artifice and icons, heralding the projects of architectural modernity and redesign undertaken during the Ventennio.<sup>3</sup> Considerations of the rural landscape stressed the picturesque, suggesting an essentialized harmony between the agrarian peasantry and the land. Conversely, Neorealist treatments of landscape reflect a horizontal rather than vertical linearity. From depictions of the long banks of the Po River and its valley in *Riso Amaro*, *Paisà*, and *Il Mulino del Po* to the expansive, desolate environments of southern Italy and the islands in

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<sup>3</sup> Ventennio refers to the twenty-year period of Fascist rule from 1922-1943.

*Stromboli* and *La terra trema*, the picturesque is eschewed in favor of more realistic treatments of interior spaces and naturalistic physical landscapes. Space becomes open, active, and affective.



Figure 3: *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) © Produzioni De Sica/ENIC

Although many films have focused on realistic presentations of rural life (particularly associated with the Mezzogiorno), the predominant setting of Neorealist works is what Lizzani refers to as “the great urban periphery” (in Tartagni, 1989). This periphery embodies the lived location of the marginalized working classes, characterized by a lack of monuments, artifice, and physical symbols associated with Fascist interpretations of the city. In its elucidation, it represents both the peoples and places excluded under Fascism, offering a new site of collective association based less on symbols of ascendancy and state virility than on the social conditions of poverty, unemployment, the breakdown of the family, and the uncertainty of the future endemic to peripheral urban areas across the peninsula. *Ladri di biciclette* represents the most cogent example in this regard. Set in Rome, the film follows the protagonist Antonio and his son Bruno as they traverse the city from neighborhood to neighborhood in search of Antonio’s stolen bicycle. Throughout their quest, Rome is rendered devoid of its symbolic greatness.

There is no Colosseum, Vatican, Trevi fountain, Roman Forum, or monuments, roads, and buildings from Mussolini's E.U.R. district.<sup>4</sup> In their stead, De Sica presents the ordinary lived-in spaces of the city. Working-class neighborhoods, peddlers' markets, unemployment offices, and trolley stops become central backdrops. In stripping Rome of all things Roman, De Sica's portrayal of the city allows working-class urbanites across the country, whether from Milan, Naples, or Palermo, the ability to identify with the plight of the Ricci family.

## Youth

As a primary concern of Fascist ideologues and planners, the representation of youth constituted a vital role in the overtly propagandist films of the 1930s. The documentaries and newsreels produced by LUCE (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa), the state organization overseeing the production of pro-Fascist cinema, "highlighted the relation of youth to education, the military, and to sports" (Landy 2000, 237), in essence utilizing children as a metaphor for the rejuvenating qualities of the Fascist movement. Numerous documentaries championed their socialization policies specific to children, including the vitality of youth groups, adolescent patriotism, and the reduction of juvenile delinquency through the delineation of children by age and gender. As Elaine Mancini has noted, these documentaries "were designed to instill the Fascist spirit, to teach ideals and to enforce discipline" (1985, 155). Blasetti's film, *Vecchia guardia* (1934) epitomizes such glorifications. The story revolves around a young boy named Mario whose death at the hands of the Socialists renders him a heroic martyr to the Fascist cause. Other films, including *Camicia nera* (1933), herald the crucial involvement of children in the *squadristi*, the "marauding bands of black-shirted adherents to Fascism" who "terror[ized] the populace" (Landy 2000, 240). An underlying theme is that children exist as a blank slate of sorts, and it is through regimented indoctrination via the Fascist redesign of the educational system and reinforcement of the traditional family that the potential for youthful recidivism is squashed.

In contrast, Neorealist depictions locate children outside of the formal educational system, embroiled in the everyday and real-world struggles to survive in the postwar environment. Children are stripped of their innocence, left unprotected by the disintegration of the traditional family, often orphaned as a consequence of the war, and forced to fend for themselves. The reassurance of a

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<sup>4</sup> The Esposizione Universale Roma is a large urban complex begun in 1935 by Mussolini. It is a model of Fascist architecture originally created for the 1942 world exhibition. Its greatest symbol is the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, better known as the "Cubic Colosseum".

sheltering domestic life is gone as boys are impelled to take on the role of provider and girls the role of caregiver.



Figure 4: *Sciuscià* (1946) © Società Cooperativa Alfa Cinematografica

*Sciuscià* (1946) offers a particularly acute example. Set in Rome immediately after the war, the film follows the trials and tribulations of two young boys, Pasquale and Giuseppe, who live on the streets, and earn a paltry existence by shining shoes and shaking down American G.I.s. The boys land in reform school, where a series of events leads to the dissolution of their solidarity. Loss of innocence is also echoed in the second vignette of *Paisà* (1946), wherein a young boy named Pasquale “buys the rights” from his fellow street-gang members to pilfer the belongings of an American soldier named Joe. At first, Pasquale approaches Joe as a helpful hand, yet when Joe passes out drunk, the boy steals his boots. Several days later, Joe catches up to Pasquale and forces the boy to take him to his home in order to retrieve the boots. As Pasquale leads him to the caves of Mergellina outside of Naples where he and hundreds of others, forced from their homes by the war, live in squalor, Joe learns that the boy’s parents have been killed. Realizing the boy’s plight, Joe leaves the boots behind as an act of

sympathetic charity. He understands that his intention of having the boy punished is now meaningless since Pasquale no longer exists in the realm of childhood.

The situation of boys forced to assume the role of men is reiterated by the relationship between Bruno and his father in *Ladri di biciclette* (1948). Scarcity of employment in the postwar city has required Bruno to work as a gas-station attendant to supplement the family income. Such a reversal of roles between father and son develops as a recurrent theme. The morning after his bicycle is stolen, Antonio is too ashamed to tell Bruno. Later on, when Antonio confronts the thief and is subsequently accosted by the crowd, Bruno acts as protector of his father by having the wherewithal to summon the police. In the penultimate scene, after he is caught stealing another person's bicycle, a desperate and humiliated Antonio seeks forgiveness from Bruno. Bruno is forced to stand strong, consoling his distraught father by taking his hand as the two walk towards the camera and an uncertain future.

## Poverty

Whereas the treatment of youth reflects the realities of social change necessitated by the uncertainty of the immediate postwar period, it is the injection of poverty and its associated destructive and crippling elements that provides the greatest unifying symbol for Neorealist films. The emphasis serves two vital purposes. First, it acts as a response to Fascist valorizations of urban and rural life. It is no surprise that images of destitution and economic hardship are almost entirely absent from Fascist depictions of society. City life, as conveyed through the *telefono bianco* and *stracittà* films prevalent in the 1930s, was one of luxury, cosmopolitanism, and leisure. Similarly, the country was predominantly framed as a simple and satisfying life provided by the bounty of the land. Akin to the realistic portrayal of landscapes, Neorealist cinema stresses instead economic plight in these settings and in this way represents the groups of Italian society excluded from Fascist interpretations of the nation. The images of downtrodden working classes in both the city (e.g. *Paisà*, *Roma*, *città aperta*, and *Ladri di biciclette*) and the country (e.g. *Stromboli*, *Riso Amaro*, and *Ossessione*) counter the idealization of Fascist modernization principles and economic advancement.

The presentation of poverty and unemployment that characterized the Italian postwar environment also functions as a great social equalizer in its suggestion that all citizens, regardless of class, region, and urban and rural location are confronted by the same struggle to survive. The myths of cultural backwardness and economic stagnation historically connected to the South are transformed into national issues. In such, the Mezzogiorno is renewed as the lynchpin of Italian unity because southerners could offer tactics of survival to a developed and industrialized North in which widespread economic plight and unemployment were largely new

phenomena. Rather than language or a shared relationship to history, the primary basis of Italian unity is transferred to the collective task of rebuilding both the physical and social landscapes following the war. The endemic nature of poverty and destitution wipes the slate clean, breaking down social and regional stratifications and fostering drastically new concepts of national unity that allow for the retention of cultural heterogeneity.

### **Re-imagining the Basis for National Unity in Visconti's *La terra trema***

In terms of form, technique, and content, *La terra trema* is the most salient effort of Neorealist film in positing a new path to Italian unity. A consuming emphasis on realism is inherent in Visconti's construction of image and narrative and in his choice of subject. Critics agree that it "fits many of the traditional definitions of Italian neorealism better than any other work of the period" (Bondanella 1990, 68). Shot entirely on location in the fishing village of Aci Trezza, Sicily, the film employed no studio or sound sets. The only utilization of artificial lighting occurred during night scenes at sea. There are no professional actors--the characters in the film are all members of the local community. Instead of post-synching or dubbing the sound, Visconti chose to capture authentic sounds and voices of the town. In doing so, "he took a revolutionary cultural stance, refusing standard Italian (as well as the official culture it symbolized) for the dialect of the simple people he filmed, believing that the authentic expression of the people's emotions could only be achieved using their own language" (Bondanella 1990, 68). Since Sicilian was largely unintelligible to the mainland audience, Visconti added voice-over narration and subtitles in standard (Tuscan) Italian. His construction of images through long, single shots, slow, wide-angle pans, and stationary, extreme depth-of-field frames reflects the formalist aspects attributed to documentary film. Great attention is also paid to the presentation of realistic interiors and family life. Stylistically, *La terra trema* employs the cinematic conventions ascribed to Neorealism more so than any other film.

Thematically, Visconti incorporated an attention to *verismo* unequalled in any other Neorealist work. The film itself is based on Verga's novel *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*, 1881), a story that follows a family of Sicilian fishermen (the Malavoglias) and their aspirations for a better life in the wake of Garibaldi's liberation of Sicily. Visconti's adaptation serves two purposes. On the one hand, it acts as a platform for discussion of the "southern question," instigating a renewed consideration of how the South "has been taken to emblemize the problem of state formation since 1859" (Forgacs, 1987, 27). On the other, it entertains the possibility, owing to Antonio Gramsci, of a national-popular alliance between southern agricultural peasants and northern industrial workers. This hope is highlighted by the fact that the initial funding for the film was provided by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and that *La terra trema* was originally envisioned as

part of a trilogy documenting southern fishermen, miners, and agrarian peasants (hence the subtitle, *Episodio del mare*).

The support for the film by the PCI is indicative of the broader political ethos underpinning Neorealist cinema. The years between the end of the war (1945) and the establishment of the new Italian Constitution (1948) were marked by great political upheavals and antagonisms as multiple parties, including the PCI, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), the Labor Democratic Party (PDL), the Action Party (Pd'A), and the Christian Democratic Party (DC) that had been outlawed under Fascism sought to reorganize, realign, and concretize support for their own nationalist projects. The results of the general election of 1946 reduced the number of parties with any realistic chance of establishing parliamentary dominance to three: the DC, which garnered 35% of the vote, the PSI (20%), and the PCI (19%). In this same year, the results of the Referendum on the Monarchy illustrated in sharp detail the political differences of the populace at the regional scale. While northern regions voted to abolish the monarchy and oust the King of Italy altogether, the vast majority of southerners voted for retention. Whereas the center-right DC maintained its strongest support in the north, particularly in the northeast (*la zona bianca*), the PCI located the majority of its backing in the central regions (*la zona rossa*) (Agnew, 2002). As a result, the south, including Sicily and Sardinia, and the northwest regions centered around the "industrial triangle" proved to be the areas of greatest competition between the two parties.

Owing largely to Gramsci, one of the party's founders when it split from the PSI in the early 1920s, the PCI heavily promoted the formation of an alliance between northern industrial workers and southern peasants. Although the party had always appealed to working-class consciousness, the particular postwar environment offered an opportunity to expand its support base beyond the proletariat. Given the degree of leveling of hierarchical class divisions brought about by wartime devastation, the PCI sought to outline the possibility of a broad-based populist collectivity by means of presenting through multiple media outlets the pervasiveness of postwar socio-economic strife. Consequently, the party vocalized support for many of the Neorealist directors and films of this period due to their realistic modes of presentation and the overarching emphasis on the unifying elements inherent in the struggle to survive. In this respect, *La terra trema* represented an impeccable vehicle with which to promote a new form of national alliance.

Visconti's adaptation centers on the Valastro family, a clan of multiple generations of fishermen and their wives, sisters, and daughters who live together in their modest seaside home. The central character is one of the sons named 'Ntoni, who more than anyone else, aspires to break the family free from their long-standing exploitation by local wholesalers. Because the wholesalers own the boats and maintain exclusive contracts with the city markets, they control prices. As 'Ntoni's anger towards this subjugation boils over, he hatches a plan to mortgage the family house in order to buy their own boat. This plan is met with resistance, particularly from the family's older generation. In a crucial scene, 'Ntoni's grandfather repeats a common saying among the Sicilian poor that "you can learn to live with injustice." 'Ntoni's response, that "old proverbs don't work anymore," is reflective of Visconti's underlying notion of the need to break free from the past in order to reinvent social relations.



Figure 5: *La terra trema* (1948) © Universalialia

After the family acquiesces and the boat is purchased, 'Ntoni relishes in the potential realization of his bourgeois intentions, flaunting his new position of economic freedom much to the chagrin of his neighbors. His dream, however, is abruptly ended when the clan is forced to fish in bad weather in order to make the mortgage payment. The boat is destroyed by the storm, forcing 'Ntoni and his brothers to seek employment on the boats of others. Their neighbors, however, turn them away as a consequence of their perceived betrayal of their fellow fishermen and the threat of dismissal by the wholesalers who the Valastros have scorned. Without employment, the bank eventually forecloses on the house and the Valastros are forced to move. In a telling scene where he encounters a young girl repairing his former boat, Visconti illustrates how 'Ntoni finally "realizes his fatal error in basing his hopes on the traditional family rather than on a new sense of



Figure 6: *La terra trema* (1948) © Universalialia

class consciousness and unity” (Forgacs 1987, 27). In a crucial scene that follows, ‘Ntoni’s awareness of his personal and familial plight is transferred to the nation as whole. Framed in close-up, ‘Ntoni addresses the camera (and consequently the audience) directly, stating: “We have to learn to stick up for each other, to stick together. Then we can go forward . . . .” In an act of self-sacrificial martyrdom, ‘Ntoni then returns to the office of the wholesalers who, in the process of granting him his old job on one of their boats, humiliate him even further in front of his peers. Behind the wholesalers’ boss, Raimondo, who is laughing incessantly at ‘Ntoni, we see the washed-over remnants of the Fascist slogan “Andare decisamente verso il popolo” painted on the wall. Whereas the image is used to



Figure 7: *La terra trema* (1948) © Universalia

associate the corrupt and unsympathetic wholesalers with the Fascist regime, the slogan’s faded condition also suggests that, in time, the effects of the Fascist era will disappear, allowing for a more just and equitable sense of the nation to take its place. In the final scene, the camera focuses on ‘Ntoni returned to his former place on the wholesalers’ boat. Rather than resignation or defeat, his facial expression and intense rowing indicate a simmering rage. Amidst the overwhelming tragedy of the film, the viewer is led to believe that ‘Ntoni is not done fighting, and that dreams of a better world, of a more egalitarian nation, lie just beyond the approaching horizon.

## Conclusion

The Neorealist film genre developed in a period of radical political openness and social uncertainty, a time prior to the consolidation of power by the Christian Democrats in the national elections of 1948 in which the appeal for a humanistic base to national unity remained a possibility. Leading up to the Parliamentary election, several parties of the left, including the PCI, PSI, Christian Social Party (PCS), Labor Democratic Party (PDL), and the Sardinian Action Party joined together in an historic compromise, casting away ideological (and regional) differences in order to better challenge the DC. With its defeat, however, the Popular Democratic Front (FDP) dissolved as quickly as it had formed. The brief period characterized by nation-scale political organization and orientation immediately following the war devolved into a “regionalizing regime” lasting until the early 1960s in which the dominant political parties focused their energies on solidifying their traditional geographical centers of support (Agnew, 2002).

The waning popularity of Neorealist films in the latter years of the 1940s is in part attributable to the nature of escapism inherent in the cinematic medium. Audiences grew tired of being confronted with the images and issues related to their postwar struggles, favoring instead the American spectacles and melodramas inundating the theaters as a consequence of United States involvement in Italian reconstruction. The political distaste for Neorealist projections of the nation compounded the decline. Neorealism’s association with the PCI and the left became a target of the Christian Democrats who had substantial support (and consequently pressure from) the United States owing to the global battle against communism. The Andreotti Law of 1949 threatened a degree of censorship (and a denial of distribution rights) to filmmakers who presented “unfavorable” conditions of Italian life while offering financial subsidies to those who championed the integrative and positive qualities of the Christian Democratic Party. Neorealism largely evolved into the light-hearted and star-studded films of “pink” Neorealism in the early 1950s--decidedly more optimistic endeavors that heralded the betterment of social conditions tied to the beginning phases of Italy’s “economic miracle.” The decline in popularity of Neorealist projects was also a symptom of an unattainable idealism underscoring much of the political motivation behind the films. Through the uncompromisingly realistic presentation of the common experiences of postwar poverty, unemployment, and fractured families, Neorealist cinema as a whole projected a belief in the inevitability of the desired national-popular alliance free of class, ethnic, and regional antagonisms. Ironically, the frequent audience perception of a narrative pessimism in numerous Neorealist films occluded the ideological optimism and political idealism. The simple presentation of unifying “social truths” on the screen did not necessarily render them real amongst the populace.

To their credit, Neorealist films such as *La terra trema* returned the “southern question” to the forefront of debate surrounding Italian nationalism. While the South had been viewed since the Risorgimento as the greatest obstacle in the path to Italian unity, Neorealist depictions of the Mezzogiorno at the very least attempted to annul long-standing characterizations of the region as backward, socially disintegrated, archaic, and foreign. By highlighting the similarities in work ethic, moral practice, and social organization that united cultural practice between the regions, Neorealism sought to reposition the South out of a relationship of dependence on northern culture, industry, and governmental aid into one of mutual benefit. While embedded in a specific period of postwar Italian history, film Neorealism has proven to be of valuable influence to subsequent Italian and international filmmakers intent on challenging hegemonic models of society, place, and identity. From French New Wave, to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s investigation of the homogenizing effect of Italian modernization and consumerism (*Comizi d’amore*, 1964) to activist documentary projects from the developing world, the cinematic techniques ascribed to Neorealism continue to be utilized for their contestatory modes of presentation. In the realm of representation, realism has become a salient mechanism for socio-cultural interrogation. This is where the legacy of Neorealism shines brightest.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Amy Siciliano, Kevin McHugh, Annarita Lamberti, and Marco Antonsich for their insightful comments and criticism. Special thanks to Jim Craine for proposing and organizing this unique edition and to Harald Bauder and Rachel Pain for their consideration and acceptance. I extend my sincerest gratitude as well to my advisors, Pete Shortridge and Garth Myers, for their relentless support, patience, and guidance.

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