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Notes toward a Definition of Neorealism

One of the most fascinating developments in the post-war cultural scene has been the sudden skyrocketing of Italian films and literature to a position of singular prominence. Ever since the end of the war a steady flow of books and films, of varying quality and range but invariably distinguished by a remarkable vitality, has reached our shore —bringing about a much needed re-evaluation of Italy and her people.

"The Italian success story" has become a favorite topic of conversation in cultivated circles, and in determining the real cause for a success so wide, the term "neorealism" has played, irrespective of individual views, a predominant role. Yet, seldom before in the history of contemporary criticism have we been at such a loss to define not only what neorealism purports to be but what it ultimately *means* within the larger frame of contemporary Italian culture. Not that definitions have been lacking. Quite the opposite: if anything, we have been drowned in a sea of conflicting reports and interpretations. Every critic has had his say, to the point that the term "neorealism," profusely and loosely used in a variety of contexts, has been employed both to describe the style of such diverse literary artists as Moravia and Vittorini and to indicate the highly polemical social and political themes prevailing in a good number of post-war Italian films. In common practice neorealism, as used in cinematographic criticism, has come to mean a representation of reality by certain and almost "traditional" methods (filming on location, the faithful reproduction of customs and traditions, historical accuracy, and so forth). A less vocal group of critics, on the other hand, have dismissed the whole question of neorealism by simply treating it as a catchword, a slogan, at best a kind of useful orientation within which many prominent Italian artists have readily found their place.

A BACKGROUND OF PAROCHIALISM

Now, there may be a grain of truth in all these contentions. My chief complaint, however, is that this kind of reasoning distorts the problem confronting us. Over-emphasizing the mechanics of neorealism or denying its existence has gotten us nowhere. Indeed, as we achieve a greater perspective on this question we can readily see that neorealism considered as a tool, or a bag full of tricks ranging from the

adoption of local dialects to the use of unprofessional actors, can hardly be of great consequence to the artist struggling to communicate with his public. One does not strait-jacket a certain theme in a certain form: the creative artist intuitively finds the "style" that makes his subject a living and independent work with a definite relevance to timeless and universal situations.

In our efforts to pin down the technical peculiarities of neorealism, we have thus far failed to consider the problem in a broader way. As a result, we have overlooked the fact that its important achievement has been to focus its attention (either with words or the camera's lens) on some real Italians, with their aspirations and hopes and anguish, moving against a truly Italian background—therefore substantially, if unintentionally, contributing toward the formation of a genuine *Italian* cinema.

To be sure, one of the problems we should have grappled with long ago was *why,* in spite of her having produced some significant films, Italy could never claim a truly "Italian cinema." The logical question that should have been asked was, to paraphrase the nineteenth-century critic Ferrini, "Esiste un cinema italiano?" In 1875 Ferrini had asked this very question in reference to the theatre and, even without his ever having explicitely stated just exactly what he meant by an "Italian" theatre, it is fair to assume that he visualized it as one drawn from Italian life, written from an essentially Italian viewpoint and one which, while preserving the local color and flavor, would be equally appealing to people from all walks of life the globe over.

If it is impossible to discuss, and then dismiss, in a few words the complex reasons for the non-existence (to this very day) of an indigenous theatre, it may be said that two traditions are generally responsible for the critical state in which the theatre (and then the cinema) have always found themselves in Italy.

The first of such traditions is one deeply embedded in the nation's social conditions, religion and philosophical outlook, through which the Italian has come to accept things as they are in a rather stoical manner (this is what he usually means when he exclaims the proverbial "Pazienza!"), seldom wanting to analyze the foundation of moral and social life in his country and even more seldom wanting to question it.

The second tradition is a literary one, dating back to Petrarch and the Renaissance—a tradition that has always looked with much repugnance upon any attempt to make life an integral part of literature. Even taking into account such writers as Boccaccio, Machiavelli and Verga, the cleavage between life and literature is a predicament that even time has failed to alleviate.

It is impossible, of course, to explain logically how the first tradition came into being and became rooted in the very fabric of Italian

life. On the other hand, it is at least feasible to speculate that the second tradition was made possible by a long record of failure in military and political matters. It was this failure that prompted the Italians to compensate for their disappointing performance by resorting, with a pride that with time metamorphosed into arrogance, to a display and glorification of their rich cultural heritage. As this pride every Italian instinctively felt for the cultural achievements of his country turned into adulation, it became more and more difficult to work outside the tradition. In literature, and later in the cinema as generally in many of the arts, few works that bore the mark of nonconformity and experiment made their appearance through the first part of the present century. Gradually, as the Italian artist gained the conviction that he must work excusively within his own tradition, his work became progressively more rhetorical, falling on self-imitation and losing whatever urgency it might have had in ordinary circumstances. If a poet has the right to depart from where the tradition has left off, there is little evidence that the majority of literary artists elected to exercise this natural right. Having failed to express themselves in a unique, personal manner, and having failed to look elsewhere for ideas that could readily be assimilated in their cultural pattern, their culture became not only ultraregionalistic in content, but downright parochial in form and scope.

This no doubt represents a severe judgement of Italian culture, but it is best to be aware of the past failures since they can often be used as convenient yardsticks to measure the extent if not to predict the probable durability of today's triumphs. Indeed, these preliminaries should make it clear that to a large extent the success the Italian artist is enjoying today must perforce imply not only the discovery of a new *maniera* in which to articulate a national condition with universal applications, but an unburdening the personality of whatever was conducive to a highly distorted view of life—a calculated rejection, therefore, of certain attitudes and traditions that had long been part and parcel of his intellectual and emotional baggage.

SHACKLES OLD AND NEW

It was generally against the background previously described that the movie industry came into being in Italy at the beginning of the century. Thus, rather than being accepted as a *new* medium that could, unhampered by existing traditions, start afresh to explore and dramatize in a visual manner feelings, passions and customs of a country that had at last found its independence, the movie camera was used to exploit, once again, a glorious past that had lost much of its glow since it had been changed from a living reality into a meaningless myth.

The long list of historical films made in the early part of this century testifies to this desire of "playing up" the greatness of Italy. *Quo vadis?, Cabiria, Nerone, The Last Days of Pompeii,* and countless other spectaculars certainly impressive for their contribution to the *technique* of movie-making, represent, more than attempts showing what the medium was capable of, works whose true value could be carefully measured not in terms of form and meaning but in dollars and cents. Because of its overwhelming initial success, the Italian movie industry found itself, almost overnight, in a position of leadership in a newly-born but still not over-competitive world of the cinema.

Crises always test the strength of leadership, and the crises provoked by the First World War, political and economic, and the chaos that ensued proved beyond any doubt that the leadership of the Italian cinema was at best of a very temporary nature. Most of the equipment and sets used to make movies were destroyed or damaged beyond repair; raw materials became increasingly harder to buy without a stable currency, and American and German movies flooded Italy and were found appealing by an audience that had grown accustomed to being fed extravaganzas of the historical type.

It was necessary to start all over again. Not until the early thirties did the process of reconstruction begin, however, with the opening of Cinecittà Studios, in the vicinity of Rome, and the Experimental Center of Cinematography where actors, directors and technicians began receiving training whose full value was not to be appreciated until several years later. The Italian cinema could actually have experienced some of kind of rejuvenation, had it not been for the fact that a dictator was now firmly in the saddle of power, and the new order he inaugurated became known through a series of clichés painted in bold letter on the facades of buildings from Piedmont to Sicily. The stern admonition "Mussolini is always right" left no doubt that a new era had, indeed, truly begun.

By the middle thirties the cinema, too, began feeling the stifling impact of censorship. It became first hazardous, then altogether impossible to deal with suicide, moral and political aberrations, social or religious themes, sabotage, discontentment. Italy, so dictated her master, must be depicted as morally and physically sane, clean, happy. Tourists and diplomats, if at all aware of the fact that Italy had been steadily losing her freedom, could derive satisfaction only from the fact that—at long last!—trains were running on time, the streets were clean, beggars had disappeared (as least from the prominent tourist landmarks), and they were faced everywhere with a picture of order and respectability.

Because the Italian artist was no longer able, let alone willing, to deal with the raw stuff of life, he became lax and shallow, often allow-

ing the cinema to degenerate in the hands of the fascists into an inefficient and puerile instrument of official propaganda. The rest of the world could well be undergoing one crisis after another: with the usual rare exceptions it is difficult for the student of contemporary Italy to find in the literature, and even less in the movies produced in the years 1920-1935, a sharp reflection of these crises.

STIRRINGS

Yet the waters were not completely stagnant: witness the fact that several intellectuals without special allegiance to any particular group, disgusted by the emptiness prevailing in the culture of their day and by the rhetoric of its form, began a crucial search for a "style" through which they could articulate once again some of the problems that had been drowned by the fanfare of official propaganda. In literature, this quest led to such disparate results as the novels of Alberta Moravia (*Le Ambizioni sbagliate,* 1953), Corrado Alvaro (*L'uomo è forte,* 1938), Romano Bilenchi (*La siccità,* 1940), Elio Vittorini (*Conversazione in Sicilia,* (1941), and the difficult poetry of a school that was called "hermetic" (Montale, Luzi, Quasimodo) which produced poems overcharged with strange, obscure images and metaphors that made their "message" incomprehensible to anyone without an extensive knowledge of and training in modern poetry.

In this search for what became known as "the national style" it was almost inevitable that scenario writers and film directors should turn their attention to the works of the late 1800s, which more than any other had given a serious and colorful depiction of mores and cultural manifestations of a regional, special character. Critics of literature and cinema began a new analysis and re-evaluation of those styles and contents that had left an indelible imprint upon modern Italian art and, as a partial result of this process of the spirit of inquiry of the thirties, a new orientation took place in the cinematic world. Among the important factors that gave further impetus to this trend was the publication of *Cinema* (1936) and *Bianco e nero* (1937), two cinematographic reviews with high standards which, under the guidance of Umberto Barbaro and Luigi Chiarini, emphasized the necessity of turning to reality—and not to literature—as a source of scripts. The war in Ethiopia (1935-36), too, contributed to a revision of traditional techniques as it forced Italian film directors to work outside a geographical and cultural context within which they had been raised and which had always been available to them. Working far away from their native country, forced to use untrained actors and rely on improvised methods, they were challenged by the possibility of an approach that would give them the opportunity of shedding some light upon the life of strange people long considered

barbarians but who claimed an interesting heritage of their own that warranted careful scrutiny.

Through this experience the focus underwent a shift. It was not necessarily the conventional "situation" of the Italian middle class that needed exploiting, but the very nature of man in general, and of Italian man in particular. It was this man who, living in a certain economic, social and political milieu, obsessed by certain desires and ambitions, afflicted by certain longings, was totally unknown to the Italian audience. In dramatizing his situation the artist was not to loose sight of the fact that it must be done in such a way as to draw ultimately the moral issues involved in living that particular life, and thus be concerned with the overriding questions of good and evil that are the proper concern of any serious artist.

This general climate made possible such films as Francesco de Robertis' *Uomini sul Fondo* (1940), Mario Soldati's *Piccolo Mondo Antico* (1941), Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942) and Vittorio de Sica's *I bambini ci guardano* (1943). These films do not necessarily represent special tendencies—as the titles themselves may indicate—but are samples of the personal approach adopted by individuals of different background, endowed with different sensibility, to give form and *meaning* to their products. Whether they operated within a school that tended toward the documentary style or one that held that the cinema must draw its subjects from masterworks of literature, they all agreed that in cinema, as in literature, one must deal with universal themes applicable to any human being regardless of his race, color and religion. Each of these men brought a new measure of realism to the cinema after they became acutely aware that the cinema, an art of things and facts and men, could never achieve its authenticity unless it contributed its share to a better knowledge of mankind. The flaw that had marred Italian films had not been necessarily a lack of subjects, but of a novel way to handle them so as to enable them to illuminate Man's Fate. In this respect De Sica's film constituted an important milestone precisely because it dared to take the traditional "triangle" situation and, through its presentation from the vantage point of a boy who lives through the experience of adultery and suffers from it, changed a prosaic theme, much exploited by literature and cinema, into a poignant indictment of the social and moral values of the Italian bourgeoisie.

Similarly, movies such as *Piccolo Mondo Antico* and *Ossessione* accomplished far more than demonstrating the validity and correctness of shooting on location. Their achievement consists perhaps in their having vividly and concretely presented, for the first time in many a decade, a part of the Italian landscape and life—in its misery and brutality and humanity—that previous film directors had carefully avoided because it was in direct contradiction with the teach-

ings of fascism and the false view of life it had tried to promulgate for almost twenty years.

It was only in 1943 that the various tendencies were brought together and given some sort of direction. As the government fell, an editorial published in *Cinema* denounced in no uncertain terms the clichés, the grotesqueness, the rhetoric and the conventionality that had characterized so large a share of Italian movies under fascism. In the latter part of the same year, Luchino Visconti declared, in what was to be a bit of autobiographical reminiscence, the reasons for his working with the cinematographic medium: "What brought me to the cinema, first of all, was a need to recount stories of living human beings, of men living in things and not of things themselves . . . I could shoot a movie of men standing before a wall, if I could find, in so doing, the qualities of a true humanity, if it were necessary to put men before simple sets so as to better find them and express them. . ."

THE BREAKTHROUGH

The time was ripe for that re-examination of the national conscience and that re-evaluation of values upheld for centuries that were long due. If Italy was ready to seek her place in a continent that had been devastated by a war whose scars were everywhere to be seen, she must first give indication that she had reached a kind of moral maturity. That maturity had been foreshadowed by the poetry of Montale as well as the fiction of Moravia, Vittorini, Pratolini and a good many other artists who, forced to live under the yoke of a dictatorship that had always repressed any attempt of free expression, had tried to dramatize what it is like to live a life that, humiliated again and again by violence, had lost its dignity.

The war was barely over when the first signs of this maturity blossomed as miraculously as the broom flower blossoms in arid lands. In 1945 Carlo Levi's *Christ stopped at Eboli* and Roberto Rossellini's *Open City* made their appearance. That they belonged to two different "genres" made little difference. What did matter was that they were the creations of artists who, liberated from a life without freedom, were now ready to express in a language which, for all its objectivity, managed to be eloquent, how much Italy had suffered in the disorder and violence that had been at the base of an intolerable way of life of twenty long, "black," years.

With the films and books that found their way into print in spite of tremendous technical difficulties, came a new view of what art, and certainly cinema, may be. In the words of Cesare Zavattini, a scenario writer who has become one of the most articulate spokesmen

of the new generation of cineasts, "the true function of the cinema is not to tell fables, and to a true function we must recall it. . . The cinema must tell a reality as if it were a story: there must be no gap between life and what is on the screen." This poetics, so boldly stated, revolutionized a tradition that had been unquestionably accepted for centuries, injecting new life into it.

With this new conception of the role of cinema came new films and new visions. Italy was being re-explored and re-analyzed with an objectivity and lyricism that had been made possible only by the war and the suffering Italians had endured. The Italian artist learned not to fear confessing that he had been afraid, that he was poor and wretched, but that the economic poverty of his people would never prevent him from exploring the mystery of existence, the social and political injustices, present and past mistakes—so as to grow, and help others grow. It is not without special significance that Rossellini declared that his great film, *Open City,* "is the film of 'fear', of everybody's fear, but mine above all. I, too, had to hide; I, too, fled; I, too, had friends who were captured and killed. My fear was real: a fear that meant my losing thirty-four kilos, perhaps because of my hunger, perhaps because of that terror which I have described in *Open City.*"

Little facts—the meeting of a soldier and a girl in a liberated town, his falling in love with her to find her the second time a prostitute—without his being aware that she is the same girl (*Paisan*); the man who finds a job only to lose it when his bicycle is stolen from him (*Bicycle Thief*); the isolation and pathos of a retired teacher who is about to be thrown out of his apartment because he cannot meet the great increase in his rent (*Umberto D.*)—these and other little episodes of common daily Italian life become transformed, in the magic hands of De Sica, Zavattini, Rossellini, Visconti and many other film directors, into larger reflections of the boundless sorrow of mankind.

It was customary in the early fifties to associate neorealism with the underground movement, and Anna Banti, a noted woman intellectual, defended this thesis in a penetrating article entitled "Neorealismo nel cinema italiano." Recent events have, however, done much to rebut her contention. Films like *Miracle in Milan, La Strada* and *Umberto D.* are irrefutable proofs that old positions have been abandoned for new ones. If the cinema of the immediate post-war period was preoccupied with documenting the sufferings and the tragedy Italy had experienced, different trends are discernible today. The Partisan hero is no longer at the center of the stage; his part has been played, his role is over. If politics had been injected into the early films of this new period, therefore slanting them now toward this, now toward that political side, more recent cinema has shown that its interest lies in providing a testimony of its high degree of critical and

moral consciousness by giving a truthful picture of Italian life that needs more understanding and less apology. The noted writer Alberto Moravia once remarked that if Italian literature could not claim a national novel or a national theatre, it was largely because it never cherished the idea of self-criticism. Contemporary films are strong affirmations that the time has come for that self-criticism which alone can lead to a better knowledge and eventually to an improvement of present conditions.

In the closing pages of his monumental *History of Italian Literature* Francesco de Sanctis had written: "We must examine ourselves, our customs, our ideas, our prejudices, our qualities, both good and bad; we must convert the modern world into a world of our own, by studying it, assimilating it, and changing it. . .We live a great deal on our past and on the work of other people. There is no life or labour we can call our own. And from our boasts one can perceive the awareness we have of our every inferiority." As an antidote, he suggested "an art resharpened in the jargon of the people, closer to nature; an art with more alive passions, immediate impressions, deriving its language not from rules, but from impressions."

It seems to this writer that if neorealism is to be appraised fairly, it must be in these terms. Its mechanics may or may not survive—that is not a vital point. What it has given to the Italian people, however, will indeed survive the test of time. To the literary and the cinematic artist neorealism has given a new, crisper language which, for all its commonness, has already been brought to a new height of poetic expression. It has forced every Italian intellectual to revive, re-examine, re-appraise. What was good yesterday, may not do today. Only what is lasting because truly meaningful is worthy of preservation. It has given the Italians and possibly to other people the moral strength to recognize their weaknesses and find the fortitude to hope and work. It has emptied the national culture of a rhetoric that has infested it for centuries. It is in these terms that we must measure its contribution and its achievement. And no sensitive person will deny that, as a school, or a trend, or a mood, neorealism should and, it is hoped, will survive.

SUGGESTED READING

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Anna Banti, "Neorealismo nel cinema italiano," in *Paragone,* no. 8, Aug, 1950, pp. 22-32.

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