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Author(s): Manoj Sharma

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NEOREALISM IN ITALIAN CINEMA: 1942-55

Manoj Sharma

Neorealism was a movement in Italy in the realm of motion pictures in the 1940s and early 1950s. It was a reaction against the artificiality of pre-World War II and fascist cinema. Neorealism sought to deal realistically with the events leading up to the war and the socio-economic problems that were engendered during the period and afterwards. Film directors like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti became forerunners of neorealism. Though they had differences in their aesthetic concepts and treatment of subject matter but their quest for reality and a deep and moral commitment led to the emergence of neorealism. Later, other directors such as Alberto Lattuada, De Santis, Luigi Zampa and Pietro Germi also contributed and Federico Fellini adapted and personalized neorealist aesthetic to such an extent that he was sometimes referred to as a betrayer of the cause of neorealism. An analysis of some neorealist films will provide us with an opportunity to comprehend neorealism - its principles, aesthetics and ideals. It was a break from the earlier escapist entertainment, known in Italy as the 'white telephone' films. From that perspective, neorealism isn't only an aesthetic but also a political and ideological movement. It strived for reorientation of cinema – expression of everyday reality and focusing on the class/people who have never before received the attention of cinema. In other words, its purpose was to deglamorise film and to make it a relevant, purposeful and socially useful form of communication.

The Precursors

Ossessione (Obsession, 1942) of Visconti marks the emergence of a style which was neorealist in conception and treatment. This film was not well known during that period as it also suffered from censorship troubles. But it definitely put Italian cinema on a new course, which was later perfected and symbolised by *Roma Città Aperta (Rome Open City, 1945)* of Roberto Rossellini. Alessandro Blasetti's *Quattro passi fra le nuvole (Four Steps in the Clouds, 1942)* was story of a poor, pregnant and unmarried peasant girl, its depiction uncovered certain unexplored scenes in the Italian life. The scenes of ordinary people traveling on a bus who are tired and unglamorous; old and untidy buses running on bumpy roads; images of villages; an unhappy girl; and a

traveling salesman unable to make ends meet, were new to the Italian screen. De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children are watching us*, 1943) dealt with the themes of an unhappy childhood, an emotionless marriage, adultery and suicide. These ideas challenged the official fascist propaganda, which believed that there were no unhappy children in the fascist state, no adulteresses (only men could have extramarital relationships while women had to suffer) and no suicides as suicide was antifascist.

Anti-Fascism:

Ossessione looked towards a kind of manifesto which was opposed to 'white telephones' and 'optimistic bourgeoisie intrigues of the official cinema.'¹ It was an electrifying tale of the seductive and destructive power of human sexuality. The authentic portrayal of the proletarian life outraged the Italian Fascist Government. A dark and provocative drama of sexual tension, it was criticised as immoral and subversive. It was also a harbinger of a new era of dark realism in Italian cinema. Under the Fascist regime of Mussolini, the film suffered a strict censorship. It has been acclaimed as the first example of neorealist cinema which is powerful in its marriage of character and landscape and in its initial scenes of broiling sexual tension.² The profound despair of *Ossessione* was as a result of the intention of Visconti to react against the obligatory optimism of Mussolini's Fascist regime and its fantasy tales about a prosperous Italy inhabited with healthy minds in healthy bodies. There was an emphasis on the solitude of the hero along with the ugliness of their environment — shabby pubs with greasy tables, uneven roads with cracked fuel stations, dirty grass, apathetic and indifferent faces of people. This face of Italy was earlier not depicted in the films.

Rossellini's desire to chronicle a specific reality and to bear witness to a given state of affairs is visible in *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1947). Anti-fascist at the same time, he also poses a specific question, "The Germans were human beings like everybody else what could have led them to this disaster."³ The answer to this is 'a corrupt idea', an idea that encourages "the abandoning of humility for the cult of heroism, the exaltation of strength rather than weakness, pride against simplicity."⁴ The best example of this idea is shown in the form of Edmund's former school teacher Herr Enning, an unreconstructed Nazi and a homosexual who tells Edmund that strong are meant to live and the weak to perish. This remnant of a corrupt Nazi philosophy, coupled with the father's grumbling that it would have been better for the family, if he had perished, encourages Edmund to poison him, thinking that he

is doing a correct thing, a justifiable act.

Rossellini views Herr Ennings' individual sexual depravity as symbolic of the wider ethical and philosophical depravity known as Nazism. Ingrid, the lesbian Nazi of *Rome Open City* also functions in the similar manner. It is the 'idea' of Nazism that so obsesses Rossellini, for it is this corrupt idea that encourages all the specific individual corruption that is contained in the film. Here, the situation is even worse because Enning is a teacher, and as such in an advantageous and revered position, from which he is capable of perpetrating his venomous ideas and beliefs on the most vulnerable.⁵ Furthermore, school master is a pederast of which twelve year old Edmund is unaware, and his gestures — gentle caress of Edmund's neck as they talk in the street or the virtual hug when they go back to Enning's room — are certainly reflective of homosexual overtones.

Haves versus Have-nots

The concern with labour and capital is also an important theme in *Ossessione*. The problem of unemployment of the protagonist reflects rising unemployment in Italy in those times. The distinctions between Haves and Have-nots are evident throughout the film. In *La Strada* (Federico Fellini, 1954), poverty is the driving force of the film. It compels Gelsomina's mother to virtually sell her to a brute, Zampano, who had earlier taken away her elder daughter Rosa who died in his service. The fatal implications of employment with Zampano reflect how severe is the mother's decision and how desperate her condition must be to send another daughter to the same possible death. Apart from visual reality, the camera treats the poor settings objectively by depicting their most characteristic constituents. On the other hand, luxurious settings are seen with a satire and only their most ridiculous elements are emphasised.⁶

De Sica's film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) reflected the banality of the stabilised postwar circumstances where hunger, poverty unemployment and despair were the most common subject-matter widely available. In De Sica's words, "my purpose, I was saying, is to find the element of drama in daily situations, the marvelous in the news, indeed, in the local news, considered by most people as worn out materials."⁷ When Antonio is reporting the theft of his bicycle at the police station, a journalist enquires if there is any news. When the policeman answers, "no, nothing just a bicycle, the spectator suddenly encounters a contest of perspectives. For police and press, bicycle theft is too trivial and lacks any sensationalism while for Antonio the policeman's dismissal

is a brutal understatement. At one level, the statement is an acceptable assessment of the event while on other levels its unfairness is an insult to our very ideas of human justice.”⁸

There is, however, another Rome, staged in opposition to Antonio and his fellow sufferers. This is the middle class city of restaurant customers, church visitors and football fans who are engrossed in the recreational pursuits of a typical Roman Sunday. What this indicates is that recent history has affected only the lower classes and that the bourgeoisie bask in a sort of a historical status, that their lives are free from the ravages of war and its aftermath and are disciplined only to the routine rhythms of the work week, with its ceremonial Sabbath rewards.⁹ This difference is most evident in the restaurant sequence where protagonist and his son are sitting next to a prosperous family of conspicuous consumers. The conceited son of the affluent family reflects his estimation of them in belittling glances and table etiquettes caricatured to the level of buffoonery.¹⁰ It is the waiter, however, who pronounces a decisive class differentiation between them and their neighbours, depriving them of a table cloth and failing to arrange the silverware, in distinct contrast to the amenities piled for the more affluent customers.¹¹ Thus, this juxtaposition of rich and poor makes a strong statement about the prevailing situation in Italy in those times.

In the words of Satyajit Ray, “*Bicycle Thieves* is the best example so far of such a story, perfectly translated to the screen in the most universally comprehensible terms.”¹² The film not only explores the intense suffering, despair, solitude and anxiety of the protagonist but the metamorphosis of a simple story into a penetrating chronicle of human agony within an apathetic and cruel social reality. The universality of its theme and the social consciousness it represented not only depicted, an acute and distressing picture of a working class family but summed up a whole epoch of hopelessness and frustration.¹³

Poverty and Inequality:

The main role in *Umberto D* was played by a college professor named Carlo Battisti, who had reportedly never acted before.¹⁴ The film does not scrutinise the root causes of inequality and poverty but accepts them as inevitable realities and advances to tackle with understanding and sympathy a single, perhaps untypical case. Roy Armes writes, “De Sica had opposed the contention that neorealism is in essence a proletarian cinema and justly claimed that the one problem which spreads through all his films is that of bourgeoisie: criticism of and satire on the bourgeoisie of course it is to be understood immediately

that beneath the criticism is hidden love for this humanity so full of defects but still remaining human.”¹⁵ He further writes, “It is clearly closely linked to De Sica’s own background in the impoverished middle class and he has explained that he dedicated the film to his father because he himself was an old bourgeois who fought against poverty and had his dignity to maintain. The dignity of a whole social class.... Umberto D is each one of us, members of the middle classes who have a sense of dignity. All the film in the single word pronounced in defence of the bourgeoisie, in defence of the individual.”¹⁶

Another face of the bourgeoisie is the landlady of Umberto D who embodies all the demerits of a society antagonistic to the old man: pretension, hypocrisy, callousness and stupidity. Though renting out Umberto’s room for adultery and prostitution in his absence, she victimises him for not paying his dues and is almost certain to throw out the maid when she learns of her pregnancy. Maria, the maid is another victim of the landlady and of society, and an example perhaps of the sub-proletariat. The film is a scornful social commentary in its criticism of the avaricious and hypocritical bourgeoisie embodied in the landlady who is sober with her finance yet has no hesitation in renting out Umberto’s room for one thousand lire per hour for adulterous purposes.

Moral Eye:

In *Rome Open City* the comparison between Pina and Marina is another important highlight of the film. The repercussions of two categories of moral decisions are manifested by these two women who are juxtaposed to each other, in the entire film in terms of physical appearance, emotional style, amorous desires and cinematic precedents. Though both share the same humble origins but Rossellini portrays Marina fully liable for her choices, projecting Pina as a model against which she will be ceaselessly judged. Marina appears to be a showgirl — glamorous and pretentious, whereas Pina is plain, simple and without any pretension. Pina’s language with its colloquialisms puts her directly in the popular midst while Marina uses a neutral, non-regional Italian conforming to her ‘pretensions to social mobility’. Pina dies in the name of courage and confrontation, Marina lives because of her shortcomings and when encountered the sight of her dead lover Manfredi, she only faints in a coward’s version of Pina’s heroic and noble martyrdom.¹⁷

Emphasising the interpersonal success of Pina and the emotional insolvency of Marina is their different attitude towards love itself. Pina

sees it as an internal force 'set in motion by an act of free will' while Marina views it as an external drive that oppresses those who become its victim. Pina says, in a scene, "well a woman can always change, especially when she is in love", thus, viewing the woman as the architect of her own amorous transformation while Marina assigns love's alchemy to another source she tells Manfredi, "If you had really loved me, you would have changed me", thus externalising the reason for her ethical bankruptcy. When Manfredi had taken refuge at Marina's house, she seemed to be totally distraught on the question of informing Ingrid, the lesbian agent, about the whereabouts of Manfredi. Her mental conflict can be understood in terms of her moral sense (of right) versus material desires (of wrong). Ultimately her material urges overpower her and she betrays her former lover, someone who had sought refuge with her. At another level, the depiction of Italian life under Nazi occupation reflects a stark juxtaposition of good (the Resistance) and evil (the perverted Germans and their much less offensive Italian allies). On the one hand, it is a vivid depiction of the years 1943-44, a period distinguished by hunger (Pina), self-sacrifice (Don Pietro), will to continue the struggle (Francesca), corruption (Marina) and persecution (Manfredi) and on the other, it sounds the note of optimism with which the year 1945 ended. *Rome Open city* exhibited sufficient strength and momentum to continue its vision and to inspire a whole cinematic movement committed to its accomplishment.

In *Sciuscia*, (*Shoeshine* 1946, Vittorio De Sica) value judgement of the adult world is done not by scrutinising it in its own terms but by contrasting it with the virtuousness and innocence of childhood. The portrayal of children as innocent victims lays the blame entirely on the adults whose actions prove them to be ignoble and hostile. Giuseppe's elder brother callously pushes them in crime, while the police use trickery to seek information from them, lawyers are mean and opportunistic and prison officials behave stupidly by separating the two boys from each other, leaving Giuseppe in bad company and then punishing Pasquale for fighting a bully.

About the role of the son in *Bicycle Thieves* as a moral eye to the entire film Andre Bazin writes "The idea of the boy is a stroke of genius... It is the child who gives to the workman's adventure its ethical dimension and fashions, from an individual moral standpoint, a drama that might well have been only social.... The complicity between the father and the son is so subtle that it reaches down to the foundations of the moral life....The public shame of the worker, exposed and clouted in the open street, is of little account compared with the fact that his son witnessed it. When he feels tempted to steal the bike, the silent

presence of the little child, who guesses what his father is thinking, is cruel to the verge of obscenity.”¹⁸

In *Riso Amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1948), on the most concrete level, that of individual story, Francesca’s new life begins after the death of Silvana, who at the end of the film earns her personal honour and Marco’s affection.¹⁹ Francesca who initially was a partner in crime with Walter shows a change in herself as the film progresses and is finally transformed by the end of the film. Marco, lover of Silvana, who was an antithesis of Walter, an unscrupulous thief, exerts a deep influence on Francesca who literally changes place with Silvana — not only in terms of their relationship with men but also their moral stance — during the course of the film. Silvana who began as an innocent maiden deteriorates and degenerates while Francesca balances this by gradually and systematically progressing towards redemption, or rather towards purification, truth, virtue and morality.

Dedramatisation

Paisan (*Neighbour*, Roberto Rossellini), committed to dedramatisation, exhibits only a few soldiers, a couple of explosions and a burning house. There is hardly any attempt to portray genuine anxiety or to show real heroics. The entire episode is shot in medium or long shot and in semi-darkness, so that one has a powerful sense of being witness to rather than identifying with the action.²⁰ The characters are not heroes or leaders but common people whose participation in war will, if they remain alive, be no more than a solitary incident in their lives. The murder of two Fascists is shown in the similar serene factual manner as the execution of two partisans. The formal elements like *mise-en-scene*, lighting and camera movement also work here in the direction of reality. In the final episode, the faces of partisans are often so perfectly blurred that we become consciously aware that we cannot view them, and thus we temporarily miss the grip of the film’s narrative. In the Florence episode, the sequence of the execution of the Fascists appears so real precisely because it takes place very quickly: they are dragged into and out of the frame and summarily killed without any fanfare, in a few seconds. In the fourth episode, when Harriet is suddenly told of Lupo’s death, no time is devoted on preparations for or reactions to either event and we accept this as somehow more lifelike because it is not what we see in conventionally “realistic films” where the fullest emotional effect is generally wrung from each image and event.²¹

Robert Kolker writes: “The neorealist wanted only to avoid heaping upon the spectator clichéd emotion extraneous to what was needed to

understand the character in his or her immediate situation, and rather to allow audience response to flow from the “image facts” and not a preconceived notion of character.” *Paisan* also exhibits the effectiveness of Rossellini’s stylistic technique: his capability to capture a seeming spontaneity, his unrestrained handling of locations, non-professionals and crowds, and his sensitive portrayal of various moods and atmospheres.²² Thus, Rossellini commands control over his own blend of realism and subjectivity, uniting the personal philosophy of his earlier films with a structure built on verisimilitude.²³

Millicent Marcus writes that De Sica’s “Ideal of a film that is utterly devoid of a dramatic superstructure and that dignifies the ordinary and the unexceptional by taking any moment of human life and showing how striking that moment is” finds its closest possible realisation in *Umberto D*. De Sica has applied the term ‘uncompromising’ to describe his film, which makes no adjustments to commercial demands for drama, ostentation and emotional catharsis.²⁴ It is not so much the non-existence of the extraordinary, then, that explains *Umberto D*’s mark of authenticity, but the dedramatisation of essential dramatic situations and moments which De Sica rejects to order in any hierarchy of significance.²⁵ Maria is the spokesperson for this device of dedramatisation when she tells Umberto in the similar matter-of-fact approach that she applied to complain of the ants in the kitchen, leading to Umberto’s exclamation: “Pregnant, and you say it like that!” Maria replies, “How should I say it?” clearly emphasising De Sica’s approach of emotional leveling by not agreeing to give excessive dramatic thrust to her disclosure. Another instance of shying away from melodramatic trappings is witnessed when Maria tells the soldier from Naples that she is pregnant and he walks away in silent dismissal of any responsibility for her crisis, leaving the harsh realities behind.²⁶

Portrayal of Women

In *Bitter Rice* perhaps the most prominent intrusion is that of the undisguised eroticism which Silvana, introduces into the otherwise pure neorealist canon. Though neorealism recognised the sexuality of its characters in the premarital pregnancies of Pina in *Rome Open city* and of Maria in *Umberto D*, for instance, it did not make eroticism one of the driving forces of the narrative activity, nor did it exhibit the physical statistics of its characters, the manner in which De Santis does in *Bitter Rice*.²⁷

Another manner in which *Bitter Rice* transcends its own melodramatic assertion is by making melodramas one of the thematic

interests of the film and then balancing it with a contesting disposition, that of documentary realism. The juxtaposition of these two competing forces is clear from the very opening title which declares, "... man sought two things since the dawn of time food and love... The film tells two stories: one of hard work and other of the flow of emotions created by thousands of women who pick and plant, pick and plant for forty days."²⁸ The two stories that the film intends to narrate — that of food and that of love — unveils the division of De Santis' allegiance between the assertion of documentary reportage on the one hand and of melodrama on the other. In the very beginning, the dual nature of his project appears as he juxtaposes the two narrative approaches that will portray women.

De Santis, denies any erotic intent, explaining that in this film he was thinking not so much of eroticism as of liberation, desiring "to express man, woman and society in their... natural primitive integrity."²⁹ He accepts eroticism only as "a total interpretation of nature, outside social or moral habits, a total sense of nature, a...cosmic sense of nature."³⁰ If such is the case, De Santis doesn't really succeed in *Bitter Rice* as Silvana is the centre of the film with her physical presence, creating an international reputation for herself as the type of pin-up the film was supposed to denounce.³¹

Deviations or Additions:

Despite authentic elements, *Miracle in Milan* (1953, De Sica) remains a fairy tale, replete with magical and unbelievable incidents — recovery of Toto, protagonist by an old woman, long scene of Toto's granting of wishes of the poor with the help of a magic dove, blowing away of tear-gas used by the police with the help of the magic-dove and final departure of Toto and his friends on a broomstick to heaven a journey towards imagination and fantasy.

Barbaro points the deviation of the neorealist technique in the zoom shot from Umberto's window to the cobblestones below where the obtrusive camerawork and its subjectivity is suggestive of Umberto's contemplation of a jump to death as the resolution of his dilemma. Another non-neorealist scene is that of the growling bull dog in the kennel, depicting Umberto's (or Flike's) subjective point of view on the unfriendly environment of the kennel. Another subjective set of images are presented when Umberto is traveling in a trolley car to the presumed destination of Flike.

The near absence of concrete spatial and temporal indicators to root the narrative in history is a departure from standard neorealist

practice. Millicent Marcus observes that in *La Strada* “with regard to time, the Esso sign in the background of the first composite suggests that this is a postwar setting, as does the red headed prostitute’s admiring question, ‘Is it American?’ when presented with the spectacle of Zampano’s moto-trailer and scene of their imminent lovemaking.”³² Edouard de Laurot indicates that Zampano’s refusal to identify his origins — his reply to Gelsomina’s question, “Where do you come from?” With the non-committal, “From my part of the country” and “Where were you born?” with “In my father’s house” — reflect as much his rootlessness as his conversational perversity. Millicent Marcus writes, “Unbound in time and space, Fellini’s story thus announces its departure from neorealist historicity and its preference for an historical rendering of the human condition.”³³ In its departure from neorealist constraints of subject matter and ideology *La Strada* opened the path for forays into territory previously considered forbidden for serious cinematic treatment. Georges Sadoul concurs, “Far from betraying neorealism, Fellini enriched it by guiding it along a new path.”³⁴

In *Paisan* the use of flashback, when Fred tells the prostitute about Francesca, is an addition to neorealist practice in the narrative structure. With *Umberto D*, De Sica and Zavattini have not renounced the radical promise of the initial neorealist films; they have simply transferred the responsibility from the level of narrative content to that of cinematic form. This retreat into form as the agent of social change is not so much a dismissal of the neorealist project as a modernisation of it. The emphasis on working-class and the reference to resistance ideals no longer appealed to an Italy anxious to put the “bad old day” behind it, like Umberto’s landlady, and revel in the gains of reconstruction. By making the form the new repository of neorealist meaning, De Sica and Zavattini gave a blow to classical neorealism of content and made possible instead Fellini’s, Visconti’s and Antonioni’s application of its stylistic precepts to themes hitherto excluded from serious postwar cinematic portrayals.

In *Paisan*, the actual news reel footage is integrated with the filmed narrative in such a manner that they blend together in a seamless whole, and the editing is done in such a way that it is extremely difficult to separate the two types of footage at the first glance. Rossellini’s style of blending various elements is also reflected in the selection of actors. The Americans, used in the film, were certainly not stars but they were nevertheless professionals with considerable theatrical experience in United States. The central roles in each episode are masterfully played by these professionals amidst a huge number of non-professional actors, generally in minor roles.³⁵ The whole film may be said to be about

transformations — of peoples, of genres and of the systems of signification that characterise a culture. Rossellini's concern with the second and third kinds of transformation is what makes him the initiator of a new cinematic approach and of a new cultural foresight — in short, it is what makes him the first neorealist.³⁶ The generic transformation is the most evident and the easiest to recognise, thanks to "Rossellini's own celebration of the spontaneous creations of the actors: of Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi in particular."³⁷ Both had experience of working on the stage as well as in cinema. The use of dialect and slapstick humour by Rossellini has been done so exquisitely and aptly that it generates relaxation in moments of almost intolerable dramatic intensity.

An analysis of film *Rome Open City* points out the hoary truth that insufficient resources and difficult conditions of work are often helpful to the art. The fact that shooting had to be done in real streets and real houses for lack of a studio, the grey photography because of the lack of power units and abrupt cuts because of the fact that editing was done in bits and pieces and constantly improvised provided this 'reconstituted actuality' a semblance of documentary authenticity. Peter Bondanella points out the entire cast of the open city had vast experience in the entertainment world so the use of non professional actors for specific aesthetic effects is completely absent in it. But he cast his actors in unaccustomed roles, placing actors normally identified with comic roles in situations that would demand tragic or tragic-comic actions. The script of the film was written and rewritten again and again, thereby, repudiating one of the myths about neorealism and Rossellini's stylistic contribution to it — that of improvisation.³⁸ Contrary to traditional belief that sets are of little importance in neorealist films, the very structure of the set of Gestapo headquarters heightens the drama. From Bergmann's Central office, where he interrogates his prisoners, two doors open out onto totally different worlds — one to torture chamber where blood, sweat, cruelty and sadism rules and the other to a kind of recreation room for German officers where Champagne, playing cards, piano music and gossiping flourish, oblivious to the human suffering on the other side of the wall.

Bicycle Thieves was a neorealist masterpiece — with a huge budget, a cast of hundreds and a meticulously devised shooting style.³⁹ Far from being economical, "the total cost of the finished picture came to almost exactly 100,000 lire; that was almost \$50,000 at the then rate of exchange, and though this is a small budget by British standards, it is high by Italian standards, very few films indeed cost more, most cost less, and many much less."⁴⁰ It is reflective of a conscious ideological

prise de position against the elaborate traditions of the commercial cinema — a dismissal that is manifested in two scenes in *Bicycle Thieves*. First, when a co-worker curses the Sunday rain and laments that there is hardly anything to do but go to the film — a singularly uninteresting prospect for him — he is pleading for the unrelatedness of commercial cinema to the common plight. It is important, too, that Antonio's nightmare starts as he is pasting a publicity poster of Rita Hayworth's new film, indicating a noticeable disparity between commercial cinematic fantasies and the genuine survival problems troubling the Italian populace.⁴¹

One of the significant developments because of explorations of so many directors in the realm of neorealist principles - the subject range of the neorealist cinema was considerably broadened, and an increasing number of topical problems were dealt with. These films provide no comprehensive analysis and most just only mention various facets of life in post-war Italy. However, the fact that they bore witness to the existence of the problems was significant. Not only the neorealist but also their fellow travelers were bitten by the prevailing desire to present as many facets of life as possible in film. Thus, in the early 1950s, the subjects were changed and a less sharp social reality, having trust in the future, was substituted for the grievous and problem-ridden post war period.

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