

Film Styles: Italian Neorealism

Italian neorealism (Italian: Neorealismo) is a style of film characterized by stories set amongst the poor and working class, filmed on location, frequently using nonprofessional actors. Italian neorealist films mostly contend with the difficult economical and moral conditions of post-World War II Italy, reflecting the changes in the Italian psyche and the conditions of everyday life: poverty and desperation. Neorealism is properly defined as a moment or a trend in Italian film, rather than an actual school or group of theoretically motivated and like-minded directors and scriptwriters. Its impact nevertheless has been



enormous, not only on Italian film but also on French New Wave cinema and ultimately on films all over the world. "The term 'neorealism' was first applied by the critic Antonio Pietrangeli to Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943), and the style came to fruition in the mid-to-late forties in such films of Roberto Rossellini, Visconti, and Vittorio De Sica as *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Shoeshine* (1946), *Paisan* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), and *The Earth Trembles* (1948). These pictures reacted not only against the banality that had long been the dominant mode of Italian cinema, but also against prevailing socioeconomic conditions in Italy. With minimal resources, the neorealist filmmakers worked in real locations using local people

as well as professional actors; they improvised their scripts, as need be, on site; and their films conveyed a powerful sense of the plight of ordinary individuals oppressed by political circumstances beyond their control. Thus Italian neorealism was the first postwar cinema to liberate filmmaking from the artificial confines of the studio and, by extension, from the Hollywood-originated studio system. But neorealism was the expression of an entire moral or ethical philosophy, as well, and not simply just another new cinematic style" [André Bazin (author) & Bert Cardullo (editor), *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (Continuum International Publishing, 2011) p 19]

Historical origins of Italian neorealism

By the outbreak of World War II, the country had been under Benito Mussolini's since 1924. With the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime in 1943 and the end of World War II, Italian directors, newly freed from Fascist censorship, were able to merge a desire for cinematic realism (a tendency already present during the Fascist period) with social, political, and economic themes that would never have been tolerated by the regime. Neorealist films often took a highly critical view of Italian society and focused attention upon glaring social problems, such as the effects of the Resistance and the war, postwar poverty, and chronic unemployment. Continuing a trend toward realism that had already been initiated during the Fascist period by prewar directors such as Alessandro Blasetti (1900–1987), Augusto Genina (1892–1957), and Francesco De Robertis (1902–1959), these new postwar faces - dubbed neorealists by critics who praised the 'new' realism they believed such directors sought to create - rejected, in some instances, traditional dramatic and cinematic conventions associated with commercial cinema in both Rome and Hollywood. Some (though very few) even wanted to abandon literary screenplays

altogether to focus on improvisation, while most preferred to chronicle the average, undramatic daily events in the lives of common people with the assistance of a literate script. But almost all neorealists agreed that the 'happy ending' they associated with Hollywood was to be avoided at all costs.

With Cinécitta (Rome's studio complex) relegated to refugees, films had to be shot outside. Surrounded by the shambolic ruins of World War II, human and structural, filmmakers had ready-made drama even in their backdrop, the atmosphere anxiety-charged and utterly uncertain. After twenty-one years under Mussolini, all bets were off as to what direction Italy would take. In the war's aftermath, members of the Resistance (including several of the neo-realist directors) had to come to terms those who collaborated. Though unstated, this almost civil war-like tension fuels neo-realist cinema.

Characteristics

Ideologically, the characteristics of Italian neorealism were:

- a new democratic spirit, with emphasis on the value of ordinary people
- a compassionate point of view and a refusal to make facile (easy) moral judgements
- a preoccupation with Italy's Fascist past and its aftermath of wartime devastation
- a blending of Christian and Marxist humanism
- an emphasis on emotions rather than abstract ideas

Stylistically, Italian Neorealism was:

- an avoidance of neatly plotted stories in favor of loose, episodic structures that evolve organically
- a documentary visual style
- the use of actual locations - usually exteriors - rather than studio sites
- the use of nonprofessional actors, even for principal roles
- use of conversational speech, not literary dialogue
- avoidance of artifice in editing, camerawork, and lighting in favor of a simple 'styleless' style

So what is neo-realism? André Bazin called it a cinema of 'fact' and 'reconstituted reportage', having its antecedents in the anti-Fascist movement with which these directors identified. Although they owed a debt to Renoir (with whom both Luchino Luchino Visconti and Michelangelo Antonioni had worked), the neo-realists respected the entirety of the reality they filmed. This meant occasionally showing scenes in real-time and always resisting the temptation to manipulate by editing. Scenes are shot on location, with no professional extras and often a largely unprofessional cast. Set in rural areas or working-class neighborhoods, the stories focus

focus on everyday people, often children, with an emphasis on the unexceptional routines of ordinary life.

Neorealism preferred location shooting rather than studio work, as well as the grainy kind of photography associated with documentary newsreels. While it is true that, for a while, the film studios were unavailable after the war, neorealist directors shunned them primarily because they wanted to show what was going on in the



streets and piazzas of Italy immediately after the war. Contrary to the belief that explains on-location shooting by its supposed lower cost, such filming often cost much more than work in the more easily controlled studios; in the streets, it was never possible to predict lighting, weather, and the unforeseen occurrence of money-wasting disturbances. Economic factors do, however, explain another characteristic of neorealist cinema - its almost universal practice of dubbing the sound track in post-production, rather than recording sounds on the supposedly 'authentic' locations. Perhaps the most original characteristic of the new Italian realism in film was the brilliant use of nonprofessional actors by Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti, though many of the films accepted as neorealist depended upon excellent performances by seasoned professional actors.

Some film historians have tended to portray neo-realism as an authentic movement with universally agreed-upon stylistic or thematic principles. In fact, Italian neorealist cinema represents a hybrid of traditional and more experimental techniques. Moreover, political expediency often motivated interpretations of postwar neorealism that overlooked the important elements of continuity between realist films made during the Fascist era and realist films made by the neorealists. After 1945, no one in the film industry wanted to be associated with Mussolini and his discredited dictatorship, and most Italian film critics were Marxists; neorealism's ancestry was thus largely ignored.

One of the paradoxes of the neorealist era in Italian film history, an epoch that lasted no more than a decade, is that the ordinary people such films set out to portray were relatively uninterested in their self-image. In fact, of the approximately eight hundred films produced between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s in Italy, only a relatively small number (about 10 percent) could be classified as neorealist, and most of these few works were box-office failures. After years of fascist dictatorship and the deprivations of war, Italians were more interested in being entertained than in being reminded of their poverty.

(<http://cinecollage.net/neorealism.html#ftn>)