

THE ENDLESS PURSUIT OF TRUTH: SUBALTERNITY AND
MARGINALIZATION IN POST-NEOREALIST ITALIAN FILM

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Languages.

Chapel Hill
2007

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ABSTRACT

LUCA BARATTONI: The Endless Pursuit of Truth: Subalternity and
Marginalization in Post-Neorealist Italian Film
(Under the direction of Federico Luisetti)

The dissertation analyses the political dimension of post-neorealist Italian film, concentrating on the representation of the subaltern by directors such as Antonio Pietrangeli, Alberto Grifi and Massimo Sarchielli, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. After a critical assessment of the debate on Neorealism, the dissertation applies Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "minor literature" to practices of subversion at play in Italian film, attempting a renegotiation of Italy's cinematic canon. Other analyzed themes include the potential of the cinematic medium to provide agency to marginalized social groups and the role of intellectuals in Italy's anomalous political landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

REINSERTING THE MASSES INTO HISTORY AND ABANDONING NARRATIVE

When debating the meaning and function of the word “realism” in Italian film, transparency of the photographic image and genuinely mimetic sets of filming procedures are only one aspect of its definition. In fact, Italian filmmakers have never refrained from defining their work as realist even when the aesthetic premises would apparently discourage such label. This apparent contradiction has interested more than one scholar in the past, for example Millicent Marcus who in her *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* opened the chapter on Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Teorema* with a number of problematic statements issued by the director on the very nature of cinematic realism,¹ to which Marcus replies by saying:

For a filmmaker who abhors naturalism, who reconstructs everything, who is wedded to mythic archetypes, dreamwork and wish-fulfillment fantasies, it is difficult to fathom Pasolini’s logic in designating himself a realist [...]. Indeed if Pasolini’s claim to realism is to have any meaning at all, it must be considered in the context of his criticism of neorealism. (Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism 45-46)

¹ Marcus 245. “I consider my films realist compared with neorealist film.” “In neorealist film, day-to-day reality is seen from a crepuscular, intimistic, credulous, and above all naturalistic point of view [...]. In neorealism, things are described with a certain detachment, with human warmth, mixed with irony — characteristics which I do not have. Compared with neorealism, I think I have introduced a certain realism, but it would be hard to define it exactly.”

This explanation captures an important aspect of Pasolini's philosophy of realism, but it should be complemented by another instance: the potential of reading into historical, fantastic, non-realist plots an account or a reflection of contemporary economic and social problems through a number of politically motivated mediations. In Italian film, this is what makes a work realist, sometimes even more than a set of aesthetic rules aimed at effortlessly recapturing the flow of daily events and entrusting film to the ontologic nature of the photographic image. This is why Pasolini's mythic realism seems at first sight problematic but can be definitively inscribed into *an even more realist* line by the filmmaker: it is the same tendency that would prompt, for example, Roberto Alemanno to judging Bernardo Bertolucci's *Novecento* as a pretentious, washed-out, unrealistic representation of class struggles whereas *Star Wars*, thanks to the upright character of the rebellion would in fact convey a more vigorous and honest revolutionary message.² One could actually argue that this ingenuous tendency of mediating social events in apparently distant genres almost coincides with the birth of Italian literature:

Both figure and fulfillment possess ... the character of actual historical events and phenomena. ... This enables us to understand that the beyond is eternal and yet phenomenal; that it is changeless and of all time and yet full of history. ... The many played-out dramas are combined in one great play, involving his [Dante's] own fate and that of all mankind; they are but exempla of the winning or losing of eternal bliss. With Dante as spectator, all the dramas are played over again in tremendously concentrated form ... And in them, seemingly scattered and fragmented, yet actually

² Roberto Alemanno, Itinerari della violenza. Il film negli anni della restaurazione (1970-1980) (Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1982) 135.

always as parts within a general plan, the history of Florence, of Italy, of the world, unfolds.³

Many scholars believe that one of the central vocations of Italian cinema, even before Neorealism,⁴ has been, to quote Ivone Margulies, the quest for “a cinema animated by a double movement of misrecognition and social adjustment.”⁵ Others, like Mira Liehm, are even more direct: “The trend toward realism has always been the most important of the Italian artistic endeavors.”⁶ Margulies is describing Cesare Zavattini’s⁷ reenactment project *Love in the City*, but the space given to the poor and the unprivileged traverses the entire corpus of Italian film from its origin to date, as if realism itself equates with a sort of compensating effort to restore the place of the low-life in modern Italy. The issue, obsessively investigated, of expunging the conventional and ideological dimension of commercial, industrial film is a constant on which a significant number of Italian filmmakers have racked

³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953) 197-98.

⁴ See for example the pages that Mira Liehm dedicates to the Neapolitan filmmaker Elvira Notari in her *Passion and Defiance*. The few photograms left of Notari’s entire work have a shockingly “pre-neorealist” appearance.

⁵ Ivone Margulies, “Exemplary Bodies: Reenactment in *Love in the City*, *Sons*, and *Close Up*,” *Rites of Realism. Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke UP) 81.

⁶ Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1984) 80.

⁷ Cesare Zavattini (1902-89) was a writer, film director, and scriptwriter, born in Luzzara, Emilia-Romagna, Northern Italy. He began his career with novels where social commitment is infused with humour and a touch of Surrealism, as in *Parliamo tanto di me* (1931), *Io sono il diavolo* (1941), and *Totò il buono* (1943). His work with Vittorio de Sica resulted in some of the best examples of neorealist cinema, including *Sciusià* (1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (1948, *The Bicycle Thieves*), *Miracolo a Milano* (1951), *L’oro di Napoli* (1954), and *La ciociara* (1960).

their brains. A study taking into account the strategies of representation and social redemption of subaltern individuals and groups earns legitimacy if, as Frederic Jameson writes, we reverse the place of realism in its relationship to modernism and we think of it “as a form of demiurgic praxis” (Signatures of the Visible 162) trying to understand “its essential falseness and conventionality” (163). The project of exploring the realist line in Italian film dealing explicitly with the masses excluded from signification can achieve two important goals: To include in the discussion recently (re-)discovered works whose importance is somehow understood but not systematized critically; and to offer a different but not oppositional line of interpretation to the already existing “grand narratives of Italian cinema” — for example, reading Italian film in the light of Neorealism (Marcus); seeing a fundamental influence of Pirandello’s concept of humor as a strategy of subversion in all of Italy’s most vital achievements (Gieri); arranging the entire history of the country’s cinema in the three major moments of realism, modernism, and postmodernism (Jameson); or expanding on Italian film’s capacity of monitoring sociological changes (Landy). The aesthetical and ethical systems of the *auteurs* representing the core of this project — Antonio Pietrangeli, Alberto Grifi (in collaboration with Massimo Sarchielli), and the duo of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi — will be examined both in their own autonomy and in relation to the realist movement *par excellence* of Italian film, Neorealism.

Italian filmmakers — most notably, Luchino Visconti — seldom have bestowed class consciousness to the indistinct, populist groupings of poor and excluded children and men populating classics like *Bicycle Thieves*, *Shoe-Shine* or *Open City*.⁸ The same occurs in literature, certainly until Manzoni. But, even if the subaltern only occasionally become a class in classic Marxist fashion, lending an allegedly autonomous, significating voice to those who do not make what Elsa Morante called “la grande storia,”⁹ they populate under different titles the entire history of Italian realist film. From this standpoint Neorealism tried to achieve a twofold goal, not only representing the subaltern but also — albeit very faintly — exploring its possibility of agency. As Giorgio Tinazzi wrote, Neorealism tried to restore the signifying capacity of “zones of reality considered useless or marginal,” making them true subjects of history, even though it fell short of its goals because of the rhetorical encumbrance of the Resistance/Reconstruction ideology, whose stylistic consequences were also “the narrative arc resulting in a form of populism, the positive character acting like a guarantee, the sentimentality plugging every leak.”¹⁰

⁸ Giorgio Tinazzi notes that Marxist intellectuals like Fortini and Roversi were the first ones to declare explicitly the insufficiency of socio-economic analysis in Neorealist films, in “Un rapporto complesso,” Cinema e letteratura del Neorealismo (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1990) 34.

⁹ See the introductory chapter of Morante’s most successful novel, La storia (Torino: Einaudi, 1995) 5-12.

¹⁰ “Zone di realtà considerate inutili o marginali;” “la parabola narrativa dava ragione al populismo, il personaggio positivo garantiva, il sentimento copriva le falle,” Giorgio Tinazzi, “Stile e stili del neorealismo,” Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano. Atti del convegno della X Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, ed. Lino Micciché (Venezia: Marsilio, 1975) 253-54.

It was not the first time the subaltern enjoyed a position of apparent centrality in Italian film, and after Neorealism many filmmakers have brought to the fore the fundamental issue of the ephemeral presence of subordinate groups. One interesting aspect is that such filmmakers do not belong to the canonized line of presumed followers of Neorealism, a line that sometimes seem to comprise numerically and qualitatively the vast majority of Italian movies. After the end of its heroic period, filmmakers like Rosi, Olmi and Scola could legitimately claim the baton of post-neorealist film. Sometimes, as in the case of Rosi and Scola, they exalted its legacy and treated it with a sense of nostalgic affection even when analyzing its insufficiencies. Sometimes they imposed their own work as an example of stronger incisiveness but always implying a direct connection with Neorealism, like Olmi did with his seminal works *Il posto* and *I fidanzati*. But one of the most intriguing aspects of scholarly work carried out on Italian film in the last fifteen years is the archeological “excavation” in the gold mine of the entire Italian cinematic *corpus*, which has led to the screening, restoring and reissuing of an unprecedented wealth of material. Many reasons lead to such a zealous democratization of genres, now available for scholars and cinéphiles at a different, fairly satisfactory level: for example, the marketing potential of what Lino Micciché called the “cinema di profondità” of the 70s, also boosted by Quentin Tarantino’s words on Fernando Di Leo as his favorite director and his subsequent involvement in special “King of B’s” and “Spaghetti Western” events at the

Venice Film Festival. And one can also argue that there was a diffused perception of the importance of other works — removed, forgotten, repressed — for the radicalism and criticality of their positions, as well as an implicitly oppositional stance. This so-called excavation officially marked the surfacing of a widespread impatience against the theoretical inertia conferring to the “modernist” masters — Fellini and Antonioni — and especially to Neorealism a privileged space, an elitist but by this time fossilized status that seems capable even today of promulgating final judgments on the aesthetic and moral value of the contemporary works.

But what is the real influence on Neorealism on post-WWII Italian film, and how can we make something out of Italian film as a whole, in terms of periodization, ideological conformity or challenge, and dependence or rebellion from established aesthetic patterns? Sometimes Neorealism has worked as a bastardization of a deceptively straightforward development. Within this frame, in what we can call the thumbs up/thumbs down culture, Italian cinema can be perceived as being, so to speak, addicted to realism, avidly using the entirety of the realist subjects present in a country such as unemployment, children in rags, the state of necessity during the war, and the like. On a different level, there is a tendency to read all Italian film in the light of Neorealism, as the title of the book written by Millicent Marcus argues, or to confer to neo-neorealist works a special place in the history of our moving pictures, rekindling that which appears to be the truest vocation of Italian cinema. The scope of the present research does not

include paradigmatic, post-neorealism realist figures like the above-mentioned Francesco Rosi and Ermanno Olmi, or the Taviani brothers, just to name some of the most recognizable ones, but it will allow for a history of Neorealism as a critical category, in order to review how the different positions on it have ranged, and to try to understand its concrete influence and importance on the three realist *auteurs* presented hereby. The narrative chosen for the present work is in fact one of progression towards a faithful, purer adherence to the demands of reality. Antonio Pietrangeli, Alberto Grifi with Massimo Sarchielli and the Yervant Gianikian/Angela Ricci Lucchi duo can stand together with the established, canonized masters and complicate the assumption about the importance of Neorealism for every realist picture realized after its death. In fact, these directors achieve remarkable results in broadening the scope of cinematic realism with almost no direct reference to sacred neorealist principles. In other words, they create their personal brands of realism with practically no need of the illustrious forefathers' legacy, sometimes arriving at their epistemological premises through different routes. Taking the argument to the extreme, one could postulate the existence of equally interesting and more radical realisms in Italian film, and relegate neorealism to a more limited sphere of influence, such as the impact it had on foreign cinematographies. The filmmakers presented in this project invested a great amount of theoretical and technical speculation in the pursuit of definitive, unassailable realism because of their main ethical purpose: Let the subordinate and voiceless protagonists of history speak

with no prearranged script, confer to their words the maximum power and credibility, and reinsert their cries in the chain of signification. Noël Carroll writes that “realism is not a simple relation between films and the world but a relation of contrast between films that is interpreted in virtue of analogies to aspects of reality” (Theorizing the Moving Image 244) and this is particularly appropriate for Realism in Italian cinema, which is often oppositional, confrontational and always engaged in an endless search for the ultimate means capable of guaranteeing a perfect mimesis. Sophisticated narratives were seen as superfluous excess already in the years of Neorealism, and completely abandoned by many directors whose ultimate goal was to break through conventional styles of representation. Pietrangeli, a strenuous advocate of realism, and a critic to the point of basically second-guessing many of the choices that Neorealist directors would actually make on the field, opts for a disintegration of linear plots in favor of a regime of visual associations interweaving the narrative ganglions in order to give meaning to the classes struggling with the values imposed by capital and economic growth. Grifi lets his actress — who was “discovered” homeless on the streets — dismiss the script, albeit rudimentary, and quite willingly accepts the original project being replaced by the new turns that the actors and crew members’ lives are taking. Finally, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi take the ultimate step towards the complete dismissal of fiction cinema and the return to the ontology of the photographic image, by rephotographing old material shot at the beginning

of the century during crucial moments of world history — the first World War, the colonization of Africa. Their goal is a return of the politically repressed by brutal colonization. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi try to give new dignity and visibility to the cannon fodder of history (the colonized, the brutalized, the eradicated), originally marginalized and treated as insignificant details in pictures blatantly celebrating the superiority and the conquests of Western civilization.

The rarefaction of narrative structures and in general a cautious attitude towards any type of narrativization was already evident in Neorealism. Rossellini explicitly set Neorealism apart from the conventional cinema of mediation: “oggetto del film realista è il ‘mondo’, non la storia, il racconto,”¹¹ while Zavattini tended to magnify the sociopolitical scope of cinema, arguing that thus far filmmakers had privileged the representation of the bourgeoisie because of the privileges and wealth that class was enjoying, and invoking a change of pace that would also involve less fortunate strata of society. Giorgio Tinazzi, the first to write about a “dilution” of narrative modules in *Umberto D.* synthetically summarizes as follows:

Il non eccezionale come oggetto di rappresentazione comportava il superamento di quella gerarchizzazione dei fatti che la costruzione narrativa favoriva, proprio perché portava a privilegiare le ‘punte’ significative a danno dei fatti non necessari allo

¹¹ Roberto Rossellini, “Due parole sul neorealismo,” *Retrospective* 4 (1953): 78.

sviluppo. La sintesi narrativa nasce quasi sempre dall'artificiosità, l'analiticità invece seziona il fatto, lo recupera — abbassandolo — alla sua "umanità".¹²

On the one hand, there is a theoretical effort deliberately striving to disengage film from narrative and spectacular complications, a clear reaction against what was perceived as passatist cinema, against the pre-war industry and its pompous display of expensive choreography, with magniloquent but ultimately insignificant actors in the background, whose only function was to perpetuate a cluster of well constructed reactionary values. On the other hand, different sensibilities used different approaches towards literature and attractions, if only to prop up the supporting structure of a given movie, and the critical admiration for other cinematographies became sometimes the surreptitious vehicle for conventional treatment of characters or situations. The rejection of strong narrative modules is seen as intrinsically positive and innovative: the result is a peculiar use of narrative episodes, whose function is to exemplify the type of troubles and ordeals one has to go through. The issue of finally giving to the marginalized citizenship in the realm of absence was also connected to the idea of time. In the hands of Zavattini, but especially of

¹² "The non-outstanding as object of representation entailed the rejection of the hierarchization of facts as requested by narrative construction, because it tended to privilege the 'points' of signification instead of the facts not necessary to its *development*. Narrative synthesis is almost always born out of artificiality, analyticity instead picks fact apart, confers to it — by lowering it — its 'humanity'," Giorgio Tinazzi, "Un rapporto complesso," *Cinema e letteratura del Neorealismo*, (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1990) 15. Tinazzi also mentions Zavattini's metaphor of Neorealist cinema as a medium that sticks to problems "like sweat sticks to skin," as well as a passage from the introduction written by Italo Calvino to his *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, in which the writer defines the cultural temperie where the novel was written as an "anonymous voice of the epoch," almost an epistemic testimony of the fields of force where the rationality and ideas of Neorealism were born.

Rossellini, time became a type of duration capable of enfolding everything, open to the unexpected and the unforeseen, reclaiming its integrity as something that cannot be fragmented and rearranged. Neorealist filmmakers tried to solve two problems: how to reinsert Italian people into history and how to give an adequate idea of the flowing of time, prefiguring a qualitative leap in communication and representation, almost a secular revelation. Zavattini spoke about his works that were most recognizable as fundamentally neorealist as moments of passage, innovative experiments which nonetheless must not be taken as definitive results but only as compromises. Something even more radically new was apparently in view, a product that would answer the problem of representation and time as well as the other related issues, like the function of narrative. The transition between the original sin of *Bicycle Thieves* or *The Earth Trembles*, i.e. the presence of “un racconto inventato” and the promised land of the “spirito documentaristico,” is still in the making.¹³ At the same time, Zavattini — himself a writer — epitomizes the problems that neorealist directors have with the role of the story; he adapts his own novel *Totò il buono* for *Miracolo a Milano*, in an apparent infraction of neorealist principles.

Each one of three *auteurs* mentioned above reacted to such open issues with a coherent set of aesthetic principles: Pietrangeli can be considered a skilled equilibrist, capable of rejecting absolute causality and

¹³ The two definitions — “a story of invention” and “documentary spirit” respectively — are in Cesare Zavattini, Umberto D. Dal soggetto alla sceneggiatura. Precedono alcune idee sul cinema, (Milano-Roma: Bocca, 1953) 16.

at the same time conferring a privileged status to the environment that influences the actions of his characters, while Grifi let the new life of his “guinea pig” dictate the direction of the movie only after he realized that it would not have been possible to chronicle the misfortunes of Anna through a careful reconstruction of her past. Even though the films of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, made with library pictures and without actors, are the exact opposite of well written stories with character development and thorough studies of different environments, they still rely on the emotional charge of the events portrayed; theirs is not a destruction of traditional cinema but a rediscovery of its potential, when not manipulated or repressed. In general, narrative artifices like saturation, inversion, and resolution after complication are replaced by clusters of events that are exemplary for their emotional and political potential: episodes connect in loosely incomplete fashion, subordinated to a moral construction, an historical message.

The argument one could make about the entertaining value that such works nevertheless have is in fact contradictory. On the one hand, Pietrangeli, Grifi and Gianikian/Ricci Lucchi functionally build their own aesthetic system; on the other hand, no matter how deeply and consciously these filmmakers elaborate their political realism, every work still has a melodramatic, narrative flavor crucial for its cohesiveness, to the point where a question about manipulation of the audience can be legitimately raised. It is as if, rejecting every temptation of coherent narrative and dismissing the option of adapting the principles of *Bildungsroman* to film

like Fascist cinema did, the auteurs still had to find something to complement the void left by abandoning narrative and to confer a structuring principle to their works. In other words, each filmmaker, within the boundaries of its elective style, tried to achieve the most unmediated representation in order to obtain an effect of maximum truthfulness. Almost a manifesto of literary Neorealism, the introduction to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* published by Italo Calvino in 1947 comes in handy to understand the spirit of that time: at first Calvino writes that the objective writing seemed so easily within reach, only to add that Italian intellectuals could not be indifferent to the most important literary currents on the cutting edge in Europe — in particular, Expressionism. Calvino's is the first, conscious effort to give artistic dignity to the marginalized, through their gestures and behaviors, without the entanglement of a plot with ramified ends.¹⁴ Pietrangeli will refine this technique by adding the unexpected emersion of memories charged with emotional meaning and using such moments as apparently accidental twists, thereby bringing an irrational element. The Roman filmmaker insisted on this theoretical cul-de-sac rooting for the application of cinematographic guidelines resembling the orality of language, and not the written — synonymous with artificial, fictional — aspect. This trend was taken by Grifi and Gianikian to its extreme

¹⁴ The Verism of Verga and Capuana represents a major break in Italy's literary tradition for the scientific interest towards a subaltern world of desperate and destitute people. In their works, a personal interpretation of Naturalism and a strong influence armoniously blend together. The influence of Verga and Capuana can be observed in the so-called neorealist writers of the 30s like Carlo Bernari, Ignazio Silone, and Corrado Alvaro.

consequences with obstinate determination, leading to the development of new technological devices whose purpose was to capture the flow of events in their untouched naturalness.

The tendency that is possible to observe in the Pietrangeli-Grifi-Gianikian arc¹⁵ is the use in which cinema, by then become an instrument of colonizing and hegemonic processes, is undergoing a transformation, with filmmakers trying out the potential of the medium as a means of subversion or as a vehicle for counter-discursive practices. Gilles Deleuze writes, trying to solve the problem, in his words, of a people that is not present in the discourse created by the prevailing forces:

Art, and especially cinematographic art, must take part in this task: not that of addressing a people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people. The moment the master, or the colonizer, proclaims "There have never been people here", the missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute. (Cinema 2. The Time-Image 217)

In other terms, there is a need of a deliberate research of exploring the medium as the political instrument which will finally grant historical equality to the marginal and the dispossessed, making cinema a loyal representative of difference and subalternity. If it is true that Italian film is quintessentially realist in its "serious" attempts, as Marcus puts it, and within this natural calling there is in turn a privileged space where

¹⁵ These *auteurs* are paradigmatic figures in a realist line exploring the modes of representation of subaltern and marginalized social groups, without an explicit reformulation of neorealist principles.

filmmakers experiment and test the medium's potential for redeeming the poor and the subaltern, then this conspicuous line will be worthy of examination in order to explore the strategies, the devices and the counter-discourses created for that purpose. In other words, the realist vocation of Italian film seems so adamantly established that it is sometimes hard to deconstruct the ideological layers and locate the fissures of the realist discourse. For the Italian case, the study of such invention is even more fascinating because it often originates from a clear Marxist consciousness, but in a complicated way, because Marxist theory in its Gramscian interpretation has worked in post-WWII Italy as a colonizing agent *sui generis*. Quoted in that Deleuzian passage is also the concept of "minor literature," in the sense that political authors explore the possibilities of a subversive, vernacular use of a dominant and colonizing practice, such as cinema, to liberate subaltern categories — women, dropouts, poor soldiers sent to death in meaningless wars, peoples that are considered uncivilized at best and brutishly imbecile at worst — from the homogenizing yoke of a dominant discourse. It is precisely "the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (Deleuze and Guattari 17) that emerges from their works, especially in Grifi's radical attempt to welcome the least privileged and most distant other and make her -- the female protagonist -- the foundation of a new society. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "the three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language,

the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation” (18).

Starting from the second point, one cannot help but note the obsessive, recurring theme of the reinsertion into history of the subaltern in Italian film: the filmmaker often takes upon himself the heraldic role of interpreter of popular demands, and the voice of the speechless and political avant-garde, filling the condemnable omissions and oversights of the ruling parties. And, regarding the collective value, it goes arm in arm with the sociopolitical analysis, pinpointing the failures and the aggressiveness of the political regimes, and sometimes striving to conjure up a different idea of communal life. For the first point, the deterritorialization of language can be linked to the lack of a shared idea of a national identity, which after the war was basically available for the highest, more aggressive bid of the forces physically occupying or ideologically influencing the country. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s article “The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview” (Chaturvedi) the Indian scholar mentions Gramsci’s doctrine of subalternity almost as a consequence of the internal colonization that the alliance of Fascist state with capitalism perpetrated against the preexistent culture, soon to be completely and, as she says, “internally” replaced by new production relationships.

In Italy, things are more complicated because the history of Italian institutions and politics after World War II shows that, along with the cultural colonization supposedly carried out by the bourgeoisie and its allies

— big industries, the Vatican, and the United States, continuously pumping resources into the administrative office of the Christian Democrats, and in a few situations, probably interfering in openly military fashion — there is another line of colonization, operated by the PCI (the Italian Communist Party) with a quintessentially Gramscian cultural hegemony as one of its main instruments of power. In other words, if we think about post-war Italy as a political think-tank, ideas have always been debated in the Centre or in the Left of the spectrum, with a strong influence — sometimes direct, sometimes indirect — of Marxist ideas, and in general with an overwhelming presence of ideology and predominance of political parties and unions in decisions regarding the country's economy. The political uniformity that was not possible to achieve through elections was sought with the foundation and subsequent military ideologization of labor unions, newspapers and publishing companies, in general infiltrating every means that could potentially produce culture. The result is always an intrinsic refusal of industrial dynamics, an aristocratic, albeit ahistorical, contempt for the consequences of a modern economy. This ideological stratification, constituting what we know today as Italian identity, creates a chain of apparently insoluble contradictions. Any filmmaker with political consciousness is of course aware of the economic implications of his works, but he apparently dissimulates and conceals it, *obtorto collo*, under a curtain of generic anti-industrial instances. Stagnation and unemployment, consequences of a mixed economy that is deeply influenced by communist

principles, is condemned on the assumption that actually more communism is needed. Heavily borrowing from Croce's aesthetics, the myth of leftist writers and performers as the only repositories and producers of high artistic value is thus constructed, as opposed to "trivial" questions like infrastructural needs and budgeting, irreconcilable categories with the simulacrum of quality and national character¹⁶. An imposing bibliography extensively documents the influence of the PCI, infiltrating in all the interstices not occupied by the other parties. As Piero Melograni writes, "La cultura di tipo idealistico e assai poco empirica diffusa tra gli intellettuali italiani, li predispondeva difatti a farsi sedurre da programmi — come quello comunista — aventi una forte carica utopica" (Melograni 12) ¹⁷ even more so if some Gramscian ideas are quintessentially of Crocean origin: Gramsci is a true disciple of Croce in his way of conceiving Marxism as an extension of idealism and especially of Crocian historicism, with the key concepts of history as a creation of spirit and of freedom as a brute and unstoppable force twitching its muscles at every major social mutiny and conquest. Mira

¹⁶ An aspect that deserves more attention is the uncertain boundary of the term "art film" as opposed to Hollywood entertainment pieces. One paradigmatic declaration is this one by Rossellini: "To me realism is simply the artistic form of truth. Only if you re-establish truth you will express it. If it's a dead truth, you feel it is false, it is not truly expressed. With my views of course I cannot accept the 'entertainment' film, as the term is understood in some business circles, especially outside Europe. Some such films may be partially acceptable, to the extent that they are capable of giving partial expression to reality" (*Realism and the Cinema* 32). In other words, some European directors willingly fought to preserve film from the contamination of industry, in precapitalist fashion.

¹⁷ "An idealist culture, not at all empirical, widely spread among Italian intellectuals, made them prone to be seduced by programs — like the Comunist one — with a strong utopist charge," "L'egemonia culturale della sinistra," *Prospettive nel mondo* 5 (1990): 12.

Liehm has written convincingly about the Croce-Gramsci line and the obsession with history:

For Croce, as for the neorealists, “all history was contemporary history,” with every human being situated in a particular point in time [...]. The primary value of Croce’s philosophy lay in the impulse it gave to studies in history. Its historic orientation is so dominant that his conclusions lead to an identification of philosophy with history. This approach, shared and developed on a different ideological and political basis by Antonio Gramsci, was influential in shaping the neorealist generation.¹⁸

Gramsci wrote that “the historical development is governed by the rhythm of freedom” which is “the immanent force of history making every preconceived scheme explode” (*L’Avanti!* July 25, 1918).¹⁹ Indifference for the individual, and the concept of man as a unity to be inserted in a group in order to gain significance, returns in the chapter “Americanismo e fordismo” from the *Notebooks*. Although Gramsci perfectly understands the dehumanizing implications of Taylorism, he sees the passage from Fordism to Taylorism as a progressive moment in the grand scheme of the revolutionary process. His remarks echo the Marxian words on work as an ethical perspective of emancipation, and the way the factory and machines absorb the worker is justified and not differentiated from the artificial and compulsory procedures of Fordism: in revolutionary terms, now the choice has to be voluntary and participated in (Revelli 34). This Gramscian subtext was masterfully orchestrated by the use Palmiro Togliatti made of the

¹⁸ *Passion and Defiance* 42.

¹⁹ “Lo sviluppo storico è governato dal ritmo della libertà;” la libertà “è la forza immanente che fa scoppiare ogni schema prestabilito.”

Notebooks to the point that arguably Togliatti, in spite of an apparent contrast against idealist intellectuals for their aristocratic aloofness, actually “enlisted” Croce through Gramsci thus likely establishing many subterranean languages inside the corpus of Italian film: hence the almost divine status entrusted to the intellectual and his crucial role in the formation of class consciousness, and the obsession with the excluded and the wretched, with different theoretical approaches, as we will see within this project. Italian film seems to answer an ethical call when representing the subaltern: its purpose is to provide the answers that the government does not give and reinsert the subaltern into history. The theoretical instruments provided by Deleuze and Guattari are invaluable to highlight such tendencies. Other key concepts sourced from other thinkers — for example, Emmanuel Lévinas and Walter Benjamin — will be occasionally used to corroborate the ethical aspect inherent in the endeavors of Pietrangeli, Grifi and Gianikian/Ricci Lucchi. Given the moral and political aspects of this thread, engaging in a meaningful way the uncertain idea of an Italian nation complicated by the different forces portioning out the Italian identity, a brief note on some aspects of Italy’s political and economic history that can qualify as anomalies in the European context will be necessary before going deeper into the philosophy of each filmmaker. This will hopefully clarify the idea of society that realist filmmakers had in mind, as well as the nature and plausibility of their critique.

CHAPTER 1

THE USE AND ABUSE OF NEOREALISM

1.1 A BRIEF NOTE ON ITALY'S POLITICAL ANOMALY: THE SUBTRACTION OF LIBERAL AND LABURIST CULTURES FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY SPECTRUM

One of the most fascinating books on Neorealism is the work of Michael Rocchio, *Cinema of Anxiety*: a fundamental endeavor to lay bare the non-revolutionary conventionalities of Neorealist cinema. In Rocchio's words:

The problem for contemporary American society, though, is that no other kind of social model has found wide acceptance as a viable replacement for reverence and obedience to authority. In this respect, there are very strong parallels between contemporary American culture and postwar Italian culture. The critical difference between the two is that for postwar Italian culture there were visible other models competing with patriarchal capitalism: the cooperation and unity of the Resistance became the most hallowed example. Despite the dissolution of its government and the resulting social upheaval, postwar Italy did not become a revolutionary society. Patriarchal capitalism, while battered, nonetheless maintained itself, with not a little help from American intervention in the economic and political life of postwar Italy. Bald economic and political acts do not occur in a vacuum, however; Gramsci's concept of hegemony demonstrates that they operate through and with ideological discourse. (6-7)

This passage, worthy of being quoted in its entirety, contains all the key historical and cultural ambiguities about postwar Italy that tend to fossilize in the debate on cultural movements and therefore also Neorealism. Quite obviously, from such a standpoint democracy is not enough for a country

trying to rebuild after a dictatorship. If one can agree with Rocchio about the seemingly inevitable turn that political events had to take in Italy under American pressure, choosing capitalism and the free market as opposed to Sovchoz, five-year plans and other forms of revolutionary economy, many problems nevertheless arise when one seeks to understand the intimate nature of those “bold economic and political acts” that to Rocchio’s dismay did not take place in Italy. Concerning the “cooperation and unity” of the Resistance, aside from all geopolitical questions, it is not clear what Italy should or could have become because Rocchio does not mention in his book Pietro Calamandrei doctrine of “cooperazione e unità”, unless Rocchio is simply trying to pinpoint the homologies between what in his opinion is a reactionary political turn — the electoral loss of the Popular Front in 1948 — and similarly reactionary art — Neorealism. Likewise, if it is true that Italy could not be assimilated to a purely socialist economy, it is also true that the Italian case was truly a type of capitalism *sui generis*, that had very little to do with anything American because of a strong role of the central state in economic and industrial planning as well as heavy doses of that “cooperation and unity” — which was actually the chosen model for many Italian regions, and also an illegal way to fund the PCI — that in Rocchio’s words characterized the Resistance. In other words, thanks to the overwhelming importance acquired by the unions — soon to become veto players in every key decision — and the parties’ collective strategy of politicizing every economic section and administrative branch for electoral

purposes, “cooperation and unity” can be chosen as an appropriate slogan for post-war economy. In fact, after the war not only the PCI, which is the most striking case but every party in Italy, even from the Right, was funded by its own cooperatives.²⁰ Cooperatives were only one of the means through which a party could obtain major fiscal facilitations,²¹ not to mention the enlargement of its sphere of influence and the consequent implementation of sophisticated systems of “ballot-swapping.” Even today, for example, the ultra-left newspaper *Il Manifesto* and the neo-con newspaper *Il Foglio*, that

²⁰ A cooperative is a legal entity owned and controlled by its members. The defining point in a cooperative is that the members have a close association with the cooperative as producers or consumers of its products or services, or as its employees. However, it is the principle of “one member — one vote” that, separating it from capital stock corporations, governs most cooperatives to avoid the concentration of control in an elite. In theory, cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members theoretically believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. Such legal entities have a range of unique social characteristics. Membership is open, meaning that anyone who satisfies certain non-discriminatory conditions may join. Unlike a union, in some jurisdictions a cooperative may assign different numbers of votes to different members. Economic benefits are distributed proportionally according to each member's level of economic interest in the cooperative, for instance by a dividend on sales or purchases. Cooperatives may be generally classified as either consumer or producer cooperatives, depending largely on the mutual interest that their membership shares. Classification is also often based on their function. In Italy, cooperatives have always been associated with political parties — hence the “cooperative rosse” of the Communist Party and the “cooperative bianche” of the Christian Democrats. The “cooperative rosse” have built a financial empire in construction businesses and retailing chains, but all politicized cooperatives have worked with organized crime in the South of Italy, have been illegally favored by political parties in public contract works, and have served as electoral machines guaranteeing votes and funds to their party of reference, not to mention the scientific system of illegal invoicing carried out by the “cooperative rosse” to evade taxes and fraudulently finance the Communist party. A good estimate of the current size of the social cooperative sector in Italy is given by updating the official ISTAT figures from the end of 2001 by an annual growth rate of 10% (assumed by the *Direzione Generale per gli Enti Cooperativi*). This gives totals of 7,100 social cooperatives, with 267,000 members, 223,000 paid employees, 31,000 volunteers and 24,000 disadvantaged people undergoing integration. Combined turnover is around 5 billion euro. The cooperatives break into three types: 59% type A (social and health services), 33% type B (work integration) and 8% mixed. The average size is 30 workers.

²¹ Other means guaranteeing defiscalization and unfair competition are the public funding and improved access to finance for political parties, made possible by the infiltration of political power in banks and financial institutions.

nominally is also the house-organ of Silvio Berlusconi's party *Forza Italia*, are legally organized as cooperatives. Cooperatives in fact were also one of the tools of Italy's mixed economy, where the state had a golden share in many key sections and actually was the main entrepreneur in chemical and steel industry, just to name two of the most important sections, not to mention the role of IRI, the Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale, playing the function of the controller of private ventures. Established in 1933 as a prop for failing Italian banks, and originally conceived as "an instrument for the furtherance of the industrial policy of the Fascist state,"²² the state-owned holding company grew over the years to encompass over 1,000 businesses, employ over 500,000 people, and produce everything from highways to telephone equipment to ice cream. Credited with spurring the phenomenal growth of the Italian economy that occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, IRI worked well until it functioned mostly as a facilitator capable of attracting private capitals. In the 70s, when it was compelled to undertake more difficult and varied tasks such as promoting the economy in the South, investing against recession, maintaining employment, and supervision of areas of vital importance to the nation's economy, often with no sound economic criteria underlying these efforts, IRI underwent a major crisis that undermined its very foundations and ultimately shrank its revenues and owned companies in dramatic fashion. During those days, IRI proved to be the perfect metaphor for a significant share of Italian economy:

²² Mario Einaudi, Maurice Byé, and Ernesto Rossi, Nationalization in France and Italy, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1955) 69.

a major hindrance for competition in the world market, and a purely political vehicle for providing jobs and winning votes.

It is not possible to describe exhaustively all the key moments in Italian history that have deeply influenced the *Weltanschauung* of the filmmakers examined here, but some quick examples will clarify the political humus where culture had to grow and come to terms in post-war Italy. In fact, given the geopolitical conditions, it would have been very hard to implement an agenda of reforms based on free trade and respect of individual life styles. The level of literacy was extremely low, the country was shattered into pieces as a result of the war, deep wounds were still lingering, and the presence of different agents on Italian soil, each one interested in its own share of power, would create the conditions of “democrazia bloccata” that hampered harmonious economic development and fruitful political discussion. Another factor contributing to this state of things were the unmatched political and organizational skills of the two charismatic leaders that emerged from the Resistance. Palmiro Togliatti and Alcide De Gasperi, representatives of the communist and catholic culture, respectively, that still pervaded Italy, were by far the most authoritative figures in Italy at the time. Togliatti and De Gasperi earned their credit violently opposing the Fascist regime and at the same time built their parties with unparalleled craftiness, adopting far-reaching policies of popular attraction. The country was just coming out of dictatorship, thus it was natural to exalt the proportional aspect of representative democracy and refuse models based on

individual initiative and liberal reforms. Therefore, the proliferation, hypertrophy and *de facto* omnipotence of political parties were a byproduct, a natural consequence of the distance between the Republic and the regime under Mussolini. Still, some examples will serve to describe what Italy was *not* after the end of the war and to argue that even though the Christian Democrats were essentially a moderate party, with a few exceptions like the Tambroni government, political ideas were discussed and negotiated still by the left or center-left.

Intellectuals who like Rocchio are devastated by the conservatism of the postwar years should have clearly made manifest what type of concrete alternatives they had in mind. They should have also let us know what could have realistically happened had Italy not accepted to gravitate under American influence by accepting the Marshall Plan and condemning the PCI to a life outside the government posts. The true problem of Italy after WWII was that the country emerged with political parties that either did not have the potential to accept liberal culture within their internal debate, like the PCI, or scientifically excluded from their ranks and ideological *pantheon* all those thinkers who could have facilitated a process of power transfer from suffocating institutions to the individual, like the Christian Democrats. The latter in fact ostracized their true father, the very founder of the Partito Popolare, Don Luigi Sturzo, from which the Christian Democrats emanated, because of his unyielding opposition to state intervention in the economy,

personal unwavering insistence on morality in the public sphere, and individualistic acceptance of the message of Christ.

This hostility against liberalism is well rooted in each of the key figures that basically determined what could be done or thought in modern Italy. One of the thinkers who most influenced Italian culture before and after the war, a character we could to some extent call the founder of modern Italian culture, Benedetto Croce, in a letter sent to Friedrich von Hayek, praises his book *The Road to Serfdom* — the seminal book against socialist planning in the economy and in general against the state as entrepreneur — only to deliberately misinterpret his thought and somehow affirm that von Hayek's economic analysis could not represent a good solution for Italy:

Io pongo fondamentale la libertà di coscienza morale, che sola decide; e considero liberismo e statalismo come modi di soluzione economiche che valgono in rapporto alle condizioni di fatto e alle esigenze morali. In generale, la soluzione buona è quella della iniziativa individuale e della libertà di mercato, ma che non possa essere assoluta è comprovato dalle eccezioni, che anche Lei ammette.²³

The problem here is that Croce postulates exceptions, which in *The Road to Serfdom* simply are not present. Croce cannot admit that a truly free market is only the tip of the iceberg of a system of institutions and juridical conditions guaranteeing the existence of a good habitat for what the other

²³ "I deem fundamental the freedom of moral conscience, which is the only one that decides; and I consider liberism and statalism ways of solving economic problems that apply to factual conditions and moral needs. In general, the good solution is individual initiative and free market, but it cannot be absolute as proved by the exceptions that even you admit" (Benedetto Croce, letter to Friedrich von Hayek, 9 February 1945, b. 16, fasc. 50, Hoover Foundation Archive, Hayek Papers).

founder of the Austrian marginalist school Ludwig von Mises called *catallaxis*, a concept borrowed from Herodotus and meaning the creation of a habitat where the conditions for a just exchange are met. Von Hayek prearranges a constellation of norms and institutions that are simply too much for the conservative Croce to accept. In this sense, the capitalist market is a process of discovery requiring a set of norms guaranteeing equal access to its perspectives, and it is something that Italy has never known, for in Italy's mixed economy, the market has always been the subaltern part to state intervention. This situation is the consequence of adopting the position proposed by post-Bismarck, German thinkers, who subordinated the economy to politics. The evolutionist nature of Scottish and Austrian liberalism, with their concept of knowledge scattered throughout the social tissue, was not acceptable to the political class of the time. Therefore, even though private property nominally remained in force after the war, the role of the state in deciding where to direct the national economy, which key sectors had to be privileged, which raw materials had to be bought, etc., left very few opportunities to individual initiative.²⁴ Croce reconnects with an ancient tradition of suspicion against economic activity dating back to Plato and Cicero. His thought goes against the Humian doctrine of private

²⁴ The provocative nature of this statement is clear, and its function is to focus the attention on the liberal stance that Italy has never known. Even though free initiative and entrepreneurship are a basic foundation of Italy's economy, opportunities in many sections were significantly limited by agents surreptitiously supported by the state and/or political parties. The definition of an "economia sociale di mercato" — a market social economy — expressly coined for Italy is a contradiction in purely economic terms, and the "social" part of it — with its dream of equality and solidarity — has played a major role in the worldview of many Italian writers, filmmakers, and men of arts in general.

property, and against the discovery of society made by the Scottish moralists. In fact, Croce constructs an ethical liberalism separated from “economic” liberalism — a derogatory term coined in Italy to oppose the free market, seen as a suspicious activity whose protagonists are modern pirates and buccaneers — saying that freedom can exist even in a system where private property of means of production is suppressed.

A constant trend in the socio-economic thought in post-war Italy is the obsession of limiting the power of the market to favor political power, and not the opposite. The problem of the state as the owner of the means of production implies a limitation of political and civil rights, and it is in fact one of the points that von Hayek stresses the most, but, as I noted, this is not a concern for Croce. If we look at the Italy of today, all of its most serious problems derive from the omnipotence of partitocracy and political power, interfering in the relationships and rapports that happen among individuals, and interfering with every institution or organization that can be transformed into an electoral reservoir, thanks to public funding. Intervention in the economy seems to be the professional disease of the political class, which has all the advantages to do so in order to gain personal advantage from the type of investments the state makes: the disintermediation of the political class is one of the key concepts to understanding postwar Italy.

As noted, a similar scheme was carried out in the Catholic field, with the systematic ostracism of Don Luigi Sturzo and his liberal thought, and

instead giving much attention to and accepting the doctrine of Giuseppe Dossetti, proposer of a doctrine of social market economy often bordering on assistentialism and clientelism. Sturzo strenuously attacked all monopolies, in the state as well as private version, and proudly stated his ideological affinity with Luigi Einaudi, one of the most important names in Italian liberalism, who was also the target of furious attacks by Benedetto Croce. Symbolically, Sturzo was the victim of one of the first consociative operations carried out by the PCI and the Christian Democrats, when the Sturzo Institute, whose founder always wanted to be funded by private sponsors, was quickly nationalized (together with the Gramsci Institute) right after his death for electoral purposes and consequently “infiltrated” by faculty members that Sturzo himself explicitly refused when he was alive. Sturzo also always objected to the inclusion of the word “Christ” in the name of the party, first against Father Gemelli when Sturzo founded the Partito Popolare in 1918 and then against Alcide De Gasperi when the latter founded the Christian Democrats. Sturzo, also in his activity as mayor of Caltagirone, in Sicily, sought to turn into concrete, propositive measures the anti-Marx instances of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* written by Leo XIII. Thus, all of Sturzo’s actions as theorist and politician are devoted to find the most innovative and just measures of alliance between capital and work. But the interpretation of the encyclical was very different from some of Sturzo’s party companions, leading to an omnipervasive interpretation of the role of the state as owner of all major companies, intervening and planning

economic investments, with political parties parasitizing the state finances, funded by the companies and enterprises owned by the state. The political powers, responsible for not creating that safety net of juridical norms and conditions of equal access — the Rule of Law — always had it easy in criticizing the predatory behavior of corporations or big owners storming the economic scene and mythologizing the market with the connotations of robbery and loot.

Neorealism came to life within this complex political and economic context, and it did not seem concerned about updating the embarrassing stagnation of Italy's history of political ideas, dominated by communist and Catholic ideologies interested in a type of political action having as their main target not the individual but the social group, the caste, the establishment. Historically, one of the main features of Italian politics has been the complete absence -- with the notable exception of the Partito Radicale, funded by personal donations and largely emarginated by the media because of its capacity of causing havoc in the fossilized parliamentary activity -- of political movements of Anglo-Saxon inspiration for the advancement of civil rights and the reduction of the role of the state in the economy. Interested in the creation of an unprecedented space for the subaltern and the marginalized, neorealist art approaches the poor with the naïve poetry and the bona fides of the generically left-wing and Catholic philanthropist. In the same years, Ernesto Rossi published the essay "Abolire la miseria" (Let's Abolish Poverty). Here, in mostly utopian fashion

and not borrowing directly from von Hayek's concept of guaranteed minimum income, he theorized a rigid system of concrete measures made of alimentary help and, most importantly, of educational access to school and institutes in order for the unprivileged to gain knowledge, skills and competence; in brief, to enter the world of culture, away from the indistinct masses. In fact, one of the interesting aspects, common to Rossi and Sturzo, is the attention to the poor, the unprivileged, or simply to those who did not have fortune in their enterprising attempts. Thus, for instance, Rossi accused Sturzo of being "un liberista manchesteriano," — i.e., some sort of outlaw not wanting any sort of market regulation, an advocate of the *laissez-faire* and *laissez-passer* that created huge disparities between the different actors in the economic field. Sturzo vehemently replied, affirming his emphasis on social security as well as his strenuous opposition to every sort of monopoly, and the validity of a participatory, non-restricted capitalism, open to society, with a pivotal idea somewhat similar to stock options open also to workers. In August and September 1920, Italy was shaken by long and violent strikes. Sturzo, in order to solve the opposition of capital and market, hypothesized a form of participation of the strikers in the capital and the profits as well as the risk of enterprise. What he had in mind was in fact an economic development model consisting of full coparticipation, coresponsibility of employees and workers to the enterprise. But the strikers protested. In order to stop the strikes Italy's prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti, did not accept Sturzo's proposal but he instead flirted with

and then seemed to welcome Filippo Turati's Bolshevik project — Turati was the secretary of the Socialist Party — of workers' complete control over factories. The threat of being dispossessed of the factories scared Italy's capitalists, and pushed them to find another political interlocutor and consequently fund the secretary of the Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini, making him for the first time the tutor of order and the referent of big industry.

According to Sturzo, economic freedom has the same dignity of other individual rights:

Coloro che affermano che la libertà individuale ancora esiste solo perché il cittadino può parlare, scrivere e votare non si accorgono che la quasi scomparsa della libertà economica sotto la valanga dell'interventismo statale in tutti i campi della produzione porta fatalmente all'attenuazione e alla scomparsa della libertà politica che vi è connessa riducendo le libertà formali, mancanti di contenuto e quindi sterili e vane. La libertà non è divisibile; buona nella politica o nella religione e non buona nell'economia o nell'insegnamento: tutto è solidale. Vedo che certi cattolici sociali ora sarebbero disposti ad abbandonare la libertà economica e non comprendono che essi così abbandonano la libertà in tutti i campi, anche quello religioso. (Qtd. Baldini 40)²⁵

Putting together this latent lack of freedom with the consequential emphasis on the group, be it class, establishment, corporation or trade union as opposed to the individual, some confrontational moments of *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D*, where the protagonists have to confront

²⁵ "Those who affirm that individual freedom still exists only because every citizen can still speak, write, and vote do not realize that the quasi disappearance of economic freedom under the avalanche of state intervention in all the fields of the production will fatally bring about a reduction and then the disappearance of the political freedom related to it, reducing the formal rights, emptied of content and therefore sterile and useless. Freedom cannot be divided, good in politics and religion and not good in economy or education: everything is joined together. I see now that certain social catholics would be disposed to give up economic freedom and do not realize that by doing so they give up freedom in every field, also in the religious one."

individually a hostile environment, still stand out as a prophetic message against the problems still afflicting contemporary Italy.

Like Gramsci, Ernesto Rossi spent part of his life in a Fascist prison or removed from civil life, in secluded villages. His writings explore the recesses of Italy's social dynamics from the point of view of Croce's idealism and economic liberalism, and contain as many key concepts as Gramsci's *Notebooks*. For example, exiled in 1941 on the isle of Ventotene, together with Altiero Spinelli and Eugenio Colorni, he wrote the homonymous manifesto soliciting the creation of the United States of Europe and inspiring the foundation of the European Union. Not surprisingly, together with Sturzo, Rossi is the author of furious invectives against national cinema funded by the state.

In Italy right now the individual sphere is still restricted, and the strategy of cultural hegemony carried out by the PCI with its emphasis on the masses and its anachronistic condemnation of the free market is still very well alive. Private entrepreneurship is still regarded suspiciously by a significant number of parties and reforms are very slow to take place because of the many agents involved: Church, unions, parties, professional associations, local government, central government, etc. We can thus better understand why at some point Italian electors chose to delegate an incredible amount of power to someone like Silvio Berlusconi. With his charismatic demeanor of a now rich and powerful self-made man, his populist appeal and — only apparent — strong sponsorship of drastic

reforms to open markets, illusory guarantee of more wealth for the population, and above all his emphasis on the individual and the right of entrepreneurship and profit, Berlusconi broke a long tradition of empty ceremonies and took by surprise an entire political class that was still shocked by the fall of the Berlin wall, while using ludicrous and unrefined language that one would hear in a sports bar, but precisely for this reason a lot more refreshing than the boring, stale philosophizing of the Left. Not surprisingly, confusedly realizing its cultural retardation, and still quoting extensively from Marx years after the Soviet Union collapsed in a fully globalized world, the Left unleashed its writers, journalists, entertainers, singers and of course filmmakers to furiously attack Berlusconi with blind rage. The myth of political and social engagement is directly applied to all genres: comedies, as well as films with individualist heroes, must be dismissed because they are not confronting the true needs of the people and overlook economic inequities; historians and journalists demonize Berlusconi and warns that the electorate has simply fallen to the falsely enticing charms of the Milanese entrepreneur. But it is a *Catch 22* situation: even if they carry out this massive propaganda operations in good faith, the more scholars like Rocchio write about Italian “patriarchal capitalism,” and the more directors like Nanni Moretti belittle and ridicule Berlusconi with movies like *Aprile* or *Il Caimano*, the more potential electors will be disgusted by the arrogance and presumptuousness of Moretti’s discourse and the supposedly aristocratic nature of leftist culture, and if they will not

directly vote for the populist leader, they will inexorably distance themselves from the Left. It is the same strategy that started in the late 40s, when a horde of cultivated and refined communist intellectuals like Carlo Salinari, Mario Alicata, Guido Aristarco and Antonello Trombadori, was always in the trenches and on duty, ready to decimate Hitchcock or American westerns and exalt the latest conquests of socialist realism.

This brief political analysis does not mean to state that liberalism would solve all of Italy's problems, or that the doctrine itself does not have its own negative aspects even when applied integrally — meritocracy without merit, marginalization of unions, etc. — but Italy certainly has not known the positive ones. Italy is the kingdom of short-termism, where unions, parties, professional associations and all the other establishments are tirelessly involved in a permanent war of position. It is possible to see these contradictions in the words of the above mentioned Carlo Salinari, a literary critic of pure Communist faith and one of the most important figures in the history of Italian literature. He, on the one hand, blames state capitalism for the decadence of Italian art, and, on the other, he does not reveal what type of society he has in mind, a society in which acceptable standards of life would go together with “high art.”

The crisis of neorealism was rooted in an objective general fact: in the involution of the Italian society or, if we wish to use another expression, in the restoration of capitalism in Italy. It affected the arts in different ways. Film received a direct, massive, and brutal blow. The state used its entire political power and took advantage of the dependence of film on the industrial structure. All kind of administrative measures were used to disrupt a further evolution of neorealism. The blow aimed at the cinema had a far-reaching effect. (Qtd. & tr. Liehm 101)

Thus, on the one hand we have the pretense that quality is the opposite of industry and “state capitalism,” on the other hand we have an idea of culture that goes in the direction of a constructivist rationalism *sui generis*, stemming naturally from Croce and seamlessly engrafting Marxist ideology into idealistic culture. Salinari confirms the existence of a mixed economy where the state heavily intervenes in the market, making it a hybrid, non-liberal capitalist “superstructure”; furthermore, he blames the industry as an organism fundamentally unsuitable for high quality films. The picture is very familiar to historians and politologists who seek to account for the country’s idiosyncrasy for liberal and laburist culture. For in Italy, there is always somebody or something else deciding instead of the individual what is best for him — the State, the Church, the Party, the Union. It is the homeland of the people von Mises called the *risentiti*, always thirsty for state guarantees and compensations, looking for a social “arrangement” through posts earned with networking and no competition, behaving as if the challenges put out by the market and globalization do not concern neither them nor the country itself (The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality).

1.2 NEOREALISM AT THE CROSSROADS OF A NEW ITALY

In an essay entitled “Storia e Semiotica. La percezione del tempo come problema semiotico,” Boris Uspenskij in 1987 reflected on the semantic

orientation of history and the narrativization of the past when an event is perceived as a historical fact. Accordingly, if the contemporaries of that event attribute a signification to it, they select and reinterpret events from the past in accordance with the present. The semiotically marked events lead those who have taken part in them to associate arbitrarily chosen moments from the past in order to corroborate the historical experience, i.e. the interpretation of the past, and confirm its importance, if not its inevitability. History becomes “un gioco fra presente e passato” (Uspenskij 15), where “il passato viene visto entro la prospettiva degli avvenimenti attuali del presente, ma allo stesso determina la direzione del processo storico” (16).²⁶ The Russian semiotician does not couple this reflection on the movements of history to concepts of fallibility or productivity of interpretation. Possibly, the strongest claim he makes on the past is on the infinite possibilities it opens up on those who try to interpret it. The past, he says, is not given in its concrete experience: its very existence is in the last analysis “a question of faith” (17). The arbitrariness of conjuring up different lines of development is of course also inherent in the arbitrary choices made in my current project. What was different, though, in the case of Neorealism, was the project behind the oversweeping tones of many positions inside the debate. Such tones were also the results of the messianic expectations entrusted to the first post-war elections: for many leftist commentators and men of culture, the fact that after Liberation Italy

²⁶ “The past is seen within the perspective of current events, at the same time determining the direction of the historical process.”

was a democracy again almost seemed a distraction, a detail of no consequence, before the new regime yet to come. The construction of Neorealism as a phenomenon then became almost synonymous with the definitive discovery of an “ontological” nature inside Italian cinema, a nature that Neorealism had finally unveiled once and for all.

Especially among journalists, writers and theoreticians of Neorealism, there is an obsession with quality, with going beyond the immediate reference of plots and genres, to find a deeper meaning, a greater reality. Such greater reality usually coincides with a nostalgic longing for a pre-capitalist economy and in general to a world where industrial demands miraculously play no role in the production, reception and fruition of the work of art. The position of one of the protagonists of Neorealism on both sides, the filmmaking and the theoretical writing, Carlo Lizzani, can be considered paradigmatic in this sense. The disproportionate faith entrusted to Neorealism as a new mantra guaranteeing quality and spirituality, knowledge and social justice, is followed by bitter dismay when the orthodox purity of neorealist assumptions fails to represent an albeit tiny possibility of social and economic change.

Physiologically, many of the zealous sponsors of Neorealism had connections with Fascist Party, like Lizzani himself.²⁷ Even after his “conversion,” and the resolute defense of “his concept of neorealism,

²⁷ Not to mention other artists with strong leftist or Communist agendas, like the Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo, who was even a member of an assault squadron during the Republic of Salò.

blaming his demise solely on adverse political circumstances” (Liehm 99), Lizzani always acknowledged in a very direct and honest way the role of Fascism in boosting a national cinematographic industry. In the words of historian Renzo De Felice, Lizzani is the perfect example of the young, restless intellectual of the time who looks for the most appropriate political organization best suited to support his thirst for revolutionary change:

Molti dei passaggi all'antifascismo (non ci riferiamo qui a quelli meramente opportunistic) degli intellettuali più giovani e di molti guffini avvennero con una naturalezza che denota una notevole affinità culturale e psicologica di fondo e una continuità fra il fascismo di prima e il loro successivo antifascismo e comunismo, e fa pensare non tanto a una rottura culturale quanto a una perdurante fedeltà a una visione del mondo e della politica prima cercate di realizzare attraverso il fascismo poi attraverso l'antifascismo. (Cinema, Profondo Rosso 89)²⁸

Breaking the taboo of genre to invigorate the failure of Neorealism requires courage and is at best suspicious, synonymous with contamination, a word that in Italian post-war culture has a very negative connotation because of the dominating idea of aesthetics. The oppositional nature of Neorealism, evident from the outbreak of the movement, earned it a dangerous status of disfavor with the political authorities, who could not allow free voices of criticism in a crucial phase to stabilize their power. Neorealism did not have a true, politically consistent position of economic renewal, so it is not possible to say that Neorealism could have been a solid

²⁸ “Many of the passages to antifascism (here we do not refer to the ones that were exclusively opportunistic) by many of the younger intellectuals and adherents to the Fascist Association of University Students took place with the utmost naturalness, showing a fundamental affinity, cultural and psychological, as well as a continuity between their fascism of before and the subsequent antifascism and communism, and makes us think not really about a cultural rapture but about a persisting faith to a specific view of the world and of politics, first pursued through fascism and then through antifascism.”

ideology but was marred by individual tendencies. However, palingenetic traits were evident even in its bleakest moments — except possibly for the existential surrender of *Umberto D* — and the lack of a clear political affiliation probably made the work of rebellious figures like Zavattini more fruitful, if not simply possible in the first place. Millicent Marcus summarizes:

Needless to say, the neorealists' commitment to social change did not endear them to the guardians of the postwar status quo. Despite their reluctance, for the most part, to embrace a Marxist perspective, the filmmakers maintained a resolutely antiestablishment stance and presented an image of Italy that was anything but comforting to Italian officialdom. (Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism 26)

Perhaps the bitterness with which the failure of Neorealism was perceived lies in a combined action of political ostracism and of the illusory ambitions of the movement itself, because of the impossible leap in quality in taking Giovanni Verga's claim about reality as it should be to a level of political praxis, showing reality as it was and as it ought to be, especially in Cesare Zavattini. It is widely known that in the history of Italian film, the most sweeping and over-general claims about the nature of a movement have been made about Neorealism: the two directions of history postulated by Uspenskij can be easily found in the discussions on the implications that the movement had and on the expectations for the radical renewal that followed. Regarding the play of the present with the past, critics and commentators read Italian films retrospectively, isolating those works that somehow resembled the stylistics canonically associated with Neorealism.

But Neorealism, seen as the climax of Italian cinema's historical experience, was also able to dictate its evolution: in the 60s, our westerns were described as more realistic than the American ones, our avant-garde was considered a little bit less surrealist than the Spanish, and so on. The return of the Resistance and war as subjects in the 60s seem to provide a confirmation of the ghostly nature of Neorealism, its capacity of being born again from its own ashes, as well as, as Marcus Writes, "to provide cinematic examples of pointed social satire" (Italian Film 28). In general, every noteworthy film had to be more grounded in "reality" than the average work of art, and it was considered noteworthy precisely when some aspects could be ascribed to a realistic nature of Italian cinema, almost given *a priori*.

The aim of the present work is not to piece together the glosses and debates around the term.²⁹ Rather, it is to monitor its use as a category capable of defining a crucial moment of Italian history, its components and overall functionality, and the way it has affected the perception of Italy's cinema over the years, through the contributions and the ideas of some of its key protagonists. Neorealism as a term and a word has a controversial story. It was first used at the beginning of the 20th century in philosophy, to label a school maintaining the objectivity of facts independent of human thought, then in literary criticism for some novelists of the early twenties

²⁹ For such exercise, an excellent and indispensable book giving a detailed account of all the positions involved in the critical debate is Pensare il Neorealismo by Giulia Fanara. See also the chapters "Neorealism is like" in Liehm's Passion and Defiance and "Neorealism; The Myth" in Sorlin's Italian National Cinema 1896-1996.

(like Giuseppe Antonio Borgese and his novel *Rubé*, published in 1921).³⁰ The term was apparently used in its new capacity by cinema operator Mario Serandrei about *Ossessione*: “Non so come potrei definire questo tipo di cinema se non con l'appellativo di neo-realismo.”³¹

The consensus is that literary Neorealism is a movement born out of Italy's cultural history, particularly from the Italian Romanticism and Verismo. Cinematic Neorealism was born out of the shock and the destruction of the war, of the necessity of a new ethical pact in a nation that was trying to resurrect from its ashes with the clear consciousness of its desperation and heroism. In other words, Neorealism constitutes an allegory of reconstruction for a hungry community, providing the necessary help during the faltering steps of the post-war epoch, and trying to find a practicable way among the uncertainties of the future. Many critics and scholars have sought to deconstruct Neorealism as a category and have achieved remarkable results in narrowing down the authentic field of contestants, pinpointing the conformities as well as the disturbances of the movement when compared to early Italian cinema. Yet, although settling on the impossibility for Neorealism to actually encapsulate far different sensibilities and aesthetic stances, many have failed in providing a different systematization of that period, ranging from the mid-forties to the early

³⁰ The most comprehensive collection of texts regarding the debate on Neorealism in literature, film-making, painting and photography in Italy is Neorealismo. Poetiche e Polemiche edited by Milanini.

³¹ “I don't know how to define this type of film but with the term neo-realism” (Serandrei in Gaiardoni, ed. Mario Serandrei. Gli scritti, un film: Giorni di Gloria 40).

fifties, still overwhelmed by that colossal, obtrusive fetish that seems capable of dictating the cinematically proper way that has to be followed from beyond the grave.

In his introduction to the Neorealism reader *Springtime in Italy*, David Overbey sees Neorealism mostly as a refreshing aberration between two normalities, the first being Fascism and the second being the restoration that followed the defeat of the Democratic Popular Front in the 1948 general election. For Overbey, the words that Rossellini used in the famous 1954 interview conducted by Maurice Schérer and François Truffaut can be held as a fitting, albeit loose, description of what was actually going on during those years: “Most of the time it is only a label. For me, it is above all, a moral position from which to look at the world. It then became an aesthetic position, but at the beginning it was moral” (1).

This stance also explains the struggle that scholars had with the apparent sloppiness of some of Rossellini’s scenes, if not some of his works in their entirety.³² The editor of this volume goes further, adding what seems but an extension of Rossellini’s words: “Neo-realism did, after all, exist: a large number of films were made in Italy, from the early Forties to the mid Fifties, which shared at least, a certain appearance, manner, and

³² As Christopher Williams comments in his annotation on the interview given by Rossellini to Mario Verdone, “What Verdone here calls the ‘hasty sketch’ aspects of parts of Rossellini’s work has produced interesting discussion. Some see it as reinforcing the realistic pretensions of the work, in that human perception can be described as operating in the same broad way. Others have seen it as the distinctive stylistic hall-mark of Rossellini in particular, or by extension, as typical of neo-realism in general. Still others have suggested that the apparently unorganized nature of the sketch-fragments might be related to Brechtian strategies of distantiation” (*Realism and the Cinema* 35).

area of subject” (Overbey 1). But while Overbey delimits Neorealism to its natural, widely accepted timeframe, at the same time he concedes that Neorealism is still alive, a phoenix reborn from its ashes, or better, an ever renovating source of inspiration for good filmmakers. After pronouncing Francesco Rosi “the most important figure to emerge in Italian cinema” (Overbey 30), the same scholar leaves aside the theoretical uncertainties of the movement about the different sensibilities, about the entertainers *à la* De Sica and the tireless researchers *à la* Rossellini, proclaiming Neorealism the one and only serious intellectual movement in Italian cinema, the Humpty-Dumpty philosophy that makes critics focus on the similarities with the good old days instead of exploring the novelties of the new tendencies:

In reading through the statements of directors, screenwriters, novelists, critics, and scholars, then, about a movement of a national cinema which has been pronounced “dead” for some twenty years, it is startling to discover that many of the basic arguments are still being carried on: the relationship of cinema to society and government, the function of cinema as either reflection of or as a motivating force in culture, the nature of realism, and the nature of cinema itself. These statements are also of interest in any attempt to understand current Italian cinema, for the very best of it began with and evolved from a neo-realism which after the war brought renewed vitality to the screen and new hope for cinema throughout the world. (Overbey 32)

If we give credit to the murder theory surrounding Neorealism, a murder perpetrated by the Vatican, Giulio Andreotti, and the Christian Democrats then we must take into account and deal with the ambiguous position of the Communist Party, unscrupulously using Neorealist works for electoral reasons. An excellent example of how filmmakers had to

preventively treat their screenplays, stories and other materials can be seen in the volume *De Sica & Zavattini. Parliamo tanto di noi*, where there is a detailed chronicle of all the gratuitous and instrumental attacks that the two artists had to endure whenever one of their pictures came out. Besides well-known hostilities from Christian Democrat representatives, in that book the reader will find malevolent criticism from the Left (mostly because the movies were not communist enough) and in general a perfect representation of the paranoid atmosphere in Italy, where everything had to be judged in political and ideological fashion because of the wholesale penetration of partitocracy in any critical aspect of the country.³³ Such dynamics are also described by Pierre Sorlin, who perfectly captured the unscrupulous way political parties used pictures instrumentally for electoral reasons or to gain credit as the ones truly capturing the character of the nation. Describing the illiberal and authoritarian strategy carried out by Andreotti but also by Communist critics, Sorlin writes:

Communist Puritanism matched that of the Catholics and Communists, like the Catholics, were longing for happy, positive endings not for ambiguous ones. Using different words, *L'Unità* could have said, like Andreotti, that there was a good and a bad realism. (Italian National Cinema 90)

³³ Another detailed account of this situation, not only about the case of De Sica and Zavattini but also De Santis, Fellini, Visconti and others, is in Liehm, Passion and Defiance (92-95 and 105-06). On page 94, Liehm poignantly observes that "Marxism had offered the only consistent antifascist ideology during the twenty years of fascism," and "it should not be forgotten that a centuries-old Catholic tradition has accustomed the Italians to the translation of most problems, including those of art and culture, into ideological terms." If we compare those two statements with contemporary Italy, we cannot but notice the paradoxical nature of antifascist ideologies that, by rejecting completely the major principles of liberalism, perpetuate some fascist continuities, and how partyocracy's excess of power have perpetuated the translation of every problem into political terms.

On the one hand, every political party destroyed filmmakers who were deemed to be too unorthodox; on the other hand, parties were not really concerned about the fate of Neorealism, so that they could hold the power system as an example of despotic repression. However, the true problem is not the presence — or, in this case, the absence — of an industrial cinema, but in the lack of alternate means of expression and production. And, most notably, the question is why cinema in Italy had to relentlessly occupy and surrogate the place of political agency.

Many have tried to extrapolate a set of stylistic norms capable of more or less defining Neorealism. An excellent attempt is the one carried out by Millicent Marcus in *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, where the scholar is the first to acknowledge the lack of conformity and consistence among neorealist practitioners:

The rules governing neorealist practice would include location shooting, lengthy takes, unobtrusive editing, natural lighting, a predominance of medium and long shots, respect for the continuity of time and space, use of contemporary, true-to-life subjects, an uncontrived, open-ended plot, working class protagonists, a nonprofessional cast, dialogue in the vernacular, active viewer involvement, and implied social criticism. (*Italian Film* 22)

Since the edition of the Pesaro Film Festival specifically devoted to Neorealism and its legacy, many critics' voices have kept questioning the old vision of Neorealism as an organic whole of directors and aesthetic principles. Sidney Gottlieb, using the same list compiled by Marcus, writes referring to *Rome, Open City*:

It was filmed partly on or near evocative real locations of the events it portrays or alludes to, but much of the action takes place in four carefully designed sets; medium and long shots indeed position the characters in their environment, apart from which they can't be fully understood, but the film is also punctuated by sudden close shots, all the more striking because of their rarity; much of the dramatic impact of the film comes from abrupt cuts, and many "wipes" alert us to rather than conceal quick scene shifts; natural lighting is frequently contrasted with highly effective, often expressionist artificial lighting effects; time and space are repeatedly broken up by ellipses and jumps; true-to-life subjects are colored by melodrama and exaggeration, and exist alongside caricatured figures of evil and weakness; the plot has some patently formulaic elements, and the ending is by no means thoroughly inconclusive; the term *working class* must be greatly expanded to incorporate all the major protagonists (this is part of the intention of the film, I should note, emphasizing our shared humanity); the cast includes experienced actors and actresses, used in conventional and unconventional ways; the dialogue highlights varieties of the vernacular, as well as several styles and types of language identified and threatening; spectators are construed to a certain extent as independently critical and reflective, but are also "directed" by carefully established patterns of shock and identification with and revulsion from certain characters; and, finally, the social criticism is direct, extensive, and central to the design of the film. (Roberto Rossellini's Rome Open City 39-40)

Thus, the questions to be asked are related to the degree of success that Neorealism enjoyed in achieving its goals, and whether the means used by other, foreign cinematographies were more productive in opening up a new world of references to problems, habits, social idiosyncrasies and costumes of classes and groups previously not investigated — not only with the filmmakers who explicitly acknowledged Italian neorealists as major sources of their work, like Satyajit Ray,³⁴ but also with spontaneous

³⁴ Satyajit Ray, 1921–92, Indian film director, b. Calcutta (now Kolkata). He was the first Indian director to win international acclaim. His early reputation was built on a trilogy of realist films that portrayed the everyday life of a Bengali family and the childhood, youth, and manhood of a character called Apu. *Pather Panchali* (1955), his first film, was an immediate success and a Grand Prix winner at the Cannes Festival. It was followed by *Aparajito* (1956) and *The World of Apu* (1959). The films of this "Apu Trilogy" remain his best known works. Ray's recurrent themes are the life of Bengal's various social classes, the conflict of old and new values, and the effects of India's rapidly changing economic and political conditions. His more than 30 films include *The Music Room* (1958), *Charulata* (1964), *The Target* (1972), *Distant Thunder* (1973), *The Home and the World* (1984), *The*

instances of realism revolutionizing the very significance of realism with less clamor.

The religious zeal with which devotees of Neorealism defended their creature is not surprising; for its political nature of revenge justified a lexicon that was arguably more appropriate for a judicial verdict than for academic discussion. Neorealism had to be “verified,” not “betrayed,” and was ultimately “killed” by diehard supporters of the Church, an innocent casualty in the endless war of position with the Left. The rupture with pre-1943 cinema was apparently abrupt and unexpected, calling for a theoretical systematization which would carve once and for all the features of Neorealism in the eternal marble of history. Neorealism deserved to be grounded in a pugnacious array of untouchable, indisputable certainties, capable of silencing critics and unbelievers. Thus, the political aspect was overwhelming, but such were also the issues of “quality,” “truth” and “accuracy:” the champions of Neorealism became stern theoreticians of a system that would show the “real” way to make movies, falling in the prescribing nature of Italian culture.

It is easy to see where this trail can lead: the foundation of a number of speculations that Francesco Casetti has called the ontological paradigm of film theory. An ontological stance towards the world outside the viewers

Visitor (1991), and *The Stranger* (1992). Over the years, he received many prizes, including an Academy Award for lifetime achievement (1992). Ray was also a screenwriter, wrote the musical scores for many of his films, and was intimately involved with all the elements of their production. He wrote articles and review on Visconti, Rossellini, and De Sica.

characterizes the systems of all the major contributors to the debate: Zavattini, Umberto Barbaro, Luigi Chiarini, Guido Aristarco and André Bazin, among others, take on the unenviable task of situating a new, irreducible and obtrusive reality in their thoughts about cinema.

1.2.1 CESARE ZAVATTINI

Speaking at the Conference on Neorealism held in Parma in 1953, Cesare Zavattini said that one of the tasks of the movement was to make filmmakers responsible for change and that, in his opinion, the natural trajectory of Neorealism was from the false and artificial to the real, granting the opportunity of signification to everybody. This declaration is extremely important also because it represents an attempt to salvage a national tradition from outside threats during the harshest years of the cold war. For Zavattini, signification is not exclusively a question of agency, but granting decent life conditions and dignity to every citizen: hence his frequent romanticization of the poor and eccentric people. “Il suo orecchio e il suo occhio” — he said in his presentation — “sono fatti per accogliere l’istanza di tutti gli uomini che vogliono essere presenti, non solo nel cinema, col loro nome e cognome, che vogliono essere conosciuti.”³⁵ In Zavattini, such reality

³⁵ Cesare Zavattini, “Il neorealismo secondo me,” previously in *Rivista del cinema italiano* 3 (1954), then in *Neorealismo ecc.*, and in Milanini, ed. *Neorealismo. Poetiche e Polemiche* 179. “Its ear and eye are made to welcome the instance of all the men who want to be present, not only in cinema, with their first and last name, men who want to be known.”

is infinitely plentiful, multi-faceted, never ordinary, and expects to be respected and obeyed, at the expense of the generic entertainment provided by cinematic conventions; it commands a different movement, a flux proceeding towards the director, whose task it is to facilitate the dense, intense flow of truth which promanates from the scene.³⁶ Zavattini was the master of rendering the persistent life of the oppressed and the poor. It is for this reason that films like *Miracle in Milan* age well in spite of their nostalgic and anti-modern stance. Postulating this type of reality is a challenge for an artist like Zavattini who started his career as a successful writer and novelist because it raises doubts on the utility of a plot, of a well written and intriguing story. Since reality is rich enough to fascinate an audience and convey a truth, there is simply no need of such writing expertise capable of conjuring up contrived situations and artificial characters. A conventional plot with conventional twists and turns would divert attention from the subject of the cinematic inquiry, which needs to be supported, cherished and loved, in the acceptance of such a term that Gilberto Perez associates with the Christian *agape* (169).³⁷ For Zavattini, Neorealism is at the same time the aesthetics of respect and moral commitment towards the insulted

³⁶ Even though it probably overestimates the similarities between him and Vertov, a succinct but exhaustive definition of Zavattini's poetics is presented by Liehm, *Passion and Defiance* 104: "Zavattini followed Vertov on three of his main points: his concern with the ontological authenticity of the shots; his belief in the artist's obligation to face reality, without hiding from the facts; and his linking of an aesthetic perception with an ethical and social concern (this third issue being probably the most important)."

³⁷ At the end of the war, life conditions in Italy were truly catastrophic. One of the recurring themes about the social and economic problems of reconstruction is the perception Italians had of the overall situation of the country, thought to be in even worse conditions than the real ones.

and injured of the world. The coherent conclusion of this philosophical approach to the objects of representation is his poetics of *pedinamento* or “tailing,” following a “simple” man on the streets, and letting his life do the job for the director. Extreme conditions of poverty, unemployment and other social diseases, Zavattini says, cannot be improved if those realities are not explored and known extensively, and this can be one of Neorealism’s functions.

Zavattini stubbornly adopts a strong moral stance whose ultimate ambition is changing the very conscience of humankind, their behavior and their conduct. Mino Argentieri writes: “Se le espressioni dell’arte e la comunicazione sociale non migliorano l’umanità, se non si tramutano in un accrescimento di conoscenza critica e di dialogo critico, mostrano la propria debolezza, ad onta dell’ingegnosità e del talento spesivi” (Lessico zavattiniano. Parole e idee su cinema e dintorni 158).³⁸ He is candid and sharply straightforward about his poetics: “Io e i miei collaboratori accettiamo, l’illusione se vuoi, che l’arte ci aiuti a conoscere le cose, a illuminarle in tutti i loro piani e non solo nelle facce composte e armoniose. L’arte come opposizione, come provocazione, come conoscenza di una città, di una categoria sociale, di un uomo” (106).³⁹ Giorgio de Vincenti went so far

³⁸ “If the expressions of art and social communication do not improve mankind, if they do not enhance critical knowledge and critical dialog, show their weakness irrespective of the talent and ingenuity used for that.”

³⁹ “I and my collaborators accept the hypothesis, the illusion if you like, of the possibility for art to help us know things, enlighten them in all of their planes, not only in their harmonious and shapely facets — art as opposition, as provocation, as knowledge of a city, a social category, a man.”

as linking the innovative practices of social inquiry carried out by Zavattini to the concept of participant observation in anthropology as coined by Bronislaw Malinowski (Lessico Zavattiniano 145).⁴⁰ Although such a comparison could seem overstretched and hasty, it has the important merit of pointing to the ethical and methodological problems arising when the various manipulations of the filmic material are at issue.⁴¹ Zavattini himself would speak of a “partecipazione di presenza, per cui l'intuizione si eserciti sulla cosa e non sull'intuizione, ricreando attraverso una serie di intuizioni l'oggetto” (Argentieri 125)⁴² and thus putting his research in the phenomenological aspect of Neorealism, as it would be later explored by Amédée Ayfre, especially in Rossellini (Cahiers du cinéma 17, 1957). An idea drawing Zavattini closer to the thought of Rossellini is the concept of the script conceived not prior to the shooting but during the shooting, which is reminiscent of the Rossellinian acceptance of things dictating the rhythm of the film during their enfolding. In a famous statement he would compare the nature of the intervention and immediacy of Christ in the midst of

⁴⁰ Participant observation implies the proximity of the anthropological observer to the group he is studying: anthropologists live with natives and in many cases go as far as adopting their customs and habits. The goal is the most faithful and transparent observation.

⁴¹ On the ethical problems of participant observation, see I. C. Jarvie, “The problem of Ethical Integrity of Participant Observation,” Current Anthropology 10.5 (1969): 505-508. For a degeneracy of participant observation, see the chapter “The Napoleonic Wars,” Patrick Tierney, Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon (New York: London, 2000).

⁴² “A participation of presence, for which intuition is exercised on the thing and not on intuition, recreating the thing through a series of intuitions.”

events to the potential of cinema as the closest means to represent and recreate reality (Argentieri 175).

A fundamental stance by Zavattini, which also sheds light on the driving force of his work, is the insistent necessity for knowledge, almost with existential overtones and a marked attention on the metalinguistic implications of his philosophy. Imagining the problematic nature of a long, motionless take of an unemployed man situated in front of the camera, Zavattini poses the question of editing as a treacherous means of escapism, whose function is to prevent the audience from digging into a satisfactory understanding of economic and social situations:

Mettiamo un disoccupato fermo davanti alla macchina da presa, e poi inchiodiamo il pubblico per cinque minuti davanti a quell'immagine proiettata sullo schermo. Questo non si vuole. Si grida: "Montaggio!", perché le immagini scorrano veloci e la conoscenza del pubblico resti superficiale, e la verità non venga approfondita. Dico disoccupato ma potrei dire qualunque cosa che richieda urgenti interventi e per la quale la nostra durata di attenzione è sempre inferiore alla necessità di conoscerla veramente. (Zavattini in Argentieri 118)⁴³

On the one hand, the privileged status granted to the external reality that the director strives to recapture suggests the overambitious, unrealistic and impracticable nature of such enterprises on a national level — no industry, no capital, no machines, no labor involved; on the other hand, a late blossoming of Zavattini's poetics will give Italian cinema one of the most

⁴³ "Let's put an unemployed standing still in front of the camera, and then immobilize the audience for five minutes in front of that image projected on the screen. This is not accepted. Somebody will cry 'Editing!', in order for the images to run fast and the understanding by the audience to remain superficial, and for the truth not to be delved into. I said unemployed but I could mention everything requiring urgent measures and for which the duration of our attention is always inferior to the necessity of truly grasping it."

memorable works of its entire history, duly examined in the chapter on Alberto Grifi. Zavattini can be defined as a true representative of the avant-garde whose aesthetics are sometimes trapped in an extremely rigid ideological scheme, but his ideas will live on in unexpected forms. We will see that in Alberto Grifi's groundbreaking *Anna*, Zavattini's radicalism will be finally taken to its extreme consequences, at the same time showing its productivity and ultimate impossibility to be carried out on a regular basis. Zavattini equates the use of a story, of a conventional plot, to a death mask artificially pulled down to the overflowing nature of reality, and he states that the "true" Neorealism is yet to come, even after films acknowledged as neorealist masterpieces. Reading Zavattini, one always has to leave the De Sica collaborations aside, and consider his works as faltering and unsteady, though necessary steps in the direction of a pure and liberated neorealist cinema that would finally unmask life's richness. An implicit reference to timelessness can be sensed in Zavattini's words, in the sense that the final discovery will be that of metaphysical truth, i.e., the revelation of a less constrained existence for man, as opposed to a forged past of narrative conventionality, as he writes:

The most important characteristic of neo-realism, i.e. its essential innovation, is, for me, the discovery that this need to use a story was just an unconscious means of masking human defeat in the face of reality; imagination, in its own manner of functioning, merely superimposes death schemes onto living events and situations. (Zavattini in Overbey 67)

It is a new faith in one's means that man needs when "confronting reality," Zavattini says, always with the task of finding a comprehensive scheme for Italian cinema first, and then for humanity. The screen is for him the place of a culture clash, whose key concepts are disturbance and subversion. For him the old way of making art has failed miserably; it is now time to abolish the division between the creator of art and the spectator passively receiving the medium. As Argentieri noted in *Lessico Zavattiniano*, Zavattini's project is consistent with Dziga Vertov's ambition of turning every Soviet citizen into a camera, and understanding cinema not just as a practice but as a way of life, and again, with no script involved or, better, with story, screenplay, and direction together as a seamless unity, and no barrier between the producer and the public-turned-producer/filmmaker. He charges American films with a sort of human fraud. They do not know what models to employ and they are stuck in fossilized representations of reality, leaving an unpleasant, mawkish aftertaste of falsification. Such falseness, he argues, is not possible in Italy because of the overwhelmingly collective character of our lives. This collective character automatically invests subjects with a potential of revelation. It is an anagogic inquiry, trying to match the verticality of a sacred subject with the humbleness and precariousness of human occupations and earthly deeds:

In a novel, the protagonists were heroes; the shoes of the hero were special shoes. We, on the other hand, are trying to find out what our characters have in common; in my shoes, in his, in those of the rich, in those of the poor, we find the same elements: the same labour of man. (Zavattini in Overbey 70)

The utopia is what he calls a “cinema of encounter” with its fresh, intrinsic “collective awareness” naturally removed from the illusionist nature of an artificial spectacle. In Zavattini’s program of social attention, every single person has the potential to educate the spectator with his own experiences, in an epistemological space where knowledge and identification are the same thing, and together open an unprecedented glimmer of light on the truth of the human condition. It is difficult to subsume the constellation of philosophical and theoretical aspects discussed or merely skimmed by Zavattini into a single concept. The most appropriate one would be probably be the spiritual education of a people, its progressive consciousness rising in the direction of egalitarianism and piety for human frailty and the social vulnerability of the poor. The very idea of “poverty” is crucial for Zavattini’s system: even if the poor lack financial means, they still own a subversive charge making them the carnival that bursts into bourgeois propriety. The poor are, to use Deleuze’s words “the people that are there,” the carnival of the world, “la vera alterità del mondo, la sua faccia sconosciuta, impervia, ingenua, autentica,”⁴⁴ their language knows no metaphors and is the lockpick to strip reality of its conventions and open the door of truth. Their imagination is the key to have access to events they have the right to attend just like everybody else. In a fashion typical of the enthusiasm and overambitious impracticability of partisan thought, other aspects, such as

⁴⁴ Sandro Bernardi in Argentieri 214. “The poor are the true otherness of the world, its unknown, hard to access, naïve, authentic face.”

the entertaining use of the medium, are mostly dealt with by subtraction, with sweeping statements:

I am against exceptional persons, heroes. I have always felt an instinctive hate towards them. I feel offended by their presence, excluded from their world as are millions of others like me. We are all characters. [...] The term neo-realism, in its larger sense, implies the elimination of technical-professional collaboration, including that of the screen writer. Manuals, grammars, syntax no longer have any meaning, no more than the terms “first take”, “reaction shot” and all the rest. [...] Neo-realism shatters all schemes, shuns all dogmas. There can be no “first takes” nor “reaction shots” *a priori*. (Zavattini in Overbey 76)

Zavattini wrote many unrealized screenplays. One of the dearest projects to his heart was the story of people looking for an apartment. Just like many other scripts, its potential is not explored thoroughly and soon becomes a dead letter. Another of his strong points was the jeremiad against recognizable actors. One cannot but think about the only work that Zavattini himself directed, and starred in, the hilarious non-film *La veritàaaa*, where the already 80-year old writer scrambles all over the place playing the role of a madman enunciating his theories and recovering the pleasure of the experience with the frenzied dynamism of a Groucho Marx performance. Indeed, as many scholars have noted, his heroic intransigence rebutting the most vulgar attacks on Neorealism has a humanist but also a religious valence, distinctively Christian in some passages, especially in its attempt to embrace the entire mankind and to “resurrect” its soul on the

screen.⁴⁵ It is that type of Christian sensibility resembling the urgency and the paroxysm of a Russian *jurodivyy* or “folle in Cristo,” — and Zavattini himself reveals that during his first years in Rome he was called “il pazzo,” before he finally accepted to be somehow tamed by the establishment and therefore deliver projects and scripts palatable also for commercial purposes, with those extreme figures following the word of Christ in original, often excessive and uncompromising ways.⁴⁶

Also his idea of democracy was resolutely socialist and anti-capitalist: “Democrazia è antitesi di borghesia, è antitesi di individualismo, è antitesi [...] di struttura liberale” (Argentieri 409).⁴⁷ Romolo Runcini, in the entry titled “Intellettuale” in *Lessico zavattiniano*, associates Zavattini with the French writer Henri Barbusse, whose idea of intellectual is informed with the divine prerogative of giving things and ideas their true names, while understanding the rational design in the history of humankind: “Si tratti di scienziati, filosofi, critici o poeti, il loro mestiere sempiterno è quello di fissare e metter in ordine la verità innominabile con formule, leggi e opere. Essi ne tracciano le linee e le direzioni, essi hanno il dono quasi divino di chiamare finalmente le cose col loro nome” (Barbusse in Runcini, *Lessico*

⁴⁵ Maurizio Grande in Moneti, *Lessico Zavattiniano*. “Gli uomini, le cose, i rapporti umani sono là, inconfondibili, incontrovertibili, irreparabilmente veri; al cinema spetta il compito di ‘resuscitarli’ e di rivelarne l’anima, nel senso quasi religioso del termine”.

⁴⁶ Zavattini shares many traits with the old *jurodivye*: just like his predecessors, he can be considered an intermediary between popular and official culture, and was definitely somebody not afraid of saying the truth in front of the “mighty and powerful.” On the phenomenology of *jurodstvo*, see Panchenko, *Smech v drevnej Rusi*.

⁴⁷ “Democracy is antithetical to bourgeoisie, antithetical to individualism, antithetical to liberal structure.”

Zavattiniano 114).⁴⁸ The scope of Zavattini's action of influence — school, print, cinema, television — and his polemic attacks against the gap between historical contemporaneity and the artificial nature of education in public schools, echo Antonio Gramsci's words on the instruments that create consensus and the mission of the intellectual, who has to actively interpret the pleas and needs of the people and become an educator. It is by means of all of those institutions capable of filtering ideas and propagating culture that the intellectual must answer the historical mission and fulfill his potential using his specialization, and offering a vital and passionate presence in society in order to define new class relationships. Zavattini tries to embrace all the fields where culture is produced, carrying out that "ricerca dei processi autenticamente educativi e formativi che passano nella società attraverso momenti ufficialmente non ritenuti come 'educativi' in senso tradizionale" (Monasta 125).⁴⁹

By the same token, Zavattini is authentically obsessed with the impossibility of writing new "stories" now that mass behavior has basically codified every possible character and event. His struggle then is to find non-conventional means of expressions in order to arrive at the core of the new social changes, and to dismantle the hierarchy of the historical novel and of the feature film, whose structure emphasizes a preconcerted set of

⁴⁸ "Scientists, philosophers, critics, or poets — their eternal craft is to establish and put in order the unnameable truth with formulas, laws, and works. They trace the lines and directions, they have the almost divine gift of finally calling things with their name."

⁴⁹ "A research of those authentically formative and education processes running through society by way of instances not officially taken as 'educative' in the traditional sense."

protagonists and hide the nature of man in its everyday enfoldings. Some of the statements of purpose blossomed afterwards in some tendencies of the world new waves. For example, the detailed account of all the economic inequalities and global production counterbalances in the case of the unfinished script about a woman purchasing a pair of shoes for her son, where hints of what some twenty years later will appear in brilliant documentaries by French new wave second generation director Luc Moullet, e. g., *Genèse d'un repas (Origins of a Meal, 1978)*: a description of all the exploitation mechanisms and wastes involved in food processing. The vastness of Zavattini's approach could be called epistemic, in the sense that Zavattini is interested in determining all the psychological and practical thrusts leading to the situation he describes — albeit only roughly outlined — in the project. The conclusion is very typical, i.e., the uniqueness of Italian people and consequently of Italian film, the peculiar call Italian filmmakers must answer. After mentioning the genius of Chaplin and other foreign *auteurs*, Zavattini sees for Italy a sealed destiny of rejuvenating creation *ex novo*:

But the men of Italian cinema, in order to continue to search for and to conserve their own style and inspiration, having once courageously set ajar the doors of reality and truth, must now open them wide. (Zavattini in Overbey 77)

A genial preacher and provoker,⁵⁰ a writer of picaresque stories and parables with titles like “Poor people are crazy,” Zavattini was a man of clear stances and uncompromising views. He had great faith in humans as an active source of knowledge, and in cinema as an epiphanic act of (almost Bergsonian) intuition, an instance of meaningful revelation in the continuity of everyday life. Again in purely Christian fashion, its potential derives from the flesh of the actor, who sacrifices his body and his experience in order for the audience to be informed with the previously unattainable knowledge of social injustices, economical misappropriations and political conservatism. Speaking about Neorealist cinema, Zavattini summarizes: “This type of cinema brings about a better understanding of reality, our self-knowledge, of our and of others’ place in society” (Grande in Moneti 34).⁵¹

The dark side, so to speak, of his speculation is the demiurgic tendency, already mentioned by Jameson, where the anti-divistic demolition of mainstream cinema confers on the filmmaker a god-like power in deciding who is worthy of representing the people and other social classes, to which Zavattini obviously does not belong anymore. Unlike writers like Italo Calvino, who with *Marcovaldo* gave a dreadful, alienating insight of urban

⁵⁰ The entries “Cultura” and “Follia” (with the reference to the Italian version of the *judovyi*, the “matto beato” or “blissful loon”) in Lessico Zavattiniano clarify the cultural background of Zavattini, son of the Christian Socialism of Camillo Prampolini, of the visionary culture of *naïf* painters, and of the more radical revolutionary instances of his region, Emilia Romagna, historically one of the most left-wing in Italy. If the first influence is especially evident in this overview, the second resurfaces occasionally in Zavattini’s life, for which see the endorsement of terrorists and Red Brigade mentioned in Chapter 4.

⁵¹ “Questo tipo di cinema porta a una conoscenza migliore della realtà, a una conoscenza di noi stessi, del nostro posto nella composizione sociale e del posto degli altri.”

life, made even eerier by the stories' apparently gentle and light tone — *Marcovaldo* is still used nowadays as “children’s literature” — Zavattini’s utopia excludes from its horizon the disgregating sociality, severely strained by an economic revolution that will soon increase mobility and industrialization in an Italy at that time still mostly rural, and is thus imbued with a precapitalistic look on man’s relationship with his environment.

Zavattini is probably the most luminous representative of the hegemonic culture in post-war Italy: a culture completely devoid of liberal instances, composed of populist Christianity and communist conservatism, responsible for the democratic development and modernization of the country, but always with a strong vision of classes and collective groups as protagonists of economic and political life, completely dismissing the ideas of citizens’ empowerment, respect for one’s lifestyle and liberal rights of the individual. His attention to the marginalized is unprecedented and vehemently honest, as Brunetta writes: “Now departed towards other destinations where ‘good morning truly means good morning,’ Zavattini’s homeless ideally carry with themselves a huge number of politically defeated men and social groups, to which cinema does not want to grant rights of citizenship anymore” (Cent’anni di cinema Italiano 323-24).⁵²

⁵² “Partiti verso altri lidi in cui ‘buongiorno vuol dire veramente buongiorno’, i barboni zavattiniani trascinano idealmente con sé una quantità di individui e gruppi sociali sconfitti sul piano politico a cui il cinema non vuol più concedere diritto di cittadinanza.”

Although sometimes his speculation remains at the stage of wishful thinking, Zavattini is probably the one who, together with Bazin, takes us further in providing the philosophical basis of Neorealism — surely more convincing than any commentator who first attempted to situate Neorealism in the wake of established philosophical schools.

1.2.2 A CATHOLIC LOOK ON NEOREALISM: FATHER FELIX MORLION

Neorealism “achieved a powerful formal *and* ideological reconfiguration of Italian cinema in an invigorating new social context” (Shiel 53). Thus, it is not surprising that the blocks in Italy’s political landscape sought to use it as a propaganda vehicle. Quite predictably, Communists liked the insertion of the working class into mainstream cinema, and the representation of simple men who seemed prototypes of voters for the Left. But also the Catholics, before realizing how difficult it would have been to make a political instrument of Neorealism, explored its potential as an electoral ally. Luigi Gedda and Diego Fabbri were the protagonists of Catholic Neorealism, with the foundation of two production companies of Catholic inspiration, the Orbis and the Universalia.⁵³ The figure who went further in seeking to provide theoretical grounds for the

⁵³ On Orbis and Universalia, see Emilio Lonero and Aldo Anziano, La storia della Orbis-Universalia. Cattolici e neorealismo.

Catholic nature of Neorealism was Father Felix Morlion⁵⁴ with his “Le basi filosofiche del neorealismo cinematografico italiano,” an article that appeared in the journal *Bianco e nero* in 1948. Father Morlion forcefully ascribed Neorealism to a purely Catholic sensitivity, equating the pursuit of beauty to a metaphysics of spirituality. Forswearing sophistication, Morlion says, Neorealists have achieved shared visions of existence, images of heroism and sacrifice, where “both artists and audiences forget with pleasure those artistic inventions which merely served as a means for the creation of that new-born thing” (Morlion in Overbey 121). According to Morlion, Neorealism reaches the new, different dimension of the pleasurable with no cheap tricks or formal shortcuts by simply investigating something that has to be there already. If a director has faith in God and, consequently, in the reality he made, then he will uncover extraordinary things only waiting to be freed from evil by an act of love: hence the dismissal of sophisticated lighting techniques or costly staging that Morlion finds so teleologically inappropriate, in the direction of a more complete revelation of God in cinematic disguise.

1.2.3 ROBERTO ROSSELLINI

⁵⁴ Father Felix Morlion, a Belgian priest of the Dominican order, was the founder of the Catholic sponsored Pro Deo University for Social Studies in Rome, an institution dedicated to the promotion of justice and democracy. He often participated to the post-war artistic debate and contributed to the screenplay of Roberto Rossellini's *Francesco giullare di Dio* (1950).

Chorality, “a subordination of the individual to the entire group” (Roberto Rossellini’s Rome Open City 49),⁵⁵ was one of the main features of Fascist films and survived in Rossellini’s postwar neorealist trilogy with his emphasis on the common destiny of the population of Rome in *Open City* and the partisans in *Paisà*.⁵⁶ And yet, at the same time, Zavattini is the one responsible for those moments of rapture in the choral aspect of Neorealism, when the protagonists of *Ladri di biciclette* and *Umberto D* firmly ground their individual needs and tragedies in a project of life that excludes any enlargement of the social scope. In his most innovative moments, Rossellini’s images are immersed in state of suspension, de-dramatized and not spectacular, to give the impression that things have their own voice and reality is just unfolding in front of our eyes, and also to elevate everyday

⁵⁵ See also Chapter II for the tension between the individual and the collective.

⁵⁶ Rossellini started his directorial career with three fascist propaganda features, downplayed by his sympathizers and subsequently avoided by the director himself, who did not mention them in 1955 when *Cahiers du cinéma* invited him to write a personal account of his work to that point. Only two years after his last fascist feature, Rossellini completed *Roma, città aperta* (1945), one of the most important and immediate antifascist films, considered by many the beginning of Italian Neorealism. This direction was emphasized in his following *Paisà* (1946), but *Germania, anno zero* (1947), the last of the trilogy, announced an important change. Perceived by his contemporaries, this change would lead to a long running argument between Rossellini and Marxist neorealist theoreticians and critics. Starting with *Stromboli* (1949), this period is marked by Ingrid Bergman's participation. The Swedish actress became Rossellini's lover during and wife after shooting the first film. The change perceived in *Germania, anno zero* increased as well as the controversy, and Marxist critics (Italian and French) accused the director of betraying neo-Realism. At this point, *Cahiers du cinéma* named him “father of modern film.” After divorcing Ingrid Bergman, Rossellini traveled to India in 1957, where he completed a ten-part documentary series on 16mm for Italian television and a 90-minute 35mm feature. This opened up a four year period where Rossellini returned to war films, but he also began harboring a certain disillusionment about the cinema. In 1963, Rossellini announced that he had abandoned cinema and would start working in television. He directed nine telefilms on historical subjects and six short documentaries, claiming TV could be used as an educational device. Near the end of these years, he completed two biographical features: *Anno uno* (1974), about Alcide de Gasperi, Christian democrat politician and first postwar Italian president, and *Il messia* (1975).

words and gestures to the rank of “great history.” With *Roma città aperta*, Rossellini experiments with the construction of a global consciousness, from which emanates a new idea of society, whose protagonists are a community in transit:

Not only children, but the family and the community at large, rather than the exceptional individual as in conventional cinema, are the focus in neorealist films, and these social formations are presented as fundamental, but under siege, and in the process of being both reaffirmed and reconfigured. (Gottlieb 37)

Although less articulated than Rossellini’s, Vittorio De Sica’s words communicate the freshness of his approach by insisting on key concepts like adherence and transparency, yet at the same time indicating that the task of the director must be probing the depths of reality, uncovering different dimensions of the real. In 1948 he wrote: “My scope is to trace the ‘dramatic’ in every-day situations, the wonderful in small events, what many consider to be artificially embellished trivia” (“Perché Ladri di Biciclette?” La fiera letteraria in Overbey 87). There is an echo of these ideas in the most explicit declarations of Roberto Rossellini on this subject: among other things, Neorealism is, he says, “the greatest possible curiosity about individuals [...] to be aware of being able to arrive at the extraordinary through inquiry itself. [...] To give anything its value means to have understood its authentic and universal meaning” (“Due parole sul Neorealismo,” Retrospective 4, April 1953, in Overbey 89). Again, even though De Sica and Rossellini are in general less articulate than Zavattini,

they share a common loathing for what they perceived as cheap effects and for entertainment as an industrial practice. With consummate expertise, in that retroactive fashion so typical of many neorealist narratives, Rossellini organizes an overarching rationalization retrospectively labeling each of his works as neorealist, even the early *La nave bianca* (1942) and *L'uomo dalla croce* (1943). The key aspects of Neorealism, Rossellini says, can be summarized in four broad categories: warm participation in the life of the communities, especially in troubled times such as war and resistance; documentary attitude; hints of pure imagination even in the most rigorous representation, and, finally, spirituality. Such loose categories describe only superficially the act of courage represented by the cinema of Roberto Rossellini. The extemporaneous nature of these statements should not lead us by one in taking his words to the letter, for Rossellini was articulate in popularizing his method but always very defensive and shrewd when talking about his movies, craftily selling them as lofty milestones created in desperate conditions. He usually portrays himself as a victim of injustice and unfair criticism, and in general as a man on the right side of the moral line, resolutely stating the authentic Catholicity of his works and choosing the sincerity of a neorealist approach versus commercial prostitution, or being faithful to his life in Italy instead of giving himself up to the “atmosphere of contempt, wounded pride, and frenzied chauvinism” (“Dieci anni di cinema,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 52, November 1955, in Overbey 104) of Hollywood. Neorealism, in his words, is “following a human being and all of

his discoveries and impressions with love” (“Il mio dopoguerra,” in Cinema Nuovo IV 70-72, 10 November and 10 December 1955, now in Milanini 216-17) following them around while they are falling prey to some sort of material or spiritual expectation: “a moral approach that becomes an aesthetic fact” (Milanini 219). One could provocatively argue that Rossellini’s experience lies almost entirely outside the neorealist canon, and still the major points he has in common with other neorealist filmmakers make him the most advanced in the research on the nature of the relation of things to cinematic image. His tendency to let the moods of the actors, and the stories he heard from the people living near the locations, dictate the shooting was well known, but also the multiplicity of points of view, the heterogeneity of the look, the emphasis on perception and the rejection of a higher meaning orchestrating the life of things make his contribution fundamental for the French *Nouvelle Vague*.⁵⁷

1.2.4 GIUSEPPE DE SANTIS

One of the few *auteurs* to posit a methodological question in forthright terms was Giuseppe de Santis, at first a film reviewer who, together with Antonio Pietrangeli, inaugurated the journalist-to-become-director trend in

⁵⁷ On Rossellini’s influence in the development of the French New Wave, see Colin McCabe, Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy, Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram, François Truffaut, and the BFI release of *Voyage to Italy* with commentary by Laura Mulvey.

Italian cinema.⁵⁸ De Santis, together with Luchino Visconti, always had the abrupt “irruption” of destitute classes on the stage of official, high art as his main goal. In his “Per un paesaggio italiano,” De Santis discusses the function of landscape in romantic, symbolic ways, arguing that the key concept for a successful, true and genuine Italian cinema is one of participation. De Santis names some works by Alessandro Blasetti (who, by the way, made the only truly Fascist film produced in Italy, *Vecchia guardia*) and Mario Soldati, together with Walter Ruttmann’s *Acciaio* as the best representatives of a cinema where figurative motifs of the landscape and interior motivations of the actors conjure up a more authentic, richer atmosphere, properly reconstructing the illusion of the world in which people live and work. Thus, his manifesto could be summarized in the formula “a real landscape with real working people.” According to De Santis, an avid reader of Gramsci and particularly influenced by the volume “Letteratura e vita nazionale” of the *Notebooks*, the unparalleled master is Jean Renoir, whose attention to reality and to the landscape has forged an unrivaled craftsmanship when it comes to associate surroundings and human feelings: “It would seem that Renoir wants to point out the existence

⁵⁸ A native of Fondi, Giuseppe De Santis was first a student of philosophy and literature before entering Rome's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. In 1942, de Santis collaborated on the script for *Ossessione*, Luchino Visconti's debut film. While still working for the magazine, he began to increasingly work as a screenwriter and assistant director until 1947 when he made his own directorial debut with *Caccia Tragica*. Among Italy's most idealistic neorealist filmmakers, De Santis made powerful films punctuated by ardent cries for social reform. His third feature, *Bitter Rice* (1948), the story of a young woman working in the rice fields who must choose between two socially disparate suitors, was a landmark of the new cinematic style. His career was severely damaged by the disfavor with which his films were met by the Left press. He died in 1997.

of feelings which men cannot express; therefore, it is necessary to use everything around him to express those feelings” (in Overbey 126). Through De Santis, Renoir’s influence will get to the “most French” of our filmmakers, Antonio Pietrangeli.

Another question of major interest is the tormented relationship that De Santis and other theoreticians of Neorealism had with the role of literature in film. This issue can be better understood by contrasting the two major trends explored in the debate. On the one hand, there is a tendency to dismiss the importance of literature when it comes in the disguise of intricate plots with tangled events. As we know from the words of Zavattini, such narrative heaviness was perceived as deceitful, looking for illusory attractions instead of focusing on the ever surprising facts unfolding in front of our eyes. As Zavattini — a prolific writer of (anti)novels, poems, letters, short stories, various notes, diaries and film scripts — wrote in his memories, he almost paradoxically sought to free his literary self from literature, and to experiment with formal devices through which to gain access to the original, revealing dimension of man. Through humor and a quasi-surrealist approach, Zavattini was processing reality and giving it back with a sentiment of astonishment, surprise and wonder, exasperating the absurd side of language and conjuring up bizarre characters with improbable names. By exploiting the rifts and fissures of language, Zavattini was thus able to destroy the illusory soundness of the well-adjusted, integrated person and to expose the absurdity of specific socio-economic

processes geared to make sure that the poor would remain in their place. Consequently, he brought to light rituals of exploitation and pauperization, finding the egalitarian roots of people and condemning the arbitrary and dehumanizing logic of discrimination. De Santis was similarly interested in exposing such practices of exploitation, yet at the same time he felt a strong and well documented urgency to return to what was perceived as good literature, namely, to the Italian realist tradition and to the verist Giovanni Verga in particular. Verga was seen as the first Italian intellectual capable of answering the demand for a less mediated artistic experience: the formal devices he adopted — a verbal mixture where dialectal words, colloquial iterations, and deformed intonations skillfully reproduced the immediacy of real, in context conversations; the seamless adoption of different point of views, and the use of a distant, “receded” narrating technique to leave characters at the center of the stage — were perceived as a potential literary equivalent of neorealist efforts. At the same time, however, different components of Verga’s writing — his potential for Marxist readings; the lyrical, almost decadent aestheticization of some aspects of the peasants’ life; as well as the enthusiastic judgement pronounced by Croce suggest that it was not De Santis and Alicata who chose Verga; rather, the use of Verga is almost the byproduct of the episteme of the time. One might even argue that the intrinsic conservatism of Verga would serve appropriately for a movement that has left many sections of life — family, industrialization, the role of media — relatively untouched. The article “Verità e poesia: Verga

e il cinema italiano,” written by De Santis in collaboration with Mario Alicata and published in the journal *Cinema* in 1941, is an example of the backwards movement in film history to subreptitiously demonstrate the intrinsic realist nature of cinema. Showing an erudite film culture the audience will appreciate in *Bitter Rice*, yet squeezing different tendencies and schools into a single, loose realist category, De Santis isolates realistic moments in the works of some of the major filmmakers — from King Vidor to Ewald André Dupont to Marcel Carné, to name a few — in order to bend them to a definitive assumption: the best cinema is realistic, and it has to be realistic because cinema is a narrative medium.

Dismissing the persistency of avant-garde and symbolist filmmakers and poets as obstacles to the emergency of inspirational narratives, and labelling their technique as self-referential technicality, De Santis traces out the development of American cinema as a situation comparable with Italy’s recent cinematic tendencies. Just as the crisis of American society gave birth to the realism of the King Vidor and the Ruben Mamoulians of *City Streets*, Italy is ready to give voice to the Italian landscape thanks to the pictorial tradition in literature and in particular to writers like Verga and Leopardi. And again, just as gangster movies can be ascribed to tumultuous upheavals, economic depression and social mobility, French realism is likewise seen by De Santis as a direct consequence of a deeper look into civil troubles, even though the Italian filmmaker is ready to “sacrifice with no regrets” Julien Duvivier and his acolytes because, as we know, albeit with

major reservations, Jean Renoir is the one perfecting a vision of the capabilities of men that is also a vision of truth.⁵⁹

It is necessary to make clear — De Santis and Alicata say — that the cinema finds its best direction in the realistic tradition because of its strict narrative nature; as a matter of fact, realism is the true and eternal measure of every narrative significance — realism intended not as the passive homage to an objective, static truth, but as the imaginative and creative power to fashion a story composed of real characters and events. (De Santis and Alicata in Overbey 131)

De Santis and Alicata see a fruitful parallel between what they name as the influence of Zola and French naturalism on Duvivier, Carné and Renoir, on the one hand, and the birth of an Italian national cinema with Verga as its tutelary deity, on the other. Accurately picking among Italian works the ones that seem to corroborate their demand for moral commitment and non-rhetorical topics, they elevate *Sperduti nel buio* by Nino Martoglio⁶⁰ and *Rotaie* by Mario Camerini to the rank of exemplary, almost heroic efforts in the midst of rotting, decadent *divertissements* and the *biedermeier* of our romantic comedies. The finale is simply an offer Italian cinema cannot refuse: Verga is highly necessary because his works offer “both the human experience and a concrete atmosphere” (135) so that Italian cinema will be able “to redeem itself from the easy suggestions of a moribund bourgeois state” (135).

⁵⁹ Jean Renoir stood out as the best example to be followed by the new realist Italian cinema De Santis had in mind, mainly because of his uncompromising look into poverty and class struggles, as well as the vivid plasticity of his cinematography.

⁶⁰ On the mythization of *Sperduti nel buio* and Verga see Fanara, Pensare il Neorealismo 15.

In another work, written as an answer to a critical reception of the article on Verga, De Santis elaborates that all-embracing aesthetic proposition typifying the discussion on Neorealism. He blames the the emphasis on lyrical elements in cinema of the author of the critical piece, Fausto Montesanti, as well as his vision of art as a group of technically different fields: “[...] quasi il riconoscimento delle unità delle arti non fosse stata la più semplice ma insieme la più alta conquista della coscienza artistica moderna, e confonde l'autonomia del mezzo espressivo con l'autonomia della poesia.”⁶¹ These words, imbued with idealism — as already noted by the critic Giorgio Tinazzi — could very well have been written by Benedetto Croce himself, not to mention the distinction between poetry and non-poetry that De Santis makes just few lines after. He then, adds another hieratic finale:

Anche noi, [...] più di tutti gli altri, vogliamo portare la nostra macchina da presa nelle strade, nei campi, nei porti, nelle fabbriche del nostro paese: anche noi siamo convinti che un giorno creeremo il nostro film più bello seguendo il passo lento e stanco dell'operaio che torna alla sua casa, narrando l'essenziale poesia d'una vita nuova e pura che chiude in se stessa il segreto della sua aristocratica bellezza. Forse per ciò, anzi solamente per ciò, oggi abbiamo scartato dal nostro tavolo i volgari romanzi d'appendice dai quali altri scettici e disamorati spiriti borghesi vogliono trarre la loro giornaliera grammatica, e ci siamo dati ad inseguire nel paesaggio più libero e fantasioso della nostra letteratura i gesti delle sue creature più primitive e più vere: il sentenziare disperato e amaro di padron 'Ntoni Malavoglia, il sacrificio silenzioso e tragico di Luca, quello consapevole e malinconico di 'Ntoni di padron 'Ntoni, l'innocenza aspra e selvaggia di Jeli il Pastore. (Verso il neorealismo 63-64)⁶²

⁶¹ Giuseppe De Santis and Mario Alicata, “Ancora di Verga e del cinema italiano,” *Cinema* 130 (25 Nov. 1941) in Cosulich, Verso il neorealismo. Un critico cinematografico degli anni quaranta 51. The debate is also revisited by Millicent Marcus in Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism 14-18.

⁶² “More than anybody else, we want to take our camera on the streets, in the fields, ports, factories of our country: we are deeply convinced that one day we will make our most

In “Il linguaggio dei rapporti,” a critical decimation of the shallowness characteristic of contemporary Italian cinema, De Santis invokes a general democratization of cinema without stars and prima donnas, with all the actors on the same spiritual level, and with objects rendered as essential parts of the scene. It is a blend of romantic ideas and cues that sound already Zavattinian. Also Zavattinian is the mystic belief in a distinct and eternal vocation of the nation and consequently of Italian cinema, expressed with a definitive tone: “Non esiste popolo cui gli interessi spirituali premono così tanto come al nostro.”⁶³ Giulia Fanara summarizes best the critical production by Alicata and De Santis:

C'è, negli scritti di Alicata e De Santis, una sottolineatura maggiore, il senso cioè di una vera e propria battaglia ideologica che il primo proseguirà nel campo della politica e il secondo maturando un'idea di cinema che riesce a tener salda fin dalla prima prova una precisa progettualità: guardando ai moduli narrativi tratti dalla cultura popolare (dal fotoromanzo, al romanzo d'appendice, al cinema hollywoodiano), essa si sforza di tradurre, pur marcandole, alcune delle indicazioni gramsciane, prima fra tutte quella che muove nella direzione di una cultura nazionale e popolare. (Pensare il neorealismo 223-24)⁶⁴

beautiful movie by following the slow and tired pace of a worker returning to his home, telling the bare poetry of a new and pure life enclosing in himself the secret of its aristocratic beauty. Perhaps it is for that, and only for that, that we cleared our table from the cheap fiction where other skeptical and listless bourgeois types want to get their daily grammar, and instead we strove to pursue the gestures of more primitive and truer creatures in the free, fantastic landscape of our literature: the tragic and desperate eloquence of Master 'Ntoni Malavoglia, the silent and tragic sacrifice of Luca, the dejected and conscious one of 'Ntoni son of Master 'Ntoni, and savage and wild innocence of Jeli the Shepherd.”

⁶³ Cinema 132 (25 Dec. 1941) in Cosulich, Verso il neorealismo 64. “Nobody cares more about spiritual interests than our people.”

⁶⁴ “In the writings of Alicata and De Santis there is a greater emphasis, that is the sense of an ideological battle that will continue for the former in the political field, for the second in the incubation of an idea of cinema that, from the very first work, will develop a specific project: by looking at the narrative modules taken from popular culture (photostories, penny dreadfuls, Hollywood cinema), it will strive to translate, albeit

Finally, in “È in crisi il neorealismo?” — a late defense of the results that the vanishing movement was still enjoying in 1951 — De Santis does not dismiss the importance of Neorealism’s success on international markets and at the same time emphasizes its truly national and identitary character, stemming from the representation of Italy’s new motor; that is, simple people who were the protagonists of the Resistance and now are trying to liberate themselves from the condition of being “insulted and humiliated.” According to De Santis, if filmmakers want to protect Neorealism from extinction, the only feasible path is to “superare la denuncia per affiancarsi a quel passo inesorabile della storia che i loro stessi personaggi invocano per potere progredire, andare avanti e sviluppare la lotta contro le ingiustizie.”⁶⁵

1.2.5 GUIDO ARISTARCO

In Guido Aristarco,⁶⁶ the tendency of bending present movies to the theological truths of Marxist literature reached an unprecedented peak, at

personalizing them, some of the Gramscian principles, first of all the one regarding national and popular culture.”

⁶⁵ Giuseppe De Santis, “È in crisi il neorealismo?” *Filmcritica* 4 (1951), now in Milanini, *Neorealismo. Poetiche e polemiche* 142. “To go beyond exposing and adopt history’s inexorable pace, the same that their characters are invoking in order to advance, to go on and to expand the struggle against social injustices.”

⁶⁶ Guido Aristarco was an influential Left-wing film critic who penned the script for *Il sole sorge ancora* (1949), a neorealist tribute to Italian resistance fighters during WWII. His articles and reviews could very well determine the fate of a movie, even of a career.

least for the Italian debate, with the famous discussion on the film *Senso*. In fact, the paranoid propaganda of the Communist Party and its cultural institutions created over the years a sort of conditioned reflex for the militant. Here is how the argument went: since Communism was the one and only truth worthy of being pursued, and since in Italy we did not have Communism yet, it was natural to copy from those who already had it, namely, the Soviet Union, and from those men — writers, polemicists, artists etc. — whose thought had not been censored by the *Poliburo*. This tendency induced an artificial interest for all the Socialist countries, until these in turn proved to be woefully inadequate models. When Russia was not appealing anymore for its aggressiveness and imperialism, China became fashionable; when China dropped out of fashion, the model became North Korea, and so on, because at least one of them *had* to possess the truth. The same happened for academic discussion. Since György Lukács had not been banished and blacklisted (yet), Marxist critics considered completely acceptable to pinpoint in movies the same coordinates Lukács discovered in historical novels. Thus, the realism that historical novelists reconstructed in their works finds a surprisingly synchronized counterpart in *Senso*, where the spectacular nature of the profilmic was subdued to the subterranean, intrinsically oppressive dynamics of history and its never ending repression and violence against the masses. Dredging up and denouncing such abuses of power was the only way to make the decadent attractions of cinema acceptable. It was a law of retaliation: by

subordinating high budgets and lavish productions to the unsung heroes of exploitation, the poor and oppressed would gain their first revenge against the official, bourgeois historiography. With that historical truth restored, the path towards socialism would definitely be easier. Aristarco is the perfect example of *intellectuel engagé*, the target of a famous letter written by André Bazin because of his criticism against Rossellini. Aristarco writes:

L'involuzione cui mi riferivo riguardava il venir meno dell'impegno civile e sociale di Rossellini (e non soltanto di lui), nel mezzo di un'Italia nuovamente imbarbarita da tante ingiustizie, lotte represses anche nel sangue, da fascismi che si nascondevano sotto altri colori, dove la Costituzione era di continuo disattesa, non attuata, e la libertà veniva prima della giustizia, e si trattava di una libertà più formale che effettiva. (Il cinema fascista. Il prima e il dopo 186)⁶⁷

Aristarco's extremely laudable position that unfortunately ends with a bitter, coherently Marxist decimation of Rossellini because of the latter's spiritualism and sympathy for the Christian Democrats. Aristarco likes to pick holes in Rossellini's work — his relentless self-promotion, the “absent-minded” omission of the fundamental *Uomini sul fondo* by Francesco De Robertis⁶⁸ — to demonstrate his failure in purely political terms. And quite obviously Bazin is also bashed for his naïveté, not realizing that Rossellini is

⁶⁷ “The regression I was referring to regarded Rossellini's (and others') lack of civil and social engagement in Italy, a country barbarized by many injustices, struggles sometimes put down with blood, fascisms disguised with other colors, where the Constitution was continually disregarded, not implemented, and freedom — a formal more than effective freedom — came before justice.”

⁶⁸ Francesco De Robertis was an officer of the Italian Navy and director of remarkable documentaries. Filmed with the cooperation of the Italian Navy, *Uomini sul fondo* was his first feature film and documented the latest advances of submarine warfare. Most of the film takes place on the decks of Submarine A-103 during a 72-hour test mission, and concludes with a series of vignettes demonstrating the efficiency of Italian seaplanes, PTs, tugboats and the like. Because of its dry style and fast pace, *Uomini sul fondo* is considered a precursor of Neorealism's documentary style.

nothing more than a Catholic supporter. In brief, Aristarco represents very well the Marxist ideological cul de sac that, pursued to its last consequences, would hamper even the most well-intentioned critical undertaking.

1.2.6 LUIGI CHIARINI

The issue of “quality” and the problematization of the cinema vs. industry relationship resurface in the position of Luigi Chiarini.⁶⁹ His task is to find a plausible loophole from the fast declining production of the early 50s and provide theoretical grounds for rescue. Chiarini classifies movies into roughly two categories. On the one hand, some movies display spectacle in the proper sense, targeted to big audiences, with its paraphernalia of fancy costumes, lavish cinematography, ingenuous plots and the like; on the other hand, there is the pure film, looking for no such mediations like those mentioned above, and seeking to establish a virginal, pristine relationship with reality by pursuing uncompromising allegiance to the photographic document. Not surprisingly, deviations from Neorealism are labeled as “a process of involution into a mannerism without soul and therefore without bite” (“Discorso sul neorealismo,” Bianco e nero XII, July

⁶⁹ Luigi Chiarini is best remembered as the founder of one of the world’s most prestigious film schools, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in 1935. Chiarini was also a prolific and influential film writer. In 1937, he created the film journal, *Bianco e Nero*. In 1962, he helmed the Venice Film festival, and later returned to academia. Chiarini also directed a few films and wrote scripts. One of his most notable ones was for De Sica’s *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953).

1951 in Overbey 139). The spontaneity of the neorealist movement is clear for Chiarini. He understands that Neorealism did not address specific stylistic problems, at least consciously, and was born as a response to what neorealist filmmakers thought were the new spiritual needs of the nation. The scholar dismantles all the simplistic, mechanic elevation to inspirational sources of previous realist moments in film and literary models such as the above-mentioned Verga. For Chiarini, this common sentiment that is Neorealism, this break with the tradition

springs from a sincere need for truth and humanity after so much suffering, from a need for pure air painfully acquired during the war and the foreign occupation which had made the individual drama (of a psychological order) dissolve into a collective drama. It developed in us the incentive to begin a social inquiry so that we could discover the causes of so many evils and so much pain. (Chiarini in Overbey 141)

Chiarini believes that with Neorealism cinema has evolved from naturalism to a dialectic movement between the human beings in a specific historical moment and the socio-economic conditions in which they live: “[...] far removed from hypocrisy and rhetoric, it has rediscovered the concrete values of the homeland, of liberty, work, and family” (143), a statement that sounds more like a policy document than a dispassionate observation, since themes like liberty and family remained mostly unscathed in neorealist analysis. Chiarini’s alignment of past facts proceeds in two directions: the Italian precedents such as the infamous *Sperduti nel buio* by Nino Martoglio (1914) and, more to the point, Rossellini’s *La nave bianca* (1942) and Francesco De Robertis’ *Uomini sul fondo* (1942); and,

furthermore, the many currents of international realisms that, more advanced stylistically and for this reason more mediated, gave way to the Italian Neorealism and its revealing sincerity achieved with an extreme poverty of means. Stitches come off the sutured shots: spectators feel estranged and displaced in a collective experience engendering a true, albeit traumatic, immersion into authenticity:

During the projection of the film, — Chiarini writes about *Roma città aperta* — the audience no longer sees the limits of the screen, does not sense a skilful artifice, and no exclamations are uttered about the virtuosity of the director and actors. The images have become reality, not seen with lucid detachment as in a mirror, but grasped in their actuality and very substance. The formal presence of the filmmakers has dissolved in that reality. (Chiarini in Overbey 150)

An aesthete like Chiarini, director of some of the most representative “calligraphic” movies, i. e., rich of formally convoluted shots, was a sharp critic of stylistic sloppiness. Thus, after the usual anathema against movies made for exclusively commercial purposes and formalism, the scholar dissolves the significance of Rossellini’s work into an unspecified social category: “Cinema which itself is comprised of a collective soul is the best means for the expression of the collective soul called society” (Chiarini in Overbey 150). He does the same for *La terra trema*, seen as an example of formal perfection and a work in which, even in the presence of some calligraphic shots, the dignity of man is preserved and exalted like never before. From here, the move towards cinematic mannerism is expected: Chiarini bashes Augusto Genina’s *Il cielo sulla palude*, works by Renato Castellani and the Ingrid Bergman phase of Rossellini, who established the

foreign woman as “an unjustifiable and gratuitous character” (Chiarini in Overbey 158). Neorealism, Chiarini says, has lost momentum and motivations and turned into a generic naturalism: one can use non-professionals, shoot on location and portray a disturbing atmosphere in pure verist terms, but its aesthetic decadence has irredeemably taken place. Causes can be found in changing socio-economic conditions, Chiarini concedes, but the main reason is the abandonment of that authenticity, of that faith in the role of film as vehicle of knowledge that has caused the death of Neorealism. Contradicting himself, he expands on the lack of appropriate financial mechanisms ensuring decent production levels, at the same time stressing that one of Neorealism’s major strengths was its independence from political parties or socially recognizable points of view hindering its polemical force: “[...] censorship, the system of state prize money; political struggle becomes embittered, provoking factionalism and excess. Criticism fails to support the best works in the cinema and fails in all the other constructive ways by which it is possible to influence production. Yet production should be directed, even under a libertarian regime” (Chiarini in Overbey 161).

Chiarini also indicates different ways to renovate the sacred tenets of Neorealism, picking four different works by Rossellini (*Francesco, giullare di Dio* 1950), Pietro Germi (*Il cammino della speranza* 1950), Michelangelo Antonioni (*Cronaca di un amore* 1950) and Vittorio De Sica (*Miracolo a Milano* 1951). Each film seems to him rather a deviation than a fruitful

development. Chiarini's praise goes to the unmediated dialectics of *Miracolo a Milano*, warning at the same time that the weakest parts of this work are the one where Zavattini and De Sica opt for explicit fairy-tale, borderline sci-fi solutions and depart from the reality of the poor and the arrogance of the rich.

Chiarini holds his position with admirable coherence: he has marked off the heroic period of Neorealism as the most appropriate cultural proposition for the transitional period Italy is facing, and he stubbornly and nostalgically seeks to ward off further distractions from something which, he concedes, is already dead. In his last article on this topic, while providing with the usual insight very concise, functional yet extremely sharp definitions of Neorealism,⁷⁰ his lexicon fluctuates between terms like "betrayal," "deviation," "appeasement," "negation" and "conciliation": Neorealism is seen as a tool capable of uprooting a deep structure layered in reality, almost an ontology.

The prescriptive nature of Chiarini's criticism, and its hopeful emphasis on renewal and social progress are evident in his own pursuit of illustrious predecessors advocating realist practices in the arts. Chiarini

⁷⁰ Chiarini, "Tradisce il neorealismo," *Cinema nuovo* 55 (25 March 1955) in Overbey 208 and 209. "Films like *Roma città aperta*, *Paisà*, *Sciuscià*, *Ladri di biciclette*, *La terra trema*, and *Umberto D* [...] possessed in common a new spirit, born from the Resistance, and revealed the fruit of a deepening (almost a conquest) of cinematic expression in the illumination of a new form," this form consisting of the following set of replacement rules: "(1) men derived from the audiences' own reality replaced the pre-conceived characters in conventional narratives of the past; (2) the chronicle [...] events and facts culled from the daily existence of men, replaced the prefabricated adventures of novels and comedies; (3) the throbbing photographic document replaced pictorial and figurative virtuosity; (4) the cities and countryside, with people effectively living there, replaced the *papier-maché* scenery of the past;" "Neo-realism sprang from the inner need to express ideas and feelings which are neither abstract nor schematized, but those suggested by reality itself."

enlists no less than Francesco De Sanctis, who in 1871 authored what is considered the first modern history of Italian literature. Besides the emphasis on the observation of Italian habits and behaviors as a mandatory means to renovate Italian literature, and his idea of realism as an antidote against fossilization and literary Arcady, Chiarini's appropriation of De Sanctis was tempting for two reasons. De Sanctis's conception of art as a dissolution of concept into form, later mediated and developed by Benedetto Croce, was soon to become overwhelmingly popular in Italy and unmatched by any other theory of beauty; De Sanctis was also the first Italian intellectual of the modern era to establish himself with unprecedented authority as a guide in the field of literature, annotating the history of Italian literature with comments and remarks on the intrinsic value of works, in a manner where it is sometimes very hard to tell the erudite philosopher apart from his ethical and personal concerns.⁷¹ It is hardly surprising that the *intelligenza* of postwar Italy was so obsessed with matters such as the value of a film vs. its pure enjoyability, or its moral potential. For the Italian intellectuals, we know that emphasis on moral motivation derived from the momentum generated by the end of the conflict, when instances of renewal were extremely pressing and urgent.

The emphasis on value is the consequence of the unprecedented success that Benedetto Croce's theory of aesthetics acquired in Italian

⁷¹ On the use of De Sanctis, see also Antonio Prete, "La restaurazione dell'occhio; materiali per una critica dell'economia politica del neorealismo," in Micciché, Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano 163-91.

culture. Rather, it would be preferable to say that a specific vulgarization of Croce's ideas dominated, and still dominates, the way Italian schools students are taught to think about the existence of art. For Croce, true art is a joining of lyric intuition and expression, the product of a free fantasy where no violent feelings are involved. Thus, the intuition-expression moment is an active mental process when the artist finds the proper sounds, images and colors. Croce was resolute in saying that art could not have any ethical or heteronymous purpose, but apparently his theory was malleable enough to be contaminated by some generic humanism, a recurrent problem that perhaps has to do with the most sentimental aspect of Catholicism:

Se si prende a considerare qualsiasi poesia per determinare che cosa la faccia giudicar tale, si discernono alla prima, costanti e necessari, due elementi: un complesso d'immagini e un sentimento che lo anima. ... Due elementi, che per altro appaiono due nella prima e astratta analisi, ma che non si potrebbero paragonare a due fili, neppure intrecciati tra loro, perché, in effetto, il sentimento si è tutto convertito in immagini, in quel complesso di immagini, ed è un sentimento contemplato e perciò risoluto e superato. Sicché la poesia non può dirsi né sentimento né immagine né somma dei due, ma "contemplazione del sentimento" o "intuizione lirica", o (che è lo stesso) "intuizione pura" in quanto è pura di ogni riferimento storico e critico alla realtà o irrealtà delle immagini di cui s'intesse, e coglie il puro palpito della vita nella sua idealità. Certo nella poesia si possono trovare altre cose oltre questi due elementi o momenti e la sintesi loro; ma le altre cose o vi sono frammiste come elementi estranei (riflessioni, esortazioni, polemiche, allegorie, ecc.), o non sono che questi stessi sentimenti-immagini, disciolti dal loro nesso, presi materialmente, ricostituiti quali erano innanzi della creazione poetica. [...] Quel che si è detto della poesia vale di tutte le altre arti. (Aesthetica in nuce 193-95)

The ideas of Croce can be clearly seen in the entire discussion on Neorealism, specifically in the speculation of Zavattini, with his emphasis on the individual nature of the production of the work of art, and with the ultimate goal of Neorealism as a movement that will limit and possibly

remove the tyranny of industrial and technical elements.⁷² Moreover, one can sense in the essays and articles published during the heroic period of Neorealism an idea of art that exists only for its own sake, miraculously disconnected from broader political and industrial considerations. It is not only the transcendental idea of a kind of art existing outside contingency that informs the discussion on Neorealism; one can also sense commentators and scholars as talking from a podium, invested with the power of discriminating between true and false art, endowed with the privilege of determining the course of intellectual development. In a word, the solemnity of the different interventions derived also from the peculiar De Sanctis-Gramsci-Croce line. For, even though they were very different in terms of thought and analysis of the Italian situation, they all could be regarded as intellectuals who were interested in cultural revolutions of national extent. Furthermore, the ideology resulting from the PCI's cultural strategy was a well-pondered selection of ideas from the above-mentioned thinkers, their differences being a minor obstacle in the hegemonic nature of the cultural *pantheon*, that is, a heterogeneous collection of positions showing that after all the PCI was tightly connected to the main lines of national thought. For example, even though Gramsci and Croce had completely different ideas on the popular nature of Risorgimento, the official PCI historiography had no problems at all in melding those two positions in

⁷² See Asor Rosa, "Neorealismo o il trionfo del narrativo" in Tinazzi 91, also about the paradoxically similar views between devotees of Neorealism as something still unaccomplished, like Zavattini, and supporters of the "overtaking" of Neorealism, to be replaced by a poetics of Realism, like Guido Aristarco.

an optimistic and hypocritical gradualism, teleologically leading to a greater involvement of the people in the subsequent history of the country. Claudio Milanini summarizes the process of establishing a totalizing, teleological historicism through the concept of realism:

Il riferimento alla categoria del realismo — già fatta propria in modo problematico da buona parte del marxismo europeo almeno a partire dalla formulazione leniniana della teoria del riflesso e della partitività — venne allora irrigidendosi nella ricerca di prescrizioni normative; ce ne dà riscontro il diffondersi di una comune disposizione a estrapolare dai testi gramsciani e lukacsiani una serie di spunti e di formule immediatamente fruibili in una prospettiva militante.⁷³ (Milanini 14)

Alberto Asor Rosa talks about Francesco De Sanctis's cultural proposition as a "modello di iniziativa culturale complessiva,"⁷⁴ an elaborated, systematic project echoing Gramsci's words on the necessity of a totally new culture for Italy, where the dismissal of Croce sounds like a tactical departure from an ideological adversary:

Il tipo di critica letteraria propria della filosofia della prassi è offerto dal De Sanctis, non dal Croce o da chiunque altro (meno che mai dal Carducci): essa deve fondere la lotta per una nuova cultura, cioè per un nuovo umanesimo, la critica del costume, dei sentimenti e delle concezioni del mondo con la critica estetica o puramente artistica nel fervore appassionato, sia pure nella forma del sarcasmo. (Quaderni del carcere 2185-186)

⁷³ "The reference to the category of realism — already received problematically by the greater part of European Marxism, at least from Lenin's formulation of the reflexion theory — became then more rigid in the pursuit of normative rules; hence the general tendency to estrapolate a number of cues and theories immediately usable in a militant perspective from the texts of Gramsci and Lukács."

⁷⁴ Alberto Asor Rosa, "Lo Stato democratico e i partiti politici," Letteratura italiana, Volume Primo, Il letterato e le istituzioni 675.

Such positions were exposed by the novelist and director of the journal *Politecnico* Elio Vittorini, who, portraying the latent paranoia stemming from cultural debates of the left, denounces the danger of a clerical culture, owned only by those who have read Marx and therefore “possess the truth.”⁷⁵

1.2.7 GIUSEPPE FERRARA

The first intellectual to mention the Croce-Gramsci line about Neorealism was Giuseppe Ferrara.⁷⁶ Neorealism, he argued, was the “first attempt of our culture to attain a “national-popular” expression in the sense meant by Gramsci” (Ferrara in Overbey 202). In other words, Neorealism would have emerged as that much needed form of mediation between men of art and the masses, an aesthetic device capable of processing the aspirations, hopes and feelings of the people and finally resulting in a series of works of art which were technically convincing, with a high degree of skilled, non-manipulative craftsmanship and ultimately successful in reducing the distance between the intellectuals and the rest of the nation. From this perspective, Neorealism thus becomes the advance guard of a popular movement capable of inverting the results of the revolution as

⁷⁵ Elio Vittorini, “Lettera a Togliatti” in Overbey 44.

⁷⁶ Giuseppe Ferrara (b. Castelfiorentino 1932) is a versatile intellectual who has books on Luchino Visconti and Francesco Rosi, as well as many documentaries and feature films to his credit. He started writing for the most important cinema journals, such as *Bianco e nero*, *Cinema*, and *Cinema nuovo* when in his 20s. His views reflect the Marxist orthodoxy of the time.

theorized by Gramsci, because of its educative potential. By showing that cinema had in itself the capability of direct intervention, Ferrara argues, Neorealism called for a rejection of Croce's idealist concept of culture, at the same time conferring to art an unforeseen potential.

Even by Marxist parameters, in fact, Neorealism could not be evaluated simply as a superstructural phenomenon or a more convincing propaganda. For it seemed to answer the Gramscian question of the culture seeking to be "nazionale" and "popolare" with unprecedented creativity and autonomy, as well as Vittorini's plea for a renewal of Italian culture in the sense of a pluralist, polyphonic *ensemble* representing the different voices of society. Consequently, Ferrara defines Neorealism as an oppositional movement, as a movement of struggle, important for what it is as well as for what it is not. In Ferrara's opinion, Neorealism is not romantically individualistic or, worse, existentialistic; it is more deserving because it is pure, without superimpositions and symbolic condensation. Yet, Ferrara writes in orthodox Marxist jargon, Neorealism already contained in itself the germs of its own decay, namely an inadequate ideological background. Thus this lack of revolutionary clarity and resolution led to the inevitable compromises on the ground of romanticized subjectivism. Ferrara, with his study on Francesco Rosi, is also the first who inaugurates the tendency of reading Italian film through Neorealism. Because of its progressive, revolutionary dynamism, Neorealism can be present even years after its demise:

The neo-realist perspective, as it was formulated, represented a position almost impossible to sustain because it was too progressive within an atmosphere which renewed itself only on the surface, leaving the ideological substructure unaltered. For the artists to have grasped the core of neo-realism and to have developed that, would have meant putting themselves on a revolutionary platform, both within and without the labour movement. It is interesting to observe how almost all the directors of the Italian film, young and old, have developed after the first rebellious wave of the neo-realist movement. In the last days of neo-realism, there are few directors who have remained faithful to the original core of the aesthetic; among these is Francesco Rosi. (Ferrara in Overbey 205)

In the same book of Francesco Rosi, an inflamed Ferrara delivers an unprecedented tirade against post-*Umberto D* Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini's works, labeling them as the chief traitors of Italian cinema, well worthy of a Marxist national-popular excommunication: "The road to becoming the most well-bred director and the most entertaining screenwriter of Italian neo-capitalism has opened for De Sica and Zavattini; the way is irreversible" (Ferrara in Overbey 222). After the umpteenth, slippery categorization of who is the purest neorealist among the pure, Ferrara writes that, after watering down their critique, De Sica and Zavattini now are as insignificant as quasi-neorealists like Luigi Zampa, Dino Risi, Luigi Comencini and Renato Castellani. We also witness a late resurgence of the retrospective criticism, targeting Nanni Loy but especially Ermanno Olmi:

These directors represent what De Sica and Zavattini would have done had they remained faithful to the cultural basis of their earlier work. They would have saved what could be saved ... Or, like Olmi, they would have pushed the camera to explore the more intimate zones of the petit-bourgeois consciousness, recording with courtesy the spiritual aridity emanating from a mechanized society, but still accepting that system in the sure belief that a soul well-disposed to love and the

Christian family virtues would doubtless triumph over the negative aspects of such a life. A drop of Chekhov, a dollop of De Amicis, a pinch of the Catholic catechism, all mixed together with a bit of internal suffering, and presto!, life can proceed, illuminated by goodness and the love of one's fellow creatures. These are themes of a Catholic taste which were evident even in the Zavattini films; in the midst of the 'restoration' it is logical that Olmi should use them fully. (Ferrara in Overbey 223)

Later on, Ferrara initiates the reading-through-neorealism practice, dismantling the late Rossellini, branding Pasolini as a Viscontian spin-off and calling Fellini and Antonioni neo-neorealists. Fellini, however, is in Ferrara's opinion as irresolute and unimpressively eclectic as a poem by the 19th-century mediocre writer Nicolò Tommaseo, while Antonioni's limit is his separation between man and historical necessity, at the same time bordering on irrationality, just as the Rossellini of *Viaggio in Italia*. Rosi, on the contrary, is the only one who can write the word "evolution" next to "Neorealism": "To follow Rosi is not only to encourage the evolution of the last vestiges of neo-realism, but also to allow the possibility of a culture of progressive opposition to the *status quo*" (Ferrara in Overbey 227). Directors themselves seemed to feed off this game. See in particular Rosi's words on the fairy-taleish *C'era una volta*, with Sofia Loren, an actress Ferrara heavily despised, but defined by Rosi as another plausibly realist variation.

In general, commentators were convinced that worshipping realism would inevitably lead to a restored purity of art, coinciding with the philosophical truth of the spontaneous, non-artificial lives of simple man. Even when intellectuals do face the relationship between economy and culture, where culture is a synonym of high art, they nostalgically reminisce about literary civilizations of the past. Critics would look for art everywhere,

seeing high art as an inspirational tool capable of taking care of evils like provincialism, vacuous infatuations, and the absence of unifying experiences enhancing the moral and political level of the nation. A major neorealist of the twentieth century, Alberto Moravia, reflecting on what he calls a meaningful diffusion of culture, reestablishes the supremacy of high culture, whose valence can defeat the above-mentioned evils and make people grow to an unspecified, higher stage of maturity, but to do that one has to carefully avoid the agricultural model of economic development:

We can deprecate the fact that modern cities have not kept that admirable balance between nature and artifice proper to cities, but we must reckon that the industrial civilizations are still, and always will be, those which forge the destiny of the world. (Moravia, "For Whom Do We Write" in *Overbey* 38)

1.2.8 FRANCO VENTURINI

In that which we could call the paradigmatic example for the difficulties of the historical trend, Franco Venturini⁷⁷ tried to identify the "exact antecedents" ("Origini del Neorealismo," Bianco e nero XI, 2, February 1950 in *Overbey* 169) of Neorealism, indicating six neuralgic moments in "the regional tradition; calligraphism; the influence of French realism; Mario Camerini and Alessandro Blasetti; Luchino Visconti; the documentary tradition" (169) Dismissing the Italian *avant-garde* and futurism, Venturini

⁷⁷ Franco Venturini was the president of the Unione Italiana Circoli del Cinema (UICC), an association of cineclub born after the Federazione Italiana Circoli del cinema (FICC) became too politicized and turned into a political vehicle of the Communist Party.

examines a wide array of works belonging to the above mentioned categories — or even to apparently incompatible genres, like the early *pepla*, i.e., cloak and dagger vehicles of Roman setting, the most notable of which was *Cabiria* by Giovanni Pastrone, a movie that was said to inspire D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* — and isolating in each of them the realist elements, stating that such tendency was evident in Italian film from its very origins.

Venturini decimates the entire verbal rigmarole about Verga and the Italian literary and pictorial tradition from Giotto to Caravaggio, only to replace those models with its own model, more updated because of its cinematic affiliation. He mocks the critics, who like anxious obstetricians waiting for some extraordinary delivery “in all seriousness and with the conviction of fulfilling a social function [...] quoted Martino or Vico in order to pass judgement on films by Mastrocinque or Guazzoni” (172).

Again, there is no point in criticizing Venturini or other scholars for their approach, since the aim of this chapter is simply to introduce the reader to all the positions that have characterized the formation of Neorealism as an unstable signifier. One can only note that pointed literary references can be in fact very appropriate when speaking of Italian neorealist film, such as the use of framing in early works like Rossellini's *Paisà*. The use of one or more frames to create different layers of interpretations, while at the same time conferring an aura of realism to the work of art, is a practice that in Italian literature is as old as the introductory canto of the *Divine Comedy* or the seven frames of the

Decameron. Yet, the expertise of Venturini and company is out of the question — for instance, Venturini is the first who understood the decisive importance of Francesco De Robertis' war documentary *Uomini sul fondo* for Rossellini: what is important to point out is the relentless frenzy in historicizing tendencies, schools and movements in the search of the right, messianic solution coming to the rescue of Italian film. The historical arguments are built ponderously and to a certain extent convincingly, but remain loose on the surface. Venturini dismantles the French realism of Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir and Jacques Feyder as an unassuming phenomenon, "spoiled by literary impulses," (174) but still exerting "a great influence" (175) in the creation of Italian cinema, only to say a few lines below that it remained "a marginal experience in our cinema" (175); he decimates Pietrangeli for picking Blasetti as the true catalyst of Neorealism and chooses Camerini, instead, only to say that, yes, he is an important precursor, "however distant and indirect" (176); he squeezes a bundle of names — Germi, Lattuada, Vergano, De Santis — into the neorealist container, only to rectify that we should not talk about Neorealism as a proper school, while insisting on its authenticity and genuineness, as a number of tendencies solidifying into a recognizable trend. Venturini localizes very specific gaps he then tries to bridge. The situation of pre-Visconti and pre-De Robertis Italian cinema, he says, is the same of pre-Ungaretti Italian poetry: no connection with European currents, legitimate masters belonging to different epochs, "the impression of having to start

again from the beginning” (178). And, he continues, flirting with one of the most hackneyed commonplaces of criticism when it comes to pass judgment on Italian film and literature, i.e., their imitative nature, “that is exactly what the Italian cinema has had to do; like lyric poetry, the Italian cinema has had to join the mainstream of European culture” (178). The positive definitions of what Neorealism should be in its purest forms — an uncompromising need for experimentation, an ethical upheaval in the hierarchy of the image, a definitive leap beyond provincialism and other local issues — are scattered in the text and then solemnly and less convincingly reemerge in the work that in Venturini’s opinion epitomizes the virtuous circle started by Visconti’s *Ossessione*, that is Vittorio De Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette*:

In *Ladri di biciclette* [...] the absolute masterpiece of the entire Italian cinema, De Sica’s *stimmung* is even more precise: the cruel solitude to which man is doomed in his struggle for existence, the determinist vision of humanity without catharsis. The nature and range of his social and moral polemic, which is never an end in itself, but a symbol of the human condition, is a question which does not wait for an answer. The Italian cinema before De Sica had never adopted themes of such total human involvement nor achieved such results. (Venturini in Overbey 185)

Regardless of what real impact the infamous Andreotti bill of 1949 had, securing state control on scenarios, funding and distribution, or in effect, instituting a sort of preventive censorship on the filmmaker, the emphasis was always on the value that was going to be lost and on the abrupt interruption of the global cultural and educational project, as theorized by the line De Sanctis-Gramsci-Croce:

One of the most tragic aspects of the current crisis in Italian cinema is not that it might suddenly make thousands of workers jobless. It is that it could deprive the Italian people of the instrument it has itself struggled for and won: cinema. It is now indispensable to a people in order for them to know themselves, to criticize the negative aspects of their lives, and to educate themselves toward a higher concept of liberty.⁷⁸

In the same article, De Santis insists on the apolitical sensibility of the filmmakers restrained from working, cautioning against the loss that a restoration in film would represent for a country in transition. The most interesting passage is probably the one of Blasetti's *Fabiola*. Elsewhere hurriedly dismissed as a vulgar peplum, thus confirming the true nature of Blasetti, here it is praised for the "warning which solemnly arises from the people."⁷⁹ As already noted, in the same fashion, years later, the communist writer Roberto Alemanno will commend *Star Wars* as opposed to bland Italian products because, at least, it brings a revolutionary message.

1.2.9 LUCHINO VISCONTI

⁷⁸ Pietro Germi, "In difesa del cinema italiano," *Rinascita* VI, Mar. 3, 1949 in Overbey 216. Germi a few paragraphs earlier admonishes about the danger of losing the now painfully established national tradition: if one wants to make a thriller, he says, he will not look at contrived foreign productions; if he wants to tell the story of a cuckold, he will think of De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano*, etc.

⁷⁹ Giuseppe De Santis, "In difesa del cinema italiano," *Rinascita* in Overbey 218. He finishes his intervention putting together the two watchwords of value and global project: "Then it all exploded with *Roma città aperta*. From that moment, the cinema was able to move forward on a path which has, perhaps, been completely opened, but which has only now become clear. The Italian cinema has discovered a new language, an inexhaustible source of inspiration. [...] To smother that ferment would be a crime not simply against Italian, but against world culture," 218-19. And Visconti, with a curt stance: "I am for *quality*," in Overbey 219.

Especially in *La terra trema*, Luchino Visconti⁸⁰ systematically carried out his project of portraying rural and subaltern classes as the true protagonists of history: the director can be considered a materialist at least until *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, and the Gramscian theme of exclusion and elimination from history by the ruling classes is well explored by Gian Piero Brunetta and by Millicent Marcus in the chapter on *Senso* in *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. In his writings, Luchino Visconti touches upon one of the deepest reasons of dissatisfaction of pre-WWII Italian film, shedding light on the main technical failures of 30s and 40s cinema: the basic inadequacy of Italian actors as opposed to the extremely high level of specialization achieved by directors, choreographers and technicians in general, boasting a type of diversified production which we could call by all means industrial. One could also use retrospectively Pier Paolo Pasolini's coinage of the *birignao*, i.e., a nonexistent language affecting the performances of actors, to characterize Visconti's position about the precarious and deceiving constructions, completely lacking authentic

⁸⁰ A director who heralded the neorealist movement with his first film, Luchino Visconti was preoccupied with the emargination of subaltern classes and social changes. *Ossessione* (1942) was an Italian version of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* about a woman who murders her husband. *Bellissima* (1951) examines a stage mother hell-bent on exploiting her daughter. And *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960) chronicles a rural family seeking a better life in the city. Visconti's segment in *Boccaccio '70* (1962) was a study of casual adultery, and his last film, *L'innocente* (1976), illustrated themes of sexuality and moral dissolution. The upper class and their trials were recurring subjects of Visconti's work; he came from an extremely well-to-do family, and, like many sympathizers with communism, maintained a lavish lifestyle. One of his aristocracy-oriented movies, *Il gattopardo* (1963), featured Burt Lancaster and was considered by many to be one of his best. The director also wrote the screenplays for many of his own films, including successful adaptations of novels by both Albert Camus, *Lo straniero* [1967], and Thomas Mann, *Morte a Venezia* [1971]. Visconti died in 1976.

experiences and spontaneity, occurring while our past stars were at work. "Until now," Visconti writes, "the Italian cinema has had to *endure* [italics mine] actors; it has left them free to magnify their vanity and errors, while the real problem is to use the originality and actuality of their true nature. [...] And what of non-professionals? Not only do they possess a fascinating simplicity, but they often have more genuinely sane qualities because, being less corrupt, they are often better men."⁸¹ One cannot but think about Rossellini's words on non-professionals and his manipulation to "a power of two," in other words, to an exponential growth, because, he said, the non-professional had to be reconstructed after momentarily losing his spontaneity in front of the camera, so that his specific weight, his individuality would, so to speak, ooze from him. Rossellini tellingly says that he has to reteach the movements to the non-professional in order for his pristine identity to be recaptured.⁸² One consideration that can be made is about the semi-divine status entrusted to the director. If Neorealism wants non-professional actors, then why not non-professional directors and technicians as well? Later, Federico Fellini would take this stance to its extreme consequences, arguing that if you apply the same act of humility not only to reality but also to the camera, then you do not need a director at all because the camera can take care of the work itself.

⁸¹ Luchino Visconti, "Cinema antropomorfo," Cinema (Sept. 25/Oct. 1943) in Overbey 84.

⁸² The process is described in Roberto Rossellini, "Dieci anni di cinema," Cahiers du cinéma 52 (November 1955) in Overbey 98 and in "Il mio dopoguerra," in Milanini, Neorealismo 211.

Visconti's positions and unorthodox application of materialist principles spurred the debate on realism in a time when Umberto Barbaro insisted on the role of editing, often seen as unnecessarily obtrusive by Luigi Chiarini, at the same time breaking the aesthetic and ethic pact between film and photography. Barbaro also postulated a stronger role for ingenuity and imaginativeness, while Guido Aristarco chose the well-known Lukácsian slogan "From Neorealism to Realism," paying homage to the principle of an ideal political and artistic movement toward perfection. Guido Aristarco praised *La terra trema* because of its non-populist stance, since the interest for the poor did not translate into a nostalgic and passatist defense of an untouched rurality, but gave explicit directions pointing towards class struggles as the motor of history. But with the intertwining of collective history and personal tragedies Visconti was already moving towards a different and peculiar evolution, a projection of his own anxieties and passions on the historical stage similarly to other "modernist" filmmakers like Antonioni, Fellini and Pasolini. He was therefore moving away from Neorealism, with works that only Neorealism had made possible. Later in his career, he preferred to speak about realism rather than neorealism, saying that the true legacy of the movement, its life blood, was the capacity of problematizing different aspects of the society where the filmmakers live.⁸³

⁸³ In "Intervista con L. V.," edited by Lorenzo Chiaretti, in Mondo Nuovo 9 (28 Feb. 1960) now in Milanini, Neorealismo. Poetiche e Polemiche.

1.2.10 ANDRÉ BAZIN

Among the early commentators, André Bazin⁸⁴ is the clearest and, at the same time, the most practical in his analysis of Neorealism. His ideas on Neorealism are well known and are based on the following tenets: the wholehearted admiration for the new humanism and for film as the only medium capable of satisfying the unquenchable thirst for reality typical of all the arts, the defense of Rossellini against the attack of Guido Aristarco, his conception of Neorealism as a form of participation in the world and as a lantern clearing the path between the things represented and their transcendental meaning, their eternal nature. The secondary literature about Bazin on Neorealism is obviously very extensive, so only some positions will be set out in order to clarify his thought. Bazin's enthusiasm for Neorealism seemed immediately suspect at best, leading to some almost

⁸⁴ French film critic André Bazin was born at Angers, France on April 18, 1918. He devoted his life to cinema discourse by writing about film and film theory before a broad spectrum of readers, as well as by participating in the showing of films and discussion about them in a broad range of venues, including ciné-clubs and factories. Bazin was a movie reviewer, cinema critic, and film theorist, and often combined these functions. Bazin wrote for many different reviews and magazines, including the general review *L'Esprit*, founded by the liberal Christian personalist philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier, where Bazin was influenced by the ideas and integrity of the film critic Roger Leenhardt; the more Marxist *L'Écran française*, a film review founded during the Resistance; the revived version of Jean George Auriol's Gallimard-sponsored *La Revue du Cinéma* (1946-1949); *Le Parisien libéré*, *L'Observateur*, *France-Observateur*, and *Radio-Cinéma-Télévision*. He co-founded the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* and probably did more to elevate and vitalize film discourse than anyone before him or since.

disdainful comments, insisting on the patently Catholic inspiration of Bazin's ardent defense:

Leaning heavily in his defense of Rossellini on the work of fellow-Catholics like Aifre, he is led to identify the phenomenological attentiveness with "love of characters" and of "reality as such," "unpenetrated artificially by ideas or passions." Having sought a theoretical sanction for an aesthetic or style in the knowledge that the style reflects the structure and dynamics of human consciousness itself, its meaning and significance, he is obliged, ultimately, to look beyond the level of philosophical discourse to the Logos itself. The Neo-Realist, then, will be a "filtering consciousness"; his images are bound by a kind of ontological identity to their object, and the Neo-Realist cinema, establishing the asymptotic relationship to reality, is ultimately, Contemplation in Love.⁸⁵

But, notwithstanding the notorious fetishization of certain traits of what Casetti calls an "obsession for reproduction"⁸⁶ and the teleological evolution of the representation's truthfulness, Bazin has still much to offer in terms of uninhibited comments about the place of Neorealism in the general state of cinema in the Forties. His phenomenological framing of Rossellini, also influenced by the concept of Bergsonian duration, is still a valid interpretation that prefigures many an outcome of the French new wave. If photography is the end of the long journey of reproduction of reality, and if cinema is the medium capable of joining the illusion of time to the perfect objectivization of reality, then Neorealism is all the above to an exponential level.

To fully understand the extent and the ramification of Bazin's stance towards Neorealism, one needs go deeper into its system and see if the scales of reality tip in favor of the subject or the object. Such terms have to

⁸⁵ Annette Michelson, "What is Cinema?" Performing Arts Journal 17.2-3 (1995): 27.

⁸⁶ "Un'ossessione riproduttiva," in Casetti, Teorie del Cinema 1945-1990 33.

be integrated into one of the philosophical influences shaping Bazin's thought, the existentialist debate to which Bazin contributed with his phenomenological theory. In an essay entitled "History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin,"⁸⁷ Philip Rosen scrupulously dismantles the myth of Bazin's fideistic belief in cinema's immediate concreteness, highlighting his complete awareness of the illusionistic nature of the medium, and, as Bazin himself writes, the "many different routes"⁸⁸ that realism can choose. He also sets Bazin very firmly in the phenomenological thought by insisting on the intentional, investigative nature of his subject, i.e., on a movement proceeding from the subjective to the objective world, which is available exclusively through the abstractions and rationalizations of the subject. One of the keywords of the essay is, not surprisingly, "faith": obviously, the faith, as Rosen says, in the indexicality of the image, the faith the subject must provide in the true existence of some referent. Following through Peter Wollen's Peircean description of Bazin, Rosen points out the exclusivity the French scholar granted to indexical significations involving a temporal dimension: thus, Rosen adds, when it comes to confer credibility to images, temporality plays a crucial role in Bazin's system, because the human's obsessive need of challenging time will reinforce our convictions about the events that are captured and shown.

⁸⁷ In Margulies, ed., Rites of Realism. Essays on Corporeal Cinema 42-79.

⁸⁸ André Bazin, Qu'est-ce que le Cinema? 27.

Such obsession is inherent to humans and Bazin's notorious example of the Egyptian mummies is, in Rosen's words, "a universal unconscious human need that culture must confront through ritual, religion, art, or in some other way" (Rosen in Margulies 51). Then, the subject will fill in the porous relationship between reality and representation, smoothing out the imperfections of those two planes and finding new pretexts to accept the documentary plausibility of the medium. In fact, scholars who have investigated the nature of realism do not refrain from cautioning about its relative openness and always incumbent self-referentiality. Reflecting diachronically on the history and reception of mythology, and comparing the realist myth with the anthropological and the psychoanalytic, Gianfranco Bettetini emphasizes the internal dynamics of its organization. Bettetini, using A. J. Greimas's interpretation of Lévi-Strauss, sees a direct correspondence between practices of myth formation and narratives in realist operational modes. Both provide models for human conduct, and both have the status of existential routes, hence the creation of "realist myths." The realist myth, Bettetini says, does not originate from a collective tradition, and is not available for different tasks: unlike the anthropological myth, the realist one is not so malleable, confined to the immanent ideologies and not serviceable as an instrument for a scientific inquiry toward the object. Both serve as epistemological replacements for not yet attained knowledge, used to understand otherwise inexplicable phenomena, and both pine away in their narratives. Thus, our realist mythologies could

undergo the same wearing effect of time, and in the future look as inadequate as anthropological myths seem to us today.⁸⁹ At this point, speculation can arise about the interest for this realism “to the power of two,” as I called it above. Where does this religious necessity to champion Neorealism stem from? Why is it so intriguingly suitable to be made an instrument of politics and ultimately of faith, even by people who are perfectly capable of deconstructing its cumbersome conventionality? An indirect answer could be provided by the hypothesis formulated by Michael Rocchio in his already mentioned *Cinema of Anxiety*, where he describes major Neorealist works as strategies of political containment favoring patriarchal capitalism as opposed to different economic models.

In other words, the general attitude towards Neorealism is not favorable because it is the final stage of a technological enterprise with the advantage of a generic humanist flavor devoid of old tricks and conventionalities. Rather, Neorealism is the narrativization, a conventional reinforcement of something for which man has an unquenchable thirst, i.e., the hope that there must be some order out there, in Neorealism’s historical case, an individual identity to be dissolved in the collective, ripe and ready to be seized. Neorealism, for Bazin and others, took on itself the arduous goal to claim the existence of such order and immortalize it, working as a

⁸⁹ In *L'indice del realismo* 99. “Un antropologo che tra duemila anni si occupasse dei miti ‘realisti’ della nostra civiltà potrebbe trovarsi nei confronti di questo materiale nelle stesse condizioni che i ricercatori dei nostri tempi sperimentarono nel contatto con la mitologia primitive. Anche il cosiddetto mito realista potrebbe cioè apparire come una modalità di pensiero e di linguaggio legata più ai contenuti ideologici delle nostre società, più ad una mitologia recepita e trasmessa dagli autori che ad una ricerca disponibilmente scientifica nei confronti dell’oggetto.”

cinematic correspondent to the authenticity of the phenomenon, the most rigorous and unmediated adhesion to an illusory concreteness outside of us. If cinema is such an exhibition of a fundamental need, Neorealism has a special place in it because it functions as a locus of nostalgia: it does not completely unhinge the traditional plot, it only makes it slightly looser; it does not completely wrench conventions from spectacle, but it only restores a different type of closure, providing an answer to the disintegration of modern man. But by the same token, Bazin chooses the realistic, antiexpressionist field not for technological determinism, let alone generically humanistic reasons: for him, realist cinema is the ultimate answer — the one with the most outstanding potential and capability — to a genetic disease inscribed in the frailty of man. Cinema becomes tautological evidence of the events that gave birth to it, thus making the audience's investment more comfortable and reassuring.

1.2.11 GILLES DELEUZE

Gilles Deleuze⁹⁰ identifies the Italian films of the neorealist period as the chief instances of techniques diluting time and the usual expectations related to conventional plots, reading these works as belonging to a cinema

⁹⁰ French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) considered himself an empiricist and a vitalist. His body of work, which rests upon concepts such as multiplicity, constructivism, difference and desire, stands at a substantial remove from the main traditions of 20th century Continental thought. Deleuze wrote a number of books on cinema (the influential studies *The Movement-Image* (1983) and *The Time-Image* (1985)) and on painting (*Francis Bacon* (1981)). His thought locates him as an influential figure in present-day considerations of society, creativity and subjectivity.

of the “time image.” As Marcia Landy noted, grouping seminal neorealist works to the category of time image can in fact solve some problems, like the trite debate on Neorealism as a “school,” a “movement,” or just a moral “stance.” As opposed to the European cinema prior to Neorealism, in which meaning is achieved through a synthetic action-movement, the new cinema of the “time image” is characterized by dispersive situations, weak plot links, the voyage or stroll form, and an absence of old-school plot:

Neo-realism therefore invented a new type of image, which Bazin suggested calling ‘fact-image’ [...] When Zavattini defines neo-realism as an art of encounter – fragmentary, ephemereal, piecemeal, missed encounters – what does he mean? It is true of encounters in Rossellini’s *Paisa*, or De Sica’s *Bycicle Thief*. And in *Umberto D*, De Sica constructs the famous sequence quoted as an example by Bazin [...] This is how, in an ordinary or everyday situation, in the course of a series of gestures, which are insignificant but all the more obedient to simple sensory-motor schemata, what has suddenly been brought about is a *pure optical situation* [...] This is a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent. (Deleuze, Cinema II: The Time-Image 1-2)

The visual flânerie of *Germania anno zero* or *La dolce vita* thus provides a textbook case for the application of Deleuze’s theory. Deleuze makes the point that the movies of Visconti, Antonioni and Fellini⁹¹ might all be considered neorealist, as they all share what he considers the three main achievements of neorealism: that of a “direct image of time,” that of a purely optical space, and finally that of sound situations that “overwhelm” the motor actions. The spectator is provoked by this kind of cinema, which

⁹¹ Michelangelo Antonioni’s themes of alienation and disease, as well as Federico Fellini’s oneiric symbolism were considered by many a break with Neorealism, even if a loose neorealist influence was in fact recognizable in the works of these two filmmakers.

will come to encompass the French New Wave, to decipher an image rather than to follow an action.

1.2.12 THE DEBATE IN ITALY AFTER THE HEROIC YEARS

New interest in Neorealism and its ramifications was sparked by the publications of the 1974 Pesaro Film Festival, expressly devoted to a number of theoretical questions defining the movement, such as the relationship between Neorealism and other theories of realism. The proceedings of the seminar that took place during the Festival show a tremendous effort to form the ideological boundaries and analyze *tout court* the procedures of the neorealist discourse. With the proven instruments of semiology and especially of some Metzian⁹² categories like the motivation of signifying units and their recondite meaning, Gianfranco Bettetini investigates the construction of the neorealist object, the implication of its iconic nature and of its ideological field of reference. According to Bettetini, Neorealism was a type of cinema that represented “a complex of objects already articulated according to a semantic system, in its turn referring to a

⁹² The film theories of French semiotician Christian Metz had tremendous influence on the American branch of film studies: in Italy, they were extensively discussed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Metz's two-volume *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* is considered a seminal study into the inner meaning of films by the outward symbolism of their images; *Language and Cinema* (1974) took a broader approach to the cultural and historical influence of film. By 1977, Metz incorporated psychoanalytic theory into his work with *The Imaginary Signifier*.

system of values.”⁹³ Understanding the nature of such values is made difficult by the emphasis that neorealist filmmakers put on the verisimilitude effect, sacrificing other semantic constellations and expressive channels. The tension between the idea that, on film, it is in fact possible to perceive reality as it is, and the codes through which such reality is organized, modeled, and finally rendered results in two fundamental questions: What are filmmakers trying to know by means of realist film, and what is the value granted to the chosen cognitive process? Bettetini argues that in post-war Italy there were the historical conditions to experiment with a zero degree of filming, where the “poetics of refusal” theorized by Jurij Lotman coincided with the refusal of everything ideological that preceded the war. This coincidence made possible the “complete identification of art and reality existing outside of art.”⁹⁴

Like many other articles of this volume, the conclusions are somehow bitter and resigned, deriving from the old vision that saw Neorealism as an ideological instrument, prescribing a different way to make movies, fighting a political war that not surprisingly ended with a resounding defeat: as Giulia Fanara puts it, “ciò che ci sembra accomunare la maggior parte di questi scritti è una più o meno sotterranea volontà di liquidare, di

⁹³ “Un complesso di oggetti già articolati secondo un sistema semantico, che a sua volta rinvia a un sistema di valori.” Gianfranco Bettetini, “Realtà, realismo, neorealismo, linguaggio e discorso: appunti per un approccio teorico,” in Micciché, Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano 120.

⁹⁴ “Una completa identificazione dell’arte e della realtà extra artistica.” Bettetini in Micciché, Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano 134.

ridimensionare, o, meglio forse, di smitizzare l'esperienza neorealista.”⁹⁵

Neorealism is seen as a lost opportunity whose protagonists did not dare enough, an illusory legacy lost in fanciful precapitalist dreams, a spark that did not start a fire, a preliminary phase towards a possible revolution that did not have the political means to make it.

Gianni Scalia touched precisely on this sore point, highlighting the hurried misappropriation of neorealism made by Marxist criticism: if in Marx there are no aesthetics but only criticism of economic laws, it is hard to understand why Marxist poetics would use realism as a privileged device to study reality as a reflection of such laws. In fact, realist art — and all art in general — should be criticized as a byproduct of production relations. The climax of this standpoint focusing on Neorealism as a failed experiment and political defeat is Paolo Bertetto's accusation of Neorealism as fossilizing practice and intrinsic negation of avant-garde and experimentation:

[Neorealism is] an hypothesis of representation through which the transformability of the real is bound to a defined order of classification, in the first place consisting precisely in the negation of whichever transformability [...] it is the predominance of a present interpreted according to the past on a present projected into the future, of the static objectivity of the phenomenon on the dynamic intensity of change.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ “That which the most part of those articles has in common is a more or less explicit tendency to write off, belittle, or better to deglamorize the neorealist experience.” Fanara, Pensare il Neorealismo 31.

⁹⁶ Paolo Bertetto, “Struttura della ripetizione e restaurazione del verosimile nel cinema neorealista,” in Micciché, Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano 175. The entire passage reads: “[Il neorealismo è una] ipotesi di rappresentazione mediante la quale la trasformabilità del reale viene ricondotta a un ordine definito di classificazione, che consiste in primo luogo proprio nella negazione della trasformabilità e nella riconduzione di ciò che si modifica e che è suscettibile di modificarsi alla variante non alternative del dato; è la prevalenza del presente interpretato sulla base del passato sul presente proiettato sul futuro, della oggettualità statica del fenomeno sull'intensità dell'istanza del mutamento. La

Paolo Bertetto, speaking of an established order of representation where realism is only a link in the chain of ideological ratification — hypothesis confirmed by apparatus and postmodern theory — sees only two possible routes to escape the ideologized impression of reality that mystifies and deceives: one is, not surprisingly, militant cinema; the other is attentive investigation into the history of film to identify those crucial moments of rapture producing a quantum leap in the discovery of new forms and new discourses. According to Bertetto, regarding Neorealism, Rossellini is the figure who better than the others was able to disclose the undetermined and unexpected, breaking its constraining structuring method. The epistemological horizon of the neorealists seems to be a generically progressive humanism, the ideology of national unity, the realist and populist literature of the Thirties, even the robust realism of fascist cinema of the Forties. What they do not realize is that such plain exposure of economic diseases does nothing but perpetuate the notions of capitalist production and surplus value, at the same time limiting drastically the possibility of social intervention and improvement; also on a diegetic level, neorealist endings are completely consistent with the “constitutive laws” of this faint, non-subversive and therefore ultimately useless type of protest.⁹⁷

convenzione formale allora assume, in questa prospettiva, la funzione di un riordinamento della qualità trasformabile degli oggetti rappresentati in un quadro cristallizzante.”

⁹⁷ Bertetto in Micciché, *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano* 181. The passage reads: “Il concatenamento dell'accadere e la trasformazione delle modalità dell'accadere nel film neorealistico, se da un lato segnano la denuncia delle condizioni di arretratezza e di

But then again, just a few pages later, Maurizio Grande and Franco Pecori demystify the very concept of transparency of works like *Paisà*, which would in fact be a “peculiar and singularly well-made case of ‘disguise’ or aesthetic elaboration of historical reality.” (199)⁹⁸ The two authors impute to the movement the misrecognition of film as a mediated text, adopting some of the principles of the Marxist philosopher Galvano Della Volpe’s “Il verosimile filmico”:

A livello del senso, nel neorealismo, la verosimiglianza diviene *istituto della somiglianza*, occupa il piano istituzionale del discorso e, in quanto *istituto fondamentale* di esso, anche per ‘mozioni degli affetti’ politiche e ideologiche, realizza la seconda fondamentale e arbitraria equazione: la verosimiglianza è la realtà *tout court*.⁹⁹

Amidst all these negative reaction, the expected criticism of Zavattini’s popular humanism is carried out by Adelio Ferrero, and in particular his idea of man, “esemplare e astratta, connotata dalle categorie ‘universali’ dell’

squilibrio socio-economico del reale, dall’altro sono la forma dell’inserimento determinato del referente nel quadro della ripetizione differenziale, e l’attribuzione all’evento di una dinamica di sviluppo e di potenzialità rigidamente determinate e non eversiva. L’ordine di rappresentazione del film neorealista opera, in questo modo, una rigida riduzione del campo del possibile e lo riconduce a un meccanismo il cui grado di autonomia di sviluppo è scarsamente articolato e determina uno sbocco diegetico della storia già implicito nelle leggi costruttive. Così l’apparente superamento delle convenzioni da parte della narrativa neorealistica si rivela come oggettivazione di una nuova convenzionalità della rappresentazione che chiude nella circolarità definite dell’ideologicamente prevedibile (ossia del verosimile) tutto l’itinerario diegetico.”

⁹⁸ “Singolare e riuscitissimo caso di ‘travestimento’ o elaborazione estetica della realtà storica.” Maurizio Grande and Franco Pecori, “Neorealismo. Istituzioni e procedimenti.”

⁹⁹ “For neorealism, as far as meaning is concerned verisimilitude becomes the *institution of similarity*, occupies the institutional level of discourse and, being its *fundamental institute* also for ideological and political ‘affections,’ realizes the second most important and arbitrary equation: verisimilitude is reality *tout court*.” Maurizio Grande and Franco Pecori in Micciché, Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano 198.

‘esistenza’ e della ‘pena’ e la sola determinazione sociale possibile ne è l’umiltà’ nel suo nesso inestricabile di sofferenza e vitalità, di subordinazione e di ansia di giustizia.” (235)¹⁰⁰ As one can easily see, the proceedings of the Pesaro Film Festival represent well the ideological atmosphere of the 70s, with its delusional approach (from the communist left) and virulent, orthodox attacks to episodes that were considered as ideological and political defeats.

Browsing through outstanding scholars that after the Pesaro Film Festival have tried to take stock of Neorealism in its entirety, very interesting contributions come from Fernaldo Di Giammatteo, Giampiero Brunetta, Lino Micciché and Alfonso Canziani. Di Giammatteo sought to distribute evenly the load between documentary and the language inherent to the cinematographic medium. Di Giammatteo states that post-war Italian culture did not train sufficiently our filmmakers to analyze reality and to understand its status. Therefore the sense of disenchantment when they realized that their neorealist approach did not necessarily produce significant, lasting results, pushed them to explore new paths, especially the fantastic and the magic, often bordering science fiction.¹⁰¹ The scholar also tried to find potential flaws in the arguments of those who previously have

¹⁰⁰ “Exemplary and abstract, connotate by the ‘universal’ categories of ‘existence’ and ‘pain,’ where the only possible social determination is that of ‘humbleness’ in its inextricable nexus of suffering and vitality, subordination and need for justice.” Adelio Ferrero, “La ‘coscienza di sé’: ideologie e verità del neorealismo.”

¹⁰¹ Di Giammatteo, “Neorealismo fantastico tra miracoli e deliri,” FucineMute WebMagazine 26.3 (2001). <<http://www.fucine.com/search.php?aid=126&fma=26>>.

provided convincing research of Neorealism, like André Bazin and his definition of residual realism, resulting from a mixture of conventions and authentic reality:

L'errore di tanto cavillare nasce da una pretesa definitoria che vuole abbracciare un fenomeno non riducibile a unità. La strada per accostarsi a ciò che fu definito neorealismo, non può essere che quella della storia.¹⁰²

Di Giammatteo monitors the surfacing of a different type of realism outside the canon of Fascist comedies, war movies, and melodramas, basically concurring with the old Visconti-Pietrangeli-Barbaro line, advocating the role of realism whenever art is going through a crisis and needs to advance. According to Di Giammatteo, the irruption of Neorealism is like an earthquake cracking the hypocrisy of Fascist illusions. Again, Neorealism achieved this goal not necessarily with pompous manifestos or bombastic declarations, but with the quiet feelings of Rossellini, such as solidarity, spirituality and love of *L'uomo dalla croce* (1943), where the quiet determination of the protagonist, a war chaplain on the Russian front, symbolize a newly found faith in the potential of humankind. Thus, Neorealism is almost forced by historical circumstances to be what it is: the simplification of shooting techniques, the absence of sceneries, the non-professional actors are the consequence of an historical catastrophe looking for somebody to put it into works of art for a wounded community. In this

¹⁰² Di Giammatteo, *Storia del cinema* 238. "The problem in all this quibbling comes from the pretension of defining and embracing a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to unity. The right way to grasp what was defined as Neorealism is the historical approach."

perspective, the scholar endeavors to sort out what is authentically neorealistic also in the so-called degenerations of social comedies or pink Neorealism. Di Giammatteo very poignantly recognizes the risk of fossilization for many of the early protagonists of the heroic phase, stating that Rossellini was the director who foresaw this problem before the others, by moving away from war themes and inaugurating a new line of cinematic research, a different way of looking that will give him access to unexplored depths. The roots of Neorealism, he says, cannot be confined to the products of the heroic years of verisimilitude but have to be searched in the popular traditions of regional masks, in the *commedia dell'arte*, in the most authentic tradition of national literature. Then, Neorealism dies almost unnoticed, also because the country is heading for a normalization that is partially imposed by the political power, and partially is a natural reaction after years of poverty and despair. If Gramsci had written that literature does not beget literature and ideology does not beget ideology, Di Giammatteo says that Italian cinema actually counters these theories: pictures are made as replicas, and history does not provide any clues for the *uomo nuovo*, or revolutionary man. The scholar very honestly recognizes that the quiet death of Neorealism can also be ascribed to the “minimalist” nature of its enterprise, not refounding humankind but simply showing what Merleau-Ponty called the exceeding matter of film, its additional laws and drama, common to other types of cinema:

Nei più tipici film neorealisti qualcosa sempre eccede, perché la storia che narrano non può contenere tutto quel che il regista vorrebbe includervi. Il racconto è in genere rigidamente strutturato ma non tanto da non creare l'illusione che il mondo esterno partecipi ai fatti narrate, ampliandone il senso. Sono l'illusione e l'utopia che hanno conferito un valore così alto al neorealismo. (Storia del cinema 267)¹⁰³

Widely recognized as one of the Italian scholars with an admirable ability to synthesize the many currents and stories behind the different trends in Italian cinema, Giampiero Brunetta views Neorealism as the instrument that better than others is capable of taking the pulse of the country, explaining its social and economical changes, always conferring to the elements of its aesthetics a potential for representation of more general and widespread conditions:

La voce dell'Io narrante si trasforma in voce collettiva enunciate nel momento di più alta e sofferta consapevolezza. L'occhio della macchina da presa assume il ruolo di un fondo retinico verso cui confluiscano miriadi di immagini non preconosciute da cui si sprigiona un ethos e un pathos mai riscontrati in precedenza. Nell'andare alla scoperta di un intero popolo e di un paese sconosciuto gli autori osservano, soprattutto nella loro ricchezza e molteplicità, forme inedite di comunicazione verbale e gestuale e di interazione dell'uomo con il proprio ambiente. Scoprono l'uomo della strada, il suo volto, il suo corpo, i suoi gesti, il suo dolore, la sua forza, la sua capacità di sopportazione, il suo modo di giudicare e reagire. Riescono a far parlare gli sguardi, i silenzi, gli oggetti, registrano le ferite nelle persone e nelle cose. (Cent'anni di cinema italiano 304)¹⁰⁴

With his acute sense of observation, Brunetta looks at the discontinuity with the cinema of white telephones: the parasitic relationship

¹⁰³ "In the most typical neorealist films there is always something exceeding, because the story they tell cannot contain all that the director would like to include. The story is generally structured rigidly but still creating the illusion that the external world takes part in the narrated facts, broadening their meaning. They are the illusion and the utopia conferring such a high value to Neorealism."

¹⁰⁴ "The voice of the Narrating I turns into a collective voice in an act of utterance at the highest peak of doleful awareness. The eye of the camera takes the role of a retinal background where a myriad of previously unknown images converge to, releasing an ethos and pathos never found before."

that cinema entertained with theatre and literature functioned as hindrance of the full autonomy and awareness of the former; many layers of factual knowledge and moral engagement are revealed simply by dismissing fictive names and impossibly constructed characters. The scholar discovered many working hypotheses and thematic lines in the entire neorealist *corpus*, such as the interpellation through dialect and not artificial Italian, to make sure that all the strata of the population could be involved, the politicization of cinema and a new cultural dirigisme during the electoral campaign for the first free elections after Fascism in 1948, and the emphasis on the journey that many of the protagonists must undertake in order to improve their lives and pitiful conditions, an anticipation of the “strolling” so common to many works of the 60s. In a time when making art and making history seemed to march at the same pace, Brunetta insists on the “capacity of multiplication and expansion of the visible as one of the fundamental characteristics of neorealist cinema,”¹⁰⁵ and on Neorealism as a formidable tool capable of implementing the formation of a national identity because:

Lo sguardo neorealista è uno sguardo totalizzante e inclusivo che punta inoltre ad abbracciare il territorio italiano nella sua massima estensione ... e come tutto un popolo possa diventare protagonista di una gigantesca epopea i cui registri narrative possano essere talora elevate, ora tragicomici, ma per lo più attestati su un piano di prosa e di *sermo communis*. (Cent'anni di cinema italiano 306)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Fanara, Pensare il neorealismo 74. “La capacità di moltiplicazione e di dilatazione del visibile come una delle caratteristiche fondamentali del cinema neorealista.”

¹⁰⁶ “The neorealist look is an inclusive and totalizing look whose goal is also to take in at a glance the Italian territory in all of its extension [...] and to demonstrate how an entire people can become the protagonist of a gigantic epic, whose narrative modules can sometimes be lofty, sometimes tragicomic, but mainly organized as a prose and as a *sermo communis*.”

One of the most influential Italian film scholars was Lino Micciché. Micciché has written extensively on Neorealism *in toto* as a historical movement as well as specifically on single filmmakers. The analysis of his contributions will also show the changes that the topic had undergone in Italian film criticism, from the initial perception of the differences among neorealists to a clear awareness of the problematicity of Neorealism as a homogeneous *ensemble*. In *Visconti e il Neorealismo. Ossessione, La terra trema, Bellissima*, Micciché insists on the birth of Neorealism as the natural conclusion of an itinerary of cultural renewal that started in the mid-thirties to culminate in *Ossessione* of 1943. Interestingly enough, Micciché is not concerned with potentially realistic lines in Italy's previous cinema. Rather, he sees *Ossessione* as the ripe yield coming after a learned debate taking place on the journal *Cinema*, oriented towards a conscious rehabilitation of a literary matrix for Italian cinema — most important models being the verist writer Giovanni Verga, and the French Naturalists — and imbued with political militancy. On this score, Micciché inscribes *Ossessione* in a revolutionary perspective by quoting and giving credit to some comments made by Pietro Ingrao, later an influential figure of the PCI, who highlighted the political message of the movie, which transfigured the “umanità che soffre e che spera” portrayed in *Ossessione* into a signifier of the working

class.¹⁰⁷ The novelty of *Ossessione* lies in the extraneousness that the two lovers feel for the order in which they have to function, while in the novel after which the movie is made — *The Postman Always Rings Twice* by James M. Cain — Micciché sees a fundamental homology between characters and environment. Such indomitable alterity is the connective tissue of the movie, leading to “the first cinema discourse in Italy whose reasons are fury and death, desire and solitude.”¹⁰⁸ Although expanding on the similarities in some dialogues and in the overall scenario, Micciché is not willing to grant to the original novel a wider importance. Quoting Visconti’s words, the novel served as a “fragmentary sketch.”¹⁰⁹ Inspiration came from other sources: the novelty of a plastic, crude and sweaty and representation of Italy; the urgent need to grant cinematic citizenship to previously unapproachable subjects; the conscience of a new status to which filmmakers could now legitimately aspire — that of heralds of a new ethical bond between people, in a new spiritual community founded on solidarity and egalitarianism. But this generic core explains only partially the energy a movie like *Ossessione* is still emitting today. Micciché dismantles Jeffrey Nowell-Smith’s argument on the film being a work reflecting the destructive power of sexual

¹⁰⁷ Ingrao in Micciché, *Visconti e il Neorealismo. Ossessione, La terra trema, Bellissima* 35. “La via che veniva tentata con *Ossessione* era quella di una cultura che riqualificasse se stessa in rapporto ad un nuovo soggetto di storia, che era stato riconosciuto attraverso un lungo travaglio, politico e intellettuale, cominciato nella seconda metà degli anni trenta. L’umanità che soffre e spera’ era il nome cifrato che alludeva alla classe operaia. Quegli scritti su ‘Cinema’ erano un aspetto di una lotta, che trovava il suo sbocco culminante nella cospirazione politica.

¹⁰⁸ Micciché, *Visconti e il Neorealismo* 41.

¹⁰⁹ Visconti names it a “traccia aneddotica,” in Micciché, *Visconti e il Neorealismo* 41

concupiscence, saying that the true tragedy of which the movie is both metaphor and representation, lies in “the impossibility of Liberation, the insatiability of Desire, the Unbearability of the Norm, and the Impracticability of the Escape,” in some sort of existential fashion.¹¹⁰

In *Gli anni del neorealismo*, Alfonso Canziani confirms the problems scholars have to face when confronted with the innovative charge of Neorealism and the real causes that determined its death. This book by Canziani is extremely important because it springs from the unfaltering conviction, argued with pure Marxist analysis, that not only did Neorealism in fact gloriously exist, but it was the unfathomable event that opened new ways, the unexpected renaissance that soon became a religion and it is for this reason so hard to dismiss. Canziani blames the active intervention of reactionary forces aimed at shutting down the whole movement, yet at the same time admits that there was still fertile soil to make good movies, had filmmakers tried to do it. He implicitly attacked the makers of comedies and non-orthodox products from his leftist position. And, given the oppositional stance he takes against the old style fascist flicks, his words are the clearest when attempting a positive definition of the conscious, social efforts of Neorealism:

Il neorealismo fu un cinema di aggiornamento politico-culturale, dopo decenni di disinformazione e di ignoranza. Fu un cinema realizzato nella speranza di contribuire a risolvere mali antichi del nostro paese, tra cui l'indifferenza dei ceti

¹¹⁰ “Nella impossibilità della Liberazione, nella inappagabilità del Desiderio, nella invivibilità della Norma, nella irrealizzabilità della Fuga,” in Micciché, Visconti e il neorealismo 41.

medi, il distacco degli strati più poveri dalle cose della politica e la tendenza a risolvere i problemi del lavoro, della casa, della sicurezza, separatamente, come casi individuali. Il neorealismo offrì riferimenti e dati problematici in chiave di cristiano umanitarismo e di solidarismo socialista. (Gli anni del neorealismo 18)¹¹¹

As Canziani states, before WWII the predominant slant of Italian culture is an irritating and politically dishonest declamatory, academic and celebrative slant of bourgeois ideals, connected to the pseudo-culture of the conservative class, whereas “la poetica del neorealismo è invece già quella dell’uomo possibile di fronte all’uomo reale, in contrapposizione con il ‘potere’.” (19)¹¹² Another important observation made by Canziani, although not taken to its extreme consequences, is that the ideals of such conservative social strata were even more reactionary than in any other European countries, at least those that had had a bourgeois revolution. But it is in fact the absence of a bourgeois revolution explaining the predominance of an idealist culture so ready to be imbued with Marxist philosophy, as well as the pact between the Catholic and communist forces aimed at an equal distribution of power between them, that is the reason for the permanence of populist and paleo-capitalist models in Italian culture.

¹¹¹ “Neorealist cinema was a movement of political and social advancement after decades of ignorance and disinformation. It was a type of cinema realized as a hopeful contribution aimed at solving the ancient ills of our country, among which are the indifference of middle classes, the detachment from the lower masses from political issues and the tendency to solve house, work and security problems separately, as individual cases. Neorealism gave evidence and problematic data from the viewpoints of Christian humanitarianism and social solidarity.” Canziani goes even further in actually circumscribing the neorealist phenomenon in indicating the exact number of movies of neorealist vision, as mentioned also in Millicent Marcus, Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism.

¹¹² “Neorealism instead, is already a poetics of the potential man against versus the real one, in contrast with ‘power.’”

But possibly the most interesting observations on Neorealism were made by Brunello Rondi, who tried to inform the movement with a solid philosophical foundation proposing the idea of Neorealism as “cinema of duration,” overcoming the juxtaposition of observer and object in a fluid representation of reality, where the indistinct and hypnotic rhythm of things can supposedly help us penetrate the ideological layers superimposed on people, create knowledge, and through that revelation at the same time improve human solidarity and the social tissue, in a virtuous circle that would in turn spark the desire for further knowledge and further improvement.

1.2.13 NEOREALISM TODAY: REDEFINING THE ROOTS, EVALUATING THE LEGACY

One of the most interesting hypotheses that have founded recent works on Italian cinema, proposed by Marcia Landy’s *Italian Film* is the idea of its function in the formation or a problematic negotiation of a national identity, in Marcia Landy’s *Italian Film*. Expanding on the concepts of collective narratives offering the illusion of unity and cohesiveness, and the perception/misperception of what is considered to be typically Italian, the scholar writes:

The Italian cinema reveals itself as engaged in a social fiction but a necessary one, relying on a narrative that perpetuates itself in terms of “the people.” The national community is forged through the assumed common bonds of unitary language, the nation as a family, conceptions of gender and ethnicity that rely on an identity of

“origins, culture, and interests,” and geographical (and sacrosanct) borders. (Italian Film 1)

Landy sees in the explosion of the movement-image the true innovation of Neorealism: fragmentation, multiplication, “disjunctions between landscape and character” (Italian Film 140), the category of “openness” and broken causality are implemented as never before, in order to redefine conventions and establish a different relation to the world. It is the birth of conceptual realism, where auterist cinema privileges its own preferred formal device or philosophical stance taken from the broad category of “realism”:

Rethinking neorealism from the vantage point of the time-image releases the film critic from the dreary round of having to first establish the precise moment of neorealism’s beginning as well as marking its absolute limits and absolute distinctions [...] Neorealism [...] was, foremost, a harbinger of the attention that must be paid to the visual image in a world that had been set in motion by the powers of the visual and their relation to the dynamism of time, motion, and change. (Landy 15)

This way, Neorealism almost equates with every challenge against genre cinema and in general against every wave of returning movement-image, in a natural alliance with “quality” works — or, as the scholar writes, “serious” — against the huge receptacles of *pepla*, spaghetti westerns, comedies Italian style and the rest of the “gastronomy cinema,” as Lino Micciché would later name it.

Peter Bondanella is the author of one of the most interesting contributions. Like Di Giammatteo, Bondanella sees in Neorealism,

especially in De Sica, a line that cannot be ascribed to the different theories of realism influencing Italian filmmakers at the time, a line of magic and grotesque imagery. Examining *Ladri di biciclette*, Bondanella brings to the surface the metaphysical and Kafkaian dimension of the work, almost carrying an allegorical meaning: the journey of the protagonist all over Rome, the mysterious chain of events and phases he has to go through, the futile, useless attempts of regaining his previous status, his final defeat — all those elements concur to a revision of Neorealism, where pictorial and literary influences, dating back to Dante and the Middle Ages, cannot be ignored to comprehend its meaning. But the most interesting part of his analysis deals with an aspect that according to Bondanella has been too often forgotten when discussing Neorealism: its cinematic framing and the technical artifice, erroneously put aside in favor of an emphasis on Italy's historical passage and social problems. Bondanella insists on the crucial differences existing among the neorealist masters, as well as on the absence of a “programmatic approach” and of a “governing manifesto” (Italian Cinema 34). An even stronger statement is that “there was no single aesthetic or programmatic approach to society in their works” (52). Bondanella is here referring to Rossellini and De Sica, dismissing the foundational stance, albeit generic, of their post-WWII works. The scholar remarks about the problematic interpretations of Neorealists films, saying for example about *Ladri di biciclette* that it

may also be seen as a pessimistic and fatalistic view of the human condition, as well as a philosophical parable on absurdity, solitude, and loneliness ... In De Sica's universe, economic solutions are ultimately ineffective in curing what is a meaningless, absurd, human predicament. (Italian Cinema 52-53)

Like Di Giammatteo, Bondanella analyzes *La macchina ammazzacattivi* and *Miracolo a Milano* to stretch the aesthetic boundaries of Neorealism, presenting them as a self-conscious attempt to meditate on themes like the ethical nature of the camera, incapable of telling good from evil when it comes to filming, and the meager consolation that art can provide in a world where too often there is no escape whatsoever from a condition of poverty and marginalization.

Even though both scholars do not call Neorealism a movement or a school, Millicent Marcus's position is extremely interesting in itself, even more so when compared with Bondanella's. If Bondanella insists on the different aesthetic agendas and the loose character of the movement, Marcus does not refrain from connecting a hypothetical, cohesive poetics of Neorealism to further developments in Italian film, ranging from what she calls the "consumable realism" of the *Pane e amore* series, to Scola's melancholy homage of *C'eravamo tanto amanti*, or rather in taking apart such developments and check their potential rate of Neorealism. Marcus is very careful in not giving mandatory properties to the formal devices employed by the different filmmakers, already quoted in the introductory part of this chapter, as well as to the break with prewar cinematic practices, because "Italian film industry had always paid obeisance to the realist possibilities

implicit in the medium” (Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism 20). At the same time, Marcus wants to confer to Neorealism the privileged status of a thematic and moral touchstone, contradictorily feeding itself off a mythical aura constructed by celebratory bibliography. The provocative thesis of *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* is that it “constitutes *la via maestra* of Italian film, that it is the point of departure for all serious postwar cinematic practice, and that each director had to come to terms with it in some way, whether in seeming imitation (the early Olmi), in commercial exploitation (the middle Comencini), or in ostensible rejection (the recent Tavianis). The sporadic outbursts of neo-neorealism (*The Organizer*, *Accattone*, and *Bandits at Orgosolo*) are only the most obvious examples of a cinematic memory that will not disappear, and that dictates, if not the outward form of the modern film industry, at least its conscience” (xvii). This statement surely contains a high percentage of critical truthfulness, even though similar positions have opened critical problems when coming to judge the history of Italian film in its entirety, namely slurring over filmmakers like Marco Ferreri who have nothing to do with Neorealism and still deserve to be included in an ideal list of Italy’s best all-time directors, or coining the “neo-neorealist” label every time a filmmaker deals with social commentary, such as the case of Gianni Amelio, or the police movies of the early nineties. By stretching Neorealism’s competence too far, thanks to the political infection of every aspect of Italy’s social and economic life, that notion could

be used instrumentally as an argument to judge the subversion rate of a work.

Antonio Pietrangeli's career is also a case in point. Even though he was a flaming advocate of Neorealism even before its official birth, works like *Io la conosco bene* really do not show a direct neorealist influence, unless we isolate very marginal stylistic concerns. Yet it is in fact surprising to take stock of Neorealism's influence on post-war Italian cinema, even in those works like Grifi's *Anna* that no scholar considers, even though it represents the point of no return when it comes to a precise application of neorealist, mostly Zavattinian, principles. The problem that might arise from such an operation is to forget that in many situations the influence of Neorealism is, if not just a pretext, a correspondent of that moral stance to which scholars have sometimes reduced Neorealism. Marcus in fact belongs to this group, by adopting Lino Micciché's definition of Neorealism as a new moral poetry "whose purpose was to promote a true objectivity — one that would force viewers to abandon the limitations of a strictly personal perspective and to embrace the reality of the 'others,' be they persons or things, with all the ethical responsibility that such a vision entails. This shared moral commitment united filmmakers 'from above,' dissolving their pretty stylistic differences into basic agreement on the larger issues of human concerns and general world view" (Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism 23).

A more cautious approach is Mira Liehm's *Passion and Defiance*. Liehm describes the neorealist family as an incarnation of Gramsci's

modern prince, having borrowed from the philosopher the principle of the intellectual as organizer. According to Liehm, Neorealism was a movement mainly born out of history, unthinkable without the disasters caused by the war, because the devastation of the country made filmmakers use that desolate background as the most adequate idea of reality. The scholar seems to capture the importance but also the ultimate unpredictability of its future outcomes when she says, with regard to the style of *Ladri di biciclette* and Neorealism in general, that “each filmmaker took from it what he wanted, adapting it to his own artistic vision” (77). In Liehm’s opinion, Lino Micciché’s definition of Neorealism as ethical aesthetics, albeit contradictory insofar as it was enunciated during the 1974 Pesaro conference that dismissed the principle of Neorealism as a school or a movement, still proved to be more foresighted than purely sociohistorical approaches. By retracing the ideas of such scholars as Giuseppe Ferrara, Mario Gromo, Jurij Lotman and others, who have seen in Neorealism an oppositional force to previous aesthetics, Liehm comes to the conclusion that probably the most appropriate and insightful theoretical description of Neorealism was carried out by Amédée Ayfre, characterizing it as “a movement that went beyond previous aesthetics based on the emphasis of reality, be it naturalism, verismo; or, in cinema, the French populism of the thirties or the British documentary school of John Grierson and Basil Wright. This approach, formulated mainly by Amédée Ayfre “[...] saw neorealism as a movement that used the full capacity of the film medium in order to capture

not only real events but also their deeper significance” (112). In the words of Siegfried Kracauer, by featuring “environmental situations rather than private affairs, episodes involving society at large rather than stories centering upon an individual conflict” (Theory of Film 98-9) and adding to this aesthetics the above mentioned ethical stance, Neorealism proved in fact an important school, albeit *sui generis*.

Questions regarding the character of Italian identity were pursued by Pierre Sorlin who, “instead of considering ‘Italianness’ a datum which can be hunted down in artistic works” (Italian National Cinema 7), observed the progressive building of a national cinematic culture trying to find out “what was genuinely Italian or perfectly international in the movies that Italian studios produced.” It is a particularly appropriate question for Italian cinema, where there are recurring phenomena of pictures made exclusively for foreign markets. Sorlin agrees with David Forgacs and Gian Piero Brunetta in defining Neorealism primarily as a myth developed in critical and polemical literature. His approach to Neorealism as a category is decrowning, and reducing it to a semiotic game. When speaking about foreign critics, the scholar writes:

Neorealism was a vacant signifier and they adopted it. But their interpretations were at variance; some thought that it was the best description of the moral and physical destruction caused by the war, others maintained that it provided a metaphysical image of human beings faced with despair. (Italian National Cinema 89)

And even more bluntly, joining Christopher Wagstaff in the discussion whether it would be fair or not to include *Roma città aperta* in the neorealist canon, Sorlin adds:

Had it not been for the polemics which surrounded them [...] Neorealist films would have become, simply, “the fabulous Italian films of the late 1940s”. But critics, intellectuals and politicians created a “genre”. They created it since the films we still consider Neorealist are essentially theirs [...] Neorealism has, in fact, not just one, but a variety of meanings. It is a tendency identified first by critics, then by spectators, finally turned into a series, or rather a generic field. (Italian National Cinema 93)

Sorlin also stresses that the Church and the Communists were both worried by Hollywood pictures because they were posing threats to Italian traditions. What is more important here is not what the real perception of American cinema was, but rather the well documented inability of the two ideological churches, the Communist and the Catholic, to understand the changes occurring in the *paese reale*, going at a much faster speed than they were able to figure.

Another attempt at understanding the cultural changes that made Neorealism possible is in Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell’s *Film History: An Introduction*. Thompson and Bordwell see the birth of Neorealism in a generic realist tendency already present in Italian cinema and literature during the last years of the agonizing Fascist regime. They look deeper into the misfortunes of Italian industrial film, trying to connect the character of the production by attentively reconstructing the different inputs coming from state executives or party officials as well as the effects of the Andreotti

Law of 1949. The erratic progress of most neorealist plots is carefully summarized: “Such plot developments, in rejecting the carefully motivated chain of events in classical cinema, seem more objectively realistic, reflecting the chance encounters of daily life. Along with this tendency goes an unprecedented use of ellipsis. [...] Neorealist storytelling tends to ‘flatten’ all events to the same level, playing down climaxes and dwelling on mundane locales or behaviors” (419 and 420). Thompson and Bordwell also note the influence of Neorealism on the “modernist” *auteurs* like Antonioni, whose films draw on some neorealist conventions and other stylistic aspects: “Now a film’s plot might mix scenes of banal conversation with scenes showing the characters reacting to their environment or simply walking or driving through a landscape” (420). The two scholars also give a brief but fundamental account of the attempt to incorporate Neorealism in Italian cultural history as a natural outcome of common, popular characters indelibly inscribed in the nation’s DNA, citing the aforementioned Pesaro Film Festival and Conference of 1974 as a crucial point in the debate, when “many believed that Neorealism was a loose ethic, not an aesthetic or a political position” (432).

Starting from Thompson’s study of *Ladri di biciclette*, Julia Hallam keenly deconstructs the ambiguous nature of historical reception — and subsequent commodification — of Neorealist films, arguing that there is a contradiction in the judgment pronounced by specialists seeing a work of

art that breaks dominant expectations and conventions as a more realist film than its predecessors, and the nature of the realist code itself:

Inherent within this conception of realism as defamiliarisation, as breaking conventions, lies an implicit assumption that the popular film, by definition, can never be a realist film. (Realism and Popular Cinema 41)

The scholar follows the description established by Pierre Sorlin and essentially agrees on the generalist nature of Neorealism as a loose category, stressing its potential as a container capable of accommodating variations found in many sub-genres of the 30s and 40s. She insists on the early function of Neorealism as a source of knowledge and truth, a palingenetic force initializing a virtuous circle of rebirth for a country accustomed to the stereotypical immobility of the Fascist regime. Hallam agrees with Sorlin in blaming the infamous Andreotti law of 1949, instituting a protectionist regime and essentially constraining Italian directors to a sort of *de facto* self-censorship if they wanted to be eligible for state sponsorship. According to Hallam and to the French scholar, once the Popular front collapsed, the vitality of the movement waned and ultimately crumbled, leaving behind a small number of excellent works of art, thereby signifying the short springtime of Italy, its ephemeral resurrection. More interesting is the emphasis on the lack of shared goals and principles, and on the true nature of the movement, where it is problematic to trace a line between a set of negative assumptions about commercial cinema and common intentions and filmmaking practices: “Unity, such as it was, came from a moral

commitment to the creation of a new Italy, rather than an explicit programme of aesthetic or political aims” (Hallam 17). This statement takes us back to the use of Croce and idealist culture, and the conviction that realist art would unavoidably reconnect with the true nature of the Italian nation.

In an essay dedicated to *L'amore in città*, Ivone Margulies take stock of the liturgical lexicon in Zavattini's theoretical works. In Margulies's opinion, the urgency of healing, the task of relieving one's sins in the shape of a father confessor, and the turning one's back on reality as a betrayal are clear signs suggesting “that the moral superiority warranted in resistance was continuously mobilized in neorealist rhetoric but particularly so in the early 1950s,”¹¹³ when the end of Neorealism was perceived as a bitter and painful defeat for its champions. The impossible unity pursued by Zavattini can be inscribed in the debate on the role of intellectuals after the war: even before the cultural dictatorship of the Left was omnipervasive, unchallengeable and zealously sold as unequivocal symbol of its intrinsic superiority, Zavattini had shaped for the intellectual a compromissory role, as an evangelical redistributor of social cohesion, the artistic equivalent of a just distribution of wealth.

1.3 CONCLUSIONS

¹¹³ “Exemplary Bodies: Reenactment in Love in the City, Sons, and Close Up” in *Rites of Realism* 224.

The aim of this summary of different criticism and stances is not to demonstrate the theoretical inconsistencies of the movement or to play down the effects of Neorealism on Italian cinema. Rather, it is to explore it in the light of Tinazzi's statement about Neorealism exploring the "zones of reality considered useless or marginal," and to appreciate better the impossible task Neorealism took upon itself, caught in an indissoluble contradiction between a precapitalist nostalgia and an industrial future. The rejection of a fully industrialized Italy in the name of a revolutionary and idealized social egalitarianism marked Neorealism as a precocious *Nouvelle Vague* whose cinematic influence was lasting but seemed extremely old after just a few years. From an ideological standpoint, neorealist filmmakers fought against establishment refusing agency to the "zones of reality considered useless or marginal," only to adopt a populist, paternalistic stance and romanticize imaginary communities. Thus, notable exceptions where the emphasis is on the individual stand out even more, such as in *Il cammino della speranza* of Pietro Germi with the emphasis on the Law of the State as the best form of workers' protection, or in certain passages of *Ladri di biciclette* when the protagonists have to fight the establishments and their different forms of indifference. But Neorealism acted as if the modernization of the country was something that did not concern its actors:

La lotta contro il capitalismo si traduce così nel rifiuto ideologico della sua organizzazione sociale e produttiva, finendo col coincidere — è questa la critica che

negli anni Settanta verrà rivolta al neorealismo —, col rifiuto della realtà della fabbrica e dei processi di massificazione e del mercato, col recupero dell'incontaminato, del primitivo, del non industriale, col rischio di inserire con ciò nel solco della tradizione meridionalista salveminiiana — e cioè la campagna, il meridione, il sottosviluppo come realtà altre e separate rispetto al capitalismo e ai suoi processi di accumulazione (e quindi unificabili solo nei termini dell'“alleanza”) —, quello che era effettivamente un dato reale: e cioè la fisionomia ancora profondamente rurale dell'economia italiana.¹¹⁴

The Gramscian conflict between society and intellectuals saw neorealist filmmakers in a somehow backward and regressive position, for they chose rurality instead of industrialization and the new phenomena of urbanization, as well as “il rapporto uomo-natura piuttosto che quello uomo-società” (Fanara 205).¹¹⁵ Formed by the Fascist industry, they became the advocates of an impossible cinema without industry. Moreover, as appears from the proceedings of the Pesaro Film Festival, Italian intellectuals of the 70s have reproached neorealist filmmakers for their lack of revolutionary bravery. The contradictions here reflect many problems of post-war Italy, where the so-called revolutionary “alternatives” are never satisfactorily outlined and the reluctance to having to deal with the market, even the market *sui generis* in Italy, is patent.

Even more disquieting is the accurate overview carried out by Marcia Landy of Gramscian motifs in later works by the Taviani Brothers, Pasolini,

¹¹⁴ Fanara, Pensare il Neorealismo 227. “The struggle against capitalism is translated into an ideological rejection of its social and productive organization, coinciding with — this is the criticism of the 70s against neorealism — the rejection of the reality of the factory, the market and processes of massification, and the recovering of the uncontaminated, the simple, the non-industrial, thus running the risk of inserting into the Salvemini tradition of the South — the countryside, the South of Italy, underdevelopment (forces that could be combined only with an “alliance” — that which was a real fact, the rural nature of Italian economy of the time.”

¹¹⁵ “The man-nature relationship rather than the man-society one.”

Bertolucci, Monicelli and Olmi. According to Landy, directors implement in good faith the Gramscian principle of southern populations as governed by their common sense and therefore incapable of cultural emancipation. Thus the impression is always of an unresolved acceptance of the present, where the brilliant but incomplete and passatist critique overwhelms the sharp observations on change, cultural fossilization, and modernization one can find in *Il cammino della speranza*, *Ladri di biciclette*, or *Riso amaro*.¹¹⁶ Paraphrasing an important essay by the Marxist sociologist Alberto Abruzzese included in the same volume, a definitive *summa* seen from the Left on the intellectual implications of Neorealism and its relations with the two main parties/ideological coalitions ruling Italian politics, Giulia Fanara highlights

la contrapposizione tra l'“anonimato intellettuale” di un militante DC, che ha alle spalle un patrimonio culturale, ma anche tecnico-funzionale, risorse, consapevolezza del ruolo dei media, il potere della censura e la capillarità dei circuiti popolari che si traduce dunque nella capacità di organizzare un “consumo culturale”, e una incapacità delle sinistre di articolare il binomio politica-cultura intorno ai valori dell'industrializzazione e alla presenza della classe operaia. (*Pensare il neorealismo* 209)¹¹⁷

Neorealism “notarized” the utopist tendency in Italian film of considering cinema a tool with potential for change, an instrument capable

¹¹⁶ See the chapter “Gramsci and Italian Cinema” in Landy, *Italian Film* 149-180.

¹¹⁷ “The juxtaposition between the ‘cultural anonymity’ of a militant in the Christian Democrats, who has on his shoulders a cultural but also functional and technical heritage, resources, awareness of media’s role, power of censorship and diffuseness of popular circuits, translating into the ability of organizing a ‘cultural consumption,’ and the incapacity by the Left of articulating the politics-culture relation around the values of industrialization and presence of the working class.”

of reinserting man into history, while at the same time fighting the very industrial nature of the medium. Franco Fortini's *a posteriori* definition of neorealism as "neopopulism" as opposed to Lukácsian realism seems relevant and reductive at the same time, just like Carlo Emilio Gadda's romantic need for more than an objectified world, namely its noumenic and kaleidoscopic dimension. The main actors of the movement were caught in ideological contradictions that undermined many of its theoretical and formal achievements, but these same contradictions can also be seen as opportunities and intrinsic wealth of propositions, making its legacy resound even today. It is misleading to judge Neorealism a failure and blame it for hypothetical revolutionary shortcomings — "in campo cinematografico il movimento neorealista non riuscì a elaborare un progetto alternativo capace di incidere sulla ferrea logica capitalistica cui rimaneva legata la catena dei tre anelli convenzionali produzione-distribuzione-esercizio" — when only a couple of its key figures were authentically Marxist, and above all without indicating a suitable model of economic and intellectual growth for Italian society.¹¹⁸

In short, if the waning of Neorealism has to be attributed to its vain "aspiration to change the world" (Marcus, Italian Film 27-28) the reality is that Neorealism was not a failure for the way it changed the history of film. One of Neorealism's most remarkable achievements was to separate the

¹¹⁸ Milanini, Neorealismo 18. "As regards film-making, the neorealist movement did not succeed in elaborating an alternate project, capable of affecting the strict capitalist logic of the three conventional rings production-distribution-business."

characters' events in macrosequences that would reject traditional psychological, "flowing" fiction, placing the actors in an indifferent, if not hostile, environment. Neorealism instituted a dialectics between the characters and the — sometimes reconstructed, sometimes natural — profilmic material. The interaction between the characters and the settings where they had to function brought to the surface the former's fragility and desperation, but also their spiritual resources, their feelings, love, and courage. Again, just like the coming of democracy after the war almost seemed a trivial detail for many commentators, the fact that Neorealism basically determined an epoch-making shift in the history of moving pictures with the advent of the time-image, cannot be overlooked because of imaginary shortcomings in the "revolution" or "cooperation" department.

CHAPTER 2

ANTONIO PIETRANGELI: THE ONE-MAN-BAND ITALIAN *NOUVELLE VAGUE*

2.1 THE FILM CRITIC AND THE LITERARY *CONNOISSEUR*

Antonio Pietrangeli is an exemplary figure in the history of Italian film because as a post-neorealist filmmaker he had to face a list of very hard tasks. He wanted to find ways for renewing the language of Neorealism, without rejecting in *toto* such an illustrious predecessor, whom he had loved so much during its heroic period. In fact, in his career of critic and film reviewer, Pietrangeli became the advocate of realist solutions that later would be almost prophetically adopted by the key figures of the neorealist movement. But Pietrangeli also wanted to understand the changes that were taking place in Italy, in a time when the country was on the verge of beginning an unprecedented process of industrialization and social modernization.

Mira Liehm is the only American scholar who considered Pietrangeli not only as a critic or as a scriptwriter, but also as an important director, namely, for his *Il sole negli occhi*. Coincidentally, Liehm writes that the picture came out in 1953, the year many considered to be the last of Neorealism. Such coincidence is very symbolic for the challenge of

renovating the cinematic language that Antonio Pietrangeli accepted and ultimately won with impressive results. As noted in the first chapter, Antonio Pietrangeli began his career as a critic and film reviewer: extremely competent in French culture to the point of being virtually bilingual, Pietrangeli's most important critical contribution — an overview article on Italian cinema and Neorealism in particular — was in fact published on the French journal *Revue du cinéma*.

In search for a style our film-makers again began to film outside the studios, slowly rediscovered the Italian landscape, and became reacquainted with the reality of their time and the problems of their country, which they have only understood and expressed in these latter years. Even in those intellectual directors who were attracted towards aestheticism by nature, a desire arose to paint a lively, non-conventional Italy. ("Panoramique sur le cinéma italien" in Overbey 173)

"Panoramique sur le cinéma italien" can be defined as a compact history of Italian cinema from the origins to Neorealism, retracing its most important moments while at the same time highlighting the supposedly "natural" vocation of the national art, that is, the realist tendency. Today it is a document that one can appreciate especially for some notes on Italian cinema of the 30s and the 40s, a cultural heritage that remains relatively unexplored even today. The climax of Pietrangeli's narrative is *Ossessione*, where Pietrangeli is finally satisfied by the use of the background with so many popular figures and real Italian towns and outskirts, the plasticity of the bodies, and the virulence of their passions. After *Ossessione*, the way of realism is opened and directors only have to conform to its rules. Pietrangeli can in fact be defined as a neorealist before Neorealism, advocating a more

intense bonding with Italian landscapes and social issues even before the actual advent of Visconti, Rossellini and De Sica. Pietrangeli seeks to organize ideologically an idea for a new cinema that has to be *gramscianamente* national and popular: he is a master in detecting every possible “realist” hint also in works and directors that apparently have nothing to do with it — the Fritz Lang of *Metropolis* and *Dr. Mabuse*, and Luis Buñuel, just to name a few. He believes that the quantum leap in the quality of film has to go through a more mature and sophisticated adoption of a non-escapist, non-Hollywoodian and therefore problematic, inquiring, realist stance. His articles resemble similar stances by De Santis, Alicata, Aristarco and Visconti, for the closer relationship Italian cinema should have with the country’s historical events and for the tireless effort in individuating a specific, authentic Italian tradition and vocation in literature. As Pietrangeli says in “Analisi spettrale del film realistico,” the goal is to seamlessly translate the Italic sense of “observation,” the love for “concreteness” (as observed in the works of Alessandro Manzoni), and the tradition of Renaissance painting into a new experience of realist cinema. Also, he was not immune from the retroactive disease of finding the exact antecedents, indicated in the essay “Verso un cinema italiano” in Alessandro Blasetti’s *1860* and in Nino Martoglio’s *Sperduti nel buio*. His early articles present a number of ideas picked from the protagonists of the debate in vogue at the time, and basically they do not depart from the official mantra of the national spirit, the artificiality of stale narratives, the

need for truthful representations giving sense to “human existence and its troubles.”¹¹⁹ With a definitive tone, he insists on a familiar recipe that is injecting Italian cinema with full-bodied shots of realism, ineluctably confirmed by our historiography and cultural tradition:

La tesi fondamentale [...] è che in arte non si dà innovazione o rinnovamento, se non partendo dall'estrema validità del reale e della verità. (Antonio Pietrangeli. Verso il realismo 56)¹²⁰

In arte non c'è rinnovamento se non c'è realismo.¹²¹

Pietrangeli is a master in analyzing movies and evaluating the scenes that can remain in our memory, the objects pointing to rural life that we will still be able to remember after the movie is over. In his opinion, those are the only worthy moments, the human documents of American film showing stories of poverty and passion, found in Mack Sennett, in King Vidor, in the early westerns; and again, *Soldati*, *Poggioli*, *Chiarini*, *Franciolini* and *Lattuada* are worthy only when they do not indulge in convoluted symbologies and obscure formalisms. Not surprisingly, as mentioned above, his favors went to the proletarian lovers of *Ossessione* and their erotic frenzy.

¹¹⁹ Previously in *Bianco e nero* 8 (1942), now in Maraldi, ed. Antonio Pietrangeli. Verso il realismo 56.

¹²⁰ “The fundamental thesis [...] is that in art there is no innovation or renewal if not starting from the extreme validity of the real and of truth.”

¹²¹ “Analisi spettrale del film realistico,” in Cinema 146 (25 July 1942), now in Maraldi, ed. Antonio Pietrangeli. Verso il realismo 105. “In art there is no renewal if there is no realism.”

Pietrangeli works at a crucial moment of our cinematography, when Italian filmmakers must bitterly certify the end of Neorealism — whether artificial or physiological — but at the same time they can enjoy a number of new ways offered to them by the filmic evolution in Europe and the unprecedented social mobility and economic development within the boundaries of Italy:

Il periodo che Pietrangeli sceglie per le sue storie più significative [...] è quello dei primi anni '60, gli anni del boom economico, quando l'abbandono di forme produttive rurali e la corsa verso la città si accompagnano ad una improvvisa e rapida caduta degli schemi morali e sociali della provincia, senza che ancora nulla li abbia sostituiti.¹²²

Nor does he accept and support the old, anti-industrial cliché, seeing industrial production as quality's sworn enemy:

L'ingerenza dell'industria nel processo creativo del film non può portare che ad una limitazione della libertà necessaria all'artista per realizzare la sua opera: e, d'altra parte, la industrializzazione del cinema porta con sé il pericolo di un enorme sviluppo quantitativo, di una elefantiasi della produzione — che viene ad essere necessariamente 'confezionata in serie', standardizzata — a scapito della qualità dei singoli film prodotti. Esempio tipico ne sia l'industria americana — organizzata in maniera veramente ammirevole e perfetta, senza dubbio superiore a quella di ogni altra nazione — che, se produce ogni anno centinaia di ottimi e rifiniti e leccati lavori di uno splendido artigianato, solo rarissimamente dà opere che a buon diritto possano dirsi creazioni d'arte.¹²³

¹²² Elisa Bussi Parmiggiani, "Desiderio e infelicità: La donna nel cinema di Antonio Pietrangeli," in Riviello, ed. Women in Italian Cinema. La donna nel cinema italiano 136. "The period that Pietrangeli chooses for his more significant stories is the early '60s, years of rapid economic growth, when phenomena like the abandonment of rural forms of production and emigration towards big cities come along with a sudden and quick decline of provincial moral and social schemes, temporarily without a replacement."

¹²³ "Gli intellettuali e il cinema. Massimo Bontempelli," in Maraldi, ed. Antonio Pietrangeli. Verso il realismo 31. "Industrial interference in the creative process of film cannot but result in a limitation of the freedom necessary for the artist to carry out his work: and on the other hand, the industrialization of cinema brings with itself the danger of a gigantic development in quantity, of an hypertrophic production — inevitably getting

Lorenzo Pellizzari perfectly summarizes: “il Pietrangeli regista [...] inizia ad applicare al proprio cinema quella libertà da certe formule che forse il Pietrangeli critico non avrebbe totalmente approvato.”¹²⁴ On a very immediate level, this impression is confirmed by the transcription of the preliminary dialogue that Pietrangeli had with his collaborators during the production of *Io la conoscevo bene*, from the same volume, when the director does not seem very concerned about additional costs and is always pushing for the most spectacular and expensive solution. But apart from this minor anecdote, Pietrangeli makes a huge leap forward because he accepts the challenge of a new *société du spectacle*, dominated by the power of the image and caught during the crisis of an uncertain and violent transition in economy, values and social relations. He is not interested in assembling the “people who are not there,” but he is strongly determined to show the effects of change on defenseless individuals. Not surprisingly, the role of Pietrangeli is well described by Brunetta in timely fashion, highlighting his innovative screenwriting, and including Pietrangeli in the restricted number of those filmmakers who have portrayed the transformation women underwent in a

serialized and standardized — at the expense of the quality of single films produced. American film industry is a typical example — perfectly, admirably organized, doubtlessly superior to any other nation’s — which, while producing every year hundreds of excellent, well refined and overpolished works of high craftsmanship, very seldom gives movies that can be called with good reason works of art.”

¹²⁴ Lorenzo Pellizzari, “Un critico cinematografico degli anni ’40,” in Micciché, ed. *Io la conoscevo bene di Antonio Pietrangeli. Infelicità senza dramma* 48. “Pietrangeli the director [...] begins to use in his cinema the freedom from some constraints that the Pietrangeli critic would probably not have totally approved.”

changing environment. Pietrangeli, together with Emmer and Comencini, Brunetta writes, gives to female characters parts of higher “propulsive boost” (Cent’anni di cinema italiano 327-28).¹²⁵

To his credit, Pietrangeli was the one who in the era of pink Neorealism, dominated by idyllic endings and escapist perspectives, used cinema again to reflect on the problems and the direction Italian society was taking, focusing on the Italian woman as a preferred symbol of the great changes taking place at the time, like a feminist *ante litteram*: “Tra gli anni ‘50 e i ‘60, la donna compariva nel cinema italiano, nella commedia, come madre, come sorella, come puttana ma non come portatrice di problemi, infelicità, repressione subita. Allora non esisteva neanche la parola ‘femminismo.’”¹²⁶ And in fact Pietrangeli made in 1960 the grim *Adua e le compagne*, about a group of prostitutes trying to reinvent their lives as Italian law closes all brothels in the country.

Pietrangeli was able to go beyond the most fruitful experiences of the time — works by Alberto Lattuada, Germi and the Neorealist giants, the early Fellini, *Febbre di vivere* by Claudio Gora, thus creating a different cinematic language. However, even though Brunetta acknowledges that Pietrangeli fulfills the meritorious task of portraying the casualties of

¹²⁵ The scholar stresses out “un ruolo di maggiore spinta propulsiva.”

¹²⁶ Mario Sesti, ed. “Sceneggiare per Pietrangeli: Conversazione con Ettore Scola,” in Miccichè, ed. *Io la conoscevo bene di Antonio Pietrangeli* 25. “Between the 50s and the 60s woman would appear in Italian cinema, in comedies, as mother, sister, whore but not as bearer of problems, unhappiness, suffered repression. The word ‘feminism’ did not even exist back then.”

women's liberation and bid for social emancipation, he somehow belittles the director's poetics, saying that Pietrangeli "strives to annul his presence behind the camera and serve the plot and the protagonists" (Cent'anni di cinema italiano 402).¹²⁷ It is partially true that Pietrangeli aims at a transparent style, because he does not contaminate the script with his personal obsessions or nightmares *à la* Fellini, but Pietrangeli is in fact at work to complicate the events portrayed with brilliant metaphors and camera movements, apparently failing to fill the gaps narratively and stressing the uncertain identity of his characters. Thus, the character of Adriana is constructed from the outside by her casual encounters, while to express her emotions she only has pop songs at her disposal.

Io la conoscevo bene consists of 19 macrosequences, where the protagonists are always using or giving orders to Adriana, and each one with its own micro-climax, as pointed out by Lino Micciché in the miscellaneous volume on the movie.¹²⁸ Each sequence — from the interior scenes and their suggested squalor, to the locations in Rome and especially the last, ephemerally liberating driving scene through the city at dawn — gives its crucial contribution in organizing a phenomenology of alienation. As mentioned above, Pietrangeli was an expert of Continental literature, especially of French and English novels, and his use of dialogue, that is at

¹²⁷ "[Pietrangeli] cerca quanto più gli è possibile di cancellare la sua presenza dietro alla macchina da presa e di porsi al servizio degli interpreti e del racconto."

¹²⁸ "Su alcuni dati strutturali di *'Io la conoscevo bene*,'" in Micciché, ed. *Io la conoscevo bene di Antonio Pietrangeli* 113-22.

the same time defamiliarizing and contiguous with the character, resembles the style of such authors as Virginia Woolf or Ivy Compton-Burnett.

2.2 FILMING THE POOR SPARING NO EXPENSE: *IO LA CONOSCEVO BENE* AND THE LEAP BEYOND NEOREALISM

When in Ettore Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amanti* Stefania Sandrelli introduces her character, she says she was born in the province of Udine, precisely in Trasachis. Apart from choosing Sandrelli for the main female character, the choice of Trasachis as birthplace of the main female protagonist is Scola's homage to the memory of Pietrangeli, the artist and the friend, since the obscure Friulian small town is also mentioned by the actress Véronique Vendell during the party scene in *Io la conoscevo bene*. This latter picture, unanimously considered Pietrangeli's most accomplished work, is a consistent experiment showing a soul in a perennial state of renegotiation, and making its protagonist Adriana a symbol of a nation in transit towards a new but unknown social pact, not based on rural culture anymore, and at the same time struggling with the industrialization and modernization of the country. Pietrangeli is a filmmaker who works with contrasts. For the most part, his male characters are bourgeois types that symbolize the anthropological crisis in Italy when confronted by women who do not fall into the roles mentioned above by Scola. Even though Pietrangeli is interested in the evolution of the Italian bourgeoisie, his "unconventional" women, always stroked by smooth camera movement within American and

pan shots, are portrayed while facing phenomena of emargination and marginalization. In his films, men are generally portrayed as shallow, satisfied representatives of the *petite bourgeoisie*, while women are the only characters going through crises and capable of a spiritual evolution:

Pietrangeli, le donne, le ha riconosciute vittime di una società a dimensione del maschio, dove è assai difficile, se non assurdo, per la donna, trovare una via d'uscita.¹²⁹

As Manuela Gieri bluntly but appropriately points out, “Italian neorealism was already holding back Italian cinema in the late 1950s. It inhibited the growth and development of a new wave in Italian filmmaking in the 1960s, and eventually ‘contaminated’ the Italian cinematic panorama until the 1970s” (*Contemporary Italian Filmmaking* 202). The absence of a Nouvelle Vague is probably imputable to the fact the Neorealism was by all means the Italian new wave. But there is a small number of works that seem conceived in that cultural atmosphere, nourished with the same aesthetic principles and the same innovations. Basically, the Italian new wave consists of four films: *La parmigiana*, *La visita* and *Io la conoscevo bene* by Antonio Pietrangeli and *Morire Gratis* by Sandro Franchina; at most five films if we include Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Prima della rivoluzione*. In particular, Roberto Silvestri, an influent Italian critic and journalist, once

¹²⁹ Sebastiano Gesù and Elena Russo, “I personaggi femminili nel cinema di Pietrangeli,” in Martini, Morelli, and Zappoli, eds. *Un'invisibile presenza. Il cinema di Antonio Pietrangeli* 43. “Pietrangeli acknowledged one and only condition for women: that of oppressed, of victims in a society made for men, where for women it is extremely difficult, if not absurd, to find a way out.”

defined *Io la conoscevo bene* the most important movie of the 60s. The entire movie is crossed by the theme of speed. At a sordid party organized by the low-life of Cinecittà, the old, failed actor Bagini, played by Ugo Tognazzi, is asked to amuse squalid parasites and their like by doing the “train” routine. Thus the car, but also other means like the motorboat, are cinematic sites where the aspiring actress played by Stefania Sandrelli can finally fall into an oblivious state and forget her misery. In the prefinale, Sandrelli drives home in a dreamlike sequence before taking a crucial decision, committing suicide: the same sequence, albeit not ending in a tragic way, can be seen in another Pietrangeli movie, *La visita* (1963). The similarities with French new wave films are numerous, especially with Louis Malle’s *Le Feu follet* (1963), but it is the use of Sandrelli, mindful of Godard’s use of Anna Karina, that gives us access to the core of the film: the formal device of the close up and the masterly use of jangling tunes used as pure noise to create a type of image constructed as a cluster of affections that does not need to refer to anything outside itself or imply social criticism. The close up, as Gilles Deleuze writes, “suspends individuation” (Cinema 1 103) and in *Io la conoscevo bene* indirectly takes us above regular commentary, hinting at a vision of life as irrational and ultimately untamable. After Neorealism, the goals to reach are even more obscure: Pietrangeli harshly describes a world where the deepest feelings and the most profound emotions can be described by pop numbers, where immediate satisfaction and pressing

needs have supplanted archaic values and overall — be they moral, religious or philosophical — views.

From a technical point of view, it is interesting to observe that during *Io la conoscevo bene* Pietrangeli creates a narratee, the loser/journalist Cianfanna, taking Sandrelli/Adriana to a miserable interview with the director of a lousy magazine, only to reject his role further in the film. One could argue that Pietrangeli, besides the “objective” style of his filming — establishing shots, close-ups of Sandrelli — wanted to diminish the role of every character that could take upon himself a mediating look. When the novelist interpreted by Joachim Fuchsberger tries to sum up what he knows of Adriana, the spectator’s knowledge remains the same and is actually more confused than ever: “Le va bene tutto, è sempre contenta. Non desidera mai niente, non invidia nessuno, è senza curiosità. Non si sorprende mai. Le umiliazioni non le sente, eppure povera figlia [...] gliene capitano tutti i giorni. Le scivola tutto addosso senza lasciare traccia come su certe stoffe impermeabilizzate. Ambizioni zero. Morale nessuna, neppure quella dei soldi perché non è nemmeno una puttana. Per lei ieri e domani non esistono. Non vive neanche giorno per giorno perché già questo costringerebbe a programmi troppo complicati, perciò vive minuto per minuto. Prendere il sole, sentire i dischi e ballare sono le sue uniche attività. Per il resto, è volubile, incostante, ha sempre bisogno di incontri nuovi e

brevi, non importa con chi: con sé stessa mai.”¹³⁰ The narrator in the title states that he/she knows Adriana well, but during the film this “I” is never found, nobody says they know Adriana and nobody actually cares about knowing her. Pietrangeli joins the characters of his creation as well as his spectatorship in constructing a fleeting knowledge of the female protagonist. Adriana is a vortex of ephemeral changes — hairdo, wardrobe, accessories, music — apparently reinforcing her empty stability but in fact never affecting her real condition of instability and disenchantment, culminating in her suicide:

Il costume si rende anche elemento di denuncia del potere di falsificazione delle immagini: Adriana, ripresa per un'intervista, si ritrova poi a fare la parte dell'automa sciocco nel montaggio che dell'intervista viene effettuato per un cinegiornale. Il primo piano sul buco nella calza sul tallone, manipolato attraverso il commento sarcastico e maschilista del commentatore del cinegiornale, diviene l'emblema del corpo frammentato e ricomposto secondo il potere dell'immagine: la semplicità raggiunta di Adriana porta alla sua finale ma consapevole autodistruzione.¹³¹

¹³⁰ “Everything is always fine for her, she's always happy. She never wants anything, she is not envious of anybody, she has no curiosity. She is never surprised. She never feels humiliated even though, poor thing [...] she happens to be on a daily basis. Nothing has an effect on her and goes away leaving no trace, like on a waterproofed material. Zero ambitions. No morals, not even for money, because she is no prostitute. For her, yesterday and tomorrow do not exist. She does not even live day by day because doing so she would be forced to too complicated programs, so she lives minute by minute. Sunbathing, listening to records and dancing are her only activities. Apart from that, she is flighty, she always needs new and brief encounters, does not matter with whom: with herself, never.”

¹³¹ Patrizia Calefato in Gianni Canova, ed. *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. XI 1965-1969 (Venezia: Marsilio, 2002) 156. “The costume is also an instrument revealing the counterfeiting power of images: after Adriana gives an interview, she finds herself playing the part of a dumb automaton in the edited version for a newsreel. The close-up of her heel through the broken stocking, manipulated by the sarcastic and chauvinist commentary of the newsreel's presenter becomes the emblem of the body fragmented and reassembled by the power of the image: Adriana's deceived naïveté leads to her final but conscious self-destruction.”

Pietrangeli informs Adriana with a strong communicative mandate: the female protagonist serves as a symbol for a nation still uncertain about its movement from the agricultural and its values to the industrial and the chaotic renegotiation of roles, social controllers, and individual perspectives. The title speculates about how well it is possible to know another person. Pietrangeli illustrates the additional uncertainty in an age of shifting masses and beliefs: his criticism is not against pop culture or the new, ruthless “monsters” of Italian society; rather, it is an analysis of the consequences of a cultural void, of a weak and defenseless individual losing the grip on reality. Many have noted the obsessive relationship that Adriana has with his record player, whose function is to “costituire una ‘presenza’ (dunque una compagnia, una complicità),” an object that is operated by the protagonist “meccanicamente, come un oggetto che marcia praticamente da solo, che non appartiene ai momenti separati, né tanto meno ‘liturgici’ dell’esistenza.”¹³² And again, the apparent absurdity of looking for inspiration from an inanimate thing is used as a description reinforcing the renegotiation of values for Adriana and women like her. They do not find comfort in anything other than dancing or music, because their interiority is too rich for the men to understand. In Pietrangeli’s Italy women do have something to share and communicate with other people, but men are not

¹³² Ermanno Comuzio, “La musica nei film di Pietrangeli,” in Martini, Morelli, and Zappoli, eds. *Un’invisibile presenza. Il cinema di Antonio Pietrangeli* 32. “The record player [...] is operated by Adriana with her foot, mechanically, like an object that runs by itself and does not belong to the separate or much less ‘liturgical’ moments of her existence, but it is called to work as a ‘presence’ (therefore a companionship, a complicity) always ready and compliant.” Comuzio also insists on the “dialectic” function of Pietrangeli’s “muzak.”

ready to listen because they have not adjusted to their unprecedented dynamism. Pietrangeli is interested in this anthropological fracture.

CHAPTER 3

ALBERTO GRIFI: THE SECRET PHILOSOPHER OF AN IMPOSSIBLE SOCIAL REDEMPTION

3.1 TO THE FURTHEST LIMITS OF NEOREALISM

Neorealism was fetishized so quickly that it became problematic, behind the ritual declaration of faith and love, to actually take stock of its most innovative instances without a strong ideological interest and, more important, to realize its most fruitful aesthetic as well as political core, in other words the lesson that could be updated and renewed for future filmic initiatives. Manuela Gieri summarizes:

Over the years, neither directors nor film critics ever managed to deal with the neorealistic lesson successfully. From its outset, Neorealism had been turned into a myth, transformed in an aesthetic and ideological category for Italian cinema to follow. Micciché intuitively observes that for decades, a strict and rigid interpretation of the neorealistic lesson unfortunately inhibited any possibility of linguistic and stylistic innovations, breachings into the fantastic, escapes from ideology, and narrative experimentations. In short, it impeded the delineation of new avenues that could provide an alternative route to those defined by direct derivation/citation or deviation/digression from Neorealism itself. The few exceptions — such as the cinema of Federico Fellini but also the best protagonists of the so-called 'comedy Italian style' — have been marginalized, isolated, or, as in the case of Carmelo Bene, forced to silence in a sterile and impossible relationship with the impoverished audience of commercial cinema. (Contemporary Italian Filmmaking 202-03)

The most convincing part of this statement is the first, dealing with the crystallization of Neorealism into ideology. Regarding Fellini, Bene and

the comedy Italian style, it would be interesting to understand whom the scholar refers to when mentioning phenomena of marginalization. But the lengthy quote represents a perfect start to introduce the figure of Alberto Grifi, because he was the filmmaker who, distancing himself immediately from the Neorealist *temperie*, at the same time (as already mentioned) took the Zavattinian doctrine of “tailing” to its ultimate consequences. In Grifi’s *Anna*, “the people are not there,” but one exemplary specimen is chosen to represent the disadvantaged. By opposing Godard’s *cinéma-vérité*, and by adopting a personal version of Zavattini’s *pedinamento*, Alberto Grifi provides the final answer to Bazin’s dream. *Anna* was meant to be a Zavattini-style (as postulated by him in his writings) reenactment film, but as Grifi declared in the long introduction to the movie, “reality took over,” i.e., the immediacy of Anna’s life dictated the direction where the movie went. Incidentally, it is also possible to note that in the first conversation between Anna and Massimo Sarchielli, we have a shot of Anna’s scar on her wrist, just like in *Tentato suicidio* by Michelangelo Antonioni, an episode of the portmanteau film *L’amore in città*: *Anna*, in fact, stems so directly from the reenactment theory that in its premises almost seems a Zavattinian spin-off.¹³³ But such premises are swiftly abandoned, taking its significance to another level. *Anna* can be considered a film following more strictly neorealist principles and yet it imported nothing from Zavattini and the like,

¹³³ On page 108 of *Lessico Zavattiniano*, speaking about the Zavattinian cinema-inquiry, Mino Argentieri argues that no filmmaker has fully applied his method. If this is true for this branch, for the “tailing” *Anna* certainly controverts such assumption.

even though it seems to put into practice his well-known theories of *pedinamento* and other assumptions. In other words, Grifi, like Francesco Rosi and Ermanno Olmi, are not direct neorealist offspring; rather, they find in Italian history the reasons for an oppositional stance and for a break with the current trends.

3.2 ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF (MIS)REPRESENTATION: ANNA AS A FAILED ENCOUNTER

Anna epitomizes the tendency in Italian film to give to misrepresented social groups and classes their proper place in history. It tries to make a political statement, and from this standpoint it is also the movie that for a great part represents a leap in quality in the stagnant ceremonies of Italian politics. In fact, as already noted, given the almost complete absence of liberal culture focusing on the individual's rights in Italian parliamentary democracy, in spite of political differences, parties tend to reason in terms of "castes," unions, classes, associations and establishments. *Anna* strives to treat its unfortunate protagonist as an individual, but ends misrecognizing her and making her yet another object of a political and social reification. In film, the tendency of privileging the group as opposed to the individual started before WWII with the so-called Fascist cinema of the white telephones, which prescribed a very specific, "proper" way of behaving by establishing what Benedict Anderson calls imagined communities, i.e. social

groups with ties to relatively communally shared pasts and senses of progress.

This objectifying gaze is not abandoned with Neorealism but instead takes a different aesthetic turn, making many neorealist movies the *locus amoenus* of nostalgia: illusory sites where no power agencies seem involved, and documents of a popular life that was soon to be lost forever. With the politically overcharged cinema beginning at the end of the 60s, the act of representing the putative reality it attempts to critique implies even more crucial ethical choices. One of those choices is the representation of what is perceived as difference, the disruptive force at the seams of discourse. Defining the external law and the ethical transaction between the self and the other could take us to the discovery of the fundamental implications that the authorial gaze took upon itself.

The number of close-ups in *Anna*, investigating the reactions and the feelings of the protagonist, is so high that seeing in it a shadow of the ethical relationship as postulated by Emanuel Levinas is very tempting, and just a few references to his ideas will probably clarify the problematic nature of an unselfish act of welcoming subsequently poisoned by ideologic barriers.

Affirming that the ethical relationship between the self and the other is constitutive of the social fabric would probably stretch the philosopher's categories too far, but we can definitely agree with Diane Perpich when, trying to give critical features to the concept of "face," she writes that "the

demand for social justice is not derived from reason but is an independent, irreducible motive force.”¹³⁴ Since it is only as a result of one’s relationship with an other that any sense of self can emerge, in turn suggesting that portions of our identity are owed to him/her, it would be extremely interesting to determine the play of conflicting forces in the definition of such identity, especially that aspect I called as politically “overcharged.” This ideological stance is generically Marxist, conservative, or more strictly related to the position of a specific political party, not interested in acknowledging the other as such, but aiming at political homogeneization. We will see that with its bitter and tragic ending, *Anna* epitomizes the pernicious effect of the overpoliticization of human relationships and civil life in Italy.

If we consider the work of art as a mediatory space between ethics and representation rather than a political vehicle, the notion of the face-to-face explains the mechanisms of the interplay between identity formation and construction, and projects a totally different idea of reciprocation. *Anna* is exemplary in exposing — in spectacular fashion, so to speak — the omnipervasive nature of ideology in identity construction, at the same time presenting itself as a vehicle for the foundation of a natural community. The problematic nature of the acceptance in *Anna* makes this movie an extremely biased product according to Levinas’ doctrine of encounter and separation; at the same time, it is of the most innovative movies of Italian

¹³⁴ “Figurative Language and the ‘Face’ in Levinas’s Philosophy,” Philosophy and Rhetoric, 38.2 (2005): 113.

filmic culture, also reinforcing its “radicality” as expressed, among others, by Franco Cordelli, because of his relentless unveiling of reality, layer after layer, so that an ideal synthesis of *cinéma-vérité* and ideological cinema is finally reached, while rejecting the metaphoricity of the avant-garde of the 70s.¹³⁵ Before expanding on the nature of this synthesis masterfully achieved by Grifi, I will switch from film to politics in order to give an accurate idea of the political situation when *Anna* was made.

In the classic definition of representation in film, we speak, according to Richard Dyer, of how “a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of being spoken for and on behalf of” (The Matter of Images 21). The instruments polished by Dyer in the study of race and gender oppositions can be fruitfully employed in the study of the representation of the aforementioned imagined communities. In the case of *Anna*, this attempt at founding an alternate society is something that we can configure as the chaotic — yet authoritative in the eyes of the authors — imaginary community imbued with Marxist doctrine. Grifi and Sarchielli give the most exhaustive account of an expanding, parallel counter-culture on the verge of becoming a dominant one, almost idolizing and fetishizing the low-lives and dropouts of Rome. The filmmakers — especially Grifi, the theoretician at the

¹³⁵ A summary of Cordelli’s article from newspaper Paese Sera is in Silvestri, ed., Il cinema contro di Alberto Grifi 42.

origin of the project — systematically look for crucial situations where the exploitation — from the state, from the bourgeoisies, from apparently revolutionary but now “made domestic” parties — can be made evident and criticized. When not centered on Anna, the movie portrays the supporters of minor, far-left, extra-parliamentary and sectarian political organizations, that are much more radical than the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which is in turn representational of the “healthy” Italy.

Anna is the most daring, coherent and extreme attempt to take stock of the political and ethical possibilities that Marxism was offering to Italian society. In the initial declaration of poetics opening the movie, Alberto Grifi has a specific target in mind: Jean Luc Godard and his fake — in Grifi’s words — *cinéma vérité*, with its timetables and rhythms still dictated by capital.¹³⁶ Grifi and Sarchielli aimed at something different, to a sort of degree zero of filming, by means of the recording devices engineered by Grifi himself for the economical aspect,¹³⁷ and obviously thanks to the very *siužet*

¹³⁶ The peak of this cinematographic practice is *Lotte in Italia*, shot in Italy one year before *Anna* was started. *Lotte in Italia* is the most ambitious effort made by Godard to capture the slogans invented in 1968 and apply them to cinema: in the case in point, the watchword “il privato è politico” (the private aspect of our life is political). In the movie, Anne Wiazemsky has the role of a revolutionary Italian girl that has in fact fallen prey to bourgeois ideology, replicating with her boyfriend the rituals of exploitation and domination engendered by capital. *Lotte in Italia* is significantly signed not by Godard himself but by “The Dziga Vertov Collective Group”: there is a happy ending though, when at the end of the movie Wiazemsky learns to be revolutionary also in bed.

¹³⁷ *Anna* was in fact the first videorecorded film in Italy. The final result we see today was made possible by Grifi’s *vidigrafo*, a system of video-cinematographical slides which served to copy the first version into film. For its proclaimed capacity of giving a faithful, non-glamorized image of reality, the *vidigrafo* is an anticipation of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s “analytical camera,” capable of translating old film into new while at the same time re-photographing it, changing its speed and adding different colors. A technological contiguity serving a pursuit of truth.

of the movie for the aesthetic-ethical part. The two Italian men, Grifi a cinema technician, and Sarchielli, a professional actor, one day during a walk in Piazza Navona in Rome, run into a 16- year old, drug user, homeless Sardinian girl named Anna. She has just fled from a mental institution in France, and is now living in the streets. Moreover, Anna is expecting a baby, due in three months. Anna is taken into Sarchielli's home, fed, and given a bed as well as affection. The two men try to make a movie about her staging some episodes of her previous life. (Sometimes knowingly fetishizing her — one of Sarchielli's criticism after the movie was released — like Godard used to do with Anna Karina.) But Anna is untamable and restless. And real life takes over. When they joke about her being dirty in the famous “shower scene,” lice infect the entire crew. Likewise, in the equally famous “declaration scene,” Vincenzo, the electrician of the film crew, sits in front of the camera and declares his love for Anna while talking to her. From that day on, scripts and notes are “thrown into the trash can” (Grifi's words, emphasizing his own consciousness rising towards proletarian awareness). Vincenzo's irruption is likened to a proletarian action against the bourgeoisie: the film is no longer representational of a moment of life lost forever, for life itself is broken loose from the chain of capital. No more staging or dependence from any sort of economic superstructure make *Anna* the purest messenger of a new humanism. Vincenzo has opened a revolutionary perspective by getting possession of himself as a human being and denying the usual paternalistic and voyeuristic perspective of the

camera. Vincenzo was a worker, excluded from signification. Now he has inserted himself into history by being revolutionary and at the same time has made the rest of the crew understand that Anna — a prototypical Levinasian heroine because of her stubborn, painful, quintessential Otherness — wanted no moralistic piety, but again, in Grifi's words, "love." We follow Anna and Sarchielli in Rome, we listen to their conversations, and finally, we see Anna going to the hospital right before having the baby, when her relationship with Vincenzo is falling apart. Then, we learn from Vincenzo's bitter words that Anna often goes out carelessly leaving the baby at home, and that she cheats on him. Once again, reality takes over.

There is a lot more to be said about this incredible movie that shocked everybody when it was presented in Berlin, Venice and Cannes. It attained a level of success that no other underground movie had previously reached at "mainstream" film festivals. A myriad of drop-outs and characters populate the scene, casual conversations with people on the streets — the Warholian actor Louis Waldon and Jane Fonda are also captured in different moments. And other socially conspicuous events are filmed, like a feminist rally where a police chief orders an attack on the demonstrators after a tiny and inoffensive teenage girl has threatened his masculinity. Everything is filmed in documentary style, with establishing shots to create an exhaustive picture of the socio-political environment and with close-ups for Anna. No doubt or perplexity must remain in the audience, the epistemic network shown with steadfast belief, the diegetic knowledge becoming a universal

example. Grifi and Sarchielli try to achieve the minimum degree of mediation, giving us a thorough account of what is for them a decaying Italy, corrupted by the Christian Democrats and still imbued with Fascist “practical” behavior and ideology. *Anna* remains incredibly fascinating today, offering such an overwhelming picture of 70s Italy that no other movie of that decade has been capable of giving.

As said, the intentions of Grifi and Sarchielli were to establish a sort of degree zero of filming, beyond “representation,” beyond the most extreme forms of realism, beyond even the ghost of neorealism, the practice that has influenced Italian cinematic culture so deeply. The presence of Anna first as a “Guinea pig” and then as a true *source* of signification, as Grifi maintained, is the irruption of a new ethical dimension through the film. In fact, after Grifi and Sarchielli understand that staging episodes of her life is impossible, they let Anna do whatever she wants simply taking care of her. The filmed document goes beyond the Zavattinian project of *pedinamento*: the person to be tailed has, so to speak, spontaneously knocked on the filmmakers’ door. The abandonment of a traditional moralistic point of view makes the specific use of Levinasian categories very intriguing. In fact, for its self-conscious attempt to respect the Other, and for its attempt to found a new community based on such complete acceptance, *Anna* can be seen as the filmic equivalent of the Levinasian encounter. The use of Levinas is important because through his doctrine of encounter one can better

understand how useless, illusory and ultimately pernicious the politically overcharged is even when its agents are in perfectly good faith.

Although *Totality and Infinity* encourages a quasi-transcendental ethic (to quote Dan Smith) and is definitely not about a normative stance, still the similarities between the Levinasian system and the project carried out by Grifi and Sarchielli with the pure “reception” of Anna are somehow striking. Silvia Benso writes: “To burden the Other with the request of an identity, thereby establishing a system of relations thanks to which the other can be ascribed to a family, a gender, a territory, means to reproduce the ontological economy that proceeds in terms of proper, propriety, appropriation. Therefore, the question, which is analogous to asking ‘what is the Other?’, is banned by Levinas already in the description of the Other, who is ‘not a character within a context’ (29).

In fact, the cultural origin of the movie can be put under the category the Lithuanian philosopher calls “the universal order of justice.” It is as though Grifi and Sarchielli had created the possibility for a pristine ethical relation, feeling commanded to respond to the call of “the Other”: they try to provide a response, with the tooling at their disposal, to the demand of “the Other”. Moreover, in strict Levinasian terms, their discursive relation with the Other is not limited to the complicity of a private pact, but supposedly concern everyone: they are establishing a sheer policy of “reconciliation” that they take as a new foundation for a new (Communist) society. Anna is the cornerstone of this experiment, and we are constantly reminded of the

obtrusiveness of her presence, of her rupturing of history — as I said above, basically fetishizing her — with continuous close-ups, snaky movements of the hand-held camera to capture her bittersweet replies, her slightly deranged comments, and the sudden outbursts of sadness when reminiscing about her many nights in the open, walking downtown Rome, her dead boyfriend, and her stern parents. The grainy images generated by the recording instrument invented by Grifi give an ambiguous, startling, even eerie picture of Anna's illusorily new beginning, conveying an impression of reality that would have not been reached by any other means. The film thus privileges the absolute dimension of the bodies and faces of the protagonists, in a “metaphysical” manner that can make us use the Levinasian concept of the face-to-face quite directly:

Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. Thus a person bears on his own face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its own picturesqueness.¹³⁸

Nonetheless, Levinas introduces the face in all its ambiguity, as the site of the “emergence” of the Other. The face, if not constitutive of the social fabric, is understood as a demand for justice that comes from beyond the social totality understood in its economic sense, and it cannot remain isolated from the community. The relation must refuse all intimacy,

¹³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” in Alphonso Lingis, ed. Collected Philosophical Papers (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) 6.

understood as absence from the community, in order to avoid instituting another social totality, this time governed by the extraordinary demand of the Other. Levinas explains that the “relation” has to be neither friendly nor hostile; rather, it has to be a relation of respect. This is something that we can equate to the “change of pace” that Grifi observed after Vincenzo’s declaration of love, when Anna is disengaged of reciprocity.

Welcoming Anna is almost a “genealogical” act that, Grifi and Sarchielli suggest, nobody is ready to perform in the Italy of the time. The reactionary forces want to suppress people like Anna. The PCI, with its bigotry, has no answer for somebody like her: see, at the beginning of the movie, the memorable scene almost used as a frame where a woman interviewed in Piazza Navona explains how the PCI wants its supporters to be proletarian in a “real” way; straight, married, etc., not because they believe in it but simply to counterbalance the Catholic bigotry with their “right” bigotry. Welcoming Anna is thus the foundation of a true Marxist community, unhinged from the mastodontic and obtrusive presence of the PCI: like the transcendental humanity which, in *Totality and Infinity*, presides over the encounter with the Other. It is as if, for the two Italian directors, the face-to-face relation with Anna is the constitution of the civic condition that precedes any social contract currently in force. Their sharp criticism, unacceptable for the orthodoxy of the party, is to say that the PCI is not capable of imagining, let alone establishing, that type of a relation. Via such criticism, Grifi and Sarchielli take on themselves, and pay for, the

faults created by their contemporary society that is unable to acknowledge and love “Anna”: “In obsession my being is to be hostage for the other: ethical action is in extremis my expiation for another’s sins, for all others’. In substitution for others I empty myself of my being in expiation for them.”¹³⁹ In addition, Levinas maintains that the face that commands cannot simply command me to “bow down” before it. Elizabeth Louise Thomas explains this problematic passage in a very pertinent way for the study of *Anna*, worth being quoted in all its extension:

This is a moment in which the Other, heard in the groaning of affliction, nevertheless refuses the pity with which the will, in its self-concerned need to restore its own good conscience, attempts to ease the suffering of the Other. This is a moment in which the subject must recognize that the face does not call me to bow down before it but awakens me to the ultimate act of egoist appropriation in my very attempts to inhabit the space of good intentions. I am called to confront the question of the possibility of justice once again. (106-07)

Introducing the face, Levinas insists that the manner in which the Other confronts the subject does not entail a negative or oppositional relation — the Other remains infinitely distant — inasmuch as it questions the subject in relation to being and the “kingdom” of possessions. It is what Levinas calls “invitation” that opens the possibility for discourse, the commencement of an ethical relation that subverts the arbitrary freedom of the “I” by calling it to responsibility. It is the leap into infinity, because “I” am not simply commanded by the Other, but he/she commands me to

¹³⁹ Hugh Miller, “Reply to Bernhard Wladenfels, ‘Response and Responsibility in Levinas,’” in Peperzak, Ethics as First Philosophy. The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion 115.

command, to place myself before him/her “and thus introduce myself to the whole of humanity” (Thomas 118). *Anna* retains its incredible fascination because it presents itself as a foundational act, with such an uncompromisingly honesty that can still leave us breathless after more than thirty years. The two filmmakers are engaging a new type of ethical realism, and yet as the film goes on a tragic dimension takes over, as if all the passion, energy and uncompromising affection will turn into a force dooming the entire project, and the life of Anna as well.

At the end of the film, the picture becomes gloomier and gloomier. First, a friend of Vincenzo sees Anna with somebody else. Her untamable nature ultimately proves to be too much for everyone involved. One member of the crew starts a tirade against Anna, calling her as “fascist” because she acts in such an individualistic manner. In one of the last scenes Vincenzo, in a moving monologue, explains how Anna simply fled from their home one day, leaving the just born little baby without food, his life at risk. From that moment on, there is only desperation and death. Grifi, in a grim afterword similar to the introduction placed before the movie, tells of the final day of Vincenzo, killed while he is trying to defend some people involved in a brawl, and probably actually assassinated by Claudio Camaso Volontè — brother of Gian Maria Volontè, one of the greatest actors of Italian cinema. Anna will disappear. Grifi will hear her voice only one more time, one day on the phone, from yet another mental institution where she has been locked up, where she will die not much later. And after all this misery, the most urgent

question is the original act of Grifi and Sarchielli: did they humbly put themselves at Anna's disposal, or did their picking her as a symbol for renewal prove to be an unexcusable act of *hubris*? While Grifi defended the good intentions of this operation until his recent death, Massimo Sarchielli will in fact make his doubts public in a very harsh and sincere way, almost as if he needs to repent for the manipulative aspect of the film, certifying the impossibility of even the purest attempt of helping — creating? — the “people who are not there”:

Non so dire quale sia oggi l'atteggiamento che ho oggi davanti al film. Mi sento come un pittore che, finito il quadro, non è contento, vorrebbe rifarlo. Credo di non essere soddisfatto. Il film non dice abbastanza su Anna, sul suo modo di esprimersi. Anna è progressivamente uscita dal film, anche mentre lo giravamo e oggi *Anna* non è più su un film sulla sua presenza ma sulla sua assenza. Avrei voluto restare un po' di più su di lei perché Anna non è solo se stessa, ma indirettamente suo padre, sua madre, la sua cultura, la Sardegna, le espressioni che faceva, i mondi che ha attraversato. Ora Anna è un film che la gente vede, ma la vera Anna l'ho sentita l'ultima volta un anno fa. Mi ha telefonato dalla Neuro di Roma e mi ha minacciato: “Ti faccio carcerare. Hai fatto un film con una minorenni.” Ho tentato di registrare queste sue parole per incorporarle dentro il film perché mi sembrava giusto che ci fosse anche questa accusa. È in fondo la stessa accusa che molti mi hanno fatto, di averla sfruttata, fingendo di aiutarla.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Massimo Sarchielli in Silvestri, ed. Il cinema contro di Alberto Grifi 29-30. “I cannot say today what is my position towards the movie. I feel like a painter who, once his painting is done, wants to do it all over again. I think I am not satisfied. The movie does not say enough about Anna, on her way of expressing herself. Anna progressively disappeared from the movie, also while we were shooting it, and today *Anna* is not a movie on her presence but on her absence. I would have liked to stay more on her because Anna is not just herself but indirectly she is her father, her mother, her culture, Sardinia, the faces she made, the different worlds she traveled across. Now Anna is a movie that people watch, but the last time I heard from the real Anna was one year ago. She called me from the Mental Home in Rome and she threatened me: ‘I’ll have you thrown into jail. You made a movie with a girl underage.’ I tried to record those words and incorporate them into the movie because I thought it was fair to include also this accusation. After all it was the same accusation that many people flung at me, of having exploited her pretending to help her.”

Reading Grifi's version, one can only be appalled by the rational, somehow merciless logic of his project, of objectifying her in order to transform her into a symbol of other people's frustrations and defeats, and openly calling her a guinea pig. At first Grifi seems concerned about his new recording toy, capable of transferring images from tape to film (some of which graciously donated by Rossellini), and consequently of releasing *Anna* as a movie from the rhythm dictated by capitalist production, while at the same time telling fantastic stories about the revolution. But at the end he realizes his defeat and his words sound incredibly gloomy and bitter:

L'esperienza di *Anna* con l'uso del videoregistratore che abbassa enormemente i costi di produzione, ci ha reso evidente che la regia calcolando in denaro il costo della pellicola, calcola in denaro anche la crescita dei rapporti umani che filma [...]. Ma questa constatazione non è bastata perché sul set di *Anna* i rapporti umani divenissero liberi dagli imperativi economici. Lavorare a basso costo è diventato un alibi, l'alibi dell'underground appunto, per costruire menzogne ancora più contorte di quelle del cinema di cassetta. Una realtà assai più profondamente rimossa ci sfuggiva: dire che il set aliena, era un modo di non mettere in discussione che i nostri comportamenti, i nostri scambi interpersonali erano già, assai prima di darsi al cinema, intrisi di capitale e della sua ideologia. Anna non si era voluta adattare alla violenza del mondo, al dolore, ai condizionamenti che impone il sistema, non voleva diventare sociale e socievole; e noi rimuovevamo in lei, tramutandola in oggetto cinematografico, il dolore del nostro condizionamento e, infine, tenevamo a freno il desiderio di tutti: quello di scrollarsi di dosso il peso di un'esistenza ormai progressivamente adattata alla rinuncia [...]. Ma la violenza di stato che produce l'emarginazione di Anna è la stessa che produce l'impotenza del cinema. Anna è la cavia di un esperimento registico che dietro il tentativo di mettere in scena una storia melensa e pietistica, lascia intravedere malcelato sadismo, voyeurismo, gretto paternalismo. Ma Anna non è stata al gioco. Anna voleva amore non pietà.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Alberto Grifi in Silvestri, ed. *Il cinema contro di Alberto Grifi* 30-31. "The *Anna* experience with the use of the tape-recorder consistently lowering production costs, made evident to us that direction, by calculating in money the cost of the film calculates in money as well the growth of human relationships it is filming [...]. But this statement of fact was not enough in order for the human relationships born on the set of *Anna* to become free from economic imperatives. Working low-cost in fact has become an alibi, the alibi of underground, to construct lies that are even more twisted than the ones of the blockbusters. An even more removed reality escaped us: saying that the set alienates was a way of not bringing into question our behaviors and our interpersonal exchanges which were already imbued with the capital and with its ideology well before going in for cinema. Anna did not want to resign herself to the violence of the world, to pain, to the conditions

Sarchielli cannot be faulted during the events of the film in his sincere attempts to help Anna, but the nature of the medium prevails and the contradictions explode like never before in Italian film. In this respect, *Anna* is still the most innovative experiment of the 70s: the most daring and extreme, but also the most devastating in reconfirming the pernicious outcome of the action of political agencies in Italy — political agencies that can be called for all intents and purposes colonial, albeit *sui generis*. *Anna* is particularly meaningful when put in the perspective of two major trends in Italian cinema: the realist and the political film. At first sight, it seems the most accurate application of the Neorealist, specifically Zavattinian theory of the “tailing” technique, consisting of following a person in his daily pursuits and occupations, and trying to map the social and economic background of his concerns,¹⁴² explicitly evoked by Grifi in similar fashion — referring to the almost unbearable sequence for its length of Anna trying to dial a

imposed by the system, she did not want to become social and sociable; and by turning her into a dramatized object we removed in her the pain of our conditioning, and all things considered we put a bridle on everyone's desire: that of shaking off the burden of an existence progressively resigned to renunciation [...]. But the state violence producing Anna's marginalization is the same one producing the powerlessness of cinema. Anna is the guinea pig of a direction experiment that, behind the attempt of staging a cheesy and pitiful story, points to ill-concealed sadism, voyeurism, and petty paternalism. But Anna did not play along with us. Anna wanted love not pity.”

¹⁴² The influence of Zavattini on Grifi and Sarchielli can be better understood by using two works of Mario Verdone and Mino Argentieri as the necessary mediation. Verdone stresses the uneasiness experienced by Zavattini with his uncompromising research when confronted by elementary industrial demands and commercial requirements: see Mario Verdone, *Gli intellettuali e il cinema* (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1952) 225. Argentieri instead praises the balance achieved by Zavattini's discourse, between a popularizing tension and cinematic forms almost extraneous to what was accepted at the time in film industry. Argentieri calls Zavattini an anticipator of underground and post-68 political cinema (see Argentieri in Zavattini, *Neorealismo ecc.* 7).

number that is always busy, Grifi proudly states that directors should forget the illusions of cinemascope and instead shoot and screen

an inmate walking up and down in his cell for hours and hours, for months and years [...] a worker at the assembly line hanging the pieces to the hooks, or welding for eight straight hours”¹⁴³

There are also experimental works Grifi made about or even with Zavattini himself. But it may also seem to share quite a few traits with Bertolucci and Pasolini’s political dramas/mythologies and their cannibalistic vision of the bourgeoisie. And yet, *Anna* stands by itself both formally — thanks to its bizarre concoction of documentary takes and Godardian close-ups — and ideologically, thanks to the rebellious nature of the filmmakers’ take on Marxism, favoring the “underground” culture as opposed to everything that is established and accepted as orthodoxy, not to mention the refusal to idealize the subordinate class, *à la* Pasolini.

The film is a confirmation of how a dialogue in such a cultural *temperie* is most of the time actually just the opposition of two monologues facing each other. The epithet “fascist” given to a person who has lived a life like that of Anna, with problems like those she had, is another confirmation of how the colonial breed, be it Communist, Vatican or American, has made Italy the place where identity is defined exclusively in an oppositional way,

¹⁴³ Alberto Grifi in Silvestri, ed. *Il cinema contro di Alberto Grifi* 35. The passage reads: “Al posto dei film consolatori in cinemascope, bisognerebbe girare e proiettare un carcerato che cammina avanti e indietro nella cella per ore e ore, per mesi e anni. Bisognerebbe filmare e proiettare un operario in catena che attacca i pezzi ai ganci o che salda per otto ore filate”.

constituted by different ideological layers imported from the outside. The epithet “fascist,” used against Anna, is precisely the murder that Levinas mentions as the temptation inscribed in the face of the Other: the point, the place, the nowhere where absolute encounter turns into an absolute negation.

CHAPTER 4

YERVANT GIANIKIAN AND ANGELA RICCI LUCCHI: FUTURE ARCHEOLOGY

4.1 THE SPLENDOR OF MORAL REALISM¹⁴⁴

We have established the tendency of many Italian filmmakers of exploring the possibilities the medium offers to them in terms of granting agency to the poor, the subaltern, the marginalized. Sometimes filmmakers are more concerned with giving “rights of citizenship” to new, previously unrepresented subjects. But the technical aspect is also crucial, as demonstrated by Alberto Grifi’s emphasis on the new opportunities opened by his *vidigrafo*. The two directors analyzed in this chapter metaphorically represent a point of no return for each of the above-mentioned aspects. In fact, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi¹⁴⁵ are skilled craftsmen and invented their own special equipment with which they rework old film,

¹⁴⁴ Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s *Uomini, anni, vita* was surprisingly used by Pierre Sorlin in his Italian National Cinema 1896-1996 as an example of the return of individual stories in Italian cinema. The scholar probably noted the title ignoring its literary origin as well as the procedures behind Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s works.

¹⁴⁵ The most important works of internationally acclaimed filmmakers Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi are *Dal Polo all’Equatore* (1987), *Uomini, anni, vita* (1990), *Prigionieri della guerra* (1996), *Su tutte le vette è pace* (1999), *Inventario balcanico* (2000), and *Oh uomo* (2004), all made with original material found in museums, archives and private collections that is subsequently rephotographed and colored. For each work, the task of the directors involves taking still photographs of an average of more than half a million frames from the original film negative. Movies by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi are frequently screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

mostly propaganda pictures. Then, they use their “analytical camera” to bring to the surface the subjects that had previously been ignored or repressed in the original film.

In the chapter of *Signatures of the Visible* entitled “The Existence of Italy,” speaking about the revival of photo-documentaries, Frederic Jameson writes:

Ponge’s great question — how to escape from treeness by the means available to trees — which once seemed to us to offer the very formulation of the antinomies of the linguistic, now reimposes itself in a different way with the situation of media society: how to escape from the image by means of the image? (*Signatures* 162)

Playing with words, we could say that one possible solution would be to turn movement-images into time-images, and the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi is Italy’s most comprehensive answer to such a question. The two filmmakers are responsible for the most radical attempt at restoring the cultural creation of repressed and colonized social and national groups, pursued through a reworking of early 20th-century photographic images with a special “analytical camera” of their invention, intervening on color, details, and film running. On the one hand, their projects belong to that current in postmodernism participating, as Jameson writes, “in that general repudiation of, and even loathing and revulsion for, the fictive as such which seems to characterize our own time” (*Signatures* 187). At first sight, their films show clear symptoms of postmodern reworking and elaboration of composite materials. But the vocation of realism and the temptation of

filling the gaps voluntarily left open by official historiography and stagnating political action takes over in shaping what the two filmmakers call their moral realism. It is opportune to investigate the inconsistencies of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi with the canonized classifications of postmodern art in order to fully appreciate their projects. The salvaging of old materials and the fragmentation of such recovery is not carried out to elicit pleasure; rather, as Frédéric Bonnaud writes, the two confer a religious, ontologic authoritativeness to the photographic image and to its “irradiating permanence” (“The Rightful Return of the Ghosts,” in Mereghetti and Nosei 73), and then again, consistently with the creation of a postmodern spectator, they require an active act of performance from the audience, bestowing cinema with the ambitious task of educating and shaping man’s consciousness. The great intuition of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi is in conferring a moral structuring principle to material that, if used for quintessentially postmodern instances, would be refractory to strong stances or teachings. Instead, the atypical restoration of old documentaries, filmed excursions diaries and other marks of the transformation of the West at the beginning of the century serves a didactic purpose: in the words of the two filmmakers, “helping people think with their head.”¹⁴⁶ The forgotten soldiers of *Prigionieri della guerra*, the homeless populations of *Inventario balcanico*, the colonized children and subaltern natives of *Dal Polo*

¹⁴⁶ “Aiutare la gente a pensare con la loro testa,” as said during an interview with the author of this project.

all'Equatore are some examples of a forgotten humanity whose voice was smothered before it learned to talk, whose role was not acknowledged even when it was the motor of the “great” history:

In *From Pole to the Equator* the slowed, irregular pace of the imagery highlights particular details of expression, gesture, and action, so that we seem to be making contact with people and events and on a far more dramatic an[d] revealing level than we usually experience when we see early films. My guess is that in the Gianikian/Ricci Lucchi film we are making contact with people at a level Comerio would not only not have expected, but would not have wanted [...]. Of course, even if we were to see his imagery unmediated by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, we would probably understand it differently than Comerio would, but their recycling dramatically extends the gap between Comerio's probable understanding of his images and ours. Their decision about where to retard the imagery and which frames to highlight foreground complexity of the exotic cultures and the humanity of the individuals who populate them. Comerio may have been fascinated by these people as representatives of a Difference to be overcome by the church and the military, but for contemporary viewers (at least for this viewer), this Difference is more to be admired than the power of those who would compromise it.¹⁴⁷

The smooth surface of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's works is made possible by the demiurgic stance that they adopt, investigating the porousness of film documents and carefully selecting the repressed details highlighting the histories of ethnic violence, religious abuse and colonization that have founded the present. The rejection of narrative and fictive constructions in favor of pure documentary stock, making nameless and forgotten children and men the true protagonists, can be inscribed in the

¹⁴⁷ Scott MacDonald, “From the Pole to the Equator,” in Toffetti, ed., *Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi* 41. Luca Comerio was the cinematograph operator who filmed most of the material reused from *From the Pole to the Equator*: according to Gianikian, Comerio wanted to become Mussolini's official documentarian, with roughly the same role that Leni Riefenstahl covered for Hitler.) *From the Pole to the Equator* consists of four main chapters: “The Eternal Struggle,” “In the Kingdom of the White Sphinx,” “In the Kingdom of the Black Sphinx,” and “Man's Victory.” The third chapter, one of the most “graphic” ones, has Comerio following Italian Baron Lorenzo Franchetti exploring the esotic “other” in Africa, with the “orientalist” display of naked bodies, animal massacres, and in general the muscular exhibition of Europe's superior civilization.

postmodern tendency of abandoning grand schemes, and disperse narrative elements through unsung heroes and situations with no metaphysical grounding. If in postmodern art, as Ihab Hassan said, the subject has to become flat and negotiate a different role in the rising tide of images and objects assailing man's status, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi use restored images of wars, expeditions, massacres, cultural annihilation and Western aggressiveness in general to rewrite the lives of the cannon fodder of history, in a grandiose and heart-wrenching democratizing enterprise against what they call a state of amnesia.¹⁴⁸ The absence of whatever experience of transcendental knowledge carried out by a recognizable protagonist against a grey mass of philistines, and the presence of equally important protagonists inscribe the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi in the area of avant-garde where the collective stance prevails over the individualistic epiphany. And yet, at the same time, this gigantic work of rediscovery has a philosophical contiguity with the Walter Benjamin of *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, especially with the concepts of discontinuity and subversion. In contrast with the continuist and evolutionist stance of historicism, Benjamin serves his contemporaries with the terrifying spectacle of slavery and destruction that is history. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi constantly remind us of this spectacle, of our continuity with it, and consequently of the illusion of progress:

¹⁴⁸ Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, *Griffithiana* 29-30 (Sept. 1987): 67.

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹⁴⁹

It is an ideological continuity that can lead to open connivance. In fact, examining the use of eerie, sinister music synchronized with the tribal dances and the movements of the colonized and subjugated people on the screen, MacDonald discovers the type of educational impact that the movie should have on its audience:

The music helps to convey a sense of overwhelming sadness about the events Comerio documents, about what was lost through the colonization and domination of people and animals. It also periodically dramatizes our historical complicity in the events; at times, the people we see seem to dance to the music we're hearing, particularly during the earlier passages filmed in Africa. These momentary synchronizations of image and sound reaffirm a fact that is implicit throughout: that we, sitting in a theater, fascinated with the people and events Comerio has captured, are the recipients not only of his filmmaking, but of the process of power and domination he documents for us.¹⁵⁰

Besides the formal strategy of isolating specific moments and details and then reworking them through processes of enlargement and estrangement¹⁵¹, another similarity can be noted between the above process of demystification and Alberto Grifi's rage against the audience at the

¹⁴⁹ Excerpted from “On the Concept of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) 262.

¹⁵⁰ MacDonald in Toffetti, ed., *Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi* 43.

¹⁵¹ Especially in Grifi's radio pieces, cfr. for example the use of the animals' screams in *Che cosa orribile: un bue sta macellando sanguinosamente un uomo...*

Biennale di Venezia while watching *Anna* — one may better understand the type of investment that this type of cinema makes on spectatorship, the heroic attempt of planting an albeit minimum seed of reason:

Alla Biennale di Venezia, mentre proiettavano *Anna*, Stefano veniva tenuto fuori dal cinema dalla polizia perché era ubriaco e urlava le stesse cose che dice, da ubriaco, nel film. Nel cinema il pubblico applaudiva la sua immagine mentre lo faceva cacciar fuori dalla sala perché in carne e ossa disturbava. Quegli spettatori impegnati (il cui impegno è quello di essere spettatori) che vanno al cinema per vedere i matti al manicomio (per dimenticare di essere alienati sociali) o carcerati in galera (per dimenticare di essere prigionieri nelle città), non sono molti diversi dai questurini che guardano un film come uno schedario da far coincidere con gli identikit, con il solo interesse di incriminare qualcuno. Applaudendo *Anna* al cinema e lasciando *Anna* al manicomio nella realtà, ecco che quegli spettatori finiscono per tramutarsi in questurini.¹⁵²

Saying that Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's method is intrinsically Marxist is not intended to have any malicious meaning: it is simply a statement of fact that they deal with in the processes of production, in their case of historical meaning. The prisoners we see in *Prigionieri della guerra*, filmed during WWI in different detention camps,¹⁵³ are not labeled with

¹⁵² Alberto Grifi in Silvestri, ed., Il cinema contro di Alberto Grifi 37. "At the Biennale in Venice, while *Anna* was being screened, Stefano was being kept out of the theater by the police because he was drunk and he was screaming the same things he says, while being drunk, in the movie. The audience in the theater was applauding his image while it was kicking him out of the cinema because his real self in flesh and bones was a nuisance. Those committed spectators (whose commitment is to be spectators) going to the movies to see the loonies in the asylum (to forget about being social alienated) or convicts in prison (to forget about being prisoners in the cities) are not very different from cops watching a movie just as a photo index to be matched with identikits, cops whose only interest is to incriminate somebody. By applauding *Anna* in the theater and leaving her in the asylum in reality, those spectators end up turning into cops."

¹⁵³ *Prigionieri della guerra* mostly deals with the civil and military population of Trentino, one of the Italian regions to be more affected by WWI. Trentino was the theater of complicated war dynamics: at the time of the war it was still under the Austro-Hungarian empire, thus while about 55.000 thousand men were called up and sent to fight on the Eastern Front, and subsequently made prisoners by the Russian army, more than thirty thousand people were deported south by the Italian army. To complicate the odyssey of the prisoners even more there were political subtexts related to the position to be held towards

names or nationalities because Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi insist on the anti-heroic anonymity of masses and soldiers, on their physical features and facial expressions, on their gestures, during slow and dreamlike sequences walking outdoors, because the most important thing for them is to excavate into the sovrastructural elements that have contaminated those lives and those bodies. Mereghetti writes:

What is important is not so much the informative value of the footage collected (much of it not seen before) as the ability to 'liberate it' from the layers that have become encrusted over it and get to the heart of things, the heart of history [...] We are looking at 'old things', but seeing them in a new way: it is as if an unknown world is passing before us on the screen, a world that is cut up, minced, slowed down, re-coloured, but most of all unveiled. ("The Moral of History," Cinema Anni Vita 110)

Hence the moral exercise of the title, the construction of a spectatorship that is willing to welcome this radical challenge and accept a

the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Some of the prisoners were irredentist who believed in fighting the Empire to reclaim the Italian lands under its yoke, as opposed to lealists who were willing to serve the empire. The result was a displaced civil war taking place in remote prison camps in Russia between men who had to pay for myopic and opportunistic choices made by statesmen who used them as exchange goods. Paradoxically, the effects were pernicious even after the war, when the coexistence of irredentists and lealists was made possible by authoritarian state censorship: "The Italian State, which replaced the Hapsburg government in the 'redeemed lands', was determined to create a body of public opinion strongly tied to the idea and the history of the Italian nation — no easy task considering the 'redeemed' subjects were at the same time the vanquished former enemies and that they found it difficult to recognize any common history with their conquerors. So every effort was put into *inventing* a mythological tradition [...] to be superimposed on the memories of the vanquished [...] In other words, a large national civic entity was to be created, first of all breaking down all local identity and then building unity and continuity of purpose by means of the age-old *damnatio memoriae* [...] A calculated bureaucratic, police-state silence was cast over the evacuation experience, over the soldiers who had died serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, and in general over the entire experience of the battle fought on the Eastern Front, the imprisonment and the return home [...] The mechanism of transmission and reception of social memory was stopped in order to facilitate the creation of a fixed and hierarchical collective memory based on the *great stories* of national myth." Diego Leoni, "Those Places, Those Faces," in Toffetti, ed. Cinema Anni Vita 180.

new vision, a new way to look at film: in Edwin Carels' words, "The whole purpose of their endeavours is precisely to activate each individual's viewer recollective capacities"¹⁵⁴ or, as Dan Sipe wrote, "The lack of words, the slow pace, and the banality of the action allow us to focus on aspects of the images that we would otherwise not notice. We are searching for cues, watching intently, but in the process we are seeing details and alternative meanings. We have the time to wonder: 'What did these people think about this ceremony? How did they feel about the camera? How did they live? What were their stories?' We find new agendas, new questions: and we are encouraged to approach the footage as analysts, as active questioners, rather than as passive viewers" ("*From the Pole to the Equator. A Vision of a Wordless Past*," Cinema Anni Vita 152-53). Although this exercise is not consolatory, and radical in its discontinuity with traditional narrative cinema, still it appears to be a point of no return in the excavation of the image, whose results are fascinating and at the same time uncertain about the new perspective to be opened: their moral realism in the words of Giovanna Marini who composed the music for some of their works, is "la realtà che più realtà non si può" ("La musica," Cinema Anni Vita 115), flat-out reality, where the silence of the original film has a repressing, defamiliarizing effect, making the events even more present and real. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi are not only cultural archeologists but also

¹⁵⁴ Edwin Carels, "The Politics of Re/Collection," in Toffetti, ed., Cinema Anni Vita 110.

authentic philosophers of the image, giving to film an unprecedented political status. Unlike *Blowup*, at the end of *Dal Polo all'Equatore* and their other works, we have the illusion of knowing exactly the disquieting construction made possible by the medium and revealed/deconstructed before our very eyes. If their intellectual integrity is out of question — as Dan Sipe wrote about *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, “they made this film in passionate response to these found images instead of using them to illustrate some prior thesis” (“*From the Pole to the Equator. A Vision of a Wordless Past*,” Cinema Anni Vita 151) — it is arguable that they gloriously opened an era of creativity for the viewer, even more meritoriously given the iconic nature of the material they reinvent.

CONCLUSIONS

QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CINEMA

The quest for realism resurfaces periodically in Italian film. Next to Olmi and Rosi, who explicitly started their cinematic practices welcoming the neorealist framing, or Taviani, who partially rejected it, we have filmmakers who, pursuing newer forms of realism, either did not feel the necessity of a theoretical dialogue with Neorealism, or came to the same conclusions through different ideological paths. Moreover, the persisting presence of a sectarian mentality in the Left prolonged the illusion of cinema as a medium capable of changing the world:

Il cinema italiano, con le sue ambizioni pseudo-politiche, è nella stessa situazione; come dice Marco Montesano, “è un cinema istituzionalizzato, nonostante le apparenze concettuali, poiché il conflitto rappresentato è il conflitto previsto e controllato dall'istituzione. È un teatro, è un cinema narcisistico, storicistico, moralizzante”.¹⁵⁵

But the theoretical rejection of industrial cinema led also to interesting experiments of craftsmanship, where filmmakers were forced to

¹⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “Un manifesto di meno,” in Sovrapposizioni (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2002) 107. “Italian cinema is in the same situation with its pseudo-political ambitions; as Marco Montesano says, ‘in spite of conceptual appearances it is an institutionalized cinema, because the conflict represented is the conflict calculated and controlled by the institution. It is a kind of theater, it is a narcissistic, historicistic, moralizing cinema’.”

engineer their own shooting/recording devices if they wanted to escape the usual circuits of production. We should not ask filmmakers to be masters of economic theory or social philosophers, but the *auteurs* we have examined all tried to broaden the scope of social analysis and provide agency to groups ignored by the political power and excluded from signification. It is more than just “allargare le categorie del poetabile,” that is, broadening the scope of what can be used in art, more than just enrichment and polishing of formal devices. The contribution of Pietrangeli, Gianikian with Ricci Lucchi, and Grifi with Sarchielli was mostly aesthetic; in other words, they did not exploit the contradictions of the Italian system to their full potential. But their effort in reinserting into history the poor and forgotten is the reason why their names today appear next to more celebrated directors. The decaying bourgeoisie in Antonioni, the symbolic descent into hell in Fellini, the aristocratic reification of the proletarian in Pasolini, enable us to discover many things about Italy. However, in terms of social awareness the filmmakers analyzed in these project add some indispensable details, and this is why their well due process of canonization is now taking place. The Italian satiric journalist and comedian Gianni Ippoliti, famous for his corrosive, demystifying comments on Italian life, once declared: “Newspapers are talking about a revival of Italian cinema at this Venice Film Festival: my suggestion is to let us know beforehand when such revivals are scheduled, so we can prepare ourselves adequately for the event.” Such skepticism is equally met by a number of writers, scholars and simple

cinéphiles, feeling oppressed by the nostalgic memories of the good old times and inspired by an unaffected disbelief for the extreme poverty of Italy's cinematic situation. Hence the excavations, the debates, the screenings, the Tarantino's revealing to Italian audiences and scholarship the *true nature* of Italian cinema, the multiplicity of commercial and institutional activities aimed at promoting non-traditional interpretations of Italian film history, in the hope of some miraculous revelation and discovery. The line presented in this project is only a possible proposition among many others, because there is in fact enough material addressing a range of previously untouched themes, and doing it in a visually disrupting way when compared to the low-key, quasi-neorealist aesthetics of many contemporary works or the pompous and decadent cinematography of Giuseppe Tornatore. One of the pernicious and embarrassing fruits of Italy's policy of public funding is the phenomenon of *cinema invisibile*, i.e., a number of movies whose quality is so mediocre that they never make it to the theater. But there is also another category of *cinema invisibile*. Regardless of the quality of the movie, if the director does not belong to the number of already established filmmakers, it will be extremely difficult to see it, if not at a film festival or in an extremely small number of theaters. And yet, there are emerging directors whose works stand as important contributions capable of competing with much more fashionable, publicized and visible national cinematographies. The independent *Giro di lune tra terra e mare*, by Giuseppe M. Gaudino, is an amazing blend of experimental techniques and mythical method revving up

relatively customary topics such as the dissolution of the traditional family and the clash of patriarchal culture and modern development in southern Italy. The eerie landscapes of Daniele Cipri and Franco Maresco, a depressing stage of recursive rituals and gestures acted by a plethora of deformed and monstrous bodies — in their intention, a frontal attack against any compromising ideology and aesthetics of complacency and consolation — reminded critics of the “necrorealism” ascribed to the Russian filmmakers Evgenij Yufit and Vladimir Maslov.¹⁵⁶ Finally, the epistemic research of Paolo Benvenuti gave us the austere and terrifying *Gostanza da Libbiano*, the story of a witchcraft trial that took place in 1594 against an illiterate countrywoman, who in order to satisfy her inquisitors and escape tortures, made up incredible stories of extraterrestrial encounters with the devil charged with a strong sexual character, thus using her power of fabulation and developing a female subjectivity that proved extremely dangerous, more than regular heresy, for the Catholic Church. All these works are worth the same attention one would give to François Ozon or Takeshi Miike, just to name two filmmakers who are, and deservedly so, considered for different reason the avant-garde of art movies. But Italian film desperately needs to rapidly forget the unserviceable notion

¹⁵⁶ On Gaudino, see the well documented essay “The Cinema of Giuseppe M. Gaudino and Edoardo Winspeare: Between Tradition and Experiment” by Daniela La Penna (with the reference to Neorealism for Gaudino’s film, almost a ritual homage, and the just acknowledgement of the role that Enrico Ghezzi’s *Fuori Orario* plays in generating interest and critical attention on works showcased only at Film Festivals, and sometimes not even there); on Cipri and Maresco, “Daniele Cipri and Franco Maresco: Uncompromising Visions – Aesthetics of the Apocalypse” by Ernest Hampson: both essays are in William Hope, ed. *Italian Cinema. New Directions* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2005).

of quality and move on in terms of imaginary influences coming from its good old days. Great artists like Marco Ferreri still wait for a full critical exploration, while others that are considered the backbone of our post-modern period barely deserve to make the cut. In a country that has not fully modernized, the unyielding realist stance is a source of cinematic wealth, but the way political inadequacy is not “transfigured” or properly dealt with cannot be overlooked. The task is to define the uneasiness and the sense of guilt Italy has for being an industrialized society, keeping its feet in the Western world but looking somewhere else, sometimes to the developing countries, sometimes to archaic models of economic growth.

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