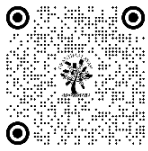


# THEMES IN ITALIAN NEOREALIST CINEMA: A STUDY OF THE 1940S AND 50S

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## ABSTRACT

The paper talks about various themes explored in Italian neorealist cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. During the 1940s and 1950s, Italian filmmakers responded to the artificiality of pre-World War II and Fascist films with a new movement called neorealism (Italian for "new reality"). The movement aimed to address the pre-war events and the social and economic issues that the war spawned realistically. The presentations of events/situations follow certain patterns like poverty, starvation, suffering and struggle for socio-economic justice. There is a clear-cut and distinct emphasis on characterization and the social milieu from which its thematic concerns grow. It aims to make films less glamorous and more helpful as a means of communication for the greater good. It could be suggested that while interacting with the socio-political realities of that period cinema was influencing and being influenced by it. The objective is to show that films do not just appear in a vacuum but are part and product of a specific political, historical, and cultural milieu. They can't remain divorced from the socio-cultural and political relations of the period they belong to. The themes of anti-Fascism, problems of have v/s have-nots, unemployment, poverty, inequality, and their moral dimensions have been studied. The de-dramatization of situations and the deviations in the portrayal, as evident in *Miracle in Milan* (1953), which has been compared with the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, have also been discussed.

**Keywords:** Neorealism, De Sica, Rossellini, Bitter Rice, Rome Open City, Bicycle Thieves



Italy's cinematic neorealism (Italian: neorealismo) of the 1940s and '50s was a reaction against the stylizations of pre-World War II and Fascist filmmaking. The movement's overarching goal was to take a sober, objective look at the circumstances that led up to the conflict and the resulting socio-economic difficulties. The presentations of events/situations follow certain patterns like poverty, starvation, suffering and struggle for socio-economic justice. There is a clear-cut and distinct emphasis on characterization as well as the social milieu from which its thematic concerns grow. Neorealism sought to reorient cinematic expression towards daily life by documenting events within their historical context and concentrating on classes and individuals who had previously been ignored by the film industry.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the goal is to transform cinema from a glitzy entertainment medium into one that serves a meaningful societal function. Also, the themes on which it was based will provide an understanding of the relevant contemporary issues of Italy during that period.

Stylistically, *Ossessione*, (*Obsession*, 1942) is the most realistic of Visconti's films.<sup>2</sup> It was a cinematic genre that took issue with the official film industry's optimistic "bourgeoisie intrigues" and "white telephones" genres.<sup>3</sup> It was an invigorating story of the alluring and obliterating force of human sexuality, given James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The Italian government was horrified by the film's practical portrayal of an average life. The film depicts the affair between an attractive vagabond named Gino and a frustrated housewife Giovanna. Their pure physical passion results in the murder of Giovanna's boorish husband. It was a drama about sexual tension that was both dark and provocative, drawing charges of immorality and subversion. In addition, it heralded the beginning of a more realistic period in Italian filmmaking. There was severe censorship of the picture under Mussolini's Fascist administration. Highly regarded as the pioneering work of neorealist filmmaking, its early sequences of simmering sexual tension and the seamless integration

of the film's protagonist into the surrounding countryside have earned it widespread recognition.<sup>4</sup> Alicata, Visconti, Puccini, Pietrangeli, and De Santis, together with Moravia, all put their names on the film's screenplay before it went into production. The Italian Communist Party's postwar leader Pietro Jugrao was a member of this clique. In addition to their theoretical work, they participated in anti-Fascist underground movements. During the shooting of *Ossessione*, the secret police started the investigation of the group resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of Puccini, Visconti, and Alicata. Lino Micciche, Italian film critic and historian writes that the 'real text' of *Ossessione* begins before the first establishing shot of the motion picture and, in a way, it continues much later than Gino's anguish over Giovanna's deceased corpse.<sup>5</sup> With this story of grimy obsessions and shots fragrant with lust and sensuality, Visconti was intentionally defying governmental decrees of cleanliness and decorum on celluloid.<sup>6</sup> Visconti wrote *Ossessione* intending to react against the vital confidence of Mussolini's extremist organization and its fantasy stories of a rich Italy loaded up with solid cerebrums in healthy bodies. The hero's isolation was emphasized, and so was the harshness of their surroundings, which included seedy watering holes with sticky tables, rickety highways with nonfunctioning petrol stations, unkempt lawns and the expressionless stares of the locals. The character of Giovanna seems more alone towards the end of the film while Gino appears more disturbed, desperate, and guilty. Until recently, films seldom showed this side of Italy.

In *Germany anno zero*, Rossellini demonstrates his ambition to document a certain reality and act as a witness to a particular time and place. Despite its anti-Fascist stance, the film asks the obvious question: If Germans were just like us, what would have driven them to this tragedy? The correct response to this question is "a rotten idea," which advocates rejecting modesty in favour of praising boldness, celebrating strength over weakness, and pitting pride against modesty.<sup>7</sup> The unrepentant Nazi and gay former teacher of the young protagonist serves as the greatest illustration of this principle when he informs the protagonist that only the strong are destined for survival while the weak are doomed to die. The father's repeated complaints that they would have been something more off without him drove the protagonist, then a youngster, to poison him, certain that he was doing righteously and that his father's death would have been for the best. Rossellini sees the sexual depravity of individual educator as emblematic of Nazism's broader ethical and intellectual degeneration. This is how Ingrid, lesbian Nazi of *Roma Città Aperta* also works. Rossellini is obsessed with the Nazi 'concept' since it is this corrupt notion that fosters all the concrete examples of human corruption shown in the film. The issue is exacerbated since he is a teacher, at a respected and privileged position from which he may inflict his poisonous views and ideas on the most defenseless members of society.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the school teacher is a pederast, a fact that escapes the attention of the twelve-year-old protagonist, and his actions, such as the soft caress of the child's neck when they talk on the street or their virtual embrace when they walk back to his room are resonant of gay connotations. The two older children, Jo and Christel, to whom the child protagonist is introduced by the school teacher, are pernicious examples – the boy already an expert thief and the girl exhibiting in her posture an advanced sexual consciousness. Their attitudes are suggestive of the effect of Berlin's atmosphere on the defenseless youth.

*Ossessione* (1942) focuses heavily on the relationship between labour and capital, with the protagonist's joblessness reflecting the growing rate of unemployment in postwar Italy. There is a clear contrast between the wealthy and the poor throughout the film. The dramatic power of *Rome Open City* emerges in the reality of 'the things.' There is Pina's house and its table with half-empty plates containing food insufficient to satisfy even a child's appetite; her tattered coat and chequered scarf; Don Pietro's residence with an unsteady and wood-burning stove, old newspapers, and a bowl of thin cabbage soup; overloaded and congested buses; the greasy, untidy jacket of the waiter who serves food to Francesco, Manfredi and Marina at the restaurant, the face of a poor Roman woman as she hastens to apprise the priest of the coming disaster etc. For Rossellini, such details which might have emerged rarely in earlier films as components of a set or decor or as elements of montage, turned into the crux of the narrative and visual composition, the very root of the dramatic force.<sup>9</sup> The story of *Il Sole Sorge Ancora* (*The Sun Rises Again*, 1945) made by Aldo Vergano is set on a vast agricultural estate in Lombardy after September 1943. Its characters explicitly fall into two separate domains - owners of land on one side and exploited peasants on the other.

In Fellini's *La Strada* female protagonist is effectively sold by her mother to the film's brutish male protagonist since the latter took away her older daughter, who tragically perished while in his service. The mother's choice and her desperation to send one more girl to a similar situation with the same male protagonist are reflected in the catastrophic consequences of employment with him. According to Millicent Marcus, *La Strada* has all the earmarks of a cinematic thesis on poverty and social injustice, yet it is not one in the slightest, since it departs from the usual neorealist starting point and travels to a very different lyrical destination.<sup>10</sup> His theme is spiritual poverty and the quest for some form of salvation from it. But over and above this, the parallel between physical and psychological voyage is drawn. The camera objectively depicts the substandard circumstances, emphasizing their most distinguishing features without compromising on realism. Conversely, opulent environments are seen satirically, with the emphasis placed on the most

absurd aspects of these surroundings.<sup>11</sup> Robert Philip Kolker notes that both *La Strada* and *Nights of Cabiria* include observations of the poor and powerless as they wander through desolate landscapes; this aspect of neorealism is central to both films. However, in well-crafted melodramas, the environment takes a back seat to a character who goes above and beyond to achieve moving reactions.<sup>12</sup> When defending *Nights of Cabiria*, Andre Bazin said that the audience should see the characters "not in the middle of the objects, but, as if these had become transparent, through them."<sup>13</sup> In a way, characters start to detach from objects and thereafter the two will contest.

Themes as ubiquitous as hunger, poverty, unemployment, and despair were depicted in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, reflecting the ordinariness of stability of the postwar era. Despite this disadvantage, Zavattini turned it into an advantage by contending that a more vulnerable topic was, by definition, more affluent in actuality since it was devoid of allurements and creations of customary story structure. According to De Sica, he set out to find the dramatic potential in mundane circumstances, the miraculous in what the general public viewed as ordinary news. At the police station, where the protagonist reports the theft of his bicycle, a reporter approaches him and asks whether there is information. At the point when the cop answers, "No, nothing a bike," the crowd is blessed to receive an astounding conflict of perspectives. The male protagonist views the policeman's reaction as a harsh miscalculation since the theft of a bicycle is seen as insignificant and lacks any drama by the police and the media. On the one hand, the explanation is a reasonable assessment of what happened, but on the other, its inequity violates basic human rights.<sup>14</sup>

Another Rome, however, stands in opposition to the male protagonist and his fellow victims. In this part of Rome, the city's middle class spends their Sundays going to church, eating out, and watching football. This suggests that the bourgeoisie takes pride in a historical status, liberated from the assaults of war and its fallout and disciplined to the standard rhythms of the week of work, with its stylized prizes, and that new history has just impacted the lower classes. This class divide between the Riccis and the film's middle-class exemplars is most apparent during a scene at a restaurant when the film's male protagonist and his child are seated next to an extravagantly wealthy family of customers. The arrogant heir of a rich family communicates his opinion of the male protagonist's child via condescending looks and a comical exaggeration of table manners. However, it is the waiter who makes a clear distinction in social status between the male protagonist and their neighbours by neglecting to lay down a tablecloth and arrange the cutlery, while these items are organized for the wealthier clients.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this contrast between the wealthy and the impoverished strongly reflects the reality in Italy at that time.

Filmmaker Satyajit Ray considers De Sica's film *Bicycle Thieves* to be the finest example of a tale being conveyed in cinema in the clearest, most accessible terms possible.<sup>16</sup> As the film progresses, it transforms from a straightforward narrative into a profound record of human anguish inside an indifferent and brutal societal reality, delving into the protagonist's extreme sorrow, despair, isolation, and worry. The pervasiveness of its topic and the societal awareness it represented, not only painted a bleak and upsetting portrait of a working-class family but also encapsulated the despair and disillusionment of a whole era.

Carlo Battisti, a college lecturer, apparently had no acting experience before playing the lead role of Umberto D.<sup>17</sup> The film doesn't try to figure out why people are unequally wealthy or poor, but instead takes these things as given and moves on to show compassion and consideration for one unusual instance. Roy Armes contends that De Sica had gone against the contention that neorealism in essence a working-class cinema and properly guaranteed that an issue that is clear in the entirety of his movies is that of the bourgeoisie: while the judgment of and parody on the bourgeoisie are present in his films, it is to be understood at once that underneath the criticism is hidden affection for this flawed but still human category. De Sica has said that he dedicated the picture to his father, an elderly bourgeoisie who struggled against poverty and had his dignity to protect, therefore the story certainly had strong personal resonance for him. The film as a whole was a manifesto in support of the bourgeoisie and the human race.<sup>18</sup>

The landlady of Umberto D is another face of the bourgeoisie; she exemplifies all that is wrong with the society that is hostile to the elderly gentleman. She victimizes the male protagonist for not paying his rent even though she has rented out his room for adultery and prostitution while he is away. She is likely to fire the maid once she discovers she is pregnant. The maid is another victim of society and the landlady, and potentially a kind of sub-proletariat. She is a girl from the countryside who has come to Rome for employment, becomes pregnant by one of her two soldier lovers (she does not know which), and faces the prospect of an illegitimate child.

The film's sarcastic societal critique is shown by its portrayal of the landlady, a member of the bourgeoisie, who is sober with her fiancé but has no qualms about renting out the male protagonist's apartment for 1,000 lire each hour for adulterous reasons. The two sons of a patient to the right of the male protagonist's bed in the hospital exhibit concern over their father's condition in front of the nun, but recline into cheerful gossip about money when she has gone. The

religious hypocrisy is also criticized in a scene in which a fellow patient appeases a nun for keeping the male protagonist an additional week in the hospital in place of his appropriate display of Christian devotion. It's hard to miss the nun's "carrot and stick" approach to religion when she offers him the rosary as she's offering a kid a toy. The sequence at the dog-pound contains perhaps the most virulent social critique implied in the entire film. The canine pound's chilly productivity, gigantic staff, and cutting-edge actual plant are an engaging incrimination of a general public that pampers such consideration and inefficient spending on the removal of creatures, yet can't stand to give increased allowances to its aged people.<sup>19</sup>

The death of Silvana, who wins Francesca's respect and Marco's love at the film's conclusion, marks the beginning of Francesca's new existence in *Bitter Rice* (1948) on the level of the individual tale.<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of the film, Francesca and Walter are partners in crime, but by the conclusion of the film, Francesca has changed drastically. In the course of the film, Francesca completely switches places with Silvana in terms of her relationships with men and her moral compass, thanks to the profound impact of Marco, Silvana's boyfriend and the opposite of Walter, an unscrupulous robber. To counteract Silvana's fall from grace, who was once a pure and beautiful young woman, Francesca makes steady and methodical strides towards salvation, or more accurately, towards purity, truth, virtue, and morality. The last scene of Marco and Francesca, with their luggage slung over their shoulders, serves as a signal to look forward to a bright future, and so becomes emblematic of the film's shift in tone and style. Francesca's white blouse, their placement against the horizon, and their attitudes of defiance all contribute to the impression that they are heroic figures expressing the will of the people to overcome exploitation and injustice.<sup>21</sup>

In 1947, Visconti went to Sicily, with some money advanced by the Communist Party, to shoot what was at first to have been a short documentary. The film was to contain three connected episodes, depicting the lives of the fishermen, the peasants, and the workers in the sulphur -mines. But not more than one episode on fisherman could be completed that was afterward called *La Terra Trema*.<sup>22</sup> The film was a realistic portrayal of the hardships faced by the fishermen in their struggle for survival and genuinely portrays their environment and surroundings.

In *Bicycle Thieves* (1948, De Sica), the actual people who played father and son with such self-control ranted the hearts.<sup>23</sup> Commenting on how the son serves as the film's moral compass, Andre Bazin thinks the notion of the kid is a brilliant tactic because it adds a moral dimension to the worker's search and elevates what might have been a just social performance to the one with ethical implications. The bond between a parent and son is especially delicate since it touches on some of life's most basic moral questions. The account of the father's obvious humiliation while walking down the road falls short when compared to the reality that his child witnessed it. Silently guessing what his father is thinking, the small boy's presence is cruel to the point of obscenity as he realizes that his father is contemplating stealing the bicycle.<sup>2</sup>

*Sciuscia*, (1946, Vittorio De Sica) is a callous story of the victimized lives of child shoeblacks who are under pressure for their continued existence on the streets of post-war Rome.<sup>25</sup> The film's moral assessment of the adult world is not based on an examination of the world as it is but on a comparison with the immaculateness and guiltlessness of early stages. The kids are depicted as vulnerable casualties, with all the guilt falling on the shoulders of the parents whose actions show them to be dishonourable and aggressive. They are coerced into committing crimes by Giuseppe's older brother; the police trick them into giving them information; legal counselors are mean and tactical. By separating the two, prison officials commit stupidity, putting Giuseppe in bad company and punishing Pasquale for resisting a bully

A high point of *Rome Open City* (1945, Rossellini) is the contrast between Pina and Marina. These two ladies stand in stark contrast to one another in terms of physical appearance, emotional style, sexual appetites, and cinematic predecessors, yet they also represent the consequence of two distinct classes of moral choices. Despite their similar backgrounds, Rossellini holds Marina solely responsible for her actions, while holding Pina up as a standard by which Marina will be eternally measured. Neither Marina's complicity has been ascribed to any bourgeois decadence, nor a perennial addiction to affluence, but instead to a personality shortcoming that makes her capitulate to the allurements of fur coat, drugs, and lavish surroundings.

Marina seems like a showgirl, all glitz and pretense, whereas Pina seems straightforward and unaffected. Pina's dialectical pattern and colloquialisms place her squarely in the middle of the masses, whereas Marina's use of standard, non-regional Italian exhibits her compliance to "pretensions to social mobility." While Pina sacrifices herself for the sake of bravery and honesty, Marina continues to exist despite her many flaws and, when confronted with the body of her departed sweetheart Manfredi, she simply blacks out in a defeatist impersonation of Pina's gallant and honorable suffering.<sup>26</sup>

Pina's positive outlook on love highlights her sociability, whereas Marina's pessimism highlights her emotional bankruptcies. Pina sees it as an internal force 'set in motion by an act of free will' while Marina views it as an external



drive that oppresses those who become its victim. Marina views the woman in love as a helpless victim of an uncontrolled force, whereas Pina sees her as an active agent who chooses her destiny and is ethically responsible for the path of her desire. While Pina sees a lady as the engineer of her passionate change when she says, "Indeed, a lady can constantly change, particularly when she is infatuated," Marina credits love's speculative chemistry to one more source when she tells Manfredi, "If you had truly loved me, you would have transformed me." Marina seemed to be very upset about telling Ingrid, the lesbian agent, that Manfredi had sought sanctuary in her home. Her inner turmoil may be broken down into two categories: her moral sense (of right) and her material wants (of evil). In the end, she gives in to her financial desires and betrays her ex-lover, who had sought shelter with her. There is also a contrast between good and evil in the representation of Italian life under the Nazi occupation, with the Resistance representing the former and the distorted Germans and their extensively less forceful Italian teammates addressing the latter. Pina, Francesca, Don Pietro, and Manfredi are all optimistic characters in the film who share Francesco's hope for a new beginning and an Italian spring. While Pina and her sister Lauretta are more interested in the deeper meanings of life, they, like Marina, are easily swayed by the shallow goals of the Cafe culture and the materialistic merchandise given by the Germans.

*Rome Open City* captures the hopeful tone in which 1945 concluded, it is primarily a vivid portrayal of 1943-44, a period set apart by hunger (Pina), selflessness (Don Pietro), the purpose to proceed with the fight (Francesca), sleaze (Marina), and persecution (Manfredi). Inspiring an entire cinematic movement devoted to realizing its vision, *Rome Open City* proved to have the power and momentum to carry out its mission. Although directors may change some details of the vision in subsequent films, no one will challenge its justifiability or the urgency of its claim to recurrent creative expression.<sup>27</sup> On the whole, *Rome Open City* remains the first forceful sign of genuine freedom in Italian cinema after the lengthy dark era of fascism.

In the Rome episode of *Paisan*, Maria Michi's fallen condition is not completely the consequence of weak individual willpower. Rather the decline of the entire Italian culture because of poverty and the presence of the American military conspire to bring her down. Rossellini does not specify this fall or its intricate causes. Instead, he simply allows his camera to be placed on the face of the concierge (or Madame) after Maria Michi goes out from the house of disrepute. The economic hierarchy alluded to in this scene carries ample ethical overtones for an audience to imagine a complex cultural web; in this way, this narrative appears as a reflection of a real historical setting which Rossellini has depicted with nominal props.<sup>28</sup>

In *Paisan* (*Neighbour*, 1946) Rossellini discarded the use of professional actors for the 'six episodes of life in Italy' at the end of the war.<sup>29</sup> Due to his dedication to the concept of de-dramatization, Rossellini shows just a handful of troops, a few explosions, and a home on fire. There is scarcely any effort to convey legitimate anxiety or demonstrate true bravery. Almost the whole episode is filmed in medium or long shots, and it's mostly dark, giving the viewer a strong impression of observing the event rather than participating in it. This episode portrays the bewilderment of the circumstances in which the Italians are entrapped between the two sides and has a distasteful irony in its conclusion, but as a statement on war it is distinctly restricted, moving no further than to testify that the contesting troops are virtually uniforms and filled with a similar carving for home.<sup>30</sup>

No one in the story is a hero or a leader; they're just regular folks for whom the war will be a passing experience if they survive it at all. We understand their aspirations but none of the ideological confrontation behind the fight of Americans and Germans, Partisan and Fascist. Two Fascists are killed, and their deaths are shown with the same calm, dispassionate factuality as the deaths of two partisans. This response to events is the result of a conscious belief on the director's part when he agrees that he constantly attempts to remain unemotional. He thinks that amazingly outstanding and touching in humans is exactly that the grand gestures or facts are fashioned in the same way, with the same stir, as the ordinary small acts of life; it is with the same humility that he attempts to record both: there is a basis of dramatic attention to be found there.<sup>31</sup>

The use of formal aspects like *mise-en-scene*, lighting, and camera movement all contribute to an atmosphere of realism. In the last episode, the partisans' features are frequently so completely obscured that we become mindful that we can't watch them, and we subsequently momentarily lose the film's grip on the story. The execution of the Fascists in the Florence episode is so chillingly realistic because it happens so swiftly. The villains are taken into and out of the picture and then shot dead with no fanfare. In the fourth episode, when Harriet is unexpectedly informed regarding Lupo's demise, no time is given to arrangements for or responses to one or the other occasion, and we acknowledge this as some way or another more similar because it isn't what we regularly see in traditionally 'realistic movies,' in which the fullest profound impact is for the most part wrung from each picture and occasion.<sup>32</sup>

Robert Philip Kolker says that the incompleteness and inconclusiveness of the episodes allow and in reality, persuade the spectator to transact with them with at least executive assistance, which is the reason this film, more than some other

of the time, is so uninspiring inside the structure of one's filmic assumptions, and more effective with regards to one's emotional experience. It refuses to do anything beyond what is presented, and it doesn't demand anything more from us than that we understand what is shown. On top of that, we may add our spin to the narrative by considering how the historical events shown in the photographs made us feel and how we would react to them. This might be a tale of suffering and loss, of weakness and resilience, or even of success.<sup>33</sup> The neorealists' primary goal was to permit the crowd's reaction to originate from the "image facts" instead of an "assumption of character," rather than burdening the viewer with sentimentality that was superfluous to understanding the character in his or her actual situation. Rossellini's creative method is on full display in *Paisan*, from his ability to create an illusion of spontaneity to his uninhibited use of locales, non-actors, and people to his nuanced depiction of shifting emotions and settings.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Rossellini is in charge of his mix of realism and subjectivity, fusing the philosophical underpinnings of his previous works with a foundation of verisimilitude.<sup>35</sup>

De Sica's model of a film that is entirely without an emotional superstructure and that elevates the normal and the unobtrusive by taking 'any snapshot of human existence' and introducing momentousness tracks down its nearest conceivable acknowledgment in *Umberto D.*, contends Millicent Marcus. De Sica employs the term 'uncompromising' to portray his picture since it does not cater to commercial expectations of drama, ostentation, or emotional catharsis. But unlike Zavattini's vision for realism filmmaking, this is not a ninety-minute film about a man's life in which nothing significant occurs. Thus, *Umberto D.*'s stamp of authenticity is not due to the absence of the fantastic, but rather to the de-dramatization of crucial dramatic circumstances and moments, which De Sica does not arrange in any sort of hierarchy. The female servant in the film is the voice of this de-dramatization technique when she informs the male protagonist about her pregnancy with the same matter-of-fact tone she used to complain about the ants in the kitchen, prompting the male protagonist to exclaim, "Pregnant and you say it like that!" When asked how she should break the news, the maid responds with "How should I say it?" This exchange highlights De Sica's attitude to emotional equality by showing that he does not agree to give her confession a too dramatic arc. Another instance of avoiding dramatization is when the maid informs the warrior from Naples that she is pregnant and he leaves, ignoring any responsibility for her predicament.<sup>36</sup>

Andre Bazin praises the maid's kitchen scene for its dailiness and explains the approach of this narrative and direction - the story unit isn't the episode, the occasion, the abrupt development, or the personality of its heroes; it is the progression of substantial moments of life, none of which can be supposed to be a higher priority than another, for their ontological equality demolishes drama at its actual root.<sup>37</sup>

The blatant sexuality introduced by Silvana into the neorealist canon in *Bitter Rice* is possibly the most jarring deviation from the norm. Even though neorealism acknowledged its characters' sexuality, such as with Pina's and Maria's unwed pregnancies in *Rome Open City* and *Umberto D.*, respectively, it didn't make sensuality one of the main thrusts of the action, nor did it display the actual insights of its characters, as De Santis does in *Bitter Rice*.<sup>38</sup> Silvana Mangano was gorgeous, ravishing, and sensuous, displaying her black stocking-clad legs and her uncovered breasts with an innate defiance. In a way, she represented and personified sexual temptation and desire.

*Bitter Rice* goes beyond its melodramatic declaration in another way by including melodrama as one of the film's themes and then countering it with a documentary-realist stance. Opening titles assert that hunger and love have been man's two primary motivations from the beginning of time, establishing an immediate contrast between these two antagonistic forces. The film follows thousands of women as they harvest rice and plant it for more than a month. Two tales are told in the movie: one of difficult work, and the other of the surge of feelings experienced by these women.<sup>39</sup> De Santis' split faithfulness between the documentations of real news coverage from one viewpoint, and those of melodrama on the other, is seen in the film's two intended narrative strands: that of food, and that of love. The project's inherent duality is made clear from the outset, as he contrasts the two narrative approaches, he would use to portray women. De Santis refutes allegations of sexual explicitness, saying he was more concerned with emancipation than eroticism when making this film and that he just wanted to show "man, woman, and society" as they normally are, in all their primordial trustworthiness. Only in the context of a comprehensive, cosmic, and asocial understanding of nature can he embrace eroticism. If this is the case, then De Santis fails miserably in *Bitter Rice*, as Silvana's physical presence dominates the picture and earns her a worldwide reputation as the sort of pin-up the film is meant to criticize.<sup>40</sup>

*Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan* 1953, De Sica) introduced a component of fantasy into the neorealist situation.<sup>41</sup> Despite its realistic underpinnings, *Miracle in Milan* (1953, De Sica) is more akin to a fairy tale than a documentary, what with the main character, Toto, being rescued by an old woman, a lengthy scene in which Toto grants wishes to the poor,

tear-gas being dispelled by a magic dove, and Toto and his friends flying away to heaven on a broomstick. This film has the elements of magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Zavattini reveals another layer of significance under this pleasant exterior by saying that the fundamental feeling of *Miracle in Milan* isn't one of getaway (the trip at the finale), but of outrage, a need for cognizance for certain people, a dismissal of it with others. The film is structured to suggest that a large number of the film's protagonists have united to fight against the film's antagonists. The meek, however, are unable to defend their homes and territories because they lack the necessary armaments. Toto delivers no social message, nor does he hold a solution to the problems of poverty and impoverishment, but instead, he serves to provide an outsider's partial evaluation of a situation whose complexities he is unable to comprehend, in this instance those of social organization and human motivation. De Sica provides a fairer assessment of the film when he comments that it was not a political cinema but a tale, and his solitary intention was a twentieth-century fairy tale. Regarding the significance of the film, it was for him the victory of goodness: let men be good to each other. That was the only political message of his film.<sup>42</sup>

Barbaro identifies a breach of the neorealist technique in the zoom shot from Umberto's window to the cobblestones beneath, contending that the blatant camerawork and its subjectivity imply that Umberto is considering suicide as a solution to his predicament. Another scene that deviates from realism is the snarling bulldog in the kennel, which shows Umberto's (or Flike's) impression of the hostile atmosphere there. When Umberto takes a tram to where he thinks Flike is, the audience is shown yet another subjective collection of visuals. The city is shown through the eyes of a person who is seeing it for the last time before he commits suicide, and even the start of nostalgic longing cannot prevent his determination to end his life. Millicent Marcus argues that these moments are not violations of neorealist objectivity but rather point to a larger psychological and cinematic pattern of shifting perspectives and ambiguous optics.<sup>43</sup> In reality, the film stays true to its perspective-shifting in the entire movie - with Umberto being the target of various degrees of pity, humour, and criticism according to the fluctuating opinion.

In *La Trera Trema*, regarding the improvisation of dialogues and the actors' contribution to the evolution of the script in certain scenes, Visconti stated that the script was not predetermined but he made the actors compose it up themselves. He just provided the introductory draft and they brought imagery, thoughts, ideas, and accompaniments. Then he made the actors rehearse the transcript and then they didn't alter the expressions anymore. They became predetermined, as if dialogues had been noted down though they were not written, but invented by the fishermen.<sup>44</sup>

A divergence from typical neorealist practice is the almost total lack of specific geographical and chronological clues to ground the narrative in history. In *La Strada* only once a geographic referent i.e. Rome is given, though we venture into anonymous rural areas of the city and never face any of its milestones. The referred building is called San Paolo Fuori Le Mura (St. Paul, Outside the Walls), and its name suggests that it is on the city's outskirts. Millicent Marcus makes the historical observation that the first composite was likely made after World War II on account of the presence of an Esso sign in the background and the prostitute's appreciative question, "Is it American?" upon seeing the hero's motorbike trailer and the sequence of their impending sexual encounter.<sup>45</sup> Edouard de Laurot indicates the male protagonist's refusal to identify his origins - what he told the foremost female character in response to her "Where do you come from?" His non-committal answers to basic personal questions like "Where were you born?" ("In my father's house") and "Where are you from?" ("From my part of the country") reveal as much about his lack of a sense of belonging as his abrasive manner of speaking. According to Millicent Marcus, Fellini's narrative, freed from the constraints of neorealist historicity, makes a clear declaration of its preference for a historical representation of the human condition.<sup>46</sup>

*La Strada* broke free of the neorealist shackles of theme and philosophy, making investigations in forbidden fields of filmmaking. Far from double-crossing neorealism, Fellini further developed it by guiding it down another lane, as Georges Sadoul agrees.<sup>47</sup> When Fred tells the prostitute about Francesca in a flashback, the narrative structure in *Paisan* deviates from the norm of neorealist practice. De Sica and Zavattini's *Umberto D.* does not abandon the radical promise of the early neorealist films; rather, it shifts the accountability from the level of narrative content to that of cinematic form. This withdrawal towards form as the driver of social change is to a lesser extent a dismissal of the neorealist scheme and more of an upgrading of it. Italy, like Umberto's landlady, was eager to forget the "bad old day" and bask in the fruits of reconstruction, thus the country's new focus on working-class values and references to resistance ideals fell flat. De Sica and Zavattini dealt a blow to classical neorealism of content when they made the form the new repository of neorealist meaning. This allowed Fellini, Visconti, and Antonioni to apply their stylistic precepts to themes that had previously been excluded from serious postwar cinematic portrayals.

In *Paisan*, the real newsreel footage is blended with the filmed story in such a way that they mix seamlessly, and the editing is done in such a way that it is exceedingly impossible to differentiate the two kinds of material at first look. The

cast of the film is a reflection of Rossellini's aesthetic, which is characterized by a synthesis of disparate components. The film's American cast members weren't A-listers by any stretch of the imagination, but they were seasoned actors who had worked in American theatre before. These professionals portray the most prominent parts in each episode with consummate ease, while a large number of amateurs, who play mostly supporting roles, round up the cast.<sup>48</sup>

*Rome Open City* was based on actual events that Romans underwent during the years 1943-44. The plot highlights the happenings of the Italian Resistance during three days.<sup>49</sup> The film portrayed the events during the resistance with a ruthless intensity which made spectators believe that they were viewing reality.<sup>50</sup> One might argue that the whole movie is about how people, genres, and the symbolic structures that define a culture – all change. Initiating a new cinematic technique and a new cultural perspective, Rossellini is widely seen as the pioneering neorealist of Italian films due to his focus on the second and third types of change. Rossellini's memorialization of the performers' spur-of-the-moment inventions helps make the generic shift the film's most recognizable and noticeable one: of Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani in particular.<sup>51</sup> Both had experience not only in the music hall presentations but also on stage and film. The characters of *Open City* blend the characteristics of music hall presentations with those of Italian popular comedy.<sup>52</sup> Rossellini's use of dialect and slapstick comedy is so well timed and placed that it provides relief at periods of nearly unbearable theatrical tension.

The film's research reaffirms the age-old belief that working with few means and under adverse circumstances may be beneficial to creative output. The lack of a studio meant that filming took place in actual streets and houses; gray photography was used because of an absence of power units; unexpected cuts because of editing being finished in parts and constantly improvised, giving the film a sense of documentary authenticity.<sup>53</sup> The movie was such a great hit that it became the highest-grossing picture of the year. Interestingly, Rossellini never again directed a neorealist picture that performed so well at the box office.

Peter Bondanella notes that, unlike other films, *Rome Open City* does not rely on amateur actors for any of its visual effects since the whole cast is made up of professionals in the entertainment industry. Rossellini, on the other hand, placed his artists in parts that were out of character for them, sometimes putting comic players in sad or tragicomic settings. One of the illusions surrounding neorealism and Rossellini's aesthetic contribution to it - that of improvisation - was disproven by the film's screenplay, which was written and revised several times.<sup>54</sup> Although it's often assumed that sets play a little role in neorealist films, the Gestapo headquarters' sheer architecture adds to the tension. There are two doors leading out of the central office where Bergmann questions his prisoners: one prompts a dungeon where blood, sweat, brutality, and sadism dominate; the other prompts a sort of diversion space for German officials, where champagne, playing card game, piano music, and chattering prosper, unmindful of the human experience on the opposite side of the wall.

In *Germany Year Zero* Rossellini tried to relocate the neorealist experimentation to the defeated Germany.<sup>55</sup> Viewed within the context of neorealism and indeed of realism in general, *Germany Year Zero* arouses conflicting reactions. Its film portrait of Germany is bare and sparse. The exterior shots of the film depict authenticity and objectivity. While the interiors, which are studio-built in Italy exhibit superficiality, thereby causing a contest between realism and artificiality. Neorealism is usually seen as a social and political form of cinema but on both these estimates *Germania anno zero* is strangely quiet, anticipating Rossellini's later interest (in films like *Stromboli* and *Francesco, Giullare di Dio*) in purely spiritual problems. Politically, the film does not refer to the four-way division of Berlin or the status of the invading authorities. The arrival of the French soldiers at the drinking club appears something of a surprise, so little have the mechanics of the occupation been dealt with, while the English soldiers whom the child protagonist meets merely appear like ill-at-ease tourists. Socially too, the film's indictment of the capitalist system where everything is on sale (including women) and even a record of Hitler's speech finds a consumer is only implicit and never put forward in any way as a conscious message.

*Bicycle Thieves* came closest to Zavattini's ideal of making films out of the natural drama of actual life.<sup>56</sup> It had a massive budget, hundreds of actors, and a painstakingly planned out filming method; in short, it was a neorealist masterpiece.<sup>57</sup> Overall, the production cost was much beyond budget at about 100,000 Lire, or almost \$50,000 at the prevailing currency rate at that time. While this may seem like a small budget by American or Canadian standards, it was rather large by Italian ones, since very few films cost more than this, and the vast majority cost much less.<sup>58</sup> Zavattini and De Sica spent six months on the screenplay, debating every picture and continually selecting the greatest possible locations to film in. No one is suggesting that De Sica's cautious aesthetic is in evil conviction; somewhat movies were filmed with extreme precision to maximize visual complexity while hiding the creativity that went into their creation. Rather, it reflects a deliberate ideological stand against the ornate traditions of commercial film, which are explicitly dismissed in two acts in *Bicycle Thieves*. First, when a coworker states that there isn't much to do but complain about the rain on a Sunday to



watch a movie (which is, to him, an exceptionally unappealing prospect), he is making a case for the commercial cinema's disconnection from the common suffering. Also, it's significant that Antonio's nightmare begins while he is putting up a promotional poster for Rita Hayworth's new movie since it shows how commercial cinematic illusions contrast sharply with the real survival challenges of the Italian citizenry.<sup>59</sup>

*Bicycle Thieves* is one of the most meticulously crafted and also one of the most expensive neorealist films.<sup>60</sup> Through a highly stylized portrayal of a genuine environment (the whole film is shot in the streets, stores, and apartments of Rome), the filmmaker transcends the explanatory proportions of the narrative, engendering in the spectators a feeling of immense empathy, which substitutes the usual identification with the characters. In the absence of a story and apparent lack of any *mise-en-scene*, the film produces a web of images that are projections of the emotions of the characters. Out of these images, symbolic meanings appear (the apathy of the crowd, the unity of the family, the solitude of a human being, etc.) The carefully selected authentic locations make imagery with powerful emotional overtones (flea markets, slums, and brothels of Rome; the atmosphere of the sports stadium, etc.). The story which would not be worthy of a few lines in a 'stray dog column'<sup>61</sup> ultimately appears with remarkable dramatic effect and uniqueness; *Bicycle Thieves* was originally conceived of by Zavattini as a description of a certain historical period and set of social events, but De Sica's natural skepticism of history allowed him to go beyond these aspects.<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps neorealism in the chaste ideal theoretical conception of Zavattini never existed as *Rome Open City* uses skillful acting performances and *Bicycle Thieves* employs dramatic devices to produce sentimentality.<sup>63</sup> But we can say that the beauty of neorealism lies in the fact that it was adapted by various filmmakers according to their filming styles. The sincerity of its practitioners to portray reality was unquestionable and their commitment to the cause of neorealism was also beyond doubt.

Thus, we can say that the varied themes of neorealist films dealt with the day-to-day realities of those times. They were reflective of issues of post-war Italian cinema. The fact that they could attest to the issues' very existence was crucial. Apart from neorealists, others also attempted to depict as many aspects of life as possible in cinema. These themes and presentations were a major inspiration for other filmmakers not only in Italy but also in other parts of the world. This enriched the cinema of other countries and also led to the emergence of alternative cinema in these countries.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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