



FILM  
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

*Neorealist  
Film Culture  
1945 - 1954*

**ROME, OPEN CINEMA**

FRANCESCO PITASSIO

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## Neorealist Film Culture, 1945-1954



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*Francesco Pitassio*

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Many decades ago, back when tiny, badly lit, and barely heated film clubs existed and neorealism was an undisputable value of Italian culture, my mother dragged me to a film club to watch *Rome, Open City* on what I remember to be a cold winter night. I was still in primary school and clearly remember the shabby movie theatre and the rigid wooden seats as much as the shock of the crucial death of Pina, the main female character played by

Anna Magnani. However, I did not remember the fact that I spent a good part of the film pretending I had lost something on the dark floor of the venue in order to simply divert my eyes from the screen, which offered a view too hard for me to bear. My mother recently recollected this episode, to my embarrassment. I guess this book settles the score with that difficult viewing, the contradictory memory I had of it, and a certain legacy that neorealism implied for Italy and many of its citizens. Given that this volume does not directly scrutinise primarily neorealist masterpieces, I suppose I am still only giving neorealist films a sideways look.

I started thinking about writing this book when my son Bernardo was just born, and the research and the writing has grown with him. So far, I have not brought him to watch any neorealist films, given that I had stolen enough of my 'father time' to focus on this subject. But I consider it a way to transmit a legacy which that hesitant viewing spawned. I dedicate this book to Bernardo, who looks at things straight in the face.

# Introduction

## An Uncertain Direction. Neorealist Cinema and Transitional Culture

A young kid in rags is on the corner of a street selling cigarettes on the black market. A puppy keeps him company. A flashy woman, black-haired, wearing heels and heavy make-up, approaches. A blonde, dull-looking American soldier is with her. She notices the child and wants to have a smoke. She rummages through the box the kid is holding until she pulls out of it a cigar, which she lights up. A policeman shows up: the couple flees without paying the kid, whom the policeman chases, until the latter hits a lamppost. After losing his goods and his money, the kid travels back home by jumping onto the bumper of a bus, together with his dog. He finally gets to a shanty, where his barrack is located. Just a loaf of stale bread awaits him for dinner, which he shares with the dog. While the wind howls, he gets in bed with the animal. As he falls asleep, he starts dreaming: he climbs up a ladder coming out of a hole in the roof and admires the city's skyline. Then the ladder extends all the way up to the sky. The child ascends it and finally is high above. He starts picking up beautiful stars. But as he is ready to leave, a voice stops him, saying that he cannot bring the stars home but that he can stay if he wants to, which he does. In the morning, down on earth, the dog tries to wake his master, to no avail. It begins to howl (Fig. 1).

The few lines above describe a peculiar film, directed by Italian animator Francesco Maurizio Guido (aka Gibba) between 1946 and 1947.<sup>1</sup> Its title is *L'ultimo sciuscià* (The last shoeshine)<sup>2</sup> and it is an animation short that Alfa Film, a new company located on the Italian Riviera, produced under precarious circumstances. While in Rome in 1944, the young Gibba attempted to direct an animation short called *Hello Jeep!* which should welcome the American troops. The short was meant to be created together with Federico

1 On Gibba, see Boledi (ed.), *Grandi corti animati*; Verger, *Gibba: 80 anni nella Cinecittà di cartone*.

2 The film is now available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atWNwfdXRIw> (Last access: 15 August 2018).



Fig. 1 A neorealism out of place. Animation and neorealist motifs in *L'ultimo sciuscià* (The last shoeshine, Gibba, 1946-47)

Fellini, who at the time was also involved in the production of *Roma città aperta* (Rome, Open City, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), but unfortunately they were never able to complete the project. In the early 1950s, Gibba moved back to Rome where he worked in advertisement, popular theatre, TV, and cinema and became a decisive figure in national animation cinema. Nowadays, readers would have trouble finding information about *The last shoeshine* in any account on neorealist cinema and its culture. Nonetheless, the film entails many features usually attributed to neorealist cinema and culture. The story behind its production easily fits into the narrative categories about neorealist film production: it was spontaneous, precarious, and notably located far from Rome, which Fascism had empowered as the main centre for film production by supporting the creation of the huge studios of Cinecittà (built in 1937) and the birth of the film academy (in 1935). The film's plot tackles controversial topics such as abandoned children, prostitution, the Allies' presence in Italy, and the black market. Visually, it displays iconic locations such as city streets and wretched shantytowns. Its narrative tone alternates between a bleak rendition of contemporary urban reality and a fairytale representation of what transcends appearances and lies beyond materiality, as do some feature films directed by acknowledged neorealist personalities—*Miracolo a Milano*

(*Miracle in Milan*, Vittorio De Sica, 1950) and *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (*The Flowers of St. Francis*, Roberto Rossellini, 1950) being good cases in point. Moreover, the film combines comic scenes, like the Chaplin-esque policeman's chase, with tragic ones, like the dramatic ending. This combination of tragedy and comedy was among the virtues of Italian neorealist cinema praised by film critics, with its cinematic representation of multi-layered reality that seldom offers crystal-clear facts and circumstances.<sup>3</sup> However, the animation short also brings to the fore contradictory questions associated with neorealist cinema that have haunted its discussion since the beginning. To begin with, notwithstanding its contemporary subject, the film could not be farther from a direct and unmediated recording of reality: it is an animated film and as such it is not reliant on an indexical relationship with portrayed reality, a point that is discussed extensively in relation to analogic photographic recording and neorealist cinema. Consequently, its alleged realism depends much more on a visual tradition and on thematic motifs rather than on a direct engagement with reality. Furthermore, the film's story is fictitious and universal—its very title refers to an unspecified subject—and does not address any actual person, location, or event. Despite its timely topic and the empathy it evokes, the film failed to prompt widespread interest and fell into oblivion. Even if film critics at the time may not have considered the possibility that the neorealist style could have influenced the field of animated films or did not view Gibba as an engaged filmmaker, why did film history overlook this film, despite its many similarities with one of the most discussed and glorified film eras and styles? How did such a vibrant phase, period, and culture come to be reduced to a restricted number of films, directors, and keywords, whereas a closer inspection discloses an impressive diversity? This question underpins my line of thought and research, which the following chapters will try to substantiate.

Historical accounts regularly rely on logical concatenations of facts, data, names, and personalities whose relationship is based on a chain of acts and consequences, causes and effects as extracted from empirical reality. This kind of historical approach offers an effective description of past circumstances. However, the new philosophy of history in the past decades has questioned this linear reconstruction, no matter how dense, and has instead turned to multifaceted explanations. Polish historian Jerzy

3 For instance, in a brief remark, film critic and director Luigi Comencini celebrated the compound of comic and dramatic scenes in *Rome, Open City*, and compared this example to Hollywood filmmaking, which offered simplified narratives. See Comencini, 'Italia domanda—Perché ci applaude New York?.'

Topolski singles out a different approach and highlights two qualities, which he terms historical 'synchronic narration' and 'diachronic narration'.<sup>4</sup> The former focuses on processes more than on events, that is, on gradual developments more than on chains of individual happenings, on what French historian Fernand Braudel named the *longue durée* (long duration) in history, counterposing it to an 'evenemential approach'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Topolski underlines that when writing cultural history, a 'synchronic narration' is preferred. However, is this kind of approach suitable when dealing with a short-term phenomenon such as neorealism, which most of its observers consider to be a sudden outburst, i.e. more of an event than a process? Some film historians and common sense apply a very different periodisation to neorealism, seeing it as a much more prolonged phenomenon. Among neorealism's advocates, notably until the early 1960s, some trace its origins back to Italian silent cinema of the 1910s and its rare realist trends, while modern film critics regularly widen its parameters by labelling as 'neo-neorealist' most contemporary films set in urban outskirts and featuring underprivileged protagonists. The list of personalities and works being labelled as neorealist includes Federico Fellini and Pierpaolo Pasolini, Italian cinema of the early 1990s, and contemporary filmmakers such as Gianfranco Rosi and Matteo Garrone, who aim to depict Italy in various ways. Basically, this use of the notion creates an ever-expanding corpus that incorporates a good deal of national *auteurs* and potentially every work representing the nation through a realistic lens. However, such an extended concept, while effective in discussions and debates based on common sense, is useless in writing film history. For this reason, I tend to agree with a restricted notion of neorealism, which locates the phenomenon—and notably its cinematic emergence—in the war's aftermath between 1945 and 1950,<sup>6</sup> when neorealism identified with an overall transformation of Italian society and culture as well as major shifts in the world order. This phase came to an almost abrupt end with the onset of the Cold War. However, I contend that in cultural terms, neorealism prolonged its influence until the mid-1950s, even as it lost ground in terms of film production. As neorealism turned into a template for world cinema, film art, and theoretical discussion, as evidenced by the conference held in 1953 in Parma,<sup>7</sup> neorealist cinema

4 Topolski, *Narrare la storia*, notably pp. 19-39.

5 Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences: The Long Duration'.

6 Farassino, 'Neorealismo, storia e geografia'.

7 A recent conference examined the relevance and legacy of that event for showcasing and defining neorealism. See Guerra (ed.), *Invenzioni dal vero*.

itself faded away. Nonetheless, if we focus on neorealist culture—that is, the definition and transfer of themes, motifs, stylistic features, and modes of production—I maintain that the early 1950s were still a crucial period defining neorealism, even if its variety had been reduced. I am not championing an idea of neorealism as an ahistorical essence, as its early advocates did, and I am aware of the fact that every periodisation implies a stance regarding the time it showcases.<sup>8</sup> However, I intend to bring to the fore the way neorealist culture shaped the very existence of this phenomenon, which was not limited to experimental masterworks but circulated across a variety of forms and media. To do so, I believe that a ‘synchronic narration’ might adequately render the major shift that neorealist culture represented while not giving away its multiple roots and later impact. In fact, we might look at *neorealism as an explosion* affecting cultural structures.

Another influential historian, Krzysztof Pomiań, describes in terms of a ‘history of structures’ one of the main achievements of history in the wake of the emergence of the French *Annales* school of historiography.<sup>9</sup> Structures are sets of constraints preventing conjunctures, that is, variations, from exceeding a certain limit; accordingly, structures are stable and can be thoroughly explored in historical research. However, this does not rule out the occurrence of revolutions, i.e., the emergence of a new structure replacing a previous one. In Pomiań’s view, we should consider revolutions not as a series of rapidly evolving events but rather as a wave of innovations that are iterated and that prompt major shifts. Russian semiotician and cultural historian Yuri Lotman attempted to describe these kinds of changes in culture, which he terms ‘explosive processes’. He posits some crucial characteristics of these shifts: alien components force cultural systems to turn from static to dynamic; the coexistence of different languages within one system increases its complexity; explosions bring to a halt chains of causes/effects within one cultural system and produce a number of simultaneous potential events. We cannot forecast which of these events will occur and substantiate a new structure.<sup>10</sup> I suggest that the fall of Italian totalitarianism and the end of World War Two altered the basic structures of culture in Italy and prompted a series of transformations. It pushed Italian culture from being a relatively stable and static system into a process of accelerated dynamism; it incorporated different languages into a restricted public space; and, for a brief time, it created opportunities for

8 See Le Goff, *Faut-il vraiment découper l'histoire en tranches?*

9 Pomiań, ‘L'histoire des structures’. See also Pomiań, *L'Ordre du temps*.

10 Lotman, *Cercare la strada*, notably pp. 29–38. See also Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*.

heterogeneous subjects, forms, styles, and production modes to become dominant within national—and to some extent international—film culture.

Elsewhere, Lotman discusses the historical approach to artistic phenomena, positing that historians tend to extract from a surveyed epoch a uniform interpretation, thus providing it with an identity. But, he argues, did contemporary observers look at it the same way? Consequently, he makes a plea for an open look at the artistic multiplicity of the past.<sup>11</sup> I believe that considering neorealist culture in these terms might reframe our understanding of this epoch—not only the shifts it prompted but also its many connections with what preceded and followed it, as I shall later try to clarify. To recapitulate, I intend to refer to a synchronic narration to account for neorealist culture's true nature, despite the fact that neorealism only lasted for a short period of time. I have chosen this approach for its far greater effectiveness than causal explanation in allowing us to understand cultural history. Moreover, a synchronic approach that is focused on structures and recurrences is also convincing when dealing with sudden shifts, which are part and parcel of structural changes and namely conceived as 'revolution' or 'explosion'. These notions are indeed often associated with neorealism itself, which is considered to be a radical change in film history as much as in Italian culture.

My claim is that we can discuss neorealism as a critical culture, or as a transitional one. I bring up the notion of 'critical culture' by referring to the thorough historical and theoretical scrutiny of the notion of 'crisis' by Reinhart Koselleck,<sup>12</sup> who contends that in the modern age this notion came to overlap with that of revolution. In the philosophy of history, it is identified with an inherent quality of the historical process itself, i.e. transition. As applied to film history, in the authoritative work of Rick Altman and, in his wake, Michael Wedel, 'crisis historiography' inquires into the consequences of cultural changes as they 'plunge representational systems into an *identity crisis* during which they are sequentially and even simultaneously imaged as belonging to several different categories, each with its own separate (and sometimes contradictory) set of practices'.<sup>13</sup> I believe neorealism manifests the identity crisis that Italian culture, and more specifically film culture, experienced: neorealism offered some viable options for both.<sup>14</sup> Regarding

11 Lotman, 'Khudozhestvennyi ansambl' kak bytovoe prostanstvo'.

12 Koselleck, 'Crisis'.

13 Altman, 'The Silence of the Silents', p. 689. See also Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, notably pp. 15-23; Wedel, 'Universal, Germany, and "All Quiet on the Western Front": A Case Study in Crisis Historiography'.

14 One of the most cited works on Italian post-war cinema reads this production through the lens of 'crisis'. See Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema*.

Italian culture, cinema came to hold a place it never did before in terms of influence and authority. It brought together contradictory issues such as *auteur* and industry, showmanship and social engagement; and for many years it embodied the national culture abroad, where it was frequently—and, alas, inaccurately—grouped together with Italian auteurs from the 1960s. In terms of film culture, neorealist cinema usually marks a rupture from which a different way of articulating cinematic discourse and narratives emerged, the primacy of recording and representing over storytelling, which gave way to ambiguity and narrative indeterminacy and a new mode of film production. Regularly, film historians consider neorealist cinema to be a milestone in departing from the classical film style and mode of production and as an entryway to modern cinema.<sup>15</sup> Even if these features are undisputable, I think we should look historically at neorealism in a different way. I believe that when neorealism came to an end, film history and critique singled out its most prominent characteristics; however, I am persuaded that its inner energy and force are less related to an imagined purity than to its variety, which is a sign of its critical function. I contend that *neorealist culture blurred the traditional boundaries of cinema*. Nowadays, Italian film historians tend to agree that the works of Roberto Rossellini and Pietro Germi both belong to the neorealist canon. However, how could we possibly liken the two when the former shot his films with a high degree of improvisation, loose scripts, and little concern for narrative clarity and established editing patterns, and the latter painstakingly planned the shooting and drafted his scripts, mostly referred to Hollywood filmmaking, and designed polarised narratives? I believe that we should consider not only the thematic resonance between artworks—as in the cases of Rossellini and Germi—but also the contemporary social discourses. Accordingly, lively debates surrounding Italian post-war realist films, the ephemeral materials heralding or prolonging their existence, and contemporary media practices locating neorealist films within a given mediascape help us understand how neorealist culture existed and how contemporary viewers acknowledged it.

*I consider neorealist culture to be a transitional one.* I derive this notion of a transition culture from the work of the American sociologist Michael D. Kennedy, who created it to discuss post-communist Eastern European societies.<sup>16</sup> In Kennedy's view, 'transition culture is a mobilizing culture organized around certain logical and normative oppositions, valuations

15 Just to name two major examples, see Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, notably pp. 353-366; Bálint-Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, notably pp. 253-274.

16 Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Post-Communism*, notably pp. 1-43.

of expertise, and interpretations of history [...]. That mobilizing culture, in turn, structures transition.<sup>17</sup> Transition culture implies an elite that oversees the transitional phase; it can incorporate elements from popular culture and from tradition for the needs of transition, and it depends on the imaginary of collapse, a situation whereby a community believes its very existence is at stake and its reference points vanish, necessitating a transition to a new status. In my view, neorealist culture certainly hinged on the imaginary of collapse and widely incorporated both traditional and popular culture, as the following chapters will demonstrate. However, national and international elites presiding over cultural and social change after World War Two marginalised some features belonging to neorealist culture and magnified others in order to promote and steer the transition itself. I am not contending that this process intentionally distorted neorealist culture's characteristics; I firmly believe, though, that we should inspect the era more closely if we aim to elucidate its dynamism, potential, and variety. To sum up, neorealist culture and cinema resulted from a number of events and the processes they triggered.<sup>18</sup> At a time of explosion, as Lotman names these major shifts in culture, neorealist culture existed as a wide array of possibilities and potential developments to direct the transition. As such, neorealist culture is a 'culture of disorder', as it questioned long-established structures and meanings and created new, unprecedented hybrids. Transition culture originated from this explosion. However, as the political and social transition was completed, towards the end of the 1940s, its cultural richness and variety diminished.

In a seminal contribution on film genres, Altman discussed the grounds on which a film is included in or excluded from a corpus, i.e. what is defined as an individual film genre.<sup>19</sup> According to Altman, the inclusive approach to film genres' corpora is based on content, i.e. on the films' semantics and on a sort of tautological statement—e.g. an Italian neorealist film is a film dealing with Italian reality. Conversely, the exclusive approach relies on syntax, that is, on recurrent structural patterns responsible for creating meaning—e.g. an Italian neorealist film is a film bearing witness

17 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

18 American sociologist William H. Sewell, Jr. discusses the relationship between events, causalities, and developments in terms of 'evenemential temporality'. This notion implies that causality exists but is largely contingent and heterogeneous. Furthermore, 'events bring about historical changes in part by transforming the very cultural categories that shape and constrain human action'. See Sewell, Jr., 'Three Temporalities', p. 101.

19 Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre'.

by forcing a main character and the audience identifying with her to face an unbearable act of moral (and often physical) cruelty. In his conclusions, Altman contended that an integration between the two approaches might greatly help in conflating applicability with explanatory power and account for historical transformation. In a subsequent article, he expanded this by including the pragmatic sphere: corpora exist and evolve because categories we make use of help us trace boundaries, enhance elements, and bestow identities. The labels we attribute to films, personalities, and trends crystallise them, although the act of labelling varies through time and corpora change according to relentless labelling practices.<sup>20</sup> The American scholar's argument fits very well into a decades-long quarrel over the corpus of Italian neorealism, between what Italian film historian Alberto Farassino has called the advocates of neorealist masterworks (*opere*), i.e. those films epitomising at best the style's praised qualities, and those drawing attention to 'neorealist films', i.e. films that incorporated those qualities, adapting or predating them.<sup>21</sup> One approach—searching for aesthetic, commercial, and ideological purity—is an exclusive one; the other is inclusive and deals with those works that are both genre *and* realist films, commercially successful *and* politically engaged, stylistically not as groundbreaking as the masterpieces *but* presenting many of the same features. Farassino championed this second approach, and I concur with him. Furthermore, the pragmatic approach that Altman recommends provides us with an incredibly productive insight into post-war neorealist culture. In fact, paying due attention to the enormous amount of evidence that films, promotional materials, popular press, film criticism, and film theory produced during the 'neorealist age' helps us understand the shift in Italian and film culture. In my view, this approach, while being historically more productive, is also preferable in heuristic terms: it helps the researcher understand the inherently complex nature of cultural phenomena and their vital existence, which regularly exceeds our concerns for identity. To echo Bhabha's words, it is 'the "inter"—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture'.<sup>22</sup> Hence, this book does not provide its readers with two approaches—i.e. the textual and the historical approach—that have dominated the debate about neorealism in the past and today.

20 Altman, 'Emballage réutilisable'. See also Altman, 'Conclusion: A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Genre'.

21 Farassino, 'Neorealismo, storia e geografia'.

22 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 38.

My background is rooted in semiotics and textual analysis, and this work is largely based on a close reading of some neorealist films. Each chapter thus opens with a discussion of a particularly telling sequence from either an acknowledged masterpiece or a less celebrated film. However, it is not through the interpretation of certain films that readers will gain an encompassing knowledge of specific works or the aesthetic choices characterising neorealist cinema. Recent and past research has widely relied on such an approach, and I do not intend to replicate what others have done, even though I have enormously benefitted from their endeavour. Readers will find traces of my debt to these scholars in my argument. I attempt to connect individual films and related narratives, style, representations, and discourses with broader issues, which the artworks somehow incarnate and help illuminate. Because of this, my research is not a discussion of neorealist canonical works: there is little concern for the outstanding achievements of artists such as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, and Luchino Visconti, or the still little-known names—beyond Italy—of filmmakers such as Renato Castellani, Giuseppe De Santis, Pietro Germi, or Alberto Lattuada. However, I hope this book will prompt scholars and students to look at both the neorealist canon and its fringes with a fresh eye. In a similar vein, this volume does not offer a historical description of neorealist cinema based on authorship, films, style, and accompanying film criticism; nor is it a thorough account of the industry involved in producing, releasing, promoting, and screening the works belonging to this phenomenon. While there is no shortage of historical descriptions of neorealist cinema, I believe there is still much work to do in terms of production studies, reception studies, and audience studies, in both national and international terms. I am indebted to the general historical accounts on neorealist cinema and neorealist culture overall as well as to in-depth case studies asking specific historical questions related to neorealist films or filmmakers. However, this volume tries to offer a cultural history of neorealism and accordingly is not primarily focused on data and facts or on causal explanation. While I am aware of the questions this volume might raise for a reader who is not at all familiar with neorealist cinema, I hope that my efforts to include and quote the existing literature and reference books might provide readers with a useful tool to find more traditional accounts and introductory descriptions. To summarise, this book intends to locate and explain the role and function that neorealist cinema held within national and international post-war culture.

The need to render accurately neorealist culture and cinema's multiplicity drove me to linger on the protracted debate that has, from the early 1950s, struggled to define the subject. The Italian debate in the early 1970s did

away with previous binary oppositions, like anti-fascist/fascist,<sup>23</sup> modern/classical, engaged/escapist, that located neorealist cinema on the left side of the equation.<sup>24</sup> A more recent discussion, in the past three decades, has helped to bridge the gap between an auteurist, arthouse notion of neorealist cinema and the industrial rationale underpinning a good deal of neorealist films.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the most recent debate has tried to showcase the extension of what film historian Brunetta has termed the 'neorealist field':<sup>26</sup> its connection with media developments, other arts, the political debate and the political agenda, and the ideological discussion in Italy and abroad.<sup>27</sup> In addition, more recent research places considerable emphasis on the historical and cultural function of neorealism as a way to cope with an encumbering national past.<sup>28</sup>

All in all, I believe that the more scholars look at neorealist cinema and culture, the more acceptable the idea pointed out by pioneering scholar Lino Micciché in the mid-1970s becomes: there were *as many neorealist filmmakers as different versions of neorealism itself*. In his view, this implied that 'neorealism, being a compound of various phenomena, was not a phenomenon itself; rather, it did not exist as a well-defined and distinct phenomenon, since in terms of expression (i.e., films) it appeared—and appears particularly nowadays—easy to deconstruct and reconstruct as one likes best.'<sup>29</sup> However, I believe that the ghost of unity, identity, and purposefulness no longer haunts contemporary scholarship. While I claim that there has been a neorealist age, implying specific features, modes of address, narratives, and subjects, I am not at all interested in tracking down

23 This couple is usually associated with continuity/discontinuity, as they refer to Fascist cinema and culture. See Casetti, Farassino, Grasso, and Sanguineti, 'Neorealismo e cinema italiano degli anni '30'.

24 The crucial occasion for this major revision of the debate on neorealism is, obviously, the huge retrospective and associated conference on Italian neorealism at the Festival del Nuovo Cinema di Pesaro in 1974, and the ensuing volume Micciché (ed.), *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*.

25 Again, another retrospective, at the Turin Film Festival in 1989, and ensuing volume paved the way for this reconsideration of neorealist cinema. See Farassino (ed.), *Neorealismo*. See also Farassino, 'Margini, attraversamenti, contaminazioni', and particularly Parigi, *Neorealismo*. For the transition from neorealism to genre film production in the 1950s, see Villa (ed.), *Cinema e cultura popolare nell'Italia degli anni Cinquanta*; Noto, *Dal bozzetto ai generi*.

26 Brunetta, 'Il campo neorealista: coerenza e coesione'.

27 A recent publication, following a major conference held at the Università degli Studi di Torino, tries to take stock of the discussion in various fields of research. See Carluccio, Morreale, and Pierini (eds), *Intorno al neorealismo*.

28 See Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space*; Minghelli, *Cinema Year Zero*.

29 Micciché, 'Per una verifica del neorealismo', p. 27.

and praising its integrity and rebuffing into oblivion what does not match it. This brings me to another statement by Micciché, in his closing remarks. If neorealist cinema did not establish individual aesthetics, it created an 'ethics of the aesthetics', that is, a battlefield for promoting neorealism as a way to engage artists, artworks, and cinema in operating and transforming contemporary society.<sup>30</sup> I concur with Micciché's view, insofar as it refers to some individual cases. Moreover, I am convinced that it is precisely the alliance of political and aesthetic values that viewers were presented with in the major works of neorealist culture. This turned neorealist cinema into a template for many subsequent renewals in world cinema. One tradition in film theory associated neorealist cinema with engaged artistry through a 'presentational' mode, that is, a way of depicting its subject by directly recording its physical existence, without assigning it a pre-established ideological or dramatic meaning. Thus, characters embody sheer humanity, not a set of moral values associated with certain acts and behaviours; and it is up to the spectator to extract from the characters these values. Consequently, neorealist films purportedly do not force the viewer to side with one or another position but instead transform her into a responsible bystander. This line of thought can be traced back to André Bazin as well as the discussion of neorealism (or, to be frank, mostly of Rossellini) that film critic Serge Daney and philosopher Gilles Deleuze produced in the mid-1980s,<sup>31</sup> and extends to insightful recent work conducted by Lucia Nagib.<sup>32</sup> I concur with this view: neorealist cinema presented the viewers with a new way of looking at reality which at the same time politically engaged its audiences because it presented them with a representation that enhanced cinema's reproductive qualities while downplaying Manichean narrative oppositions. This novelty, together with film criticism magnifying neorealist productions' poverty, improvisation, and low-budget productions, was very productive beyond national boundaries. That being said, neorealism's novelty and its moral and political implications are not the subject of this book, for two distinct reasons. First, others before me have examined and discussed this issue more authoritatively than I can possibly do. Second, I contend that the association of ethics with aesthetics that turned Italian neorealism into a template for world cinema can only be found in a few neorealist films. This approach, which focused on neorealism as a style that was valuable

30 Ibid., pp. 27-28.

31 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*; Deleuze, *Cinema 2*; Deleuze, 'Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel'; Daney, 'The Tracking Shot in *Kapò*'.

32 Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*.

in both aesthetic and ethical terms, endured for several decades and is still influential in film criticism, as a polemical article recently argued.<sup>33</sup> However, I am far more interested in inquiring into the cultural explosion that affected Italy and Europe in the post-war era and that reshuffled cultural and film production, because I am convinced that scrutinising it can clarify the dynamics underlying masterworks and formulaic films, bombastic political claims and down-to-earth professional statements and practices.

Since I was less interested in defining an alleged neorealist essence and much more in neorealism as a field, a set of relationships, and a structural shift, I decided that, instead of looking at its centre, I would go the other way. Accordingly, *I walked along the margins of neorealism*. This stance obviously has its origins in previous, sound research undertaken on neorealist cinema, which allowed me to circumnavigate it. Now, dozens of books have thoroughly treated the phenomenon, its undisputable champions—such as De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti—and shed light on its outstanding achievements.<sup>34</sup> However, I realised that scholars have repeatedly pointed out potential intersections of neorealism with convergent subjects. For instance, since the 1970s, scholars have cited the need for further research on the connection between neorealist cinema and film genres, or for a more thorough exploration of documentary filmmaking before, during, and after neorealism. Recent endeavours have surveyed the international distribution and reception of neorealist films while demanding further inquiry into the emergence of international film culture, film festivals' networks and arthouse cinema. And historical investigation has highlighted the European culture of reconstruction, against whose background neorealism materialised. Accordingly, I attempt to explore neorealist culture through its junctions, where its identity is questionable, out of the conviction that boundaries differentiate things but also contribute to defining them. There is a major risk inherent in this approach, as I will be addressing a readership that is already widely familiar with neorealist cinema and, because of this, is either Italian or chiefly interested in twentieth-century Italian culture. I do not intend to disregard this thorny issue; in fact, I wrote this book always bearing in mind that I could not identify my perspective with that of my readership. Indeed, in order to move away from the highly selective neorealist canon while not losing my readers, I asked some basic questions about my subject and framed it with related methods of inquiry. My hope

33 O'Leary and O'Rawe, 'Against Realism: On a "Certain Tendency" in Italian Film Criticism'.

34 Among most recent and conclusive works following this approach, see Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*.

is that through this crucial move my research resonates with concerns that involve a broader community of readers while offering a deeply interior view of this period and phenomenon.

The questions I tried to ask and tentatively answer revolve around different margins. By way of oversimplification, these boundaries are related to neorealist culture's definition, circulation, practice, and territory.

The first question is: What was neorealism in its time? What were its allegiances in terms of style? What was its genealogy and why did contemporaries bring to the fore some likely answers while discarding others? And what was the rationale behind the appraisal that film criticism or institutional committees bestowed on certain films while deprecating others? The borders defining neorealism help us understand its construction as a cultural object but also aid us in tracing its sources and outreach.

The second question is: Where was neorealism? Did it intermingle with formulaic films, hybridise with film genres, and feed on well-established narrative and representational patterns? Did neorealism exist solely in highbrow arthouse films or can it also be found in popular productions that grossed at the box-office, countering the narrative that limits neorealist cinema to low-budget, cutting-edge artworks? And how was neorealist cinema announced and promoted? Moreover, did neorealist culture appear only in established forms of expression that were textually coherent and critically discussed (films, novels, art photography) or did it migrate into anonymous popular products (weepies, popular press, photo-romances), whose influence in terms of audience often far surpassed that of neorealist masterpieces? This book does not thoroughly research cognate fields and media beyond cinema, such as literature, theatre, painting, radio, photography, and the popular press, though each of these contributed in multiple ways to the burgeoning neorealist culture. Nonetheless, throughout the book I repeatedly refer to many of them as a counterpart to film culture and production. The margins defining the territory of neorealism contribute to a deeper understanding of its influence over a whole period and culture.

The third question is: How were neorealist cinema and culture practiced? Was neorealist cinema an occasional and experimental endeavour, or did contemporary media practices consistently engage in a discourse that dealt with reality in various ways? And how did contemporary audiences consume and experience neorealist culture? Were neorealist films distributed solely in the restricted network of film clubs and film festivals—of whose existence still needs to be reconstructed in detail—while the market marginalised all but a few works? Or did neorealist films and culture enjoy considerable audience demand and exist through forms of consumption that matched

popular needs, such as film stars? The margins defining neorealist cultural practices provide us with a more grounded look at the actual existence of this phenomenon.

And finally, was neorealist cinema and culture a typical national product? Did contemporary Italy realise it and promote it as such? Was Italy the only territory where neorealist culture burgeoned, or did a new way of conceiving the relationship between cinematic representation and reality also exist elsewhere? Why and how did Italian neorealist cinema act as a spearhead for the return of Italian film production to the international market, after an eclipse that dated from the late 1910s? The margins defining the territory of neorealist culture allow us to comprehend how it fit into the contemporary cultural and political debate, how it matched a film market that was rapidly evolving, and how it adapted itself to the needs of newly established supranational agencies.

These questions coalesce around issues that run throughout the volume. To summarise, these are the genealogies and their cultural and political function; the networks and the way they empowered neorealist culture; the mediascape moulding, hosting, and circulating neorealist culture; and the silences, that is, the reticence regarding neorealist culture's potential association with a totalitarian past, with mass culture, with international counterparts, and with political agencies. While I do not present readers with an exclusive approach to neorealist culture in terms of an archaeology of knowledge, network theory, media history, trauma theory, or social practices of distinction, these kinds of concerns ground my discussion of neorealist culture and form the background of my research.

I chose to tackle neorealist culture with a two-pronged approach, as will hopefully emerge from the rest of the volume. On the one hand, I tried to focus as much as I could on historical sources. On the other, I decided to interrogate them through the lens of different methods and implied questions. Despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the impressive literature on neorealist culture, contemporary accounts frequently approach it by referring to a limited set of primary sources while privileging theoretical frameworks. This has not been my intention. Beyond obvious reasons of soundness in conducting historical research, the motivation leading me to refer chiefly to historical sources lies in the significant amount of material that has been under-researched. As a matter of fact, the more I plunged into the research, the more evidence I found of neorealist culture's richness, which emerged clearly from its products or by-products—political discussion, film criticism, ads, and so forth. Furthermore, as has occurred in other countries, in the past forty years Italian film archives have embarked on

a comprehensive policy of collecting, preserving, and restoring films and related materials, which have provided contemporary researchers with an enormous amount of historical data, helping them to define and scrutinise past film culture. Italian film archives are productively cooperating with academic film studies, implementing shared initiatives, and sharing sources and approaches with the aim of advancing our knowledge of film culture. This cooperation is sometimes path-breaking and consistent; at other times it hinges on an oscillating institutional governance. However, I firmly believe that unless a regular and mutually beneficial allegiance between archival and research policies is established and developed, as in other fields of knowledge, little progress will be possible. In order to properly contribute to this shared endeavour, I believe good questions need to be asked. While I am not sure I have succeeded in this task, I have attempted to address them by selecting some approaches to interrogating historical sources. The chapters articulate these operational frameworks, as they question historical subjects.

In Chapter 1, I discuss neorealism as a national cinema. Neorealist culture came about during a major shift in Italian and European history, to say the least: the aftermath of World War Two, the transition to democracy and a republic, and the establishment of the transatlantic order on the one hand and the Warsaw Pact on the other. The new cultural trend heralding an unprecedented engagement with reality, which merged aesthetic innovation, political commitment, and new modes of production, often became associated with the nation's task. The chapter attempts to highlight the close connection between realism—as a vast notion overlapping aesthetic and social concerns—and national identity. By depicting its recent past and its contemporary existence and by reflecting on Italy, neorealist films celebrated the Resistance as a national epos, delved into unexplored national areas and social groups, and presented the nation with its new image, which differentiated this culture from what preceded it. Furthermore, neorealist culture aimed to portray, address, and involve popular audiences, a direct result of Italy's newly established democracy, the public sphere, and political concerns. Accordingly, it defined a national image. This portrait was not without its grey areas, notably in what regards gender, ethnic, and racial representation, which I have tried to explore. Finally, the different circumstances under which the film industry operated prompted a lively political debate in post-war Italy on what a national film industry is and could be. I believe this discussion and the laws that resulted from it are worth scrutinising. Among the issues this debate raised is the role that Italian cinema played abroad, heralding the arrival of a new nation into

an international arena that increasingly appreciated accurate depictions of foreign societies and remote realities. I have attempted to sketch neorealist cinema against the background of the international scenario, where many nations were emerging from the rubble of war. This scenario also had its catchwords, visual and narrative motifs, and personalities, contributing to a transnational humanist film culture, which also implied the circulation of personalities across the continent as well as across the Atlantic.

In Chapter 2, I focus again on neorealist culture in national terms, this time with regard to collective memory. More specifically, neorealist culture struggled to distinguish between what came after the end of the conflict and what existed under Fascist rule. In addition, it revolved around the celebration of the Resistance as a national struggle liberating Italy from totalitarianism and, in consequence, purifying it. However, this culture seemed oblivious to Italy's inter-war past and the huge support for Fascism itself: all in all, neorealist culture simply omits all direct representation of this period, but for a few telling examples. Moving from this assumption, based on empirical evidence, I have tried to further investigate the way in which neorealist culture construed the nation's memory. To do this, I examined documentary films, for two distinct reasons. First, studies on neorealism frequently ignore contemporary documentary filmmaking, except for the early 1950s, when documentary production became a refuge for the second generation of neorealist filmmakers who were eager for the chance to get started. I believe that leaving this area unexplored is preposterous, given the fact that neorealist cinema claimed to document post-war Italy. Second, documentary films mostly originated either directly or indirectly from institutional policies, which contributed to shaping the nation's collective memory. Therefore, post-war documentaries could be a suitable litmus test for understanding the state of Italy's post-war memory. I focussed on two case studies: Michelangelo Antonioni's early documentaries and post-war documentaries accounting for the transition from Fascism to democracy. Film historians have regularly associated Antonioni's early work with neorealism; accordingly, I intend to scrutinise this association and shed light on similarities and differences. Conversely, film history has for a long-time neglected documentary works representing the Italian Resistance and the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, despite their many parallels with neorealist cinema. My aim, consequently, is to figure out the reasons for this protracted negligence. I tapped into these two cases using two distinct approaches: the notion of cultural memory in the former example and that of trauma in the latter. My conclusion is that neorealist culture avoided direct references to the inter-war period and culture and

tried to come to terms with the sense of endangerment stemming from the abrupt shift occurring between 1943 and 1945. Nonetheless, inter-war culture and the lively debate on realism, documentary filmmaking, and experimental cinema contributed to the establishment of post-war realism and influenced its personalities, Antonioni being a very telling case in point. Moreover, the traumatic experience of warfare as depicted in post-war documentaries and their focus on the photographic rendition of its most brutal aspects testify to the eagerness to depict Italy in terms of victimhood. Finally, the widespread use of photographic images indicates the emergence of a new form of representation that enhanced the role of photography as an ambiguous means, rendering trauma as something unspeakable while avoiding the assigning of responsibilities for past crimes in the narrative. In my view, the combination of photographic description, the act of witnessing, and humanism as a major neorealist achievement was a way of creating a memory oblivious of past happenings, which did away with any national accountability for them.

In Chapter 3, I examine neorealism in terms of visual culture, and notably in terms of the mass production and popular culture of the post-war era. I discuss it first by enumerating some of the most recurrent visual motifs marking its films and photography. However, I also examine the circulation of these motifs in international photographic reportages before and after World War Two and their presence in other national cinemas. This chapter resonates powerfully with Chapter 1, as the images describing post-war Italy helped to provide the nation with its visual identity and originated both within the country and outside of it. I then discuss the existence of neorealist culture beyond its most celebrated episodes and forms of expression, that is, in advertising and in the popular press. Accordingly, my intention is to define neorealist visual culture by exploring three different case studies, i.e. neorealist film posters, the novelisation of neorealist films, and late photo-documentaries. Neorealist posters highlight the coexistence of a legacy of realist painting and popular realist illustration, which propagated the image of neorealism while doing away with documentary photography. Whereas neorealist masterworks were undoubtedly aesthetic achievements, neorealist visual culture was significantly more complex and articulated. It also implied the coalescence of neorealist visual motifs with new popular print formats and narrative modes, such as the photo-romance (*fotoromanzo*), which emerged almost at the same time as neorealism. Photo-romances that were adaptations of neorealist films were not a rare case, proving that the phenomenon's existence was multifaceted. They often represented the convergence of highbrow cultural endeavours with

mass culture, which relied on simplified narratives but whose outreach was often broader than neorealist masterpieces. Finally, I discuss a peculiar episode of late neorealism, that is, the photo-documentaries published in the film journal *Cinema Nuovo*. This creation displayed all the visual and political features that film critics attributed to neorealist cinema (witnessing, description, social engagement, political denunciation), involved an entire new generation of photographers, and testifies to the willingness to pair neorealist aesthetics with new media formats such as photographic reports and photo-romances. In addition, photo-documentaries spotlight the hypostasis of neorealist cinema during the 1950s as a result of the increasingly bitter political confrontation stemming from the Cold War in Italy.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the different notions of the film performer associated with neorealist cinema and culture. Neorealism is usually praised for its wide use of non-professional performers, which became the hallmark of some of its most celebrated films. However, a closer inspection of the corpus discloses a much more varied use of performers, ranging from experienced stage actors to popular comedians. Moreover, neorealist films also paved the way for the advent of a brand-new generation of female stars. By reconstructing the debate around the use of non-professional performers, the willingness to update national film culture by reinforcing the role of film directors in the filmmaking process, the widespread concerns of preserving a performing tradition, the new casting practices, and the new media industry initiating a culture of celebrity, I shed light on neorealist culture as a laboratory for renovating Italian cinema, preserving its assets and vernacularising foreign models of film performance. By way of conclusion, I focus particularly on Anna Magnani, who epitomised neorealist film performance from her appearance in *Rome, Open City* onwards. A close inspection of the actress' work from her celebrated appearance as Pina in Rossellini's masterpiece up to the Academy Award she received in 1956 illustrates the co-existence of different legacies, which included music hall, drama, and cinematic performance. Whereas her varied style produced consistent ruptures in terms of rhythm, inducing a sense of authenticity, her demeanour emerged by way of contrast with both preceding and subsequent national film stars and was associated with neorealist cinema overall. The media intensified this association by bringing to the fore the dedicated authenticity of her persona and the fact that she came from the lower class.

There are many things this book might have been and—for want of space, time, energy, and firm intention—is not. It is certainly neither a theoretical discussion of neorealism as a major shift in the history of film style and its many legacies in national and international film culture,

nor a scrutiny of whether it belongs to cinematic realism, as discussed by many critics and scholars from the 1940s on.<sup>35</sup> I obviously consistently refer to the cultural function that this shift played in heralding and branding neorealist culture, but my aim is not to elaborate on a widely discussed set of aesthetic traits or to offer a brand new interpretation of this style. As I previously explained, I am much more convinced that to fully grasp neorealism's significance, we need to move away from prescriptive stylistic notions and look at it as a phase of cultural history. This book does not even attempt to examine neorealist culture as a practice, even though I am convinced that the lively, chaotic years of the war's aftermath perpetuated some practices of a hegemonic mode of production such as indoor shooting or film finance while transforming others such as scriptwriting or location shooting. Nevertheless, the film industry thrived, given the fact that in the post-war years in Italy, film exhibition boomed and an almost entirely new film clubs' movement closely associated with neorealist works flourished. Accordingly, my work does not discuss neorealist cinema within national or transnational media history. This was a concern I permanently bore in mind, and specific issues discussed throughout the four chapters refer to media developments in order to account for the meaning achieved by neorealist culture. But this is not the book's subject. Finally, the chapters that follow do not tackle neorealist cinema and culture as popular culture, nor do they solely focus on the relationship of its products with film genres, film and media stardom, and popular theatre as well as with the explosion of mass culture expressed in popular magazines, photo-romances, radio broadcasting, or the soon-to-be-dominant TV. However, neorealist cinema and its related culture are consistently explored along these lines, since my aim is to describe their concrete existence in a multiplicity of products and forms. And if I should ascribe in hindsight a flaw to this book, it is its own rationale: it never walks down one particular path or charts a singular territory, because I always felt this would have missed the landscape I was struggling to depict.

I hope this summary description of the chapters provides a clear overview of my goals. Neorealist culture implied many novelties. Some were artistically outstanding, politically far ahead of the rest of the national debate, and often originated in unprecedented convergent media practices; others were less so. However, the major novelty was the general reorganisation of national and international cultural structures, engendered by the cultural explosion and managed by the ensuing transition culture. If we intend to move forward

35 See, for instance, Haaland, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*.

in this phase of knowledge and understand why we continue to need its images, I believe we should disregard simplistic accounts and plunge into its fascinating variety. My major concern was describing this multiplicity while not losing the specificity of neorealist culture, the peaks of its cinematic manifestation, and the rigour that some methodological approaches enabled me to achieve. While I strove to highlight some consistency in explaining the major shifts transforming national and international culture, I also aimed to depict its force and diversity created in the cultural explosion of warfare and boosted by the lack of inherited reference points.

In 1944, Stefano Vanzina, then renowned as Steno, a humourist, screenplay writer, and comic film director, compiled a diary chronicling the Allied occupation of Rome, the echoes of civil war ravaging Central and Northern Italy, and the new climate of uncertainty experienced by artists. Steno attended meetings with prominent directors and intellectuals, talked to actors and stars, wrote film and cultural criticism for different magazines and journals proliferating under the new circumstances, struggled to secure funding for a theatre production, visited the Psychological Warfare Branch offices to obtain permission for some publication, and ran into people as he wandered throughout Rome. At some point, he came across Zavattini.

I meet Zavattini in the rain. He has his usual child-like, astonished gaze. I ask him whether he signed up for some party: he replies he doesn't yet feel mature enough to know the direction to move forward. Uncertainty: this is the reality inspiring his idea for a new publication. By following this incertitude creating a 'tabula rasa' (his words), maybe some direction can be found.<sup>36</sup>

Soon after, Steno comments about Zavattini's involvement in highly engaged meetings and groups, as if constantly jumping from Kierkegaard to some popular magazine, from political commitment to show business. Steno bestows a mocking look upon occupied Rome's cultural scene, its flaws and its virtues, its down-to-earth everyday needs, and its hopes and ambitions for a new start. All in all, incertitude might well describe this incredibly rich phase, and meetings and groups struggling to oversee its evolution might well represent the attempt of social elites to direct this transition—the explosion and transition of culture. While I am certain this is what makes neorealist culture so rich and vibrant and why it still

36 Steno, *Sotto le stelle del '44*, p. 133

fascinates me after my long and sometimes exhausting research, I am unsure if this volume aptly illustrates it. However, since the neorealist era was replete with hope, I leave the reader with my confidence in having foregrounded its variety.

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# 1. Locating the Real

## National, International, and Transnational Neorealism

### Abstract

The chapter considers neorealism as a cultural construct responding to historical needs. Neorealism aimed to mark a discontinuity with Fascism, rebuild the nation, and examine afresh its people, landscape, and neglected areas. For this reason, neorealism was a politically contested culture, producing both innovative works and formulaic but popular ones. In addition, the chapter scrutinises the role that neorealist film production played in post-war cultural diplomacy, which was based on mutual recognition among nations. Therefore, the chapter examines the international cultural exchange of Italian neorealism with countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Finally, the work focuses on the emergence of a transnational style in Europe and in the US, with neorealism holding a major role in it, together with film noir.

**Keywords:** Realism; national Identity; national-popular; landscape; international circulation; transnational cinema

### An Address to the Audience

A man wearing a hat stares at the camera in close-up, with an absorbed expression on his face. Behind him, out of focus, female figures are moving. He starts speaking to the camera, describing rice plantations in north-western Italy, which have existed throughout the centuries as in China or India, and where millions of women's hands saw to them. Then the man looks to his left, thoughtful, considering this hard work that has never changed through the centuries, in the water, the sun shining all day long. Finally, while his gaze wanders from his right to his left, the man declares that only women can handle this task because of their small, delicate hands, the same hands that sew and nurture babies. As he utters these last words,

the camera tracks backwards, includes more women behind the man, now in full focus, while he reveals his identity and accordingly reframes his previous speech: he is a Radio Torino (Radio Turin) speaker, a station broadcasting an extraordinary radio programme. As the man declares his role ('Here is Radio Torino speaking...'), women's voices out of frame burst into song, singing a popular rice-pickers' ballad. The camera pans to the left, and we enter the film's narrative.

This scene occurs right at the beginning of *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1948), one of neorealism's most peculiar achievements. In fact, the film conflates contradictory features: the depiction of the working conditions of the lower class and a sensational plot that merges crime, sexual attraction, and open challenges; real locations set amidst the Po Valley, and a staging that mimicked Hollywood and Soviet musicals; harsh criticism against mass culture and its harmful effects on the lower class, and a vivid fascination with popular dances, beauty pageants, and bigger-than-life characters. What is most striking about the opening scene, however, is its uncertainty: is the speaker talking to film viewers, or is he addressing a fictitious radio audience? Are the circumstances the reporter is describing permanent and widespread, as expressed in references to remote countries and enduring practices, or are they typical of a particular time and place, as disclosed by the sudden acknowledgment of a specific condition ('Here is Radio Torino...')? And are we watching a documentary film about the working conditions in the rural areas of Piedmont and Lombardia, as the tone and content of the voice—so much resembling contemporary newsreels—lead us to believe, or is it just the staging of an imaginary radio programme? Finally, are we watching a movie or listening to a radio broadcast?

*Bitter Rice* counts among Italian neorealism's major successes on the domestic market. Initially presented in May 1949 at the Cannes film festival, where film critics compared its rising star Silvana Mangano to Marlene Dietrich and Rita Hayworth, De Santis' work became the fifth top-grossing film in the year 1949-1950.<sup>1</sup> *Bitter Rice* pointed openly to acute social problems,

1 See a brief reference to the film's reception at Cannes in 'Cronologia neorealista. Uscite, premi, sale, città, metropoli', p. 176. The box-office revenues of *Bitter Rice* are discussed together with other neorealist films in Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico*, pp. 17-45. Christopher Wagstaff attempts to describe a 'notional measure of the film's success with the public' based on the percentage of total Italian receipts earned; however, the author cautions that this is nothing more than an indication. According to his survey, *Bitter Rice* was the most successful neorealist film in 1949, and the fifth national top-grossing film that year. Wagstaff also monitors the length of opening runs of neorealist films; according to this survey, together with *Rome, Open City* and *Vivere in pace* (*To Live in Peace*, Luigi Zampa, 1946), *Bitter Rice* was one of the most enduring and

such as rural workers' exploitation, the illegal recruitment of labourers, scabs, and the need for class consciousness and labour unions, even if its production took place on the premises of a farm belonging to the Agnelli family, the archetypical industrial capitalists in twentieth-century Italy.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the film intended to take a stand on post-war Italian society: De Santis was a strong supporter of the Italian Communist Party, and his film addressed the nation as the speaker does in the opening sequence, portraying the fate of a multitude of seasonal workers coming to the Po plains from villages all over Northern Italy as a new, disembodied voice speaks over the closing scene. Therefore, *Bitter Rice* simultaneously narrates the story of a community (the workers) and speaks to a community (the audience) that has been summoned to watch, enjoy, and reflect on the fate of its peers, in contemporary existing conditions. The film sparked a heated debate, notably among the Italian Left, revolving around what could be considered realism and consequently how cinema could represent Italian society and actively contribute to its development.<sup>3</sup> While intellectuals argued over the true essence of realism and the role that art could play in social change, the popular Leftist magazine *Noi Donne* adapted the film into a photo-romance,<sup>4</sup> an initiative later replicated by the popular magazine *Cineromanzo*.<sup>5</sup> Cultural and political elites discussed the most suitable way to accurately depict the lower classes at the same time as the cultural industry was replicating and circulating the film's plot and characters in a wide array of popular media.

*Bitter Rice* superbly illustrates the contradiction between a thorough reflection on popular culture, as the film intended, and the desire to attract

successful neorealist films in the year of its release. See Wagstaff, 'Appendix 6' and 'Appendix 15', in *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, pp. 421 and 435-439.

2 Toffetti, 'Amarcord... Conversazione con Giovanni Agnelli'.

3 See Anonymous, "'Riso amaro" a Cannes'; Trombadori, "'Riso amaro" di De Santis e il problema della realtà nell'arte'. Later, prominent intellectuals such as Carlo Muscetta and Umberto Barbaro joined the discussion in the Communist magazine *Vie Nuove*, until the Italian Communist Party's secretary, Palmiro Togliatti, intervened to appease the discussants and shelter an artist flanking the Party.

4 *Noi Donne* was the magazine of the Unione Donne Italiane (Italian Women's Union), an association flanking the Italian Communist Party. The film was first announced on the front cover before its production was completed, and then it was turned into a photo-romance and published between August and November 1949. See Cardone, *'Noi donne' e il cinema. Dalle illusioni a Zavattini (1944-1954)*.

5 *Cineromanzo*, 2 (November 1954). The film's DVD release also includes a graphic adaptation of the film, which is referenced as published in 1948, before the film's release, in a special issue of an unspecified publication named *Il Lavoro*, devoted to rice pickers. Unfortunately, I could not retrieve further bibliographical data. See *Riso amaro* (Dolmen Home Video, 2007).

popular audiences. In fact, the film focuses on the lower class, describes its ambitions, criticises its cultural consumptions, and praises class solidarity among the rural population. At the same time, through its highly polarised narrative and the incorporation of features from Hollywood genres, the film is designed to be a cutting-edge product that would gross big at the box office. Furthermore, the film presents situations mostly belonging to pre-modern, rural society; its characters fall prey to the lure of modernity and mass culture, like Silvana (Silvana Mangano), the protagonist, who is driven to perdition by the delusions of boogie-woogie, photo-romances, and the phoney tales whipped up by a certain Walter (Vittorio Gassman). As the director declared two years after the film's release:

*Bitter Rice's* main theme is denouncing the corruption that certain American ideology spread throughout Western Europe, even if this happened through allegedly innocuous means. This ideology succeeded in poisoning even the healthiest strata of society, notably the youth: it introduced itself to this latter with the lovable face of *boogie-woogie, chewing gum, easy money*.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast between an allegedly pure, rural, national community and the temptations of urban, modern, cosmopolitan life relies on visual and narrative patterns inherited from popular film genres, and notably Hollywood ones such as gangster movies, musicals, and weepies. Therefore, what the narrative criticises and the director explicitly names—i.e. imported mass culture—was also ironically the chief means used for building this argument against mass culture. Finally, as Paola Valentini has recently claimed, De Santis' work in neorealism strives to move beyond classical divides between entertainment and realism, illusion and reality, by systematically addressing a popular audience in his films: an effective and plausible representation was its end rather than a rigorous, unquestionably truthful portrayal.<sup>7</sup> To fully achieve such a goal, De Santis' films constantly reflect and incorporate popular entertainment forms (dance, music, circus) and media (radio). Neorealism, as one of its champions proves, is entangled in a web of apparently contradictory issues: the meaning of realism, the way to represent and possibly transform reality, and, consequently, the way realistic representation interacts with its main subject, that is national reality. In addition, how can it adequately describe reality to a foreign eye

6 De Santis, 'Confessioni di un regista', pp. 227-246 (238).

7 Valentini, *La scena rubata*, pp. 99-111.

when acting on an international scale or partake in broader ideological, social, and cultural turns happening at a transnational level? Consequently, this chapter will deal with neorealism as a mode of interpreting the real and acting on a national, international, and transnational scale.

## The Real Thing

'Realism' is a highly uncertain notion that easily lends itself to many different aims and discourses and can pigeonhole radically dissimilar objects. As the Italian literary scholar Federico Bertoni recently argued, 'realism points to the case—"unfortunate", indeed!—of a common word that seems to be doomed to an idiolectal singularity, continuously codified, re-inscribed every time into a semantic constellation almost private, always needing—beyond usual bracketing—periphrases, glosses, attributions, explanations.'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the notion is heavily charged with functions that exceed its artistic realm: inasmuch as realist artworks produce discourses engaging with reality, they are statements about it, about the possibilities to modify it, and about the circumstances enabling those statements. In consequence, realism aspires to play a significant role both in art and society, but this intention is also the reason for the disputes recurrently surrounding realist artworks.

The philosopher Nelson Goodman contended that realism is a relative notion, 'determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time'.<sup>9</sup> I am less interested here in embracing Goodman's theory as a framework and much keener on concurring with his constructivist and relativist approach: realism, as much as reality, is the product of human symbolic action. Therefore, realism is not an essence but a reproduction of what individuals and communities, located in time and space, temporarily believe to be real and meaningful.<sup>10</sup> The same applies to Italian neorealism.

The Russian literary theorist and linguist Roman Jakobson speculated on realism in one of his earlier contributions.<sup>11</sup> First, he classified three different meanings of the concept, related to the levels of production,

8 Bertoni, *Realismo e letteratura. Una storia proibita*, pp. 22-23.

9 Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 37.

10 Recently, Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris promoted an anti-constructivist return to ontology. See: Ferraris, *Documentality. Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces*; Ferraris, *Introduction to New Realism*.

11 Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art'.

reception, and tradition, which respectively refer to a poetic intention to render reality, an understanding of the artwork as depicting reality, and nineteenth-century realism. This latter incorporates into the discussion the question of conventions, i.e. shared sets of textual features considered of paramount importance to accomplish a realist artwork. According to the subjective attitude of the producer or addressee of the artwork, either conservative or revolutionary, the compliance with established artistic conventions or the rebellion against them will be classified as realist. On the one hand, conformity to a set of inherited rules for rendering reality will inevitably produce a realist artwork; on the other hand, discarding accepted modes of representation, perceived as obsolete and therefore artificial, will also bring a realistic surplus value into the artwork, since this latter will be perceived as more genuine and therefore 'real'. While heralding a revolutionary shift in society and culture, Italian post-war neorealist culture frequently persevered practices and maintained narrative and visual patterns recalling the pre-war era. And according to the observer, both modes were realist.

Lucid commentators have observed that, among major historical shifts in realism, modernity holds a special place. Whereas classical realism relied on narrative schemes to convey reality and provide it with moral meaning, cultural modernism 'appears to many interpreters to have entailed the repudiation of both the form of the narrative and any interest in the representation of historical reality',<sup>12</sup> due to major changes happening in society. According to the American historian Hayden White, the notions 'of both history and realism have changed. Modernism is still concerned to represent reality "realistically", and it still identifies reality with history. But the history which modernism confronts is not the history envisaged by nineteenth-century realism.'<sup>13</sup> This stance is in line with the divide that the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze located in the transition from what he termed the 'movement-image' to a 'time-image', i.e. from an indirect representation of time through movement, including narratives, to its direct rendering. Even though Deleuze explicitly declined to produce a history of cinema, nonetheless he historically located the moment when 'time-images' took over 'movement-images': 'It is possible that, since the war, a direct time-image has been formed and imposed on cinema. We do not wish to say that there will no longer be any movement, but that—just as happened a very long time ago in philosophy—a reversal has happened in

12 White, 'Literary Theory and Historical Writing', p. 22.

13 White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', p. 51.

the movement-time relationship.<sup>14</sup> Nelson Goodman assumes that changes in standard representations of reality can occur abruptly; my claim is that warfare and the consequent major political and social shifts brought about a momentary dissolution of hegemonic cultural models and traditional social and political allegiances in Italy. The Neapolitan journalist and storyteller Domenico Rea, when considering in hindsight his first published book, *Spaccanapoli* (1947), recollected: ‘Then something happened, the war. Italy exploded, and I felt the need to use a linguistic system more fitting to reality.’<sup>15</sup> To refer back to Jakobson, warfare compelled Italian culture to move away from inherited conventions. As the Italian literary historian Bruno Falchetto properly illustrated, warfare and the ensuing Resistance acted upon the ‘collective mentality [...] as an enormous apparatus inducing an effect of estrangement.’<sup>16</sup> This estrangement meant a revision—or rejection—of previous modes of expression, including basic coordinates such as space and time,<sup>17</sup> and the ensuing discovery of social layers and locations thus far neglected. *Discovery* is precisely the word that the intellectual Franco Fortini used when recalling his experience working at *Il Politecnico*, the journal that Elio Vittorini founded in 1945: ‘It was for us the proof of the discovery we made during the war: the incredible possibilities of *our provinces*, the latent energies of the *silent classes*.’<sup>18</sup>

To sum up, estrangement caused by the war prompted Italian culture to reconsider its forms and led to a proliferation of modes of expression, including an unprecedented relevance of reality. However, this notion of reality was multifarious rather than unambiguous and distinct. I claim that within Italian post-war culture, different models of realist art coexisted, struggled to emerge and prevail, or were rejected: some of them were part of a legacy dating back to nineteenth-century realist literature; others were quite novel and paved the way for pivotal developments in film art; and finally, still others combined previously existing characters, narrative patterns, and places in unprecedented ways, leading to original results. To

14 Deleuze, ‘Preface to the English Edition’, in *Cinema 1*, p. ix. For a thorough survey of cinematic realism and the relationship between modernity and neorealism, see Quintana, *Fábulas de lo visible*. For a general survey of realism and cinema, see Williams (ed.), *Realism and the Cinema. A Reader*.

15 Rea, ‘Nota’, in *Spaccanapoli*, p. 40.

16 Falchetto, *Storia della narrativa neorealista*, p. 78. It goes without saying that the notion of ‘estrangement’ belongs to the scholarship of Russian formalism, which Jakobson helped to create.

17 This is the main argument of Torriglia in *Broken Time, Fragmented Space*.

18 Fortini, ‘Che cosa è stato “Il Politecnico”’, p. 66, my italics.

return to the role that realism played within Italian post-war culture, rather than championing one model or artist over the others, I would agree with Vittorini, who maintained: 'As you go along saying the word [neorealism] you need to fill it with a special meaning. Basically, you have as many neorealists as writers.'<sup>19</sup>

In my view, neo-realism as a category should not be an exclusive one, i.e. a fixed set of traits to be found every time in the same quantity and function. Even though some undisputable masterpieces display a set of features that previous scholars have commented on at length (outdoor shooting, non-professional performers, contemporary subjects and social and collective issues, immediate rendering of reality, etc.), a restricted notion of neorealism, relying on a bundle of world-acknowledged classics, has little to do with historical reality and is theoretically highly questionable, as the Italian film historian Alberto Farassino contended.<sup>20</sup> Often, those features are dispersed and aggregate in unexpected ways with other components that can hardly be identified as realism. For instance, a post-war film celebrating the Italian Resistance in Naples, *O' sole mio* (*O Sole Mio*, Giacomo Gentilomo, 1946), combines a spy movie plot, outdoor shooting, newsreels spliced in the fiction together with explicit references to historical facts, and songs performed within a radio show according to the model of film revues produced in the 1930s. However, in 1946 Italian film critics associated it with *Rome, Open City* and advocated it over Hollywood's cheap movies.<sup>21</sup> *O Sole Mio* and many other examples prove that a restricted notion of neorealism could prevent us from a full understanding of what constituted Italian neorealist culture. Moreover, even renowned masterpieces establish different relationships with the reality they intend to convey. The media theoretician Francesco Casetti outlined four different areas involved in the negotiation that the (neo)realist style sets up when determining its identity: the signifier, i.e. its connection with reality; the representation, i.e. a narrative providing a verisimilar reality; the enunciation, creating reliability through modes of address (e.g. voice-over, documentary sequences); and the audience, notably its image when viewing and believing in a cinematic representation.<sup>22</sup> Neorealist films presented these four areas to different degrees, each film negotiating its role in

19 Elio Vittorini quoted in Bo (ed.), *Inchiesta sul neorealismo*, p. 27.

20 See the groundbreaking introduction written by Farassino, 'Neorealismo, storia e geografia'. See also Farassino, 'Margini, attraversamenti, contaminazioni', pp. 156-175.

21 See Parigi, 'Le ombre di *O' sole mio*'.

22 Casetti, 'Der Stil als Schauplatz der Verhandlung'. See also Casetti and Malavasi, 'La retorica del neorealismo'.

mediating reality for the viewers. What I found particularly useful in Casetti's assumption—which echoes Goodman's constructivist approach and, in a different way, Stuart Hall's line of thought about negotiation in cultural exchange<sup>23</sup>—is the idea that the relationship in which (neo) realist artworks engage with reality does not inherently, exclusively, and univocally determine their identity: (neo)realist artworks are confirmed as such according to the reading they are subjected to and the ideology guiding it. Elsewhere, Casetti and Malavasi discuss neorealist films against the grain of the society they represent and to which they're addressed.<sup>24</sup> However, what was the post-war ideological framework but the yearning and vague willingness to move away from the totalitarianism of the past and accordingly foster freedom of expression?

The estrangement effect induced by warfare deprived Italian artists of fixed points of reference and led to a stylistic outburst that strove to deal with and make sense of an unknown, unprecedented reality. I agree with the French film scholar Pierre Sorlin who posits that neorealism was a 'vacant signifier', a term primarily used by foreign film critics when viewing post-war Italian films, and later and more reluctantly adopted by Italians.<sup>25</sup> The notion of neorealism was neither steady nor prescriptive; it had already begun circulating in the 1930s, radiating from literary works to cinema,<sup>26</sup> but was imposed posthumously on post-war films at a time when their production and relevance was decreasing.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, as English scholar David Forgacs demonstrates, neorealism indicates two separate things: a set of cultural practices and products as well as a critical concept to group those practices and products, which came about later:

Neorealism was and is, first and foremost, a descriptive category which was produced and developed in criticism. It did not derive from or reflect any underlying 'Neorealist essence' in actual films or writings. Rather, those films or writings which were originally designated 'neorealist' were, in themselves, heterogeneous and capable of being described in a number of different ways.<sup>28</sup>

23 Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding'. Casetti discusses in more general terms the notion of 'negotiation' in *Communicative Negotiation in Cinema and Television*.

24 Casetti and Malavasi, 'La retorica del neorealismo', p. 177.

25 Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996*, p. 89.

26 See the pioneering Brunetta, *Umberto Barbaro e l'idea di neorealismo (1930-1943)*.

27 A thorough survey on the lexical history of the notion in Parigi, 'Le carte d'identità del neorealismo'.

28 Forgacs, 'The Making and Unmaking of Neorealism in Post-war Italy', p. 51.

In my opinion, neorealism is not a stable aesthetics nor the conflation of a visual and narrative style with specific political stances. On the contrary, I believe that, in a certain given period—i.e. the post-war era, and namely in the years 1945-1949 and more occasionally in the following five years—numerous Italian artworks appeared that aimed to represent, reflect, and change national, and sometimes international, reality. For the sum of these reasons, I agree with scholars such as Gian Piero Brunetta, Alberto Farassino, or Bruno Falcetto<sup>29</sup> who, rather than using expressions such as movement, school, or aesthetics, prefer to talk about the ‘neorealist epoch’ or ‘field of tensions’. Such a conception does away with any intentionality or planned action in the phenomenon itself,<sup>30</sup> particularly when it comes to the relationship of cultural products with reality; conversely, it emphasises the unpredictable manner in which artworks, declarations, appraisals, or rejections followed one after the other at a given historical conjuncture. Nonetheless, within this epoch and field, some mottos, slogans, and implied constellations of meanings and practices did recur, as already discussed by many scholars.<sup>31</sup>

Words such as engagement, document, chronicle, everydayness, people, humankind, and/or man come back in statements and declarations or echo in novels, tales, and films. They all exhibit a willingness to face reality, to report authentic experiences, and to advocate general human values beyond political ideologies and allegiances, in an allegedly distanced mode, as chronicles usually do, and in a direct way, beyond art. Right after the war, novelist Cesare Pavese proclaimed:

We are not aiming at the people. Since we are already people, and everything else does not exist. If anything, we shall aim at the man. [...] The new legend, the new style is all there.<sup>32</sup>

The war’s aftermath created unprecedented circumstances for artists, who now felt (or believed) they were part of a larger community—their audience. The practicing of art was no longer distinct from ‘real’ life; instead, life

29 Brunetta, ‘Il campo neorealista: coerenza e coesione’; Farassino, ‘Neorealismo, storia e geografia’; Falcetto, *Storia della narrativa neorealista*.

30 Influential literary scholar Corti discussed neorealism as an ‘accidental trend’. See Corti, *Il viaggio testuale*.

31 See Falcetto, *Storia della narrativa neorealista*; Milanini, ‘Introduzione’. A recent contribution, revolving around the opposition between continuity/discontinuity with the Fascist past, soundly interrogates a number of tropes such as childhood, rebirth, or new culture. See Leavitt, “‘An Entirely New Land?’ Italy’s Post-war Culture and Its Fascist Past’.

32 Pavese, ‘Ritorno all’uomo’, p. 44.

comprehended it. When discussing the significance of the Resistance for Italian literature, Italo Calvino considered the unprecedented creation ‘of a common denominator between the writer and his society, the beginning of a new relationship between these two terms’.<sup>33</sup> It is not my wish to question these statements; rather, what I would like to point out is the inclination to incorporate artistic practice into overall social reality and to openly speak for and about it. For Italian artists, blending art into reality was a vital mission, as Cesare Zavattini declared in 1949:

This almost heroic effort to merge representation [*spettacolo*] and reality; our struggle and our novelty consist of this. And this can happen only in a nation [*popolo*] which achieved such a higher and ultimate meaning of reality to consider for representation in and of itself.<sup>34</sup>

Let’s just briefly consider this last statement. According to Zavattini, the novelty that the ‘neorealist field’ represented lay in the mutual contamination of reality and representation, in the unparalleled attention now given to reality representation as much as in the skill to magnify the artistic values that reality entailed. Both this attention and skill belonged to a nation resurging after the brutal, almost inhumane events of World War Two. According to the screenplay writer and novelist, the reason for this renaissance—or, more properly, *resurrection*—resides exactly in the overall collapse that the national culture and film industry underwent, together with the fall of Fascist totalitarianism. This provided Italian artists with entirely new possibilities in terms of art and ethics.<sup>35</sup>

In late 1944, when the war was still in full swing and continuing to ravage Northern Italy, artists and intellectuals were at work to plan, foster, and implement a renewed culture. Inasmuch as this latter blended representation and reality, it comprised aesthetics and ethics, as many commentators have remarked.<sup>36</sup> Even though many notions belonging to one or the other realm had already been circulating in the inter-war period, as literary historian Alberto Asor Rosa first remarked<sup>37</sup> and cultural historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat

33 Calvino, ‘La letteratura italiana sulla Resistenza’, p. 92. Later, in 1964, the writer was to further reflect on this stance. See Calvino, ‘Preface’.

34 Zavattini, ‘Sono ottimista’, p. 685.

35 In this same line of thought, see Zavattini, ‘Ciò che si sta facendo oggi’; Zavattini, ‘Il cinema’.

36 See Falchetto, *Storia della narrativa neorealista*; Milanini, ‘Introduzione’; Bertoni, *Realismo e letteratura*; Ferroni, *Storia della letteratura italiana*.

37 Asor Rosa, ‘Lo Stato democratico e i partiti politici’.

later explored,<sup>38</sup> the war's aftermath presented Italian intellectuals with an unprecedented sense of freedom, together with the feeling that culture could play a crucial role in building anew the nation's society. As an editorial of an early issue of the journal *Società* expressed, 'It is no surprise [...] if nowadays we don't read true artworks, and we don't even ask for them [...]. We are just asking to seek a new culture. [...] We accept this culture to be transitory by enhancing its positive characters, immediacy, that is, its effectiveness among humankind.'<sup>39</sup> Intellectual engagement, supposedly spontaneous cultural production conveying factual experience, and the discovery of hitherto ignored classes, places, and people induced a new culture. This new culture had aesthetic implications and required an ethical stance towards the reality it was meant to capture and portray. It goes almost without saying that these vague assumptions also implied a limited effectiveness, that is, they never turned into a uniform aesthetic practice or led to a common political orientation, except under the controversial aegis of the Communist Party. Demanding that the 'neorealist field' initiate an aesthetic and ethical struggle is to presume an intentionality that was in fact absent.<sup>40</sup> However, these ethics implied that many neorealist film productions intended to make statements about national post-war reality and address a broader national audience, encouraging it to engage in the reconstruction of Italian culture and society. Accordingly, a good deal of these productions and the debate surrounding them imagined a national community, represented it, and strove to create the circumstances for a national cinema to prosper after the civil war, the Nazi raids, and the Allied administration almost eliminated regular film production. Furthermore, by portraying a national community, offering a privileged look at it, and acting for a nation resurging after Fascism, neorealist films heralded a new Italy on the international arena. Thus, they became a means for international relations. Finally, Italian neorealism—its multifarious aesthetics and passionate and vague ethics—was part of broader transnational developments and practices. I believe we should investigate neorealist cinema not exclusively as a national product but also against broader backdrops, including issues such as post-war production practices, newly established cultural networks, and diasporic and exilic trends.

38 Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities. Italy, 1922-1945*.

39 Editorial, 'Letteratura d'occasione', p. 120.

40 This is what film historian Micciché regretted when taking stock of the debate on neorealism in the mid-1970s. '[...] Neorealism [...] wasn't an "aesthetics" and one of the reasons (one among many) for its defeat was precisely in believing it was so, or even worse, in pretending to be so. Neorealism was rather an "ethics of the aesthetics".' Micciché, 'Per una verifica del neorealismo', p. 27.

## Wasteland. Neorealism and National Identity

A wasteland, somewhere on the outskirts of Rome. Two secret police agents and a platoon made up of Italian soldiers prepare an execution: they place a chair amidst the wasteland. A tall, stern SS officer addresses the Italian counterpart responsible for the platoon: he asks him the time, and then remarks that the persons they are waiting for are late. Then he offers the Italian official a cigarette and lights up his own, which he smokes rigidly. The platoon lines up for the execution. Finally, a lorry arrives: a policeman gets out of it, opens the back door, and two priests come out. One is tied up, the other attempts to hearten him. The latter replies that it is not a difficult task to die properly; it is much harder to live well. The secret police agents tie the priest to the chair, with his back to the platoon, while the other clergyman stands beside him, praying. The SS officer smokes alone, coldly, then asks everybody to walk away from the chair. A bunch of kids come close to a fence presumably at the opposite end of the wasteland, in front of the priest, who is now between the platoon and the boys. The boys start whistling. The soldiers are distracted while the sentenced priest raises his head, listening to the sound and muttering a prayer. The platoon refuses to aim at the priest, and fires aside. The SS officer loses his temper, yells at the platoon in German, commanding them to complete the execution; then he pulls out his gun and shoots the priest in the back. Italian secret police agents confirm the priest's death and then untie him. The kids bow their heads; one puts his arm around the most desperate among his mates, and they walk away. While they all come away from the wasteland, the camera pans from left to right, disclosing in the backdrop Rome's downtown and eventually the dome of St. Peter's cathedral.

It is not hard to recognise in this short description the closing sequence of *Rome, Open City*, a film that articulates national identities throughout its whole plot. In fact, *Rome, Open City* showcases different degrees of 'Italianness', which are revealed just like Russian nesting dolls or in concentric circles, like the map the SS officer displays at the beginning of the film. The centre of Italian identity is an elite of rational individuals who experience and react against war and the totalitarian horrors: Communist leaders such as Luigi Ferraris (Marcello Pagliero) and clergymen such as Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi) fight for national freedom, counter the inhumane Nazi ideology and practices, and willingly sacrifice their lives for a better future. Their herd is the Italian population, in particular the non-rational, unknowing individuals who instinctively embody the qualities of 'Italianness' while not being full-fledged citizens, and they are embodied by women such as

Pina (Anna Magnani) and the kids. They fight and struggle for their right to live freely and in peace. Around them are more ambiguous figures, striving to make ends meet, like the guard working in Pina's block or Don Pietro's sexton: seldom proud men, they have sympathy for the resistance fighters.

More controversial are those characters who explicitly refuse to share the destiny of their national peers and choose to align themselves with the Nazi occupants: these are, obviously, Fascist militia soldiers and policemen who raid the lower-class neighbourhoods; or, more blatantly, women having some kind of connection with Nazi troops, such as Marina (Maria Michi) and Pina's sister, Lauretta (Carla Rovere). Finally, at the most distant end are the Nazis, and notably SS commander Bergmann (Harry Feist). The Nazis' behaviour is carefully planned, and their mastering of the city and the continent almost disembodied, as shown in the sequence in which Bergmann illustrates Gestapo methods to the Italian chief of police through maps and pictures.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the Nazis represent a new world order wherein abstract forms of knowledge and violent domination are hegemonic, to the detriment of humanity and bodily experience. However, as the dramatic confrontation between Bergmann and another drunken SS officer proves, this palingenetic order is imposed through brutality, suffering, and mass murders, and is inevitably doomed. To sum up, *Rome, Open City* produces a discourse about the nation that creates a common space for different beliefs, creeds (Marxism, Catholicism), and identities, while bestowing forgiveness on those who err—Marina is a Nazi victim as much as the partisans are, the Italian soldiers refuse to shoot Don Pietro, and Lauretta simply disappears. However, the non-Italians embody what the narrative itself cannot redeem: the Nazis are either drunkards or cowards—like the Austrian deserter who hangs himself—or degenerates, like Bergmann and his assistant Ingrid (Giovanna Galletti), who is portrayed as sexually perverted (a lesbian), socially dangerous (a drug pusher), and morally indifferent. More surprisingly, the same goes for the Americans. At the beginning of the film, Pina comes back home and meets the guard; he hopefully asks her whether the Allied troops really exist; Pina raises her gaze and looks to the right, saying that it appears so; the following shot shows a building heavily bombed, testifying to the Allied damages inflicted on Italy's cities and its population. The final sequence describes the martyrdom of a nation, temporarily located amidst a wasteland. Don Pietro incarnates the nation

41 A detailed analysis of this sequence and of the sense of maps in Rossellini's work can be found in Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*. A thorough discussion of alternative models of space in *Rome, Open City*, as related to nationality, is available in Forgacs, *Rome, Open City*.

and is executed at the hands of a foreigner, while the Italian citizens refuse to collaborate. The hopes lie in a new generation to come that identifies with the city and with Christianity overall.

After a rough start, *Rome, Open City* was a major success at the domestic box office, awarded with the Palme d'or at the Cannes film festival, and nominated as best foreign film at the Academy Awards. Rossellini's work received both national and international praise, laying the groundwork for the identification of neorealist cinema with post-war Italy. What was the film's significance for the fostering of a new national identity and the activation of a process of national identification? How can we articulate and discuss cultural production and national identity? What are the basic assumptions for our discussion of neorealism in relation to post-war Italian culture?

The notion of the nation has undergone deep scrutiny over the past thirty years, possibly together with the decline of nationalist ideology.<sup>42</sup> While this is not the place to discuss this debate at length, I would like to briefly pinpoint leading opinions in this discussion and explain my stance. Moreover, I shall refer to the recent debate on the nation and the media to substantiate my argument on the role that neorealist cinema played within post-war Italian culture.

Past and recent discussions about the nation tend to coalesce around two basic perspectives: ethnicism and constructivism.<sup>43</sup> The former point of view, whose principal thinker is Anthony Smith,<sup>44</sup> believes that nations are the result of convergent forces and trends rooted in a common previous ethnic and linguistic identity. The latter provides nation-building and its related nationalist ideology with an ample set of visual motifs, stories, characters, and symbols capable of prompting and strengthening the feeling of belonging to one community. Conversely, constructivism, whose chief representatives are Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson,<sup>45</sup> considers the nation as a construed notion whose emergence can be precisely located in time, i.e. in modernity. In this line of thought, the nation is both the outcome of major socio-economic shifts occurring with the Industrial Revolution

42 Hobsbawm was the first to associate the peak in academic studies with the decreasing importance of nationalism; later, Anderson reported the peak while concurring with the authoritative historian. See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*; Anderson, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in *Imagined Communities*.

43 For a detailed reconstruction of this debate, see Day and Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism*.

44 See Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. See also Smith, *National Identity*. For its application to the fine arts, see Smith, *The Nation Made Real*.

45 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

and its consequences as well as the apparatus inducing them. These major developments include the end of traditional, small communities, which horizontal communities replaced; the centralisation of institutions; and mass schooling. The nation is not a fixed essence but an ever-changing construct: it matches different needs in time and space and articulates power within a given society in a limited territory. As Stuart Hall put it, nations are not solely political entities but also systems of cultural representation, implying the cultural power to define otherness, enhance certain meanings while suppressing others, and reduce differences that exist to the benefit of one, prevailing identity.<sup>46</sup> For instance, in the case of *Rome, Open City*, the film articulates a new solidarity between monarchists, Communists, and Catholics, who all cooperate to protect the Italian population, which appears internally united and spontaneously against authoritarianism. Major political, ideological, class, or gender differences are consequently concealed for the sake of the higher good, or dislocated elsewhere, beyond the national community, namely on the Germans.

I tend to agree with the constructivists, with one *caveat*: I believe that national identities should be looked at in terms of 'national identifications', as Stuart Hall argues, in order to highlight the cultural process producing those identities.<sup>47</sup> They are not to be found exclusively in cultural products such as literary works, films, poems or in shared sets of symbols such as flags, emblems, places, and monuments. If national identities are structures of cultural power that require institutional agencies (e.g. schools, associations, academic societies) and activities whose scope, extent, and targets vary over time, we should think of national identification as an ongoing process that affects cultural products and practices but is also embedded in the action of these agencies. Furthermore, if national identification is an ever-shifting process, we should regard national identity more in terms of its eventfulness, as a temporary outcome resulting from different, sometimes contrasting forces negotiating the meaning of a national community.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the forces moulding temporary national identities should not be restricted to institutional agencies but imply those cultural and political energies acting within a certain territory at a given time. To sum up, as David Miller argues,<sup>49</sup> nations (and national identifications, we might add) are the product of common public culture, that is, what is momentarily and publicly available to

46 Hall, 'The Question of Cultural Identity'.

47 Ibid.

48 See Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*.

49 Miller, *On Nationality*.

citizens, which means expanding the notion to include those forces usually neglected as alien when speaking of national identities. In consequence, when discussing Italian post-war culture and film production, we should not underestimate the multiplicity of forces struggling to determine what should be considered national. Among those forces we ought to count also foreign products and implied models influencing the orientation of Italian audiences, artists, and policymakers; and we should definitely consider the interests and motivations of social actors deriving benefits from those products, in financial or political terms. As Pierre Sorlin declared at the onset of his work on Italian national cinema,

A national cinema is not a set of films which help to distinguish a nation from other nations, it is the chain of relations and exchanges which develop in connection with films, in a territory delineated by its economic and juridical policy.<sup>50</sup>

National boundaries determine the extent of economic and juridical policies. The latter are crucial factors in shaping a national culture by tracing its perimeter, highlighting its characteristics, and supporting its existence—namely, in the framework of European welfare states. Furthermore, if we agree with the constructivist approach, which emphasizes the role that education and communication play in creating a national community, the boundaries defined by a modern nation-state tend to coincide with the extent of a linguistic community. Accordingly, boundaries limit how members of a nation communicate with each other. The media often reinforced these thresholds, and related policies proactively backed national media sectors. As media sociologist Philip Schlesinger claims, they ‘function as a categorical system: widespread public identification with the national space is held to be an effect of this form of cultural identification. Media are boundary markers.’<sup>51</sup> However, Schlesinger adds, media, and cinema, even when aimed primarily at the national community and determined by it, are aware of external forces such as foreign products competing on the national and international markets. In consequence, Schlesinger recommends expanding the question of national cinema to that of national audiovisual space,<sup>52</sup> a line of thought that resonates with Sorlin’s stance. If we consider the heated debate about the identity of neorealism

<sup>50</sup> Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Schlesinger, ‘The Sociological Scope of National Cinema’, p. 22

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

and its significance for Italy in defining its reality as well as the function that cinema held in depicting it and denouncing its shortcomings, we are certainly focusing on the media's internal function for the national community. However, if we enlarge the picture to include difficult discussions on the war's aftermath about the juridical framework for the national film industry, we are shifting our focus to the audiovisual national space and to the forces moulding it. In the following paragraphs, I shall attempt to discuss both issues.

National film production is not bound exclusively to an audience contained within the borders of the country. Often, it aspires to move beyond the national boundaries and reach out to a wider, international audience. The awareness of external forces concerns both the competition they engender on the domestic market and the need to locate and promote national products abroad. This originates a double view, both internal and external. On the one hand, such awareness prompts national institutions to implement policies defining the national audiovisual space and possibly sheltering national cinema on the domestic market from international competition. We can hardly think of national cinema as conveying the essence of the national community; however, as English film scholar Andrew Higson points out, if national cinema itself is a concept 'considered troublesome at the level of theoretical debate, it is still a considerable force at the level of state policy'.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the awareness of cultural and market competitors drives policymakers, producers, distributors, and artists to nationally brand media products and place them on the domestic and international market. Therefore, national films are entangled in a network acknowledging and promoting them and consciously performing their identity. Or, as Thomas Elsaesser puts it, echoing Homi Bhabha,<sup>54</sup> they are 'impersoNations', i.e. incarnations of models of nationality as external observers constitute them; or, even more properly, films can be performances and intentional manifestations of the national, in a nation's efforts to find its place in the sun.<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere, Elsaesser discusses 'national cinema' as a term of two different binarisms: one that pits it against Hollywood cinema, which is seen as having no national tint; and another that pits it against auteur cinema as the allegedly pure embodiment of European art cinema and

53 Higson, 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema', p. 69.

54 Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. In his introduction to the collection, Bhabha explicitly addresses the question of the performativity of the language used in the narratives of nations.

55 Elsaesser, 'ImpersoNations: National Cinema, Historical Imaginaries and New Cinema Europe'.

cultural heritage. However, these oppositions rest on a paradox: the financial resources to support both European arthouse and national cinema derive primarily from exhibition, which generates its profits thanks to Hollywood cinema.<sup>56</sup> Recurrently, neorealist cinema has been construed as a national auteur cinema by referring solely to its aesthetic champions—notably, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti. This assumption discarded national popular cinema and its genres as much as Hollywood cinema and disdainfully rejected the attempts to merge artistic intention (a hallmark of auteur cinema) with popular genres, as was the case with De Santis. I believe a closer inspection of the projects for a national film industry already circulating in Fascism's late years, of the hybridisation between arthouse and popular cinema, and of Italian audiovisual space in the post-war era allows us to fully grasp neorealism's multifaceted identity and its struggle to emerge as a national cinema at home and abroad. A vague notion such as 'realism' could easily include these contradictory issues.

In my view, in mid-twentieth-century Italy, cinematic realism went through three phases: the first phase being from the late 1930s to 1945; the second one, which I already defined as the 'neorealist age', from the end of World War Two until the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the Cold War; and a final phase in which neorealism faded away while the debate about it burgeoned and attempts to ideologically bias its works increased. A good deal of research in the past decade has surveyed the widespread interest in artistic realism under Fascism in literature, cinema, and painting. Realism identified with two distinct but intermingling issues. On the one hand, realism derived from the role that mechanical reproduction and actual facts played in the avant-garde (e.g. German *neue Sachlichkeit*)<sup>57</sup> and was opposed to the romantic myth of the individual genius. Otherwise, an interest in realism stemmed from the knowledge of contemporary American literature, cinema, and photography. Accordingly, realism was seen as a way to modernise Italian culture, a crucial matter for Fascist culture overall. On the other hand, realism played a role in young culture, growing in the shadow of associations the regime itself nurtured, such as the Gruppi

56 Elsaesser argues that 'a national cinema is precisely something which relies for its existence on a national exhibition sector at least as much as it does on a national productions sector: without Hollywood, no national exhibition sector; without a national exhibition sector [...] you cannot have a national cinema.' Elsaesser, 'European Culture, National Cinema, the Auteur and Hollywood', pp. 38-39.

57 For instance, film theorist and instructor Umberto Barbaro initially referred to realism in these terms. See Barbaro, *Neorealismo e realismo*.

Universitari Fascisti (GUF, the Fascist University Students' Association)<sup>58</sup> or journals such as *Primato*<sup>59</sup> or *Corrente*.<sup>60</sup> Imbued with revolutionary vigour and originating in the disappointment that young artists experienced as a result of the unfulfilled promises of Fascism to radically renew Italian society,<sup>61</sup> realism primarily meant a revolt against the artistic treadmill, notably in film production. The most telling case of this meaning of the notion, political and aesthetic at once, is likely to be found on the pages of *Cinema*, the film magazine that Il Duce's son, Vittorio Mussolini, edited.<sup>62</sup> It was there that future filmmakers such as Giuseppe De Santis, Gianni Puccini, Luchino Visconti, Antonio Pietrangeli, and the then prominent Communist Party official Mario Alicata voiced and demanded a radical shift in Italian filmmaking, one that could align national film production to European standards. Such requests revolved around the realist tradition in nineteenth-century literature and the interaction of human figures with the landscape, considered a typical mark of realism.<sup>63</sup> The younger generation intended realism or, alternatively, truthfulness, as the future director Carlo Lizzani demanded,<sup>64</sup> to be a means to carve its way into the Italian film industry. Such an endeavour also had political implications, since young intellectuals and artists aimed to complete and perfect what the regime could not properly accomplish, that is, a true national cinema. Film historian Antonio Costa illustrated this genealogy and concluded: "Chorality", "regionalism", "provincialism", "classicism" replete of "rural" and "national" resonances: all in all, the design for an Italian cinematic style revolved around these terms; therein, the "realist" question emerged quite

58 See La Rovere, *Storia dei G.U.F.* Recent research sheds light on the film association within GUF and extensively illustrates the relationship between experimental cinema, documentary filmmaking, and realism. See Mariani, *Gli anni del Cine-guf*.

59 See Zagario, "Primato". *Arte, cultura, cinema del fascismo attraverso una rivista esemplare*.

60 A direct genealogy of post-war realist painting in the experience of *Corrente* has been traced in Caramel, 'La questione del realismo e i realismi nella pittura e nella scultura del secondo dopoguerra'. *Corrente* was a training ground for future photographer and director Alberto Lattuada. See Costa (ed.), *Alberto Lattuada. Gli anni di 'Corrente'*.

61 On younger generations and Fascism, see Wanrooj, 'The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism as Generational Revolt'; Malvano, 'Il mito della giovinezza attraverso l'immagine'.

62 For a sound discussion of film criticism in *Cinema* and contemporary Italian cinema, see Miccichè, 'L'ideologia e la forma. Il gruppo "Cinema" e il formalismo italiano'. For a wider survey of the debate on realism during the war, see Argentieri, 'Confusi desideri di realismo e di antiretorica'.

63 De Santis, 'Towards an Italian Landscape'; De Santis and Alicata, 'Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema'; De Santis and Alicata, 'Ancora di Verga e del cinema italiano'; Pietrangeli, 'Analisi spettrale del film realista'.

64 Lizzani, 'Infanzia del cinema italiano'.

clearly.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, this Italian cinematic style was explicitly intended to counter Hollywood, as Costa later clarifies.<sup>66</sup> Why did this heated debate flourish in the early 1940s? Beyond the generational and artistic reasons previously mentioned, I believe the crucial reason lies in the transformation of the national audiovisual space.

Between 1938 and 1939, three different but interrelated laws directly supported national cinema<sup>67</sup> and forced all foreign producers to release their films through the state distributor ENIC,<sup>68</sup> which in effect created a monopoly. This led to a harsh retaliation by American producers. While American producers had in the interwar period created their subsidiaries for local distribution, in 1938-1939 they shut them down and withdrew their films from the Italian market, which in 1938 grossed 75% of total Italian film revenues. Consequently, the Italian film industry rapidly grew bigger, increased its film output, and gained market share.<sup>69</sup> This scenario opened up new opportunities for the young generation, which were now able to enter into film production in large numbers. During this time, quite a few new experiments were attempted, as was the case with Francesco De Robertis' docufictions, which the Navy Film Unit produced. This was also the time period in which Roberto Rossellini's first three films—*La nave bianca* (The white ship, 1941), *Un pilota ritorna* (A pilot comes back, 1942), and *L'uomo della croce* (The man of the cross, 1943)—and *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, Luchino Visconti, 1943), the collective endeavour of the *Cinema* group, saw the light. As film historian Leonardo Quaresima explains, the aim of the group of filmmakers associated with *Cinema* was to initiate

A project for restructuring Italian cinema, a project for reorganizing Italian cinema—as a system, as an apparatus, and overall as an institution, at a higher level, with a new standard. [...] In the post-war era, neorealism will draw on this same project.<sup>70</sup>

65 Costa, 'La via italiana al realismo', p. 35.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

67 These were, respectively, the decree no. 1061, promulgated on 16 June 1938, and the Royal decree no. 2237, promulgated on 20 October 1939. Basically, the two decrees secured 12% of all gross revenues as an incentive for national film production, plus an additional award based on box-office success. See Gian Piero Brunetta, 'La produzione dalla crisi del 1929 al 1943'. See also Quaglietti, 'Il cinema degli anni Trenta in Italia: primi elementi per una analisi politico-strutturale'; Manetti, 'Un'arma poderosissima'. *Industria cinematografica e Stato durante il fascismo, 1922-1943*.

68 The decree no. 1389 was promulgated on 4 September 1938.

69 Detailed production, distribution, and exhibition data can be found in Quaglietti, 'Il cinema degli anni Trenta in Italia'.

70 Quaresima, 'Neorealismo senza', p. 69.

What is even more striking is that this programme sought to create not arthouse cinema for the happy few but rather a popular cinema aimed at a broad, national audience.

World War Two had an estrangement effect, forcing the national community to reconsider and reshape political allegiances, institutional policies, industrial infrastructure, and everyday practices. National film production itself was split in two, partly maintaining its premises and facilities in Rome in various studios, notably in Cinecittà, and partly following the Nazi retreat after Allied forces landed in southern Italy, and relocating its activities in Venice, in the studios on Giudecca Island. During the civil war (1943-1945), film production decreased and was scattered in different places, while national bonds were dissolved as a consequence of the irresponsible conduct of the king and his administration and the occupation of the country by two opposing armies—the Allied forces and the Nazis. Historian Ernesto Galli Della Loggia went as far as to say that this transition produced a death of the fatherland and led to a post-war weakened nation.<sup>71</sup> Film narratives and modes of production often bear traces of such fragmented circumstances. Shooting sometimes needed to be suspended and later resumed, as was the case in *La donna della montagna* (The mountain woman, Renato Castellani, 1944), thus incorporating discontinuities in the film.<sup>72</sup> In other cases the film narratives were episodic and fragmented to match the ever-changing circumstances and delays in the shooting, to shelter its participants from the war and the occupation's nefarious effects, as happened with the production of *La porta del cielo* (*Doorway to Heaven*, Vittorio De Sica, 1944), which the Vatican hosted.<sup>73</sup>

After the Liberation, film production combined the willingness to create a national cinematic style, a mode of expression, and production standards serving both cultural and political purposes and incorporating the experimentalism of some films from the early 1940s, with the temporary lack of shared models and acknowledged authority. As a matter of fact, this momentary void concerned primarily legal frameworks and production infrastructures. The end of the Fascist regime implied general uncertainty as regards the laws regulating cultural production and notably censorship. The decree defining film production after the end of the war read, right from the outset: 'Film production activities are free', but only regarding military censorship and international relations, thus overtly promoting a whole new

71 Galli Della Loggia, *La morte della patria*.

72 See Alovio, 'I morti di ieri. "La donna della montagna" tra il vecchio e il nuovo'.

73 See Grmek Germani, 'Bon voyage'.

spirit.<sup>74</sup> The studios of Cinecittà were in miserable condition: Nazis fleeing Rome had ransacked their equipment, and large areas were now hosting displaced persons from the former Italian regions of Dalmatia, Istria (which became part of post-war Yugoslavia), and Lybia.<sup>75</sup> This temporary precariousness turned into a multifarious array of production schemes, stylistic trends, and narratives. For a few years (1945-1947), film production became less centralised in Rome, with initiatives being supported in Sicily, Genua, Naples, Turin, or Milan.<sup>76</sup> Realism corresponded with stylistic variety and the commitment to provide the nation with a cinematic representation of the state it was in: realism here meant offering the nation a reliable rendition of reality, reflecting on recent war sufferings and celebrating heroic actions, sharing actual knowledge about the nation's diversity, strengthening social bonds by articulating the relationship between individuals and the community, and criticising contemporary inequalities. Many films right after the end of the war aggrandised the Italian Resistance, which was represented in terms of a variegated multitude, including people from different classes with different beliefs and allegiances but entirely committed to Italy's redemption and rebirth. In films as ideologically and aesthetically diverse as *Il sole sorge ancora* (*Outcry*, Aldo Vergano, 1946), *Un giorno nella vita* (*A day in the life*, Alessandro Blasetti, 1946), and *Paisà* (*Paisan*, Roberto Rossellini, 1946), the Resistance is depicted as a never-ending encounter of individuals: priests and Communist militants, scoundrels and nuns, Americans and Italians, and so forth. The representation of the only national epos surviving the war's destruction, that is, the Resistance, celebrated national freedom and manifested a willingness to recapture a 'phantasized pleasure of fullness (plenitude)<sup>77</sup> to secure a community's identity.<sup>78</sup> In this brief period, realism (i.e. neorealism) was considered a novelty when compared with the control over public opinion and cultural production that the Fascist regime had exerted. Neorealist culture was set against the backdrop of broad-based

74 The decree also abolished all restrictions imposed by the Fascist regime on film importations. The decree no. 678 was promulgated on 5 October 1945. For a discussion of the relationship between juridical frames and Italian film production in the post-war era, see Grignaffini, 'Lo Stato dell'Unione. Appunti sull'industria cinematografica italiana (1945-1949)'.

75 See the excellent research of Steimatsky, 'The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944-1950)'.

76 For brief remarks on neorealist production, see Farassino, 'Neorealismo, storia e geografia'; Grmek Germani, 'La produzione del neorealismo'; and Noto and Pitassio, *Il cinema neorealista*, pp. 43-52.

77 Hall, 'The Question of Cultural Identity', p. 268.

78 The role of the Resistance in cinematic nation-building is discussed in Dalle Vacche, 'The Resistance After World War II and After May 1968'; Hurley, 'Working Class Communities and the New Nation: Italian Resistance Film and the Remaking of Italy'.

governance, bringing together democratic political parties rejecting the totalitarianism of the past, lively cultural and political debate, burgeoning print journals and magazines, and an impressive wave of personal accounts and memoirs about the war and the Resistance experience. Cinematic neorealism implied the celebration of sacrifice for a newborn nation, a loose notion of commitment to documenting reality, and the freedom to assemble characters, locations, and stories in production schemes that had so far been nonexistent.

To summarise, the post-war era magnified hybridism and communication as new, inherently positive values embedded in the neorealist endeavour. As writer Cesare Pavese explained, when discussing post-war literature, ‘the most important thing which was impeded until yesterday was the freedom to work and talk to the benefit of other people [*lavorare e parlare per gli altri*], for thy neighbour, for the comrade man.’<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, culture should not comfort humankind; conversely, by actively taking part in social and national life, showcasing its dysfunctions and fighting against them—that is, by pinpointing ‘real’ problems and attempting to find viable solutions for them—culture could renew itself. To quote from Vittorini’s editorial in the first issue of the influential cultural journal *Il Politecnico*:

If [...] culture could have an effect on human things depends exclusively on the way culture manifested. It preached, taught, elaborated principles and values, discovered continents and built machines, but it never identified with society, governed together with it, led armies for it. On what does culture rely for developing its principles and values? On showing the human suffering within society. Men suffered in society, men suffer. And what does culture do for the man who suffers? It tries to comfort him. Society is not culture, because culture is not society. And culture is not society [...] because its principles are nothing but comforting, because they are not promptly innovative and effectively actual, living together with society, as society lives. Shall we ever have a culture sheltering mankind from suffering, rather than consoling it?<sup>80</sup>

This open and cooperative spirit came to an abrupt end with the growing international tensions that nearly led to overt hostilities during the Cold War. Formerly an enemy country and now located right on the geographical edge between capitalist and socialist countries, Italy also had the largest

79 Pavese, ‘Di una nuova letteratura’, p. 121.

80 Vittorini, ‘Una nuova cultura’, p. 1.

Communist Party in the Western world. Its geopolitical location, together with its peculiar political scene, put the country under surveillance and resulted in enormous amounts of money being channeled from the Marshall Plan as both an aid to recovery and a means of political and cultural influence. The political coalition that had led Italy out of the war—which had united Christian Democrats, Communists, Socialists, plus a number of smaller political parties referring to liberal politics—broke up and its chief protagonists forced into harsh confrontation in the political polls held in April 1948. There were reciprocal accusations of complicity with external powers (the US and the USSR) that were all too willing to determine the nation's destiny. The election resulted in a major defeat for the Communist and Socialist parties and in the Christian Democrats' decade-long rule over Italy.

At the end of 1949, a new framework legislation on cinema was approved, providing the national film industry with a structured plan for full recovery and paving the way for its great achievements in the ensuing decade.<sup>81</sup> In the years that followed, film critics, theoreticians, historians, and political figures argued heatedly over neorealism and what kind of practices the notion underpinned. On the one hand, neorealism turned into a bedrock for the Communist Party's cultural politics: it no longer indicated just a willingness to expand notions of citizenship and ethical engagement, it also implied an outspoken denunciation of contemporary social inequalities to be taken at face value, as documents. Furthermore, neorealism incarnated a truly national cinematic style at a time when European communist parties assumed they represented the most profound identity of national populations, since the former were advocating the latter's interests. And finally, neorealism also denounced the obstacles created by the Christian Democratic administration for leftist artists and culture when it discarded neorealist projects or interfered with important artistic achievements in various ways. For instance, Pietro Germi's *Il cammino della speranza* (*The Path of Hope*, 1950), a film about illegal migrants from Southern Italy, was denied the right to state funding, something that was granted to the vast majority of national film production.<sup>82</sup> In the year following its Italian release, the film was awarded the Palme d'or at the Cannes Film Festival

81 This is the Law no. 958, approved on 29 December 1949. It can be retrieved, together with the most significant decrees, at the following URL: <http://www.sturzo.it/sottos/atti.html> (Last access: 20 October 2017).

82 See Gromo, "Il cammino della speranza" di Pietro Germi al Lux'. The files concerning Germi's movie of the Committee censoring films can be found at: [www.italiataglia.it](http://www.italiataglia.it) (Last access: 30 October 2017).

and the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, both major awards attesting to its artistic excellence. A major debate erupted when Undersecretary Giulio Andreotti, who was also responsible for legislation on cinema in the second half of the 1940s, outspokenly attacked Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952), a film about the miserable conditions affecting retired civil servants. Andreotti reproached the director for exposing the most lurid aspects of national life rather than acknowledging its many achievements.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, neorealism was widely acknowledged as a new artistic trend right when it was rapidly becoming outdated and giving way to many forms of hybridisation with popular genres.<sup>84</sup> In the first half of the 1950s, film critics regularly discussed neorealism in essentialist terms while deploring as deviations actual neorealist films where pure neorealism merged with comedy—so-called 'pink neorealism' (*neorealismo rosa*)—or with film noir. Among the many examples originating in this debate, I recall the frank discussion in *Cinema* magazine between its director, Adriano Baracco, and the former critic but then director De Santis on the occasion of the release of *Non c'è pace tra gli ulivi* (*Under the Olive Tree*, 1950). The former regretted the success of the word 'neorealism', which had led to the rise of its use to describe films relying on a set of formal and thematic features but artificial imitations indeed, detached from actual reality. Finally, Baracco attributed De Santis' last work to this category, to which De Santis replied by proving his deep experience of the reality he depicted in the film. Baracco countered by illustrating how often the director proved to be unaware of the actual subjects he wanted to deal with.<sup>85</sup> What is striking about this marginal quarrel is the discomfort with contemporary cinematic realism and its many modes of existence. Many commentators have discussed this issue,<sup>86</sup> either to regret the decline of neorealist film production or to reproach so-called heretics who departed from the neorealist canon. To summarise, in the early 1950s, neorealism multiplied, infiltrated popular film genres, turned into a suitable subject for theory, and became disputed territory for adverse political factions. At the same time, neorealism lost its initial momentum in terms of novelty, and every year it became less perceived as a manifold

83 Andreotti, 'Piaghe sociali e necessità di redimersi'.

84 On film genres in the early 1950s, and their relationships with neorealism, see Noto, *Dal bozzetto ai generi*.

85 Baracco, 'Etichette mortali'; De Santis, 'Non c'è pace'; Baracco, 'Non c'è pace'.

86 For instance, authoritative film critic Di Giammatteo regretted the decline of artistic freedom typical of neorealism, and the increasing labelling activity of neorealist films. See Di Giammatteo, 'Un'esperienza di libertà'.

but uniform phenomenon.<sup>87</sup> All in all, even in its new trends, neorealism took centre stage for a few years, notably in the debate regarding the style most fit to represent national reality and the nation overall and the ways to achieve it.

In the following section, I will discuss the relevance of cinematic neorealism in reconstructing, reinforcing, and devising national culture and providing long-lasting images of the nation. I tap into this broad issue through four points of access, or questions, related to the nation: the discovery of the nation in the post-war era; the connection between the nation and its ethnoses; the association between the nation as a community and the people through a pivotal notion such as 'national-popular'; and the post-war national audiovisual space.

### A New Land? National Territory and Ethnos

A canal bordered by poplars in the plains of the Po Valley. People biking along it. The canal leads to a town, where it merges into the sea. The camera pans out and frames the docks, the boats, the railway on the side of the banks, a factory. A newly wed couple—Michele (Massimo Girotti) and Giovanna (Carla Del Poggio)—kiss on the back of a truck. The truck drives through a wasteland. While Michele tosses sugar candies to a group of friends following the truck on their bikes, land mines in the fields beside the road explode. Michele offers sugar candies to the accountant carrying the earnings of the cooperative he works for; as he bends to reach out to the accountant, the sleeve of his poor coat lifts to unveil a tattoo from a concentration camp. In the meantime, the cooperative's activities are going on: crippled or mutilated people are putting their shoulders to the wheel. The cooperative members discuss a loan with representatives of the landowner and ask for an extension: they are about to dig out of the land all the land mines. The leader of the cooperative sadly explains that were it not for the cooperative, the land would have been lost because of the explosives (Fig. 1.1).

The first sequence of *Caccia tragica* (*Tragic Hunt*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1947) features many claims regularly evoked when discussing neorealist cinema.

87 When reviewing *Miracle in Milan*, influential film critic Chiarini in 1951 declared that neorealism suffered from the new social and political scenario and either turned into mannerism or to ideologically biased films. See Chiarini, 'Impossibilità della sintesi tra favola e realtà'.



Fig. 1.1 An entire new land? The devastated landscape in *Caccia tragica* (*Tragic Hunt*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1947)

One such feature is the discovery of a neglected landscape, and notably that of the Po Valley, a place that became famous as a result of the film *Obsession* and that was the setting for many post-war films. Other features include the creation of a new national identity produced out of mutual solidarity and equity as opposed to capitalist greed and violence; the reclamation of the land in search of purification, after Fascism and warfare had polluted it to the point that it was almost wasted; and the scars that the war left on the nation—on its soil, its citizens, and its morals.

One of the most enduring assumptions about cinematic neorealism, and more generally of post-war Italian culture, is the discovery of national territory. The term 'discovery' is inherently ambivalent because it conflates an act of recovering what had been concealed from public discourse with one of invention, imagining, and conveying a representation of this territory. Neorealist cinema certainly paid attention to formerly overlooked regions, areas, or urban peripheries. Even if outdoor shooting and some attention to the province emerged during the 1930s in both literature and cinema, the post-war importance of spatial and cultural voyage was unprecedented. In fact, post-war cinema and literature imagined unveiling the multitudinous faces of the nation by paying attention to overlooked places and subjects and

incorporating a wide variety of dialects. Such a discovery implied that the manifold features of the national population would at times be presented through synthetic associations of different faces and bodies, which were to appear briefly just once. One example of this is the closing sequence of *Bitter Rice*, when the rice pickers, all displaying very different looks, one by one toss a handful of rice over the corpse of Silvana. Earlier in the film we heard them speaking in a variety of Northern Italy's dialects. However, they play no crucial role in the film's plot and only contribute to creating a 'reality effect', as Roland Barthes put it—that is, the immediate coalescence of the referential and the signifier, without classifying and structuring those elements into a signified, i.e. the narrative.<sup>88</sup> These components create the impression among viewers that they are confronting the varied reality of the nation: they are not part of the narrative discourse and only serve to complicate the film's representation with what apparently are non-functional details. However, variety and novelty also implied an ethical engagement.

Neorealism revealed the richness of the nation to its citizens, something that the ruling regime kept in the dark. Therefore, neorealism was intended to be a brand-new endeavour whose significance was not limited to aesthetic innovation—for example in cutting or reducing the use of painstakingly designed indoor shooting. The relevance of this novelty resided first in its ethical value, as discussed above. Cinema was believed to be the most effective means to view the true nation, to single out its flaws and its responsibilities. Indeed, right after the end of the war, director Alberto Lattuada declared:

Are we in rags? Let us show to everybody our rags. Are we defeated? Let us look at our failures. [...] Let us pay our dues with a fierce love for integrity, and the whole world will participate in this great game for truth. [...] Nothing more than cinema reveals a whole secret nation.<sup>89</sup>

In fact, neorealist cinema often combined a rigorous look at the nation's underdevelopment and misery with an attempt to bring all the multiple elements of the nation together. Accordingly, cinematic representation and notably narratives concocted a new nation by composing its parts. For instance, *Il bandito* (*The Bandit*, Alberto Lattuada, 1946) articulates its storyline across two different places, namely Turin's urban wretched cityscape and Piedmont's pure, majestic Alps. In *Paisan*, the episodic

<sup>88</sup> See Barthes, 'The Reality Effect'.

<sup>89</sup> Lattuada, 'Paghiamo i nostri debiti', p. 7.

narrative combines six different regions and urban areas with the seaside, the mountains, and the marshes (Sicily, Naples, Rome, Florence, Emilia's Appennines, and the Po delta). *The Path of Hope* follows its characters from the mines of Sicily to the French Alps, through Rome and the plains of the Po Valley.<sup>90</sup> Neorealist cinema assembles an image of the nation by bringing together its components in terms of regions, landscapes, dialects, and characters from different origins.

Discovering national reality also had a social aspect to it. In fact, surveying national peculiarities through cinema implied introducing new, democratic forms of communication, circulating knowledge across the nation, and increasing mutual awareness.<sup>91</sup> We might call it cinema's knowing function: helping the national community to create reciprocal bonds by spreading representations and related information across a country that had come together only quite recently. National unity dates back to 1861, and Italy was split in two during World War Two. The country has generally suffered from—and still experiences—major internal gaps in terms of culture, wealth, employment rates, and gender. In Germi's words, 'cinema helps men to see and get to know themselves. Therefore, cinema is indispensable to Italians. If they suffer from a chronic disease, they suffer from this: they never learned to see and judge themselves substantially.'<sup>92</sup> Moreover, in Zavattini's view, cinema was an entirely new tool for fostering national unity because of its immediacy. Almost foreseeing the upcoming emergence of television broadcasting and its role in the process of nation-building, Zavattini assigned to cinema a crucial function because of its speed in circulating knowledge. As he declared in 1950,

Cinema must come close to its true expressive reason, that is contemporaneity, immediacy. Film must become the storyteller of ourselves [...] Its moral and artistic power lies in such skill to grasp what is contemporary. Allow me to make myself understood. If we could shoot a film of our daily experience and watch it in the evening, maybe tomorrow we could do better, our actions would be better, more moral, and more human. [...] Cinema proves how effective it is as a *mirror* [...] it turns speed into a moral fact.<sup>93</sup>

90 See Rascaroli, 'Remapping the Neorealist Nation: *Il cammino della speranza* and the Rhetorics of the Road to Realism'.

91 Communication is a major concern in many neorealist narratives, and notably in some of the masterworks Rossellini directed, such as *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan*. See Aprà, 'Rossellini oltre il neorealismo'

92 Germi, 'In difesa del cinema italiano. Che cosa ne pensano i principali interessati', p. 64.

93 Zavattini, 'Morirà il cinema?', p. 4. A discussion of the notion of 'event' in Zavattini can be found in Barilli, 'Evento'.

Finally, understanding national reality and its numerous aspects implied a political function. The supposedly objective knowledge produced by cinema could serve the purpose of denouncing economic disparities, social injustice, and moral inadequacy and could spark political action. When introducing a belated but influential account of neorealism, Rossellini summarised this function as follows:

Mostly, neorealism is an art of ‘observation’ [*constatazione*] (that is, coming close with love to a reality seen as it is, without any prejudice or schematic filter). [...] Neorealism has mostly the value of a denunciation.<sup>94</sup>

Among the areas that were subjected to underdevelopment, labour exploitation, and political corruption, the urban peripheries and Southern Italy stood out. Peripheries are a widely explored subject in neorealist culture, as they allowed filmmakers to combine statements about the pitfalls of Fascist social engineering with new concerns for inclusive citizenship. As Mark Shiel points out, neorealist ‘images of the city seek to undo the fascists’ work of ideological investment in architecture and planning in keeping with the post-war reorientation of the discipline or *urbanistica* as a whole’.<sup>95</sup> *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, Vittorio De Sica, 1946), *L’Onorevole Angelina* (*Angelina*, Luigi Zampa, 1947), *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, Vittorio De Sica, 1948), *Sotto il sole di Roma* (*Under the Sun of Rome*, Renato Castellani, 1948), and *Bellissima* (*Bellissima*, Luchino Visconti, 1951) show urban peripheries far from public life, where the protagonists endure long trips to join the centre of their respective communities and attend to their business. Late neorealist works—films such as the short *Appunti su un fatto di cronaca* (*Notes on a crime story*, Luchino Visconti, 1952) or the feature *Ai margini della metropoli* (*At the edge of the city*, Carlo Lizzani, 1953)—portray peripheries as wastelands: social bonds are loose or simply nonexistent and require awareness and public intervention to redress otherwise doomed conditions.

Neorealist literature, photography, painting, and cinema literally ‘discovered’ Southern Italy in the double sense of the word. On the one hand, artists moved to the region and found a landscape, habits, traditions, and social and individual circumstances so far removed from national culture; on the other hand, they often reinvented Southern Italy by reducing

<sup>94</sup> Rossellini, ‘Prefazione’, p. 9.

<sup>95</sup> Shiel, *Italian Neorealism*, p. 74. See also Shiel, ‘Imagined and Built Spaces in the Rome of Neorealism’.

its representation to social, industrial, and, ultimately, anthropological backwardness.<sup>96</sup>

Southern Italy became an artistic subject due to concurrent factors. To begin with, ever since the process that led to national unity in the nineteenth century and the ensuing wave of repression that the Italian army imposed on the area, the national discourse had repeatedly perceived Southern Italy as different from the rest of the country, especially when compared to Northern European standards. Fascism had largely suppressed these discrepancies by promoting national unity over local differences and by channelling money to the region to silence social protest.<sup>97</sup> However, the post-war era revitalised awareness of the major differences between the north and the south as well as a civic commitment to bridge them and level inequalities across the nation. Many films bear traces of this engagement. The work representing the best civic commitment dealing with Southern 'specificity' is perhaps that of director Germi. His films locate narratives among the Sicilian underprivileged classes, as in *In nome della Legge* (*In the Name of the Law*, 1948) and *The Path of Hope* as well as *Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo* (*The bandit of Tacca del Lupo*, 1952), a historical movie dealing with the controversial incorporation of the region into the Italian Kingdom.<sup>98</sup>

Secondly, Southern Italy's underprivileged classes represented a revolutionary potential, as argued in Antonio Gramsci's political theory elaborated in the 1920s.<sup>99</sup> Gramsci perceived what he termed the 'Southern question' as a full-fledged part of national life and of the revolutionary process: Southern peasants together with Northern Italy's working class could be the national revolutionary force turning Italy into a Socialist society. The period of totalitarianism under Mussolini obviously prevented the works of the Marxist thinker from circulating. However, the end of Fascism and the relevance of the Communist Party in the post-war era resulted in general interest in Gramsci's theory being revived, leading to the publication from 1947 onwards of his collected works. Accordingly, discussion of the 'Southern question' was rekindled and also influenced culture: it is hard to think of *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, Luchino Visconti, 1948), a film that was set among Sicily's working classes and was actively supported by the Italian Communist Party, without this theoretical framework.

96 See Filippucci, 'Anthropological Perspectives on Culture in Italy'; Gribaudi, 'Images of the South'.

97 For a brief summary of Southern Italy under Fascism, see Bevilacqua, 'Questione meridionale'.

98 For a thorough discussion of Germi's works on Sicily, see Zagarrío, 'La Sicilia di Germi, tra autore e genere'; Morreale, 'Western di Cose Nostre: *In nome della Legge*'; Giordano, 'La questione meridionale e *Il cammino della speranza*'.

99 See Gramsci, 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question'. For a sound summary of the regional divide in Italian history, see Barbagallo, *La questione italiana*.

In addition, Southern Italy played a significant role in realist literature, serving as an inspiration for neorealist filmmakers from the projects that the group of intellectuals working for *Cinema* magazine produced onwards. Notably, Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga was an important reference not only for the adaptation of his novel *I Malavoglia* (1881) into *The Earth Trembles* but for many projects that directors discussed in the early 1940s.<sup>100</sup> Other personalities operating in the inter-war period, such as Corrado Alvaro, the Calabrian author of *Gente in Aspromonte* (*Revolt in Aspromonte*, 1930), contributed to the viewing of Southern Italy through a realist lens, and thus intermingled the depiction of local traditions, habits, and landscapes with a general concern for realism. The following generation of filmmakers discovered his previous work, and Giuseppe De Santis involved him as a screenplay writer for the first two films he directed, *Tragic Hunt* and *Bitter Rice*.<sup>101</sup> In the post-war era, literature contributed to the incorporation of the 'Southern question' into the public debate as both a social issue and a source of inspiration for the peculiarities the South offered in both its urban and rural areas. The works of writers such as Francesco Jovine, Domenico Rea, and Anna Maria Ortese placed on centre stage the conundrum that Southern Italy presented to hegemonic models of social and anthropological development for the country. Among the most influential literary works on Southern Italy is *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 1945), an account of the exiled painter and anti-fascist militant Carlo Levi, set in a remote rural area of Basilicata during the time of the Fascist regime. One of the distinctive traits of this work is the encounter between the Northern Italian intellectual and the radically anthropologically different Southern peasants. The book fully illustrates the duplicitous nature of the representation of Southern Italy offered by neorealist culture. On the one hand, neorealism recognised that this part of Italy and its population could not be fully incorporated into the nation without accurate consideration of its complexity, which post-war culture strove to show. On the other hand, its peculiarity triggered an interest for Southern otherness, which occasionally turned into exoticism.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, Southern Italy was the subject of a major endeavour in the post-war era: the work of ethnologist Ernesto De Martino, who was heavily influenced by Carlo Levi and Antonio Gramsci. Whereas his body of work

100 See Micciché, *Visconti e il neorealismo*; Marcus, 'Visconti's *La terra trema*. Typology of Adaptation'.

101 Alvaro was also a prolific film critic. His articles are now collected in Alvaro, *Al cinema*.

102 For a sound discussion of this duplicity, see Forgacs, *Italy's Margins*.

mostly appeared in the late 1950s to early 1960s,<sup>103</sup> De Martino began in the early 1950s to merge his work on magic as a way to make sense of the world, particularly under precarious circumstances,<sup>104</sup> with field research among Southern Italy's rural communities. This endeavour extended also to photographic and cinematic recording and involved prominent personalities such as Ando Gilardi, Franco Pinna, and Arturo Zavattini.<sup>105</sup> De Martino contributed to the drive in post-war culture to visualise and understand Southern Italy using sound research methods and concepts. What is particularly interesting is the relevance of De Martino's work to neorealist production in the post-war era: both strove to unveil the harsh reality of the underprivileged in Southern Italy and reclaim them as Italian citizens in their own right while at times both magnifying anthropological differences and superimposing stereotypes onto reality. In some ways, the post-war artistic, scientific, and institutional initiatives concerning Southern Italy produced a discourse similar to the notion of Orientalism, as Edward Said coined it: 'A distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts [...]; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power'.<sup>106</sup>

The representation of Southern Italy in neorealist films, photography, and literature reveals a fascination with backwardness, an antimodernist attitude characterising neorealist culture and the national image it created. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith highlights, neorealism stresses mostly 'poverty, backwardness, the legacy of fascist neglect and the difficulties of post-war reconstruction'.<sup>107</sup> Differences might reside in the political criticism that individual films directed against political or social power, ranging from manifest denunciation, as in *The Earth Trembles*, to misery depicted as natural phenomenon and folklore, in *Due soldi di speranza* (*Two Cents Worth of Hope*, Renato Castellani, 1952). Nonetheless, neorealist culture seems altogether oblivious of national modernity and instead privileges a representation of national reality as mostly premodern. There are many reasons for this. I believe post-war culture reacted against Fascist modernity and its related narratives in the Italian manner of reactionary modernism,

103 De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*; De Martino, *Sud e magia*; De Martino, *La terra del rimorso*.

104 De Martino, *Il mondo magico*.

105 Gallini and Faeta (eds), *I viaggi nel Sud di Ernesto De Martino*.

106 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 12.

107 Nowell-Smith, 'Italy: Tradition, Backwardness and Modernity', p. 54.

magnifying the achievements of the Fascist regime and overestimating its mastering of technology, industry, and form.<sup>108</sup> In consequence, post-war culture favoured rural and/or underprivileged settings to the detriment of modern metropolitan areas. Occasionally this led to film representation lingering on a national landscape and population, which pitted rural purity against urban corruption, as in *The Bandit*, *Bitter Rice*, and even *Bicycle Thieves*. Moreover, such backwardness perpetuated the representation of distinct areas of the country in picturesque terms: this mode dated back to the seventeenth century and, as film historian Giorgio Bertellini argues, was pivotal in also establishing racial representations of Italy and its inhabitants.<sup>109</sup> *The Earth Trembles*; *Under the Olive Tree*; *Stromboli, terra di Dio* (*Stromboli*, Roberto Rossellini, 1950); and *In the Name of the Law*, to mention a few examples, offer stunning visuals of sublime Southern landscapes, where nature overwhelms the human presence inhabiting it (Fig. 1.2). Neorealist films such as *Paisan*, *The Bandit*, and *Shoeshine* reveal their fascination for picturesque representations of Italian landscape, in which sublime natural landscapes are combined with ancient ruins. The latter are also utilised in neorealist films such as *Under the Sun of Rome*, *Umberto D.*, or the later *Viaggio in Italia* (*Voyage to Italy*, Roberto Rossellini, 1954).<sup>110</sup> In the erudite and authoritative work of Giulio Bollati, both underdevelopment and ruins constitute national hallmarks because they conflate primacy with a sense of inadequacy: Italy came first, as the ruins of a glorious past bear witness, but it differs from modern Northern European countries, which became marks of comparison for Italian culture. As Bollati put it,

Italian specificity [...] lies exactly in this splitting, which enables being modern, if necessary, without giving up the mythical gifts of backwardness.<sup>111</sup>

Finally, inasmuch as the notion of engagement that neorealist culture promoted and pursued in its artworks was loose and general, as previously discussed, the less its characters were identified with a particular class, the broader the audience the film could address. This implied that rather than portraying individuals as being fully integrated into the productive

<sup>108</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*.

<sup>109</sup> Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema. Race, Landscape, and the Picturesque*.

<sup>110</sup> On the motif of ruins in *Voyage to Italy*, see Mulvey, 'Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy/Viaggio in Italia* (1953)'; Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space*, pp. 127-141.

<sup>111</sup> Bollati, *L'italiano*, p. 118.



Fig. 1.2 Sublime Southern landscape in of *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, Luchino Visconti, 1948)

process, as industrial or rural working-class members could be, cinematic neorealism foregrounded those who were on its margins, such as children, homemakers, retired civil servants, and the unemployed. An ethical stance underpinned this perspective: the aim was to spotlight those that Fascism had forgotten and democracy had left behind. However, this also implied fostering a representation of the nation that was forgetful of major contradictions regarding industrial development and fond of a picturesque image of its underdevelopment.

Backwardness also served to reinforce a national image rooted in the Italian ethnos. In his discussion of alternative models of national identity, Anthony Smith posited that Western Europe bases national identity on factors such as 'historic territory, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology', whereas other regions such as Eastern Europe and Asia privilege 'an "ethnic" conception of the nation' whose characterising feature is 'its emphasis on a community of birth and native culture'.<sup>112</sup> Did

<sup>112</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, p. 11.

Italy in 1945 belong to Western Europe, or was it located elsewhere on the national identities' map?

At first glance, neorealist cinema could not be more distant from ethnic concerns. First of all, neorealist culture promoted universal humanism, relying on human solidarity as an essential value that transcended local, national, and racial identities. Secondly, neorealist culture fiercely opposed Fascism and strove to mark discontinuity with anything related to that era in Italy's history. Among its most egregious initiatives, the Fascist government oppressed national minorities such as Germans, Slovenes, and Croats in Northern Italy since the early 1920s, led a colonial conquest of Eastern Africa from the mid-1930s, and introduced racial laws to the detriment of the Jewish minority at the end of the 1930s, resulting in their exclusion, mass deportation, and genocide. The inter-war public discourse, including cinema, at times reflected these policies in varying degrees. Conversely, post-war cinema glorified pacifism, linguistic diversity, and cultural encounter. Undisputed masterpieces such as *Paisan*, influential works such as *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity*, Alberto Lattuada, 1947), and successful films such as *To Live in Peace* or *The Path of Hope* all celebrated the unity of humankind instead of speculating on ethnic differences. *Paisan* revolves entirely around cultural encounters; as the narrative moves through six episodes, US forces advance across Italy, from Sicily to the Po Valley. Americans meet the Italian population, struggle to understand and make themselves understood, and sacrifice their lives as much as Italians forfeit theirs. Reciprocal attempts at acknowledging national counterparts anchor each episode, and additional pairs of opposites are articulated, such as masculine/feminine in the Sicilian, Roman, and Florentine episodes; childhood/adulthood and white/black in the Neapolitan one; Catholic/non-Catholic in the one set in the Appennine Mountains; and soldiers/civilians in the one on the Po delta. The only radically alien, cruel, and irredeemable components in the film's narratives are the Germans. To sum up, inherited descriptions of neorealist cinema and culture assume that this body of work portrays and praises cultural and ethnic diversity. However, a closer inspection reveals more complex articulations of ethnic difference.

The great majority of neorealist films undoubtedly depict Germans as the source of evil and blame them for Italy's grievance and sufferings as a nation. Beyond mass executions, reprisals, and sackings, the Nazis exhibit sadistic behaviour in *Outcry* and *Paisan*, *A day in the life*, and *Rome, Open City*. In neorealist cinema, the Nazis incarnate a wave of ruthless brutality ravaging Europe. At the same time, the films' narratives occasionally excuse Italian Fascists and their conduct. One example is the Florentine episode of *Paisan*, which has one of the film's crudest scenes. Partisans are struggling to conquer

a neighbourhood where Fascist snipers are barricaded. The insurgents catch three of them, drag them to the middle of the street, and brutally execute them, while their victims plead for help. The message here seems to be that Fascists are human beings just like any other character. Italian neorealist cinema often redeemed Italian Fascists as members of the national community who acted wrongly but could be redeemed. The Nazis never meet a similar fate within neorealist cinema and are always beyond salvation. If individuals fall outside this assumption, such as the German soldier in *To Live in Peace* who befriended the Italian peasant Zio Tigna, or the Austrian deserter in *Rome, Open City*, the Nazis promptly annul this incoherence by killing these characters. Furthermore, the Nazis are repeatedly associated with sexual deviance. As David Forgacs and then Dominic Holdaway and Dalila Missero have explained, feminine sexuality in *Rome, Open City* is embodied first by Pina, who represents normative heterosexuality, and then by Ingrid, the SS lesbian driving Marina to prostitution, drug addiction, and likely homosexual intercourse.<sup>113</sup> *Tragic Hunt* draws a clear opposition between two feminine characters: on the one side there is Giovanna, newly wed to Michele, a prominent leader of the rural cooperative, who embodies normative heterosexuality and is associated with the productive earth; and on the other side we have Daniela, infamously known as Lili Marlene, who is the destructive leader of a criminal gang hiring Nazi veterans and who proves to have a clear homosexual fascination with Giovanna, whom she kidnapped. To summarise, post-war neorealist cinema depicted Germans as radically other and anything associated with them as perverse. Moreover, this deviance surfaced in two ways: first, as meaningless cruelty against harmless human beings, and then as sexual aberration, according to the film narratives. By contrast, the Italian population was humane, mutually helpful, inherently good, prolific, and heterosexual. Ethnic differences were constantly associated with the mutation of traditional gender roles.

The Italian ethnos was also juxtaposed with other foreign presences: namely, those of Allied soldiers. Even if *Paisan* describes the struggle and sacrifice that the GIs went through to liberate Italy and its population from Nazi oppression, the film highlights the pitfalls of this encounter, which originates in cultural prejudice and ignorance. Misunderstandings characterise all the film narratives, and the Neapolitan episode offers what I believe is the clearest example. A black military policeman (MP), Joe, meanders through Naples' ruins while drunk. He meets Pasquale, a young kid, who guides him across the shattered city. When the man falls asleep on a pile of rubble, the

113 Forgacs, *Rome, Open City*; Holdaway and Missero, 'Re-Reading Marina: Sexuality, Materialism and the Construction of Italy'.

boy steals his boots. Some days later, the MP runs into Pasquale: he arrests him for stealing and drives him home while giving him an earful. He intends to meet his parents and report the kid's behaviour. However, as the two reach the dwelling—that is, the temporary shelter for displaced persons located in the Mergellina caves—Joe realises that there is no home anymore and that the parents were killed during the Allied bombings, which hit Naples harder than any other Italian city. The MP drops the boots and runs off. If we follow Sandro Bernardi, who contends that Rossellini's realism 'builds up a stereotype, then suddenly demolishes it' in order to achieve an 'epiphanic instant',<sup>114</sup> we might add that the Americans initially based their Italian experience on stereotypes, whereas the Italian population supplied them with pure, albeit often dramatic, reality. If we take a closer look at other neorealist films, we understand that film narratives seldom describe the Allied presence as entirely benign for the Italian population. If we go back to Smith's definition of ethnos-based national identity as a conception rooted in a community of birth and native culture, we realise that Italian post-war cinema held national community apart from what was perceived to be pernicious foreign influence. Allied troops are associated with two kinds of corruption: deculturation—that is, the divesting of ethnic national traits—and miscegenation. The former happens when American troops' wealth, goods, and mass culture lure Italians—and notably young girls—and mislead them. In *Un uomo ritorna* (*Revenge*, Max Neufeld, 1946), Sergio (Gino Cervi) returns home from war captivity. The plant he was running has closed, his brother was mutilated at the front, while his younger brother and his sister have moved to Rome; the former survives by doing business in the black market. What is worse, however, is the girl's attitude: to celebrate Sergio's return and to show him the latest trend, she puts on a boogie-woogie record and performs an obscene dance before her elder brother, who looks at her in disgust. The record is just one token of the close relationship the young woman has with Allied troops, whose soldiers gift her with food and cigarettes while depraving and corrupting her. Similar examples appear in other films produced in the war's aftermath, when Italian society and culture faced the presence of alien troops and the introduction of imported mass culture. In the meantime, a no less alien culture and ethnos threatened the Italian nation, i.e. the ruthless Slavic population who were mercilessly conquering Italy's eastern provinces.<sup>115</sup> *La città dolente* (City of pain, Mario

114 Bernardi, 'Rossellini's Landscape: Nature, Myth, History', p. 53.

115 Slavic, Italian, and German populations coexisted for centuries in the regions of Istria, Kvarner Gulf, Dalmatia, and Carnia. After the end of World War I, Italy deployed an aggressive cultural

Bonnard, 1949), written by Federico Fellini among others, displays in its early sequences many neorealist features: it alternates fictitious scenes with documentary ones. It was shot in Pola, a former Italian settlement in Istria, from which the new Yugoslav administration chased out the native Italians. A voice-over describes Italy's rule and its achievements there and the current bleak circumstances, while a reporter, as in *Bitter Rice*, leads us through the abandoned city. The film also features the neorealist elements of open-air shooting and a contemporary topic. The plot pits an Italian family that enshrines many traits of a sacred family (a new-born, a mother depicted as holy, a sacrificial masculine figure) against the ruthless, godless Slavic Communists, led by a woman official incarnating a new, subversive ethos. *Penne nere* (Black feathers, Oreste Biancoli, 1952), a war film set in the Alps on the border with Austria, tells the story of a young couple, Pieri (Marcello Mastroianni) and Gemma (Marina Vlady) who are engaged when the war breaks out. While Gemma stays in the village, Pieri goes to the front, fights against the Albanians, and after the armistice, refuses to fight for the Germans. On an exhausting trip back home, Pieri, together with his brother and his platoon, first fights members of the Communist Yugoslav Liberation Army and then Russian Cossacks, who had been encouraged by the Nazis to settle in his village. While his brother is killed by the Yugoslavs, the Cossacks rape the women in the village and almost kill Gemma. To summarise, in Italian post-war neorealism, the Italian population faces an unprecedented threat to its traditional values, i.e. the family and the patriarchal order. The message is that atheism, US mass culture, and Eastern European Socialism ruin populations and put national bonds at risk, which only common birth and native language and traditions protect. Women are particularly vulnerable to this risk, as proven by the above-mentioned examples.

Miscegenation is a recurrent theme in post-war neorealist cinema: it represents a major risk for Italian womanhood. There are many possible reasons for such negative representation, including the memory of the mass rapes in May 1944 at the hands of French colonial troops in Southern Italy, an event that affected thousands of women.<sup>116</sup> These rapes were later depicted in Alberto Moravia's novel *La ciociara* (*Two Women*, 1957) and in Vittorio De Sica's film adaptation (1960). Secondly, ruthless racist propaganda related to

and ethnic policy, which sparked a no-less-hostile reaction as Italian troops retreated, including a brutal retaliation on the Italian population. An overview of the Eastern border question is available in Cecotti and Pupo (eds), *Il confine orientale*; Pupo, *Il lungo esodo*; Crainz, *Il dolore e l'esilio*.

<sup>116</sup> On contradictory feelings towards Allied troops as a consequence of warfare memories, see Gribaudo, 'Bombing and Land War in Italy: Military Strategy, Reactions, and Collective Memory'.

Italy's colonial conquest was rampant during the interwar period. From the end of the nineteenth century, Italy attempted to establish its own colonial empire, notably in Africa. Colonisation generated widespread concerns about maintaining the nation's racial purity and led to later attempts to define the Italian ethnos and race and to reject the 'inferior races' by means of propaganda. Propaganda publications such as the infamous journal *La difesa della razza* (*The defence of the race*)<sup>117</sup> propagated pseudo-scientific explanations for racial differences, which significantly influenced narratives and images promoting ideal national types and beauty<sup>118</sup> while dismissing populations subject to colonisation. Cinema under Fascism contributed to the promotion of the colonial undertaking and echoed racial stereotypes,<sup>119</sup> both in its documentary production<sup>120</sup> and in fictional films with narratives set in the colonies.<sup>121</sup> These stereotypes carried on into post-war culture and cinema, leading to enduring derogatory representations of black individuals rooted in racist prejudice. Finally, the Allied troops included numerous African-American soldiers, who befriended native Italians and occasionally partnered with Italian women. Popular narratives perceived this match as grotesque and a clear infringement of boundaries based on skin colour. A hugely popular Neapolitan song, *Tammurriata nera* (*Black drum song*, 1944), perfectly describes the contradiction in the eyes of traditional culture, saying 'a black baby is born, and his mother names him *Ciro* [a typical Neapolitan name]' and further adds, 'they might call him *Ciccio* or '*Ntuono*, they might call him *Peppe* or *Ciro*, though he was born black, just black'.<sup>122</sup>

117 See Cassata, «*La difesa della razza*»; Pisanty (ed.), *La difesa della razza. Antologia 1938-1943*. On Italian racism, see Centro Furio Jesi (ed.), *La menzogna della razza*.

118 The reflection of 1930s racial politics on models of Italian beauty is discussed in Gundle, *Bellissima. Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy*.

119 An encompassing survey can be found in Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*.

120 See Fidotta, *Un impero cinematografico*. Retrieved at: <https://dspace.uniud.cineca.it/handle/10990/726> (Last access: 25 November 2017).

121 See Pickering-Iazzi, 'Ways of Looking in Black and White: Female Spectatorship and the Miscege-National Body in *Sotto la croce del sud*'; Bertellini, 'Colonial Autism: Whiteness, Heroism, Auditory Rhetoric, and National Identity in Inter-war Italian Cinema'; Boggio, 'Black Shirts/Black Skins: Fascist Italy's Colonial Anxieties and *Lo Squadrone Bianco*'; Coletti, 'Il cinema coloniale tra propaganda e melò'.

122 The lines of the song read:

*E' nato nu criaturo è nato niro,  
e 'a mamma 'o chiamma *Ciro*, sissignore, 'o chiamma *Ciro*.  
Seh vota e gira seh  
Seh gira e vota seh  
Ca tu 'o chiamme *Ciccio* o '*Ntuono*  
Ca tu 'o chiamme *Peppe* o *Ciro**

In the popular song, national identity based on cultural codes (as names are) clashed against racial codes, and clearly the two should match if one aimed to maintain an ethnically pure nation.

Post-war film narratives articulate in various ways the risk of miscegenation. Films professing humanitarian and pacifist concerns, such as *Without Pity* or *To Live in Peace*, displace the risk by portraying the African-American soldier as a noble savage and by depicting intercourse with Italian women as childish, i.e. desexualised (Fig. 1.3).<sup>123</sup> Spontaneity, childishness, and vitality could also be turned into more unsettling representations, as in *Tombolo, paradiso nero* (*Tombolo*, Giorgio Ferroni, 1947). In the film, there is a forest called Tombolo near the US military base of Livorno that acts as a shelter and home to prostitutes, smugglers, and lascivious African-American soldiers. A former policeman, Andrea (Aldo Fabrizi), tries to bring his daughter home, who is now part of the crowd peopling the forest and exposed to the risk of sexual intercourse with libidinous black soldiers. Andrea sacrifices his life but saves his daughter's virtue. *Il mulatto* (*Angelo*, Francesco De Robertis, 1949), a post-war film directed by De Robertis, who supervised Rossellini's first feature film, *The white ship*, offers an even more racist view. It depicts the story of Matteo (Renato Baldini), forced by war to steal some food; he is caught and sent to prison. Upon his release, he discovers that Allied troops raped his wife, who died after giving birth to a blonde boy with black skin. The protagonist is forced to face conflicting feelings towards the boy, who represents pure innocence but is also a living contradiction born out of an infamous violation that caused the death of his beloved wife and incarnated an unacceptable form of hybridisation. Furthermore, the boy's presence prevents the man from getting married again. The boy's uncle, a huge African-American who learned about his brother's crime, arrives in Italy intending to atone for his family's crime: he will bring the boy to the United States. In a crucial scene, Matteo performs some typical Neapolitan songs on stage; the boy's uncle follows, and plays a spiritual, wearing a cotton-picker hat. The young boy suddenly and spontaneously acknowledges in this 'primitive' tune his true race, sits beside the uncle, and decides to leave Italy, a country now released from the burden of an intolerable racial mixture.<sup>124</sup>

*Chillo 'o fatto è niro niro, niro niro comm'a cche..'*

123 For a thorough discussion of both films and the role that John Kitzmiller embodies, see Giovacchini, 'Living in Peace after the Massacre. Neorealism, Colonialism, and Race'. See also Fidotta, 'Di una sopravvivenza del primitivo nel cinema neorealista'.

124 See Greene, *Equivocal Subjects*; Giuliani Caponnetto, *Fascist Hybridities*, notably pp. 131-169.



Fig. 1.3 The risk of miscegenation. The poster of *Senza pietà* (*Without Mercy*, Alberto Lattuada, 1947)

Ethnic-based notions of national identity circulated in post-war Italian culture and infiltrated neorealist cinema. Such conceptions of national identity enhanced the community of birth, traditions, and conservative models of family subject to patriarchal authority. Furthermore, ethnic conceptions of Italy relied on racial stereotypes and feared miscegenation. At the core of these film narratives was the body of the Italian women, which came to represent the endangered body of the nation, prey to the lusty appetites of cultural, political, and territorial aliens. Susan Hayward explained that

in narratives of the nation, 'the woman's body is closely aligned/identified with nationalist discourse.' Thus, the nationalist discourse appropriates the woman's body, which becomes a substitute for the nation: masculine characters are agents who fight for and sacrifice themselves to protect both their territory and their women, who are reductively and passively responsible for national reproduction. In order to produce a reassuring account of the traditional patriarchal order, women cannot lie with the enemy but instead are abused: rape 'becomes one way of eroticising the nation's plight in male-driven narratives that have appropriated the female body. [...] The female body by extension becomes the site of life and death of a nation, the rise and fall of a nation.'<sup>125</sup> In a period of major uncertainty regarding national unity and identity, gender roles and citizenship, an ethnic-based conception of the Italian nation—no matter how feeble—surfaced and influenced allegedly supranational, humanistic neorealist cinema.

### Controversial Screens: Neorealism, People, Media

Within a projection booth, a woman holds a girl in her arms. They both stare beyond the frame's borders into the screening room, which is peopled with men only but for one script supervisor in the background. The screening test starts, and the woman and child acknowledge a girl from a previous meeting; this girl appears on screen. First she struggles to blow out the candles on a cake, which takes multiple attempts. The men in the room heckle, while in the projection booth the anxious mother starts worrying. Then the girl on screen recites a short poem, and as she finishes, bursts into tears for no reason. The mother is now disconcerted, but the men in the projection room roar with laughter. The close-ups of the girl in tears alternate with the men loudly laughing and mocking her, but for the director, ending with a close-up of the mother in the projection booth whose facial expression shifts from dismay and sorrow to deep anger.

This renowned scene is one of the most dramatic and painful scenes of neorealist cinema overall. It is the crucial scene of *Bellissima* in which Maddalena (Anna Magnani) and her little girl are pitted against a film crew, which is at the same time the film audience. Throughout the film, Maddalena struggles to have her little girl Maria selected for a screening test, part of a contest to hire fresh faces drawn from real life for a brand-new film production directed by authoritative film director Alessandro

125 Hayward, 'Framing National Cinemas', pp. 97-98.

Blasetti. Maddalena is a passionate viewer of Hollywood movies, and in a previous scene we see her watching *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) and becoming fascinated with the landscape and exotic view of cattle crossing the river. So against all odds and against the opinion of her family and the neighbourhood, Maddalena forces her girl into the contest with the aid of allegedly professional training based on acting and dancing lessons and hairdressing and make-up, but unfortunately, these efforts produce an effect opposite to the one intended. The scene thus dramatises an acute and lucid assessment of the discrepancy between neorealist ideology, film production practices, and popular social ambitions and media diet. Whereas neorealist ideology requires authentic and popular faces, and so does the film crew and casting within *Bellissima*, film practices compel prospective actors to undergo traditional training. Popular ambitions conceive of cinema as a dreamland and a chance to redress underprivileged conditions. The audience praises Hollywood films while ridiculing the lower class when it is acting genuinely.<sup>126</sup> The scene thus highlights the contradictions between what the lower class is and wants and what cinema audiences prefer, on the one hand, and film production's vision of both, on the other.

Neorealist culture aimed to simultaneously represent and address the national community. A notion that Antonio Gramsci discussed at length and which became common currency after 1945 was the notion of the 'national-popular'. In his *Prison Writings*, Gramsci criticised Italian culture for the disjunction of the 'national' and the 'popular': in his view, the nation revolved around a restricted elite that was unaware of and indifferent to the needs and habits of the people and consequently was unable to create a culture that addressed them. If any attempts of this sort were made, they targeted the people as 'humble subjects', thereby revealing a patronising and condescending attitude.<sup>127</sup> In the post-war era, intellectuals committed themselves to radically renewing popular culture by offering a more faithful rendering of the people while understanding and incorporating previous forms of popular culture. I shall discuss this effort to create a national-popular culture from three different perspectives: national-popular culture and populism, national-popular culture as opposed to mass culture, and national-popular culture as part of the Italian Communist Party's cultural policy.

<sup>126</sup> For an insightful discussion of *Bellissima* as a critique of neorealist ideology, see Micciché, *Visconti e il neorealismo*, notably pp. 187-209.

<sup>127</sup> See the section 'Popular Culture' in *The Gramsci Reader*, pp. 363-378. See also Forgacs, 'National-popular: Genealogy of a Concept'.

Many commentators have noted an enduring attitude in Italian culture: the portrayal of the lower class in a manner that is sympathetic but also simultaneously condescending. Cultural populism—that is, the depiction of characters and the environment of the people in order to allegedly bring popular audiences into the realm of public life—can be traced back to the early days of the struggles to unite Italy. This endeavour experienced a resurgence in the post-war era. In my view, there are two reasons for this persistence. Firstly, the social and political elites were responsible for the major political shifts in recent Italian history and excluded the lower classes from taking part in these developments. Cultural populism was a way to involve at an imaginary level those whom first Italian Unification and subsequently the Resistance had failed to take in. Neorealist culture consistently coupled the *Risorgimento* (Italian Unification) with the Resistance as national upheavals in which the elites later betrayed the lower classes.<sup>128</sup> And secondly, by placing ‘the people’ on centre stage, neorealist narratives construed an image of the nation. ‘The people’ epitomised the nation, and the narratives depicting them articulated a discourse about it, reflecting on its assets and shortcomings. Through the use of vague categories such as ‘humble subjects’ (*umilt*) or ‘mankind’, resonating with broad ideological paradigms such as Catholicism and Marxism, populist culture produced a collective subject that belonged not explicitly to a class but rather to a nation.

When discussing post-war Italian culture, and namely neorealism, I believe it might be beneficial to refer to the philosopher Ernesto Laclau’s reflections on populism.<sup>129</sup> In political theory, populism is often classified as reactionary because of its association with nationalism, its appeal to irrational categories, and its tendency to use stark dichotomies (people/elite, poor/rich, national/alien, etc.) to oversimplify reality, which is much more complex. However, Laclau contends, populism constitutes collective subjects exactly through such dichotomies, whose simplification is ‘the very condition of political action’.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, Laclau considers the act of nomination—i.e. giving a name to a pre-extant conceptual entity, one that operates as a pure signifier—to be crucial in bringing together all the

128 A still unsurpassed, all-encompassing account of Italian literary populism is Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo*. An interesting film that aesthetically and thematically refers to neorealism (non-professional performers, outdoor shooting, dialects, everyday characters, humanism) is *La pattuglia sperduta* (The lost patrol, Piero Nelli, 1954). The film, however, is set during the first war for Italian Unification and tells the story of common soldiers whose commanders abandoned them and wandered astray, metaphorically betraying the national population.

129 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

130 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

different demands and needs that otherwise could not aspire to represent a whole, 'the people'. Finally, Laclau posits that some such signifiers are floating because rival hegemonic projects refer them to different particular demands. This is seen most clearly in periods in which there is a crisis of representation. In my view, post-war Italian culture generated a new collective subject that was no longer subordinate to charismatic leadership, totalitarian organisation, or political subjugation. Acts of nomination defined this collective subject, such as 'anti-fascism', or 'neorealism', which endeavoured to address widespread demands. With the rise of Cold War politics, these signifiers started floating, becoming the prey of now rival hegemonic projects, which for want of space we might term as right-wing and leftist. However, I consider it of paramount importance to highlight one fact: post-war neorealism for a brief time strove to represent the whole nation, its 'people', and in doing so encompassed very different demands, became a hegemonic project, and was considered a progressive phenomenon that sought to cut ties with the preceding era of totalitarianism. In my view, the lasting importance of Italian neorealism, in Italy and abroad, lies in its identification with modern Italy emerging from the ruins that warfare had left behind. Farassino condensed this peculiar status of cinematic neorealism by placing it between History and Geography as a school subject and, pursuing the metaphor half in jest, naming it 'the Italian of the Italian cinema'.<sup>131</sup>

To summarise, neorealist culture collected very particular demands to represent different aspects of post-war Italy. Among them are: the Resistance as a collective national redemption, as depicted in *Rome, Open City*; *Paisan*; *Outcry*; *A day in the life*; *O Sole Mio*; *Pian delle Stelle* (High plains of the Stars, Giorgio Ferroni, 1946); the condition of abandoned children in the postwar era, as in *Shoeshine*, *Proibito rubare* (*Guaglio*, Luigi Comencini, 1947), and *Campane a martello* (*Alarm Bells*, Luigi Zampa, 1949); the difficult circumstances of veterans, as seen in *The Bandit* and *Tragic Hunt*; the tragic fate of the unemployed or retired persons, as portrayed in *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D.*, and *Two Cents Worth of Hope*, or in a fairy-tale mode in *Miracle in Milan*; and the pitfalls that women had to face in a social environment granting them unprecedented freedom but also lack of (masculine) authority, as represented in *Without Pity*, *The Path of Hope*, and *Bitter Rice*. All these works assumed they were depicting reality, albeit transfigured into a universal, general interpretation. Moreover, these films articulate in visual terms the dialectic between the individual and the collectivity

131 Farassino, 'Neorealismo, storia e geografia', p. 21.

by representing protagonists stemming from or returning to the embrace of their respective communities. These communities regularly surround the protagonists and provide them with a sense of popular and national belonging. For instance, throughout *The Path of Hope*, migrating villagers always gather around the protagonist Saro (Raf Vallone), who derives his authority from this acknowledgement. Representations of collective identities recur throughout neorealist films: they always embody popular classes, although their narrative as much as their political meaning may vary. Whereas in the works of De Santis, popular groups incarnate class-conscious communities struggling for their rights, as cooperative workers in *Tragic Hunt* or rice pickers in *Bitter Rice*, in the works of Visconti or De Sica, crowds represent the lower classes, whose solidarity is far from steady. The anglers in *The Earth Trembles* waver between the rebellious 'Ntoni, who wants to fight for their rights, and the fishmongers, who represented the capitalist exploitation of the former's labour. In *Bellissima*, large groups of people in the protagonist's dwelling strive to reincorporate the rebellious Maddalena into the community. In *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio, the main character, confronts 'the people' as he enters the popular neighbourhood in the tracks of the thief who stole his bike, where he is first challenged and then eventually harshly rejected. However, all the above-mentioned protagonists embody individuals belonging to the lower class, and their paths throughout the narratives illustrate alternatives for the people to change and improve their conditions. Neorealist films articulated the social demands circulating within post-war society, and generated representations of the people while positing viable options for them to elevate their conditions.

Post-war efforts to foster a more democratic and inclusive society dealt with alternative notions of popular culture. Post-war Italy did strive to overcome the inherited separation of high and popular culture. Such efforts frequently conflicted with prevailing popular taste, which revealed its significant discrepancy with what intellectuals believed national-popular culture should be. In other words, the notion of national-popular culture circulating in post-war Italy often did not match popular cultural practices. Whereas social and cultural elites began appreciating traditional, folkloric culture as a pure expression of the idealised, rural population, which in turn incarnated the nation, mass culture was anonymous and alien and thus seen as suspicious. However, the people, notably in the rapidly growing urban areas, had no qualms about mass culture. Italian popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century was largely regional, due to the late unification of the country, which brought together areas with very different traditions,

social structures, and levels of modernisation; the slow dissemination of the Italian language as a shared means of communication;<sup>132</sup> the uneven presence of mass media, mostly limited to the main metropolitan areas and to the Northern regions, which left large parts of the nation without access to cultural and technological developments happening in the cities and beyond national borders.<sup>133</sup> Fascism largely promoted linguistic and political unification to keep a better grip on an otherwise fragmented country and society. Furthermore, in the inter-war period, media production and consumption significantly increased, laying the groundwork for the Italian media industry's growth after 1945, which helped to mould the nation's identity.<sup>134</sup> And the post-war era and reconstruction led to large flows of internal migration, as huge portions of the population from the rural areas streamed into urban environments.<sup>135</sup> However, post-war projects designed to renew popular culture mostly turned to traditional, pre-modern forms, as was the case with popular music. The post-war era saw an unprecedented wave of ethnological surveys on folkloric music,<sup>136</sup> and film scores bear traces of this endeavour. Classical composers like Goffredo Petrassi elaborated on folk tunes for films such as *Bitter Rice* and *Under the Olive Tree*, and frequently a popular tradition was invented that never existed in real practice.<sup>137</sup> Italian high culture, therefore, tried to appropriate traditional popular culture and to occasionally invent one matching its ideals, in a process that the German-American sociologist Herbert Gans terms 'gentrification'.<sup>138</sup> In this process, the 'higher' classes adopt some forms originating from underprivileged social layers and adjust them to the image they have of the people. What is most striking about Gans' explanation is that the process of gentrification only takes place once the lower classes have abandoned these cultural forms.

Despite the major differences that still existed between rural and urban areas and Northern and Southern regions in the post-war era, the lower classes consistently moved towards unified mass culture and slowly

132 De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*.

133 See Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era 1880-1980*.

134 Forgacs and Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*.

135 For an overview of this process, see Crainz, *Storia del miracolo italiano*.

136 See Leydi, *L'altra musica. Etnomusicologia*.

137 The same happened with the successful tune *Vitti 'na crozza*, which was sung all along *The Path of Hope* but was composed for the occasion and never existed previously as such. See Buffa, *Carlo Rustichelli. Un musicista per il cinema*. In the wake of pioneering work by Richard Dyer, I address this question in previous research. See Dyer, 'Music, People and Reality'; Pitassio, 'Popular Tradition, American Madness, and Some Opera'.

138 Gans, 'New Introduction. The Popular Culture-High Culture Distinction: Still Relevant?'

abandoned folklore. Modern forms of urban popular culture infiltrated neorealism. If we look at showmanship, playwrights, or urban popular music, it is not hard to find examples. For instance, popular comedians such as revue performer Erminio Macario starred in two films, namely *Come persi la guerra* (How I lost the war, Carlo Borghesio, 1947) and *L'eroe della strada* (The hero of the street, Carlo Borghesio, 1948). These two films lined up many actors usually cast in neorealist productions and dealt with typical neorealist subjects, i.e. fortuitous Italian heroism during World War Two and post-war social inequalities. However, until the late 1980s, film criticism and film history hardly recognised these productions as significant attempts to hybridise popular showmanship and contemporary social concerns. An often-neglected film, a comedy titled *Natale al campo 119* (*Christmas at Camp 119*, Gianni Franciolini, 1947) set in a camp for war prisoners, conjures up an image of the nation by casting popular film stars and music stars and featuring different regional songs, recorded on vinyl discs which the prisoners play, each recollecting his native town. *Christmas at Camp 119* exemplifies the relevance of mediated culture in celebrating local identities while creating a new, national one. However, despite its subject (war sufferings) and the actors cast in it (Vittorio De Sica, Massimo Girotti, Aldo Fabrizi, Nando Bruno, Carlo Campanini, among many others), which could be associated with neorealist production, the film has not been included in the neorealist canon. Actually, cultural elites dismissed similar attempts and disdained popular cinema based on melodramas, revues, or farces. Ironically, though, such popular cinema derived much of its narrative patterns, characters, scores, and styles of performance from pre-modern forms, which post-war culture looked upon kindly. For instance, it is hard to conceive of post-war melodrama without the Neapolitan *sceneggiata*, a form of popular theatre based on highly polarised dramatic plots that alternated songs, music, and theatre performance. Furthermore, together with the increasing political polarisation in Italy during the Cold War, cultural elites often praised a radical arthouse notion of neorealism, expressed in such masterpieces as *The Earth Trembles*, or *Umberto D.* even when, despite its outstanding artistic achievements, this production failed to meet popular taste. In the early 1950s, Italo Calvino regretted in hindsight the opportunity that neorealist cinema let slip when seeking to create national-popular culture:

Cinema means sitting amidst people panting, wheezing, chuckling, eating candies, disturbing, getting in and out, maybe reading aloud the titles as in the silent era; cinema is these people, plus a story happening on a

screen. [...] An arthouse film is a wonderful thing, but it will always be a unique artwork, something we are making and then go to watch it, while blinking and smacking our lips. Though, whether the language of Visconti, De Sica, Rossellini, Castellani could proliferate, turn from poetic style into common language, and give way to a good series of regular popular dramas and farces—that's what was interesting in new Italian cinema. Then we would have the evidence that it was not just a cultural movement, but it was dialectically linked to the audience's demands and taste. That's why the most interesting director is Luigi Zampa. Perhaps also Steno and Monicelli. Even Germi, although Germi always knows too well what he is aiming at.<sup>139</sup>

The Italian Communist Party played a major role in advocating a vision of this national-popular culture and of the Italian nation overall. Whereas neorealist ideology requires authentic and popular faces, and so does the film crew and casting within *Bellissima*, film practices compel prospective actors to undergo traditional training. As Eric Hobsbawm explained, post-war patriotism could be combined with an aspiration to social revolution: whereas revolution united the world's working classes, patriotism expressed the rejection of local rulers who supported Fascism in the inter-war period and the willingness to counter the allegiances of ruling classes with new international hegemonic powers, namely the US.<sup>140</sup> The USSR loomed large in this scenario, as it promoted international solidarity between the working classes, under its aegis, and praised national-popular culture. The Italian Communist Party insisted on representing 'the people', that is, the true essence of the nation. Communist leader Emilio Sereni in 1948 declared on the pages of the communist journal *Rinascita* that 'world culture and human civilization can grow only from national cultures' autonomous development and mutual fertilization', and explicitly countered a 'colourless and poisonous cosmopolitan anti-culture'.<sup>141</sup> In the Communist Party's view, national traditions consisted of either nineteenth-century literature, notably realist writers such as Verga,<sup>142</sup> with rural folklore, or with historical phenomena allegedly incarnating the people, such as the Italian Unification

139 Calvino, 'Il realismo italiano nel cinema e nella letteratura', p. 262.

140 Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, pp. 145-148.

141 Sereni, 'Il Congresso di Wrocław', p. 312.

142 Communist intellectual Fabrizio Onofri, who was responsible for propaganda from 1946, spared only Giovanni Verga within bourgeois culture. See Onofri, 'Irresponsabilità dell'arte sotto il fascismo'.

or the Resistance.<sup>143</sup> Conversely, cosmopolitan anti-culture easily adopted mass culture imported from the United States. Hollywood cinema, pulp literature, or comics were explicitly condemned,<sup>144</sup> and some late neorealism documentary works overtly criticised imported mass culture. Examples include *Zona pericolosa* (Dangerous area, Francesco Maselli, 1952), which dealt with the nefarious influence that Hollywood films and American comics exerted on Italian children, or *Le fidanzate di carta* (Paper fiancées, Renzo Renzi, 1951), a film that takes a critical look at pin-up culture. To explain this view, Communist cultural policy referred mostly to print culture and was suspicious of visual and mass culture. Moreover, this cultural policy considered popular culture in terms of education: 'the people' needed access to the 'real' culture, which the party should select for them and teach them about. Finally, Communist leaders' notion of culture was not industrial but instead was centred on abstract notions of cultural value over production practice; 'real' culture was thus in their eyes mostly nineteenth-century realist literature.<sup>145</sup>

The Communist Party also strove to keep pace with social developments. Party rallies, together with the cultural magazines that the party promoted, attempted to match popular taste and cultural practices: magazines and party gatherings included beauty contests, celebrity culture, modern dances, or photo-romances, to mention just a few examples.<sup>146</sup> However, generally speaking, the party's cultural policy maintained a patronising attitude towards popular culture and championed literary realism over other forms. On these grounds, the Communist Party appropriated neorealism, considered to be the national-popular culture par excellence. In this view, neorealism was closely associated with the Resistance and anti-fascism as the true expression of the Italian nation.<sup>147</sup> Furthermore, neorealism was seen as being simply the final and most renowned episode of the Italian path to realism, from Verga's novels and tales through some Italian silent films such as *Sperduti nel buio* (Lost in the dark, Nino Martoglio, 1914) or *Assunta Spina* (Gustavo Serena and Francesca Bertini, 1915) to Visconti's *Obsession*. Some filmmakers embraced this political reading by identifying only neorealist production with popular cinema because it dealt with the people. Gianni Puccini, an influential film critic, screenplay writer, and

143 Lizzani, 'Temi da ritrovare: Resistenza e Storia'.

144 See, for instance, Jotti, 'La questione dei fumetti'.

145 Forgacs, 'The Italian Communist Party and Culture'.

146 Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow*.

147 See, for instance, the interpretation provided in Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano*.

full-fledged member of the *Cinema* group who also worked for Visconti and De Santis, declared that Italian postwar cinema was national-popular:

Our time [...] presents a huge task, which the generation of Italian Unification just started to attend to: turning Italy into a united and modern nation. [...]. Italian cinema is popular because, first of all, it looks for its protagonists in a much wider pool than ever before. Most of all, it is inspired by the passions and hopes of huge popular layers and captures their fighting anti-fascism first [...] and then their yearning for a more just existence.<sup>148</sup>

As soon as the Cold War intensified in the late 1940s, this perspective narrowed to the point of subjugating the hybrid, multifarious, and ideologically diverse practice of neorealism to the template of socialist realism, as it was termed earlier in the USSR and then exported to its satellite countries during the Cold War. What feels missing in this debate is a sound reflection on popular practices and taste as much as a prospective view on media industries. The former and the latter underwent major changes in the post-war era.

Post-war neorealist culture aimed to appeal to a national and popular audience. Literature underwent an unprecedented renewal in its search for a broader, less cultivated readership than before.<sup>149</sup> In fact, until then, Italian literature included few novels that addressed a large audience and mostly consisted of highly refined writing in terms of language, subjects, and writing style. Cinema faced a completely different situation: inter-war film production relied heavily on theatrical plays and acting and not on art cinema, except for a few examples, and the target audience was the common man. In the post-war era, film production continued to target the common people but it also initiated an auteur cinema previously unknown to domestic production. Furthermore, prominent personalities such as directors Carmine Gallone and Augusto Genina, who had initiated their careers during the 1910s, merged traditional cultural forms and values with realist tones and contemporary subjects. For instance, Gallone, a specialist in historical epics and opera-related blockbusters, brought together operatic settings and storylines, relying on Giacomo Puccini's opera *Tosca* (1899) and

<sup>148</sup> Puccini, 'Per una discussione sul film italiano', pp. 15-16.

<sup>149</sup> See Falcetto, *Storia della narrativa neorealista*, from p. 80 on; Ferroni, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, from p. 349 on; Luperini and Melfi, *Neorealismo, neodecadentismo, avanguardia*.

a story of the Resistance to produce a major postwar box-office winner: *Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma* (*Before Him All Rome Trembled*, 1946).<sup>150</sup> Genina, also a veteran with significant international experience,<sup>151</sup> made use of all the typical components of neorealist style in *Cielo sulla palude* (*Heaven over the Marshes*, 1949) such as outdoor shooting, non-professional performers, and underprivileged characters. The film tells the story of a young martyr, Maria Goretti, whom Catholic believers worshipped for her integrity. In 1902, she sacrificed her life in order to avoid sexual intercourse. Just one year after the film's release, Pope Pius XII consecrated her as a saint. And finally, many productions merged art cinema with film genres, either imported or domestic.

Alberto Lattuada's neorealist films, such as *The Bandit* or *Without Pity*, blended European inter-war art cinema—with regard to lighting and setting, noir subjects and narrative patterns (crime, perversion, lost heroes)—with the wretched landscape of Italy in the war's aftermath.<sup>152</sup> A good deal of the early films that Pietro Germi directed, from *Gioventù perduta* (*Lost Youth*, 1947) to *La città si difende* (*Four Ways Out*, 1951), combine contemporary Italian subjects with classical Hollywood narrative style, as shaped by film genres such as western and gangster movies.<sup>153</sup> He makes use of psychologically defined individuals struggling to solve a conflict, causality driving the narratives and motivating its temporal structure, double causal structure (romance/action), linearity, and a clear ending.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, Germi's films blatantly refer to previous Hollywood artworks, as is the case with *In the Name of the Law* quoting *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), or with *The Path of Hope* relying on *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940). Germi seemed very conscious of these stylistic achievements and their related aim, i.e. targeting popular audiences, as he declared:

The audience in popular movie-theatres is the one mostly appreciating my films. Though, I am not sure whether it appreciates their good or

150 Farassino, *Carminé Gallone*.

151 Grmek Germani and Martinelli (eds), *Il cinema di Augusto Genina*.

152 De Vincenti argues that the post-war bodies of work of directors such as Castellani, Lattuada, or Zampa are under the sign of 'the blatant contradiction between their belonging to the pool of neorealist works (sometimes, to the "masterpieces") and their belonging for the most part to "established" cinematic rhetorics', which proves their 'outsspoken, sometimes obvious reflexivity.' De Vincenti, 'Il dopoguerra di Castellani, Lattuada e Zampa', p. 207.

153 I discuss Germi's post-war work in Pitassio, 'Giovani di poche speranze: Pietro Germi nel secondo dopoguerra'.

154 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*.

bad features. By good I mean aesthetic features, and by bad attractions: melodrama, plot, twists; which, all in all, I also like.<sup>155</sup>

Germi's point, reflected also in De Santis' work previously mentioned, is telling: it illustrates the conflict between two opposing views on cinema's social function. On the one hand, political and cultural elites insisted that cinema portray reality and expose its shortcomings, and convey aesthetic values, and on the other, they expected cinema to distract and entertain the audience and to avoid stirring up the masses. Cinema should thus either instruct or distract the people, who are not considered active subjects in their own right. For instance, the release of the film *In the Name of the Law* gave rise to parliamentary questions about the film's topic. The film was based on a popular novel, *Piccola pretura* (*Small Magistrates' Court*, 1948), written by the former judge Giuseppe Guido Lo Schiavo recollecting his previous work in Sicily in the inter-war period. The story pits a young judge appointed in a small Sicilian village against the local aristocracy and mafia against the backdrop of misery and social protest. The Office for Censorship approved the film without hesitation.<sup>156</sup> However, the film sparked an intense parliamentary discussion. Representatives of the ruling Christian Democracy complained that the film distorted Sicilian reality, which, in their opinion, tarnished the region's decorum and dignity. Conversely, both the Socialists and the Communists accepted at face value the representation offered by the movie and urged the administration to launch strong initiatives to counter local mafia power and redress Sicilian social inequalities.<sup>157</sup> Two prominent Christian Democrat leaders—future president Giovanni Leone and many times prime minister Giulio Andreotti—rebuked both attacks in an exemplary way. Leone highlighted how the judge and the police in the film conquer unlawfulness, arguing that it crystallised the spirit of law and order that imbued the nation and its people and thus put the film beyond political polemic. Andreotti, who was responsible for cinema during the postwar era, provided parliament with a much more refined argument. To begin with, he recalled that the film had been approved by the Office of Censorship. He then pointed out that both film critics and filmgoers had highly appreciated *In the Name of the Law*, reporting in detail the box-office revenues. Then he concluded that fiction films are artworks and thus should not be judged on the grounds of their reference to a supposed reality but on their own terms. Andreotti's argument is interesting

<sup>155</sup> Germi, 'Che cosa pensano del pubblico', p. 322.

<sup>156</sup> See *In nome della Legge*, visa no. 5362.

<sup>157</sup> See the minutes of the debate: 'Discussioni'.

for two reasons: because it disempowered the stance that neorealist works were renditions of contemporary Italy by positing that films are fictions, and because it appreciated neorealist productions, provided they were popular, i.e. successful at the box office. In other words, the individual responsible for Italian cinema during the reconstruction era supported national film production as long as the films were tailored to popular audiences. However, some film critic reproached attempts such as *In the Name of the Law* precisely for being popular and for relying on formulaic but effective options. In their view, these formulaic options prevented filmmakers from capturing reality; indeed, rather than proving the power of the film to attract an audience, box-office success exposed the collusion of the filmmaker with commercial interests to the detriment of art and knowledge. The reaction to *In the Name of the Law* is a good example of this.<sup>158</sup>

Neorealist stylistic and political novelty frequently converged with traditional Italian culture or new mass culture. This convergence created unique hybrids, which were often successful. However, contemporary and later interpretations of this era gave prominence to a narrow understanding of neorealism based on stylistic novelty and social criticism. This meant that such interpretations rejected those productions that catered to popular taste and even contended that reactionary political forces had stifled neorealist film production.<sup>159</sup>

The war's aftermath and the need to reconstruct the national film industry alongside the country and the national identity produced two different views of the stakes such an endeavour implied. From October 1945 to December 1949, when the last and most extensive law on cinema was promulgated, a series of bills served to define the national film industry and mould it after the collapse of Fascist rule. The crucial issue that Allied and national representatives faced when drawing up the first decree (no. 678, October 1945) was the governance of the Italian film market. Whereas it was relatively easy to come to a general agreement over the abolition of pre-emptive censorship and Fascist restrictions on film production, the issue of film imports and the viable options for the survival of the national film industry were another matter altogether.<sup>160</sup> More specifically, the chief

158 See the review of *In the Name of the Law*, Doglio, 'Personaggi equivoci e nuova decadenza'. See also the ensuing replies: F. Ber., 'I lettori e il cinema italiano. La "legge di Germi"'; Viazzi, 'I film non piovono dal cielo'.

159 See, for instance, the opinion expressed in Lizzani, 'Verso il realismo', in *Il cinema italiano*, pp. 157-172; Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema italiano*.

160 A detailed account of this transition can be found in Quaglietti, *Il cinema italiano del dopoguerra. Leggi produzione distribuzione esercizio*, pp. 5-9. See also Quaglietti, *Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano 1945-1980*.

request put forward by the Allied forces, and notably the Psychological Warfare Branch, was the removal of: 1) any monopolistic restriction on film imports, 2) the quota forcing exhibitors to screen one Italian film for every two foreign ones, and 3) the prohibition against distributing foreign products dubbed abroad. This request was to a large extent granted, and the first post-war bill on cinema opened the way for the unbounded presence of Hollywood in Italy. No protectionist measures sheltered the national film industry from foreign imports, apart from one: a tax relief consisting of 10% of the admissions was secured for national feature films, plus an additional 4% for those films judged to be artistic. To sum up, the first post-war law on the film industry opened the Italian market up to the foreign film industry. This favoured the domestic distributors and notably the exhibitors, whose offer consisted mostly of imported films. However, the 1945 decree also tried to spare what remained of the national film industry by supporting films that proved to be popular, mostly on a regional basis, since Cinecittà studios were still out of business and the top-grossing films on a national basis were mostly Hollywood products. Given this scenario, decree no. 678 had another side effect: it fostered film productions dealing with national contemporary issues that were experimental in terms of production schemes and style, since these films could benefit from an additional tax relief equivalent to 4% of their total revenues. Moreover, as competing directly with Hollywood films was too difficult under such circumstances, this encouraged the national production of more innovative initiatives. The first post-war bill thus regarded national cinema as a minority production that was aimed at either local popular audiences or at cultural elites and the national film industry as one that focused chiefly on brokerage and sales, that is, on distributing and exhibiting foreign goods. Under the aegis of this bill, neorealist cinema flourished.

Two years later, in 1947, an additional bill followed—decree no. 379—also known as the ‘80 Days bill’. Following complaints from the film industry’s labour organisations and from film producers, this new law aimed to support national film production on the domestic market. Rather than imposing a tax on foreign imports, as the film industry had requested, the bill maintained the tax relief for national film productions and required exhibitors to programme Italian films for a minimum of 20 days every three months (hence the nickname ‘80 Days bill’). At the same time, the decree created a Central Film Office that coordinated and oversaw the film industry but also monitored the content of ongoing productions. While this new bill still supported foreign producers as well as national distributors and exhibitors, it also enabled the national film industry to stand on its own

feet again. In fact, through decree no. 379 the national film industry was ensured stable financial support, slots in the national film market, and a clear institutional counterpart. The bill fostered a national audiovisual space that derived its well-being from foreign imports but favoured the launch of neorealist films aimed at popular audiences, such as those that Germi, Lattuada, and De Santis directed for Lux Film, working together with young, soon-to-be renowned producers such as Carlo Ponti, Dino De Laurentiis, or Luigi Rovere.<sup>161</sup> It is important to note that the administration was not only responsible for the national film industry but also supervised it and could mould its political orientation. The case of *Lost Youth*, a film dealing with urban criminal youth and postwar social decay, is paradigmatic in this regard. Undersecretary Giulio Andreotti attempted to hinder the release and export of the film at various stages,<sup>162</sup> which triggered widespread protest among filmmakers.

Two more bills concluded the decade: decree no. 448, which went into effect on 26 July 1949, and decree no. 958, which was passed on 29 December 1949. The former forced distributors of foreign films to pay a flat fee for every imported film, the money going to an account for the benefit of national film production. Simultaneously, for every national film they produced, national film producers could import one foreign film without having to pay the fee. The permissions to import films film producers received by producing Italian works could be transferred to other distributors. Decree no. 958, also known as the 'Legge Andreotti', or the Andreotti Law, safeguarded the existence of the national film industry in the ensuing decade. It maintained the general framework of previous decrees (political supervision, free market and limited protectionism, indirect support for national film production) while increasing from 4 to 8% the additional tax relief for works of artistic value. What most likely tipped the scale from distributors and exhibitors to producers was the need not to alienate the latter, who were often active in other industrial sectors too, as well as the desire to cut off the Italian Communist Party, which championed the interests of film producers and film workers alike. In fact, a huge demonstration in support of the national film industry took place in Rome on 20 February 1949. Film producers, directors, and stars attended the demonstration, and the leader of the leftist labour

161 See Farassino and Sanguineti (eds), *La Lux*; Farassino (ed.), *Lux Film*.

162 See Andreotti's personal notes in 1947, now preserved at the Cineteca di Bologna or in his personal archive, at the Istituto Luigi Sturzo. The Undersecretary judged the film, which pictured in bleak tones post-war Italian society and bourgeois elites, to be unsuitable for distribution or export. A description of these documents can be found at: <http://www.italiataglia.it> (Last access: 16 November 2017).

organisation, Giuseppe Di Vittorio, gave the final speech.<sup>163</sup> In May, Emilio Sereni, a former minister and prominent Communist leader, made a speech in parliament in which he complained about the overwhelming presence of Hollywood films, the difficulties faced by national film producers, the obstacles placed in neorealist cinema's way, and the growing influence of the Catholic Church in guiding the content of Italian films.<sup>164</sup> He outlined his own ideas for a national film industry: a new law would shelter it from dumping practices by imposing a tax on imports and a limitation on their number, and a state organisation would support national film production, whose works ought not to resemble 'the forms of "American-style" stardom, which have nothing to do with art and artistic cinema'.<sup>165</sup>

Sereni and the Communist Party drew up plans for a national film industry resembling nationalised film industries in Eastern Europe. They envisaged production support—both financial and in terms of content—coming from the state, and cultural and artistic values being promoted and ideally incarnated in national identity. Leftist parties defended abstract ideals of art and cultural value and championed neorealist culture, which promoted a pre-modern representation of the nation. But as media scholar Alberto Abruzzese has pointed out, the left was inadequate when it came to managing the media industry.<sup>166</sup> Andreotti and the Christian Democrats, by contrast, had a more articulated project by which they rapidly took over the national media industry either by gaining control of the state apparatus—including radio broadcasting and, from the early 1950s, TV broadcasting<sup>167</sup>—or by making agreements with key stakeholders. The new law supported national film production by matching the needs of foreign producers with those of domestic distributors and exhibitors—two crucial sectors of the European film industry. In fact, Andreotti championed neorealist cinema as the spearhead of arthouse film production,<sup>168</sup> creating the circumstances that enabled foreign money to be channeled into national film production and maintaining the prominence that the distribution and

163 De Santis, 'Piazza del Popolo, prima e dopo'; De Agostini and Mida, 'L'ordine non regna più a Varsavia'; De Agostini and Mida, 'L'ordine non regna più a Varsavia (Continuazione e fine)'.

164 The connection between religious, economic, and political interests as related to the post-war Italian film industry has been explored in Treveri-Gennari, *Post-war Italian Cinema*.

165 Sereni, 'Per la difesa del cinema italiano', p. 97.

166 Abruzzese, 'Scrittura, cinema, territorio'.

167 See Cesareo, 'L'avvento della televisione e il cinema negli anni cinquanta: la nascita di un nuovo apparato'; Pinto, *Intellettuali e Tv negli anni '50*; Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia*.

168 See Andreotti, 'I film italiani nella polemica parlamentare'.

exhibition sectors had gained in the post-war era in a market which, by the late 1940s, had become the biggest in Europe. This led to later agreements between the Italian government and the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA) that increased American investments in Italy and helped Italian film distribution in the United States.<sup>169</sup> Andreotti's law maintained government control over national film production and its contents as well as over submitted grants and funding for prior political approval.

The law implemented at the end of the neorealist epoch created the conditions for a prosperous national film market, one in which Hollywood was the hegemonic force but which also benefitted national film production through funding financed by revenues from imports. As a result, film production moved beyond its post-war experimental phase: it became consistent and more rooted in the national film market; it heralded Italy's national identity abroad; and it became part and parcel of the post-war transatlantic commercial and cultural space through transatlantic commercial agreements. Italian national cinema had entered a new era, one that can properly be called post-neorealist.

### Teaching in the Middle of Ruins. International Neorealism

Two American soldiers drive in a jeep through the countryside of Central Italy. They reach a town, Orvieto, heavily bombed, presumably by Allied forces. The two men, Dick (Leo Dale) and Tom (Adolfo Celi), wander through the wretched landscape, looking for something to drink. Buildings in ruins tower over the two human presences, who walk cautiously. Then a bell attracts their attention. They find a church, heavily damaged, where a priest is celebrating Mass before a crowd of believers. The two soldiers move forward, pass through some courtyards and rubble, and finally reach the remains of what was once a school. In the classroom, deprived of part of its walls and a roof, a group of kids sitting on benches listen to the lesson taught by a young teacher (Valentina Cortese). From the outside, the two men observe the teacher spark the pupils' curiosity and laughter. Then the teacher notices them. She loses the thread of her lesson and becomes embarrassed, while the kids laugh and yell. The two soldiers seem to disappear. They walk around to enter the class while the teacher is writing on the blackboard and then proceed to distribute chewing gum to all the kids. They pretend to be

169 See Quaglietti, *Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano*, notably pp. 94-106; Bizzarri and Solaroli, *L'industria cinematografica italiana*.



Fig. 1.4 Teaching amidst the ruins. Valentina Cortese in *Un americano in vacanza* (*A Yank in Rome*, Luigi Zampa, 1946)

two schoolboys, ready to learn the Italian language. The teacher gets fed up and stops teaching, asking the kids to leave (Fig. 4).

One of the early sequences of *Un americano in vacanza* (*A Yank in Rome*, Luigi Zampa, 1946) presents some of the issues I will be dealing with in the following section. The film, which was produced with ‘the friendly support of the Allied forces’, as the credits read, conveys the sense of grievance and loss that warfare inflicted on the Italian population at the hands of both occupying forces. Furthermore, Zampa’s movie depicts the features of national identity, such as Catholicism, for a foreign eye. It is the first encounter between the two Americans and the Italian town; only a few minutes before, the credits passed by against the image of St. Peter’s Square, epitomising the Vatican. Most of all, *A Yank in Rome* stages the meeting of a nation, embodied by the industrious, modest, and pure teacher, with another—smart and goal-oriented but often disrespectful of habits and traditions—as Dick proves to be.<sup>170</sup> This is an encounter between a woman

170 The importance of the teacher’s morality is highlighted in the remarks the censorship committee’s member Vittorio Calvino added to the subject: he praised it explicitly. See Calvino, ‘Remarks for the Undersecretary’.

and a man but also between a teacher and a mocking schoolboy who deserves to be taught a lesson. Finally, the film was made within an audiovisual space that had been significantly determined by the Allies, and notably the American occupying forces, and thus, their presence could not go unnoticed and had to be dealt with, in this case by Maria as she deals with Dick in the film to finally win his heart.<sup>171</sup>

Henceforth, I shall discuss neorealism through the lens of international relations. First, I locate the role of neorealist cinema in devising a reborn country—that is, Italy—and making it known to its international counterparts. Cinema played this function within a broader cultural and political framework, fostering international and reciprocal understanding. In addition, I outline the exchanges of neorealist cinema with its most burdensome opponent, Hollywood and American culture overall. Finally, I briefly linger on the topic of how Italian neorealist cinema was discussed on the other side of the Iron Curtain and what its political and stylistic significance was for film culture in these socialist countries.

Italian neorealist cinema appeared at a time when world politics was undergoing major shifts. The desire among many nation-states to bring an end to conflicted approaches in state-to-state relations and to bury for good Hitler's infamous idea of a New Order of Europe led to the creation of the United Nations and its various branch organisations such as the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). These institutions promoted a new political framework known as international humanism. This notion deserves closer inspection. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 in Paris, addressed and crystallised many of the concerns and debates arising worldwide at the time. Its preamble declared that it was meant to set 'a common standard of achievement for *all peoples and all nations*, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, *national and international*, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance'.<sup>172</sup> This short excerpt showcases the three reference points around which the Declaration revolves: individuals, nations, and the

171 A brief but thorough discussion of the film can be found in Pezzotta, *Ridere civilmente*, pp. 100-103.

172 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'.

international arena. With regard to individuals, the Declaration specified that: '(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.'<sup>173</sup> Whereas the Declaration promoted the cross-border movement of people, it also contended that nations were the prime reference point for individuals. Moreover, the Declaration's preamble singled out the toolkit available to societies and individuals for promoting human rights, that is, 'teaching and education', which should aim to foster reciprocal acknowledgement between nations and individuals. As Julian Huxley, the first Director General of UNESCO, remarked in 1946:

In the forefront is set Unesco's collaboration in 'the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication' and in the obtaining of international agreements 'necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image'.<sup>174</sup>

Cultural exchange takes place between peoples—a notion that rapidly expands into that of nations—for mutual acknowledgement. To sum up, in the post-war era, a new framework for international relations emerged that promoted human values and encouraged recognition and cooperation among nations. Moreover, culture acted as a crucial means to develop these relations and to foster mutual understanding.

Cinema fulfilled a special function in this scheme, which heralded what film theoretician Dudley Andrew has called the 'federated phase' of world cinema. During this period, humanism became associated with art cinema; actual knowledge about foreign nations through films went hand in hand with their international circulation; and film festivals acted as initiatives independent 'from business concerns and promising that films from anywhere could speak as they might choose and be given a chance to make a difference culturally and politically'.<sup>175</sup> In 1951, *Courier*, UNESCO's bulletin, published a special issue on cinema. Its cover displayed a picture of the non-professional Italian actress Elena Varzi in *The Path of Hope*. Ross McLean, Head of the Film and Visual Information Division of UNESCO, opened the issue with an editorial that focused on the ways that cinema could promote international understanding, in which he stated:

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Huxley, *UNESCO. Its Purpose and Its Philosophy*, p. 6.

<sup>175</sup> Andrew, 'Time Zones and Jetlag. The Flows and Phases of World Cinema', p. 70.

The study of film as a means to human understanding is not a mere intellectual exercise. It is part of a continuing study we have all got to make in our search for harmony in a tortured world. The power of the film to entertain and to distract, to move to action, to hatred and contempt, to compassion and respect, is everywhere agreed. [...] To say that the film has the power to interpret life and help to create a harmonious world is not to suggest that it should in any way depart from its duty to entertain. But it is to suggest again that in the search for themes it is possible for a greater number of writers and producers and directors and players in a greater number of countries to lift their eyes above the frontiers which divide mankind and from whatever vision they command help to create a design for life instead of a passion or an excuse for death or oblivion.<sup>176</sup>

McLean seems to have in mind films offering a fictional narrative that mirrors reality and delivers information about it—films that entertain while teaching. What he seems to be talking about is post-war realism.

The background for this phase of world and media history is what French sociologist Luc Boltanski names the ‘politics of pity’, a concept that draws on Hannah Arendt.<sup>177</sup> Boltanski contends that a politics of pity, which is closely related to modern media, does not equal a politics of justice, which is based on an abstract notion of fairness. Nor can a politics of pity be equated with compassion, which relies on individual identification with those who suffer. The politics of pity is rooted in the spectacle of suffering; it requires physical distance and is not ‘centred directly on *action*, on the power of the *strong* over the *weak*, but on *observation*: observation of the *unfortunate* by those who do not share their suffering, who do not experience it directly and who, as such, may be regarded as fortunate or lucky people’.<sup>178</sup> Moreover, a politics of pity encompasses both the singular, which is the specific case depicted, and the abstract, that is, a generalisation of represented conditions, which needs to be illustrative in order to address a distant audience. If we go back to the Declaration quoted above, we can easily associate Boltanski’s argument with the efforts the United Nations undertook to hold together individuals and peoples, nations and supranational institutions. Finally, when considering some neorealist films, which revolve around the sufferings of the Italian population but do not speak exclusively to a domestic audience, one can easily see the conflation of singularity and universalism. In fact,

<sup>176</sup> McLean, ‘International Understanding and the Cinema’, p. 2.

<sup>177</sup> Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the written credits shown at the outset of such films presenting the story soon to unfold consistently underline two crucial factors: first, what we are going to see is a fictitious story that nevertheless could happen and is closely connected with actual reality; second, it is an individual narrative, but its meaning is universal. Such epigraphs appear in films as diverse as *The Earth Trembles*, *Without Pity*, and *Shoeshine*, to name the most remarkable, and all hint at the universal meaning of the stories we are about to watch. As Italian film theoretician Luigi Chiarini clarified in his contribution to the special issue of *Courier* mentioned above,

Three fundamental factors [...] explain the importance of films as a medium for international understanding: their immense popularity and wide circulation; their direct visual character which makes them a magnificent instrument for concrete, first-hand knowledge; and their artistic qualities born of a concentration on significant detail which permit them to translate the universal through the particular.<sup>179</sup>

Chiarini underlined the importance of cinema as a mass medium, its immediate effectiveness because of its visual character, and its conflation of specificity and universality. Italian cinema was able to speak to a global audience by visually conveying information about Italy, which was embedded in local reality but implied a universal appeal. Italian neorealist cinema appeared at a time when supranational agencies such as those of the UN operated to create general frameworks for promoting a culture of mutual understanding, which conferred special status to cultural products that described to distant observers a national circumstance, and notably a nation's hardships. Cinema and photography, more than other forms of expression, matched the aims of such supranational agencies.

In the wake of Boltanski's reflection, the American film scholar Karl Schoonover elaborates on the association of neorealist cinema with a 'visual culture whose politics have for the last sixty years been organized around witnessing'.<sup>180</sup> Schoonover locates this production historically against the backdrop of a new diplomatic and political endeavour leading to post-war transatlantic relationships and the Marshall Plan. In fact, I posit that neorealist cinema was able to act as a representative of a new Italian path at different international levels—the supranational level, like the one set by the United Nations, and the international level, on both sides of the Iron

179 Chiarini, 'The Italian Film: A Mirror of Mankind's Social Responsibility', p. 3.

180 Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*, p. xxxiii.

Curtain from 1948 on. Why did Italian cinema tower over other national film industries in globally advocating this realist visual culture?

I argue that Italian neorealist cinema acted as an emissary of the new nation while also tapping into issues that concerned many other countries. The new Italian nation combined democracy, a republic, and universal suffrage. Moreover, cinema represented the nation's impressive cultural heritage as much as its unique landscape as well as its need for recovery, reconstruction, and consequently financial and technical aid. By exposing the country's material destruction, the grievances of the population, and its fight for freedom, its underdevelopment as much as its recent achievements, post-war neorealism redeemed Italy in the eyes of other countries for its original sin of having been the birthplace of Fascism. As the Cold War set in, universal humanism and political diplomacy also affected film history and circulation, as efforts to redeem belligerent nations and establish new bonds and allegiances also involved culture. This was a way to circulate actual knowledge about other nations, create reciprocal understanding, and define a common space while maintaining national specificities. For instance, German film heritage was reclaimed thanks to the influential work of exiled intellectuals such as Lotte Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer,<sup>181</sup> and thanks to French culture, which traced a lineage connecting German Expressionism to Hollywood, German cinema became the ancestor of a new style known as film noir, which was both artistically remarkable and socially conscious.<sup>182</sup> Italy had no feather in its cap like Germany's Expressionism, but its post-war film production was significantly more innovative than German rubble films, and it basically revealed to other nations both a country and a new style of filmmaking. This discovery was based on mutual recognition after warfare, and incorporated Italy into broader international networks.

To sum up, Italian neorealist cinema heralded a post-totalitarian nation to the world. Both progressive and conservative Italian parties were aware of this added value and were proud of the significance that Italian culture had achieved through cinema. In the late 1940s, as the political crisis between the left and the right in Italy reached its peak, political discussions also focused on film production. Undersecretary Andreotti, for instance, declared:

181 Both Kracauer and Eisner published their highly influential works on Weimar cinema in the war's aftermath, respectively in 1947 and 1952. See Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*; Eisner, *L'Ecran démoniaque*.

182 For a discussion of this allegiance between German film legacy and film noir, against the post-war political and cultural grid, see Elsaesser, 'A German Ancestry to Film Noir?'; Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*.

We should encourage a healthy, very moral and appealing production; this latter could be part of the new Italian school's trend [neorealism], which does justice to our film production and people abroad envy us.<sup>183</sup>

Communist leader Sereni later echoed these words a few months later when he pinpointed the importance of neorealist cinema in promoting Italian culture, especially after twenty years of Fascism had either stifled it or excluded the nation from international cultural exchange: the 'Italian neorealist school provided products which are requested and admired worldwide, not only on commercial grounds, but for cultural reasons; everybody talks about Italian cinema, everybody knows the names of Italian directors and actors; international awards come from the most varied parts'.<sup>184</sup> Post-war neorealist cinema became a matter of pride in public discourse<sup>185</sup> and acted as leverage in implementing new co-production ventures, notably on a European basis.<sup>186</sup> In fact, in 1946 and later in 1949, Italy and France signed co-production agreements that led to numerous successful productions.<sup>187</sup> Neorealist cinema contributed to reinforcing the Italian part in these joint productions, and Italian producer Riccardo Gualino, who was instrumental in supporting post-war neorealism with his company Lux Film, played a pivotal role in these Italian-French agreements.<sup>188</sup>

To recap, neorealist cinema enabled the country to sever the cord with Fascist culture. Through its multifarious style, it addressed contemporary Italian reality, which had until then been underrepresented in the international market, and it advocated a humanism that went beyond issues of race, nation, or political allegiance. As André Bazin contended: 'I am prepared to see the fundamental humanism of the current Italian films as their chief merit.'<sup>189</sup> This political and stylistic novelty presented the world with a country now purified of totalitarianism, one that could participate in new allegiances and that offered insightful moral and factual lessons by conveying information about Italy and by not taking ideological stances.

183 Andreotti, 'I film italiani nella polemica parlamentare', p. 64.

184 Sereni, 'Per la difesa del cinema italiano', p. 76.

185 Wagstaff, 'The Place of Neorealism in Italian Cinema from 1945 to 1954'.

186 See Corsi, 'Le coproduzioni europee del primo dopoguerra: l'utopia del fronte unico di cinematografia'.

187 See Bernardini (ed.), *Filmografia delle coproduzioni italo-francesi*; Gili and Tassone (eds), *Paris-Rome. 50 ans de coproductions franco-éuropéennes*; Palma, 'Les coproductions cinématographiques franco-italiennes 1946-1966: un modèle de "cinéma européen" ?'.

188 See Corsi, 'L'utopia dell'unione cinematografica europea'.

189 Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality', p. 21.

International film festivals and awards incontrovertibly contributed to heralding and promoting post-war Italian cinema. Dutch media scholar Marijke de Valck has made a historical periodisation of film festivals: according to her, the phase between the inter-war years and the late 1960s was marked by international diplomacy. During this phase, film festivals negotiated European identity and its film culture in terms of cultural hegemony, social awareness, and world influence. Furthermore, film festivals 'had one foot planted in the model of avant-garde artisanship, while the other steps forward to the beat of market forces within the cultural economy'.<sup>190</sup> Italian neorealism fit perfectly into this scheme: it matched the need to champion European nations devastated after World War Two (including those that had been defeated) while advocating international humanism; it moulded a cutting-edge film style while paying homage to the legacy of European art cinema; and finally, as the quote by Chiarini above illustrates, it represented post-war reality while producing a fiction that appealed to an international audience. It was for these reasons that Italian neorealist cinema proved to be highly successful at international film festivals. Between 1946 and 1952, the Grand Prix of the Cannes Film Festival was bestowed on Italian neorealist films three times out of a total of five.<sup>191</sup> The Locarno Film Festival awarded the Golden Leopard to *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, Roberto Rossellini) in 1948, and a year later *Bicycle Thieves* won the Special Jury Prize. Italian films were regularly selected for the competition in Berlin, since 1951, and in Mariánské Lázně (from 1948) and Karlovy Vary (from 1950), even though, for obvious broader political reasons, Soviet films tended to triumph over their competitors at this festival.<sup>192</sup> Notably, the origins of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film basically coincide with Italian neorealist cinema, which received three Oscars out of four editions, from 1947 to 1950.<sup>193</sup>

Italian post-war cinema's novelty and its exposure at international film festivals went hand in hand with the attention bestowed upon it by film critics. Italian film scholar Claudio Bioni highlights two distinct but related

190 De Valck, *Film Festivals. From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, p. 25.

191 Respectively, to *Rome, Open City* (1946), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), and *Two Cents Worth of Hope* (1952).

192 For a discussion of the Karlovy Vary film festival under Socialism, see Bláhová, 'National, Socialist, Global. The Changing Roles of the Karlovy Vary Film Festival, 1946-1956'. For a survey of the role of film festivals in the Cold War, see Kötzing and Moine (eds), *Cultural Transfer and Political Conflicts. Film Festivals in the Cold War*.

193 The awarded films were *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Le mura di Malapaga* (*The Walls of Malapaga*, René Clément, 1949).

stages in the reception of neorealism by international critics: first there was widespread critical interest in neorealism, but this was accompanied by a large gap between a tremendous enthusiasm for and a lack of thorough knowledge of post-war Italian cinema.<sup>194</sup> Nonetheless, neorealist cinema enjoyed widespread attention and instigated different concerns and specific legacies beyond its national boundaries. French film criticism played a critical role in defining, scrutinising, and advocating Italian neorealist films,<sup>195</sup> with special issues of various magazines and journals such as *La revue du cinéma*,<sup>196</sup> *Ciné-club*,<sup>197</sup> *Cahiers du cinéma*,<sup>198</sup> and *Les Lettres françaises* focusing on Italian cinema.<sup>199</sup> In fact, Italian neorealist production encompassed many merits in the eyes of French film critics: it incarnated European cultural legacy by moving forward on the path of realism, a style that marked the peak of European culture between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that was part of the apex of European art cinema in the inter-war period. Moreover, Italian neorealist cinema moved away from literary tradition and, according to Bazin, brought about a new, inherently cinematic style based on an analogical rendition of physical reality, which placed European cinema and film criticism at the forefront of contemporary film culture. Furthermore, neorealism proved to be class conscious and therefore incorporated widespread political and social concerns at a time when many Western countries began to embrace the European welfare state. Finally, thanks to post-war co-production agreements, Italian neorealist cinema contributed to the creation of a Latin alliance to counter Hollywood's increasing domination. This idea of a Latin alliance was also widely discussed in Spanish circles of film critics, where concerns about the need to safeguard Latin cultural heritage and counter American hegemony overlapped with a need for stylistic renewal.<sup>200</sup>

In the United States, Italian neorealist cinema spearheaded the distribution of European films in the arthouse circuit, which flourished in the

194 Bioni, 'Il cinema italiano oltre confine'. For a first survey of film criticism on neorealist cinema, see Petraglia and Rulli (eds), *Il neorealismo e la critica. Materiali per una bibliografia*.

195 A discussion of Italian cinema's critical reception in France can be found in Beltrame, 'Cahiers à l'italienne: della politique, prima della politique. I quaderni di Bazin e il cinema italiano, 1951-1958'; Beltrame, 'Revue des revues. Cinema italiano e critica francese negli anni '50'.

196 See the special issue 'Cinéma italien', *La revue du cinéma*.

197 See the special issue on Italian cinema, *Ciné-club*.

198 Beyond the lively debate on Rossellini, the famed journal produced a special issue on Italian cinema, 'A propos du cinema italien', *Cahiers du cinéma*.

199 The leftist journal published a special issue on Italian realism in cinema, theatre, and painting. See *Les lettres françaises*.

200 Bioni, 'Il cinema italiano oltre confine'.

post-war era.<sup>201</sup> Moreover, as Thomas Schatz argues, outstanding success in this circuit led in some cases to films breaking into the major distribution networks.<sup>202</sup> Italian neorealist cinema sparked critical interest for two reasons. Firstly, it offered unprecedented realism, which challenged the classical Hollywood style while conveying factual knowledge about war-ravaged Europe. And secondly, its narratives and visuals infringed the Hays Code and sparked a morbid curiosity as well as a search for a less puritanical portrayal of reality. American film historian Nathaniel Brennan relies on the groundbreaking scholarship of Mark Betz<sup>203</sup> to discuss the distribution and significance of Italian neorealist cinema in the United States.<sup>204</sup> Brennan builds his argument on Betz's assumption that arthouse cinema was usually discussed by neglecting the role of geopolitical and economic mechanisms, which he terms the 'generative forces in the institutionalization of art cinema'.<sup>205</sup> Film history and criticism focused instead on issues of authorship and style. Nonetheless, geopolitics and economy have operated—and continue to do so—as agents shaping the concept of art cinema.

In the case of the distribution of neorealist cinema in the US, Brennan convincingly explains the coexistence of two main forces that converged to give rise to a specific notion of realism: for the sake of illustration, we might term them ideology and market. The former saw cinema as a means of promoting international understanding. Arthur Mayer, who together with Joseph Burstyn was responsible for the American distribution of many neorealist masterpieces, declared before the National Board of Review: 'Responsible members of the motion-picture industry are making a greater effort than ever before to import into the United States films made in the other countries of the United Nations.' He highlighted the degree to which these imports could elevate US citizens' understanding of what was happening beyond their national boundaries, whereas dismissing this production implied 'that we don't care to know our neighbors or understand their problems and aims. We will be saying that we do not seek to evaluate any way of life save our own, or any viewpoint save our own.'<sup>206</sup> In the name

201 Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters. The Emergence of Art House Cinema*.

202 Schatz, *Boom and Bust. American Cinema in the 1940s*, pp. 295-296.

203 Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema*. See also the historical account in Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973*.

204 Brennan, 'Marketing Meaning, Branding Neorealism. Advertising and Promoting Italian Cinema in Post-war America',.

205 Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle*, p. 12.

206 Arthur L. Mayer, 'People to People', *Theatre Arts* (June 1946), quoted in Brennan, 'Marketing Meaning, Branding Neorealism', p. 91.

of mutual acknowledgement and social awareness, Burstyn and Mayer fought a battle against the Production Code Administration and organisations such as the Legion of Decency.<sup>207</sup> Marketing campaigns made use of neorealist films' infringement of the Production Code by drawing attention to neorealist cinema as a style and form of narrative that went beyond the thresholds of representation that American culture provided its audience. Italian post-war realism offered a new experience, one that was based on factual knowledge of what happened in another country as much as on the rendition of brutal circumstances such as cruelty, violence, and sexuality, which featured in crucial scenes in *Rome, Open City*; *Shoeshine*; *Paisan*; and *Without Pity*.

Distributing and advocating Italian neorealist films in post-war America implied expanding the knowledge and awareness of American citizens. This was both a social mission that questioned the inherited limits of cinematic representation and a marketing strategy based on sparking morbid curiosity. This phase culminated in 1950 with the notorious case pitting Burstyn against the Legion of Decency when Burstyn released *Il miracolo* (*The Miracle*, Roberto Rossellini, 1948). The Legion of Decency as well as the Catholic Church's representatives found the short film offensive, for it told the story of a poor shepherdess (Anna Magnani) who becomes pregnant and, being feeble-minded, believes she is miraculously giving birth to the son of god. Burstyn contended that he released the film basing his judgement on its sole artistic merits, which had been borne out by its selection at the Venice Film Festival.<sup>208</sup> In 1952, the case was brought to the attention of the Supreme Court which, contrary to its previous decision that censors across the United States could forbid films on moral grounds, declared that movies fell under free speech protection as defined by the First Amendment. Thus, the distribution and reception of Italian neorealist cinema in the United States contributed to championing these films as artistic works.<sup>209</sup>

Italian neorealist cinema also made inroads into the other side of the Iron Curtain, that is, into the newly established socialist republics in Eastern Europe. I believe this success, which few Western film productions equalled, can be attributed to two factors: Italy's peculiar geopolitical location right in between the two sides of the Iron Curtain, which drew the interest of socialist countries, and the role of the Italian Communist Party, the largest

<sup>207</sup> See Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens*.

<sup>208</sup> Burstyn, 'Statement at a Press Conference'.

<sup>209</sup> See Wittern-Keller and Haberski Jr., *The Miracle Case: Movies and the First Amendment*; Johnson, *Miracles and Sacrilege: Roberto Rossellini, the Church, and Film Censorship in Hollywood*.

in Western Europe, in acting as a patron of neorealist cinema. Although the Italian Communist Party was never part of the national government in its entire history from 1948 to its dissolution in 1991, it played a major role in shaping post-war Italian culture,<sup>210</sup> in promoting those Italian artworks that contributed to the cause of international socialism,<sup>211</sup> and in circulating socialist countries' cultural products—including films—within Italy.<sup>212</sup> Italian neorealism played a noteworthy function in Eastern European cinemas in three different ways: it introduced a representation of Western societies at a time when the movement of individuals was drastically hindered; it offered a critical viewpoint on Western capitalist societies; and it contributed to the variety of cultural offerings in socialist countries while testifying to socialist regimes' liberality in importing cultural products from non-socialist nations. Whereas Italian neorealism had limited circulation in the regular distributory network of Eastern European countries, it received major attention at film festivals and from film critics in the region and was included in the curriculum of film academies as well as many influential film retrospectives.<sup>213</sup>

Neorealist cinema was part of a complex political network in Eastern Europe made up of organisations promoting cultural policies—such as the Partisans of Peace and the World Peace Council, both Cominform's creatures<sup>214</sup> that is the official international forum bringing together communist parties under the Soviet aegis—festivals and awards, conferences and conventions, and the exchange of intellectuals and cultural products across the Iron Curtain. For example, prominent film theoretician Umberto Barbaro—who throughout the 1930s instructed future neorealist filmmakers and in 1948 organised a conference in Italy entitled 'Cinema and Modern Man', attended by Communist artists and intellectuals such as Russian Vsevolod Pudovkin and Czech Antonín Matěj Brousil<sup>215</sup>—contributed to establishing the Łódź Film School in Poland in 1948. In 1955, Cesare

210 See Ajello, *Intellettuali e PCI (1948-1958)*; Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow*.

211 I attempted earlier to define the Czechoslovakian critical reception of Italian neorealism in Pitassio, 'Italian Neorealism Goes East. Authorship, Realism, Socialism'.

212 On Czechoslovakian cinema and Italian leftist film criticism, see Pitassio, 'For the Peace, For a New Man, For a Better World! Italian Leftist Culture and Czechoslovak Cinema, 1945-1968'.

213 See for example Bulgakowa, 'Cinema sovietico: dal realismo al disgelo: 1941-1960'; Salazkina, 'Soviet-Italian Cinematic Exchanges, 1920s-1950s: From Early Soviet Film Theory to Neorealism'; Näripea, 'National Space, (trans)National Cinema: Estonian Film in the 1960s'; Garbolevsky, 'Mirrors of Death: Subversive Subtexts in Bulgarian Cinema, 1964-1979'.

214 See Buton, 'Le Mouvement des Partisans de la Paix'; Dobrenko, *Conspiracy of Peace: The Cold War, the International Peace Movement, and the Soviet Peace Campaign, 1946-1956*.

215 Barbaro (ed.), *Il Cinema e l'uomo moderno*.

Zavattini, the prominent screenplay writer and theoretician, received the International Peace Prize, another of Cominform's creations. Both Zavattini and De Santis gave speeches at the Prague Film School during the 1950s, and De Santis was able to co-produce his war movie *Italiani brava gente* (*Attack and Retreat*, 1965) with the USSR due to both his neorealist background and political engagement.<sup>216</sup> Finally, many articles, essays, or volumes of committed political intellectuals in Italy were translated and published in Eastern European countries.<sup>217</sup>

Over the years, Italian neorealist films behind the Iron Curtain came to incarnate two apparently contradictory issues. On the one hand, they represented the resistance of European artists in capitalist countries against the overwhelming presence of American mass culture, which choked freedom of expression, artistic experimentation, and the struggle for social justice. According to this view, Italian filmmakers embodied the hardships faced by truly engaged intellectuals in a region unfortunately subject to the evil influence of capitalist interests. They struggled to defend 'humanism' and alleged human values against depersonalised capitalist greed.<sup>218</sup> Accordingly, their work fit into the anti-American scheme that organisations such as the World Peace Council established. On the other hand, Italian neorealist cinema constituted a threat to the hegemonic socialist style of realism and as such was deplored by politically orthodox film critics between the late 1940s and early 1950s. But with the political 'thaw' in the region following the death of Stalin, neorealist cinema came to offer a viable political and aesthetic alternative.

In conclusion, at a time in which international relations were being reshaped to foster mutual recognition between individual nations and peoples, neorealist cinema personified a re-born nation: post-war Italy. Such films drew the attention of film critics and intellectuals as well as audiences on both sides of the Iron Curtain because they conveyed information about specific national circumstances in a fashion that appealed to varied sets of political and aesthetic concerns. They departed from the hackneyed modes of Hollywood's film style and also offered a useful complement to the domination (and enforcement) of socialist realism in Eastern Europe. For a few years, Italy's cutting-edge cinema enjoyed favoured status among film

216 See Pisu, 'Coesistenza pacifica e cooperazione culturale nella Guerra Fredda: il film *Italiani brava gente* e l'avvio delle coproduzioni italo-sovietiche'.

217 See, for instance, the Czech translations of two screenplays: De Santis, *Lidé a vlci*, and Zavattini, *Střecha*; or the history of film theories by Aristarco, *Dějiny filmových teorií*.

218 With regard to the Polish context, see Ostrowska, "Humanist Screens": Foreign Cinema in Socialist Poland (1946-1956).

styles and had a lasting influence on ensuing film production, occasionally offering a safe haven for filmmakers.

### Strangers on the Prowl. Transnational Neorealism

A man and a kid arrive at the entrance of a fun fair. The man looks miserable, dressed in rags; the boy is wearing a striped t-shirt and shorts. The man buys two tickets but forgets to collect his change. While the two are moving away from the counter, a well-dressed man comes across them and insistently peers at the man. The cashier calls the man back, handing out the change. The man returns and sheepishly accepts the change, blatantly embarrassed. Finally, the man and the kid enter the fair. They stop by a stand selling nougats, and the man buys the kid one piece. The boy is enthralled, while the man has conflicted feelings. The fun fair lies in the middle of a dismal urban landscape, where buildings have been turned into ruins. They stand looking at some circus cages in which large felines prowl. Then the boy runs to a game of strength, surrounded by a popular audience. The boy declares that his father can win, but the man stands aside. An elderly woman, likely the owner of the game, summons him, the gathered people loudly supporting her. The man reluctantly comes closer, plays the game, and wins. Everybody merrily congratulates him, while the kid is thrilled. In a matter of minutes, the man realises the policemen are after him. He runs away with the kid, across the rubble (Fig. 1.5).

The brief scene just described was shot outdoors on a real set that was clearly shaped by the bombings in World War Two. Non-professional performers play all the characters, except the man, played by famous Hollywood performer and Academy Award winner Paul Muni; the lack of professional training demonstrably affects the lines spoken by all other performers. Furthermore, the story deals with post-war misery and the brutality caused by unmet basic needs. The man and the kid belong to this scenario, and their behaviour is typical of those who live in poverty. In narrative terms, both the couple and the scene as a whole present the viewer with striking resemblances to *Bicycle Thieves*, and namely to the sequence that takes place at the flea market in Piazza Vittorio. And yet despite the fact that the film was made in Italy in real settings, that its scheme shows many resemblances to neorealist cinema, and that its director was celebrated for realist filmmaking, this work is regularly neglected in the neorealist canon and in discussions of the influence that neorealism exerted on later films. The film in question is *Imbarco a mezzanotte* (*Stranger on the Prowl*, 1952),



Fig. 1.5 Transnational neorealism and the legacy of film noir. Paul Muni in *Imbarco a mezzanotte* (*Stranger on the Prowl*, Joseph Losey, 1952)

which American-born Joseph Losey directed even as the work of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) raged in the United States, causing the long exile of many artists, including Losey himself. What was he doing in Italy, anyway? And why did he produce a film merging features that already associated Losey's work with others so clearly identified with neorealist cinema?

In the following section, I describe neorealist cinema as a transnational film style. I would like to briefly discuss the overlooked presence of foreign filmmakers in Italy during the neorealist age. Moreover, I intend to examine neorealist cinema against the backdrop of post-war European production. Finally, I hint at what we might term 'elective affinities', i.e. transnational works that fused components usually identified with particular national cinemas, such as Italian neorealist cinema and American film noir. Hybrid works force us to reconsider the knowledge we have inherited and to consider neorealist cinema more thoroughly.

Roughly speaking, in the past two decades, there have been numerous attempts to question the notion of national cinema. Back in the early 1990s, French film historian and theoretician Michèle Lagny published a thorough

exploration of a historical method that hinted at two pitfalls implied by the notion of 'national cinema': first, its empirical foundation, which naturalises an otherwise cultural category, and second, its definition as 'a priori'. Lagny contends that some parameters allow the film historian to focus on the national identity of a film or a corpus (e.g. language and political or historical references), whereas others (market constraints, style, production schemes, etc.) force the historian to locate its subject in a supranational context.<sup>219</sup> Later scholars tended to define this context as 'transnational', which refers to phenomena and processes exceeding national boundaries but not directly involving national entities, i.e. nation-states, but rather applying to individuals, groups, initiatives, subjects, and motifs whose scale is variable.<sup>220</sup> This warrants a brief but closer inspection. According to Higbee and Hwee Lim, we can refer to three different meanings of 'transnational cinema'.<sup>221</sup> First, in the influential scholarship of Andrew Higson, who has been working extensively on coproduction strategies and European cinema, the term designates those cultural and economic formations exceeding national boundaries. Film production, distribution, and reception very often take place on a much broader scale than that allowed by national borders, which consequently limits our information and compromises our understanding.<sup>222</sup> A second approach focuses on transnational cinema as part of regional strategies that enhance shared cultural heritage or transnational allegiances.<sup>223</sup> Finally, according to Higbee and Hwee Lim, a third perspective to define and survey transnational cinema deals with issues of diaspora, exile, and/or postcolonial cinema.<sup>224</sup> Whereas this last body of work mostly aims to challenge Eurocentrism and deals with contemporary cinema as part of a much broader globalisation process, I contend that its main concerns about displacement, exile, and power imbalance are no less relevant when

219 Lagny, *De l'histoire du cinéma*, notably pp. 90-102.

220 Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*.

221 Higbee and Lim, 'Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies'.

222 Higson, 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema'; Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema'.

223 See Bergfelder, Harris, and Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema*; Nestingen, and Elkington (eds), *Transnational Cinema in a Global North*; Sturm (ed.), *Allo Berlin? Ici Paris! Deutsch-französische Filmbeziehungen der zwanziger und dreißiger Jahre*; Karl and Skopal (eds), *Cinema in the Service of the State*.

224 As applied to contemporary cinema, see Berghahn and Sternberg (eds), *European Cinema in Motion. Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe*; Berghahn, *Far-flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema*. A key reference is obviously Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*.

looking at twentieth-century European cinema and its migration waves as a result of political or racial persecution.<sup>225</sup> All in all, despite the existence of national cinemas in Europe, which national institutions largely support, other factors such as market circumstances, cultural heritage, and migration flows as well as recently emerging supranational bodies and policies have led film and media scholars to discuss European cinema not only as the sum of individual national productions but as a transnational entity. Tim Bergfelder posits that, instead of a 'stable cultural identity or category', European cinema can best be understood as:

An ongoing process, marked by indeterminacy or 'in-between-ness'; among its chief characteristics, European cinema should encompass 'liminality and marginality', which could enable film historians to deal with migratory movements between cultural and geographical centres and margins.<sup>226</sup>

My claim is that Italian post-war neorealism can be considered a transnational cinema, and by this, I mean all three meanings of the notion. In fact, neorealist cinema was not exclusively a national product but consistently circulated beyond Italy's national borders, as explained in the previous section and was often aimed at an international audience. Neorealist cinema was part of a broader cultural formation, which we might term the European culture of reconstruction. Against this backdrop, neorealist cinema stood out. Exile and migration did not happen solely as the result of national-socialist rule in Germany, even though this was by far the most striking event inducing a mass migration in the European film industry. There were other reasons that forced filmmakers to leave their native places and search for more favourable working and personal conditions, which post-war Italy offered. Thus, foreign directors landed in Italy to escape anti-Semitism and later Stalinism or the Second Red Scare, or simply because working conditions were more attractive. These include Max Neufeld (an Austrian of Jewish origins), Géza Radványi (Hungarian), Michał Waszyński (a Pole of Jewish origins), the above-mentioned Joseph Losey, and the Hollywood-based German Wilhelm Dieterle. Finally, I briefly consider specific transnational

225 For two possible examples dealing with cinema and migration within inter-war Europe, see Phillips, *City of Darkness, City of Light. Émigré Filmmakers in Paris, 1929-1939*; Bergfelder and Cargnelli (eds), *Destination London. German-speaking Émigrés and British Cinema, 1925-1950*.

226 Bergfelder, 'National, Transnational or Supranational Cinema? Rethinking European Film Studies', p. 320.

cinematic formations that built a bridge between post-war Hollywood and Europe.

Italian neorealist cinema became a successful export product, together with Italian popular film genres. However, according to English film historian Christopher Wagstaff, the trouble with neorealist films from the late 1940s was that they frequently did not do well on the domestic market: "They did not have the "entertainment" quality (known stars and conventional genre characteristics) to wrest the domestic market from American imports; they won prizes abroad, but Italians would not go to see them."<sup>227</sup> Beyond neorealist masterworks such as *Bicycle Thieves* or *The Earth Trembles*, many more films merged the realist style with generic patterns. Lux Film produced some of the most remarkable among these, including *The Bandit*, *To Live in Peace*, *Angelina*, *Lost Youth*, *Without Pity*, *In the Name of the Law*, *Bitter Rice*, and *Under the Olive Tree*. These productions proved to be successful abroad, not only in Europe but also in South America, where a large Italian migrant community existed. Furthermore, Lux Film's extensive exporting strategy involved branch companies operating in Argentina, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the United States, to mention the biggest markets. In France, Lux Film cooperated consistently with a branch company named Lux CCF, against the backdrop of the Italian-French co-production agreements. Lux Film also co-produced some late neorealist films together with British Ortus Film, including the film *Alarm Bells*, starring a young Gina Lollobrigida. *Anna* (*Anna*, Alberto Lattuada, 1951), a flamboyant melodrama, was also a co-production with Lux CCF, as was *Il mondo le condanna* (*The World Condemns Them*, Gianni Franciolini, 1953), a bleak story about prostitution and sordid relationships that presented the audience with an international all-star cast including Alida Valli, Amedeo Nazzari, Serge Reggiani, and Franco Interlenghi. The example of Lux Film illustrates the post-war search for a film that could succeed both on the domestic market and abroad, the best strategy for which was a strong plot that included hot topics (prostitution, crime, miscegenation), stardom, and a co-production scheme.

A particularly telling film in this regard is *The Walls of Malapaga*. René Clément, who had a background in documentary filmmaking and who celebrated the French Resistance in the semi-documentary *La Bataille du rail* (*The Battle of the Rails*, 1946), directed the film. The story is set in post-war Genua, where an impoverished single mother, Marta (Isa Miranda), struggles to avoid being harassed by her former husband (Andrea Checchi), and meets and falls in love with a French sailor, Pierre (Jean Gabin). The man

227 Wagstaff, 'Italian Genre Films in the World Market', p. 75.

is absconding from justice after having killed his lover in Marseille, but his fate is sealed. *The Walls of Malapaga* brings together many features that were characteristic of inter-war poetic realism, a style that heavily influenced neorealist filmmakers. These elements include Gabin's stardom and his role as an outlaw, the romantic plot revolving around love/death, a stylised set design such as those displayed in the previous work of designers such as Léon Barsacq and Alexandre Trauner,<sup>228</sup> and a screenplay that Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, who regularly cooperated with prominent French directors, co-authored with neorealist writers such as Cesare Zavattini and Suso Cecchi D'Amico. The whole spatial scheme, based on the dichotomy between the old town centre and harbour and the open sea, also figures in a previous film that gave Gabin one of his most celebrated roles: *Pepé Le Moko* (*Pepé Le Moko*, Julien Duvivier, 1937), produced by Italia Produzione and Francinex. The head of Italia Produzione was producer Alfredo Guarini, husband of Isa Miranda and particularly active in Italian-French co-productions in the 1950s. Francinex was involved in a number of co-production schemes in the 1950s, notably *Don Camillo* (*The Little World of Don Camillo*, 1952) and *Il ritorno di Don Camillo* (*The Return of Don Camillo*, 1953), both films that incorporated the neorealist style into a village farce and were directed by the veteran of poetic realism, Julien Duvivier. *The Walls of Malapaga* alternates alluring components—such as a crime plot and the inclusion of film stars (Gabin, Miranda, Checchi)—with the visual characteristics of post-war neorealism (rubble, tiny alleys, outdoor sets), utilising a semi-documentary style of shooting on location and a screenplay to which Zavattini contributed. The co-production superbly illustrates the attempts to draw upon the heritage of European art cinema, refreshing it with neorealist innovations while incorporating high production values such as renowned screenplay writers, international stars, and elaborate visual styles. The result was a transnational product that was not a success with the Italian audience, particularly in comparison to other neorealist films incorporating genre conventions such as *In the Name of the Law* and *Bitter Rice*. But the film enjoyed a better reception in France, where it attracted more than two million viewers over a seven-week period. Finally, the Cannes Film Festival named René Clément as best director and Miranda as best actress in 1949, and the film received the Academy Award for best foreign-language film in 1950. To summarise, Italian producers sought viable options to produce films that

228 Barsacq was later responsible for the set design of *Roma: ore 11* (*Rome: 11*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1952) and thus enhanced the connection between poetic realism and neorealist cinema. See Quaresima, 'Parigi ci appartiene? Modelli francesi nel cinema italiano del dopoguerra'.

would be received well abroad while also attracting domestic audiences, one of which was to combine a European art cinema heritage with more recent neorealist achievements and transnational production values such as famed film stars.

Why was realism a beacon for post-war film? It is beyond the scope of this book to delve into the social or epistemological grounds for the wave of realism hitting post-war cinema in Europe and beyond its borders. However, I would like to emphasise a fact that usually goes almost unnoticed when discussing neorealist cinema as a national cinema, that is, the unprecedented outbreak of realist representations of the effects of warfare throughout Europe. Post-war European cinema produced in France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, England, the USSR, or Hungary tried to convey the brutality experienced during World War Two at the hands of the occupying forces, the difficulties encountered in the aftermath of the war, and the hope implied by humanist values. In his discussion of post-war European cinema, Pierre Sorlin highlights the unparalleled violence they depict: 'All over Europe the resistance films are among the crudest of the 1950s [...]. Resistance films widen the visible; they introduce on the screen some aspects of cruelty and sadism which will survive the war.'<sup>229</sup> More recently, David Forgacs locates Italian neorealist cinema within this current of European films, including works such as Denmark's *De røde enge* (*Red Meadows*, Bodil Ipsen and Lau Lauritzen, Jr., 1945) that are now mostly forgotten.<sup>230</sup> Beyond the question of stylistic achievements and innovation, I contend that this wave of films graphically describing violence and sufferings drew widespread attention both in Europe and across the Atlantic. The interest sparked by these films led to important awards, which were not exclusively bestowed on neorealist films. For instance, a Swiss production directed by Austrian-born Jewish exile Leopold Lindtberg, *Die letzte Chance* (*The Last Chance*, 1945), gained world acclaim and won the Grand Prix (then the Palme d'Or) in Cannes. It portrayed the national resistance movement against Nazi troops, as did *Red Meadows*; *Rome, Open City*; *Muži bez křídél* (*Men without wings*, František Čáp, 1945); and *Veliký perelom* (*The Turning Point*, Fryderikh Ermler, 1945). *The Last Chance* was exported both within Europe and in the United States, where it received the Golden Globe for the Best Film Promoting International Understanding. Two years later, another film received the same award: *The Search* (Fred Zinnemann, 1948), which stars a young Montgomery Clift and which depicts the fate of abandoned

229 Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939-1990*, pp. 57 and 59.

230 Forgacs, 'Rome, Open City: Before and After Neorealism'.

children, displaced persons, and the recovery in post-war Europe thanks to the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitations Administration) and American troops. Even more striking is the fact that the film was produced on behalf of MGM by the same company that produced *The Last Chance*, Praesens-Film.<sup>231</sup> Both *The Last Chance* and *The Search* presented the audience with an unprecedented degree of multilingualism. *The Last Chance* placed at the core of its narrative the question of linguistic mediation, as its characters fleeing Nazi persecution to Switzerland spoke a variety of languages ranging from English to Italian, Swiss German, Polish, Yiddish, French, and Dutch. *The Search* revolves around a displaced child who loses both his mother and subsequently his mother tongue, following his psychological and linguistic recovery under the care of an American soldier. War-ravaged Europe appears as a continent where national languages overlap. Rather than representing national pride, languages here act as tokens for humankind.

A similar, albeit politically alternative narrative is depicted in a Hungarian film produced before the Communist take-over: *Valahol Európában* (*It Happened in Europe*, Géza Radványi, 1947). *It Happened in Europe* is the story of a group of orphans in a non-specified European country: they barely speak, raid farms and fight one another, until they enter a castle and encounter its owner, a musician, who teaches them the values of tolerance, respect, coexistence, and culture. The plot allegorises the new humankind emerging from the rubble of warfare, a new humanism that is now being nurtured and taught by those few who resisted the barbaric conflict.<sup>232</sup> The film is significant for a number of reasons. It received the second prize at the Locarno Film Festival in 1948 and was distributed under the patronage of the United Nations.<sup>233</sup> Furthermore, the script was written by screenplay writer and theoretician Béla Balázs, one of the most prominent personalities of inter-war European film culture, and the film was directed by internationally experienced film director Radványi. In fact, while echoing post-war realism, the film contains many elements typical of an inter-war transnational style, or what film historian Kirstin Thompson

231 On the production history and the shifts the screenplay underwent, see Etheridge, 'In Search of Germans: Contested Germany in the Production of *The Search*'. For a discussion of *The Search* against the backdrop of the humanitarian crisis, see Smyth, 'Fred Zinnemann's *Search* (1945-48): Reconstructing the Voices of Europe's Children'.

232 See Parvulescu, 'The Continent in Ruins and its Redeeming Orphans: Géza Radványi and Béla Balázs's *Somewhere in Europe* and the Rebuilding of the Post-war Polis'. See also Parvulescu, *Orphans of the East. Post-war Eastern European Cinema and the Revolutionary Subject*.

233 See Anonymous, 'Rassegna cinematografica-E' accaduto in Europa-E' tempo di vivere'.

has called 'international film style',<sup>234</sup> including contrasted cinematography, an elaborate set design echoing German expressionism, and fast-paced editing. Thus, the film combined the legacy of European art cinema with new achievements to mirror and ponder Europe's most recent traumatic experience. Contemporary observers remarked on this combination: some deplored its stylistic eclecticism, while many others praised how it came close to major achievements such as *Putyovka v zhizn* (Road to life, Nikolay Ekk, 1931), *Shoeshine*,<sup>235</sup> or Vsevolod Pudovkin's filmmaking. In my view, it was this work and Radványi's allegiance with post-war neorealist cinema, together with his Italian experience under Fascism when he directed the colonial melodrama *Inferno giallo* (Yellow hell, 1942), that brought the director back to Italy in the late 1940s in order to flee Stalinism and to direct the realist film *Donne senza nome* (*Women Without Names*, 1950).

The film is entirely set in a camp for displaced persons in Southern Italy where stateless women are gathered, waiting for their identity to be acknowledged. Accordingly, languages and identities are uncertain, and the plot emphasises the state that Europe was in after the collapse of the nation-state. Furthermore, the film narrative hints at recent occurrences that had been overlooked in contemporary Italian cinema: the developments in the formerly Italian territories of Dalmatia and Istria, which later became part of Yugoslavia;<sup>236</sup> the Nazi concentration camps and eugenics; and prostitution as a survival strategy for displaced persons. Most importantly, the film draws attention to the question of exile and diaspora, with its plot revolving around the loss of identity and the struggle to face the memory of warfare amid the emerging Cold War. If we follow Ezra and Rowden's claim, this film offers a vision of the loss and deterritorialisation that lie at the core of many transnational films, along with the idea that the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity happen alongside mobility.<sup>237</sup>

*Women Without Names* provides us with a very suitable example of a film production relying on transnational narratives (i.e. displaced persons and deterritorialization) and lining up international actors, screenplay writers and a director. Navona Film, the company producing the film, seems to have been a hit-and-run initiative, since *Women Without Names* was its only production. However, it was able to recruit an impressive number

234 Thompson, 'National or International Films? The European Debate During the 1920s'.

235 Panicucci, "'Prima" al cinema-E' accaduto in Europa'; Casiraghi, 'Gli sciuscià del Danubio imparano La Marsigliese'; Sorbi, 'Oggi, in Ungheria'.

236 The only film explicitly dealing with the question is *City of pain*, which I previously mentioned.

237 Ezra and Rowden, 'What Is Transnational Cinema?'.

of stars for the film, including celebrated French actresses Simone Simon and Françoise Rosay, Italian rising celebrity Valentina Cortese, and old acquaintances such as Irasema Dilian, Vivi Gioi, and the stout figure of Gino Cervi, who embodied many heroes under Fascism, together with the stern profile of Lamberto Maggiorani, now world-renowned for his role as the protagonist of *Bicycle Thieves* (Fig. 6). The authors of the script included both Corrado Alvaro and René Barjavel, who later also wrote *The Little World of Don Camillo*, another transnational film that adapted neorealist cinema to market demands. Italian critics who had previously celebrated *It Happened in Europe* harshly deplored *Women Without Names*. In their view, eclecticism once appreciated now became lack of control,<sup>238</sup> collective performance became scattered acting,<sup>239</sup> and the filmmaker's international experience became simply ominous cosmopolitanism.<sup>240</sup> However, the film was released in many foreign countries, including the United States, and epitomises the attempt to bring together realism, humanistic discourse, urgent social and political questions, and film stars and artists with transnational experience.. Furthermore, *Women Without Names* exemplifies the way European cinema as a transnational body of work dealt with the disaster of war and tried to make sense of it. If one agrees with this perspective, *Germany Year Zero* can be understood not only as the outcome of Rossellini's genius but also as a full-fledged part of post-war European transnational realism.<sup>241</sup> Finally, the career of Radványi represents the pathway of both professional and political migrants who, having moved to Italy in the early 1940s, returned to the country after the war under very different circumstances to escape rising totalitarianism.

Other directors searched for shelter from the Cold War in Italy between the late 1940s and early 1950s. In addition to the previously mentioned Joseph Losey, we might recall Michał Waszyński, a renowned director in inter-war Poland who, having followed the Polish Army during its Italian campaign, remained in Italy to work as a director and a facilitator for Hollywood runaway productions.<sup>242</sup> In the late 1940s in Italy, Waszyński directed a few

238 D.F. [Dino Falconi], 'Donne senza nome'.

239 Anonymous, 'Rassegna cinematografica-Donne senza nome'.

240 U.C. [Ugo Casiraghi], 'Donne senza nome'.

241 As we know, *Germany Year Zero* itself was an international coproduction bringing together Italian, French, and German capital. On the production history, see Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*, notably pp. 228-251.

242 See Blumenfeld, *Człowiek, który chciał być księciem. Michał Waszyński – życie barwniejsze niż film*. See also the recent biographical documentary *Książę i dybuk (The Prince and the Dybbuk*, Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski, 2017).



Fig. 1.6 Realism, stardom and humanism. Simone Simon and Valentina Cortese in *Donne senza nome* (*Women Without Names*, Géza Radványi, 1950)

features, including the peculiar *Lo sconosciuto di San Marino* (*Unknown Men of San Marino*, 1948). The film takes place in the tiny republic of San Marino in Central Italy, where displaced people look for shelter as war is ravaging Italy. Among them is a man suffering from amnesia who speaks in parables and displays a naiveté that prompts locals to believe he is a new prophet and to reconsider notions of tolerance, humanity, and coexistence. However, during a religious procession, the man's memory is suddenly restored, and he discovers he was a Nazi officer attending mass killings in Poland.

As this brief outline of the film illustrates, it is once again issues of displacement, disorientation, and identity loss that are placed at the core of the storyline. As in *Women Without Names*, Waszyński's film articulates the question of memory: in both films, the protagonists' traumatic war experiences are removed from them, and in both cases, they are unexpectedly forced to remember them. Accordingly, both films deal with the experience of warfare as a transnational event—that is, one that does not privilege a national perspective—with an ensuing loss of reference points in terms of both space and time.

Precariousness, anxiety, and uncertainty also marked filmmaking across the Atlantic: in particular, film noir. In a highly authoritative work, film

scholar Dana Polan describes film noir as an inherently ambivalent narrative.<sup>243</sup> Later, film theoretician Vivian Sobchack convincingly demonstrates how film noir, rather than allegorising post-war uncertainty, deals in a hyperbolic way with Americans' shattered experience at the time:

This perception of the loss of home [...] does not find its expression as mere metaphor. It is not simply the hyperbolic trope of filmmakers and film critics [...]. The wartime and post-war period's myth of home and its loss are, in fact, grounded historically in the concrete social reality and material conditions that constitute a life-world.<sup>244</sup>

Sobchack grounds her argument in the relationship between film noir and the American cultural and social context, together with its 'transitional' condition. However, I believe that we can also apply this to many European post-war realist works, including neorealist ones. To begin with, Italian post-war neorealist cinema vernacularised Hollywood cinema in order to come to terms with its overwhelming presence on the domestic market and counter its predominance. Explicit representations of crime and violence as well as moral ambiguity, as depicted in film noir, were alluring to an audience that had experienced both state and Catholic censorship in the previous twenty years. Accordingly, films such as *Lost Youth*, *Four Ways Out*, *Bitter Rice*, *Persiane chiuse* (*Behind Closed Shutters*, Luigi Comencini, 1951), and *At the edge of the city* utilise urban settings, crime plots, and visuals largely borrowed from contemporary film noir. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the importance of French film criticism in appropriating film noir, given that French critics were the ones to coin the term.<sup>245</sup> In this view, film noir acted both as a proxy for most groundbreaking American culture—which French critics alleged was able to highlight better than Americans could—and as the heir of a European legacy that included German Expressionism and French poetic realism. According to this perspective, film noir was an inherently transnational film style. Finally, and more substantially, film noir's displacement and anxiety also closely paralleled filmmakers' experience, since many were forced into exile as McCarthyism and blacklists undermined democracy and Hollywood filmmaking.

<sup>243</sup> Polan, *Power & Paranoia*, notably pp. 193-249.

<sup>244</sup> Sobchack, 'Lounge Time: Post-war Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir', p. 146.

<sup>245</sup> See Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom'; Naremore, *More Than Night. Film Noir in Its Contexts*, notably pp. 9-27.

Rebecca Prime associates American film noir's insecurity with the circumstances affecting radical filmmakers, who had to leave their workplaces and homeland and find themselves a job in Europe from 1947 onwards. Film noir possibly offered them a chance to produce films that echoed their previous work and that were adapted to European subjects and concerns and palatable to a European audience. Prime emphasises the intrinsic transnational nature of film noir:

As a genre (or style, or movement), noir contains within its form and, by virtue of its transatlantic and cosmopolitan heritage, a hybridity that likewise challenges the boundaries of national cinema.<sup>246</sup>

I would follow up on this argument by adding what I believe are two crucial factors in the intermingling of neorealist cinema and film noir legacies. Many European commentators in the mid-1940s remarked upon a shift in Hollywood filmmaking that film noir epitomised, namely an emphasis on realism. Early definitions of film noir provided by French critics point out its realistic depiction of characters and situations.<sup>247</sup> Italian critics received these works in a similar way, notably those overseen by American producer and journalist Mark Hellinger, such as Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947) and *The Naked City* (1948), which have in fact been included in the canon of 'American neorealism'.<sup>248</sup> Moreover, for film critics in Italy and in Europe, neorealist cinema, or realism altogether as I previously explained, came to represent a politically progressive style. American filmmakers exiled for political reasons, who had directed or written realist films about American society in the past, fit into this narrative, wherein realism in art depicted a struggle to eliminate social inequalities. Furthermore, the search for a formula that could merge effective narrative patterns and visual style with realism and thus attract an international audience coincided with the exiled filmmakers' desperate need for work. This is how a little explored constellation came into being, one in which screenplay writers, directors, and actors with very different backgrounds worked together.

*Christ in Concrete* (Edward Dmytryk, 1949) is considered to be the first European film of a Hollywood exile. The film adaptation of the novel by Italian-American writer Pietro Di Donato<sup>249</sup> was originally meant to be

<sup>246</sup> Prime, *Hollywood Exiles in Europe*, p. 85.

<sup>247</sup> Frank, 'Un nouveau genre policier: l'aventure criminelle'.

<sup>248</sup> Proserpi, 'Neorealismo americano'.

<sup>249</sup> Di Donato, *Christ in Concrete*.

directed by Roberto Rossellini and produced by Rod Geiger, who had previously worked on *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan*. The film would have been Rossellini's first American project. Earlier, Geiger had hired Di Donato to subtitle *Rome, Open City*, and during the shooting of *Paisan* he purchased the rights to adapt the novel. In the end, Rossellini turned down the project in order to direct *Germany Year Zero*.<sup>250</sup> Instead, Edward Dmytryk directed it after he was convicted in the United States for contempt of Congress following his refusal to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). British Rank studios produced the film. Ben Barzman wrote the script about the hardships of an Italian migrant bricklayer in the United States. The young Italian actress, Lea Padovani, starred in the wife's role. American film scholar Peter Bondanella sees echoes of Italian neorealism but clearly distinguishes *Christ in Concrete* from neorealism due to its narrative based on flashbacks, which is more a feature of film noir.<sup>251</sup> However, I believe we should look at *Give Us This Day*, as the British release title read, as part and parcel of the broader constellation it belonged to: a transnational realism that brought together new stylistic achievements, social criticism, and international allegiances. In fact, according to English researcher Erica Sheen, what 'the anti-Communist campaigns, both at home and abroad, achieved in these early years was suppression, not so much of a Soviet-led program of Communist infiltration but of the *possibility* of a radicalism that was not yet in any real sense dominated by the Soviet Union, a radicalism that had the potential to respond [...] to the varied social and economic conditions of post-war Europe, even of post-war America.'<sup>252</sup>

Europe still offered some room for a radicalism in filmmaking that was being suppressed in the United States. This possibility gave way to allegiances that historians have neglected for decades. For instance, the exiled director and actor Jules Dassin planned to film the novel *Mastro Don Gesualdo*, which Giovanni Verga had written in the late nineteenth century. Sicilian writer Vitaliano Brancati was asked to draft a script. As I mentioned before, Verga was a key reference for early neorealism, and in this respect the project—which was ultimately aborted—is a good example of the meeting between an exiled film director with a background in film noir, a realist novelist who heavily influenced neorealist filmmakers, and post-war Italian film production.<sup>253</sup> Productions such

250 Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*, cit.

251 Bondanella, 'Christ in Concrete di Edward Dmytryk e il neorealismo italiano'.

252 Sheen, 'Un-American. Dmytryk, Rossellini, and Christ in Concrete', p. 47.

253 Pellizzari, 'Un inedito "Mastro Don Gesualdo"'; Prime, *Hollywood Exiles in Europe*.

as *Stranger on the Prowl* and *Vulcano* (*Volcano*, Wilhelm Dieterle, 1950) can also be included in this constellation. Both projects sprouted from Italy's willingness to attract talented filmmakers in order to be able to market their films abroad. Behind the company producing *Stranger on the Prowl*, Riviera Films, were the blacklisted writer Barzman and the director John Weber but also Andrea Forzano, son of the Fascist playwright Giovacchino Forzano, a close friend of Mussolini, and responsible for the Pisorno studios.<sup>254</sup> Located on the Tirrenian shores, Pisorno had been inaugurated before Cinecittà and had in the mid-1930s attracted foreign filmmakers such as Gustav Machatý, Luis Trenker, Abel Gance, and Jean Epstein. *Stranger on the Prowl* was an unsuccessful attempt to revive this trend under different circumstances. At the time of Joseph Losey's arrival in Italy, the Italian Communist newspaper *L'Unità* praised him, while he, Barzman, and Weber were named in HUAC hearings. Later, a still from the film picturing Paul Muni and the kid, Vittorio Manunta, adorned the cover of the prominent film journal *Cinema*.<sup>255</sup> Everything looked promising for Barzman's adaptation of *La Bouteille du lait*, a novel written by French author Noël Calef, about the unlikely friendship between a man sought for murder and a child. The film situated issues such as power relationships and perversion, crimes committed in the name of survival, and cynicism against a post-war realist setting. United Artists was supposed to release the film in the United States, but conservative organisations forced the company to boycott the film. In the end, the film was shortened and re-edited, the names of blacklisted persons in the opening titles replaced with those of their Italian counterparts, and Losey was expelled from Italy, considered a political 'persona non grata'.<sup>256</sup>

Sicilian Panaria Film hired the likely grey-listed Wilhelm Dieterle to direct a story set on the Sicilian volcanic islands that Rossellini's cousin, Renzo Avanzo, had first submitted to the Italian director, offering him the support of Panaria Film. However, Rossellini turned down Avanzo and moved forward to produce his own film with RKO, starring Ingrid Bergman: *Stromboli*. Avanzo and the head of Panaria, Ferruccio Caramelli, flew to Hollywood and agreed with Dieterle to produce the film, with Anna Magnani as the main protagonist.<sup>257</sup> The story pits the real, harsh

254 See Della Croce, 'Tirrenia, la prima città del Cinema'.

255 'Cover', *Cinema*.

256 Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*; Cristalli, 'Il clandestino neorealista. Note su "Imbarco a mezzanotte"'; Prime, *Hollywood Exiles in Europe*, pp. 66-69.

257 Mierendorff, *Wilhelm Dieterle. Der Plutarch von Hollywood*, pp. 175-181.

working conditions on the island against the delusions that capitalism offers. Dieterle had directed many successful films in Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s, including film noirs such as *Rope of Sand* (1949) and *The Accused* (1949), and had never appeared on the blacklist. However, the German-born actor and director was also responsible for *Blockade* (1938), a film openly supporting the loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, written by John Howard Lawson, one of the Hollywood Ten. As the McCarthy witch hunt kicked into gear, Dieterle found he faced increasing obstacles to working in Hollywood. He therefore turned to European projects, from *Volcano* onwards. It is not surprising to discover that Erskine Caldwell was responsible for the English dialogue. Caldwell was known for his realist novels such as *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933). He was praised also in Italy, where he and writers including John Steinbeck, William Saroyan, and William Faulkner served as models for engaged artists, even under Fascism.<sup>258</sup> Furthermore, Caldwell had married photographer Margaret Bourke-White, with whom he produced three photo-documentaries: *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937)<sup>259</sup> about Southern sharecroppers, *North of the Danube* (1939)<sup>260</sup> about a Czechoslovakia jeopardised by the aggressive Third Reich, and *Say, Is This the USA?* (1941), on American workers.<sup>261</sup> These books belong to the social awareness associated with this documentary style, which deeply influenced neorealist filmmakers such as Visconti. They also highlight an international political commitment that during the McCarthy era was criticised or even taken to trial.

Foreign filmmakers working in Italy during the age of neorealism epitomised the transnational nature of this style and culture and its association with other forms of realism (such as film noir), legacies (such as European art cinema), and supranational production schemes. Therefore, I claim that our understanding of neorealist cinema could benefit from reading it as part of post-war international relations or by looking at transnational exchanges of skills, culture, and politics.

258 The first Italian translation of *Tobacco Road* dates back to the Fascist era: Caldwell, *La via del tabacco*.

259 Bourke-White and Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces*.

260 Bourke-White and Caldwell, *North of the Danube*.

261 Bourke-White and Caldwell, *Say, Is This the USA?*.

## **Culture and Cultures. Reconsidering Neorealism as a National Cinema**

Was neorealism a truthful depiction of post-war Italy? Was it an outstanding outcome of a new-born culture in the aftermath of war? Or did it belong to post-war international media culture? Was it rather a transnational creation, bringing together diasporic filmmakers and supranational topics and production schemes?

This chapter started by foregrounding my approach to both realism and national identity as a constructivist one: both are the outcome of cultural activity and as such are historically and spatially determined. Accordingly, realism is based at the same time on previous representations of reality, on realist traditions, and on their rejection, on an estrangement of acknowledged forms of realism. In fact, estrangement conveys an idea of a more truthful description imbued with an ethical sense—what is shown is more than could be seen beforehand. National identity is a set of practices that includes cinema. Neorealism came to incarnate national cinema after World War Two. It was later construed as an ethical stance because it openly rebuffed Fascist totalitarianism and discovered a previously neglected national reality and society—notably, Southern Italy and the nation's urban outskirts. Furthermore, its productions regularly focused on underprivileged classes and individuals, which came to embody 'the people'. However, a closer inspection reveals that realism was a widely discussed topic also within inter-war film culture, which allegedly mirrored modern Fascist society and its regime. Moreover, projects for the renewal of national cinema circulated before 1945, and their advocates were future neorealist filmmakers who had received their education from institutions created by the regime itself to nurture the future national ruling classes. Finally, neorealist cinema aimed to portray and champion the lower classes, and films repeatedly merged a realist style with popular characters, topics, and film genres. However, neorealist culture and critics often rejected these less pure works. These contradictions lie at the core of neorealist cinema and culture and their relation to national identity. They pop up when looking at representations of the Italian ethnos, which is depicted as unaware of any responsibility for the country's recent totalitarianism and regularly opposed to brutal and evil Germans as well as naïve and racially impure Americans. This representation of the nation is coupled with an overall rejection of modernism as a culture and aesthetics, leading to the portrayal of Italy as an innocent, backward territory and people. However, this notion of neorealist cinema ignores its function within the post-war

international arena, the role that humanism played in it, and its part in the burgeoning film culture, including film festivals, film criticism, and arthouse cinemas. Neorealism as a national cinema belonged to and worked within this scenario. Moreover, when speaking about film practice and style, given the vagueness and flexibility of a notion such as ‘realism’, neorealist cinema also belonged to the broader family of post-war realism and offered cultural and professional opportunities for diasporic filmmakers. This set of contradictions illustrates the difficulties neorealist culture had with the nation’s past and with national Otherness. These difficulties can be better explored when focusing on notions such as memory and trauma as related to post-war cinema, and on documentary production, which at its best records and describes reality and ideally provides neorealist works with nourishment and content.

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## 2. Lies of Memory

### Post-war Culture, Remembrance, and Documentary Film-making

#### Abstract

Neorealism is credited with providing a truthful depiction of warfare and its aftermath. This depiction is based on a new kind of cinematic image: rather than telling a story, the image bears witness. However, neorealism was oblivious of anything related to the Fascist era. The chapter considers neorealism as cultural trauma, i.e. the work performed by a community that is feeling endangered in order to tighten its bonds. Neorealist culture, which helped build post-war Italy, discarded experiences from the past such as modernism or propaganda documentary. However, by looking at seldom-considered cases such as the early work of Michelangelo Antonioni or documentaries depicting the Resistance, we discover that these traditions did survive. They provide us with a litmus test of the role that neorealism played in forging a collective memory based on victimhood.

**Keywords:** Collective memory; cultural memory; Michelangelo Antonioni; trauma; documentary cinema; modernism

### Displaced Memories

Right in the middle of the most celebrated neorealist masterpiece, *Paisan*, Francesca (Maria Michi), a young Roman girl, approaches a drunken American GI, Fred (Joseph Garland Moore Jr.), and drags him to a shady hotel. She is a prostitute, and as they settle in the room, she undresses and attempts to seduce him. He is both intoxicated and disgusted and does not react. Instead, he plunges into remembering the day when he entered Rome together with the US Army, in June 1944. The crowd had welcomed the liberators, and a young, decent, bourgeois girl invited him to her flat, supplying him with water and offering a momentary rest from the war's fatigue. He could never

forget the girl, Francesca was her name, he blabbers, but never got back to the place. After a few months in occupied Rome, all girls are alike to him, all corrupt and on sale: no one can equal that first encounter. While he is recounting the episode, the prostitute realises it is her that the GI had met six months beforehand. But he is too drunk to recognise her. So she makes him promise to go to Francesca's place and leaves him in the room. The day after, Francesca waits in vain in front of her house. The soldier leaves Rome and bitterly comments to his mates on the umpteenth chick that tried to approach him the night before.

This short story is the third episode of *Paisan*, the least praised and least remembered one. The film's release was criticised for its conventionality, which came across as even more blatant when compared to the cinematic heights reached in the other episodes, such as those of Naples and the Po Valley.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, two distinct traits contributed to this widespread rejection: the melodramatic tone, colouring an impossible love in a paradoxical circumstance, and a traditional narrative, articulated through Fred's flashback, which provides the spectators with a 'before/after' scheme. Whereas melodrama was far from alien to neorealist cinema, present even in Rossellini's previous film *Rome, Open City*, flashbacks and a depiction of the past were indeed *rara avis* in Italian post-war realism. However, what is even more striking is that such a device was used in the most renowned neorealist film, a blueprint defining the whole neorealist aesthetics for its alleged crystal-clear purity.<sup>2</sup> *Paisan's* Rome episode is itself an oddity, and one of its primary peculiarities is its depiction of memory. For what happens between Fred and Francesca is a profound, discomfoting malfunction of memory. Fred remembers the past, but instead of providing him with a useful map to orientate himself in the present day, it becomes a temptation in which he indulges to flee from the present: he cannot identify what surrounds him at that present moment, namely the lost object of his love. Francesca instead cannot remember: she is totally moored to her present situation made up of moral and material misery, and she therefore bequeaths the function of memory to another subject, which happens to be a foreigner. She recognises her mate, but recollecting the recent national past is a work somebody else performs, without national conscience, while Italians strive to survive in

1 A detailed production history of *Paisan* and the described episode can be found in Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*, pp. 180-227. For a thorough analysis of the episode see Bruni, 'Il classicismo nella modernità'.

2 See Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation'.

the hardships of the aftermath of war. But what is it that Francesca and neorealism together fail to remember?

For decades, neorealist cinema was commended for its truthful depiction of Italy during the war and its aftermath. Without doubt, a film like *Rome, Open City* largely refers to real events that occurred during the brutal Nazi occupation of Rome, reconstructed on the basis of detailed historical research.<sup>3</sup> *Paisan* contains notable quantities of documentary footage that introduce the individual episodes and lead the spectators into the narrative. The fact that the Rome episode displays the longest documentary introduction is of some significance, as commentators have remarked.<sup>4</sup> However, neorealist cinema *did not* face, incorporate, or deal with past or present reality if not in a highly mediated way, particularly when compared to literature or photography. Instead, it provided national and international audiences with a *low-intensity memory*, i.e. a highly iconic remembrance—highly influential but not closely associated with an actual experience. Accordingly, neorealist cinema greatly contributed to shaping post-war collective memory through a work of *cultural trauma*, i.e. a cultural work that a social group performs to overcome a sense of endangered identity. This work echoed a more general European endeavour to heal survivors by having them forget recent wounds and related guilts. Its oblivious narratives functioned to relocate a set of experiences and attached meanings that were otherwise scattered and to reconnect national and international social bonds. Finally, due to a number of stylistic features, some of the most remarkable neorealist films achieved a mode of address that revolved around *victimhood* and focused on remembering this condition only, to the detriment of individual and collective accountability for inter-war totalitarianism and war atrocities.

Neorealist cinema has always been at odds with memory: it focused mostly on Italy during the war, as depicted in works such as *Rome, Open City*; *Paisan*; *Outcry*; *A day in the life*; and *To Live in Peace*, or more frequently on post-war national sufferings and hardships, as rendered in widely circulating works such as *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Germany Year Zero*, *The Earth Trembles*, and *Angelina*. Neorealism represented a present time, and film critics praised it for being the instant outcome of contemporary Italian culture: a style that focused on ‘extant time’ and privileged interpersonal encounters

3 See Forgacs, *Rome Open City*; Bruni, *Roma città aperta*, pp. 27-42; Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, pp. 136-163.

4 Bruni maintains that ‘the weight of History, at least the one blatantly evoked through audiovisual documentary sources, is determining when compared to the story.’ See Bruni, ‘Il classicismo nella modernità’, p. 75. See also Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, particularly pp. 192-195.

over straightforward narratives, as artist and intellectual Brunello Rondi declared.<sup>5</sup> According to this view, neorealist films were somehow the fruit of a collective narrative, which the outbreak of war and its later civil conflict had produced by suspending the usual modes of communication and traditional social bonds. A major protagonist during this time, Italo Calvino, offered in hindsight the most famous account of this shift:

This is what strikes me most today: the anonymous voice of that age, which comes across more strongly than my own individual reflections which were still rather uncertain. The fact of having emerged from an experience—a war, a civil war—which had spared no one, established an immediacy of communication between the writer and his public: we were face to face, on equal terms [...]. The rebirth of freedom of speech manifested itself first and foremost in a craving to tell stories [...]; we existed in a multi-coloured world of stories.<sup>6</sup>

The crucial point here is the merging of an individual story into a wider, shared narrative and the overlapping of the storyteller and the audience. What made this possible was presumably a shared experience: a narrative rooted in individual analogous biographies. Between the end of the conflict and its aftermath, a wave of memoirs flooded publishers, journals, and magazines. They are now considered part and parcel of literary neorealism. They were indeed the consequence of personal, actual knowledge of warfare and/or resistance; they incorporated a subjective perspective on the events that often translates into fragmented storytelling and embodiment in the author's physical experience. Although major achievements of literary neorealism displayed an elaborate style, a significant number of crude diaries and chronicles circulated; they enforced a style allegedly based on a crude rendition of reality. For instance, a work like *Banditi (Bandits)* immediately after the war assembles and reworks the diary written by philosopher Pietro Chiodi between 1939 and 1945, whose fragmented character is preserved in the published book. Moreover, a declaration opens the plain report of the events leading the protagonist from silent dissent to active resistance against the regime: 'This book is neither a novel, nor an embellished story. It is a historical documentary, by that meaning that characters, events and feelings have really been. In regards to this, the author takes his own

5 Rondi, *Il neorealismo italiano*, notably pp. 74-79.

6 Calvino, 'Preface', in *The Path to The Spiders' Nest*, p. 8.

full responsibility.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, the account of the disastrous Italian Army campaign in Russia offered by Nuto Revelli in *Mai tardi* (*Never late*) hinges on his direct participation as an officer. The story alternates crazed, distorted depictions of the long march of withdrawal in the snowy Ukrainian landscape with long narrative gaps, as the diary was not written on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup> Also the brutal circumstances that partisans experienced while underground, or the viciousness of torture they survived, were described in detail, sometimes with unprecedented precision about the effects on their own bodies. Luciano Bolis, a high-ranking figure in the Italian resistance, remembers his imprisonment right at the end of the war, the beating and abuses he endured at the hands of Fascist secret police, and the extreme option he took in order not to disclose any information to his torturers: in one of the few moments he was left alone in a cell, he lacerated his throat with his own hands.<sup>9</sup> The authors of this body of work are what the historian of literature Bruno Falchetto calls 'writers-witnesses' to distinguish them from writers in their own right. What led them to write was 'the intention to preserve and convey lived experiences, that need to tell [...] originating memoirs in their various forms'.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, individual experience as translated into literary memoirs contributed to shaping collective memory inasmuch as it provided the collectivity with a rendition of recent events through personal witnessing, which entailed both a unique story and a moral ideal. Moreover, in building a shared memory, the autobiography form has a greater likelihood of lasting because of the direct link between the recollection and the person who is doing the remembering. This connection enhances the uniqueness and thus the density of the remembrance. Furthermore, the very fact of choosing to remember is evidence of an agency, that is, a moral choice in representing the past and sharing it with a community.<sup>11</sup>

Neorealist films *did not* represent filmmakers' personal experiences either during the war or in post-war misery, and a great part of the narratives are only very loosely based on actual facts and deeds. Furthermore, neorealist storytelling systematically avoided any kind of reflection on the past: stories are told straightforwardly, as if they were unfolding before the camera. Beyond the above-mentioned case of *Paisan*, very few examples articulate an explicit narrative arc and move back and forth along it. These films' narratives

7 Chiodi, *Banditi*.

8 Revelli, *Mai tardi*.

9 Bolis, *Il mio granello di sabbia*

10 Falchetto, *Storia della narrativa*, p. 116.

11 Winter and Sivan, 'Setting the Framework'.

are telling examples of the controversial relation neorealist culture had with the national totalitarian past: as a matter of fact, the works displaying a narrative arc stretching back to Fascism are located at the margins of neorealism, as is the case with Waszyński's *Unknown Men of San Marino*, or based on tales of open national heroism, as in the resistance movie *High plains of the Stars*, whereas most of celebrated neorealist masterpiece dismiss intrepid characters. Otherwise, films dealing with the national past were basically disregarded or simply ignored, such as was the fate of Piero Nelli's *The lost patrol*.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, renditions of the past were more dramatically rejected. This notably occurred when Luigi Zampa and novelist Vitaliano Brancati adapted a long tale that the latter had written entitled *Il vecchio con gli stivali* (*The Old Man and His Boots*, 1946)<sup>13</sup> into a film titled *Anni difficili* (*Difficult Years*, Luigi Zampa, 1948). The work portrayed a middle-aged petty-bourgeois man in Central Sicily over a fifteen-year timespan. Circumstances force him into becoming a reluctant member of the National Fascist Party. While Italy moves from Mussolini's heyday to national defeat and Allied occupation, Piscitello, the main character, loses his self-esteem, his family, and eventually his own son, who was sent repeatedly to the front until Germans shoot him when he finally returns to his village. The film was harshly criticised for its merciless depiction of national acquiescence to Fascism. In a highly polarised political discussion, right-wing and leftist opinions could agree on nothing but one assumption: that the Italian population was a victim of Fascism, in no way its accomplice or active supporter.<sup>14</sup>

Neorealist cinema was very effective in providing Italian and foreign audiences with a convincing image of war and its devastating effects, to the extent that some iconic moments epitomised the sufferings of a whole nation, if not a continent. Pina falling on the street under Nazi fire in *Rome, Open City*; Antonio and Bruno walking miserably hand in hand in *Bicycle Thieves*; and Silvana emerging from the mud of the rice fields in *Bitter Rice* presented their viewers with an image resuming a shared (or allegedly shared) experience: warfare and its aftermath, fall and redemption. If we follow Wulf Kansteiner, neorealism contributed to building a low-intensity memory, i.e. a memory transcending a specific time and space, circulating

12 Nelli's film was a weird representation of the mid-nineteenth-century Italian first war of independence fashioned in a neorealist style (non-professional performers, use of dialect, outdoor settings, long takes, etc.). On Nelli's work, see Fiammetti, Recupito, and Cirri (eds), *La pattuglia sperduta*.

13 Brancati, *The Old Man and His Boots*.

14 On the film, see Cosulich, "Anni difficili": film politicamente scorretto', Pezzotta, *Ridere civilmente*, pp. 46-52; Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema Since 1945*, pp. 63-86.

widely, highly iconic, and based on a reduced number of characters and situations.<sup>15</sup> The diffuse and enduring distribution across the mediascape of the images that neorealism produced incorporated them into Italy's account of the transition from Fascism to democracy and turned them into proxies for actual experience. Scholars of memory studies argue that a memory boom coincides with the weakening of collective identity; furthermore, they insist that memory is not a permanently identical activity but changes together with the media producing it, which affects its structure, form, and circulation.<sup>16</sup> I would move a step further and claim that neorealist cinema produced a collective memory of warfare and its aftermath that was so successful because it responded to a widespread need for oblivion and dispensation. In fact, the post-war collective memory as moulded by neorealist films and related cultural products neglected past totalitarianism and its support among the population, the colonial wars, racial laws, and Italy's early involvement in World War Two together with Nazi Germany. Accordingly, neorealist culture helped shape a national collective memory that started with the armistice distinguishing Italians from the Nazis, and often portraying them as members of the Resistance. This memory's leading edges presented national and international audiences with an unprecedented kind of aesthetics that consistently circulated throughout the media in the second half of the twentieth century. *This multifaceted style was itself the result of both a new kind of memory and a new state of cinema within the mediascape.* This was a memory that dwelt on bearing witness instead of calling to account through narrative articulation, a cinematic style emphasising description to the detriment of causality.

New scholarship has shed light on the role that trauma played in neorealist cinema, that is, 'a cinema of mourning and atonement, a cinema of *the present haunted by the past*, not that of the war, civil war, or post-war ruins, but the long *ventennio* (twenty years) of Fascism'.<sup>17</sup> But what kind of trauma are we talking about? Can we productively compare notions of trauma—as analysed in the seminal studies by Cathy Caruth and E. Ann Kaplan within literary and film studies<sup>18</sup>—with cultural trauma as defined in the social sciences?<sup>19</sup> Caruth pays attention to the ways an event or a set of events haunts the

15 See Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies'.

16 See Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, 'Introduction'.

17 Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film*, p. 3.

18 See Caruth (ed.), *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*; E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*.

19 See Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*.

person(s) and/or text(s) that somehow inadvertently carries the original force of shocking circumstances. Trauma troubles chronological linearity and direct knowledge, occurs repeatedly and obsessively, and is related to images rather than narratives: 'To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.'<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, trauma studies aims to lend an ear (or an eye), through a symptomatic reading, to the paradoxical act of witnessing another's burdens—facing the unbearable, and thereafter striving to come to terms with it. Kaplan's book emphasises instead the ways a whole society tries to accommodate abrupt changes affecting communities, moving from an experience felt as seriously endangering collective identity. To recall Smelser's definition, cultural trauma is 'a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental presuppositions.'<sup>21</sup> Cultural trauma is not an actual event impacting fiercely on an individual or community of individuals; it is rather the way a society perceives a danger to its own identity and reacts by framing it and relocating the set of meanings and relationships defining its character. A chosen group of individuals—Jeffrey C. Alexander terms it a 'carrier group'<sup>22</sup>—is responsible for elaborating a cultural trauma and providing the community with a new cultural structure, which can host already coined and circulating meanings.

I am personally reluctant to reduce the issue of trauma exclusively to the first perspective described above, at least with regard to neorealist cinema, for two reasons. First, warfare and its aftermath shook all of European culture to its foundation, and as a result, European societies desperately had to strive to cope with the abrupt shifts produced by their recent past. Such an effort was clearly aimed at creating reasonable accounts for what had occurred on a moral, ideological, social, and aesthetic level. Second, war trauma certainly affected individuals, as much as the narratives they told and consumed. That being said, I intend to stress the fact that omissions and silences were not the accidental side-effect of traumatic events which individual or collective consciousness did not register: they were instead the result of collective agency, struggling to make sense of the peculiar position Italy held in the aftermath of war. As a matter of fact, Italy was one of the first European nations to opt for an authoritarian and then totalitarian regime in the inter-war period, which served as a template for many upcoming oppressive political

20 Caruth, 'Introduction', pp. 4-5.

21 Smelser, 'Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma', p. 44.

22 See Alexander, 'Toward a Cultural Theory of Trauma'; Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*.

governments. In addition, Italy undertook the brutal colonial occupation of Eastern Africa, implemented and applied racial (mostly anti-Semitic) laws, and joined Hitler's war of aggression very early on. When the fate of the alliance and the war became clear, Italy initially withdrew from the conflict and then backed the Allied forces to chase away its former Nazi partners from national soil. A more engaged minority of the Italian population, for the most part located in Central and Northern Italy, took up arms and went underground, forming a notable resistance movement. To sum up, the nation was at once responsible for deplorable choices made during both the inter-war period and the war as much as for the more laudable choices it made from 1943 on. Italy was simultaneously the defeated and the victor, a totalitarian society and a champion of democratic freedom. Circumstances led to an opaque, uncertain role for Italy, a nation that was not entirely a passive victim while also not fully an active perpetrator. How was Italy to cope with this peculiar condition?

In an overlooked film directed by one of the personalities of neorealist cinema, Renato Castellani, *Mio figlio professore* (Professor, my son, 1946), there is a telling sequence. The main character is a poor janitor at a gymnasium in Rome; being widowed, he devoted his entire life to his son and turned him into a professor. The son discovers that his assignment to the gymnasium his father works in is the result of bribery. Having a strong sense of morals, he addresses a letter to the Ministry of Education, asking to be sent back to his original place of work. The sequence starts and is entirely set in the same office of the Ministry, where the letter arrives on 25 July 1943, the day that Mussolini was impeached. What follows is the synthetic account of the rapid turnover of officers obsequious to different regimes: the Savoy Monarchy, then out-and-out Fascists working for the Nazis, followed by the English occupying forces. Each of the civil servants reacts differently to the letter, by commending, reproaching, or simply making ironic comments on its content and request. After Mussolini's impeachment, there is a grey square on the wall behind the public officials where a portrait of the dictator had been displayed. A civil servant loyal to the Savoy monarchy asks to cover the grey void with the picture of a cow; then a following one, associated with Nazi occupying forces, wants that Mussolini's picture is hung back on the wall – an image which the film refuses to show; and finally, the last in the line of subsequent officers, when the war is finally over, demands to place once more the picture of the cow behind his desk. The trauma of totalitarianism and warfare did not go unnoticed or unregistered among the population or the cultural elites. It was rather just like an image one hides from public view: it was far better to display a state of nature, be it a human being or a placid cow, in order to avoid jeopardising the precarious



Fig. 2.1 Fascism as a blatant oversight. The inkling on the wall in *Mio figlio professore* (Professor, my son, Renato Castellani, 1946)

state of the nation: ‘The cow is better, and it is not compromising, for the time being,’ explains the self-satisfied monarchic officer (Fig. 2.1). Neorealist culture was the product of a multifarious carrier group, a mode to deal with uncomfortable memories by neglecting or reshaping them. In what appears with hindsight to be a bombastic tone, this is exactly what is at stake in ideologically charged statements such as those produced by Zavattini and other intellectuals in the post-war era:

The most important characteristic, and the most important innovation, of what is called neorealism, it seems to me, is to have realised that the necessity of the ‘story’ was only an unconscious way of disguising a *human defeat* [...]. Now it has been perceived that reality is hugely rich, that to be able to look directly at it is enough [...]. For me this has been a great victory. I would like to have achieved it many years earlier. But *I made the discovery only at the end of the world*. It was a *moral discovery*, an appeal to order. I saw at last what lay in front of me, and *I understood that to have evaded reality had been to betray it*.<sup>23</sup>

23 Zavattini, ‘Some Ideas on the Cinema’, p. 217. My italics.

In this widespread discourse, warfare and the Resistance are a watershed, and transcending Fascism implies a return to the national culture's true wellspring, a restoration of the faculty of speech, and a true relationship to reality, with the rejection of the story and the causal links it enforces. Whatever identifies with Fascism is tossed into an unspeakable past: Fascism is nothing but an unfortunate break in the spontaneous flow of national identity. Moving forward requires that one not look back too carefully. Post-war culture produced a hegemonic time map and a related frame-narrative. If we consider memory as a social construct, following the seminal studies of Maurice Halbwachs,<sup>24</sup> and if we decide that its structure is significant for providing communities with maps wherein they can locate and make meaning of their past, present, and future, we can infer a recurring template within neorealist culture: a pattern of discontinuity, that is, a temporal structure enhancing the fracture between current times and what preceded them.<sup>25</sup> Post-war Italian society strove to exclude Fascism from the national historical discourse. Accordingly, this culture performed a mnemonic beheading, making consistent use of historical turning points to unite remote parts of time—for instance, as previously pointed out, a recurrent comparison between the process of mid-nineteenth-century national unification and resistance to Nazism/Fascism—while neglecting others, namely totalitarianism. This approach to the recent national past was a way to come to terms with the burning questions it implied.<sup>26</sup> It became a collective narrative for Italian post-war culture and society, that is, a master frame offering an explanation for the state of the nation and defining its membership and its exclusion but also giving some room for non-hegemonic readings of the past.<sup>27</sup>

Neorealist cinema contributed greatly to this collective narrative, which resonated with the specific demands coming from Italian society while also fitting into a broader transnational frame, i.e. the politics of retribution and reconciliation after World War Two. To evoke the notions coined by memory studies scholar Aleida Assmann, post-war Italian society implemented alternatively dialogic forgetting and remembering in order to never forget.<sup>28</sup>

24 Halbwachs, 'The Social Frameworks of Memory'.

25 See Zerubavel, *Time Maps*.

26 On warfare, post-war politics, and memory, I referred to Deák, Gross, and Judt (eds), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe*; Cappelletto (ed.), *Memory and World War II*; and Echterkamp and Martens (eds), *Experience and Memory*.

27 On 'collective narratives' and its similarities and differences to Michel Foucault's notion of 'discourse', see Ron Eyerman, 'The Past in the Present'.

28 Aleida Assmann outlines four viable options for communities to come to terms with a traumatic past: dialogic forgetting, remembering in order to never forget, remembering in order

That is, in order to come to terms with its conflicted past, the nation either implemented a dialogue between the opposing sides that confronted each other during the civil war (the reason an Italian version of the Nuremberg trials never took place) or remembered the Resistance obsessively while never truly questioning what happened beforehand. Specifically, while it pretended to remember in order to never forget, it carried out a dialogic forgetting. While pointing out the sufferings the population had endured in World War Two and in expelling Fascism, which was held responsible by the national community for the war that was considered 'non-Italian', this mnemonic strategy had the effect of reintegrating into Italian society the vast majority who approved and yielded to totalitarianism during the inter-war period. Neorealist culture echoed an overall European approach to recent war events, which implied that only the Germans were guilty for the continental and transnational tragedy that had taken place and that collaborative governments were at worst mere puppets estranged from their nations and at best tragic victims of ferocious Nazism. The focus on victimhood had many benefits: it created a symmetric memory (i.e. 'Everybody suffered'), which countered asymmetric memories prevailing after World War One (i.e. 'We suffered because of them') that had led to a second widespread conflict. Inasmuch as everybody fell victim to the barbarian Germans, and therefore nobody (but the Germans) could be held accountable, it produced the myth of the Italians' innate good character, which was to resurface over and over throughout the second half of the twentieth century, appearing in highly praised films and TV series such as *I girasoli* (*Sunflower*, Vittorio De Sica, 1970) and *Perlasca. Un eroe italiano* (*Perlasca. The Courage of a Just Man*, Alberto Negrin, 2002).<sup>29</sup> It renewed storytelling by giving up heroic (and masculine-engendered) narratives, focusing instead on harmless, innocuous human beings facing the brutality of war. And finally, the privilege accorded to victims suited the media discourse, as it fit into melodramatic narratives revolving around the notion of virtuous victims falling prey to malicious activity.

The poetics of parapraxis is a suitable approach to neorealist cinema and its contradictory relation with the past. Thomas Elsaesser derives the notion of parapraxis from Sigmund Freud, whose concept of *Fehlleistung* (usually translated as parapraxis) combines a condition of unawareness—a

to forget, and dialogic remembering. See Assmann, 'From Collective Violence to a Common Future'.

<sup>29</sup> On the origin of this myth, see Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano*; Schwarz, 'On Myth Making and Nation Building'.

slip (*fehlen* = to fail, to lack)—with active performance (*Leistung* = performance).<sup>30</sup> Parapraxis therefore combines active and passive roles and addresses how passivity is a way to conceal while attracting attention to the act of hiding. Neorealist cinema, as the counterintuitive example of *Professor, my son* fittingly proves, hid the nation's twenty-year-long national affair with Fascism by overtly neglecting to expand its narratives to anything preceding the armistice on 8 September 1943, which triggered mass resistance to German presence on Italian soil. However, as with the grey spot on the wall of the office, Fascism's absence was something that was systematically performed, and some of neorealism's major concerns as a style reverberate with this paramount cultural and ideological issue. Neorealism is commonly praised for pulling cinema out of the narrative dominance and pushing it into a new state of being.<sup>31</sup> Neorealism is commonly praised for pulling cinema out of the narrative dominance and pushing it into a new state of being. This new state of the cinematic representation relies much more on individual camera shots in providing meaning to the film, as opposed to the process of film editing. As a consequence, this new state of the image fosters to some degree the viewer's freedom to select and associate the components within the individual frames, as the meanings one can attach to sequences—conceived as loose successions of shots—in the case of neorealism allegedly offered new, more informal editing patterns, released from the task of driving the viewers' attention to dramatic pivot points. The importance accorded to the shot, however, complicates established standards of identifying cinematic memory by detaching individual frames from a clear chronological succession. If photography provides its viewers with a perception of duration deprived of a chronological time—that is, what Deleuze names a sensory-motor schema—the post-war works of Rossellini or De Sica/Zavattini violate this same schema and discard a strictly causal progression, thereby enhancing the role that photography plays within cinema.<sup>32</sup> Photography had a pivotal function in neorealist cinematic style and in post-war Italian culture overall. Moreover, a focus

30 Elsaesser, *German Cinema – Terror and Trauma*.

31 French philosopher Gilles Deleuze lists five characteristics marking the time-image, a new condition of the cinematic image that neorealism ushered in that is opposed to the movement-image, which was instead prominent until the end of World War Two—although Deleuze does not conceive the classification in strictly historical terms: *dispersive situation*, *deliberately weak links*, *voyage form*, *consciousness of clichés*, and *condemnation of the plot*. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, pp. 205-215. See also Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, pp. 1-14.

32 Sutton provides a Deleuzian reading of the relationship between photography, cinema, and memory in *Photography, Cinema*.

on the present moment—on the instantaneous glimpse that photography captures as an undetermined, potential reserve of meaning—prevents cinematic works from assigning roles within the narrative according to causality and consequently to a moral partition. Thus, instead of identifying the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, this kind of representation offers no certain memory of past deeds and related accountability. By refusing to depict the past, neorealist cinema distributes communion to all implied subjects, which is exactly what parapractic poetics do, as Elsaesser points out, when locating ‘parapraxis at another level of generality, where the opposition victims or perpetrators are not the ones that define or divide the nature of the affects or the actions involved’.<sup>33</sup> Finally, parapractic poetics, as neorealist cinema implemented them, were particularly successful in performing a manifold mediation.

How did neorealist films achieve such mediation? Firstly, while neglecting the past, neorealist films constructed new social bonds by glorifying the fallen and creating an unprecedented image of the nation. Rather than basing themselves on progressive narratives hinging on antagonists and protagonists or accounts proclaiming that ‘the trauma created by social evil would be overcome, that Nazism would be defeated and eliminated from the world, that it would eventually be relegated to a traumatic past whose darkness would be obliterated by a new and powerful light’,<sup>34</sup> the most praised neorealist works offered a *tragic narrative* in which responsibilities and certainties were not so clear. This prevailing narrative,<sup>35</sup> revolving around victimhood and magnifying human beings as such, anticipated the master framework offered by the accounts of the Holocaust, which became hegemonic after the Eichmann trial in 1961. According to eminent historians, the narratives describing the Jewish genocide from the early 1960s onwards elicited the role of the witness and is strictly related to the growing importance of the media and its related modes of representation.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, neorealist cinema blended national representation, i.e. films blatantly rooted in a specific landscape and language, with universalism, narratives depicting conditions widely shared in post-war Europe and in

33 Elsaesser, *German Cinema – Terror and Trauma*, pp. 15-16.

34 Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, p. 42 and following.

35 I am not reducing neorealist cinema’s multifariousness to some of its most outstanding products, namely the post-war works of Rossellini, De Sica/Zavattini, or Visconti. However, since these works were a beacon for national and international production and influenced the debate for decades, I consider them as embracing the values of a carrier group.

36 Viewiorka, *The Era of the Witness*.

developing countries.<sup>37</sup> As such, neorealist cinema carried out a mediating function between the victors and the vanquished, capitalist and socialist countries, Hollywood and Europe.

Finally, neorealist cinema's most acknowledged masterpieces fostered a modernist style that did away with agency and passivity, perpetrators and victims, memory and oblivion, fiction and facts. When discussing the ways of dealing with the Shoah and the problem of historical emplotment, historian Hayden White refers to the notion of intransitive writing,<sup>38</sup> which he derives from Roland Barthes.<sup>39</sup> Barthes identified the middle voice of some European languages and ancient Greek as a feature marking modernist writing. The middle voice refers to an experience that is neither active nor passive but reflexive about the subject carrying it out. White argues that this is 'A new and distinctive way of imagining, describing and conceptualizing the relationships obtaining between agents and acts, subjects and objects [...]. What modernism envisions [...] is nothing less than an order of experience beyond (or prior to) that expressible in the kind of oppositions we are forced to draw (between agency and patiency, subjectivity and objectivity, literalness and figurativeness, fact and fiction, history and myth, and so forth) in any version of realism.'<sup>40</sup> But choosing to bear witness through a middle voice—that is, a mode deleting oppositions between perpetrators and victims—also implied oblivion and forgiveness.

Post-war Italian culture maintained a contradictory relationship with its national past. Normally, film history and critique focused on neorealist cinema as the heyday of that culture at a time when everything was starting anew; most of the time, they overlooked how neorealism disavowed history. However, my claim is that neorealism's mnemonic strategy was parapractic in hinting at the hiding of this past. That is, neorealist cinema concealed the Fascist past while promoting itself as a radical novelty. It did so through a style that did away with causality and accordingly with clear-cut moral distinctions. The neorealist style thus perfectly matched the need to jettison a troubled past and to begin again with forging national and international bonds.

Italy's controversial past did, however, resurface in a genre neglected by film history: documentary filmmaking. Until recently one of the least scrutinised

37 I consider the influence of neorealist style on developing cinematic cultures (India, Brazil, Iran, just to name a few) as a token of its mediating function. On neorealism and world cinema, see Giovacchini and Sklar (eds), *Global Neorealism*.

38 White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth'.

39 Barthes, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?'

40 White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', p. 49.

fields of Italian post-war film production, documentary cinema is a suitable case to examine when dealing with collective memory and post-war Italian culture. To begin with, documentary films were aimed at representing reality, and common sense might place them close to contemporaneous realist filmmaking. However, post-war documentaries often diverged from neorealist films in terms of style and narrative, but they nonetheless frequently supplied examples of progressive narratives that proved to be no less oblivious of past national responsibilities. Accordingly, this genre proves the widespread existence in Italy of an endeavour to construct a cultural trauma, which neorealist masterpieces fashioned in the most effective way. Secondly, documentary filmmaking in the late 1930s to the early 1940s became a haven and a laboratory for the modernist style. This cultural legacy was originally part of neorealist culture but was to be expunged later by film critics as an incongruous relic of avant-garde, cosmopolitan, and totalitarian culture as opposed to truly national, vernacular humanism. Nevertheless, the modernist tradition contributed to moulding post-war cinematic realism while not rejecting the major achievements of the inter-war period, which resurfaced as cultural memory, an intertextual web, or as historical permanence. In consequence, the recent past was not simply obliterated as regards political responsibilities but encased as part of a multi-layered representation—landscape, backgrounds, and narrative—which, rather than being traumatic (an unconscious slip), was a token of persistence, a way to relocate past signs and meanings. Thirdly, post-war documentaries were closely connected to the ruling administrations' political agenda: they reinforced overall political orientations and performed a number of required functions (celebration, mourning, incitement), including national reconciliation. Finally, as the neorealist phenomenon slowly began to fade out in the early 1950s, documentary filmmaking became a place for it to survive and further elaborate its views on contemporary Italy. These documentaries are usually remembered as a springboard for politically engaged filmmakers.<sup>41</sup> They shared with neorealist cinema a number of visual features (urban peripheries, shooting outdoors, focus on misery) and ideological components (humanism). Nonetheless, these documentaries still inadvertently displayed the inter-war cultural legacy, and thus the task of neorealist culture—i.e. forging a dialogic forgetting—was accomplished, since the production bore traces of the Fascist past but adjusted to a forgetful, politically progressive ideology.

Below, I examine post-war documentary filmmaking from two different perspectives, which are essentially two sides of the same coin of neorealist

41 Francesco Maselli, Florestano Vancini, Valerio Zurlini are the most famous among them.

culture's troubled relationship with its recent past. First, I look at Michelangelo Antonioni's early works which, in my view, perfectly epitomise the survival of modernism in the post-war era in documentary filmmaking and in neorealist culture. Antonioni's documentaries represent a case of 'cultural memory', i.e. a way of remembering past culture while dealing with contemporary issues. Accordingly, they are an effective way to unveil neorealist culture and shed light on its relationship with inter-war art and modernism, which the post-war era has tended to reject. I then focus on post-war documentaries depicting the civil war and the shift to democracy. These productions are usually neglected but have many connections to neorealist cinema. The way in which documentary films perform a memorial function and the use they make of some stylistic devices help to expose the rationale underpinning neorealist filmmaking.

### Memory Frames. Michelangelo Antonioni's Early Documentaries

The opening titles appear, covering a large part of the frame. Offscreen, a mechanical sound pulses, its source concealed: does it belong to outer space? Beneath the titles, there is a flat, abstract surface, diagonally parted in two, a wider black area on the right, and a sandy, brighter one on the left, its boundaries marked by a vertical line. As the name 'Michelangelo Antonioni' rolls by, the camera pans cautiously to the left to reveal the arms, torsos, and faces of two dockers unloading heavy sacks from a barge.

This sequence opens *Gente del Po* (*People of the Po Valley*, 1943-1947), Michelangelo Antonioni's first short film, shot on a shore of the delta of the river Po at the same time that Luchino Visconti was filming *Obsession* on the opposite shore. This narrative is a typical neorealist one, which Antonioni himself embraced,<sup>42</sup> thereby trying to enroll himself in the ranks of neorealism by locating his early work in the same pioneering time and area as Visconti's, although in a slightly peripheral or displaced position. This displacement and marginality are indeed telling, for a number of reasons. To begin with, a number of talented, ambitious intellectuals and filmmakers had joined Visconti's crew. Most of them were employed by the film journal *Cinema* (which they used as a springboard), whose general editor at the time was Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce's son. Among the crew's members were De Santis, Puccini, Lizzani, and Pietrangeli. At the time of shooting, their names were known solely to a restricted readership of cultivated moviegoers, but

42 Antonioni, 'Preface to Six Films', p. 65.

they were soon to become more familiar names among a broader audience and among political militants in the post-war era. Antonioni himself was also a contributor to the journal, where he had published the manifesto: 'Per un film sul fiume Po' some years before.<sup>43</sup> And yet the film considered to be the manifesto of *Cinema* and the first neorealist film was in fact *Obsession* and certainly not *People of the Po Valley*. Confirming the peculiar, individual position he held vis-a-vis neorealism, Antonioni said, 'I just presume having entered into the pathway of neorealism alone.'<sup>44</sup> Why did film history privilege *Obsession* over *People of the Po Valley*?

The second reason for examining why Visconti and Antonioni were simultaneously working on opposite sides of the Po river has to do with time frames. *Obsession* was released in 1943 but was promptly banned and destroyed by the Fascist government due to its explicit depiction of gender relations and the Italian countryside, which was taken to be an implicit criticism of Fascist rural mythology. The film disappeared during the civil war, with only the director's personal copy surviving. In contrast, *People of the Po Valley* had not yet been edited in 1943, the year that Italy was divided into two. The film materials were brought to Venice and partially damaged in the following months; what survived of them was then edited into the shape the film took in 1947, when it premiered at the Venice Film Festival. Thus, while Antonioni's debut film shared its start *Obsession*, a work which was a bedrock for neorealism to come, it was thereafter forgotten, dismembered, and delayed. Why did *Obsession* survive its misfortunes to become a cornerstone of post-war cinema while *People of the Po Valley* met such a harsh fate?

Finally, the displacement of *People of the Po Valley* is also a historical and aesthetic misplacement, a synecdoche for how Antonioni's early work has been neglected. Until recently, even the most meticulous among his readers have failed to examine at length his documentary filmmaking between 1943 and 1953 or have plainly forgotten to even mention some of Antonioni's early achievements. There are two possible reasons for this omission. Firstly, some of Antonioni's early documentary films were lost for a long time and rediscovered or restored only recently, including *Sette canne, un vestito* (Seven reeds, one suit, 1948) and *Vertigine/La funivia del Faloria* (Vertigo/The funicular of Mount Faloria, 1950).<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, it is striking how little attention has been paid to Antonioni's relentless output

43 Antonioni, 'Towards an Italian Landscape'.

44 Antonioni, 'Preface to Six Films'.

45 On *Vertigo*, see Tinazzi, 'Un esercizio di stile'; Bruni, 'Il film'; Di Carlo, 'Lottavo documentario'.

in these early years, which also included *N.U.* (1948), *L'amorosa menzogna* (Lies of love, 1949), *Superstizione* (Superstition, 1949), and *La villa dei mostri* (The villa of the monsters, 1952). Film critics and historians have tended to discuss only *People of the Po Valley* and *N.U.* in great detail, as both possess a number of features that were pivotal to the director's feature films in this period, and both were notoriously influential with documentary filmmaking in the 1950s. Why has this body of work been neglected for such a long time?

Secondly, Antonioni's early filmmaking somehow faded from view following the release of his most renowned films such as his feature debut—*Cronaca di un amore* (*Story of a Love Affair*, 1950)—and his enormously celebrated and influential masterpieces of the 1960s. Accordingly, as Leonardo Quaresima recently remarked,<sup>46</sup> the early stage of the director's career has been discussed more as an homage to an artistic personality whose significant works were yet to come. Quaresima goes on to argue that an ideological perspective on neorealism overshadowed Antonioni's contribution to post-war culture, and I agree with this line of thought.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, even Carlo Di Carlo, who was for many decades the film critic most active in contributing to a deeper knowledge of Antonioni, labelled the director's early documentaries as a generic and socially oriented humanism: 'From *People of the Po Valley* on, one can feel his [Michelangelo Antonioni's] interest for a realistic storytelling: here the human being is pivotal and drives the search for truth, which is meant as an outcome of human, social relations.'<sup>48</sup>

I believe that ideological readings of neorealism, which predominated from the 1950s to the 1970s but are still widespread now, prevent us from understanding the relevance of inter-war modernism to Italy's post-war film culture, and specifically the role that experimentalism and documentary played in it. In my view, this is a failure of memory. I concur with Noa Steimatsky's argument<sup>49</sup> that both modernism and the documentary genre were downplayed or overtly rejected in post-war culture due to the need to liquidate a legacy dangerously

46 Quaresima, "Making Love on the Shores of the River Po": Antonioni's Documentaries'.

47 A previous, seminal attempt to position Antonioni within neorealism while downplaying the ideological readings that prevented his full understanding is: Quaresima, 'Da "Cronaca di un amore" a "Amore in città": Antonioni e il neorealismo'. He states therein: 'Obviously neorealism combines these features also with ideology [...]. And ideology is instead missing in the films of the director from Ferrara. But [...] ideology is not neorealism's basic component [...]. It is a concurrent element, joint with many others, but it can be dislocated, separated.' (p. 43).

48 Di Carlo, 'Vedere in modo nuovo', p. 14.

49 My reading is indebted to Leonardo Quaresima's above-mentioned article, 'Da "Cronaca di un amore" a "Amore in città"', and to Steimatsky, 'Aerial: Antonioni's Modernism', in *Italian Locations*.

tied to the fate of Fascism itself. Antonioni's work sheds light on this tradition: the modernist legacy was still felt after 1945, albeit in a lesser way. Nonetheless, this legacy can be traced back to specific occurrences in terms of personal relationships, joint or individual projects, and cinematic options, as implied in Antonioni's work and in related documentary production. Thus, if we want to clarify the peculiar position that Antonioni held between the 1940s and the 1950s, it may be useful to question and relate apparently disconnected terms such as neorealism, documentary, and modernism.

Without doubt, Michelangelo Antonioni shared the concerns and initiatives of acknowledged personalities of neorealist cinema—there are simply too many coincidences for this not to be true. In addition to his work for *Cinema*, where he also became editing manager for a brief period,<sup>50</sup> in late 1944 Antonioni co-founded the Associazione Culturale Cinematografica Italiana (Italian Film Culture Society) together with some of the most prominent neorealist intellectuals and directors—among them, Zavattini, Visconti, and again De Santis. This Society was later to become the Circolo del Cinema di Roma (Rome Film Club), whose role in promoting neorealism cannot be underestimated. Moreover, throughout the second half of the 1940s, Antonioni worked side by side with neorealist artists such as Visconti and De Santis, thus crossing the Po to the other shore.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, his documentaries shared themes and locations with a number of acclaimed neorealist masterpieces. Antonioni chose to film urban outskirts, the Po Valley, and Southern Italy, where underdeveloped or underprivileged people belonged and which were to become well represented in 1950s documentaries. However, the mode that Antonioni chose to represent persons, locations, and situations fit neither with neorealist humanism nor with contemporary mainstream documentaries. In *N.U.*, only a loose time-setting is provided: one day in the life of Rome's street sweepers. Instead of using a straightforward form of storytelling and a compelling and optimistic voice-over, as did many

50 See the detailed reconstruction of Antonioni's early biography offered in Benci, 'Identification of a City: Antonioni and Rome, 1940-1962'.

51 Antonioni contributed, together with Umberto Barbaro, Carlo Lizzani, and Gianni Puccini, to the screenplay of *Tragic Hunt*, De Santis's feature film debut. Furthermore, he also worked on some projects that did not make it into a film, such as *Il processo di Maria Tarnowska*, to be directed by Luchino Visconti, and co-scripted with Antonio Pietrangeli and Guido Piovene. See Antolin and Barbera (eds), *Il processo di Maria Tarnowska*. Antonioni also drafted with De Santis and Puccini another screenplay, today preserved as a part of Antonioni's estate in the Museo Antonioni, Ferrara: Antonioni, Dabini, De Santis, and Puccini, *Disordine*. Finally, Benci reports a screenplay that Antonioni wrote with Pietrangeli and De Santis. Visconti was planned as its director, but the notice has no factual or bibliographical reference. See Benci, 'Identification of a City', p. 30.

documentaries at the time, the discourse hesitates, wavers, gets lost. Rather than a sympathetic look at the life of a worker and a consequential narrative, such as the remarkable examples of *Bicycle Thieves* and *The Path of Hope*, we have a vague association of anonymous individuals whose faces and paths remain almost unexplained. At one point, two street cleaners sit on the back of a truck amidst garbage stacks. The older one picks out of the rubbish a gorilla mask and wears it, thereby losing the last remnants of his humanity while drawing our attention to the reflexive attitude at the core of Antonioni's early documentaries. Two years later, his first feature was to begin with a number of photographs of a beautiful woman being tossed onto a table, while a voice utters a revelatory phrase: 'No, it's not the same old story...'

Late neorealist filmmaking occasionally based its narrative, aesthetic, and political stances on reflexivity. This was the case in *Bellissima, La macchina ammazzacattivi* (*The Machine That Kills Bad People*, Roberto Rossellini, 1948-52) and in *Siamo donne* (*We, the Women*, various directors, 1953).<sup>52</sup> At the time, a similar mode of address was also common in documentary filmmaking, often due to the influence of Antonioni's earlier work. Nonetheless, almost from the start of his career, Antonioni built up a continuous tension between reality and its representation—between the objects, facts, and figures portrayed and the act of portraying them. This tension led to two outstanding outcomes: the feature film *La signora senza camelie* (*The Lady Without Camelias*, 1953) and the short *Tentato suicidio* (*Attempted suicide*) in *L'amore in città* (*Love in the city*, various directors, 1953), a documentary episode of an omnibus film conceived by Zavattini and meant to be a survey of contemporary feelings and the urban experience. The opening of *Attempted suicide* brings before a white screen in a studio set a number of people who survived suicide attempts. Appearing only as profiles on a white, almost abstract surface, it is as though these people are no longer human beings but mere case histories, asked to reenact their past in cold blood. The screenplay requires that they painstakingly reproduce sequences of gestures, which is exactly what they do, without any compassion for their deed. On principle, when outlining a script, Antonioni brings together chronicle—collecting individual declarations—and science, by choosing to investigate the cases through psychology.<sup>53</sup> Zavattini, the creator

52 For a focus on reflexivity and neorealist and post-neorealist production, see for instance: Casetti, 'Cinema in the Cinema in the Italian Films of the 1950s'; De Vincenti, '*Siamo donne*: un esempio "neorealista" di coscienza metalinguistica'; Parigi, *Neorealismo*

53 See Antonioni, *Tentato suicidio* (Introduction/Suicides summaries); Antonioni, *Tentato suicidio* (bound screenplay).

of *Love in the city*, certainly comes across as the most convinced advocate of a humanist neorealism, always placing at the core of his narratives the fate of the individual. This is not the case, however, with Antonioni. It might be more productive to look at *Attempted suicide* as the final outcome of an elaborate investigation of the forms of modern individual existence and representation itself. This exploration tackles contemporary anthropological conditions (subjectivity, feelings, environment) in a detached way, challenging the immediacy and transparency of documentary filmmaking: the people interviewed tell their stories while reproducing past gestures. But the trustworthiness of their past deeds is itself scrutinised, their will challenged. What we see is a reenactment that reproduces an act whose intentions are opaque and possibly different from what is stated before the camera. Representation can only ask questions, not provide answers. *Attempted suicide* and Antonioni's previous documentary works take part in neorealist culture, exploring reality and contemporaneity, and substantially enrich it by complicating the notions of realism and reality themselves, both visually and narratively.

In a 1939 article, Antonioni questions the boundaries between documentary and fiction:

First of all, there is the basic question: should it be a documentary or a story film?

Without any doubt, the former appeals to me a good deal. [...] This is rich material but dangerous, because it lends itself to rhetoric. [...] The introduction of a light narrative thread would not entirely suffice either. [...] Between you and me, I feel a good deal of sympathy for a filmed fiction/document without any label.<sup>54</sup>

A similar question appeared in a no-less-discussed and influential article by De Santis published in *Cinema* in the spring of 1941.<sup>55</sup> But the uncertainty regarding fiction and documentary received an abrupt answer soon after, when De Santis and Alicata wrote an article that came to be considered the cornerstone of neorealism. In this contribution, a clear-cut lineage is drawn between nineteenth-century literary realism, inter-war film art, and a national cinema that was just emerging. The narrative backbone of many post-war neorealist films, Rossellini's works being an exception, solidified this perspective:

54 Antonioni, 'Towards an Italian Landscape'.

55 Giuseppe De Santis, 'Towards an Italian Landscape'.

When most of its technical problems were solved, the cinema, which has moved *from documentary to narrative*, realised that its destiny was linked with literature [...]. At any rate, it is necessary to make clear 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*.<sup>56</sup>

Alicata and De Santis conceived a project binding together nineteenth-century literature, cinematic realism, and a barely concealed ideological stance to be the bedrock of the ideological interpretation of neorealism. Such a framework belittled another notion of realism circulating in the inter-war period,<sup>57</sup> one that was much more related to avant garde movements such as the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* and its American counterpart: the *documentary style*. Both traditions merged the search for reality with a continuous interrogation of what its representation might be in the age of mechanical reproduction. It is no surprise to find out that Antonioni was aware of the documentary work of American director Pare Lorentz, whose *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) were screened at the Venice Film Festival at a time when Antonioni was a regular correspondent for the event.<sup>58</sup>

To summarise, Michelangelo Antonioni provides a convincing example to examine neorealism's troubles with the cultural and artistic legacy of Fascism, that is, with memory overall. His early works, including his non-produced stories and scripts now available in his estate, have a twofold purpose: on the one hand, they carry a profound memory of the past; on the other, they reveal through contrast the frequent obliviousness affecting many discourses on post-war cinema as well as post-war films themselves. Indeed, a good deal of studies of neorealism promotes the phenomenon as a novelty and a sudden cultural outburst, if not in terms

56 De Santis and Alicata, 'Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema', p. 131. My emphasis.

57 For a detailed survey of the birth of the notion of neorealism, see Brunetta, *Umberto Barbaro e l'idea di neorealismo*. The main link between *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the Italian inter-war film culture was Umberto Barbaro, himself a writer indebted to the German avantgarde. For his theoretical writings, see Barbaro, *Neorealismo e realismo*.

58 However, if Antonioni appreciated the first documentary, he explicitly dismissed the second. See Antonioni, 'Towards an Italian Landscape'. For the influence of the Farm Security Administration on late 1930s/early 1940s Italian photography, and specifically on *Obsession*, see Grespi, 'Italian Neo-realism between Cinema and Photography'.

of individual and professional background then in terms of a renewed political and aesthetic consciousness and an unprecedented immediacy in representation. And in many cases, this happens to be true. Nonetheless, this novelty came at the expense of an awareness of a very recent past in its contradictory legacy: a past very often operating underneath the renewed cultural forms. Antonioni partakes in neorealism by bringing in more explicitly this memory, to be considered a 'cultural memory', in the meaning Jan Assmann attributes to the term.<sup>59</sup> Assmann coins the notion to define a memory that is not closely connected to daily life, one that connects social groups and cultural production by creating bonds through cultural motifs across time.

Given the recent civil war that ravaged the country and its society, the paramount drive in Italian post-war culture was to forget. However, Antonioni, by deploying multi-layered visual strategies, evoked instead a dense memory. His early works and the scrupulous building of the frames' composition harkens back to the inter-war avant garde experience in painting, photography, and documentary production. These visual formations seek an internal strength, as if they were trying to benefit from the energy the composition itself might convey, as a sort of *Pathosformeln* (formulas of pathos) in the sense that Aby Warburg gave to the term. In this respect, Michelangelo Antonioni's early work certainly fits into some of the categories Assmann attributes to cultural memory: transcendence, retrospective contemplativeness, and a capacity to reconstruct.<sup>60</sup> According to Assmann, the latter is based on a tension between an intertextual memory and its role in contemporaneity:

Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images and rule of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning in its own perspective, giving its own relevance.<sup>61</sup>

The early work of Michelangelo Antonioni creates a more or less explicit bond between subject matter, both past and present, and historical ways to look at it. At a time when anything related to the inter-war period was dismissed or downplayed, Antonioni composed his urban landscapes and

59 See J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*.

60 J. Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity'.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 130.



Fig. 2.2. Realism, modernism and peripheral places. *L'amorosa menzogna* (Lies of love, 1949)

the wretched human presence populating them, in *N.U.* or *Lies of love*, in a manner very close to Mario Sironi's 1920s paintings, such as *Paesaggio urbano con camion* (*Urban Landscape with Truck*, 1920) or *Periferia (Il tram e la gru)* (*Suburbs [The Streetcar and the Crane]*, 1922).<sup>62</sup> (Fig. 2.2) The squares in cities or villages that Antonioni photographed in his documentaries from the 1940s on, and the loss suffered in them by human beings—as in the closing frame of *N.U.*—seem much more reminiscent of the 1910s paintings of Giorgio De Chirico, as in *La Lassitude de l'infini* (*The Lassitude of Infinity*, 1912) or *L'Enigme d'une journée* (*The Enigma of a Day*, 1914) than of nineteenth-century literature.<sup>63</sup> Thus, at a time when iconoclasm dominated the memory of the inter-war past, Antonioni proved instead to be an iconophile, remembering his artistic debts to it. Moreover, this attitude often became a sort of *historical vertigo* in his works, when the boundaries between distinct historical periods are blurred. In a script for a

62 Antonioni's interest in the work of Sironi, an artist whose allegiance to Fascism was quite clear, is described in Maselli, 'I miei esordi con Michelangelo'.

63 And yet these personalities were no strangers to the vivid post-war cultural climate and to film culture itself. For instance, Giorgio De Chirico was among the intellectuals contributing to the Associazione Culturale Cinematografica Italiana. See Benci, 'Identification of a City'.

documentary titled *Scuola di ballo* (Ballet School), the same facility is used to host a contemporary ballet academy, an association of Russian exiles, and a collection of statues by Giovan Battista Canova, thereby erasing all historical restrictions:

In the evening, when the ballet academy shuts down and the silence returns in the hall, by the way loaded with Canova's statues, the old colonel [an ancient tsarist officer working as janitor] must experience an unsettling feeling, as he walks amidst the paintings of Tsars' Russia, Canova's statues and the echo of sambas, rumbas and boogie-woogies.<sup>64</sup>

This uncomfortable visual and historical uncertainty was mostly rejected in post-war Italy, as it risked the blurring of time periods that had to be clearly distinguished, namely Fascist Italy versus the new-born nation. Yet Antonioni was much more interested in looking at figural and historical complexities than in hiding them. In 1948, he co-authored another script with Ennio Flaiano. In it, the main character returns to a place utilised for Fascist propaganda: the reclaimed land of Maccarese, near Rome. As with many of the figures in Antonioni's later films, the protagonist is quite at pains to make distinctions, but he mixes up his past lover with her daughter and the Fascist past with his miserable present. The past haunts him as much as the place to which he returns.<sup>65</sup>

Antonioni expresses an overt interest in documentary filmmaking and *locations* from the early stages of his career.<sup>66</sup> He considers locations not solely as the background for a story but rather as first of all a *possibility*. He is more interested in their potential, spirit, *genius loci*, than in their actual meanings.

Documentary filmmaking requires a specific experience and its creator must have a whole specific experience. [...] Ancient architectures' *evocative power*, the *scent* emanating from the many places around the world, or from any other natural sight, or from extraordinary human work... In order to express all these enticements, one must profoundly *feel* them beforehand; if not, they lose all their *power* and significance.<sup>67</sup>

64 Antonioni, *Scuola di ballo*.

65 Antonioni and Flaiano, *Maccarese*.

66 For an overall survey of the role that landscape covers in the filmmaking of Antonioni, see Bernardi, *Il paesaggio nel cinema italiano*.

67 Antonioni, 'Documentari', p. 66.

Long before Lidia's stroll through Milan and its co-existent past, present, and potential temporalities in *La notte* (*The Night*, 1961), Antonioni declared a peculiar interest in locations and atmospheres, as he confirmed in the post-war era through his documentaries and scattered notes:

I stopped by, looking at a white wall, the side of a lonely house. Few windows. An extraordinary balance between empty and full spaces. It's three o'clock. Only one window is open. The heat is oppressive, the room is dark. A woman's figure passed through the window, in full light of the sun: she is naked. She glances down, sees me, cries to somebody else, inside the house, to pull the curtains. But before he gets there, she appears again, looking at me, half-smiling, more naked than ever.<sup>68</sup>

Power and evocation, sensations and feelings are the terms associated with a landscape in these notes, solidified in the documentary shorts that Antonioni directed. The paramount role that landscape played in the 1940s debate in *Cinema* is widely acknowledged.<sup>69</sup> However, Antonioni focuses more on the significance of this landscape in terms of atmosphere than as a narrative resource. Moreover, he pays utmost attention to the landscape deeply marked by human presence: the Po delta and plains,<sup>70</sup> urban outskirts, a mannerist villa, a mountain cable car. Modernity profoundly affected these places, but these transformations are not in themselves negative, however unsettling they may be. As already mentioned, Antonioni's early works use many locations that neorealist productions used, as did 1950s documentary filmmaking, which was essentially a politically engaged follow-up to neorealist fiction cinema. However, Antonioni looks at this landscape with no ideologically explicit concerns and without articulating a narrative. The signs of modernity, so immediately identified with Fascism or ascribed to the failure of post-war conservative politics—be they urban peripheries, reclaimed marshes, or industrial production—are not targets for ideological condemnation in Antonioni's works. This happens in later documentaries or in neorealist fiction films.

The early documentaries of Michelangelo Antonioni render a composite space: the signs of the past and of modernisation coexist with an

68 Antonioni, *Agosto* '51.

69 The almost canonical references are De Santis, 'Towards an Italian Landscape'; De Santis, 'Il linguaggio dei rapporti'; De Santis and Alicata, 'Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema'; De Santis and Alicata, 'Ancora di Verga e del cinema italiano'.

70 Gambi, 'Paesaggio rurale lungo il Po'.

overwhelming nature, and the human presence is disconnected from both. Landscape in the work of Antonioni has been widely commented on. Quaresima discusses it in terms of intransitive space, wherein characters are prevented from productively intervening in their environment. Steimatsky examines what she terms the fracture between figure and ground and the switching between the two. With reference to Antonioni's later work, Bernardi refers to the relevance of landscape and space in reducing the importance of the character, thereby marginalising human subjectivity.<sup>71</sup> This landscape is itself peculiar: its components express their mutual detachment. This visual strategy is duplicated in the relationship between sound and image. Again, Antonioni's work stands out among both post-war fiction films and contemporary documentaries. Whereas the latter connects the images thanks to a relentless voice-over, in Antonioni's documentaries the voice seems to get lost, misses some sequences, or steps in rhapsodically, as the musical score does. For instance, in *People of the Po Valley* and *N.U.* the voice-over refrains from explaining and commenting on the images or building a causality between the sequences; rather, it evokes more nuanced feelings by briefly mentioning states of being or activities at unpredictable moments in the film. It points out individual components within the frame but is not concerned with connecting them with an overall design or narrative. The voice-over appears almost randomly, following abruptly the musical score composed by Giovanni Fusco or Mario Labroca. Indeed, Antonioni refused to make what he considered to be unnecessary connections between the components: 'Here is a screenplay's weakness: giving words to events refusing them.'<sup>72</sup> This resistance to an encompassing, synthetic representation is a sign of both Antonioni's modernist legacy and his approach to filmmaking based on disconnected, scattered materials. It is a modern approach, as it was consistently deployed in his career and greatly influenced what is usually termed modern cinema. Antonioni's modernity has been discussed at length, and it is not my intention to explore this notion yet again, apart from one connection that largely goes unnoticed. The modern cinema that Antonioni pursued from the early 1940s onwards does not go without a solid, deep integration into a modernist legacy. Accordingly, many of the striking options Antonioni adopted in his post-war work belonged to a widespread inter-war debate, which found in the realm of documentary the most suitable chance to be turned into actual films. Indeed, documentary

71 See Quaresima, 'Da "Cronaca di un amore" a "Amore in città"'; Steimatsky, 'Aerial: Antonioni's Modernism'; Bernardi, *Il paesaggio nel cinema italiano*.

72 Antonioni, *Untitled*.

filmmaking was at once a chance for filmmakers to experiment with new ways to articulate film language and for young filmmakers to have an arena for self-expression, one that was relatively less monitored. It was in this spirit that Antonioni began with documentary filmmaking. Some features of his early documentary works are particularly relevant, notably abstract patterns, fragmentary discourses, reflexivity, discursive subjectivity, and the fantastic.

First let us examine the use of *patterns based on rhythm and graphic shapes* when composing frames or editing sequences. Such patterns can already be found in *People of the Po Valley* in the way the riverbanks become a visual motif, for instance, or how the village square becomes a sort of abstract setting. The same goes for the factory and its machines in *Seven reeds, one suit*, a promotional short meant to advertise the production process of turning reeds into fabric in the plant of Torviscosa, between Venice and Trieste. For a long time, malaria had afflicted this region, but the disease was virtually eradicated by the reclamation of swamp land under Fascism in 1927, as in other areas in the country. The vision we find in *People of the Po Valley* or *Seven reeds, one suit* is therefore less dismissal of the recent past or of modernity as an anonymous, inhuman process. Instead, these films, like the other documentary shorts Antonioni directed, aim to perceive phenomena through their formal structures, eidetically, detecting pure forms in their appearances. Technology has here a twofold function. It embodies the ideal object to be represented because it is rational, linear, geometrical, and functional, beautiful in itself, in accordance with its modernist glorification in previous decades. Moreover, technology allows the modern viewer and artist to perceive and organise image and sound in an effective way, since technology surpasses human perception. This modern vision is often conveyed in a no-less-modern way to investigate the world: detection. By now we are all familiar with the unusual and blatantly unsuccessful detections haunting many of Antonioni's feature films, including *Story of a Love Affair*, *L'avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1959), *Blow-Up* (1966), or *Professione reporter* (*The Passenger*, 1975). Similar narrative structures, referring to abstract ways of inquiring into reality by moving backwards to explain a present condition, are widespread in a great deal of scripts Antonioni drafted in the second half of the 1940s: *Grand Hotel* starts from a corpse lying in a luxurious hotel suite at the Venice Lido.<sup>73</sup> *Delitto a Roma* (*Murder in Rome*, 1947) opens with the arrest of a young man who claims to be innocent but cannot prove it.<sup>74</sup>

73 Antonioni, *Grand Hotel*.

74 Antonioni, *Delitto a Roma*.

*Crisi* (*Un pacchetto di Morris*) (*Crisis* [*A Pack of Morris*], 1947) combines this kind of narrative with an opening based on a loose association of elements in the life of a contemporary, unspecified metropolis.<sup>75</sup> These scripts prove Antonioni's early interest in a narrative based on formulaic patterns and highly motivated goals that are then challenged and slowly dissolve. His early works already revolve around abstract patterns, either narrative or visual. These patterns derive from modernist inter-war culture and are conceived as a way to understand and synthetically convey reality.

The preference Antonioni expresses for abstract patterns goes hand in hand with his celebrated *fragmentary discourse*, which can be found in his later feature films. The films Antonioni directed between 1943 and 1953 never describe coherently the places or situations depicted. For instance, although *People of the Po Valley* follows the river flow, we are almost never certain of where a sequence is located but for the ending, when the river abruptly meets the sea. *Lies of love* explains the mass production of photo-romances, how they are processed, and the relationship that is built between the characters, their performers, and the readership. When following one of these performers in a poor neighbourhood, the camera suddenly turns all its attention to a little girl dancing for the 'star' in a way that is both moving and obscene, and unbecoming to her. Instead of a logical, complete explanation of a media and cultural phenomenon, the storytelling wanders and almost gets sidetracked. Fragmentation also originates in the inter-war reflection on the modern experience as inherently scattered.

Thirdly, as already mentioned above, *reflexivity* is a marked feature of Antonioni's early documentaries. *Lies of love* is a prime example, which focuses on the process of producing (still) images and counterfeiting them. (Fig. 2.3) But reflexivity works in a subtler way in *The villa of the monsters*. This short film employs a narrator who addresses somebody he calls 'Professor', who remains silent throughout the film. The narrator's voice leads the camera through the astonishing and grotesque beauties of a Mannerist villa close to Viterbo, northeast of Rome, hinting at the relevant monuments adorning the park. This very function, duplicating the anonymous voice-over of contemporary documentary discourse, disproves the artificial nature of documentary storytelling. Moreover, the narrator jeers at well-established art history categories: just before a gigantic amphora with a romantic landscape, the narrator utters in the background ironically: 'Metaphysical, indeed!' Reflexivity is neither accidental nor limited to this documentary production: it recurs also in the scripts Antonioni drafted in

75 Antonioni and Galluppi, *Crisi* (*o Un pacchetto di Morris*).

the same years. For instance, consider *Vita del manifesto* (*Life of a Poster*). The story has much in common with *Lies of love*, since it painstakingly describes all the steps in the production of an artifact typical of post-war visual mass culture: a film poster. The narrative begins with the end product as a user would receive it—be it a reader (in *Lies of love*) or a moviegoer (in *Life of a poster*)—and moves backwards. Any form of representation undergoes the scrutiny of Antonioni, whether it be a photo-romance, a poster, or the film itself.<sup>76</sup> A keen interest in the act of seeing lies at the core of a script Antonioni wrote with Francesco Pasinetti, the Venetian film director and scholar, in the second half of the 1940s: *La bella veneziana* (*The beautiful Venetian*, 1947).<sup>77</sup> The plot is about a painter who runs into a young girl who strikingly resembles a woman portrayed in an old painting, her ancestor. The painting is stolen, and the couple starts looking for it, thus triggering the narrative. In the script there are a good deal of thematic and theoretical concerns that Antonioni shared with Pasinetti, including the motif of the double, the relationship between the portrait and the frame, and the relation between photography and painting. Furthermore, the attentiveness that Antonioni showed for landscape and the gaze shaping it echoes the interest Pasinetti always had for Venice and its variegated identity, expressed in documentary films including *La gondola* (*The gondola*, 1942), *Venezia minore* (*Minor Venice*, 1942), and *Il palazzo dei Dogi* (*The Dogi's palace*, 1947). *The beautiful Venetian* begins with some tourists, but soon the camera pans away from them to identify with the more acute and curious look of the artist, who soon wanders around Venice's less known areas in search of the stolen painting. Reflexivity is a full-fledged component of inter-war modernism, but while it has been widely scrutinised within this field, it has been less discussed as an element that was part and parcel of post-war neorealist culture. Antonioni brings into light its role in the post-war era and in neorealism in particular.

Fourth, as some scholars have already remarked,<sup>78</sup> Antonioni's early documentaries often embed the act of seeing in *subjectivity* by way of a number of options, including unusual perspectives, complicated framing, and intricate camera tracking movements. However, this subjectivity is not anchored to a human presence, nor does it presume such a presence. We might term it a *non-anthropomorphic vision*. Seeing can be embedded in a mechanical device, and specifically in its functioning, as in the short film *Vertigo/The*

76 Antonioni, *Vita del manifesto*.

77 Antonioni and Pasinetti, *La bella veneziana*.

78 See particularly Quaresima, "Making Love on the Shores of the River Po".



Fig. 2.3 Realism and reflexivity: the birth of an image in *L'Amorosa menzogna* (Lies of love, 1949)

*funicular of Mount Faloria*, where the camera is placed on the roof of a cable car that suddenly and unexpectedly ascends the mountain, simply ignoring any human presence along the way.<sup>79</sup> *Vertigo* creates a tension between the modern, technological aerial lift and the primordial, unsettling, titanic mountain face towering above the whole frame surface. Technology does not provide a means to dominate nature, be it through a cable car or a camera, by climbing up its cliffs or capturing its appearance with a powerful gaze. Simply put, technology is a determining factor of contemporary life and part of a new anthropology, renewing the way in which humans see and experience nature. As stated by the calm voice at the end of the short: 'One concludes the contemplation of this precipice with a distressed eye, like somebody looking once more at this current world after grasping millenniums.' A similar reflection could apply to *People of the Po Valley*, where the camera slides along the riverbanks without ever stopping on a human figure, taking the place of

79 The film was part of a documentary series named 'Documento Film', whose inspirers and producers were Riccardo Ghione and Marco Ferreri. Its purpose was to set up a meeting between prominent artists and intellectuals and documentary. The series was also to include directors like Visconti and writers like Vasco Pratolini. Unfortunately, the series was very soon terminated.

a human observer. Literally, we are before a non-human or a de-humanised vision. It is exactly this characteristic that marks Antonioni's dislocated and peculiar position with regard to neorealist humanism. Humanism was the feature most often and aptly turned into ideology, preventing for a long time a full understanding of the manifold nature of neorealism itself. Certainly, humanism was a crucial issue for neorealism but did not coincide with it, and it certainly did not coincide with the early stages of Antonioni's career. Instead, humanism threatened to conceal the modernist components that were themselves active and productive in his work, as in neorealism overall to a certain degree. Modernism in the inter-war period often employed realist settings, raw materials, and experimentation, and documentary filmmaking provided an ideal medium for such attempts. Antonioni walked this path. In his early works, subjectivity does not coincide with the human character but rather reveals the mechanical apparatus behind the act of looking. As such, subjectivity manifests this act while deconstructing the neorealist ideology of humanism.

Finally, Antonioni's documentaries often slide in the *fantastic*. Even when writing film reviews, Antonioni was interested in fantasy as a mode of appraising film technology, attaining unprecedented goals, and conflating the incredible with the real.<sup>80</sup> In his documentaries and scripts, the fantastic offers a sort of fissure in the surface of the real, potentially endangering its own existence. Something well rooted in the visual landscape produces an uncanny effect in everyday life: the act of seeing reveals a disproportion between a component and the things surrounding it. This imbalance might refer to the coexistence of historically distinct times. This happens in *Vertigo*, as a modern cable car is unexpectedly tossed back into a pristine, towering landscape. The same goes for *People of the Po Valley*, where historical and geographical boundaries become indistinct: the river's delta reveals settlements close to prehistory, and the huts barely sheltering their inhabitants are compared to those in Africa. In *Superstition*, the editing pattern associates various forms

80 The first to track this motif in the director's film criticism was Brunetta, 'La formazione della poetica di Antonioni e il neorealismo'. See for instance this long excerpt from a review of *The Thief of Baghdad* (Michael Powell, Ludwig Berger, Tim Whelan, 1940): 'The pathways of the fantasy genre are plenty of pitfalls and obstacles, and we would be at odds, if requested to produce on the spot an example of a movie abusing, that is *endorsing, the fantasy to turn it real*. However, when watching this Baghdad, its stony sails amidst the sea, those oriental landscapes of cities climbing up a shore or on the top of a mountain, weird for their steeples, mosques, minarets, marvelous palaces: yellowish or blueish landscapes, against which turbans, baracans, merchants' tents and people's sandy faces stood out; most of all, looking at the action scenes, brawls or getaways [...] we came to believe that until now film fables missed colour, and that this kind of film should recur to colour *in the least realistic way*.' Antonioni, 'Film di tutto il mondo a Roma', p. 47, my emphasis.

of urban contemporary superstition with archaic rural society. Framing and editing become thus a means to enhance the differences within the unity. Antonioni neither straightforwardly glorifies modernity nor sings the praises of an idyllic backwardness: he connects the two terms in an unsettling, enigmatic way. Even more often a fantastic tone is achieved by the visual design of the frame, and namely by two methods: disproportion and decontextualisation. The first term refers to an image displaying two homologous elements whose dimensions are radically different. For instance, the human beings in *The villa of the monsters* are associated with the titanic statues of mythological creatures towering over them: human figures are no longer the unit of measurement of the universe and are instead reduced through a comparison with inanimate creatures. Decontextualisation indicates a process through which the image's features, as photographed in reality, are abstracted and receive new meanings. For instance, this happens openly in *Seven reeds, one suit*: the voice-over disanchors the industrial plant processing rayon from its primary function and compares it to a magic castle, not resembling to the Castle of Atlante in Ludovico Ariosto's *The Frenzy of Orlando*, a place where everything entering loses its appearance by way of sorcery. (Fig. 2.4) This way of framing the plant reinforces such a way of looking at the place, as it enhances the modern, colossal, almost unearthly profile of the factory, detaching it from its surroundings. Fantastic motifs also appear in Antonioni's later work: the mysterious vanishing of Anna in *The Adventure*; the open, uncomfortable ending of *L'eclisse* (*The Eclipse*, 1962); or the disorienting experience of seeing in *Blow-Up*... The connection between composition and fantasy can also be seen in a significant element of twentieth-century Italian painting and literature, beyond Sironi and Giorgio Morandi, whom Antonioni so much appreciated. In terms of painting, we can mention De Chirico and the blatant disproportion of the components included in his metaphysical landscapes. And with regard to literature, Italo Calvino's works consistently included a hesitation between the realist depiction of actions and characters and a longing for the marvelous and extraordinary. In the early 1950s, the young Calvino championed the marvelous in Italian cinema, in support of the effectiveness of neorealist production, beyond its ideology.<sup>81</sup> The aesthetic need to manipulate raw, real materials into a fictitious composition was circulating already in the post-war discussion on neorealism: a good example is the debate in the 1950s around literary neorealism.<sup>82</sup> Antonioni's early work was entangled in this tension between the weight of material and social reality and the need

81 Calvino, 'Il realismo italiano nel cinema e nella letteratura', p. 262.

82 See Bo (ed.), *Inchiesta sul neorealismo*.



Fig. 2.4 Realism and fantastic. An industrial plant as a magic castle in *Sette canne, un vestito* (Seven reeds, one suit, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1948)

to give it an adequate, expressive form. The fantastic is possibly one of the ways he felt he could produce an expressive form, a concern that he shared with other artists associated with neorealist culture (e.g. Calvino, Zavattini).

All the characteristics so far traced in the early work of Antonioni play a role in various ways in the inter-war period, and specifically in the debate and practice of documentary filmmaking. It was without doubt a minor practice, but at various stages prominent intellectuals partook in it, as was the case with Luigi Chiarini and Umberto Barbaro, at the time respectively head of the Rome film academy (Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia), and head of the the film academy's training programme.<sup>83</sup> However, another personality was far more active in the area of documentary: Francesco Pasinetti, who was also appointed instructor at the academy. Due to his untimely death in 1948 at the age of 37, his work has been overlooked for a long time. Nonetheless, Pasinetti was an authoritative figure among younger scholars of the film academy and a pivotal personality in establishing the young fascist college students' film society. Known as Cineguf, the group aimed to spread international film culture and produce experimental

83 See for instance Chiarini, 'Per un documentario artistico'; Barbaro, 'Piccola storia del film documentario in Italia'.

filmmaking. Pasinetti also founded one of the main journals of the GUF association: *Il Ventuno*,<sup>84</sup> which was to become a respected publication in the second half of the 1930s. Antonioni himself was a member of the group in the late 1930s.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Cineguf discussed the creation of a *film art overtly experimental instead of narrative-based, and with recurring references to the fantastic*, as two crucial films of their production testify: *Il cuore rivelatore* (The tell-tale heart, Alberto Mondadori, Mario Monicelli, Cesare Civita, Alberto Lattuada, 1935) and *Il caso Valdemar* (The facts in the case of Mr. Valdemar, Ubaldo Magnaghi, Giani Hoepli, 1936), both based on renowned tales by Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>86</sup> The Cineguf's activity (film criticism, film culture's initiatives, film production) was not confined to academia, but reached a wider arena; in fact, many among the Cineguf members carried their experience into Istituto Luce's newsreels and documentary films. We can conclude that the documentary offered a way to experiment with new forms of film art but also a fully professional and institutional pathway, benefiting from a vivid theoretical debate. The debate and film practice that took place at Cineguf were strikingly parallel to Antonioni's early works. Let's consider some of the terms circulating in the discussion, such as *landscape*:

It is no more the characters, but the atmosphere that comes now to the fore and is the cornerstone upon which the author builds his theme. Accordingly, *the landscape is the main character* [...]: the valley, the reclamation, the industrial harbour.<sup>87</sup>

Pasinetti thus praises the modern landscape, wherein the narrative collapses into the energy of a more undefined atmosphere. A modern landscape makes for an ideal subject matter for documentary filmmaking. In general, Cineguf paid much attention to documentary filmmaking as a free theoretical, political, and experimental domain. One of the main organs of the association, the journal *Il Bò*, had the following to say in its review of *Il popolo ha scritto sui muri* (The people wrote on the walls, Fernando Cerchio, 1938): 'Here is the *modern documentary*, the film describing an *atmosphere*, a state of

84 See Montanaro, 'Francesco Pasinetti'.

85 On the Cineguf's activity at the crossroads of documentary and experimental filmmaking, see Mariani, *Gli anni del Cine-guf*; Mariani, 'Regimi della competenza, Passioni della tecnica'. On Antonioni's Cineguf membership, see Benci, 'Identification of a City'.

86 On these two adaptations, see Mariani and Venturini, 'Sapessi com'è strano incontrare Poe a Milano'.

87 Pasinetti, 'Film di atmosfera', p. 249. The film Pasinetti discusses is *Estuario* (Estuary, Arnaldo Boscolo). My emphasis.

mind, taking advantage of *places* as an external reference point, as *sheer visual features*.<sup>88</sup> Film critics like Pasinetti or Glaucio Pellegrini considered documentary filmmaking to be an opportunity to study ‘pure language’<sup>89</sup> or to fashion a coherence based on ‘*rhythmic and contrapuntal values*, and on fascinating *relations between images and sounds*, in every possible sense’.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, all the key issues present in the film artistry of Antonioni—modernity, landscape, atmosphere, places, vision—were very much prevalent in the inter-war period.

An utterly subjective camera eye, so typical of Antonioni’s early filmmaking, recurs throughout many documentaries in the 1940s. We find such a viewpoint, for instance, in many of Pasinetti’s works, including *Sulle orme di Giacomo Leopardi* (In the footsteps of Giacomo Leopardi, 1941). Here, the camera frames the landscape through the window of a bell tower, then tracks forward towards it until it moves beyond the frame of the window. Accordingly, the camera produces a double effect: first, by moving so explicitly, the camera draws the viewer’s attention to its presence; then, by including a frame within the frame, demarcating the landscape, the shot underlines the eminently visual nature of film art, inscribing it in a genealogy going back to painting, collating cinematic landscape with landscapes belonging to Italian painting. A year later, Pasinetti placed his camera on a gondola’s prow to wander through the canals of Venice in *Minor Venice*. This produces a wavering vision made up of reflections, shadows, and faces of buildings just briefly perceived. It is uncertain and enigmatic because of the pure rhythmic effect it produces, and because of this, the route seems aimless.

Antonioni’s early documentaries and the films created by Cineguf share many of the same locations, including Chioggia, Comacchio, the Venice lagoon, as well as places Antonioni visited when shooting *People of the Po Valley* or was planning to choose in his film scripts.<sup>91</sup> These locations were selected for being highly expressive landscapes and for merging industrial transformation and archaic presences, as was the case with the early works of Francesco Pasinetti, for example, or films such as *Comacchio* (Comacchio,

88 T.D., ‘Littoriali del cinema’. My emphasis.

89 Pellegrini, ‘Il documentario: ieri, oggi e domani’. In the immediate aftermath of World War Two, it is not surprising to discover that Pasinetti supervised a documentary Pellegrini devoted to the Resistance in Venice, *Venezia insorge* (Venice uprisings, 1945), confirming a network of people, competences, and practices surviving Fascism into the post-war era.

90 Pasinetti, ‘Uomini sul fondo’, p. 218. My emphasis.

91 Beyond Antonioni, *Grand Hotel*, and Antonioni and Pasinetti, *La bella veneziana*, consider Antonioni, Balboni, and Pier Maria Pasinetti, *Con il tuo perfido cuore (Odia il prossimo tuo)*; Anonymous (Antonioni, Balboni, and Pier Maria Pasinetti?), *Grand Hotel (Odia il prossimo tuo)*.

Fernando Cerchio, 1940-42) and *Gente di Chioggia* (People from Chioggia, Basilio Franchina, 1942). (Fig. 2.5) The latter film turns the places portrayed into abstractions by foregrounding the geometrical shapes of the objects and locations framed. There was even some overlap in the film staff used by these filmmakers and by Antonioni.<sup>92</sup> The collaboration between Antonioni and Pasinetti is the most notable one. The two peers not only worked together on a number of initiatives and projects, they also shared a vivid attention for the ongoing transformations in Italian society. They even happened to share in-laws.<sup>93</sup> Their cultural modernism combined with Italy's artistic heritage resulted in an open-minded attitude when confronted with technology. In different ways, both Pasinetti and Antonioni considered film art as a fulcrum where traditional art somehow ended and could start over.<sup>94</sup> Both artists possessed an intense interest in American culture, something that is well known in Antonioni's case due to his later experience filming in the United States but is much less discussed in Pasinetti's case, who nonetheless travelled to the United States in 1934 as a member of a GUF delegation.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, both Antonioni and Pasinetti had high regard for twentieth-century classical music. This is self-evident in the work that Antonioni pursued with composer Giovanni Fusco and also in his later works. Pasinetti worked together with Gian Francesco Malipiero, one of the most prominent Italian composers of the twentieth century. And the most well-known area in which Antonioni and Pasinetti collaborated was in drafting film scripts. They also worked together on shared initiatives and considered documentary filmmaking to be the best opportunity to test film art and expand its forms. Thus, it should come as no surprise that it was Pasinetti who originally began directing *Ragazze in bianco* (Girls in white, 1949), a film about young nurses, which in 1949 was taken over by Antonioni when the former passed away due to an aneurysm. What is most evident is that Antonioni not only took over

92 For instance, consider Giovanni Fusco, the composer of the musical score of *Comacchio*, who later regularly composed the scores of Antonioni's films. Or Piero Portalupi, who was the cinematographer of *People of the Po Valley* and formerly portrayed the epic conflict between man and nature in *Cinque Terre* (The five lands, Giovanni Paolucci, 1942) and *People from Chioggia*.

93 Antonioni and Pasinetti were brothers in law, since Michelangelo Antonioni married Letizia Balboni in 1942 and Francesco Pasinetti later married her sister, Loredana. Reference to this kinship is found in Tassone, *I film di Michelangelo Antonioni*; Benci, 'Identification of a City'.

94 Pasinetti conceived such a role for film art in his dissertation, which was the first that focused on cinema in general in Italy. See Pasinetti, *Realtà artistica del cinema*.

95 The interest in the Anglo-Saxon culture becomes even more striking when considering Pier Maria Pasinetti, Francesco's younger brother. Beyond being a respected novelist, Pier Maria Pasinetti was professor of Comparative Literature and Italian Literature at UCLA. Finally, he also worked with Antonioni as a scriptwriter for *Lady Without Camelias*, as well as on some non-produced scripts.



Fig. 2.5 Realism as modernism under Fascism. *Gente di Chioggia* (People from Chioggia, Basilio Franchina, 1942)

that film but also moved on from the inter-war culture and filmmaking and into a new age: less than a year later, *Story of a Love Affair* was released.<sup>96</sup>

For a number of reasons, the discourse on documentary filmmaking was curtailed during the post-war years. To begin with, there was a need to clearly put behind its inter-war past and mould a new, post-war culture, one that was socially engaged. In addition, an ideological distrust of the avant-garde prevailed in Italy. The marginal position relegated to documentary and experimental filmmaking within national film culture and film criticism also did not help. However, the fall from prominence of the documentary might prevent us from fully understanding post-war film culture on its own terms, forcing us to rely primarily on the critical discussion while overlooking the cultural memory that filmmakers brought into play, that is, the intertextual references, former and still influential theoretical notions, and the models they had before their eyes.

96 The story of the documentary was only recently clarified and is now provided in Montanaro (ed.), *Francesco Pasinetti. Il suo cinema*. The handover between Pasinetti and Antonioni was not ideal, or solely aesthetic: thanks to the Antonioni estate, a relevant part of Pasinetti's body of work has been so far preserved, and in 1999 Carlo di Carlo, on behalf of Antonioni, transferred it to the Cineteca Nazionale, in Rome. See Montanaro, 'Il primo cinema di Pasinetti'.

To conclude, I believe that to fully grasp the function that Antonioni played in post-war Italian film culture, we need to reconsider his affiliation to neorealism that has thus far been conceived too simplistically. This is not because Antonioni does not belong to that specific phase of Italy's national culture but because this phase has been reduced to its humanist or progressive ideology and thus completely overlooks its inter-war cultural legacy. Antonioni's early documentaries have been subject to a double anachronism: either they were the seeds that blossomed in the later major works of the acknowledged master, namely the feature films of the 1960s; or they were merely a template for the neorealist documentaries of the early 1950s. Subsequently, a tautological vicious cycle was established: *People of the Po Valley* is important because it anticipates the later film *Delta padano* (Po Delta, Florestano Vancini, 1951); but this latter, conversely, is memorable because it relies on Antonioni's established authority. *N.U.* is remarkable in that its location and tone influence *Bambini* (Children, Francesco Maselli, 1951) and *Ombrellai* (Umbrella makers, Francesco Maselli, 1952); and Maselli's early works are worthwhile because their director was Antonioni's assistant and clearly relied on his previous experience. All in all, previous and past works mutually validate themselves, and historians never scrutinize them in themselves. And so on. This perspective might weakly explain Antonioni's later work, or following documentary filmmaking,<sup>97</sup> but it appears ineffective in locating and clarifying his artistic activity during the 1940s.

I theorise that Italian cinema followed two different trajectories of modernisation in the early and mid-1940s. One from the very start was meant to be hegemonic: it aimed at translating the narrative forms implemented during the nineteenth century in the European novel and in drama, based on verisimilitude; these forms were to be renewed by contact with the cinematic medium, as in *The Earth Trembles*. This hegemonic line might be termed *literary*, and the film journal *Cinema* chiefly promoted it. Roughly speaking, the literary line is based on a clear plot, albeit subject to detours; main characters holding a relationship with their surroundings, wherein they belong to their environment—in fact, the environment becomes the characters' expression. The other line was rather minor and inherited a number of concerns and stylistic options but also a notion of cinema from inter-war modernism. This line might be termed *experimental*: it paid a great

97 From the early 1950s on, Renzo Renzi commented carefully on Antonioni's work, and quite early he focused explicitly on his documentaries. Back then Antonioni's influence on contemporary documentary practice was clear to Renzi, who named "*N.U.'s Children*" the most remarkable documentaries. See Renzi, 'Gli "antichi gesti" del documentario italiano'.

deal of attention to the real and the ways to record and shape it by cinematic means. But it is precisely this relationship between new technological opportunities (recording) and the desire to give an adequate form to raw materials (shaping) that sets this body of work apart from the hegemonic line. Rather than rejecting modernity and its contradictions, this line embraced it: by recording reality, it reflected on anthropological shifts, on the ways of looking, and on the apparatus itself. It certainly led to Antonioni's major achievements, and I suspect that it also affected the filmmaking of Rossellini.<sup>98</sup> In post-war Italian cinema, a good deal of documentary filmmaking belonged to this experimental line. Antonioni was certainly outstanding, as he reached an unprecedented clarity of forms and density of reflection. In his quest to ask good questions, he gave up the iconoclasm so widespread in the neorealist debate, which was so prone to do away with a past that many of its members had been a part of. Instead, Antonioni detached its images from the ideological function that late neorealism attached to them and refused to have them explicitly talking. As he said about screenplays, trying to attribute words to events that refuse them is a screenplay's inherent vice. Instead, from his early works the director questioned the images he used, and he let them question him and the viewer. He was aware of their powerful ambiguity, since images articulate desire. Perhaps the composite, compound, often enigmatic images defining Antonioni's early documentaries embody a passion for the image wherein a desire circulates rather than resting in its search for a lost reality. The consistent question these films articulate is how images relate to the real, and they seem far less concerned with reassuring us about the existence and fullness of this reference.<sup>99</sup> Instead of anchoring the image to a comforting and stable meaning—be it class, hardships, the Resistance, or humankind—Antonioni prefers visual jigsaw puzzles whose reality is uncertain and whose nature

98 In this respect, I tend to depart from Caminati's view, who mostly underlines the narrative mode of the inter-war documentary and the role that Cavalcanti played in fostering a new generation of filmmakers, including Rossellini himself. Although I certainly agree with the importance Caminati attributes to key figures such as Grierson and Cavalcanti in upholding the Italian debate and new ways of considering documentary filmmaking, I would not underestimate the specific blend of formal experimentation and peculiar storytelling their work offered and that later Italian filmmaking developed in its own right. See Caminati, *Roberto Rossellini documentarista*. On the connection between documentary and avant-garde, an insightful overall framing is found in Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, and in particular Chapter 6.

99 Here I am referring to Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, as it discusses the relationship between images, desire, and a minoritarian language as a way to imbue the former with the latter. Mitchell draws the notion of minoritarian language from Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*.

is ascetic. Rather than rewarding the viewer, they continuously strike him with painstaking, reflexive, and memorial composition, detachment from the portrayed subject matter, and deferral of a final meaning. In this regard, Antonioni's iconic passion represents a cultural memory, extracting from the archive of the inter-war past the images to explain and confront the present. Rather than rejecting recent history, its forms serve to question the modes of our present.

If we go back to the early works of Antonioni as part of neorealism, we might trace their function as the expression of a minoritarian cinema within the majoritarian language of realism. The cultural memory operating in Antonioni's early work; the way it refers to past and present visual patterns and re-forges them; the interest in a non-human, mechanical view that dominates in these and later films; the explicit interest Antonioni had for the work of artists as Bruno Munari and his 'useless machines'<sup>100</sup>—all this bears witness to the minoritarian nature of this approach. Having said that, the peculiar position of this body of work sheds light on the way neorealist culture functioned and its artistic background, and its difficulties in remembering the national cultural and political past.

### **Recurring Interruptions. Post-War Documentary, War Memories, and Trauma**

Modern states build their consistency and coherence by shaping national memories. Devoid of metaphysical transcendence, modern states require rituals, icons, and frameworks that can elicit identification processes and articulate a feeling of community. Narratives about the nation's past meet this demand by conveying makeshift versions of the past according to specific socially and historically determined requests.<sup>101</sup> Nations are as much a cultural product as memory, both being available to individuals and groups to achieve relatively stable identities.<sup>102</sup> Modern states and their institutions

100 See the project Antonioni drafted to make an 'almost abstract documentary' out of Bruno Munari's 'useless machines', as reported in Di Carlo, 'Vedere in modo nuovo', pp. 15-16. The 'useless machines' is a work that Italian artist and designer Bruno Munari started during the so-called 'second Futurism' phase in 1933 and continued in the following decades, thus bridging the inter-war and post-war periods. A statement about this project can be found in Munari, 'Che cosa sono le macchine inutili e perché'.

101 An overview of the relationship between memory and nation can be found in Olick, 'Introduction'.

102 'There are no identities, national or otherwise, that are not constituted and challenged in time and with histories, but nations have had a special place in the history of memory and

produce specific forms of knowledge about the past through established sets of discourses that include ceremonies, monuments, celebrations, historical surveys and accounts, and the media. As Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy put it, 'modern states solidify their power in part by manipulating assumptions about time and space, and they do so with both history and memory'.<sup>103</sup>

In the aftermath of World War Two, the new-born Italian state desperately needed to cohere its national community after twenty-two years of totalitarianism, a disastrous war experience, a civil conflict splitting Italy in two from the fall of 1943 to the spring of 1945, and the loss of the north-eastern territories and the colonies in Africa.<sup>104</sup> At this point in time, Italy was not all that different from other nations inasmuch as its war experience deeply affected and determined its post-war experience in terms of culture, society, and politics.<sup>105</sup> The crucial question that had to be addressed was the identity that could bind together the national community emerging from warfare: was Italy a victor, one of the defeated, or a traitor? Moulding a memory that was broad enough to accommodate the majority of the population was an issue of paramount importance for Italian society. The lowest common denominators were war violence and victimhood, which mirrored experiences as diverse as those of the victims and the perpetrators. As historian Richard Bessel explains:

For millions of people, their experiences of war were remembered in terms of fear and agony, of sacrifice and of the terrible consequences of the conflict, of being the objects of the horrors of war, of having behaved as best they could, of having been betrayed—in short, remembered in terms of violence and victimhood.<sup>106</sup>

The focus on the war experience excluded from critical scrutiny issues related to accountability. Conversely, a line was drawn between the past and

identity and in the history of their relations. Memory and the nation have a peculiar synergy.' Olick, 'Introduction', p. 2.

103 Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, Levy, 'Introduction', pp. 13-14.

104 On the experience of mass executions, and migration forced on the Italian population of Istria, Quarnero, and Dalmatia, see Crainz, *Il dolore e l'esilio*; Pupo, *Il lungo esodo*

105 In this respect, I agree with Echterkamp and Martens, who argue that the 'post-war period should primarily be regarded [...] as time that was decisively molded by the war's multifaceted effects. [...]. This reflects the seemingly paradoxical circumstance that the war did not end with the end of the war.' Echterkamp and Martens, 'The Meanings of the Second World War in Contemporary European History', p. 246.

106 Bessel, 'Violence and Victimhood', p. 230.

the present, with specific regard being paid to the circumstances leading to the conflict and the way the conflict developed. Immediately after the war, the effort to mould the collective memory was undertaken, with a clear foundational function for the states emerging from the ruins of the conflict. This meant a new social contract that would bestow forgiveness on most of the perpetrators—in Italy, nothing similar to the Nuremberg trials ever occurred<sup>107</sup>—and aggrandise the fallen and the victims. This mnemonic strategy misrepresented historical facts and processes, which many historians later lamented.<sup>108</sup> For Italy, one of the most striking features of this divergence was the emphasis put on the losses suffered by the nation. When compared to other states—Poland, USSR, or Germany, for instance—the conflict had spared Italy in terms of both casualties and material losses. Nevertheless, in symbolic and cultural terms, the blow experienced by Italian society was deeply felt and accordingly represented.<sup>109</sup> The widespread perception of having suffered from grievance, violence, and moral abjection led post-war Italian society to forge a *monologic national memory*, as Aleida Assmann terms it: a memory limited exclusively to the national community to the exclusion of the rest of the world. This happened almost everywhere in Europe as a way to come to terms with internal issues and heal the wounds of war. Monologic memory recognised only the position of victims, witnesses of injustice and violence, and victors over evil;<sup>110</sup> the responsible and the guilty were not included. Neorealist cinema pretended to address an international audience and did so successfully. In terms of narrative, style, and roles within the diegesis, neorealist films partly echoed the same issues at the core of documentary films representing national history, and their contradictory account.

Italian post-war documentaries portraying war events and the transition to democracy are quite a neglected subject. One possible reason for this indifference is the apparent lack of homogeneity of the corpus: formats sometimes differ, as do directors' backgrounds and the agencies supporting the production. However, I believe these discrepancies represent not a pitfall but rather a telling peculiarity, as they dovetail with an extensive

107 See Battini, *The Missing Italian Nuremberg*.

108 Judt argues that the memory of World War Two bequeathed to post-war generations an 'identity that was fundamentally false'. See Judt, 'The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-war Europe', p. 293.

109 This is the main claim made in Lanaro, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana*, pp. 5-36. Similarly, in a historical pamphlet, the intellectual Galli Della Loggia discussed the phase as 'death of the homeland'. See Galli Della Loggia, *La morte della patria*.

110 See Assmann, 'From Collective Violence to a Common Future'.

endeavour to perform a work dealing with cultural trauma. If we move away from a perspective that merges post-war culture with a leftist orientation, anti-fascism, social commitment, and humanism and try to look at it from a more inclusive view, doing justice to inherent cultural dynamics, then we can find a number of associations and correspondences. A number of post-war documentaries that came into production at the same time that neorealist cinema came onto the scene intentionally depicted the shift from dictatorship to democracy and namely the phase of the civil war. Most of them glorify the Italian Resistance movement, mourn the fallen, and look compassionately at the ravaged post-war landscape. It was not only neorealist cinema but also documentary filmmaking that privileged ruins as a motif, as productions like *La valle di Cassino* (Cassino valley, Giovanni Paolucci, 1946) prove.

Neorealist filmmakers who became prominent later contributed to the production of post-war documentaries, including De Santis and Visconti, who together with Marcello Pagliero and Mario Serandrei directed *Giorni di gloria* (Days of glory, 1945), or Lattuada, who was responsible for *La nostra guerra* (Our war, 1945). Among these renowned artistic personalities was also Zavattini, who co-scripted a later production, *Guerra alla guerra* (War to war, Romolo Marcellini and Giorgio Simonelli, 1948).

Moreover, these films cover the same timespan as neorealist films do, that is, the recent civil war and its aftermath. But war documentaries address similar issues in a different way, and those responsible for portraying the hardships recently suffered were not always politically neutral. In addition to the names mentioned above, more dubious personalities turn up, such as Fernando Cerchio, who directed *Aldo dice 26x1* (Aldo says 26 × 1, 1946)<sup>111</sup> and had been one of the pivotal figures in documenting warfare for Istituto LUCE, the regime's official mouthpiece; Domenico Paoella, who directed *L'Italia s'è desta!* (Italy woke up!, 1947), who not only worked in warfare propaganda but also contributed to the infamous racist journal *Difesa della razza* and took part in documenting the Spanish civil war.<sup>112</sup> The most controversial figure, however, was Romolo Marcellini, who before co-directing *War to war* glorified in fictional and documentary works depicting the colonisation of Ethiopia, the Spanish civil war, and Italy's involvement in World War Two

111 The title refers to the rallying cry triggering the general uprising in Piedmont, on 24 April 1945.

112 Paoella, 'Antimilitarismo cinematografico'; Paoella, 'Madri sullo schermo'; Paoella, 'Incontri e scontri di razza sullo schermo'; Paoella, 'Espressioni rappresentative di selvaggi, di dementi, di ebrei'. A short biographical sketch can be found in Siniscalchi, 'Domenico Paoella'.

alongside Hitler's Third Reich.<sup>113</sup> Such backgrounds were a bitter pill for a post-war culture pretending to be rooted in an ethical viewpoint.

Furthermore, the institutional agencies backing these projects should not be underestimated. The Home Office, the Psychological Warfare Branch, and the Garibaldi Brigades (a communist resisters' association) supported *Days of glory*;<sup>114</sup> the Socialist and Liberal Parties, together with the National Association of Italian Partisans (ANPI), contributed to *Aldo says 26 x 1*; and the Vatican—and namely the Catholic Centre for Cinema (Centro Cattolico Cinematografico) and the production company Orbis Film—were responsible for raising funds for *War to war*.<sup>115</sup> And finally, while not an institution as the ones listed above, La Settimana Incom, a major post-war newsreel producer with strong ties to the ruling administration,<sup>116</sup> helped to realise *Italy woke up!*

All these films overtly articulate their function, which was to establish a social pact by means of a renewed collective memory. In addition, some components used are analogous to neorealist cinema, including the liberal use of a disembodied, almighty voice-over as a token of truthful and objective storytelling; substantial heterogeneity of the footage in terms of quality, exposure, and setting; access to archival footage; and a blending of documentary footage and staged sequences that constituted the backbone of many works, providing the viewer with a decidedly fictional, exemplary narrative. Furthermore, all these films had an explicit educational purpose: they offered a detailed account of the Resistance's organisation and *modus operandi*, and they lingered on the plight of the fallen, thus fostering a new lay ritual that expressed definite moral arguments and that distinguished right from wrong. However, with regard to the latter, it was not always so clear who was responsible.

The invariable chronology of all these films, regardless of the political orientation of those who were artistically responsible for them or of the institutions backing them, suppresses any reference to totalitarianism before the civil war. According to these films, Italian history essentially starts when the people rose up against Nazi fascism. This precise point of departure is made even clearer in the opening sequence of *Italy woke up!*: right after the credits,

113 See Cori, *Il cinema di Romolo Marcellini*.

114 For factual information concerning the film production, see Gaiardoni (ed.), *Giorni di gloria*; Musumeci, 'Giorni di gloria. Una scabrosa vicenda filmata'; Servetti and Asquini (eds), *Giorni di gloria*.

115 On the Vatican, Catholicism, and post-war Italian cinema, see Eugeni and Viganò (eds), *Attraverso lo schermo*; Treveri-Gennari, *Post-War Italian Cinema*; Della Maggiore and Subini (eds), *Catholicism and Cinema. Modernization and Modernity*.

116 On the company, see Sainati (ed.), *La Settimana Incom*.



Fig. 2.6 A lack of memory. The Italian population as blinded victim in *L'Italia s'è desta!* (Italy woke up!, Domenico Paolella, 1947)

an intertitle reads 'Roma 8 settembre 1943' (Rome, 8 September 1943). The date refers to the day that Marshal Pietro Badoglio proclaimed the armistice which had been signed a few days earlier by King Vittorio Emanuele III; the proclamation was soon followed by the king's dishonourable escape from Rome with the royal family and the government, which led to the German occupation of the peninsula, widespread confusion among the Italian Army, and massive participation in the partisan movement. Beyond the historical significance of this momentous day, what is striking in *Italy woke up!* is the choice to determine it as the starting point, immediately assigning clear roles within a staged sequence. As Marshal Badoglio's voice is broadcast on the radio, people gather in front of a restaurant where only an SS officer is having lunch, to listen to the loudspeakers. As the proclamation reveals Italy's withdrawal from its alliance with Germany, the Nazi soldier collects his things and gets ready to go outside and raid the country, and the people in front of the restaurant disperse, leaving behind just one witness: a blind man, who is clearly shaken by the news. The narrative's function is obvious: a ruthless perpetrator (the German soldier); a multifaceted crowd—portrayed through a variety of close-ups of popular, diverse faces—hints at potential

civilian victims; moral conscience in the form of a man deprived of his sight who nonetheless bears moral witness.<sup>117</sup> (Fig. 2.6)

This narrative scheme as much as the succession of staged and archival footage is taken to an extreme in *War to war*. The film was produced in 1947 as a part of the political propaganda leading to the elections of 1948, which pit the Popular Democratic Front (*Fronte democratico popolare per la libertà, la pace e il lavoro*)—a coalition made up of the Communist and Socialist Parties—against the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*). The film accordingly revolved around the figure of the Pope and was openly backed by Luigi Gedda, a prominent Catholic politician and promoter who was in charge of the Christian Democrats' propaganda. *War to war* is thus a documentary film with an overt political function. However, in addition to the fact that a number of professional figures who belong to neorealism worked on this film, there is more that *War to war* has in common with much more left-leaning documentaries in terms of the use of archival footage or the way it depicts the national past.<sup>118</sup> *War to war* alternates documentary footage with a re-enacted basic plot whose main character is the Everyman, and as war suddenly breaks out, he is dragged from his family dwelling and forced right to the front. While he is fighting in a no-man's land for an unknown army with no allies, his city undergoes massive bombings, during which his son perishes while his nation is reduced to ruins. Thereafter, the unwilling soldier is imprisoned by anonymous forces and subsequently confined in a concentration camp. Warfare is depicted as a natural phenomenon affecting innocuous, blameless individuals who become victims of political and racial persecution.

In these films, which echo the Christian narrative of a neorealist masterpiece such as *Rome, Open City*, the Italians are generally portrayed as martyrs who are sacrificed on the altar of warfare by new pagans. Ultimately, much of the corpus of political documentaries dwells on Christian iconography and moral values, which can also be seen in leftist-oriented films such as *Aldo says 26 x 1* and in overt propaganda films for the Vatican such as *War to*

117 Please note the recourse to masculine disabled bodies as a metaphor for the wounded nation, which recurs also in other post-war documentaries such as *Dobbiamo vivere ancora* (We need to live again, Vittorio Gallo, 1949), and *Camminare con gli altri* (Walking with other people, Ugo Fasano, 1948).

118 The authorisation for the film release singles out the paradox of a pre-war past depicted as an idyll: 'The world lived beforehand in peace in the prosperity of work, but sinister omens of war were to trouble it.' See Calvino, *Guerra alla guerra – Nulla osta*.



Fig. 2.7 The Italian population as martyred Christ under enemy's fire in *Guerra alla guerra* (War to war, Romolo Marcellini and Giorgio Simonelli, 1948)

*war*. The former uses an unusual viewpoint: at a ceremony paying homage to the fallen of the uprising in Turin, the camera looks at the service through a breach in the wall where an iron cross is encased. In *War to war*, the bombing of the Holy City of Rome is superimposed over a statue of a crucified Christ, comparing the martyrdom of the Italian population with the suffering of the Son of God and the humanity he represented. (Fig. 2.7) While these visual strategies associate Italians with Christianity and martyrdom, they are also well-rooted in an inter-war discourse that connected war disasters with Christian imagery.<sup>119</sup> The suffering of the civilian population, the exhibition of abused bodies, and the moral value of this representation all coalesce into visual and religious motifs deeply embedded in Italian and European culture.<sup>120</sup>

119 The most known case being obviously Friedrich, *Krieg dem Kriege!*. However, the iconography was widespread, as seen in graphics such as George Grosz's *Maul halten und weiter dienen* (1927) or the opening page of *Vier vor der Infanterie*'s French translation, Johanssen, *Quatre de l'infanterie*, shaping the textflow as a cross. I am grateful to Michael Cowan for drawing my attention to this issue.

120 On the exhibition of bodies in pain, Christian iconography, and contradictory drives of repulsion and attraction, see Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, and particularly pp. 36-52.

There is a major difference that can be singled out between documentaries backed by partisan organisations and later, more institutionally biased ones. Whereas the latter tend to reduce the role of the victors—i.e. the national resistance—focusing instead on the victims and witnesses, the former emphasise the partisans' moral and military function as redeemers of the nation. In point of fact, all these films are tales of redemption, as they articulate stories that move from a dark past to a bright future in which—thanks to a purifying process of self-denial, grievance, and sacrifice—a new nation can arise.

Except for *War to war*, all these films turn Italy's defeat into a triumph as a narrative strategy meant to help the nation work through a cultural trauma.<sup>121</sup> That is, they erase the Italian Army's disastrous undertakings on the Russian front and in Africa, the nation's shameful aggression towards France and Albania, the war crimes in the Balkans and in Eastern Africa, the hesitancy accompanying the nation's choice of remaining with Nazi Germany or switching to the Allied forces—all this to glorify the victorious war side by side with the liberators and the later efforts in reconstruction. For this same reason, *Our war*, *Days of glory*, *Aldo says 26 x 1*, and *Italy woke up!* are in effect the partisans' pageants, a non-narrative apotheosis by way of a glorious conclusion to a tale of misery, distress, and struggle. To sum up, rather than designing a memory of a defeated and shameful nation, these films enact a glorious past.

Though these narratives are progressive in following the triumph of virtue over vice and evil, they are seldom linear in their articulation. They frequently entail *discursive anachronies*, which are paired with images of abused corpses. (Fig. 2.8) These films systematically show pictures of partisans' or civilians' corpses preceding the uprising, the message being that before being fighters, partisans were everyday citizens who underwent raids, reprisals, and death. In this anachronism, remembrance precedes action, victimhood is more important than manoeuvres, and suffering is highlighted instead of the act of violence. Furthermore, these same brutal images are repeated throughout the narrative. Iteration here has a manifold function, as it recalls the price paid for liberation and shows the transition from unvindicated victims to martyrdom, thereby celebrating the fallen. If we agree with historian Guri Schwarz, who recently drew attention to the significance of violent death in Italy's war experience as well as the rituals implemented during the civil war and its immediate aftermath, then these dead bodies have a paramount role: corpses can be the instruments of a funerary pedagogy, reverting to a practice that the Nazi troops widely made

121 Eyerman, 'The Past in the Present'.



Fig. 2.8 Anachronies and forgetfulness. The image of abused corpses in *Aldo dice 26 x 1* (*Aldo says 26 x 1*, Fernanco Cerchio, 1946)

use of, that is, exposing the bodies that had been subjected to ominous reprisals.<sup>122</sup> To recapitulate, these films perform national memory as a commemoration of the victims, and accordingly, they elicit an identification with the innocent, harmless citizens who experienced brutal violence.

Some films display dead bodies as tokens of vicious cruelty and as justification for brutal reprisal, or what has been termed transitional justice,<sup>123</sup> as seen in *Days of glory* and in *Aldo says 26 x 1*. The former film is an interesting case in point, since it was a collective work testifying to a peculiar political phase, that is transitional justice, during which the Psychological Warfare Branch and the Italian Ministry for the Occupied Territories, a temporary organisation run by the Communist Mauro Scoccimarro, cooperated in producing a political account of recent happenings and associated strategies to lead the nation through a complex phase.<sup>124</sup> *Days of glory* describes

122 Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*.

123 See McAdams (ed.), *Transitional Justice and the Rule of Law in New Democracies*.

124 The momentary circumstances leading to the production and release of *Days of Glory* are demonstrated by the opposition it later met when the conservative administration ruling the

this transition, as stated in a note from the officer responsible for the film release: 'The film [...] glorifies the endeavour to liberate Italy from Nazi-fascist oppressors, and reproduces the most remarkable episodes among the heroic partisan war and the attitude of the population, before and after Liberation.'<sup>125</sup> In a key sequence, the camera meanders throughout the Fosse Ardeatine, the abandoned Roman quarries where SS troops mass-executed 335 defenseless Italian prisoners on 24 March 1944 as a reprisal for a partisan attack the day before. The sequence then displays the human remains of that mass execution, horribly disfigured. Only then does the narrative go back to the partisan attack, the SS headquarters, the decimation, and finally the bodies' exhumation more than two months after the massacre. The film then moves on to the trial and lynching of the head of Rome's prison, Donato Carretta, and the execution of Pietro Caruso and Pietro Koch, respectively the head of the police in Rome during the German occupation—who co-organised with the SS the Fosse Ardeatine massacre—and the person responsible for a paramilitary group persecuting and torturing partisans. This discursive articulation presents viewers with the result of political and military violence and oppression to the detriment of historical chronology, thereby depriving the victims of any direct agency, iterating their representation to emphasise their overwhelming presence over any other component, and producing them as evidence for the prosecution, leading to the execution of those responsible for the war crime.<sup>126</sup> Corpses here represent a pedagogical tool as much as a proxy for a ritual, that is, that

country in the mid-1950s considered its re-release to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Italian Resistance as troubling. See Ermini, *Confidential letter to the Prime Minister Cabinet*.

125 Calvino, *Note to the Undersecretary of the Prime Minister responsible for the entertainment industry*. One day beforehand, the P.W.B. responsible for cinema, i.e. Capt. Pilade Levi, authorised the film's release. See Levi, *Letter on behalf of the P.W.B. Film Section to Vittorio Calvino*.

126 A discussion of *Days of glory's* discursive strategy and how the film articulates an ideological narrative rooted in cinema's indexicality is found in Pucci, 'Shooting Corpses: The Fosse Ardeatine in *Giorni di gloria* (1945)'. Executions as legitimate acts of political justice can be represented, while lynching needs to be deleted, as the story of the sequence showing the death of Donato Carretta clearly summarises. This sequence, which some commentators report they saw in an early edition of the film, disappeared. Now, the film includes only the moment when the mob recognises the director of the prison and advances on him; a fade to black closes the sequence, and Mario Musumeci hypothesises that political reasons inspired this option. A late interview with the film's co-director Giuseppe De Santis confirms the political relevance of the event: 'We did not edit it [the lynching] for the sake of the homeland: we believed that displaying the wrath of Rome's people against the director of Regina Coeli, so terrible, dramatic, tragic as it was, was at that point in time extreme. Maybe we were wrong, but it was a political and poetic stance. *It was just an isolated incident, the Italian people were definitely different*. We wanted to show another Italy.' Giuseppe De Santis, in Gaiardoni (ed.), *Giorni di gloria*, pp. 22-23.

of bowing down before the victims. As journalist Adriano Baracco declared when the film production was still ongoing: 'It seems to me a good sign that the only film in production out of the many there is so much fuss about, is this one [i.e., *Days of glory*]. An act of contrition. [...] The 320 muddy corpses, subject to such a painful death, must teach something to all of us Italians; and namely to those among us who always had an easy life.'<sup>127</sup> The victims teach something to the whole nation and are the sacred body of a religious ritual: an act of contrition, or a prayer for sins committed. It should be noted that, within the Catholic Church, the act of contrition is one of the prayers connected to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Similarly, *Aldo says 26 x 1* begins in late 1944 and depicts civilians' sufferings right after the executions of partisans. Images of the partisans themselves appear much later, after a detailed description of the partisans' activities, as a Fascist's trial—and the resulting death penalty—is celebrated in a camp of resistants. Corpses are a recursive component, concisely explaining the distress that Fascism caused, producing a lay hagiography, and supplying evidence for the prosecution of war criminals. The bodies of the victims are the means for delivering a sentence on the perpetrators, ultimately to depict their execution as transitional justice's political act. Moving beyond Bazin's caveat on the cinematic representation of death<sup>128</sup> and considering instead the pragmatics of the image, what is at stake here in including a preordered representation of death is its political function, however contradictory it might appear to us now.<sup>129</sup>

The images of corpses are traumatic images. I define the images' value in three different ways, which refer respectively to their moral function, their aesthetic value, and media experience—all of which co-existed and accordingly reinforced the role of these images. First, as outlined above, these pictures are inherently brutal, portraying in close-up tortured, disfigured, corrupted bodies: partisans, civilian victims, and deportees. They are

127 Baracco, 'Un documentario sulle Fosse Ardeatine. I trecentoventi', p. 6. In terms of casualties, by the figure 320 Baracco mistakenly refers to what he believes to be the outcome of the decimation process, as 32 was the number of German soldiers initially killed in the partisan attack and 10 Italian prisoners were executed for every fallen German. However, by 24 March the number of German casualties had risen to 33; therefore, 330 Italian prisoners were brought to the Fosse Ardeatine and viciously killed. Five more were also executed within the caves, leading later to the charge of murder against those responsible for the mass execution; for the remaining 330 victims, martial law applied.

128 Bazin, 'Death Every Afternoon'.

129 For a phenomenological discussion of the cinematic representation of death in documentary filmmaking, focusing also on execution, see Vivian Sobchack, 'Inscribing Ethical Space. Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary'.

monstrous, for they trespass the boundaries of represented human figures. Furthermore, they reactivate the etymological meaning of monstrous, stemming from the Latin 'monere', which means to warn, to admonish. These images are traumatic because they violate the established shapes of human life and consequently exhort viewers to avoid any possible resurgence of such an abjection. Moreover, photos of unburied corpses generate a paradoxical sense of the sacred: they are not images of life embalmed, as discussed in the writings of Bazin and later Barthes;<sup>130</sup> they are *literally* mummies, corpses embalmed by photography, who demand to be buried after the Nazis scandalously exposed them. If photography inherently has something to do with fear of death and with resurrection, as Bazin and Barthes respectively suggested, then the still photographs of the dead bodies or the corpses dug out of mass graves that repeatedly haunt *Days of glory*—rather than providing the viewer with a hope of deliverance—require in their stillness nothing but a supplement of spirituality, leading them back to the grave in a human way.<sup>131</sup> The recursive presence of dead bodies does the work of mourning: corpses are first displayed as an atrocity and then as the reason for vengeance and/or dignified burial.

In addition, these images are traumatic inasmuch as they introduce an anomaly into the cinematic flow: corpses are in most cases displayed as still photographs, calling attention upon themselves *per se*. *These pictures are recursive and trouble chronological linearity*, as is believed to happen with images haunting traumatised subjects. A reasonable explanation for the presence of still photography in the film fabric is that there was little or no evidence of the execution of partisans available on film. But there is another motivation for using still photographs, one that is related to media formats and discourses and the related cultural values. Still photography ushers in a sense of factual truth for two reasons. On the one hand, photojournalism was an increasingly widespread phenomenon in inter-war Italy, imitating similar formats in the US such as *Life* magazine. Photography played a crucial role in this format as a component of truth.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, one should not disregard the role that war photography played in photojournalism, which significantly increased during the inter-war period.<sup>133</sup> The truthful-

130 Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image'; Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

131 A detailed discussion of index, photography, and ontological paradoxes can be found in Mulvey, 'The Index and the Uncanny: Life and Death in the Photograph'.

132 Recently, Forgacs drew attention to this cultural development in inter-war Italy, tracing a genealogy which stems from illustrated magazines to neorealist aesthetics and then to *Paisan*. See Forgacs, 'Photography and the Denarrativization of Cinematic Practice in Italy, 1935-1955'.

133 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of the Others*.

ness of still photography is reinforced by associating these uncomfortable images with the front pages of undercover newspapers. In this view, still photography and the clandestine press are claiming the truth—a harsh, callous truth—after decades of Fascist propaganda. On the other hand, still photography is trustworthy in its stillness, for it presents us with an image that does not rapidly elapse in the wake of ensuing images. We are forced to face a body dislodged out of its usual function and appearance and an image that does not rapidly vanish, both eluding media and cultural codes. In Sobchack's words: *'The representation of the event of death is an indexical sign of that which is always in excess of representation and beyond the limits of coding and culture: Death confounds all codes. [italics in original]'*<sup>134</sup> Such a blurring or lack of codes pertaining to the representation of death matches the alleged absence of codes inherent to photography and its proximity to the portrayed subject.

Finally, this halting of the cinematic flow through the use of still photographs is traumatic when considered against customary ways of watching cinema: the images of the corpses don't elapse, and cinematic flow comes to a halt. If the flux of the images was a simulacrum of life, its suspension reminds viewers of its fragility, of the delusion of eternal change we live in, and of the failure of existing cinematic codes of movement to shelter us from brutal interruptions. Images that are still are traumatic, as they freeze time and experience<sup>135</sup> and duplicate this interruption within the film fabric. By recurring identically, they undermine the experience of time as irreversible, as much as the metonymic chain implied by film narratives: cinematic time is not an everdeveloping, endless flux. They instead open up space for a more disquieting metaphor: an infinite repetition of brutality.<sup>136</sup> We tend

<sup>134</sup> Sobchack, 'Inscribing Ethical Space. Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary', p. 233.

<sup>135</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between photography, ruins, and trauma, see Cadava, "Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins".

<sup>136</sup> Laura Mulvey, discussing Garrett Stewart's reflections on the freeze-frame, defines it in two possible ways: 'The freeze-frame ending leads in two directions, one that relates primarily to narrative and the other that relates to the materiality of film. First of all, the freeze frame represents the fusion between the death drive in narrative and the abrupt shift from the cinema's illusion of animated movement to its inorganic, inanimate state. This is the site of metaphor. Secondly, the freeze frame is a series of identical frames repeated in order to create an illusion of stillness to replace the illusion of movement. Beyond its presence as 'photograph', a single image outside the continuum of film, there is the continuous flow of the filmstrip and its individual frames, closing the gap between the film in the projector and the image on the screen. While the freeze frame brings finality to narrative, the sequence of individual frames can, as suggested by the system of pattern and repetition in the flicker film, lead to infinity.' See Mulvey, 'The Death Drive: Narrative Movement Stilled', p. 81; Stewart, *Between Film and Screen*.

to consider life as perennial change and transformation and translate it into a spatial and dynamic scheme in what Deleuze termed the sensory-motor schema. However, the experience of warfare together with major shifts in the media inaugurated a different concept of the image as well as a different relationship to memory. This new condition revolved around a concept of duration autonomous from chronological succession, which photography fittingly embodied.<sup>137</sup> What is traumatic about these still images of corpses is the perception of the duration of our lives and the unfolding of the film as compared to the deadly stillness of those bodies.

Despite the many claims made in the past four decades against historical teleology and aesthetic hierarchies in writing film history, these political documentaries of the immediate post-war era have fallen into oblivion. While there is likely more than one reason for this, if we were to reduce these reasons to an all-encompassing one, we would say that these documentaries displayed an *excessive clarity* as compared to neorealist fiction films. The documentaries' method was to alternate clearly staged scenes with archival footage, whereas neorealist filmmaking often merged the two to the benefit of aesthetic pleasure. The former explicitly addressed a national agenda, downplaying Italy's accountability, dismissing its involvement in warfare, and legitimising its brutalities during the civil war, whereas neorealist films ignored these, not even taking into account the nation's accountability. As a result, neorealist films fit far better into a humanistic international agenda. Finally, these documentaries directly addressed the traumatic violence by coupling the grim repetition of still images with a modernist narrative, magnifying the nation's progress, whilst neorealist filmmaking did not offer a triumphant narrative moving from the past misery to contemporary triumphs, but preferred a hesitant, uncertain, and suspended view of the present.

Neorealist masterpieces fit into and contributed to a new form of memory, one that was doubtful about the recent past and no less tentative about the future. A new structure of temporality appeared in the aftermath of war and then prevailed in the second half of the twentieth century: it no longer considered modernity and novelty as a step forward in the progress

137 'The instantaneous photograph reverses our relationship to duration, a reversal that gives photography—both as optics and as imprint—its curious power. With a photograph we are presented with an image that is static but that nonetheless can give a powerful sensation of time passing. We are suddenly internal to the change of the world and can glimpse the enormity of past and future that the photograph suspends.' Sutton, *Photography, Cinema, Memory*, p. 38.

of humankind.<sup>138</sup> In fact, the new doctrine of humanism questioned the role of machines, industry, progress, and abstract planning as the rationale that led humankind to disaster and mass murder. Indeed, the blind faith in general advancement and improvement that modernity—and modernism as its cultural form—had heralded was rebuffed, while different values and a non-teleological notion of temporality gained a foothold.

Neorealist culture made a choice to champion ethics, that is, the common good. However, the common good as depicted in neorealism was based on the oblivion of past responsibilities.

### Inspecting the Frames

Post-war documentary cinema and its relationship to neorealism is a subject requiring further exploration. So far, film history has either ignored the genre on political grounds or discussed it only as a minor episode in the career of filmmakers associated with neorealist culture. On the one hand, for a long time film history neglected a documentary film production that seemed too close to a conservative administration, and considered nothing but a mouthpiece of institutional agencies, devoid of any aesthetic ambition, often hiring professionals for political purposes. The laws determining documentary production, which were issued from 1945 to 1949, restricted documentaries to a short format and tied their fate to that of the feature films they were coupled with when released. As a matter of fact, decree no. 678, passed in 1945, guaranteed a reimbursement of the documentary's production costs of 3% of the gross revenues of the feature film the documentary was coupled with. In 1949, the framework legislation on Italian cinema (no. 958) introduced by Undersecretary Andreotti raised the reimbursement rate by an additional 2% for those documentary shorts deemed to have outstanding cultural and/or artistic value. When documentary shorts and newsreels were selected for state financial support, they were also included in cinemas' programmes on a mandatory basis. The extant legislation led documentary producers to seek agreements under the table to couple their products with moneymaking feature films. The context determined by the laws implied

<sup>138</sup> Huyssen considers the post-war era as an epoch of stable memories because of an also fixed geopolitical division. I would say that this applies from 1950 on; nonetheless, the immediate post-war period was instead very fluid, both in geopolitical and cultural terms, and accordingly neorealist hesitancy between a repulsive past and an unknown future is the epoch's ideal outcome. See Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*.

that documentary producers were beholden to the administration, as reimbursements hinged on an acknowledgment bestowed on individual films by a selection committee. And the coupling of films with successful feature films reduced their inherent quality insofar as their profitability depended on state backing and the market performance of the feature films. Finally, the overall circumstance generated a concentration of financial power in the hands of a group of producers, namely those more politically akin to the ruling administration and well connected to the feature films milieu.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, documentary filmmaking has been examined, described, and praised as a haven for neorealist aesthetics, when the opportunities to carry on production within mainstream trends were drastically reduced between the 1940s and the 1950s.<sup>140</sup> However, recent research has shed light on the overlap between ethically and/or aesthetically committed neorealist filmmaking and post-war documentaries, including propaganda.<sup>141</sup> Given that a political paradigm has prevailed in accounts that have analysed this genre, I believe careful scrutiny might reveal a more comprehensive explanation of the cultural dynamics underlying this phase. In the wake of seminal research on neorealist fictional cinema in the 1970s exploring the specificity of the phenomenon before and beyond its political value, post-war documentary filmmaking demands closer inspection. Certainly, at first glance, this body of work appears to have renewed cinema far less than contemporary neorealism, as many commentators have argued.<sup>142</sup> And mainly political and financial reasons led to these unfortunate circumstances, the financial motives being a variable of political reliability. But even ideologically divergent films often share with neorealist productions concerns, motifs, locations, and stylistic options. For instance, a short such as *Bimbi che aspettano* (Children waiting, Vittorio Carpignano, 1950) utilises

139 A seminal though politically biased account of the dependence of documentary filmmaking on political administration in post-war Italy can be found in Quaglietti, 'Lo scandalo dei documentari e dei cinegiornali'. See also Nepoti, 'Gli anni del documentario (1945-1965)'.

140 This paradigm is applied to post-war documentary filmmaking in Micciché, 'Documentario e finzione'. Perniola, *Oltre il neorealismo*, is the first extensive scrutiny of a field otherwise almost unknown.

141 See, for instance, Longo, 'Between Documentary and Neorealism: Marshall Plan Films in Italy (1948-1955)'; Bonifazio, *Schooling in Modernity*.

142 For instance, Bertozzi discusses this production in very negative terms, with some very well-founded reasons: 'Thus takes shape a style which cultural and productive commands, all oriented to exploitation, determined: skimping on technical equipment [...]; avoiding an inspection of the locations (or leaving the costs to the director); producing a second film during the production breaks.' Bertozzi, *Storia del documentario italiano*, p. 124. See also Bertozzi, 'Styles nationaux? La recette italienne de la "Formula 10".'

a good deal of neorealist motifs: abandoned childhood, desolate shacks and barracks on the outskirts of Rome, and a compassionate voice-over describing the misery reigning in the area.<sup>143</sup> Even a far different film such as Visconti's short *Notes on a crime story* exhibit many neorealist features. Whereas *Children waiting* is basically a propaganda movie promoting the UN recovery programmes for children, *Notes on a crime story* is an auteur film (with a literary comment from novelist Vasco Pratolini) depicting a true crime that occurred in the impoverished Rome periphery and was intended to be included in an alternative newsreel named Documento Film.<sup>144</sup>

Are film authorship, alternative networks and formats, or political ideology all-encompassing frameworks preventing us from further inquiries into similarities and analogies? I believe they are not. As for what concerns aesthetic options and their role in defining a cultural memory, the case of Michelangelo Antonioni is indeed telling: the early work of this revered personality deploys a wide range of references to experimental inter-war cinema and to modernist culture as well as to post-war realist filmmaking and culture. Ideologically biased discourses on neorealism have rejected the modernist components in neorealism and instead have focused on film authorship, humanism, and social concerns. However, I posit that modernism influenced the shaping of post-war film culture and some of its distinctive characteristics such as reflexive modes, description as related to storytelling, and the particular relevance that locations bore in post-war film production. The memory of inter-war artistic and cinematic culture was therefore highly effective in moulding not only the work of one of the most prominent post-war directors but also post-war filmmaking overall. If we see inter-war film culture as devoid of its ideological content, as a 'back-text' (as one describes a background, that is, a term of reference to collate post-war film culture with),<sup>145</sup> then the contradictions inherent to post-war film culture and its relations to the past become clear.

The consistency between an ideologically rejected past and current artistic practices jumps out even more clearly when looking at Antonioni's followers, the majority of whom also began in documentary filmmaking.

143 Moreover, the voice-over turns from almighty and disembodied to individualised and human, directly addressing the kids playing amidst the barracks; they reply to the invisible subject, looking at the camera. An identical discursive option, shifting from traditional documentary comment to a dialogue between the camera and its subjects, can be found in a peculiar neorealist film merging introductory archival footage with a fictional story: Mario Bonnard's *City of pain*.

144 On the documentary short Visconti directed, see Bertozzi, 'Appunti su un fatto di cronaca. Paesaggi dal silenzio'.

145 Casetti, Farassino, Grasso, and Sanguineti, 'Neorealismo e cinema italiano degli anni '30'.

Much of Antonioni's style persists in the work of artists such as Maselli, Valerio Zurlini, and Vancini. Maselli and Vancini achieved outstanding results in the early 1950s, directing short documentaries that were set for the most part in locations very similar to the urban settings Antonioni chose for *N.U.* and *Lies of love*, not to mention early features such as *Chronicle of a Love Affair* or *Ivinti* (*The Vanquished*, 1953). Deprived outskirts imply similar options: bodies and buildings used for their inherent plastic shape, human figures detached from the background, and anonymous characters. And yet what in Antonioni's work was clearly reminiscent of the inter-war culture and the nation's past, as much as ideologically undetermined, became in the work of his imitators a much more coloured representation. Whereas Antonioni had no problem with modernity and its role in triggering anthropological transformation, a much more suspicious view surfaces in the documentary productions that came after him. *Umbrella makers*, *Fioraie* (Florists, Francesco Maselli, 1952), and *Niente va perduto* (Nothing gets lost, Francesco Maselli, 1952) portray in a nostalgic manner professional activities and a humankind that are fading out. *Dangerous area* is a reflexive inspection of mass culture as a major threat to culture and childhood. In this view, modernity is outdoing humanity. While Antonioni regards his characters and figures dispassionately from a distance, a much more affectionate attitude emerges in later documentary productions: the persons populating *Children*, *Serenata da un soldo* (One-dime serenade, Valerio Zurlini, 1952), *I blues della domenica* (Sunday blues, Valerio Zurlini, 1952), and *Soldati in città* (Soldiers in town, Valerio Zurlini, 1952), together with the sympathetic portrayal of wandering figures, reduce the unsettling effects of some of Antonioni's characters. The same applies to the treatment of landscape: in Antonioni's early works, the realist representation of spaces is subject to hesitations, fractures, and uncertainties, as this environment is simply alien to humankind. Documentary cinema in the 1950s constantly refers to Antonioni's previous works but strives to attribute specific, politically palatable meanings to the representation of landscape. In *Po delta*, *Uomini della pianura* (Men of the plain, Florestano Vancini and Adolfo Baruffi, 1949), and *Quando il Po è dolce* (When the Po gets sweet, Renzo Renzi, 1952), the monotonous, obsessive landscape setting does not evoke ambivalence or irresolution: by the end of the film, it is moored in a discourse of social redemption. If Antonioni's early work adequately epitomises the richness of neorealism inasmuch as the phenomenon encompassed many legacies and respective cultural energies—including inter-war film experimentation and its memory—later documentaries illustrate how neorealist ideology rooted in humanism, vague social progress, and moral scorn swiftly forgot

the origins of these practices and motifs, sealing them in a self-contented denunciation of national backwardness.

Oblivion affected Italian culture overall. A collation of neorealist cinema and documentary filmmaking sheds light on analogous ways to come to terms with the recent, problematic past. This past—which is rejected in neorealist films but nonetheless evoked through its absence—is in any case a term of reference: it can be explicitly addressed in narratives of social progression based on a template of ‘before/after’, as in *Promessa di vita* (Promise of life, Vittorio Gallo, 1948) and *Italia d’oggi* (Italy today, Romolo Marcellini, 1953). These examples, which make no reference to Fascism, depict the pre-war epoch as an era of widespread well-being and warfare as an unfortunate pause along the otherwise unstoppable evolution of the country. Otherwise, the past is simply concealed and not remembered. However, this oblivion produced a hesitancy in the flow of the images, a halt to the narrative, an obstacle to succession, and a stumbling block to memory. A reluctance to collate the past and the present gave rise to peculiar and discontinuous time maps. Moreover, this oblivious attitude led to the rejection of causal accounts and narratives deployed over a long, all-encompassing arc. Traditional narrative roles such as ‘hero’ and ‘villain’, did not fit the needs of this new narrative scheme, leading to the introduction of cultural trauma and the emergence of the ‘witness’ or ‘bystander’, who was neither the active/virtuous savior nor the evil perpetrator. These shifts provide us with a clue or a trace of a major source of disquiet: widespread accountability and guilt regarding the dictatorship and the disaster of war. This reluctance as spelled out in the media discourse moulded a specific mode of depicting time: a suspended temporality anchored in a present devoid of chronological articulation; that is, a perception of duration deprived of chronology, a time originated in photography. This might appear as a recurrent freeze frame, as in documentary filmmaking, wherein photography conveyed a sense of factual truth while abiding by its symbolic function. Otherwise, this reluctance to come to terms with the past led to a mode of representation that was hailed as neorealist cinema’s novelty, one that neither privileged causal storytelling nor represented long chronological arcs but relied much more on the energy radiating from individual, disconnected frames. Photography was a significant part of neorealist visual culture: it foregrounded the importance of a direct, unembellished look at reality; it connected neorealist films and photography to the growing field of photojournalism while associating the image with truthful depiction; it located neorealist films on the map of post-war humanitarianism, encouraged by supranational agencies; and finally, it enhanced the relevance of media

culture in surveying and representing reality. However, beyond photography, other modes of expression, styles, and cultural objects greatly contributed to post-war visual culture and shaped its astonishing variety. In the following chapter I focus on neorealist visual culture and its manifold forms.

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### 3. Looking at the Images

#### Neorealist Visual Culture

##### Abstract

Neorealism offered a harsh representation of reality in its portrayal of war brutality, shantytowns, an impoverished population, and abandoned children. This depiction relied on photographic reproduction. However, besides this rendition, neorealism consisted of other multifaceted forms that defined its visual culture. Film posters promoted neorealist productions through a pictorial style and the eroticisation of the actors' bodies, instead of displaying photographic images of everyday reality, as in photo-journalism. Neorealism emerged at the same time as photo-romances, which were popular magazines offering melodramatic narratives in pictures. Neorealist works were novelised according to this template, which contributed to defining neorealist visual culture. In the 1950s, as neorealism declined, attempts were made to merge documentary representation with the template provided by photo-romances and the burgeoning field of photo-journalism. Photo-documentaries published in *Cinema Nuovo* expanded and prolonged neorealist visual culture into photography.

**Keywords:** Visual culture; scopic regime; film posters; photo-romances; photo-documentaries

#### Neorealism as a Scopic Regime

A bill sticker (Lamberto Maggiorani) carefully spreads a huge film poster on the walls in the centre of Rome. A beguiling and seductive female beauty peeps out from within the wrinkles of the poster. It is Rita Hayworth, promoting the film *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946). The bill sticker timidly smiles, possibly from professional satisfaction of a job well done, or perhaps in reaction to the image radiating its joy from the paper. It is a matter of

seconds: a well-organised party of rascals sneaks out of the parked cars: one makes sure the bill sticker is looking in the wrong direction, another one is ready to mislead him, the third one grabs the bike left unlocked beneath the ladder, jumps on it and quickly rides away from his victim. This latter desperately tries to chase the thief, but to no avail. The rest of the narrative is devoted to the many attempts made by the robbed man and his son to retrieve his means of transportation and work as they meander the streets of sunny, ancient, intricate, and merciless Rome.

This sequence is certainly one of the most renowned and iconic in neorealist production and the turning point in the plot of *Bicycle Thieves*. It is at this point that the story turns from a potentially socialist and edifying tale of redemption from misery and desperation through honest work into a bleak depiction of urban loneliness, lack of class solidarity, the inadequacy of public institutions and their representatives, and progressive moral depravation. The scene is also pivotal when looking at the narrative discourse. Whereas up to this point, the story is told at a relatively sustained pace and is mainly focused on those events affecting the characters (being hired, redeeming the bike at the pawn shop, being trained), from now on the film moves from one dead end to another represented by the failure of the man to retrieve his stolen bike and the detours from the characters' main goal. One of the barely concealed meanings of this crucial sequence is an aesthetic and political claim. Antonio, the bill sticker, represents the innocent, defenceless (male) Italian worker who has finally regained some dignity when he is given the right to work and to provide for his family. However, as he stands up, he is fatally distracted by a luring, illusory, and yet astounding female beauty who drags him out of his true reality into a realm of self-contentment and dream. While he is absorbed in this representation, he is robbed. At once, he is stripped of both his status and his means of survival. Moreover, Antonio embodies the contradiction of the post-war Italian lower class as De Sica saw them: on the one hand, they are doing their best to emerge from a world of unemployment, charity, and petty crime; on the other, the overwhelming presence of Hollywood mass culture seduces and deludes them.<sup>1</sup> The American escapist film is pitted against a truthful, harsh, and discomfiting neorealist one depicting the real condition of the disadvantaged. But was neorealism exclusively made of this kind of brutal, direct, unadorned representation?

1 Ellwood and Brunetta (eds), *Hollywood in Europa*; Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow*; Nowell-Smith and Ricci (eds), *Hollywood & Europe*; Forgacs and Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*.

As I have tried to explain in the previous chapters, neorealist culture aimed to herald the birth of the new nation as it emerged from the rubble of warfare it left behind. Accordingly, it was a culture that belied the nation's recent past. Neorealist images claimed to be a response to contemporary national and international needs because they surveyed reality through a direct, straightforward lens that privileged photographic reproduction over narratives. However, a thorough inquiry into post-war visual culture as related to neorealism sheds light on the latter's multifaceted nature. In this chapter, I would like to examine the inherent multifariousness of the visual culture related to neorealism. In fact, the images that neorealist culture originated reveal different cultural legacies and attitudes to various modes of expression. Often, images corroborate the idea that neorealism coined unadorned representations of the real; however, other images that greatly contributed to disseminating neorealist culture lay bare a very different relationship with narratives and painting. Whereas common opinion would associate neorealist films with description, this visual culture I intend to scrutinise enhances a narrative value imbued in the images, which often carry pictorial values. In the following pages I will look at mostly neglected products related to neorealist culture: the advertisements promoting neorealist films, their novelisation in the popular press, and the photo-documentaries created in the mid-1950s. All these forms are less widely known than the neorealist masterpieces, but if we consider the circulation of neorealist works and the channels conveying them, the relevance of these products becomes obvious: they contributed to defining, promoting, and prolonging neorealist visual culture. Finally, by looking at late neorealist photo-documentaries, I would like to pinpoint how neorealist visual culture became associated mostly with photographic reproduction, the documentary gaze, and a political ethos. This is something that happened *later*, posthumously, as a resistance strategy when leftist culture appropriated neorealism.

I intend to explore the thresholds of the films themselves because it is there that the heterogeneity of the visual forms within neorealist culture emerges most clearly. My claim is that neorealism was a field of co-existing scopic regimes within a heterogeneous visual culture. I intend to refer to the notion of visual culture as a contested terrain. More than as a *dangerous supplement*<sup>2</sup>

2 Mitchell refers to visual culture as a theoretical tool to open up the closed and compact areas of aesthetics and art history. See Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing'. Mitchell declares: 'Aesthetics and art history are in a complementary and collaborative alliance. Aesthetics is the theoretical branch of the study of art. It raises fundamental questions about the nature of art, artistic

or as a cultural and political tactic,<sup>3</sup> visual culture is meant here as the way a certain epoch shaped its visual forms. Did the 'neorealist epoch' uniformly shape its visual products? Did neorealist works replicate the same visual pattern, which was then praised in film criticism and film history? I don't believe so. It is through the visual expressions on its margins that neorealism's multifariousness fully emerges and can free itself once and for all of a unitary, essentialist, and crystallised description. Therefore, visual culture is conceived as a territory to explore and to discover why Italian post-war visual culture created different forms, some of which were remembered, promoted, and then later forgotten.

The term 'scopic regime' was coined by the art historian Hal Foster, who argues that 'each scopic regime seeks to close out these differences: to make of its many social visualities one essential vision, or to order them in a natural hierarchy of sight'.<sup>4</sup> Within the contested terrain of Italian post-war visual culture, different and sometimes even antithetical scopic regimes were present. Each of them entailed specific viewing positions: a relationship to the images, an implied viewer whom the images addressed, and a presupposed ideology. Some forms and related scopic regimes were not as manifest, at least not according to widespread historical accounts on post-war culture, which did not ascribe such 'ways of seeing' to the neorealist phenomenon, although these forms played an influential role in it. Other scopic regimes were widely praised and became hegemonic—if not in popular culture and consumption then in highbrow memory. What is of the utmost importance is the fact that, within neorealist visual culture, different forms and regimes co-existed and sometimes co-operated.

Neorealist cinema promoted a set of visual features on a transnational market and in global discourses. Its fame was due in part to them, which first struck contemporary viewers and then was enshrined in historical memory. Highly iconic elements from acknowledged neorealist masterpieces and more formulaic films offer the same set of visual components. First and foremost

value, and artistic perception within the general field of perceptual experience. Art history is the historical study of artists, artistic practices, styles, movements, and institutions. Together, then, art history and aesthetics provide a kind of completeness; they cover any conceivable question one might have about the visual arts. [...]. Visual studies, then, is from a certain familiar disciplinary point of view, quite unnecessary. We don't need it. [...]. *Visual studies threaten to make art history and aesthetics into subdisciplines within some expanded field of inquiry whose boundaries are anything but clear.*' (167, my emphasis).

3 'Visual culture is thus a tactic, rather than a strategy [...]. A tactic is carried out in full view of the enemy, the society of control in which we live.' Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, p. 8.

4 Foster, 'Preface', p. ix.

are the ruins: the rubble that Anna Magnani looks at in *Rome, Open City*; the debris that the young thief and the military policeman roam through or that the American nurse and a Florentine man cross in *Paisan*; or the Berlin ruins in which Edmund gets lost in *Germany Year Zero*. This bleak setting can also host hopeful, pedagogic initiatives, like the school a young priest attempts to organise for Neapolitan orphans in Luigi Comencini's *Guaglio*. Children are themselves a paramount visual trope in neorealist films, most of the time placed at the core of unsafe, precarious urban settings. If ruins offer a view of the aftermath of warfare and the possibility of reconstruction,<sup>5</sup> children also play a twofold role, representing the most fragile and endangered part of humankind as well as the possibility for redemption. They are in some ways the metonymy of the ruins, the perfect match for a humanist discourse in both neorealist masterpieces such as *Germany Year Zero* or *Shoeshine* and in barely known documentary shorts such as *Bambini in città* (Children in the city, Luigi Comencini, 1945) and *Children waiting*. These visual tropes could be found across post-war European film production. The most obvious equivalent revolving around the same basic terms<sup>6</sup> is the German film *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*, Gerhard Lamprecht, 1946), which belongs to the 'rubble film' (*Trümmerfilm*) trend. In some cases, international institutions promoted and fostered humanist cultural products that focused on the post-war European landscape in ruins and the children lost amidst it. David Seymour's photo reportage *Children of Europe*, commissioned by the UN and UNICEF, is a telling example of this new image because it places human rights at its core. By focusing on the weakest and most endangered human beings—children—it arouses the viewer's solidarity and reinforces the need to let reason prevail over violence. Furthermore, it should not go unnoticed that some stills that Seymour took are almost identical to a shot that Rossellini included in the conclusion of the Neapolitan episode of *Paisan* describing the miserable conditions of the evacuated population forced to live in Mergellina's ancient caves. (Figs. 3.1-3.2)<sup>7</sup> Preceding Seymour, Thérèse Bonney published a photo-book in 1943 titled *Europe's Children, 1939-1943*<sup>8</sup> dedicated to the European children who suffered during the war. The book was published as part of a larger initiative under the

5 This double value of the ruins trope is brilliantly discussed in Steimatsky, *Italian Locations*, pp. 44-45.

6 Fisher, 'On the Ruins of Masculinity: The Figure of the Child in Italian Neorealism and the German Rubble-Film'.

7 Regarding what concerns the relationship between such initiatives and photography in post-war Italy, see Forgacs, 'Photography and the Denarrativization of Cinematic Practice in Italy, 1935-1955'. See Seymour, *Children of Europe*. The two pictures are on pages 14 and 15.

8 See Bonney, *Europe's Children*.

auspices of the Temporary Committee on Food for Europe's Children. Later, Bonney was involved in the production of Zinneman's *The Search*, a movie benefiting from significant support from the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration).<sup>9</sup> Another example is the international release of the Hungarian film *It Happened in Europe*, which also focused on the issue of childhood in a ruined post-war landscape. The UN promoted and supported the film's international circulation, as an Italian report testifies.<sup>10</sup> Destroyed urban spaces and childhood are thus visual features pertaining to neorealism and to a broader humanist post-war culture, wherein the image has the twofold function of triggering empathy and articulating a sensational aesthetics through striking visual features.

Beyond ruins and children in rags, neorealism also treated different subjects, often more heroic. The Italian resistance to Nazi occupation is a case in point. The Italian Resistance offers more politically biased visual elements recurring in neorealist films: underground operations, groups of partisans and collectives, and an enormous variety of landscapes—mountains, plains, and cities. However, instead of using monumental poses and expressive lighting to aggrandise human figures opposing the enemy and advocating the national cause, neorealist films recurrently preferred badly assorted uniforms and self-mocking heroic attitudes—or, more simply, anti-heroic poses, usually cinematographed with poor lighting, as in *Paisan* or *High plains of the Stars*, or highly contrasted lighting, as in *Rome, Open City*, *O Sole Mio*, and *Due lettere anonime* (*Two Anonymous Letters*, Mario Camerini, 1945). These images parallel the self-representation that Italian partisans produced.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of the visual representation of landscape, specific components of neorealist visual culture are the urban outskirts and the peculiar merging of the ancient and the new or the city and the countryside that marked visual culture even into the early 1960s. Rome's blurred boundaries came to represent neorealist cinema and Italy overall, thanks to pivotal films such as *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D.*, and *Angelina*.<sup>12</sup> Italy was depicted as the place merging the remnants of a fascinating ancient past and the disarray produced by warfare and modernity. In *Under the Sun of*

9 For detailed accounts on the film's production history, see Gemie and Rees, 'Representing and Reconstructing Identities in the Post-war World'; Smyth, 'Fred Zinnemann's Search (1945-48)'.

10 See the report Anonymous, 'Rassegna cinematografica. È accaduto in Europa. È tempo di vivere'. On childhood and orphans as a controversial trope of incipient Socialism, see Parvulescu, *Orphans of the East*.

11 See Mignemi (ed.), *Storia fotografica della Resistenza*; Chessa, *Guerra civile 1943-1945*.

12 On the neorealist city, see Shiel, *Italian Neorealism*; Shiel, 'Imagined and Built Spaces in the Rome of Neorealism'.



Fig. 3.1 Visualizing post-war human crisis. The primitive settlements at the Mergellina Caves, Naples, in *Paisà* (*Paisan*, Roberto Rossellini, 1946)



Fig. 3.2 Visualizing post-war human crisis. The primitive settlements at the Mergellina Caves, Naples, in David Seymour's reportage *Children of Europe* (1949)

*Rome*, one of the main characters is a deprived adolescent living in the ruins of the Colosseum, while his mates live in the Roman suburbs. In *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio lives on the outskirts of Rome and travels downtown every day, walking through historical buildings and archaeological ruins in the hopes of becoming a full-fledged citizen.<sup>13</sup> The same goes for Southern Italy's sun-drenched, pristine landscape, which marked the visual scores of world-renowned masterpieces such as *The Earth Trembles* and high-grossing films such as *In the Name of the Law* and *Difficult Years*. As I previously explained, bringing into full light the underdevelopment of Southern Italy and its archaic landscape and habits was part of an overall endeavour to create a more aware, equal, and inclusive society in the post-war era. It should be noted, however, that this representation converged with the international photographic discovery of Southern Italy. Robert Capa portrayed this same landscape during the war, as did David Seymour for his photographic survey mentioned above. And in the early 1950s, Henri Cartier-Bresson visited the same area.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Southern Italy simultaneously epitomised cinematic

13 For a still unsurpassed close analysis of the visual representation of urban space in *Bicycle Thieves*, see Sorlin, *Sociologie du cinéma*.

14 See Cartier-Bresson, 'Christmas in Scanno'. See also Cartier-Bresson, *La Lucania di Henri Cartier-Bresson*.

neorealism and a new, realist photographic look that coalesced into the 'Magnum' aesthetics, i.e. the press agency which outstanding photographers such as Capa, Cartier-Bresson, Seymour, and George Rodger founded in 1947.

By way of temporary conclusion, the most acknowledged neorealist visual culture fostered humanism by depicting war disasters and human sufferings without any embellishment and by promoting mutual understanding through the visual knowledge of national subjects and social groups that had so far been neglected. The atrocity, misery, and devastation were depicted for bystanders to acquire unprecedented knowledge thanks to cinematic and photographic means. As Karl Schoonover suggests:

Neorealism's use of spectacles of suffering as a means of establishing a newly humanist spectator might then be best understood as the ultimate manifestation of a post-war cinematic politics of the image that authorizes the foreign gaze to adjudicate local politics.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, such visual elements sometimes pertained to a politically oriented European culture (the Resistance and its myths) and displayed the national space as conflating the past and the present, the pristine and the modern, the natural and the cultural as both Italians and foreign observers saw it. Having said that, I suggest that this visual culture rooted in the ethics of witnessing, which hinged on an aesthetics of the photographic reproduction of reality without any further embellishment—displaying visual motifs of the recent devastation that warfare had produced in Europe and of local peculiarities unfolded before an allegedly native eye—was not as coherent and homogeneous as commentators claimed it to be.

This widely shared opinion about neorealism as an ethics of witnessing from a historical and national standpoint is based on the refusal to acknowledge and explore those territories that might contradict it. This shared opinion is the ideological and disciplinary side of a specific scopic regime. The notion applies therefore not exclusively to long-term periods and objects, as Martin Jay suggests,<sup>16</sup> but as a guiding drive in establishing cultural objects and ways of looking at them in the short term as well. In order to better understand Italian post-war and neorealist culture, one should at the same time apply to the epoch a broader scope, inquiring into

<sup>15</sup> Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*, p. xvii.

<sup>16</sup> Jay, 'The Scopic Regimes of Modernity'.

photographic, cinematic, and graphic images and media to try to shed light on their common territories.

In this regard, traveling through some liminal terrain might be a fruitful exercise. These regions are seldom explored, despite the fact that they mark the boundaries of neorealism and help to promote its discourse and products, spread its stories and characters, and strengthen its ideology and arguments. Film posters, photo-romances, and photo-documentaries all partook in neorealist visual culture but are nonetheless helpful in countering a unique, essentialist vision of this phenomenon.

### The Bill Sticker and the Posters. Film Ads and Visual Culture

In *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio Ricci unfolds, spreads, glues, and regards a Hollywood film poster. But did the images that promoted and advertised neorealist movies differ significantly from the style heralding Hollywood products? These paratexts have not been examined much in neorealist scholarship but seem to be relevant for a number of reasons. First of all, in the post-war era, in a relatively under-mediatised country, posters were in general a key element in advertising strategies and basically served to kick-start promotional campaigns.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, film posters and advertisements select visual features from the continuum of the film, thus enhancing some tropes instead of others—they put in place a *thematic strategy*. These visual materials are expressed through specific matters and styles; they choose a *formal strategy* not necessarily coherent with the visual one expressed in the promoted film. Finally, film posters and advertisements are mostly aimed at a national audience: they express a *certain attitude toward the images* and their functions. Hence, understanding this attitude might enrich the information we have on Italian culture after World War Two. Even if their function is primarily promotional—i.e. commercial and for this very reason often disregarded or reduced to memorabilia—film posters and analogous materials are themselves complex cultural artefacts, and they can thus be a useful tool to access an epoch's multifarious culture and thoroughly understand its manifestations and functioning.<sup>18</sup>

In recent decades, Italian and international film scholars have begun to counter the myth of a clear-cut and deep fracture between pre-war to

<sup>17</sup> See Pittèri, *La pubblicità in Italia*.

<sup>18</sup> See the claims in Meir, 'Introduction. Film-marketing and Promotional-historical Perspectives'.

wartime film production and neorealism. From the 1970s onward, scholars have inquired into the connections between post-war film culture and previous film discourses and practices. Nevertheless, not much attention has been paid to subsidiary practices such as film promotion, where one notes a considerable difference with film production. Those responsible for film promotion often had similar roles in the pre-war era, but the stylistic changes between this epoch and what came after World War Two are quite striking. Pre-war film posters inherited the legacy of the golden age of Italian graphics, i.e. the *belle époque* and the meeting of the avant-garde and applied arts. This legacy is evident in a certain tendency toward geometry and abstraction found in pre-war film posters, advertisements, and propaganda until 1943.<sup>19</sup> Inter-war film posters often offer a modern, geometric, effective image. In his discussion of advertising graphics, Daniele Pittèri believes that this kind of image originates in the influence that established art, and particularly Futurism, exerted on advertisement at the time. Moreover, he considers Italy's peculiar situation to be Fascist-determined and based on economic autocracy and totalitarian politics. Pittèri posits that these circumstances helped mould a widespread, coherent, and highly persuasive style.<sup>20</sup> The same does not go for the post-war epoch. In fact, there is a major difference in the shift from the pre-war to the post-war era in the way a subject was visualised: a considerably more verisimilar way emerged to depict the figures and scenes displayed in movie posters. To sum up, we might say that, just as in the case of film production, the shift from pre- to post-war did not affect the personalities working in film advertising, but in terms of style, post-war film posters differed greatly from pre-war ones.

Instead of the abstraction used in pre-war examples, post-war graphic film advertisements sought verisimilitude through 'iconisation', by which I mean a mode of representation that relies on the intention to faithfully render reality. Post-war film posters strove to faithfully portray a film's main character without resorting to the use of photography.<sup>21</sup> The basic opposition of abstraction/iconisation derives from the semiotic reflection

19 On pre-war film posters, see Menegazzi, *Il manifesto italiano; I manifesti tipografici del cinema*; Della Torre and Elena Mosconi (eds), *I manifesti tipografici del cinema*. An overview in English on Italian film posters' design can be found in Kehr, *Italian Film Posters*; Bagshaw, *The Art of Italian Film Posters*.

20 See Pittèri, *La pubblicità in Italia*, pp. 18-27.

21 As a first exploration in the field of film posters, I consulted *L'immagine del cinema*; Dell'Anno and Soccio, *Cinema di carta*; Marchiando-Pacchiola, *Cento stelle di carta*; Baroni, *Platea in piedi (1945-1958)*; Marinozzi, *Cinema a pennello*.



Fig. 3.3 Verisimilitude and popular illustration. The film poster for *Persiane chiuse* (*Behind Closed Shutters*, Luigi Comencini, 1951)



Fig. 3.4 Verisimilitude and popular illustration. The film poster for *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, Luchino Visconti, 1948)

of the Franco-Lithuanian scholar Algirdas Julien Greimas, renowned for his work on narrative structures, who in the late 1970s attempted to define methods and concepts to describe the processes of making meaning in visual texts, which are still quite productive and reliable.<sup>22</sup> These methods and concepts examine the structure of a text and the strategies put in place at a formal level in order to make meaning. Thus, they leave room for further analysis of the ways in which meanings circulate within communities and become immaterial tools for identifying processes.

The inclination toward verisimilitude in post-war film advertising was mirrored in popular illustrations such as the book covers of dime novels and in a neorealist movie with a noir penchant, *Behind Closed Shutters*. The same can be said of late nineteenth-century dramatic painting, which survived in twentieth-century popular illustrations for the periodical press (e.g. *La domenica del Corriere*) and which was more surprisingly revealed in the poster drawn for *The Earth Trembles*. These posters placed human

22 See his pioneering contribution in Greimas, 'Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts'.

figures centre stage, portraying them in dramatic moods and in realistic ways (Figs. 3.3-3.4).

To summarise, a major change affected both graphic and cinematic production in the transition between the pre-war and post-war eras, marking a profound difference and a longing to differentiate itself from the past. This renewal was not homogeneous; a multiplicity of styles characterised it, and that multiplicity is itself telling because it went against the totalitarian homogenisation that prevailed during the Fascist era.<sup>23</sup> However, there is a significant divergence between cinematic and graphic imagery regarding the strategies used to create truthful pictures. While posters ape photorealism by depicting a detailed, plausible representation of the main characters, they very rarely utilise photography, turning instead to the most academic, realist pictorial style. Therefore, post-war film posters rejected modernist graphics and reinvigorated a realist pictorial tradition that now belonged to popular illustration.

Taking a closer look at contemporary visual culture, another sharp divide appears that relates to the blatant difference between graphics promoting film products and the general renewal that was taking place in graphics in the post-war era.<sup>24</sup> The latter was patently visible in the typesetting of book covers, newspapers, and magazines and the advertisements for the big companies that soon modernised the country through their industrial policies and communication strategies. Olivetti was a case in point, hiring modernist graphic artists to devise advertisement campaigns for its typing machines featuring abstract, geometrical motifs. These initiatives were often entrusted to avant-garde artists, whose theoretical reflection was often no less intense than their artistic skills. Publishing or advertising graphics differ greatly from film promotion: they reduce the iconic value of the image, enhance typesetting instead of verisimilar visual motifs, and often incorporate photography, whereas most of the film posters at the time avoided it. In 1954, Albe Steiner, one of the most influential and committed post-war designers, acknowledged the key role of photography in the visual composition of magazines and journals: 'In contemporary magazines, photo illustration is of the greatest importance [...]. It is therefore vital to discuss photo illustration, in both its content and its form and its technique.'<sup>25</sup>

By downplaying narration and enhancing the sheer mechanical film recording, neorealism stressed the importance of the photographic

23 On Fascism and the politics of style, see Malvano, *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine*.

24 Regarding graphics and drawing, see Negri and Capano, 'Il disegno in Italia dopo il 1945'.

25 Steiner, 'Sulla fotografia', p. 194. For an overview of the evolution of Italian graphics, see Giorgio Fioravanti, Leonardo Passarelli, and Silvia Sfigiotti (eds), *La grafica in Italia*.



Fig. 3.5 Photography and printed press. The trailer for *Il bandito* (*The Bandit*, Alberto Lattuada, 1946)



Fig. 3.6 Photography and printed press. The trailer for *L'Onorevole Angelina* (*Angelina*, Luigi Zampa, 1947)

reproduction. Cinematic recording promoted visual description over narrative structure. Furthermore, photography was part of a renewed journalistic culture: in the new, free press—and specifically in magazines and journals—photography went hand in hand with political and cultural discourses. Accordingly, graphic features were often part of a strategy of verisimilitude. Neorealist films hybridised graphic and photographic features, as did the trailers promoting these products. For example, trailers used newspaper typesetting for two purposes: to increase the suggestion of truthfulness, since newspapers report and comment on reality, and to ensure that the layout was clear and readable. For instance, the trailer of *The Bandit* superimposes the title of the movie onto the layout of a newspaper, thus equating the film with the practice of newsmaking or, at the least, including fictitious narratives in the realm of daily communication about reality. Furthermore, the leading actors are introduced as photos emerging from this background, as if they were picked from the news section. (Fig. 3.5)<sup>26</sup>

A similar strategy is at work in another trailer that launched an Anna Magnani film, i.e. *Angelina*, which is set in the poor outskirts of Rome. Angelina becomes the head of an uprising against the miserable conditions affecting the underprivileged community. In this capacity she starts to wonder whether she should become a political candidate. The trailer explicitly interweaves the fictitious story—naming a new-born party—with the supposedly factual, i.e. the rotary press printing the newspapers. (Fig. 3.6)<sup>27</sup>

26 It goes without saying that the Hollywood gangster movie and its use of montage scenes of newspapers' titles is also a key reference for *The Bandit*.

27 The trailer for *Angelina* also refers to a Hollywood genre, i.e. the newspaper movie and its montage scenes. See Dagrada, 'Genere: Newspaper movie'.



Fig. 3.7 Photography and printed press. The film poster for *Roma ore 11* (*Rome: 11*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1952)



Fig. 3.8 Visual culture and typesetting. The film poster for *Salvatore Giuliano* (*Salvatore Giuliano*, Francesco Rosi, 1962)

If graphic and photographic images were occasionally combined in films and film trailers, film posters seldom did so. This happened in relatively marginal cases, as in *Cuori senza frontiere* (*The White Line*, Luigi Zampa, 1950), a drama set on the most troubled Italian border, the one dividing the nation from its former territories, which in 1950 belonged to Communist Yugoslavia. An overlapping of graphic and photographic images is to be found in *Rome: 11*, a film originating in a reportage that the Communist newspaper *L'Unità* devoted to the news item. Finally, a typesetting structure appears in later neorealist epigones, as in *Salvatore Giuliano* (Francesco Rosi, 1962), a film conceived as a full-fledged news report. (Figs. 3.7-3.8)

Neorealist films thus tended to include a typesetting composition in their own visual score. However, the posters advertising them—their peritext, i.e. what French literary theoretician Gérard Genette considers the way producers and/or distributors choose to promote their products—distance



Fig. 3.9 Advertisement and graphics. The film poster for *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, Vittorio De Sica, 1950)

themselves from both photographic and graphic styles<sup>28</sup> and instead rely on well-established pictorial styles and canons. To summarise, neorealist film posters favoured a pictorial style instead of embracing photorealism or imitating typesetting, as in print media. The artists responsible for them were often themselves painters, including Anselmo Ballester, Ercole Brini, Angelo Cesselon, and Averardo Ciriello.<sup>29</sup> Much more rarely, graphic designers partook in film promotion campaigns, and when they did, they made rather uncommon choices. Michele Majorana, for instance, designed a black-and-white poster that spotlighted an unusually thin line, for *Miracle in Milan*. (Fig. 3.9)

Most of the time, the graphic advertisements promoting neorealist films consisted of a wide range of colours, often sensational. Their main function was to define as sharply as possible the profiles of the characters. 'If we assume, based on the widespread knowledge of neorealism, that the films associated the phenomenon depicted characters and themes in truthful terms, without any adornment, these posters present us with antithetical examples. Here a sensuous and sensational style operates, one that is aimed at immediately capturing the viewer's attention. The same recurrent use of the colour red for the lettering of titles confirms this hypothesis, revealing a shared approach pointing out through chromatic means the main item, i.e. the title.

If we turn to figurative semiotics, i.e. the attempt to define and survey the formal strategies underpinning visual composition, we can grasp the peculiarity of neorealist film posters better. Regarding the eidetic level of the figures, i.e. the graphic profile defining the contour and therefore individuating it, a thick and round line prevails. On a topological level, film posters that advertise neorealist films favoured a structure with three dominant points: the breaking of the frame; the top/bottom separation fulfilling a semi-symbolic function, i.e. expressing a stable opposition between categories of content

28 I draw here the notions of paratext and peritext from Genette, *Paratexts*. The notions Genette coined should be carefully applied to cinema, since the simple conversion from literature is far from unproblematic, mostly with regard to the epitext. In this respect, I disagree with scholarship tending to identify literary and film epitext. From my standpoint, promotional materials, although physically distinct from the core text (film) but serving it, do not belong to the epitext but instead to the *publisher's peritext*, as I tried to single out. This latter is a full part of the paratext. As a matter of fact, Genette distinguishes the paratext from the epitext on a spatial and functional basis: the epitext is distant from the text, and its function is not institutional. The publisher's peritext belongs to the paratext and depends on the publisher's strategies. See Genette, *Paratexts*, pp. 16-36. On the notion of film paratext, see Re, *Ai margini del film*.

29 A recent scrutiny of Cesselon's work can be found in Burato, 'Il cinema secondo Cesselon. Un'analisi del suo metodo creativo attraverso la raccolta dello CSAC'.



Fig. 3.10 Advertisement and pictorial style. The film poster for *Sotto il sole di Roma* (*Under the Sun of Rome*, Renato Castellani, 1948)



Fig. 3.11 Advertisement and pictorial style. The film poster for *Non c'è pace tra gli ulivi* (*Under the Olive Tree*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1950)

by way of formal categories;<sup>30</sup> and a deep-staging composition. Jean-Marie Floch, recalling Heinrich Wölfflin,<sup>31</sup> defines this set of features as 'baroque' as opposed to 'classical'. A baroque representation is visual and pictorial instead of tactile and linear, as we would find in a classical one; it is deep-staged instead of frontal and shallow; and it goes beyond the boundaries of its framing and presents an a-tectonic form, neither containing nor offering sides for the composition to lean on. Furthermore, a baroque representation is based on a dominant motif, and its components are not autonomous. Finally, in baroque compositions, the lighting does not coincide with the form: therefore, it does not have a clarifying function.<sup>32</sup> These features describe the work that artists as different as Ercole Brini or Pasquale Manno produced for, respectively, *Bicycle Thieves* and *Under the Sun of Rome*, and *Under the Olive Tree*. (Fig. 3.10-3.11)

30 'When a relationship is established between a figurative opposition and a thematic opposition, as in day/night (figures) with virtue/crime (themes), it is known as a semi-symbolic relationship in Greimasian semiotics.' See Hébert, 'Figurative, Thematic and Axiological Analysis'; Greimas and Courtès, 'Semi-symbolic'. See also Martin and Ringham, 'Semi-symbolic'.

31 Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*.

32 Here I entirely refer to Jean-Marie Floch's work and notably to *Semiotics, Marketing and Communication*.



Fig. 3.12 Pictorial style and narration. The film poster for *Gioventù perduta* (*Lost Youth*, Pietro Germi, 1947)

Furthermore, most of the placards used to promote neorealist films do not extract fragments from supposed reality. These posters have no interest in an aesthetic based on the casual fragment as linked to the photographic

image: an unexpected, unintentional pose does not usually feature in a poster promoting a neorealist film. Alternatively, posters offer to the viewer a representation of a privileged, significant moment, usually portrayed through expressive postures of the characters. The pictorial ruling of these images hinges on meaningful attitudes and faces, whereas a photographic occurrence might enhance the blurred, unexpected, or, more generally, the non-artistic nature of the chosen subject. Most of the time they unfold micro-narratives instead, displaying characters attending to some activity. To draw again on Floch's scholarship, these posters are *pictograms*, based on a chronological continuity and on linear characters, as opposed to *mythograms*, which present us instead with non-linear characters devoted to mythopoetic activities.<sup>33</sup> Posters promoting neorealist films tell short tales, structuring the main components of the storyline as a paradigm. Visual materials created by artists such as Antonio Ballester, Luigi Martinati, and Carlantonio Longi to promote films as different as *Rome, Open City*; *Paisan*; *Without Pity*; and *Lost Youth* all contrast within their iconic structure characters and situations as in the films' narratives (Fig. 3.12).

The posters created to promote neorealist films do not exhibit the sobriety that militant film critics claim these film works possessed in terms of colour, narratives, or complex visual structures. Furthermore, at merely the visual level, they featured multiple sensational characteristics similar to those seen in posters advertising Hollywood productions such as fights and crimes involving men, and women confined to an idealised sentimental role, mostly as a sort of ethereal ghost, floating on the upper side of the picture, above the misfortunes of the men. Otherwise, women express an erotic attraction through their bodies. Gian Piero Brunetta has noted the absence of attractive feminine images in pre-war posters,<sup>34</sup> and I agree with his view: the display of the feminine body was a post-war novelty and a way to attract viewers through the lure of sensation and eroticism. In fact, the posters promoting neorealist films exhibit all those subjects—such as the feminine body and crime—that had been removed or concealed until 1945 since they conflicted with Catholic morals and were considered socially dangerous. These features were often derived from Hollywood cinema and adapted to a vernacular visual culture. Moreover, the post-war era presents us with the vision of the woman's body but framed in a narrative and sexual function. Post-war era posters offered a gendered and narrative topological representation. On the lower side of the poster, secular actions take place,

33 Floch, *Semiotics, Marketing and Communication*; Floch, *Petites mythologies*.

34 Brunetta, *Il colore dei sogni*.

often sensational ones: crime, fights, arguments. A celestial scene dominates these cheap earthly travails: in the upper half of the poster, impalpable feminine figures look with sorrow from above at these human miseries, and immoral desires transubstantiate into a pure sentimental union between a just man and woman.

Very interesting connections can be drawn between the visual and semantic structure described above and a rising phenomenon in the Italian cultural industry: photo-romances. These were popular print products based on sentimental fictions conveyed by photographed actors and written dialogues (the original photo-romances had drawn figures instead of photos of actors). This new medium—its birth is conventionally given as the first issue of the popular magazine *Grand Hotel* in July 1946—sometimes shared producers with film posters, if not exclusively a style.<sup>35</sup> Photo-romances, and particularly their covers, had in common with film posters a set of iconic features: the relevance of characters, namely stars; the display of explicit attitudes expressing clearly codified feelings (e.g. love, hatred, joy); a functional similitude, as they both had to communicate in a clear, non-ambiguous, immediate way; and, finally, a predominance of pictorial codes over photographic ones. To sum up, film posters and photo-romances shared similar compositional strategies and semantic choices. Moreover, if we focus on cultural consumption rather than production, the relevance of this common strategy becomes clear. Popular subjects, simple feelings, verisimilitude, narrative, and pictorialism were the means to win a broad readership. Finally, film posters and photo-romances had a similar function with regard to the body of neorealist films: they reduced the aesthetic multifariousness of their reference texts in order to foreground the characters, who take centre stage, and the narratives, as characters are shown doing things or expressing feelings. In doing so, they underlined the role of female stars and built a psychological portrait of them, mostly based on passions and morals. This psychological portrait is partly conveyed through the visual layout, partly through a narrative voice, whose purpose is to direct and disambiguate the visual components.

Within post-war visual culture, a scopie regime based on pictorial, sensational images displaying feminine bodies as attractive objects and referring to narratives to simplify and stimulate the viewers' interests

35 For instance, Lancio publishing house, which produced photo-romances in the 1950s, got started with producing huge film posters to be placed along the roads. See Bravo, *Il fotoromanzo*, p. 34.



Fig. 3.13 Popular press and neorealism. *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1949)

co-existed with a much more austere visual style, i.e. neorealism as common knowledge would define it. This co-existence demonstrates how different cultural formations and discourses marked post-war national culture and produced enduring fractures.

### The Earth Trembles at the Grand Hotel: Neorealist Photo-Romances

Walter and Francesca are hiding from the policemen in a railway station. They are trying to flee after stealing a precious necklace, so they shuffle among the rice pickers leaving on the trains to go to the plantations. While waiting for the train to leave, Walter notices a very young, stunning girl dancing the boogie-woogie just beside the coach. He joins her in a flexuous dance. The policemen identify Walter, and a shootout ensues. After using Francesca as a shield, Walter manages to escape. Francesca stays on the train, and as it leaves, she goes to the restroom, where she pulls the necklace out. As she leaves the restroom, the young dancer, Silvana, is waiting for her: Silvana eyes her sceptically, and then goes back to the photo-romance magazine she is browsing, *Grand Hotel*. (Fig. 3.13)

The second and third sequences of *Bitter Rice* show how photo-romances make use of the same ingredients characterising popular narratives (hot passion, crime, action). The message is that mass culture was a dangerous phenomenon, leading the working class astray from its true goals and values. However, was neorealism itself so distant and alien to mass culture, as represented by the photo-romance?

In the early post-war years, at a time when the press and popular magazines were making rapid inroads,<sup>36</sup> a new medium appeared in Italy: the photo-romance magazine. The photo-romance magazine has often been described as offering escapist and regressive narratives to an illiterate readership. Nonetheless, it also addressed a broader readership than any previous popular magazine; secondly, it appealed to a female readership that had been neglected during the Fascist era; and finally, photo-romance's emphasis on visuality was itself a novelty in a print culture largely conceived and conveyed through literary language. On 29 June 1946, a minor publisher, Universo, run by Cino Del Duca in Milan, produced the first issue of what was to become a huge success: *Grand Hotel*. Major publishing houses soon followed: Mondadori published *Bolero Film* and Rizzoli *Il mio sogno*, later renamed plainly *Sogno*.

Photo-romances can be discussed as a medium in their own right,<sup>37</sup> with their own genealogy that can be traced back partly to romances and popular literature in general, as has been discussed at length. Furthermore, the importance of this medium for the nation's visual culture in the post-war era is unquestionable. First of all, photo-romance magazines were an outcome of Italian culture's general transformation in the previous decade from traditional to industrial cultural production.<sup>38</sup> The shift in the modes of cultural production created the conditions for—and profited from—a new visual culture. It is certainly no accident that Del Duca's previous main publishing activity in the 1930s was a comic magazine named *L'Intrepido*. Comic magazines were a major outcome of the new industrial culture because they were serialised and produced on a mass scale, as was later the case with photo-romance magazines. In the 1950s, highbrow intellectuals still tended to conflate photo-romances with comic magazines. Secondly, within this new industrialised culture, cinema as an industrial mode of production

36 Sorlin called attention to the national and international promotion of neorealism through popular magazines. See Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema*.

37 For a discussion of photo-romance as a medium, see Baetens, 'The Photo-novel: A Minor Medium?'

38 See Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era*; Colombo, *La cultura sottile*.

held a hegemonic role as a representational, social, and media model. Cinema was the beacon for cultural production. Again, it is no coincidence that the name of the first very successful photo-romance magazine makes explicit reference to a famous Hollywood movie, *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932). On the front cover of the first issue, well-dressed bourgeois fiancés enter a movie theatre called Grand Hotel, where the scheduled film is titled 'Anime incatenate' (*Souls in Chains*), which is also the title of the photo-romance. And another lucrative magazine was named *Bolero Film*, thus directly connecting cinema and the photo-romance. Among the ancestors and heirs of photo-romance magazines were the cine-romances, i.e. the adaptation of film narratives through the selection of individual frames, complete with written commentary.<sup>39</sup>

A new freedom of expression, first of all in political terms, affected the post-war mediascape. A powerful agent within this media scene was Hollywood cinema and American culture more generally, which influenced both photo-romance magazines and cine-romances. Photo-romance and cine-romance magazines became a vehicle for American mass culture to penetrate deeply into Italy. Nevertheless, both kinds of publications somehow negotiated the moral values entailed in American mass culture in terms that were culturally and socially acceptable to post-war Italy. Some journals and individuals played a significant role in this negotiation: Adriano Baracco, for instance, and the magazines he published—*Hollywood*, *Novelle Film*, and *Cineromanzo*—which followed a similar policy in spreading a mass culture related to cinema, stardom, and popular narratives.<sup>40</sup> Italian cinema was not initially an inspiration for photo-romances or cine-romances, but its progressive relevance grew with its industrial stabilisation following the reinstatement of the Cinecittà studios, the growth in film exports and co-productions, and the increase in film attendance. For example, consider that *Novelle Film* adapted an Italian film only three years after the start of the magazine, in 1949. Moreover, most national films belonged to very popular film genres such as farce, popular comedies, historical films, and, obviously, melodramas. From

39 The practices of film novelisation in Italy have been recently scrutinised in De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta; La novellizzazione in Italia*; Morreale (ed.), *Lo schermo di carta*. See also Giovenco, *Il cineromanzo in Italia e in Francia negli anni cinquanta e sessanta*. On novelisation itself, see Autelitano, Re (eds), *Il racconto del film. La novellizzazione: dal catalogo al trailer/ Narrating the film. Novelization: From the Catalogue to the Trailer*; Baetens, 'Novelization: A Contaminated Genre?'

40 An overall discussion of post-war popular press in its relationship to cinema can be found in Muscio, 'Tutto fa cinema. La stampa popolare del secondo dopoguerra'.

the 1950s on, some studios specifically interested in popular film genres and intermedial tie-ins became interested in cine-romances. This was the case with Titanus, located in Naples and responsible for some of the most successful melodramas between the 1940s and 1950s—its production was often novelised as cine-romances in *Novelle Film*.<sup>41</sup> During this period, even high-budget or neorealist film productions were often turned into cine-romances.

Did neorealism partake in and merge into post-war visual culture to the point that some thresholds and boundaries between highbrow, politically conscious, and aesthetically experimental films and formulaic cultural products became hard to detect? In the post-war iconic sphere, it was common for modern American visual culture, stereotypes belonging to traditional popular culture, and newly forged realistic forms to intertwine. Cine-romances sometimes crystallised these unexpected matches. Moreover, what role did intermediality and intertextuality play in this process? An intermedial and intertextual mode of production prompts researchers to shift from an aesthetic and author-based perspective of neorealism to a more inclusive and broader view of the phenomenon. And this broader view understands that neorealism was not solely a high-brow, politically conscious, and aesthetically outstanding production but belonged to the same cultural industry as photo-romances. Finally, what happened in the transformation that occurred along the passage from the screen to the magazine? By comparing the function that narratives had in novelisation and in films, some major shifts are revealed.

Photo-romance and cine-romance magazines were part of an emerging mass culture that mostly revolved around visual features. In a country that was highly unbalanced culturally—some areas of Southern Italy in the post-war era had an illiteracy rate exceeding 20%, whereas North-Western Italy's illiteracy rates were below 5%—this new visual culture was somehow able to negotiate between highbrow models and the needs of the middle and lower classes. Photo-romance magazines were not sold primarily in rural underprivileged areas but were aimed at an urban population that possibly attended film screenings and experienced recently mediated cultural consumption.<sup>42</sup> Most readers belonged to

41 See, for instance, Caviglia, 'Catene'; Aldrovandi, 'Chi è senza peccato', both drawn from very popular melodramas that Raffaello Matarazzo respectively directed in 1950 and 1952. On *Catene* as an intermedial case, see Di Chiara, 'Lacrime italiane'. On Titanus film production and the Italian film industry, see Di Chiara, *Generi e industria cinematografica in Italia*.

42 An in-depth survey on cinema and media consumption in post-war Italy is Casetti and Fanchi, 'Le funzioni sociali del cinema e dei media'.

the proletarian or petty-bourgeois classes; nevertheless, photo-romances also penetrated the upper classes.<sup>43</sup> This intermediate position between conservative highbrow and pre-modern and traditional culture defines the peculiarity of the photo-romance. It belonged to a new media culture that questioned high culture, which was still dominant as a national model, and in this respect, was in the same boat as popular cinema, dime novels, comics, category romances, and so forth. For this very reason, many of these genres and formats have for a long time been called para-literature, meaning 'a field of contradiction of *another* field as *literature*'.<sup>44</sup>

The main reference for a newly established mass and visual culture was American culture as conveyed via mass media and related products and goods. This modernisation process happened between the 1920s and the 1930s but significantly accelerated after the end of World War Two. From the very start, photo-romances examined (supposedly) American social and moral habits, as in the first issue of *Grand Hotel* that tells the story of an Italian-American engineer and his romantic affair. American cultural models were authoritative in at least three different respects: social customs, iconography, and visual syntax. Social customs refer to the way in which relationships among individuals and the associated moral values were depicted as a moral example for the readers. By iconography, I mean a set of visual features concerning goods, objects, the environment, and human bodies as discussed above. The early issues of photo-romances balanced the dream of consumerism and social success—represented by the available goods used to define the story and its characters—with traditional moral values. In terms of visual syntax, what is of concern to us here is the way of arranging a set of individual frames to build up a coherent discourse. Basically, this is an editing pattern or a method used to associate the images. Photo-romances and cine-romances picked up from Hollywood cinema a set of goods and objects, often luxurious or associated with specific film genres, and they also selected certain emotions such as fear, desire, and longing. This also appears to have been an effective model when novelising films that declared their affiliation with the neorealist movement, as in Lizzani's *At the edge of the city*. (Fig. 3.14) The visual score of this politically committed film, mostly set in the Roman suburbs, spotlights dramatic exchanges among characters,

43 See Bravo, *Il fotoromanzo*, pp. 76-82.

44 Rak, 'Appunti sulla dinamica del sistema dell'informazione estetica: i generi della paraliteratura e la cultura di massa', p. 17.



Fig. 3.14 Adapting neorealism to Hollywood narration. The novelization of *Ai margini della metropoli* (At the edge of the city, Carlo Lizzani, 1953)

tortured facial expressions, guns, and the near exclusion of outdoor scenes.<sup>45</sup> Indoor stills set this type of novelisation apart from its neorealist origins in that they leave out outdoor scenes and the realist depiction of Roman suburbs. Instead, they are more similar to Hollywood editing patterns, rooted in dominant narratives and the *dramatis personae*. Whereas the film presented the viewer with many outdoor settings, implicitly rooting

45 See Sciolti, 'Ai margini della metropoli'.

its narrative in actual recent crimes happening in Rome's suburban areas,<sup>46</sup> the cine-romance version of the story basically renounced any reference to a specific, identifiable local reality and instead chose to make use of solely indoor scenes from the film. Furthermore, Hollywood production in the 1940s was mostly known for being studio-based and was usually accused of excluding the casualty of reality as it might emerge accidentally in outdoor recording.

What is most conspicuous in photo- and cine-romance magazines is their exhibition of the human body, specifically the feminine body. Its relevance as a means to express desire, eroticism, and attraction hits readers from the front cover of photo-romances and cine-romances and was strictly connected to stardom. The sentimental discourse was mainly linked to a couple expressing their passion through the closeness of their bodies and faces. However, eroticism was exclusively a feminine 'privilege', disclosed through a body half-naked, displaying a lascivious attitude or abandoned to its own passion. In this respect, these covers show similarities with the layout of film posters, as previously discussed. With regard to visual syntax, photo-romance and cine-romance magazines mostly preferred medium shots, thus foregrounding characters and indoor scenes instead of outdoor ones based on landscape, even though this latter feature played such a meaningful role in many respects in neorealist culture. Furthermore, the arrangement of shots was often based on classical Hollywood editing, regardless of the film source. This happened even when adapted films clearly opposed the Hollywood mode of representation, as illustrated by the case of the novelisation of *Umberto D.* Conceived as an almost anti-narrative film, casting an untrained actor as the main character, *Umberto D.* originated a cine-romance articulating a set of stills using the Hollywood style of editing.<sup>47</sup>

The novelisation begins by displaying the image of Umberto's landlady, portrayed as a sort of femme fatale, a platinum blonde, looking at the camera in close-up. The following frames are a full shot of the corridor where Umberto confronts the landlady, with the maid in between them; two medium shots of Umberto talking with the maid in the kitchen; a medium

46 The film was inspired by a renowned case occurring three years before in the impoverished suburban neighbourhood (*borgata*) of Primavalle: the attempted rape and subsequent murder of Annarella Bracci, which took place in mid-February 1950. Public opinion was deeply impressed by the case, which led to a documentary short directed by Luchino Visconti, *Notes on a crime story*. It possibly inspired Roberto Rossellini to locate some sequences of his *Europa '51* (*Europe '51*, Roberto Rossellini, 1952) in the neighbourhood and was the main reference for *At the edge of the city*.

47 See De' Rossignoli, 'Umberto D.'

shot of Umberto begging outdoors before the Pantheon in Rome; a full shot of Umberto in his room; and a full shot of the maid in the corridor, looking at Umberto's door; followed by a full shot of Umberto in his room under reconstruction, as if from the maid's point of view. Scenes of dialogue are clearly privileged over individual characters, indoor images over outdoor ones, and editing patterns based on the establishing shot or the point-of-view shot dominate.

Photo- and cine-romance magazines incorporated popular visual culture as much as common past social experiences. Sometimes, diegetic spaces and events referred to the harsh reality of war and of the post-war era, as some commentators have remarked, focusing on the issues of war, ruins, the Resistance, and migration. Photo-romances—and specifically those that adopted photographic stills from the very start instead of graphic illustration as *Bolero Film* did—reflected an interest in the difficulty of the nation's recent experiences and assigned a crucial function to the photographic medium itself.<sup>48</sup> Future film director Damiano Damiani played a key role in this respect by directing photo-romances that relied on such aesthetics.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, some columns in photo-romance magazines telling supposedly 'real' stories—such as 'È accaduto' ('It Happened') in *Grand Hotel*—reported scoops from everyday experience and resembled similar columns affiliated with the neorealist project to describe Italy at length. Furthermore, diegetic spaces as portrayed in photo-romance narratives often implied post-war reality; these magazines also presented columns describing 'real' and highly dramatic stories set in post-war Italy, sharing some features with similar columns published in specifically neorealist film journals. This is another telling sign of the convergence between neorealist culture and photo-romances.

Conversely, neorealist films often reflected on the boom in mass culture. In *Bitter Rice*, for example, the main character Silvana browses through *Grand Hotel* and dances the boogie-woogie,<sup>50</sup> and a number of documentary shorts portrayed popular media products such as pin-ups or comic and photo-romance magazines with a mix of curiosity and repulsion, as illustrated in Renzo Renzi's *Paper fiancéés*, Maselli's *Dangerous area*, and Antonioni's *Lies of love*. Moreover, some neorealist films and individuals,

48 See Detti, *Le carte rosa*, pp. 104-113.

49 On Damiani, see Pezzotta, *Regia Damiano Damiani*.

50 It should also be remarked that *Bitter Rice* was itself novelised at least twice: as a graphic photo-romance and as a cine-romance. See, respectively, the extras of the DVD edition *Riso amaro*, Cristaldi Film/Dolmen Home Video 2007; Gardonella, 'Riso amaro'. Also note that this latter novelisation stresses the eroticism, both in terms of visual and verbal features, by enhancing this dimension that was already explicit in the film itself.

such as De Santis or Lattuada, paid great attention to the emerging mass culture and consequently moulded their works according to narratives and visual motifs derived from the popular press. Just to name a striking example, a huge box-office success and ruthless melodrama like *Anna* could not have been conceived outside a mediascape implying photo-romance magazines. Based on the triumph of virtue over vice, and fate as the drive that moves the world and regulates justice, *Anna* tells the story of Anna, a former nightclub dancer (Silvana Mangano) whose partner is Vittorio, a cynical bartender (Vittorio Gassman). As she falls in love with Andrea (Raf Vallone), an honest man, a conflict arises, and Andrea accidentally kills his rival. For this reason, Anna decides to become a nun and help people in need in a hospital. After many years, she runs into Andrea at the hospital and must make up her mind and choose between love and virtue, between worldly and spiritual passion. The film relied upon the same actors who made the outspoken neorealist film *Bitter Rice* a major success and was at the time the highest-grossing Italian film.

When discussing photo- and cine-romances, it might therefore be fruitful to frame and expand the question of realism as a trilateral relationship between neorealism, the popular press, and post-war melodrama. The latter certainly profited from a realist visual style, as proven by Raffaello Matarazzo's films *Chains*, *Tormento* (*Torment*, 1950), and *I figli di nessuno* (*Nobody's children*, 1952), or Clemente Fracassi's *Sensualità* (*Barefoot Savage*, 1952).<sup>51</sup> However, simplified narratives added to the realist setting. In this respect, I agree with Lucia Cardone when she describes photo-romance magazines as belonging to the family of popular realism<sup>52</sup>—a family, however, intersecting new-born neorealism. In fact, neorealist films employed polarised, simplified narratives and clear-cut characters belonging to popular realism. Moreover, films such as *Bitter Rice* or *Under the Olive Tree* utilised simplified popular narratives as a way to address popular audiences and convey political opinions. Conversely, cine-romance magazines simply took from the multi-layered visual score of neorealist films what was easier to subjugate to clear-cut narratives. Therefore, neorealist urban space and outdoor scenes in general were typically excluded from the selected frames, which instead favoured indoor family groups and situations. Quite paradoxically, this happened with a film like *The Earth Trembles*, the aim of which was to depict a family melodrama (no need to underline the role

51 The latter was also novelised as Pierfranchi, 'Sensualità'. See Aprà and Carabba, *Neorealismo d'appendice*; Morreale, *Così piangevano*.

52 See Cardone, *Con lo schermo nel cuore*.

of melodramatic tradition in Visconti's cinema!) but which was well rooted in a specific archaic space—Eastern Sicily's seaside.<sup>53</sup> Except for the first frame—a sort of establishing shot depicting the fishermen's village and the seashore—all the stills of the cine-romance depict medium shots of the main characters, mostly expressing their feelings or living a simple family life.

We can examine intertextuality in photo-romance and cine-romance magazines through three different lenses. The first one focuses on the media in general and the role that cinema held in the mediascape. The second and the third tap more specifically into the way cinema produced its works and circulated its images across a wide array of media. Firstly, as previously explained, in post-war Italy, cinema was certainly the hegemonic medium in terms of symbolic power, the newest and most financially supported medium, determining and crystallising visual culture by rooting it in complex narratives. In order to be qualified as an art in its own right, cinema had to incorporate aesthetic categories well established in the traditional arts such as artwork and literature. Italian post-war film culture—and, more specifically, neorealism—worked hard to promote what was acknowledged across Europe from the inter-war period onward: that the film director was the sole artistic person responsible for the work of art. It is for this reason that photo-romance and cine-romance magazines were denied the right to qualify as an art based on two basic features determining their very existence: anonymous producers and serial production. As a matter of fact, the authors of photo-romances and/or those responsible for novelisations were often anonymous; even when explicitly named, they remained in obscurity most of the time. Furthermore, photo-romance magazines fragmented their narratives in a series of publications, whereas cine-romances prolonged the life of the film into another form and medium. Thus cine-romance magazines declared film's multiplicity and stressed the fact that its very existence was not exclusively the outcome of individual aesthetic genius but the effect of anonymous powerful narratives and industrial inertial force. As Emiliano Morreale stated, 'cine-romance belongs to film product's "derivative" exploitation; [...] in 1950s' Italy emerged an articulated system of synergies within the entertainment industry which is particularly interesting.'<sup>54</sup> Film directors affiliated with neorealism are barely remembered on the pages of cine-romance magazines, with the sole exception of Roberto Rossellini, himself a star due to his love affair with Swedish-born Hollywood star Ingrid Bergman. To sum up, photo-romances benefitted from cinema's symbolic

53 See Rasori, 'La terra trema'.

54 Morreale, 'Il sipario strappato. Introduzione ai cineromanzi', p. 34.

relevance, and they often had a broader audience than neorealist movies themselves, but they were then neglected because they did not belong to high-brow cultural production.

Secondly, in terms of modes of production, photo-romances shared with neorealist films a number of components. Realistic representations, everyday stories, non-professional performers, and low budgets were part and parcel of photo-romance production.

Thirdly, stardom as a transtextual phenomenon became key to the success of cine-romance magazines for a number of reasons. This was first and foremost because female stars offered an identification model for female readership. In addition, such stars were attractive objects to male readers. For both these reasons, pictures of feminine stars were often displayed on cine-romance magazines' front covers. Furthermore, in order to give these appearances an articulated existence, biographical accounts were printed on the last page of the magazine. Actually, photo-romance magazines were part of a mediascape that enabled young ambitious talent to get started in the cultural industry, as with Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida. Last but not least, it was through national stardom that cine-romance magazines were able to establish a relationship between Italy and Hollywood's film industries by adopting the key category of film stars. By publishing regular columns like 'Rosa dei venti' or 'Sala di soggiorno' in *Novelle Film*, which underlined both the international and family dimensions of Italian stars, or including single biographical portraits as *Cineromanzo* did, the cultural industry promoted alternative, industry-based values as opposed to authorship and artwork. When adapted to photo-romances, neorealist films' multi-layered aesthetic and moral representation was reduced to well-built, clear-cut, and radically dualistic narratives. Let's consider the adaptations made in the novelisation of a world-famous neorealist masterpiece, Rossellini's *Stromboli*. The major adaptations that were made all increased the narrative clarity and reduced everything not immediately pertaining to it. First of all, the cine-romance, originally published in *Cineromanzo*,<sup>55</sup> stressed the film's value as a star vehicle by featuring on the front cover Ingrid Bergman's profile, as did the posters for her films under Rossellini's direction. (Fig. 3.15) Secondly, the novelisation elevated the narrative information by including in the plotline exhaustive references to the past of the main female character, from which the film narratives abstained. Thirdly, the novelisation excluded all description on both the verbal and visual levels by picking only those frames centred on a character. As a matter of fact, the verbal text provides

55 See 'Stromboli, terra di Dio', *Cineromanzo*.



Fig. 3.15 Reducing neorealism, promoting stardom. The novelization of *Stromboli, terra di Dio* (*Stromboli*, Roberto Rossellini, 1950)

the characters with complex psychology, which the film representation avoided in order to obscure the deep motivations behind their actions and feelings. Finally, the cine-romance integrated into the story a narrative voice with a threefold function: to connect episodes in order to clarify obscure passages and provide the reader with a full explanation; to describe the

characters' internal motivation, which the film refrained from doing for aesthetic reasons, and to stress moral uncertainty and/or freedom;<sup>56</sup> and to include in the narratives a moral stance, allegedly external to the facts and therefore supposedly neutral, assigning to the characters and their conduct a position on the scale of virtue.<sup>57</sup> In this respect, the voice-over in novelisations did nothing but respond to a basic melodramatic function, i.e. depicting virtue's misfortunes.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the voice-over, a recurrent feature of neorealist films as a truthful component resembling a neutral documentary voice, was transmuted into its very opposite: a moral, authoritative, and authoritarian voice reducing visual ambiguity to narrative transparency. We could call this a scopic regime in which the image functioned as seduction and the voice as a site of moral redemption.

In a suburban basement, a photography studio is set; everyday figures enter it. They change their clothes, pose in front of the camera, and their pictures are developed. Onto these pictures, speech balloons are added, while the images are retouched. When the session is finished, the actors performing the characters of the photo-romances return to their origins: the urban outskirts and poor neighbourhoods where they are well regarded and admired. But it is hard to tell the readers from the performers. Is Antonioni's title *Lies of love* stressing the lie of the passions portrayed by photo-romances or rather the act of love in reshaping daily reality into a story, conflating harsh and popular realism?

### Still Lives. Neorealist Photo-Documentaries

A procession parades out of a medieval church, down the long stairs, out to a square somewhere in Southern Italy. People are carrying a saint's statue on their shoulders. The authorities, American investors, and villagers look down from the balconies and admire it. A photographer named Celestino is called upon to photograph the procession. Staged shots alternate with documentary shooting. The camera Celestino holds in his hands has a peculiar power: it freezes life, as any photographic apparatus, and moreover gives him the power to kill evil people and save the good ones. As Celestino captures a photo, he bestows a punishment on the represented subject. In *The Machine That Kills Bad People*, one of the paramount filmmakers of

56 This is particularly true of Rossellini's films, which were morally normalised through their novelisation. Beyond the examined case, consider also Pagos, 'Europa 51'.

57 For a discussion of the voice-over function in post-war novelisations, see also De Berti, 'Il cinema fuori dallo schermo'.

58 See Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*.

neorealism glorifies and questions the power of photography as a specific, dangerous tool to survey reality, define responsibilities, and apply penalties.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, this magic power—devilish or sacred—surfaces in Southern Italy, a region where it is hard to tell archaic rituals from monotheistic religion, popular beliefs from modern spirituality.

Italian neorealism is renowned for a few masterpieces, but it is rarely considered a starting point for Italian post-war photography. I shall now focus on photo-documentaries, which are sets of photographs about a distinct subject matter (i.e., mostly the underprivileged social classes) produced and assembled in order to provide objective knowledge about, or to document, this subject. In particular, I will study the photo-documentaries published in *Cinema Nuovo* between 1954 and 1956 depicting the harsh social conditions of individuals living in rural or metropolitan areas. Some of these were then collected as a stand-alone volume in 1955, with some very telling choices compared to their first appearance in the journal.<sup>60</sup> Albe Steiner<sup>61</sup> designed the layout of the photo-documentaries. These products raise many questions. How did distinct scopic regimes interact in post-war visual culture? More specifically, how did a series of photographic reportages published in a leftist-oriented Italian film journal, *Cinema Nuovo*, become a crossroads for film and photographic visual culture? And how did these photo-documentaries incarnate photography, description, and political awareness? How did the legacy of neorealist films become an elitist product, intermingled with more popular forms and media culture such as photo-documentaries?

The layout of the photo-documentaries is fairly standard and consists of eight pages, with the opening and closing ones displaying full-size images, often with a very similar subject and looking at the viewer in a frontal close-up: the portrayed human figures looks at the camera and thus back at the viewer, who is being summoned to view the documentary representation. Therefore, although published in a journal that explicitly intended to distinguish itself from news magazines, photo-documentaries relied on a format as stable as those included in such weekly magazines as *Epoca*, a renowned weekly magazine that was part of the journalistic post-war boom that produced new knowledge about the world and the nation by coupling modern verbal text with an unprecedented quantity of photographic images. Furthermore, the

59 On *The Machine That Kills Bad People* and the dialectics between still and moving images, see Bellour, 'The Film Stilled'.

60 See *I fotodocumentari di Cinema Nuovo*.

61 On Steiner, see Steiner, *Il mestiere di grafico*; Steiner, *Foto-grafia: ricerca e progetto*; Huber and Steiner (eds), *Albe Steiner: comunicazione visiva*.

stories that were published were consistently about the same subjects and environments dealt with in post-war neorealist culture such as deprived urban areas<sup>62</sup> and underdeveloped Southern regions.<sup>63</sup> The weekly magazines contributed to circulating the work of modern, realist photographers such as Robert Capa. The chosen topics, and mostly those discussing misery and indigence in urban and rural areas, were common to news magazines and to photo-documentaries. Each photo-documentary included a number of illustrations accompanied by a written commentary that was often ironic. This implies that the relationship between the written and visual parts of the text was quite peculiar. The written text often scrutinises and criticises the images; the function of this commentary (whose authors were usually writers and journalists themselves) was to examine and dismantle widespread stereotypes concerning the American way of life, Hollywood, or Italian petty bourgeois habits. At the very heart of the relationship between the written and the visual features are concerns about the deceitfulness of the images and the need to secure their ideological meaning.

Quite often, manuals on the history of Italian photography refer to photo-documentaries<sup>64</sup> for an obvious reason: several remarkable Italian photographers of the second half of the twentieth century began their careers with photo-documentaries. They included Ugo Mulas, Mario Dondero, Chiara Samugheo, Franco Pinna, and Enzo Sellerio, to name a few. Moreover, renowned and less famous foreign photographers also collaborated on photo-documentaries, including, most notably, Paul Strand, who worked with Cesare Zavattini on the illustrated volume *Un paese (A Village, 1955)*<sup>65</sup> and that same year published a preview of this volume under the title '25 persone' ('25 People'). (Fig. 3.16) In addition to Strand, there was also Jone Robinson, who photographed archaic landscapes and rituals in Central Italy, which echoed an anthropological interest that British and American scholars had in Italy and namely its Southern regions at the time.<sup>66</sup>

62 See, for instance, Sorrentino, 'Usura sulla parola'; Salvalaggio, 'Roma. Opera del cielo'.

63 See, for instance, Cantini and Naldoni, 'Sila: l'avvenire è sull'altopiano'; Pittino and Naldoni, 'Il diavolo nell'orto'.

64 See, for instance, D'Autilia, *Storia della fotografia in Italia dal 1839 a oggi*, pp. 250-271; Russo, *Storia culturale della fotografia italiana*, pp. 75-91. See also Viganò (ed.), *NeoRealismo*.

65 Strand and Zavattini, *Un paese*. See also the correspondence between the Italian writer and the American photographer, as collected in Strand and Zavattini, *Lettere e immagini*. On the relationship between Strand and Zavattini, see Parigi, 'Film su carta. *Un paese* di Strand e Zavattini'.

66 Strand and Zavattini, '25 persone'; Robinson, 'Il Soratte'. On the question of Anglo-Saxon post-war anthropological interest in Southern Italy, see Filippucci, 'Anthropological Perspectives on Culture in Italy'.

*I fotodocumentari di* **CINEMA NUOVO**  
**25 PERSONE**  
 di Zavattini e Strand

Spero che il turista quando si metterà in viaggio per il nostro paese dia un'occhiata ai libri della collana "Italia mia". Troverà pochi monumenti ma parecchi uomini, donne, bambini e sarà un buon risultato se il turista di passaggio per un luogo abitato e di qualcuno ricordando una frase, cercherà perfino intracciare per scambiare due parole con lui. Spero insomma si cominci una biblioteca dove ogni villaggio, ogni città sia senta con la sua raccolta il più numerosa possibile di voci e scene.

Cesare Zavattini scrive nella prefazione a *Una paese*, il primo volume della collana "Italia mia" diretta dallo stesso Zavattini per la casa editrice Einaudi. Il primo volume, con testo di Zavattini e fotografie di Paul Strand, uscirà per Pasqua. Del volume, per gentile concessione dell'Editore Einaudi, pubblichiamo

una serie di voci e di facce: uomini, donne e bambini di Luzzara, il paese emiliano dove nacque Zavattini. Il secondo volume, di Vittorio De Sica, sarà su Napoli; il terzo, di Luchino Visconti, su Milano.

Paul Strand è uno dei più grandi fotografi americani e ha pubblicato molti libri di fotografie, sul New England il Messico, la Francia, l'Italia e la Scozia. Recentemente è stata allestita a New York un'esposizione delle sue opere; è stato presidente della Frontier Film, la più importante delle case di produzione indipendenti di Hollywood, l'attività della quale si svolse nel periodo rooseveltiano e produsse, fra l'altro, i celebri documentari di Pare Lorentz. Nel 1942 diresse per la Frontier, in collaborazione con Leo Hurwitz, *Nature Land*, premiato al Festival di Karlovy Vary del 1949. Venne una prima volta in Italia nel 1949, per il Convegno di Perugia. Vive attualmente a Parigi.

cio la portalettere. Mio marito si amava Compagnoni e lo hanno fucilato a Reggiolo perché era partigiano. Ci sono ancora i segni di tutte le lottate nel muro vicino al cimitero. Il giorno delle sette di mattina si sono prestati in cinque. Mio marito era già andato fuori. Sono tornati alle nove, mio marito c'era e ha abbracciato uno dei cinque che era un suo amico soldato e gli ha detto: controlliamo solo i documenti. Con queste parole siamo diventati calmi. Ma uno gli ha detto: hai la bicicletta? Mio marito ha risposto che era sgonfia. Il milite ha preso fuori la rivoltella e ha detto: ho detto di tirar fuori la bicicletta. Ci hanno portato in piazza dove c'erano sessanta o settanta giovani rastrellati con tutte le famiglie da una parte e rastrellati dall'altra. Li hanno portati a Reggiolo a piedi, gli hanno fatto fare dodici chilometri di corsa e gli hanno andate dietro le donne, ma poi si sono dovute fermare. Il mio due giorni dopo lo hanno fucilato con gli altri di Luzzaresi. Mia figlia compiva dieci anni. Quando dopo la liberazione il paese ha fatto i funerali a mio marito e agli altri fucilati a Reggiolo, era tutto un pianto. Il funerale stava arrivando dove si svolta per il cimitero e le macchine che venivano da Guastalla si erano fermate per lasciar passare il funerale. C'era anche uno in motocicletta che guardava e avevo gli occhiali da motociclista, ma uno lo ha conosciuto allo stesso e gli ha gridato: "È uno di quelli che hanno ammazzato i nostri". Lui si è accorto che lo guardavano e ha messo la moto in marcia, ma gli sono corsi dietro e lo hanno preso e portato nel bosco.

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Fig. 3.16 Neorealism, photography and international allegiances. Paul Strand and Cesare Zavattini cooperating on '25 persone' (1955)

Photo-documentaries belong to neorealist culture for a number of reasons.<sup>67</sup> First of all, they share with this cultural trend both a blind faith in a realist style and a focus on social themes: Southern Italy's underdevelopment,<sup>68</sup> misery and deprivation pervading the nation's new urban reality,<sup>69</sup> Northern Italy's social and political militancy,<sup>70</sup> and a penchant for representational self-reflexivity.<sup>71</sup> Along with such established themes, some other photo-documentaries also resorted to archival images and historical footage or depicted realities located outside of Italy. We shall return to this later on.

Second, photo-documentaries partake in a visual and political genealogy stemming from the cinematic masterpieces of the late 1940s. As neorealist film production declined and as leftist culture appropriated it, neorealist culture aimed in the early 1950s to become a full-fledged political and cultural project. As a matter of fact, before photo-documentaries, *Cinema Nuovo* (and Zavattini in particular) attempted to foster bottom-up initiatives, soliciting readers to send their narrative and photographic accounts about everyday life. The column was named 'Contributi al neorealismo' ('Contributions to Neorealism') and was meant to provide neorealist cinema with material to elaborate in feature films while also stimulating a wider iconic citizenship by documenting everyday reality. As stated in the column's first appearance: '*Cinema Nuovo* intends to solicit readers' human interest and perceptiveness by inviting them to "discover" life, i.e., the world surrounding them.'<sup>72</sup>

67 To name a coincidental but revealing fact that fully brings the photo-documentaries project into neorealist legacy, one should remember that Zavattini-Strand's *Un paese* was originally conceived as the first of a series of photo-books. After it, two others devoted to Naples and Milan were expected to be published by the same left-oriented publishing house, Einaudi. The announced authors were, respectively, Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti, together with Roberto Rossellini, the most renowned neorealist film directors. The series was to be titled 'Italia mia' (My Italy): a title recurring around photo-documentaries, as we will later see. Unfortunately, the book series never saw the light. The book series is announced together with Zavattini-Strand's excerpt, p. 137. *Un paese* was reviewed by Gobetti, 'I libri del giorno – Un paese italiano.'

68 Samugheo and Tadini, 'Le invasate'; Robinson, 'Il Soratte', cit.; De Martino and Benedetti, 'Narrare la Lucania'; Gandin and Sellerio, 'Borgo di Dio'; Samugheo and Rea, 'I bambini di Napoli'.

69 Bavagnoli, 'Via della Passerella'; Lalonde, 'Beatrice e Maorina'; Manetti and Mastellini, 'Roma proibita'.

70 See Tadini and Cisventi, 'Cronaca dalla bassa'; Renzi and Fusaroli, 'L'osteria dei tenori'; Zavattini and Strand, '25 persone'; Tadini and Cisventi, 'L'operaio del porto'.

71 Dondero and Mulas, 'La città e la mostra'; Benedetti and Fusco, 'Il Grand Hotel'; Zanetti and Pisoni, 'Eterno mio sogno'; Ernazza and Pinna, 'Le bellissime'; Samugheo, 'Quanto costa la mostra'; Samugheo, 'I padroni del cinema italiano'.

72 Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (15 March 1953). See also: Editorial, 'Guardatevi intorno e scoprite la realtà'; Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (1 June 1953); Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (15 June 1953); Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (1 July 1953) Editorial, 'Contributi

The column enabled *Cinema Nuovo* to confirm neorealism's chief visual ideology: neorealism as a non-mediated and revelatory approach to reality, a strategy available to filmmakers and ordinary citizens alike. But the column also turned into a photographic and literary contest, with the aim of selecting future photographers and critics to work for the journal.<sup>73</sup> Before photo-documentaries came to be identified as such, *Cinema Nuovo* published several similar contributions: surveys in Southern Italy,<sup>74</sup> reports from the main sites of the national working class or Resistance,<sup>75</sup> and reportages on the national film industry.<sup>76</sup> Photo-documentaries inherited this previous production by seeing cinema and photography as instruments of accurate inquiry and knowledge. Photo-documentaries were also meant to question current assumptions about national reality and broadcast a deeper knowledge about it. To quote Zavattini,

*Cinema must get closer to its very expressive mission, i.e., contemporaneity, immediacy. Cinema needs to tell stories about ourselves, and in this respect nothing else will ever replace it!* [italics in original]<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, by their very existence, photo-documentaries exposed the obstacles that the national film industry and the right-wing government posed to the neorealist project. Photo-documentaries strove to symbolically

al neorealismo' (15 July 1953); Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (1 August 1953); Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (15 September 1953); Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (15 October 1953); Editorial, 'Contributi al neorealismo' (1 November 1953). From 1955 on, the column is renamed 'Italia mia' and becomes part of 'Bollettino del neorealismo' (Neorealism's Bulletin). See 'Italia mia' (25 January 1955); 'Italia mia' (25 April 1955). As already mentioned, 'Italia mia' was also the title for the series that Zavattini planned for the publisher Einaudi. I am indebted to Russo, *Storia culturale della fotografia italiana*, for drawing my attention to the column.

73 Among the first ones was Benedetto Benedetti, who then became a photographer for the ethnographical surveys that Ernesto De Martino led in Southern Italy; among the second ones was Guido Fink, then outstanding American literature scholar and remarkable film critic from the 1960s on. On Ernesto De Martino's ethnographic surveys and the role photography had in them, see Gallini and Faeta (eds), *I viaggi nel Sud di Ernesto De Martino*.

74 See Grieco, 'Le pacchianelle in processione senza preti e senza musica'; Costa, 'Proposte per film—Il mito del Sulcis'; Benedetti, 'Antonio vive alla scusa di Cristo'; Celentano, 'Storie di parigino'.

75 See Zurlini, 'Sopraluogo a San Frediano'; L.Z. [Livio Zanetti], 'Un mappamondo sul trattore (fotoservizio)'.

76 See De Laurentiis, Forges Davanzati, and Ponti, 'Il problema degli attori in Italia. Rispondono i produttori'; Bosè, Ferrero, Cervi, and Cegani, 'Il problema degli attori in Italia. Vogliamo andare a scuola'; Magnani and Stoppa, 'Il problema degli attori in Italia. La signora è servita'.

77 Zavattini, 'Morirà il cinema?', p. 4.

equate the way in which contemporary neorealism countered conservative policies in film production and public broadcasting in the 1950s through an alternative media project with the wartime Resistance against Fascism. Somehow, they represented a cinema that inquired about Italy, one that was to be prohibited from turning into actual films because of financial or political censorship. From this standpoint, photo-documentaries had the same role as another section of the journal entitled 'I film che avrebbero voluto fare' ('Films they would have liked to make').<sup>78</sup> This section published the projects that leftist filmmakers attempted to produce but were prevented from doing so due to a lack of funding and political support. Photo-documentaries were themselves a political act, as they were in fact declaring that, in the Italian media of the 1950s, freedom of expression was largely impossible.

Finally, photo-documentaries share with most celebrated neorealist masterpieces a tendency to dismantle traditional narratives, to highlight single moments and images, and to turn witnessing into a political act.<sup>79</sup> In this respect, photo-documentaries intended to carry on the peaks of aesthetics reached under Rossellini and De Sica. By choosing photography as a medium, photo-documentaries did not exclusively claim greater freedom of expression but also addressed the need for a different cinematic style, one that was not based mostly on narration. It is no surprise, then, that one of the most notable contributors to *Cinema Nuovo* and a documentary film director himself, Michele Gandin, so extensively employed the use of photography and the static image in his own documentary films. For instance, in *Cristo non si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Did Not Stop at Eboli, 1955), set among the illiterate peasants of Lucania in Southern Italy, he almost freezes the faces and bodies of the characters as they move toward the camera. This stylistic device was to become even more blatant in his 1960s production *Processioni in Sicilia* (Processions in Sicily, 1965). Relying upon the photographic stills shot by Fernando Scianna, one of the most renowned and committed post-war-era photographers, the documentary builds up a composition based exclusively on frozen images. According to *Cinema Nuovo* and Gandin, documenting reality required a practice rooted in stillness and witnessing.

Photography seems to have played a minor role within neorealist culture in comparison to cinema or literature.<sup>80</sup> On the one hand, in accounts on

78 See, for instance, Pirro, 'Ti scrivo questa lettera'; Lizzani, 'Gli uomini del fiume'.

79 Forgacs, 'Photography and the Denarrativization of Cinematic Practice in Italy, 1935-1955'.

80 This assumption is partly questioned in Taramelli, *Viaggio nell'Italia del neorealismo*.

canonical film history, photography is barely acknowledged for its contribution to post-war Italian visual culture; on the other hand, its rising role in popular magazines between the 1930s and the 1950s is undeniable.<sup>81</sup> In truth, photography became a major tool for the description of reality and a popular medium. Hence it played a significant role in the layout of pre- and post-war news magazines that referred to American visual culture and inter-war magazines such as *Life*. It was particularly key in building a visual narrative relying on the classical Hollywood mode of representation, as Company suggests: a narrative revolving around the description of a character or a place rather than developing a series of actions.<sup>82</sup> In addition, the national leftist elite adopted the photographic medium in an unprecedented way to convey abstract concepts and communicate them to ordinary readers, as writer and cultural promoter Elio Vittorini acknowledged while reminiscing about his experience in the 1940s:

As a starting point for *Il Politecnico* [a famous journal run by Vittorini in the post-war era], I assumed *Americana* [an American literature anthology edited by Vittorini in 1941 and illustrated with photographs realised under the Farm Security Administration programme], and as a starting point for *Americana* I assumed cinema, beyond books and newspapers. I just didn't care about the aesthetic or illustrative role that every single still image might have per se. I was interested only in photography's material content (that is how it reproduced a certain 'object') [...]. By putting the most varied photographs one beside another I obtained or tried to obtain a more or less aesthetic value; and an illustrative or documentary one [...]. By reducing single photos' single values, or anyway dissolving them, I could obtain these new general values, all subsuming just one new meaning; due to it, reality depicted in photographs did not appear any more fragmented or passive, but unitary, dynamic and transformable. As if it contained, I would say, projects for renewal.<sup>83</sup>

81 For a very detailed description of Italian popular magazines in the inter-war period, see De Berti (ed.), *Forme e modelli del rotocalco italiano tra fascismo e guerra*.

82 Company states: 'In the immediate post-war years documentary photography refined the photo-story format that had borrowed heavily from narrative cinema in the 1930s. In particular, *Life* and *Look* magazines in the United States synthesized forms of shooting and editing into sequences that were formulaic, containable and saleable to other magazines internationally. They were rarely stories in the linear sense, but profiles of people or places, orchestrated across several spreads. They were made up of image types familiar from popular film: the establishing shot, narrative shots, close-ups, cut-aways, details and summary endings.' Company, *Photography and Cinema*, p. 83.

83 Vittorini, 'La foto strizza l'occhio alla pagina'.

Photography thus implied an iconic discourse parallel to a written one and a project for social intervention, what W.J.T. Mitchell might call '*the visual construction of the social field*'.<sup>84</sup> By coupling what was basically a new way to represent and treat reality (photography) with a more traditional one (literature), a new knowledge was achieved that mediated between well-rooted and elitist discourses and more popular and direct ones. This knowledge was functional to an overall cultural renewal, a new mode of address, and a political project. Exhibiting long concealed or neglected questions through photography was a way to denounce them. And with the use of editing, and by associating them with a literary text, unexpected and potential meanings might be produced and enhanced.

Photography also meant the rise of a new visual and contested culture. In 1947, a new kind of popular magazine and simplified narratives emerged in Italy and quickly spread throughout Europe and South America: photo-romances. Photo-documentaries attempted to incorporate this new visual culture in their effort to reach out to a broader readership.<sup>85</sup> But to do so, they chose alternative strategies: instead of the hegemonic role that photo-romances assigned to narratives in structuring visual features, photo-documentaries used an association of images based on their simple spatial juxtaposition. Moreover, many photo-documentaries adopted a critical stance toward dominant formats. For instance, some photo-documentaries deconstructed popular forms of expression like the photo-romance by reflecting upon the conditions in which they were produced. This was the case with '*Eterno mio sogno*', a photo-documentary depicting the production of photo-romance magazines and describing how their sentimental and misleading narratives capitalised on the very tangible and rather poor social and economic conditions of their readership.<sup>86</sup>

Other photo-documentaries took a critical stance against the national film industry's economic and social conditions, taking a behind-the-scenes look at Italian cinema and questioning its status quo by unveiling its stakeholders, its power relationships, and its economic interests. This was conveyed through specific surveys published as photo-documentaries, such as those devoted to film actor payrolls, British film critics, and the law on cinema approved in 1949.<sup>87</sup> A critique of the film industry was also expressed

84 Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing'.

85 Recent research shed light on the incorporation of photo-romances into political parties' attempts to win a popular audience. See Bonifazio, 'Political Photoromances: The Italian Communist Party, *Famiglia Cristiana*, and the Struggle for Women's Hearts'.

86 Zanetti and Pisoni, '*Eterno mio sogno*'.

87 See Lisi, '*Le paghe degli attori; I critici inglesi e i film italiani*'; Lisi (ed.), '*La legge sul cinema e i partiti italiani*'; Gandin and Martini (eds), '*Che cosa pensano della critica*', in *I fotodocumentari*

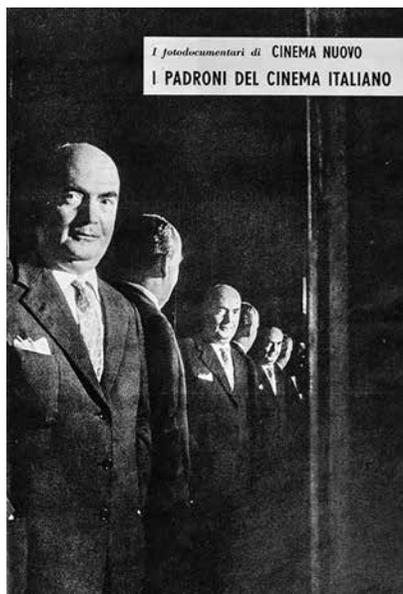


Fig. 3.17 Realism, reflexivity and grotesque in photo-documentaries. Chiara Samugheo's 'I padroni del cinema italiano' (1955)



Fig. 3.18 Patronizing Southern Italy through high-brow film style. Ernesto De Martino and Benedetto Benedetti, 'Narrare la Lucania' (1955)

through a grotesque visual style, as in Samugheo's photo-documentaries, which portrayed Italian cinema's main personalities in a distorted and mocking way. (Fig. 3.17)<sup>88</sup>

Overall, photo-documentaries responded to national Marxist culture by identifying the underprivileged urban *Lumpenproletariat* as a 'good' popular subject, promoting a transnational Socialist iconography,<sup>89</sup> and often adopting a patronising attitude toward Southern Italy's surviving cultural traditions. As the most influential post-war ethnologist De Martino commented, when explaining how to depict religious ceremonies photographically, one could look at these rituals through cinematic highbrow models, as did Carl Theodor Dreyer or Sergei Eisenstein. (Fig. 3.18)<sup>90</sup> From this standpoint, De Martino's work reveals much more of a cinematic and

*di Cinema Nuovo*, cit.

88 Samugheo, 'Quanto costa la mostra'; Samugheo, 'I padroni del cinema italiano'.

89 Casiragli, 'Fronte della libertà'. The photo-documentary is drawn exclusively from fiction films describing the European Resistance to Nazism! See also a photo-documentary on a European Marxist and literary icon: Tadini and Cisventi, 'La terra di Lorca'.

90 De Martino and Benedetti, 'Narrare la Lucania'.

sophisticated model than an alleged ethnographic stance. As anthropologist Francesco Faeta has underlined, the photography attached to De Martino's ethnographic surveys has much in common with neorealist aesthetics because of the priority accorded to an exotic socio-anthropological subject, the realistic style used, and the exclusion of the observer from the framing.<sup>91</sup>

To summarise, photo-documentaries had a political task: to focus on the conditions of the film industry, to promote neorealist culture, and to build and spread knowledge of Southern Italy's underdevelopment. A pedagogical and patronising attitude was a significant part of photo-documentaries, as De Martino's remarks prove. A number of institutions determined photo-documentaries' main political, aesthetic, and cultural goals as well as the expressive means to reach such goals, thus defining what was to be considered convenient and true.<sup>92</sup> People's magazines, news magazines, the Italian version of Marxism and its related culture, and European art films all contributed to defining the photographic 'truth' promoted in photo-documentaries. Underneath photo-documentaries lay a political programme. In my view, a neglected piece of evidence confirms this. When collecting contributions to publish as a single volume, *Cinema Nuovo* excluded some from the collection, and among the excluded contributions were those devoted to Northern Italy's urban political militancy, the most ironic being those that focused on the film and media industry. At the same time, surveys on the fortunes of neorealism abroad and on the national film industry overall were included. The volume thus clearly prioritised a critical stance toward the Italian film industry in the battle for representation. To achieve this goal, the journal did not hesitate to recycle images from the past that had long since lost their contemporary value, including photos taken of the huge demonstration against the approval of the new law on cinema in 1949 in Rome. These stills, widely known, were republished in 1955 as a photo-documentary.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, photo-documentaries tended to question the ruling social and cultural models, i.e. the American way of life, through a critical attitude toward representation. This strategy demanded

91 See Faeta, *Le ragioni dello sguardo*.

92 'The various "truths" which photography may be made to "reveal", derive precisely from the authority of certain privileged institutions to define "the truth" in the likeness of their own beliefs, values and methodologies, inscribed as *it* were into the very appearances of the world by the technology of the medium. [...] It is this range of institutions, both financial and conceptual, which defines our sense of coherent, identifiable styles, as well as our internal sense of what is appropriate to certain types of photography as opposed to others.' Watney, 'On the Institutions of Photography', p. 151.

93 Mangini, 'Ieri hanno vinto così'.



Fig. 3.19 Southern Italy's underdevelopment and magic. Chiara Samugheo's 'Le invasate' (1955)

that underrepresented American social issues be given attention such as racism or de-constructing recently established social models such as female employment. Yet, in criticising these representations, *Cinema Nuovo* resorted to using the main US photo syndicates, thus implicitly contributing to their

full acknowledgement as an institution. Finally, in its representation of the nation, the volume collecting the photo-documentaries dismissed photos of the more advanced Northern regions and society, instead favouring the portraits of the underprivileged urban population and the underdeveloped South. (Fig. 3.19) One should not underestimate the fact that, at that time, there was widespread social, anthropological, and ethnographic interest in these areas. Southern regions were brought to national attention in the post-war years and submitted to an articulate scheme of educational, agrarian, and social reforms. From this standpoint, photo-documentaries contributed to the spreading of new knowledge about this neglected subject.<sup>94</sup>

This new media knowledge constituted part of a wider political project for the inclusion of the underdeveloped fringes of the nation. Photo-documentaries pursued a twofold strategy of building up a transnational Marxist folklore and including the Southern population into a broader advanced society by producing knowledge about them that enabled further measures to facilitate their inclusion. These two aims lie at the core of De Martino's theoretical reflection, as he speaks of compiling a progressive folklore for a popular, revolutionary imagery and considers the cultural formations typical for the illiterate rural population to be historical products. By progressive folklore, De Martino meant myths and symbols related to the working class and revolutions, mostly rooted in the European Marxist experience. And with regard to the illiterate Southern population's cultural formations, he was referring to the superstitions and systems of belief held in those underdeveloped rural areas. This historical standpoint and attitude was based on Antonio Gramsci's speculation on folklore<sup>95</sup> and constituted a basis for further initiatives.<sup>96</sup>

94 As John Tagg put it, it is 'a knowledge which, in turn, engendered new effects of power and which preserved in a proliferating system of documentation—of which photographic records were only a part. [...]. It is in the emergence, too, of new institutions of knowledge that we must seek the mechanism which could enable photography to function, in certain contexts, as a kind of proof [...]. What we begin to see is the emergence of a modern photographic economy [...]. What alone unites the diversity of sites in which photography operates is the social formation itself: the specific historical spaces for representation and practice which it constitutes.' Tagg, 'Evidence, Truth and Order: A Means of Surveillance', pp. 245-246

95 See De Martino, 'Due inediti su Gramsci. "Postille a Gramsci" e "Gramsci e il folklore".'

96 As anthropologist George Saunders explains, connecting De Martino's elaboration with influential philosopher Benedetto Croce: 'The goal of ethnology, according to De Martino, ought rather to be the historicization of popular culture, meaning (again with Croce) the study of the meanings that are themselves entirely historical products. That historicization allows the possibility of social action and of progressive culture change.' Saunders, "'Critical Ethnocentrism" and the Ethnology of Ernesto De Martino', p. 88o.

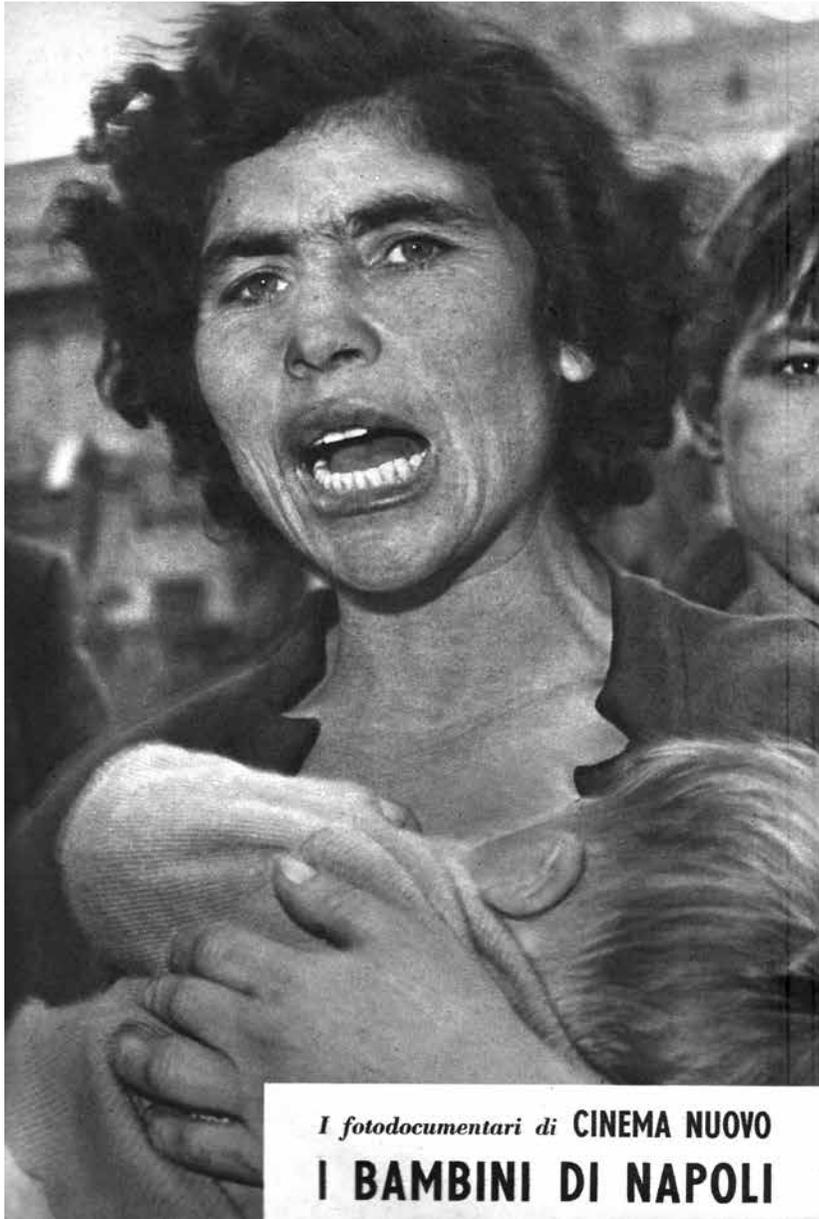


Fig. 3.20. Southern Italy's anthropological alterity. Domenico Rea and Chiara Samugheo, 'I bambini di Napoli' (1955)

An ethnographic perspective was suitable for both rural and urban underprivileged areas, as both could produce further knowledge on the subject and be the basis for subsequent political action. This was the case

with the depiction of Rome's destitute suburbs in photographic surveys on their miserable conditions.<sup>97</sup> Photo-documentaries as ethnographic studies were thus aimed at producing a knowledge immediately profitable in political terms. As De Martino stated when introducing his authoritative ethnographic study *Sud e magia* (*Magic: A Theory from the South*): 'This essay intends [...] to use the materials concerning magic rituals in Lucania as documentary instances helping us to discover in Southern Italy's highbrow culture retardations when compared to corresponding European standards.'<sup>98</sup>

Southern Italy and its folklore were also at the core of the so-called Southern question, as elaborated in Gramsci's Marxist reflections. As previously explained,<sup>99</sup> from the end of the 1940s, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were published under the strict control of the Communist Party and anthologised under keywords such as 'questions of folklore'.<sup>100</sup> Gramsci's 'humanistic historicism' permeated leftist culture and also photo-documentaries, and always centred on the human subject itself. Such a perspective needed a 'radical Other' in order to build its own entitled subject, and the Southern Italian population as an object and photography as a means proved to be very suitable tools to achieve this goal. When describing the Neapolitan underprivileged in a photo-documentary that Samugheo shot, Domenico Rea stated (Fig. 3.20): 'The truth is that secular Neapolitan misery even transformed people's physical appearances, turning it into a race of its own. [...] Are they Neapolitans? Are they Italians? Are they women? Are they men?'<sup>101</sup>

By choosing an apparently minor medium, photo-documentaries accomplished the multiple tasks of promoting an ideology of neorealism, favouring a political action, and building a space and position for a rising intellectual middle class. Pierre Bourdieu, as is well known, explained the role that photography played for the middle classes in post-war Europe.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, photography spawned a long-lasting productive history for Italy's leftist culture, one that was based on a patronising and cathartic depiction of underdevelopment in Southern Italy and suburban areas. This was a catharsis that was produced by way of denouncing the social inequality but that seldom required any further steps.<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, this sort of

97 Lalonde, 'Beatrice e Maorina'; Manetti and Mastellini, 'Roma proibita'.

98 De Martino, *Sud e Magia*, p. 12.

99 See chapter 1.

100 Gramsci, 'Observations on folklore'.

101 Samugheo and Rea, 'I bambini di Napoli'.

102 Bourdieu, with Castel, Boltanski, and Chamboredon, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*.

103 On Italian marginality, related discourses, and implicit risks, and for an enquiry on De Martino's surveys, see Forgacs, *Italy's Margins*.

representation intensified rather than bridged the gap between the middle class and the culture of the lower classes.

### On the Films' Margins

Long, elaborate panning shots depict a rural landscape, alternated with shots of the outskirts of Rome. The outskirts of the capital offer a chance to use refined framing, which emphasises points of view. The distant, anonymous figures crossing this wasteland come from the countryside where they produce umbrellas to be sold to impoverished urban residents. They are the subject of *Umbrella makers*, a documentary short produced in the early 1950s by Antonioni's former assistant director, Maselli. As with many other similar documentaries in the aftermath of neorealism, it portrays a reality that was quickly fading away and that was looked down upon in an elegiac tone, a situation that was depicted as both a scandal of the nation's backwardness and a nostalgia for a past when everyone knew their places. Destitute rural areas, deprived urban peripheries, and impoverished characters came to visually incarnate the character of post-war neorealism and its political denunciation. However, the reification of neorealist imagery and rising ideological conflict during the Cold War prevented many leftist artist and intellectuals to fully grasp major changes happening in Italy during the 1950s.

These kinds of late neorealist films conveyed to posterity a crystallised image of neorealist visual culture, one that merged social and political awareness, documentary filmmaking, and pre-modern subjects. Celebrated films and their epigones accentuated description over narration and approached filmmaking as a way of producing actual knowledge and social criticism and reflexivity as a means of questioning representation. However, neorealist visual culture was much more varied and heterogeneous than what leftist culture distilled from it. In fact, by looking beyond film masterpieces and their critical legacies, we can experience the variety of this visual culture by exploring the margins of the films. In this chapter, I have tried to explain this richness. First, I described the visual motifs regularly associated with post-war Italian neorealism such as ruins, deprived childhood, urban peripheries, and Southern Italy's dry and contrasted landscape. I then pointed out the existence of supranational agencies that supported and promoted actual knowledge of the subjects mentioned above and that contributed to post-war visual culture. I also referred to the notion of a 'scopic regime' as a mode of conceiving the act of seeing and accordingly assigning a function to the images, shaping them and designing a role for

the viewer. I am persuaded that during the post-war era, and notably within neorealist culture, different scopic regimes coexisted, each of which had a different conception of the role that images held. Beyond the pivotal function of photographic realism and its often overt political function, as was the case with the photo-documentaries that *Cinema Nuovo* launched, other products originating from and associated with neorealism can be seen as the paratexts promoting and prolonging the existence of both major works and less celebrated films. This wide array of material, which have been either rarely surveyed or totally neglected, epitomise the heterogeneity of post-war visual culture. At first glance, these images seem to have little in common with neorealism as the inherited knowledge describes it: they are colourful images, they hinge on narration rather than on description, they benefit from the emergence of popular mediums such as the photo-romance, and generally speaking they rely on a naive “popular realism” instead of a high-brow, intellectually challenging style, depicting reality while innovating the cinematic (or photographic) style used. These less explored products were the outcome of the explosion of mass culture in the post-war era, and they incorporated aspects of academic painting into its graphics, vernacularised American weekly magazine templates, and recurrently relied on narration and star discourse. Whereas these features are not usually associated with a narrow definition of neorealism, they happened at the same time as the latter and contributed to shaping it. In fact, as a direct result of the explosion of mass culture in the post-war era, stardom took centre stage in post-war visual culture at the same time that neorealism came to the fore. Stars did in fact cross paths with the most celebrated Italian cinematic style, as I shall explain in the following chapter. Neorealist cinema is usually praised for role improvisations and for the utilisation of non-professional actors in its films, but a closer inspection provides the observer and the film historian with a multi-layered phenomenon reflecting a wide array of entertainment practices while bringing together very different kinds of performers.

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## 4. Actors, Non-professional Actors, Starlets, and Stars

Film Performance in the Neorealist era

### Abstract

Film critics and film history celebrate neorealism for its use of non-professional performers in a number of masterpieces. However, as lucid observers such as André Bazin pointed out in the late 1940s, neorealist films relied on a mixture of professional and non-professional actors. This chapter describes the debate on film performance and its origins from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s and looks at how the use of non-professional performers was associated with neorealism's aim to present a non-narrative cinematic representation. Moreover, the chapter examines the relationship between neorealism, non-professional performers, and phenomena such as popular theatre and new female stardom. The chapter ends with a case study of the most renowned neorealist actress, Anna Magnani.

**Keywords:** Stardom; film performance; film criticism; Anna Magnani

### A Stroll by the Sea

A fish lies on the plate of a huge metal scale. The camera pans upwards and frames a boy holding the scale while a fish wholesaler is rhythmically uttering the price he is willing to pay. They are standing on a dock, other fishermen surrounding them. Behind this human circle, a kid pops up. He is looking for someone. The camera follows the boy to the right and then to the left, trying to track him down among a crowd made up of buyers, sellers, and bystanders as he carries on his pursuit. A cross-eyed wholesaler argues with a fisherman, raises his arm, holding a huge octopus, and tosses it to the ground. The camera pulls away toward the open sea and frames the whole community, gathered on the dock for the fish market, and eventually

includes the boats beyond the farther side of the dock and even the poor houses in the background.

This long tracking shot is one of the early sequences of *The Earth Trembles*, an undisputed masterpiece of Italian neorealism and one of its most radical achievements. The shooting, which took place entirely on location in a poor village on the eastern shores of Sicily, lasted almost eight months, as if the film's production was the equivalent of an ethnographic expedition. The film's shooting occurred in difficult conditions due to the lack of adequate facilities and finances and a partly inexperienced crew. Visconti chose all the people embodying the characters of *The Earth Trembles* from among the village's indigent populace, and the language spoken in the film is the Sicilian dialect. 'In Sicily, Italian is not the language of poor people,' the voice-over opening the film explains.<sup>1</sup> The film thus aims to position itself as close as possible to the world it is building before the viewer: it presents us exclusively with non-professional performers. Moreover, the latter's social, linguistic, and geographical identity is closely related to the one the narratives assign them, as if we are looking at a re-enactment of their lives. However, a closer look at the film unveils the complex strategy underneath. Notwithstanding the literary source, the renowned late-nineteenth-century novel *I Malavoglia* by Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga, which provides the film with an elaborate narrative structure, the film cannot be exclusively associated with an allegedly objective look at a remote community. A closer reading reveals that a multifarious aesthetic moulds the film's choices and the use of non-professional performers. In the first place, an everyday gathering on a jetty for basic commercial exchange between villagers is the impetus for one of the most refined camera movements within the whole film, showcasing the director's intention to shape the reality being displayed. Accordingly, wholesalers, anglers, youngsters, while trading and arguing, turn into plastic material, part of a dynamic visual composition revolving around physiognomies, bodies, and a location conceived as a theatre prop, as the dock stands above the beach and against the backdrop of the poor dwellings where human figures are seen trudging. In addition, this composition, rather than exposing a self-evident community, constantly oscillates between the individual—the boy walking through and around the gathered people—and a group. This fluctuation visually articulates one of the film's crucial motif,

1 A thorough description of the making of the film can be found in Moneti, 'La messa in scena del pensiero'. Detailed scrutinies of the movie include Casetti, 'Per un'analisi testuale'; Bernardi, 'La terra trema. Il Mito, il Teatro, la Storia', and especially Micciché, *Visconti e il neorealismo*, notably pp. 69-186.

which is the conflict between society and the individual. Therefore, instead of gazing at reality from an open window, the visuals and performances of the film are thoroughly designed to mould its meaning. Finally, the voices emanating from the group combine indistinct ground noise (the sound of the crowd) with rhythmic tones punctuating it (the cries of the wholesalers). As reports from the set tell us, Visconti asked the villagers to contribute to the dialogue; nonetheless, rather than retaining the lines they proposed, he filtered them through a more archaic dialect, which few elderly still spoke.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the spoken language or sound-design of the film did not simply record a given social environment or what non-trained performers might offer to a listener; they were instead the outcome of a thoroughly conceived soundscape. Thus, one of the most renowned neorealist masterpieces, whose radical aesthetics epitomise the willingness to give a voice to the underprivileged, endeavoured to expose physical and social reality and disclose its crudeness by relying on a very rich and complex setting, directing, and writing. *The quest for a non-mediated humankind goes hand in hand with a forceful attempt to forge it through rhythmic, plastic, and visual moulds.* The obvious materiality of non-professional performers—their faces, bodies, gestures, and the use Visconti makes of them—entangle these human figures, determining their meaning. However, what kind of performers did neorealism look for? In addition, what kind of use did neorealist cinema envision for them? In the following pages, I question received assumptions about performers and non-performers in neorealist cinema. Consequently, I outline what kind of performers were available to post-war Italian cinema and its related genealogies. Finally, I shall focus on what I consider the most telling example within neorealist culture of the overlapping of acting traditions, performing styles, modes of representation, and cultural frameworks: namely, the case of Anna Magnani, which has been underresearched to date, despite its relevance for both Italian and world cinema.<sup>3</sup>

I include in the scope of my reflection the study of stardom, which has only relatively recently been studied in relation to post-war Italian cinema.<sup>4</sup>

2 See the reports of Francesco Rosi and Antonio Arcidiacono collected in Mancini and Sciacca (eds), *La città-set. La terra trema di Luchino Visconti*.

3 To date, Italian volumes focused on the most renowned post-war Italian performer are either biographies or merge film criticism with biographical data. See: Mantegazza, *Anna Magnani: la vita, il mito, i film*; Carrano, *La Magnani. Il romanzo di una vita*; Hockhoffer, *Anna Magnani: lo spettacolo della vita*; Governi, *Nannarella: il romanzo di Anna Magnani*; Hockhoffer, with Magnani, *Anna Magnani: la biografia*; Moscati, *Anna Magnani. Un urlo senza fine*; Persica, *Anna Magnani. Biografia di una donna*.

4 See, for instance, Gelley, *Stardom and the Aesthetics of Neorealism*.

Nevertheless, I believe any consideration of neorealism should not limit itself to such an approach. For decades, stardom took centre stage within film studies for obvious reasons: stars were a medium-specific phenomenon and the most prominent among film performers. They were also a driving force for Hollywood film production, which held a hegemonic role over other film industries, and they also contributed to determining post-war film criticism and theory. The blossoming of star studies in the wake of Richard Dyer's groundbreaking work<sup>5</sup> is closely related to widespread reflection on the function that representations play in culture and in determining models and stereotypes of humankind,<sup>6</sup> gender,<sup>7</sup> and race,<sup>8</sup> as Dyer's subsequent works aptly demonstrate. In the introduction to a no less authoritative volume, *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer clarifies: 'It has become increasingly clear that at all levels how we think and feel we are, how we are treated, is bound up with how we are represented as being. [...] Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the "individual".'<sup>9</sup> However, film scholars' almost exclusive focus on images neglected certain important assumptions that were first included in their thinking by Dyer and other scholars—namely, the work implied in the production of star images. As Dyer puts it, 'Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces. They do not produce themselves alone. [...] The star image is then a given, like machinery, an example of what Karl Marx calls "congealed labour," something that is used with further labour (scripting, acting, directing, managing, filming, editing) to produce another commodity, a film.'<sup>10</sup> Barry King echoes this assumption: 'stardom is a strategy of performance that is an adaptive response to the limits and pressures exerted upon acting in the mainstream cinema'.<sup>11</sup> To summarise, stardom is the outcome of specific historical and economic circumstances, i.e. the classical Hollywood mode of production, and one among many modes of incorporating human presence into film representation. Accordingly, it requires adequate translation when turning to different modes of production or historical phases, as in post-war Italy.<sup>12</sup>

5 Dyer, *Stars*.

6 Dyer, 'The Role of Stereotypes'.

7 Dyer, *Now You See It*; Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*.

8 Dyer, *White*.

9 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. x and 8.

10 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 5-6.

11 King, 'Articulating Stardom', p. 167.

12 For instance, Small cautions against a too simplistic discussion of Italian film stars in the 1950s by calling attention to the fact that 'European stars never held contracts with studios as

Stardom implies but does not entirely coincide with performance. As Dyer and James Naremore have pointed out, scholars face many obstacles when discussing film performance, as it is not made of discrete, individual components.<sup>13</sup> When analysing star images, scholars can benefit from previous discussions on images as signs, which ensured the success of star studies first and celebrity studies more recently. Nonetheless, as Paul McDonald underlines, ‘the separation of actor and role makes the voice and body of an actor particularly significant, for these are the means for bringing together agent, character, actor, and image in a believable configuration. The actor’s voice and body provide hypersemiotized fragments burdened with meaning.’<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, as Cynthia Baron and Sharon Maria Carnicke indicate, the experience of viewers influences the perception of film performance or, broadly speaking, cinematic human presence, by comparing it with social gestures and ‘gestural conventions of pertinent aesthetic traditions’.<sup>15</sup> My intention is to pay attention to different modes of producing human presence within post-war Italian cinema, related ideas of film acting and stardom, and eventually subjectivity. Accordingly, beyond examining films and performances, I shall also linger on the post-war debate on film acting.

In my view, an open, multifarious perspective is key to approaching the human presence in neorealist cinema. To begin with, neorealist cinema often brought together actors with different levels and types of experience and training. In his most complete account of post-war Italian cinema written in 1948, French film critic and theoretician Bazin called this mode of representation the ‘law of amalgam’: ‘It is not the absence of professional actors that is, historically, the hallmark of social realism nor of the Italian film. Rather, it is specifically the rejection of the star concept and the casual mixing of professionals and of those who just act occasionally. It is important to avoid casting the professional in the role for which he is known.

did the US stars of the 1930s and 1940s nor, once the studio era concluded, were their careers managed by a single agent, or agency grouping.’ Small, ‘Industry, Co-production and Agency: Gina Lollobrigida in documents’, p. 197. See also her *Sophia Loren: Moulding the Star* (Bristol-New York: Intellect, 2009).

13 Dyer, *Stars*; Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*. See also Stern and Kouvaros, ‘Descriptive Acts. Introduction’.

14 McDonald, ‘Film Acting’, p. 32. McDonald refers to notions Heath previously introduced, as related to human presence in cinema. ‘Agent’ is the narrative function, ‘character’ is a set of individuating traits, ‘actor’ is what an audience assumes is the human being delivering a performance, which might rely on previous renderings, and ‘image’ is the locus bringing together all these separate factors but itself autonomous. See Heath, ‘Body, Voice’.

15 Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, p. 4.

The public should not be burdened with any preconceptions.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, some outstanding examples of neorealism rely solely on non-professional performers, as is the case with the above-mentioned *The Earth Trembles* and the no less pivotal *Paisan*, *Bicycle Thieves*, or *Umberto D.*, but this was not a general rule. For instance, top-grossing film *Bitter Rice* gathered together soon-to-be major film stars such as Mangano and Vallone, actors with a theatrical background like Gassman, Hollywood film players such as Doris Dowling, and numerous non-professional performers whose relevance should not be underestimated.

Moreover, human figures within neorealist cinema came from varied training and professional backgrounds, carrying into films different social gestures, acting styles, and aesthetic traditions and conveying various cultural values attached to them. Unless we want to emphasise just one component out of the many peopling neorealist representations, we should account for this multiplicity.

In addition, discussions proceeding from neorealist films offer a vivid description of what critics prized and what they dismissed in these productions according to inherited but reframed sets of cultural values. As many observers have pointed out, post-war Italian culture and cinema experienced a sweeping rearrangement. For instance, in a seminal article, Casetti, Farassino, Grasso, and Sanguineti talk about '*the disorder* of neorealist cinema consisting [...] in a significant ideological [...], semiotic [...], production [...], political [...], aesthetic [...], and critic [...] heterogeneity.'<sup>17</sup> This position echoes Marcia Landy's more recent work on Italian film stardom in which she contends that 'neorealism is a hybrid form that, while expressing discontent with preexisting cinematic forms, cannot, for better or worse, ignore them, though using them for different ends.'<sup>18</sup>

The notion of human presence offers the perfect opportunity to grasp the intermingling of old and new as well as inherited and original forms in neorealist cinema. Observing the debate these films prompted provides the contemporary scholar with a vantage point accounting for the multifarious human presence in neorealist cinema, the manifold cultural values attached to it, and therefore the viewers' experience of film performance, as Baron and Carnicke point out. To conclude, my approach attempts to relate human

16 Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation', pp. 23-24.

17 Casetti, Farassino, Grasso, and Sanguineti, 'Neorealismo e cinema italiano degli anni '30', p. 379.

18 Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*, p. 86.

presence within individual films, the various backgrounds of performers, and social discourses such as film criticism, theoretical discussions, and the popular press.

### **Life Begins Anew. Non-Professional Performers and Neorealist Culture**

At the beginning of *La vita ricomincia* (*Life Begins Anew*, Mario Mattoli, 1945), a long-neglected film, a man in a military outfit walks through the shattered landscape of post-war Naples. The camera frames him in documentary fashion as he passes through the Neapolitan alleys, and as it does so it seems to be catching unawares pedestrians and bystanders, who suddenly look back at the camera, surprised. The man walking is Fosco Giachetti, a film star from the 1930s. He was well known to Italian audiences for embodying characters epitomising martial authority, such as Captain Santelia in *Lo squadrone bianco* (*White Squadron*, Augusto Genina, 1936), Massinissa in *Scipione l'africano* (*Scipio the African*, Carmine Gallone, 1937), Captain Vela in *L'assedio dell'Alcazar* (*The siege of the Alcazar*, Augusto Genina, 1940), and Captain Enrico Berti in *Bengasi* (*Benghazi*, Augusto Genina, 1942).<sup>19</sup> After entering what seems to be a pawnshop, the veteran changes into plain clothes and moves out of the city in ruins. We find him hitchhiking in nearby Cassino, a small centre sadly known for a long, bloody battle pitting the German Wehrmacht against the Allied troops. He is picked up by a truck driven by the actor Ughetto Bertucci (who until 1945 worked as a fruit seller in Rome) and accompanied by Nando Bruno, a performer with whom popular Roman audiences were familiar, for he was an experienced character actor on the popular stage and notably Aldo Fabrizi's sidekick. After passing through Cassino's real ruins, the truck carries the veteran to Rome, to a household where his spouse (Alida Valli, one of the major pre-war female stars soon to leave for Hollywood) awaits him.<sup>20</sup> Just beside their flat lives a professor of philosophy who offers a serene look at the past and present turmoil: this character is played by Eduardo De Filippo, one of the most famous playwrights and theatrical performers of modern Italy, stemming from the Neapolitan tradition.

19 On Fosco Giachetti's persona under Fascism see Gundle, 'The Uniformed Role Model. Fosco Giachetti'.

20 On the actress' transition from national to transnational stardom, see Gundle, 'Alida Valli in Hollywood'.

Within a matter of a few sequences, very different types of performers line up, providing the film with a unique blend and freshness. While not included in the strictest categorisation of the neorealist canon, *Life Begins Anew* offers a typical case of the blurred boundaries characteristic of neorealist performances. Furthermore, movies belonging to that canon share with *Life Begins Anew* not only main themes, such as the veterans' return and post-war hardships, but also some of the faces and bodies turning those motifs into affects.<sup>21</sup> The disorder of the war's aftermath required entirely new faces or a narrative frame motivating the presence of formerly established actors. As an observer commenting on post-war acting put it:

In the enormous fracture the war engendered, professional actors seemed inadequate to render the new life [...]. It is as if they could not have modern faces: their own appearance is excessively associated with very typical roles in previous performances; it is as if they never got rid of them. [...] Thus, new actors, as a promise of new characters.<sup>22</sup>

Non-professional performers best fulfilled precisely this need for novelty. For the sake of exposition, we might summarise the debate on their presence in film production under three main headings: ideology, representation, and tradition.

From an ideological perspective, non-professional actors bridged an alleged major hiatus between totalitarian and democratic Italy. Non-professional performers' lack of training supposedly drew attention to naked humanity rather than relying on impersonation, i.e. on building a fictional character.<sup>23</sup> French film theoretician Jacques Aumont argues that this was the outcome of a widespread European poetic stance relying on the incorporation of the real into representation: 'The idea of cinema born in the post-war era is entirely revolving around the human being, around the human represented as such. [...] The human face, it is the face of the man in general, before being somebody's face.'<sup>24</sup> Cinema under Fascism—and

21 For instance, Ughetto Bertucci soon appeared as the cynical shop keeper of *Angelina*, while Nando Bruno is the sexton Purgatorio, reprising his role as Fabrizi's sidekick in *Rome, Open City*. He is a recurrent presence in neorealist cinema in films such as *Roma città libera* (Rome: Free city, Marcello Pagliero, 1946), *To Live in Peace, Lost Youth*, and *Angelina*.

22 Volpicelli, 'Tipi e attori', p. 24.

23 King names 'impersonation', a performance aimed at transforming the actor's basic features to embody a fictional character, and 'personification', a performance iterating those same basic features across a number of roles. See King, 'Articulating Stardom'.

24 Aumont, *Du visage au cinéma*, pp. 117-118.

somehow also in Hollywood's representation—defined and circulated opposing models of 'good' and 'bad' humankind, offering antithetical examples as part of Manichean narratives. Conversely, post-war European culture, and notably neorealism, privileged humanity above and beyond any ideological or moral determination. With regard to humanity and the rejection of clear-cut demarcation, children played an obviously significant function in neorealist cinema. In masterpieces such as *Shoeshine*, *Germany Year Zero*, or *Bellissima*, children came to represent an innocent humankind, framed amidst the devastated post-war landscape.<sup>25</sup> As I argue throughout this volume, humanitarianism was a crucial issue in fostering post-war Italian cinema: the human body and the sufferings it underwent were a cornerstone of this ideology, as Schoonover convincingly demonstrated.<sup>26</sup> Children's bodies were the most devoid of any ideological belonging, and they also made a political statement about the primacy of humanity. In *The White Line*, Enzo Stajola, whom many remember as the kid in *Bicycle Thieves*, moves from his innocent childhood to a tragic ending as adults fight for political reasons. Accordingly, Stajola maintains an overt ideological function, confirming the childish body as a privileged site for testing and exhibiting the atrocities produced by warfare and its aftermath, while the first half of the film shows him among other children, focused mostly on playing and telling jokes, which ape and ridicule the ideological games that the adults are playing.

Children or non-professional performers could deliver performances as effective as those they delivered in neorealist films in formulaic films that were devoid of any humanitarian framework. For instance, non-professional children were widely used in a number of comic or tragi-comic productions belonging to the 'neorealist galaxy', even though they are not acknowledged as legitimate masterpieces. The diptych *Abbasso la miseria!* (*Down with Misery*, Gennaro Righelli, 1946) and *Abbasso la ricchezza!* (*Peddlin' in Society*, Gennaro Righelli, 1946) make use of Vito Annichiarico, who plays shoulder to shoulder with Anna Magnani, as he did just a year before in *Rome, Open City*. (Fig. 4.1) In the former, Annichiarico embodies a *scugnizzo*, a young, ruthless Neapolitan boy, and in the latter he plays a rebellious Roman kid. In both films, his characters entail no dramatic clues but nonetheless contribute to tinting the films with vivid, realistic tones. The same goes with one of the

25 For a discussion of the relationship between childhood and European post-war ruined landscape, see Sorlin, 'Children as War Victims in Post-war European Cinema'; Fisher, 'On the Ruins of Masculinity: The Figure of the Child in Italian Neorealism and the German Rubble-Film'.

26 Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*.



Fig. 4.1 Non-professional performers and childhood beyond neorealist masterpieces. Vito Annichiarico in *Abbasso la miseria!* (*Down with Misery!*, Gennaro Righelli, 1946)



Fig. 4.2 Promoting non-professional performance. The trailer for *Sotto il sole di Roma* (*Under the Sun of Rome*, Renato Castellani, 1948)

most striking examples of the massive use of childhood in neorealist cinema: *Guaglio*. Beside experienced actor Adolfo Celi, the film utilises a group of non-professional children who incarnate Neapolitan childhood abandoned in the war's aftermath. However, whereas the characters of Pasquale in *Paisan*'s Neapolitan episode and Pasquale and Giuseppe in *Shoeshine* face a tragic fate, *Guaglio* tells the story of a collective redemption. Consequently, its impressive treatment of non-professional actors went unnoticed, and the film did not enter the neorealist canon.

Three films Castellani directed between the 1940s and the 1950s met with similar negligence: *Under the Sun of Rome*, *È primavera* (*It's Forever Springtime*, 1950), and *Two Cents Worth of Hope*. The latter was awarded the Grand Prix du Festival de Cannes, together with *Othello* (Orson Welles, 1952). The three films are all set among the lower classes, and they all make wide use of local dialect and outdoor shooting and revolve around stories of misery and hardships. Characters range from morally dazed youngsters in post-war Rome to the unemployed in the rural areas surrounding Naples.

What is most striking, all the films cast non-professional actors in the major roles, whose lack of training goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the novelty of their presence due to their young age and the dominance of light narrative overtones. Lack of professional training and youth were enhanced as production values in the films' advertisements, such as the trailer of *Under the Sun of Rome* portraying main actors Oscar Blando and Liliana Mancini in their everyday professional environment, or flyers for *It's Forever Springtime*, which displayed the pictures of non-professional performers Mario Angelotti and Elena Varzi embedded in a composition evoking freshness and springtime. (Fig. 4.2) In fact, at the core of all films lie comic, sentimental conflicts originating in the contrast between social problems and the drive to mate. Film critics disagreed sharply about the three films, with a fraction of them disavowing Castellani's work as neorealist, despite the fact that the films' main features were decidedly neorealist.<sup>27</sup> To summarise, while film critics and film history praised non-professional performers in neorealist masterpieces as a sign of political engagement and humanitarian ideology, their presence was not limited to the neorealist canon, and their work contributed to transforming the notion of film performance in post-war Italian cinema.

Non-professional performers were proof of the direct connection between reality and its cinematic rendering and consequently acted as a token of the intention to adequately represent such reality.<sup>28</sup> The post-war hegemonic ideology promoted realism as the path to truthfulness and socially aware aesthetics. As such, it opposed inter-war cinematic culture, which it considered escapist and delusive. Thus, non-professional performers on many occasions embodied what previous film production neglected, i.e. everyday people. There were different levels pertaining to this 'everydayness'. First, it hints at a social environment because non-professional performers could allegedly bring into their representation the signs of their background. As a journalist on the pages of an established theatre magazine remarked, 'when compared to legitimate performers, the actor "taken from life" has some advantages; among them, an instantaneous, non-sophisticated characterization of both the character and the environment, with his sole presence'.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, non-professional performers guaranteed that the description of

27 I attempted to describe this debate in Pitassio, 'Uomini e animali. Renato Castellani nonrealista'.

28 The linguistics professor embodying Umberto D. in the eponymous film expressed this blurring of non-professional performers in an ironic article: Battisti, 'Mi viene un dubbio: sono Battisti o Umberto D.?'. See also Battisti, *Come divenni Umberto D.*

29 Dentice, 'Ritorno all'attore', p. 39.

place and social circumstance suited that reality. In one of his most quoted and renowned statements, Visconti talked about an ‘anthropomorphic cinema’, a representation wherein men and things are mutually related:

What led me to filmmaking is the engagement to tell stories about living human beings: human beings amidst things, not the things in themselves. [...] Among the many tasks awaiting me as a film director, the one that intrigues me most is therefore working with actors: human material to build these new human beings that, summoned to live it, engender a new reality, the reality of art.<sup>30</sup>

Then Visconti moves on to discuss various types of film performers, to bring to the fore the significance of non-professional performers because they represent an uncorrupted environment.

Social and human purity—before the economy, politics, and warfare can corrupt it—points to a virtual and powerful entity: the people. As discussed in the first chapter, this notion persistently haunted post-war Italian culture, which sought legitimisation after decades of totalitarian power. Non-professional performers epitomised a concern for the underprivileged social strata which inter-war culture did not adequately consider. In fact, as the voice-over in *The Earth Trembles* highlights, what is at stake is voicing a community that had been silenced for decades, offering a mouthpiece for stories yet untold. Accordingly, non-professional performers in masterpieces such as *The Earth Trembles*; *Bellissima*; *Rome, Open City*; *Bicycle Thieves*; and less acknowledged movies such as *To Live in Peace*, *Angelina*, and *Molti sogni per le strade* (*Woman Trouble*, Mario Camerini, 1948) represented a popular, collective being: a chorus. Choralities is a term iterated in post-war literary and film debates, and a delusive one indeed, for it posits an imaginary community, which is actually the achievement of an ideological and aesthetic action. Recently, Elizabeth Alsop singled out the character of chorality in neorealist cinema and associated it with ideology, performance, and sound: ‘Chorality in neorealist cinema should be viewed less as a naturalistic technique than as a theatrical and often polemical one—a device used by directors not to reflect an existing social group so much as to project or enact an imaginary one.’<sup>31</sup> Non-professional performers, often in the background, helped in shaping this collective, imaginary body, i.e. the people.

30 Visconti, ‘Cinema antropomorfo’, p. 35.

31 Alsop, ‘The Imaginary Crowd: Neorealism and the Uses of *Choralità*’, p. 28.

A collective being within neorealist films could substantiate different notions of social groups. They could, for example, be part of a problematic relationship between the crowd and the individual, as in *The Crowd* (1928) by King Vidor, a filmmaker soon celebrated before neorealism in the pages of *Cinema*. The fate of Antonio Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves* demonstrates this dialectic well. A group of rascals steals his bike, and they are supported by the whole neighbourhood. But later on, when out of desperation Antonio attempts to steal a bike, a group of people track him down, beat him up, and are ready to turn him in to the policemen. In *Bicycle Thieves*, the crowd is nothing but a threat to isolated individuals. But in a different ideological framework, the collective could represent a positive, absorbing force, and this was how it was frequently depicted in cinema in the inter-war years. In fact, neorealist films frequently referred to non-professional performers as a political force, reminiscent of the crowd portrayed in Soviet celebrated films of the 1920s. The authoritative post-war film critic Renzi echoed this viewpoint:

Today, in Italy, the film without actors is basically proletarian. It was genuine, it was and still is useful, since it led to the discovery of a substantial reality, through the authenticity of the 'type'. This latter has an enormous significance, as it is self-evident; it is the correct pathway to build a character, while revealing an environment. Let's look at the American cinema: one of its assets has always been the authenticity of the types it represented in the course of time.<sup>32</sup>

This excerpt sheds light on the various sources of inspiration underlying the use of non-professional performers and the ideological values associated with them. To begin with, non-professional performers refers here to a collective entity, i.e. the working class, which was a Marxist key concept inasmuch as the 'type' was crucial to an aesthetic tradition striving to achieve a Marxist representation, as the theory of the Soviet 'typazh' demonstrates. According to Soviet theoreticians, human types, when carefully selected, acted as social masks and enabled filmmakers to visually represent class warfare. At the same time, the classical Hollywood style and related typecasting practices also proved to be an effective way of conveying meaning. Both these sources were at work in the use that Marxist director De Santis made of non-professional performers in his post-war films. He tended to merge ideological concerns with a narrative

32 Renzi, 'Sullo schermo per una volta', p. 242.

that was highly dependent on the Hollywood mode of representation, including film genres, stardom, and typecasting. For instance, in *Tragic Hunt*, popular film stars such as Andrea Checchi, Massimo Girotti, and Carla Del Poggio were eventually absorbed into a crowd of non-professional actors who embodied collectivist peasants. And at the end of *Bitter Rice*, we see all the rice pickers—who present the viewer with a wide variety of physiognomies, bodies, and dialects and represent the working-class's multifariousness through the heterogeneity of the non-professional performers—gather together to cover the corpse of Silvana with rice and thus reincorporate into the proletariat the girl who struggled to break free of that very class.

Within the debate in post-war Italy, however, less nuanced opinions also circulated. As the internal political conflict between the right and the left escalated along with the rising tensions of the Cold War, notions such as non-professional performers, types, and realism converged into the encompassing theory of Socialist Realism. For instance, the influential Communist intellectual Glauco Viazzi analysed the use of non-professional performers as follows: 'Those characters were typical, they were historical generalizations; which means that the actors creating them were realist actors, who, under the directors' guidance, could summarize the lives of millions of human beings, the most progressive and conscious part of the nation.'<sup>33</sup> While Viazzi's opinion is quite radical, he was not alone in holding this almost Stalinist-biased look at non-professional performers. Such an attitude, equating types with realism, and realism with political rightness, also exemplifies a widespread patronising attitude held by intellectuals when discussing 'the people's' needs, culture, and non-professional performers. This is even more evident if we think of the general 'discovery' of Southern Italy in the post-war era by literature, photography, print, and cinema and how that revelation often went hand in hand with a condescending look at the underdeveloped areas of the region. Accordingly, non-professional performers who were selected from among the destitute Southerners—as in *The Earth Trembles*, *Two Cents Worth of Hope*, and *In the Name of the Law*—were not exempt from this almost colonial attitude. A closer look at André Bazin's writings on neorealism unveils this concern. In his analysis of *The Earth Trembles*, the most prominent advocate of Italian neorealism abroad connects the film to 'exotic' filmmaking in the integration of non-professional performers and the aesthetics of the whole film.<sup>34</sup> More

33 Viazzi, 'Contro il divismo l'attore realistico', p. 851.

34 Bazin, 'La terra trema'.

recently, French film scholar Jacqueline Nacache pointed out the inherent contradictions of ethnographic filmmaking and its use of non-professional performers.<sup>35</sup> One of these contradictions was the patronising attitude radiating from intellectuals and artists who, conversely, glorified the truthfulness of non-professional performers.

From the late 1940s, a series of patronising articles and commentaries appeared discussing the perils that non-professional performers underwent, having been deceived in their naivete by cinema and show business.<sup>36</sup> The use of non-professional performers was subject to this condescending attitude, as evidenced by a script Zavattini drafted in 1948, right after *Bicycle Thieves* was completed. Titled pristinely *The Great Deceit*, and in its second version *You, Maggiorani*, the script tells the story of the real-life hardships experienced by the non-professional performer embodying Antonio Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves*, while his fictitious character is celebrated all over the world.<sup>37</sup> A celebrated self-reflexive sequence in *Bellissima* corroborates this assumption. Struggling to access the projection of her daughter's screen test, Maddalena Cecconi (Anna Magnani) sneaks into an editing room, where she meets Iris. This character bears the same name of the protagonist of *Under the Sun of Rome* and *Vent'anni* (Twenty years, Giorgio Bianchi, 1949), and the same non-professional performer, Liliana Mancini, embodies her. In a brief monologue, Iris explains to the disconcerted Maddalena the pitfalls she encountered after being cast as a protagonist in the film: she lost her job, parted from her fiancé, and eventually ended up as assistant editor. In this view, non-professional performers provided truthful, effective material for the benefit of an ideological discourse. However, they did not truly belong in filmmaking, inasmuch as filmmaking and society did not change significantly.<sup>38</sup>

35 'Ethnographic filmmakers were sometimes considered accomplices of colonialism: a born-actor, so naturally natural, could just be somebody acting without being asked, through the shooting, framing, editing, stealing him much more than his sole image.' Nacache, *L'acteur de cinéma*, p. 129.

36 See, for instance, N.F., 'Sei divi a riflettori spenti'.

37 See Zavattini, 'Tu, Maggiorani'. The Hungarian film director Géza Radványi was to direct the film, as a correspondence between him and Zavattini proves.

38 This patronising view is somehow contrasted in another statement made by Liliana Mancini: 'I don't think [...] the cinema screws the people up. To my knowledge, all my friends in *Under the Sun of Rome* have got it made, as I did anyways, and I must say that among my acquaintances nobody ended badly for working in cinema for once.' Liliana Mancini, quoted in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano raccontata dai suoi protagonisti (1935-1959)*, p. 146.

## We, the Humans Beings. Non-Professional Performers and Neorealist Representation

In addition to ideological concerns, non-professional performers were frequently at the centre of discussions concerned with new modes of representation. It was acknowledged that the use of non-professional performers represented a desire to avoid the standard studio setting and the workflow that dominated film production under Fascism. It also symbolised the alleged reality that was outside the studio. Accordingly, non-professional performers conveyed the filmmaker's intention to go beyond established modes of production and to innovate film practice by working with untrained personnel outside film studios. In its most extreme conception, namely in Zavattini's poetic speculation, neorealism turns into an observational cinema, conveying knowledge on contemporary subjects and stimulating awareness and solidarity among viewers. As the Italian intellectual and screenplay writer said: 'Let's watch our man: he walks, smiles, talks, you can look at him from all quarters, come close to him, move away, scrutinise every single act, and again and again as if you were on a steenbeck. [...] We watch him full of interest; we open our eyes on him, who stands before us without any fable, without any seeming story.'<sup>39</sup> In the early 1950s, Zavattini corresponded regularly with Bazin,<sup>40</sup> and he seems to have imported some of the French critic's theoretical cornerstones into his unsystematic reflection. One such theory is the idea that, within cinematic representation, the description of bodies in action foreruns the narrative and thus also the characters those bodies are summoned to build. Bazin's writings repeatedly focus on this question, namely when taking into account the work of De Sica and Zavattini. For instance, in their private correspondence, Bazin explains

39 Zavattini, 'Address to the Convegno Internazionale di Cinematografia, Perugia, 24-27 September 1949', in Barbaro (ed.), *Il cinema e l'uomo moderno*, pp. 39-45 (p. 44). Zavattini repeatedly expressed these ideas, as when he declared: 'The keenest necessity of our time is "social attention." Attention, though, to what is there, directly: not through an apologue, however well conceived. A starving man, a humiliated man, must be shown by name and surname; no fable for a starving man, because that is something else, less effective and less moral. The true function of the cinema is not to tell fables, and to a true function we must recall it. Of course, reality can be analysed by ways of fiction. Fictions can be expressive and natural; but neorealism, if it wants to be worthwhile, must sustain the moral impulse that characterised its beginnings, in an analytical documentary way.' See Zavattini, 'Alcune idee sul cinema'. The translation here quoted, not entirely reliable, can be found in 'Some Ideas on the Cinema', p. 53.

40 For a detailed account of the relationship between Zavattini and Bazin, see Parigi, 'Zavattini e Bazin: corrispondenza di parola e pensiero'. The same issue presents also the unpublished correspondence between the two intellectuals.

to Zavattini the priority of actors' (both professional and non-professional) movements over their facial expressions and therefore the predominance of the human body as opposed to the psychological portrait a mimic renders.<sup>41</sup> The primacy of action over character and narrative is a distinctive feature of the interpretation Bazin offers of De Sica/Zavattini's cinema. In their body of work, this feature becomes increasingly important film by film, as is clear in Bazin's commentary on one of De Sica's later films, *Umberto D.*:

The film is identical with what the actor is doing and with this alone. The outside world is reduced to being an accessory to this pure action, which is sufficient to itself in the same way that algae deprived of air produce the oxygen they need.<sup>42</sup>

This equating of non-professional actors with non-narrative representation was not uncommon in Italian film criticism. For instance, film critic Giuseppe Pistorio praised films with non-professional actors as the best artworks produced in post-war Italy. He considered these performers intransitive and saw them as raw material devoid of any nuance: '[A non-professional performer] is so genuine and stands and is used for what he is worth, for what he always meant; like a word designating a fixed concept, without metaphorical or allegorical meanings, a word in its primitive state.'<sup>43</sup>

This was to be highlighted further in French film critique on neorealist works other than those of Zavattini. It is used as an explanation for the peculiar work of Rossellini, who was championed against De Sica and Visconti by the film critics' generation known as the Young Turks, known for their work for the film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*.<sup>44</sup> For instance, in a 1950 analysis of *Stromboli*, Maurice Scherer (who was soon to go by the name of Eric Rohmer) talked about the primacy of things, including human beings, over inner life.<sup>45</sup> Some years later, Jacques Rivette discussed *Voyage to Italy* as a film privileging bodies and their revelatory power over narrative.<sup>46</sup> This assumption about non-professional performers expressing the importance of staging and time over narrative and editing has often been taken for granted in the lineage of film analysts leading from Bazin to the Young Turks to Deleuze. But in the neorealist era, the issue comprised

41 Bazin, 'Lettera a Cesare Zavattini'.

42 Bazin, 'De Sica: Metteur en scène', p. 76.

43 Pistorio, 'Attori professionisti e attori di strada', p. 17.

44 See De Baecque, *Cahiers du cinéma. Histoire d'une revue. A l'assaut du cinéma (1951-1959)*.

45 Scherer (Eric Rohmer), 'Roberto Rossellini: "Stromboli"'

46 Rivette, 'Letter on Rossellini'.

different stances that were often in contradiction with each other. Let's examine this discussion in more detail.

To begin with, Zavattini and Bazin's positions are more elaborate than film historians often assume. Beyond a concern for non-dramatic narrative as a major neorealist achievement, Zavattini included in his post-war reflection an interest in reality as a spectacle whose origin dates back to the inter-war period. In fact, as Italian film historian Stefania Parigi explains, Zavattini appreciated the variety show as a form of presentation rather than representation; that is, the variety show draws attention to the performer while performing rather than absorbing its viewers into a fiction and an impersonation, to recall King's term.<sup>47</sup> According to this view, non-professional performers were themselves a show, the spectacle of life unfolding before the camera.<sup>48</sup> The presentational performance of the variety show also affected Zavattini's very conception of neorealism, which in his view was a method to unveil the illusions that representation presents to the audience. Metadiscursive narratives prevailing in Zavattini's projects from the early 1950s onwards testify to the growing relevance of this expanding notion of neorealism. As discussed above, *Bellissima*, for instance, revolves around a deconstruction of the delusory power of cinema as a mother aims to launch her daughter in a career as a film star only to discover through the merciless eye of the camera that the child is indeed beautiful but only to her mother, precisely because the little girl is unable to embody any fictional character.<sup>49</sup> In Zavattini's later project, *We, the Women*, celebrated real-life stars are called upon to disclose their lives as an everyday spectacle, beyond their star personas.<sup>50</sup> To summarise, post-war Italian culture granted the film apparatus the power to reflect on reality and turn everyday existence and human beings into a full part of its signifying practices. Such an assumption engendered conflicting opinions about the function of non-professional performers over time. One widespread opinion held that non-actors should abstain from appearing more than once, as their

47 Parigi, 'Dal cinema-varietà al cinema-verità'. See also Stefania Parigi, *Fisiologia dell'immagine*, notably pp. 325-350.

48 Bazin argued that 'In Zavattini's view [...] what is at stake is not opposing the cinematic spectacle to real life but turning to reality in such a way that this latter becomes a spectacle.' Bazin, 'Cesare Zavattini o il neorealismo italiano', p. 101.

49 See Jandelli, 'Attore e recitazione nei soggetti di *Bellissima*'. For a close scrutiny of the film's genesis, see Micciché, *Visconti e il neorealismo*.

50 On *We, the Women* and metadiscursivity, see De Vincenti, 'Siamo donne: un esempio "neorealista" di coscienza metalinguistica'. On *Bellissima*, the Italian cinema in the 1950s, and metadiscourse, see Casetti, 'Cinema in the Cinema in Italian Films of the Fifties: *Bellissima* and *La signora senza camelia*'. }

revealing power relied in the identification between a fictitious role, their body and identity, and the environment they referred to. Basically, they coalesced with the individual films they appeared in. Literary academic Umberto Bosco expressed this opinion in the pages of the authoritative *Bianco e nero*, claiming that a non-professional performer turns into a professional actor from the second time the camera shoots her.<sup>51</sup> The purpose of uniqueness is to enhance realism: indeed, repetition could draw attention to the inauthenticity of the world depicted. Furthermore, non-professionals derived their effectiveness from being unknown. They were not bringing into film representation any reference to previous work, and the fact that they were anonymous was, according to a contemporary film critic, itself an 'expressive means'.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, a point of view less theoretical and more related to production practices emerged. As director Castellani declared, 'When a boy or a girl, working for the very first time in cinema, stands ten minutes before the camera they already turn into professionals; later, they can become excellent actors, due to experience.'<sup>53</sup>

In the post-war era, productions regularly cast non-professional performers in main or side roles. As I discuss later, this practice contributed to the rise of a new kind of stardom. Film director Lizzani recently admitted that when he was campaigning for funds to finance his first feature film, *Achtung! Banditi!* (*Attention! Bandits!*, 1951), he cast Lamberto Maggiorani to take advantage of his fame after *Bicycle Thieves* and to persuade financiers to back the project.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, many non-professionals famous for joining the most rigorous neorealist films often appeared in later productions, carrying into following roles an intertextual reference to previous works and related realist aesthetics. Let's take as an example the two protagonists of the most iconic neorealist film, *Bicycle Thieves*: the man portraying the unemployed father, Maggiorani, and the boy playing the part of his son, Stajola. Maggiorani's stern face appeared in a number of films after *Bicycle Thieves*, portraying background roles in Radványi's *Women Without Names* and in *Anna*. However, he could also work as a marker, as his presence summarised the meanings he embodied in De Sica's renowned masterpiece. For instance, in the above-mentioned *Attention! Bandits!*, he plays a politically

51 Bosco, 'Tipo e individuo nel cinema e nel teatro'.

52 Maggiore, 'Attore non professionista e anonimie del personaggio'.

53 Renato Castellani quoted in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, p. 147.

54 See Carlo Lizzani's interview in *A proposito di Achtung! Banditi!* (*About Achtung! Bandits!*, Silvia D'Amico, Gioia Magrini, Roberto Meddi, 2013), included as an extra in *Achtung! Banditi!* DVD Warner Bros. published in 2013.

conscious factory worker who embodies an awareness that the unemployed man of *Bicycle Thieves* could not achieve. Accordingly, he came to signify the film's overall progression in terms of class consciousness since the release of De Sica's masterpiece. Later on, in his brief appearance in *Mamma Roma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1962), Maggiorani plays a hospitalised sick person. The son of *Mamma Roma*, Ettore, attempts to steal from him. In a film entirely devoted to deconstructing neorealist poetics, this brief sequence clearly hints at the most famous role Maggiorani embodied, in order to bring to the fore the close bonds Pasolini had with post-war film and political culture. The same happened with Stajola, who operated as an immediate reference to deprived post-war childhood in ensuing films as diverse as *The White Line*, *Volcano*, *Black feathers*, and *The Return of Don Camillo*. Despite their differences, all these films made great use of outdoor scenes, which were meant to refer to contemporary or recent reality, and benefited from Stajola's presence as a feature reinforcing this reference.

So far, I have discussed the role held by non-professional performers in fostering an unprecedented mode of representation and in reducing narration as a dominant force and subjugating other features. In this view, non-professional performers do away with traditional dramatic structures and transform real life and the real world into a spectacle. They become one with their characters, and in the most radical assumptions, the adventures of the characters correspond to the performers' actual lives. This is the case with Zavattini's above-mentioned script, *You, Maggiorani*, and with some of the episodes included in *Love in the city*, an omnibus film Zavattini himself conceived. The episode that Antonioni directed, *Attempted suicide*, and notably the one directed by both Zavattini and Maselli, *Storia di Caterina* (Story of Caterina), are based on re-enactments that summoned the people who actually experienced the represented events to stage them once more for the camera. Non-professional performers were thus either asked to appear just once, so as not to spoil the realism of the representation, or were requested to iterate a real-life experience in order to turn cinema into both an analytical tool to inquire into reality and individuals and a means to increase social awareness.<sup>55</sup> However, as I highlight throughout

55 When discussing the implications of Zavattini's work for film acting, Italian film theoretician Maurizio Grande wrote: 'The form of knowledge is participation [...] Characters, environments, circumstances, social and individual gestures are part of the observed episode [...]. But cinema cannot limit its action to "acknowledging" and "witnessing" the episode's human and social landscape; it must do far more: it must transform it into a ritual of knowledge and, at the same time, in a spectacular liturgy. [...] In this process [...] there is no room for professional actors [...]. It is the episode's key player who must act once more the happening.' What I want to pinpoint here

this section, this view was not as coherent and monolithic as we might presume today, as production practices and theoretical frameworks were multi-layered.

For decades now, we have been used to discussing neorealism in terms of modern cinema and loose narratives. Sometimes, however, non-professional performers helped to strengthen film narration by reducing intertextual resonance. Indeed, concerns for narrative efficiency often prompted directors to cast non-professional performers, even in the case of the most celebrated neorealist film directors. With regard to the narrative function non-professional performers played, six years after shooting *Paisan*, Rossellini described the casting, allegedly happening in a village, as follows:

Curious people surrounded me, and I picked the actors from the crowd. When you are dealing with good professional performers, they never match the idea you have of a character. In order to properly create the imagined character, the director must engage in a struggle with his player and bend him to his will. Since I don't want to waste my energies in this struggle I recur exclusively to casual performers.<sup>56</sup>

In Rossellini's words, 'imagined characters' are the priority, not a pre-existent reality that cinema should convey. As concerns the preference accorded to narration over reality, Vittorio De Sica expressed his resilience in choosing performers: 'Actors or non-actors? At this stage, I would like to say that my choice to recur to the actors taken "from real life" is never predetermined, it does not result from a rigid attitude. [...] It was very difficult finding the two boys of *Shoeshine*. Cappellone and Scimmietta [the two boys in real life who inspired the film] could not be cast: too ugly, almost crooked.'<sup>57</sup> In other words, for the sake of film narrative, good-looking non-professionals had to replace ugly figures. Due to their looks and lack of training, non-professional actors might reinforce narrative expectations.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, a widespread assumption was that, whereas narratives presented the viewer

is precisely the co-existence of knowledge and spectacle, which converge in the non-professional, who turns factual episodes into a source of intelligence and show for a sympathetic audience.' See Grande, 'Attore', pp. 31-32.

56 Roberto Rossellini, quoted in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, p. 108

57 Vittorio De Sica, quoted in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, p. 113.

58 Pistorio, 'Maschere e tipi'.

with articulate characters, these required the technical skills of trained thespians.<sup>59</sup>

To sum up, the use of non-professional actors suited different—often contradictory—needs. It sometimes indicated the desire to incorporate reality into film representation while producing an effective narrative, while other times it reflected filmmakers' willingness to observe and scrutinise real-life figures while portraying multi-layered and appealing characters. Some of the terms of this scenario lead me to delve into the origins of the Italian practice of using non-professional actors.

Non-professional performers were also a token of film directors' willingness to implement inter-war film culture, which promoted film language's specificity and priority over other representational forms, including acting. Research undertaken in the past decades has shown that under Fascism, cultural debate was not entirely stifled, and some cultural institutions collected cultural items from all over Europe, including the Soviet Union.<sup>60</sup> The Rome film academy (Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia), established in the mid-1930s, was where many future neorealist personalities were educated and where the prominent Marxist intellectual Umberto Barbaro taught. Barbaro was familiar with contemporary European film theory, and from the early 1930s on translated the writings of Béla Balázs and Vsevolod Pudovkin, among others.<sup>61</sup> In the theoretical debate that flourished at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia under the guidance of intellectuals such as Barbaro, Chiarini, and Pasinetti, and in the publications associated with the institution, film acting and the human presence in film were crucial issues, as I discuss elsewhere.<sup>62</sup> The number of publications testifies to the relevance of this debate and the role European theory played in framing

59 For instance, screenplay writer, film critic, and theatrical director Giorgio Prosperi declared in 1948: '[B]ut for background characters, which might actually stem from real life, with regard to main characters the myth of "faces from real life" is part of the old delusion that art is an imitation of life.' Prosperi, 'Attori o persone vere', p. 6.

60 On the influence of the Soviet model on cinema under Fascism, see Garofalo, 'Seeing Red: The Soviet Influence on Italian Cinema in the Thirties'; Zaggarro, *Cinema e fascismo*; Salazkina, 'Soviet-Italian Cinematic Exchanges 1920s-1950s. From Early Soviet Film Theory to Neorealism'; Salazkina, 'Moscow-Rome-Havana: A Film Theory Road Map'. For a general outline of the role Soviet culture played in Italy under Fascism, see Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities. Italy, 1922-1945*.

61 See, for instance, Pudovkin, *Film e fonofilm*. Translations of the two volumes that Hungarian-born intellectual Balázs wrote between the silent and the sound era—*Der Sichtbare Mensch* (1924) and *Der Geist des Films* (1930)—appeared scattered in magazines and journals, such as *L'Italia letteraria*, *L'Italiano*, *Occidente*.

62 Pitassio, 'La formazione dell'attore e la discussione teorica'.

it.<sup>63</sup> Italian film historian Brunetta explains that European theoretical heritage led Barbaro to assign a major role to physiognomy—a notion Balázs also included in his film theory—as an integral part in making meaning, beyond acting skills. All the same, Barbaro nuanced Pudovkin's theory from the 1920s, which stressed the crucial power of editing: Barbaro considered actors to be co-creators of films in their own right, whether or not professionally trained.<sup>64</sup>

In brief, the issue of non-professional performers was an integral part of European film theory and transnational art cinema legacy. This tradition was thoroughly considered and discussed in the pre-neorealist era and likely exerted an influence on the education of prominent neorealist figures. In the first place, previous attempts to generate film representations entirely or partly relying on non-professional performers, such as Alessandro Blasetti's early works *Sole* (Sun, 1929) or *1860 (Gesuzza the Garibaldian Wife, 1933)*, were included in the canon of art film. This endorsement traced a lineage between inter-war and post-war filmmaking. Moreover, it is no coincidence that among the forerunners in making use of non-professional performers, a recurring name (beyond De Robertis) is Blasetti, who embodied the heights of Italian film culture under Fascism and represented a demiurge-like figure.<sup>65</sup> Blasetti epitomised the widespread concern for establishing the film director as the sole person responsible for both production practice and artistic vision. Finally, the rise of neorealism also marked a shift between two opposing notions of filmmaking: one prevailing in the inter-war period that basically revolved around screenplay writing and thespians derived from commercial theatre, and the other fostered in the post-war era that was based on film directors overseeing the whole production process and moulding reality and materials into a coherent artistic view.<sup>66</sup> Immediately after the war, film director Lattuada wrote:

63 The Rome film academy published an authoritative journal, *Bianco e nero*, which devoted three issues to film acting: Umberto Barbaro and Luigi Chiarini edited all of them. See *Bianco e nero*, ii, 2-3 (February-March 1938); *Bianco e nero*, iv, 7-8 (July-August 1940); *Bianco e nero*, v, 1 (January 1941).

64 See Brunetta, *Umberto Barbaro e l'idea di neorealismo (1930-1943)*, notably Chapter v.

65 See, for instance Campanella, 'Vecchi come il cinema: "presi dalla strada".'

66 In the late 1930s, Barbaro pitted theatre against cinema. In the former, the playwright and the actors are responsible for the artwork; in the latter, directors create by means of staging, composing, and editing. In this view, film directors that rely mostly on the screenplay and performers give up their creative task and reduce their activity to mere reproduction. See Barbaro, 'L'attore cinematografico'. An echo of this view is found in Frosali, 'I "tipi" sono un'esigenza del cinema'. For a discussion of the opposition between theatre and film actors, based on classical

What is missing in Italian cinema? An 'auteur' is missing. [...] In Italy, many directors know how to stage, that is, how to instruct actors playing, how to make them move around and keep a cinematic tempo, but few, or basically nobody, know how to maintain a story from the pristine idea through the screenplay, the dialogues, the set design, the costumes, the make-up and so forth.<sup>67</sup>

Neorealist film culture in Italy heralded art film and borrowed from its inter-war legacy a number of notions, one of which was the film director as a demiurge who had at his disposal all the available components according to his artistic vision. From this perspective, performers were little more than building material, and acting skills comparable to those offered by theatrical thespians were not necessarily required. The artistic freedom that Rossellini came to embody, as well as the painstaking control that Visconti exerted both in theatre and cinema, substantiate this argument. It is not surprising, then, that film critic Guido Aristarco compared the way Visconti worked with non-professional performers in *The Earth Trembles* with Eisenstein's mastery.<sup>68</sup> The supremacy of film directors did not go against the notion of realism. As a matter of fact, the realist style and the rise of directors within Italian theatre and film culture implied a turning point that limited the power of thespians and imposed an individual vision on representation. As Visconti himself declared when commenting on his 1944 staging of Jean Cocteau's *Les parents terribles* (*Intimate Relations*): 'More than a work of invention, we cleaned up. We had to put the stage into order, impose a rule on actors, and give the play a truthful mark. [...] Thus, the Italian theatre as conceived in the nineteenth century died out.'<sup>69</sup> Neorealist culture often pitted film directors against actors: the latter's predominance in inter-war cinema and theatre expressed the persistence of nineteenth-century culture, which neorealism was to outstrip. As Pistorio clearly describes, 'neorealism [...] mostly declares that the *film director is the absolute master of what he does, of what he says, and makes use of the actors as if they were words of his discourse*.'<sup>70</sup> Reducing the power of actors by making use of non-professionals was a historical process whose purpose was to exalt a new generation of film directors. As Fabrizio Dentice sees it:

film thinkers such as Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and Balázs, see Bolchi, 'Gli attori di teatro italiani nei loro rapporti col cinema'.

67 Lattuada, 'Cinema italiano', pp. 79-80.

68 Aristarco, 'La terra trema'.

69 Luchino Visconti, quoted in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, p. 89.

70 Pistorio, 'Attori professionisti e attori di strada', my italics.

The actor should be nothing but clay in the hands of the director [...]. Partly for the sake of coherence with the realistic assumption, requiring having characters who were not acting, but living naturally, with generic and anonymous reaction, and accordingly far more universal; partly for *a precise will to produce a cinematic language*.<sup>71</sup>

This shift can be underlined by contrasting neorealist film directors with their successful counterparts in the inter-war years such as Mario Mattoli or Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, who were considered artistically insignificant due to their dependence on actors.<sup>72</sup>

Another notion that post-war cinema inherited from inter-war film art was that of the 'type', a concept that implied a human presence selected primarily according to its physical characteristics. Relying on the controversial theory of constitutional psychology—that is, the study of physical complexion and alleged psychology through the notion of somatotypes—Umberto Barbaro in the late 1930s underlined the relevance of cinematic types.<sup>73</sup> While promoting performers as co-creators, Barbaro also highlighted the importance of types as a synthetic means to convey narrative meaning. Within film representation, the autonomy of types is indeed limited, whereas the film director takes advantage of them as components. In the post-war era, non-professional performers often worked as types, bringing to films their complexion, face, and behaviour according to a limited typology, either geographical (the Southerner, the Roman) or social (the worker, the fisherman, the policeman, the rice picker). As an illustration, we might consider a film like *The Path of Hope*, directed by Germi, a former student at the Rome film academy. The film describes the journey of impoverished Sicilian miners throughout Italy. At the film's onset, the population of the Southern village that was soon to migrate is portrayed by way of close-ups of groups of people, divided into women and men: squat, dark-haired, dressed in black or half naked, expressing both grievance and resistance about their harsh social circumstances. Later on, during their migration in search of employment and hope, this same group of people is confronted with Northern Italy's class-conscious peasants. They are presented in a similar fashion, as a collective face, but their bodies and gender are much

71 Dentice, 'Ritorno all'attore', p. 39, my italics. A similar opinion, appointing film directors as solely responsible for the film, is expressed in Tosi, 'Come nasce un film. 12: L'attore'.

72 Mida, 'Punto fermo su una discussione: attori professionisti e non-professionisti'.

73 Barbaro, 'L'attore cinematografico'. Barbaro mainly referred to somatotypes as conceived in the work of Italian endocrinologist Nicola Pende, who was a prominent advocate of Italian national racism. See Cassata, *Building the New Man*.

more varied—dark-haired, blonde, red-headed, tall and thin, or short and robust, but vivid and much less statuesque. We are thus confronted with two collective characters, allowing their respective morality to be trenchantly represented in a kind of face-off.

Some commentators have singled out an accordance between the typological use of non-professionals and the audiences, whose understanding of film narratives relied on simplified templates as conveyed in the visuals.<sup>74</sup> However, types were also hailed as pure cinematic means, as their visual appearance embodied the narrative qualities of the signified characters. In this view, 'without exception cinema tends to the type'.<sup>75</sup> For this same reason, types could point to established beacons in film art's legacy, that is, the Soviet 'typazh' and Hollywood typecasting. While the former practice had obvious ideological implications, the latter enhanced the will in Italy to establish standard production practices and renew national cinema by referring to the most efficient film industry.<sup>76</sup> Finally, non-professional actors who were conceived as types could basically operate as masks, that is, as a set of graphic signs imbued with moral values. They became faces whose function relied on the redundancy of a template rather than expressing an individual subject. This was alternately praised or condemned, and namely in the work of Castellani.<sup>77</sup>

By way of conclusion, the use of non-professional performers accommodated different demands and were used for various needs. Non-professionals embodied the ideological needs of portraying humankind as such, giving voice to the underprivileged and neglected social classes or representing a collective being, thus accentuating the divide between the pre- and post-war eras and their respective film production. This ideological renewal matched an aesthetic one aimed at reducing narrative dominance in favour of the representation of everyday life, as shown in the writings and some of the films of Zavattini. In this view, non-professional performers' inability to render a variety of fictional characters was more of an asset than a disadvantage. However, during the neorealist epoch, non-professional performers were also widely used in narrative films or employed as intertextual references to previous films, thus reducing their 'everydayness' and uniqueness. Finally, non-professional actors were part of a major shift in film culture between

74 Volpicelli, 'Tipi e attori'.

75 Bosco, 'Tipo e individuo', pp. 6-7.

76 Renzi, 'Sullo schermo per una volta'. Another commentator emphasises the relation between typecasting and stardom in Hollywood production. See Frosali, 'I "tipi" sono un'esigenza del cinema'.

77 See, for instance, Chiarini, 'Esuberanza di Carmela e sette peccati capitali'.

the late 1930s and the mid-1940s in which film directors were acknowledged as the sole artistic force responsible, to the detriment of actors. The debate about non-professional performers both before and after the end of World War Two bears traces of this concern. Furthermore, the discussion incorporated notions and keywords originating in inter-war European film theory. All in all, non-professional performers exemplified the multifarious nature of neorealist culture, which aimed to move forward while pretending not to look back.

### **Ladies Without Camelias. Post-War Feminine Stardom**

Among the most striking and paradoxical outcomes of both the phenomenon of non-professional performers and neorealist culture is post-war stardom, and namely female stardom. Whereas most film directors remained active in the post-war era, even those who were heavily involved in Fascist propaganda, and many male stars were given a second chance, the great majority of female film stars disappeared in the war's aftermath. In a few exceptional cases, they worked abroad, like Isa Miranda in France and Alida Valli in Hollywood and Europe. At first glance, the careers of an entire generation of established female stars came to a halt or significantly slowed down after 1945. Based on the results of the survey that *Cinema* magazine submitted to its readers in late 1939, two of the five actresses that readers ranked the highest simply disappeared at the end of the war: Assia Noris, who was inactive from 1945 to 1951, and Luisa Ferida, who was executed by partisans alongside her lover, film actor Osvaldo Valenti. The remaining three were working abroad, either in prominent roles like the above-mentioned Valli and Miranda, or in less prestigious productions, as Paola Barbara did in the Spanish film industry.<sup>78</sup> Other stars met a similar fate. Doris Duranti, after fleeing to Switzerland and attempting suicide, emigrated to South America; and Maria Denis was arrested under charges of collaboration with the Nazis but acquitted within two weeks, thereafter working predominantly in Spain and France.

Age was not a key factor in this disappearance of female film stars, because the majority of them were in their early thirties or younger. Retaliation for their responsibility in spreading Fascist propaganda by directing films or incarnating figures of power on the screen did not affect men so much as women, whose faces disappeared from the big screen or were replaced with new models. Their replacement can be attributed to several

78 The results of the poll were published in 'Risultato di sorteggio. Referendum 1939-1940'.

factors. To begin with, as a consequence of warfare and the ensuing civil war, women had gained a more active role within society. Moreover, the widespread demand for democracy and access to public life led to universal suffrage, which extended the right to vote to women, who had thus far been excluded from active political life. Eventually, the feminine body won unprecedented relevance in Italy due to the loosening of censorship and the boom of imported American mass culture: magazines, films, photos, and beauty contests displayed young beauties, no longer constrained by familial limitations or framed through the lens of Renaissance artistry as pious Madonnas. Inter-war film stars adapted badly to these new models, or their personas were too established and thus harder to redefine.<sup>79</sup>

Women in the post-war era were often portrayed as active citizens playing a significant role in society and embodying the nation's resurrection. The feminine characters portrayed in post-war films—working-class women, mothers out of wedlock, prostitutes, factory workers neither accepting their social condition nor blaming an abstract destiny for it—were much more concrete, down-to-earth, and physical than those from before the war. What is more striking is that they were much more material, rooted in the individual bodies incarnating them. As Stephen Gundle points out, 'the discourse on feminine beauty ceased to be abstract and general [...] and instead became related to specific flesh and blood individuals who came to the fore by various means, but specifically through beauty contests and cinema'.<sup>80</sup> Even though from the early 1950s onwards, feminine stardom was gradually framed through glamorous images imitating Hollywood,<sup>81</sup> I claim that there was a transitional phase that led from the inter-war autarchic stardom to the later international celebration of such Italian stars as Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida in the 1950s. This intermediate period overlaps with the neorealist epoch. In this phase, feminine beauty was associated with ideas of authenticity, spontaneity, physicality, and genuine but often unconscious eroticism.<sup>82</sup>

If we briefly consider the cinematic debuts of the major stars from this era such as Silvana Mangano in *Bitter Rice* and Lucia Bosè in *Under the Olive Tree*,<sup>83</sup> both films directed by De Santis, the most flamboyant among the

79 In the early 1950s, a report took stock of the major upheaval in feminine stardom by accounting for the fate of inter-war stars. Salvioni, 'Le dive del ricordo'.

80 Gundle, 'Feminine Beauty, National Identity and Political Conflict in Post-war Italy, 1945-1954'.

81 Gundle, 'Hollywood Glamour and Mass Consumption in Italy'.

82 See Pierini, 'Inventare una nuova bellezza'.

83 For the sake of completeness, one should clarify that Lucia Bosè appeared previously in a short celebrating the Milans against the Hapsburg dominion, during the national revival, i.e. 1848 (Dino Risi, 1949). However, *Under the Olive Tree* is her first main role.

neorealist filmmakers,<sup>84</sup> both actresses are bodies that tend to be subjected to a desiring man's gaze before being faces and characters. Their very first appearance on screen magnifies their physicality instead of their psychology or moral virtue. The first shot portraying Mangano is a pan framing her legs and moving upwards as she is dancing the boogie-woogie, to the delight of a group of bystanders and the rascal Walter. In *Under the Olive Tree*, the hero catches a glimpse of Bosè as he is walking on the hills: in full figure, she turns her back to him (and thus also the audience who has his point of view) and then slowly turns to the camera. Whereas the implications of such physicality created for a masculine gaze are quite obvious and arguable from our contemporary standpoint, one should not underestimate two factors. First, the reference to the woman's body and the related erotic dimension was itself a novelty in the late 1940s and a challenge to traditional Italian culture. And second, the enhancement of the bodily dimension as opposed to abstract ideas of virtue or vice, as was usually embodied in the female stars of the inter-war years, also implied an aesthetic shift. This transformation played on notions of *authenticity* and *spontaneity* and went hand in hand with the new pathways available to these stars to enter the cinematic world and to attain celebrity status.

The new stars of the post-war era did not receive training for the stage, as Paola Barbara did; nor did they attend a film academy, as Valli did. Most of the time, post-war actresses were selected through the new opportunities that mass culture offered: beauty contests (as was the case with Mangano, Bosè, and Lollobrigida), photo-romances (Loren) (Fig. 4.3), and the fashion industry (Eleonora Rossi Drago). Under Fascism, the conflation of Mussolini's personality cult with the Catholic fear of alluring images and modernisation<sup>85</sup> allowed limited space for stars to develop their personas. Instead, hard work and professional skills in acting were praised.<sup>86</sup> By contrast, post-war culture enhanced the relationship between newly discovered personalities and reality, to the detriment of professional training. Post-war female stars were directly associated with the landscape hosting them, be it nature or society.<sup>87</sup> As Landy argues, such embeddedness re-territorialised the

84 I owe the definition of 'flamboyant neorealism' to the seminal Farassino, *Giuseppe De Santis*, wherein the author also explores the relationship between cinema and new mass culture products such as pin-ups and photo-romances. On De Santis, see also Toffetti (ed.), *Rosso fuoco. Il cinema di Giuseppe De Santis*; Vitti, *Giuseppe De Santis and Post-war Italian Cinema*.

85 On Mussolini as an obstacle to celebrity culture under Fascism, see the seminal article written by Rositi, 'Personalità e divismo in Italia durante il periodo fascista'.

86 Gundle, 'Film Stars and Society in Fascist Italy'.

87 See Grignaffini, 'Female Identity and the Italian Cinema of the 1950s'.



Fig. 4.3 Photo-romances, non-professional performers, feminine stardom. Sofia Lazzaro (aka Loren) in *Sogno* (1950)

feminine presence in 'affective images linked closely to region, nation, and class, with a particular emphasis on the value of being oneself'.<sup>88</sup>

The association with a social and/or natural space and the lack of professional practice emphasise the similarity between post-war actresses and non-professional performers: they were both presented as authentic beings

88 Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*, p. 91

rooted in a specific national time and space. Due to these essential features, both helped to reshape Italian film production and notions of film acting. Furthermore, this explains why actresses who later went on to become glamorous stars made their early appearances in neorealist movies, a fact that might seem ironic to us now. Besides the above-mentioned examples of Bosè and Mangano, the most telling case is Gina Lollobrigida, who appeared in realistically biased productions directed by Luigi Zampa such as *The White Line* and *Alarm Bells*, or in a proudly neorealist film like *Attention! Bandits!* Examining the early days of celebrities should take into account also late neorealism and films in between a vernacular noir production and realistic depictions of the new urban life. Filmmakers previously working in canonised neorealist production were responsible for these films, and they cast actresses that were later to become stars, as was the case with Lollobrigida working under the direction of Germi in *Four Ways Out*, Rossi Drago acting under the guidance of Luigi Comencini in *Behind Closed Shutters* or side by side with Silvana Pampanini in *La tratta delle bianche* (*Girls Marked Danger/Frustrations*, 1952), and Mangano supervised by Lattuada in *Anna*.<sup>89</sup>

This new female stardom was not a spontaneous phenomenon. It was, rather, part of the national film industry's strategies. A key player in fostering post-war original stardom was Lux Film, where then world-renowned producers Dino De Laurentiis and Carlo Ponti put their hands to the plough.<sup>90</sup> Film stars stabilised film productions and were a crucial factor in the reconstruction and later success of the national film industry. Film scholars have long contrasted what they believed to be the disorderly post-war phase with the golden age of Italian cinema in the 1950s, identifying the latter with regular workflow, international co-productions, Hollywood runaway productions, and stardom. This juxtaposition is then also applied to the contrast between the non-professional performers of the immediate post-war era and the female stars of the 1950s.<sup>91</sup> Although, broadly speaking, I concur with this view, I believe that a closer look reveals how much post-war film stardom in its early days was associated with non-professional performers. Both stars and non-professional performers appeared shoulder to shoulder in a number of films, the vast majority of which were produced by Lux Film. The most notable examples are *Bitter Rice*, *Under the Olive Tree*, *Alarm Bells*,

89 This production trend is discussed in Marchesi, 'Noir all'italiana'.

90 Farassino and Sanguineti (eds), *La Lux. Esthétique et système d'un studio italien*; Farassino, *Lux Film*. As is common knowledge, the two producers, beyond initiating international productions and launching film stars, also married them: Dino De Laurentiis married Silvana Mangano, while Carlo Ponti married Sophia Loren.

91 De Giusti, 'Disseminazione dell'esperienza neorealista', p. 15.

and *The White Line*. I believe these productions derived some essential features from the most radical neorealist films—such as outdoor shooting, everydayness, non-professional performers, and social themes—and turned them into standard attributes in mainstream film production. Stardom was part of the standard, but under these circumstances it was deeply entangled in a discourse on the social and aesthetic value of truthfully depicting reality. As previously explained, neorealism predominantly manufactured female celebrity but occasionally also produced male stardom. This was the case with Raf Vallone. Formerly a football player, a partisan, and a journalist for the Communist Party's newspaper *L'Unità*, with a sturdy and strong aura, Vallone merged in his persona all the credentials to be a successful star in ideologically biased neorealist productions. As a matter of fact, he embodied characters 'who were called upon, in a world of upheaval and uncertainty (especially in the films he made from the late 1940s to mid-1950s), to assert ethical values, or to confront and overcome their own desires'.<sup>92</sup> He was the counterpart to Mangano in *Bitter Rice* and *Anna*, to Bosè in *Under the Olive Tree*, and to Elena Varzi (another non-professional performer who ultimately became his wife) in *The Path of Hope*, again a Lux Film production. With his female colleagues, Vallone embarked in the 1950s on a fruitful national and international career.

The preponderance of female stardom in the post-war era was also the cause of political conflict and controversies between different ideological formations. When discussing Loren's stardom, British cultural historian Gundle mentions the Catholic Church, traditional local culture, the Italian Communist Party, and American mass culture.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, the representation of female agency changed according to the political value assigned to it by the ideological formation prevailing in the film's narrative. The Communist-biased film *Attention! Bandits!* is a case in point. It portrays the political coming of age of Anna who, working as a secretary in a plant whose labourers oppose the Germans, is caught between opposing factions and characters. (Fig. 4.4) On the one side are the Nazis, who deport the factory's machines and its workers; and on the other we have the partisans defending both, and among them is her former fiancé. In between these two sides stand Anna and her brother, an Alpine soldier just returned from the Eastern front, eager to stay away from further conflicts. The film narrative describes the growing awareness of the young petty bourgeois and her brother, leading them to finally join the fighters for national freedom.

92 Reich and O'Rawe, *Divi. La mascolinità nel cinema italiano*, p. 87.

93 Gundle, 'Sophia Loren, Italian Icon'.



Fig. 4.4 Non-professional performers, feminine stardom, neorealism. Gina Lollobrigida in *Achtung! Banditi!* (*Attention! Bandits!*, Carlo Lizzani, 1951)

Another film that cast Lollobrigida, *Miss Italia* (*Miss Italia*, Duilio Coletti, 1950), depicts the exact opposite representation of femininity, one that is much more passive and traditional. The film is itself a fascinating case because of its symptomatic production history. Originally, director Lattuada had planned a film depicting the beauty contest that crowned Miss Italia, a newly created and highly successful initiative whose first edition took place in 1946.<sup>94</sup> Stated simply, the story was intended to describe the pitfalls of beauty contests for young women, pitting the glamour of jet-set life and the entertainment industry against the more prosaic but honest reality of factory work. Ultimately, the main character, who has been shortlisted for the contest, gives up the competition and chooses the factory life. Thus, female agency and everyday reality were both aggrandised as opposed to the lure of mass culture and superficial beauty.<sup>95</sup> Lux Film had produced

94 On the contest and its role in moulding post-war Italian beauty, see Gundle, 'Miss Italia in Black and White: Feminine Beauty and Ethnic Identity in Modern Italy'. See also Gundle, *Bellissima*.

95 Alberto Lattuada and Carlo Lizzani drafted the story. Later on, renowned novelist Elsa Morante worked on the screenplay, which never turned into a movie. Both the story and the screenplay are now preserved at the Cineteca di Bologna. See: Lattuada, Lizzani, and Morante, 'Progetto non realizzato. Miss Italia'; Lattuada, Lizzani, and Morante, 'Schema provvisorio su Miss Italia'; Lattuada, 'Soggetto cinematografico di Andata e ritorno di III classe (Miss Italia)', CDP 03.4

the previous films Lattuada had directed in the post-war era, namely *The Bandit* and *Without Pity*, and Lattuada had specifically conceived the project for the company. However, Carlo Ponti turned down the screenplay, and Fulvio Palmieri and Vittorio Nino Novarese rewrote it, while the deceived Lattuada distanced himself from the company.<sup>96</sup> Lux Film entrusted Coletti with the film's direction. Eventually, *Miss Italia* told a brand-new narrative, much closer to the comforting Cinderella template. Just before the final stage of the contest, a journalist wants to unveil the truth behind the photos of the girls shortlisted. He travels around Italy and meets such archetypal characters as the fallen woman, the country girl, the traditional Madonna, and so on. Among them is a humble seamstress, Lisetta, whom Lollobrigida embodies. (Fig. 4.5) Without her knowledge, her father sends her picture to the contest, which selected the girl for the final phase. To support her candidacy, her father gets involved with a smuggler who pretends to exert some influence over the jury. The fallen woman, Lilly (Constance Dowling) is the seamstress's major competitor. Lilly discovers that the smuggler is the man who led her to prostitution and kills the man (and herself) by crashing a car. The seamstress is crowned Miss Italia and marries the journalist. To summarise, a story depicting a new, conscious, and resolute female identity turns into an ideal of virginal, honest, traditional womanhood. Lisetta is a natural beauty, unaware of her stunning features, moving from her father to her husband's embrace. What is in and of itself notable is the narrative framing Lollobrigida's body: Lisetta's character hints at the star's persona, because Lollobrigida herself competed in the actual Miss Italia contest in 1947, placing third after Lucia Bosè and Gianna Maria Canale. The character incarnates many moral virtues such as humility, probity, industriousness, and, most important, attachment to the family. All in all, she is Miss Italia not despite the lack of any willingness to win the contest and of any skills to take advantage of her stunning beauty but precisely because she lacks both. Regarding the discourse on stardom, while differently biased productions such as *Attention! Bandits!* or *Miss Italia* might imply divergent ideological values, they shared a common concern for promoting authenticity as the basic, pivotal characteristic of their performers.

Social discourses, and namely film criticism, often looked down upon contemporary female stardom. It should not be overlooked that both *Attention! Bandits!* and *Miss Italia* place Lollobrigida's body under masculine

(1948-1949). For detailed accounts of the screenplay and the role Morante played in it, see Bardini, 'Elsa Morante e il cinema. Il trattamento di "Miss Italia"'; Bardini, *Elsa Morante e il cinema*.

96 Cosulich, *I film di Alberto Lattuada*, p. 47.



Fig. 4.5 Non-professional performers, feminine stardom, formulaic films. Gina Lollobrigida in *Miss Italia* (*Miss Italia*, Duilio Coletti, 1950)

authority—a brother and a lover in the former, and a father and a husband in the latter. This kind of patronising attitude was widespread among those analysing the aesthetic evaluation of female stardom. Many commentators petitioned for more adequate training, associated with traditional aesthetic values: ‘Beyond starlets, a film requires also an actress, a performing actress, who might possibly elevate the work to an artistic level, instead of being condemned because of her immaturity and permanently confined to the news section, as happens to starlets.’<sup>97</sup> In this view, art was pitted against mass culture, and legitimate actresses against stars. Just after directing his first feature film, Michelangelo Antonioni wrote a short, telling note: ‘It will be a happy day when we shall get rid of stardom, and the only admiration for actors will be artistically deserved.’<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, observers frequently emphasised the dangers associated with being a star without appropriate professional training. The film critic turned esteemed documentary filmmaker Gandi expressed this patronising attitude toward those on the verge of becoming female stars between the 1940s and the early 1950s:

97 Fantasyo, ‘Attrici e non solo Miss’, p. 42. See also Nediani, ‘Attori e tipi’.

98 Antonioni, ‘Attori e canarini’, p. 4.

Broadly speaking, Misses are only beautiful bodies, when they are so. They have not temperament, they have not a true 'face' of their own, they know nothing about acting. [...] Neorealist filmmakers' discoveries can be classified according to two categories: those with a real temperament, and those without. [...] The former and the latter, as soon as they become 'stars', lose their head. Soon abandoned, in a matter of a short time they ruin themselves both as women and as actresses.<sup>99</sup>

### The Show Must Go On. Professional Performers and Neorealist Cinema

Neorealist culture also held conflicting viewpoints with regard to professional actors. Whereas non-professionals exemplified the overall ideological and aesthetic change, established film actors were part and parcel of film production's regular workflow. Although the post-war era might be termed as transitional and thus accepted standards were accordingly questioned, actors often stretched their professional existence from the inter-war years into the post-war era. Moreover, performers usually belonged to the wider field of show business that included established theatre and popular entertainment, radio shows and popular music. The radical political change in 1945 did not do away with this culture, which determined not only post-war popular cinema but neorealism too. Eventually, post-war film culture saw an extension of the notion of film acting beyond its established boundaries. Non-professional performers and new-born stars hugely contributed to this shift, alongside the unprecedented relevance of previously marginal modes of performance.

To summarise, the careers of many established performers were prolonged into the post-war years, even if frequent adjustments were needed to cope with past personas. Furthermore, the period reshuffled legitimate styles of performance.

For example, renowned male film stars from the inter-war and war years also managed to prolong their success in the post-war period. Apart from the telling case of Vittorio De Sica, a *matinée* idol in Camerini's 1930s comedies,<sup>100</sup> many male actors until 1943 embodied in various ways Mussolini's fictitious

99 Gandin, 'Fanno il cinema guardandosi allo specchio', p. 180. A similar opinion is expressed in Meccoli, 'Il Molok cinema le vuole fresche', and Giani, 'Predivo col cuore a fumetti'. Notably, Giani associates popular classes with the lure of the film industry, and stardom with popular culture, i.e. comics.

100 On De Sica's career across decades and political shifts, see Micciché (ed.), *De Sica. Autore, regista, attore*; Masecchia, *Vittorio De Sica. Storia di un attore*.

proxies by impersonating authoritarian figures, often wearing uniforms and promoting Fascist policies. Among these were beloved inter-war stars such as Gino Cervi,<sup>101</sup> Fosco Giachetti,<sup>102</sup> and Amedeo Nazzari.<sup>103</sup> All of them were trained as established theatrical performers and actively joined prominent companies in the inter-war period, where their acting created well-rounded dramatic characters. Indeed, these three actors aptly illustrate a style of performance devoted entirely to building verisimilar characters. As key components driving the films' narrative, they represent what theatre historian Claudio Meldolesi termed the 'actor of the anti-language' (*attore dell'antilingua*) when referring to the style of acting under Fascism: a performer renouncing his own expressivity and entirely submitted to the needs of the play.<sup>104</sup> Thus, actors such as Cervi, Giachetti, and Nazzari seem leagues apart from established thinking about film acting in neorealist films: highly trained and skilled thespians who imbued their performances with strong personas and recurrently played commanding, if not despotic, roles. For instance, before the end of the war, Cervi played the role of medieval Italian warlord Ettore Fieramosca in the eponymous film Blasetti directed in 1938, in which he represented national military skills and virtues fighting treacherous foreign attempts to rule Italy. Nazzari, a fascinating romantic lead actor resembling Errol Flynn, oscillated between comedy and drama. But notoriously in films such as *Cavalleria* (Cavalry, Goffredo Alessandrini, 1936) and *Luciano Serra, pilota* (Luciano Serra, pilot, Goffredo Alessandrini, 1938), he played characters depicting heroic sacrifice for higher values such as the motherland and courage. He also co-starred with Giachetti in the propaganda film *Benghazi*, in which both played Italian officers countering the British invasion of former Italian colonies. Giachetti was likely the actor most implicated in Fascist culture, having embodied either military officers in films such as *White Squadron*, *Sentinelle di bronzo* (Sentinels of bronze, Romolo Marcellini, 1937), *The siege of the Alcazar*, *Carmen fra i rossi* (Carmen among the reds, Edgar Neville, 1939), and *Benghazi*, or heroes returning from the colonies, incarnating the enlightening function of the Italian nation, in films such as *Luce nelle tenebre* (Light in darkness, Mario Mattoli, 1941) or *L'amante segreta* (The secret lover, Carmine Gallone, 1941). Furthermore, some directors with whom Giachetti regularly worked, such as Genina

101 See Tellini, *Vita e arte di Gino Cervi*.

102 See Borghini, *Fosco Giachetti*; Gundle, 'The Uniformed Role Model. Fosco Giachetti'.

103 On Amedeo Nazzari, see Lancia and Pruzzo, *Amedeo Nazzari*; Gubitosi, *Amedeo Nazzari*.

104 Meldolesi, *Fondamenti del teatro italiano*. An overview can also be found in Angelini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Novecento*.

and Gallone, were among the few artists briefly ousted from national film production in the post-war era due to their cooperation with the Fascist regime. However, neither Cervi and Nazzari nor Giachetti suffered from their past star personas. Whereas the latter never regained the fame he had achieved before 1945, Cervi and Nazzari enjoyed great prominence in the post-war media. Immediately following the war, all three were recast in very similar ways.

The need to rely on established stars for film productions somehow conflicted with the post-war effort to renew the ideological framework of national cinema. Therefore, male actors, and notably those who previously played military figures, were recast as war veterans who came home dispossessed and betrayed by their own fatherland. As scholars such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Catherine O'Rawe convincingly explain, these war veterans' narratives substantiated the need to cope with a highly controversial past and a no less disorienting present.<sup>105</sup> Through the story of innocent soldiers sent to the warfront unaware of the murderous task they had to fulfill, and coming home only to find the urban, social, and emotional landscape they had left entirely devastated, Italian culture and society somehow excused people's involvement in Fascism and warfare while simultaneously explaining the widespread social chaos affecting post-war Italy. This is the story portrayed in *Life Begins Anew*, described earlier. We see it again in films such as *Tragic Hunt*, whose chief male characters, played by Andrea Checchi and Massimo Girotti, both return from German concentration camps. The same goes for Max Neufeld's *Revenge* and Lattuada's *The Bandit*, respectively starring Cervi and Nazzari.<sup>106</sup> Beyond an overall discussion of post-war Italian culture and issues related to memory and trauma, what is relevant in these examples is that narrative made a virtue out of necessity; or, to put it plainly, stories profited from pre-extant celebrities while designing for them a more palatable fictional role. Pre-war styles of performance did not survive solely in popular film culture; Cervi, Giachetti, and Nazzari, as much as Checchi or Girotti, also acted in their usual dramatic style as lead stars in acclaimed neorealist films including *The Bandit* and *Tragic Hunt*, or in films that we would today categorise as neorealist such as *Revenge* or *Life Begins Anew*. They embodied traditional dramatic characters facing adverse circumstances with consistent reactions, deploying an acting style made up of internal grief, resolute movements, and a grave tone. Amidst

105 Ben-Ghiat, 'Un cinéma d'après-guerre: le néoréalisme italien et la transition démocratique'; O'Rawe, 'Back for good: melodrama and the returning soldier in post-war Italian cinema'.

106 On Lattuada's film, see Villa, *Botteghe di scrittura per il cinema italiano*.

the landscape of wretched cities and devastated relationships, these actors sketched figures illustrating the permanence of traditional masculinity and culture, defeated but ready to rise again. Neorealist cinema was not made up exclusively of loose narratives and untrained performers in outdoor settings but often relied on qualified stars who acted as focal points of traditionally designed film narratives. However, rather than embodying authoritarian figures who lead the narratives and the nation toward a brighter future, as they did in the Fascist period, their characters dealt often unsuccessfully with post-war issues.

Non-professional performers, recently created female stars, and male stars inherited from inter-war cinema did not work separately or on their own. Often, all three types performed together in the same film, creating a dense representation consisting of a wide range of physiognomies and acting skills. For instance, in *Bitter Rice*, Mangano, formerly a mannequin and an extra who was elevated to lead actress, and Vallone, journalist and football player, are lined up with Gassman, who received classical theatre training,<sup>107</sup> and Doris Dowling, who previously had parts in Hollywood films such as *Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945) and *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946). In the background, a large number of non-professional performers portray the rice pickers and peasants working at the farm. Moreover, many established actors were summoned to substantiate marginal characters. For instance, two of the rascals helping Walter (Gassman) to steal the crop are Checco Rissone and Nico Pepe. Rissone came from a renowned family of actors and had worked on the stage since the early 1930s in well-respected productions with directors such as the French Jacques Copeau as well as more routine ones. Pepe had also worked for both the legitimate stage and music hall since the 1930s, regularly collaborating with the figurehead of Italian post-war theatre renewal *Il Piccolo Teatro*, and had contributed to Italian film production with an impressive number of character roles. Neorealist films regularly entrusted experienced performers with establishing an effective background, sketching convincing characters in just a few frames, and bringing in film production skills and know-how. Comic actors played a non-negligible part in this contribution to neorealist films and in terms of quantity represented a significant part of neorealist films' casting. Most of all, comic actors were influential with regard to representation, performance, and authenticity.

107 Gassman was one of the most talented and prominent Italian actors in the second half of the twentieth century. Among the many sources available on his art and career, see Deriu (ed.), *Vittorio Gassman: l'ultimo mattatore*; Gambetti, *Il teatro e il cinema di Vittorio Gassman*.

Comic actors who were imported into otherwise dramatic narratives presented a different way of articulating representation based on two key features: the proliferation of centres of attraction and counterpoint. By the first term, I mean a representation that does not entirely focus on a leading actor but places next to him (and more seldom her) a sidekick. For instance, if we look at *The Bandit*, beside the tragic figure of Ernesto (Amedeo Nazzari) we find Carlo played by Carlo Campanini, a renowned comedian. In the lines he exchanges with the leading star, Carlo offers a human, ironic stance on the film's events. Accordingly, even if Nazzari is the fulcrum of representation, the sidekick provides an alternative, nuanced voice. This template was derived from popular revue shows (*avanspettacolo*), which had routines wherein a comedian was paired with an allegedly serious character. As comedian Dino Falconi and journalist Angelo Frattini once explained: 'Maybe the audience is not aware of how important a good "sidekick" is. Whoever is intimately familiar with the stage knows how much synergy, extraordinary timing, acute sense of humour and self-confidence are requested to fill in adequately this difficult task.'<sup>108</sup> As a counterpoint to this, I would highlight the variation of tones, shifting from tragic to comic, that comedians added to neorealist films. For instance, a film such as *High plains of the Stars* tells the story of the heroic resistance against the Nazi occupiers set in the Alps. The cast includes pre-1945 stars such as Roldano Lupi, Antonio Centa, and Dina Sassoli, who embodied characters sacrificing their lives for the sake of victory and national progress. However, within this heterogeneous partisan party a weird character pops up: a sales representative from Bologna who decides to enlist in the Resistance. He speaks with a strong regional accent, has no military experience, is generally clumsy, and consequently is the source of a series of gags. This comic figure is portrayed by Tino Scotti, a renowned Milanese comic actor who offers a lively comic counterpoint to the sombre, tragic performance of Lupi and Centa, thereby enriching the variety of tones in the film.

In terms of performance, comic actors were inclined to utilise rhythmic variance and abrupt shifts of tone. Rather than creating a coherent dramatic character, their style of performance aimed to produce vivid figures who grasped the audience's attention. Most popular comedians began their careers in local theatres acting in revues, i.e. heterogeneous shows, which did not rely on coherent dramatic personas. Within such a framework, therefore, comedians were accustomed to facing demanding audiences

<sup>108</sup> Falconi and Frattini, *Guida alla rivista e all'operetta*, quoted in De Matteis, Lombardi, and Somarè (eds), *Follie del varietà*, p. 257.

and needed to promptly react to their appreciation or disappointment. As a result, comedians coming from popular theatre favoured improvisation rather than the creation of rounded, consistent characters. Dante Maggio, a Neapolitan comedian who was cast in character roles in neorealist productions such as *A day in the life* (together with Nazzari and Girotti), *Tombolo* (with Fabrizi), *Woman Trouble* (with Magnani and Girotti), and *Under the Olive Tree* (with Bosè and Vallone), summarised his early training on the popular stage as follows:

Dante Maggio, myself, followed in his family's footsteps. [...] The first time I was on stage I must have been seven or eight years old. [...] At the Orfeo theatre the public was enthusiastic, much nicer and smarter than today. Whenever one of the actors playing uttered the decisive lines: 'Mummy, my beloved mummy, do forgive me, I will never do that again!' [*'Mammà, mammà mia bella perdoname, nun lo facce cchiù.'*] the theatre almost collapsed under the applause.<sup>109</sup>

Traditional, practical training in popular theatre usually provided the credentials of the vast majority of Italian post-war comedians. This experience branded such actors as inherently popular and accordingly marked their work and roles in terms of class. Basically, comedians were often cast to embody proletarians or the underprivileged, as in the case of Fabrizi, from his part as the Roman priest Don Pietro in *Rome, Open City* to that of the Umbrian peasant Zio Tigna in *To Live in Peace*. Fabrizi's director described the combination of professional background and ideological value in the personas of some actors as follows:

My father was a worker [...], therefore I was born proletarian. I have always lived in a fifty apartments housing block and I could see the problems of poor humble people [...]. I spent my childhood in Jovinelli theatre, where Neapolitan theatre companies performed [...]. It is therefore somehow logical for me seeking a certain kind of performer. I did *Processo alla città* [*The City Stands Trial*, 1952] just with actors stemming from Neapolitan melodramas [*sceneggiate*]; I got started with Aldo Fabrizi who worked in popular revue shows; I did *Angelina* with Anna Magnani, who came from theatre. We had very spontaneous character players, such as Ave Ninchi, Dante Maggio, etc. Magnani was an extraordinary actress, and so were

109 Dante Maggio, quoted in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, pp. 34-35.

Fabrizi, Manfredi, Sordi. Sordi too has proletarian origins; we lived amidst the people and we can speak the language of this non-bourgeois class.<sup>110</sup>

Actors coming from popular theatre, as opposed to inter-war film acting, relied on verisimilar leading characters. Popular theatre's style of performance was rooted in a close bond with popular audiences and based on a loose dramatic structure and on improvisation. Identification with popular local culture and class values, together with ad-lib performances, enhanced the impression of authenticity: in many cases, comedians from popular theatre strengthened the feeling that characters and representations incorporated fresh reality rather than exhausted narrative formulas. Accordingly, such comedians contributed to post-war neorealist culture by enriching representation itself with a wide range of routines, regional accents, and vivid physiognomies.

To conclude, beyond the preponderance of non-professional actors, neorealism employed a wide array of performers. On the one hand, it recast formerly renowned stars; on the other, it expanded the boundaries of film acting, bringing to the fore its aesthetic and ideological novelty. Untrained actors, newly generated female stars, and comedians coming from popular theatre all reconfigured the smooth acting style of the inter-war period, blurred inherited distinctions between high and low culture, and disregarded verisimilitude with regard to acting. It is this peculiar and multifaceted human presence that characterises many neorealist films, creating an unprecedented blend. The most remarkable product of this union, and the one best symbolising its hopes and pitfalls, its novelty and legacy, is likely Anna Magnani.

### **Cries, Laughs, and Songs. Anna Magnani in Transition**

On the outskirts of Rome: a miserable slum peopled with impoverished women and crowds of children running around. Two cars enter the frame; those inside beckon to the people, who gather around the vehicles as they pull over. A number of well-dressed journalists and a photographer get out of the cars and start exploring the shanty, while kids pull at their sleeves to attract their attention. They walk over to the poor homes, question women, tactlessly take pictures of the destitute children. A woman bathes one of

110 Luigi Zampa, quoted in Fasoli, Guastini, Restuccia, and Rivosecchi (eds), *La città del cinema. Produzione e lavoro nel cinema italiano 1930/1970*, p. 285.

her children on the porch: the camera pans to connect her to the journalists and the photographer, who is surrounded by a group of local women. The journalist leading the group asks the photographer to shoot the scene, which epitomises a remote sense of cleanness and decency. A reverse shot shows the woman in close-up, outraged: she returns the look fiercely, and rather than posing for the camera, throws the basin of dirty water at the intruders.

This is the opening sequence of *Angelina*, a vehicle for Magnani for which she also worked on the script. It was one of her biggest box-office triumphs and highlights many features that determined her career in terms of performance and persona. Her acting combines static attitudes and outraged gazes with sudden outbursts of emotion. Her character is situated among the lower class in an impoverished Roman neighbourhood and is closely associated with motherhood: she offers a counterpoint to the slick act of mercy of the bourgeoisie expressed towards the underprivileged. It inspires her action in the ensuing narrative, when she is at the forefront of a political protest movement advocating the rights of the destitute population. Accordingly, Magnani comes from 'the people', identifies with Rome, and represents post-war active womankind struggling for empowerment and shaking up gender and class-inherited habits and structures. By conflating trends circulating in the post-war era and tying them to a real space and time—the post-war outskirts of Rome, which the Fascist regime had designed to relocate the lower class—Magnani offers a realistic representation. She does so in terms of iconography, being placed amidst neglected neighbourhood and characters; the same goes for the narratives she contributes at building, based on the everyday struggle for existence among the lower class; and also for acting, which she forges through inconsistent performances and the use of dialect. The actress' identification with realism was unequivocal, indeed: twenty-two years later, she declared: '[...] I am effective only when playing realistic, truthful, human characters. [...] In cinema I can do something valuable only in realistic films.'<sup>111</sup> Thanks to her almost fortuitous performance enacting the character of Pina in *Rome, Open City*,<sup>112</sup> Magnani was regularly connected with neorealism itself and was repeatedly credited for her individual contribution to its birth and significance. Sergio Amidei, one of neorealism's key intellectuals and screenplay writers, described

111 Lietta Tornabuoni, quoted in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, p. 404.

112 Apparently, one of the producers, Carlo Civallero, intended to cast Clara Calamai. However, screenplay writer Sergio Amidei, Roberto Rossellini, and producer Giuseppe Amato preferred Magnani, who finally won the role. See Sergio Amidei, in Faldini and Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, p. 92; Bruni, *Roma città aperta*, p. 34.

Magnani's involvement in Rossellini's milestone as follows: 'In 1945, when I visited her in Via Amba Aradam [Magnani's flat] to submit and read her the screenplay she said, I remember this as though it happened yesterday [...] "It's the best story I have ever read, and seen too." To be honest, Anna had a feeling that neither me nor Rossellini had."<sup>113</sup>

What was the nature of Magnani's contribution to neorealism? What was her training, and how could it be classified as realistic? What determined her star persona, and how did it take part in the post-war outburst of stardom? Finally, what was Magnani's national and political significance, in an epoch of ideological conflict and political turmoil? In the ensuing pages, I focus on the most celebrated neorealist performer, examining her work in terms of acting, mode of representation, and star persona. Accordingly, I interrogate Magnani's close connection to neorealism by scrutinising her style of performance, its location within specific representational patterns, and the values and social discourses associated with the actress. My general aim is to examine the manifold ways in which post-war culture created authenticity, and how this authenticity could expand and influence notions of film acting and film art beyond the nation's boundaries.

When *Rome, Open City* was released, Magnani was thirty-seven years old. In the 1930s and 1940s, actresses gained celebrity and became stars much younger; alternatively, older established theatre performers acted as supporting actresses, as the sisters Gramatica, Maria Jacobini, Ada Dondini, and Bella Starace Sainati illustrate. Magnani was positioned between these two categories: in 1945 she was a highly esteemed theatre performer *but* could hardly be considered a film star. She had worked in a variety of theatre genres, having been educated in the mid-1920s at the Reale Scuola di Recitazione Eleonora Duse (Eleonora Duse Royal School of Acting), and then worked for some of the most prominent legitimate stage companies. She rapidly moved from minor roles to more notable ones. In the mid-1930s, she clearly stood out and could perform a wide range of roles. It was from the early 1930s that she constantly began alternating between dramas, featuring in some of the most celebrated companies, and music hall, working with, among others, Michele Galdieri, a Neapolitan songwriter, playwright, and screenplay writer who held a crucial function within Italian popular theatre and music in the 1930s and 1940s. The late 1930s and early 1940s reinforced this combination of legitimate stage and music hall performances in Magnani's career. In 1938, the Roman Teatro delle Arti (Theatre of the Arts), which was under the direction of the eclectic Anton Giulio Bragaglia,

113 Sergio Amidei, quoted in Hockholler, with Magnani, *Anna Magnani: la biografia*, p. 71.

hired the actress and cast her in prominent tragic roles in plays by Robert E. Sherwood and Eugene O'Neill. In the same period, she also co-starred in a company with Neapolitan comedian Totò (Antonio De Curtis), possibly the most famous comic actor in twentieth-century Italian culture. The company extolled the fame and skills of the two actors, who often improvised within loose dramatic structures.

During the fifteen years between her early roles in theatre and *Rome, Open City*, cinema played a minor role in the actress's career, and she was barely more than typecast. Today's historian is struck by the gap in this period in her career between Magnani's growing importance in both legitimate stage and popular theatre and the irrelevance of her work in film production. Although her first film roles date back to the late 1920s—notably *Scampolo* (*Scampolo*, Augusto Genina, 1928)—she was never cast as a protagonist before 1945. Magnani was regularly cast as a character actress, usually displaying the same features: she played waitresses in *Tempo Massimo* (*Full Speed*, Mario Mattoli, 1934) and *La principessa Tarakanova* (*Betrayal*, Fyodor Otsep and Mario Soldati, 1938); questionable chanteuses and performers in *Cavalry*, *Teresa Venerdì* (*Doctor, Beware!*, Vittorio De Sica, 1941), *La fortuna viene dal cielo* (*Luck comes from Heaven*, Ákos Ráthonyi, 1942), and *L'ultima carrozzella* (*The last wagon*, Mario Mattoli, 1943); and popular characters, like the fruitseller in *Campo' de' Fiori* (*The Peddler and the Lady*, Mario Bonnard, 1943). The latter role has long been considered influential on her post-war career, also because Federico Fellini was among the scriptwriters. We should not forget that Magnani received praise and awards for her part in *Rome, Open City*, but that the award bestowed on her in 1946 by the Sindacato Nazionale Giornalisti Cinematografici Italiani (Italian Film Journalists National Association), the Nastro d'argento (Silver Ribbon), was for the best supporting actress. She was to wait until 1948 to receive the award for best actress in *Angelina*.

Anna Magnani's acting is celebrated for its moments of passion and outbursts of gestures disclosing an inner, truthful, *authentic identity*. The entry in the canonising *Filmlexicon* for *Rome, Open City* summarised her acting as follows: 'After many years, thanks to Magnani, for the first time our cinema provided us with an authentic, live creature. [...] Henceforth Magnani could aspire to any endeavor [...] because the characters she lends her lively face to all entail the mark of truth.'<sup>114</sup> But how was this truth construed? Magnani's performance skills relied on the mastering of a wide variety of registers. These ranged from the perfect union of her passionate acting and the roles she played, as is the case with the celebrated sequence of the

114 Carancini, 'Anna Magnani', pp. 83-84.

death of Pina in *Rome, Open City*, or the emotional collapse of Maddalena in *Bellissima*, to more distanced performances, when the focus switches from emotions embedded in a narrative to the display of a technical skill, such as singing. For instance, in *Down with Misery*, Magnani represents an honest petty-bourgeois woman reduced to misery in the aftermath of war, together with her husband (Nino Besozzi), who works as a truck driver. Neither she nor her husband intend to enter the dirty business of their neighbour (Virgilio Riento), who is selling on the black market and getting rich on the back of other people's misery. When the neighbour treats them to dinner and shows off his brand-new radio, Magnani's character replies by singing a Roman folk song and concludes her performance by hugging both her husband and the neighbour. In just one action, Magnani's acting conflates her qualities as a singer, her emotional authenticity as the narrative has built it, and her identification with Rome and its popular culture.

Magnani consistently included in her performances a singing number. The film *Volcano* includes one of the most renowned: Maddalena (Magnani) sits at a table on the porch of a restaurant together with Donato, a rascal (Rossano Brazzi) who seduced her in her youth, and her younger sister Maria (Geraldine Brooks). They are surrounded by a crowd of bystanders. Maddalena sings a popular song, *Ciuri Ciuri*, and soon the crowd surrounding the three protagonists breaks into song, while Maddalena struggles to keep Donato away from Maria. The sequence foregrounds once more the actress's vocal qualities, showcasing them with a popular overtone and with passion, punctuated by frequent gesturing. So what is it that such routines indicate? In my view, they relocate into film performance a set of skills previously carried out on a stage, either legitimate or popular. Scholars such as Tony Mitchell and Catherine O'Rawe have pointed out this professional competence, which film critics have often downplayed in favour of a discourse of authenticity.<sup>115</sup> I believe Magnani's effective acting was the outcome of this rich and varied professional background, born in the popular theatre, and namely music hall, in which improvisation was crucial. As Magnani herself put it: 'The best school for an actor is the stage. [...] This kind of apprenticeship is invaluable because it is carried out in front of a real audience, an audience which is implacable in its judgements. An actor can feel whether or not the audience is with him and he corrects himself instinctively.'<sup>116</sup> According to Rossellini, this variance in performance and

115 See Mitchell, 'The Construction and Reception of Anna Magnani in Italy and the English-Speaking World, 1945-1988'; O'Rawe, 'Anna Magnani: Voice, Body, Accent'.

116 Anna Magnani quoted in Pistagnesi (ed.), *Anna Magnani*, p. 49.

the inventiveness that actors demonstrate through it are a cornerstone for neorealism:

The compound of neorealism [...] came to be composed through the actors' spontaneous creation: notably Anna Magnani's and Aldo Fabrizi's. Who might counter that these performers were the first to embody neorealism? That the 'strong men' variety show sketches, or the 'Roman stornelli' [...] as Magnani invented them, heralded some moments in the films of the neorealist era?<sup>117</sup>

Singing, crying, and gesturing became Magnani's hallmarks. Her sudden shifts in acting also provided audience and critics—in Italy and overseas—with a sense of authenticity that originated in inconsistency. In his review of *Woman Trouble*, *The New York Times* film critic, Bosley Crowther, who was pivotal in creating an audience for Italian neorealism in the United States,<sup>118</sup> described 'wonderful Anna Magnani' who 'has justly established her fame as the most dynamic individual performer in post-war Italian films' and 'proves that comedy, rich and rambunctious, is also within her range in the surprisingly bright Italian picture.'<sup>119</sup>

I emphasise dynamism and rambunctiousness as an indication of the extent to which variety was inherently considered a novelty in performance, singling out Magnani's characters from other examples. Her gestures, though, reappeared in film after film and disclosed issues of authorship, or at least an individual approach to the characters. In addition to her singing performance, I would like to pick two gestural patterns from Magnani's performances to clarify my assumption. If we look at the photos of the variety show *Volumineide* (1942), in which she appeared with Totò, we notice a bodily attitude that recurred throughout her post-war film career, beginning with *Peddlin' in Society* (Fig. 4.6): her fists placed at her hips, her elbows stretched out, her chin raised up to a challenging angle, or conversely pushed against her chest, as though ready to charge. The whole body expresses an opposition against a character or a situation and seems to prepare the actress for an ensuing explosion. This gestural pattern articulates apparently contradictory attitudes—inbound at first, outbound when the outburst happens—and goes back to what Russian theatre director and theoretician Vsevolod Meyerhold

117 Rossellini and Verdone, 'Colloquio sul neorealismo', p. 85.

118 On Crowther's role, see Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973*, notably pp. 40-61.

119 Crowther, 'Anna Magnani Plays Light Role in "Woman Trouble," Film at the Little Cine Met'.



Fig. 4.6 Building authenticity by relying on performance skills. Anna Magnani's opposition in *L'Onorevole Angelina* (*Angelina*, Luigi Zampa, 1947)

named *otkaz* (inverse movement) and his pupil Eisenstein coined 'expressive movement'.<sup>120</sup> This pattern strengthens the relevance of a gesture by basing it on an antithetical attitude.<sup>121</sup>

An even more recurrent pattern is what we might term 'solo performance'. In *Peddlin' in Society*, Gioconda (Magnani), an upstart who built her wealth thanks to black-market profits and who pretends to be cultivated, is cheated and deprived of her fortune. Count Ghirani (Vittorio De Sica), the aristocrat she chased out of his mansion, patiently conveys the bad news. Magnani stares into the camera, her face slowly expressing growing awareness and misery, acting just for the camera and our eyes, not addressing her diegetic counterpart. This pattern, disclosing for the audience an inner feeling, is iterated in all momentous sequences of her post-war career: when Angelina is told about what is happening behind her back (in *Angelina*), when Maddalena in the screening room realises that the film crew to which she entrusted the future career of her daughter is laughing at her (in *Bellissima*), or when

120 See Gordon and Law, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*.

121 An extensive analysis of this strategy in the framework of an anthropology of the performer can be found in Barba and Savarese (eds), *L'arte segreta dell'attore*, notably pp. 161-171.

Maddalena understands that Maria fell in love with Donato, the man she loved and a true scoundrel (in *Volcano*), among many other examples. This pattern produces authenticity by means of performance. Through a monstrational mode,<sup>122</sup> that is through a spatially and temporally continuous frame, which is usually a frontal one, we are presented with the disclosure of the inner world of the character. The actress performs this shift apparently only for our benefit.

Opposition and solo performance usually anticipate the major attribute of Anna Magnani's acting: an uncontrollable outburst of passion, gestures, and outcry, as in the celebrated sequence of *Rome, Open City* depicting the death of Pina. The scene in point might be easily split in two: in its first part, Nazi soldiers round up Pina and the women living in the council house while they arrest the men found in the building. Magnani is subject to the sickening advances of a Nazi soldier; first she gives him a dirty look in an oppositional mode, then she slaps his hand. Basically, her body is framed and repressed while she is burning. The event that triggers her reaction and leads to the second part of the sequence is her lover Francesco's arrest. The two exchange loud cries in the courtyard, as Nazis drag him away. She bursts out and starts running haphazardly and desperately from the courtyard out into the street while crying out loud her lover's name, until a machine-gun takes her down. Magnani's acting thus stands out because her performance prepares this explosion by framing her body in a constrictive setting, which enhances her ensuing physical and emotional liberation. This pattern recurs in film after film, from Rossellini's first post-war film to Magnani's work in Hollywood, where she was cast in *The Rose Tattoo* (Daniel Mann, 1955), the part for which she earned an Academy Award for best actress, and *Wild Is the Wind* (George Cukor, 1957). It can be argued that her Hollywood roles emphasised these outbursts and melodramatic overtones as much as her laughter as a hallmark of authenticity. Both Italian and American critics promptly equated this impetuous style of performance with a natural energy, as did this anonymous reviewer of *Volcano*:

In melodramatic prodigality, Anna Magnani outdoes both story and setting. She acts the unhappy heroine with her own vivid personality, slouching body, disheveled hair, grieving eyes and caged face. [...] Whether she is mourning the death of her dog, shouting obscenely at the islanders

122 I refer to the term of 'monstration' as opposed to 'narration', the former relying on the continuity of the signifier, the latter on its discontinuity and articulation, as discussed in Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière. Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*.

or tipsily singing a holiday song, she makes most other movie actresses look like pale blossoms indeed.<sup>123</sup>

I pinpoint here another critical quality of Magnani's acting, which the reviewer mentions: her performance was the representational fulcrum by way of excess, overshadowing narrative verisimilitude and thus also the consistency of the characters she embodied. Her layered, varied acting provided the characters, not the narratives, with eagerness and effectiveness. On the one hand, this style originated from the 'great actor' (*grand'attore*) tradition, a national legacy bestowing on leading performers the right to tower over other actors by virtue of their dramatic skills. On the other, this mode of performance renovated Italian film acting, which until 1945 had usually yielded to the needs of narrative coherence.

As a summary, I would like to address four key issues in Magnani's acting. First, her style was composite, merging both the legitimate stage and popular theatre—'impersonation', as King puts it<sup>124</sup>—and the expression of sheer technical skills when singing, shouting, or frantically gesturing. Secondly, this composite style modernised Italian film acting by drawing attention to the performer's body and performance rather than absorbing it in the represented character. Thirdly, this style of performance was inherently popular, as it partly originated in popular theatrical genres (music hall) and its performances often entailed popular cultural forms such as local songs and dialects. Finally, this style strengthened the feeling of authenticity by articulating through vocal and bodily gestures a dialectics based on repression/rebellion.

These performances occurred within a recurrent, specific setting: a representational framework. In my view, Magnani's work can be read in terms of representation, that is, a spatio-temporal setting. Namely, I would like to look at her performance as a 'scene', as melodrama, and as a portrait. When this momentous sequence happens in a film, whether a celebrated neorealist masterpiece such as *Rome, Open City* or a formulaic drama about a nun's repressed longing for motherhood in *Suor Letizia (The Awakening, Mario Camerini, 1956)*, Magnani always acts within a peculiar spatial organisation. Basically, she 'makes a scene' in the twofold meaning of the word: she expresses her emotions intensely (misery, dismay, refusal, or happiness and joy), and she does so to a crowd of bystanders, thus turning what has so far been described as a verisimilar everyday setting into a stage

123 Anonymous, 'Cinema – The New Pictures – Volcano'.

124 King, 'Articulating Stardom'.



Fig. 4.7 Building a scene. Anna Magnani in *Molti sogni per le strade* (*Woman Trouble*, Mario Camerini, 1948)

for her performance. *Woman Trouble* is a realistic comedy depicting the misfortunes of a young couple and their child: Paolo (Massimo Girotti) is unemployed and cannot make a living, while Linda (Magnani) constantly reproaches him for not being a good husband. Out of desperation, Paolo steals an expensive car together with the small-time thief Donato (Checco Rissone). However, on their way out of town to sell the car, the two men accidentally run into Linda and the child. She halts the car and starts loudly rebuking Paolo in the street: the more the tongue-lashing goes on, the more people gather around the car, finally surrounding the couple and the shouting woman. Magnani's acting here changes a neutral space into a theatrical one wherein she holds the central position. (Fig. 4.7)

In order to 'make a scene', two ingredients are essential: an emotional outburst and an audience before which the tirade is performed. The outbreak of feelings and gestures also corresponds to a boiling point in the narratives, a major twist in the character's path: she is often forced to revise her past choices, while her identity crumbles under the pressure of overwhelming forces. These narrative shifts paired with the character's emotional identity are a typical feature of melodrama. Here I would like to stress the potential double meaning of the notion within Italian culture: on the one hand, it refers to melodrama—widely discussed from the 1970s to the 1990s

within film studies—as a genre typical of classical Hollywood cinema;<sup>125</sup> on the other hand, the term refers also to the ‘operatic’ as a specific Italian cultural legacy merging popular narratives, live performance, and music and usually revolving around tragic female fates.<sup>126</sup> I believe that Magnani’s performances are frequently entangled in such representational frameworks wherein her particular style of acting, made of heterogeneous registers (tragedy, comedy, singing, etc.), can find its place due to a precise national legacy. It comes as no surprise that soon after *Rome, Open City*, Magnani was cast in a top-grossing production directed by Gallone combining Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Tosca* (1899) with a tale of Roman partisans: *Before Him All Rome Trembled*.<sup>127</sup> An anonymous American reviewer hit the nail on the head in his commentary: ‘The overblown eloquence of gesture and voice in tragic opera and the grim melo-naturalism of a modern police state are shrewdly used to enhance each other. The opera house serves, too, as a huge, machine-like symbol of a nation. [...] There is also the magnificent Anna Magnani (pronounced *mon-yon-ee*), who is soon, for better or worse, to come to Hollywood. [...] Her acting style, too, is Mediterranean in its richness.’<sup>128</sup>

The frames for these scenes are a patent indication of their theatricality: squares, window frames, or proper stages offer Magnani a space to emerge and showcase her tirades. Either cursing at a bunch of disrespectful kids from a balcony, as in *Unknown Men of S. Marino*; laughing and shouting surrounded by policemen at the top of a staircase, as in the episode *Anna* which Visconti directed in *We, the Women*; or playing an eighteenth-century actress on stage as in *La carrozza d’oro* (*The Golden Coach*, Jean Renoir, 1953), Magnani always stands out during these explosions. Moreover, these scenes articulate a relationship between the individual and society—‘chorality’ as Alsop puts it<sup>129</sup>—by visually associating Magnani with a group of people paying attention to her. The crowd surrounding Magnani when she argues, harangues, and fights provides her character with an audience and, more

125 An encompassing account of this debate can be found in Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is. Studies in Melodrama and the Women’s Film*; Landy (ed.), *Imitations of Life*; Gledhill, ‘Melodrama’.

126 I attempted to describe the predominance of the latter meaning of the notion in the inter-war film debate in Pitassio, ‘Divi in uniforme. Melodramma e divismo nel cinema italiano degli anni Trenta’. A thorough discussion of the relationship between melodrama and realism in Italian post-war cinema can be found in Bayman, *The Operatic and the Everyday in Post-war Italian Film Melodrama*; on post-war Italian film melodrama, see Morreale, *Così piangevano*.

127 A detailed reflection on the film and the writing of film history can be found in O’Rawe, *Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma: opera, melodrama and the Resistance*.

128 Anonymous, ‘Cinema—Also Showing: Before Him All Rome Trembled’, p. 40.

129 Alsop, ‘The Imaginary Crowd’.

importantly, with a representation of 'the people' that she stands for. The most simplistic representation of this connection is a backdrop, as in the sequences of *Woman Trouble* and *Volcano* described above: a heterogeneous group of bystanders. Sometimes, the relationship between individual/crowd becomes overtly political, as in *Angelina*, when the women living in the same neighbourhood as the protagonist choose her to represent their political concerns. In the closing sequence, Angelina addresses the women, declaring she is one of them. More rarely in Magnani's film oeuvre, this articulation is subject to questioning, and the bond between the actress and the mass of people around her expresses contradiction or conflict, as in *The Miracle*, the second episode of the diptych *L'amore (Ways of Love)*, Roberto Rossellini, 1948), and *Bellissima*. In the former, a laughing crowd derides and persecutes the half-wit abused shepherdess, who is persuaded that St. Joseph himself impregnated her, whereas more sadly a drifter abused her. In the latter, the residents of the council house where Spartaco, Maddalena, and Maria live spread out onto the stairs, echo from one window to another, roar when Spartaco chases them away, and constantly criticise Maddalena's ambition. Thus, the relationship between Magnani and the people represents both the support for a new notion of woman's agency and the constraints its expression finds on its way.

From 1947 on, Magnani became the subject of film productions conceived as explicit homages to her artistic personality. This form of representation might be termed as a portrait, as German philosopher Georg Simmel put it, that is, a unified reading of a multiplicity of visible features. The portrait grounds its interpretation in the appearances of the physical being.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, as French film theoretician Jacques Aumont emphasises, a portrait derives its meaning from its supposed truthfulness.<sup>131</sup> That is, we assume that the unifying reading of the visible features conveys the truth about the represented subject. I underline here the notion of *truthfulness* because of its close relationship to the overall project of neorealism as an exact rendition of reality through its sensible appearance. Prominent painters affiliated with neorealist culture, such as Carlo Levi and Renato Guttuso, painted portraits of the actress in 1954 and 1960 respectively. Cinema thus foreran painting. I believe some films produced between 1947 and 1953 intentionally aimed to portray Magnani:<sup>132</sup> she is not only constantly

<sup>130</sup> Simmel, 'Das problem des Portraits'.

<sup>131</sup> Aumont, *Du visage au cinéma*, notably pp. 21-24.

<sup>132</sup> Obviously, I am not considering here a later and no less explicit homage such as *Mamma Roma*.

at the centre of the stage in terms of both narrative significance and spatial relevance, she is also the heart of the film production and aesthetic project from its outset, active in shaping and promoting it. Whereas *Angelina* is basically a vehicle for Magnani, who was partly responsible for the screenplay and the costume design, some other films are construed and circulated as a unique encounter between two artists, i.e. the director and the actress. This outstanding cooperation within Italian film culture glorifies both the unprecedented relevance of the film director and the importance of an authentic female agency. *Ways of Love*, *Bellissima*, and *The Golden Coach* are all designed and produced to celebrate the collaboration of respective directors and the celebrated actress.<sup>133</sup> In *The Miracle*, the second episode of the diptych, the opening credit sequence presents us with a statement: 'Questo film è un omaggio all'arte di ANNA MAGNANI [in capital letters]. Roberto Rossellini' (This film is a tribute to the art of ANNA MAGNANI. Roberto Rossellini).

Later, Rossellini interpreted his film—namely the first episode, *Una voce umana* (*A Human Voice*), based on Jean Cocteau's monologue *La Voix humaine* (1932)—as a close scrutiny of Magnani herself, a unique spectacle:

Cinema is also a microscope, for sure. It can take us by the hand and lead us to discover things the human eye might not notice [...] More than any other topic, *A Human Voice* gave me the chance to use the camera as a microscope. Even more so, since Anna Magnani was the phenomenon for close analysis.<sup>134</sup>

The posters advertising the film read: 'A great film of Anna Magnani and Roberto Rossellini', foregrounding the cooperative nature of their endeavor. Furthermore, *A Human Voice* capitalises on the love affair between Rossellini and Magnani: the dog appearing in some shots is the Belgian shepherd Rossellini gave Magnani as a gift, and the whole episode was shot while their romance was coming to an end. Accordingly, the episode constantly blurs the threshold between life and fiction, reality and representation. In the two episodes of *Ways of Love*, whose subjects are quite different—an abandoned woman alone in despair in *A Human Voice*, and an idiotic abused shepherdess in *The Miracle*—Magnani occupies centre stage and freely performs her roles throughout the whole

133 For a discussion of the director/actress cooperation in the aftermath of neorealism, see Di Salvo, *Redirecting Neorealism*.

134 Rossellini, 'Dix ans de cinéma II'.

narrative, crying, chuckling, shouting, gasping, and sighing. This freedom of expression, together with the wide range of attitudes deployed, conveys the impression of a truthful, vivid portrayal of a personality beyond the fictitious characters embodied.

*Bellissima* is conceived as a portrait, too. However, whereas Rossellini's endeavor harnesses the revelatory power of the camera, unveiling the deep personality of an actress through her sensible forms, *Bellissima* relies on a dialectic collaboration based on enactment as a pathway to achieving reality. The film's opening sequence encircles the credits with the two names of Anna Magnani and Luchino Visconti in full-frame size, while in the background are the images of an orchestra and choir performing Gaetano Donizetti's comic opera *L'elisir d'amore* (*The Elixir of Love*, 1832), notably a story of deception and fraud. This sequence summarises two basic assumptions of the film: the two personalities assure the film's artistic quality, as in *Ways of Love*; while the reference to *The Elixir of Love* anticipates the crucial motif of duplicity, i.e. a pivotal issue of acting itself—people pretending to be what they are not. Throughout the film, Maddalena (Magnani) goes back and forth from Cinecittà (the Rome film studios), the lower-class neighbourhood of Prenestino, and the Tiber in the area of Via Ostiense, struggling to enter her five-year-old daughter Maria into a competition to select young talent for a film production. In a short amount of time, she forces her to go through all the steps to become an actress—dance and acting lessons, hairstyle, make-up, and auditions, whereas Maddalena is the only one truly willing to step out of her condition. The whole film concentrates on the actress. In a renowned sequence, Magnani is placed in front of a mirror—a recurrent device, appearing also in *A Human Voice*—while speaking to her daughter, she admires herself and reflects on acting, speculating on it as a simple act of belief and role-playing.<sup>135</sup> The character's perpetual oscillation between what she is and what she pretends to be, between authenticity and delusion, has been discussed as Visconti's criticism of simplistic approaches to neorealism.<sup>136</sup> We might add that Zavattini wrote the original script, which resonates with his interest in cinema as a tool to reflect on representation itself, to unveil its delusory power, and to render the complexity of reality, as with the previously mentioned projects of *You*,

<sup>135</sup> The sequence's relevance was remarked from the shooting phase. *La Settimana Incom*, which also promoted a contest associated with *Bellissima*, recorded the shooting of this exact sequence in *La Settimana Incom*, no. 661, *Appuntamento a Cinecittà con Bellissima. Sul set del film di Visconti Bellissima* (18 July 1951). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

<sup>136</sup> Namely, see Micciché, *Visconti e il neorealismo*.

*Maggiorani* and *We, the Women*.<sup>137</sup> But I intend to stress here Magnani's priority over other components within the film, except for Visconti's artistic authority. The director himself, when the film was released, lingered on this artistic cooperation as the key to achieve his aim:

For a long time, I've been wishing to produce a film with Magnani: since Magnani was the actress cast for *Bellissima*, I agreed. I was interested in working together with an 'authentic' character, through which more internal, meaningful things could be said. And I was interested in getting to know what kind of relationship could happen between me and the 'star', Magnani. The outcome was the most fortunate.<sup>138</sup>

Only Magnani would do for this task, because she combined technical skills and popular instinct, by way of improvisation, and by these means could elevate all other elements of the film. When discussing changes to the original script, Visconti added:

Also the lines have been entirely changed. In respect to this, Magnani proved to be very useful, because with her you can improvise [...] Magnani's acting is full of popular instinct, which has nothing to do with commercial theatre. She can match the others, and somehow bring them to her level.<sup>139</sup>

In his words, Magnani was at once a star and an authentic personality, but Visconti bracketed both notions to blur them or to further enhance the dialectic between reality and representation, between authenticity and film production. In *Bellissima*, Magnani's authenticity can be achieved only by means of representation, by locating her figure against the backdrop of the studios<sup>140</sup> and drawing a portrait wherein 'the people' aim to be part of a media and celebrity discourse.<sup>141</sup> By collating her artistic skills

137 On the various versions of the script and the function that acting played in it see Jandelli, 'Attori e recitazione nei soggetti di *Bellissima*'.

138 Gandin, 'Storia di una crisi in *Bellissima*', p. 292.

139 Ibid., p. 293.

140 This conflation of authenticity and representation is glorified in a later collaboration between director and actress, i.e. *Anna*, which starts from an alleged authentic episode that Magnani experienced and ends up on a stage where she performs one of her most celebrated theatrical roles, the florist. For analysis of this short film, see Marcus, 'Cane da grembo o carne in scatola? Il divismo in *Anna* e *La Strega bruciata viva*'; Costa, 'Anna Magnani. Paradosso sull'attrice'.

141 An insightful account of Visconti's critical approach to popular culture is Michèle Lagny, 'Visconti e la "cultura popolare"'.

with an everyday setting, Magnani, according to contemporary insightful commentators such as novelist and screenplay writer Corrado Alvaro, sketched a portrait representing all Italian women: 'After the principal scene in *Rome, Open City*, Magnani probably here gave evidence of her greatness, her most compact and consistent creation. What is striking is the fact that it is not a vernacular character in extraordinary circumstances, but an everyday middle-class Roman woman, in a small tale of everyday illusions and disillusion. All in all, we have a portrait of an Italian woman'.<sup>142</sup>

*The Golden Coach* was an entirely different endeavor, originating in an international coproduction helmed by celebrated French film director Jean Renoir. The film, loosely based on a play by French writer Prosper Mérimée in the first half of the nineteenth century, tells the story of an Italian theatrical company seeking fortune in South America. However, in terms of representation, the film shares some of its basic elements with the examples described above, namely Magnani's pivotal function, the role that improvisation holds in this function, and a reflexive composition underpinning its narratives. Furthermore, the film was promoted once more as an encounter between artistic geniuses: the film community gathered around them when production began, and the popular press widely propagated this event, which was attended by celebrities such as De Sica, Del Poggio, Fabrizi, and Miranda.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, Magnani's statements helped to merge her work and personality with the character, turning the latter's story into a portrayal of the actress: 'The life of an actress or, as Renoir prefers, a thespian, resembles Camilla's life: she destroys everything around her beyond her will, like an animal. She can be a woman only within the boundaries art sets for her. I am like that, too. I am like Camilla, too. I am not sure Renoir got it...'<sup>144</sup>

To sum up, the mode of representation hosting Magnani's acting helped build her alleged authenticity in many ways. To begin with, her passionate outbursts broke up the consistency in narratives and characters, which in the post-war era were perceived as originating in the inter-war culture or in the Hollywood mode of filmmaking; accordingly, the inconsistencies she expressed provided the audience with an alternative considered more authentic because they were less formulaic. Secondly, these gestural

142 Alvaro, 'Ritratto di donna'.

143 Salvalaggio, 'Brindisi alla carrozza'. The beginning of the shooting was also heralded in newsreels. See *La Settimana Incom*, no. 607, *Cronache dal cinema* (14 June 1951); *La Settimana Incom*, no. 721, *La carrozza d'oro a Cinecittà* (9 February 1952). Available at: <http://www.archivio-luce.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

144 Anonymous, 'Anna Magnani canterà la Tarantella dei maccheroni', p. 69.

and emotional explosions implied a cultural national legacy, i.e. popular theatre, which was based on improvisation and melodrama. This blend of melodrama and improvisation appeared as something new, which merged different forms of expression. Moreover, this cultural national legacy was strengthened by its staging in realistic settings, such as squares and streets, balconies, stairs, or on stage. In addition, passionate outbursts reinforced common ideas about Italian culture and people, i.e. its inherent theatricality. Representation further increased Magnani's typicality by articulating, within the frames, a close relationship between her performing body and a popular crowd working both as a representative of the Italian people and an audience for her expressive behaviour. According to this visual and performative template, Magnani both comes from and addresses the people. Finally, some film productions epitomise the significance of Magnani within Italian post-war culture: she became the subject of film portraits, that is, films entirely revolving around her. However, rather than mere star vehicles, these films earned attention for two reasons: firstly, they were conceived and promoted as unique artistic encounters between film directors and an actress; and secondly, by allowing freedom for the actress's improvisation and by relying on reflexivity, these films achieved authenticity by way of a constant blurring of the boundaries between reality and its rendition.

Authenticity and theatricality also shaped Magnani's star persona. I would like to examine this persona by way of her film roles but also the image conveyed by newsreels and the popular press. In the first place, I want to question Magnani's vernacularisation in her transition from the inter-war parts she played to the post-war era. Secondly, I'll scrutinise how her authenticity was closely connected with popular culture in both her film roles and the image circulated by the media. Furthermore, her association with the people was tinted with anti-bourgeois overtones in both her pre- and post-war films. Finally, I'll describe how Magnani was construed as a star in her own right. On the one hand, she was described as a celebrity since she belonged to show business and was often paired with national and international politics. On the other hand, this celebrity was never discussed as a mere image but was paired with both artistry and truthfulness. Magnani was opposed to post-war female stardom as nothing more than a media product affiliated with the Hollywood mass culture flooding Italy in the aftermath of World War Two. Magnani thus came to represent a national creation that was closely related to neorealism as a transitional culture, before new forms of cultural industry took over.

Since *Rome, Open City* or even before, when acting in *The Peddler and the Lady*, Magnani was always associated with Rome. How did this association begin? In her pre-war film appearances, Magnani usually uttered her lines in standard Italian and played characters with no specific origin. This was either because Italian films at that time sought to address a national audience or because of her supporting roles. However, from Rossellini's film until her last appearance—a cameo in *Roma (Fellini's Roma, Federico Fellini, 1972)*—the actress always incarnated a local, regional, or national body. Particularly in the Italian productions, Magnani was intimately connected to Rome's urban space and popular culture. This characterisation was achieved by rooting the characters she played in the capital's neighbourhoods, usually the poorer ones such as Prenestino, Garbatella, Pietralata, or Trastevere. Media discourse frequently reinforced this association, usually locating its origin in *Rome, Open City* and its historical importance.<sup>145</sup> The most important post-war newsreels repeatedly coupled Magnani's appearances with references both to Rome and to *Rome, Open City*. *La Settimana Incom* joked about Rossellini's title whenever Magnani and the director came into view. Consequently, at a charity auction for unemployed workers of the film industry, the voice-over called the couple 'Roma, notte aperta' (Rome, Open Night);<sup>146</sup> or later that same year, when promoting a contest through a number of staged sketches in which Magnani and Rossellini acted, the title chosen was 'Roma, città tranquilla' (Rome, Quiet City).<sup>147</sup> Otherwise, the actress repeatedly appeared in newsreels registering her presence in the suburbs of Rome among destitute individuals and children. In late 1947, Magnani attended an initiative for the poor residents of Roman shanties, addressing them in the Roman dialect and, in a puzzling reflexive event, sitting in the audience to watch *Angelina*, a film about poor Roman neighbourhoods!<sup>148</sup> Two years later, the actress was shown on the news providing food and support to the deprived children of Roman suburbs.<sup>149</sup> The popular press kept this association alive either by representing the actress against the monumental backdrop of Rome—as on the front cover of the magazine

145 See, for instance, Meccoli, 'Quanto rende la bellezza'.

146 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 163, *Nel mondo del cinema. Serata di solidarietà* (16 June 1948). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

147 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 198, *Cora Incom: Vista la vista? Errore n. 12* (16 October 1948). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

148 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 97, *Nel mondo del cinema. Serata per le borgate povere* (21 November 1947). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

149 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 376, *Roma. Bimbi poveri a banchetto* (14 July 1949). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

*Tempo* devoted to Magnani<sup>150</sup>—or by including statements from the actress expressing her grief when leaving Rome to go overseas, as if severing a physical bond.<sup>151</sup> Vernacularisation was also an effect of Magnani's film roles: women repeatedly aspiring to an upper, legitimate status, striving to express themselves in the standard Italian language but easily moved to the more authentic and lively Roman dialect when outraged, as with Sora Gioconda in *Peddlin' in Society*, Liana in *Unknown Men of San Marino*, or Angelina in the eponymous film. As described earlier, the emotional outburst offers a view of the most truthful identity, which is always locally specified. Vernacular expression increased the authenticity of Magnani's persona and contributed to shaping her personality in international productions: *Volcano*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Wild Is the Wind* all cast Magnani as a Mediterranean character, coupling a wild personality with the notion of nature. In 1955, *Time's* anonymous critic described the effect of Magnani on film culture and stardom as a natural cataclysm: 'The most explosive emotional actress of her generation had, in fact, erupted over filmland and was filling the vicinity with temperamental lava, flaming ash, and general consternation.'<sup>152</sup> In the film Dieterle directed, Magnani is regularly framed against the Mediterranean landscape: the audience receives just basic information about the woman's past on the mainland, and she visually exists exclusively as a product of the harsh nature of the volcanic island. In *The Rose Tattoo*, Magnani is again cast as a Southerner, namely a Sicilian, and she alternates a heavily accented English with Italian interjections and utterances. In *Wild Is the Wind*, she embodies an Italian woman, Gioia, who can barely speak English and is married to a rough rancher (Anthony Quinn). Gioia is repeatedly framed against the grazing land or enthusiastically rejoicing in the beauty of the horses. To sum up, whereas until 1945, film productions cast Magnani without reference to a geo-cultural identity, from then on she existed both in film fictions and media discourse solely as a territorialised being.

Some other features also contributed to Magnani's authenticity and popularity. I stress once more the association of her persona with nature in three different ways: through her close association with animals, through motherhood, and by enhancing her body beyond social constraints. Magnani was regularly represented both on screen and in media discourse together with animals, as in the episode *The Miracle* or in *The Rose Tattoo* with goats; horses in *Wild Is the Wind*; dogs, such as the ferocious Belgian shepherd

150 'Cover', *Tempo*.

151 Magnani, 'La mia avventura in America'; Magnani, 'La mia avventura in America (2)'.  
 152 Anonymous, 'Cinema—World's Greatest Actress', p. 59.

that Rossellini gave her or the dachshunds in the sketch *La Settimana Incom*, wherein Rossellini and Magnani supposedly meet accidentally on the streets;<sup>153</sup> or small poodles in the episode *Anna* directed by Visconti. This colourful diversity had a primary purpose: to juxtapose the actress's spontaneity and authenticity with a society whose habits and aims were often unprepared to make room for generosity, as in the sequence in *Volcano*, when the islanders kill Magnani's puppy to push her away from the local community. This association was repeatedly maintained in the popular press and connected to the star's magnanimity, as her dog's puppies were sold for a charity initiative.<sup>154</sup>

Magnani was regularly associated with motherhood. The iconic death of Pina in *Rome, Open City* is even more striking because the woman was going to marry her lover that same morning and is carrying their child in her womb. As recent commentators have discussed, within a complex network of feminine identities in the film, the death of the character symbolises the blasphemous destruction of the nation's generativity at the hands of Nazi occupants.<sup>155</sup> Earlier in the film, her character was connected to childhood through her son Marcello, who is the go-between with a broader group of children, the little resisters' gang. Her current pregnancy occurs outside the marriage bond: she is a widow who is not yet married to the baby's father. Accordingly, Pina is represented amidst groups of children and as a mother beyond social conventions. Both these features, which echoed her personal circumstance of being a single mother to her only son Luca,<sup>156</sup> were consistently displayed in her films and media appearances. For instance, Magnani is cast in two more films alongside Vito Annichiarico, the child playing Marcello in *Rome, Open City*: in *Down With Misery* and *Peddlin' in Society*. And her character in *Woman Trouble* is always carrying her child Romoletto, while in *Volcano*, she plays elbow to elbow with iconic child performer Enzo Stajola. She is a mother of five in *Angelina*, and in *Unknown Men of S. Marino*, she is surrounded by a group of children ready to protect

153 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 198.

154 Anonymous, 'Italia domanda—I cuccioli della Magnani'.

155 See Forgacs, *Rome Open City*; Landy, 'Diverting Clichés: Femininity, Masculinity, Melodrama and Neorealism in *Open City*'; Marcus, 'Pina's Pregnancy, Traumatic Realism, and the After-Life of *Open City*'. For a close analysis of the sequence in Wagstaff, see *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, pp. 163-180.

156 In 1935, Magnani married film director Goffredo Alessandrini, whom she divorced in 1950; however, the two had already split up by the early 1940s. Magnani had an affair with fascinating matinée idol Massimo Serato, who is the father of her only son, Luca: however, the actor never acted as a father to the child, the responsibility for whom was entirely Magnani's.

her after a few arguments get her into a dangerous situation. She glorifies an encumbered, dominating but warm and loving motherhood in *Bellissima*. But her procreative power is literally magnified in *The Miracle*, a film that associates illiteracy and mental disability with the mystery of birth and maternal love. The association between Magnani and childhood appears in a number of newsreels, when the star promoted charity initiatives for the benefit of deprived children and occasionally declared her maternal affection for them.<sup>157</sup> After all, generativity and generosity have the same etymology, based on the Proto-Indo-European root 'gen', i.e. 'give birth'. It is perhaps for this reason that Magnani was regularly associated with both concepts in the media and regularly appeared to help people in need, whether Italian convicts for whom she sponsored a ball or the black community when she visited New York.<sup>158</sup>

In the chaotic aftermath of World War Two, when social structures were being turned upside down and often questioned, Magnani embodied a magnanimity and unselfishness that preceded habits and constraints considered to limit the expression of humanity. Many of her roles consolidated her persona as an outcast, as a sensual presence that lives and moves on the margins of society. What is most interesting is the consistency of these roles before and after World War Two. Before neorealism, film productions barely known outside Italy but instrumental in the construction of Magnani's star image regularly cast her in ambiguous roles, including as a singer wavering between an artistic career and prostitution. Her supporting roles were of capricious figures whose artistic and moral qualities are questionable. Typically she portrays a temptress forcing or keeping her victims out of a legitimate marriage bond, as in *Doctor, Beware!*, *Finalmente soli* (Finally alone, Giacomo Gentilomo, 1942), or *The last wagon. Luck comes from Heaven* is possibly the best filmic example of the ambiguous threshold between show business and prostitution: Magnani plays Zizi, a destitute singer who is invited by crooks to sit at their table after she donates her old pair of shoes. However, Zizi also intrudes into the upper-class environment and helps to expose the despicable plans concocted by its least honourable members. In short, before 1945, Magnani played roles identifying her with show business, prostitution, and the margins of society, and this typification carried on into the post-war era when Magnani was cast either as an ambiguous temptress

<sup>157</sup> *La Settimana Incom*, no. 97; *La Settimana Incom*, no. 247, *Excelsior di Roma. Gran ballo en tête* (4 February 1949); *La Settimana Incom*, no. 376. Available at: <http://www.archivioluice.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

<sup>158</sup> Rizza, 'Giocano al calcio col pallone della Magnani'; Magnani, 'La mia avventura in America'.

(in *The Bandit*), a prostitute (in *Unknown Men of S. Marino* or *Volcano*), or a voluptuous actress (in *The Golden Coach* and *Anna*). Despite enacting similar types, a major shift occurred within Italian cinema with regard to the values associated with these characters. Except for *The Bandit*, which portrays a crisis of masculinity, all the other films Magnani played in accentuate the humanity, generosity, and justness of these heroines who are rejected by society. Many commentators have ascribed this change to Magnani, who in her uniqueness was able to take a stand against bourgeois cowardice and conformism. Indro Montanelli, one of the most influential and enduring journalists of the second half of the twentieth century who regularly reported on Magnani, sketched a portrait in 1950 of the actress in which he compared her to the Roman bourgeois circles, whose women strove to imitate Magnani by speaking a standard dialect and wearing disheveled hair. Magnani, though, ignored her own influence and avoided such company, preferring to spend her time alone or with old acquaintances from the lower class.<sup>159</sup> Authenticity was thus associated with Magnani in the representation of her persona on the margins of society and in her association with pre-social values such as spontaneity, nature, bodily existence, motherhood, and an anti-bourgeois attitude.

Soon after Magnani emerged, a new generation of stars appeared. The media pitted them against Magnani in many ways. First, Magnani was regularly commended for her acting skills and was thus set in contrast to the new stars' phony images. For example, Mangano was often chosen as Magnani's counterpart, with the former expressing sex appeal and a lack of technical skills and the latter exemplifying art.<sup>160</sup> Mangano epitomised a whole new generation of untrained actresses representing beauty and inadequacy, considered nothing more than bodies to match an uncultivated audience's expectations. As a late article put it, 'Italian cinema's worst guilt [...] is an excessive export of flesh. [...] Abundance led to boredom. Boredom nuisance. Nuisance scandal.'<sup>161</sup> According to this view, Magnani countered this trend by relying on her art: her sexuality did not stem from her looks but from a combination of art and authenticity. Furthermore, the contraposition between new stars and Magnani hinted at another polarity rooted in inter-war film culture: between American and Italian mass culture. Magnani's skills represented national values as much as her association with theatre and popular culture, whereas Hollywood stars typified mass

159 Montanelli, 'La Magnani'.

160 Meccoli, 'Quanto rende la bellezza'.

161 Cane, 'Molte "ragazze carne" e una Anna Magnani', p. 57.

culture. As summarised in an article written by Domenico Meccoli after the release of *The Rose Tattoo*,

For Americans, Anna Magnani meant 'something different', that is, an actress and not the usual beautiful girl with stunning looks and an empty brain.<sup>162</sup>

All in all, Magnani personified this Italian distinctness from Hollywood.<sup>163</sup> Her specificity as a star relies on embodying a coalescence of national values, i.e. theatricality, art, cultural and historical heritage, and the post-war democratic turn. Theatricality and artistic value were achieved by her refusal to mention or refer to her private life. Whereas the popular discourse on celebrities tries to build a link between film roles and everyday existence, the latter was basically excluded from the media's coverage of Magnani. Accordingly, all the focus was on her professional achievements. Furthermore, the visual culture enhancing the new cult of celebrity tended to display female stars of stunning beauty in supposedly everyday settings. The covers of popular magazines such as *Epoca* and *Tempo* frequently featured Italian or Hollywood stars such as Bergman, Mangano, and Pampanini photographed in their mansions wearing marvelous gowns. But Magnani rarely appeared in such magazines and when she did, it was in a setting that lacked all depth, either against the Roman cityscape or in the theatrical costume she wore in *The Golden Coach*.<sup>164</sup> Therefore, the representation suggested by these images was not delusory, such as the template for Hollywood stardom, but one that promoted artistry over beauty.

The media often associated Magnani's personality with prominent artists, either in Italy or overseas. Newsreels showed her at literary or fashion galas<sup>165</sup> together with important intellectuals such as Alberto Savinio, and her long friendship with Tennessee Williams was also widely documented. Furthermore, the Italian popular press widely reported her first trip to the United States, in 1953, covering her encounters with stars who stood out for their unconventional skills such as Bette Davis and Marlon Brando. In an article allegedly written by Magnani, Brando appeared at once as a seducer

162 Meccoli, 'La tigre timida', p. 40.

163 An article from the same period reported the obstacles that Italian actors faced when hired in the Hollywood film industry. See Barzini jr., 'Hollywood non è per gli italiani'.

164 'Cover', *Epoca*; 'Cover', *Tempo*.

165 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 172, *Vita letteraria*. *Il Premio Strega* (18 July 1948); *La Settimana Incom*, no. 408, *Premio letterario "il re degli amici"* (24 February 1950); *La Settimana Incom*, no. 619, *Notturna sul Tevere* (12 July 1951). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

and an artistic mate.<sup>166</sup> To sum up, Magnani's persona was defined as that of a member of the international artistic jet set rather than a media product.<sup>167</sup>

Finally, Magnani's persona grew to embody a political celebrity: she attended rallies in defense of the national film industry,<sup>168</sup> and she was covered in the news when voting at the crucial political polls in 1948<sup>169</sup> or when meeting prominent European politicians such as Robert Schumann.<sup>170</sup> Due to her identification with neorealism and with Italian grievances during the German occupation, the cultural values attached to her acting style and the forms of representation incorporating it, and the authenticity associated with her star persona, Magnani came to personify a national political body that was internationally marketable. In his review of *Camicie rosse* (*Anita Garibaldi*, Goffredo Alessandrini and Francesco Rosi, 1952), Crowther acutely wrote:

One must agree that the casting of Anna Magnani to play the wife of Giuseppe Garibaldi was eminently logical. If anyone should be able to do a fiery job as the loyal companion and inspiration of the great Italian patriot, it is she.<sup>171</sup>

It should be mentioned that nationhood and authenticity were not essential values but rather the outcome of a long process moulded by different forces. Authenticity was achieved through theatricality, realism through representation, and popularity through the media and the renewed political scene. These same forces shaped the inherently heterogenous forms of acting which to date enliven neorealist movies.

## The Body of the Multitude

Few aspects of neorealist film culture display the heterogeneous character of this phase in film history as completely as the image of the human presence.

166 Magnani, 'La mia avventura in America (2)'. See also Morandini, 'Non mi piace essere un monumento nazionale'.

167 A recent volume entailing her correspondence during her stays in the US reinforces this profile. See Magnani, *La mia corrispondenza americana*.

168 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 256, *Per il nostro cinema. Manifestazioni a Roma* (25 February 1949). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

169 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 148, *18 aprile. L'Italia alle urne* (23 May 1948). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

170 *La Settimana Incom*, no. 803, *Cronache del cinema italiano all'estero* (3 July 1952). Available at: <http://www.archivioluca.com/archivio/> (Last accessed 12 July 2017).

171 Crowther, 'Camicie rosse'.

In the previous sections, I outlined the intermingling of different and sometimes contradictory concerns, practices, and forms.

Film performance and stardom under neorealism were partly the result of a vivid critical and theoretical discussion, which benefitted greatly from the development of Italy's film culture in the inter-war period. In the post-war era, much of this debate focused on what appeared to be the ultimate novelty, that is, the use of non-professional performers. They embodied a new mode of film production, one that could reject the wealth of the Cinecittà studios and come close to a social and anthropological reality. Accordingly, non-professional performers manifested the ideological hopes of a culture representing and addressing 'the people' by doing away with the traditional training offered by institutional agencies and providing the post-war era with a refreshing insight into the lives of the underprivileged classes. Furthermore, they incarnated a major shift from the inter-war era's use of highly trained and skilled performers who often played fictitious characters against the backdrop of a refined studio set. Finally, non-professional actors fulfilled the hopes spawned after the end of the war of revolutionising the nation's film culture by elevating the role of the film director, who became the visual master of all the film's components including performers, who were handled as nothing more than raw material. In doing so, cultivated critics and film directors were striving to counter the modes of representation of the previous decade in which theatrical forms revolving around notable performers were imported into film production. Directors such as Castellani, De Santis, Germi, Rossellini, and Visconti heralded a new-born film culture in post-war Italy, one in which directors were now the masters.

Non-professional performers offered a chance for the film industry to reflect on the very notion of film acting and film representation. Through them, the focus of discussion could shift from acting skills to the human presence within film representation. What is a human being in film when she lacks the basic competence to properly personify a fictitious character? Moreover, if acting is weakened, so is the fiction hosting it. Consequently, the theoretical discussion of non-professional performance went hand in hand with the reflection on descriptive modes of film representation as an alternative to film narratives. Finally, this highly dense discussion on non-professional performance was actually addressed in a number of feature films and short films portraying the fortunes and pitfalls of untrained actors. In celebrated masterpieces such as *Bellissima* and the now barely known film short *Bambini doppiatori* (Children dubbers, Damiano Damiani, 1955) the very nature of film performance and film representation is reflected upon by placing at their core the subject of non-professional performers.

Film practices during the neorealist period underwent a major overhaul, which very often affected film performance and stardom. The most relevant transformations concern the massive incorporation of untrained actors in both prominent and side roles, the inclusion of many thespians stemming from popular theatre rather than legitimate drama, the re-casting of popular stars from the inter-war years, and an entirely new notion of film stardom. If we were to recapitulate film performance during the neorealist period in just one word, 'multitude' is what comes to mind: these diverse modes of producing the cinematic human presence co-existed simultaneously and very often in the same film. Thus, in a pivotal film such as *Rome, Open City*, a highly trained actress such as Anna Magnani, who had been working for more than a decade for both popular and legitimate theatre, was cast alongside vernacular performers like Aldo Fabrizi and his sidekick Nando Bruno, dancers such as Harry Feist, and non-professional performers like former movie-theatre usher Maria Michi.

The heterogeneity of the human presence in films expressed also a new popular culture. This was the result of an unprecedented freedom of expression, the willingness of cultural and political elites to represent and address the lower classes, the importation of American mass culture, and significant media developments such as photo-romances, popular magazines, and beauty pageants. New film stars, notably female film stars, were seldom trained performers and thus complemented political and aesthetic values, while suiting the new media scene. By being non-professional performers, often from humble origins, film stars came from the lower classes and their celebrity served the purposes of politics, as the case of Anna Magnani illustrates. Female film stars incarnated new notions of national beauty while fitting the agenda of post-war production policies, which strove to relaunch Italian cinema by associating neorealist film style—praised by national and international film critics alike—with refined film production in terms of set design, costumes, lighting and camera work. Finally, the new film stars—who had been selected in beauty pageants or photo-romances and promoted in popular magazines—propagated neorealist values (popularity, humility, authenticity) in the post-war media culture, stretching their relevance into the 1950s. Common sense would still categorise *Two Women*, a film that is clearly beyond the era of neorealism, as neorealist thanks to the presence of a prominent film star such as Sophia Loren who embodies a certain notion of nation, femininity, and authenticity created in the post-war years. The film was produced in 1960, almost ten years after what is generally recognized as the end of neorealism. Initially, De Sica considered casting Anna Magnani as the protagonist and Sophia Loren as her daughter.

However, Magnani disdainfully rejected the offer because she did not want to highlight her age difference with the now celebrated Loren. Loren took her place, and her performance earned her the Academy Award, the prize at the Cannes Film Festival, the BAFTA Award, and the David di Donatello. This shift possibly epitomises the end of an era, when the outstanding variety of Magnani's skills and performances personified the multiple nature of neorealism as well as the lasting legacy to Italian and world cinema of this incredibly rich cultural phase.

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When referencing the titles, I strove to identify whether a film circulated only in its country of origin or was also released in the English-speaking world. Accordingly, the film titles are quoted according to this system:

- Titles that were released in an English-speaking country first appear using the following format: *Abbasso la miseria!* (*Down with Misery*, Gennaro Righelli, 1946) and with subsequent occurrences *Down with Misery*.
- Titles that were *not* released in an English-speaking country first appear using the following format: *Ai margini della metropoli* (*At the edge of the city*, Carlo Lizzani, 1953) and with subsequent occurrences *At the edge of the city*.

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Unique, truthful, brutal... Neorealism is often associated with adjectives stressing its peculiarities in representing the real, its lack of antecedents, and its legacy in terms of film style. While this is useful when confronting *auteurs* such as De Sica, Rossellini or Visconti, it becomes problematic when examining a widespread cultural practice that realistic modes deeply affected. This cultural production included filmmaking, literature, visual culture and photography, as well as media discourses. It was internally contradictory but fruitful inasmuch as its legacy influenced national culture for many decades to come.

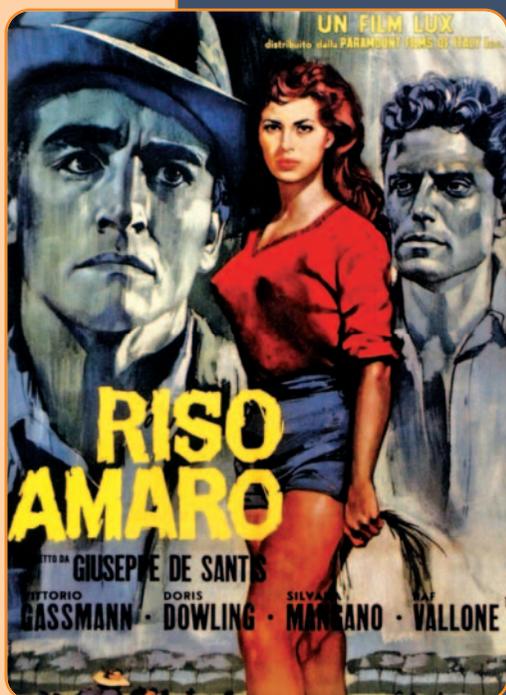
The volume spotlights post-war Italian film culture by locating a series of crossroads, i.e. topics barely examined when discussing neorealism: nation, memory and trauma, visual culture, stardom, and performance. The aim is to deconstruct neorealism as a monument and to open up its cultural history.

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# FILM CULTURE

IN TRANSITION



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