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The Portrayal of Reality on films after Italian Neorealism

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Zobrazení reality ve filmech po italském neorealismu

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Declaration

I hereby declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis on the following topic:

The Portrayal of Reality on films after Italian Neorealism

independently under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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Abstract

Beginning in Italy in 1942 with the release of *Obsession* (1942) by Luchino Visconti, Italian Neorealism was a movement that aimed to move away from the look of glamourized film productions of the time in favor of a more realistic depiction of human lives. The neorealist films that were born as a reaction to the Fascist ideology, featured workers and poor people as a way to oppose the regime's ideals and also show the struggles which the Italian population was going through during and after the war.

The goal of this thesis is to understand how realism was achieved in neorealist films in regard to cinematography and camera techniques. The thesis offers a definition of terms such as 'realism', 'naturalism', 'deep focus', and 'newsreel aesthetic' alongside a brief overview of the development of realism in art and the development of cinematography lighting until the 1940s in order to analyze how they come together to shape the neorealist movement's aesthetic. Using primarily *Rome, Open City* and *The Earth Trembles*, film analysis is provided in order to exemplify the neorealist aesthetic while explaining how the filmmakers' choices granted an increased sense of realism to their films. Ultimately, the findings are extended to an analysis of how the neorealist choices influenced other filmmakers and how they pushed the realistic representation further.

Abstrakt:

Italský neorealismus, který začal v Itálii v roce 1942 uvedením filmu „Obsession (Posedlost)“ (1942) režiséra Luchina Viscontiho, byl hnutím, jehož cílem bylo odklonit se od tehdejší glamour filmové produkce ve prospěch realističtějšího zobrazení lidských životů. Neorealistické filmy, které se zrodily jako reakce na fašistickou ideologii, zobrazovaly dělníky a chudé lidi jako způsob, jak se postavit ideálům režimu a také ukázat boje, kterými italské obyvatelstvo procházelo během války a po ní.

Cílem této práce je pochopit, jak bylo v neorealistických filmech dosaženo realismu s ohledem na kinematografii a kamerové techniky. Práce nabízí definici pojmů jako „realismus“, „naturalismus“, „hluboké zaostření“ a „estetika filmového týdeníku“ spolu se stručným přehledem vývoje realismu v umění a vývoje filmového osvětlení do 40. let 20. století s cílem analyzovat, jak společně utvářely estetiku neorealistického hnutí. Na příkladu filmů Rome, Open City (Řím, otevřené město) a The Earth Trembles (Země se chvěje) je provedena analýza filmů, která ilustruje neorealistickou estetiku a zároveň vysvětluje, jakým způsobem tvůrci svými rozhodnutími dodali svým filmům větší smysl pro realismus. Nakonec jsou tato zjištění rozšířena o analýzu toho, jak neorealistická rozhodnutí ovlivnila další filmaře a jak posunuli realistické zobrazení dál.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	8
2. History and definitions	12
2.1. What is Realism? - Chronology and Definition	12
2.2. History of Realism in Art	16
2.3. What is Glamour?	18
2.4. Italian Cinema	19
2.5. Italian Neorealism	22
2.6. On the Term and its Adhesion Within the Group	27
3. Analysis	31
3.1. The Newsreel Aesthetic and Lighting in Rome, Open City	32
3.1.1. Lighting Development until Neorealism	34
3.1.2. Defining 'Newsreel'	43
3.1.3. Analysis	45
3.1.3.1. On Lighting	51
3.1.3.2. Other Camera Techniques	53
3.2. The Use of Deep Focus and Non-actors in The Earth Trembles	60
3.2.1. On Focus	62
3.3. Overview of the Cinematography in other Neorealist Films	70
4. After Neorealism	77
5. Conclusion	87
Bibliography	92
Filmography	94

1. Introduction

“The historical significance of realism was to make social and physical reality (in a generally materialist sense) the basis of literature, art and thought.” (Williams 202)

Italian Neorealism was a movement that is said to have started during the war with *Obsession* (1942 Visconti) and then continued after that in the works of many Italian filmmakers but more prominently in the films of Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio de Sica, Cesare Zavattini, Luchino Visconti, and Giuseppe de Santis. The main characteristics are the use of real locations, non-actors or off-cast known actors, natural or simple lighting, and a ‘documentary-like’ style that focused mainly on topics that gravitated around war, resistance against the Nazis, human plight, poverty, and the working class while, at the same time, rendering films that moved away from the glamour that was so common in Hollywood films and their well-developed studio and star system.

The fascists ruling Italy, much like any other dictator before and since, noticed the power of mass media very early on. Radio and cinema were co-opted and soon brought under the wings of the ruling party in Italy.

The films produced and released in Italy in the years preceding Neorealism favored entertainment in the form of comedies, melodramas, and epic dramas that reflected the conservative fascist ideals of family, religion, class hierarchy, and subservience to the strong leader. The most popular ones were the films called ‘telefoni bianchi’ (that translates to ‘white telephone’), which were in line with the fascist ideals which, for some time, dictated the kinds of films that were released in Italy. The ‘telefoni bianchi’ films often told stories of the upper class and were given this name due to the telephones being a symbol of bourgeois wealth.

The war brought destruction and a myriad of different problems to the Italian populace including hunger, scarcity of jobs, and destruction. During the war, the 'white telephone', the epics, and films that were complicit with the regime continued being produced but they started making less and less sense to the more engaged film artists. These films were too distant from the day to day life and very rarely reflected on the problems that the majority of the audience was experiencing at the time. After all, they promoted escapism.

Other than that, the country was more or less destroyed and film equipment was rare. The biggest studio in Europe, Cinecittà, which was built in Rome in 1937 by Benito Mussolini mainly as a way to spread the fascist ideology, came to be useless during the war. Cinecittà had been partially flattened to rubble by an Ally bombing in 1943 and doubled as a shed for displaced people from 1945 to 1947, making production in the complex more difficult than ever. Thus, artists had to adapt to their reality of scarce film material and electricity, among other things.

The country's condition forced the more engaged filmmakers to steer in a different direction and move away from escapist films. The reality of the invasion and the conflict started pouring into the screen in its rawest form. The immediacy and realism of Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *Germany Year Zero* (1948), also known as the "war trilogy" (Bordwel, 1994 p.366), took full advantage of cities in rubble and real people in a documentary-like style in an attempt to show the real problems Italy (and Germany) had at that moment and to somehow reflect on these issues. It is worth mentioning, however, that social-drama-oriented storylines and the use of non-actors in real locations are by no means unique characteristics that were first brought by the Neorealist directors. Films such as the Mexican *Redes* (1936, Fred Zinnemann and Emilio Gómez Muriel), *Our Daily Bread* (1934, King Vidor), and *The Peddler and the Lady* (1943, Mario

Bonnard), to mention a few, already featured some of these characteristics but not to the extent of the Neorealist films. Furthermore, they were not shared ideals with other filmmakers at the time they were released. Italy, on the other hand, went through issues that prompted filmmakers to respond and the Neorealist aesthetic seemed right for the subject matter.

Based on my research, there are countless books and articles written on Neorealism, on the main artists of the movement, or on the main characteristics its artists made use of. The most common characteristics mentioned being the use of non-actors in real locations and the portrayal of the struggles of the poor (usually workers) during or in the immediate aftermath of World War II or, afterward, in a country torn apart by the conflict. Similar explanations are very likely to follow in an attempt to delineate the reasons why Italian films took such a sharp turn back towards social dramas.

I was not able to find a specific book to be referenced that covered mainly cinematography in Neorealism but, from the references found it is possible to draw parallels and inferences to analyze the characteristics of Neorealist cinematography in the light of the classical style. The main reason for the choice was to track down the similarities and differences in the Neorealist films' style when compared to Hollywood films and also with the films produced in Italy before Neorealism, in the 1930s and 1940s, to understand why Neorealist films appeared more realistic than those and what were the reasons for the style to be the way it is. I felt that I wanted to study it closely to better understand the evolution of lighting and camera work so as to be able to perhaps use the knowledge acquired to portray reality in a more conscious way but also to know the limits of stylization. Many films have employed the Neorealist techniques ever since, building upon the new paradigms Neorealist films have created.

This thesis sets itself to analyze some of the most important Neorealist films in the light of cinematography. The analysis is going to be based both on films and on relevant bibliography to the topic. The text is going to touch upon topics that are relevant to the understanding of Neorealism in an attempt to familiarize the reader with neighboring themes that have a direct impact on the movement.

Chapter two is going to define relevant terms to the understanding of Neorealism, such as 'realism' and 'glamour', and also offer a historical background to the movement. The chapter is going to delve into the history of realism in art, the history of Italian cinema, and how the Fascist government influenced film production and eventually stimulated the creation of Neorealism. Finally, in the next chapter, we will delve into the main characteristics of Neorealism, its films, main figures, and their difficult relationship with the term. Chapter three offers an overview of the evolution of cinema lighting and other cinematography techniques, an analysis of *Rome, Open City* and its use of the newsreel aesthetic and lighting, an analysis of *The Earth Trembles* and its use of deep focus and blocking, and an overview of other Neorealist films that employed the techniques discussed. Chapter four covers the aftermath of the movement and how it impacted other movements and filmmakers. Lastly, in chapter five, we will see how these films have used these conventions to provide a more realistic aspect and have thus impacted other films and our understanding of realistic images.

2. History and definitions

In order to understand what Italian Neorealism was and how it differed from other movements, it is important to understand what realism is. There is also a need to establish a common ground of concepts for the rest of the thesis so this chapter is going to try and differentiate the many meanings the word 'realism' has, from the day to day use, to the art sense, going through the difference between realism and naturalism and also realism as an art movement. That is no easy task since these meanings are very often overlapping.

It is important to mention that the scope of this definition will stay within the boundaries of art, not exceeding onto international relations or philosophy. Socialist realism, social realism, and magic realism are also not going to have a thorough analysis in this thesis. Even though they are art movements that branched out from realism and developed characteristics of their own, they are not so relevant to the topic at hand and if they are mentioned it is in regards to the topic.

2.1. What is Realism? - Chronology and Definition

In order to properly understand and expand on Neorealism, it would be important to delineate the chronology of the term 'realism' in art. This chapter will set itself to describe how the noun evolved and the many uses and senses that the word has acquired throughout the years (until it arrived at Neorealism).

The term has been used to describe artistic movements in art throughout the years but also, more loosely, to describe how close to reality a given depiction is. When researching the term 'realism', one will find certain common definitions that repeat here and there throughout many sources that help in the understanding. Good examples of those would be 'faithfulness', 'mirror of life', 'idealization', 'accurate', 'unembellished', 'unadorned', etc. As can be seen, they all tend to point toward an

understanding of how much mediation reality underwent in a given reproduction, be it a painting, a book, a film, etc. In other words, how much reality was changed in the given depiction and how close it is to the real object that served as reference. But not only that, the same research might return other definitions such as the “rejection of the artificiality of both Classicism and Romanticism” (“realism”) or the portrayal of “the lives, appearances, problems, customs, and mores of the middle and lower classes, of the unexceptional, the ordinary, the humble, and the unadorned” (“realism”). This may come in handy later when considering why Italian Neorealism was dubbed so.

In the book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, published in 1976, Raymond Williams examines the meanings of certain important words that are rather fuzzy in definition due to their relevance to society, words that are in a constant tug of war of definitions such as ‘culture’ or ‘art’. The book focuses on the development of the meanings of these and many other words. Realism is one of them and here is how he describes it:

Realism was a new word in [19th century]. It was used in French from the 1830s and in English from the 1850s. It developed four distinguishable meanings: (i) as a term to describe, historically, the doctrines of Realists as opposed to those of Nominalists; (ii) as a term to describe new doctrines of the physical world as independent of mind or spirit, in this sense sometimes interchangeable with naturalism or materialism (Williams 199)

According to Williams, these first two senses could be disregarded in the light of the more modern uses of the term ‘realism’ because sense (i) “is now an isolated and specific historical reference” and sense (ii) “for all practical purposes [...] has been taken over by materialism” (Williams 199). Even though Williams deems it dispensable, for this thesis, sense (i) is still important for the understanding of why the movement Neorealism was called that way since Realism as an art movement

came about in the 19th century as a response to the heroic and idealized art of the Romantic period and had a comeback in Italy with the Neorealist movement, but that will be expanded upon later. Williams then continues to offer two more senses:

(iii) as a description of facing up to things as they really are, and not as we imagine or would like them to be – ‘let us replace sentimentalism by realism, and dare to uncover those simple and terrible laws which, be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern’ (Emerson, 1860); (iv) as a term to describe a method or an attitude in art and literature – at first an exceptional accuracy of representation, later a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist. (Williams 199)

These other two senses (iii and iv) give us a base to better understand the use of the term in the scope of this thesis. The Neorealist films wanted to portray reality in the least mediated form (“exceptional accuracy of representation”); showing real people and real events to unfold their stories and realities on screen. The term realism when used hereinafter is going to be circumscribed to senses iii and iv unless specified that it means the 19th-century Realist movement.

Naturalism as an art theme is used in many cases nowadays as a synonym for realism due to the evolutionary route the term has taken. Naturalism primarily came as a response against Romanticism, the same way the Realist movement came to be, as explained earlier, but had its artists (mainly in the literary arts) focused on the use of the scientific method to depict reality and characters. Charles Darwin’s writings had a tremendous influence on Naturalism. The movement relied on natural sciences and scientific observations to create social commentary in a deterministic way (Williams 162-164). It is almost as if the authors wanted to conduct an experiment in a textual format and submit their characters to that reality in order

to see how they would behave or how the environment would shape their actions. In the visual arts, Naturalism, as observed in many paintings of the 19th century, aspired to reproduce natural objects in a detailed way in their natural setting (Williams 164). As Williams explains, the term 'naturalism' then evolves into losing certain senses but keeping the reproduction faithfulness aspect of it.

The thrust of what had been naturalism found other names for its processes and its methods, and naturalism itself was increasingly specialized to a style of accurate external representation. (Williams 164)

As exemplified here, 'naturalism', according to Williams, has overlapping meanings with 'realism'; therefore, nowadays, both tend to point to a sense in which accuracy of representation is their main object. The distinction was relevant at some point but both terms are now mainly used to describe faithful reproductions of reality.

The limit of reality reproduction is also worth putting in perspective. Although an accurate depiction was the Neorealist's idea, every reproduction of reality has an inherent selection and bias when represented, not to mention that they are a copy of the world transported to a completely different medium.

Williams comes to the rescue and explains that it is the conventions around 'realism' that matter most and that is what the thesis is going to focus on: On the realism conventions since nothing will ever BE reality.

Realist art or literature is seen as simply one convention (q.v.) among others, a set of formal representations, in a particular medium (qq.v.) to which we have become accustomed. The object is not really lifelike but by convention and repetition has been made to appear so. (Williams 201)

2.2. History of Realism in Art

The approach to this section is going to be a more practical one, starting with the art world as a whole and then departing from it in favor of a more cinema-oriented analysis after the introduction of geometric perspective and photorealistic images during the Renaissance. For that, I'm going to base my discussion on two main authors, Ernest Gombrich and André Bazin. Gombrich will provide the basis for the history of art until the Renaissance (with *Story of Art*) whereas Bazin's article on *The Ontology Of The Photographic Image* takes us from there.

Throughout art history, representations of life, nature, and human beings have managed to achieve increasing degrees of faithfulness. The advancements in depiction have undergone different trends and styles, from the cave paintings on the walls of Lascaux through Medieval times and the Renaissance to the likes of Picasso.

Depictions and representation in the art world were very much tied to their function more than anything else, the realism of the depictions didn't seem to be a concern, often the clarity of depictions was given more attention. As Gombrich tells us, the Egyptians were concerned with the proper transition of their kings and nobles to the afterlife, not so much with the creation of a lifelike or naturalistic portrait even though there are beautiful examples of faithful creations. "One sees that the sculptor was not trying to flatter his sitter, or to preserve a jolly moment in his life. He was concerned only with the essentials. Every lesser detail is left out" (Gombrich 34). The changes in pictorial tradition were then set in motion when the Greeks "began to use their eyes" (Gombrich 52) and started building new techniques upon each other's discoveries which suggests a more rapid development as compared to Egyptian art. "Once this ancient rule was broken, once the artist began to rely on what he saw, a veritable landslide started" (Gombrich 53).

Greek art is also responsible for an important dissociation between art and its initial *raison d'être*, the connection with magic and religion. An important awakening of art to freedom came about in the 5th Century B.C. and, by the end, artists had become aware of their own power and mastery. The artists of the time broke with the tradition, moving towards an art form that was more concerned with their own development and improvement. Such an advancement influenced reproductions and created an environment of art appreciation and a certain competition toward betterment.

Bazin, in an attempt to describe the evolution of cinema language in his *What's Cinema vol. 1 (The Ontology Of The Photographic Image* page 12) offers us a summary of how reality has been portrayed throughout history. Painting is a great example of that and its struggles with a dichotomy since its beginning, as it divides artists of the representative arts in two. The ones who want to represent the inner characteristics of the subject and the ones that are trying to better themselves in the realistic representation. By doing so, Bazin provides us with an interesting take on how the creation of linear perspective during the Renaissance and, later, the creation of photography influenced the way visual arts depict the world. Bazin says that the mathematical description of perspective elucidated by Brunelleschi tied the artists' hands to a more accurate representation of the world because it provided them with a way to mathematically represent depth and distance; therefore, getting closer to faithfulness.

The realist movement in the arts comes as a response to how life was being represented and to battle and oppose Romanticism and its rigid and hero-focused themes. Artists of the 19th century were presented with certain advancements and changes in paradigms that influenced the art world and pushed representations of reality away from Romanticism into a more humane and objective approach. Artists

avored a more accurate and detailed depiction and, at the same time, rejected imaginative idealization and artificiality. The focus shifted towards the unexceptional (“realism | History, Definition, & Characteristics”), the ordinary.

2.3. What is Glamour?

Why are we summoning this specific term and, above all, why is it relevant to the understanding of Italian Neorealism? How does it tie to the topic covered in this thesis? In order to understand the term, we have to first introduce the concept of Glamour, its etymology, and mainly how it was commodified by the Hollywood Industry in the ‘30s. These aspects are going to help the understanding of the cinema industry of the ‘30s and ‘40s, how it affected the films produced in Italy, and why they were seen as a life-like experience.

After all, the language realm is the place where the fight of classes finds yet another battlefield, where the symbolic battle happens, and where the ideology of the ruling class hides itself and spreads throughout society.

The origins of the word glamour date from the early 18th century in Scotland, but its etymology is what interests us here. Even though fairly unknown, glamour has a common origin in the word grammar. In the Middle Ages, the Latin word *grammatica* (from which grammar derives) was used in a different sense. The word meant ‘scholarship, learning’, and was more used in the context of occult practices like enchantment or magic. The word carried a similar meaning until the mid-1800s when it started to drift apart from this original magical meaning toward the modern sense used today more along the lines of “an exciting and often illusory and romantic attractiveness” and “alluring or fascinating attraction” (“The History of Glamour”). It is important to mention that the entry on glamour makes sure to mention that there is still a component of magic that is kept in the sense of the word since there is a lot

that is hard to explain about the attraction that certain stars, films, or lifestyles exert on the audiences.

Glamour is a characteristic that is extensively explored throughout the history of art in paintings, statues, literature, etc. It is not so hard to imagine the reason why. Art, since very early on, revolved around nobility and the elite and, for this reason, reflected their views of society. In some specific cases, like with cinema, films were pretty much used as a way to advertise a specific way of life that, at the same time, reinforced meritocracy and the capitalist structure but also presented audiences with what to dream about, with a way of escaping their own lives. Hollywood mainstream films always had certain kinds of films that were more responsible for presenting a lifestyle to aspire to. Escapist films made extensive use of glamour to lure the audiences into the film.

Glamour, as a concept, is very much used by the cinema industry to appeal to the masses and show audiences the lives of the privileged. Neorealism comes to oppose that and shows the struggles of the lives of the poor, the working class and, by doing so, requires a distancing from the ideals of classical cinema that puts embellishment in high praise.

2.4. Italian Cinema

Italian cinema had seen ups and downs prior to Neorealism. It went from a dominant cinema industry preceding World War I to almost irrelevant by the early 1930s. According to Mark Shiel in 'Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City', feature film production went from 371 films in 1920 to only 8 in 1930. All that is due to the business model Italy's movie industry had assumed for itself. The production was pretty much managed by private interests that wanted to mimic the Hollywood industry and its "commercially-oriented entertainment model". The method proved

itself unviable and soon succumbed to other national industries such as those from France, Germany, and Hollywood.

The fascist regime, from its beginning in 1922 to 1930, had stayed more or less away from the cinema industry; however, they very soon realized the power of cinema when it comes to propaganda. From 1926 to 1936, the fascist government founded numerous government bodies to foster the production of films in Italy. *L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa* (LUCE) was responsible for the vast production of documentaries and newsreels spreading Mussolini's image and achievements throughout Italy's territory. The *Ente Nazionale per la Cinematografia* (ENIC) came to aid the industry and give greater coordination in order to rival other film industries. Apart from that, the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* and the Venice Arts Festival were created, and, more importantly, the biggest studio in Europe at the time, Cinecittá.

In 1933, an important step toward fascist control over the cinema industry happened at the hands of Luigi Freddi. The *Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia* is founded and that kickstarts the changes in Italy's industry. A series of measures were taken so as to limit the exhibition of international films while banning certain films and directing the importation taxes imposed on foreign films to productions that reinforced the official agenda. The *Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche* came to cement the fascist control of the film industry in 1935.

As Shiel tells us, from this moment on, cinema had become central to the spread of the fascist ideals of cultural agenda, economy, politics, and the conservative social values that were pretty much in line with the Catholic Church.

As Jacqueline Reich writes in *Re-viewing Fascism*, the films produced in the 1930s and early 1940s under the fascist regime seemed to take the rule of making films as entertainment in the highest praise.

Italian commercial cinema focused on cinema's capacity to delight and enthrall. Comedies, melodramas, and literary adaptations dominated feature film production during those years. The film industry's reliance on cinema's entertainment value formed the basis for a cultural politics of evasion. What the industry wanted were not feature films that functioned as overt, dogmatic political mouthpieces. The task of the directors, scriptwriters, and performers involved was not to make the spectator think, but rather to induce him or her to forget. (Reich et al. 3)

It is important to note that it would be a mistake to label all the films that were produced during the fascist regime as fascist films. Some of the films like *Scipione L'Africano* (1937, Gallone), the most expensive film funded by the regime, are clearly a propagandistic piece, while other melodramas, musicals, costume dramas, and innocent comedies can't be described as defending the regime's agenda. These films, although escapist, could be considered complicit with the regime while 'projecting this image of "kinder, gentler" Fascism. Among the most famous was the 'white telephone'. These films were usually "well-made, cinematically stylish, studio-filmed productions, which contained gentle social satire but were very much endeared to the material wealth and comfort of the upper-middle class and their social status, and to the luxury of their own mise-en-scène" (Shiel 25).

Among escapist films, the comedies of Mario Camerini are regarded as having introduced some realism tendencies, mainly visually, to the genre in the fascist era. His films dared to offer some superficial social criticism and show characters from the lower-middle-class that were not kin to the regime (Shiel 25). The humor and the conservative morals that his films evoked eased the reception by the fascists.

The incoming war pushed Camerini and other directors that were shooting more realistic films away from the comedy and consequently away from the depiction of the day-to-day life of regular people. Their films moved towards high stylization and literary adaptations. These films “reflected a defensive art-for-art’s sake attitude” and were later called ‘calligraphist’ films. The young filmmakers got impatient with what they considered to be a “dull bourgeois complacency” and organized themselves around publications such as *Cinema* and *Bianco e Nero* to oppose the status quo. Giuseppe De Santis and Alicata published an essay (*Truth and Poetry: Verga and Italian Cinema*) that praised Giovanni Verga, the founder of Italian *verismo*, and his approach to realism in literature. De Santis and Alicata believed that a superior cinema would necessarily have to keep a connection to the lives of real people while being faithful to great literature such as the naturalists of the nineteenth century like Flaubert, Chekhov, and Dickens but also Verga that was a closer connection to their reality. They stated that the time had come for Italian cinema to move to an “unambiguously realist cinema” that was committed to the working-class and ordinary Italians in their real settings (Shiel 29-30).

This call for action didn’t directly produce Neorealism but opened the discussion in the cinema circles, the main films of the movement didn’t necessarily follow these guidelines but it definitely found resonance in the work of Visconti. *Obsession’s* script that had Alicata as a co-writer, adapted the work of James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *The Earth Trembles* adapted Verga’s *Malavoglia* (Shiel 29-30).

2.5. Italian Neorealism

As mentioned, Italian Neorealism was a movement in cinema history that is circumscribed to Italian filmmakers. The movement happened after the second world

war and marked a turn from the big Cinecittà productions made earlier in an attempt to build morale and propagate the fascist views and ideology.

With fascist ideals being forced into the population, it is expected that some friction occurs; therefore, an anti-fascist feeling among young intellectuals started steering artistic productions and critics toward more realistic works. Realism was already being explored in different film industries with different purposes in mind, like in the USSR with socialist realism and in France. Films that covered the lives of the low class were shot in the 30s. Italy also went through this phase in the 30's very much influenced by the French and the work of Jean Renoir. Neorealism comes then not as a way to explain a new kind of realism but as a revival of certain themes in the Italian film industry that had been dormant during the fascist regime because they didn't represent the ideal of the government. The transition from 'white telephone', fascist epics and melodramas to the more realistic films, as explained before, happened because those kinds of films no longer made sense and the artists wanted to reflect on the poor people and the struggles of the recent war.

Italy had previously gone through a trend of regional naturalism in the turn-of-the-century with the works of Giovanni Verga that went back in trend as the younger generation began discussing the merits of realistic art again in opposition to Nominalists (Bordwell and Thompson 279).

After the war, Cinecittà studios were pretty much destroyed and the big productions that were once possible had to make do with a more modest kind of production. Neorealism was then a response to the situation but also a way to oppose the Fascist ideals, break away from the luxurious and escapist films that were being produced, and address the problems the country was going through at that moment. Poverty, unemployment, workers' lives, the German occupation, and the resistance by the partisans made their way to the screen at the hands of Roberto

Rossellini, Giuseppe De Santis, Luchino Visconti, Vittorio De Sica, and others as a reaction to Italy's status quo. For example, *Obsession*, the film that is said to have started the movement, was born within Fascism and as a reaction to it; it challenged the rigid Fascist rules of the strong leader and family. The film tells the story of an adulterous woman that falls in love with a character that is hinted to be homosexual. Needless to say, these were the complete opposite of Fascist ideals.

Due to their characteristic rawness and unconventional aesthetic choices, the films better known as Neorealists became the face of Italy. *Obsession* (Visconti), *Rome, Open City* (Rossellini) or even Zavattini and De Santis' writings influenced Italian filmmakers and, soon enough, other artists started employing similar aesthetics to their own films. It's important to recall that other non-Neorealist films continued being produced alongside, when the period from 1945 and 1953 is concerned 768 films were produced in Italy but only 55 of those were Neorealists (Wagstaff 425-426).

The main characteristics of Neorealist films were the unusual lenses through which social problems were brought to light at that time. The lives of common poor working class people in their natural settings were being shown in the least mediated form in an almost documentary-like way.

A disclaimer here, it might be important to note that even though a canon is mentioned, despite my searches, I was not able to locate the canon mentioned but, based on my understanding and studies, the following are the films that are most widely known, mentioned, and regarded as good examples of Neorealist films due to development in aesthetics, story, themes, or impact. According to Mark Shiel "most critics agree on the seven key works, all produced in the late 1940s – *Rome, Open City, Paisà, Germany Year Zero, Shoeshine, Bicycle Thieves, Umberto D,* and *The Earth Trembles* – but beyond these what constitutes a Neorealist film remains a

subject of debate. Whether films such as *Miracle in Milan* (Miracolo a Milano, 1951), *I vitelloni* (1953), *Journey to Italy* (Viaggio in Italia, 1953), *Senso* (1954), or *Nights of Cabiria* (1957) could be described as Neorealist at all was hotly disputed when they were released during the seemingly endless so-called 'crisis of Neorealism' of the 1950s" (Shiel 3-4).

Rome, Open City brought an immediacy that was rarely seen in fiction films that granted a certain documentary-like style to the films and also brought realism. *Bicycle Thieves* is referred to by Bazin as being proof that Neorealism could go past the topic of resistance and the war, that the movement could still approach social topics and issues with the same lens. *Umberto D* pushed forward the observation approach and the match of cinema time to "life time" that was so kin to filmmakers like Zavattini, according to Bazin it's a cinematographic "report," a disconcerting and irrefutable observation on the human condition (Bazin and Cardullo 113).

There is little agreement on the film that enclosed Neorealism. Some scholars go to the extent of extending the movement's reach to Antonioni or Fellini as far as the '60s (these directors were an integral part of the movement, Antonioni with his documentary on people of Po and Fellini with the help given on the script of *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan*) others would say that it ended with *Umberto D* (De Sica, 1951).

The first few years after the decline of fascism saw the birth of films that employed a new aesthetic that had been cooking inside the regime. As Bordwell and Thompson tell us, Italy went through an "Italian Spring" after the country was liberated from Mussolini in 1945, the ideals of this new realism managed to fully bloom in an environment that wanted the left-liberal ideas to represent Italy's rebirth. The films that were produced between 1945 and 1948 benefitted from somewhat unrestricted freedom that would soon come to an end. The Neorealist films with their

depiction of “desolate, poverty-stricken country” infuriated politicians of the time; they wanted stories that showed an Italy headed toward “democracy and prosperity” (Bordwell and Thompson 359-361).

Giulio Andreotti, the state undersecretary in charge of entertainment, managed to control the production of films that, according to him, “slandered Italy”. He did so by not only providing funds to film productions and tying it to the scrutiny of a government committee but also by subjecting them to export denial in case they featured a picture of Italy that the government didn’t want to see exported. This measure is best known as the Andreotti Law and it created a “preproduction censorship” (Bordwell and Thompson 362) that led to a change in Neorealist films that moved away from purer Neorealism in favor of more traditional romances and melodramas (Bordwell and Thompson 362). These regulations also stimulated a new flavor of Neorealism, known as rosy Neorealism, that made use of the working-class characters in 1930s-style populist comedies (Bordwell and Thompson 362). Apart from *Umberto D* released in 1952, the rosy Neorealism was the dominant form in Neorealism in the early 1950s and 1960s. The new variation continued with the use of non-actors and the location shooting with occasional social commentary but, as Bordwell puts it, “[rosy Neorealism] absorbed Neorealism into the robust tradition of Italian comedy” (Bordwell and Thompson 366).

In general, it can be said that the movement filmmakers “made a virtue out of necessity”; they became their own producers and had to develop “cheap production methods, concentrating on authentic content rather than on ‘production values’ such as stars and spectacle” (Wagstaff 13). This granted the Neorealist films “with a freshness and individuality that rapidly gained them a commercially modest but culturally prestigious export market” (Wagstaff 13).

2.6. On the Term and its Adhesion Within the Group

A look back to Raymond Williams provides us with an excerpt retrieved from the book *Keywords* that intends to define 'Isms', a termination that has served as a suffix for many art movements throughout art history such as Cubism, Dadaism, Impressionism, Expressionism, and, of course, Italian Neorealism. This is how the passage starts:

There have been **isms**, and for that matter **ists**, as far back as we have record. ism and ist are Greek suffixes. **ism** was used in English to form a noun of action (baptism); of a kind of action (heroism); and of actions and beliefs characteristic of some group (Atticism, Judaism) or tendency (Protestantism, Socialism) or school (Platonism). (Williams 125)

As can be observed, the philosopher begins the entry on 'Isms' by offering an overview of meanings and briefly describing its history in order to clarify the etymology of the word. In Neorealism, the suffix comes through the word Realism; it comes embedded in it since that consists of a term coined to describe a representation tendency in art. It can be inferred that Neorealism was named in allusion to Realism being a 'new realism' as the name suggests (from the Greek *neos*, 'new') that flourished in Italy and revived a tradition from a few decades prior. The termination 'ism' comes, therefore, in a second hand borrowing from 'Realism', but fits the idea of Neorealism being a cohesive movement of which the term wanted to describe nonetheless. Neorealism was thought to be well-suited to describe the films produced in Italy exactly due to the fact that it was thought to be a cohesive movement that shared common beliefs and characteristics. However, that is far from being true when it comes to Neorealism as mentioned previously. Even though the

term alludes to unity in its core, historians tend to disagree on “how unified and uniform Italian Neorealism was” (Bordwell and Thompson, 371).

As for the filmmakers, the term was not widely welcomed at the time with only a few exceptions. Cesare Zavattini and Roberto Rossellini are among the ones that identified themselves with the description (Bazin and Cardullo 106), while other filmmakers at the time didn't relate to it and felt this was more of a broad term that was used to define very different kinds of artists, films, and, especially, approaches to filmmaking. The aversion to the term does nothing but emphasize how little coherence the movement had. During a conference in 1974, described in chapter 4 of *Mira Liehm's Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present*, many scholars believed that Neorealism instead of being cohesive was more of a loose ethic, not an aesthetic or a political position (qtd. in Bordwell and Thompson, 371).

Therefore, far from reaching consensus regarding common guidelines, the movement was formed by filmmakers that followed common themes but utilized different techniques to do so. To assume all Neorealist films employed the same procedures would be a disservice. As exemplified in chapter 2, most of the claims regarding their aesthetic choices, such as the use of non-actors or avoidance of studios, cannot be applied to all of them. Visconti did use real fishermen in their real houses in *The Earth Trembles* but Rossellini, on the other hand, brought the most famous actors in Italy at the time (Wagstaff 119) to play the main roles in *Rome, Open City*, a film that was mostly shot in a building adapted to serve as a makeshift studio (Wagstaff, 35).

Williams' article comes in handy once again in order to provide us with a possible reason for the animosity toward the term. He describes the evolution of the suffix 'isms' as being itself transformed into a word that has a meaning on its own. He mentions a “reaction expressed in the isolation of isms and ists as separate words”

(Williams, 125) that happens in the late 18th century and early 19th century as a response to the overuse of the suffix. Williams brings examples from this period to illustrate that the term used on its own had acquired a derogatory sense. A sense that persists until today as can be seen in the *Collins English Dictionary* entry:

ism

noun

informal, often derogatory an unspecified doctrine, system, or practice

(Collins English Dictionary)

One can infer that the aversion comes due to the fact that any '-isms' come with a set of rules and characteristics that are expected to be across the board but that is simply not the case for Neorealism.

Unlike other movements in art that had their foundations based on the writings of their artists like Futurism with the *Futurist Manifesto* by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti or André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* for Surrealism or even George Courbet's manifesto on Realism, the Italian Neorealism was never introduced to the world with a manifesto or program (Bordwell and Thompson, 361). There were surely some writings done on that topic by Zavattini or De Santis from the *Bianco e Nero* newspaper but they seem to prioritize different things as being the very essence of the movement and, by doing so, exclude and include different films to the canon.

De Santis, as mentioned before, who was an important figure for the movement and created powerful films such as *Bitter Rice* and *Rome 11:00*, seemed to see the movement through a resistance lens, be it in the fight of classes, fight against a tyrannic government, or against the Nazi forces that occupied Italy (Lawton XII).

As analyzed by Ben Lawton in the foreword of the *Giuseppe de Santis and Postwar Italian Cinema* by Antonio Vitti, De Santis would probably drop *Bicycle Thieves* from the canon in favor of *Miracle in Milan*, for example, since the first

doesn't clearly show the fight of classes so clearly the same way *Miracle* does for example. This example goes a long way to show how diverse the understandings were. De Santis himself wanted to make films "from a working-class perspective (...) what he defined as the true spirit of Neorealism" (Lawton XIII) and eventually get to the core and show the workers' life when he comes back home from work.

Zavattini, another filmmaker (screenwriter) that was interested in theorizing about their work even though he had divergences to De Santis, also had a similar wish in which he also desired to show someone's life uninterruptedly. His intent was to tell a story in the least idealized way as possible, an unadorned picture and the least mediated story in which all that is seen is someone's life. That was his wish to shoot after both De Sica and himself shot *Umberto D.* Bazin analyzed this scene in one of his articles and deems it as a fantastic example of realism but this will be further analysed later when the cinematography aspects come into play.

3. Analysis

As exemplified earlier, the scope of the Italian Neorealism movement seems to change according to the authors and the characteristics these authors seem to prioritize. The film canon, for example, is no different and is also subject to change. For the purpose of this thesis, two films have been chosen to focus on. It is rather important to focus the research on certain works and directors that were important for the movement at the time and have also impacted cinema history.

Of course, it is not possible to analyze all of the Neorealist films within the scope of the thesis so it's going to assume a more restricted scope basing its breakdowns on *Rome, Open City* (Rossellini, 1945) and *The Earth Trembles* (Visconti, 1948) due to the fact that these films are believed to have characteristics that are somehow understood nowadays as being quintessential to the Neorealism. These films are going to serve as means for a breakdown that exemplifies the movement's characteristics and that is desired to be representative of other films of Neorealism. Afterward, a general overview of some of the movement's other renowned films is going to be analyzed in the light of the cinematography techniques analyzed.

This choice follows the reasoning behind Christopher Wagstaff's selection of Neorealist films for the analysis featured in the book *Italian Neorealist Cinema - An Aesthetic Approach*. Wagstaff argues that his selection (that included *Paisan* but doesn't feature *The Earth Trembles*) other than being based on relevance, are films that ranged from the period which he calls a "'hiatus' in the control and domination by producers of Italian film production between the years 1945 and 1949" (Wagstaff 5). Wagstaff then proceeds to explain that the films chosen for his analysis were selected from that period "as being more plausibly products of their artistic progenitors and less conditioned by other, conventional factors than films deriving

from other contexts” (Wagstaff 5). The ‘other contexts’ mentioned here allude to the Fascist and Nazi ruling of Italy until 1945 when the country was freed from both Benito Mussolini and the Nazi forces as well as the Andreotti law abrogated in 1949 that affected the kinds of films being released in Italy, the Andreotti law encouraged the production of uncritical and superficial films, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

The characteristics studied here are more or less present in all of the films in some way or another but are very prevalent in the films chosen. *Rome, Open City* will allow us to discuss the claims of Neorealism being documentary-like and rough in appearance. *The Earth Trembles* will provide us with a basis for a discussion on the deep focus and the Bazinian long takes that are believed to enhance realism. By doing so, we could understand how Neorealism moved away from the Hollywood tradition of glamour and idealization getting closer to a more realistic aesthetic.

3.1. The Newsreel Aesthetic and Lighting in *Rome, Open City*

Rome, Open City, directed by Roberto Rossellini and shot by Ubaldo Arata, impacted the world with its stark imagery. A lot is said about the ever-lasting significance of *Rome, Open City* and how much it awed audiences around the world. Many of the characteristics attributed to Neorealism, such as documentary-like footage, use of non-actors, and systematic use of real locations were popularized by *Rome, Open City* and made it into other Neorealist films or became part of the aesthetic canon of the movement. Bert Cardullo defines it as a “landmark film in the promulgation of Neorealist ideology”, as it “completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of its historical moment” (Bazin and Cardullo 21). The film shed light on the movement in international circuits while making both the public and critics aware of the new directions Italian films were taking (Bazin and Cardullo 21).

A review published in *The New York Times* upon the film's release in the United States of America in 1946, describes the feature as "unquestionably one of the strongest dramatic films yet made about the recent war" (Crowther 21).

As discussed in previous chapters, Italy's situation imposed certain choices and barriers to the filmmakers that had to be surpassed in order to produce their films. That certainly impacted the production of those films but is, more often than not, given a bigger role than it should have where *Rome, Open City* aesthetics are concerned, as if they can only be seen as a direct result of the circumstances. These misconceptions around the production of this film are a disservice to the understanding of the film as an art piece that looks the way it does due to deliberate design by Roberto Rossellini and Ubaldo Arata in opposition to being a result of the surrounding situation such as the difficulty of finding film stock, the impossibility of using Cinecittá's facilities that were imposed to the filmmakers due to the economic crisis and destruction caused by the war.

In this chapter, Rossellini's techniques and film language are going to be analyzed in the context of added realism. The refusal of embellishment brought by the classical lighting tradition and the emulation of newsreel aesthetics are the main topics covered here. *Rome, Open City* is going to serve as a dive into why these choices can convey better realism on screen and mainly why the Neorealist films moved towards more and more use of such techniques.

In order to better understand the break with traditional lighting and with glamour, we should have an introduction to the development of Hollywood lighting as that was the biggest cinema industry at the time. As exemplified in chapter 1,

American films were very much present in Italian markets and the American industry served as a model for the Italian industry during the 1920s.

3.1.1. Lighting Development until Neorealism

Cinematography in the fiction realm has made lighting its main characteristic and has used it to make films possible, create moods, glamour, and, above all, create imagery that serves the purpose of the stories filmmakers set themselves to tell. Lighting techniques in cinema history have come a long way since its early days. From the quest towards conquering natural light in cinema's beginning to mastering light shaping, three-dimensionality, and pictorialism of the '20s, '30s, and so on.

This subchapter is designed to give a brief overview of how lighting evolved over time culminating in the Hollywood classical style that was so influential to the Italian films' style prior to Neorealism, especially during the Fascist regime.

This immense presence of the classical Hollywood style helped shape the audience's expectations of the quality of their own Italian films, therefore, raising the bar for the national market.

In the book *Hollywood Lighting from the Silent Era to Film Noir*, Patrick Keating writes about the development of lighting in Hollywood from the beginning of the classical Hollywood cinema in 1917 (as proposed by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson) until the film noir era in 1950 (Keating et al. 10). Keating explains that, at this moment in time, the "Hollywood companies were committed to a certain product - the feature-length narrative film" (Keating et al. 10) while the filmmakers had assumed a "set of conventions - the rules of the continuity system" (Keating et al. 10). The cinematographers, on the other hand, were adopting the so well-known

'three-point lighting' that, according to Keating, would soon become the go-to technique amongst cinematographers due to its versatility (Keating et al. 10).

Hollywood, back in the day, was not circumscribed to three-point lighting only; rather, many different techniques co-existed. Keating tells us that the cinematographers were aware of a set of conventions that were able to meet different needs of the industry and "accomplish a range of tasks, from storytelling to glamour, from expressivity to realism" (Keating et al. 1). These conventions were responsible for offering certain rules. Keating also tells us that publications such as *American Cinematographer* suggest that the cinematographers of the time constructed their cinematography around four general groups of conventions "figure-lighting, effects-lighting, genre/scene, and composition" (Keating et al. 3). Figure-lighting involved all the techniques used to light characters, to bring three-dimensionality, gender differentiation, and glamour; effects-lighting encompassed the techniques used to mimic certain lighting effects of real life such as a fireplace, torchlight, lamps, and sunsets that were on screen; the genre/scene lighting were the conventions that dictated how to shoot specific genres and scenes depending on the mood required. For example, a crime film might require high-contrast while a comedy requires a high key lighting; lastly, the composition conventions used lighting to suggest depth and direct the attention of the audience by contrasting the foreground and background. For the purposes of the analysis of *Rome, Open City*, we are going to focus on figure-lighting and composition since they are more applicable.

A good way to summarize the early days of Hollywood lighting and what has become the classical Hollywood style of the 30s and 40s is *differentiation*. As Keating puts it, "A man should not be lit like a woman, a crime film should not be lit like a

romance, and a back alley should not be lit like a ballroom” (Keating 29). The conventions mentioned earlier (figure-lighting, effects-lighting, genre/scene, and composition) allowed cinematographers to differentiate their images in the terms of gender, atmosphere, space, or time of day, etc.

In the olden days of natural light, in which film stocks were not that sensitive, light served a more practical function of exposing the film. Light shape and mood were a somewhat secondary worry; however, artistic filmmakers still managed to modify the light using bouncing boards, diffuse it using muslin, or emphasize specific parts of the set or characters by letting more light through (Keating et al. 18). Still photographers, however, managed to experiment a bit more with figure-lighting in their portrait endeavors. Their much longer exposure time of usually two seconds (Keating 43) allowed them to aim for quality of lighting as opposed to quantity of light (used for exposure). It is important to say that many of the cinematographers at the time had started their careers in still photography which is why this connection is made here.

When photographers started employing artificial lighting in the late 20s due to the freedom it brought (they didn't have to wait for the sun), they were still praising natural light for its softness (the available light fixtures were sharp arc lights) and its capability to produce the 'illusion of roundness' (Keating 33). Photographers knew that roundness and three-dimensionality were characteristics that had to be *brought* to the image since the characteristics of the stereoscopic vision were lost in a picture. They also realized quite soon that what differentiates the production of a picture from the production of a painting, the automatic mechanic use of perspective, didn't supply the desired sense of depth automatically. Likeness to reality is *created*, not *captured*,

by using the right angle of light and also by having a good gradation of tones according to the photographers (Keating 34).

Parallel to that, photographers were experimenting with lighting schemes that reflected character and adapted to age and gender. The rule of thumb was to use low-contrast, high-key, and soft images for women and the opposite (high-contrast, low-key, and sharp images) for men. As to the reason for that, Keating explains that “the photographers’ discourse of “character” is almost invariably complicated by a discourse of sexual difference, as many photographers start with the assumption that men and women have different degrees of “character” (Keating 35). Images of men were expected to show their faces’ ‘character’ while pictures of women focused on beauty and softness.

However complicated it is, this differentiation based on gender persisted in photography and was brought to Hollywood lighting as well; however, photographers and cinematographers started to diverge on how to achieve this. According to Keating, the links between Hollywood’s figure-lighting and portraiture lies more on the structural level instead of the technical level (Keating 42-43). The techniques employed to reach the desired effect were different but the intended result was the same: differentiate images according to gender. Photographers had the option to retouch images or use different contrast levels, a thing that was simply not possible for cinematographers because they were using contrast to signify the time of day for example.

Other experimentations around the disposition of lights in figure-lighting were being made at the time until the industry and cinematographers reached an agreement on the 3-point system. Double-key lighting employed two key lights of the



Image 3.1 - Example of double-key lighting
Daddy-Long-Legs (1919)
Reproduced in Keating 48



Image 3.2 - Example of core-lighting
The Prisoner of Zenda (1922)
Reproduced in Keating 49

same intensity (Image 3.1) along with backlight (sometimes more than one) to suggest a moderate roundness and depth at the same time as flattening and smoothing women's features (Keating et al. 24). The *core-lighting* (Image 3.2) as described by Barry Salt was also experimentation toward more roundness that came about in the 1920s in a film called *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) by Ingram (Keating et al. 24). Ingram was a sculptor and he was very much invested in bringing the illusion of roundness to screen (Keating 48).

Both examples were experiments that pushed the understanding of lighting further but fell short due to certain aspects. They either moved away from the 'natural ideal' (Keating 48) like the two-key lighting due to its lack of roundness when compared to other systems, or they didn't work for women since it emphasized their character and was not so gentle to their features, concerns that were in vogue at the time. Core-lighting continued on the close-ups of men though for the added character.

Another aspect of the core-light (Image 3.2) that's worth mentioning is that it pushed the illusion of roundness far, so that it created another concept that is very kin to Hollywood style, "the illusion of presence".

The illusion of presence is a concept that made its way to the classical Hollywood style and can be argued to still be part of the characteristics we see in films nowadays. The illusion of presence technique was used to allow the spectator “to pass seamlessly from one ideal viewpoint to another” (Keating 107) and produce stories in which the audience “can live with the characters inside the fictional world” (Keating 113).

The experimentations continued throughout the 1920s. Key-light was being raised more and more in height towards a more top-light position, partly following the original lighting technique used in paintings by Rembrandt (Keating 48).

In the late 1920s, the double key-light and core-lighting were becoming more unusual in favor of the three-point lighting that we know nowadays. The reason being that it encompassed the ideals cinematographers at the time were striving for, gender differentiation, the illusion of roundness, the illusion of presence, pictorial beauty, and, more importantly, the need for efficiency. The three-point lighting was a system that allowed slight changes but was quick to make at the same time. Another reason for the homogenization of techniques was the “cinema star phenomenon, which placed high priority on glamour” (Keating 50).

Three-point lighting directs our attention to the actor’s face (which aids storytelling), while making the actor look attractive (which enhances the star’s glamour), while also creating an illusion of roundness (which is a kind of realism), and ensuring a pleasing balance of light and dark (which creates a level of pictorial quality). This helps to explain why three-point lighting became a default convention, rather than merely one option among many equals. (Keating 6)

By the 1930s, Hollywood's classical style had already been more or less matured and it was invested in a commitment to storytelling while, at the same time, concealing the filmmaking techniques (directing, acting, lighting, editing, etc.) as much as possible and creating the sought-after illusion of presence. Hollywood was looking to create realism and illusion on-screen with lifelike characterizations.

The illusion of presence mentioned earlier is important to understand the Hollywood production when compared to Neorealism because this aspect is what led to the escapist films that were so common to Hollywood, and to the fascist productions that preceded Neorealism.

Apart from figure-lighting, composition lighting was also used to increase depth and realism and, therefore, was important for the industry at the time. The composition conventions were not so unified as the other lighting conventions but the main idea was to use the composition lighting to balance the contrast between the foreground and the background in order to, again, create the illusion of roundness and depth. This lighting convention was also supposed to be used to guide the spectators' eyes to the most important part of the story. To do so, some techniques should be used, such as making the points of interest in the shot (like faces or props) the brightest or placing objects in the foreground to suggest multiple layers of distances. This technique, called 'repoussoir', was very much used in painting and was also employed in film composition mainly because it enhanced beauty and was ideal for the illusion of presence (Keating 88).

The two techniques explained here can be found in *Rome, Open City* mainly as a way to bring depth to the images and make them believable and realistic. The

use of these techniques in Neorealism doesn't come necessarily tied to the aim for glamour and illusion of presence but, rather, as a means to create life-like imagery.

Cinematographers of the '30s and '40s maintained the techniques and conventions of the 1920s. John Alton offers us an insight into Hollywood classical lighting. As opposed to Keating's research, Alton's writings offer a breakdown of the lighting system that could be worth it for the later analysis of the lighting in *Rome, Open City*.

Alton's chapter on the "Hollywood close-up", defines what could be called an evolution of the three-point lighting, the eight-point system. Alton carefully takes us through the reasoning he found for the addition of the extra 5 points of light and the effect it creates. He justifies that, even though a simpler one light system might do the job and is satisfactory for portrait photography, it doesn't cut in motion pictures. In films, where realism is desirable and "where people move around and do things", it is necessary to make the characters look real in order to convince the audience (Alton 99). Alton devises a lighting technique called the "eight-light system" (Alton 99) that is supposed to keep Hollywood's glamour and quality level. According to him, "the result is that of the one-light system, only more plastic, rounder, and more realistic". Alton's system is devised of 5 extra points that are added to the regular key-light, fill-light, and backlight combination, and they are: filler light, clotheslight, kicker light, eye light, and background light. A *filler light* is a light point that is responsible for filling the shadows cast by the key light that were not filled by the fill light. Their purpose is rather different than the fill light because they are there to wrap the face and extend the key-light (sometimes it has the same intensity as the key-light); the *clotheslight* is employed to bring texture and to model clothes; the kicker light is placed behind the

character in a similar position to the backlight but usually lower; it is brought to shape and model the face a bit more. The eye light is a reflection that is supposed to bring life to the character's eyes and it's the reflection that shows in their eye bulbs (very often some of the other lights doubles as an eye light); background light is to light whatever is behind the character and is expected to balance the exposure between foreground and background so as to create the mood desired since the light has to fit the general mood.

Alton says that the cinematographer needs to be alert to the fact that the eight-light system might not require all the points depending on the set and its various reflectance levels, in that case, the system might only serve as a basic pattern.

It is interesting to point out that there is a long way from the three-point lighting to the one described by Alton and one possible explanation for the discrepancy is the need for pictorial beauty. This is showcased when Alton voices his beliefs about the Hollywood close-up: "Close-ups of Hollywood stars are known the world over for their exquisite beauty. They are the export of the American film industry, and should be photographed with lenses especially designed for the purpose of beautifying" (Alton 85). Keating summarizes it by saying "These functional groupings—storytelling, realism, pictorial quality, and glamour—do not provide a comprehensive theory of lighting; rather, they indicate the purposes for lighting that seemed most relevant to Hollywood cinematographers" (Keating 6).

To the best of my knowledge Hollywood lighting history has the vastest documentation and due to its importance to cinema history and incontestable impact on Italian cinema of the '30s and '40s, it will serve as a good starting point to

understand where the Neorealist movement is situated when it comes to cinematography techniques (more specifically lighting) and its style. As mentioned, Neorealist films wanted to move away from the Italian productions that drew inspiration from American films and imported the same conventions and ideals of Hollywood when it comes to cinematography.

3.1.2. Defining 'Newsreel'

Here, I would like to differentiate the terms documentary and the newsreel as I believe it to offer an insight into the 1940 audience's exposure to this format and their capabilities of tying Rossellini's artistic choices back to the newsreel format. The idea is also to expand on the use of these words when describing *Rome, Open City* since most documentaries at the time were very often scripted and re-enacted. The subchapter aims to clear any doubts and explain that *Rome, Open City* is much closer to a newsreel than to a documentary of the time. The use of this word today carries what WE call documentary but differs very much from what it used to be.

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the newsreel was a short motion picture format that featured current events and was introduced in England by Charles Pathé about 1897. The newsreels were routinely shown, initially, in music halls between acts and, later, migrated to the intermissions of feature films in movie theaters ("newsreel"). Still within the definitions given by *Encyclopedia Britannica*, one can find "documentary" being described as "motion picture that shapes and interprets factual material for purposes of education or entertainment" ("documentary film"). The aspect of the definition that would be worth pointing out is the employment of the words "shapes" and "interprets" factual material. This definition takes into account the intervention the author has on the piece and is very helpful to explain the documentaries of the time in which the separation between journalism and

documentary format was more clear cut. The American documentaries like *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (Lorentz, 1936), the propagandistic *From D-Day to Germany* (Lieb, 1944), or *Two down and One to Go* (Capra, 1945) had a very recognizable structure that heavily relied on voiceovers, graphs, and re-enactments. They would fall under the Expository Mode described by Bill Nichols in his book *Introduction to Documentary*. Reconstructions of events were also commonplace in documentaries, a good example being *Nanook of the North* in which an artistic license was granted in favor of clinical accuracy but this discussion is not going to be covered here.

The newsreel, on the other hand, is part of a group of films ‘where the standard principles governing journalism must apply’ (Manvell et al.). One specific passage of the Encyclopedia Britannica’s entry on ‘Types of Films’ I would like to point out is that, since the beginning of the century, viewers are said to require that the “newsreel material be neither prearranged nor fabricated” (Manvell et al.) and that they had become accustomed to the format and mainly that they had become “aware of the effects of the intrusiveness of the reporter and the limitations of point of view on the objectivity of any documentary film” (Manvell et al.).

As for the more topical aesthetic characteristics of the newsreels, the ones that would be immediately understood as newsreel characteristics are grainy black and white images, often close to the action, that were frantically operated, usually handheld. The images that follow can perhaps exemplify the newsreels aesthetics with images from *Yesterday’s Newsreel* (1946) (Images 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5).



Image 3.3



Image 3.4



Image 3.5

Some technical aspects could explain the look of the newsreels such as that the cameras used mostly were 16mm due to their longer runtime and reduced size. The 16mm, at the same time, has a more apparent grain structure, hence the grainy image. It is worth mentioning that 35mms were also commonly used by German, British, and American army cameramen (Salt 255-256). The nature of war cinematography also implies a hectic camera operating due to the closeness to the conflict, the cameramen also very often employed hand-held operating over static tripod shots.

There is yet another aspect that is also part of the newsreel aesthetic that is worth mentioning due to the common employment in *Rome, Open City* and that is the use of long lenses. The camera operators would favor the use of longer lenses when they couldn't come closer to the actions due to safety or impossibility. They had to be able to record at all times and in all sorts of situations so a long lens would come in handy when the subject was too far away. What's important to be mentioned is that a long lens leaves a fingerprint on the image captured. Due to its magnification, it results in an image that looks flattened and very often it also increases the perception of shakiness. These characteristics were not so much used in cinema at the time being relegated to the newsreels.

3.1.3. Analysis

Rome, Open City shows the partisan resistance against a Nazi-occupied Rome during World War II. The film revolves around five main characters that are somehow related to each other and vary in degrees of connection to the partisan cause. Pina, a widowed pregnant mother of two; Francesco, Pina's fiancé, a worker at a communist newspaper that supports the resistance; Don Pietro, a priest that also makes use of his privileges as a parish to assist the fighters; Manfredi, a resistance

leader that is being tracked down by the Nazis; and Marina, a nightclub singer who used to be in a relationship with Manfredi but finds herself involved with the Nazis.

Rome, Open City was shot during the liberation of Rome with an ensemble of actors that included well-known professional actors such as Anna Magnani (as Pina) and Aldo Fabrizi (as the priest), cast off-type here amidst non-actors and real German soldiers. The exterior scenes were shot on the real streets of Rome, as mentioned previously. The interior sets, on the other hand, were set in a real building that served as an improvised studio where many of the scenes were shot.

In the book *Italian Neorealism: An Aesthetic Approach*, Wagstaff sought to give reasons for the look of *Rome, Open City* and, in extension, Neorealist films (because it influenced the rest) due to its impact, as said previously. According to him, we could see the development of the style in two different ways. The first would be that Rossellini appropriates stylistic attributes of the newsreels and, therefore, increases the effect of reality. The aesthetic would then serve as a code, bringing the film's overall style close to journalistic pieces; therefore, arrogating a sense of reality that comes linked to that aesthetic. Second, Wagstaff offers that the look comes in a response to the scarcity of resources (Wagstaff 94-95). Rossellini had a modest budget – if compared to other films of the time - and no access to Cinecittà or any other studio, there was a shortage of film stock and electricity, and, as a result, lighting was difficult to get. Between these two, I would like to tip the scale to the former, toward the side of deliberate design.

It is very much true that these problems impacted the production and are indissociable to the film itself, they shaped *Rome, Open City* and forced Roberto Rossellini and Ubaldo Arata, the cinematographer, to adapt. However, I would like to bring some counterarguments that tend to point to the fact that, even though the situation pushed Rossellini to make these decisions, he took them knowingly

because they fit the style, the story, and the characters and, by doing so, sedimented the Neorealist style, as explained below.

Barry Salt states that, in regards to technology, the cinematography techniques necessary for a jump from the studio to location had already existed when *Rome, Open City* was shot (Salt 254) and, considering the fact that Italian filmmakers were required to post-dub their films under Fascism (Shiel 11), there was no reason why films that came before it couldn't be taken to the street since the late '30s (Salt 254).

Take a film like *The Peddler and the Lady* from 1943 that features both of Rossellini's main actors, Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi, for example. Even though it is considered by Rossellini as being the birth of Neorealist acting (qtd. in Wagstaff 92), it can serve as proof that filmmakers were still shooting streets and real locations as if they were studios. They were able to, technically, shoot on location but preserved the same conventions and glamour expectations (image 3.6 and 3.7).



Image 3.6 *The Peddler and the Lady*



Image 3.7 *The Peddler and the Lady*

Barry Salt says that the move to location was then an “aesthetic choice, no doubt induced by experience of all concerned with documentary film in world war 2” (Salt 254). The move to location shoot was done due to the realism it brings and to

be able to show the real people's lives, places, struggles during the war, and values that were very much akin to Neorealist filmmakers.

Another aspect that brought Rossellini's film closer to the newsreel look was the film stock choice. As discussed earlier, newsreels mainly used black and white stock. A lot has been said about the contrast jumps in *Rome, Open City* attributing this to the shortage of film stock in Italy at the time which forced the production to take whatever bits and pieces were available. That is a myth that was very much insuflated by Rossellini himself in a series of interviews in which he states that he had to go to street photographers to find usable material (Wagstaff 95). He reinforces that the production had to stretch itself to secure film stock having to resort to photography short tail-ends. That is surely true but it doesn't tell the whole story.

Research done in Italy by researchers of the *Cineteca Nazionale* has found that Arata, the cinematographer of the film, had used only three kinds of films: a Ferrania C.6 produced in Italy for the outdoor scene and two kinds of Agfa Super Panchromatic film for the interiors, one of ASA 32 and another at ASA 120. According to Wagstaff, Agfa stocks were very much comparable in quality to the ones used in Hollywood and the Ferrania was the standard for commercial productions and government-financed films in Italy, This granted *Rome, Open City* with the possibility of virtually having the same degree of image quality which Hollywood films or fascist productions could have had (Wagstaff 96).

The main explanation for the inconsistency in the contrast has been said to have come from the unreliable film development undertaken by Italian laboratories. Problems with the fixing step granted the inconsistencies in contrast to the film (Wagstaff 97). Even though these imperfections were probably not planned, they were certainly embraced and perhaps even welcomed by the filmmakers. If you observe this sequence out of a newsreel you will be able to see the jumps in contrast

from one shot to another, due to all sorts of situations, weather, and terrain conditions that a war cameraman had to go through. These inconsistencies in *Rome, Open City's* overall image quality, if anything, brought veracity and uniqueness as if the footage came from a real event that was not scripted, that happened only once.

The exposure is an aspect that is worth leaning upon here as well. Some of the images, especially in the beginning of *Rome, Open City* when the Nazi troops are marching in Rome, are extremely underexposed, the soldiers are only discernible due to a faint outline caused by the morning skylight. The arrival of the soldiers at Manfredi's building is also worth noting (Sequence 3.1).



Sequence 3.1 - Underexposed shots in *Rome, Open City*

Shots like these from *Rome, Open City* could easily have been removed in case they didn't fit the film but they were deliberately kept. It is safe to say that an underexposed shot like that would not have survived the edit in a film that follows the classical aesthetic.

An understandable assumption would be that the image was mistakenly underexposed by the cinematographer but that simply doesn't resonate with the fact that Arata was a very experienced filmmaker that had been shooting 'white telephone' films and fascist era epics for a while including films like *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) that include whole sequences at night.

A comparison between two films shot by Arata could perhaps bring insight into the choices made in *Rome, Open City* regarding exposure. For instance, a night scene in which Pina's son and his fellow neighbors are coming back to their building after attacking the Nazi with a bomb could be compared to a night scene in the film *Scipione L'Africano* (Image 3.8 and 3.9).



Image 3.8 - *Rome, Open City*



Image 3.9 - *Scipione L'Africano*

The examples make it clear that Arata can light a scene at night, he pretty much follows the conventions of the time for night scenes such as the use of strong backlights, low-key lighting, and skins with a reflectance of one stop or more over middle gray (which means no underexposure of keylight). That is, however, not the case for *Rome, Open City* where the boys are silhouetted against the explosion and have their faces severely underexposed - two stops below middle gray or even less. A technique that is nowadays commonplace in any dark sequence was not so common at the time in fiction films but somewhat present in newsreel footage.

The cinematography exposure 'mistakes' in this sequence are used to allude to the newsreel aesthetic. Arata indeed voiced his concerns about the 'inadequacy of lights available' (Wagstaff 97) and the lack of rushes on the first days (Wagstaff 97) but there is no doubt that he skillfully adapted to the situation and made do with the resources he had while producing images that are very well integrated to the story. The result is as if the cameramen had that only chance to capture whatever is happening in front of his lenses like in newsreels.

3.1.3.1. On Lighting

The prototypical Neorealist film is often thought to be shot on location, using nonactors filmed in rough, offhand compositions. Actually, however, few Neorealist films display all these features (Bordwell and Thompson 362)

As Bordwell exemplifies, not all Neorealist films display all the characteristics that are often used to describe the movement but, above all, it is important to mention that even though they are a rupture with the classical style they still keep a lot of the characteristics of classic films such as the illusion of roundness and illusion of presence. *Rome, Open City*, which relied on a simplified lighting scheme that didn't aim for glamour, still featured some attention to the lighting, especially the interior ones. Observe an insight from Barry Salt on the lighting of the film.

The location scenes in *Rome, Open City* are lit with only a very few lights, but these are still carefully disposed to produce reasonably attractive lighting, though without any backlighting. The roughness in these scenes is in what is lit, rather than the way light is applied. (Salt 255)

The cinematography still followed certain conventions of lighting that are reminiscent of the classical style of well-produced Italian fascist escapist films (Arata had been shooting numerous of these films in the years prior to *Rome, Open City* after all) such as modeling lights but they are employed in a more technical way to produce depth and separation to the characters and sets. They are not used to produce glamour or beauty. Take these dialogue shots between Pina and her fiancé for example (Sequence 3.2).



Sequence 3.2 - Dialogue between Pina and fiancé

The technique used here doesn't aim for beauty. Pay attention to the fact that Pina is lit no different than her fiancé, the gender differentiation, so common in Hollywood, was not being used, there was no intention of glamourizing Pina or showing her in a star light.

The three-point lighting still made its way to this shot and most Neorealist films because of the added realism it brings. In the shot of Pina, therefore, Arata uses modeling lights to create roundness and regain the sense of three-dimensionality as opposed to flatness. Even though the three-point lighting is being used, its purpose is different, Arata wants to increase the realism while others want to bring roundness and beauty or wrap the stars the same way a present would be.

3.1.3.2. Other Camera Techniques

Rossellini also utilizes the positioning of the camera in relation to the characters and the set to suggest distance to the characters and, once again, resemble the newsreel aesthetic and its objective approach to filming. Wagstaff claims the placement of the camera in *Rome, Open City* to be further from the profilmic space in comparison to other films of the time, in fact, as he put it “Rossellini keeps his camera further back from the profilmic than is normal in cinema of the time” (Wagstaff 102). Observe these images:



Image 3.10 - *Rome, Open City*



Image 3.11 - *Rome, Open City*

The distance of the camera to the actors produces a specific kind of image that is understood as distant by the audience perhaps because of the similarity to the way human beings see the world with their own eyes. Perspective cues, the use of layers and objects in the foreground, and the flattening of planes and faces serve as unconscious hints as to where the camera is. It is hard to assert that audiences notice these choices on a more conscious level so as to pinpoint how far the camera is or even the lens range (wide, normal, or tele) the filmmakers made use of, but it certainly impacts how people feel the scene, how they connect to the character since

the distance to the character – and, therefore, the lens used – is one of the most important aspects when the connection to the character is concerned.

The realism here comes from the fact that the camera not only stays a bit further away but always assumes a point of view with which we identify as if we were observing what is happening from a vantage point and sneak peeking into the action. Needless to say that that is also how some real footage newsreels of the time framed certain events. Consider the following images from *Rome, Open City* in which this distanced point of view can be seen (Images 3.12, 3.13 and 3.14).



Image 3.12 - *Rome, Open City*



Image 3.13 - *Rome, Open City*



Image 3.14 - *Rome, Open City*

The conscious use of long lenses coupled with another very common newsreel aspect, the handheld camera, is used in *Rome, Open City* and can be seen in the sequence that became the most remembered sequence of Neorealism, Pina's

death in the hands of the Nazi. The shots that lead to it and the actual scene in which Pina is shot to death are comprised of a somewhat different approach if compared to the rest of the film. The use of long lenses (distance from the action), chaotic editing, and the shakiness of the camera come together to create a perfect match for the scene. These techniques are used in other parts of the film as exemplified earlier but here they are used in unison to create the tension and immediacy the scene requires.

The shakiness combined with shots from afar brings the sense of being observed which is, at the same time, a reminder that the characters are being observed by the Nazi occupation while also resembling the newsreel shots of the time.

The sequence starts with Nazi troops approaching Pina's building on vehicles looking for partisans. The shots are taken from afar from what seems to be balconies of buildings that overlook the action or from the other side of the street. The camera assumes an objective point of view and is frantically operated to follow the quick action of the cars and the marching troops.



Sequence 3.3 - *Rome, Open City*

It is only after a few seconds that we move closer to the main action when the soldiers are evacuating the place and sending soldiers up the building. At this point, Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizzi) comes to the building and takes advantage of being a priest to be granted access to the evacuated building to go up and hide proof against the resistance. Don Pietro heads up, followed by Pina's son, and the sequence is then edited in parallel with the shots of the Nazi troops downstairs that soon decide to check on whatever the priest is going to do. The shots of the priest running up, intercut with the Nazi following his steps, features a handheld camera that is quite shaky. All the shots are taken from a distance and seem to observe the action from afar. Some of the shots also contain objects or pieces of the set that are framed quite close to the camera and appear out of focus resembling the feeling of hiding away behind something (Sequence 3.4).



Sequence 3.4 - *Rome, Open City*

The sequence then develops into the Nazi troops finding Pina's fiancé and arresting him. Pina sees her fiancé being taken away to a patrol wagon and she breaks away from the Nazi guards to run after the patrol wagon to be soon after shot to death in the middle of the street in front of her own son that had come to the streets with Don Pietro (Sequence 3.5).



Sequence 3.5 - *Rome, Open City*

The shakiness of the camera gives way to pans that follow the rapid movement of the characters while employing a long lens. The combination of both elements creates images that blur the backgrounds and assume a distant point of view that sells the objective point of view that Rossellini wanted to achieve with this scene. The director employs these techniques that resemble a newsreel approach to add veracity to the scene but, more importantly, Rossellini doesn't try to over-dramatize Pina's death. It happens very quickly, avoiding the use of close-ups or dedicated lighting (it is all shot with natural light) and, soon after, we are left with the aftermath of the assassination, her acquaintances crying over her body. That is also kept on screen for not so long before it cross-dissolves to the next scene. This lack of dramatization combined with an objective approach could be regarded as a clear difference between the style of *Rome, Open City* and the classical style. This sequence is the polar opposite of the dramatization often seen in classical films.

Apart from the cinematography aesthetic choices that define the proximity between *Rome, Open City* and newsreel, some other aspects are worth mentioning

as well. According to Wagstaff, two other reasons can be given for the realistic effect of the images. First, the film not only fictionalized the story of the last moments of the occupation of Rome but it documented a historical moment, reconstructed the liberation of Rome and the resistance by the partisans, and it recorded, above all, the meaning of the resistance the Italians were fighting, existing as a document to that. Second, is how Rossellini uses the profilmic, the acting, and the locations. *Rome, Open City* shows the real places where the historical moments could be actually happening, it uses real people that did go through similar situations to what is being shown in the film and also uses the recourse of *coralitta* which takes shape here in the use of masses of real people around the main action bringing veracity to the piece. Those are not mere extras but witnesses to the occupation, they are the exact people they represent in the film (Wagstaff 98).

Rossellini made sure to employ all these elements but, above all, he paid attention to wrapping it with an aesthetic that was not conflicting with the subject matter. Wagstaff, who seems to ignore this aspect in Rossellini, deeming him a lazy director that came in the way of the cinematographer where the image and lighting conventions were concerned (Wagstaff 104), analyzes *Rome, Open City* based on its 'mistakes' and incongruences. He does indeed offer some insight into Rossellini's craft with commendable reasoning and examples, especially in his analysis of *Paisan* but it is also clear that these "mistakes" or roughness only granted more authenticity to the piece because they brought the images closer to the newsreel aesthetics. At that moment in time, those images were the reference of reality since those were the images the population would see of the war and the real world. Furthermore, they moved away from what the audiences would see in the big budget films at the time:

perfect lighting and well-constructed sets that aimed for glamour. It is safe to assume that that is the same reason why Rossellini made use of this aesthetic. On the same note, Wagstaff points out that:

the resources available to the filmmakers were not inferior to those available to the makers of *La terra trema*, where the photography is incomparably better. *Roma città aperta* is not a typical example of Arata's cinematographic style, because he photographed other films differently. (Wagstaff 103).

This statement can be seen as proof that the style here is very much used to fit the specific story they wanted to tell, a raw and rough approach to go side by side with the adversity of the moment.

The quote that opens the thesis could once again be used to back the argument and say that the techniques were used by Rossellini and granted more realism at the same time because they emulated the reference of accuracy and less mediation at the time, the newsreels.

Realist art or literature is seen as simply one convention (q.v.) among others, a set of formal representations, in a particular medium (qq.v.) to which we have become accustomed. The object is not really lifelike but by convention and repetition has been made to appear so. (Williams 201)

The social struggles that created technical obstacles to *Rome, Open City* are the same which prompted Rossellini to move to more direct storytelling, to a more realistic approach, to the unadorned lives of the poor and working-class. The cinematography techniques come along and are used to enhance veracity.

3.2. The Use of Deep Focus and Non-actors in *The Earth Trembles*

The Earth Trembles is a film co-scripted, produced, and directed by Luchino Visconti. The film followed 5 years after Visconti's acclaimed first feature *Obsession*. In the years that followed his debut, Visconti is credited to have delved into the production of documentaries that perhaps impacted the artistic choices of this particular film. *The Earth Trembles* exhibits certain characteristics that were held in high esteem by the Neorealists in their pursuit of unadorned, non-idealized, and accurate stories. These cinematography characteristics, such as deep-focus, long takes, and seamless transition between real exterior locations and real interior locations, are the ones that are going to be analyzed here in the light of Andre Bazin's writings. The commitment to using only non-actors in opposition to 'Rossellini's kind of "amalgam"' (Bazin and Cardullo 51) is also going to be explained and tied together as a way to offer a reason for the realism it achieved. As Bazin writes, this can be placed in a tradition of aim for realism but here it achieves maximum realism. He defines *The Earth Trembles* as the film to fully achieve what other films were trying before but were not fully capable of doing so due to limitations or artistic choices.

The feature tells the story of the Valastros, a family of fishermen in their fight for better rights and better economic compensation for their hard work in the sea. The film has a clear communist undertone and, in fact, 'began as a Communist Party-funded documentary to help in the 1948 general election' (Wagstaff 27). Perhaps it wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that the story, therefore, comes from a desire to show the real stories of the working class in their real setting which is reminiscent of the initial idea of this film being a documentary. The idea of making it resemble the fishermen's real lives and, above all, be as close as possible to their reality and make use of the fishermen themselves, grants extra realism to the piece

but is, however, not all that is necessary for that. As Bazin says, it only works due to Visconti's amazing skill to put together a coherent piece. The mere fact of employing real people and real locations might not be enough for the conveying of realism per se, as some may think, there is more to it than meets the eye.

According to Christopher Wagstaff, “a performance is not more about reality simply because the performer is not a professional actor. However, it does narrow the distance between the icon and its referent” (Wagstaff 31). As said by Wagstaff “choosing, from ‘reality,’ a ‘person’ to ‘be’ the part is a movement away from ‘iconic’ reference (imitation) towards ‘indexical’ reference, in which you put into your film part of the reality you want to represent” (Wagstaff page 31-32). Wagstaff also brings the information that the theoretical writings of the Russian director Pudovkin might have come to influence filmmakers at the time, including Visconti, regarding the use of non-actors. Pudovkin’s theories favored the choice of “the right ‘person’ (rather than the right ‘actor’) for the part, exploit the free self-expression of that person, but subject it to tight directorial control for the expressive and representational purposes of the film” (Wagstaff 31). In other words, a badly employed non-actor can defeat the purpose of making it more realistic, thus going the other way around and detaching the audience from the film entirely.

From the aesthetic point of view, the same is true. Simply pointing the camera to the subject would not render said realism, the film has to be constructed that way. Bazin compares *The Earth Trembles* acting to how real people were shot in the documentary *Farrabique* by Rouquier. The people’s embarrassment, awkwardness, and repressed laughter present in the film are indeed covered by a skillful edit but Rouquier doesn’t handle or conceal it entirely without the audience becoming conscious of a camera, breaking the objectivity of his recording (Bazin and Cardullo 54). On the other hand, Visconti, even though dealing with a similar situation in which

he uses real people, achieves masterly directorial quality in regards to pulling realistic performances without breaking realism, quite the contrary, he increases it. (Bazin and Cardullo 54).

3.2.1. On Focus

Cinema captures the world in a very particular way that differs from the way our brains perceive reality in many ways. Where focus is concerned, both cinema lenses and our eyes render the world based on the same optical rules but the combination of eye-brain creates a unique feature of presenting whatever is in front of us in focus constantly. The eyes keep changing focus based on our point of interest which, in practice, allows us to keep everything sharp but that is not true for cinematography. The out-of-focus images seem distant from what we see with our own eyes so it is only expected that cinematography, in the course of its development, would try to recreate our visual system and avoid a shallow depth of field.

The relationship between cinema and focus is somewhat a difficult one throughout cinema history. From as far as early cinema, Hollywood, for example, has gone from the sharp but theatrical images of the early day to a soft-focus era of the 1920s and 1930s to a deep focus trend in the 1940s. That is due to the technology available in each era. In the early days of cinema, deep focus was required for its films' static camera to see everything sharp while actors moved around like on a stage. The early 1920s saw the use of diffusion on the lens and on the lamps to counteract the use of arc light and its sharp shadows which made the glamor and beautiful star shots unviable. The late 1920s saw the advent of sound that brought the inconvenience of an added blimp to isolate camera noise. That meant an added layer of softness since the images had to be recorded through a glass placed on the noise canceling booth (Keating et al. 37). The advent of faster film stocks in the

1940s, on the other hand, provided cinematographers with the technical aspect they lacked before to achieve more realistic images (Keating 3). Dombrowski gives yet another reason, shorter focal-length lenses were more popular in the 1940s:

by 1950 the 35mm lens had supplanted the 50mm as the customary lens. The arrival of the Garrutso modified lens at the end of the 1940s allowed increased depth of field without necessitating increased amounts of light ... Combined with other stylistic choices, deep-focus cinematography became a hallmark of realism. (Keating et al. 62)

When filmmakers are presented with the task of keeping both actors on screen during a dialogue, the first thing that probably crosses one's mind when preparing for a shot like that would be "which character will I keep in focus?" or "when will I rack focus from one character to another?", the reason being that the depth of field (considering the very usual super 35 format and F2.8) is very often not enough to keep both characters sharp due to reasons we are not going to go into right now.

The technical solution the Neorealists (specially Visconti) made use of was that of deep focus or, in other words, a big depth of field in which the shot is virtually sharp in its entirety. The film most remembered for this achievement is perhaps *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles which features Gregg Toland's wonderful achievement in cinematography. The work on this film granted him the Oscar that year.

Even though deep-focus was used even prior to the war in the 1930s and 1940s when 'cinematographers turned away from the dominant "soft style" of the late silent era and sought to craft a "realistic" look through sharper images and greater depth of field' (Keating et al. 62), they used it in a selectively way, for war, crime, and action genres. Charles Clarke, for example, criticized Gregg Toland for using it too often in *Citizen Kane* and proposed 'that deep-focus should be seen as "something which

rounds out our assortment of artistic tools, so that we have a better way of meeting the dramatic requirements of any story-situation” (Keating et al. 3).

Bordwell documents that cinematographers at the time had to find a balance between the harshness and the added realism of the deep focus and it “became a give-and-take between technical agencies and the cinematographers. ... In short, most cinematographers sought to maintain a balance between technological novelty and the ‘artistic’ demand for soft images” (Bordwell et al. 343). For *The Earth Trembles*, however, pictorial beauty or glamour was not a concern which meant that there was no interest or need to balance between the two.

Take this sequence, for example, in which ‘Ntoni’s sister holds a conversation with their younger sister, she is far from being shot like a Hollywood star or even like the Italian stars of previous years were. This becomes clear as seen in the images below, comparing this shot to that of a lady in *Citizen Kane* (Image 3.15 and 3.16).



Image 3.15 - *The Earth Trembles*

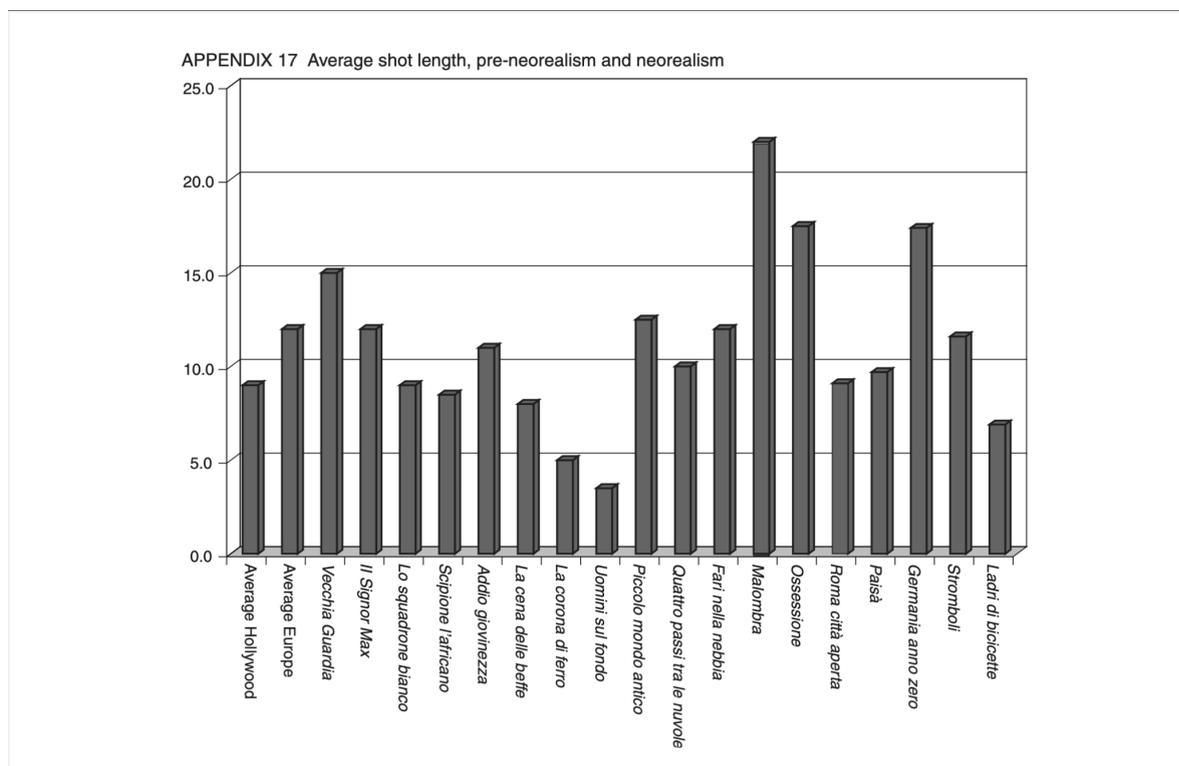


Image 3.16 - *Citizen Kane*

There is yet another reason for deep focus to be so highly praised by Bazin in regard to realism. As Bert Cardullo writes in the Introduction to *Bazin and the Neorealism*, Bazin celebrates it “for its capacity to simulate the most elemental aspect of nature—its continuousness” (Bazin and Cardullo 9). Visconti, as seen in the examples below, makes use of deep focus and, by doing so, is able to keep shots for

longer, uninterrupted while the audience is presented with an overall sharp image to look at and can therefore decide where to focus their attention (Bazin and Cardullo 39).

It is interesting to note that, based on this graph from Wagstaff (Graph 3.1), *The Earth Trembles* has an average shot length that is higher than other films of the Neorealist canon that don't employ the technique of deep focus and rely more on the classical edit like *Rome*, *Open City* or *Bicycle Thieves*.



Graph 3.1 - Average shot length, pre-neorealism and neorealism

Bazin also places the use of long takes in high praise as opposed to a fragmented edit because it restores the spatial continuity that tends to be lost when shots are put together in succession to tell a story. The classical edit from Griffith according to him tends to organize “reality into successive shots which were just a series of either logical or subjective points of view of an event” (Bazin and Cardullo 39). The way to counteract that is to be able to have shots that can be held for

longer, shots that involve blocking that allows characters to come in and out of the frame or walk back and forth while the action is happening and the deep focus is the technique that makes it possible in this case.

At minute 9:07 of *The Earth Trembles*, for example (Sequence 3.5), Visconti shows an uninterrupted shot of the fishermen dealing their fish. The following sequence of images tries to exemplify his mastery and mainly the intricate blocking of the scene. The choice for deep focus allows him to have a character that walks through the crowd of fishermen that is dealing with the fish they caught that morning. There is clear attention to the composition and to building a multiplicity of layers of action that clearly show the fishermen's *métier*. It is worth mentioning that Visconti and Urata brilliantly construct a scene that both introduces the dramaticity of the fish trade and the clash between workers and the wholesalers but also shows the day-to-day activity that these villagers would go through had the camera crew not been there. It is safe to say that the sequence is valuable enough to feature both in a film and a documentary, given the journalistic merit of the sequence. The scene obviously wouldn't be shot the same way had it been a documentary, as was the initial plan, but it has an undeniable behavioral value due to Visconti's profound comprehension of the subject matter. The use of deep focus clearly puts us in the scene and brings a lot of realism to the piece. (Visconti, *The Earth Trembles*, 00:09:07)



Sequence 3.5



Sequence 3.6

Take this other shot of a dialogue between 'Ntoni, his brother, and his mom as another example (Sequence 3.6). Make note that, in this sequence of screen grabs, the regular shot and reverse shot, a common practice for dialogues, is simply not present, and that rather, the characters assume what Wagstaff would call a V formation (Wagstaff 110) and talk to each other in the same shot. The blocking is all organized to have the characters acting and talking to each other while a big portion of the set is shown, 'Ntoni's mom is visible outside of the house while the dialogue happens inside. Visconti also keeps the shot uncut until the character leaves and gets to the mom when he finally cuts to a new shot outside the house. The deep focus here allows us to keep track of everything that happens in the shot since it is built in layers that are in reach of the spectator at all times. Visconti and Aldo offer us a point of view that any of us could assume had we been in the house when the action unfolded. Thus, it feels very much as if we are there observing it with our own eyes.

That brings us to another topic mentioned by Bazin which is the fact that, in this film, for the first time, according to him, there is a seamless transition between the interior and exterior shots of the film (Bazin and Cardullo 54).

The Earth Trembles achieved the impossible of having both real locations and real fishermen acting in a tightly choreographed film. This has to happen in this film to be deemed believable. The cinematography has, therefore, to adapt and follow the aesthetic of everything else. The excessive use of lights and the pursuit of glamour and pictorial beauty does not have a space here and Aldo was completely aware of the fact while, at the same time, creating wonderful pictures that were true to the villagers and paid respect to their reality. Previously, this type of realistic deep focus had only been possible in Welles's film due to the deliberate use of studio (Bazin and Cardullo 53) and Hollywood budgets. The employment of deep focus, one can imagine, impacts the production costs since it demands a smaller aperture and, therefore, the use of more light to expose the film. Gregg Toland said that an f-stop of 8.0 or smaller was used for all Kane's interior scenes in a moment in which most films used f-2-3 and f-2.8, which would mean eight times more light or more if the same film speed is considered (Bordwell et al. 588). In *Citizen Kane*, Welles and Toland achieved certain realism due to the use of deep focus but lacked the realism of the real stories and real people that *The Earth Trembles* was able to put on screen. Until *The Earth Trembles* was made, deep focus had not been integrated so well to a combination of real interior/exterior location, night scenes, in open.

This quote from Bazin summarizes the work on *The Earth Trembles* too brilliantly to be kept out.

But, one may ask, where is art to take refuge if the realism one is proposing is so ascetic? Everywhere else: in the quality of the photography, especially. Our compatriot Aldo (...) has here created a profoundly original style of image (Bazin and Cardullo 53)

Aldo's work is masterful not only for the amazing compositions and delightful camera movements but mainly because he managed to marry what would be an 'ascetic' need for realism with the needs of the story and elevated it to a piece of art. Visconti's film is probably the epitome of the marriage between realism and imagery for Neorealism. The techniques employed in the film were there to serve the purpose of increasing realism and were an integral part of the art piece. All the elements come together to create a film that would not be possible in any other configuration.

3.3. Overview of the Cinematography in other Neorealist Films

In general, though only two films were chosen for analysis; the aforementioned traits are extendable to other Neorealist films. This chapter aims to offer a brief comparison between the Neorealist films in order to establish the similarities and differences that are relevant to the topic. This way the reader can better see how other films dealt with the cinematography techniques in favor of a more realistic approach.

As explained in other chapters, the Neorealist movement can't be easily defined based on a few characteristics that are expected to be present in all of the films that comprise the movement. The films vary and use different techniques to tell their stories.

A filmmaker like Roberto Rossellini goes to the extent of avoiding any beautifying techniques in his cinematography in favor of a more raw aesthetic. The same approach we see in *Rome, Open City* is also present in his other films of the 'war trilogy' such as *Paisan* and *Germany Year Zero*. Even though he worked with different cinematographers, Otello Martelli and Robert Juillard respectively, his films mentioned here follow similar aesthetics. Where lighting is concerned, the aim for roundness and separation between foreground and background is present but, in general, the overall lighting produces a rather flatter image. The lighting is broader

and organized in a simpler manner when compared to other films of the time, rendering images that are rough in appearance. A film such as the comedy *Professor, My Son* (1946), released in the same year as *Paisan*, and *Bitter Rice*, a film shot by the same Otello Martelli could offer a comparison between the two aesthetics (Images 3.17, 3.18, 3.19 and 3.20).



Image 3.17 - *Professor, My Son*



Image 3.18 - *Bitter Rice*



Image 3.19 - *Paisan*



Image 3.20 - *Paisan*

A film such as *Stromboli* (1950) shows similar characteristics to other Rossellini films. It shows the rocky island of Stromboli and its inhabitants in a documentary-like approach the same way Rossellini had been doing so far. This film, however, features a big star, Ingrid Bergman. The film is lit more carefully than the previously mentioned films by Rossellini but Bergman, who was probably the biggest star in Hollywood at the time, doesn't receive special attention when the lighting is concerned. The close-ups aim for depth and roundness but no differentiation

techniques or embellishments are employed for most of the film. Compare a close-up from *Stromboli* (Image 3.21) to a close-up from *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946) (Image 3.22).



Image 3.21 - *Stromboli*



Image 3.22 - *Notorious*

Other choices such as darker images are very much present in *Paisan* and *Germany Year Zero*. Exterior sequences are shot only with natural light without any addition of backlight, reinforcing the unadorned and unscripted feel Rossellini aimed for.

The use of real newsreel footage differs between the films of the trilogy of war. According to my research, I was not able to find whether the images of the Nazi troops featured in *Rome, Open City* or the opening sequence of *Germany, Year Zero* were taken from actual newsreel footage but, according to Wagstaff, that is the case for *Paisan* (Images 3.23, 3.24, 3.25). The three films open with images of cities in rubble and the movement of tanks and troops. Even if not an actual newsreel footage, it is still supposed to be understood as such. The choice of opening the film like that reinforces the idea of realism since it is presented in a different key to the audience. It suggests they are about to see images that serve as a document of that moment in time.

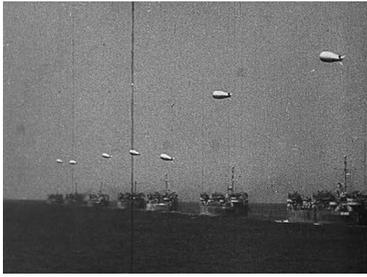


Image 3.23 - *Paisan*



Image 3.24 - *Paisan*

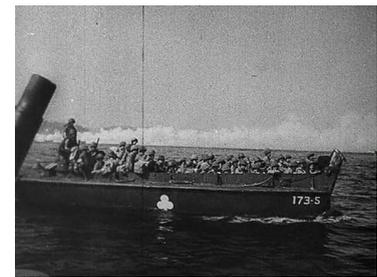


Image 3.25 - *Paisan*

Germany, Year Zero features the use of more long takes when compared to the other films. There is a slight difference in approach when compared to *The Earth Trembles* but it is used with the same purpose of keeping the continuity of the action in favor of less editing and less manipulation. The blocking in this film relies more on the use of camera movement to accommodate the action instead of deep focus. *Paisan* and *Stromboli* favor a more classical edit although they still feature deep focus shots with blocking in distance and long takes here and there.

De Sica, on the other hand, favors a more classical approach to editing and cinematography. There are generally more cuts in films like *Shoeshine* (Vittorio De Sica, 1946), *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Miracle in Milan* (Vittorio De Sica, 1951). These films' average shot lengths are lower when compared to films by Rossellini and Visconti (Wagstaff Appendix 19). De Sica uses more cuts in their edit including more shot and reverse shots for dialogues. The cinematography, however, still aims for invisibility in which most of the camera movements, pans, and tilts are motivated by the character's actions. Generally, these films focus more on the characters themselves, De Sica uses his character's struggles to expose the society they live in whereas Rossellini, in the 'war trilogy', deals with the situation in which his characters are part of. In that case, it is only expected that we see more close-ups of De Sica's characters' on screen.

The lighting in De Sica's first Neorealist film, *The Children are Watching Us*, is carefully constructed; sets and faces are very skilfully lit. This is a level in style that is perhaps unmatched in subsequent De Sica films that are part of the main bulk of his Neorealist films. A more attentive approach to lighting would come back in films such as *Indiscretion of an American Wife*, 1953 (an American-Italian co-production) or in *The Gold of Naples* 1954. Films that were released after *The Children are Watching Us* give way to a simpler lighting scheme that does intend to model faces and sets but still keeps the simplicity required to match his characters' modest houses and surroundings. *Shoeshine* has a more somber approach to lighting, perhaps due to its subject matter of children delinquency. The three-point system and composition lighting are present but don't necessarily aim for creating beautifying images.

The deep focus is not a technique that is so much used by De Sica. If employed, it comes to show the characters in relation to the space they are in but it is not used as much as an alternative to cutting. Bazin mentions the fact that *Bicycle Thieves* manages to achieve brilliance as far as narrative is concerned but sacrifices "the continuum of reality" (Bazin and Cardullo 111). *Umberto D* follows the same path for most of it but, in certain scenes, it shows, what Bazin calls, 'what a truly realist cinema of time could be, a cinema of "duration"'. It could be seen as a development of Zavattini and De Sica's realism.

In these moments (for example, the sequence in which the maid wakes up which was praised by Bazin), the camera seems to only observe the character's actions, freeing them to do whatever they want. The edit comes to punctuate the fact that the shots are in continuity with one another and that the temporal continuity is not broken. The camera work is designed to be free to pan, tilt, and track in and out to follow the action of the characters uninterruptedly. The shots are objective and seem to show an unmanipulated reality that unfolds in front of the camera.

Obsession by Visconti employs a more low-key lighting, all the interiors are darkly lit, and the lighting itself is simplified at times but still manages to keep a decent roundness and depth. It very much resembles what the Noir films of the 1950s would look like. This film, as opposed to *The Earth Trembles* which was released 4 years later, doesn't make use of deep focus as an integral part of the narrative. The technique is used in the exterior shots but it is used in the same way a lot of the Neorealist films use it, as a way to show the *coralittá* aspect of the film, to show the crowds of real people and places that are so much present in these films.

Giuseppe De Santis was not mentioned as much as the other Neorealist filmmakers but his work is also of extreme importance. His film *Bitter Rice* shot by Otello Martelli, as mentioned earlier, alongside *The Earth Trembles* has one of the most impressive achievements in cinematography where the Neorealist films are considered. *Bitter Rice* shows the hardships that women hired to pick rice go through. De Santis makes use of all the techniques exemplified here to construct possibly the most classical of the films analyzed here. There are images of the process of picking rice that are shot the same way a documentary would. The use of deep focus is also present, coupled with camera movements to reduce the need for editing and, therefore, keep the shot continuous while it pan and tracks to accommodate the characters' actions. Even though the shot is kept for longer, due to the use of this technique, it brings perhaps a lower sense of realism if compared to the use De Sica gives in *Umberto D.* De Sica focuses on quotidian actions that are usually forgotten or ignored in classical films whereas De Santis, most of the time, makes use of the continuous shot to advance the story forward, making room for the dialogue to bring the story's dramas. The background in *Bitter Rice* is constructed to give context and show the workers but they are relegated to be secondary when the dialogues take place. The lighting is perhaps what distances it the most from the

other films of the movement, as it features a very well-crafted lighting scheme that brings the best out of the sets. The close-ups show great control of the light and create roundness and depth but, at the same time, embellish the actresses glamourising their characters. The film was very much criticized for the eroticized way it depicted the main characters (Wagstaff 24). Eroticism was seen as escapist (Wagstaff 25). It can be said that De Santis is not able to achieve the same realism as Visconti in *The Earth Trembles* or De Sica in *Umberto D* while using similar techniques but the film still manages to show the work of real workers that have their stories intertwined with professional actors. The realism comes then because of the use De Santis gave to the very same techniques that became part of the Neorealist canon.

4. After Neorealism

The scope of the influence Neorealism had is way too vast as it encompasses an endless range of films made all over the world in the years since. This chapter will try to gather what has been written about the influence of Neorealism in the subsequent years and also extend the description of the movement's reach by offering some directors and films that carry a formal and philosophical resemblance to Neorealism.

Books like *Film History: An Introduction* by Thompson and Bordwell mention that Neorealism continued in the next years, from the 1950s and onwards with a twist in the works of Rossellini, Antonioni, and Fellini. The issues that prompted filmmakers to show the human struggles in opposition to Hollywood's well-produced films and most of the films that were either complicit with the Fascist regime or openly supported it were now in the past. As a result, Italian filmmakers went through a change where the subject matter is concerned but kept the Neorealist humanistic approach. Fellini, for example, was criticized for having moved away from Neorealism, to which he replied that he kept the 'sincerity' of the movement (Thompson and Bordwell 369). In the 1950s, according to Thompson and Bordwell, "much of Italian "quality" cinema would center on individual problems. Instead of documenting a historical moment by depicting group struggles, filmmakers probed middle-class and upper class characters for the psychological effects of contemporary life" (Thompson and Bordwell 369). The films by Rossellini, Fellini, and Antonioni shifted toward a "cinema of imagination and ambiguity" (Bordwell and Thompson 369).

Outside the scope of Italian cinema, Italian Neorealism also finds resonance in the works of Spanish filmmakers of the 1950s that had been under the strict dictatorship of Franco. Spanish filmmakers underwent censorship from the moment Franco's fascist government was established in 1939 until a partial opening in the 1950s (the dictatorship lasted until the mid-1970s). The industry, in the early years of the regime, was mainly a propaganda machine that used films to tie the heroic images explored in the productions to Franco. In 1951, Spain's main film school organized an Italian week that brought light to Neorealist films with traceable influences. Filmmakers such as Luis Garcia Berlanga and Juan Antonio Bardem started shooting films that were inspired by what they had seen. The experience was though short-lived. In 1957, Buñuel was requested to return to Spain to shoot a film that wanted to discuss the future of Spanish cinema, filmmakers at the time deemed it "politically, useless; socially, false; intellectually, inferior; aesthetically, non-existent; and industrially, sick. " (qtd. in Bordwell and Thompson 370). Buñuel's film went to win Cannes Festival's biggest prize that year but was deemed blasphemous by the Catholic Church which soon prompted the government to take measures that led to the end of this Neorealist trend in Spanish cinema.

In the United States, the influence of Neorealism in the subsequent decade is perhaps more visible in crime films that dealt with topics that were not so much welcomed in escapist glamorized mainstream Hollywood cinema. According to Bordwell and Thompson, the American government imposed a limit to the budget of set construction during the war (Bordwell and Thompson 339) so the use of cities as a background came in handy in increasing the realism in these films. Certain films are mentioned often when the influence of Neorealism in American films is

discussed. *The House on the 92nd Street* approached an FBI investigation with a documentary aesthetic showing very accurate procedures undertaken by the investigators (America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry – book). *The Naked City* is perhaps the film that came closest to the way Neorealist filmmakers were shooting and “is part of a post–World War II continuum from stage-bound dramas produced in Hollywood to location movies, made possible by new technology and the creative influence of Italian neo-realism” (Eagan 413). The film tells a real story of a murder, opening with a documentary-like narration over aerial images of New York and, right after that, a disclaimer shows up to inform the viewer of the fact that whenever real locations were available, the filmmakers opted to use it. The message also addresses the fact that non-actors were used and make-up was avoided. The film makes use of New York streets that grant a realism that was perhaps unparalleled at the time, so much so that the narrator (who is the film’s producer) warns the viewer that the film “is a bit different than most films you’ve ever seen” (*Dassin* 02:07–03:16). The film is shot in a low-key style but keeps certain conventions of Hollywood where cinematography and glamour are concerned, and a lot of attention is put on the cinematography (the film won an Oscar for best cinematography). The realism of this film arose from the real-location usage, which grants new textures and backgrounds to an audience accustomed to Hollywood studio sets.

The Neorealist films are also regarded as having influenced the rise of new waves around the world, most prominently the French New Wave, but also Iranian cinema and the Brazilian Cinema Novo (Bergan 155) among others. The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of new equipment, such as lighter cameras with reflex viewfinders

that showed exactly what the camera saw, direct sound recorders, and more sensitive film stocks that were developed with documentary cinema in mind. It permitted filmmakers to take the Neorealist approach and move it forward. Bordwell and Thompson tell us that "in particular, young directors absorbed the Neorealist aesthetic and the art cinema of the 1950s. Thus the new cinemas extended several postwar trends" (Bordwell and Thompson 440). French filmmakers took advantage of new equipment developments and took the Direct Cinema approach of bringing the cameras to the streets in the search for stories. The creation of the *plan-sequence* (long takes that followed the characters around) can be seen as reminiscent of the long take from Neorealism. Zoom lenses for shot and reverse shot started to be used. The edit, however, gave way to a more experimental trend of discontinuous and fragmentary editing (with occasional use of newsreel or 'found footage') (Bordwell and Thompson (440)).

Carlos Diegues, part of the Brazilian *Cinema Novo* movement (*Ganga Zumba*, 1963), writes about how the ideals of Neorealism came to be shared ideals with Brazilian filmmakers and how the films of Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti, and Zavattini influenced the Brazilian movement. In his book, *Vida de Cinema*, (2014), Diegues writes that the humanistic cinema proposed by Rossellini was exactly what they aimed to achieve, a cinema that didn't embellish reality like the American productions they were used to seeing did (Diegues 137). He writes that the works of the abovementioned directors were brought to their attention by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, the figure that, among others, founded the Cinema Novo movement and influenced many other Brazilian filmmakers. Santos discovered Neorealism when studying filmmaking in Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He was very much

impressed with the depiction of reality in those films and how they showed Italy in the post-war era. *Barren Lives* (Santos 1963), probably his most important film, clearly shows that the influence exerted on him by the Neorealist films lasted.



Image 4. 1 - *Barren Lives*



Image 4. 2 - *Barren Lives*



Image 4. 3 - *Barren Lives*

Barren Lives tells the story of a family battling against hunger and poverty in an impoverished dry region of Brazil. Their wandering is shot in a very direct way, mainly with natural light in an unadorned fashion rendering very rough and realistic imagery that resembles a documentary (Images 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3). Certain camera techniques that were present in Neorealism are also present in *Barren Lives*, the use of long lenses and a handheld camera being the most prominent ones. The shots are organized around a more classical edit so deep focus and long takes are not so common but the realism is still present due to the use of long takes, non-actors, and real locations. A similar approach can be seen in a film such as *The Turning Wind* (Glauber Rocha 1962) or *Antonio das Mortes* (Glauber Rocha 1968) which won the main prize in Cannes in 1968. *The Turning Wind* deserves special attention due to the slight resemblance to *The Earth Trembles*. *The Turning Wind* features non-actors and images that look straight out of a documentary. Rocha also uses deep focus in order to keep the continuity in his shots and use long takes (Images 4.4 and 4.5).

This decision grants him the possibility of keeping two or more characters on screen while they deliver their lines without the need for cutting.



Image 4. 4 - *The Turning Wind*



Image 4. 5 - *The Turning Wind*

The influence of Italian Neorealism continues throughout the years and can be seen in films produced in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s. Films such as *Close-Up* (Abbas Kiarostami 1990), *Through the Olive Trees* (Abbas Kiarostami 1995), *Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami 1997), and *The White Balloon* (Jafar Panahi 1995) can all be regarded as having been influenced by the Neorealism; these films mix reality and fiction while telling stories of common people. Realism is achieved through the choice of subject matter (most of them employ the use of non-actors in real locations) but also by the use of documentary conventions the same way Rossellini did. *Close-Up* goes to the extent of recreating an event using the real people that participated in it.

The techniques employed are similar to the Neorealist films but, being separated by something like four decades, are not exactly the same, but rather had to be updated to meet the conventions of the time. The humanistic approach is what continues and what grants the comparison.

A film like *Where is the Friend's House* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987) could be taken as a sample to exemplify that. The film tells the story of a boy in his quest to return his friend's notebook. Take the first scene, for example, in which we are introduced to the characters in a classroom; here, all the techniques are brilliantly used to create a jarringly realistic piece. Apart from the most obvious realistic layer of the use of non-actors and a real classroom, the blocking, editing, lighting, and camera techniques are aspects that bring it closer to documentary conventions and to a better sense of realism. Kiarostami employs long shots of the kids and the teacher with occasional close-ups that are kept on screen for long in favor of a more choppy edit. We have the time to observe the class and see the kids behaving in a way that is not so common in films, resembling the richly detailed sequence of the maid in *Umberto D*. The kids acting affects the others and creates unexpected reactions. At a certain point, the main actor even looks to the camera as a reaction to perhaps not knowing what to do when his friend cries in the scene. This, coupled with the use of long lenses that allow the action to be recorded from a distance, really leaves the audience wondering whether this is a documentary or a film. The light is used in an almost invisible way that imitates natural light coming from the window or from fixtures that would be present in a classroom like that (*Kiarostami* 01:45–08:17).



Image 4. 6 - *Where is the Friend's House?*

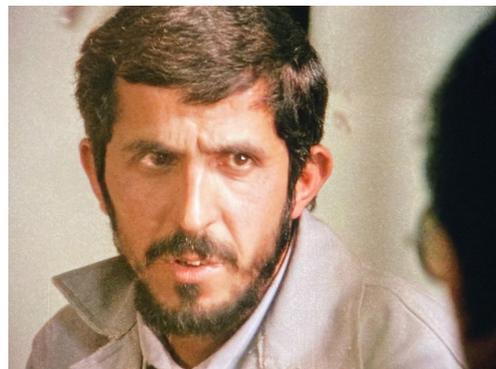


Image 4. 7 - *Close-up*

The aspect ratio used here is also something worth noting. The cinema world had seen a trend, starting in the early 1950s, towards wider and wider aspect ratios as a way to compete with the advent of television and to seduce viewers back to movie theaters. According to Dombrowski the trend aimed for appeal and to feed the movie industry spectacle (Keating et al. 71). New wave filmmakers, such as the ones mentioned here, understood its use as conflicting to the stories they wanted to tell. Films like *Where is the Friends House* or the other Kiarostami films mentioned here made use of narrower aspect ratios such as 1,66:1 (Image 4.6) or even 1,37:1 in *Close-up* (Image 4.7), for example, the narrower aspect ratio allows the director to focus more on the character's faces and emotions while not having close-ups in which a lot of distracting background elements are visible.

A film like *Rosetta* is also a good example of the update on the aesthetic and could be seen as a continuation of Neorealism. The Dardenne brothers are known for having similar interests to that of Neorealist filmmakers. Their films often deal with the working class, immigrants, and unemployed in a realistic light. Their esteem for Neorealism can be confirmed when one takes a look at a list of 79 films put together by the Dardenne brothers with films they consider to be the most important ones. Rossellini ranks first in the amount of works mentioned with 8 films (Sharf).

It wouldn't be a stretch to assume that some of Rossellini's approach lives in the Dardenne brothers' filmic work. Even though different to *Rome, Open City*, *Paisan*, or *Germany, Year Zero* in a superficial level, *Rosetta* bares immense resemblance to the work of Rossellini in its humanistic approach. Years of technical development of cameras, lighting fixtures, film stock, and lenses separate the

Dardenne brothers and Rossellini. These advancements granted the Dardenne brother the possibility of pushing what Rossellini was doing in favor of an even less obtrusive style. One can wonder whether Rossellini wouldn't be making similar films had he been in a similar position.

The avoidance of embellishment, be it in the lighting or the sets, pushes these two filmographies very close to each other. In their words, the Dardenne brothers describe *Rosetta* as having a strong sense of documentary with no sense of fiction.

The film tells the story of Rosetta, a girl that struggles to keep a job to support herself and her alcoholic mother. The Dardenne brothers saw the feature as a war film in which the character is battling to penetrate society's bunker but keeps getting repelled (Criterion). This rather unusual understanding informs how their camera behaves since, much like in a battlefield, there is no predicting what comes next. The camera in *Rosetta* is put in a place of only reacting and following the character wherever she goes. The camerawork is used here to suggest an unscripted piece as if we are seeing reality first hand. Zavattini's desire of matching the film time and the life time is achieved in *Rosetta* in various moments mainly due to the long takes that follow the character around. We are put in a position of observing the character very closely while she goes about her life.

The handheld camera that was used only here and there in Rossellini's 'war trilogy' is fully embraced here. Travellings of any source are avoided in *Rosetta* for the same reason Rossellini avoided techniques that were tied to Hollywood films; they would communicate a certain adhesion to the mainstream cinema that opposes the type of story *Rosetta* tells. It is worth mentioning that the use of traveling was not a problem for the Neorealists but the conventions are different nowadays and other

movements such as French New Wave, Direct Cinema, and Cinema Verité came to push the paradigms and present new expectations for the depiction of reality on screen.

The effect of realism in *Rosetta* comes from the fact that every aspect of the film is constructed to suggest that what we see is an unpredictable event that happened to be recorded. As the Dardenne brothers put it, the decisions are intentional but shouldn't look intentional (Criterion). The lighting scheme in a classic film, for example, is designed to fall on the characters, faces, and sets to produce a desired image that is in line with the expectations of the audience, studios, and directors but it comes with a side effect. This scheme somehow gives the characters' next moves away and breaks the illusion of realism. The lighting scheme in *Rosetta*, on the other hand, is rather invisible. The cinematographer of the film, Alain Marcoen managed to light it in a way that the light feels part of the set and doesn't show itself.

All the techniques exemplified above are used in *Rosetta* to achieve a naturalistic piece that avoids any "affectations" as the Dardenne Brothers would put it (Criterion).

5. Conclusion

Despite the undeniable impact Neorealism had on cinema history, some important books on cinematography published in the United States refrained from citing the films of the movement as at least a part of the influence exerted on American films in the post-war period which took a step out from the studio into the city streets and alleys and toward the realistic trend. In the book *Painting with Lights* published in 1949, John Alton claims that the changes toward an improved realism, the use of real locations, simplified lighting, etc. that had happened in the United States during and after the war, could only be credited to the abundance of newsreel footage that the United States were exposed to. There is no mention of the Neorealist movement whatsoever. Here is Alton's passage about that:

In exteriors as well as interiors, Hollywood was addicted to the candied (not candid) type of chocolate-coated sweet unreal photography. Then came the war...There was only one take of each scene. There were no boosters, no sun reflectors, no butterflies, and no diffusers. The pictures were starkly real. Explosions rocked the cameras, but they also rocked the world, and with it rocked Hollywood out of its old-fashioned ideas about photography. The year 1947 brought a new photographic technique. Boomerang and T-Men, photographed on original locations, prove that realistic photography is popular, and is accepted by the great majority. Let us have more realism. (Alton 134-135)

Lisa Dombrowski in her chapter on *Postwar Hollywood, 1947-1967* seems to think that Alton's reasoning oversimplifies matters. According to her, "realism had long been one of the primary functions of classical Hollywood cinematography" (Dombrowski in Keating 62). She expands on that and exemplifies that "while certain

stylistic choices—such as black-and-white film stock, location shooting, and low-key lighting—were most frequently associated with realism, cinematographers produced a realistic “mood” through a range of techniques across different types of films”. (Dombrowski in Keating 62). Other books, although not dedicated to cinematography, mention the connection between Neorealist films and the move from studios to the streets of New York in the 1940s. Mark Shiel mentions that only a few years after *Rome, Open City*, some Noir films that had “anti-formulaic tendencies and low-budget aesthetics” started to show up. Films such as *They Live by Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1948), *Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948), and *The House on 92nd Street* (America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry) are mentioned.

The movement’s impact at the time might have come from the fact that the films being produced in Italy during and after the war offered an alternative to Hollywood’s big-budget film productions and therefore stood out. An article from *The New York Times* by Bosley Crowther on *Rome, Open City* published in 1946 exemplifies the topic covered here:

To us who have been accustomed to the slickly manufactured sentiments of Hollywood’s studio-made pictures, the hard simplicity and genuine passion of this film lends to its not unfamiliar story the smashing impact of a shocking exposé.(qtd. in Dargis)

Although some authors avoid explicitly tying the changes on mainstream cinema to Neorealism, it is possible to assert its influence. If not directly, they promoted indirect changes by influencing other movements worldwide that pushed the move toward realism that the Neorealists started to higher levels. Bordwell writes the following about the impact of the movement:

Neorealism's stylistic and narrative devices influenced the emergence of an international modernist cinema. Location shooting with post dubbing; the amalgam of actors and nonactors; plots based on chance encounters, ellipses, open endings, and microactions; and extreme mixtures of tone—all these strategies would be adopted and developed by filmmakers around the world over the next four decades. (Bordwell and Thompson 366)

Filmmakers, such as the ones exemplified in chapter 4, preserved the ideas initiated by Neorealism and moved them forward while keeping similar stories that focused on the underprivileged. Nowadays, it is possible to see films that, however not explicitly influenced by Neorealism employ similar tactics to appear realistic while shooting the same old formulaic stories that don't necessarily employ the same care and interest on showing stories that feature the underprivileged. It is only expected for a style that aims to break with the status quo to be co-opted into mainstream cinema as a way to appear different while shooting the same old stories that reinforce the capitalist structure. The outcast style soon becomes a mean for mainstream films to differentiate themselves from the other films around. The visual style used by Neorealists and pushed by the abovementioned movements and filmmakers becomes a code that filmmakers use in order to appear realistic.

Films are always a construct and the filmmaker has to be aware of that. The techniques used to convey realism have to be picked carefully in order to convey what is intended. In many ways, realism can only be conveyed by avoiding the conventions that are so closely tied to fiction filming and classical films or by using documentary aesthetics. Filmmakers have to utilize the conventions to its advantage and only from the right employment of acting, real locations, camera techniques, lighting, and editing a film can get closer to accuracy, to naturalism.

In cinematography, for example, “invisibility” is the word at play. Any choice has to come grounded in reality when it comes to set construction and lighting or be the least intrusive as possible when it comes to manipulation, be it framing and composition, camera movement, focus, or editing.

Conventions change over time and, therefore, push filmmakers to adapt. Audiences grew accustomed to the techniques and, nowadays, are more aware of the interventions. They are more and more exposed to different media that show the world and people in different ways. Newsreels, documentaries, super 8 films, VHS recordings, the digital revolution, the internet, and social media all changed the paradigms and keep changing them. Films like *Rome*, *Open City*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *The Earth Trembles*, and *Umberto D* looked realistic to the audiences at the time (in comparison) but would probably not appear as realistic to modern audiences as it did when they were released. These very same films were in line with the advancements of their era and used the conventions of the time to show the world in a way that had not been shown the same way before. The Neorealist films inaugurated a new paradigm of realist aesthetic that had to be updated for films that came after if the filmmaker wanted their piece to appear more realistic. It is only possible to appear realistic when breaking or advancing the current conventions of realism. Audiences grow accustomed to the techniques and, therefore, need new conventions.

The initial idea of this thesis was to track down and to describe the conventions and techniques that defined Neorealist films but also to understand how they were used to increase realism in both films from the movement and movies released ever since. I tried to surround myself with bibliography on the Neorealist movement and on cinematography history in order to comprehend how certain techniques that are rather common nowadays came to be and developed to that point. Certain techniques that are approachable nowadays might tend to be used just

for the sake of it without a proper integration to the storytelling. Needless to say that this scenario only diverts the story from its objectives of communicating the emotions and original ideas. Other than that it was of great importance to share the findings so as to help myself and the reader to make more conscious decisions when approaching a script. I believe that the knowledge on the history of certain techniques can result in a more conscious use of the available tools and also improve how we pass stories along. It's hoped that this text exemplifies how the cinematography techniques were incorporated to other films and how they oppose to mainstream cinema.

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