

AN AESTHETIC OF REALITY: NEOREALISM

(Cinematic Realism
and the Italian School of the Liberation)

THE HISTORICAL importance of of Rossellini's film *Paisà* has been rightly compared with that of a number of classical screen masterpieces. Georges Sadoul has not hesitated to mention it alongside *Nosferatu*, *Die Nibelungen*, or *Greed*. I subscribe wholeheartedly to this high praise as long as the allusion to German expressionism is understood to refer to the level of greatness of the film but not to the profound nature of the aesthetics involved. A better comparison might be with the appearance in 1925 of *Potemkin*. For the rest, the realism of the current Italian films has been frequently contrasted with the aestheticism of American and, in part, of French productions. Was it not from the outset their search for realism that characterized the Russian films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko as revolutionary both in art and politics, in contrast to the expressionist aestheticism of the German films and Hollywood's mawkish star worship? *Paisà*, *Sciuscà*, and *Roma Città Aperta*, like *Potemkin*, mark a new stage in the long-standing opposition between realism and aestheticism on the screen. But history does not repeat itself; we have to get clear the particular form this aesthetic quarrel assumes today, the new solutions to which Italian neorealism owed its triumph in 1947.

An Aesthetic of Reality The Precursors

Confronted with the originality of the Italian output, and in the enthusiasm engendered by the surprise that this has caused, we have perhaps neglected to go deeply into the origins of this renaissance, preferring to see it rather as something spontaneously generated, issuing like a swarm of bees from the decaying corpses of fascism and the war. There is no question that the Liberation and the social, moral, and economic forms that it assumed in Italy have played a decisive rôle in film production. We shall return to this later. It was simply a lack of information about the Italian cinema that trapped us into believing in a sudden miracle.

It could well be that, today, Italy is the country where the understanding of film is at its highest, to judge by the importance and the quality of the film output. The Centro Sperimentale at Rome came into existence before our own Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques; above all, intellectual speculation in Italy is not, as it is in France, without its impact on film-making. Radical separation between criticism and direction no more exists in the Italian cinema than it does in France in the world of literature.

Furthermore, fascism which, unlike Nazism, allowed for the existence of artistic pluralism, was particularly concerned with cinema. One may have reservations about the connection between the Venice film festival and the political interests of the Duce but one cannot deny that the idea of an international festival has subsequently made good, and one can measure its prestige today by the fact that five or six European countries are vying for the spoils. The capitalists and the Fascist authorities at least provided Italy with modern studios. If they turned out films which were ridiculously melodramatic and overly spectacular, that did not prevent a handful of bright men, smart enough to shoot films on current themes without making any concessions to the regime, from making high-quality films that foreshadowed their current work. If during the war we had not been, albeit justifiably, so prejudiced, films like *SOS 103* or *La Nave Bianca* of Rossellini might have caught our attention more. In addition, even when capital-

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ist or political stupidity controlled commercial production completely, intelligence, culture, and experimental research took refuge in publications, in film archive congresses, and in making short films. In 1941, Lattuada, director of *Il Bandito* and, at the time, the head of the Milan archive, barely escaped jail for showing the complete version of *La Grande Illusion*.*

Beyond that, the history of the Italian cinema is little known. We stop short at *Cabiria* and *Quo Vadis*, finding in the recent and memorable *La Corona di ferro* all the proof we need that the supposed characteristics of films made beyond the Alps remain unchanged: a taste, and a poor taste at that, for sets, idealization of the principal actors, childish emphasis on acting, atrophy of *mise en scène*, the dragging in of the traditional phenomena of *bel canto* and opera, conventional scripts influenced by the theater, the romantic melodrama and the *chanson de geste* reduced to an adventure story. Undoubtedly too many Italian films do their best to justify such a caricature and too many directors, including some of the best, sacrificed themselves, sometimes with self-irony, to commercial necessity. The great spectacles like *Scipio Africanus* were, of course, the primary export. There was another artistic vein, however, almost exclusively reserved for the home market. Today, when the thunder of the charging elephants of Scipio is only a distant rumble, we can the better lend an ear to the discreet but delightful sounds made by *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*.

The reader, at least one who has seen this latter film, will undoubtedly be as surprised as we were to learn that this comedy with its unfettered sensibility, brimming over with poetry, the lightly handled socialist realism of which is directly related to the recent Italian cinema, was shot in 1942, two years after the famous *La Corona di ferro* and by the same director: Blasetti, to whom, about the same time, we owe *Un'avventura di Salvatore Rosa* and most recently *Un Giorno nella vita*. Directors like Vittorio De Sica who made the admirable *Sciuscià* were always concerned to turn out human and sensitive comedies full of realism, among them, in 1942, *I Bambini ci guardano*. Since 1932, Camerini has made *Gli uomini che*

* The influence of Jean Renoir on the Italian cinema is paramount and definitive. Only that of René Clair in any way approaches it.

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mascelzoni, the action of which, like *Roma Città Aperta*, is laid in the streets of the capital and *Piccolo Mondo Antico*, no less typically Italian.

As a matter of fact, there are not so many new names among the directors in Italy today. The youngest, like Rossellini, started to make films at the beginning of the war. Older directors, like Blasetti and Mario Soldati, were already known in the early days of the talkies.

But let us not go from one extreme to the other and conclude that there is no such thing as a new Italian school. The realist trend, the domestic, satirical, and social descriptions of everyday life, the sensitive and poetic verism, were, before the war, minor qualities, modest violets flowering at the feet of the giant sequoias of production. It appears that from the beginning of the war, a light began to be shed on the papier-mâché forests. In *La Corona di ferro* the style seems to parody itself. Rossellini, Lattuada, Blasetti were striving toward a realism of international importance. Nevertheless it is the Liberation that set these aesthetic trends so completely free as to allow them to develop under new conditions that were destined to have their share in inducing a noticeable change in direction and meaning.

The Liberation: Rupture and Renaissance

Some components of the new Italian school existed before the Liberation: personnel, techniques, aesthetic trends. But it was their historical, social, and economic combination that suddenly created a synthesis in which new elements also made themselves manifest.

Over the past two years, Resistance and Liberation have furnished the principal themes, but unlike the French, and indeed one might say unlike the European cinema as a whole, Italian films have not been limited to themes of the Resistance. In France, the Resistance immediately became legendary. Recent as it was, on the day of the actual Liberation it already belonged to the realm of history. The Germans having departed, life began again. By contrast, in Italy the Liberator did not signify a return to the

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old and recent freedom; it meant political revolution, Allied occupation, economic and social upheaval. The Liberation came slowly through endless months. It had a profound effect on the economic, social, and moral life of the country. Thus, in Italy, Resistance and Liberation, unlike the Paris uprising, are in no sense just words with a historical connotation. When Rossellini made *Paiss*, his script was concerned with things actually happening at the time. *Il Bandito* showed how prostitution and the black market developed on the heels of the advancing army, how disillusion and lack of employment turned a liberated prisoner into a gangster. Except for unmistakable Resistance films like *Vivere in Pace* or *Il Sole Sorse Ancora*, the Italian cinema was noted for its concern with actual day-to-day events. The French critics had not failed to emphasize (whether in praise or blame but always with solemn surprise) the few specific allusions to the postwar period that Carné deliberately introduced into his last film. If the director and his writer took so much trouble to make us understand this, it is because nineteen out of twenty French films cannot be dated within a decade. On the other hand, even when the central scene of the script is not concerned with an actual occurrence, Italian films are first and foremost constituted with an actual reportage. The action could not unfold in just any social context, historically neutral, partly abstract like the setting of a tragedy, as so frequently happens to varying degrees with the American, French, or English cinema.

As a result, the Italian films have an exceptionally documentary quality that could not be removed from the script without thereby eliminating the whole social setting into which its roots are so deeply sunk.

This perfect and natural adherence to actuality is explained and justified from within by a spiritual attachment to the period. Undoubtedly, the tide of recent Italian history cannot be reversed. Thus, the war is felt to be not an interlude but the end of an era. In one sense Italy is only three years old. But other effects could have resulted from the same cause. What is a ceaseless source of wonder, ensuring the Italian cinema a wide moral audience among the Western nations, is the significance it gives to the portrayal of actuality. In a world already once again obsessed by terror and hate, in which reality is scarcely any longer favored for its own sake

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but rather is rejected or excluded as a political symbol, the Italian cinema is certainly the only one which preserves, in the midst of the period it depicts, a revolutionary humanism.

Love and Rejection of Reality

The recent Italian films are at least prerevolutionary. They all reject implicitly or explicitly, with humor, satire or poetry, the reality they are using, but they know better, no matter how clear the stand taken, than to treat this reality as a medium or a means to an end. To condemn it does not of necessity mean to be in bad faith. They never forget that the world is, quite simply, before it is something to be condemned. It is silly and perhaps as naïve as Beaumarchais' praise of the tears induced by melodrama. But does one not, when coming out of an Italian film, feel better, an urge to change the order of things, preferably by persuading people, at least those who can be persuaded, whom only blindness, prejudice, or ill-fortune had led to harm their fellow men?

That is why, when one reads resumsés of them, the scenarios of many Italian films are open to ridicule. Reduced to their plots, they are often just moralizing melodramas, but on the screen everybody in the film is overwhelmingly real. Nobody is reduced to the condition of an object or a symbol that would allow one to hate them in comfort without having first to leap the hurdle of their humanity.

I am prepared to see the fundamental humanism of the current Italian films as their chief merit. * They offer an opportunity to savor, before the

* I do not hide from myself the astute political role more or less consciously concealed under this communicative generosity. It could happen that tomorrow the priest in *Roma Città Aperta* and the Communist former member of the Resistance might not get on so well. It could happen that the Italian cinema might soon become political and partisan. There might be a few half-lies hidden somewhere in all this. The cleverly pro-American *Paiss* was shot by Christian Democrats and Communists. But it is not being a dupe, it is simply being sensible to accept in a work what is in it. At the moment the Italian cinema is more sociological than political. By that I mean that such concrete social realities as poverty,

time finally runs out on us, a revolutionary flavor in which terror has yet no part.

An Amalgam of Players

What naturally first struck the public was the high quality of the acting. *Roma Città Aperta* enriched the world's screen with a performer of the first order, Anna Magnani the unforgettable pregnant young woman, Fabrizzi the priest, Pagliero a member of the Resistance, and others whose performances rival in retrospect the most stirring of film characterizations in the past. Reports and news items in the public press naturally made a point of letting us know that Sciuscà was filled with genuine street urchins, that Rossellini shot crowds taken at random at the scene of the action, that the heroine of the first story of *Paisà* was an illiterate girl discovered on the dockside. As for Anna Magnani, admittedly she was a professional but from the world of the *café-concert*. Maria Michi, well, she was just a little girl who worked in a movie house.

Although this type of casting is unusual in films, it is not new. On the contrary, its continual use, by various realistic schools ever since the days of Lumière, shows it to be a true law of the cinema, which the Italian

the black market, the administration, prostitution and unemployment do not seem to have given place in the public conscience to the *a priori* values of politics. Italian films rarely tell us the political party of the director or whom he is intending to flatter. This state of affairs derives doubtless from ethnic temperament, but it also derives from the political situation in Italy and what is customary in the Communist party on that peninsula.

Political associations apart, this revolutionary humanism has its source likewise in a certain consideration for the individual; the masses are but rarely considered to be a positive social force. When they are mentioned it is usually in order to demonstrate their destructive and negative character *vis-à-vis* the heroes: the theme of the man in the crowd. From this point of view the two latest important Italian films, *Caccia tragica* and *Il sole sorge ancora*, are significant exceptions, indicating perhaps a new trend.

The director De Santis who worked very closely with Vergano as his assistant on *Il sole sorge ancora* is the only one ever to take a group of men, a collective, as the protagonist of a drama.

school simply confirms and allows us to formulate with conviction. In the old days of the Russian cinema too, we admired its preference for nonprofessional actors who played on the screen the roles of their daily lives. Actually, a legend has grown up around the Russian films. The theater had a strong influence on certain Soviet schools and although the early films of Eisenstein had no actors, as realist a film as *The Road to Life* was in fact played by professionals from the theater and ever since then the actors in Soviet films have continued to be professionals, just as they have in other countries.

No major cinematographic school between 1925 and the present Italian cinema can boast of the absence of actors, but from time to time a film outside the ordinary run will remind us of the advantage of not using them. Such a film will always be specifically only slightly removed from a social document. Take two examples: *L'Espoir* and *La Dernière Chance*. Around them, too, a legend has grown up. The heroes in the Malraux film are not all part-time actors called on for the moment to play their day-to-day selves. It is true that some of them are, but not the principal characters. The peasant, for example, was a well-known Madrid comic actor. As regards *La Dernière Chance*, the Allied soldiers were actually airmen shot down over Switzerland, but the Jewish woman was a stage actress. Only productions like *Tabu* are entirely without professional actors, but here, as in children's films, we are dealing with a special genre in which a professional actor would be almost unthinkable. More recently, Rouquier in *Farrebique* set out to play the game to the hilt. While noting his success, let us also note that it is practically unique and that the problems presented by a peasant film, so far as the acting is concerned, are no different from those of an exotic film. So far from being an example to be followed, *Farrebique* is a special case in no way invalidating the law that I propose to call the law of the amalgam. It is not the absence of professional actors that is, historically, the hallmark of social realism nor of the Italian film. Rather, it is specifically the rejection of the star concept and the casual mixing of professionals and of those who just act occasionally. It is important to avoid casting the professional in the role for which he is known. The public should not be burdened with any pre-

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conceptions. It is significant that the peasant in *Esprit* was a theater comedian, Anna Magnani a singer of popular songs, and Fabrizi a music-hall clown. That someone is an actor does not mean he must not be used. Quite the opposite. But his professionalism should be called into service only insofar as it allows him to be more flexible in his response to the requirements of the *mise en scène*, and to have a better grasp of the character. The nonprofessionals are naturally chosen for their suitability for the part, either because they fit it physically or because there is some parallel between the role and their lives. When the amalgamation comes off—but experience shows that it will not unless some “moral” requirements are met in the script—the result is precisely that extraordinary feeling of truth that one gets from the current Italian films. Their faithfulness to a script which stirs them deeply and which calls for the minimum of theatrical pretense sets up a kind of osmosis among the cast. The technical inexperience of the amateur is helped out by the experience of the professionals while the professionals themselves benefit from the general atmosphere of authenticity.

However, if a method so beneficent to the art of the cinema has only been employed here and there, it is because unfortunately it contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The chemical balance of the amalgam is of necessity unstable, and nothing can prevent it evolving to the point at which it reintroduces the aesthetic dilemma it originally solved—that between the enslavement of the star and the documentary without actors. This disintegration can be observed most clearly and quickly in children's films or films using native peoples. Little Ravi of *Tabu*, they say, ended up as a prostitute in Poland, and we all know what happens to children raised to stardom by their first film. At best they turn out to be infant actor prodigies, but that is something else again. Indispensable as are the factors of inexperience and naïveté, obviously they cannot survive repetition. One cannot envisage the Farrebique family appearing in half a dozen films and finally being signed up by Hollywood. As for the professionals who are not stars, the process of disintegration operates a little differently. The public is to blame. While an accepted star is received everywhere as himself, the success of a film is apt to identify

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the ordinary actor with the role he plays in it. Producers are only too glad to repeat a success by catering to the well-known public fondness for seeing their favorite actors in their established roles. And even if an actor has sense enough to avoid being confined to a single role, it is still a fact that his face and some recurring mannerisms in his acting having become familiar will prevent the amalgam with nonprofessionals from taking place.

Aestheticism, Realism and Reality

Faithfulness to everyday life in the scenario, truth to his part in an actor, however, are simply the basic materials of the aesthetic of the Italian film.

One must beware of contrasting aesthetic refinement and a certain crudeness, a certain instant effectiveness of a realism which is satisfied just to present reality. In my view, one merit of the Italian film will be that it has demonstrated that every realism in art was first profoundly aesthetic. One always felt it was so, but in the reverberations of the accusations of witchcraft that some people today are making against actors suspected of a pact with the demon of art for art's sake, one has tended to forget it. The real and like the imaginary in art is the concern of the artist alone. The flesh and blood of reality are no easier to capture in the net of literature or cinema than are gratuitous flights of the imagination. Or to put it another way, even when inventions and complexity of forms are no longer being applied to the actual content of the work, they do not cease thereby to have an influence on the effectiveness of the means. Because the Soviet cinema was too forgetful of this, it slipped in twenty years from first to last place among the great film-producing nations. *Potemkin* turned the cinema world upside down not just because of its political message, not even because it replaced the studio plaster sets with real settings and the star with an anonymous crowd, but because Eisenstein was the greatest montage theoretician of his day, because he worked with Tissé, the finest cameraman of his day, and because Russia was the focal point of cinematographic thought—in short,

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because the "realist" films Russia turned out secreted more aesthetic know-how than all the sets and performances and lighting and artistic interpretation of the artiest works of German expressionism.

It is the same today with the Italian cinema. There is nothing aesthetically retrogressive about its neorealism, on the contrary, there is progress in expression, a triumphant evolution of the language of cinema, an extension of its stylistics.

Let us first take a good look at the cinema to see where it stands today. Since the expressionist heresy came to an end, particularly after the arrival of sound, one may take it that the general trend of cinema has been toward realism. Let us agree, by and large, that film sought to give the spectator as perfect an illusion of reality as possible within the limits of the logical demands of cinematographic narrative and of the current limits of technique. Thus the cinema stands in contrast to poetry, painting, and theater, and comes ever closer to the novel. It is not my intention here to justify this basic aesthetic trend of modern cinema, be it on technical, psychological, or economic grounds. I simply state it for this once without thereby prejudging either the intrinsic validity of such an evolution or the extent to which it is final.

➔ But realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice. Every form of aesthetic must necessarily choose between what is worth preserving and what should be discarded, and what should not even be considered. But when this aesthetic aims in essence at creating the illusion of reality, as does the cinema, this choice sets up a fundamental contradiction which is at once unacceptable and necessary: necessary because art can only exist when such a choice is made. Without it, supposing total cinema was here and now technically possible, we would go back purely to reality. Unacceptable because it would be done definitely at the expense of that reality which the cinema proposes to restore integrally. That is why it would be absurd to resist every new technical development aiming to add to the realism of cinema, namely sound, color, and stereoscopy. Actually the "art" of cinema lives off this contradiction. It gets the most out of the potential for abstraction and symbolism provided by the present limits of the screen, but this utilization of the residue of conventions aban-

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doned by technique can work either to the advantage or to the detriment of realism. It can magnify or neutralize the effectiveness of the elements of reality that the camera captures. One might group, if not classify in order of importance, the various styles of cinematography in terms of the added measure of reality. We would define as "realist," then, all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen. Reality is not to be taken quantitatively. The same event, the same object, can be represented in various ways. Each representation discards or retains various of the qualities that permit us to recognize the object on the screen. Each introduces, for didactic or aesthetic reasons, abstractions that operate more or less corrosively and thus do not permit the original to subsist in its entirety. At the conclusion of this inevitable and necessary "chemical" action, for the initial reality there has been substituted an illusion of reality composed of a complex of abstraction (black and white, plane surface), of conventions (the rules of montage, for example), and of authentic reality. It is a necessary illusion but it quickly induces a loss of awareness of the reality itself, which becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic representation. As for the film maker, the moment he has secured this unwitting complicity of the public, he is increasingly tempted to ignore reality. From habit and laziness he reaches the point when he himself is no longer able to tell where lies begin or end. There could never be any question of calling him a liar because his art consists in lying. He is just no longer in control of his art. He is its dupe, and hence he is held back from any further conquest of reality.

From Citizen Kane to Farrebique

Recent years have brought a noticeable evolution of the aesthetic of cinema in the direction of realism. The two most significant events in this evolution in the history of the cinema since 1940 are *Citizen Kane* and *Farewell My Love*. Both mark a decisive step forward in the direction of realism but by different paths. If I bring up the film of Orson Welles before I analyze the

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stylistics of the Italian film, it is because it will allow us to place the latter in its true perspective. Orson Welles restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality—its continuity. Classical editing, deriving from Griffith, separated reality into successive shots which were just a series of either logical or subjective points of view of an event. A man locked in a cell is waiting for the arrival of his executioner. His anguished eyes are on the door. At the moment the executioner is about to enter we can be quite sure that the director will cut to a close shot of the door handle as it slowly turns. This close-up is justified psychologically by the victim's concentration on the symbol of his extreme distress. It is this ordering of the shots, this conventional analysis of the reality continuum, that truly goes to make up the cinematographic language of the period.

The construction thus introduces an obviously abstract element into reality. Because we are so used to such abstractions, we no longer sense them. Orson Welles started a revolution by systematically employing a depth of focus that had so far not been used. Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field. It is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an *a priori* significance, it is the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern, as in a sort of parallelepiped of reality with the screen as its cross-section, the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene. It is therefore to an intelligent use of a specific step forward that *Citizen Kane* owes its realism. Thanks to the depth of focus of the lens, Orson Welles restored to reality its visible continuity.

We clearly see with what elements of reality the cinema has enriched itself. But from other points of view, it is also evident that it has moved away from reality or at least that it gets no nearer to it than does the classical aesthetic. In ruling out, because of the complexity of his techniques, all recourse to nature in the raw, natural settings,* exteriors, sun-

* Matters become complicated when we are dealing with urban settings. Here the Italians are at an undoubted advantage. The Italian city, ancient or modern, is prodigiously photogenic. From antiquity, Italian city planning has

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light, and nonprofessional actors, Orson Welles rejects those qualities of the authentic document for which there is no substitute and which, being likewise a part of reality, can themselves establish a form of realism. Let us contrast *Citizen Kane* and *Farrebique*—in the latter, a systematic determination to exclude everything that was not primarily natural material is precisely the reason why Rouquier failed in the area of technical perfection.

Thus, the most realistic of the arts shares the common lot. It cannot make reality entirely its own because reality must inevitably elude it at some point. Undoubtedly an improved technique, skilfully applied, may narrow the holes of the net, but one is compelled to choose between one kind of reality and another. The sensitiveness resembles the sensitiveness of the retina. The nerve endings that register color and intensity of light are not at all the same, the density of one being ordinarily in inverse ratio to that of the other. Animals that have no difficulty in making out the shape of their quarry in the dark are almost color blind.

Between the contrasting but equally pure kinds of realism represented by *Farrebique* on the one hand and *Citizen Kane* on the other, there is a wide variety of possible combinations. For the rest, the margin of loss of the real, implicit in any realist choice, frequently allows the artist, by the use of any aesthetic convention he may introduce into the area thus left vacant, to increase the effectiveness of his chosen form of reality. Indeed we have a remarkable example of this in the recent Italian cinema. In the absence of technical equipment, the Italian directors have been obliged to record the sound and dialogue after the actual filming. The net

remained theatrical and decorative. City life is a spectacle, a *commedia dell'arte* that the Italians stage for their own pleasure. And even in the poorest quarters of the town, the coral-like groupings of the houses, thanks to the terraces and balconies, offer outstanding possibilities for spectacle. The courtyard is an Elizabethan set in which the show is seen from below, the spectators in the gallery being the actors in the comedy. A poetic documentary was shown at Venice consisting entirely of an assembly of shots of courtyards. What more can you say when the theatrical façades of the palazzi combine their operatic effects with the stage-like architecture of the houses of the poor? Add to this the sunshine and the absence of clouds (chief enemy of shooting on exteriors) and you have explained why the urban exteriors of Italian films are superior to all others.

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result is a loss of realism. However, left free to use the camera unfettered by the microphone, such directors have thereby profited by the occasion to enlarge the camera's field of action and its mobility with, consequently, an immediate raising of the reality coefficient.

Future technical improvements which will permit the conquest of the properties of the real (color and stereoscopy for example) can only increase the distance between the two realist poles which today are situated in the area surrounding *Farrebique* and *Citizen Kane*. The quality of the interior shots will in fact increasingly depend on a complex, delicate and cumbersome apparatus. Some measure of reality must always be sacrificed in the effort of achieving it.

Paisà

How do you fit the Italian film into the realist spectrum? After trying to trace the geographical boundaries of this cinema, so penetrating in its portrayal of the social setting, so meticulous and perceptive in its choice of authentic and significant detail, it now remains for us to fathom its aesthetic geology.

We would clearly be deluding ourselves if we pretended to reduce recent Italian production to certain common, easily definable characteristics applicable to all directors. We will simply try to single out those characteristics with the widest application, reserving the right when the occasion arises to limit our concern to the most significant films. Since we must also make a choice, we will arrange, by implication, the major Italian films in concentric circles of decreasing interest around *Paisà*, since it is this film of Rossellini's that yields the most aesthetic secrets.

Narrative Technique

As in the novel, the aesthetic implicit in the cinema reveals itself in its narrative technique. A film is always presented as a succession of frag-

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ments of imaged reality on a rectangular surface of given proportions, the ordering of the images and their duration on the screen determining its import.

The objective nature of the modern novel, by reducing the strictly grammatical aspect of its stylistics to a minimum, has laid bare the secret essence of style.* Certain qualities of the language of Faulkner, Hemingway, or Malraux would certainly not come through in translation, but the way, or Malraux would certainly not suffer because their style is almost essential quality of their styles would not suffer because their style is almost completely identical with their narrative technique—the ordering in time of fragments of reality. The style becomes the inner dynamic principle of the narrative, somewhat like the relation of energy to matter or the specific physics of the work, as it were. This it is which distributes the fragmented realities across the aesthetic spectrum of the narrative, which polarizes the findings of the facts without changing their chemical composition. A Faulkner, a Malraux, a Dos Passos, each has his personal universe which is defined by the nature of the facts reported, but also by the law of gravity which holds them suspended above chaos. It will be useful, therefore, to arrive at a definition of the Italian style on the basis of the scenario, of its genesis, and of the forms of exposition that it follows. Unfortunately the demon of melodrama that Italian film makers seem incapable of exorcising takes over every so often, thus imposing a dramatic necessity on strictly foreseeable events. But that is another story. What matters is the creative surge, the special way in which the situations are brought to life. The necessity inherent in the narrative is biological rather than dramatic. It burgeons and grows with all the verisimilitude of life.† One must not con-

* In Camus' *L'Étranger*, for example, Sartre has clearly demonstrated the link between the author's metaphysic and the repeated use of the passé composé, a tense of singular modal poverty.

† Nearly all the credits of an Italian film list under the heading "scenario" a good dozen names. This imposing evidence of collaboration need not be taken too seriously. It is intended to provide the producers with a naively political assurance. It usually consists of one Christian Democratic and one Communist (just as in the film there is a Marxist and a priest); the third screenwriter has a reputation for story construction; the fourth is a gang man; the fifth because he is a good dialogue writer; the sixth because he has a fine feeling for life. The result is no better or no worse than if there had been only one screen writer, but the Italian

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clude that this method, on the face of it, is less aesthetic than a slow and meticulous preplanning. But the old prejudice that time, money, and resources have a value of their own is so rooted that people forget to relate them to the work and to the artist. Van Gogh repainted the same picture ten times, very quickly, while Cézanne would return to a painting time and again over the years. Certain genres call for speed, for work done in the heat of the moment, but surgery could not call for a greater sureness of touch, for greater precision. It is only at this price that the Italian film has that air of documentary, a naturalness nearer to the spoken than to the written account, to the sketch rather than to the painting. It calls for the ease and sure eye of Rossellini, Latuada, Vergano, and de Santis. In their hands the camera is endowed with well-defined cinematographic tact, wonderfully sensitive antennae which allow them with one stroke to get precisely what they are after. In *Il Bandito*, the prisoner, returning from Germany, finds his house in ruins. Where a solid building once stood there is now just a pile of stones surrounded by broken-down walls. The camera shows us the man's face. Then, following the movement of his eyes, it travels through a 360-degree turn which gives us the whole spectacle. This panning shot is doubly original. First, because at the outset, we stand off from the actor since we are looking at him by way of a camera trick, but during the traveling shot we become identified with him to the point of feeling surprised when, the 360-degree pan having been completed, we return to his face with its expression of utter horror. Second, because the speed of this subjective panning shot varies. It starts with a long slide, then it comes almost to a halt, slowly studies the burned and shattered walls with the same rhythm of the man's watching eye, as if directly impelled by his concentration.

I have had to dwell at some length on this minor example to avoid making a purely abstract affirmation concerning what I regard, in an almost psychological sense of the word, as cinematic "tact." A shot of this notion of a scenario fits in with their concept of a collective paternity according to which everyone contributes an idea without any obligation on the part of the director to use it. Rather than the assembly line of American screenwriters, this interdependence of improvisation is like that of *commedia dell'arte* or jazz.

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kind by virtue of its dynamism belongs with the movement of a hand drawing a sketch, leaving a space here, filling in there, here sketching round the subject, and there bringing it into relief. I am thinking of the slow motion in the documentary on Matisse which allows us to observe, beneath the continuous and uniform arabesques of the stroke, the varying hesitations of the artist's hand. In such a case the camera movement is important. The camera must be equally as ready to move as to remain still. Traveling and panning shots do not have the same god-like character that the Hollywood camera crane has bestowed on them. Everything is shot from eye-level or from a concrete point of view, such as a roof top or window. Technically speaking, all the memorable poetry of the children's ride on the white horse in *Sciucida* can be attributed to a low-level camera angle which gives the riders on their mounts the appearance of an equestrian statue. In *Sorliège*, Christian Jacques went to a great deal more trouble over his phantom horse. But all that cinematic virtuosity did not prevent his animal from having the prosaic look of a broken-down cab horse. The Italian camera retains something of the human quality of the Bell and Howell newsreel camera, a projection of hand and eye, almost a living part of the operator, instantly in tune with his awareness.

As for the photography, the lighting plays only a minor expressive role. First, because lighting calls for a studio, and the greater part of the filming is done on exteriors or in real-life settings. Second, because documentary camera work is identified in our minds with the grey tones of newsreels. It would be a contradiction to take any great pains with or to touch up excessively the plastic quality of the style.

As we have thus far attempted to describe it, the style of Italian films would appear to belong with a greater or less degree of skill and mastery of technique or feeling to the same family as quasi-literary journalism, to an ingenious art, pleasing, lively, and even moving, but basically a minor art. This is sometimes true even though one may actually rank the genre fairly high in the aesthetic hierarchy. It would be unjust and untrue to see such an assessment as the final measure of this particular technique. Just as, in literature, reportage with its ethic of objectivity (perhaps it would be more correct to say with its ethic of seeming objectivity) has simply

provided a basis for a new aesthetic of the novel, so the technique of the Italian film makers results in the best films especially in *Paisà*, with its aesthetic of narrative that is both complex and original.*

Paisà is unquestionably the first film to resemble closely a collection of short stories. Up to now we had only known the film composed of sketches—a bastard and phony type of film if ever there was one. Rossellini tells us, in succession, six stories of the Italian Liberation. This historical element is the only thing they have in common. Three of them, the first, the fourth, and the last, are taken from the Resistance. The others are drivel or pathetic or tragic episodes occurring on the fringes of the Allied advance. Prostitution, the black market, and a Franciscan convent alike provide the story material. There is no progression other than a chronological ordering of the story beginning with the landing of an Allied force in Sicily. But their social, historical, and human foundation gives them a unity enough to constitute a collection perfectly homogeneous in its diversity. Above all, the length of each story, its form, contents, and aesthetic duration gives us for the first time precisely the impression of a short story. The Naples episode of the urchin—a black-market expert, selling the clothes of a drunk Negro soldier—is an excellent Saroyan story. Another makes us think of Hemingway, yet another (the first) of Faulkner. I am not merely referring to the tone or the subject, but in a profound way to the style. Unfortunately one cannot put a film sequence in quotation marks like a paragraph, and hence any literary description of one must of necessity be incomplete. However, here is an episode from the final story which reminds me now of Hemingway, now of Faulkner:

1. A small group of Italian partisans and Allied soldiers have been given a supply of food by a family of fisher folk living in an isolated farmhouse in the heart of the marshlands of the Po delta. Having been handed

* I will not at this point get into an historical argument over the origins or the foreshadowing of the "novel of reportage" in the nineteenth century. Besides, the novels of Stendhal or the naturalists were concerned with frankness, acuteness, and perspicacity of observation, rather than with objectivity properly so called. Facts for their own sake had not yet acquired that kind of ontological autonomy, which makes of them a succession of sealed off monads, strictly limited by their appearance.

a basket of eels, they take off. Some while later, a German patrol discovers this, and executes the inhabitants of the farm. 2. An American officer and a partisan are wandering at twilight in the marshes. There is a burst of gunfire in the distance. From a highly elliptical conversation we gather that the Germans have shot the fishermen. 3. The dead bodies of the men and women lie stretched out in front of the little farmhouse. In the twilight, a half-naked baby cries endlessly.

Even with such a succinct description, this fragment of the story reveals enormous ellipses—or rather, great holes. A complex train of action is reduced to three or four brief fragments, in themselves already elliptical enough in comparison with the reality they are unfolding. Let us pass over the first purely descriptive fragment. The second event is conveyed to us by something only the partisans can know—distant gunfire. The third is presented to us independently of the presence of the partisans. It is not even certain that there were any witnesses to the scene. A baby cries besides its dead parents. There is a fact. How did the Germans discover that the parents were guilty? How is it that the child is still alive? That is not the film's concern, and yet a whole train of connected events led to this particular outcome. In any case, the film maker does not ordinarily show us everything. That is impossible—but the things he selects and the things he leaves out tend to form a logical pattern by way of which the mind passes easily from cause to effect. The technique of Rossellini undoubtedly maintains an intelligible succession of events, but these do not mesh like a chain with the sprockets of a wheel. The mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river. It may happen that one's foot hesitates between two rocks, or that one misses one's footing and slips. The mind does likewise. Actually it is not of the essence of a stone to allow people to cross rivers without wetting their feet any more than the divisions of a melon exist to allow the head of the family to divide it equally. Facts are facts, our imagination makes use of them, but they do not exist inherently for this purpose. In the usual shooting script (according to a process resembling the classical novel form) the fact comes under the scrutiny of the camera, is divided up, analyzed, and put together again, undoubtedly without entirely losing its

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facial nature; but the latter, presumably, is enveloped in abstraction, as the clay of a brick is enveloped by the wall which is not as yet present but which will multiply its parallelepipeds. For Rossellini, facts take on a meaning, but not like a tool which function has predetermined its form. The facts follow one another, and the mind is forced to observe their resemblance; and thus, by recalling one another, they end by meaning something which was inherent in each and which is, so to speak, the moral of the story—a moral the mind cannot fail to grasp since it was drawn from reality itself. In the Florentine episode, a woman crosses the city while it is still occupied by a number of Germans and groups of Italian Fascists; she is on her way to meet her fiancé, a leader of the Italian underground, accompanied by a man who likewise is looking for his wife and child. The attention of the camera following them, step by step, though it will share all the difficulties they encounter, all their dangers, will however be impartially divided between the heroes of the adventure and the conditions they must encounter. Actually, everything that is happening in a Florence in the throes of the Liberation is of a like importance. The personal adventures of the two individuals blend into the mass of other adventures, just as one attempts to elbow one's way into a crowd to recover something one has lost. In the course of making one's way one sees in the eyes of those who stand aside the reflections of other concerns, other passions, other dangers alongside which one's own may well be merely laughable. Ultimately and by chance, the woman learns, from a wounded partisan, that the man she is looking for is dead. But the statement from which she learned the news was not aimed straight at her—but hit her like a stray bullet. The impeccable line followed by this recital owes nothing to classical forms that are standard for a story of this kind. Attention is never artificially focused on the heroine. The camera makes no pretense at being psychologically subjective. We share all the more fully in the feelings of the protagonists because it is easy for us to sense what they are feeling; and also because the pathetic aspect of the episode does not derive from the fact that a woman has lost the man she loves but from the special place this drama holds among a thousand others, apart from and yet also part of the complete drama of the Liberation of Florence. The camera, as if

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making an impartial report, confines itself to following a woman searching for a man, leaving to us the task of being alone with her, of understanding her, and of sharing her suffering.

In the admirable final episode of the partisans surrounded in the marshlands, the muddy waters of the Po Delta, the reeds stretching away to the horizon, just sufficiently tall to hide the man crouching down in the little flat-bottomed boat, the lapping of the waves against the wood, all occupy a place of equal importance with the men. This dramatic role played by the marsh is due in great measure to deliberately intended qualities in the photography. This is why the horizon is always at the same height. Maintaining the same proportions between water and sky in every shot brings out one of the basic characteristics of this landscape. It is the exact equivalent, under conditions imposed by the screen, of the inner feeling men experience who are living between the sky and the water and whose lives are at the mercy of an infinitesimal shift of angle in relation to the horizon. This shows how much subtlety of expression can be got on exertions from a camera in the hands of the man who photographed *Paisà*.

The unit of cinematic narrative in *Paisà* is not the "shot," an abstract view of a reality which is being analyzed, but the "fact." A fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact, thanks to other imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships. Unquestionably, the director chose these "facts" carefully while at the same time respecting their factual integrity. The closeup of the door knob referred to earlier was less a fact than a sign brought into arbitrary relief by the camera, and no more independent semantically than a preposition in a sentence. The opposite is true of the marsh or the death of the peasants.

But the nature of the "image facts" is not only to maintain with the other image facts the relationships invented by the mind. These are in a sense the centrifugal properties of the images—those which make the narrative possible. Each image being on its own just a fragment of reality existing before any meanings, the entire surface of the scene should manifest an equally concrete density. Once again we have here the opposite of the "door-knob" type of scene, in which the color of the enamel, the

dirt marks at the level of the hand, the shine of the metal, the worn-away look are just so many useless facts, concrete parasites of an abstraction fittingly dispensed with.

In *Paisà* (and I repeat that I imply by this, in varying degrees, all Italian films) the closeup of the door knob would be replaced, without any loss of that peculiar quality of which it is part, by the "image fact" of a door whose concrete characteristics would be equally visible. For the same reason the actors will take care never to dissociate their performance from the decor or from the performance of their fellow actors. Man himself is just one fact among others, to whom no pride of place should be given *a priori*. That is why the Italian film makers alone know how to shoot successful scenes in buses, trucks, or trains, namely because these scenes combine to create a special density within the framework of which they know how to portray an action without separating it from its material context and without loss of that uniquely human quality of which it is an integral part. The subtlety and suppleness of movement within these cluttered spaces, the naturalness of the behavior of everyone in the shooting area, make of these scenes supreme bravura moments of the Italian cinema.

The Realism of the Italian Cinema and the Technique of the American Novel

The absence of any film documentation may have operated against a clear understanding of what I have so far written. I have arrived at the point of characterizing as similar the styles of Rossellini in *Paisà* and of Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*. By diametrically opposite technical routes each arrives at a scenario with roughly the same approach to reality—the depth of focus of Welles and the predisposition toward reality of Rossellini. In both we find the same dependence of the actor relative to the setting, the same realistic acting demanded of everyone in the scene whatever their dramatic importance. Better still, although the styles are so different,

the narrative follows basically the same pattern in *Citizen Kane* and in *Paisà*.

In short, although they use independent techniques, without the least possibility of a direct influence one on the other, and possessed of temperaments that could hardly be less compatible, Rossellini and Welles have, to all intents and purposes, the same basic aesthetic objective, the same aesthetic concept of realism.

I had leisure enough as I watched the film to compare the narrative of *Paisà* with that of some modern novelists and short story writers. Besides, the resemblances between the technique of Orson Welles and that of the American novel, notably Dos Passos, are sufficiently obvious to allow me now to expound my thesis. The aesthetic of the Italian cinema, at least in its most elaborate manifestations and in the work of a director as conscious of his medium as Rossellini, is simply the equivalent on film of the American novel.

Let us clearly understand that we are here concerned with something quite other than banal adaptation. Hollywood, in fact, never stops adapting American novels for the screen. We are familiar with what Sam Wood did to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Basically all he wanted was to retell a plot. Even if he had been faithful to the original, sentence by sentence, he would not, properly speaking, have transferred anything from the book to the screen. The films that have managed to translate something of the style of novels into images can be counted on the fingers of one hand, by which I mean the very fabric of the narrative, the law of gravity that governs the ordering of the facts, in Faulkner, Hemingway, and Dos Passos. We had to wait for Orson Welles to show what the cinema of the American novel would be.*

So then, while Hollywood adapts bestseller after bestseller at the same

* The cinema nevertheless has come close to these truths on several occasions, in the case of Feuillade for example, or of Stroheim. More recently, Maltoux has clearly understood the parallel between a certain style of novel and film narrative. Finally, instinctively and by virtue of his genius, Renoir had already applied in *La Règle du jeu* the essentials of the principles of depth of focus and the simultaneous presentation of all the actors in a scene. He had explained this in a prophetic article in 1938 in the review *Point*.

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time moving further away from the spirit of this literature, it is in Italy, naturally and with an ease that excludes any notion of deliberate and willful imitation, that the cinema of American literature has become a reality. Unquestionably we must not underestimate the popularity of the American novelists in Italy, where their works were translated and assimilated long before they were in France, and the influence for example of Saroyan on Vittorini is common knowledge. I would sooner cite, in preference to these dubious cause-and-effect relations, the exceptional affinity of the two civilizations as revealed by the Allied occupation. The G.I. felt himself at home at once in Italy, and the *paisan* was at once on familiar terms with the G.I., black or white. The widespread black market and the presence everywhere of prostitution, wherever the American army went, is by no means the least convincing example of the symbiosis of two civilizations. It is not for nothing that American soldiers are important characters in most recent Italian films; and that they are much at home there speaks volumes.

Although some paths have been opened by literature and the occupation, the phenomenon cannot be explained on this level alone. American films are being made in Italy today but never has the Italian film been at the same time more typically Italian. The body of references I have adopted has excluded similarities even less disputable, for example the Italian "tale," the *commedia dell'arte* and the technique of the fresco. Rather than an influence one on the other, it is an accord between cinema and literature, based on the same profound aesthetic data, on the same concept of the relation between art and reality. It is a long while since the modern novel created its realist revolution, since it combined behaviorism, a reporter's technique, and the ethic of violence. Far from the cinema having the slightest effect on this evolution, as is commonly held today, a film like *Paisà* proves that the cinema was twenty years behind the contemporary novel. It is not the least of the merits of the Italian cinema that it has been able to find the truly cinematic equivalent for the most important literary revolution of our time.

LA TERRA TREMA

THE SUBJECT MATTER of *La Terra Trema* owes nothing to the war: it deals with an attempted revolt by the fishermen of a small Sicilian village against the economic stranglehold exerted by the local fleet-owning fish merchants. I might define it as a kind of super-*Farrebique* about fishermen. The parallels with Rouquier's film are many: first, its quasidocumentary realism; then (if one may so put it) the exoticism intrinsic to the subject matter; and, too, the underlying "human geography" (for the Sicilian family, the hope of freeing themselves from the merchants amounts to the same thing as the installation of electricity for the Farrebique family). Although in *La Terra Trema*, a Communist film, the whole village is involved, the story is told in terms of a single family, ranging from grandfather to grandchildren. This family was as much out of its element in the sumptuous reception Universal gave in its honor at the Excelsior in Venice as the Farrebique family had been at its press party in Paris. Visconti, like Rouquier, did not want to use professional actors, not even Rossellini's kind of "amalgam." His fishermen are fishermen in real life. He recruited them on the scene of his story's action—if that is the proper term here, for here (as in *Farrebique*) the action deliberately resists the seductions of "drama": the story unfolds without regard for the rules of suspense, its only resources a concern with things themselves, as in life. But with these negative rather than positive aspects of the story the resem-

blances to *Farrebique* end; *La Terra Trema* is as remote as could be in style from *Farrebique*.

Visconti, like Rouquier, aimed at and unquestionably achieved a paradoxical synthesis of realism and aestheticism but the poetry of *Farrebique* is due, in essence, to montage—for example, the winter and spring sequences. To obtain this synthesis in his film, Visconti has not had recourse to the effects one can produce from the juxtaposition of images. Each image here contains a meaning of its own which it expresses fully. This is the reason why it is difficult to see more than a tenuous relation between *La Terra Trema* and the Soviet cinema of the second half of the twenties, to which montage was essential. We may add now that it is not by means of symbolism in the imagery either that meaning manifests itself here—I mean, the symbolism to which Eisenstein and Rouquier resort. The aesthetic peculiar to the image here is always plastic; it avoids any inclination to the epic. As staggeringly beautiful as the fishing fleet may be when it leaves the harbor, it is still just the village fleet, not, as in *Potemkin*, the Enthusiasm and the Support of the people of Odessa who send out the fishing boats loaded with food for the rebels.

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, who before his work on this film did nothing of real note and was known only as a studio cameraman, has here created a profoundly original style of image, unequaled anywhere (as far as I know) but in the short films which are being made in Sweden by Arne Sucksdorff.

To keep my explanations brief, I will only note that, in an article on Italian film of 1946, "Le réalisme cinématographique et l'école italienne de la libération" (*Esprit*, January, 1948), I had examined some aspects of the kind of film realism then current, and that I was led to see *Farrebique* and *Citizen Kane* as the two poles of realistic technique. The realism of *Farrebique* derives from the object itself, of *Citizen Kane* from the way it structures what it represents. In *Farrebique* everything is real. In *Kane* everything has been reconstructed in a studio—but only because such depth of field and such rigorously composed images could not be obtained

on location. *Paisà* stands somewhere between the two but closer to *Farrebique* for its images, while the realistic aesthetic works its way into the film between the component blocs of reality through its peculiar conception of narrative.

The images of *La Terra Trema* achieve what is at once a paradox and *tour de force* in integrating the aesthetic realism of *Citizen Kane* with the documentary realism of *Farrebique*. If this is not, strictly speaking, the first time depth of focus has been used outside the studio, it is at least the first time it has been used as consciously and as systematically as it is here out of doors, in the rain and even in the dead of night, as well as indoors in the real-life settings of the fishermen's homes. I cannot linger over the technical *tour de force* which this represents, but I would like to emphasize that depth of focus has naturally led Visconti (as it led Welles) not only to reject montage but, in some literal sense, to invent a new kind of shooting script. * His "shots" (if one is justified in retaining the term) are unusually long—some lasting three or four minutes. In each, as one might expect, several actions are going on simultaneously. Visconti also seems to have wanted, in some systematic sense, to base the construction of his image on the event itself. If a fisherman rolls a cigarette, he spares us nothing: we see the whole operation; it will not be reduced to its dramatic or symbolic meaning, as is usual with montage. The shots are often fixed-frame, so people and things may enter the frame and take up position, but Visconti is also in the habit of using a special kind of panning shot which moves very slowly over a very wide arc: this is the only camera movement which he allows himself, for he excludes all tracking shots and, of course, every unusual camera angle.

The unlikely sobriety of this structure is possible only because of the remarkable plastic balance maintained—a balance which only a photograph could absolutely render here. But above and beyond the merits of its purely formal properties, the image reveals an intimate knowledge of the subject matter on the part of the film makers. This is especially re-

* For a note on Bazin's use of technical terms, see p. 181.

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markable in the interiors, which hitherto have eluded film. The difficulties attendant on lighting and shooting make it almost impossible to use real interiors as settings. It has been done occasionally, but the results from an aesthetic point of view have been far inferior to what can be achieved on exteriors. Here, for the first time throughout an entire film there was no variation in quality between interior and exterior as to the style of the shooting script, the performance of the actors, and the results of the photography. Visconti is worthy of the novelty of his triumph. Despite the poverty—or even because of the simple “ordinariness” of this household of fishermen, an extraordinary kind of poetry, at once intimate and social, emanates from it.

The masterly way in which Visconti has handled his actors deserves the highest praise. This is by no means the first time in history of film that nonprofessional actors have been used, but never before (except perhaps in “exotic” films, where the problem is somewhat specialized) have the actors been so skillfully integrated with the most specifically aesthetic elements of the film. Rouquier never knew how to handle his family without our being conscious of a camera. The embarrassment, the repressed laughter, the awkwardness are skillfully covered up by the editing which always cuts just in the nick of time. In *La Terra Trema*, the actor, sometimes on camera for several minutes at a time, speaks, moves, and acts with complete naturalness—one might even say, with unimaginable grace. Visconti is from the theater. He has known how to communicate to the nonprofessionals of *La Terra Trema* something more than naturalness, namely that stylization of gesture that is the crowning achievement of an actor's profession. If festival juries were not what they are, the Venice festival prize for best acting should have gone to the fishermen of *La Terra Trema*.

Visconti lets us see that the Italian neorealism of 1946 has been left far behind on more than one score. Hierarchies in art are fairly pointless, but cinema is too young an art still, too involved in its own evolution to be able to indulge in repeating itself for any length of time. Five years in cinema is the equivalent of an entire literary generation. It is the merit of Visconti to have managed a dialectical integration of the achievements

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of recent Italian film with a larger, richer aesthetic for which the term “realism” has not too much meaning now. I am not saying that *La Terra Trema* is superior to *Paizà* or to *La Caccia tragica* but only that it does, at least, have the merit of having left them behind from an historical standpoint. Seeing the best Italian films of 1948, I had the impression that Italian cinema was doomed to repeat itself to its utter exhaustion.

La Terra Trema is the only original way out of the aesthetic impasse, and in that sense, one might suppose, it bears the burden of our hopes.

Does this mean that those hopes will be fulfilled? No, unhappily, it is not certain, for *La Terra Trema* runs counter, still, to some filmic principles with which Visconti will have in future films to deal somewhat more convincingly than he does here. In particular, his disinclination to sacrifice anything to drama has one obvious and serious consequence: *La Terra Trema* bores the public. A film with a limited action, it lasts longer than three hours. If you add that the language used in the film is a dialectal Sicilian (which, given the photographic style of the image, it is impossible to subtitle), and that not even Italians understand it, you can see that this is somewhat austere “entertainment” and faces no more than a restricted commercial future. I am sincere when I say that I hope Universal will play the Maecenas sufficiently to enable Visconti, while himself sharing the cost from his large personal fortune, to finish the trilogy he projects of which *La Terra Trema* is only the first part. We will then, at best, have some filmic monster, whose highly social and political preoccupations will nonetheless remain inaccessible to the general public. In the world of cinema, it is not necessary that everyone approve every film, provided that what prompts the public's incomprehension can be compensated for by the other things. In other words, the aesthetic of *La Terra Trema* must be applicable to dramatic ends if it is to be of service in the evolution of cinema.

One has to take into account too—and this is even more disturbing, in view of what one has the right to expect from Visconti himself—a dangerous inclination to aestheticism. This great aristocrat, an artist to the tips of his fingers, is a Communist, too—do I dare say a synthetic one? *La Terra Trema* lacks inner fire. One is reminded of the great Re-

renaissance painters who, without having to do violence to themselves, were able to paint such fine religious frescoes in spite of their deep indifference to Christianity. I am not passing judgment on the sincerity of Visconti's communism. But what is sincerity? Obviously, at issue is not some paternalistic feeling for the proletariat. Paternalism is a bourgeois phenomenon, and Visconti is an aristocrat. What is at issue is, maybe, an aesthetic participation in history. Whatever it be, though, we are a long way off from the telling conviction of *Potemkin* or *The End of Saint Petersburg* or even (the theme is even the same) of *Piscator*. There is no doubt that the film does have propaganda value, but this value is purely objective: there is no moving eloquence to bolster its documentary vigor. This is how Visconti intended it to be. This decision is not in itself unattractive. But it involves him in a fairly risky bet, which he may not necessarily be able to cover, at least in terms of film. Let us hope that his future work will show us that it can. As it stands, however, it will not, unless it can avoid falling in the direction in which it is already leaning perilously.

BICYCLE THIEF

WHAT SEEMS to me most astonishing about the Italian cinema is that it appears to feel it should escape from the aesthetic impasse to which neorealism is said to have led. The dazzling effects of 1946 and 1947 having faded away, one could reasonably fear that this useful and intelligent reaction against the Italian aesthetic of the superspectacle and, for that matter, more generally, against the technical aestheticism from which cinema suffered all over the world, would never get beyond an interest in a kind of superdocumentary, or romanticized reportage. One began to realize that the success of *Roma Città Aperta*, *Paisà*, or *Sciuscià* was inseparable from a special conjunction of historical circumstances that took its meaning from the Liberation, and that the technique of the films was in some way magnified by the revolutionary value of the subject. Just as some books by Malraux or Hemingway find in a crystallization of journalistic style the best narrative form for a tragedy of current events, so the films of Rossellini or De Sica owed the fact that they were major works, masterpieces, simply to a fortuitous combination of form and subject matter. But when the novelty and above all the flavor of their technical crudity have exhausted their surprise effect, what remains of Italian "neorealism" when by force of circumstances it must revert to traditional subjects: crime stories, psychological dramas, social customs? The camera in the street we can still accept, but doesn't that ad-

mirable nonprofessional acting stand self-condemned in proportion as its discoveries swell the ranks of international stars? And, by way of generalizing about this aesthetic pessimism: "realism" can only occupy in art a dialectical position—it is more a reaction than a truth. It remains then to make it part of the aesthetic it came into existence to verify. In any case, the Italians were not the last to downgrade their "neorealism." I think there is not a single Italian director, including the most neorealist, who does not insist that they must get away from it.

French critics too feel themselves a prey to scruples—especially since this vaunted neorealism early showed signs of running out of steam. Comes, agreeable enough in themselves, appeared on the scene to exploit with visible ease the formula of *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* or *Vivere in Pace*. But worst of all was the emergence of a neorealist spectacle in which the search for real settings, action taken from everyday life, portraits of lower-class milieus, "social" backgrounds, became an academic trawls of lower-class milieus, "social" backgrounds, became an academic stereotype far more detestable than the elephants of *Scipio Africainus*. For a neorealist film may have every defect except that of being academic. Thus at Venice *Il Parto col diavolo* by Luigi Chiarini, a somber melodrama of rural love, took visible pains to find a contemporary alibi in a story of conflict between shepherds and woodsmen. Although well done on some accounts, *In nome della legge*, which the Italians tried to push to the fore at Knokke-le-Zoute, cannot escape similar criticisms. One will notice incidentally, from these two examples, that neorealism is now preoccupied with rural problems, perhaps prudently in view of the fate of urban neorealism. The closed-in countryside has replaced the open city.

However that may be, the hopes that we placed in the new Italian school had started to turn into uneasiness, or even skepticism, all the more since the aesthetic of neorealism forbids it to repeat itself or plagiarize itself in the way that is possible and even normal in some traditional genres (the crime film, the western, the atmospheric film, and so on). Already we were beginning to look toward England whose recent cinematic rebirth is likewise, in part, the fruit of realism: that of the school of documentarists who, before and during the war, had gone deeply into the resources offered by social and technical realities. A film like *Brief Encounter* would

probably have been impossible without the ten years of preparation by Grierson, Cavalcanti, or Roha. But the English, instead of breaking with the technique and the history of European and American cinema, have succeeded in combining a highly refined aestheticism with the advances of a certain realism. Nothing could be more tightly structured, more carefully prepared, than *Brief Encounter*—nothing less conceivable without the most up-to-date studio resources, without clever and established actors; yet can we imagine a more realistic portrait of English manners and psychology? Certainly, David Lean has gained nothing by making over, this year, a kind of second *Brief Encounter*: *The Passionate Friends*, presented at the Cannes festival. But it is against repetition of the subject matter that one can reasonably protest, not against the repetition of the techniques, which could be used over and over indefinitely.*

Have I played devil's advocate long enough? For let me now make a confession: my doubts about the Italian cinema have never gone so far, but all the arguments I have invoked have been used by intelligent men—especially in Italy—nor are they unfortunately without some semblance of validity. They have also often troubled me, and I subscribe to some of them.

On the other hand there is a film called *Ladri di Biciclette* and two other films that I hope we will soon get to know in France. With *Ladri di Biciclette* De Sica has managed to escape from the impasse, to reaffirm anew the entire aesthetic of neorealism.

Ladri di Biciclette certainly is neorealist, by all the principles one can deduce from the best Italian films since 1946. The story is from the lower classes, almost populist: an incident in the daily life of a worker. But the film shows no extraordinary events such as those which befall the fated workers in Gabin films. There are no crimes of passion, none of those

* This paragraph, which redounds to the glory of the English cinema but not that of the writer, has been retained to bear witness to critical illusions about English cinema which I was not the only one to entertain. *Brief Encounter* made almost as great an impression as *Roma Città Aperta*. Time has shown which of the two had a real cinematic future. Besides, the Noël Coward-David Lean film owed very little to the Grierson school of documentary. [Note by Bazin some time after the article was written, probably in 1956.—TR.]

grandiose coincidences common in detective stories which simply transfer to a realm of proletarian exoticism the great tragic debates once reserved for the dwellers on Olympus. Truly an insignificant, even a banal incident: a workman spends a whole day looking in vain in the streets of Rome for the bicycle someone has stolen from him. This bicycle has been the tool of his trade, and if he doesn't find it he will again be unemployed. Late in the day, after hours of fruitless wandering, he too tries to steal a bicycle. Apprehended and then released, he is as poor as ever, but now he feels the shame of having sunk to the level of the thief.

Plainly there is not enough material here even for a news item: the whole story would not deserve two lines in a stray-dog column. One must take care not to confuse it with realist tragedy in the Prévert or Janes Cain manner, where the initial news item is a diabolic trap placed by the gods amid the cobble stones of the street. In itself the event contains no proper dramatic valence. It takes on meaning only because of the social (and not psychological or aesthetic) position of the victim. Without the haunting specter of unemployment, which places the event in the Italian society of 1948, it would be an utterly banal misadventure. Likewise, the choice of a bicycle as the key object in the drama is characteristic both of Italian urban life and of a period when mechanical means of transportation were still rare and expensive. There is no need to insist on the hundreds of other meaningful details that multiply the vital links between the scenario and actuality, situating the event in political and social history, in a given place at a given time.

The techniques employed in the *mise en scène* likewise meet the most exacting specifications of Italian neorealism. Not one scene shot in a studio. Everything was filmed in the streets. As for the actors, none had the slightest experience in theater or film. The workman came from the Breda factory, the child was found hanging around in the street, the wife was a journalist.

These then are the facts of the case. It is clear that they do not appear to recall in any sense the neorealism of *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, *Vivere in Pace*, or *Sciuscià*. On the face of it then one should have special reasons for being wary. The sordid side of the tale tends toward that most de-

batable aspect of Italian stories: indulgence in the wretched, a systematic search for squalid detail.

If *Ladri di Biciclette* is a true masterpiece, comparable in rigor to *Paisà*, it is for certain precise reasons, none of which emerge either from a simple outline of the scenario or from a superficial disquisition on the technique of the *mise en scène*.

The scenario is diabolically clever in its construction; beginning with the alibi of a current event it makes good use of a number of systems of dramatic coordinates radiating in all directions. *Ladri di Biciclette* is certainly the only valid Communist film of the whole past decade precisely because it still has meaning even when you have abstracted its social significance. Its social message is not detached, it remains immanent in the event, but it is so clear that nobody can overlook it, still less take exception to it, since it is never made explicitly a message. The thesis implied is wondrously and outrageously simple: in the world where this workman lives, the poor must steal from each other in order to survive. But this thesis is never stated as such, it is just that events are so linked together that they have the appearance of a formal truth while retaining an anecdotal quality. Basically, the workman might have found his bicycle in the middle of the film; only then there would have been no film. (Sorry to have bothered you, the director might say; we really did think he would never find it, but since he has, all is well, good for him, the performance is over, you can turn up the lights.) In other words, a propaganda film would try to prove that the workman could not find his bicycle, and that he is inevitably trapped in the vicious circle of poverty. De Sica limits himself to showing that the workman cannot find his bicycle and that as a result he doubtless will be unemployed again. No one can fail to see that it is the accidental nature of the script that gives the thesis its quality of necessity; the slightest doubt cast on the necessity of the events in the scenario of a propaganda film renders the argument hypothetical.

Although on the basis of the workman's misfortune we have no alternative but to condemn a certain kind of relation between a man and his work, the film never makes the events or the people part of an economic or political Manicheism. It takes care not to cheat on reality, not only by

contriving to give the succession of events the appearance of an accidental and as it were anecdotal chronology but in treating each of them according to its phenomenological integrity. In the middle of the chase the little boy suddenly needs to piss. So he does. A downpour forces the father and son to shelter in a cartage, so like them we have to forego the chase and wait till the storm is over. The events are not necessarily signs of something, of a truth of which we are to be convinced, they all carry their own weight, their complete uniqueness, that ambiguity that characterizes any fact. So, if you do not have the eyes to see, you are free to attribute what happens to bad luck or to chance. The same applies to the people in the film. The worker is just as deprived and isolated among his fellow trade unionists as he is walking along the street or even in that ineffable scene of the Catholic "Quakers" into whose company he will shortly stray, because the trade union does not exist to find lost bikes but to transform a world in which losing his bike condemns a man to poverty. Nor does the worker come to lodge a complaint with the trade union but to find comrades who will be able to help him discover the stolen object. So here you have a collection of proletarian members of a union who behave no differently from a group of paternalistic bourgeois toward an unfortunate workman. In his private misfortune, the poster hanger is just as alone in his union as in church (buddies apart that is—but then who your buddies are is your own affair). But this parallel is extremely useful because it points up a striking contrast. The indifference of the trade union is normal and justified because a trade union is striving for justice not for charity. But the cumbersome paternalism of the Catholic "Quakers" is unbearable, because their eyes are closed to his personal tragedy while they in fact actually do nothing to change the world that is the cause of it. On this score the most successful scene is that in the storm under the porch when a flock of Austrian seminarians crowd around the worker and his son. We have no valid reason to blame them for chattering so much and still less for talking German. But it would be difficult to create a more *objectively* anticlerical scene.

Clearly, and I could find twenty more examples: events and people are never introduced in support of a social thesis—but the thesis emerges fully

armed and all the more irrefutable because it is presented to us as something thrown in into the bargain. It is our intelligence that discerns and shapes it, not the film. De Sica wins every play on the board without ever having made a bet.

This technique is not entirely new in Italian films and we have elsewhere stressed its value at length both apropos of *Paisà* and of *Allemagne Anno Zero*, but these two films were based on themes from either the Resistance or the war. *Ladri di Biciclette* is the first decisive example of the possibility of the conversion of this kind of objectivity to other, similar subjects. De Sica and Zavattini have transferred neorealism from the Resistance to the Revolution.

Thus the thesis of the film is hidden behind an objective social reality which in turn moves into the background of the moral and psychological drama which could of itself justify the film. The idea of the boy is a stroke of genius, and one does not know definitely whether it came from the script or in the process of directing, so little does this distinction mean here any more. It is the child who gives to the workman's adventure its ethical dimension and fashions, from an individual moral standpoint, a drama that might well have been only social. Remove the boy, and the story remains much the same. The proof: a *résumé* of it would not differ in detail. In fact, the boy's part is confined to trotting along beside his father. But he is the intimate witness of the tragedy, its private chorus. It is supremely clever to have virtually eliminated the role of the wife in order to give flesh and blood to the private character of the tragedy in the person of the child. The complicity between father and son is so subtle that it reaches down to the foundations of the moral life. It is the admiration the child feels for his father and the father's awareness of it which gives its *tragic stature* to the ending. The public shame of the worker, exposed and clouted in the open street, is of little account compared with the fact that his son witnessed it. When he feels tempted to steal the bike, the silent presence of the little child, who guesses what his father is thinking, is cruel to the verge of obscenity. Trying to get rid of him by sending him to take the streetcar is like telling a child in some cramped apartment

to go and wait on the landing outside for an hour. Only in the best Chaplin films are there situations of an equally overwhelming conciseness.

In this connection, the final gesture of the little boy in giving his hand to his father has been frequently misinterpreted. It would be unworthy of the film to see here a concession to the feelings of the audience. If De Sica gives them this satisfaction it is because it is a logical part of the drama. This experience marks henceforth a definite stage in the relations between father and son, rather like reaching puberty. Up to that moment the man has been like a god to his son; their relations come under the heading of admiration. By his action the father has now compromised them. The tears they shed as they walk side by side, arms swinging, signify their despair over a paradise lost. But the son returns to a father who has fallen from grace. He will love him henceforth as a human being, shame and all. The hand that slips into his is neither a symbol of forgiveness nor of a childish act of consolation. It is rather the most solemn gesture that could ever mark the relations between a father and his son: one that makes them equals.

It would take too long to enumerate the multiple secondary functions of the boy in the film, both as to the story structure and as to the *mise en scène* itself. However, one should at least pay attention to the change of tone (almost in the musical sense of the term) that his presence introduces into the middle of the film. As we slowly wander back and forth between the little boy and the workman we are taken from the social and economic plane to that of their private lives, and the supposed death by drowning of the child, in making the father suddenly realize the relative insignificance of his misfortune, creates a dramatic oasis (the restaurant scene) at the heart of the story. It is, however, an illusory one, because the reality of this intimate happiness in the long run depends on the precious bike. Thus the child provides a dramatic reserve which, as the occasion arises, serves as a counterpoint, as an accompaniment, or moves on the contrary into the foreground of the melodic structure. This function in the story is, furthermore, clearly observable in the orchestration of the steps of the child and of the grownup. Before choosing this particular child, De Sica did not ask him to perform, just to walk. He wanted to play off

the striding gait of the man against the short trotting steps of the child, the harmony of this discord being for him of capital importance for the understanding of the film as a whole. It would be no exaggeration to say that *Ladri di Biciclette* is the story of a walk through Rome by a father and his son. Whether the child is ahead, behind, alongside—or when, sinking after having had his ears boxed, he is dawdling behind in a gesture of revenge—what he is doing is never without meaning. On the contrary, it is the phenomenology of the script.

It is difficult, after the success of this pairing of a workman and his son, to imagine De Sica having recourse to established actors. The absence of professional actors is nothing new. But here again *Ladri di Biciclette* goes further than previous films. Henceforth the cinematic purity of the actors does not derive from skill, luck, or a happy combination of a subject, a period, and a people. Probably too much importance has been attached to the ethnic factor. Admittedly the Italians, like the Russians, are the most naturally theatrical of people. In Italy any little street urchin is the equal of a Jackie Coogan and life is a perpetual *commedia dell'arte*. However, it seems to me unlikely that these acting talents are shared equally by the Milanese, the Neapolitans, the peasants of the Po, or the fishermen of Sicily. Racial difference apart, the contrasts in their history, language, and economic and social condition would suffice to cast doubt on a thesis that sought to attribute the natural acting ability of the Italian people simply to an ethnic quality. It is inconceivable that films as different as *Paisà*, *Ladri di Biciclette*, *La Terra Trema*, and even *Il Cielo sulla Palude* could share in common such a superbly high level of acting. One could conceive that the urban Italian has a special gift for spontaneous histrionics, but the peasants in *Cielo sulla Palude* are absolute cavemen beside the farmers of *Farabique*. Merely to recall Rouquier's film in connection with Genina's is enough at least in this respect to relegate the experiment of the French director to the level of a touchingly patronizing effort. Half the dialogue in *Farabique* is spoken off-stage because Rouquier could never get the peasants not to laugh during a speech of any length. Genina in *Cielo sulla Palude*, Visconti in *La Terra Trema*, both handling peasants or fishermen by the dozen, gave them complicated roles and got them to recite long

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speeches in scenes in which the camera concentrated on their faces as pitilessly as in an American studio. It is an understatement to say that these temporary actors are good or even perfect. In these films the very concept of actor, performance, character has no longer any meaning. An actorless cinema? Undoubtedly. But the original meaning of the formula is now outdated, and we should talk today of a cinema without acting, of a cinema of which we no longer ask whether the character gives a good performance or not, since here man and the character he portrays are so completely one.

We have not strayed as far as it might seem from *Ladri di Biciclette*. De Sica hunted for his cast for a long time and selected them for specific characteristics. Natural nobility, that purity of countenance and bearing that the common people have . . . He hesitated for months between this person and that, took a hundred tests only to decide finally, in a flash and by intuition on the basis of a silhouette suddenly come upon at the bend of a road. But there is nothing miraculous about that. It is not the unique excellence of this workman and this child that guarantees the quality of their performance, but the whole aesthetic scheme into which they are fitted. When De Sica was looking for a producer to finance his film, he finally found one, but on condition that the workman was played by Cary Grant. The mere statement of the problem in these terms shows the absurdity of it. Actually, Cary Grant plays this kind of part extremely well, but it is obvious that the question here is not one of playing of a part but of getting away from the very notion of doing any such thing. The worker had to be at once as perfect and as anonymous and as objective as his bicycle.

This concept of the actor is no less "artistic" than the other. The performance of this workman implies as many gifts of body and of mind and as much capacity to take direction as any established actor has at his command. Hitherto films that have been made either totally or in part without actors, such as *Tabù*, *Thunder over Mexico*, *Mother*, have seemingly been successes that are either out of the ordinary or limited to a certain genre. There is nothing on the other hand, unless it be sound prudence, to prevent De Sica from making fifty films like *Ladri di Biciclette*. From

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now on we know that the absence of professional actors in no way limits the choice of subject. The film without names has finally established its own aesthetic existence. This in no sense means that the cinema of the future will no longer use actors: De Sica who is one of the world's finest actors would be the first to deny this. All it means is that some subjects handled in a certain style can no longer be made with professional actors and that the Italian cinema has definitely imposed these working conditions, just as naturally as it imposed authentic settings. It is this transition from an admirable *tour de force*, precarious as this may be, into an exact and infallible technique that marks a decisive stage in the growth of Italian neo-realism.

With the disappearance of the concept of the actor into a transparency seemingly as natural as life itself, comes the disappearance of the set. Let us understand one another, however. De Sica's film took a long time to prepare, and everything was as minutely planned as for a studio superproduction, which as a matter of fact, allows for last-minute improvisations, but I cannot remember a single shot in which a dramatic effect is born of the shooting script properly so called, which seems as neutral as in a Chaplin film. All the same, the numbering and titling of shots does not noticeably distinguish *Ladri di Biciclette* from any ordinary film. But their selection has been made with a view to raising the impidity of the event to a maximum, while keeping the index of refraction from the style to a minimum.

This objectivity is rather different from Rossellini's in *Paisà* but it belongs to the same school of aesthetics. One may criticize it on the same grounds that Gide and Martin du Gard criticized romantic prose—that it must tend in the direction of the most neutral kind of transparency. Just as the disappearance of the actor is the result of transcending a style of performance, the disappearance of the *mise en scène* is likewise the fruit of a dialectical progress in the style of the narrative. If the event is sufficient unto itself without the direction having to shed any further light on it by means of camera angles, purposely chosen camera positions, it is because it has reached that stage of perfect luminosity which makes it pos-

sible for an art to unmask a nature which in the end resembles it. That is why the impression made on us by *Ladri di Biciclette* is unfailingly that of truth.

If this supreme naturalness, the sense of events observed haphazardly as the hours roll by, is the result of an ever-present although invisible system of aesthetics, it is definitely the prior conception of the scenario which allows this to happen. Disappearance of the actor, disappearance of *mise en scène*? Unquestionably, but because the very principle of *Ladri di Biciclette* is the disappearance of a story.

The term is equivocal. I know of course that there is a story but of a different kind from those we ordinarily see on the screen. This is even the reason why De Sica could not find a producer to back him. When Roger Leenhardt in a prophetic critical statement asked years ago "if the cinema is a spectacle," he was contrasting the dramatic cinema with the novel-like structure of the cinematic narrative. The former borrows from the theater its hidden springs. Its plot, conceived as it may be specifically for the screen, is still the alibi for an action identical in essence with the action of the classical theater. On this score the film is a spectacle like a play. But on the other hand, because of its realism and the equal treatment it gives to the man and to nature the cinema is related, aesthetically speaking, to the novel.

Without going too far into a theory of the novel—a debatable subject—let us say that the narrative form of the novel or that which derives from it differs by and large from the theater in the primacy given to events over action, to succession over causality, to mind over will. The conjunction belonging to the theater is "therefore," the particle belonging to the novel is "then." This scandalously rough definition is correct to the extent that it characterizes the two different movements of the mind in thinking, namely that of the reader and that of the onlooker. Proust can lose us in a madeleine, but a playwright fails in his task if every reply does not link our interest to the reply that is to follow. That is why a novel may be laid down and then picked up again. A play cannot be cut into pieces. The total unity of a spectacle is of its essence. To the extent that it can realize

the physical requirements of a spectacle, the cinema cannot apparently escape the spectacle's psychological laws, but it has also at its disposal all the resources of the novel. For that reason, doubtless, the cinema is congenitally a hybrid. It conceals a contradiction. Besides, clearly, the progression of the cinema is toward increasing its novel-like potential. Not that we are against filmed theater, but if the screen can in some conditions develop and give a new dimension to the theater, it is of necessity at the expense of certain scenic values—the first of which is the physical presence of the actor. Contrariwise, the novel at least ideally need surrender nothing to the cinema. One may think of the film as a supernovel of which the written form is a feeble and provisional version.

This much briefly said, how much of it can be found in the present condition of the cinematographic spectacle? It is impossible to overlook the spectacular and theatrical needs demanded of the screen. What remains to be decided is how to reconcile the contradiction.

The Italian cinema of today is the first anywhere in the world to have enough courage to cast aside the imperatives of the spectacular. *La Terra Trema* and *Cielo sulla Palude* are films without "action," in the unfolding of which, somewhat after the style of the epic novel, no concession is made to dramatic tension. Things happen in them each at its appointed hour, one after the other, but each carries an equal weight. If some are fuller of meaning than others, it is only in retrospect. We are free to use either "therefore" or "then." *La Terra Trema*, especially, is a film destined to be virtually a commercial failure, unexploitable without cuts that would leave it unrecognizable.

That is the virtue of De Sica and Zavattini. Their *Ladri di Biciclette* is solidly structured in the mold of a tragedy. There is not one frame that is not charged with an intense dramatic power, yet there is not one either which we cannot fail to find interesting, its dramatic continuity apart.

The film unfolds on the level of pure accident: the rain, the seminarians, the Catholic Quakers, the restaurant—all these are seemingly interchangeable, no one seems to have arranged them in order on a dramatic spectrum. The scene in the thieves' quarter is significant. We are not sure

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that the man who was chased by the workman is actually the bicycle thief, and we shall never know if the epileptic fit was a pretense or genuine. As an "action" this episode would be meaningless had not its novel-like interest, its value as a fact, given it a dramatic meaning to boot.

It is in fact on its reverse side, and by parallels, that the action is assembled—less in terms of "tension" than of a "summation" of the events. Yes, it is a spectacle, and what a spectacle! *Ladri di Biciclette*, however, does not depend on the mathematical elements of drama, the action does not exist beforehand as if it were an "essence." It follows from the pre-existence of the narrative, it is the "integral" of reality. De Sica's supreme achievement, which others have so far only approached with a varying degree of success or failure, is to have succeeded in discovering the cinematographic dialectic capable of transcending the contradiction between the action of a "spectacle" and of an event. For this reason, *Ladri di Biciclette* is one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema.

DE SICA: METTEUR EN SCÈNE

I MUST confess to the reader that my pen is paralyzed by scruples because of the many compelling reasons why I should not be the one to introduce De Sica to him.

First, there is the presumption implied in a Frenchman wanting to teach Italians something about their own cinema in general,* and, in particular, about the man who is possibly their greatest director. Besides, when I imprudently accepted the honor of introducing De Sica in these pages, I was particularly conscious of my admiration for *Ladri di Biciclette* and I had not yet seen *Miracolo a Milano*. We in France have of course, seen *Ladri di Biciclette*, *Sciuscià*, and *I Bambini ci guardano*, but lovely as *Sciuscià* is, and revealing as it is of the talents of De Sica, it bears, side by side with certain sublime discoveries, traces of the apprentice director. The scenario occasionally succumbs to melodramatic indulgence, and the direction has a certain poetic elegance, a lyrical quality, that today it seems to me De Sica is concerned to avoid. In short, we do not have there as yet the personal style of the director. His complete and final mastery is

* This article, dating from 1952, was originally published in Italian by Editrice Guanda (Parma, 1953). The text in the French edition of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, from which this is translated, was itself a translation of the Italian text.

revealed in *Ladri di Biciclette* to such an extent that the film seems to include all the efforts that went into the making of its predecessors.

But can one judge a director by a single film? This film is sufficient proof of the genius of De Sica, but not of the future forms that this genius will take. As an actor, De Sica is no newcomer to the cinema, but one must still call him "young" as a director—a director of the future. In spite of the resemblances we will observe between them, *Miracolo a Milano* differs greatly in inspiration and structure from *Ladri di Biciclette*. What will his next film be? Will it reveal trends that appear only of minor importance in the previous works? In short, we are undertaking to speak of the style of a director of the first order on the basis of just two films—one of which seems to conflict with the orientation of the other. This is all right if one does not confuse the role of a critic with that of a prophet. I have no trouble explaining why I admire *Ladri* and *Miracolo* but that is something very different from pretending to deduce from these two films what are the permanent and definitive characteristics of their maker's talent.

All the same we would willingly have done that for Rossellini after *Roma Città Aperta* and *Paisà*. What we would have been able to say (and what we actually wrote in France) ran the risk of being modified by Rossellini's subsequent films, but not of being given the lie. The style of Rossellini belongs to a different aesthetic family. The rules of its aesthetics are plain to see. It fits a vision of the world directly adapted to a framework of *mise en scène*. Rossellini's style is a way of seeing, while de Sica's is primarily a way of feeling. The *mise en scène* of the former lays siege to its object from outside. I do not mean without understanding and feeling—but that this exterior approach offers us an essential ethical and meta-physical aspect of our relations with the world. In order to understand this statement one need only compare the treatment of the child in *Alla mano Arno Zero* and in *Sciuscià* and *Ladri di Biciclette*.

Rossellini's love for his characters envelops them in a desperate awareness of man's inability to communicate; De Sica's love, on the contrary, radiates from the people themselves. They are what they are, but lit from within by the tenderness he feels for them. It follows that Rossellini's

direction comes between his material and us, not as an artificial obstacle set up between the two, but as an unbridgeable, ontological distance, a congenital weakness of the human being which expresses itself aesthetically in terms of space, in forms, in the structure of his *mise-en-scène*. Because we are aware of it as a lack, a refusal, an escape from things, and hence finally as a kind of pain, it follows that it is easier for us to be aware of it, easier for us to reduce it to a formal method. Rossellini cannot alter this without himself passing through a personal moral revolution.

By contrast, De Sica is one of those directors whose sole purpose seems to be to interpret their scenarios faithfully, whose entire talent derives from the love they have for their subject, from their ultimate understanding of it. The *mise-en-scène* seems to take shape after the fashion of a natural form in living matter. Despite a different kind of sensibility and a marked concern for form, Jacques Feyder in France also belongs to this family of directors whose one method of work seems to be to treat their subject honestly. This neutrality is illusory but its apparent existence does not make the critic's task any easier. It divides up the output of the film maker into so many special cases that, given one more film, all that has preceded it might be called into question. It is a temptation therefore to see only craftsmanship where one is looking for style, the generous humility of a clever technician meeting the demands of the subject instead of the creative imprint of a true *auteur*.

The *mise-en-scène* of a Rossellini film can be readily deduced from the images he uses, whereas De Sica forces us to arrive at his *mise-en-scène* inductively from a visual narrative which does not seem to admit of it. Finally and above all, the case of De Sica is up to now inseparable from his collaboration with Zavattini, even more than is that of Marcel Carné in France with Jacques Prévert. There is no more perfect example in the history of the cinema of a symbiosis of screen writer and director. The fact that Zavattini collaborates with others, while Prévert has written few stories or scripts for anyone but Carné, makes no difference. On the contrary, what it allows us to conclude is that De Sica is the ideal director for Zavattini, the one who understands him best and most intimately. We have examples of the work of Zavattini without De Sica, but nothing of

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De Sica without Zavattini. We are therefore undertaking arbitrarily to distinguish that which truly belongs to De Sica and all the more arbitrarily because we have just referred to his at least apparent humility in the face of the demands of the scenario.

We must likewise refuse to separate, as something against nature, what talent has so closely joined. May De Sica and Zavattini forgive us—and, in advance, the reader, who can have no interest in my scruples and who is waiting for me to get on with my task. I would like it understood, however, for my own peace of mind, that I aim only to attempt a few critical statements which the future will doubtless call into question; they are simply the personal testimony of a French critic writing in 1951 about work full of promise, the qualities of which are particularly resistant to aesthetic analysis. This profession of humility is in no sense just an oratorical precaution or a rhetorical formula. I beg the reader to believe that it is first and foremost the measure of my admiration.

It is by way of its poetry that the realism of De Sica takes on its meaning, for in art, at the source of all realism, there is an aesthetic paradox that must be resolved. The faithful reproduction of reality is not art. We are repeatedly told that it consists in selection and interpretation. That is why up to now the "realist" trends in cinema, as in other arts, consisted simply in introducing a greater measure of reality into the work: but this additional measure of reality was still only an effective way of serving an abstract purpose, whether dramatic, moral, or ideological. In France, "naturalism" goes hand in hand with the multiplication of novels and plays *à thèse*. The originality of Italian neorealism as compared with the chief schools of realism that preceded it and with the Soviet cinema, lies in never making reality the servant of some *à priori* point of view. Even the Dziga-Vertov theory of the "Kino-eye" only employed the crude reality of everyday events so as to give it a place on the dialectic spectrum of montage. From another point of view, theater (even realist theater) used reality in the service of dramatic and spectacular structure. Whether in the service of the interests of an ideological thesis, of a moral idea, or of a dramatic action, realism subordinates what it borrows from reality to its transcendent needs. Neorealism knows only immanence. It is from ap-

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pearance only, the simple appearance of beings and of the world, that it knows how to deduce the ideas that it unearths. It is a phenomenology.

In the realm of means of expression, neorealism runs counter to the traditional categories of spectacle—above all, as regards acting. According to the classic understanding of this function, inherited from the theater, the actor expresses something: a feeling, a passion, a desire, an idea. From his attitude and his miming the spectator can read his face like an open book. In this perspective, it is agreed implicitly between spectator and actor that the same psychological causes produce the same physical effect and that one can without any ambiguity pass backwards and forwards from one to the other. This is, strictly speaking, what is called acting.

The structures of the *mise-en-scène* flow from it: decor, lighting, the angle and framing of the shots, will be more or less expressionistic in their relation to the behavior of the actor. They contribute for their part to confirm the meaning of the action. Finally, the breaking up of the scenes into shots and their assemblage is the equivalent of an expressionism in time, a reconstruction of the event according to an artificial and abstract duration: dramatic duration. There is not a single one of these commonly accepted assumptions of the film spectacle that is not challenged by neorealism.

First, the performance: it calls upon the actor to be before expressing himself. This requirement does not necessarily imply doing away with the professional actor but it normally tends to substitute the man in the street, chosen uniquely for his general comportment, his ignorance of theatrical technique being less a positively required condition than a guarantee against the expressionism of traditional acting. For De Sica, Bruno was a silhouette, a face, a way of walking.

Second, the setting and the photography: the natural setting is to the artificial set what the amateur actor is to the professional. It has, however, the effect of at least partly limiting the opportunity for plastic compositions available with artificial studio lighting.

But it is perhaps especially the structure of the narrative which is most radically turned upside down. It must now respect the actual duration of the event. The cuts that logic demands can only be, at best, descrip-

tive. The assemblage of the film must never add anything to the existing reality. If it is part of the meaning of the film as with Rossellini, it is because the empty gaps, the white spaces, the parts of the event that we are not given, are themselves of a concrete nature: stones which are missing from the building. It is the same in life: we do not know everything that happens to others. Ellipsis in classic montage is an effect of style. In Rossellini's films it is a lacuna in reality, or rather in the knowledge we have of it, which is by its nature limited.

Thus, neorealism is more an ontological position than an aesthetic one. That is why the employment of its technical attributes like a recipe do not necessarily produce it, as the rapid decline of American neorealism proves. In Italy itself not all films without actors, based on a news item, and filmed in real exteriors, are better than the traditional melodramas and spectacles. On the contrary, a film like *Cronaca di un Amore* by Michelangelo Antonioni can be described as neorealist (in spite of the professional actors, of the detective-story-like arbitrariness of the plot, of expensive settings, and the baroque dress of the heroine) because the director has not relied on an expressionism outside the characters; he builds all his effects on their way of life, their way of crying, of walking, of laughing. They are caught in the maze of the plot like laboratory rats being sent through a labyrinth.

The diversity of styles among the best Italian directors might be advanced as a counter argument and I know how much they dislike the word neorealist. Zavattini is the only one who shamelessly admits to the title. The majority protest against the existence of a new Italian school of realism that would include them all. But that is a reflex reaction of the creator to the critic. The director as artist is more aware of his differences than his resemblances. The word neorealist was thrown like a fishing net over the postwar Italian cinema and each director on his own is doing his best to break the toils in which, it is claimed, he has been caught. However, in spite of this normal reaction, which has the added advantage of forcing us to review a perhaps too easy critical classification, I think there are good reasons for staying with it, even against the views of those most concerned.

Certainly the succinct definition I have just given of neorealism might appear on the surface to be given the lie by the work of Latuada with its

calculated, subtly architectural vision, or by the baroque exuberance, the romantic eloquence of De Santis, or by the refined theatrical sense of Visconti, who makes compositions of the most down-to-earth reality as if they were scenes from an opera or a classical tragedy. These terms are summary and debatable, but can serve for other possible epithets which consequently would confirm the existence of formal differences, of positions in style. These three directors are as different from one another as each is from De Sica, yet their common origin is evident if one takes a more general view and especially if one stops comparing them with one another and instead looks at the American, French, and Soviet cinema. Neorealism does not necessarily exist in a pure state and one can conceive of it being combined with other aesthetic tendencies. Biologists distinguish, in genetics, characteristics derived from different parents, so-called dominant factors. It is the same with neorealism. The exacerbated theatricality of Malaparte's *Cristo Proibito* may owe a lot to German expressionism, but the film is nonetheless neorealist, radically different from the realist expressionism of a Fritz Lang.

But I seem to have strayed a long way from De Sica. This was simply that I might be better able to situate him in contemporary Italian production. The difficulty of faking a critical stand about the director of *Miracolo a Milano* might indeed be precisely the real indication of his style. Does not our inability to analyze its formal characteristics derive from the fact that it represents the purest form of neorealism, from the fact that *Ladri di Biciclette* is the ideal center around which gravitate, each in his own orbit, the works of the other great directors? It could be this very purity which makes it impossible to define, for it has as its paradoxical intention not to produce a spectacle which appears real, but rather to turn reality into a spectacle: a man is walking along the street and the onlooker is amazed at the beauty of the man walking.

Until further information is available, until the realization of Zavattini's dream of filming eighty minutes in the life of a man without a cut, *Ladri di Biciclette* is without a doubt the ultimate expression of neorealism.*

* Cf. note on *Umberto D* at the end of this chapter.

Though this *mise-en-scène* aims at negating itself, at being transparent to the reality it reveals, it would be naïve to conclude that it does not exist. Few films have been more carefully put together, more pondered over, more meticulously elaborated, but all this labor by De Sica tends to give the illusion of chance, to result in giving dramatic necessity the character of something contingent. Better still, he has succeeded in making dramatic contingency the very stuff of drama. Nothing happens in *Ladri di Biciclette* that might just as well not have happened. The worker could have chanced upon his bicycle in the middle of the film, the lights in the auditorium would have gone up and De Sica would have apologized for having disturbed us, but after all, we would be happy for the worker's sake. The marvelous aesthetic paradox of this film is that it has the relentless quality of tragedy while nothing happens in it except by chance. But it is precisely from the dialectical synthesis of contrary values, namely artistic order and the amorphous disorder of reality, that it derives its originality. There is not one image that is not charged with meaning, that does not drive home into the mind the sharp end of an unforgettable moral truth, and not one that to this end is false to the ontological ambiguity of reality. Not one gesture, not one incident, not a single object in the film is given a prior significance derived from the ideology of the director.

If they are set in order with an undeniable clarity on the spectrum of social tragedy, it is after the manner of the particles of iron filings on the spectrum of a magnet—that is to say, individually; but the result of this art in which nothing is necessary, where nothing has lost the fortuitous character of chance, is in effect to be doubly convincing and conclusive. For, after all, it is not surprising that the novelist, the playwright, or the film maker should make it possible for us to hit on this or that idea, since they put them there beforehand, and have seeded their work with them. Put salt into water, let the water evaporate in the fire of reflection, and you will get back the salt. But if you find salt in water drawn directly from a stream, it is because the water is salty by nature. The workman, Bruno, might have found his bike just as he might have won in the lottery—even poor people win lotteries. But this potential capacity only serves to bring out more forcefully the terrible powerlessness of the poor fellow. If he

found his bike, then the enormous extent of his good luck would be an even greater condemnation of society, since it would make a priceless miracle, an exorbitant favor, out of the return to a human order, to a natural state of happiness, since it would signify his good fortune at not still being poor.

It is clear to what an extent this neorealism differs from the formal concept which consists of decking out a formal story with touches of reality. As for the technique, properly so called, *Ladri di Biciclette*, like a lot of other films, was shot in the street with nonprofessional actors but its true merit lies elsewhere: in not betraying the essence of things, in allowing them first of all to exist for their own sakes, freely; it is in loving them in their singular individuality. "My little sister reality," says De Sica, and she circles about him like the birds around Saint Francis. Others put her in a cage or teach her to talk, but De Sica talks with her and it is the true language of reality that we hear, the world that cannot be denied, that only love can utter.

To explain De Sica, we must go back to the source of his art, namely to his tenderness, his love. The quality shared in common by *Miracolo a Milano* and *Ladri di Biciclette*, in spite of differences more apparent than real, is De Sica's inexhaustible affection for his characters. It is significant then in *Miracolo a Milano*, that none of the bad people, even the proud or treacherous ones, are antipathetic. The junkyard Judas who sells his companions' hovel to the vulgar Mobbi does not stir the least anger in the onlookers. Rather would he amuse us in the tawdry costume of the "villain" of melodrama, which he wears awkwardly and clumsily: he is a good traitor. In the same way the new poor, who in their decline still retain the proud ways of their former fine neighborhoods, are simply a special variety of that human fauna and are not therefore excluded from the vagabond community—even if they charge people a lira a sunset. And a man must love the sunset with all his heart to come up with the idea of making people pay for the sight of it, and to suffer this market of dupes.

Besides, none of the principal characters in *Ladri di Biciclette* is unsympathetic. Not even the thief. When Bruno finally manages to get his hands on him, the public would be morally disposed to lynch him, as the

crowd could have done earlier to Bruno. But the spark of genius in this film is to force us to swallow this hatred the moment it is born and to renounce judgment, just as Bruno will refuse to bring charges.

The only unsympathetic characters in *Miracolo a Milano* are Mobbi and his acolytes, but basically they do not exist. They are only conventional symbols. The moment De Sica shows them to us at slightly closer quarters, we almost feel a tender curiosity stirring inside us. "Poor rich people," we are tempted to say, "how deceived they are." There are many ways of loving, even including the way of the inquisitor. The ethics and politics of love are threatened by the worst heresies. From this point of view, hate is often more tender, but the affection De Sica feels for his creatures is no threat to them, there is nothing threatening or abusive about it. It is courtly and discreet gentleness, a liberal generosity, and it demands nothing in return. There is no admixture of pity in it even for the poorest or the most wretched, because pity does violence to the dignity of the man who is its object. It is a burden on his conscience.

The tenderness of De Sica is of a special kind and for this reason does not easily lend itself to any moral, religious, or political generalization. The ambiguities of *Miracolo a Milano* and *Ladri di Biciclette* have been used by the Christian Democrats and by the Communists. So much the better: a true parable should have something for everyone. I do not think De Sica and Zavattini were trying to argue anybody out of anything. I would not dream of saying that the kindness of De Sica is of greater value than the third theological virtue* or than class consciousness, but I see in the modesty of his position a definite artistic advantage. It is a guarantee of its authenticity while, at the same time, assuring it a universal quality. This penchant for love is less a moral question than one of personal and ethnic temperament. As for its authenticity, this can be explained in terms of a naturally happy disposition developed in a Neapolitan atmosphere. But these psychological roots reach down to deeper layers than the consciousness cultivated by partisan ideologies. Paradoxically and in virtue of their unique quality, of their inimitable flavor, since they have not been classi-

* The three theological virtues are faith, hope and charity.—TK.

fied in the categories of either morals or politics, they escape the latter's censure, and the Neapolitan charm of De Sica becomes, thanks to the cinema, the most sweeping message of love that our times have heard since Chaplin.

To anyone who doubted the importance of this, it is enough to point out how quick partisan critics were to lay claim to it. What party indeed could afford to leave love to the other? In our day there is no longer a place for unattached love but since each party can with equal plausibility lay claim to being the proprietor of it, it means that much authentic and naïve love scales the walls and penetrates the stronghold of ideologies and social theory.

Let us be thankful to Zavattini and De Sica for the ambiguity of their position—and let us take care not to see it as just intellectual astuteness in the land of Don Camillo, a completely negative concern to give pledges on all sides in return for an all-around censorship clearance. On the contrary it is a positive striving after poetry, the stratagem of a person in love, expressing himself in the metaphors of his time, while at the same time making sure to choose such of them as will open the hearts of everyone. The reason why there have been so many attempts to give a political exegesis to *Miracolo a Milano* is that Zavattini's social allegories are not the final examples of this symbolism, these symbols themselves being simply the allegory of love. Psychoanalysts explain to us that our dreams are the very opposite of a free flow of images. When these express some fundamental desire, it is in order perforce to cross the threshold of the super-ego, hiding behind the mark of a two-fold symbolism, one general, the other individual. But this censorship is not something negative. Without it, without the resistance it offers to the imagination, dreams would not exist.

There is only one way to think of *Miracolo a Milano*, namely as a reflection, on the level of a film dream, and through the medium of the social symbolism of contemporary Italy, of the warm heart of Vittorio De Sica. This would explain what seems bizarre and inorganic in this strange film: otherwise it is hard to understand the gaps in its dramatic continuity and its indifference to all narrative logic.

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In passing, we might note how much the cinema owes to a love for living creatures. There is no way of completely understanding the art of Flaherty, Renoir, Vigo, and especially Chaplin unless we try to discover beforehand what particular kind of tenderness, of sensual or sentimental affection, they reflect. In my opinion, the cinema more than any other art is particularly bound up with love. The novelist in his relations to his characters needs intelligence more than love; understanding is his form of loving. If the art of a Chaplin were transposed into literature, it would tend to lapse into sentimentality; that is why a man like André Suarès, a man of letters *par excellence*, and evidently impervious to the poetry of the cinema, can talk about the "ignoble heart" of Chaplin when this heart brings to the cinema the nobility of myth. Every art and every stage in the evolution of each art has its specific scale of values. The tender, amused sensuality of Renoir, the more heart-rending tenderness of Vigo, achieve on the screen a tone and an accent which no other medium of expression could give them. Between such feelings and the cinema there exists a mysterious affinity which is sometimes denied even to the greatest of men. No one better than De Sica can lay claim to being the successor to Chaplin. We have already remarked how as an actor he has a quality of presence, a light which subtly transforms both the scenario and the other actors to such an extent that no one can pretend to play opposite De Sica as he would oppose someone else. We in France have not hitherto known the brilliant actor who appeared in Camerini's films. He had to become famous as a director before he was noticed by the public. By then he no longer had the physique of a young leading man, but his charm survived, the more remarkable for being the less easy to explain. Even when appearing as just a simple actor in the films of other directors, De Sica was already himself a director since his presence modified the film and influenced its style. Chaplin concentrates on himself and within himself the radiation of his tenderness, which means that cruelty is not always excluded from his world; on the contrary, it has a necessary and dialectic relationship to love, as is evident from *Monsieur Verdoux*. Charlie is goodness itself, projected onto the world. He is ready to love everything, but the world does not always respond. On the other hand, De Sica the director infuses into his

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actors the power to love that he himself possesses as an actor. Chaplin also chooses his cast carefully but always with an eye to himself and to putting his character in a better light. We find in De Sica the humanity of Chaplin, but shared with the world at large. De Sica possesses the gift of being able to convey an intense sense of the human presence, a disarming grace of expression and of gesture which, in their unique way, are an irresistible testimony to man. Ricci (*Ladri di Biciclette*), Toto (*Miracolo a Milano*), and *Umberto D*, although greatly differing in physique from Chaplin and De Sica, make us think of them.

It would be a mistake to believe that the love De Sica bears for man, and forces us to bear witness to, is a form of optimism. If no one is really bad, if face to face with each individual human being we are forced to drop our accusation, as was Ricci when he caught up with the thief, we are obliged to say that the evil which undeniably does exist in the world is elsewhere than in the heart of man, that it is somewhere in the order of things. One could say it is in society and be partly right. In one way *Ladri di Biciclette*, *Miracolo a Milano*, and *Umberto D* are indictments of a revolutionary nature. If there were no unemployment it would not be a tragedy to lose one's bicycle. However, this political explanation does not cover the whole drama. De Sica protests the comparison that has been made between *Ladri di Biciclette* and the works of Kafka on the grounds that his hero's alienation is social and not metaphysical. True enough, but Kafka's myths are no less valid if one accepts them as allegories of social alienation, and one does not have to believe in a cruel God to feel the guilt of which Joseph K. is culpable. On the contrary, the drama lies in this: God does not exist, the last office in the castle is empty. Perhaps we have here the particular tragedy of today's world, the raising of a self-deifying social reality to a transcendental state.

The troubles of Bruno and Umberto D have their immediate and evident causes but we also observe that there is an insoluble residue comprised of the psychological and material complexities of our social relationships, which neither the high quality of an institution nor the good will of our neighbors can dispose of. The nature of the latter is positive and social, but

its action proceeds always from a necessity that is at once absurd and imperative. This is, in my opinion, what makes this film so great and so rich. It renders a two-fold justice: one by way of an irrefutable description of the wretched condition of the proletariat, another by way of the implicit and constant appeal of a human need that any society whatsoever must respect. It condemns a world in which the poor are obliged to steal from one another to survive (the police protect the rich only too well) but this imposed condemnation is not enough, because it is not only a given historical institution that is in question or a particular economic setup, but the congenital indifference of our social organization, as such, to the fortuitousness of individual happiness. Otherwise Sweden could be the earthly paradise, where bikes are left along the sidewalk both day and night. De Sica loves mankind, his brothers, too much not to want to remove every conceivable cause of their unhappiness, but he also reminds us that every man's happiness is a miracle of love whether in Milan or anywhere else. A society which does not take every opportunity to smother happiness is already better than one which sows hate, but the most perfect still would not create love, for love remains a private matter between man and man. In what country in the world would they keep rabbit hutches in an oil field? In what other would the loss of an administrative document not be as agonizing as the theft of a bicycle? It is part of the realm of politics to think up and promote the objective conditions necessary for human happiness, but it is not part of its essential function to respect its subjective conditions. In the universe of De Sica, there lies a latent pessimism, an unavoidable pessimism we can never be grateful enough to him for, because in it resides the appeal of the potential of man, the witness to his final and irrefutable humanity.

I have used the word love. I should rather have said poetry. These two words are synonymous or at least complementary. Poetry is but the active and creative form of love, its projection into the world. Although spoiled and laid waste by social upheaval, the childhood of the shoeshine boy has retained the power to transform his wretchedness in a dream. In France, in the primary schools, the children are taught to say "Who steals an egg,

steals a bull." De Sica's formula is "Who steals an egg is dreaming of a horse." Toto's miraculous gift which was handed on to him by his adopted grandmother is to have retained from childhood an inexhaustible capacity for defense by way of poetry; the piece of business I find most significant in *Miracolo a Milano* is that of Emma Gramatica rushing toward the spilled milk. It does not matter who else scolds Toto for his lack of initiative and wipes up the milk with a cloth, so long as the quick gesture of the old woman has as its purpose to turn the little catastrophe into a marvelous game, a stream in the middle of a landscape of the same proportion. And so on to the multiplication tables, another profound terror of one's childhood, which, thanks to the little old woman, turns into a dream. City dweller Toto names the streets and the squares "four times four is sixteen" or "nine times nine is eighty-one," for these cold mathematical symbols are more beautiful in his eyes than the names of the characters of mythology. Here again we think of Charlie; he also owes to his childhood spirit his remarkable power of transforming the world to a better purpose. When reality resists him and he cannot materially change it—he switches its meaning. Take for example, the dance of the rolls, in *The Gold Rush*, or the shoes in the soup pot, with this proviso that, always on the defensive, Charlie reserves his power of metamorphosis for his own advantage, or, at most, for the benefit of the woman he loves. Toto on the other hand goes out to others. He does not give a moment's thought to any benefit the dove can bring him, his joy lies in his being able to spread joy. When he can no longer do anything for his neighbor he takes it on himself to assume various shapes, now limping for the lame man, making himself small for the dwarf, blind for the one-eyed man. The dove is just an arbitrarily added possibility, to give poetry a material form, because most people need something to assist their imaginations. But Toto does not know what to do with himself unless it is for someone else's benefit.

Zavattini told me once: "I am like a painter standing before a field, who asks himself which blade of grass he should begin with." De Sica is the ideal director for a declaration of faith such as this. There is also the art of the playwright who divides the moments of life into episodes which, in

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respect of the moments lived, are what the blades of grass are to the field. To paint every blade of grass one must be the Donatier Rousseau. In the world of cinema one must have the love of a De Sica for creation itself.

A Note on Umberto D

Until I saw *Umberto D*, I considered *Ladri di Biciclette* as having reached the uttermost limits of neorealism so far as the concept of narrative is concerned. It seems to me today that *Ladri di Biciclette* falls far short of the ideal Zavattini subject. Not that I consider *Umberto D* superior. The unmatched superiority of *Ladri di Biciclette* still resides in the paradox of its having reconciled radically opposite values: factual freedom and narrative discipline. But the authors only achieve this by sacrificing the continuum of reality. In *Umberto D* one catches a glimpse, on a number of occasions, of what a truly realist cinema of time could be, a cinema of "duration."

These experiments in continuous time are not new in cinema. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, for example, runs for eighty uninterrupted minutes. But there it was just a question of action such as we have in the theater. The real problem is not the continuity of the exposed film but the temporal structure of the incident.

Rope could be filmed without a change of focus, without any break in the shots, and still provide a dramatic spectacle, because in the original play the incidents were already set in order dramatically according to an artificial time—theatrical time—just as there is musical time and dance time.

In at least two scenes of *Umberto D* the problem of subject and script take on a different aspect. In these instances it is a matter of making "life time"—the simple continuing to be of a person to whom nothing in particular happens—take on the quality of a spectacle, of a drama. I am thinking in particular of when Umberto D goes to bed, having retired to his room thinking he has a fever and, especially, of the little servant girl's awakening

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in the morning. These two sequences undoubtedly constitute the ultimate in "performance" of a certain kind of cinema, at the level of what one would call "the invisible subject," by which I mean the subject entirely dissolved in the fact to which it has given rise; while when a film is taken from a story, the latter continues to survive by itself like a skeleton without its muscles; one can always "tell" the story of the film.

The function of the subject is here no less essential than the story but its essence is reabsorbed into the scenario. To put it another way, the subject exists before the working scenario, but it does not exist afterward. Only the "fact" exists which the subject had itself forecast. If I try to recount the film to someone who has not seen it—for example what Umberto D is doing in his room or the little servant Maria in the kitchen, what is there left for me to describe? An impalpable show of gestures without meaning, from which the person I am talking to cannot derive the slightest idea of the emotion that gripped the viewer. The subject here is sacrificed beforehand, like the wax in the casting of the bronze.

At the scenario level this type of subject corresponds, reciprocally, to the scenario based entirely on the behavior of the actor. Since the real time of the narrative is not that of the drama but the concrete duration of the character, this objectiveness can only be transformed into a *mise en scène* (scenario and action) in terms of something totally subjective. I mean by this that the film is identical with what the actor is doing and with this alone. The outside world is reduced to being an accessory to this pure action, which is sufficient to itself in the same way that algae deprived of air produce the oxygen they need. The actor who gives a representation of a particular action, who "interprets a part" always, in a measure, directs himself because he is calling more or less on a system of generally accepted dramatic conventions which are learned in conservatories. Not even these conventions are any help to him here. He is entirely in the hands of the director in this complete replica of life.

True, *Umberto D* is not a perfect film like *Ladri di Biciclette*, but this is perhaps understandable since its ambition was greater. Less perfect in its entirety but certainly more perfect and more unalloyed in some of its parts—those in which De Sica and Zavattini exhibit complete fidelity to

the aesthetic of neorealism. That is why one must not accuse *Umberto D* of facile sentimentality, some measure of modest appeal to social pity. The good qualities and even, for that matter, the defects of the film are far beyond any categories of morality or politics. We are dealing here with a cinematographic "report," a disconcerting and irrefutable observation on the human condition. One may or may not find it to one's taste that this report should be made on the life of a minor functionary boarding with a family or on a little pregnant servant; but, certainly, what we have just learned about this old man and this girl as revealed through their accidental misfortunes above all concerns the human condition. I have no hesitation in stating that the cinema has rarely gone such a long way toward making us aware of what it is to be a man. (And also, for that matter, of what it is to be a dog.)

Hitherto dramatic literature has provided us with a doubtless exact knowledge of the human soul, but one which stands in the same relation to man as classical physics to matter—what scientists call macrophysics, useful only for phenomena of considerable magnitude. And certainly the novel has gone to extremes in categorizing this knowledge. The emotional physics of a Proust is microscopic. But the matter with which this microphysics is concerned is on the inside. It is memory. The cinema is not necessarily a substitute for the novel in this search after man, but it has at least one advantage over it, namely, that it presents man only in the present—to the "time lost and found" of Proust there corresponds in a measure the "time discovered" of Zavattini; this is, in the contemporary cinema, something like Proust in the present indicative tense.

UMBERTO D: A GREAT WORK

MIRACOLO IN MILANO created only discord. In the absence of the general enthusiasm that greeted *Ladri di Biciclette* the originality of the scenario, the mixture of the fantastic and the commonplace, and the penchant of our time for political cryptography stirred up around this strange film a sort of *succès de scandale* (which Micheline Vian has debunked with relentless humor in an excellent article published in *Les Temps modernes*).

A conspiracy of silence, a sullen and obstinate reticence, is building up against *Umberto D* and as a result even the good that has been written about it seems to condemn the film with faint praise; though it is a kind of mute ill humor or even contempt (to which no one is prepared to admit in view of the illustrious past of its makers) that in secret animates the hostility of more than one critic. There will certainly be no "Battle of *Umberto D*."

And yet it is one of the most revolutionary and courageous films of the last two years—not only of the Italian cinema but of European cinema as a whole, a masterpiece to which film history is certainly going to grant a place of honor, even if for the moment an inexplicable failure of attention or a certain blindness on the part of those who love the cinema allows it only a reluctant and ineffective esteem.

If there are lines outside theaters showing *Adorables créatures* or *Le Fruit défendu*, it is perhaps in part because the brothels have been closed;

all the same, there should be a few tens of thousands of people in Paris who expect other pleasures from film.

For the Paris public to be properly shamed, must *Umberto D* leave the marquees before it has had the kind of run it deserves?

The chief reason for the misunderstandings that have arisen about *Umberto D* lies in comparing it with *Ladri di Biciclette*. Some will say, with some semblance of reason that De Sica "returns to neorealism" here, after the poetico-realist interlude of *Miracolo in Milano*. This is true, but only if one hastens to add that the perfection of *Ladri di Biciclette* was only a beginning, though it was first regarded as a culmination. It took *Umberto D* to make us understand what it was in the realism of *Ladri di Biciclette* that was still a concession to classical dramaturgy. Consequently what is so unsettling about *Umberto D* is primarily the way it rejects any relationship to traditional film spectacle.

Of course, if we take just the theme of the film we can reduce it to a seemingly "populist" melodrama with social pretensions, an appeal on behalf of the middle class: a retired minor official reduced to penury decides against suicide because he can neither find someone to take care of his dog nor pluck up enough courage to kill it before he kills himself. This final episode is not the moving conclusion to a dramatic series of events. If the classical concept of "construction" still has some meaning here, the sequence of events which De Sica reports obeys a necessity that has nothing to do with dramatic structure. What kind of causal relationship could you establish between a harmless angina for which *Umberto D* will be treated in hospital, his landlady's turning him out on the street, and his thinking of suicide? The notice to vacate was served irrespective of the angina. A "dramatic author" would have made the angina acute in order to establish a logical and a pathetic relationship between the two things. Here, on the contrary, the period in hospital is in effect hardly justified by the real state of *Umberto D*'s health; rather than making us pity him for his unhappy lot, it is really a rather cheerful episode. That is not where the question lies, though. It is not his real poverty that moves *Umberto D* to despair, though it is in a very real sense a contributing factor, but only in the degree that it shows him just how lonely he is. The

few things which *Umberto D* must rely on others to do for him are all it takes to alienate his few human contacts. To the extent that it is indeed the middle class that is involved, the film reports the secret misery, the egoism, the lack of fellow-feeling which characterizes its members. Its protagonist advances step by step further into his solitude: the person closest to him, the only one to show him any tenderness, is his landlady's little maid, but her kindness and her goodwill cannot prevail over her worries as an unwed mother-to-be. Through his one friendship, then, there runs the motif of despair.

But here I am now lapsing back into traditional critical concepts, though I am talking about a film whose originality I set out to prove.

If one assumes some distance from the story and can still see in it a dramatic patterning, some general development in character, a single general trend in its component events, this is only after the fact. The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis. One wonderful sequence—it will remain one of the high points of film—is a perfect illustration of this approach to narrative and thus to direction: the scene in which the maid gets up. The camera confines itself to watching her doing her little chores: moving around the kitchen still half asleep, drowning the ants that have invaded the sink, grinding the coffee. The cinema here is conceived as the exact opposite of that "art of ellipsis" to which we are much too ready to believe it devoted. Ellipsis is a narrative process; it is logical in nature and so it is abstract as well; it presupposes analysis and choice; it organizes the facts in accord with the general dramatic direction to which it forces them to submit. On the contrary, De Sica and Zavattini attempt to divide the event up into still smaller events and these into events smaller still, to the extreme limits of our capacity to perceive them in time. Thus, the unit event in a classical film would be "the maid's getting out of bed"; two or three brief shots would suffice to show this. De Sica replaces this narrative unit with a series of "smaller" events: she wakes up; she crosses the hall; she drowns the ants; and so on. But let us examine just one of

these. We see how the grinding of the coffee is divided in turn into a series of independent moments; for example, when she shuts the door with the tip of her outstretched foot. As it goes in on her the camera follows the movement of her leg so that the image finally concentrates on her toes feeling the surface of the door. Have I already said that it is Zavattini's dream to make a whole film out of ninety minutes in the life of a man to whom nothing happens? That is precisely what "neorealism" means for him. Two or three sequences in *Umberto D* give us more than a glimpse of what such a film might be like; they are fragments of it that have already been shot. But let us make no mistake about the meaning and the value realism has here. De Sica and Zavattini are concerned to make cinema the asymptote of reality—but in order that it should ultimately be life itself that becomes spectacle, in order that life might in this perfect mirror be visible poetry, be the self into which film finally changes it.*

* "Telle qu'en elle-même, enfin, le cinéma la change." Bazin here rewrites the first line of Mallarmé's famous sonnet *Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*, "Tel qu'en lui-même, enfin, l'éternité le change."

CABIRIA: THE VOYAGE TO THE END OF NEOREALISM

AS I SIT DOWN to write this article, I have no idea what kind of reception Fellini's latest film will have. I hope it is as enthusiastic as I think it should be, but I do not conceal from myself the fact that there are two categories of viewers who may have reservations about the film. The first is that segment of the general public likely to be put off by the way the story mixes the strange with what seems to be an almost melodramatic naïveté. These people can accept the theme of the whore with a heart of gold only if it is spiced with crime. The second belongs, albeit reluctantly, to that part of the "élite" which supports Fellini almost in spite of itself. Constrained to admire *La Strada* and under even more constraint from its austerity and its "outcast" status to admire *Il Bidone*, I expect these viewers now to criticize *Le Notte di Cabiria* for being "too well made"—a film in which practically nothing is left to chance, a film that is clever—artful even. Let's forget the first objection; it is important only in the effect it may have at the box office. The second, however, is worth refuting.

The least surprising thing about *Le Notte di Cabiria* is not that this is the first time Fellini has succeeded in putting together a masterly script, with an action that cannot be faulted—unmarred by clichés or missing links, one in which there could be no place for the unhappy cuts and the cor-

rections in editing from which *La Strada* and *Il Bidone* suffered.* Of course, *Lo Sceicco bianco* and even *I Vitelloni* were not clumsy in their construction, but chiefly because, though their themes were specifically Fellinian, they were still being expressed within a framework provided by relatively traditional scenarios. Fellini has finally cast these crutches aside with *La Strada*: theme and character alone are the final determinants in the story now, to the exclusion of all else; story has nothing now to do with what one calls plot; I even have doubts that it is proper here to speak of "action." The same is true of *Il Bidone*.

It is not that Fellini would like to return to the excuses which drama affords him in his earlier films. Quite the contrary. *Le Notti di Cabiria* goes even beyond *Il Bidone*, but here the contradictions between what I will call the "verticality" of its author's themes and the "horizontal" of the requirements of narrative have been reconciled. It is within the Fellinian system that he now finds his solutions. This does not prevent the viewer from possibly mistaking brilliant perfection for mere facility, if not indeed for betrayal. All the same, on one score at least Fellini has deceived himself a little: is he not counting on the character played by François Perier (who to me seems miscast) to have a surprise effect? Now it is clear that any effect of "suspense" or even of "drama" is essentially alien to the Fellinian system, in which it is impossible for time ever to serve as an abstract or dynamic support—as an *a priori* framework for narrative structure. In *La Strada* as in *Il Bidone*, time is nothing more than the shapeless framework modified by fortuitous events which affect the fate of his heroes, though never in consequence of external necessity. Events do not "happen" in Fellini's world; they "befall" its inhabitants; that is to say, they occur as an effect of "vertical" gravity, not in conformity to the laws

* Alas, the facts give me the lie: the original-language version shown in Paris reveals the deletion of at least one long scene that was still in the film when it was shown at Cannes, namely the scene of "the visitor of Saint Vincent de Paul" to which I allude below. But then we have seen how easy it has been in the past to convince Fellini—if it is indeed he who is responsible for this cut—that a truly remarkable sequence is "useless." [The "visitor" is a member of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul founded in France in 1833 to care for the sick, the aged, the poor, and what were then known as "fallen women."—TR.]

of "horizontal" causality. As for the characters themselves, they exist and change only in reference to a purely internal kind of time—which I cannot qualify even as Bergsonian, in so far as Bergson's theory of the *Données immédiates de la conscience* contains a strong element of psychologism. Let us avoid the vague terms of a "spiritualizing" vocabulary. Let us not say that the transformation of the characters takes place at the level of the "soul." But it has at least to occur at that depth of their being into which consciousness only occasionally reaches down. This does not mean at the level of the unconscious or the subconscious but rather the level on which what Jean-Paul Sartre calls the "basic project" obtains, the level of ontology. Thus the Fellinian character does not evolve; he ripens or at the most becomes transformed (whence the metaphor of the angel's wings, to which I will shortly return).

A Spurious Melodrama

But let us confine ourselves, for the moment, to the structure of the script. I totally reject, then, the *coup de théâtre* in *Le Notti di Cabiria* which belatedly reveals Oscar a swindler. Fellini must have been aware of what he was doing because, as if to compound his sin, he makes François Perier wear dark glasses when he is about to turn "wicked." What of it? This is a minor concession indeed and I find it easy to pardon in view of the care Fellini now takes to avoid in this film the grave danger to which a complicated and much too facile shooting script exposed him in *Il Bidone*.

I find it all the more easy to pardon when it is the only concession he makes in this film: for the rest Fellini communicates the tension and the rigor of tragedy to it without ever having to fall back on devices alien to his universe. Cabiria, the little prostitute whose simple soul is rooted in hope, is not a character out of melodrama, because her desire to "get out" is not motivated by the ideals of bourgeois morality or a strictly bourgeois sociology. She does not hold her trade in contempt. As a matter of fact, if there

were such creatures as pure-hearted pimps capable of understanding her and of embodying not love indeed but just a belief in life, she would doubtless see no incompatibility between her secret hopes and her nighttime activities. Does she not owe one of her greatest moments of happiness—happiness followed consequently by an even more bitter deception—to her chance meeting with a famous film star who because he is drunk and feeling embittered against love proposes to take her home to his luxurious apartment. There was something to make the other girls just die of envy! But the incident is fated to come to a pitiful end, because after all a prostitute's trade commonly destines her only to disappointments; this is why she longs, more or less consciously, to get out of it through the impossible love of some stalwart fellow who will make no demands of her. If we seem now to have reached an outcome typical of bourgeois melodrama, it is in any case by a very different route.

Le Notte di Cabiria—like *La Strada*, like *Il Bidone*, and, in the final analysis, like *I Vitelloni*—is the story of *asceticism*, of renunciation, and, (nowever you choose to interpret the term) of salvation. The beauty and the rigor of its construction proceed this time from the perfect economy of its constituent episodes. Each of them, as I have said earlier, exists by and for itself, unique and colorful as an event, but now each belongs to an order of things that never fails to reveal itself in retrospect as having been absolutely necessary. As she goes from hope to hope, plumbing enroute the depths of betrayal, contempt, and poverty, Cabiria follows a path on which every halt readies her for the stage ahead. When one stops and reflects, one realizes that there is nothing in the film, before the meeting with the benefactor of the tramps (whose irruption into the film seems at first sight to be no more than a characteristic piece of Fellinian bravura), which is not proved subsequently to be necessary to trick Cabiria into making an act of ill-placed faith; for if such men do exist, then every miracle is possible and we, too, will be without mistrust when Perier appears.

I do not intend to repeat what has been written about Fellini's message. It has, anyway, been noticeably the same since *I Vitelloni*. This is not to be taken as a sign of sterility. On the contrary, while variety is the mark of a "director," it is unity of inspiration that connotes the true

"author." But in the light of this new masterpiece maybe I can still attempt to throw a little more light on what in essence is Fellini's style.

A Realism of Appearances

It is absurd, preposterous even, to deny him a place among the neo-realists. Such a judgment could only be possible on ideological grounds. It is true that Fellini's realism though social in origin is not social in intent. This remains as individual as it is in Chekhov or Dostoevsky. Realism, let me repeat, is to be defined not in terms of ends but of means, and neorealism by a specific kind of relationship of means to ends. What De Sica has in common with Rossellini and Fellini is obviously not the deep meaning of their films—even if, as it happens, these more or less coincide—but the pride of place they all give to the representation of reality at the expense of dramatic structures. To put it more precisely, the Italian cinema has replaced a "realism" deriving in point of content from the naturalism of novels and structurally from theater with what, for brevity's sake, we shall call "phenomenological" realism which never "adjusts" reality to meet the needs imposed by psychology or drama. The relation between meaning and appearance having been in a sense inverted, appearance is always presented as a unique discovery, an almost documentary revelation that retains its full force of vividness and detail. Whence the director's art lies in the skill with which he compels the event to reveal its meaning—or at least the meaning he lends it—without removing any of its ambiguity. * Thus defined, neorealism is not the exclusive property of any one ideology nor even of any one ideal, no more than it excludes any other ideal—no more, in point of fact, than reality excludes anything.

I even tend to view Fellini as the director who goes the farthest of any to date in this neorealist aesthetic, who goes even so far that he goes all the way through it and finds himself on the other side.

Let us consider how free Fellini's direction is from the encumbrances

* For Bazin's use of the term "ambiguity," see the Introduction.

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of psychological after-effects. His characters are never defined by their "character" but exclusively by their appearance. I deliberately avoid the word "behavior" because its meaning has become too restricted; the way people behave is only one element in the knowledge we have of them. We know them by many other signs, not only their faces, of course, but by the way they move, by everything that makes the body the outer shell of the inner man—even more, perhaps, by things still more external than these, things on the frontier between the individual and the world, things such as haircut, moustache, clothing, eye glasses (the one prop that Fellini has used to a point where it has become a gimmick). Then, beyond that again, setting, too, has a role to play—not, of course, in an expressionistic sense but rather as establishing a harmony or a disharmony between setting and character. I am thinking in particular of the extraordinary relationship established between Cabiria and the unaccustomed settings into which Nazziari inveigles her, the nightclub and the luxurious apartment.

On the Other Side of Things

But it is here that we reach the boundaries of realism, here, too, that Fellini, who drives on further still, takes us beyond them. It is a little as if, having been led to this degree of interest in appearances, we were now to see the characters no longer *among* the objects but, as if these had become transparent, *through* them. I mean by this that without our noticing the world has moved ~~from~~ meaning to analogy, then from analogy to identification with the supernatural. I apologize for this equivocal word; the reader may replace it with whatever he will—"poetry" or "surrealism" or "magic"—whatever the term that expresses the hidden accord which things maintain with an invisible counterpart of which they are, so to speak, merely the adumbration.

Let us take one example from among many others of this process of "supernaturalization," which is to be found in the metaphor of the angel. From his first films, Fellini has been haunted by the angelizing of his characters, as if the angelic state were the ultimate referent in his universe, the

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final measure of being. One can trace this tendency in its explicit development at least from *I Vitelloni* on: Sordi dresses up for the carnival as a guardian angel; a little later on what Fabrizio steals, as if by chance, is the carved wooden statue of an angel. But these allusions are direct and concrete. Subtler still, and all the more interesting because it seems unconscious, is the shot in which the monk who has come down from working in a tree loads a long string of little branches on his back. This detail is nothing more than a nice "realistic" touch for us, perhaps even for Fellini himself, until at the end of *Il Bidone* we see Antonio dying at the side of the road: in the white light of dawn he sees a procession of children and women bearing bundles of sticks on their backs: angels pass! I must note, too, how in the same film Picasso races down a street and the tails of his raincoat spread out behind him like little wings. It is that same Richard Basehart again who appears before Gelsomina as if he were weightless, a dazzling sight on his high wire under the spotlights.

There is no end to Fellini's symbolism. Certainly, it would be possible to study the whole body of his work from this one angle. * What needed to be done was simply to place it within the context of the logic of neorealism, for it is evident that these associations of objects and characters which constitute Fellini's universe derive their value and their importance from realism alone—or, to put it a better way, perhaps, from the objectivity with which they are recorded. It is not in order to look like an angel that the friar carries his bundles of sticks on his back, but it is enough to see the wing in the twigs for the old monk to be transformed into one. One might say that Fellini is not opposed to realism, any more than he is to neorealism, but rather that he achieves it surpassingly in a poetic reordering of the world.

A Revolution in Narrative

Fellini creates a similar revolution at the narrative level. From this point of view, to be sure, neorealism is also a revolution in form which comes to bear on content. For example, the priority which they accord incident

* See the article by Dominique Aubier in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 49.

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over plot has led De Sica and Zavattini to replace plot as such with a microaction based on an infinitely divisible attention to the complexities in even the most ordinary of events. This in itself rules out the slightest hierarchy, whether psychological, dramatic, or ideological, among the incidents that are portrayed. This does not mean, of course, that the director is obliged to renounce all choice over what he is to show us, but it does mean that he no longer makes the choice in reference to some pre-existing dramatic organization. In this new perspective, the important sequence can just as well be the long scene that "serves no purpose" by traditional screenplay standards.*

Nonetheless—this is true even of *Umberio D.*, which perhaps represents the limits of experimentation in this new dramaturgy—the evolution of film follows an invisible thread. Fellini, I think, brings the neorealist revolution to its point of perfection when he introduces a new kind of script, the scenario lacking any dramatic linking, based as it is, to the exclusion of all else, on the phenomenological description of the characters. In the films of Fellini, the scenes that establish the logical relations, the significant changes of fortune, the major points of dramatic articulation, only provide the continuity links, while the long descriptive sequences, seeming to exercise no effect on the unfolding of the "action," proper, constitute the truly important and revealing scenes. In *I Vitelloni*, these are the nocturnal walks, the senseless strolls on the beach; in *La Strada*, the visit to the convent; in *Il Bidone*, the evening at the nightclub or the New Year's celebration. It is not when they are doing something specific that Fellini's characters best reveal themselves to the viewer but by their endless milling around.

If there are, still, tensions and climaxes in the films of Fellini which leave nothing to be desired as regards drama or tragedy, it is because, in the absence of traditional dramatic causality, the incidents in his films develop effects of analogy and echo. Fellini's hero never reaches the final crisis (which destroys him and saves him) by a progressive dramatic linking but because the circumstances somehow or other affect him, build up in-

* This is true of the sequence that has been deleted from the film.

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side him like the vibrant energy in a resonating body. He does not develop; he is transformed; overturning finally like an iceberg whose center of buoyancy has shifted unseen.

Eye to Eye

By way of conclusion, and to compress the disturbing perfection of *Le Notte di Cabiria* into a single phrase, I would like to analyze the final shot of the film, which strikes me, when everything else is taken into account, as the boldest and the most powerful shot in the whole of Fellini's work. Cabiria, stripped of everything—her money, her love, her faith—emptied now of herself, stands on a road without hope. A group of boys and girls swarm into the scene singing and dancing as they go, and from the depths of her nothingness Cabiria slowly returns to life; she starts to smile again; soon she is dancing, too. It is easy to imagine how artificial and symbolic this ending would have been, casting aside as it does all the objections of verisimilitude, if Fellini had not succeeded in projecting his film onto a higher plane by a single detail of direction, a stroke of real genius that forces us suddenly to identify with his heroine. Chaplin's name is often mentioned in connection with *La Strada*, but I have never thought the comparison between Gelsomina and Charlie (which I find hard to take in itself) very convincing. The first shot which is not only up to Chaplin's level but the true equal of his best inventions is the final shot of *Le Notte di Cabiria*, when Giulietta Masina turns toward the camera and her glance crosses ours. As far as I know, Chaplin is the only man in the history of film who made successful systematic use of this gesture, which the books about filmmaking are unanimous in condemning. Nor would it be in place if when she looked us in the eye Cabiria seemed to come bearing some ultimate truth. But the finishing touch to this stroke of directorial genius is this, that Cabiria's glance falls several times on the camera without ever quite coming to rest there. The lights go up on this marvel of ambiguity. Cabiria is doubtless still the heroine of the adventures which she has been living out before

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us, somewhere behind that screen, but here she is now inviting us, too, with her glance to follow her on the road to which she is about to return. The invitation is chaste, discreet, and indefinite enough that we can pretend to think that she means to be looking at somebody else. At the same time, though, it is definite and direct enough, too, to remove us quite finally from our role of spectator.

IN DEFENSE OF ROSSELLINI

*A letter to Guido Aristarco, editor-in-chief
of CINEMA NUOVO*

My dear Aristarco,

I have been meaning to write these comments for some time now, but month after month I have deferred doing so, put off by the importance of the problem and its many ramifications. I am also aware that I lack theoretical preparation, as compared with the seriousness and thoroughness with which Italian critics on the left devote themselves to the study of neorealism in depth. Although I welcomed neorealism on its first arrival in France and have ever since continued to devote to it the unstinting best of my critical attentions, I cannot claim to have a coherent theory to rival your own, nor can I pretend to be able to situate the phenomenon of neorealism in the history of Italian culture as surely as you can. If you take into account, too, the fact that I am bound to look absurd if I try to instruct Italians in their own cinema, you will have the major reasons why I have failed as yet to respond to your invitation to discuss in the pages of *Cinema Nuovo* the critical position which you and your associates have taken on some recent films.

I would like to remind you, before getting to the heart of the discussion, that differences of opinion due to nationality are frequent even

among critics of the same generation whom all else would seem to align. We of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, for example, have experienced this with the staff of *Sight and Sound*, and I am not ashamed to admit that it was at least in part the high regard in which Lindsay Anderson held Jacques Becker's *Cague d'or* (which was a failure in France) that led me to reconsider my own view and to see virtues in the film which had escaped me. It is true that the judgment of a foreigner is apt sometimes to go astray because of a lack of familiarity with the context from which a film comes. For example, the success outside France of films by Duvivier or Pagnol is clearly the result of a misunderstanding. Foreign critics admire in these films a picture of France which seems to them "wonderfully typical," and they confuse this "exoticism" with the value of these films as film. I recognize that these differences are of little consequence and I presume that the success abroad of some Italian films which I think you are right to hold in low esteem is based on the same kind of misunderstanding. Nevertheless, I do not think that this is true of the films that have caused us to disagree, nor even with neorealism in general.

To begin with, you will allow that French critics were not wrong, at the very outset, in being more enthusiastic than Italian critics about the films that today are the undisputed glory of the Italian cinema on both sides of the Alps. For my part, I flatter myself that I was one of the few French critics who always linked the rebirth of Italian cinema to "neorealism," even at the time when it was fashionable to say that the term was meaningless. Today I still think it the best term there is to designate what is best and most creative in Italian cinema.

But this is also why I am disturbed by the way in which you defend it. Do I dare suggest, dear Aristarco, that the harsh line taken by *Cinema Nuovo* against certain tendencies in neorealism which you consider regressive prompts me to fear that you are thereby unwittingly putting the knife to what is most alive and rich in your cinema? I am eclectic enough in what I most admire in Italian cinema, but you have passed some harsh judgments which I am prepared to accept: you are an Italian. I can understand why the success in France of *Pane, Amore e Fantasia* annoys you; your reaction resembles mine to Duvivier's films on Paris. But, on the

other hand, when I find you hunting for fleas in Gelsomina's tousled hair, or dismissing Rossellini's last film as less than nothing I am forced to conclude that under the guise of theoretical integrity you are in the process of nipping in the bud some of the liveliest and most promising offshoots of what I persist in calling neorealism.

You tell me you are amazed at the relative success which *Viaggio in Italia* has had in Paris, and even more so by the almost unanimous enthusiasm of the French critics for it. As for *La Strada*, you are well aware what a success it has been. These two films have come just at the right moment to restore Italian cinema not only in the interest of the general public but also in the esteem of the intellectuals—for interest in Italian film has flagged in the past year or two. The reasons for their success are in many ways very different. Nevertheless, far from their having been felt here as a break with neorealism and still less as a regression, they have given us a feeling of a creative inventiveness deriving directly from the spirit which informs the Italian school. I will try to tell you why.

But I have first to confess to a strong dislike for a notion of neorealism which is based, to the exclusion of all else, on what is only one of its present aspects, for this is to submit its future potential to *a priori* restrictions. Perhaps I dislike it so because I haven't enough of a head for theory. I think, however, that it is because I prefer to allow art its natural freedom. In sterile periods theory is a fruitful source for the analysis of the causes of the drought, and it can help to create the conditions necessary for the rebirth. But when we have had the good fortune to witness the wonderful flowering of Italian cinema over the past ten years, is there not more danger than advantage to be gained if we try to lay down a law which we say is imposed by theory? Not that we do not have to be strict. On the contrary, an exacting and rigorous criticism is needed—now more than ever, I think. But its concern should be to denounce commercial compromise, demagoguery, the lowering of the level of the ambitions, rather than to impose *a priori* aesthetic standards on artists. As I view it, a director whose aesthetic ideals are close to your own but who sets to work assuming that he can include only 10 or 20 per cent of these ideals in any commercial script he may happen to shoot has less merit than a man who for

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better or worse makes films that conform to his ideal, even if his concept of neorealism differs from yours. In the first of these two films, now, you are content objectively to record that the film is at least in part free of compromise by according it two stars in your critiques, but you consign the second film to your aesthetic hell, without right of appeal.

In your view Rossellini would, doubtless, be less to blame if he had made something like *Stazione Termini* or *Umberto D* rather than *Giovanna d'Arco al rogo* or *La Paura*. It is not my intention to defend the author of *Europa 51* at the expense of Lattuada or De Sica; the policy of compromise is defensible, up to a point; I am not going to try to define it here, but it does seem to me that Rossellini's independence gives his work—whatever one may think of it on other grounds—an integrity of style and a moral unity only too rare in cinema, which compel us to esteem it even before we admire it.

But it is not on such methodological grounds as these that I hope to defend him. Instead, I will direct my argument on his behalf at the assumptions on which the discussion is based. Has Rossellini ever really been a neorealist and is he one still? It would seem to me that you admit that he has been a neorealist. How indeed can there be any question of the role played by *Roma Città Aperta* and *Paix* in the origin and development of neorealism? But you say that a certain "regression" is already apparent in *Allemagne Anno Zero*, that it is decisive beginning with *Sironi* and *Fioretti di San Francesco*, and that it has become catastrophic in *Europa 51* and *Viaggio in Italia*.

But what is it, in essence that you find to blame in this aesthetic itinerary? Increasingly less concern for social realism, for chronicling the events of daily life, in favor, it is not to be denied, of an increasingly obvious moral message—a moral message that, depending on the degree of his malevolence, a person may identify with either one of the two major tendencies in Italian politics. I refuse to allow the discussion to descend to this dubious level. Even if Rossellini had in fact Christian-Democrat leanings (and of this there is no proof, public or private, so far as I know) this would not be enough to exclude him *a priori* from the possibility of being a neorealist artist. But let that pass.

It is true, nonetheless, that one does have a right to reject the moral

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or spiritual postulate that is increasingly evident in his work, but even so to reject this would not imply rejection of the aesthetic framework within which this message is manifest unless the films of Rossellini were in fact films *à thèse*, that is, unless they were mere dramatizations of *a priori* ideas. But in point of fact there is no Italian director in whose work aims and form are more closely linked and it is precisely on this basis that I would characterize Rossellini's neorealism.

If the word has any meaning—whatever the differences that arise over its interpretation, above and beyond a minimal agreement—in the first place it stands in opposition to the traditional dramatic systems and also to the various other known kinds of realism in literature and film with which we are familiar, through its claim that there is a certain "wholeness" to reality. I borrow this definition, which I consider to be as correct as it is convenient, from Amedée Ayfre (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 17). Neorealism is a description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole. Neorealism contrasts with the realist aesthetics that preceded it, and in particular with naturalism and verism, in that its realism is not so much concerned with the choice of subject as with a particular way of regarding things. If you like, what is realist in *Paix* is the Italian Resistance, but what is neorealist is Rossellini's direction—his presentation of the events, a presentation which is at once elliptic and synthetic.

To put it still another way, neorealism by definition rejects analysis, whether political, moral, psychological, logical, or social, of the characters and their actions. It looks on reality as a whole, not incomprehensible, certainly, but inseparably one. This is why neorealism, although not necessarily antispectacular (though spectacle is to all intents and purposes alien to it) is at least basically antitheatrical in the degree that stage acting presupposes on the part of the actor a psychological analysis of the emotions to which a character is subject and a set of expressive physical signs that symbolize a whole range of moral categories.

This does not at all mean that neorealism is limited to some otherwise indefinable "documentarism." * Rossellini is fond of saying that a love not

* "Documentarism" according to A. Ayfre is an "attitude supposedly of passivity that claims to be impersonally objective."—TR.

only for his characters but for the real world just as it is lies at the heart of his conception of the way a film is to be directed, and that it is precisely this love that precludes him from putting asunder what reality has joined together, namely, the character and the setting. Neorealism, then, is not characterized by a refusal to take a stand *vis-à-vis* the world, still less by a refusal to judge it; as a matter of fact, it always presupposes an attitude of mind: it is always reality as it is visible through an artist, as refracted by his consciousness—but by his consciousness as a whole and not by his reason alone or his emotions or his beliefs—and reassembled from its distinguishable elements. I would put it this way: the traditional realist artist—Zola, for example—analyzes reality into parts which he then reassembles in a synthesis the final determinant of which is his moral conception of the world, whereas the consciousness of the neorealist director *filters* reality. Undoubtedly, his consciousness, like that of everyone else, does not admit reality as a whole, but the selection that does occur is neither logical nor is it psychological; it is ontological, in the sense that the image of reality it restores to us is still a whole—just as a black-and-white photograph is not an image of reality broken down and put back together again “without the color,” but rather a true imprint of reality, a kind of luminous mold in which color simply does not figure. There is ontological identity between the object and its photographic image.

I may perhaps make myself better understood by an example—from *Viaggio in Italia*. Admittedly the public is easily disappointed by the film in that the Naples which it depicts is incomplete. This reality is only a small part of the reality that might have been shown, but the little one sees—statues in a museum, pregnant women, an excavation at Pompeii, the tail-end of the procession of Saint Januario—has the quality of wholeness which in my view is essential. It is Naples “filtered” through the consciousness of the heroine. If the landscape is bare and confined, it is because the consciousness of an ordinary bourgeoisie itself suffers from great spiritual poverty. Nevertheless, the Naples of the film is not false (which it could easily be with the Naples of a documentary three hours long). It is rather a mental landscape at once as objective as a straight photograph and as subjective as pure personal consciousness. We realize now that the attitude

which Rossellini takes toward his characters and their geographical and social setting is, at one remove, the attitude of his heroine toward Naples—the difference being that his awareness is that of a highly cultured artist and, in my opinion, an artist of rare spiritual vitality.

I apologize for proceeding by way of metaphor, but I am not a philosopher and I cannot convey any meaning any more directly. I will therefore attempt one more comparison. I will say this of the classical forms of art and of traditional realism, that they are built as houses are built, with bricks of cut stones. It is not a matter of calling into question either the utility of these houses or the beauty they may or may not have, or the perfect suitability of bricks to the building of houses. The reality of the brick lies less in its composition than it does in its form and its strength. It would never enter your head to define it as a piece of clay; its peculiar mineral composition matters little. What does count is that it have the right dimensions. A brick is the basic unit of a house. That this is so is proclaimed by its appearance. One can apply the same argument to the stones of which a bridge is constructed. They fit together perfectly to form an arch. But the big rocks that lie scattered in a ford are now and ever will be no more than mere rocks. Their reality as rocks is not affected when, leaping from one to another, I use them to cross the river. If the service which they have rendered is the same as that of the bridge, it is because I have brought my share of ingenuity to bear on their chance arrangement; I have added the motion which, though it alters neither their nature nor their appearance, gives them a provisional meaning and utility. In the same way, the neorealist film has a meaning, but it is *a posteriori*, to the extent that it permits our awareness to move from one fact to another, from one fragment of reality to the next, whereas in the classical artistic composition the meaning is established *a priori*: the house is already there in the brick.

If my analysis is correct, it follows that the term neorealism should never be used as a noun, except to designate the neorealist directors as a body. Neorealism as such does not exist. There are only neorealist directors—whether they be materialists, Christians, Communists, or whatever. Visconti is neorealist in *La Terra Trema*, a call to social revolt, and Rossellini is neorealist in *I Fiorenti*, a film which lights up for us a purely

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spiritual reality. I will only deny the qualification neorealist to the director who, to persuade me, puts asunder what reality has joined together.

In my view, then, *Viaggio in Italia* is neorealist—more so than *L'Oro di Napoli*, for example, which I greatly admire but whose realism is basically psychological and subtly theatrical, despite the many realistic touches that aim to take us in.

I would go even further and claim that of all Italian directors Rossellini has done the most to extend the frontiers of the neorealist aesthetic. I have said that there is no such thing as pure neorealism. The neorealist attitude is an ideal that one can approach to a greater or lesser degree. In all films termed neorealist there are traces still of traditional realism—spectacular, dramatic, or psychological. They can all be broken down into the following components: documentary reality *plus* something else, this something else being the plastic beauty of the images, the social sense, or the poetry, the comedy and so on. You would look in vain in the works of Rossellini for some such distinction of event and intended effect. There is nothing in his films that belongs to literature or to poetry, not even a trace of "the beautiful" in the merely pleasing sense of the word. Rossellini directs facts. It is as if his characters were haunted by some demon of movement. His little brothers of Saint Francis seem to have no better way of glorifying God than to run races. And what of the haunting death march of the little urchin in *Allemagne Anno Zero*? Gesture, change, physical movement constitute for Rossellini the essence of human reality. This means, too, that his characters are more apt to be affected by the settings through which they move than the settings are liable to be affected by their movement.

The world of Rossellini is a world of pure acts, unimportant in themselves but preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning. Thus it is with the miracle of *Viaggio in Italia*: unseen by the two leading characters, almost unseen even by the camera, and in any case ambiguous (for Rossellini does not claim that it is a miracle but only the noise and crowd movements that people are in the habit of calling a miracle), its impact on the consciousness of the characters is such, nonetheless, as to prompt the unexpected outpouring of their love for one another.

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To my mind, no one has been more successful in creating the aesthetic structure which in consequence of its strength, wholeness, and transparency is better suited to the direction of events than the author of *Europa 51*; the structure which Rossellini has created allows the viewer to see nothing but the event itself. This brings to mind the way in which some bodies can exist in either an amorphous or a crystalline state. The art of Rossellini consists in knowing what has to be done to confer on the facts what is at once their most substantial and their most elegant shape—not the most graceful, but the sharpest in outline, the most direct, or the most trenchant. Neorealism discovers in Rossellini the style and the resources of abstraction. To have a regard for reality does not mean that what one does in fact is to pile up appearances. On the contrary, it means that one strips the appearances of all that is not essential, in order to get at the totality in its simplicity. The art of Rossellini is linear and melodic. True, several of his films make one think of a sketch: more is implicit in the line than it actually depicts. But is one to attribute such sureness of line to poverty of invention or to laziness? One would have to say the same of Matisse. Perhaps Rossellini is more a master of line than a painter, more a short-story writer than a novelist. But there is no hierarchy of genres, only of artists.

I do not expect to have convinced you, my dear Aristarco. In any event, it is never with arguments that one wins over a person. The conviction one puts into them often counts for more. I shall be satisfied if just my conviction (in which you will find an echo of the admiration [for Rossellini] of several of my critic colleagues) serves at least to stimulate your own.