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David Overbey, Springtime in Italy: A Reader in Neo Realism (Archon, 1978)

Overbey/Introduction

1. Introduction by David Overbey

When asked if he were a neo-realist, Roberto Rossellini replied

... neo-realism,¹ but what does that mean? You know, there was a Congress in Parma on neo-realism, and they discussed the term for a long time, but it remained undefined. Most of the time it is only a label. For me, it is above all, a moral position from which to look at the world. It then became an aesthetic position, but at the beginning it was moral.²

If Rossellini is ultimately right in suggesting that "neo-realism" is impossible to define, or is a label of journalistic convenience, like "New Wave", one can still delimit the term in several ways. Neo-realism did, after all, exist: a large number of films were made in Italy, from the early Forties to the mid Fifties, which shared at least, a certain appearance, manner, and area of subject. They were made by directors and writers, who, allowing for individual differences in sensibility, style and motivation, shared a number of theoretical assumptions about the nature of cinema and the world it presented. Nonetheless, it might be more useful to relinquish the term itself, for the moment, as well as the problems raised by a "movement" which was discussed by a large number of people, but to which no one, except Cesare Zavattini, would finally admit belonging, in order first to understand Rossellini's statement that neo-realism was a moral and ethical position before it was an aesthetic. To do that, and to understand the social, political and economic circumstances from which the movement sprang, it is necessary to review, as briefly as possible, the history of Italy from the beginning of the Fascist period, through the war, to the "restoration of normality"³, although this essay, to a certain extent, assumes that the reader has some knowledge of the period.

Numerous critics, scholars and directors have linked the ethical and moral aspects of neo-realism to a "cultural renewal", carried out

through and beyond a "second *Risorgimento*" and the "war of liberation". The age-old problems of Italy — chronic poverty in the South, unemployment, social alienation in the industrial cities, illiteracy, the unequal distribution of land, and a vast gulf between social classes, matched only by the void existing between creative intellectuals and a popular audience — were still very much present during the early Twenties when Mussolini came to power. In spite of the hopes that the Fascists might solve these problems — and for a few years, at least, some of them were ameliorated, Mussolini attracting support from surprising sources, none too soon it became clear that the "Fascist revolution" was hopelessly bourgeois and ineffective. The early hostility of the urban working class and the farmer towards Fascism was allayed for a time when industrial and agricultural production increased and wages remained high. The new government was given the *imprimatur*; the "Conciliation" between the Holy See and the Fascists was accomplished, according to terms under which the Fascists were officially recognized by the Vatican in return for the ratification of the Lateran Treaty; this was then incorporated into the constitution. The terms of the treaty were that the Italian government accepted the papal sovereignty over Vatican City (which had been an irritant for centuries); Catholicism became the official state religion and would be taught in all state schools; the religious marriage ceremony had civil effect.

Mussolini's government was further legitimated and strengthened by statements by foreign politicians like that of the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, on June 20 1927, that if he had been Italian he would have been a Fascist from the start) a sentiment promptly seconded by the British Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin. Described as "the man sent by Providence" by Pius XI, it was not surprising, given the single-list voting system which meant that there was no choice between parties, that in the 1929 elections, the affirmations of Mussolini totalled 8,506,576. Only 131,198 negative votes were cast.

As Giuliano Procacci has pointed out,⁴ and as had been true for centuries, there was an unsettling discrepancy between official rhetoric and reality in Italy. Although the rhetoric portrayed the Fascist movement, in near rapturous terms, as a "glorious revolution in progress", in reality, it was far more a crystallised self-restoration of a

reactionary class structure permeating all sectors of society. The vulgarly ostentatious apartment buildings newly constructed in the centre of Rome, like more official structures, served aptly as a symbol of the verbal and moral rhetoric of the state. They had no effect in solving the misery of inadequate housing on the outskirts of Rome, nor, for that matter, in the rest of Italy, and were hardly constructed to promote human happiness, although people proudly pointed to their facades. How indeed, those grotesque buildings functioned to control behaviour is, in part, the subject of Ettore Scola's filmed reconstruction of the period: *Una giornata particolare* (1977).

Behind the rhetoric there was nothing — or at least, very little. Alberto Moravia's first novel *Gli indifferenti* (1929), portrayed the cynical void in the middle-class intellect; it is hardly by accident that Pirandello (who proved himself not entirely unsympathetic to Fascism) wrote many of his, mostly unpopular, plays about the nature of illusion and reality during this period.

As the international recession of the late Twenties and early Thirties began to damage it economically, the Italian state attempted to apply a number of solutions. It nationalised several industries; it supported others through subsidies; it manipulated import tariffs. Nonetheless, production dwindled, wages dropped, the standard of living fell, and unemployment rose. Working-class protest was quickly suppressed by a government which possessed controlling interest in most major corporations. The wave of rhetoric increased to accompany rising discontent and to disguise totalitarian Fascist policies. Through censorship and government control of publishing, radio broadcasting, and the film industry — Cinecittà, the gigantic film studio complex on the outskirts of Rome was built by the government — artistic expression and public communication were formulated to fit official rhetoric. If books were published which appeared critical, they were quickly suppressed, as happened to works by Moravia, Vittorini and others. The "white telephone" films of the period reflected the official view of prosperity and well-being, even in the glistening surface of the images themselves. Middle class fantasies romantically exalted the joys of country living and emphasised a mystic connection with the land, even as labourers were aggravating the unemployment problem by leaving the farms to look for work in the cities. In no sector of Italian life was reality permitted to

express itself. To make doubly sure that uncomfortable questions would not be raised, even among the privileged, and to reinforce the tradition of class-conscious education in the humanities, Giovanni Gentile was appointed Minister of Education. Under the guise of educational reform, university professors were required to sign an oath of loyalty to the state. Only eleven refused.

It is customary for states with apparently insoluble domestic difficulties to turn to foreign policy to bolster their sagging prestige. Italy went to war with Ethiopia: visions of rich farmland and vast mineral deposits tempted bourgeois and peasant alike. Industrial production took a swing upward as the demand for war supplies grew. The short war was politically costly: Italy's diplomatic relationships with England and France degenerated, and its image abroad began to tarnish, especially as the League of Nations was unable to introduce effective sanctions. Italy, along with Hitler's Germany, entered the Spanish Civil War in support of the Falangists. The fear of Communism, so prevalent in the bastions of capitalist conservatism, meant that England, France, and the United States, were not totally opposed to such intervention. They had decided on a pragmatic policy of non intervention themselves. Italy and Germany, therefore, were brought closer in an alliance which led to a "Pact of Steel". Although the action in Spain had not been widely popular in Italy, in spite of the open resistance among many of Mussolini's own ministers and the country's lack of preparation for war, Italy was drawn inexorably into the Second World War. Mussolini increased the level of rhetoric as if words were both fact and action. He dramatically pictured eight million Italian bayonets (at the beginning of the war, only one million Italians were soldiers), impregnable tanks (Italy had four hundred small ones) and a gallant air force (consisting of just over one thousand well-used airplanes incapable of making long-distance flights), all ever-ready and anxious to conquer any and every enemy (the Italian population was unenthusiastic for the war, and, for once, was vocal about it). The old inability to confront reality came full circle as Hitler tried to compel Mussolini to deliver all that his rhetoric had promised. There is a possibility, of course, that Mussolini was aware of his situation and, seeing how easily France had fallen, had concluded that the war would be over quickly and that he would not have to deliver the goods. As it was, he could not.

The resistance to Fascism in Italy, if not total, was multivarious. Benedetto Croce, the leading intellectual, had been equivocal, even approving of certain of its aspects, but in 1925, with the murder of Matteotti (the Socialist member of parliament who was outspokenly opposed to Mussolini) Croce edited a manifesto criticising the government, signed by forty leading personalities. He then loyally and ambiguously retired to his study in Naples, where he wrote a *History of Italy* and a *History of Europe*, both of which were only anti-Fascist in the narrow sense of being "histories of liberty". Croce's review *La Critica* was also élitist in its anti-Fascism — intellectual and dignified. It is clear that Croce never really grappled with Fascism in his work, neither to analyse the causes, nor to reflect upon its results. Instead, it appeared that his solution was to outwait it in the hope of re-establishing the Italy of the century's first decade. The self removal of Croce to an only semi-public ivory tower left many Italian intellectuals without a respectable rallying flag and achieved little.

Croce's attitudes were more practically felt by numerous liberal and left-wing Italians exiled in Paris (Treves, Modigliani, Turati and others) who founded an anti-Fascist newspaper, *La Libertà*. Others (Parrì, Gobetti, and Rosselli, among the rest) believed that the Fascists had played on the weaknesses and lack of unity of pre-Fascist liberals. They argued that post-Fascist Italy would have to be ideologically different and have to be founded on the basis of Libertarian Socialism. They organised the "Justice and Liberty Party" the purpose of which was to engage in "subversive" activities, including sabotage and the dropping of anti-Fascist leaflets over Milan.

The most unified and active of anti-Fascist groups were Communists who viewed the other factions as naive and ineffective. Effective anti-Fascist action, they argued, had to be mounted within Italy, as a movement of the people — workers, peasants, and leftist intellectuals united in a common aim. They managed to publish their newspaper *L'Unità* with regularity, to organise workers in the factories, and, in general, to keep their organization intact, in spite of it being banned and of consequent harassment by the Government's Special Tribunal — a court devoted specifically to dealing with anti-Fascist activities.

The most significant intellectual leader to arise among the Communists was Antonio Gramsci. His thought continues to

inform and provide a basis for the Italian Communist Party which he helped to found. Of more importance and relevance here, however, is his work as a social and cultural critic, which cannot be overestimated. It was necessary, he argued, to analyse the objective aspects of Italian society in order to understand what had occurred and therefore to see what might be done. The analysis must be kept free of dogma and preconceptions which would pre-determine any answers. Fascism was, for him, merely the most brutal and most current expression of the industrial/agrarian/bourgeois complex which had always occupied the top level of Italy's class structure, and which influenced every level of Italian life, including — perhaps especially — education and culture. In some ways, indeed, Croce's thought was a form of that expression, particularly in his insistence that art exists external to time and social reality. The racism of the industrial North against "gli africani" of the rural South was, according to Gramsci, one more way in which the ruling class reinforced disunion amongst the working class. Gramsci proposed an organized link between the industrial workers of the North and the peasants of the South in order to oppose their mutual oppression. Further, he maintained that any Marxist state which might evolve in Italy would, of necessity, have to grow naturally out of particularly Italian problems and from the Italian temperament and situation. It would also have to remain open to diversity, constant questioning, and change. If he embraced Lenin's idea of an alliance between workers and peasants, he rejected the developments in the Soviet Union towards strict systemizations of ideology and its hardening into a bureaucracy as oppressive as that which it sought to replace. Gramsci's ideas exerted a profound influence on Italian progressive thought. Their power is reflected in the answer of a Communist intellectual and artist like Elio Vittorini to problems of politics and culture proposed by Palmiro Togliatti. His essay is essential reading in so far as it provides a rich and multi-faceted backdrop against which most of the events and arguments in the neo-realist movement took place.

Togliatti, who, with Gramsci, had co-founded the Italian Communist Party, tended, for pragmatic reasons, to hew closer to the line of strict class solidarity and loyalty to the Soviet Union, although he too was much affected by Gramsci's thought — he too believed in a uniquely Italian path for Communism and was certainly prepared to

make various compromises in the light of Italian historical reality. Gramsci's ideas, today more than ever, are operating as a motive force in Italian political and cultural life.

The war never went well for Italy. Mussolini attempted to explain to Hitler, privately, and to the Italian people, publicly, (in theatrical speeches from his balcony overlooking the Piazza Venezia), why the facts failed to match the rhetoric, but did not disclose that the "parallel war" was an illusion and that Italy had become merely the lackey of Nazi Germany. The best that could be hoped for Italy was to save enough face and to have a share in whatever divisions of territory might be made after the war. The Italian people, aware of the failure of Fascism at all levels had real reason to put an end to it and, by hopeful extension, the war. Conditions at home were chaotic. Privation was the order of the day for everyone, except Fascist leaders; they corrupted the little remaining system and then resorted to the ever-expanding black market. When news reached Italy from the Russian front that as many Italian soldiers had died from the cold, (because their German "allies" had refused to give them transportation), as had died from Russian bullets, they decided to put an end to it. With military deals reported on every front, the anti-Fascists finally united and moved into the open. In Turin, in December 1942, socialists, Communists, liberals, and two recently organized parties, the Action Party (composed largely of members of the old "Justice and Liberty" group) and the Christian Democrats, formed a joint committee. The workers of Fiat and other large industries went on strike, first in Turin and then in Milan.

On 25 July 1943, members of the ruling class, of the Fascist Party itself, and of the military who wanted to withdraw from the war by first separating Italy from Germany, and then suing for peace with the Allies, managed, with the King's assistance, to remove Mussolini from power and arrest him. Events then became complex and confused, and led to the "war of liberation", the circumstances of which gave birth to neo-realism proper. Marshal Pietro Badoglio was appointed by the King to head the new government, which then attempted simultaneously to keep the Germans at bay with rather transparent lies, and to manipulate the Allies into giving the easiest surrender terms possible, with ominous threats of the fear of "Communist takeover". Unconditional surrender was nevertheless the

result; the King, Badoglio, and most government and military officials fled by boat to Pescara and the safety of Allied occupation in the South and left Italy without a government. Mussolini was rescued by the Germans who sent him to Lake Garda to set up his puppet Salò Republic. The Allies and the King held the South; the Germans invaded. No one ruled, save by direct force of arms.

The Badoglio government then declared war on Germany. The Vatican — ever alert to changes in the political wind — gave its full support to the new government and the King. The Communists, the Action Party, and numerous other anti-Fascist organizations united with the Italian Army to repel the German invasion. Although progressive groups had called for the eradication of the monarchy as the first step toward Italian post-war renewal, pressure was applied by Croce, by the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and the Allied Front in general, to retain at least the figure of the king. This ideological division split the anti-Fascist/anti-Nazi front, at which point, Togliatti, aware of Stalin's policy regarding "spheres of influence" after the war, agreed with Croce's compromise: the King would turn his powers over to his son, the title would be held in abeyance, until a referendum could be held after the war on the form that Italian government was to take. A new government was formed by Badoglio, which included all the anti-Fascist groups except the Action Party.

Resistance to Fascism grew stronger and more widespread, to be met with Nazi brutality on one hand and Allied Command mistrust and hostility to partisans, especially to Communist partisans, on the other. When the Allies entered Rome in 1944, Badoglio handed over the government to a new cabinet headed by Bonomi and including representatives of all the anti-Fascist groups, which declared itself a manifestation of the Committee of National Liberation. This move particularly upset Churchill who, with the other Allies, was worried over the political implications, for it was becoming clear that in a large number of areas, including the heavily industrialised Po Valley, "liberated" by the Allies, the Resistance had taken control. The National Committee of Liberation had also fostered an insurrection in the North and had captured and executed Mussolini; they would have to be dealt with as equals when the Allies finally arrived in Milan.

At this point the "involution" or degeneration so often referred to in discussions of Italian neo-realism and Italian culture in relationship to political and social life occurred. The "War of Liberation" had been fought by men with articulate ideas about the future of society. Although ideas differed according to the group to which they belonged, they held in common that a regression to the society out of which Fascism in Italy first evolved was not what they were fighting for. Clear as they were about this, they misread the mood of the people and underestimated the cunning and power of conservative forces, not only in Italy, but outside as well.

The miseries undergone by the Italians, represented in films like *Roma città aperta* were real. It was, indeed, the brute force of that reality which made most people want to move rapidly through it and to forget. It became unspoken, but official policy to refuse to examine the operative causal factors of what had happened in order to prevent a similar occurrence. In the South, the American military came to terms with the Mafia, which was, it could be said, not only anti-Fascist (they had been hounded by a Fascist government jealous of its power in the South) but, better still, anti-Communist, (the Communist Party had maintained an organization among the peasants and was a threat to Mafia power in the region). This involvement was a matter of naïveté, as much as of corruption, both of which are illustrated by Francesco Rosi in his film *Lucky Luciano* (1973).

The Christian Democrat Party, the stronghold of which was in the North, soon spread throughout the country. Led by Alcide de Gasperi, who had been a librarian at the Vatican during the Fascist period, the Christian Democrats now became the rallying point for the conservative elements in Italy (especially the Vatican, with its broadly based hold over the rural population) as well as the centre liberals. Well nourished anti-Communist paranoia, fed by propaganda from the United States, the Vatican, and other conservative elements within Italy, brought the Christian Democrats to power in an uneasy coalition with the Communists and socialists. It did not take long for the Communists to be manipulated out of government, by the maneuvering of de Gasperi, assisted by the left's own disunity and lack of clear-cut policy. The Constitution was rewritten, but retained several Fascist codes — including Article Seven, the Lateran Treaty of "Conciliation" — and Italy joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The country had been truly "restored to normality".

II

The ethical and moral position of neo-realism was, in part, born in the "War of Liberation" and was dedicated to exploring and exposing the rhetorical lies of the Fascist period and to confronting the social reality of the present. Lies and equivocations had caused Italy's calamities and it was thought that the "truth" would save her, but, of course, the people had to be confronted to understand the totality of the truth. As a product of a "War of Liberation", of a kind of revolution, its artistic expression might continue the battle to success where politics had failed. This seems to have been the stance of many creators of, and commentators on, neo-realism, whose reasoning grew more and more desperate as it became clear that the long awaited revolution was not to come. The very expression of it through cinema, was atrophying because of its own "involution" and because applied pressure from the newly "restored" establishment co-existed with the growing hostility (or worse, indifference) of the very audiences film-makers were trying to educate. Film makers might well have heeded Orlando Guerrini's words about the parallel situation in Italy concerning realist literature in 1878: "Art never modified the aspirations of a people or a society, but the opposite. Art does not make revolutions, but follows and supports them."⁵

The moral position of "seeing things as they are" accompanied by a corresponding analysis in order that the whole of reality might be understood, existed, in fact, more in the theory and criticism of neo-realism than it did in the films themselves, which failed to analyse the lies of Fascism. Although social problems form the basis of content in many neo-realist films, few are dealt with in any depth; many of them end with either desperate resignation or a sentimental mysticism at odds with the means of expression itself.⁶ One of the supposed masterpieces of the movement, for example, De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, has the problem of unemployment in the city as its pivot (few films dealt with the problems of urban workers employed or not), yet, instead of treating the "total reality" of the problem the film degenerates into a sentimental, albeit often effective, tale of grace lost and restored, constantly reinforcing bourgeois notions about the sacredness of property.⁷ Although a large number of directors and scriptwriters were leftist in sentiment, few of them were

either Marxists or Communists. The attacks on neo-realism as being "Communist inspired", and the emphasis by many critics on Soviet cinematic "realism" as an influence on the movement were wide of the point. Neo-realist films never really approached Marxist solutions to social problems. In *Il cammino della speranza* for example (putting aside its turgid melodrama) the unemployed and dispossessed mine workers survive, to a degree, by sticking together. At the end of the film, they are still dispossessed but led toward hope by a "strong leader" across the border into Switzerland in the search for work, a road which more and more Italian labourers were later to take. Even Vergano's *Il sole sorge ancora* cannot be seen in socialist terms; the equivocal "unification of the people" comes during a communal prayer led by a priest before his execution with a partisan.

Only Rossellini and Visconti, of the original neo-realists, managed to maintain their original moral vision throughout their careers, but they were obliged to shift their terms of expression and widen their areas of examination to a point where most leftist critics and theorists disowned them both, with accusations of "involution" and "betrayal". The very term "betrayal" which is frequently used in critical essays, is, in itself, something of an indication of the critical problems involved: these had more to do with politics than aesthetics and were based on narrow definitions of the "reality" proper for neo-realist representation. With the exception of Zavattini, most neo-realist directors and writers chose to make their ethical and aesthetic statements in their films rather than in theoretical essays. The theory that was created by critics to support and define neo-realism was developed after the fact. Few contemporary critics attempted to follow and understand what the film makers were attempting when they shifted away from the theoretical constructs which the critics themselves had devised. Rossellini is an important case in point, particularly as he was almost universally attacked in both contemporary and later essays by critics of the left, right and centre. He is discussed at greater length below.

The moral position of neo-realism was also expressed in terms different from social ones, although one was never far from "social reality" in discussing it. According to Cesare Zavattini: neo-realism consisted of the principles of love and understanding of others, as those others actually exist, "with their own real first name and their

real family name". To represent man as he is, however, requires the elimination of invented story and character entirely, in order that "real and ordinary" men can themselves tell their own stories to the audience. This, in turn, requires a director to follow and to observe ordinary men engaged in ordinary activities. The goal is to establish a common understanding and recognition between audience and film. Although Zavattini is often called "the father of neo-realism", being the movement's most famous theorist and the author of scripts for many of the major films, there is no single neo-realistic film which fulfills his ideas; the possible exception is a sequence only in *Umberto D* in which the camera merely observes a maid getting out of bed, getting dressed, and preparing breakfast.

Yet another aspect of the moral position was what Gramsci called "popular-national" art: that which would grow organically from the particular environment, problems, character, emotions, and mentality of the Italian people, almost as an expression of a popular soul, and which would, at the same time, be truly national in origin. Such art should then flow back and nourish its original source. Here, too, however, the neo-realist situation is ambiguous. It was clear that the majority of Italian film-goers had very little use for the purer forms of neo-realism. It is a myth that *none* of the films were successful at the Italian box office, but not that neo-realist directors had to depend to a large degree on foreign receipts to show a small profit. In Ettore Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amanti* (1974), Nicola is a teacher in a small Italian town. He attends a screening of *Ladri di biciclette* in 1948, after which a fight breaks out when he defends the film against the mostly political hostility of his fellow townsfolk. He is accused of being a dangerous leftist, is fired, and ends up alone in Rome scratching out a meagre living as a film critic. The individual case, as Scola presents it, is doubtless rather extreme, but the strong reactions of film-goers against neo-realist films, in favour of American cinema, in particular, is all too accurate. There were ways of dealing with the problem, of course, while continuing to make films which mirrored the reality of the Italian audience and attempting to motivate it towards change. In the opinion of critics and theorists, one tended to see films which led further and further away from the original moral position of neo-realism. Their neo-realist manner merely disguised melodramas which attracted and entertained popular audiences.

Riso amaro, in which De Santis ostensibly treated the problems of agricultural workers in the rice fields of the Po Valley, was an enormous financial success of this kind. The film treats its social content as a side issue and concentrates on the not inconsiderable physical attractions of Silvana Mangano, her tribulations over a false diamond bracelet, and a robbery plan during her lousy affair with a young thief.

Indeed, very few of the supposed basic tenets of neo-realism were actually observed in practice. Real people from the streets, for example, were supposed to replace professional actors in the playing of characters much like themselves, and thus to "liberate" the screen from the artificiality of acting. Aside from the basic absurdity of the idea, springing as it does from a confused notion of "reality" and an over-reaction to the falsity of "stars" as opposed to actors, it was rarely applied, except in secondary roles. To portray a down-at-the-heels retired functionary, De Sica hired an aging professor who had little other than advanced age in common with the character of *Umberto D*. The professor was very effective in the convincing *performance* he gave, but not because "he was the character". Anna Magnani, herself a well-known actress, played in film after film, as did a great number of other professional actors from the stage, radio, and film. The illusion of "non-acting" was a matter of style and appearance, different from that prevalent in the artificial "white telephone" films of Fascist Italy (and most glamorous Hollywood products). A matter of style, however, is not quite the same thing as a matter of "absolute reality". Only Visconti used non-professionals for the *entire* cast of a neo-realistic film, and then only once, in *La terra trema*. Again, however, it was a matter of Visconti, a great director of actors, drawing great *performances* from his village fishermen.

What was actually *new* in neo-realism was its style — a new set of conventions to be shared by film makers and audiences which were accepted as "being more real" than those of earlier films. Of course, even the *new* in neo-realism depends upon one's perspective. If there was a "new" realism, it presupposes an "old". Critics, looking outside Italy, have pointed to various possible influences on and origins of the movement — that is to the "old" realism. France and "*réalisme poétique*" is the most often cited, with Renoir generally conceded to be the major foreign influence. Certainly there is a good deal to be

said for resemblances between the best of neo-realism and the films of Renoir: an open, seemingly loosely-knit narrative, a focus on the environment and its organic relationship to the characters and their actions, a refusal to make facile judgements about human action, and, almost always, a level of performance which belies the fact of acting. It is also clear that French cinema also exerted a less fortunate influence through the films of Carné, Clair, and Duvivier, whose poetic veneer of semi-sweet cynicism and sentimental resignation mar the work of the lesser French realists as much as the lesser Italian neo-realists.

Another "realism" cited as influential from outside Italy was that of the American cinema — which one critic traces back to Tom Mix — but which most are satisfied to centre about a discussion of the films of King Vidor. The degree of such influence of neo-realist directors (as opposed to critics) depends upon how many such films were available to them, in the light of the suspension just before the war of the importation of American films. Some directors have commented on their own film-going: Rosi remembers best Jean Harlow and Franco Caroli, while Antonioni speaks glowingly of American documentaries like Pare Lorenz's *The river*. Certain individual films, like Vidor's *The crowd*, were widely seen, but would seem only natural footnotes to neo-realist theory and practice. (It would be more to the point to consider the American influence on Italian film production and distribution towards the very end of neo-realism, which was considerable and not always healthy). American literature, on the other hand, played an important and more direct part in forming the neo-realist sensibility. Although many authors are cited, the most important writer must remain, at least on the practical level, James M. Cain, whose novel *The postman always rings twice* was adapted by Visconti for his first film, *Ossessione*, which, in turn, played a major role in determining the "look" of neo-realist films, even if its attitude towards character was rather too strong for most directors to imitate undiluted.

Within Italy, however, a genuine heritage of indigenous realism already existed; it is mentioned again and again to demonstrate that neo-realism was not only the long-awaited "popular-national" art form, but also the legitimate direction which Italian film should take. There is a division of theory here. Zavattini and the "purists"

maintained that, even if a narrative is allowed in neo-realist cinema, it must "come directly from the people" and must never be derived from novels and plays — a rule which no one, not even Zavattini himself, followed. Others claimed that to follow the narrative methods of Giovanni Verga would both further and insure the purity of Italian neo-realism.

When speaking of realism and Italy, even more than when speaking about realism and the cinema, it is wise to be cautious. The plays of Pirandello indicate the problems involved, but it might be remembered that any number of opera composers and librettists have been accused in their own time of an excess of realism, Verdi included. *Nabucco*, after all, was chosen to reopen La Scala after the war in 1946 because of its "realistic" political content.

It is often pointed out by historians of the Italian cinema that there was a brief period during the second decade of the century, particularly around Naples, when "realistic" cinema flourished: Martoglio's *Sperduti nel buio* (1914) is the most often cited example. When I once suggested to Francesco Rosi that his *C'era una volta* seemed an odd film for him to have made in the light of his other films which are "social" and "realistic", he laughed:

Well it's not as bizarre as all that! Actually ... I wanted to make a fairy story, but one which had a rather realistic colouration. Do you know Basile, the great Sicilian writer of fairy stories who wrote *Lo cunto dei cunti*? Those have a Neapolitan flavour. You know there is a very strong stream of realism in Neapolitans, so that the fairy stories too are rather realistic: the dream is to be able to eat a lot and to wear clothes like a princess. In *C'era una volta* I tried for something of that realism, so that there is the hero's relationship with his mother (he is a bit weak in that area like many men), and there is a focus on pasta and cooking.⁸

For the most part, however, the Italian cinema followed the example of a film like Pastore's *Cabiria* (1914) and plunged into the making of historical epics, the kind of film that first brought Italian cinema to the attention of international audiences and influenced even D.W. Griffith with its length, and the scope of its content. Italian cinema repeatedly returns to such films when other streams of national pro-

duction dry up. The Hercules films of the Fifties and Sixties are in direct descent from the Maciste series (which are, even now, still made from time to time) and *Cabiria*.

III

The pointing, by various critics, to a realistic tradition in Italian literature is even more apposite here. Indeed, the entire series of arguments about realism, culture, moral position, and all the rest, in many ways had already been rehearsed during the final half of the Nineteenth Century, over *verismo*, *realismo*, and *naturalismo*. Such discussions do not, of course, take place in a social and cultural vacuum, and in order to trace the tradition of realism and the arguments over it, the state of the cultural environment needs to be clarified.

Alberto Moravia asked, in 1944: "For whom do we write?" His description of the great gulf between the serious artist and the public can apply just as aptly to the Nineteenth Century, when the upper and middle classes comprised the majority of the reading public. In the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, the prime subject of the novel was the bourgeoisie, described usually in much the same romantic and rhetorical manner as in the "white telephone" period of Italian film. Literature was written in Tuscan, the standard Italian used for cultural and legal purposes and taught in schools, but seldom used by ordinary people in their daily lives. It was an intellectual language divorced from the masses who spoke some forty different dialects. Thus the supposed national cultural unity represented by the *Risorgimento* was a literary concept which left the masses largely indifferent.⁹

As a symbol of national unity, however, the preservation of Tuscan remained all-important. Even those artists who believed in the necessity of social and cultural evolution (if not revolution) remained steadfastly traditional when it came to modifying it. Many writers on neo-realism came to believe that neo-realism, which had been seen as the expression of potential change in society, might in itself institute change, just as many writers and literary critics of the Nineteenth century had come to regard Tuscan as the means to unity,

generally ignoring the fact that ordinary people continued to speak their local language and that literature written in Tuscan was read only by a very small percentage of the "Italian nation". The situation was still far removed from Gramsci's ideal of "popular-national" culture. Ironically, those writers who wished to treat the "whole of Italian reality" to touch and unite Italians, achieved exactly the opposite effect in their use of Tuscan; they spoke only to those of their own social class and further widened the gap between classes. As G.M. Carsaniga observed:

The real scandal was that a bourgeois pastime was masquerading as the national literature, that a ruling-class culture pretended to be the national culture, when three quarters of the population were not merely uneducated but illiterate, while only a minority of the remaining quarter ever read books. What was unrealistic was to shut one's eyes to the absurdity of such a pretension, to refuse to see it for what it was — one symptom among others of the same social injustice and class exploitation that *veristi* writers were all too ready to denounce.¹⁰

It is probably not really necessary here to distinguish too finely between "verism" and "realism", save to remark that the first term is immediately associated with those realistic Italian writers of the Nineteenth Century who were concerned primarily with working class people and their problems (particularly in the South) and what they maintained was "objectivity". In doing so, the verists opened the door to the use of dialect as a legitimate means of literary expression. For most people, however, the use of dialect in novels and stories was another means of "objective observation" and, like most of the problems and situations described, was regarded by middle-class readers as exotic and removed from their own "reality".

Contributing to this was the influence of French naturalism, the effect of which was that for many Italian writers of the time there was no longer a place for judgement nor a push for social reform, since the characters described were usually subject to immutable "natural law" and the description of their plight in "detached, scientific, and objective" terms was something of an end in itself. Shaw's distinction between realism and naturalism as a matter of social and moral

arbitration is useful here.

One of the stated goals of the verists was the social education of their readers, but, aside from the fact that very few bourgeois were deeply radicalized by their work, the work itself did not reach the class which might have drawn from it a sustaining core of shared indignity and oppression upon which to build a unified and effective protest. Instead (like neo-realism) in order to reach a more popular audience, the novels and stories assumed the *manner* of realism, retelling standard shop-girl fantasies that gained added spice by the introduction of biologically and socially "rude" material. The added sensationalism was, of course, excused on the respectable moral basis of "reflecting reality" for the social edification of the reader. A few titles will indicate easily enough what popular verism had become: Tronconi's *Passione maledetta* (Accursed passion, 1875), *Madri... per ridere* (Make-believe mothers, 1871), or Mariani's *Gli amori di una kellerina* (The loves of a barmaid, 1888). Had film makers half a century later, been writers instead, doubtless Lattuada, Comencini, and De Santis could easily have joined them with their *Il mulino del Po*, *Panè, amore e fantasia*, and *Riso amaro*.

Nevertheless, there did exist another mode of realistic novels and stories on the highest level of achievement, and, as Giuseppe De Santis continually pointed out when he was a critic, Giovanni Verga provided the richest vein here. The latter's position as a theorist, however, is vague, with equivocation and ambiguity marking the spaces between his espoused intentions and what he actually does. In his prefaces, he speaks of removing the artist's personality from a novel in order to present a "human document" through almost scientific analysis. This sounds, of course, very much like Zavattini on the cinema, but Verga was too much the poet to be able, finally, to remove himself, his understanding and sympathy for men too great to treat them as mere objects of study. He also embraced a larger view of realism — derived evidently from Edmond de Goncourt — in which he affirmed the duty of realism to investigate every level of society, a stand which the defenders of Antonioni, Visconti, and even Rossellini properly took later when the directors were accused of "betraying" neo-realism. While Verga never completed his cycle, *I vinti*, to include the upper classes, his masterpiece, *I malavoglia*, the first section of the planned cycle, demonstrates that he was not

content solely to observe, nor solely to treat the characters as mere puppets in a pre-determined biological or social system; both however, exist as facets of the struggle of his Sicilian fishermen for survival and dignity. To be victorious in the struggle demands human solidarity, which is still a possibility for those who are not yet the prisoners of the many illusions of the middle classes as in *Maestro Don Gesualdo*. This theme is also to be found in those supposedly "involved betrayers" of neo-realism, Visconti, Antonioni, and Rossellini, who were among the very few to perceive the possibility of man's redemption from oppressive illusions and unbearable reality. It is not inherent in realism that the characters be defeated — an idea closer to the usual pessimism of naturalism — yet this is often the result both in literary verism and in neo-realism. One explanation of this is suggested by Carsaniga: "to be 'defeated by life' is a natural subject for bourgeois *verismo*... unable to free himself from his class ideology and to understand and express reality, the *verista* can achieve nothing more significant than to celebrate consciously and conscientiously his own defeat by chronicling the defeat of his characters."¹¹ Those who were able to free themselves, however, were able to create works in which the surface expression of reality reflected a "higher reality" far more vividly than a careful observation of atmosphere and detail alone could provide, an achievement illustrated by Verga himself, as well as by films like *Viaggio in Italia*, *Stromboli*, *Ossessione*, *La terra trema*, and *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (in the last three of which, the immediate seeming defeat of major characters differs considerably from the ultimately and deeply sentimental defeated resignation displayed in the films of De Sica, De Santis, and Lattuada).

IV

If, then, there are a number of "old" realisms to consider when discussing neo-realism, one is still left without a precise definition of the term. Indeed, I have found it convenient to let the term "realism" itself alone, although what was meant by "reality" has at least been hinted at throughout the brief summation of "old" realism. As I have

tried to indicate by references to Pirandello, Verdi, and the verists, the term is a slippery one and probably cannot be defined in connection with art without first accepting the idea that we are talking about the relativity of artistic conventions.¹² The word "reality" is used through every discussion of neo-realism by critics, scriptwriters, directors and theorists, but is never actually defined. The use of the term shifts and slides a good deal, not only from writer to writer, but often within a single paragraph by a single writer. At times, the assumption is made that film as a medium is somehow "attracted" by its nature to, or has as its intrinsic goal, the expression of "reality". The fact that a camera will record whatever is in front of the lens, and that the processed film will then (depending upon the skill of the film maker) convince a spectator (always assuming the "willing suspension of disbelief" necessary for any aesthetic experience) of the "reality" of what he is seeing, should be enough to convince that film, like every other medium, has no natural "attractions" or "goals", independent of the creator. Film must of necessity be manipulated by someone which implies that whatever "reality" is recorded on film is different from, and is only a fragment of, the endlessly wide and complex "reality" of common existence. Editing, camera placement, type of film stock, etc., involve choices, after all, even if such choices are seemingly left to chance. We are then left with an argument based on relative factors. Rossellini maintained that the "effaces" himself "as much as possible" — which is not quite the same thing as saying that as a director he was not there at all.

I indicated, when speaking of the use of actors and non-professionals in neo-realism, that one is actually discussing questions of convention, content, manner, and style. No one would argue that the "white telephone" films, or an MGM musical, are "more realistic" than neo-realism, simply because neo-realism seems less artificial, seems less stylized and manipulated. This is not only a matter of convention, but because neo-realist directors were paradoxically, more concerned to disguise their artifice, this would suggest rather more manipulation than less. Silvano Mangano was allowed to sweat, to be disheveled and dirty, in *Riso amaro*, while in *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* she is elegantly coiffed and gowned. If she appears to be more "realistic" in the former, it is simply because we have grown to accept certain conventions of costuming and make-up: Miss Man-

gano is not less real in the later film. Indeed, it might be argued that she is more "realistic" in it because over the years she has become a less awkward and more convincing actress and is (in true neo-realist theory) acting a role within the wealthy social milieu in which, both as a film star and the wife of powerful producer Dino De Laurentiis, she is more likely to move in "real" life.

There is, of course, something to be said for the "realistic" atmosphere to be gained by location shooting on real streets, in actual apartments, and so on, although here too we are dealing with conventions which audiences have learned to accept or reject according to their sophistication and experience in seeing films. Lubitsch was making a serious point when he joked that he preferred Paris, Paramount, to Paris, France. *Germania anno zero*, shot in the actual rubble of post-war Berlin, for example, is more convincing than, say, the same director's *Generale Della Rovere*, for which Rossellini was obliged to use sets of reconstructed rubble, but only because, in the latter, the artifice is self conscious, not because of the use of artifice itself. Some critics of neo-realism are willing to grant that they are, in actuality, speaking of conventions, or of "artistic realism", or of "cinematic realism" — that is, of the way the material is to be represented: many insist that the only way to treat material is in the neo-realist manner. This leads to some odd critical positions, and even odder films. As Luigi Chiarini points out, the subjects of some films cry out for another treatment, but because of the director's insistence on following the neo-realist method, such films become doubly false. In this way, inferior films are often valued over obviously superior works simply because the former are in the neo-realist manner. *Vivere in pace*, for example, is much praised, while *Senso* is denigrated. Most critics, however, including the "most pure" Zavattini, allow that neo-realism is but one way to make films, implicitly suggesting that, for all their insistence that film and "reality" are somehow naturally wedded, they are in fact speaking of artistic convention.

For some critics "reality" is, or implies, "social reality". The proper subject of neo-realism then becomes that which is actually happening in society, and in particular, the representation of the conditions of the poor, with the unemployed, prostitutes, and the destitute as typical characters suffering the problems of a class. The same critics also hold that such "reality" is to be analysed. We are once

more, however, evidently no longer speaking of an "objective" and "director-less" cinema, since *someone* must be analyst. Oddly enough, however, when directors attempted to "analyse reality" on other levels of society than that of the working class, the critics furiously denounced the directors for their decadence and involution. This is particularly true although, perhaps, for different reasons, when anything approaching psychologically-oriented analysis enters the films. It is as if the critics would accept only what Zola called Flaubert's *Education sentimentale*: "a verbal report dictated by the facts". Evidently, neither psychology nor classes other than the obviously exploited were "facts" of Italian reality. The point must be made, even though, as I have previously suggested, it is difficult to find neo-realist films (at least during the years of greatest activity in neo-realism) which deal directly with and "analyse" social problems.

This is not to say that social criticism is completely lacking in the films, but simply that it is rarely their main thrust. In *Ladri di biciclette*, the camera pans over rows of pawned wedding sheets while the protagonist attempts to pawn those of his wife, in order to buy a bicycle — an indication (no matter how obviously sentimental) of the protagonist's typicality of character and situation. Throughout the film we are indeed made aware of the thousands of others like the protagonist, all seeking work. Yet, although the problem is evoked through partial representation, nowhere in the film is the problem "analysed". The story, instead, turns most untypical as the protagonist turns thief himself, only to be humiliated and then "redeemed" by an act of forgiveness. At the end of the film we are moved by the man's plight — he still has no job and his prospects are even worse — but we are really no closer to an *understanding* of the "social reality" which neo-realists claimed was at the centre of the film. As is apparent in every film which De Sica made, his background was as an entertainer — any and every device to divert and move an audience was fair. How else can one explain the constant use of children as an entrée into the adult world he was supposedly attempting to analyse, save as emotional and theatrical devices to pull easy tears, tears indeed which are used as substitutes for analysis and understanding?¹³

Visconti's *La terra trema* comes closest to being the perfect neo-realist

list film in this regard. It is also of the highest quality on every other level as well. By its conclusion we are legitimately moved, but we also understand perfectly *how* the fishermen are exploited, how this "social reality" works to oppress people, who are at once both individuals and social types. We are moved by their plight due to Visconti's acute perception and honesty; clearly the characters are caught in a trap, but the way out of it is just as clear. 'Ntoni simply has not yet become aware of the need for unified action and has been momentarily defeated in his attempts to act outside his community. Visconti came to *La terra trema* after serving as assistant to Jean Renoir (De Sica's training was on the sets of the films of Cameron):

The mythological vein which I had found in Verga no longer seemed adequate to me. I felt an impelling urge to find out for myself what were the historic, economic, and social foundations on which that Southern drama had been built. Reading Gramsci, I learned the truth that is still waiting to be resolved. Gramsci not only convinced me by the acuteness of his historical and political analysis, but his teaching also explained to me the character of Southern Italy as a great Social rupture and as a market for a colonialist type of exploitation by the ruling classes of the North. I saw in Gramsci, the founder of the Italian Communist Party, something that is not to be found in other studies of the South's problems: the indications of a realistic, political solution, in terms of the overall problem of the unity of our country: an alliance between the workers of the North and the peasants of the South, in order to break up the power of the agricultural and industrial capitalist block.¹⁴

La terra trema was admired widely and won a Venice Film Festival prize. It was also a financial disaster. It played abroad (when it was released abroad) in a mutilated version. Whether it was cut from distributor's fear that audiences would be unable to bear its starkness, because of its original length, or from exhibitor's greed for a shorter film which could be played more often each day, is unclear. On the other hand, *Ladri di biciclette* garnered international acclaim as a masterpiece and was hugely successful at the foreign box office. Small wonder, then, that neo-realism evolved into a popular enter-

tainment dressed with realistic trappings, and that, after re-seeing many films of the period only a handful of titles still seem to represent an achievement of the first rank.

It is ironic that one of the greatest of the neo-realist films should have been based on a more-or-less faithful adaptation of a novel, just as Visconti's earlier masterpiece, *Ossessione*, had been based on an American novel which most critics even now consider to be almost beneath notice. It took a mind as sharp as Visconti's to see the stark quality of Cain's realism, while the critics, left-wing and bourgeois alike, with hardly an exception, courted the essentially naive and sentimental Hemingway. Neo-realist theory holds that plot should disappear, for plot suggests a too-obvious manipulation of characters which blocks "reality" from being truly represented. Like most tenets of neo-realism, this too was more honoured in essays and speeches than in practice, although, again, one of the finest of the directors to emerge from neo-realism, Roberto Rossellini, carried this tenet to the core of his work by minimising narrative events in order to observe more clearly the "movements of the soul", and the "movements of ideas as they are born and acted upon".

Rossellini was much praised for this near-plotless fidelity to reality in the war trilogy (*Roma città aperta*, *Paisà* and *Germania anno zero*), yet, when he attempted to develop the theory further, he found himself attacked on all sides. Leaving aside *Paisà* — of which the fragmented, minimal narrative about the episodic movement of the Allied Army up the Italian peninsula could only have been structured in one way — this is particularly odd criticism, because in both *Roma città aperta* and *Germania anno zero* there are, in fact, more "plot manipulations" than in a good many of his later films. While it is true that *Roma città aperta* has no continuously developing plot, what can one make of the superhuman purity of the partisans, the priest, and the wife, Pina, as opposed to the equally superhuman villainy of the totally perverted and degenerate Nazis and their loathsome collaborators? Is this not exactly the same kind of "manipulation of reality" decried by those critics who warmly embraced *Roma città aperta* while rejecting, with contempt, *Stromboli* and *Viaggio in Italia*? In neither of these can there be said to be plots after the basic situation is given, nor as Manichean conception of character as in *Roma città aperta*.

V

Throughout the essays which follow, critics and directors alike often make what seem to me to be outrageous critical judgements, with which I have not argued in notes. Some of these, however, seem to be a result of the years in which they were made and thus deserve some comment. Many of the essays were written before 1958, the year De Sica and Zavattini collaborated on *Stazione termini*. Therefore, with few exceptions, De Sica received almost universal praise as the artist of neo-realist cinema. Critical judgements might have been different had writers been able to foresee De Sica's later commercial work. The degradation of neo-realist method is exemplified in his use of *La ciociara* (1960) as a star vehicle for Sophia Loren, and of Zavattini's glossy, empty comedy, *Ieri, oggi, domani* (1963) for the same star. The critics failed to see the ultimate cynicism of Zavattini's (1966) in which an actor (Victor Mature) receives a proposition by telephone to act in a neo-realist film. Turning to the others in the room, he asks "A neo-realist film? What's that?" Answer: "Films you make when you have no money." It is a joke, perhaps, but one which Rossellini would have been incapable of making, even late in his career when he claimed he felt "little personal connection" with his early work.

Whether or not one responds to the films of Rossellini is not at issue. His films are not always easy to "like", and he certainly made a number of films which were far from masterpieces. The point is, that he did not compromise his aesthetic/moral view of what film should do. From his earliest films to his last, *The messiah* (1976), his interest in the movement of characters in their daily existence within a surrounding environment, and in the movement of new ideas as they burst upon the historical scene, remained the same. This led him from filming in real streets to reconstructions of history (indeed, it might be argued that he really began there) in which the way that Louis XIV arose in the morning and was dressed, or how he ate his meals, told us as much about the period and the historical importance of the idea of the Sun King (and his ideas) as what was said and done on a grander historical scale. An abiding interest in the "rea-

lity" of details that explode into an understanding of "social reality" was at the core of neo-realism, and remained at the core of Rossellini's work. In his last film, he said he kept his camera in constant motion over and about the plane of action in order to free the audience as much as possible so that they might pick up the details they considered important; in this way he asked the audience to collaborate with him in the creation of the film.

As to why Rossellini and his films were constantly under attack while those of De Sica were so highly praised, at least two reasons suggest themselves: the taste of most critics is not so very different (nor, perhaps, should it be) from that of the "average" filmgoer, and De Sica gave the public easy entertainment and emotional *divertissement* on a "high level" ("cultural" even), while Rossellini gave them films about which they had to think and which refused to "entertain" in the usual sense of the word. Secondly, until 1953, De Sica used the lower classes as subject matter, while Rossellini refused to continue shooting films about partisans, the resistance, and the more obvious "social problems" of the day. The one director thus attracted the admiration of critics who were the "guardians" of neo-realist social purity; the other alienated them. As Vittorini says in his apology for cultural diversity, a social and cultural danger is run when "truth" is regulated as an orthodox system, when any group decides it alone possesses *the* "truth" and *the* definition of "reality".

The neo-realist manner (style, if you like) somehow became detached from the movement itself, and from Italian cinema, so that Georges Sadoul, for example, could ask in *Cahiers du cinéma*: "Is there a Japanese neo-realism?" When Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* was screened in 1956 at the Cannes Film Festival, those who had both-ered to see it began at once to speak of "Indian neo-realism." Thus, neo-realism could no longer be treated as exclusively Italian, nor as the long hoped for "popular national" art form. Certainly Chiatini's suggestion that neo-realism had become one way of making films, even a mannerism, applicable to any subject in any nation, seems accurate.

In spite of the mildness of social criticism in most neo-realist films, even that was too harsh for a "restored" Italy under the Christian Democrats at the end of the Forties and in the early Fifties. The government was upset that such films displayed to the world the

unemployed, the poverty, the deprivations, the poor housing, and the often general misery of the lower classes in Italy. The Church (which under Article Seven of the Constitution was *the* spiritual voice of Italy) decried everything from the "Communist content" of the films to the lack of respect shown Catholic priests and charities, and even accused them (as in the case of Rossellini's *Il miracolo*) of "blasphemy" and "insulting all Italian women".¹⁵ Such attacks might have added to the prestige of neo-realism as being more strongly anti-establishment than it actually was. However, a number of things happened at once to cause the famous "crisis"; suddenly a wave of congresses, press conferences, and polemical essays swelled up in "defense" of the cinema in general and neo-realism in particular.

The "crisis" had its roots in the situation of the entire Italian film industry. There was no definite pattern as to how well any single neo-realist film would do at the Italian box office. Many of them fared rather well, especially when the neo-realist manner served a sexual melodrama. As their production budgets were usually small, the films, in theory at least, did not have to become gigantic hits in order to recoup the money spent. Generally speaking, however, Italian audiences simply preferred not to see films which showed "their own reality as it was". For much the same reason that so many had voted for the Christian Democrat Party, they refused to attend films which had the goal of closely examining what had happened and what was happening in Italian society. They preferred the "restoration" of old cultural values because they seemed to bring peace and some level of prosperity. Audiences also wanted to escape that daily reality mirrored in neo-realist films, and crowded to see whatever purely escapist fare was offered, which was almost always American films.¹⁶ The huge popularity and large influx of American films after the war, all but destroyed whatever financial basis the domestic market had for Italian films, neo-realist or otherwise. Thus, neo-realist producers and directors were obliged to rely heavily on foreign receipts. As Roberto Rossellini points out, in his series of reminiscences ("Ten years of cinema"), such funds were very often enough to cover the costs of an inexpensive film and even to show a small profit.

Producers, however, were greatly worried: commercial films were passing them by, fortunes were being lost. Furthermore, the film

makers themselves were understandably upset that their intended audience preferred American films and escapist fare in general; the lack of a local audience made a mockery of a number of basic moral positions of neo-realism.

Several disastrous consequences for neo-realism resulted from this situation. First, there was the "crisis of involution"; depending upon who used the term, it could mean either the supposed "betrayal" of directors like Antonioni, Rossellini, and Visconti who chose to widen their subject matter and method, or that many filmmakers tried to make "commercial" films under the guise of neo-realism. Chiarini's discussion of Genina's *Cielo sulla palude* is an important and central example of the latter.

The government acted immediately. Giulio Andreotti, then a Government Minister who was to become more famous later, was appointed to take charge of the film industry. The reaction of the film industry to what subsequently happened was mixed. Several new measures were aimed at the neo-realists and, naturally, most of the hostility to governmental actions and most of the "defenses of the Italian cinema" came from neo-realists. For a time, Italian film receipts went up because of better and more efficient distribution under Andreotti. A number of cinema unions listened with sympathy when he explained that more "popular" films would mean more films and more jobs. Actors, particularly, felt Andreotti could help them, since they had long feared that neo-realist doctrine about the use of non-professionals might be taken seriously in practice. The "Andreotti Law" was passed in December, 1949. Under the law, an official body with wide-ranging powers, the *Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo*, was established. It was empowered to subsidise "suitable" films. In order to be granted a loan for a production, producers were obliged to submit their script to a government-owned bank, which could then demand changes in script, cast, director, or simply refuse the loan outright. Andreotti could not only ban public screenings of films he determined were not in the "best interests of Italy", but, even more harmful to the neo-realists, he could, and did, ban any film for exportation on the basis that it maligned Italy and its people. This effectively cut off the foreign receipts on which many neo-realists depended.

The government's view of cinema can be summed up best by three

quotations which were made publicly and officially. From the office of Mario Scelba, then Christian Democrat Prime Minister:

Film is merchandise. If the government has the right to control the export of vegetables and fruits to make sure that they are not rotten, it also has the right, and the duty, to prevent the circulation of films infected with the spirit of neo-realism.

Minister Ponti: "Film is escape, relaxation, forgetfulness for the poor. The people have need of bread and circuses."

And, in the famous letter to De Sica concerning *Umberto D*, from Andreotti himself:

We ask the man of culture to feel his social responsibility, which should not be limited to a description of the abuses and miseries of a system and a generation . . . If it is true that evil can be fought by harshly spot-lighting its most miserable aspects, it is also true that De Sica has rendered bad service to his country if people throughout the world were to start thinking that Italy in the middle of the Twentieth century is the same as in *Umberto D*.

Italy joined NATO in 1949. However ultimately mild their social criticism, neo-realist films were anti-Fascist; it was a political stance which in some circles was, and still is, equated with Communism. Some directors and writers, of course, were and are politically and socially left. Nonetheless, Karel Reisz was absolutely accurate in stating that neo-realism and neo-realist films were political "only in the sense that they treat problems that are subject to the jurisdiction of political control; but they do not offer any solutions, nor have they got any particular programme". The sensitive government and the Church were determined, nonetheless, to quell all opposition, particularly if it seemed "tainted" with leftist ideas. George A. Huaco suggests, indeed, that: "The increasing distaste of the Italian government for the neo-realist cinema was at least in part a consequence of Italy's position in the 'cold war'."¹⁷

Still, in spite of Andreotti's repression, the depletion of bank credits and funds, and the problems of release, distribution, and

exportation, neo-realist films continued to be made. They became, however, more and more commercially careful. Any strong "analysis" of social reality seemed more out of the question than before. Neo-realist directors continued to work, but the majority joined the commercial mainstream, or made films outside both commercial and neo-realist structures. Neo-realism, as a movement, dwindled away during the Fifties, but its influence continued to be felt, both internationally (as with the early films of Satyajit Ray, Elia Kazan, Jules Dassin, Robert Rossen, and Stanley Kramer) and in Italy itself.

Several new directors emerged during the Fifties and Sixties whose work can be traced directly to neo-realism. Ermanno Olmi, for example, came to feature films from industrial documentaries. His films *Il posto* (1961) and *I fidanzati* (1968) assumed the look of earlier neo-realist films, to discard all but the most minimal narrative, to treat ordinary people and situations, and to represent reality in social terms. Although they have modified their style considerably while maintaining a good deal of the original moral vision of neo-realism (as in *Padre Padrone*, 1977), the Taviani brothers clearly began as neo-realists with *San Mimato*, *Iuglio '44* (1954), made in collaboration with Zavattini, and *Un uomo da bruciare* (1962).

In fact, the most important figure to emerge in Italian cinema in the last two decades, Francesco Rosi, came out of neo-realism. He had been an assistant to Antonioni, Zampa, Gianini, Emmer, and most importantly to Visconti (*La terra trema*, *Senso*). Strictly speaking, he is not a neo-realist at all. His complicated editing, his use of flash-backs, his casting of stars and well-known actors, and his detailed dialogue, are all anathema to pure neo-realist theory. Yet, the neo-realist spirit is strong, and not simply because Rosi usually insists on filming on the actual locations where historical action took place. His films reflect precisely the profound analysis of which the neo-realists spoke so often. *Salvatore Giuliano* (1967) is, to my mind, the finest Italian film since the war. Its stark, unswerving search for the truth — modified consciously by the knowledge of the impossibility of finding it — is expressed through an unsettling analysis of the forces at work in society during the brief life of the Sicilian "bandit". In speaking about his relationship to neo-realism and *Salvatore Giuliano*, Rosi explains:

It's true that I have a rapport with the films of neo-realism. After all, everything started for me with Visconti and *La terra trema*. That was the first time I really did anything in the cinema and it was a very fundamental experience for me, that contact with reality: the reality of a small village in Sicily, with real fishermen who became our actors. Visconti followed a rigid structure; he had a very precise idea of what he wanted, and it was not in any way a documentary. I don't make documentaries either. I make documented films on a certain reality of life, and in this I do feel linked to the neo-realist experience. On the other hand, I make an effort — since *Salvatore Giuliano* — to interpret the facts and document. I don't try to represent life more or less exactly, but to interpret what I know of it . . . [*Salvatore Giuliano*] is about the pain of a Sicilian village, about people badly treated, used, exploited by different political powers. It is a film indeed, about a whole framework of politics which is central to all of Italy. Therefore I couldn't make a film just about a man. I profited by the character, Salvatore Giuliano, to make a sort of discourse about institutions, about the different forces of the police, but above all, about justice and the negation of justice. And, of course, about various versions, various interpretations of "the truth".

Since then, Rosi has made films about the corruption of city governments by land speculation (*Mani sulla città*, 1963), war as class oppression (*Uomini contro*, 1970), the hypocrisy and corruption involved in the "restoration" of the Naples government after the war by the American military (*Lucky Luciano*, 1973), and the disturbing manipulation of historical-social-political "truth" by both a reactionary government and the Italian Communist Party (*Cadaveri eccellenti*, 1975). His films are also sophisticated critiques of film itself as cultural fact. While neo-realism proper was by implication critical of previous Italian cinema (refusing, in Zavattini's words, the "lies and myths" of pre-war films), Rosi's films are often explicit statements concerning cinema and society, culture and politics. In *Lucky Luciano*, for example, he reduces the romantic and "exciting" gangster violence of fifty years of cinema into one jolting balletic sequence of bloodshed in order to suggest that such violence, while real enough, has been too long exploited by the "official" screens to

mask the equally real and much more dangerously widespread violence and corruption by the "respectable" and "law-abiding" ruling classes.

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

Notes

- 1 It is not clear exactly where the term "neo-realism" came from, nor who was the first to use it. Morlion claims rather vaguely that it was invented by unnamed Catholic critics. Visconti claimed his editor Mario Serandrei first used it after seeing the rushes of *Ossessione*. Umberto Barbaro, evidently, was the first to use it in print in *Cinema* in 1942, but he applied it to French cinema.
- 2 Maurice Schéfer and François Truffaut, "Entretien avec Roberto Rossellini", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 37, July 1954.
- 3 I have leaned on a number of sources for this historical summary, including Denis Mack Smith, *The making of Italy 1796-1870*; Giuliano Procacci, *History of the Italian people*; Luigi Villari, *The liberation of Italy*; Norman Kogan, *A political history of postwar Italy*.
- 4 *History of the Italian people*, *op. cit.* p. 425.
- 5 Olindo Guerrini, *Le rime di Lorenzo Stecchetti*, quoted by G.M. Caraniga, "Realism in Italy", *The age of realism*, p. 329.
- 6 Particularly useful is the discussion of the lack of social analysis in neo-realist cinema in the light of the ideas of Georg Lukács and the films of

Francesco Rosi, "Neo-réalisme et réalisme critique" by Michel Ciment in his *Le dossier Rosi*.

- 7 See Parker Tyler's discussion of De Sica in *The shadow of an airplane climbs the Empire State Building: a world theory of film*, pp. 223-230.
- 8 David Overbey, "Rosi in context", *Sight and sound*, Summer, 1976.
- 9 Smith, *Making of Italy*, *op. cit.*
- 10 Caraniga, "Realism in Italy", *op. cit.*, p. 331.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 349.
- 12 For a succinct but solid discussion of the basic arguments about realism and cinema, see Andrew Tudor, *Theories of film*.
- 13 Eric Rhode, *A history of the cinema*.
- 14 Quoted by Roy Arnes, *Patterns of realism*.
- 15 Governments in general seem particularly sensitive to the reputations of their female population. In 1964, for example, the French censor required Jean-Luc Godard to change the title of his *La femme mariée* to *Une femme mariée* before allowing its release. This gentlemanly concern evidently even crosses national borders: Joseph Losey's *The romantic Englishwoman* became *Une anglaise romantique* in France. Nor is Italy the only nation whose government officials could become upset over the display of apparently national problems in foreign cinemas. Claire Booth Luce, then U.S. Ambassador to Italy, caused headlines with her outrage over the importation into Italy of Richard Brooks's *The blackboard jungle* from her native land in 1954.
- 16 This is neither a unique nor surprising phenomenon. One need only consider the American cinema during the Great Depression. The films of Satyajit Ray can never hope to attract more than a fraction of the audience which flocks to see popular musical films in India. Nor do the many foreign workers in France attend films about the plight of the North African workers in France, preferring instead to see Egyptian comedies, musicals, and melodramas.
- 17 *The sociology of film art*.

8 1908 was the year of Croce's statement to the effect that Marxism was dead. If not moribund, the socialist movement had split in two as a result of triumph and collapse. Italy was experiencing an economic crisis marked by the growing monopolistic ownership of major industry. Arturo Labriola and Alcide de Ambris led an agricultural strike in the Parma region which lasted for months. The temporary success of the strike led to the real beginnings of organized contact between industrial workers and the peasants in the South. When the strike in Parma finally failed, the less activist-oriented wing of the movement gained control.

9 Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) was a revolutionary who spent most of his life in exile, and who actively supported the demand for an independent and united Italian Republic. For a time he was called back to serve in the Roman Republic of 1848, and then, bitterly opposed to Cavour, he went back into exile.

As has been noted, the reputation of Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1872), who is often cited as the best lyric poet in nineteenth century Italian literature, is based on a very small number of poems and a few prose works. His poetry, while not ignoring society completely, concerns itself primarily with personal considerations of man's insignificance in the face of an indifferent universe.

Gianbattista Niccolini (1782-1861) was a minor but prolific writer of plays and verse. His most famous theatre pieces, *Giovanni da Procida* (1830) and *Arnaldo da Brescia* (1843), are romantically patriotic. Mazzini is undoubtedly alone in preferring the latter to the former.

10 Those poets who belonged to the "*Dolce stil/nuova*" (sweet new style) movement, including Francesco Petrarca. It is unclear why Vittorini excepts Petrarca from the charge of "Arcadianism", save that Petrarca set, perfected, and moved with profound freedom within the poetic conventions of the school. Substitute "manner" for "Arcady" and the same line of reasoning is used by Chiarini in his discussion of neo-realism.

11 Vincenzo Monti (1745-1828) was, for fifteen years, the official poet of the Papal court at Rome. He wrote a great many occasional poems to commemorate, among other happenings, Pius VI's travels, land reclamation, and the first Italian ascent in a balloon. His verse is always formally elegant, verse and plays both being modelled along classical lines. Evidently, he espoused no political convictions, for he wrote on politics from every possible point of view.

4. A Thesis on Neo-Realism by Cesare Zavattini

This essay is actually made up of three articles by Zavattini: "*Alcune idee sul cinema*", *Revista del cinema italiano*, December, 1952; "*Tesi sul neorealismo*", *Emilia*, 21 November, 1953; "*Il neorealismo secondo me*", first delivered at the Congress of Parma on Neo-Realism, December 3, 4, 5, 1953, and later printed in *Rivista del cinema italiano*, 3, March 1954.

Zavattini has several basic ideas about neo-realism and the cinema ("which I will repeat until everyone listens"). These turn up again and again in his articles and in the various interviews with him, often with very little modification in either phrasing or illustrative examples. Thus the three articles named have been edited together here to avoid the repetition which would have resulted in printing all three. No violence has been done to any of his ideas. This essay as it now stands encompasses his central ideas; his examples impart the flavour of the man himself.

There is no doubt that our first, and most superficial, reaction to daily existence is boredom. Reality seems deprived of all interest as long as we cannot succeed in surmounting and overcoming our moral and intellectual sloth. It is, therefore, not surprising that the cinema has always felt the "natural" and practically inevitable necessity of inserting a story into reality in order to make it thrilling and spectacular. It is evident that in this manner one could spontaneously escape from reality; it is as if nothing could be done to prevent the interference of the imagination.

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

Yet, in fact, we are now aware that reality is extremely rich. We simply had to learn how to look at it. The task of the artist — the neo-

realist artist at least — does not consist in bringing the audience to tears and indignation by means of transference, but, on the contrary, it consists in bringing them to reflect (and *then*, if you will, to stir up emotions and indignation) upon what they are doing and upon what others are doing; that is, to think about reality precisely as it is.

From a profound and unconscious lack of confidence in confronting reality, from an illusory and ambiguous evasion, we have gone on to an unlimited confidence in things, events, and in men.

Naturally, this taking of sides requires us to dig deeply, to give reality the power and faculty of communication, the radiance, which, up until the time of neo-realism, we didn't believe it could possess.

It has often been written that the war was the keystone for neo-realism. This overwhelming event upset men's souls; film directors, each in his own way, tried to transpose this overwhelming emotion onto the screen. As we saw absolutely no reason for participating in it, the war seemed particularly monstrous for us Italians. We had far more reasons for not becoming involved. This rebellion, however, was not limited to that particular war; it went much further. It was the absolute — I would even say the eternal — revelation that war always violates those fundamental human needs and values which are so dear to us. This revelation was, in my opinion, the starting point of a vast human uprising.

You might reply that this revelation was not the distinction of Italy alone. I would tend to agree. Nonetheless, those very qualities which many take to be the faults of our people, but which are actually our essential virtues — extreme individualism, a lack of overweening social pride, and so on — urge us towards a full and passionate reaction against the supreme evil of war. It was not "historical man" who acted — that abstract character in novels which follows a course of action that is unrelated to a specific time and deals with dates of past, present and future was indistinctly — on the contrary, it was the real, deep thinking, hidden man who acted. You might object by pointing out that "historical man" and the man without a label exist side by side. That is true enough, except that they co-exist *usefully* only when, by the principle of clear channels of communication, they find a common level and merge; that is to say that the former, with his awareness, and the latter, with his profoundly original drive to live, must be in real contact. The need to

live, when it is rich and happy, can transcend its limits more easily when, as in this case, it inspires and enlightens an entire fallen people who seemingly could no longer make the smallest contribution to humanity.

I dare to think that *other* peoples, even after the war, have shown that they continued to consider man as a historical *subject*, as historical material, with determined, almost inevitable, actions. This is why they, unlike the Italians, did not give the cinema its freedom. For them, everything continued; for us, everything began. For them the war had been just another war; for us, it had been the last war. What were the discoveries and the consequences of this rush of post-war pioneers, which were new, not because they had never before been known, but because they had never been felt in such a collective and tenacious manner? The results were the endless possibility of studying man that we see opening before us, a non-abstract and concrete study of man, as concrete as the men who provoked and underwent the war. We needed to know and to see how these terrible events could have occurred. The cinema was the most direct and immediate way of making this sort of study. It was preferable to other art forms which did not possess a language which would readily express our reactions against the lies of those old, generalized ideas in which we found ourselves clothed at the outbreak of the war, and which had prevented us from attempting the smallest rebellion.

This powerful desire of the cinema to see and to analyse, this hunger for reality, for truth, is a kind of concrete homage to other people, that is, to all who exist. This, among other things, is what distinguishes neo-realism from the American cinema. In effect, the American position is diametrically opposed to our own: whereas we are attracted by the truth, by the reality which touches us and which we want to know and understand directly and thoroughly, the Americans continue to satisfy themselves with a sweetened version of truth produced through transpositions.

That is why the Americans are undergoing a crisis; they have no idea what subjects to use. This is not possible in Italy, for here, there can never be a lack of truth. Every hour of the day, every place, every person, can be portrayed if they are shown in a manner which reveals and emphasizes the collective elements which continually shape them.

This is why one cannot speak of a crisis of subjects (facts), but only of the possibility, as the case may be, of a crisis of content (the interpretation of facts).

This essential difference was very clearly expressed by an American producer who told me:

In America, the scene of a plane passing over is shown in this sequence: a plane passes, machine-gun fire opens, the plane falls. In Italy: a plane passes, it passes again, and then again.

It is the absolute truth. But it is still not enough. It is not enough to have the plane pass by three times; it must pass by twenty times. We work, therefore, to extricate ourselves from abstractions.

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

Let us move on to style. How can we express this reality (truth) in the cinema? First, I would like to repeat what I have often said: The contents always engender their own expression, their own technique. Imagination, therefore, is allowed, but only on the condition that it exercise itself within reality and not on the periphery. Let me be clear: I do not intend to give the impression that only "news items" matter to me. I have tried to concentrate on these with the intention of putting them together again in the most faithful way, using a bit of imagination, which comes from a perfect understanding of the event, situation, or fact itself. Obviously, it would be more coherent for the camera to catch them at the moment they develop. This is what I intend to do when I make my film on Italy.¹ It should never be forgotten, of course, that any relationship with an idea one wishes to express implies a choice which is part of the creative act, but that choice must be made in relationship with the subject on the spot rather than the subject being a reconstruction following an imaginative choice. This is what I call the "cinema of encounter". This method of working should lead logically to two results: first, from an ethical point of view, directors would leave the studio in search of direct contact with reality. Therefore, we will create a sys-

tem of production which will bring with it the freshness of collective awareness. The number of films we make also plays an important part. If we make one hundred films a year which are inspired by these criteria, we would change the very conditions of production; if we only make three, we will have to submit to the conditions of production as they exist today.

This awareness of reality, which constitutes neo-realism, has two consequences in terms of narrative construction:

(1) Whereas in the past, cinema portrayed a situation from which a second was derived, and then a third from that, and so on, each scene being created only to be forgotten the next moment, today, when we imagine a scene, we feel the need to "stay" there inside it; we now know that it has within itself all the potential of being reborn and of having important effects. We can calmly say: give us an ordinary situation and from it we will make a spectacle. Centrifugal force which constituted (both from a technical and a moral point of view) the fundamental aspects of traditional cinema has now transformed itself into centripetal force.

(2) Whereas the cinema always told of life's external aspects, today neo-realism affirms that we should not be content with illusion, but should move toward analysis, or better, should move towards a synthesis within analysis.

For example: let us take two people who are looking for an apartment. In the past, the film-maker would have made that the starting point, using it as a simple and external pretext to base something else on. Today, one can use that simple situation of hunting for an apartment as the entire subject of the film. It must be understood, of course, that this is true only if the situation is always emphasized with all the echoes, reflections, and reverberations which are present in it.

We are, we recognize, still far from that necessary and true analysis. Now we can only speak of analysis simply in opposition to the vulgar artificiality of current production. For the time being we have only an analytic "attitude", but this attitude brings with it a powerful movement towards facts, a desire for comprehension, for adhesion, for participation, and for co-existence.

This principle of analysis arises in the consideration of style, in the most narrow sense, and is opposed to bourgeois synthesis. In the

bourgeois cinema, directors choose the most representative aspects of a situation of well-being and privilege of a part of Italian culture. To understand critically the range of neo-realism, one must stress the role played by Italian culture. Given the increasingly important collaboration of writers in the creation of the cinema, it could not be otherwise. But this collaboration cannot limit itself to the furnishing of novels as a basis for film; writers should rather contribute to the enrichment of cinematic expression, an expression rich with as much potential as literary language. If writers can involve themselves in a less tentative way than they usually do, they can bring great progress to the cinema and involve the whole of Italian culture.

It should, therefore, be clear that contrary to what was done before the war, the neo-realist movement recognized that the cinema should take as its subject the daily existence and condition of the Italian people, without introducing the coloration of the imagination, and thereby, force itself to analyze it for whatever human, historical, determining and definite factors it encompasses.

I believe that the world continues to evolve towards evil because we do not know the truth: we remain unaware of reality. The most necessary task for a man today consists in attempting to resolve, as best he can, the problem of this knowledge and lack of awareness. That is why the most urgent need of our times is social contact, social awareness. But no matter how artistically successful it may be, moral allegory is no longer enough. This awareness and contact must be direct. A hungry man, a downtrodden man, must be shown as he is, with his own first and last names. A story should never be constructed in which the hungry and the oppressed merely appear, for then everything changes, becomes less effective, and far less moral.

The true function of the arts has always been that of expressing the needs of the times; it is towards this function that we should redirect them. No other means of expression has the potential which the cinema possesses for making things known directly, for making contact immediately, to the largest number of people. It was, of course, natural that even those who understood such things were still obliged, for all sorts of reasons — some valid, others not, to compose stories invented according to tradition, and even more natural that they sought to add to the stories some elements of what they themselves had discovered.

In effect, this is what neo-realism is currently in Italy.

Roma città aperta, *Paiss*, *Sciuscià*, *Ladri di biciclette*, and *La terra* are films which contain passages of great significance. They were inspired by the possibility of telling everything, but, in a certain sense, they still involve translation because they tell stories and do not apply the documentary spirit simply and fully. In films like *Umberto D.*, the analytical fact is much more evident, but the analysis is set within the framework of traditional narrative. We have not yet come to real neo-realism.

The neo-realism of today is like an army prepared to march, the soldiers are prepared: Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti. They must lead the assault; it is the only way the war can be won. The important fact is that the movement has begun; now either we go forward to the very end, or we will have missed a great opportunity. Ahead of neo-realism vast perspectives are opening, perspectives beyond our imagination. We must grasp our chance. It will not be easy. Transforming every day situations into spectacle is not an easy thing to do; intensity of vision is required from both the director and the audience. It is a dialogue in which one must give life, reality, its historical importance, which exists in each instant.

As for recent productions, I can speak about those in which I was involved. I assure you that I do not hold *Stazione termini* as an important example of a human document in my neo-realistic career. The existence of a co-production² reduced to practically nothing the basic and original inspiration, which made the first conception of the film an examination of a precise and limited time and place.

My next film *Italia mia* has neo-realist origins in the most precise sense of the term. It began with my need to know and to understand my own country thoroughly, and my absolute confidence in the adventures and encounters I would meet. Aspects of neo-realism are contained in the central ideas of *Amore in città* and *Siamo donne*.³ In the latter, at least, there is a certain moral idea in the need for communication which inspires actors and their confessions to the audience. In the presence of these confessions, the audience should be able to liberate itself from the inferiority complex caused by the mythic idea of the "star".

Attacks on these films, like the attacks on other films based on a neo-realistic idea, indeed on neo-realism itself, have come in various

guises. Here are the principle ones:

Neo-realism describes only misery. Neo-realism can, and must, study misery as well as luxury. We have begun with misery because it is one of the most vivid realities of our time. I defy anyone to prove the contrary. To believe, or to feign belief, that after a half dozen films about poverty the theme has been exhausted is either an error or sophistry. The theme of poverty (of both the rich and the poor) is one to which a person could devote a lifetime. We have only just begun. If the rich raised their eyebrows at *Miracolo a Milano*, which is only a fable, they will soon see better than that. I place myself among the rich. What riches we have are not simply money (which is only the most apparent aspect of richness); we are also rich in the injustice and violence which money engenders. There is also a moral position which might be counted as a man's riches.

Neo-realism offers no solutions; shows no new roads; gives no conclusions; the films are totally evasive. I deny this with all of my being. Every moment of each of our films is a continual response to such accusations. As for solutions, it is not up to the artist to examine them. It is enough for him to make the need urgently felt.

Every day occurrences are not interesting; they do not constitute a dramatic spectacle. When a director evades the analysis of "every day occurrences" he obeys the more or less expressed desires of the capitalist system of cinema production; he gives in to the public's wish to escape reality; he is lazy. The putting together of one situation after another in a narrative line is not so very difficult. The analysis of a situation or an action in depth is extremely difficult. If it is done, however, it is dramatic and a spectacle.

We have the illusion — call it that if you like — that with us something completely different and new is beginning. Today a man who suffers before my eyes is absolutely different from a man who suffered a hundred years ago. I must concentrate all my attention on the man of today. The historical baggage that I carry within myself, and from which, by the way, I neither can nor want to free myself, must not prevent me from being what I wish to be, nor from using the means I have at hand to deliver this man from his pain. This man — and this is one of my basic and fixed ideas — has a first name and a last name. He is part of society in a way that concerns us, make no mistake about that. I feel his fascination. I must feel it in such a way that I

am urgently obliged to speak to him or of him, but not as a character of my imagination's invention; it is exactly at that moment one must beware, for it is then that the imagination attempts to come between reality and the self.

I have often had to explain that I do not wish to prohibit actors from playing in films. Of course actors have a place in films, it is simply that they have very little to do with neo-realistic cinema. The neo-realistic cinema does not ask those men in whom it is interested to have the talents of actors; their professional aptitudes have to do with the profession of being men. They need to be made aware of this, of course, which is the responsibility of the cinema. It is evident that this awareness can only be created or reinforced through the knowledge we give them of themselves, knowledge which we will attain through neo-realistic cinema.

How, then, does the imagination, the creative act, enter neo-realism? It is, of course, a very particular sort of imagination, and the creative act is a very new method of using that imagination.

For example: a woman goes to a shoe store to buy shoes for her son. The shoes cost 7,000 lire. The woman bargains to get them cheaper. The scene lasts ten minutes, whereas I have to make a film two hours long (we will discuss the commercial "rules" of distribution and exhibition which dictated that a film be of a certain length at another time). What then do I do? I analyze all the elements which go to make up the situation, what happened beforehand, what will come afterwards, and what is really happening while the situation exists. The woman buys the shoes, but what is happening to her son at the moment? What is happening in India which might be related to this particular pair of shoes? The shoes cost 7,000 lire. How did the woman get that money? What pain have they cost her? What do they represent for her? And the shoe shop owner who sells them: who is he? What relationship is created between these two people? There might be two other sons also there eating and chattering. Would you like to hear their conversation? Here they are. And it goes on.

It is the act of getting to the bottom of things, of showing the relationships between the situations and the process through which the situations come into being. If we analyze the purchase of a pair of shoes, we see before us a complex and vast world, rich in scope and possibilities, rich in practical, social, economic and psychological

motifs. The banal disappears, for it never really existed.

I am against exceptional persons, heroes. I have always felt an instinctive hate towards them. I feel offended by their presence, excluded from their world as are millions of others like me. We are all characters. Heroes create inferiority complexes throughout an audience. The time has come to tell each member of the audience that he is the true protagonist of life. The result would be a constant emphasis on the responsibility and dignity of every human being. This is exactly the ambition of neo-realism: to strengthen everyone, and to give everyone the proper awareness of a human being.

The term neo-realism, in its larger sense, implies the elimination of technical-professional collaboration, including that of the screen writer. Manuals, grammars, syntax no longer have any meaning, no more than the terms "first take", "reaction shot" and all the rest. Each of us will "direct" in his own way, "compose a scenario" in his own way. Neo-realism shatters all schemes, shuns all dogmas. There can be no "first takes" nor "reaction shots" *a priori*. The subject, the adaptation, the direction cannot, in neo-realism, be three distinct phases of the same work. It is true that they are so today, but this is an anomaly. In neo-realism, the screen writer and the writer of dialogue disappear; there will be no scenario written beforehand, and no dialogue to adapt.

We must come to terms with the unique *auteur*, the director, but he will, in the long run, have little in common with either the theatre or cinema directors of today.

Everything is in flux. Everything is moving. Someone makes his film: everything is continually possible and everything is full of infinite potentiality, not only during the shooting, but during the editing, the mixing, throughout the entire process as well.

I have been working in the Italian cinema since 1934. I know that I have contributed to the destruction of a few of the usual and traditional schemes. If I place myself among those who believe that neo-realism is one of the most powerful forces to which we can address ourselves, it is not by any lack of imagination. On the contrary, I must constantly pull myself to a halt with both hands so as to refuse my imagination entrance into my work. I have enough imagination in the traditional sense of the word to sell and resell, but neo-realism requires us to allow our imagination to exercise itself only *in loco*

and through reality, for the situations increase their natural imaginative force when they are studied in depth. It is only then that they can become dramatic spectacles, because it is then that they become revelations.

I know very well that one can make marvelous films like those of Charlie Chaplin, and that they are not neo-realist works. I know very well that there are Americans, Russians, Frenchmen, and so forth, who have made masterpieces which bring honour to humanity. They have certainly not wasted film. And God knows how many distinguished works they will continue to produce, depending upon their genius, using stars, studios, and the adaptations of novels. But the men of the Italian cinema, in order to continue to search for and to conserve their own style and inspiration, having once courageously set ajar the doors of reality and truth, must now open them wide.

Notes

1 *Italia mia*, a film which was never made. It came from Zavattini's idea to make a film about a trip around the world, and then developed into a project for a film about a journey throughout Italy. He was particularly enthusiastic about the project in 1951 and 1952. His idea was to move through various social environments filming brief episodes and rites. In 1953, he described the project: "A time will come when in the cinema we will share a man's everyday preoccupations, observe him doing the most ordinary tasks, and we will follow all of this with the same attention the Greeks gave to their great playwrights."

2 For reasons best known to himself — his films represented the opposite end of the cinematic spectrum from neo-realism — David O. Selznick, throughout the Fifties, attempted to interest various neo-realists in making films for him. In 1949, he tried to sign Roberto Rossellini to a contract, perhaps to "protect" Ingrid Bergman whom he had "discovered" for American films in 1939; Rossellini refused, going back to Italy to make *Stromboli* and several other films with Bergman, but without Selznick. The producer then approached De Sica in the early Fifties, the result was *Stazione termini* (U.S. title: *Indiscretion of an*

American wife), with a script by Zavattini, directed by De Sica, and starring Jennifer Jones, who was then both Mrs. Selznick and Selznick's most valuable star.

The 1954 film had a huge budget (for Italy and De Sica), two major Hollywood stars (Montgomery Clift played Miss Jones's lover), and "additional dialogue" by Truman Capote. Whatever Zavattini-De Sica's original intent (or that of Selznick, for that matter), the film became an over-produced, semi-glossy melodrama of hysterical adultery in Rome's central train station. There were three versions of the film when it was released: in Europe outside of Italy, the film was shortened by about half an hour; in America it was shortened by one third; the Italian version maintained the original length, but was entirely dubbed into Italian. The film was a critical and financial failure in all three versions.

This film, however, marked the beginning of De Sica and Zavattini's move away from neo-realism towards comedies and melodramas with big budgets and stars.

Zavattini produced (with Riccardo Ghione and Marco Ferreri) *Amore in città*, and collaborated on one of the episodes (with Franco Maselli): "*Storia di Caterina*". *Siamo donne* was also an episode film partially written by Zavattini and Luigi Chiari. The idea was to have several stars "play" themselves (Ingrid Bergman, Anna Magnani, Alda Valli, and others) in short "revelatory" and "realistic" episodes directed by several directors (Rossellini, Visconti, and others). The episodes ranged from interesting personality studies to fully scripted and artificial "star turns".

5. Concerning a Film about the River Po by Michelangelo Antonioni

Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-) was first a film critic (for *Corriere padano* and *Cinema*), then an assistant director (for Marcel Carné), and finally a director who has gained a well-merited international reputation as one of the most important artists in the Italian cinema. This essay was written for *Cinema* as a description of intention some time before he became active in making films.

It is not ridiculous to say that the people of the Po Valley are in love with the Po. In fact the river is surrounded by a halo of instinctive attraction, even of love, and, to a certain extent, the Po can be regarded as the despot of its valley. The people of the valley "feel" the Po. How this feeling comes to reification, we do not know. We only know that it is "in the air" and is felt as a subtle bewitchment.

Actually, this is a commonplace phenomenon in many places which are intersected by large rivers; it is as if it were the destiny of such lands to terminate in a river. There, life is endowed with particular customs and tendencies. A new, limited economy arises from the river. Children choose it for their favourite, often forbidden, games. In other words, a special intimacy, fed by different factors, is established, among which is the common struggle of the population against the waters. Almost every year, at the beginning of summer or of autumn, the waters set themselves against the population, through floods that are always tragically superb and forceful.

This flood is, therefore, a basic divining force in our hypothetical film. It is basic for two reasons: for the spectacle itself, and because it reveals the essence, the substance, of that love hinted at before. This attachment is strange; so is the steadfastness which resists the ordeals imposed by the floods. If today the floods leave the people in relative peace because of the new jetties and easily built shelters, we must not assume that the floods of the past have always receded without scoring deep marks. Very often the floods took human victims; they left

7. Why *Ladri di Biciclette*?
by Vittorio De Sica

Vittorio De Sica was born in Naples and became first a music hall entertainer, then a film actor, and finally a director himself, usually working in collaboration with Cesare Zavattini.

Why did I make that film? Well, after *Sciuscià*, I read some thirty or forty scripts, each more "beautiful" than the one before, full of facts and interesting situations. But I was looking for action which would be less apparently "extraordinary", which could happen to anyone (above all to the poor), action which no newspaper wants to talk about.

Anyway, everything happened as follows: one evening Zavattini called me to tell me he had read a beautiful book, *Ladri di biciclette*, by Luigi Bartolini, and that the book had inspired him to write a story for me. The next day I read the first draft of the story.

The story differs from the book fairly radically; the latter is really rather cheerful, colourful, and picaresque. It suffices to note that the protagonist of the film is not Bartonini's, but a bill poster who wanders through Rome in a desperate search for his means of transport. From that point, there is another atmosphere, other interests, more adapted to my own means and scope. Why did we then acquire the title and the rights to a book from which we planned a free adaptation? To acknowledge a remarkable writer who, with his vivid style, has given me inspirational motivation for my new film. My scope is to trace the "dramatic" in every-day situations, the wonderful in small events, what many consider to be artificially embellished trivia.

What is the importance, after all, of stealing a bicycle, one which is far from bright and new? In Rome many are stolen every day and nobody cares, since it is of no importance to the rest of the city. Yet, to lose a bicycle is a grave event, a tragic circumstance, for those who have nothing else, who use it to go to work, who cherish it in the turmoil of city life. Why seek extraordinary adventures when we are pre-

sent ed daily with artless people who are filled with real distress?

It has been a long time since literature first discovered that modern dimension given to small things, that state of mind considered too "common". Thanks to the camera, the cinema has the means to capture that dimension. That is how I understand realism, which cannot be, in my opinion, mere documentation. If there is absurdity in this theory, it is the absurdity of those social contradictions which society wants to ignore. It is the absurdity of incomprehension through which it is difficult for truth and good to penetrate. Thus, my film is dedicated to the suffering of the humble.

"*Perché Ladri di biciclette?*", *La fiera letteraria*,
February 6, 1948.

8. A Few Words about Neo-Realism.

by Roberto Rossellini

Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977) is one of the toweringly important figures in Italian and international cinema. He began working in documentaries at the *Istituto Nazionale Luce* during the Fascist period, came into his own as a director immediately after the war, and continued making films outside the usual commercial structure until his death following his heart attack soon after serving on the jury at the Cannes Film Festival.

I am a director, not an aesthete, and I doubt whether I am capable of indicating with absolute precision what realism and neo-realism are. Nevertheless, even if there are probably those who can talk about it better than I, I can describe what I perceive neo-realism to be and what I have done. Neo-realism is the greatest possible curiosity about individuals: a need, appropriate to modern man, to speak of things as they are, to be aware of reality, in an absolutely concrete manner, conforming to that typically contemporary interest in statistical and scientific results; a sincere need, as well, to see men with humility, as they are, without resorting to stratagems in order to invent the extraordinary; to be aware of being able to arrive at the extraordinary through inquiry itself; a reality, whatever it is, in order to attain an understanding of things. To give anything its true value means to have understood its authentic and universal meaning.

There are those who still think of neo-realism as something external, as going out into the open air, as a contemplation of misery and suffering. For me, it is nothing other than the artistic form of truth. When truth is regained, we can arrive at expressing it. If the truth is a sham you can feel the falseness, and truth of expression is not achieved. Holding these ideas, I cannot believe in an entertainment film as it is understood in some industrial circles, of course, even outside Europe, if it is not a film which is at last partially capable of attaining the truth.

The subject of neo-realist film is the world; not story or narrative. It contains no preconceived thesis, because ideas are born in the film from the subject. It has no affinity with the superfluous and the merely spectacular, which it refuses, but is attracted to the concrete. It does not remain on the surface, but seeks out the most subtle aspects of the soul. It refuses recipes and formulas in its search for the motivating forces in each of us. Briefly, neo-realism poses problems for us and for itself in an attempt to make people think. We found ourselves, after the war, face-to-face with this commitment. What counted for us was the enquiry into truth, the correspondence to the real. For the first so-called Italian neo-realist directors, it was a real act of courage, and no one will deny that. After the innovators came the popularizers. They had nothing to transform, and perhaps they were able to explain themselves better: they provided a larger conception of neo-realism. In so far as they spread it, perhaps they are more important. Then, as was inevitable, came the deviations and transformations, but by then neo-realism had already travelled a long way on its road.

The birth of neo-realism is to be found first in certain romanticized film documents about the war, then in "true" war films, and eventually in minor films in which the formula (if I may call it that) of neo-realism is achieved through the spontaneous creations of the actors. Neo-realism was born unconsciously as dialectical film, after which it acquired a heart-felt consciousness of the social, human problems during the war and the post-war period. As an example of dialectical cinema, neo-realism harkens back to less immediate predecessors. With *Roma città aperta*, so-called neo-realism revealed itself to the world in an impressive way. From then on, from my first documentaries really, there has been only one direction.

I have no formulas or preconceptions, but if I were to look back at my films, undoubtedly I would come across elements which are in themselves constant, and which are repeated not systematically but naturally, especially the aspects of the chorus. Realistic film is in itself a chorale. The sailors of *La nave bianca* are as important as the refugees at the end of *L'Uomo della croce*, as the population of *Roma città aperta*, the partisans of *Paisà* and the monks of *Francesco, giullare di Dio*. *La nave bianca* is an example of a choral film: from the first scene of the sailors' letters from home, to that of the battle, to that

of the wounded who attend mass or play music and sing. There is also the pitiless cruelty of the machine in relation to man in the film: that supposedly unheroic aspect of the man who lives inside the ship in almost total darkness, in the midst of death, seeing only dials and gauges, wheels and levers; an aspect without apparent heroism or lyricism, and yet heroic to a tremendous degree.

Then there is the documentary attitude of observation and analysis, which I had learned in shooting my first short films, and which stood me in good stead when I later shot *Germania anno zero* and *Stromboli*.

Then, the perpetual return, even in the most rigorous documentary, to fantasy, for in man there is one part which leans toward the concrete and another which is attracted by pure imagination. The first tendency must not suffocate the second. From it comes the fantastic, even fabulous, aspects of *Il miracolo*, or *La macchina ammazzacattivi*, even of *Paisà* if you like, as well as of *Francesco, giullare di Dio*: the rain at the beginning, the young monk jostled by the soldiers, Saint Clare near the hut. Even the ending in the snow must have a properly fantastic appearance.

Finally, spirituality: I am not alluding to the religious aspects of *Stromboli* so much, nor to the heroine's cry to a divine power at the end, as to themes which I had already developed. How can it be denied that there was effective spirituality in *La nave bianca*, in *L'Uomo della croce*, in *Paisà*, in *Francesco, giullare di Dio* and *Il miracolo*?

Anyway, it cannot be doubted that I began by putting the accent on the collective above all. It was the war itself which motivated me; war and resistance are collective actions by definition. If from the collective I then passed to an examination of personality, as in the case of the child in *Germania anno zero* and the refugee of *Stromboli*, that was part of my natural evolution as a director.

In the narrative cinema, "waiting" is essential. Every solution is born from waiting. It is waiting which makes people live, which unchains reality; it is waiting which, after the preparation, gives lib-

"Due parole sul neorealismo",
Retrospective, 4, April 1953.