

The stylistic features of Italian Neorealism.

'In most movies the characters are locked into the machinery of narrative like theme park customers strapped into a roller coaster. Their ups and downs are as predetermined as their shrieks of terror and sighs of relief, and the audience goes along for the ride. But the people in this movie seem to move freely within it, making choices and mistakes and aware, at every turn, that things could be different.'

AO Scott on *The Descendants*¹

Italian director Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* was released in 1945 just after the end of World War II. Shot in the war-scarred city it takes its name from it is the story of 'ordinary people who become heroes under extraordinary circumstances'² during the German occupation of their city. In Martin Scorsese's documentary *My Voyage to Italy* he notes that *Rome Open City* is the first of a series of films, subsequently labelled neo-realist that broke down the 'barrier between documentary and fiction and in the process permanently changed the rules of movie making'.³ Stylistically the films labelled as neo-realist are quite different but they are held together by their moment in time, working class protagonists, critical examination of recent history⁴ and desire to tell the truth⁵. In this respect the influence of the tendency has been long lasting and though they are by no means pertaining to be documentary, it could be said that recent films such as *Weekend*, *Fish Tank*, *Margaret* and even *The Descendants*, with their character focus and loose plotlines are directly related to neo-realism. In this essay I will describe the stylistic features of neo-realism drawing on the historic political situation

¹ AO Scott, 'The Descendants', New York Times (15.11.2011) as cited in Film Eye Magazine, 'The Descendants' (UK, 2012)

² *My Voyage to Italy* (1999), Martin Scorsese

³ *My Voyage to Italy* (1999), Martin Scorsese

⁴ Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell, 'Italy: Neorealism and After' in *Film History: An Introduction* 2nd edition (USA: McGraw Hill, 2003), pg361

⁵ Although this 'truth' telling was often manipulated to serve the purposes of the director.

that spawned the tendency and looking in more detail at two of its most important and very different films *Rome Open City* and *Terra Trema*.

Scorsese proposes that neo-realism was Italy's way of announcing its humanism after years of Fascist rule and it is certainly true that the new breed of left leaning Italian directors such as Rossellini, Visconti and De Sica wanted to sever their connections with Italian cinema's past which had been dominated by historical epics and bourgeois 'white telephone' comedies. Their new kind of film emerged from the ruins of Italy's war-torn cities, encapsulating real experiences and focusing on 'the poverty and pessimism of ordinary people.'⁶ Post-war austerity meant that resources were scarce so 'the content demanded the form'⁷ and filmmakers generally used non-actors, and shot on location using natural light and black and white film stock. Cameras had to be mobile which often meant they recorded pictures only and sound had to be post-synchronised sometimes creating a disconnected effect.

Despite the focus on the immediate there were external influences on neo-realism including 19th century verismo literature and contemporary American literature by Hemingway, Faulkner and James M Cain (which had an unsentimental tone, working class protagonists and vernacular language). One of Cain's novels was the basis of Visconti's *Obsessione* (1943), which predated *Rome Open City* and is seen as a forerunner of neo-realism. Within cinema the French poetic realist tendency of the 1930s was an important influence, and both Visconti and Rossellini spent time working with one of its chief exponents Jean Renoir. Other precedents include, maybe surprisingly, the LUCE documentaries made under the Fascist regime.⁸

⁶ David Parkinson, *Neo-realism*, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/cinemaitalia/neorealism.html>

⁷ Christopher Wagstaff, 'Rossellini and Neo-realism', in David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton and Geoffrey Newell-Smith (eds), *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real* (BFI, 2000), pg 37

⁸ 'Despite labelling cinema "the strongest weapon", Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was content to confine propaganda to the documentaries and newsreels produced by L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE)'. David Parkinson, *Neo-realism*, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/cinemaitalia/neorealism.html>

Otto Preminger said that the history of cinema is divided into two eras: one before and one after *Rome Open City*⁹. Rossellini himself was less enthusiastic about the film seeing it as weaker than his subsequent work. In truth it is a transitional film, its 'cinematic innovation grafted onto dramatic convention'.¹⁰ Its melodramatic plot, tightly scripted dialogue and use of known actors have much in common with preceding cinema. But its rapid post-war release, subject matter, gritty look and authentic locations set it apart from popular movies of the time. The film is collaged from a number of true stories, and re-enacts events that culminate in the torture of a resistance leader and the execution of a priest; it was scripted by among others Federico Fellini. Although the film was made in Rome, in the places where violent events had taken place and were still fresh in the minds of the actors, extras and production staff, its reputation as a quasi-documentary is more due to the closeness in time to the events it reconstructed than to its look (the events took place in early 1944 and the film was released in the summer of 1945). In 1945 Rome's main studios, Cinecittà, were still out of action (the allies had used them as a refugee camp) so interior sets were constructed in a betting shop and filming took place at night when the electricity supply was less intermittent. These interior shots have a shadowy expressionistic look and the film has been described as 'realist in content but expressionist in means' especially in its 'melodramatic manipulation of light'¹¹. Although seemingly at odds with a realist, naturalistic approach, this ramping up of atmosphere is an effective device and relates quite directly to Renoir and poetic realism which depicted 'real', working people and their lives. Legend around the film says that the film stock was bought in short lengths on the black market, giving the film a variable look. In fact the restorer of the film has said that only three types of stock were used and its streaky look and changes in exposure were due to poor processing of the negative.¹² Rossellini said that

⁹ David Forgacs, *Rome Open City* (BFI, 2000, reprinted 2007), back cover notes.

¹⁰ David Forgacs, *Rome Open City* (BFI, 2000, reprinted 2007), pg12.

¹¹ Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini: His Life and Films* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), pg178-9. As cited in Sidney Gottlieb, 'Rossellini, Open City and Neo Realism', in Sidney Gottlieb (ed) *Roberto Rossellini's Rome Open City* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pg34

¹² From a report by Mario Calzini, the technician in charge of restoration in 1995. In, David Forgacs, *Rome Open City* (BFI, 2000, reprinted 2007), pg26

the technical perfection of a film was less important than its content; he was unconcerned about surface roughness and more concerned with a shot's composition. This seems a little disingenuous; the 'rough' look of the film added to its 'realness', something that the director must have appreciated even if it was not wholly intended.

Rome Open City's characters are to some extent caricatures, clichéd renditions of the 'good' working people and resistance fighters and the 'bad' Germans and nightclub girls with loose morals. One girl who has an apartment funded by her dalliances with German soldiers is seen making telephone calls from her bed on her own ornate phone - a direct link to the bourgeois 'white telephone' films. Anna Magnani's ferocious, hardworking Pina, is a different 'type', after being shot by the Nazis she is cradled by the priest, Pieta-like. Her sudden death, half way through the film is a shock to viewers and her killer's identity is never revealed because 'in real life—as opposed to the movies—good people may die pointlessly'¹³. The scene of her fatal run towards her fiancée is dynamically shot from many angles on a number of different cameras, and includes long lens shots, giving it a news-reel style and making it look authentically real. Although film stock was in short supply there was no shortage of cameras in the city and filming from multiple angles meant numerous shots could be gathered from one take cutting down on production time and costs.

Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948) is a very different film and is often seen as 'the consummation of the neo-realist aesthetic'¹⁴. Entirely set and shot in the small village of Aci Trezza in Sicily using non-professional actors, it is the story of a family of fishermen who try to escape poverty and exploitation by buying their own boat. Their boat is wrecked and they lose their house, but after much misery the film lifts slightly at the end when Antonio – the film's hero – realises that others can learn from what they tried to do.

¹³ Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell, 'Italy: Neorealism and After' in *Film History: An Introduction* 2nd edition (McGraw Hill, USA, 2003), pg365

¹⁴ Shiela Johnston, 'La Terra Trema', in Pam Cook & Mieke Bernink (eds), *The Cinema Book* 2nd Edition (BFI, 1999), pg79.

La Terra Trema is far less plot driven than *Rome, Open City* with a gently meandering narrative and an inconclusive ending, but its rhythm and intensity make it a more cohesive film. The non-actor cast improvised much of the dialogue from suggestions by Visconti and although to some extent stereotyped, the characters are realistic making the whole effect more 'real'. However the film's length (nearly three hours) and the loose plotting along with the Sicilian dialect of the cast make it a more difficult film and it was commercially unsuccessful.

It is an almost overwhelmingly visual film with much of the imagery drawing on the same expressionistic influences that Rossellini has in *Rome Open City*. Shadows and chiaroscuro sculpt the figures both within interiors and exteriors, which often seem to be shot in the half-light of dusk. The interior scenes in particular have a claustrophobic composition reminiscent of paintings by Caravaggio (who spent time in Scilly and used working people as models).

All of the action happens within the confines of the village, giving the film a sense of the stifling smallness of village life. Visconti chooses not to go on the fishing boats to see the men at work as Rossellini does in the strikingly brutal tuna-fishing scene in *Stromboli* (1949). The one brief shot on board boat when Antonio's brother Cola leaves the island seems to use back projection and uncomfortably stands out from the rest of the film.

Although a Marxist, Visconti was less concerned with current politics and the aftermath of the war than other neo-realist directors. His focus instead was the plight and nobility of poor people in the Italian South. The stylised look and voice over narration mean the total effect may be 'self consciously

composed'¹⁵ and 'not realistic but lyrical',¹⁶ but it is a film of breathtaking beauty and its imagery has influenced late 20th century visual culture.¹⁷

It can be concluded that rather than a movement with a manifesto, neo-realism was born out of necessity and a historic moment in time. There is in truth little coherence between the films and it is almost impossible to list common factors; for instance Visconti's beautiful visuals are at odds with Rossellini's resolute anti-spectacle, 'if I mistakenly make a beautiful shot, I cut it out' he once remarked¹⁸. Although it purports to be 'real' in actuality as we have seen 'neo-realism relies no less on artifice than do other film styles'¹⁹. The tendency came to a natural end in the 1950s when there was less to be said about the harsh life of the Italian people. Despite this, as alluded to at the beginning, the influence of these directors and the films that they made is far reaching and can be seen in film from 1950s kitchen sink dramas in the UK to the French New Wave through to contemporary cinema in Iran and Taiwan and even in American Independent cinema.

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¹⁵ Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell, 'Italy: Neorealism and After' in *Film History: An Introduction* 2nd edition (McGraw Hill, USA, 2003), pg362

¹⁶ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Visconti*, (Cinema One, BFI, London, 1973), pg53

¹⁷ See fashion photography by the likes of Bruce Weber and Steven Meisel and advertising by fashion companies such as Dolce and Gabbana.

¹⁸ Quoted in Peter Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pg14. As cited in Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell, 'Italy: Neorealism and After' in *Film History: An Introduction* 2nd edition (USA, McGraw Hill, 2003), pg367.

¹⁹ Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell, 'Italy: Neorealism and After' in *Film History: An Introduction* 2nd edition (McGraw Hill, USA, 2003), pg362

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Obsessione (1943), Luchino Visconti
Rome, Open City (1945), Roberto Rossellini
La Terra Trema (1948), Luchino Visconti
Stromboli (1949), Roberto Rossellini
My Voyage to Italy (1999), Martin Scorsese
Fish Tank (2009), Andrea Arnold
Margaret (2011), Kenneth Lonergan
Weekend (2011), Andrew Haigh
The Descendants (2011), Alexander Payne