

Neorealist Cinema *and* Post-Neorealist Cinema

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ITALIAN NEOREALIST CINEMA AND ITALIAN POST-NEOREALIST CINEMA

One may think that a crowded area of film studies such as the history of Italian cinema and, more specifically, the history of Italian cinema in the 1945-1970 time frame could be experiencing a slowing down. On the contrary, the scholarship on Italian film is alive and well and has in fact known a phase of revival in the last few years.

This decade opened with the publication of Peter Bondanella's *A History of Italian Cinema* in 2010, the reworked edition of his seminal *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (originally published in 1983). The following year Howard Hughes offered his *Cinema Italiano: The Complete Guide from Classic to Cult* and Flavia Brizio-Skov's edited collection *Popular Italian Cinema: Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society* also appeared. 2013 is going to be remembered as a year that confirms this relentless revival, as Louis Bayman-Sergio Rigoletto's edited collection, also titled *Popular Italian Cinema*, was published by Palgrave-Macmillan in January to be followed in May by Giacomo Lichtner's *Fascism in Italian Cinema since 1945: The Politics and Aesthetics of Memory* (also a Palgrave-Macmillan book) and by the upcoming publication in late December of Peter Bondanella's *The Italian Cinema Book* for the British Film Institute Press.

As much as Italian cinema scholars devote their attention to understudied aspects of the country's film production in the second half of the 20th century, a natural consequence of this revived interest is the fact that the cinematic phenomenon by which for many decades the entirety of Italian postwar cinema was defined, is also, by default, experiencing a reassessment. In this context, the two Edinburgh University Press volumes in the 'Traditions in World Cinema' series *Italian Neorealist Cinema* by Torunn Haaland (2012, available as a paperback as of December 2013) and *Italian Post-Neorealist Cinema* by Paolo Barattoni (available as a paperback as of January 2014) are welcomed contributions.

If, as its author notes, in the mid-1970s and early 1980s the rediscovery of the hidden merits of twenty years of forgotten filmmaking under Fascism had led scholars to believe that "it appeared that much of one had celebrated in neorealist film... was far from miraculously new" (p.3), Haaland's volume subscribes to the current critical perception of neorealism as a phenomenon characterized by the negotiation between the continuity with some of the filmmaking produced under Fascism and a renovating impulse derived from the Resistance. This was a view already foreshadowed in some of the influential essays included in Sidney Gottlieb's edited collection *Roberto Rossellini's Rome Open City* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), although that notion is here transplanted from a case study context to a more encompassing reassessment of the whole 1945-1954 neorealist production.

After an introductory chapter on the historical contingencies that led to the emergence of the neorealist phenomenon, Chapter 2 'Realism and neorealism' focuses on the instances of continuity with Italian and foreign realist trends circulating before the end of World War II, the author having previously reminded us that "a realist aesthetic had already been advocated by fascist leaders and intellectuals." (p.6) Subsequently, Haaland sums up the most influential criticism produced on the topic of postwar neorealism, representing (and successfully simplifying for the non-expert reader) the often conflicting readings of neorealism offered by Bazin, Aristarco, Zavattini and Deleuze, to name some.

In light of the array of influences that informed the phenomenon, Haaland rightfully points out that "the difficulty in arriving at an aesthetic definition sheds light on the essentially hybrid nature of the phenomenon." (p.27) Emphasizing this hybridity, the author subscribes to the now widely accepted notion that "more than a *movement*, neorealism was a *moment*." (p.27) Haaland's work distinguishes two phases of the neorealist film phenomenon: "an initial phase... between 1945-9 that embraces most of its masterpieces and a second phase that only the most generous critics stretch to include Federico Fellini's *Le notti di Cabiria*, 1957" (p.25), while most critics consider it concluded in 1954 with the release of Fellini's *La strada* and Luchino Visconti's *Senso*. If an all-encompassing aesthetic definition of neorealism cannot be offered, Haaland states that the

masterpieces produced by Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti in the first phase have in common "the search for a relation of immediacy between the cinematic eye and current socio-historical realities." (p.26)

Italian Neorealist Cinema dedicates a chapter each to the three 'masters' of neorealism. If a defect had to be found in the book it is its tendency to define Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti's approaches to neorealist filmmaking by focusing mostly on their early production, before 1949. In a (successful) attempt to produce innovative considerations on films that have been discussed so many times in the scholarship on Italian cinema, all of these three chapters present the directors' treatment of urban spaces as the 'angle' by which the novelty of neorealism is analyzed. Haaland's final chapter is dedicated to the so-called 'minor' neorealist filmmakers such as Luigi Zampa and Renato Castellani and their attempts "to reconcile traditional narratives and generic conventions with socio-geographic concreteness and critiques of injustice." (p.170)

The most refreshing aspect of Haaland's study, however, is the author's choice of dedicating a whole chapter to the phenomenon of Italian literary neorealism, this being a manoeuvre that scholars who have engaged with the topic of cinematic neorealism have tended to avoid in the most recent studies on the phenomenon. Haaland's discussion of the neorealist works written by Cesare Pavese, Alberto Moravia, Elio Vittorino, Italo Calvino and Carlo Levi will be familiar to those who have studied the neorealist phenomenon in an Italian Studies context, but quite insightful for those who have approached the study of neorealism in a Film Studies context in the last fifteen years. According to Haaland, neorealist film and literature share the tendency of portraying history from below, "from the position of those who suffer from, and have the least impact upon 'History'" (p.89), and "were we to identify one single feature of neorealist film and literature that distinguished it from previous and later tradition, it would be this ability to conduct such a move". (p.89)

In conclusion, Haaland's *Italian Neorealist Cinema* is a work that, without any ambition of shockingly re-defining the current understanding of neorealism, rallies the most insightful literature on its subject matter. It synthesizes the key notions inhabiting the critical debate on the topic and serves very well as an introductory reading for those who are approaching neorealism early in their academic career and may be ideal as a textbook for a monographic course on Italian cinema of the 1945-1954 period.

The relationship between Haaland's book and Luca Barattoni's *Italian Post-Neorealist Cinema*, which could be perceived ideally as its 'sequel' as the two are part of the same series and their subject matter is tangential, is, however, problematic.

This is immediately evident in the fact that, contrary to Haaland's definition of neorealism as a 'moment', Barattoni does not shy away from referring to it as a 'movement'. Furthermore, whereas Haaland emphasizes neorealism's continuity with previous traditions as much as its innovation, Barattoni only takes in consideration the latter attribute, stating that "the Neorealist *rupture* was so radical [reviewer's emphases] that it is unthinkable that such a revolution could be easily filed away and disposed of" (p.49) and focuses on the rupturing reading of neorealism to come to the conclusion that it "was already born modernist." (p.49) Barattoni warns us that this modernist reading of the phenomenon is "especially true if one adopts Gilles Deleuze's epistemic reading of Neorealism as the birth of a new image" (p.3-4). Methodologically speaking, whereas Haaland offered us a plethora of critical readings to survey, here, the reader is supposed to subscribe to the Deleuzian view without being offered any possible alternative.

In a statement by its author "*Italian Post-Neorealist Cinema* is an attempt to establish twenty-five years of Italian motion-pictures as a formal and aesthetic continuum characterized by an explicit modernist sensitivity." (p.2) In other words, Barattoni here is trying to reconcile Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's view of Italian cinema from the 1960s lacking a 'new wave' because it had already experienced the renovation of neorealism and Deleuze's modernist reading of neorealism and "subsume Neorealism into a larger movement that can be called the anomalous Italian wave." (p.50) In this new definition, "previously insulated categories such as 'the heroic phase of neorealism', 'the Internationalist auteurs', 'the Italian New Wave' and 'commedia all'italiana'... can be disrupted and reconfigured through an approach underscoring the realist-modernist dialogue in the hierarchy of the image and... the foundational nature of the new cinema." (p.3)

Barattoni's argument in favour of this reconfiguration into a modernist continuum is that "the transition between Neorealist and post-Neorealist cinema was fluid - with the Neorealist canon already supplied with an 'openness' going beyond socio-economic concern - so that finding the rupture point is problematic." (p.80)

However, such a notion presents its own problems. It is true that it is hard to find a rupture between neorealist and post-neorealist cinema. It is likewise hard, if one subscribes to Haaland's reading, to find such a marked rupture between pre-neorealist and neorealist cinema and the notion of continuity between neorealist cinema and some instances of fascist cinema is one that is potentially detrimental for this 'modernist' reading grounded in Deleuze's theory.

Barattoni engages with Millicent Marcus' influential reading of Italian film 'in the light of Neorealism', reminding us that "one of the dangers of this approach is to turn Neorealism into a semiotic play, retrospectively isolating those works that somehow resembled the stylistics canonically associated with the movement, considering a film noteworthy only when it could be ascribed to an *a priori* realistic nature of Italian cinema." (p.50) It is a fair observation, however Barattoni's 'modernist' reading houses the same danger in that only films produced between 1945 and 1970 that can be ascribed to a modernist sensibility become noteworthy in such an analysis of the cinema of the period. Like Barattoni, the author of this review believes that there is as much continuity between neorealism and the genre production of 'commedia all'italiana' (1958-1980) as there is between neorealism and the 'auteur' cinema of the 1960s; however, the reconfiguration at the core of *Italian Post-Neorealist Cinema* isolates only those comedies, such as Dino Risi's and Antonio Pietrangeli's - some of which are excellently analyzed in Barattoni's book - that display a modernist aesthetic, in the same way that neorealism is circumstantiated only to its most innovative masterpieces.

The discussion of the entire film production of the country between 1945 and 1970 through an aesthetic (modernist) principle also leads Barattoni to pose unequivocal primacy on film directors, discussing every narrative and representational choice as the result of a single authorial voice, while in the case of 'commedia all'italiana' screenwriters and stars were very often extremely influential on the final outcome of a film.

Since each of the 'insulated categories' that Barattoni hopes to collapse in one single continuum is comprised of hundreds of films and each of these bodies of work is of difficult definition and object of continuous scholarly reassessment, merging them altogether in a continuum (and in one single volume with the ambition of covering them all) presents practical difficulties. Barattoni's discussion of the merits of under-studied directors such as Pietrangeli and Cottafava is extremely interesting and a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on Italian cinema of the period. So is his chapter dedicated to the political developments of the period and on how the clash between Catholicism and Communism that inhabited the country at the time has been reflected in films with different aspirations. However, the second half of the 1950s is a period that *Italian Post-Neorealist Cinema* often overlooks and it feels like a missed opportunity since so much has been already written on the Italian cinema of the 1960s. The contradictory second half of the 1950s, however, in which former neorealist filmmakers take very different paths and sometimes alternate more popular enterprises to text-book realist films (as the case of Vittorio De Sica with *L'oro di Napoli* in 1954 and *Il tetto* in 1956), in which Italian comedy is at times retracting into pre-neorealist forms of representation (pink neorealism) and at others introducing the major themes of 'commedia all'italiana' by highlighting the paradoxes of the Economic Miracle (the 'average Italian' films written by Rodolfo Sonego starring Alberto Sordi), still remains an area that needs to be systemized. If one wants to posit the notion of a modernist continuum informing the Italian film production between 1945 to 1970, it is probably the period that is needed to be engaged with the most, in that it is the period which poses more problems to the articulation of such a notion.

In addition to this, Barattoni dedicates a final chapter to the current state of Italian cinema, taking in consideration films produced between the 1990s and the present and assessing their modernist impulse or lack thereof. It is a common trend in recent film scholarship to include chapters like this one in works that aim to revisit an already heavily discussed period of a country's cinematography in order to make the overall work more current, but in Barattoni's case the period of Italian film history mainly addressed (1945-1970) is so dense and the analysis of under-studied films so significant that this manoeuvre does not seem necessary.

In conclusion, the two books in Edinburgh University Press' 'Traditions in World Cinema' series not only address neorealism in very different ways, they also seem to engage with different audiences. As previously remarked, Haaland's *Italian Neorealist Cinema* is an excellent (and not controversial) introductory read. Whether one subscribes to its modernist reconfiguration or not, Luca Barattoni's *Italian Post-Neorealist Cinema* is, instead, a book aimed at scholars of Italian cinema who are already familiar with the basic critical notions circulating around its subject matter. For those readers, it is an invaluable addition for its



Figure 1:

rediscoveries (especially that of Pietrangeli's work) and its challenging point of view.



Figure 2:

Author Information

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