



Review: Mark Shiel (2006) *Italian Neorealism:
Rebuilding the Cinematic City*

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One of the chief achievements of Mark Shiel in *Italian Neorealism. Rebuilding the Cinematic City* is that with this book he manages to offer us an elegant introduction to Italian neorealism in general and, at the same time, a reading of this movement from a particular hermeneutic angle, that is, from the standpoint of its various approaches to the city. This makes Shiel's book perform a somehow paradoxical task: on the one hand, the book speaks to a relatively unspecialized audience – and does so generously, in a jargon-free and highly readable manner – and, on the other hand, it offers the specialist reader a series of insights into the complex relationship between Italian neorealism and the wide repertoire of topics associated with (the construction of) the urban space: urban/rural distinction, urban destruction and reconstruction, ruins, housing crises, industrialization, symbolism of space, architectural styles and city planning.

To introduce neorealism, Shiel briefly reviews the philosophical, formal-aesthetic, literary, and cultural preconditions that concurred to generate neorealism as a distinct cinematic programme/movement in the mid-1940s in Italy. Philosophically, neorealism – like any form of realism, be it cinematic, literary, artistic in general – is characterized by 'a disposition to the ontological truth of the physical, visible world' (1). In other words, neorealism is born out of a sense of tiredness with the veil of (artistic, scientific, ideological, political) lies that comes to separate people from their world – Elio Vittorini, one of the literary inspirations of the Italian neorealists, talks about his 'hunger for reality' – and

instantiates itself as a continual celebration of 'the things as they are.' In particular, Italian neorealism was born, as Vittorio De Sica expressively put it, out of an 'overwhelming desire to throw out of the window the old stories of the Italian cinema, to place the camera into the mainstream of real life, of everything that struck our horrified eyes.' (9) Yet, as it turns out, nothing can be more difficult than to create an impression of simplicity, of ease and 'real life.' As such, the neorealists had to adopt a set of specific filmmaking procedures, routines, and practices:

a preference for location filming, the use of nonprofessional actors, the avoidance of ornamental *mise-en-scène*, a preference for natural light, a freely-moving documentary style of photography, a non-interventionist approach to film directing, and an avoidance of complex editing and other post-production processes likely to focus attention on the contrivance of the film image. (2)

Thanks to the employment of at least some of these procedures, a film can be said to be 'neorealist.' In mapping out semantically the world of neorealism, Shiel distinguishes several layers of meaning: beside neorealism in the aesthetic sense (Shiel uses the phrase 'neorealism as visual truth'), there is another one, one with which aesthetic neorealism 'coincides and sometimes clashes.' This is what Shiel calls neorealism 'as a sentiment of ethical and political commitment – a social realism which motivated not only film-makers but writers... painters... photographers... and... architects.' (2) What made Italian neorealism an unique film movement was precisely its being more than just a film movement: neorealism also meant a social attitude, a certain political sensibility. Shiel's book, let it be said in passing, does an excellent job precisely at (inter-)connecting the aesthetics of neorealism with its politics. Finally, this double-layered notion of neorealism leads Shiel to an understanding of neorealism as a more or less

coherent movement of particular directors, writers, cinematographers, editors and actors who were loosely connected to each other through personal and professional associations, who shared anti-fascist convictions and a leftist politics, and who produced a recognizable body of work from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. (2)

One of the major merits of Shiel's book comes, I think, from his interdisciplinary approach to the origins of Italian neorealism. Unlike formalist approaches, where the emergence and evolution of neorealism are seen strictly in aesthetic terms, as the result of certain formal developments in the history of Italian (and international) cinema, Shiel takes into account not only the aesthetic-formal factors that triggered the emergence of neorealism, but also a wide range of other factors: literary, intellectual, political, economic, social, ideological, national and international. Italian neorealism – its emergence and evolution, its complex

history and the controversies it caused, its rich heritage and the impact it had on the shaping of post-WWII century cinema, not only in Italy but virtually all over the world – is clearly better understood if we take an interdisciplinary approach like the one that Shiel proposes.

Cinematically, as Mark Shiel points out, Italian neorealism owes important things not only to the relatively advanced film culture and education in Italy in the 1930s, or to the influences from French cinema (especially Jean Renoir and Marcel Carné), but also to the Soviet montage school, which was highly regarded among the circles of leftist filmmakers and film critics. Thanks to Umberto Barbaro, even some of the texts of the Russian films theorist became available in Italian. In terms of major literary influences, the impact of the Italian literary tradition of *verismo* on neorealism is rather self-evident (for example, one of most important neorealist films, Visconti's *La terra ferma* [1948] is a screen adaptation of *Malavoglia*, by Giovanni Verga, the 'founding father' of *verismo*). The result was that the Italian neorealist filmmakers were not only 'among the most well-schooled in film history,' (17) but some of them were also film writers, authors in their own right (Luchino Visconti and Michelangelo Antonioni, for instance), capable of articulating a sophisticated critical discourse on cinema and filmmaking.

The relationship between neorealism and fascism is a rather complex one, and not so easy to map out. On the one hand, neorealism defined itself in opposition to fascism. Even in its formal-aesthetic sense, neorealism was conceived of as an anti-fascist artistic movement as it sought 'to overcome the stylization, heroic rhetoric and literary tedium which had dominated cinema of the fascist era.' (46-7) Then, the politics of neorealism was saturated with anti-fascism. Some neorealist filmmakers were just anti-fascist, while others (Visconti, De Santis and Lizzati, for example) were openly leftist, and so were Cesare Pavese, Vasco Pratolini and Italo Calvino among the Italian writers. Antonio Gramsci came to be seen as a martyr of fascism (he died in a fascist prison, in 1937, at the age of 46), and his work became quite influential among neorealist circles to the extent that it openly inspired Visconti in making *La terra ferma* (a film actually commissioned by the Italian Communist Party), who describes his film using Gramscian terminology: the political aim of the film was, according to him, to draw attention to the south as 'a great social rupture and as a market for a colonialist type of exploitation by the ruling classes of the North.' (82) On the other hand, as Shiel clearly points out, for all its opposition to fascism, neorealism benefited significantly from the developments brought about in the Italian film establishment by the fascist regime. Mussolini, just like Hitler or Stalin, realized that cinema could be used as a highly efficient propagandistic tool ('the most powerful weapon'). As

such, he did all he could to make cinema 'central to Italian fascism's political, economic and cultural agendas and its promotion of conservative social values.' (22) A series of institutionalized structures were thus created under the fascist regime that would have an important impact on the shaping of the Italian cinema between the two world wars, neorealism included: Mostra Cinematografica di Venezia (1932), Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (1935), then the journals *Cinema* (1936) and *Bianco e Nero* (1937) and of course the Italian equivalent of the Hollywood: Cinecittà, inaugurated in 1937 by Mussolini himself. As Shiel shows, many of the future neorealists were formed and worked, for longer or shorter periods, within these structures. For example, Rossellini, Antonioni, De Santis, Zampa and Germi were trained at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, at that time 'one of the world's most sophisticated film schools.' (21). Most ironically, the text that was to be considered the neorealist manifesto ('Verità e Poesia: Verga e il cinema italiano' by Mario Alicata and Giuseppe De Santis) was published in the journal *Cinema* (10 October 1941), which had been edited by Vittorio Mussolini (Benito's son) since 1938.

The economic context of Italian neorealism is that of WWII and of the immediately post-war period. It was a time of extreme poverty and penury, of shortages of all kinds and humiliations, not to mention a terrible sense of defeat, guilt and deception, experienced both individually and collectively. When one can barely live, it is almost unimaginable that one can even think of making films. Yet, one of the most spectacular accomplishments of the Italian neorealists was not only that they overcame these difficulties, but that they managed to use them creatively, for the benefit of their work. They learned how to turn scarcity of resources into simplicity of expression, poverty into beauty. Thus, the economic difficulties they had to go through were not only part of the historical context, but managed to pass into their work too, into their stylistic texture. Mark Shiel reads the production of *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, 1945) precisely with this lens. The film, made on a limited budget, had to be filmed mostly on location 'with a mixture of film stock bought on the black market.' Then, insufficient money for film processing meant that Rossellini could not see rushes during shooting and had to take 'a disciplined approach' to filming, which practically meant that he had to place 'limits on the length and number of takes of each scene.' But all these difficulties, as Shiel puts it, only 'conspired to produce a finished film with a striking sense of immediacy and frugality which only enhanced its meaning.' (48)

The same thing applies to a great extent to Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948). Not only does De Sica turn economic poverty and scarcity of resources into greater expressivity to the point of challenging the limits of the cinematic

representation itself (Bazin's comments are revealing: 'No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema.' [62]), but – in a certain sense – the entire film turns out to be a philosophical exploration of the many faces and meanings of poverty: economic, social, institutional, political, metaphysical, psychological, individual and collective. Rarely has a filmmaker managed to *portray* poverty with the force and astuteness displayed by De Sica in *Ladri di biciclette*. The narrating gaze compels us to be witnesses to the epiphany of poverty: it is everywhere, not just in the streets, but also in people's eyes and minds, not only in their appearance, but also in the inflections of their voices. In Shiel's wording, the film 'describes the ubiquity of poverty in post-war Rome, using the simple icon of the (missing) bicycle as an index of the collapse and continuing injustice of an entire social and economic system.' (58) The result is a 'merger of metaphysical and political concerns,' (54) a visual meditation 'on the human condition, on loneliness and isolation, and on the difficulty of social and private relationships.' (59)

Historically, one of the important functions of Italian neorealism was that of planting the seeds for a series of post-war narratives of identity. For what the Italians surviving the war discovered in these films was the fact that, despite everything that had happened, there was still humanity, there was room for new hope, it was still possible to start everything anew. Shiel reads *Roma, città aperta* as offering such a legitimizing narrative: 'Through these images of stoic endurance, Rossellini begins to build a new mythology of Italian national identity.' (50) The closing sequence of the film (as well as its title) points precisely to this (regained) openness towards the future.

Apart from Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, Mark Shiel also analyses closely in this book: Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943), Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amore* (1950), Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, 1954) and Fellini's *The Nights of Cabiria* (*Le notti di Cabiria*, 1957). These are excellent samples of film analysis. Relying on the best scholarship available (Bazin, Kracauer, Chatman, Ferrara, Nowell-Smith, Bondanella, Brunette, Chandler, Michalczyk), Shiel comes up with original insights and proposes a privileged hermeneutic lens for reading neorealism: its treatment of the city. The very selection of these (rather than other) neorealist films is based on the author's conviction that 'an understanding of the Italian city, urbanization and its representation is the key to the understanding of neorealism.' (16) The rich significance of neorealism comes precisely from the richness of that which it portrays:

Neorealist films set in urban spaces were deeply preoccupied with the iconography, social make-up, phenomenological experience and wide-spread

influence of the city: as a physical space with distinctive sights and sounds; as a lived environment in which the struggle for food or work was particularly intense; as a mental concept supposedly signifying human achievement and progress, but often in neorealist films, represented by little more than wastelands and ruins; and, with Italy's gradual economic recovery after the war, as an engine of modernization. (16)

The Italian city – and, in particular, the processes it had to go through under fascism, during the war, and then during the reconstruction period – becomes for Shiel a precondition of Italian neorealism: neorealism would not have existed in the absence of the city and therefore we cannot have full access to its meaning unless we adopt this hermeneutic key. Everything significant that happens in a neorealist context has to do with 'the city and with the processes of modernization – for example, post-war reconstruction, industrialization, secularization and rural-to-urban migration – of which the city was the clearest expression.' (15) Further, Shiel seems to suggest that the chief reason why the urban world is so important for understanding neorealism is that the city (rather than the countryside) was the locus of the traumatic experience of war. Therefore, his considerations on the significance of the city for the understanding of neorealism revolve around World War II and the events associated with it (destruction, reconstruction, modernization): precisely because of their urban setting, neorealist films 'would speak more powerfully than their rural counterparts to the Italian and international experience of war as a cataclysm of physical destruction and rebuilding.' (15-16)

The nexus of neorealism and the city is certainly a tempting lens for reading neorealism. The more so as Shiel follows the parallel even further. For example, even after the war is finished, he sees a mutual mirroring in the debates – in the late 1940s and 1950s – over the future of the Italian cinema, on the one hand, and on the future of the Italian city, on the other:

Where in cinema conflict raged between neorealism and profit-oriented filmmaking as popular entertainment, in relation to the city conflict raged between leftist and free-market models of urban development. The former prioritized social housing, environmental manageability and ethical architecture, while the latter prioritized industrial rebuilding, corporate expansion and a rapid return to economic profitability. (74-5)

While I am definitely intrigued by Shiel's interpretation and quite sympathetic with his vision of neorealism as structurally tied to the experience of urban space, I wonder whether this rather strong emphasis placed on the relationship between neorealism, on the one hand, and a specific type of urban space (the Italian city), which is the place of a specific type of traumatic historical experiences (WWII, destruction, post-war

reconstruction), on the other hand, might not lead to a certain 'provincialization,' or self-limitation, of the concept of neorealism? One of the possible corollaries of such a strong emphasis is a 'closed' concept of neorealism, rather than an 'open,' more comprehensive one. In other words, Shiel's analysis of neorealism is so closely tied to the Italian context that it would be difficult to apply it elsewhere. The fact that the author chooses not to include, among his film analyses, Rossellini's *Germany year zero* (*Germania anno zero*, 1948) betrays to some extent this difficulty. Obviously Italian neorealism needs to be related to the Italian city and the Italian history, but Shiel relates them so closely that one comes to wonder whether neorealism is conceivable anywhere else beside Italy. True, Shiel rightly mentions the impact that neorealism had, on the one hand, on the shaping of the 'new wave' cinemas in Europe and the US, and on the emergence of various 'postcolonial cinemas,' on the other:

Neorealism inspired intense debate on the nature and meaning of the cinematic medium itself... This was an exciting moment which would influence later Italian filmmakers such as Pasolini, Olmi and Rosi, and which would have a tremendous impact on the French, British and American 'new wave' cinemas of the 1960s and on the postcolonial cinemas of Brazil, India, Egypt and elsewhere. (88)

However, a preference for a self-limiting concept of neorealism still persists as Shiel seems to see neorealism in these places as somehow 'imported' from Italy, appearing as an immediate echo of the Italian original, and not homegrown. There might be several arguments for an 'open concept' of neorealism. An argument at hand is the recent (or relatively recent) emergence of various forms of home-grown neorealism in places like Iran, China and Eastern Europe. What is immediately evident about the films pertaining to these new 'neorealisms' is that, in most cases, not only are they set in an urban space, but the city permeates their very texture, give them pace, narrative impetus and a specific aesthetic physiognomy. Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (*Moartea domnului Lazarescu*, 2005) and Jafar Pahani's *The Circle* (*Dayereh*, 2001), to give only a couple of examples, are striking instances of films we might call 'neorealist' where the experience of an alienating urban universe plays a crucial role. More, what I find remarkable about such films is that they reconfirm Mark Shiel's reading of neorealism as city-centered. In fact, Shiel's book offers insights for a more comprehensive reading of this kind of films. That is one more reason to see Mark Shiel's *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City* as an innovative and important contribution to an interdisciplinary understanding of neorealism, not just in Italy, but wherever it might choose to grow.