

Analyzing the Circumstances under Which Art Was Born from Italian Neorealism

- The Suffering of the Times and the Rise of Art

Yuang Wang^{1,a,*}

¹Media and Communications, University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street, London, W1B 2HW, UK

a. Wang2490418337@outlook.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: This essay is a unified study of the formation and development of Italian Neorealist cinema in Italy from the pre-World War I period to the post-World War II period as the time of study. Taking Italian Neorealism as an example, it explores the relationship between the suffering of the times and the rise of art. In addition to how Italian Neorealism was born against the backdrop of war and social upheaval, it influenced the subsequent French New Wave cinema and global cinema, and in particular generated far-reaching references in Third World cinema. By analyzing the gradual decline of Italian cinema from its peak in the early twentieth century, which relied on its historical and cultural heritage, through the impact of Hollywood globalization and the economic hardships of World War I, all the way to the suffering of Italian society and the collapse of the economic market during and after World War II, the study demonstrates how Italian Neorealism, through its use of long shot filming, non-professional actors, live-action productions, and documentary narratives, redefined the mission of cinematic art beyond its traditional entertainment function to give voice to the underclass. The article delves further into the influence of Italian Neorealism on the French New Wave and Third World cinema, particularly regarding its influence on social realism and political critique. It is expected to continue inspiring future filmmakers, especially those working in independent and developing country cinema.

Keywords: Italian Neorealism, Post-war Cinema, The suffering of the times, Film History.

1. Introduction

Gombrich, in the *Story of Art*, illustrates that many great artistic periods and works emerged during times of social upheaval and suffering, as he describes the development of art in different historical periods [1]. For example, the Renaissance movement, which took place in Florence, Italy, during the 14th century, was an indispensable and far-reaching Enlightenment movement in art. It is also acknowledged that artistic inspiration can often be sparked when artists are experiencing distress and suffering. For almost a hundred years, in the Italian city of Rome, Italian Neorealism, a very important chapter in the history of cinema, proved this once again. Emerging from the misery of its times, Italian Neorealism subverted the traditional notion of cinema as mere entertainment.

Artists departed from traditional studios and techniques, opting instead to utilize non-professional actors and natural lighting. They also took to the streets, shouldering the camera with a fresh cinematic approach aimed at portraying social reality in a more authentic manner. Simultaneously, they sought to redefine the purpose of cinema by capturing and documenting the hardships of their era, giving voice to those marginalized within society's hierarchy. Cinema usually, according to Bazan, neorealist cinema belongs to the individual as well as society, and it not only focuses on the fate of the individual but also profoundly depicts social issues and collective destiny. He praised these films for revealing social suffering and injustice through their meticulous portrayal of the daily lives of ordinary people [2].

2. An Overview of Italian Neorealism

Italian Neorealism has profoundly influenced both the content and method of global filmmaking, especially in its emphasis on social reality and human nature. It is not difficult to find a great deal of Italian Neorealism in the films of the French New Wave, especially in Truffaut's film *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) and Godard's film *À bout de souffle* (1960). In terms of content, the focus is not on making the audience the main role of the story, but rather on conveying the author's emotions. Non-professional actors and actresses are utilized, with minor characters taking on the roles of protagonists in order to emphasize the real social backgrounds and relationships of the characters, thus effectively conveying the author's emotions.

In addition, in terms of film-making, Italian Neorealism's departure from linear narrative and its focus on everyday life influenced the narrative style of French New Wave cinema. New Wave directors often used non-linear narratives, jump cuts and open-ended endings to challenge the traditional Hollywood narrative model. French New Wave director François Truffaut spoke highly of Italian Neorealism and elaborated on the far-reaching influence of this film movement on the French New Wave. He believed that the narrative simplicity and detail-oriented aesthetic style of Italian Neorealist films and the social and political themes that focused on the lives of ordinary people and social problems had a profound influence on the French New Wave's film-making. [3] This led Truffaut and his fellow directors to draw much inspiration from neorealist cinema, thereby driving the advancement and evolution of cinematic art.

In addition to the use of long shots in Italian neorealism, a style of filming that has persisted to the present day, long-shot filming and montage techniques have consistently been trendy topics in film studies. Ruberto mentions that long takes diverged from Hollywood editing techniques and the traditional Soviet school of montage by allowing the camera to move during the shot to show the environment and background of the character's location. This method assists the audience in gaining a better understanding the social and physical environment in which the story unfolds, thereby highlighting the real-life concerns depicted in neorealist cinema. Consequently, this approach can create an impression for the audience feel that they are watching authentic, unaltered scenes rather than meticulously edited and processed film footage. [4] For example, in the film *The Bicycle Thief* (1949), long shots are often used to show city streets, squares and crowds, which enhances the portrayal of social reality, and at the same time, establishes a deeper emotional connection between the viewers and the characters, so that the viewers can have a deeper understanding and experience of the helplessness and heartache of the post-war social environment that the characters of the Gadoux film are in.

Italian Neorealism not only breaks the traditional editing techniques of Hollywood and the Soviet Montage School but also brings the audience closer to the characters and enhances the portrayal of social reality by showing the real-life environments where the characters are located. Wagstaff concluded that Italian Neorealism was the first liberation of post-war cinema, a rebellion against the Hollywood studio system and artistic norms and it had a direct influence on the French 'New Wave'

film movement. [5] The influence of Neorealism on film movements in other countries extended to the French New Wave, British Social Realism, Indian Cinema of the Common Man, and Third World cinema in Latin America.

3. The Context in which the Art was Born

3.1. Cultural Factors

In quite a few analyses of Italian neorealist cinema, there is a tendency for some scholars to focus on the influence of Italian post-war society on neorealist cinema primarily from the end of Italy's World War II period. However, this approach is inaccurate as it overlooks the significant impact that the history of Italian cinema's development prior to World War II had on shaping Italian neorealism. In fact, it indirectly paved the way for the emergence of neorealism in Italian cinema.

Proyon will argue that the period from 1909 to 1916 marked the most profitable golden period of Italian cinema [6], during which a series of films like *The Fall of Troy* (1911), *Gli Ultimi giorni di Pompeii* (1913), *The Sack of Rome* (1920) opened up the market for historical and costume dramas. Geduld argues that films such as *Cabiria* (1914) incorporated historical themes into the lives of mundane characters and succeeded in bringing every ordinary person into the cinema [7]. These Italian films, produced between 1909 and 1916, captured the global attention and proved to be financially successful at the box office.

Moreover, prior to Italian Neorealism, similar to the art preceding the Renaissance, Vasari depicts the Italian painting during the Renaissance as being constrained by a rigid adherence to constant imitation of the early Greek art for establishing the framework and Byzantine art for figure and architecture, while lacking its distinctive style [8]. Italian cinematic art was experiencing a decline in its creative approach, modes of playwriting, and ideology, and Italian cinema was constantly imitating the American Hollywood film model. Ben-Ghiat mentioned that the political and cultural intervention of Mussolini's government made the creation of Italian cinema more limited. [9] Mussolini and the Fascist regime attached great importance to the role of film as a propaganda tool. The government utilized film to propagate the ideals of fascism, while also fostering a sense of national identity and nationalist fervor. In 1924, Mussolini's government established the National Film Company, which specialized in producing and distributing propaganda films to promote fascism and nationalism. The government implemented a strict film censorship system in which all films had to be censored before release, and any content in the films that was deemed incompatible with fascist ideology or critical of the regime would be removed or banned. This act completely wiped out the limitless imagination of filmmakers.

3.2. The Economic Environment

The Italian people's passion for cinema resembles that of the small-town cinema on the island of Scythia presented in the film *Cinema Paradiso* (1988). When this art form, so closely connected to reality, emerged, it sparked an extraordinary frenzy. The theater was always packed and tickets were consistently sold out. Bondanella mentions that Italian cinema was a very important form of entertainment for the Italian people until 1920 and did not depend on foreign films to attract the box office. Italy also witnessed the rise of the film star system ahead of Hollywood as the World War I was about to break out. [10] The star system facilitated the continued growth of film attraction and the rise in both the price and purchasing power of film tickets. It can be seen that, during this period, Italian cinema with its strong cultural heritage, historical stories and star system, possessed a commercial value no less significant than that of Hollywood films on the global stage.

After 1911, the American market began to boycott Italian films to make profits, limiting the number of Italian films imported and increasing the number of Hollywood films exported. However,

the Italian film industry had not yet been able to establish a profitable chain of cinemas, a complete system of rental agencies and a sound business model for film distribution. This, coupled with the Italian film import policy of 1913, which allowed foreign films free access to the Italian market, was one of the keys to the declining profitability of local Italian films. Hollywood films were initially more successful in attracting audiences, and Powdermaker argues that early Hollywood technological innovations, sophisticated productions, star systems, narrative techniques, publicity techniques and marketing strategies attracted the attention of audiences around the world [11]. This enabled Hollywood films to start dominating the global market. As a result of such bilateral policies, the box office revenues of Italian films started to decline, while Hollywood films gradually took over the box office. Smith records that in the post-war period of the World War I from 1914 to 1918, social unrest exacerbated economic hardship, which was a major factor in perpetuating the decline of the Italian film industry. Inflation and material shortages led to a rise in the cost of living and a decline in the population's standard of living. The post-war economy experienced a sluggish recovery, leading to a significant increase in the number of families living below the poverty line. A large number of soldiers had difficulty finding jobs after discharge, leading to rising unemployment and spreading social discontent. [12] The World War I had far-reaching effects on Italy's economy and population, leading to economic difficulties, social unrest and political changes. Post-war Italy had to confront these challenges and devise a strategy for recovery and growth.

Proyon provides a comprehensive overview of local cinema between 1920 and 1928. In contrast to the once illustrious output of Italian cinema, the number of native Italian films experienced a significant decline in the 1920s. In 1920, there were 220 native Italian films, which decreased to 100 in 1921, further dropping to only 50 in 1922. The production continued to decrease with only 20-30 films in 1923, and further dwindled to just 15-20 in 1924. From 1925 to 1926, there were only a total of fifteen films produced over the two-year period. Finally, from 1927 to 1928, almost no local films were produced at all. [6] The economic impact of World War I combined with the rapid takeover of the Hollywood market brought Italian cinema to a low point in terms of production.

The Second World War was a complete destruction of Italian cinema, and the Italian film industry experienced a complicated situation under the control of the Fascist regime. Mussolini's regime placed a high value on cinema as a propaganda tool, establishing the Cinema City of Lucca to ensure that films conformed to fascist ideology, and Overy's war history mentions that in 1943, the Allies landed in Sicily and gradually pushed their way northwards, forcing the fall of the fascist regime in Italy. Mussolini was deposed and arrested, and the new Italian government then announced its withdrawal from the Axis camp and cooperation with the Allies. In order to prevent Italy from completely surrendering and falling to the Allies, Nazi Germany moved quickly to occupy key areas in northern and central Italy, including the capital, Rome. The Allies occupied the southern part of Italy and engaged in heavy fighting with the Germans in the north. [13] Wartime economic difficulties and material shortages posed a great challenge to film production, many film shoots were restricted, as well as many studios were destroyed during the war, thus other types of films could hardly be produced. The people of Italy endured countless hardships during the Second World War and were deprived of the opportunity to enjoy films.

4. The Relationship between Art and the Suffering of the Times

4.1. The Influence of War

Under the circumstances of the Second World War, Italian cinema did not go to extinction because the suffering of the times always inspired the birth of new art. Film artists were forced to make changes, and director De Sica was the first to do so. He used a number of cameras and patchwork of film left over from the pre-war and wartime periods as the backdrop for his film *Rome*,

Open City(1945), which is about Rome, the capital city of Italy during the Nazi occupation during the Second World War, as well as some of the Communists who remained in Italy between 1943 and 1944, alongside the partisans and ordinary citizens. It narrates the story of those who chose to stay behind in Italy during this time to resist against the German army's occupation and their oppressive actions. The film is regarded as the beginning of Italian neorealism. Cousins considers the documentary film *Nanook of the North*(1922) of 11 June 1922 to be the first documentary film, a branch of cinema used to record reality. [14] In the time that followed, documentaries were relegated to recording real events and films to entertain the masses. But Italian neorealism broke this perception once again. All the scenes in Rome, *Rome, Open City*(1945) were shot on location. Compared with professional studio productions, these real post-war scenes could highlight the great trauma brought by the war to the people and the great persecution caused to the city, and they showed the real life of the residents of Rome after the war, with the dilapidated streets, the ruins everywhere, and the chaotic family life.

During the two world wars of the twentieth century, suffering became a major motivation for many artists. Modernist and Expressionist artists often expressed inner pain and criticism of social reality in strong ways. Gay argues that Western modernist art developed and took shape as a result of the influences brought about by the wars. In particular, he emphasizes the profound impact of the two world wars on modernism. The social, political and psychological traumas of the wars prompted artists to seek new forms of expression, which furthered the development of modernism. [15] One of the most influential movements was Dadaism, a pioneering art movement of the early 20th century. It is considered to be an important prototype of modern art and has had a significant impact on the development of artistic expression. It originated in Zurich, Switzerland during the World War I and spread rapidly throughout Europe and the United States. Known for its subversive attitude towards traditional art and its strong rebellion against the social order, Dadaism became one of the most influential art movements in the history of modern art. During the war, Europe was plunged into unprecedented chaos and destruction, and traditional values and moral systems were severely challenged. Many artists and intellectuals were extremely angry and disillusioned with the war and the social and political system behind it. They used the works of Dadaism to reflect their dissatisfaction with the war, the political system and social norms. Unlike Italian Neorealism, which focused on depicting real-life situations authentically, Dadaism emerged as an art form born out of suffering and offered a new interpretation of art as “no longer a creation of beauty,” but rather as a direct response and critique of reality. Dadaism expressed protest against war, social injustice and the dark side of human nature through art, showing how art can be a tool for reflection and protest in the midst of suffering.

4.2. Social Unrest and Poverty

Under multiple social pressures, and following the release of the film *Rome, the Undefended City* (1945), Italian neorealism sprang out of misery. By documenting real Italian family life, Reynolds shows the effects of wartime poverty and social upheaval on families. She describes wartime separations, bereavement, and the important role of women in maintaining the family. It also shows the audience the effects of economic hardship, material shortages, bombing and fighting on the general population in post-war Italy. [16] In the aftermath of World War II, film director Vittorio De Sica stepped forward to use film to give a voice to the people of post-war turbulent and impoverished Italy. He created the film *The Bicycle Thief* (1949) to depict the story of a city in Rome, plagued by high levels of unemployment and poverty, where people struggle to secure employment in order to survive, often resorting to fierce competition for job opportunities. , reflecting the grim social conditions prevalent in Italy during that period. The film is centered around a small character, Ricky Antonio, who goes to great lengths to find a job in order to support his family. He serves as a

representative of the countless Italian individuals striving for stability, while his family embodies the experiences of numerous Italian households. The actors in the film are also belong to this group of people. Cinema has evolved into a platform where smaller entities have the opportunity to express their voices, rather than being solely dominated by major players. This shift represents a new reality within the industry.

In addition to *The Bicycle Thief* (1949), the film *The Sun Will Still Rise* (1949) shows the hardships of post-war reconstruction and conveys a positive spirit through the stories of Mario, Maria, Antonio and Sofia who, after experiencing the trauma of the war, gradually return to a normal life, overcoming difficulties through solidarity and mutual help. The film symbolizes the beginning of a new life with a village celebration, conveying the theme of resilience and hope, encouraging the Italian people to get out of the difficulties caused by the war. This is exemplified in a series of representative works of Italian neo-realism from the same period, , such as *The Earth is Fluctuating* (1947), *Partisan* (1946) and *Eleven Hours in Rome* (1952).

However, suffering was not confined to the war and its aftermath. Backwardness, poverty, political unrest, social class inequality and natural disasters also often served as the catalysts for the production of art. The release of Italian neo-realist films has greatly stimulated the courage and motivation of Third World filmmakers to reflect and critique social realities through cinema on a spiritual level. Amidst the tribulations of the times, Third World filmmakers have drawn inspiration from them and found a unique voice of their own. With the Italian Neo-Realism style of filming as a weapon in their hands, Third World film directors have focused on social problems in their own countries, such as poverty, injustice, the legacy of colonialism, and political turmoil. Especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America, many of the films born out of suffering often take the underclass as their first point of view, emphasise a simple aesthetic style, and focus on the moral choices and human expression of the characters in difficult situations, thus giving these films a deeper social and humanistic significance. For example, Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène used a large number of non-professional actors in his film *La Noire de*, 1966 (The Raft of God) to realistically portray the living conditions of the Senegalese people. Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1969) is a socially critical film that reflects the post-revolutionary reality of Cuba. Indian director Satyajit Ray's *The Apu Trilogy* (1955), which was heavily significantly influenced by Italian neorealism, with a focus on the poverty and societal change experienced by the underclass in Indian society.

5. Conclusion

Instead of completely decimating Italian cinema during a period marked by artistic stagnation, the dominance of Hollywood globalization, the economic downturn of World War I, the devastation of World War II, and the social upheaval in the post-war era, these challenges actually paved the way for the emergence of Italian neo-realist cinema. The success of Italian neorealism lies not only in its realistic narrative and innovative film language, but also in its profound reflection of the suffering of the times and the resilience of mankind. It once again demonstrated to the public the creative power of art during difficult times and encouraged more creators to remain resilient in adversity. It also urged them to utilize art as a means of expressing their concerns about reality and their hopes for the future.

The tradition of neo-realist films focusing on social and political issues will persist in the future. Future filmmakers are expected to pay more attention to global issues such as social justice, poverty, immigration, and the environment, and they will express concerns and criticisms of social phenomena through their films. The influence of Neorealism will continue to have an impact on global filmmaking beyond Italy and Europe. The simplicity of Neorealism's production methods will continue to encourage low-budget filmmaking. It inspires young filmmakers and independent

filmmakers that they have the potential to impactful works using simple yet effective production techniques that do not rely on expensive special effects and complex production processes. Filmmakers in developing countries can draw on the aesthetics and methods of neorealism to produce films that reflect the realities of their local societies. The field of third world cinema, independent films and documentaries will continue to be inspired by neorealism to use the art form of realism to make a statement to the world.

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