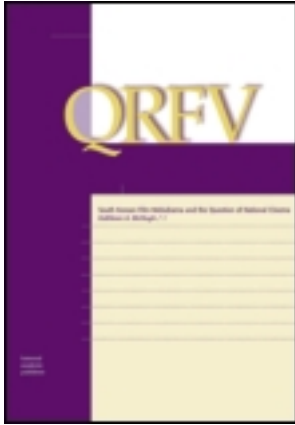


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Quarterly Review of Film and Video

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gqrf20>

### Patriarchy Has Failed Us: The Continuing Legacy of Neorealism in Contemporary Italian Film

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Available online: 03 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Vincent F. Rocchio (2012): Patriarchy Has Failed Us: The Continuing Legacy of Neorealism in Contemporary Italian Film, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 29:2, 147-162

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509200903004688>

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## **Patriarchy Has Failed Us: The Continuing Legacy of Neorealism in Contemporary Italian Film**

VINCENT F. ROCCHIO

Perhaps nothing seems as pervasive—and passé—to the field of film studies as the enduring question of Italian Neorealism. Pervasive because over fifty years later, there still is no adequate definition of Neorealism, prompting Millicent Marcus to argue, “even among the upholders of neorealism (and these are by far the majority) there is much debate about definitions, rules, and influences” (1986, 21). This essay demonstrates that the fundamental problem of defining Neorealism is the problem of realism itself. The two dominant approaches to Neorealism both take as their object the role of realism in aesthetic production. Peter Bondanella and Mira Liehm, who attempt to explore the issue through the figures of the directors and their achievements, precede Marcus’s work on Neorealism.

Liehm, for example, uses such categories as “Minor Films” and “Followers and Imitators” (1985, 85, 98) as a means for evaluating the aesthetic treatment of realism in film practice. Though problematic, these auteurist approaches anticipated the enormous contradictions that formal approaches to Neorealism encounter: the nearly impossible task of trying to resolve stylistic differences as a means of creating a categorical stylistic approach.

Despite the problems of a formal approach to Neorealism, this mode still dominates discussions of Neorealism (outside Italian film studies proper). It is still seen as the most adequate ways to summarize Neorealism from a historical perspective. Thus, in their introduction to film history, David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson still weave a narrative about Neorealism that is based largely on distributing a set of formal practices into a coherent whole, first presenting, then questioning the traditional concept of Neorealism as an aesthetic reaction to Fascist film (2003, 417) and a laundry list of cinematic techniques: shooting on location, use of non-professional actors, and loosening of narrative causality (2003, 418–419). Bordwell and Thompson are hardly alone in taking this approach. Christopher Wagstaff acknowledges the historical specificity of Neorealism (2007, 1), but nonetheless takes an aesthetic approach to the subject, as do Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones. None of these discussions offers a clearer understanding of Neorealism, and hence, the question still pervades.

Another reason the question of Neorealism persists is that the subject of Neorealism is now very much passé. Certainly, Italian Neorealism is still recognized as a significant moment in the history of world cinema—and as an influence for many directors and progressive (if not revolutionary) cinemas. In contemporary media studies, where globalization driven by large multinational corporations is a mounting concern, the question of Neorealism does not seem nearly as important as the ideological issues of race, class and gender—the major sites of hegemonic struggle.

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In the face of those struggles, the question of what a bunch of dead white guys did over half a century ago seems pretty minor. Only, the question of Neorealism is just as important now precisely because we live in an age of corporate and increasingly global media. Public television in both Italy and Britain, for example, has been overcome by a privatized system that has effectively redefined and reduced their mission and place within society—not to mention vanquished their ratings. At the same time, however, global media and digital technology are introducing a strong measure of volatility into the marketplace as media texts immigrate seamlessly across distribution venues and media technologies: from film to DVD to streaming video on the web, and/or onto an MP3 player.

This volatility in the marketplace, created by easier access to production technology, and a future of more open distribution (the internet) create possibilities for aesthetic resistance and contestation. Indeed, from a technological perspective, there has never been a better opportunity to mount effective challenges to global media empires and their ideological functioning through entertainment media. In this respect, a revised understanding of Italian Neorealism is vital precisely because it is a successful model of resistance. Neorealism's noted impact on the development of cinematic style through individual directors and progressive movements is grounded in its success as a cinema of contestation. Reducing Neorealism to a set of aesthetic practices and/or "great artists" is missing the opportunity to examine a significant model of contestation and resistance.

Further, as Millicent Marcus argues, Italian film still needs to be read "in the light of Neorealism" because whatever Neorealism was, it endures within contemporary Italian cinema. Neorealism remains the legacy by which most, if not all, Italian films and Italian filmmakers define themselves—one way or another. Still operating under the legacy (if not mandates) of Neorealism, Italian cinema remains a socially conscious cinema: it continues to strive—sometimes obsessively—towards a not too clear concept of Italian society realizing its potential or culmination—what Ernst Bloch describes as the "new aeon" (1970, 80). For nowhere does the deeply embedded Catholicism of Italian culture mark itself more in both contemporary Italian cinema and Neorealism than in the striving engendered in the utopian impulse of Christianity—a striving that fiercely resists the containment that Constantinianism, patriarchy, and hierarchy all work to achieve.

Thus, as Bloch argues, "Religion, with constant final reference to the last leap and the utopian totum, is not exhausted with all its ethicizations and smoother rationalizations . . . The wish content of religion remains livability in the mystery of existence, a mystery conveyed in man and inclined to man's deepest wish . . . the future establishment of the kingdom, the right kingdom (1970, 157)." The result of this utopian mandate is that the stakes are higher for Italian films and their makers than it is for their American counterparts. It is not enough for Italian films to be entertaining or profitable (there's enough film imported from Hollywood to achieve that). Rather, for an Italian director, where the possibility of completion and distribution are pathetically low and intensively competitive, a film has to do more: it has to achieve social relevance.

This, more than anything else, is where a definition—or at least understanding—of Neorealism has to begin: with a relationship to the social. No definition can hope to capture the complexity at stake in Neorealism—the web of social, economic, political, technological, and aesthetic relationships that come into play—until Neorealism is situated socially and historically, both as a film practice and cultural signifying practice. Resituating Neorealism as cultural production is a means for reintegrating historical specificity while at the same time mediating authorship with formal aesthetics. In addition, a concept of cultural production can recognize the contributions and dominant patterns of earlier investigations while synthesizing them into a more accurate analysis. In this respect, Neorealism is best

understood as a historically specific encounter between film practice and a particular set of social circumstances, including:

- The collapse and occupation of Italian society
- The stagnation of post-war society
- The preexisting problems of forming a national culture from a regionally based society
- The preexisting tension between modernity and traditional provincial and/or agricultural society

If such a definition seems to place too much emphasis on the social, it is only because the term “film practice” is too frequently understood as a set of procedures or formal approaches to film production—a conception that occludes the individuals and their history as practitioners from immediate consideration. Here, however, film practice designates the role of the individual as a site of historical determinations (political, technological, aesthetic, and others) and contingencies interacting through individual agency. In this sense, Neorealist film practice is fundamentally a specific moral vision: a commitment to make film actively participate in the rebuilding of Italian society.

The concept of Neorealism as a moral or ethical vision is a dominant theme among auteurist studies, but their reference to it lacks specificity, and equates the concept with realism itself.<sup>1</sup> Liehm, for example, will reposition the concept as “a hunger for reality” (1985, 73), while Marcus sides with an agenda of promoting “a true objectivity” (1986, 23). Rather than a general concept directly related to realism, moral vision in Neorealism is directed instead toward a commitment to make the cinema actively participate in the rebuilding of Italian society. Moreover, while this specific moral vision does not directly translate into aesthetic practice, it does produce two outcomes that organize Neorealist film practice: a mandate to examine how—and what—to rebuild from the ashes of Italian society, and an understanding that if film is to participate in the process, the traditional relationship between film and spectator must be reconstituted. As further analysis will demonstrate, these two mandates organize what are otherwise divergent film styles into a coherent agenda.

It is not just 1950s film criticism hyperbole to say that Neorealism was born of the ashes of Italian society. But the word “society” does not adequately convey the complexity of the social context of Neorealism. While Italian “society” existed in some form or another in 1945, Italy as a political reality did not. As a result of its disastrous participation on the side of Germany in World War II, Italy was in receivership at the start of Neorealism—occupied and administered by the Allied forces. The complete political collapse of Italy—let alone the horror of World War II—demanded a reckoning, but also, and more practically, required a new country to be built. The political referendum of 1948—in which Italians had to choose between a return to monarchy or a completely representative democracy—demonstrates that the exact structure of a new Italian government was anything but apparent.

The question of building a new political structure is far from only a practical consideration, and for Italy, that meant reckoning with the legacy of its participation in World War II, itself the result of its Fascist past. Italy, like Spain, could have chosen the path of aligned non-participation. Led by Mussolini and Fascism, however, Italy chose the dream of empire building. The collapse brought on by World War II made clear the degree to which Italy had engaged in political fantasy. Reckoning for Italian society thus meant coming to terms with its consent for a repressive totalitarian government, but also an Imperial war against Ethiopia, racial laws and the deportation and extermination of its Jewish population, and

participation in a war against the Soviet Union, England, France, and later, the United States.

The complete collapse of the Italian state as a result of its participation in World War II thus determines those rebuilding and reckoning functions as essential parameters for the film practice that came to be known as Neorealism. In Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome: Open City*, 1945), for example, the questions of both rebuilding and reckoning are directly confronted. Within the film's narrative, the cooperation of the Italian Resistance to German occupation is seen as a model for the rebuilding of Italian society. Moreover, the film makes clear through the character of Don Pietro, the partisan priest, that reconciliation with Italian Fascism is the preferred mode of reckoning.

Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948) offers a decidedly different view. With its barely scratched out Fascist slogans on the wall of the co-operative, *La terra trema* asserts the continuity of Fascism and calls for the conditions that will facilitate emancipation. Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) does not posit such a direct line of continuity, but in the police station scene makes clear that the government is more concerned with social control than with helping the citizenry. Each offers different positions with respect to reckoning with past Fascism, but in each film the questions of rebuilding and reckoning are fundamental.

Furthermore, *Ladri di biciclette* and *La terra trema* both show that the question of rebuilding was neither quickly nor effectively answered. For both of these films, made in the post-war rebuilding era, the direction of Italian society is a pressing concern—even if the war and occupation no longer are. In *La terra trema*, the bitter failure of the small family collective to get out from under the system of exploited labor in Sicily is a stinging indictment against modern capitalism as Italy's preferred path. Likewise, in *Ladri di biciclette*, the failure of almost every Italian institution—unions, the church, the police—to respond to the needs of a working class man trying to support his family functions as a continual criticism of Italy awkwardly lurching towards a modern economy without a soul. For Neorealism, the question of rebuilding is fundamental and enduring, as transitional films like Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952) and Giuseppe De Santis's *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1949) also demonstrate.

In addition to the collapse of the Italian state and its rebuilding, two social tensions that pre-exist both the war and Fascism are significant for understanding Neorealism: the regionalism of Italian society and culture, and the tensions resulting from modernization. James Hay, in particular, focuses on the social tensions created by modernization with respect to traditional rural and provincial Italian culture. Indeed, Hay makes the compelling case that Fascism itself needs to be understood as more than just a political party, but as a response to the crisis of modernization (1987, 7–10). In Hay's view, Fascism functioned to mediate between these two opposing forces, presenting itself as both the protector of traditional Italian values and as the harbinger of change.

Because Hay's work focuses on the Fascist film period, however, the issue of modernization is not carried forward as a cultural issue confronting the post-war period as well. World War II and its aftermath, however, brought the forces of modernization forward even further into Italian culture. Images of modernization as an intrusion or potential threat abound in Neorealist films. In *Roma, città aperta*, modernism is first introduced via the image of modern warfare. Early in the film the narrative is temporarily sidetracked as Pina and the neighborhood policeman contemplate the effects of Allied bombing, gazing at the remains of a building. And while the Germans are first introduced as marching patrols in the city, they are consistently associated with mechanized warfare and modernization. In *Ladri di biciclette*, the new housing development where Antonio and his family live rises

out of a barren space, seemingly divorced of any contact with Rome. Instead, it is featured more as an intrusion upon Italy itself. As others have noted, modernism also appears in the film as images of American imperialism: the Esso gas station where Bruno works and the Rita Hayworth movie posters that are the basis of Antonio's employment.

The setting of Acitrezza for *La terra trema* works precisely as a means for giving an image of traditional provincial culture that is on a collision course with modernization. In *La terra trema*, modernism is an abstract economic system that Antonio attempts to master, but fails. It takes the form of mortgaging a house to pay for a boat, something that the older generation can barely understand. Cash from the house provides Antonio and his family with the "means of production." Antonio's failure, however, results from his underestimation of the means of distribution in this modern economic system: the wholesalers conspire against him to crush him. Conversely, the rhythm and cycles of traditional provincial life in Trezza seem organic and natural, if not timeless.

In addition to the preexisting tensions of modernization, Neorealism works within the historical context of the problem of creating a national culture from a society defined by its regionalism. Indeed, the pressures of modernization and the need for rebuilding were further complicated by Italy's lack of a national culture. More than any other European country, Italy in the pre- and post-war eras was characterized by its atomistic identity. Italians identified themselves by their village or city first, their region second, and their nation last. This identification was reinforced by language. Within Italy are no less than 19 regional dialects, and within any given region even more languages—frequently unrelated to the regional dialect—exist. These dialects are profoundly different languages largely unintelligible to Italians outside the region and village of origin.

*La terra trema*, for example, was subtitled in Italian because the use of Sicilian by the main characters was unintelligible to the rest of the country. The Neorealist film that emphasizes this regionalism par excellence is Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946), a film divided into six narrative segments, each defined by the effects of the war on a particular region. Even *Ladri di biciclette*, a film tightly focused on the city of Rome, brings the issue of regionalism into the narrative when Antonio follows the swarthy thief into a sub-working class neighborhood. The thief is defined as non-Roman, as a troublesome Southern Italian who does not belong. He is then associated, as is the neighborhood, with local Mafiosi—another "Southern Problem" foisted upon national culture. The sharp divide here between the neighborhood and Antonio (along with the policeman who eventually joins him) is thus constructed as regional ethnicity.

As a film practice, Neorealism operates within the turmoil created by these social determinations. The collapse of Italian society and the other historical determinates which complicate its rebuilding do not lead directly to realism as a preferred aesthetic practice. Indeed, if one wanted a simple linear causality for the return to realism, then the decimation of the film industry's infrastructure by the retreating Fascist government would be a much more likely candidate. Rather, the dire social conditions of Neorealism, particularly the need to both rebuild for the future and reckon with the past, created the social impulse for film to actively participate in this rebuilding process. Here, too, the moral commitment to pursue such a purpose leads not as much to specific stylistic practice as it does to aesthetic mandates: the necessity for focusing film practice on examining the question of rebuilding, and the need to reconstitute the traditional—otherwise understood as passive—relationship between film and spectator, if the first mandate were to succeed.

Early definitions of Neorealism depend too much on an understanding of Neorealism as a reaction against the Fascist film period of Italy. This concept of Neorealism engenders a historical narrative that views the Fascist film industry as an important propaganda

tool for manufacturing the consent of the Italians for Fascism and its exploits. More recent assessments of Neorealism stress the opposite: the continuity between Fascist films and Neorealism (particularly amongst practitioners who participated in both eras). Each approach, however, overvalues the role of Italian film in Italian film culture. Hay in particular demonstrates the manner in which cinema in Italian society was dominated by Hollywood far more than the Fascist film industry. According to Hay's data (1987, appendix C), American films comprised seventy percent of films shown in Italy from 1929–36, and increased to eighty percent by 1941.

In this respect, Neorealism is more a reaction against Hollywood and its production of American ideology as entertainment than it is against Fascism. Indeed, to the degree that critics can find continuity in films of directors who worked in the Fascist and Neorealist eras, it is because during the Fascist film period these directors already saw their job as competing against Hollywood. A large part of the practice that became known as Neorealism should be understood as an opposition—or at least as a resistance—to the Hollywood style and its privileging of passive spectatorship. In this respect, Neorealism can be defined as the attempt to reconstitute the traditional relationship between film and spectator: to move from passive entertainment or state propaganda to moral and social questioning.

The drive to reconstitute the relationship between spectator and film leads Neorealist film practice to particular stylistic tendencies that remain consistent across Neorealism. These tendencies include: the foregrounding of social conditions within the narrative, privileging an analytical mode of narrative, and as I argue in *Cinema of Anxiety*, replicating the structure of anxiety within the structure of plot (Rocchio 1999, 41–47, 54–59, 83–86). These stylistic tendencies of Neorealist practice foreclose the possibility of a passive spectatorship lulled into escapist narrative. Rather, they continually ask the spectator to examine social reality and judge it.

Neorealist films consistently—if not continually—place social conditions in the foreground of the narrative. Unlike Hollywood cinema, where, for example, the landscape of the American west helps define the rugged character of the cowboy hero, Neorealism does not subordinate setting and social conditions to character and character development. Rather, in Neorealist practice, social conditions are given equal weight to character. Social conditions are always on display: they figure prominently in the camera's view, and, just as significantly—are assessed and evaluated. In *Paisá*, for example, the conditions of occupation that drive women into prostitution are under examination more than the individual character (played by Maria Micci) who is forced into prostitution. The story's conclusion makes clear that the tragedy here is social, not personal morality: the result of complex social conditions, cultural conflicts and confusion.

*Ladri di biciclette* may be the most vivid example of this tendency. While the plot revolves around Antonio Ricci's attempt to regain his stolen bicycle in order to keep his newfound job, it nonetheless subordinates Antonio's character to the social conditions that allow this economic vulnerability to exist. Along the way, as discussed earlier, the plot levels clear critique at the social institutions that should help Antonio, but fail to do so. In the end, the plot's concern is less Antonio's moral lapse in his quest to regain a bicycle, as it is the increasingly impersonal society that drives him to it—a society that seems fundamentally unable to provide either justice or the daily needs of its citizenry. It is therefore not coincidental that the film closes with Antonio and his son being absorbed back into the impersonal crowd.

Two specific stylistic practices that frequently make the list of Neorealist formal elements are the result of this aesthetic commitment to foreground social conditions: the relaxing of narrative causality, and temporary obstructions to the camera's view of main

characters. In their discussion of *Ladri di biciclette*, for example, Bordwell and Thompson discuss the famous Porta Portese scene, where the search for the bicycle must be temporarily suspended for a rain storm (2003, 418). Antonio and Bruno seek shelter under a building along with a group of German seminarians. The scene flaunts a lack of causality as it suspends both the search and the narrative. *Roma, città aperta* is also filled with deviations from the causality of plot. One of the more notable occurs while Giorgio Manfredi, the resistance leader, waits on the stairwell. Two women, completely unrelated to the story, struggle to carry a demi-john up the stairs as Manfredi waits. The purpose of this narrative intrusion is not to clarify narrative action—they are completely unrelated to Manfredi's quest—but rather, to insert social conditions into the foreground of the narrative.

More than just functioning as plot disruptions, social conditions dominate the mise-en-scene and the plot of Neorealist films, whether in the manner in which the brothers sleep in the same bed in *La terra trema*, or the long lines to get on a bus during rush hour in *Ladri di biciclette*. Because social context is no longer subordinate to character, Neorealism rejects the Hollywood convention of providing an unfettered view of character. Instead, the diegetic world frequently intrudes on the camera's view.

In addition to raising the status of social conditions from background to foreground, Neorealist films consistently engage in conducting an analysis of social conditions. One of the most notable instances of such narrative analysis occurs in *Ladri di biciclette* when Antonio and Maria pawn their sheets to retrieve Antonio's pawned bicycle. The camera first shows an employee searching through a rack of bicycles before following another worker climbing an enormous shelf filled with bundles of sheets. The exposition here is clear: most of Rome is reduced to pawning its possessions to survive. Several critics, like Frank Tomasulo (1982, 3) and David Overby (1979, 10) accurately argue that Neorealist films like *Ladri di biciclette* fail to conduct in-depth analyses of social conditions. These failures, however, are all the more noticeable because of the films' use of an analytical mode to begin with.

*La terra trema*, for example, consistently examines the different modes by which the monopolistic capitalism of Southern Italy works to disenfranchise the working class—in this case, fisherman. *Roma, città aperta*, organized around an analysis of the unity of the Resistance and how it can serve as a model for rebuilding Italian society, incorporates an analytical mode in several different ways. David Forgacs, for example, discusses the manner in which the space of Rome is divided and analyzed within the film's narrative (2004, 106–125). Marcia Landy examines the transformation of stereotypes, cinematic clichés, and melodrama in the film—a process that occurs as a result of the film's analysis of these operations within the context of its own narrative (2004, 85–105).

The degree of this analytical mode is clearly demonstrated by comparing Vittorio De Sica's *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946) with an American film shot by a French director nearly fifty years later, Luc Besson's *León* (*The Professional*, 1994). In each film, pre-adolescent children are surrounded by the underworld of society—in *Sciuscià* black marketeers, in *León*, drug dealers and the Mafia. The latter film, however, is not directed at examining either causes or consequences of the men who serve as foot soldiers in the Mafia. Surrounded by crooked police and degenerate parents, the adolescent Mathilda is left dependent on Leon, who, along with Tony, the local Mafia chieftain, seem to be the only characters with a moral compass.

Despite this irony, *León* is not an examination of the underside of modern urban culture, and Leon is not the 1990's equivalent of the outlaw hero. Rather, the narrative is a morality tale about the difficulty for virtue to survive in such a fallen world. *Sciuscià*, by comparison, is an intricate analysis of the underside of Rome during a very specific time: the post-war



years. The two main characters, Giuseppe and Pasquale, earn their living by working the streets of Rome and act as a means for the film to examine the harsh realities of a fallen society fundamentally unable to rebuild. The camera gazes at the streets, at apartments notable for their sparseness, and lastly, at the prison. The underside of Rome is not the dramatic backdrop for a morality tale—it is the subject of a persistent investigation.

In this regard, one of the classic techniques of Neorealism, location shooting, is not a means in itself, but rather, a function of this analytical approach. Certainly, historical conditions—the decimation of the studios—drove Neorealism into the streets, but that does not, in itself, determine an analytical style. Instead, Neorealism adopts an analytical style based on its commitment to participate in the rebuilding of Italian society and to redefine the relationship between spectator and text. Location shooting clearly facilitates that approach, but does not define it.

Moreover, realism itself is not the end goal of Neorealist practice as much as is subjecting social reality to the gaze of the camera—the better to analyze causes and consequences as a means for understanding how and what to rebuild. Neorealism's power, and its enduring legacy, finds its strength here. Under specific historical conditions Italian film practice made a decisive turn from a cinema of entertainment—defined by Hollywood and largely imitated by Fascist film—towards an analytical cinema. The turn to analytical narrative, driven by the need to reckon with the past and rebuild the future, defined a film practice and gave voice to a cultural dynamic. No longer would society be understood as a seamless evolution of an organic process, but rather, as a web of interests, impulses, conflicts, desires, and mandates, which, under the gaze of Neorealist practice, would now become the subject of cinema.

The analytical mode that Neorealism inaugurated became a mandate for Italian cinema that a complex and contentious political system would keep in place for the remainder of the twentieth century. The constant struggle for power—and for the soul of Italy—meant that competing visions and analyses of society became the cultural content of everyday life. Post-war Italian society is characterized by a running debate between a Communist party (PCI) seeking social transformation, and a traditionalist Christian-Democrat party (DC) at its best seeking to reintegrate Roman Catholicism with liberal democracy (and at its worst seeking to revive Fascism) —mediated by a Socialist party (PSI) which saw neither side as viable. Consistently, Italian film practice engaged this debate under the mandate for analysis, or shrunk from it via nostalgia, as with Giuseppe Tornatore's *Nuovo cinema Paradiso* (*Cinema Paradiso*, 1988), Gabriele Salvatores's *Mediterraneo* (1991), and Michael Radford's *Il postino* (*The Postman*, 1994).

The collapse of the major political parties—the Communists in 1991 and the Christian Democrats in 1994—and the formation of the European Union with a common currency adopted in 2002 leaves Italy without the clear master narratives for the future it once possessed. The need for cultural analysis has increased, but at the same time, become more dispersed. Continuing the legacy of Neorealism, a dominant trend in contemporary Italian film centers on analyzing Italian culture in this period of cultural disarray. One such film is Alessandro Piva's *LaCapaGira* (*My Head is Spinning*, 2000). Set in contemporary Bari, the film begins with a long and unencumbered gaze at the smuggling of illegal immigrants—Albanians—onto the shores of Bari. The narrative then shifts to the drug trade, where some of the illegal immigrants are employed.

Just as *Roma, città aperta* confines itself to the resistance, and *Ladri di biciclette* to the working class of Rome, *LaCapaGira* restricts itself to the underclass of Bari. It is a relentless examination of the drug subculture as constituting the underclass, and Bari itself as an underworld of Italy. Spatially, there is never an indication that Bari is anything but

an urban underworld confined to itself—where dialect is still the dominant language. What narrative there is (in terms of linear causality) structures itself around the search for a botched drug shipment mislaid along the railway lines.

The loosened narrative alternates between the search for the drugs by two of the organization's mules, and the distribution site waiting for the drugs: a bar/pool hall with illegal gambling in the back. This alternation is itself structured around analysis more than the linearity of narrative. By examining both the shipment and the street distribution of the drugs, the film is able to expose the system of drugs and the people who inhabit it. Indeed, one of the few characters who is not underclass is the local Mafiosi reaping the profits of the trade.

Two other aspects of the narrative also evidence this privileged analytical mode. The first of these is the examination of the hidden gambling room in the bar/pool hall. The characters make clear through dialogue that the main purpose of the gambling room is not as a revenue source, but rather, as a red herring to the drug trafficking. To illustrate the point, the narrative then makes recourse to a police detective investigating the bar and being thrown off the scent by the admission of Sabino—the bar's proprietor—to running illegal gaming. Privileging of the analytical over narrative causality is also demonstrated by the recovery of the drugs.

Far from being a narrative resolution, or a culminating point, the recovery and delivery of the drugs to the bar only further complicates things. With the drugs in stock, the bar is hit by a more ruthless gang of drug dealers who shoot Sabino in an attempt to take the drugs and take over the trade. The film ends with the wounded Sabino being attended to by his cohorts—who nurse him with puffs on a joint. The plot, which eschewed a dramatic conflict to begin with, thus offers no resolution, just a conviction that Bari will remain an underworld, and that, while the names may change, the process will continue.

While *LaCapaGira* is constricted within the confines of provincial Bari, Daniele Vicari's *Velocità massima* (*Maximum Velocity*, 2002) is locked outside of Rome proper. Confined to Ostia, the Roman Empire's port city and now a beachfront suburb of Rome, the plot only leaves Ostia to venture into the EUR district of Rome—originally an outlying area that became a planned modern suburb. The story focuses on Italian suburbia by centering on the performance car subculture that meets nightly at the obelisk in EUR.

The story is constructed around the characters Stefano, a mechanic who owns an automotive shop, and Claudio, whose father apprentices him to Stefano. The term "apprentice" does not accurately characterize the professional relationship between the two since Claudio, though much junior than Stefano, is the better mechanic. Just as Ostia is outside Rome, Stefano's shop is outside of Ostia, but his business woes are due more to his obsession with having the fastest car. Indeed, the plot makes clear that Stefano has forgotten where he came from in terms of social position, and that his problems continue as a result of his aspirations: trying to outdo the wealthy Gianluca in owning the fastest car.

*Velocità massima* is a prime example of why critical approaches to Neorealism cannot be reduced to a set of aesthetic techniques. The quick cutting and special effects editing of the final race scene make it decidedly un-Neorealist in its carving up of narrative space as a means of conveying interior consciousness. The legacy of Neorealism remains, however, in the analytical approach to story and in the examination of Italian society that the film undertakes. Within this narrative is a far tighter linear causality than in *LaCapaGira*, but no less an emphasis on an analytical mode. Even such casual scenes as Stefano taking the Ford out for a test drive, or Claudio walking with Giovanna are moments where the camera pursues geography as part of a social discourse intimately tied to character and character relations.

With the former scene, the plot emphasizes the outlying character of both Ostia and Stefano's shop by a long view of the thin dirt road slicing through marsh area just outside civilized Ostia. In the coupling scene with Claudio and Giovanna, the pair walk first through dormant, late-night Ostia before crossing a graffiti-strewn bridge. As the couple sit on the bridge railing, the camera slowly zooms into the characters, finally privileging them above the setting.

The slow zoom is understood as a means of getting a more intimate look at Giovanna, heretofore portrayed as barely more than a trophy girlfriend of the Obelisk crowd. Even here, however, the camera's gaze at Giovanna as she reveals her desires and frustrations comes to be seen retroactively as an examination: Giovanna, like Stefano, is a character type—both of them products of Italian suburban culture who cannot seem to rise above its materialism, parochialism, or its lack of moral compass. Each is shown sympathetically, and yet each is fundamentally lacking a moral center. When the narrative reveals that Stefano and Giovanna are former lovers, it makes Stefano's obsession with beating Gianluca all the more petty—and typical of the hedonistic subculture of the Obelisk racing crowd.

Far less confined to a specific location in Italy, yet no less analytical is Alex Infascelli's *Almost Blue* (2000), a thriller genre set in Bologna, Italy's preeminent university town. The most striking thing about *Almost Blue* is its apparent lack of cultural specificity. With such a predominant focus on the thriller genre, *Almost Blue* could seemingly be set in any university town: Krakow, Oxford, Heidelberg, Ann Arbor, or Berkeley. In this respect, the analytical approach to narrative in *Almost Blue* seems dedicated more to the generic expectations of the thriller film than to Italian culture itself. Before the narrative can fully establish itself, however, the plot makes clear that the thriller genre will be subordinated to the narrative's analysis of contemporary patriarchy.

This subordination begins immediately with the introduction of Vittorio and Grazia, detectives from UVAC (an acronym for the Violent Crimes Unit). With their arrival at the Bologna airport, the plot undertakes an analytical mode, drawing on the segmenting of space into objects associated with character, and registering the actions and reactions of the characters as local detectives greet Vittorio and Grazia. From here the plot moves into a slower rate of projection as a means of both placing and examining Grazia within a man's world. The scene continues in this way, constantly analyzing Grazia's place, her functioning and her negotiation with the patriarchal subculture of Italian law enforcement. This highly analytical mode reaches its culmination with the Bologna Police Commissioner handing the case over to UVAC.

Here, the Commissioner pulls Grazia into a private antechamber to give her advice before turning the case over. His advice, "follow humans, not machines," is fatherly, is rendered in a close-up two-shot, and is punctuated by the closing shot, which shows two separate groups of men gazing on the scene from opposite windows. The message is clear: Grazia will always be under the gaze of patriarchy. This message is then reinforced when Vittorio leaves Grazia with the case—both visually and through character interaction. Vittorio tells Grazia that the credibility of UVAC is on the line with this case, and that "We're all in your hands." As Vittorio exits, the camera dollies back, and Grazia is almost immediately plunged into the world of men, as businessmen walk through the lobby, occluding her from the gaze of the camera.

As *Almost Blue* advances, and the plot puts in motion the cat-and-mouse, rise-and-fall, success-and-failure machinations of the thriller genre, it will only temporarily abandon its analysis of Grazia by shifting to the other two parts of the plot's tripartite structure: the serial killer and the helper. Even here, it joins the helper to Grazia as a means of keeping focus on Grazia while developing an alternative gaze. The helper, Simone, is blind, but knows the

killer's voice. Simone thus cannot see Grazia—does not subject her to his gaze—but rather, experiences her as the same color as the Elvis Costello number, *Almost Blue*.

In keeping with its analytical mode, the plot's climax and denouement withhold from Grazia the ability to triumph in a man's world. Likewise, in putting patriarchy under examination, the plot constructs an implied critique that reaches its height with the death of Vittorio, who basically dies as a result of his own arrogance in confronting the serial killer. Vittorio's death is but another manifestation of the impotence of patriarchal law enforcement. The serial killer's capture, while facilitated by Grazia's maternal tending of Simone, is nonetheless due more to his own self-destruction/mutilation than to either law enforcement or Grazia's effectiveness.

The film's ending, an extended one hundred eighty degree panning shot followed by an elaborate, bird's-eye crane shot closes the narrative by reverting back to its highly analytical style. This reversion is itself the result of an implosion of the agencies of law within the diegesis—both Grazia as agent of the law and patriarchy as agency of the law. Moreover, the closing shots firmly situate the analysis back onto Italian society, and only ambiguously on characters. The panning shot starts with a view of Bologna *moderna*, as two high-rise apartment buildings tower over the terra cotta roof-scapes of turn-of-the-century buildings. It then progresses to reveal Bologna *vecchia*, with its medieval church spires, before progressing to mid twentieth century Bologna and finally coming to rest on Simone, who is attended to by Grazia.

After Grazia gives Simone his pills, however, the panning shot is repeated, as if from Simone's point of view, only this time ending with Bologna *pastorale*, the hills outside the city which define its boundaries. A dissolve to the next shot, however, suggests that the location of the asylum is situated—isolated—within the hills: outside the boundaries and hidden from view. The film then concludes with an elaborate rotating crane shot of Alessio, the serial killer now confined to the asylum. These elaborate and extended camera moves prevent the film from closing generically—or even clearly. Rather, the narrative extends itself back out into Italian society.

Like *Velocità massima*, *Almost Blue* is indicative of the pitfalls that can occur when critical approaches conceptualize Neorealism only as a set of formal techniques. Its use of genre and contemporary shooting styles—fast-paced cutting, extreme point of view shots, strobe lighting—hardly resembles the work of Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti (indeed, it is the antithesis of Visconti's formal style). The commitment to an analytical style and the intensive examination of a significant aspect of Italian culture, however, testify to the enduring legacy of Neorealism that pervades *Almost Blue*.

This lack of formal similarity is just as pronounced, if not more so, in Francesco Patierno's *Pater familias* (2003). Not only does *Pater familias* lack the linearity of Neorealism—it uses a complex flashback structure—it also lacks the restricted narration characteristic of Neorealism. Further, *Pater familias* incorporates into its flashback sequences changes in hue and color to signify characters' memories of events. This coloring of the narrative world to signify character consciousness is a dramatic departure from Neorealism's emphasis on external reality. The Neorealist legacy, however, is decidedly pronounced in *Pater familias*. While *La Capagira* is a relentless examination of provincial Southern Italian culture, it nonetheless incorporates humor into its analysis to keep its audience invested. *Pater familias*, however, affords no such break from an obsessive, claustrophobic, and unrelenting analysis of the dysfunction within sub-working class Neapolitan urban culture.

Indeed, perhaps the best way to characterize *Pater familias* is to say that if Pasolini had gone through a "Cubist" period, this is the film he would have made. The story revolves

around the character of Matteo, who is on a short furlough from prison to take care of family legal affairs resulting from the imminent death of his father. As Matteo reenters the location of his past, he also enters into his memory of the past events that lead him to prison. Matteo's past is composed of an oppressively dysfunctional world characterized by its brutality, pathology, and hopelessness. While it mounts a sustained critique against this culture, the film nonetheless works to humanize Matteo and his friends. What does come under intensive critique, however, is patriarchy. All the fathers within the film are crass, brutal, and primal men whose priorities are their carnal desires for food, sex, and drink. They abuse their wives, their children, and themselves.

The focus of the narrative is on the effects of this dysfunctional patriarchal subculture. No one in Matteo's circle escapes, and many do not survive. The plot is thus organized at detailing the level and sources of dysfunction. Moreover, it organizes a series of aesthetic techniques to privilege an analytical mode of narration: changes in film stock and printing, the mimicking of surveillance-style videography and home movies, long takes, and most prominently, the repetition of scenes. Significantly, the scene that gets repeated is the flight to freedom scene: a shot that reveals Matteo's friends as they jump one by one down to the street from the ruins of a building, with Matteo bringing up the rear. The film repeats this scene six times, using slow motion to emphasize the individual characters, and occasionally making slight alterations to camera position.

Predominantly, the repetition of the scene is used to introduce an individual character's segment—his background story as it occurs in Matteo's memory. Although each segment will focus on an individual character, the analytical mode dominates each segment, highlighted in part by the fact that each is conveyed through omniscient narration (Matteo has no direct access to the events portrayed). Each memory will prove to be traumatic—ending in one form of tragedy or another—yet each is a careful study of the brutality and dysfunction that define the parameters of Matteo's (and his friends') world. Gege's segment in particular evidences this analytical mode. Set in the kitchen, the scene is rendered through a repetitive camera pan. The camera starts on the mother, washing dishes in the sink, before panning left to reveal Gege, seated at the table facing the camera. Gege's father sits to the left in profile, idly smoking while watching TV. The panning movement ends with the television at the left end of the room. The scene then cuts back to the original camera position of Gege's mother at the sink, and begins again.

The pattern is broken, however, after Gege leaves the room in disgust and the mother starts to berate the deadbeat father. After completing its movement to the left side of the room, which effectively abandons both characters, the camera begins panning in the opposite direction. It does not arrive in time to show Gege's father strike his wife. Rather, she tumbles into the frame having received the blow. At this point, the plot completely reverses its pattern. Having panned back to the characters to register the effect of the violence—Gege's father blaming his wife for his violence—the camera cuts back to the opposite side of the room and begins panning back to the characters. As a result, the camera does not arrive in time to show Gege's father beginning to rape his wife. By the time the camera does arrive, the father has already pushed his wife over the sink. Likewise, the camera begins panning away from the characters before the actual rape takes place, then cuts away from the scene entirely.

The scene, with its long takes with camera pans, is formally pronounced in its operation, analytical in its function, and fundamentally in opposition to conventional Hollywood style. Typically, the contemporary Hollywood cinema would render such a scene in shot/reverse-shot mode: first showing the man striking, then the reaction of the woman being hit. That conventional approach feigns analysis by substituting causality in its place. The

shot/reverse-shot segments space and subordinate it to action: the camera registers the action and its effects as if causality were being analyzed, not privileged. Indeed, a feminist analysis would point to the manner in which this feigned analysis of action justifies the voyeuristic gaze at violence against women.

*Pater familias*, however, resists this convention. With its emphasis on the camera's gaze on the domestic space, and abandoning the action itself, the plot subordinates action to context. Rather than privilege action, the plot reduces it to the context of the pathology of the provincial Southern Italian patriarchal culture it examines. In this respect, the plot generalizes the action as a predictable—and by now mundane—outcome of patriarchy that no longer merits direct and focused representation. More significant to the plot is getting at the pathology of provincial patriarchal culture itself, which reduces women to powerless victims devoid of any hope, and produces men so fundamentally dominated by a Madonna/whore complex that they are incapable of interpersonal relationships.

The Madonna/whore complex saturates the narrative of *Pater familias*, a toxic social and individual complex that dominates the life of women. Within the film men, teen-age boys, and women themselves are continually referring to specific women as skanks. The teen-age girls who engage in sexual activity are subjected to brutal punishment and sexual victimization, while the wives in the film are constricted to roles of domesticity and sexual servitude. Conversely, a statue of the Madonna is located in almost every domestic space of the film. The place of the Madonna as an idealized and privileged figure is most forcefully articulated in the film's ending, where, in the midst of the boys' teen rebellion staged in the school, Gerardo grabs a Madonna from its niche, and with a howl of protest, smashes it to the floor in a stairwell several stories below.

The smashing of the Madonna and the boys' staged rebellion are key to the film's analysis and critique of provincial Southern Italian patriarchal culture. The catalyst for the rebellion is Giovanni's forced eviction from the classroom. Rather than the eviction being unjustified, the plot makes it clear that Giovanni is removed for being completely inappropriate: mocking his teacher by calling him a cuckold and making exaggerated claims about having sex with his wife. Giovanni's forced removal vacates the classroom of any authority figure and the rest of the boys use the absence to rebel. Like their raging fathers, however, the boys' rebellion is misdirected; the school and school system are neither the source of their oppression nor an illegitimate authority. Their moment of triumphant rebellion is thus underscored by its irrelevance and ineffectiveness.

As one of the closing images, the smashing of the Madonna within the rebellion makes clear the point of the film's analysis: that in terms of Italian culture—of Italy's unrealized potential—patriarchy has been a toxic failure. Unbeknownst to Gerardo and the rest of the group, their rage actually signifies their disgust and communicates quite simply that “patriarchy has failed us.” The Madonna as an idealized and asexualized symbol within patriarchy thus becomes the object with which to express the level of frustration and rejection of a social system which promises male power, but offers instead nothing but disenfranchisement, brutality, and hopelessness. The howl of protest that accompanies the smashing of the symbol thus vents this frustration and rejection.

In reaching its conclusion that “patriarchy has failed us” *Pater familias* articulates a theme shared by all the films discussed here, and by the films of Neorealism. In all these contemporary films, the analytical mode of narrative investigates patriarchy and finds it lacking. With *LaCapaGira*, the focus on the underworld and absence of any positive male figure illustrates the illegitimacy of patriarchy and the patriarchal order of Italian hierarchical culture, which designates positions of wealth and power to some and consigns others to absolute marginality. The law, as such, is an object of derision for the characters

because it has no legitimacy. The law, as such, does not provide, it only restricts. The characters' illegal activity is thus a logical response to being shut out of a hierarchical social system that they have no hope of gaining access to.

With *Velocità massima*, the absence of male legitimacy is also prominent. Both Claudio's father and Stefano fail Claudio, and their limitations are defined mainly by their inability to see beyond the boundaries of the automotive world. While Claudio's father seems resigned to pessimism, Stefano seems no more liberated, dreaming only of being more successful in building custom performance cars. No less resigned to the limits and failure of patriarchy is *Almost Blue*, which puts these limitations on display and resigns itself to their inadequacy.

Patriarchy, especially as associated with Fascism, figures heavily in Neorealism. Indeed, the failures of a patriarchal culture mediated by Fascism constitute the very conditions by which Neorealism turns its gaze (Rocchio [1999, 44, 76, 114–124], and Jaimey Fisher [2007, 25–53] both detail the role and function of patriarchy in Neorealist films). In this respect, the most enduring legacy of Neorealism is the privileging of an analytical mode of narrative directed at patriarchy (and other) root causes of Italian social problems. As a model of resistance, however, contemporary Italian film is too trapped in the legacy of Neorealism to be effective.

What contemporary film practice fails to realize is that the analytical mode—and moment—has exhausted itself; it is subject to historical conditions and contingencies no longer in operation. The analytical mode of Neorealism grew out of a response to a society in need of rebuilding itself after collapse. This collapse was facilitated by the consent for Fascism and the excesses of its political fantasies: its rhetoric of the new Rome, dreams of empire, and participation in World War II. The character of Francesco in *Roma, città aperta* gives voice to this non-critical dissent when he says of the war, “They were all deluded thinking it would end soon, and we'd see it only in the newsreels.”

Neorealist practice adopted the analytical mode of narrative both as a critical response to the failures of consent for Fascism and as a point of resistance to Hollywood cinema. In this respect, Neorealism understood its historical moment. This analytical mode, and moment, was still viable—and even necessary—as late as the 1970's, where the reemergence of Fascism remained a threat, social volatility was on the rise, and the political movement of the left demanded a change in social conditions. The potential and the failures of the political left made the conditions of analytical narrative remain viable, giving rise to such highly analytical films as Elio Petri's *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (*The Working Class Goes to Heaven*, 1971), Marco Bellocchio's *Nel nome del padre* (*In the Name of The Father*, 1972), Franco Brusati's *Pane e cioccolata* (*Bread and Chocolate*, 1973), Vittorio and Paolo Taviani's *Padre padrone* (*Father and Master*, 1977), and investigations of Fascism's past such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *Il conformista* (*The Conformist*, 1970), Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (*I Remember*, 1973), and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975).

By the new millennium, however, the analytical moment has exhausted itself, both in terms of cultural critique and film practice. In terms of cultural critique, the crisis of cultural studies demonstrates that thorough analysis of modes of oppression will not, in itself, constitute (or even necessarily facilitate) social change. Cultural studies, and the cultural modes of critique that come out of it, remains locked within a quasi-Freudian belief that unmasking root causes (and/or the operations of ideology) will also dismantle them, a conflation of a model of the individual with a social model of transformation. Contemporary Italian film, which comes out of this critical milieu, appropriates the Neorealist legacy of analytical narrative without a critical awareness that the analytical moment has expired.

The only film to venture beyond analysis is *Velocità massima*. Claudio's childlike innocence is clearly out of place in the world he inhabits, and none of the characters know how to respond to it. He fundamentally refuses to embrace their cynicism, and, as with the case of Giovanna, attempts to move them beyond the limits of their social world. Moreover, Claudio's rejection of Stefano, signified by the dismantling of the racecar, serves as an alternative to the cynicism that surrounds him. Claudio does more than just strip the car in a defiant rejection of Stefano, he organizes the pieces aesthetically: arranging patterns and making a mobile out of parts assembled from the car and the garage. In this gesture, Claudio articulates a refusal to accept the constraints of social reality, and instead, reaches for the transcendent through those constraints. In effect, he demonstrates, in an almost Theresian gesture, that the transcendent is always possible, always accessible.<sup>2</sup>

This brief moment, however, demonstrates the degree to which contemporary Italian cinema remains for the most part locked within the constraints of the analytical mode that Neorealism inaugurated as a response to Hollywood cinema and its passive spectatorship and ideologically manipulative synthesis of ideal worlds that it produced nearly effortlessly. If Neorealism is to serve as a model of resistance, then Italian cinema—and alternative practice in general—must come to realize that the analytical moment has passed: that a socially progressive cinema must provide images of solutions, not just dwell endlessly on the problems. It must, in this respect, return to a synthetic mode without the ideological limitations of the Hollywood style. If the Italian cinema could achieve such a synthesis, it would leap off the screen as vividly as Neorealism and ignite the world's imagination for decades.

### Notes

1. Liehm opens her discussion of Neorealism by quoting Rossellini as saying, "mine was a moral position" (1985, 129). Marcus draws on Francois Debreceni and Chiarini, among others, as forming a consensus that Neorealism was a moral "statement" (1986, 23).
2. Therese of Lisieux (1873–1897) was a Carmelite nun and an enormously popular saint with a far-reaching influence in the Twentieth century. Named a Doctor of the Church in 1988, Therese advocated devoting oneself wholly to the task at hand and to the people that come into one's life as a way of experiencing the love of God.

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