

Italian Neorealism: Origin and Correlation with Documentary Style Film

Briana M. Andrews

Professor Jami Ramberan

RTFJ 500 – Film History

## **Introduction**

Italian Neorealism is often heralded as one of the most important movements in film history. Distinctive features such as the use of non-professional actors and filming on-location provided viewers with a realistic depiction of life in post-war Italy. Watching the black and white movies from this movement, frequently referred to as the golden age of cinema, devoid of fluff and grandeur popularized by its American cinematic counterparts gave a dreary scene of the everyday conditions experienced by normal citizens in the aftermath of a fascist regime.

Although highly regarded as one of the most influential film movements, there isn't much discussion about the origins and stylistic influences of Italian Neorealism. Documentary film existed prior to neorealism, still exists and continues to expand in modern times. By contrast, the Italian neorealism movement lasted just under a decade. There are several similarities found between both styles and while it isn't expressly stated, it is very likely that the roots of neorealism rests in documentary film.

## **Research Paper Objectives**

Italian filmmakers in the post-war period created neorealism to capture the hardships of everyday life. In this research project, the factors that contributed to the popularization of this cinematic language are explored, while drawing parallel to documentary film. This research idea was selected since I, like many others are fascinated by this style of cinema. It was a stark contrast to American cinema and appealed to our sensibilities with harsh reality and an emphasis on humanity.

Moreover, I sensed similarities between neorealism and documentary. Documentary films are not Hollywood blockbusters, they typically have smaller budgets and home in on a topic to explore from an artistic, cultural and realistic standpoint. Both documentary film and neorealism have been used to provide an accurate depiction of life. In this research paper, various sources are utilized to demonstrate the correlation between Italian Neorealism to Documentary style film. Both can be deemed anti-Hollywood film styles derived from political and social circumstances.

### **Methods and Procedures**

In order to conduct research on this topic, I used several resources including excerpts from text, scholarly journals and published books. Primary research included the screening of films from this time period with heaviest emphasis placed on the works of directors Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica. I explored the origins and techniques commonly found with both styles and referenced academic works citing similarities and possible shared influences.

### **Neorealism Origins and Researcher Analysis**

“The proponents of this politically committed reaction to the glossy, studio-bound, Hollywood-influenced productions approved by Mussolini’s regime were determined to take their cameras to the streets, to neglected communities and their surroundings, to show the ‘real Italy’ in all its diversity” (Iannone). The four point program outlined in Barbaro’s 1943 essay in Cinema, neorealist films were to: 1) get rid of the “naïve and mannered clichés which have formed the larger part of Italian films” 2) abandon “those fantastic and grotesque fabrications which exclude human problems and human point of view” 3) dispense with “historical set-pieces and fictional

adaptations” and 4) exclude the rhetoric which pretends that all Italians are “inflamed by the same noble sentiments” (Lawton 8).

“A lively Italian cinematic culture in the 1930s and 1940s generated an interesting though small body of documentary films and a very dynamic cultural debate on the issue of realism in the arts and in cinema in particular” (Caminetti). Several scholars have argued that the rise of documentary, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s gave way to the formation of neorealism. Films generated during the neorealist movement are a form of narrative documentary that blends fiction and nonfiction. It is likely the reception of documentary in Italy impacted its filmmaking practices. French realism and American novels are also possible sources of inspiration. “While it is widely acknowledged that neorealism shows strong documentary qualities, the exact nature of this relationship has never been fully explored” (52). Looking at the style of cinema immediately preceding Italian Neorealism, documentary and newsreels were instrumental during the Italian fascist regime. It was used as a tool to offer a historical record and present documentation of the success of governmental initiatives.

### **Documentary Film Definition and Characteristics**

Dating back to the 1920s, documentaries continue to be a mainstay in cinema. The popularization and widespread availability of streaming services, enhanced web and mobile distribution outlets, and increasing affordability of technology enables content creators to reach audiences. Documentaries are popular mode for visual storytelling and has taken several forms. For educational purposes, creating social impact and documenting reality, combined with the usage of non-actors and location-based shooting, documentary remains the preferred-style.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines documentary film as a nonfiction motion picture intended to document reality, primarily for the purposes of instruction, education, or maintaining a historical record. Documentaries are often viewed as a visual source of social truth. However, the term documentary is quite difficult to narrowly define, and cinematic scholars have varying takes on what qualifies. While many people tend to associate documentary with nonfiction, it is also possible for a documentary to contain fiction.

“Scottish filmmaker and theorist John Grierson called the documentary the “creative treatment of actuality” (Plantinga 105). This definition leaves much room for interpretation and countless academic journals feature researchers attempting to give meaning to an otherwise general explanation. According to film scholar, Bill Nichols “Documentary types can be variously categorized.” “He supplies the most influential conceptual mapping of documentary and proposes six subgenres or modes of the documentary: expository, observational, poetic, participatory, reflexive and performative.” (105).

### **Stylistic Similarities**

There are undeniable associations shared between documentary style film and Italian Neorealism. While exploring the nature of the relationship, I concluded it is quite likely both styles share a mutual influence between fiction and non-fiction. Both styles have been used as an important medium for spreading knowledge with an emphasis on reality, non-fiction style, realism and filming on location. The styles offer comparable camerawork, reduced editing stylization, exploration of culture, appreciation of humanity and social themes. Neorealism and documentaries are both known for structure in the absence of scripts, lack of professional actors

and the use of actual locations rather than studio sites and conversational speech instead of literary dialogue. Documentaries are generally not profit driven, similarly, Italian filmmakers that emerged after the fall of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime were also not profit driven but that focused on documenting harsh truths in the world around them. "What makes the task of defining this movement so challenging is that even though most neorealist films share a similar pattern when it comes to their themes and subject matters, they each have a distinctive way of dealing with them" (Kartal).

### **Italian Neorealism Identifiers**

"The realism that characterizes the documentary dates back to the Lumiere brothers, turning into an aesthetic and political motif" (Camineti 52). Formed in post-WWII Italy, the Neorealism movement took place between 1944-1952. These films are characterized by showing how life really was for people experiencing poverty. These were slice of life films in the aftermath of Fascism, developed as the war destroyed studios and directors sought a revised methodology for cinema. Technology enabled them to take their lightweight cameras on the road for a more realistic depiction of life. Regarding style, films were shot on location, there was a large emphasis on environment, non-professional actors, working class protagonists, natural light, long takes, on-location shooting and realistic plots using the problems Italians faced as a backdrop.

*In Re-envisioning the Nation: Film Neorealism and the Postwar Condition*, author Piepergerdes states, "Neorealist directors sought to co-opt and transform the predominant semiotic codes of the regime through a contradistinctive socio-political lens" (233). "Many of the Neorealist directors, including Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Giuseppe De Santis, Luigi Zampa, and Cesare Zavattini, began their careers during the Fascist era" (Piepergerdes). "Coupled

with the advent of new cinematic techniques that characterized the genre (the use of non-actors, natural lighting, on-location shooting, and the absence of melodrama), the reassertion of local and regional realities in Neorealist films marked a sharp break from Fascist-era depictions of a national ideal” (Pierpergerdes).

### **Neorealism Film Analysis – De Sica and Rossellini**

There is a heavy reliance on dramatic characters and life changing circumstances in neorealist films. “Thematically, the uniting factor of the master works of Neorealism... is a concern for representing the ordinary and everyday struggles of the working class in the uncertain climate of postwar reconstruction” (Kartal). One of the acclaimed directors of this period, despite negative reviews is Vittorio De Sica. In his 1948 film *Bicycle Thieves*, the protagonist Antonio begins a job after a bought with unemployment. One of the requirements for the position was owning a bicycle. From a standpoint of historical accuracy, it was commonplace to have a bicycle, in fact it was practically a prerequisite for being about to travel about and support your family. Since he was in dire straits, his wife’s sheets were sold in order to afford the bike. Tragically, his bike was stolen during his first day on the job. He experiences frustration and anguish, desperate to retain his position he too resorts to becoming a thief and steal’s someone else’s bicycle. Antonio was relegated to becoming a “bicycle thief” himself because it appears he had no other options or alternatives. Viewers, understanding his plight resonate with him and sympathize despite the act and evoking the same grief and anguish he experienced when his bike was stolen.

Another De Sica film which also shares a theme of desperate measures being resorted to at the hands of poverty is *Umberto D.* In this film, the protagonist is an old lonely man whose only companions are Flike and Maria, his dog and the maid at his home. Initially, he is portrayed as an

elder experiencing difficulty paying his rent. He is alerted that he will soon be evicted. This is another De Sica film where a person is desperate and left without alternatives resorting to unfortunate measures. He practices begging on the streets but feels ashamed since he worked for many years. His concern isn't only retaining his home but keeping up appearances. This displayed the psyche of working-class Italian people who fear losing face and concerned with pride and outward impression.

Another film director that emerged during the Neorealist era who received critical acclaim but was also subject to negative reviews is Roberto Rossellini. His war trilogy was raw and controversial, changing the landscape of film history and turning the lens on the harsh realities faced. *Rome, Open City* is said to have opened the gates for the Italian Neorealism era. It displays the tragedy of Italian people done by the Germans and tells the story of a man trying to evade Nazi capture. The movie was banned by Germany and mistaken to be a documentary by some viewers since the story hit so close to home, it was also very soon after the country's suffering which didn't sit well with people looking for escapism. It highlighted political and social issues in post-war Italy.

### **Documentary Film Discussion**

Some controversial and memorable documentaries released include *Vaxxed*, *Supersize Me*, and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. I often watch documentaries on Netflix and YouTube and have a tremendous appreciation for this form of storytelling, although it admittedly takes on several forms. For the purpose of comparing documentary film to the neorealism era films I watched over the course of this semester, I will refer to one of my most recent viewings, *Best Boy*, a 1979 Academy Award winning documentary directed by Ira Wohl. The documentary followed the narrator's 52-year old

mentally retarded cousin, Philly. Philly was a middle-aged man when he first started to attend school and his actions, ability and appears don't meet social norms. The camera followed along as he went to school and various events, showing the associated challenges and victories. It shows his interactions and how the experience impacted his family and everyone he interacted with.

This documentary helps toward fighting against stigma against individuals who experience disability. It humanized the experience by bringing you into a home, environment and life of a mentally retarded person. Viewers were able to see the interactions and impact it has on everyone. As Philly grew older his parents couldn't physically keep up with him and make the difficult decision to place him in a community home. There were troublesome scenarios after he was placed in the home where he had fewer interactions and engagement. He grows accustomed to and was often left isolated. Also, since he was unable to clean himself, caregivers wanted to sedate him. He had to learn how to adjust to his family not being there and living by himself. The documentary humanized the experience of disability. The follow up shows Philly being treated unequally and the prejudice along with discrimination that people with disabilities or sometimes subjected to. There is a societal stigma and long-term disability affects not only relationships with friends and family but also less-intimate relationships.

This documentary shows the common plight of a family caring for a disabled relative. There is an incident that changes everything, and the family was forced to make a difficult choice since there was no alternative. Neorealism films such as *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D* are also stories of struggle where there is an incident that changes everything and makes life more difficult. Their main characters were also forced to make tough choices. Likewise, the documentary *Best Boy* and the follow-up *Best Man* gives a voice to a population who feels overlooked. It allows the viewers

to sympathize and most importantly, they gain understanding of what life must be like for people in comparable situations. The documentary also features non-actors, handheld camerawork, natural lighting and on-location shooting. These also happen to be key components found in neorealist films.

### **Conclusion**

“The notion of a predominant social mission separated the documentary from fiction and show business, but thanks to the Neo-realist movement in postwar Italy, documentary realism found an ally to its ethic call in the field of fiction, as a form of responsible and often committed representation of history” (Caminetti 52). While it is difficult to determine the full impact of documentary style film on the formation of the Italian Neorealism movement, the existence of said influence is undeniable. “On both the formal and ideological levels, the bond between neorealism and documentary form has been considered self-evident, a point of view that is reflected in scholarship: Even a quick survey of histories of Italian cinema immediately points to the documentary quality of neorealist filmmaking, making a tie between the two points on the basis of their shared “realist” ambitions” (Caminetti 52). The films from the Italian Neorealism movement can also loosely be defined as narrative documentary, or docufiction. “Neorealism itself is best characterized by a hybridization of genre. Counter to prevailing assessments, no singular narrative form unites the films. Neorealist works instead tend to be composites of multiple narrative structures. They are amalgams of tried-and-true genre formulas central to prewar Italian cinema, ranging from melodrama, comedy, and historical epic to documentary and suspense” (Piepergerdes 232).

It is possible Italian filmmakers wanted to differentiate their works, and not necessarily refer to them as documentaries because of stigma and negative connotations. Throughout the 1920s, governments used film to spread propaganda, support national agendas and influence individuals. In fact, some of the neorealist filmmakers held careers developing government funded and controlled programming. Through the research conducted and films watched, I was able to affirm the correlation and apparent overlapping between neorealism and documentary.

## Bibliography:

Caminati, Luca. *The Role of Documentary in the Formation of Neorealist Cinema*. Academia. University of Mississippi Press.

[https://www.academia.edu/7847165/The\\_Role\\_of\\_Documentary\\_in\\_the\\_Formation\\_of\\_Neorealist\\_Cinema](https://www.academia.edu/7847165/The_Role_of_Documentary_in_the_Formation_of_Neorealist_Cinema)

Iannone, Pasquale. *The Roots of Neorealism*. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/roots-neorealism>

Kartal, Esmā. *Defining Italian Neorealism: A Compulsory Movement*. Kadir Has University. <https://cinej.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/cinej/article/view/73/227>

Lawton, Ben. *Italian Neorealism: A Mirror Construction of Reality*. *Film Criticism*, Vol. 3, No. 2, *Italian Neorealism* (Winter, 1979), pp. 8-23.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44018624>

Piepergerdes, Brent. *Re-envisioning the Nation: Film Neorealism and the Postwar Italian Condition*. University of Kansas. 2007. Acme Editorial Collective.

Plantinga, Carl. *What a Documentary Is, After All*. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 63, No 2 (Spring, 2005), pp. 105-117

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3700465>

## Film Sources:

De Sica, Vittorio, director. *The Bicycle Thieves*. 1948.

De Sica, Vittorio, director. *Umberto D.* 1952.

Rossellini, Roberto, director. *Rome, Open City*. 1945.