CHAPTER I
NEOREALISM: A DISCUSSION

Neorealism offered an emphatically analytic, rough, striking depiction of a human state tormented amidst will and resentment by the pain of the senses, the traditions of bourgeois existence and the meaninglessness and ennui of life. Neorealism was different from the realist aesthetic prior to it, in particular with naturalism and verism, in that its realism is not so much related with only the selection of subject - matter as with a specific manner of regarding things. Neorealism strived for re - orientation of cinema - expression of everyday reality, recording events within their historical fold and focusing on the class/people who have never before received the attention of cinema. In other words, its purpose was to deglamorise film and to make it a relevant, purposeful and socially useful form of communication. Moreover, cinema was freed from its studios; the filmmakers went out on the streets and the fields, employing both professional and non-professional actors and documenting the nation’s experiences for posterity. The themes of neorealist films centred around contemporary socio-economic tribulations of the post-war Italian working class - economic oppression, feeding one’s family, interracial marriage. The literary movement of neorealism boasted some of the most distinguished figures in 20th century Italian culture, including Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Vasco Pratolini and Elio Vittorini. Before discussing the literature of neorealism and the cinema of neorealism, the developments in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the debate on neorealism and its stylistics and its decline; let us briefly discuss realism and its relationship with melodrama and semiotics.

Realism

Realism comes from a literary and art movement of 19th century which sought to portray ‘life as it really was’. As far as film camera is concerned, it is easy see why it is perceived as a ‘natural’ tool for realism, because it reproduces
‘what is there’ (that is, the physical environment). Usually, realist films deal with social issues whereas Dada arose in 1916 as an agonized but ironic nihilist protest against world war and the society that had incubated it: including its art. As it discarded all art it had no formal characteristics. Surrealism was an authentic addition to the range of avant-garde arts, its uniqueness attested by the capability to generate shock, incomprehension, or what led to the same thing, a bit of uncomfortable laughter, even among the older avant-garde.⁵

Realism in film is a combination of the referents of reality that support “the image as realistic, the conventions of rendering plausible whatever is shown and the entirely self sustaining diegetic nature”.⁶ John Grierson founded the British documentary film movement of 1930s. His emphasis on life and its interpretation express a basic tendency of documentary film. He also uses the term ‘cinema’ and ‘documentary’ in an interchangeable manner.⁷ A lot of realist thinking about cinema has ‘ascribed specific realist effects to specific factors’ in cinema technology.⁸

S.M. Eisenstein talks about two characteristics to which film is particularly accountable - first, ‘photo-fragments of nature are recorded’ and second, these fragments are combined in a number of ways. Thus, the shot (or frame), and thus, montage. Eisenstein emphasizes the intervention of the film maker the way in which ‘photo - fragments’, are to be organized and presented. For Eisenstein, it is necessary to displace the real world, which is itself a construction of bourgeois ideology and to replace it with a range of other possibilities. This displacement is itself executed in the name of realism. Eisenstein’s idea of a realist cinema is a combination of a correct ideological position and the technical means with which to reconstruct and reflect reality.⁹

The Italian neorealist school was a movement which was based on the primary notion of realism. Cesare Zavattini was its foremost spokesperson who argued:
The cinema should accept unconditionally what is contemporary... it must tell reality as if it were a story... I analyze the fact in all its constituent elements, in its 'before' in its 'after' in its contemporaneity. The fact creates its own fiction, in its own particular sense... The question is to be able to fathom the real correspondence between facts and their process of birth, to discover what lies beneath them. Excavate... in the illimitable mine of reality, the cinema will become socially important... if I use living, real characters with which to sound reality... my emotion becomes more effective, morally stronger, more useful... I want to meet the real protagonist of everyday life.¹⁰

Zavattini adds the element of questioning to the realist spectrum. In a way, the direct involvement of the audience in the process of questioning the shown reality on a one-to-one basis; as though the celluloid could not only show the audience 'facts' but also provide him access to them. In this type of realism, significant ideas are responsibility, understanding and warmth.¹¹ Roberto Rossellini sees neorealism as a response to the genuine need to view men for what they are, with humility and without fabricating the exceptional; to show an awareness that the exceptional is arrived at through the investigation of reality. He also realizes the importance of film which borrowed something from neorealism. These adapted films were also capable of giving partial expression to reality.¹² The 'popularizers', who adapted neorealism to suit their styles, were very important as they spread neorealism making it more widely understood.¹³

**Semiotics and Realism**

Semiotics developed as a movement which collaborated with the modernist movement in literature to criticize realism. Modernism in all its forms claimed the superiority of artistic construction and supported the notion of illusory nature of realism. Film Semiotics is virtually synonymous with the study of codes of illusion. The realism of literature, painting and theatre can be seen as a particular style that came to an end. But cinema is “an art born in, and as part of, the age of realism.”¹⁴
Cinema’s peculiar rapport with realism has two important aspects - of perception and of representation. Umberto Eco, noted semiotician, work on the multi-articulation of cinema sought to overpower cinema at the basic moment of perception. His work talks about the mechanically coded ways in which light, shadow, colour created molecular particles which are recognized as shapes and later which become the images of objects and actions that can be identified of our world. Other semioticians argue that no medium ever reproduces reality. Its signs reproduce at best one facet of the object as we conceive it.  

In traditional film theory, for instance, realism is the name given to the aesthetic theory of Andre Bazin who suggested ways in which the cinema could be made closer to our experience of the phenomenal world. Cesare Zavattini’s neo-realist manifesto published in 1953 argues, “Neo-realism breaks all the rules, rejects all those canons which in fact, only exist to codify limitations. Reality breaks all the rules, as can be discovered if you walk out with a camera to meet it.

Semiotics was first applied to cinema in 1960s by French scholar Christian Metz. Film semiotics tries to explain how meaning is contained in film and the way in which it is communicated to the spectators. Evidently, Metz’s purpose was not to change the cinema in to linguistics. Keeping in mind the gap between cinema and language, the intention of his research was to notice how and to what extent it was feasible to use in films a codifying method which would be, for cinema, the equal of grammar for language. Metz’s effort has enabled empirical methods to be replaced by a rational exploration, and has brought out the processes by which (or with which) cinema creates meaning, has revealed how it functions. However while Semiology is able to articulate how something signifies, it has no method of expressing why it does so. Semiology is effective in analysis or “deconstruction” of a film but it is of no use when it comes to framing laws, codifications and rules appropriate to all films. Irving Singer while criticizing the proponents of physical reality argues:
The film image resembles the retinal image, which is quite different from an actual percept. Perceptual images of sight result from the brain’s processing whatever retinal images have been transmitted to it. In perceiving the world, we have a retinal image of something that might be called surface reality, plus brain action upon that retinal image. When we see the photographic image, however, we have a retinal image not of the world but of the camera’s quasi-retinal image plus brain action on our image of the camera’s image. To this extent alone, film experience involves transformations of what appears as physical reality regardless of how realistic the filmmaker may wish to be, or how much he or she cares to use the camera as a recording device.\textsuperscript{20}

Since cinematic image is different from the ordinary perceptual image that the neorealist filmmakers were able to go beyond Lumiere brothers and others who sought to do little more than duplicate surface reality. Zavattani speaks for Rossellini, De Sica, Fellini etc. when he motivates realist filmmakers not only to portray reality but also to study and analyse.\textsuperscript{21} For Andre Bazin and for almost all realist theorists, the rendering of a reality made more real by the use of aesthetic device is important.\textsuperscript{22}

\section*{Realism and Melodrama}

The term melodrama originated from the Greek term \textit{melos} meaning song and originally denoted a stage play accompanied by music. Possibly, J.J. Rousseau, used the term melodrama in this sense in ‘Pygmalion.’ In later times music ceased to be an integral part of melodrama. The term came to represent a type of drama featuring emotional intensity, rhetorical excesses, sensationalism, hyperbole, strong action, ethical polarities, violence, cruel villainy and its final eradication and the victory of good.\textsuperscript{23}

Wimal Dissanayake discusses three important aspects related to melodrama and cinema within the context of western cultural discussions. Firstly, melodrama highlights experiences, activities and emotions of women and provides a forum for ‘expression of repressed feminine voices’. In a way,
it plays an important role in the growth of the consciousness of women. Secondly, a lot of attention is now given by film theorists to issues of ‘representation, cultural construction and the role of ideology’. The examination of the complex and subtle working of ideology in melodrama and the cultural contradictions inherent in them has been conducted. In the films subscribing to ‘realism’ the ubiquitous working of ideology is hidden and ‘naturalized’. But in melodrama with their emotional extremes and rhetorical excesses, the role of ideology can be discerned. Thirdly, they are important because of the manner in which they highlight the deeper structures of varied cultures. He argues about these aspects in the context of western cultural discussion. He also says that none of the Asian languages has a synonym for this word. Wimal Dissanayake’s postulation that melodrama is a western construct and no synonym for it is found in Asian languages may be correct but the characteristics he discusses and going by melodrama’s original conception; it appears to be closer to the Indian theatre traditions and his view appears far fetched.

The rich dramatic literature of India could be categorized as melodrama. Some of the theoretical treatises composed on drama lack the concept of melodrama in them. Ancient theoreticians classified drama into ten groups on the basis of the structure of the drama, the nature of the protagonist and the character of the aesthetic emotion generated. The notion of melodrama as we now understand the term seems to cut across and pervade all ten kinds of drama.

Dissanayake talks about the difference between western and Asian melodramas and also how they are depicted in the respective cinemas highlight underlying cultural differences. The manner in which characters are portrayed in Indian melodramas has the district cultural undertones of Indian society and tradition. Though cinema is a western import yet it was quickly indigenized. Indian film melodramas portray interplay between western and classical Indian theatre, folk theatre and the comparatively modern Parsi theatre. One should realize that cinema is a cultural expression in which the
artistic, economic, social, political technological, industrial dimensions are 
intimately connected.  

In Indian cinema, we find a certain kind of realism, largely drawn from 
literary and middle class sensibilities that have influence of western culture. Melodrama stirs up 
emotions and they overshadow other considerations. Melodrama emphasizes 
on the reaction of characters in situations that push their emotions to extremes. 

Earlier the term melodrama was used to refer to inferior works of art 
focusing on sensationalism and the crude manipulation of the emotions of 
spectators. But now it is used as a neutral term that characteristics certain 
genres of films. Melodrama is now as consisting of ‘subversive potential for 
exposing bourgeois ideology and an insight to read the dialectic between 
ideology and desire. Melodrama’s focus is on ‘close – ups’ to augment the 
impact of emotional depth and heighten the role of the protagonist (star) and 
interaction of the audience with the moving image. The feminist film criticism 
has used the term melodrama to designate the ‘50s family melodrama’ of 
Hollywood. It derives its distinguishing properties from characteristics that 
attest to its origins in a transitional social formation. Some scholars suggest 
that, initially melodrama was studies within the auteurist critical tradition, 
feminist writing resulted in more generalized theoretical projects trying a 
historical evaluation of the genre in cinema as a whole. The term has so 
many divergent explanations and applications that its usefulness as a critical 
term may well be uncertain. In case of Hollywood, it is being argued that 
‘melodrama was at best a fragmented generic category’ and as a ‘pervasive 
aesthetic mode broke genre boundaries’. 

The realist and melodramatic codes seem to occur in combination. But 
both contained different values. Italian neorealism led to equation of realism 
with democratic anti - fascist ideologies while popular forms were called as
escapist and corrupting. M. Madhav Prasad argues that no aesthetic mode can be inherently democratic or reactionary and such attributions to them is essentialist or anti-materialist. The Indian cinema’s women’s melodramas have a male centeredness but at the same time they raised the question of desire of women and albeit with patriarchal scaffolding broached questions linked with the women’s emancipation from the oppression and injustice of feudal orthodoxy.

Culture

Kishor Valicha says, “The key to cinema lies in culture.” The term culture is of much debate among historians and anthropologists. E.B. Tylor defined it as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. In other words, human culture is the complex of all one knows, all one possesses and all one does. The dimensions and forms these various elements take determine the nature and quality of a culture. But cultures differ not only one from the other, every culture is divided into numerous subcultures with patterns of thought and behaviour which differentiate the life of a hunter from that of a shopkeeper, the customs of the city dweller from those of a rural folk and the behaviour of a child from that of an adult.

According to Malinowski, culture comprises inherited artifices, commodities, ideas, values, habits and technical process. Culture has a material content a body of knowledge and social organization. Moreover, it is not static but dynamic in nature. Raymond Williams referred to culture as “the whole way of life.” The codes, symbols and conventions used in the cinematic medium are culture specific. In India, film borrows from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and myths and other tales. Ramayana and Mahabharata are like the Iliad and the Odyssey each is also a compendium of folk history, poetry and wisdom.

The knowledge of a region’s cultural content and its nuances helps in understanding cinema of that area. Tejaswini Niranjana argues that the
category Indian may no longer be restricted to national boundaries and the
categories of Indian audience may be seen as a category used to describe
audience formations in parts of both the ‘west’ and the ‘Third World’ wherever
people, whether ancestrally of Indian origin or not, see Indian cinema. She is
talking about the people of Indian diasporas as well as those who understand
and watch Indian films. This becomes more relevant in today’s world where
because of developments in communications, technology and rising tide of
globalization, boundaries between areas are shrinking at a much faster rate.

Culture is a dynamic process which evolves with time. The contradiction
and reconciliation in tradition and modernity can be understood in the context
that while trying to surpass the contradictions between tradition and modernity,
several dimensions of ‘tradition as cultural constructs’ under the auspices of an
‘ideology of modernity’ are ‘re-constructed in neo-traditional forms.’ The
fundamental distinction between the elite and the popular cultures has been
presupposed by conventional models of culture. Stuart Hall argues that popular
culture is positioned in a continuing tension (relationship influence, antagonism)
to the dominant culture. Ranjit Guha’s work on popular culture and the
‘subaltern’ appears compatible with such a position. Within European history,
popular culture acquired a broad non-elite focus in which the perspectives and
values of factory workers, agriculturists, servants, craftsmen, beggars, and
thieves got their due.

Within South Asian history, subaltern studies suggested that nationalist
historiography reproduced colonial historiography in certain ways; one type of
elite was replaced by another. In Guha’s framework this apathy towards
masses and their problems reflected a more general failure of the ‘Indian
bourgeoisie to speak for the nation’. Their hegemony remained aloof from the
concerns and consciousness of people. Some sort of a similarity can be
seen between subaltern consciousness and popular culture, especially
popular culture of the type suggested by Carlo Ginsberg which also emerged
out of a basic absence of hegemony. In later subaltern studies, subalternity
emerges not so much from the view of an Indian authenticity but out of the
‘translational slippage’ of the colonial encounter. It is in this context that Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge claim that ‘public culture’ is a partner and postscript to subaltern studies, applying that position to India considered as a “post colony” is logical.\(^5^2\)

To employ the term ‘public culture’ as a middle ground that occupies a space which includes much of the ‘middle class’ and considerable sections of small town and rural India.\(^5^3\) Although there are differences in their preference of cinema, however, all take part and gain knowledge of the language of cultural agency.\(^5^4\) The making of this new social space is helped by prevalence and dominance of electronic mass media - radio, cinema, television, video technologies and internet. The rising vigour of mass media attempts to bring about cosmopolitanism and homogenization of cultures. This in turn, will provide a thrust to increasing consumerist tendencies among the masses.

The national bourgeoisie has produced one hegemonic description of Indian culture, promoted through government institutions like universities, academies, art - galleries, museums etc. which has derided the new middle classes mainly on the basis of taste.\(^5^5\) Bourdieu says that taste is a constituent of a resistance for social recognition or position, in which lifestyle plays a vital role, focusing on cultural consumption rather than production. ‘Taste’ is defined by the governing class, the bourgeoisie, who possess economic capital in terms of income, employment status etc. They enforce their taste so as to create their cultural legitimacy, to delineate the lawful doctrines of domination, between economic, educational or social capital.\(^5^6\) Consequently the bourgeois aesthetic transforms in to cultural capital, seen as being innate in the bourgeoisie rather than learnt or acquired. The bourgeoisie identify what is legitimate culture, and other sections of the populace are considered to be deficient in taste, having a penchant for so-called middle brow or popular.\(^5^7\)

The \textit{bhadralok} have defined India’s legitimate culture in expressions of literature, music, painting and theatre through their organizations such as
universities, academies, art-galleries and museums. They have also dealt with a category which in Bordieu’s expression is ‘legitimizable’ that is cinema, by including certain filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, and later Shyam Benegal and others into the standard of taste, and have, although to some degree provided a little institutional help through government institutions like National Film Development Corporation and Film Festivals. But, they have not legitimized India’s commercial cinema and the cultural products related with it.58

English language is of immense cultural significance as the language of corporate business, of much high culture. It is considered to transcend regionalism and is linked with the secular old middle classes. The film industry in Bombay makes almost all its films in Hindi but uses English for communication, publicity, marketing and trade.59 Even anglicized heroes and heroines give their interviews in English and sometimes their dialogues are dubbed by others as they cannot speak appropriate ‘Hindi’ in the Hindi film.

Literature of Neorealism and Cinema of Neorealism

Despite the paucity of cross-influences between the literature and cinema of neorealism, both media shared enough common source material to present them as ‘parallel manifestations’ of the ‘same aesthetic and ideological impulses.60 The development of the two groups, filmmakers and writers, follows an almost identical pattern. Luigi Mistrorigo who tries to define literary neorealism comments that it was formally born immediately after the Second World War (1945) but its origins are to be found before, some say in 1941 when Cesare Pavese published Paesi tuo, a little before, a little after, according to others.61 The movement became well-known after 1945 and a number of remarkable films were made in 1940s and 1950s. There are striking similarities in terms of content too. Though the product of intellectuals, the literature of neorealism arose out of contact with immediate reality which is expressed as directly as possible, often though narrators who are presented as ordinary men living perfectly ordinary banal lives. Like cinema, neorealism in literature is a reaction against the rhetoric of the Fascist era and
yet a continuation of an older literary tradition, the verismo of Verga. Through Luchino Visconti, this naturalist urge straightforwardly led to the growth of one strain of neorealism in his adaptations of James M. Cain (Ossessione) and Verga (La Terra Trema). In spite of this unity and approach, however, neorealist literature and cinema exhibit little positive interaction, says Roy Armes. He points out the case of Alberto Moravia in this connection and says that though Moravia was both a script writer and the film critic of L’espresso, it would be difficult to indicate any definite cinematic influences on his style, or, conversely, to single out important films which in any real way reflect his literary ideas and achievements. Also, by the time Lizzani came to adapt Pratolini’s novel Cronache di poveri amanti in 1953 or Antonioni was inspired by Pavese’s Tra donne sole for his Le Amiche in 1955, cinematic neorealism had already ceased to be a truly potent force.

On the other hand, Francesco Flora wrote that the cinematographic and literary neorealism originated from the same exploration and experience. Many of the stylistic considerations are relevant to both literary neorealism and its ‘more celebrated cinematic equivalent’. In 1933, Leo Longanesi anticipated Barbaro’s call for a cinema of realism when be supported a filmmaking style free of artifice, devoid of fixed screenplays, inspired by real-life subjects and determined to portray the unvarnished truth. A group of young contributors to the journal Cinema again took up the cause of realism. They favoured stories and screenplays about the conditions of working classes, set in the fields and the factories portrayed with minute attention to their day-to-day lives. Giovanni Verga (1840-1926) provided the narrative prototype for the Cinema writers who looked for an alternative to the clichés and falsehoods of the Fascist film industry and who found in the Sicily of verismo the genuiney so deficient in contemporary cultural models. Verga was a follower of realist tradition in Italian art, concentrating on the less privileged social strata. The Italian artists have always tended towards realism. Beginning in the early Renaissance, with Petrarch, Boccaccio and followed later by Goldoni, Italian artists had sought to render the flow of life. The fascination with nature, a perspective that was the ‘most
treasured heritage’ of the neorealists, was inherent in this tradition. In the works of many Italian painters and poets, landscape/nature emerges as a dominant trait, together with sensuously rendered human bodies. Verga’s work, a huge array of short stories and novels, clearly depicts the significance of nature. Italian Verismo (verita in Italian means “the truth”), represented mainly by Verga and Luigi Capuana, reached its climax in the decade 1875-85. The works representing verismo focus on the dark side of life whose events are seen as resulting from historical and social circumstances. The verists were criticized for having a simplified vision of the world, for forging an unfavourable image of Italy.67

The neorealists opted for Verga and his ‘compassion without mercy’ and disregarded the official Italian literature, presented in their time by Giosue Carducci, Alessandro Manzoni, Luigi Pirandello and Gabriele D’Annunzio. As early as 1941, Giuseppe De Santis and Mario Alicata wrote that their discussion led them to one name: Giovanni Verga who not only produced a great work of poetry, but he produced a country as well, an era, a society. Astonishingly bleak and authentic, it could provide encouragement to an imagination of cinema that seeks things in the space-time of reality, to redeem itself from the simple suggestions of a declining bourgeois state.68

Taking note of the prescriptions of Alicata and De Santis, Visconti chose a Verga story, L’Amante di Gramigna for his screenplay but the Fascist censors thought otherwise and disapproved it. Fortunately, the censors failed to detect the subversive threat in the screenplay for Ossessione (based on The Postman Always Rings Twice a novel by James Cain) giving Visconti a chance to shoot a film whose revelations of passion and provincial squalor stood in stark opposition to Fascist ideas of artistic propriety. Along with Alessandro Blasetti’s Quattro passi fra le nuvole (Four Steps in a Cloud) and Vittorio De Sica’s I bambini Ci guardano (The Children are Watching Us), Ossessione was seen as the harbinger of that realist recurrence which produced its first full-fledged post war example in Roma Città Aperta (Rome Open City) of Roberto Rossellini.69
But this opening to realism was not a sudden reaction to the falsification of the Fascist cinema, for the Italian film industry had always respected the realist possibilities implicit in the medium of cinema. Since the beginning of the industry, Italian filmmakers tried to seek at least physical realism in their faithfulness to detail in historical reconstructions, in their sporadic use of existing antiquities as settings for their “costume films” and in a kind of ‘philological passion for authenticity.’ In a few cases, the early cinema’s dedication to realism went past such surface precision to the reach for underlying social truths that have come to be identified with the classical realist tradition. Thus, in between the historical spectacles and bourgeois melodramas of the silent era, there appeared a slight knowledge of films of realist descent too. These were Sperduti nel buio (1914) and Teresa Raquin by Nino Martoglio, Assunta Spina by Gustavo Serena, and Cavalleria rusticana by Ubaldo Maria Del Colle, all made between 1914-16 and all owing gratitude to the “naturalism of the Southern tradition” as it was formulated in literature by Giovanni Verga, Luigi Capuana and others. In the late 1920s, two filmmakers Alassendro Blasetti and Mario Camerini made several films of realist bent. Sole (1928) of Blasetti and Rotaie (1929) of Camerini (1929) look ahead to neorealism in their technique – non professional actors, location shooting – and also in their subject matter – contemporary problems in a working class milieu. Blasseti’s 1860 (1934) anticipates historical neorealism and his Quattro passi fra le nuvole (Four Steps in a Cloud) became a member of the triumvirate of 1942 films that directly prefigured neorealism. Its scenarist Cesare Zavattini became one of the important theorists and practitioners of neorealism. Uomini sul fondo (1941) of de Robertis also belonged to this style of filmmaking.

Neorealism

It would be naïve to pursue a study of neorealism assuming its meaning and validity to be beyond question. The term has generated a lot of controversy. Some dismiss it as a figment of the critical imagination claiming that though some remarkable films did emerge from the immediate postwar industry but
they were a result of fortuitous and serendipitous amalgamation of forces, including the talent of De Sica and Rossellini and the restricted situation that necessitated the technical expedients associated with neorealist style. Those who extol it view it as the ‘highest expression of the postwar Italian worldview.’

Even among the supporters of neorealism there is much debate and discussion about its rules, definitions and influences.

Georges Sadoul views neorealism as a school and lists five features prerequisite to such a designation: ‘clearly delineated geographic and temporal boundaries, a group of masters and disciples and a set of rules.’ Neorealism fulfils the first two requirements in its almost exclusive confinement to Rome from the years 1945 to 1952. The neorealist masters are Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini while its disciples consist of Pietro Germi, Giuseppe De Santis, Luigi Zampa, Renato Castellani and Aldo Vergano. The rules governing neorealist practice were a non professional cast, location shooting, respect for the continuity of time and space, lengthy takes, natural lighting, unobtrusive editing, a predominance of medium and long shots, use of contemporary true to life subjects, active viewer involvement, working class protagonists, dialogue in the vernacular, an undevised open ended plot and implied social criticism.

The definition of neorealism encounters a lot of problems, for the stylistic differences among its individual practitioners are often greater than their conformity to a given set of rules. At the same time, neorealist filmmakers never formed a formal group. De Sica is reported to have once said that it’s not that one day they sat down at a table Rossellini, Visconti, himself and the others and decided to produce neorealism. The neorealist rules were critically formulated only after the films were made. It did not provide any priori basis for cinematic practice. In his famous essay, Some ideas on the Cinema, Zavattani’s definition of neorealism was not the analysis of a disinterested critic but a scriptwriter searching for theoretical justification for the particular aesthetic of his own work in Shoeshine, Bicycle Thieves and Umberto D. Thus, the consistent appearance of all the qualities of the neorealist style, as institutionalized by the critical literature, in the films of neorealist filmmakers was not seen.
To typify neorealism is, in fact, really complex, except as regards when it happened. If a social and aesthetic description were to be tried, in terms say of five traits quite generally acknowledged as characteristics—realistic handling, popular location, social substance, historical authenticity and political commitment—one would not come across a lot of films which fulfill all these conditions together. What one can highlight, however, is the broad convergence of some Italian directors at a particular era around some of the characteristics proposed as the norm. 81

Looking beyond technical considerations, the ethical impetus behind neorealism creates more of a consensus among artists of the era and to find enough reason for clubbing them together as supporters of a certain school, style, tendency, broadly construed. A number of critics view neorealism as a moral statement, the purpose of which was to promote a true objectivity one that would persuade viewers to forsake the inadequacies of a strictly personal perspective and to accept the authenticity of the “other”, be they person or things, with all the moral responsibility that such a perspective entails. This mutual ethical adherence united filmmakers “from above,” melting away their trivial stylistic dissimilarities into an essential agreement on the important matters of human concerns and general world view. 82 Such an ethical consensus among stylistically different practitioners of neorealism influenced Micciche, a film critic, to infer that neorealism was never an aesthetic code at all but strictly a moral one. 83

The understanding of neorealist ethics can be best done in relation to its 19th century literary inspiration in Verga. When Verga vows to provide the representation of reality as it has been or as it should have been, his emphasis on an ideal course of human history, which may or may not be articulated by the factual account, indicates the effect of classical realism on an artist not fully dedicated to beliefs of naturalists. This contest between the scientific objectivity of naturalism and the humanistic survivals of classical realism carries on in the 20th century but it takes a different form in the neorealism. For the neorealist, the effect of classical realism does not end
with Verga’s acknowledgement of the disparity between the way things are and the way they should be but goes on to insist on ending that disparity, or as Sandro Petraglia’s argues to change things from the way they are to the way they should and could be. In the dissimilarity of locution of Verga and Petraglia, lies the whole contrast between the 19th century Italian verismo and its 20th century counterpart. The usage of past tense verbs by Verga provides the objects of his representation fixity and closure that with stands or resists any chance of revision or alteration. On the other hand, Petraglia keeps that alternative open in his choice of present and conditional verbs. The temporal discrepancy between Verga’s act of writing and the episodes he accounts for indicates a distance which is not only historical at performative – his composition takes place in a world that is unattached from and incapable to change the world of his characters. On the contrary a neorealist views himself as a part of the world he documents. He is inside it and a determinant of it, mediating in the present so that the conditional verbs will some day merit the unqualified future tense, and even the present tense itself. To the Verga’s list of essere (to be) and dovere (to have to), Petraglia’s addition of potere (to be able to) is most important, indicating that the contest between the way things are and the way they ought to be is reconcilable by suitable social action. This highlights the difference between the status quo and the inherent potential of social change. It points to the old debate between a conservative view of society and a progressive view of the future. It also positions Realism as an essential prerequisite of thinking about and planning for a better world not only for the working classes but also for the bourgeois.

The Resistance provided an impetus to change Verga’s passive resignation into neoralist activism. This movement provided its generation the faith and confidence that ideal could impinge upon the real and that man could shape his own fate in a way conforming to his highest ethical promptings. Art, which for Verga ‘bore passive witness to the underlying dynamism of the historical process’, becomes a tool for encouraging drastic change in the hands of the neorealists. The remnant of classical realism which combined with 19th
century positivism to shape Verga’s aesthetic, is thus developed by neorealists’, who improve upon the cognitive plan into an incentive for action. The 19th century naturalism’s scientific pretensions continue to exist in the neorealist ambition to an objective, impartial scrutiny of the social order. But there Verga could stick to the pretence of empirical objectivity because of his resigned acquiescence to the status quo; the neorealists could not support this excuse against the burden of their compelling didacticism.85

Neorealism sought to reclaim and re-appropriate the cinema so as to revamp the trust in the medium’s ability to demonstrate reality as it is before it presumed to transform it.86 The neorealists’ dedication to the cause of social change did not endear them to the custodians of the postwar status quo.87 The neorealists were denounced for washing dirty linen in public and of ‘slandering Italy abroad.’88 The neorealist filmmakers perpetuated a thorough anti-establishment posture and depicted an image of Italy that was anything but reassuring to Italian officialdom. In 1945, Alberto Lattuada wrote:

We are in rags? Let’s show everyone our rags. We are defeated? Let’s look at our disasters. How much are we obligated to the mafia? To hypocritical bigotry? To conformity, to irresponsibility, to bad breeding? Let’s pay all our debts with a ferocious love of honesty and the world will participate, moved by this great contest with the truth.89

So it was not surprising that the authorities felt intimidated by these confessions and termed such films as Paisan, La Terra Trema and Caccia Tragica hostile towards national interest.90 The Vatican newspaper L’Osservatore Romano censured Ladri di Bicicletta (Bicycle Thieves) as being unkind to Catholic charities, while De Sica’s disclosure of the Roman prison system in Sciuscia (Shoeshine) ensured that no filmmaker would gain access to an Italian jail in future for the purpose of filmmaking.91

State Retaliation

The state retaliated with the time honoured privilege of censorship. The Giulio Andreotti Law of 1949 contained certain provisions to check films
portraying Italy in an unflattering light. The introduction of strict pre-censorship gave the state control over the film industry. The submission of all scripts to a special ministerial commission and granting of production loans to only those that received official acceptance. This policy brought a radical decrease in the efforts to make films on controversial themes and dissuaded producers from financing films that were unlikely to obtain financial support. Under this law, a film could be refused an export license on the pretext that it ‘slandered Italy.’ This policy deprived them of foreign earnings on which many neorealists relied because domestic sales rarely covered production costs. The denial of entry into foreign market was an assured guarantee of financial breakdown.

In an open letter addressed to De Sica, published on Feb 24, 1952 in Liberta the weekly of the Christian Democratic Party, Andreotti summed up the allegations against the neorealists. According to Andreotti, neorealist films were defaming Italy abroad, portraying her as a nation of social strife unemployment and poverty. Andreotti asked De Sica to assume his social duty, which can not be restricted to a depiction of poverty and misdeeds of a system and a generation but which must assist to surmount them. Andreotti urged De Sica to not to disregard the nominal commitment towards a healthy and constructive optimism that can aid humanity to advance and to achieve hope. He says that the international reputation that director has fittingly acquired provides him the right to demand that he acknowledge his responsibility and accomplish this duty.

On the other hand, the majority of filmmakers continued to condemn and organize meetings and demonstrations against Andreotti’s policy. In Dec. 1947, thirty-five film directors signed a letter to Andreotti articulating their objections to government measures intended to suppress Lost Youth of Pietro Germi and other films. In February 1948, the movement for the Defence of Italian Cinema was formed and ten eminent filmmakers denounced Andreotti’s law in a number of articles published in Rinascita, the communist weekly on March 3, 1949. There Pietro Germi summed up the situation as follows:
Neorealism is not a fashion or a craze. It did not spring from casual or contingent sources, it is so for some, and such people will be left behind and will finish by betraying the art. Others have achieved their ambition after a lot of toil. They will not move backwards, they move forward. The current Italian cinema is part of a long and difficult struggle for a modern Italy. Its works represent the “lists of grievances” of a period. The Italian cinema has discovered a new language, an inexhaustible sense of inspiration. But it is a discovery that has just begun and whose development cannot be planned or imagined.95

Developments in Germany

In early 1930s, Germany held a dominant position in the European cinema. It also had an energetic left-wing culture which made its own films outside the mainstream. During the Weimar Republic, the Social Democrats as well as the Communists tried to set up alternative cultural networks with their own literature, theatre and sporting cultural activity. After the Nazi Party assumed power in 1933 the situation began to change. The Nazis established their own cinema institutions and brought cinema under the control of the ministry of Propaganda. The primary task of Nazis was to reshape the imagination and perception of the masses in accordance with its own persuasions. The propagandist motives and activities of Adolf Hitler and his minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels who were keenly aware of film’s ability to mobilize minds, to create powerful illusions and captive audiences were very clear.96 About the Nazi party, Rentschler argued:

Given the atrocities of National Socialism, the movies, newsreels and documentaries made under its aegis represent for many commentators film history’s darkest hour... Nazi cinema... an infamous entity, its most memorable achievement is the systematic abuse of film’s formative powers in the name of mass manipulation state terror and world wide destruction... The ministry of Propaganda monitored film scripts, over saw studio productions and orchestrated press responses.97

The German cinema classified as Tendenzfilme during the Third Reich was meant to describe a film that portrayed strong themes and doctrines
identifiable with Nazism which the Ministry of Propaganda wished to transmit at sporadic periods.⁹⁸ On 20 May, 1933, in one of the initial speeches as Minister for Popular Entertainment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels stated that the German cinema had the duty of conquering the globe as the vanguard of the Nazi military forces.⁹⁹ The most vital device of Goebbels Ministry had been the Reich Film Chamber which maintained almost exclusive control over independent and also state film-production by centralizing film finance, inspecting all scripts before film-making and enforcing up on all film workforce membership of affiliated party organisations.¹⁰⁰ Leni Riefenstahl close association with Hitler and her Nazi ties resulted in production of Der Triumph des Willens (The Triumph of Will, 1935) which was the cinematographic equivalent of Hitler’s deification through monumental architecture. Hitler was shown in the Nuremberg Nazi party rally where a gigantic rectangular tribune was built. This architectural stage was designed to enhance the Fuhrer’s image as the saviour of the masses.¹⁰¹

Susan Sontag states that in The Triumph of the Will the document (the image) is no longer merely the documentation of reality; “reality” has been constructed to serve the image.¹⁰² The Nuremberg Nazi Party rally (1934) itself was staged to accommodate the film and fundamentally operated as extremely artificial, premeditated portion of theatre. In other words, in the film, ‘Actuality is not actual’; the cinematographic documentation of the occasion is extremely mediated; the matter is edited not to disclose the reality but a set of symbolic relationships with a precise political objective; the rally in becoming an illusion of ‘reality’ becomes ‘documentary myth’.¹⁰³ Another film Olympia (1938) was devoted to the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936 which Hitler tried to turn into a propaganda triumph.¹⁰⁴ Both these films were amazing pageants, metamorphosing the Nazi leaders into a magnificent pantheon.¹⁰⁵

In Joseph Goebbels 1941 speech, “The Film as Educator”, the propaganda minister inaugurated the Hitler Youth Film Works Program. He spoke frankly about his tactical goals, the identical goals he had already implemented in the nationalized German film industry:
A national leadership, which aspires to such a lofty title, must make it a duty to care for the people, lovingly and helpfully, not only in their worries and burdens, but also in their joys and recreations. Film in this respect is one of the most valuable factors, contributing to beautifying those few hours remaining to the individual German citizen after work, ones necessary to replenish his soul. Beyond that, however, the modern cinema is a national educational tool of the first order. The scope of its effect is almost comparable to that of primary schools.\textsuperscript{106}

In other words, he wants to keep film production ideology at this level of reception. Cinema of political propaganda increased from an average ten percent to twenty five percent in 1942, the year of the Nazis’ utmost military extension in Europe.\textsuperscript{107} Moreover, we can argue that the question of number of films produced was not important but more relevant was the production ideology i.e. their thematic concerns and the degree of association to Nazi ideals, and the devastation they caused to the human race.

Due to state repression and persecution a number of left-wing and Jewish filmmakers fled to various European countries. Some finally landed in America. A number of film industry personnel who remained in Germany died in concentration camps. Some of the anti-Nazi artists and technicians who survived the onslaught later worked in the entertainment sector of the German film industry. It must be pointed out that one of the most significant influence that Nazism and Fascism, had on cinema did not pertain to films that were made in Germany and other Fascist countries but to the emigration they caused in 1933 and then again in 1940. The anti-Semitic and anti-communist propaganda coupled with too much state control of the film industry caused exile of so many artists that it must have, definitely, hurt German cinema as these artists would have enriched German cinema in better circumstances. This emigration served as a boon for the cinema of those countries who willingly and pleasantly accepted the refugees – Hollywood gained the most but other countries also had their share of luck.

**Fascism in Italy**

The fascists came to power in Italy in 1922 under the leadership of Benito Mussolini. He echoed Lenin in proclaiming that the cinema is the most powerful
weapon to influence masses. In 1926, the production of news reels and documentaries was nationalized by the government, making them an instrument of state propaganda. In Italy, Alessandro Blasetti’s *Sole* (*Sun*, 1929) exhibits a clear influence of Pudovkin and other masters of Russian silent cinema. The beliefs and notions of Eisenstein and Pudovkin were taken up by film theoreticians like Umberto Barbaro and Luigi Chiarini and came, by a round about route to affect the post-war neorealist generation of filmmakers.  

The Italian cinema during the Fascist rule (1922-43) has traditionally been seen as a cinema of propaganda. This cinema was, generally, neglected by mainstream film historians and scholars. Cesare Zavattini talks about rejection of this cinema as the two decades of fascist regime did not produce a single film which was a 3000 meter of film out of thirty million shot. At other point, this apathy is also reflected by Carlo Lizzani who said that hundreds of films made between 1938 and 1943 should not be remembered or regretted, even if they are lost, since they contained merely a record of ordinary places in a filthy and boring recipe book.  

But recent research on the films produced in Italy during the Fascist period points that out of over seven hundred films made, only a few can be called “Fascist”, although a huge number have nationalist and patriotic themes. It is argued that the fascists interfered very little in the entertainment cinema. The government interference was in the first instance economic rather than cultural. Its chief objective was to encourage a crumbling industry and helped in making of films which could compete with Hollywood at the box-office. The cultural results of the fascist interference were chiefly negative and came out in the form of censorship and the discouragement of anti-national ideas. Peter Bondanella, claims that fascist cinema was not a cinema of ideological propaganda but it favored a thriving commercial cinema based on the Hollywood model, inclusive of the star system, a group of significant auteur directors and a genre oriented theme. Morando Morandini, noted film scholar, claims that rather than persuading artists and intellectuals into approved political positions, fascism simply worked to deflect their concern
from contemporary reality, which was to be the restricted preserve of the politicians. Though it is true that ‘official’ cinema of the two decades of fascist regime represented five percent of national production but it is also true that except the individual efforts of figures like Alessandro Blasetti and Camerini, the driving force behind Italian cinema remained the escapist film or as Luchino Visconti calling it ‘a cinema of corpses’. The style was closer to Hollywood films of the same period; relied on the cult of the stars; and made in the genres of comedy, melodrama and costume-cum-historical drama. The comedies were generally frivolous and inane based on a rejection of reality in favour of anemic over indulgent figures who dwell in a ridiculous abundance of wealth and who speak to each other on the shining ‘white telephones’ which provided their name to the genre. Moreover, to restrict the intelligentsia and masses to a particular genre or style of cinema, which was away from reality, shows the authoritarian attitude and censorship intentions of the Fascist state. Furthermore, we can argue that the question of number of films produced was not important but more relevant was the production ideology i.e. their thematic concerns and the degree of association to Nazi ideals, and the devastation they caused to the human race.

Under Fascist rule of Mussolini the kind of cinema that was being created was detached from reality and aimed at promoting an excellent image of Italy. The government had prohibited the portrayal of crime and immorality on screen. Neorealist films were a reaction against the disapprovingly called ‘white telephone films’ which were pretentious in nature and in which character talked on white shining phones. Neorealism then owes its origin, in part, to these filmmakers discontent at the limits placed on their freedom of expression. Neorealism emerged in response to this genre which delved in imagination and fantasy and was miles away from any kind of reality. It was a movement against the artificiality of the pre-war and fascist cinema. It can also be construed as an attempt to make cinema more meaningful to the audience.
The neorealist attempt to do away with all the canons of the traditional cinema comprised a drastically different technique of casting to complement the other features of the emanating style. Rossellini’s casting of two famous performers in the two tragic roles in *Rome Open City* gave a jolt to the prevailing traditions. De Sica sought out the protagonists of *Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves* in the streets of Rome. But neorealists soon realized that this technique with all its authenticity, freshness and “realism” could be used only in a particular kind of film and that was in itself restricting in nature. Finally, type casting was retained mostly for extras and for supporting roles. Some others including De Santis who recognized the restraints of type casting and of artists’ “found in the streets” attempted another method. They chose as their protagonists “natural performers” from among their friends, acquaintance, participants in pageants etc. assisting them, in many cases, to achieve a professional level. In this way, neorealist elements were assisted by having artists who were devoid of professional stereotyping and unused by acting academies. Historically, it is not the absence of professional actors that is the hallmark of Italian film but it is particularly the turning down of the star concept and the irregular intermingling of professionals and those who just act occasionally. Raf Vallone, who debuted in *Bitter Rice* and later became one of the most well known Italian actors, originally worked on the staff of the Turin edition of *L’Unita*. Silvana Mangano herself won the Miss Italia contest and from there found her way to *Bitter Rice*, which made her internationally famous.

It is significant to refrain from using the professional in the type –cast role. The spectator should not be afflicted with any preconception. The professionalism of an actor should be utilized only in so far as it permits him to be more adaptable in his reaction to the necessity of the *mise en scene* and to attain a better understanding of the character. The selection of the non professional is of course done for their suitability for the role either because they fit it physically or because there is some resemblance between the role and their lives. Their loyalty to a script which stimulated them intensely and which demanded minimal theatrical pretense established a type of osmosis.
among the cast. The technical immaturity of the amateur is helped out by the expertise of the professional while the professionals themselves gain from the all-embracing ambience of authenticity.\textsuperscript{119}

On the other hand, Siegfried Kracauer supported the view that filmmakers must present their own view of reality.\textsuperscript{120} The film image does have an aura and immediacy and a perceptual position that seem to equate with the manner we look at the world itself. But it is an image and not the ‘reality’ of our daily perception. Christian Metz argued, “The secret of film is that it is able to leave a high degree of reality in its images, which are, nevertheless, still perceived as images.”\textsuperscript{121} Neorealism never misunderstood the image of reality for reality itself, and in fact desired to create the image as an expressive tool that would be convincing in the way it conveyed emotion, behaviour, action and reaction, history and place. The neorealist desired their images to show a world neglected by conventional cinema and to portray that world unmediated by cinematic stereotyping. Take any type of film, image is an artifice and there is never any confusion on the part of the audience about this fact. The most significant question pertains to the extent to which the image makes the audience conscious of its position as a created object. The neorealists relied upon the ‘artifice of the camera eye to transcend artifice’ and produce a variant of reality - stark, immediate and approachable than that of the former times.\textsuperscript{122} Furthermore, image is not a portion of reality but output of labour. The reality is put to use by the labour as an ingredient in the process, but this process does not present reality back in its actual purity.\textsuperscript{123}

Bazin argued that one advantage of the Italian film was that it demonstrated that realism in art was first profoundly aesthetic. Realism in art could only be achieved in one manner through artifice. With this realization ‘a turn away from the neorealist aesthetic’ took place.\textsuperscript{124} The filmmakers who adhered to the movement realized that to acknowledge the deception of an unmediated viewing of the world without questioning it, is a ploy that can cause reduced responsibility on the part of the filmmaker. They realized that the polemic about an objective versus a manipulative cinema can be circular,
inexhaustible and infinite unless such arguments are transformed into
dialectic.\textsuperscript{125} Reality finally is not “out there” and there is an aspiration for the
image to be authentic to such an abstract, idealist notion. The image can be
authentic only to a filmmakers reading of “reality” and competence to provide
such a reading an articulation, suggest a viewpoint or interpretation, to create
images that express and comment while allowing the audience, scope to
participate in the act of interpretation. The history of film after neorealism is
the history of how much open recognition was provided by the filmmaker, by
the film itself, to the artifice that created it, that made it to be seen “real” or as
a description of “reality”\textsuperscript{126}

**Humanists**

Humanists viewed and explained the neorealist phenomenon in terms of its
moral content. Andre Bazin says, “Is not neorealism primarily a kind of humanism
and only secondarily a style of filmmaking.”\textsuperscript{127} Bazin was prominent among the
humanist exponents of neorealism. He sees the basic humanism of the
contemporary Italian films as their principal merit and views them as presenting a
chance to appreciate a revolutionary flavour in which terror has no role. Bazin
considered neorealism as a ‘revolution in art’, which was severely criticized
during the 1974 Congress on neorealism. The term revolution is often mentioned
not only in Bazin’s writings but in others as well. The term revolution is,
undoubtedly, an exaggerated designation for a movement tied in many ways to
the traditional aesthetics and inspired by the cinema of 1930s - descriptive
calligraphist realism, documentarism of de Robertis’s, Rossellini’s war films,
French Populism etc.\textsuperscript{128} Yet for Bazin, it was a revolution in a form which comes
to bear on the content. For example, the priority which they accord to incident
over plot had let De Sica and Zavattini to replace plot as such with a micro action
based on an infinitely divisible attention to the complexities in even the most
ordinary of events. This is evident in *Bicycle Thieves* where a simple incident is
presented in simplicity yet the complexities involved in the situation are also
highlighted in an effective manner. This in itself rules out the slightest hierarchy,
whether psychological, dramatic, or ideological, among the incidents that are
portrayed.\textsuperscript{129}
Bazin argues that *mise en scène* is the essence of the neorealist film. By *mise en scène* he refers to deep focus photography and the sequence shot; these devices permit the audience to be more involved in the viewing of film. Thus, Bazin discovers the evolution of deep focus to be not just a mere filmic tool but rather a dialectical advancement in the history of film language because the depth of focus positions the viewer in intimate relation with the image than he is with reality. This indicates consequently both a more active mind-set on the part of the spectator and a more optimistic contribution to the act in progress. Furthermore, there is a metaphysical result of deep focus photography: "montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression, neorealism tends to give back to cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality". Free to select, we are free to interpret. Bazin’s dedication to Italian neorealism was guided not only aesthetically, but equally by socio-political sympathies with a movement that emerged out of Catholics and Communists uniting against Fascism. Moreover, he wrote in an era of depressing post-war Europe and had experienced the inconceivable terror of genocide and mass extermination.

Bazin acknowledged a realism of perceptual experience wherein the day-to-day life routine of ‘apperception, recognition and mental elaboration’ is structurally reproduced in films. For Bazin, realism is constantly a matter of being grounded in a perceptual as well as a particular social reality. In other words, realism for Bazin is not so much a technique that one can exercise or an effect induced in the viewer, but rather an attitude or position that the filmmaker adopts in relation to his subject-matter.

Bazin states that “neorealism is a description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole.” Bazin argues that in neorealism there is definite “wholeness” to reality. His usage of idea of reality as an “inseparable whole” implies that the things used by a film - the “fact” as he calls it - have an ontological unity which film has to value. For Bazin, the meaning of a film emerges from the ontological existence of the things themselves (“reality conceived as a whole”) filtered through the filmmaker’s
receptivity ("a consciousness disposed to see things as whole"). Neorealist cinema subordinates itself to the "facts" and becomes a window on a certain reality or a particular situation or a specific historical circumstance.\(^{135}\)

In Italy, another humanist, Luigi Chiarini argued that neorealism tends towards new cinematic forms that stand for an authentic and true revolution with regard to the notion of cinema as a spectacle. He examined the neorealist phenomenon, criticizing the simplified socio historical approaches. He claimed that the greatest misunderstanding consists in confusing neorealism with cinematic verismo and in the belief that a neorealist film can be created just by shooting on location without actors and with people picked up in real life. That was a mistake that led to the confusion between the demands postulated by a spiritual attitude and a technical fact. It is utterly arbitrary to classify as neorealist all films, and only such films, that tackle the contents of social concern and are based on certain external features such as the use of non professional actors and shooting on location.\(^{136}\)

Mario Gromo, one of the first Italian film critics influenced by the principles of Benedetto Croce, while talking about neorealism always associated historical situations with the emergence of human freedom. He argued that after the collapse of Fascism, when half of the nation was still under German control, life was tough and unkind; this hurt and agony became crucial for filmmakers who felt free but obsessed with this suffering. Thus Open City and Shoeshine were born and were hailed almost all over the world, they appeared, suddenly, in an atmosphere of three tired conformities; the American, predominantly industrial; the Russian, entirely political; and the French, rather literary. What came to life was less a new realism and more a new truth rooted in the search for a new freedom.\(^{137}\)

**Socio-historians**

Umberto Barbaro in Italy and Georges Sadoul in France were the most important among socio-historians. Their postulation of neorealism as an
exclusive articulation of the war and the antifascist resistance, with stress on social concern, proved excessively unyielding. Its supporters tried to tie down all succeeding developments in Italian cinema to this original force. The argument that neorealist cinema was constantly portraying unfair and distorted social structures which threaten to damage and pervert the necessary and inner human value gained ground.\textsuperscript{138} A more cautious investigation is required to show that the constant focus of major neorealist films was not merely upon social reality but also upon the ‘dialectics of reality and appearance,’ generally the ‘appearance or illusion of reality’ created by artistic way. George Sedoul recognizes that the people, their struggle for national independence and the theoretical basis explained profoundly and secretly by anti-Fascists led to emergence of neorealism after the war. Sedoul adhered to the general guidelines of neorealism propounded by Umberto Barbaro, for whom art was conditioned and determined (i.e. tied to a period), expressing a determined reality and also turned in the direction of future, anticipating and contributing to the foundation of a new era.\textsuperscript{139}

Sigfried Kracauer explained the roots of neorealism better than many of the social critics. He claimed that when history is made in the streets, the streets are likely to move to the screen. Despite their differences in ideology and techniques, \textit{Paisan} and \textit{Potemkin} contain this “street” quality in common; they portray environmental situations rather than personal matters, episodes concerning society at large rather than narratives focusing on an individual quarrel. In other words, they demonstrate inclination towards documentary. These narratives serve to dramatize social situation in general. The penchant for real inhabitants on the celluloid and the documentary approach appear to be intimately interconnected.\textsuperscript{140}

The contest between the socio-historians and the humanists resulted in its time in the debate about Rossellini, ending with Andre Bazin’s open letter to Guido Aristarco. Bazin could not agree that Rossellini be omitted from the
class of major Italian filmmakers only because he did not restrict the use of film medium to the limits decided by the socio-historical demands that Aristarco supported. Bazin, rightly apprehended that by restricting neorealism to just one side of its experience, both the future growth of Italian cinema and the general image of neorealism could be threatened. Thus, for instance, the denial by the 1974 Pesaro group to view neorealism as a movement was based, among others, on the refusal of the formula into which neorealism had been locked after the rejection of directors like Rossellini, Fellini and Antonioni. The socio-historical explanations entered into many film histories and alternatively created a certain misgiving of neorealism among some filmmakers and critics outside Italy who viewed it as a ‘typical product of the traditional narrative cinema’ with no place left for formal experiments.  

Bazin, in his letter to Aristarco, the editor-in-chief of Cinema Nuovo commented:

When I find you hunting for fleas in Gelsomina’s tousled hair (La Strada) or dismissing Rossellini’s last film (Voyage in Italy) as less than nothing, I am forced to conclude that in the guise of theoretical integrity you are in the process of nipping in the bud some of the liveliest and most promising offshoots of what persist in calling neorealism. (These two films), far from being felt here (in France) as a break with neorealism and still less a regression, have given us the feeling of creative inventiveness deriving directly from the spirit that informs the Italian school. I will try to tell you why. But I have first to confess to a strong dislike for a notion of neorealism which is based, to the exclusion of all else, on what is only one of its present aspects, for this is to submit its future potential to a priori restriction.  

Was it a Movement?

Rossellini said that there are many kinds of neorealism; each one has his own but his was an ethical position, an attempt to comprehend himself within a phenomenon. In the early seventies, some Italian film critics refused to view neorealism as a movement. They argued that a movement has to have a
unity, which neorealism lacked. Micciche, in his introductory paper at the conference on neorealism in 1974, said:

Neorealism was not an aesthetic, and one of the reasons for its demise was the belief that it was and, what is worse, had the intention to be one. Neorealism was “an ethic of aesthetic.” It was the answer of a generation of filmmakers to the question asked by Vittorini: “Shall we have a culture capable of protecting people against suffering instead of just comforting them?” In this respect and only in this respect—the Viscontis, De Sicas, Rossellini’s and De Santis, aesthetically so different from one another, were ethically similar.¹⁴³

Neorealism, by its title, reclaimed the territory of reality, and in that reclamation denied the claims of past filmmaking while presenting itself as a harbinger for filmmaking to come in future.¹⁴⁴ The above mentioned filmmaker, one so unlike the other, led to the flowering of a phenomenon with well defined technical and moral components that created an impact on almost all subsequent film trends in the west and in the east.

Basil Wright remarked that after *Paisan*, *Shoeshine*, *Germany Year Zero* and *Bicycle Thief*, cinema could never be the same again. The neoralist approach became a permanent part of the filmmakers’ ideological universe. Its influence was felt on French cinema from Clement, Cayatte, and Clouzot to Godard and Truffant. Its influence on Japanese directors like Kinoshita, Ichikawa, and Oshima was considerable, and neorealism also inspired Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali*.¹⁴⁵ James Monaco supports the argument of Basil Wright and says that though neorealism as a movement lasted till early fifties, the consequence of its aesthetics were felt for considerable time in future.¹⁴⁶ Louis Marcorelles, a French critic argued that historically, neorealism in 1944-45, the British free cinema of 1956-59, and the French new wave of 1958-59 demonstrate the earliest attempts that were undertaken to produce a cinema that was not expensive, that was nearer to reality, and that was liberated from bondage to technique.¹⁴⁷

Robert Philip Kolker talked about two neorealisms: one was the genre of films in Italy between 1945 and 1955 and the other was a concept, an
aesthetic, a politics, a drastic reorientation of films that transformed the perception on what had already passed and made possible a lot of what appeared subsequently. He further argues that occasionally concept and execution of neorealism was closely reflected in the films made by Visconti, Rossellini, De Sica, Fellini and others during that period. Our understanding of neorealism can be undertaken by looking at the images of its films through the theory and the theory from a particular historical perspective. Neorealism was a turn, a ‘break’, in the sense that Louis Althusser applies the expression to articulate the time at which a new consciousness starts to emerge, in this case, a new consciousness of cinematic representation and story narration.148

De Sica’s believed that Sciuscia (Shoeshine), his first film of the post war period, indicated the intensity of the ethical and social commitment towards neorealist practice. He felt that the experience of the Second World War was crucial as everyone felt the aspiration to discard previous tales of the Italian films, to place the camera in the middle of real life, to acquaint oneself with reality, to realize what one really was, and to search for salvation. Shoeshine was a little stone to contribute to the ethical rebuilding of nation. Elio Petri referred to neorealism as a tool ‘leading to knowledge about reality’ and felt that after the years of Fascist obscurantism and of regional escapist cinema, films came which were seen as a means towards liberation and to freedom.149 This freedom was from the sin of personal complicity with a corrupt moral order and social injustices perpetrated by Fascism.

Zavattini argued that the neorealist movement recognized that films should depict the daily life and circumstances of the Italian masses.150 Zavattini’s most important postulate was unequivocal acquiescence of “life as it is”, which meant entrapping reality as nearly as possible in real time. He brushed aside any intrusion of photographable material by the filmmakers’ will arguing that all intellectuals were influenced by their past – in the Italian case by twenty years of Fascism.151 Neorealists believed that the moving image could be relied upon to show the world, seen by the filmmaker if the filmmaker merely looked and kept his counsel and interfered as little as possible.152
Neorealists desired to observe the world without mediations and interferences so that the lives of the poor would unfold themselves. It also did not want predetermined ends where emotional excesses, demand for sacrifice and hope of mobile acts from the hero dominated the moving image. Felix A. Morlion, an Italian Critic, wrote in 1948:

The Italian neo-realist school is based on a single thesis diametrically opposed to that thesis which regards the cinema only in terms of lighting effects, words, and purely imaginary situations. Neorealism’s thesis is that the screen is a magic window which opens out on to the “real”; that cinematic art is the art of recreating, through the exercise of free choice upon the material world, the most intense vision possible of the invisible reality inherent in the movements of the mind.\(^{153}\)

Post synchronization was a method used by Italian neorealists in which dialogues recorded on location were not actually used except as a reference in the recording of the final sound track made under controlled acoustical conditions. It played an important role in the shaping of neorealist aesthetics (and / or the aesthetics of the Italian cinema in general). Most of the films were shot silent and post-synchronized. This experience imparted them high levels of skills in sound recording and dubbing. They even perfected it to such a level that hardly anybody noticed any discrepancy. The most famous case was that of *Ladri di Bicicletta (Bicycle Thief)* where Lamberto Maggiorani, who played the part of unemployed worker, was dubbed by an actor.

Jacques Daniol Valcroze, a French critic argued that the photography of the neorealist films is austere and gray; the sound evokes the mood of outdoors; hasty direction, and a total absence to seek effects. The actors pursue these movements; they ‘exist’ humbly facing camera. Giuseppe Ferrara, Italian film historian, wrote that the neorealist cinematographer merely followed the ‘stream of light’ like the famous painter Caravaggio. In other words, if the light entered through single window, then the illumination had single source that lighted things in their most modest reality. The things were not be made attractive- the cruder they were, the purer they appeared,
the more genuine, the more striking. Neorealist cinematography had a radiant authenticity that had not appeared in earlier cinema.\textsuperscript{154}

Some critics attempted to explain neorealism as an aesthetic of rejection. Jurji Lotman, a Soviet semiotician, fully adopted the theory of rejection in his work. He argued that in its resistance against pompousness, Italian neorealism arrived at the overall ‘equation of art and extra-artistic reality.’ Its active elements were always refusals: a refusal to employ stereotyped heroes or characteristic sequences; a refusal to utilize professional actors; a refusal of the star system; a refusal to use montage and a fixed set-up; a refusal to draw on ready dialogues or dramatic melodious accompaniment.\textsuperscript{155}

Lotman’s argument does not stand the proof of any major neorealist film. The foremost neorealist filmmakers never attained the entire ‘equation of art and extra artistic reality’ and probably never really tried it. They did use professional actors (\textit{Rome Open City}, \textit{Bitter Rice}, and \textit{Without Pity}), prepared dialogues (\textit{Tragic Hunt}, \textit{Shoeshine}, \textit{Umberto D}) elaborate montage (\textit{Bicycle Thief}, \textit{Bitter Rice}, \textit{La Terra Trema}) and dramatic musical accompaniment (\textit{Germany Year Zero}). Lotman just reduced neorealism to a simple rejection of the past.\textsuperscript{156}

Another approach viewed neorealism as a movement that went beyond previous aesthetics based on the emphasis of reality- be it naturalism, \textit{verismo}; or in cinema, the French populism of the thirties or the British documentary school of John Grierson and Basil Wright. Amedee Ayfre, the French philosopher and film critic mainly formulated this approach and viewed neorealism as a movement that fully utilized the medium of cinema to not only capture real events but also their deeper significance and under-currents. Ayfre wrote in an essay in 1963 that neorealist films offered themselves to everyone, who sought to see them with inexperienced eyes, as uncomplicated images deficient in a dominating contextual thought. In this way, many scholars of the period did not regard them as art but merely documents that were not interpreting a historical viewpoint but simply chronicling. This type of
minimalization happens whenever radically new artifacts cannot be evaluated according to existing yardsticks.\textsuperscript{157} Ayfre touched the heart of the matter. The critics were caught unprepared by the neorealist films, and much of the confusion arose from the incongruence of the theoretical positions that followed them eventually helped to bury them. But, the manifold characteristics of neorealism sparked a debate that continued long after those who had once initiated it were no longer its protagonists. Like some critics, cinegoers often were unprepared to accept films which were radically different from almost everything that had been shown to them until then. Films that did not attract attention with understandable and topical messages as did, \textit{Rome Open City} and \textit{Paisan} or with their extra-cinematic values as the eroticism in \textit{Bitter Rice} usually failed financially.\textsuperscript{158}

**Decline of Neorealism**

There are many causes of the decline of neorealism some of which have been discussed in the preceding pages: the state and financial exigencies to subdue its harshness; and the survival of prewar stylistic techniques.\textsuperscript{159} At the end of the forties, neorealism was struck with a severe crisis. The crisis had two facets- an objective one (economic) and a subjective one (artistic). In early 1950s Giulio Andreotti was selected as Director of Performing Arts and given extensive powers by the government. Any film portraying a negative image of Italy was refused viewing rights in Italy and since he controlled bank loans, Andreotti could also hold back funds from films he believed excessively neorealist in inspiration.\textsuperscript{160} Though Andreotti assisted the industry to attain certain profitability, but at the same time, he overthrew the neorealist movement as a danger to the establishment and its institutions. Carlo Salinari, a prominent historian and a literary critic viewed that the crisis of neorealism was embedded in an objective general fact i.e. in the evolution of the Italian society or in the restoration of capitalism in Italy. Cinema received a direct, huge and cruel blow. The state used its total political power and took advantage of the dependence of cinema on the industrial structure. All types of administrative actions were taken to dislocate a further evolution of neorealism.\textsuperscript{161}
The objective reasons for the crisis had their subjective counterpart. Some proponents of neorealism, such as De Santis, Puccini, Lizzani, Zavattini, Barbaro, Pietrangeli, desired to persist with the neorealist thrust against all odds, without any alteration whatsoever in basic approach. Others such as Rossellini, Amidei, Fellini, Visconti and Lattuada, gradually broke away from the neorealist matrix, disapproving of its commitment to simple, day-to-day reality (the already seen) and suggesting the pursuit of a reality that remained to be explored. The tale of neorealism followed, in a manner, the sequence of evolution of other art forms, which, at different historical times, have deserted the emulation of nature to look for their own metaphoric interpretations. The suffering and scarcity which the neorealists’ usually portrayed was not appealing to an Italy on the eve of a transitory economic expansion. Moreover, the success of the films had created, contrary to neorealism’s esteemed principles, a new generation of colossal global stars like Sophia Loren, Marcello Mastroianni, Anna Magnani etc. The success of the Italian films in the United States and the rising investment of American capital in the Italian industry created commercialized and corrupted imitations of neorealism.

Millicent Marcus looks for decline of neorealism in the very principles that provided the movement such vigour and greatness of purpose its desire to transform the world. The threat to an art - form oriented towards extra-aesthetic objectives is that its career is dependent up on the whim of historical events, which can exterminate it as abruptly and arbitrarily as it, brought it to life. The birth of neorealism in the resistance may have endowed the movement with its substantial nobility and strength, but it also led to its unavoidable demise when the victory of Christian Democratic Party over the Popular Front in 1948 elections brought to light that the forces for change had been subjugated by the forces of reaction. Neorealism, which was no longer a protagonist in the historical process of renewal, could not revert or retreat to a Vergian stance of passive observer to social injustice. The tendencies polarizing the neorealist movement became fully manifest at the forums
convened to deliberate upon the crisis of neorealism and to protect the movement for instance at Perugia and Parma. But the dissensions and the conflicts were too intense, the misapprehension too apparent, and no degree of consensus could be achieved. More and more former supporters were abandoning the movement that seemed to be driven underground.\textsuperscript{165}

Thus we can say that Italian cinema may have lost its immediate postwar hope about the effort to mould political reality in accordance with an ethical idea, but it never lost its intense, earnest and enduring dedication to the nobility of that endeavour. A careful analysis of the postwar production of the Italian film industry proves that it has continued to recognize, in whatever respectful or irreverent ways, its lasting debt to neorealism. Moreover, the resonances of Italian neorealist cinema which was a reaction against the fascist forces could also be seen in cinema influenced by the colonial oppression in large part of Asia and Africa and the post–colonial apathy of the power-wielders of the state in India.
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