

## Lecture 19 -- Italian Neorealism

- I. The Opening of *Bicycle Thieves*
  - The multiplicity principle
- II. Historical Context
  - WW II
  - Italian film under Fascism
  - Hollywood film
- III. Origins
  - Italian, German, French
- IV. Key Features
  - Character vs plot, mise en scene, the contemporary world
- V. Central Figures
  - Cesare Zavattini (1902-77)
  - Luchino Visconti (1906-76)
    - *Obsession* (1942) *The Earth Trembles* (1948)
  - Roberto Rossellini (1906-77)
    - *Open City* (1945)
  - Vittorio De Sica (1902-74)
- VI. The Neorealist Counter-plot
  - The beginning of *Open City*

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- A note about the distinction between art and entertainment:
  - There are levels of success that different entertainment forms have.
    - No one would confuse an escapist melodrama with a great film by Renoir or Hitchcock
  - It's important to learn how to make these distinctions
  - However, the difference is never simple
  - Most movies contain some of both.
    - Parts of the film will jump out at us as compelling
    - The performances might be richer than the actual story
  - The crucial element of works of art is multiplicity
    - Every piece of the film works double-duty, or triple or quadruple, and so on
    - There are always multiple levels (which is not to say that the surface is less important than the depths)
    - The details register in more than one way
    - There are multiple facets
  - Clip: the opening of *Bicycle Thieves*
    - Men are shaping up hoping to get work

- Notice that the camera work is similar to that of Renoir
      - This camera work is technically impressive
    - Notice the multiplicity:
      - You can see the conditions of post-WWI Rome
        - So many people without work for so long
        - Huge apartment buildings without running water in them
      - There is sociopolitical meaning to all these details
      - Note the relationship between Ricci and his wife
        - He doesn't notice that she's carrying such heavy buckets by herself
        - He doesn't do this because he's mean, but only because he's distracted about the job
        - They're close
        - He takes only one bucket and helps her down – they're partners
      - Notice how there's nothing growing anywhere
        - It's like a desert
      - All of this is demonstrated by the action – nobody has to tell you
    - Neorealist films like *Bicycle Thieves* are impressively free from motives of profit
  - The multiplicity principle works for all forms of art: films, music, visual art, literature...
- Historical context of Neo-realist films
  - Actually a brief period, though it was hugely influential
  - Very successful internationally
  - Two academy awards (*Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves*) made Neo-realism an international movement
  - Its films were very serious, and dedicated to describing social and moral issues
  - By the mid 50s and the late 50s Neo-realism was just a memory
  - The most important thing about the Neo-realist movement is that it appears right after WWII, and it's about the devastation of that period
    - 35% of all the permanent buildings in Europe had been bombed
    - 25% of the Polish population was killed
    - Unemployment in Europe was at least at 25%
  - The Neo-realist films are in part a reaction against other styles of film making
    - Under Mussolini, a style of escapist melodrama had been popular
    - These films described the minor troubles of the upper classes
    - The films were called white telephone films, after the more elaborate white phones that the wealthy used (instead of ugly black ones)

- The Neo-realist films explicitly saw themselves as a reaction against the escapist tendencies of these white telephone films
- They were also a reaction against the escapism of Hollywood films
  - Note the moment in *Bicycle Thieves* when Ricci has to put up a poster of an American movie star, and he's told to be careful not to put any wrinkles in it
  - This can be seen as a commentary – in Neo-realist films, the stars had wrinkles, because they looked like real people
- The great theorist of Neo-realism: Cesare Zavattini
  - He wrote about these movements
- Origins of Neo-realism
  - Influential movements:
    - The chamber film – a German movement
      - The whole film often took place in one room
    - Street films
      - similar to chamber films, but it took things outside, to see real poverty
    - Poetic realism – Jean Renoir and the other French directors
      - Aimed for authenticity
- Key Principles of Neo-realism
  - Note the use of non-professional actors
    - The neo-realist directors were skilled at getting great performances from non-professionals
    - The actor who played Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves* wasn't a professional
  - Improvisation – aimed at reality
  - Outdoor camera and commitment to using real spaces
    - The neo-realists were willing to sacrifice a certain gloss in order to get the realism of actual spaces
  - Mise-en-scene style
  - Documentary flavor to these films
    - They're interested in real people, and sometimes you begin to feel like the characters actually exist
  - Clip: from a film that tells an anti-Fascist fable
    - The children have essentially been acting as anti-fascist terrorists
    - They're returning from an insurrection, great heroes of the war
    - But when they return, they are instantly children again, and it begins to feel like a comedy
    - The immensely crowded apartment says something meaningful about the living conditions in Rome at the time
    - We can see how much human destruction and distraction have been crammed into this small space

- Later on, we see a small child on a potty – it’s probably the first toilet scene of Western film – it says something about where Neo-realist films are willing to go
- Central Figures
  - Cesare Zavattini (1902-77) – the great theorist
  - Roberto Rossellini (1906-77) – the director of a great series of Neo-realist films
  - Luchino Visconti (1906-76) – often identified as the first Neo-realist
    - Great masterpiece: The Earth Trembles
  - Vittorio De Sica (1902-74)
  - The influence of Neo-realism is almost impossible to exaggerate
    - It extended globally
    - It was very influential in the U.S.
    - It was influential on the emerging forms of American television
    - A series of early television plays were deeply influenced by Neo-realism
    - The influence extended to Asia, and all over the world

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