FILM CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

Neorealist Film Culture
1945-1954

ROME, OPEN CINEMA

FRANCESCO PITASSIO

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Acknowledgements

I first conceived of this book many years ago, and the more I lingered in my research, reading, and collating of sources and perspectives, the more my debt of gratitude to friends, colleagues, and institutions loomed large. This debt, however, certainly has not cast a shadow on the book; instead, it has projected a bright light on the notions and ideas I have elaborated over the years. I owe these lights to them and am fully responsible for all the shadows.

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I believe the first spark that set my interest in neorealist culture on fire is a class I joined while still a student at the University of Bologna. The class engaged in questioning inherited notions of neorealism and provided off guard students with an expanded look at neorealist works, which merged path-breaking theoretical frameworks with barely known films. The instructor was Leonardo Quaresima, and I consider this volume to be the outcome of an endeavour he initiated.

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Many decades ago, back when tiny, badly lit, and barely heated film clubs existed and neorealism was an undisputable value of Italian culture, my mother dragged me to a film club to watch *Rome, Open City* on what I remember to be a cold winter night. I was still in primary school and clearly remember the shabby movie theatre and the rigid wooden seats as much as the shock of the crucial death of Pina, the main female character played by

Anna Magnani. However, I did not remember the fact that I spent a good part of the film pretending I had lost something on the dark floor of the venue in order to simply divert my eyes from the screen, which offered a view too hard for me to bear. My mother recently recollected this episode, to my embarrassment. I guess this book settles the score with that difficult viewing, the contradictory memory I had of it, and a certain legacy that neorealism implied for Italy and many of its citizens. Given that this volume does not directly scrutinise primarily neorealist masterpieces, I suppose I am still only giving neorealist films a sideways look.

I started thinking about writing this book when my son Bernardo was just born, and the research and the writing has grown with him. So far, I have not brought him to watch any neorealist films, given that I had stolen enough of my 'father time' to focus on this subject. But I consider it a way to transmit a legacy which that hesitant viewing spawned. I dedicate this book to Bernardo, who looks at things straight in the face.

Introduction

An Uncertain Direction. Neorealist Cinema and
Transitional Culture

A young kid in rags is on the corner of a street selling cigarettes on the black
market. A puppy keeps him company. A flashy woman, black-haired, wearing
heels and heavy make-up, approaches. A blonde, dull-looking American
soldier is with her. She notices the child and wants to have a smoke. She
rummages through the box the kid is holding until she pulls out of it a
cigar, which she lights up. A policeman shows up: the couple flees without
paying the kid, whom the policeman chases, until the latter hits a lamppost.
After losing his goods and his money, the kid travels back home by jumping
onto the bumper of a bus, together with his dog. He finally gets to a shanty,
where his barrack is located. Just a loaf of stale bread awaits him for dinner,
which he shares with the dog. While the wind howls, he gets in bed with
the animal. As he falls asleep, he starts dreaming: he climbs up a ladder
coming out of a hole in the roof and admires the city's skyline. Then the
ladder extends all the way up to the sky. The child ascends it and finally is
high above. He starts picking up beautiful stars. But as he is ready to leave,
a voice stops him, saying that he cannot bring the stars home but that he
can stay if he wants to, which he does. In the morning, down on earth, the
dog tries to wake his master, to no avail. It begins to howl (Fig. 1).

The few lines above describe a peculiar film, directed by Italian anima-
tor Francesco Maurizio Guido (aka Gibba) between 1946 and 1947.[1] Its title
is *L'ultimo sciuscià* (The last shoeshine)[2] and it is an animation short that
Alfa Film, a new company located on the Italian Riviera, produced under
precarious circumstances. While in Rome in 1944, the young Gibba attempted
to direct an animation short called *Hello Jeep!* which should welcome the
American troops. The short was meant to be created together with Federico

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1   On Gibba, see Boledi (ed.), *Grandi corti animati*; Verger, *Gibba: 80 anni nella Cinecittà di
cartone.*
2   The film is now available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atWNwfdXRIw
(Last access: 15 August 2018).

Fig. 1   A neorealism out of place. Animation and neorealist motifs in *L'ultimo sciuscià*
(The last shoeshine, Gibba, 1946-47)

Fellini, who at the time was also involved in the production of *Roma città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), but unfortunately they were never able to complete the project. In the early 1950s, Gibba moved back to Rome where he worked in advertisement, popular theatre, TV, and cinema and became a decisive figure in national animation cinema. Nowadays, readers would have trouble finding information about *The last shoeshine* in any account on neorealist cinema and its culture. Nonetheless, the film entails many features usually attributed to neorealist cinema and culture. The story behind its production easily fits into the narrative categories about neorealist film production: it was spontaneous, precarious, and notably located far from Rome, which Fascism had empowered as the main centre for film production by supporting the creation of the huge studios of Cinecittà (built in 1937) and the birth of the film academy (in 1935). The film's plot tackles controversial topics such as abandoned children, prostitution, the Allies' presence in Italy, and the black market. Visually, it displays iconic locations such as city streets and wretched shantytowns. Its narrative tone alternates between a bleak rendition of contemporary urban reality and a fairytale representation of what transcends appearances and lies beyond materiality, as do some feature films directed by acknowledged neorealist personalities—*Miracolo a Milano*

(*Miracle in Milan*, Vittorio De Sica, 1950) and *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (*The Flowers of St. Francis*, Roberto Rossellini, 1950) being good cases in point. Moreover, the film combines comic scenes, like the Chaplin-esque policeman's chase, with tragic ones, like the dramatic ending. This combination of tragedy and comedy was among the virtues of Italian neorealist cinema praised by film critics, with its cinematic representation of multi-layered reality that seldom offers crystal-clear facts and circumstances.[3] However, the animation short also brings to the fore contradictory questions associated with neorealist cinema that have haunted its discussion since the beginning. To begin with, nothwithstanding its contemporary subject, the film could not be farther from a direct and unmediated recording of reality: it is an animated film and as such it is not reliant on an indexical relationship with portrayed reality, a point that is discussed extensively in relation to analogic photographic recording and neorealist cinema. Consequently, its alleged realism depends much more on a visual tradition and on thematic motifs rather than on a direct engagement with reality. Furthermore, the film's story is fictitious and universal—its very title refers to an unspecified subject—and does not address any actual person, location, or event. Despite its timely topic and the empathy it evokes, the film failed to prompt widespread interest and fell into oblivion. Even if film critics at the time may not have considered the possibility that the neorealist style could have influenced the field of animated films or did not view Gibba as an engaged filmmaker, why did film history overlook this film, despite its many similarities with one of the most discussed and glorified film eras and styles? How did such a vibrant phase, period, and culture come to be reduced to a restricted number of films, directors, and keywords, whereas a closer inspection discloses an impressive diversity? This question underpins my line of thought and research, which the following chapters will try to substantiate.

Historical accounts regularly rely on logical concatenations of facts, data, names, and personalities whose relationship is based on a chain of acts and consequences, causes and effects as extracted from empirical reality. This kind of historical approach offers an effective description of past circumstances. However, the new philosophy of history in the past decades has questioned this linear reconstruction, no matter how dense, and has instead turned to multifaceted explanations. Polish historian Jerzy

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3   For instance, in a brief remark, film critic and director Luigi Comencini celebrated the compound of comic and dramatic scenes in *Rome, Open City*, and compared this example to Hollywood filmmaking, which offered simplified narratives. See Comencini, 'Italia domanda— Perché ci applaude New York?'.

Topolski singles out a different approach and highlights two qualities, which he terms historical 'synchronic narration' and 'diachronic narration'.[4] The former focuses on processes more than on events, that is, on gradual developments more than on chains of individual happenings, on what French historian Fernand Braudel named the *longue durée* (long duration) in history, counterposing it to an 'evenemential approach'.[5] Moreover, Topolski underlines that when writing cultural history, a 'synchronic narration' is preferred. However, is this kind of approach suitable when dealing with a short-term phenomenon such as neorealism, which most of its observers consider to be a sudden outburst, i.e. more of an event than a process? Some film historians and common sense apply a very different periodisation to neorealism, seeing it as a much more prolonged phenomenon. Among neorealism's advocates, notably until the early 1960s, some trace its origins back to Italian silent cinema of the 1910s and its rare realist trends, while modern film critics regularly widen its parameters by labelling as 'neo-neorealist' most contemporary films set in urban outskirts and featuring underprivileged protagonists. The list of personalities and works being labelled as neorealist includes Federico Fellini and Pierpaolo Pasolini, Italian cinema of the early 1990s, and contemporary filmmakers such as Gianfranco Rosi and Matteo Garrone, who aim to depict Italy in various ways. Basically, this use of the notion creates an ever-expanding corpus that incorporates a good deal of national *auteurs* and potentially every work representing the nation through a realistic lens. However, such an extended concept, while effective in discussions and debates based on common sense, is useless in writing film history. For this reason, I tend to agree with a restricted notion of neorealism, which locates the phenomenon—and notably its cinematic emergence—in the war's aftermath between 1945 and 1950,[6] when neorealism identified with an overall transformation of Italian society and culture as well as major shifts in the world order. This phase came to an almost abrupt end with the onset of the Cold War. However, I contend that in cultural terms, neorealism prolonged its influence until the mid-1950s, even as it lost ground in terms of film production. As neorealism turned into a template for world cinema, film art, and theoretical discussion, as evidenced by the conference held in 1953 in Parma,[7] neorealist cinema

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4   Topolski, *Narrare la storia*, notably pp. 19-39.
5   Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences: The Long Duration'.
6   Farassino, 'Neorealismo, storia e geografia'.
7   A recent conference examined the relevance and legacy of that event for showcasing and defining neorealism. See Guerra (ed.), *Invenzioni dal vero*.

itself faded away. Nonetheless, if we focus on neorealist culture—that is, the definition and transfer of themes, motifs, stylistic features, and modes of production—I maintain that the early 1950s were still a crucial period defining neorealism, even if its variety had been reduced. I am not championing an idea of neorealism as an ahistorical essence, as its early advocates did, and I am aware of the fact that every periodisation implies a stance regarding the time it showcases.[8] However, I intend to bring to the fore the way neorealist culture shaped the very existence of this phenomenon, which was not limited to experimental masterworks but circulated across a variety of forms and media. To do so, I believe that a 'synchronic narration' might adequately render the major shift that neorealist culture represented while not giving away its multiple roots and later impact. In fact, we might look at *neorealism as an explosion* affecting cultural structures.

Another influential historian, Krzysztof Pomiań, describes in terms of a 'history of structures' one of the main achievements of history in the wake of the emergence of the French *Annales* school of historiography.[9] Structures are sets of constraints preventing conjunctures, that is, variations, from exceeding a certain limit; accordingly, structures are stable and can be thoroughly explored in historical research. However, this does not rule out the occurrence of revolutions, i.e., the emergence of a new structure replacing a previous one. In Pomiań's view, we should consider revolutions not as a series of rapidly evolving events but rather as a wave of innovations that are iterated and that prompt major shifts. Russian semiotician and cultural historian Yuri Lotman attempted to describe these kinds of changes in culture, which he terms 'explosive processes'. He posits some crucial characteristics of these shifts: alien components force cultural systems to turn from static to dynamic; the coexistence of different languages within one system increases its complexity; explosions bring to a halt chains of causes/effects within one cultural system and produce a number of simultaneous potential events. We cannot forecast which of these events will occur and substantiate a new structure.[10] I suggest that the fall of Italian totalitarianism and the end of World War Two altered the basic structures of culture in Italy and prompted a series of transformations. It pushed Italian culture from being a relatively stable and static system into a process of accelerated dynamism; it incorporated different languages into a restricted public space; and, for a brief time, it created opportunities for

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8   See Le Goff, *Faut-il vraiment découper l'histoire en tranches?*
9   Pomiań, 'L'histoire des structures'. See also Pomiań, *L'Ordre du temps*.
10   Lotman, *Cercare la strada*, notably pp. 29-38. See also Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*.

heterogeneous subjects, forms, styles, and production modes to become dominant within national—and to some extent international—film culture.

Elsewhere, Lotman discusses the historical approach to artistic phenomena, positing that historians tend to extract from a surveyed epoch a uniform interpretation, thus providing it with an identity. But, he argues, did contemporary observers look at it the same way? Consequently, he makes a plea for an open look at the artistic multiplicity of the past.[11] I believe that considering neorealist culture in these terms might reframe our understanding of this epoch—not only the shifts it prompted but also its many connections with what preceded and followed it, as I shall later try to clarify. To recapitulate, I intend to refer to a synchronic narration to account for neorealist culture's true nature, despite the fact that neorealism only lasted for a short period of time. I have chosen this approach for its far greater effectiveness than causal explanation in allowing us to understand cultural history. Moreover, a synchronic approach that is focused on structures and recurrences is also convincing when dealing with sudden shifts, which are part and parcel of structural changes and namely conceived as 'revolution' or 'explosion'. These notions are indeed often associated with neorealism itself, which is considered to be a radical change in film history as much as in Italian culture.

My claim is that we can discuss neorealism as a critical culture, or as a transitional one. I bring up the notion of 'critical culture' by referring to the thorough historical and theoretical scrutiny of the notion of 'crisis' by Reinhart Koselleck,[12] who contends that in the modern age this notion came to overlap with that of revolution. In the philosophy of history, it is identified with an inherent quality of the historical process itself, i.e. transition. As applied to film history, in the authoritative work of Rick Altman and, in his wake, Michael Wedel, 'crisis historiography' inquires into the consequences of cultural changes as they 'plunge representational systems into an *identity crisis* during which they are sequentially and even simultaneously imaged as belonging to several different categories, each with its own separate (and sometimes contradictory) set of practices'.[13] I believe neorealism manifests the identity crisis that Italian culture, and more specifically film culture, experienced: neorealism offered some viable options for both.[14] Regarding

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11   Lotman, 'Khudozhestvennyi ansambl' kak bytovoe prostanstvo'.

12   Koselleck, 'Crisis'.

13   Altman, 'The Silence of the Silents', p. 689. See also Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, notably pp. 15-23; Wedel, 'Universal, Germany, and "All Quiet on the Western Front": A Case Study in Crisis Historiography'.

14   One of the most cited works on Italian post-war cinema reads this production through the lens of 'crisis'. See Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema*.

Italian culture, cinema came to hold a place it never did before in terms of influence and authority. It brought together contradictory issues such as *auteur* and industry, showmanship and social engagement; and for many years it embodied the national culture abroad, where it was frequently—and, alas, inaccurately—grouped together with Italian auteurs from the 1960s. In terms of film culture, neorealist cinema usually marks a rupture from which a different way of articulating cinematic discourse and narratives emerged, the primacy of recording and representing over storytelling, which gave way to ambiguity and narrative indeterminacy and a new mode of film production. Regularly, film historians consider neorealist cinema to be a milestone in departing from the classical film style and mode of production and as an entryway to modern cinema.[15] Even if these features are undisputable, I think we should look historically at neorealism in a different way. I believe that when neorealism came to an end, film history and critique singled out its most prominent characteristics; however, I am persuaded that its inner energy and force are less related to an imagined purity than to its variety, which is a sign of its critical function. I contend that *neorealist culture blurred the traditional boundaries of cinema.* Nowadays, Italian film historians tend to agree that the works of Roberto Rossellini and Pietro Germi both belong to the neorealist canon. However, how could we possibly liken the two when the former shot his films with a high degree of improvisation, loose scripts, and little concern for narrative clarity and established editing patterns, and the latter painstakingly planned the shooting and drafted his scripts, mostly referred to Hollywood filmmaking, and designed polarised narratives? I believe that we should consider not only the thematic resonance between artworks—as in the cases of Rossellini and Germi—but also the contemporary social discourses. Accordingly, lively debates surrounding Italian post-war realist films, the ephemeral materials heralding or prolonging their existence, and contemporary media practices locating neorealist films within a given mediascape help us understand how neorealist culture existed and how contemporary viewers acknowledged it.

I consider neorealist culture to be a transitional one. I derive this notion of a transition culture from the work of the American sociologist Michael D. Kennedy, who created it to discuss post-communist Eastern European societies.[16] In Kennedy's view, 'transition culture is a mobilizing culture organized around certain logical and normative oppositions, valuations

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15   Just to name two major examples, see Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, notably pp. 353-366; Bálint-Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, notably pp. 253-274.

16   Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Post-Communism*, notably pp. 1-43.

of expertise, and interpretations of history [...]. That mobilizing culture, in turn, structures transition.'[17] Transition culture implies an elite that oversees the transitional phase; it can incorporate elements from popular culture and from tradition for the needs of transition, and it depends on the imaginary of collapse, a situation whereby a community believes its very existence is at stake and its reference points vanish, necessitating a transition to a new status. In my view, neorealist culture certainly hinged on the imaginary of collapse and widely incorporated both traditional and popular culture, as the following chapters will demonstrate. However, national and international elites presiding over cultural and social change after World War Two marginalised some features belonging to neorealist culture and magnified others in order to promote and steer the transition itself. I am not contending that this process intentionally distorted neorealist culture's characteristics; I firmly believe, though, that we should inspect the era more closely if we aim to elucidate its dynamism, potential, and variety. To sum up, neorealist culture and cinema resulted from a number of events and the processes they triggered.[18] At a time of explosion, as Lotman names these major shifts in culture, neorealist culture existed as a wide array of possibilities and potential developments to direct the transition. As such, neorealist culture is a 'culture of disorder', as it questioned long-established structures and meanings and created new, unprecedented hybrids. Transition culture originated from this explosion. However, as the political and social transition was completed, towards the end of the 1940s, its cultural richness and variety diminished.

In a seminal contribution on film genres, Altman discussed the grounds on which a film is included in or excluded from a corpus, i.e. what is defined as an individual film genre.[19] According to Altman, the inclusive approach to film genres' corpora is based on content, i.e. on the films' semantics and on a sort of tautological statement—e.g. an Italian neorealist film is a film dealing with Italian reality. Conversely, the exclusive approach relies on syntax, that is, on recurrent structural patterns responsible for creating meaning—e.g. an Italian neorealist film is a film bearing witness

17   Ibid., p. 9.
18   American sociologist William H. Sewell, Jr. discusses the relationship between events, causalities, and developments in terms of 'evenemential temporality'. This notion implies that causality exists but is largely contingent and heterogeneous. Furthermore, 'events bring about historical changes in part by transforming the very cultural categories that shape and constrain human action'. See Sewell, Jr., 'Three Temporalities', p. 101.
19   Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre'.

by forcing a main character and the audience identifying with her to face an unbearable act of moral (and often physical) cruelty. In his conclusions, Altman contended that an integration between the two approaches might greatly help in conflating applicability with explanatory power and account for historical transformation. In a subsequent article, he expanded this by including the pragmatic sphere: corpora exist and evolve because categories we make use of help us trace boundaries, enhance elements, and bestow identities. The labels we attribute to films, personalities, and trends crystallise them, although the act of labelling varies through time and corpora change according to relentless labelling practices.[20] The American scholar's argument fits very well into a decades-long quarrel over the corpus of Italian neorealism, between what Italian film historian Alberto Farassino has called the advocates of neorealist masterworks (*opere*), i.e. those films epitomising at best the style's praised qualities, and those drawing attention to 'neorealist films', i.e. films that incorporated those qualities, adapting or predating them.[21] One approach—searching for aesthetic, commercial, and ideological purity—is an exclusive one; the other is inclusive and deals with those works that are both genre *and* realist films, commercially successful *and* politically engaged, stylistically not as groundbreaking as the masterpieces *but* presenting many of the same features. Farassino championed this second approach, and I concur with him. Furthermore, the pragmatic approach that Altman recommends provides us with an incredibly productive insight into post-war neorealist culture. In fact, paying due attention to the enormous amount of evidence that films, promotional materials, popular press, film criticism, and film theory produced during the 'neorealist age' helps us understand the shift in Italian and film culture. In my view, this approach, while being historically more productive, is also preferable in heuristic terms: it helps the researcher understand the inherently complex nature of cultural phenomena and their vital existence, which regularly exceeds our concerns for identity. To echo Bhabha's words, it is 'the "inter"—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture'.[22] Hence, this book does not provide its readers with two approaches—i.e. the textual and the historical approach—that have dominated the debate about neorealism in the past and today.

20   Altman, 'Emballage réutilisable'. See also Altman, 'Conclusion: A Semantic/Syntactic/ Pragmatic Approach to Genre'.
21   Farassino, 'Neorealismo, storia e geografia'.
22   Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 38.

My background is rooted in semiotics and textual analysis, and this work is largely based on a close reading of some neorealist films. Each chapter thus opens with a discussion of a particularly telling sequence from either an acknowledged masterpiece or a less celebrated film. However, it is not through the interpretation of certain films that readers will gain an encompassing knowledge of specific works or the aesthetic choices characterising neorealist cinema. Recent and past research has widely relied on such an approach, and I do not intend to replicate what others have done, even though I have enormously benefitted from their endeavour. Readers will find traces of my debt to these scholars in my argument. I attempt to connect individual films and related narratives, style, representations, and discourses with broader issues, which the artworks somehow incarnate and help illuminate. Because of this, my research is not a discussion of neorealist canonical works: there is little concern for the outstanding achievements of artists such as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, and Luchino Visconti, or the still little-known names—beyond Italy—of filmmakers such as Renato Castellani, Giuseppe De Santis, Pietro Germi, or Alberto Lattuada. However, I hope this book will prompt scholars and students to look at both the neorealist canon and its fringes with a fresh eye. In a similar vein, this volume does not offer a historical description of neorealist cinema based on authorship, films, style, and accompanying film criticism; nor is it a thorough account of the industry involved in producing, releasing, promoting, and screening the works belonging to this phenomenon. While there is no shortage of historical descriptions of neorealist cinema, I believe there is still much work to do in terms of production studies, reception studies, and audience studies, in both national and international terms. I am indebted to the general historical accounts on neorealist cinema and neorealist culture overall as well as to in-depth case studies asking specific historical questions related to neorealist films or filmmakers. However, this volume tries to offer a cultural history of neorealism and accordingly is not primarily focused on data and facts or on causal explanation. While I am aware of the questions this volume might raise for a reader who is not at all familiar with neorealist cinema, I hope that my efforts to include and quote the existing literature and reference books might provide readers with a useful tool to find more traditional accounts and introductory descriptions. To summarise, this book intends to locate and explain the role and function that neorealist cinema held within national and international post-war culture.

The need to render accurately neorealist culture and cinema's multiplicity drove me to linger on the protracted debate that has, from the early 1950s, struggled to define the subject. The Italian debate in the early 1970s did

away with previous binary oppositions, like anti-fascist/fascist,[23] modern/
classical, engaged/escapist, that located neorealist cinema on the left side
of the equation.[24] A more recent discussion, in the past three decades,
has helped to bridge the gap between an auteurist, arthouse notion of
neorealist cinema and the industrial rationale underpinning a good deal
of neorealist films.[25] Finally, the most recent debate has tried to showcase
the extension of what film historian Brunetta has termed the 'neorealist
field':[26] its connection with media developments, other arts, the political
debate and the political agenda, and the ideological discussion in Italy and
abroad.[27] In addition, more recent research places considerable emphasis
on the historical and cultural function of neorealism as a way to cope with
an encumbering national past.[28]

All in all, I believe that the more scholars look at neorealist cinema and
culture, the more acceptable the idea pointed out by pioneering scholar
Lino Micciché in the mid-1970s becomes: there were *as many neorealist
filmmakers as different versions of neorealism itself.* In his view, this implied
that 'neorealism, being a compound of various phenomena, was not a
phenomenon itself; rather, it did not exist as a well-defined and distinct
phenomenon, since in terms of expression (i.e., films) it appeared—and
appears particularly nowadays—easy to deconstruct and reconstruct as
one likes best.'[29] However, I believe that the ghost of unity, identity, and
purposefulness no longer haunts contemporary scholarship. While I claim
that there has been a neorealist age, implying specific features, modes of
address, narratives, and subjects, I am not at all interested in tracking down

23   This couple is usually associated with continuity/discontinuity, as they refer to Fascist
cinema and culture. See Casetti, Farassino, Grasso, and Sanguineti, 'Neorealismo e cinema
italiano degli anni '30'.

24   The crucial occasion for this major revision of the debate on neorealism is, obviously, the
huge retrospective and associated conference on Italian neorealism at the Festival del Nuovo
Cinema di Pesaro in 1974, and the ensuing volume Micciché (ed.), *Il neorealismo cinematografico
italiano.*

25   Again, another retrospective, at the Turin Film Festival in 1989, and ensuing volume paved
the way for this reconsideration of neorealist cinema. See Farassino (ed.), *Neorealismo.* See also
Farassino, 'Margini, attraversamenti, contaminazioni', and particularly Parigi, *Neorealismo.* For
the transition from neorealism to genre film production in the 1950s, see Villa (ed.), *Cinema e
cultura popolare nell'Italia degli anni Cinquanta*; Noto, *Dal bozzetto ai generi.*

26   Brunetta, 'Il campo neorealista: coerenza e coesione'.

27   A recent publication, following a major conference held at the Università degli Studi di
Torino, tries to take stock of the discussion in various fields of research. See Carluccio, Morreale,
and Pierini (eds), *Intorno al neorealismo.*

28   See Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space*; Minghelli, *Cinema Year Zero.*

29   Micciché, 'Per una verifica del neorealismo', p. 27.

and praising its integrity and rebuffing into oblivion what does not match it. This brings me to another statement by Micciché, in his closing remarks. If neorealist cinema did not establish individual aesthetics, it created an 'ethics of the aesthetics', that is, a battlefront for promoting neorealism as a way to engage artists, artworks, and cinema in operating and transforming contemporary society.[30] I concur with Micciché's view, insofar as it refers to some individual cases. Moreover, I am convinced that it is precisely the alliance of political and aesthetic values that viewers were presented with in the major works of neorealist culture. This turned neorealist cinema into a template for many subsequent renewals in world cinema. One tradition in film theory associated neorealist cinema with engaged artistry through a 'presentational' mode, that is, a way of depicting its subject by directly recording its physical existence, without assigning it a pre-established ideological or dramatic meaning. Thus, characters embody sheer humanity, not a set of moral values associated with certain acts and behaviours; and it is up to the spectator to extract from the characters these values. Consequently, neorealist films purportedly do not force the viewer to side with one or another position but instead transform her into a responsible bystander. This line of thought can be traced back to André Bazin as well as the discussion of neorealism (or, to be frank, mostly of Rossellini) that film critic Serge Daney and philosopher Gilles Deleuze produced in the mid-1980s,[31] and extends to insightful recent work conducted by Lucia Nagib.[32] I concur with this view: neorealist cinema presented the viewers with a new way of looking at reality which at the same time politically engaged its audiences because it presented them with a representation that enhanced cinema's reproductive qualities while downplaying Manichean narrative oppositions. This novelty, together with film criticism magnifying neorealist productions' poverty, improvisation, and low-budget productions, was very productive beyond national boundaries. That being said, neorealism's novelty and its moral and political implications are not the subject of this book, for two distinct reasons. First, others before me have examined and discussed this issue more authoritatively than I can possibly do. Second, I contend that the association of ethics with aesthetics that turned Italian neorealism into a template for world cinema can only be found in a few neorealist films. This approach, which focused on neorealism as a style that was valuable

30   Ibid., pp. 27-28.
31   Deleuze, *Cinema 1*; Deleuze, *Cinema 2*; Deleuze, 'Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel'; Daney, 'The Tracking Shot in *Kapò*'.
32   Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*.

in both aesthetic and ethical terms, endured for several decades and is still influential in film criticism, as a polemical article recently argued.[33] However, I am far more interested in inquiring into the cultural explosion that affected Italy and Europe in the post-war era and that reshuffled cultural and film production, because I am convinced that scrutinising it can clarify the dynamics underlying masterworks and formulaic films, bombastic political claims and down-to-earth professional statements and practices.

Since I was less interested in defining an alleged neorealist essence and much more in neorealism as a field, a set of relationships, and a structural shift, I decided that, instead of looking at its centre, I would go the other way. Accordingly, *I walked along the margins of neorealism*. This stance obviously has its origins in previous, sound research undertaken on neorealist cinema, which allowed me to circumnavigate it. Now, dozens of books have thoroughly treated the phenomenon, its undisputable champions—such as De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti—and shed light on its outstanding achievements.[34] However, I realised that scholars have repeatedly pointed out potential intersections of neorealism with convergent subjects. For instance, since the 1970s, scholars have cited the need for further research on the connection between neorealist cinema and film genres, or for a more thorough exploration of documentary filmmaking before, during, and after neorealism. Recent endeavours have surveyed the international distribution and reception of neorealist films while demanding further inquiry into the emergence of international film culture, film festivals' networks and arthouse cinema. And historical investigation has highlighted the European culture of reconstruction, against whose background neorealism materialised. Accordingly, I attempt to explore neorealist culture through its junctions, where its identity is questionable, out of the conviction that boundaries differentiate things but also contribute to defining them. There is a major risk inherent in this approach, as I will be addressing a readership that is already widely familiar with neorealist cinema and, because of this, is either Italian or chiefly interested in twentieth-century Italian culture. I do not intend to disregard this thorny issue; in fact, I wrote this book always bearing in mind that I could not identify my perspective with that of my readership. Indeed, in order to move away from the highly selective neorealist canon while not losing my readers, I asked some basic questions about my subject and framed it with related methods of inquiry. My hope

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33   O'Leary and O'Rawe, 'Against Realism: On a "Certain Tendency" in Italian Film Criticism'.
34   Among most recent and conclusive works following this approach, see Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*.

is that through this crucial move my research resonates with concerns that involve a broader community of readers while offering a deeply interior view of this period and phenomenon.

The questions I tried to ask and tentatively answer revolve around different margins. By way of oversimplification, these boundaries are related to neorealist culture's definition, circulation, practice, and territory.

The first question is: What was neorealism in its time? What were its allegiances in terms of style? What was its genealogy and why did contemporaries bring to the fore some likely answers while discarding others? And what was the rationale behind the appraisal that film criticism or institutional committees bestowed on certain films while deprecating others? The borders defining neorealism help us understand its construction as a cultural object but also aid us in tracing its sources and outreach.

The second question is: Where was neorealism? Did it intermingle with formulaic films, hybridise with film genres, and feed on well-established narrative and representational patterns? Did neorealism exist solely in highbrow arthouse films or can it also be found in popular productions that grossed at the box-office, countering the narrative that limits neorealist cinema to low-budget, cutting-edge artworks? And how was neorealist cinema announced and promoted? Moreover, did neorealist culture appear only in established forms of expression that were textually coherent and critically discussed (films, novels, art photography) or did it migrate into anonymous popular products (weepies, popular press, photo-romances), whose influence in terms of audience often far surpassed that of neorealist masterpieces? This book does not thoroughly research cognate fields and media beyond cinema, such as literature, theatre, painting, radio, photography, and the popular press, though each of these contributed in multiple ways to the burgeoning neorealist culture. Nonetheless, throughout the book I repeatedly refer to many of them as a counterpart to film culture and production. The margins defining the territory of neorealism contribute to a deeper understanding of its influence over a whole period and culture.

The third question is: How were neorealist cinema and culture practiced? Was neorealist cinema an occasional and experimental endeavour, or did contemporary media practices consistently engage in a discourse that dealt with reality in various ways? And how did contemporary audiences consume and experience neorealist culture? Were neorealist films distributed solely in the restricted network of film clubs and film festivals—of whose existence still needs to be reconstructed in detail—while the market marginalised all but a few works? Or did neorealist films and culture enjoy considerable audience demand and exist through forms of consumption that matched

popular needs, such as film stars? The margins defining neorealist cultural practices provide us with a more grounded look at the actual existence of this phenomenon.

And finally, was neorealist cinema and culture a typical national product? Did contemporary Italy realise it and promote it as such? Was Italy the only territory where neorealist culture burgeoned, or did a new way of conceiving the relationship between cinematic representation and reality also exist elsewhere? Why and how did Italian neorealist cinema act as a spearhead for the return of Italian film production to the international market, after an eclipse that dated from the late 1910s? The margins defining the territory of neorealist culture allow us to comprehend how it fit into the contemporary cultural and political debate, how it matched a film market that was rapidly evolving, and how it adapted itself to the needs of newly established supranational agencies.

These questions coalesce around issues that run throughout the volume. To summarise, these are the genealogies and their cultural and political function; the networks and the way they empowered neorealist culture; the mediascape moulding, hosting, and circulating neorealist culture; and the silences, that is, the reticence regarding neorealist culture's potential association with a totalitarian past, with mass culture, with international counterparts, and with political agencies. While I do not present readers with an exclusive approach to neorealist culture in terms of an archaeology of knowledge, network theory, media history, trauma theory, or social practices of distinction, these kinds of concerns ground my discussion of neorealist culture and form the background of my research.

I chose to tackle neorealist culture with a two-pronged approach, as will hopefully emerge from the rest of the volume. On the one hand, I tried to focus as much as I could on historical sources. On the other, I decided to interrogate them through the lens of different methods and implied questions. Despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the impressive literature on neorealist culture, contemporary accounts frequently approach it by referring to a limited set of primary sources while privileging theoretical frameworks. This has not been my intention. Beyond obvious reasons of soundness in conducting historical research, the motivation leading me to refer chiefly to historical sources lies in the significant amount of material that has been under-researched. As a matter of fact, the more I plunged into the research, the more evidence I found of neorealist culture's richness, which emerged clearly from its products or by-products—political discussion, film criticism, ads, and so forth. Furthermore, as has occurred in other countries, in the past forty years Italian film archives have embarked on

a comprehensive policy of collecting, preserving, and restoring films and related materials, which have provided contemporary researchers with an enormous amount of historical data, helping them to define and scrutinise past film culture. Italian film archives are productively cooperating with academic film studies, implementing shared initiatives, and sharing sources and approaches with the aim of advancing our knowledge of film culture. This cooperation is sometimes path-breaking and consistent; at other times it hinges on an oscillating institutional governance. However, I firmly believe that unless a regular and mutually beneficial allegiance between archival and research policies is established and developed, as in other fields of knowledge, little progress will be possible. In order to properly contribute to this shared endeavour, I believe good questions need to be asked. While I am not sure I have succeeded in this task, I have attempted to address them by selecting some approaches to interrogating historical sources. The chapters articulate these operational frameworks, as they question historical subjects.

In Chapter 1, I discuss neorealism as a national cinema. Neorealist culture came about during a major shift in Italian and European history, to say the least: the aftermath of World War Two, the transition to democracy and a republic, and the establishment of the transatlantic order on the one hand and the Warsaw Pact on the other. The new cultural trend heralding an unprecedented engagement with reality, which merged aesthetic innovation, political commitment, and new modes of production, often became associated with the nation's task. The chapter attempts to highlight the close connection between realism—as a vast notion overlapping aesthetic and social concerns—and national identity. By depicting its recent past and its contemporary existence and by reflecting on Italy, neorealist films celebrated the Resistance as a national epos, delved into unexplored national areas and social groups, and presented the nation with its new image, which differentiated this culture from what preceded it. Furthermore, neorealist culture aimed to portray, address, and involve popular audiences, a direct result of Italy's newly established democracy, the public sphere, and political concerns. Accordingly, it defined a national image. This portrait was not without its grey areas, notably in what regards gender, ethnic, and racial representation, which I have tried to explore. Finally, the different circumstances under which the film industry operated prompted a lively political debate in post-war Italy on what a national film industry is and could be. I believe this discussion and the laws that resulted from it are worth scrutinising. Among the issues this debate raised is the role that Italian cinema played abroad, heralding the arrival of a new nation into

an international arena that increasingly appreciated accurate depictions of foreign societies and remote realities. I have attempted to sketch neorealist cinema against the background of the international scenario, where many nations were emerging from the rubble of war. This scenario also had its catchwords, visual and narrative motifs, and personalities, contributing to a transnational humanist film culture, which also implied the circulation of personalities across the continent as well as across the Atlantic.

In Chapter 2, I focus again on neorealist culture in national terms, this time with regard to collective memory. More specifically, neorealist culture struggled to distinguish between what came after the end of the conflict and what existed under Fascist rule. In addition, it revolved around the celebration of the Resistance as a national struggle liberating Italy from totalitarianism and, in consequence, purifying it. However, this culture seemed oblivious to Italy's inter-war past and the huge support for Fascism itself: all in all, neorealist culture simply omits all direct representation of this period, but for a few telling examples. Moving from this assumption, based on empirical evidence, I have tried to further investigate the way in which neorealist culture construed the nation's memory. To do this, I examined documentary films, for two distinct reasons. First, studies on neorealism frequently ignore contemporary documentary filmmaking, except for the early 1950s, when documentary production became a refuge for the second generation of neorealist filmmakers who were eager for the chance to get started. I believe that leaving this area unexplored is preposterous, given the fact that neorealist cinema claimed to document post-war Italy. Second, documentary films mostly originated either directly or indirectly from institutional policies, which contributed to shaping the nation's collective memory. Therefore, post-war documentaries could be a suitable litmus test for understanding the state of Italy's post-war memory. I focussed on two case studies: Michelangelo Antonioni's early documentaries and post-war documentaries accounting for the transition from Fascism to democracy. Film historians have regularly associated Antonioni's early work with neorealism; accordingly, I intend to scrutinise this association and shed light on similarities and differences. Conversely, film history has for a long-time neglected documentary works representing the Italian Resistance and the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, despite their many parallels with neorealist cinema. My aim, consequently, is to figure out the reasons for this protracted negligence. I tapped into these two cases using two distinct approaches: the notion of cultural memory in the former example and that of trauma in the latter. My conclusion is that neorealist culture avoided direct references to the inter-war period and culture and

tried to come to terms with the sense of endangerment stemming from the abrupt shift occurring between 1943 and 1945. Nonetheless, inter-war culture and the lively debate on realism, documentary filmmaking, and experimental cinema contributed to the establishment of post-war realism and influenced its personalities, Antonioni being a very telling case in point. Moreover, the traumatic experience of warfare as depicted in post-war documentaries and their focus on the photographic rendition of its most brutal aspects testify to the eagerness to depict Italy in terms of victimhood. Finally, the widespread use of photographic images indicates the emergence of a new form of representation that enhanced the role of photography as an ambiguous means, rendering trauma as something unspeakable while avoiding the assigning of responsibilities for past crimes in the narrative. In my view, the combination of photographic description, the act of witnessing, and humanism as a major neorealist achievement was a way of creating a memory oblivious of past happenings, which did away with any national accountability for them.

In Chapter 3, I examine neorealism in terms of visual culture, and notably in terms of the mass production and popular culture of the post-war era. I discuss it first by enumerating some of the most recurrent visual motifs marking its films and photography. However, I also examine the circulation of these motifs in international photographic reportages before and after World War Two and their presence in other national cinemas. This chapter resonates powerfully with Chapter 1, as the images describing post-war Italy helped to provide the nation with its visual identity and originated both within the country and outside of it. I then discuss the existence of neorealist culture beyond its most celebrated episodes and forms of expression, that is, in advertising and in the popular press. Accordingly, my intention is to define neorealist visual culture by exploring three different case studies, i.e. neorealist film posters, the novelisation of neorealist films, and late photo-documentaries. Neorealist posters highlight the coexist-ence of a legacy of realist painting and popular realist illustration, which propagated the image of neorealism while doing away with documentary photography. Whereas neorealist masterworks were undoubtedly aesthetic achievements, neorealist visual culture was significantly more complex and articulated. It also implied the coalescence of neorealist visual motifs with new popular print formats and narrative modes, such as the photo-romance (*fotoromanzo*), which emerged almost at the same time as neorealism. Photo-romances that were adaptations of neorealist films were not a rare case, proving that the phenomenon's existence was multifaceted. They often represented the convergence of highbrow cultural endeavours with

mass culture, which relied on simplified narratives but whose outreach was often broader than neorealist masterpieces. Finally, I discuss a peculiar episode of late neorealism, that is, the photo-documentaries published in the film journal *Cinema Nuovo*. This creation displayed all the visual and political features that film critics attributed to neorealist cinema (witnessing, description, social engagement, political denunciation), involved an entire new generation of photographers, and testifies to the willingness to pair neorealist aesthetics with new media formats such as photographic reports and photo-romances. In addition, photo-documentaries spotlight the hypostasis of neorealist cinema during the 1950s as a result of the increasingly bitter political confrontation stemming from the Cold War in Italy.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the different notions of the film performer associated with neorealist cinema and culture. Neorealism is usually praised for its wide use of non-professional performers, which became the hallmark of some of its most celebrated films. However, a closer inspection of the corpus discloses a much more varied use of performers, ranging from experienced stage actors to popular comedians. Moreover, neorealist films also paved the way for the advent of a brand-new generation of female stars. By reconstructing the debate around the use of non-professional performers, the willingness to update national film culture by reinforcing the role of film directors in the fimmaking process, the widespread concerns of preserving a performing tradition, the new casting practices, and the new media industry initiating a culture of celebrity, I shed light on neorealist culture as a laboratory for renovating Italian cinema, preserving its assets and vernacularising foreign models of film performance. By way of conclusion, I focus particularly on Anna Magnani, who epitomised neorealist film performance from her appearance in *Rome, Open City* onwards. A close inspection of the actress' work from her celebrated appearance as Pina in Rossellini's masterpiece up to the Academy Award she received in 1956 illustrates the co-existence of different legacies, which included music hall, drama, and cinematic performance. Whereas her varied style produced consistent ruptures in terms of rhythm, inducing a sense of authenticity, her demeanour emerged by way of contrast with both preceding and subsequent national film stars and was associated with neorealist cinema overall. The media intensified this association by bringing to the fore the dedicated authenticity of her persona and the fact that she came from the lower class.

There are many things this book might have been and—for want of space, time, energy, and firm intention—is not. It is certainly neither a theoretical discussion of neorealism as a major shift in the history of film style and its many legacies in national and international film culture,

nor a scrutiny of whether it belongs to cinematic realism, as discussed by many critics and scholars from the 1940s on.[35] I obviously consistently refer to the cultural function that this shift played in heralding and branding neorealist culture, but my aim is not to elaborate on a widely discussed set of aesthetic traits or to offer a brand new interpretation of this style. As I previously explained, I am much more convinced that to fully grasp neorealism's significance, we need to move away from prescriptive stylistic notions and look at it as a phase of cultural history. This book does not even attempt to examine neorealist culture as a practice, even though I am convinced that the lively, chaotic years of the war's aftermath perpetuated some practices of a hegemonic mode of production such as indoor shooting or film finance while transforming others such as scriptwriting or location shooting. Nevertheless, the film industry thrived, given the fact that in the post-war years in Italy, film exhibition boomed and an almost entirely new film clubs' movement closely associated with neorealist works flourished. Accordingly, my work does not discuss neorealist cinema within national or transnational media history. This was a concern I permanently bore in mind, and specific issues discussed throughout the four chapters refer to media developments in order to account for the meaning achieved by neorealist culture. But this is not the book's subject. Finally, the chapters that follow do not tackle neorealist cinema and culture as popular culture, nor do they solely focus on the relationship of its products with film genres, film and media stardom, and popular theatre as well as with the explosion of mass culture expressed in popular magazines, photo-romances, radio broadcasting, or the soon-to-be-dominant TV. However, neorealist cinema and its related culture are consistently explored along these lines, since my aim is to describe their concrete existence in a multiplicity of products and forms. And if I should ascribe in hindsight a flaw to this book, it is its own rationale: it never walks down one particular path or charts a singular territory, because I always felt this would have missed the landscape I was struggling to depict.

I hope this summary description of the chapters provides a clear overview of my goals. Neorealist culture implied many novelties. Some were artistically outstanding, politically far ahead of the rest of the national debate, and often originated in unprecedented convergent media practices; others were less so. However, the major novelty was the general reorganisation of national and international cultural structures, engendered by the cultural explosion and managed by the ensuing transition culture. If we intend to move forward

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35   See, for instance, Haaland, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*.

in this phase of knowledge and understand why we continue to need its images, I believe we should disregard simplistic accounts and plunge into its fascinating variety. My major concern was describing this multiplicity while not losing the specificity of neorealist culture, the peaks of its cinematic manifestation, and the rigour that some methodological approaches enabled me to achieve. While I strove to highlight some consistency in explaining the major shifts transforming national and international culture, I also aimed to depict its force and diversity created in the cultural explosion of warfare and boosted by the lack of inherited reference points.

In 1944, Stefano Vanzina, then renowned as Steno, a humourist, screenplay writer, and comic film director, compiled a diary chronicling the Allied occupation of Rome, the echoes of civil war ravaging Central and Northern Italy, and the new climate of uncertainty experienced by artists. Steno attended meetings with prominent directors and intellectuals, talked to actors and stars, wrote film and cultural criticism for different magazines and journals proliferating under the new circumstances, struggled to secure funding for a theatre production, visited the Psychological Warfare Branch offices to obtain permission for some publication, and ran into people as he wandered throughout Rome. At some point, he came across Zavattini.

> I meet Zavattini in the rain. He has his usual child-like, astonished gaze. I ask him whether he signed up for some party: he replies he doesn't yet feel mature enough to know the direction to move forward. Uncertainty: this is the reality inspiring his idea for a new publication. By following this incertitude creating a 'tabula rasa' (his words), maybe some direction can be found.[36]

Soon after, Steno comments about Zavattini's involvement in highly engaged meetings and groups, as if constantly jumping from Kierkegaard to some popular magazine, from political commitment to show business. Steno bestows a mocking look upon occupied Rome's cultural scene, its flaws and its virtues, its down-to-earth everyday needs, and its hopes and ambitions for a new start. All in all, incertitude might well describe this incredibly rich phase, and meetings and groups struggling to oversee its evolution might well represent the attempt of social elites to direct this transition—the explosion and transition of culture. While I am certain this is what makes neorealist culture so rich and vibrant and why it still

36   Steno, *Sotto le stelle del '44*, p. 133

fascinates me after my long and sometimes exhausting research, I am unsure if this volume aptly illustrates it. However, since the neorealist era was replete with hope, I leave the reader with my confidence in having foregrounded its variety.

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