



**A CINEMA OF POETRY**



AESTHETICS OF THE ITALIAN ART FILM



**JOSEPH LUZZI**

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Aesthetics of the Italian Art Film

JOSEPH LUZZI

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*For Yolanda Luzzi*

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Imagine what the cinema of poets could be.—Jean Cocteau



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This book follows a generally chronological structure. The two chapters in part 1, “Neorealist Rhetoric and National Identity,” show how certain films grouped under the term *neorealism* established cinematic discourses that illuminate our understanding of concerns in the history of art while reflecting on the question of Italy. Chapter 1 studies a key term in the neorealist lexicon—the word chosen by Rossellini as its defining quality, *coralità* (chorality)—in connection with the political aims of neorealist filmmakers and, more broadly, the historical connotations of the chorus going back to Greek tragic theater and its influential theorist Friedrich Nietzsche in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy* [1871]). I focus on the links between neorealist *coralità* and the question of *italianità*, to show how filmmakers drew on religious (Rossellini) and political (Visconti) traditions to create visual discourses of chorality that bear analytical witness to the rebuilding of national identity after decades of world and civil war. Chapter 2 examines the relation between symbol and allegory, a rhetorical crux that stretches back to Homer and informs two critical moments in the formation of Italian national identity: literary romanticism and cinematic neorealism. I first explain why, in contrast to the triumph of the symbol in romantic Europe, Italian authors favored allegorical forms because of their potential for moral and political instruction. The argument then proposes that the terms of this ancient aesthetic crux reappeared, after the vigorous mediation by Verga, in the transition from the allegorical neorealist Italian cinema of the 1940s to the symbolic auteur films of the 1950s and 1960s, as each group sought to represent national identity onscreen.

Organized around the themes in Pasolini’s landmark essay on cinematic *poesis*, part 2, “Cinemas of Poetry,” continues the rhetorically inflected discussion of part 1 by looking at how film and poetry interact. Chapter 3 analyzes *Voyage to Italy* in light of the historical link between film and nonnarrative, lyric poetry. I aim to show how Rossellini’s film establishes a unique posi-

tion in the international debates in the early 1950s about film's relationship to literary art forms by continually citing a make-believe poem and incorporating its forms and themes, using this dialogue between the visual and literary image to critique a category in aesthetic and cultural history (romanticism), and generating relations between visual and verbal signs to create a "cinema of poetry" that anticipates many of Pasolini's theories on the supposedly pre-grammatical, irrational forms of knowledge produced by film. The argument also considers three challenges that have conditioned the connection between film and lyric poetry: the perceived threats of verbal discourse, ocular vision, and causal narrative to cinematic representation. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the most salient points of Pasolini's essay "Il 'cinema di poesia,'" to show how the notion of *poesis* articulated in it, and embodied in his eponymous film adaptation of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1971), illuminates concepts linking film to the other arts, including the free indirect style in its verbal and visual forms, as well as Benjamin's figure of the storyteller. I also seek to connect what I call Pasolini's "visual philology" and reflections on cultural production by the Neapolitan philosopher of history Vico.

Part 3, "Aesthetic *Corsi* and *Ricorsi*," picks up on a Vichian trope for understanding what Vico calls the *vita comune delle nazioni* (common life of nations), where earlier cycles of cultural expression (*corsi*) continue to reappear but with diminishing force as their original vigor is blunted by intellectual thought and abstract reasoning (*ricorsi*). In this spirit I explore how certain concepts in the history of Italian cinema resurface like a hydra's head, often in ways indistinguishable from one generation to the next. Chapter 5 examines a problem in the Italian film debates of the 1940s and 1950s, the perceived threat of realist representation to the expressive capacities of the cinematic medium, in the films of Antonioni. I aim to show how Antonioni's retreat from the referential claims of the image—which are often associated with death in *Blow-Up* (1966) and the trilogy *L'avventura* (1960), *La notte* (*Night* [1961]), and *L'eclisse* (*Eclipse* [1962])—reflects his desire to separate the "fact" from the "image," a relationship he theorizes in a little-known essay from 1963. In chapter 6 I argue that another recurring aesthetic form—the chiasmus—became the symbol par excellence for the shifting nature of Italian political life during two key moments of political transition: the Risorgimento and Fascism. In the literary and film versions of *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*)—by, respectively, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1959) and Visconti (1963)—the chiasmus represents the *trasformismo* (transformation-

ism) that witnessed the shifting of power from one unprincipled ruling class to another in pre- and post-Risorgimento Italy. In a related manner, and in one of the many films on Fascism to appear some three decades after Benito Mussolini's fall, Bertolucci's *Il conformista* (*The Conformist* [1970]) employs the chiasmus to expose the double speak of Fascist political discourse and the Freudian nature of the film's erotic substitutions—a process of doubling and inversion that also permeates the film's literary source, Alberto Moravia's novel of the same name (1951). Chapter 7 analyzes two later films by Fellini, *Casanova* (1976) and *La voce della luna* (*The Voice of the Moon* [1990]), to show how a technique associated with film, montage, finds a literary mode of expression and how the literary figure of apostrophe takes on cinematic form. The epilogue focuses on the afterlife of the neorealist and auteur Italian art-film tradition and the cinematic poetics it inspired in a core of films from the new millennium: Emanuele Crialesi's *Respiro* (2002), Frammartino's *Le quattro volte*, and Marco Tullio Giordana's *La meglio gioventù* (*The Best of Youth* [2003]).

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. Foreign titles are given alongside their English translation and year of publication (books) or release (films) the first time they appear in the book. Since some Italian films are better known by their original title than by their English rendering, they appear without translation (e.g., *La terra trema* and *La strada*).

This book was born in the classroom. I began teaching film at Columbia University in 2001, and my first screening was Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*. Though my research until then had focused on literature, this encounter would change the course of my career. The moral force of Rossellini's vision, his unembarrassed portrayal of heroism when the soul of his nation was at risk, revealed the power of cinema to remake people's lives. On the train back to New Haven from New York that winter night, I carried inside images from Rossellini's film that I had yet to find words for. Since then, the privilege of teaching cinema, first at the University of Pennsylvania and then (and especially) at Bard College, has helped me find those missing words. My writing on film owes its life to years of conversation with my students. To all of you, my warmest thanks.

Portions of the book appeared in the journals *Adaptation*, *Modern Language Notes*, and *Modern Language Quarterly*, as well as the audio course *The Blessed Lens: A History of Italian Film*. I owe a special debt of gratitude

to my friends at the National Humanities Center, where I spent a blissful year writing this book thanks to a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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*A Cinema of Poetry* is dedicated to my mother, who has never said a word to me about Italian film but who has, with the deepest care and generosity, taught me more than anyone else has.

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## A Cinema of Poetry



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## Introduction: Toward a Poetics of the Italian Art Film

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The first thing I notice about a film is its light. There's something about the light of Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* that announces Antonioni's *L'avventura*.

—Bernardo Bertolucci

On 19 August 1916 Giovanni Verga wrote to his screenwriter that he was taking matters into his own hands: “Ho creduto meglio di stendere io stesso la trama delle scene . . . onde evitare uno dei soliti pasticci chilometrici che fanno assomigliare la cinematografia al romanzo di appendici per analfabeti” (“I thought it would be better if I myself wrote the plot for the film scenes [based on my play] . . . to avoid the usual reels of mess that make cinema seem like a serial novel for the illiterate”) (Raya 91). Verga's words reveal the intense cinematic involvement of arguably Italy's most important living author, whose work became a major point of reference for filmmakers during the Fascist and neorealist eras. They also show the cross-fertilization of the nascent film medium with other art forms and point to the aesthetic issues that would drive film's relations with the sister arts: the legibility of the cinematic image as opposed to the more restricted realm of literary language, the potentially corrosive effect of cinema's commercialism on artistic concerns, and the mix of uneasiness and excitement that artists like Verga felt about the new celluloid medium.

In the spirit of Verga's letter I consider how films made in the age of neo-realism and its auteur aftermath shaped the history of aesthetics and abiding issues in cinema's relations with other art forms, especially literature. In what ways do filmmakers think through long-standing aesthetic questions? What are the principles, or “poetics,” of cinema that connect it to the practices of its artistic counterparts? What qualities of film—its link with technological processes, capacity for mass distribution, synthetic virtues (or vices) as the so-called total art—have reshaped centuries-long aesthetic debates? And why did a critical mass of these sophisticated and critically acclaimed films appear

during Italy's neorealist and auteur periods? This book answers these questions by examining them in a group of works that have long been acknowledged for their artistic and sociopolitical influence. My argument centers on the following three elements in the richly intermedial and formally complex nature of what I will call the nation's "art-film" period.

1. *Italian cinemas of poetry.* The qualities of Italian literary history—its strong traditions in lyric poetry, its role in establishing a unifying Italian language, and the great political influence of some of its poets—made Italian cinema dependent on poetry's institutions and cultural prestige as early as Giovanni Pastrone's historical blockbuster *Cabiria* (1914), which featured intertitles by the self-proclaimed *poet vate* (poet-prophet) Gabriele D'Annunzio. I will argue on behalf of the ongoing impact of poetic modes of expression in Italian cinema and show how the emergence of a "poetic cinema" was central to the development of Italian film as it moved out of neorealism and into the more stylized auteur period. To that end my book focuses on the implications of arguably the most famous essay by an Italian filmmaker, Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Il 'cinema di poesia'" ("The 'Cinema of Poetry'" [1965]), which borrows semiotic theories from literary criticism to link cinematic and poetic expression. Overall, I seek to challenge the commonplace—advanced in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, among others—that film is bound to the novel above all other literary genres because each shares qualities capable of representing the elusive term *reality*. I contend instead that Italian directors have often looked to poetry to capture nonmimetic and nonnarrative forms of so-called reality that unveil the unconscious of their characters and the discontinuities of history—what Pasolini called "the world of memory and dreams."

2. *"Italianità" and the aesthetics of film.* Although the term *national cinema* is highly controversial, especially when linked to the embattled drive for Italian political identity, this unstable issue of *italianità* led filmmakers with competing aesthetic agendas onto common paths of cinematic expression.<sup>1</sup> As early as the influential articles by Giuseppe Prezzolini in *La voce* (1912–13), the film medium provided an irresistible forum for considering the issue of national identity. The intersection between the politicized component of rhetorical imagery and its aesthetic qualities coalesces in a defining quality of Italian cinematic history: *the predominance of an intermedial and interdisciplinary poetics*, in which certain films contributed to transnational aesthetic debates while meditating on the question of what it means to be Italian. My book explores how key historical moments—for example, the reconstruction

after World War II, as well as the representation of the Italian Risorgimento and Fascism in the 1960s and 1970s—elicited cinematic responses that engaged major notions in the arts to make political and ideological points about Italian identity.

3. *Polemics and schools.* Beginning with the debates about the putative school (or lack thereof) of neorealism, Italian filmmakers faced the daunting question of labels, especially in the highly partisan atmosphere of the postwar. The need to define their positions pushed many Italian directors to speculate on their *métier*, which in turn motivated them to locate their aesthetic vision in the history and categories of aesthetic theory and practice. For example, Michelangelo Antonioni defined his version of realism against that of neorealism by establishing a tension between traditional (that is, mimetic) realism and the term's more abstract, Platonic associations—a tension that Antonioni described in terms of a distinction between the “fact” and the “image.” Moreover, other directors who learned their cinematic craft under neorealism, especially Fellini and Pasolini, built their careers more in reaction to the tenets of this movement than to any other aesthetic or cultural factor. All told, the intensely collaborative—and at times confrontational—cinematic world of the Italian postwar decades led filmmakers to position their work in relation to one another as they explored intermedial practices, especially the cinematic adaptation of literary sources.

Along with these three elements, two key terms in my title suggest the larger aims of the book: *cinema of poetry* and *art film*. Going back to philosophers including Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce—and culminating in the cinematic theories of Pasolini—Italian thinkers have used the term *poesia* not only in the usual sense of “written poetry” but in the etymological sense of the Greek *poiesis* and Latin *poesis*, “creative making,” in all its forms. The aesthetics of Italian cinema, I will argue, is beholden to this distinctly Italian, cross-disciplinary, and intermedial understanding of poetry. In the neorealist debates in Italy of the 1940s, the word *poesia* assumed an elastic web of signification inflected by one of the most influential theorists in the nation's philosophical tradition: Croce. In their seminal defense of adaptation, “Verità e poesia: Verga e il cinema italiano” (“Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema” [1941]), Mario Alicata and Giuseppe De Santis disregarded the possibility of a “pure” cinema divorced from predecessor art forms and claimed instead that the emergence of film should be understood in the context of existing literary and artistic tastes. Albert Asor Rosa locates the inspiration for Alicata and De Santis's promotion of a “literary” neorealism

in Croce, whose shadow lingers over two of their claims: first, a work's *poesia* is the result of “una ispirazione creatrice superiore a ogni pratica distinzione di generi” (“a creative inspiration superior to any practical distinction in genre”); second, any distinction among lyric, narrative, picturesque, or other forms of cinema is invalid because “in tutti questi casi bisognerà solamente parlare di opera d'arte realizzata o di opera d'arte non realizzata, vale a dire più semplicemente di poesia e non poesia” (“in all these cases, it is necessary to speak only of successfully or unsuccessfully realized works of art—which is to say, of poetry and nonpoetry”).<sup>2</sup>

By voicing Croce's controversial definition of the “poetic” as the successful synthesis of artistic intuition into formal expression, Alicata and De Santis use the term *poesia* as a transcendental category to denote the successful work of art. Their generic sense of poetry as heightened artistic expression and self-contained lyrical perfection, a Crocean saw of profound impact in the history of Italian aesthetics, also informs the unexpected use of the term by Cesare Zavattini, the militant Marxist screenwriter averse to aesthetic expression not grounded in socioeconomic reality. Zavattini's essay “Poesia, solo affare del cinema italiano” (“Poetry, the only obligation of Italian cinema” [1945]) invokes the powerful signifier *poesia* to suggest cinema's need for unbridled imagination: “bisogna spalancare le porte alla fantasia” (“we must burst open the doors to fantasy”). Most important of all, Pasolini's essay on the cinema of poetry—a recurrent subject of my book—offers a theoretical model for grasping the interplay between poetic and cinematic aesthetics, while establishing the centrality of the term *poesia* for a range of filmmakers including Antonioni and Bertolucci. Thus, beginning with the debates about adaptation in the 1940s and extending into the auteur period of the 1960s, the word *poetry* functioned as a malleable signifier that recalls Friedrich Nietzsche's autopsy of the term *romanticism* as the empty vessel filled with whatever its theorists wished (or needed) to supply. We will see how the legacies of this “poetic cinema,” broadly defined, have continued to produce a rich vein of filmmaking, as recently as Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le quattro volte* (2010), which returns us to the tenets of Pasolini's essay while creating its own view of what constitutes the *cinema di poesia*.

The recent edited volume *Global Art Cinema* (2010), by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, shows that the term *art cinema* is difficult to define in any context, let alone the Italian one. Yet it continues to be used fruitfully—if controversially—throughout the cinematic world.<sup>3</sup> Attempts to define the art film have been many, including David Bordwell's emphasis on it as a “mode”;

Steve Neale's thesis that it is an "institution"; and Barbara Wilinsky's claim that it denotes practices of exhibiting films in the emerging "art-house" cinema.<sup>4</sup> Galt and Schoonover define the art film as the aesthetically complex work that transcends its local public and enters the global marketplace. Such films, they argue, inhabit an "impure institutional space: neither experimental nor mainstream," as they move "uneasily between the commercial world and its artisanal others"; articulate "an ambivalent relationship to location," as well as "a complexly ambivalent relationship to the critical and industrial categories that sustain film history, such as stardom and authorship"; "trouble notions of genre"; and constitute "an impure spectator," who is often led to contradictory responses (Introduction 7–9).

Although this definition succeeds in identifying a certain strand of international art cinema, it fails to describe the Italian version. For example, a film invoked by Galt and Schoonover, Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City* [1945]), cannot be said to display an "ambivalent" relation to location or lead spectators to "contradictory responses": the film presents itself as an on-location depiction of the Roman Resistance with its local dialect and customs, in a straightforward battle of good versus evil that pits Italian heroes against Nazi villains. Other examples of acknowledged cinematic excellence in Italy also refute Galt and Schoonover's definition: Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948) did not seek to "trouble" the neorealist genre with which it aligned itself, and his highbrow *Senso* (1954) made no pretense of infiltrating the "commercial world." Moreover, no film by Pasolini or Antonioni displays "ambivalence" toward the notion of authorship, and many works by Fellini embraced the category of "stardom" that Galt and Schoonover regard with suspicion. The shortcomings of their definition suggest that, like politics itself, the essence of the Italian art film lies in the local, not the global.

The term *art film* has not only a local but a technical resonance in Italy, whose government created the category of *film d'essai* or *film d'autore* to contribute "alla diffusione della cultura cinematografica ed alla conoscenza di correnti e tecniche sperimentali" ("to the diffusion of cinematic culture and to the understanding of experimental currents and techniques") (Decreto Legislativo 22 gennaio 2004, n. 28).<sup>5</sup> But no legal definition alone could account for the term's manifold resonances. In Italy, art film has generally been associated with the cinema from post-World War II neorealism to the auteur period of the 1950s and 1960s, when producers including Dino De Laurentiis, Carlo Ponti, and Franco Cristaldi offered international audiences films with what Geoffrey Nowell-Smith calls "a general if indefinable air of 'quality'"

about them” (*Making Waves* 152–53). The ongoing presence of these films in scholarship, journalism, festivals, and curricula attests to the cultural value they have accrued. Moreover, they continue to inspire filmmakers to revisit their aesthetic issues and concerns in an ongoing negotiation with their cinematic legacies. Speaking not just about the Italian tradition but “art cinema” in general, Dudley Andrew emphasizes the sense of aesthetic discovery in such films: “The art cinema promises something that no other group of films can: to question, change, or disregard standard film making, in seeking to convey the utterly new or the formerly hidden” (*Aura* 5–6).

Building on Nowell-Smith’s periodization and Andrew’s sense of aesthetic discovery, I use the term *art film* to designate a group of interconnected Italian films from the 1940s to the 1970s that contain the following qualities. First, the Italian art film links directors who both directly and indirectly engaged with one another’s work and ideas as they explored common aesthetic concerns. Second, it raises questions about cinema’s relation to other arts, especially literature and the cinematic adaptation of literary sources, as adaptation assumed a distinctly “Italian” dimension because of the specific characteristics of the nation’s literary history. Third, the Italian art film often demonstrates its debt to the neorealist era, which established a cinematic framework—figuratively speaking, an informal “film school”—that nurtured the aesthetics and conditioned the ideologies of directors who either aligned themselves with this pioneering movement or set their work in opposition to it. Last, my version of the Italian art film sets aesthetic concerns in dialogue with social and political ones, so that the model of the “engaged” filmmaker—a particular legacy of neorealism—became a touchstone for directors who, as the neorealist refrain went, sought to *rifare l’Italia* (“remake Italy”).<sup>6</sup>

My model is by no means meant to be prescriptive or categorical. The directors I refer to did not labor under the lofty abstraction “art cinema,” which is a value judgment made in retrospect. And of course, other films worthy of the designation *art film* have appeared in Italy in other periods, movements, and contexts than the narrow ones I propose. But by referring to the art cinema produced in a specific period of Italian cinematic history—roughly, from the immediate postwar to the heyday of auteur film—I establish the parameters of what I believe is a well-articulated phenomenon whose cultural legacies continue to impact Italy’s sense of cinema and its sense of self.

Angelo Restivo offers a useful model for construing the art film by drawing our attention to the place of neorealism in the Italian filmic imagination and its link to questions of national identity. “The Italian art film of the sixties dif-

ferentiates itself from the 'low art' of the period insofar as it self-consciously addresses itself to a national cinematic tradition: the tradition of neorealism, so crucial to the process of national reconstruction after the war" (9). I agree with Restivo's emphasis on the role that neorealism has played in determining the aesthetic hierarchies of Italy's cinematic tradition, but I would take his argument a step further and add that this very pervasiveness raises two methodological challenges: first, the problems of taxonomy and definition posed by a term as contentious and hotly debated as *neorealism*; second, the burdens of interpretation created by the canonicity of these same neorealist films, the subject of ongoing scholarship and critical inquiry whose sheer quantity would appear to make it difficult to say anything new about them.

To begin with the problem of definition, we dispensed long ago with simplified notions of neorealism as a monolithic movement or school characterized by documentary-style techniques, nonprofessional actors, long takes under natural lighting, and improvisational story lines that rejected script, set, and other vestiges from supposedly more artificial predecessors, ranging from the historical melodramas of Pastrone and Filoteo Alberini to the propaganda of the Fascist screen and the mannered Calligraphic and White Telephone eras. Even those films designated "neorealist" often broke with the dogma and clichés ascribed to the putative movement: for example, Vittorio De Sica's *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine* [1946]) and *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves* [1948]) made extensive use of montage and *mise-en-scène*, even though De Sica's cowriter, Zavattini, famously called for "story-less" films. And no less than the movement's supposed founder, Rossellini, employed stars on the order of Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi in *Rome, Open City* in addition to his cast of nonprofessionals.<sup>7</sup> As Stefano Parigi points out, the word *neorealism*, like so many terms from the history of art, arrived a posteriori: a critical designation born in 1948, it began to circulate "quando quelli che a tutt'oggi si considerano i 'capolavori' del dopoguerra sono già stati realizzati" ("when those films that nowadays are considered the 'masterpieces' of the postwar had already been shot") (92).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the fluid signifier *neorealism* was and remains highly controversial, as evidenced in the following words from Lino Micciché, one of the movement's most authoritative voices: "Is it really possible that, half a century after the phenomenon [of neorealism], we cannot aspire to having not just a survey of diverse and programmatically partial opinions on authors, film, and problems, but . . . a compact, unifying monograph that . . . can analyse and historically reconstruct the overall phenomenon, which was certainly complex, but



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