



ITALIAN NEOREALISM
REBUILDING THE CINEMATIC CITY

MARK SHIEL

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Author's note: titles of films are given in English where the film received a significant English language release and the English-language title has since become well-established in film scholarship. All such films are given with their original title in parentheses on their first citation in the text. Otherwise films are given their original titles only.

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January 2006

INTRODUCTION: DESCRIBING NEOREALISM

Few moments in the history of cinema have been as hotly debated in their day and by succeeding generations as the moment of Italian neorealism in Italy after World War Two. Most critics and historians agree that neorealism was a watershed in which realism emerged for a time as the dominant mode of Italian cinema, with decisive impacts on the ways in which films would be made and thought about in Italy and worldwide for generations. One of the most important ways of thinking about neorealism has been to see it as a moment of decisive transition in the tumultuous aftermath of world war which produced a stylistically and philosophically distinctive cinema that achieved a limited but influential popularity from the mid-1940s until some time in the early or late 1950s, depending on the flexibility with which one uses the term: for example, from Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta)* (1945) to Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), or from Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) to Federico Fellini's *The Nights of Cabiria (Le notti di Cabiria)*, (1957). In particular, neorealism marked a significant stage in the transformation of cinema from the classical forms which dominated in Europe and in the US prior to World War Two to the modernist art cinema which came to dominate in Europe after the war and which had considerable impact and influence on Hollywood too from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Neorealism is also often thought of not so much as a particular moment, defined by starting and ending dates, but as a historically- and culturally-specific manifestation of the general aesthetic quality known as 'realism' which is characterised by a disposition to the ontological truth of the physical, visible world. From this perspective, the realism of Italian neorealism manifested itself in a distinctive visual style. This was typified by a preference for location filming, the use of nonprofessional actors, the avoidance of ornamental *mise-en-scène*, a preference for natural light, a freely-moving documentary style of photography, a non-interventionist approach to film directing, and an avoidance of complex editing and other post-production processes likely to focus attention on the contrivance of the film image. Not all neorealist films employed *all* of these strategies, especially in the 1950s when neorealism became increasingly concerned with subjective experience, but most of these strategies are evident in all neorealist films. The perception of neorealism as visual truth is closely identified with the influential critical position of André Bazin who, more than any other non-Italian, argued in favor of neorealism as a cinematic agenda, thinking of it as a cinema of 'fact' and 'reconstituted reportage' (1971a: 20, 37).

The sense of neorealism as visual truth coincides and sometimes clashes with another sense of neorealism as a sentiment of ethical and political commitment – a social realism which motivated not only filmmakers but writers such as Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino, painters such as Renato Guttuso and Aldo Borgonzoni, photographers such as Mario De Biasi and Federico Patellani, and, as we shall see in chapter three, architects such as Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi. Neorealist cinema has often been characterised as what Miriam Liehm calls 'an aesthetics of rejection' (1984: 132) in which the visual style, mythology, politics and working methods of fascist-era cinema were thrown out. In their place, neorealist filmmakers demonstrated a commitment through visual realism to making known the lot of ordinary, everyday Italians, especially the working class. They were inspired by leftist political

especially the agendas of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and Socialist Party (PSI), and the determination to create a new and better Italy after the degradation and barbarity of fascism and in spite of the conservative tendencies of the mainstream of Italian political life represented by the Catholic Church and the Christian Democrat (DC) party. Especially after 1948, the latter was the dominant force in political life.

This sense of neorealism as a political or ethical disposition leads into another – that of neorealism as a more or less coherent movement of particular directors, writers, cinematographers, editors and actors who were loosely connected to each other through personal and professional associations, who shared anti-fascist convictions and a leftist politics, and who produced a recognisable body of work from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. Three directors produced most of the generally recognised masterworks of neorealism: Rossellini's *Rome, Open City, Paisà* (1946), and *Germany Year Zero (Germania anno zero)* (1947), De Sica's *Shoeshine (Sciuscià, 1946)*, *Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette, 1948)* and *Umberto D*, and Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948). After these, one must acknowledge key filmmakers who began as writers, making their directorial debuts in the 1950s with films which pushed the boundaries of neorealism as in the cases of Michelangelo Antonioni, who spent the war years as a critic writing prolifically for the noted journal *Cinema* before directing his first feature, *Cronaca di un amore*, in 1950, and Federico Fellini who wrote for the screen in the late 1940s, making decisive contributions to such films as Rossellini's *Paisà* and *The Miracle (Il miracolo, 1948)*, before co-directing *Variety Lights (Luci del varietà, 1950)* with Alberto Lattuada and directing his own first feature *The White Sheik (Lo sceicco bianco, 1952)*. Other important directors regularly considered as neorealist would include Giuseppe De Santis, Pietro Germi, Carlo Lizzani and Aldo Vergano, while directors whose fidelity to the aesthetics and politics of neorealism is often debated because of the allegedly superficial neorealist style of many of their films include Alberto Lattuada and Luigi Zampa. Many of these knew each other prior to the advent of neorealism: Visconti, Antonioni, De Santis and others such as Mario Alicata and Pietro Ingrao all being associated with the *Cinema* journal during the war. Some formed regular director/writer collaborations – Rossellini and Fellini and more famously, De Sica and Cesare Zavattini who, more than any other Italian, developed neorealism as a positive and clearly articulated doctrine. Certain actors such as Anna Magnani in *Rome, Open City*, Silvana Mangano in De Santis' *Bitter Rice (Riso amaro, 1949)* and Massimo Girotti in Germi's *In the Name of the Law (In nome della legge, 1949)*, came to be associated with neorealism as icons of the ordinary Italian people and their suffering after the war. Key cinematographers such as G. R. Aldo (*La terra trema*), Otello Martelli (*Paisà*), Carlo Montuori (*Bicycle Thieves*) and Aldo Tonti (*Ossessione*) worked frequently with the key neorealist directors and were responsible for much of neorealism's distinctive visual immediacy.

How many neorealist films these people produced remains a bone of contention. Most critics agree on the seven key works, all produced in the late 1940s – *Rome, Open City, Paisà, Germany Year Zero, Shoeshine, Bicycle Thieves, Umberto D* and *La terra trema* – but beyond these what constitutes a neorealist film remains a subject of debate. Whether films such as *Miracle in Milan (Miracolo a Milano, 1951)*, *I vitelloni* (1953), *Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia, 1953)*, *Senso* (1954) or *The Nights of Cabiria* could be described as neorealist at all was hotly disputed when they were released during the seemingly endless so-called 'crisis of neorealism' of the 1950s. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, each of these was seen

either to move neorealism into new territory or to break with it altogether, and opinion as to the neorealism of these films remains divided today. Indeed, the diversity of filmmakers and films grouped under the term 'neorealism' has led a number of film historians, including Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Peter Bondanella and Pierre Sorlin, to question its usefulness. For example, in his influential study *Luchino Visconti*, first published in 1967, Nowell-Smith suggested that 'neorealism' was only a convenient label to describe a 'pattern of brief convergence around a diffuse blob on the film-historical map' (2003: 27) during the four or five years after World War Two. The crucial differences which he identified between Visconti's politically astute but aesthetically stylised realism and Rossellini's deeply moralistic but more purely realist cinema are only the clearest of the many contrasts which existed within neorealism. More recently, Alberto Farassino has characterised a 'permanent neorealism' which coloured and conditioned all Italian filmmaking in the five years after the liberation of Italy and which 'extended well beyond its specific historical moment to constitute a sort of vein, even a "universal" aesthetic category' (1998: 75). But such observations ought not to invalidate a sense of neorealism as a more or less coherent phenomenon. The view which underpins this book is a flexible one which sees neorealism as a complex but nonetheless useful and vital term of description of a relatively coherent but always evolving historical moment and movement in Italian cinema from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, which may be used to discuss a variety of filmmakers and films whose stylistic and ideological similarities outweighed their differences. If neorealism was not an *organised* movement, it was nonetheless a movement, and certainly the most prominent in international cinema in the ten years after World War Two, a cinema which displayed more coherence of formal and thematic concerns among Italian filmmakers than was evident at the time in American, French, British or Soviet or any other cinema.

Although neorealist filmmakers did not regularly collaborate to issue manifestoes, a reasonably large body of neorealist theory and criticism did develop: Zavattini's 'Some Ideas on the Cinema' (1952) and other writings; Lizzani's history *Il cinema italiano* (1953), and the innumerable articles, interviews and interventions by critics and filmmakers which proliferated in *Cinema*, *Bianco e nero* and elsewhere. This theory and criticism grew around a body of films which, though substantial, was only ever a minority tendency in Italian cinema: estimates of the number of films which can be described as neorealist vary from Pierre Sorlin's low calculation of just twenty (or four per cent of total production), to Lino Miccichè's estimate of not more than ninety between 1945 and 1953 (out of a total of 822), to David Forgacs' more generous reckoning of 259 (nearly one-third of total production) in the same period (Sorlin 1996: 93; Miccichè 1999: 21; Forgacs 1990: 117). Neorealist films were, even by the most generous estimate, always a minority of the films Italian cinema produced in any given year.

Moreover, neorealist films were not generally commercially and critically successful, although, when they were, they were often high-profile in their success and in the public and critical controversies they provoked. *Rome, Open City* was a worldwide critical and commercial success, as were *Paisà*, *In the Name of the Law*, *Bicycle Thieves* and *Bitter Rice*, but most others did not perform well in box-office terms, especially given the quick post-war re-establishment of commercial genre film production in Italy and the return of Hollywood cinema to market dominance. *Rome, Open City* was exceptional in topping the Italian box office in 1945–46 at 162m lire. Many other successful neorealist films were more modest in their commercial performance – for example, *Paisà* was the ninth most successful film in Ita

in 1946–47 generating 100m lire at the box office, *Bicycle Thieves* was eleventh in 1948–49 with 252m lire and *Bitter Rice* was fifth at 442m lire in 1949–50 (Spinazzola 1985: 18). Film imported from the US controlled two-thirds to three-quarters of the Italian box office from 1945 to 1950 – for example, holding a 77 per cent market share in 1948 compared to 13 per cent for Italian films and a 63.7 per cent share in 1950 compared to 29.2 per cent for Italian films (Quaglietti 1980: 248; Liehm 1984: 333). This American dominance was secured by agreements between the Italian film industry's main representative body, the Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche ed Affine (ANICA), and its Hollywood counterpart, the Motion Picture Export Association.

Neorealism was arguably welcomed abroad, especially in the US and France, more than it was at home, and in Italy (as well as abroad) its appeal tended to be strongest among educated, urban audiences. Even the most popular and accessible neorealists such as Vittorio De Sica encountered real difficulties securing financing for their films: his *Shoeshine* was a major financial disaster despite its very low budget of less than one million lire and despite winning an Academy Award on its US release; De Sica was subsequently forced to fund many films either by borrowing from friends, for *Bicycle Thieves*, or using his own personal funds for *Miracle in Milan*.

The period in which neorealism flourished was one of intense struggle in which progressive and conservative forces sought to determine the character and future of Italian society in politics, economics and culture, including cinema. Italy found itself in a process of profound self-exploration, adjustment and reorganisation, an experience which it shared with other countries of Western Europe and elsewhere. Within the context of the Cold War which would quickly come to determine so many aspects of life in the years after 1945, this was essentially a struggle between capitalism and liberal democracy, on the one hand, and various forms and combinations of communism, socialism and social democracy, on the other. In Italy, the main parties to this struggle were the Christian Democrats, in the case of the former, and the Communists and Socialists, in the latter case, although the ascendant power of the United States always made its strong preference clear for capitalism and liberal democracy and had a very real presence and influence on Italian life through the Marshall Plan for the economic and infrastructural reconstruction of Europe (1948–52). Inevitably, this struggle also raged in the cinema where Italian neorealism and Hollywood cinema stood as opposite, divergent models of what popular culture should be and how it should relate to its audience – Italian neorealism embodying the idea of culture as critique, seeking a critical awareness alongside ennobling representations of society with a clear contemporary relevance, and Hollywood cinema, at least to its critics, presenting itself as the epitome of entertainment, not necessarily mindless but not particularly political, compliant and not resistant, escapist and not engaged. Though neither neorealism nor Hollywood was as monolithic as such cursory characterisation suggests – for example, Hollywood cinema in the late 1940s experienced the 'subversion' of *film noir* – neorealism may be seen in this sense not just as a moment of transition but as a moment of particularly overt ideological conflict in cinema.

Their clear national identity also marks neorealist films as products of an era when cinema was still thought of largely in terms of discrete national cultures and the relatively limited 'influences' of one country's national cinema upon that of another – as in the close relationship between French and Italian cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s. The notion of 'national cinema' is an important one in the study of film and neorealism remains an archetype of the

post-war art cinemas around which the term was originally developed. One of the presumptions of the national cinema approach is that while films make an interesting object of study in themselves, their ultimate utility lies in the ways they produce 'a collective narrative' for a people and a national culture, as Marcia Landy explains in *Italian Film* (2000: xiii). However, as Landy warns, a balance must be struck between approaching Italian national cinema as a unitary phenomenon, the expression of a discrete and stable national culture, and recognising that on close analysis any national culture and any national cinema is bound to reveal itself to be 'eclectic, fragmentary and contradictory' (2000: xiv).

Neither is any national cinema an island. As we shall see later in this chapter, neorealism was strongly influenced by French cinema of the 1930s and Hollywood cinema coloured the consciousness of its filmmakers and audiences. The international acclaim which greeted neorealism was intense in the United States and in France. Italy, in being liberated from fascism in 1943–44, was immediately also more globalised by its occupation by the Allies and the reopening of its culture, economy and political life to outside influences after the relative isolation of the fascist era. In this circumstance, a new internationalist excitement was part of the cultural atmosphere of the day and provided a liberating light in which filmmakers, critics and audiences were naturally eager to view their film culture. The many non-Italian critics and audiences who welcomed neorealism found that it related profoundly to the war which they too had experienced. Reviewing *Rome, Open City* in the *New York Times* in February 1946, Bosley Crowther wrote:

It may seem peculiarly ironic that the first film yet seen hereabouts to dramatise the nature and the spirit of underground resistance in German-held Europe in a superior way – with candid, overpowering realism and with a passionate sense of human fortitude – should be a film made in Italy. Yet such is the extraordinary case. *Open City*, which arrived at the World last night, is unquestionably one of the strongest dramatic films yet made about the recent war. And the fact that it was hurriedly put together by a group of artists soon after the liberation of Rome is significant of its fervour and doubtless integrity. (1946: 32)

It was clear that with neorealism Italy experienced a more creative cinematic rebirth after the war than any other combatant nation in World War Two. As P. Adams Sitney has argued, although great films were also made elsewhere, post-war Italian films were superior on the whole to their US, French and British contemporaries in 'their stylistic organisation of elements of apparent rawness, their emotional intensity, and their focus on current political and social problems' (1995: 6). The late 1940s therefore came to constitute what Sitney, drawing on Pier Paolo Pasolini, calls the first of the 'vital crises' which punctuated post-war Italian cinema history, the second being the art cinema of the early 1960s, including Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960), Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961), Antonioni's *Red Desert* (*Deserto rosso*, 1964), and Bertolucci's *Prima della rivoluzione* (*Before the Revolution*, 1964). The neorealist crisis, artistic and political in roughly equal measure, produced a 'concentration of creative energy' (Sitney 1995: 219) quite peculiar in the history of the medium which appeared to promise profound social and cultural regeneration but which did not necessarily deliver. As Pasolini used the term to look back on neorealism from the 1960s, the notion of a vital crisis was meant not

only to convey neorealism's exciting creativity but also its failed opportunities, especially the failure to produce an Italy after the war which was substantially better than that before the war:

It is useless to delude oneself about it: neorealism was not a regeneration; it was only a vital crisis, however excessively optimistic and enthusiastic at the beginning. Thus poetic action outran thought, formal renewal preceded the reorganisation of the culture through its vitality (let's not forget the year '45!). Now the sudden withering of neorealism is the necessary fate of an improvised, although necessary, superstructure: it is the price for a lack of mature thought, of a complete reorganisation of the culture. (1965: 231)

For Pasolini, as for many others of the neorealist generation and their 1960s descendants, the end of the war, after a brief moment in which everything seemed possible, soon saw a disappointing return to power of Italian capitalism and the Catholic Church, but now backed by the silent partnership of the United States.

In the immediate post-war environment, however, this eventual return to old ways was not predictable and the emphasis for filmmakers, critics and audiences was on the new-ness of the Italian situation after the fall of fascism. Early uses of the term 'neorealism' therefore carried not only a sense of neorealist cinema as something different but as something artistically and morally better than what had gone before. Although the term was occasionally used in the 1930s in relation to literature and Soviet cinema, its popularisation in the context of Italian cinema is often dated from one of two instances: the description in 1943 by Mario Serandrei, the editor of Visconti's *Ossessione*, of the striking immediacy and freshness of the imagery he was viewing in the rushes of Visconti's film; or the expression in the same year by the film critic, Umberto Barbaro, of his admiration for the films of French directors René Clair, Jean Renoir and Marcel Carné, all of whom were influential on neorealist cinema (see Brunetta 2001: 201–3).

After the war, the term quickly gained currency. Filmmakers, critics and the cinemagoing public came to a consensus that neorealism arose out of the trauma of fascism, war and occupation, in response to which it offered a means of national and personal self-examination. Vittorio De Sica explained the original impetus for neorealism as 'an overwhelming desire to throw out of the window the old stories of the Italian cinema, to place the camera into the mainstream of real life, of everything that struck our horrified eyes' (quoted in Liehm 1988: 59). Luigi Chiarini compared the revelatory impact of neorealism to that of the early motion pictures although now the world 'did not reveal itself in its pleasant exterior, but in its deeper human content, in the dialectic between war and peace, civilisation and barbarism, reaction and progress: mechanical reproduction had become artistic representation' (1979: 145). This sense of neorealism was central to influential histories of Italian cinema such as Lizzani's *Cinema italiano*, and to the writings and teachings of influential critics and educators such as Barbaro and Guido Aristarco. It also informed the enthusiastic reception of neorealist film abroad, especially in the United States and in France where the consensus was strengthened by the critical interventions of André Bazin and the journal *Cahiers du cinéma*. For Bazin, the most famous critic to develop a theory of neorealism and to promote its application in cinema

the term was a valid one despite the frequent impatience of film directors with what seemed from their point of view, an abstract category, and despite the diverse range of films to which the term was applied, whether a statement of moral outrage such as *Rome, Open City*, a Marxist analysis of class-based society such as *La terra trema*, a philosophical enquiry such as *Journey to Italy*, or a historical epic such as *Senso*. For Bazin, neorealism constituted 'the triumphant evolution of the language of cinema' (1971a: 26) where, by 'triumphant' Bazin meant not that neorealism was or would eclipse all other forms of cinema but that in its day neorealism it was more wonderful, more inspiring, than anything else in its day.

Today we can acknowledge Bazin's useful recognition of the innovation of neorealism without necessarily sharing his faith in the utopian potential of realism as an aesthetic strategy, a faith for which he has received his share of criticism since the 1940s (see Aumont *et al.* 1999: 108–14). Neorealism did make certain important filmmaking approaches more common in post-war cinema and did give them new legitimacy, even if, as much recent scholarship has shown, some of what the neorealists became most famous for was not unknown in cinema of the fascist era and earlier. For example, one of neorealism's most important and influential areas of innovation was its removal of filmmaking from the confines of the studio to the expanses of the countryside and the built space of the city where the camera could fully engage with physical and social reality. In 1945, this removal had both material and an ideological impetus behind it. Like those of other countries, especially Germany, Italy's film studios and most of its film equipment were out of commission. In Rome, for example, much equipment from the main studios, Cinecittà, had been removed by the Germans and Italian fascists when they fled the advancing Allies in the late summer of 1943. Filmmakers were forced to look for creative solutions to the problem of producing cinema in conditions of extreme austerity. At the same time, austerity was a characteristic of society as a whole: the brute realities of hunger, poverty, displacement and unemployment with which so many Italians lived imbued the making of cinema with a peculiar moral urgency and social purpose. As Alberto Lattuada explained with more than a hint of nostalgia in 1959:

After the last war, especially in Italy, it was this very need for reality which forced us out of the studios. It is true that our studios were partly destroyed or occupied by refugees, but it is equally true that the decision to shoot everything on location was above all dictated by the desire to express life in its most convincing manner and with the harshness of documentaries. The very spirit of walls corroded by time and full of the tired signs of history, took on an aesthetic consistency. The actors' costumes were those of the man in the street. Actresses became women again, for a moment. It was a poor but strong cinema, with many things to say in a hurry and in a loud voice, without hypocrisy, in a brief vacation from censorship; and it was an unprejudiced cinema, personal and not industrial, a cinema full of real faith in the language of film, as a means of education and social progress. (Quoted in Armes 1971: 66–7)

Without established sources of financing, the first neorealist films were made with very low budgets and with a minimum of production funds secured in advance by filmmakers for whom location filming helped to reduce costs while also encouraging socially-committed cinema. In the name of authenticity, a film was more often than not filmed where it was set – Al

Vergano's *Il sole sorge ancora* (1946) in rural Lombardy, Visconti's *La terra trema* in A Trezza in Sicily, Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1950) on the volcanic island of that name in the Mediterranean. Sometimes, where a film was based on real-life events, specific streets and buildings used by the film's real-life subjects were used as locations for reproducing their lives, as was the case with Rossellini's filming in the Via Casilina and the Piazza di Spagna in Rome for *Rome, Open City*. On the other hand, *Rome, Open City* contained many indoor sequences filmed in a makeshift studio which Rossellini put together in the Via degli Avignonesi, and in his *Paisà* stand-in locations were used in the episode set in a monastery in the Apennines between Florence and Bologna which was actually filmed at Maiori on the Amalfi coast. Occasionally, such cases would prompt criticism – André Bazin expressed dissatisfaction with the 'melodramatic indulgence' (1971a: 61) of De Sica's use of a studio set to recreate Rome's Porta Portese prison in *Shoeshine* – but they could usually be tolerated if the general principles of authenticity and verisimilitude were not surrendered. Location filming remained the preference of neorealist directors through the mid-1950s and beyond. It was accompanied by a cinematography which aspired to documentary-like objectivity and austerity, a preference for long- and medium-shots in deep-focus, an avoidance of unnatural camera movements and camera angles (including close-ups) and a favouring of natural light over what Bazin condemned as the 'plastic compositions' (1971a: 65) of studio lighting. It was reinforced by editing which sought to minimise the manipulation of time and space by cutting as little as possible and by aiming towards a cinematic equivalent of real-time in which, according to Bazin, every shot 'must now respect the actual duration of the event' (ibid.).

These characteristics have long underpinned the recognition of neorealism as a particular visual form of cinema which Angela Dalle Vacche has contextualised within the larger tendency of Italian culture as a whole to downplay the verbal and the written (1992: 5). This tendency is demonstrated in the neorealist practice of dubbing the soundtrack in post-production and in the deprioritisation of elements such as script, dialogue and literary sources which are central to other cinemas, especially Hollywood. Because the dubbing of films had been compulsory under the fascist regime, most neorealist films were shot without sound and all dialogue was added to the image track after the fact. This had an anti-realist effect, dislocating the original sound and image but, as in the case of *Rome, Open City*, Italian filmmakers had become quite expert in the technique by the 1940s and, in most cases, any loss of realism due to dubbing was compensated for by the distinctive mobility and expanded field of view which relatively lightweight silent film cameras afforded the cinematographer.

Neorealist films therefore distinguished themselves in their interest in the visualisation of the ordinary events and environments of Italian life. Of course, most neorealist films, including those such as *Bicycle Thieves* for whom chance itself was a major theme, were underpinned by some classical narrative structure, following a line from initial stasis to exposition to struggle and resolution, but doing so without the dramatic urgency or storytelling efficiency of classical cinema, especially classical Hollywood, and in films such as *Paisà* or *Umberto* neorealism came close to dispensing with classical structure altogether. Both of these films contained a high degree of what David Bordwell has called 'narrative irresolution' (1993: 20) in so far as they resisted logically and emotionally satisfying narrative closure. Instead, neorealist films tended to focus on open-ended situations, especially the fleeting moments of encounter between human beings or between human beings and their environment which led the German film historian Siegfried Kracauer to cherish neorealism for its revelation of the

disjointed, haphazard and chance-based 'flow' (1997: 31) of modern life. This was partly the result of neorealism's relative de-prioritisation of literary sources and of the script. Although works of contemporary Italian literature such as Elio Vittorini's *Uomini e no* (*Men and No Men*, 1945), Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, 1947) and Cesare Pavese's *La luna e i falò* (*The Moon and the Bonfires*, 1950) were frequently described as 'neorealist' because they arose out of the same social and political conditions and dealt with many of the same themes of post-war, post-fascist Italy, neorealist cinema and literature actually had very little practical interaction. As with Zavattini's adaptation of *Bicycle Thieves* from Luigi Bartolini's novel (1946) or Visconti's adaptation of *La terra trema* from Giovanni Verga's *I Malavoglia* (1881), those scripts which did have literary sources were generally loose in their adaptation. The deprioritisation of narrative and literary sources signified a refusal of loyalty to the written word which was seen to restrict the potential of realism. Neorealist scripts were usually collaboratively produced by several contributors and left significant room for modification during shooting. While Luchino Visconti proposed that film must always give the 'impression of improvisation' (quoted in Armes: 1971: 187) even if it was not actually improvised, Cesare Zavattini professed a desire to jettison narrative altogether.

By extension, neorealist filmmakers refused to be tied by conventional approaches to acting and performance, instead employing non-professional actors and casting professional actors against type in order to revise the notion of acting as the performance of fictional roles by film stars. For Kracauer, who championed neorealism in his *Theory of Film*, first published in 1960, the playing of the lead roles by non-professionals in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D* produced an admirable 'documentary touch', while their anonymity countered cinematic stardom by focusing the viewer's attention on 'social patterns' rather than 'individual destinies' (1997: 99). In being untrained, performances by non-professionals carried a desirable raw authenticity of physique, behaviour and mannerism. In *La terra trema*, these were central to Visconti's casting of real Sicilian fishermen and villagers in his study of the impoverished community of Aci Trezza, and were underlined by the scripting of the film entirely in local dialect. Meanwhile, where neorealist films did employ professional actors these were often cast in such a way as to modify their established screen personae and thereby question traditional modes of performance. Massimo Girotti had been a wartime heart-throb in the romance *A Romantic Adventure* (*Una romantica avventura*, 1940) and the mythological epic *La Corona di ferro* (1941) before Visconti cast him in *Ossessione*, an antiestablishment drama of murder and adultery with homosexual overtones. Rossellini cast the comic actors Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi in tragic roles in *Rome, Open City*, and argued that, in any case, he was not interested in their stardom but only in the ways in which their peculiarly natural acting style allowed him to 'make contact with humanity' (see Rossellini 1946).

The search for authentic human experience and interaction was a central preoccupation of neorealist cinema from the outset, and, like neorealism's questioning of cinematic stardom, was no doubt partly informed by a reaction against the rhetorical insincerity and inhumanity of the fascist regime and its projection of the political 'stardom' of Mussolini. Against this, and in view of the traumatic experience of war and post-war hardship (both material and psychological), character became a subject in itself. Neorealist films often lacked narrative momentum and the determined heroic protagonist of classical cinema. Neorealist protagonists

were often hopelessly oppressed or deeply troubled and often victims of chance or fate which testified to the fragility and contingency of life in the aftermath of war – a stray bullet from a German gun in *Paisà*, the theft of a bicycle in *Bicycle Thieves*. The opportunity for serious exploration and a re-evaluation of Italian society which neorealism provided led to examinations of the nature of human existence on both the social and existential levels, and these levels were always intricately related. Naturally, earlier neorealist films demonstrated a greater concern for the immediate conditions of post-war, post-fascist Italy. Oppression, poverty, crime, unemployment, homelessness, class and power in Italian society were at the centre of all of the most important neorealist films from 1943 to 1948, a period generally identified as the crucible in which neorealism was formed and in which many of the most important films were made. But within this concern with material conditions, there was a variation between the preoccupation with morality of Rossellini and De Sica's films and the more political concerns of Visconti, De Santis and Germi. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, material concerns became gradually less central to neorealism, especially in the 1950s when, in an atmosphere of increasing economic stability and even abundance, the emphasis shifted to the question of spiritual rather than material lack. It is for this reason that the 1950s are often seen as a period of 'crisis' for neorealism in which it lost its artistic and ideological coherence and momentum, or even a period in which a fundamental 'break' with neorealism occurred, of which the first signs include Roberto Rossellini's *L'Amore* (1948), Fellini and Lattuada's *Variety Lights*, and Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amore*.

In truth, however, neorealism was always in crisis, even in 1945. This book is structured in such a way as to recognise an *evolution* in neorealism from the 1940s to the following decade, rather than a break. As will be argued in the following chapters, the formal characteristics of neorealism in the 1950s demonstrated both continuity and change: location filming and loose narrative remained central; non-professional actors were still used, though with decreasing frequency after *Umberto D*; visual austerity prevailed, though certain films such as Visconti's *Senso* seemed to undermine it. Neorealism became increasingly self-conscious, giving way to a modernist experimentation increasingly skeptical of the truth of images of 'the real' and tending toward greater degrees of abstraction and interiorised philosophical enquiry. As will be suggested in chapter five, perhaps no single film epitomised this tendency more than Fellini's *The Nights of Cabiria*.

Metaphysical issues of morality, interpersonal communication, guilt and responsibility were prominent in Rossellini's immediately post-war films and were further examined, albeit with greater and greater degrees of formal experimentation, in his films of the 1950s: *Francesca*, *God's Jester (Francesco, giullare di Dio, 1950)*, *The Machine to Kill Bad People (La macchina ammazzacattivi, 1952)*, *Europa '51 (1952)*, and *Journey to Italy*. Most neorealist films focused on contemporary Italy to such an extent that when Visconti's *Senso* emerged in 1954, its historical setting during the mid-nineteenth century emergence of Italy as a nation-state (the period known as the Risorgimento) was taken by many as evidence of a break with neorealism even though *Rome, Open City* and *Paisà* were already historical films in a broad sense, if set in the much more recent past. Similarly the evolution of the work of De Sica and Zavattini after *Bicycle Thieves* is one of continuity despite the elements of fantasy which are worked into the neorealism of *Miracle in Milan* and the return to an extremely austere form of neorealism immediately afterwards in *Umberto D*. In other words, what began immediately after the war as a way of thinking about the war and its material, psychic and social

consequences gradually evolved into a way of thinking about the material, psychic and social character of peacetime society, especially in relation to urban modernity which became the default mode of existence for more and more Italians as the 1950s progressed.

As will be argued throughout this book, one of the most important continuous concerns of neorealist cinema was with the city and with the processes of modernisation – for example post-war reconstruction, industrialisation, secularisation and rural-to-urban migration – which the city was the clearest expression. On the one hand, the numerous neorealist films set in rural Italy present a range of spaces from near-wilderness (*Stromboli*) to agricultural community (*Bitter Rice*) to the small town (*In the Name of the Law*) in which each type of space bears a distinctive relationship of proximity to or remoteness from the modernising processes at play in the nation as a whole. In many such films, the city as such is missing from the *mise-en-scène* but it is present as a ‘structuring absence’, as an offscreen space from which characters depart or from which they arrive in ways which have decisive effects on rural space and the events which take place within it. On the other hand, the numerous neorealist films set in urban space, from *Rome, Open City* to *The Nights of Cabiria*, anticipate and represent much more directly the modernising processes at the heart of the city which would come to define the fabric of life for a majority of Italians in the decades after World War Two and which would come to connect Italy to the increasingly globalised economic and cultural realities of the post-war era. As will be suggested throughout the book, but especially in chapter three, neorealist films set in urban space, precisely because of their urban setting, would speak more powerfully than their rural counterparts to the Italian and international experience of war as a cataclysm of physical destruction and rebuilding – a cataclysm which could not fail to achieve more convincing and resonant form in densely-built and populated urban spaces than in the immutable and timeless spaces of the countryside. Indeed, in this sense the war itself, and the fascist aggression which provoked it, had been a product of the failings of a new kind of urban industrial modernity which had emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century. Neorealist films set in urban space were deeply preoccupied with the iconography, social make-up, phenomenological experience and widespread influence of the city: as a physical space with distinctive sights and sounds; as a lived environment in which the struggle for food or work was particularly intense; as a mental concept supposed to signify human achievement and progress but, often in neorealist films, represented by little more than wastelands and ruins; and, with Italy’s gradual economic recovery after the war, as an engine of modernisation whose economic power and infrastructural networks reached ever deeper into the rural hinterland through both overt and subliminal forms of urbanisation.

Therefore, the organisation of ideas in this book as a whole, and the selection of six films for close analysis – *Ossessione*, *Rome, Open City*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Cronaca di un amore*, *Journey to Italy* and *The Nights of Cabiria* – reflects the conviction that an understanding of the Italian city, urbanisation and its representation is the key to the understanding of neorealism. In the following chapters we shall attempt to trace a history of neorealism in which urban images are never far from view while proposing that the historical evolution of neorealism in cinema, and of the utopian hopes, intellectual debates and political controversies which surrounded it, is tellingly reflected in the history of the post-war Italian city.

Influences on neorealism

Italian neorealism has always been both an Italian and an international phenomenon and neorealist films and filmmakers regularly drew on both Italian and foreign influences. The neorealist filmmakers of the 1940s and 1950s were among the most well-schooled in film history, capitalising on the proliferation of popular film culture and of film education in Italy during the 1930s, and drawing upon a wide range of cinematic precedents. In respect of neorealism's documentary-like preoccupation with the everyday life of a society, the Soviet montage school of the 1920s was not widely known but had a specialised influence, especially through the translation of Russian film theory by Umberto Barbaro and the teaching of Russian filmmaking techniques at the national film school, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (see Brunetta 2001: 167–74). More influential because they were more thoroughly part of the common culture were French cinema, especially the poetic realism of Jean Renoir and Marcel Carné, which enjoyed commercial success in Italy and provided some of the most important neorealist filmmakers with their first experiences of filmmaking, and Hollywood cinema, which, prior to its exclusion by the fascist authorities in 1938, enjoyed widespread popularity and a dominant position in the market.

Of all influences on neorealist cinema, none was more important than that of French cinema – especially the work of Renoir, Carné and René Clair, which was popular with Italian audiences in the 1930s and became even more so after 1938 when Hollywood films were no longer available in Italy. The aesthetics and ethics of their films were regularly cited as an inspiration for the rejuvenation of Italian cinema called for by Giuseppe De Santis, Marco Alicata, Antonio Pietrangeli and Umberto Barbaro in their critical writings for *Cinema* and *Bianco e nero* in the early 1940s (see Quaresima 1996). The French film industry provided important professional opportunities to neorealist filmmakers in their days as young apprentices to major French directors. De Sica and Rossellini readily acknowledged their admiration of the films of Clair, and Antonioni worked as an assistant on Carné's *Les visiteurs du soir* (1942). Visconti spent much of his early adulthood in France, gained his first professional experience working as an assistant to Renoir on *Une partie de campagne* (1936) and regularly cited the influence of 1930s French poetic realism on his own later work in cinema. Renoir's *Toni* (1935) provided a precursor of neorealism in its focus on working-class subjects, its downplaying of stardom and glamour and its location filming in the French provinces while Visconti's first feature, *Ossessione* – generally recognised as the most important Italian forerunner of neorealism, if not itself the first neorealist film proper – drew heavily on the admiration for French cinema which Visconti shared with the film's scriptwriter Giuseppe De Santis.

Only American culture had a more widespread presence in Italy before World War Two. Italians cultivated a fascination with the United States due to America's status as a popular icon of urban modernity and Italy's important emigrant population in the US whose letters and remittances sent home to family in the old country were inspiring points of contact between continents. Italian appreciation of American cinema was widespread. The neorealists admired Hollywood directors from William Wyler and Frank Capra to John Ford and King Vidor, both

realist and epic in their cinematic visions. In the 1930s, Italian audiences were drawn to the realism and modernity of the American gangster film, and to escapist American movies including those of popular icons such as Mickey Mouse, and Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). According to Pierre Sorlin, during the period 1930 to 1935, US film accounted for sixty to seventy per cent of total box-office revenue in Italy while Italian film amounted to a relatively small 15–17 per cent (1996: 56). Faced with this reality, the fascist regime was ambivalent. At the end of the 1920s, the playwright Luigi Pirandello, a fascist sympathiser, declared his hostility to the coming of sound cinema as the manifestation of vulgar American popular culture which was antithetical to theatre and art. Mussolini, however, pragmatically tolerated the prominence of Hollywood, at least partly in recognition of the Italian emigrant connection. But that tolerance would run out in 1938 when, under the new doctrine of national self-sufficiency known as 'autarchy', the regime unilaterally assumed responsibility for the distribution of all imported films, effectively freezing the Hollywood studios and their films out of Italy until 1944. For James Hay, the 'essentialism and imperialism' (1987: 60) which dominated Italian political life in the 1920s and 1930s can be seen, in part, as a reaction to Americanisation among conservative groups in Italian society.

For many Italian writers, meanwhile, American culture provided a surrogate culture of resistance to fascism. Writers such as Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini favored American authors of realist or naturalist leanings such as Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner and John Dos Passos. Moravia translated Ernest Hemingway and others into Italian, and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) was adapted by De Santis and Visconti to become the film *Ossessione* in 1943, though the book itself was not published in Italian until 1945. This socially-oriented literature, much of it compiled in Vittorini's influential anthology, *Americana* (1941), remained popular in Italy despite the restrictive cultural and political climate of the fascist regime. American literature grated against the ultra-nationalism of official literary figures such as Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938), the writer and soldier whose Nietzschean romanticism, super-masculine iconography and virulent antiliberal, anti-communist politics were beloved of the fascists. This is not to say that America was idealised – rather it was seen, as Pavese put it, as 'a sort of great laboratory' (quoted in Liehm 1984: 36) which exemplified the latest political, cultural and economic and social trends in modern urban society in a way which was exciting if also somewhat disturbing. In 1935, Mario Soldati became one of the most important commentators on the ambivalent myth of America through his book *America primo amore* (*America: First Love*, 1935), which provided a detailed account of his experiences of the energy and diversity of American culture and society during two years he spent working and completing a fellowship at Columbia University in New York. In his characterisation, the United States functioned as a symbolic counterweight to the dominant nationalist mythology and imposed social order of the fascist era.

But if American literature and, to a certain extent, American film provided a realist counterweight to the mythologising tendencies of fascism, realist tendencies had been established in Italy much earlier. Indeed, Italy can be said to have been the birthplace of the realist representation which dominated Western art, in the sense of perspective and figuration, from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century. Italian cinema, from its earliest days, was constituted by a tension between a dominant spectacular and a minor realist tendency which Angela Dalle Vacche has explained in terms of the opposing Italian cultural traditions of open

and of the *commedia dell'arte* – the former heroic, legendary and statuesque, and the latter like neorealism, concerned with small-scale realities, and human, everyday interactions and environments (1992: 3–5). The dominant tendency of Italian cinema prior to the advent of the fascists in 1922 was towards technically-sophisticated and lavish melodrama and historical epic of the type provided by films from *The Taking of Rome* (director unknown, 1905), *The Fall of Troy* (*La caduta di Troia*, 1910) and *Agnes Visconti* (1910) to *Cabiria* (1912) and *Quo Vadis?* (1914). But this tendency was met by an important, if minor, strain of documentary style realism which flourished in *Assunta Spina* (1915) and *Sperduti nel buio* (1914) as well as in the films of Elvira Notari, *A santa notte* and *È piccerella* (both 1922), which were often filmed on location with non-professional actors in working-class environments and which achieved critical recognition after World War Two when Italian and French film historians such as Umberto Barbaro and Georges Sadoul pointed to them as important antecedents of neorealism.

However, while signs of early Italian cinema, as well as French and American film and literature, could be seen throughout neorealism, nothing influenced it more deeply than the social and political regime of fascism from which it emerged and against which it was formed both ideologically and artistically.

Italian cinema under fascism

From its inception in 1922 until the end of that decade, the fascist regime was only remotely involved in the Italian film industry, assuming that film production was best handled by private interests seeking to emulate the commercially-oriented entertainment model of Hollywood. However, this approach proved unsustainable. From a dominant position in international cinema prior to World War One, competition from Hollywood, France and Germany increased, production companies and Italy's famous star system (*divismo*) became unprofitable, the industry fell behind international standards in equipment and training, and Italian films lost foreign market share, especially with the coming of sound. Overall feature film production fell from 371 films in 1920 to 8 in 1930. Studios in Milan and Turin were abandoned, production in Naples declined, and Rome remained the only area of continuing feature production, most carried out by small, independent companies (see Sorlin 1996: 53). With the exception of Italy's one major film distributor-exhibitor, Stefano Pittaluga, and the studio Cines, Italy's feature film industry was in dire straits.

However, the fascist regime had quickly realised the usefulness of documentary film in building and maintaining political power. In 1926, it had founded L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE) which produced large volumes of documentaries and newsreels emphasising Italy's economic, industrial and cultural progress and making the image of Mussolini ubiquitous in Italian society. In 1929, when the regime consolidated its power by declaring Italy a one-party state, it launched the Ente nazionale per la cinematografia to give greater coordination to the film industry in response to its economic crisis and to provide Italy with a vibrant and modern film industry to rival those of other great powers. Subsequently, the fascist regime developed a sophisticated carrot-and-stick set of initiatives to foster Italian film production and then dramatically increased its control of the industry after 1936 just as it commenced its imperial wars in Africa and the Balkans, intervened in the Spanish Civil War on Franco's side, initiated the policy of economic and cultural autarchy, and formalised its long

standing alliance with Nazism. The desirability of fascist influence on all aspects of film culture, not just documentary, became clear and cinema was recognised by Mussolini as 'the most powerful weapon'. The regime's approach to film culture was to foster the production and consumption of Italian films within ideological and industrial parameters which, although not as rigorous as those applied by the Nazi regime to German cinema, were nonetheless carefully controlled and consonant with its agenda.

In 1932, the Mostra cinematografica di Venezia was inaugurated as an extension of the Venice Arts Festival, giving official cultural credibility to the medium. From 1933, Fascist party cinema youth clubs, the so-called Cine-GUF (Gioventù universitaria fascista), promoted film among the proliferating educated middle-class youth population. The founding of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in 1935, led by Luigi Chiarini, provided Italy with one of the world's most sophisticated film schools where students, including the future neorealists Rossellini, Antonioni, De Santis, Zampa and Germi, were exposed to the influences of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Arnheim and Balázs and to new critical debates about film. Italy's increasingly intellectual film culture was epitomised by the Centro's theoretically-oriented in-house journal *Bianco e Nero* (founded in 1937) and by *Cinema* (founded in 1936) which, despite being edited from 1938 by Vittorio Mussolini, provided young film critics, including Antonioni and De Santis, with early opportunities to publish their ideas. *Cinema* soon became known for its belief that cinema should display a commitment to the subject of contemporary Italian society and to the naturalistic aesthetic of *verismo*. As a new generation of filmmakers and critics was produced, feature-film production was also significantly boosted by the establishment of the state-of-the-art and state-funded Cinecittà studios, on the Via Tuscolana in Rome, which were opened to great fanfare by Mussolini in 1937 and presented as an Italian emulation of the Hollywood model and the epitome of Italy's dynamic urban modernity.

Meanwhile, other initiatives were undertaken which were more clearly aimed at controlling the character of Italian feature films. The Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia was founded in 1933 under Luigi Freddi, himself a fascist and adviser to the regime on cinema, who combined his experiences of visiting Hollywood with the advice of established filmmakers such as Mario Camerini, Alessandro Blasetti and Mario Soldati. Through the Direzione, steps were taken to limit the exhibition of foreign films by imposing taxes on their importation which could be channeled into domestic production, and requiring the dubbing of all foreign films into Italian, while selectively banning certain films, such as Jean Renoir's pacifist film *La Grande illusion* (1937), and funding others according to an official agenda, such as Carmine Gallone's militaristic Roman epic *Scipio Africanus* (1937). This kind of control was extended in 1935 with the Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC) which, thirteen years after the start of the fascist regime, established complete fascist control of the film industry. ENIC controlled all first-run film theatres (*prima visione*) in Italian cities, thereby accounting for eighty per cent of the total box office, and, despite the protests of exhibitors, took over all distribution of foreign films from the private sector in a move which forced the American studios Fox, Paramount, MGM and Warner Bros. to pull out of the Italian market by 1938. Cinema had become central to Italian fascism's political, economic and cultural agendas and its promotion of conservative social values. These values coincided with those of the Catholic Church, which arrived at an accommodation with the fascist regime in the 1929 Lateran Pact and which also sought to promote a patriarchal and sexually-conservative social order, including by means of its own network of cinemas which showed films approved by the Catholic Centre for Cinema (Centro

Cattolico Cinematografico) and publicised in its own film magazine *Cinematic Information*. Following these developments, film production in Italy rose substantially from ten to twenty films per year in the early 1930s to nearly 100 per year in the early 1940s (see Quaglini 1980: 245). An extensive programme of new cinema building was commenced, cinema audiences grew dramatically, and spending on cinemagoing as a proportion of overall consumer spending on entertainment rose, especially when the government fixed the price of cinema tickets against inflation.

The efforts of the fascist regime to influence the character of Italian feature-film production, distribution and exhibition transformed the Italian film industry into the fifth largest in the world by 1942. They fostered a cinema which was diverse in its formal strategies and thematic concerns but whose diversity was, for the most part, safely contained within ideological confines suitable to the regime. Historical epics and war films were the minority but were generally propagandistic in reinforcing the principles of national superiority, militarism and male heroism and female subservience which underpinned fascism. The most well-known film of this type, *Scipio Africanus*, epitomised the big-budget spectacular, overrun with excessively rhetorical and ornamental representations of classical architecture, costume and the Roman people as symbolic mass. Produced in the aftermath of Italy's invasion and conquest of Ethiopia in 1935, the film's publicity proposed that it was intended 'through a distant parallel of events and ideals' to express 'a fate through which after more than two thousand years Africa once again becomes the key of a new Mediterranean and Latin empire' (quoted in Aristarco 1996: 80). Contemporary newsreels associated Mussolini with the film and the public mind through the visits he made to the production during filming. *Scipio Africanus* was funded by the government with the largest budget to that date of any Italian film and achieved huge box-office success. Its bombast was replicated in other war films with a contemporary setting, such as Augusto Genina's *The White Squadron (Lo squadrone bianco)* (1936) which glorified Italian colonialism in Libya through an orientalisising representation of the desert landscape and through the heroic figure of the Italian officer, Captain Santelia. The film won the Mussolini Prize for Best Italian Film at Venice in 1936. Goffredo Alessandrini's *Luciano Serra pilota* (1938), part-scripted by a young Roberto Rossellini and produced by Vittorio Mussolini, likewise honoured the heroism of Italian air force pilots in combat in Africa.

Meanwhile, the films of Alessandro Blasetti, who had been instrumental in pushing for a rejuvenated film industry in the 1920s and would remain one of the most important figures in Italian cinema after World War Two, took a direction which was less aggressively rhetorical in style and more subtle in technique. A radical fascist and a filmmaker whose work was admired by Mussolini himself, Blasetti achieved critical success with the silent film *Sole* (1929) which presented a government-run land reclamation project for public housing at the Pontine marshes as evidence of fascism's positive modernising agenda. Much of *Sole* was filmed on location and Blasetti would become known as one of those filmmakers who employed realism as an aesthetic strategy in feature films in ways which contrasted with the artifice of *Scipio Africanus*. His masterpiece, *1860* (1934), presented the drama of Garibaldi's invasion of Sicily and the march of the one thousand which led to the formation of Italy during the Risorgimento. Though the film was a historical epic, it presented history through the extensive use of location filming, non-professional actors speaking in local dialect and scenes of peasant life and rural landscape, characteristics which some historians have taken as anticipating aspects of neorealist filmmaking practice in the post-war period. But its realism was

compromised by the heroic battle sequences which made up much of its action, its valorisation of a combative form of Italian patriotism, and its closing sequence which presented contemporary fascists and veterans of the Garibaldi campaign parading together in the Foro Mussolini. Blasetti's enlistment of realism in the fascist cause was also evident in *The Old Guard* (*Vecchia guardia*, 1935), whose drama commences just before Mussolini's 1922 march on Rome and revolves around skirmishes in a small town between local fascists and communists, the former presented as heroes and the latter as brutal thugs. *The Old Guard*, which was one of Hitler's favourite films, became the most infamous of a subgenre in the mid-1930s, including Giovacchino Forzano's *Black Shirt* (*Camicia nera*, 1933) and Giorgio Simonelli's *Dawn over the Sea* (*Aurora sul mare*, 1935), which strategically employed cinematic realism for its tendency to lend authenticity and truthfulness to its characters and subjects, but as a means of legitimising fascism.

Although Blasetti's films tempered the martial rhetoric of the most overtly propagandist historical epics and war films by emphasising the everyday life of working people in contemporary Italy, they nonetheless wore their fascist politics on their sleeve. As such, they constituted a minority tendency in Italian cinema, but one with a particular symbolic significance and rhetorical presence. Numerically, Italian feature-film production was dominated by escapist genres – costume dramas, musicals, melodramas and comedies. These did not explicitly endorse Italian nationalism, Italy's right to an empire, the rejection of parliamentary democracy, or the physical force ideals of fascism – indeed, most of them made no mention of fascism or war at all. However, they were nevertheless complicit with the agendas of the fascist regime. Among the most important were the popular comedies known as 'white telephone' films, the white telephone being a desirable luxury consumer item of the 1930s. Alessandrini's *The Private Secretary* (*La segretaria privata*, 1931), Genina's *Castles in the Air* (*Castelli in aria*, 1939), Max Neufeld's *Mille lire al mese* (1939) and other films of this type were well-made, cinematically stylish, studio-filmed productions, which contained gentle social satire but were very much endeared to the material wealth and comfort of the upper middle class and their social status, and to the luxury of their own *mise-en-scène*.

The comedies of Mario Camerini meanwhile injected the genre with notes of cinematic realism, at least in visual style – indeed, Camerini was arguably the most important of those filmmakers who demonstrated realist tendencies in the fascist era. His films were generally romantic comedies focusing on sympathetic lower-middle-class characters, often young lovers, and their dreams for self-improvement in modern urban society. From *The Rascals* (*Rotaie*, 1929) and *What Rascals Men Are!* (*Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, 1932) to *I'll Give You a Million* (*Darò un milione*, 1935) and *Il Signor Max* (1937), they were firmly contemporary in their representation of modern romance, the world of work and the excitement of the city environment. They contained mild elements of social critique in contrasting their protagonists with the pampered upper-middle class – a theme which, as James Hay has explained, was concentrated around certain social spaces such as the department store and the luxury hotel that symbolised social and economic ambition and the modernity and material abundance of Italy under fascism (1987: 37–40). Their contemporaneity was enhanced by their employment of visual realism in representing the modern Italian city – for example, the striking location filming of Milan in *What Rascals Men Are!* However, although Camerini was not a fascist, his films were ultimately compatible with fascist imperatives. Their mild social critique and elements of visual realism were generally made safe by their comedy and by the conservative

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