Between

Neorealism and Transmediality: A Migrating Narration

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Abstract

The lively debate on cinema, literature and the visual arts between the two wars fed into Italian Neorealism in an intertextual way, as emerges in Bazin's, Zavattini's and Deleuze's writings on Neorealism. The French philosopher observed how Neorealism breaks the sensory motor connection typical of classical cinema, thus paving the way for a cinema of pure optical situations. W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of 'the image as agent' exemplifies how neorealist movies possess a lasting iconic impact capable of affecting different medias, thus making new venues viable for innovative intertextual narrations. The present contribution analyses how this debate may be translated today in a multimedia theory that orients aesthetic choices and forms of reception in a globalized context.

Keywords

Neorealism; Narration; Transmediality; Screenplay; Reception

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From Media Convergence to Neorealism

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will get almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about. (Jenkins 2006:3)

By developing intuitions that are already embryonically present in McLuhan's mediacentric vision, through "media convergence" Henry Jenkins illustrates the effects on the market of different platforms which propose a broad range of multimedia contents, directed towards a given public. This public may be heterogeneous in its origins, in its social position and behavior, just as the products to which this public has access are also disparate. It is a clientele that , at the very moment when it expresses preference for one of these products over the others, adheres to fashion or tendencies that coagulate, even though fleetingly in a shared notion of taste; in this way the users / consumers also adopt a position, with greater or lesser awareness, as regards the events of their own time. If the product in question is a film, its market success coincides with the deployment of its communicative potential on an

eventual planetary scale[1]. This aspiration is supported by the fact that the film, the video and the respective variants reflect the "ontology" of the «person- produced universe» (Jameson 1992: 1) more effectively than would be the case in other forms of expression, connected to the written one.

> It would have to be an ontology of the visual, of being as the visible first and foremost, with the other senses draining off it; all the fights about power and desire have to take place here, between the mastery of the gaze and the illimitable richness of the visual object; it is ironic that the highest stage of civilization (thus far) has transformed human nature into this single protean sense. (*ibid.*: 1-2).

Underlining the fact that the supremacy of the visual involves not only a form of perception, Jameson cites Deleuze, who singles out the cinema as the synthesis of movement of the physical world and the image as a psychic reality. Thanks to the dialectic that revolves around the movement-image, the cinema becomes the «symptom of the novelty of an era, a novelty that, beginning with the aesthetic, ends up by involving the whole of ontology and philosophy» (Carbone 2016: 21).

«A film, an object we usually consider to be a self-sufficient work, possessing a narrative with its own mode of closure, is being created rather like a land – mine; to scatter on impact across as wide a topographical and semantic field as possible» (Elsaesser 1998: 156): the explosion of a mine, a programmed traumatic event having the greatest possible range of action, is an appropriate image for describing the operation that frames «transmedia storytelling, where film is the primary media» (Atkinson 2019: 15).

This is the framework and, together with it, the arrival point of the idea that lies behind this brief intervention, whose subject is not Neorealism, but the discourse of Neorealism. The intention is not a

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[1] See Broich – Pfister 1985.

historiographical one but a philological one in the Gramscian sense of the term: namely, one has to single out the «more general 'laws of tendency'» (Gramsci 1975: 1429; Gramsci 1971: 428) of the neorealist phenomenon in order to understand how the conditions in which it developed and its interpretations settle down into common sense, on which in the last analysis market dynamics intervene. In context, it can be hypothesized that, from a pervasive – and controversial – ideology, of the immediate post-war years in Italy, over a period of sixty years Neorealism was transformed into the iconic matrix of a media narration. This was capable of exploitation on the international circuit: by making use of the suggestions made by movie criticism, but also by refraining from expressing the nth value judgement on Neorealism, we are here postulating the existence of a neorealist discourse – in the Foucauldian meaning of the term – which has over time amplified the importance of the phenomenon, turning it into a myth and subsuming its crucial iconic elements in order to promote a transmedia storytelling that synthesizes and crosses through an entire «narrative ecosystem» (Benvenuti 2017: 7). In this sense, as a «complex cultural phenomenon integrating literature, journalism and cinema» (Balint Kovacs 2007: 253) Neorealism constitutes a perfect case study: the merger of different means of expression is, at one and the same time, the techné and the ideology that qualifies it, a meld which provided the basis for the choice of Vittorio De Sica's classic *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* (1990), Saverio Costanzo's *My Brilliant Friend* (2018)[2]; all are works which, in different ways, relate to the psychology of perception. Recently it has emerged that the discourse associated with Neorealism did not come to an end with Bazin's "resistance" reading and may instead be also linked up to the supersession of classical psychology such as conceived by Merleau-Ponty. This latter shifts the instrument of our sensory consciousness from *sensations*, the stimulus to the activation of the intelligence and of memory as ordering functions of experience, to *perceptions*, which instead apprehend a phenomenon *in its entirety*, through the senses. As he clarifies in his *Phenomenology of perception*,

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[2] *Ladri di biciclette*, *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* and *l'Amica Geniale* are the original titles.

Merleau-Ponty conceives a "movement" common to the various arts, including the cinema, that is capable of stimulating «the same type of attention and amazement […], the same will to grasp the sense of the world or of history at it is being born» (Carbone 2016: 26-27). In a nutshell, it is from these tendencies that there follows «the *non-mimetic* nature of film neorealism» (Carbone 2016: 39), a judgment that delocalizes the lively debate on the sense of Neorealism in the cinema, and, as a reflection of this, on the meaning of Neorealism. Carbone's line of research does not stop at the formal aspect, and implicitly gives the lie to the idea of «An Aesthetic of Reality [which] constructs Bazin's account of neorealism» (Fabbri 2015: 184), a cornerstone in the reconstruction in a sociopolitical perspective of Neorealism as a faithful mirror of the Italy of the immediate post-war years. Lorenzo Fabbri makes a similar charge, meticulously documented and forcefully argued, against a vision of Neorealism that is reduced to the myth of the resistance, a vision that as the years passed ended up by hindering a critical revisiting of the collusion of Italy with fascism: as urgent as it was lacking, this would also include the cultural sphere. Alan O'Leary and Catherine O'Rawe (2011) arrive at suggesting a moratorium on the use of the very term Neorealism; this provocation of theirs is accompanied by the claim for an Italian cinema that was not to be monopolized in an élite sense by Neorealism at the expense of other traditional genres such as the melodrama, the «commedia all'italiana» or the detective movie. A reasoned assertion against the veritable consecration – by conformist academic criticism under the aegis of the Italian Communist Party – of Neorealism as the national film canon, as the ambassador of Italian values in the world runs as such «While Vittorio De Sica's shoe shiners conquered the entire world, while Roberto Rossellini and Giuseppe De Santis were presented in American salons as "Open City" and "Bitter Rice", while – that is – neorealismo determined and defined the film image of Italy in the US and it is for this reason that since then the US market has accepted only those Italian films that recall that period and that style: *Nuovo cinema paradiso*,

Mediterraneo, Il postino, La vita è bella and so on» (O'Leary – O'Rawe 2011: 112)[3].

Della Casa not only took note of the irresistible rise of Neorealism to the rank of the national cinema but also observed how, thanks to the recognition afforded by the Anglophone academy, the neorealist paradigm oriented not only the taste of the habitués of the cinema clubs, but also, even if only by emulation, that of the wider public. Even now when Neorealism is anthologized in the histories of the cinema, various Italian producers and directors try to benefit from the extraordinary sounding box provided by Hollywood and, more or less consciously, go back to neorealist style elements in order to satisfy the constant thirst for an orientalist Italy, on the part of the United States audiences and on that of the mass of world-wide spectators. O'Leary and O'Rawe also propose afresh the question of the simultaneous presence within the neorealist galaxy of a popular and élite use, in other words the possibility of tracing within a work of entertainment a vision of the world and assigning a pedagogical role to it which a certain critical tendency obstinately denies. Precisely the problematics of the neorealist discourse accentuate its «monstrous, in the sense of prodigious» and, at the same time, unresolved nature (Parigi 2014 :8). These are factors that contribute to the culturally and economically profitable metamorphic longevity of the phenomenon, in which it is exactly «the catalogue of icons, objects, physiognomies, landscapes which, albeit difficult to define, are nevertheless immediately recognizable, are deployed in an easily identifiable series, and are disseminated in time and space. We are dealing with three linked profiles which are grafted onto each other, involving different perspectives of analysis: history (of the cinema and the nation), theory of forms, and social, cultural and visual studies» (*ibid*.).

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[3] See also Della Casa 2001: 5.

Fig. 1. *Bicycle Thieves*

In Stefania Parigi's diagnosis, following on the lasting neorealist divergence between poetics and theory even after the end of the neorealist decade, one may reasonably hypothesize that it is precisely hybridization as a factor of identity – an evident oxymoron – that makes Neorealism the meeting point for a differentiated use, never in any case related to the real and presupposing to reflect it, but having instead recourse to symbolic practices.

Thanks to the contribution of Zavattini, with De Sica Neorealism had already gone through various aspects of "media convergence" and was developing in a transmedial direction, starting from the tried-and-tested adaptation of the literary text to the screenplay. At a distance of forty years Tornatore added his own value to what in the meantime had been confirmed as part of the neorealist iconic heritage for drawing up his personal account-sheet of Italy in the 1980s; and lastly similar stylistic elements are re-proposed as a distinctive and recognizable code in Elena Ferrante, the premise for television serialization. Starting from dissemination between literature, a historical perspective is adopted which, from the globalized present looks back to the past to define the formal constants of a neorealism that migrates through different eras, modes and sensitivities.

Neorealism and traveling theory

Like people in flesh and blood, theories too travel, from one situation to another, from one era to the next; this is an empirical observation, the critical approach whose notably dialectical nature is underlined by Edward Said. This postulate of his does not however represent a smooth unhindered path for migration:

> such a movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessary involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origins. This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation and commerce of theories and ideas. […] there is a set of conditions – call them conditions of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. (Said 1983: 226-227)

If the neorealist discourse worked as a traveling theory, the weather-vane for this theory would coincide with the asymptotic nature of the neorealist parabola, the desire to transcend the technical limits of cinematography, in the conviction that the real hurdle to overcome for an adequate representation of reality in the last analysis coincides with the institution of the cinema and its productive apparatus. The neorealist paradox is seated precisely in the spasmodic research for the «coincidence between the character and the actor, between the person and the character, between essence and appearance, between substance and form» (Parigi 2014: 73), an operation in which the elimination of all camouflaging filters between us and *actual* reality could – if not even *should* – also include the film camera.

While aware of not being able to realize such a radical utopia, albeit with various tones and differentiations, public voice was given it by both André Bazin and Cesare Zavattini: «To achieve realism, one has to be concerned with making cinema the asymptote of reality 'in order that life might in this perfect mirror be visible poetry, be the self into which

the film finally changes it'»[4]. Surprisingly the "historic" critics of Neorealism enter into dialogue with Deleuze, although from the perspective of this latter there is no trace of the Platonic idealism and Christian ecumenicalism that had oriented his predecessors: both in the exegesis of Bazin and of Zavattini and in that of the poststructuralist philosopher, an iconological enquiry with ethical implications does however prevail: «Yet even in Deleuze's description of neorealism as the realm of idle time images, one can hear the silent ring of futurity. Deleuze's Cinema volumes, in fact, are not only a natural history, a taxonomy of images; they are also an axiology of life» (Fabbri 2015: 192). This is an outcome consistent with the vision of Zavattini's world considered in relation to film, in which the interpreters

> are no longer actors, the actor by now is finished for this type of cinema, but it is one of the aspects that may become normal for the profession of a man, the man who says 'I have a means on my hands allowing me to better acquaint myself with how things go, how the cinema goes, and I use it in a disciplined fashion, ready for any reproof, since we are dealing with understanding in the gesture, in the act of the word, in the repeated scene and the detachment that emerges indeed from repetition, a moment that reveals the significance of our presence in the world and more precisely in chronicle, in everyday life, in continuity. (Zavattini 2002: 713)

The quest for a revelatory moment, in Zavattini's view, finds its counterpart in the cinematography which opens towards a «more inclusive reality» in Kracauer:

> any film narrative should be edited in such a manner that it does not simply confine itself to implementing the intrigue but also turns away from it toward the objects represented so that they may appear in their suggestive indeterminacy. It follows […] that cinematic films evoke a reality more inclusive than the one they actually picture. They point beyond the physical world to the extent

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[4] Bazin 1967a: 82 (in Fabbri 2015: 192).

that the shots or combinations of shots from which they are built carry multiple meanings. (Kracauer 1979: 71)

A cinema constructed around objects (Gunert – Kimmich 2009: 13), around the observation of their surfaces, and not their interiors, is a choice that provocatively devalues the concept of interiority, giving rise to the problematics bound up with the body in a mechanized modernity, and stimulates the public to assume a role analogous to that of an eyewitness: «Cinema had literally to undo itself to become itself, had to abandon its putative specificity in order to get at what lay beyond it»[5]. But what lies "beyond" the cinema? The response in a nutshell is contained in the screenplay, which reworks an atypical realist text:

> Whoever robbed my bike, the light aluminium bike, five kilos of it, with the semi-new tyres, their inner tubes hardly punctured, just once in the front one and twice in the back one, the racing handle bars, the carrier basket, must be a young thief just out the other day from Rome's Regina Coeli prison. (Bartolini 1948: 11-12)

While Bartolini's short novel is not a masterpiece, after having been put in the shade by the eponymous movie, it has not deserved to be obliterated by the course of time. Its peculiar realist style[6] is to be found in a critical line in which one confronts the same themes that subsequently recur in the debate on Neorealism among the film historians. In this perspective, we were already witnessing in the interwar period the intensification of exchanges and fusions between heterogeneous environments, which shed doubt on that idea of a canonic literature, with frequent connotations of nationalism, which is associated with naturalism. The supersession of the expressionist and high modernist positions came about thanks to the convergence between media, beginning with the contact between prose and the cinema. The

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[5] Andrew 2009: 85 (in Schoonover 2012: 5).
[6] See Morreale 2008.

object of the novel is reality without the self. The completely independent reader, faced with an event that has its development, that has taken shape – it is up to that reader, not to the author, to judge. […] Given the enormous mass of reality that has been formed, representation requires a filmic style. The 'treasure of vision'[7] must flow with the greatest possible concision and precision. From language we must extract the highest degree of plasticity and vitality. The old narrative monotony is irrelevant to the novel: we do not recount, we construct. (Döblin 1994: 45)

Döblin's provocatory stance is not exhausted in the proposals for a rupture at the technical level. But takes in the sense of art in modernity, incapable of measuring itself against reality and transmitting a credible perception of it: film techniques are exalted as the remedy against sterile naturalistic conventions. The anguished appeal of the German novelist for a supersession of literary conformism chares the same asymptotic logic that guides Bazin's and Zavattini's positions, since in both cases the demand for an aesthetic appropriate for its times requires a literature and a cinema «which completely [revolutionize] the modes of production» (De Vincenti 2008: 26).

In bourgeois society, it is only with aestheticism that the full unfolding of the phenomenon of art became a fact, and it is to aestheticism that the historical avant-garde movements respond. The central category of 'artistic means' or 'procedures' can serve to illuminate this thesis. Through it, the artistic process of creation can be reconstructed as a process of rational choice between various techniques, the choice being made with reference to the effect that is to be attained. Such a reconstruction of artistic production not only presupposes a relatively high degree of rationality in artistic

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[7] "Die Darstellung erfordert bei der ungeheuren Menge des Goformten einen Kinostil. In höchster Gedrängtheit und Präzision het die Fülle der Gesichte vorbeizuziehen. Der Sprache das Außerste der Plastik und Lebendigkeit abzuringen" (Döblin 1913: 3). The expression "die Fülle der Gesichte" is a quote from Goethe's *Faust*.

production; it also presupposes that means are freely available, i.e., no longer part of a system of stylistic norms where, albeit in mediated form, social norms express themselves» (Bürger 2016:17)

Bürger does not mention the main antagonist of the avant-garde, the canon, and as the highway for renewal – meaning also ethical renewal – points to artistic technique, whose instruments are at the disposal of the artist according to a free rational choice, freed from the prescriptions of any school, or of any form of state authority. It is moreover by concentrating one's innovative efforts on technique and not on an abstract theorization that one arrives at the synthesis between different forms and artistic genres[8]. Against this background one understands the importance of the detailed description of the bicycle in Bartolini's novel as an example of the fascination for the technological object; neorealism in fact shares some of the founding principles of New Objectivity (*Die Neue Sachlichkeit*), beginning with the fascination for "the thing", which

> is not taken in by the senses, but thought as a concept [bearing] an intellectual status […] So many temperaments and different ways of thinking and seeing converge in New Objectivity. For the moment it is useful to define a new way of being, freeing us from an exorbitant subjectivity, helping us to find anew a sort of reality […]. (Michel 2002: 43)

As against the anti-objective and anti-figurative drives of the first twentieth-century avant-gardes, it was the requirement of objectivity that was dominant in the late expressionism of Weimar. «Naturalism contraposed to one's self. Objectivity of the interior vision […] There is nothing I detest so much as sentimentalism. I want to establish the facts

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[8] "The forces of Technology have the same effect on all borders, work like an eraser on the lines, make them disappear. This drive takes us into the boundless. […] The drive for extension is documented at the same time as the laying of endless railway tracks, telephone wires. These are newly awakened sense organs that know no boundaries" (Döblin, 2019: 42).

of life in such an intense and overwhelming manner that they cannot be expressed» (Beckmann 2002: 11-12). The new formal paradigm is the fruit of an intense dialogue between cinema and literature.

> Spiritual revolution, interior research, subjectivist delirium, cult (and crisis) of the self: doubt is soon shed on the cognitive frontiers indicated by expressionism and modernism by those who distrust psychology and bring man back to the materiality of the body, to the elementary automatism of gestures and instincts, a body crushed by the dis-human, perturbing inflexibility of objects and of the environment in which we live. (Bertoni 2007: 282)

The outcome of the lively debate on techniques of representation stimulates a dialectic of realism that unites the narration of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and the screenplay of *Bicycle Thieves*. In wandering, alienated, through the streets of Berlin, Franz Biberkopf shares various elements with the feverish search for the stolen bicycle, in Rome's markets and among her petty thieves, by Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani) and his son Bruno (Enzo Staiola). In both works, the relations between the individual and surrounding reality are constituent factors in modernity's notion of the citizen; the world and the person are presented as mutually open systems, while finally the metropolitan context reorients the forms of perception by applying Simmel's lesson to the cinema and the novel. We are not dealing with universal principles but with the precipitate of cinema praxis in dialogue with narratology. Both Biberkopf and Antonio in *Bicycle Thieves* propose

> the ordinary man, precipitated into everyday life. An individual, then, who is not exceptional, only normal, in whom the spectator may be reflected rather than identifying with. The singularity of this individual tends almost always to be projected within a community, with regard to which the person justifies their acts and feelings. (Parigi 2014: 74)

Even the endorsement of the goodness of an idea only after it has been subjected to the scrutiny of the collectivity confirms how, both in the construction of a naturalistic work like that of Döblin[9] and in neorealist poetics, technique is simultaneously the expression of the aesthetic and of the ethical requirement that lies at the base of the operation[10]. As Zavattini observes:

> Neorealism is always a process of non-differentiation, it aims at tracing common rights according to the needs of elementary life, and for this reason it is love of life […]. And, let us come to the 'way'. How, that is, can we express this reality in the cinema? I would like to repeat, here too, that a content that we want to express always finds its technique. And then there is imagination, on condition however that this is exercised in reality and not in a limbo. (Zavattini 2002: 744)

The faculty of the imagination firmly anchored to reality emphasizes how that axiology of existence is not a prerogative of Deleuze: Zavattini does not limit himself to asking, but *requires* the active participation of the spectator to a projectuality firmly anchored to the present.

> «As in the novel the aesthetic implicit in the cinema reveals itself in the narrative technique. […] The objectivism of the modern novel, by reducing the strictly grammatical aspect of its stylistics to a minimum, has laid bare the secret essence of style. Certain qualities of the language of Faulkner, Hemingway, or Malraux would certainly not come through in translation, but the essential quality of their styles would not suffer because their style is almost

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[9] "The naturalistic impulse initially asserts itself in the technical form. To be precise, it rises to the surface in the technical form" (DÖBLIN 1994: 175)

[10] Cf. BELTING 2001.

completely identical with their narrative technique». (Bazin 1971: 30-31)[11]

In the osmosis between neorealism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, paradigmatic of the intermedial nature that in the first half of the twentieth century grouped together literature, the figurative arts and cinema, the preeminence of technique stands out, the importance attributed to technique by all theorists and artists without exception. Through his reflection on movement-images Deleuze constructs an archeology of the cinema in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Bergson had already intuited by what means reality is fixed in snapshots, which attribute sense to reality itself, to become in this way our code of reality, by which «we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge […] Perception, intellection, language so proceed in general. Whether we would think becoming or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a sort of cinematograph inside us»[12].

Fig. 2. *Cinema Paradiso*

[11] In Italian Bazin 2019: 291.
[12] Bergson 1911: 306 (cited in Deleuze 2016: 6).

The cinematograph inside us for Bergson is a metaphor and, at the same time, a framework in which the celebrated movement-image is, to which Deleuze attributes the epoch-making role of dividing line between an "old realism" bound up with the motor senses and the neorealism which «is [instead] defined by this growth of purely optical situations (and sound ones, although at its beginnings synchronous sound did not exist)» (Deleuze 2017: 5). There has been much discussion of this caesura which involves not only the cinema as a device but, rather, reorients its praxis and, indirectly, also the function based on the Darstellung (on which he again comes close to Kracauer): expressed in other terms, the cinema, rather than explaining, must make one see.

A young Bazin, the future founder of *Cahiers du cinema*, in March 1945 invited Merleau-Ponty to give a lecture at the *Hautes Études Cinématographiques*, which Bazin directed. The text was then published under the title "Cinéma et psychologie": «There are great classic works which confront man from the outside as, at the same time, do the cinema, modern psychology, and the American novel» (Carbone 2019: 269)[13]. The French critic continues: «If the cinema, psychology and literature agree in expressing man from the outside, it is not a whim of fashion, it is a demand of the human condition that even classical art did not ignore»[14] (Carbone – Dalmasso – Franzini 2013: 25-27)[15]. To shift the perspective to the outside means first of all to make the character «a sort of spectator. He moves well, runs well, is agitated, the situation in which he finds himself goes well beyond his motor capacities, and makes him see and feel what cannot be theoretically justified by a response or an action» (Deleuze 2017: 5). The transformation of the character into a receptacle of feelings which then is left to the reader/spectator to decipher abolishes the distance between internal and external psychic and physical reality. The cinema forces the spectator to assume an inverted perspective

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[13] Translation modified.

[14] The text was published in *Les Temps Modernes* n° 26, 1947, under the title "Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie". (CARBONE 2017: 24)

[15] Cited in CARBONE 2019: 269t.; see CASETTI 2005.

because what appears on the screen has only a symptomatic value as compared with the real.

Referring to *Bicycle Thieves*, Bazin links the weaknesses of the screenplay to a vacillation of the possibility of a hermeneutic of the real: «the events are not necessarily signs of something, of a truth of which we are to be convinced: they all carry their own weight, their complete uniqueness, that ambiguity which characterizes any fact. So, if you do not have the eyes to see, you are free to attribute what happens to bad luck, or to chance» (Bazin 2011: 65)[16]. As well as Bazin, Zavattini too insisted on the fact that neorealism must constitute the "eye on the world" and Bartolini's novel, which inspired the film represents only «a stage, an aspiration to a rupture at that given moment [while] the cinema served to drive even literature to detach itself from its schemes of narration» (Zavattini 1979: 95). This neorealism, refractory as it was to any programming, as it was equally refractory to a rigid naturalistic temporal reading, meant to shape itself to the contingent and fortuitous element, since the plot negates the flow of daily life, which for Zavattini constituted the sustenance of the real. To the uncertainty to which the perspective of man from the outside arrived, Zavattini reacted by emphasizing his faith in the cinema as a machine, and, concurrently, a local prosthesis for lessening the distance between the observing subject and the world. Purged of all its spectacular lustre, from the screenplay to the plot, up to the actors and the scenography, what remains is the movie-camera, fetishized in the cinema of Dziga Vertov – although Zavattini does not mention him – in order to sanction a «visible perception [that] is already a cognitive act. Vision is thinking, just as thought is the visible»[17].

Summarizing the neorealist discourse it emerges that we find ourselves faced with a movement that, over time, has transformed into a plural sensitivity, or rather an «indiscipline» (Cometa 2020: 1), that has transited along barely perceptible trajectories as compared with other expressive environments, from literature to the cinema, from

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[16] In Italian Bazin 2019: 308.

[17] Arnheim 1974 (in Parigi 2006: 38).

photography to the constantly exploding field of the new visual arts. Intertextuality is inscribed in an ensemble that is not to be identified in a reduced corpus of texts[18], except by repressing a nature that is dialectical and "resistantial". The term "resistantial" is here to be understood not in the sense of a Manichaean and exclusive identification of Neorealism with the Resistance[19], a degenerate identification, beginning in the 1950s in a self-celebratory appropriation by the Italian Communist Party in order to construct a rhetoric which, in the long run, devalued the revolutionary drive embodied by the Italian antifascist resistance movement.

In a post-Bazin era «scholars have returned to Bazin after a period of comparative disinterest in his works and found his question, 'what is cinema?, to be relevant once again as the medium weathers an identity crisis in the aftermath of its centennial celebrations» (Schoonover 2012: 8). The reply to the question on the meaning of the cinema today emphasizes the centrality of the reception, that consideration for the user/spectator that constitutes the ethical substrate for the neorealist iconic turn.

> Alongside his famously bottom-up version of image production and democratic semantics, Bazin grants the viewer a top-down perspective. The sequestering of the ethical agent he describes is a familiar concept, and here we have it identified with the filmgoer. This is a reappropriation of many Western systems of justice, which seek out juridical authorities (justices, juries, tribunals) who are simultaneously within the community and outside it, agents who are not actors in a community but are charged with acting for the

[18] While taking note of what is designated the Andreotti Act of 1949 on the reorganization of the cinema industry, and of the 1952 occupation of the Experimental Cinema Centre (Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia) by governmental forces, as episodes in a general post-war restoration, it is reasonable to argue that the import of neorealism went beyond a taxonomic vision limited to the first generation of directors who may be ascribed to this tendency (see Fabbri 2015: 186).

[19] See Fabbri 2015; O'Leary – O'Rawe 2011.

community. Bazin makes the case that cinema's unique spatial and temporal parameters can nurture this type of observation and adjudication. Furthermore, he sees taking this vision to a global scale, and hence he expands the parameters of what we think of as ethical community. (Schoonover 2012 :7).

One is then dealing with re-reading the neorealist film as a critical elaboration of reality, a reading that cannot give up on a reflection on the expressive means (Parigi 2014: 287), taking account of the fact that if we identify with a genre more than with a corpus of texts[20], «already in its terminological constitution itself, neorealism seems to put in close-up the relation between the old and the new. The entire lexis that it uses in the attempt to give itself an identity presents this double nature, this ambiguous oscillation between present and past» (*ibid.*: 304).
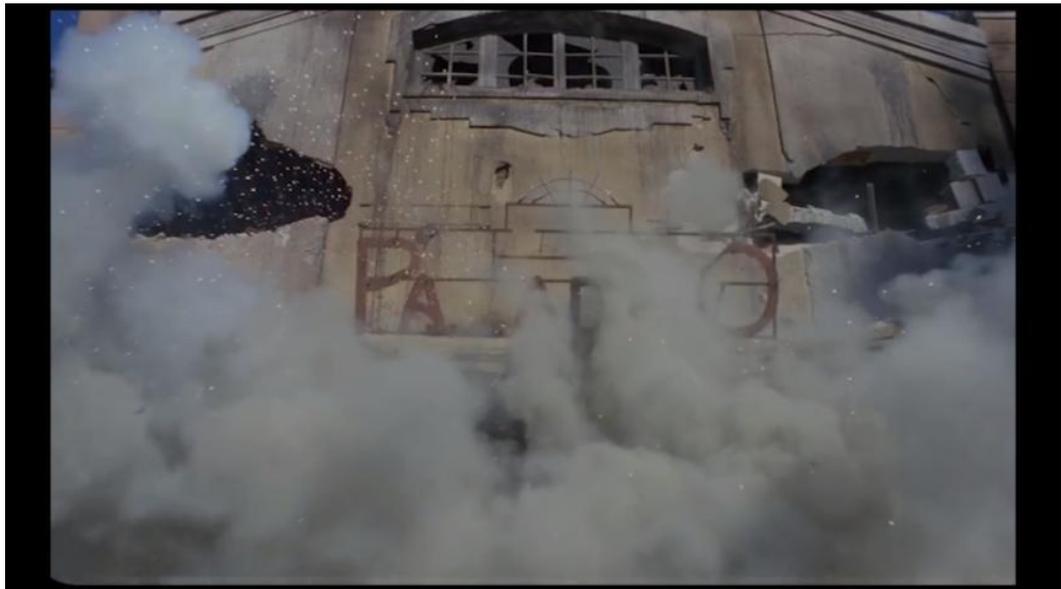
Fig. 3. *Cinema Paradiso*

[20] Within the limits of competence and space, this revisitation of the neorealist discourse refers mainly to the idea of the movement as an "ethic of the aesthetic" (see Miccichè 1999), while granting undoubted anthropological and historiographical merits to other lines of research that are more typologically oriented (see Farassino 1989).

And, in effect, neorealism plays on this ambivalence, criticizing the productive mechanism of the film industry and, simultaneously surprising us – as a neorealist discourse – exactly in the invention of new film styles, that are important even against the background of the current mediatic convergence (Forgacs 2008: 47).

The neorealist discourse between awareness and brand

In many ways, the ambivalent but at the same time technically *centrifugal* discourse of neorealism, a compendium of its theatrical, literary and, obviously, filmic components anticipates multimediality.

> If we give the same meaning to both occurrences of 'media' in the expression 'multimedia media' we get something as difficult to conceive of as a set that is a member of itself, which is a well-known paradox in logic. But people have no trouble understanding the expression 'multimedia media', because they spontaneously interpret the two uses of media differently – the first (in multimedia) in a semiotic sense and the second (in media) in a technological or cultural sense. (Ryan 2014: 26).

Alice Bell and Marie Laure Ryan do not need to clarify what multimediality consists of, in that the phenomenon is already common knowledge in their field: it has already for some time been metabolized at the global level. The problem that they pose regards the meeting between semiosis and technology[21], in other words, what type of narration can originate from the indispensable condition of the technology being used.

> The question of fiction, long taken for granted, suddenly becomes worthy of attention. It also means the rehabilitation of the question of truth and reference with respect to fiction, a question that was either undecidable, heretical, or too easily resolved in a

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[21] See Murray 2017.

one-world model. […] we can interpret statements made in language with respect to various fields of reference or universes of discourse. If we call these fields 'worlds' the statement presupposes the existence of multiple worlds with respect to which the truth of propositions can be evaluated. (Bell – Ryan 2019: 2-3).

In the techniques used and the discourse that informs them, two works such as Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* and Saverio Costanzo's *My Brilliant Friend* prefigure what Bell and Ryan presuppose, namely an "*Unwelt*", or an innovative ecology of the media, a new synthesis between gaze, images[22] and media devices (Cometa 2020: 293).

Bicycle Thieves invites us to rethink the opposition high culture versus mass culture in such a way that the emphasis on evaluation to which it has traditionally given rise – the binary system of value which distinguishes between popular culture as more authentic and high culture as autonomous and, therefore, utterly incomparable to a simplistic mass culture, does not hold true.

This is precisely the point on which *Bicycle Thieves* meets Giuseppe Tornatore's *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (*Cinema Paradiso* in English). Tornatore's Academy award-winning movie evokes remembering, childhood and adolescence, an intense sensory experience through film, once again with a focus on the fabulous Neorealist decade, seen through the eyes of another child – after Bruno –, Toto, the protagonist, who falls in love with cinema and forms a bond with the projectionist of the theatre, Alfredo (Philip Noiret). Alfredo, who works at the Nuovo Cinema Paradiso, becomes a father figure to the boy, and teaches him about the cinema. We see the progression of cinema, with Toto eventually becoming filmmaker himself and, at the same time, an unconscious translator of that American way of life epitomized by Hollywood, which already in 1943 had lured his fellow citizens.

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[22] See Freedberg 1989.

Fig. 4. *My Brilliant Friend*

Italy in 1990 had little in common with the war ruins and rubble from the late 1940s. Lastly, the Southern problem remains unresolved and Toto, who, as a Sicilian makes a career in Northern Italy, dramatizes this issue as he gets back home as member of that new urban class well on the road to becoming the dominant section in Italian society. The talk on the phone between Salvatore (Tore) and the love of his youth Elena show how lost love and romantic dreams do not come true, making obvious the gap between what could have been and what has really happened. Tore has thwarted his adolescence and youth, cutting ties with his family in exchange for fame and fortune. His transition from Cinema Paradiso's movie projector to his own activity as professional movie maker epitomizes the meaning of Italian modern history according to Tornatore: the country has not worked through its past in order to come to terms with its present and the related cultural contradictions. But the final explosion of the old building hosting the Cinema Paradiso – reminiscent of the close of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* – tells also another story. This story could be narrated through a bottom- up approach, such as in Edward Branigan's *Narrative Comprehension*, «that analyses local strategies of subjective representation in order to arrive at the global structure of a given narrative» (Ryan – Thon 2014: 69) but also in more philological and

conventional forms (e.g. in Genette's palimpsest) and in this case we can easily detect that a "media convergence" as conceived by Jenkins (Jenkins 2006) had already taken place with both De Sica, and Tornatore, the latter one telling the same story as first, rather focusing, in his case, on the mimetic qualities of the cinematic medium.

De Sica is explicitly indebted to photojournalism and a school of cinema which imagined new forms of producing the event shooting outdoor, thus adopting new categories of temporality and causality, which also preside over what will come to be thought as reality. Indeed, such narratives must eventually produce both the reference and the referent of the real, of the 'objective' or 'external' world, which may undergo decisive modifications in other modes of production. At the same time, the realism that De Sica and Tornatore share must cancel while producing, and at an outer limit must seek to cancel itself as fiction in the first place. There is no better example of this procedure than the dialogue between Alfredo and Toto as a child, as the experienced projectionist cuts sections of the film – those which feature kisses or anything possibly related to erotism – acting as a narrator producing and sorting out stories for his storytelling. We should not forget that the façade of the building where Cinema Paradiso is located closely resembles that of a baroque church: religious and secular authorities compete for the souls of the local audience. After all, also in *Bicycle Thieves* Antonio got a job for putting up movie posters. The decade of neorealism is the perfect location and template for these epistemological experiments.

Why did a female author, Elena Ferrante, seeking recognition and fame end, with *My Brilliant Friend*, as a realist author instead of opting for some flamboyant version of postmodernism? The reason, once again, can be found in De Sica. There is a crowd in the background, but only a man and his male son in the centre. In scrutinizing Italian social history Paul Ginsborg notes: «there is [a] theme upon which I have tried to concentrate in particular. It is that of the relationship between family and society. Attachment to the family has probably been a more constant and less evanescent element in Italian popular consciousness than any other» (Ginsborg 1990: 2).

Ferrante needs to return to the foundational experience of the neorealist decade to validate a new gender perspective for interpreting a culture and a worldview which represent the stigma of the South. The two protagonists, Elena and Lila, experience through Don Achille a sense of the past, in which «the images of dark cellars and hidden spaces evoke an underworld where all is mysterious and frightening: Italy's dark past of fixed social classes, poverty, lack of opportunity, and abuse of power. When Lila deliberately throws Elena's doll through the grate of Don Achille's cellar, they are forced to descend in the hellish underworld to retrieve it. Ferrante spares no effort in conveying the little girls' terror» (Bullaro – Love 2016: 21). It is still the grim image of Neaples in the aftermath of World War Two. «I felt under the soil of my sandals objects that squeaked, glass, gravel, insects. All around were things not identifiable, dark masses, sharp or square or round. The faint light that pierced the darkness sometimes fell on something recognizable: the skeleton of a chair, the pole of a lamp… fruit boxes… I got scared by what seemed to be a soft face… those are moments which are stamped into memory. I am not sure, but I must have let out a cry of real terror… I continued to tremble and moan with fear» (Ferrante 2012: 55). «In Ferrante's Neapolitan novels the reader is offered the privilege of sharing the mental states, the interiority of those have lived this transformation» (Bullaro – Love 2016: 16).

Gianpiero Brunetta confers on Giuseppe Tornatore the "cinematographic citizenship" of "icononaut" and able, as such, to «assimilate all the syntactic and prosodic forms and to move at all levels of narration by image» (Brunetta 2020: 300-301). Tornatore deserves consideration as a global director since, beyond his undoubted iconic expertise (before becoming a director he was a skilled photographer), and as well as putting us on our guard against correlated risks, his movie anticipates the tendencies of the multimedia spectacle[23] in which the spectators, on the basis of their tastes, are called on to evaluate the correctness or adequacy of the "statements" which comprise the "work of fiction". In the main scene of *Cinema Paradiso* a stunned crowd

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[23] See Bartsch 2019: 179-200.

witnesses the demolition by dynamite of the building housing the cinema. That explosion not only brings to an end the reassuring and compensatory role played by so many films before a public that loved the place, but also heralds the end of the utopian drive «of the *expanded* cinema […], always involved in reflecting on how to fully develop its own possibilities, and for this reason intent on looking beyond its immediate horizons» (Somaini 2011; XVI). A reflection such as the one that characterizes canonic neorealism and culminates in the hypothesis of a cinema-symptom, and of a spectator *educated* to a "thinking vision" is to be excluded. Tornatore's and Costanzo's neorealism is a «second semiological system» (Barthes 1978: 197), a modern mythologeme within which «culture itself and its sphere and social function undergo radical and dialectic modifications from one historical moment to another» (Jameson 1992: 214); the *strategy* of these directors, active in different periods but both of them interpreters of that evolution that over the course of thirty years, has made a genre of neorealism. Various qualifying elements in this sense, from the setting in the Mezzogiorno through the landscapes, to the physiognomy of the characters and the photography converge in a textual synergy that is competitive on the world media market thanks in part to the aura of historical neorealism. «Neorealist cinema promoted a set of visual features on a transnational market and in global discourses. Its fame was due in part to them, which first struck contemporary viewers and then was enshrined in historical memory» (Pitassio 2019: 212). Neither *Cinema Paradiso* nor *My Brilliant Friend* have, nor aim at having, the same dramatic charge of Godard's *Histoires(s)*; however, in these productions, as in Godard's reflections, neorealism functions as a semantic substrate which «does not indicate the recognition of a movement, of a group, but is rather a stylistic label associated with a certain number of values» (Schifano 2008: 216).

In particular Costanzo and the author – or the consortium of authors – known as Elena Ferrante are well aware of the close relationship between image and value. The serial saga of *My Brilliant Friend* calls neorealism into question indirectly, and avoids proposing afresh the nth documentary on post-war Italy and the related sensitivity: «What is at stake, then, is not some proposition about the organic unity

[of that period] but rather a hypothesis about the rhythm and dynamics of that fundamental situation» (Jameson 1988:179). The outcome is a narration strongly imprinted with the characteristics of television, which gives pride of place to rhythm rather than to the continuity of the historicist approach, and one that entrusts itself to image more than to acting, drawing on an ideal neorealist archive that, though without an apologetic intention, is effective as a consciousness of national identity. Elena Ferrante satisfies «the immediacy which characterizes television [such as] exemplified with great clarity by soap opera serials» (Bolter – Grusin 2003: 220) and constitutes the primary value of this communicative modality, on which the name of brand, crucial for the promotion of the television serial, depends. In the second place, albeit closely bound to the primary aspect, is the capacity to orient the production on the basis of the relationship between spectator and the media means: «to make the relationality of image and beholder the field of investigation. The idea is to make pictures less scrutable, less transparent: also to turn analysis of pictures towards questions of process affect, and to put into question the spectator position: what does the picture want from me or from 'us' or from 'them' or from whoever?» (Mitchell 2005: 49).

Placing the accent on the agency between user and media, Mitchell criticizes a *modus operandi* of «Media ecology» (Scolari 2019: 323), an emanation of «Transmedia commodification» (Kerchy 2019: 225). We cannot limit ourselves to the formal and organizational aspects of an initiative such as that of Elena Ferrante, as demonstrated by the militant feminist criticism of Grace Russo Bullaro. Faced with Jenkins's optimism on the hoped-for annulment[24] «of the distinction between producer and user, within a universe of widespread co-authorship and creativity» (Benvenuti 2017: 15), Mitchell observes that «vision and visual images, things that (to the novice) are apparently automatic, transparent, and natural, are actually symbolic constructions, like a language to be

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[24] «In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets told, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platform» (Jenkins 2006: 3).

learned, a system of codes that interposes an ideological veil between us and the world» (Mitchell 2005: 344).

Conceding that, with a limited sample and summary analysis such as the present one, it would not have great sense to draw up a balance-sheet of neorealism, I would argue that Mitchell's acute remarks are pertinent to the discursive analysis of neorealism beginning with the choice, among the various possible meanings of the lemma, of an «[attitude which] functions as a continually reactivated space of memory» (Parigi 2014: 335). Mitchell's reference to the spatial dimension of theory underlines this «new attitude towards reality» (Zavattini 2002: 741). «Consciousness [that] is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of that fact that no system of theory exhausts the situations out of which it emerges or to which it is transported» (Said 1983: 242). The resistance to theory as an effect of "traveling theory" is translated for neorealism into a scopic regime which, although maintaining it to be essential, transcends the technological basis of the phenomenon[25]. The dialectic between common sense and technological innovation, the «physiology of vision and the social and technological dimension of the devices» (Cometa 2020: 127) go, rather, in the direction formulated by Reinhart Koselleck of an "identity crisis" and a "culture of transition": «neorealist cinema marks a rupture from which a different way of articulating cinematic discourse and narrative emerged, the primacy of recording and representing over storytelling, which gave way to ambiguity and narrative indeterminacy and a new mode of film production» (Pitassio 2019: 18-19). From these elements there emerge the outlines of an innovative episteme, a productive contradiction and, with this, a cultural cypher for the nation of which neorealism is a metonym.

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[25] «Paying attention to mise-en-scène, narrative technique, acting, cinematography, and location, Wagstaff (Wagstaff 2007) ascertains that neorealist films abide by the laws of genre that govern conventional filmmaking» (Fabbri: 186).

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