

CORRENTI DELLA STORIA

ITALIAN CINEMA AND NEOREALISM

September's Correnti della Storia investigates Italian Cinema, in preparation for Il Cenacolo's event on September 23 at Cenacolista Lido Cantarutti's Italian Film Festival presentation in Marin. The essay looks at the early years of Italian cinema and the key films and people that played an important role in the development of this art form in Italy. After this introduction, the essay goes on to explore in depth what many consider to be the major genre of Italian cinema—Neorealism. The age of Neorealism begins after World War II and reaches its high point during the 1960s. But its influence on Italian and worldwide cinema continues down to the present day. Neorealism has been aptly called “the Golden Age of Italian Cinema.” Future essays will look in more detail at various people who were associated with this genre, especially actors and directors. In this essay, we will only touch very briefly on these same individuals and the role they played in the development of this important genre.

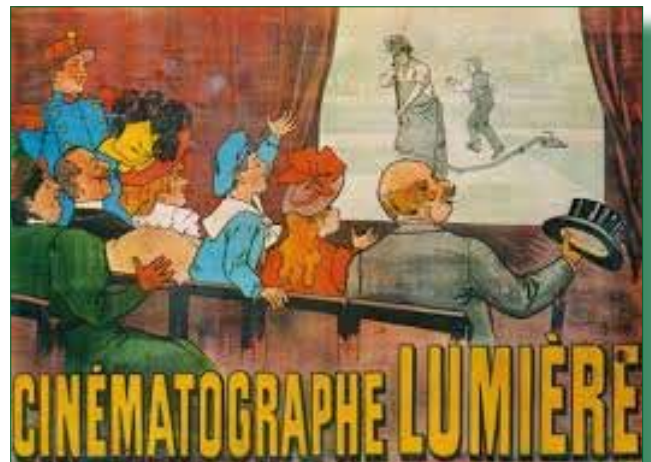
EARLY HISTORY OF ITALIAN CINEMA



The French Lumière brothers (*left*) began showing films in Italy in 1896. The first known Italian film was produced that year and records the visit of the Italian King and Queen in Florence. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, Lumière trainees were soon producing short films documenting everyday life and comic strips that were popular at the time. The commercial Italian film industry was led by three major organizations: Cines, based in Rome; and the Turin-based companies

Ambrosio Film and Itala Film. The first major film released commercially was Florentine Filoteo Alberini's historical film, *La Presa di Roma, 20 Settembre 1870 (The Capture of Rome, September 20, 1870)* released in 1905 by Cines. Other film companies soon followed both in Milan and in Naples. By 1908, these early companies had quickly attained a respectable production quality and were able to market their products both within Italy and abroad.

Early Italian films typically consisted of adaptations of books or stage plays, such as Mario Caserini's *Otello* (1906) and Arturo Ambrosio's 1908 adaptation of the novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*.



Also popular during this period were films about historical figures, such as Caserini's *Beatrice Cenci* (1909) and Ugo Falena's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1910). *L'Inferno*, produced by Milano Films in 1911, was the first full-length Italian feature film ever made. Popular early Italian actors were Emilio Ghione, Alberto Collo, Bartolomeo Pagano, Lyda Borelli (*right*), Ida Carloni Talli, and others.



Enrico Guazzone's 1913 film *Quo Vadis* was one of the earliest "blockbusters" in cinema history, utilizing thousands of extras and a lavish set design. Giovanni Pastrone's 1914 film *Cabiria* was an even larger production, requiring two years and a record budget to produce. Pastrone developed a number of innovations in this film: using dramatic settings derived from the tradition of grand opera; using numerous cameras to film the same scene from different angles instead of a fixed single camera (this then became the standard for film production worldwide); using a dolly or moving camera for the first time. Nino Martoglio's *Lost in Darkness*, also produced in 1914, documented life in the slums of Naples, and is considered a precursor to the Neorealist movement of the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, prior to the First World War in 1914, Italy was at the forefront of screenwriting and movie production. These silent films were originally historical, mythological or documentary in nature, but by 1910 the Italians began producing art films and comedies.

Between 1911 and 1919, Italy was home to the first avant-garde movement in cinema, inspired by the country's "Futurism" movement. The 1916 Manifesto of Futuristic Cinematography was signed by a number of Italian filmmakers. To the Futurists, cinema was an ideal art form since it was a fresh medium, and able to be manipulated by speed, special effects, and editing. Most of the futuristic-themed films of this period have been lost, but critics cite *Thaïs* (1917) by Anton Giulio Bragaglia as one of the most influential, serving as the main inspiration for German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s. Another important avant-garde classic was Mario Caserini's 1913 film, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which was a blockbuster that featured great visual effects for the time, and is regarded as the first disaster movie.

In 1914 society drama became popular with its melodramatic themes and passionate emotions. These films marked the birth of the Italian "femme fatale," and made stars of the actresses who played these roles. The genre gave rise to the popularity of the



lingering close-up shot, which was emulated throughout Europe. The most famous Italian diva of the time was Eleonora Duse, who, in 1923, became the first woman (and the first Italian) to be featured on the cover of the newly created *Time* magazine.

The burgeoning Italian film industry struggled against rising foreign competition in the years following the first World War. To counter this competition, several major studios, among them Cines and Ambrosio, formed the Unione Cinematografica Italiana (Italian Cinema Union) to coordinate a national strategy for film production. However, this effort was largely unsuccessful because of the wide disconnect between production and exhibition, i.e., some movies weren't released until several years after they had been produced.

Among the notable Italian films of the late silent era were Mario Camerini's *Rotaio* (1929) and Alessandro Blasetti's *Sun* (1929).

Sound came to Italian films in 1930 with Gennaro Righelli's *The Song of Love*, the first Italian sound film. This was followed by Blasetti's *Mother Earth* (1930) and *Resurrection* (1931), and Camerini's *Figaro and His Great Day* (1931). The advent of sound film led to stricter censorship from Mussolini's Fascist government.

During the 1930s, light comedies known as "*Telefoni Bianchi*" ("white telephone") were predominant in Italian cinema. These films, featuring lavish set designs, promoted conservative values and respect for authority, and thus typically avoided the scrutiny of the government censors. Important examples of *Telefoni Bianchi* include Guido Brignone's *Paradiso* (1932), Carlo Bragaglia's *O la Borsa o la Vita (Either the Bag or Your Life)* (1933), and Righelli's *Together in the Dark* (1935). Historical films, such as Blasetti's *1860* (1934) and Carmine Gallone's *Scipio Africanus: The Defeat of Hannibal* (1937), were also popular during the early 1930s.

While Italy's Fascist government provided financial support for the nation's film industry, it also engaged in censorship, and thus many Italian films produced in the late 1930s and early 1940s were propaganda films showing the benefits of living the "wonderful" life in Fascist Italy. The most important financial contribution of the Fascist government came in 1934 when the government created the Direzione Generale per le Cinematografia (General Directorate for Cinema), and appointed Luigi Freddi its director. With the approval of Mussolini, this directorate called for the establishment of a town southeast of Rome devoted exclusively to cinema, dubbed the "Cinecittà" (Cinema City). Built from scratch, it was completed in 1937.

The Cinecittà provided everything necessary for filmmaking: theaters, technical services, and even a cinematography school, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Experimental Center for Cinematography), for younger apprentices. The Cinecittà studios were Europe's most advanced production facilities, and greatly boosted the technical quality of Italian films. (Many films are still shot entirely in Cinecittà. Today it is the largest film studio in Europe, and is considered the hub of Italian cinema. During the 1950s, the number of international productions being made there led to Rome's being dubbed the "Hollywood on the Tiber.")



Also during the late 1930s, Mussolini's son, Vittorio (*right*), created a national production company and organized the work of noted authors, directors, and actors (including even some political opponents), thus creating an interesting communication network among them that produced several important artistic friendships and stimulated cultural interaction.

NEOREALISM

As World War II came to an end and Benito Mussolini's government fell, the Italian film industry lost its center. A new genre in Italian cinema began to develop. Neorealism, also known as the "Golden Age of Italian Cinema," was a sign of cultural change and social progress in Italy. The films presented contemporary stories and ideas that involved the lives of the poor and the working class. They were often shot in the streets and other outdoor locations, since the Cinecittà film studios had been damaged significantly during the war by Allied bombings. They frequently incorporated non-professional actors. The themes that Neorealist films explored were the difficult economic and moral conditions of post-World War II Italy, emphasizing changes in the Italian psyche and conditions of everyday life, including poverty, oppression, injustice and desperation.

Though the term "Neorealism" was first used to describe Luchino Visconti's 1943 film, *Ossessione*, there were several important precursors to the movement, most notably Camerini's *What Scoundrels Men Are!* (1932), which was the first Italian film shot entirely on location, and Blasetti's 1942 film, *Four Steps in the Clouds*.

Visconti adapted James M. Cain's 1934 novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* for his film *Ossessione*, a murder mystery released in 1943, while Italy was still under Fascist rule. The film angered Fascist officials because of the raw portrayal of Italian life under Fascist rule. Upon viewing the film, Vittorio Mussolini is reported to have shouted, "This is not Italy!" before storming out of the theater. The film was subsequently banned in the Fascist-controlled parts of Italy.

A second important film that established the genre and techniques of Neorealism was Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), which was released just months after the war's end. It dramatized the end of German occupation of Rome in 1944. Italians were portrayed as both victims and collaborators in the film, just as they were in real life.

Following these two films, up-and-coming director Vittorio de Sica scored two major successes to further the Neorealist movement. The first was *Shoeshine* (1946). This movie featured two young friends who were trying to survive minimally in post-WWII Italy. In the process of survival, they faced unjust imprisonment. This turned them into enemies and they soon came to personal ruin at the hands of cruel outside forces. As with all the major movies of the '40s and '50s, the film ended in tragedy.

Vittorio de Sica's second was *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). Not only is it considered by many to have been de Sica's best film, it is arguably the crowning achievement of the entire Neorealist movement. The story followed a father and son as their family came to ruin among throngs of desperate people in postwar Rome. This crushing tragedy not only boasted the artistic achievement of one of the most haunting final shots in film, but also contained images that made the best visual case for the Marshall Plan. *The Bicycle Thief* contained iconic shots of endless repositories that held pawned possessions. These images and others in the movie hauntingly depicted the plight of bombed-out Europe, a continent of people who were still buckling even after World War II had ended. *The Bicycle Thief* also embodied the bleak themes of the early Neorealist movement, namely, the failure of downtrodden people to work together and a vile world of adults corrupting children.



Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (*The Trembling Earth*) (1948) also highlighted the lack of cooperation among Italians by focusing on Sicilian fishermen—who spoke Sicilian, not Italian, in the film—making a life for themselves out of the plentiful bounty of the sea. A working-class family tried to free itself from the price-fixing of the local bosses, only to end up poorer than before thanks to an uneven playing field. Soon, the joys of small-town life got buried by oppressive entrapment and the protagonist realized that no amount of self-preservation would save him from poverty—it would require unity with others who are struggling.

Rossellini explored these ideas even further in *Germania Anno Zero* (*Germany, Year Zero*) (1948), which was set not in Rome nor Sicily, but in Berlin. The cast was composed of regular

people living among Berlin's rubble and offered the world a glimpse into the state of the city, still in ruins two and a half years after the war. In this tragic tale, Edmund, a well-meaning little boy, had an ailing father, and his schoolteacher, seeking to keep the Nazi ideology alive, convinced Edmund that poisoning his weak father would be the charitable thing to do. Things only got worse from there.

Films like *Germania Anno Zero* weren't made just to tell sad, honest stories; they were also made to inform audiences of the real issues people faced and thereby to inspire change. This was the point of Italian Neorealism: the backdrop in this case was Germany, but the story could take place anywhere. The themes of regular people fighting the brutal world around them make for universal stories that can reach the hearts of any audience in any time period.

While Neorealism exploded after the war, and was incredibly influential at the international level, Neorealist films made up only a small percentage of Italian films produced during this period, as postwar Italian moviegoers preferred



escapist comedies that built on Neorealist themes but added some comedic cynicism to the mix. Federico Fellini (*left*) moved Neorealism in this new direction. He took the cinematic world by storm with his work with actress Giulietta Masina in the films *La Strada (The Street)* (1954) and *Nights of Cabiria* (1957). These films were a notable departure from the dark nature of Neorealism since Fellini took serious topics and mixed in some comedy. Fellini followed Masina's characters, a naïve street performer in *La Strada* and a prostitute looking for love in *Nights of Cabiria*, through a world of ar-

rogant men who repeatedly thwarted or manipulated her goals for a better life. These films were also unique because they explored the cultural roots that led to Italian Fascism, specifically the destructive masculine impulses. By shining a light on the inhumanity of sexism, Fellini showed viewers that rebuilding Italy would mean more than just repairing its broken structures; it would have to amend its social structure as well.

As Italy entered the 1960s with confidence, its movies reflected this novel attitude in order to reach new heights of international popularity. Fellini reached a high point with his two best-known works: *La Dolce Vita (The Sweet Life)* (1960) and *8 ½* (1963). Both of these titles featured Marcello Mastroianni, who portrayed a womanizing journalist (*La Dolce Vita*) and a womanizing director (*8 ½*), probably representing Fellini himself. These were very unique

narratives. Many characters entered and exited at odd times, entire plot points picked up and ended without warning, and Mastroianni failed to arrive at any sort of settled relationship with the women in his life. But unlike the mainstream Neorealist films, neither movie ended in tragedy, but in ambiguity.

La Dolce Vita and *8 ½* were praised by international audiences, with directors like Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen taking lots of inspiration from them, and this was a clear turning point in the Neorealist movement. After all, crowds did not gravitate towards these films for their innovation, but really for their decadence. The shift from tragedy to ambiguity brought in an era of lighter films and showed how the grit of postwar Italy was eroding into glamor. There was good reason for that shift since Italy was experiencing the full benefits of aid from the Marshall Plan, successful democratic government in Italy, and economic integration, all of which were ushering in a new era of prosperity.

The early 1960s also began the first major comedies associated with this movement, all of which starred Marcello Mastroianni (*right*): *Divorce Italian Style* (1961); *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1963); and *Marriage Italian Style* (1964). The latter two had de Sica as the director and starred Sophia Loren as the female lead. Each of these films ridiculed Italy's sexist laws and attitudes, while also emulating absurdity and feminism from the French New Wave genre. These movies also had the characters do crazy things to match the crazy laws they were confronting. For example, when Mastroianni tried to get his wife to cheat on him (since divorce was illegal in Italy), Loren insisted she was constantly pregnant to exempt herself from getting arrested.



Further, Vittorio de Sica's *Two Women* (1960) inaugurated the "pink Neorealism" phase of the movement. Essentially, he and others filmed movies with Sophia Loren (*left*) and other actresses that looked at social issues in a comic light. *Two Women* bridged this gap in tone by featuring a mother and daughter persevering through the horrors of WWII in a film marked by heaviness like that in Neorealism's early films. Loren proved she was more than just another European sex symbol when she won the 1961 Academy Award for *Two Women*. (She was one of two Italian women to win the Best Actress award, the other being Anna Magnani in 1955 for *The Rose Tattoo*).

While these lighter films were certainly popular, the prolific Luchino Visconti believed that the movement was heading in the wrong direction, and decided that the only path that would usher in sobering authenticity was to go backwards. His 1963 masterpiece, *The Leopard*, based on Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel of the same name, told the tale of Italy's unification a century earlier through the eyes of Don Fabrizio, a Sicilian noble. Fabrizio embodied the titular animal. He was a regal beast who feared a united Italy, as it would mean losing his powers as a noble. So he scorned the rising bourgeois class whose members he saw as scavengers. Fabrizio's nephew shocked him by selling out his family name for a prime position in the new nation of Italy—a nation that rigs elections and executes dissenters—leaving the disheartened Don Fabrizio to take a step back and merely watch the world change around him. Everything changes and nothing changes, he reasoned.

With Italy's worst days now behind it, the key Neorealism titles of the '70s took stock of the past and what Italy had lost in its postwar recovery and modernization. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Decameron* (1971) was based on Boccaccio's famous literary work. It was set in Medieval Italy and featured the Neapolitan dialect, rather than common Italian. Pasolini bemoaned the loss of regional dialects which an improved school system, news media, and even films, ironically, were sweeping away. A modernizing Italy, in other words, was losing something in the process.

Sadly, the '70s saw the passing of first generation Neorealists de Sica, Rossellini, Visconti, and Pasolini. It also witnessed the decline of Federico Fellini. Because of this, Italian cinema languished as more and more American movies were emerging and displacing European movies. As Italy made social progress, it seemed to eliminate the very struggle that drove its filmmakers in the first place. In a final act of the genre, Giuseppe Tornatore came onto the scene with his masterwork, *Cinema Paradiso* (1988). This movie, along with *Malena* (2000), is not set in contemporary Italy like most of the films of his forebears. Instead, they look back to the '40s and '50s when Neorealism was at its height.



Malena took on the familiar themes of fascism and sexual repression, and *Cinema Paradiso* told the story of a boy who learned to become a projectionist for his small town theatre. These coming-of-age stories each followed a boy we can assume had some of aspects of Tornatore in him. As the boy wanted not only to project great movies but to make his own, his father-figure told him he must leave town and never return if he wanted to realize his dreams. And where are both films set? In Sicily, of course! As Don Fabrizio argued in *The Leopard*, Sicily

crushes its youth—if they don't leave the ancient island by the time they are twenty, they have no chance of ever rising above the weight of tradition. That is precisely what Tornatore's hero did to become a director, yet there was something incomplete about this narrative.

A young Tornatore (*right, 2016*) may have yearned for greater things than Sicily, but it was precisely this regional entrapment that compelled filmmakers to return to it. Sicily and the southern half of Italy, which magnify every Italian characteristic, were the setting of almost every key Neorealist film. Thus, Tornatore returned to his native Sicily with a romantic outlook that he probably lacked as he grew up in a town too small for his dreams. Realism, after all, would not succeed as art without romanticism.



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All the Neorealists desired to show the extraordinary in the common, to document humanity in what others have passed over. No story better exemplifies this dynamic than Tornatore's own paradoxical life-story: Like Italy, his rising tide of fortunes slowly eroded his drive for art, but in turn, he grew and became better for it.

So, Neorealism as a movement was no longer popular; it had run its course. Italian filmmakers sought other stories and ways to convey the new image of life in contemporary Italy, with the new problems that emerged in the modern world dealing with family, loss of tradition, work, societal issues, isolation of the individual, and others.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Italian Legacy Website, Film Reference Website, Film Inquiry Website, Movie Musing Website, and Wikipedia.