IT'S A NEOREALIST WORLD

BY

Ara H. Merjian, Rhiannon Noel Welch

September 22, 2020 3:06pm

Alfonso Cuarón: *Roma*, 2018.
COURTESY NETFLIX

"The **cinema (https://www.artnews.com/t/cinema/)**," claims screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, the chief theorist of what came to be known as **Italian neorealism (https://www.artnews.com/t/italian-neorealism/)** in the early 1950s, "has always felt the 'natural' and practically inevitable necessity of inserting a story into reality in order to make it thrilling and spectacular."[1] For Zavattini's generation, the thrill of new narratives hewing close to everyday life

promised to restructure Italy's postwar ruins, both physical and political. From our perch in the twenty-first century, where globalized spectacle threatens to supersede the real, it is now the coarse trace of reality that we often seek as a foil to virtual thrills and terrors. Whether in episodes of "The Bachelor," "Arab Idol," or even less brazenly commercial entertainment, we long to feel the frisson of "reality" inserted into our stories, to turn Zavattini's formulation on its head. The popularity of films such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018) perhaps attests to that longing. Cuarón's meditative black-and-white film has also occasioned some reflection on the enduring resonance of Italian neorealism in world cinema today. Referencing the middle-class neighborhood in Mexico City where the director spent his youth, the title *Roma* also evokes the Italian capital, repeatedly featured in a cluster of films which emerged out of the literal and figurative rubble of World War II.

Twenty years of Fascist cultural policy had proscribed depictions of class consciousness, material struggle, or poverty, dismissing these as heretical and "Bolshevik." Neorealism promised the nation — recovering from a bombastic dictatorship—a new self-image at once humble and ostensibly uncorrupted. A good deal of Italian neorealism's perceived authenticity lay in the relative asceticism with which its examples were undertaken: shoestring budgets (with a few notable exceptions) and nonprofessional actors, whose lived proximity to the stories in question lent the films a degree of raw truth. Rome's Cinecittà Studios had been bombed during the war, forcing many directors to pursue on-location shooting—a topographic immediacy with enormous influence on later twentieth-century cinema. Neorealist films altered both spatial and temporal perceptions. Works like Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) and Roberto Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1948) plunge viewers into the nearly real-time plight of believable and flawed protagonists. Portraying a poor elderly pensioner and his dog struggling to stay afloat in a hostile Rome, Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) homes in at one point on a young, pregnant maid grinding coffee by hand. The camera lingers on her body and face for the duration of her menial task; without the quick cuts of montage, the most banal of chores in this dingy kitchen takes on a more noble mantle, universal in its dignity. Once Italian cinema after *Umberto D* began to merge with other genres and styles, its ethical imperatives enjoyed an extensive cinematic afterlife.

Indeed, neorealism perennially remerges as a yardstick by which to measure contemporary films concerned with the far-reaching implications of seemingly quotidian problems. Like its original iteration in Italy, neorealism's revivals have tended to follow periods of social and economic crisis. In the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, for example, the film critic A.O. Scott rejected the notion that audiences craved merely "fanciful or temporary" escapism. "What we need from movies, in the face of a dismaying and confusing real world," he avowed, "is realism." Calling attention to American productions like Ramin Bahrani's *Man Push Cart* (2005) and So Yong Kim's *Treeless Mountain* (2008), Scott's polemical "Neo-neorealism" essay implicitly highlighted the obsolescence of national denominations in an age of globalized culture, while also affirming an abiding desire to "escape from escapism."[2] The *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody challenged Scott's inclusions, dismissing the "facile materialism of neorealism" as a specious standard and calling it essentially a

synonym for independent cinema writ large.[3] Yet neorealist films persist as the continual touchstones—both stylistic and critical—for disparate cinematic works.

(https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Tangerine-1.jpg)

Sean Baker: *Tangerine*, 2015.
COURTESY MAGNOLIA PICTURES

Cuarón's *Roma* is not the only recent film to have been discussed in relation to neorealism. Take, for example, the 2015 film *Tangerine* directed by Sean Baker, which follows a transgender sex worker of color and her friends through public spaces in Los Angeles (crosswalks, parking lots, a booth in a Donut Time shop) and the city's linguistic mix (English, Armenian, Spanish, Black vernacular). Shot on three iPhones, the film features an often bumpy cinematography that inflects it with a certain verisimilitude—particularly since early twenty-first-century experience has become contiguous with our smartphone screens. Or consider Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), which focuses on estranged young adults in the city of Datong to explore the digital addictions that now shape our very perception of the real. Limiting camera movement and montage in his mostly medium-shot long takes, Jia uses digital format—with its harsh contrast and frequently antiseptic look—to evoke his protagonists' nervous disaffection. The frequent dismissal of digital film as looking "too real" has been turned by Jia and other directors into a new realist stratagem. Aiming at more heightened effects, Iranian director Asghar Farhadi employs extensive shot/reverse-shot sequences in his dramatization of strained relationships in working-class Tehran; yet like those of

Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Majid Majidi, Farhadi's recent films have repeatedly earned the designation of "Neorealism, Iranian style."[4]

We can think of Italian neorealism as global in two respects—it was shaped by international influences, and it subsequently exerted considerable formal and thematic impact abroad. Yet, rather than rehearse the countless echoes of "neo-neorealism" across the globe today, what if we were to ask why the term is so frequently invoked to begin with? Instead of appraising the relative "realism" intrinsic to each new production—American or international—what if we considered why the quest for "realism" refuses to disappear as a cinematic paradigm? If neorealism's relevance now transcends geography, then surely the very definition of the term has evolved in turn. Despite its origins in and enduring associations with Italy, neorealism was perhaps already global from the start—an often overlooked dimension that nevertheless bears upon its persistent influence.

(https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Germany-Year-Zero.jpg)

Roberto Rosselini: *Germany Year Zero*, 1948.
COURTESY CRITERION

Italian neorealism never formed a coherent movement or group. Its examples ranged from the Catholic-inflected anti-Fascism of Rossellini (*Rome, Open City*, 1945; *Paisan*, 1946) to the Communist commitment of Visconti (*La Terra Trema*, 1948) to Giuseppe De Santis's seamless fusion of Marxism and noirish melodrama (*Bitter Rice*, 1949) to the often oneiric spirituality of Federico Fellini (*La Strada*, 1954; *Nights of Cabiria*, 1957). Indeed, neorealism's practitioners never even agreed on its basic rationale. Fellini averred that "neorealism is not a question of what you show, its real spirit is how you show it"; Visconti, by contrast, insisted that neorealism was "above all a question of content."[5] Yet whether its imperatives were understood as ethical or topical, philosophical or aesthetic, neorealism's approach to representation was quickly echoed in various national cultures, countering Hollywood's slick productions with stylized grit and unabashedly ideological engagement. As a client of America's Marshall Plan initiative, Italy reaped the rewards

of the anti-Communist Truman Doctrine after 1948. Lent momentum by neorealism's success, the cinema emerged as one of the country's most eminent cultural exports—not merely a measure of pride and prestige, but proof of Italy's national rebirth as a full-fledged democracy.

Interestingly, neorealism often proved less popular within Italy than abroad, both at the box office and on festival and award circuits. Given its wide-ranging critical reception, filmmakers like Luis Buñuel, Satyajit Ray, Ousmane Sembène, and Charles Burnett all felt compelled to respond to aspects of neorealism, deploying its most prominent elements (location shooting, nonprofessional actors, etc.) within a range of sociopolitical, linguistic, and artistic contexts across the Global South, from India to Senegal, Latin America to Watts.

Yes, Watts. The fact that poor, predominantly Black areas of Los Angeles and New York were then understood by many to belong to an expanded **Third World (https://www.artnews.com/t/third-world/)**—and hence to offer a narrative of resistance and redemption that contributed to an international struggle of the disenfranchised—underscores both the evolving globalism of postwar culture as well as the cinema's role in articulating it. Shot in 1972 and 1973 in Watts by first-time director and producer Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* refuses narrative conventions and coherence in its evocation of urban, African American, working-class life. Though the film faced major distribution hurdles when released in 1978, its official re-release three decades later witnessed extensive comparisons to Italian neorealism. However, despite the influence on Burnett of neorealism's precursors and successors—from Jean Renoir to Satyajit Ray— the global inflections of his particular realism prove anything but clear-cut.

(https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Killer-of-Sheep.jpg)

Charles Burnett: *Killer of Sheep*, 1978.
COURTESY MILESTONE FILM & VIDEO

Ray himself has spoken of the formative impact of Zavattini and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) on his own *Pather Panchali* (1955)—a stylistic and thematic influence evident even later in works

ranging from Norman Loftis's *Messenger* (1994) to Spike Lee's *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008). Ray's work did not launch an Indian neorealist cinema movement, so much as extend and revive formal and sociopolitical elements already latent in the nation's filmic approaches to reality, such as the naturalist depictions of disenfranchised peasant subjects in Baburao Painter's silent films. Other directors applied neorealist strategies—even as they changed and updated them—to comparable projects of postcolonial national and cultural identity. Take Sembène's *Black Girl* (*La Noire de . . .*, 1966), which follows Diouana (Mbissine Thérèse Diop), a young Senegalese woman who moves from Dakar to Antibes to work as a domestic for a white French family. The film departs from neorealist precedent even as it draws upon it, using flashback sequences and first-person narration—strategies eschewed by neorealism proper.

Yet toward the film's end, after the defiant and dignified Diouana commits suicide by slitting her throat, we glimpse a brief account of her death among the *faits divers* in a newspaper, an offhand item that underscores her anonymity and unimportance in a white, bourgeois world. It was precisely the amplification of the ostensibly inconsequential on which much of Italian neorealism staked itself. Moral narratives could be constructed from the most seemingly insignificant events—ennobled and exalted because of their overlooked, even abject origins. Zavattini and De Sica developed *Bicycle Thieves* out of—as Zavattini put it—"a little news item . . . considered by most people throwaway material."[6] That news item became the story of a poor father who is robbed, who robs in turn to save his job, and whose apprehension, humiliation, and contrition ironically redeem him in the eyes of his plucky son.

What had first appeared as a seemingly hyperlocal set of parables, practices, and aesthetic choices was thus almost immediately recognized for its transnational relevance and adaptability. The roots of an increasingly global cinema in the second half of the twentieth century are more tangled than any seemingly straightforward Italian genealogy would suggest, however. Film scholar Rachel Gabara has noted, for example, that Sembène and other African directors encountered neorealism as it filtered not directly from the source, but rather by way of the New Latin American Cinema Movement of the 1960s. Though its aesthetic impact lay in the capacity to amplify and interrogate local, quotidian, even dull aspects of postwar Italian life, neorealism arguably constituted a global phenomenon from its fitful inception. Canonized as a wholly "national" cinema, neorealism in fact bore various international origins.

The seemingly inimical precedents of Soviet realist cinema and Hollywood production proved equally influential on neorealism.[7] Italian neorealism found itself canonized through French film theory, whether that of André Bazin or Gilles Deleuze, while many of its examples remained indebted to both interwar American literature (by such authors as Steinbeck, Saroyan, Cain, et al.) and aspects of German Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) aesthetics from the 1920s. Yet there is another, less celebratory sense in which Italian neorealism might be thought of as global, particularly if we consider its entanglements with a kind of colonial world-making with which cinema has long been complicit. Many of the strategies that came to characterize Italian neorealism

had been incubated in Fascist film production, particularly in the "empire cinema" used to propagandize colonialist expansion. Formal devices characteristic of some neorealist films, such as the deep-focus long shot— subsequently taken up in the 1960s by proponents of Latin America's "third cinema" (specifically the Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino)— cannot be wholly disentangled from more complicated political origins.[8]

Indeed, film historians have pointed out that despite its avowed anti-Fascist stance, Italian neorealism owes many of its technical and aesthetic innovations to the regime's own cinematic initiatives: from the early film careers of Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti themselves, to films set in Libya and the Horn of Africa, which privileged on-location shooting over studio sets and exploited free labor by Indigenous people as crew and nonprofessional actors.[9] Other scholars have critiqued neorealism's bolstering of the pernicious myth of Italians as reluctant Fascists and benevolent colonizers. Many of the films' classical examples stage the redemption of Italian masculinity, exculpating the "common man" from complicity with Fascist violence by projecting villainous perversion onto Nazi caricatures (such as the predatory homosexuality of Major Bergmann and Ingrid in Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* or the pedophilia of Herr Henning in the same director's *Germany, Year Zero*).

Significantly, Italian neorealism just as dozens of countries declared their independence from colonial rule in the mid-1950s and 1960s. "There is a direct line," writes the cultural historian Michael Denning, "between the pioneering cinematic alternatives to Hollywood (the Left-inspired Italian neorealism) and the various Third World cinemas."[10] These new alternatives aimed to replace what Solanas and Getino, in their pioneering 1971 essay, "Towards a Third Cinema," refer to as "Establishment cinema," typified first by Hollywood, and then by European art cinema. "As a rule," they write of the pacificatory entertainment long peddled in various decolonizing postwar societies, "films only dealt with effect, never with cause; it was cinema of mystification or antihistoricism. It was surplus value cinema. Caught up in these conditions, films, the most valuable tool of communication of our times, were destined to satisfy only the ideological and economic interests of the owners of the film industry, the lords of the world film market, the great majority of whom were from the United States."

Solanas and Getino insist that even ostensibly "local," nationalist cinema production was conditioned by the Hollywood system of production and distribution. While ostensibly Argentine in its origins, their own documentary-based film, *La Hora de Los Hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) constitutes a paean to international class struggle, beginning with the "45 million Latin Americans living a life of poverty." Between an onslaught of chilling statistics, cacophonous sounds, jump cuts, and quotes by Aimé Césaire (the Afro-Caribbean poet and founder of the Négritude movement), Solanas and Getino home in on what the film calls "the geography of hunger": a revolutionary geography lent flesh and humanity in the faces of the workers and peasants on whom the camera lingers intermittently. It was now incumbent upon cinema, Solanas and Getino

claimed, to respond to "the existence of masses on the worldwide revolutionary plane."[11] If a through line from neorealism to Cuarón's *Roma* passes by way of Solanas and Getino's promise of a revolutionary Latin American cinema, Cuarón's film nevertheless falls indisputably short. So let us conclude where we began: with one of the latest films claimed for the global neorealist canon.

(https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Treeless-Mountain.jpg)

So Yong Kim: *Treeless Mountain*, 2008.
COURTESY OSCILLOSCOPE LABORATORIES

Roma is fraught with many of the tensions that characterized neorealism itself: between the local and the global; between historical reckoning and colonial amnesia; between shiny commodity and gritty, unadorned revolutionary art; between fetishizing and fully humanizing working-class characters. Roma's black-and-white photography (often associated with European art cinema, a first for Cuarón), combined with its irresistibly fluid cinematography and its centering on an Indigenous domestic worker who speaks Mixtec, might bespeak this bind most plainly. Perhaps these sites of ambivalence and friction are precisely where neorealism's legacy is to be located in *Roma*, more than in its adherence to a laundry list of technical prescriptions or politico-philosophical propositions. The film recalls both Sembène's *Black Girl* and a recent wave of films by Latin American women directors that *New Republic* staffer Miguel Salazar has dubbed "nanny-inspired cinema": for example, *La teta asustada* (*The Milk of Sorrow*, 2009) by Peruvian director Claudia Llosa; *La Nana* (*The Maid*, 2009) by Chile's Sebastián Silva.[12] Roma tells the story of Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), an Indigenous woman who comes from Oaxaca—a state with a long history of conflict between its sizable Indigenous community and colonizing elites—to Mexico City to cook, clean, and care for a white, upper middle-class family based on Cuarón's own.

Chicano studies professor Sergio de la Mora has noted how Roma draws Mexico's racialized caste system to the fore[13]—much like Sembène's *Black Girl* did with the colonial relations of domestic work that endured between Senegal and France, even after Senegal gained formal independence in

1960. And yet several critics have argued that the film does little to dismantle the structures of white supremacy that naturalize the labor that Cleo performs for her employer, Sofia.

(https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Black-Girl.jpg)

Ousmane Sembène: *Black Girl*, 1966.
COURTESY JANUS FILMS

Unlike Diouana in her alienated off-screen voiceover in French—a testament to the linguistic hegemony of an occupying power—Cuarón's Cleo speaks Mixtec in several intimate scenes with her fellow domestic worker and childhood friend, Adela (Nancy GarcÍa GarcÍa). Cleo and Adela's uninhibited speech in a non-hegemonic language—in the kitchen, after work doing exercises by candlelight, at a diner counter while gossiping about boys back home—has not insulated the film from accusations of denying women's agency and ignoring Indigenous erasure, from skeptics such as the contrarian Brody and Cherokee scholar Joseph M. Pierce. Classical neorealism à la Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti turned a blind eye to Italy's colonial past just as it availed itself of some of its most pernicious tools in order to recast Italians as hapless victims rather than oppressors. It thus comes perhaps as little surprise that this ambivalence reverberates in its ongoing expression around the globe.

As crisis once again reigns the world over, so too does an appetite for realism among viewers and filmmakers alike. For the founding mythmakers of neorealism, the photographic image was to be put to work to capture "life as it is," "the real things, exactly as they are," in all their quotidian duration, to quote Zavattini once again. In postwar Italy, "life as it is" was marked by the crises of mass trauma, displacement, and poverty—issues that until then had been left out of the frame of mainstream cinema. Indeed, neorealism's initial global resonance, film scholar Karl Schoonover has recently argued, was due in part in its ability to mobilize spectators outside Italy's borders as "extranational eyewitnesses" to the country's tragic postwar plight. Today, many cinematic afterlives in many places suggest that the form still compels us to keep our collective eyes trained on "the

real" in a moment of crisis.[14] And yet, as neorealism's uneven legacy in Cuarón's *Roma* attests, the lofty promise of unmediated access to reality has always produced blind spots.

1 Cesare Zavattini, "A Thesis on Neo-Realism" (1952–54), *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-Realism*, ed. and trans. David Overby, Hamden, Conn., Archon Books, 1978, p. 67.

2 A.O. Scott, "Neo-Neo Realism," *New York Times*, Mar. 17, 2009, nytimes.com.

3 Richard Brody, "About 'Neo-Neo Realism,'" *New Yorker*, Mar. 19, 2009, newyorker.com.

4 Stephen Weinberger, "Neorealism, Iranian Style," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 1, Feb. 2007, pp. 5–16; Hamid Naficy, "Neorealism Iranian style," *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style*, eds. Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2011, pp. 226–39.

5 Federico Fellini, "The Road Beyond Neo-Realism," in *Federico Fellini, La Strada*, eds. Peter Bondanella and Manuela Gieri, New Brunswick and London, Rutgers University Press, 1987, p. 217; Luchino Visconti, "Intervista a Luchino Visconti," in *Leggere Visconti*, eds. Giuliana Callegari and Nuccio Lodato, Pavia, Amministrazione Provinciale di Pavia, 1976, p. 86.

6 Cesare Zavattini, cited in *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, eds. Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1979, p. 134.

7 While prominent neorealist practitioners and theorists like Zavattini famously positioned themselves in opposition to Hollywood, it proves difficult to decouple Italian experiments from commercial American precedents. See in particular Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson, *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2007, and *Global Neorealism*, pp. 226–39.

8 Eileen Jones, "The Death of Revolutionary Film Form," *Jacobin Magazine*, Feb. 19, 2020.

9 See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascism's Empire Cinema*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2015. For instance, Rossellini's early collaboration with director Goffredo Alessandrini, *Luciano serra, pilota*, won the Mussolini Cup alongside Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* at the Venice International Film Festival in 1938.

10 Michael Denning, cited in Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, "Introduction," *Global Neorealism*, p. 9.

[11] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," *New Latin American Cinema*, vol. 1, ed. Michael T. Martin, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1997, p. 34.

[12] Miguel Salazar, "The Story Behind Roma," *New Republic*, Dec. 18, 2018, newrepublic.com.

[13] Sergio de la Mora, "Roma: Repatriation vs. Exploitation," *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 4, Summer 2019, filmquarterly.org.

[14] Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

More From Art in America

Interviews

The Creation of a Collaborative Video Changed Shirin Neshat's Life and Career

In 1998, Shirin Neshat and a group of friends collaborated on the video Turbulent, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale.

BY SHIRIN NESHAT

Interviews

What It Means to Be a Social Justice Curator

The Bronx Museum's Jasmine Wahi, the inaugural Holly Block Social Justice Curator, discusses how institutions can respond to crisis.

BY JASMINE WAHI

Interviews

Kristina Newman-Scott on Authenticity, Vulnerability, and "Rising Tide" Moments in the Arts

BRIC president Kristina Newman-Scott explains why BRIC is well-suited to respond to the current crises and how she sees the institution adapting to an uncertain future.

BY ART IN AMERICA

Interviews

Liza Lou on Building Community During Coronavirus

Lou's online platform Apartogether, which encourages making from familiar materials at home, has grown into a global community of artisans.

BY LIZA LOU

Interviews

More Is Less

Barbara Rose looks back at Pop, Minimalism, and other aesthetic tendencies that emerged in New York's intimate art world of the 1960s.

BY WILLIAM S. SMITH