Italian cinema essay sample

Italian neorealism is one of the most historically influenced periods of cinema. Rooted in Italian resistance of northern Italy during the close of World War II, the movement is greatly influenced by sociohistorical factors of the time. From its earliest days during the resistance against the German occupation, to the devastating aftermath of the War and the hopelessness of reconstruction that ensued, neorealism painted a picture of “ real” Italian life from 1943 to 1952. Few other periods of film history are so deeply influenced by the political ideal and social history of their time. Italian neorealist film parallels the changing political and social hopes and realities of its time.

In particular, as the social institutions of Italy became increasingly complex with the reconstruction, neorealism’s presentation of social problems went from having a clear cut victim and oppressor relationship as in Open City, to having grayed out lines of good and bad, concealing who was truly at fault for the problems at hand. Similarly, the movement reflects how the feeling of hope for a renewed society of equity slowly faded away to be replaced by the darker reality of hopelessness and disparity in the future on the part of the lower-classes.

Similarly, the feeling of realism accomplished by the cinematographic mode and mise-en-scene, when combined with the life of the common people of Italy, could only evoke a sense of the grim nature of the post-war times, the harshness of poverty and unemployment, the social chasm between the “ haves” and the “ have-nots”, and the isolation of the individual from the societal group. It was these ideas which gave meaning to the films of the neorealist movement; they transcended the minimal narratives as the

important themes of the play, speaking out against the plethora of maladies which plagued post-war Italian life.

In Rome, Roberto Rossellini had started filming his classic, Open City, while the Germans still occupied the streets. With the city's studios destroyed, he was forced to resort to shooting in the streets, and did so on stock that was purchased bit by bit from street vendors and taped together. This resulting film would be hailed as the first of the great Italian neorealist movement.

To understand the effects of Rossellini's work, it is necessary to define neorealism here. In its most general terms it is a group of films that shared core characteristics of method, the use of non-professional actors, natural lighting, and location shooting; attitude, the desire to get closer to everyday reality; subject matter, the lives of the post-war popular classes; and ideology, the hope of political renewal in its early years, and later a loss of hope coinciding with the failure of the renewal. Each of these characteristics built on the preceding one, culminating in the directors' ultimate goal of conveying the hope (and later, pessimism) of renewal.

The use of non-professional actors, and location shooting provided the viewer of the neorealist film with images different from those seen in typical cinema of the time. The actor was no longer handsome and well-trained, but instead looked as if he was plucked off the streets. His surroundings were no longer carefully constructed but were instead the austere streets of Rome.

Peter Brunette explains how the use of these elements accomplished a sense of reality for viewers: " Conventional cinema demands a basic level of plausibility, enough to allow us to put ourselves emotionally into the created

world of the film…. We perceive something as realistic…when it corresponds to a set of conventionalized expectations…about what people in movies do…. When we experience…a film as more realistic than usual…it is because it is pushing against the currently accepted boundaries of the realistic, closer toward the dangerous unpredictability of the (represented) real.”.

As noted previously, Rossellini’s Open City ushered in this new era of Italian film. Though the use of realist techniques were forced upon the masterpiece since it was filmed in an occupied Rome where all the studios had been destroyed during the war, the effects were at the same time intended – “ They new exactly what they were after and knew that they were getting it. The end result was a film that contained some elements of the pervasive American cinematographic style, but was primarily realist in its nature.

Its cast was comprised of a mix of both professional and non-professional actors. Rossellini noted: “ I select my performers on the basis of their physical appearance…. I watch a man in his day-to-day life and get him embedded in my memory. Facing the camera, he will no longer be himself…. He forgets who he is, thinking that he was chosen for the role because he has become an exceptional human being. I have to bring him back to his real nature, to reconstruct him, to teach him his usual gestures again.”.

Thus, the actors were chosen for how closely they resembled the typical lower class Italian of the time. Rossellini placed them, representing the common people united by the resistance, in the stark and squalid surroundings of the tenements of Rome.

Though the film’s visual style incorporates many of the elements of neorealism, it departs from these codes in more ways than one. For instance, its plot is of such historical significance and so powerful that it literally pushes aside the typical concerns of the genre, forcing social commentary to take a backseat to the action. Conversely, in De Sica’s Bicycle Thief, the narrative is so minimal that “ the whole story would not deserve two lines in a stray-dog column,” allowing the concerns of poverty, unemployment and alienation to take center stage. Open City concerns itself with the epic nature of the resistance.

This is also seen in the social status of the characters, which are empowered to a degree. Manfredi and Don Pietro are not required to accept what happens in the world around them like De Sica’s elderly and resigned Umberto; they are clearly protagonists. Along with the stronger narrative comes some remnants of other film styles such as the melodrama, with its brief moments of uplifting comedy. Don Pietro, a priest, knocks out the old man in the tenements with a frying pan over the head, and earlier he turns the figure of St. Rocco to face away from the nude statue while waiting to meet Francesco at the shop. Though these features were not part of the typical neorealist film, Rossellini’s commentary on society is still heard beneath the powerful narrative.

It must be said that neorealist style, like most styles, does not have an inherent political message. The most common attribute of neorealism is location shooting and the dubbing of dialogue. The dubbing allowed for filmmakers to move in a more open miss-en-scene. Principal characters would be portrayed mostly by trained actors while supporting members (and

sometimes principals) would be non-actors. The idea was to create a greater sense of realism through the use of real people rather than all seasoned actors. The rigidity of non-actors gave the scenes more authentic power. This sense of realism made Italian neorealism more than an artistic stance, it came to embody an attitude toward life.

Ideologically, the characteristics of Italian neorealism were:

1. a new democratic spirit, with emphasis on the value of ordinary people

2. a compassionate point of view and a refusal to make facile (easy) moral judgments
3. a preoccupation with Italy’s Fascist past and its aftermath of wartime devastation
4. a blending of Christian and Marxist humanism
5. an emphasis on emotions rather than abstract ideas

Stylistically, Italian Neorealism was:

1. an avoidance of neatly plotted stories in favor of loose, episodic structures that evolve organically

a documentary visual style

3. the use of actual locations–usually exteriors–rather than studio sites
4. the use of nonprofessional actors, even for principal roles
5. use of conversational speech, not literary dialogue
6. avoidance of artifice in editing, camerawork, and lighting in favor of a simple “ styless” style

From the violent realism of MEAN STREETS, TAXI DRIVER, and RAGING BULL to the poignant romance of ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANY MORE, the black comedy of AFTER HOURS, and the burning controversy of THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST, Martin Scorsese's uniquely versatile vision has made him one of the cinema's most acclaimed directors.

Martin Scorsese was born in Flushing, New York in 1942. A quiet child with a strong case of asthma, Scorsese spent much of his young life alone— in the movie theater or watching movies on television. After attending high school in the Bronx he spent a year in the seminary before enrolling at New York University. The early 1960s was a time of renewed interest in American film, and he found himself drawn to NYU's film school, where the emerging French and Italian New Wave and independent filmmakers such as John Cassavetes had a profound influence on him. Soon after graduating he became a film instructor at NYU and made commercials in both England and the United States.

He also finished his first full-length feature in 1968, WHO'S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR? He followed this with a number of hard-hitting films throughout the 1970s. His style combined a rough and gritty attention to the everyday life of the urban jungle with a monumental visual sensibility. In one of his most famous films, TAXI DRIVER (1976), Scorsese focused on the particulars of an individual and his obsessions. Starring Robert DeNiro (with whom Scorsese has had one of the most celebrated collaborative relationships in American cinema), TAXI DRIVER elevates the obscure specifics of a disturbed life with the greatest drama.

With two later films, RAGING BULL (1980) and THE KING OF COMEDY (1983) (both starring De Niro), Scorsese focused on a theme that has permeated nearly every one of his movies—the plight of the desperate and out-of-control individual. Often unsympathetic, his characters display a crazed violence that mimics the repressive social structures in which they live. With the protagonist in RAGING BULL we find a fighter possessed with anger both in and out of the ring, while in THE KING OF COMEDY we find one overwhelmed by the impossibility of breaking into the entertainment industry. Both are telling social commentaries and engaging films.

Michael Powell once said of Martin Scorsese: “ He breakfasts on images”. But it still seems surprising that, while editing Raging Bull, Scorsese would watch Powell’s ballet film Tales Of Hoffman over and over again “ because of the movement in it”. Raging Bull is now considered Scorsese’s most perfect film and one of the few American masterworks of the last 20 years. Boxing and ballet clearly have some parallels. Not everyone thought so at the time.

Pauline Kael described De Niro’s portrait of boxer Jake La Motta as “ a swollen puppet with only bits and pieces of a character inside”. And though the film got Oscars for its editing (Thelma Schoonmaker, Powell’s widow) and for De Niro, Scorsese’s nomination as director was unsuccessful. Where Kael was undoubtedly right was in her opinion that the film was as much a biography of the genre of boxing movies as about a particular fighter. Films such as Body and Soul, The Set-Up and Golden Boy are recalled in the film’s slow motion sequences, rapid cutting and sweeping camera movements.

What was new was the emotional and psychological intensity of a time (the 40s and 50s), a place (mostly New York, Scorsese's home ground) and a person (a champion fighter who in the end loses everything). When describing La Motta – the man who let himself be hit in order to exhaust his opponent's strength – Scorsese cited St Thomas Aquinas, who said that animals served God better than man because they lived their natures so purely, without guilt. But at the end of the film, he allows La Motta, whose brutality has hitherto extended from the ring into the lives of his wife and brother, to shout in his Maimi jail cell: " I am not an animal!" and begin his redemption.

It is a typical Scorsese moment – in nearly all his films there is a character who eventually recognises his own soul. Scorsese's Catholic antecedents are never very far away, nor is the thought that the destructive instincts of man are capable of atonement.

Yet Paul Schrader, who wrote the first screenplay, loosely culled from La Motta's own ghosted book, has said that Raging Bull was not a film either Scorsese or he wanted to make. De Niro talked Scorsese into it and then the two of them talked him into it. It is by now common knowledge that De Niro was obsessed with the part and not only spent 10 weeks perfecting the fight scenes but took two breaks away from the shoot to eat his way around Italy and France to gain weight for the second half of the film.

Emotionally precise and visually overpowering, Scorsese creates lush landscapes in which every detail seems to pulse with energy. In his 1988 masterpiece THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST, Scorsese used this elevation

of the particular to present both Jesus and everything around him with a fullness required by such a loaded topic. The controversial nature of the film and the stunning visual reality it created stirred up Hollywood and met with strong reactions from the general public.

In 1995's CASINO, Scorsese brought together much of the stylistic and theoretical content of his earlier works. The engaging world and controlling power structure of the Mafia (a source repeatedly tread by Scorsese) is brought to life in the loud and visually stunning world of the casino. In tone, style, and content, Scorsese is constantly pushing the boarders of the film, seeing how much we can come to feel about the most foreign and familiar characters. For many, Martin Scorsese is the most important living American filmmaker—one whose relentless search for the furthest emotional reaches of his genre have led him to the center of the American psyche.

Divided into four distinctive parts, *The Age of Innocence* begins with a pictorial section which envokes the late 19th century period of the film. This assemblage of impressions includes historical images and literary excerpts which heavily influenced the film's settings and costume design. Included are paintings by Sargent, Tissot, Whistler, and others; pictures of locations as they were in the 19th century; fabrics and wall papers; etchings from the New York Historical Society; period portraits; cabinet cards; and rich details from Christie's and Tiffany. These are accompanied by the production images they inspired and informed.

GoodFellas (1990) is his only film of the past 20 years to garner much critical attention. It is certainly one of the most interesting and subversive of all

gangster films, combining elements of the musical and black comedy in its story of the rise and fall of an unrepentant mob henchman. The film combines Scorsese's typically ambivalent view of violence, displaying it in all its nastiness while at the same time positioning the viewer (through editing, camera angle, and music) to identify with it.

The most shocking element of *GoodFellas* is the ending, in which Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) is stuck in the prison of American suburbia. Henry has the American Dream, and he despises it. Unfortunately, similarly powerful films such as *Casino* (1995) and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999) have been mostly ignored, both critically and at the box office. His most successful film commercially, *Cape Fear* (1991), is one of the best remakes of the ' 90s but ultimately limited by the very fact that it is rather conventional (although not without some subversive twists).

In recent times, Scorsese has been able to establish a place of prestige for himself within film culture. He has made two documentaries on national cinemas (United States and Italy) and has appeared in numerous history of cinema documentaries as a talking head authority. He continues to be a noted figure within film preservation, and has even extended into editing a series of reissued film books for the Modern Library. All of this cultural work on the part of Scorsese is perhaps necessary, given his lack of commercial success. By establishing himself as an important authority on film culture, he has almost guaranteed that he will be a powerful and influential figure within the future of American film.

Worked Cite:

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