

## Italian neorealism

Italian neorealism is a film movement lasting from about 1943 to 1952.

The movement is characterized by stories set amongst the poor and working class, filmed in long takes on location, frequently using non-actors for secondary and sometimes primary roles. Italian neorealist films mostly contend with the difficult economical and moral conditions of postwar Italy, reflecting the changes in the Italian psyche and the conditions of everyday life: defeat, poverty, and desperation. Because Cinecittà (a complex of studios in Rome--the center of commercial filmmaking in Italy since 1936) was occupied by refugees, films were shot outdoors, amidst devastation.

The movement was developed by a circle of film critics that revolved around the magazine *Cinema*, including Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Gianni Puccini, Giuseppe De Santis, and Pietro Ingrao. Largely prevented from writing about politics (the editor-in-chief of the magazine was none other than Vittorio Mussolini, son of Il Duce), the critics attacked the *telefono bianco* films that dominated the industry at the time. As a counter to the poor quality of mainstream films, some of the critics felt that Italian cinema should turn to the realist writers from the turn of the century.

The neorealists were heavily influenced by French poetic realism. Indeed, both Michelangelo Antonioni and Luchino Visconti had worked closely with Jean Renoir. Additionally, many of the filmmakers involved in neorealism developed their skills working on calligraphist films (though the short-lived movement was markedly different from neorealism). Elements of neorealism are also found in the films of Alessandro Blasetti and the documentary-style films of Francesco De Robertis. Two of the most significant precursors of neorealism are *Toni* (Renoir, 1935) and *1860* (Blasetti, 1934).

There are a number of traits that make neorealism distinct. Neorealist films are generally filmed with non-professional actors (though, in a number of cases, well known actors were cast in leading roles, playing strongly against their normal character types in front of a background populated by local people rather than extras brought in for the film). They are shot almost exclusively on location, mostly in poor neighborhoods and in the countryside. The subject matter involves life among the impoverished and the working class. Non-acting is always emphasized, and performances are mostly constructed from scenes of people performing fairly mundane and quotidian activities, completely devoid of the self-consciousness that amateur acting usually entails. Neorealist films generally feature children in major roles, though their roles are frequently more observational than participatory.

Neorealism was first introduced to the world in 1946 with *Roma, città aperta* (Rome, Open City), which was the first major film to come out Italy after the war. Despite containing many elements extraneous to the principles of neorealism, it depicted clearly the struggle of normal Italian people struggling to live their lives from day to day under the extraordinary difficulties of the German occupation of Rome, consciously doing what they can to resist the occupation. The children play a key role in this, and their presence

at the end of the film is indicative of their role in neorealism as a whole: as observers of the difficulties of today who hold the key to the future.

At the height of neorealism, in 1948, Luchino Visconti adapted *I malavoglia*, a novel by Giovanni Verga, written at the height of the 19th century realist *verismo* movement (in many ways the basis for neorealism), bringing the story to a modern setting, which resulted in remarkably little change in either the plot or the tone. The resulting film, *La Terra trema*, (The Earth Trembles) starred only non-professional actors and was filmed in the same village (Aci Trezza) as the novel was set in. Because the local dialect differed so much from the Italian spoken in Rome and the other major cities, the film had to be subtitled even in its domestic release. The celebrated 1952 film *Umberto D.*, by Vittorio De Sica, about an elderly, impoverished retired civil servant struggling to make ends meet is often cited as a classic neo-realist effort.

Italian neorealism has had as deep and broad an impact on the history of cinema as any of the most significant movements in film. Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Luchino Visconti, three of the most important and celebrated filmmakers of all time began their careers in neorealism, and brought elements of it with them through their careers. The French New Wave critics celebrated neorealism and incorporated much of it in their own movement. Other movements in The United States, Poland, Japan, The United Kingdom and elsewhere developed many of the ideas first articulated by the neorealists. Some of the most notable neo-realist influenced films were the popular "spaghetti westerns" directed by Sergio Leone in the mid-1960s, which spawned many subsequent imitators.

Some of Pier Paolo Pasolini's works in the 1970s were considered part of a new neorealist sub-genre, even if Pasolini's attention to picaresque was this time openly declared and evident. The neorealist content would then be in an accessory description, spectacular and perhaps documentary, of some elements of true common life in Italy during and after the so-called economic "boom" of the 1960s.

In recent times other movies have been produced that deeply recall the neorealist canons, including works by Gianni D'Amelio and others. Arguably, something of neorealism can be found in most Italian cinema and often also in TV fiction.

Italian neorealism was inspired by French cinema verite (and deeply inspired the French New Wave), German Kammerspiel, and influenced the U.S. documentary movement and the Polish Film School. Its effects can be seen as recently as the Danish Dogme 95 movement.

## Significant Works in Italian Neorealism

Precursors and influences:

- The works of Giovanni Verga
- 1860 (Alessandro Blasetti, 1934)

- *Toni* (Jean Renoir, 1935)
- *La Nave bianca* (Francesco De Robertis, 1941)
- *Cristo si è Fermato a Eboli* (novel, Carlo Levi, 1947)

Main works:

- *Ossessione* (Luchino Visconti, 1943)
- *Roma, città aperta* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946)
- *Sciuscià* (Vittorio De Sica, 1946)
- *Paisà* (Rossellini, 1946)
- *Germania anno zero* (Rossellini, 1948)
- *Ladri di biciclette* (De Sica, 1948)
- *La Terra trema* (Visconti, 1948)
- *Stromboli* (Rossellini, 1950)
- *Umberto D.* (De Sica, 1952)