

Saverio Giovacchini, Robert Sklar (eds.),
Global Neorealism.
The Transnational History
of a Film Style,

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 Jackson 2012, pp. 273+IX

Although neorealism has never experienced a lack of scientific interest, over the last few years the theme has gained particular attention in the academic circles thanks to the publication, among others, of works that combine teaching intent and methodological updates (Haaland 2012; Noto, Pitassio 2010), studies that analyze the history of postwar Italian cinema in light of the innovations caused by neorealism (Barattoni 2012), research into formerly disregarded key aspects (Leavitt 2013), and even useful provocations that stimulate scholars researching in the field of Italian studies to address less familiar topics (O’Leary, O’Rawe 2011).

Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style, a collection edited by Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, follow this trend, yet provides an original point of view in order to pull neorealism out of the specific area of Italian studies and integrate it into the debate on global cinema.

The volume is organized into three parts, divided according to their historical proximity to the central phase of the neorealist phenomenon. The essays of the first section deal with Italian film culture of the 1930s and early 1940s, and focus on those films and filmmakers that “anticipate” postwar cinema (Zagarrio), on the relationships of intellectual exchange between Fascist and Soviet film cultures in their attempt to stand out as national cinemas – as well as on the impact that neorealism had on the production of

post-Stalinist Cinema of the Thaw (Salazkina), and the role of documentary films in relation to the debate on realism before World War II (Caminati).

The second part covers the way in which neorealism has been acclaimed and incorporated in the United States by the intellectual elites (Sklar) and marketed in the most suitable and profitable (Brennan), assumed as a compelling reference by the generation of critics/filmmakers of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Eades), and used as a critical and rhetorical argument in Argentina in the years of Peronism (Halperin). This section is closed, by the co-editor Saverio Giovacchini, with an essay dedicated to John Kitzmiller, a unique example of an African-American star in Italian postwar cinema and an effective starting point for examining the ways in which Italian culture has come to terms with its own colonial past and with the perceived threat of Americanization. The essays in the third part present neorealism as a completely global phenomenon and focus on those cultural institutions that have facilitated the reception and adaptation of neorealism, which as a consequence allowed national cinemas from very different geographical areas, such as Latin America (Mestman), India (Majumdar), West and North Africa (Niang), Brazil (Sarzynski) and Iran (Naficy), to emerge. Finally, the epilogue is devoted to the persistence of a neorealist legacy in contemporary Italian cinema (Carlorosi).

The relatively short length of the essays allows the editors to provide readers with a very broad array of case studies. What emerges as truly global and transnational is less a set of style rules linked to the “original” neorealism, than a range of patterns of adaptation and creolization. All over the world in fact, the

nebulous concept of neorealism is always mediated through a network of institutions, such as film festivals, academies, journals and state funded programs that are very often involved in and responsible for the building of national cinemas. The contributors prove that wherever the word “neorealism” is accepted and applied, it undergoes similar changes, potentially shifting from a critical category, to a style or a mode of production, or to a theoretical stronghold. Sometimes all these transitions are apparent, as in the professional trajectory of James Agee through criticism and filmmaking investigated by Robert Sklar.

Moreover, the same word can describe and cause different occurrences. The ideological connotations of neorealism vary according to particular conditions (Sarzynski) and can be obliterated for political reasons (Halperin), since the relationships between the intellectual elites and the cultural institutions that promote the realist discourse can be characterized by collaboration and rejection at once (Salazkina, Caminati). The reception of neorealism has usually been instrumental in the establishment of a locally rooted art cinema (Mestman), although its impact is traced back to the mainstream (Majudmar), and neorealist films themselves are marketed in the United States not as pure examples of art cinema, but as unstable compounds of art and exploitation (Brennan).

Such a variety of examples can affect the thorough elaboration of some of the historiographical and theoretical issues around which the contributions revolve. The notion of “national cinema”, for example, still being crucial in the majority of the essays, is not called into question, but rather referred to by means of assertions of film critics and practitioners, and the absence of a concept that has been highly influential over the past decade, such as that of “ImpersoNations” proposed by Thomas Elsaesser (2005) is notable. Furthermore, in many

cases the historiographical common denominator seems to be that of the neorealism as the aesthetic expression of a moral position, according to a tradition of scholarship that recalls the works of Millicent Marcus and Lino Micciché. This not only runs the risk of renationalizing neorealism (and each of its transnational expressions), as the editors point out, but also of restating the factors behind the assumption that realism is an inevitable effect of certain social and historical conditions.

Here lies the limit and also the strongest point of interest of this volume, which does not intend to add much to the understanding of neorealism as an all-Italian phenomenon, but nevertheless succeeds in broadening it. The more the essays turn away from the specific area of Italian studies and address distant contexts, the more they seem to demonstrate that neorealism is a moment of “the nationalization [...] of a widely international conversation about realism and political cinema that had been at the center of the 1930s. [...] In different ways, all of the conversation’s participants were concerned with the possibility of making cinema relevant to what they saw as their national realities” (*Ibidem*, pp. 9-10). The readers may therefore undertake the task to verify how long this conversation has gone on, how deeply and how far this “subterranean artistic tradition” has tunneled through the history and geography of global cinema, and most of all which are the entry points for exploring it and which, instead, are dead ends.

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Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam and Rajinder Dudrah (eds.), *Theorizing World Cinema*, I.B. Tauris, London 2012, pp. XXXII-229

Against the background of the increasingly global nature of the film market and film industry and the emergence of questions of transnationalism, globalisation, cosmopolitanism and world culture, the need undoubtedly arises to revisit the definition of world cinema and to reach a better grasp of how our understanding of the term has developed within the context of film studies and film history.

This is the main aim of the recently published edited collection *Theorizing World Cinema*: to problematise the collocation of world cinema within the disciplines of film studies and film history. In doing so this work present itself as a new addition to film studies’ re-engagement with the notion of world cinema, joining in this way a series of books published in the last decade which include Dennison and Lim’s edited collection *Remapping World Cinema*, Dina Jordanova’s *Cinema of the Periphery*, Ďurovičová and Newman’s *World Cinema: Transnational Perspectives* and (with a different focus) Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt’s *Global Art Cinema*.

As part of the recently launched I.B. Tauris World Cinema book series, *Theorizing World Cinema* offers a new theoretical discussion of the subject in order to relocate some of the most established meanings of world cinema by freeing the term from the negative binary division between Hollywood and “non-Hollywood” cinema, in favour of the adoption of

a polycentric approach. Previously introduced by Lúcia Nagib (2006) as the filmic adaptation of the notion of “polycentric multiculturalism” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 7), polycentric cinema implies a “world made of interconnected cinemas” (2006: 34) as it focuses on the idea of circulation in order to think of world cinema as a “positive, inclusive, democratic concept” (2006: 35). This theoretical argumentation against the binary system is effectively conceptualised in the introduction of the book written by the three editors, Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam and Rajinder Dudrah. In fact, it successfully engages with the limits of the discipline, inviting to overcome the Hollywood-centric perspective and to offer viable alternatives to the established understanding of world cinema. This reframing invites the adoption of “a positive and inclusive approach to film studies, which defines world cinema as a polycentric phenomenon with peaks of creation in different places and periods” (p. xxii). In order to address these peaks of creation, from India to South America, *Theorizing World Cinema* comprises twelve chapters – plus the introduction – organised in four “theoretical projects:” the national, the transnational, the diasporic and the realist. This structure is a consequence of the application of the polycentric method to traditional attitudes and new tendencies of film studies, from the theoretical models of transnational cinema to the role played by the notion of realism in the diachronic idea of world cinema. Featuring a series of exemplary case studies analysed by prominent scholars such as John Caughie, Ismail Xavier, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Laura Mulvey (to cite a few), the book ultimately