

Francesco Pitassio

Neorealist Film Culture, 1945–1954: Rome, Open Cinema

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019, pp. 382

Addressed to ‘a readership that is already widely familiar with neorealist cinema,’ Francesco Pitassio’s ambitious new study, *Neorealist Film Culture, 1945–1954: Rome, Open Cinema*, stands deliberately at the leading edge of scholarship in Italian screen studies. Rather than surveying once more the well-trodden territory of the neorealist canon, Pitassio has boldly ‘walked along the margins of neorealism,’ exploring terrain entirely overlooked in previous accounts and providing far-reaching insights well beyond the scope of more traditional investigations.

In the first chapter, Pitassio makes the case for abandoning the more restrictive definitions of neorealist art and for recognising instead the many different varieties of realism — local and international, traditionalist and modernist — that converged in the transitional moment of Italy’s post-war reconstruction. This convergence, he argues, led to the creation of ‘unique hybrids’ that could never be confined to the narrow strictures of the retrospectively created neorealist orthodoxies. The results of the convergences that characterised the post-war Italian scene were often contradictory: an anti-Fascist culture indelibly marked by its Fascist origins; a popular culture founded on a rejection of popular taste; a national cinema predicated on a transnational film style. As Pitassio shows, ‘this set of contradictions illustrates the difficulties neorealist culture had with the nation’s past and with national Otherness.’

Chapter 2 examines neorealism’s difficulties in rigorous detail. These difficulties, Pitassio shows, complicate traditional accounts of neorealism’s political significance, which have tended to celebrate, at times uncritically, the apparent commitment to represent with ethical fidelity the tragedies and triumphs of recent Italian history. Pitassio makes the provocative claim that ‘neorealist cinema has always been at odds with memory,’ not just betraying but also concealing the experience of history, and superseding it, until fictional representation displaces historical reality. Neorealism, in this account, serves the cause of post-Fascist political equivocation and moral obfuscation, allowing Italians to deny their complicity with Mussolini’s regime. Indeed, argues Pitassio, it succeeds in doing so by virtue of the very aesthetic innovations that have traditionally earned it the highest critical accolades: by rejecting the linear

narratives and unambiguous morality of Hollywood films, he contends, Italian filmmakers implied that notions of causality, responsibility, and culpability were too complex to resolve. ‘The neorealist style thus perfectly matched the need to jettison a troubled past and to begin again with forging national and international bonds,’ Pitassio explains.

Even as he identifies this perfect match between form and content, Pitassio — ever attentive to the margins — details its exceptions and complications, presenting a nuanced picture of neorealism’s politics and style. In chapter 2, with its stress on the evasion of historical memory, the compelling exception is documentary filmmaking, which was not only more politically forthright in its content but also more experimental, more modernist in its style than were fiction films. Chapter 3 examines post-war Italian film promotion, which Pitassio finds to be more innovative than was film production, and which he uses to complicate the relationship between neorealism and its Fascist past. Whereas neorealist filmmaking demonstrated substantial continuities with film under Fascism, film advertising, in contrast, broke new ground. ‘Instead of the abstraction used in pre-war examples,’ Pitassio explains, ‘post-war graphic film advertisements sought verisimilitude through “iconisation,”’ which entailed figurative rather than photographic realism, and which mirrored the aesthetics of the era’s popular art, exemplified by the covers of pulp novels and the contents of photo-romances. Pitassio thus identifies what he calls ‘a trilateral relationship between neorealism, the popular press, and post-war melodrama,’ revealing new connections between films, photography, graphic design, and advertising that advance the case well beyond the typical auteurist framework within which neorealism still tends to be discussed.

The fourth and final chapter proposes a similar advance in our understanding of the contributions of nonprofessional actors to neorealist cinema. Once again, Pitassio casts a wider net than is typical, attempting to capture not only the supposed quest for authenticity that led prominent directors to cast amateur actors in key roles, but also the competing considerations that inspired the creation of casts far more diverse than is often recognized. As he aptly puts it, ‘human figures within neorealist cinema came from varied training and professional backgrounds, carrying into films different social gestures, acting styles, and aesthetic traditions and conveying various cultural values attached to them.’ Pitassio is particularly interested in the new female figures that came to prominence after the war, explaining persuasively why we should not be surprised that actors like Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Lucia Bosè, and Silvana Mangano all got their first break in neorealist films, even as their subsequent star personas would seem to owe little to the neorealist aesthetic. He is no less persuasive in his analysis of the star who would seem instead to embody most fully the neorealist aesthetic: Anna Magnani, whose persona reveals for Pitassio the manifold ways in which post-war culture created authenticity.’ Crafting her ‘composite’ style, which borrowed from the theatre, the music hall, and other forms of popular performance, Magnani skilfully

Neorealist Film Culture, 1945–1954: Rome, Open Cinema

cultivated what Pitassio identifies as the ‘close relationship between her performing body and a popular crowd working both as a representative of the Italian people and an audience for her expressive behaviour.’ That relationship has never appeared with the kind of depth or clarity it does here, and with good reason. To take it in fully, to appreciate the sophisticated on- and off-screen operation that ensured its success, requires the kind of comprehensive approach Pitassio adopts in this study.

If there is a limit to *Neorealist Film Culture 1945–1954*, it is that the book contains no conclusion, afterward, or epilogue, no attempt to synthesise its arguments or to speculate about its implications for the field. The reviewer is thus compelled, even more than usual, to conjecture. Of course, it takes little imagination to see how, informed by Pitassio’s insights, scholarship on neorealism will be renewed and revised, evolving to consider more films — and much more besides film — than has been customary. Yet I would hazard to guess that scholarship across the field of screen studies — not just neorealist, and not just Italian — will likewise benefit from Pitassio’s countless discoveries and his capacious methodology.

[Charles Leavitt, University of Notre Dame]