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Christopher Wagstaff. *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach.* Toronto Italian Studies Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. ix + 504 pp. Illustrations. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9761-3; $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-9520-6.

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A New Look at Neorealism

Since its inception, Neorealist cinema has inspired so many studies, both popular and scholarly, that they amount to something of a cottage industry among film scholars and observers of Italian culture in general. For some, the years of Neorealism stand as a kind of Second Golden Era of Italian film, an apogee of national cultural production. During the eight or so years during which cinematic Neorealism flourished and in the decade thereafter, the battles over turf and terms were bitter, internecine affairs. Since then, however, a kind of critical dÃ©tente has settled in, and a broadly writ critical consensus was reached which can be summarized as followT: the technical, thematic, and stylistic qualities of Neorealist cinema were born in express opposition to those that marked Italian cinema during the Fascist *ventennio,* and were determined more or less exclusively by the exigencies of its political aims. A consequence of this axiom is the certainty that we can identify a shared (indeed, a single-minded) ethical impetus behind the Neorealistsâ films, which built the scaffolding on which their artistic realizations were constructed. As Christopher Wagstaff puts it, âSince films *could* presuppose a serious and incisive socal and cultural function for the cinema, they *should*â (p. 38).

To be sure, variations on this oversimplified view circulate on topics such as the degree to which the core agents of Neorealism (directors, screenwriters, critics, and directors of photography) explicitly articulated their intention to form a school; the extent to which Neorealism constituted a rupture with its cinematic predecessors; or the primacy accorded to certain technical qualities. But regardless of the nuances of the definitions and paradigms, there is almost total consensus about the centrality of ethical considerations to any reading of these films. Indeed, sixty-plus years after Roberto Rossellinâs masterpiece *Roma cittÃ aperta*, the ground of received wisdom about Neorealist ethics is so firmly trodden that oneâs first response to the news that 504 more pages about the movement are awaiting our attention might be something less than unvarnished delight. Another book on Neorealist cinema? Why now?

But Christopher Wagstaffâs splendid volume puts that question firmly to rest, because those 504 pages are not intended to constitute "The Definitive Study on Neorealism," in the manner, say, of the latest and greatest biography of Winston Churchill. On the contrary, and in sharp contradistinction to orthodox approaches to Neorealism, Wagstaffâs aim is to investigate three indisputably Neorealist films, *not* as representations of some contemporary historical reality, but rather, as the title indicates, as aesthetic artifacts. Reading against what he calls the âinstitution of Neorealismâ (that is, Neorealism âas defined by its critical receptionâ([p.37]), and according to which a film âwas evaluated according to whether it posited a positive cultural function for the cinema or was a regression into escapist entertainmentâ (p. 38), Wagstaff invites a radically ne,w and rather less pious approach to Neorealist cinema. He argues for an examination of Neorealist films that is largely independent of their historical referents (though not of historical context)–in other words, not as mirrors of reality, as conventional critical wisdom might have it, but as original aesthetic objects, to be interpreted in isolation from the profilmic events they depict. It is in some ways a difficult argument to make, not least because it runs counter to all that we think we know about Neorealism, and thus its success requires a vast and mighty critical arsenal. In ample possession (504 pages!) of both a tremendous quantity and variety of empirical data–tables and charts but also anecdotes, such as the ones that underscore the many contradictions and vagaries in Rossellinîâs declarations about his art–Wagstaff proffers a nuanced, crystalline argument, couched as a modest contribution. We are reminded regularly that his approach is not meant to be taken as the *only* approach to these films, just another approach, when in fact it is an extraordinarily daring move.And d Despite whatever initial misgivings the reader may feel upon seeing its size, this is a remarkable book and a highly readable one, due in equal parts to Wagstaffâs appealing narrative voice and to the clarity of his exposition.

The volumeâs initial chapters provide introductions to the theoretical terms at the base of the bookâs premise, but in point of fact they also offer highly synthetic reviews of terms and concepts that make the chapters accessible to the less-initiated (though not perhaps to the non-initiated) without bogging down the flow of the argument. A separate overview describes the Italian film industry with particular attention to Neorealismâs historical position as a kind of parentheses between the abrogation of the Legge Alfieri (1945) and the implementation of the Legge Andreotti (1949), laws that offered financial incentives to encourage the production of predictably remunerative (but not necessarily high quality) films that could reliably attract a sufficiently large paying audience. Had the hiatus between the laws not occurred, the argument goes, the riskily unspectacular, and more importantly unfamiliar, style of Neorealist films would have made them very difficult to produce (and indeed the three films with which Wagstaff deals were, we might imagine, questionable investments at the time). This chapter also contains individual subsections on production, screenwriting, performances, locations, and sound.

In the second chapter (âRealismâ), Wagstaff walks us through the exercise of investigating film as an object and determining the tools with which to study it, in order to justify his aesthetic approach. The chapter thus addresses the questions, Wâwhat is a film, what determines that a âthingâ belongs in the category of the aesthetic, and what kind of aesthetic artefact is a film? How does a film make reference to the real world, and what notions of ârealityâ govern what a neorealist filmmaker makes reference to? What do we understand by the notion of ânarrative„â what is the referent of a narrative, and are there features that characterize neorealist narratives? How do rhetorical notions help us to characterize features of an Italian neorealist fil?mâ (p. 41.)? This is, to my mind, Wagstaffâs most interesting chapter for the admirable agility with which he wields concepts and terms. More than the simple intellectual spadework necessary to prepare the garden to come, this section also contains several highly engaging discussions, such as the one on the kinship between Neorealism and melodrama, or a marvelous illustration of the distinction between types and tokens, involving a Martian and Michelangelo.

After these first two chapters, the stage is set for individual readings of three films. The centerpiece of the volume consists of lengthy chapters on, respectively, *Roma cittÃ aperta* (1945), *PaisÃ* (1946), and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948). It is in these chapters that the wind-up of the bookâs initial chapters converts into pitch, for these are chapters in which Wagstaffâs argument is made indisputably by the steady accretion of facts (not observations, which are contestable, Wagstaff notes, but facts like shot lengths). These are chapters in which God is very much in the details–to the extent that there are no fewer than twenty-seven appendices. Let me reiterate, however, that this is not a book of actuarial tables but rather a cogent and innovative look at material that, of late, had almost lost the ability to surprise.

Wagstaff offers painstakingly meticulous analysis in these chaptersof concerning empirical aspects of the films as varied as economic data on ticket sales; production arrangements and costs; length and scale of shots; and comparisons of directors of photography, the filmsâ overall structures, and the influence of the theater on their narrative organization. Though his analysis (to which I cannot do justice in this limited space) is specific to these three films, the methodology is more broadly applicable, and the result is a tidal wave of evidence in the service of the argument that these films are not best read, as they have been, exclusively for some content from which their social critique derives, but also as entities whose social critique is contingent upon its ability to âenact what the aesthetics of cinema could beâ (p. 397). The appendices provide empirical data and are welcome syntheses of some of the chaptersâ analytical underpinnings. Wagstaff also includes two pithy summaries of the historical context in which Neorealism was born and of conventional critical approaches to Neorealism. There are also some brief concluding remarks and an eighteen-page bibliography. In short, *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach*constitutes an enormously important new contribution to our understanding of these films and is necessary reading for students and scholars of Italian cinema.

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