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Style as site of negotiation: the case of realism and neo-realism

“To make cinema today is to tell a story in a clear and perfectly transparent language”

A. Bazin, *Le cinema est-il majeure?*, p.5, cit. in Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, p.54.

0. Introduction

In this paper, I will deal with narrative, clearness, and transparency – with the aim of understanding what we mean by the expression “a realistic film” or, if you will, with “cinematic realism”.

I am aware that under these labels we may find at least two different “realisms”. On the one hand, there is the classic “realism” of Hollywood, which is strictly tied to the practice and discipline of *decoupage*. On the other, Italian neo-realism, which seems to contradict the former, but which in fact can be understood as a different (and a renewed) answer to the same need – the claim for reality, through a clear and transparent narrative. Here I’ll try to explore the set of stylistic devices that Italian neo-realism employs, in order to understand its “discipline” (also in Foucaultian terms...). I would argue that, in the experience of Italian Neorealism, the need for reality is satisfied by a highly sophisticated cinema, which is able to *negotiate* between a set of filmic components; , some involve the typology of the filmic signifier, others the structure of the filmic representation or the process of filmic enunciation; and some deal with the “claim for the real”, while others seem to contradict it. This negotiation tends toward a compromise, which we may agree to call “the neorealist canon”.

1. Italian Neo-realism

In post-war Italian cinema (and post-war Italian theory), realism was conceived as the result of a moral attitude. Such attitude consisted in a number of main imperatives: to look at reality without prejudice; to describe everyday life, with its non-heroic events; to show human behaviour and its contradictions; to criticize social constraints in the name of a new model of engaged art and anti-fascist society. This moral attitude was supposed to produce a “style” directly tied to – and dependant on – the sensibility of a group of film-makers who had nothing in common but this tendency.

A revision of Italian Neorealism allows us to arrive at another insight. In these films, realism springs not simply from a moral attitude, but from the adoption of a number of formal and communicative devices: a film is “realistic” inasmuch as it can produce an “effect of reality”, due to the employment of a set of formal and communicative strategies. These devices are more numerous than the bazinian triplet “long take – depth of field – moving camera”. They can be grouped into four general fields: the existential connection with the reality of the filmic signifier (and the indexical status of the photographic image); the representation of the reality provided by the film (and the verisimilitude of the depicted world); the linguistic process through which the world is presented as “real” (i.e. the veridiction implied in the filmic enunciation), and the social trust in film as a witness of reality (i.e. the confidence and the belief of a community of film-goers).

I will try to sort through a partial list of these devices.

2. The filmic signifier and its indexicality

A certain number of clues define the filmic signifier as “caused by” and “close to” empirical reality. The sign is thus experienced as “ontologically” linked to its referent (see the concept of index in Peirce; and the metaphors of the veil or fingerprint in Bazin). Among these cues are:

- a. the ability of the camera to “grasp” the real. The opening shots of *Bicycle Thieves* and *Bellissima* are two examples; the characters, who are the main point of interest (Ricci in the first film, Maria in the second), must be located and accessed by the camera. In the first shot, they are off screen (literally: lost), and the camera “finds” them, thanks to a pan and crane that “explore” the space.
- b. the ability of the camera to “witness” reality “as it is”. The “dark” images in the opening sequence of *Open City* are a good example. If the light is not sufficient, you should not add to it. Another element of paramount importance is the use of real settings (vs. studio settings).
- c. the absence of any mediation. In this regard, the casting is interesting. The “miscast” roles in *Open City* (both Fabrizi and Magnani were formerly known for “varietà” and film comedies). The use of non-professional actors gives a sense of proximity to life, to everyday reality

3. Filmic representation and the verisimilar

The concept of verisimilitude refers us to Aristotle: imitation in tragedy concords with necessity and the verisimilar. Verisimilar is not what happened, but what can happen, the “probable” – and what happens is “proof” of what can happen. The shift from “what can happen” to “what happens, in the way in which it happens”, and vice-versa, is the core strategy of mimesis. In Italian neo-realism, we may understand this shift in different ways:

- a. a tragedy with comic components: films often dealing with dramatic situations, casting characters taken from everyday life.
- b. a non-teleological narrative: see *Bicycle Thieves*, in which each section of the story is based on a goal, which fades as a new goal arises (the search for work, which becomes the search for a bicycle, then the thief, and finally the son’s love...). The narrative presents a “flow” of events and a continuous displacement. See also Zavattini, and the idea that “instrumental” moments do not exist; there are only “essential” ones, on which the camera must remain.
- c. the tendency toward a “whole”: narrative situations are depicted in “all” their components, without any regard for their relevance. See Rossellini and his trans-political attitude
- d. the unfolding of a shared experience: stories foreground a common sense of grief for a national tragedy; or a collective memory.
- e. consequently, we have the depiction of everybody’s experience - the flow of life, and the shared past. It does not mean that the narrative makes reference to “immediate experience”; this “immediacy” is tied to a set of social discourses that shape a common sense of things (Robert Warshaw?) – yet a reference to a “possible” which is “realized”.

4. Filmic enunciation and veridiction

The third element at stake is filmic enunciation, i.e. the act or process through which we may consider a film not as a meaningful product, but as a production of meaning (see also a second definition of enunciation: the conversion of a “langue” into a discourse - Greimas). This insight enables us to foreground the implied instance which “moves” the

discourse, and the self-reference of the discourse. What kind of instance governs the neo-realist films? A First Person narrative? An individual or a collective First Person? An institutional First Person? To answer these questions, it is useful to take in account:

- a. the voiceover: *Paisan*, *Germany Year Zero*, *The Earth Trembles*, *Bitter Rice*. Captions: *The Earth Trembles*, *Germany Year Zero*
- b. the use of documentary footage as “quotation”: *Paisan*
- c. the shift from a non-diegetic enunciator to a diegetic-enunciator. I.e.: *The Earth Trembles*: from extra-diegetic (captions in opening sequence), to infra-diegetic (the voiceover), to diegetic (sequence of Ntoni facing Rosa)
- d. the internal observer: *Bicycle Thieves*
- e. consequently, we have the objectification of a subjective instance, which –still maintains the strength of a First Person witness

5. A social trust

The fourth element at stake is the confidence of the filmgoer in what he/she sees. This confidence is something stronger than the “intentional suspension of disbelief” at work in narrative: it is a positive reliability, the certitude that filmic images “record” and “witness” reality. In order to analyze such trust, we need to move outside the filmic text, to take into account documents like reviews, debates, filmgoers’ letters, etc.; but we may also analyze the filmic text both in its “perlocutive” components, as a “promise” to its spectator, and in its “metalinguistic” components, as a representation of its own reception. In this respect, possible questions to be asked include:

- a. Whom/what do we trust? The depicted world or the film-maker himself?
- b. How is trust represented in the film? The theme of the individual and social belief in *Bicycle Thieves* (the loss of all confidence) in *Bellissima* (the illusion), and in *Senso* (the deceit).

6. Negotiations: points of contrast and tensions

A “realistic” film is neither an entity that takes into account all these elements, nor one that uses them in an ordered and coherent way. On the contrary, a text is always a site of conflicts, tensions, and even emptiness. How and where could the different elements of filmic realism conflict and collapse?

- a. At a single level, we may have the co-existence of realistic and non-realistic cues. Examples: at the level of the signifier, *Sciuscià* places index and icons side by side (sequences set in streets and in prison - an almost Piranesi-like structure). *The Earth Trembles* does the same by simultaneously using real settings and a highly stylized (pictorial) composition (i.e. the wives waiting on the rocks for their husbands after the storm). At the level of representation, *Open City* mixes a set of well-structured fictional characters and a non-teleological narrative. Etc.
- b. We have the same co-existence of realistic and non-realistic cues between various levels. In *Bellissima*, the representation is a “portrait” of everyday life, as the enunciation is self-dubious (Magnani in face of the mirror asking herself “What does it mean “to act”? If I pretend to be another...”).
- c. Furthermore, let me remind you that the soundtrack was never live-recorded, but included reconstructed noises and dubbed dialogues.

7. Negotiations: suturing the contrast

However, the contrast between a variety of trends and drives at each level and among different levels could be “arranged” in different ways.

- a. dominance: in *Sciuscià*, the sequences eschewing a documentary attitude (the long section of the film set in prison, or the dream-sequence of the horse) are almost put into

parenthesis – and the “realistic” elements (the acting by the boys, the “plein air” setting) come to the forefront.

b. saturation: i.e. in *Paisan*, proximity becomes a semantic element as well. There is a passage from situations based on “misunderstandings” (Carmela’s and Joe from Jersey’s inability to have a conversation in the first episode) to those of complete understanding and shared experience (Cingolani and Al die together in the last episode). From symmetry to co-occurrence, this echoes the closeness of the signifier to reality.

c. displacement: *Bitter Rice*, and the long debate following the film’s release in the communist Newspaper *L’Unità*, is a good case study. Leftist militants reacted against what they consider a “false” representation of the rice-keeper world. The newspaper’s director, however, though “condemning” the film, claimed that its maker, a militant, deserved their trust.

When a set of even contrasting elements are balanced and connected, thanks to a device that “ties them together”, we may say that the set is “sutured”.

It would be interesting to investigate the “suturing elements” in neo-realism: sometimes they are formal devices, sometimes they are thematic components.

8. Style as a site of negotiations

According to my approach, it is difficult to accept the idea that style is “a film’s systematic and significant use of the techniques of the medium”, or “the texture of the film’s images and sounds” (Bordwell, p. 4). Of course, style is *also* that.

But what we have to foreground are the dynamics between different components, rather than their structure; a set of conflicts, rather than a texture; and, at the same time, the way in which they negotiate their potential conflicts, through a pivotal element “keeping them together”.

In this sense, style is *also*, but not *only*, a *pattern* of elements in use, able to absorb changes and new pressures. Style could be better conceived as an *open structure*, always instable, which is able to find an (apparent) stability through (local and momentary and transitory) compromises, and thanks to suturing elements.

Of course, we also have stylistic “canons”. It is the moment in which a certain arrangement becomes a true *institution*. This institution, as literary institutions do, may survive the conditions of its own existence: any “canon” has an intrinsic force, and can work, for example, for pure aesthetic purposes (see Marx’s critique of the survival of Greek myths in an industrial age). This institution may also survive because it finds new motivations (i.e. new suturing elements: see, the neo-neo-realism in Italian cinema of the sixties, which works as a political manifesto, on the eve of the “historical compromise” between Catholic parties and the left wing parties). The “canon” is often a good “scheme” in which new contents and new goals fit. But this institution, as any institution does, is also ready to collapse under the attack of external (I mean: historical, social, etc.) elements, under the pressure of an internal exhaustion and under the blow of parody. When the tricks of a negotiation end, a style disappears.