

**Film Appreciation**  
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**Lecture - 07**  
**Traditions in World Cinema Italian Neo-Realism**

Good morning.

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We will be continuing our discussion on traditions in world cinema. And, today's topic is Italian neo-realism. So, we have been... We know that, there are other traditions in world cinema such as the French New Wave; we have been talking about the German expressionism and British New Wave, several others. During the course of this discussion, we will also some time later talk about the Iranian New Wave cinema, the Latin American cinema. So, we are now... The attempt is here now to look at the major cinematic movements. So, we talk about Italian neo-realism today. But, before I talk neo-realism, we should be able to understand what is realism after all. So, what is realism?

Now, see realism again like other... We are using the cinematic terminology here – cinematic vocabulary here. But, it all goes back to literary terminologies. So, realism finds its routes in the writings of French writers such as Honore de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, the guy who wrote Madame Bovary; and, Emile Zola, who was also associated with the great naturalistic tradition. Now, historically, we are at the point, where artists

reacted against the romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. I am giving you a brief historical background. So, there was something called the romantic movement; and, realism was a sort of response to that. Now, realism after all depicts the everyday life – particularly, the everyday life of the middle and the lower class as they exist day to day. As opposed to the exotic, the romantic, the ideal as was depicted during the romantic period. So, everyday becomes worthy of high art. Now, it also led to a certain degree of interest in the documentation of real life. So, realism focused on depiction of characters and places and also situations as they actually appear in life, not perfect, not completely flawed, but a natural combination of the two.

Now, prior to realism, the norm was to make characters less like real people and more like symbolic characters – the hero, the villain; Damsel in Distress – all these archetypes. In cinema, realism is a stylistic choice and can be understood as an illusion that what is shown on the screen is actually connected to reality. Now, realism is a contested term. What is real? People say Satyajit Ray's cinema or Satyajit Ray's cinema is highly realistic. People may also question that, how realistic is that kind of cinema. So, realism is a contested and a much debated term; that is, are all things which we can recognize; are they real, are all recognizable things real. It is a mix of devices to disguise the fact that, the fact what we really see in real life.

Now, with the development of photography and camera, was able to capture and objective truth about the world. Realistic films present what appears on their screen as natural. Now, one of the very first film of this period was one of the very first film actually. I am sorry to use the term – one of the very first film; or, the first film ever was something called arrival of a train at railway station at this station; and also, Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory in 1895 by the French film pioneer – The Lumiere brothers. And, it was so real as close to reality as life. So, I would highly recommend that, all of you watch these two films that, Arrival of the Train at the Station and also Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory, the very first films ever made in 1895 by Lumiere brothers.

Now, it may be noted that, in a realist film, hero is not always easy to identify with and often carries a certain degree of moral ambiguity about him. In other words, to make a protagonist appear as a real person, a realist film must attribute those characteristics on the character, which the audience perceives as real. Now, where is all this leading to? Towards Italian neo-realism, because what is neo? It must be a revival of interest in

realism. So, cinema began perhaps showing certain degree of commitment towards depicting reality. But, somewhere along the life – along the way, fiction overpowered. Something alert – a taste for adventure and romanticism it took over. So, Italian neo-realism was a response to that. So, we need to connect realism with Italian neo-realism.

Now, major theorists of realism are Rudolph Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer and Andre Bazin. Now, Bazin in his *What is cinema?* says photography does not create eternity as art does; it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption. Here he implies that, photography has a historical purpose in capturing a view of the world forever. This kind of film making is associated with the kinds of films that were made in France in the 30s particularly by directors such as Jean Renoir; and, while talking about Renoir, I would suggest that you watch his film – *Got the Rules of the Game*. So, this is one film due to copyright acts, we may not be able to show you actual clippings from films, but what I would suggest is that, you keep watching these films; and, I would be discussing these films and referring to these films, particularly certain scenes from these films quite often. So, these films with their focus on its stories about the masses and kinds of hardships common people faced; they were all about that. Renoir's use of the long take also helped in his brand of cinema, which resulted in helping the ((Refer Time: 07:54)) to navigate their way around the frame rather than getting manipulated by editing techniques.

Now, very close... I am making a jump now from the early kind of realistic cinema and something more recent; something or so 1895 we had one revolution called invention of cinema and the first ever film. And then, in 100 years from then, we were in 1995, where people like Lars von Tier established something called the Dogme movement. So, Dogme movement – Dogme 95 as it is called, it was established in 95 in Denmark by Lars von Tier and Thomas Vinterberg. It sets out the aims in a manifesto which is referred to as a Vow of Chastity. Dogme focused on form and not on form and content. The idea is to tell his stories in bare and basic form and expose the artificial nature of filmic story telling. With respect to content, most Dogme films deal with the bleaker aspects of life. Some of the Dogme principles are shooting on location and using no props. Sound must not be produced, it should be as true to life as possible. Camera must be handheld. And, you may recall that, these are the features of the French New Wave also. They also talked about using or shooting films in color with no a special lights and also avoid using optical work and filters. They shunt melodrama and also shunt a special

temporal alienation.

The idea that film should be about here and now; genres are unacceptable to the Dogme's – to the principles of Dogme. And, format should be 35 mm. And, most interestingly the director must not be credited. You can relate this to the theory of auteurism. Now, there is another concept called cinema verite, which is literally truthful cinema. Cinema verite films are usually shot with light, easily portable, inexpensive equipment, handheld cameras, on actual locations with real people, and not professional actors, and on a relatively small budget. The films are usually shot without a script and assembled later in editing. So, these are the... So, these are the principles. This is how cinema verite is generally understood and there is a film called Cinema Verite, 2011. I would suggest that you please watch it.

While talking about realism, there is also a concept of social realism especially, soviet social realism, which is at the center of social realists cinema; and, it fully recognizes the ideological potential of cinema. For example, the works of Russian film maker Sergei Eisenstein; and, these works are the most important films in this category; however, this kind of cinema with a strong ideological over tones has been embraced in other countries also. For example, our own brand of social realist cinema, for example, I would say Saeed Mirza's Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai. It was 1981 film starring Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. So, it comes quite close to social realism and several other films of the so-called parallel cinema movement in India. The another film called Manthan, a Shyam Benegal movie; that also I would recommend – if you are not already familiar with that, you please watch it as an exemplar of social realistic cinema.

We have another brand of realism; kitchen sink realism, which is a part of British New Waves cinema. It is particularly related to the literary movement of the 50s in Britain, an important characteristic; characteristic is a plot based on youth – the young people – using their dialogue, their attitudes, their angst, their anxieties. The idea was to explore social and political issues through a new kind of cinema and some of the great films of this period. Most of them are based on works of literature, theater and novels; so, Look Back in Anger, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, A Taste of Honey, etcetera. Now, from here, we move on to our discussion of Italian neo-realism; so, a brief background of Italian cinema. In 1905, the first Italian studios were established. They were owned by two of the largest production companies Cines and Italia – both of which made successful period films costume dramas. Some of which were the Last Day of Pompeii,

The Fall of Troy and Cabiria. Now, Cabiria is a story of a slave girl, which took 6 months to shoot the film, shoot in studios and also partly and partially on location. It contains technical innovations such as dolly and crane shots. And, its success in America inspired people such as D. W. Griffith and Cecil DeMille to launch big budget productions.

The First World War and competition from the US film industry put an end to the large scale Italian productions. Ironically, it was the fascist regime under Mussolini that revived Italian cinema. Mussolini unlike Hitler or Stalin did not aim at total control over the content or style of the Italian commercial cinema. For propaganda reasons, Mussolini preferred documentary films and news reels produced by an agency called L U C E. The fascist regime viewed Hollywood as its model and saw cinema more as a vehicle of entertainment rather than propaganda. So, you can compare this with Hitler and the entire propagandas machinery that he was associated with. There was a film called The Triumph of Will, which was made in order to project Hitler in a very positive light. But, Mussolini more or less refrained from this. So, he was more interested in cinema as a form of entertainment in artistic form rather than propagandas form.

In the 30's, Italian cinema was dominated by the so-called White Telephone films. And, these films are about the upper class – the aristocrats, the wealthy people of society. In 1935, the fascist regime founded a major film school – the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. In 1937, Mussolini inaugurated a film complex Cinecittà. And then, a journal called Cinema was launched during this period. In 1942, Alessandro Blasetti made Four Steps in the Clouds, which is the film that anticipated neo-realism by using humble characters and ordinary background. And then, there was The Siege of Alcazar by Augusto Genina, which celebrates the defense of the fortress in the Toledo region during the Spanish Civil War by Francos – General Franco's fascist. It is in the style of a fictional documentary. The fictional documentary style generally meant adding a love story to adventure or war story. And, this kind of hybrid plot became a typical part of postwar neo-realist cinema. The most significant documentary is shot from the Italian armed forces were Men on the Bottom by Francesco De Robertis and many fictional documentaries by the great Roberto Rossellini.

Now, one of the key names of this period is Leo Longanesi. Now, Leo Longanesi was a journalist – a staunch journalist and a staunch supporter of Mussolini. He gave the motto – Mussolini is always right. And, he advocated extremely simple realistic films without elaborate sets. With The fall of Mussolini and The End of the War, international

audiences were suddenly introduced to Italian films – especially the works of Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti. Italian directors by this period combined the desire for cinematic realism with social, political or economic themes that would not have worked under the fascist regime. Now, neo-realism cinema generally refers to the films of working class people. And, it often depicts their abysmal poverty. The peak period was the 40s and the 50s. This movement tabbed into a particular transition in Italian life and became a vehicle for film makers interested in vivid description of history and society. The underlying message is that, in a just society, their wealth and means of wealth would be more evenly distributed. Often these films would be based on true incidents and they often use news reel footage. They were shot on actual locations and used non-professional actors. The plot and the characters were reused as a vehicle for ideas. And, there was an emphasis on sound and avoidance of heavy musical scores.

In the late 1940's, a neo-realism influence spread to Hollywood. People started using actual locations. And, city was used as an important character. And, long takes were used to bring about a touch of reality. Again think of our own Satyajit Ray and his brand of cinema and also directors in Germany, Spain and Eastern Europe too were influenced by the Italian neo-realist movement. The first Italian neo-realist film was *Ossessione* directed by Luchino Visconti. It was based on American pulp writer James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Again some major Italian neorealist were Roberto Rossellini. He was named the father of modern film by *Cahiers du Cinema* – influential French film journal along with Jean Renoir. He was the most influential name among the *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers. The *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers from France – they held him in high regards. Rossellini's first three films are *The White Ship*, *A Pilot Returns* and *The Man with the Cross*. However, it was with *Open City* that he broke into this movement called Italian neo-realism; and, came to be associated with this movement. The film vies together a variety of stories of Romans during the occupation of Italy by the German forces. It is shot on locations with non-professional actors using long wide takes.

Rossellini's next film *Paisa* contains six vignettes from the liberation of Italy, a chronicle of 1943 to 1946. And, it was followed by *Germany, Year Zero*, which is a devastating tale of defeat and solitude. And, in one of the series – in one of the scenes, recording of a Hitler's speech echoes over the devastated landscape. Together these films provide us with great commentary on the then contemporary social issues at a time of

political movements of global importance. Rossellini famously said I am not a pessimist to perceive evil, where it exists is in my opinion a form of optimism. After a spate of neorealist films, he made several films with Ingrid Bergmen, the Hollywood actress whom he later married and also made several documentaries on an about Italy during this phase.

Another important film maker of this period is Vittorio De Sica, who grew up in a lower middle class district of Naples and joined the stage. He began his career as a leading man in light-hearted romantic films, but soon took to direction. And, his *Shoeshine* is scripted by the neorealist theorists Cesare Zavattini, is an account of the Shoeshine boys of the post-war Italy. And, the object poverty these children lived in. His *The Bicycle Thief* is commonly regarded as the film that heralded Italian neo-realism in a real big way – in a major way. I would recommend that you watch *The Bicycle Thief* and perhaps we would discuss that as part of our course on film appreciation, which the film is a characteristic of the Italian neo-realism with its use of non-professional actors and shooting on actual roman locations. Its influence can be felt on Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* and films as recent as *Children of Heaven*, 1999 from Iran.

Other Italian masters include Federico Fellini, whose early work reflects a pre-occupation with human weakness and also an interest in illusion and loneliness. In *La Strada*, which is a 1954 film and it won him international recognition; Fellini unfolds a tale of travelling circus, a recurring motive or recurring milieu in his works. *La Dolce Vita* is an eloquent statement on life and its excesses and the role of so-called paparazzi in the modern times. This is a film where the plot centers on the exploits of a gossip journalist. And, this is one of the key film; this is one of the first times that the term paparazzi was used. Fellini's next major film was *8 and a half*; it is a semi autobiographical account of an artist's creative process. The film traces the film director a partially based on Fellini himself. And, the plot is that, with a new project set to start and no script, the film maker has come to a dead end. And, the director – the fictional director plumbs the memories of his childhood and his hidden desires for inspiration. One of the famous lines go as – I have nothing to say, but I want to say it. Most of Fellini's films are autobiographical, quite personal in nature; they are influenced by his life, his dreams and also his love for performative arts.

Then, we move on to another influential filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni. Antonioni began his professional life as a critic and was fired by Mussolini's regime on his leftist

views. Before turning into an independent director, he contributed to the screenplay of Rossellini's *A Pilot Returns*. His early film such as *Chronicle of a Love Affair*, which is influenced by Visconti's *Ossessione*; and thus, *The Cry* showed the influence of neo-realism and established his aesthetics of alienation. His other major films include *L'Avventura*, *Blow Up*, *L'eclisse* and *Zabriskie Point*. *Blow up* is particularly important, which is Antonioni's view of the world of modern fashion and it is also a provocative murder mystery that examines the existential nature of reality interpreted through photography. Interestingly, it was set in the mid-1960s – mid-1960s London and which is a locale, which was fairly unfamiliar to the director. An important think about *Blow Up* is how it influenced the Hollywood film makers and one of the key films that inspired filmmakers of that period to experiment more with cinema.

So, moving on with Italian neo-realist directors, another major name is Pier Paolo Pasolini, who is widely respected as a poet novelist and director. He is one of the most controversial and ambitious filmmakers. His writings were scandalous and iconoclastic; and, he celebrates the low-lives of the Italian societies such as hustlers, pimps, thieves, etcetera. His one major film he has made a handful of great films; but, a major film is *The Gospel According to Matthew*, which was film in the district of Basilicata and its capital Matera. It was shot in a neo-realistic style without a screenplay. And, Passolini's *Interpretation of Christ* was done by a non-professional Spanish student. And, Mary at the time of Crucifixion is Passolini's own mother and the director uses minimal sets and simple cameras to capture the story. His depiction of Jesus is more along the lines of a messiah of the countercultural times and an angry young man. Much of the dialogues in the film are in a debating style, where a question is answered with a question or a parable. So, Italian cinema – the other great names are Bernardo Bertolucci, the director of *The Last Tango in Paris*, *The Last Emperor*, *Little Buddha* and so on. And, recent Italian film cinema continues to enthrall the audience all over, for example, *IL Postino*, *Life is Beautiful* and *Cinema Paradiso*. So, we continue with our lectures on traditions in world cinema in our next classes.

Thank you very much.