





Cover: *La Terra Trema*

Above: *Ossessione*

(Photofest)

National Gallery of Art

The Earth Trembles: An Introduction to Italian Neorealist Cinema

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*il vero dell'aspra sorte e del depresso loco che natura
ci die (the truth about harsh fortune and the depressed
place that Nature gave us)*

—Giacomo Leopardi, *La Ginestra*

In 1948 the Italian film director Luchino Visconti (1906–1976) made *La Terra Trema* (*The Earth Trembles*), the story of the rituals and hardships of life in the small Sicilian fishing village of Aci Trezza near Catania. Based on the nineteenth-century realist novel *I Malavoglia* by Giovanni Verga (1840–1922), *La Terra Trema* was, in part, Visconti's response to films by such French directors as Jean Renoir (1894–1979) and René Clair (1898–1981). More importantly, the film was a vibrant example of the tenets of neorealism advocated in the 1941 article "Truth and Poetry: Verga and the Italian Cinema" in the Italian avant-

garde journal *Cinema*. The article called on Italian filmmakers to return to the rich tradition of Italian realist literature, going back to the nineteenth century, specifically to the novels and stories of Verga. His stark, impersonal, and often fatalistic portrayals of human experience as well as his sensitivity to regional dialects and customs were praised as inspiration for a relevant cinema meant to confront the problems of modern Italy in the 1940s.

With the fall of Fascism in 1943, Italian filmmakers embraced a new freedom that encouraged this direct and authentic style of moviemaking. Beginning with the films of Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977) and continuing in the work of Vittorio De Sica (1902–1974) and the early films of Visconti, neorealism sought a more democratic spirit, telling stories of the lives of ordinary people with little or no moralizing. The settings were the streets and buildings of real cities, many of which still bore the scars of the war. The performers, even those cast in major roles, were often nonprofessional actors. If the films had a style, it might loosely be termed documentary (or realistic): they eschewed subjective camera work and editing as well as romantic effects of lighting; they allowed scenes to play out in real time, however slowly or methodically; and they drew dialogue from the street, even when the source of a script was a literary text. Indeed, literary texts that inspired Italian neorealist films were themselves written in a vernacular style stressing common speech patterns and regional dialects. (*La Terra Trema*, which featured the Sicilian dialect spoken in Aci Trezza, was screened in the rest of Italy, and even in other parts of Sicily, with Italian subtitles.)

This golden age of Italian cinema extends roughly from 1943 with Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, Città Aperta*) to 1952 with De Sica's *Umberto D.* The neorealist films produced during this period are among the greatest in world cinema and include Rossellini's *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) and *Germania Anno*

Zero (*Germany Year Zero*, 1947), the final two chapters in his War Trilogy; *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946) and *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) by De Sica; and an early formative film by Visconti, *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943).

These directors based their films on screenplays and contributions by such talented writers as Cesare Zavattini (1902–1989), Suso Cecchi d'Amico (1914–2010), Giuseppe De Santis, (1917–1997), and the young Federico Fellini (1920–1993). They provided the human stories and the ear for everyday speech so important in neorealist cinema. Inspiration also came from the literary successors to the realist tradition of Verga, including some of Italy's greatest postwar writers: Ignazio Silone (1900–1978), Elio Vittorini (1908–1966), Cesare Pavese (1908–1950), Carlo Levi (1902–1975), and Vasco Pratolini (1913–1991). Predating or appearing contemporaneously with many neorealist films were such novels as *Pane e Vino* (*Bread and Wine*, 1937) by Silone; *Conversazione in Sicilia* (*Conversations in Sicily*, 1941) by Vittorini; and *Cristo si è Fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 1945) by Levi.

The historical antecedents of neorealism are disputed. Whereas some scholars find that the roots of neorealism extend back to the Fascist (1922–1943) and pre-Fascist periods of Italian cultural history, others have attempted to sever its connections to Italy's Fascist past. Simply stated, neorealism's relationship to the earlier history of Italian cinema is complex. Filmmaking in the Fascist period has only recently begun to receive the kind of scholarly attention it deserves, and what emerges is a cinema that was neither as Fascist nor as propagandistic as once thought. A host of talented prewar filmmakers, including Alessandro Blasetti (1900–1987), Mario Camerini (1895–1981), and Ferdinando Maria Poggioli (1897–1945), anticipate neorealist techniques and goals. Finding continuities

or breaks between Italy's pre- and postwar cinema history, however, seems to depend upon approach, prejudice, politics, and methodology.

An intriguing political aspect of neorealism is its connection to Marxism and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Although he wrote very little on cinema itself, his belief in the cross-fertilization of politics and culture and in the importance of art as a catalyst for breaking down regional barriers and establishing national identity related directly to cinema. He viewed it as a populist art form capable of reaching a larger audience more easily and cheaply than theater could. Ironically, neorealist films were attacked by both the Italian Right and Left. From the Right came diatribes against the vulgar stories emphasizing unsavory characters, unemployment, poverty, and crime. From the Left came disappointment in neorealism's failure to create a focused and coherent manifesto for changing society.

With the arrival of Italy's so-called economic miracle in the mid-1950s, the form and content of neorealist films lost much of their relevance and impact. A new group of filmmakers went to work, including Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), and Francesco Rosi (b. 1922). These directors, however, emerged from the creative crucible of neorealist cinema, and many of their early films—Fellini's, *La Strada* (1954), Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961), Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), and Antonioni's early documentary shorts—can only be understood against that backdrop.

