

ONE

“In Defense of Rossellini”

“If the word has any meaning - whatever the differences that arise over its interpretation, above and beyond a minimal agreement - in the first place it stands in opposition to the traditional dramatic systems and also to the various other known kinds of realism in literature and film with which we are familiar, through its claim that there is a certain "wholeness" to reality. I borrow this definition, which I consider to be as correct as it is convenient, from Amedee Ayfre (**Cahiers du Cinema**, No. 17).

'Neorealism is a description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole. Neorealism contrasts with the realist aesthetics that preceded it, and in particular with naturalism and verism, in that its realism is not so much concerned with the choice of subject as with a particular way of regarding things.'

If you like, what is realist in **Paisa** is the Italian Resistance, but what is neorealist is Rossellini's direction-his presentation of the events, a presentation which is at once elliptic and synthetic.

To put it still another way, neorealism by definition rejects analysis, whether political, moral, psychological, logical, or social, of the characters and their actions. It looks on reality as a whole, not incomprehensible, certainly, but inseparably one. This is why neorealism, although not necessarily antispectacular (though spectacle is to all intents and purposes alien to it) is at least basically antitheatrical in the degree that stage acting presupposes on the part of the actor a psychological analysis of the emotions to which a character is subject and a set of expressive physical signs that symbolize a whole range of moral categories.”

In this passage, Bazin seeks to uncover and perhaps set a future framework for what it means to be “neorealist.” First, he points out that it inherently rejects other traditional forms of expression in theater (and literature). From the ground up, a neorealist film inserts nothing beautiful for beauty's sake. Instead, to quote his friend Amédée Ayfre (who is in fact paraphrasing someone else), the way of neorealist filmmaking is to be “surrounded by a bloc of reality account of the fact that everything is filmed in such a way as to produce the dense texture of life which, to a quote that predates Sartre, is the only true measure of beauty.” (Cahiers 185.)

“The dense texture of life.” This is perhaps the best way to describe the intentions of a neorealist film. It is a presentation of life as it is, showing equal parts beauty, ugly, and anything in between. From Ayfre's assertion, it is easy to make the next jump to understanding the perspective of a neorealist film. If a documentary is a realistic portrayal of history, then neorealism is historical fiction. More important to the neorealist film than historical accuracy, then, is a realistic portrayal of the abrasive truths, non sequiturs, and inequalities of life. Rossellini, for instance, goes to great pains to preserve the jagged edges and imperfections of the world as we know it.

But now the genre needs something that sets it apart from realism. Bazin turns to Ayfre in his own article for the distinction. Basically, Ayfre explains that the neorealist movement differs from realism in that it still manages to have its own story. Not only the aesthetics of the film, but also the presentation of events, are realist. Instead of simply describing the real world as accurately as possible, the neorealist filmmaker goes to great pains to make sure that the camera and editing serve to be unbiased, while at the same time letting the story run a course that is as close to “natural” as possible. If one event is out of place, arbitrary or excessive, the cohesive nature of the film will be lost. Like Bazin says, a good neorealist film “is at once elliptic and synthetic.” He makes the distinction that unlike realism, neorealism “is always reality as it is visible through an artist, as refracted by his consciousness-but by his consciousness as a whole and not by his reason alone or his emotions or his beliefs- and reassembled from its distinguishable elements.”

Bazin makes the argument that a moral message does *not* necessarily upset the delicate aesthetic and storytelling elements of a film. Rather, he postulates, one can operate successfully with the others, so long as the film does not become a dramatization of the moral dilemma presented. Later in the article, he says “You would look in vain in the works of Rossellini for some such distinction of event and intended effect. There is nothing in his films that belongs to literature or to poetry, not even a trace of “the beautiful” in the merely pleasing sense of the word. Rossellini directs facts. It is as if his characters were haunted by some demon of movement... The world of Rossellini is a world of pure acts, unimportant in themselves but preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning.”

Amédée Ayfre, for his part, muddles the argument even more. He argues that the films we know as “neorealist” should be more accurately called “phenomenological.” Ayfre asks: “Did neorealism re-chart worlds already mapped in detail, or did it strike out on its own path? In other words, should the accent be on the ‘realism’ or on the ‘neo’?” (Caheirs 182)

Amédée Ayfre, “Neo-Realism and Phenomenology,

TWO

Viaggio in Italia

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktAVGKCUPAs#t=30m40s>

Until 31:45

This sequence shows Katherine and Alex dining together after another day spent apart. Katherine accuses Alex of being mean, but their conversation is cut short by a lover's quarrel happening outside the window. One of the women of the house shouts an explanation up to the window: “They're getting married in a week, and they're always fighting. Its jealousy!” Alex, cynic that he is, quips “How could anyone be jealous before marriage?” to which his wife responds, “Well, the time just before marriage is a very delicate one.” Alex gets a look on his face like that had never occurred to him, and then shuts the window on the commotion.

This film in particular was important to Bazin in “In Defense of Rossellini,” as it one of the films that he tries to defend in his letter to Guido Aristarco. Before I delve in to the specifics of a sequence, I want to quote Bazin:

“Nevertheless, far from their having been felt here as a break with neorealism and still less as a regression, they have given us a feeling of creative inventiveness deriving directly from the spirit which informs the Italian school.”

Bazin's assertion is in line with my opinion of how the genre should be regarded. *Viaggio in Italia* breaks with several formal elements of neorealism, such as using professional actors and focusing on the bourgeois. I would argue, however, that for a genre to advance by developing complexity is natural and even healthy. By developing complexity, I mean Rossellini's subject matter: he has transitioned from depicting the common man struggling to survive to more psychological issues.

The cinematography and editing of this sequence are simplistic and impartial. Rossellini isn't trying to sway you one way or another with the construction of his shots, staying true to his neorealist roots. The order of shots is broken up by an altercation outside. The break comes in the middle of the couple's conversation, something that has happened repeatedly throughout the film. Katherine and Alex always tend to the distraction: it's as if neither of them is passionate enough about their relationship to put other things on hold to fix it.

The sound of the scene is interesting, because a Neopolitan love song is playing in the background, juxtaposed against Alex and Katherine's rocky marriage. Again, these love songs drift through scenes the entire movie. The couple-to-be arguing outside their window adds to the texture of sound that Rossellini likes to incorporate to remind us that this is a realistic depiction of our imperfect world.

Several themes are present in this short sequence. Throughout the film, Katherine has been tortured by images of couples in love that seem to be mocking her. Even the shouting of the lovers outside is more passion than she and Alex could muster. When she says to Alex, “You don't realize how mean you can be sometimes. It's more than anyone can stand,” he doesn't even respond to her. Her statement was meant to provoke a defense or spark an argument, but he won't bite. This callous and dispassionate behavior is characteristic of him. She is not free from all blame, either. They have both been passive-aggressive to one another, and the theme of jealousy that appears in this sequence is repeated through the film. Jealousy is one of their main weapons against one another. When Alex says, “How could anyone be jealous before marriage?”, he is reinforcing the prevalence of this theme as well as being his typically insensitive self by speaking his mind out loud. Finally, Alex closing the window at the end of the scene could be another reference to his constant irritation with Italy and his desire to be left alone.

The one theme that is absent from this sequence is death. Images of death come and go throughout the movie; indeed, the climax of the film concerns death and losing one another. Death in *Viaggio in Italia* is lonely and dark, something that you don't want to go through alone. This is the notion that plays on Katherine's mind as she is confronted with skeletons and funeral processions. She fears dying alone, and in the end she wants to love Alex just to have someone to go through the dark times with. To me, love as told by Rossellini is not a grand proclamation. That's what I like about it, and that's what makes this film neorealist. He just wants us to know that while we are here, things are a lot less miserable if you have someone by your side.

Even with the breaks from the fundamentals of neorealism, I don't believe that Rossellini's departure from the genre is terribly significant. A close reading of the film shows that instead of abandoning these elements, Rossellini has simply repurposed them. For example, one critique of *Viaggio in Italia* was that it failed to represent Italy and the Italian. Rossellini's representation of both of these are vivid, just in a less direct way than we are accustomed to. The device he uses for doing this are the old Italian men that give Katherine tours. He uses their meandering descriptions and anecdotes to present us with a richly historic and proud Italy. Rossellini also carefully places iconic Italian imagery in his shots, such as Mt. Vesuvius in the background of the shots of Alex and Katherine lounging on the deck. Rossellini also repurposes the role of children in this film; instead of being the

actors, they are symbols, but no less important to the motif of a crumbling marriage. Finally, concerning the issue of non-professional actors, I believe that Rossellini made the right choice in casting professionals. This film needed subtle performances to communicate to us the nuances of psychological distress.

Rossellini no doubt had a very strong personal investment in this film, which makes it all the more interesting. For him to tell a story like this with his wife playing the lead role must have been complicated. Like Bazin said, neorealism is not simply about being strict and disciplined with your storytelling, it is reality filtered through the mind of the artist.

THREE

What is our fascination with the depiction of reality in cinema? Or, perhaps more truthfully, with reality television? Reality TV is everywhere these days, and most major networks carry reality programs. At this point reality television is not just a fad, it is an epidemic. Even the networks that used to be good, like the History Channel and Discovery Channel, are brimming with reality TV swill. If it had died out, say the way the internet was supposed to, we would all be laughing about it now. But most of us aren't laughing, we're engrossed.

How did it get to this? At its inception, the idea of reality on the screen was hotly contested. Whose reality is it? The implication of a created (whether it is true or fabricated) "reality" is that every one of us has a say in it, and because of this there was an open dialogue concerning the genre that facilitated healthy academic debate and critique. Discussions like these ("In Defense of Rossellini," for example) posed questions that cut to the core, questions that eventually led to the development of a "neorealist" style. If it weren't for that critical debate, we wouldn't have been left with masterpieces such as "Viaggio in Italia" or "Rome: Open City." These debates were the impetus that led to neorealist directors coding their messages in subtle ways.

It is clear now that a genre can degrade just as easily it can grow. Reality TV is that degradation manifested. I say this simply because it is so painful to watch. Perhaps it is true, though, that reality television deserves the same critical discourse that neorealism got. The act of questioning something's artistic value paradoxically has the effect of giving it artistic value.

I remember studying art history and becoming confused by all the movements and schools of art. I asked my friend, who already had an art degree, what "age" of art we were in now. He told me po-po-mo, or post-postmodern. This answer was on one hand satisfying and on the other infuriating. When a movement has passed, there is a tendency to move far away from it as quickly and violently as possible, because most artists are ironic asshole teenagers at heart. However, the movement that has passed never really passes. Instead, it becomes a useful entry in the art journal of the world, something to be remembered fondly when the time has come. And some people never vacate that moment, but rather revel in it and continue to make use of it.

So is reality television that ugly, painfully self-indulgent, overly-saturated journal entry? It's easy for me to write like that because that's the overarching opinion of the day. Truthfully, though, it isn't really fair. Reality television's origins are somewhat more artistically pure than we might think them to be, but at the same time, ironically polarizing from the get-go.

In 1971, Craig Gilbert filmed a California family (the Louds) as part of a reality television series. It was the first show of its kind. It was meant to show an American family as it were, but the family self-destructed. In a retrospective interview, Gilbert recounts a telling argument he had with the Raymonds (his sound technicians) when one of them objected to recording the intimate moments he was expected to. This excerpt from "That Seventies Show: Reality Replay" provides some insight in to

his artistic intentions, and the consequences of them:

“Looking back, Gilbert blames the Raymonds for not being willing to observe the first rule of the form: never stop filming. “What did they think cinéma vérité is?” Gilbert said. “You shoot only certain things?” He also fought with the couple about their credit on the series. The Raymonds are still bitter that they weren’t given proper credit for effectively creating reality TV, and Gilbert seems crushed by the knowledge that he did.”

From this paragraph, we see where Gilbert was coming from: cinéma vérité, a respected cinematic tradition that derives from documentary filmmaking and makes use of the “fly on the wall” technique. However, we also feel Gilbert's regret in this paragraph. He regrets that his “pure” vision was tarnished, and he regrets what it gave rise to.

The Loud family was torn apart, and it begs the question: was it because of the camera, for the camera, or independent of the camera? The New York Times describes the phenomena well:

“For the viewing public, the controversy surrounding “An American Family” doubled as a crash course in media literacy. The Louds, in claiming that the material had been edited to emphasize the negative, called attention to how nonfiction narratives are fashioned. Some critics argued that the camera’s presence encouraged the subjects to perform. Some even said it invalidated the project. That line of reasoning, as Mr. Gilbert has pointed out, would invalidate all documentaries. It also discounts the role of performance in everyday life, and the potential function of the camera as a catalyst, not simply an observer.”

Perhaps a disillusioned Rossellini saw the perils of capturing “reality” before everybody else did, and so chose to portray his reality in a sort of parallel universe. Rossellini's characters and their struggle are no less true, but they exist in a world slightly removed from ours. This was simply one solution. In the big picture, reality television is simply an artistic movement. It wouldn't be fair to dismiss an entire movement, albeit one that is somewhat corrosive. Reality television is evolving, but here's to its extinction.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/arts/television/hbos-cinema-verite-looks-at-american-family.html?_r=0&pagewanted=2

http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2011/04/25/110425ta_talk_winer

FOUR

Throughout the quarter, my current events connections have been concerned with the idea of realism in film. From neorealism to reality television to cinema verite, I have explored the various ways

that people attempt to portray life. The idea of a reality that we control is fascinating to filmmakers, and it is, and will be, continually recycled.

The words “reality” and “control” could almost be considered opposites. We are a part of reality, yet we have only partial control over it. When translated to film, though, the opposite is true. Filmmakers have complete control over what they show and how they show it, which is a tricky business when it comes to describing reality. Concerning realism, the school of thought I enjoy the most is neorealism, which, according to Bazin, is “a description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole.” Note that this reality is *conceived*. Even though a neorealist like Rossellini will strive for as much truth as he can in a film, it is still conceived, conjured up, constructed.

So what if you want to avoid this? Cinema verite or documentary is a good bet, but remember how a New York Times article pointed out “the potential function of the camera as a catalyst, not simply an observer.” This is the fundamental flaw we run in to when we ask people to act as themselves. They *are* themselves to begin with, but as soon as they are told to *act* as themselves, there is a crisis of identity. Perhaps they have never given a second thought to who they are, because they simply are. Or, even more likely, they begin to worry even more about how people see them, and recognize the fact that in front of the camera, they have the ability to construct themselves however they wish. Whatever internal dialogue occurs, the “real” people in question arrive at the realization that all reality is a construct, and that they now have the power to influence the construct of not only their own reality, but the viewer's.

In *Viaggio in Italia*, the Catherine and Alex's own argument is disrupted by that of an engaged couple. We watch from a window as the young pair fights ([here is the scene](#)), and then an Italian women shouts up to fill in Alex and Catherine: “They're getting married in a week, and they're always fighting. Its jealousy!” By learning the context of the argument, we are provided with a window in to the lives of strangers. This is exactly what reality television does. But how would this scene have worked in reality TV?

As soon as the shouting starts, the camera whips away from the more dull, reserved scene. Reality is what the show is about, but drama and conflict is the meat of it. As the passionate young couple square off, the camera shakily zooms in on their faces. The camera follows the volley of accusations: back and forth, from the man to the woman, with an extra tight zoom when the girl begins to cry. More than likely, their friends are holding them back, and the camera is inevitably jostled several times. The conflict comes to an end, and each party retreats to brood until it is time for a one-on-one with the camera where they can tell us exactly how hurt they are. ([Here is the scene](#))

But what of Alex and Catherine? In its haste to depict reality, the camera ignored them, instead opting to record the louder, juicier conflict. We missed Alex and Catherine, and at this point it is clear that the show is more like a drama than any reality we are a part of; when was the last time in your life you were suddenly transported away from your own dull meditations to take part in a shouting match? Ironically, the people in reality shows have seen their reality before it happens. This is for one of two reasons: they have decided how they will portray themselves, or they have been told how to.

So which reality is more acceptable, the reality that is constructed but at least realistic, or the one where we are told it is reality and expected to believe it? Each form asks us to suspend our disbelief, but to different ends. Neorealism asks us to feel the real, whereas reality television asks us to see the real. Essentially, any form of realism asks this: is seeing believing, or is believing seeing?

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/arts/television/hbos-cinema-verite-looks-at-american-family.html?_r=0&pagewanted=2