



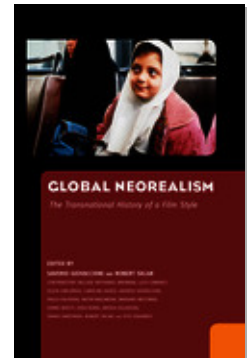
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## Global Neorealism

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# THE ROLE OF DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE FORMATION OF THE NEOREALIST CINEMA

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The importance of the debates on the nature of realism in art and mass culture and on the role of nonfiction films in the formation of the fascist culture forces scholars not only to reevaluate the role of the documentary in the Italian context but also to rewrite the narrative of the genesis of neorealism as part of the evolving discourses on Italian modernity.<sup>1</sup> Documentary and newsreels played a key role in the process of modernization brought forward by the Italian fascist regime, both as documentations of the successes of governmental initiatives (the images of Il Duce leading the way in all fields of modernization are a staple of this period) and as integral parts of a thrust toward a more direct engagement with reality.<sup>2</sup> On both the formal and ideological levels, the bond between neorealism and documentary form has been considered self-evident, a point of view that is reflected in the scholarship: Even a quick survey of histories of Italian cinema immediately points to the documentary quality of neorealist filmmaking, making a tie between the two on the basis of their shared “realist” ambitions.<sup>3</sup> Bill Nichols’s account of this relationship, Mariano Mestman notes,<sup>4</sup> sounds attractive because it is reminiscent of the historical order of things: The realism that characterizes the documentary dates back to the Lumière brothers, turning into an aesthetic and political motif in the hands of Dziga Vertov, Robert Flaherty, and John Grierson. In his discussion of the shared qualities of the two modes of filmmaking, Nichols enumerates the fictional representation of “time and space in experience as it is lived,” the combination between “the searching eye of the documentary and the inter-subjective, identifying strategies of fiction, and the prioritisation of victims as subject-matter.”<sup>5</sup> The notion of a predominant “social mission” separated the documentary from fiction and show business, “but thanks to the Neo-realist movement in postwar Italy, documentary realism found an ally to its ethic call in the field of fiction, as a form of responsible and often committed representation of history.”<sup>6</sup>

While it is widely acknowledged that neorealism shows strong documentary qualities, the exact nature of this relationship (in terms of the history of reception of documentary by neorealist practitioners and mutual influence between fiction and nonfiction filmmaking) has never been fully explored.<sup>7</sup> Many reasons account for this historiographical lacuna. Many postwar film and cultural critics (those who first wrote the history of neorealism) certainly were fully committed to differentiating both the new cinema and themselves from any cultural product tainted by the ideology of the fascist era.<sup>8</sup> Rather than looking back at fascist cinema—or more generally, films produced during the fascist period (following Steven Ricci's distinction)—all intellectuals looked geographically outside of Italy and temporally to an antecedent period to systematize the cultural milieu of the new postwar cinema.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, film historians have associated prewar documentary with LUCE newsreels, known for their didactic and/or propagandist overtones, without taking into consideration the rich production of other types of nonfiction films.<sup>10</sup> On a more complex ideological/cultural level, this omission may reflect the cultural bias, established by criticism derived from Benedetto Croce's idealist aesthetics, against documentary as "nonartistic." And given neorealism's status as modernist cinema par excellence, this omission may reflect a particular—liberal—reading of neorealism as above all a form of art cinema, uncontaminated by such "low" forms as documentary. The insistence of early Italian film historians (such as Umberto Barbaro and Carlo Lizzani) on literary and painterly indigenous sources reflects precisely this anxiety regarding artistic hybridity and miscegenation.<sup>11</sup>

My research shows that a lively Italian cinematic culture in the 1930s and 1940s generated an interesting though small body of documentary films and a very dynamic cultural debate on the issue of realism in the arts and in cinema in particular. This essay addresses the historical connections between the rise of the documentary in the 1920s–30s, its reception in Italy and its effects on both critical discourse and filmmaking practices, and the formation of neorealism. Thus the structure of this essay is twofold. First, it is concerned with the ideological and political implications of the post-facto narrative of the genesis of neorealism as a way of re-creating a nationalist historiography of cinema. The standard narrative of the genesis of neorealism emphasizes Italian literary and foreign cinematic influences, while domestic film production, embarrassingly associated with fascism, is forgotten. This essay, then, places the standard account in its historical context. Second, this work ascertains the alternative genealogies of neorealism by reconstructing the historical connections between fiction and nonfiction filmmaking in Italy in the 1930s, the emergence of Italian documentary filmmaking and the Istituto LUCE, and the larger

international history of prewar documentary cinema and its impact on the stylistic changes in fiction films of that period. This shift from documentary to fiction is particularly significant for the artistic trajectory of Italian directors working at the Centro Sperimentale and of those, like Roberto Rossellini, who started their careers as documentary filmmakers. Thus, this body of material forces us to shift the inception in Italy of a realist mode in cinema (and in the arts in general) to an earlier date and further renegotiate the nexus of fiction/nonfiction as pertinent exclusively to the neorealist movement.

In addition to the cinematic practices, I address the critical discussions of realism and documentary in Italian film journals. While the debate surrounding documentary disappears in the flowering of post-1945 neorealism (for political and ideological reasons that I discuss later), this conversation was indeed very animated from circa 1930 until the end of the war. Most writers for *Cinema* (culturally gravitating around the Istituto LUCE under the directorship of Vittorio Mussolini, Il Duce's son) and *Bianco e nero* (published by the Centro Sperimentale beginning in January 1937), the two most influential film journals of the time, discuss the impact on Italian cinema of documentary filmmakers John Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, and Joris Ivens; American filmmaker Robert Flaherty; and American photographer Walker Evans, highlighting the importance of this genre for the development of contemporary cinema. Among various discussions on the documentary as a genre, what stands out most is the debate on *documentario narrativo* (narrative documentary, as Cavalcanti defines this type of film that blends fiction and nonfiction).<sup>12</sup> I focus on this hybrid genre of *documentario narrativo* as a cultural battlefield between these two modes of filmmaking and as a progenitor to neorealism. Moreover, the highly sophisticated critical discussions this genre engendered can greatly contribute to the ever-evolving history of critical discourse on documentary cinema and on the complex relationship between fiction and documentary modes.<sup>13</sup> But before delving into the history of documentary practice and its reception in Italy, we must confront its absence from most of the historiographies of neorealism and the historical context for this important omission.

## The Neorealist Narrative Redux

There are two major strands in the narratives of the formation of neorealism. The first is the original foundational narrative that emphasizes the movement's Italian roots—in particular, its literary antecedents. This story originated in the Italian critical discourse of the late 1930s and was further strengthened by

national sentiment that firmly associated neorealism with the nation's new (antifascist) identity. Because neorealism was seen as a liberal embodiment of the new "liberated" Italy in need of overcoming its tainted past, it is hardly surprising that much of the discussion of the origins of neorealism traced them back to the prefascist literary sources as a way to reconstruct a foundational national narrative that bypassed the recent cultural heritage. In this sense, André Bazin's unapologetic critical enthusiasm played well into this "springtime in Italy" narrative. According to the French critic, "Some components of the new Italian school existed before the Liberation," but "in Italy Liberation did not signify a return to the old and recent freedom; it meant political revolution, Allied occupation, economic and social upheaval."<sup>14</sup> Traces of this conception of neorealism persisted in critical literature as late as the 1970s and 1980s—for example, in Peter Bondanella's widely popular textbook on Italian cinema.<sup>15</sup>

The more recent work on neorealism seems to give greater weight to international sources (French realism, the American novel, and so forth) in an attempt to counter the perception of Italian cultural exceptionalism bringing both its fascist and postwar periods in closer contact to the contemporary (largely European) movements. For example, in Gian Piero Brunetta's authoritative *Storia del cinema italiano*, a brief mention of the European avant-garde (and in particular the *neue Sachlichkeit*) as a model artistic context for the emergence of neorealism stands out as one of the first major attempts to look outside of the culture of the peninsula.<sup>16</sup> But this is a fairly recent development in the foundational narrative of neorealism. In the 1930s and 1940s, when the discourse of neorealism was being formed, its critical discussions were usually shaped by a clearly nationalist framework and thus strongly emphasized Italian national literary and cultural sources.<sup>17</sup> This return to realism in cinema is solidly linked to the autarchic Giovanni Verga and the Italian *verismo* tradition as best exemplified by Mario Alicata and Giuseppe De Santis's often-quoted 1941 articles, "Verità e poesia: Verga e il cinema italiano" and "Ancora di Verga e del cinema italiano."<sup>18</sup> What sutures together these two schools of interpretation is a willful attempt to disconnect the neorealists from the institutions in which they operated, inasmuch as these institutions were fascist creations. Thus, the origin is sought either in a moment of institutional rupture (the war) or in the influence of institutional moments outside Italian cinema (the literature and film cultures of other countries). Both schools, then, swerve around the institutional context of Italian cinema under the fascists. Political and ideological reasons obviously underlie this swerve, as does the assumption that propaganda is inherently antiaesthetic and somewhat nonartistic (very much in the Crocean ideological mode). The Alicata/De Santis articles have been

instrumental in triggering a narrative that connected neorealism to southern realism, pointing to that mostly painterly and literary tradition of the Italian *meridione* and the towering figure of Verga.

Why does the Sicilian-born writer Giovanni Verga sit at the top of Italian realist art? Indeed, it is not a surprise to find him in the title of De Santis's and Alicata's call to arms and subsequently anthologized and quickly incorporated as the patron saint of the *école italienne*.<sup>19</sup> Alicata and De Santis followed in the footsteps of a new interest in Verga, triggered by a new 1941 edition of Luigi Russo's *Giovanni Verga* (1919).<sup>20</sup> In "Verga e noi" ("Verga and Us," 1929), even Luigi Pirandello notes how the Sicilian writer had already been singled out as a Janus-like figure that different camps could use to support their visions.<sup>21</sup> Croce's ambiguous role in fascist Italian culture as a cornerstone for all intellectual debate, a liberal asserting "individuality" and autonomy of the artwork, foundational for Giovanni Gentile's educational programs (and therefore accepted by the fascist culture at large), and target of materialist philosophers, is transposed and applied to Verga's realist art. As Verga becomes a key protagonist in Croce's liberal/idealist philosophy, realism becomes a key concept for Croce's opponents, both positivists and materialists, such as Barbaro and Alicata, who reclaim Verga as a precursor in their genealogy of realist art in Italy.<sup>22</sup> The southern realist vein of Italian art singled out by Barbaro became a master narrative that was sure to please Crocean idealists (including the heretical Russo); materialist philologists such as Sapegno and his protégé, Alicata; and the more progressive Barbaro, who regularly praised Verga in *L'Italia letteraria*. This "imaginary" Verga becomes the flag that all parties can follow without losing face: it is national/popular, it is realist, and Croce liked it! Moreover, by incorporating Verga and his southern characters into a national narrative, the fascist regime sought to complete the process of full integration of the South of Italy into the Italian polity as an integral part of the new fascist nation, thus eliminating the North-South divide that had haunted the nation from its inception.<sup>23</sup>

What would become a seminal first attempt to theorize more broadly the origins of neorealism and to escape the narrow nationalistic narrative did not take place until 1950. In *Bianco e nero* (Nuova Serie), Franco Venturini attempts a comprehensive systematization of the elements in the cultural milieu that originated the neorealist movement. Venturini singles out six key factors: the regional traditions, calligraphisms, the influence of French realism, Mario Camerini and Alessandro Blasetti, Luchino Visconti, and the documentary.<sup>24</sup> Venturini was the first Italian critic to recognize the neglect of the institutional context of much of the debate up to this point, denouncing the idea that the realist tendency in Italian cinema arose perforce from a pictorial and literary

tradition that was a way of domesticating neorealism by “grafting it to the indigenous tradition of Giotto, Dante, Verga, Caravaggio and Masaccio in hopes of obtaining the quintessence of the genius of the race so as to inject it directly in the vein of Italian cinema.”<sup>25</sup> Venturini was also one of the only critics to deal directly with the legacy of documentary cinema. His section on documentary focuses in particular on the war documentary and the experiments of Francesco De Robertis and Rossellini’s *Uomini sul fondo* (SOS Submarine, 1941), the rescue story of sailors trapped in a submarine, as a hybrid fiction/nonfiction experiment. For Venturini, the combination of documentary and fiction, the lack of professional actors, and the abandonment of fascist rhetoric characterize this new Italian cinema, which finds its highest manifestation in neorealism. He further claims that while *Ossessione* (1943) was an end point of an earlier era of Italian cinema (in terms of a coalescence of different styles of fiction cinema—mainly French realism and classic Hollywood), *Uomini sul fondo* is a “new event,”<sup>26</sup> thus shifting the status of proto-neorealist film away from Visconti’s *Ossessione* and toward the ideologically more problematic film by De Robertis. Venturini’s article went largely unnoticed at the time, however, and had little effect on the evolving narrative of origins. In fact, Venturini’s claims have not been fully explored until fairly recently, when the question of the relationship between neorealism and prewar Italian cinema and culture has begun to be thoroughly reevaluated in both Italian and Anglo-American scholarship.<sup>27</sup>

Whether or not we should follow Venturini in finding Visconti’s *Ossessione* more an end point than the beginning of a “realist” movement in the arts, many critics have already addressed the inconsistencies of an absolute rebirth of Italian cinema *ex novo* in 1945 and incorporated it into a larger vein of realism.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, many documentary filmmakers and scholars of the fascist era were involved in a conversation centered on the issue of nonfiction film. The role of nonfiction film during the late fascist period is signaled by the translation in the first issue of *Bianco e nero* of an ample selection from Paul Rotha’s 1936 book *Movie Parade*. In addition, the Centro’s interest in the *documentario narrativo*, as Cavalcanti defines these films à la Flaherty, seems to be an intentionally neglected missing link in the history of neorealism.

This connection between cinema *dal vero* and neorealism can now be tracked backward. When the term *neorealism* was first applied in Italy—previous to its “late” inclusion in film magazines around 1948—the term was used in the context of a reference to the documentary. In her genealogy of the word *neorealism*, Stefania Parigi states that from the mid-1930s onward, Italians applied the term to various aesthetic experiences—for example, to Grierson’s British Post Office documentary film unit.<sup>29</sup> Alberto Cavalcanti suggested that

Grierson use the same word for his documentary work.<sup>30</sup> The fact that neorealism is an elastic term from the 1930s thus signifies a general philosophical and societal trend of return to a more stringent engagement with reality. The historic neorealism (the actual cinematic movement) is a culmination of a long process of *rapprochement* between art and reality in the Italian and European *weltanschauung*.

### The *Documentario Narrativo*

Even a cursory look at the documentaries produced during the second decade of the fascist regime (roughly 1933–43), excepting the propagandist LUCE newsreels, shows that this new foreign genre presented exciting possibilities to Italian filmmakers. In magazines and journals of the time, the great popularity of John Grierson's social investigations (*The Drifters*, 1939), Flaherty's narrative documentaries (*Nanook of the North*, 1922; *Moana*, 1926; and *Man of Aran*, 1934), and similar docufiction experiments, such as F. W. Murnau's *Tabu* (1931), helped to set off a wave of Italian filmmakers working on the same lines, creating the *documentario narrativo*, a hybrid fiction à la Nanook.

The real shift in interest toward new documentary forms must be attributed to the cosmopolitan figure of Alberto Cavalcanti, a Brazilian-born, French-educated intellectual of Italian origin who moved to Paris in the late 1920s and started a career in cinema as a set decorator. His first feature film is an experimental documentary, *Rien que les heures* (Nothing but the Hours, 1930), a sort of city symphony film depicting twenty-four hours in the life of members of the Parisian lumpenproletariat. Cavalcanti joined Grierson's Empire Marketing Board in 1934, subsequently moving on to the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, where he became one of the driving forces behind the British documentary movement and directly worked on such GPO masterpieces as *Coalface* (1935). Cavalcanti also taught at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome and contributed regularly to *Bianco e nero*. One 1938 article, "Documentari di propaganda," sets up a genealogy for the *documentario narrativo* (not to be confused, in Cavalcanti's taxonomy, with the *documentario puro* of Grierson).<sup>31</sup> The *documentario narrativo*, sometimes dubbed the *documentario poetico* (poetic documentary), had its precursors in Flaherty's *Nanook* and *Moana*, Ernest Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper's *Grass: A Battle for Life* (1925) and *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927), and Leon Poirier's *La croisière noire* (The Black Journey, 1927). A short unsigned article in *Bianco e nero* attests to Cavalcanti's role as an intermediary between London and Rome and as an active participant in the life of the Centro:



We saw a private screening of some documentaries produced in Great Britain by Alberto Cavalcanti. Short films made on the cheap, but realized by people with great enthusiasm and with a great sense of cinema. What interested us the most was the way in which sound was used: noises, words, and music. Instead, in our Italian documentaries, which are rarely shown in our theaters, there is not much to be impressed by because of the use of sound. Almost always it consists simply of a generic and banal music which comments on one image after the other. And by the way, individuals whose names are not shown on the film title cards produce the great majority of Italian documentaries.<sup>32</sup>

Cavalcanti's role as "modernizer" of the Italian documentary scene has not yet been fully appreciated. He played a key role at the Centro Sperimentale until 1942, when he had to leave Italy because his citizenship was deemed suspicious.<sup>33</sup> The issue of sound raised by the editors of *Bianco e nero* points in the direction of a "creative use of sound"—in particular, toward the handling of diegetic and nondiegetic elements. Grierson's emphasis on "noises" and "words" impressed the Italian directors, probably for their realism. In *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926–1946*, Paul Swann singles out a key issue in the Cavalcanti-Grierson relationship. When Grierson resigned from the GPO in June 1937, Cavalcanti stayed on, leading "the GPO Film Unit away from theoretical discussions about public education and 'art' and towards films that relied heavily upon the narrative techniques of the commercial film industry. . . . The story-documentary made its first appearance while Grierson was still at the Post Office."<sup>34</sup> In the same new populist tone, Harry Watt produced *The Saving of Bill Blewitt* (1936), which had scripted dialogue, some studio sets, and most significantly was built around a wholly fictional story. However, it also was made largely on location and employed nonprofessional actors, who were real people acting out events that might happen to them during their day-to-day lives. As Swann points out, this film "in some respects anticipated the production techniques and the aesthetic of Italian neorealism." *Bill Blewitt* was indeed a rejection of the earlier Griersonian tradition of didacticism in favor of a much more humanistic approach that was less intimidating to film subjects and audiences alike.<sup>35</sup> "The story-documentary," Swann writes, "in contrast to this other tradition, relied primarily upon conventional feature film continuity editing. In this type of film the burden of the film was carried within the narrative and the performances of the actors. Watt had learned how to treat people in films from his apprenticeship under Robert Flaherty."<sup>36</sup> The direction in which Cavalcanti was taking the GPO was also very evident in his insistence on having nonprofessional actors act a script.<sup>37</sup>

The influential figure of Cavalcanti in the development of the *documentario narrativo* must have found an eager audience among the Centro's students, teachers, and hangers-on.<sup>38</sup> More generally, Italian filmmakers and film critics shared the worldwide interest in the new genre of documentary, as proven by *Bianco e nero's* publication of Paul Rotha's interventions and of the entire translation of Raymond J. Spottiswoode's *A Grammar of Film* in 1938.<sup>39</sup>

Cavalcanti found at the Centro a fertile ground, even though the Italian way to *documentario narrativo* did not achieve the results of other countries. This said, however, it was certainly conceived as a possible venue of expression and explored by some directors in the early 1930s. One of the first experiments with mixing reality and fiction predating Cavalcanti's arrival at the Centro could be *Palio* (1932), directed by Alessandro Blasetti with Anchise Brizzi as director of photography. The film is described as a "a mix of documentary and narration. . . . [N]ot prone to quick cuts and Russian-style montage, [Blasetti] often uses tracking shots and pan shots since he is interested in giving narrative consistency and fluidity to his films."<sup>40</sup> Another such experiment, *Camicia nera* (Black Shirt, 1933, produced by LUCE and directed by Giovacchino Forzano), was shot partially in the Maremma with nonprofessional actors. It impressed the contemporary reviewers, including the one who wrote in the March 1933 issue of *Scenario* that the film was

anti-literary and anti-intellectual, careless of particulars, scornful of technical bravura, sworn enemy of decorativeness and calligraphy, totally devoted to description . . . fundamentally unaware of photography and lighting effects, the film has a naturalist, positive character, all substance and no form. What one can say, in a word, is an ingenious thing. . . . The dominant light of the film is . . . obscurity. All the shots are immersed in shadow, in dark and wide gray areas, so that there is, then, an anti-elegant but genuine tone of spontaneity. The photography is verist [*verista*], without excessive softness, little worked and absolutely lacking final polish.<sup>41</sup>

Other documentaries of the time were picking up on different European traditions, such as the city symphony films or the humanistic study of a particular event or location.<sup>42</sup> Examples include *Acciaio* (Steel, 1933), directed by Walter Ruttmann and loosely based on a script by Pirandello; Francesco Pasinetti's *Il canale degli angeli* (The Canal of the Angels, 1934); Francesco Di Cocco's *Il ventre della città* (The Belly of the City, 1933); and Umberto Barbaro's *Cantieri dell'Adriatico* (The Shipyards of the Adriatic, 1933). But according to Barbaro, writing in 1936, documentary film was spearheaded by the

production house Cines under the direction of Ludovico Toeplitz del Ry and Emilio Cecchi<sup>43</sup> and culminated with the great critical reception of Giacomo Pozzi-Bellini's *Il pianto delle zitelle* (The Crying of the Spinsters, 1939).<sup>44</sup> This documentary, shot in the Simbruini Mountains in Lazio, describes the pilgrimage to honor the Vallepietra icon by hundreds of anonymous people from Lazio, Abruzzo, and Campania. Bertozzi notices the interesting use of sound, a blend of narrating voice-over and diegetic noises.<sup>45</sup> Although the film won a prize at Venice, it was quickly censored by the regime.

Italian filmmakers' particular interest in narrative and poetic documentary is proven by Jacopo Comin's short essay in *Bianco e nero*, "I volti della realtà" (Faces of Reality).<sup>46</sup> This piece is symptomatic of the contemporary debate in Italian film circles operating under the pressure of the political establishment. While this article might seem to be a simple acknowledgment of the medium's intrinsic limitations, it operates on two levels: it establishes the yardstick of the value of documentary cinema in its inability to "objectively represent reality" and therefore subtracts from the pressure of being used as mere propaganda; and it elevates documentary to that celestial place where the art of the Crocean tradition resides. "If the reality of things . . . didn't have but one face, a single aspect and almost a single surface, we might be ready to concede that cinema is not an art. . . . In documentary, as in every art, there is the intervention of a strictly subjective element, a interpretative element of reality, hence an artistic element: the choice of point of view which acquires function and character of a creative act . . . and the choice of subject."<sup>47</sup>

Comin lists Barbaro's *Cantieri dell'Adriatico*, Marco Elter's *Miniere di Cogne* (The Mines of Cogne, 1934), Matarazzo's *Littoria* (1933) and *Sabaudia*, and Di Cocco's *Il ventre della città* as examples of this "artistic" documentary<sup>48</sup> where the artistry is defined by both form and content: the choice of point of view of the director of the film, and the topic chosen to be filmed. In "Appunti sul cinema d'avanguardia," Comin mentions Flaherty, Joris Ivens, and in Italy, Barbaro, Matarazzo, Di Cocco, and *Paestum* (1932) by Luciani as documentaries that push the boundary of mere documentation.<sup>49</sup>

The general interest in realism and how much the *Bianco e nero* crowd pushed for it is summed up in an article by Giuseppe Prezzolini, "L'uomo comune, personaggio del cinema e delle radio" (The Common Man, Character in Cinema and the Radio), that originally appeared in *La gazzetta del popolo* and was reprinted in *Bianco e nero*: "The latest character of American films is the man in the crowd, or, as they say over there, the average American."<sup>50</sup> The influence of American culture—in particular, in the realist vein of American writers on Italian culture—is well known.<sup>51</sup> What is of interest here is how Italian critics picked up certain aspects of American cinema. The general

interest in the “common man” is also a major point of the fascist propaganda in its double attempt to modernize and fascistize the country. In an article, “Il cinema per i rurali” (Cinema for the Peasants), that appeared in *Il lavoro fascista* and was later reprinted in *Bianco e nero*, Vittorio Cardinali claims that the Confederazione Fascista dei Lavoratori dell’Agricoltura (the Fascist Confederation of Agricultural Workers) is preparing to shoot films with real peasants—one in the rice fields, the second in Puglia—to promote both the *battaglia demografica* (the demographic battle) and *battaglia per il grano* (the corn battle).<sup>52</sup>

The Gioventù Italiana del Littorio was also responsible for some documentaries beyond the mere celebration of the Fascist Youth. In 1937, Ivo Perilli made *Ragazzo* (The Boy), which follows the descent of a Neapolitan street urchin into the criminal underworld. The film, destroyed by the Nazis in late 1943, was personally censored by Il Duce himself, and the only viewers were the students of the Centro Sperimentale.<sup>53</sup>

## The Way of Rossellini

The most critically successful *documentario narrativo* is De Robertis’s *Uomini sul fondo*. Produced by the Marina Militare Italiana (the Italian navy), it uses only nonprofessional actors to tell the story of the rescue of a military submarine off the coast of La Spezia. While the film is meant to enable the navy to impress the Italian audience with cutting-edge technological equipment, it turns very quickly into a gripping story of humanistic values. Roberto Rossellini (with Ivo Perilli, subsequently in the writing teams of both Giuseppe De Santis’s *Riso amaro* [Bitter Rice, 1949], and Rossellini’s *Europa ’51* [1952]), who visited the set,<sup>54</sup> might be one of the reasons behind the striking resemblances of *Uomini sul fondo* to the postwar realist films. The combination of highly dramatic moments (Will the ships find the submarine in the fog?) alternating with long takes that painstakingly show the suffering of the sailors because of lack of oxygen and undersea pressure in the sunken submarine. The sailors are both anonymous (all of them wear the same clothes and the same expression) and identified by some specific qualities: their accents, pictures of their mothers, food hidden in their pockets. The narrative structure, while less episodic or “elliptical” (to use Bazin’s terminology in “An Aesthetic of Reality”)<sup>55</sup> than in *Roma, città aperta* (Rome, Open City, 1945) or *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves, 1948), certainly lends itself to detours that have no primary narrative motivation. While the film has a clear teleology (Will the ships rescue our heroes?), the many asides enrich the humanity of the story while augmenting

the film's documentary value. One such episode is the scene in which the mother of one of the sailors trapped in the submarine has a conversation with an official of the Italian navy. She claims that her sixth sense is telling her that her son is dead and that the navy therefore must be hiding information from her. To prove her wrong, the high-ranking official does not hesitate to create a radio connection with the submarine, allowing mother and son to have a brief but very emotional conversation. This scene exemplifies the *modus operandi* of De Robertis and Rossellini. On the one hand, it shows off the great technological advances of the Italian navy and its absolute commitment to its sailors in the most difficult circumstances; on the other hand, it inserts a melodramatic and almost comedic tone (the actual conversation of mother and son). Similarly, in *Rome, Open City*, we see Don Pietro playing both a comedic and a dramatic role (as in the search for rebels in Pina's building ending with Don Pietro banging a frying pan on an old man's head). As Venturini noted in 1950, *Uomini sul fondo* disappeared from the official history of neorealism, replaced by more illustrious literary predecessors.

While the long *cammino della critica verso il neorealismo* (march of criticism toward neorealism), as Brunetta titles his chapter devoted to the cultural milieu that produced the Italian return to reality, was indeed rich with national and international stimuli, I seek to relocate documentary cinema on the map of Italian cinema. Understanding both theory and praxis of nonfiction filmmaking in Italy in the late 1930s is indeed vital to understanding the post-war phenomena of neorealism's mixed origins. Any history of Italian cinema would certainly lack a very important piece of the puzzle without the lively Italian documentary scene of the late 1930s.

## Notes

1. This essay is very much in debt to Ruth Ben-Ghiat's seminal *Fascist Modernities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), which reassesses the influence of European "realist" trends on Italian modernism.

2. As Francesco Casetti has recently pointed out, cinema represents the true eye of the twentieth century not simply as a representational device but more importantly in the way in which it influenced the outlook of the arts on reality. On the relationship between cinema and modernity, out of a possible very long bibliography, I suggest Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (1986): 63-70; Miriam Hansen, "America, Paris, the

Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 362–402.

3. See, for example, Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano* (Rome: Riuniti, 1993); Gianni Rondolino, *Storia del cinema italiano* (Turin: UTET, 1996); Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

4. See Mariano Mestman, “The World of Labor and Social Conflict: From Italian Neorealism to New Latin American Cinema,” paper presented at “*Neorealismo: A Workshop on Cinema, History, and National Culture*,” University of Maryland, College Park, October 4–5, 2007. See also Mestman, this volume.

5. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 92.

6. Ibid.

7. As far as I know, the only essay that tangentially touches on this topic is Ivelise Perniola, “Documentari fuori regime,” in *Storia del cinema italiano*, ed. Orio Caldiron (Venice: Marsilio, 2006), 5:372–80.

8. See Ennio Di Nolfo, “Intimations of Neorealism in the Fascist *Ventennio*,” in *Re-Viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 83.

9. See Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 20. Historians have written extensively on the many elements of political and ideological continuity between the pre- and postwar period. Probably the most thorough and insightful study remains Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: Saggio storico sulla moralità nella resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991). As far as cinema studies, Alan O’Leary brilliantly summarizes the issues at stake: “The assertion of a definitive split between the cinema of the fascist period and that which followed the war has regularly been challenged since the 1970s. The perception of a strict division tends, however, to reassert itself. It might be suggested that the short span allotted to SCI vii (1945–1948) [*Storia del cinema italiano*, coordinated by Lino Micciché] inevitably sunders the neorealist moment from that which preceded it. More generally, many tenaciously maintain an ideological stake in insisting that the cinema of the nascent democracy and republic is ethically and aesthetically distinct from that produced by or under fascism. Conversely, the commitment to neorealism as the ethical or aesthetic core of Italian cinema has the paradoxical effect of asserting that anything of quality, including that which comes before, centrifugally derives from it” (“After Brunetta: Italian Cinema Studies in Italy, 2000 to 2007,” *Italian Studies* 63. [2008]: 284). This continuity is very cogently reasserted by the thorough study on Italian spectatorship by Mariagrazia Fanchi and Elena Mosconi, who assert the existence of a “spectatorial continuum” in terms of visual experience between the pre- and postwar audiences (*Spettatori: Forme di consumo e pubblici del cinema in Italia, 1930–1960* [Rome: Biblioteca di *Bianco e nero*, 2002], 9). Motivated by a similar intent “to

circumvent certain historical prejudices" (O'Leary, "After Brunetta," 305) is the fifteen-volume *Storia del cinema italiano* (conceived by the late Lino Micciché for the Centro Sperimentale and currently being published by Marsilio). Each volume tackles roughly a five-year period.

10. On LUCE and fascist propaganda, see Mino Argentieri, *Locchio del regime* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2003).

11. See Umberto Barbaro, "Piccola storia del film documentario in Italia," in *Neorealismo e realismo* (Rome: Riuniti, 1976), 471–76; Carlo Lizzani, *Storia del cinema italiano* (Florence: Parenti, 1961).

12. "Documentari di propaganda," *Bianco e nero*, 10.2 (October 1938): 3–7.

13. On the nexus between fiction and nonfiction, see the current debates in Gary Rhodes and John Parris Springer, eds., *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking* (London: McFarland, 2006); Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, eds., *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

14. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2:17.

15. Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

16. Gian Piero Brunetta, "Il cammino della critica verso il Neorealismo," in *Storia del cinema italiano, 1895–1945* (Rome: Riuniti, 1979), 441.

17. According to the Regio Decreto Legge no. 1121, an "Italian film" has the following characteristics: it is shot on Italian soil, by an Italian crew, and, if of foreign source, it is adapted by an Italian. See Reich and Garofalo, eds., *Re-Viewing Fascism*, 8.

18. Mario Alicata and Giuseppe De Santis, "Verità e poesia: Verga e il cinema italiano," *Cinema* 127 (October 10, 1941), 216–17; Mario Alicata and Giuseppe De Santis, "Ancora di Verga e del cinema italiano," *Cinema* 130 (November 10, 1941), 50–53.

19. See David Overbey, ed., *Springtime in Italy: A Reader of Neo-Realism* (London: Talisman, 1978).

20. Luigi Russo, *Giovanni Verga* (1919; Bari: Laterza, 1941). Russo (1892–1961), a Sicilian-born critic, was a heretical Crocean who blended historicism and idealism. Throughout his career, he kept a very intense intellectual relationship with Benedetto Croce.

21. Luigi Pirandello, "Verga e noi," in *Studi vergghiani* (Palermo: Edizioni del Sud, 1929), no. 1, reprinted in Lina Perroni, *Studi critici su Giovanni Verga* (Rome: Edizioni Bibliotheca, 1934).

22. Mario Alicata, assistant to Natalino Sapegno, chair of Italian literature at the University La Sapienza in Rome beginning in 1940, remembered that for Sapegno, "Verga in 1945 looks like the prodigal son, and his work a 'home coming'" (Orio Caldiron, ed., *Il lungo viaggio del cinema italiano: Antologia di "Cinema," 1936–1943* [Padua: Marsilio, 1965], lxx; translation by author).

23. Giorgio Amendola, *Fascismo e Mezzogiorno* (Rome: Riuniti, 1973).

24. Franco Venturini, "Origini del Neorealismo," *Bianco e nero* 11.2 (February 1950): 31–32.

25. *Ibid.*, 34.

26. *Ibid.*, 42.

27. See Reich and Garofalo, *Re-Viewing Fascism*, a collection that fully exemplifies this trend.

28. Carlo Celli, for example, has aptly investigated what he defines as the "Camerini–De Sica continuity" in terms of both style and content: "Camerini's films, like De Sica's efforts in the neorealist style, were part of a current of realism or *verismo* that appeared as a reaction to the D'Annunzian rhetoric that dominated Italian culture early in the century and was associated with centuries-old mimetic traditions in Italian artistic expression" (Carlo Celli, "The Legacy of Mario Camerini in Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* [1948]," *Cinema Journal* 40.4 [Summer 2001]: 4).

29. Stefania Parigi, "Le carte d'identità del neorealismo," in *Nuovo Cinema (1965–2005): Scritti in onore di Lino Micciché*, ed. Bruno Torri (Venice: Marsilio, 2005), 80–102.

30. "Was Cavalcanti in some way undermining Grierson's work? What exactly was the difference of opinion between them? 'The only fundamental difference was that I maintained that *documentary* was a silly denomination,' says Cavalcanti. . . . 'I had a very serious conversation in the early, rosy days with Grierson about this label *documentary* because I insisted that it should be called, funnily enough (it's only coincidence, but it made a fortune in Italy), *Neorealism*. The Grierson argument—and I remember it exceedingly well—was just to laugh and say, 'You are really a very innocent character. I have to deal with the Government, and the word *documentary* impresses them as something serious'" (Elizabeth Sussex, "Cavalcanti in England," *Sight and Sound*, August 1975, reprinted in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. Ian Aitken [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998], 188).

31. "Documentari di propaganda," *Bianco e nero* 10.2 (October 1938): 3–7.

32. *Bianco e nero* 7.2 (February 1940): 67.

33. Ian Aitken, *Alberto Cavalcanti: Realism, Surrealism, and National Cinema* (Trowbridge: Flick, 2000), 82.

34. Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926–1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 85–86.

35. *Ibid.*, 86.

36. *Ibid.*, 88.

37. "Cavalcanti once cabled David MacDonald, a commercial director who had been brought in to direct *Men of the Lightship* (1940), to tell him to reshoot all the 'totally unconvincing' footage where he had used professional actors, while the footage he had shot with real people was 'splendid'" (*ibid.*, 163).



38. The list of students enrolled or affiliated with the Centro Sperimentale in 1940 is quite interesting: Michelangelo Antonioni, Giuseppe De Santis, Stefano Vanzina (Steno), Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Pasqualino De Santis, Gianni Di Venanzo, Pietro Fermi, Dino De Laurentiis, Pietro Ingrao, and Francesco Pasinetti. Among the teachers were Umberto Barbaro, Alessandro Blasetti, and Pietro Sharoff.

39. The chapter "Origin of the Documentary Movement in the Class Struggle" is translated into Italian omitting the reference to class struggle, and throughout the article, *USSR* is translated as "Russia."

40. Barbaro, "Piccola storia," 474; translation by author.

41. Cited in Elaine Mancini, *Struggles of the Italian Film Industry during Fascism, 1930–1935* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981), 134.

42. Marco Bertozzi discusses with a certain depth these documentaries in a chapter, "Un regime in luce," in his *Storia del documentario italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008), 59–95.

43. Barbaro, "Piccola storia," 471–76.

44. Emilio Cecchi wrote the film's text. The director of photography was LUCE's Angelo Jannarelli, and the music was by Luigi Colicchi. It won a medal at the Venice Film Festival in 1939. See Mancini, *Struggles*, 154.

45. Bertozzi, *Storia*, 81.

46. Jacopo Comin, "I volti della realtà," *Bianco e nero* 2.8 (1938): 123–24.

47. *Ibid.*, 123.

48. The article erroneously attributes the film by Di Cocco to Luciani.

49. Jacopo Comin, "Appunti sul cinema d'avanguardia," *Bianco e nero* 1.6 (1937):6.

50. Giuseppe Prezzolini, "L'uomo comune personaggio del cinema e della radio," *Bianco e nero* 1.1 (1937): 115; translation by author.

51. Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime* (Bari: Laterza, 2009), 186–87.

52. *Bianco e nero* 2.1 (1937): 119–21.

53. The same article mentions *Viviamo* by Francolini and *Chiostri e cortili* by Ubaldo Magnaghi.

54. See Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 67.

55. Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* 2:35.

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