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## THE PATHS OF NEOREALISM (GENESIS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PHENOMENON IN ITALIAN CULTURE. MANIFESTATIONS IN SOCIALIST BULGARIA)<sup>8</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to outline the emergence and development of Italian neorealism in twentieth-century literature and cinema, its main characteristics, its various manifestations, its spread, and its interaction with dominant ideologies/regimes. In the Bulgarian socio-cultural context of the socialist period (1944-1989), neorealism became a problematic topic, but at the same time its influence can be traced in a number of works of literature and cinema.*

**Keywords:** *neorealism, ideology, literature and cinema*

### INTRODUCTION

A number of scholars of neorealism point to its resistance to strict definitions, the inability of a precise periodization of the movement and the impossibility of defining its characteristic features as major difficulties in dealing with the concept. These difficulties arise from the very nature of neorealism, which (although it can be defined as a new, peculiar phenomenon in the literature and cinema of the twentieth century) took shape under the influence of a variety of factors, underwent its metamorphoses, and followed different paths: from the verbal to the visual, from fascist to postwar reality, from Italy to the world. Despite this peculiar flexibility, neorealism retains its immanent characteristics, its moral charge, and its influence continues to be felt in the cultural sphere decades after its end in the mid-1950s, including in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context.

### EXPOSITION

The emergence of neorealism is associated with Italian cinema at the end of World War II. Just two months after the Allies' entry into the Italian capital and the withdrawal of the German troops, in the summer of 1944, Roberto Rossellini began shooting the film that would become the progenitor of neorealism in cinema, *Rome, Open City* (1945). Originally conceived as a documentary about a priest (member of the Resistance), who was executed by the Nazis, the film introduced solutions, that were atypical for the cinematic production at the time: the use of authentic locations and non-professional actors, the interweaving of documentary and fiction, and the construction of a plot based on real events and personalities. These traits turn the films of neorealism into recognizable and original works of art, into genuine testimonies of the era.

The characteristic aspiration of Italian filmmakers - to show the country as it is, to discover the face of the "real Italy", freed from the ideological clichés of the fascist regime - can be traced back to the literature and cinema of the interwar period. In this sense, Luigi Fontanella speaks of a "general neorealist *tendency*" that has manifested itself in different branches of Italian culture (literature, cinema, painting, architecture) since the 1930s (Fontanella, L., 2008: 127), and of many "neorealisms" as variations of this tendency. The lack of a unified model, the presence of multiple approaches and interpretations by filmmakers and writers underline the spontaneous and hybrid nature of the phenomenon.

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The term *neorealism* was first used at the beginning of the 20th century in the field of philosophy, and was subsequently borrowed by Italian literary criticism in connection with the work of the realist writers of the 1930s - Alberto Moravia, Carlo Bernari, Vasco Pratolini, Elio Vittorini, and others - the precursors of neorealism in literature. In 1930-1931 Umberto Barbaro used the term *neorealism* in an article on Russian literature published in the journal *Italia letteraria*, probably referring to the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (*New Objectivity*) movement. In the context of Italian cinema of this era, the term was first used by the editor of the film *Obsession* (1943), Mario Serandrei, in a letter to the director, Luchino Visconti (Andreykov, T., 2004: 318).

It is films such as Visconti's *Obsession* and Vittorio De Sica's *The Children Are Watching Us* (1943) that are considered the precursors of neorealism in cinema. They presented a more objective, unstylized picture of reality, in contrast to most of the ideologically charged cinema of the 1930s, which oscillated between "white telephones and Roman tunics"<sup>9</sup> (De Nicola, F., 2016: 15).

The article *Truth and Poetry: Verga and Italian Cinema* by Mario Alicata and Giuseppe De Santis (screenwriters of *Obsession*), published in 1941 in the pages of *Cinema* magazine (with Vittorio Mussolini as editor-in-chief), has the significance of a cinematic manifesto of neorealism. It stressed the "unity of the arts", and foreshadowed a successful future symbiosis between literature (influenced by the novels of Flaubert, Zola and Verga) and cinema (Soviet and French realist films), which had to liberate art from falsity and deceit, and serve to document the real problems of modernity (Ibid: 19-20).

The turn to the realistic literary tradition of the 19th century, to the naturalistic school of verism (with its prominent representative Giovanni Verga), and to the novels of the American realists (Hemingway, Steinbeck, etc.) was a key factor in the process of the formation of neorealism - both in literature and in cinema. No strict distinction can be drawn between the manifestations of neorealism in the two arts, not least because many of the artists belonging to the movement appeared as writers as well as screenwriters or directors. One of the central figures of neorealism, Cesare Zavattini, began his creative career in the field of fiction, and later, as a screenwriter, together with De Sica, he created most of the universally recognized masterpieces of neorealist cinema, including *Shoeshine* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), and *Umberto D.* (1952).

Moreover, many of the films of neorealism are adaptations of literary works. Lucchino Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (1948), for example, is a loose interpretation of Verga's novel *The Malavoglia Family*. The film was shot in Sicily with local fishermen speaking in dialect. It testified both to the prolific symbiosis between cinema and literature that Alicata and De Santis had anticipated and to the drawing of a line between verism and neorealism. Both works construct an authentic, almost documentary picture of reality, but whereas Verga's novel tells the story of a family that, "striving for social and economic progress, then fatalistically accept their own defeat" (Ibid: 22), Visconti's film overcomes the declaratory character of the literary work, it shows the characters' will to rebel against their fate, their belief in the future change of society. This motif can also be found in the epilogue of *Rome, Open City*, in the scene in which the group of children (bearers of hope for the future) return to the city after the execution of the priest Don Pietro.

Thus the peculiar bifurcation of neorealism along the axis *past-future* emerges. On the one hand, the new movement turned to tradition, rejecting certain artistic models and building on others; on the other hand, neorealists sought to create an inherently new culture. In this sense, neorealism represented a kind of "anachronistic avant-garde and avant-garde anachronism", which, according to Giuliana Minghelli, succeeded in recovering the lost thread of folklore, of oral narrative, by combining it with the newest and most progressive art - cinema (Minghelli, G. 2008: 200). Thematically, one can also point out this characteristic duplicity of neorealism: post-war Italian cinema uses subjects from the recent past (the war, the resistance), but at the same time its

<sup>9</sup> The "white telephones" films (comedies and melodramas depicting the life of high society) formed a large part of Italian film production in the 1930s. Among the pro-fascist films of the period, grand historical productions (such as *Scipio Africanus*, 1937) occupied a special place.

suggestions are directed towards a utopian vision of the future - an example is De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951) in which, through the fantastic layer, the idea of a world in which "good morning really means good morning" is built up. This dual aspiration (to what has already passed, but also to what is to come) finds its artistic resolution in "the poetics of the present moment, of the event, of everyday life" (Ibid: 201).

In contrast to the regional character of 19th-century verism, neorealism was spatially turned outwards - towards European and world art. Its regionalism is only apparent: in the provincial, the marginal, the remote from the centre one should recognise the universal, the whole world, just as through the neorealist gaze the small story of the ordinary, anonymous character is transformed into the big story, the story of all (Brunetta, G. P., 2008: 70).

The artistic optics of neorealism is also twofold: on the one hand, the external, the objective, the documentary is in the foreground; on the other, an important place is given to introspection, to the psychological analysis of the characters, which also represents a kind of approach to the study of reality. The neorealist cinematic lens is subjective, penetrating beyond the visible characteristics of things. The neorealist gaze is not a neutral, "passively mimetic" one, but "an inclusive and totalizing gaze that aims to embrace the Italian territory to its fullest extent" (Ibid: 72). It is ideological (in the broad sense), while at the same time the movement opposes ideology (in the narrow sense). In the context of the period from the 1920s to the end of the Second World War, this was fascism, which according to many neorealist activists was just one of the many faces of the "real enemy", capitalism.

The overthrow of Mussolini's regime, the end of the war, and the processes of democratization in Italy marked the official beginning and flourishing of neorealism. However, the repeated accusations by the government, in the person of Giulio Andreotti (deputy minister of entertainment), that neorealist cinema was spreading a negative image of Italy abroad, showing the "family skeletons" of society<sup>10</sup>, largely echoed the attitudes of the previous (fascist) regime towards the movement. A kind of censorship was also imposed by the Catholic Church, which defined neorealism as "godless", and in the context of the Cold War, ideological contradictions in the sphere of Italian culture were further exacerbated.

Neorealism can be defined as "the true left cinema of the era" (Bratoeva-Darakchieva, I., 2013: 109). However, the artists of the movement were not representatives and functionaries of a particular party - the "independent socialism" of the writer Ignazio Silone, author of the novel *Fontamara* (written in 1930), is emblematic. Despite his active political activity and left-wing ideological orientation, Silone defended an anti-dogmatic and anti-Stalinist position.

As in cinema, neorealism in literature is characterized by its social orientation; it is an example of "committed literature" and, based on purely humanist positions, it seeks to restore the lost connection with the people, with the others, to educate civic consciousness, and ultimately to lead to the construction of a new culture that does not take solace in suffering but struggles with it. In this sense, a characteristic feature of the movement is the blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction: neorealism seeks "to bring the viewers closer to the cinema screen, to bring the screen to the street and, conversely, to project the street onto it" (Minghelli, G., 2008: 219).

In the first half of the 1950s, due to a number of internal and external factors, neorealism (in its classic form) came to an end. In the sphere of cinema, the movement transformed into the so-called "pink neorealism"<sup>11</sup>, which retained certain external features but lacked social commitment. Nevertheless, neorealism has left a deep imprint on the development of Italian cinema, as well as on a number of European and world cinemas, including those of the Eastern Bloc countries.

In Bulgaria, the reception of neorealism by socialist criticism was contradictory. On the one hand, it was defined as "an ally in the struggle for a radical change of society", as the closest movement to socialist realism in Western art (Molhov, Y., 1962: 37). On the other hand, a number

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the themes of the recent past, the neorealist gaze turned to the problems of the present - social injustice, unemployment, migration.

<sup>11</sup> Emblematic examples are Luigi Comencini's *Bread, Love and Dreams* (1953) and *Bread, Love and Jealousy* (1954).

of differences between socialist realism and neorealism were highlighted: the "active and militant humanism" of the former was opposed to the "abstract humanism" of the latter, the neutral ideological positions taken by neorealists and their non-involvement in the struggle for socialism were condemned. An illustrative example of these attitudes is the controversy surrounding the film *On a Small Island* (1958, director Rangel Valchanov, screenwriter Valeri Petrov). The film was harshly criticized by the dogmatic critics in the pages of the periodical press, with accusations of lack of political engagement, abstract humanism, debunking of heroism and strong influence from neorealism (Stanimirova, N., 2012: 143-144). The plot is based on the true story of the escape of a group of political prisoners from the island of St. Anastasia in 1925, but according to the film's critics, the affiliation of the main characters - Costa Rica, the Student, the Doctor and Zheko - with the Communist Party is not foregrounded. The ridiculous deaths of most of them are also problematic: Costa Rica is shot after a failed escape attempt in which the Student inadvertently kicks a tin can, giving away the fugitives; Zheko dies after he is hit by an accidental bullet during a practice shooting; just before the escape from the island, the Doctor trips over the leash of a goat, resulting in the breaking of his leg, and to avoid being a burden to his companions, he takes cover while the escape lasts, blowing himself up in the morning.

Although Bulgarian cinemas used to screen Italian neorealist films, preference was given to those that belonged to the "pink" version of neorealism. Their influence was stronger in relation to domestic cinematographic production, an example of which is the film *It Happened in the Street* (1956, director Yanko Yankov, screenwriter Pavel Vezhinov), a lyrical comedy telling the love story of the driver Misho (Apostol Karamitev) and the laboratory assistant Katerina (Petrana Lambrinova). After accidentally hitting the girl with his truck, Misho finds Katerina at her workplace and asks her not to file a complaint against him, because if she does, he will be fired. Subsequently, amorous feelings emerge between the two, and after a series of misunderstandings (cleared up with the crucial intervention of Misho's friends), the denouement follows - Misho and Katerina's kiss stops the street traffic. Emphasis is placed on the sentimental layer of the story, while the social contradictions (the characters' belonging to different classes, the impossibility of an ordinary truck driver to fit into the environment of doctors and lab assistants) remain in the background, softened by the light humour and cheerfulness permeating the film.

The socialist regime maintained a rather reserved attitude towards the classic films of neorealism, the happy ending being preferred to the hopelessness of films such as *Umberto D.* (1952), presenting the fate of a former civil servant who, despite his small pension, tries to survive with his dog Flike in the uncertain post-war Italian reality.

Thanks to the mediation of Italian neorealist films, but not without the influence of neorealist writers whose novels and short story collections began to appear in translation in Bulgarian in the 1950s and 1960s, neorealist aesthetics also invaded Bulgarian literature of the period. One of the fiction writers in whose work one can find traits of the Italian movement is Georgi Mishev. In the 1960s, he established himself in literature as the author of the short story collections *Osam Stories* (1963) and *Adamites* (1966) and the novella *Matriarchate* (1967). His works focused on the fate of the Bulgarian countryside after the processes of industrialization and collectivization, as well as the migration from villages to cities. In the field of cinema, Mishev took his place as one of the leading screenwriters of films belonging to the so-called "migration cycle", reworking many of his works into literary scripts<sup>12</sup>.

Georgi Mishev himself repeatedly pointed out in the course of his literary inquiry, as well as in his memoirs, the influence that Italian neorealism had on his formation as a writer and screenwriter. "The movement called *neorealism*, the author says, was to me like the ozonated air after a celestial electricity. The plots from which I was planning to write stories began to emerge,

<sup>12</sup> Among the most iconic films whose scripts were created by Georgi Mishev based on his literary works are: *The Hare Census* (1973, based on the short story of the same name), *A Peasant on a Bicycle* (1974, based on the novella *Alienation*), *Villa Zone* (1975, based on the novella of the same name) and *Matriarchate* (1977, based on the novella of the same name).

the stories appeared gently, like small screenplays" (Ivanov, N., 2023: 119). A number of features characteristic of the new Italian movement can be found in his work: simplicity and sincerity; objectivity and documentarity, but also in-depth psychological analysis of the characters; interest in the lower social strata (peasants, workers), in the problems of modernity and in the heroism of everyday life. In the prose works and film scripts of Georgi Mishev, the image of a "real Bulgaria" was created, freed from the ideological clichés and false optimism of socialist realism.

## CONCLUSION

Neorealism remains in history as perhaps the most significant Italian cultural phenomenon, whose achievements extend far beyond national and temporal boundaries. The movement had a profound impact on European, South American, Indian and Japanese cinema, and decades after its official end, one can talk about post-neorealism and neo-neorealism in contemporary cinema. At the same time, neorealism is a pan-cultural phenomenon, it plays a key role in the synthesis of the various arts. Its social function and civic pathos, debunking every ideology and regime - be it fascist, capitalist or socialist - should not be overlooked. In spite of its unclarified, dual status in the cultural life of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, neorealism found its ways in the works of Bulgarian artists from the middle of the 20th century onwards, its reception constituting a still understudied but fruitful area of research.

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