The Revival of Film Realism

The case of neo-neo-realism

B.A. Thesis

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Abstract

When fascism fell in Italy at the end of World War 2, Italian film-makers were no longer required to produce propaganda films that glorified Italy and its government. Instead, they began creating films that were on the opposite end of the spectrum: films that told realistic stories about ordinary people, working class people trying to deal with life after the war. Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica were among those who lead the charge. These film-makers operated within certain boundaries according to an ideology that was in formation at the time: they used non-actors for most roles, they filmed on the street or in nature without relying on constructed sets, they used long-shots and often encouraged improvised dialogue. The era was named *neorealismo* (neo-realism) and the films it produced have ever since been regarded as some of the best ever made. A similar development has taken place in modern day film-making that is the birth of neo-neo-realism. We are witnessing a rise in realism in cinema where, much like their Italian post-war colleagues, modern day film-makers are casting non-actors that play the roles of underprivileged members of society struggling to cope with everyday life. Sean Baker, Andrea Arnold, Celine Sciamma and the Safdie Brothers have all incorporated the laws of realism into their film-making. While the motivation behind the neo-realist era was the fall of fascism and absence of governmental interference, today´s motives are not as clear. There are nonetheless a few recent historical and technological events that have affected today´s generations and helped to form the social circumstances that call for a new era of realism in film-making; the war in Iraq, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the economic crash in 2008 and the social media movements (#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #FreeTheNipple) demanding social reform on a global scale.
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1 Introduction

In a piece in the *Sunday New York Times Magazine*, published in March 2009, film critic A. O. Scott introduced for the first time the idea that a new trend in film-making was emerging. Scott noticed that, similar to the Italian neo-realist directors of the 1940s, independent directors had started casting non-professional actors for leading roles, using street scenes shot in public (often without the public’s knowledge) with little or no pre-written dialogue. The intent was to convey the lives of the underprivileged parts of society - those gritty people living “on the fringes” that had been habitually left out of mainstream cinema.

This new movement, which he labelled neo-neo-realism, seemed to him to be emerging in response to the predominant American science-fiction blockbuster. In the age of CGI (computer-generated imagery), where superheroes and dystopian sci-fi themes are being produced on a grand scale and dominate at the box-office. We can see, maintained Scott, a reply of some sorts from directors that wished to capture the reality of this world and present it to their audience without employing visual trickery or emotional pretentiousness. It is an ultimately fresh take on realism that strips away the cloak of illusion and plants the viewer directly among the film’s subjects without the use of special effects or surreal scenarios (Scott).

This idea was not without its critics, and as reported in the media, film writers clashed over Scott’s analysis. Richard Brody, in his article in *The New Yorker*, considered Scott’s article “ambitious” and “[resting] on questionable premises and [reaching] dubious conclusions” (Brody), while Glenn Kenny, a fellow film critic, considered the analysis an exaggeration dictated by an editorial need to oversell or possibly cause some sort of controversy. I would like in this dissertation to carry out an in-depth analysis of both the Italian neo-realist movement and the modern-day neo-neo-realist movement, examining similarities and differences and exploring, among other factors, the socio-political landscape in which they emerged.

I shall therefore proceed first with an overview of the birth and development of the Italian neo-realist movement, reviewing some of its most prominent examples, namely: Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione*, Vittorio De Sica’s *Ladri di Biciclette* and Rossellini’s trilogy *Roma Città’ Aperta, Paisa’* and *Germania Anno Zero*. I will then focus on the current so-called neo-neo-realist trend, looking at a variety of works created by five different directors; the American Sean Baker, the English Andrea Arnold, the French Celine
Sciamma and the American Safdie brothers. I will finally try to highlight the social changes and historical events that have led us to this rise in realism in film, while drawing connections between the two movements.
2 The Italian Neorealismo

In the first half of the 1900s the development of cinematography and overall artistic production in Italy had been severely stifled by the rise of the fascist regime. In the 1930s Mussolini (in charge since 1922) had tried to boost Italian film production by opening the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Experimental film centre or Italian National film school) and the Cinecittá film studios. It had soon become very apparent to him that cinema could be used as a powerful tool to further the fascist agenda and during the Second World War Italian cinematic production increased even further. Despite the political climate (the vast majority of films produced aimed at propaganda), the stage had been set for a new generation of directors whose influence in cinematography would be felt worldwide and across the ages.

From 1945, after a bitter defeat and the final collapse of the fascist government, resources to be used for film production were virtually non-existent. The Cinecittá studios had been destroyed, there was no government funding available to go into film-making. Films were often shot with substandard instruments, with old, expired film and sometimes even without sound. Actors were scarce: those who had been associated with the old regime would not be employed. As Italian society started the post-war self-healing process, young directors felt the need to disassociate themselves from Mussolini’s old rhetoric and craved authenticity. They started portraying everyday reality almost in documentary fashion: films were shot on location, whether in towns, suburbs or in the countryside, often using non-professional actors speaking with local accents and in local dialects, instead of the more elegant Italian language. Rather than looking at the middle-class or individual heroes, the film plots dealt with the daily struggles of the poorest in society, sometimes inspired by real events, and the indifference of authorities to the plight of their most vulnerable citizens (Wagstaff).

Films were no longer propaganda, but not yet entertainment. These films gave a minute observation of reality, of human behaviour often in extreme situations, a mirror of the historical developments that were taking place. They provided the painful yet necessary medium to exercise a social and cultural critique: they questioned and re-evaluated the legacy left by years of dictatorship and war. They constituted an almost cathartic process through which Italy could look at itself and come to terms with its severely scarred collective subconscious. This new movement in cinema would soon be called neo-realism (The term neorealism had previously been in use in literature with
negative connotations since the 1930s as a derivative of the German Neue Sachlichkeit. It was only after Luchino Visconti made Ossessione in 1942 that the term started to denote a new trend in film-making. Almost ten years later, writers Eugenio Montale and Cesare Pavesi explained how the word had effectively completely split from its literary definition, taking on a decisively positive meaning in connection with cinema (Lanza). Realism as a movement can be difficult to define in terms of both geography and years. Generally speaking, it can be interpreted as a European artistic trend that evolved, especially in the second half of the 1800s, in opposition to Romanticism. Realism had its roots in Positivism, a philosophy that had developed with the progress of Science and that set out to understanding reality in a scientific way. While Romanticism had exalted fantasy and emotions, Realism aimed at representing reality (and therefore society) as objectively as possible. The industrial revolution had by now created a poor, exploited, underrepresented working class and Realist artists started portraying without artifices this new reality as raw as it was. It is not difficult then to understand how this new trend could be compared to the movement of the previous century and be called “new realism”, with all the innovations that technology could now offer (Latimer).

2.1 Luchino Visconti: Ossessione

Even though it precedes the end of the Second World War, Luchino Visconti’s Ossessione (1943) is usually considered the first Italian neo-realist film. The film, inspired by the American novel The Postman Always Rings Twice by James Cain (1934), slightly altered to suit the Italian settings, is the story of a wondering tramp, Gino, who has an affair with Giovanna, the wife of restaurant owner Giuseppe. Gino and Giovanna have an affair and plot to murder Giuseppe, who eventually dies in a car accident. After a sequence of events, the lovers, overcome by guilt and chased by the police, try to escape one last time. The film ends with Giovanna’s death, while Gino is finally arrested.

Admittedly the film is not considered neo-realist by everyone: the melodramatic love triangle between Gino and Giovanna is removed from the story that will eventually characterise neo-realist cinema. It could be argued nonetheless that the film touches upon many important aspects not yet considered before that time. It’s not the story itself, it could be said, that is neo-realist, but how it is told.
The film proceeds in a slow pace, focusing on the characters’ daily routines, thereby giving the viewer that feeling of realism and of events unfolding almost in real time. This monotony well illustrates the uneventful life of the protagonists: the boredom the viewers feel allows them to better understand the lack of opportunities experienced by the characters in the film. This serves, in my opinion, if not to justify, then at least to explain the choices made by Gino and Giovanna; through this understanding the audience may be less inclined to pass judgement. Visconti therefore, with intellectual honesty and moral transparency, re-discovered a reality forgotten by contemporary literature and propaganda and gave a new model of representation of reality. Indeed, the main feature of all of Visconti’s production is a criticism of the moral and social condition of mankind in his time: the protagonists’ crisis is the symptom of society’s crisis. As reported in the Magazine Sipario (n. 230, June 1965), Visconti explained: “I am always interested in extreme situations - those moments in which an abnormal tension reveals human beings’ inner truth.” Both Giovanna and Gino in fact have been described as “tragic characters in their inability to find a space in which to situate themselves comfortably. The limited roles made available by society prove to be insufficient in providing narratives for their lives that bring them closer to happiness”.

The film could be considered neo-realistic even from a more technical and aesthetic point of view. The sets are improvised, with amateur actors, shot on location in rural Italy. The outdoor scenes are romanticised, just like the interior scenes, which again reflect the unflattering and stark reality of the main characters’ everyday life. The leading roles are played by two famous stars of the post-war era, Clara Calamai and Massimo Girotti who put their own mark on the film with “breath-taking performances that are anything but glamorous” (Ruberto).

The whole story is mostly told using long or medium shots. By looking at the characters from a certain distance, the director (and viewer) acts more as an independent observer, rather than a choreographer. The depth of field allows the audience to take in the scene and see the characters as firmly embedded in their environment. The environment, with its dusty roads winding into the distance, is an integral part of the film: there is no detachment between the characters and the space and time they inhabit.
2.2 Roberto Rossellini: The war trilogy

Roberto Rossellini started working in cinema in the mid ‘30s as an editor and director for Mussolini’s *Istituto Luce* (Light Institute). His so-called War trilogy is composed of *Roma, Città’ Aperta* (Rome, Open City, 1945), *Paisa* (Paisan, 1946) and *Germania Anno Zero* (Germany, Year Zero, 1948). Made straight after the end of WW2, *Roma Città’ Aperta* is by some considered the first neo-realist film and a manifesto of renewal of Italian cinema. The film follows the daily struggles of ordinary citizens in Rome during the period that saw the forces of Resistance fighting against the German army while waiting for American intervention. The film still preserves some traditional characteristics: the main cast is made up of renowned Italian actors; some scenes are clearly set up to emphasise drama and provoke an emotional response. It is nonetheless based on real facts and it portrays the tragedy of the last years of German occupation.

*Paisa* again follows the advance of the American Allies from Sicily to Northern Italy. Just as in a news reel documentary, a narrator announces the main military developments while following the story, but far from being a war chronicle, the film develops in single episodes, unrelated to each other and focusing on the relationship between the characters in their effort to preserve their humanity while living in traumatic times. The film is shot in different locations in Italy with a diverse international cast. Instead of depending on traditional voice-overs, several languages are used in the film - German, American and British English and the local Italian dialects. This chaotic mix of languages added to the confusion caused by the war, make Italy appear entirely different than ever before on the silver screen.

*Germania Anno Zero*, follows a 13-year-old Edmund and his family in a post-WW2 Berlin devastated by bombardments. This film is often considered the most pessimistic of Rossellini’s works: he paints a bleak picture of history and human nature, symbolised by the last scene with Edmund walking silently among the ruins of the city, eventually committing suicide.

By incorporating contemporary affairs directly into his films as well as shooting in war torn cities demolished by war, and employing non-professional actors in some of the major roles, Rossellini attempted to draw attention to the psychological impact that conflict has on the common people. Consequently, he instigated a new chapter in the history of Italian cinema.
2.3 Vittorio De Sica: *Ladri di Biciclette*

Vittorio De Sica is another major exponent of the Italian neo-realist movement. He had started working as a director during the fascist regime, producing a few light-hearted comedies. In 1944 he produced *I Bambini i Guardano, (The Children are Watching Us)* a film that, similar to *Ossessione*, contained many of the elements that would eventually characterise neo-realist cinema. De Sica explained in an interview, how he had grown “tired of producing the same romantic comedies” and desired to make something that would look “closer to human nature”.

Before starting work on *I Bambini i Guardano*, De Sica employed the screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, who would from then on regularly collaborate with him. Zavattini became instrumental in the development of neo-realism, shaping its idealism and procedural process. It was Zavattini for example who first employed the term neo-realism in connection to cinema and when asked about the ideal film he summarised what would become the main neo-realist principles as such: "The ideal film would be 90 minutes of the life of a man to whom nothing happens. Film should repudiate the star system, studio artifice, plot contrivances and spectacles... Plot is inauthentic because it imposes an artificial structure on everyday life."

*Ladri di Biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves, 1949) was based on a book written by Luigi Bartolini and adapted for the big screen by Cesare Zavattini. Antonio Ricci, after being unemployed for a long time, finally finds employment hanging posters around the city of Rome, but he’s required to have access to a bicycle in order to carry out the job. After retrieving his old bike from the pawnshop by selling his linen, Antonio just about manages to start working when disaster strikes and his bike is stolen. The rest of the film shows his attempts, together with his young son, Bruno, to retrieve the bike. Their quest is made difficult because of the indifference of authorities and the “omertà” (a code of silence that is deeply rooted in the community and restricts those who follow it to inform the authorities of criminal activity) of fellow Romans. Tired and out of, luck Antonio attempts as a last resort to steal a bike, but is immediately caught. The bicycle owner, somewhat moved by the sight of a humiliated Antonio and a tearful Bruno, takes pity on the pair and lets them go without pressing charges. As the film concludes, the audience is left to ponder the consequences: Antonio and his family will most likely be caught in a seemingly never-ending cycle of poverty and unemployment for the rest of their lives.
Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves, 1949), (together with Sciusciá (Shoeshine, 1946), and later on Miracolo a Milano (The Miracle in Milan, 1951) and Umberto D. (Umberto D., 1952)) are often considered De Sica’s and Zavattini’s best work and stand as the best examples of neo-realist Italian cinema. The thread connecting all these films is the gaze cast on the miseries and contradictions of men, highlighting how progress was achieved through social injustice and exploitation. The film thus represents the vast majority of the Italian population at the time. Much like Zavattini’s “ideal film”, De Sica follows Antonio and Bruno for three days: there are no major temporal gaps between events and Antonio’s movements are documented step by step, catching glimpses of real, ordinary human life, in proper neo-realist style.

The director never intervenes: there is no narration, no artificial effects. Original music, while used to highlight the most emotionally intense moments, is always in the background; the few contemporary songs used further enhance the scenes in which the true image of Italy seems to come through.

Most scenes are shot outdoors, using natural light. Val Melaina, the housing complex in the suburbs where Antonio and his family lives, had been built during the fascist period to isolate, away from the city, the working-classes whose image clashed with the grandeur Mussolini wanted Rome to project. The houses were made with cheap materials, in repetitive patterns, unremarkable as the environment in which they were built. There is virtually no connection to the city: the roads are incomplete, there is no public transport and workers can reach town by cycling in to work. The city of Rome itself, where most of the action takes place, is a city devastated by war, trying to pull itself together and slowly return to normality. Far from casting that typical image of ‘eternal city’, Rome is not idealised: the roads are half empty, there are no famous locations in the spotlight, no important landmarks to add romance to the film.

3 Modern day neo-neo-realism

While realism has never really disappeared from the world of cinema, there is a significant rise in the number of high-profile films that depend on the principles of realism to attain a certain atmosphere in their story-telling. This type of films all have a few things in common; low budgets, amateur or non-actors both in leading and supporting roles, long shots with improvised acting that sometimes resembles documentary-style film-making. Directors such as Mike Leigh, Steven Soderbergh, the Dardenne brothers and Michael
Haneke have all been known to employ these methods in their films, to name a few. They have done so with the desire to create films that explore the fundamental chemistry of human interactions, to cut through the candy coated, glittering exterior that so often dominates relationships and conversations in mainstream films. And once again, realism is catching the eye of critics and viewers alike. As mentioned above, A.O. Scott, the film critic for The New York Times, has used the phrase neo-neo-realism to define this new movement. Scott wrote about *Wendy and Lucy* and its minimalistic but powerful impact it had on American film-making. The film premiered at Cannes in 2008, where it was shown out of competition and flew under the radar for most of the year, as it was mostly screened in art-house theatres, until being shown in New York in December of the same year. Many critics included *Wendy and Lucy* in their year-end best-of lists and there were talks of an Oscar nomination for Michelle Williams in the leading role. Scott goes on to speculate that the film is indeed an indicator of the social and economic unrest following the 2008 banking collapse; “the film, a modest, quiet, 80-minute study in loneliness and desperation, seemed like something more — not so much a premonition of hard times ahead as a confirmation that they had arrived.” The old cliché about art imitating life fits perfectly here, as it did in post-war Italy (Scott).

### 3.1 Sean Baker

Sean Baker is an American film-maker from New Jersey who has written and directed six feature films. He has famously used the tools of realism when casting and shooting his films. *Starlet* (2012), *Tangerine* (2015) and *The Florida Project* (2017), are all perfect examples of realism in films where untrained actors star in most roles and filming consists mainly of long shots on location.

*Tangerine* does this especially well as it utilises its environment beautifully to unfold a story about two trans-gendered prostitutes, played by two trans-gendered prostitutes that have to deal with the struggle of everyday life on the street. There is a comic aspect to the story but it does not draw away from the seriousness of their situation; one of them, having just been released from prison and upon her return, hears that her boyfriend has been cheating on her. The film is shot on three iPhone 5´s which minimised production costs and allowed the film-makers to spend more on paying extras and location purchases. While the film follows the two colleagues on their search for the boyfriend, it also leads the viewer on a journey through a neighbourhood in West Los Angeles and really seems to capture the atmosphere of the city and its inhabitants.
As it is now well known, the film was shot using iPhones. When asked why during an interview, Sean Baker explained: “the decision [to use phones to shoot] was something we eventually got to because when we started budgeting the film, looking at how we were going to make this with the limited budget that we had, that option eventually rose”. Using iPhones allowed Baker to be inconspicuous when shooting: the actors on set and especially the public - the unaware, improvised cast of the film - could be recorded in their ‘natural environment’ without the heavy intrusion of machinery. In the spirit of previous neo-realist directors, using relatively cheap hand-held devices and the simple tools offered by the phones, Baker produced a film almost in real time. While the film was clearly edited in post-production (as it was necessary for the big screen), Baker utilised a tool that was not only inexpensive but nowadays used by everyone to broadcast on social media: there is no difference or separation between the director and society. In other words, ‘everyone’ could have been a witness to the events of Tangerine; ‘everyone’ could have told that story. The public can be found both in front and behind the camera (Filming A Movie).

Baker’s *The Florida Project* revolves around Halley, a struggling young mother, and the film’s main character, her young daughter Moonee. The pair live in a cheap motel room as Halley tries to earn money doing odd jobs and committing petty crime. Moonee and her friends get into all sorts of trouble since they have to fend for themselves most of the time, stealing, vandalizing and fooling around. After a rough period and a falling out with her best friend, Halley is driven to prostitution which eventually leads to her arrest. The film follows these two main characters and their everyday experiences: the seemingly endless struggle to attain money, the effects of absent parents on children, the stigma of being poor and dependent on others and the slippery slope into the life of crime. These are the people stuck in the “grey zone”, uneducated, unemployed and lacking resources to better their status in life. They are not well enough off to stay afloat but still not too deep in trouble to receive the help they need.

To allow the characters to develop naturally, many of the scenes and dialogues were only limitedly scripted and many of the actors chosen were non-professional and had never acted before, including the children. Baker recalls: "There’s one scene, the one where they’re in the pool together, that was almost entirely improvised, because they’d gotten to the point where they understood their characters and they understood the themes and what they had to hit in terms of bullet points. We ran the camera on them for about 10 minutes and got a perfect little, like, 20 seconds that encapsulated the relationship they
were in at that time”. The film, in many ways, was a “fluid process and the script evolved as we shot,” cinematographer Alexis Zabe said (Nakhinikian).

The motel Magic Castle is located in Kissimmee, Florida, right next to the local Walt Disney World resort. The setting is no coincidence, chosen to underline the often-sharp contrast of class divide in the USA (Desowitz).

3.2 Andrea Arnold
Andrea Arnold is an English film-maker and a former actress. She has made three feature films which all bare the characteristics of realist film-making; Red Road (2006), Fish Tank (2009) and American Honey (2016). Arnold sought out actors with little or no acting experience for all three films, but when casting for American Honey she "street cast” by searching beaches, streets, and approaching drunk teenagers. Arnold discovered Sasha Lane while she was on spring break with her friends; Lane decided to audition for the film and was cast in the lead role. The remainder of the cast were found in parking lots, construction sites, streets, and state fairs (Lan).

The cast is mostly an ensemble of people with no acting experience, apart from Shia Labeouf, being the biggest name among them. The film follows a travelling sales crew of teenagers through the Midwest of the United States as they go door to door selling magazine subscriptions. We follow Star, a teenage girl who has just run away from a dysfunctional home, as she joins the crew and tries to prove her worth. Star gets to know life on the road while the emphasis is on the harsh reality facing so many Americans today, the struggle to acquire and maintain a job in order to support a family and raise children.

The plot in itself is virtually non-existent: there are no major events in the film. Even when it seems that ‘something might happen’ (for example when Star finds herself alone with the three men), situations eventually dissolve into nothing. While the crew’s lifestyle might not be typical or common, there are no extremes in the film either. As viewers we get to travel together with the crew in the minivan for most of the time. Shooting with handheld cameras from the backseat, the director (and the audience) eavesdrop in the youths’ (improvised) conversations, we get to experience their view through their car window and sleep in the same motel room as they do. Rather than pummeling us with romanticised nature shots, the camera’s focus is fixed on the run-down residential areas and their under-privileged residents. This austere image of the Midwest sends a clear message about the dire situation which many inhabitants of this rural area are
experiencing, where unemployment, substance abuse and inadequate social services are all too common.

The film was shot with neither a script nor a storyboard to preserve the spontaneity of the performances: actors would be given a concept or a few lines to go on and then be let free to perform as naturally as they wanted. Because of this, the main criticism that has been moved against the film is that it lacks a ‘story arc’ or ‘character development’ and that technically “any shot in the film looks as though it could have been taken by a 17-year-old Instagram user”. But as I explainer earlier in the case of Sean Baker, filming from the teens’ perspective charges the film with stark realism. Moreover, the apparent absence of character development is also “more of a merit than a weakness, as it more closely resembles life. In reality, not all experiences, not even the life-changing ones, have immediate and specific impacts on one’s personality”. overall, I agree with the critic Donald Clarke: in the film “there are many troughs and peaks” but this is all very much part of the aesthetic and an honest portrayal of American everyday reality. “After all, America is an uneven nation” (Clarke).

3.3 Celine Sciamma

Celine Sciamma is a French screenwriter and director who focuses on minimalistic production methods and likes to cast non-actors for her films. In 2014 she released the film *Girlhood* which portrays a group of teenage girls and their daily lives in a suburb of Paris, a neighborhood awash with poverty and social problems. Marieme lives with her mother and three siblings in an apartment building and because their mother has to work many jobs to pay the bills, Marieme has to look after her two younger sisters. Their older brother treats Marieme badly with intimidation, threats and violence.

As a response to her brother’s chauvinistic bullying, Marieme joins a gang of girls from the neighborhood where she proves her worth by defeating a rival gang member and humiliating her in front of a crowd. She receives recognition from both her fellow gang members and older brother for winning the fight. Things take a turn for the worse though when Marieme’s brother assaults her for having sex with a boy from the neighborhood. She realises she can no longer live under the same roof as him and leaves for good. She turns her back on everyone that she knows and begins a career as a criminal and drug dealer.

Sciamma auditioned and cast teenage girls she found on the streets of Paris, where she also shot the film. She was inspired by the numerous gangs of black girls she had
observed around Paris throughout her life. When criticised for maybe not being in the best position to represent young black women, herself being a middle-class white woman, Sciamma said: “I had a strong sense of having lived on the outskirts—even if I am middle-class white girl. I didn't feel I was making the film about black women but with black women - it's not the same. I'm not saying, ‘I'm going to tell you what it's like being black in France today’; I just want to give a face to the French youth I'm looking at”.

Mick LaSalle, a critic for the San Francisco Chronicle wrote: “Girlhood is about as grim as movies get, but it's showing something real, and Sciamma has a feel for this period of life, the camaraderie, the jokes, the kinds of conflicts, the panic and the hope. Each time Sciamma makes a movie, it’s as if she’s saying, not stridently, but plainly, 'Here’s something real people are going through that you’ve never thought about.”’ (LaSalle). That is exactly what neo-neo-realism is all about; to present everyday struggles that everyone knows about but no one takes the time to think about. There is an underlying sense of imminent threat throughout Girlhood, nevertheless Sciamma restrains from presenting the audience with any brutal scenes of violence. Although there are scenes where the girls fight each other, the real threat projected is domestic misogyny that seems to affect all aspects of society (Romney).

3.4 The Safdie Brothers
The Safdie brothers are independent film-makers, born and raised in New York City. The brothers, who regularly collaborate, started experimenting with their father’s camera at an early age. Les Fréres Safdie, as they sometimes call themselves, have been making films for over ten years and are perhaps the poster-boys for the modern neo-neo-realism movement. Their own unique style of writing, casting, shooting, directing and editing is in essence what realist film-making is all about. Josh Safdie has famously recruited actors wherever he meets people he believes will fit into their roles: on the subway, at film festivals or at parties. His brother Ben has a leading role in their latest film, Good Time, alongside superstar Robert Pattinson and Buddy Duress. Duress is a recovering addict and multiple felon whose drug-running and prison experiences are what the film is partially built on, among other stories.

The brothers have made three feature films, one short and a documentary and are currently working on several projects, one of which is being produced by Martin Scorsese. One of the defining attributes of a Safdie brothers’ film are the long shots with improvised
dialogue, often set on busy streets or in moving vehicles. These scenes tend to add depth and feeling to their films so that it becomes almost impossible not to get emotionally involved with the characters and their struggles. Another method the Safdie brothers apply is to shoot their scenes on busy streets and public areas from a long distance, in order to not disrupt the flow and chemistry of passing pedestrians. There will be a boom operator nearby but the camera might be located a few blocks away, most likely in the back-seat of a parked car or behind an advertising sign. In Good Time, Connie Nikas is fighting to free his disabled brother Nick out of prison on Ryker’s Island after his mismanaged bank robbery had led to his arrest. Connie consequently spends the night frantically trying to raise funds for a bail bondsman who has agreed to handle the case. An endeavor filled with mishaps and coincidences sends Connie on a journey through Manhattan and Long Island that eventually lands him in the arms of the police. Like so many other realist films, Good Time is a poor man’s quest for cash. A quest that highlights the lesser known side of well-known American places, a darker side but still very relevant to those who are living in it.

4 What has led us to neo-neo-realism?

What is it that raises demand for realism in film? What social circumstances are we seeing today that make people crave the ordinary, the plain, the straight forward, the seemingly simple yet also underlying complications. Today’s younger generations watched the 9/11 terrorist attack on live television, witnessed the economic collapse in 2008 and have had access to an almost constant live feed of military conflict since the early 1990’s. Additionally the world is becoming ever more “woke” with the social enlightenment movement gathering pace everyday through social media (Woke is a word that first emerged in 2008 in Erykah Badu’s song “Master Teacher”, initially signalling awareness of injustice or racial tension, and later transforming into a word of action. Activists were woke and called on others to stay woke. Like many other terms from black culture that have been taken into the mainstream, woke is gaining broader uses. It describes those who are aware of the social and political environments regarding all demographics and socio-economic standings (“Woke”). It is a movement that is dismantling old idealisms built on violence and fear, colonialism, racism, misogyny, sexism, and bigotry by unearthing the very roots of dominating patriarchy and capitalist discrimination. It is this background setting of war and awareness that allows the neo-
neo-realism movement to flourish, to take its time in telling stories of everyday people in everyday situations that the viewer can relate to in a palpable way.

There are a few events in recent history that have shaped today’s generations and accumulatively may have led to the rise in neo-neo-realism film-making. These events are historical landmarks that have opened people’s eyes to the current state of affairs and increased the need for realism in film.

4.1 The Persian Gulf War

The war in Iraq, often referred to as The Persian Gulf War, began in August of 1990 and lasted for seven months. The war started when the United Nations invaded Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein’s armies to occupy Kuwait, as Iraqi leaders believed that Kuwait was a historic part of Iraq and therefore its rich oil-sources were Iraq’s property. Kuwait’s armies were no match for Iraq’s highly sophisticated armoury, hence Iraq quickly seized control and installed a military regime. Led by the U.S. Military, the United Nations sent forth an army of 500 thousand soldiers that fought and defeated an Iraqi army of 540 thousand soldiers in an operation named Desert Shield. These military proceedings received high exposure and were televised and broadcast all over the world, day and night. CNN led the charge, having already established connections in and around the city of Baghdad and therefore were ahead of the pack when it came to reporting from the area under siege (Kellner). Most of the western world had access to CNN at the time while viewer ratings in the USA had not been higher since John F. Kennedy’s funeral in 1963. What perhaps defined CNN’s reporting received many criticisms, most notably from Douglas Kellner, a professor of philosophy from Columbia University. Kellner claimed that CNN were dramatizing the military conflict, making it exciting to watch on TV in order to boost the network’s ratings. The rising trend in televised military conflict did not only boost viewer ratings but also attracted advertisers, since there is a direct link between witnessing death on television and an increased appeal of advertised products (Dar-Nimrod).

4.2 9/11

On September 11, 2001, two airline jets were hijacked and flown into the two towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan, New York. The first plane hit the North Tower at 8:46 am and by the time the second plane crashed into the South Tower, at 9:06 am, the events were being broadcast on live television all over the world. The incident claimed
the lives of nearly 3000 people, making it the largest single terrorist attack in the nation’s history. President George W. Bush declared a “Global War on Terrorism” and ordered an increase in national security. The U.S. government was now at war against terrorist groups, focusing their efforts on the Taliban regime and their leader, Osama Bin Laden. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks led to the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, which spearheaded the war on terrorism whilst overseeing enhancements in domestic security measures. Soon after, the Information Awareness Unit was created to monitor possible terrorist activity within the United States. Consequently, the IAO was given authorisation for searches and surveillance without being granted warrant, which many believed to go against basic civil rights and the right to privacy. Lord Ashdown, a British diplomat and former international High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the many critics that spoke against this campaign, stating that it was unsuccessful and calling the USA a “failed state” (Pyszczynski).

4.3 The financial crisis of 2008

The economic crash of 2008 began to form when the subprime mortgage market faced problems in 2007, eventually leading to the collapse of Lehman Brothers investment bank in October 2008. A global crisis soon ensued as many banks around the world sought bail-outs to prevent the world financial system to fail completely. The Lehman Brothers bank had been a leading force in allowing American home-owners to acquire loans with their mortgage as insurance, offering low interest rates in addition to fast and easy lending processes. Housing prices went up fast, as mortgage approval rates were high and the number of homebuyers grew substantially (Taylor). The period following the crash saw an increase in foreclosures, bankruptcies and unemployment worldwide, but mainly in Europe and the USA (The Financial Crisis Report).

4.4 Social media movements

Several social media movements have gained a large following in recent years and helped many grass-root movements to spread their message across the United States and even the world. Black Lives Matter is a movement that began in 2013 as a protest following the murder of Treyvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American who was walking unarmed through his own neighbourhood. His killer, George Zimmerman claimed to have been acting in self-defence and was acquitted in a court of law, sparking nationwide outrage. When Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old African American, was killed by
police in 2014, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter went viral and the movement started to
gather followers around the world and became a symbol used to represent opposition to
crime brutality and the discrimination against African Americans in the United States. When Michael Brown was gunned down by a white policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, riots broke out locally as well as in many other cities around the country. The founders of Black Lives Matter claim that the goal is to expand the debate regarding the government’s systematic oppression of African Americans. They have also declared that the movement is an ideological and political tool against said oppression, allowing them to fight back against the violent force that is depriving them of their basic human rights, leaving them powerless and without dignity (Rickford). Another movement that started as a protest is Free the Nipple, when women started posting pictures of their bare breasts online in order to normalise them and undoing the presumption that breasts are exclusively sexual. Hence, the hashtag #FreeTheNipple quickly became a symbol for feminists battling the pornographisation of women created by the media and outdated social norms. In October 2017, a movement that identified itself with the hashtag #metoo, went viral. After Alyssa Milano urged women who had experienced any kind of sexual harassment or assault by the hands of men, to come forward and share their stories, the response was immediate. The beginning of this wave of shared stories can be traced to October 2017, when several women of the entertainment industry in Hollywood accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual misconduct. Weinstein became the model for the patriarchal male that used his power to manipulate and abuse women. Milano tweeted her message at noon on October 15 and by the end of the day the phrase Me Too had been used 200 thousand times, counting 500 thousand times the very next day. On Facebook, the number went to 12 million, reaching around 45% of all Americans in the first day. The #MeToo movement helped shed light on a pre-existing problem that everyone knows about but most are afraid to talk about; the sexual violence against women, transcending both age and race (Kelly). According to a survey conducted by the Washington Post and ABC News, 45% of all women in the United States have reported receiving “unwanted or inappropriate” sexual advances from the hands of men (Langer). A global estimate, issued by the World Health Organisation, states that one third of all women have been affected by sexual violence in some way.

Same as the shift from traditional fascist induced, propaganda film-making to the neo-Realist era of post-war Italy, today’s neo-neo-realism is a response to a period in the history of the United States filled with turmoil and conflict. The need to experience films
with stories of regular people, dealing with problems the viewer can relate to, is ever growing. Arnold, Sciamma, Baker and the Safdie Brothers have all declared their desire to represent real people in their works, to point the camera at groups that have been left out of the spotlight, but are no less worthy of it. Italian neo-realism counteracted fascist propaganda in the same way neo-neo-realism counteracts the current state of global turmoil.

5 Conclusion

When the Second World War came to an end, Italian cinema took a sharp turn that would be the topic of endless discussions and theoretical studies. The absence of fascist propaganda set forth by the ruling government saw a new kind of film emerge; realistic and un-romanticised films that depicted the stories of the working class as they dealt with life after the war. The films were shot in the streets of dilapidated cities and run-down areas of Italy, entirely different from the before-mentioned propaganda films that hyped and glorified their subjects. The neo-realism era produced films that are still to this day, some 70 years later, valued as some of the best films ever made. A similar trend has been forming in recent years, where film-makers are responding to the condition created by political unrest, increased economic and financial complications and increased demand for social reform. Today’s neo-neo-realism movement is receiving critical acclaim and drawing attention to the subjects that its films represent.
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