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Realism across borders: The role of state institutions in making Italian neo-realist film transnational

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## **Realism Across Borders:**

The role of state institutions in making Italian neo-realist film transnational\*

*Francesco Di Chiara and Paolo Noto*

### **Abstract**

This case study investigates the role of state institutions in the molding of Italian neo-realism as a transnational phenomenon. Conventionally, the birth of Italian neo-realism is associated with Rossellini's *Open City* and the end of World War II; however, its transnational story already begins in the late 1930s and early 1940s when the project of a new Italian cinema was initiated by a group of young film intellectuals. Focusing on the discourse surrounding the creation of this new realism in Italian film, we examine its transnational dimension as it manifests itself in the production history of a sample of lesser known films that put Italy in touch with other countries. Some of these films were the result of international coproduction agreements (for instance René Clément's *The Walls of Malapaga*), some represented foreign characters or involved foreign professionals (Joseph Losey's *Stranger on the Prowl*), whereas the international distribution of yet others resulted in diplomatic tensions and wrangles (Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle*). Of special interest in these contexts will be to scrutinize the means deployed by Italian government institutions to control film production and police the kind of realist content that could be sanctioned, but also to examine how the films' potential for international circulation in turn curbed and modified those very decision-making processes.

In a recent review of *My Brilliant Friend* published in *The Guardian*, Tobias Jones compares the TV movies based on the novels of Elena Ferrante to postwar Italian cinema and to filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, and Federico Fellini (Jones 2018). According to Jones, an expert writer on Italian matters and author of volumes also translated into Italian, the representation of themes and situations such as the postwar period, Naples, rubble, childhood, and so on, links the TV show to neo-realism, which virtually plays the role of a second ghost on the set, alongside that of the elusive Neapolitan author herself, a "ghost" that like that of Ferrante is capable of influencing the *mise en scène*.

\*This work is the fruit of genuine collaboration on all parts and aspects of this essay, with Francesco Di Chiara responsible for "Four Case Studies," "The Obscenity of the Realist Image" and "The Diplomacy of the Realist Image," and Paolo Noto for the Introduction, "From Project to Transnational Circulation," and the Conclusion. The authors wish to express their gratitude to Tomaso Subini (Università degli Studi di Milano) and to the project "I cattolici e il cinema In Italia tra gli anni '40 e gli anni '70" (<http://users.unimi.it/cattoliciecinema/home/>), whose digital database allowed for easier access to some of the primary sources cited in this case study.

We do not need to dwell on the abstractly philological gist of these opinions (a film historian might question, for example, the inclusion of Fellini in the neo-realist canon) to note that assertions of this kind are not unusual, especially in the non-specialist press. What is of interest here is that these affirmations reveal certain assumptions underlying the use of the notion of neo-realism and of its ability to put Italian culture in touch with transnational audiences. First, the frequency and regularity with which the term neo-realism is adduced (and, obviously, along with it realism as its semantic matrix) indicate that this historical and critical category does not belong exclusively to the domain of academic and scholarly discourse, but rather that it has long spilled over into the wider realm of public opinion. Second, the review implicitly suggests not only that neo-realism is a kind of demon of the Italian culture that, in the form of recurring elements (ruins, postwar, poverty, the South, etc.), distinguishes all Italian visual production beyond a specific moment in time, but also that it offers a privileged position from which to fruitfully examine Italian cinema and, as in this case, television, as well as a benchmark to evaluate them. This is an idea authoritatively developed, for example, by Peter Bondanella and Millicent Marcus in their influential works on this subject (Bondanella 1983; Marcus 1986). Third and finally, and mostly in symptomatic terms, the review attests that references to neo-realism provide an interpretative framework especially for the benefit of non-Italian audiences, inasmuch as, playing with that tension between the exotic and the already-known mentioned in the article, they help make familiar what appears to be new, unusual, foreign in Italian audiovisual contents traveling across borders. In short, in all these cases we can observe a dialectic between the national and the transnational, manifesting itself in the notion that neo-realism as a term and concept identifies something inherently Italian and, at the same time, something worthy to be circulated abroad: it is something that *represents* Italy both in textual/visual/aesthetic and ambassadorial terms.

In considering neo-realism in strictest historical terms as a phase of Italian film production from the end of World War II to the early 1950s, this case study seeks to place the emphasis on two aspects, its institutional and its transnational dynamics. In the first instance we want to reconstruct the transnational story of the discourse surrounding neo-realism, from the moment preceding its actual birth—that is, the period dating from the late 1930s to the early 1940s when the project of a new Italian cinema was initiated by a group of young film intellectuals—to its worldwide diffusion and its inclusion among the most vital trends in the “culture of reconstruction” in the wake of World War II (as it has been so labeled for the years 1946 to 1950 by Nicholas Hewitt; see Hewitt 1989). Our second focus is the institutional dynamics governing the selection, production and international circulation of Italian neo-realist films

which, due to their particular characteristics, put Italy in touch with other countries; here our attention centers on Italian films that were produced through international coproduction agreements and involved non-domestic stakeholders such as foreign companies, producers or actors, and whose distribution and reception abroad on occasion resulted in diplomatic spats. This in turn leads us to scrutinize how the Italian governmental institutions that controlled film production—in a context in which state intervention was key to the functioning of the industrial system—established the conditions for realist film content to be staged and diffused, but also how they controlled respectively sanctioned the level of cinematic “realism” allowed in those films.

### *1 From project to transnational circulation*

In film studies discourse, the noun neo-realism goes hand in glove with the adjective “Italian”: seen as a specifically Italian contribution to modern cinema, the “Italian language of cinema” (“italiano del cinema”; Farassino 1989, 21), it has been instrumental to the construction of national cultural identity (Pitassio 2007). This interpretation does not necessarily prevent other takes; on the contrary, it can be considered complementary to that of neo-realism as a transnational phenomenon, a view voiced more insistently in recent years. Francesco Pitassio thus argues that in postwar Italian cinema we can find traits that may be associated with the three different meanings of the category of transnational cinema provided by earlier film scholars (see Pitassio 2019, 110–14). Italian neo-realist cinema is in fact often produced by means of capital and creative personnel coming from abroad, and it is successfully distributed and discussed by critics all over the world. Neo-realism is also part of the wider European post-WW2 “culture of reconstruction” mentioned above, serving to catalyze those discourses that converge around what French sociologist Luc Boltanski (1999) has called the “politics of pity”: the habit of modern media to present images of human suffering to a distant and unaffected audience that, whether it responds compassionately or not, holds an asymmetrical position of power. The success of Italian neo-realism specifically among the cultural elites of the East Coast of the United States has been framed precisely in this way by Karl Schoonover (2012) who highlights how the spectacle of misery and suffering offered by Italian cinema was instrumental in enabling late 1940s trans-Atlantic European recovery policies such as the Marshall Plan. Finally, neo-realism is often also a diasporic cinema in which the contribution of filmmakers who fled their country of origin and arrived in Italy for political or economic

reasons should not be underestimated.

As regards chronology, while it should be noted that the term neo-realism is applied to postwar Italian cinema for the first time by French-speaking critics such as André Bazin and Felix Morlion, it was, as Stefania Parigi reminds us, already used widely in Italy in the previous two decades to define such heterogeneous cultural phenomena, often of non-national origin, as films by Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir and Julien Duvivier, German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and modernist Soviet literature (Parigi 2014, 19–24). It was not until the release of Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* in 1943, however, that the word became tied explicitly to an Italian film. The adoption of the term by film culture must thus be understood against the backdrop of a wider cultural struggle that was fought in particular by several young Italian critics who were active between the late Thirties and early Forties and who subsequently either became renowned film directors (Luchino Visconti, Giuseppe De Santis, Michelangelo Antonioni, Antonio Pietrangeli, Carlo Lizzani) or played a fundamental role in the institutionalization of film culture (Umberto Barbaro, Mario Alicata). Italy, these intellectuals contended, lacked a fully-fledged national cinema, capable of representing the life of the country, its landscape, its history. For this reason, its cinema could not keep up with the standards of other European countries, not even with its own artistic and cultural heritage. In their view, realism had always been the essence of any authentic Italian art tradition. Thus the path forward identified by these intellectuals, who not coincidentally began to emancipate themselves from the fascist culture in which they had grown up and had been immersed during fascism's reign, is that of realism, but a realism at this time still devoid of prefixes. Models for this type of cinema were not lacking, but they were taken mostly from the past or from abroad, for instance from the history of Italian literature and figurative arts, which these intellectuals rearranged into a curious genealogy that brought together the stories of Sicilian life written by a Giovanni Verga and the Renaissance paintings of a Masaccio, thus reappropriating the past in the light of the needs of the present (Forgacs 1989, 53). Moreover, it is foreign films—assimilated according to their real or alleged realist character—that provided the inspiration for the Italian cinema to follow. To cite only one of the more famous programmatic documents of the period by De Santis and Alicata (1941), today's models for realism must include films by Buster Keaton and René Clair, King Vidor and Rouben Mamoulian, as well as the works of directors of the so-called French pre-war poetic realism, such as Carné, Duvivier and Renoir. It is interesting to note, however, that, although the social realism of American writers like Ernest Hemingway or William Faulkner served as a key reference point for Italian neo-realist writers such as Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini as well as for early commentators of neo-realist film such as Bazin, they

were not a primary source of inspiration for the critics and intellectuals who first devised the aesthetics of Italian neo-realism between the late 1930s and early 1940s.

This scenario becomes even more complex in the postwar period as the films that are today recognized as the showpieces of the neo-realist canon succeeded on international screens: De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948; *Bicycle Thieves*) and *Sciuscià* (1946; *Shoeshine*), Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945; *Rome, Open City*) and *Paisà* (1946; *Paisan*), Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948; *The Earth Trembles*), De Santis's *Riso amaro* (1949; *Bitter Rice*). Indeed, national film production was not purely national. Even the opening film of the new Italian cinema, *Rome, Open City*, relied on the collaboration of an American producer and screenwriter, Rod E. Geiger (Gallagher 1998, 802), just as Rossellini's subsequent films, from *Paisan* to *Viaggio in Italia* (1954; *Journey to Italy*), are made with the assistance of foreign collaborators and institutions, when not entirely shot abroad (as was *Germania anno zero/Germany Year Zero*, 1948). The end of the 1940s also sees the development of a system of film coproductions with France, with the express purpose to compete with Hollywood imports by producing bigger and more spectacular films that could reach out to a wider European audience. Even if many of these Italian and French coproductions were mainstream spectacular fare and seemingly far removed from a neo-realist aesthetics, as for instance the huge 1949 sword-and-sandal epic *Fabiola* directed by Alessandro Blasetti, in some cases this policy did lead to the production of films that approached the neo-realist canon, as the example of René Clément's *Le mura di Malapaga* (1949; *The Wall of Malapaga*) illustrates.

Less well known and much less fortunate, but equally interesting, is the case of so-called *Britalian* films, runaway productions made for financial reasons in Italy by British companies, but which in some instances succeeded in crossing over into the territory of neo-realism, for example *Miracolo a Milano* (Vittorio De Sica, 1950; *Miracle in Milan*), which was prepared in collaboration with London Films, although the British company did not itself participate in the eventual production (Chibnall 2013, 250–51), and *Due mogli sono troppe* (Mario Camerini, 1951; *Honeymoon Deferred*), a curious example of comedy presenting English characters in a typically neo-realist environment.

We have already briefly alluded to the importance of neo-realism's French critical reception in the process of its cultural accreditation, a theme touched upon by Valerio Coladonato (2018). The central figure here, one who provided the first interpretation of neo-realism in a comparative and transnational key, is French critic André Bazin who highlights the novelty of the "école italienne de la libération" [Italian school of liberation] in terms of its narrative technique, comparing it with the modern American social realism of authors like Faulkner,

Hemingway and John Dos Passos; like these writers, Bazin remarks, Italian film directors “combin[e] behaviorism, a reporter’s technique, and the ethic of violence” (Bazin 1972, 40). The American reception of neo-realism is no less important, albeit for different reasons. In the United States, *Rome, Open City* was released in 1946. While not the first foreign film to be released there, it was unusual in that it presented the rare instance of “a foreign film that made money,” as Nathaniel Brennan observes (2012, 87) and whose success was not limited to the art house or ethnic theater. The popular and critical acclaim of this forerunner leads to the wider recognition of Italian cinema which culminates in the granting of Honorary Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film to three Italian films, *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves* and *The Walls of Malapaga* in 1948, 1950 and 1951 respectively. For its part, *Rome, Open City* owes its popularity in the United States also to what might appear to be a mere distraction from its realistic and serious content, namely the foregrounding of the scandalous and sexually explicit nature of the film which resulted from a deliberate strategy pursued by the film’s distributors, Burstyn and Mayer. Tellingly, as both Brennan (2012) and Schoonover (2012) have argued, it is the depiction of sex, torture and violence—that is, themes and objects of representation that Italian dramas addressed more frankly than did their Hollywood competitors—that paves the way for a new form of cultural and political relationship with the body of the ethnically Other. This process is based on a logic of presenting “suffering as a spectacle” in which the image of the injured and imperiled body becomes a commodity that circulates across and beyond national borders; as Schoonover notes in this regard, “corporealism is a graphic force capable of opening Italy to the global spectator” (Schoonover 2012, xv).

We can add to these examples of the transnational transfer and circulation of Italian neo-realism further instances in which neo-realism impacts on even more distant national realities, from the directors of the Iranian New Wave of the 1960s (such as Farrokh Gaffary and Ebrahim Golestan), to Brazil’s Paraíba Documentary School and Cinéma Nôvo (see directors like Linduarte Noronha and Glauber Rocha). In doing so, neo-realism provided filmmakers in these countries with sources of inspiration for the development of indigenous national cinemas as alternatives to the dominant Hollywood model, thus making Italian neo-realism a matrix of sorts for modern global art cinema (for more on this see Part 3 of Giovacchini and Sklar 2012). It can be argued that the transnational circulation of Italian neo-realist films works in ways similar to that of translation in literary polysystems as described by Itamar Evan-Zohar (1990). In the same way that the place occupied by translated literatures within the polysystem of a target literature mirrors the balance of power between the respective national cultures, Italian neo-realist films traveling abroad take on varying positions according to the destination country;

while they occupy a merely peripheral status within the context of a North American market dominated by Hollywood films, within the systems of emerging non-Western cinema cultures they can assume a crucially central position.

In sum, what these cases of transnational transfer and diffusion illustrate is that Italian neo-realism is not just a genre, an aesthetic, or a set of recurring themes and situations, but rather, as David Forgacs argues, a discursive “critical concept, a way of defining and grouping particular cultural products” (Forgacs 1989, 51). The creation and circulation of this visual form of aesthetic, to which is attached an equally distinct form of discursive and critical vocabulary, is fostered through the work of various national, supranational and international institutions which, certainly in the immediate postwar years, are all seeking to promulgate the agenda of what Pitassio calls “international humanism” (see Pitassio 2019, 98–99), an agenda that reaches well beyond the film sector as is illustrated by the creation of such a supranational agency as UNESCO in late 1946. What we hope to show in more detail below through the example of Italian neo-realism is how such institutions work upwards from a national level, how they insert themselves in the production chain of film-making, how they instrumentalize the label and appropriate it as a tool of evaluation and, finally, how they engage with other agencies and stakeholders both to sanction and control the shaping and circulation of neo-realist film. In order to probe these mechanisms and pathways we have selected four films; chosen precisely because they do not represent the core of the neo-realist experience, but rather are located on the genre’s margins, studying them can help us better to understand not just Italian neo-realism as a cinematographic medium but also the bureaucratic maneuvering and machinery behind it that tends to remain invisible.

## 2 *Four case studies*

As just mentioned, the four films we intend to analyze are located at the margin of the neo-realist canon; but rather than delve into a thorough textual analysis of them, we want to focus instead on the discursive and institutional mechanisms that allowed the label “neo-realism” to acquire its distinctive discursive shape in the wake of its successful international launching in 1945 via Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City*. Our first case study, *L’amore* (1948; *Love*), also directed by Rossellini, is an anthology film divided into two segments, both of which are interpreted by Anna Magnani: an adaptation of Jean Cocteau’s *La Voix humaine* (1930; *The Human Voice*) and *Il miracolo* (*The Miracle*), scripted by Rossellini. The latter, starring



Rossellini's longtime collaborator Federico Fellini alongside Magnani, is a short film set in the Italian countryside in which a naïve peasant (Magnani) is seduced by a mysterious wanderer who she thinks is Saint Joseph (Fellini). After having discovered that she is pregnant, the woman is convinced that the baby she is bearing is the son of God, for which she is violently mocked by the other villagers. Despite being rather tame in its depiction of the female body and sexuality, especially in comparison with other Italian neo-realist films that had already reached the American market, *The Miracle* was banned from screening in the state of New York shortly after its North American release in 1950 because of its supposedly sacrilegious content.

The second case study, the aforementioned *The Walls of Malapaga*, is an Italian-French coproduction focusing on the doomed love story between a French fugitive (Jean Gabin) and a local woman (played by the pre-war Italian film star Isa Miranda) in postwar Genoa. Directed by the French filmmaker René Clément, this film melds together various traits of Italian neo-realism—the representation of an urban landscape still bearing the scars of the war and its use of child characters played by non-professional actors—with features of 1930s French poetic realism—the theme of a tragic romance, the careful reconstruction of poor working class interiors and, above all, the presence of the French actor Jean Gabin. Indeed, as we mentioned earlier, this strand of 1930s French cinema was a major source of inspiration for the critical debate on realism in late 1930s Italy. After a successful run on the North American market, *The Walls of Malapaga* was bestowed an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1951.

The third and fourth films are the works of exiled directors who resided in Italy for short periods for political reasons. *Donne senza nome* (1950; *Women Without Names*) was helmed by Géza von Radványi, a film director fleeing from the Sovietization of his native Hungary, and deals with a group of women held as prisoners in an IRO (International Refugee Organization) camp in Puglia in southern Italy. On the one hand, this film is representative of the relationship that neo-realism entertains with what Pitassio calls “a post-war transnational realism” (Pitassio 2019, 123): an experienced director who had already worked in Italy under fascism, von Radványi had previously directed *Valahol Európában* (1947; *It Happened in Europe*), a film produced in Hungary before the communist takeover which can be seen as part of the larger wave of realist films dealing with the outcome of the war that flourished briefly, alongside Italian neo-realism, all across Central and Northern Europe. On the other, and more importantly for our argument, *Women Without Names* shares with many other neo-realist films a morbid interest for the representation of the female body and for the theme of prostitution as a means of survival in postwar Italy (see for instance the Roman episode of *Paisan*, or Alberto

Lattuada's *Senza pietà/Without Pity*, 1949).

Finally, *Imbarco a mezzanotte* (Joseph Losey and Andrea Forzano, 1951; *Stranger on the Prowl*) was conceived and directed by Hollywood exiles in the period between the 1947 and 1951 hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (henceforth HUAC). This film deals with a fugitive (Paul Muni) hiding in an Italian port (in this case Livorno) who develops a brief but tragic friendship with a local kid, played by non-professional child actor Vittorio Manunta. After De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* and *Shoeshine*, the film again reprises the theme of the end of innocent childhood in a postwar environment.

Our archival research, conducted mostly on the files preserved at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Italian Central State Archive, henceforth ACS) in Rome, reveals how the realistic content and style of these films led to controversies that often required intervention by Italian state bureaucracy, specifically the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo (General Directorate of Performing Arts, responsible also for the film industry, henceforth DGS), a board under the direct control of the Undersecretary to the President of the Council. This board worked in consort with the bureaucratic apparatus established during the fascist years, both in terms of its personnel (many head officers already active before the war retained their posts in the newborn republic) and its organizational structure (the chain of control on film production still terminated at the level of government). Nevertheless, what had changed dramatically since the years of Benito Mussolini's rule was the film industry's international context: while in the late 1930s state intervention was aimed at boosting the national production and making the domestic market self-sufficient in each and every step of the film supply chain, the postwar context instead forced Italian—and more generally European—film- and policy-makers to face the competition from the American film industry by introducing measures intended to support their own national film industry, with such intervention occasionally taking the form of diplomatic activity involving the Italian government and its representatives abroad (i.e., primarily its ambassadors and cultural attachés, but also international trade associations and religious institutions such as the Vatican).

That such interventions inevitably tended to congeal around certain issues should come as no surprise; these were above all the blunt and realistic representation of the female body and sexuality, of religious belief and institutions, and of symbols of (Italian) national identity. The inclusion of purportedly obscene elements has defined—and colored—Italian neo-realism from the outset, especially as regards its transnational audiences (Schoonover 2012; Coladonato 2018), often eliciting critical reactions on the part both of individuals and institutions in Italy and abroad. Ironically, precisely because of Italian neo-realism's

transnational success, the Italian government increasingly felt the need to discipline the representation of the body, especially when said representation was linked to questions of Italian national identity. Obviously, other than merely serving as a selling point and boost for the transnational circulation of Italian films—allowing them to outdo the tamer representation of sex and violence allowed in Hollywood by the Code Administration—and other than serving also to arouse controversy abroad, the presence of obscene elements—or elements that were perceived as such by the time’s standards—could become a possible hindrance to Italian film’s future circulation. When such controversies occurred, the Italian government often felt called upon to act, either directly or indirectly, in the interest of the Italian film industry.

Often tied in with the issue of sexual decency is, second, the issue of national decency, especially when it comes to the representation in Italian films of Italian national identity and/or Italian national institutions (e.g., the country’s national police or refugee camps on its soil). On occasion, as we shall see in the case of Rossellini’s *The Miracle*, the protection of national decency can blow up into a matter of diplomatic concern. A third issue relates to the role of realism in the definition of specific modes of film production. Despite having long been regarded as a form of low budget art cinema, neo-realist films were in fact fully integrated in the contemporaneous film industry and frequently employed state of the art means of production (see Farassino 1988). Just as this aspect on the one hand links into the debates surrounding the cost of realist productions, on the other it also highlights the relationship between Italian and foreign film crews, for instance the American personnel working in Italy on so-called ‘runaway productions,’ that is the 1950s Hollywood practice of shooting films in Europe to cut down on labor costs.

The following analyses of the four films we have selected allow us to show how neo-realism was not just an aesthetic program, acclaimed by the niche audiences of international film festivals and of the burgeoning North American art cinema circuit, but also a terrain of contention in which different (and often competing) players such as the Italian government, religious institutions, the Italian film industry and Hollywood negotiated crucial issues relating to, and impacting on, the expansion of the Italian film industry, the representation of Italian national identity, and the role played by Italy and Italian filmmakers within the international film market.

### 3 *The obscenity of the realist image*

Rossellini's *The Miracle*, repackaged as a short with older works by Renoir and Marcel Pagnol and entitled *Ways of Love*, was released in the United States by distributor Joseph Burstyn in December 1950. The screenings at the Paris Theatre in New York City were soon interrupted after the Legion of Decency, a Catholic pressure group, mounted a protest against the film claiming it was sacrilegious. As a result, *Ways of Love* was withdrawn by the New York state authorities, despite having previously passed state censorship. Most notably, in early January 1951 the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Francis Spellman, personally attacked *The Miracle*, describing it as an offense against "every Christian and [...] all Italian women." Burstyn appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in May 1952 finally allowed the film to be screened again. In fact, overturning a 1915 decision that considered cinema as "business, pure and simple" (Clark 1952), the Supreme Court acknowledged the role it has as a means of expression and its right to be protected by the First Amendment. As a result, not only was *The Miracle* allowed a screening license again, but it also became a symbol of the new status of film as a cultural product in postwar America (see Wittern-Keller and Raymond 2008).

In reexamining the historical documents related to the case of *The Miracle* from today's vantage point, various issues stand out. Firstly, it is noteworthy that in his public statement against a film that "is a despicable affront to every Christian," Cardinal Spellman focuses mostly on what he deems to be an obscene representation of the female body and sexuality; but in doing so he underlines especially the film's racial and gender connotations, for in his words all the film is about is "the seduction of an idiotic Italian woman," and as such "*The Miracle* represents a vicious insult to Italian womanhood. [...] Only a perverted mind could so misrepresent so noble a race of women" (Spellman 1951a). It is a sentiment that is echoed in other statements, in particular in declarations by members of the American Catholic community. For instance, an Italian priest from the Immaculate Conception Church in San Francisco wrote a protest letter to the Italian Prime Minister in which, drawing from Spellman's argument, he objected that *The Miracle* was an insult to the Italian woman "who worships her home, her family, her spouse," adding that because of his private life Rossellini was unfit to represent Italy abroad through his films (Biasiol 1951). Even if, as Schoonover suggests, the rage of the Catholic community against the film may have been driven by the public resentment towards Rossellini's extramarital affair with Ingrid Bergman, it is also apparent that the pivotal points of contention are the physical representation of the body and sexuality, which is so characteristic of Italian postwar neo-realism, and its representation of Italian national identity. In fact, an article entitled *The Ugly Italian Cinema* ("Le brutte cinematografie italiane") and published in a newspaper of the Italian community in Philadelphia shortly after Rossellini's

film was banned went so far as to attack the whole of those “now fashionable Italian film productions that, disguised as art, only depict misery and filthiness, rags, corruption and shame, [speculating] on the misery and depravation [of] tragic post-war Italy” (Di Giura 1951).

Secondly, however, it is equally noteworthy that this rage against *The Miracle* and Rossellini’s persona as well as the damning of Italian neo-realism in general as damaging to Italian identity and religion is not matched by an equal attitude on the part of the Italian Catholic Church and government. *The Miracle* was approved by the Italian censorship board and it was even awarded the supplemental 8% tax rebate on box office revenues reserved for films of technical and artistic value. We have to remind ourselves that, during this period, the DGS had started to assume a regulatory function also towards the realistic representation of the body and sex, and this especially in relation to films meant for transnational circulation. This regulatory function was exerted through the institution of a preemptive review of the script, conducted before filming, by a censor internal to the DGS. Formally not mandatory, this step became the norm in particular for producers who applied for the financial aid measures included in the 1949 law of reform of the Italian film sector. While other forms of expression, and most notably literature, underwent similar censorship processes during that period, the singular aspect of the system regarding films was that these were scrutinized not prior to their public distribution, but rather before they were even shot.

A first and particularly interesting early case of such “preemptive censorship” as regards the obscene character of postwar realism is that of *Women Without Names*. The film, directed by Géza von Radványi, focuses on a group of women detained in Farfa refugee camp in the South of Italy. In September 1949, as it is documented in the film’s file at the ACS, shortly after the filming began, the Ministry of Interior (which in turn had been alerted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) contacted the DGS to express its concern that the direct representation of the internment camp could be detrimental to the nation’s prestige. The Ministry of Interior therefore recommended that any reference to the IRO be removed from the film, and that the screenplay be subjected to a preemptive review by the censor (which, in accord with the aforementioned procedure, was already being conducted). In his report, the censor had praised the quality of the script, only later to conclude that *Women Without Names* was “yet another humanitarian, pacifist and internationalist ‘postwar’ movie,” but nonetheless required cleansing of its most excessive scenes, and specifically of any explicit reference to lesbian relationships, prostitution and sexual intercourse (Sciocluna Sorge 1949). In other words, the film was clearly considered to be part of a film production trend engaging in the direct representation not merely of the misery of social deprivation, but also of what were deemed as

“perverse” sexual practices whose presence in neo-realist films dates back to the lesbian relationship implied in *Rome, Open City*. Since the film was intended for transnational circulation and, above all, depicted military institutions, the excessive representation of bodies and sexuality—the characteristic of neo-realism that was arguably key to its international success—needed to be strictly scrutinized, a scrutiny that the Italian government had not deemed equally urgent in the case of *The Miracle*.

#### 4 *The diplomacy of the realist image*

The documents preserved in the archival file for *The Miracle* at the ACS show that the DGS closely followed the legal troubles the film had encountered through a series of diplomatic cables sent from the Italian embassy in the United States to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome. In one of these cables, Ambassador Alberto Tarchiani speculated on the inner motives of Cardinal Spellman’s attack and the reasons behind the ban on the film; in fact, he noted, the Legion of Decency had protested against all three of the episodes of *Ways of Love*, yet only *The Miracle* had come to be forbidden (Tarchiani 1950). In another message Tarchiani reflected on the possible influence of “rival film companies” on Spellman and the Catholic pressure groups; he dismisses this hypothesis, however, as it seemed unclear what said rival groups stood to gain from making such a fuss (Tarchiani 1951). While Tarchiani does not specify what he means by “rival film companies”—whether he is referring for instance to independent U.S. producers like Burstyn or to the major Hollywood studios—this remark does take on added significance when we consider that, also in January 1951, Cardinal Spellman had undertaken to lobby the Italian government on behalf of a few major Hollywood film companies. The background here is that the Italian currency laws of the time prevented the Italian branches of the Hollywood majors to export to the U.S. the profits made by their films at the Italian box office; American companies were in consequence forced to deposit their revenues into special bank accounts, named “cinema accounts,” where they remained blocked for years. These funds could be reinvested only in American films shot in Italy, as for instance *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), or in works made in participation with Italian studios. These restrictions notwithstanding, the Hollywood majors did come up with creative ways to make use of their funds (see Nicoli 2016, 148–51); one particular method consisted of granting loans to the Vatican State for the construction of pastoral buildings, hospitals and religious schools. This situation lasted until May 1951, when ANICA, the Italian film trade association, and

MPPEA, which represented the major Hollywood studios, signed an agreement allowing American film companies to export around half of their Italian revenues, but requiring them to reinvest the other half in the Italian economy, mostly obviously in the film production sector, but on occasion also by acquiring real estate. In exchange, the American companies agreed to a series of measures aimed at aiding the circulation of Italian films on the North American market.

The papers preserved in the personal archive of Giulio Andreotti, who controlled Italian cinema as Undersecretary of the Presidency of Council of Ministers from 1948 to 1953, show that Cardinal Spellman played a major role in the financing of Vatican real estate business through currency stemming from the American “cinema accounts” in Italy before the ANICA-MPPEA agreements came into force. Although Andreotti and Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi generally authorized Spellman’s financial operations, albeit not always eagerly, the custom of investing the profits made by Hollywood companies in Italy outside of the Italian film industry often came to be opposed by the Currency Exchange Division of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Trade, and hence became less frequent already as of 1950. Between October 1949 and the summer of 1951, Spellman acted as middleman in at least two major business transactions of this kind, interceding with the Italian government to allow the Hollywood studios to lend money for use by the Pontifical North American College in Rome. Exactly three days prior to his statement against *The Miracle*, on January 4, 1951, Spellman wrote to De Gasperi asking the Italian government to allow Warner Bros. the use of one billion liras from their Italian revenues in order to lend them to the Vatican, “at a very attractive rate,” for the completion of the North American College (Spellman 1951b). The transaction, which also involved members of the Vatican aristocracy (DiGiovanni 2013, 126–31), was finally authorized in September 1951, by the time of which the ANICA-MPEEA agreements were already being enforced. In an internal memo to De Gasperi, Andreotti expresses his concern over the fact that authorizing the money transfer could undermine the agreements with the American companies and thereby jeopardize future Hollywood investments in Italian film productions that might help “to raise the quality of Italian imports also from a *moral* standpoint” (Andreotti 1951; emphasis in the original text). In the words of Andreotti, whereas the acclaimed Italian postwar films might have been instrumental to opening foreign markets to the Italian film industry, it was time to move on to replace them by more mainstream, and by implication less controversial, production trends made in partnership with Hollywood.

With the documents available at present, it is not possible to confirm whether there was a direct cause/effect relationship between the case of *The Miracle*, the ANICA-MPPEA agreement and

the financing of the Vatican real estate business by the Hollywood majors. What the documents do reveal, however, is that the transnational production and circulation of Italian neo-realist films also involved a complex net of diplomatic relationships in which a small group of players (foremost the American Catholic Church, the Italian government, the Hollywood film industry) was regularly implicated. This is also to say that *The Miracle* was not the only Italian film entangled in this kind of diplomatic wrangling. The documents preserved at the ACS show how the DGS constantly mediated between Italian producers and foreign authorities. No less interesting is the case of *The Walls of Malapaga*. As mentioned earlier, the film was a French and Italian coproduction directed by René Clément, starring Jean Gabin and Isa Miranda and set in Genoa, blending Italian neo-realism with echoes of 1930s French poetic realism. However, because the production of the film started before the French and Italian agreements came into force, the DGS played a pivotal role in negotiating with both the French National Center of Cinematography and the Italian Ministry for Foreign Trade in order to ensure that *The Walls of Malapaga* could be considered a coproduction, allowing it to benefit from financial aid from both France and Italy. Secondly, the DGS followed closely the highly successful transnational circulation of the film, celebrating its many achievements; from August to November 1949, General Director Nicola De Pirro sent a series of telegrams to producer Alfredo Guarini to congratulate him for the two awards (for best director and best actress) bestowed on Clément and Miranda, and for the successful reception of the film at the time of its release in French cinemas. Moreover, De Pirro also arranged the shipment to Italy of the Academy Award that *The Walls of Malapaga* won in May 1951. All of which is indicative of the peculiar role played by the DGS in relation to postwar realist films. On the one hand, and especially after the 1949 cinema law had come into force, the Italian government used it to assume a regulatory role aimed at containing potentially controversial themes and imagery; on the other, once the films started circulating abroad, the DGS maintained public relations with relevant bodies and institutions (Italian ministries, foreign film agencies, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) on behalf of Italian producers.

A more complex instance of this dual dynamic of regulatory function and diplomatic agency is discernible in the case of *Stranger on the Prowl*. The film project was first conceived by Riviera Films, a company set up by producer Bernard Vorhaus and agent John Weber, who had moved to Europe because of the activity of the HUAC (Prime 2014, 66–69). The two bought the rights to *A Bottle of Milk*, a short story by French writer Noël Calef, then hired two other Hollywood exiles, screenwriter Ben Barzman and director Joseph Losey, and finally struck a distribution deal for the United States with United Artists. In order to produce the film, they



approached the Italian company Consorzio Produttori Cinema Tirrenia, which owned the Pisorno Studios in Tirrenia, Tuscany. These studios had been built in the 1930s by Giovacchino Forzano, a playwright and entrepreneur who had strong ties with Mussolini, and who still controlled the company along with his son Andrea. Centering on the brief and tragic friendship between an unnamed fugitive, played by Paul Muni, and an eight-year-old child, *Stranger on the Prowl* exhibits many features of Italian neo-realism: it is partly shot in exterior locations in a postwar Livorno still bearing the signs of the heavy bombings the port endured during the war, and its cast blends established film stars (Muni and Joan Lorring) with an ensemble formed by non-professional actors. Nonetheless, the film also bears film noir legacies which clearly hark back to Losey's previous directorial experiences, and it displays strong affinities with the genre of postwar American crime dramas whose style, as is also the case with Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947) and *Naked City* (1948), was in turn influenced by Italian neo-realism (see Pitassio 2019, 122). The foreign influence is perceptively noted by the DGS censor when he observes, after explicitly praising the script for its humanitarian message, that the work "draws its inspiration from themes rooted in foreign productions, rather than adhering to the canons of the Italian realist school." This observation is as acute as it is revealing in that it shows a state bureaucrat fully cognizant of the set of features which sets Italian neo-realism off from its foreign competitors.

Equally illuminating is how the DGS censor felt the film's specific mixture of realist styles to be problematic because it raised a number of red flags vis-à-vis the representation of Italian national identity, especially as regards character presentation and the depiction of Italian institutions. Thus, although the anonymous reviewer also expresses reservations about some potentially obscene details—the possible presence of scantily clad women in a scene set in a circus—most of his attention is directed toward the depiction of the Italian police; he observes:

Although the film is set in Italy, it lacks an *authentically Italian soul*, especially in the case of the ruthless chase for the murderer. [Therefore,] in agreement with the concerns already expressed by the superintendent of the Livorno police (Marzano), we suggest that the Italian police force is depicted in a way more closely adhering to the Italian mood and culture. In particular, Italian police should never shoot first, but only in self-defense. (Anon. 1951, our emphasis)

If, as was the case with *Women Without Names*, *Stranger on the Prowl* too is seen as a potentially controversial film in regard to the representation of Italy and how this might be perceived abroad, the specific trigger here revolves around the insertion of symbols of national authority inside a narrative that relies on tropes derived from foreign film genres. Thus the

the censor expressly registers his concern over the character Castellano whose role is comparable to that of a Hollywood villain; the censor asks that the script be rewritten in order to change this character's role from that of a policeman to that of a municipal guard. In short, through its censor's recommendations the DGS is adopting a double function, that of state censorship on the one hand and on the other that of an institution mediating between various branches of government on behalf of the producer. On the one hand, it is conferring with the Interior Ministry with De Pirro asking it, on behalf of Consorzio Tirrenia, to arrange that the police headquarters of Pisa and Livorno authorize and facilitate the location shooting on their territory (De Pirro 1951); on the other it is conferring with the Ministry of Foreign Trade which had to approve the coproduction contract between Consorzio Tirrenia and Riviera Film. Both functions are closely interrelated in that one impinges on the other, with the anonymous censor obviously seeking to prevent the representation of what might be perceived as a sensitive national matter from negatively affecting Italy's image abroad.

In fact, the film had altogether other problems to contend with in the international arena. Shortly after receiving the final cut of *Stranger on the Prowl*, Arthur B. Krim, president of United Artists, informed Alfredo Baiocchi, a representative of Consorzio Tirrenia, that his company had decided to back out from the distribution contract. This decision was taken after Ben Brewster, the conservative leader of the film projectionist union Film Council of the American Federation of Labor, had denounced the film, informing the American press and HUAC that *Stranger on the Prowl* had been scripted, produced and directed by suspected communists. Nonetheless, the film was eventually released in the U.S. with a delay of a couple of months, in November 1953: United Artists had solved the problem by crediting Andrea Forzano, owner of Consorzio Tirrenia, as its director instead of Joseph Losey, and by marketing *Imbarco a mezzanotte* as "yet another bleak and gritty Italian film at a time when the vogue for Neo-Realism had peaked" (Prime 2014, 69).

The troubled story of *Stranger on the Prowl*'s release is ironic as all of the figures involved in the Italian part (from the Forzano family to Adolfo Baiocchi and General Director Nicola De Pirro) had played prominent roles in the Italian fascist regime, but were now being accused of having produced a communist film. On a much deeper level, though, this episode is indicative of how, due to its transnational dimension, postwar realism represented a kind of ideological free zone in which people from opposing political backgrounds could temporarily converge and collaborate.

### 5 *The price of the realist image*

An undated memoir sent by Consorzio Tirrenia to the DGS after the completion of *Stranger on the Prowl* sheds precious insight into its production history. The obvious goal of the memoir was to champion the film in front of the DGS in order to obtain the additional 8% tax rebate granted to films of exceptional artistic value and technical achievement. However, three of the arguments used by the anonymous author are of particular interest. Firstly, he praises the unprecedented artistic and financial effort of the film; in his words, *Stranger on the Prowl* is distinguished among other recent Italian productions for its state-of-the-art production values, that is—in the language of the film and TV industry—the value bestowed on a film by the means of production deployed, and for the technical prowess of the personnel involved, which are on a par with the standard set by Hollywood productions (this of course being in part the result of the training received by Italian crews working on American films shot in Italy such as *Quo Vadis*). Secondly, the grandeur of the film production and the technical ability of its crew find expression mostly in the “realism” of set designs for which the production crew was able to “replicate an entire city block of Pisa, with the cooperation of an authentic construction company from Livorno” (Consorzio Tirrenia 1952). Thirdly, the author of the memoir remarks how, thanks to its production values and the distribution contract with United Artists, *Stranger on the Prowl* was set to spearhead a new phase of Italian presence on the American market, as made possible by the 1951 ANICA-MPPEA agreements.

The explicit connection between realism and high production values made in the memoir is of such interest because it highlights some of the often unspoken suppositions about neo-realism circulating within the critical discourse of the time; specifically, the legendarily troubled shooting of *Rome, Open City* had created a “myth of the low cost of Neo-Realism” (Noto and Pitassio 2010, 43–44), a perception that was shared by Italian film critics throughout the 1950s. It was only by renouncing standard production practices (e.g., professional actors, studio shoots, expensive set designs, etc.) that neo-realist cinema was able to set itself apart, both aesthetically *and* ethically, from mainstream American and Italian film productions. While this myth was questioned as early as the 1960s, it was not until the 1980s that it was more thoroughly reexamined by early Italian film industry scholars. In a pivotal work in this field, Alberto Farassino looked into the neo-realist films produced by Lux Film, the leading production company in late 1940s/early 1950s Italy, and concluded that many of the most acclaimed works in the neo-realist canon were actually high profile productions, characterized by high production costs and by modes of production comparable to other products of the Italian film

industry of the time (Farassino 1988). The above-cited memoir corroborates that, especially as regards films intended for transnational distribution, both the producers and the DGS were fully conscious of the substantial financial investment required by neo-realism, in other words they were fully aware of “the cost of the realist image,” to paraphrase the title of Farassino’s article.

## 6 Conclusion

The material availability of archival documents and the presence of certain production characteristics have prompted us to deal with a corpus of films that does not fit squarely within the classical canon of Italian neo-realist cinema, nor do the films fall into the category of particularly celebrated Italian movies circulating abroad. However, this does not mean that the argument presented here cannot, to a certain extent, be extended also to their more canonized and aesthetically ambitious counterparts: the dynamics of power that we have described apply regardless of the presumed artistic value of the films involved. In the events and debates that we have sought to reconstruct in this case study lie the roots of the processes that led, as they still lead today, to the international circulation and use of neo-realism as a broad and non-specialist term, one capable of embracing a Rossellini and Losey just as well as a Fellini and *My Brilliant Friend*. Our study hence represents merely a starting point that requires further archival study. The production and reception history of these films, domestic and international, emphasizes once more just how complex an aesthetic phenomenon Italian neo-realism is, and how complex the interplay was not just between its producers and directors but also the state bureaucracy and governmental and non-governmental institutions (such as the Catholic Church) supporting it, or hampering it, as the case may be. Indeed, our research even belies conventional wisdom according to which, by virtue of its eminently progressive, if not outright provocative, ethical and aesthetic qualities, neo-realism should have been the natural victim of government censorship. Censorship certainly existed, and the archival story of these films confirms this, but this does not fully explain the behavior of the stakeholders involved. In relation to the quantity and quality of realism present in Italian films circulating at an international level during the period discussed, the cinematographic bureaucracy acted with conflicting roles; it could be controller and controlled, censor and lobbyist, international negotiator and national facilitator at one and the same time.

As viewed from the institutional side of the production and dissemination of Italian neo-realism, some aspects of which we have tried to illuminate here, our research substantiates the degree

to which neo-realism served, in the postwar years, as a free-floating concept not limited to the inner circles of literary or film critics. Diverse “subjects”—individuals as well as institutions with often opposing interests and agendas—appropriate it and take part in its dissemination. Certain themes linked to the notion of neo-realism prove to be capable of catalyzing discussions and reactions not just in a domestic arena, but also across cultural and national borders. (Italian) neo-realism’s key themes may be politics, violence, poverty, and the destruction caused by war, but it was more often than not its sexual content that begat neo-realism’s notoriety. The representation of sex is unquestionably the main cause of the international success of Italian neo-realism cinema, especially in the United States; at the same time, though, this is also the aspect that most hampered its circulation outside of Italy’s borders. Both an object of censorship and a marketing tool, the sexualized body is either way one of the most powerful markers of twentieth-century realism (see also Section 5 of the core essay by Robert Weninger) and it is no surprise that this is what most drew the attention of its stakeholders, the producers, film critics, anonymous censors, politicians, diplomats and international audiences (among which we find certain Catholic clergymen) who all in one way or another contributed to the success of Italian cinema as a realist cinema. Depending on who employs the term, and why it is deployed, neo-realism can be a worthy cause or an unworthy curse. But one thing is clear: its significance lies not solely in the thematic properties shared by these films, but is rather the result of the multifaceted interaction between producers, filmmakers, texts, audiences, and institutions.

### **Filmography**

*Donne senza nome (Women Without Names)*, dir. Géza von Radványi, 1950.

*Il miracolo (The Miracle)*, episode of *L’amore*, dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1948.

*Le mura di Malapaga (The Wall of Malapaga)*, dir. René Clément, 1949.

*Imbarco a mezzanotte (Stranger on the Prowl)*, dir. Joseph Losey and Andrea Forzano, 1951.

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