

Saverio Giovacchini, Robert Sklar (eds.),
Global Neorealism.
The Transnational History
of a Film Style,
University Press of Mississippi,
Jackson 2012, pp. 273+IX

Although neorealism has never experienced a lack of scientific interest, over the last few years the theme has gained particular attention in the academic circles thanks to the publication, among others, of works that combine teaching intent and methodological updates (Haaland 2012; Noto, Pitassio 2010), studies that analyze the history of postwar Italian cinema in light of the innovations caused by neorealism (Barattoni 2012), research into formerly disregarded key aspects (Leavitt 2013), and even useful provocations that stimulate scholars researching in the field of Italian studies to address less familiar topics (O’Leary, O’Rawe 2011).

Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style, a collection edited by Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, follow this trend, yet provides an original point of view in order to pull neorealism out of the specific area of Italian studies and integrate it into the debate on global cinema.

The volume is organized into three parts, divided according to their historical proximity to the central phase of the neorealist phenomenon. The essays of the first section deal with Italian film culture of the 1930s and early 1940s, and focus on those films and filmmakers that “anticipate” postwar cinema (Zagarrio), on the relationships of intellectual exchange between Fascist and Soviet film cultures in their attempt to stand out as national cinemas – as well as on the impact that neorealism had on the production of

post-Stalinist Cinema of the Thaw (Salazkina), and the role of documentary films in relation to the debate on realism before World War II (Caminati).

The second part covers the way in which neorealism has been acclaimed and incorporated in the United States by the intellectual elites (Sklar) and marketed in the most suitable and profitable (Brennan), assumed as a compelling reference by the generation of critics/filmmakers of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Eades), and used as a critical and rhetorical argument in Argentina in the years of Peronism (Halperin). This section is closed, by the co-editor Saverio Giovacchini, with an essay dedicated to John Kitzmiller, a unique example of an African-American star in Italian postwar cinema and an effective starting point for examining the ways in which Italian culture has come to terms with its own colonial past and with the perceived threat of Americanization. The essays in the third part present neorealism as a completely global phenomenon and focus on those cultural institutions that have facilitated the reception and adaptation of neorealism, which as a consequence allowed national cinemas from very different geographical areas, such as Latin America (Mestman), India (Majumdar), West and North Africa (Niang), Brazil (Sarzynski) and Iran (Naficy), to emerge. Finally, the epilogue is devoted to the persistence of a neorealist legacy in contemporary Italian cinema (Carlorosi).

The relatively short length of the essays allows the editors to provide readers with a very broad array of case studies. What emerges as truly global and transnational is less a set of style rules linked to the “original” neorealism, than a range of patterns of adaptation and creolization. All over the world in fact, the

nebulous concept of neorealism is always mediated through a network of institutions, such as film festivals, academies, journals and state funded programs that are very often involved in and responsible for the building of national cinemas. The contributors prove that wherever the word “neorealism” is accepted and applied, it undergoes similar changes, potentially shifting from a critical category, to a style or a mode of production, or to a theoretical stronghold. Sometimes all these transitions are apparent, as in the professional trajectory of James Agee through criticism and filmmaking investigated by Robert Sklar.

Moreover, the same word can describe and cause different occurrences. The ideological connotations of neorealism vary according to particular conditions (Sarzynski) and can be obliterated for political reasons (Halperin), since the relationships between the intellectual elites and the cultural institutions that promote the realist discourse can be characterized by collaboration and rejection at once (Salazkina, Caminati). The reception of neorealism has usually been instrumental in the establishment of a locally rooted art cinema (Mestman), although its impact is traced back to the mainstream (Majudmar), and neorealist films themselves are marketed in the United States not as pure examples of art cinema, but as unstable compounds of art and exploitation (Brennan).

Such a variety of examples can affect the thorough elaboration of some of the historiographical and theoretical issues around which the contributions revolve. The notion of “national cinema”, for example, still being crucial in the majority of the essays, is not called into question, but rather referred to by means of assertions of film critics and practitioners, and the absence of a concept that has been highly influential over the past decade, such as that of “ImpersoNations” proposed by Thomas Elsaesser (2005) is notable. Furthermore, in many

cases the historiographical common denominator seems to be that of the neorealism as the aesthetic expression of a moral position, according to a tradition of scholarship that recalls the works of Millicent Marcus and Lino Micciché. This not only runs the risk of renationalizing neorealism (and each of its transnational expressions), as the editors point out, but also of restating the factors behind the assumption that realism is an inevitable effect of certain social and historical conditions.

Here lies the limit and also the strongest point of interest of this volume, which does not intend to add much to the understanding of neorealism as an all-Italian phenomenon, but nevertheless succeeds in broadening it. The more the essays turn away from the specific area of Italian studies and address distant contexts, the more they seem to demonstrate that neorealism is a moment of “the nationalization [...] of a widely international conversation about realism and political cinema that had been at the center of the 1930s. [...] In different ways, all of the conversation’s participants were concerned with the possibility of making cinema relevant to what they saw as their national realities” (*Ibidem*, pp. 9-10). The readers may therefore undertake the task to verify how long this conversation has gone on, how deeply and how far this “subterranean artistic tradition” has tunneled through the history and geography of global cinema, and most of all which are the entry points for exploring it and which, instead, are dead ends.

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Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam and Rajinder Dudrah (eds.),
Theorizing World Cinema,
 I.B. Tauris, London 2012, pp. XXXII-229

Against the background of the increasingly global nature of the film market and film industry and the emergence of questions of transnationalism, globalisation, cosmopolitanism and world culture, the need undoubtedly arises to revisit the definition of world cinema and to reach a better grasp of how our understanding of the term has developed within the context of film studies and film history.

This is the main aim of the recently published edited collection *Theorizing World Cinema*: to problematise the collocation of world cinema within the disciplines of film studies and film history. In doing so this work presents itself as a new addition to film studies’ re-engagement with the notion of world cinema, joining in this way a series of books published in the last decade which include Dennison and Lim’s edited collection *Remapping World Cinema*, Dina Iordanova’s *Cinema of the Periphery*, Ďurovičová and Newman’s *World Cinema: Transnational Perspectives* and (with a different focus) Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt’s *Global Art Cinema*.

As part of the recently launched I.B. Tauris World Cinema book series, *Theorizing World Cinema* offers a new theoretical discussion of the subject in order to relocate some of the most established meanings of world cinema by freeing the term from the negative binary division between Hollywood and “non-Hollywood” cinema, in favour of the adoption of

a polycentric approach. Previously introduced by Lúcia Nagib (2006) as the filmic adaptation of the notion of “polycentric multiculturalism” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 7), polycentric cinema implies a “world made of interconnected cinemas” (2006: 34) as it focuses on the idea of circulation in order to think of world cinema as a “positive, inclusive, democratic concept” (2006: 35). This theoretical argumentation against the binary system is effectively conceptualised in the introduction of the book written by the three editors, Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam and Rajinder Dudrah. In fact, it successfully engages with the limits of the discipline, inviting to overcome the Hollywood-centric perspective and to offer viable alternatives to the established understanding of world cinema. This reframing invites the adoption of “a positive and inclusive approach to film studies, which defines world cinema as a polycentric phenomenon with peaks of creation in different places and periods” (p. xxii). In order to address these peaks of creation, from India to South America, *Theorizing World Cinema* comprises twelve chapters – plus the introduction – organised in four “theoretical projects:” the national, the transnational, the diasporic and the realist. This structure is a consequence of the application of the polycentric method to traditional attitudes and new tendencies of film studies, from the theoretical models of transnational cinema to the role played by the notion of realism in the diachronic idea of world cinema. Featuring a series of exemplary case studies analysed by prominent scholars such as John Caughie, Ismail Xavier, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Laura Mulvey (to cite a few), the book ultimately

offers a wide array of theoretical approaches surrounding the notion of world cinema. I am thinking here, for instance, of the notion of accented cinema, re-evaluated by Song Hwee Lim in his analysis of Ang Lee's career from a diasporic perspective; or the concept of "minor cinema," deterritorialisation and national identity discussed by Caughie in his account of Scottish cinema and the film *Morven Callar* (2001). Despite not all the contributions succeed in maintaining the excellent premises of the introduction, in particular in terms of methodological innovation, chapters such as Xaviers' "On Film and Cathedrals: Monumental Art, National Allegories and Culture Welfare" and Dudrah's "Beyond World Cinema? The Dialectics of Black British Diasporic Cinema" present a refreshing and welcomed approach able to influence future studies on the topic. Starting from specific case studies such as Taviani's brothers *Good Morning, Babylon* (Xaviers) and *Bhaji on the Beach* (Dudrah), the two chapters open the discussion to the persistence of national elements in world cinema, and to the questions of community and identity. One of the most significant examples of the polycentric approach in the book is Lùcia Nagib's chapter on the corporeal realism of *The Realm of the Senses* (1976) as part of the realistic theoretical project. Nagib successfully shows the advantages of this approach "drawing on local context and traditions, over the arbitrary application of alien (usually Hollywood-based) paradigms to films produced across the globe" (p. 160). Engaging with the European approaches to the film, in particular that of "anti-realism," Nagib demonstrates how matter of ethics and boundaries related to the realistic representation of and the position of the spectator change when moving away from Western philosophy in favour of local cultural context.

An aspect of the book that, arguably, would have benefitted from further development is the

Diasporic theoretical project. In addition to the two good chapters that comprise this section, I felt that a contribution specifically dedicated to the concept of diaspora in film studies and to its relationship with those of national and transnational cinema would have provided a more solid ground for further investigation and contextualizing. This would have allowed the book to offer an important insight on a theoretical approach, which undoubtedly is going to be increasingly pertinent for the discipline.

Despite some minor limitations (mostly due to its nature of edited collection), with its range of chapters *Theorizing World Cinema* is a book that will easily meet the interest of scholars working on different aspects of world and transnational cinema. However, its greatest achievement goes beyond the sum of its contributions: it consists in the invitation to problematise the term "world cinema" and the role it plays in film studies. While doing so, it clearly shows a series of distinctive directions that the discipline can now decide to follow, while moving away from the predominant Hollywood/Western-centric perspective.

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Marc Cerisuelo,
Fondus enchaînés.
Essais de poétique au cinéma,
Seuil, Paris 2012, pp. 309

As a sort of homage to the “Poétique” series, let us start from the paratext and, more precisely, from the book’s back cover, where we can read: “Avec ces *Fondus enchaînés*, la collection ‘Poétique’ s’ouvre au septième art.”

This evocative claim should be slightly corrected: this time, cinema goes through the “main entrance.” This means, of course, that cinema had already entered the series, although it passed, if I may say so, through the “service entrance.” Indeed, it has been one of book series’ founders who has been the one “smuggling in” cinema from the very beginning, and who is also the first reference we can find in the book’s “Ouverture,” significantly titled “Un art des relations” – which also affectionately hints at Gérard Genette’s teaching in its concluding lines.

Genette’s poetics is one of the main references of Cerisuelo’s book, and of course this is not surprising. On the one hand, it is worth mentioning that another book by Cerisuelo, *Hollywood à l’écran* (“a study of historical poetics of films”, 2001), guided Genette’s largest “incursion” into the field of cinema – namely *Métalepse* (2004), where the borders between narratology and poetics tend to blur. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Genette has recently (see *Figures V*, 2002) referred to cinema, to a certain extent, as the “art of relations” par excellence, in order to discuss why the question “can we love a genre?” should be replaced by the more appropriate question “can we really love something different from a genre?”

However, Genette’s poetics is not the only reference in *Fondus enchaînés* – nor, as we will see, the main reference. What Cerisuelo is really interested in is, as he defines it, is an “expanded poetics” (“poétique élargie”). Of course the

main features of Genette’s poetics, considered as the starting point of the overall project, are reaffirmed, such as the focus on transcendence, the effort of clarification, and the attention to how artworks function. And yet, Cerisuelo adds something more.

According to the challenging project developed into the book, an “expanded poetics of films” must also include the classical film theory (as becomes evident in the section titled “La fin du grand sommeil de l’introuvable dame du Lac,” where Cerisuelo refers to Christian Metz and Albert Laffay, among others, to discuss the issues of showing, narrating, and the particular features of the viewing experience), history (we will return to this) and interpretation, which seems to be strictly connected to the fact that an “expanded poetics” cannot but interact with philosophy.

Given this aim, the book does not provide something like a linear, systematic discussion; and although it is clearly divided into three main parts (“Poétique des films,” “Cinéphilosophie” and “Transferts culturels”), the three parts continuously overlap and intertwine. Thus, rather than a linear treatment, what we can find is a series of in-depth analyses of individual topics which gradually start to appear as profoundly interconnected and manage to show the overall theoretical project of an extended poetics “at work.”

Let me provide some examples. Starting from the well-known field of film remakes (Part One), and passing through Douglas Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), the author comes to address (Part Three) the wide topic of “cultural transfers” – that is not a matter of “influence” and, indeed, explains quite well how poetics can cross history. In the more general context of the work of European filmmakers based in Hollywood, Cerisuelo discusses how American Transcendentalism has been imported into films (see the section “Les cinéastes européens à Hollywood et le transcendantalisme”). And it is in

this way that we enter the field of “Cinephilosophy” and we meet Stanley Cavell, who had a broader and fundamental role in regaining the transcendentalist heritage, and who largely (although not exclusively) based his interpretation of films on transcendentalist philosophy.

Stanley Cavell (especially for his well-known book about the “comedy of remarriage,” *Pursuits of Happiness*, 1981) and poetics (for its traditional attention to the issue of genre) also meet each other in what Cerisuelo defines as the “seconde comédie américaine,” which has Preston Sturges as its leading figure and which particularly interests the author due to its “post-classical” features.

As a matter of fact, Stanley Cavell can be regarded as the true core of the book – the center (the two sections “La philosophie et le cinématographe” and “Stanley Cavell, un philosophe au cinéma”) of the central part (“Cinephilosophie”). It is in this part that we clearly understand that the relationships between cinema and philosophy do not consist of a process by which cinema would illustrate or provide examples of philosophical concepts – this is actually the worst way to conceive these relationships.

In opposition to this perspective, Cerisuelo’s proposal is in tune with Francesco Casetti’s idea (*The Eye of the Century*, 2008) of considering cinema as a form of thought and a place where philosophical investigation can be developed;

and indeed, it is not by chance that both Cerisuelo and Casetti refer to Gilles Deleuze (to whom Cerisuelo devotes the section “Deleuze et la comédie: petite forme et grande santé”) and, of course, Stanley Cavell.

Cavell’s “philosophical criticism” remains the focus of Cerisuelo’s research, perhaps one of the best examples of “cinephilosophy” and, I would add, a “forerunner” of the “expanded poetics.” As Cerisuelo writes (pp. 196-197), “plutôt que de considérer la philosophie comme une activité qui consisterait dans la ‘création’ de concepts et dont le cinéma montrerait en quelque façon le théâtre des opérations, Cavell semble procéder à rebours en préférant un geste plus rigoureux qui aboutit à un gain en terme de liberté. Assez proche en cela de la critique, Cavell organise une interprétation centrifuge qui part du film, toujours minutieusement résumé, et propose une ‘lecture,’ certes autonome du film en question mais rejoignant inévitablement des questions qui le dépassent et aussi [...] que le cinéma contribue à *régler* (ultime tour d’écrou wittgensteinien).”

In this perspective both cinema and poetics, besides being (although on different levels) “arts of relations,” are definitely aimed at becoming (p. 197) “un laboratoire inappréciable pour l’étude de notre relation au monde.”

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Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg,
Simon Rothöhler (eds.),
Screen Dynamics.
Mapping the Borders of Cinema,
Österreichisches Filmmuseum/Synema
Publikationen, Vienna 2012, pp. 184

In the history of viewing technologies 2010 was an important year, if not a turning point a confirmation of a series of processes that began

in previous years with the arrival of the digital age. The launch of the iPad marks a decisive step in the delocalisation of audio visual contents and the relocation of the viewing experiences, especially in terms of cinema.

Screen Dynamics collects together essays from a conference called “Cinema without Walls,” held towards the beginning of 2010. It is a valuable document on the way film and media studies approach the issue of cinema’s

future and the forms that it assumes in the digital environment. The text includes a plurality of perspectives that, on the one hand, demonstrate the vivacity of the debate (and therefore also the urgency of finding a solution to the issue of cinema and the digitalisation process) and, on the other, they provide a chance for a meta-disciplinary reflection on the reorganisation process of film studies.

The text provides as an important opportunity to reorganise and revive the debate. Reading the essays collected in *Screen Dynamics*, we can identify three aspects that outline a new possible architecture of film and media studies.

The first aspect deals directly with the research policies. In particular the essays by Gertrud Koch and Vinzenz Hediger examine a change in film studies and a progressive shifting of the reflection on cinema from ‘what it is’ (revealed as aporetic well before the start of the digitalisation process) to ‘where it is’ – and, according to Koch, also ‘when’ and ‘how’ cinema is. Especially the issue of place and space becomes crucial: film studies are called upon to account for the plurality of cinema locations (intended as places where cinema is experienced, as well as places of production – the impulse originating in postcolonial studies), but also, and more radically, to account for the configuration that the cinema experience space assumes and of the network of relations that come into being between film, spectator, platform and the social and cultural environment. In this sense the reformulation of the question at the heart of film studies assumes a strategic importance: it imparts an inductive progression to the reflection, breaking the impasse of the speculative and ontological approaches, and encourages an understanding (and therefore appreciation) of the multiple situations and contexts that cinema is relocating in and reinventing itself, demonstrating the persistent (social, cultural and aesthetic) prominence of the cinematic experience.

The second aspect that emerges from *Screen Dynamics* is the naturalization of the change. The digital age has not distorted cinema’s identity; rather it has rendered the plurality (or better still the mobility) of its forms patent and irrefutable. The experimentation and contamination with art (Volker Pantenburg), the phenomena of metalepsis (Thomas Morsh) and the interaction (Victor Burgin), are all aspects that could already be found in cinema; they have merely been intensified in the digital environment. Expanded cinema represents a stage of cinema’s evolutionary process and the changing forms that it presents itself in are the epiphenomenon of the mobile nature of the medium. Similarly to theories on spectatorship – Patenburg recalls – the comparison with the empirics and the acknowledgement of the complexity and variability of historical data allow us to grasp, in the exuberance of cinema’s current forms, the full expression of its nature and, I would add, proof of its versatility and capacity to communicate with the present.

A final aspect emerges from the essays collected in *Screen Dynamics*, which we can sum up as cinema’s resilience, in other words its capacity to maintain its distinctive traits. The theme of resilience emerges in different contexts in relation to different aspects. Tom Gunning, for example, examines the issue of cinema’s indexicality (with its speculative criticality), highlighting the capacity of digital technologies of strengthening the ‘impression of reality’, confirming a ‘classic’ aspect of the medium. Or, in terms of the way cinema is viewed, the phenomena of new cinephiles, however renewed and often different from the past, reveal continuity between a contemporary cinematic experience and its previous forms (Jonathan Rosenbaum). Or Miriam Hansen’s proposal of leaving the task of rethinking cinema to the new generations and avoiding the pessimistic visions of the effects of digitalisation, implies

the idea of a persistence of the cinematic experience as something that lies deep in the culture and collective memory (not least, as Raymond Bellour's essay reveals, as nostalgia), which is merely waiting to be acknowledged.

The essays collected in *Screen dynamics*, for their diversity in approach and perspective, share the conviction that cinema is anything but dead, but rather livelier than ever.

Film studies are perhaps in not such a healthy state, often stuck on rear guard positions and with a categorial and speculative apparatus that finds it difficult to account for any changes. *Screen dynamics* seems to me like an excellent survival manual: may those who read it, apply it.

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