

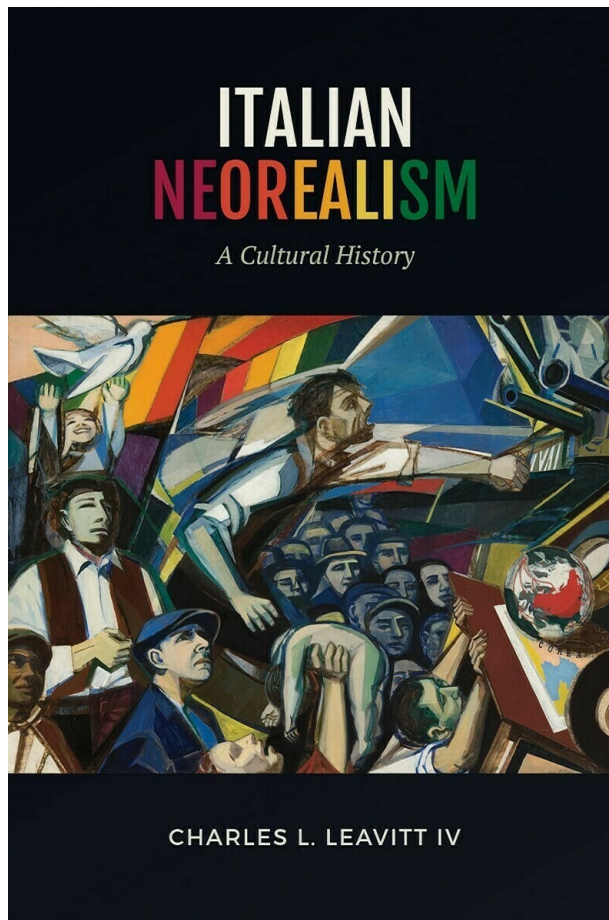
An 'Imagined Conversation' with Italian Neorealism. Charles L.
Leavitt IV, *Italian Neorealism. A Cultural History*, Toronto University
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Italian Neorealism. A Cultural History is one of the most generous examples of scholarships that I have come across in the last few years. Leavitt's heroic endeavor to discuss a remarkable range of voices that, over the last 80 years, have written on and theorized Neorealism is nothing short of admirable. This is a study that articulates its own method of inquiry – and arguably also an ethics of scholarship – in response to the distinctive characteristics of the object being studied. Generosity may name here also the book's research method.

Italian Neorealism has been described by some critics as too diverse and contradictory to be considered a movement at all. Leavitt suggests that the problem might lie in the misguided attempts of these critics to tie Neorealism to dogmas, narrow definitions and stable conceptual boundaries.

The book takes as its point of departure 'an imagined conversation', namely the often-cited 'non-conversation' that Vittorio De Sica once mentioned when he was asked to reflect on the rise of Neorealism: "Non è che un giorno ci siamo seduti a un tavolino di via Veneto, Rossellini, Visconti, io e gli altri, e ci siamo detti: adesso facciamo il neorealismo". Leavitt's central argument is that Neorealism was in fact a *conversation*, one that took place all over Italy – and beyond – in cafes, newspapers, film sets, magazines, lecture halls and so on. Made of divergent objectives, dissimilar beliefs and conflicting proposals (but common concerns and shared challenges), neorealism was, according to Leavitt, a cultural climate that made pluri-vocality a central feature of its 'conversation'. Through the pages of this book, Leavitt enables us to explore the complex articulation of this conversation and the different contributions and ideas that enriched this extraordinary moment in the history of the 20th century.

I must admit that I was not prepared for the discoveries that Leavitt led me through chapter 1, where he provides a genealogy of Neorealism as a cultural concept. The chapter reveals that, in the critical discourse of the 1930s, the term 'neorealism' served to identify several of the artistic tendencies that are today more commonly

known as European modernism. Leavitt notes that in those years the term was deployed to characterize the literature of authors such as Proust, Joyce, Svevo and Pirandello. This point is significant because it suggests that neorealism was from the start understood to be 'new' – and thus different from 19th century realism – in so far as it did not seem to simply represent an objective, external reality. Rather, the use of the term had something to do with the recognition in certain literary works of a subjective, experiential relation to reality. Leavitt writes that Giovanni Verga, one of the writers that was most closely associated with the renewal of Italian cinema leading to the rise of Neorealism, was championed by the critics of the *Cinema* journal for a "realism of human scale" (27) that conjoined appearance and experience, objectivity and subjectivity. If this does not sound like the Italian neorealism that we have come to know, the author argues, it is because later critical accounts reduced the critical coverage of the term and its descriptive value. As Leavitt notes, after WW2 "borders were erected where none existed before" (40). *Italian Neorealism. A Cultural History* may thus be understood as an attempt to take down – or look beyond – these walls.

Leavitt's book is much more than a cultural history. It provides, for example, a refreshing reading of *La Terra Trema*. Visconti's films has been, for a very long time, enlisted as a kind of cinematic manifesto of Neorealism based on the claims of indexical fidelity that appear in the rolling text at the beginning. In its reading of the film, Leavitt renders tangible the 'expressionistic intimations of mythology' borrowed from the Homeric legend and Joyce's Ulysses. Here, he writes about the subjective, experiential realism that allows Visconti 'to get at things' beyond their objective materiality. The intertextual analysis that the author offers mainly focuses on the film's dialogue and on the development of the narrative. Leavitt's analysis made me wonder how these expressionistic intimations may be identified also at the level of the cinematic image, from its acoustic expressions to its affective intensities.

One of aspects of this book that I appreciated most is its careful, nuanced way of tackling some difficult historiographic conversations such as that on the relation between neorealism and the culture of the fascist period. Readers may be familiar with the repeated calls made by some scholars since the 1970s to consider more seriously the points of continuity between the two periods. Leavitt persuasively argues that emphasis on such continuity risks implying that the war changed nothing. The author corrects the view according to which the proponents of neorealism generally repressed its debts to the film culture of the fascist period. He points to a series of interventions in magazines of the postwar period openly recognizing that the successes of Italian cinema during those years rested also on the gains made by the Italian film industry of the fascist period. In placing emphasis on these debts, this writing also celebrated some of the innovations of the cultural moment to which they belonged. How to make sense of the *Year Zero* so often claimed by proponents of Neorealism during the postwar years then? The answer that Leavitt provides is that the discourse about 'the new' really meant a *repurposing* of the role of culture. For many postwar intellectuals the central question was not how to break with the culture of the past but how to redeem it and renew it.

In a chapter titled "*From I to We*": *Neorealism's Choral Politics*, Leavitt writes about the collectivist ethos of neorealism as arguably its most distinctive and least controversial characteristic. In his monumental study of Italian neorealist cinema, Christopher Wagstaff calls it 'an organic ontology', that is to say a way of conceiving the individual as always being part of a society. Leavitt takes us through the different conceptions of the relation between culture and politics that were behind Neorealism's choral disposition. As a viewer of neorealist films, one may feel at times frustrated by the masculinistic logic that is behind the frequent conflation between, on the one hand, the desires and aspirations of the individual – usually a female character – and, on the other, references to self-interest and lack of social responsibility. Leavitt helps us understand the function that this collectivist ethos, including its repression of individuality, had in the postwar period. He maintains that the claim to chorality should be primarily understood as aspirational. Combining the sacrificial memory of antifascist Resistance with Christian morality and its related imagery of martyrdom, the neorealist deployment of a collective ethos was an attempt to represent a unified national community that, after the *ventennio* and the war, *did not* and *could not* cohere. As Leavitt brilliantly argues, such coherence was established – performatively created as it were - through the act of representation.

It is hard to imagine how much time Leavitt must have spent in the archives to produce this impressive study. I would like to mention that the book includes around 70 pages of notes containing a remarkable amount of bibliographical references – especially little-known essays, reviews and articles in magazines and newspapers

– that many scholars might not be very familiar with. *Italian Neorealism. A Cultural History* extends and enriches the conversation on Neorealism in ways that are deeply illuminating and refreshing. I am sure that this study will also inspire young scholars to think about the archive of neorealism in new ways and to approach it, generously, as a vibrant and far-from-exhausted shared conversation.