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## VERGA AND THE REALIST CINEMA

ROBERT ALAN SPIEGEL

In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag writes that

Style is the principle of decision in a work of art, the signature of the artist's will. And as the human will is capable of an indefinite number of stances, there are an indefinite number of possible styles for works of art.<sup>1</sup>

Verga's writing had both a direct and indirect effect on the films of the period we call Neorealist. When Visconti adapted *I Malavoglia* for his film *La Terra Trema*, he was able to do so with practically no change in plot or location between the story written in 1881 and the film of 1948 because of the static nature of life in Aci Trezza. The film stands as a critique of the lack of solidarity among the exploited fishermen and an exposition of the way individual pride leads to disaster. Verga had frequently attempted to tell his stories from the point of view of his characters, with as little intervention as possible on the part of the narrative voice. Visconti attempts a parallel authenticity, using the fishermen themselves and their own Sicilian dialect, because, as he tells us in the prologue to the film, Italian is not the language of the poor.

Six years earlier Visconti had proposed Verga's *L'Amante di Gramigna* to the fascist censors as the basis for the film *Ossessione*, but it was rejected by the authorities who were unwilling to accept a story based on the presence of bandits in Fascist Italy.<sup>2</sup> Visconti then turned to James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as the background for his film, but the theme remains the same, the effect of

passion on human actions. This theme is central to many of Verga's stories, among them *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Jeli Il Pastore*, *La Lupa*, and *L'Amante di Gramigna*. Although the harsh economic and social realities of the period 1945–51 displaced the theme of passion and its effects in most of the better known films of the period, Verga's *verismo* as well as that of American writers like Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Dos Passos had a tremendous influence on Italian post-war filmmaking.

The famous preface to *L'Amante di Gramigna* outlines Verga's strategy for revolutionizing the narrative discourse:

Io te lo ripeterò così' come l'ho raccolto pei viottoli dei campi, press'a poco colle medesime parole semplici e pittoresche della narrazione popolare, e tu veramente preferirai di trovarti faccia a faccia col fatto nudo e schietto.... Quando nel romanzo l'affinità e la coesione di ogni sua parte sarà così completa, che il processo della creazione rimarrà un mistero, come lo svolgersi delle passioni umane, e l'armonia delle sue forme sarà così perfetta, la sincerità della sua realtà così evidente, il suo modo e la sua ragione di essere così necessarie, che la mano dell' artista rimarrà assolutamente invisibile, allora avrà l'impronta dell'avvenimento reale, l'opera d'arte sembrerà *essersi fatta da se*; aver maturato ed esser sorta spontanea come un fatto naturale....<sup>3</sup>

Years later, André Bazin referred to *Bicycle Thieves* as one of "the first examples of pure cinema" for many of the same reasons mentioned by Verga: "No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema."<sup>4</sup> Films as different in style as *Bicycle Thieves* and *La Terra Trema* attempt to obliterate the presence of the narrator and to leave the viewer as close as possible to the examined subjects, the poor worker and his son in *Bicycle Thieves* and the exploited fishermen in *La Terra Trema*.

Just as Verga minimized the presence of the narrator, so the collaboration of De Sica and Zavattini simplified the narration and excluded as much as possible the implied viewer's awareness of the presence of the camera. The story would then unfold itself in the most direct and uncomplicated way. This does not mean that there was not a carefully structured story. De Sica and Zavattini worked for

more than six months on the details of the narration. But as in the work of Verga, the structure serves to conceal rather than to call attention to the narrative voice.

A story like *L'Asino di San Giuseppe* shows Verga's attention to the minimal necessities of life, a theme that was reexamined by filmmakers like De Sica and Visconti in works such as *Bicycle Thieves*, *Shoeshine*, and *La Terra Trema*. As a symbol of humility and necessity, the donkey can be related to Ricci's bicycle in *Bicycle Thieves*. Everyone who comes to own the donkey is living a marginal existence. The donkey then becomes a symbol for the human condition lived at the level of bare survival:

Pure ci sono tanti cristiani che non stanno meglio, e non hanno nemmeno quel cencio di tabarro nel quale il ragazzo che custodiva il branco dormiva raggomitolato davanti la fornace.<sup>5</sup>

While the story of *Bicycle Thieves* is based loosely on the novel of the same name by Luigi Bartolini, only the title and the main idea were taken from the original work. In De Sica's film as in much of Verga's work, we find the individual isolated with respect to a society which is indifferent to his needs. Only Ricci's immediate family and friends shelter him from a cold and disinterested mass in *Bicycle Thieves*, just as 'Ntoni's family is the main buffer between him and a cold sea and hostile environment in *La Terra Trema*. This failure to look beyond the immediate family structure is one of the social critiques suggested in both the work of De Sica and Visconti. In Verga, the individual is equally isolated in a hostile world, and often a victim of his or her passions as well. In the *Storia dell'Asino di San Giuseppe*, the narrative focus is on the figure of an animal, and the donkey is poeticized as well as being an object of sympathy:

La notte il branco restava allo scoperto, accanto alla fornace, e le bestie si facevano schermo stringendosi fra di loro. Ma quelle stelle che luccicavano come spade li passavano da parte a parte, malgrado il loro cuoio duro, e tutti quei guidaleschi rabbrivivano e tremavano al freddo come avessero la parola.<sup>6</sup>

The sense of desolation and desperation characteristic of the world of Verga's stories is typical of the Neorealist films of De Sica, Visconti, and Rossellini. As D.H. Lawrence comments in his story "Reflections

on the Death of a Porcupine,” “One suddenly realizes again how all creatures devour and must devour the lower forms of life.”<sup>7</sup> Bazin sees this unpleasant fact as the thesis behind *Bicycle Thieves*:

Its social message is not detached, it remains immanent in the event, but it is so clear that nobody can overlook it, still less take exception to it, since it is never made explicitly a message. The thesis implied is wonderously and outrageously simple: in the world where this workman lives, the poor must steal from the poor in order to survive.<sup>8</sup>

This truth is present in *Bicycle Thieves* and *Shoeshine* as well as in the *Storia dell'Asino di San Giuseppe*. But where De Sica projects a measure of compassion and love for his subjects, Verga relates the story as if it were a fact of nature, with a sense of fatality and dispassion. The animal is ultimately an object to be traded and devoured. At the end when he is finally bought for the last time with a pile of wood, the donkey is objectified into a useless instrument, worthless and worn out:

Compro soltanto la legna, perchè l'asino ecco cosa vale!—E diede una pedata sul carcame, che suonò come un tamburo sfondato.<sup>9</sup>

In *Rosso Malpelo*, Verga deals with a world of primitivism and superstition. The title of the story itself combines a reference to red-headed and evil-haired, since Sicilians believe that red-headed people possess a malicious disposition. The central character is a subhuman type who exists in the world of animal instincts. He is referred to as a “mangy dog” («un can rognoso») who “no one wanted around,” («che nessuno avrebbe voluto vederselo davanti») and seen as an eyesore, “surly, snarling and wild.” («torvo, ringhioso, e selvatico»)<sup>10</sup> And there is a connection made between him and supernatural forces:

Spesso, mentre scavava, si fermava bruscamente, colla zappa in aria, il viso torvo e gli occhi stralunati, e sembrava che stesse ad ascoltare qualche cosa che il suo diavolo gli sussurrasse negli orecchi, dall'altra parte della montagna di rena caduta.<sup>11</sup>

However, the supernatural element never becomes the focus of the story, which is essentially concerned with the problem of survival and adaptation to the world of necessity. But it is a presence that reminds the reader that the unexplainable exists, just as the fortune teller in

*Bicycle Thieves* is only able to indicate the course of the story but never detracts from the central problem, the recovery of the stolen bicycle.

In an essay entitled "Revival of the Matriarchal Spirit," in *Sex, Psyche, Etcetera in the Film*, Parker Tyler writes of the significance of the fortune teller in De Sica's film:

It seems justifiable to speculate . . . that its source is a reaction felt in the depths of the Italian people, and confirmed by De Sica through Bartolini's novel, against the failure of the combined patriarchic symbols of church and state (the Pope and Mussolini) to have created a prosperous destiny for the nation. . . . Organized labor, church and police fail to provide effective aid in the hero-worker's search for his stolen bicycle; these institutions are inutile, indifferent, or actually obstructive.<sup>12</sup>

Verga's world, however, is a good deal more primitive than that of De Sica/Zavattini. It is one where fundamental emotions rule, frequently isolated from the context of social institutions. When the police do appear, as in *L'Amante di Gramigna*, they function primarily as a backdrop for the story of passion and as a counterpoint to the courage of the bandit. Most of the action exists on the level of primary emotion, where the state and its institutions do not figure. This absence is structured into Verga's work and suggests that the "ideological state apparatus" is as remote as possible from the actual needs and struggles of the Southern Italian peasant, as Carlo Levi was to demonstrate in *Cristo si è Fermato a Eboli*.

What is central for Verga, as he relates in *L'Amante di Gramigna*, is:

il misterioso processo per cui le passioni si annodano, si intrecciano, maturano, si svolgono nel loro cammino sotterraneo, nei loro andirivieni che spesso sembrano contraddittori....<sup>13</sup>

The passion in *Rosso Malpelo* is the primitive and almost unexplainable repetition of the fate of Malpelo's father. As Verga tells us:

Dopo la morte del babbo pareva che gli fosse entrato il diavolo in corpo....<sup>14</sup>

And it is this union of occult forces and economic necessity that drives the action of the story forward. Verga relates how Mastro Misciu,

Malpelo's father, had died. After everyone else had left work, Misciu continued:

Questo è per il pane! Questo pel vino! Questo per la gonnella di Nunziata! —e così andava facendo il conto del come avrebbe speso i denari del suo *appalto*, il cottimante.<sup>15</sup>

And then:

Tutt'a un tratto, punf! Malpelo che si era voltato a riporre i ferri nel corbello, udì un tonfo sordo, come fa la rena traditora allorchè fa pancia e si sventra tutta in una volta, ed il lume si spense.<sup>16</sup>

Malpelo's destiny is to reenact the scene of his father's death, as if Verga were telling us that nothing can really change in such a primitive environment. Like Visconti's exploited fishermen who work all night for the profit of the wholesalers, Malpelo's father dies trying to improve his miserable existence. But Verga implies a certain fatality in the struggle of the lower classes to improve their condition, without any suggestion of the lack of class consciousness which Visconti brings to his work. In Visconti's film, there is at least the suggestion that unity or the consciousness of its necessity could have begun to make a change in the living conditions of the exploited fishermen. In Verga's story, on the other hand, there is the reproduction of a primitive reality which seems to predate such conscious thinking. Malpelo's fate mirrors that of his father before him.

While Verga's work was unusually modern in suggesting techniques of interior narration and point of view that were more fully explored in the twentieth century by writers like Joyce, there is also something in his style which looks back to an older type of discourse. In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag compares the modern with the Aristotelian tradition:

In the Aristotelian tradition of art as imitation the writer was the medium or vehicle for describing the truth about something outside himself. In the modern tradition of art as expression, the artist tells the truth about himself . . . love, like art, becomes a medium of self-expression.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas a writer like D.H. Lawrence, who was himself deeply interested in the work of Verga, does use the material he creates as a

medium of self-expression Verga almost always effaces himself in describing the fortunes of the people he observes. There is an epic quality in the choices and actions of the individuals in his stories, even though their class origins are as low as possible. The critic Gyorgy Lukacs has written of the importance of practice in the success or failure of human purpose in a book called *Writer and Critic*:

We are interested in how Odysseus or . . . Quixote react to the decisive events of their lives, how they stand up to danger, overcome obstacles.<sup>18</sup>

What is important in these tales is the interaction of the characters with world events. For Lukacs, "the inner poetry of life is the poetry of men in struggle, the poetry of the turbulent, active, interaction of men."<sup>19</sup> A story like *Jeli il Pastore* with its striking and passionate climax of the murder of Don Alfonso by the simple shepherd not only underlines the class differences which keep Jeli in an inferior position, but also shows an individual doing what he must in the face of a repressive social convention:

—Come!—diceva— Non dovevo uccidirlo nemmeno?.... Se mi aveva preso la Mara!...

Verga's stories are typically narrated rather than described, in Lukacs' terms, establishing proportion and a necessary distance. As Cecchetti says in his introduction to *The She-Wolf*:

This strict adherence to the world of his characters leads Verga to eliminate conventional description. He treats nature and all external elements as integral parts of his people. The grueling Sicilian sun that scorches the countryside, and the fogs and rains that destroy the crops, are never considered for their own sake, but are felt as components of the toil and struggle of his men and women.<sup>20</sup>

*L'Amante di Gramigna* makes use of a similar style of narration, and is also concerned with the fundamental theme of passion and its effects on the world of ordinary social convention. In both *Jeli il Pastore* and *L'Amante di Gramigna* the protagonist acts in accord with his or her true nature, and that nature is in direct opposition to the society that functions to repress or eliminate an individual's passions.

According to Pavese, "the richest style is the synthetic voice of the

leading character.''<sup>21</sup> This is true both of many of Verga's stories and in the best films of De Sica, especially Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves*, the boys in *Shoeshine*, and Umberto D. As Cecchetti says:

What Verga wanted to do was to interpret his Sicilian world not in literary terms but in the terms that were ideally those of that world itself. For this purpose, he adopted a very limited vocabulary, which consisted of words that were popular in quality, or would sound so in a given context. He condensed the narration as much as possible, eliminating everything except what seemed absolutely indispensable . . . His syntax became linear, and kept some traces of the syntax of Sicilian dialect—the language most of his characters would have spoken in real life . . .<sup>22</sup>

This very adherence to an observed reality characterized many of the more important films made in Italy between 1945 and 1951. *Bicycle Thieves* reduces the element of plot to an absolute minimum; the theft of the bicycle, the attempt to recover it, and Ricci's own theft. Although the motivation for the film was a literary idea, this literary idea was stripped down to its essentials for the film. There is the continual sense of the individual isolated in society. Where Verga's stories use a rural setting, most of the films of the Neorealist period are set in the city, and explore the problems that a new urban class had to confront following the war. These films are paralleled by the writing of Pavese, and his attempt to come to terms with the new class of Italian city dwellers cut off from their roots and struggling to give meaning to a world which had become increasingly hostile to human values.

With the disappearance of the quest for the revolutionary ideal proposed by Rossellini in *Open City*, and the subsequent economic and social problems which surfaced in post-war Italy, Italian directors attempted to probe the relationship between men, women, and their environment with an honesty and simplicity unequalled in the history of motion pictures. While De Sica proposed to deal with the problem at the level of human interaction and indifference, Visconti was more interested in exposing the roots of the economic conflict between classes. This interest links him directly to the world of Verga where

problems of survival and economic issues often play a key role. As Visconti said of *La Terra Trema*:

I was seeking to express the whole dramatic theme as a direct result of an economic conflict. The key to the understanding of the spiritual and psychological conflicts is always social even if the conclusions I reach are those which concern the individuals whose cases I am describing.<sup>23</sup>

*La Terra Trema* includes an individual melodrama, but unlike *Ossessione*, it is set against the context of economic exploitation and the social drama of poor fishermen trying to better themselves, to break out of the cycle of poverty and despair. As a study in defeat it is an object lesson to show what happens to the poor if they are not united. Like Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves*, 'Ntoni is isolated and ultimately defeated. And like so many of Verga's heroes, his attempt to better himself runs up against the harsh economic and social realities of his world, set against the context of fatality and hopelessness.

The many shots of the masses, as well as the title, *La Terra Trema*, owe much to the Russian directors like Eisenstein and Pudovkin. They also hint at the kind of dynamic that could have been created by a unified class of fishermen. But this ideal is never realized due to the lack of the consciousness necessary to produce social change. And so 'Ntoni is reduced to a state of resignation and defeat, and the cycle of exploitation continues.

One of the theoretical concerns of the group of critics who wrote for the journal "Cinema" was the problem of landscape, and as early as 1941 De Santis wrote that primary in the cinema "ought to be the preoccupation with an authenticity, even if it is fantastic, of gestures and atmosphere, in a word of the factors that must serve to express the totality of the world in which men live."<sup>24</sup> When Visconti made *Ossessione* in 1942 it was to the surprise of the Fascist censors who thought they were getting a simple adaptation of a harmless American novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The result instead was the film which has been seen as the precursor of Neorealism and one which seriously criticized the squalid and repressive nature of Italy under Mussolini.

*Osessione* is notable for the way it links characters with their background in a manner familiar to readers of Verga. And this environment, rather than being the ideal fatherland hoped for by the Fascist censors, was instead a place seething with passion, corruption, unemployment, the breakdown of the family, vagrants and sexual deviants. The linking of characters with their environments was something Visconti had learned from Jean Renoir, but it was also something he could have read in Verga. Gramigna's cleverness, for example, is explained with respect to his environment, the landscape in which he moves:

Gramigna non era stanco mai, non dormiva mai, combatteva sempre, s'arrampicava sui precipizi, strisciava fra le messi, correva carponi nel folto dei fichidindia, sgattajolava come un lupo nel letto asciutto dei torrenti.... lui solo contro mille, stanco, affamato, arso della sete, nella pianura immensa, arsa, sotto il sole di giugno.<sup>25</sup>

The descriptions of the landscape here are not arbitrary, but serve to express attributes of the outlaw's character. His strength is seen in relation to his environment. In the same way, the lovers in *Osessione* are always placed in the context of a society whose traditional structures—family, state, and church—are unresponsive. The figure of the Spagnuolo, the outsider, is created as a direct symbol of the kind of freedom that was impossible under Mussolini. As Visconti said:

*Osessione* was shot under a Fascist regime and at the time this character was the very symbol of revolution and freedom of thought.<sup>26</sup>

Like Gramigna, the Spagnuolo is in the tradition of outsiders who question the given social structure, whether Southern Italy in the nineteenth century or Fascist Italy in the twentieth. While the element of melodrama in Visconti often appears to remove his work from the realm of actuality, its social critique is nonetheless unmistakable, as the Fascist censors were quick to recognize when seeing the finished work. The individuals in *Osessione* are linked with their repressive environment as Malpelo is with his village and workplace, or Ricci and Bruno with modern Rome. The underbelly of Italian life which Visconti evokes in *Osessione* is the counterpart of the poverty of the fishermen in *La Terra Trema* or the indifference of the Roman crowds to Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves*. It is a critique of an environment

which is hypocritical, composed of false institutions which dominate and control rather than assist and nurture. As such, the best Neo-realist films, like Verga's stories, open up to the viewer or reader and call for a moral judgment on the world they present. Rather than being ideologically neutral they are charged with a sense of compassion and the need for change.

While it is clear that there are affinities between the Italian realist cinema and Italian realist fiction, another interesting connection is the link between the Italian realist cinema and American realist fiction. In speaking of this affinity, André Bazin has written:

The aesthetic of the Italian Cinema, at least in its most elaborate manifestations and in the work of a director as conscious of his medium as Rossellini, is simply the equivalent on film of the American novel . . . It is in Italy, naturally and with an ease that excludes any notion of deliberate and willful imitation, that the cinema of American literature has become a reality.<sup>27</sup>

Bazin is referring here especially to *Paisan*, and its similarities with the work of Hemingway, and also mentions the importance of American soldiers in the Italian films of the period. In *Paisan* there is much of the linking of character and environment typical of the writing of both Verga and Hemingway. The marsh, for example, in the last episode in *Paisan* performs a dramatic function as well as being the setting for the action. Bazin observes that the positioning of the horizon at the same height, and the maintaining of the same proportions between water and sky in every shot produces the visual equivalent of men's feelings when they live their lives at the mercy of the elements.

*Paisan* is an attempt to chronicle, or rather to reconstruct, the events leading up to the liberation of Italy, but at the heart of the document is a problem that is not dissimilar from many works of the period, and that is the issue of gaps in communication that exist between people. Bazin has observed that the structure of the episodes is similar to a series of short stories. In each of these episodes, there are people separated from others, relationships which are confused or fragmented, and communications which are inadequate or completely lacking. As such there is a metaphysics of isolation running beneath the attempt to document an historical period.

It was left to filmmakers of the fifties and sixties, and especially artists like Fellini and Antonioni, who were writing scripts and criticism at the time of the Neorealist period, to more fully explore the difficult internal problems that Italian cinema turned to after "the problem of the bicycle" had been solved. But that is another discourse, and one where both aesthetic and moral problems become a good deal more complicated. As Bazin says:

"Realism" can only occupy in art a dialectical position—it is more a reaction than a truth. It remains then to make it part of the aesthetic it came into existence to verify. . . . I think there is not a single Italian director, including the most Neorealist, who does not insist that they must get away from it.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation*, Delta, New York, 1964, p. 32.
2. Armes, Roy, *Patterns of Realism*, Tantivy Press, London, 1971, p. 53. Visconti relates how the Fascist censors had rejected his manuscript with the words "enough of bandits!" written across it with red ink.
3. Verga, Giovanni, *Tutte Le Novelle*, V.I., Mondadori, Milano, 1940, p. 203–4.
4. Bazin, André, *What is Cinema?* V.II., University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, p. 60.
5. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 325.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Lawrence, D.H., *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1963, p. 203.
8. Bazin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 51.
9. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 327.
10. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 187.
11. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 190.
12. Tyler, Parker, *Sex, Psyche, Etcetera, in the Film*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1969, p. 49.
13. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 203.
14. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 190.
15. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 188–90.
16. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 189.
17. Sontag, *Op. Cit.*, p. 45.

18. Lukacs, Gyorgy, *Writer and Critic*.
19. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 186.
20. Cecchetti, Giovanni, *The She-Wolf and Other Stories*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973. p. xvii.
21. Sontag, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.
22. Cecchetti, *Op. Cit.*, p. xv.
23. Armes, Roy, *Op. Cit.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Verga, *Op. Cit.*, p. 205.
26. Armes, *Op. Cit.* p. 59.
27. Bazin, *Op. Cit.* p. 39.
28. *Ibid.*

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