The Rebirth of Neorealism in American Independent Cinema

Dating back centuries, even millennia, humans have had a fascination with the representation of the physical likeness. The Egyptians expressed this idea literally when they mummified their dead. Mummification is just an attempt to preserve the physical body of the person who has passed away. This idea was taken even further during the Middle Ages through painting and the idea of the portrait. Now, once someone has their portrait painted, their physical likeness will be around even after they passed away. This notion exploded with the invention of DaVinci’s camera obscura, and eventually the photograph. People became obsessed with pictures of other people. Even today, we keep pictures of others around after they pass away. This idea of preserving something that we know as reality has become known as realism. French film theorist Andre Bazin speaks about this concept in his essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”. Bazin speaks about how realism evolved through the different forms of art, from mummification to the “plastic arts”, which is the term he uses for painting, photography, and eventually cinema for the use of plastics in their creation (cellulose for photography and film, and plastics in different paints). The representation of reality started in early cinema with Edison and the Lumiere Brothers shooting people doing everyday things (Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image). Eventually cinema evolved into fiction stories
that many people used to escape from reality. After World War II, filmmakers, based mainly in Italy, began making films that represented the harsh reality of life for the Italians during that time. Bazin also wrote about this movement, coined Neorealism, in his essay on Vittorio Di Sica’s 1948 film *Bicycle Thieves*. Bazin speaks of all of the different things that Di Sica uses in this film to represent reality, while making the film so memorable. Using *Bicycle Thieves* as a benchmark, many filmmakers through the years have made films that emulate the concept of “Neorealism” (Bazin, *Bicycle Thieves*). As A.O. Scott describes in his article, “Neo-Neo Realism: American Directors Make Clear-Eyed Movies for Hard Times,” the Neorealist genre has made a comeback, while American independent filmmakers have made films that represent the reality and the “plight of the everyman”, so to speak. Scott uses New York City based filmmaker, Ramin Bahrani as the lead example for his argument, citing Bahrani’s films as examples of pure Neorealism for employing many of the same techniques as Di Sica (Scott).

In his essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” Bazin argues that the concept of realism stems from the Egyptians mummifying their dead, opening his essay by stating “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex” (Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*). When he speaks of the mummy complex, Bazin is talking about the instinct to preserve the dead. The Egyptian religion saw survival as the existence of the physical body, not the spirit. As long as the physical being was preserved and still on earth, that person was not
really gone. This became a psychological need in man to preserve the bodies of the dead. While many people today see death a very much a spiritual process, many of our same customs are rooted in this principle. By embalming our dead in order to be able to say one last goodbye to the physical body, we are in a sense practicing the same idea. Regardless of the practice, there is a definite instinct in humans to preserve the likeness of their dead (Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image).

Through this instinct came the eventual desire to create a realistic likeness that would last forever. This idea of creating images that one would see as reality is where the entire concept of realism is rooted. As Bazin states in his essay on the subject, “…true realism, the need that is to give significant expression to the world both concretely and in its essence” (Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image). Here, Bazin is stating that “true realism” is the depiction of the world “both concretely and in its essence,” which means to depict the world exactly how it is and how it is seen. Bazin goes on to state “The artist was now in a position to create the illusion of three-dimensional space within which things appeared to exist as our eyes in reality see them” (Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image). This statement only further solidifies his argument of creating the world as one would perceive it in reality, while also taking it a step further by bringing in the third dimension. The third dimension, allowing for perspective, is a huge step in producing realistic images as it allows the viewer to place themselves inside the image, furthering its reality. Now in these statements, Bazin is speaking generally about the world, but this idea can be further applied to a physical likeness of a human, in that the true desire for realism of most people lies in the desire to
preserve someone’s image long after they have passed away. This desire was brought about in two mediums, painting and photography.

Before the technology of the camera came along, many people had their portraits painted by an artist. With the invention of the camera, a mechanical means of producing a physical likeness, more and more people started to produce photographic images of their loved ones. This happened for a couple of reasons; first, it was a more readily available and often cheaper method of doing so, and second, many people believed that this method was much more accurate. In looking at portraits of people from long ago, that is how one remembers that person, but in reality we have no way of knowing how that person looked, or if they were anything like that portrait. There are many stories floating around about historical figures looking nothing like their portraits, but if there is a picture of one of these historical figures, there is absolute certainty that that is what they looked like. As Bazin puts it, “No matter how skillful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that a human hand intervened and cast a shadow of doubt over the image” (Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image). What Bazin is saying here is that because of the sheer fact that the image was produced through a human, that it cannot be perfect. For this reason, Bazin argues, many people pursued photography in their search for a perfect likeness. Because, in photography, the image is produced through a mechanical means, there is no subjectivity, there is no doubt, and as Bazin puts it, “The photographic image is the object itself.” (Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image)
Through the development of the still image, came the development of the moving image. As the technology surrounding cinema evolved, it took realism to a whole new level, as Edison and the Lumiere Brothers gained popularity for filming people doing everyday things. One of the more famous Lumiere Brothers films is, simply put, people walking out of a factory. This is truly pure realism. People watched these films and were amazed that they were watching something that really happened. The development of the cinema took realism from a flat image to a living, breathing person standing on the screen before you. Bazin describes this phenomenon by stating "Photography and the cinema...are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism" (Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image).

As cinema evolved it become more of a fiction medium, people began to use it to escape from their reality, and the idea of realism went on the back burner, so to speak. However, after World War II, Italian filmmakers began to make fictional films that attempted to recreate the harsh reality of the everyday life of Italians. As much as these films were propaganda pieces, as many of them were tied to the communist party. This genre became known as Neorealism, or New-realism. These films depicted the struggles of the average person. As A.O. Scott puts it in his article “The lives they illuminate, of fictional characters most often played by non-actors from similar backgrounds, are not commonly depicted on screen”(Scott). These films did a number of things to try to be perceived as reality to the viewer, and to try and make the audience feel the same as they did watching those workers exit the factory in the Lumiere Brothers’ films. First, as Scott mentions, they did not often use
professional actors. In many films they found people on the street and put them in front of the camera. Second, all of the films were shot in the streets, never in a studio. This was done to highlight the destruction and the hardship caused by the war, making it more real to the viewer. Third, and probably most importantly, was the story. The plots had to be believable if the filmmakers wanted the audience to feel as though it was actually a real story. As Bazin puts it in an essay he wrote on one of the more notable Italian Neorealist films, *Bicycle Thieves*, “It takes care not to not to cheat on reality, not only by contriving to give the succession of events in the appearance of an accidental and, as it were, anecdotal chronology but in treating each of them according to its phenomenological integrity” (Bazin, *Bicycle Thieves*). Bazin makes a great point here in stating that the story must feel somewhat like an anecdote. In trying to make a realist fiction film, this is very important. The whole theory of realism is to make it seem like reality, and if the audience feels like they’re watching a fiction film, then it’s clearly not realist.

One of the landmark films to come out of the Italian Neorealist movement was Vittorio Di Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves*, from 1948. This film is one that many look upon as a prime example of Neorealist cinema. The film follows Antonio Ricci, a poor Italian man who gets a job hanging posters, mainly because he has a bicycle. Once his bike is stolen, Antionio needs to find it in order to keep his job, so he walks the streets of Rome with his son in search of the bike. At day’s end, they do not find the bike, and Antonio is forced to steal a bike, lowering himself to that level. As he tries to run away from the owner of the bike, and the crowd that has gathered around him, Antonio is caught. The owner of the bike eventually decides to let Antonio go. What
makes this worse is that Antonio’s son, whom he told to take the street car home, witnessed the whole event. The film ends on the image of father and son walking down the street, hand in hand. Despite a plot that is anything but action packed, the film does an extraordinary job of making itself memorable, and it does that by being real. Even without the historical perspective, one is still drawn into the story and finds themselves rooting for Antonio and his son to find the bicycle. Despite a story that even Bazin describes as “Truly an insignificant, even banal incident…” the film is interesting (Bazin, Bicycle Thieves). This is because the viewer sees themselves in Antonio, especially when put in the context of when it was made. At that time, many Italians were in the same situation as Antonio, out of work, in desperate need of money, and needing to provide for their families. They can see this happening to themselves or someone they know. It feels anecdotal, as Bazin puts it. The ending of the film may bother some people, but what bothers them about it is exactly what helps to make it so real. Many people want to see what happens to Antonio or want to see him find his bike on the way home, but that can’t happen in a realist film because as A.O. Scott puts it, “Neorealism rests equally on the acknowledgement that life is hard and the recognition that life goes on, that there is something in human nature that will persist in the face of defeat” (Scott).

*Bicycle Thieves* uses all of the techniques of Italian Neorealism to near perfection to produce such a vibrant sense of reality in the film. First, as mentioned earlier, the story had a huge effect on the audience of the time, and can still have one today. To say that a film from that era holds up today as well as it does and still feels so real, is a huge testament to all of the other elements working in it. Another thing that Di
Sica did in making this film, which is a staple of Italian Neorealism, was shoot everything on location in the streets of Rome. This highlighted the trouble that, not only Antonio but everybody in film, and out of the film for that matter, was going through. Getting up close and personal with the debris and destruction caused by the war and making that such a huge part of the film added to the notion of reality for the viewer. However, I feel the most important quality of Neorealism is the use of non-actors in the films. Neither Antonio, nor his son had ever acted before this film. Antonio was played by a steelworker name Lamberto Maggiorani, who did an incredible job, as stated by Scott when he wrote, "... [He] is hesitant and inarticulate in ways that capture, with a gravity that few professionals could approximate, the character's struggle to maintain some control over his circumstances" (Scott). As for Antonio's son, Di Sica would walk the streets looking for a child that had the right walk to complement Maggiorani’s, because there are so many shots of the two walking side by side (Bazin, Bicycle Thieves). Eventually, Di Sica found the child who wound up playing the son in the film, and stole the film, some might say. This film has been used as an icon for any filmmaker wishing to try and tackle the realist genre, and as A.O. Scott put it, "... it was in the late 40's, a moment of political crisis and turmoil, that the movement achieved its characteristic form in movies like... Vittorio Di Sica's Bicycle Thieves (1948), and international sensation at the time and still perhaps the single best known Neorealist work" (Scott).

Over time, the realist approach to filmmaking was put on the back burner once again, but as Scott states in his article, “The Neorealist impulse, however, proved remarkably mobile and adaptable” (Scott). While never being in the forefront of the
cinematic world, as Scott states, it popped up in more than a few places over the years; Bengal in the 50’s through the early 60’s, Brazil through the 60’s, Senegal in the 70’s and 80’s, and popping up recently in the former Soviet states. Scott goes on to talk about Neorealism in the United States, stating that it has “... pop[ped] up at the edges of even what is habitually and somewhat misleadingly known as independent film” (Scott). Scott cites the work of Kent MacKenzie in the 60’s, Charles Burnett in the 70’s, and David Gordon Greene and Jim McKay in the early 2000’s as examples of Neorealist work from American filmmakers through the years. Recently, there has been an influx of Neorealism from American independent filmmakers, which he calls Neo-Neorealism, and as Scott states “American film is having its Neorealist movement, and not a moment too soon” (Scott).

I do not feel that it’s a coincidence that the Neorealist movement has begun here in the United States in the last decade or so, just as I do not believe that it’s a coincidence that realism came about when it did in Italy. After World War II, the Italian economy was a disaster, and there was an incredible amount of damage caused by the war. The truth of it is, the majority of people were in the same position that Antonio Ricci was. Between 9/11 and the economic recession, many people in the United States are in similar situations as well. So there seems to be a correlation between countries in hard times, and Neorealist films. A.O. Scott examines this correlation in his article by stating “... what if, at least some of the time, we feel the urge to escape from escapism...Perhaps it would be worth considering that what we need from movies, in the face of a dismaying an confusing real world, is realism” (Scott). Maybe it’s just where the inspiration comes from
during those times, or maybe the filmmakers see an opportunity to capitalize on the audiences' vulnerability. Whatever it is, out of these tough times seem to always come the stories of the “plight of the everyman”. Scott’s take on this idea is a very interesting, and seemingly backwards way of looking at this correlation. Many people believe during times of hardship they need to escape into cinema, but as Scott points out, maybe this is the opposite of what we need from cinema.

In today's world, there aren't many films that really capture every aspect of the true Italian Neorealist style, but, as stated earlier, there are an increasing number that do fall under the Neorealist style. Dan Rush’s 2010 film, Everything Must Go, is simply a story about an alcoholic man coping with the fact that his wife has left him (Rush). Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck’s 2010 film, It's Kind Of a Funny Story, is just a story of a depressed teenager coming to terms with the fact that his problems aren’t that bad (Boden and Fleck). Robert Siegel’s Big Fan from 2009 is about a socially awkward hardcore sports fan that follows his favorite player one night, gets beaten up, and has to deal with the consequences (Siegel). Tamara Jenkins’ 2007 film, The Savages, is just a story about an estranged brother and sister dealing with the death of their father (Jenkins). All of these films, and many more that are unmentioned, follow Neorealism in the aspect of their stories. Each of these stories is written so that they can appear as reality to the viewer, they can easily be conceived as anecdotal, to reference Bazin again. Some people, however, might be hesitant to call these films completely Neorealist because they all use professional actors, and some big names at that. However, I feel that this shouldn’t take away from the realism of the films because one must consider today's market for
independent films. In order receive any funding for your film, the sad truth is that
you must have a name attached to it, and no studios are willing to take a chance on
inexperienced actors.

A.O. Scott, however, uses a filmmaker who has decided to forego this paradigm,
and takes a page from Di Sica’s playbook, using people he found on the street to act
in his films. Ramin Bahrani has directed three feature films in his career and all of
them can be used as examples of “Neo-Neorealism”, as Scott refers to it. Bahrani’s
first feature *Man Push Cart* follows a Pakistani immigrant named Ahmad through his
daily life. Ahmad runs a coffee cart on the streets on Manhattan, but he’s also a
dreamer, a lover, a former pop singer, and a Muslim man dealing with the post 9/11
city. Now the story seems similar to those mentioned above, very easy to perceive as
reality, as anyone that has been to New York City, or any other major city for that
matter, has walked passed countless coffee carts and can immediately place this
character in their minds. However, the main difference between this film and the
others is that the actor playing Ahmad, is a push cart operator for Brooklyn named
Ahmad Razvi. Bahrani found him in Brooklyn and used him to act in his film. His
second feature, *Chop Shop* from 2008, again follows along this path of Neorealism.
The film follows Ale and Izzy, two children that live in makeshift living quarters
above a car repair shop where Ale does odd jobs. This is, again, another story the
viewer can place in reality, because the harsh reality is that it’s entirely possible for
that to happen. The film also follows the other aspects of Neorealism because it was
shot completely on location, in Willet’s Point, New York, and it was the children’s
first film. Bahrani’s third film, *Goodbye Solo* is about a cab driver in North Carolina,
who thinks one of his regular customers is preparing to die. This film also follows
the same methods as Barhani’s first two, and does indeed fall in line with the
Neorealist approach. Bahra
[230x652]ni is not the only filmmaker around who has emulated
the Neorealist techniques set forth by Di Sica in Bicycle Thieves, and this trend is one
that has only just begun its upswing (Scott).

The human obsession with realism started centuries ago and has evolved through
different forms of art through the years, and found its home in cinema. Cinema is an
art that lends itself very nicely to this idea because it captures people as they are
living and encapsulates it forever. Through fiction films, however, Neorealism really
took flight. Starting in 1948 with Bicycle Thieves, and continuing through today with
the films of Ramin Bahrani and many others, Neorealism tells the stories that many
studios don’t want to tell. These films are as close to true realism as it gets, aside
from the films of the Lumiere Brothers. They tell the real stories, many of which
don’t have happy endings, because life doesn’t always have happy endings. I believe
A.O. Scott put it best when he wrote, “... it will hardly surprise you that, in these
movies, dreams generally don’t come true. Antonio Ricci never did recover his
bicycle” (Scott).
Works Cited


Everything Must Go. Dir. Dan Rush. 2010.

