

Italian cinema at Cannes 1946-1959

Italy emerged from the war ravaged by destruction and misery, yet fervently hoping that it could redeem itself both morally and materially. The emerging neorealist **cinema** movement was marked by these same characteristics. Its candid re-examination of the contradictions in Italian society was reflected in two innovative and highly influential works which featured in the Selection at the 1946 Festival: *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, open city*), directed by Roberto Rossellini, which won one of the Grand Prix, and *Il bandito* (*The Bandit*), directed by Alberto Lattuada. As for the three other Italian **feature films** in competition that year, these reflected a strong tradition of popular genres: the sentimental musical, *Amanti in fuga* (*The Lovers*), directed by Giacomo Gentilomo, *Le miserie del signor Travet* (*His Young Wife*), a theatrical adaptation directed by the eclectic Mario Soldati, and *Un giorno nella vita* (*A day in the life*), a religious drama by Alessandro Blasetti, **the top** director during the fascist regime. On the Croisette, Rossellini immediately received glowing reviews in the *Revue du cinéma* as well as praise from Georges Sadoul.

The director, then in his forties, would lament in his later memoirs the lack of interest shown at the time by the Italian authorities and general public. Nevertheless, Rossellini's appearance at Cannes would allow him to establish a base of hard core supporters in Paris who would follow him **very** faithfully for many years, to the point where the works of fascist propaganda that he had directed a few years earlier would be completely forgotten. The scriptwriters of *Roma, città aperta* included Rossellini's favourite protégé, Federico Fellini, who, at the age of 26, had already made a name for himself as a screenwriter and satirical artist. Also **involved at Cannes** was the **27-year-old Dino** De Laurentiis, who had produced the film directed by Soldati as well as that directed by Lattuada for Lux Film. Among the short films to appear in 1946 was *Bambini in città* (*Children in cities*), an extraordinary report on hopeless childhood directed by the thirty-year-old Luigi Comencini.

Over the course of the following years, this **short film** section of the Festival would serve to raise the profile of numerous screenwriters and directors with promising careers ahead of **them**. **From** the documentary maker, Luciano Emmer, to the influential critic, Gian Luigi Rondi, the future specialist of "sword-and-sandal" epics, Pietro Francisci, the film historian, Domenico Paolella, and the novice film director, Michelangelo Antonioni.

The rise of neorealism continued with films like *Il delitto di Giovanni Episcopo* (*Flesh Will Surrender*), directed by Lattuada, *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*), an epic directed by Giuseppe De Santis, **starring Silvana Mangano and produced** by De Laurentiis, *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*), directed by Vittorio De Sica and written by Cesare Zavattini (Grand Prix 1951), *Il Cammino della speranza* (*Path of Hope*), directed by Pietro Germi with Fellini as co-scriptwriter, *Il Cristo proibito* (*Strange Deception*), by that polemical man of letters, Curzio Malaparte, and *Due soldi di speranza* (*Two Cents Worth of Hope*), directed by Renato Castellani.

Indeed, the latter film was awarded the Grand Prix in 1952, while the Award for Best Screenplay that same year went to Piero Tellini for penning the brilliant **original story** for *Guardie e ladri* (*Cops and Robbers*), directed by Steno and Mario Monicelli. **Both Carosello Napoletano** (*Neapolitan Carousel*), a spectacular musical comedy directed by Ettore Giannini (assisted by Francesco Rosi), and *Il Segno di Venere* (*The Sign of Venus*), an acerbic comedy directed by Dino Risi and starring Sophia Loren, opened up new narrative pathways in the mid-1950s that were resolutely post-neorealist, and which would also be taken by Vittorio de Sica (*Il Tetto – The Roof*)

and Pietro Germi (*Il ferroviere –The Railroad Man*). The 1957 Award, presented to the **mesmerizing** Giulietta Masina for her performance in *Le notti di Cabiria* (*Nights of Cabiria*), would be the first in a long series of Cannes trophies **conquered by** her husband, Federico. In 1958, the novelist and poet, Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was **already** experiencing a meteoric rise, won the Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Giovani mariti* (**Young Husbands**), directed by Mauro Bolognini.

A photograph taken during the 1959 Festival – at which the Italian film producer, Carlo Ponti, was a member of the Jury – shows Rossellini and Jean-Pierre **Léaud laughing** together after handing over the Award for Best Director to François Truffaut, a protégé of Rossellini, for his film, *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*).

Neorealism

Cesare Zavattini, an influential theorist and a key figure in the neorealist movement laid out his views in an article published in 1953 entitled, “Neorealism lives on”: “*Neorealism cannot be limited to the war and post-war period: it has a hunger for reality. It craves to explore the times we are living in in a more direct and immediate way. That's why this movement is unable to content itself with the escapist subject matter that, working in the way does, the film industry serves up to us. That's why, as was already demonstrated in Paisà (Paisan), Ladri di biciclette (Bicycle Thieves) or La Terra trema (The Earth Will Tremble), neorealism will continue to do everything it can to free itself from the fiction of entertainment.*”

Nevertheless, in 1950, Zavattini's colleague, the eminent screenwriter and leader of the movement, Sergio Amidei, had penned and personally produced the film, *Domenica d'agosto* (**Sunday in August**). This “escapist” comedy directed by Luciano Emmer deliberately toned down the focus on **harsh reality**. Therefore it wasn't just Zavattini's loathed cinema industry that contributed to steering the movement towards “the fiction of entertainment”. Indeed, Zavattini himself would go on to move towards **light** comedy and popular melodrama in his work with Vittorio De Sica in the 1950s and 1960s. And Federico Fellini, who had contributed to the effects in *Roma, città aperta* and *Paisà* would not hesitate to abandon neorealist topics and techniques almost contemptuously as soon as he became a director **himself**.

Neorealist masterpieces to rediscover include: *Senza pietà* (*Without pity*), directed by Alberto Lattuada (1948); *La Terra trema* (*The Earth Will Tremble*), directed by Luchino Visconti (1950); the collective work, *Giorni di gloria* (*Days of Glory*, 1945); *In nome della legge* (*In the Name of the Law*), directed by Pietro Germi (1948); and *Sotto il sole di Roma* (*Under the Sun of Rome*), directed by Renato Castellani (1948).

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