

WHAT IS CINEMA?

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© CABOOSE 2009. ISBN 978-0-9811914-0-9

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*Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation*

It is enough to watch a few Italian films, even without the remarks of their authors, to realise the role played by improvisation. Since the advent of the talking film especially, films require the carrying out of tasks too complex and the investment of too much money to permit the least vacillation along the way. We can say that *découpage*, which foresees everything, has virtually created the film before the first day of shooting. The material conditions of filmmaking in Italy immediately after the Liberation, the nature of the topics the films addressed and no doubt also some sort of essence of the Italian spirit freed filmmakers from this tyranny of the *découpage*. Rossellini set out with his camera, some film and script outlines, which he modified according to his inspiration, his human and material resources, nature, the landscape, etc. This was how Feuillade worked long ago in search of locations in the streets of Paris for the next instalment of *Les Vampires* or *Fantômas*, a continuation he was no more clear about than the viewers left quivering with anxiety the week before.

Naturally, a filmmaker's margin of improvisation can vary. It is often reduced to mere details, yet this is enough to give the narrative a very different look and feel than what we normally see on the screen. Certainly the screenplay of *Four Steps in the Clouds* is just as well constructed as that of an American comedy, but I would be willing to bet that a third of the shots were not planned

in advance. The screenplay of *Shoeshine* does not appear to have been subjected to very strict dramatic necessity, and the film ends on a situation which could just as easily not have been the last. Marcello Pagliero's delightful little film *Roma, città libera* enjoys creating and clearing up misunderstandings that could undoubtedly have been treated differently. The demon of melodrama, which Italian filmmakers are not entirely capable of resisting, unfortunately takes over here and there, introducing dramatic necessity to entirely foreseeable effect. But that is another story. What is important is the creative process, the very particular way in which situations are generated. The need for a narrative is more biological than dramatic in nature. It buds and grows with the verisimilitude and freedom of life itself. We should not conclude from this that such a method is inherently less aesthetic than slow and meticulous planning. The preconception that time, money and resources are enough on their own is so pervasive that we forget to relate them to the work and the artist. Van Gogh did the same painting a dozen times over, very quickly, while Cézanne returned to his for years on end. Some genres require you to work quickly, to strike while the iron is hot. A surgeon, however, must be reliable and precise. This is the price Italian film has paid for its feel of immediacy and naturalness. It is closer to oral narrative than to writing and to a sketch than to painting. To achieve this it needed the ease and sure eye of Rossellini, Lattuada, Aldo Vergano and Giuseppe De Santis. Their camera has a very subtle cinematic touch and marvellously sensitive antennae, enabling it to grasp at a stroke what it needs and how to achieve it.