FILM 2332 — Understanding Film, Discussion 9

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Question

Neorealist films arose as a result of widespread poverty in post-WWII Italy. In other parts of the world, how did times of poverty affect film? Were the results similar to Italian Neorealism, and if not, why?

Commentary

Neorealist film could not take place in the present. *Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica 1948), depicts scenes of abject poverty as the normal condition for the masses. Hollywood tends not to make movies replicating neorealism, particularly the most profitable films, opting instead for less subtle plots with dramatic consequences. To some extent, the change in style is indicative of how much more prosperous the environment of Hollywood is. Now, we see that the most popular films discuss issues "worth portraying in film" are removed from daily life. Even films like *Do The Right Thing* (Lee 1989) depicting poverty do not have the same existential struggle for survival. The trend also draws attentions to the intentions behind Neorealist filmmaking and the contrast from Hollywood films. Rather than creating films for money, they are more focused on promoting societal change, leading to their bleaker style.

The treatment of women by Michel in *Breathless* (Godard 1960) is shocking. From the beginning, his repeated derogation of women makes him unlikable - indeed, the movie begins with him refusing to pick up hitchhiking women on the basis of attractiveness, calling them "dogs". Michel is meant to be a hardened criminal, which initially helps explain his character, but ultimately the environment accepts his casual sexism. Even Patricia seems not to mind this, or even notice, which jars the audience. This indifference to shocking behavior allows Godard critically comment on society's attitude towards women.