

Revisiting Italian Neorealism: Its Influence toward Indonesia and Asian Cinema or There's No such Thing Like Pure Neorealist Films

EKKY IMANJAYA

Film critic and journalist, editor of www.rumahfilm.org

Abstrak

Pada dekade 1940an dan 1950an, film-film neorealis Italia dianggap sebagai salah satu dari gerakan dan pencapaian film terbaik di dunia, hingga saat ini. Tetapi, membincangkannya lagi, apakah sudah kadaluwarsa? atau masihkah relevan saat ini, mengingat banyak sekali pencapaian, kemajuan, dan perkembangan dalam dunia perfilman internasional? Artikel ini mencoba mendiskusikan pendapat bahwa madzhab neorealisme Italia masih relevan untuk sinema dunia saat ini, khususnya di Asia dan Indonesia. Misalnya, film-film awal Usmar Ismail, Bapak Film Indonesia, diwarnai oleh gaya dan elemen aliran ini, dan banyak yang tidak tahu hal ini. Bagaimana Neorealisme Italia mempengaruhi Sinema dunia ketiga, khususnya sineas Asia dan Indonesia? Tulisan ini akan menjawabnya. Tetapi, diskusi itu menjadi lebih luas ketika kita menganalisis pengaruhnya pada satu film mutakhir. "Apakah ia film neorealis?", "apakah film ini bagian dari neorealisme? Artikel ini menyatakan bahwa tidak ada yang namanya film neorealis murni, dan hal itu dimulai sejak dari awal mula gerakan ini. Argumen ini akan mengubah banyak hal, misalnya kemungkinan bahwa seorang akademisi untuk melakukan pembacaan dari dekat terhadap satu film terkini lewat element-element neorealis.

Kata kunci: neorealisme di Italia, sinema Indonesia, sinema Asia, sinema negara berkembang, sinema dunia, cinema Iran, cinematic aesthetic, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica

Introduction

Among film scholars, film critics, film journalists, and film buffs, 1940s and 1950s Italian neorealist films are considered as one of the best film movements and achievements in the world cinema history. It began with *Roma, città aperta* (Rome Open City, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), *Sciuscià* (Shoeshine, Vittorio De Sica, 1946), and *Paisà* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946). Later, works like *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves, Vittorio De Sica, 1948) and *Umberto D* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952) are considered as masterpieces. In 1950s, director like Federico Fellini and Michaelangelo Antoniani developed the style.

Generally, film critics identify neo-realism with some elements. Its central characteristics consist of a method of filmmaking practice (location shooting and the use of unprofessional actors), the attitude of the filmmakers (who aim at getting close to their subjects), their choice of subject matters (the loves of ordinary people, and as notable film critic Andre Bazin puts it, "the concern with actual day-to-day events (Bazin 1972: 20)), and the ideological/political slant of the films (broadly left wing/liberal humanist) (Hallam & Marsment, 1988: 40).

Discussing Italian Neo-realism in our time is still relevant for the world, Asian, and Indonesian cinemas. First, there is a (so to speak) myth that early Indonesian films directed by Usmar Ismail, later

known as the father of Indonesian cinema (Sen 1999, 16), are neorealist films (Said 1991: 6-7). Second, there are some discussions on the coming back of neo-realistic styles in the recent world cinema, especially in Asia, such as New Iranian films. Then, the discussion becomes wider while we begin to analyze on its influence toward one recent cinema. "Is it a neo-realist film?" "Does that film really belong to neo-realism?", etc. I argue that there is no such thing like pure neorealist films, so that a scholar can undertake close reading on one film toward its neo-realism elements.

This paper tries to elaborate the relevancy of Italian neo-realism with Indonesian cinemas and its influence toward the world cinema, especially Asian cinemas. In addition, the term "no pure neorealist films" is elaborated.

Third World Cinema and Italian Neo-realism

In his book, notable Indonesian film critic Salim Said, says that Usmar Ismail and his colleagues were influenced by Italian neo-realism.

The commercial pattern of filmmaking in Indonesia had its roots in the Hollywood style of movie making while Usmar Ismail's approach was most clearly embodied in Italian Neo Realism, born as a reaction against the Hollywood style which did not allow the movie maker room for self expression. The Neo Realist movie makers,

and Usmar Ismail and his friends, tried to express themselves through the portrayal of problems faced by their respective countries after World War II. (Said 1991: 6-7)

Said mentions that at the time Perfini was established, neo-realism (which was a new trend in filmmaking) was riding high in Italy. For Said, some aspects of Italian neo-realism occurred in Ismail's early films. "The Italian Neorealist believed in taking the camera out into the street and using common people, not stars. This same opinion was shared by Perfini people. Usmar was so fanatic about this new approach that Perfini's films always introduced new actors with no previous film experience (Said 1991: 54). Said states other aspects. The first is the constant lugging of the camera to the street, or location shooting instead of the studio. The second is that just as the neo-realist succeeded in showing the worn face of post-war Italy. Perfini did its best to show the real face of Indonesia. He, however, highlights that "Although a comparison might be deemed exaggerated, there are also some Indonesians in line with the resistance that sprang up in Italy" (Said 1991: 54). Both filmmakers began to make films after the end of World War II.

Another Perfini's film, *Embun* (Dewdrops, 1951), directed by Djaduk Djajakusuma highlighted a common problem in those days, the veterans, depicting the village life with its detailed visual description of living customs and beliefs

(Said 1991: 54-55). The story followed the common model of a frustrated ex-revolutionary being brought back to life and society by a woman's love (Sen 1994: 23).

After the production, Ismail was awarded Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to study for a year at the University of California in Los Angeles (Said 1991: 55). A year later, he made films under the influence of Hollywood' styles and tried to compromise between idealism and commercialism. However, the spirit of idealistic group of filmmaking still existed in Perfini. For example, *Krisis* (Crisis) directed by Ismail in 1954, dealt with Jakarta's housing problems and depicted a variety of human characters and a range of human behavior and responses to this distressing situation (Said 1991: 56).

About the connection between Perfini and realism, Nyak Abbas Akub, director specializing in comedy and always putting social issues on his films and starting his career at Perfini, explains:

In Perfini days, we got the stories for our films from reality. The Long March of the Siliwangi Division gave birth to *The Long March*; the general attack on Jogya gave birth to *Six Hours in Yogya*; the struggle for housing in Jakarta in those days became the source of *Crisis*; while *Past Midnight* was based on the difficulty that veterans were having in adjusting to society after leaving military service. The stories and the themes that we chose were totally different from these that were dominant in the cinemas at that time

(quoted in Said 1991: 102).

Asia Media Scholar Krishna Sen disagrees and argues that upon his return from Hollywood in 1953 Ismail was most directly influenced by the working methods of Hollywood directors and actors whom he had observed during his cinematography studies at University of California, and, Sen says that Ismail own writing indicates that he had taken over the working system of Hollywood (Sen, 1994: 35-38), even though Ismail says that it was unintentionally, as the result of his studying there (Ismail, 1986: 175).

Ismail himself does not mention the influence of neo-realism toward his films. He only writes, in *Pembina* magazine on 8 September 1965, that once he met Soekarno, President of Indonesia at that time, and discussed the best way for film to devote to the Revolution of Indonesia: Hollywood style (fast and smooth but shallow story) or Soviet Style (depth and intensive story but mostly in a slow and boring way—according to common spectators). Soekarno said the third way: the story flowed in a smooth but in depth way, and he took examples from Italian films¹ (Ismail: 1986, 99). There is no further information about the link

between the president's suggestion and Ismail's films.

However, there are some similarities between Ismail's films and Italian Neorealist films. The first is production budgeting and filmmaking equipments. Ismail says that some people always compare Indonesian films with Italian films made in low budget but yet producing great movies. Ismail explains the fact that the budget of *Bicycle Thieves* (Italy: Vittorio de Sica, 1948) is about \$ 100.000,- or Rp 2,5 million (at that time) and Indonesian film productions averagely are no more than Rp 350.000,-. (Ismail: 1986, 64). *Darah dan Doa's* production cost Rp 350.000,- and that broke the record considering at that time that people made film just with small capital about Rp 100.000,-. (Ismail: 1986, 170). The second, the most important thing, is the fact that both Ismail and Italian neo-realist belong to the second group of filmmaking. Both films intend to treat films as media of expressions, even though the films were made in very low budget and lacked professional skills and equipment. Other similarities are the themes, using some unprofessional actors, and real shooting location. The theme *Darah dan Doa* focuses on common people (especially the army) and their psychological situation while the Siliwangi military division did the long march. Ismail used of unprofessional actors after coming home from Hollywood in 1953. Ismail writes that 12 March 1953

¹ Ismail does not mention the date of the meeting. But, there is a probability that the certain meeting was in the middle of 1950, when he brought *Darah dan Doa* to be screened at the Palace of Independence as premiere show (Ismail, 1986: 164).

was the first day of his working day after coming home from Hollywood, and that was the first time he would use both amateur and professional actors. (Ismail: 1986, 172,174). Ismail also used the authentic locations of the Long March of Siliwangi military division as the location of shooting, and wanted to be as closer as it could be to the real event (Ismail:1986, 168).

The influence of the style and approach of Italian neo-realist films has spread worldwide. In *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (Ruberto, Laura and Kristi Wilsom, *italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), there are articles discussing the influence of neo-realism on Brazilian Cinema, German Cinema, Hong Kong Cinema, African cinema, Latin America cinema, India cinema, and Czechoslovakia cinema. On *Blood Cinema, the Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*, cinema scholar Marsha Kinder illuminates that Spain cinema were influenced by Italian Neo-realism, especially for critiquing Franco's false picture of Spain within the national context as well as an ideal means for overcoming Spain's isolation by expressing its unique cultural identity abroad (Kinder 1993 , 26, 28), and Spanish filmmakers of the 1950s uses Neo-realism and Hollywood style as a dialectic opposition within their films (Kinder 1993, 36, 39-58). For example, Kinder says the *Surcos* (Spain: José Antonio Nieves Conde, 1951) uses neo-realist conventions effectively to

depict "social problems in the barrio". "There are many wonderful depth-focus long shots documenting Madrid's streets, open markets, subways, employment offices, and tenements where the members of the family are contextualized amid the anonymous poor. The multitude tenements with their barred railings, small overcrowded rooms, and overlapping voices, entrap their inhabitants no matter whether they are positioned in the foreground of background". (Kinder, 1993: 47). Film scholars Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment illuminate that Italian Neorealism influence filmmakers in Spain, Japan, France, Poland, India, Greece, Latin America, and Britain (Hallam & Marshment 2000, 40)

Italian Neo-realism influences the Third World Cinema, from Cuban Humberto Solas to Brazilian cinema novo like Ruy Guerra (Armes, Roy. *Third World Film Making and the West*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: 1987: 82). These filmmakers are attracted by neorealist films, mostly, on the mode of production and the stance of filmmakers themselves (Armes, 1987: 82).

The influences of Italian Neo-realism are also shown on some Asian films. Film scholar David Overbey writes that Georges Sadoul in *Cahiers du cinema* discussed Japanese Neo-realism When *Pater Panchali* directed by Satyajit Ray screened on 1956 Cannes Film Festival, people began to speak of "Indian neo-realism"

(Overbey (ed) 1978, 26).

In 1990s and 2000s, there are some Asian filmmakers influenced by this movement, for example, Taiwanese directors like Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang. In 1995, film scholars Abe Mark Nornes and Yeh Yueh-yu, said that all the Taiwan directors are influenced by neo-realism.

Clearly influenced by Italian neo-realism, the new directors are committed to a quasi-documentary style in their filmmaking. They draw deeply on their life experiences to construct their narratives and in their deployment of mise-en-scene. Their narratives often pit the working or peasant classes against a background of deprivation and misery. Almost every new film tries to reconstruct history to some extent. The look at the rural, agricultural past is nostalgic; the attitude toward the urban, industrial present is bitter. As a result, a set of thematic binary pairs can often be found in these films: rural (backward, peaceful) vs. urban (advanced, turbulent); peasant/working class (innocent, benevolent) vs. middle class (sophisticated, manipulative); past (good) vs. present (bad)².

When discussing on Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness*, Nornes and Yueh-yu

focus on neorealism on one sub-chapter: *Style: Long Take (and Neo-realism)*³.

On 3-5 December 2007, there was a conference on "Realism and the Audio-visual Media" in University of Leeds, and some of the topics were Neo-realism and New Argentina Cinemas by Joanne Page⁴. Thomas Elsaesser, as plenary lecturer, in "World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence" sessions, mentions the influence of Neo-realism in world cinema:

The New Iranian cinema, for instance, was hailed as a welcome return to the precepts of neo-realism, and many other emerging national cinemas, notably from Africa, Latin American and parts of Asia are feted at festivals for their quasi-documentary, ethnographic engagement with the slow rhythms of the everyday, with the lives of ordinary people, with the disappearing natural environment, the wasted desolation of the shantytowns and urban slums, or the ennui and anomie of the newly affluent Asian middle-classes.⁵

On New Iranian cinemas, fine arts scholar Bert Cardullo underlines that *Children of Heaven* (Iran 1999: Majid Majidi) is influenced by Italian Neorealism, as well

² Nornes, Mark & Yeh Yueh-yu. *Cinema Space*. <http://cinemaspace.berkeley.edu/>. 24th March 2008).

³ <http://cinemaspace.berkeley.edu/Papers/CityOfSadness/slong.html>

⁴ *University of Leeds*. http://www.leeds.ac.uk/worldcinemas/Conference_Programme.pdf. 24th March 2008

⁵ *University of Leeds*. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/worldcinemas/Abstracts.pdf>. 24th March 2008

as other New Iranian films (Cardullo 2002, 111-114) such as *The White Balloon* (Iran: Jafar Panahi, 1995), *The Mirror* (Iran: Jafar Panahi, 1997), and *The Apple* (Iran: Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998).

But, yet, if we want to define about recent Asian neo-realism, I should undertake deep research. I just want to underscore that there are many Asian films influenced by neorealist films. More than 40 years, yet, the legacy of Italian filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti have still existed and even spread up to Asia.

Redefining Italian Neo-realism

Anyway, what is actually the definition of "neorealism" from the first place? There is no manifesto of agreed aims and principles and no agreed method of filmmaking practice⁶, but only an array of negative convictions was opposed to the formulaic depictions of commercial cinema and the belief that films should be a source of knowledge and reality (Hallam & Mersment, 1988: 41). David Overbey states that the films "...were made by directors and writers, allowing the differences in sensibility, style, and motivation, shared a number of theoretical assump-

tions about the nature of cinema and the world it presented" (Overbey 1978, 1)." Bondanella illuminates the similar statement about no single or no specific approach has been taken by the film-makers (Bondanella 1988, 35). Bazin underlines that there is no such thing as pure neo-realism (Bazin 1972: 100). Let me explain and elaborate this issue with some examples.

On discussion about the marks of neo-realist films, many film scholars and critics describe neo-realist films with some characteristics: the central characteristics consist of a method of filmmaking practice (location shooting and the use of non-professional actors), the attitude of the filmmakers (who aim to get close to their subject), their choice of subject matter (the loves of ordinary people, and as Bazin puts it, "the concern with actual day-to-day events (Bazin 1972: 20)), and the ideological/political slant of the films (broadly left wing/liberal humanist) (Hallam & Marsment, 1988: 40).

Although the word "neo-realism" is always used in every article or discussion among critics, scriptwriters, directors, and theorists, it is never actually defined (Overbey, David (ed). *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-Realism*. London: Talisman Books, 1978: 20). Surely, they emphasize the pressing problems of the time — mostly social realism issues such as the war, the Resistance and the Partisan struggle, unemployment, poverty, social

⁶ Bazin, for example, compares Rossellini and De Sica. For him, Rossellini's style is a way of seeing, and de Sica's is primarily a way of feeling (Bazin: 1972, 62)

injustice, and the like—but "...there was never a programmatic approach to the questions or any preconceived method of rendering them on celluloid (Bondanella, Peter. *Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present*. New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1988: 34).

The statements about no pure neo-realism above are important for me. In Indonesian cinemas, there is no single film adopting the whole characteristics and style of Italian neorealist. Some film critics assume that some of Garin Nugroho's films content neorealist style and approach, for example *Daun di Atas Bantal* (Leaf on a Pillow, 1997), *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* (Bird-Man Tale, 2002), *Serambi* (Verandah, with Tonny Trimarsanto, Viva Vesti, and Lianto Luseno), *Rindu Kami Pada-Mu* (On Love and Eggs, 2004), and *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* (The Poet, 1999). There are some Indonesian films post-May 1998 with some parts of neorealist characteristic, such as *Viva Indonesia* (Ravi L. Bharwani Aryo Danusiri Asep Kusdinar Lianto Luseno Nana Mulyana, 2001), *Eliana, Eliana* (Riri Riza, 2002), and *Bendera* (Nan T Achnas, 2002). Can we consider the films as neo-realist? Or we just call them films influenced by Italian neo-realism approach and style? Because the films I mentioned above do not apply full elements of neo-realism.

The same phenomenon also happens in Italian neo-realism. In order to prove

my argument, let me elaborate the cases. Indeed, the term "neo-realism" is not a simple and fixed definition. Shiel writes that the realism of neo-realism manifests itself in a distinctive visual style: preference for location filming, the use of unprofessional actors, the avoidance of ornamental mise-en-scene, a preference for natural light, a freely-moving documentary style of photography, a non-interventionist approach to film directing, and an avoidance of complex editing (Shiel, 2006, 2). At the same time, Shiel also mentions that not all neo-realist films employed all of these strategies, especially in the 1950s, "...when neo-realism becomes increasingly concerned with subjective experience, but most of these strategies are evident in all neorealist films" (Shiel 2006: p 2). Shiel states that most of neo-realists as visual truth is closely identified with the Andre Bazin's criticism, arguing in favor of neo-realism as a cinematic agenda, thinking of it as a cinema of "fact" and "reconstituted reportage (Shiel 2006: 2). As Roberto Rossellini mentions: "most of the time it is only a label. For me, it is above all, a moral position to look at the world. It then becomes an aesthetic position, but at the beginning it is moral" (quoted in Overbey 1978: 1).

Outdoor location, for example. in *Rome Open City* (Italia: Roberto Rossellini, 1945), Rossellini uses the real location of the events in many scenes, but, the same

film contained many indoors sequences filmed in a makeshift studio. In *Paisa* (Italy: Roberto Rossellini, 1946) Rossellini filmed a monastery in the Apennines (between Florence and Bologna) at Maiora on the Amalfi coast. (Shiel:2006, 11). De Sica recreated Rome's Porta Portese prison in *Shoesline* (Italy: De Sica, 1946) (Shiel 2006: 11). These innovations, however, could usually be tolerated if "...the general principles of authenticity and verisimilitude are not surrendered (Shiel 2006: p 11). Bazin writes an article as a defense on Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy*, when the director did not shoot Naples in the real location. Bazin mentions the term "mental landscape" and states that the Naples of the film is not false.

It is Naples "filtered" through the consciousness of the heroine. If the landscape is bare and confined, it is because the consciousness of an ordinary bourgeoisie itself suffers from great spiritual poverty. Nevertheless, the Naples of the film is not false (which could easily be with the Naples of a documentary three hours long). It is rather a mental landscape at once as objective as a straight photograph and as subjective as pure personal consciousness. We realize now that the attitude which Rossellini takes toward his characters and their geographical and social setting is, at one remove, the attitude of his heroine toward Naples—the difference being that his awareness is that of a highly cultured

artist and, in my opinion, an artist of rare spiritual vitality (Bazin 1972: p 98-99).

Using of unprofessional actors is one of the most important aspects, and they are chosen for their suitability for the part, either because they fit it physically or there is some parallel line between the role and their lives (Bazin, 1972: 24). Yet, there are some films with professional actors or mixed between professional and amateur actors (Shiel, 2006:13). In fact, only Visconti used non-professionals for the entire cast of an neo-realistic film, and only in *La terra trema* (Italy: Luchino Visconti, 1948) (Overbey, 1978: 13). Bazin underlines that it is not the absence of professional actors that is the hallmark of neo-realism or social realism, but the rejection of the star concept (Bazin, 1972: 23).

Another example comes from Bazin when he discusses *Cronaca di un amore* (Italy: Michelangelo Antonioni, 1950). Bazin considers the film as neorealism—in spite of the professional actors, of the detective-story-like arbitrariness of the plot, of expensive settings, and the baroque dress of the heroine) because "...the director has not relied on an expressionism outside the characters; he builds all his effects on their way of life, their way of crying, of walking of laughing" (Bazin, 1972: 66).

How about quasi-documentary style? Bondanella argues that the realistic texture of the work is produced by careful

planning, instead of by improvisation or a documentary approach of the plot. The unprofessional actors are chosen in a tight casting in order to get the right manner of walk and facial expressions. And De Sica employed six different cameras from a various angles when shooting the scene of stolen bicycle in *Bicycle Thieves* (Bondanella, 1988: 57). Indeed, the film does not represent pure cinema in the sense of Bazin's theory: no more actors, sets, or storyline—and, as extreme of the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality: there is no more cinema.

Even more, at the second phase of neorealism (1950-1957)⁷, when the problems represented in the films are more personal, both Rossellini and De Sica explore the realm of fable and imagination, for example *The Machine to Kill Bad People* (Italy: Roberto Rossellini, 1952)) and *Miracle in Milan* (Italy: Vittorio De Sica, 1951) (Bondanella 1988: p 95). □

⁷ Mark Shiel makes demarcation between neorealist films made from 1943 to 1950 (he calls it first phase) and from 1950 to 1957 (second phase). Check (Shiel 2006: p 78)

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