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An Evolution of Neorealism: How Fellini Changed It All with *Nights of Cabiria*

The neorealist movement in cinema, which came about in Italy post-World War II, sought to capture absolute truth through being as realistic as the technology of the time would allow. These neorealist films, such as those from Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, were centered around sociological issues, most of which were those that had also risen out of a postwar Italy. Like all of Europe, Italy had been a large battleground during the war, leaving portions of the country destroyed and in constant need of repair. Directors like Rossellini and De Sica crafted narratives out of the struggles to survive in and rationalize the new state of the country. As Peter Bondanella writes in his book *A History of Italian Cinema*, neorealism was defined by its use of “social content, historical actuality, political commitment, realist treatment, and popular settings” as filtered through the lens of “on-location shooting rather than conventional studio sets, and made novel use of nonprofessional actors or documentary effects” (61). However, director Federico Fellini interpreted the nature of neorealism in a different fashion. Bondanella writes that Fellini actually perceived neorealism to be that of a “moral position rather than a true cinematic movement” (138). His internal over external interpretation of neorealism is actually an evolution of the neorealist movement, as evidenced in his 1957 film *Nights of Cabiria*.

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Early neorealist films, such as 1945’s *Open City*, directed by Roberto Rossellini, would metaphorically flood the screen with dread and tension, as if trying to suffocate the audience with an overbearing sense of their actual real life surroundings. Fellini actually worked on many of these films early in his career. This allowed him a firsthand account of how to make an inward spin on the neorealist concept. For example, the endings of *Open City* and *Nights of Cabiria* are, on the surface, quite similar; however, a closer look reveals that the two spin off into radically different tones. The former resolves with the death of one of its central characters, Don Pietro Pellegrini, a Catholic priest, as seen by a group of young children behind a chain-link fence. These children then walk back to the city with sullen looks on their face. And, at first, *Nights of Cabiria* appears to be heading to a similar ending, with Cabiria left poor and alone, walking amongst strangers into the night. However, there’s a shift in the film’s closing moments in which Cabiria’s sad face transitions into one of joy, and once more she has yet to have her spirits completely destroyed. As Bondanella writes, it’s “a completely gratuitous, spontaneous, and unexpected experience” for us and Cabiria (153). Fellini even goes so far as to have Cabiria look directly into the camera — breaking the fourth wall — as if she is directly telling the audience that things might be rough for her now, but eventually everything will be okay.

Specifically, the breaking of the fourth wall speaks to larger evolutions of the original neorealism concept on an aesthetic level. That level, in its original form, was all too often cold and unwelcoming. That is not without its merits, as the neorealist directors were trying to capture a sense of the reality they faced in their daily lives, but it also actively goes against their first intentions with the movement. This is where Fellini’s reinterpretation shows its evolution. For example, there’s a shot of Cabiria late in the film in which she is standing outside, under an

umbrella. She is just to the left of being center frame, and all around her is encompassing darkness. Above Cabiria shines a light, letting her stand out against her surroundings. On a metaphorical level, this reveals — or perhaps reinforces — the internal light that will always shine brightly from Cabiria. That said, it is important to note that this would not be framed in such a way had someone akin to Rossellini been behind the camera. This is because Fellini allows for a more truthful representation of reality, which is that amidst the darkness and ruins of life there is always a light in the night. It lends the film a nearly fantastical element, especially when held up against the fellow neorealist films of the time and those that came prior.

In fact, that fantastical, heightened sense of reality runs rampant throughout the entire film, from the story to the setting to Cabiria herself. Bondanella writes that in Fellini's "Trilogy of Grace or Salvation," he "created characters that face loneliness and alienation alone, each experiencing an existential crisis" (153). It would be easy for Fellini to take Cabiria, or any of his other characters, down a road more like that of the *film noir* that rose out of German expressionism, but that is not the game Fellini is playing. In fact, the reversed nihilism that could be felt in early neorealism was, to a degree, rendered moot. While keeping an honest portrayal of life, Fellini uses Cabiria to bolster the spirits of the Italian people. Her optimism and capability to always dream ahead are a nearly polar opposite of that which is found in *Open City*. As Bondanella writes, Cabiria is a character that "affirms life and continues down the symbolic path of self-discovery that all humanity must travel" (154). Whereas the characters in *Open City* only serve a cynical purpose of exposing sociological issues that Italy face post-World War II, and while the characters in that film stay true to their desires, they also meet cruel ends to which the film frames as an expected reality.

While the films of Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica serve a purpose in film's history, and life itself, the fact remains that they pale in comparison to the internal shift Fellini brought about in neorealism. By moving sociological issues to a background state and letting characters flow from the page, Fellini is able to dig deeper and reach universal truths that go beyond simply showing the possible evil nature of man. Through his changes in tone and aesthetic choice, Fellini crafts a world more recognizable than the rubble outside on the street. It is hard to imagine a world in which Fellini did not come about and radically shift how neorealism is portrayed, for his changes better reflect the nature of storytelling itself.