

Columbia University  
Film Program, School of the Arts  
B.A. Thesis in Film and Media Studies

**How did Italian *documentario narrativo* influence Michelangelo Antonioni's early films?**

By Valerie Pires

Thesis Advisor: Professor Annette Insdorf

Senior Seminar in Film Studies

New York, NY

February 5, 2024

## Acknowledgments

Developing, researching, and writing this thesis has been incredibly rewarding and enlightening, which would not have been possible without the support of the extraordinary professors I have had the pleasure to learn from throughout my undergraduate years. I would like to express my warmest thanks to my thesis advisor, Professor Annette Insdorf, whose guidance and support carried me through all the stages of writing this thesis.

Additionally, I would like to specifically thank Professor Breixo Viejo, a greatly admired mentor, for his steadfast support throughout my entire undergraduate experience and with this thesis. I am also deeply indebted to Professor Robert King and Professor Ron Gregg for their invaluable and unwavering backing throughout my time in the undergraduate Film and Media Studies program at Columbia. This thesis would not have been possible without their encouragement and collaboration.

Furthermore, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Elizabeth Leake for generously helping me clarify a concept and draw a defining road map for this thesis. The research led me to Venice, where I had the privilege of exploring the Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts (ASAC) of the Biennale di Venezia. That opportunity would not have materialized without the phenomenal support of Professor Konstantina Zanou and the Columbia Summer in Venice team, to whom I would like to extend my sincerest thanks.

I am also very thankful to those who provided valuable insights and incentives throughout the research and development process: Veronica Martinez, Leandra Pires, Katie Peters, Kaveh Jalinous, and Iris Chen are among them.

This thesis is a testament to my passion for the cinema, specifically Italian cinema, and all your contributions.



If you ask me what were the motives and the reasons that led me to make films in this particular manner,...it was to examine the individual himself, to look inside the individual and see, after all he had been through (the war, the immediate postwar situation...) what remained inside the individual; ... the symptoms of such restlessness and such behavior which began to outline the changes and transitions that later came about in our psychology, our feelings, and perhaps even our morality.

Michelangelo Antonioni (*The Architecture of Vision* 22-23)

## Introduction

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Italians considered the moving image a new technological experiment and, like most Europeans, realized its potential for mass entertainment. While the production of narrative fiction films would quickly prove to be popular, realism played a vital role in the development of Italian cinema. The presence of the *cinema dal vero* (cinema of truth) in Italy goes back to the origin of the moving image in Europe. However, it was during the two decades of Italian Fascism between 1923 and 1943, known as the *ventennio nero* (twenty-year blackness), that the socio-political and artistic relationship with nonfiction and the documentary was consolidated.

Documentary and newsreel footage were instrumental in Mussolini's modernization efforts, showcasing the government's successful initiatives. The footage of the Duce "leading the way in all fields of modernization are a staple of this period" and became "an integral part of a thrust toward a more direct engagement with reality" (Caminati "Notes"). With the creation of the LUCE<sup>1</sup> agency (acronym for L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa/Educational Cinema Union) in 1924—directed by Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce's son—the fascists established popular propaganda that provided Italians with a *unico testo*, "a single, long, and uninterrupted history of excellence, sacrifice, commitment, and success" through newsreels, documentaries, didactic and instructional shorts<sup>2</sup> (Caminati "Notes").

Given the groundbreaking works that later stemmed from Neorealism,<sup>3</sup> one of the most influential movements in film history—and the complicated relationship (at times collaboration)

---

<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1923, the Istituto LUCE (LUCE Institute) in Italy was a state-controlled organization producing educational and documentary films and newsreels. It quickly became a tool for Fascist propaganda, promoting regime ideologies while also contributing to educational and cultural content, significantly influencing Italian cinema and public opinion during that era.

<sup>2</sup> Many LUCE productions are available on their website: <http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/jsp/schede/>.

<sup>3</sup> It is assumed the reader is familiar with the seminal film movement known as Italian Neorealism.

between Italian filmmakers and the Fascist regime in pre and post-Second World War Italy—film scholarship sometimes overlooks the “lively Italian cinematic culture in the 1930s and 1940s [that] generated an interesting though small body of documentary films and a very dynamic cultural debate on the issue of realism in the arts and in cinema in particular” (Caminati “Role” 53). One member of that generation of filmmakers who broadened, enriched, and complicated the discussion about reality in cinema was a young Italian from Ferrara: Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007). Even though he would gain critical acclaim and international recognition for his fictional narrative films that explored existential questions, modern malaise, and the alienation of individuals within society—among them, *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), *L'Eclisse* (1962), *Blow Up* (1966), and *Professione: reporter* (1975)—Antonioni’s roots as a filmmaker are in the documentary.

Between 1943 and 1953, Antonioni produced eight short documentaries<sup>4</sup> influenced by personal, cultural, and political factors, including the social climate in pre and post-war Europe, Fascism in Italy, and the devastating consequences of war. As the neorealist movement formed with a focus on the exterior consequences of a war-torn country and on what filmmakers saw, Antonioni’s lens centered on what was within: the existential tribulations of Italian society in post-war Italy. His first films, all documentaries, are explorations of human existence, society, and alienation. Bridging fiction and nonfiction, Antonioni produced a new type of documentary known as *documentario narrativo* (narrative documentary)—a hybrid documentary genre that portrays reality through a cinematically crafted story.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Gente del Po/People of the Po Valley* (1943), *N.U. (Nettezza Urbana)/N.U. (Urban Sanitation)* (1948), *L'amorosa menzogna/Lies of Love* (1949), *Superstizione/Superstition* (1949), *Sette canne un vestito/Seven Reeds, One Suit* (1949), *La funivia del Faloria/The Funicular of Mount Faloria* (1949), *La villa dei mostri/The Villa of Monsters* (1950), and *Tentato Suicidio/Attempted Suicide* (1953).

This thesis will explore how Antonioni made documentaries before and during the evolution of Neorealism, blending fiction and nonfiction in cinematic exposés. More specifically, it proposes to answer how the *documentario narrativo* forged a path for the Italian filmmaker to produce extraordinary studies of a time, place, and people. By closely analyzing two of Antonioni's short documentaries—*Gente del Po/People of the Po Valley* (1943) and *N.U. (Netezza Urbana)/N.U. (Urban Sanitation)* (1948)—and granting the director's early films “the status of autonomous works, minor only in the sense of their (intrinsic) brevity” (Quaresima)—one learns what influenced the young Antonioni. Ultimately, this paper examines how the master of subjective narrative crafted his groundbreaking cinematic vision and artistic illusion that would later influence many generations of filmmakers worldwide.

### **“Facistizing” a Nation**

Benito Mussolini's rise to power in Italy began after World War I amid widespread social unrest, economic instability, and disillusionment with the peace settlements. “The rise to power of Fascism in Italy was ... symptomatic of changing cultural conditions characteristic of the interwar era and of growing pains attendant on modernity” (Landy 9). Capitalizing on nationalist sentiment, Mussolini founded the Fascist Party in 1919, promising to restore Italy's glory and resolve the chaos through strong leadership. In 1922, as Italy teetered on the brink of civil war, Mussolini threatened a “March on Rome.” Fearing conflict, King Victor Emmanuel III invited Mussolini to form a government, effectively making him the Prime Minister and consolidating his rise to dictatorial power.

Mussolini understood the power of the media and its mass potential through slogans, manifestos, and the dissemination of images of collective aspirations. Through media, he could promote the cult of personality, censor and control social messages, and manipulate information.

As Fascist power was consolidated, “the regime created state [media] organizations after the March on Rome as a means of ‘Fascistizing’ society” (Landy 10). Thus, film became a central promotional avenue for the Fascist regime in both suburban and rural areas, and Mussolini pursued it on all fronts: “The inauguration of the Venice Film Festival in 1932 was an incentive, as was the inception of training and educational facilities at the newly founded Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1) and the building of the new studios at Cinecittà<sup>6</sup>” (Fig. 2) (Landy 9).



Fig. 1: Front of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia.



Fig. 2: Cinecittà main entrance.

Mussolini expanded his control of the narrative through print when the regime promoted another Fascist cinema initiative. In 1936, the National Fascist Federation of Italian Industrialists launched the fortnightly film criticism magazine *Cinema* (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4), with Vittorio Mussolini serving as its director.

Not missing the opportunity to gain more power and “committed to the notion of cinema as a weapon in the service of Fascism,” Mussolini founded Istituto LUCE in 1923, early in his Fascist reign (Landy 49). The dictator planned to form a cooperative responsible for producing documentaries and newsreels to be shown in commercial movie theatres along with feature films.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Experimental Center of Cinema) was an influential film school and research institute in Italy that was established to promote and improve Italian cinema. It had a prominent role in the development of Italian filmmaking during the Fascist years and represented both the artistic ambitions of the era and the complex interplay between cinema and political power.

<sup>6</sup> Inaugurated in 1937 in Rome by Mussolini’s regime, Cinecittà was envisioned as Italy’s answer to Hollywood. It became a major film production studio, equipped with state-of-the-art facilities. While fostering Italian cinema’s growth, it also produced films aligning with Fascist ideologies, intertwining politics with the burgeoning film industry.

In contrast to commercial filmmaking, “where the conflict between state control and private initiative was evident, LUCE was tightly tied to the government and the [Fascist] party” (49). With the enhancement in technical quality of the films and a broader range of narrative types available, Italian cinema was embarking on a path of renewal through a Fascist lens.

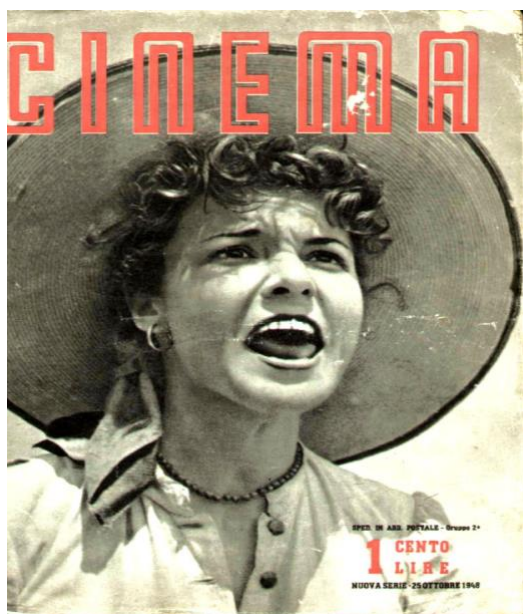


Fig. 3: Cover of *Cinema* magazine.



Fig. 4: Cover of first edition of *Cinema*, July 1936.

In 1932, Mussolini invited ideologically friendly filmmakers to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his ascension to power. Giovacchino Forzano, a playwright and Fascist ally, wrote the screenplay of *Camicia nera* (*Black Shirt*, 1933) (Fig. 5 & 6). The film is structured as a propagandistic documentary rather than a traditional narrative film. Produced by LUCE, it consisted primarily of compiled newsreel footage, blending elements of a fiction screenplay with nonfiction footage, and ends with a “documentary-like sequence on agricultural improvement” (Sorlin 62). *Camicia nera* is carefully edited to glorify the Fascist regime and commemorate its achievements, exemplifying the use of cinema as a tool for political and ideological persuasion in Mussolini’s Italy. This helped promote the upcoming neorealist school of cinema and a subgenre of the documentary in Italy: the *documentario narrativo*.





Fig. 5. Front page headline of *L'Italia Nostra* announcing the much-anticipated premiere of *Camicia Nera* (1933).



Fig. 6. Commercial poster of *Camicia nera*.

### ***Documentario Narrativo: Precursor to Neorealism***

As Italy entered the Second World War, the regime realized the need to amplify the Fascist message through war films. Besides disseminating propaganda and promoting national unity, the Fascists understood that wartime narrative fiction films would boost Italian civil and military morale. Evolving from the experience of using real-life footage in documentaries exhibited in commercial cinemas, Benito and Vittorio Mussolini insisted on incorporating into commercial fiction films the actual footage of the men on the front defending the nation. The most prominent example of Fascist wartime films is *Uomini sul fondo* (*SOS Submarine*, 1941)<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 7 & 8).

Produced by Scalera Film,<sup>8</sup> written by Francesco De Robertis, and directed by De Robertis and Roberto Rossellini, *Uomini sul fondo* recreates a real-life event of an Italian submarine that

<sup>7</sup> While some film scholars consider *Uomini sul fondo* the most critically successful *documentario narrativo* (Caminati “Role” 62), and others position the film as a narrative fiction feature film precursor to Neorealism (Liehm 44), this thesis positions the film in a dual role: a prominent example of *documentario narrativo*, but predominantly a narrative fiction feature film with reenactments of actual events and neorealist film principles.

<sup>8</sup> Scalera Film, active from 1938 to 1950, was a key player in the Italian film production, supported by Mussolini. Founded by the Scalera brothers, Michele and Salvatore, the company was initially headquartered in Rome. However, in 1943, amidst the German occupation, it relocated to Venice, becoming part of Cinevillaggio, a film complex supported by the Fascist regime in the *Repubblica di Salò* (Italian Social Republic). Post-World War II, Scalera faced challenges in reclaiming its assets in Rome and was scrutinized for its affiliations with the former fascist regime.

collided with a ship. The film depicts sailors trapped in a damaged submarine, focusing on their struggle for survival, camaraderie, and resilience, set against the backdrop of World War II. Shot on a submarine in authentic settings with nonprofessional actors, *Uomini sul fondo* is “traditionally mentioned as one of the forerunners of Neorealism” (Liehm 44). This was less an aesthetic choice than the necessity of the subject, which was the opposite of the neorealist method De Robertis’s war film “represented an interesting experiment with seminarrative structure and a low-key, antirhetorical style. ... Hailed by some critics as genuine experimental works and examples for other filmmakers to follow. ... Filmmakers (first of all Rossellini himself)<sup>9</sup> found in them the first signs of neorealism” (44).



Fig. 7. Screenshot of *Uomini sul fondo*



Fig. 8. Commercial poster *Uomini sul fondo*

### **The Evolution of the *Documentario Narrativo***

While Italians were widely exposed to LUCE's domestically produced and Fascist-backed films that blended fiction narrative and nonfiction footage, the drive to explore new filmmaking forms receptive to innovative stylistic and thematic elements—particularly those linking cinematic

---

<sup>9</sup> Rossellini would go on to direct the sequels to *Uomini sul fondo*, eventually forming his “Fascist Trilogy” (*La nave bianca/The White Ship*, 1941; *Un pilota ritorna/A Pilot Returns*, 1942; and *Uomo dalla croce/Man of the Cross*, 1943).

expression to socio-political and ethical issues—predominantly originated from international influences. New visions of the documentary arrived in Italy through the works of foreign filmmakers—such as John Grierson (*The Drifters*, 1939), Robert Flaherty (*Man of Aran*, 1934), Dziga Vertov (*Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas*, 1930), F.W. Murnau (*Tabu*, 1931) and Joris Ivens (*The Spanish Earth*, 1937)—which helped “set off a new wave of Italian filmmakers working on the same lines, creating the *documentario narrativo*, a hybrid fiction” (Caminati “Role” 58). Thus, as World War II unfolded in Europe, a new cadre of Italian directors learned that for prominent foreign filmmakers—whose works they had screened in Italy and abroad—reality, the primary element of the documentary, turns into an aesthetic and political choice.

In post-war Italy, the nonfiction genre was synonymous with films that had a social purpose. Documentaries were meant to have a “social mission” and were “separated ... from fiction and show business” (Caminati “Role” 52). In that regard, Alberto Cavalcanti,<sup>10</sup> had a significant role in modernizing the documentary in Italy and influencing Italian filmmakers towards developing innovative documentary styles. Through foreign and domestic cinematic influences and artistic references, by the 1930s, Italian *documentario narrativo* was “conceived as a possible avenue of expression and explored by some directors” (60).

Throughout the decade, a series of *documentari narrativi* (narrative documentaries) were produced mixing documentary with a narrative structure, among them, *Palio* (Alessandro Blasetti, 1932) (Fig. 9), *Il pianto delle zitelle/The Crying of the Spinsers* (Giacomo Pozzi-Bellini, 1939) (Fig. 10), *Il canale degli angeli/The Canal of the Angels* (Francesco Pasinetti, 1934) (Fig. 11), *Il*

---

<sup>10</sup> Alberto Cavalcanti, the cosmopolitan filmmaker and producer, became a pivotal figure in the development of documentary cinema in Italy and beyond. Renowned for his work with the GPO Film Unit in the 1930s, Cavalcanti's innovative approach to sound and his explorations of social themes significantly influenced the British and international documentary movement. In 1930, Cavalcanti made *Rien que les heurs (Nothing but the Hours)*, his first feature film and an experimental documentary. He later moved to Rome, where he taught at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Caminati “Role”).

*ventre de la città/The Belly of the City* (Francesco Di Cuoco, 1933), and *Cantieri dell'Adriatico/The Shipyards of the Adriatic* (Umberto Barbaro, 1933), all of which earned public praise and critical acclaim.



Fig. 9. Screenshot of *Palio*



Fig. 10. Screenshot of *Il pianto delle zitelle*



Fig. 11. Screenshot *Il canale degli angeli*

Antonioni followed the evolution of the documentary form in Italy, eventually delving into the *documentario narrativo* as a form of cinematic expression. In post-war Italy, the filmmaker developed social exposés portraying the inner realities and external circumstances of ordinary Italians living in an impoverished, war-ravaged country while also depicting the transitioning urban and rural cultures of the time. Through his films, he conveyed subjective emotional experiences and introduced a unique visual aesthetic.

### **Antonioni: A Modernist in the Making**

*La cosa importante per un film non è che sia capito ma che provochi un'emozione, un'esperienza in chi lo guarda.*

(The important thing about a film is not that it is understood but that it provokes an emotion, an experience in those who watch it).

- Michelangelo Antonioni (*Tassone Parla* 28)

Antonioni's entry into the world of cinema was marked by gradual exploration in and out of Italy. Born in 1912 in Ferrara, Italy, he initially embarked on a path unrelated to film. Early on, he developed an interest in puppetry—designing figures and building model settings—and

architecture. During his teenage years, he began painting but eventually studied economics at the University of Bologna. However, during his university years, he became actively involved in student theater and cultivated a deep interest in cinema. After graduating, he returned to Ferrara, briefly working as a bank teller before founding a drama company with friends. They staged plays by Pirandello and Ibsen and a piece written and directed by Antonioni titled *The Wind*. Parallel to the theatrical endeavors, he ventured into film criticism, writing for the local newspaper *Il Corriere Padano*. His initial foray into filmmaking was an incomplete 16mm documentary shot in a psychiatric hospital (Antonioni, *Fare*).

Between 1939 and 1940, when the Fascists controlled access to Italian film and media production, Antonioni briefly collaborated with the regime. He headed to Rome to assist Mussolini's Esposizione Universale Roma/E.U.R. (World Fair), which was to be held in 1942 but never occurred. However, he left his position after a few months and became a writer and editor for *Cinema*, the official film magazine of the Fascist Party. He also traveled as a journalist to the Italian colonies in Africa (Antonioni, *Fare*).

Unsatisfied with his artistic trajectory, Antonioni eventually moved to Rome—where Cinecittà and the Centro Sperimentale were based—bringing him closer to the Italian film community and cinema industry. In Rome, he continued writing film criticism, contributing to various publications—including *Il Corriere Padano*, *Cinema*, and the national newspaper *Corriere della Sera*—analyzing films, with a particular interest in cinematography. Seeking to deepen his knowledge in filmmaking, Antonioni enrolled in the Centro Sperimentale, where he would formally study film. However, his time at the Centro would be brief. Being a state-run institution, the film school operated under ideological and political constraints. Antonioni, an

artist with a non-conformist approach to cinema, found the Fascist restrictions stifling and left after three months.

In 1942, already a prolific screenwriter, Antonioni traveled to France to work with Marcel Carné as his assistant director on *Les Visiteurs du Soir* (*The Devil's Envoys*, 1942), a film shot in Nazi-occupied Paris. Carné's poetic realism would greatly influence the 29-year-old Antonioni, who returned to Rome as soon as filming was completed. There he co-wrote the screenplay for *Un pilota ritorna*/*A Pilot Returns* (1942) with Rossellini and worked in Venice on Enrico Fulchion's *I due Foscari*/*The Two Foscari* (1942) (Fig. 12 & 13).



Fig. 12. Poster of *I due Foscari*



Fig. 13. On the set of *I due Foscari*.

In the late summer of 1943, Nazi soldiers occupied Rome. By then, Antonioni was deeply troubled by the reality surrounding him and the one he would portray in his films. Aldo Tassone, Italian film historian and journalist, explained that “*Già si sente nel regista l’interesse per il racconto realista in cui l’uomo sia el centro dell’indagine* (One already sensed the director’s interest in realist stories in which man is the center of the investigation)” (Tassone *Parla* 14). Years later, Antonioni would explain how experiencing war in Europe and the post-war devastation in Italy forced Italian filmmakers to face reality—and his need to turn to the documentary:

*[N]elle discussion che si fecero, qui in Italia, nell'immediato dopoguerra in tema di neorealismo... sembrava che il cinema italiano non sapesse svincolarsi da questo criterio: la realtà, il vero, sempre più il buco di una serratura per cogliere gli aspetti più segreti della realtà. ... La verità è che c'era intorno a noi, una realtà effettivamente scottante, eccezionale. Come ignorarla?*

During discussions on Neorealism that took place in Italy in the immediate post-war period... it seemed that Italian cinema was unable to free itself from this criterion: reality, the truth, a keyhole to capture the most secret aspects of reality. ... The truth is that around us there was a truly burning, exceptional reality. How to ignore it? (Antonioni, *Fare*, 14)

A sharp observer of the encompassing violent environment in Italy, Antonioni struggled with the fact that German Nazi soldiers had invaded his country and Italian Fascists were still in power. As a filmmaker, he chose not to ignore what was happening in his country. The horrors he witnessed made Antonioni turn to a familiar place he considered safe and sacred: the Po Valley region, where he was born and raised. In "Concerning a Film about the River Po," an article he wrote in *Cinema*, Antonioni commented on his aims: "I would like a film with the Po [river] as a central character, ...a film which is the sum total of its moral and psychological elements, rather than a heap of its folkloric, exterior, decorative elements" (Antonioni, "Concerning" 82).

At first, he was uncertain whether to turn his written reflections into a narrative fiction film or a documentary: "All of this can seem to be literature; it is not. It is, or wants to be, cinema. Now, it remains for us to see how it can be translated into action. First of all there is the basic question: should it be a documentary or a story film? ... [W]e must be careful not to welcome a fiction film too quickly" (Antonioni, "Concerning" 81).

Finally, in 1943, inspired by Pare Lorenz's *The River* (1937), Antonioni picked up a 16mm film camera, pointed it at a land and a people he knew well—at the time disfigured by war and transformed by misery—and made his debut as a film director. Antonioni embraced the *documentario narrativo* as he

*opera una rottura sia con il documentario di ispirazione fascista che con il cinema di finzione, proponendo una terza strada (attraverso la riscoperta del paesaggio italiano e la valorizzazione dell'elemento ambientale su quell umano) che sarà poi quella intrapresa a distanza di qualche anno dal neorealismo*

breaks off from Fascist-inspired documentary and fiction cinema, proposing a third path (through the rediscovery of the Italian landscape and the valorization of the environmental element over the human one) which will be embraced a few years later by Neorealism (Perniola 90).

Film historians Dave Bordwell and Kristen Thompson explained the stylistic features that characterize postwar modernism; among them, filmmakers “sought to be truer to life” than classical filmmakers had been, “seek to reveal the unpleasant realities of class antagonism or bring home the horrors of Fascism, war, and occupation,” and focus on “emphasizing current social problems.” They add that European modernist art films of the postwar era presented “*authorial commentary*—the sense that an intelligence outside the film’s world is pointing out something about the events we see,” thus providing a “more intimate psychological portrayal, focusing on how social circumstances affected the personal relations among individuals” (Thompson 320-329). By incorporating these elements into his cinematic vision, Antonioni became the most relevant modernist filmmaker of the postwar era in Italy.



### Return to Po Valley

*Il cinema è inutile se non produce la verità e la poesia.*

(Cinema is useless if it does not produce truth and poetry.)

Michelangelo Antonioni (*Fare un film è per me vivere*, 16)

Italian film director Fabio Capri explained that *Gente del Po/People of the Po Valley* (1947) presented an atmosphere that “serve[d] to suggest the presence of man, or rather of a certain human condition. He [Antonioni] does not seek the picturesque but the truth of man and things. A few scant images in a landscape of water and muddy lands, a few faces that promptly go to the origin of a reality trying to be revealed for the first time” (Tassone *Parla* 14). Prior to 1943—before Neorealism became a film movement and Rossellini made *Roma città aperta/Rome, Open City* (1945)—Italian cinema had not portrayed the extreme misery Italians were experiencing during the war, nor had they shown the lower classes onscreen. At the time, documentaries were designed to praise Italian Fascism, culture, and products. Antonioni instead went to the mouth of the Po River and made “these images [that] were very harsh, representing the very difficult life of the fishermen, who lived at the mouth of the river in straw huts that would flood after every sea storm. ... Our cinema had carefully avoided representing those situations, as the fascist government prohibited them” (*Michelangelo* 194). Antonioni would state, “I do not want to sound presumptuous, but I was the first person ever to portray them,” and claimed, “none will admit it, but the fact is that I invented my own brand of neorealism” (*Michelangelo* 194).

Before filming began, he returned to the region and made a photographic essay that outlined the aesthetics of his future short film. The production of *Gente del Po* began in 1943 near Ferrara, Antonioni's hometown. However, due to the escalating events of the war, logistical problems severely hampered the production, the editing had to be suspended, and the film shelved.

When Antonioni returned to editing the film after the war, much of the original footage had been irreversibly damaged or destroyed due to improper handling.<sup>11</sup>

*Gente del Po* follows the people who live along and on the Po River, working as farmers or fishermen, many of whom—men, women, and children—have made floating barges their homes. Antonioni had observed the river and its people since childhood and was always fascinated by how the water, nature, and people interacted. The lens that captures the rituals is one of familiarity; people's movements, the relationship between nature and man, the integration with the environments on the water and dry land, and the pacing are portrayed through the perspective of one who knows it intimately. That sense of closeness, authenticity, and perception of beauty makes this short film a remarkable cinematic debut.

The film breaks away from documentary conventions of the 1940s. Antonioni presents a location and its inhabitants, transforming them into integral characters of his story. While masterfully incorporating his observations into small narratives threaded together, between social analysis and lyrical expression, he effectively created a *documentario narrativo* that eschews traditional documentary techniques for a more evocative, reflexive, and subjective experience.

*Gente del Po* also diverges from the era's traditional documentary productions through its sound editing. In the opening sequence, following the credits, there is a notable silence apart from natural ambient sound (00:00:41-00:01:42). The first added sound is non-synchronous and non-diegetic; it is the click-clacking rumble of an engine, used as ambient sound. After about a minute, a boat whistle is heard. Interestingly, while the sound of machinery permeates the scene, the visuals depict men silently loading and unloading sacks of produce on a small dock, then leading to a shot of the river where a small boat comes into view. The juxtaposition of the non-diegetic machinery

---

<sup>11</sup> Antonioni believed that Fascists who had remained loyal to Mussolini after the 1943 Armistice had taken the footage to the north of Italy where it was intentionally destroyed or left to ruin (*Michelangelo* 194).

with the quiet industry of a few men engaged in physical labor creates a distinct auditory atmosphere. Antonioni's innovative sound editing technique thus adds a layer of complexity to the film, contrasting the audible with the visible and enhancing the viewer's sensory experience.

A cut shifts the camera's perspective to the boat at 00:01:10 (Fig 14), offering a distant view of the riverbank. The continuous sound of the running engine persists throughout a series of shots of boats on the river. Subsequently, at 00:01:20, an aerial shot showcases several boats drifting down the river (Fig. 15). It is in this moment, as the viewer observes the boats swiftly navigating the river below, that Antonioni subtly introduces an instrumental score. The music emerges softly, building gradually in a crescendo, adding a new layer to the film's auditory landscape.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 14. Screenshot *Gente del Po*; riverbank.



Fig. 15. Screenshot *Gente del Po*; musical score begins.

Twenty more seconds elapse before any narration is introduced, marking yet another departure from the norm. In an unconventional choice, a woman's voice enters, beginning the narration *in medias res*, as though continuing from an unseen, unheard text. This narration overlays

---

<sup>12</sup> The instrumental score was composed by the Italian classically trained musician Mario Labroca. Between 1933 and 1947, Labroca composed four film scores, one being the *documentario narrativo*, *Il ventre della città* (Francesco Di Cocco, 1933). Labroca went on to become the artistic director of La Fenice Opera House in Venice and Teatro alla Scala in Milan.

the ongoing music and the rhythmic click-clacking of engines, creating a layered auditory experience that intertwines the spoken word with the film's ambient soundscape. Throughout the film, the narration offers basic descriptions of the lives of those living on barges. However, it is through the imagery that Antonioni best conveys the narrative, capturing both the landscape's beauty and severity as well as the labor undertaken within it. These images powerfully express the essence of the story, bringing to life the vivid realities of this environment and its inhabitants.

Antonioni employs abstraction as a key element. The film opens with an abstract composition over which the credits are displayed, resembling a painting or photograph more than a traditional film scene (00:00:41) (Fig. 16). As the credits end, a swift zoom out and pan to the left introduces working men into the frame. The men are seen moving sacks from a storage onto a carriage. The camera captures primarily textures and movements, leaving little else for clear identification. The subsequent shot, however, provides context for the unfolding narrative. It establishes the setting as a vital component, positioning the river as a central character within the documentary. This technique effectively anchors the story in its environment.

Antonioni's abstraction is composed of a confluence of cinematic techniques seamlessly woven to create a tapestry of visual poetry. The composition and framing often focus on patterns and forms, transforming ordinary scenes into abstract canvases. The camera captures the vast, flowing landscapes of the Po River and its surroundings with a painterly eye, often reducing human figures to mere elements within a larger,



Fig. 16. Opening abstract shot of *Gente del Po*



Fig. 17. Use of abstract negative space in *Gente del Po*

almost impressionistic tableau (Fig. 17). This approach not only captures the beauty and harshness of the landscape but also reflects the lives of those who inhabit it. As Antonioni's style evolves, the destabilization of character and narrative through formal abstraction becomes increasingly pronounced.

Long and wide shots, negative space use, dolly and tracking shots, and frequent focus pull shifts contribute significantly to the abstraction. Compositions of the river's rhythmic flow, the tree's sway, and the fishermen's labor add a lyrical quality to the visuals. Moreover, Antonioni's use of natural lighting and contrast often increases the sense of abstraction. High-contrast scenes highlight shapes and contours over detailed realism, lending a stylized, almost ethereal quality to everyday scenes.

Additionally, Antonioni frequently places his characters within overwhelming landscapes, using the environment to echo their feelings of alienation and solitude. In one sequence, he positions a woman as a diminutive figure against an expansive, barren sky, accompanied by a slender tree reaching upwards. This perspective—a low-angle shot aimed toward the woman set against the vast, cloudy sky—foreshadows the iconic compositions in Antonioni's later works such as *La Notte* (1961) and *Red Dessert* (*Deserto Rosso*, 1964). These frames capture the immensity

of the environment, placing human activity within the context of the natural world and creating a sense of scale that is both humbling and awe-inspiring (Fig. 21 & 22). Here he constructs a narrative of a woman who walks to the bank of the river to salute a passing navigator.



Fig. 21 & 22: Screenshots of *Gente del Po*: A woman walks to the banks of the river to salute a passerby.

Even in his earliest documentary, Antonioni's ambiguous and open-ended cinematic flair is unmistakable as he skillfully threads narrative vignettes into the fabric of real-life settings, showcasing his drive to delve into his characters' inner lives. In another sequence, a woman's journey begins with a boat ride and takes her to a local store, but we do not know where she is coming from nor what led her to this destination (Fig. 18, 19 & 20).



Fig. 18, 19, & 20. Screenshots of *Gente del Po*: Sequence of constructed narrative; a woman takes the boat to get to the local store.

Another sequence captures a moment of melancholic romance by the riverbank, focusing on a man approaching a woman, initially filmed from behind as she gazes over the water. She turns just as the young man arrives and sits beside her, gazing sadly at her lover. These moments of

narrative intrigue defy the conventional documentary format, revealing Antonioni's early inclination towards character study while preserving the mystery and ambiguity of the narrative (Fig. 23 & 24).



Fig. 23 & 24. Screenshots *Gente del Po*: Lovers meet by the River Po.

There are more fragmented stories in *Gente del Po*: the family that lives on a boat; the young girl who is ill and whose mother patiently feeds her in bed and gives her medication; the locals who patiently wait to cross the river; the village that prepares for the arrival of a storm (Fig. 25 26, 27 & 28). All of these constructed narratives through image and sound editing exemplify how Antonioni embraced *documentario narrativo*. Simultaneously, Neorealism was making its way into the public realm.





Fig. 25, 26, 27 & 28. Screenshots *Gente del Po*

### **Merging Neorealist Aesthetics and Principles of Abstraction**

From the moment he filmed *Gente del Po*, Antonioni began making films about people “in a way that was much more intense, much more sympathetic, much more involved” (*Michelangelo* 23). In *N.U. (Nettezza Urbana)/N.U. (Urban Sanitation)* (1948), the street cleaners—isolated within the vast urban sprawl—serve as early representations of the alienated individuals that populate Antonioni’s later films. In addition to examining the individual, he had a second consideration, “an everincreasing boredom with the current standardized methods of filmmaking and the conventional ways of telling a story” (23). Tracking a day in the life of street sweepers, this film emerges as a short masterpiece, marking a stylistic evolution towards what would later be recognized as Neorealism. It offers viewers a unique lens on Rome, experienced through the daily routines of sanitation workers, focusing on the rhythms of their work as well as the city’s majestic landmarks (Fig. 29 & 30).



Fig. 29. Screenshot of *N.U.*Fig. 30. Screenshot of *N.U.*

When Antonioni started filming, he had already finished editing what had been recovered of the *Gente del Po* original footage, having gained years of practice in film editing. That experience would lead him to experiment further in the cutting room when editing *N.U.*: “I set out to do a montage that would be absolutely free, poetically free. And I began searching for expressive ways ... through a juxtaposition of separate isolated shots ... which were the very substance of the documentary itself” (*Michelangelo* 24).

Featuring minimal narration, with only a brief introduction in the beginning that outlines the street sweepers’ role—arguably unnecessary—Antonioni crafts sequences of *documentario narrativo* showcasing the men at work throughout the city. Partly due to the impossibility of achieving quality sound recording with a low budget, Antonioni chose to practically exclude all diegetic and synchronous sound from the film, adding primarily nondiegetic sound in post-production.<sup>13</sup>

The cinematically constructed narrative evokes a sense of wonder, transforming mundane activities into a canvas for potential private real-life dramas. In one such sequence, a couple—

---

<sup>13</sup> Post-production sound design in *N.U.* includes nondiegetic and nonsynchronous urban ambient sound, a classical-style piano by Giovanni Fusco, and an unlikely jazz compilation, creating several juxtapositions through sound and image.

epitomizing the bourgeois archetype that Antonioni would later dissect with sharp insight—engage in an argument while walking down the street. The woman departs, leaving the man to angrily rip up a piece of paper and scatter it on the ground. As he hurries off toward the woman to reconcile, a street sweeper methodically cleans up the litter, embodying the stoicism of the unseen labor that keeps the city clean. The narrative briefly lingers on them before shifting focus to a homeless man approaching the street sweeper, moving the private drama and unresolved conflict of the couple into the background, onto an unseen stage (00:03:30-00:03:59) (Fig. 31, 32 & 33).



Fig. 31, 32, 33 & 34. Screenshots *N.U. documentario narrativo*: Cinematic construction of story.

Antonioni's filmmaking is often defined by a contradictory tension: it simultaneously rejects predictable character development and meticulously explores character study of through stillness and introspection. His camera looks but does not always show; his stories progress but never fully develop, much less resolve. As in *Gente del Po*, there are several parallel narratives illustrated through Antonioni's use of sequence shots, shifting the focus from the direct events to their repercussions, and from immediate causes to the deeper, underlying effects they elicit.

In another sequence, the camera pans from a high angle to a small wooden shed in a public square. As the pan concludes, the camera frames the shed door's opening, a homeless man emerges from within, indicating where the street cleaner sought refuge, living an invisible existence of social exile and estrangement (00:02:01-00:02:24). Again, Antonioni provides no introduction or resolution to this fragment of narrative.

*N.U.* displays the extraordinary technical execution of Antonioni's sophisticated cinema, revealing moments of visionary filmmaking, particularly in his use of composition. The high-contrast cinematography often leaves subjects in silhouette (Fig. 35), seen through reflections (Fig. 36), anonymously from the back (Fig. 37), or framed within frames (Fig. 38). Through these images, Antonioni presents indications and insinuations, inviting the viewer to form an interpretation.



Fig. 35. Screenshot *N.U.*



Fig. 36. Screenshot *N.U.*



Fig. 37. Screenshot *N.U.*



Fig. 38. Screenshot *N.U.*

Furthermore, his compositions often place isolated individuals against the vast, impersonal backdrop of the city or focus on patterns and textures that evoke a sense of melancholy and

dislocation. They deemphasize individual identity, instead highlighting the individual's place in a larger urban complex (Fig. 38).



Fig. 38. Screenshot *N.U.*

Cueing visual metaphors that deepen the film's narrative, Antonioni juxtaposed individuals with their surroundings as a commentary on their social status, the nature of work, and the decaying beauty of the urban landscape. Moreover, he used narrative, temporal, and visual abstraction in *N.U.* to elevate his *documentario narrativo* beyond a simple depiction of street cleaners in Rome, instead offering a contemplative neorealist meditation on the human condition within the modern urban environment.

### Conclusion

Soon after completing *N.U.*, Antonioni would direct his third *documentario narrativo*—*L'amorosa menzogna/Lies of Love* (1949)—groundbreaking in its exploration of the cultural

phenomenon of *fumetti e fotoromanzi* (photo comic/novels), and offering a nuanced critique of post-war Italian society's engagement with media. It was precisely through his cinematic exploration of the Italian bourgeoisie in *L'amorosa menzogna* that Antonioni's first narrative fiction film—*Cronaca de un amore/Story of a Love Affair* (1950)—emerges. *Cronaca* contrasts neorealist themes and modes of representation, presenting a daring tale about a doomed ménage à trois. The characters from the Milanese bourgeoisie cling to their inner emptiness, refusing to look at the social decay they embody as they search for meaning and connection in a world that feels increasingly superficial. Antonioni bypasses conventional plot structures, centering on the inner emotions of the lovers instead, exploring the existential ennui and moral ambiguity of post-war Italian bourgeois society. Employing a slow roaming camera, he crafts spacious compositions that follow the protagonists in extended takes, often in deep focus, using visual approaches that underscore his emphasis on exploring narrative through composition stylistics. Sequences are often uncut, maintaining the scene's continuity, remaining within the frame while eschewing analytical montage, and crafting the editing within the composition itself.

A close reading of Antonioni's early films elucidates how the filmmaker shifted his cinematic focus from the *documentario narrativo* genre to narrative fiction films, a trajectory filled with national as well as international artistic and humanistic impetus, inspiration, and motivation. Understanding both the theory and praxis of Antonioni's documentary filmmaking in Italy in the 1940s—and the influence of the *documentario narrativo* in his work—is indeed vital to understanding European postwar cinema, the origins of Neorealism, and, more broadly, the evolution of the documentary genre in Italy and beyond.

Any history of Italian cinema must consider the early films of the master of modernist cinema. This innovative and visionary artist explored social realist themes in the documentary

while establishing Neorealist principles—but not all, not always, and not all simultaneously. According to film scholars Luca Caminati and Mauro Sassi, Antonioni’s early films are “key components in a documentary history that takes into account all the potentials of the documentary narrative form” (Caminati “Italian” 283).

This thesis is intended as an introduction to a more comprehensive reevaluation of Antonioni’s early cinema by film scholars and historians. It is worthy of greater integration into the foundational curriculum of Italian cinema studies and the global film canon. The early shorts are not merely forerunners to Neorealism but essential contributions to modernist cinema. Antonioni’s early documentaries should be recognized as fundamental to his body of work, containing core manifestations of his artistic exploration.

### Works Cited

Antonioni, Michelangelo. "Concerning a Film about the River Po." *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-Realism*, edited and translated by David Overbey, Archon Books, 1978, pp. 79–80.

---. *Fare un film è per me vivere: Scritti sul cinema*, edited by Carlo di Carlo and Giorgio Tinazzi, Marsilio Editori, 1992, p. 14.

---. *Michelangelo Antonioni: The Architecture of Vision, Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, edited by Marga Cottino Jones, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Caminati, Luca. "The Role of Documentary Film in the Formation of the Neorealist Cinema." *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style*, edited by Saverio Giovacchini, and Robert Sklar, 2011, *Mississippi Scholarship Online*, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.14325/mississippi/9781617031229.003.0004>

Caminati, Luca and Mauro Sassi. "Italian Documentary and the Predicaments of the Auteur: Nonfiction Films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Roberto Rossellini," *Italian Cinema from the Silent Screen to the Digital Image*, edited by Joseph Luzzi, Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2020, pp. 275-281.. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/reader.action?docID=6036858&ppg=294>

---. "Notes on the History of Italian Nonfiction Film." *A Companion to Italian Cinema*, edited by F. Burke, Wiley & Sons, 2017, p. 361. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119006145.ch21>.

Fig. 1-38. Images/illustrations: Authors and dates unknown. Screenshots: *YouTube*, captured by thesis author. Historic photos: Achivio Fotografico LUCE. <https://www.archivioluce.com/archivio-fotografico-2/>.

- Gente del Po (The People of the Po Valley, 1947)*. Written and directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, cinematography by Piero Portalupi, edited by Carlo Alberto Chiesa, music by Mario Labroca, *The Criterion Channel*, <https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/gente-del-po>.
- L'amorosa menzogna (Lies of Love, 1949)*. Written and directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, cinematography by Renato Del Fuente, music by Giovanni Fusco, with Annie O'Hara, Sergio Raimondi, Sandro Roberti, and Anna Vita, Filmus, 1949. *You Tube*, uploaded by Filmoteca Random, 11 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BAvjKpLzSE>.
- Landy, Marcia. *Italian Film*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Liehm, Mira. *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present*, University of California Press, 1984.
- N.U. (N.U., 1948)*. Written and directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, produced by Vieri Bigazzi, cinematography by Giovanni Ventimiglia, music by Giovanni Fusco, 1948. *The Criterion Channel*, <https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/n-u>.
- Perniola, Ivelise. *Oltre il neorealismo: Documentari d'autore e realtà italiana del dopoguerra*, Bulzoni, 2004.
- Sorlin, Pierre. *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996*. Routledge, 1996.
- Thompson, Kristen and Dave Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*, McGraw-Hill, 2010.
- Quaresima, Leonardo. "‘Making Love On the Shores of the River Po’: Antonioni’s Documentaries." *Antonioni: Centenary Essays*. Edited by Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes London: British Film Institute, 2011. 115–133. *Screen Studies*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781838711788.0012>.
- Tassone, Aldo. *Parla il cinema Italiano*, vol. 1, Il formichiere, Milano, 1979-1980.



- - - . "La storia del cinema la fanna i film". *Parla il cinema italiano. Il Formichiere*, 1979.

*Uomini sul fondo (Men on the Sea Floor, 1941)*. Written, edited, and directed by Francesco De

Robertis, assistant director Roberto Rossellini, produced by Cesare Zanetti,

cinematography by Giuseppe Caracciolo, music by Edgardo Carducci, Scalera Film,

1941. *YouTube*, uploaded by CineCittà Home Video, 30 December 2023,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-q-AQevWUK0>.