

*BRUTAL VISION:*  
*THE NEOREALIST BODY IN POSTWAR ITALIAN CINEMA*

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Karl Schoonover's *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* may seem at first glance to be yet another monograph in the ever growing body of literature dedicated to Italian neorealist cinema. Schoonover's engagement with geopolitics, Andre Bazin's theory of the long-take, and auteur directors such as Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica supports the suspicion that this effort may be a further rehashing of the well worn arguments that have occupied critics concerning postwar Italian Cinema for over fifty years. And yet, *Brutal Vision* over its five meticulously researched chapters proves to be a worthy and needed addition to the renewed discourse concerning art cinema's position and importance in the contemporary moment by reimagining neorealism as a global cinema. Instead of arguing that Italy's neorealist period constitutes a national cinema defined by the aftermath of World War II, Schoonover expertly contends that these films were always designed to engage a global audience. The significance of this claim is two-fold: 1) by repositioning neorealism as a global cinema Schoonover provides the coordinates to replenish the vitality of one of film studies most treasured cinemas; and, 2) in making such a claim Schoonover crafts his argument so as to engage some of the most interesting and present conversations in the study of cinema today.

For Schoonover, neorealism's global nature is defined through a reading practice predicated on a humanistic engagement with the suffering body on screen. In addition to making the distribution of non-Hollywood films viable to a global audience post-War, Schoonover argues, "neorealism's interest in detailing the brutalized human body also underwrites the emergence of a new visual politics of liberal compassion that I call *brutal humanism*" (xiv). "Brutal humanism" serves to name the reading practice Schoonover advocates neorealist cinema offers a global audience: "Italian films use scenarios of physical suffering to dramatize the political stakes of vision and the need for an outside extranational eyewitness. By

grounding global empathy in cinematic corporeality, these films introduce a new species of what Hannah Arendt calls the ‘politics of pity’” (xiv). Schoonover’s engagement with Arendt is strictly limited to the introductory section where her theory of pity serves as an organizing principle for the book’s more ostensible engagement with historical, archival, and reception based research. Mobilizing Arendt’s theory of pity serves Schoonover less as a theoretical intervention and more as a catalyst to understand vision’s principal political function: rendering reality for ethical judgment. In presenting the profilmic body suffering and imperiled, Schoonover demonstrates neorealism’s global need for an extranational spectator in order to identify those who suffer from those who don’t. Ultimately, neorealism’s corporealism opens Italy to a global spectator in order to “turn watching from a passive form of consumption into an activity replete with palpable geopolitical consequence” (xvii). “Through the staging of bodily violence for virtual witnessing,” Schoonover writes, “these films offer up the activity of looking as an exercise of political will” (xvii). Schoonover suggests that witnessing the endangered body “triggers charitable dispositions” implying that “[o]nly through gestures of humanitarian caring are we able to define and experience our humanism” and “a suffering body is needed to understand the category of the human” more generally (xix, xx).

With this idea, *Brutal Vision* connects a variety of contemporary debates concerning the profilmic body in art cinema, the renewed interest in André Bazin, politics and aesthetics, and the global nature of art cinema more generally. In order to demonstrate the efficacy of his repositioning of neorealist cinema, Schoonover organizes the book into five chapters, each of which argues for its theoretical gambit through detailed close readings of individual films and supporting historical and archival research.

Chapter 1 (“An Inevitably Obscene Cinema: Bazin and Neorealism”) finds Schoonover in a sustained engagement with Bazin’s theory of realism, the long take, and the recent return to Bazin currently enjoying so much attention. This chapter argues for the global nature of neorealism through Bazin’s account of the film spectator defined by a “fundamental humanism” and witnessed through on-screen bodies. Chapter 2 (“The North Atlantic Ballyhoo of Liberal Humanism”) continues the argument introduced above by arguing that neorealist aesthetics envisages an ideal spectator defined by liberal humanism. This spectator, specifically American, serves as a “bystander” who “occupies the paradoxical space of secondary

eyewitnessing, a kind of surrogate seeing in which one can always be on the scene, but never of it or trapped in it" (73).

Chapter 3 and 4 continue this direction by taking on two of neorealism's most celebrated filmmakers: Roberto Rossellini. Chapter 3 ("Rossellini's Exemplary Corpse and the Sovereign Bystander") engages Rossellini's work by speculating "whether and how neorealist films might have met an American need to see the Italian as willing to accept his or her own limited sovereignty" (108). If the body can serve as a site of political struggle and looking can be understood as a form of political action, Rossellini's films grant the international spectator a virtual mode of bearing witness to postwar politics on screen. Chapter 4 ("Spectacular Suffering: De Sica's Bodies and Charity's Gaze") moves this discussion to De Sica, whose films are explicitly less concerned with the physical violence of war. De Sica's work is no less important though in the practice of witnessing as an ethical action. For, by and large, they expand the terrain by which to conceive of the body's performative spectacle as a realist technique capable of prompting an altruistic gaze in line with the practice of humanism.

Chapter 5 ("Neorealism Undone: The Resistant Physicalities of the Second Generation") opens up an interesting discussion concerning the second generation of "neorealist" filmmakers in Italy — such as, Fellini, Antonioni, Pasolini, Bellocchio, and Bertolucci—concerning citation and a national aesthetic tradition legitimated through international markets. Schoonover's argument suggests that the early work of these auteurs does not simply legitimate neorealism through visual reference and filmic homage. Instead, these films use neorealist elements as a starting point to critique the way corporealism was mobilized as a transatlantic political tactic of ethical witnessing. In short, "this second generation of postwar Italian films reproaches neorealism's use of the bodily image as a form of compassion-triggering testimony" (186). The explicit citation of neorealist style is, ultimately, a hindrance to the progression of lived life in postwar Italy, as well as a retardation of cinema's progression as an art form. Placed squarely in the middle of the trauma of World War II and the optimism of Italy's "economic miracle," the films of this wave openly question the neorealist optic as an instrument capable of mobilizing the empathy of suffering for political and ethical ends. And, for Schoonover, this set of filmmakers retroactively confirm the global nature of neorealism through its explicit attention to representing social life postwar through this critique which pushes Italian cinema into new territory concerned with the more contemporary developments of *il boom*.

The main contention of this argument rests on the notion that witnessing is, ultimately, a form of political action. Readers of *Brutal Vision* will largely be divided on this point in addition to the merit or necessity to reevaluate art cinema as it concerns the global appeal of one of modernism's most enduring national cinemas. To Schoonover's benefit he openly acknowledges the difficulties that accompany this proposition, even questioning whether it is "ever appropriate to use a body as the unit of measure for political discourse?" in the book's conclusion. These points aside, Schoonover's "brutal humanism" offers an important and intriguing means to understand the historical, optical, political, and ethical nature of neorealist cinema beyond the confines of national borders.