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Beyond Neo-Neo Realism
Reconfigurations of Neorealist Narration in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff*

Since the widely reported critical wrangling between A. O. Scott and Richard Brody on the merits of using the term "Neo-Neo Realism" to describe a batch of American independent productions released in 2008 and 2009,[1] the term has been largely conspicuous by its absence. Of the various directors deemed by Scott to be bringing American cinema its "neorealist moment," three have yet to re-emerge (So Yong Kim, Ramin Bahrani, Lance Hammer), two have moved toward the mainstream (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), and only one, namely Kelly Reichardt, has continued to receive significant attention. Tellingly, however, the considerable quantity of critical discussion on Reichardt's 2011 film, *Meek's Cutoff,* has failed to invoke this contentious term, giving credence to the idea that Scott's "neorealist moment" was of a fleeting nature. Yet, while the intrinsic value of categorizing films based on a movement famed for its *own* lack of a clear definition is debatable at best,[2] neorealist theory can still be utilized as a means of exploring the recent trend of American realism touched on by Scott. If anything, the sheer wealth of academic writing on neorealism comprises a rich seam of theoretical approaches that can easily be applied to contemporary contexts.

Unlike *Wendy and Lucy* (2008)—which has been brought into connection with De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952) regarding the structuring principle of a search, and the solace offered by a canine companion, respectively[3]—*Meek's Cutoff* does not, at least at first glance, invite such obvious neorealist comparisons. Although this can perhaps be put down to the nineteenth-century setting and the more immediate foregrounding of the Western genre, a more detailed analysis reveals a range of neorealist underpinnings. The subtle reconfigurations Reichardt performs on these neorealist elements lead to a shift in their ultimate effect and help to illustrate that the relationship between contemporary realist stirrings and neorealism is more complex than a direct revival.

The following discussion of *Meek's Cutoff* focuses on the narrative techniques employed by the film and how these relate to various neorealist narrative forms. Rather than get embroiled in the variety of theories pertaining to neorealist narration,[4] I will draw primarily from André Bazin's conception of neorealist narrative structure in order to analyze Reichardt's film. Due to Bazin's frequent referencing to Cesare Zavattini's own thoughts on neorealism, I supplement Bazin's comments with those of Zavattini where appropriate. While some of Bazin's more utopian statements on neorealism are to be treated with caution, his lyrical yet precise approach continues to pay dividends, as the recent surge of renewed interest in his work seems to indicate.[5]

Rather than appearing as a single coherent theory, the two main components of Bazin's neorealist narration I am interested in are referred to across a range of texts spanning a five-year period, serving to refine the same ideas in each iteration. The first of these is introduced as a lyrical-natural

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1. See Scott and Brody for details on the original critical spat; for its subsequent discussion, see Knegt and Bordwell.
2. See Ruberto & Wilson for a succinct account of the problems in defining neorealism.
3. See Gross, Hoberman, and Jones.

4. See, for example, Deleuze, *Cinema 1* 201-220 and *Cinema 2* 1-23, Thompson 197-217, and Wagstaff.
5. For recent examples of this tendency, see Andrew and Cardullo.

metaphor, describing the episodic narrative structure employed by Roberto Rossellini in *Paisan* (*Paisà,* 1946), as a series of events between which "the mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river" (Bazin 35). In more concrete terms, this stepping-stone metaphor can best be understood as referring to a narrative structure consisting of individual events whose exact relationship to one another is not always apparent during the narrative itself (as it only becomes clear in retrospect which particular stones proved decisive in allowing the river to be crossed), and whose overarching construction avoids any overtly contrived quality (as the stones were not placed in the river for that exact purpose).

Bazin later returns to the same idea in more explicit terms to describe the narrative strategy employed in Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (*La Terra Trema,* 1948) and Genina's *Heaven Over the Marshes* (*Cielo sulla Palade,* 1949), remarking approvingly that "things happen in them each at its appointed hour, one after the other, but each carries an equal weight. If some are fuller of meaning than others, it is only in retrospect; we are free to use either 'therefore' or 'then'" (59). The various occurrences that comprise the plot, thus, each have different levels of significance for the narrative as a whole, with some merely following one another chronologically, while others build on one another to form a narrative progression. Moreover, the respective significance of each occurrence actually emerges only once the whole narrative has played out, as no one occurrence is emphasized more than any other.

It is with regards to this basic episodic structure that *Meek's Cutoff* cleaves closest to Bazin's narrative model. The narrative is structured as a series of episodes whose rela-

tionship to one another moves constantly back and forth between the "then" and the "therefore." Broadly speaking, these episodes can be placed on a sliding scale according to the amount of narrative information they contain, running the gamut from extended narrative episodes (such as the scene in which the wagons are lowered into the valley), brief episodes showing a single event or interaction (such as when Emily Tetherow gives the Indian food), brief moments of dialogue or incidents inserted into scenes showing the travails of the journey and the daily tasks that go along with it (such as when the Tetherows briefly concur before throwing most of their possessions out the back of the wagon), to the

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many scenes that merely focus on the details of these various travails and tasks (such as the extended river crossing scene that opens the film). The constant shifting between episodes in which something and nothing "happens" serves to give all the various narratively heterogeneous episodes equal weight while also necessitating the same retrospective ascription of meaning described by Bazin. In turn, seemingly innocuous details end up receiving subsequent significance (such as when the shot of water being collected from the river in the first scene is later proven to be of vital importance) and episodes that appear to convey significant narrative information end up leading nowhere (the discovery of gold in the desert, for example, plays no further role other than that of just another crushing disappointment). This feeling that the occurrences or even individual images in the film could end up meaning everything or nothing is further intensified by the *in medias res* ending. Even the developments that do play out over the course of the narrative, such as the feelings of trust that Emily slowly develops for the Indian, are rendered somehow stunted and ambiguous as to their ultimate significance by the complete lack of resolution.

Bazin's second component of the neorealist narrative model was first introduced in an article on De Sica in reference to Rossellini, and refers to the desire for narrative events to be portrayed in accordance with their original duration. As Bazin sees it, narrative structure "must now respect the actual duration of the event" being portrayed, as opposed to reconstructing events according to an "artifi-

cial and abstract" dramatic duration (Bazin 64-65). While this effectively amounts to a utopian, largely unworkable appeal for real-time narratives, which bears little relation to the Rossellini films it refers to, Bazin's subsequent comments do, at least, constitute a qualification of sorts: Zavattini's dream of filming eighty minutes in the life of a man without a single cut is reformulated as an ideal, with *Bicycle Thieves* forming its nearest approximation at the time of writing (Bazin 67). It is *Umberto D.*, however, that represents a yet closer approximation of this ideal, providing Bazin an even better opportunity to elaborate on the details of such durational considerations. In a note on the film, Bazin enthuses that the film offers a "glimpse, on a number of occasions, of what a truly realist cinema of time could be, a cinema of 'duration'" (Bazin 76). However, a look at the two scenes from the film that Bazin has in mind—the scene in which the protagonist goes to bed after falling ill and the scene in which the maid rises in the morning and makes coffee—demonstrates that duration is not the only marker of their realist significance. A sense of realism arises, not only because these scenes unfold in real time, but also because of the type of activities they show, namely, "the simple continuing to be of a person to whom nothing in particular happens" (Bazin 76).

It is worth mentioning here that Bazin does not provide any clear explanation as to why portraying everyday activities in real time might generate the sense of dramatic spectacle and emotion that he clearly believes them to. While he does not explicitly mention the durational element key to Bazin's model, some of Zavattini's thoughts provide possible explanations to this end. First, that presenting everyday activities in the cinema "will astonish us by showing so many things that happen every day under our eyes, things we have never noticed before" (Zavattini 221); and second, aside from this idea of a new perspective being opened up by having details of the everyday simply shown onscreen, Zavattini describes a more complex reaction that takes place within the viewer:

> People understand themselves better than the social fabric; and to see themselves on the screen performing their daily actions—remembering that to see oneself gives one the sense of being unlike oneself—like hearing one's own voice on the radio—can help them to fill up a void, a lack of knowledge of reality. (222)

Apart from the vague sense of didacticism that underlies these comments, Zavattini's idea of a simultaneous identification with, and feeling of, dislocation from the familiarity of the activities shown is interesting, as this critical distance enables the viewer to reflect on the way in which reality is being presented to them.

Umberto D. unites the two different threads of Bazin's narrative model: the episodic structure remains evident, but the "events" that comprise it are now the fragments of everyday life. He notes:

> If one assumes some distance from the story and can still see in it a dramatic patterning, some general development in character, a single general trend in its component events, this is only after the fact. The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than any other. (Bazin 81)

While the extent to which this description actually tallies with the film itself remains unclear, it is perhaps best to grasp this narrative model as a realist aspiration rather than a tangible strategy, a yet-to-be-reached station along a line that starts at *Umberto D.* and follows the "asymptote of reality" toward Zavattini's dream of showing eighty minutes of real life without a single cut (82).

In addition to the episodic narrative structure and resultant retrospective ascription of meaning, *Meek's Cutoff* also places a strong focus on both daily activities and real-time duration, a combination that might, at first glance, suggest that the film represents a contemporary attempt to push the realist aspirations of *Umberto D.* one stage further. Yet, while all these elements are certainly present in the film, their subtle reconfiguration and interaction with other aspects of the film's aesthetic end up generating effects that actually run counter to Bazin's original realist agenda.

The way in which the film persistently foregrounds the various tasks involved in a cross-country trek clearly motivates the question of how these scenes are to be understood, a question to which Zavattini's ideas provide some interesting answers. Although it is unlikely that a contemporary viewer is going to discover any previously unnoticed

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moments of grace in the repairing of a wagon axle, the collecting of firewood, or the grinding of wheat, the second explanation given by Zavattini as to the effect achieved by portraying these activities proves surprisingly apt for *Meek's Cutoff*, albeit with a decisive shift in focus. While the various iconographical markers of the Western in the film immediately evoke a sense of familiarity in the viewer, the continual emphasis on the chores that allow this Western world to function represents a clear break with the traditional, more event-driven demands of the genre. Thus, instead of such feelings of disassociation and identification emerging due to the inherent familiarity of the chores themselves (*á la* Zavattini), these feelings are generated due to the unfamiliar sensation of seeing chores foregrounded within an otherwise familiar genre setting. The critical distance created here does not, therefore, lead the viewer to reflect upon the (neorealist) portrayal of social reality, but rather upon the standard portrayal of reality in the Western, exposing the mechanics of genre convention before addressing any social considerations. At the same time, however, the intrinsic physicality of these activities does create a link between the viewer and the historical social reality being portrayed, a corporeal identification with the sheer physical harshness of a settler's life that remains undisturbed by any genre confusions. In this sense, *Meek's Cutoff* can be seen to expand Zavattini's identification model to include genre, on the one hand, while still retaining a link to a specific social reality via the body, on the other.

A similarly subtle reconfiguration is also undertaken regarding duration. While the film does, indeed, show certain episodes with the sort of respect for real-time duration advocated by Bazin, the choice of episodes presented in this way actually end up undermining his theory rather than adhering to it. Instead of showing the characters carrying out their tasks in real time, the film insists on presenting *central dramatic episodes* in real time. Perhaps the clearest example of this tendency is the scene in which Emily first encounters the Indian. Having run from the sight of each other, Emily enters a wagon and emerges with a rifle. Over the next minute, she methodically loads the gun, fires a shot, cleans the gun's two barrels, reloads, and finally fires for a second time, a cut coinciding with the second shot. While this scene pro-

vides the most overt example of this durational approach to presenting dramatic episodes, the film contains various narrative episodes in which a similarly pronounced sense of duration is created, such as when Stephen Meek and Solomon Tetherow return to camp with the Indian tied between them, or when Emily cautiously repairs the Indian's shoe.

Although this sort of durational presentation is not the only strategy used to portray dramatic episodes—the ellipses in the wagon-lowering scene, for instance, provide an alternative—its very use in this context brings about a complete reversal of Bazin's theory. The two necessary conditions that led Bazin to consider *Umberto D.* an unadorned presentation of real life are decoupled here: certain dramatic episodes are presented in real time while daily activities are portrayed so as to exemplify their generality, circumventing a fidelity to duration. This decoupling ends up running counter to the aims of Bazin's original model, as the decision to present selective narrative episodes in real time serves, if anything, to underline their significance for the narrative as a whole, giving them precisely the kind of additional weight that Bazin's episodic model is concerned with avoiding. Thus, by pulling apart and applying separately the two components of a narrative strategy whose goal it is to represent reality by converging on reality itself, a new strategy is created that aims to accentuate the narrative's

dramatic construction rather than allowing it to disappear into realist transparency.

Combining the respective theoretical approaches of Bazin and Zavattini produces a set of narrative principles and justifications whose application in contemporary cinema by no means needs to be limited to *Meek's Cutoff*. The narrative analysis of the film also serves to illustrate that transferring past realist strategies into such settings is unlikely to leave their functions unchanged, with comparatively little reconfiguration needed in order to create very different, even contradictory, effects. As such, it is important for any exploration of neorealist elements in contemporary cinema to avoid the temptation to merely reduce their use to basic revivalism. In addition, the inherent plurality of the neorealist canon and the ways in which it resists neat categorization also renders such oversimplified, revivalist arguments problematic: the often drastically different realist approaches employed in Rossellini's War Trilogy, *Umberto D.* in its role as the final flowering of neorealism, as well as subsequent, widely-debated outliers such as Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, 1954) or Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* (*Le notti di Cabiria*, 1957), indicate just how many different variants of neorealism exist, all of which form an equally viable basis for exploring contemporary realist strategies. Finally, with regards to Kelly Reichardt's work, *Meek's Cutoff* can be seen as another example of her penchant for

gently subverting neorealism's legacy, as *Old Joy* (2006) and *Wendy and Lucy* also undertake the same sort of subtle retooling of neorealist approaches apparent here. Yet, while neorealism represents as good a theoretical starting point as any when it comes to exploring Reichardt's deceptively slim *oeuvre*, it can only be hoped that future analyses go on to address the many wider questions of cinematic realism, genre, feminism, politics, and society raised by her work, and how these fit into and influence both the current state of American independent cinema and contemporary cinema as a whole.

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