Bitter Rice, neither Neorealism nor Noir

The standard history of film noir sees noir as an American phenomenon, influenced in part by earlier European film movements like France's poetic realism or German expressionism, but only first realized in the many nihilistic and melodramatic crime films made in 1940s and 1950s Hollywood. From those canonically classic films, noir had a profound influence on international film thanks to America's position as a global hegemon following World War II. Following the spread of American political and economic power, Hollywood exported its products into international markets often set up in favor of American interests. There is certainly plenty of truth to this narrative despite some simplification. There is no doubt that the imposition of Hollywood exports had a dramatic effect on international film consumption and production. But a closer examination of the film movements which preceded film noir can complicate the notion of a noir history beginning in full with 1940s Hollywood. If you are willing to expand beyond a tautological notion of classic noir then the poetic realist films of 1930s France may seem less like a point of influence and more like the beginning of a cynically modernist tendency in film that would only later be understood as noir. Similarly, the dark yet socially conscious tendencies of pre-war Japanese cinema certainly point towards the formation of a certain noir-ness separate from the influence of a *Maltese Falcon*. And Luchino Visconti's 1943 film *Ossessione*, an adaptation of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice,* suggests a parallel instance of crime melodrama drawing from the same influences that would come to define the canon of classic noir.

Whether these examples can completely undermine the claim of noir first emerging in 1940s Hollywood they at least complicate the history enough to make one ask why there were so

many films rooted in a similarly stylized dark melodrama. As discussed by Dennis Broe in *Class, Crime, and International Noir*, one explanation may be the similar conditions that surrounded the production of these films. The explosion of the two world wars certainly point to the intense social, political, and economic fractures that defined the first half of the early twentieth century in the global north. While this same period led to a momentary flourishing of various left and proletarian movements, it is the defeat, or at least the suppression of these movements, that more than anything defines the nihilism of noir according to Broe: "In country after country, with the onset of the Cold War their struggle was defeated, and they turned again to the crime film as the place where the struggle might continue in a more clandestine way. This darker variant of the crime film, called film noir, was also a form that might express their exasperation, nay despair, over their watching the world being remade, no longer in the image of the ordinary person, of which they had dreamed, but instead as one in which the old competitiveness, inequality, and fear returned."[1]

Following World War II, as the logic of the Cold War began to codify itself by the end of the decade, the international expansion of American capital and hegemony would suffocate the brief hopes of a coherent working class militancy that could have arisen out of the defeat of Fascism. This dynamic was especially prominent in post-war Italy. Although its southern half was liberated by the Allied forces, the industrial north was liberated by communist-led partisan forces following a wave of insurrection and general strikes.[2] For a brief couple years following Italy's transition away from fascism, there was a very real possibility of an Italy governed by a strong working class coalition of communists and socialists. But by 1948, after a few years of overly conciliatory policy by communist leader Palmiro Togliatti and with the direct and overt

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[1] Broe, Dennis. *Class, Crime, and International Film Noir*. Palgrave Macmilian, 2014, pp. xiv-xv.
[2] Ginsborg, Paul. *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

intervention of the United States on behalf of the anti-communist Christian Democrats in the 1948 national election, this possibility was essentially foreclosed upon.[3]

If film noir, as Broe argues, is a response to both the foreclosure of those hopes and the subsequent suppression of their expression, then how do Italian films made before 1948 respond to the possibilities of a world that had yet to be foreclosed upon? Guiseppe De Santis' 1949 film *Bitter Rice*, written and produced before the pivotal election of 1948, is an especially useful example of the connection between noir's central cynicism and the failures of left politics in the twentieth century. Although it employs some noticeable elements of noir, namely a melodramatic crime narrative as well as certain shared aesthetics, *Bitter Rice* should not be considered a film noir primarily because its creation was rooted in the still existing hopes of an empowered Italian working class. In fact, the noir elements in *Bitter Rice* function mostly as an explicit point of contrast, compared with the hopeful populism that is expressed in the neorealist elements that make up much of the rest of the fim. Thus, the stylistic contradictions of *Bitter Rice*, neither classic noir nor orthodox neorealism but a strange synthesis of the two, reflect the political conditions of its production, when the Italian left had yet to settle into its role as the opposition to Christian Democrat governance.

According to De Santis, Italian neorealism had no fathers, but rather had "one great mother: the Resistance." For him, neorealism dealt with a specific historical phenomenon: "it was the first time that the working classes armed themselves. The people took up arms and became the protagonist of their own destiny. They fought against the dictatorship to win their freedom and to demand their right to their own aspirations. The face of Italian cinema suddenly changed: no longer was it the petty or middle bourgeoisie, but the people in all their layerings.

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[3] Ginsborg, Paul. *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

These people had now become protagonists, they wanted to matter."[4] While this definition of neorealism needs to be contextualized with the negative response that many critics had towards *Bitter Rice*, seeing the film as a bastardized form of social cinema that harmfully leaned into Hollywood spectacle, it is clear that De Santis understood the importance of the Italian political context following World War II. Only after the success of a proletarian armed resistance, and before a variety of factors would soon restrict the production of neorealist films, could such a democratic cinema flourish. Yet despite the hopefulness embodied by a Communist Party member like De Santis, as *Bitter Rice* shows, he was also keenly aware of the creeping danger of American political and cultural hegemony.

Although American films dominated the Italian film market from the 1920s to the 1960s—with the exception of 1939 to 1945 the vast majority of films exhibited in Italy were American—the specific conditions of postwar Italy meant that the American government was in a unique position to dictate the circumstances of the Italian film industry towards its own interests.[5] Protectionist initiatives that set quotas for domestic film exhibition (as was the case in France) were successfully prevented and American films flooded Italy as it became Hollywood's largest foreign market.[6] Subsidies for Italian productions were abolished and because Cinecittà, the home of the Italian film industry, was occupied by refugees, Italian productions were severely limited for some time following the war.[7] While the passing of the "Andreotti Law" in 1949 led to partial state control of the film industry, the law was drafted by the Christian Democrats who

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[4] Vitti, Antonio. *Giuseppe De Santis and Postwar Italian Cinema*. University of Toronto Press, 1996, pp. xii-xiv.
[5] Forgacs, David, and Gundle, Stephen. *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*. Indiana University Press, 2007, pp. 146.
[6] Ibid., pp. 154-156.
[7] Ibid., pp. 136.

were willing to accept American hegemony as a condition of their continued control of the Italian state. Thus, as a whole, the legislation "favored three developments: industrial expansion, depoliticization, and Americanization."[8] Among these conditions, according to David Forgacs, "in some respects the American companies were more powerful in the Italian market than they were in the United States."[9]

Yet, despite these conditions, until the early 1950s when industrial film production became the dominant norm in Italy, there was still enough space for a proletarian cinema to flourish in Italy, a movement most famously associated with the neorealist films of directors like Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rosellini, and Luchino Visconti. While these productions represented a proportionally small part of the total number of productions, some were immensely popular. Rosellini's *Rome, Open City* was the highest grossing film between 1945 and 1946[10], and *Bitter Rice* was a success as well, as the fifth most profitable film of 1949 while also finding relative success internationally.[11] The production company behind *Bitter Rice*, Lux, also represented an important alternative to the dominance of Hollywood productions. Founded by anti-fascist businessman Riccardo Giuliano in 1934, Lux didn't have its own studios and instead focused on financing various neorealist-adjacent projects including some of De Santis' other early films. Although Lux was a major player in Italian film production,

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[8] Forgacs, David, and Gundle, Stephen. *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*. Indiana University Press, 2007, pp. 133.
[9] Ibid., pp. 141.
[10] Ibid., pp. 154
[11] Vitti, Antonio. *Giuseppe De Santis and Postwar Italian Cinema*. University of Toronto Press, 1996, pp. xi.

according to Forgacs the "gap between [their] style of operation and the Hollywood studio system... could scarcely have been wider."[12]

It is among these conditions that the connection between De Santis' style and his politics found its form. Both of his first two feature films, *Tragic Hunt* (1947) and *Bitter Rice* (1949), blend neorealist settings and politics with impressive setpieces and showy camera work inspired by De Santis' appreciation for the mise-en-scene of Hollywood musicals and the early westerns of John Ford.[13] While *Tragic Hunt* is focused on the toil of partisan farm collectives in the wartorn countryside of Northern Italy, it combines those political interests with a heightened crime narrative. After a collective farm's payment is stolen by bandits it is up to the workers to hunt down the thieves. One of its most impressive sequences takes place on a propaganda train campaigning for the Popular Democratic Front (a coalition made up of the Communist and Socialist parties) after the bandits hop onboard to escape the armed partisan-farmers. The camera starts low on the subjects sitting atop the train only to crane upwards and show the expansive countryside as supporters run alongside the train. And in an especially noir-like climax, as the partisan-farmers surround the thieves, the main antagonist, a former partisan turned bandit, decides to shoot his fascist girlfriend in order to prevent her from blowing up rigged explosives placed around their hideout. This combination between stylized crime melodrama and leftist political interests would also define De Santis' next film, *Bitter Rice*, and make him an especially unique figure in the wider neorealist movement.

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[12] Forgacs, David, and Gundle, Stephen. *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*. Indiana University Press, 2007, pp. 127.

[13] Vitti, Antonio. *Giuseppe De Santis and Postwar Italian Cinema*. University of Toronto Press, 1996, pp. 139.

Bitter Rice begins at a train station in Northern Italy where hundreds of women are waiting to leave for the rice harvest in the countryside. Among all these *mondine*, is a man trying to escape from the police; Walter, a thief with stolen goods on hand, sports a fedora and trenchcoat, an absurdly ill-fitting disguise among the many peasant laborers at the station. This visual contrast between a trenchcoat wearing jewel thief and poor farm laborers is a great example of De Sants' filmic contradictions: Hollywood noir dropped onto the Italian countryside. With the police hot on Walter's tail, he meets his partner Francesca and gives her the stolen jewels. He escapes while Francesca boards the train in the hopes of blending in with the *mondine*, and from there the film continues to combine the tension of a melodramatic crime film with an incisive examination of labor conditions in the Italian countryside. At the heart of the film are Francesca and her narrative opposite, the sensuous Silvana, a young *mondina* who curiously helps Francesca after noticing her and Walter at the train station. The tension of the film is built upon the opposing dynamic between these two women and their respective romantic interests. Silvana becomes enamored with Walter's criminal glamor while Francesca is charmed by Marco, a chest-hair bearing soldier, whose regiment trains in the area. Silvana's infatuation with Walter is partly driven by her fascination with American culture, including her love of melodramatic photo-novels and the boogie-woogie which she dances with Walter, whose character represents the allure and danger of American culture. Increasingly she shies away from the collective solidarity of the *mondine* towards individual desires while Francesca fulfills the opposite arc, turning away from Walter and towards Marco and solidarity with the *mondine*. The opposing relationship between the four reaches its climax when Walter and Silvana attempt to steal the entire rice harvest in

a daring heist. Marco, Francesco, and the *mondine* are able to stop the heist but Walter is

shot by Silvana during a dramatic shootout between the four characters. After realizing

she was deceived by Walter's lies and comes to grips with her betrayal of the *mondine,*

Silvana commits suicide in a dramatic fashion. And in the final scene the *mondine*

redeem her memory in a final dramatic gesture of collective solidarity.

Like its plot, the visual style of *Bitter Rice* is an interesting combination of

Hollywood melodrama and Italian neorealism. Shot on location in the Po Valley, there

are shots of the collective labor of the *mondine* that would seem at home in the early

documentaries of Antonioni, but elsewhere De Santis' tight framing and dramatic camera

movement sets it far apart from the relatively understated visuals of other early neorealist

films. The first shot, shown under the title and credits, is itself a synthesis of these two

styles. The camera begins low, focused on water flooding into the rice fields, but then

cranes upwards to reveal hundreds of working *mondine* and then ends as it cranes

downwards and frames itself at an individual's eye-level. The next shot which begins the

film is also a long take that cranes across and through space. It begins with a closeup of a

man wearing a fedora addressing the camera directly. Slowly the camera moves

outwards, revealing that he is a radio announcer recording a live report of the *mondine*

leaving for the countryside. The camera, placed on a rooftop patio, then sweeps to the

side, tracking the many *mondine* walking towards their train from above. Slowly

sweeping across the trainyard, the camera then lowers itself and frames a tight medium

shot of the two cops waiting to spot Walter. The two minute shot, inspired by the mass

visual spectacle of American musicals[14], is an impressive showpiece that rivals the work

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[14] Vitti, Antonio. *Giuseppe De Santis and Postwar Italian Cinema*. University of Toronto Press, 1996, pp. 33.

of any contemporary Hollywood technicians. And while such style betrays common notions of neorealist aesthetics, De Santis imbues this crane movement from the individual to the collective with ideological importance. In combining the two scales into a single shot, De Santis connects his characters to their wider social and class context. Personal drama and social commentary become intrinsically linked through his camera.

While these sweeping crane shots are a result of Hollywood influence, they aren't rooted in any specific noir style, which, except for a few specific examples, like the opening shot of *Touch of Evil*, is not typically thought of in relation to camera movement. The most stereotypically noir stylization, low-key lighting accented with conspicuous shadows across actors and sets, is largely absent from *Bitter Rice*. Mostly because of the rural setting and the nature of outdoor daylight, the vast majority of the film is lit in a flat and natural manner. The most prominent indoor location, the *mondine* dormitory, also features fairly even lighting. Even the dramatic noir-like opening at the train station is shot in the open with even daylight. There are two prominent exceptions however: the scenes shot in the grainery and the dramatic shootout in the slaughterhouse. Both sequences are especially essential to the film's melodramatic crime element and so the change towards stylized lighting makes thematic sense. The low-key lighting casts stark shadows across the scenery as well as the actors and the unusual shape of the mounds of rice even gives these scenes an especially surreal feel to them. The shootout in the slaughterhouse also features low-key lighting with especially grim shadows cast by the hanging cow carcasses. After gunshots are exchanged and Silvana and Walter hide behind an overturned table, horizontal shadows cast across their faces mimic the venetian blind lighting that is so prominent in classic American noir.

While the lighting of *Bitter Rice* is, for the most part, distinct from typical noir, elsewhere the stylized mise-en-scene of the film, alongside the narrative, calls to mind Hollywood crime melodrama. The direct address of the fedora wearing radio announcer certainly fits with the established tropes of classic noir voice over, but the specific framing of the shot itself and subsequent ones in the same opening sequence highlights the Hollywood influence on De Santis' style; namely, the use of tightly framed medium shots of either one or two characters who are clearly separated from the background. Unlike neorealist aesthetics which tend towards wider shots that fuse characters with their environment, in these frequently used medium shots De Santis makes these characters seem larger than life and distinct from the background in a way that prioritizes their individual stories. While De Santis uses *mondine* as a political reference it is hard to universalize the experiences of Silvana or Francesca in the same way that De Sica's characters, for example, are representative of the Italian proletariat. While this is mostly due to the melodrama of the film's crime narrative, the use of these tightly framed shots is another way De Santis leans away from the standards of neorealist themes and aesthetics.

Another scene in which this same shot is featured is when Francesca tells Silvana about her troubled relationship with Walter. Francesca wears a white slip and Silvana wears a black one, and as the shot begins the two women, tightly composed within the frame, are seperated by the corner of a wall which heightens the aesthetic and dramatic contrast between the two. While Francesca continues to tell the story of Walter's cruel behavior, she stares off into the distance and her voice is clearly burdened by the pain of her past. Although this scene can easily be related to noir themes—the use of black and

white to refer to a character's morality, as well as the immense emotional weight of the past—the scene also showcases some of the contradictions that make *Bitter Rice* stand alongside noir without quite fitting in with its usual standards. A female nihilism is not unusual in noir, but the fact that this conversation unfolds between two women rather than a femme fatale and a male noir protaganists makes it stand out from typical examples. But more than anything it is the physical space of female solidarity that surrounds Francesca and Silvana that makes this scene distinct from classic noir. The conversation does not only take place within the *mondine* dorm, but is also continually interrupted by various examples of female solidarity. The first interruption is caused by *mondine* arguing against their bosses in favor of hiring illegal laborers of which Francesca is a part of. And later on Francesca gets up to give an injection to another woman who talks about a past lover. While the romantic nihilism of Francesca's story fits comfortably within noir standards, this other woman confidently and casually explains how she initiated the breakup with her boyfriend and appears to be completely unburdened by her past. Francesca returns to her conversation with Silvana only to get up again to help a sick *mondina* who is already being comforted by two other women. Francesca goes back again to finish the story only for the scene to conclude with a group of *mondine* joyously declaring that the illegal workers are now officially hired. It is as if De Santis, through these interruptions, is consciously commenting on the strange combination of noir and a progressive social realism that make up his film.

While this scene is a great example of the contradictions found throughout *Bitter Rice*, the extended final sequence, including the dramatic shootout and the aftermath of Silvana's suicide, may be the clearest example of these contradictions. Although a heist

sequence is an ordinary enough climax for noir, the use of rice as the potential spoils is another strange and unique example of De Santis' combined interests. After the heist begins and Silvana floods the fields, the four main characters all end up in a slaughterhouse where the climatic shootout occurs. The aforementioned low-key lighting, the surreal horror of the setting, as well as the dramatic shootout in which revelations of truth are as deadly as bullets, all make this sequence feel like the perfect climax of a classic noir. The following scene when Silvana, overwhelmed by Walter's lies and her own betrayal of the *mondine*, walks slowly up the tower in order to kill herself also fits comfortably with the darkest standards of noir. But it is the following sequence, the true conclusion of the film, that once again highlights how the political priorities of De Santis contrast with the use of melodrama. While most noirs would end with Silvana's death and an overbearing sense of nihilistic dread, De Santis instead ends the film on a redemptive note. The nighttime darkness that surrounds Silvana's suicide has now turned to daytime for these last few shots. De Santis uses his typical crane shot which initially frames Silvana's covered body and then sweeps upwards to show the *mondine* standing around her, only to sweep downwards to frame Francesca and Marco. As music swells, one *mondina* comes forward to sprinkle rice upon her body and then the entire group of *mondine* follow this initial act and cover her body in rice in a gesture of redemption. Despite Silvana's betrayal, the solidarity of the collective whole is overpowering and along with the final shots of Francesca walking off with Marco, De Santis manages to end the film on a genuinely optimistic note, a far cry from the essential bleakness of a noir ending. And besides the overt optimism, the explicit call for working class solidarity,

further highlighted by the voice over that ends the film, certainly makes the ending something entirely separate from noir.

Besides imparting an optimistic sense of proletariat solidarity, another political objective of De Santis was to critique the threat of American political and cultural hegemony in Italy. As mentioned earlier, this critique is mostly embodied in the relationship between Silvana and Walter. If Walter represents the threatening glamor of America then Silvana represents the danger of an Italy all too willing to submit itself to the desires of American power. According to De Santis, *Bitter Rice*'s central theme is "an indictment of the corruption that, in a seemingly innocent way, a sort of American ideology has brought to Western Europe. Such ideology has managed to spread its poisons even in the healthiest strata of the population, especially among young people who encounter it through the captivating filter of boogie-woogie, chewing gum, and easy luxuries."[15] This critique reaches an especially dramatic peak in the act and aftermath of Walter's rape of Silvana. Utilizing a noir-like understanding of the dramatic properties of rain, a torrential downpour comes down upon the *mondine* who have decided to go ahead with their work despite the weather. After a *mondina* cries out in pain, she is carried by Francesca and surrounded by many other *mondine* who look after her. After Silvana is raped, she desperately runs off to the side alone and screams with absolute agony. Here not only is the split between Silvana and the solidarity of the *mondine* made clear, but also the visceral danger that Walter and his coded Americanness represents. The

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[15] Zagarrio, Vito. "The Cinematic Jewel: Feteshizing the Goods". Habits of Being, edited by Giorcelli, Cristina, and Rabinowitz, Paula. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, pp. 215-217.

downpour, Silvana's screams, and the collective singing of the *mondine*, all combine in an immensely powerful moment of melodramatic excess.

The way De Santis places his critique of American hegemony into Walter and Silvana's relationship is certainly typical for noir. If noir can be understood as a response to the conditions of the early Cold War, then the use of personal drama as an expression of a wider political critique is one of the central modes of noir expression. But while this anti-American critique is coded into cultural references like the boogie-woogie and chewing gum, it can also be seen in the specific use of melodramatic crime elements. The imposition of melodramatic mise-en-scene, an intense eroticism, heists, and a climatic shootout, onto the neorealist setting of rice fields may be read as its own meta-textual critique of American influence. While this may not have been De Santis' intention, especially considering he was cineaste who had a genuine appreciation for American films, the continually conspicuous clash between the two dominant styles of *Bitter Rice* combined with its central political criticism makes this reading of the film seem rather essential. And while it would clearly be wrong to consider *Bitter Rice* a neo-noir, I do think it's worthwhile to make a connection between this meta-textual reading of *Bitter Rice*'s use of 'genre' with the similar ways in which the conscious use and recontextualization of noir elements would come to define neo-noir a few decades later.

In the same way that the melodramatic elements of the film preclude *Bitter Rice* from an orthodox definition of neorealist filmmaking, the explicit expression of an optimistic working class politics clearly make the film something other than noir. Although classic noir is often critical of modern capitalist life, the bourgeois family, and masculinity, these critiques are mediated through individual melodrama. The actions of

noir's characters are symbolic of wider political critiques rather than direct expressions of them. De Santis, despite also employing these symbolic critiques, made the political agit-prop at the surface of *Bitter Rice* unmistakable thanks to the political conditions within Italy before the pivotal election of 1948. The feeling you have after watching *Bitter Rice*, of an optimistic momentum, cannot be reconciled with the defining bleakness of noir. But it is because of this contradiction, between noir-ness and a clear non-noir-ness, that makes the film such a fascinating object of study and may in fact be a perfect case to help further define the notoriously malleable borders of noir.