

## Neorealism Revisited by African American Directors in the New Millennium

*Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* (Daniels, 2009), and *Miracle at St. Anna* (Lee, 2008)

"I was always intrigued with European cinema, and hated most American cinema. I didn't like the one, two, three-*boom!* style, with a neat and tidy ending. That was never my scene."

—Lee Daniels in an interview with Scott Foundas

Neorealism, perhaps the most distinctly Italian genre of filmmaking, emerged in the 1940s in the waning years of World War II in Italy. Representative of the Italian penchant for artistic expression and political commitment, this genre of filmmaking can be identified by its component parts as well as its narrative themes (Marcus, *Italian Film 22*). Characterized by the use of on-location shooting, long shots, natural lighting, nonprofessional actors, working-class protagonists, nonliterary dialogue, and open-ended narratives about World War II and its aftermath, this approach to filmmaking insists on the ethical aspects of representation. In his famous discourse on neorealism, Zavattini repeatedly used the adjective "moral" to describe this genre. A deep concern for the individual and the exigencies of daily life, indeed a belief in and appreciation for the fundamental primacy of mankind, underscored Zavattini's theory and practice as a screenwriter ("Some Ideas on Cinema"). The representation of antifascist political positions was essential to the works of other neorealist directors. Sty-

listically, neorealist films served as antidotes to the escapist tales of the bourgeois world of the *telefoni bianchi* (or middlebrow comedies called “white telephones,” after the prop that came to embody Hollywood comedies of manners) that entertained the masses during the height of fascism. By combining the aesthetics of the documentary with the realism of contemporary Italy, neorealist films strove to tell compelling narratives about the individual and society. With their largely nonprofessional casts, these works, often hastily and crudely made due to the exigencies of the postwar period, sought to project objectivity (Marcus, *Italian Film* 22). The radical departure from the idealized world of traditional moviemaking in Hollywood productions and the bold handling of contemporary themes resulted in international acclaim for films such as *Roma città aperta/Rome Open City* (Rossellini, 1945) and *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948).

From its inception, according to Brunetta, neorealism was an example of international cinema:

Per qualche tempo il meridiano del cinema mondiale passa per *Roma città aperta* e da lì segna il tempo del cinema



Figure 5.1. Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani) and Bruno (Enzo Staiola) Ricci contemplate a brighter future in *Bicycle Thieves*.



Figure 5.2. Pina (Anna Magnani) tries to defend her man in *Rome Open City*.

internazionale. Tra il 45–48 le opere di Rossellini, Zavattini–De Sica, DeSantis, Visconti, Germi, Castellani, Lattuada sprigionano con una forza di novità, un’energia e una potenza tali da cambiare le coordinate, i sistemi di riferimento, i paradigmi culturali, la prosodia, la sintassi e le poetiche di tutto il cinema mondiale. (For awhile the meridian of world cinema passes through *Rome Open City*, which marks the age of international cinema. From 1945–48 the works of Rossellini, Zavattini–De Sica, DeSantis, Visconti, Germi, Castellani, and Lattuada emitted an innovative force, an energy and a strength great enough to change the coordinates, systems of reference, cultural paradigms, prosody, syntax, and poetics of all world cinema.) (qtd. in Vitti 69)

Critics and students of Italian film celebrate this aesthetic movement despite the fact that it was rather short-lived and not necessarily successful in commercial terms. For reasons that this chapter addresses, neorealism continues to appeal to both directors and audiences outside Italy in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> I contend that in the United States this genre of filmmaking informs the work of Lee Daniels and Spike Lee in particular. These two African American directors have signaled their knowledge of and respect for the neorealist masters Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini with both their words and their works.

The neorealist movement in film evolved from an earlier literary movement that had its roots in *verismo*, a late nineteenth century genre that was somewhat akin to, but different from, the French school of naturalism championed by Émile Zola and others. Reaching its height at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the verist movement included writers such as Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana who detailed the lives of working-class protagonists. Similar to *verismo*, neorealist fiction of the 1930s and 1940s portrayed simple life in a contemporary setting; the humanity and frankness of this prose stood in stark contrast to fascist propaganda that sought to portray Italy and the Italians in idealistic terms. Authors Elio Vittorini, Alberto Moravia, and Cesare Pavese adopted the neorealist literary style. Vittorini also embraced American literature as an antidote to the oppression suffered by writers in Italy during the fascist regime, as demonstrated by his work as editor and translator of *Americana* (1941), an idiosyncratic selection of American literature from the 1700s to the mid-twentieth century that included works by authors such as Melville, Twain, Poe, Saroyan, and Faulkner. For Vittorini, the translation of American authors represented a subversive force insofar as certain texts underscored the idea of the United States as both a place and a set of ideas that existed outside the constraints of fascism. As Delisle and Woodsworth (147) point out, “The myth of America, as a land embodying a harsh class struggle and at the same time utopian principles, posed a direct challenge to the fascist view of the world. It also fed quite directly into the postwar neorealist movement which was to have such a profound influence in Italian literary narrative and cinema.”<sup>2</sup> Vittorini also wrote several novels, including his first and most famous, *Conversazioni in Sicilia/Conversations in Sicily* (1949), which begins with an introduction by Ernest Hemingway.

Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione/Obsession* (1943) offers an example of how neorealism functions in a cross-cultural context. Considered one of the first examples of this new aesthetic, Visconti's film was an adaptation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), a detective novel by the American writer James M. Cain. That book inspired three other cinematic adaptations: *Le dernier tournant* by French director Pierre Chenal in 1939 and then versions by American directors Tay Garnett and Bob Rafelson in 1946 and 1981, respectively. Ironically, *Ossessione* was not distributed outside Italy until 1976 because Visconti had never obtained copyrights to the novel. According to Van Watson (177), this oversight allowed MGM to produce its 1946 version of the film. *Ossessione*, originally cleared by fascist censors, engendered vehement protests from Catholic clergymen. Later, at the urging of his son Vittorio, Benito Mussolini screened the film and allowed it to be shown with a few cuts. Although he purportedly despised Visconti's portrayal of Italy, Mussolini took a copy of *Ossessione* with him when he departed in haste for the Republic of Salò (Van Watson 177). Why did Visconti's debauched tale of unsavory, scheming, and unemployed characters satisfy fascist censors in the first place? Perhaps the fascist regime's fascination with, and respect for, Hollywood, which led Vittorio Mussolini to visit there in 1937 to work out a deal with producer Hal Roach, predisposed him positively toward this film. Italians had viewed a steady stream of American films until 1938, when their government decried a monopoly on the distribution of films by instituting a flat rate for movie imports. After that, major American studios ceased distribution to Italy because of the disadvantageous terms; a few independent American producers continued to export their products to Italy. Contrary to what fascist officials feared and predicted, Italian production increased to fill the void even though American film distribution had grown to such an extent that it represented between 75 and 80 percent of all films shown in Italy prior to the Alfieri Law of 1938. During this period, imitations of Hollywood films were particularly popular in Italy, according to Segrave (108) and Treveri Gennari (8).

The transposition of Cain's 1934 detective novel set on the California coast into Visconti's 1943 masterpiece of cinematic realism in the Po Valley necessitated significant changes. In the novel, a handsome drifter named Frank Chambers meets and quickly falls in love with beautiful Cora, the wife of Nick Papadakis, a Greek immigrant

and successful restaurateur. The tale of deception, murder, and infidelity chronicles the initial attraction between Frank and Cora, the subsequent unraveling of the lovers' bond, and their eventual reunion before tragedy strikes. In Visconti's film, the protagonists Giovanna (Clara Calamai) and her lover Gino (Massimo Girotti) understand the economic reality of relationships. Practical considerations, not love, underlie the union between the attractive but penniless Giovanna and the financially secure older man Bragana (Juan de Landa). But lust compels the young wife and her lover Gino to attempt murder, then to separate, only to reunite and finally succeed in killing Bragana. Ironically, in the end, Gino, who is questioned but ultimately not charged with Bragana's death, is arrested for Giovanna's murder when she dies after he swerves to avoid a collision with a truck in a true accident.

Neorealism has exerted its influence internationally, as recent volumes edited by Ruberto and Wilson and by Giovacchini and Sklar demonstrate. However, this genre's relationship to American cinema is complicated. Cesare Zavattini, one of the founders of the movement, emphasized neorealism's underlying difference from American filmmaking, stating in 1953:

The cinema's overwhelming desire to see, to analyse, its hunger for reality, is an act of concrete homage towards other people, towards what is happening and existing in the world. And, incidentally, it is what distinguishes "neorealism" from the American cinema.

In fact, the American position is the antithesis of our own: while we are interested in the reality around us and want to know it directly, reality in American films is unnaturally filtered, "purified," and comes out at one or two removes. (51)

While there is no disputing Zavattini's contention about the distance from reality that characterizes mainstream American films, recent works by Lee Daniels and Spike Lee evidence an appreciation, indeed an appropriation, of neorealism. Both Daniels' *Precious* (2009) and Lee's *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008) focus in a particular way on the African American experience, both domestically and abroad, in the contemporary period and during World War II. These films mirror

the two sides of neorealism that either celebrate the war against fascism, as in Rossellini's *Roma città aperta/Rome Open City* (1945), or offer a critique of postwar society, as in De Sica's *Sciuscià/Shoeshine* (1946), *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (1948),<sup>3</sup> and *Umberto D.* (1952). In this chapter, I argue that *Precious* and *Miracle at St. Anna* follow the neorealist prescription of honoring humble people in their daily lives.

In his essay on neorealism, Zavattini notes that directors of this genre prefer the quotidian, the commonplace, instead of the extraordinary stuff of fables. Neorealist films offer few, if any, solutions to the trenchant problems facing society. Zavattini (55) insists that the artist should show reality, not give answers to questions. He explains the selection of poverty as a neorealist theme, stating: "We have begun with poverty for the simple reason that it is one of the most vital realities of our time, and I challenge anyone to prove the contrary." Arguing against the claim that there is too much emphasis on poverty in neorealist films, Zavattini declares that these films move beyond a superficial portrayal to include an analysis of the phenomenon. In his seminal article on *Bicycle Thieves*, Bazin described the genius of this film, which he described as "pure cinema": "No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema" (60). The sense of authenticity found in neorealist films resonates with Daniels' aesthetic as a filmmaker. He explains that the realism of *Precious*, a tale of an illiterate teenaged mother and victim of incest, originated in his personal experience: "I think what made *Precious* so true is that, down to the wallpaper, I worked from a snapshot of the room that I grew up in, the hallway I grew up in. I knew exactly where the paint was going to chip from the wall." Speaking of his subsequent film, *The Paperboy* (2012), the director said: "[I]t's very much in the stark and plain, deliberately ramshackle and stripped down mode of *Precious*. I'm not just talking about the look of the movie, either. I'm talking about atmosphere, the corroded and even cruddy authenticity that says, 'this is a movie that doesn't pretty things up'" (Gleiberman). Daniels' realistic presentations are both unselfconscious and evocative of a certain time and place. The director's emphasis on authenticity separates his films from other Hollywood productions. Gleiberman, for example, notes that *The Help* (Taylor, 2011) "looks about as naturalistic as a kabuki performance" in comparison to Daniels' *The Paper Boy*.

With a narrative set in a specific time (1987) and place (Harlem), Lee Daniels' *Precious* follows the neorealist conceit of temporal and spatial grounding as its humble protagonists confront racism and crushing poverty. In this open-ended narrative of the quotidian, which Roger Ebert described as a "landscape of despair," Lee Daniels renders his protagonist's life in painstakingly genuine detail. He does not spare the viewer the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, harsh language, unappetizing images of food and vomit, or physical degradation that Claireece Precious Jones (Gabourey "Gabby" Sidibe) confronts in her mother Mary's (Mo'Nique), walk-up apartment. In fact, the actors felt their environment acutely. Sidibe, an acting neophyte, enjoyed filming the fantasy sequences, because her makeup, hair, and clothing provided welcome relief from the blood, dirt, and leaves that covered her in many scenes (Ebert). Known for his unorthodox casting (for example, Mariah Carey as a dowdy social worker), Daniels sought an amateur for the title role in *Precious*. Five hundred young women answered the open casting call for the movie, at which Sidibe, who was in her mid-twenties, was chosen. She had heard about the role from her mother, Alice Tan Ridley, a subway performer who herself had been approached to audition for the role of Mary (Hirschberg).



Figure 5.3. Precious (Gabby Sidibe) in *Precious*.



Daniels' protagonists speak the language of their class in 1980s Harlem, in much the same way that De Sica's and other neorealist director's characters spoke the dialect of their place and social standing. Zavattini, who championed the use of dialect, asserted that formal language creates dissonance in these social critiques: "In our literary and spoken language, the synthetic constructions and the words themselves are always a little false" (60). Daniels' insistence on authenticity of language appears in Mary's expletive-laced screeds and the idiomatic language of Precious's classmates in the Each One Teach One alternative school, where she finally encounters a teacher who will help her learn to read and write. The director extends this aesthetic choice to the fantasy scene in which Precious and Mary converse in Italian. In that scene, mother and daughter recite their lines in Italian, a feat that was achieved after intense language training. Sidibe reported that Mo'Nique only got the words right when the cameras rolled (Kramer).

The use of Precious's voice-over narration reminds the viewer that this story is being told through the lens of a child, another element typical of neorealist cinema, according to Bazin (53–54). It is easy to forget that Precious, who has a baby and is pregnant with another, is only sixteen years old, struggling with illiteracy in junior high school. Her use of inventive spelling appears in the film's credits including, for example, a quote from Ken Keyes, Jr.: "EvrY-FIN is a gif of TH unvass" which translates into standard English as "Everything is a gift of the universe." The initial frames of the film establish Precious's struggle with written expression and thus its link to the novel by Sapphire (*Push*) on which the film is based. Even though the protagonist is a teenager, her writing resembles that of a first grade student. Indeed Precious is much younger developmentally than she appears.

*Precious*, like the neorealist films before it, offers no facile solutions to the entrenched problems facing its protagonists. While much of the publicity surrounding this film focuses on Precious's obesity, the tragic state of her life as an illiterate, impoverished victim of incest renders her weight much less significant. Abuse is at the center of this film; in fact, the director (Daniels), promoters (Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry), and star (Mo'Nique) all claim to have been victims of abuse by family members (Hirschberg). Liberation

from her mother's apartment, the locus of her physical and sexual damage, offers Precious a sense of hope, yet the viewer cannot forget that she is a single mother of two children, one with Down's syndrome. Additionally, and tragically, her HIV-positive status in 1987 meant she would most certainly die from the disease. When, at the end of Daniels' film, Precious leaves the apartment in which she has been abused repeatedly to start a new life with her two children the viewer sees little chance for reconciliation. In fact, the rupture of the mother and daughter bond is the only hope for Precious's future. The literary sequel to this story, Sapphire's novel *The Kid* (2011), continues the tragedy as it chronicles the life of Abdul Jones, Precious's second child, from age nine, when his mother dies, to young adulthood. His world appears even crueler than that of his mother, yet readers may be less sympathetic to his state than to hers, as Michiko Kakutani suggests. She states that because of Abdul's violent rages, perverse actions, and deranged thoughts, we may experience revulsion at his character.

De Sica articulated the idea that neorealist films depict the complexity of human nature in an essay titled "On Character": "When I make a picture I love all the characters, their vices and defects. My work is human work. There is always an excuse, even for the criminal. Humanity is a very deep mystery. . ." (29). Bazin (69) speaks of De Sica's "inexhaustible affection for his characters," pointing to the fact that not one character in *Bicycle Thieves* is unsympathetic, not even the thief himself. Daniels appears to echo the neorealist belief in the complexity of the individual. When asked at the New York Film Festival if his intention was to disparage inner-city dwellers, he replied: "Even the most evil person was somebody's baby at one time. And that's where life is lived. I've never been that comfortable with black and white" (Hirschberg). Reviews of *Precious* focus on the visceral impact of Daniels' brutally honest portrayal of a marginalized and dysfunctional African American family. Writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, Hirschberg describes the reception of *Precious*: "[T]he audience's initial rejection of Precious, even repulsion at the sight of her, slowly gives way to a kind of identification." Hirschberg goes on to assert the potential universality of Daniels' title character: "Precious is a stand-in for anyone—black, white, male, female—who has ever been devalued or underestimated." In an interview in the *New*

*York Times Magazine*, Daniels underscores the simple truth behind our relationship to people like Precious: “People read so much into ‘Precious.’ But at the end, it’s just this girl, and she’s trying to live. I know this chick. You know her. But we just choose not to know her.” This comment calls to mind Antonio Ricci, the hapless protagonist of De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves*, whose struggle to survive in postwar Italy was hardly unique.

Perhaps the most salient evidence of the influence of Italian filmmaking on Lee Daniels’ work appears in his direct citation of De Sica’s *La Ciociara/Two Women* (1960). Approximately halfway through Daniels’ disturbing tale, De Sica’s film appears on television as mother and daughter sit in the living room. *Two Women*, deemed a transitional film in De Sica’s oeuvre by Marcus (*Filmmaking by the Book* 67) and others, signals a break with the director’s neorealist past in several aspects. Vitti (294), for example, contends that this film represents “un melodramma concepito secondo le esigenze del divismo e le convinzioni della produzione hollywoodiana della grande specolarità” (“a melodrama born of the exigencies of the star system and the belief in Hollywood’s epic-scale productions”). The appearance of this film within the film demands critical attention.

*Two Women*, like Daniels’ film in which it appears, derives from a literary work that employs first-person narration. Alberto Moravia’s highly autobiographical novel, *La Ciociara* (1957), draws on the author’s eight-month period of hiding in Fondi, on the border of the Ciociaria, with his wife, Elsa Morante, following the declaration of the armistice on September 8, 1943. De Sica’s close adaptation of the novel chronicles the experience of the widowed Cesira (Sophia Loren) and her teenaged daughter, Rosetta (Eleonora Brown), as they flee Rome, a city under bombardment, for the safety of their small hometown.<sup>4</sup> Once the Allies succeed in liberating the land from the fascists and the Germans, Cesira elects to return to Rome, where she had been the successful proprietress of a grocery store. Her decision to leave the safety of the group of refugees results in horrific violence. Cesira exhibits ferocious determination to protect her terrified child as the wild, animal-like French colonial troops known as Goumiers pursue both women inside the church in which they have sought refuge from the midday sun. After the vicious attack, Cesira awakens to see the open sky through the bombed-out roof, with swallows sweeping past. Tragically, the violence suffered by

the two women reflects reality: historians recount that many Italian women were sexually assaulted by Allied troops, mostly North African colonial soldiers, following the final battles of Monte Cassino and the declaration of the armistice.<sup>5</sup> This attack also underscores the issue of race, for the soldiers are black and the women are white.

Critics of Daniels' film expressed skepticism that a poor, African American mother with little education living in Harlem in 1987 would watch a subtitled foreign film on television. The choice by Daniels, the first African American sole producer of an Academy Award-winning film (*Monster's Ball*, 2001), to cite De Sica's film highlights the Italian director's continuing significance for American filmmaking. Daniels, who was born a year after *Two Women* was released, unapologetically explains his selection thus: "Because I am watching 'Two Women,' and it's my movie. You're in my world!" (Kramer). Of the decision to include De Sica's film, he declared: "I thought it was so truthful—so in the moment" (Kramer). The parallels between the two film narratives go beyond Daniels' viewing fancy; they point to a deliberate selection that suggests the relevance of neorealism for films of the new millennium. *Two Women*, which, like *Precious*, focuses on marginalized female figures, makes a direct connection between Daniels' narrative and World War II. Considered by Moravia a paean to the Resistance fighters or *partigiani*, the novel on which the film is based can also be read as an example of neorealist prose. Faustini (286) reads the sexual violence perpetrated against mother and daughter as a metaphor for the evils of fascism that besieged Italy during those years. Moravia's novel, which was an expanded version of his earlier eponymous short story, was also the basis for Dino Risi's made-for-television film *La Ciociara/Running Away* (1988), also starring Sophia Loren.

When analyzed together, *Precious* and *Two Women* reveal disturbing parallels between the abusive conditions of Precious's life in the United States in the late 1980s and the deprivation and cruelty experienced by Cesira and Rosetta in the waning years of World War II when horrendous acts of violence threatened civil society. Precious, whose name ironically suggests that she is a treasure, shares a private hell with her antagonistic mother and, occasionally and tragically, with her abusive father. The challenges she faces—poverty, illiteracy, life-threatening illness, incest, single motherhood, raising a mentally

handicapped child—are magnified in comparison with those encountered by Cesira and Rosetta. After all, *Precious* lives in the United States during a period of peace and relative economic prosperity more than forty years after the events portrayed in *Two Women*. This fact renders *Precious*'s pain and alienation even more acute than the wartime suffering of De Sica's characters. As in many neorealist films, here also the protagonists are portrayed in relative isolation, with Mary and *Precious* often shown alone inside their apartment building. Yet unlike De Sica's neorealist critiques of postwar society in *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D.*, or *Shoeshine*, Daniels' film demonstrates that institutions, and certain individuals within them, attempt to assist the less fortunate. Interventions by *Precious*'s principal, Mrs. Lichenstein (Nealla Gordon), who comes to the apartment to tell *Precious* about alternative education at Each One Teach One, and later by her teacher, Ms. Rain (Paula Patton), make a difference in this young woman's life. Ms. Weiss (Mariah Carey), *Precious*'s social worker, insists that her client tell the truth about her abuse in order to help her. There is no such assistance offered in De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, for example. In that film, trade unions, police forces, and the Catholic Church fail Antonio as he searches for his lost bike, as Marcus points out (*Italian Film* 64–65).

Other similarities emerge between the films in terms of the commodification of sex. In *Two Women*, the widowed Cesira decides to ask her married friend, Giovanni (Raf Vallone), to watch her store in Rome in order to escape the regular bombings. The unspoken understanding between the two suggests that he will take care of her store if she has sex with him, which she does. This compact tragically presages her daughter's decision to trade sex for stockings when the two women hitch a ride from a truck driver shortly after the brutal rape in the church. In *Precious*, children embody monetary compensation for sex. Mary receives benefits for *Precious* and her daughter Mongo (Quisha Powell), so named because she has the genetic mutation of mongolism, the pejorative term for Down's syndrome. *Precious*'s mother also insists that her daughter seek social assistance instead of going to school, telling her to “get her ass down to the Welfare.” Mary frames the discussion of such benefits in racial terms, declaring that “white folks get just as much or more state assistance than blacks.”

In their Academy Award-winning roles, Sophia Loren and Mo’Nique portray mothers who have intense relationships with their daughters. At first glance, De Sica’s film within Daniels’ film suggests an antidote to Precious’s abusive situation. Yet a more nuanced analysis reveals *Two Women* as profoundly disturbing for the mother-daughter dynamic. No doubt Cesira’s ferocious defense of her daughter during the horrendous attack stands in stark contrast to Mary’s lack of resistance to her daughter’s rape by her own father. Yet Cesira’s valiant effort ultimately fails. Careful consideration of De Sica’s film narrative demonstrates the Italian mother’s culpability of sorts: after all, her decision to leave the protection of the group of refugees to return to Rome after the surrender by the Axis powers led the two women to their darkest moment. In fact, both mothers, Mary and Cesira, do not or cannot prevent their daughters from being raped.

Precious’s superficial examination of *Two Women* provides momentary solace, as her fantasy sequence demonstrates. Her complete identification with the daughter in De Sica’s film occurs when she sutures herself into that narrative. This fantasy, like others in the film in which the protagonist imagines yearbook photos that speak



Figure 5.4. Precious (Gabby Sidibe) and Mary (Mo’Nique) at home with Mongo (Quisha Powell) in *Precious*.



Figure 5.5. Cesira (Sophia Loren) with Rosetta (Eleonora Brown) in *Two Women*.

and herself as a celebrity, represents a sanitized version of events in her life.<sup>6</sup> The imagined scene, which does not occur in De Sica's film, takes place in Italian around a table adjacent to the bombed-out church in which the pair have sought refuge. Here, Mary, as Cesira, encourages her daughter to eat in polite tones and mildly profane language ("Metti il culo sulla sedia" ["Sit your ass down on the chair"] or "Mangia, puttana" ["Eat, you whore"]) that pale in comparison to the vulgar expressions she hurls at her daughter in real life. In the fantasy sequence, the two women are dressed in the same clothing as the Italian actors. Their calm discussion of food contrasts with the crude and unappetizing exchange between mother and daughter when Mary insists that Precious eat, and then eat some more, despite her protestations. This bizarre form of punishment for not having prepared collard greens to accompany the pigs' feet ends with Mary telling Precious: "You fucked it up now you gonna eat it up."

Perhaps even more salient for this analysis of De Sica's influence on Daniels is the image that *Precious* and *Two Women* share: in these



Figure 5.6. Screen shot: Hole in ceiling in *Two Women*.

two films, a hole in the ceiling serves both as a technical device and as a metaphor for understanding the narrative. When Precious's ceiling breaks apart as her father rapes her, a fantasy begins, signaling an escape from the horrible violence. It is through daydreams such as this, in which she envisions herself as a celebrity, that Precious liberates herself from everyday violence. (The viewer notes Mary's shadowy figure in the doorway during the rape, suggesting the mother's acquiescence to this perverse act.<sup>7</sup>) In a voice-over early in the film, Precious declares her intention to survive: "I'm going to break through. I'm going to be normal." It appears as if the opening in the ceiling, which gives way to a scene of light and celebrity, promises Precious an escape from the violence and abuse that her father inflicts. Sadly, that is not the case.

Cesira and Rosetta focus on an opening in the ceiling as well. It is the last thing that Rosetta sees before her rape by the colonial



Figure 5.7. Screen shot: Hole in ceiling in *Precious*.



soldiers, and her mother finds her staring catatonically at it afterward. Thus, the two films are linked by a terrible irony: the image of freedom that promises Precious an escape into a fantasy world actually represents the aftermath of horrific sexual violence when we consider the meaning of the film within the film. The violence perpetrated against mother and daughter in a desperate, war-torn land in what should be a holy space (an abandoned church) finds parallels in the sexual abuse by Precious's father in what should be her sanctum, the home. Daniels does not present the violence depicted in De Sica's film, but rather makes a powerful commentary on the young woman's misguided fantasy. Precious fancies an escape into another world without grasping the entire narrative, and hence the terror, of De Sica's film. Nor does she comprehend the violence inflicted on Italian women after the Axis surrender that *Two Women* represents. Thus the film within Daniels' film underscores Precious's marginalized state: she cannot read the film nor grasp the historical events that inform its narrative.

In place of the horrifying rape that De Sica portrays, Daniels inserts a fantasy sequence in which mother and daughter reenact their previous conversation about food. This substitution signals Precious's desperate need to cancel her own memories of rape by her father and abuse by her mother. The hole in the narrative, filled with Precious's fantasy, constitutes an inherent irony. This metaphor for escape—a physical hole or a break in a story that can be filled with fantasy—is in fact a trap. As Marcus (*Filmmaking by the Book* 90) points out, in cinematic terms, this hole opens onto another plane, into a world beyond the confines of the camera. I would argue that the hole in the ceiling also establishes a dialogue of sorts between De Sica and Daniels in the same way that another famous literary opening, the chink in the wall through which Pyramus and Thisbe communicate, connects Shakespeare with classical mythology and, by extension, Ovid in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The reenactment of this tragic tale from antiquity permitted the sixteenth-century English playwright to comment on the forbidden love in his own comedy. As working men, the amateur players (or "rude mechanicals" as Puck calls Bottom and Flute and company) offer a contrast in terms of station to Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, the noblemen and women whose dramatic love story plays out on the larger stage. Precious's daydreams underscore the dissonance between her impoverished existence and the fabulous world of celebrity (the American alternative to royalty). The play-

ers' work, like Precious's fantasy, elicits questions about the use of imagination in life. Thus this opening is an appropriate metaphor for the conversation between the Italian and American directors Vittorio De Sica and Lee Daniels. Daniels' *Precious* owes much more to De Sica's filmmaking than the coincidental viewing the American director describes. Rather, as this analysis demonstrates, it is studied application of neorealist social critique.

Spike Lee employs the genre to expose racism at home and abroad in *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008). The director declared in an interview with the *Telegraph* that this film, which is a fictionalized retelling of an actual battle in the Italian campaign, "is a homage to Rossellini, De Sica, and those cats." *Miracle at St. Anna* signals a new direction for Lee whose earlier films such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *School Daze* (1988), and *Jungle Fever* (1991) addressed issues in contemporary black America. With this, his first work filmed outside the United States, Lee announced his intention to respect Italian history and not merely appropriate it: "We hope to get into Venice, and I think that the Italians feel this is their film. We're not just some American people coming over here and commandeering their subject matter."

More recently, another African American director, Anthony Hemingway, made his debut with *Red Tails* (2012), the story of Tuskegee Airmen, a segregated crew of black pilots during World War II. This film, which takes place in Italy and was filmed there as well as at Air Force bases in California and Prague, contrasts the acceptance by the native Italians of the Tuskegee Airmen (332nd Fighter Group and 477th Bombardment Group of US Army Air Corps) with the racism and condescension with which most of their white American commanders treat them. George Lucas had proposed initially that Lee Daniels direct the prequel to this movie and that Spike Lee direct its sequel. At a premiere of his film (and later on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*), Lucas told those assembled that he had financed this project, which had been in production for twenty-three years, because Hollywood would not back an expensive movie with an all-black cast. Lucas believed that it would not do well in foreign markets, which typically represent 60 percent of any film's profit.<sup>8</sup> This contention reflects a certain irony in that the black airmen in Hemingway's film, like the soldiers in *Miracle at St. Anna*, feel more at ease with Europeans than with their fellow white Americans. As Spike Lee points out, the same phenomenon occurred in the case of African American entertainers

such as Josephine Baker, Miles Davis, and James Baldwin, who traveled abroad to seek freedom of artistic expression and refuge from the prejudice they experienced in the United States in the twentieth century.

*Miracle at St. Anna* contains several neorealist elements. The director tells his tale from the perspective of a child, a narrative strategy for which he thanks author James McBride on whose eponymous 2003 novel the film is based. McBride choose this viewpoint without realizing the importance of children in neorealist films such as *Bicycle Thieves*, *Rome Open City*, and *Paisan*. Lee sought an untrained actor for the role of Angelo Torancelli, the Italian youth who is befriended by the American troops. Like De Sica in *Bicycle Thieves*, Lee was searching for a child who had never acted before; he interviewed the top hundred of the five thousand children who showed up for an open casting call. In a conversation with author James McBride and Paul Holdengräber at the New York Public Library, Lee described Matteo Sciabordi, his choice for this role, as looking as if “he walked out of a De Sica or Rossellini film” (“Miracle at St. Anna”). Lee shot many other scenes on location, just as the neorealists did, and employed a crew of more than three hundred Italians. In order to preserve a sense of historical accuracy, Lee shot the scene of the massacre in the small Tuscan town of St. Anna di Stazzema in the actual spot where 560 innocent civilians, mostly elderly, women, and children, were killed by the retreating German SS troops on August 12, 1944. Queried as to why he chose to film in Italy, Lee quipped: “It took place in Italy” and later added, “You cannot duplicate the beauty of Tuscany with the mountains and hills” (“Miracle at St. Anna”). The director firmly believed that it was important for actors to speak their native language because that added a sense of authenticity to the film. He complained: “I’m tired of seeing war films where everyone speaks English, especially the Nazis” (“Miracle at St. Anna”). In addition, Lee hired an expert in military training, Billy Budd, to conduct a two-week boot camp for both the American and German soldiers so they would seem credible in their roles.

*Miracle at St. Anna*, like Lee’s previous films, created controversy. Italians rejected the director’s interpretation of the history of events that led to the massacre at St. Anna. In particular, they contested his representation of traitorous partisans who essentially delivered their fellow citizens to the advancing Nazis (Pisa). Lee attended the premiers of *Miracle at St. Anna* in Rome and Florence along with

the main actors. When asked if he would continue making films in Italy, the director, who received Italian and French funding for the film with the stipulation that he find a domestic distributor (Disney Touchstone), responded that he needed a story to take him there (“Miracle at St. Anna”).

*Miracle at St. Anna* follows the neorealist prescription of film as “moral imperative” or conduit for telling a forgotten or misrepresented chapter in history. The film recounts in flashback African American participation in World War II as a way of explaining the cold-blooded, seemingly random killing by the postal worker Hector Negron (Laz Alonso) in the initial scenes. As the narrative unfolds, Hector watches *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Bernard Wicki, and Darryl F. Zanuck, 1962), starring John Wayne, which recounts the events of D-day from both the Allied and German perspectives, on television in his New York apartment in 1983. The Army veteran announces to no one in particular, “We fought that war, too.” This scene introduces the theme of racial prejudice, experienced by African American soldiers during World War II, that the subsequent flashback will explore in greater depth.

Asserting, “There’s no way that one film can eradicate the Hollywood omission of African American soldiers” (“Miracle at St. Anna”), Lee attempted to establish a memorial for the more than 1 million so-called “Buffalo Soldiers” of the 92nd Division and their wives. The original Buffalo Soldiers were organized in October 1917 for combat in World War I; their nickname derived from the name given by Native Americans to black cavalymen during the Civil War. This segregated unit was the only African American infantry division to see combat in Europe during World War II.<sup>9</sup> As part of the 5th Army, the Buffalo Soldiers served in the Italian Campaign from 1944 to the war’s end. Reports vary as to the reason for this name, but soldiers tell of wearing their insignia of a brown-black buffalo with pride.<sup>10</sup>

Lee’s retelling of the story of the battles of the Serchio River, where many black soldiers lost their lives as white officers mistakenly sent firepower in their direction, was meant to reveal racism in the military. This difficult and prolonged battle, chronicled in detail by Hargrove (53–81), was one of the flashpoints for racial tensions in World War II. By resurrecting the memories of this division, Lee hoped to acknowledge the fine job that black soldiers, like James

McBride's stepfather and uncles, had done in the war. In an interview with Ty Burr of the *Boston Globe*, Lee recounted the connection between the black soldiers' return home and the rise of the civil rights movement. He added a critical scene at the soda fountain in the South that shows the deplorable treatment of black soldiers vis-à-vis German prisoners of war to highlight the unfairness of racial prejudice. Lee refers here to the Double V campaign which aimed to defeat both fascism abroad and discrimination at home, and the Jim Crow laws in particular. McBride's novel and Lee's film immortalize the sacrifices of black soldiers by recounting a formerly under-reported part of history, just as the neorealists had retold important events of the partisan participation in World War II. Author McBride in particular noted that without history there is no hope for the younger generation ("Miracle at St. Anna").

Neorealist directors also portrayed African American soldiers as Rossellini's *Paisà/Paisan* (1946) demonstrates. This episodic film, which chronicles the landing of American troops in Italy in the sum-



Figure 5.8. Spike Lee, wearing the Buffalo Soldier insignia, on the set of *Miracle at St. Anna*.

mer of 1943 and their progress up the peninsula from Sicily to the Po Valley in the winter of 1944, focuses on the interaction of Americans and Italians, whether in battle, love, or friendship. American soldier and novelist Alfred Hays recalls the birth of this film, calling it “a rather casual parturition midwifed by a two or three bottles of vino dei castelli” at a Roman trattoria with Rossellini in the spring of 1945 as the war was ending. Hays, who agreed to write the episodes set in Naples and Rome, declared that this film was even more pertinent to the American viewer than *Rome Open City* “because its basic theme is the relationship between a native population and a foreign soldier.” In fact, this writer, whose work was significantly altered by Rossellini,<sup>11</sup> declared that for those American soldiers who had fought, drank, and loved in Italy, *Paisan* would be “an overwhelming Valentine, a mirror in which once more the whole recent past will come rushing and flooding back.” In the second episode of Rossellini’s film, Pasquale (Alfonsino Pasca), a Neapolitan street urchin, meets and befriends a drunk black military policeman Joe (Hylan “Dots” Johnson). Once sober, Joe realizes that Pasquale has stolen his boots. He tracks down the boy who brings him “home” to the Mergellina cave. There the American soldier views the deplorable conditions in which the boy and his neighbors live in postwar Italy. Wagstaff, in his formal analysis of the episode (*Italian Neorealist Cinema* 243–253), notes the similarity of the relationship between Joe and Pasquale with that of the protagonists of *Bicycle Thieves* (246): “As they go through Naples, the pair are very similar to Antonio and Bruno in *Ladri di biciclette*, both as a visual motif (their contrasting height and gait) and psychologically: in De Sica’s film Antonio’s wits are dulled by obsessive anxiety, while Bruno is alert, resourceful, and protective of his father.” In fact, as Gallagher (195) reports, the episode “really took form only when Roberto [Rossellini] saw the boy and the black together exchanging lines and smiles”; this comment recalls De Sica’s decision to cast Enzo Staiola as Bruno because of the contrast of his gait with that of Lamberto Maggiorani, who played his father, Antonio Ricci (Bazin 54–55). Parallels emerge between Rossellini’s African American MP, Joe, and Lee’s “*il gigante di cioccolata*,” Private First Class Sam Train (Omar Benson Miller) in terms of their relationships to young, orphaned Italian boys (Pasquale and Angelo respectively) as well as in their experience of the racial prejudices faced at home in the United States. Both films, I would argue, acknowledge racism in

the United States while underscoring the shocking deprivations and staggering losses in Italy caused by the war.

Lee Daniels' and Spike Lee's adaptations of neorealist techniques and themes underscore the need for contextualizing film criticism in a larger, transatlantic framework instead of considering Italian and American cinematic works only in relation to their respective national film cultures. This consideration of the Italian neorealist aesthetic by African American directors forces us to gaze outward beyond the confines of national cinema to understand the use of an essentially foreign genre to comment on racism and poverty within American society. In an ironic twist, the quintessentially American problem of racism (at least in the European imagination) now threatens the social fabric of that continent as waves of immigrants enter the once homogeneous societies of the past.<sup>12</sup> Daniels and Lee effectively project social and political critiques, just as De Sica and Rossellini did in postwar Italy. In this way, contemporary American directors demonstrate the continued vitality and relevance of Italian film for American cinema in the twenty-first century.