

The Non-Professional Actor:

Italian Neorealist Cinema and Beyond

by Catherine O'Rawe. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. 249 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$157.95 and E-book: \$126.36.

The study of nonprofessional acting in film history is always going to be a study in contradictions. The term itself, given to someone performing but not considered “professional,” is a setup for exploitation. Catherine O'Rawe's excellent account of the men, women, and children who populated neorealist cinema tracks the practice in and beyond that movement, offering a detailed account of the ethics and effects of casting “from the street.” The strength of the book is in her “distanced” readings, in which she fills in details of the casting process, the discourse of the period, and the later lives of dozens of performers.

Among the challenges of such a study is the fact that most performers tend to vanish from the historical record after their work is done and every case study tells a different story. O'Rawe has, however, provided new research and brings together dozens of stories and anecdotes that have been published, or told to documentary filmmakers, and it is instructive to have them assembled into one account. The book might even be thought of as a history of neorealism from the perspective of the untrained actors who helped to put it on the map. Nonprofessionals helped the neorealist directors challenge the commercialism of the star system, but only by forgoing their own access to that system and its rewards. They perform their own vulnerability, and O'Rawe asks us to consider their performances as labor, and their presence on screen as much more than them “performing themselves.”

Case studies of some of the key actors in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *La terra trema* (1948), and *Paisan* (1946) are developed alongside many less-known films from the 1940s and 1950s. Each of the case studies is embedded in the critical discourse of postwar Italy and production details given by directors and crew members, which are consistently patronizing. Vittorio De Sica, director of *Bicycle Thieves* and many other films featuring untrained actors, was said to be able to get a “performance from a chair,” which is typical of the prolific commentary that negated the actors' agency, labor, and talent completely. The “accidental” discovery of Lamberto Maggiorani and Enzo Staiola for *Bicycle Thieves* perpetuated an ongoing discourse of fate in the casting of “ordinary” people. Inevitably, the practice of finding people on the street rather than through auditions means that many of those who were cast had no desire to be in movies in the first place.

The labor of nonprofessionals includes the act of showing up and assuming the identity of “actor,” which is already work, especially since for the nonprofessionals of neorealism this new identity made it difficult for them to return to being nonactors. In fact, Cesare Zavattini (scriptwriter on *Bicycle Thieves*) already recognized this in his treatment for a film he never made called at first *The Great Swindle*, and renamed *Tu Maggiori*, about the lead actor of *Bicycle Thieves*. The script is a cautionary tale about the “impossible future” of the untrained actor.

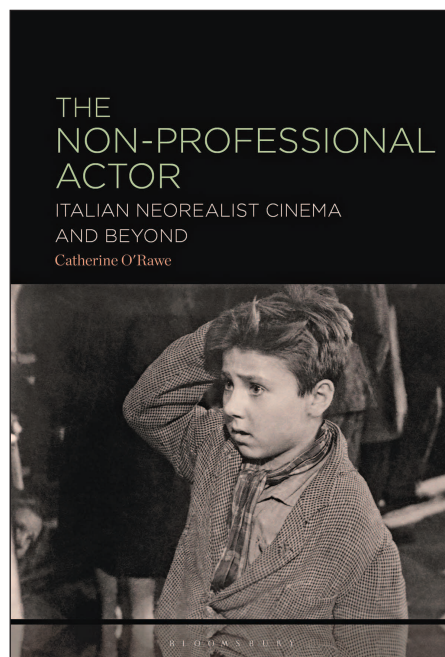
O'Rawe suggests that Maggiore's story has haunted Italian cinema as symptomatic of the contradictions implicit in the practice of street casting as he was famously left stranded after the film was such a success. The practice of postsynching dialogue in Italian cinema further silences the nonprofessionals who were dubbed by professionals in studio. What we see, then, are bodies being characters, raising critical metaphysical questions about being and seeming, and about the humanity of performance.

Visconti's accomplishment in *La terra trema* was described as that of a “water diviner,” molding the raw materials of his human cast. Many actors have in fact spoken out about their mistreatment, including Antonio Arcidiacono who plays Ntoni in *La terra trema*, who said in 1981 that Visconti betrayed and abandoned him after the shoot. Björn Andrésen, who plays Tazio in *Death in Venice* (1971), says much the same thing in the documentary *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* (2021). By assembling these various accounts, O'Rawe is able to paint a disturbing picture of postwar Italian cinema, which, for all of its humanism on screen, is predicated on firm hierarchies of class, race, and gender.

Being cast in movies was especially difficult for women and girls. The Giammona sisters in *La Terra Trema* had to continue to work at the family trattoria (where they were “discovered”) and had to cook and clean for their brothers on top of the tiring shooting schedule. More damaging was the reputations of women who were in movies that “spoiled them for marriage” given the proximate relations between female public performance and sex work. The story of Carmela Sazio in Rossellini's *Paisan* is particularly sad, even if it is mostly incomplete. For her performance in the Sicily episode of *Paisan* (in which she dies tragically) she was praised in the international press as being more authentically sexual than any trained actress, a provocative primitive wild girl on the verge of womanhood. After the shoot, Carmela begged Rossellini to help her find a way not to return to her impoverished life in a small village, but the director seemed only to be amused by the girl's poor grammar. She had no future in the industry and vanished into rumors of abuse and mistreatment by the men in her village.

One of the deepest contradictions of the nonprofessional in neorealist aesthetics is that they are “fallen” once they have played one role and can never be as “authentic” again, as if they would lose their virginity as pure human beings. André Bazin advocated against the reuse of the nonprofessional, saying that they “obviously cannot survive repetition.” They would essentially be professional, and thus ruined. Robert Bresson certainly subscribed to this mantra, although more contemporary directors have attained a more humane perspective. Sean Baker, for example, describes his nonprofessionals as “first-timers” recognizing their ability and potential to pursue acting careers rather than remain flash-in-the-pan novelty acts.

Among postwar Italian nonprofessionals, some did indeed flourish, particularly women such as Silvana Mangano, Gina Lollobrigida, and Sophia Loren, among others, who were discovered in beauty pageants or in the pages of photo magazines. Directors such as De Sica, Visconti, and Zavattini were frequently judges for these contests and O'Rawe tracks the interrelations between the film industry, the publishing industry, and the culture of contests. Male actors were often “discovered” as athletes, polo and swimming star Massimo Girotti being one who became a full-scale movie star (*Ossessione* [1943] was his tenth film in what became a very long career). When films such as *Bitter Rice* (1949) became hugely popular, the buxom stars (Mangano, et al.) were accused of bringing down the whole edifice of neorealism with their unbridled sexuality. In an editorial in the leading cinema journal *Cinema Nuovo*, entitled “The Scandal of the Curves” (1953), they were accused of having no artistic abilities and to be only beautiful bodies; moreover, if they continued acting, they would “endanger themselves morally.” The magazine did not hesitate, though, to use their voluptuous images on their covers.



Child actors are perhaps the most vulnerable nonprofessionals and are also responsible for some of the most memorable performances of neorealism. Due to lax labor laws in postwar Italy, many children were already working in factories and family businesses. Many were hustling black market goods on the street, inspiring films such as *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Hey Boy!* (1948) and a cycle of similar films about so-called “delinquents.” The swarms of street urchins were characterized as *meridionalismo* or Neapolitan, Southern, and backward. The trope of the nonprofessional tends to equate innocence with authenticity, primitivism, and the subaltern—which in Italy is in turn conflated with the Neapolitan and Sicilian southerner. The child actor who will only be a child briefly is perfectly positioned to embody the full neorealist aesthetic, including the novelty of a one-time appearance. Even more reason, claims O’Rawe, to distinguish between what these actors actually *did* with their performances, rather than, or alongside their *being*. The child actor cannot, after all, be childish, but must perform childhood.

Some of the most successful child performances in postwar Italian cinema were produced in collaboration with professionals, or what Bazin called the “amalgam.” O’Rawe parses this as the instability and unpredictability generated by “an acting partnership between a professional (adult) actor and a child non-professional.” She analyzes several such films in which Anna Magnani or Vittorio De Sica are paired with young actors. In *Rome, Open City* (1945) the child actor Vito Annichiarico throws himself dramatically on the body of Magnani when she is shot by the fascists, a gesture which is critical to the heightened effect of the scene. Annichiarico made several films with Magnani who emerges as one of the more benevolent and humane adults during this period.

Beyond neorealism, nonprofessional actors have continued to be a kind of “genre marker” for global art-house cinema, at least in the sense that the term “neorealist” gets used as shorthand to refer to the use of nonprofessionals to achieve a social realist aesthetic that is thought to be unattainable through the star system. O’Rawe’s final chapter is a partial catalogue of these films, although it is far from exhaustive. Nonprofessional acting remains an important aesthetic choice for many independent directors, and most performers are still left without support following the end of the shooting and promotional campaigns. O’Rawe offers multiple examples, including *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), for which the young actors were handsomely rewarded by director Danny Boyle, but they became embroiled in family disputes and substance abuse as their new status was so out of synch with their home community. One of the more tragic tales concerns Marina Golbahari, who was discovered by director Sadiq

Barmak begging on the streets of Kabul, and starred in the Afghanistan film *Osama* (2003) at age fourteen. She was accused of immodesty when photographed without a head covering at a film festival and, after receiving death threats from religious hardliners, could not return to her home in Afghanistan. As O’Rawe puts it, visibility can be a double-edged sword for women and girls in many parts of the world.

O’Rawe presents very few encouraging examples of nonprofessional actors having some agency in their performances and emerging intact from the experience, although I’m sure such actors exist, besides Massimo Girotti, Sophia Loren, and Silvana Mangano. Céline Sciamma chose to cast nonprofessional actors in *Girlhood* (2014) so that she could develop a more collaborative mode of directing, rather than fall into hierarchical patterns established and sustained by experienced actors (and, according to IMDb, many of those actors have made subsequent films). Yalitza Aparicio, the indigenous star of *Roma* (2018), was controversially nominated for an Academy Award. She continues to act in Mexican TV and has become an activist for domestic workers in Mexico.

The controversy over Aparicio’s nomination is symptomatic of the challenge that nonprofessionals present to the acting profession. They may not have put in years of training, but their performances are frequently riveting and can carry entire feature films—and it’s not because they are simply “being themselves.” An actor’s labor extends beyond the work of the production itself and includes the emotional effort of entering an unfamiliar working environment, and the postproduction work of publicity and promotion. Debates over the roles of nonprofessionals date back to postwar Italy, where actors’ unions strongly protested their use. The lack of a star system was partially due to the lack of proper training available through the Centro Sperimentale that otherwise supported the neorealist movement in so many ways, so the use of nonprofessionals by neorealist directors may have been a necessity that became an aesthetic that was sustained due to the economics of the practice.

O’Rawe’s study by her admission stops short of the effects and ethics of reality TV as well as the influential stars of social media. She does offer one strong example of an Italian neo-neorealist film, *Selfie* (2019), in which two Neapolitan boys were given iPhones to shoot their own film of their lives on the streets. Even here, when the boys are enabled to assert their agency as creatives and as social actors, it is the adult director Agostino Ferrente who was responsible for the “infrastructure” of editing, production, and promotion. O’Rawe points out that the absence of the boys from film festivals and press conferences is symptomatic of the cultural economy of film festivals that has little space for nonprofessionals except as trophies to trot out for display.

Analysis of the role of nonprofessional actors in world cinema raises a multitude of philosophical and ethical questions. O’Rawe’s book provides an important historical approach to the issue, to the extent that neorealism is considered the inaugural moment, and indeed it was a huge influence on the cinemas of Latin America and Iran. Once we consider the variability of work by such diverse directors as Ousmane Sembène, Tsai Ming-liang, Apitchatpong Weerasethakul, the Dardenne brothers, Kelly Reichardt, and so on, we see a much more varied approach in which nonprofessionals may be coached differently than the exploitive system that was at the core of the neorealist project. While they might all be “molding raw material” in some sense, these directors might also have developed more collaborative methods than the neorealist model suggests.

O’Rawe’s research is extensive and one of the real assets of the book is her account of the discursive context of nonprofessional performance in postwar Italy (although Pasolini is given short shrift). All the quotations in Italian are given in both Italian and English and taken together with all the critical quotations and citations, it makes for a choppy read. O’Rawe is so concerned to present all sides of debates, varieties of film readings, and the many contradictions inherent in her topic that her own voice is sometimes lost in the mix. While her historical account of the casting of nonprofessionals and questions concerning their afterlives are valuable contributions, she offers few original close analyses of actual performances. For that dimension of the topic, I would strongly recommend Miguel Gaggiotti’s *Nonprofessional Film Performance* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2023)—Catherine Russell

Directed by Yasujirō Ozu

by Shiguhiko Hasumi. California:
University of California Press, 2024.
352 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$85.00
and Paperback or E-Book: \$29.95.

Among recent books about the cinema of Yasujirō Ozu—including Jinhee Choi’s *Reorienting Ozu: A Master and His Influence* (2018), Woojeong Joo’s *The Cinema of Ozu Yasujirō: Histories of the Everyday* (2018), and especially Shinnosuke Kometani’s *Chasing Ozu* (2021) and Kathe Geist’s *Ozu: A Closer Look* (2023; see review in *Cineaste*, Winter 2023)—Shiguhiko Hasumi’s *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu* is among the most significant. It is a forerunner of these works as it was first published in Japan in 1983 when discourse on Ozu in the West had only been undertaken by Paul Schrader, Noël Burch, and Donald Richie, whose writings established numerous occidental clichés about the filmmaker. Like the more recent volumes cited, however, Hasumi’s book is an



In *Wicked Little Letters*, Chief Constable Spedding (Paul Chahidi, left) and Constable Papperwick (Hugh Skinner) stand behind Police Officer Gladys Moss (Anjana Vasan) outside the courthouse, pretending that they knew all along who the real culprit was.

The film treats its audience with intelligence but understands, at the same time, that most viewers will want an amusing comedy that descends into a little silliness with actors and actresses they know well. *Wicked Little Letters* nevertheless engages in a conversation about sexism, showing how Edith, Rose, and Moss are victims of different forms of patriarchal repression. Each shows a resiliency—Moss is a pioneer, contending with misogyny and prejudicial indifference; Rose refuses to compromise her outspoken and tomboyish persona; and Edith [Spoiler Alert] ultimately pursues a scorched-earth policy of rebellion or pushback against her overbearing father.

Edith is an especially intriguing character because she uses the poison-pen letters to manufacture a sense of victimhood for herself as their target, thereby sublimating the victimhood she actually suffers at the hands of her father and a repressive patriarchal culture. She revels in religious connotations, likening her own suffering to that of Christ on the cross (which, ironically, merely places her in the shadow of another overbearing masculine presence). Her father dismisses Edith's humble assertions with his righteous and foreboding irritation that the authorities have yet to bring Rose to justice. The delightful if tense interplay between Colman and Spall establishes the film's comedic and dramatic energy from the very first scene.

The film is perfectly cast, and the ensemble's verbal and physical interplay has an effortless rhythm. *Wicked Little Letters* is also an ensemble of comedy styles. It leans toward slapstick in portraying the constabulary's incompetence. Then there's a mocking satire of conservative social etiquette that recalls the BBC comedy series *Keeping Up Appearances* (1990–95), about a woman from a working-class family with aspirations of climbing the social ladder. Spall's performance evokes a boiling teapot that's about to whistle, while Buckley's devilish and disruptive presence as Rose is reminiscent of the rebellious young girls in the classic British comedy *The Belles of St. Trinian's*

(1954), overturning Littlehampton's proverbial apple cart by daring to be different. This is comedy crafted with a specific purpose.

The spark of exaggeration in Spall's physicality, verbal interplay, and volatile temperament recalls Peter Sellers's performance as the union leader Fred Kite in John and Roy Boulting's 1959 labor dispute comedy, *I'm All Right Jack*. Comedic exaggeration also animates Colman's, Buckley's, and Skinner's performances, but less so than in Spall's character. But the film never feels like it's ridiculing its characters. Instead, it's poking fun at traditional and conservative Englishness, and perhaps at Britain's misplaced nostalgia. This gives the film a satirical spirit that recalls the Boulting brothers' 1963 comedy, *Heavens Above!*, about a socialist priest, a privileged congregation, and the chaos that ensues around a case of mistaken identity.

Wicked Little Letters shares the silliness of those classic British films and their desire to underpin the comedy with thematic commentary, but it refuses to be too on the nose. Instead, Sharrock and Sweet create a space for the audience to do some of the work. *Wicked Little Letters* leaves itself to be completed by the audience afterward, planting seeds for thought in the minds of its more discerning viewers.—Paul Risker.



Accuser and Accused: the real-life Edith Swan (left) and Rose Gooding in 1920.

Contributors

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