

REOPENING THE MATARAZZO CASE

ERIK BACHMAN AND EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS REVISIT RAFFAELLO MATARAZZO'S 1949–55 ITALIAN MELODRAMAS

1

The release of four Matarazzo films in the Criterion Eclipse series gives English-speaking audiences a valuable opportunity to reflect on the development of cinematic melodrama outside of the Anglo-American context. Although they were blockbusters in Italy, *Chains* (1949), *Tormento* (1950), *Nobody's Children* (1952), and *The White Angel* (1955) did not receive the same international circulation and interest that neorealist films of the period did. It took about a decade before French critics at *Positif* and *Présence du cinéma* paid the attention to Matarazzo's work that it still has not received in the U.S.

He got his start as a film reviewer and a script editor before directing his first feature in 1933, *Popular Train*, a joyous romp with theme songs, screwball mix-ups, and innovative editing; there are affinities with René Clair's *À Nous La Liberté* (1931), Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht's *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), and the British General Post Office documentary, *Night Mail* (1936). The title is apt because the notion of *popolare* is central to Matarazzo's cinematic practice. While best translated into English as "popular," *popolare* nevertheless carries a highly specific meaning in Italian culture, evoking the values and codes of working-class and non-bourgeois (yet neither "proletarian" nor "revolutionary") life: traditional, uneducated, and (especially in the case of Matarazzo's Neapolitan melodramas) distinctly *meridionale*, or "southern," as opposed to the metropolitan, cosmopolitan, industrial north. Above all, it often carries the echoes of the *conservative*, the resistance and inertia of the masses to "rational progress" or modernization. And crucially for Matarazzo's engagement, it is less a social quality or demographic category than a *discourse*: a set of shared and commonly known texts, materials, styles, gestures, and habits that constitute the obstinate texture of a social world undergoing drastic change.



Paradoxical conservatism
Tormento. © 1950 Titanus. DVD: Eclipse from The Criterion Collection.

2

Following World War II, producer Peppino Amato offered Matarazzo a low-budget melodrama project intended to cash in on the enormous success of the recently created *fotoromanzi* ("photo novels"), weekly magazines that told melodramatic tales in photographs arranged like comic-book panels with speech inserts and that featured a recurring set of actors familiar to Italian audiences. These *fotoromanzi* often resemble publicity stills for nonexistent films, and they tell endless variations on the same stories of mistaken identity, false accusation, and betrayal. They were both a continuation of *popolare* traditions and an innovative medium in the post-war years that witnessed an explosion of Italy's mass culture industry, as cinema ticket sales went from 318 million per year before the war to 532 million in 1947. Read not just by women but by peasants and the working class, *fotoromanzi* targeted a vast Italian audience of the semiliterate and illiterate who did not necessarily have the means to go to the cinema regularly. Amato's proposal to translate the pseudo-cinematic print format into film was an attempt to get this diverse audience into theaters, and it ultimately produced the first melodrama in the Eclipse boxed set, *Chains*, which became the top-grossing film in Italy the year of its release.

This early achievement ensured a wide audience base for Matarazzo's subsequent melodramas, though none ever equaled the success of his output from 1949 to 1955, a period in which Matarazzo directed fourteen films, including two similar films Criterion has released only on Hulu Plus, *Torna!* (1954) and *He Who Is without Sin* (1954); a 1953 Verdi biopic; and *The Ship of Condemned Women* (1954), which is a women-in-prison movie set on a boat that a waggish *Positif* reviewer called "a porno *Potemkin*." Minor differences aside, the films in the Eclipse set disclose the contradictory qualities of Matarazzo's cinematic practices: conservative *and* suspicious of institutions, sentimental *and* sadistic, formulaic *and* unpredictable, filled with unobtrusive sequences *and* passages of baroque excess.

Long reviled by leftist critics, Matarazzo fell from public favor by the end of the 1950s, and it took nearly twenty years for film scholars to revisit his work in terms that are of major importance for debates about melodrama and popular culture more generally. (*Fotoromanzi* survived into the 1970s, but with higher production costs and fierce competition from television, the format became increasingly unprofitable and gradually lost mass-cultural prominence during that decade.) The major critical intervention was a slim volume published in 1976 to mark a Matarazzo retrospective in Savona that year, *Neorealismo d'appendice: per un dibattito sul cinema popolare—il caso Matarazzo* ("Feuilleton Neorealism: For a Debate on Popular Cinema—The Matarazzo Case"; *appendice* here means "feuilleton," a newspaper supplement filled with light entertainment, talk-of-the-town gossip, and the like). Not available in English, *Neorealismo d'appendice* features dueling essays from Adriano Aprà and Claudio Carabba. Aprà's piece supports the reconsideration of Matarazzo for three reasons: to underscore the need to understand cinema as a form of mass communication; to attack the elitism of discounting the *popolare*; and to defend the intrinsic artistic merits of these films. The last point is perhaps the most interesting: Aprà argues simultaneously that there is both less of a difference than we think between Matarazzo and the neorealists (shared mode of production, shared melodramatic plot devices) and far more of one stylistically, since his melodramas appear to embody an expressionist mode closer to "mythological archetype" and a "theater of the psyche."

Carabba scathingly rebuts these claims, refusing to credit Matarazzo's postwar films with any originality. According to him, to cry foul at the "ghettoization" of blockbuster fare such as *Chains* and to denigrate the "militant" critics of the immediate postwar period who fought a difficult "battle" to defend and circulate neorealist films is downright perverse.

Crucially, Carabba points to the connections between Matarazzo's melodramas and the *fotoromanzi* in order to insist that these films remain "feuilleton neorealism"—an expression he uses disparagingly to indicate that they neither engage with the present nor construct any "anti-realist" alternative.

Looking back at the debate, it is evident that both sides are in fact correct. The films do borrow the look and tropes of neorealism but only to return them in a hurry. Halfway through *Chains*, for instance, there are numerous dream-like scenes of a young boy idly witnessing tempestuous encounters between his mother and a former lover of hers that look like canny citations of *Germany Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948). Yet these connections are not made explicit or elaborated in any sort of consistent way. Once the mother's former lover is killed, the father is forced to flee the country, and the mother herself is thrown out of the family home, this engrossed focus on child witnesses vanishes altogether. Similarly, while it is also clear that Matarazzo's postwar melodramas can be vertiginous and excessive, such moments of disorienting surfeit neither break with the conventions of melodrama nor do they happen as frequently as some critics have suggested. After all, no one could reasonably contest that these postwar melodramas situated themselves as *cinema popolare* or that they were the mainstream result of a production and distribution system doing its best to develop a home product capable of beating the Americans. Above all, there is no doubt that, whatever else one might say of them, these certainly are conservative films, insofar as they reliably stand on the side of family, church, and order.

Yet it is with this final point that we can discern the limits of the Aprà–Carabba debate, for what is far trickier to account for is the way in which Matarazzo's films are conservative and the degree to which that conservatism may in fact be wholly compatible with realism, be it neo- or feuilleton. To say that these films enact a plausible defense of "the family" or "the church" is only possible if one has not watched them with anything approaching full attention. Even if the masses who flocked to these melodramas consumed them as *popolare* entertainment, they were still sitting through films that presented a deeply incoherent conservatism, in which many contradictions in the institutions being defended were laid bare. The families may get back together at the end, but they do so despite the fact that state, church, and the family unit itself are unfailingly responsible for having broken them up in the first place, through a dizzying array of unjust imprisonments, false accusations, pious condemnations, thefts, and a general incapacity to openly confront a minor issue before it becomes deliriously overblown.



Lost world

Chains. © 1949 Titanus. DVD: Eclipse from The Criterion Collection.

Ultimately, the problem with the 1976 debate is that it never questions the basic assumption that neorealism is progressive while melodrama is conservative. What is missing from it is the idea that has long been familiar to Anglo-American scholars: that popular melodrama can be, in the manner of Sirk's films, a site for symbolic resistance to dominant modes of social organization. More specifically, however, a return to this debate casts both neorealism and its imagined antagonist in a different light. For in preserving and focusing on the spaces of working-class culture, neorealist cinema tended to simultaneously sever the discursive structures and materiality of *popolare* culture. As such, neorealism's much-vaunted access to social reality and its supplementary details also reveals itself as a potential falsification of mass experience and, in its own way, as a paradoxically conservative dismissal of the energies and contradictions embedded in the lived texts and historical details of the *popolare*. Matarazzo's films, complexly conservative though they may be, nevertheless illuminate the shortcomings of neorealism by adumbrating a politics built not on the evacuation of the *popolare* but on a melodramatic elaboration of the messy and communal intersections of inherited discourses and historical rupture. At the very least, it is on such a basis that a new look at the Matarazzo debates proves instructive, pointing less toward the question critics then could not answer (*are Matarazzo's melodramas really instances of feuilleton neorealism?*) than it does toward the one they did not even try to: *and what kind of realism might that be?*

3

A scene from *Chains* is suggestive. In exile in the United States following the murder of a man he mistakenly assumed was his wife's lover, Guglielmo (Amadeo Nazzari) finds him-

self in a room full of other Italian emigrant railroad workers in Ohio on Christmas Eve. Guglielmo has just received a letter from his mother, who has been looking after his children since he escaped from Naples and banished his wife, Rosa (Yvonne Sanson), from their home. The missive is filled with poignant seasonal details: his son, Tonino (Gianfranco Magalotti), has just set up the Nativity scene; his daughter, Angelina (Rosalia Randazzo), cannot stop asking questions about their ostracized mother. In a sequence bookended by dissolves, we briefly see Guglielmo's mother and children gathered around the aforementioned Nativity. When we cut back to Ohio, a musician starts strumming his guitar and singing: "*Dearest Mother / Christmas is almost here / And being so far from home / Leaves a bitter taste.*" This epistolary song goes on to narrate a situation in which a father exiled in the U.S. mournfully gives permission to his mother to allow his unfaithful wife to come back home so his children can see her again. Understandably, Guglielmo's response to the uncanny correspondence between his current situation and the song is to cry.

What makes this scene striking, however, is not so much the seamless fit between the protagonist of a melodramatic film and the narrator of a song lyric but rather the fact that this particular protagonist would have already known this tune quite well. It is a version of "Lacreme Napuletane" ("Neapolitan Tears"), a massively popular emigrant song from 1925 that came out of an interwar tradition of Neapolitan musical theater called *sceneggiata*. This is not in itself surprising, especially for melodrama, but it points toward a crucial difference from its neorealist touchstone. According to Gilles Deleuze's famous theorization of neorealist techniques, the decoupling of perception from action achieved by means of long periods of inactivity produces the chance for audi-



Scenes from a marriage

Tormento. © 1950 Titanus. DVD: Eclipse from The Criterion Collection.

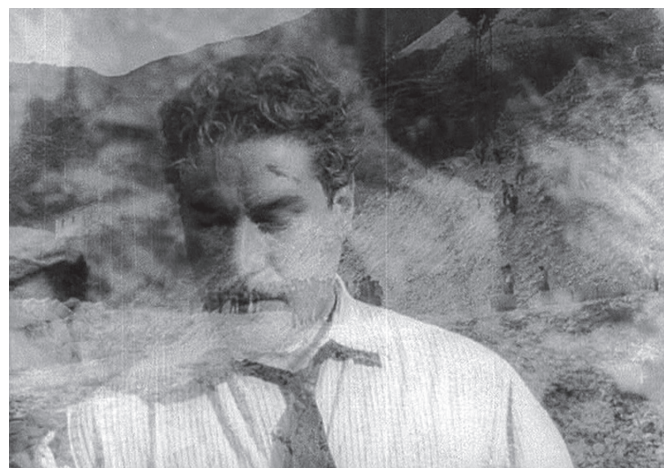
ence attention to wander and become active itself, thereby compensating for the lack of agency often depicted in neorealism's desperate situations of characters unable to escape or affect their surroundings. As such, it is paradoxically an attention to spaces themselves—presented without the “distraction” of inherited cinematic styles or *popolare* cultural modes—that elicit active, and assumedly “radical,” affects and desires.

In Matarazzo's melodramas, however, it is assumed that the mere perception of a materially given reality, either by the audience or by the characters in the film's worlds, will not suffice to bring about the kind of lachrymose experiences on ample display. Instead, what is used to evoke and provoke subjective experience in these films are the songs and texts that make up the culture of the *popolare* itself: in an echo of the ideology of neorealism, it is not a “representation” of *popolare* culture but a seemingly more direct access to its texts as historically present materials. In other words, insofar as Italian *cultura popolare* was inextricable from the very sort of working-class experiences attended to by neorealist cinema, it makes little sense to speak of these films as flights from such everyday concerns. Rather, they foreground the discursive elements and traditions, such as the *sceneggiata* song, that emerged from those experiences and that effectively and often plaintively stimulate those forced to inhabit and endure the same reality more famously depicted by the likes of De Santis, De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti.

If already existing *popolare* traditions structure cathartic reactions and help produce the moments of melodramatic excess in *Chains*, this redeployment of shared cultural knowledge gets complicated further in Matarazzo's follow-up film, where the functions of repetition in his melodramas start to become highly conspicuous. *Tormento* slightly adjusts the

characters, thematic elements, narrative arcs, and formal techniques that proved to be so successful in *Chains*. In both films Nazzari and Sanson, who star in all of Matarazzo's major melodramas, play a couple whose fidelity to each other is tested by the ill will of friends and family toward their relationship. In *Chains*, the person instigating this crisis is an old flame of Sanson's Rosa, while in *Tormento* this role gets fulfilled by her character's wicked stepmother, Matilde (Tina Lattanzi). As in *Chains*, an accusation of murder (false this time) sends Nazzari's character (Carlo) to prison, and Sanson's character (Anna) finds herself banished from her home by her stepmother. Much depends in both films not only on one's access to the letters people send but also on when such access ends up being granted. What keeps Anna exiled from home even as she tries to raise her child without Carlo is the fact that Matilde is withholding Anna's letters from her father. Complications ensue, Anna's daughter ends up with Matilde, and Anna herself is made to enter a home for fallen women. She is only freed from her prison-like reformatory after Carlo gets released because the police have meanwhile managed to catch the real murderer, thus clearing his name. As in *Chains*, *Tormento* climaxes with a scene depicting the reconstitution of the family unit through the power of a teary embrace.

Viewers of the boxed set will be struck by the degree to which all of these films serially recombine a strikingly consistent set of elements. To be sure, this recombinatory approach has long functioned as an indicator of a director's auteur status. However, what potentially makes critical attention to repetition in Matarazzo's films more than an exercise in auteurist interpretation are the linkages between his recombinatory film practice and the diverse discourses of the *popolare* from which he draws. Repetition in these four films suggests



Visible chains

Nobody's Children. © 1951 Titanus. DVD: Eclipse from The Criterion Collection.

the successful application of an evocative formula (replete with accompanying idiosyncrasies) that seems to have worked on a wide cross-section of a diverse postwar Italian public, much like the one successfully addressed by the equally repetitious scenarios, figures, and plots of *fotoromanzi*. In other words, the seeming bluntness of this repetition indexes that of a wider cultural landscape, compressed into the overcrowded confines of a single director's serial output.

To call repetition in Matarazzo's melodramas formulaic, however, is not the same thing as labeling them crass commercial enterprises, insofar as the adjective "formulaic" applies equally well to other forms of human expression—like idioms, prayers, or proverbs—that establish a sense of continuity and community across time by means of a prefabricated representation or text. Consequently, recognizing the formulaic qualities of Matarazzo's repetitions is a way of identifying an impulse that informs his entire postwar engagement with the *popolare* because that engagement indicates an attempt to view contemporary Italian life in continuity with interwar Italian life by way of the popular discourses that most informed mass experience in those two periods. Whereas many neorealist films emotively explore the cratered spaces and economic disparities left behind by the war, the literally formulaic plots of Matarazzo's postwar melodramas instead constitute so many desperate attempts to salvage and conserve a popular community torn apart not just by war but by violent contemporary political enmities.

Nobody's Children and its sequel, *The White Angel*, tell a single story in which the machinations of a family member (this time a mother) lead to a rupture in the relationship between Guido (Nazzari) and Luisa (Sanson), which sets off a chain of narrative events, betrayals, and misrecognitions too dizzying to recount here. Stylistically what is most notable

in these films is the ostentatious presence of wipes and dissolves. Two small details are particularly worth noticing in the climatic quarry sequence in *Nobody's Children*. First, the passage of young Bruno (Enrico Olivieri) from the quarry into the house is achieved via a wipe: he leaves his marble seat, and as he exits diagonally out of the bottom-left corner of the frame, his exit is obscured by a shot of his entrance into a house. Because of this editing, the whole thing happens just *slightly* too fast to be read as a real-time unfolding. Several moments are shaved off, non-essential ones in which he climbs the stairs, moving through a space that will be passed through but that will not bear directly on the plot. Second, there is no hard cut between a shot of Guido's face as he holds a dying Bruno to what follows it: an extreme long shot of Guido, surrounded by the quarry and backed by a procession of workers. Rather, there is a dissolve, such that his downcast face looms over the site of work and its workers.

To be sure, there is nothing novel about wipes and dissolves in and of themselves, especially not in the cinema of this period. However, watching Matarazzo's postwar melodramas, one is struck by both their frequency and their capacity to produce jarring, unexpected transitions and screen compositions. For instance, a common transition in these films involves a wipe or a dissolve from a character or group of characters onto that same character or group. When it is achieved with a wipe, as in a *Tormento* sequence in which Anna's father and stepmother miss the opera and return home early, the result is that a character ends up sharing screen space with herself, as a new location with her in it seems to shove her and her previous locale out of the way.

Elsewhere in *Tormento*, there are multiple left-to-right wipes of Anna with her daughter, producing a situation in which the pair appears to be facing off against each other

across fractured spaces and times. Similar dislocations of space with constant characters are also achieved in dissolves, such as one of Bruno dying in bed overlaid on a graveyard bust of him, a ghostly figuration of his memorialized death occluding his face.

What to make of these frankly distracting transitions? First, they achieve narrative efficiency, especially with the dissolves that produce the appearance of smooth transition while erasing the connective tissue between spaces and the causal networks linking them. Second, Matarazzo's wipes and dissolves generate a filmed world in which there is no breathing room: the next shot or sequence is constantly intruding into the one currently before our eyes. This leads to an odd effect that formally bolsters the sense of fatalism as well as the absence of choice or chance that led to many of the accusations of these being conservative films that defended the status quo. What is to come already exists, independent of what may happen in the last moments of a dissolving or wiped-away shot. The "chains" of the earlier film become formally literalized, tightly drawing together different locations, characters, and moments in time into the same cramped screen space. The films will offer no way out of this corner, no solution or escape: they bring to full weeping, ceaselessly repetitive, and hurried light a texture of *popolare* experience as real and painful as those blasted postwar landscapes over which the neorealist camera lingered.

4

If we are to take seriously the idea of feuilleton neorealism as an extension of *fotoromanzi*, then it is in the very compositional methods outlined above that we see just how formally indebted Matarazzo's films are to the medium they draw from and develop. After all, this dual tendency—both the visible pre-existence of what is to come in the next frames and the capacity to see these two distinct frames at the same time—is analogous to the reading experience of a *fotoromanzo*, as the eye sees both what has been read and what will be read all at once. It is a fixed world, not just of formulaic storylines but of already composed frames laid out and ready to be slotted in.

There are a couple reasons to stress this technique-based interpretation of how the presence of the *popolare* can be discerned in these Matarazzo films over against those readings that focus instead on its inherited conservative content or tawdry plotlines. First, to agree briefly with Aprà, it is largely true that a restriction of critical attention to films that are recognizably a part of a radical political-aesthetic project excludes from consideration much of what has actually been watched in the last century. Second, while one may, with good reason, still believe in the conviction that under-



Feuilleton neorealism

Top two: *Tormenta*. © 1950 Titanus. DVD: Eclipse from The Criterion Collection. Bottom: *The White Angel*. © 1955 Titanus. DVD: Eclipse from The Criterion Collection.

pinned the “militant” criticism advocated by Carabba, that should not preclude consideration of *how* the conservatism of a supposedly conservative cinema coheres or fails to cohere (which may finally be the more difficult and fruitful topic). Third, even if these films are “merely” feuilleton neorealism, we should recall that neorealism itself was never just about a set of particular content that included the Working Class, War, Poverty, Labor, Absence of Free Choice, The Countryside, and The City Slum. In the critical defenses of neorealism—often made by the very critics who attacked Matarazzo’s films—emphasis was placed on how it developed a formal language particular to its historical moment that produced a mode of looking that ran counter to those commonly available in mainstream, especially American, film. Hence, whether or not one put the emphasis on “access to reality” or on a reaction to other styles, a common defense of that uneven neorealist project was how it could expose the material conditions that limited the capacity of the poor to change their situation without becoming didactic socialist realism in the process.

We take the charge of “feuilleton neorealism” seriously by neither disavowing it (*Matarazzo was never trying to be realist*) nor accepting it (*Matarazzo made pop imitations of “real” radical art*). Rather, we take it seriously by severing its status as an appendix; no longer the feuilleton understood as a “stupid copy” of the real thing but as something that is substantively feuilleton and formulaic in its own right. Only in this way do we start to grasp the kind of realism at stake here, which is a feuilleton realism proper to Matarazzo’s melodramas that also extends well beyond them. It is a realism that fully embodies the formal relations of a social system as well as its attendant modes of looking and ordering space. In this way, it is not a critical realism, especially not one intended to operate as such, but a site in which one can detect the selfsame realism of a given social order—the collected means by which a system reaffirms its apparent naturalness—and recognize its contradictions. How? It does not expose something unseen, and, counter to what many standard accounts of melodrama purport, it seems wrong to claim that it is concerned with the revelation of the “unspeakable” or the “gestural.” Rather, the specificity of the melodramatic mode here is the way in which it takes banal material and chains it together a little *too* tightly, repeats its formulas a little *too* blatantly, makes the *melos* moment a little *too* precise, and hurries from one moment to the next a little *too* quickly. It does not take the time or space to produce occasions for reflection. The result is the collapse of that distance and supplementary detail to which neorealism attended. In so doing, Matarazzo’s feuilleton realism produces another perspective

just as necessary, one that detects the profound and perverse interconnection of distinct zones, the oppression not of brute material necessity but of inherited formal relations and *popolare* institutions, and, above all, the binding together of all of this into a single film’s world.

These films followed in the wake of a world war, one that built a new international order of zones and alliances, pathways and connections, at the same time as it irrevocably wrecked a previous one. That war is hardly ever spoken directly of in these melodramas (*Chains* briefly alludes to Rosa’s childhood lover’s military service), and yet it is always there, not in the glaring absence of wartime experiences and ordeals among its characters but rather in another painfully felt loss, the trench-sized wound for the fantasy of the *popolare*. Alberto Abruzzese writes in *Letteratura italiana: Storia e geografia* (“Italian Literature: History and Geography,” Einaudi, 1989), “the *fotoromanzo* was in fact born as a solution of continuity between the *cultura popolare* of the 1930s and the dominant culture of the first period of reconstruction. There was a vacuum of melodramatic production after the fracture of the war. Not because there was an absence of products included in this genre, but rather because their traditional, local, and unitary connotations appeared lost” (our translation). How true this is too of Matarazzo’s postwar melodramas, which rushed in to fill that vacuum as well. And how fitting that the war remains missing as content in almost all of these films: an absent war in a series of melodramas aiming to reconstitute and cash in on the continuity of a *popolare* destroyed by the very war that these films cussedly refuse to represent directly. What we have here, then, is the cramped over-accordance between the structural position of these films in Italian history and the structural position adopted by their characters, confronted on all sides by domestic and social environments that are more evocative, painful, and ridiculous than they are fully comprehensible.

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ABSTRACT Looking back at the postwar films of Raffaello Matarazzo (specifically, *Chains*, *Tormento*, *Nobody’s Children*, and *The White Angel*), this essay comparatively resituates Italian melodrama in terms of nationally marked conceptions of the popular that help produce an alternative critical perspective onto the period to that offered by neorealism.

KEYWORDS Raffaello Matarazzo, Italian neorealism, *Chains*, *Tormento*, *Nobody’s Children*

DVD DATA Raffaello Matarazzo’s Runaway Melodramas [*Chains*, *Tormento*, *Nobody’s Children*, *The White Angel*]. Director: Raffaello Matarazzo. © 1949, 1950, 1951, 1955 Titanus (under exclusive license from Intramovies Srl). Publisher: Eclipse from The Criterion Collection. \$59.95, 4 discs.