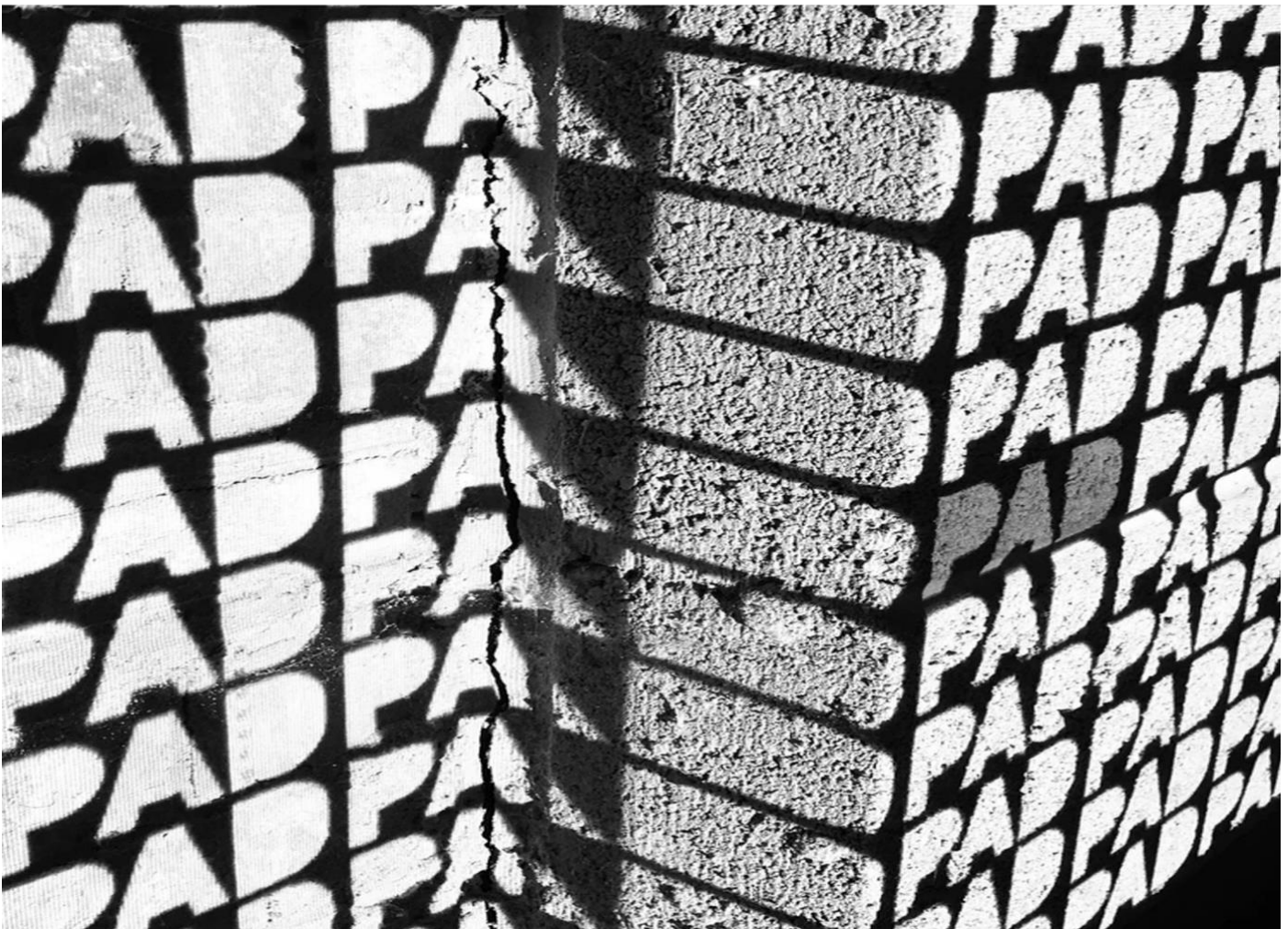


November 2022

Realism: World Building, Present Truth and Post-Cinema

A Comparative Study of Rossellini and Fellini's 'Rome, Open City' (1945) and The Safdie Brothers 'Uncut Gems' (2019)

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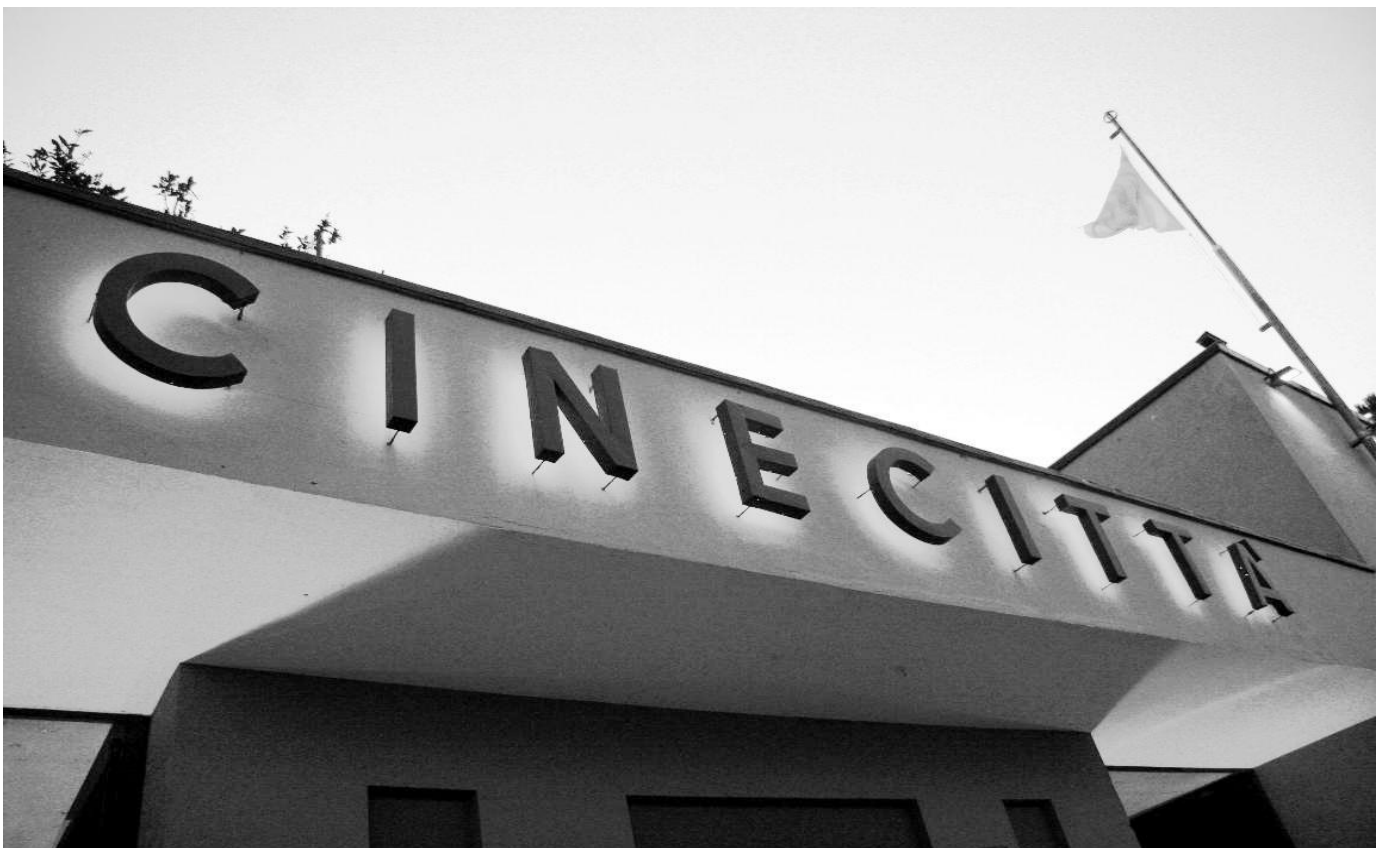


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One of the earliest examples of realism within cinematic conventions was the Italian Neo-realist movement which rose to prominence in the aftermath of the second world war, following the fall of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Mussolini understood that film was a way to reach his people; *“Mussolini recognized the country’s mass desire to emulate what the people imagined as the prosperous American lifestyle.”* (Wells, 2007). Under Mussolini’s rule, Italian cinemas screened exclusively imported Hollywood films purposely neglecting the experiences of Italian directors. Mussolini created his own film studio ‘Cinecittà’, intended – and proclaimed -as the ‘Italian Hollywood’, emulating the same fictitious, glamorous presentation prevalent in the average American movie smash hit. From 1937 to his fall in 1943, Mussolini’s Cinecittà was responsible for three-quarters of the Italian film industry exports, which purposely prohibited Italian filmmakers to present the realities of Italian working life to international audiences, made particularly worse especially during a time of war and austerity.



Cinecittà Studio, Rome, Italy

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After the Second World War, filmmakers including Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti and Gianni Puchini campaigned for the end of the right-wing influence and involvement in the Italian film industry. Roberto Rossellini, along with screenwriter Federico Fellini made the seminal film, 'Roma Città Aperta' (Rome, Open City, 1945), in response, which detailed the resistance to German occupation by the citizens of Rome, weeks before Russian forces besieged Berlin and the German Army surrendered to the Allies. 'Roma Città Aperta' (Rome, Open City, 1945) certified both Rossellini and Fellini as notable figureheads in the revolutionary Italian neo-realism movement, characterized by a desire to tell the stories of poverty, injustice and austerity through the experiences of the Italian working classes.



Rome, Open City Poster, 1945

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Rossellini believed that it was imperative that he present the war for what it was, deciding to favour 'truth over style'. However, and perhaps controversially, before his launch into a career as a realist filmmaker, Rossellini made films for the Fascist Italian government under Cinecittà. It was perhaps this experience that inspired Rossellini to make anti-fascist films after experiencing the truly 'Americanized' Italian film industry under Mussolini's dictatorship. Rossellini's experience in Cinecittà inevitably evoked feelings of guilt in which he questioned his morality as a filmmaker. There was a clear need for political redemption in the films of the Italian Director, and conceivably this was seen most prominently in 'Roma Città Aperta' (Rome, Open City), 1945. It was suggested that "[*Rome, Open City*] is concerned with the survival of morality in an immoral world" (Los Angeles Times Film Critic, 2015). However, while presenting resistance to Nazi occupation, the film also blended a revolutionary spirit with the everyday experiences of working-class citizens of Rome, merging the freedom fighters with those who desired freedom.



Still from Rome, Open City dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1945

Rome, Open City was one of the first internationally recognised films to feature non-actors in lead roles. Rossellini and Fellini were instrumental in pioneering a street cast, which would later influence movements such as French New Wave, and Contemporary British Realism; with directors including Andrea Arnold (*Fish Tank*) and Paddy Constantine (*This is England*) adopting street casts in recent years as a way of eliciting authenticity. A street cast can be mostly made up of backgrounds that relate directly to the subject matter of the project; “[Realist] Filmmakers hope that actors not schooled in the overtrained mannerisms of the drama school will supply their work with authenticity and realism.” (Jablonski, 2011).



Still from Fish Tank dir. Andrea Arnold, 2009

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Although Rome, *Open City* provided an outlet for the voices of the Italian working classes to be heard on a larger scale. Rossellini was vehemently unafraid to portray the horrors of the war in complete and genuine honesty, including graphic scenes of torture and the deaths of multiple characters the audience becomes familiar with and invest in, one such brutality is Pina (Anna Magini) who is shot and killed in the street, and horrifyingly, in front of her young son. The film ends with the tragic death of Aldo Fabrizi's Don Pietro, a heroic priest seen as the protagonist of the film. This leaves the audience on a sombre note, inspiring a moment of reflection on the plight of the Italian people as they attempted to rebuild their lives with the wounds of the war still apparent and lingering.



Pinã, Rome, Open City dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1945

Rossellini and Fellini's use of actual locations in post-war Rome, and non-professional actors, provided a level of authenticity to his film, which in turn allowed them to succeed in his quest to present the truth and the feelings of the people of his open, undefended Rome. The American film critic, Manohla Dargis, posited; *"He [Rossellini] helped usher the world back into cinema by mixing authentic people and locations in with actors and studio sets."* (Dargis, 2006).

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The influence of Rossellini, Fellini and the Italian Neo-Realist movement has been highly influential in presenting the truths of everyday people. This unabridged form of authenticity and honesty enables a stronger audience investment in the work. While dramatic in substance, it reflects the methods that realist filmmakers use to present the trials and tribulations of the working class that removes any elements of 'drama' and instead retain a legitimacy that audiences can identify and empathise with.

Considering the notion of authenticity in relation to *Rome, Open City*, Roland Barthes discussion on the value of film as an art form regarding the presentation of important messages can be applied. In *Signs and Images* published in 1960, Barthes theorised that due to film's place as a visual medium, the images presented can be seen as 'messages', "*These images aim to teach us, or inform us of, something. In other words, some elements of these images are genuine messages.*" (Barthes, 1960 p.22). In *Rome, Open City*, the choices of cinematography and set decoration intersect with the visceral and truthful experiences of the people to elevate anti-war rhetoric which communicates Rossellini's message both authentically and powerfully.



Still from Rome, Open City dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1945

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As self-proclaimed admirers of the Italian Neo-Realist movement, the Safdie Brothers, are a young New York native filmmaking duo, whose films present a truthfulness and a jarring authenticity that comes from their use of techniques referencing the historical realism movements as well as their overall use and approach of realism-as-method. The Safdie Brothers have openly declared their admiration of the Italian Realist movement. Speaking to The Criterion Collection in 2015, Josh Safdie referred to Vittorio de Sica's quintessential 1948 film, *Bicycle Thieves*, as his most influential film, professing: 'This is the holy grail, the ultimate filmmaking bible. It maximizes its use of father/son dynamics and trying, real locations, all while its pure emotional current is completely understated yet very felt'.



Bicycle Thieves, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948

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As two boys from New York City, the brothers moved between living in Queens, the setting of their first acclaimed film *Good Time* (2017) and Manhattan, which is where the most recent project from the brothers, *Uncut Gems* (2019) takes place. The Safdie Brothers found an outlet through their films to present the diversity and busyness of the bustling streets of NYC in contrast to the city's gritty underbelly.



Beni and Josh Safdie with Adam Sandler on the set of Uncut Gems, 2012

Visually, the Safdie's realistic style does not lead to a lack of a clear and individual cinematic aesthetic. This style, while being a beautiful homage to the classical film techniques such as shooting on 35mm Kodak film, which both films, *Uncut Gems* (2019) and *Good Time* (2017) are shot on and utilise as a medium. The aesthetic that is portrayed in both films is dramatically grounded in the director's devotion to realism in cinema and the accurate depiction of their beloved city of New York, not unlike Rossellini's Rome, while commenting on the very real issues embedded within it.

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Uncut Gems is the Safdie Brothers' second major feature film, they began developing the film in 2012 and even then, eyed the world-famous actor *Adam Sandler* for the lead role. The entire premise of 'Uncut Gems' revolves around *Howard Ratner* (Adam Sandler) and his life as a diamond district jewellery store owner and gambler. The film begins with his purchase of a Black Opal from Ethiopia, as it arrives at his shop in Manhattan, he is also entertaining professional basketball player *Kevin Garnett* who plays himself in the film. This is no cameo however, his 'character' is one of pivotal importance for the entire film, as the plot centres around the real-life events of Kevin Garnett's performance in the 2012 NBA Championships.



Howard Ratner (Adam Sandler) holding a 14-carat diamond encrusted furby pendant, Uncut Gems, 2018

Throughout the NBA in 2012, Garnett played for the Boston Celtics and it was noted that his performance was inconsistent in between games until eventually he helped the Celtics win the entire season. As native, basketball loving New Yorkers, the Safdie's followed Garnett closely at the time of his run for the Celtics in 2012 and used the actual event to inform the direction of their film. The Safdie Brothers insinuate that the black opal in the film, *the uncut gem*, is what helps Garnett win the championship. The use of a genuine basketball player who is widely recognised in the world as a great athlete as a main character, further brings out the genuine feeling of familiarity in most audiences. The film also features other celebrity cameos, varying from simple one-shot

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references to entire scenes, for example *Abel Tesfaye*, better known as *The Weeknd*, a world-famous R&B artist makes an appearance in the film as himself.

The techniques the Safdie Brothers use to build another truly authentic version of NYC is nothing short of ground-breaking. As in the neo-realist movement that precedes it, the film features street casting on multiple levels, firstly, the use of ex- enforcers with ties to the Italian mob who play similar characters and secondly, extras including pawn shop owners who were key figures in New York’s diamond district. Nevertheless, the directors manage to overpass and evolve on these techniques, even further building an even more convincing world through casting multiple famous celebrities as themselves in *Uncut Gems*, such as Kevin Garnett and *The Weeknd*.



Scene from Uncut Gems (2019) featuring The Weeknd and Julia Fox

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Uncut Gems also stars the veteran American sitcom star, John Amos, as one of the film's main protagonists in the guise of Howard's neighbour. Amos makes a 10 second appearance that does not really relate to the plot at all. Despite this, it is this appearance from the actor as himself along with every other cameo in the film, treads a fine line between the cinematic world, and the real world. As the film went into development in 2012, consequently that year became the time when the film was set, and through this it led to tell stories that, at heart, amplify the cinematic truth as they were based on real events in real time.



Howard Ratner (Adam Sandler) inspecting the uncut black opal in Uncut Gems, 2019

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It has been suggested that there has been a changing point when it comes to the canon of cinema, theorists have begun to discuss a *'new form'* of cinema, termed as *'post-cinema'*. This theory suggests a changing of the guard when it comes to the typical medium and representation of cinema. In a modern 21st-Century world, the introduction of new forms of media through the advancement of technology has deemed it necessary for a new outlook on cinema for a new generation of viewers. Henry Jenkins seminal text *'Convergence Cultures: Where Old and New Media Collide'* published in 2006 explores how the internet, fandom and online cultures have impacted the traditional medium of filmmaking. Jenkins states *'In the world of media convergence, every importantly story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms'* (Jenkins, 2006 p.2).

As filmmakers, this theory undoubtedly applies to the Safdie Brothers. The aesthetic style that enriches the films they create are full of inspirations born throughout the history of cinema, yet their utilisation of street casting and TV and sports personalities blurs the boundaries between both. *"Accordingly, post-cinema would mark not a caesura but a transformation that alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema."* (Denson & Leyda, 2016). The Safdies have a clear intention and respect for the history of film, choosing to use 35mm film in all their productions, referencing and in turn continuing the traditions of neo-realism, which also applies to post-cinema theory.

Perhaps what is most interesting about *Uncut Gems* is its dissemination. *Uncut Gems* was released in cinemas for a limited run, but its main release was through Netflix, where it streamed directly to people's homes on the 30th of August 2019. *Uncut Gems* was one of Netflix's breakthrough successes of 2019. Post-lockdown, Netflix became the highest ranking on-demand streaming service globally. This links to perhaps a more democratic viewing experience with viewers choosing how and where to access the film, further reinforcing realism-as-method.

Filmmaking has developed throughout the years since its conception, and with each generation, each new wave of cinema, there has been an abundance of opportunity to communicate real world issues through the silver screen. Now more than ever are the issues that face our society are seen at the forefront of cinema, with more and more directors taking on the role of messenger for the people who are less fortunate, the working classes, and those whose lives are affected every day by the injustices brought along from an immoral, high society. *'Film as Social Justice'* is a phrase that could be applied to this new wave of cinema. The Safdie Brothers are two directors

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who have taken this calling with extreme veracity, as directors that have a large following, the messages they communicate through their work must be filled with truth and authenticity through realism, in which they succeed. It is brought about through their use of realism-as-method, to build a world that is familiar and truthful with the capacity to involve audience participation.



Uncut Gems Netflix marketing and publicity campaign, 2019

From works like *Rome, Città Aperta* to *Uncut Gems*, the realist movement is best known for creating projects that naturally bring an emotional response out in the audience. With the Safdies, their work is full of emotional beats, but in every way that is opposed to the average movie-goer. In *Uncut Gems*, there is a coherent and intense stress brought about from the details of the story. More specifically in *Uncut Gems*, the actions of 'Howie Bling', leave the audience on the edge of their seats for the entire two hours and fifteen minutes of screen time. There is a truth to this daily stress that resonates with audiences, but the most important element to the madness they put forward is the miniscule detail that makes the portrayal realistic.

In summary, there are many cultural events that change the canon of cinema, Rossellini's desire for change and truth after the Second World War, pushed him to build upon a new era of filmmaking. Josh and Benny Safdie not only naturally comply to realism-theory through their search for authenticity, but also reference the trajectory of the cinematic canon by paying homage

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to Italian Neo-Realism, Cinema Verité and the French Nouvelle Vague in line with their Twenty First Century values. While the Safdie's have utilised the history of cinema to inspire their work, it is almost a certainty that future filmmakers will no doubt proclaim the Safdie's work as major inspiration, and as post-cinema theory develops in tandem with advancements in technology, so too will cinema advance as a place for the expression of equality and change.

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