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# At the corners of the Italian «dopoguerra» *David Escudero*



*fig. a* The cinematographer Robert Juillard pushing the dolly to film Edmund Moeschke's stroll through the ruins, «Germania anno zero / Germany Year Zero», Roberto Rossellini (director), Italia 1948, archives of the National Cinema Museum, Torino, author unknown

The Italian «dopoguerra» carried with it a remarkable change in both people and their surrounding environment. Apart from the physical, social, cultural and economic regeneration, Italy was the scenario of a new cinematic topic, based on recording the human experience in the street. One of the key transformations was the abandonment of the film studios, since most of them had been completely destroyed. For the first time, the Italian urban processes were filmed and the street became the main theme of the films. Today these recordings are essential for the urban landscape studies, insofar as they provide a wide perspective of the street and allow us to better understand some past urban processes and to compare them with the contemporary context.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of audiovisual registers in our contemporary urban culture and its values as indicators of urban phenomena. In a second stage, it will provide a comparative analysis between four meaningful scenes filmed at a corner in neorealist films—«Ladri di biciclette», «Sotto il sole di Roma», «Osessione» and «Umberto D». In these scenes, corners were special, defined by filmmakers as links, limits, borders, frontiers and at the same time as elements of shot composition. These scenes allow an interpretation that is not only spatial but also conceptual, providing a veritable goldmine for contemporary approaches to the subject. All of them together will shape a constellation of sequences to depict the background theme, based on studying these audiovisual recordings from an urban view.

#### FROM/THROUGH/OVER/VIA/WITH—THE VIDEO

The culture of the image has been progressively imposed to the point of occupying a central position in our cognitive experience and the aesthetic links we have with our surroundings. *Image* is defined as a likeness, a mental impression or picture, a vivid or graphic description, or a metaphor. As such, images shape our understanding of, and reactions to, the world we live in. Images act as mental reminders, cognitive maps, suggestive impositions, and creative projections.<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard maintained that contemporary society only understands itself by means of reflections captured through the eye of the camera. According to him, you should not begin with the city and move inwards towards a screen, you should begin with a screen and move outwards toward the city.<sup>2</sup> Audiovisual resources allow us to see and compare many stages of the same place simultaneously, compare built environments from virtually all over the world, analyse spatial behaviour and identify the potential that lies in the filmed landscape. Without any claim to rigorousness or precision, they have the extraordinary capacity to suggest situations hidden from everyday view.

Usually the public, who is presented with moving images of cities, has never been to those cities, thus underscoring the huge importance of these images in forming the collective imagination. This also happens on a reciprocal basis, in that cities use many of the images created by audiovisual culture for touristic, cultural and economic promotion. Therefore, several questions are presently being raised about the contemporary relationship between video and the city: Does one really exert influence on the other? If so, is this influence bidirectional? Can ideas and arguments be drawn about urban processes from certain video creations? To what extent does cinematographic culture affect the formation of the collective memory?

#### ITALY GOES OUT INTO THE STREET

«The Italian city, ancient or modern, is prodigiously photogenic. From antiquity, Italian city planning has remained theatrical and decorative. City life is a spectacle, a «*commedia dell'arte*»

that the Italians stage for their own pleasure. And even in the poorest quarters of the town, the coral-like groupings of the houses, thanks to the terraces and balconies, offer outstanding possibilities for spectacle. [...] Add to this the sunshine and the absence of clouds and you have explained why the urban exteriors of Italian films are superior to all others.»<sup>3</sup>

*André Bazin*

There are times in the cities when the relationship between man and his built environment is intensified. It is at those times when recording media such as video can reveal aspects of this relationship that would otherwise go unnoticed. The Italian «dopoguerra» period is a case in point, one in which the role of the camera is fundamental in showing us today the urban relationships and phenomena that had to be confronted at a key time for the rebuilding of an Italy destroyed by bombs. The destruction of cities made misery, despondency and a lack of hope a part of everyday life. It also shed light on the absence of a national identity, due to the late unification of Italy and the lack of a common sentiment that should have been formed at that time. All of this created the need to begin major reconstruction, both of the cities as well as of social and identity values. Subsequently street life became the focal point within this process.

As affirmed by Siegfried Kracauer: «When history is made in the streets, the streets tend to move onto the screen»<sup>4</sup>. It was evident from the outset that many cinematographic studios had been destroyed and that there was also a significant shortage of qualified people to do the filming. So the cameras had to go out into the streets (fig. a), which gave the appearance of the truth converging with an emerging style, while also reducing costs. The interior became exterior, resulting in a fundamental qualitative change in filmmaking methods owing to the availability of new topics, new shooting and montage techniques and new shooting locations. Likewise, using non-professional actors saved money and was essential to the transmission of everyday values as seen in personal appearance, language, manners and behaviours.<sup>5</sup> Insofar as the aim was to represent urban reality without filters, today these videos can be used to analyse the city's processes at that time and view them from a contemporary perspective. Also highly significant was the development of new architectural approaches and practices during the «dopoguerra» period, not to mention the theoretical foundations that were laid during those years. Magazines such as *Metron* in Rome and *Domus* and *Casabella* in Milan ushered in a process of urban rebuilding.<sup>6</sup>

#### AT THE CORNERS OF THE ITALIAN «DOPOGUERRA»

*Corner* is an elastic and ambiguous term. It belongs to two planes, but it could be considered as isolated, or perhaps as a nexus between elements. It is certainly a line, but also a threshold, a region and an unquantifiable space. Where does it physically end? This article does not seek to go more deeply into the concept of *corner* as such, but rather to reveal some phenomena associated with it.

It is worth first reflecting briefly on some etymological aspects that help to understand the ambiguity, controversy and depth of the term and subsequent interpretations of it.

The Oxford Dictionary defines corner as «a place or angle where two sides or edges meet». In German, French and Spanish, its meaning is, in essence, the same. Because the Italian dictionary has no word for it, it borrows from the English «corner» and Italian people also use the word «angolo», which is the direct translation of «angle» (English and French), «ángulo» (Spanish) and «Winkel» (German) and does not literally have the same meaning as «corner».

Furthermore, there is a fair amount of controversy

Scene from Vittorio DeSica (director), «Ladri di biciclette», 1952



Scene from Vittorio DeSica (director), «Ladri di biciclette», 1948

Scene from Luchino Visconti (director), «Ossessione», 1943

Scene from Renato Castellani (director), «Sotto il sole di Roma», 1948

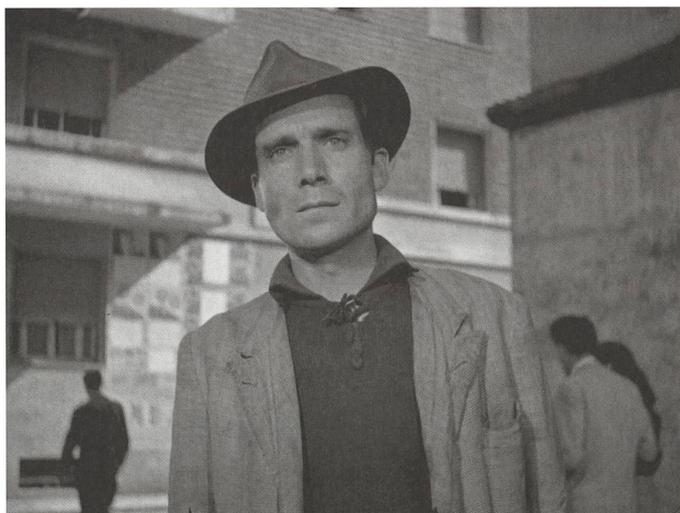


fig. b, c Scene from Vittorio DeSica (director), «Ladri di biciclette», 1948

surrounding the origin of the word «corner». Officially, the etymology says that it comes from the Anglo-Norman French «corner», from the Old French «corne» and in turn from the Latin «cornu», which means «projecting point, end, horn». However, Yakov Malkiel notes that the linguist Hugo Schuchardt's theory could be valid: a regressive formation connected to «excuneare», linked, in turn, to «cuneu» (wedge), which represents the prototype for the French «coin». The Swiss philologist Meyer-Lübke rejected that idea at the time. However, Joan Corominas, author of the *Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano e Hispánico*<sup>7</sup> has qualified Schuchardt's hypothesis as highly likely, but not entirely certain, leaving the debate still unresolved to date.

As a peculiarity, it is worth mentioning the case of Spanish, where two words are used, depending on the convexity or concavity of the corner: «esquina» or «rincón». This is due to the Arab influence, which brought the word «rukn» from classical Arabic, which was turned into «rukán» in Hispanic Arabic. In languages such as English («corner»), French («coin»), German («ecke»), Italian («angolo»), Greek («γωνία») and Swedish («hörn») just one word is used to refer to a corner, whether it is facing inwards or outwards.

In English it is the preposition that precedes «corner» that indicates its physical convexity, while in German, despite the existence of «Winkel», the use of «Ecke» is favoured.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, these etymological issues only anticipate the implications of a concept that is as open, interpretable and interesting as is the corner.

#### THE CORNER AS AN ABYSS IN «LADRI DI BICICLETTE»

After Antonio and his son Bruno have been engulfed by a complex web of miserable circumstances, the father is forced to steal a bicycle. The film places them both on the Via Flaminia in Rome, at the gates of what was then still the Stadio Flaminio, rebuilt over the Stadio Nazionale in 1927. After a football match, Antonio believes that the crowds will enable him to steal the bicycle, so he sends Bruno home on a tram and proceeds to grab it. However, he is immediately caught, beaten up and judged by the passers-by right in front of Bruno, who witnesses the entire scene after having missed the tram.

Antonio's entire mental debate is focused on this point of the film, where the corner plays the role of frontier between opposing morals (fig. b, c). On one side, the side of Via Flaminia, is grief, misery and acceptance of the umpteenth defeat. But there is also honesty, humility, conformity, resistance and the prevalence of values in the face of all adversity. On the other side, that of Via Pietro da Cortona, is the desire for a better life and the need to feed his family and recover his lost job and the justice that life owes him. But there is also delinquency, public disgrace, the shame of the theft, guilt and disrepute. In the middle, there is the corner.

Antonio's existential doubts associated with it are represented through the montage. His worry is conveyed by continuously changing shots, symbolising his constant mental comings and goings. From the beginning of the scene until he gets on the bicycle, there are a total of 32 shots in 3 minutes and 30 seconds, including two travelling shots parallel to the facade and one final shot when he turns to steal the bicycle. The montage with the corner as the pivot point is, therefore, proof of the centrality of this element in the scene.

This idea of abyss is reinforced even more in some of the decisions relating to the spatial elements. The location near the stadium legitimates the behaviour of the people who walk about and amuse themselves. This places Antonio in an opposing position to the attitude of the other people. The crowds pass along the Via Flaminia en masse, while the only person

who goes onto Via Pietro da Cortona is Antonio, who does so with the intention to steal. In addition, the time of day chosen for filming is ideal for the sun to light up the bicycle, with the avenue remaining in shade, making the scene even more theatrical. Finally, it is worth pointing out how, to heighten the drama, the only time when Antonio touches the corner is when he sends Bruno to the tram, defeated, and announcing that he is going to cross the frontier. From this moment on, the abyss occurs.

#### THE CORNER AS A PICTURE IN «SOTTO IL SOLE DI ROMA»

Tosca, *Ciro's* lover, turns the corner of Via Emmanuele Filiberto, where it meets Via Umberto Biancamano. After having been blackmailed by Geppe, *Ciro's* friend, she managed not to pay for her love letters between her and *Ciro*. She sits down and orders a drink as she smiles seductively at the waiter. However, it is Iris, *Ciro's* girlfriend, who has the real letters as she had stolen them beforehand. Tosca realises that she has been tricked, then she phones *Ciro*, tells him that she will pay and asks them to come. Geppe and Bruno immediately show up, but Iris beats them there, appearing behind the corner along Via Emmanuele Filiberto. At that very moment, with the corner framing St John Lateran church, one of the film's most decisive acts takes place. In order to get the letters Iris asks her to humiliate herself by saying «Io sono una vacca» [I am a cow] three times out loud in front of the watchful eyes of the newsstand owner and the waiter. Iris then throws the letters at her and leaves. Then Geppe and Bruno appear, Tosca slaps Bruno and goes along Via Umberto Biancamano.

The corner functions as a connection, as an element that makes it possible to develop the action and give meaning to the scene (fig. d,e). Simultaneously, it frames the view towards St. John Lateran, the cathedral church of Rome, which becomes the absolute protagonist of the scene behind the corner that forms the backdrop. A line is thus marked as a means of differentiation from the background, and from where the idea of a picture emerges. In addition, actors, extras, cars and trams appear and disappear between the corner and St. John Lateran, in an interesting buffer space between the action and the framed background. The filming technique and the position of the camera are essential tools for reinforcing the idea of frame. After the key decision is taken to fix the camera in a strategic spot looking at the church, there are only a few movements while the action is taking place, and even then always with St. John Lateran as the background, like a composed moving picture. The corner makes it possible to generate a protected space, almost domestic in scale, where a very urban action takes place in complete contrast with the immensity, monumentality and scale of what is shown in the background. This contrast goes even further. On the side with Via Umberto Biancamano is the absolutely worldly conflict between lovers, infidelities and blackmail. On the other side is St. John Lateran, with all the values it implies in terms of religion, spirituality and morality. Therefore, it is once again possible to consider the corner as a hinge that is not only spatial but also conceptual, that helps multiply the effects of the scene in which the drama of the script is complemented with the «architecture» of the scene.

#### THE EVERYDAY NATURE OF THE CORNER IN «OSSESSIONE»

This scene introduces the end of the film through a complete theme around a street cross. Although the whole 16-minute sequence is quite revealing, it is worth analysing only the first scene here. At the beginning the camera is fixed on one point and focuses on a corner. Apparently, the only thing that happens in the scene is that Gino goes into a warehouse and



fig. d, e Scene from Renato Castellani (director), «Sotto il sole di Roma», 1948



fig. f Scene from Luchino Visconti (director), «Osessione», 1943



fig. g Scene from Luchino Visconti (director), *Osessione*, 1943



fig. h, i Scene from Vittorio DeSica (director), *Umberto D.*, 1952

shortly after Giovanna, who is following him, arrives at a bar. The aim of this scene is to show, in a concise yet profound way, the urban life of the Italian city around just any corner, in the style of a documentary. Therefore, the location, actors and action are of little importance, as it is precisely about detaching oneself from all of that and revealing several phenomena from those years associated with the meeting between streets. Besides Gino and Giovanna there is the corner, housing a store. A number of children, some sitting using a projection as a bench, are at the corner. A parked cart is also visible in the foreground and, at medium distance, a mobile kiosk is positioned in the middle of the street. Hard, uniform pavement makes up all the space that is filmed, and it is only coloured by the sun that peeks through between the buildings. The open windows and unfurled awnings signal good weather and openness between the houses and the street. Finally, the people: couples, families, elderly people with children, groups of elderly women standing, children on their own, women, disabled people and people on bicycles continuously pass before the camera (fig. f, g). The huge mass of people that appears seems to have been deliberately chosen so as to be all different in terms of clothing, age and groupings. This is obviously another aspect in the minute detail of the scene.

It is also interesting to dwell on the spatial system of shooting used here, for its intention and interest in seeking the best way to narrate. The camera films a corner located in front of it. Static in front of static, everything happens in the middle. This scene returns to a more conventional way of revealing urban phenomena, although the way in which thinking and spatial organisation affect the way the urban landscape is represented is undoubtedly significant. Decisions that involve space are absolutely essential to achieve the most profound expression possible.

#### THE SOLEMNITY OF THE CORNER IN *UMBERTO D.*

Umberto is a humble, upright and shrewd man, although frustrated by his age, his financial hardship and his growing debts. His only brief moments of happiness are with Flike, his dog. One of the most decisive sequences in the film takes place at the corner of Palazzo Severoli, headquarters of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy (Piazza della Minerva and Via di Santa Chiara), up to the Pantheon (Piazza della Rotonda and Via della Minerva).

At first, while Umberto is stroking Flike in the foreground, a beggar asking for money appears on the corner and with Piazza della Minerva as the background image. Umberto walks towards the square and notices—this time from the opposite side—how the beggar receives money from nearly all the passers-by. Umberto lowers his head and gives up, sadly moving on to the closest corner. There, at the corner of the Pantheon, he starts to ask for money hesitantly. When he sees that the first passer-by is going to give him some coins, he turns his hand and hides, unsure. It is then that he puts Flike on his feet, with a hat, so that it is he who is asking, while Umberto hides behind the columns of the Pantheon. Coincidentally, another old acquaintance of Umberto's soon passes by and recognises Flike, forcing Umberto to come out of his hiding place and pretend that everything is normal. He accompanies him to the bus, without exchanging more than superficial words about life and the war. Finally, Umberto is exposed, with the Pantheon in the background, in a pathetic scene.

Once again the technique is essential to the depiction of spatial meanings. Here the montage, the position of the camera or the frame are not, in and of themselves, the key elements. Umberto is the center point of the scene and everything is focused on him and his experience in order for us to gain an understanding of his feelings. Focused on the goal of depicting Um-

berto's sorrow, the camera follows him from one corner to another—and finally to the «piazza» in front of the Pantheon.

Thus, the spectator can identify the urban path, charged with significance, that Umberto follows.

In this case, the corner is shown as an urban link and connection, confrontation and a course from one corner to the next. Owing to their solemnity, both represent a radicalisation of the narration and highlight the contrast achieved by relating the poorest social strata—Umberto and the beggar—with two of the most symbolic places in Rome. While in «Ladri di biciclette» the corner was a symbol, something untouchable that separated opposites, it functions here in a very different way. Both the beggar leaning back and Umberto while hiding, touch the buildings, humanising the corner and making it part of the scene. They physically involve the built space in the development of the action (fig. h, i). Once again, the intentions related to the space, the architecture of the scene, the choice of the physical elements and of the two corners reveal complex urban processes while also opening up a range of interpretations.

#### THE CORNER FOR THINKING/THINKING WITH THE CORNER

The corner is an element that has had, and still retains, a high level of interest for «architecture» from construction to urban scale and from function to form. The use by filmmakers of architectural elements such as the corner makes it possible to perceive them beyond their mere form, and to think about their spatial meaning instead of other features, as has been explained before. In this context, new readings of the urban space through phenomenological approaches still have much to contribute. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the cases outlined have exploited the potential meaning associated with corners as far as possible, using them to convey certain messages at key moments in the films. In these scenes feelings such as sadness, sorrow, jealousy, misery, or surprise have been intersected with concepts like abyss, border, monumentality, frame, urban life, or heritage—and everything has been spatially linked to urban places.

However, it is outside the screen, in our everyday life, that these places have the potential to find a place and a meaning in our collective imagination. In considering the architect as a space producer, it has become essential for the contemporary practice to incorporate the meanings associated to spaces into their design. Nowadays it is also an unquestionable fact that physical features are only one layer of what we call «space», among countless others—historical, social, cultural, sensitive, virtual—that coexist and play multiple roles. The aim is, therefore, to analyse space in a transversal way, putting together the meanings gathered from all of these layers in order to better respond to the contemporary challenges of urban space.

These considerations encourage a phenomenological review not only of corners but of urban studies, more focused on the urban experience instead of morphological or functional features. Far from being a deterministic, closed and conclusive analysis, this work embraces a wide range of questions related to the current time, to the spatial processes at the urban level and to the role of the corner in the city. Is *corner* a term only related to physical space? Does it or could it have any conceptual implication? How are corners used today? Would it make any sense to rethink and redesign some urban spaces starting from our experience? Is it possible, then, that virtual traits have a greater influence than physical ones in the way we think about spaces? How have social conventions changed (or not) so that today we see these fragments as foreign (or not)? Ultimately, the corner has simply been an example to approach a method for analysing the city whose aim is to extract, reveal and build contemporary criteria for planning the cities in which we live today.

- 1 Gerald D. Suttles, «The social construction of communities», Chicago 1972.
- 2 Jean Baudrillard, «America», London 1988.
- 3 André Bazin, «What is cinema? [vol. 1 and 2]», Berkeley 1971 [translation by Hugh Gray].
- 4 Siegfried Kracauer, «Theory of film: the redemption of physical reality», Princeton 1997.
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- 7 Critical Spanish and Hispanic Etymological Dictionary.
- 8 Yakov Malkiel, «Las vicisitudes etimológicas de rincón», in: «Revista de Filología Española, Vol 70, No 1/2» 1990.

*David Escudero*, graduated from his architectural studies with honors and is currently pursuing his research as a PhD candidate at the Madrid School of Architecture (ETSAM-UPM). He has been engaged as a researcher and coordinator for the Cultural Landscape Research Group (GIPC) since 2012. After completing his Master of Advanced Studies in Architecture in 2016, he obtained a four-year fellowship to develop his research thesis whilst teaching at UPM. His recent work has received an award by the XIII Spanish Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (XIII BEAU).