

REVIEW ARTICLE

New approaches to neorealism in Italian cinema

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Roma e il cinema del dopoguerra. Neorealismo, melodramma, noir, by LORENZO MARMO, Rome, Bulzoni, 2018, 228 pp., €18.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788868971120

Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film: Cinema Year Zero, by GIULIANA MINGHELLI, New York, Routledge, 2013, xii + 264 pp., £36.99 (paperback, 2016), ISBN 9781138233843

Neorealism and the ‘New’ Italy: Compassion in the Development of Italian Identity, by SIMONETTA MILLI KONEWKO, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, xii + 272 pp., £74.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781137541321; published in Italian as *L’Italia neorealista*.

Compassione e identità nazionale nel dopoguerra, Rome, Carocci, 2018, 284 pp., €27.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788843089604

In an article with the challenging title ‘Against Realism’, Alan O’Leary and Catherine O’Rawe (2011) argued that Italian cinema studies needed to move forward. In their view, the abuse of ‘realism’ as a prescriptive as well as descriptive term had stunted research into Italian cinema of the postwar period, channelling it exclusively towards neorealist trends and thus devaluing study of the other forms, movements, auteurs and productions that emerged during the same period. This historiographical tendency, which Christopher Wagstaff aptly called the ‘institution of neorealism’ (2007, 37), encouraged the development of reverential study and by the 1960s had assumed the form of a canon. While the position taken by O’Leary and O’Rawe was certainly provocative, it has served to stimulate thinking about the areas of postwar Italian cinema that had remained in the shadows and unexplored. Starting to focus on an ‘other’ cinema has not had to mean ‘forgetting’ neorealism, but has brought changes to the way that it is studied. Almost ten years later, the challenge seems to be to rethink neorealism as a transnational phenomenon that straddles different periods, genres and contexts; while it has its roots in postwar European culture, it continues to be influential on a global level.

A recent special issue of the *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, edited by Louis Bayman, Lecturer in Film at the University of Southampton, Stephen Gundle, Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick, and Karl Schoonover, Associate Professor in Film and Television Studies also at Warwick, takes the film *Roma città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, 1945), a manifesto for neorealism, as a starting point for widening the discussion beyond

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Roberto Rossellini's text. In their introduction, the editors emphasise the film's importance in its influence on 'movements from the French New Wave to Brazilian Cinema Novo, British social realism, Iranian cinema and Dogme 95' (p. 295). It is one of the most exhaustively discussed films in both Italian and international writing on cinema (Forgacs, 2000); nevertheless, the issue includes seven articles that attempt to rise above the customary canonisation to which neo-realism, and hence this film, has been subjected (Marcus, 1986). So, is there anything left to say about *Rome, Open City*? Articles by David Forgacs and Valerio Coladonato analyse its reception in different contexts. Firstly, Forgacs highlights how the political approval that accompanied the film's circulation in the years that followed, more than its contemporary critical reception, contributed to the establishment of its status. Moreover, as Vittorio Spinazzola had observed back in 1974, '*Rome, Open City*, when it first appeared, did not meet with the amount of critical recognition that it merited, but in compensation it was given huge support by audiences'; it took 162 million lire at the box office, winning first place among the films shown in Italian cinemas in 1945 (1974, 21, 19). Coladonato's article, 'The Reception of *Rome, Open City* in France (1946–1968): Realism for the Elites, Revolution for the People', draws attention to the contrasts between, first, its widespread success with French cinemagoers in general; second, its contemporary critical reception, which was quick to emphasise the theoretical importance of its stance on realism, subsequently championed by André Bazin (1958) and the *Cahiers du Cinéma*; and, third, the use of the film as a weapon of revolutionary political struggle by the movements linked to France's May 1968.

In the same journal issue, Stefania Parigi's article questions the customary division of *Rome, Open City* into two major sections, a split first made by contemporary commentators. She argues that the film can better be divided into three parts, each characterised by a different relationship between the viewer and the representation of death. This of course relates to the three deaths of Pina, Manfredi and Don Pietro, which indirectly refer to the model of the Holy Trinity and introduce the idea of martyrdom and Christian sacrifice in the face of a 'necessary' death. This attempt at a fresh approach, challenging the traditional textual analysis of the film, leads neatly to the article by Dom Holdaway and Dalila Missero, who reinterpret the seemingly secondary character of Marina from a queer and feminist viewpoint. This new 'cultural studies' approach to Marina allows the two authors to reconsider her character in all its symbolic importance, especially in relation to the ambiguous position that Italians occupied during the 'civil war'. While Lesley Caldwell (2000) noted that one of the major cinematographic consequences of neorealist currents had been the suppression of sexual differences and female desire, Holdaway and Missero, however, highlight how the figure of Marina is located in a position of both sexual and political ambiguity, in indirect reference to the tension experienced by Italians in the uncertainty of their location between Fascism and anti-Fascism. In similar fashion, Charles Leavitt's contribution on the film's ending makes the connection between the scene in which Don Pietro is killed and the generational issue that emerged in Italy in the immediate postwar period: on the one hand, the closing shot offers the image of childhood that had been constructed during the Fascist era; on the other, it refers to the difficulties of rebuilding the country when starting with a generation that had been deeply marked both by the war and by its memory.

All the articles in this special issue demonstrate an attempt to go beyond the traditional interpretative constrictions based on the forms of *mise-en-scène*, especially realism, that have been a feature of much of the research into Italian cinema in the postwar period; they thus question the establishment of *Rome, Open City*'s status in the history of this cinema. The final two pieces, by Francesco Pitassio and Sergio Rigoletto, are in a similar vein: they put Rossellini's film back into the general context of postwar cinema, placing it in direct dialogue with the world of Italian popular culture. The first aspect to emerge from both articles is the importance of the

performance by Anna Magnani, as an incontrovertible star of Italian cinema and also as a cinematographic icon of the working classes. As Rigoletto observes, the importance of Magnani's presence, both textual and extra-textual, forces us to reconsider the arguments about the authenticity of the actor's performance and the non-professional status of actors in neorealist cinema. Along the same lines, Pitassio identifies *Rome, Open City* as a turning point in Magnani's career, especially as regards the construction of her international image as a star. He reviews the ways that her figure was constructed through the press, newsreels, and other films in which she appeared, and observes that the issue of her authenticity emerges as a central feature of her transnational image. This issue is then further complicated by Rigoletto's analysis, as he argues that it was thanks to *Rome, Open City* that her image could be constructed in open opposition to the conventions of Hollywood's star system. The adoption of a 'cultural studies' perspective thus makes it possible to reinterpret neorealism's most canonical film by sidestepping the traditional historiographical issues (realism, *mise-en-scène*, the aesthetics of ruins, and so on). This special issue therefore offers a noteworthy enrichment of the debate, taking *Rome, Open City* out of the pantheon in which it had become imprisoned.

It is no coincidence that Rossellini's film also provides the starting point for the second chapter of *Roma e il cinema del dopoguerra. Neorealismo, melodramma, noir* (2018), a recent book by Lorenzo Marmo, Lecturer in the History of Italian Cinema at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale', whose very interesting perspective merits some discussion here. Marmo's intention is to investigate cinema's particular role in negotiating 'the serious impasse in the figuration and configuration of collective space and national identity, which marked the passage between the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of democracy in Italy' (p. 12). Neorealism takes on considerable significance in this process, and its role is explored by Marmo from a broad perspective. Rather than limiting himself to identifying the traces of realism in the portrayal of Rome's spaces and landscapes by the films that came out between 1945 and 1953, he places neorealist cinema in dialogue with other types of cinematographic production in Italy's postwar years.

His book's central argument is that the cinema of that period launched a fresh exploration of the city of Rome, a place of enormous symbolic value both for Italian cinema and for the memory of the Second World War. To put this another way, there was a quest to reconnect the urban fabric to the processing of the trauma and abuse perpetrated by Fascist violence and the Nazi occupation of the city. To reinterpret postwar cinema, including of course neorealism, in terms of the city of Rome's post-traumatic anxiety in the wake of the war means, above all, to consider the difficulties this cinema clearly experienced in dealing with the problematic memory of the Fascist past. In neorealist films, the monumental aspects of the city, traditionally portrayed in all their striking modernity, give way to accounts of the difficult living conditions of the lower classes: a representation of marginal spaces that both reveals and hides a multiplicity of aesthetic and symbolic functions. In Marmo's view, dwelling on realism's interpretative and revelatory simplification has, until now, been an obstacle to fully grasping the complexity and many layers within the films that adopted these aesthetic trends in the postwar period.

Marmo's book is organised in four chapters, which interweave major theoretical issues with the methodology of film analysis. In the first, he focuses on *Giorni di gloria* (1945), the documentary directed by Mario Serandrei, Luchino Visconti, Giuseppe De Santis and Marcello Pagliero, and coproduced by ANPI (the Italian partisans' association) and the film company Titanus. Marmo particularly notes, on the one hand, how the disturbing and extremely violent nature of the film's images marks its distance from the output of 'canonical' neorealism; on the other, he observes that elements of a theatrical aesthetic later adopted by many neorealist films can already be identified. He takes up the ideas put forward by Schoonover (2012), who argued that by

highlighting injured and abused bodies neorealist films employed strategies of 'brutal humanism', which served to engage viewers morally and forced them to take a political position on what they were seeing. This discourse clearly applies just as well to the documentary images in *Giorni di gloria* as to the fictional images in *Rome, Open City*. Not least for this reason, the most important aspect of Marmo's analysis lies in his attempt to bring the contribution of the former collective film, in every respect an 'instant movie', within the process of developing Rome's postwar public memory, making particular reference to two episodes: the Ardeatine Caves massacre, and the trial of Pietro Caruso, Rome's former chief of police, which resulted in the mob assault on and summary killing of Donato Carretta, previously governor of the Regina Coeli prison. While the mise-en-scène of these two events contributed to the creation of an imaginary that was to strongly influence the portrayal of Rome in neorealist cinema, the film was undoubtedly an early stage in the process of overcoming the trauma of the war. In summary, *Giorni di gloria* introduces and actively engages in the mechanisms for negotiating the memory that postwar Italian society would have to address: consider, for example, the decision not to show all the images of Carretta's death.

In his second chapter, Marmo returns to the analysis of *Rome, Open City*, exploring anew the film's use of Rome's spaces and landscape for particular narrative and 'persuasive' purposes. Once again, he does not allow the 'realist' label to limit his analysis to the customary issues: instead of emphasising neorealist cinema's deconstruction of the narrative apparatus in order to extol the modernity of its portrayal of the landscape 'from life', he stresses the importance of the relationship between narrative discourse and forms of representation of the city. A good example is the contrast between the representation of Fascist Rome's constituent elements and that of the ruins of central Rome and its districts; in Rossellini's film, this is apparent in his contrasting juxtapositions of centre and periphery. The careful construction of landscapes and urban spaces in a film like *Rome, Open City* forces us to re-examine the sense of aesthetic rupture that was so heavily emphasised both by postwar critical opinion and by subsequent historiography. Marmo illustrates this by reconstructing the debates on the relationship between neorealism and landscape that were hosted by *Cinema* magazine in the early 1940s. Various intellectuals and directors, including Mario Alicata, Visconti, De Santis and Michelangelo Antonioni, contributed to this discussion, from which emerged the importance of reflecting on the way that cinema functioned in theatrical terms as well as considering the realism of its mise-en-scène. As Marmo observes, the very decision to start filming outside the studios, taking the camera onto the streets, brought to postwar cinema a metamorphosis that 'more than demolishing the narrative, was primarily the story of rediscovering a landscape, which when crosscut with other scenes had great melodramatic value' (p. 86).

Marmo's third chapter in fact opens with the relationship between neorealism and melodrama. His starting position is that melodrama, rather than realism, is the most helpful categorisation for understanding the complex relationship that developed between neorealism and landscape. He examines the case of Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), which he regards as a 'melodrama of the lost object', taking up Lucilla Albano's apposite expression (2007). While the film's attention to social issues is important, the 'modern' device of depth of field, often used by De Sica, serves to orchestrate the city, in spatial terms, in a melodramatic tone. The director's cityscapes, in Marmo's words, 'above all serve to intensify the film's narrative charge, to give anxiety a spatial form, and to create aesthetically satisfying images' (p. 116).

The book's fourth and final chapter further develops the same perspective by focusing on another genre of cinema that cuts across the neorealist trends of the postwar period: film noir. The author first provides a very helpful reconstruction of the establishment of this genre in Italy in the immediate postwar period, and then develops his argument by analysing three films by

Pietro Germi, a writer and director with a very cosmopolitan approach. From this analysis we see how in his early films Germi tried to limit description of the spaces in which the stories were set, but, as his career developed, we can see the city of Rome acquiring an increasingly important presence as a genuine element of the narrative. By placing neorealist currents in relation to a system of varied genres and narratives, Marmo's book convincingly locates neorealism within the context of postwar Italy. The representation of Rome's urban spaces and landscape, as a lens, contributes to an increased interest regarding every aspect of neorealism. In his analysis of various canonical films, the author focuses more on narrative than aesthetic issues, and also looks at the relationships between neorealism and the various cinema genres; his approach thus runs counter to the traditional way in which Italian film criticism and historiography, as discussed, have usually addressed neorealism.

A similar attention to the landscape of neorealist cinema, and its relationship with the memory of the Second World War, can be found in a book published a few years earlier, Giuliana Minghelli's *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film: Cinema Year Zero* (2013). Minghelli, Associate Professor in Italian Studies at McGill University, Montreal, takes a chronological approach, dedicating a chapter each to four directors, Visconti, Rossellini, De Sica and Antonioni, and then the last chapter to Cesare Zavattini and Gianni Celati, in which cinema, photography and literature intermingle. At first glance, the book would seem to be largely about auteurs within the pantheon of the neorealist canon. However, Minghelli tries to reinterpret the work of these directors outside the categorisation that informed their interpretation in the immediate postwar period. She therefore goes beyond both the idea of neorealism as a realist expression of populist politics and the attention to form, rather than content, that saw in neorealism the birth of modern cinema (see, in particular, the contributions by Bazin [1958] and Deleuze [1985], and their influence on later thinking). Returning to two fundamental issues for the analysis of Italian neorealism, first, the conflictual relationship between the memory of the Second World War and the aspiration to create a fairer society, and, second, the relationship between the cinematographic construction of the landscape and the description of geographical spaces 'from life', Minghelli presents a third way of interpreting neorealist cinema. As she says in her introduction, this can instead be seen as 'a cinema of mourning and atonement, a cinema of *the present haunted by the past*, not that of the war, civil war, or post-war ruins, but the long *ventennio* (twenty years) of Fascism' (p. 3, emphasis in the original). In Minghelli's view, it was the experience of Fascism that structured, from beneath, the expression of neorealism. From this perspective, neorealist cinema was nothing other than the extended articulation of a national trauma: repression of the memory of Fascism, and the difficulty of coming to terms with the country's past. Neorealism can thus be reinterpreted as a phenomenon reflecting a prior failure to work through loss, rather than as a 'project'. According to Minghelli, this interpretation is visibly borne out when history and memory make their mark in the background in the landscapes of neorealist films. To develop her analysis, she dedicates a chapter to each of four films that illustrate this relationship: Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943), Rossellini's *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946), De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amore* (*Story of a Love Affair*, 1950).

The main focus of Minghelli's first chapter, *Obsession*, produced and filmed in the final stages of the Fascist era, is full of covert political allusions. Rather than identifying the features of Visconti's film that anticipated neorealism and were developed in the cinema of the postwar period (the themes, camera movements, and realism of representation), Minghelli concentrates on reinterpreting the film as a metaphor for the breakdown of Fascist society. In this light, *Obsession* not only breaks with the norms of the classical *mise-en-scène*, but also, and especially, contests the values of Fascist social order, by challenging the fixed and monumental nature of spaces and

instead offering the quest for an alternative landscape of experience. The chapter that follows is dedicated to Rossellini, but starts with his *Paisan* of 1946 rather than *Rome, Open City*. As Minghelli observes, the film opens with a minimalist landscape that takes the viewer inside history as 'historical emotion' (p. 40, citing Pasolini). Throughout the film, moreover, history remains an atmosphere: an evanescent and inexpressible emotion, always in the background, that constantly questions the present, made manifest in landscape form. After analysing *Paisan* in depth, she turns in the same chapter to another of Rossellini's films, *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy*, 1954). In this later film, the relationship between memory and landscape is made still clearer by the switches between sequences set within natural spaces and regular references to classicism in the material form of monuments, archaeological sites and museums.

Minghelli's third chapter in her conceptual journey through the landscapes of Italian cinema discusses one of neorealism's key films, De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*. This moves within a very different set of landscapes from the films already discussed: the setting is Rome, an urban and socially stratified world in which the characters move about in search of a lost object, the bicycle (echoing Albano's description, mentioned earlier). As well as being the city that symbolised Italian cinema during the Fascist period (hosting, for example, the establishment of Cinecittà and the Istituto LUCE, and the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia [Italian National Film School]), Rome was also the site for Fascism's most discernible architectural and memorial self-expression. The memory of Fascism thus visibly stays with postwar Rome during its problematic phase of political and social reconstruction. All this, in Minghelli's view, is adroitly referenced in De Sica's film, especially in the portrayal of the contrast between the city's different spirits: one more official, monumental and institutional, the other more hidden, informal and working-class. In her fourth chapter, dedicated to *Story of a Love Affair*, the author further widens the range of representation of the Italian landscape. This film is set in postwar Milan, where we are witness to the obsessions of a wealthy industrialist who takes on a private detective in order to delve into his wife's past. Minghelli argues that this investigation, typical of Antonioni, is a reference to the continued presence of the past (Fascism) in Italian society during the postwar period. It is from the urban immateriality of night-time Milan, constantly enveloped in fog, that the difficulty of working through the memory of Fascism emerges: this is expressed in the shape of a ghost of the past.

Minghelli's concluding chapter presents Zavattini's draft plan for a film he never made, with the title *Italia mia*, which then became a book series published by Einaudi. In 1955, a volume was published in this series with the title *Un paese*, featuring a photographic essay on Luzzara, Zavattini's birthplace, with his own commentary on photographs by Paul Strand. In placing the analysis of an authentically neorealist photographic and literary project alongside cinematic works, Minghelli is trying to offer a broader perspective on Italian postwar culture. She uses Zavattini's experiment as a device for investigating neorealism as a cultural and multimedia phenomenon that made its mark on postwar Italy: a nexus of relationships between different media (cinema, photography and literature) and a diverse range of auteurs and social actors, but most especially a site of constant interplay between the lofty sphere of the auteur and the broader world of popular culture.

The principle of working across different media drives *Neorealism and the 'New' Italy: Compassion in the Development of Italian Identity* (2016), a book by Simonetta Milli Konewko, Associate Professor in Italian Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. This has four parts, the first of which outlines neorealism's historical origins and development within literary and cinematographic contexts. The second has as its focus the role that compassion had played in Italy's cultural discourse, in particular during the Fascist era, prior to its reinterpretation in the light of neorealism. In the third part, the author explores the use of this concept in literary works by Natalia Ginzburg and Alberto Moravia, and in two case studies in the representation

of women (Renata Viganò's novel *L'Agnese va a morire* [1949] and, appearing again, Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*). The fourth and final part examines the portrayal of compassion in two works of personal testimony, Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*) and Liana Millu's *Il fumo di Birkenau* (*Smoke over Birkenau*), both first published in 1947. In Milli Konewko's book, too, the favoured focus of analysis is Italy's postwar period, and in particular the cultural events unfolding in the later 1940s; she considers works seen as belonging to the neorealist canon, but also literary texts that do not have an established place within this critical classification. Cinema, which occupies a somewhat marginal space within the volume, is located within a complex cultural system. The sections on cinematographic representation, which mainly occur in the first and third parts, merit brief consideration here.

In her analysis of neorealist representations of compassion, Milli Konewko particularly focuses on the mode of construction of this emotion, which unites individuals and communities in the wake of interactions between the characters. In the book's first part, and especially in Chapter 3, she summarises the evolution of neorealist trends in cinema. However, there are some problematic aspects to her approach. First of all, she uses the idea of a neorealist 'movement' when she discusses cinema, but neorealism, in that sphere, was in reality more of a trend and an aesthetic style than a proper structured movement. Secondly, the choice of works cited and the method used to place them in context derive from oversimplifications: the most obvious is that of still seeing realism as the exclusive basis for the development of neorealist style, and consequently there is an insistence on the use of non-professional actors, the rhetoric of poverty, and the aesthetics of decay as the main themes that establish a sense of emotion in neorealist films. As discussed earlier, these notions have already been questioned by both Italian and international historiography. Moreover, when the author considers the relationship between postwar Italian cinema and the emotions in her fifth chapter, she makes a distinct contrast between Fascist and neorealist cinema in the devices used to reveal the characters' emotional states. According to Milli Konewko, Fascist cinema, unlike its neorealist counterpart, was not capable of involving the viewer in an authentic relationship with its cinematic imagery. However, we can observe similarities as well as differences between these two cinematographic approaches in their ways of generating an audience response to characters and situations, and in the contrast between mass and individual emotions. Breaking out from the norms and genres affected by purest neorealism, and thus exploring all the other cinematographic territories of the postwar period, would undoubtedly have generated new material for investigation.

When Milli Konewko turns to an analysis of *Rome, Open City* in her fourteenth chapter (in Part III), she complains of 'the lack of critical attention to women's conditions reflected in this film' (p. 180). However, she neglects much of the vast amount of literature on this topic; while she rightly cites Millicent Marcus, she leaves Caldwell and Forgacs, among others, undiscussed. The author charges Rossellini with representing the characters of Pina, Laura and Marina by denying them 'any compassionate response from characters on screen toward female figures embodying behaviors in opposition with the patriarchal definition of women'; his construction of female identity thus 'reveals an unwitting correlation with the one adapted by the Fascist creed' (p. 196). The combative position taken by Milli Konewko is thought-provoking, but clearly contradictory: she goes on from this case study to suggest that there was a continuity of ideas between Fascist and neorealist cinema, implicitly contradicting her earlier argument about compassion and the new emotional engagement, lacking in Fascist cinema, that neorealism introduced. Despite these problematic issues, the book has the undoubted merit of attempting to provide a structured approach to the phenomenon, from a broad perspective covering both cinema and literature, by steering discourses and theories relating to neorealism into one shared cultural arena.

From an overall reading of the contributions summarised above, we can see how cinematographic neorealism has been subjected to fresh scrutiny from a range of complementary perspectives: cultural studies, social history, and reception studies, alongside renewed attention towards its audiences. While most of the research seems to firmly distance itself from the theoretical arena that had become stunted by customary reference to terms like ‘realism’ and ‘modernity’, which had been useful but were often arbitrary, there has still not been a decisive move towards consideration of neorealist cinema within the wider and more multi-faceted context of postwar Italian cinema as a whole. There still needs to be research into the impact of neorealism’s formal, narrative and production-related innovations on the continued strength of popular cinema in the 1940s, especially in relation to the endurance of successful genres such as comedy and operatic film, and the persistence of the historical epic. Furthermore, the influence of neorealism on the world of the mass media in the subsequent decade is still to be investigated: the almost total absence of research into radio and television programmes, even in the studies that extend into the 1950s, is striking. RAI’s documentary investigations of the 1950s and 1960s, however, now seem to have been distinctly indebted to the linguistic, aesthetic and dramatic impact of neorealist cinema’s trends in the 1940s. Finally, burgeoning neorealist approaches within the cinematography of ‘subaltern’ nations, which have recently developed in countries recovering from economic crisis and social trauma in particular, seem to be among the most important transnational phenomena in contemporary world cinema as a whole: we need only mention the influence of Italian neorealist films on the ‘sixth generation’ of Chinese cinema, or, more recently, the establishment of ‘new wave’ cinemas in countries like the Philippines and Romania. In brief, now that neorealism seems truly more alive in the world than ever, there is a very great need for a radical new historiographical approach.

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