

Italian Neo-Realism and *The Bicycle Thief*



*Antonio and Bruno pause in
their
search for the stolen bicycle*

Rating: **** (1948) Running time: 90 minutes. Not MPAA rated.

Credits

<u>Producer/Director:</u> Vittorio De Sica	<u>Screenplay:</u> Cesare Zavattini, from the novel by Luigi Bartolini ¹
<u>Director of Photography:</u> Carlo Montuori	<u>Decor:</u> Antonio Traverso
<u>Music:</u> Alessandro Cicognini	<u>Editing:</u> Eraldo da Roma

Cast

<u>Antonio Ricci:</u> Lamberto Maggiorani	<u>Bruno Ricci:</u> Enzo Staiola
<u>Maria Ricci:</u> Lianella Carell	<u>Biaocco, Ricci's Friend:</u> Gino Saltamerend.
<u>Thief:</u> Vittorio Antonucci	<u>Old Man:</u> Giulio Chiari

Plot Summary

"The one authentic masterpiece of the era, the film which represented all that was best in Neo-Realism, and that outlives the movement, is De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*, a highly structured, self-consciously simple, deeply concerned, and intensely warm picture that gives the impression of being a social documentary, but which is really, in the best sense of the word, artfully contrived for maximum emotional impact.

The story of *The Bicycle Thief* develops like a chase, and as a result the audience is kept in suspense. Will Antonio Ricci find his stolen bicycle and keep his job, or will he fall back into unemployment and despair? There is the relationship between Antonio and his son Bruno, slowly, subtly revealed through their day of misery in all of its unspoken tenderness, loving, even in the final moments, when Bruno learns a harsh lesson. In this sense, the film is a story of a boy coming of age. Finally, because of the way the search for the bicycle is structured, the film is a virtual encyclopedia of social comment, revealing the sullen indifference of the police, the tough hypocrisy of the church, and the dehumanization of urban society, illustrated by the way a vast Spectrum of people reacts to the problem of a single desperate man. What seems at first to be a simple, linear story is really a story of suspense, a story of relationships, and an exposé of the inadequacy of social institutions, all three interwoven with such skill that audience involvement is total."—William Bayer, *The Great Movies* (1973)

Critical Comments

1. A Definition of Italian Neo-Realism: The origins of neo-realism are traceable to the 'realist' or verismo style cultivated in the Italian cinema between 1913 and 1916, when films inspired by the writings of Verga and others dealt with human problems in natural settings These were the themes to which the neo-realists of the forties returned, reacting against the banality that had for long been the dominant mode of Italian films and against prevailing social conditions. Neo-realism was not only a cinematic style but a whole social, moral, and political philosophy.

The term 'neo-realism' was first applied . . . to Visconti's [film] *Ossessione* (1942). At the time *Ossessione* was circulated clandestinely, but its social authenticity had a profound effect on young Italian directors [like Vittorio] De Sica and [Cesare] Zavattini [, who] adopted a similarly uncompromising approach to bourgeois family life. The style came to fruition in [Roberto] Rossellini's three films dealing with the [Second World] war, the Liberation, and post-war reconstruction: *Roma, Città Aperta* (Rome, Open City, 1945), *Paisà* (1947), and *Germania, Anno Zero* (Germany, Year Zero, 1947). With minimal resources, Rossellini worked in real locations using local people as well as professional actors; the films conveyed a powerful sense of the plight of ordinary individuals oppressed by political events. The roughness and immediacy of the films created a sensation abroad although they were received with indifference in Italy. . . .

By 1950 the impetus of neo-realism had begun to slacken. The burning causes that had stimulated the movement were to some extent alleviated or glossed over by increasing prosperity; and neo-realist films, although highly praised by foreign critics, were not a profitable undertaking: audiences were not attracted to realistic depictions of injustice played out by unglamorous, ordinary characters. De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) was probably the last truly neo-realist film. . . .

Although the movement was short-lived, the effects of neo-realism were far-reaching. Its influence can be traced across the world from Hollywood, where stylistic elements in films about social and political problems echoed those of the neo-realists, to India, where Satyajit Ray adopted a typically neo-realist stance in his early films. . . .—Liz-Anne Bawden, Ed., *The Oxford Companion to Film* (1976).

2. On Neorealism: The most important characteristic, and the most important innovation, of what is called neo-realism, it seems to me, is to have realized that the necessity of the 'story' was only an unconscious way of disguising a human defeat, and that the kind of imagination it involved was simply a technique of superimposing dead formulas over living social facts. Now it has been perceived that reality is hugely rich, that to be able to look directly at it is enough; and that the artist's task is not to make people moved or indignant at metaphorical situations, but to make them reflect (and, if you like, to be moved and indignant too) on what they and others are doing, on the real things, exactly as they are.

Substantially then, the question today is, instead of turning imaginary situations into 'reality' and trying to make them look 'true,' to make things as they are, almost by themselves, create their own special significance. Life is not what is invented in 'stories'; life is another matter. To understand it involves a minute, unrelenting, and patient search."—Cesare Zavattini, quoted in Jack C. Ellis, *A History of Film* (1979) [Cesare Zavattini (1902-1989) was an Italian scriptwriter and film theorist who collaborated with De Sica on *The Bicycle Thief* and other films.]

3. The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply. Yet it is almost never used to do this. Among modern film trends, the best known is the so-called neorealism. The neorealist film offers the spectator what seem to be moments from real life, involving real people caught as they move about the street, and having even authentic scenery and interiors. With some exceptions, among which I would single out *Bicycle Thief*, neorealism has done nothing to spark what is properly and characteristically cinematic—I mean the mysterious and the fantastic. What is the point of all the visual dressing up if the situations, the motives that animate the characters, their reactions, and even the plots themselves are drawn or copied from the most sentimental, conformist literature? The most worthwhile contribution—and it comes not from neorealism generally but from Zavattini specifically—is the raising of a humdrum act to the level of dramatic action."—Luis Buñuel, in Joan Mellen, Ed., *The World of Luis Buñuel* (1978)

4. In an international critics' poll organized by *Sight and Sound* [an important British Film magazine, still in monthly publication] in 1952, *Bicycle Thieves* was voted as the best film ever made; in a similar poll held ten years later, it had dropped to sixth place. Clearly, it is not by a long way the greatest film in cinema history; arguably, it may not even be de Sica's finest work. But it is a film so thoroughly committed to its characters, made with such transparent resolution and devotion, that its continuing hold on people's imagination seems self-explanatory."—Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema* (1963)

5. The techniques employed in the *mise en scene* [directing] . . . meet the most exacting specifications of Italian neorealism. Not one scene shot in a studio. Everything was filmed in the streets. As for the actors, none had the slightest experience in theatre or film. The workman came from the Breda factory, the child was found hanging around in the street, the wife was a journalist. The scenario is diabolically clever in its construction; beginning with the alibi of a current event, it makes good use of a number of systems of dramatic coordinates radiating in all directions. *Ladri di Biciclette* [*Bicycle Thief*] is certainly the only valid Communist film of the whole past decade precisely because it still has meaning even when you have abstracted its social significance. Its social message is not detached, it remains immanent in the event, but it is so clear that nobody can overlook it, still less take exception to it. . . . The thesis implied is wondrously

and outrageously simple: in the world where this workman lives, the poor must steal from each other in order to survive. —Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (Vol. II, 1971)

6. On Film Audience: The public is a mysterious entity that bewilders me by its incongruous and unpredictable reactions. The crowd is a monster unknown even to itself—a collective force controlled and directed by primeval instincts—the monster that writers of history and fiction alike tell us is capable of the sublimest actions as well as of the vilest deeds. I see the public as a crowd, governed by a multiplicity of passions, prejudices, waves of intolerance and secret sympathies which influence and determine its behavior and which motivate its applause or its disapproval.

On Directing: Whether they succeed or fail, my films are the faithful transcription in pictures of a life, usually a simple one, of an atmosphere, and of characters whom I can feel growing and unfolding within me, in whom I believe instinctively from the very first moment and in whose fate I bear a part.

On Film Technique: I follow the development of the plot step by step; I weigh, experience, discuss and define with (Cesare Zavattini), often for months at a time, each twist and turn of the scenario. In this way, by the time we start shooting, I already have the complete film in my mind, with every character and in every detail. After such a long, methodical and meticulous inner preparation, the actual work of production boils down to very little."—Vittoria De Sica, from *Miracle in Milan* (1969) [This method of De Sica's is similar to the preparations that Alfred Hitchcock makes in his films.]

¹ According to John Stubbs, all De Sica and Zavattini took from the novel were an idea and the title (Robert Carringer et al, Eds. *Film Study Guides: Nine Classic Films*, 1975).

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lverburg@scescape.net