Virtual February 23, 2021 (42:4)

Vittorio De Sica: **BICYCLE THIEVES/LADRI DI BICYCLETTE** (1947, 93 min)

Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries

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[Vimeo link for **ALL** of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS]

[Vimeo link for our introduction to *Bicycle Thieves*]

[Zoom link for *all* Spring 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:]
Meeting ID: 925 3527 4384 Passcode: 820766

Director Vittorio De Sica
Writing Oreste Biancoli, Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Vittorio De Sica, Adolfo Franci, Gherardo Gerardi, Gerardo Guerrieri, Cesare Zavattini, based on a novel by Luigi Bartolini.
Producer Vittorio De Sica
Original music Alessandro Cicognini
Cinematographer Carlo Montuori
Film Editor Eraldo Da Roma
Production Designer Antonio Traverso

The film received an Academy Honorary Award (most outstanding foreign language film) in 1950 and, in 1952, was deemed the greatest film of all time by *Sight & Sound* magazine's poll of filmmakers and critics; fifty years later another poll organized by the same magazine ranked it sixth among the greatest-ever films.

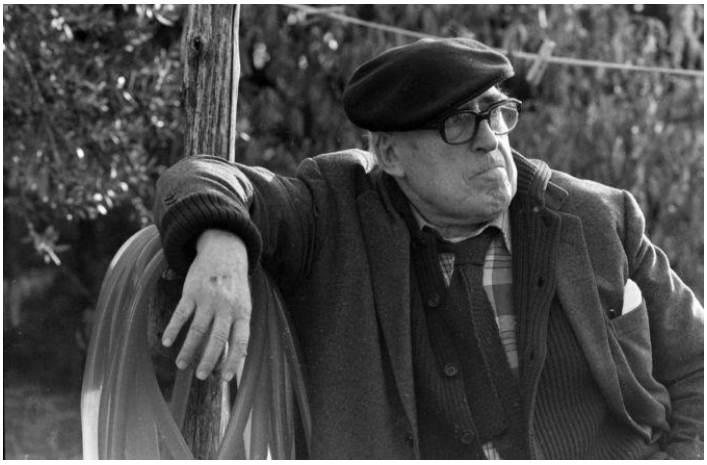
Lamberto Maggiorani…Antonio Ricci, the father
Enzo Staiola…Bruno Ricci, the son
Lianella Carell…Maria Ricci, the mother
Gino Saltamerenda…Baiocco

Vittorio Antonucci…The Thief
Giulio Chiar…The Beggar
Elena Altieri…The charitable Lady

VITTORIO DE SICA (b. July 7, 1901 in Sora, Lazio, Italy—d. November 13, 1974 (age 73) in Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, France) was an Italian director (35 credits) and actor (161 credits), a leading figure in the neorealist movement (23 writing and 8 producer credits). His meeting with Cesare Zavattini was a very important event: together they created some of the most celebrated films of the neorealistic age, like *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*) in 1946 and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), both of which De Sica directed. Four of the films he directed won Academy Awards: *Sciuscià* and *Bicycle Thieves* (honorary), while *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963) and *Il giardino dei Finzi Contini* (1970) won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Indeed, the

great critical success of *Sciuscià* (the first foreign film to be so recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) and *Bicycle Thieves* helped establish the permanent Best Foreign Film Award. These two films are considered part of the canon of classic cinema. *Bicycle Thieves* was cited by Turner Classic Movies as one of the 15 most influential films in cinema history. De Sica was also nominated for the 1957 Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for playing Major Rinaldi in American director Charles Vidor's 1957 adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, a movie that was panned by critics and proved a box office flop. De Sica's acting was considered the highlight of the film. He also won the Grand Prize of the Festival for *Miracolo a Milano* (1951), the OCIC Award for *Il tetto* (1956), and was nominated three times for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. These are the other films he directed: *Rose scarlatte* (1940), *Maddalena... zero in condotta* (1940), *Doctor, Beware* (1941), *Un garibaldino al convento* (1942), *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944), *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953), *The Gold of Naples* (1954), *Two Women* (1960), *The Last Judgment* (1961), *Boccaccio '70* (segment "La riffa") (1962), *The Condemned of Altona* (1962), *Marriage Italian Style* (1964), *Un monde nouveau* (1966), *After the Fox* (1966), *Woman Times Seven* (1967), *A Place for Lovers* (1968), *Sunflower* (1970), *Lo chiameremo Andrea* (1972), *A Brief Vacation* (1973), and *The Voyage* (1974). And these are some of his other film parts: *The Clemenceau Affair* (1917), *Beauty of the World* (1927), *Company and the Crazy* (1928), *The Old Lady* (1932), *Love Passes By* (1933), *The Lucky Diamond* (1933), *Bad Subject* (1933), *The Song of the Sun* (1934), *Mr. Desire* (1934), *Lohengrin* (1936), *The Man Who Smiles* (1937), *Mister Max* (1937), *Naples of Former Days* (1938), *Departure* (1938), *They've Kidnapped a Man* (1938), *Department Store* (1939), *It Always Ends That Way* (1939), *Manon Lescaut* (1940), *The Two Mothers* (1940), *The Sinner* (1940), *The Adventuress from the Floor Above* (1941), *Doctor, Beware* (1941), *La guardia del corpo* (1942), *Our Dreams* (1943), *Responsibility Comes Back* (1945), *Roma città libera* (1946), *Lost in the Dark* (1947), *Heart and Soul* (1948), *Tomorrow Is Too Late* (1950), *The Earrings of Madame De...* (1953), *It Happened in the Park* (1953), *Bread, Love and Dreams* (1953), *Marriage* (1954), *The Anatomy of Love* (1954), *The Bed* (1954), *Modern Virgin* (1954), *The Gold of Naples* (1954), *Too Bad She's Bad* (1954), *It Happens in Roma* (1955), *The Miller's Beautiful Wife* (1955), *Roman Tales* (1955), *Scandal in Sorrento* (1955), *The Bigamist* (1956), *Nero's Mistress* (1956), *A Tailor's Maid* (1957), *The Guilty* (1957), *It Happened in Rome* (1957), *Count Max* (1957), *Casino de Paris* (1957), *Sunday Is Always Sunday* (1958), *Fast and Sexy* (1958), *Bread, Love and Andalucia* (1958), *The Girl of San Pietro Square* (1958), *Venetian Honeymoon* (1959), *Men and Noblemen* (1959), *Il Generale Della Rovere* (1959), *The Angel Wore Red* (1960), *The Battle of Austerlitz* (1960), *The Millionairess* (1960), *Love in Rome* (1960), *The Last Judgment* (1961), *The Wonders of Aladdin* (1961), *The Orderly* (1961), *The Two Marshals* (1961), *Lafayette* (1962), *The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders* (1965), *An Italian in America* (1967), *The Biggest Bundle of Them All* (1968), *Dear Caroline* (1968), *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (1968), *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium* (1969), *Twelve Plus One* (1969), *Cose di Cosa Nostra* (1971), *Snow Job* (1972), *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (TV Mini-Series) (1972), *Blood for Dracula* (1974), and *The Hero* (TV Movie) (1976).

CESARE ZAVATTINI (b. September 29, 1902 in



Luzzara, Emilia-Romagna, Italy—d. October 13, 1989 (age 87) in Rome, Lazio, Italy) was an Italian screenwriter (118 credits) and one of the first theorists and proponents of the Neorealist movement in Italian cinema. He studied law at the University of Parma, but devoted himself to writing. In 1930 he relocated to Milan, and worked for the book and magazine publisher Angelo Rizzoli. After Rizzoli began producing films in 1934, Zavattini received his first screenplay and story credits in 1936. At the same time

he was writing the plot for the comic strip *Saturn against the Earth* with Federico Pedrocchi (script) and Giovanni Scolari (art) for *I tre porcellini* (1936–1937) and *Topolino* (1937–1946). In 1935, he met Vittorio De Sica, beginning a partnership that produced some twenty films, including such masterpieces of Italian neorealism as *Sciscià* (1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), *Miracolo a Milano* (1951), *and Umberto D.* (1952). In 1952, Zavattini gave an interview to *The Italian Film Magazine 2*, republished in English as "Some Ideas on the Cinema." The thirteen points Zavattini outlined are widely regarded as his manifesto to Italian neorealism. He was nominated for three Oscars throughout his career. These are some of the other films he wrote for: *I'll Give a Million* (1935), *La danza delle lancette* (1936), *Doctor, Beware* (1941), *Don Cesare di Bazan* (1942), *Our Dreams* (1943), *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944), *The Testimony* (1946), *Roma città libera* (1946), *La grande aurora* (1947), *Guerra alla guerra* (1948), *The Walls of Malapaga* (1949), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), *The Overcoat* (1952), *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953), *A Husband for Anna* (1953), *The Walk* (1953), *Angels of Darkness* (1954), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1954), *The Doll That Took the Town* (1957), *Men and Wolves* (1957), *Lipstick* (1960), *Two Women* (1960), *Blood Feud* (1961), *The Young Rebel* (1961), *Boccaccio '70* (1962), *The Condemned of Altona* (1962), *Mysteries of Rome* (Documentary) (1963), *The Boom* (1963), *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963), *After the Fox* (1966), *Woman Times Seven* (1967), *A Place for Lovers* (1968), *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1970), and *The Children of Sanchez* (1978).

LUIGI BARTOLINI (February 8, 1892 – May 16, 1963) was an Italian painter, writer, and poet. He is most well-known for his novel, *Bicycle Thieves*, upon which the Italian neorealist film directed by Vittorio De Sica and of the same title was based. He published more than 70 books during his lifetime.

LAMBERTO MAGGIORANI (28 August 1909, Rome, Italy – 22 April 1983, Rome, Italy) was an Italian actor remembered for his portrayal of Antonio Ricci in the 1948 Vittorio De Sica film *Bicycle Thieves*. He was a factory worker and non-professional actor at the time he was cast in this film. He was laid off from the factory because he was perceived to be a now rich movie star, but he struggled to find steady film work. He appeared in De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) and later in Pasolini's *Mama Roma* (1962) for his then iconic status in Italian cinema, largely due to his first film role. Cesare Zavattini, the screenwriter for *Bicycle Thieves*, aware of Maggiorani's predicament, wrote a screenplay about him titled "Tu, Maggiorani," in an attempt to demonstrate the limits of neorealist film's capacity to change the world.

On neorealism (from Liz-Anne Bawden, Ed., *The Oxford Companion to Film* 1976):

The term "neo-realism" was first applied . . . to Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942). At the time *Ossession*e was circulated clandestinely, but its social authenticity had a profound effect on young Italian directors De Sica and Zavattini, [who] adopted a similarly uncompromising approach to bourgeois family life. The style came to fruition in Rossellini's three films dealing with the [Second World] war, the Liberation, and post-war reconstruction: *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, 1945), *Paisà* (*Paisan/Ordinary People*1947), and *Germania, anno zero* (*Germany, Year Zero/Evil Street*, 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. . . .

Ladri di biciclette and its times (from _World Film Directors_, vol. I. Ed. John Wakeman NY 1987), entry by Derek Prouse:

What is sometimes overlooked in the growth of the neorealist tradition in Italy is the fact that some of its most admired aspects sprang from the dictates of postwar adversity: a shortage of money made the real locations an imperative choice over expensive studio sets, and against any such locations any introduction of the phony or the fake would appear glaringly obvious, whether in the appearance of the actors or the style of the acting. De Sica therefore chose to work with unknowns who, under his sympathetic direction, could retain their naturalness and would bring with them no aura of personal legend or glamor.

With the passage of time and recovery of the Italian economy, some of the original impact of *Ladri di bicyclette (Bicycle Thieves/The Bicycle Thief,* 1948*)* has been obscured. The film can only be fully appreciated when it is related to the traumatic, chaotic postwar years when a defeated Italy was occupied by the Allied forces. It is this failure to assess the film in its social-historical context that has ousted it from the place it occupied for many years in leading critics' lists of best films. To describe this picture, as Antonioni once did, as a story of a man whose bicycle has been stolen, is deliberately to miss the point. Here we have a man who has been deprived of a rare chance to earn tomorrow's bread; it is as urgent as that. The long Sunday the film describes becomes for him a kind of nightmare that betrays him into conduct which is fundamentally alien to him. *Ladri di bicyclette,* loosely based on Luigi Bartolini's novel, was scripted primarily by Zavattini and De Sica. The latter, unable to find studio backing, produced it himself with financial backing from friends.

Another perceptive film critic and biographer, Lotte Eisner, sets the scene: "no famous monument shows that the action takes place in Rome. Here are drab suburban streets, ugly houses, instead of ancient or contemporary ruins. The Tiber flows sluggishly, its embankments are dusty and deserted. This could be anywhere in the world where people are poor. Where dawn brings the dustmen emptying the bins, the workmen going to the factories, the crowded tramcars. Nothing of the picturesque South: there are not even any beggars to be seen. They are to be found herded like a flock of sheep into an enclosure, where the lady members of a religious organization, with tight smiles, and a hurried charity which sacrifices one hour a day to the verminous, call the poor starvelings to their knees for a mechanical prayer in return for a bowl of thin soup.

For Lotte Eisner, *The Bicycle Thief* was the best Italian film made since the war. Others made higher claims: in 1952, a poll of 100 international filmmakers votes their choices of the best ten films of all time. The list was headed by *Potemkin*, followed by *The Gold Rush*, and *The Bicycle Thief.*

from _Film Notes_ Scott Hammen Louisvile KY, 1979

The film's action encompasses many facets of the urban scene. Outdoor markets, churches, brothels, streetcars, music halls, restaurants, soccer stadiums, and lower-class neighborhoods all figure in the film's action and support De Sica in his announced goal of

"surmounting the barrier separating the documentary from drama and poetry."

Part of the film's genius lies in the stark simplicity and appearance of total naturalism in its technique. Yet, contrary to all appearances, it was meticulously constructed. De Sica worked with his performers for months and had entire streets cordoned off for the shooting of outwardly impromptu crowd scenes. The film was so effectively thought out as to achieve just the opposite effect: a feeling of complete spontaneity.

Didn't get seal of approval in America because of several indelicate scenes. One NY area theater which attempted to show it was closed down when Knights of Columbus arrived in force with the objection that the work "glorified a thief."

Godfrey Cheshire: "A Passionate Commitment to the Real" Godfrey Chesire (Criterion Essays, 2007)

Viewed in retrospect, much of modern cinema can seem to flow from twin fountainheads: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). Though separated by World War II, the two movies symbolize the cardinal impulses that came to captivate serious audiences, critics, and filmmakers after the war. The tendencies they signaled—ones soon fused into a singular aesthetic by the French new wave—are not so much divergent as complementary.

Where *Citizen Kane* heralded the age of the auteur and a cinema of passionate individual vision, *Bicycle Thieves* renounced "egoism" for collective concern, envisioning a cinema of impassioned social conscience. Both films reflect their directors' formal gifts, and their distinct approaches to "the real" transmute the very different production circumstances under which they were created. While Welles's use of deep-focus and other innovations brought a hyper-realist sophistication to the elaborate fantasy mechanics of the Hollywood studio film, De Sica's uncommon skills as a visual stylist and director of actors imbued the purist tropes of Italian neorealism—social themes, the use of real locations and nonprofessional performers—with a degree of poetic eloquence and seductive dramatic power seldom equaled in his era.

To an extent almost unimaginable today, the very different forms of realism exemplified by these films were seen as matters not just of aesthetic advancement but of moral urgency, too. Welles's critique of the collusion of media, political, and economic power was unprecedented, and he later paid the price for his boldness. In Europe, the searching self-examination provoked by a devastating war and the revelation of Hitler's death camps implicated an entire culture, including a cinema of complicity and vain distraction, typified in Italy by the "white telephone" farces and historical superspectacles of the 1930s.

Born in the fires of war, neorealism served as a chastening, disillusioning rejection of Fascism and fantasy, yet its resort to documentary-style, street-level filming (especially in Roberto Rossellini's trailblazing *Rome, Open City*, from 1945) was initially a matter of sheer necessity. It soon became an ethical stance, one with consequences both immediate and enduring. Today, more than in any other passage in film history, the tactics and ideals evoked by "neorealism" continue to represent the struggle for authenticity and political engagement in cinema.

Yet neorealism, which by some counts produced only twenty-one films in seven years, was finally less a movement than a moment: a rush of creative energies sparked by, and ultimately tied to, a particular historical crisis. Its authors began in Resistance and thought they were headed for Revolution, but Revolution did not materialize. By the time we reach *Bicycle Thieves*, in 1948, the neorealist trajectory has reached its apogee. With Italy reborn not as a socialist paradise but as a capitalist purgatory beset with massive unemployment (the postwar boom had yet to launch), the film teeters between ongoing idealism and encroaching melancholy, a place where the earnest formulas of ideology are deepened by the intuitions of tragedy.

The film was the third official collaboration between DeSica, a successful actor and matinee idol turned director, and Cesare Zavattini, a screenwriter who also served as one of neorealism's leading theoreticians. Like *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944) and *Shoeshine* (1946) before it, *Bicycle Thieves* uses children as characters whose innocence interrogates the dubious adult authority around them. Though loosely based on a book by Luigi Bartolini, the film exemplifies De Sica's stated desire to "reintroduce the dramatic into quotidian situations, the marvelous in a little news item...considered by most people throwaway material."

The quotidian anecdote dramatized here concerns Antonio Ricci, a young husband who has been suffering a prolonged spell of unemployment when he is offered a job as a bill poster. The catch is that he must have a bicycle and his is in hock. Rescued by his wife's willingness to pawn their bedsheets, Antonio sets out proudly and confidently on his new job, only to have his bicycle stolen on the first day. Desperate to stay employed, he mounts a wide-ranging search across Rome, accompanied most of the way by his young son, Bruno.

More than half a century on, it's hard to recapture how strikingly Italy's new realism—with its actual city streets and unfamiliar, hard-bitten faces—was to world audiences in the late 1940s, when any comparable Hollywood movie would have been shot on a studio back lot, with a star like Cary Grant (David O. Selznick's choice for Antonio) in the lead role. Yet *this* film's neorealism is a bit anomalous. Far from being shot guerilla-style, with minimal crew and technical support, it was mounted by a team of movie professionals working on a budget generous enough to allow for large-scale scenes, hundreds of extras, and even the apparatus necessary to create a fake rainstorm.

Here, the situational imperatives of early neorealism have become a conscious aesthetic—one, it must be noted, with proven market value in the cinephile capitals of Europe and America (neorealist films were always mostly an export commodity). Yet this isn't to question De Sica's and Zavattini's sincerity. Though they perhaps elected to compete with Hollywood on a comparable level of technique, they were still embarked on the heroic quest of speaking about the real people and places and social hardships that most moviemakers (then as now) took pains to avoid.

Their commitment to the real finds its most immediate gratifying proof in the movie's capacious, quasi-picaresque portrait of Rome. Like *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City, À Propos de Nice,* and *Wings of Desire*, among others, *Bicycle Thieves* is one of cinema's great "city films." But its wide gaze isn't simply geographic. In a way that subtly links De Sica's vision to Dante's each of its physical spaces also has a social, emotional, and moral dimension—from the union hall where crass entertainment intrudes, to the sprawling thieves' market of the Porta Portese, to the church where the poor are run through an assembly line of shaving, food, and worship, to the brothels' rough solidarity of the aptly named Via Panico, to the environs of a soccer stadium where Antonio's solitary ordeal reaches a humiliatingly public climax.

This city symphony is also, at its most intimate cinematic level, a symphony of looks. From the first, we are drawn into Antonio's alternately hopeful and haunted gaze and what it beholds. In the shop where

his wife pawns their sheets, the camera leads our eyes up a veritable tower of such linens, a catalog of forestalled dreams. In the search for the bicycle, Antonio both casts his own looks and receives looks of suspicion, curiosity, and, most prevalently, indifference. Sometimes looks are significantly blocked (by a slammed window, say) or misdirected (Antonio hurries on, looking ahead, while Bruno falls twice in the street behind).

In what's often regarded as the film's pivotal scene, Antonio decides to treat Bruno to a good meal. This complex gesture from father to son is played out against the subsidiary drama of looks exchanged between Bruno and a supercilious, pompadoured bourgeois boy at the next table. One could not call this passage especially subtle, yet its haunting power and richness show us what cinema can do that novels and theater cannot.

Looks also cue us to a gradual shift in the drama of *Bicycle Thieves*. Though it starts out focused closely on Antonio's poverty and desperate need to recover his bicycle, by the latter sections what most concerns us is not what happens between Antonio and the bicycle or his social position but what transpires between the man and his son. Indeed, a second viewing of the film might suggest that this has been the drama all along, that Bruno has been "looking after" Antonio in several senses that point us toward the film's justly famous final moments, when a touching gesture of filial solidarity replaces the class solidarity that De Sica and Zavattini evidently saw as receding in Italy.

Given the importance of individual gazes to his drama, it's no surprise that De Sica depends far more on variable compositions and cutting than did his neorealist colleagues Rossellini and Luchino Visconti, who inclined toward a more distanced camera style. Yet De Sica resists using close-ups or montage for Hollywood-style emotional overkill. Rather, his directing remains impressive for its vigorous inventiveness, the sense that every scene abound in moments and details that add to the film's accruing, multivalent meanings. Additionally, his genius with actors accounts for the indelible performances of the nonprofessionals Lamberto Maggiorandi, as Antonio, and Enzio Staiola, as Bruno.

Much has been made of the fact that Antonio is putting up a poster for a Rita Hayworth movie when his bike is stolen. Apologists like Zavattini, in positioning neorealism as the antithesis to Hollywood, often made claims that today look extravagant if not fanciful. André Bazin was surely closer to reality when he spoke of a "dialectical" relationship than when he vaunted neorealism as approaching "pure cinema." Yet no important contribution to cinema should be condemned by its most utopian rhetoric. Judged by the brilliant conviction of *Bicycle Thieves*, neorealism still looks like our most potent reminder that a whole world exists outside the movie theater, to which our conscience and humanity oblige us to pay attention.

<u>"Ode to the Common Man" Charles Burnett</u>

Bicycle Thieves is truly one of my favorite films. I could watch it over and over again, and in truth, I have. It's a complicated and eloquent story in spite of its simple plot. The first time I saw *Bicycle Thieves* was in a class on neorealism, and I was immediately struck by how seamless and real it was, as if a camera were fortunate enough to be present in capturing an actual event. *Bicycle Thieves* gives meaning to the common man. And, as is often the case in life, reality here doesn't have a happy resolution. It was the same where I grew up: life was basically a continuous struggle. You endure, as William Faulkner points out. The people from the housing projects near where I used to live had a lot in common with those in *Bicycle Thieves*. In trying to find answers to what I experienced, I read a lot of Depression-era literature and studied the works of the photojournalists who focused on families struggling to make ends meet—slave narratives and books like Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise*

Famous Men, which share the sensibility that produced neorealism. To tell a story without imposing your values is very challenging.

There is a group of filmmakers like myself who wanted to counter the distorted narratives and stereotyped images of Hollywood, and on seeing *Bicycle Thieves*, I was moved by how ordinary people were able to express so much humanity. The story achieved in very simple terms what I was looking to do in films: humanize those watching. It is totally unromantic. The characters are just ordinary people, and the film gives the impression you are watching life unfold before you. It is entertaining, but that is not the goal. Its goal is to make audiences aware of a particular social condition that needs a political solution. It is clear that it was made as a tool for change.

Also amazing is the fact that the thieves are not portrayed as bad people but as victims of a corrupt society. It is postwar Italy, just freed from a Fascist government that had controlled information and lied to its people. When Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani) forces the young man who stole his bike to take him to his house, all of the thief's neighbors come out to give him support. His partner comes out of his rundown apartment holding a baby when he hears the commotion. When he sees Antonio, he escapes back into his apartment. You find a kind of Lower Depths, but in spite of their poverty, they have grace.

The predators are rich and disconnected. De Sica's commentary is fascinating. The theft of the bike ironically unveils the layers of corruption at all levels of postwar Italy, but especially in the upper classes. You see a well-dressed, self-indulgent young man blowing bubbles and totally oblivious to Antonio's suffering as he and his friend conduct their through vendors selling bikes and parts. In the same scene, De Sica shows a well-dressed pedophile trying to seduce Antonio's son, Bruno (Enzo Staiola); no one seems to be concerned about the pedophile, as if it is all too common. Even the church is not a sanctuary.

Class struggle is clearly a concern of De Sica's.

The most significant insight I gained from *Bicycle Thieves* is that stories don't have to be complicated. Something small can start a whole landslide of emotions.

from *Encountering Directors* Charles Thomas Samuels NY 1972: Interview with Vittorio De Sica Rome, May 9, 1971

DS: But when it came out ["The Children Are Watching Us"], we were in the middle of our Fascist period–that absurd little republic of ours–and I was asked to go to Venice to lead the Fascist film school. I refused, so my unfortunate little film, came out without the name of its author.

DS: Neorealism is not shooting films in authentic locales; it is not reality. It is reality filtered through poetry, reality transfigured. It is not Zola, not naturalism, verism, things which are ugly.

CTS: By poetry do you mean scenes like the one in *The Bicycle Thief*, where the father takes his son to the *trattoria* in order to cheer the boy up only to be overcome with the weight of his problems?

DS: Ah, that is one of the few light scenes in the film.

CTS: But sad at the same time.

DS: Yes, that's what I mean by poetry.

CTS: You say that neorealism is realism filtered through poetry; nonetheless. It is harsh because you forced your compatriots right after the war to confront experiences they had just suffered through. Didn't they resist?

DS: Neorealism was born after a total loss of liberty, not only personal, but artistic and political. It was a means of rebelling against the stifling dictatorship that had humiliated Italy. When we lost the war, we discovered our ruined morality. The first film that placed a very tiny stone in the reconstruction of our former dignity was *Shoeshine*.

CTS: Are you nostalgic for the earlier days?

DS: Very. *Umberto D* was made absolutely without compromise, without concessions to spectacle, the public, the box office.

CTS: Even fewer than *The Bicycle Thief*?

DS: Look, for me, *Umberto D* is unique [his favorite of his films].Even though it has been the greater critical success, *The Bicycle Thief* does contain sentimental concessions.
DS: In Italy there are about a hundred actors; fewer, if you are critical. In life there are millions. . . .

For *The Bicycle Thief*, only one producer would give me money. David O. Selznick was the only one who saw value in the project, but he wondered whom I would cast as the father. I replied that I wanted a real Italian worker because I found no one suitable among the available professionals (Mastroianni would have done, but he was too young then, only eighteen). You know who Selznick wanted? Cary Grant. Grant is pleasant, cordial, but he is too worldly, bourgeois; his hands have no blisters on them. He carries himself like a gentleman. I needed a man who eats like a worker, is moved like a worker, who can bring himself to cry, who bats his wife around and expresses his love for her by slamming her on the shoulders, the buttocks, the head. Cary Grant isn't used to doing such things and he can't do them. Therefore, Selznick refused to give me money, and I had to beg to finance the film, as I always have had to beg. For my commercial movies, money was always available.
CTS: Bresson complained to me that you neorealists were violating reality by dubbing, since the voice is the truest expression of personality.
DS: It's not the voice; it's what one says.
CTS: Still, why do you dub?
DS: Because I didn't have the money. *The Bicycle Thief* cost a hundred thousand dollars, *Shoeshine*, twenty thousand. With such budgets, I couldn't afford sound cameras.
CTS: You've worked in color and black and white. Which do you prefer?
DS: Black and white, because reality is in black and white.
CTS: That's not true.
DS: Color is distracting. When you see a beautiful landscape in a color film. You forget the story. Americans use color for musicals. All my best films were made in black and white.
CTS: Most critics today maintain that the true film artist writes what he directs.
DS: That's not true. Directing is completely different from writing; it is the creation of life. If *Bicycle Thief* had been directed by someone else, it would have been good, but different from the film I made.
CTS: Does this mean that you think dialogue less important than images?
DS: Images are the only important things. Let me give you an example of what I mean. Five films have been made of *The Brothers Karamazov*, all bad. Only one came close to Dostoyevsky: the version by Fedor Ozep. That's how the director is an author. In all these films the same story was used, but only one of them was any good.
CTS: Why are you so drawn to the destruction of young children as a theme for your films?
DS: Because children are the first to suffer in life. Innocents always pay.
CTS: This is what you show in *The Children Are Watching Us*. But something even more remarkable in that film is the general decency of the characters. Even that nosy neighbor turns out to be all right, in the moment when she brings the maid a glass of water. Does this represent your belief about mankind?
DS: All my films are about the search for human solidarity. In *Bicycle Thief* this solidarity occurs, but how long does it last? Twenty-four hours. One

experiences moments, only moments of solidarity. That glass of water is one of them. Two hours later there will be no more union; the people won't be able to bear one another.
CTS: But it's important that the moment occurred.
DS: One needs something that lasts longer.
CTS: Is that possible?
DS: No. Human incommunicability is eternal.
CTS: Incommunicability or egoism?
DS: Let me tell you something. I wanted to call my films from *Shoeshine* on, not by their present titles, but "Egoism #1, #2, #3." *Umberto D* is "Egoism #4."
CTS: Did you believe in your next film, *The Gate of Heaven*?
DS: No, I made it only to save myself from the Germans. As a matter of fact, the Vatican didn't find it orthodox enough and destroyed the negative….All the time the Fascists kept asking me when I would finish that Vatican film and come to Venice, and I kept telling them I was at work on it. It took me two years. I completed it the day the Americans entered Rome. It was made to order. There are some good things in it, but the final scene of the miracle is horrible. It was a film made only to save me from the Fascists.

CTS: Why do you use music in *The Bicycle Thief* so often to provoke an emotional response?
DS: I am against music, except at a moment like the end of *The Garden of the Fitzi-Continis* when we hear the Hebrew Lament, but the producers always insist on it.
CTS: You said that this film contains a compromise…
DS: Not a compromise, a concession. A small, romantic sentimentality in that rapport between father and son.
CTS: But that is the most moving thing in the film.
DS: Look, I agree that *The Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D* are my best films, but I stoutly maintain that the latter is superior.
DS: [about *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*] I am happy that I made it because it brought me back to my old noble intentions. Because, you see, I have been ruined by lack of money. All my good films, which I financed by myself, made nothing. Only my bad films made money. Money has been my ruin.

De Sica on film technique (from *Miricalo in Milano*): 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.

Censoring De Sica (from the File Room): In spite of the praise and awards *The Bicycle Thief* was receiving from around the globe, Hollywood's Production Code Administration (PCA) was able to find two scenes that it demanded be removed before it would issue its Seal of approval. "The first was a brief, slightly poignant episode in the midst of the frantic daylong search for the stolen bicycle. Antonio's son pauses beside a Roman wall, apparently to relieve himself. His back is to the camera and before he can begin, his father compels him to abandon the call of nature and continue the chase. The second problem, more important to the plot, involved Antonio's pursuit of the thief into a "house of tolerance." The run went through the bordello. Showed nothing even remotely sensual. The women were clothed, unattractive and occupied only with their Sunday morning meal." (*American Film* 12/1989 pg.52) Although neither scene technically violated the official Production Code, Joseph Breen, the PCA's Director, personally opposed the scenes and demanded they be removed before he would issue the film the PCA Seal. Because most cinemas were still owned by the major studios, this Seal was imperative for a film's distribution. "The company presidents made the Production Code Seal the passport that the movies needed to enter the

largest and most profitable theaters in America. They fined those who distributed or exhibited a picture without the Seal." (*American Film* 12/1989 pg.42) Banking on the film's reputation and critics' support, Burstyn, the film's distributor, began a press campaign to have the Motion Picture Association overrule Breen's decision. The Association supported Breen's decision and demanded that the scenes be removed. Burstyn refused the to make the cuts, and he was forced to release the film without the Seal. "The decision sparked intense criticism of the Production Code Administration. In a two-column New York *Times* story "The Unkindest Cut," Bosley Crowther termed the outcome of the appeal "the sort of resistance to liberalization or change that widely and perilously oppresses the whole industry today...In a series of press releases, he accused Breen of applying petty standards that the vast majority of Americans had long sense rejected.." (*American Film* 12/1989 pg.53) As the support of the PCA began to be challenged by Bursytn and the like, *The Bicycle Thief* decision marked the beginning of the end of the PCA's rigid hold on film distribution.

A.O. Scott: "Why You Should Still Care About 'Bicycle Thieves': On the unforgettable heartbreak and enduring pleasures of an Italian neorealist masterpiece (*NY Times*, 13 August 2020)

"People should see it — and they should care." Those are the concluding words to one of the more passionate raves in the annals of New York Times film criticism: Bosley Crowther's 1949 review of the Italian movie introduced to American audiences as "The Bicycle Thief."

The English title has since been adjusted to reflect the original. It's "Bicycle Thieves" ("Ladri di Biciclette" in Italian) not only because more than one bike is stolen, but also because the cruelty of modern life threatens to make robbers of us all. More than 70 years after Crowther's enthusiastic notice — during which time Vittorio De Sica's fable of desperation has been imitated, satirized, analyzed and taught in schools — I'm tempted to let my predecessor have the last word.

But why should you see it, or see it again? Why should you (still) care? These are fair questions to ask of any consensus masterpiece — skepticism is what keeps art alive, reverence embalms it — and especially apt in the case of "Bicycle Thieves." The movie is about seeing and caring, about the danger of being distracted from what matters. The tragedy it depicts arises partly from poverty, injustice and the aftereffect of dictatorship, but more profoundly from a deficit of empathy.

Based on a book by Luigi Bartolini, with a script by Cesare Zavattini — written, as Crowther noted, "with the camera exclusively in mind" — "Bicycle Thieves is a political parable and a spiritual fable, at once a hard look at the conditions of the Roman working class after World War II and an inquiry into the state of an individual soul. The soul in question belongs to Antonio Ricci, a lean, handsome, diffident man who lives with his wife, Maria, and their two young children in a recently built apartment that lacks running water.

At a time of mass unemployment and widespread homelessness, the Riccis are relatively fortunate, and as the film begins, luck seems to be smiling on them. Antonio is picked out of a throng of job-seekers and offered a position pasting up advertisements. He needs a bicycle, and Maria pawns the couple's bed linens — one set has never been used — so her husband can get his trusty Fides out of hock.

The good times don't last. On his first day at work, Antonio's bicycle is snatched from under his nose, and he and his young son, Bruno, spend the rest of the movie in a desperate effort to recover it. Their journey takes them (and the viewer) on a tour of Rome's rougher quarters, away from the monuments and museums. By the end, we have witnessed a humble man's humiliation, a loss of dignity as devastating as an earthquake.

The use of ordinary people and actual locations, which didn't begin with De Sica, was already, in 1948, a hallmark of neorealism, the movement that helped Italy secure a central place in postwar world cinema. Like most artistic tendencies, neorealism has often been more of a puzzle than a program, its essence obscured by theoretical hairsplitting and ideological disputation.

By the strict accounting of some critics, there are exactly seven films in the neorealist canon: three apiece by De Sica and Roberto Rossellini and one by Luchino Visconti. A less rigorous definition includes countless Italian films released between the end of the war and the mid-1960s, even big-budgeted, movie-star-filled, internationally flavored productions like Federico Fellini's "La Strada" and Visconti's "Rocco and His Brothers." Any Italian movie shot in black-and-white and concerned with the struggles of poor people might qualify.

I prefer to think of neorealism as an impulse, an ethos, a spore that caught the wind of history and sprouted in the soil of every continent. The spirits of Maria and Antonio Ricci — and perhaps especially of the impish, vulnerable Bruno — live on in the work of Satyajit Ray in Bengal in the late 1950s, in the Brazilian Cinema Novo in the 1960s, in Iran in the 1990s and the United States in the first decade of this century. Films like Ramin Bahrani's "Chop Shop" and Kelly Reichardt's "Wendy and Lucy," which tally the moral and existential costs of economic precariousness, have a clear affinity with "Bicycle Thieves."

In Italy, the neorealist impulse has been refreshed in each generation, in the work of filmmakers like Ermanno Olmi and, most recently, Alice Rohrwacher, whose "Happy as Lazzaro"infuses a story of hardship and exploitation with literal magic. "Bicycle Thieves" itself has become an essential part of the cultural patrimony, a touchstone to be treasured, teased and taken for granted. It has been quoted and referenced in countless later movies. My own favorite is Ettore Scola's "We All Loved Each Other So Much," which traces the postwar lives and loves of four anti-fascist partisans. One of them, a left-wing intellectual played by Stefano Satta Flores, is obsessed with De Sica and "Bicycle Thieves," a preoccupation with absurd, unhappy consequences. His love of the movie costs him a job and causes him embarrassment on a television quiz show.

Part of what draws filmmakers (and film lovers) to "Bicycle Thieves" is its purity and simplicity, but to emphasize those elements — the unvarnished honesty of the performances, the gritty realness of the Roman streets, the raw emotions of the story — is to risk underestimating its complexity and sophistication.

Neorealism was partly an aesthetic of necessity. Right after the war, money and equipment were in short supply, and the vast Cinecittà studio complex on the southern edge of Rome was a refugee camp. Cinecittà had been built by Mussolini as one monumental expression of his belief in the natural affinity between fascism and film. (The Venice Film Festival was another.) The leading lights of neorealism — including De Sica, a prominent actor before he took up directing — had started out working in Mussolini's movie industry, which specialized in slick melodramas and high-society romances as well as propaganda.

While it is free of those genre trappings, "Bicycle Thieves" has a sometimes playful, sometimes poetic self-consciousness. The first work we see Antonio doing is hanging up a poster of Rita Hayworth, a sign that Hollywood is part of the Italian landscape. Within a few years, the import and export of movie stars would become a fixture of Italy's cultural and economic boom. Fellini's "La Strada" and "Nights of Cabiria" won back-to-back foreign-language film Oscars in 1957 and '58. Anna Magnani had won for best actress in 1956. Six years later it was Sophia Loren's turn, for "Two Women," directed by De Sica, who had perhaps done more than anyone

other than Loren herself to cultivate her star power and unlock her artistic potential.

"Bicycle Thieves" may seem like an improbable gateway to the glamorous golden age of Italian cinema, the starry, sexy cosmos of Loren, Gina Lollobrigida and "La Dolce Vita," but sensuality and spectacle are hardly alien to the neorealist universe. The struggle for survival doesn't exclude the pursuit of pleasure. Even as Antonio and Bruno encounter disappointment, indifference and cruelty, they also find glimmers of beauty and delight. Seeking help from a sanitation-worker friend in their search for the Fides, Antonio finds the man at the neighborhood cultural center, rehearsing a musical sketch for a revue. Later, Antonio and Bruno will cross paths with itinerant musicians, a fortuneteller, and a young man blowing bubbles in an open-air bicycle market. They will duck into a restaurant for a snack of fried mozzarella, enduring the condescending stares of the rich patrons at the next table.

Their pursuit of the purloined bicycle is full of pain and anxiety, but it is also an adventure, with episodes of tenderness and comedy on the way to final heartbreak. Those moments, modulated by Alessandro Cicognini's musical score, provide an undercurrent of hope, much as the bustling rhythm of Rome itself — a city that has resisted dreariness for 2,000 years — supplies a reminder that life goes on.

That's always a good lesson, though "Bicycle Thieves" is a film entirely without didacticism. It shows everything and doesn't need to explain anything, and so does away with the false choice between escapism and engagement. To care about a movie can be a way of caring about the world.

Sandra E. Lim: "The Tribulations of the Working Class: *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) (*Senses of Cinema*, February 2020)

Ladri di biciclette (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) marked Vittorio De Sica's eighth directorial credit in a prolific filmmaking career, which had included work produced within the dictates of Italy's government-controlled cinema during the time of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime. By the end of World War II, De Sica had begun to transition away from the artificiality of the sanctioned historical melodramas and romantic comedies of the time and towards a way of making films that privileged the experiences of real people.[1]

Bicycle Thieves opens with the arrival of a bus – a sign of life – and the scattering of young men who assemble and follow a government agent to the steps of a makeshift employment office. Antonio Ricci's (Lamberto Maggiorani) name is called for work, but he is nowhere to be found. Instead, he sits hopelessly off in the distance by a dusty road, with a sparse landscape and crumbling apartments looming overhead, unaware of the bus's arrival until one of the men from the steps runs to fetch him. Antonio is offered a job in the city pasting posters on walls; he later tells his wife, Maria (Lianella Carell), that it is a "good job" with a "family allowance", but one that strictly requires a bicycle – something that he no longer has, having pawned it for food money. As Antonio laments to his wife about the job he has accepted (but thinks he's already lost), Maria comes up with a thrifty solution to get the bike back. Even so, as soon as the bicycle is retrieved, it is lost again to a thief during Antonio's first day on the job. From then on, *Bicycle Thieves* follows Antonio and his young son, Bruno (Enzo Staiola), on a futile search throughout the streets of Rome.

According to the French film critic André Bazin, what makes the unremarkable story of *Bicycle Thieves* – much like Italian neorealist films in general – so remarkable and satisfying is the uncontrived way it depicts working-class people and their "genuine problems of living" as the basis for a simple and incidental narrative.[2] From roughly 1942 to 1953, Italian neorealist directors became known for shunning the spaces of film studios in favour of using non-professional actors, natural lighting and location photography, all of which lent the "impression of truth." A further key aspect was their focus on plots

derived from the social world and the lives of the working class.[3] In fact, *Bicycle Thieves* is a pivotal example of the Neorealist deployment of non-professional actors, wherein Staiola's Bruno offers a natural counterpoint to Maggiorani's Antonio. This is evident from the scene of the morning of Antonio's first day in his new job, when we learn that Bruno is also getting ready for work. Wearing coveralls, he gets a smaller version of the egg sandwich that Maria makes for Antonio, and saves it in his shirt pocket, just like his father. The gesture echoes something eternal about the relationship between the two, which is again reinforced when Antonio drops Bruno off at a gas station and we see the latter immediately get to work, awkwardly lifting and filling heavy cans with his small and clumsy frame.

Naturalistic moments between Bruno and Antonio are also evident during the course of events that begin at the Porta Portese market, where stolen bicycle parts end up on the black market. In these scenes, the mental and physical strain of the search begins to show, when Antonio runs ahead of Bruno to take cover from a sudden shower of rain and Bruno, as if unrehearsed, slips and falls flat on his face. Antonio yells at him in annoyance, "What happened?" to which Bruno's wounded ego counters unexpectedly, "I fell!" Next, when they find and lose the only person who has had contact with the bicycle thief (Antonio allows the man to go for lunch before they drag him out of a church, but the man gives them the slip), Bruno admonishes his father for letting the man go. From out of nowhere, Antonio slaps Bruno across the face and calls him a nuisance. In response, Bruno's hurt reaction builds and washes over his face like the previously observed turn in the weather. After this, Antonio leaves Bruno on a bridge overlooking a canal and continues the search on his own. It's at this point that the precarity of the young boy's existence in the world is brought into focus, as people gather and yell that a boy has drowned. In a panic, Antonio finds Bruno waiting for him on the steps of the canal, and redirects his attention to his love and care for the boy – a dynamic brought back to the forefront as they indulge in a meal of melted cheese sandwiches and wine in a nearby café. Never is the contrast and convergence of feelings between the two more apparent than in the heartbreaking finale, when, out of desperation, Antonio tries to steal a bicycle and is caught and publicly shamed by a crowd of men. It's in Bruno's action of taking his father's hand that the despair on Antonio's tearful face becomes not so much a moment of melodrama as a moment of unbearable tragedy.

According to film scholar Peter Bondanella, De Sica's approach to directing non-professional actors was anything but non-interventionist or haphazard (as the strictures of neorealism might imply). In fact, De Sica not only went to great lengths to shape his actors' performances, but also engaged in meticulous planning of scenes for the camera. Moreover, the narrative was less documentary-like than it was "mythical in structure."[4]Still, in remembering the difficulties of finding the right child to play Antonino's son, De Sica recalls that what struck him about Staiola, was his "adenoidal voice" and "clownlike and melancholic face." In a similar vein, De Sica's attention was caught by Maggiorani's callused worker's hands and the way he moved, both of which signified his class status, and each of which could never have been replicated.[5]

The Bicycle Thieves has been hugely influential in the film world in many ways. Click here for what Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke said about whatit meant to him: "The Joy and Pain of One Good Meal in *Bicycle Thieves* (Criterion).

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, SPRING 2021, SERIES 42

Feb 23 1959 Yasujiro Ozu *Floating Weeds*
March 2 1960 Alfred Hitchcock *Psycho*
Mach 16 1969 Éric Rohmer *My Night at Maud's*
March 23 1972 Peter Medak *The Ruling Class*
March 30 1978 Terrence Malick *Days of Heaven*
April 6 1981 Karel Reisz *The French Lieutenant's Woman*
April 13 1989 Spike Lee *Do The Right Thing*
April 20 1993 Jane Campion *The Piano*
April 27 2000 Joel and Ethan Coen *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*
May 4 1982 Ingmar Bergman *Fanny and Alexander*

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