

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Why You Should Still Care About ‘Bicycle Thieves’

On the unforgettable heartbreak and enduring pleasures of an Italian neorealist masterpiece



By [A.O. Scott](#)

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“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.

Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani), Maria (Lianella Carell) and Bruno (Enzo Staiola) are played — along with almost everyone else in the movie — by nonprofessional actors. Some of the mystique around "Bicycle Thieves" rests on this fact, on the arguable but durable belief that minimal acting technique will produce maximal authenticity.

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.

Editors’ Picks

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.

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