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*Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)* (review)

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Modernism/modernity, Volume 16, Number 2, April 2009, pp. 463-465 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.0.0071>



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## DVD Review

***Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)*. Vittorio De Sica, dir. Starring Lamberto Maggiorani and Enzo Staiola. Criterion Collection, 2007 (1948). 2 DVDs + 76-page booklet featuring essays by Godfrey Cheshire, Charles Burnett, André Bazin, and Cesare Zavattini, and remembrances by Vittorio De Sica and his collaborators. \$39.95.**

**Reviewed by Torunn Haaland, The Pennsylvania State University**

Fifty years after its release, *Bicycle Thieves* strikes us as a much more modern film than the specificity of its socio-historical anchorage would suggest. De Sica's commitment to postwar Italy's most underprivileged presupposes a critical exposition of events, but his aesthetic ideal of poetic realism, and scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini's apparently antithetical vision of a cinematic chronicle, tend rather towards de-dramatized and ambiguous *hic et nunc*. What will happen after two days' futile search for a stolen bike is therefore left unresolved, leaving the last shots to dwell on the two desolate city-walkers as they merge with the indolently moving crowd, so indifferent to their needs, and with the film's languid texture, so embrace instead of their tacit despair and solidarity. Behind them rises the city, officially at the verge of modernity and industrialization; ahead of them lay underdeveloped outskirts areas still entangled within struggles of the past. De Sica's Rome resides between what it is and what it wants to be, a dialectics dramatized through the hardships of an unskilled worker, Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani) and his son Bruno (Enzo Staiola) who over the past two days—89 minutes of cinema time—has seen his father rise and fall from disillusioned and unemployed, to proudly employed, to (un?)employed bicycle-thief humiliated beyond belief.

The anti-cinematic story of a bike starts in the scarcely spectacular Val Melaina, one of postwar Rome's geographically and socially most displaced areas. The massive, rudimentary apartment complex thrown into a deserted field is a housing project fascist planners started, and evidently never finished, in order to dislocate the lower classes and reserve the inner city areas for the respectable middle class.<sup>1</sup> The result, as Antonio's endless commuting demonstrates, resonates in the postwar years as deprivation not only of decent housing conditions, but also of

MODERNISM / *modernity*  
VOLUME SIXTEEN, NUMBER  
TWO, PP 463–465.  
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UNIVERSITY PRESS



464 access to the few jobs available in the city centre. After two years' unemployment, luck selects him out of a crowd of disillusioned men; but the position as billposter requires a bike and his is pawned. Antonio curses his destiny, and it is his far more practical wife, Maria (Lianella Carell) who resolves to convert their bed linen so that he can present himself to his new boss with the essential vehicle, while she goes to thank a fake psychic for having predicted his sudden change in fortune. De Sica failed in convincing a fortune teller known in Rome as La Santona (Great Saintess) to star as herself in this episode, but the performance he got from Ida Bracci Dorati—like the rest of the cast, not a professional actor—vividly suggests what function entrepreneurially-minded wise-women played in postwar times of loss and destruction.<sup>2</sup> Although La Santona was included mostly as a token of popular Roman folklore, she becomes crucial to the development of Antonio's character when he, who initially disapproved of Maria's credulousness, eventually turns to her ridiculous predictions for help.

Both a heroic victim of social injustice and an inert, irresolute anti-hero, Antonio's misfortunes begin the following morning when he is busy covering antique walls with promotional posters for *Gilda* (1946). Inherent in the ironic allusion to the illusionist cinema *Bicycle Thieves* categorically rejects, there is also an authorial recognition that, once the wartime ban on foreign film was lifted, Hollywood bombshells fared way better at national box offices than angry Italian cineastes. Antonio would know nothing about this, but he gets so absorbed in his first assignment that he fails to see the men surrounding him until one of them rolls away with his bike, leaving him alone with a distorted Rita Hayworth. As one of the film's first and still most influential critics, André Bazin, observed, this is a world in which "the poor must steal from each other," and the sense we get from Antonio's successive odyssey is that his critical situation has less to do with low-scale organized crime than with social institutions that serve to exclude rather than aid the already disenfranchised.<sup>3</sup>

This everyday tragedy divides the film into an uplifting *before* and an increasingly disconcerting *after* that begins at the police station, where stolen bikes are routine and not crime, and ends the following evening in the thief's own neighborhood, where the law of silence destroys the victim's unarmed claim to justice. Between these two points, Antonio and Bruno cross the city in all its vastness and contradictions, moving from the trade union, where radical intellectuals talk much and act little, and the black markets, overloaded by other peoples' stolen bikes, to a brothel, where the thief seeks to hide from their persecution, and a church, where hypocritical bourgeois Catholics shave and feed the homeless provided they attend mass. As points of connection between these encounters stand *temps mortes* of unforeseen circumstances, such as the heavy rain shower and the German priests who share their shelter but not their language or their despair, and of directionless wandering along narrow alleys and deserted riverbanks that avoid landmarks and signs of imperial glory for a spatial exposition of solitude and displacement.

One of the film's most memorable sequences occurs when Antonio takes Bruno to a restaurant in order to restore peace with the son he had unjustly slapped. For a moment, Antonio can even pretend not to worry, but the multiple servings arriving at the table next to them leave no room for illusion as to the effective implications of his trivial loss. It is a question of relative, and stable, prosperity, but also of dignity as a father and a citizen, that leads the dispossessed bill-poster to the self-destructive attempt at redressing social injustice. A significant difference separates the film's parallel thefts, however, since Antonio faced his misfortunes alone, whereas the victim he unwittingly chooses—a comfortable bourgeois with no apparent need of a bike—receives instantaneous assistance from the entire neighborhood. The mass reaction to his misdeed is closer to Kafkaesque surrealism than to social realism, but it provides a psychologically verisimilar illustration of what happens within a man whose feeling of shame overcomes indignation toward an unfair world; and of what transpires in a child when his ideals are crushed and roles are twisted so that the son paradoxically becomes the one to offer a paternally consoling hand.

Like Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) and Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (1947), *Bicycle Thieves* has become synonymous with neorealism; a cultural practice of everyday aesthetics and

social engagement that, while it evolved in the wake of Nazi-fascist resistance and of the war, had its roots in prewar films such as Visconti's *Obsession* and De Sica/Zavattini's *The Children are Watching Us*. Released in 1943 at the dawn of Italy's long and gory struggle for liberation, these films rejected the evasive comedies De Sica had starred in since the early 1930s for bleak portrayals of female adultery and disintegration of the bourgeois family, thus inciting scarce enthusiasm among fascist censors. Neorealism elaborated this anti-rhetorical and demystifying mode of representation, and, while it never achieved the programmatic unity or the scope of a movement—only a handful of directors and roughly ten per cent of the films produced in Italy between 1945 and 1953 can be considered strictly neorealist—it demonstrated a considerable degree of coherence in the dedication to contemporary issues, popular ambiances, real locations, documentary-like aesthetics, and non-professional actors.<sup>4</sup>

Of these characteristics, it was untrained actors and children, in particular, that became De Sica's trademark. His ability to communicate the essence—not of a role, or of a character—but of a situation, and of the sentiments to be simulated in a given moment, marks all of his and Zavattini's neorealist collaborations; from *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Miracle in Milan* (1951) to *Umberto D* (1952) and *Il tetto* (1956). None of these films escapes *Bicycle Thieves'* critical exposure of underprivileged realities and could not therefore expect to thrill Giulio Andreotti, then Undersecretary of Culture and later legendary Prime Minister. His 1949 law declared film a merchandise that, like tomatoes, should export sunny images of Italy, and it did not help, in times of cold war polemics, that the leftist “dirty-linen” (*sic*) De Sica shipped out admittedly had given Italian cinema a certain international reputation. *Bicycle Thieves'* most uncompromising allegation was unquestionably that at the peak of reconstruction, Italy still struggled with socio-economic disjunctions inherited from Mussolini. However, ultimately, what will strike viewers most today is the story of a man whose life of deprivation and displacement also involves few pleasures, destructive inertness, and desperate solitude.

Leaving very few hints of damage, the transfer from film to DVD achieves an extraordinary sharp reflection of a photography that rarely is black or white, but that moves within ranges of gray tones and in suggestive association with the melancholic score. An accurate but hardly literal subtitle translation represents a clear improvement compared to earlier releases, but it tends to omit parts of the primary dialogue and of background voices and comes short in rendering the colloquial and paratactic quality of the character's speech. The dubious optional English-language score—apparently retrieved from an old theatrical release—one I would refrain from using. Supplements tracing the film's production history and its position within Italian and world cinema are substantial and truly revealing. *Working with De Sica* features new interviews with screenwriter Suso Cecchi d'Amico, actor Enzo Staiola, and film critic Callisto Cosulich, whereas Carlo Lizzani's 2003 documentary features interviews with Bernardo Bertolucci and Roberto Benigni, among others, to reconstruct an image of Cesare Zavattini as so much more than a controversial scriptwriter. Finally, *Life as It Is: The Neorealist Movement in Italy* offers an exceptionally lucid treatment of the sociohistoric and cultural context of Italian postwar film by one of its most perceptive contemporary critics, Mark Shiel.

## Notes

1. See Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Cities 1939–1990* (London: Routledge, 1991), 119–24.

2. See De Sica and Caldiron, eds., “*Ladri di biciclette*” di Vittorio di Sica (Roma: Pantheon, 1997), 55–56.

3. André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 2.*, ed. and transl. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 51–52.

4. See Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 35.