

Bicycle Thieves (1948)

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The Resilience of Neorealism

Context

Bicycle Thieves is a film that is famous without in fact being particularly well known. As a result, many confusions have grown up around it, and it is not easy to approach unless some of these confusions are removed. The confusion begins with the title itself. The original Italian title is *Ladri di biciclette*, which translates as "Bicycle Thieves," and it is as *Bicycle Thieves* that it was released in Britain. But in France it was released as *Le voleur de bicyclette*, and in the United States as *The Bicycle Thief*, suggesting that it is first and foremost a drama about a man who steals a bicycle (or even several bicycles). In fact, it is a story about a man whose bicycle is stolen and who then attempts to steal a bicycle himself. There are therefore two thefts (one of them unsuccessful) and two thieves, and the point of the film's rather slender plot lies in the tit-for-tat nature of the theft. In this essay I shall use the British (and Italian) title *Bicycle Thieves* throughout, to respect the actual dynamic of the plot.

The second confusion concerns the author. Most sources assign the film simply to Vittorio De Sica, who was the director. But some writers describe the film as being by De Sica and Zavattini, on the grounds that Cesare Zavattini, who was principal scriptwriter on the film, played a shaping role not only in creating *Bicycle Thieves* but in creating other films on which the two men collaborated in the 1940s and 1950s. This fact was widely recognized at the time and is so again today. But the "auteurist" criticism in the mid-1950s has tended to downplay the role of collaborators of all kinds and scriptwriters in particular, and Zavattini's importance has thus been obscured. It is also the case that the credits of the film describe Zavattini only as the author of the treatment (*soggetto*) and as just one of many writers who contributed to the final



script. De Sica was in fact the only actual director and was solely responsible for what many critics regard as the most remarkable feature of the film, the direction of the nonprofessional actors, so calling it a De Sica film is in a technical sense correct. But this, as I shall show, is by no means the whole story. In this essay I shall treat the film as a joint creation, attributing individual contributions where the known facts permit, but leaving this open in cases where the symbiosis of the two authors makes precise attribution impossible.

A third confusion arises from the film's connection with the Italian neorealist movement, of which it is a much-cited exemplar. This particular confusion manifests itself in two ways. First, although the film is generally (as mentioned above) ascribed to De Sica as its director, it is also widely thought to be an enactment of a distinct neorealist poetics, attributed to Zavattini. In his writings on film, Zavattini did indeed propose a poetics of neorealism, radically different from that of mainstream cinema, but it is not difficult to show—as has been done for example by Kristin Thompson—that *Bicycle Thieves* does not enact it.

Meanwhile, the film has also suffered from the equally widespread belief that neorealist films were badly made and generally shot on "grainy" black-and-white stock, which in the case of *Bicycle Thieves* is simply not true. This misconception has gained credence from the fact that it is rarely shown theatrically, so that two generations of viewers have gone by, one watching it on 16 mm and the other on VHS video, who have no firsthand knowledge of what it should look like. Shown on 35 mm it is a very beautiful film to watch, a fact that undoubtedly contributed to its original reputation. With any luck, rerelease on DVD will help bring back a sense of what the film ought to look like.

A fourth and final confusion surrounds its seesawing reputation. Over the years *Bicycle Thieves* has sunk from being regarded as a pinnacle of film art to becoming one of those films shown only as monuments to changes in critical fashion. It has also been pointed out, not without malice, that even when its reputation was at its peak, it was never popular with a mass audience, at home or abroad. This contrast between critical acclaim and popular disdain has, however, been much exaggerated. *Bicycle Thieves* was one of the better performing films at the box office in Italy when it came out, though its greatest success was in art-house distribution—in France, Britain, and the United States, in

particular. The rest of this essay will be devoted to showing why the film deserves better than to be regarded as a historical curiosity.

Background

In 1948, when *Bicycle Thieves* came out, Italy was slowly recovering from the devastation caused by the Second World War. Aid under the Marshall Plan had started flowing, but its effects were still to be felt. There was widespread unemployment and a continuing shortage of food and raw materials. The film industry had been dismantled during the war and was just beginning to put itself back together. But it faced overwhelming competition from the backlog of American films that the Italian public had not been able to see during the war years and that were being released en masse from 1946 onward. It was while the commercial industry was in disarray and before the trickle of American films entering the country had become a deluge that the neorealist movement established itself.

Neorealism has never been easy to define precisely, but its most important characteristic, in literature as much as in the cinema, was the bearing of testimony. Neorealist stories and films tended to be about ordinary life, whether in extraordinary circumstances such as under the German occupation or ordinary ones such as the times of deprivation that followed. The neorealist writers and filmmakers were mostly left wing in politics, and many had taken part in the Resistance. They had a vision of reconstruction that looked forward to a future radically different from the recent Fascist past.

In the immediate postwar years, two Italian films in particular had enjoyed wide success: they were Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, 1945) and De Sica and Zavattini's *Shoeshine* (*Sciuscià*, 1946). *Open City* had been a box-office hit both in Italy and abroad, especially in the United States. *Shoeshine* had been less successful commercially, but it won an Oscar for best foreign film, and on that basis American producers had begun to express interest in investing in Italian films. But these were the years of the onset of the Cold War, and conservative opinion, both in Italy and in the United States, was suspicious of the pro-Communist leanings of the neorealist filmmakers. It was also widely thought, and probably rightly, that a cinema that made a virtue of making films without star actors had restricted commercial prospects with a mass audience.

By the time *Bicycle Thieves* came out, neorealism had lost much of its novelty value in its home country. Audiences were showing a clear preference for American films on the one hand and the product of the revived commercial industry on the other. The most successful "neorealist" film at the box office was *Bitter Rice* (*Riso amaro*), directed by Giuseppe De Santis and produced by Dino De Laurentiis in 1949. But *Bitter Rice*, although it shared the leftist politics characteristic of neorealist filmmakers, was a down-the-line commercial product, with a star-studded cast (including Raf Vallone, Vittorio Gassman, and the sexy "newcomer" Silvana Mangano) and a highly melodramatic subplot. Thereafter the neorealist movement began to crumble away, with a few prized directors plowing their own distinctive furrows and the remainder sinking into what became disparagingly known as "rose-tinted" neorealism (*neorealismo rosa*), in which the original radical impulse of the movement was dissipated into sentimental pictures of the lives of the deserving and not-so-deserving poor.

Internationally, however, the reputation of neorealism remained high, and the pioneers of the movement could count on a sympathetic reception at festivals and on the art-cinema circuit, and sometimes on foreign finance as well.

The Filmmakers

When De Sica and Zavattini joined forces to make the film *The Children Are Watching Us* (*I bambini ci guardano*) in 1943, De Sica was already famous as one of Italy's leading theater and film actors, while Zavattini was an up-and-coming young writer with a successful sideline as a cartoonist. De Sica had made his first film appearance as a teenager in 1917 and had then joined the theater, becoming a recognized leading actor from 1930 onward. Popular screen success came with his starring role in Mario Camerini's *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* (*Men—What Scoundrels*) in 1932, and for the rest of the decade he divided his time between cinema and theater (where he now had his own company), specializing as the debonair (and sometimes fraudulent) man-about-town with a delightful, self-regarding sexual charm. It was therefore somewhat of a surprise when he reemerged after the war as a director of films with proletarian subjects and a gritty, neorealist content.

Zavattini was an equally engaging character, an acerbic cartoonist and a writer whose early stories display a delightful mix of realism and

whimsy. From 1935 he took to earning his money as a screenwriter, at which he soon developed a great facility. He wrote the script for Camerini's *Darò un milione* (*I'll Give a Million*, 1935), in which De Sica had one of his most famous starring roles, and was a writer (uncredited) on De Sica's second film as director, *Teresa Venerdì* (1941). But the two were not intimate (until 1940, Zavattini lived mostly in Milan, De Sica always in Rome), and the partnership proper did not begin until two years later. Unlike De Sica, whose life was totally immersed in theatrical and film work, Zavattini was involved in all sorts of different circles, journalistic and political as well as artistic. In 1944, just after the liberation of Rome, he called a meeting of filmmakers to debate what cinema should be like after the war was over. Later on, Za, as he was referred to, called many meetings, but this first was one of the most important and a founding moment of neorealism.

The Production

The title of the film was taken from a novel by Luigi Bartolini, but the core idea—the tit-for-tat theft—was basically Zavattini's. He read the novel, liked it, and dashed off a treatment, which, however, bears precious little relationship to the original. (This was to lead to trouble later, when Bartolini objected to the cavalier way his book was treated.) The action was pared down until all that was left was a man whose bicycle is stolen and who engages in a desperate search, accompanied by his small son, to find the bicycle and the thief who stole it. In desperation, he becomes a thief in his turn, but is spotted, chased down and captured, and finally released by a crowd of fellow workers.

Zavattini showed the treatment to De Sica, who decided it was worth trying to raise finance for the film. But Italian producers were wary, while an American producer who had been approached was prepared to finance it on condition that Cary Grant played the lead. So desperate were the filmmaking team to get the project off the ground that they even took this idea seriously, although, as co-scriptwriter Suso Cecchi D'Amico said later, they should have laughed it out of court immediately (Faldini and Fofi 135). Eventually money was found from private sources, and De Sica formed a production company of his own to make the film.

Besides De Sica and Zavattini, five other writers receive screen credit for the script. On the credits these names are put in alphabetical

order, so that Zavattini appears at the bottom (although he was by no means least, and was in fact the only writer involved in the project at all stages of preparation).

Scripting took place in late 1947 and early 1948. Members of the script team visited a number of prospective locations, including a licensed brothel, a Catholic soup kitchen, and the home of a popular fortune-teller, in order to immerse themselves in the required atmosphere. A complete shooting script was prepared, which De Sica adhered to very closely, possibly too closely, since it proved quite constricting at times. One scene, however, was improvised. During the shooting, a group of German seminarists was encountered sheltering from the rain. As it happened, a high school student called Sergio Leone was acting as unpaid assistant on the production. According to his account, De Sica was so enchanted by the spectacle he decided to include it in the film (Faldini and Fofi 135). Leone came back the next day with a group of schoolmates and a set of costumes, and a scene was filmed inspired by what the filmmakers had seen.

Casting sessions were held to find a child actor for the film. No suitable child was found, but at one session a man walked in with his small son. The boy was rejected, but the man, an engineering worker at the Breda works called Lamberto Maggiorani, was instantly selected to play the male lead. A child was eventually found among the bystanders watching the filming (Nuzzi and Iemma 102). The actress playing the hero's wife was a journalist in real life. Other parts were mostly filled by professionals.

Filming took place over the spring of 1948. The length of the shoot was partly due to variable weather on location, which made continuity difficult and also created problems during editing. The director of photography was Carlo Montuori, and the film was shot on Gevaert stock. As was customary in Italy, no sync dialogue was recorded, and dubbing sessions were held after the rough cut was assembled. The editor was Eraldo Da Roma, who went on to be Michelangelo Antonioni's editor on a number of films, beginning with *I vinti* in 1952. Zavattini, who had taken a backseat during the shooting, returned to join in the supervision of the editing, and subsequently claimed credit for its being so tight (Nuzzi and Iemma 110). The editing is indeed tight (much tighter than in Da Roma's work for Antonioni, for example), and there are very few lingering shots and a surprisingly large number of close-ups.

Analysis

It is sometimes said that the narrative of *Bicycle Thieves* is quite sparse and that there is not much narrative or dramatic action. While it is true that the action of the film is not particularly dramatic, the narrative is in fact quite full of incident. (Rather too full, in Zavattini's later judgment.) But the structure of the narrative is episodic and resembles a road movie more than a conventional action film.

First and foremost, *Bicycle Thieves* is a film about Rome. Not, on the whole, the Rome that tourists see—though some do venture to the flea market at Porta Portese, where the hero first catches sight of the thief, and even more go to Trastevere, where the thief is finally tracked down. Rather, it is the Rome of working-class suburbs and the old popular center, districts later frequented by other Italian directors such as Federico Fellini and Pier Paolo Pasolini. It is also a film about one man, disappointed, bewildered, and angry, on a vain search for the object that symbolizes his connection with the world of work and honorable survival. In between the man and his setting stands the social world, the world of work and no work, of mutual help and mutual suspicion, and the manipulations practiced by politicians and bureaucrats.

The Story

The film is divided into forty-four scenes, with breaks in continuity marked by lap dissolves or, in the case of longer time lapses, by fades to black. The uniformity of this division may suggest a formalist impulse, cutting up the film into discrete chunks whose interrelation would be significant for its understanding. But the fact is that the dissolves, although noticeable to scholars (Thompson; Moneti) as they play through the film on a Moviola or on video, are pretty much imperceptible to the ordinary viewer, and their uniformity is more a matter of conforming rather slavishly to the editor's rule book than a major signifying feature. If anything, they serve as a reminder that the film, while original in many respects, is also quite conventional in others.

The action of the film takes place over three days. On Friday the hero is offered a job. On Saturday he starts it, but when his bicycle is stolen from him he is unable to continue it. On Sunday he searches for the bike and commits his impulse theft.

The first scene takes place outside a labor exchange. Groups of unemployed are standing around, waiting without much hope for their name to be called. Bricklayers are complaining that they never get offered anything, which might seem unfair but whose logic would be appreciated at the time: they have a skill which is going to be needed in due course, and the authorities are not keen to see this pool of labor dispersed.

Among the men with no particular skill, Antonio Ricci is one of the lucky ones. He is offered a job as a bill poster. But to get the job he needs a bike, and he doesn't have one. Or rather he does, but it is in pawn. On his return home, his wife Maria, who is shown as a competent and resourceful woman, at first upbraids him for pawning the bike but then decides that it would be better for the family to do without sheets than for Antonio to pass up this chance of a job.

Husband and wife therefore set out to the pawnshop, which is no ordinary shop but a giant and rather historic looking building with shelves reaching up to its lofty vaulted ceiling—testimony, if it were needed, to the dire circumstances of the many poor people forced to dispose of precious property in order to raise much-needed cash. They redeem the bike, and Antonio calls in at his new place of employment, where he is told to report for work at 6:45 the next morning.

Husband and wife then set off home. On the way, she asks to stop and enters a house, from which she does not come out for some time. Antonio gets impatient. With an anxious glance at his bike, which he asks a bystander to look after for him, he goes upstairs to find it is the house of "la Santona," a fortune-teller. His rationalist sensibilities offended, Antonio drags Maria away.

After a fade to black the film reopens in the Riccis' apartment. It is 6:30 the following morning and Bruno, their seven-year-old son, is cleaning Antonio's bike. As he has done earlier, De Sica takes a pretty functional view toward filming the apartment. It is clearly lit and in deep focus, with no attempt to make it seem other than it is—average sized, modestly furnished, certainly not luxurious but not desperately poor either. Besides Antonio, Maria, and Bruno, there is also a baby, shown in a brief cutaway, another of the trappings of family life.

Antonio drops Bruno off at the gas station, where the boy works as an attendant, and reports for duty. After a brief training in how to put a poster up without creasing it, Antonio is on his own. But hardly has he learned the art of how to smooth Rita Hayworth's voluptuous

curves onto a flat surface, than disaster strikes. A lurking thief has spotted his unguarded bike, and makes off with it at high speed. Antonio gives chase, assisted by a bystander, but to no avail. He returns disconsolately to the scene of the crime, gives a final smoothing down to Rita, and goes to report the theft to the police. The police, however, are far more interested in despatching the riot squad to suppress a workers' demonstration, and little attention—in Antonio's opinion—is paid to his complaint.

Up to the moment of the theft the manner of the film has been mainly expository. We have been introduced to the world of economic, urban, and family life. The narrative has been tied together with cross-cutting, which also serves to relate the world of individuals to a wider social environment. Features of this manner will characterize the film throughout. But as we enter into the theme of Antonio's desperate search for the missing bike there is a shift of focus. The narrative becomes more strung out, with events following each other according to the rhythm of the search and with the psychological focus almost entirely on the searcher, Antonio, and his emotions. The family takes a backseat (we hardly see Maria anymore, though Bruno becomes more important), while Rome is viewed more and more through the prism of Antonio's frantic anxiety.

After the visit to police headquarters, Antonio sends Bruno home to break the news to Maria. He himself sets out to an unnamed building where a political meeting is being held while in the basement a group of people are rehearsing a variety routine. The building is in fact a Communist Party social club and would have been recognizable as such to audiences at the time. One of the comrades, Baiocco, a garbage collector, agrees to help Antonio and gives him a rendezvous for the following day.

Antonio and Bruno set out at dawn to join Baiocco and his team, and together they comb the market at Piazza Vittorio. After an altercation with a man refurbishing what is probably a stolen bike (but not Antonio's), Antonio and Baiocco collect Bruno, who has attracted the attentions of a dubious-looking man in a straw hat. They then set out in the rain to another market, at Porta Portese, where Baiocco leaves them—another character who will not be seen again. It is here that the unscripted scene occurs with the German priests sheltering from the rain. Antonio and Bruno then have a lucky break. They see the thief talking

to an old man and give chase. The thief escapes, but they pursue the old man to a church where some charitable ladies have organized a soup kitchen for the poor.

The scene in the church is played as anxiety-comedy. Antonio tries to force information out of the old man, but the harder he tries the more disturbance he creates (this motif has already surfaced in the visit to the Communist club) and the less he is able to achieve. During the disturbance the old man manages to escape. Antonio is detained by a couple of young men in suits, who would appear to be the sons of the charitable ladies, but evades their clutches. Bruno follows, pausing to cross himself as he scampers past the altar.

The scene that follows offers respite from the chase, but not from Antonio's anxiety. Bruno ticks his father off for his incompetence and is rewarded with a slap in the face. Antonio apologizes and then asks Bruno to wait for a moment near the river. During their separation Antonio is distracted by the sight of a body being recovered from the water, which he thinks must be Bruno's, though it is not.

To pacify his son, Antonio decides to take him to a restaurant. This scene too is comic, but not without its moments of embarrassment and pathos. Antonio plies his son with wine, which is not as outlandish an idea in Italy as it may appear to present-day Americans. Even so, Bruno seems to accept more to show his precocious manliness than because he enjoys it. The comedy derives mainly from the byplay between Bruno and an overdressed middle-class child at the next table.

After leaving the restaurant, father and son pass by the house of the fortune-teller and decide to go in. Asked about their chances of recovering the bike, she offers the wise, if statistically unremarkable, prediction, "Either you'll find it immediately, or you won't find it."

The chase now resumes. Antonio and Bruno spot the thief, who recognizes Antonio and shuffles off, breaking into a run as he turns into a side street. They pursue him into a place that turns out to be a brothel where the young ladies, as they are referred to, are just taking their lunch break. Back in the street, Antonio confronts the thief, who falls down in a fit. A gang of heavies now surrounds Antonio, and a policeman, summoned by Bruno, refuses to take Antonio's side. The camera tracks in on Antonio as he retreats from the scene, defeated and utterly disconsolate.

The film now moves to its denouement. As Antonio and Bruno retreat toward the river, the sound of cheering is heard from a soccer

stadium. Thousands of spectators have left their bikes unattended. As they stream away from the stadium, Antonio makes a decision. Sending Bruno away to catch a tram, he snatches a bike from a doorway and makes off on it but is instantly caught and hauled back. A crowd assembles, threatening punishment, but the bike's owner is forgiving. Bruno, who—probably deliberately—never caught his tram, takes his father's hand and leads him away. Father and son, both with tears in their eyes, merge into the crowd as it disperses.

Realism

God, as Gustave Flaubert is reputed to have said, is in the detail, and this remark is as true of *Bicycle Thieves* as of Flaubert's own novels. If the above account of the plot of the films seems unduly intricate, it is because the life of the film is not in any broad narrative sweep but in the accumulation of psychological, social, and visual detail, not all of which is instantly and unambiguously clear. For modern viewers it is probably the psychological aspect that is most interesting. We follow events through Antonio's eyes, identifying with his suffering and anxiety even if we are not always clear what emotions are coursing through his lanky frame. The acting is little help. Although Maggiorani's performance seems authentic, it is lacking in expressive intentionality such as a professional actor would have provided. The spectator is therefore engaged in a constant guessing game: What is really going on in this man's head, and how does it relate—other than in the most obvious way—to what is going on around him? Which of the many random-seeming details presented to our view is in fact the significant one that will guide us to a clear understanding of the man and his predicament?

Bicycle Thieves' use of a causally loose-knit narrative, coupled with the piecemeal introduction of sociological detail, is central to its effect. But the film's sociopolitical message, which nowadays comes across as vaguely humanist and at times almost sentimental in its stress on the sufferings of the poor, would have asserted itself much more starkly in 1948. As contemporary critics noted, the "poor" in the film are not an undifferentiated mass but clearly divided into two basic groups. Antonio finds support and solidarity among regular working-class people and suspicion and hostility among the shiftless subproletariat clustered around the street markets and the stews of

Trastevere. The institutions to which the poor have recourse are also differentiated. The fortune-teller is a fraud, the charity offered by the middle class via the Church is meaningless and ineffective; only the Communist Party seems committed to helping not just Antonio but others like him, and if in the event it cannot do much for Antonio himself it is because his problem is only a symptom of a wider social malaise that can only be tackled by collective action.

The ambiguity of the film is also much limited by the way it is edited, which is full of narrative and psychological clues. In particular, the prevalence of shots of unattended bikes from (broadly) Antonio's point of view makes it clear that the idea that bicycles might be stolen is never far from his mind and acts as a leitmotif for the action. While this helps keep the narrative focused, an alternative reading is also hinted at. For although the story would appear to be one of real events, precisely located in space and time, there is also a strong sense emanating from the film that what we are seeing is not entirely real but an enactment of Antonio's nightmare.

The main thrust of the film, however, is toward realism, and in several senses. It is, despite the occasional hints in the direction of a subjective reading, on the whole firmly objective. Events are placed in a carefully observed social reality, which is sometimes pointed up but more often simply forms part of the overall texture of the film. The plot mimics the ups and downs of everyday life, in which both chance and determinism play a part. Clever though the narration is in blending elements of alternating good and bad luck for its protagonist, it does not force the twists and turns of the action into an overly purposeful narration, in the Hollywood manner. Furthermore, the narrational stance occupies a position both within the action and at a slight distance from it. There are very few overt marks of a directorial point of view engaging the spectator's attention from a position outside the action in order to show scenes as more comic or more pathetic than they intrinsically are, while at the same time the narration holds a certain distance from the characters so that their actions are always seen in the context of what others are doing around them. It is not surprising, under the circumstances, that *Bicycle Thieves* is so often held up as a model of cinematic realism.

But caveats remain. The plot of *Bicycle Thieves* is not as "slender" (*gracile*) as Zavattini thought the ideal neorealist story should be.

Zavattini's dream was to write a film that aimed "not to invent a story which was like reality, but to tell reality as if it was a story" (Zavattini 103), and he envisaged a *mise-en-scène* that followed the characters in their everyday life without anticipating their next move and directing the spectator's attention to what was about to happen. Clearly, *Bicycle Thieves* does not fit this idealized and probably unrealizable model.

Other objections can also be made to the claims for *Bicycle Thieves* as a work of pure realism. Thompson has pointed out that its style, while generally conforming to canons of realism, also contains many elements of "classical" Hollywood narration, notably a time-driven narrative that gives shape and momentum to its otherwise sprawling construction (209). For his part, Christopher Wagstaff makes the telling point that the comic moments in the film are very deliberately staged and belong to a different mode from observational realism. It is not that realist works cannot be comic—indeed their realism would not be complete if it did not recognize the funny side of life—but rather that comedy entails a form of address to the audience that invites an active response. De Sica, who always had an eye for comedy, whether as an actor or as a director, undoubtedly intervenes in scenes such as that in the church in ways that alert the audience to how the scene is being staged for their conscious amusement.

Even so, while modern scholars (and audiences) have no difficulty in relativizing the film's realism and spotting its not infrequent moments of obvious artifice, the fact remains that in the context of its time the film was clearly locatable in a movement that made great and on the whole justifiable claims to a realistic approach to life in general and to how that life should be portrayed in cinema.

The Critics and the Public

As mentioned above, *Bicycle Thieves* was a huge critical success and a more modest one with the public. De Sica describes a rapturous reception at the Paris premiere, where he was publicly embraced by René Clair and André Gide, while a few days earlier in Rome he had heard angry working-class spectators ask for their money back (Faldini and Fofi 136). In fact, it did quite well at the box office, grossing 250 million lire (approximately \$650,000). It then went on to do very well abroad, mainly on the art-house circuit but also on wider release.

While the film's aesthetic achievement was admired pretty universally, its politics proved divisive. The left applauded it, but right-wing Catholics were offended by its satire on the Church, while the Christian Democrat politicians in power in Italy were alarmed by its general portrayal of Italy as poor and backward and considered refusing it an export license.

Perhaps the most influential voice in support of the film came from outside Italy, where André Bazin wrote enthusiastically about it in the left-leaning Catholic magazine *Esprit*. Bazin praised both its realism and its political forthrightness, calling it "the only valid Communist film of the last decade" ("*Bicycle*" 51)—a barbed comment designed as much to cast suspicion on certain other neorealist films as to praise *Bicycle Thieves* itself. Politically, he praised the film for having a universal, rather than sectarian, message, while aesthetically he particularly admired what he called its transparency, meaning by this the way its components—acting, *mise-en-scène*, even the story—merged into near invisibility as if in the presence of life itself. This presumed transparency is the great enduring myth about *Bicycle Thieves*. We may not believe it so much now, but it made the film's reputation.

Conclusion

Bicycle Thieves remained on a pinnacle of critical admiration for well over a decade. It tied for third in an international critics' poll of best films, which was conducted by the magazine *Sight and Sound* in 1952. A similar poll on the occasion of the Brussels International Exhibition in 1958 named it the best film ever. But when *Sight and Sound* repeated its poll in 1962, it had fallen to seventh, and in 1972 it dropped out entirely, and has not returned.

It was not just *Bicycle Thieves* that rather dropped out of sight in the 1960s and 1970s; it was neorealism itself, under attack from both non-political and "new left" standpoints. In France, François Truffaut declared roundly in *Cahiers du cinéma* that he had no interest in any Italian neorealist directors except Rossellini, while in England, *Movie* pronounced *Bicycle Thieves* and films like it merely boring.

The "new left" critique started in Italy and France, where the generation of 1968 denounced the claims of neorealism as political cinema,

finding the universalism praised by Bazin merely a cover for a reformist and antirevolutionary stance. This virulent attitude spread to the English-speaking world through the magazine *Screen* (Cannella), merging with the view once expressed by Jean-Luc Godard that a political film was not one with a political content but one that was "made politically." Neither *Bicycle Thieves* nor any neorealist film matched up to Godard's criterion, nor were they intended to.

But history has a habit of making fools of people who make extreme pronouncements. *Bicycle Thieves* is a resilient film. Its richness and density underlying an apparently simple story never cease to surprise viewers—whether they come expecting a boring masterpiece or nothing in particular.

Credits

Italy, 1948, Produzioni De Sica S.A.

Director: Vittorio De Sica

Screenplay: Oreste Biancoli, Suso D'Amico, Vittorio De Sica, Adolfo Franci,

Gherardo Gherardi, Gerardo Guerrieri, and Cesare Zavattini

Story: Cesare Zavattini (based on the novel by Luigi Bartolini)

Cinematography: Carlo Montuori

Camera Operator: Mario Montuori

Assistant Director: Gerardo Guerrieri and Luisa Alessandri

Editing: Eraldo Da Roma

Music: Alessandro Cicognini

Song: Giuseppe Cioffi

Music Direction: Willy Ferrero

Sound: Gino Fiorelli

Art Direction: Antonino Traverso

CAST:

Antonio Ricci	Lamberto Maggiorani
Bruno Ricci	Enzo Staiola
Maria Ricci	Lianella Carell
Patroness	Elena Altieri
Baiocco	Gino Saltamerenda
The pauper	Giulio Chiari
The thief	Vittorio Antonoucci
Beggar	Carlo Jachino