

## THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

### 20 FEBRUARY 2001 (III:6): THE BICYCLE THIEVES/LADRI DI BICICLETTE (1948)

**VITTORIO DE SICA** (7 July 1901, Sora, Italy—13 November 1974, Paris) was as well-known as an actor as a director. He took many of those acting jobs only to get the money with which he would make his own films, not unlike Orson Welles. Some of the 35 films he directed are *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini* 1970 (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*), *I Girasoli* 1970 (*Sunflower*), *Woman Times Seven* 1967, *Matrimonio all'italiana* 1964 (*Marriage Italian-Style*), *Ieri, oggi, domani* 1963 (*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*), *La Ciociara* 1961 (*Two Women*), *Umberto D* 1952 and *Sciuscià* 1946 (*Shoeshine*). He appeared in Andy Warhol's *Dracula* 1974, *The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders* 1965, *A Farewell to Arms* 1957, *Il Processo Clémenceau* 1917 and 156 other films.

**CESARE ZAVATTINI** (29 September 1902, Luzzara, Italy—13 October 1989) started out as a journalist and a writer of ordinary fiction, then became a screenwriter and the prime theorist of the Italian neorealist filmmakers. He and De Sica worked together on 25 films, among them *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, *Sunflower*, *Two Women*, *Umberto D*, and *Shoeshine*.

#### from *Encyclopædia Britannica's* entry on De Sica:

Italian motion-picture director who, along with Roberto Rossellini, dealt compassionately with the problems of people in post-World War II Italy in some of the most outstanding films of the Neorealist movement.

De Sica, the son of an Italian businessman, prepared for a career in banking or government. Financial difficulties interfered, and in 1923 he joined an acting company, becoming a matinee idol and singer. His first motion-picture role, in Mario Camerini's *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* (1932; "The Men, What Rascals!"), established him as a leading film star, and *Due dozzine di rose scarlatte* (1940; "Two Dozen Red Roses") brought him box-office success as a director. De Sica turned to the Neorealist mode of directing, with its characteristic emotional compression, social themes, and faith in the essential brotherhood of man. He gradually developed into a director of great humanistic films in the period after 1945. In his motion pictures, stories of people outside so-called respectable society take on tragic poignancy. *Sciuscià* (1946; *Shoeshine*) is the tale of poor Italian children. *Ladri di biciclette* (1948; *The Bicycle Thief*) deals with an impoverished postwar family whose livelihood is threatened by the theft of a bicycle. *Miracolo a Milano* (1950; *Miracle in Milan*) combines social satire with fantasy. *Umberto D.* (1952) is the story of a lonely pensioner whose only companion, his dog, dies at the film's end. Four of De Sica's films—*Sciuscià*, *Ladri di biciclette*, *Ieri, oggi, domani* (1963;

*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*), and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Continis* (1970; *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*)--received Academy Awards for best foreign film. His later films, however, usually are not considered to be of the same stature as his Neorealist works. The last two were *Una breve vacanza* (1974; *A Brief Vacation*) and *Il viaggio* (1974; *The Voyage, or The Journey*), which was having its premiere in Paris at the time of his death.

#### **LADRI DI BICICLETTE (BICYCLE THIEVES)** Italy 1948 93 minutes)

**Director** Vittorio De Sica  
**Writers** 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

**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 Chiari** The Beggar  
**Elena Altieri** The charitable Lady

#### **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 *Ossessione* 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. II. Ed. John Wakeman NY '87):

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 biciclette* (*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 biciclette*, 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*.

**"The film's genius..."** (from *Film Notes* Scott Hammen, 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.

...One New York area theater which attempted to show it was closed down when the Knights of Columbus arrived in force with the objection that the work "glorified a thief."

**Cesare Zavattini on reality in film** (quoted in Jack C. Ellis, *A History of Film* 1979):

Substantially then, the question today is, instead of turning imaginary situations into "reality" and trying to make them look "true," to make things as they are, almost by themselves, create their own special significance. Life is not what is invented in "stories"; life is another matter. To understand it involves a minute, unrelenting, and patient search."

**De Sica on film technique** (from *Miracle in Milan* 1969):

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 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 Burstyn and the like, *The Bicycle Thief* decision marked the beginning of the end of the PCA's rigid hold on film distribution.

[The File Room is a collection of materials on censorship in all media

Introductory comment and links to the rest of the holdings are online at <http://www.cd.sc.edu.es/FileRoom/documents/Intro.html>

The entry on De Sica is at

<http://www.cd.sc.edu.es/FileRoom/documents/Cases/70deSica.html>

**The film's story** (from William Bayer, *The Great Movies* 1973):

The story of *The Bicycle Thief* develops like a chase, and as a result the audience is kept in suspense. Will Antonio Ricci find his stolen bicycle and keep his job, or will he fall back into unemployment and despair? There is the relationship between Antonio and his son Bruno,

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**De Sica on De Sica** (from a May 9, 1971 Interview with De Sica by Charles Thomas Samuels in *Encountering Directors* 1972):

**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.

**S:** 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.

**S:** But sad at the same time.

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

**S:** 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*.

**S:** 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.

**S:** 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

slowly, subtly revealed through their day of misery in all of its unspoken tenderness, loving, even in the final moments, when Bruno learns a harsh lesson. In this sense, the film is a story of a boy coming of age. Finally, because of the way the search for the bicycle is structured, the film is a virtual encyclopedia of social comment, revealing the sullen indifference of the police, the tough hypocrisy of the church, and the dehumanization of urban society, illustrated by the way a vast Spectrum of people reacts to the problem of a single desperate man. What seems at first to be a simple, linear story is really a story of suspense, a story of relationships, and an exposé of the inadequacy of social institutions, all three interwoven with such skill that audience involvement is total.

to beg. For my commercial movies, money was always available.

**S:** 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.

**S:** 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.

**S:** You've worked in color and black and white. Which do you prefer?

**DS:** Black and white, because reality is in black and white.

**S:** 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.

**S:** 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.

**S:** 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.

**S:** 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.

**S:** 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.

**S:** But it's important that the moment occurred.

**DS:** One needs something that lasts longer.

**S:** Is that possible?

**DS:** No. Human incommunicability is eternal.

**S:** 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."

S: 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.

S: 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 Finzi-Continis* when we hear the Hebrew Lament, but the producers

always insist on it.

S: 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.

S: 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.

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THE BFS MOTTO: "Filmmaking seems to me a transitory and threatened art. It is very closely bound up with technical developments. If in thirty or fifty years the screen no longer exists, if editing isn't necessary, cinema will have ceased to exist. It will have become something else. That's already almost the case when a film is shown on television: the smallness of the screen falsifies everything." —LUIS BUÑUEL

Here are two good web pages on Italian Neorealism:

<http://www.carleton.edu/curricular/MEDA/classes/media110/Voigt/index.html> and

<http://www.nwlink.com/~dbmeek/neo-frame.html>

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For information on "Gender Myths: Sacred Stories of Sex, Difference & Dominance," Diane's 2:00 p.m.

February 24<sup>th</sup> lecture on myth, and "The Fate of Stories," Bruce's 7:30 p.m. February 28<sup>th</sup> lecture on

narrative, at UB's Amherst campus Center for the Arts, visit