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, Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves 1948, 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.


Carlo Battisti (10 October 1882, Trento, Austria-Hungary—6 March 1977, Florence, Italy) acted in just this film. He also directed one film: Nozze fassane 1955.

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 People1947), 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.
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.

from “The Masters of Neorealism: Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti” in Italian Cinema From Neorealism to the Present. 
Peter Bondanella. Continuum. NY 1999

There is general agreement among critics and film scholars that the moment in Italian cinematic history known as “neorealism” was a crucial watershed in the evolution of the seventh art. However, it is rare indeed to discover any unanimity in specific definitions of what this phenomenon represents. The label itself is confusing, for it limits the parameters of any critical debate to concern with the connection between the films produced and the society or culture which produced them. And, indeed, the traditional view of Italian neorealism reflects this emphasis on social realism, as can be seen from one very typical list of its general characteristics: realistic treatment, popular setting, social content, historical actuality, and political commitment. The most sensitive critic of the era, André Bazin, called neorealism a cinema of “fact” and “reconstituted reportage” which contained a message of fundamental human solidarity fostered by the anti-Fascist Resistance within which most of the great Italian directors came of age. In his view, such works often embodied a rejection of both traditional dramatic and cinematic conventions, most often employed on-location shooting rather than studio sets, and made original use of nonprofessional actors or documentary effects. Bazin defined the aesthetics of neorealism as akin to a separate and differently motivated evolution in the mise-en-scène techniques of Welles or Renoir with their penchant for deep-focus photography, which he contrasted sharply (and approvingly) to the montage of Eisenstein and its ideologically inspired juxtaposition of images and shots. Thus, the neorealists in principle “respected” the ontological wholeness of the reality they filmed, just as the rhythm of their narrated screen time often “respected” the actual duration of time within the story; neorealist aesthetics thus opposed the manipulation of reality in the cutting room.

The vexing problem posed by any comprehensive definition of neorealism derives ultimately from its almost universal association with the traditions of realism in literature and film, an association which quite naturally moves critics to emphasize its use of nonprofessionals, the documentary quality of its photography, or its social content. And yet, with the exception of Cesare Zavattini, an important scriptwriter and collaborator with De Sica but never a major director, the remarks of the artists themselves sound an entirely different note. Only Zavattini advocates the most elementary, even banal, storylines Bazin prefers, and only he stresses the need to focus upon the actual “duration: of real time. By contrast, while such figures as Rossellini, De Sica, or Fellini sympathize with Zavattini’s reverence for everyday reality, what he terms an “unlimited trust in things, facts, and people,” rarely if ever do they equate their artistic intentions with traditional realism. Fellini, for example, who worked on a number of neorealist productions in various capacities before beginning his own career as a director in 1950, declared simply that “neorealism is a way of seeing reality without prejudice, without conventions coming between it and myself—facing it without preconceptions, looking at it in an honest way—whatever reality is, not just social reality but all that there is within a man.” Rossellini remarked that realism was “simply the artistic form of the truth,” linking neorealism most often to a position similar to Fellini’s rather than to any preconceived set of techniques or ideological positions, and De Sica stated that his work reflected “reality transposed into the realm of poetry.” In an obvious reference to the origin of the cinema in the early dichotomy between the documentaries of the Lumière and Méliès’s fantasies, Rossellini has asserted that film must respect two diametrically opposed human tendencies: “that of concreteness and that of imagination. Today we tend to suppress brutally the second one....

As André Bazin perceptively wrote years ago, “Rossellini’s style is a way of seeing, while De Sica’s is primarily a way of feeling.”...

In all of his early neorealist films, De Sica is even more conscious than Rossellini of the fact that his filmed “reality” is a product of cinematic illusion, and he takes great pleasure in revealing this to the careful viewer.

A great actor himself, De Sica is suspicious of the ease with which professionals seem to be able to leap from one emotion to another.

We should remember De Sica’s remarks concerning transposing reality to the realm of poetry, for this perspective is precisely what lies at the root of his aesthetics in all of his neorealist films. While The Bicycle Thief certainly does treat the many pressing social problems of postwar Italian reconstruction, it is not merely a film on unemployment, nor will André Bazin’s famous remarks about the film—that it is the “only valid Communist film of the whole past decade” or that it represents pure cinema with no more actors, sets, or storyline—bear close scrutiny in spite of the fact that no other critic ever wrote so sympathetically on De Sica’s films. De Sica’s careful instructions to the nonprofessionals in the film produced a level of acting competence far surpassing the self-conscious nervousness of the non-professionals in the works of Rossellini or Visconti. His scrupulous organization of the on-location shooting differs drastically from a documentary approach to his material. And the complexity of its plot negates Bazin’s view that storyline has disappeared in the work. The mythic structure of the story—a traditional quest—as well as its strange and suggestive sound track and the crucial role of chance or fortune in the film all depart from a strictly realist approach to the subject matter and constitute the very elements of the film which make it a great work of art.

Umberto D may be said to complete De Sica’s neorealist trilogy of solitude. It was De Sica’s favorite work, produced with his own money, and its disastrous record at the box office was due in some measure to the fact that few sentimental concessions to public taste were allowed. Yet, André Bazin’s view that the work was a masterpiece in the face of bitter critical opposition when it first appeared in Paris has now been generally accepted....Once again, De Sica’s choice and direction of nonprofessional actors is brilliant: Umberto D was portrayed by a professor from Florence whose facial expressions and general appearance capture perfectly the mannerisms and the moral values of the older generation.
Perhaps in no other film made during the neorealist period would Zavattini’s views on film time find a more eloquent expression. Zavattini’s notion of realism involved a complete respect for actual time or duration: ninety minutes in a character’s life should require ninety minutes of screen time; a film about the purchase of a pair of shoes should possess as much dramatic potential as the account of a war.

De Sica’s reliance upon the sound track to advance the story of Umberto D. represents a step beyond The Bicycle Thief. His landlady, once kept alive by her old boarder’s surplus ration coupons during the war, now wants to evict him, and she even rents his room by the hour to prostitutes and adulterers; yet she is so hypocritical she will doubtless fire Maria when she learns of her pregnancy. The decor of the apartment, her lover, and her friends all show her selfishness, superficiality, and heratenality, and the immoral qualities she exhibits are underscored by the sound track, which almost always associates her with opera heard on a record. She views operatic music not as an expression of genuine emotions, which she could appreciate neither in art nor in life, but as a means of confirming her social status. Opera, with its refined control of emotion and its theatrical or melodramatic overtones, is posed by De Sica as a counterpoint to the genuine, elemental, and truly pathetic human suffering experienced by both the maid and Umberto but ignored by the landlady.

As in his earlier works, which employed parallel subplots, De Sica again delineates character by playing Umberto’s tragedy off against that of Maria, the maid. Throughout the film, she is his counterpart in suffering, but Umberto rarely understands how similar their lives actually are, just as no one understands his suffering. When Maria’s negligence allows the dog to escape, Umberto scolds her for her carelessness immediately after she has told her boyfriend about her pregnancy and has been abandoned by him. Umberto is concerned for his dog and is completely unconscious of her pain, yet he expects others to be sensitive to his problems. Human loneliness thus fails to produce a sense of empathy in us, and as the film ends, Umberto is left alone with his pet—his problems and especially his solitude still unresolved. Bazin has cleverly remarked that “the cinema has rarely gone such a long way toward making us aware of what it is to be a man. (And also, for that matter, of what it is to be a dog.)” De Sica has also shown us in no uncertain terms that there is very little difference between the two.

from World Film Directors, V. I. Ed. John Wakeman NY ‘87
entry by Derek Prouse
[born Sora, small market town midway between Naples and Rome ...father transferred (when De Sica was 6 days or 3 years old-...given) to Naples, the city to which De Sica asserted spiritual allegiance all his life. (Family also lived in Florence & Rome during his formative years.) ...father Umberto a former journalist sought a show biz career for son; w/ contacts Vittorio made scene debut in teens playing young Clemenceau in a biopic about the French statesman ...also sang Neapolitan songs in amateur entertainments ...studied accountancy (craved a secure occupation) at a Rome technical college ...family finances at a low ebb, took an opening in a Rome theatre company run by popular Russian Tatiana Pavlova. “The die was cast.” ...played clowns, old men, lead romantic comedy roles. By 1930, a matinee idol. In the popular films of Mario Camerini [this is the
name of Cage figure in “Moonstruck”] De Sica became a
star—known as the Italian Maurice Chevalier, then the Italian Cary
Grant. “Brides left their husbands on their wedding nights to
pursue me,’ he declared with characteristic Neopolitan brio.”

One of early Camarini successes _Darò un milione (I’ll
Give A Million)_ was scripted by journalist and critic Cesare
Zavattini who was later to forge with De Sica one of the most
fruitful writer-director partnerships in the history of the Italian
cinema.

[DeSica most revered director Charlie Chaplin - influence seen in
closing child scene from _I bambini ciguardano (The Children Are
Watching Us, 1943)_ where son turns from mother who has had an
affair and triggered suicide of father. Genius in being able to show
perception of children. Also revered Rene Clair.]

DeSica had received an invitation (or command) from Hitler’s
propaganda minister, Dr. Goebbels, to make a film in Prague. A
simultaneous commission from the Catholic Cinema Center
supplied a fortuitous alternative to serving under the Fascist
banner. _La porta del cielo (The Gate of Heaven, 1944)_ recounted
a train journey to the shrine of the Blesses Virgin at Lourdes,
famous for curing the afflicted. In various interwoven vignettes,
Zavattini, De Sica, and Diego Fabbris investigated the stories of
some of the travelers, among them a young worker blinded in a
factory accident and a concert pianist with a paralyzed hand, who
is making the pilgrimage in spite of his atheism.

De Sica’s account seems to have lacked the mystical
fervor the Vatican had hoped for, and the completed film was
mysteriously “lost.” Nevertheless, it resurfaced in Paris some four
years later, amplified by archival shots intended to give the
impression that it concerned a pilgrimage to Lourdes, in a bid to
increase its appeal to French cinema-goers. It was also briefly
shown in Rome in November 1944, but today, as far as known, no
complete copies of the original film remain. Years later, De Sica
said that he considered it one of his best works.

_Sciuscia (Shoeshine, 1948)_ was a landmark in the De Sica-
Zavattini partnership. Reviewer Lindsay Anderson wrote “What is
it about these Italian pictures which makes the impression they
create so overwhelming? First, their tremendous actuality; second,
their honesty; and third, their passionate pleading for what we
have come to term human values.”

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.

...the prison scenes have an almost documentary air of
squalor. Physical and moral.

producer dictated dark ending. Film aroused great
antagonism, he’d dared to show prison, but won awards abroad,
international recognition as a major director

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 Tiger 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 _Umberto D_ (which many critics consider to be his finest
work), De Sica encountered his main protagonist walking along a
Roman street on his way to a lecture. He was Professor Carlo
Battisti, a celebrated philologist from the University of Florence.
He plays a retired government clerk, whose struggle against
loneliness, destitution, and humiliation is the film’s subject. The
only other human character of importance is the housemaid (Maria
Pia Casilio), pregnant, defeated, but for a while a companion in
misery. _Umberto D_ was De Sica’s favorite among his own works,
and the film is dedicated to his own father, another Umberto.

Her the director-writer team carried their neorealist
approach to its most concessionless expression, coming closest to
Zavattini’s avowed ambition: to insert into a film ninety minutes
of a man’s life wherein nothing happened. The lonely old man,
subsisting on his meager pension, is seen shuffling around his
shabby room where an entire reel is devoted to his preparations
for bed. The servant girl is observed preparing, in like detail, for
yet another eventless day. The minutiae of drab, everyday lives are
penetratingly observed, and they exert a powerful fascination. And
then there is the old man’s closest companion—his dog. Although
the film is decidedly more austere than in _The Bicycle Thief_ there
are many parallels to be drawn in the depiction of the central
friendship....All the incidents are seamlessly woven into a
beautifully observed texture of simple lives which is never guilty
of a calculated, sentimental onslaught on the senses.

After the film’s opening performance, Giulio Andreotti,
State Undersecretary, published an article deploring the neorealist
trend in current Italian movies and, in particular, calling for a
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

from *Encountering Directors* Charles Thomas Samuels NY 1972. Interview/ 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.

**CTS:** Even fewer than *The Bicycle Thief*?

**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. 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:** 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:** *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.

**CTS:** 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*.

**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:** 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 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. 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?

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COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:

Oct 18 Robert Bresson A Man Escaped/Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut 1956 (35mm)
Oct 25 Luis Buñuel Diary of a Chambermaid/Le Journal d'une femme de chambre 1964 (35mm)
Nov 1 Andrei Tarkovsky Andrei Rublev/Andrey Rublyov 1966 (DVD)
Nov 8 Peter Yates Bullitt 1968 (35mm)
Nov 15 Woody Allen Annie Hall 1977 (35mm)
Nov 22 Rainer Werner Fassbinder Marriage of Maria Braun/Die Ehe der Maria Braun 1979 (35mm)
Nov 29 Terry Gilliam Brazil 1985 (35mm)
Nov 30 Luchino Visconti The Leopard/Il gattopadro 1963 (35mm)

THE WORK OF JAMES BLUE: A RETROSPECTIVE. Hallwalls and the Burchfield-Penney Art Center are having a retrospective on the work of filmmaker James Blue, onetime member of the UB Department of Media Study, Oct. 13-16. Blue's only fiction film Olive Trees of Justice, will be shown at the Market Arcade October 15 at 7:00 p.m., with an introduction by Gerald O'Grady. The documentary for which he is perhaps best known, Kenya Boran, will be shown at the Burchfield-Penney Sunday, October 16, at 1:00 p.m. For a full listing of other screenings and events in the James Blue retrospective, go to http://www.burchfield-penney.org/pdf/JamesBlue.pdf.

MARGARET MEAD TRAVELING FILM & VIDEO FESTIVAL Free admission. Screening Room, UB Center for the Arts. For more info visit http://www.ubcfa.org All screenings begin at 6:30 p.m. on the following Thursdays:


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