

## 4 De Sica's *Umberto D*: Dark victory for neorealism

JUST AS *Open City* reveals an explicit awareness, on Rossellini's part, of the new cinematic movement that his film so dramatically inaugurates, *Umberto D* is very much about the movement as it is now drawing to an end. The film is at once a celebration of neorealism and a lament for its death, a pure embodiment of its ideals and the terminus beyond which the movement could not go without lapsing into repetition or mere self-embroidery.<sup>1</sup> What some critics have called lyricism and others crepuscularism may be attributed to this elegiac mood, which characterizes De Sica's and Zavattini's attitude toward the cinematic era they are so consciously bringing to a close.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the bells which chime at the opening of *Umberto D* sound a funereal note when linked with the subsequent image of a cortege moving slowly down a city street flanked by a single line of cars proceeding with miraculous solemnity and order for the traffic of Rome. The itinerary begun by *Open City*, with its climactic shot of the young boys marching back into the city to forge a better world, has come to its bitter fulfillment in this parade of old men protesting the inadequacy of their pensions in a society that has disappointed the neorealists' reformatory hopes. "We have worked all our lives," reads one of the protest signs, announcing the dual themes of social injustice and old age

<sup>1</sup>According to Torri, *Umberto D* and *Two Pennyworth of Hope* form "terminal points in a road closed by now, beyond which it is not possible to proceed." See *Cinema italiano*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Thus Torri calls the film "an occasion for poetry in addition to civic commitment." See *Cinema italiano*, p. 48. Mario Gromo considers the minimal storyline on which De Sica and Zavattini have courageously built an entire film a "pathetic, crepuscular sketch." See *Cinquanta anni di cinema italiano*, ed. Malerba and Siniscalco, p. 61.

that locate *Umberto D* on the losing end of the neorealists' inaugural promise.

Far from the future of solidarity and progressivism anticipated by Marcello's and Romoletto's activist stance, Umberto's present bears witness to the failure of social change and popular attempts at corrective action.<sup>3</sup> The protest is pitifully ineffective, beset with obstacles from without and misunderstandings from within, as visually expressed by the bus that turns into the midst of the marchers and easily destroys the unity of their advancing front.<sup>4</sup> The demonstrators never even reach the goal of city hall, but are intercepted by police who scold them for daring to march without a permit. When the old men let loose with a barrage of angry shouts, De Sica's camera is harsh and leering, showing not only the policemen's unflattering views of the crowd, but the filmmaker's own judgment on the futility and impotence of their efforts at redress. The cacophonous soundtrack, which lets us distinguish no single utterance of their grievances, shows that the men speak without a unified voice, and the closeups of toothless mouths make them caricatures of complaining old age. A similar scene in *Bicycle Thief* showed an angry group of unemployed men shouting their frustration when Antonio Ricci alone got a job, but De Sica's camera was more sympathetic than it is toward these raging old men. No less unattractive, however, are the police, who engage in a disproportionate show of force and whose mock military maneuvers suggest that this is a society at war with itself. In fact, the old men must hide in a doorway until the guards disperse and only then can they venture back onto the streets, alien to their own social order. But this defeat will not motivate

<sup>3</sup>The general comparison between Rossellini's political optimism in *Open City* and De Sica's disappointment in *Umberto D* is made by Nick Barbaro in his review of *Umberto D*, *Cinema Texas Program Notes* 12 (Spring 1977), 18.

<sup>4</sup>On these visualizations of the demonstrator's ineffectuality, see Armes, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 157.

them to regroup their forces and engage in further campaigns for justice, since the very premise of collective action has been lost in the scuffle. "Scoundrels," inveighs one of the old men. "Who, the police?" asks Umberto. "No, the organizers of the protest—they should have had a permit," he replies, granting the establishment the power to make all the rules, even those that prohibit its citizens from breaking the rules according to the imperatives of civil disobedience.

Though Umberto himself seems to champion the need for solidarity in defending the protest organizers against these misplaced charges, his own subsequent actions reveal a grievous inability to set aside the claims of the self and to act in concert with others. The very next scene shows how Umberto aborts a burgeoning friendship by trying to sell his watch to a fellow demonstrator, Orazio Valenti, without reading the obvious signs of the other man's financially straitened circumstances. When Orazio answers defensively, "I have one," Umberto is impervious to the sudden change in the other man's tone and presses insensitively on. "What kind?" Orazio's evasive, "it's good, it has a gold case," only occasions an equally proud falsehood from Umberto, who explains, "I have two, that's why I'm selling one." Orazio takes unceremonious leave of Umberto at this point, bringing to an end what could have been a mutually supportive relationship for two men who share not only the same plight, but the same style of coping with it. In the next scene, Umberto's insensitivity makes him a nuisance to the other customers of the soup kitchen when he inconveniences everyone around him in a conspiracy to feed his dog Flick, unbeknownst to the waitress. He uses his table partners not only as co-conspirators, but as possible buyers for the ever-marketable watch, forgetting, of course, that the other men are eating at the soup kitchen only because they are as destitute as he.

In his campaign to avoid eviction by raising the 15,000 lire that he owes the landlady in back rent, Umberto is oblivious to the common plight that unites all the participants

in the demonstration and all the patrons of the soup kitchen, seeing in them, instead, potential contributors to his own empty coffer. The only character in the story who is not instrumentalized by Umberto is Maria, the servant, who is also a victim in the landlady's dictatorial household. Umberto takes a paternal, or grandpaternal interest in this illiterate girl from the provinces, offering her lessons in grammar and showing concern for her predicament as an unwed mother-to-be. Maria fully reciprocates, showing him many small attentions, from her visit to him in the hospital with a gift of a banana, to the slice of cake she brings him from the landlady's engagement party, to her insistence on getting up to bid him farewell on several early morning occasions. In their subjugation to the landlady's tyranny, Umberto and Maria have a great deal in common, especially their deadlines for expulsion from the premises: Umberto will be evicted by the end of the month, and Maria as soon as her pregnancy becomes obvious. If the landlady represents the interests of the new middle class of postwar Italy, as De Sica has made explicit in his own comments on the film,<sup>5</sup> then Umberto and Maria represent two disenfranchised social categories, the old and the "subproletariat" who suffer at the hands of the rising bourgeoisie. Indeed, it is the landlady's middle-class aspirations that dictate her intolerance for the old man and the maid—her parvenu notions of propriety would never allow her to harbor an unwed mother in her midst, just as her burgeoning prosperity requires that she remodel her apartment and convert Umberto's bedroom into an elegant receiving room commensurate with her newly achieved social status. This new status will be inestimably enhanced by her marriage to the owner of the cinema next door. "She'll get into the movies free," Maria tells Umberto in a remark which suggests that the landlady's empire is expanding considerably in this marriage to a neighboring "lord."

<sup>5</sup>See Vittorio De Sica, "Analyzing *Umberto D*," *The New York Times*, 30 October 1955, Sec. 10, p. 5.

Despite their many shared experiences and feelings, or perhaps because of them, the relationship between Umberto and Maria is the most flagrant example of the failure of solidarity in the entire film. When Umberto takes his leave and Maria asks if she can visit him some time, the hint of a happy ending is there, but when Umberto says, “You change places too,” the logical follow-up—“You come with me”—is never made.<sup>6</sup> De Sica himself suggests the possibility of such a comic resolution to Umberto’s problems.

When everything is at a dead end, when there is no more hope of getting help from anybody, it is just then that Umberto could have found a way out. By taking the girl out of this house, being a father to her. Two, or three, together might solve their problems. Nothing of this sort happened. Human beings have this primitive, perennial, ancient fault of not understanding one another, of not communicating with each other.<sup>7</sup>

De Sica’s surrender to the isolation of the human condition and the impossibility of true solidarity marks the distance between *Open City* and *Umberto D*, between the harbinger of a new social order committed to the populist ideals of the Resistance and the elegiac look back at the hope which history had failed to fulfill.<sup>8</sup> *Open City* and the first neorealists argued that Italy had been irrevocably changed by the Nazi-Fascist occupation and the campaign for liberation and that Italians would never forget the unifying lessons it taught. But the landlady, De Sica’s paragon of the new middle class, has conveniently forgotten the truths of the war years, when she used to call Umberto “grandpa” and he would give her his rations of food. “After the war,” Umberto tells the man in

<sup>6</sup>As Giuseppe Ferrara argues, “the two solitudes are so much more desperate because the girl could find salvation with the old man, and he could find in her affection a reason for living.” *Il nuovo cinema italiano*, p. 281.

<sup>7</sup>“Analyzing *Umberto D*,” sec. 10, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>See the remarks by B. Singerman in *Etudes cinématographiques* 32–35 (Summer 1964), 165–66.

the hospital bed to the left of his, "she went crazy," mercifully rebuilding her depleted empire at the expense of her former companion in the privations of war. For the landlady, and her counterparts throughout reconstructed Italy, the war was something to put behind them or to dismiss from memory in a denial of the solidarity and fellow feeling of that exceptional time.<sup>9</sup>

Implicit in De Sica's attack on the new Italy is a recognition that neorealism, in its strict 1940s form, has no place in it. Just as Umberto has no more right to his room in Via Martini Della Battaglia No. 14, so too his film will have no run in the movie theater next door, the Cinema Iride, whose proprietor the landlady will marry. This built-in projection of public failure became a self-fulfilling prophecy, for *Umberto D* was indeed a commercial loss, discouraging future production of films in the strict neorealist vein. We would be wrong, however, to ascribe the film's public reception to external changes in Italian society alone, for *Umberto D*'s aesthetic severity is also responsible.<sup>10</sup> De Sica's and Zavattini's neorealist cinema has constituted an ever purer and more refined application of the theory that Zavattini was to formulate the very year of *Umberto D*'s release.<sup>11</sup> His ideal of a film that is utterly devoid of a dramatic superstructure and that dignifies the ordinary and the unexceptional by taking "any moment of human life" and showing "how 'striking' that moment is"<sup>12</sup> finds its closest possible realization in

<sup>9</sup>Tino Ranieri sees in this the very basis of De Sica's neorealist pessimism. "But his voice should be heeded also because De Sica, among the directors of postwar Italy, is the first to feel and to communicate that many things have not changed, that the difference resides only in the freedom to say that they have not changed." See "De Sica neorealista," in *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*, ed. Miccichè, p. 303.

<sup>10</sup>On the public's rejection of *Umberto D* for its exploration of "the zero degree of reality," see Brunetta, *Storia*, p. 390. Also see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 62.

<sup>11</sup>The famous essay, "Alcune idee sul cinema," first appeared in *La rivista del cinema italiano*, December 1952.

<sup>12</sup>See Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," p. 221.

*Umberto D.*<sup>13</sup> De Sica has used the term *uncompromising* to describe his film, which makes no concessions to commercial demands for spectacle, drama, and emotional catharsis.<sup>14</sup> In a sense, the filmmaker defied the public to identify, or even to empathize with Umberto in any way, choosing a subject that has little audience appeal, and a protagonist who is “at the limit of the unpleasant; . . . he is not the ‘poor old man’ whom we see begging on street corners and who whimpers to make us feel sorry for him. He is closed and hostile; it seems that he has lost contact with the world from which he comes.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is De Sica’s and Zavattini’s supreme achievement that they succeed, almost despite Umberto, in bringing us around to his cause and that they do so through no recourse to conventional melodramatic means. That this man, whose self-involvement and senile quirks so alienated us at first, can make us care so deeply about his solitary fate, is a tribute to his compassionate and accepting treatment at the hands of De Sica, whose dedication of the film to his father, Umberto De Sica, reveals a personal interest successfully sublimated to the requirements of a realist approach.<sup>16</sup>

Zavattini himself admits, however, that *Umberto D* is no perfect application of his theoretical precepts. Though purer than *Paisan*, *Open City*, *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thief*, and *La Terra Trema*, which still depend on an “invented story,” *Umberto D* presents “reality as an analyzed fact . . . but the presentation is still traditional.”<sup>17</sup> Critics have been quick to point out that there is, indeed, a plot “marked by a feeble

<sup>13</sup>This is what led Bazin to apply his metaphor of the asymptote to the relationship between neorealist practice and theory, or between neorealist practice and reality itself. See *What Is Cinema?*, 2:82.

<sup>14</sup>See “Analyzing *Umberto D.*,” sec. 10, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano*, p. 132. On this refusal to appeal to our sympathies, see Baldelli, *Cinema dell’ambiguità*, p. 246; and Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup>On De Sica’s dedication of *Umberto D* to his father, see Armes, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 157.

<sup>17</sup>Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema,” p. 221.

dramatic progression and this progression of events leads to an interior tension, if not to a tension of facts.”<sup>18</sup> “Holding *Umberto D* together is the kind of emotional crisis which one can imagine a conventional film treating (if with other stylistic methods) namely a few days during which a man is driven to the verge of suicide.”<sup>19</sup> Obviously, this is not a film about ninety minutes in the life of a man in which nothing happens, according to Zavattini’s ideal for realist cinema, nor is it an accumulation of uneventful moments linked together to give the sense of quotidian reality.<sup>20</sup> *Umberto D* is a series of life-shaping occurrences: an old man, reduced to penury, is threatened with eviction for failure to pay back rent, takes ill and is hospitalized, returns to his lodgings to find his room semi-demolished and his dog missing, rescues the dog from extermination at the pound, contemplates suicide but reneges at the last minute out of concern for the welfare of his pet. Furthermore, the film chronicles critical events in the lives of the two most important secondary characters: pregnancy for Maria and imminent marriage for the landlady. It is not so much the absence of the extraordinary, then, that accounts for *Umberto D*’s impression of authenticity, but the “dedramatization”<sup>21</sup> of inherently dramatic moments which De Sica refuses to order in any hierarchy of importance.<sup>22</sup> Maria is the spokesperson for this strategy of “dedramatization” when she tells Umberto she is pregnant in the same matter-of-fact tone that she uses to complain of the ants in her kitchen. Umberto’s middle-class ideas of propriety and

<sup>18</sup>Karel Reisz in *Etudes cinématographiques* 32–35 (Summer 1964), 162.

<sup>19</sup>Armes, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 160. Bazin writes similarly, “if we take just the theme of the film we can reduce it to a seemingly ‘populist’ melodrama with social pretensions, an appeal on behalf of the middle class.” *What Is Cinema?*, 2:80.

<sup>20</sup>See Zavattini, “Intervento al convegno di Perugia,” in Lizzani, *Storia del cinema italiano*, p. 465.

<sup>21</sup>This is Pierre Leprohon’s term. See *The Italian Cinema*, p. 131. For an elaboration of this notion, see Leprohon’s *Vittorio De Sica*, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup>On this “ontological equality,” which destroys the possibility of dramatic structuring, see Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:81.



perhaps his innate sense that such a confession requires a heightened rhetorical mode lead him to exclaim: "Pregnant, and you say it like that?" "How should I say it?" answers Maria, making explicit De Sica's policy of emotional leveling by refusing to give undue dramatic weight to her revelation.

The film actually includes three love stories, including Maria's, but its restraint with respect to the dramatic opportunities they offer, and its use of the other two erotic "subplots" as foils for Maria's and Umberto's adventures, only serve to make clearer the filmmaker's own divergent narrative strategy. The other two love stories, if they can be called that, involve the middle-class characters who appropriate all the melodramatic possibilities of the culture at hand. There is the adulterous couple who use Umberto's room by the hour with the landlady's blessing, and there is the landlady herself and her new fiancé. Both couples posture and pose in very studied ways: while Olga, the landlady, is singing her arias, Paolo, her betrothed, is perched affectedly on the arm of her sitting-room chair, and as they take their leave after the engagement party, she pouts prettily when he fails to kiss her goodnight. The ploy works—"Dear," he intones as he grants her a perfunctory peck on the cheek in a scene which Olga and Paolo probably think worthy of the *Cinema Iride*, but which De Sica exposes for all its insincerity and absence of passion.

The adulterers are equally theatrical as they take their conventional roles to stylized extremes. The dark, handsome woman slinks down the hall in cloak and feathered hat, followed a few paces behind by her lover, as if such separate exiting could allay any suspicions that their behavior might arouse. Maria, who refuses to dramatize her own situation, is the amused public for their posturings as she looks through the keyhole of Umberto's room into the adjoining parlor where the adulterous couple have withdrawn. The camera makes us privy to what Maria herself sees—a glamorous cameo of a man standing in swirls of cigarette smoke looking unre-

sponsively off while the woman sits beside him, pressing his hand in her own. "Answer, answer!" are the only lines we hear, but we can well reconstruct the melodramatic scenario that this glimpse into the parlor suggests. It is as if a scene from another film found its way by mistake into *Umberto D*, serving, in its incongruity, as a foil for De Sica's resolutely undramatic storytelling mode. In a parallel episode later on, when Maria tells the soldier from Naples that she is pregnant and he walks away in mute rejection of any responsibility for her predicament, all the melodramatic trappings of the earlier scene are stripped away and only the harsh realities remain. The secrecy of the adulterers' setting is contrasted to the open market scene of Maria's encounter—the stylized pose, the cigarette smoke, and the keyhole framing of the earlier scene are opposed to the unglamorous, straightforward *mise-en-scène* of the later one, just as the uninformative, minimal dialogue of the adulterers is contrasted to Maria's blunt statement of fact.

Umberto finds himself inadvertently in the midst of these three love stories and his intervention in any one of them would radically change not only the plot of the film, but its genre. Were he to intercede on behalf of Maria, as he promises he will in the hospital, he would indeed be establishing a paternal authority over her which would tie their destinies together and guarantee the film if not a comic ending, at least an exemplary status as a lesson in the virtues of solidarity. Were Umberto to intervene in the landlady's engagement, denouncing her as an ingrate and a bawd, or were he to expose the adulteress whom he sees several times after her assignation, the film would degenerate into a silly melodrama, worthy indeed of a run at the Cinema Iride. But instead, the three erotic subplots remain tangential to Umberto's story, offering temptations into other genres that the film valiantly resists in defense of its stylistic virginity.

And yet, in its near-perfect embodiment of the precepts of neorealism, *Umberto D* also signals its breakdown. Not only

have De Sica and Zavattini abandoned the cause of solidarity and the working-class themes of the postwar school, but they have also violated the pretense to objective reportage, which bore witness to the documentary aspirations of the neorealist founding fathers. The predominance of medium shots, the unobtrusive camera movements, and the minimal editing bespoke the fixed, external, neutral point of view typical of neorealist cinema. It is this absolute authority that begins to break down in *Umberto D* as perspectives shift and reality begins to take on a multiplicity of faces, according to its variant contexts and the particular biases of the observer. Critical attention has been called to the zoom shot from Umberto's window to the cobblestones below as the most obvious violation of neorealist technique in its obtrusive camerawork and its subjectivity—this is Umberto's consideration of a plunge to death as the resolution of his dilemma.<sup>23</sup> Another non-neorealist shot is that of the snarling bulldog in the kennel, presenting Umberto's (or Flick's?) subjective point of view on the inhospitality of this rest home for dogs. A third blatantly subjective set of images is the panorama from the trolley car which takes Umberto from the apartment on Via San Martini della Battaglia to Flick's presumed destination on Via Leccosa. The views of the city are seen through the eyes of a man who is regarding them for the last time, whose resolve to end his life cannot prevent this surge of last-minute nostalgia. But these shots are not the only violations of neorealist objectivity, for they point to a whole pattern, both psychological and cinematic, of ambivalent optics and shifting points of view.<sup>24</sup>

Umberto's condition itself is shown through a plurality of perspectives. When we first see him alone after the fiasco of the watch-vending episode, he is depicted simply as a dignified old man, dressed in middle-class finery, taking his dog

<sup>23</sup>On this zoom shot, and other technical violations of neorealist decorum, see Barbaro, "Umberto D," pp. 17–18.

<sup>24</sup>On the complexity of De Sica's cinematography in *Umberto D*, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 63.

for a Sunday walk. The music itself is festive, reinforcing this sense of a Sabbath outing devoid of the financial worries intimated in the previous scenes and fulfilled in the subsequent ones. The film is punctuated with such idyllic moments, whose musical commentaries accord with the gay *mise-en-scène*: Umberto's lighthearted tripping up the steps of a garden after his hospital release, and his cavorting with Flick in the loveliness of the children's park at the film's end. If we were seeing Umberto out of context, in these carefree moments alone, we would consider him a jolly pensioner enjoying his leisure, as the Commendatore assumes when he asks after Umberto's well-being. "I'm retired, I survive, I don't do anything." "Lucky you, who does nothing," remarks the Commendatore in a judgment as partial and as misrepresentative as our own would be were we to see Umberto only during these select moments. In a complex shot that reveals the Commendatore's flawed point of view, Umberto's image is reflected on the window of the bus which the other man has already boarded. Embarrassed because he has nothing to say, the Commendatore stands at the window looking down, creating the optical illusion that he is contemplating Umberto's reflected image which, of course, we see but he cannot. The illusion is, however, an accurate indication of the Commendatore's attitude toward Umberto—both condescending and distorted—for he sees not the man, but his own version of this idle pensioner trying to make a claim on his reluctant attentions.

Indeed, the play of perspectives is constant throughout the film, making Umberto the object of humorous, pathetic, or critical treatment according to the shifting point of view. Initially, De Sica posits an alienating distance between protagonist and public, presenting Umberto as the eccentric, self-involved old man of the first three scenes. But a radical shift of perspective occurs during the famous episode of Umberto's preparation for bed, an example of the *temps morts*<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup>This is Armes's term, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 160.

that constitute so important a part of the film's dedramatizing technique. During this long sequence, which is interrupted by Maria's comings and goings, and a trip to the bookstall, nothing really happens to advance the storyline, yet its very dramatic insignificance concentrates our attention on the protagonist himself as the author of the small gesture and the organizer of this quotidian space. Without resorting to the more overt manipulative techniques of conventional cinema, De Sica and Zavattini succeed in drawing us into Umberto's interior world by making us cohabitants of his room—the room that has become an external expression of his innermost self, literalizing the old metaphor of the chambers of the mind.<sup>26</sup> This *topos*, which underwrites the entire scene of Umberto's preparations for bed (as well as Maria's famous scene in the kitchen the next morning) is introduced by the protagonist's entrance into the room after the adulterers adjourn to the parlor. Umberto's fastidious actions—removing the handkerchief from the light, airing the room, turning the pillow, smoothing the bed—reveal as much his moral revulsion at what has just gone on there as his desire to reappropriate this space for himself, making it once more the ideal image of an inner psychic order. By letting us observe this ritual of reclamation, we watch the metaphor unfold, witnesses to the figurative link between Umberto's interior life and its exterior manifestation in the “cameretta” doomed to extinction by the landlady's empire-building schemes. The famous scene later in the film, where the zoom shot to the cobblestones reveals Umberto's death wish, concludes with a shot of Umberto through the hole in the wall of the semi-demolished room, taken by a camera in the ad-

<sup>26</sup>The *topos* is an example of the “house of the body” tradition which, according to Robert Durling in his lecture entitled “Boccaccio and the House of the Body,” delivered at the meeting of the American Association of University Professors of Italian, University of Illinois, Champaign, 21 November 1980, goes back to Plato's *Timaeus* and is used extensively in Ovid. The chambers-of-the-mind metaphor finds specific application in Petrarch's sonnet 234, “O cameretta che già fosti un porto.”

joining parlor.<sup>27</sup> The two shots are causally linked—the former is a logical result of the latter—as Umberto’s suicide pact follows from the destruction of the psychic order figured in the room. This portrait of Umberto framed by the hole in the wall reverses the shooting direction, and the generic implications, of the earlier portrait of the adulterous couple framed by the keyhole. Though as artful as the glamorous couple’s shot, Umberto’s reveals all the vast distance separating his film from the one that would tell their story. For them, the elegant keyhole frame and the parlor setting are environmental props whose conventionality simply primes us for the predictable plotting of melodrama. For Umberto, the hole-in-the-wall framing and the dreary bachelor room are themselves the story<sup>28</sup>—they not only locate Umberto physically, but contain and determine him in his rush toward material and emotional ruin. Though Umberto’s portrait is shot from the same distance as the couple’s portrait (each from a room away), our sudden remoteness from his reveals, by contrast, how close we have come to this character and how well De Sica’s interiorizing technique has worked, while we remain utterly detached from the adulterers.

The morning scene of Maria in the kitchen serves a similar interiorizing function. Like the bedroom for Umberto, this is Maria’s personal space which she claims as her own through a series of small, ritualized gestures, from her fiery and watery campaign against the ants, to her lighting the stove and grinding the morning coffee. The movement into her mind is done with delicacy and tact through a subjective camera shot which, when it returns to an “objective” view of Maria, does so with new compassion and understanding. We merge with Maria’s point of view early in the scene as she looks out the

<sup>27</sup>On the violation of neorealist technique implicit in this shot, see Bararo “*Umberto D*,” p. 18.

<sup>28</sup>It is unclear whether Umberto is a bachelor or a widower but, as De Sica remarks, the specifics of his past are immaterial since all that should concern us is his present solitude. See “Analyzing *Umberto D*,” sec. 10, p. 5.

kitchen window onto the adjoining rooftops where she sees a stray cat—her momentary counterpart in its solitude and homelessness. When Maria returns to the stove and touches her breast to test for palpable signs of her pregnancy, we share with her the burgeoning realization of her desperate plight.

These two scenes, which have been so justly celebrated for their naturalism, do much more than simply introduce us to the ordinary and uneventful quality of Umberto's and Maria's daily routines, for they reveal the characters to us in almost embarrassing intimacy—an intimacy far more revealing than confessional dialogue or intense dramatic encounters could afford.<sup>29</sup> Umberto's bedroom and Maria's kitchen serve as stages for the private enactments of their innermost selves, freed from the pretenses and defenses of public life. Despite the intimacy of these vignettes, De Sica and Zavattini never cast us in the role of voyeurs, peeping through keyholes into secret rooms, nor are we made to feel like unauthorized intruders into an alien land, but instead are eased into the characters' own perspectives, becoming "roommates" in the metaphoric chambers of their minds. Once this merging of perspectives is achieved, we begin to see much of Umberto's surroundings through his particular optic. The central hallway of the apartment is always shot frontally, from a low angle so that we feel at once dwarfed and oppressed by the heavy-ceilinged space in accordance with Umberto's own subjugation to physical circumstance. The positioning of the central hallway also suggests infinite, hidden depths in the landlady's portion of the apartment, which lies at the vanishing point of the *mise-en-scène*, while Umberto's bedroom and Maria's kitchen flank the front of the hallway that gives onto the photographic plane. We realize too that all the events we witness in the apartment that include Umberto are filtered

<sup>29</sup>Bazin considers these two scenes perfect examples of the "cinema of duration" that is Zavattini's neorealist ideal. See Bazin, *Vittorio De Sica*, p. 16 n.



4. *Umberto's bedroom, once the outward image of his psychic order and material security, is now about to be remodeled according to a plan that will have no place for him.*



through his perspective, so that sights and sounds are exaggerated as if they were assaults on his fevered senses. In his illness and insomnia, he is like Proust's Aunt Eulalie for whom the sickroom details and the comings and goings of the servant Françoise take on macrocosmic significance. For Umberto, no sooner does the landlady's pretentious singing stop than the fanfare of the Cinema Iride starts up, and the soundtrack magnifies these sounds to accord with the heightened perception of his overwrought state. Two of the love stories which unfold around Umberto have musical motifs that seem to converge on his room. The landlady's singing amounts to a kind of mating call as she vocally preens and postures for her fiancé, while Maria constantly comes running to the sound of the bugle that summons the soldiers into formation outside Umberto's window.

Once this merging of perspectives is established, there are moments of backing off in which we achieve enough distance on Umberto to laugh at him or to censure his conduct. Thus, even the interiorizing strategy of the bedroom scene is arrested by a momentary step back from Umberto as we laugh at his slapstick antics with the thermometer that has disappeared down the legs of his pants. Another source of humor is Umberto's face-offs with Olga, which include a dialogue of defiant "ha-ha's" between the two in a spoof of the landlady's own operatic exertions. A second episode of silly sparring occurs when Umberto returns home with the recently retrieved Flick and jumps out in front of Olga, berating her before an unsympathetic audience of onlookers. Later, our laughter is tinged with pathos when Umberto tries to beg and then is compelled by pride to deny his eleemosynary appeals. In a scene reminiscent of Chaplin, Umberto turns his outstretched hand palms down, pretending to a passer-by about to make him a donation that he was merely testing for rain.<sup>30</sup> When he delegates the job of begging to Flick, who

<sup>30</sup> On the Chaplinesque affinities of the film, see Armes, *Patterns of Realism*, p. 160.

sits on his hind legs and holds his master's hat in his teeth, Umberto withdraws to the porch of the Pantheon and pretends to be reading a letter. It is then that the Commendatore walks by and questions Flick's acrobatics, but Umberto only dismisses the dog's trick as a game, unwilling to admit his disgrace to his former supervisor in the Ministry of Public Works. The amusement occasioned by this Chaplinesque interlude is different from that of the thermometer or the soup kitchen, where his antics were motivated by senile self-absorption or physical awkwardness, for here, they reflect an admirable pride that the other beggars, in their aggressiveness, have easily discarded. The mendicant who harangues passers-by ("I have seven dependents, seven") and the one who buys Umberto's gold watch with all his morning's earnings are foils, in their shamelessness, for Umberto's sense of lost dignity.

This humorous distance from Umberto, be it tempered with pathos, or hardened with critical detachment, gives way to direct censure of him in his moments of supreme insensitivity to others. Though we sympathize with his frenzy over Flick's absence from home, we cannot countenance Umberto's brutal interrogation of Maria in the immediate aftermath of her abandonment by the soldier from Naples, nor can we condone his obliviousness to the next man in line at the pound who is unable to pay the retrieval fee for his dog.<sup>31</sup> Though Umberto is obviously unaware that Maria has just been jilted, or that the man will lose his dog to the gas chambers, De Sica's decision to give us this information which he withholds from the protagonist nonetheless serves to dramatize this character's self-absorption and to make us judge him accordingly. Yet, at the moment of Umberto's reunion with Flick in the pound, we are drawn into full sympathy with the character once more and forgive him his human failings.

If it were not for the filmmaker's complex and shifting

<sup>31</sup>Nick Barbaro cites this, among other examples of Umberto's failure of solidarity. See his "*Umberto D*," p. 20.

attitude toward the protagonist, *Umberto D* could easily rigidify into a thesis film about the plight of the socially disenfranchised, both the elderly and the so-called “subproletariat.” There are the makings of a thesis film in Umberto’s admonition to Maria about her failure to do her homework. “Some things happen because we don’t know grammar. All exploit the ignorant.” But not even grammar will help those for whom society has no more use, as the public official suggests when he shouts to the protesters, “You don’t have a permit,” as if they had no permission to exist in the eyes of a production-oriented establishment. Indeed, the film is full of withering social commentary in its attacks on the mercenary and hypocritical bourgeoisie embodied in the landlady who is so proper with her fiancé yet has no compunctions about leasing out Umberto’s room for 1,000 lire per hour. The hospital patient in the bed to Umberto’s right is visited by two sons who show the expected concern over their father’s condition when the nun is there, but lapse into cheerful chatter about money the minute she is gone. The Church gets a broadside in the nun who can be talked into keeping Umberto in the hospital for an extra week provided he make the proper show of Christian reverence. When the nun holds out the rosary to him as if it were a trinket for a child, her carrot-and-stick approach to religious piety is only too obvious.<sup>32</sup> Like the pauper’s Mass in *Bicycle Thief* where beggars are enticed into prayer with the promise of Sunday dinner, De Sica’s Church makes unabashed use of the claims of the body to win the loyalty of the soul. Perhaps the most lethal social commentary is implicit in the scene at the dog pound, whose murderous efficiency, huge staff, and sophisticated physical plant are a terrible indictment of a society which lavishes such care and expense on the disposal of animals but cannot manage to fund increased pensions for its elderly.

<sup>32</sup>On the religious hypocrisy exposed in this scene, see Canziani and Braggaglia, *La stagione*, p. 101.

As in *Bicycle Thief*, no programmatic solution is offered to the social ills diagnosed by the film, but *Umberto D* does not even hold out the shred of hope in solidarity that we discerned in Bruno's forgiveness of Antonio at the conclusion of the earlier film.<sup>33</sup> Though both stories end with betrayals followed by reconciliations (in Umberto's case, he violates Flick's trust in attempting to commit a "double suicide" but wins him back in the end), it is significant that Bruno's human witness to Antonio's tragedy is replaced by a dog in *Umberto D*. The substitution is devastating, and gives the lie to the critical consensus that considers this final scene an upbeat ending to Umberto's story.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, the protagonist's mood at the conclusion of the film suggests the gaiety that lies beyond tragedy, like Yeats's actors who

If worthy their prominent part in the play,  
Do not break up their lines to weep.  
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;  
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.<sup>35</sup>

And like Yeats's gay Chinamen carved in lapis lazuli at the end of his poem, it is the permanence of the artwork itself that consoles the tragic vision. Such an ending to De Sica's film constitutes at once the ultimate affirmation and the demise of neorealism, for it takes us out of the realm of history and into the realm of art in a total reversal of realist priorities, while positing the power of that art to help us change the world in accordance with the neorealists' injunction to social action. This double and seemingly contradictory conclusion is the result of a shift in emphasis from thematic to formal solutions to Umberto's plight. Indeed, within the terms of fiction, we can envision no answer for his predicament,

<sup>33</sup>See Singerman, "Umberto D," pp. 165–66.

<sup>34</sup>See for example, Canziani and Bragaglia, *La stagione*, p. 102; and Lepron, *Vittorio De Sica*, p. 62.

<sup>35</sup>From William Butler Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli," in *Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. W. L. Rosenthal (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 159.

either in self-inflicted death, or life in a flophouse, or a return to Via San Martini della Battaglia to retrieve Maria. This inability to project a future for the protagonist beyond the final frames of *Umberto D* throws our attention back on the film as aesthetic object in a violation of the neorealist insistence on artistic transparency. However, the isolation and incomprehension that Umberto suffers can be overcome by the approach to experience manifested on the film's formal level. In hypothesizing the perfect realist film of ninety uneventful minutes in the life of a man, Zavattini writes:

. . . each of these frames will be equally intense and revealing, it will no longer be just a bridge to the next frame, but will vibrate within itself like a microcosm. Then our attention will become continuous, and I would say perpetual, as one man's must be toward another man.<sup>36</sup>

Thus it is the style of the film, rather than the personal or political implications of its story, which offers a corrective to the atomization and solitude of the social order it depicts. The Zavattinian attentiveness to the conditions of others is exemplified by the formal attributes of *Umberto D*, especially in its *temps morts* sequences and in its general strategy of dedramatization, which assign as much importance to the minutiae of our daily routines as to the life-shaping events of which plots are made.

With *Umberto D*, De Sica and Zavattini have not abandoned the revolutionary promise of the first neorealists, they have simply shifted the burden from the level of narrative content to that of cinematic form. While it is enough to read the screenplay of *Open City* to appreciate Rossellini's didactic intent, *Umberto D* must be screened before it can teach

<sup>36</sup>See "Intervento al convegno di Perugia," in Lizzani, *Storia del cinema italiano*, p. 465.

us how to regard mankind with Zavattinian attentiveness.<sup>37</sup> This withdrawal into form as the agent of social change is not so much a rejection of the neorealists' venture as a modernization of it. Rossellini's visionary city was further from realization in 1952 than it had been in the immediate aftermath of war when anything seemed possible and the memory of the liberation was still fresh. The working-class emphasis and the allusions to Resistance ideals no longer spoke to an Italy eager to put the "bad old days" behind it, like Umberto's landlady, and enjoy the fruits of reconstruction. By making the form the new repository of neorealist meaning, De Sica and Zavattini put an end to the classical neorealism of content, and rendered possible instead Fellini's, Antonioni's, and Visconti's application of its stylistic precepts to subjects hitherto excluded from serious postwar cinematic treatment.

Significantly, there is no child at the end of *Umberto D* to embody the hopes for a better future, there is only an old man whose refusal either to die or to prolong an unviable existence reflects the dilemma of neorealism itself toward the end of its first decade of life.

<sup>37</sup>Kracauer cites *Umberto D* as an example of a truly cinematic narration, as opposed to Renato Castellani's *Romeo and Juliet* (1954) whose story is detachable from its medium. See his *Theory of Film*, p. 221.

