

Chapter Six

"Bicycle Thieves"

"*Voleur de bicyclette*," from *L'Esprit*, 18.161 (November 1949), pp. 820–832; in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Vol. 4 (Éditions du Cerf, 1962), pp. 45–59; in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Cerf, 1975 [single-volume version]), pp. 295–309; translated into English by Hugh Gray in *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 2 (Univ. of California Press, 1971), pp. 47–60, and edited below by Bert Cardullo.

What seems to me most astonishing about the Italian cinema is that it appears to feel it should escape from the aesthetic impasse to which neorealism is said to have led. The dazzling effects of 1946 and 1947 having faded away, one could reasonably fear that this useful and intelligent reaction against the Italian aesthetic of the super-spectacle and, for that matter, more generally, against the technical aestheticism from which cinema suffered all over the world, would never get beyond an interest in a kind of super-documentary, or romanticized reportage. One began to realize that the success of *Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Paisà* (1946), or *Sciuscià* (1946) was inseparable from a special conjunction of historical circumstances that took its meaning from the Liberation, and that the technique of the films was in some way magnified by the revolutionary value of the subject. Just as some books by Malraux or Hemingway find in a crystallization of journalistic style the best narrative form for a tragedy of current events, so the films of Rossellini or De Sica owed the fact that they were major works, masterpieces, simply to a fortuitous combination of form and subject matter.

But when the novelty and above all the flavor of their technical crudity have exhausted their surprise effect, what remains of Italian neorealism when by force of circumstances it must revert to traditional subjects: crime stories, psychological dramas, social customs? The camera in the street we can still accept, but doesn't that admirable nonprofessional acting stand

self-condemned in proportion as its discoveries swell the ranks of international stars? And, by way of generalizing about this aesthetic pessimism: realism can only occupy in art a dialectical position—it is more a reaction than a truth. It remains then to make it part of the aesthetic it came into existence to verify. In any case, the Italians were not the last to downgrade their neorealism. I think there is not a single Italian director, including the most neorealist, who does not insist that he must get away from it.

French critics, too, feel themselves a prey to scruples—especially since this vaunted neorealism early showed signs of running out of steam. Comedies, agreeable enough in themselves, appeared on the scene to exploit with visible ease the formula of *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* (1942) or *Vivere in pace* (1946). But worst of all was the emergence of a neorealist super-spectacle in which the search for real settings, action taken from everyday life, portrayals of lower-class milieux, “social” backgrounds, became an academic stereotype far more detestable than the elephants of Carmine Gallone’s *Scipio Africanus* (1937). For a neorealist film may have every defect except that of being academic. Thus at Venice *Il patto col diavolo* (1949), by Luigi Chiarini, a somber melodrama of rural love, took visible pains to find a contemporary “alibi” in a story of conflict between shepherds and woodsmen. Although well done on some accounts, Pietro Germi’s *In nome della legge* (1949), which the Italians tried to push to the fore at Knokke-le-Zoute, cannot escape similar criticisms. One will notice incidentally, from these two examples, that neorealism is now preoccupied with rural problems, perhaps prudently in view of the fate of urban neorealism. The closed-in countryside has replaced the open city.

However that may be, the hopes that we placed in the new Italian school had started to turn into uneasiness, or even skepticism, all the more since the aesthetic of neorealism forbids it to repeat itself or plagiarize itself in the way that is possible and even normal in some traditional genres (the crime film, the western, the atmospheric film, and so on). Already we were beginning to look toward England, whose recent cinematic rebirth is likewise, in part, the fruit of realism: that of the school of documentarians who, before and during the war, had gone deeply into the resources offered by social and technical realities. A film like David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945) would probably have been impossible without the ten years of preparation by John Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, or Paul Rotha. But the English, instead of breaking with the technique and the history of European and American cinema, have succeeded in combining a highly refined aestheticism with the advances of a certain realism. Nothing could be more tightly structured, more carefully prepared, than *Brief Encounter*—nothing less conceivable without the most up-to-date studio resources, without clever and established actors; yet can

we imagine a more realistic portrait of English manners and psychology? Certainly, Lean has gained nothing by making over, this year, a kind of second *Brief Encounter: The Passionate Friends* (1949), presented at the Cannes Film Festival. But it is against repetition of the subject matter that one can reasonably protest, not against the repetition of the techniques, which could be used over and over indefinitely.

Have I played devil’s advocate long enough? For let me now make a confession: my doubts about the Italian cinema have never gone so far, but all the arguments I have invoked have been used by intelligent men—especially in Italy—nor are they unfortunately without some semblance of validity. They have also often troubled me, and I subscribe to some of them. On the other hand there is a film called *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) and two other films that I hope we will soon get to know in France. With *Ladri di biciclette* De Sica has managed to escape from the impasse, to reaffirm anew the entire aesthetic of neorealism.

Ladri di biciclette certainly is neorealist, by all the principles one can deduce from the best Italian films since 1946. The story is from the lower classes, almost populist: an incident in the daily life of a worker. But the film



Bicycle Thieves, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948.

shows no extraordinary events such as those which befall the fated workers in Jean Gabin films. There are no crimes of passion, none of those grandiose coincidences common in detective stories which simply transfer to a realm of proletarian exoticism the great tragic debates once reserved for the dwellers on Olympus. Truly an insignificant, even a banal incident: a workman spends a whole day looking in vain in the streets of Rome for the bicycle someone has stolen from him. This bicycle has been the tool of his trade, and if he doesn't find it he will again be unemployed. Late in the day, after hours of fruitless wandering, he too tries to steal a bicycle. Apprehended and then released, he is as poor as ever, but now he feels the shame of having sunk to the level of the thief.

Plainly there is not enough material here even for a news item: the whole story would not deserve two lines in a stray-dog column. One must take care not to confuse it with realist tragedy in the Jacques Prévert or James M. Cain manner, where the initial news item is a diabolic trap placed by the gods amid the cobble stones of the street. In itself the event contains no proper dramatic valence. It takes on meaning only because of the social (and not psychological or aesthetic) position of the victim. Without the haunting specter of unemployment, which places the event in the Italian society of 1948, it would be an utterly banal misadventure. Likewise, the choice of a bicycle as the key object in the drama is characteristic both of Italian urban life and of a period when mechanical means of transportation were still rare and expensive. There is no need to insist on the hundreds of other meaningful details that multiply the vital links between the scenario and actuality, situating the event in political and social history, in a given place at a given time.

The techniques employed in the *mise en scène* likewise meet the most exacting specifications of Italian neorealism. Not one scene shot in a studio. Everything was filmed in the streets. As for the actors, none had the slightest experience in theater or film. The workman came from the Breda factory, the child was found hanging around in the street, the wife was a journalist. These then are the facts of the case. It is clear that they do not appear to recall in any sense the neorealism of *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, *Vivere in pace*, or *Sciuscià*. On the face of it, then, one should have special reasons for being wary. The sordid side of the tale tends toward that most debatable aspect of Italian stories: indulgence in the wretched, a systematic search for squalid detail.

If *Ladri di biciclette* is a true masterpiece, comparable in rigor to *Paisà*, it is for certain precise reasons, none of which emerge either from a simple outline of the scenario or from a superficial disquisition on the technique of the *mise en scène*. The scenario is diabolically clever in its construction; beginning with the alibi of a current event, it makes good use of a number of systems of

dramatic coordinates radiating in all directions. *Ladri di biciclette* is certainly the only valid Communist film of the whole past decade precisely because it still has meaning even when you have abstracted its social significance. Its social message is not detached; it remains immanent in the event, but it is so clear that nobody can overlook it, still less take exception to it, since it is never made explicitly a message. The thesis implied is wondrously and outrageously simple: in the world where this workman lives, the poor must steal from each other in order to survive.

But this thesis is never stated as such; it is just that events are so linked together that they have the appearance of a formal truth while retaining an anecdotal quality. Basically, the workman might have found his bicycle in the middle of the film; only then there would have been no film. (Sorry to have bothered you, the director might say; we really did think he would never find it, but since he has, all is well, good for him, the performance is over, you can turn up the lights.) In other words, a propaganda film would try to prove that the workman could not find his bicycle, and that he is inevitably trapped in the vicious circle of poverty. De Sica limits himself to showing that the workman cannot find his bicycle and that as a result he doubtless will be unemployed again. No one can fail to see that it is the accidental nature of the script that gives the thesis its quality of necessity; the slightest doubt cast on the necessity of the events in the scenario of a propaganda film renders the argument hypothetical.

Although on the basis of the workman's misfortune we have no alternative but to condemn a certain kind of relation between a man and his work, the film never makes the events or the people part of an economic or political Manichaeism. It takes care not to cheat on reality, not only by contriving to give the succession of events the appearance of an accidental and as it were anecdotal chronology, but in treating each of them according to its phenomenological integrity. In the middle of the chase the little boy suddenly needs to piss. So he does. A downpour forces the father and son to shelter in a carriageway, so like them we have to forego the chase and wait till the storm is over. The events are not necessarily signs of something, of a truth of which we are to be convinced; they all carry their own weight, their complete uniqueness, that ambiguity which characterizes any fact. So, if you do not have the eyes to see, you are free to attribute what happens to bad luck or to chance.

The same applies to the people in the film. The worker is just as deprived and isolated among his fellow trade unionists as he is walking along the street or even in that ineffable scene of the Catholic "Quakers" into whose company he will shortly stray, because the trade union does not exist to find lost bikes but to transform a world in which losing his bike condemns a man to poverty.

Nor does the worker come to lodge a complaint with the trade union but to find comrades who will be able to help him discover the stolen object. So here you have a collection of proletarian members of a union who behave no differently from a group of paternalistic bourgeois toward an unfortunate workman. In his private misfortune, the poster hanger is just as alone in his union as in church (buddies apart, that is—but then who your buddies are is your own affair).



Bicycle Thieves, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948.

This parallel is extremely useful, however, because it points up a striking contrast. The indifference of the trade union is normal and justified because a trade union is striving for justice, not for charity. But the cumbersome paternalism of the Catholic “Quakers” is unbearable, because their eyes are closed to his personal tragedy while they in fact actually do nothing to change the world that is the cause of it. On this score the most successful scene is that in the storm under the porch when a flock of Austrian seminarians crowd around the worker and his son. We have no valid reason to blame them for chattering so much and still less for talking German. But it would be difficult to create a more objectively anticlerical scene.

Clearly, and I could find twenty more examples: events and people are never introduced in support of a social thesis—but the thesis emerges fully

armed and all the more irrefutable because it is presented to us as something thrown in into the bargain. It is our intelligence that discerns and shapes it, not the film. De Sica wins every play on the board without ever having made a bet. This technique is not entirely new in Italian films and we have elsewhere stressed its value at length both apropos of *Paisà* and of *Germania, anno zero* (1947), but these two films were based on themes from either the Resistance or the war. *Ladri di biciclette* is the first decisive example of the possibility of the conversion of this kind of objectivity to other, similar subjects. De Sica and Zavattini have transferred neorealism from the Resistance to the Revolution.

Thus the thesis of the film is hidden behind an objective social reality which in turn moves into the background of the moral and psychological drama that could of itself justify the film. The idea of the boy is a stroke of genius, and one does not know definitely whether it came from the script or in the process of directing, so little does this distinction mean here anymore. It is the child who gives to the workman's adventure its ethical dimension and fashions, from an individual moral standpoint, a drama that might well have been only social. Remove the boy, and the story remains much the same. The proof: a summary of it would not differ in detail. In fact, the boy's part is confined to trotting along beside his father. But he is the intimate witness of the tragedy, its private chorus.

It is supremely clever to have virtually eliminated the role of the wife in order to give flesh and blood to the private character of the tragedy in the person of the child. The complicity between father and son is so subtle that it reaches down to the foundations of the moral life. It is the admiration the child feels for his father and the father's awareness of it which gives its tragic stature to the ending. The public shame of the worker, exposed and clouted in the open street, is of little account compared with the fact that his son witnessed it. When he feels tempted to steal the bike, the silent presence of the little child, who guesses what his father is thinking, is cruel to the verge of obscenity. Trying to get rid of him by sending him to take the streetcar is like telling a child in some cramped apartment to go and wait on the landing outside for an hour. Only in the best Chaplin films are there situations of an equally overwhelming conciseness.

In this connection, the final gesture of the little boy in giving his hand to his father has been frequently misinterpreted. It would be unworthy of the film to see here a concession to the feelings of the audience. If De Sica gives them this satisfaction it is because it is a logical part of the drama. This experience marks henceforth a definite stage in the relations between father and son, rather like reaching puberty. Up to that moment the man has been like a god

to his son; their relations come under the heading of admiration. By his action the father has now compromised them. The tears they shed as they walk side by side, arms swinging, signify their despair over a paradise lost. But the son returns to a father who has fallen from grace. He will love him henceforth as a human being, shame and all. The hand that slips into his is neither a symbol of forgiveness nor of a childish act of consolation. It is rather the most solemn gesture that could ever mark the relations between a father and his son: one that makes them equals.

It would take too long to enumerate the multiple secondary functions of the boy in the film, both as to the story structure and as to the *mise en scène* itself. However, one should at least pay attention to the change of tone (almost in the musical sense of the term) that his presence introduces into the middle of the film. As we slowly wander back and forth between the little boy and the workman we are taken from the social and economic plane to that of their private lives, and the supposed death by drowning of the child, in making the father suddenly realize the relative insignificance of his misfortune, creates a dramatic oasis (the restaurant scene) at the heart of the story. It is, however, an illusory one, because the reality of this intimate happiness in the long run depends on the precious bike. Thus the child provides a dramatic reserve which, as the occasion arises, serves as a counterpoint, as an accompaniment, or moves on the contrary into the foreground of the melodic structure.

This function in the story is, furthermore, clearly observable in the orchestration of the steps of the child and of the grown-up. Before choosing this particular child, De Sica did not ask him to perform, just to walk. He wanted to play off the striding gait of the man against the short trotting steps of the child, the harmony of this discord being for him of capital importance for the understanding of the film as a whole. It would be no exaggeration to say that *Ladri di biciclette* is the story of a walk through Rome by a father and his son. Whether the child is ahead, behind, alongside—or when, sulking after having had his ears boxed, he is dawdling behind in a gesture of revenge—what he is doing is never without meaning. On the contrary, it is the phenomenology of the script.

It is difficult, after the success of this pairing of a workman and his son, to imagine De Sica having recourse to established actors. The absence of professional actors is nothing new. But here again *Ladri di biciclette* goes further than previous films. Henceforth the cinematic purity of the actors does not derive from skill, luck, or a happy combination of a subject, a period, and a people. Probably too much importance has been attached to the ethnic factor. Admittedly the Italians, like the Russians, are the most

naturally theatrical of people. In Italy any little street urchin is the equal of a Jackie Coogan and life is a perpetual *commedia dell'arte*. However, it seems to me unlikely that these acting talents are shared equally by the Milanese, the Neapolitans, the peasants of the Po, and the fishermen of Sicily. Racial difference apart, the contrasts in their history, language, and economic and social condition would suffice to cast doubt on a thesis that sought to attribute the natural acting ability of the Italian people simply to an ethnic quality.

It is inconceivable, then, that films as different as *Paisà*, *Ladri di biciclette*, *La terra trema* (1948), and even *Cielo sulla palude* (1949) could share in common such a superbly high level of acting. One could conceive that the urban Italian has a special gift for spontaneous histrionics, but the peasants in *Cielo sulla palude* are absolute cavemen beside the farmers of *Farrebique* (1946). Merely to recall Rouquier's film in connection with Genina's is enough at least in this respect to relegate the experiment of the French director to the level of a touchingly patronizing effort. Half the dialogue in *Farrebique* is spoken off-camera because Rouquier could never get the peasants not to laugh during a speech of any length.

Genina in *Cielo sulla palude*, Visconti in *La terra trema*, both handling peasants or fishermen by the dozen, gave them complicated roles and got them to recite long speeches in scenes in which the camera concentrated on their faces as pitilessly as in an American studio. It is an understatement to say that these temporary actors are good or even perfect. In these films the very concept of actor, performance, character no longer has any meaning. An actorless cinema? Undoubtedly. But the original meaning of the formula is now outdated, and we should talk today of a cinema without acting, of a cinema of which we no longer ask whether the character gives a good performance or not, since here man and the character he portrays are so completely one.

We have not strayed as far as it might seem from *Ladri di biciclette*. De Sica hunted for his cast for a long time and selected them for specific characteristics. Natural nobility, that purity of countenance and bearing that the common people have ... He hesitated for months between this person and that, took a hundred tests only to decide finally, in a flash and by intuition on the basis of a silhouette suddenly come upon at the bend of a road. But there is nothing miraculous about that. It is not the unique excellence of this workman and this child that guarantees the quality of their performance, but the whole aesthetic scheme into which they are fitted.

When De Sica was looking for a producer to finance his film, he finally found one, but on condition that the workman was played by Cary Grant.

The mere statement of the problem in these terms shows the absurdity of it. Actually, Cary Grant plays this kind of part extremely well, but it is obvious that the question here is not one of playing of a part but of getting away from the very notion of doing any such thing. The worker had to be at once as perfect and as anonymous and as objective as his bicycle. This concept of the actor is no less "artistic" than the other. The performance of this workman implies as many gifts of body and of mind and as much capacity to take direction as any established actor has at his command.

Hitherto films that have been made either totally or in part without actors, such as F. W. Murnau's *Tabu* (1931), Eisenstein's *Thunder over Mexico* (1933), and Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), have seemingly been successes that are either out of the ordinary or limited to a certain genre. There is nothing, on the other hand, unless it be sound prudence, to prevent De Sica from making fifty films like *Ladri di biciclette*. From now on we know that the absence of professional actors in no way limits the choice of subject. The film without names has finally established its own aesthetic existence. This in no sense means that the cinema of the future will no longer use actors: De Sica, who is one of the world's finest actors, would be the first to deny this. All it means is that some subjects handled in a certain style can no longer be made with professional actors and that the Italian cinema has definitely imposed these working conditions, just as naturally as it imposed authentic settings. It is this transition from an admirable *tour de force*, precarious as this may be, into an exact and infallible technique, that marks a decisive stage in the growth of Italian neorealism.

With the disappearance of the concept of the actor into a transparency seemingly as natural as life itself, comes the disappearance of the set. Let us understand one another, however. De Sica's film took a long time to prepare, and everything was as minutely planned as for a studio super-production, which, as a matter of fact, allows for last-minute improvisations, but I cannot remember a single shot in which a dramatic effect is born of the shooting script properly so called, which seems as neutral as in a Chaplin film. All the same, the numbering and titling of shots does not noticeably distinguish *Ladri di biciclette* from any ordinary film. But their selection has been made with a view to raising the limpidity of the event to a maximum, while keeping the index of refraction from the style to a minimum.

This objectivity is rather different from Rossellini's in *Paisà* but it belongs to the same school of aesthetics. One may compare it to the objectivity found in the kind of prose fiction that, according to André Gide and Martin du Gard, necessarily tends in the direction of the most neutral kind of transparency. Just as the disappearance of the actor is the result of transcending a style of

performance, the disappearance of the *mise en scène* is likewise the fruit of a dialectical progress in the style of the narrative. If the event is sufficient unto itself without the direction having to shed any further light on it by means of camera angles, purposely chosen camera positions, it is because it has reached that stage of perfect luminosity which makes it possible for an art to unmask a nature which in the end resembles it. That is why the impression made on us by *Ladri di biciclette* is unfailingly that of truth.

If this supreme naturalness, the sense of events observed haphazardly as the hours roll by, is the result of an ever-present although invisible system of aesthetics, it is definitely the prior conception of the scenario which allows this to happen. Disappearance of the actor, disappearance of *mise en scène*? Unquestionably, but because the very principle of *Ladri di biciclette* is the disappearance of a story. The term is equivocal. I know of course that there is a story but of a different kind from those we ordinarily see on the screen. This is even the reason why De Sica could not find a producer to back him.

When Roger Leenhardt in a prophetic critical statement asked years ago "if the cinema is a spectacle," he was contrasting the dramatic cinema with the novel-like structure of the cinematic narrative. The former borrows from the theater its hidden springs. Its plot, conceived as it may be specifically for the screen, is still the alibi for an action identical in essence with the action of the classical theater. On this score the film is a spectacle like a play. But on the other hand, because of its realism and the equal treatment it gives to man and to nature, the cinema is related, aesthetically speaking, to the novel.

Without going too far into a theory of the novel—a debatable subject—let us say that the narrative form of the novel or that which derives from it differs by and large from the theater in the primacy given to events over action, to succession over causality, to mind over will. The conjunction belonging to the theater is "therefore," the particle belonging to the novel is "then." This scandalously rough definition is correct to the extent that it characterizes the two different movements of the mind in thinking, namely that of the reader and that of the onlooker. Proust can lose us in a madeleine, but a playwright fails in his task if every reply does not link our interest to the reply that is to follow. That is why a novel may be laid down and then picked up again. A play cannot be cut into pieces. The total unity of a spectacle is of its essence.

To the extent that it can realize the physical requirements of a spectacle, the cinema cannot apparently escape the spectacle's psychological laws, but it has also at its disposal all the resources of the novel. For that reason, doubtless, the cinema is congenitally a hybrid. It conceals a contradiction. Besides, clearly,

the progression of the cinema is toward increasing its novel-like potential. Not that we are against filmed theater, but if the screen can in some conditions develop and give a new dimension to the theater, it is of necessity at the expense of certain scenic values—the first of which is the physical presence of the actor. Contrariwise, the novel at least ideally need surrender nothing to the cinema. One may think of the film as a super-novel of which the written form is a feeble and provisional version.

This much briefly said, how much of it can be found in the present condition of the cinematographic spectacle? It is impossible to overlook the spectacular and theatrical needs demanded of the screen. What remains to be decided is how to reconcile the contradiction. The Italian cinema of today is the first anywhere in the world to have enough courage to cast aside the imperatives of the spectacular. *La terra trema* and *Cielo sulla palude* are films without “action,” in the unfolding of which, somewhat after the style of the epic novel, no concession is made to dramatic tension. Things happen in them each at its appointed hour, one after the other, but each carries an equal weight. If some are fuller of meaning than others, it is only in retrospect. We are free to use either “therefore” or “then.” *La terra trema*, especially, is a film destined to be virtually a commercial failure, unexploitable without cuts that would leave it unrecognizable.

That is the virtue of De Sica and Zavattini. Their *Ladri di biciclette* is solidly structured in the mold of a tragedy. There is not one frame that is not charged with an intense dramatic power, yet there is not one either which we cannot fail to find interesting, its dramatic continuity apart. The film unfolds on the level of pure accident: the rain, the seminarians, the Catholic Quakers, the restaurant—all these are seemingly interchangeable; no one seems to have arranged them in order on a dramatic spectrum. The scene in the thieves’ quarter is significant. We are not sure that the man who was chased by the workman is actually the bicycle thief, and we shall never know if the epileptic fit was a pretense or genuine. As an “action” this episode would be meaningless had not its novel-like interest, its value as a fact, given it a dramatic meaning to boot.

It is in fact on its reverse side, and by parallels, that the action is assembled—less in terms of “tension” than of a “summation” of the events. Yes, it is a spectacle, and what a spectacle! *Ladri di biciclette*, however, does not depend on the mathematical elements of drama; the action does not exist beforehand as if it were an “essence.” It follows from the preexistence of the narrative; it is the “integral” of reality. De Sica’s supreme achievement, which others have so far only approached with a varying degree of success or failure, is to have succeeded in discovering the cinematographic dialectic capable of

transcending the contradiction between the action of a “spectacle” and of an event. For this reason, *Ladri di biciclette* is one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema.