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Source: *Cinema Journal*, Summer, 2001, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Summer, 2001), pp. 3-17

Published by: University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies

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The Legacy of Mario Camerini in Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948)

by Carlo Celli

Mario Camerini (1895–1981) was an Italian film director who directed Vittorio De Sica in romantic comedies in the 1930s. The thematic links between Camerini's films starring De Sica and De Sica's later neorealist work, such as The Bicycle Thief, reveal a continuity between prewar and postwar Italian cinema usually assumed to be lacking.

The assumption that prewar and postwar Italian films are essentially different is central to discussions of Italian neorealism. However, just as Roberto Rossellini's postwar films reflect a legacy from the prewar period, so too do Vittorio De Sica's postwar films reflect the prewar oeuvre of Mario Camerini.¹ Rather than representing a break with the past, the films De Sica and Cesare Zavattini made during the neorealist period develop themes that were staples of their earlier collaborations with Camerini, in which De Sica starred as leading man and Zavattini was the scriptwriter.² This essay examines the themes of class conflict, the black market, proletarian political organizations, Catholicism, heroism, antistatism, and sports that appear in De Sica's prewar filmography as an actor and director and again in his later works, particularly *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*, 1948).

Mario Camerini (1895–1981) was the son of an official in the Italian Socialist Party who began his career in the Italian cinema quite early. At the age of seventeen, he received a credit as a screenwriter for *Le mani ignote* (*Unknown Hands*, 1913). After serving in World War I, during which he was taken to Germany as a prisoner of war, he returned to Italy. There, he worked with his brother Augusto and his cousin Augusto Genina in silent films, in which he gained experience in a variety of genres.

Camerini directed adventure films, such as *Saetta: principe per un giorno* (*Saetta: Prince for a Day*, 1924), and African colonial films, such as *Maciste contro lo sceicco* (*Maciste against the Sheik*, 1924), *Kif Tebbi* (1928), and *Il grande appello* (*The Great Call*, 1936), but it was in romantic and sentimental comedies he made his mark. His first film as director, *Jolly* (1923), the tragic story of a clown's love affair, is reminiscent in its plot of Federico Fellini's *La strada* (1954). *La casa dei pulcini* (*The Little Kid's House*, 1924) is a sentimental drama set in an orphanage. Finally, *Rotaie* (*Rails*, 1931), the story of a struggling couple, alternates between scenes of working-class hardship and leisure-class roulette tables, a motif that would become a commonplace of the Camerini comedy. It was one of the few films of

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the fascist era to depict the travails of the Depression with documentary-style footage of working people, albeit in the context of a romantic comedy.

Vittorio De Sica acted in several of Camerini's romantic comedies—*Gli uomini che mascalzoni!* (*Men—What Rascals!*, 1932), *Darò un milione* (*I'll Give a Million*, 1935), *Ma non è una cosa seria* (*But It's Nothing Serious*, 1936), *Il Signor Max* (1937), and *I grandi magazzini* (*The Big Stores*, 1939)—and in interviews, both De Sica and Zavattini have recognized Camerini as an important influence and starting point in their careers. De Sica has gone so far as to say, "I adore Mario Camerini. . . . The beginnings of my career as an actor and my future as a director were influenced by the fine artistry and delicacy of this great artist." He added, "I am grateful to Camerini for having taught me to be truthful and sincere. As a director, [he taught me] to take great pains with acting and the relationships between characters. Camerini's characters, in those middle- or upper-middle-class houses, had such refinement and grace . . . but also a forced and vulgar irony."³

Cesare Zavattini also had a great deal of respect for Camerini: "I admired Camerini, and I consider him, despite everything, a master."⁴ Zavattini and Camerini collaborated on the script of *I'll Give a Million* and *L'angelo e il diavolo* (*The Angel and the Devil*, 1946). These collaborations led to De Sica and Zavattini's development of a neorealist worldview.

In 1933, Camerini wrote a brief article describing his cinematic approach in which he included statements that presaged the development of the neorealist style. He recommended using inexperienced actors rather than established ones because the former tend to follow directions more closely.⁵ He emphasized the importance of improvisation and chance in filmmaking and the need for the director to retain a mental montage in order to handle the mosaic of details in production.

Camerini also revealed an admiration for the work of the Russian formalists, specifically V. I. Pudovkin's book *Film Technique*.⁶ In fact, in his later interviews, Camerini claimed that his strength as a director was in his use of montage.⁷ This influence stems no doubt to a period in the late 1920s when Camerini worked at Paramount's Joinville studios producing multiple-language versions of American films for the European market. Here, Camerini was exposed to Hollywood style and to the cultural conventions of films with middle-class settings and plots centered on the sentimental treatment of a good deed rewarded with a happy ending. This classic formula and reliance on what is known as the "Hollywood ethic" became a defining characteristic of the Camerini film.⁸ The Hollywood-Camerini connection continued after the wars, when several Camerini films were remade in the United States.⁹

The Camerini–De Sica Continuity. Camerini's ideas about the value of using inexperienced actors and other innovations, such as shooting on location at the Milan Exposition for *Men—What Rascals!*, share certain similarities with the style of the neorealists.¹⁰ But the trajectory from Camerini to De Sica and Zavattini is most clearly evident in their use of plot elements. In Camerini's films of the 1930s, comedic elements derive from a Boccaccian exchange of roles between people of different economic classes. In *Men—What Rascals!*, for instance, Bruno pretends

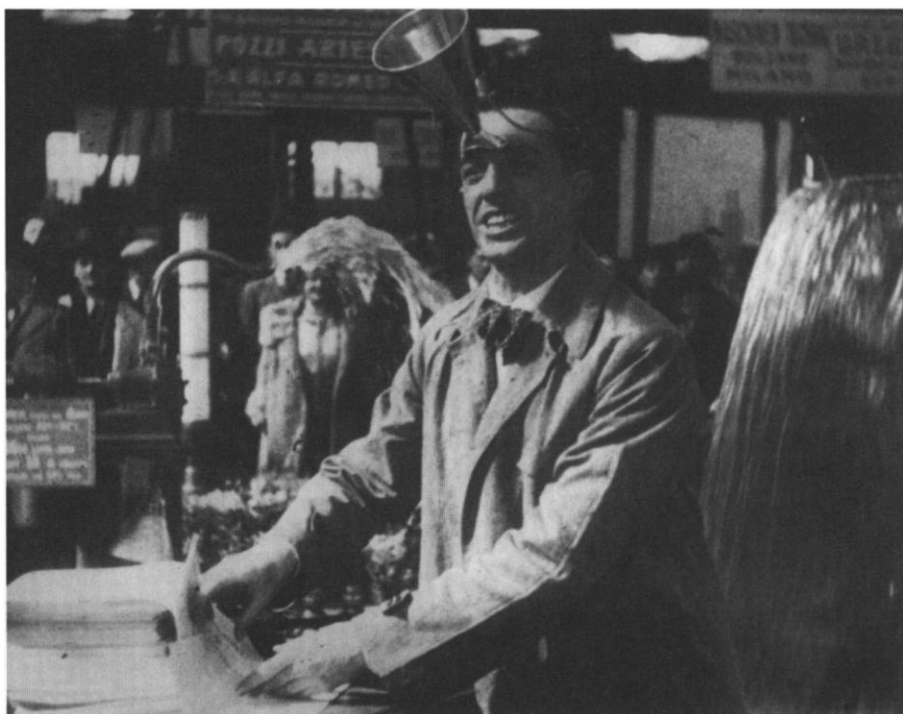


Figure 1. Vittorio De Sica performed in a number of films directed by Mario Camerini, including *Darò un milione* (*I'll Give a Million*, 1935). Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

to own a luxury car in order to impress Mariucia. In *I'll Give a Million*, the millionaire Gold assumes the identity of a pauper in order to find true love. In *Signor Max*, Gianni impersonates an upper-class boat passenger in order to impress Lady Paola. In *The Big Stores*, Lauretta steals an outfit in order to impress Bruno. In each film, the theft of a class-related object (car, outfit, and camera) makes the masquerade credible.

De Sica continued this theme/motif in his own films *Maddalena: Zero in condotta* (*Maddalena: Zero for Conduct*, 1941), with the theft of a letter, and in *Teresa Venerdi* (*Doctor, Beware*, 1941), in which the title character impersonates the sister of a doctor. In *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children Are Watching Us*, 1943), *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946), and *The Bicycle Thief*, the theft is finally presented from the perspective of the owner. The point is that by the time De Sica directed *The Bicycle Thief*, he had been involved in at least eight films that centered on the theft of a class-identifying object.¹¹

As P. Adams Sitney points out, in the scenes of the theft of the bicycle in *The Bicycle Thief*, De Sica relied on montage in the Russian formalist sense much more than directors did in other neorealist films.¹² This could have been expected, considering that Camerini thought his strength as a director was in his use of montage.

The roots of this stylistic method are in the shot-countershot exchange that establishes the protagonist's desire for the object in question. For example, in *Men—What Rascals!*, Camerini uses montage to establish Bruno's admiration for his boss's automobile, and in *Signor Max*, Gianni gazes longingly at flowers, suits, cigarette cases, and the mannerisms of the bourgeoisie. De Sica follows Camerini's style in *The Bicycle Thief* by emphasizing bicycle imagery at the pawnbroker's, on city streets, at the marketplace, and at the stadium. As in Camerini's cinema, the function of bicycle imagery in *The Bicycle Thief* is to reify the economic and social ramifications of the class-identifying object.

In all these films, the hero's ability to acquire the object in question facilitates his sexual status. Mariuccia accepts a ride from Bruno in *Men—What Rascals!* once he replaces his bicycle with his boss's car, and Gianni is successful with Donna Paola in *Signor Max* after he adopts the dress of the leisure class. These sexual motifs are repeated in *The Bicycle Thief* when Maria sacrifices the family's bedsheets for the bicycle and rides on the handlebars after Antonio accepts the job, thus reaffirming his dominance as head of the household.

Despite the sexual elements that are central to these films, both Camerini and De Sica had few scenes that featured female displays. True, in *I'll Give a Million*, Anna (Assia Noris) raises her stockings as Claudette Colbert does in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), and the bikini-clad Anna is brought out before a crowd on a float. However, each of these scenes is presented as if Anna were being violated. Also, Anna displays her legs involuntarily, because she is caught in a thorn bush, and is forced to parade in a bikini because of pressure from her boss at the circus.

Like Camerini, De Sica consciously limited overt displays of female sexuality. This ran counter to the erotic current in some neorealist films, such as *Roma città aperta* (*Open City*, 1945) and *Il bandito* (*The Bandit*, 1946), featuring Anna Magnani, *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1949), with Silvana Mangano, and *Stromboli: Terra di Dio* (*Stromboli*, 1949), starring Ingrid Bergman.

In De Sica's neorealist films, the reduction of sexuality arguably begins with *The Children Are Watching Us*, in which sex has a negative connotation. Prico's mother's display on the beach draws the attention of bourgeois admirers and foreshadows her abandonment of her son. In *The Bicycle Thief*, such deemphasis on female imagery begins as Antonio accepts his work assignment underneath a poster of Gale Storm in an evening gown advertising the American film *Forever Yours* (1945). Such female imagery continues during the scenes when Antonio works pasting posters of Rita Hayworth around Rome. However, the act of pasting reduces the sexual provocation of the image, and the *femme fatale* depicted in the poster for *Gilda* (1946) becomes wet and floppy. And in the basement vaudeville sequence, the rehearsing dance girls are dressed in everyday attire rather than in titillating costumes. The female imagery is similarly unprovocative in the *casa chiusa* bordello, where the thief seeks refuge. Although the wallpaper is of female nudes, the images, barely distinguishable in a full shot of the dining room, are without voyeuristic appeal.¹³ In the films of both Camerini and De Sica, the female body exists as an object whose value is determined by the male viewer.¹⁴ However, both directors significantly reduce the emphasis on female bodily displays and focus instead on the class-identifying object, the bicycle.



Figure 2. In De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani) accepts his work assignment underneath a poster of Gale Storm in an evening gown advertising the American film *Forever Yours* (1945). Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In general, the plots of Camerini's films question the prewar status quo of the property-conscious bourgeoisie. In the political climate of 1930s Italy, this criticism was well received in part because it was tied to the regime's autarkic policies under League of Nations-imposed economic sanctions after Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia. By the late 1930s, there were restrictions on foreign goods in Italy, including luxury items favored by the leisure classes. Such goods had a negative political connotation in Camerini's films, including *Signor Max*, in which the affectations of the aristocracy are critiqued through the use of foreign words, products, and mannerisms. Donna Paola's friends play bridge, drink whiskey, travel extensively, and inhabit extranational locations, such as the Grand Hotel, a train, and a luxury liner. These class-status objects and behavior patterns are juxtaposed with what Gianni as a working-class newspaper vendor is supposed to desire.

In *The Bicycle Thief*, there is a shortage not only of luxury goods but also of basic necessities. In Reconstruction Italy, the *borsa nera* (black market) was an important source of all goods, including basics. The black market thus became a running motif in Italian films of the early postwar period, including Alberto Lattuada's *Il bandito*, Gennaro Righelli's *Abasso la ricchezza* (*Peddlin' in Society*, 1946), and Camerini's drama *Molti sogni per le strade* (*Woman Trouble*, 1948).



Figure 3. Both Camerini and De Sica reduce the emphasis on female bodily displays and focus instead on the class-identifying object, the bicycle. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Camerini even directed a postwar black-market drama, *The Angel and the Devil*, based on a story by Zavattini.

In De Sica's *Shoeshine*, and particularly in *The Bicycle Thief*, organized crime and the black market replace the class-conscious and property-owning bourgeoisie seen in Camerini's comedies. In *The Bicycle Thief*, the black market's new role as status quo is revealed by its relationship to the police. In Camerini's comedies, by contrast, the police reestablish property and class relationships disrupted by the theft of the class-identifying object, as in *Men—What Rascals!*, in which Bruno is arrested after crashing his boss's car. The police are also societal guarantors in De Sica's *The Children Are Watching Us*, when they reestablish family order by rescuing Prico after his mother abandons him.

A prerequisite for a black market is police acceptance of illegality. In *The Bicycle Thief*, the black market's position as the protected status quo can be inferred from the police commissioner's indifference to Antonio's report and during the scene at the Piazza Vittorio market, where Antonio and his friends search for the bicycle amid aisles of spare parts of dubious origin. When Antonio finally finds the thief in the Via Panico neighborhood, a mob forms, led by a figure wearing classic Mafia-style dark glasses and talking in a Southern accent. Antonio's son,

Bruno, locates a policeman, but he only seconds the neighborhood threats rather than arresting the thief. This encounter destroys Antonio's moral compass.¹⁵ In desperation, he decides to copy the black-market model; however, he fails because he lacks the black market's organizational skills and community protection.¹⁶

Another example of Camerini's influence is the portrayal of proletarian political organizations in De Sica's movies. Camerini's *Signor Max* features De Sica as Gianni, a newspaper vendor who impersonates a rich playboy to attract a wealthy love interest, Lady Paola. The film depicts the fascist Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND)—working-class, adult versions of fascist youth groups such as the *balilla* and *giovani italiane*, which promoted the autarkic program of the regime. In *Signor Max*, an OND chorus of fresh-faced, uniformed bus drivers sing Giuseppe Verdi's fatalistic slavery lament *Va' pensiero*, thereby underscoring an acceptance of class division. Lady Paola's servant, Lauretta, is attracted to Gianni's OND community and quits her job, rejecting the model of female emancipation through work outside the family. However, rather than promoting traditional family values, a mendacious OND corporate model replaces the façade of the leisure-class model. The root of that mendacity is that Gianni is not even an official member of the OND chorus, which is limited to public transportation workers like his uncle. Gianni's coworkers lie and break the rules for him at the newspaper stand and train station. Gianni's uncle also lies about the stability of Gianni's character to Lauretta.

The Bicycle Thief continues to depict proletarian unions and political institutions along the lines established in *Signor Max*. Antonio searches for his friend Baiocco in a *casa del popolo* basement meeting hall, where the local cell of the Communist Party holds a meeting. A bespectacled Gramsci-like figure gives the communist interpretation of the unemployment situation in terms of the necessity for public-works projects through the Ministry of Labor. His audience is the same intent, male, working-age group that earlier stormed the placement office and perhaps attended the Party rally where the police geared up for crowd control. Antonio interrupts the meeting but the communists, like the police, tell him to be quiet and leave. Antonio's friend is on the other side of the hall rehearsing the popular song *Se mi volesse bene veramente* (If she really loved me) for a vaudeville stage show. Thus, the earnest OND chorus from Camerini's *Signor Max* is replaced by mistimed vaudevillians whose female dancers are twirled like puppets by an incompetent singer. If the Party really loved Antonio, it would offer him more help as their song promises. Instead, the communists and the vaudeville troupe argue about who has the right to use the stage, leaving the impression that, like the vaudeville troupe, the communist cell is only interested in putting on a show.¹⁷ Antonio's garbage-men friends (led by Baiocco) help him search for his bicycle. However, their honest approach, to report the serial number to the police, is naive.¹⁸ The successful worker organization in *The Bicycle Thief* is found in the black-market neighborhood, which, like the OND in *Signor Max*, is willing to lie for its comrade and to collude with the police to intimidate Antonio. As in *Signor Max*, the strength of proletarian unions and political groups is not found in their values of collective justice and worker solidarity but in their favor-mongering willingness to evade or subvert the enforcement of legality.

In Camerini's films that star De Sica, the Roman Catholic Church as an institution is largely absent.¹⁹ There is a Catholic subtext in *I'll Give a Million* whereby poverty is presented as a virtue that contrasts sharply with the affectations of the bourgeoisie. In Camerini's films, De Sica's dashing hero usually lives on the fringes of respectable society, eager for sexual adventure, his parents absent or avoided. The redemption and forgiveness that resolve the misunderstandings separating the young lovers reiterate fascist regime and Church-ordained dogma on family stability. The resolution of every Camerini comedy is the creation of a stable pair.

Similarly, De Sica's early efforts as a director, in films such as *The Children Are Watching Us* and *Doctor, Beware*, also champion the goal of a solid family unit. In *The Bicycle Thief*, Antonio Ricci's role as breadwinner echoes Wilhelm Reich's identification of the nuclear family unit and its patriarchal structure as a microcosm of the superstructure of fascist society.²⁰ However, the black-market scenes in that film are based on an amoral familial model. This is not a holdover from the fascist regime's family-centered social legislation. After the suffering of the war, the family simply was one of the few universally accepted and viable institutions in Italian life.²¹

In contrast to Camerini, in his early films De Sica continued to portray the Church as an institutional guarantor of familial stability. In *The Children Are Watching Us*, the priests who run the orphanage for the abandoned boy, Prico, are rare, stable characters. And in De Sica's *La porta del cielo* (*The Gate of Heaven*, 1944, 1946), a train of sick and penitent pilgrims travel to the shrine of Loreto to implore the Virgin for forgiveness and healing.

The recursion to Catholicism in the neorealist period was a reaction to the failure of the D'Annunzian and fascist culture to ingrain nationalist myths into the Italian psyche. There is also an *Azione Cattolica* undertone concurrent with the Vatican shift from Concordat politics to a tepid antifascism after the Allied invasion in 1943.²² However, in contrast to *The Children Are Watching Us* or *The Gate of Heaven*, in *The Bicycle Thief* Catholic prestige is not institutional. De Sica's themes of Catholic solidarity and brotherhood in poverty mark a return to the interpersonal settings of Camerini's films as demonstrated in the bourgeois charity sequence in *The Bicycle Thief*. After unsuccessfully pursuing the thief for a second time, Antonio accosts, attempts to bribe, and finally threatens the beggar at a church where the needy attend a service before receiving a ration of pasta and potatoes. Despite the church setting, this charity operation is run by a lay order, an indirect reference to the Christian Democrats' victory in Italy's first postwar election, in 1948.²³ A lawyer shaves the beggar as an act of penance. A man in bourgeois coat and tie, not a priest, reads a liturgy on spiritual serenity. When the film was released, the Catholic press objected to the cynical repetition of Don Luigi Moresco's "Mass of the Poor" by a congregation hungry for material rather than spiritual reassurance.²⁴

André Bazin refers to several anticlerical elements in *The Bicycle Thief*, including Bruno's urination scene and the sequence in which the crowd/congregation is locked inside the church.²⁵ Nonetheless, Franco Fortini was correct to recognize a Catholic undertone.²⁶ For instance, the policeman's search of the thief's

room reveals his miserable existence, and an embarrassed Antonio discovers that the man who stole his bicycle appears to be an epileptic struggling to earn a living. Whether motivated by fear or grace, Antonio heeds the policeman's warning about the penalty for calumny and decides not to press charges. Antonio is repaid when he steals a bicycle and is caught and beaten by an angry crowd. The bicycle's owner compassionately looks at Antonio's son, Bruno, and decides not to press charges. One of Antonio's captors admonishes him in the last line of the film, "*Può ringraziare Dio*" (You can thank God). Antonio's receipt of mercy may be interpreted as a demonstration of worker solidarity that once given was justly returned. However, the brand name of the bicycle, *fides*, meaning faith or trust, points to a Catholic reading.²⁷ Antonio, the common man, survivor of the trials and shortages of the war, searches for faith in Reconstruction Rome. After finally finding work after a two-year wait, Antonio dreams of prosperity. In the restaurant, he drunkenly calculates the economics of happiness in terms of wages, overtime, and a family allowance. One day on the job and a weekend in Rome, however, teach the supremacy of the black-market model. Divine Providence imparts an additional lesson in humility, redemption, shame, and forgiveness.

Italian films before the war relied on the popular tradition of the hero as defender of the weak. The muscleman Maciste rescues Cabiria in Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914, rereleased in 1931). Italian army war heroes and historically removed costume-drama heroes figured prominently in Goffredo Alessandrini's *Scipione l'africano* (*The Defeat of Hannibal*, 1937) and in Roberto Rossellini's *Un pilota ritorna* (*A Pilot Returns*, 1942). In Rossellini's *L'uomo dalla croce* (*Man of the Cross*, 1943) and *Open City*, the role of the hero is transplanted to good-hearted priests and commoners, a model already developed in Alessandro Blasetti's *1860* (1933), with a debt to the self-sacrificing character of Fra' Cristoforo from Alessandro Manzoni's 1827 Catholic novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*).

De Sica acted in some twenty-eight feature films between 1932 and 1939 and stated that he had been typecast in the prewar romantic comedies as a caricature of the debonair *bello dannunziano*, the D'Annunzian handsome man.²⁸ This hero rescues love interests or orphaned girls as in Camerini's comedies and comes from the tradition of the strong man who defends the weak and poor. In *Doctor, Beware*, for example, the doctor, played by De Sica, surprises Teresa as she plays a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. The doctor claims he once played Ursus, the good giant from *Quo vadis*, who is the source for the strongman character Maciste in Pastrone's *Cabiria*. Thus, the Camerinian hero traded Maciste's muscles for a bourgeois pedigree in the professional class.

In subsequent directorial efforts, De Sica steadily turned away from the Maciste/*bello dannunziano* heroic model. His early films feature nuns, as in *Un Garibaldino in convento* (*A Garibaldian in the Convent*, 1941); schoolgirls, in *Maddalena*; and female orphans, in *Doctor, Beware*. These films were part of the schoolgirl comedy genre, in which a gender shift occurs as heroes become heroines and hegemonic positioning is challenged.²⁹

In De Sica's neorealist period, the Maciste/*bello dannunziano* hero is completely absent. Instead, the protagonists are boys, such as the defenseless Prico in



Figure 4. In *The Bicycle Thief*, Bruno (Enzio Staiola), the only employed member of the Ricci family, assumes the heroic role by rescuing his father from both the black market and vigilante mobs. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The Children Are Watching Us. This thread continues in the postwar *Shoeshine* and especially in *The Bicycle Thief*, in which Bruno, the only employed member of his family, assumes the heroic role by rescuing his father from both the black market and vigilante mobs.³⁰

Such dependence on innocent characters and on children in particular seems to be a universal theme in Italian film that persists to this day. *Cabiria* centers on the rescue of a lost girl, and Blasetti's *1860* and *Vecchia guardia* (*Old Guard*, 1935) focus on the tragic death of young boys. Even Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1942) appeals for sympathy for the damned lovers with references to children.

Frank P. Tomasulo refers to a melodramatic undercurrent in *The Bicycle Thief* whereby the Ricci family struggles against a hostile world to achieve economic security.³¹ If *The Bicycle Thief* is a melodrama, this raises the question, then, Who is the villain? All factions of Italian society treat Antonio disrespectfully: the party, Church, police, and Mafia. The Italian State is a chief candidate for villain, as the collective expression of society.

There is also an antistatist current in Camerini's comedies. In fact, his *Il cappello a tre punte* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*, 1935) incurred the wrath of fascist censors. Set in Naples in the 1600s, the film focuses on Governor Teofilo, who decides to coerce favors from Carmela, a peasant girl, by imprisoning her husband, Luca. Mussolini wanted to prohibit the release of the film, but after the

intervention of Minister Alessandro Pavolini and severe cuts, the film was released in a seventy-seven-minute version.³²

In his subsequent films, *I'll Give a Million* and *Signor Max*, Camerini shifted his criticism away from the autocratic abuse of power to the leisure classes, who were targeted in the opening sequences of *Men—What Rascals!* The question of censorship was, of course, a sensitive one under the fascist regime. Fascist-era films about delinquency, public dysfunction, and poverty tended to be set abroad as a means of reducing the threat of censorship.³³ The class conflicts and social criticism in *I'll Give a Million*, for example, occur safely in France. By not attacking the Italian government or nation directly and choosing a target, such as the bourgeoisie, which had been an antagonist of the early radical days of fascism, Camerini reveals the arrogance of power without directly referring to Mussolini's regime. An example is the depiction in *Men—What Rascals!* of the Commendatore, who finds Bruno a job at the Fiera di Milano (Milan Exhibition) because of his sexual interest in Mariuccia.

Like Camerini, De Sica criticized extra-government functionaries, such as the Giovanni Gentile-like high-school teacher in *Maddalena* and the bankers in *Doctor, Beware* and *The Children Are Watching Us*. Also like Camerini, by targeting extra-government officials, De Sica revealed the abuses of a bureaucratic mentality without risking state censorship.

The Bicycle Thief continues this negative portrayal of functionaries. Antonio struggles with the inefficiency of the state employment office in order to find work. When his bicycle is stolen, Antonio confronts the state's inability to control crime. As he exits the police station, he sees stacks of unread reports gathering dust on the shelves, repeating the images of the stacks of bed linen and rows of bicycles at the pawnshop.³⁴ There are also several depictions of the public infrastructure as inefficient: long bus lines, no running water, and unemployment with myopic functionaries crouching over the entries in their casebooks at the pawnbroker's and the job center. Leftists could see the protagonist's struggle to claim his right to work in *The Bicycle Thief* as a criticism of the inefficiency and waste of the capitalist market system, which rewards the hoarding of goods and denies necessities to the lower classes. The images of shortages are an indictment of the Italian state, which was reluctant to allocate Marshall Fund resources for public infrastructures after the war in favor of an anti-inflationary monetary policy. However, because of Mussolini's autarkic economic policies, the fascist regime was also identified with state intervention. The tight monetary policy of Luigi Einaudi's postwar Christian Democrats was, in part, a break with the past.³⁵ Thus, De Sica condemns both the Italian state's autarkic past and the liberal policies of the current regime, a political stance Tomasulo identifies as a "social democratic modification of high capitalism."³⁶

Given the fascist regime's ideology, one would expect to find references to sports and sports virtue in the De Sica/Camerini comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. Spectator sports were immensely important in Mussolini's regime. With a world-champion heavyweight boxer (Primo Carnera) and two World Cup football victories in 1934 and 1938, De Sica trumpeted the return of the ancient athletic virtues of the Italian people and built stadiums, including the one featured in the final

sequences of *The Bicycle Thief*. Camerini's films also include representations of sports: a parade of bicycle racers at the opening of *I'll Give a Million*, the aristocratic fascination with bridge and horseback riding in *Signor Max*, and a spoof of the sickly physical-education instructor in De Sica's *Maddalena*.

The Bicycle Thief also portrays sports as a vital cultural phenomenon.³⁷ When the drunken Antonio visits the Santona, the soundtrack breaks into the chirping-bird network signature of the RAI radio broadcast of Sunday's football game, Modena versus Roma. Sunday is set aside for going to the stadium as well as to church. While wandering the streets, Antonio and Bruno see a truckload of exuberant Modena supporters anticipating the match of the day. In the immediate postwar period, bicycle racing, along with football, were among the most popular spectator sports in Italy. *The Bicycle Thief* even includes a brief shot of a group of bicycle racers during the final theft sequence. Desperate for a bicycle, Antonio endures the sight of so many bicycles being used for leisure as a final blow to his conscience.

Bicycling and the Bartoli-Coppi racing rivalry become linked to Italian national pride in a period of general postwar depression and misery. Because of his background and personality, Gino Bartali came to represent the Christian Democrats (DC), while Fausto Coppi became identified with the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Bicycle racing gained political significance after the 1948 assassination attempt on Italian Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti. On the same weekend, Bartali won the Tour de France and reduced political tensions by dedicating his victory to a recovering Togliatti.

Conclusion. The Perception and Reputation of a Neorealist Tradition.

Despite the prestige of neorealism, the Italian cinema returned to productions of peplum epics, melodramas, historical dramas, and comedies after the war.³⁸ Beginning with *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1951), some film critics began to discount De Sica's postwar films by implying that he had lost his touch.³⁹ De Sica was criticized for not continuing the socially progressive tone of *Shoeshine*, *The Bicycle Thief*, and *Umberto D* (1952).⁴⁰ Critics questioned the political implications of De Sica's transition from matinee idol in the 1930s to postwar neorealist legend, accusing him of being a technician of the fascist-era cinema whose sentimentalism contributed to the decline of the neorealist style.⁴¹ De Sica has even been characterized as a "minor director," perhaps because the De Sica/Zavattini collaborations of later years did not match the impact of *The Bicycle Thief*.⁴² Such readings of De Sica's career seem confirmed by his postwar acting career, which included several comedies directed by Camerini: *La bella mugnaia* (*The Miller's Beautiful Wife*, 1955), a remake of *The Three-Cornered Hat*, *Vacanze a Ischia* (*Holiday Island*, 1957), and *Io non vedo tu non parli lui non sente* (*I Don't See You Don't Speak He Doesn't Hear*, 1971).

Such criticism does not adequately recognize De Sica's debt to Camerini's films of the 1930s. Camerini's films, like De Sica's efforts in the neorealist style, were part of a current of realism or *verismo* that appeared as a reaction to the D'Annunzian rhetoric that dominated Italian culture early in the century and was associated with centuries-old mimetic traditions in Italian artistic expression. The

plots of Camerini's comedies such as *Men—What Rascals!*, featuring the problems of working-class protagonists, questioned hegemonic positioning and provided a preparatory platform for De Sica's work in the neorealist style. In addition, Camerini was identified with a genre, the romantic comedy, which has noted iconoclastic traits in its reversal of sexual power roles. De Sica continued this theme in his schoolgirl comedies, *Maddalena* and *Doctor, Beware*.

The practical filmmaking practices Camerini favored became neorealist commonplaces, such as a preference for inexperienced actors and on-location shooting. Perhaps the reason for Camerini's relative obscurity is that most of his films with De Sica—that is, the classical comedies, complete with happy endings—affirm the prewar or postwar societal status quo. In contrast, the De Sica/Zavattini collaborations of the neorealist period broke with the optimism of Camerini-style comedies and featured the tragic plot elements and ambiguous endings that would become a trademark of the Italian art film.

Notes

1. Carlo Celli, "Italian Neorealism's Wartime Legacy: Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (*Open City* [1945]) and *L'uomo dalla croce* (*Man of the Cross* [1943])," *Romance Languages Annual* 10 (1999): 225–28.
2. Since Cesare Zavattini was the screenwriter of the great majority of De Sica's films, De Sica's films should be thought of as a collaboration rather than the efforts of an isolated *auteur*.
3. Francesco Savio, "Vittorio De Sica," in Tullio Kezich, ed., *Cinecittà anni trenta: parlano 116 protagonisti del secondo cinema italiano (1930–1943)* (*Cinecittà in the 1930s: 116 Protagonists of the Second Italian Cinema Speak*) (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), 484–85; my translation.
4. Paolo Nuzzi and O. Iemma, *De Sica e Zavattini Parliamo tanto di noi* (De Sica and Zavattini: Let's Talk about Us) (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1997), 34; my translation.
5. Mario Camerini, "Comment realise-t-on un film" (How to Make a Film), in Alberto Farassino, ed., *Mario Camerini* (Locarno: Editions Yellow Now, 1992), 159; originally in *Il dramma* 9, September 9, 1933, 170, and *La gazzetta del popolo*, May 12, 1933.
6. Ibid., 160. Camerini admits that such theories are of little use in practice.
7. Savio, "Mario Camerini," in Kezich, *Cinecittà*, 225.
8. Steven Ricci, "Camerini et Hollywood: Questions d'identité (nationale)" (Camerini and Hollywood: Questions of [National] Identity), in Alberto Farassino, ed., *Mario Camerini*, trans. Jacqueline Fumagalli (Locarno: Editions Yellow Now, 1992), 37.
9. Camerini's *Darò un milione* (1935) became Walter Lang's *I'll Give a Million* (1938), and *Batticuore* (1939) became Sam Woods's *Heartbeat* (1946). Camerini's relations with Hollywood continued after the war when he directed Kirk Douglas in *Ulysses* (1954) and wrote the screenplay for *War and Peace* (1956, King Vidor). Eugene Levy remade Camerini's *Crimen* (1960) as *Criminals* (1992).
10. Camerini's story about the on-location shooting of *Men—What Rascals!* appears in Savio, "Mario Camerini," 209.
11. De Sica's first film as director, *Rose scarlatte* (*Scarlet Rose*, 1940), was codirected with Peppino Amato and therefore receives less attention in this article.
12. P. Adams Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 93.

13. Frank P. Tomasulo, "The Bicycle Thief: A Re-Reading," *Cinema Journal* 21, no. 2 (spring 1982): 13.
14. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 39.
15. Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 69.
16. Organized crime during fascist times has been largely ignored as a theme in the cinema. Mussolini's regime waged a temporarily successful attack on the Sicilian Mafia by sending the prefect Cesare Mori to Sicily to stun the Mafia into submission by enacting his motto of being "more *mafioso* than the *mafiosi*."
17. Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema*, 2.
18. Sitney notes this and other instances in which the protagonist of *The Bicycle Thief*, Antonio Ricci, lacks a sense of pragmatism. *Ibid.*, 94.
19. Camerini directed a film version of Alessandro Manzoni's Catholic novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1941), but Camerini has claimed that he made it because of a contractual obligation rather than any ideological mission on his part. When presented with the choice of making an air force film for Minister Pavolini or a film version of the classic Italian novel, Camerini chose the latter. Savio, "Mario Camerini," 221.
20. Tomasulo, "The Bicycle Thief: A Re-Reading," 8. See also Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, ed. Mary Higgins and C. M. Raphael, trans. V. R. Carfagno (London: Souvenir, 1972). Vincent Rocchio concludes his analysis of *The Bicycle Thief* on a similar note: "The radical potential of *Bicycle Thieves* is swallowed up in a fantasy where the collective is the problem, not the solution, and the answer is the restoration of patriarchy." Rocchio, *Cinema of Anxiety: A Psychoanalysis of Italian Neorealism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 77.
21. Cecilia Dau Novelli, "La famiglia come soggetto della ricostruzione sociale (1942–1949)" (The Family as Subject of Social Reconstruction), in G. De Rosa, ed., *Cattolici, chiesa, resistenza* (Catholics, the Church, and the Resistance) (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), 469–90.
22. This political shift may be viewed in Romolo Marcellini's documentary *Pastor Angelicus* (1942) as the Vatican attempted to reposition the image of Pope Pius XII for a post-fascist world.
23. Tomasulo, "The Bicycle Thief: A Re-Reading," 12.
24. Nuzzi, *De Sica e Zavattini Parliamo tanto di noi*, 119. The columns by Piero Regnoli appeared in *L'avvenire d'Italia* and *L'osservatore romano* under the pen name Vice. The excerpt from the film is "Io voglio uscire da questo luogo santo sentendomi purificato nell'anima e rassenerato nello spirito" (I want to exit this holy place feeling purified in soul and reassured in spirit); my translation.
25. Tomasulo, "The Bicycle Thief: A Re-Reading," 11.
26. Franco Fortini, "Ladri di biciclette (1949)," in *Dieci inverni, 1947–1959: Contributi a un discorso socialista* (Ten Winters, 1947–1959: Contributions to a Socialist Discourse) (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1958), 128–31. Also Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema*, 96.
27. Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 61. Also Tomasulo, "The Bicycle Thief: A Re-Reading," 4, 11–12.
28. Franco Pecori, *De Sica* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1980), 21.
29. Jacqueline Reich, "Reading, Writing, and Rebellion: Collectivity, Specularity, and Sexuality in the Italian Schoolgirl Comedy, 1934–43," in Robin Pickering-Iazzi, ed., *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 220–51.

30. Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 75.
31. Tomasulo, "The Bicycle Thief: A Re-Reading," 9.
32. Fernaldo Di Giammateo, *Dizionario del cinema italiano* (Dictionary of Italian Cinema) (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1995), 62.
33. Valentina Ruffin, "La lingua del fascismo nel cinema (The Language of Fascism in the cinema)," in R. Renzi, G. L. Farinelli, and N. Mazzanti, eds., *Il cinema dei dittatori Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler* (The Cinema of the Dictators Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler) (Rome: Grafis, 1992), 118.
34. Bondanella, *Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present*, 60.
35. Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 252.
36. Tomasulo, "The Bicycle Thief: A Re-Reading," 13.
37. Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 70. Also Franco La Polla, "La città e lo spazio" (The City and Space), *Bianco e nero* 36 (September–December 1975): 69.
38. A look at the highest-earning Italian films from 1946 to 1955 reveals the continuity in prewar and postwar Italian film production. See Gianfranco Casadio, *Adultere, Fedifraghe, innocenti: La donna del "neorealismo popolare" nel cinema italiano degli anni cinquanta* (Adulteresses, the Faithless, and Innocents: The Woman in "Popular Neorealism" in Italian Cinema of the 1950s) (Ravenna: Longo, 1990), 24–27.
39. Guido Aristarco saw a decline in the quality of De Sica's film production after *Umberto D.* (1952). Aristarco, "Zavattini e l'itinerario di Vittorio De Sica" (Zavattini and the De Sica Itinerary), *Cinema nuovo* 23, no. 232 (November–December 1974): 443–45.
40. A. Banti, "Neo-realismo nel cinema italiano" (Neorealism in the Italian Cinema), *Paragone* 1, no. 8 (August 1950): 22–32.
41. Guido Aristarco, "Ladri di biciclette" (*The Bicycle Thief*), *Cinema* n.s., no. 7 (January 30, 1949): 220–22.
42. David Thomson, "De Sica, Vittorio," in *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: Morrow, 1980), 133–35.