The Art of *Shoeshine*

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In this essay Bert Cardullo surveys the critical response to Shoeshine *and then develops a context for the delinquency of its two protagonists in the social circumstance of orphaned children in post–World War II Italian society. He comments on the effects achieved by shooting the last scene in the studio, but De Sica has his own explanation for its being studio-photographed: he had intended to shoot the scene on location, but the producer refused to wait for good weather (see De Sica, 39–40 above). In his analysis of the last scene Cardullo's description of the boys as 'a once beautiful matched pair' has the effect of turning them into figures more porcelain-like than human, yet De Sica himself has said that he did seek to make the boys aesthetically pleasing (De Sica, 24 above).*

Both Monique Fong (whom Cardullo quotes) and Cardullo use the term small-angle lens, *but there is really no such thing. A* long *lens produces a smaller angle than does a* wide-angle *lens. However, of the two lenses, the wide-angle is more likely to produce a soft image with deep focus. In fact, a careful viewing of* Shoeshine *will reveal many shots of exceptionally large depth-of-field. There are a number of* soft-focus *shots in the film, which are achieved by employing standard soft-focus photography methods – either using an unfocused lens, or placing a piece of sheer silk in front of the lens, or using defracted lights.*

It is tempting to read De Sica's *Sciuscià / Shoeshine* (1946) as an indictment of post–World War II Italian society. Pierre Leprohon writes that

Bert Cardullo, 'The Art of *Shoeshine*,' *New Orleans Review* 11:2 (1984), 74–8. Reprinted in Bert Cardullo, *Indelible Images: New Perspectives on Classic Films* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), 91–101

'the theme of *Sciuscià* is the infinitely tragic clash between childhood innocence and adult injustice' (Leprohon, 101). Roy Armes states that

> The blame in the film rests squarely on the shoulders of the adults whose actions are indeed often mean and spiteful. Giuseppe's brother callously involves [the boys] in crime, while the police use underhand methods to make Pasquale confess [the brother's name] by pretending to beat Giuseppe (we see what is really happening in the next room: a policeman is beating a sack while a boy shrieks convincingly). The lawyers are cheaply opportunistic, suggesting that Giuseppe put all the blame on his friend, and the prison officials act foolishly and split up the pair (so that Giuseppe is left a prey to bad influences) and then punish Pasquale for fighting a bully. (Armes, 148)

Peter Bondanella echoes Leprohon and Armes when he says that in *Shoeshine* 'De Sica dramatizes the tragedy of childish innocence corrupted by the adult world ... [Pasquale and Giuseppe's] friendship is gradually destroyed by the social injustice usually associated with the adult world and authority figures' (Bondanella, 53). Both Bondanella and Leprohon describe a 'tragic' conflict between childhood innocence and adult injustice, but by pitting victims against villains in this way, they are really suggesting that the film is a melodrama.

Shoeshine, however, is much more than the story of two boys whose friendship is destroyed at the hands of a villainous and insensate social system. Society may be ultimately responsible for the death of Giuseppe and the destruction of his and Pasquale's friendship, but De Sica does not portray it as villainous, as consciously or indifferently evil and exploitative. As Monique Fong has written,

> *Shoeshine* is neither an accusation nor a propaganda work ... Great skill is shown in putting the single moral-bearing sentence of the story – 'If these children have become what they are, it is because we have failed to keep them what they are supposed to be' – into the mouth of the corrupt lawyer, a man to whom lying is a profession and whom we saw, just a moment earlier, falsely accusing Pasquale in order to save his own client. (Fong, 17–18)

Italian society is as much a victim as Giuseppe and Pasquale in *Shoeshine*, and this is perhaps what James Agee had in mind when he wrote that *Shoeshine* 'is ... the rarest thing in contemporary art – a true tragedy. This tragedy is cross-lighted by pathos, by the youthfulness and

innocence of the heroes, ... but it is stern, unmistakable tragedy as well' (Agee, 279). The real tragic conflict is not between the two boys and society: it is to be found in a society divided against itself; the tragedy of post–World War II Italian society is reflected in the pathetic story of Giuseppe and Pasquale. We are not meant to focus on the misfortune of the boys apart from the world in which they live; the point of the film is that their misfortune derives directly from this world. De Sica is interested as much in having us examine and question (not blame) the society that destroyed the boys' friendship as in having us pity Giuseppe and Pasquale. He is thus a typical neorealist filmmaker, according to Roy Armes:

> Deep concern with humanity is common to ... all [neorealist filmmakers] but there is no attempt to probe beneath the surface into the mind of the individual, so that concepts like *Angst* or absurdity have no place in neo-realist art, and alienation is defined purely in social terms. In place of the traditional cinematic concern with the complexities of the individual psyche comes a desire to probe the basically human, to undertake an investigation into man within his social and economic context. (Armes, 186)

No critics to my knowledge have investigated the tragic role that society plays in *Shoeshine*; I would like to do so in the following pages.

Italy was of course in a state of political and economic turmoil after World War II. Many of its inhabitants, especially those in large cities like Rome, where *Shoeshine* takes place, were finding it difficult to survive, since there was a shortage of food and clothing. A black market arose, trading in goods stolen or bought from the American occupation forces. Giuseppe and Pasquale's problems begin when they agree to sell stolen American army blankets to a fortuneteller, as part of a plan by Giuseppe's brother and his gang to rob the fortuneteller's apartment. The boys know nothing of the planned robbery. They use the 3,000 lire that they are paid for the blankets to buy a horse; soon afterwards they are arrested.

Roy Armes says that 'Giuseppe's brother callously involves [the boys] in crime' (Armes, 148). This statement fails to take into account the environment that produces the crime. Giuseppe's brother may be a thief, but he is one in a society where there is little or no work: he must survive, so he steals. He involves his brother in his crime and pays him well. Giuseppe's brother is callous only when seen from the point of

view of someone who has never been in his situation; *he* thinks that he is doing his younger brother a favor. Petty crime is a way of life for them both, and the older brother's justification for robbing a fortune-teller is probably that he is robbing the equivalent of a thief: a woman who steals people's money legally by telling their fortunes. Giuseppe's brother is not a villain. Giuseppe turns on Pasquale when his friend names the brother as one of the thieves to prison officials; his loyalty to his brother – to the person who tried to do him a favor, not to a villain who callously involved him in a crime – leads eventually to his death. Ironically, in attempting to help Giuseppe to survive, the brother has helped to get him killed, and has gone to jail himself. Although Giuseppe's brother is not a major character in *Shoeshine*, he is part of the society whose tragedy De Sica is depicting.

Although it is true, as Roy Armes writes, that 'the police use underhand methods to make Pasquale confess by pretending to beat Giuseppe,' it is equally true that they use such methods because they want to capture the gang that robbed the fortuneteller's apartment (Armes, 148). Like Giuseppe's brother, the police are not villains. They want to stop the black-marketeering that is threatening an already unstable economy, and they use whatever means they can to do so. The police do not, in Armes's words, 'act foolishly and split up [Giuseppe and Pasquale]' (Armes, 148); the pair is split up by chance in the assigning of groups of boys to cells. The prison in which the police house the boys is not by design 'cruel, crowded, wretched, and dirty,' as Monique Fong believes (Fong, 15). It is crowded because many of the boys of Rome have turned to petty crime in order to survive; wretched and dirty because it is so crowded and because adequate funds do not exist to provide for the boys; and cruel because the prison staff is small and overworked, and therefore prone to solve problems by force instead of by disputation. The prison was not even built as one: it was formerly a convent and has been taken over, presumably because of a shortage of space in other prisons.

The deception that the police work on Pasquale is not without its consequences: he and Giuseppe themselves learn deception. In revenge for Pasquale's betrayal of his brother, Giuseppe, along with several other boys, plants a file in his cell; it is found, and Pasquale is severely whipped by the guards. Later in court, Giuseppe is forced by his lawyer to put all the blame for the fortuneteller incident on the older, supposedly craftier Pasquale. (Armes calls the lawyer 'cheaply opportunistic' [Armes,148]; he is not: he is unscrupulous in the defense

of his client, like many lawyers.) Pasquale, in revenge for Giuseppe's rejection of him and escape from jail with his new friend Arcangeli, tells the police where to find the two. Giuseppe plans to sell the horse that he and Pasquale had bought and to live off the money with Arcangeli. The police find them at the stable, Arcangeli flees, and Giuseppe is killed in a fall from a bridge. He slips trying to avoid the angry Pasquale, who is poised to strike him.

Tragically, the prison officials, in 'protecting' society from Giuseppe and Pasquale, have brutalized the boys, have robbed them of the very emotion and the very virtue necessary for the survival of humane society: love and trust. Society, in the name of law and order, has destroyed what it should promote: bonding, male and female. Giuseppe is torn not only from Pasquale when he goes to jail, but also from the mysterious little girl Nana, who had been following him through the streets of Rome and is inconsolable in his absence. Once the boys are placed in separate cells, Pasquale can give his love and trust only to the tubercular Raffaele, who himself is ostracized by the other prisoners and who is trampled to death during a fire; and Giuseppe can give his love and trust only to the scoundrel Arcangeli, who leaves him on the bridge at the end the moment he sees Pasquale.

Shoeshine does not simply portray brutality against children, for which society will have to pay no particular price and for which it is simply 'evil.' The film portrays society's brutality against *itself*, in the person of its future: its children. What makes *Shoeshine* so poignant is that we see more than the love between Giuseppe and Pasquale destroyed: we see a love destroyed that could only have grown and spread to their other relationships as they grew older; a love that meant to solidify itself through the purchase of the horse and take flight, to announce itself triumphantly throughout Rome and its environs.

The very title of this film is a clue to its intentions. *Shoeshine* is the pathetic story of Giuseppe and Pasquale, but, as I have been maintaining, that is not all. The tragedy of post–World War II Italy is *reflected* in their pathetic story. Even as the American GIs in the film see the image of their own security and prosperity in their shined shoes, so too does Italian society find the image of its own disarray and poverty in the story of these beautifully paired boys. *Shoeshine* is an illumination of reality, a 'shining' of reality's 'shoes,' if you will, of the basic problems facing a defeated nation in the wake of war: for the ruled, how to survive amidst rampant poverty at the same time one does not break the

law; for the rulers, how to enforce the law without sacrificing one's own humanity or that of the lawbreakers.

Early in the film we see the shoeshine boys at work, kneeling at the feet of the GIs, who barely take notice of them except to pay. At the end we look over the shoulder of the prison guard at the screaming Pasquale in the river bed: he is on his knees, next to the dead Giuseppe. De Sica holds this shot for a long time; it is the final one. Pasquale and Giuseppe are still the shoeshine boys, and down at them, as if they were shining his shoes, looks the prison guard, a representative of society. He is confronted with the offspring of war-torn Italy, of his own work: a once beautifully matched pair, now driven apart; the kind of pair without which Italy will not be able to move forward.

Monique Fong remarks on the cinematography of *Shoeshine*:

> It would seem that [the cinematography] might best have been painstakingly realistic, with sharp outline and great depth of field. But on the contrary, the use of a small-angle lens gives soft effects that help to retain the poetic character of the picture and, by contrast, enhance the realistic performances of the actors. (Fong, 25)

Just as the title itself, *Sciuscià*, corrupts or 'blurs' the Italian word for shoeshine, the 'soft effects' of the cinematography blur reality slightly, especially in the last scene on the bridge, where mist also obscures the image (Fong, 15). Fong thinks that this technique, in addition to giving the film a general poetic character, 'surrounds the adventure with a halo, supplying a new element to serve the basic idea of the picture – the presentation of a realistic story seen through the eyes of children' (Fong, 25). I would alter this idea and take it one step further to say that the 'soft effects' suggest that the story is seen not only through the eyes of children, but also through those of the American occupation troops, the Italian government, the prison officials, and De Sica himself – eyes that, like those of children, do not comprehend fully what they see, do not have sufficient knowledge.[1]

The American GI who looks into his shined boots sees the image of his own victory and prosperity, but his image is tainted by the Italy that surrounds him – one that he has helped to destroy and whose rebuilding it is now his responsibility to oversee. The prison guard at the end of the film looks down on Pasquale and Giuseppe and may feel sorry for them, but how aware is he of society's, of his own, responsibility for their misfortune? De Sica directed the film, but he

does not propose any solutions to the social problem he presents. There are no clear villains, no easy answers, so De Sica softens the 'blow' of what we see at the same time that he discourages us from seeking answers to all our questions on the screen. We are in a position to contemplate this social tragedy far better than any character in the film; the audience *infers* the tragedy, while the group protagonist, society, plays it out. We are thus able to consider solutions to the problems that De Sica poses, or to consider the idea of abolishing war altogether. We are the ultimate recipients of De Sica's *Shoeshine*.

Author's Note

1 When writing about neorealism, critics most often follow André Bazin's lead and emphasize its use of nonprofessional actors, the documentary quality of its photography, its social content, or its political commitment. Bazin went so far as to call neorealism a cinema of 'fact' and 'reconstituted reportage' that rejected both traditional dramatic and cinematic conventions (André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971], II: 60, 77, 78, and *passim* [the first seven chapters – over half the book – treat neorealism]). However, as Peter Bondanella points out,

> Certainly the cinema neorealists turned to the pressing problems of the time – the war, the Resistance and Partisan struggle, unemployment, poverty, social injustice, and the like – but there was never a programmatic approach to these questions or any preconceived method of rendering them on celluloid ... In short, neorealism was not a 'movement' in the strictest sense of the term. The controlling fiction of neorealist films ... was that they dealt with actual problems, that they employed contemporary stories, and that they focused on believable characters taken most frequently from Italian daily life. But the greatest neorealist directors never forgot that the world they projected upon the silver screen was one produced by cinematic conventions rather than an ontological experience ... Thus, any discussion of Italian neorealism must be broad enough to encompass a wide diversity of cinematic styles, themes, and attitudes ... Directors we label today as neorealists were ... all united only by the common aspiration to view Italy without preconceptions and to develop a more honest, ethical, but no less poetic language. (Bondanella, 34–5)

De Sica himself stated that his work reflected 'reality transposed into the realm of poetry' (*Miracle in Milan* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1969], 4). And the last scene on the bridge in *Shoeshine* is an excellent example of this poetry: it was

shot inside a studio, and relies for its meaning and effect in large part on the manner in which it is filmed (a manner more easily controlled indoors than on location). Bondanella notes that the cinematography of the last scene continues the sense of confinement witnessed in 'a number of shots through cell windows [that] place [Pasquale and Giuseppe] in a tight, claustrophobic atmosphere and restrict their movement' (54). The boys are trapped in the foreground in the final scene on the bridge, since De Sica's small-angle lens does not photograph the image in deep focus in addition to not capturing it in sharp outline.

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