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De Sica's "Bicycle Thieves" and Italian Humanism

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IN THE postwar period the preëminence in serious films seems to have passed to the Italians. In fact it has become fashionable to observe that the mantle of realism has fallen on them from the French, as if the two schools were identical except for the difference in language. As a result the very special nature of modern Italian movie realism—which is that it is Italian first and realistic afterward—has been overlooked. In fact, a case could be made that it is not fundamentally realistic at all, that the naturalistic backgrounds against which the Italians photograph their stories are only a means to an end and quite possibly a means imposed by lack of capital for elaborate studio sets.

What, then, is the underlying philosophy or aesthetic theory that distinguishes their recent productions from those of other nations? It is not really hard to discover. Russian films, too, are usually set in the lower depths, and French films are frequently concerned with the passions of fairly primitive people. But you would not expect to find in a Russian, French, or German realistic film that broad humanitarian sympathy combined with gentle cynicism which Italians alone bear as their trademark. It is an old Italian recipe for living, buried under the garbage of Fascism for a quarter century but never really lost; the war, which scraped over the country like a rake, served to turn it up again. In a world still spinning from the blows of war there are few formulae more practical for day-to-day living, or for making films that a confused humanity will recognize as true.

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But precisely because it lacks absoluteness artistically, such an approach can easily result in diffuseness. It is true that, with this formula of general pity for suffering humanity without any special solution for its problems, Luigi Zampa made the beautiful and touching *Vivere in pace* (*To Live in Peace*). But Roberto Rossellini, after his pioneering successes with *Paisà* (*Paisan*) and *Roma città aperta* (*Open City*), forgot to add the salt of cynicism to the soup of sympathy when he came to make *Germania anno zero* and served up a tasteless dish. Yet now, by a more intelligent application and development of this same national recipe, the Neapolitan stage and screen actor-director, Vittorio De Sica, already world famous for his film about the precocious children of Rome, *Sciuscià* (*Shoe-Shine*), has succeeded, in *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*), in making what is generally recognized as the best film since the war.

This new Italian Renaissance has one thing in common with that of the sixteenth century which serves to set it off from the respective "realisms" of the French, the Russians, or the Germans: its stress on the role of the individual. The poor Italian lives as miserably as the poor of other countries, but his protest takes more individualistic forms. Rossellini's priest, Zampa's peasant and his civil servant, De Sica's proletarian, and Visconti's fisherman all go down fighting: but only the first, a public figure by nature of his calling, has allies, and even he follows his individual conscience and training rather than a group loyalty in sacrificing himself. Indeed, the two most political of these new films, Zampa's *Anni difficili* and Visconti's *La terra trema*, both present this private form of rebellion as the central weakness of the Italian social consciousness.

Ladri di biciclette is the story of a workman's search for his stolen bicycle without which he cannot make a living for himself and his family. To him it is a personal wrong he has suffered: to us, as we follow him through the streets of Rome, it gradually becomes apparent that he is the victim of a social system which forces

his fellows—and will eventually force him—to rob Peter to pay Paul. The story (very freely adapted by Cesare Zavattini from a novel of Luigi Bartolini) is told in such completely cinematographic terms that there has been a tendency to underestimate the plot, even to insist that there is no plot. How erroneous this is may be gleaned from a summary of the story:

After long waiting, an unemployed workman is offered a job as a billboard plasterer, for which he must have a bicycle. To get his bicycle out of hock his wife pawns their bed sheets. She stops to leave an offering with a holy woman who predicted the job, much to the husband's contempt. He rides triumphantly to work, next morning (to stirring music), through the workers' suburbs of Rome, with his sixish-year-old son on the handlebars. He leaves his son at the filling station where the child works. While he is clumsily plastering a billboard, his bicycle is snatched by a feckless youth. The chase in heavy traffic is vain. He reports the theft to a detective at police headquarters who gets angry at his insistence that something be done about it. The detective tells him thousands of bicycles are stolen every day, and rushes off to help quell a political riot. Sad, slow return home with his son in an overcrowded trolley car. Afraid to face his wife. He goes to a Communist party meeting, but when he tries to interrupt the orator to enlist the aid of the comrades, he is hushed out of the room. He gets a promise of help from a garbage-collector friend. Together with his son and two garbage collectors on duty, he starts the rounds of secondhand bicycle stands early in the morning. Everyone in Italy has a bicycle, and thousands are on sale in the streets. He challenges one dealer and calls a policeman, but his suspicion proves false. Near the city gates he spots the thief riding his bicycle, but the man stops only long enough to talk with an old beggar and then escapes again. Father and son pursue the beggar into a charity institution, where he refuses to talk. They follow him into a church where a service is being held at which the poor may give thanks for free haircuts and soup, and create a scandal by insisting on his telling them in midst of Mass where to find the thief. The beggar flees and escapes. They go to the wife's holy woman, who predicts that they will find the bicycle "soon or never." Outside, the father loses patience with his son and slaps him. The kid stages a sitdown. Father goes ahead, but comes running when someone falls into the

Tiber. It isn't the kid, but they become reconciled and celebrate by going to a fairly expensive restaurant, where they are shoved into a corner. They spot the thief on foot and the father chases him into a bordello. Confusion among the ladies. The thief gets out to his own neighborhood near by, where the father is threatened by the thief's friends; he is saved by the kid's calling a cop. The thief has an epileptic fit. Police examination of the thief's miserable room reveals some stolen goods but no bicycle. The policeman explains the hopelessness of the case to the father, who decides not to swear out a warrant and is driven out of the neighborhood by the thief's friends. The father decides to steal a bicycle himself near the stadium while a big football match is going on. He dismisses the kid, who hangs around nevertheless. The father is nabbed in the act and beaten up, but he is saved from arrest by the appeal of the kid. Left alone, the father cries with shame, but his son takes his hand and leads him away, and they disappear in the twilight in the crowd pouring out of the stadium.

What do they mean, "No plot"? Perhaps they are fooled by the perfect synthesis of plot and movement. One sequence flows into another so smoothly, and the action within each scene is kept so natural, that you find it hard to believe the story was ever written down on paper at all; it seems to live and grow under your eyes. There isn't a false note in the whole film. Everything that happens is fresh, yet at the same time seems inevitable once it is over. De Sica's genius is the opposite of Orson Welles'. In Welles' better work you see the hand of the master like an artist's signature on every scene. In De Sica's you are conscious only of a tremendous vitality seething in the actors, seeping out of the very stone buildings, made eloquent by the camera, bursting the limits of the screen itself, but always as if it were an expression of nature, not of the ego of a director, however brilliant.

For his hero De Sica cast a worker from the Breda arms factory, Lamberto Maggiorani, who had never acted before. Now the current mania among Italian directors to use amateurs is not a good thing in itself, but it is a good test of what a director can do without being shackled to the star system with its corollary of being

limited to a certain side of somebody's face when shooting. Take Enzo Staiola, the son in *Ladri*, for example. He is a sturdy little fellow with an outsize nose and big expressive eyes, who can make you run the gamut from laughter to tears in the course of a few minutes the way Chaplin does. De Sica is not solely responsible for this, of course; Italy as a whole should get some of the credit for producing such eloquent types, even among its children. But De Sica has a gift for finding this kind of talent and developing it in a fitting atmosphere.

After his skillful handling of people, De Sica is perhaps most creative in his use of the camera (in the hands of the veteran Carlo Montuori). Sometimes it seems that all he wants to achieve is an almost amateurish clarity, as the camera roams searchingly around workers' apartments or sets the shabby father and son off mercilessly against the majestic buildings which are all that remains of the grandeur that was Rome. But at other times, by a daring use of natural twilight or an out-of-focus lens, De Sica achieves marvelous effects, such as the dawning of consciousness in a whole city or the mixing of humanity in a common cauldron, which occasionally recall the great silent films.

Ladri is not a film without precedents. The chase in the interests of social justice goes back to Griffith's *Intolerance*. But whereas in Griffith one can sometimes admire the technique without necessarily approving the social content (the dashing Kluxers in *The Birth of a Nation*, for example), in De Sica the two are so completely fused that a critical separation is impossible. His genius lies in an almost flawless directorial technique coupled with a moral sense which he knows how to embed unobtrusively in the texture of his story—a morality that *is* the texture of his story. It is a synthesis to which many artists have aspired, but at which few have arrived between Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Picasso's *Guernica*. And it has found its highest expression in our times not in a revolutionary work, but in this humanistic one, a movie about a workman whose bicycle was stolen.

Accorded world-wide critical acclaim, De Sica has also been accused of iconoclasm toward the law, the Church, politics, and practically every other institution touched by his hero in his *Odyssey*. De Sica seems to be saying that the various panaceas on which the poor pin their hopes are illusory—that in a crisis a man must help himself. This is the inevitable conclusion of the philosophy of individualism in a cruel world, which characterizes the modern Italian cinema school.