Bicycle Thieves: A Re-Reading

by Frank P. Tomasulo

We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things.
—Michel de Montaigne

Criticism is not an innocent discipline and never has been. The overdetermination of aesthetic functions and values in bourgeois criticism has ideological effects. The task, then, is to show the text as it cannot know itself, to reveal the conditions of its making which are inscribed in its structuration but which are effaced by that very structuration. Though Italian neo-realist cinema has been called "a revolutionary cinema in a non-revolutionary society,"[1] a re-reading might see those political adjectives reversed. *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) in particular posits a series of displacements and substitutions, metonymies and metaphors, within a process of signification which orders them into a particular type of discourse.

Adam Smith's contradictions are of significance because they contain problems which it is true he does not resolve, but which he reveals by contradicting himself.
—Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Values*

There is an ostensibly innocuous scene in *Bicycle Thieves* which can be seen as emblematic of a dichotomy at work in the text itself. As Antonio Ricci discusses his plight with his friend Biaocco, producer of the variety show rehearsing in a basement, a group of Communist Party members infiltrate the space of the rehearsal hall, creating a disturbance. One of the singers (the one who had trouble getting the right pitch on "*Gente*" [people]) moves forward and says: "Either we rehearse or we have a meeting!" This scene can be read as privileged in articulating a contradiction between art and politics which is a major antinomy of the film. Further, the song's lyrics actually deal with oppression, but the debate over pitch displaces the political content onto aesthetic form.

The text provides us with certain socially determined representations of postwar Italy (unemployment, alienation, housing conditions, the Church, etc.), but they are divorced from any real conditions to which these representations might refer through the workings of ideology. Elements of the historically "real" do enter the text, but they are displaced and become, as ideology, present as determined and distorted by their very absences. *Bicycle Thieves,* therefore, has a

peculiarly overdetermined relation to historical reality. Rather than making direct homological comparisons between real Italy circa 1948 and the Italy of *Bicycle Thieves*, it is important to note that the latter's imaginary Italy is the product of a representational process which signifies not so much "postwar Italy" as certain of postwar Italy's ways of signifying itself. In *Bicycle Thieves* (and in much of the neo-realist canon), ideology presents itself to the text as "Life," rather than as a system of concepts. It is the nature of this ideology, as well as the aesthetic modes of articulation of that ideology, which is at stake.

Are the contradictions of the text the same as the real social/historical contradictions, in some sort of mirror relationship? No, since it is precisely ideology's function to efface contradictions. The contradictions exist only between ideology and what it masks: history itself. Textual dissonances, then, are the effect of the film's production of ideology.

The eclecticism of Italy's 1948 Constitution is apparent; it is a melange of Catholic social doctrine, Marxism, and welfare state liberalism. It posits "a democratic Republic founded on labor" with "inalienable duties of political, economic, and social solidarity." Article Four guarantees full employment (in the year of Italy's highest level of *un*employment—estimated at 24 percent) and regulates child labor. In addition, the Constitution pledges "the material and spiritual progress of society," a phraseology obviously hammered out between competing forces.

The Christian Democrat victory in 1948 (gain of four-and-one-half million votes over 1946) over the Popular Front (loss of one million votes) has been attributed in part to the influx of American Marshall Plan aid and the threat of its withdrawal in the event of a Communist-Socialist election victory. In addition, between 1946 and 1947, UNRRA-CASAS funds were used to build modern, though cramped, housing units (of the type seen in *Bicycle Thieves*). This measure—along with increased social assistance programs, pensions, and family allowances—helped to stem the tide of social unrest brought about by the revocation of the ban on job dismissals in July 1947. Mario Cannella's implicit and explicit critiques of the P.C.I. (Partito Communista Italiano) in this period[2] center around the collaboration in the economic reconstruction of Italy. The P.C.I. did not, for instance, demand a redistribution of wealth, nationalization of industry, or institution of a welfare state; neither did the films of that period.

There are unquestionable links between neo-realism and its social/historical moment, yet the films—including *Bicycle Thieves*—seem unable to deal with the real forces at work within the society, so displace them and attempt to close the discourse around these dis-

placements. As in Adam Smith, the contradictions show but are not resolved within the text, so no perspective for struggle is offered. *Bicycle Thieves* offers several (inadequate) solutions to the problems raised. A social democratic resolution is proffered, whereby the revelation of injustice will lead to its eradication. Another is the universalization of the problem to a mythic dimension ("the poor are always with us"), undergrounded in the specificity of historical conditions. Love (personal, familial, Christian, *ad infinitum*) can resolve the conflicts ("Love conquers all") and alienation because they are originally posited as interpersonal forces, not part of an interclass struggle. Indeed, though *Bicycle Thieves* has been hailed as a progressive film, an outcry of protest, and "the only valid Communist film of the past decade,"[3] there is no class analysis at all; rather, this sort of analysis is displaced to a moralist/idealist (even a Christian) critique of social injustice. At best, therefore, the film is reformist; at worst, it legitimizes the ideology of bourgeois liberalism.

> *The true function of the cinema is not to tell fables . . . the cinema must tell a reality as if it were a story; there must be no gap between life and what is on the screen.*—Cesare Zavattini

Neo-realism, as manifested in *Bicycle Thieves*, is not an alternative signifying practice to the Hollywood classical narrative; it is not a new rhetoric. Although it purports to be "life"—as opposed to dominant cinema's positioning of a spectator—there is a construction of a subject. This may perhaps be the construction of a social subject through an intersubjectivity based on *doxa* and parable within an ideological social matrix.

Bazin's claim that *Bicycle Thieves*' narrative events are ateleological ("No one seems to have arranged them in order on a dramatic spectrum") needs to be reexamined. The dramatic construction of the film's narrative is modeled on the eleven steps of classical plot development (Freytag's triangle, Scribe's nineteenth-century "well-made play," Aristotelian tragedy, etc.). The film's published screenplay notes ten major dissolves, each a rather explicit touchstone for a dramatic increment: 1) EXPOSITION—sets the time, place, atmosphere, background, and characters; 2) POINT OF ATTACK—states the problem (Will Antonio Ricci find work?); 3) COMPLICATION—he needs a bicycle to get the job; 4) DISCOVERY—introduces new characters (wife, Bruno, boss) and new events (Ricci obtains the needed bicycle and starts work); 5) REVERSAL—the bike is stolen; 6) CONFLICT—the search for the bike, culminating in the Pathetic rainstorm; 7) RISING ACTION—the pursuit of the Old Man; 8) CRISIS—Ricci finds the thief, foreshadowing the turning point; 9)

CLIMAX—the high point of intensity (enunciated by *champs-contrechamps* editing), Ricci steals the other bicycle; 10) FALLING ACTION—Ricci is released by the mob; and 11) RESOLUTION—catharsis of tears and father-son understanding.

We know that over six months were spent on the writing of the screenplay. (Bazin: "Few films have been more carefully put together, more pondered over, more meticulously elaborated—but de Sica gives dramatic necessity the character of something contingent, accidental."[4]) Yet chance—according to Annette Michelson—is the metaphysics of capitalism. What Bazin sees as the contingency of Bruno's pissing against a wall may actually serve comic relief purposes, as well as show the primacy of economic necessity (in the text's discourse—finding the bicycle) over biological necessity (urinating).

Thus, *Bicycle Thieves* evinces a novelistic/dramatic narrative structuration which relies heavily on the creation of a closed system and character individuation through mimetic and perspectival representation of visual space. This is also achieved through a system of organized gazes (shot/countershot, spectator/screen, camera/event). Tragedy is a dramatic construct, but (divorced from Chance) it is also part of the texture of life in real human societies.

Perhaps the major stylistic achievement of neo-realism (although pioneered by earlier works) was the exploration of—and into—physical space. *Bicycle Thieves* sets up several spatial dialectics. One major one involves the relationship between a single unit subject to a mass background or real environment in what can only be described as *social shots*. This goes somewhat beyond the dominant cinema's inscription of free-standing individuals apart from their painted-on or rear-projected backgrounds, yet the foreground/background tension of the *mise-en-scène* structures a tension between the individual and his society which is a major mystification and displacement of the real conflicts and antagonisms which constitute the social fabric. Though the film depends on precise, to-the-frame editing of sutured shot/reverse shots to show that there is no camera in front of the scene being filmed, this strategy sets up a protagonist/antagonist dialectic which further displaces the class struggle.

The spatial constriction of interior locations (the Ricci apartment, the pawnshop, work place, police station, basement, church, seeress's flat, thief's place, brothel)—articulated through various compositional masks—sets up a structure of inside and outside which reinforces the individual/collectivity antinomy. Likewise, the closing of doors and shutters can be read in these terms. Window shutters are rudely shut in Ricci's face as he proudly hoists his wife up to see his new locker room; when searching the thief's apartment, a neighbor across the way

closes her shutters just as the policeman says "You're out of luck." Doors are locked throughout the church as Ricci chases after the Old Man. Thus, openings are closed on him at sites associated with work, neighbors, and religion. None of these offers any hope for integration of the hero or for a solution to his problem. Thus the film again displaces a basically social struggle onto the level of an inner malaise, a phenomenon frequently observed in films made in repressive cultures (e.g., American films of the 1950s).

A frequently deployed spatial strategy of *Bicycle Thieves* is the pan or dolly shot which initially constricts or flattens space only to open up or stretch the horizon line into deep background space through camera motility. In a film with many moving camera setups (Steenbeck analysis reveals 250 moving shots), many crucial spatial articulations follow this pattern.

Antonio Ricci is introduced in just such a shot. Initially Ricci is alone sitting in the street; as he moves toward the employment office, the camera pans with him, integrating him into the social group of other unemployed men. Maria is introduced in a group—amid the collectivity of women at the public fountain—fighting over water behind a barbed wire fence. The camera pans with her as she leaves the flatness of the frontal composition and ends up in a medium two-shot with Antonio. This shot, vertically bisected by a pole, places Maria on screen left with a deep-focus background extending into deep space behind her. On screen right, her husband's space is restricted by the background barbed wire. This composition lasts for as long as Ricci's dialogue: "I feel wretched. There's an opening and I can't fill it." Then, the camera retraces its initial pan to follow Ricci and his bucket-carrying wife walking into a wider vista (first along a flat, fron-

Bicycle Thieves, Italy, 1948, Vittorio de Sica. Frame enlargement.

tally positioned wall, then into the background space of new tenement buildings) with several vanishing points.

This pattern of camera restriction on the individual (foreground/ background, screen right/ screen left, top/bottom) leading to a limitless horizon of background space with multiple vanishing points (*à la* Veronese) shows an authorial inscription of open possibilities on the spatial level for the characters which is ultimately frustrated on the narrative plane. These shots (over 30 such compositions dot the film's spatial discourse) may be read—progressively—as "saying" that Ricci is indeed imprisoned, trapped in a net of selfhood, which he could overcome by making meaningful contact with his environment and other people who populate that background space.

On the other hand, several key scenes show the impossibility of such a resolution. The violations of classical perspective consist of "aiming" or positioning the lines perpendicular to the plane of the picture at several points (rather than the unitary vanishing point) grouped near each other in a dynamic zone. This tends to open up space. In addition, de Sica composes background buildings in the manner of early Italian landscape painters with *fabbriche* in the distance, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. This contributes to the inscription of a vanishing *area* or *zone*, similar in some ways to a stage backdrop; however, this perspectival articulation does not close the background space; rather, multiple perspective breaks up space. The fissures inherent in such a schema are represented throughout the narratival, characterological, and ideological frameworks.

Bruno is introduced through the spokes of the already overdetermined bicycle as he polishes the frame. When Bruno occupies the frame alone, his space is almost always restricted; when it is not, he is nonetheless restricted by the offscreen space above him (the adult world). The boy's gaze is always directed up at his father (directed up by de Sica's offscreen voice, almost audible in this post-dubbed film).

It is the spatial inscription of the personal versus societal dimension (a displacement of the largely offscreen class struggle) which justifies Ben Lawton's remark that "neo-realism reflected the Italian fascination with the American dream and its glorification of the limitless potential of the individual."[5] It becomes, in a sense, a metonymic displacement of an authentically phenomenological space—a closed space produced from within itself—onto a space organized from the vantage of another, absent site, the site of ideology, the closure of classical (or near-classical) representation. This is not, strictly speaking, a fixed center or locus/site; rather, it is a function. Within the framework (in cinematic terms, the frame-work) of the text, ideology

seems to determine the historically real, rather than vice versa; but, ultimately, history is the real signifier of cinema, as it is the ultimate signified.

Thus, the overdetermination of the bicycle (as job, home, pride, faith, hope, Italy, physical and social mobility, etc.) and the theft (displacement of the class robbery of capitalism onto a lumpen-proletariat petty crime) allows for a continual succession of disappointments and fissures of our unity as acting subjects, yet the text masks the basis of this subversion in the real historical forces. One arena of that struggle was the polarization between bourgeois forces and the Popular Front circa 1948. Likewise, the thief's German hat (referred to twice in the film) reworks the continual neo-realist displacement of blame onto Nazism, rather than homegrown Italian fascism. Even Ricci's theft of a bike at the end is a displaced form of revolt and protest, enunciated in a structured discourse of glance/object/reaction shots (as well as swelling shouts on the soundtrack) between Ricci, the thousands of bikes parked outside the stadium, and the lone bicycle against the wall. This structuration of looks, including p.o.v. shots, sets up a closed suture system similar to Hollywood classical narrative which designates nodal points of (displaced, internalized) conflict: Ricci and the employment bureaucrat, the family and the pawnshop attendant, Ricci and the police inspector, Ricci and the thief, etc.

But Ricci, as a traditional identification figure, is a character whose position of social knowledge is unknown to him. He internalizes the class conflicts of his society, a society whose roots are still in fascist structures. When Ricci tries on his new uniform, Maria says, "You look like a cop!" Ricci playfully tussles with her over this insult. (The low esteem in which the police are held in Italy is unmatched in the world, except perhaps in Ireland. This predates fascism somewhat, although the fascist laws on public safety [1931] reinforced these feelings.) But he is allied wiht the privileged class in many ways. On the job, he ignores the begging street urchins. With his own son, he evinces the characterological rigidity and authoritarian ideology of patriarchy which Wilhelm Reich finds at the basis of fascism.

> *In the figure of the father the authoritarian state has its representative in every family, so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power . . . The structural reproduction of a society's economic system in the psychology of the masses is the basic mechanism in the process of the formation of political ideas.*
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> —Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*

Yet Ricci often manifests a childlike helplessness, an inability to gain control of his own life (like Umberto D). The Oedipal configurations (Bruno/Antonio, Antonio/the State) are marshalled into the service of a patriarchal family structure, made even more evident by the narrative disappearance of the wife/mother after fulfilling her plot function of pawning the family linen. When she is referred to (during the restaurant scene), Maria is reinscribed into the narrative as a censoring agent—"If your mother only knew . . . (I was letting you drink)." She thus becomes a displaced super-ego, especially since Antonio is still trying desperately to deny his own authoritarian tendencies (and resultant guilt). The whole restaurant scene may be viewed in this light: as Antonio's attempt to "make up" with Bruno for the unprovoked slap (displaced onto Bruno from social/political forces and, in the film's discourse, from Antonio's own self-doubts) and imagined guilt (thinking that Bruno was drowned). *Bicycle Thieves'* ultimate dramatic resolution—the father-son handclasp—demonstrates the film's failure to think beyond the level of the family melodrama. There is hope in family unity and solidarity, even if one's society and one's comrades are unresponsive.

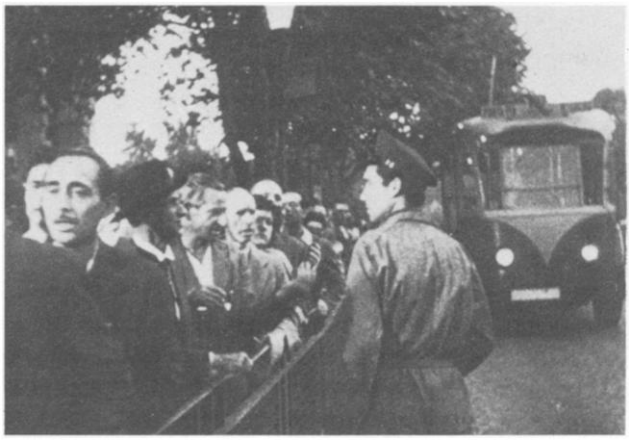
Bruno imitates his father on several occasions. He puts his lunch in the front pocket of his overalls like his father. When they sit on the curb at the end, their "body language" (Reichian character armor) is exactly the same. The Oedipal injunctions—"You should not *be* the father/You must be *like* the father"—become a redirection of libidinal cathexis in the service of ideological interpellation. Bruno is physically and psychologically dwarfed throughout the film. He is positioned next to the massive architectural monuments built by Mussolini in his at-

Bicycle Thieves, Italy, 1948, Vittorio de Sica. Frame enlargement.

Bicycle Thieves, Italy, 1948, Vittorio de Sica. Frame enlargement.

tempt to recapture the glory that was Rome. Two merchants at the Fiorida slap his hands as he searches through bike parts, a pederast accosts him in the same location, he falls onto a rainy street (unseen by Antonio), he is almost run over by an automobile (again Antonio is looking elsewhere), and he even diminishes his own stature by genuflecting and crossing himself in church—rendering homage to the supreme patriarch, God. A priest even strikes Bruno, an action repeated shortly thereafter by Antonio; the boy is thus struck by two "fathers"—an ecclesiastical and a biological one. Earlier, Bruno had been spatially trapped between two fathers: Antonio and the Austrian monks in the rain scene. The rain here may be a metonymic structure for the sorrow depicted throughout the film, yet it displaces this psychological/economic misery onto a natural event, thereby naturalizing and eternalizing suffering, rather than seeing the historical/economic basis for exploitation. The "rain," incidentally, was produced by the Roman fire brigade (so much for Bazinian phenomenological integrity!). The German accents of the monks are in line with the German hat of the thief: a displacement of vestiges of Italian fascism onto Nazism.

Ricci himself incorporates patriarchal suppression in all his dealings with authority figures, notably the police. He seeks relief and justice from the police on three separate occasions. The detective in the police station mechanically files the report ("Nothing, just a bicycle"), more interested in the *Nucleo Celere* (flying squad) of anti-riot jeeps down below. Ricci is thrown back on his own individual initiative ("Then it's up to me") in the search and, in the very next scene, he individualistically tries to sneak in line to catch a bus. In a metaphoric/metonymic compositional arrangement, Ricci moves away



Bicycle Thieves, Italy, 1948, Vittorio de Sica. Frame enlargement.

from the camera, separated from the masses by a fence; the crowd moves toward the camera. This sort of push-and-pull movement (repeated throughout the film) into the depth of illusionist projection of space and out toward the spectator tends to set up and resolve a displaced dialectic between solitude and solidarity. The displacement is in the inscription of collectivity. Whenever a social group is shown (the unemployed at the employment bureau, the women at the fountain, the line at Signora Santona's, the bus line, the peddlers at the Fiorida, the crowd outside the thief's house, the mob who apprehend Ricci), there is conflict. The Party meeting in the basement intrudes on the rehearsal, but the camera (and Ricci) seek resolution with the artistic. No scenes of an organized coalition of workers are seen; instead, groups are set in opposition to individual fulfillment. Thus, the structural absence of a major segment of the postwar republic betrays an ideological position in terms of the 1948 political climate which substitutes a social democratic model of statism—even though state and church intervention throughout the film are unsatisfactory.

Ricci's second encounter with the police ends unhappily as well. At the Fiorida, a policeman confirms that the painter did not steal Antonio's bike. Once again, Ricci defers to the police officer. Even upon catching the thief (a miracle which follows hard on the seeress's prediction and the ringing of a church bell), the police cannot help.

The treatment of the Catholic Church in *Bicycle Thieves* is fraught with contradictions. Ostensibly anticlerical, the film also posits a quasi-mystical aura of Christian brotherhood—which cuts across class lines—as a level of discourse, with young Bruno at its moral core. Indeed, the historical critique of clericalism in Italy (especially for its complicity in the rise of fascism, the Lateran Pacts, etc.) has been

pursued by both progressive and bourgeois elements. The charity ward scene in *Bicycle Thieves* might actually present a Holy See strategy of feeding the poor to diffuse political unrest. During the 1948 election campaign, the Church actively pursued a policy of "competition" with the workers' left (and the P.C.I. in particular) through a policy of social and economic reform to advance the *classo subalterne*. Though de Sica/Zavattini may poke gentle fun at this policy ("You can't eat until after Mass"), it is certainly non-threatening despite the over-reaction of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican house journal: "The time has come to sweep the country of the garbage known as realist films." The weeded churchyard, the Austrian priests, the continual presence of crucifixes and religious icons (even at Signora Santona's), the tracking shots of darkly lit poverty-stricken worshippers in the church (in sharp contrast to the overdressed lady and the elegant young man), and the irony of the *Pietà*-like scene of the thief and his protective mother all seem to point to anticlericalism. But this overdetermination is ultimately undercut by the true Christian underpinnings of the film's ideological compromise. Antonio is hushed in church, but he is also hushed in the Party meeting. Religion seems to get in his way—the icons in the church's anteroom, the genuflecting in mid-chase, etc.—yet the superstition of the seeress ("Even your mother's saints can't help us") and the highly overdetermined vespers bell which signals the spotting of the thief (articulated through a complex conflict of p.o.v.s, in tight, oppressive close-ups) reinscribe a deeper level of religiosity in the film's ideology—that of the displacement and suppression of the authoritarian family (the *Holy* Family, and all that suggests), the state, and the church. The regimentation in the church ("Line them up neatly") is no different from the general groupings in the society with remnants and vestiges of lingering fascism (see Freud's essay "Two Artificial Groups: The Church and the Army").

The film tries desperately to explode the myth of the solidarity of the poor. It is Ricci's fellow poor—the thief himself, the Old Man, his helpless friends, the Party leaders (who only see the large-scale issues), even his son—who betray him constantly. The historical fact of worker solidarity is carefully elided in favor of a populism at best (the rehearsal), an intra-class antagonism (the thief) at worst.

> *Representation is not defined directly by imitation: even if one gets rid of notions of the "real," of the "vraisemblable," of the copy, there will still be representation for so long as a subject casts his gaze toward a horizon on which he cuts out an apex . . .*
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> —Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein"

Every text internalizes its social relations of production; through the conventions established it internalizes the way it will be consumed. *Bicycle Thieves* is the product of a specific, overdetermined conjuncture of elements and formations, and encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom, and for whom it was produced. This study has attempted to avoid an "illustrative" view of the film to study social/historical conditions. Rather, cinema as an institution, neorealism as a (close to classical) rhetoric, and *Bicycle Thieves* in its effectivity can be seen as belonging to both base and superstructure because they figure in material production, ideological formation, and the nexus between the two. The film has certain elements of intertextuality—Ricci's new job is posting Rita Hayworth advertisements, a boy dressed as Charlie Chaplin (holding hands with a young girl in bridal veil) walks past Antonio, a photo of Gable is seen on the brothel wall, someone says "The cinema means nothing to me," etc.—but the linearity of the narrative, use of perspectival vistas, sutured editing, character identification techniques, traditional figurations (dissolves, fades, wipes, etc.), and representational strategies all mark the film in the mode of dominant cinema.

Likewise, *Bicycle Thieves*' relation to the forces of production and the social/historical realities of 1948 Italy marks it as a film of ideological compromise, rather than a film of revolutionary import. Though Zavattini has said: "The cinema had completely failed in its purpose by choosing the path of Méliès rather than that of Lumière," he neglects to mention that Lumière was a chronicler of bourgeois society (the parades and dignitaries) and of bourgeois family life *(Baby's Breakfast)* from the point of view of an industrialist basically satisfied with himself and his social matrix. *Bicycle Thieves* also reflects an organizational principle which implicitly accepts bourgeois society, within the framework of the social democrat modification of high capitalism. Its philosophical underpinnings are idealist, individualist, and transcendental, and careful deconstruction of the text elucidates its ideological displacements and structural absences.

Notes

1. Penelope Huston, *The Contemporary Cinema* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 29.
2. Mario Cannella, "Ideology and Aesthetic Hypotheses in the Criticism of Neo-Realism," *Screen*, XIV, no. 4 (Winter 1973/74), 5–50.
3. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Volume II, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 51.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
5. Ben Lawton, "Italian Neorealism: A Mirror Construction of Reality," *Film Criticism*, III (Summer 1979), p. 9.