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Bicycle Thieves (U)

Dir: Vittorio de Sica

Starring: Lamberto Maggiorani, Lianella Carell, Enzo Staiola, Elena Altieri, Vittorio Antonucci, Gino Saltamerenda

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Synopsis: Unemployed Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani) is elated when he finally finds work hanging posters around war-torn Rome. His wife, Maria (Lianella Carell), sells the family's bed linens to retrieve Antonio's bicycle from the pawnshop so he can take the job. However, disaster strikes when Antonio's bicycle is stolen, and his new job is doomed unless he can find the thief. With the help of his lively son, Bruno (Enzo Staiola), Antonio combs the city, growing increasingly desperate for justice.

As someone who has been writing about the movies for more than three decades, I have to confess I've always been surprised by how seldom other writers seem to change their minds about a film or filmmaker. Maybe they do change their minds but don't write about it because they don't think it's of interest to their readers; or maybe they just aren't changing their minds. If the latter, that could be due to a kind of pride ("I'm always happy with my initial opinion so why should I concern myself with reassessment?"), but I think it's rather more likely, at least for reviewers, that they're so busy trying to keep up with all the new releases that they simply don't feel they've time to revisit any movie that's not a personal favourite, let alone a body of work.

I've always been fortunate in that I've never been required to see all the new releases; moreover, it's always been a key part of my job – as well as my great pleasure – to explore cinema's past as well as its present. Revisiting and reassessing on a fairly regular basis is crucial to what I do. And of course there's really nothing wrong with changing one's opinion. Several years before I came to work at the BFI, what was then still known as the National Film Theatre mounted a retrospective devoted to Aki Kaurismäki. In discussing the season in a column in *Time Out*, the magazine for which I then used to write, I admitted that I'd only seen the light with regard to the Finnish filmmaker only very recently; that I simply hadn't cottoned on properly to what he was doing when I first encountered his work.

I'd regarded his particular brand of moody, minimalist miserabilism as some kind of sub-Fassbinder posturing. It was only when I'd seen *Take Care of Your Scarf*, Tatjana (1994) that I'd finally 'got' what Aki was up to. So perfectly formed was that 63-minute gem (to this day it remains one of my all-time favourite comedies) that I decided I should revisit the earlier films. The result was a profound shift in my opinion of Kaurismäki's work. I write this by way of preface to a brief discussion of Vittorio De Sica, whose work as a director and actor we are currently celebrating at BFI Southbank. Now, ever since I first saw *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) about 40 years ago, I've recognised both the historical importance and the emotional punch of that particular film – indeed, you can test its enduring appeal for yourselves, since it's being revived in an extended run to coincide with the retrospective. But when I look back at some of my earlier writings on De Sica, I now feel I was perhaps a little grudging in paying my respects to such landmarks of neorealism as *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Umberto D* (1952); I virtually equated his use of children in certain films with a tendency towards sentimentality, and I didn't get *Miracle in Milan* (1951) at all, even going so far to describe it as "cloying whimsical fantasy".

Reader, I was wrong. I discovered my mistake a few years ago at Bologna's Cinema Ritrovato festival, where I was able to catch up with some De Sica films I'd never seen, such as *The Children Are Watching Us* (1944), *The Gate of Heaven* (1945) and *The Gold of Naples* (1954). They were revelations, and sent me back to watch some of the more famous films again. Dio mio, had I underestimated him! Like so many, I'd probably done so because I'd



originally tended to compare his work with that of the apparently more sophisticated Roberto Rossellini – a judgement wholly unfair to De Sica, it must be said, but such, very often, is the way of cinematic fashion. I was not alone in my error.

Bicycle Thieves – that classic which so many of us think we know, but which is actually sophisticated enough to reveal fresh and fascinating nuances with repeat viewings – is a case in point. Where I once saw sentimentality, I now see understatement and an admirably tough, clear-eyed treatment of human aspiration and frailty, superstition and desolation. Yes, there's a young boy in the film, but that certainly doesn't make for any sort of mawkishness; on the contrary, his eyes provide a window through which we too may witness, without the prejudiced assumptions of supercilious adulthood, the cruel, complex, profoundly impoverished world inhabited by his parents.

Notwithstanding its super-simple storyline – in postwar Rome, a bill-poster and his son search with increasing desperation for the former's stolen bike, on which he depends for his new job – *Bicycle Thieves* is rich, subtle, powerful and – sadly – as relevant today in many ways as when it was made. (Let's not forget that films as recent as the Dardennes' *The Kid with the Bike* and Ramin Bahrani's *Man Push Cart* make use of a very similar narrative device.) Besides, as with any film worth its salt, it's far, far more than just a story, and De Sica's marvellously vivid images of evocative faces and cityscapes stick in the mind as indelibly as those of Federico Fellini or Michelangelo Antonioni.

Forget about realism; this film has the ring of truth.

Geoff Andrew: Sight and Sound, 2015

Credits

Antonio	Lamberto Maggiorani
Bruno	Enzo Staiola
Maria	Lianella Carell
The Charitable Lady	Elena Altieri
Baiocco	Gino Saltamerenda
The Beggar	Giulia Chiari
The Thief	Vittorio Antonucci
Secretary of the Charity	Michele Sakara
Amateur Actor	Fausto Guerzoni
A Beggar	Carlo Jachino

Director	Vittorio de Sica
Screenplay	Vittoria de Sica
Cinematography	Carlo Montuori
Editor	Eraldo da Roma
Music	Alessandro Cicognini

Italy 1948. 90 mins

Another View

"People should see it — and they should care." Those are the concluding words to one of the more passionate raves in the annals of *New York Times* film criticism: Bosley Crowther's 1949 review of the Italian movie

introduced to American audiences as “The Bicycle Thief.”

The English title has since been adjusted to reflect the original. It’s “Bicycle Thieves” (“Ladri di Biciclette” in Italian) not only because more than one bike is stolen, but also because the cruelty of modern life threatens to make robbers of us all. More than 70 years after Crowther’s enthusiastic notice — during which time Vittorio De Sica’s fable of desperation has been imitated, satirized, analyzed and taught in schools — I’m tempted to let my predecessor have the last word.

But why should you see it, or see it again? Why should you (still) care?

These are fair questions to ask of any consensus masterpiece — skepticism is what keeps art alive, reverence embalms it — and especially apt in the case of “Bicycle Thieves.” The movie is about seeing and caring, about the danger of being distracted from what matters. The tragedy it depicts arises partly from poverty, injustice and the aftereffect of dictatorship, but more profoundly from a deficit of empathy.

Based on a book by Luigi Bartolini, with a script by Cesare Zavattini — written, as Crowther noted, “with the camera exclusively in mind” — “Bicycle Thieves is a political parable and a spiritual fable, at once a hard look at the conditions of the Roman working class after World War II and an inquiry into the state of an individual soul. The soul in question belongs to Antonio Ricci, a lean, handsome, diffident man who lives with his wife, Maria, and their two young children in a recently built apartment that lacks running water.

At a time of mass unemployment and widespread homelessness, the Riccis are relatively fortunate, and as the film begins, luck seems to be smiling on them. Antonio is picked out of a throng of job-seekers and offered a position pasting up advertisements. He needs a bicycle, and Maria pawns the couple’s bed linens — one set has never been used — so her husband can get his trusty Fides out of hock.

The good times don’t last. On his first day at work, Antonio’s bicycle is snatched from under his nose, and he and his young son, Bruno, spend the rest of the movie in a desperate effort to recover it. Their journey takes them (and the viewer) on a tour of Rome’s rougher quarters, away from the monuments and museums. By the end, we have witnessed a humble man’s humiliation, a loss of dignity as devastating as an earthquake.

Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani), Maria (Lianella Carell) and Bruno (Enzo Staiola) are played — along with almost everyone else in the movie — by nonprofessional actors. Some of the mystique around “Bicycle Thieves” rests on this fact, on the arguable but durable belief that minimal acting technique will produce maximal authenticity.

The use of ordinary people and actual locations, which didn’t begin with De Sica, was already, in 1948, a hallmark of neorealism, the movement that helped Italy secure a central place in postwar world cinema. Like most artistic tendencies, neorealism has often been more of a puzzle than a program, its essence obscured by theoretical hairsplitting and ideological disputation.

By the strict accounting of some critics, there are exactly seven films in the neorealist canon: three apiece by De Sica and Roberto Rossellini and one by Luchino Visconti. A less rigorous definition includes countless Italian films released between the end of the war and the mid-1960s, even big-budgeted, movie-star-filled, internationally flavored productions like Federico Fellini’s “La Strada” and Visconti’s “Rocco and His Brothers.” Any Italian movie shot in black-and-white and concerned with the struggles of poor people might qualify.

I prefer to think of neorealism as an impulse, an ethos, a spore that caught the wind of history and sprouted in the soil of every continent. The spirits of Maria and Antonio Ricci — and perhaps especially of the impish, vulnerable Bruno — live on in the work of Satyajit Ray in Bengal in the late 1950s, in the Brazilian Cinema Novo in the 1960s, in Iran in the 1990s and the United States in the first decade of this century. Films like Ramin Bahrani’s “Chop Shop” and Kelly Reichardt’s “Wendy and Lucy,” which tally the moral and existential costs of economic precariousness, have a clear affinity with “Bicycle Thieves.”

In Italy, the neorealist impulse has been refreshed in each generation, in the work of filmmakers like Ermanno Olmi and, most recently, Alice Rohrwacher, whose “Happy as Lazzaro” infuses a story of hardship and exploitation with literal magic. “Bicycle Thieves” itself has become an essential part of the cultural patrimony, a touchstone to be treasured, teased and taken for granted. It has been quoted and referenced in countless later movies. My own favorite is Ettore Scola’s “We All Loved Each Other So Much,” which traces the postwar lives and loves of four anti-fascist partisans. One of them, a left-wing intellectual played by Stefano Satta Flores, is obsessed with De Sica and “Bicycle Thieves,” a preoccupation with absurd, unhappy consequences. His love of the movie costs him a job and causes him embarrassment on a television quiz show.

Part of what draws filmmakers (and film lovers) to “Bicycle Thieves” is its purity and simplicity, but to emphasize those elements — the unvarnished honesty of the performances, the gritty realness of the Roman streets, the raw emotions of the story — is to risk underestimating its complexity and sophistication.

Neorealism was partly an aesthetic of necessity. Right after the war, money and equipment were in short supply, and the vast Cinecittà studio complex on the southern edge of Rome was a refugee camp. Cinecittà had been built by Mussolini as one monumental expression of his belief in the natural affinity between fascism and film. (The Venice Film Festival was another.) The leading lights of neorealism — including De Sica, a prominent actor before he took up directing — had started out working in Mussolini’s movie industry, which specialized in slick melodramas and high-society romances as well as propaganda.

While it is free of those genre trappings, “Bicycle Thieves” has a sometimes playful, sometimes poetic self-consciousness. The first work we see Antonio doing is hanging up a poster of Rita Hayworth, a sign that Hollywood is part of the Italian landscape. Within a few years, the import and export of movie stars would become a fixture of Italy’s cultural and economic boom. Fellini’s “La Strada” and “Nights of Cabiria” won back-to-back foreign-language film Oscars in 1957 and ’58. Anna Magnani had won for best actress in 1956. Six years later it was Sophia Loren’s turn, for “Two Women,” directed by De Sica, who had perhaps done more than anyone other than Loren herself to cultivate her star power and unlock her artistic potential.

“Bicycle Thieves” may seem like an improbable gateway to the glamorous golden age of Italian cinema, the starry, sexy cosmos of Loren, Gina Lollobrigida and “La Dolce Vita,” but sensuality and spectacle are hardly alien to the neorealist universe. The struggle for survival doesn’t exclude the pursuit of pleasure. Even as Antonio and Bruno encounter disappointment, indifference and cruelty, they also find glimmers of beauty and delight. Seeking help from a sanitation-worker friend in their search for the Fides, Antonio finds the man at the neighborhood cultural center, rehearsing a musical sketch for a revue. Later, Antonio and Bruno will cross paths with itinerant musicians, a fortuneteller, and a young man blowing bubbles in an open-air bicycle market. They will duck into a restaurant for a snack of fried mozzarella, enduring the condescending stares of the rich patrons at the next table.

Their pursuit of the purloined bicycle is full of pain and anxiety, but it is also an adventure, with episodes of tenderness and comedy on the way to final heartbreak. Those moments, modulated by Alessandro Cicognini’s musical score, provide an undercurrent of hope, much as the bustling rhythm of Rome itself — a city that has resisted dreariness for 2,000 years — supplies a reminder that life goes on.

That’s always a good lesson, though “Bicycle Thieves” is a film entirely without didacticism. It shows everything and doesn’t need to explain anything, and so does away with the false choice between escapism and engagement. To care about a movie can be a way of caring about the world.

A. O. Scott *The New York Times*