

Title of the Module:

Vittorio De Sica and Bicycle Thief

Vittorio De Sica (1901—1974) occupies a conspicuous spot as far as post-World War II Italian cinema is concerned. De Sica is one of the most prominent pioneers and practitioners of Italian Neorealist cinema. De Sica's neorealist film classics *Suiscia* (Shoeshine, 1946) and *Ladri de Biciclette* (Bicycle Thief, 1948) are inseparable part of the canon of world cinema. These two films, though conceived with sociological theory on exclusion and poverty, have been praised and attacked for their sentimentalism realized through their psychological or emotional impact on the audience world over. De Sica's emotional and artistic affiliation with the disempowered has to be understood in the context of his own experience with poverty in his early ages. Along with De Sica, Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Cesare Zavattini, Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni were the other prominent Post WW II Italian filmmakers. Apart from being an internationally famous iconic film director, De Sica was both a stage actor and an Academy Award winning screen actor. He had directed about 30 feature films and two documentary films. He was born in the Italian province of Frosinone in 1901 in an economically poor family with little social recognition. However, by the time of his death in Paris in 1974, he was considered to be an important star in the galaxy of world cinema.

Learning Objectives:

To enable the learner to:

- a) understand the specialties of Vittorio De Sica as a filmmaker
- b) follow the Italian Neorealist cinema movement
- c) comprehend the filmography of Vittorio De Sica
- d) critically appreciate De Sica's film *Bicycle Thief*.

Vittorio De Sica's filmography is generally understood within the context of the movement in film, the Italian Neorealism which was in vogue, in early 1940s and ended by 1952. Mark Sheil and Robert Sheil say that, "The political battle for neorealism had two important effects: conservative interests managed to break the special relationship which briefly flourished between popular audiences and critical film culture; and political confirmism impacted upon the formal and thematic procedures of neorealist filmmakers, forcing them to look for new aesthetic directions and even to monitor how they described their films in public" (87). Neorealist films focused on the existing contemporary social issues and approached those issues without either romanticizing or demonizing them. Such films were made with the political aim of depicting social realities through realistic cinematic representations. Neorealist films emerged as counternarratives to the mainstream Italian films of 1930s which were pejoratively labelled as "white telephone" films by critics because such films depicted the luxurious lives of upper- and middle-class people. The *Telefoni bianchi* or white telephone films were very superficial where the immediate concerns of the common people were never shown. Dandies, female seductresses, womanizers peopled white telephone films. The white telephone is a motif of middle- or upper-class life.

On the contrary, the neorealist filmmakers attempted present the realistic life as it existed during post world war times in Italy. Traditionally the following features are attributed to Italian Neorealist films.

- Topical sociopolitical issues like unemployment, poverty, injustice were taken up for cinematic representation
- In the place for professional cinema stars, ordinary people or unknown actors were selected to act in Neorealist films.
- Neorealist films generally avoided costly and studio-bound production practices; instead, neorealist filmmakers preferred to shoot outdoor, on location in natural lighting.
- Narrative in neorealist films are often linear, slow paced without any attempt to emotionally manipulate the audience.
- Italian Neorealism was an intellectual movement in film aimed at providing an alternative perspective to people to understand the world around them with a realistic approach.
- Neorealist films had a strong emotional layer attached with them especially when they are sympathetic to impoverished people. However, we cannot say that Neorealist films cannot be labelled as sentimental.
- Slower and longer takes of mundane activities of ordinary people are widely found in neorealist films.
- Neorealist film dialogues are natural and often improvised on location. Dramatical and oversentimental dialogues are not used.
- Neorealist characters look ordinary, speak naturally, move freely, and engage with situations in an every-day life manner.

Synder and Curley say that, “De Sica’s 1940 films always aimed at the emotional heart of their audience; but it is our thesis that De Sica’s Impulse towards producing emotional reactions has to be understood as part of the postwar world, especially as De Sica saw. First, for example, within the context of postwar Italy De Sica saw himself not as a purveyor of sentimentality but as a physician supplying a stringent antidote to a prevailing sentimentality; a champion challenging an idealized vision of people which he understood to be a misrepresentation of human life and human living conditions. De Sica has always claimed to hate the heroic lie, which in preaching false notions of nobility and individual heroism, clouds our perception of ourselves, blurs our connection with others, and substitutes the sentimental lie for truth” (3-4).

De Sica’s film *Shoeshine* (1946) is often cited as the first cinema made in the Neorealist tradition. De Sica’s *Shoeshine* was conceived as a cinematic revolt against the mainstream Italian cinema which was far remote from real life. Cesare Zavattini, another towering figure of the neorealist film tradition, worked in close collaboration with De Sica in the making of the film *Shoeshine*. The main thematic thread of *Shoeshine* reveals the impoverished life, insecure life conditions, countless difficulties faced by two boys, Giuseppe Filippucci (played by Rinaldo Smordoni) and Pasquale Maggi (played by Franco Interlenghi) in the city of Rome after the immediate historical context of Second World War. Anchise Brizzi’s cinematography was able to capture the dilapidated cities and people driven to poverty in the city of Rome.

Dominique Chansel makes the following comment on the initial reception of *Shoeshine*. “*Shoeshine* was badly received for a number of reasons. Some people refused to accept the depressing reality portrayed in the film and expressed pseudo-patriotic indignation at the negative image it gave of Italy, whereas others from less privileged social groups simply

wanted to see some more entertaining films, precisely because they sought to escape from that very same reality. However, the film enjoyed widespread international success from that very same reality” (175). American occupation of Italy is represented through the depiction of the conspicuous presence of the American soldiers in the Italian cityscapes. These soldiers, for the young Giuseppe and Pasquale, are the main source of their income. The dream of possessing a horse drives the life of the boys forward. Apart from what they save from the money they get by shining the shoes of the American soldiers, the boys engage in petty black marketing also to save more money to buy horse. Unknowingly such petty crimes land the boys to the larger networks of big crimes committed by adults, followed by arrests, police torture, forced confessions, imprisonment and the final betrayal of Giuseppe by Pasquale. War leading to poverty, wartime black marketing, juvenile comradeship, juvenile ambition, insensitive judicial system, pathetic prison condition, custodial torture etc. make the film the closest possible narrative of the living conditions in the Italian cities in the immediate postwar context.

Bicycle Thief, 1948

Bicycle Thief directed by Vittorio De Sica is the most well-known of all the Neorealist films and one that has enjoyed great success and longevity. It was once ranked as the greatest of films by the journal *Sight and Sound*. In the journal, André Bazin wrote: "Bicycle Thieves is one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more plot, no more mise-en-scene. It is in the end the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality: no more cinema"

De Sica himself said of the film "my purpose, I was saying, is to find the element of drama in daily situations, the marvelous in the news, indeed, in local news, considered by most people as worn out materials."

Adapted from a story of the same name by Luigi Bartolini the film looks at the post world war II life in a poor Roman neighbourhood, where Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani) is looking for a job to feed his family of four, his son Bruno (Enzo Staiola), a new born baby and his wife Maria (Lianella Carell). Ricci is lucky to get a job from amongst the crowd of a thousand unemployed people but the job requires him to have a bicycle to paste advertisements across the city walls. His bicycle has been pawned to run the household. To redeem the bicycle, they need about seven thousand lira, which they manage by selling the bed sheets that Maria had received as her dowry gift.

Ricci and Maria are thrilled that they will now be able to make ends meet and even save some money. Ricci and his son Bruno leave early morning for work with their respective egg sandwiches. But misfortune strikes and Ricci's bicycle is stolen on the first day of the work itself. The rest of the film is literally a goose chase through the lanes, bylanes and markets of Rome to recover the lost bicycle. The cycle is lost for good as no one is able to help him, least of the all the police. On the visual element stylistics followed in *Bicycle Thief*, Giorgio Bertellini makes the following comment: "With its stark cinematic style theorized by Zavattini, and put into practice by De Sica, *The Bicycle Thieves* is perhaps the canonical of the neorealist works, the film owes a good deal to the Italian professional cinema of the 1930s. Apart from original innovative long-takes, De Sica's cinematic style makes extensive use of complex editing patterns, and shot/counter-shot exchanges, best visible in his intricate staging of the market sequences and in the frequent gazing exchanges between the two protagonists at the pawnbroker and outside the stadium" (44). The film ends on a rather poignant note with Ricci attempting unsuccessfully to steal a bicycle lying unattended. But unlike the thief he is caught

in an instant and is about to be handed over to the police when his son spots him getting beaten up. He comes and stands next to him crying over the humiliation and beatings his father is receiving. The old man whose bicycle Ricci had attempted to steal sees Bruno and in a moment of filial compassion allows Ricci to go. The film ends with the complete humiliation and defeat of Ricci in his struggle to find a decent job to feed his young family.

Just like the other films of Neorealism, *Bicycle Thief* too explores the life of the working class during the post-war period where unemployment, hunger, despair and prevailing social apathy lead to intense suffering, frustration and anxiety. The emotional core of the film is provided by the agony and despair father and son go through to recover the lost bicycle. In the process the run-down condition of Rome's subaltern spaces are made visible in the markets where stolen goods are sold, the areas where the poor live and also the areas inhabited by the bourgeoisie. The stark contrast in the life conditions of Ricci and his son and the rich family eating a Sunday lunch in the restaurant are made visible in the scene in which father and son stop to have a bite after their excruciating chase of the bicycle thief.

All the Neorealist films create a moral and ethical center in the choices the characters make in the face of brutal, unforgiving reality of their lives. In the two films discussed above, in *Ossessione*, Gino and Giovanna make morally disastrous choices and pay the price for it. In *Rome Open City*, Marina through her compromising moral choices has already turned into an unredeemable character. In *Bicycle Thief*, the father is an intensely moral character who wants to earn his living through honest means, but in the face of a cruel and merciless fate he is tempted to steal another man's cycle. He is punished and redeemed both at the same time because he is essentially a good man. His son who has been with him through the day looking for the lost bicycle provides what Andre Bazin calls the "ethical dimension" of the film. He says, "The public shame of the worker, exposed and clouted in the open street, is of little account compared with the fact that his son witnessed it. When he feels tempted to steal the bike, the silent presence of the little child, who guesses what his father is thinking is cruel to the verge of obscene." The film ends with Bruno reaching out to hold his father's hand as they disappear in the twilight and head home not knowing how they will face the future, what it holds for them.

Miracle in Milan (1951), *Umberto D.* (1952), *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963), *The Garden of Finzi-Continis* (1970) are the other internationally acclaimed films by Vittorio De Sica. Common man's everyday livelihood issues, rampant poverty and unemployment during the post WW II years, how poverty pressurizes otherwise morally good individuals to give up their ethics and the beauty and affections of domestic life are some of the recurrent themes in De Sica's films.

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