

21L.011, The Film Experience
Prof. David Thorburn
Lecture Notes

Lecture 20 -- De Sica, *Bicycle Thieves*

I. Vittorio De Sica (1902-74)

- 1942 *The Children Are Watching Us*
- 1946 *Shoeshine*
- 1948 *Bicycle Thieves*
- 1950 *Miracle in Milan*
- 1952 *Umberto D*
- 1960 *Two Women*
- 1971 *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

II. *Bicycle Thieves*

- Structure: organic form
- Social themes
- Character: father and son
- The title

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

Film viewing tonight:

De Sica, Vittorio. *Bicycle Thieves*. 1948.

- The Neo-Realist Counterplot
 - Striking the balance, with a story that has momentum while revealing meaningful, realistic character
 - The effort to make films that grew organically from reality
 - Counterplot: the tendency of Neo-Realist films to undermine the expectation of what comes next
 - Robert Altman and Renoir used some of this as well, but the Neo-Realists really brought this practice to its height
 - The natural rhythms of life, with all its details
 - Comparison: James Joyce treats realistic detail in a similar manner in *Ulysses*
 - Plot does not dominate the character
 - The story embodies the nature of the character, rather than the character acting in a given way to satisfy the demands of the story
 - The film and the camera might follow a particular plot line, but they are willing to be interrupted by detours in the character's life
 - These films are about life, and they move between comedy and seriousness, different stories, and different details, just as life moves through all these.
 - Passage by Andre Bazin, about the moment when the son has to stop to urinate while his father is trying to chase the bicycle thieves

- “That ambiguity that characterizes any fact”
 - The boy learns that his father is mortal, not a god
 - Clip from *Umberto D*: The despairing Umberto on a bus
 - The audience thinks Umberto might be ready to take his own life
 - Notice how the man next to him on the bus looks just as upset
 - An implication is that there are infinitely many stories, all of them just as complicated
 - Clip from Truffaut: children watching a puppet show
 - You can see how the older boys are cut off from the innocence of the rest of the children
 - The camera becomes endlessly interested in the magic of those many children’s faces, even though those children never appear in the film again
 - The endless complexity of reality is constantly threatening the forward momentum of the story
 - Clip from *Bicycle Thieves*
 - Notice how the camera follows the two beggar children after the man kicks one of them.
 - They’re not directly relevant to the story, but they’re still interesting
- De Sica’s Career
 - De Sica was an excellent actor himself, though his greatest achievements are as a director
 - His most luminous films were made in a short period:
 - *Shoeshine* (1946)
 - About shoeshine boys in postwar Rome
 - De Sica was definitely sympathetic to communist causes
 - It might seem a little heavy-handed in some ways, such as with the boy’s death at the end
 - You can feel that the film-makers are trying to give you a lesson about the hardship of life for children in post-war Rome
 - *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)
 - The ending is more complex than that of *Shoeshine*
 - *Miracle in Milan* (1950)
 - From a novel
 - An orphan escapes from an orphanage and goes to live in a shanty town in Milan. He works miracles that are hurtful only to the capitalist class.
 - It’s a sort of communist fantasy
 - *Umberto D* (1952)
 - *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini* (1971)
 - About the buildup to the Holocaust
 - It’s also a coming of age story

- The main character is a working-class scholar, but he's denied access to the libraries, and so he comes into contact with the life of a very wealthy Jewish Italian family when they let him use their private library.
- *Bicycle Thieves*
 - The film has a perfect organic naturalness
 - There is a powerful momentum, but the momentum originates from life itself, not from any artificially constructed plot
 - Watch the power of the scene where Ricci and his wife go to pawn their linens to get back the bicycle
 - Notice the huge quantities of linens you see in storage – it's as though all the sheets in Rome have gotten pawned off
 - We're set up to be constantly terrified that the bicycle will be stolen, before it ever is
 - Organic structure of the film: everything that follows has to do with how Ricci responds to the loss of his bicycle
 - The whole film takes place in a weekend
 - The story is so natural, that you're not aware that anything fictitious has been added.
 - Institutions – they all seem to be failures
 - The police are of no help
 - As the father begins to show his failings under the stress of losing his bicycle, the son begins to show his strength
 - They begin to switch places
 - The exploration of character also becomes an exploration of the physical spaces of Rome
 - There is an immense emotional depth to their interactions
 - Note the scene where Ricci becomes terrified that his son might have drowned
 - Ricci takes him to a restaurant that he can't afford in an effort to apologize to his son
 - The restaurant becomes a powerful exploration of class differences
 - When Ricci finally finds the thief, the thief is protected by his neighbors
 - It's important that the title is *Bicycle Thieves*, not *Bicycle Thief*
 - The film suggests that we're all thieves in a certain sense
 - We're driven to it by desperation
 - Ricci's son rescues him twice
 - Ricci looks like he might be arrested or beaten to death, but his son's presence brings mercy from an authority figure
 - There's a moral and psychological complexity to this film, along with a inspiring and generous sense of human nature