



# Bicycle Thieves

## A contemporary review

Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, like Rossellini's *Paisa*, came to London with a fabulous reputation to live up to, and, in a way, to live down. To *Paisa*, a film made in a state of almost feverish immediacy, the two-year gap between continental and London showings was costly. The crudities inseparable from Rossellini's hotfoot production methods took on larger proportions, the film's courageous humanity had lost perhaps some of its heat in retrospect. In any case, the London critics found cause to lower the film's status. Public audiences had fewer quibbles.

The word 'great' was affixed to De Sica's film by Clair, Becker, Lean, Cavalcanti, Ustinov and numbers of travellers from Italy as long as a year ago, when a percipient British exhibitor could have bought it for a quarter of the price (£5,000) eventually paid. Confronted with a reputed masterpiece that turned out to be a masterpiece, the British Press came fairly clean. There were little murmured warnings about 'slightness', and a ludicrous belittlement from a prominent critic who smelled communism – the self-same critic, it will be remembered, who gave Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* 'zero for achievement and one for trying'. But the reviews, guarded or otherwise, were sufficient to start *Bicycle Thieves* on what may well be the most successful record of any foreign film in British cinemas.

*Bicycle Thieves* is a wholly satisfying film in that De Sica has so simplified and mastered the mechanics of the job that nothing stands between you and his intention. It can be likened to a painting that is formed in an intensity of concentration, and is as good as finished before it reaches the canvas. In fact, *Bicycle Thieves*, as a film properly should, relates to plastic and in no sense to dramatic or literary art. De Sica displays this with the opening compilation of visuals, which at once places his family in an environment of slow, sapping industrial poverty, where the bicycle and the bed linen represent the last claims of domestic pride, and where the pawnshop and the tenement fortune-teller batten on misery. It is, needless to say, a Rome the visitor sees though seldom penetrates, but where, before the war, he might have admired the triumphs of Mussolini's industrial architecture.

At the same time and with the same economy, De Sica draws his family portrait group. An unemployed artisan with baffled dreams of security, a young wife with fading looks and breaking temper, a small boy full of premature knowledge who mingles criticism of his father with worship, and clownish innocence with precocious responsibility. De Sica may have been lucky with this amazing child (Enzo Staiola), with the father and with nearly all the rest of his unprofessional cast, but he spent a long time and used a rare instinct in finding them.

For all that, by some process of magnetism, De Sica has drawn from this boy an unparalleled child performance, it is the man who is his symbol of the human plight. He is the helpless individual, herded with, yet isolated from his fellows, who is caught in a situation. To De Sica and many Italians who have absorbed their Kafka and Sartre, this is the general theme of the century. It might be said to parallel the situation of Italy herself.

The story of that heartrending Sunday search after the stolen bicycle is now too familiar to bear retelling. Its simplicity, far from being evidence of slightness, is the outcome of a discipline that has rigorously set itself against any facile effects of 'poetry', but has evolved a complex pattern of mood and incident. The ironies, humours, oddities and heartbreaks of this adventure in the modern jungle connect with the experience of any town-dweller who has been isolated at some time or times by misfortune, great or small, and finds his familiar world suddenly hostile and strange.

*Bicycle Thieves* is the true genre movie, and a superlative exercise in screen realism. Starting with his conception of the man and the boy, De Sica spent a year preparing the film. When it came to shooting, he found he had no need to refer to the script; the whole thing was clear in his mind. The fluid crowd scenes, so beautifully composed and natural, were obtained by roping off the streets with the help of the police, and enlisting the passers-by. The casual effects were all calculated.

De Sica's lifetime of experience in the theatre and cinema as a leading man and comedian (which led him to abjure the professional actor) may account for his power to compel those flawless performances from his amateurs. But it is a painter's instinct, probably inherited from his mother, which enriches his films with such comprehensive detail. His detached compassion, his sense of irony, his tolerant understanding, are the fruits of long study of his fellow men in difficult times. Anger does not show in his films, and anger is a concomitant of hope. Yet I do not find the conclusion of *Bicycle Thieves* wholly pessimistic. Comradeship did to some extent sustain this man and doubtless, one feels, will do so again.

With *Bicycle Thieves*, De Sica considers he has sufficiently exploited 'realism' for the moment. An artist who has found his true medium somewhat late in life, he possesses an unpredictable capacity for development. And in Cesare Zavattini he has found the scriptwriter who can play Prévert to his Carné. Their next film (the third of the trilogy which *Shoeshine* started), will essay a new form – 'irrealism'. De Sica claims that in this film, *The Poor Disturb*, he will make 'the unreal seem real, the improbable seem probable, and the impossible seem possible' without the use of camera tricks. This could mean plain fantasy or, preferably, an experimental attempt to go beyond literal vision in the way Jean Vigo did. But the structure will be realistic, the actors non-professional, and their milieu the slums of Milan. De Sica believes in poor people.

**Richard Winnington, *Sight and Sound*, March 1950**

### **Vittorio De Sica on 'Bicycle Thieves'**

To see is very useful to an artist. Most men do not want to see, because often the pain of others troubles them. We, on the contrary, want to see. Our one aim is to see.

How many times the workman Antonio passed close to me: I met him in the street, at church, at the door of the cinema while he read the programme outside. I saw him several times with his son. In Italy men often go out with their sons. Children converse and argue with their fathers, become confidants, and very often become no longer children, but 'little men'.

This, I think, is universal, and that is why the image of these two beings, which I always saw united, made me decide to choose the story of Antonio and Bruno.

Lamberto Maggiorani, a simple workman of Breda, was very kind to me. He left his own work for two months to lend his face to me. I never had any difficulty with him ... He lived with great truth and naturalness the part of Antonio, from whom was stolen the tool he needed for living – his bicycle. It was not hard for me to direct Maggiorani.

Enzo Staiola is the most lovable child in the world. He is good, sensitive, intelligent. I don't think it is possible to create a character like that of Bruno without having the qualities which Enzo possesses.

He is a poor child, son of refugees whom I met by accident. His open, communicative face appealed to me at once. His expressions are half comic. His eyes have a soft and melancholy look. With his large nose and chubby cheeks he has the unmistakable look of a child who has known suffering.

I do not think I have to explain why I had no difficulty whatever in directing this child, who my good fortune enabled me to meet by chance in the street.

### ***Sight and Sound*, March 1950**

---

#### **BICYCLE THIEVES (LADRI DI BICICLETTE)**

*Director:* Vittorio De Sica

*Production Company:* Produzioni De Sica S.A.

*Production Manager:* Umberto Scarpelli

*Production Inspector:* Nino Misiano

*Production Secretary:* Roberto Moretti

*Assistant Directors:* Gerardo Guerrieri, Luisa Alessandri

*Screenplay:* Oreste Biancoli, Suso D'Amico, Vittorio De Sica,

Adolfo Franci, Gherardo Gherardi, Gerardo Guerrieri, Cesare Zavattini

*Story:* Cesare Zavattini

*Based on the novel by:* Luigi Bartolini

*Director of Photography:* Carlo Montuori

*Camera Operator:* Mario Montuori

*Editor:* Eraldo Da Roma

*Art Director:* Antonino Traverso

*Music:* Alessandro Cicognini

*Music Director:* Willy Ferrero

*Sound:* Gino Fiorelli

*uncredited*

*Song:* Giuseppe Cioffi

*Boom Operator:* Bruno Brunacci

#### **Cast**

Lamberto Maggiorani (*Antonio Ricci*)

Enzo Staiola (*Bruno Ricci*)

Lianella Carell (*Maria Ricci*)

Elena Altieri (*patroness*)

Gino Saltamerenda (*Baiocco*)

Giulio Chiari (*the pauper*)

Vittorio Antonucci (*the thief*)

Michele Sakara (*charity secretary*)

Fausto Guerzoni (*amateur actor*)

Carlo Jachino (*beggar*)

Emma Druetti

*uncredited*

Massimo Randisi (*young boy in restaurant*)

Ida Bracci Dorati (*the 'saint'*)

Peppino Spadaro (*police sergeant*)

Mario Meniconi (*Meniconi, the dustman*)

Checco Rissone (*policeman in Piazza Vittorio*)

Giulio Battiferri (*man who defends the real thief*)

Sergio Leone (*seminarist sheltering from rain*)

Memmo Carotenuto

Nando Bruno

Giovanni Corporale

Eolo Capritti

Spoletini

Italy 1948

89 mins

---

#### **BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

#### **BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

#### **SIGHT AND SOUND**

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25\*

\* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only).

More info: [sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk](http://sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk)

**SIGHT AND SOUND**

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](http://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)