



CHASING THE REAL: ITALIAN NEOREALISM

Umberto D.

Umberto D.

Director: Vittorio De Sica
Production Companies: Rizzoli Film, Produzione Films Vittorio De Sica, Produzione Film Giuseppe Amato
Producer: Giuseppe Amato
Production Manager: Nino Misiano
Production Secretary: Pasquale Misiano
Production Inspector: Roberto Moretti
Assistant Director: Luisa Alessandri
2nd Assistant Director: Franco Montemurro
Story and Screenplay by: Cesare Zavattini
Director of Photography: G.R. Aldo
Camera Operator: Giuseppe Rotunno
Assistant Camera Operators: Michele Cristiani, Giuseppe Tinelli
Stills Photography: Angelo Pennoni
Editor: Eraldo Da Roma
Assistant Editor: Marcella Benvenuti
Art Director: Virgilio Marchi
Set Decorator: Ferdinando Ruffo
Music: Alessandro Cicognini
Sound: Ennio Sensi
Cast:
Carlo Battisti (*Umberto Domenico Ferrari*)
Maria Pia Casilio (*Maria, the maid*)
Lina Gennari (*Antonia, the landlady*)
Memmo Carotenuto (*patient*)
Alberto Albani Barbieri (*the landlady's 'fiancé'*)
Ilona Simova
Elena Rea
Lamberto Maggiorani
Pasquale Campagnola
Riccardo Ferri
Napoleone (*Flick*)
Italy 1951
89 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)

Restored in 4K by CSC – Cineteca Nazionale, in collaboration with Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, Associazione Vittorio De Sica and RTI

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SPOILER WARNING

 The following notes give away some of the plot.

Vittorio de Sica made his name in the Italian cinema in the 30s as a light romantic actor. He appeared in a series of comedies, mainly under Mario Camerini, for whose films he became what Albert Prejean had been for Clair's – a good-looking, likeable local boy who sang and danced a little and engagingly wooed a succession of pretty working-class heroines. That he was not satisfied with this popular success, he made clear as early as 1929 (when his reputation was still confined to the music-hall and light comedy stage): 'I want to put aside once and for all the character of the good, slightly distracted sentimental boy. I want to attack something more profound.'

The chance did not come for many years. De Sica directed his first film in 1940 and followed it with three more light comedies, all following the pattern of the Camerini films, with de Sica himself in the central part. The real opportunity 'to attack something more profound' came just after the war when de Sica and Cesare Zavattini made *Sciuscia*. 'What struck Zavattini and me at the end of the war, was the human solitude,' de Sica has said in retrospect, and the comment goes some way towards explaining the remarkable change of style and intensity which came into his work. It is revealing in two ways. First, because de Sica insists on bracketing his name with Zavattini's when referring to the creative impetus behind the films. Second, because it implies not so much a new choice of subjects as a complete reorientation of attitude.

The change of subject matter was, admittedly, in itself radical: *Sciuscia* and the films which followed it are very far removed from what an Italian critic has called 'the white telephone films' of the pre-war Italian cinema, but this is only an incidental virtue. The aim of *Sciuscia* and the rest was to report realistically on the contemporary scene, a fact which has frequently earned the films the label of being political. This, however, is only partly just. *Sciuscia*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan* and *Umberto D.* are political films in the sense that they deal with problems which are subject to legislation and political control; but they offer no solutions and propagate no specific programme. Zavattini has spoken of the new style as 'a moral discovery, an appeal to order' and the films themselves bear out that the impulse behind them is primarily a moral one. What remains remarkable about them as a group is that their moral passion, which was born of the war and could find expression only after the release from fascism, has grown in intensity with every film.

Zavattini believes that the writer's function is to observe and record reality, not to invent situations and to offer solutions. It is an ambitious aim which, by Zavattini's own admission, commercial demands have never yet allowed him to fulfil. *Umberto D.* comes closest to the ideal. Its script, for the first time, is Zavattini's sole work, written without the customary Italian committee of writers.

Umberto Domenico Ferrari (*Umberto D.* for short) is a lonely old man, cold, uncommunicative, clinging to his ingrained bourgeois standards of behaviour and dress in spite of his inability to pay the rent at a cheap lodging house. His only friends are a pet dog and the maid at the lodging house, who is pregnant by a soldier. The old man tries to sell his possessions to raise money for rent and finally, as a last resort, goes into hospital to save his food bill. On his return the landlady tells him that he must leave his room. With the prospect of having no home to go to, the old man contemplates suicide but, finding he cannot bear the thought of leaving behind his dog, attempts to throw himself in front of a train holding the dog in his arms: at the last moment, the dog jumps from him and cringes away in terror. With no possible solution to his problem, the old man tries to regain the dog's confidence and, in the delight of succeeding, runs joyously away into the distance, his dog restored to him, the problems of his physical existence unresolved.

The similarities to *Bicycle Thieves* are immediately striking. In the earlier film the practical questions – how to regain the bicycle, how to survive without work – are

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Lights of Variety Luci del varietà

Sat 1 Jun 13:15; Mon 10 Jun 20:45;
Thu 13 Jun 18:00; Thu 20 Jun 18:20

Stromboli Stromboli, terra di Dio

Sun 2 Jun 18:15; Mon 3 Jun 12:00;
Wed 12 Jun 20:40; Sat 22 Jun 15:30

Rome 11:00 (aka Rome 11 O'Clock) Roma ore 11

Tue 4 Jun 14:50; Fri 7 Jun 18:10; Sun 16 Jun 14:00;
Mon 24 Jun 20:50

The Women of Italian Neorealism

Tue 4 Jun 18:10

Bellissima

Tue 4 Jun 20:35; Mon 10 Jun 18:10

Umberto D.

Wed 5 Jun 20:40; Sat 8 Jun 18:00;
Wed 19 Jun 20:40; Sat 29 Jun 13:10

Journey to Italy Viaggio in Italia

Thu 6 Jun 12:15; Sun 9 Jun 13:00; Tue 11 Jun
11:30; Fri 21 Jun 20:50; Tue 25 Jun 18:15

The Machine That Kills Bad People

La macchina ammazzacattivi

Tue 11 Jun 18:10; Sat 15 Jun 13:40;
Wed 19 Jun 12:20; Thu 27 Jun 20:55

Miracle in Milan Miracolo a Milano

Thu 13 Jun 20:40; Sun 30 Jun 12:10

Relaxed Screening:

The Machine That Kills Bad People

La macchina ammazzacattivi + intro and discussion
Mon 24 Jun 18:35

With thanks to

Camilla Cormanni, Paola Ruggiero,
Germana Ruscio, Marco Cicala at Cinecittà
Carmen Accaputo at
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never answered. Yet the innocent child's instinctive reaction to the father's momentary fall from grace establishes, after a brief estrangement, a firmer bond between them: moral values at least are salvaged. Umberto's situation leads him similarly to contemplate suicide and, later, separation from his dog. The dog senses this and, through its instinct for survival, loses its trust in its master. It is this estrangement that makes Umberto come to terms with his situation. His last gesture does not suggest any practical solution – he still has no money, nowhere to go – but it represents a moral victory, an affirmation of solidarity.

Umberto D. cannot be regarded as a work of that ultimate austerity which Zavattini demands from a neorealist film. Its story is loosely dramatised and its progression of events mounts to an interior, if not to a practical, climax. Yet in its continual emphasis on dramatically irrelevant detail, the film comes close to Zavattini's ideal. A girl rises from her bed, stretches herself, yawns, looks through a window to see some cats returning from their night out, goes into the kitchen, takes a mouthful of water from the tap... and so on. This is a sequence from the film and it is observed in minute detail: everything is recorded at its own tempo. The approach, it is important to note, is the opposite of the usual one of the documentary film: reality is not observed for the social facts it may reveal, but for its own sake – for, in Zavattini's phrase, 'the love of reality', the joy and pain of observing human beings as they are.

Zavattini's neorealist technique imposes on the director a severe discipline, most notably in the demand to use non-professional actors. The players are asked not to 'act' but to 'be': the player must become inseparable from the part. This makes the usual critical criteria about acting irrelevant and makes it difficult to speak with confidence about the performances. Yet, this admitted, there remains the fact that some non-professionals 'behave' in front of the camera more effectively than others. The boy in *Bicycle Thieves* engaged one's sympathy and interest immediately – he would have done so, one suspects, had one met him in the street. Neither of the chief players in *Umberto D.* quite has this natural aptitude and it is the greatest tribute to de Sica's skill that their performances never appear in the least artificial. De Sica's extraordinary tact with people enables him to get performances that are always real and dignified. Whether they are more than this must depend on the players chosen and in *Umberto D.* they sometimes fall short. In the scenes demanding strong emotional reactions, de Sica's unadorned method of observation occasionally leaves the players, as it were, too much on their own in the centre of the screen.

The best scenes in *Umberto D.* – the maid rising in the morning, the sequences at the soup kitchen and the hospital, the whole last reel – have a purity of effect which gives them, in context, a profound poetic intensity. Although the episodes mount, in a dramatic sense, slowly, there is behind them a kind of passionate identification with the characters' human predicament which creates an extraordinary concentration. De Sica has brought his subject to the screen with a directness which springs from an inner conviction and faith in his characters. It gives the film, in spite of faults in execution, the unmistakable authority and completeness of a masterpiece.

Apart from its remarkable human qualities, *Umberto D.* is an experimental film of the first importance in that it extends a relatively new approach to filmmaking to a daring extreme. A number of recent films by established directors – Visconti's *La terra trema*, Renoir's *The River*, Ford's *Wagon Master* – all employ, in their different ways and with their different aims, a discursive approach to character not primarily dependent on dramatic narrative: they make their points through obliquely relevant passages of observation rather than through an organised dramatic pattern. *Umberto D.* takes the process a stage farther: it proceeds in a long chain of side-observations, each used for its own inherent interest. In de Sica's hands, the method carries the cinema's most direct response to human behaviour.

Karel Reisz, *Sight and Sound*, October-December 1953