

Retrospective review of DeSica movies, Richard Brody, *New Yorker*, September 14, 2015.

If Vittorio De Sica had directed only one movie, the 1948 drama “Bicycle Thieves,” his name would still be enshrined in the history of cinema. That film—screening Sept. 16-19 in Film Forum’s monthlong De Sica retrospective (Sept. 9-Oct. 8)—is perhaps the quintessential work of Italian neorealism, and it displays the movement’s glories as well as its limitations. It’s the story of Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani), an unemployed man in Rome who is hired as a poster hanger, contingent on his owning a bicycle. During his first day on the job, his bicycle is stolen, and he frantically searches the city for it, accompanied by his young son, Bruno (Enzo Staiola).

Revealing the catastrophic impact of seemingly minor events on people who are struggling to subsist, De Sica endows slender side business and incidental pictorial details with high suspense and tragic grandeur. With a keen succession of tracking shots amid crowds at a market and a church, he transforms the sheer scale of the city and the vast number of residents in similarly desperate straits into a symphonic lament for the human condition.

But the plethora of incidents, together with the constraining embrace of De Sica’s sympathies, reduce the film to its plot and truncate the characters’ inner lives. Nonetheless, the actors lend the characters vibrant identities far beyond those sketched in the script. De Sica was originally an actor, and his films, even when starring nonprofessionals such as Maggiorani and Staiola, are feasts of performance.

De Sica let his imagination run wild in the 1951 political comedy “Miracle in Milan” (Sept. 18-19, Sept. 22-23, and Sept. 25-26), a fantasy that’s filled with astonishing special effects and slapstick stunts. Its Chaplinesque star, Francesco Golisano—a superbly subtle physical comedian and another nonprofessional—plays Totò, a penniless orphan in a shantytown on the outskirts of the city. When a predatory landlord summons his private army to displace its residents, Totò miraculously obtains the power of wish fulfillment, which his desperate neighbors quickly abuse. The satire on the base cravings of rich and poor alike is also a cry of despair; De Sica’s celestial visions suggest that nothing short of a miracle will save those in need.

The Hollywood luminaries Jennifer Jones and Montgomery Clift star in De Sica’s 1953 English-language drama, “Terminal Station” (Sept. 30), for which Truman Capote wrote the dialogue. Jones plays Mary Forbes, a married American woman who breaks off an affair she began while visiting Rome, with Giovanni Doria (Clift), a local professor. As Mary is leaving, Giovanni finds her at the train station and tries to persuade her to stay with him. Their tense wrangling is the core of the film; De Sica gets furious, galvanic performances from Jones and Clift and captures them in closeups of a screen-piercing immediacy. Yet, yielding to habit, De Sica also embeds the lovers in a web of picturesque incidents that are mere distractions from the operatic passion of their romantic crisis. ♦

A Review of “Bicycle Thieves,” by Bosley Crowther, *NYT*, December 13, 1949.

Again the Italians have sent us a brilliant and devastating film in Vittorio De Sica's rueful drama of modern city life, "The Bicycle Thief." Widely and fervently heralded by those who had seen it abroad (Where it already has won several prizes at various film festivals), this heart-tearing

picture of frustration, which came to the World yesterday, bids fair to fulfill all the forecasts of its absolute triumph over here. For once more the talented De Sica, who gave us the shattering "Shoe Shine," that desperately tragic demonstration of juvenile corruption in post-war Rome, has laid hold upon and sharply imaged in simple and realistic terms a major—indeed, a fundamental and universal—dramatic theme. It is the isolation and loneliness of the little man in this complex social world that is ironically blessed with institutions to comfort and protect mankind. Although he has again set his drama in the streets of Rome and has populated it densely with significant contemporary types, De Sica is concerned here with something which is not confined to Rome nor solely originated by post-war disorder and distress. He is pondering the piteous paradoxes of poverty, no matter where, and the wretched compulsions of sheer self-interest in man's desperate struggle to survive. And while he has limited his vista to a vivid cross-section of Roman life, he actually is holding a mirror up to millions of civilized men. His story is lean and literal, completely unburdened with "plot," and written by Cesare Zavattini with the camera exclusively in mind. Based on a novel by Luigi Bartolini, it is simply the story of a poor working man whose essential bicycle is stolen from him and who hunts feverishly to find it throughout one day. The man is a modest bill-poster; he must have a bicycle to hold his newly found job; he has a wife and small son dependent on him; the loss is an overwhelming blow. And so, for one long, dismal Sunday he and his youngster scour the teeming streets of Rome, seeking that vital bicycle which, we must tell you, they never find. That is the picture's story—it is as stark and direct as that, and it comes to a close with a fade-out as inconclusive as a passing nod. But during the course of its telling in the brilliant director's trenchant style, it is as full and electric and compelling as any plot-laden drama you ever saw. Every incident, every detail of the frantic and futile hunt is a taut and exciting adventure, in which hope is balanced against despair. Every movement of every person in it, every expression on every face is a striking illumination of some implicit passion or mood. Just to cite a few episodes and crises, there is the eloquent inrush of hope when the workman acquires his bicycle after his wife pawns the sheets from their beds; there is the horrible, sickening moment when he realizes that the bicycle is gone, seized and ridden away before his own eyes by a thief who escapes in the traffic's swirl; there is the vain and pathetic expedition to hunt the parts of the bicycle in a second-hand mart and there is the bleak and ironic pursuit of a suspect into a church during a mass for the poor. There are also lighter touches, such as a flock of babbling German seminarians rudely crowding the father and boy out of a shelter into the rain and a dash after the thief into a bordello, with the little boy compelled to remain outside. Indeed, the whole structure of this picture, with its conglomeration of experiences, all interlocked with personal anguish, follows a classic plan. It is a plan in which the comedy and tragedy of daily life are recognized. As a matter of fact, both the story and the structure of this film might have been used by Charlie Chaplin in the old days to make one of his great wistful films, for "The Bicycle Thief" is, in essence, a poignant and bitter irony—the irony of a little fellow buffeted by an indifferent world. As directed by De Sica, however, the natural and the real are emphasized, with the film largely shot in actual settings and played by a non-professional cast. In the role of the anguished workman, Lamberto Maggiorani is superb, expressing the subtle mood transitions of the man with extraordinary power. And Enzo Staiola plays his small son with a firmness that fully reveals the rugged determination and yet the latent sensitivity of the lad. One of the most over-powering incidents in the film occurs when the father, in desperation, thoughtlessly slaps the anxious boy. Lianella Carell is also moving as the mother—a smaller role—and Vittorio Antonucci is hard and shabby as the thief. He is the only professional in the large cast. One further word for the music which has been aptly written and used to raise

the emotional potential—the plaintive theme that accompanies the father and son, the music of rolling bicycles and the "morning music," full of freshness and bells. De Sica has artfully wrapped it into a film that will tear your heart, but which should fill you with warmth and compassion. People should see it—and they should care. Excellent English subtitles translate the Italian dialogue.

THE BICYCLE THIEF, story and screenplay by Cesare Zavattini, based on the novel of the same name by Luigi Bartolini; directed by Vittorio De Sica; produced in Rome by De Sica Production Company, and released here by Mayer-Burstyn. At the World.
Antonio
Lamberto Maggiorani
Maria Lianella Carell
Bruno Enzo Staiola
The Medium
Elena Altieri
The Thief Vittorio Antonucci
Balocco Gino Saltamerenda

TCM

Archive Materials

- [Read TCM's article on The Bicycle Thief](#)

The Bicycle Thief (1948)

After two years of unemployment, Antonio, a laborer, finally secures a job putting up movie posters around Rome. In order to travel from location to location, he has to have a bicycle, which he gets out of hock by pawning the family's linens. But on his first day of work, the bicycle is stolen. With his son in tow, he explores working-class Rome in search of the thief, who always seems a few steps ahead of him. As his search leads him to a union hall, a fortune teller's and a warehouse, he grows more desperate until he sees a theft of his own as the only way of saving his family. As his odyssey through working-class Rome grows in stature, Antonio becomes a powerful metaphor for the plight of humanity caught in a hostile universe.



Producer-Director: Vittorio De Sica

Screenplay: Cesare Zavattini, Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Oreste Biancoli, Adolfo Franci & Gerardo Guerrieri

Based on the novel by Luigi Bartolini

Cinematography: Carlo Montuori

Editing: Eraldo Da Roma

Art Direction: Antonio Traverso

Music: Alessandro Cicognini

Cast: Lamberto Maggiorani (Antonio), Lianella Carell (Maria), Enzo Staiola (Bruno), Elena Altieri (The Lady), Vittorio Antonucci (The Thief), Gino Saltamerenda (Baiocco)

BW-93m.

Why THE BICYCLE THIEF is Essential

Many critics have hailed **The Bicycle Thief** as the definitive example of Italian Neorealism, a cinema style that came to prominence after World War II as directors took their cameras into the streets to film stories of everyday, working-class life, often with non-professional actors in key roles. The movement was both a reaction against the slick, state-controlled studio films made in Italy in the '30s, dubbed "white telephone" films by their detractors, and a public confession of guilt by the artists who had attempted to collaborate with Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime.

Vittorio De Sica's direction of mostly non-actors in **The Bicycle Thief** is one of the most effective uses of non-professionals in film history. Drawing on his experience as an actor (the director had been a stage and screen star long before moving behind the camera), he drew subtly nuanced performances from his cast, often catching emotional responses and physical changes of which the performers themselves were unaware. De Sica would later comment on directing non-actors: "It is not the actor who lends the character a face which, however versatile he may be, is necessarily his own, but the character who reveals himself, sooner or later in 'that' particular face and in no other...their ignorance is an advantage, not a handicap....The man in the street, particularly if he is directed by someone who is himself an actor, is raw material that can be molded at will."

With the controversy over the film's failure to pass the U.S. film industry's Production Code and its subsequent distribution by three independent theatre chains that had never before carried a film without the Code's Seal of Approval, **The Bicycle Thief**, became a key factor in bringing an end to the film industry's self-censorship in America.

As Antonio searches the city for his stolen bicycle, De Sica presents a cross-section of post-war Rome's working-class world, from neighborhood cafes to pawnshops to a brothel. With its out-of-luck lower-class protagonist, careful attention to gesture and subtle shifts from tragic to comic, **The Bicycle Thief**, more than any other of De Sica's films, demonstrates the influence of Charles Chaplin on his work.

The story of a man led to make a fateful choice that ultimately costs him his dignity, **The Bicycle Thief** stands with Arthur Miller's classic play *Death of a Salesman* as an influential work in reshaping tragedy for a modern world where working-class men and women have replaced kings and queens as central figures.

by Frank Miller

SOURCES:

Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present by Peter Bonadella

[back to top](#)

The Bicycle Thief (1948)

None of the leading roles in **The Bicycle Thief** were played by professional actors. However, some did make other films after this 1948 feature. Lamberto Maggiorani played small roles in several films, including an unbilled bit in De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952) and a small role in the same director's *The Last Judgment* (1961). Enzo Staiola also played small roles, even turning up in a bit in *A Tale of Five Women* (1951), which also featured Maggiorani; he also had a small part in the Hollywood film *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). He eventually gave up acting to become a math teacher. Lianella Carell, Antonio's wife, worked for De Sica again as Toto's wife in *The Gold of Naples* (1954). Ironically, the one professional actor in the film, Vittorio Antonucci, who played the thief, never made another film.

Julien Duvivier's 1952 French comedy *Holiday for Henrietta* features a reference to the film when a screenwriter in search of a story reads the newspaper account of a man stealing a bicycle when his is stolen.

Indian director Satyajit Ray has acknowledged the film's influence on his breakthrough picture, *Pather Panchali* (1955), the first film in his "Apu Trilogy." **The Bicycle Thief** has also been credited as an influence on the work of Ingmar Bergman and on the new Iranian cinema.

De Sica's work, particularly **The Bicycle Thief**, was a major influence on the rise of the American independent film movement. Young directors like Martin Scorsese and Brian De Palma in the '60s followed his example in taking their cameras to the streets, while John Cassavettes excelled at mixing professional actors with non-actor friends, family members and others.

The Bicycle Thief inspired the 1978 Reggae musical *Rockers*, starring Leroy "Horsemouth" Wallace, and the 1994 independent film *Messenger*, set in the African-American community.

Woody Allen included a scene with a bedridden fortune teller in his 1984 film *Broadway Danny Rose* as a tribute to **The Bicycle Thief**.

Tim Burton's 1985 *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* uses the theft of Pee-wee Herman's bicycle as the excuse for the title character's madcap tour of the U.S.

In 1989, Maurizio Nichetti directed a loving spoof of the film called *The Icicle Thief* which starred famed Italian clown Roberto Benigni.

For its 50th anniversary, **The Bicycle Thief** was reissued in a newly restored print. It played to ecstatic reviews and was a surprising financial success.

In a 2009 episode of *Nurse Jackie*, the hospital administrator played by Anna Deavere Smith thanks a film critic under hospital care for recommending **The Bicycle Thief**.

by Frank Miller

[back to top](#)

The Bicycle Thief (1948)

The film's proper title would be *Bicycle Thieves*, but it was turned to the singular for its U.S. release. The original not only links Antonio, who attempts to steal a bicycle at the film's climax, with the thief who had stolen his vehicle, but suggests that in a world riddled with poverty we are all thieves. Each person's success robs another of his livelihood.

The Bicycle Thief's U.S. distributors, Arthur Mayer and Joseph Burstyn, applied for a Production Code Seal of Approval so the film could play the major second run chains after its art house run. PCA head Joseph Breen said he would approve the film with two cuts, a brief moment in which Antonio's son, Bruno, tries to relieve himself against a wall and the scene in which Antonio chases the thief into a brothel. De Sica refused to allow the cuts, so Mayer and Burstyn appealed Breen's decision, only to have representatives of the major studios side with the PCA. When word of the disagreement got out, the press pilloried Breen and the Code, claiming that he only demanded the cuts to protect Hollywood films from competition. It didn't help that he had allowed a joke about urination in 20th Century-Fox's *Cheaper by the Dozen* and a brothel scene in Universal's *Buccaneer Gold* (both 1950). The charge of protectionism makes little sense. Even with **The Bicycle Thief's** art house success, it was not likely to pose a serious threat to the escapist entertainments of Hollywood.

While the film's PCA status was under appeal, Mayer and Burstyn did little to ingratiate themselves to Breen by placing an ad in New York papers picturing a caricature of Bruno, seen from the rear and saying "Please come and see me before they cut me out of **Bicycle Thief!**"

The PCA's parent organization, the Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA) had recently amended its rules to exempt distributors from the fine for presenting films that did not bear the Code's Seal of Approval. When it became clear that **The Bicycle Thief** would not pass the Code, the Skouras Circuit became the first major independent theatre chain to book a film without the Seal. Two other independent chains picked it up almost immediately.

The poster Antonio is putting up before his bicycle is stolen is for the 1946 Rita Hayworth classic *Gilda*.

The brand name on Antonio's bicycle is *Fides*, the Italian for "faith," symbolically relating its loss to the loss of faith in traditional institutions.

After **The Bicycle Thief** was completed, Lamberto Maggiorani lost his job as a steelworker, experiencing his character's poverty first hand.

SOURCES:

Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin & Violence on Screen by Frank Miller

Memorable Quotes from THE BICYCLE THIEF

"You live and you suffer." -- Lamberto Maggiorani, as Antonio Ricci.

"Why should I kill myself working when I'll end up just as dead?" -- Maggiorani, as Antonio.

"There's a cure for everything except death." -- Maggiorani, as Antonio.

"I've been cursed since the day I was born." -- Maggiorani.

"Your mother and her prayers can't help us." -- Maggiorani.

"I mind my own business, I bother nobody, and what do I get? Trouble." -- Giulio Chiari, as The Beggar.

"Either you will find it immediately or you will never find it." -- Ida Bracci Dorati, as La Santona.

Compiled by Frank Miller

[back to top](#)

The Bicycle Thief (1948)

The term Neorealism was first used in Italy in reference to literature and studio arts. It was first applied to film by Mario Serandrei, the editor of Luchino Visconti's 1943 *Ossessione*. After the war, it came to be applied to all realistic Italian films depicting life during and after World War II. It was characterized by social criticism, the use of real locations and casting non-actors or actors directed to act as naturally as possible.

Director Vittorio De Sica had begun his association with writer Cesare Zavattini on 1944's *The Children Are Watching Us*, followed by *Shoeshine* (1946). **The Bicycle Thief** was their third film. In all, they would collaborate 22 times, including De Sica's two competitive Oscar®-winners for Best Foreign Language Film, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963) and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1970).

Zavattini brought Luigi Bartolini's novel to De Sica with the suggestion they could turn it into a good movie. This required major changes to the original, whose protagonist is an artist who hates the poor and hunts for his stolen bicycle on a second one he had in reserve. Working with a large team of writers, De Sica and Zavattini transformed it into the story of an unemployed working man who loses his first job in years because of the theft.

To research the script's background, De Sica and Zavattini visited both a psychic's apartment and a brothel.

Independent U.S. producer David O. Selznick offered to back **The Bicycle Thief** if De Sica would cast Cary Grant in the lead. The director turned him down.

Fearing that trained actors would be unable to truly convey the reality of the poor, working class characters, De Sica filled the cast with non-actors he thought he could mold. Leading man

Lamberto Maggiorani was a 39-year-old steelworker who accompanied his son to the auditions, hoping the child would land a role. Lianella Carell, a journalist who had tried to interview the director, played Antonio's wife. The only exception was Vittorio Antonucci, a professional actor cast as the thief.

De Sica's biggest casting challenge was the role of Bruno, Antonio's son. He went into production with the role uncast, then discovered Enzo Staiola when he showed up to watch the location shooting.

De Sica chose his nonprofessional cast based on mannerisms he observed that he thought would best fit what the characters were experiencing in the film.

by Frank Miller

[back to top](#)

The Bicycle Thief (1948)

It took careful planning and rehearsing to give **The Bicycle Thief** its realistic look. Crowd scenes were meticulously staged and drilled, including one for which director Vittorio De Sica hired 40 street vendors. The Roman fire department provided a "surprise" rainstorm for another scene. In addition, De Sica shot with as many as six cameras at once to get the untrained actors' spontaneous performances from several angles. Although the film looked like a documentary in places, the director's painstaking methods drove him over budget.

All of the Rome locations in the film were real. On one of the shooting days, British director David Lean showed up to watch De Sica film an outdoor sequence and was greatly impressed with how he handled the crowds in the street.

De Sica's son Manuel recalled in an interview the filming of scenes in the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele: "...Papa told me about coming across, early in the morning, the director of photography of the film Carlo Montuori, completely frozen, clinging to his camera, devotedly waiting for the fleeting moment. He had stayed there in order to protect with his whole body the *chassis* (the magazine of film mounted on the back of the camera) from the rigours of the night. Dawn has a brief duration, and for this reason several days were needed to sew together long sequences which had cost many early forced awakenings for the entire troupe just to get a few minutes of footage...During the filming in Piazza Vittorio, he required the production secretary, Roberto Moretti, to stop the trams passing. Poor Moretti, who did not even have a permit to set up the tripod of the camera on the square, with great presence of mind disguised himself as a tram conductor, and began to redirect all the trams bursting with workers that happened to pass in proximity to the square. Before anyone guessed the reason for the existence of this man in the middle of the crossroads, the shooting was finished and Roberto arrested."

Future Italian director Ettore Scola, who was only fifteen years old at the time, recalled passing the Piazza Vittorio while on his way to school one day and wondering why it was so deserted that time of day. He said, "...only a worker, a street sweeper and a child were crossing the street,

going in the direction of the market. A low and strangely close voice, like that of a prompter amplified by a megaphone, reached the actors and the crowd gathered behind the barriers: 'More slowly, Lamberto. Let Gino go ahead. Enzo, keep behind Papa.' The whisper was coming from a small tower on top of which, in a little wooden armchair, was seated a gentleman wearing a hat, a scarf, and a camel hair coat."

Director Sergio Leone, the father of the spaghetti western, was present during the filming of **The Bicycle Thief**. He recounted, "I was helping out for nothing on **Ladri di biciclette**, and I also had a tiny and much-noted part in the film...We were at Porta Portese, shooting the sequence in which the father of the boy wanders around looking for the bicycle. I was sixteen at the time, and was in the second year of grammar school. I was watching De Sica...when all of a sudden he said; 'Ah, here I'd like to see a group of ten or fifteen red priests, those of the Propaganda of the Faith, it has started to rain, and I'd like to use this stupendous light'...and the next day we shot the marvelous scene...of these red priests who, caught by the storm, shelter under a cornice, and two of them talk to each other, so that the child, fascinated by this strange language, is distracted and stops to listen to them...I was one of the two red priests engaged in conversation, a conversation that in fact consisted of reciting numbers, because we couldn't speak German, while the rest of the group was made up of school-friends of mine whom I had gone to recruit when De Sica had said that he didn't know at the time where to lay his hands on fifteen youths."

Lamberto Maggiorani, who played Antonio, was very shy and embarrassed throughout the shooting as he had no actor training or would often become anxious when he couldn't do what De Sica wanted him to do. The director, however, did not coddle him because he knew Maggiorani's real anxiety and nervousness before the camera would work well for his on-screen character. De Sica would later praise Maggiorani, saying "The way he moved, the way he sat down, his gestures with his hands hardened from work, the hands of a working man, not of an actor...I made him promise that after the film he would forget the cinema and would go back to his job." But during the filming of **The Bicycle Thief**, De Sica would still send a black limousine to pick Maggiorani up and bring him to the day's location.

Even though Maggiorani remained uncomfortable with the mechanics of filmmaking and acting during the filming of **The Bicycle Thief**, he nevertheless began to feel a merging of his own identity with that of his character Antonio. De Sica later stated that Maggiorani "confessed to me that he had experienced this sensation, acutely and poignantly, in the last scene in the film: Antonio, in a moment of revolt against his cruel fate, attempts robbery and is arrested and maltreated in front of his son. When, through his tears, Lamberto Maggiorani felt his hand seized by little Staiola, it seemed to him that it really was his son who took his hand, and his tears became real tears of burning shame. In a few months of patient effort, I had brought this man to the point of being able to forget himself in his role and to enter fully into the sad story."

De Sica still hadn't found the ideal actor to play Bruno when filming began on **The Bicycle Thief**. It was while he was shooting the scene in which Antonio searches for his friend who can help him locate the bike that fate intervened. "I was telling Maggiorani something," he recalled, "when I turned around in annoyance at the onlookers who were crowding around me, and saw an odd-looking child with a round face, a big funny nose and wonderful lively eyes. Saint Gennaro has sent him to me, I thought. It was proof of the fact that everything was turning out right." And

so little Enzo Staiola was hired on the spot to play Bruno. At one point during the making of **The Bicycle Thief**, Enzo Staiola was almost run over twice while crossing the street. Both were accidents De Sica kept in the film.

by Frank Miller

SOURCES:

7 Masterpieces of 1940s Cinema by Inga Karetnikova (Heinemann)

Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach by Christopher Waggstaff (University of Toronto Press)

[back to top](#)

The Bicycle Thief (1948)



Antonio Ricci, an ordinary man who has been unemployed for two years, receives a job putting up posters throughout the city. The catch is that he needs his own bicycle in order to keep the new position; his wife sells her dowry linens so he is able to take his bicycle out of hock and start work. During his first day on the job, the bicycle is stolen; together with his son Bruno, he is faced with the seemingly hopeless task of recovering it on the crowded streets of Rome.

As has often been pointed out, the original Italian title of Vittorio De Sica's **The Bicycle Thief** (1948) is *Ladri di biciclette*, or "Bicycle Thieves," the plural indicating that there is more than one thief in the story. This distinction is crucial, for the story is framed in the specific social context of an economically devastated post-war Italy, where thieves proliferate. The emphasis on the daily struggles of ordinary people is a key concern of Italian neo-realist directors, who wished to portray reality in a more faithful manner than the era's dominant escapist studio product, whether it came from Hollywood or Italy's own Cinecittà. Other typical characteristics of neo-realism include location shooting and the use of non-professional actors. It is impossible to overstate the international impact of the Italian neo-realist movement and **The Bicycle Thief** in particular. Spanish, Soviet and even Indian directors (especially Satyajit Ray) incorporated neo-realist principles in their work; the movement's continued influence is evident in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) and much of contemporary Iranian cinema.

At the same time, it should be stated that neo-realism does not necessarily entail a pseudo-documentary approach or a lack of style or plot, as some critics have suggested; **The Bicycle Thief** was thoroughly planned and quite expensive to shoot by Italian standards of the time; compare its production values to another neo-realist film, Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1946), for example. In addition to having to hire and coordinate extras for the elaborately staged scenes involving large crowds, De Sica used fire hoses to create the rainstorm in the central section of the film. The scene in which Ricci's bicycle is stolen involved no less than six cameras shooting simultaneously. The film is also beautifully crafted from a stylistic standpoint, never more strikingly than during the scene where Ricci and his son scour the market for parts from his stolen bicycle; here De Sica's direction is distinguished by fluid and dramatically pointed tracking shots.

One of the most distinctive features of **The Bicycle Thief** is its use of non-professional actors. Lamberto Maggiorani, who plays Antonio Ricci, was originally a factory worker; his tall, angular frame and high cheekbones made him an effective choice for the part, his very physique suggesting the wounded dignity of an ordinary unemployed man. Lianella Carell, who plays Ricci's wife, was originally a journalist whom De Sica met when she asked him for an interview. Enzo Staiola, who plays the son Bruno, was found watching the shoot.

De Sica explained his preference for non-professionals in the following manner: "The man in the street, particularly if he is directed by someone who is himself an actor, is raw material that can be molded at will. It is sufficient to explain to him those few tricks of the trade which may be useful to him from time to time; to show him the technical and, in the best sense of the term, of course, the histrionic means of expression at his disposal. It is difficult--perhaps impossible--for a fully trained actor to forget his profession. It is far easier to teach it, to hand on just the little that is needed, just what will suffice for the purpose at hand." According to film historian Peter Bondanella, when De Sica was searching for a producer to finance the film, David Selznick said he would back the project if Cary Grant were cast in the lead role; if it seems absurd from today's standpoint, it nonetheless illustrates the fundamental difference between Hollywood and the neo-realist approach.

De Sica no doubt owed his success at working with non-professionals to the fact that he was an accomplished theater and film actor in his own right. He made his first film appearance in *The Clemenceau Trial* (1917), acted for Tatiana Pavlova's The Stage Company, and later founded his own theatrical company ZaBum. By the 1930s he became the most popular leading man in Italian cinema, thanks to his roles in the romantic comedies of Mario Camerini, including *I'll Give a Million* (1936) and *Mister Max* (1937). This genre, commonly known as the "white telephone" film, flourished during the Fascist era and for subsequent generations of Italian filmmakers came to exemplify the petit-bourgeois banality of Italian cinema under Mussolini. Even after De Sica became established as a director, he continued to act regularly: "I Must Act to Pay My Debts," as the title of his interview for the British magazine *Films and Filming*, puts it succinctly. His aristocratic features made him an obvious choice for roles such as the Baron in Max Ophuls' *Madame de...* (1953) and Major Rinaldoi in *A Farewell To Arms* (1957). One of his most remarkable roles, however, was that of the con man impersonating a general in Roberto Rossellini's *General Della Rovere* (1959).

De Sica's first significant film as a director was *The Children Are Watching Us* (1942), which was also his first collaboration with the screenwriter Cesare Zavattini; although the film still relies heavily on melodrama, its concern with social issues and its focus on children anticipate their second collaboration and first true masterpiece, *Shoeshine* (1946), part of the initial wave of neo-realist films along with *Rome, Open City*. *Umberto D.* (1952), based on another Zavattini script and perhaps the pinnacle of neo-realism in its attempt to convey the texture of everyday life, ended up a box-office disaster, marking the last gasp of the movement. De Sica's next film was an outright star vehicle, the Selznick production *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953), with Montgomery Clift and Jennifer Jones. While his subsequent output was uneven, De Sica did produce several standout works including: *Two Women* (1961), a wartime drama starring Sophia Loren; the hit comedy *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963), starring Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni, and the Oscar-winning Best Foreign Language film of 1971, *The Garden*

of the *Finzi-Continis* (1970), a subtle examination of anti-Semitism during the Fascist era.

A modern-day Renaissance man, screenwriter Cesare Zavattini (1902-1989) started as a law student and journalist before becoming established as an important novelist in the 1930s. Before collaborating with De Sica, he wrote screenplays for two of the leading directors of the era, Camerini and Alessandro Blasetti, among them the aforementioned *I'll Give a Million* and Blasetti's *Four Steps in the Clouds* (1942). In addition to his projects with De Sica, he wrote the screenplays for other important neo-realist films such as Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951) and Giuseppe De Santis' *Rome 11th Hour* (1952). In the course of his lengthy career he also gained notoriety as a humorist, poet and painter. In 1982 he directed his sole feature, the pacifist allegory *La Veritaaaaa..*

With **The Bicycle Thief**, Zavattini and De Sica are attempting nothing less than to create a new kind of tragedy out of everyday life. If the classical tragedy has tended to focus on the fall of a great man, in **The Bicycle Thief** it is an ordinary man who falls; Antonio Ricci's fateful choice does not cause him to lose his kingdom, but rather his dignity. The screenplay, while episodic, maintains strict temporal unity, taking place over a single weekend; at the same time, it is meticulously constructed in its accumulation of meaningful details. For example, the make of Ricci's bicycle is "Fides," thus linking it to the theme of religious faith that runs just beneath the surface of the story. While the plot of a classical tragedy typically unfolds around the consequences of the tragic hero's choice, here we examine all the circumstances that shape the protagonist's choice. De Sica and Zavattini present us with a philosophically profound, wholly modern view of human life: the world Ricci inhabits is one in which individuals must struggle to exist and maintain a sense of self-worth against the overwhelming indifference of the crowd, the church and the institutions of the state (as represented by the employment office and the police). In that respect, **The Bicycle Thief** arguably counts among the most significant works of art of the twentieth century.

Producer: Umberto Scarpelli

Director: Vittorio De Sica

Screenplay: Cesare Zavattini with Oreste Biancoli, Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Vittorio De Sica, Adolfo Franci, Gherardo Gherardi and Gerardo Guerrieri, from the novel by Luigi Bartolini.

Cinematography: Carlo Montuori

Editor: Eraldo Da Roma

Production Designer: Antonio Traverso

Music: Alessandro Cicognini

Cast: Lamberto Maggiorani (Antonio Ricci), Enzo Staiola (Bruno Ricci), Lianella Carell (Maria Ricci), Elena Altieri (the lady), Gino Saltamerenda (Baiocco), Vittorio Antonucci (the thief).

BW-89m.

By James Steffen

[back to top](#)

The Bicycle Thief (1948)

Awards & Honors

Zavattini's screenplay for **The Bicycle Thief** was nominated for an Academy Award®, but lost to Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949).

The Bicycle Thief won the Grand Prize at the Brussels Film Festival, the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Award for Best Film from any Source, the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film, the National Board of Review Awards for Best Film and Best Director and the New York Film Critics Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It also received a special Academy Award® as the year's outstanding foreign-language film (the competitive category had not yet been created).

In *Sight & Sound* magazine's first poll to name the best films of all time, conducted in 1952, a group of critics voted **The Bicycle Thief** the top spot. It fell to seventh in 1962 and then lost its place on the list. In the magazine's 2002 poll of film directors, however, it captured sixth place.

The Bicycle Thief made it to the top ten (listed alphabetically) in the British Film Institute's poll of filmmakers, teachers and critics to name "The 50 Films You Should See by the Age of 14."

Critic Reviews: THE BICYCLE THIEF

"Made with a cast of principals who were picked up in Rome's streets and had never before faced a camera, and with a story [from a novel by Luigi Bartolini] incredible in its simplicity as a basis for a 90-minute film, the picture is a pure exercise in directorial virtuosity. The beauty of it, however, is that that is never apparent. There are no obvious tricks and no obvious striving."
- *Variety*.

"Again the Italians have sent us a brilliant and devastating film in Vittorio De Sica's rueful drama of modern city life, **The Bicycle Thief**. Widely and fervently heralded by those who had seen it abroad (where it already has won several prizes at various film festivals), this heart-tearing picture of frustration, which came to [the World Theater] yesterday, bids fair to fulfill all the forecasts of its absolute triumph over here. For once more the talented De Sica, who gave us the shattering *Shoeshine* (1946), that desperately tragic demonstration of juvenile corruption in post-war Rome, has laid hold upon and sharply imaged in simple and realistic terms a major -- indeed, a fundamental and universal -- dramatic theme. It is the isolation and loneliness of the little man in this complex social world that is ironically blessed with institutions to comfort and protect mankind."

- Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times*

"This story of a poor man's search for his stolen bicycle is deceptively simple. At first, there is ironic tenderness: humanity observed with compassion but without illusion. Then the search becomes an odyssey of poverty, encompassing much more than the realistic method leads you to expect. And the richness and the enigmas sneak up on you. What is the meaning of the seeress's words? How is it that the hero who is searching for the bicycle thief becomes the bicycle thief?"
-Pauline Kael, *5,0001 Nights at the Movies*

"This is the most important film of the immediate postwar period; its extension of the traditional concepts of plot and dramatic structure exerted considerable influence on the development of the cinema...The film's main theme is unemployment in a country where unemployment seemed a chronic disease. Beyond this, however, it is concerned with the loneliness of man in a dehumanized society."

- Georges Sadoul, *Dictionary of Films*

"The tight structure and the quietly effective social criticism are enriched by the gently romantic vein which enables De Sica to avoid the stridency of *Sciuscia* (*Shoeshine*)...**Ladri di biciclette** powerfully criticizes the forces - the Church among them - which reduce people to disillusion and despair; it remains both sharp and relevant, despite its apparently dated conventions."

- *The Oxford Companion to Film*

"De Sica's direct and unadorned approach to cinema is at its best here. The film is compassionate where it could be cynical; severe where it could be complaisant; somber where it could be picturesque."

- Peter Cowie, *80 Years of Cinema*

"**The Bicycle Thief** is so well-entrenched as an official masterpiece that it is a little startling to visit it again after many years and realize that it is still alive and has strength and freshness....This story is so direct it plays more like a parable than a drama. At the time it was released, it was seen as a Marxist fable (Zavattini was a member of the Italian communist party). Later, the leftist writer Joel Kanoff criticized the ending as "sublimely Chaplinesque but insufficiently socially critical"....But if the film is allowed to wait long enough--until the filmmakers are dead, until neorealism is less an inspiration than a memory--**The Bicycle Thief** escapes from its critics and becomes, once again, a story. It is happiest that way."

- Roger Ebert

"...the film is moving, even if the attempt on our heartstrings is so blatant and so much at odds with the thing that is really striking and beautiful: the sense of the streets of a great city where nearly everyone is having a hard time....The nature of the tale is obtrusive, whereas the atmosphere of the streets is stunning. And that was what was really new: the untidy infinity of life made to seem like the crowd, or all of Italy."

- David Thomson, *Have You Seen...?*

"The roles are played by non-actors, Lamberto Maggiorani as the father and Enzo Staiola as the solemn boy, who sometimes appears to be a miniature man. They bring a grave dignity to De Sica's unblinking view of post-war Italy. The wheel of life turns and grinds people down; the man who was riding high in the morning is brought low by nightfall. It is impossible to imagine this story in any other form than De Sica's. The new black-and-white print has an extraordinary range of gray tones that get darker as life closes in."

- Bob Graham, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

Compiled by Frank Miller

