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Thanks to those who came last month having heard about us on Meetup.com. If you enjoy what we offer, tell your friends, and save money by taking out a subscription.

Your committee will soon begin the process of assembling next season's programme of films. A wide spread of countries, genres and periods will be shoehorned into but twelve showings...

# Bicycle Thieves

Vittorio de Sica,  
Italy 1948



from the novel by Luigi Bartolini  
screenplay by Cesare Zavattini, Suso D'Amico, Vittorio De Sica, Oreste Biancoli, Adolfo Franci and Gerardo Guerrieri

**Lamberto Maggiorani**  
..... **Antonio Ricci**  
**Enzo Staiola** ..... **Bruno Ricci**  
**Lianella Carell** ..... **Maria Ricci**  
**Gino Saltamerenda** ..... **Baiocco**  
**Vittorio Antonucci** ..... **The Thief**  
**Giulio Chiari** ..... **The Beggar**  
**Elena Altieri** ..... **The Charitable Lady**  
**Carlo Jachino** ..... **A Beggar**  
**Michele Sakara** ..... **Secretary of the  
Charity Organization**  
**Emma Druetti**  
**Fausto Guerzoni** ..... **Amateur Actor**

The Italian neo-realist film movement began around the end of WWII with Roberto Rossellini's OPEN CITY in 1946. It is defined and encapsulated by this striking film directed by Vittorio De Sica. 'BICYCLE THIEVES' is the best of a group of films that depicted the hardship and despair that Europeans, specifically Italians, went through after the death and destruction of the war. The economy was depressed, and the towns and cities were half-destroyed and decaying. Rome is the location for the film, and De Sica shoots the city in grainy black and white with non-professional actors to get a simple, yet unbearingly emotional point across. A simple thing such as a bike can be

someone's entire world at that time and losing it means the possibility of doing something irrational and perhaps immoral with consequent loss of personal integrity.

The lead in the film, Ricci, is played by Lamberto Maggiorani who seems to be a very good actor. He is not an actor, however, and maybe this is why the film hits its mark so well and comes across so realistically. Maggiorani is of this difficult world, and his brooding face is a clear indication of this. His job is to plaster film posters up on the walls of buildings all over Rome. He even hangs a picture that symbolizes the absolute opposite of the misery surrounding him. Rita

Hayworth from GILDA is on the walls all over the city, a sign of joy to some, a representation of their own lowly status to others.

When the bicycle is actually stolen, and, with it, the protagonist's sole means of regaining some measure of economic independence and self-respect, those responsible become the object of a quest by Maggiorani and his young son, Bruno (Enzo Staiola), a little kid with so much acting ability, you swear this must be a documentary. A gruelling search throughout Rome allows us to see in sharp focus the people and places the neo-realist film movement came to represent. It is a confined and impoverished world, and the bike's recovery becomes not just an economic imperative, but also an emotional and psychological one. The father is put to the ultimate test in front of his son. Will he do the honourable thing, or will he do what his mind and heart know is merely possible? These all lead to the tense moments of the film's climax.

A note about the title, often wrongly translated as 'The Bicycle Thief', even though the Italian is definitely plural – De Sica knew what he was doing. Such a wrong translation entirely misses the point. One man may have stolen the bicycle in question, but the film clearly suggests that, given such economic pressure, perhaps we could all become 'bicycle thieves', and equally clearly suggests that those in positions of political power are just as responsible for stealing the economic means of ordinary people to live a halfway-decent life.

One key element of the film is the music by Alessandro Cicognini: a simple horn that plays so tragically that it seems to become almost a main character, and certainly a poignant counterpoint to the exploration of the relationship between father and son, undoubtedly the central theme of the entire film. What De Sica does here is to create an honest, non-corporate portrait of the struggle for life and self-respect.

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS  
**LA GRANDE ILLUSION**  
(Jean Renoir, France 1937)  
**Monday 19 January 2015**

“ A man loves his family and wants to protect and support them. Society makes it difficult. Who cannot identify with that? ”

**Vittorio De Sica** (1902-1974) was a handsome man, much in demand as an actor, whose first films as a director were light comedies like the ones he often worked in. Perhaps the harsh reality of World War Two jarred the optimism needed for such stories, and in 1942 he made **The Children are Watching**, a film that came soon after Visconti's **Ossessione**. The Visconti film, based on James M. Cain's hard-boiled novel **The Postman Always Rings Twice** is often named as the first of the neorealist films, although even in silent days there were films that boldly looked at everyday life in an unvarnished way.

De Sica and others often used real people instead of actors, and the effect, after decades of Hollywood gloss, was startling to audiences. Pauline Kael remembers going to see De Sica's first great film, **Shoeshine**, in 1947, just after a lovers' quarrel that had left her in a state of despair: "I came out of the theater, tears streaming, and overheard the petulant voice of a college girl complaining to her boyfriend, 'Well I don't see what was so special about that movie.' I walked up the street, crying blindly, no longer certain whether my tears were for the tragedy on the screen, the hopelessness I felt for myself, or the alienation I felt from those who could not experience the radiance of **Shoeshine**. For if people cannot feel **Shoeshine**, what can they feel?"

Neorealism, as a term, means many things, but it often refers to films of working class life, set in the culture of poverty, and with the implicit message that in a better society wealth would be more evenly distributed. **Shoeshine** told the story of two shoeshine boys sent to reform school for black-marketeering; Kael's description of it could function as a definition of the hope behind neorealism: "It is one of



those rare works of art which seem to emerge from the welter of human experience without smoothing away the raw edges, or losing what most movies lose--the sense of confusion and accident in human affairs."

**The Bicycle Thief**, De Sica's next film, was in the same tradition, and after the lighthearted **Miracle in Milan** in 1951 he and Zavattini returned to the earlier style with **Umberto D**, in 1952, about an old man and his dog, forced out onto the streets. Then, in the view of most critics, De Sica put his special gift as a director on hold for many years, turning out more light comedies (**Marriage, Italian Style; Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow**). The two important exceptions are **Two Women** (1961), which won Sophia Loren an Oscar for her portrait of a homeless woman during the war, and **The Garden of the Finzi-Continis** (1971), about an Italian Jewish family that tries to ignore the gathering clouds of doom. Both screenplays were by Zavattini.

**The Bicycle Thief** had such an impact on its first release that when the British film magazine Sight & Sound held its first international poll of film makers and critics in 1952, it was voted the greatest film of all time. The poll is held every 10 years; by 1962, it was down to a tie for sixth, and then it dropped off the list. Its 1999 re-release allows a new generation to see how simple, direct and true it is--"what was so special about it."

Roger Ebert 1999

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