

Bicycle thieves: the unspoken allure of communism



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Bicycle Thieves: The Unspoken Allure of Communism Bicycle Thieves is an exemplary demonstration of Italian neorealism that seeks to use non-professional actors to illustrate the struggle of average people surviving under a Fascist government. De Sica's use of film techniques such as close-ups heightens the effect of his neo-realist aesthetic, especially seen in his street-level depictions of Rome in the aftermath of World War II.

The poverty and despair captured by De Sica's cinematography and narrative choices illustrates that capitalism has failed the Italian people, providing them only with grinding poverty and inward despair.

By focusing on the mundane details of a simple man's life, rather than a narrative involving high drama, the film effectively captures the humiliating effects of class disparity while highlighting the role that communism could play in the improvement of life for the Italian people, if only a sense of community could be established. Director Vittorio De Sica uses Bicycle Thieves as a vehicle in which to stress the burdens faced by the individual in a heartless and uncaring society.

He has stated that his aesthetic intention with the film was to "reintroduce the dramatic into quotidian situations, the marvellous in a little news item [...] considered by most people throwaway material" (Cheshire), and so too is his main character, Antonio, a throwaway person. As an unemployed person, he has no value to the larger society and no apparent worth to his family as a provider. It is only once he secures a position as a poster-hanger that he begins to see himself as a productive member of society.

De Sica illustrates the importance of this job by demonstrating Antonio's increasing desperation when his bicycle--an item he cannot do his job

without--is stolen. His neorealistic style stems more from moral imperative than from necessity because, as critic Godfrey Cheshire notes in "Bicycle Thieves: A Passionate Commitment to the Real," the film was not shot in the low-budget style associated with neorealism, and instead was "mounted by a team of movie professionals working on a budget generous enough to allow for large-scale scenes, hundreds of extras, and even the apparatus necessary to create a fake ainstorm" (Cheshire). However, De Sica manages to retain an atmosphere of true realism that is heightened by scenes carefully chosen to display Antonio's quick downward spiral as he and his son ultimately fail to recover the lost bicycle. This devastating loss propels Antonio into a life of crime, demonstrating that under an uncaring government and without social support, the poor have no choice but to hurt each other for lack of a better outlet, and that those who are stolen from eventually become thieves as well. De Sica creates drama and illustrates his point by putting his protagonist in an unwinnable situation.

Although Antonio has been offered a job, he can only take it if he has a bicycle. Due to financial circumstances, the bicycle has been pawned. In this way, De Sica establishes the character of Antonio's wife, Maria, who agrees to pawn their bed sheets to pay for the bicycle. This demonstrates that material comfort is secondary to the security that will come with stable employment. The actors themselves play a huge role in successfully portraying De Sica's message, and he sticks to the requirements of neorealism by using only non-professional actors.

As film theorist Andre Bazin states, "none [of the actors] had the slightest experience in theatre or film. The workman came from the Breda factory, the

child was found hanging around in the street, the wife was a journalist" (Bazin). An added level of realism can be found in using average people with faces that show the effects of time and experience. In his essay, " Bicycle Thieves: Ode to the Common Man. " Charles Burnett notes the effect of De Sica's choice to use non-professional actors, writing that " their faces are so expressive [...] they seem to be playing themselves" (Burnett).

To further this realism, the director takes a similar approach with his background players. For example, in the pawn shop scene the director captures an elderly man with a tired, lined face who is trying, without success, to pawn a pair of binoculars. His expressiveness makes the scene seem more real, squalid, and filled with pain, while also illustrating that the Ricci family are not alone in their poverty. Indeed, the upwards panning shot that displays a towering pile of pawned sheets just like the set that Maria is exchanging for the bicycle, overwhelmingly shows the terrible effect of unrestrained capitalism on the poor.

To further show the damage caused by a social and governmental system that doesn't value human needs, De Sica characterizes the upper class as the true villains of the piece. This is seen very clearly while Antonio is fruitlessly searching the stalls filled with disassembled bicycle parts while a good-looking young man blows bubbles into the air, filled with self-satisfaction and utterly unaware of Antonio's total terror. Symbolically, the bicycles can represent both the destruction of his ability to earn a living wage, and his own mental breakdown in having to confront the loss of such a vital mode of transportation.

In this scene, also, a pedophile tries to lure Antonio's son, Bruno, into his clutches. Although the scene is populated with passerby, nobody pays any mind to the dangers faced by the vulnerable boy, let alone steps forward to offer assistance. By showing the oblivion of the group, De Sico emphasizes the isolation of the individual, as well as demonstrating that no one, not even small children, are safe from the avaricious nature of the rich in a society where, as Burnett writes, " the predators are the rich and disconnected" (Burnett).

The gripping conclusion of *Bicycle Thieves* further demonstrates how the need to secure employment in order to survive can cause honest people to behave in a dishonest manner. De Sico uses a shot of Antonio sitting outside of a football stadium, hungrily eyeing countless parked bicycles; a temptation that is akin to showing a starving man a plate of food. Through the director's use of close-up shots of Antonio's pained expression, we experience his inner turmoil as morality fights with his baser needs.

The climax occurs when he finally tries to steal a bicycle outside of an apartment building and is caught by a group of men who taunt and abuse while Bruno watches in horror. Cheshire writes that this point marks " where Antonio's solitary ordeal reaches a humiliatingly public climax" (Cheshire), and indeed it is a fitting conclusion for a film that has taken place entirely in the public environment of Rome.

By making use of the city streets as his set, and the city's population as his background cast, De Sico manages to show all of the missed opportunities where Antonio's life could have been changed for the better, were someone to have only taken an interest in his plight. As Bazin states in " Neorealism

and Pure Cinema: The Bicycle Thieves," " the thesis implied is wondrously and outrageously simple: in the world where this workman lives, the poor must steal from each other in order to survive.

But this thesis is never stated as such, it is just that events are so linked together that they have the appearance of a formal truth while retaining an anecdotal quality" (Bazin). In such a manner, the irony of Antonio's predicament remains subtle, left for the viewer to determine based on their own experiences and observations. De Sica's film is most notable for what it avoids saying about the benefits of communism when held up against a corrupt, bloated style of capitalism that treats the working person as fodder for a greater machine.

Rather than treat Bicycle Thieves as a propaganda device for his opinions, the director instead allows the audience to draw their own conclusions based on the realistic information he has provided to them. But the implication of Antonio's struggle is clear: community support is vital for the individual to survive under difficult circumstances. Without a collective group from which to seek solace and assistance in times of trouble, the individual is left as aimless and panicked as Antonio during his solitary and unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his stolen bicycle.

Works Cited Bazin, Andre. " Neorealism and Pure Cinema: The Bicycle Thieves. " Theory Kit. 21 October 2007. Web. 1 May 2011. Bicycle Thieves. Dir. Vittorio De Sica. Perf. Lamberto Maggiorani, Enzo Staiola, Lianella Carell. Criterion, 2007. DVD. Burnett, Charles. " Bicycle Thieves: Ode to the Common Man. " Criterion Film Essays. Criterion. 7 February 2007. Web. 1

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