

Ladri di biciclette
(1948), director
vittorio de sica –
review



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Ladri di Biciclette* (1948), director Vittorio De Sica portrays an Italy full of unemployment – where people turn to superstition when confronted by uncertainty, where authorities are virtually invisible, where helplessness and despair overshadow the peace of the post-war period.

One of the earlier influential titles in the neo-realism category, *Ladri di Biciclette* employs some of the most notable techniques that define neo-realism to present a vividly true picture of the then Italy – and, thus, turning an imagined incident into a true story that every audience can relate to.

Ladri di Biciclette, on the surface, talks about a lower middle class jobless father's despair and frustration after his working tool, his bicycle, gets stolen; yet, in all its subtlety, the movie explores the disparity of wealth and treatment between the middle and the upper class in the society; and questions the importance of morality when the basic needs of one is hardly met. Ricci finds himself in merry land when his search for job ends with an offering as a billsticker – only if he owns a bicycle. At the cost of all the bed sheets of his home, he is able to go to his first day of work – a day that ends with dismay for his bicycle is stolen.

His search for the bicycle begins, with the company of his son Bruno.

However, having tried every possible means, Ricci's search ends up in vain.

In the end, his eyes are fixed on a bicycle that no one is around looking after – he decides to steal a replacement instead of finding his own. Yet, for all his bad luck, he is caught, insulted, and even slapped. It is for his son's tears that eventually touch the owner of the bicycle, who gives Ricci back his freedom – the freedom to go back to the world, the search, and the

uncertainty. As a neo-realist, *Ladri di Biciclette* employs natural lighting and uses local footages to reflect a more realistic society.

The vast amount of outdoor location allows extensive use of sunlight into the camera. On the other hand, shooting on a crowded street and on-going traffic, notably in the scenes where Ricci's bicycle is being stolen and where Ricci attempts to steal, the director invites the audience to witness the truest picture of the then Italy. However, the most important element that gives *Ladri di Biciclette* a lasting status amongst neo-realist movies is the story itself: a story that follows a "worker's 'slow and tired' step" (P. 361.

Thompson, Kristin, and Bordwell, David. *Film History: An Introduction*.

2nd Edition. 2002. McGraw Hill) According to *Film History: An Introduction*, neo-realist is defined to have an "emphasis on contemporary subjects and the life of the working class. In *Ladri di Biciclette*, the story evolves around Ricci, a newly employed billsticker, and his son, Bruno. Both characters qualify to represent the working class, especially in terms of the helplessness they encounter when turning to authorities and their affiliation with the union. Yet, no other scenes demonstrate Ricci's representativeness for the working class than the opening scene where he is shot amongst a crowd of unemployed citizens.

Another defining notion of a neo-realist is "its ability to make characters' personal problems gain universal significance" (P. 362. Thompson, Kristin, and Bordwell, David. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition.

002. McGraw Hill). In *Ladri di Biciclette*, Ricci encounters and witnesses

events that seem to be "normal" – yet in fact effectively imply a number of <https://assignbuster.com/ladri-di-biciclette-1948-director-vittorio-de-sica-review/>

social issues such as insufficient social welfare and help from the government (the scene that sees a long line waiting to get on a bus; the aloof attitude of the police to Ricci's situation). The most vividly presented issue, however, is the disparity of wealth amongst the rich and the poor. This issue is powerfully demonstrated in the scene when Ricci and Bruno stops at a restaurant and enjoy their meal. Discouraged by the misfortune in his search of his bicycle, Ricci takes a hungry Bruno to a restaurant.

The scene opens with the pair standing hesitantly at the door, next to the band that is entertaining the diners. Such hesitation shows that Ricci and Bruno may have never been to such kind of restaurants, implying their class difference with the other diners. When Ricci makes his orders – a full bottle of wine and a pizza, the unfriendly waiter tells him that the restaurant is not a pizzeria and therefore does not serve pizza. This again indicates the class the restaurant belongs to, and reinforce how out of place Ricci is – that he even orders the wrong type of food. The camera then cuts to Bruno, who is observing a girl, dresses in a nice dress and is amongst other women with fancy outfits and hats, eats.

After the short exchange of sights between the girl and Bruno, he hides his smile. This indicates that Bruno realizes that he is inferior to the girl, and, comes closer to realizing the class different. As the band starts playing a more energetic music, food arrives and the pair starts eating. There's cure to everything, except death", says Ricci. His optimism, together with his meal in this higher class restaurant, draws a significant irony on his plight.

His optimism seems unrealistic, while his spending time and money in the restaurant seems reckless and needless. The camera then stays on Bruno, who has yet figured out a “proper” way to eat with a fork and a knife. He then decides to imitate the girl, implying the fact that he and Ricci are, in fact, imitating lives of the upper class while struggling to live their own. It then cuts to the girl’s table where more food is being served, and then cut to a disappointed Bruno. Such editing draws contrast of the heavenly life of the girl and the worrying Bruno, as well as pushing the difference in class to the extreme. “To eat like them, you have to earn at least a million a month”, says Ricci to an innocent Bruno.

At the beginning of this scene, Bruno has been a joyful boy, for his basic needs for food is about to be satisfied. However, as he observes more, his joy soon changes to disappointment. Such evolution signifies Bruno’s understanding of the environment surrounded. As young a boy as he is, Bruno is already facing the cruel reality of lower class struggles. He is the most innocent witness of class difference in the movie. His ability to realize the problem suggests the seriousness and blatancy of this social problem.

After the restaurant scene, as Ricci and Bruno has begun to realize, the possibility to find the bicycle is slim. As their problems haven’t been solved yet, their task remains unfinished. Their hope, however, falls further apart after their unsuccessful confrontation with the thief. This confrontation is followed by the scene where Ricci and Bruno aimlessly walk to downtown.

In the background is music full of sadness, while faces of Ricci and Bruno are accompanied with disappointment. Ricci’s aimless sight is then ironically

caught by a park packed with bicycles. The camera follows his movement until he spots a bicycle standing against a wall. The function of this sequence of shots is to display the frustration and hopelessness experienced by the two characters, and to surface the inner struggle of Ricci: to be a decent yet unemployed citizen? Or to risk his dignity of a man and steal the bicycle for a living? This sequence, thus, poses the debate of the importance of remaining morality when one can't even satisfy his basic needs.

Ricci eventually decides to steal the bicycle and is caught right on the spot. He is released, however, by the bicycle owner who has been touched by Bruno. This follows the last scene of the movie, where Ricci and Bruno walk with the crowd. After witnessing his father's wrongdoings, Bruno is forced to be exposed to the imperfection side of humanity – especially of his fathers. Bruno, however, is not ashamed, nor disgusted, by his father's action.

Instead, he chooses to walk side by side with him. Both silent, they slowly walk on the crowded street. Still camera shots stay on focusing the facial expression of the two characters – the ashamed Ricci and the concerned yet forgiving Bruno. Instead of feeling relieved from being almost arrested, the pair shows no signs of happiness. Their eyes weeping, indicating their fear of the uncertain future they are about to face. The slow camera movement allows audience to explore the two characters' emotion and, thus, become empathetic for them.

However, as the movie draws closer to the end, it cuts to a shot from behind the characters. The lighting changes to a darker one, while deep focus is taken into place. As Ricci and Bruno continue walking, audience is no longer

able to follow them, for the other walkers soon take their place. Cutting from a personal shot that shows heavy emotion of the characters to a shot that decentralizes their identification, the movie has effectively reminded us that Ricci and Bruno's story is just another common tale in the city of Rome.

Ladri di Biciclett reflects on the seriousness of class disparity through the innocent Bruno, who starts out as a mere imitator that learns how to eat in a classy restaurant yet eventually becomes a forgiving companion of his guilty father. The figure of Bruno, however, can also be seen as a representative of viewers of the movies: while Bruno learns and adjusts his moral standard (by forgiving and understanding his father's wrongdoings) through the events that have happened to him and Ricci, viewers have been following the slow and tired steps the two characters have taken and, thus, the reality of the then Italy.