

# Actor-Become-Auteur

## The Neorealist Films of Vittorio De Sica

VITTORIO DE SICA HAS BEEN considered one of the major contributors to neorealism, a movement that altered the content and style of international as well as Italian cinema. Despite these contributions and numerous citations of praise for such films as *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milano*, 1951), and *Umberto D.* (1952), which are his best known and most beloved in addition to being his best pictures, De Sica has become a neglected figure in film studies. He may be seen as a victim of (postmodernist) fashion, for today emphasis is frequently placed on technical or stylistic virtuosity, and films of social content are looked upon—often justifiably—as sentimental or quaint (unless that content is of the politically correct kind). The works of De Sica that were once on everybody’s list of best films have, to a large extent, therefore been relegated to the ranks of “historical examples” on the shelves of museums, archives, and university libraries. Then, too, the director who was lionized during the Italian postwar era was later dismissed as a film revolutionary who had sold out to commercialism. Except for *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, 1971) and *Una breve vacanza* (*A Brief Vacation*, 1973), De Sica’s films after the neorealist period have been considered minor or inferior works in comparison to those of his contemporaries.

In Italy, it must be said, one encounters very favorable reactions to his work; yet behind these reactions there are always attempts at qualification. Scholars there approach a discussion of De Sica with awe and respect but also with the proviso that he was, of course, too sentimental. The fact that the first full-length study of De Sica’s work was not published



Vittorio De Sica, 1963, on the set of *Ieri, Oggi, Domani*, a.k.a. *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. © Embassy Pictures Corporation. (Courtesy of Photofest)

by the Italians until 1992—Lino Micciché’s edited collection titled *De Sica: Autore, Regista, Attore (De Sica: Author, Director, Actor)*—attests to his countrymen’s ultimate indifference toward a major director who has been demoted to the rank of interesting but minor filmmaker. The French initially had no such indifference, being the first to hail De Sica as a “genius.” During the 1950s and 1960s, French film critics and historians preoccupied themselves with De Sica to such an extent that they produced the only full-length studies of the Italian director ever to be published in any country: Henri Agel’s *Vittorio De Sica* (1955, rev. 1964) and Pierre Leprohon’s book of the same name (1966). The waves of acclaim from France have by now subsided, however.

In Great Britain and America, as in Italy, De Sica is known and studied as a “link” in the Italian postwar movement of neorealism, such as he is represented in two basic British works on Italian cinema: Vernon Jarratt’s *Italian Cinema* (1951) and Roy Armes’s *Patterns of Realism* (1971). In America, aside from interpretive articles or chapters on individual films, movie reviews, and career surveys in general film histories as well as specifically Italian ones, a single-authored full-length critical study on

the works of De Sica is nonexistent. John Darretta's *Vittorio De Sica: A Guide to References and Resources* (1983) is certainly valuable for its biographical information; filmography complete with synopses and credits; annotated bibliography of criticism in Italian, French, and English; and chronological guide to De Sica's careers on the stage and on the screen. But Darretta's critical survey of the director's films is limited to 8 pages in a book that otherwise runs to 340.

Perhaps this lack of scholarly attention derives from the fact that De Sica was at once the Italian screen's most versatile artist and its greatest paradox. As a star performer in well over a hundred films, he embodied the escapist show-biz spirit at its most ebullient, wooing a vast public with his charm and drollery. Yet De Sica the director aspired to, and frequently achieved, the highest cinematic standards, challenging the audience to respond to his unflinching social insights and psychological portraiture. De Sica's most disarming trait as a screen star was his nonchalance, which could shift irresistibly to a wry narcissism with the flick of a well-tonsured eyebrow. Particularly in his many postwar comedies, De Sica tended to play lovable frauds—smoothies whose looks and manner were a little too studied to be true (though he did prove himself capable of a solid dramatic performance as an amoral poseur-turned-partisan in Rossellini's look back at Italian neorealism, *Il Generale della Rovere* [1959], which was set during the darkest moment of the Nazi occupation of Rome). Yet when he relinquished his own close-ups to venture behind the camera, De Sica became the utter opposite of this extroverted entertainer. De Sica's signal trait as a filmmaker was his own compassionate self-effacement, which caused him to intervene as unobtrusively as possible to tell the stories of the powerless and marginal creatures who populate his best work.

This intriguing dichotomy is what distinguishes De Sica from the brace of other successful actor-directors who have enriched film history in all eras. From von Stroheim and Chaplin through Welles and Olivier to Kevin Costner and Kenneth Branagh in the present, most actors who have turned to directing have done so in part to protect and enhance their own luster as performers. As such, their filmmaking styles tend to reflect the persona each projects on screen as an actor—the theatrical flourish of an Olivier, say, or the high-spirited pop lyricism that Gene Kelly projected in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). However, after his first forays as a director, De Sica only appeared in his own films with reluctance. Perhaps this was because, as a director, he guided his professional cast and amateur actors of all ages in exactly the same way: He acted everything out according to his wishes, down to the smallest inflection, then expected his human subjects to imitate him precisely. Therefore, for De Sica actually to perform in a movie he was directing himself would, on a certain level,

be redundant. In any event, the visual spareness and emotional force that are the key traits of his best, neorealist work behind the camera have no discernible connection to the sleek routines of that clever mountebank who enlivened four decades of Italian popular movies.

The post–World War II birth or creation of neorealism, it must be said, was anything but a collective theoretical enterprise. The origins of Italian neorealist cinema were far more complex than that. Generally stated, its roots were political, in that neorealism reacted ideologically to the control and censorship of the prewar cinema; aesthetic, for the intuitive, imaginative response of neorealist directors coincided with the rise or resurgence of realism in Italian literature, particularly the novels of Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Vasco Pratolini (a realism that can be traced to the veristic style first cultivated in the Italian cinema between 1913 and 1916, when films inspired by the writings of Giovanni Verga and others dealt with human problems as well as social themes in natural settings); and economic, in that this new realism posed basic solutions to the lack of funds, of functioning studios, and of working equipment.

Indeed, what is sometimes overlooked in the growth of the neorealist movement in Italy is the fact that some of its most admired aspects sprang from the dictates of postwar adversity: A shortage of money made shooting in real locations an imperative choice over the use of expensive studio sets, and against such locations any introduction of the phony or the fake would appear glaringly obvious, whether in the appearance of the actors or in the style of the acting. It must have been paradoxically exhilarating for neorealist filmmakers to be able to stare unflinchingly at the tragic spectacle of a society in shambles, its values utterly shattered, after years of making nice little movies approved by the powers that were within the walls of Cinecittà.

In fact, it was the Fascists who, in 1937, opened Cinecittà, the largest and best-equipped movie studio in all of Europe. Like the German Nazis and the Russian Communists, the Italian Fascists realized the power of cinema as a medium of propaganda, and when they came to power, they took over the film industry. Although this meant that those who opposed Fascism could not make movies and that foreign pictures were censored, the Fascists helped to establish the essential requirements for a flourishing postwar film industry. In 1935 they founded the Centro Sperimentale in Rome, a film school headed by Luigi Chiarini, which taught all aspects of movie production. Many important neorealist directors attended this school, including Rossellini, Antonioni, Zampa, Germi, and De Santis (but not De Sica); it also produced cameramen, editors, and technicians. Moreover, Chiarini was allowed to publish *Bianco e nero* (*Black and White*), the film journal that later became the official voice of neorealism. Once Mussolini fell from power, then, the stage was set for a strong left-wing cinema.

The Axis defeat happened to transform the Italian film industry into a close approximation of the ideal market of classical economists: a multitude of small producers engaged in fierce competition. There were no clearly dominant firms among Italian movie producers, and the Italian film industry as a whole exhibited considerable weakness. The very atomization and weakness of a privately owned and profit-oriented motion-picture industry, however, led to a *de facto* tolerance toward the left-wing ideology of neorealism. In addition, the political climate of postwar Italy was favorable to the rise of cinematic neorealism, since this artistic movement was initially a product of the spirit of resistance fostered by the Partisan movement. The presence of Nenni Socialists (Pietro Nenni was minister of foreign affairs) and Communists in the Italian government from 1945 to 1947 contributed to the governmental tolerance of neorealism's left-wing ideology, as did the absence of censorship from 1945 through 1949.

Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Open City*, 1945) became the landmark film in the promulgation of neorealist ideology. It so completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of its historical moment that it alerted both the public and the critics—on the international level (including the United States) as well as the national one—to a new direction in Italian cinema. Furthermore, the conditions of its production (relatively little shooting in the studio, film stock bought on the black market and developed without the typical viewing of daily rushes, postsynchronization of sound to avoid laboratory costs, limited financial backing) did much to create many of the myths, or mythic truths, surrounding neorealism. With a daring combination of styles and tones—from the use of documentary footage to the deployment of the most blatant melodrama, from the juxtaposition of comic relief with the most tragic human events—Rossellini almost effortlessly captured forever the tension and drama of the Italian experience during the German occupation and the Partisan struggle against the Nazi invasion.

If, practically speaking, Rossellini at once introduced Italian cinematic neorealism to the world, De Sica's collaborator Cesare Zavattini—with whom he forged one of the most fruitful writer-director partnerships in the history of cinema—eventually became the theoretical spokesman for the neorealists. By his definition, neorealism does not concern itself with superficial themes and synthetic forms; in his famous manifesto "Some Ideas on the Cinema" (1952), Zavattini declares that the camera has a "hunger for reality," and that the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the historical richness as well as the political importance of actual, everyday life.

Although inconsistently or irregularly observed, the basic tenets of this new realism were threefold: to portray real or everyday people (using nonprofessional actors) in actual settings, to examine socially significant

themes (the genuine problems of living), and to promote the organic development of situations as opposed to the arbitrary manipulation of events (i.e., the real flow of life, in which complications are seldom resolved by coincidence, contrivance, or miracle). These tenets were clearly opposed to the prewar cinematic style that used polished actors on studio sets, conventional and even fatuous themes, and artificial, gratuitously resolved plots—the very style, of course, that De Sica himself had employed in the four pictures he made from 1939 to 1942 (*Rose scarlatte* [*Red Roses*, 1939], *Maddalena zero in condotta* [*Maddalena, Zero for Conduct*, 1940], *Teresa Venerdi* [1941], and *Un garibaldino al convento* [*A Garibaldian in the Convent*, 1942]).

Unfortunately, this was the cinematic style that the Italian public continued to demand after the war, despite the fact that during it such precursors of neorealism as Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1942) and De Sica's own *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children Are Watching Us*, 1943) had offered a serious alternative. Indeed, it was as early as 1942, when *Ossessione* and *I bambini ci guardano* were either being made or released, that the idea of the cinema was being transformed in Italy. Influenced by French cinematic realism as well as by prevailing Italian literary trends, Visconti shot *Ossessione* on location in the region of Romagna; the plot and atmosphere (based on James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1934]) were seamy in addition to steamy and did not adhere to the polished, resolved structures of conventional Italian movies. Visconti's film was previewed in the spring of 1943 and quickly censored, not to be appreciated until after the war.

Around the same time, Gianni Franciolini's *Fari nella nebbia* (*Headlights in the Fog*, 1941) was portraying infidelity among truck drivers and seamstresses, while Alessandro Blasetti's *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* (*Four Steps in the Clouds*, 1942)—coscripted by Zavattini and starring De Sica's wife at the time, Giuditta Rissone—was being praised for its return to realism in a warmhearted story of peasant life shot in natural settings. De Sica, too, was dissatisfied with the general state of the Italian cinema, and, after the relative success of his formulaic films, he felt it was time for a new challenge. Like Zavattini, who had by now achieved a measure of screenwriting success, De Sica wanted to do some serious work in which he expressed his ideas about human problems and human values.

The title of his new film had already been the heading of one of Zavattini's famous newspaper columns, and the subject matter of the story would be deemed scandalous when it reached the screen. *I bambini ci guardano* examines the impact on a young boy's life of his mother's extramarital affair with a family friend. The five-year-old Pricò becomes painfully aware of the rift in his family life, and his sense of loss is made even more acute

when his father sends him away from Rome to live—first in the country with his unreceptive paternal grandmother, then at a Jesuit boarding school. His mother's love affair leads finally to the suicide of Pricò's ego-shattered father; and, at the end of the film, when his mother (draped in mourning dress) comes to the school to reclaim her child, Pricò rejects her. The last time we see him, he is walking away by himself, a small, agonized figure dwarfed by the huge, impersonal lobby of the school.

The cause of the marital rift leading to the wife's infidelity in this film is never revealed; the concern of De Sica and his screenwriters is purely with the effect of the rupture on the little boy. And it is this concentration on a child's view of the world—here the world of the petit bourgeois family almost apart from the social, economic, and political forces that combine to influence its workings (a world similarly explored, *sans* children, in *Ossessione*)—that gives a basically banal, even melodramatic tale a profounder aspect. Except for René Clément's *Forbidden Games* (1952), there has never been such an implacable view of the antagonism and desolation that separate the lives of adult and children.

*I bambini ci guardano* owes much to the remarkable performance of the boy, Luciano De Ambrosis, himself orphaned just before work on the picture began, and whose acting experience was limited to a walk-on in a Pirandello play. De Sica's uncanny directorial rapport with his five-year-old protagonist would, of course, later prove vital in the making of *Sciuscià* and *Ladri di biciclette*, which share with *I bambini ci guardano* the theme of childhood innocence in confrontation with adult realities. Arguably, De Sica would become the most eloquent director of children the screen has ever known, with the possible exception only of François Truffaut. And *I bambini ci guardano* gave the first evidence of that extraordinary dual perspective that De Sica conveyed in his films about children. At the same time, he managed both to simulate a child's vantage point on the baffling adult sorrows that surround him and to subtly establish an authorial detachment—expressed in the spare neutrality of his *mise-en-scène*, even the physical distance he so often maintains between the camera and his subject—which somehow makes the predicament of his characters doubly moving. It is as though De Sica's camera eye were a passive witness to tragedy rather than the active force in the shaping of a fictional story—this “passivity” being one of the grand illusions of the neorealist movement to come and one fostered by the frequent use of nonprofessional actors photographed in actual locations, as opposed to the artificial confines of the movie studio.

As in his subsequent neorealist films, De Sica's cinematographer (Giuseppe Caracciolo) is not called upon in *I bambini ci guardano* to exhibit striking angles or exhilarating movement: The compositions rarely

startle the viewer through their ingenuity; the use of the camera is clear-eyed rather than ingenious. *What* De Sica focuses on at a given point is more significant than the way in which he focuses his attention. The way is never neglected, it simply is not exploited; for it is to De Sica's purpose to move with unelliptical life as closely as he dares without vitiating motion-picture technique altogether. To subordinate the essentially cinematic as he does is itself a technique of ineffable skill; and to efface his signature as a director from the style of a film argues a modest purity of aim that is refreshing.

De Sica tried out such a detached or reserved *mise-en-scène* for the first time in *I bambini ci guardano*, whose simplicity of composition and subdued editing style markedly contrast with the formulaic, studio-dictated cinematic style of his previous four films. The tone of De Sica's fifth picture also strongly differs from that of *Rose scarlatte*, *Maddalena zero in condotta*, *Teresa Venerdì*, and *Un garibaldino al convento*, for there is no comedy in *I bambini ci guardano*; what relief we get from Pricò's suffering comes only in the form of his own heightened or mature perception and sensitivity—indeed, his name is a shortened form of the Italian word for precocious. Not only is there no comedy in the movie, there is a tragic ending that signaled a change in De Sica's artistic vision. The alienation evident at the start of *I bambini ci guardano* does not disappear; on the contrary, the gap in communication between the mother and her child widens. After the suicide of his father, moreover, as I have noted, Pricò is not reunited with his remaining parent: Instead, he turns his back on her and returns down a long corridor to his tiny dormitory room. The discordant ending is one of the most powerful in all of De Sica's work—challenged only by the final scene of *Sciuscià*—and it contrasts markedly with the comic endings of this director's first four movies, where the strife and confusion of the fictional world are replaced by happy harmony and romantic union.

*I bambini ci guardano*, then, proved to be a key work, thematically as well as stylistically, in De Sica's directing career: It cemented his collaborative artistic relationship with Cesare Zavattini, and it marked the beginning of his breakthrough as a filmmaker of more than provincial stature. In its thematic attempt to reveal the underside of Italy's moral life, shared with *Ossessione*, this film was indicative of a rising new vision in Italian cinema. In exhibiting semidocumentary qualities by being shot partially on location at the beaches of Alassio and by using nonprofessional actors in some roles, *I bambini ci guardano* was—again along with *Ossessione* as well as the aforementioned pictures by Blasetti and Franciolini—a precursor of the neorealism that would issue forth after the liberation of occupied Rome. De Sica's fifth film was not a financial success, however, and

its negative reception was in part engineered by those who saw it as an impudent criticism of Italian morality. The unfavorable reaction to *I bambini ci guardano* was also influenced, of course, by the strictures of the past: During the era of Mussolini's regime and "white telephone" movies (trivial romantic comedies set in blatantly artificial studio surroundings), an insidious censorship had made it almost impossible for artists to deal with, and for audiences to appreciate, the moral, social, political, and spiritual components of actual, everyday life.

After the Second World War, a different kind of "censorship" obtained: that of the lira. For, in 1946, viewers wanted to spend their hard-earned lire on Hollywood movies through which they could escape their everyday lives, not on films that realistically depicted the effects of war—effects that they already knew only too well through direct experience. As a result, De Sica's first wholly neorealistic picture, *Sciuscià*, was a commercial disaster. Mostly negative movie reviewers cited the difficulty of understanding the performers' mixed accents and dialects, and neither the newspapers nor the Italian government appreciated what they called De Sica's capitalizing on the misfortunes of the poor as well as sensationalizing the conditions of prison life. Shot in three months under the primitive circumstances of postwar production, *Sciuscià* had a different reception, however, in other countries. It proved an artistic triumph particularly in France and the United States, where it won a "special award" at the 1947 presentations of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (since the Oscar for best foreign film did not yet exist). This was the film, then, that marked the beginning of De Sica's international recognition as a major director and that stands as a landmark in his professional relationship with Cesare Zavattini.

*Sciuscià* was conceived out of the experiences of vagrant orphans in poverty-stricken, postwar Rome, where, chief among Italy's cities, they organized their enterprises (many of them illegal) in the wake of the Allied liberation. Often these youngsters were seen trailing after American soldiers calling out "Sciuscià, Gio?"—their phonetic equivalent of "Shoeshine, Joe?"—for G.I.s were among the few able to afford even this minor luxury in a country filled with unemployment following the cessation of hostilities. A magazine published a photo spread on two of the shoeshine boys, nicknamed "Scimietta" (Little Monkey), who slept in elevators, and "Cappellone" (Big Hat), who suffered from rickets in addition to having a large head; and their pictures attracted a small-time, American-born producer, Paolo William Tamburella, who suggested to De Sica that a story about such street waifs would make a touching and topical movie. Immediately, Zavattini took up the suggestion, and he and De Sica walked the streets of Rome absorbing the atmosphere, in order to achieve maximum fidelity in the final motion picture.

The filmmakers even got to know the two boys, Scimietta and Cappellone, who tried to earn enough money shining G.I. boots on the Via Veneto so that they could rush to the nearby Villa Borghese stables for an hour of horseback riding. They became the models for Giuseppe and Pasquale of *Sciuscià*, and, for a brief moment, De Sica considered drafting Scimietta and Cappellone to play themselves in the movie, since there were no equivalent Roddy McDowells or Dean Stockwells working at the time in the Italian cinema. He decided, however, that they were too ugly—a decision that tellingly reveals the limits of realism, neo- or otherwise, and that points up yet again that realism is one among a number of artistic styles, not reality itself. Zavattini artfully adapted the shoeshine boys' lives and love of horses to the screen, while Rinaldo Smordoni and Franco Interlenghi were chosen from among the throngs of an open casting call to play Little Monkey and Big Hat.

In order to drum up money to realize their dream of owning a horse, the two boys become party—albeit innocently—to a robbery. When they acquire the animal, a white stallion named Bersagliere, no conditions adhere to its joyful ownership: The horse belongs to both of them, involves each youngster totally, and symbolizes their common pastoral longing for a life of pureness and beauty. They are soon apprehended by the police, however, and, when they refuse to implicate the real thieves, Giuseppe and Pasquale are sent to jail as juvenile delinquents. There they are tricked into turning against each other, and, in *Sciuscià*'s climax, Giuseppe slips to his death from a bridge in an attempt to escape attack by an angry, vengeful Pasquale. As the latter falls to his knees, screaming, next to his friend's body in the river bed, their beloved horse has long since symbolically galloped off into the darkness.

As was the usual practice in Italian films, the script of *Sciuscià* was the joint work of several professionals—Sergio Amedei, Adolfo Franci, and Cesare Giulio Viola—in addition to the team of De Sica-Zavattini. And, although *Sciuscià* was shot in real locations as much as possible (excluding the final bridge scene, which was shot in the studio because the producer did not have the money to wait for good weather), there was nothing improvised about its script, which was worked out to the smallest detail. There were those in the late 1940s who liked to proclaim that motion pictures like *Sciuscià* were pure, unadulterated Life flung onto the screen—which, of course, is nonsense, and even an unintended insult to De Sica's powers as a great, instinctive movie dramatist. In fact, De Sica the director cannily exploits every resource of the cinema in which he had been working for fifteen years—not hesitating to underscore *Sciuscià*'s pathetic tragedy with heart-tugging music by the redoubtable Alessandro Cicognini—in order to give his audience the emotional frissons latent in the story he chose to bring to the screen.

For all its hybridization, however, what endures from *Sciuscià* is De Sica's palpable empathy for these street children and the plight of the entire generation they represent. As an artist with no particular ideological axe to grind, moreover, he manages always to give a human or personal dimension to the abstract forces that frame this drama. The grainy, newsreel quality of Anchise Brizzi's photography, the sharp cutting, and the seemingly spontaneous naturalness of the acting (particularly of Smordoni and Interlenghi as the two boys) all sustain the feel of an exhausted Roman city, bereft of its pride. This same weariness affects the authorities in the prison scenes, which have an almost documentary air of moral as well as physical squalor.

The very title of this film—the Italian-English neologism coined by the shoeshine boys of Rome—is a clue to its all-embracing intentions. *Sciuscià* may be the pathetic story of Giuseppe and Pasquale, but the tragedy of post-World War II Italy is reflected in their sad tale. Even as the American G.I.s in the film see the image of their own security and prosperity in their shined shoes, so too does Italian society find the image of its own disarray and poverty in the story of these beautifully paired boys. *Sciuscià* is an illumination of reality—a “shining” of reality’s “shoes,” if you will—and of the basic problems facing a defeated nation in the wake of war: for the ruled, how to survive amidst rampant poverty at the same time as one does not break the law; for the rulers, how to enforce the law without sacrificing one's own humanity or that of the lawbreakers. As with so many of his contemporaries, the convulsive times awakened profound feelings in De Sica of which he may not previously have been aware; without question, he had traveled a huge aesthetic and emotional distance since the making of *Maddalena zero in condotta* only six years before.

Buoyed by the artistic success, if not by the commercial fiasco, of *Sciuscià*, De Sica turned next to *Immatella Califano*, a story by Michele Prisco about the love between a young Neapolitan girl and a black American soldier. But this project was rejected because of existing social taboos, although Alberto Lattuada managed to film a similar story in *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity*, 1947), which centered on a black G.I. who had fallen in love with a white prostitute and deserted the American army. It was Zavattini who found the spark that returned De Sica to directing after he had resumed his acting career in several commercial vehicles. The spark in question was Luigi Bartolini's minor novel *Ladri di biciclette* (1948).

Zavattini thought that the book's central situation, if little else, would appeal to his colleague, and De Sica was indeed seized by it immediately, although very little from Bartolini's original narrative found its way to the screen in the end. This time, constructing the screenplay turned out to be an especially tempestuous process: Sergio Amidei, for one (who had contributed to the script for *Sciuscià*), dropped out early because he found

the story implausible. Surely, Amidei insisted, the protagonist's comrades, stalwart union members all, would have found him another bicycle after the first one was stolen. Fortunately for posterity, De Sica did not agree (or care), and neither did his coscenarist Suso Cecchi D'Amico. The final scenario, as minutely conceived as that for *Sciuscià*, was a close collaboration among D'Amico, De Sica, and Zavattini.

Raising the money to produce *Ladri di biciclette* was a predictable struggle, considering *Sciuscià*'s financial failure in Italy. De Sica's French admirers declared that they would be thrilled to *distribute* the picture once it was completed, and Gabriel Pascal of England passed on the project altogether, while David O. Selznick proclaimed from Hollywood that he would finance *Ladri di biciclette* on the condition that Cary Grant be cast in the lead. De Sica had suggested Henry Fonda or Barry Fitzgerald, but neither was considered "box office" at the time. In the end, De Sica's customary threadbare budget was scraped together from three local producers, and work could begin at last on the casting. For the central role of Ricci, De Sica chose Lamberto Maggiorani, a struggling factory worker from Breda who had brought his sons to Rome to audition for the part of the young Bruno. The role of Bruno went instead to Enzo Staiola, the eight-year-old son of a flower vendor, whom De Sica had noticed in a crowd gathered to watch the shooting of a street scene for *Ladri di biciclette*. Bruno's mother was played by Lianella Carell, a journalist from a Rome newspaper who had come to interview the filmmaker. The three major parts, then, went to nonprofessionals, although De Sica did use a professional actor to dub the role of Ricci. Actually, the only performer to appear in the movie with previous acting experience was Gino Saltamerenda (Baiocco), who had played "Il panza" in *Sciuscià*.

*Ladri di biciclette* can only be fully appreciated after being placed in its sociohistorical context: that of the traumatic, chaotic postwar years when a defeated Italy was occupied by Allied forces. In Rome after World War II unemployment is rife, and transportation is limited mainly to overcrowded streetcars. An unemployed workman, Ricci, gets a job as a bill poster on the condition that he himself provide a bicycle for getting around the city; he therefore retrieves his own bicycle from a pawnshop by pledging his and his wife's bedsheets. But while he is pasting up a glamorous poster of an American pin-up girl during his first day of work, Ricci's bicycle is stolen: an utter disaster, for here we have a man who has thus been deprived of a rare chance to earn tomorrow's bread for his family.

He spends an entire day scouring the city with his little boy, Bruno, hunting for the thief, with the story working continually on two levels: the father's relationship to the world, described in his search for the stolen bicycle; and the son's relationship with his father—for the child, the only

one of which he is aware. Indeed, De Sica developed the film's rhythm by a *pas de deux* of man and boy in their scouting expedition through the city, the boy nervously anxious to keep in time with his father's mood and intention, the boy's relationship with his father serving as a barometer of the effects of the agonizing search on this man's soul. The adjustments of temper and tempo; the resolve, haste, anger, and embarrassment; the flanking movements, the frustrations, and the periodic losses of direction: These constituted a form of situational ballet that gave the picture its lyricism.

When at last Ricci finds the thief, however, he can prove nothing and is even attacked in the street by a gang of the man's supporters, intent on protecting one of their number. At that point, Ricci spots an unattended bicycle outside a house and tries to steal it. But he is immediately caught and shamed. In this climactic moment of frustration at committing an act that is fundamentally alien to him, the father commits another alien act by striking his son, who runs away from him. They are temporarily estranged, but nightfall finds the two of them reunited yet powerless—save for the loving bond that sustains them—against the bleak threat that tomorrow holds. At the end of the picture, the tracking camera simply halts and ambivalently observes both Riccis as they walk away into, or are swallowed up by, a Roman throng at dusk.



*Bicycle Thieves* (1948), a.k.a. *Ladri di biciclette*. Directed by Vittorio De Sica. Shown from left: Enzo Staiola (as Bruno), Lamberto Maggiorani (as Antonio Ricci). (Courtesy of Photofest)

*Ladri di biciclette* established beyond any doubt Vittorio De Sica's international reputation as a major director. But, once again, the movie received far greater acclaim in France, America, and England than it did in Italy. Like *Sciuscià*, it won a special Academy Award for best foreign film, as well as awards from the New York Film Critics, the British Film Academy, and the Belgian Film Festival. At home, however, *Ladri di biciclette* exacerbated the hostility that De Sica had aroused with *Sciuscià* for promulgating an unflattering view of his country—although, ironically, both films received Silver Ribbons there. Italian critics and politicians railed against the negative image of Italy that was being exposed to the world by neorealist filmmakers such as De Sica. Works such as *Sciuscià*, *Ladri di biciclette*, and later *Umberto D.* were labeled in the press “stracci all'estero” (rags for abroad), the extreme antithesis of the white telephone movies produced before the war.

Accordingly, the initial, indifferent reception of *Ladri di biciclette* upon its release in Italy at the end of 1948 was absolutely devastating to De Sica. The international enthusiasm for the picture did prompt its rerelease in his native country, however—which at least was successful enough to allow the director to pay off the debts left over from *Sciuscià*. Italian audiences, it seems, were reluctant to respond without prompting to an indigenous neorealist cinema intent on exploring the postwar themes of unemployment, inadequate housing, and neglected children, in alternately open-ended and tragic dramatic structures populated by mundane nonprofessional actors instead of glamorous stars. (In fact, one reason for neorealism's ultimate decline was that its aesthetic principle of using nonprofessional actors conflicted with the economic interests of the various organizations of professional Italian actors.) It was the unexceptional, not the extraordinary, man in which neorealism was interested—above all in the socioeconomic interaction of that man with his environment, not the exploration of his psychological problems or complexities. And to pursue that interest, neorealist cinema had to place him in his own straitened circumstances. Hence no famous monument or other tourist attraction shows that the action of *Ladri di biciclette* or *Sciuscià* takes place in Rome; moreover, instead of the city's ancient ruins, we get contemporary ones: drab, run-down city streets; ugly, dilapidated houses; and dusty, deserted embankments that look out on a sluggish, dirty Tiber River.

Zavattini was one of the few who always felt that *Ladri di biciclette* fell somewhat short of perfection, despite its registering of a visually austere rather than a picturesquely lush Rome. The movie's pathos strayed a little too close to pulp fiction for his taste, with De Sica a touch too canny in making his audience cry—aided once again by the mood music of Alessandro Cicognini. Still, Zavattini viewed his work on this project

as a present to his good friend and trusted colleague. And De Sica, for his part, felt an immediate urge to reciprocate by turning for their next film to a subject that his collaborator had long held dear. The idea of Zavattini's fable or fairy tale for children and adults alike had gone through many stages: his early story "Diamo a tutti un cavallo a dondolo" ("Let's Give Everybody a Hobbyhorse," 1938); a treatment or outline in 1940 with the actor-director Totò in mind; a novel called *Totò il Buono* (*Totò the Good*) that was published in 1943; a working script titled *I poveri disturbano* (*The Poor Disturb*); and eventually the final screenplay of *Miracolo a Milano* in 1951, which Zavattini prepared in tandem with Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Mario Chiari, Adolfo Franci, and De Sica himself.

The film opens on a painting by Pieter Brueghel over which, as it comes to life, the words "Once upon a time" are superimposed, followed shortly afterward by the discovery by an old woman, Lolotta (played by Emma Gramatica), of a naked child in the cabbage patch of her garden. This is the orphan Totò, and we follow his adventures as he grows up, becoming, through his natural optimism and innocent ability to locate a glimmer of poetry in the harshest reality, a prop or support to everyone with whom he comes into contact. After his foster mother's death, Totò is living in a shantytown on the outskirts of Milan when oil is discovered on the squatters' stretch of land. The rich, headed by the industrialist Mobbi, move in to exploit the situation, and the homeless people are forced to fight the police hired to evacuate them. Aided by a symbolic white dove that possesses the power to create miracles—the dove being a gift from the departed Lolotta, who is now her foster son's guardian angel—Totò had endeavored to improve the earthly life of the poor, if only by making the elusive winter sun appear and beam down on them. But dove or no dove, the squatters are finally no match for the fat cats of this world, so Totò's only resource is to have his dispossessed charges snatch up the broomsticks of street cleaners and miraculously fly to a land "where there is only peace, love, and good."

*Miracolo a Milano* is understandably regarded as one of the outstanding stylistic contradictions of the neorealist period: Neorealist in action—the struggle to found, and maintain, a shantytown for the homeless—this movie undercuts that action at nearly every moment with unabashed clowning both in performance and in cinematic technique (special effects abound). However, this blend of stark verism and comic fantasy, which featured a cast that mixed numerous nonprofessionals (culled from the streets of suburban Milan) with professional leads, was not in the end such a thematic departure from De Sica's earlier neorealist films as it might at first seem: The familiar concern for the underprivileged was strongly there, as were the harsh social realities seen once again through the eyes of a child who grows up yet remains a boy full of wonder and

faith; and a seriocomic tension may underlie all of *Miracolo a Milano*, but it can also be found in the “teamwork” between both big daddy Ricci and little boy Bruno in *Ladri di biciclette*, as well as between the old man and his small dog in *Umberto D.*

As for the Leftist criticism that the picture’s use of the fanciful, even the burlesque or farcical, increasingly overshadows its social commentary about the exploitation and disenfranchisement of the underclass in an industrialized nation, one can respond that there is in fact an element of despair and pessimism, of open-ended spiritual quandary, in the fairy-tale happy ending of *Miracolo a Milano*. For this finale implies that the poor-in-body but pure-in-soul have no choice but to soar to the skies and seek their heaven apart from the hopeless earth—which is to say only in their imaginations. For his part, De Sica (unlike the staunchly leftist, even Communist, Zavattini) liked to downplay the satirical overtones of *Miracolo a Milano*, characteristically maintaining that he wanted to bring to the screen, apart from any political considerations, a Christian or simply humanist sense of solidarity: the idea that all men should learn to be good to one another.

Not everyone was content to see the movie in such simple terms, however. The Vatican condemned it for depicting the birth of a child from a cabbage, while some right-wing critics, assessing the angle of the squatters’ flight at the end over the Cathedral of Milan—not to speak of the clash between the fedora-hatted rich and the grubby but kindly have-nots—figured that they were heading east, that is, towards Moscow! Predictably, from the Left came the accusation, as we have already seen, that the excess of whimsy in *Miracolo a Milano* had sweetened the bitter pill of neorealism beyond recognition. Cinephiles from abroad turned out to be less ideologically prickly: *Miracolo a Milano* shared the 1951 Grand Prix at Cannes and also won the New York Film Critics’ award for best foreign film of the year.

It is not surprising that *Miracolo a Milano* baffled so many when it was first screened, including those who thought they liked it, for the Italian cinema had never really produced anything remotely like it before. The sheer irrational magic of René Clair in combination with the irrepressibly bittersweet charm of Charlie Chaplin had, up to now, not found its equivalent among indigenous filmmakers. *Miracolo a Milano* consciously springs from the legacy of Clair and Chaplin but transposes it to a forlorn urban landscape that could only be identified with Italian neorealism. Indeed, for all its look back at earlier film comedy, De Sica’s ninth film actually points forward to a new brand of Italian moviemaking: With its grotesque processions of fancily as well as raggedly dressed extras against an almost abstract horizon, *Miracolo a Milano* is “Felliniesque” two or more years before Fellini became so.

Furthermore, for all its undeniable quaintness, the movie now seems more topical than ever with its warring choruses of real-estate speculators

and its huddled masses longing to become selfish consumers themselves. Thus Zavattini's social conscience is linked to a sublime anarchy all its own, particularly once the squatters' village is graced by the heavenly dove that can grant any wish. By this means, a black man and a white girl may exchange races out of mutual love, yet a tramp tries to satisfy his desire not only for millions of lire but also for many more millions than anyone else. A glorious, richly meaningful anomaly in De Sica's directorial career, *Miracolo a Milano* remains more miraculous than ever, enhanced by both the consummate cinematography of G. R. Aldo (a.k.a. Aldo Graziati) and a melodious score by the ever canny Alessandro Cicognini.

By now the Zavattini-De Sica team had reached a peak of mutual understanding, whereby the director and his writer could carry their neorealistic approach to its most concessionless expression: to insert into a film ninety minutes of a man's life in which nothing happened. This was Zavattini's avowed ambition, and he chose to fulfill it in a picture about the loneliness of old age: *Umberto D.*, which was dedicated to another Umberto, De Sica's father (though the content of the movie has little to do with his father's biography). De Sica endured considerable sacrifice to make *Umberto D.*, which as usual nobody wanted to finance; he supplied part of the budget himself, while turning down an offer from Angelo Rizzoli to direct Giovannino Guareschi's 1948 novel *Il piccolo mondo di Don Camillo* (*The Little World of Don Camillo*, filmed in 1952 by Julien Duvivier), which would have earned him a small fortune. In the title role, De Sica cast another of his inspired nonprofessionals, this time a celebrated philologist from the University of Florence, Carlo Battisti, whom he had encountered walking along a Roman street on his way to a lecture (after searching in vain for an actor in homes for the aged and organizations for the retired). And for the first time on a De Sica film, Zavattini wrote the script all by himself. *Umberto D.* would turn out to be the director's favorite among his works, as well as the film that many critics consider to be his finest.

The titular character of *Umberto D.* is a retired government clerk, whose struggle against loneliness, destitution, and humiliation is the movie's subject. This isolated old man, subsisting on his meager pension, is seen shuffling around his shabby room—where an entire reel is devoted to his preparations for bed. The only other human character of importance is the housemaid, Maria, illiterate and pregnant out of wedlock but for a while the companion of Umberto in his misery. She is observed preparing for yet another eventless day, in detail similar to that found in the scene where the elderly pensioner gets ready to go to sleep. The minutiae of drab, everyday lives are penetratingly depicted here, and they exert a powerful fascination. Then there is the old man's closest companion—his dog, Flick, in reality the only steady companion this pensioner can find. Although the film's tone is decidedly more austere than that of *Ladri di*

*biciclette*—partly because De Sica and Zavattini shifted their attention here from the poor who are young to the poor who are old—there are many parallels to be drawn in the portrayal of the central friendship: Ricci loses and then refinds his son, Bruno, even as Umberto loses his dog but eventually discovers it in the pound, destined for the gas chamber; Ricci hits his son and as a result is temporarily estranged from him, while Umberto loses his dog's trust when, having failed to find it a better home, he contemplates their double suicide under a passing train rather than have them resort to a life of beggary.

All the incidents of *Umberto D.* are seamlessly woven into a beautifully observed texture of simple, indeed marginal existence, which nonetheless is never guilty of a calculated, sentimental onslaught on the senses. Umberto, after all, is not an immediately lovable or charming old cuss; and the servant girl is almost shameless in her lack of regret over, or aspiration for, her life. Moreover, De Sica and Zavattini eliminate any moment of false drama, of false climax, that the conveniences or contrivances of fiction might have tempted them to impose on their subject. It was Zavattini's intention, especially, to find dramatic relevance in "undramatic" detail—in things, facts, and people so delicately registered as to be imperceptible save to that second awareness evoked from most spectators without their being able to define it. The moment when Umberto has taken a taxi to the animal shelter to search for his dog is an excellent example of this. He has no change with which to pay the driver and therefore must ask some stallholders in the market outside the pound to break his bill; but they refuse, and he has to buy a tumbler he does not want in order to get the requisite coins. Umberto then tosses the tumbler into the gutter and pays the taxi driver. This is a trivial yet agonizing interruption, and the filmmakers were right to emphasize or dramatize it, for in trying to find his dog, Umberto is doing something on which his whole life appears to depend.

So rehearsed, the film may easily be construed as an artless and unbuttered slice of life, a testimony to "naturalism": ostensibly a method of expressing reality without inhibition, without overtones, and as far as possible without style. Nothing could be further from the case, however. Like *Sciuscià* or *Ladri di biciclette*, and with justification even more subtle, De Sica's *Umberto D.*—a masterpiece of compassion—might be termed "super-naturalism" if this compound had not been preempted for another kind of experience entirely. Indeed, De Sica's balance between the lifelike and the cinematic in this picture is tenuous; if he had actors less responsive to the naked untheatricality he is commonly after, his muted formalism might suffer from the risks he takes. But he can afford to dwell at length on the faces and motions of Umberto D. and Maria precisely because Carlo Battisti and Maria Pia Casilio are sentiently, gravely, *inside* life—not coasting along on its surface.

Maria, while subordinate to Umberto D., is by an inspired implication complementary: She is neglected youth; he is discarded old age. The girl has her involuntary burden-to-be; the man has his voluntarily assumed burden, Flick. (Girl and man are further subservient to the loud concerns of society, as exemplified by the middle-aged landlady, who is handsome in a brassy way, venal, pseudorespectable, and heartless—living in a world of opera and ormolu, broken-down technology and broken promises.) In *Sciuscià* the horse was a symbol, if you like, of the unattainable, a dream of freedom and empowerment. The bicycle in *Ladri di biciclette* was an occupational necessity that became a projection of man's self-respect. Flick, neither ideal necessity nor economic one, may be felt to represent the last thing a man will surrender: his love for a fellow living creature.

After the release of *Umberto D.* in January 1952, Giulio Andreotti, state undersecretary and head of the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo (a powerful position that had direct influence on government grants as well as censorship and that led ultimately to the Right-wing Andreotti's own corruption, exposure, and disgrace), published an open letter in *Libertas* (a Christian Democrat weekly) bitterly deploring the neorealist trend in the Italian cinema and its negative image of the country—a letter that was quickly reprinted in other journals. Andreotti took direct aim at De Sica, who was castigated for exhibiting a subversively “pessimistic vision” and exhorted to be more “constructively optimistic.” (De Sica later stated that if he had to do *Umberto D.* again, he would change nothing except to remove the “uplifting” final shots of children playing—precisely the kind of “positive” conclusion for which Andreotti seemed to be calling.)

It was this atmosphere of interventionist government criticism that hampered the exportation of neorealist films during the 1950s; indeed, the “Andreotti Law” of 1949 had established wide government control over the financing and censorship of films, including a right to ban the export of any Italian movie that Andreotti himself judged “might give an erroneous view of the true nature of our country.” In November 1955 the “Manifesto of Italian Cinema” was published in response to Andreotti's *Libertas* letter by the French journal *Positif*—a manifesto that spoke out against movie censorship and was signed by the leaders of Italian neorealism, with the names of De Sica and Zavattini prominent among the signatures. By this time, however, postwar neorealism was rapidly waning as the burning social and political causes that had stimulated the movement were to some extent alleviated or glossed over by increasing prosperity. In a society becoming ever more economically as well as politically conservative, nobody wanted to throw away his capital on yet another tale of hardship and heartbreak on the side streets of Rome.

To be sure, neither De Sica nor Zavattini harbored any illusions that a film as intimate and melancholy as *Umberto D.* would be universally

admired; still, the complete indifference to its release on the part of the Italian public, together with the howls of contempt from the cultural bureaucrats, left them dumbstruck and furious. Although De Sica managed to get *Umberto D.* screened out of competition at Cannes in 1952, the Italian government did its best to keep the picture a secret on foreign shores. At a prestigious London showcase of new Italian cinema inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth, for example, *Umberto D.* was conspicuous by its absence. Andreotti and the other Italian officials to the contrary, however, what is really subversive about *Umberto D.* has nothing to do with politics, at least not in the literal sense of the world. The insuperable tragedy of the film's elderly hero lies not in his material poverty, grave though it is, but rather in his spiritual poverty, in the utter silence that defines his solitary days and nights. *Umberto D.* tells of a hunger of the soul far more devastating, in the end, than any deprivations of the body, for they at least kill relatively quickly. And for all the specificity of its Roman setting, this story could take place virtually anywhere, in any time period.

As in the case of *Miracolo a Milano* vis-à-vis Fellini, De Sica exerted a profound influence on the next generation of filmmakers with his unembellished portrait of modern-day alienation: Without the example of *Umberto D.*, later portraits of alienation such as Antonioni's *La notte* (*The Night*, 1961) and Bergman's *Tystnaden* (*The Silence*, 1963) seem almost inconceivable. De Sica's astringent detachment, his strict avoidance of sentimentalism, is another sign of things to come in the cinema: Throughout he nobly resists the temptation to turn this slightly rigid, forbidding old man into a grizzled darling for the ages. (Even De Sica, however, is powerless before Signor Umberto's little spotted dog as his master agonizingly teaches him the tricks of the begging trade.) Yet, despite the fact that De Sica's own active career lasted another two decades, this was his last indisputable masterpiece, which may make the most poignant aspect of *Umberto D.* the discreet little professional drama beginning to unfold off-screen. Moreover, it was the complete commercial failure of this movie—despite winning an award from the New York Film Critics upon its release in America in 1955—that sounded the first death knell for the content and style of neorealist cinema, even if the dauntless De Sica would attempt to return to the aims and means of neorealism one last time with *Il tetto* (*The Roof*, 1956).

With *Il tetto*, De Sica attempted to recapture the full flavor of postwar neorealism not only by shooting on location in Rome but also by using a (photogenic) nonprofessional cast and treating the socially significant theme of inadequate or insufficient housing versus the primal human need for shelter. He chose for his leading characters Gabriella Pallotta, a seventeen-year-old salesgirl from a children's clothing store