

### **One Nation, Two Wheels: Social Context in *Ladri di Biciclette***

Cinematographic works can be sorted using a multitude of labels, including genre, director, and theme. One of the most intuitive ways to organize a group of films is by the year in which each film was produced. Classifying a film by year allows for a further discussion of how that particular time period influenced the content and form of the cinematic piece. The impact of historical events on the overall composition of film can be seen clearly in Vittorio De Sica's 1948 film, *Ladri di Biciclette (The Bicycle Thief)*. The themes and mise-en-scene in De Sica's work are heavily reflexive of the economically and politically tumultuous post-World War II period in which the film was produced. Through its use of the bicycle as a metaphor for social class, subtly negative portrayals of Catholic authority, and harsh, angular backdrops, *Ladri di Biciclette* demonstrates the desire for "a renewed cinema, and, even more, a renewed culture"<sup>1</sup> that was prevalent in postwar Italy. The narrative of the film presents the audience with Italian society's yearning for a political and social rebirth to replace the old traditions of dominant religious authority and economic oppression. Its depictions in turn have become a part of history itself, serving to document the neorealist film movement as well as the sentiments of that era.

To fully understand how *Ladri di Biciclette* fits into the scope of Italian history, one must first be familiar with the social and political atmosphere of the nation. At the conclusion of World War II, the future of the nation of Italy was very uncertain. With the end of the war came the fall of the fascist Italian leader Benito Mussolini. The defeat of Mussolini's fascist regime left a significant void in the national government, one that many Italians believed should be filled

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<sup>1</sup> Landy, Marcia, *Italian Film*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

by a new democratic body.<sup>2</sup> Two political factions that emerged towards the end of the war, the Christian Democrats and the Italian Communist Party (PCI), stepped forward and began to battle for control of the postwar government.<sup>3</sup> The Christian Democrats, a well-funded and powerful organization, based their politics heavily on the history of Italy and the Catholic tradition. The PCI, on the other hand, saw too much of the old regime in the relationship between the church and state, and instead desired the good of the common man.<sup>4</sup> The latter party was attractive to many Italians, not only because of the prestige of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, but also because of the nature of the postwar economic climate. Italy was plagued with inflation, budget problems, overpopulation, and, most severely, unemployment. Desperate poverty was widespread, and those who were affected by it did not believe that old politics could aid in their daily struggles.<sup>5</sup> This tumultuous political and economic climate fostered discontent, which manifested itself in Italian culture in various forms, including film.

The desire for change in government was reflected in Italian cinema of the early postwar era. "If we in Italy wish to abandon once and for all our trashy histories, our rehashes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and our trifling comedies, we must try the cinema of realism."<sup>6</sup> This "cinema of realism" constituted the Italian neorealist film movement. Neorealist filmmakers, such as Vittorio De Sica, were sympathetic to the causes of the PCI political party, and sought to portray the everyday lives of working class Italians in a manner as true-to-life as possible.<sup>7</sup> *Ladri di*

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<sup>2</sup> Duggan, Christopher, *A Concise History of Italy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 244.

<sup>3</sup> Header, H. and Waley, D. P., eds, *A Short History of Italy: From Classical Times to the Present Day*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 236.

<sup>4</sup> Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 249.

<sup>5</sup> Header and Waley, *A Short History of Italy*, 242.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus, Millicent, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 251.

*Bicycle Thieves* is a textbook example of neorealist cinema, in both theme and presentation. The film follows Antonio Ricci and his son, Bruno, as they desperately search the streets of Rome in an attempt to locate Antonio's stolen bicycle. Antonio's wife sold the sheets off of their bed to pay for the elusive two-wheeled device, and Antonio must locate it if he wishes to maintain his new job hanging posters on the streets. This plotline is highly reflective of the rampant unemployment and poverty that many in Italy were experiencing at the time the film was made. A job was a precious asset, and citizens clung to whatever employment opportunities they could find.

The "new realism" of the film is enhanced further by its style. Following neorealist convention, *Ladri di Biciclette* was filmed on location in the streets of Rome, utilizing mostly natural lighting. The majority of the film is shot in medium or long shots with long takes and little obtrusive editing. The combination of these techniques gives the audience the sensation that they are on the streets among the poor Italians, observing the scene naturally as it progresses. This heightens the viewers' grasp of the reality of the plight of the common working men and women. The production process of the film, made later during the neorealist movement, did deviate somewhat from the so-called standards of neorealist film exhibited in its earlier counterparts. While many such works were produced on a small budget with nonprofessional actors, *Ladri* was filmed on a sizable 100 million lire budget, with a cast of hundreds who were kept on retainer for the duration of the production.<sup>8</sup> Still, thematically, the cinematic work exemplifies the neorealist attitude in Italy during the late 1940s.

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 57.

“If I had my bicycle how much I’d earn. We could live again.”<sup>9</sup> Antonio’s lament reflects how possession of material goods, specifically a bicycle, determines not only his level of financial success, but also his overall happiness. In *Ladri di Biciclette*, the bicycle can be seen as a symbol of the larger theme of class struggle that underlies the film. The work presents two general class groupings: the impoverished working and unemployed men, and the men of financial power and authority. At the beginning of the film, Antonio is clearly presented as a member of the former group, with aspirations to somehow make himself and his family part of the latter. When he obtains a job hanging posters on the stipulation that he own a bicycle to travel between locations in the city, his bicycle becomes the ticket to his admission into a higher social echelon. However, his key to success is stolen from him before he can earn a single lira.

As the audience follows Antonio’s search for the bicycle, they witness both how easily Antonio could achieve financial success, and how difficult members of the higher class make it for the main character to achieve his goals. When Antonio reports his stolen bicycle to the police, they brush him off, stating that it is “just a bicycle.”<sup>10</sup> The police officer, whose profession ensures him a steady source of income, does not understand what the bicycle means for Antonio’s standard of living. He is therefore indifferent to the protagonist’s request for help. Later in the film, the privilege of the higher class seems to almost mock Antonio as he searches for his bicycle among hundreds of others in a market. The images of rows and rows of bicycles are taunting to both the main character and the viewer. There stand mile-long rows of two-wheeled machines, exactly what Antonio needs to obtain a “better” life, yet financial barriers prevent him from purchasing them. The flaunting of upper-class wealth to the lower class reaches its most blatant level when Antonio and his son dine in a restaurant after becoming

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<sup>9</sup> *Ladri di Biciclette*

<sup>10</sup> *Ladri di Biciclette*

exasperated with their search for the bicycle. While the protagonist's little boy uses his hands to feast hungrily on simple bread and cheese, a youth at an adjacent table looks down on him in disgust. The second boy, obviously well-dressed and well-fed, eats his meal with a knife and fork, his motions deliberately emphasizing his use of the utensils. The shame on the face of Antonio's son, molten, stringy cheese hanging from his mouth, is apparent as he witnesses the wealthy boy eat. Once again, the bicycle, or in this case the lack of a bicycle, delineates the separation between classes.

*Ladri di biciclette* uses the aforementioned scenes to highlight the negative effects of such a social conflict on the working class. The theme of class struggle strongly coincides with the platform of the PCI in postwar Italy, and shows links to communist ideology. The film also offers a brief prediction of the future, if the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. After failing to retrieve his stolen bicycle, Antonio attempts to steal someone else's bicycle, and is quickly apprehended. This action shows a new level of desperation in the main character, one that is reflexive of the situation that many Italians found themselves in during this period in history. It is a foreshadowing of future crime and chaos to come if the poor are not given the "bicycles", the income, respect, and social standing, to which they should be entitled. The ending is an argument in favor of PCI politics, which would work to close the financial gap that would otherwise lead to social turmoil.

Authority and class also come in to play in *Ladri di Biciclette* in the form of allusions to the institution of the Catholic Church. The film, sympathetic to the PCI, implies on several occasions that the Church, the main sponsor of the rival Christian Democrat party, is not the type of authority that can aid the desperate situation of the more impoverished Italians. The individual case of Antonio in the film can be applied on a broader scale to all of the unemployed or

underemployed in Italy at the time. By demonstrating the church's "wholesale approach to processing bodies and souls,"<sup>11</sup> the film makes an argument against the politics of the Christian Democrats. During the search for his stolen bicycle, Antonio encounters several religious symbols. Each time he encounters one of these Catholic icons, he is given a false hope of a lead on finding his property that is quickly dashed. One of Antonio's most potentially fruitful opportunities to locate his bicycle comes when he sees the bicycle thief briefly speaking to an old man. As the thief rides off, Antonio follows the old man into a church to find out where the thief was headed. At first, the Church appears to be a benevolent institution, as evinced by the various services, such as haircuts, being offered to the poor. However, when mass begins, the congregation around Antonio repeatedly hushes him as he attempts to interrogate the old man. The institution blatantly refuses to aid someone who is simply trying to maintain his job and keep food on his table. In essence, the film is implying in this scene that the Catholic Church will ultimately turn a deaf ear to those calling for help.

A second encounter with Catholic institutions later in the film furthers the director's point that the authority of the Catholic Church does not represent the good of the people, strengthening the subtle anti-Church implications. Desperate for advice, Antonio visits a "seer" who lives in a nearby apartment. Her room is rife with religious icons, including portraits of saints, rosaries, and crucifixes. It is clear from these aspects of mise-en-scene that the seer is flaunting her connections to the Catholic institution. Antonio asks her for advice on finding his bicycle, and she vaguely replies that he needs to locate the bicycle within the day, or it will be lost to him forever. When Antonio, well aware of the fact that he needs to find his bicycle, presses her for more information, she simply reiterates her statement. He leaves the seer's room no closer to

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<sup>11</sup> Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 65.

locating his bicycle than he started, his wallet a few lire lighter from paying the soothsayer's tribute. Once again, the Catholic institution has provided no real guidance, taking away both the main character's hope and his money. In the words of the protagonist himself, "Your mother and her prayers can't help us. Nobody can but the saints."<sup>12</sup> The institution offered him no assistance; only a direct connection with a holy being could save him from returning to unemployment.

"I feel like a man in chains."<sup>13</sup> The sensation of entrapment in poverty created by the themes of class struggle and ineffective authority is further heightened by the stylistic choices that Vittorio De Sica makes in *Ladri di Biciclette*. Early on in the film, the shots of Antonio in the streets of Rome are framed in such a way as to make the buildings behind him appear enormous. He is a tiny man confined to the area marked out by the looming white structures, like a small mouse in a very large maze of Italian streets. The facades of the buildings themselves are barren, dull, and institutional, which only adds to the jail-like feeling of the frames. In addition to caging the actors with props and cinematography, De Sica also suffocates his cast by drowning them in a sea of extras. Scenes of men cramming themselves into the public busses are the best example of the sensation of inescapable, uncomfortable closeness. The bus becomes an overflowing human sardine tin, with passengers hanging out of the windows and falling off of the back bumper. With this notion of overcrowdedness fully articulated by the director, the sensation of a jail is complete: imposing, institutional, and congested. By using images that mimic a physical prison, the director creates a visual counterpart to the social prison in which his characters are entrapped.

The uncomfortable feeling of imprisonment is further enhanced through some of the director's subtler uses of lighting and frame composition. Sharp shadows, especially during

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<sup>12</sup> *Ladri di biciclette*

<sup>13</sup> *Ladri di biciclette*

scenes in which Antonio is indoors, create high contrast on the actors' faces at certain points during the film. These shadows appear to be created by natural light falling through the small windows of buildings. The shading highlights the creases and signs of wear on the faces of the characters, showing their weariness at being stuck in their unfortunate situation. Feelings of cagedness are also evoked in the viewers through various horizontal and vertical lines that compose the background of frames. These abstract shapes mimic prison bars. For example, when Antonio's wife sells the family's sheets, the scene cuts inside of the seller's window, where small cubbies stretch to the ceiling in an intimidating grid pattern. Later on, in one of the first scenes in which Antonio has his bicycle, De Sica chooses to film his protagonist through the spokes of the bicycle wheel. This is not only an allusion to physical imprisonment, but also a symbol of imprisonment by social class, as represented by the bicycle. The oppressive nature of the composition of many of the shots in *Ladri di Biciclette* further engrains the film with the theme of class struggle. This motif relates back to postwar Italy on a broader scale.

The conclusion of the film offers no relief from this uncomfortable situation. On the contrary, it seems to indicate that the poor conditions may continue for some time, reflecting the pessimistic attitudes of the unemployed. *Ladri di Biciclette* ends with Antonio trudging home without his bicycle, soon to return to joblessness. Despite all that he has gone through, nothing about the protagonist's life has truly changed. This may be reflexive of the first postwar Italian elections, which took place in 1948, the same year in which the film was produced. The Christian Democrats dominated the campaign and the election, gaining political control over Italy.<sup>14</sup> The conclusion of the film can be seen as a foreshadowing of what the director, sympathetic to the rival PCI standpoint, believed would result from the defeat of the party

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<sup>14</sup> Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 254.

fighting for workers' rights. The Church and its related institutions would provide false hope, as they did to Antonio, but ultimately would not bring the change that many in Italy so desired. In this manner, *Ladri di Biciclette* becomes not only a film of neorealist portrayal of Italian society and politics, but also a political device in its own right. It is an active member of the continuing dialogue on how to rebuild Italy after World War II.

The Italian Neorealist film movement was not characterized by a particular set of stylistic cinematic traits as much as it was by its overall themes and relation to the state of the nation at the time neorealist films were being produced. *Ladri di Biciclette* and its contemporary counterparts can be considered more of "moral statements," philosophies about the direction that society should take in the future.<sup>15</sup> These films present, in as realistic a manner as possible, the sociopolitical conditions of the time, a postwar era of political uncertainty and economic ruin for many. *Ladri di Biciclette* embodies in both its narrative and its style many of the dominant issues with which the everyday Italian was concerned during the late 1940s. The audience sees the desperation of class struggle through the thematic use of the bicycle and the distrust of church politics. De Sica uses framing, lighting, and setting to cage his viewer in a mindset similar to that of the impoverished Italians, jailed in a situation over which they have no control. Even viewing the film over half of a century later, one can still get a sense of the constricting social and financial climate of that point in history. The filmmaker's depiction of economic situations and Catholic authority implies that the institutions of society had to be built a new in order for Italians to escape the confining bonds of their present lifestyle. This portrayal offers not only an image of the present plight, but also a prediction of the future of Italy on a broader political scale. In this film, a bicycle becomes much more than a collection of metal with two wheels. It

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<sup>15</sup> Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 23.

becomes the emblem of the *plight of the working class*, and a device with which the audience can navigate the historical twists and turns of the collective struggles of a nation.

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