

BICYCLE THIEVES

Vittorio De Sica

Sub : Film Studies (FE
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2018-2021

Vittorio De Sica

- Italian director and actor, a leading figure in the neorealist movement.
- Four of the films he directed won Academy Awards: Sciuscià and Bicycle Thieves (honorary), while Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow and Il giardino dei Finzi Contini won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.
- *Bicycle Thieves* helped establish the permanent Best Foreign Film Award. These two films are considered part of the canon of classic cinema. *Bicycle Thieves* was cited by Turner Classic Movies as one of the 15 most influential films in cinema history.¹

Analysis

- The setting of this movie takes place in post-war Rome, where economic struggles are commonplace.
- The film clearly contains many elements of the Classical Hollywood Narrative (the ending being an important exception), and it makes excellent use of film form, mise-en-scene, and cinematography to tell the story in a compelling way.
- The film follows Antonio Ricci, the main character, during his search for his stolen bicycle.

- The film focuses on the main character, Antonio Ricci, and his son, Bruno, throughout. Antonio's main goal is to get a job, but it quickly changes into the main plot of the movie: to locate his stolen bicycle so that he can return to work.
- The film progresses in a logical, linear fashion, having no major lapses in time. In addition, viewers are taken on an emotional journey, feeling the frustration and desperation of Antonio as his search continues.
- While the film meets many of the characteristics of the Classical Hollywood Narrative, there was one important difference: There was no happy ending in this film.

- Although Antonio never achieves his goal, viewers can see how his character went through a process of change. For example, his character is first portrayed as having a relatively high moral standard, but by the end of the film, he compromises his values by threatening to kill people, going to a seer for advice, becoming more hostile toward his son, and attempting to steal a bike.
- Antonio never recovers his bicycle, and his life continues on a downward spiral. After his failed attempt of bike theft, Antonio walks home with his son—crying, depressed, and defeated, with no hope of returning to his job or providing for his family.
- After all, this film perfectly captures the failures and injustices in life, and it likely conjures up similar memories of hardships in the viewer's mind. Nevertheless, the movie has a very serious tone that makes the viewer feel as if he or she is part of the journey.

- the character of Bruno creates a strong pattern in this film's form. Bruno's pattern is that of a young boy who is mature beyond his years. He cares for his father's bike and knows more about it than he does. In one scene, Bruno closes the window in the house before leaving so that his infant sibling will keep warm. He is very self-sufficient and wise: he dresses himself appropriately, seeks a police officer when his father is in trouble, and so forth. Finally, he immediately recognizes the immorality of his father's attempted theft at the end of the movie.

- the different meanings help viewers to understand this film on different levels. The referential meaning in this film is this: In post-war Rome, the average man is struggling to find work. An unemployed man finally finds a job, but he must retrieve his stolen bike to keep it. Most viewers would get this basic meaning from the film.
- the symptomatic meaning takes a deeper look into the social problems of life. The symptomatic meaning in the film is this: A moral man, placed in very difficult economic and social circumstances, becomes beaten down by his environment and compromises his morality in an effort to survive. These various levels of meaning give the viewer an understanding of the meaning or agenda of the film, and they clarify the message that the director and writers were trying to convey.



- this film's theme is enhanced by clever use of mise-en-scene, especially with respect to the lighting, costumes, and props. Although the film is in black and white, there are different shades of lighting in the film. For example, low-key lighting is used when Antonio is in his home, when he visits the seer, and in the pawnshop. This lighting emphasizes Antonio's desperation during those scenes.
- In contrast, high-key lighting is used throughout most of the outdoor scenes, which highlights the enormous size of the city. This emphasizes the large area that Antonio has to search, revealing the daunting task that lie ahead of him.

- Aside from the lighting, the costume selection helps viewers understand the characters' status. The clothing that Antonio's family wears throughout the movie is very basic, and it reflects their lower-class status. This is even more apparent during the restaurant scene. A family is portrayed as wealthy, and their clothing is very elaborate, with the women wearing expensive hats and men wearing well-made suits. Antonio's family always wears clothing that is plain and dated.
- The props in the film also reinforce Antonio's poverty and bad luck. Antonio's home is very bare inside, having few decorations. In contrast, the seer's home is decorated with many furnishings. The numerous bicycle props throughout the film also create a sense of suspense—viewers are likely wondering if he'll spot his bicycle. In addition, the vast number of bicycles reinforce the sadness of Antonio's situation: all this man needs is one simple bicycle so that he can work, and they are everywhere! Yet, he can never find his own bike—and that's all he needs so that he can provide for his family.



- The predators are the rich and disconnected. De Sica's commentary is fascinating. The theft of the bike ironically unveils the layers of corruption at all levels of postwar Italy, but especially in the upper classes. You see a well-dressed, self-indulgent young man blowing bubbles and totally oblivious to Antonio's suffering as he and his friend conduct their search through vendors selling bikes and parts. In the same scene, De Sica shows a well-dressed pedophile trying to seduce Antonio's son, Bruno (Enzo Staiola); no one seems to be concerned about the pedophile, as if it is all too common. Even the church is not a sanctuary. Class struggle is clearly a concern of De Sica's.