

## Around the World: Bicycle Thieves

[Giulia De Vita](#) looks at the Italian neorealist classic *Bicycle Thieves*, a film that explored the economic struggles of post-WWII Italy

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*Over summer many of us will be going to the cinema to watch the latest Hollywood blockbusters. So as an alternative this August the Nouse team is having a look at some of the gems of world cinema, which are often unfairly ignored in favour of their American counterparts.*



Image: Park Circus

Vittorio Di Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di Biciclette*) is perhaps the most seminal films of the Italian Neorealist period, a cinematic and literary movement notably characterised by its jarring yet honest depiction of the aftermath of the second world war. Neorealism's inception in 1943 coincides with the beginning of the Italian Resistance and the fall of the fascist dictatorship, undercutting filmmakers of the time to represent the honest realities of war and its effects. As stated by Martin Scorsese (1999), "*Ladri di biciclette*" is "the gradual unfolding of a situation" telling the candid tale of the strenuous journey a man (Antonio Ricci) and his son (Bruno) make through Rome to search for the father's stolen bicycle; without which he will lose his job and the only means for his family's survival (as epitomised by Antonio's line: "I wonder, if I had my bicycle back...how much I would earn. We could live again"). This emotionally charged film beautifully captures the unconscionable struggle a man must face to survive whilst retaining his dignity and integrity with a simple elegance.

In line with the unconventional production methods of neorealist films, in *Bicycle Thieves*, Vittorio De Sica only cast untrained actors, whose lives paralleled those of their characters. De Sica himself stated that during the casting test to Lamberto Maggiorani (who eventually was cast in the main part of Antonio), he observed: "the way he moved, the way he sat down, his gestures with those hands hardened from work, the hands of a working man, not an actor" (De Sica, 1956). Not only does the film portray the physical and

economic devastation of Italy after the war, it also highlights the stark reality of life for men, women and children; portrayed in the film through the relationship between Antonio and his family. The degree of devastation in Italy caused by the war is depicted thoroughly through Antonio's journey, showing in various wide screen shots the almost unrecognisable streets of Rome scattered with rubble.

A pivotal moment in the film is one in which Antonio, after having searched endlessly around Rome with no success in finding his stolen bicycle, is so desperate that he feels compelled to resort to attempting to steal another man's bicycle. This is a turning point in the film as it displays how Antonio is led to such extremes that he has to strip himself of moral judgement and sacrifice his dignity and integrity. As stated by Scorsese (2012), "*Bicycle Thieves*, is a film of powerful simplicity" and it is this simplicity that makes it the most accessible of neorealist films. Despite being nearly seventy years old, the 'simple' idea of a man fighting for a job, his family, and ultimately for his life, is more real and more significant than ever. Profoundly rich in human insight, 'Bicycle Thieves' embodies the essence of Neorealism: a brutal portrayal of contemporary conditions, emotional clarity and social rectitude.

Though it may have been more obvious to have chosen a film from Rossellini's 'War Trilogy' – either *Roma Città Aperta* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), or *Germania Anno Zero* (1948) – in my opinion, *Bicycle Thieves* offers the most visceral depiction of not only the horrors Italy was facing, but paradoxically the resilience of its people. De Sica ultimately presents a film that dramatically contributes to a new social awareness in Italy, almost all of the film is shot in the streets, a raw image without any mystification.

To conclude, Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* is, without a doubt, one of the greatest Italian films of all time. Effortlessly displaying the harsh socio-political that consumed Italy after the second world war as a sub-text of the film, yet still portraying a fundamentally human story at its forefront; a tale of the extremes of human endeavours, the bond between father and son, and ultimately, what it takes to survive. Justly nominated for the Academy Award for Best Screenplay by Cesare Zavattini and winning both the Golden Globe and the BAFTA for best Foreign Film, *Bicycle Thieves* is an integral film displaying the horrors of the aftermath of Fascism both on political and human level.



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