2 De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*: Casting shadows on the visionary city

SOON AFTER ANTONIO RICCI reports the theft of his bicycle to the authorities, a journalist, looking for a story, asks an officer at police headquarters if there is any news. When the officer answers, "No, nothing, just a bicycle,"[1] the audience is suddenly confronted with a violent clash of perspectives. From the point of view of the police and the press, the bicycle theft lacks any of the sensationalism, squalor, or violence that recommends crime to the public notice. For Antonio, and for the viewers, who have come to see the crucial importance of the bicycle to one family's well-being, the police officer's dismissal is the cruelest of understatements. But the clash of perspectives implies far more than the mere disparity between the public and private claims of events—it reveals the historical distance that separates *Bicycle Thief* from *Open City*, and suggests the challenges faced by De Sica and Zavattini in updating the neorealist aesthetic.[2] Though both *Open City* and *Bicycle Thief* may be considered chronicles in that they document contemporary social circumstances, Rossellini's film was endowed with drama and urgency by

[1] *The Bicycle Thief: A Film by Vittorio De Sica*, trans. Simon Hartog (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 35. All quotes from the screenplay will be from this edition. Subsequent page references will appear in the text.

[2] Though Zavattini was the official scriptwriter and De Sica the official director of *Bicycle Thief*, so neat a division of labor belies the truly collaborative nature of their partnership. When I refer to De Sica alone in these pages, I do so out of convenience, and not out of a desire to slight Zavattini's contribution to this and the other films on which the two men collaborated.

the very nature of the history it recorded, while De Sica's story reflected, instead, the banality of the stabilized postwar condition. Where Nazi occupation, torture, underground resistance, and guerrilla warfare gave *Open City* its natural dynamic power, hunger, unemployment, and despair provided De Sica and Zavattini with subject matter of far less obvious dramatic potential.[3] But Zavattini made a virtue of necessity, arguing that the dramatically poor subject matter was by definition the richer in truth, devoid of the distractions and fabrications of conventional narrative structure.[4] In De Sica's words, "my purpose, I was saying, is to find the element of drama in daily situations, the marvelous in the news, indeed, in the local news, considered by most people as worn-out materials."[5]

Such statements may be helpful in telling us why *Bicycle Thief* is not *Open City*, but they do nothing to locate the source of the film's poetic power, nor to explain why it is that we recoil in horror at the police officer's belittling of Antonio's loss. Although the comment "no, nothing, just a bicycle" is on one level a valid assessment of the incident, its unfairness, on other levels, is an insult to our very notions of human justice. What the police officer's reductiveness does is to underscore, by contrast, the filmmaker's strategy of semantic layering, whereby the storyline becomes the vehicle for multiple levels of meaning. Unlike this-for-that allegory, however, the literal level is not swallowed up by its figurative significance, but maintains its autonomy as a document of a concrete historical condition. Yet the simultaneous and parallel meanings it generates on psychological, sociopolitical, and philosophical levels serve to give every cinematic event

[3]Leprohon comments on how the filmmakers succeeded in shifting the neorealist themes from those of Resistance and liberation to the banality of postwar restoration. See *Vittorio De Sica*, p. 37.

[4]See Zavattini's "Some Ideas on the Cinema," p. 217.

[5]Cited in "De Sica su De Sica," *Bianco e nero* 36 (September–December 1975), 259.

such interpretive complexity that what appears at first glance to be a simple narrative construction upon close critical scrutiny reveals the highest degree of literariness.[6] Such deceptive simplicity, or self-concealing art, makes the film, like Antonio's bicycle, the bearer of far heavier and more sophisticated cargo than its fragile exterior would immediately suggest. But before we examine this literary strategy, we would do well to consider the concrete cinematic vehicle whose technical form reveals the same self-concealing art that typifies De Sica's approach to meaning.

Here, again, comparisons with *Open City* are in order. Just as historical circumstances gave the events of *Open City* its natural drama, so too did they dictate its technical style. The primitive equipment that Rossellini had at his disposal, the absence of studio facilities, and the improvised mode of production were all direct correlates of the very historical events that the film records. But by 1948, filmmaking was no longer the obstacle-ridden process that it was in the immediate aftermath of the Allied liberation. On the contrary, technical possibilities were wide open to De Sica and Zavattini, who made of *Bicycle Thief* a neorealist superspectacle, complete with a big budget, a cast of hundreds, and a meticulously worked out shooting style. The film cost 100 million lire—a sizable sum by contemporary Italian production standards, owing in large part to the vast number of extras who had to be kept on retainer until perfect filming conditions were met.[7] De Sica and Zavattini took six months to prepare the script, discussing every image and carefully selecting the best possible locations for the action to unfold. Shooting was done with painstaking care to maximize visual complexity,

[6] On the interpretive richness of every image in the film, see André Bazin, *Vittorio De Sica* (Parma: Guanda, 1953), p. 19.

[7] On the opulence and meticulousness of the film's production, see Armes, *Patterns of Realism*, pp. 152–55, and Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 57. On the multiplicity of camera angles and the plurality of the filmmaker's perspectives, see Baldelli, *Cinema dell'ambiguità*, p. 235.

while concealing the art that went into its making. Rossellini's expedients in *Open City* had come to be stylistic norms for neorealism, generating such a taste for simplicity, location shooting, and authorial nonintervention that subsequent filmmakers were forced into creating, through elaborate technical means, an illusion of technical poverty. *Bicycle Thief* is a prime example of the self-concealing art that neorealists were required to practice in the pursuit of Rossellinian austerity, where the impression of effortlessness and stylistic transparency were not achieved without calculated effort.[8]

This is not to say that De Sica's careful aesthetic is in bad faith. On the contrary, it reflects a conscious ideological *prise de position* against the spectacular conventions of the commercial cinema—a rejection that is made explicit in two episodes in *Bicycle Thief*. When a co-worker curses the Sunday rain and complains that there is nothing to do but go to the movies—a singularly boring prospect for him—he is arguing for the irrelevance of commercial cinema to the common plight.[9] It is significant, too, that Antonio's troubles begin as he is putting up a publicity poster for Rita Hayworth's new film, suggesting the marked contrast between commercial cinematic fantasies and the real survival problems besetting the Italian public.[10] In fact, in the very process of putting up the poster, Antonio suffers the crisis that prevents *Bicycle Thief* from ever becoming a consumable family idyll. Antonio will not be able to rescue himself and his dependents

[8] As Jean Cocteau observed, "the miracle is in having effaced the work." Cited in Henri Agel, *Vittorio de Sica* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1955), pp. 99–100.

[9] Ben Lawton cites this remark and the Rita Hayworth poster as examples of De Sica's self-reflexive commentary on the nature of his medium. See "Italian Neorealism: A Mirror Construction of Reality," p. 18; and Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 57.

[10] In an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, De Sica makes explicit the disparity between this Hollywood image and Antonio's world. See *Encountering Directors*, p. 153.

from their desperate poverty by dint of perseverence, hard work, and good luck, as the hypothetical Hollywood equivalent, produced by David O. Selznick and starring Cary Grant, would require.[11]

The literal level of the film could be summarized in two lines on the local page of a Roman newspaper. "Man's bike stolen on first day back to work after two years' unemployment. Bike prerequisite to job."[12] The film tells of an odyssey through Rome by Antonio Ricci, soon joined by his son Bruno, in search of the lost vehicle. Their itinerary includes the police station, trade union headquarters, the open markets of Piazza Vittorio and Porta Portese, a mendicants' church where one of the thief's contacts goes for a free lunch, the apartment of the soothsayer Santona, a brothel, and, finally, Via Panico where the thief is found but not apprehended. In the final episode, Antonio attempts to steal a bike himself, is caught, but soon released while his astonished and ultimately forgiving son looks on.

Like the deceptively simple visual style of *Bicycle Thief*, which conceals a wealth of technical artistry, its banal narrative hides a plentitude of meanings. Most affecting is the psychological relationship that evolves between Antonio and his son Bruno as the search for the bicycle unfolds.[13] It is this level that engages the sympathies of the viewers, for Bruno's witness provides a constant reminder of what is at stake should Antonio fail in his quest. Bruno serves as an internal chorus, mutely commenting on the action from an innocent

[11] David O. Selznick offered to finance *Bicycle Thief* provided that Cary Grant play the lead. See Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 57, and Leprohon, *De Sica*, p. 35.

[12] "The whole story would not deserve two lines in a stray dog column," remarks Bazin in *What Is Cinema?*, 2:50. In this regard see Jean Cocteau's comments, cited in Agel, *De Sica*, p. 71.

[13] That the father–son relationship is the most emotionally gripping part of the film, there is considerable critical agreement. See, for example, Luigi Comencini's observations in "Li capiva," *Bianco e nero* 36 (September–December 1975), 123, and Bazin's very moving pages in *What Is Cinema?*, 2:53–54.

child's perspective on some occasions, and from a surprisingly adult one on others.[14] His presence in the film is an inspired addition to the literary source, the novel *Ladri di biciclette* by Luigi Bartolini, whose protagonist is a childless loner. Bruno's companionship adds immense richness to the story by providing another surface against which the narrative action rebounds, so that each event is given triple impact as it affects the man's consciousness, the child's, and the interaction between the two.

Psychologically, *Bicycle Thief* traces the evolution of the father–son relationship from disparity and dependence on external mediations to full self-definition and equality. The bicycle is the emblem of all those cultural and material forces that determine the relationship from without. When the vehicle is retrieved from hock at the beginning of the film, it enables Antonio to be a conventional patriarch, requiring obedience and respect now that he is once more the chief provider for his dependents' material well-being. And if the direct relationship between the bike and Antonio's power to support the family were not obvious enough, De Sica literalizes it in two scenes where the newly reinstated paterfamilias carries first his wife Maria, and then Bruno, on its handlebars. The political significance of the bike in the family context, and the way it structures the relationship between father and son, is rendered visually in the scene that introduces Bruno to us in the film. He is first shown behind the spokes of the wheel as he polishes the bike in a point-of-view shot taken from Antonio's perspective. The boy's effort to restore the bike's original luster is an obvious projection of his desire to rehabilitate his father's parental authority, as his adoring mimicry of Antonio throughout this scene suggests. Bruno imitates his father's toilet in a way so exaggerated as to suggest parody if it were not for his utter sincerity

[14] On Bruno's role as internal chorus, as witness and conscience, see Leprohon, *De Sica*, p. 40, and Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:53.

and delight in seeing his father repossess his former exemplary status within the family. What makes Bruno's filial subordination especially striking is the fact that it involves a forfeit of his own precocious adulthood—during Antonio's extended unemployment, Bruno had been the only family breadwinner in his job as gas station attendant. Throughout the film, vestiges of his precocity remain as Bruno intermittently plays the adult to Antonio's child—when he does the higher mathematics of his father's stipend calculations in the restaurant scene, when he has the prudence to get a policeman to defuse a hostile crowd in Via Panico, and when he solicitously closes the window shutters to protect his baby sibling from the morning sun. It is perhaps with some relief, and certainly without rancor, that Bruno relinquishes his premature adulthood when the bike is retrieved at the film's start and the traditional family hierarchy is reconstituted once more.

There is a further detail in Bruno's introductory scene that merits careful critical attention if we are to establish the terms of the father–son relationship. "Papa, did you see what they did?" Bruno asks in dismay. "No, what?" "A dent!" "Perhaps it was there before." "No, it wasn't . . . I'd have complained to them" (28). Referring most obviously to Antonio's paternal dominion predicated on the bike and the earning power it betokens, the dent suggests the permanent, if minor damage, done to his authority by two years on the dole. Were this a conventional commercial film, however, where concrete details are all governed by considerations of plot, we would expect the dent to reappear later on in the story and to play a part in the narrative resolution. We could envision a happy ending, for example, in which Bruno identifies the otherwise disguised frame by this characteristic disfiguration. But the dent looks ahead to no such optimistic turn of events. If anything, it foreshadows the greater damage that Antonio allows his bike to suffer in the theft itself. Bruno's activist rejoinder ("I'd have complained to them") in which he reg-

isters an implicit criticism of his father's passivity, anticipates the later scene outside the mendicants' church when the child reprimands his father for letting the thief's contact get away. What the dent reveals, then, is the vast difference between a film aesthetic which privileges considerations of plot and one in which metaphoric meanings are given equal dignity and weight.

In developing the psychological dimension of the story, De Sica and Zavattini must solve two problems built into their very material: 1) how to reveal the shifts and subtleties of interpersonal relationships in working-class characters little given to verbalizing their sentiments; and 2) how to do so in a way that is appropriate to the medium of film. The filmmakers' solutions offer perhaps the greatest evidence of that cinematic poetry for which *Bicycle Thief* has been so rightly acclaimed. Accordingly, De Sica and Zavattini choose two physical analogues to the relational changes going on between father and son. The first is visual cuing, by which Bruno will literally look up to Antonio to observe the paternal reactions on which he should model his own. This visual cuing, as a sign of Bruno's uncritical acceptance of his father's authority, is significantly disrupted at several points in the film. When Antonio takes out his frustrations on his son and slaps him with little apparent cause, Bruno refuses all visual contact with Antonio for some time. This averting of the eyes, as Bruno's retaliation for Antonio's blow, reveals how important the earlier visual cuing had been in defining the father–son hierarchy, and thus reaffirms the hierarchy itself. Only at the end of the film, when Antonio's decision to steal a bike robs him of his paternal authority, does Bruno's gaze at him reveal the radically changed terms of their relationship. His eyes first stare in horror at the spectacle of his father turned thief. But when he emerges at his father's side as the crowd harasses Antonio, Bruno looks up in concern and fear for the well-being of his fellow traveler. His upward glance, so reminiscent of the earlier ones throughout the film,

is vastly different in the kind of information that Bruno seeks from it. Previously the conduit for behavioral directives, the glance now reveals the fallibility and contingency of the disgraced parental model. With this knowledge, Bruno is deprived of all conventional ways of thinking about Antonio. He cannot condemn him as a common criminal since the man is, after all, his father. Yet Antonio has abdicated any claim to patriarchal respect by violating the legal sanctions on which all authority rests. Thus when Bruno slips his hand into Antonio's at the end of the film, he is offering his father an entirely new relationship—one that no longer needs the mediation of the bicycle, whose physical absence throughout the film has heralded its real emotional irrelevance to this final shared understanding. The financial and political power that the bicycle represented within the family in reestablishing the old hierarchy is no longer the basis of the relationship between Antonio and Bruno. And the quest for the missing bike need no longer be the pretext for the day of important searching and mutual self-discovery that Antonio and Bruno spend together.

In addition to visual cuing, De Sica and Zavattini have also used gait to figure the shifts in Antonio's relationship with his son. "Before choosing this particular child," Bazin said of Enzo Staiola who played Bruno in the film, "De Sica did not ask him to perform, just to walk. He wanted to play off the striding gait of the man against the short, trotting steps of the child. . . . It would be no exaggeration to say that *Ladri di biciclette* is the story of a walk through Rome by a father and his son."[15] Where the visual cuing reveals Bruno's side of the relationship, the striding emphasizes Antonio's. He often walks well ahead of Bruno in a revelation of the self-absorption that at times endangers his son's very well-being. Thus Antonio fails to notice that Bruno has fallen in the rain, and as the soaked child brushes himself off, his

[15]See Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:54–55.

2. *Bruno (Enzo Staiola) refuses to make eye contact with his father (Lamberto Maggiorani) after Antonio takes out his frustration by unfairly striking his son.*

father distractedly asks why all this flailing of arms. "I fell down" (51), shouts Bruno, distressed as much by his accident as by his father's apparent obliviousness to it. Toward the film's end, Bruno is twice nearly run over in the traffic of Rome as Antonio heedlessly forges ahead to fulfill his new criminal resolve. Bruno's constant efforts to keep pace with his father are interrupted by the same incident that interfered with his visual cuing. After Antonio reprimands Bruno, the boy walks as far from his father as possible, interposing a row of trees himself and the source of his undeserved reproof. At the end of the film, as Bruno and Antonio establish their new relationship of equality, their gait reflects this psychological change. They now walk abreast, holding hands; their disparate strides have accommodated themselves to the differing needs of the man and the boy.

Bazin's apt description of *Bicycle Thief* as "a walk through Rome by a father and his son" is not limited to topography, however. The film is also a walk through Rome's social institutions, whose indifference to Antonio's plight forms the basis of De Sica's sociopolitical critique.[16] The law, the Church, and the trade union all fail to alleviate the very problems they were established to correct, forcing Antonio to resort to unconventional, and, finally, self-defeating modes of redress. His trip to the police station proves that the law is less interested in protecting the property rights of the citizens than in suppressing their civil liberties, as the officers rush out to quell a demonstration while giving no help to Antonio in retrieving his stolen goods. The law becomes an impersonal, *pro forma* means for registering injustice without doing anything about it, while the attendant human suffering is entirely dismissed as the officers minimize the significance of Antonio's loss.

The trade union proves to be just as indifferent to the in-

[16]On the failure of social service organizations to address the common plight, see Leprohon, *De Sica*, p. 39. On institutional and popular indifference to Antonio's predicament, see Agel, *De Sica*, p. 83.

dividual suffering of its constituents as the legal system is. When Antonio rushes into headquarters in search of his colleague Baiocco, he interrupts a speaker who voices the usual pieties about worker welfare. The utterly abstract and impersonal nature of this commitment is dramatized by the speaker's snarling retort to Antonio. "Hey . . . quiet please. . . . If you don't want to listen to this, go somewhere else" (41). Though Baiocco does all that he can to help his friend, he acts not as an ambassador of the union's will to help its members, but as a single individual, empowered by compassion alone, lacking the kind of institutional support that could give his aid the weight to succeed.[17]

Just as the union failed to address Antonio's material plight, the Church offers no spiritual sustenance in his despair. The Quaker do-gooders, as Bazin calls them,[18] not only enable the old man who is the thief's contact to get away, but they degrade Antonio along with the other mendicants whom they process through their church in an assembly-line operation of shaving, soul-saving, and lunch. Despite Antonio's attempts to distinguish himself from the beggars who must be shorn and shriven before they can be fed, he is constantly mistaken for one of them, responding with an emphatic "no" when asked if he wants to be shaved before being herded with the others into Mass. The Church's charitable efforts are portrayed as not only inadequate to the task of rehabilitating a war-ravaged population, but downright dehumanizing in its wholesale approach to processing bodies and souls.[19]

In order for the film's social criticism to work, however, Antonio's plight must not be seen as unique. Accordingly, De Sica and Zavattini offer a series of visual essays on the

[17]Baldelli sees in this disparity between Baiocco's individual sympathy for Antonio's plight and the union's collective indifference an example of the failure of worker solidarity and the absence of a class consciousness in the Italian populace. See *Cinema dell'ambiguità*, p. 216.

[18]Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:52.

[19]The Vatican was quick to take umbrage at De Sica's critical assault. See Leprohon, *De Sica*, p. 45.

commonality of Ricci's condition.[20] Any tendency to see the protagonists as exceptions to the impoverished masses is discouraged early in the film when Antonio and Maria pawn their wedding sheets in order to redeem their bicycle from hock. If we think that this difficult sacrifice will be enough to set them apart from the crowd and to rescue them from destitution, we are wrong, as a dizzying tilt-shot reveals when it follows the pawnshop attendant up to the top of a mountain of shelves filled with similarly pawned trousseau linens. In a later visual essay, Antonio's story is universalized by the multitudes of used bicycles shown at the open markets on the day after the theft. The evidence that these bicycles are being dismantled, painted, reassembled, and generally disguised suggests that most of them arrived at Piazza Vittorio and Porta Portese by dishonest means. One vendor's sneering comment, "well, we all know that in Piazza Vittorio there's nothing but honest people" (48), suggests a strong presumption to the contrary. A further visual essay on the plurality of Antonio's plight occurs in the police station as the constable stands before a background of cubbyholes in which scores of similar theft reports are filed. The fact that none of the characters in the film acts surprised when Antonio tells of the crime further testifies to the frequency of such mishaps.

There is, however, another Rome, set against the masses of Antonio's fellow sufferers. This is the middle-class city of churchgoers, restaurant patrons, and soccer fans who are engaged in the leisure activities of a typical Roman Sunday. What this suggests is that recent history has afflicted only the lower classes and that the bourgeoisie enjoys a kind of ahistorical status, that their lives are exempt from the devastations of war and its aftermath and are obedient only to the regular rhythms of the work week, with its ritual Sabbath rewards. The exclusivity of this caste is, of course, the

[20] On the universality of Antonio's predicament, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 60; and Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema italiano*, pp. 228–29.

theme of the entire film, which argues, in Catch 22 fashion, that one must be rich enough to own a bike in order to get the job that will provide the means to buy the very vehicle on which the job is predicated. Put more simply, one must already have a foot in the door of capitalism in order to enter that privileged domain. It is as if an invisible barrier separated the Riccis from the middle-class exemplars in the film, and indeed that barrier becomes almost palpable in the restaurant scene where Antonio and Bruno are seated next to an affluent family of conspicuous consumers. While Antonio mentally compares his earning power to that of the paterfamilias at the next table, the smug son makes his judgment of Bruno explicit in contemptuous glances and table manners exaggerated to the point of buffoonery.[21] It is the waiter, however, who makes the definitive class distinction between the Riccis and their neighbors, denying Antonio and Bruno a tablecloth and failing to lay out the silverware, in marked contrast to the amenities heaped on the more prosperous customers. Visually, De Sica need say no more about the impenetrability of the middle class to Antonio's aspirations.

The foregoing considerations have by no means exhausted the interpretive richness of De Sica's film, which abounds in metaphysical as well as psychological and sociopolitical truths. Now that social institutions have failed Antonio, he must seek alternative ways to understand and control his fate.[22] Once the law is discredited by the impotence of its enforcers, Antonio avails himself of the occult, which he had once viewed with such contempt when Maria had paid off her debt to the soothsayer, La Santona. "As if these witches had any control

[21] Baldelli offers a subtle reading of this scene whose humor tempers the harsh polemics inherent in juxtaposing rich and poor. See *Cinema dell'ambiguità*, p. 220.

[22] On the film's metaphysical inquiry, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 61. Agel characterizes the film's philosophical message as one of "fatalisme" in which Antonio is powerless to affect his negative destiny. See his *De Sica*, p. 82.

over people's lives. It's just idiotic," sneered Antonio "and who found this job then? Her or me?" (27). In a rather artful transition, Antonio reverts to the soothsayer later in the film when events have so humbled him that he can admit "we won't find it, even with the aid of the saints" (73). A cut to the scene in the soothsayer's apartment makes explicit Antonio's implied association of La Santona with *santi* (saints) in an anticlerical maneuver by De Sica and Zavattini to show how easily belief in one kind of supernatural power can be transferred to less orthodox objects of faith. This time, Antonio finds himself a suppliant among the other desperate followers of La Santona, rather than a cynical observer convinced of his own unaided power to succeed.[23] Though the fortuneteller must interpret her oracular utterances to her other clients, informing the ugly man with the unresponsive fiancée, for example, that he must sow his seeds in another field and then applying the metaphor to the problem of unrequited love, she speaks unambiguously to Antonio, telling him "either you will find it immediately or you will never find it" (76). This reply, like that of the officers at the police station, throws Antonio back on his own resources, and fails to offer either the specific practical advice or the morale-building support that he requires in this moment of crisis. Broadly interpreted, both parts of La Santona's prophecy come true, since Antonio immediately finds the thief, and at the same time, loses forever the possibility of recuperating the bike. Indeed, no sooner do father and son leave La Santona's than they spot their prey and chase him to his neighborhood in Via Panico, where the hostility of the community and Antonio's inability to marshal allies makes it impossible for him to pursue his course of justice.

[23] Baldelli finds in this return to La Santona one of the few weaknesses of the film. He faults it as precious, overly literary, and out of character for Antonio who had earlier scorned Maria's womanly superstition. See *Cinema dell'ambiguità*, pp. 239–40. For a cogent refutation of Baldelli's criticism, see Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema italiano*, pp. 224–25.

Although De Sica and Zavattini borrow the name of the neighborhood directly from Bartolini's novel, they take full advantage of its poetic implications. Via Panico is indeed the place where Antonio is thrown into the emotional turmoil which the god Pan inspired in unwary travelers of antiquity. But Antonio's turmoil is more than psychological—it affects his moral and cognitive faculties as well. The events in Via Panico destroy all the principles on which Antonio predicates his quest, making the distinctions between victim and victimizer, prey and predator, right and wrong, meaningless in a world undone by confusion and doubt. The occurrence most subversive to Antonio's moral order is the confrontation with the thief in a context that gives the criminal an identity and a background as tragic as the protagonist's own. Up to this point, the thief has been a nameless, faceless villain, devoid of any humanity and target of our unmitigated hate. In Via Panico, we learn the thief's name from the lips of his mother, whose poverty and despair cannot help but soften our judgment of her son's misdeeds. De Sica does not sentimentalize the thief and his family, however, for this is no fantasy world where victim and victimizer embrace in ultimate recognition of universal brotherhood, nor does he prettify the picture with quaint poverty and cherubic urchins to elicit our sympathies and make us ashamed of our oversimplified impulses to love or to hate. The thief remains unattractive, as do the snarling mother and the contemptuous sister in the squalid apartment whose dank atmosphere we can almost feel and whose pitiful story we probably already know. De Sica evokes less sympathy for the thief's plight than understanding—this is a cold, hard fact which the film presents to us as a material part of the equation that will determine Antonio's next move. Our awareness that the thief has himself been long unemployed and is responsible for supporting a destitute family further diminishes the distance between Alfredo and Antonio, between criminal and victim of crime.

The second, and more decisive blow to Antonio's moral order is what he discovers about the nature of justice in Via Panico. When the police officer asks Antonio, "Do you have a witness?" and Antonio replies, "I am a witness" (89), the officer says "look down there. . . . All those people are witnesses for him" (90). Antonio learns that justice is by no means an absolute, but that it is a function of the crowd—an entirely relative, situational concept that favors those already blessed with power, wealth, friends, or good luck. This devastating lesson enables Antonio to shed the morality which had previously distinguished him from the criminal object of his manhunt, making the Italian plural title of the film, *Bicycle Thieves* (as opposed to the misleading singular in English) a commentary on the sociopathic effects of life in the postwar era. Though Bartolini's novel has the same title, its plural is a far less momentous one, reflecting the narrator's condescending opinion of the Roman rabble, rather than a disturbing indictment of a society whose most fundamental principles are called into question.

Having abandoned any naive belief in social justice, and having exhausted the possibilities of the occult, Antonio casts about for other ways to take charge of his faltering destiny. If the universe is as arbitrary and as random as the events in Via Panico suggest, then Antonio could try to comply with the forces of chance and anticipate the next throw of the dice, according to the game of hazard which he had refereed at the entrance to La Santona's in the first part of the film. The game of chance merges with another kind of game—that of agility and speed—to form the final, catastrophic course of action which will end Antonio's quest. A sports subplot has developed in the second half of the film around the soccer match between Modena and Rome to be played that Sunday afternoon.[24] Heralded by the truckload of Modena

[24] Franco La Polla notes that the entire second half of the film is characterized by the tension between Ricci's desperate quest and the festivities of the Sunday soccer game. See "La città e lo spazio," *Bianco e nero* 36 (September–December 1975), 69.

supporters who pass them by on a bridge, the game provides Antonio with a pretext for humoring Bruno after their recent quarrel by deferring to the boy's superior knowledge of sports. "Is Modena a good team?" (69) Antonio asks his son, to which Bruno shakes his head in the negative, only mildly appeased. Later, the subject recurs when a radio broadcast announcing the day's soccer scores is overheard on the way to La Santona's. And indeed, it is no accident that the final act of Antonio's drama is played out against the backdrop of the soccer game, for this provides the analogue to the protagonist's choice of tactics.[25] The setting offers multiple incentives to action in the rows of bicycles parked outside the stadium, the mounting volume of audience excitement within, and, finally, the spectacle of bicycle racers whizzing past the desperate man and boy on the curb. In a universe where human justice and the supernatural are of no avail, Antonio decides to align himself with the forces of luck and brute strength that govern the world of games. But like the Modena team, whose hopeful fans we saw on the way to the stadium and whose dejected followers we see leaving it, Antonio is not favored by Lady Fortune when he attempts to steal a bicycle himself, nor is his physical prowess any match for the many runners who converge on him in answer to the owner's cries for aid. Unlike the incident of his own bike's theft, this time help for the victim is forthcoming, and witnesses to the crime are numerous, including, most tragically, the new thief's own son.

Though the events of Via Panico and the collapse of Antonio's hierarchy of values give his fall a tragic necessity, we still view it through the horrified and disbelieving eyes of Bruno. The crisis is doubly shocking, both in its violation of our own ethical standards and in its subversion of our need to identify with the protagonist and to see his actions in

[25] Armes observes that the soccer game provides a counterpoint to Antonio's moral struggle (*Patterns of Realism*, p. 153) whereas I would argue that it offers a model for his final choice of a "survival-of-the-fittest" philosophy.

morally absolute terms. When Simon Hartog compares Antonio to "the lone Western hero, or the tough detective . . . searching for justice,"[26] he forgets that the Hollywood genre heroes not only require audience identification, but take great pains to justify its vote of confidence through happy, or at least cathartic and consoling, plot resolutions. By violently shocking us out of our unexamined identification with the protagonist, De Sica is challenging not only our naive assumptions about poetic justice, but our most intimate film-viewing needs. Our sympathies were similarly violated by Rossellini when he removed Pina from the stage midway into *Open City* and disappointed our expectations for a conventional comic outcome. But Rossellini's generic revolution left the audience's moral sensibilities intact, whereas De Sica challenges even these, leaving us a vision whose only certainty is a son's miraculous love of a father stripped of all mystifications and cant.

The three years that intervened between *Open City* and *Bicycle Thief* took its toll on the optimism which typified the inaugural film of the neorealist season. By 1948, it was clear that Rossellini's visionary city would never be founded and that his hopeful synthesis of Marxist and Catholic ideals was a fantast's dream. De Sica's and Zavattini's pessimism is as much a reflection of this historic disappointment as of their more somber poetic temperaments, and in their image of the city of Rome, they make explicit the vast distance separating Rossellini's vision from their own.[27] As a physical setting, Rossellini's city is a familiar one, consisting of well-known monuments—St. Peter's, the Spanish Steps—and areas that we visit time and again in the film—the Prenestino neighborhood of the Resistance fighters, and the rooms of the Gestapo in Via Tasso. Rossellini's city is a centered, coherent

[26] See the introduction to *The Bicycle Thief*, p. 8.

[27] "An undeniable protagonist . . . of De Sica's cinema in this period is the city," observes La Polla. See his discussion of the role of the city in *Bicycle Thief* on pp. 69–70 of "La città e lo spazio." Of special interest is his identification of the city as a moral space, p. 82.

space whose overview we get in the two maps which show Nazi and partisan Rome. We always have a sense of where we are and how this location relates to the city as a whole and to its historical progression from past, to present, to future.

De Sica's Rome, instead, is a fragmented, decentered space with few familiar landmarks and no sense of cohesion. With the exception of La Santona's apartment and Antonio's tenement, we never return to the same place twice, nor does De Sica ever give us any establishing shots to tell us where we are. Rome is presented as a maze, full of endlessly twisting and turning streets that dead-end or lead into yet more labyrinthine byways, and Antonio's movements are as aimless and as random as the streets themselves.[28] In the scene following the downpour at Porta Portese, Rome becomes a setting worthy of Ariosto, where hidden secrets and dangers seem to lurk around every corner and shadowy presences materialize in the raincleansed air. This is also a Rome of thick walls with few windows which either shut in Antonio's face, or open onto yet other windows and walls, suggesting the impenetrability of the city to his quest. De Sica's camera takes great advantage of Rome's predominant architectural motif, its arches, to convey the heaviness and inevitability of Antonio's fate. The union headquarters, the poster office, the restaurant, the tunnel through which Antonio chases the thief's decoy, and the bridge under which he runs to see the boy dragged from the Tiber, are built on the principle of the Roman arch with all its implications of solidity and stasis.[29] The inhabitants of this city are the logical extensions of so oppressive and fragmented a space. They are uniformly irritable, from the priest who knocks Bruno over the head in the confessional of the mendicants' church, to the performers

[28] On the labyrinthine nature of the narrative and the urban space of *Bicycle Thief*, see Brunetta, *Storia*, p. 387.

[29] For other observations on the symbolic use of the physical topology of Rome, see Liehm, *Passion and Defiance*, p. 76.

who cannot seem to hit the right note in the vaudeville rehearsal. It is no accident that the word on which they constantly stumble is *gente* (people) and that Baiocco must continually remind them to end the lyric on a downbeat. Two tobacco salesmen in Piazza Vittorio, who have nothing to do with the plot, argue for unknown reasons while Bruno's employer at the gasoline pump refuses to acknowledge the boy's cheerful "good morning." The film is full of irascible crowds, from the throng of unemployed who resent Antonio's sole acquisition of a job at the opening of the film, to the mobs of people boarding the bus, or waiting in line to get water from the tenement well. Antonio is never part of these crowds, for they are conglomerates of isolated selves whose predicament divides rather than unites them in mutual competition for the scant resources of the unreconstructed city.[30]

Nothing could be more distant from Rossellini's popular Rome whose solidarity and fellow feeling culminated in the heroics of the partisan struggle. The demise of postwar idealism and the egocentricity of a population beset with shortages have changed Rossellini's collectivity into an angry, unwelcoming mob. But perhaps the most striking measure of the distance separating *Open City* and *Bicycle Thief* is De Sica's rejection of Rossellini's synthesizing conclusion. Where narrative events pointed ahead to the political and spiritual fulfillments of Rossellini's Christian–Marxist typology, De Sica's various semantic levels sharply diverge at his film's termination. The narrative remains inconclusive while the sociopolitical and philosophical levels reach the dead end to which the film's pessimism invariably leads. The filmmaker's modicum of hope is reserved for one level alone, as the personal relationship between father and son reaches its sub-

[30]On the film's depiction of a hostile citizenry and its pessimistic approach to class solidarity, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, pp. 59–60, and Leprohon, *De Sica*, p. 39. Lizzani sees in *Bicycle Thief* "a tired, threadbare society, and precisely because of this, more cruel and desperate, strained by the quest for new forms of solidarity and civil cooperation." See *Il cinema italiano*, p. 129.

lime conclusion. But the very isolation of this happy ending amid the profusion of negative ones on other levels serves to polarize De Sica's final view.[31] Bruno's ultimate acceptance of his fallen father, despite the social and even cosmic conspiracy against him, makes the boy's generosity remarkable to the point of heroism. Conversely, the world's utter imperviousness to Bruno's humanizing example shows how unbridgeable is the gap between personal ideals and the larger world order. In the closing shot of the film, as Bruno and Antonio merge with the crowd, the ignorance and indifference of the masses to the crisis just experienced by father and son constitute De Sica's final denunciation. As Bruno walks back into the city, he can entertain none of the hope for social justice and spiritual rebirth that characterized the young activists' triumphal march home in *Open City*. All that remains for Bruno is his own miraculous capacity for love—a gift that will have no impact beyond the immediate private domain.

[31] On the rift between the film's psychological conclusion and its political and philosophical ones, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 62, and Leprohon, *De Sica*, p. 40. The distinction between De Sica "social pessimist" and "human optimist" which emerges at the film's end is not unique to *Bicycle Thief*, but typifies his entire cinematic career according to Philip V. Cannistraro in "Ideological Continuity and Cultural Coherence," *Bianco e nero* 36 (September–December 1975), 19. On the variant political readings of this ending, from optimistic to nihilistic, see Agel, *De Sica*, pp. 85–86.

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