Lecture 20 -- De Sica, Bicycle Thieves

I. Vittorio De Sica (1902-74)
- 1942 The Children Are Watching Us
- 1946 Shoeshine
- 1948 Bicycle Thieves
- 1950 Miracle in Milan
- 1952 Umberto D
- 1960 Two Women
- 1971 The Garden of the Finzi-Continis

II. Bicycle Thieves
- Structure: organic form
- Social themes
- Character: father and son
- The title

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn’s own notes.

Film viewing tonight:
De Sica, Vittorio. Bicycle Thieves. 1948.

- The Neo-Realist Counterplot
  - Striking the balance, with a story that has momentum while revealing meaningful, realistic character
  - The effort to make films that grew organically from reality
  - Counterplot: the tendency of Neo-Realist films to undermine the expectation of what comes next
  - Robert Altman and Renoir used some of this as well, but the Neo-Realists really brought this practice to its height
  - The natural rhythms of life, with all its details
    - Comparison: James Joyce treats realistic detail in a similar manner in Ulysses
  - Plot does not dominate the character
    - The story embodies the nature of the character, rather than the character acting in a given way to satisfy the demands of the story
  - The film and the camera might follow a particular plot line, but they are willing to be interrupted by detours in the character’s life
  - These films are about life, and they move between comedy and seriousness, different stories, and different details, just as life moves through all these.
  - Passage by Andre Bazin, about the moment when the son has to stop to urinate while his father is trying to chase the bicycle thieves
“That ambiguity that characterizes any fact”

The boy learns that his father is mortal, not a god

- Clip from *Umberto D*: The despairing Umberto on a bus
  - The audience thinks Umberto might be ready to take his own life
  - Notice how the man next to him on the bus looks just as upset
  - An implication is that there are infinitely many stories, all of them just as complicated

- Clip from Truffaut: children watching a puppet show
  - You can see how the older boys are cut off from the innocence of the rest of the children
  - The camera becomes endlessly interested in the magic of those many children’s faces, even though those children never appear in the film again
  - The endless complexity of reality is constantly threatening the forward momentum of the story

- Clip from *Bicycle Thieves*
  - Notice how the camera follows the two beggar children after the man kicks one of them.
  - They’re not directly relevant to the story, but they’re still interesting

- De Sica’s Career
  - De Sica was an excellent actor himself, though his greatest achievements are as a director
  - His most luminous films were made in a short period:
    - *Shoeshine* (1946)
      - About shoeshine boys in postwar Rome
      - De Sica was definitely sympathetic to communist causes
      - It might seem a little heavy-handed in some ways, such as with the boy’s death at the end
      - You can feel that the film-makers are trying to give you a lesson about the hardship of life for children in post-war Rome
    - *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)
      - The ending is more complex than that of *Shoeshine*
    - *Miracle in Milan* (1950)
      - From a novel
      - An orphan escapes from an orphanage and goes to live in a shanty town in Milan. He works miracles that are hurtful only to the capitalist class.
      - It’s a sort of communist fantasy
    - *Umberto D* (1952)
      - *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini* (1971)
        - About the buildup to the Holocaust
        - It’s also a coming of age story
• The main character is a working-class scholar, but he’s denied access to the libraries, and so he comes into contact with the life of a very wealthy Jewish Italian family when they let him use their private library.

• **Bicycle Thieves**
  o The film has a perfect organic naturalness
  o There is a powerful momentum, but the momentum originates from life itself, not from any artificially constructed plot
  o Watch the power of the scene where Ricci and his wife go to pawn their linens to get back the bicycle
    ▪ Notice the huge quantities of linens you see in storage – it’s as though all the sheets in Rome have gotten pawned off
  o We’re set up to be constantly terrified that the bicycle will be stolen, before it ever is
  o Organic structure of the film: everything that follows has to do with how Ricci responds to the loss of his bicycle
  o The whole film takes place in a weekend
  o The story is so natural, that you’re not aware that anything fictitious has been added.
  o Institutions – they all seem to be failures
    ▪ The police are of no help
  o As the father begins to show his failings under the stress of losing his bicycle, the son begins to show his strength
    ▪ They begin to switch places
  o The exploration of character also becomes an exploration of the physical spaces of Rome
  o There is an immense emotional depth to their interactions
    ▪ Note the scene where Ricci becomes terrified that his son might have drowned
    ▪ Ricci takes him to a restaurant that he can’t afford in an effort to apologize to his son
    ▪ The restaurant becomes a powerful exploration of class differences
  o When Ricci finally finds the thief, the thief is protected by his neighbors
  o It’s important that the title is *Bicycle Thieves*, not Bicycle Thief
    ▪ The film suggests that we’re all thieves in a certain sense
    ▪ We’re driven to it by desperation
  o Ricci’s son rescues him twice
    ▪ Ricci looks like he might be arrested or beaten to death, but his son’s presence brings mercy from an authority figure
  o There’s a moral and psychological complexity to this film, along with a inspiring and generous sense of human nature